The Great Lie

A Novel

By

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

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Any similarity, especially of the non-historical personalities, is purely coincidental.

Parts of the text cursively emphasized represent a documentary stratum in the literary basis of the novel.

The author

The Great Lie – Chapter 1

After the great battle for Gramos, the villages spread between the Pindus and Malimadi Mountains were devastated and gripped by the black cloud of war. Those wounded at the battlefields of Gramos were taken to the hospitals in Albania and by now had recuperated and were returning, making their way back to the villages and bringing with them sad news about those who were killed, those who survived and those who were maimed and crippled. It was a quiet and still autumn night full of sadness and sorrow when the sound of a village church bell broke the silence and could be heard in all remote places of the valley.

Dong… Dong… Dong… - In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the Church bell rang three times… It was an odd sound, out of place in the darkness of night. It came softly and soon was lost. It rose from the silence, spilled over the valley and faded away only to rise again, tremble and repeat the pattern, mercilessly crushing the silence and the pain and sorrow delivered earlier by the bad news…

Dong… Dong… Dong… The bell toll thickens the atmosphere… silencing all hidden desires – maybe it does not toll for me, maybe it does not toll for us? ... Yet it is still an odd sound calling... there are no weddings, no baptisms and no celebrations of holy days or saints.

A bell tolls in the dark of night, a sound arising from the silence and quickly fading. For whom does the bell toll? Dark disturbing thoughts begin to rise, spreading like a wild fire, causing cold shivers…

Dong… Dong… Dong… then a break, like something terrible knocking on the door in the dark of night, crossing the threshold and storming in… seizing hearts and souls…

Icon lamp burning, lit flame flickering in the eyes of the Virgin Mary, St. Ilija, St. Nikola, St. Giorgi. The Saints come alive in the houses…

Dong… Dong… Dong… the Church bell is again ringing, the sound is spreading… the flame in the lit icon lamp shivers in the room, creating pale, shimmering curved shadows and in the silence lies the question- for whom does the bell toll?

Impatiently waiting, awaiting news about their loved ones… inquiring from the new arrivals as to what is happening…

Vasil the Priest carrying his cross under his arm visits the grief-stricken houses at night – quietly and in the dark rooms with blanket covered windows, delivers his sermon in hope that with his gentle voice and counseling words he can soothe the heavy hearts and bring comfort to those suffering from grief. This he can only do at night from house to house…

Dong… Dong… Dong… the bell again tolls three times in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost… Amen!

The Great Lie – Chapter 2

Two days before Mitrovden snow had fallen on Vicho and Malimadi, it was the first snow of the season. Georgi, huddled under an old English overcoat, entered the battalion commander's cabin and without the customary military salute, asked: "Commander, can I go to my village? It is not too far and I will not take long. The day after tomorrow is Mitrovden."

"Do you celebrate Mitrovden?" asked the Commander.

"I do celebrate it and I don't celebrate it; I just want to go. My father's name was Mitre, may God bless his soul, and it is customary for me to visit his grave and light a candle… it is an annual tradition for me… and to see…" replied Georgi.

The commander put down his cup of tea and gazed piercingly at Georgi. "Go," he said rubbing his red eyes from insomnia. "Go if you want but don't come back. You are too old for all this. Winter is coming and it will become very cold… this is not for you. Remain in your village and stay warm by your fireplace."

"Thank you Major and be well," said Georgi. "You are welcome and have a nice trip," replied the Commander.

Georgi left the cabin and on his way greeted the courier who had just arrived from the valley below. On his way down he stepped over a trench and as he passed a bunker someone called out to him; "Georgi, have a good trip and when you return don't forget to bring something to eat." "And don't forget to bring some rakia (alcoholic beverage) too," shouted another person.

They all thought that he was going home and home was on everyone's mind. But deep down he suspected that no one was alive at home and waiting for him.

Nevertheless he rejoiced at the idea that after almost a year in the mountains he was finally going home. Not knowing if his house was still intact or burned down, his thoughts were of a big fire burning in the fireplace while he lay down on his bedcovers, stretched in front of the burning fire, smoking his pipe, staring at the ceiling and enjoying a well deserved rest under his own roof.

Hopes of sleeping in came to mind and in the morning at the crack of dawn, as he always did, he would like to go out on his balcony to check the colour of the sky and from that determine what the weather would be like. After that he would like to look around the house and yard to see what needed fixing. Unfortunately, deep down he suspected that there was nothing left of his house and property. Only health, he said to himself, is what is important, the rest can be acquired again. As long as a person is alive and strives he can… Only health…

“Do not go straight! It is mined. Do you hear? Hey, turn back! The place is mined, I am talking to you!” a voice called out to him from one of the bunkers.

Georgi stopped. Deep in his thoughts he had not noticed the rows of barbed wire, but he knew that beyond there the place was mined. Yesterday when he came by with his donkey, bringing a load of water and ammunition, he had been told where to pass. Now he remembered being told.

A young man came out of the bunker, which had two gun holes covered with four rows of thick logs and boulders, and asked Georgi:

“Are you going straight for the mines? And what devil made you go this way? Follow me to the Commander. Move!” ordered the young man in a loud voice while pointing his Shmaizer (gun) at him.

“But I just came from the Commander’s cabin. I am going home…” replied Georgi.

“Don’t do that! Go see him! You are going home, visiting, how so?” asked the young man.

“Just like that, I spoke with the Commander and he let me go,” replied Georgi.

“Come now, I had no idea he was such a nice man and your friend too. Go see him and you will find out how nice he is,” said the young man.

“Hey Nikola what’s all the shouting? Why are you holding this man? Let him go on his way,” said another man from another bunker.

“Did you tell him where to pass?” enquired the young man sarcastically.

“I told you let the man go. He has permission,” replied the other man.

“You have permission?” the young man asked Georgi.

“Yes I do but not in writing,” replied Georgi.

“You are a prankster aren’t you? You went off this way and you have no permission! Now go back to the good Commander and he will show you a different way to pass. Tell him that there is a minefield this way. Go, but not this way,” ordered the young man.

Georgi turned back and followed the trench. Georgi was not a stubborn man and had no reason to storm into the Commander’s cabin to berate one of his fighters just because he had stopped him from entering a minefield. Also he had no reason to be angry with the young man for doing his job. It was his own fault that he took the wrong path because he was rushing so much. While deep in thought Georgi heard footsteps following behind him.

“Hey, hey,” he heard a voice calling. It was the voice of the young man with whom he had spoken earlier. “Stop, wait! You again! I see that you really got mad and went straight for the Commander, ha? Don’t worry, I will show you where to pass and avoid the mines. Do you have one to twist? I have paper,” said the young man as he pulled an entire newspaper out of his pocket, cut a piece and gave it to Georgi. He then cut another

piece and again gave it to Georgi. Georgi pulled out a wallet from his pocket and said, “Open your palm, come on, come on open it.”

“Enough, enough! Look, it’s full, leave some for yourself,” said the young man.

“Give some to the others,” replied Georgi.

“Of course I will, I will give them their share. Now you go as far as that rock over there then turn right and go straight down. You say you are going home eh? Oh, mother!...” said the young man.

“What?” enquired Georgi.

“I too want to… It’s been two years since I left home…” said the young man.

“Where are you from,” enquired Georgi?

“The Island villages…” replied the young man.

After the two men shook hands and said their goodbyes Georgi went on his way following the young man’s direction and quickly began the descent to the valley below. He walked straight and did not follow the path and after some hours at a fast pace, arrived at the entrance to his village. The tall trees blocked his view. He walked around until he found a better place from where he could see the full view of “Sinadev Rid” (Sinadev Hill) and then he paused. He sighed and as he wiped the sweat off his face he pondered which way he should take; the road or straight through the fields? He decided to go through the fields, it was quicker as he was in a hurry to get to his destination before dark. Certain sadness came over him when he saw that the fields were not plowed, there wasn’t a single field plowed. He pressed on walking though the fields, walking over dry, unharvested stalks of wheat, crunching them under his feet and scaring flocks of birds into flight. There were seeds everywhere, swollen and sprouting. The field was trodden down and wheat heads were lying on the ground. Around the field the soil was black. Georgi remembered the black clouds of smoke rising from the ground. Yes, then in July, when the grain of bread ripened under the hot sun, the immature wheat was burned…

He took a turn to shorten his walk and cut through a grove of trees. When he came close to the hill he could see the entire village. There wasn’t a single house left intact in the upper neighbourhood, only wrecked black walls remained. So they burned the village, he thought to himself, as dark and sorrowful thoughts began to cross his mind. He spat a bitter spit. There was no one in sight and there was no movement anywhere at all. Out of breath he reached the first houses, paused, looked around and listened. There was only silence. Something broken cracked under his feet.

The only sign that there was any life at all in this village was the faint, sad cry of a cat.

“There is no one here…” said Georgi out loud, “Not even a dog,” as he approached the place where the door of his house once used to be. “The yard… destroyed…” The only living thing in the yard left standing was the

pear tree and that too was damaged. The bark on the tree trunk had been singed and stripped off.

"Yes…" Georgi muttered, stretching out his words, feeling as if he had come out of the depths of darkness, replaying in his mind his life's experience under the roof and in the yard of this house. "I was born here; I grew up here and after the Young Turk Uprising, together with my friend Kiro, I went to America. I left my young bride here and when I returned I found a mother with a young boy." Georgi went to America again but this time for a short time. He could not do without the cries of children and without his beloved wife Georgevitsa and his sons Naum, Vane and Vasil. He returned home, together with Kiro in 1929, this time for good. With the money he earned in America he built a new home and now it was gone. "I hope Vasil is alive and well and he returns to me and we will build a larger house…" Georgi muttered to himself as he lost his train of thought, distracted by the debris in the yard. This was where the family and neighbours gathered for celebrations.

Mitrovden was a great celebration, not only because it was a holiday but because it was the birthday of this house… Many came to celebrate Petrovden, Voditsi and many other holidays in this great big beautiful yard, to get together and have a glorious time, to drink wine and rakia not from bottles but directly from the barrels and kegs which were stored in the middle of the yard. Spirits and wines were always plentiful and flowed like water. It was unheard of that the casks in this household would run dry. In this yard there was singing and dancing until the crack of dawn. And now, and now it was dead – desolate… There was nothing left of what once was life. Death lay over the village and reigned supreme this day before Mitrovden, seeming more like mrtovden (day of death)…

A flock of birds flew over Georgi's head. He watched them as they flew beyond the elms. The sound of birds chirping was soon replaced by his awareness that it was getting dark. Cruel silence had slowly descended over the village but in Georgi's ears there was an eerie unrecognizable buzzing sound, coming from afar, barely audible, dying down and rising again, like a strong gust of wind. The sound of a meowing cat broke Georgi's trance. He stooped down and pet the cat. "You are now left alone… and you are hungry, huh?" muttered Georgi and then he picked up the cat. "And you too are devastated…" he remarked to the cat.

Georgi sat down leaning on the darkened old trunk of the pear tree, put the cat in his lap and opened his backpack. He pulled out a chunk of dark army bread and a can of meat. He broke a bit of bread and put it on the skirt of his overcoat. The cat sniffed the bread, gave it a tug and then turned and looked into Georgi's eyes.

"You don't like it eh? Army bread not good enough for you?" muttered Georgi and then he opened the can of meat and smudged some on the bread. The cat hungrily ate it directly from his palm. Georgi broke another piece of bread and with it wiped the inside of the meat can and gave it to

the cat. A little later the cat returned to Georgi's lap. At the moment this warm, soft and furry creature was the only sign of life around and now it was standing under his rugged and abrasive hands.

Sitting down motionless, slumped against the pear tree in the pale light of the full moon, Georgi stared at the four naked and darkened walls of his once beautiful house. He was too tired to think as his memories began to fade. He no longer had the strength and lacked the ability to comprehend the reality of what had happened here. What he already saw devastated him, shook him savagely and took away his reasoning abilities. Time passed slowly in the night, slowly stretching forever. A cold breeze blew from the direction of Mount Malimadi causing an overhanging piece of sheet metal, hanging from the scorched wall, to rattle. Georgi stood up and immediately began to break up the remaining fence that divided his stable stall from the yard. Stepping over a pile of stones he walked to where his fireplace once was. He could hear the wind howl as it passed through the half wrecked chimney, a howl that grew into a heavy wail, pleading in despair. A strong gust of wind blew and brought down loose particles and debris from the top of the scorched wall. The loose sheet metal rattled even harder, over and over again, hitting the wall and sending its metallic sound outwards, bringing back the echoes that bounced off the walls of the ruined, empty houses, echoes that vanished somewhere far in the outskirts of the village.

Georgi lit a fire. A dog's muffled bark could be heard in the distance, the sound was carried by the wind from up above, from the direction of Sinadev Rid. Another creepy sound could be heard coming from the cemetery. "Klop-klop," was the sound made by a night bird – the keeper of the cemetery.

It was foggy and very quiet as dawn broke the next morning. Georgi came out of the ruins and looked down at the village. The houses stood bare and roofless. The belfry of the church was ruined. The boulders over yonder were nestled in thick gray fog. Beyond, Gorusha and further to the right Aliavitsa, were very still, sleeping in the morning silence. Georgi felt cold and wanted to return to his fire to sit by its glowing coals when he noticed a thin string of gray smoke rising from the lower end of the village. He felt like yelling, crying out at the top of his lungs, to wake the place from its slumber… He tossed his backpack over his shoulder and left.

To the left and to the right of the pathway everything was in ruins. When he reached the crossroad he stopped and slowly turned his head, glancing down the road that led to the water fountains and gardens and then glanced the other way which led to the vineyards. From here it seemed like these roads spread out and vanished behind the hill.

The hill looked naked and washed over by the rain, the great oak tree named D'MBOT stood mute, a witness to times past, with only three hacked up branches still standing and a trunk marred with dents of

shrapnel… At the top of the highest branch there was a single leaf, the only presence of life left on this great old D'MBOT.

The early morning light of a clear day made D'MBOT shimmer like it was made of gold, like the cloudless dawn, the warm afternoon and the blue evening sky had poured gold on it.

It was fall now and Georgi felt cold against the light breeze of the blowing wind, trembling like a handkerchief in the hand of a shy bride. Suddenly here and there he bent and straightened back and forth as though he was a scarf wrapped around the hand of an old person playing the "Bajrach".

The wind howled in the great hollow seemingly expressing the land's solitude and pain, expressing the uneasy secrets hidden over the centuries, and seemingly gasping from the torment of being torn up. The wind howled in quiet whispers – speaking of timeless memories and of bygone eras… The wind howled in the hollow, mixing sounds, sobbing and wailing, even screaming, then suddenly subsiding and feeling peaceful until it again repeated the cycle, and as long as it howled and wept, there was something there, there was sorrow… A big spider web quivered and shook in the wind and inside it a great big black spider quickly dashed around, then slowed down lurking; anxiously waiting for a victim…

The once great, bushy and dense D'MBOT's crown – was now gone. Together with it the wide and thick shadow was gone, under which centuries of memories were threaded and had found rest. The great D'MBOT was now dead; stripped naked of its branches and leaves; hacked up and silent, it stood on top of the hill. Just for a moment a raven dove down and snapped its wings but flew off again beyond the hill, over there, between the rocks and the trees, where human bones had been washed and left to bleach…

Georgi spent a long time in front of the mangled D'MBOT looking up at its branches and down at the earth on which it grew and flourished. Until several months ago the great D'MBOT stood bushy and well, and now… Three branches and a trunk…

With an intense look Georgi observed the tree's trunk and its three remaining branches feeling a sharp, stabbing pain in his gut as if someone had stuck a knife into him evoking a tortured memory reminiscent of something being savagely torn apart. A trunk and three branches; standing silent in endless pain and agony.

Georgi stood silent before the great D'MBOT. They stood together – two muted loners, each weighed down with years of burden and with the grief of emptiness in them. Georgi wiped a tear of sorrow as he shuffled his feet… He scratched, dug deeper for more memories… He glanced away from the bare tree trunk and forced his memory to restore the tree to its former beauty which, as recently as only a few months ago, had been alive and well. He took note of the voices of old men, their worries, joys, sorrows, despair and grief. And now D'MBOT befriends grief, pain and

solitude. Until recently it had befriended the joy of thousands of chirping birds and the laughter and sighs of young lovers.

People returning from the vineyards, from the fields, from harvesting grain, from the market, from weddings and celebrations, all came to rest under the shade of the great D'MBOT. Under D'MBOT they enjoyed the aroma of cut grass in the meadows, of peppermint, of freshly baked bread and cheese and the sigh of beautiful maidens…

Just before sunset the birds, on their last flight of the day, rested on the branches of the great D'MBOT and in the morning sang in celebration and in joy of a new dawn, a daily ritual repeated for centuries. And now the devastation had left the great D'MBOT naked, stripped of its size and beauty with only three branches and a hollow trunk for the wind to spin and howl, with only itself as a companion. The three thick and twisted branches resisted the strong wind and weathered many storms. The rain rinsed and washed the dust from them that had been deposited there by the north and south winds. But now there was nothing that could rinse the great D'MBOT's pain, the cry of the wounded turtle-dove, the brilliance of the sun, the wildness of the sunset, the sadness of the broken branches crackling and old and current anguish. Stuck to it, like moss were the silence and pain of the times.

Georgi knew and remembered from his childhood and younger days the many experiences that took place under the shadow of this great D'MBOT, for the sighs and joys which occurred under its crown were tangled with the rustling and dancing of its leaves in the wind. With the first melt of snow, its swollen buds signaled a warm spring and when the buds began to show a dark green colour and become firm, the leaves unwound, the mischievous cuckoo sang to the village as the first swallows began to cross the sky, then D'MBOT began to create its shadow for the plowmen, the threshers, the gardeners, the grape growers….

No one knows the great D'MBOT's age. And no one learned from their elders how many summers this great tree passed. It seems the years went by like flying birds and grew into centuries. Its trunk was as thick as twelve hands in a circle; its bark in places was cracked like the crust of freshly baked bread baked in the village oven. Everyone who passed by the great D'MBOT took a good look at it and shook their head, astonished by its majesty and beauty. D'MBOT was born on top of the hill, beaten by the wind from all sides, with a view of Kostur valley and the blue of Lake Kostur. And the wind, again the wind, when it blew violently, lost its energy in the great D'MBOT's thick body of leaves. And then the great D'MBOT turned the wind's energy into a flutter of leaves, sounding like the buzzing of many bees. It seemed like the shaking from its branches poured a sigh of relief that forever sang about the heaven and earth which gave it birth, helped it grow and gave it its firm support. Around it and near it, all there, where its shadow lay and beyond it, not once had the soil been desecrated by foreign feet.

Near the great D'MBOT and here at the small church, not even the oldest cemetery had been left in peace. The evil burned it; the dead now shared the fate of the living… They too had been chased from their timeless resting places… And for them, for the cemetery, it had always been spoken quietly, as in a prayer which was spoken in secret, that here Samoil's Warriors were forever at rest and only once a year the village church bell tolled for them in long and intermittent rings.

The bell tower unfortunately was wrecked by the new masters because they did not like it and considered it pagan and ugly. After their arrival the community became silent. The new masters were not content and made all kinds of threats, spying on people by listening to them from outside their homes, from outside their doors and then gathered them in the village square in order to silence them, to silence every moment of their lives with threats, making sure everyone felt the horror of the day, the uncertainty of the dawn, the nightly nightmares and at all times, to remain silent. Silence reigned supreme in each person individually and in the community as a whole. Daily and nightly prayer was left to the old – everyone kept silent and silence even became the habit of the young; be silent because even whispers can be heard, warnings were the only words spoken and remained in the thoughts of the people. Silence and fear darkened their minds, and silence created and reinforced obedience; even if one word, not in the language of their masters, was spoken, their honour was taken away.

But life had to go on and stealthily, avoiding alien eyes and ears, secretly by late night or before the crack of dawn, fleeting shadows, passing by the old unmarked tombstones, left boiled wheat, zelnik, mlechnik, pogacha (round loaf of bread), wine and a bottle of rakia, honouring those long gone …

Speechless, Georgi stared at the great D'MBOT, feeling its pain, listening to its cries; crying for the banished, for the mothers in pain shedding tears, for the children's quiet sobs; giving the impression that it was in constant contact with the people who had been banished over and beyond the hills to unknown lands!? Georgi embraced the entire tree trunk with his stare and slowly, going backwards, began to walk away. He took the path leading downhill leaving the crippled old D'MBOT all alone. How much longer would this tree trunk, with its three mangled branches, be able to soak up the first rays of sun, take on the colour of gold in the fresh dawn or take on the colour of bronze? How many more times would the full moon rotate over the land and on clear nights gild its naked trunk? No one knows!

Georgi continued walking further down and stopped in front of the Zisovtsi house. It was ruined, there was nothing left of the roof and the walls were knocked down to the foundation. It looked like a cannon shell had hit the house square on. Why were there no black spots on the stones in the rubble? Georgi wondered and popped his head inside the broken door. There was a broken cradle in the yard. He thought it must have been

left from the time the children [refugee children from the Greek Civil War] were taken away, out of the country. This was once a yard in which almost all the women in the village gathered together in the evening, and, sitting on a long wooden beam, hungry and thirsty, listened to the cooing and laughter of the one year old, first born in this house. They watched, listened and wept as they stared in the distance and only they knew by which hills and paths, by which creeks and mountains their thoughts wandered. Each woman wanted to touch, to stroke, to take in her arms, to embrace, to feel on her chest the little one's hot breath. That was all they needed to pacify their thoughts, their pain, the sorrow and anguish that tore inside their chests. And after that they took to the hill and stared in the direction of Labanitsa, at the path between the fields, forests and rocks which their children took when they left… They stared in the distance, wiped tears with the corner of their black kerchiefs and, in their whimper, shook their heads. On the hill, near the great D'MBOT, they cried for their living offspring and after returning home, opened the trunks and chests and for a long time folded the clothing of their children, caressing them, showering them with their tears…

Georgi entered the yard, took the remnants of the cradle and put it inside the outdoor oven. What happened to the child he wondered? This question he could not get out of his mind. He stood there a while and then left the yard. It took him a while to notice that under his feet lay a soiled rag from a wedding gown. A little further lay a twisted and broken belt buckle. "Mitra," Georgi muttered out loud – she was the last bride in the village. That was two years ago, there had been no other wedding in the village since. She brought the last child into the world in this place; she gave birth right here. And now the place was empty, desolate and who knows if anyone would ever build another house here. Would they build a fireplace and would a baby ever cry beside it?

A little to the side, close to the foundation, Georgi noticed a big hole. He went closer. That was the Zisoftsi hollow in which the family had hidden all their possessions. The chests were open. At the bottom there were torn and scattered clothes, broken glasses, plates, jugs… Just now it occurred to him to go and check the pit at his own house.

When he got there he noticed that the upper yard was also destroyed. The blackened walls of the burned house stood half demolished. He passed through the yard stepping on stones and rubble and entered the barn. The pit was open and empty. Quietly, slowly and with measured words he spat out the most disgusting profanity he knew… and then came out. From the place where the door used to be – down, in one of the last houses of the lower neighbourhood – he saw bluish smoke. He threw his backpack over his shoulder and went in that direction. Under his heavy military boots parts of broken cups and saucers crackled, his feet became tangled among torn clothes thrown all around the village streets; around him he saw remnants of saddles, pitchforks, sickles…

Georgi stopped in front of the Mitrevtsi house. He thought of Lina and Krsto Mitrevi. “They destroyed the man for nothing,” Georgi muttered. The memory of him was still fresh in his mind as he remembered the bitter feelings the villagers left. No one in the village wanted to speak about him for a long time. Krsto was one of the poorest persons in the village and in Georgi’s memory, besides poverty, there was nothing to remember except for the episode which made Georgi silent and feel sick.

It was February when, after a brief battle fought on the cliffs, Royal government troops came to the village. One unit stayed at Krsto’s house overnight. The next morning the government soldiers left and in the night a DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) Cheta (Company) arrived and spread itself around the houses. Just before midnight, the Cheta Commissar came to Krsto’s house and took Krsto to the DAG Commander, who at the time was lodging with Kuze.

“Is it true that last night you hosted and fed guests from the Royal army,” the Commissar demanded sternly?

Krsto adjusted his feet, tightened his grip on his hat with his bony fingers, looked at the Commissar and said: “The soldiers only stayed at my place, but ate the food they brought with them…”

“I asked you if you fed them or not,” demanded the Commissar?

“Yes I fed them, but with what,” replied Krsto?

“That’s what you say, but your friend Kuze here says that you fed them. Is that right Kuze or is that wrong?” demanded the Commissar.

Kuze adjusted himself, half coughed, looking at the corner and muttered: “I did not see if he fed them, but I heard that the soldiers were laughing, so I said, mother, if they are that happy, for sure Krsto fed them well…”

Unable to bear Krsto’s piercing stare in front of the Commissar, and especially in front of the Commander, Kuze got up and shouted: “Since the soldiers were so happy then you must have fed them!”

“Take him,” the Commissar firmly ordered.

They took Krsto to the church and there they beat him until dawn. Before sunrise they took him to the brook on the other side of the village and shot him dead. In the afternoon the villagers buried him.

Not much later tragedy befell the Krsto household again. Lina, Krsto’s wife, refused to send her children to the Eastern European Countries as part of the save the children program; so she kept them at home. After her husband’s episode her hatred for the Greek Partisans ate away at her and she wanted nothing to do with them. Unfortunately her attempt to save them from the Partisans landed them in a different kind of trouble. The tragic episode took place in the beginning of April when her children found an unexploded mortar shell and decided to play with it. The damn thing exploded and cut them to pieces.

This memory tortures Georgi, it tormented him last year while serving in the mountains of Gramos, where he dug trenches and bunkers, and it is

tormenting him now. He crossed himself and went on. There is Sultana's house. The villagers called her Sulta. She is the widow of a living husband with two children. They say her husband lost his mind and went crazy and does not want to return home. Sulta was left without a husband and very poor. She earned very little and was just barely able to survive. When the military occupied the village school and turned it into a barracks, Sulta worked for the soldiers, washed their dirty underwear in exchange for a small meal as payment. When the army left, the Partisans came and took Sulta to Breznitsa and there under a bridge they murdered her. Someone in the village whispered to the Commissar and told him that she was a traitor...

Georgi sighed and moved on and after taking several steps stopped and looked at the ruins of the house belonging to the man whose two sons were stabbed with daggers in front of their mill last year. In passing, bearded men had cut off their heads because they heard them speaking the forbidden language…

Vangelia the widow gave birth in the spring and with her child in her arms they sent her away with the refugee children.

Located to the left of the hill was the old cemetery. Near it was a wide green meadow. Georgi stopped again noticing the crooked lines of trenches running through the cemetery. "The cemetery had been plowed," he said to himself. He also noticed a number of bunkers nearby. "So, even here our people had to defend themselves…" he muttered.

He decided not to go up as new memories began to flood his mind. He walked closer to the meadow, crossed his arms in front of his chest and bowed his head. Here, in this green meadow, villagers and their guests from the surrounding villages gathered together during holidays; especially at Easter, Petrovden, Golema Bogoroditsa and Mitrovden. Newly wed wives with their first born stood on the side, beside them stood the mothers-in-law and mothers, across from them stood the older men with their non-stop smoking pipes, beside them stood the newly wed men and a bit to the side, in a separate group, stood the young bachelors and bachelorettes.

Georgi imagined the meadow covered with tender green May grass and people singing and dancing on it, with young maidens leading the dance. Easily, gently and silently the people stepped on the grass while combining their many voices to sing as with a single voice:

"Mori Chupi Kosturchanki (Hey young maidens from Kostur Region),
Rashiretego oroto (widen the dance circle),
Rashiretego oroto (widen the dance circle),
Da vi vime fustanite (for us to see your dresses),
Da vi vime fustanite (for us to see your dresses),
Chij e fustan damkalija (whose dress is adorned the most),
Chij e fustan damkalija (whose dress is adorned the most),
Da se stori sevdalija (to captivate us),

Po fustano na chupcheto… (by the dress of a young maiden…).

Duro, the Gypsy musician from Osheni, with puffy cheeks like balls and with legs spread wide and firmly planted on the ground, raises up his clarinet, as if wanting his melody to fly, then kneels before the dancers and overtakes the voice of the young, singing maidens. The somewhat sad melody he plays is covered by the words: "for us to see your dresses," and very tenderly laments and roars when the girls sing "for us to see your"… And exactly there the drum stops beating, and loudly beats again when the words "whose dress…" echoe through the mountains. – The drummer tilts his ear towards the drum, looks sideways at the young ladies, and beats the drum "doom-doom-doom", skips and says: -"Taka –taka – taka – oh!"

"Life was good then!" Georgi muttered softly.

All conversation and commotion are interrupted. The crowd becomes silent when the "Levoto" (Left) or "Nevestinskoto" (Bridal) dance is danced. Dancing is an all day affair with only a small break before noon. Duro moves his fingers on the clarinet, his son Kiriak beats the drum quietly. The trumpeter blows a few squeaks "–ta-ta-ta" and then spits to the side. Kiro, holding his lit pipe in his left hand, and his wallet in his right, approaches Duro and whispers something in his ear. Duro moves his head up and down like a horse drinking water and then raises his eyebrows. This is the signal for the other musicians to get ready. Kiro raises his hand and yells out loud "Bajrecheno", ordering his favourite dance. Nice and easy he takes his stride, as if testing the ground underneath to see if it can support his steps. Long and wide he looks at the houses over yonder – on the hill. Kiro pulls out a white handkerchief from his pocket and lightly waves it over his head, signaling for others to join the dance now. Following him is his wife Mara (Kirevitsa). After taking several steps, Kiro passes his handkerchief to Mara and steps out to the side. Mara now takes the lead, a step with her left foot – forward, and two steps on tiptoe, swaying her hips, lightly – playfully sliding her foot on the tender young, green grass, as if following the footsteps of a doe… She raises her head slightly, looking proud and dignified, as if wanting everyone to notice her – here I am, everyone look at me, pulls her right hand from her waist and puts it on her head, holds still for a moment and suddenly in a fast motion swings her handkerchief to the beat of the drum; she moves her arm, swings the white handkerchief and takes a step forward, moves her body, looks ahead in a long gaze and sways her hips. Kiro approaches Duro, removes his wallet from his pocket, opens it and searches through it looking for a large bill. He spits on the bill and glues it onto Duro's forehead.

Duro, who could not stop staring at Kiro's wallet, feels the bill on his forehead, grabs his clarinet and plays a melody that can be heard as far away as Borovo, Telok, the boulders and the mounds… Mara, working on the third round of the circular line dance, turns, with her right hand grabs

her friend's right hand, and places her left hand on her friend's shoulder, but not to rest, barely touching her as if wanting only to whisper something. Then moving forward one after the other, they both leap in step…

Silence follows the clarinet, the trumpet takes over and the drum beats loudest as the drummer moves towards the dancers at the end of the line. Duro approaches Mara and from two, three steps away from her plays his trumpet at her legs. Mara breaks off, sways her hips and step by step – moves forward… Duro stops playing, but only for a moment…

Young ladies join the dance, the older ones, wiping sweat from their foreheads, position themselves in a circle and sway their shoulders and hips to the rhythm of the dance. There is no fuss and no words are spoken, all eyes are glued to the young ladies. They in turn give it their all, because it is embarrassing for young ladies from Kostur Region not to know how to dance the "Bajracheto" dance well. Not knowing how to dance the "Bajracheto" is akin to not knowing how to fetch water from the spring, to not knowing how to welcome guests, prepare the bedding in a room, make zelnik, mlechnic, oriznik, burek, poparnik or not to know how to knead and prepare bread…

While the young ladies dance the "Bajracheto" by themselves, they become a mirror for many eyes to observe and a target for the bachelors. And as the dance grows – the youngest ladies join in, with Fana, who is well known for being the best dancer of the "Nevestinsko" dance, joining at the end of the line. The end of the line while dancing the "Bajracheto" dance in Kostur Region is always held by a good dancer and, in this case, that would be Fana. As for the head of the "Bajracheto", there was but one in the entire village, and that would be Mara!

Georgi shivered, uncrossed his arms and opened his eyes – the meadow was empty, desolate and devoid of people. Who knows, will this meadow ever return to its former glory?!

"Good, times were good then…" Georgi muttered as he wiped a tear from his cheek…

Usually at noon during such festivities people went indoors, visiting their friends and relatives but returned to the outdoors again later in the afternoon.

For festive occasions the young ladies of Kostur Region, as was customary then, wore a special dress for the dance which was different from the dress worn for other activities as exemplified by the following song;

"Donna has two dresses;
One green, the other red.
Green for dancing,
Red for battle ..."

Until last year, this was how people sang, danced and lived; then, last year the entire village was destroyed and people's lives were shattered. The community's destruction began with the military draft of all the young ladies, sent to Gramos to fight and be killed. Georgi met some of them there but they were not the same so it was easier for him to now remember them from better days through his memories here in the meadow, because in Gramos they were dressed in military uniforms, carried rifles or shmaizers and were often hungry, loaded with lice, wearing torn clothing, wounded and dead… His heart ached when he saw them like that.

Georgi saw many wounds and many wounded people in the battlefield, he transported some himself, and it was always a young boy or a young girl. Many times he thought to himself visible wounds hurt but will heal, unfortunately it is the invisible wounds they have to worry about which also hurt and will hurt the longest. Georgi was overwhelmed with the pain of solitude at a place where only his memories of yesterday lived, - yesterday's steps taken in this meadow…

"Life was good then…good…" Georgi muttered as he looked in the direction of the desolate road leading to the lower neighbourhood. He turned slightly and gazed at the tall poplar trees standing supreme before the hill; unfortunately under them he could only see destruction. His eyes focused on what was once Kiro's house. The balconies where he and Kiro sat, drinking the last drops of their coffee and discussing bygone days in America, were gone, destroyed. Georgi shook his head in sadness and moved on. He stopped in front of Labro Popovski's house, of which he had even older memories. He remembered Labro as a peculiar person, somewhat detached from the others. He was well traveled, well read and a smart man. He understood things, knew how to explain them and made others think. He left the village in 1908 and returned in 1925. That was a long time ago. While away he joined Sandanski's band of revolutionary freedom fighters and went to take down the Tsarigrad (Constantinople) Government. His name however was never mentioned in any of the publications or official stories. People came to believe that his life had ended somewhere in his travels which first took him to Bulgaria and then to Odessa, Russia, where he cried over Macedonia's 1913 partition by Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. Labro's four daughters all got married and one after another left home, leaving Zoja, his wife all alone. When he returned from Russia he was old and gray and within a week of his arrival he was arrested. There was a new regime in charge in his homeland now and it was worse than the one he remembered before leaving. A new person was elected in Kostur who wanted to have a word with Labro.

After being taken to Kostur, Labro was interrogated and asked if he was a Russian or a Bulgarian spy and if he wanted the Greek part of Macedonia to be separated from Greece. Labro denied the charges that he was a spy but confirmed that for him there was only one Macedonia, a united Macedonia and that's how he liked it.

They beat him terribly again and again and then sent the government employee, who had summoned him, to inform the villagers to come and get him because he was in such bad shape.

The villagers took him home all swollen and black and blue from the beatings. The entire village sat on pins and needles awaiting his fate; waiting for the church bell to toll his death. Some of the old women went to church and lit candles, praying to Mother Mary, praying to let Labro die at home in peace, not like the other men from this home who in the past had died either by the sword, dagger, or bullet. They lit candles praying that with Labro's peaceful death at home the curse would be lifted, which had befallen this home for years. But Labro, one of the first men in the village to wear a moustache, recovered and during the Voditsi holiday invited all his friends with whom he served and fought against the Greek illegal bands, to join him in a celebration. The house was full of people and they all sang songs. Labro reminisced about old times, of hope for a better life, of the Ilinden days when gunpowder blackened, Ilinden flags flew and aspirations were resurrected. He then unearthed his old Maliher (rifle) which he had buried in 1905, went out to the balcony, fired several shots and shouted out loud "Long live Macedonia".

He showed that old, Greek-appointed village Mayor who he was. Sometime later the Gendarmes arrived and took Labro to Kostur. Nothing more was ever heard of him. Women prayed for him in secret under the church porch, offering God food and drink to save Labro's soul.

Georgi continued walking down the village trail and suddenly stopped in front of the ruins of what once was Pop Vasil's house. What had happened here? What had happened to Pop Vasil? Georgi wondered to himself. He then remembered what people used to say. They said that when conflicts started up priests fled to Kostur and to Rupishta, where they were gathered together by the government army to be saved from the Communists. Had Pop Vasil gone with the army? Was he living in Kostur or in some other city where he was protected by the army?

Puzzled, Georgi shook his head and smiled slightly remembering Pop Vasil's deeds. Years ago the Dmbeni gendarmes came to the village to hunt down the boys and girls who had demonstrated in Kostur against the return of King Georgios. During the demonstrations they had sung Macedonian songs which made the Greeks very angry. Pop Vasil was first in line to defend them. He violently pushed the gendarme, out of the way, who stood guarding the front of the church where they were holding and beating the demonstrators. Visibly upset, with cross in hand, Pop Vasil entered the church and headed straight for Limneo, the tall and fat chief of the Dmbeni gendarme. Then in a loud voice Pop Vasil yelled out, "Limneo, leave my flock in peace. If there is a need for punishment, then I will punish them and I myself will be the one to contact Kostur about those who mean to do harm and who do not love the state!"

Limneo laughed and shoved Pop Vasil to the side while slapping a young man standing close to him.

"You see what happens? Don't you dare speak to me in that tone of voice because here, I am the state, I am your God! You Understand?! Fuck your Mother Mary and your Jesus! Get out!" Limneo replied violently.

It was hard for Pop Vasil to swallow the insults hurled at him so he left the church and, at a fast pace, went home, changed his clothes, took his mule and went to Kostur to complain to the Bishop. The next day he returned and on his way home he met Lazo, a confirmed communist, who Pop Vasil knew was a communist even before the war had started. "Well, Father, did you beg for mercy from your Bishop and from the government?" Lazo mockingly enquired.

"Mind your own business Lazo…" replied Pop Vasil in a tired and sad voice. "Lazo, all I know or don't know, that much they have already figured out – but it is you I am concerned about. Knowing what you are, why have they not interrogated and beaten you? Until now they haven't even asked what your name is. Why is that Lazo? Even stranger is the fact that the gendarmes have not said a single word to you, let alone slap and kick you around… Why aren't you and the two or three others like you standing before Limneo's rod? You lie to the young boys and girls, push them to go places and do things that are too dangerous for you and then you mock me? Think about it Lazo! Think about it, that is all I am going to say!" continued Pop Vasil and without looking at Lazo left for home.

A few days later Limneo returned with his gendarmes, gathered all the villagers in front of the church and while standing on top of a large rock, with a threatening voice pointed at his hand and began to speak out loud: "With this hand I will pull out everyone's tongue, if anyone tells me that someone has spoken in that abhorrent Slav language or what you call fucking Christ Macedonian!" He spoke long about what he was going to do to the villagers and with every second word he cursed Mary, mother of Jesus, the Holy Cross, and every father and mother in existence. That same evening Pop Vasil again crossed paths with him some distance from the church and signaled him to stop for a moment. "You sir, are you a believer?" Pop Vasil asked Limneo.

"Yes, but so what?" Limneo replied.

"In that case, listen to what I have to say. Do not dare swear in front of my flock, at Mary Mother of Jesus, God, the Holy Cross and… and I never want to see you enter this church again, do you understand you barbarian?!"

Limneo raised his hand looking like he was going to strike the priest but instead came closer to him and through his teeth he hissed: "Papa Vasili, I hear, you speak with these people in their language. The Bishop will hear of this, Papa Vasili, mark my words!"

Pop Vasil raised his cane and said: "Get lost you heathen! Get out of here!"

The same night a couple of hoodlums broke into Pop Vasil's house and in the dark of night attempted to shave off his beard. Fortunately they were no match for the old priest as he was stronger than they anticipated and managed to throw them off and call for help. The next morning everyone was talking about it. Kuze even took the opportunity to take a personal stab at Pop Vasil by telling him, "Well father, they did this to you because you went to visit the Bishop… And what exactly is wrong with that? If you must know then know this; if they didn't shave you, we the communists will Papa Vasili, ha, ha, ha, he, he, he!"

"Poor Pop Vasil on whose side was he anyway?" Georgi asked himself.

Georgi continued his trek down the path and stopped in front of Kuze's house. For some reason the villagers called him Lenka's Kuze. They even knew him down at the Kostur market as Lenka's Kuze. People knew him for many things but he was famous for one. In the fall of 1936, Lenka's Kuze returned to the village from Thessaly where he had worked as a hired hand for four years. He was dressed in a dark suit with white stripes, wore fancy shoes and was well shaven. His hair was parted in the centre of his head and he looked like a Count all puffed up, as the old used to say, and carried himself like a nobleman. When he was greeted by the people he greeted them back with his two fingers. Passing by the village manure heaps, to avoid the stench, he covered his nose and mouth with his palm.

With the money he earned Kuze repaired his leaking roof and bought a pair of healthy oxen and an iron ralo (plow) with a wheel. He then invited Pop Vasil to bless them and, like all other good providers, he went to work plowing his fields.

Kuze was well aware that the authorities had banned the Macedonian language which is why he spoke to his oxen in Greek. Those passing by his fields would hear him yelling at the oxen "Pano Gaito. Kato Balio"! (Up Gaito. Down Balio)!

Unfortunately Gaito and Balio stood there dozing, waving their tails and shaking their ears. Kuze, frustrated, kept yelling and poked the oxen with his poker, but all the oxen did was kick and jab one another. Kuze stood behind them then ran in front of them showed the oxen where up, down and forward were as he spoke to them in Greek. Unfortunately Balio and Gaito still stood there motionless, dozing away. Kuze became even more frustrated and spit on the inside part of his hands, then with his right hand he grabbed the handle of the ralo and with his left the cow poker. He stung the oxen lightly and yelled at them loud in Macedonian: "Go Balio, go Gaito, go my dear, go like that, oh – oh – oh!" The oxen finally began to move. "Down Gaito, this way up, up Balio don't drag down, you bandits!"

After tilling about half the length of a furrow he again switched his commands to Greek "Up, down" and every day he became less confident in the eyes of the villagers. When other plowmen or shepherds passed by

his field, they would stop for a moment and greet him with the words: "Good luck plowman… and teacher!" mocking him for his effort to teach the oxen Greek commands.

Unfortunately his efforts did not go unnoticed by the Greek authorities who nabbed him and took him to the police station, even though he attempted to teach his oxen commands in Greek by using Macedonian examples.

First they fined him for speaking the forbidden language and gave him a receipt. Kuze had no problem paying the fine but as he got ready to go home, they called him back again and asked him to go and see the superintendent. The Superintendent unfortunately was not satisfied with just issuing Kuze the fine and wanted to teach him a lesson he would never forget. He ordered Kuze to drink seventy-five grams of castor oil and eat three salted herrings; both of which incidentally always happened to be on hand, available at all police stations.

Kuze had much respect for the government and had no objection to being punished twice for the same crime so he did what he was told. Then before leaving, the superintendent had his hands tied behind his back and hung a sign on his neck that said: "This will happen to all who do not speak Greek."

Kuze was unable to make it home. They found him lying flat, face down, outside of the village. He was filthy and had soiled himself. He was so ashamed. When they brought him home Lena had to wash him. She dumped all the water from her earthenware jugs in order to clean him; water she had to fetch from the village spring.

After that episode Kuze was nicknamed "Kuze the lizard" because he had crawled his way to where they found him. And since then Kuze swore revenge. Such outrageous and cowardly acts must not go unpunished, he promised himself. It was time for pay back! But how? Then Lazo came to his aid and filled his head with various ideas which led him and Lenka to become members of the Communist Party.

The poor and less intelligent people in his village told Kuze that "in some great country called Russia a proletarian revolution had taken place some years ago and communism ruled there, a political system in which people lived free, had whatever their hearts desired, worked very little and gained a lot and everyone was equal, there were no rich or poor and that if he joined the proletarian struggle, then here in the village and in all other villages and cities the violence, poverty, and most importantly the castor oil and salted herring, would all disappear, and those who did him harm, would be punished severely".

All these things they told Kuze he somehow found hard to believe, but for him the most important thing was to take revenge against those who forced him to drink castor oil and eat salted herring. Kuze dreamed of the day when justice would be served. Deep inside him simmered the need for revenge and he wanted to avenge himself.

Going from ruin to ruin Georgi left one yard and entered another remembering the people who had lived there and stringing his memories of them like beads on a string, only now noticing that the day was coming to an end. The sky and the mountains were changing colour and turning velvet purple.

Suddenly the wind blew from Devolsko valley shaking the leaves on the old poplar tree. A flock of cawing ravens flew by in low flight and vanished beyond the hill. Georgi passed two more blocks noticing that here too the houses were in ruins. He could smell smoke so he followed the scent. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed something. It was a person. The person slowly came out of the house, took a step outside, threw something out and then went back inside. Georgi went closer, placed his hand on his forehead and looked through the window. Inside, in front of the fireplace, with her back turned to him was an old lady kneeling and blowing on the fire. He looked up and noticed there was an icon of the Virgin Mary in the corner of the room. In front of it flickered a small flame from an oil lamp. Suddenly the fireplace lit up and the flames lit the entire room. The old women, leaning with her fingers on the floor, slowly got up and turned to the icon. Georgi now recognized her. It was Zoia, Labrovitsa. His heart pumped fast, Georgi knocked on the window. She did not hear him. He knocked again, this time she stopped and listened for a moment. Georgi knocked a third time and finally got her attention. She came to the door, pulled the door stop and without asking who it was, opened the door.

Georgi nervously stood up straight and quietly greeted her:

"Greetings Labrovitse…"

"Welcome… who are you?" she asked as she continued to stare at him.

"I am Georgi…" he replied.

"Iorgi?" she asked. "Which Iorgi?" she repeated as she came closer and, in the dim light emanating from the fireplace, looked at his aged face.

"Iorgi… Are you Iorgi from the Petkovtsi family?" she asked as she recognized him more by his voice and less by his looks.

"Yes that is me, Labrovitse," Georgi replied.

"Ah, Iorgi…" replied the old lady with a long drawn out, melodious and surprised voice. "Where did you come from and how did you find yourself here Iorgi? I heard you were dead Iorgi… But now I can see that you are alive! The villagers, they all believed you were killed…" the old lady spoke excitedly and crossed herself several times all the while refraining from crying. "Turn around so I can see you… Thank God you are alive!" continued the old lady.

"Well, here I am and as you can see Labrovitse I am still alive," replied Georgi.

"Come in, come in, where are my manners? Good to see you Iorgi. Sit there in the corner, beside the fire… It is cold out here. It is warm inside. Sit, sit. Iorgi…" insisted the old lady.

Georgi took his backpack off his shoulder and set it aside. He sat down on the floor with his legs crossed and with his open hands he reached out towards the fire.

"Hey Iorgi, where were you? We've not heard a word about you since you left here. People were asking what happened to Iorgi? What happened to him, but no one knew…" the old lady explained as she walked towards the earthenware water jug, took a sip of water and passed it on to Georgi. "Welcome, good to see you Iorgi," she continued.

"I am happy to be here and may God give you good health Labrovitse. Thank you…" replied Georgi and then drank some water from the jug. Then, while the old lady went to look in the old chest, Georgi untied his backpack, pulled out a can of meat and began to open it. When the old lady saw what he was doing she immediately told him not to open it. "Please Iorgi you don't need to do that, save it for yourself, for later. I have food… I have bread, wheat, cheese and I still have the beehives… This evening we will eat what I have, what God has provided for us, please leave the can for yourself, you will need it later," she insisted.

"Let me ask you Iorgi, are you back for good or are you just passing through?" the old lady wanted to know.

Georgi lifted his eyes, briefly looked at her and said "I came, Labrovitse to light a candle at the cemetery… And after that…"

"Are you going back again? You are too old for the mountains, Iorgi, you are too old…" interrupted the old lady as she took the lid off the little kettle in which she was boiling wheat.

"Tomorrow we will go to the cemetery… Today I baked a large loaf of bread and I will get some wine," the old lady said hurriedly. "And as is our tradition, on Mitrovden we will bring young wine to the cemetery…" continued the old lady.

"The vineyards, Iorgi, this year had a bumper crop, but the grapes were left unpicked and remained on the vines. There was no one to pick them. Lazo and Lenka's Kuze told the people to leave, urging 'people please leave the village, the soldiers will capture and kill us, they will skin us all alive'. Then all the people left, they fled to Albania and so far no one has returned. Only Pandovti's dog returned. She came back for her pups. Unfortunately one of the soldiers killed them and now she is up on Sinadev Rid hauling day and night. A victim of circumstances… the dog raises its muzzle and hauls, hauls, crying day and night, she is crying, crying for her pups, for her own pain and for the pain of her masters…" the old lady said as she trailed off.

They ate dinner in silence. The loaf of rye bread with its thick crust was still warm as the old lady held it in her lap and broke pieces with her shaky old hands. The wheat was boiling in the small pot. Sparks flew out of the fireplace. The flames hugged the burning green oak logs extending upwards, licking the bottom of the boiling pot then slowly shrinking, trembling and turning bluish, eventually returning to the glowing coals.

Born of the coals the flames turned pale and retracted to the coals. Once in a while a small flame would spring to life, tremble and disappear again… The flames in the fireplace trembled like the small flame in the oil lamp that burned in front of the smoke darkened icon of the Virgin Mary on the wall, creating shadowy images of the long gone buried elders.

The wind began to blow outside causing loose metal debris to shake and rattle. It hit the smoke darkened walls in waves shaking off loose grit and carrying it away in swirls. As its intensity grew, it sped through the wall cavities making strange sounds, muddying the silence. Further yonder it swept through the trees caressing them as it touched them, twirling and displacing their leaves, dropping some in the yards of the smoke filled ruins and taking the rest far away beyond the village…

The flames in the fireplace suddenly lifted and lit the room and Georgi's face. It was not until then that the old lady truly noticed Georgi's gray hair and how much he had aged. Sitting in front of her she saw a person, an old man with a cruel, wrinkled and bony face, carved by worries, tired and baked by the sun and by the mountain winds.

"And the people, Iorgi," spoke the old lady as she tied the broken string "have disappeared, they have been chased away, the village has been burned down… they burned it, may the fires burn them… its soul has been destroyed… Not a living soul has been left… They took the people and destroyed them… Kiro's Mara was shot in the head by a bullet. Kiro went home to pick up something and evil found him there. He never returned. He was burned alive… Only I, wretched me, remained alive to look after the village and to gather the burned bones from the dead. The army (Greek Royalists) passed through, and after them came the Madzhiri (Christian settlers from Asia Minor). They pillaged the entire village. They took everything, everything… They fought among themselves over saddles, over hoes, over pitchforks and shovels… What they did not like, they tore up, broke, or burned down…"

Georgi kept silent. He felt sick, her words weighed on him, they were painful and deafening. He looked everywhere to find relief. He looked at the bread, then looked at the lit fireplace and then tried to imagine the good times. He tried hard to dig out memories from his childhood recollecting the past and what he had learned from his elders, old knowledge passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. He strung his memories like pearls on a string. Old memories from his great grandfathers swirled in the yard and flowed out through the door and onto the narrow village street then to the meadows and fields, the valleys and forests, crossing the rural highways carrying themselves over the hills, as if looking for holidays, for happiness and joy, for songs and dances in the long winter night get-togethers, in the playground of Gjurgevden, in the green wreaths and flowers of Easter, in the harvesting and grape picking days, in festivals, weddings and baptisms, in the tears of the young and the

newborn, in the skies of the long starry nights, in the waiting and anticipation…

Georgi took a puff of tobacco from his pipe, releasing thick smoke while rolling his shut eyes and moving his head side to side first right then left. He looked like he was experiencing pleasant and tormenting emotions brought on by memories of pain and pleasure. The pain from this war was unfortunately too powerful to shake, a war which had brought devastation and madness… But for now, at this very moment, it was warm, quiet and peaceful under this small, battered shelter where only memories lived, slipped in and out and changed from one thing to another like many pearls strung on a long silk string, threaded by a loom, which for centuries has woven life without pause …

Georgi, with every ounce of strength in his body, refused to believe that the thread had somehow been broken, that the loom no longer worked, that the spring had dried up and that the streams had gone dry. Then in the corner, in the place where the icon was, a spider wove its web and over the village a raven crowd foretelling its fate. It hurts to know, it hurts even more and his heart aches to imagine the narrow village cobblestone blanketed with ash and debris from the ruins, a village laid waste – it is even harder to accept that when the new sun sets no human will be left to set foot in this place…

When Georgi awoke it was day outside. The old lady quietly opened the door and entered holding an earthenware jug filled with young wine. They only exchanged a few words, to let each other know that they were here and that it was Mitrovden and that they needed to go to the cemetery. They left the house. The old lady held the basket under her arm filled with boiled wheat, pieces of cut bread and several apples.

Georgi, looking at the jug said, “This may be an overstatement Labrovitse, but will that be enough wine?”

“I don’t have anything else to put it in,” the old lady answered shyly.

Georgi looked around. He remembered that yesterday, at the far end of the old cemetery he had seen a discarded kettle. He went and found it, it was twisted and riddled with holes. Further over he saw a helmet. He picked it up, shook the dirt from it and looked through it at the sun. There were no holes. He put in under his arm and hurriedly went to the water spigot. He rubbed the helmet with sand and then rinsed it with water.

“Labrovitse, can we put some wine in here?” enquired Georgi.

“If you want…” said the old lady and they both returned to get some more wine.

They walked back to the cemetery in silence. Georgi held the full helmet with both hands and slowly, step by step, walked closely behind the old lady, being very careful not to spill a drop.

“There,” said the old lady motioning with her head “behind the place called Pretselo, in the grove, are the unburied young men and women. During the harvest, when they left Gramos they left their dead and

wounded behind… Whoever could, even by dragging themselves along the ground, left for Labanitsa, and whoever couldn't – was left there. In the night their cries and screams, begging for help, could be heard all the way here… I went there, I brought them bread and water. People came from Prespa and collected the wounded. The dead were left unburied… They were all young men and women."

They arrived at the cemetery. The old lady undid her black scarf and knelt on the ground. She cried quietly as if praying. With a sob in her voice she asked Georgi, "From where are we going to start?"

"We will give everyone a little bit," murmured Georgi.

They went from grave to grave and on the nameless crosses they lit candles. The old lady left a handful of boiled wheat and a piece of bread while Georgi poured some wine.

"This is Yane's grave…" indicated the old lady. Georgi poured some wine. "Yane's grave has caved in and is full of acorns…" said the old lady as she crossed herself.

A gust of wind blew from the direction of Mount Malimadi and ruffled Georgi's gray hair. Georgi looked up noticing that the oak trees were dropping their acorns and the poplars were losing their leaves to the wind. The hillside was littered with leaves and a flock of ravens circled.

Georgi and the old lady came to Mitre's grave. Mitre was Georgi's father. It was flattened to the ground and covered with grass. Beside it was a pile of soil which Georgi had brought from the place where his son Vane was killed. Georgi squeezed the last drops of wine from the helmet on top of the two graves and left the helmet on the rotting wooden cross to remind those passing by that people would live as long as there were people to remember them. He crossed himself, knelt down, put his hands in front of his face and began a long prayer...

The day was almost over. There was not a sound or rustle coming from the village. It was all quiet and silence reigned supreme. Only anguish scratched, dug and yelled – "Don't you know that all this will be covered in silence and this part of your world will be known as the land of silence?"

A sudden strong untamable pain gripped Georgi's throat, squeezing him from the inside, tearing at his chest, and spinning, scratching, straining and digging under his ribs, tightening his heart, twisting and distorting his face, clawing at his whole being. Relentlessly and like never before tears flooded his eyes…

Gray clouds hung over the sky and covered the boulders by the hill. Wind blew from the direction of Mount Malimadi. Silence followed only to be broken by the quiet rustle of dried autumn leaves, a rustle made by the gentle fall of little snowflakes. In no time the hills beyond were white with snow and on Georgi's lips surfaced the dry question, "Who did all this to us and why?"!

The Great Lie – Chapter 3

On the peninsula, opposite Nivitsi, in the thin grove at the very top of the hill was the old border watchtower. Its walls, once white, were now blackened, cracked and bent in jagged strips, carved and eroded by the passage of time and neglect. The strong winds and the rain had taken their toll on the building. Large patches of greenish-brown moss now covered the naked bricks. Only the roof had been restored and on top of the red French tiles, two or three layers of branches had been laid and covered with a barely visible fish net. Looking at this building from Drenicheno, Bela Voda, Licets or even further, one would get the impression that the place was abandoned and that trees were growing on it. Inside however, everything was clean, the walls were painted white and the floors were covered with thick colourful hand-woven, woolen carpets. One could travel to the watchtower from Nivitsi in less than thirty minutes if you took the narrow, rocky path beginning at the end of the cobblestone road below the village. The path passed by the bay of the dirty, muddy lake where domestic animals drank water and muddied the coastline with their hooves. There was also a donkey path near the watchtower.

There were two barely visible openings in the rocks, which could only be seen by the keen eye of a careful observer, or by a traveler who strayed too close accidentally; a village shepherd, peasant, or herdsman passing by. A watchful eye was kept on Nivitsi through one of the openings. The other opening, the one located a little to the south, was used all the time, day and night, to keep watch over the path that led from Orovo to the watchtower.

In front of the openings there were two rows of circular trenches used for defense. These too were invisible even to the sharpest eye. To the west there was a stone staircase, carved by hammer and chisel, leading up to the tower via the steep tilted slope. There were thick ropes on both sides of the staircase running from top to bottom. There was a fishing boat near the shoreline pushed against a crack in the rock and tied with a chain to a thick stake. The boat was there just in case, God forbid, something terrible happened and there was a need to flee to Albania in a hurry. All this was done, prepared and ready for the duration of the battles fought in Gramos.

All around was silence.

On the bare rocky hilltops of Mount Dzvezda and high up along the Mount Galichitsa incline the terrain looked like it was engulfed in purple flames. The sun was large and red hanging over a gap that separated Galichitsa in two. The sun's crescent shone through the gap, making the water of Lake Prespa look like it was on fire, burning with purple flames. The glorious setting of the translucent, velvet sun lasted for only a moment before its red disc slowly disappeared behind the mountain. The Galichitsa shadow now stretched over the lake. In the shade the waves rolled and tumbled gently. A slight breeze blew over the lake waking it up, making

the water tremble and quiver. Bands of small waves with reddish-purple crests rolled from coast to coast cutting and gilding the lake waters, caressing, splashing and lovingly kissing the coastal stones.

With the last rays of the sun the day slowly faded into twilight. But up there, up in Galichitsa, it was still warm as the sun with its last breath shone on top of Mounts Pelister and Bela Voda. The cry of a lone bird was heard in the distance. The bird was floating on the water, forgotten and separated from its flock. It beat its wings and pushed the water into the dense reeds. Darkness descended and thickened over the water making the lake look like a large, grayish-pink mirror. The Nivitsi fishermen, mostly aged men, pulled their fishing boats out of the water. Quietly they shook their fishing nets, placed the fish in large bushels and hung their nets to dry. Pale, dim shimmering light could be seen coming from the kerosene lamps that burned inside the houses in Nivitsi. Curtains were being closed behind small windows. The village was slowly sinking into darkness. There was no more light. Such was the order of things and those who knew about order would tell you that light attracts alien and undesirable eyes.

High above Lake Prespa, over the peak of Mount Pelister the full moon shone. Housewives set their dinner tables. The heavy boots of night patrolmen could be heard marching, pounding the cobblestones of the narrow village streets. The freshness of the air on a clear night brought out aromas of mead, freshly baked warm bread and freshly baked fish. A storm was brewing in the distance beyond Bela Voda. It was the roar of thunderous cannons but their long volleys and shells could not reach here.

Late in the evening hours, a dirty unwashed jeep arrived. With its bright glaring lights on, it parked in front of a house. The yard of the house was fenced with a high wall and in front of it was a huge tightly locked, thick wooden door. Several men carrying automatic rifles surrounded the house. A man wearing an English overcoat came out of the jeep. One of the escorts pointed to the house and suddenly all the men ran for the door. A noise was heard inside; it was the sound of the door lever being released. The gate was flung open. The man wearing the English overcoat, like a shadow, separated himself from the group and entered the gate. The gate was flung shut, closing behind him. Three armed men remained outside. In the courtyard, lit by the light of the full moon, two men stood up from a wooden bench under the stairs and quickly came to greet the newcomer. Who was this person wearing the English overcoat and who were the two men who came to greet him? Those watching did not know. They only knew the five guards from the security platoon.

The men inside greeted the newcomer and shook hands. They spoke briefly and one went to the barn. He fetched two saddled horses. The newcomer mounted the black horse and left through the door. In the dark of night the gallop of the horses could be heard on the village cobblestones. The horses descended towards the lake and after some time

disappeared beyond the bay. In front of and behind the horses marched the security people who accompanied them. Before arriving at the watchtower, roosters could be heard crowing in Nivitsi.

The room was large and spacious, lit by two kerosene lamps. A fire was burning in the fireplace spreading its warmth all through the room. The kerosene lamps, with their wicks set just right, were emitting a pale, whitish, trembling warm light. Blankets were hung over the three windows. Placed in the left corner of the room, was a broad wooden table made of finely planed planks. On top of the table was a red table cloth and a jar full of colourful pencils. Further over there was a box and beside it was a small table. On it was a battery operated radio and a pile of newspapers – Greek, Russian, English, German, etc. To the right of the table were two sets of black field telephone equipment. Under the western wall was a broad iron bed covered with a thick red woolen bedcover. On it rested a large white pillow embroidered with colourful patters of flowers and birds in flight. On the wall above the table, under a large portrait of Stalin, was a geographical map of Greece and to its left and right sides were two topographical military maps, one of Vicho and the other of Pindus, all dotted with red and blue arrows and flags.

No sooner had the newcomer stepped into the room than he headed straight for the wall with the maps. Slowly he removed his backpack from his shoulder, opened it and carefully began to rummage through it.

"Comrade Zahariadis," said one of the men in the room "the two topographic maps reflect today's activities on the fronts and…"

"I can see that," said Zahariadis quietly with a long drawn out voice.

The room was quiet for a long time while Zahariadis gazed at the maps and made notes. Then he stepped back, lowered his backpack to the floor, turned and said:

"Call General Headquarters and tell them to prepare a larger topographic map with all the details of Vicho for tomorrow." Then with his right hand he waved for the people in the room to leave. He looked at the clock and then covered his face with both palms and yawned widely.

Zahariadis opened the fly soiled white cover on the window and looked outside at Bela Voda. He then stepped out on the wooden balcony. He felt a cool breeze and raised his coat collar. He put his hands inside the pockets of his shabby old windbreaker and, while looking ahead, slowly stepped forward and walked down the hill. When he arrived at the dirty, muddy bay he turned left. He stood by the shore for a moment and then bent down and scooped a palm full of water. He looked behind. You never knew, even a stray bullet might hit and kill you. At a distance he could see moving shadows; they were his security detail. He rose up, took off his cap, stroked his hair and for some time gazed at the vastness of the lake. There was only silence beyond the lake. He looked to the right. The hilltops of Tsutse, Baltan, Veternitsa and Golema Chuka were quiet and resting under a blanket of morning fog. He looked down the road and

repeated the names “Dolno, Dupeni, Ljubojno and Asamati” of the villages located on the other side of the border.

Yes, Ljubojno and Asamati. Especially Asamati, it was deeply engraved in his memory. He pulled out his binoculars from their case and pointed the circle of sight at Chuka. He looked down, slowly, down and there he saw Pretor, a wide, sandy strip. He looked to the left along the coastline and yes, there was Asamati. He raised his binoculars slightly but he could not find what he was looking for. Then he turned the sight slightly to the right, ah, there it was… Yes… This was the villa which two years ago, in the spring of 1947, he had received from Lazo Kolishevski as a gift.

He remembered that it was late afternoon while walking in the orchard that Kolishevski had said to him, “Comrade Zahariadis, in addition to the overall assistance that Yugoslavia will continue to deliver and provide for the Greek democratic movement and your armed struggle, I want you to have this villa which will be fully at your disposal… Until now this villa belonged to the Politburo and from this day forward it will be at your disposal…”

“And to whom did this villa previously belong?” enquired Zahariadis.

“The villa once belonged to a Russian white guard, who was placed at the disposal of the Royal Yugoslav Army. I believe his name was Gritsenko. The man was familiar with military ships so he was appointed Commander of the Military Navy in Ohrid and Prespa. Here he bought a large estate, planted orchards and vineyards and built his villa… It is very beautiful… There is no better place in the entire Prespa Region…” confirmed Kolishevski and he continued. “Afterwards the National Liberation government confiscated it…”

“And what happened to the Russian?” interrupted Zahariadis.

“That’s another story…” remarked Kolishevski.

Zahariadis, no longer pushing the point, knew very well what had happened to the Russian and what they did to people like the Russian in Russia and in other countries that followed Russia’s path…

“Asamati… there is the villa… I see it,” Zahariadis muttered excitedly as his memories of the old days slowly began to return. The day Kolishevski handed Zahariadis the villa he gave him permission to enter Yugoslavia like a man enters his own backyard. There was a jeep made available to take him from the villa in Asamati to Markova Noga and back. The driver and his UDBA (State Security Bureau) guards were Macedonians. He was also assigned a cleaning lady and two female cooks to do shift work – they too were Macedonians... The Macedonians were very generous and thoughtful people...

Zahariadis remembered the memorable evenings he had at the villa when Lazo Kolishevski used to come to visit. He especially remembered the spring of 1947 when a table was set in the yard with roasted lamb, fresh baked carp from Lake Prespa, aged red and white wine from

Kavadartsi and wine from the Royal Winery now called the People's Winery of Demir Kapia. He also remembered the aroma of the spring flower blossoms and the scent of freshly cut grass... And who could forget, ah, the nights filled with the song of the blackbird...

Asamati… Until April 1948, before the barns over the village Vineni were constructed and outfitted, Zahariadis, Markos and their closest associates often spent nights in the villa, as if the towns German, Grazhdeno, Orovo, or Nivitsi were beneath them. Here they roamed around the orchards and walked along the narrow path leading to the lake. Here Zahariadis found peace.

Wake up time was five o'clock in the morning. He began his day with morning exercise, a daily habit he had acquired in the prison cells in Akronavplia, Kerkyra and the camp at Dachau. No one was allowed to bother him during his exercise even if there was an emergency. His exercises took half an hour after which he shaved and washed with cold water. He always shaved in front of his small mirror given to him by his cellmate from the Akronavplia prison before he was executed. Zahariadis did not like large mirrors because they reminded him of the time he had served in Kerkyra prison when two of his companions stabbed each other in their shared shower with pieces of glass from a big mirror.

He thought of his companions as cowards and unworthy of being communists and revolutionaries because they succumbed to torture and took their own lives in a cowardly way. But ... tfu (spit), tfu (spit) may evil stay far away... One never knew whose hand would break a sharp piece of glass from a large mirror…

He shaved every day and always alone. But before performing his daily shaving routine, Zahariadis always made sure the bathroom door was closed and the door was locked from the inside. He took his time shaving and when he was finished he placed his shaving equipment and mirror at the bottom of his backpack. He often cut his nails and washed his clothes. He could not stand dirt. Zahariadis always put on clean clothing in the morning and combed his thick, curly black hair before breakfast, which he prepared himself. He was neither a glutton nor a fussy eater. He usually ate a can of meat or fish, an egg, a slice of cheese and some bread. Not necessarily all at the same time. Sometimes he ate just canned meat, a slice of cheese and many times he ate bread thickly covered with sugar. He loved mountain tea. When he was in Prespa they brought him mountain tea from Malimadi and in Gramos mostly from Odreto. His bodyguards and his personal courier always brought him mountain tea in their backpacks. He also drank countless cups of coffee. Unsweetened to keep him alert and awake, but sometimes after drinking too many cups he felt nauseous. He never left anything to chance. He always checked everything. He did not tolerate forgetfulness, disorder, disobedience, tardiness and jobs not done on time. He often said and instructed:

"Knowledge, intelligence, order and self-discipline – are the mother of

success. Exactly that; self-discipline and stick to it as the Roman Pope sticks to morning prayer." And that he pressingly demanded from all his subordinates and associates. It was in his nature since his prison days and since his long stays in Russia to have a strong sense of caution, sickly distrust and suspicion. He did not trust anyone, even though he told them that he had great and unlimited confidence in them. His half-closed eyes left a strong impression of cunning and wisdom in everyone, always hiding his mistrust and countless questions.

Loneliness was his only company. He was used to it since his childhood, continued with it in his youthful years and strengthened it in the prison cells and camp Dachau. He could not accommodate a large number of people around him and had no tolerance for closed quarters. He could not tolerate anyone standing behind him or not looking into his eyes. He wanted the individual or the crowd to be in front of him, to look into their eyes and see their faces, hands and reactions. He could not tolerate people standing in front of him with hands in their pockets. Who knows what they had there? He was always alert.

He had a talent for talking to people and while chatting he was able to adjust his conversation to suit the person to whom he was talking. He not only wanted to hear what the person had to say, but also to give them his support, to let them know that he and only he was right and promised the person that he would personally help them right all wrongs.

He was well educated in such matters in the party schools in the Soviet Union and certainly had long conversations with Stalin, his teacher and educator. He was convinced that only those who were able to attain unlimited power, would have unlimited ability to rule over plight and grievances, pain and suffering, the wishes and fancies of the unprotected and individuals and entire nations deprived of rights.

He had the ability to come down to everyone's level and then rise up high above them. He was able to do this on an individual level as well as with a crowd. He knew how to manipulate the emotions of individuals and crowds and, to gain their confidence, he gave them his highest respect. He was able to instill his thoughts into them and when they rejected their own thoughts and will, he had them, he owned their hearts and souls and their desires.

He had the gift of talking to people perfected and deeply aspired to penetrate the feelings and souls of the mistreated and the suffering. His gift was also shaped, sustained and supported by those closest to him. They praised and glorified him, adding to his natural gift and power, feeling great under his shadow and under it they themselves gained glory and importance and they were always satisfied, collecting crumbs from the rich table. They were his long arm who knew very well how to punish harshly.

His mouth praised, promised and called on everyone to take up arms, to trust him and follow his lead blindly, to give up their precious lives in

order to bring him victory. And he, Zahariadis, in turn, knew how to repay them with praise…

Asamati… The network that promised enlargement was tangled in the distant large, wide and warm cabinets, but here it continued to be knitted. Asamati… Here, in the splendour of the vineyards when the grapes and apples matured and dispensed their aroma, at the end of September 1947, he convened the Third Plenum which lasted two days, enough time to question Markos.

He now remembered asking Markos whether Aegean Macedonia was going to be free by 1948. Unfortunately he did not like Markos's short answer when Markos said, "Yes provided that the Party initiates a program to rally the Party Organizations in the cities to mobilize 60 to 70 thousand fighters." But Zahariadis had already formulated the idea for liberating Aegean Macedonia and Thrace with their capital Solun and soon was going to draft a plan code named "Limnes". Markos however refused to deviate from his own thought that the cities held the largest reserves of fighters, where the working class was numerous and where a myriad of hardened fighters existed with experience from the resistance against the Italians and Germans. "Without these fighters going to the mountains," said Markos "we will continue to fight a Partisan war." Unfortunately, Zahariadis knew little about the Partisan movement and even less about waging war but agreed to mobilize all he could, speaking openly for the first time about the needs of the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG) – food, clothing, drugs, weapons, which were to be primarily delivered by the Yugoslavs and other friendly Eastern Europeans. He said that the weapons were promised to him and that he would arrange to have thousands of rifles, machine guns, cannons and even tanks and planes. Everyone was delighted, including Markos who immediately suggested that Zahariadis be appointed Commander in Chief of DAG. Zahariadis declined, arguing that the Party, meaning himself, needs stay out of all this so that he could keep control of politics and other things.

Asamati… Here, after long discussions lasting all night, on December 23rd, 1947, the Provisional Democratic Government of Greece was formed. And still Zahariadis couldn't forgive himself for appointing Markos as its President… Here they wondered and argued about how to lead an armed struggle rarely agreeing on a common strategy. Here, while they were relaxed and their conduct and conversations were tolerable, Zahariadis, for the first time expressed his idea to Markos about forming a regular revolutionary army. Markos did not accept the idea arguing that Partisan tactics in this country had served their struggle well, brought them success and gained them sympathy from abroad. After that their discussions became vigorous, they went their separate ways and were bitten by the bug of doubt and mistrust…

Zahariadis turned and slowly, taking tiny steps, went closer to the shore. He paused and again stared at Asamati. And from here, from the

curve, the roof of Gritsenko's villa could be seen. He stared at it for a long time. And with those thoughts he took to the road, the road he remembered well, the road he had traveled many times at dusk and late at night riding in his old, worn out jeep; a jeep given to him by Tito. But in his travels to Skopje, from Ljubojno or from Asamati, Zahariadis remembered the black limo he used to ride in, always escorted by armed guards. And when he arrived at his destination there was always a nice warm hotel room reserved for him equipped with clean towels, scented soaps and a bathtub full of hot water. Unfortunately he never had time for enjoyment not only because he was a nervous character but because his job required him to rush. Besides his busy schedule he also had to adapt to weather conditions and to the schedules of the people with whom he was meeting. It was important to him that he was seen and perceived as a well mannered and educated person who knew how to find his way around every opportunity and with all kinds of company.

He usually had his dinner late at night, after he had his bath. Outside the door of his well-kept apartment stood people with frowning faces, bearing automatic rifles well hidden under their leather coats. With dinner he drank wine, aged Macedonian red and white wine, which put a smile on his face erasing the deep, dark sadness hidden behind his eyes. He slept until the crack of dawn. Early morning he began with a quick shave (he always shaved himself, he had no confidence in others, especially surrendering his throat to someone else), strong black coffee and a ride to the airport in the same, well concealed (from eyes and ears) limo. His destination was Belgrade, a lovely and dear city. He fell in love with Belgrade after watching it from Dedinje at night and in the early hours of the morning.

And now, standing at the lake's shoreline, looking into the foggy distance he knew that there behind the dark cloud was Asamati where he found peace in the white two-story villa. In Asamati he could surrender to his thoughts while enjoying the warm heat radiating from the fireplace, the grace of good red Macedonian wine and the pleasantness of a large piece of warm, village baked bread…

How many times had he traveled on that old, pothole filled, muddy road? He knew all the villages and from each he remembered something; a conversation, a smile, a grip of a handshake, a raised fist signaling victory… He got all the attention from the people…

Markova Noga. It was like a door to the world and the road usually began at Nivitsi, Vineni, Grazhdeno, or Orovo. And always at hand was his jeep. This is where the road he traveled began leading through Skopje and ended in Belgrade. He loved Belgrade with its two rivers, whose reflection he could see from Dedinje at night. He loved the city lights, the quiet wide streets on which he rode with his friend that he had met in Moscow, and yes, those long discussions, in the Marshal's car. What did they talk about? Only they knew. Sometimes, when he was lonely, he

would wonder why the Marshal had wanted to have those conversations in his black Mercedes driving alone, the two of them, along the empty and well lit Belgrade Revolution Boulevard, so close to the many eyes and ears of a large number of his security people and yet so far away from his associates? He remembered well what he promised him. Much more than the others promised…

From Belgrade to Moscow he usually traveled by train via Prague, the three cities he truly loved the most. He loved Moscow because he had met the woman whom he had loved for his entire life there. There he had learned to love communism and met and loved Stalin, a man whom he trusted and admired.

He loved Prague not only for the woman he had fallen in love with while studying at the Marxist Communist University in Moscow, but for many other reasons. From all the cities of the world he truly loved Prague the most; its river Vltava with its famous Karlov bridge, museums, cafés, bars, baroque buildings, cobblestones and the quiet melodious voices of the people…

Modestly dressed, holding the hand of the woman he loved, he strolled through Vatslavski park then crossed over the Karlov Bridge to the top of the Royal Palace. He felt terrible pain and sorrow every time someone mentioned the name Prague, a city he loved above all the cities in the world. Every time he visited this woman and the city he fell in love with both even more…

Moscow and Belgrade were the cities where he studied but Athens was the city where he acquired his practical knowledge of the proletarian and world revolution. He hated Athens but loved Belgrade.

In Belgrade he had his first, and perhaps his most important discussions about joining or not joining the armed struggle, for which evidence and justification he found in Moscow. Conversely, the road from Vineni and Nivitsi passed through Prague and Belgrade, and from there to Gramos, mostly through Albania. When he returned to Nivitsi, Zahariadis would lay down on the iron bed that dedo (grandpa) Mitre had brought from Solun, which he bought with the first money he had earned as a pechalbar (migrant worker) in America.

From the pocket of his English military blouse, Zahariadis often took out a picture of his woman and son who now lived in Prague and would look at them with glum and sad eyes. Then he would sigh and whisper, “Ah Prague, you are most beautiful when the acacia and wild chestnut trees bloom along your wide boulevards, when the lilacs blossom in the gardens, when the flowers in flowerpots placed in the windows and balconies bloom in the warm, humid Prague nights.” He also loved the Bohemians of Prague, who, when drunk with beer would urinate behind a corner while loudly, and without breaking the conversation, debated about changing the world.

Weighed down by these reminders, he heard the blackbird sing in the night, which to him sounded like a violin playing… He got to the end of the peninsula, turned around at the first houses in Nivitsi and began his way back, retracing his footsteps.

"Living space," he said, often speaking loudly as though someone was listening to him very carefully but would not hold him accountable for what he said. "We will only have Vicho as our living space; Gramos will soon be lost. Southern and Central Greece no longer exist for us. There we lost almost all of our detachments, they were destroyed. A total defeat! Two battlefield strongholds - Vicho and Kajmakchalan. The entire region is populated with Macedonians. They should be fully utilized to turn the tide to our advantage. Full mobilization is needed. It needs to be done as soon as possible. But how? Who can I ask for advice? Is there anyone who would now support me fully? Markos? It is apparent that he is incapable. I am in great need of the miserable Velouhiotis or Sarafis. Yes Sarafis, the only educated officer from the ranks of ELAS (National Liberation Army of Greece)… Gousias, Vlandas, Bardzotas ... yes, they too will undertake anything if I promise to save their heads... they have no choice. They will accept my offer. They are simple people, obedient, eager to act and faithful like shepherd dogs. What about the deserters? They too are looking for action. And I hope they don't think they have the support of the people? With one motion of my finger I can have them disappear. And they think they have the peoples' support. No they don't! I am here and they there," pointing north with his hand "in Skopje! In the interest of the struggle I still protect and support them. Otherwise they would be executed. Watch them carefully and keep them at a distance. It is obvious that they are Tito's agents and dislike one another. They don't even greet one another. Everyone slanders everyone in my presence… There was need to execute Vera and some others; Urania, Pavle… They constantly sent reports to Lazo. Our intelligence service knows this, has reliable evidence. Let them do what they want. One day I will strangle them with those reports. I will force them to eat them and then I will tell everyone that the peoples' court found them guilty. Then I will send after them the mothers and fathers of the children who already died. I will tell them it was their fault they died. I will initiate public anger against them. I will send the International Communist and Workers' Movement against Tito..." declared Zahariadis to himself in a loud, angry voice.

New ideas, new intentions and a new future were spinning in Zahariadis's head. It was important to him that every idea put forward gain support at the Party Plenum. Enough with the mountains. War should be waged on the village plains and in the towns and cities. That's where the reserves were. The children too, who had been sent to the Eastern Block countries, were now mature and must be returned to take their place in our formations. Everyone to arms and everything for victory! No one stands outside of the formations. And what happens after that? He will explain

and they will believe him because that's what he taught them all to do; to blindly follow and not ask questions. There would be plenty of time for questions. And who would dare ask questions? Who had the courage to challenge Zahariadis?

The Party was strong and powerful when it recognized its mistakes. It learned from its mistakes. It was important to have courage to recognize mistakes. And Zahariadis had courage in the recognition of mistakes. He often said, "If the Bolsheviks had the courage to acknowledge their mistakes then why not we their students?" For him the Bolsheviks were an example of everything!

The fog that hung over Tsutse was now gone, the wind had done its job. Beyond the lake there was a column of trucks on the road and above them followed a cloud of dust. He knew what the trucks were carrying. He had watched them for two years carry the wounded back and forth… And yes, they were always full. The Macedonian roads from Markova Noga and from Kajmakchalan to Katlanovo, in the last two years, were stained with the blood of DAG fighters and with the tears of the long columns of departing under-aged children separated from their families. The trucks went around the bend and approached Ljubojno. Yes, Ljubojno the village he had come to love. There in the guest room of the National Militia he always felt secure; about the food, the rakia, the wine and about his security people. He felt more secure there than he did at Nivitsi, Vineni, Grazhdeno, or Orovo. He felt more secure with his guard, his driver and his two civilians under whose leather coats automatic rifles always hung. Yes he always carried that with him but what did he believe? What did he think of the people in Macedonia? A wild bunch! Balkanites who were always looking for something, wanting something and plotting something, especially against their own kind… Suddenly he remembered his last trip to Skopje, Belgrade and from there to Moscow and back.

To take a short breath, drink a cup of coffee or tea, he often took a trip to the watchtower in Markova Noga. Even though he was unable to see the terrain while driving he always knew where he was on the road and that he was on the right road. He recognized locations by the sharp turns.

From the tower he then, without delay, would go straight to Skopje. On the way, being driven on the dusty road, he would call out places like Babuna and Tsrn Vrv recognizing them by the curves in the road, especially those between Veles and Prilep, up to the plains before Skopje. He knew where, on the right side of the road, there was a gorge cut by the river Pchinja, where wounded and sick DAG fighters were treated in natural hot-baths. He knew this even though he had not been there, not even for a visit. One time a UDBA colonel who, on his trip to Skopje, accompanied Zahariadis from Bitola, proposed that he go to visit his recovering fighters. Zahariadis immediately declined by shaking his hand and said that there was no need because he knew the wounded were in safe

and capable hands and that, thanks to that, they would quickly return to the fight again.

All the insecurities he had while traveling to Skopje evaporated when Zahariadis entered the thick and massive doors of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Macedonia headquarters. He felt completely at ease there, especially in the guest room which was covered with wide wooden planks with motifs of characteristically Macedonian flora and fauna carved on them. He admired the carvings and was amazed at their beauty and artistic Macedonian craftsmanship, wondering who knew what was embedded in these beauties?

First he drank his refreshing juice and afterwards had coffee in the company of the Central Communist Party's top Macedonian leaders. The conversations were conducted informally in a kind of Slavic Esperanto; he spoke Russian while they spoke Macedonian and Serbian with a touch of folk Macedonian, creating moments of amusement and laughter. But during dinner, conversations were conducted formally through the help of an interpreter who spoke excellent Serbian and Russian. During these memorable conversations Zahariadis would ask his hosts: "How is my dear friend the Marshal? Has he made any changes or any new appointments?" His discussions in Skopje he regarded as more or less casual, but those he conducted in Belgrade were the real thing. His meetings with Tito were very important to him.

Depending on his needs and urgency, Zahariadis traveled to Belgrade by train or by plane. For the more urgent requirements he chose a faster mode of transportation. Very few people, however, knew of his visits to Skopje and Belgrade. While traveling to Belgrade, he disabled the handsets on his special telephone equipment.

Thinking about his visits to Belgrade reminded Zahariadis of his May (this year's) visit to the Marshal's residence where he met two generals from the Yugoslav General Staff. He recalled they were standing, giving a presentation in front of a large military map of Northern Pindus exhibiting a plan which the Greek army General Headquarters had drafted under the expertise of General Van Fleet of the United States and his numerous advisors. Zahariadis listened carefully and then when the generals finished their presentations said:

"We too are familiar with the details. We have taken all necessary military precautions and have constructed an insurmountable and unbreakable defense from the Gramos side. We are ready and waiting for the enemy to come to us and when it does we will switch our fighting tactics from defensive to offensive. Our aim is to make the enemy bleed, deliver it heavy losses in men and materials and, at the most appropriate time, mount a counter offensive to prove to them that the Democratic Army of Greece is ready and able to fight a frontal war, which means we will be finished fighting Partisan warfare."

The next day while flying to Moscow he could not get the words "Partisan warfare" out of his mind and, until he landed in Moscow Airport, he was stricken with remorse for using it. He remembered that "Partisan warfare" was the backbone of the Yugoslav struggle.

He stayed in Moscow two days and then returned and was picked up by Rankovich at Batajanitsa airport. They shook hands in silence and no discussion took place until dinner. A lavish dinner, hosted by the Marshal, was prepared in Zahariadis's honour. It was obvious Zahariadis was upset so the Marshal toasted him with aged, white wine to get him drinking and mellowed down. Whether intentionally or by accident, evidently concerned, Zahariadis let the words "Hazjainot advised me…" slip out.

"Did you order?" Rankovich interrupted quietly while smiling at the edge of his mouth.

"Hazjainot advised me regarding the newly created International situation, regarding the new hard-line position the USSR and the Peoples' Democratic countries have taken and told me to end our armed struggle," repeated Zahariadis as if he did not hear what Rankovich had asked. "They want us to ask for a truce, allow our fighters to surrender their weapons and return home and those who do not want to do that are asked to retreat to Albania. Hazjainot also advised me that he had already spoken to Enver Hoxha and Hoxha has agreed to assist, as per the advice and instructions given to him…" continued Zahariadis.

The Marshal and Rankovich looked at each other noticeably. "And did they mention us?" asked Rankovich.

"No!" lied Zahariadis. Neglecting to tell them that, while having a dinner for him organized by Stalin, after the third toast, Molotov said:

"You, comrade Zahariadis should get ready to fight against revisionism… we know that you maintain good contacts with Tito, but ... somehow you need to find a way to join us ... We have information that there, in Yugoslavia, things are not going well... to us Tito looks very suspicious ... the man wants to be independent when the whole progressive world, under the wise leadership of the great Stalin, struggles to fight against imperialism and for lasting peace..."

"No," repeated Zahariadis "you were not mentioned!" The Marshal and Rankovich looked at each other again. The Marshal touched his empty glass and the waiter filled it with wine.

One month after this meeting and two weeks after the start of the great battles in Gramos, on June 28th, Radio Belgrade broadcast the contents of a letter from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, written in response to a letter written by the Cominform. With his ear glued to his battery powered radio, while sipping his mountain tea at the General Headquarters of DAG, Zahariadis the Chief of Staff, listened intently to the text being read, then, turning the radio to long wave, intently listened to the news from Moscow. He frowned when the radio lost the signal and the sound became garbled. After listening to the

program he understood the strange look on the faces of Rankovich and Marshal Tito when he mentioned Hazjainot. They knew something but kept it from him. And after thinking for a long time he said:

"The Yugoslav leadership is not the only victim here; my movement will also suffer in all this." He already knew what Athens was going to say: "Unconditional surrender or death!" Should he have listened to Stalin? He never told anyone what Stalin had told him, not even his closest associates in the Polit-bureau. It was too late by now; all access to Gramos was already in flames.

The next day Zahariadis asked to see Markos, Bardzotas, Vlandas and Gusias so that he could tell them the news that Tito and his Party were condemned by the Comintern. Then after he told them the news he posed the question: "What position will our Party take in regards to the Yugoslav Party which now has split from the anti-imperialist camp?"

There was silence!

Markos broke the silence and said: "Comrades, we have our own problems and…"

"I want a direct answer, Comrade Markos. The question is clear, isn't it?" interrupted Zahariadis and, without giving any one else the chance to speak, said: "In a time when we lead an open war, our position must be neutral. We all know what Yugoslavia means to our movement. Besides that, our position must also be to keep our Comrade Stalin informed. I don't see anyone being against that. Do I? …Meeting adjourned!"

In the evening, using his encrypted radio, Zahariadis contacted Stalin and among other things assured him that at an appropriate time the Communist Party of Greece would openly side with the Cominform.

Going over the experiences and memories of his recent past while taking a long walk along the lake's shoreline, Zahariadis was formulating new thoughts. He created new ideas and new plans in his head.

He thought the most important thing for him now was to get assistance. It was important that DAG conquer a city and hold it, so that Zahariadis could proclaim it as his capital, and then his friends in Prague, Bucharest, Budapest, Warsaw, Sofia and Tirana would have no choice but to recognize his government and offer greater assistance to his cause…

At the same time he was well aware that attempting to capture cities would be costly. There would be many dead and wounded, crippled and maimed and the number of fighters in DAG would be greatly reduced, not to mention the effects this would have on the morale, fighting spirit and enthusiasm of the fighters. But, in spite of its downside, the idea of capturing a city sounded very promising, especially if it attracted the Macedonian population. There was also the prospect of bringing the children, sent to the Eastern Block countries, back earlier. By now they were old enough to make excellent fighters.

Everyone to arms and everything for victory! No one stands outside of the formations. And what happens after that? He would explain and they

would believe him because that's what had he taught them all; to blindly follow and not to ask questions. There would be plenty of time for questions. And who would dare ask questions? Who had the courage to challenge Zahariadis?

The struggle was necessary and when necessary then there was no question. The Party and the Movement were strong especially when they recognized their mistakes. It was important to know and recognize mistakes and for that it was necessary to have courage. Zahariadis had the most courage of all in recognizing mistakes. He used to say, "If the Bolsheviks had the courage to acknowledge their mistakes then why not we their students!?" For him the Bolsheviks were an example of everything! The Bolsheviks were the top of the top.

Zahariadis spoke the word "Bolshevik" with great respect because, to him, it meant perfection. He even pushed Greek, as well as Macedonian, "light" communists to believe in that perfection, which when brought to Greece meant to believe in him.

He paused for a moment and gazed ahead. The distance looked empty; but that was only in his own mind. He continued his walk and with his eyes closed conjured up a new idea. He noticed tiny waves splashing at his feet. He knelt down and stretched out his hand. The tiny, foamy waves washing his palm were spreading out and breaking. He curled his fingers into a fist and brought them before his eyes. He stared at them and could not stop staring. He tightened his grip so tight that his eyes became bloodshot. At first the water drained out fast then it dripped out drop by drop. He opened his hand and looked at it. There were coloured lines and indentations in his palm. He smiled.

This reminded him of the Gypsy woman he had met in 1929 in Moscow, in Taganka, when he was 25 years old and a student at the Marx Labour University. He was madly in love with the Czech woman. He loved to mix it up with the Moscow youths, listen to them speak and all the while make mental notes of their eyes, hair, physical characteristics, memorizing words he had heard spoken, etc. Then late at night he would go to one of the Party building rooms and busily make notes on what he had seen and heard. The exercise was part of his curriculum.

Yes, then while sitting at one of the benches a Gypsy woman had approached him and for two rubles she read his palm. She said "Ой, ой, парень, дорога твоя плохая… дурень ты парень. Вот, смотри, миленький, линия дороги никуда не ведет. Ты красивий, умен, но характер у тебя, характер подлеца. Ты случайно не коммунист?" (Oh, oh, man, your path is bad ... you're a fool boy. Look dear, here is a rich line going nowhere. You are handsome, intelligent, but you have the character of a scoundrel. Are you by any chance a Communist?)

He reached the end of the peninsula, paused and looked at the lake all covered with translucent fog. He continued and paused again staring into

the distance and thinking. He had already formulated in his mind what he was going to write and bring to the forthcoming Plenum.

He took a sharp turn and at a fast pace began climbing the steps leading to the watchtower. The guards took him to the yard but were unsure where he was going to sleep that night. They were accustomed to him changing plans without notice. He often changed places because he was convinced that he would be safe; convinced that no one had the ability to decide his fate in advance...

The Great Lie – Chapter 4

Every night a kerosene lamp lit the room with a view of Galichitsa. Zahariadis was working, writing and then taking small breaks to drink a cup of strong Georgian tea. On the fifth night he finished his writing, which he was going to present in the upcoming Fifth Plenum. Sometime before the break of dawn he put down his pencil, collected his papers and arranged them by page number. He then pulled out two pages as though he was getting ready to give a speech and in a soft voice began to read:

"In Northern Greece the Macedonian people…" he paused. By the movement of his head it was obvious that he was unsure of the text. He reached for his pencil, stood up, walked around the room and reconsidered. He frowned. He went to the window, lifted the curtain slightly and for some time stared at the vastness of the fog covered lake. He turned and slowly and quietly moved away from the window, then began to pace between the door and the window. He threw a couple of logs into the fireplace and then stood beside the table. He sat down and with his head resting on his left hand he began to read again:

"In Northern Greece, the Macedonian people ..." he paused again locking his sight on the last two words, swaying back and forth, making the old chair squeak beneath him and tapping the paper with his pencil. He stood up and with sluggish and quiet steps began to pace from one corner of the room to the other. He paused in the middle of the room, thought, frowned and resumed his pacing. He went close to the window, opened the curtain slightly and stared into the darkness. It was now snowing hard outside. It was a blizzard and the wind was howling wildly through the trees. He opened the window. The wind blew a wave of cold air on his face. Large snowflakes landed on the floor inside the room. He left the window open, turned and again began to pace, collecting and measuring his thoughts. When he felt refreshed he went to the fireplace, knelt in front of the fire and, with the tongs, adjusted the logs one on top of the other. He then stood up, closed the window and went back to the table. He took his papers, found the part that made him pause and spoke out loud:

"Only Macedonian, only people?" then began to talk to himself saying "If I write that it will mean that I recognize and admit to the name and to the nation. Will these two words, used in this way during this political and military situation, yield the desirable results for our movement and strengthen the position of our Party with this population? No doubt – yes! And will taking such a position cause an outcry among some members of the Politburo and central committee? No doubt - yes! There will no doubt be a storm in the very leadership."

He put his paper on the table and from the pencil jar he took out a red pencil and with it beside the word 'Macedonian' he wrote the word 'Slavo-Macedonian' in parenthesis. He then began to read out loud:

"In Northern Greece the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) people…" unsure of himself he shook his head and above the word "people" wrote the word "minority" and asked himself: "people or minority? 'Slavo-Macedonian minority' does not sound bad at all. Or would it be better if I call them 'Slavo-Macedonian' population? Minority, yes…" he said and while holding the page in his hand stood up and took a few passes around the room. He circled and opened the window again. The cold wind forced him to close it. Again he asked himself: "Must it be openly written as 'Macedonian nation'?" He hesitated. Should he replace the word 'nation' with the word 'minority' or should he use the word 'population'? He circled the room again, burdened with doubt. He thought and abruptly returned to the table placing the piece of paper on the table. Then with his red pencil he struck out the words 'minority' and 'population'. And now without thinking and without hesitation he wrote down the word 'people'. Relieved, he then began to write:

"Στη Βορεια Ελλαδα ο μακεδυικος (σλαβομακεδονικος) λαος ταδοσε ολα για τον αγωνα και πολεμα με μια ολοκληρωση ηροισμου και αυτοθυσιας που προκαλουν το θαυμασμο." (In Northern Greece the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) people gave their all in the struggle and fought with heroism and self-sacrifice, and deserve our respect and admiration…)

He paused again. Then looked at what he had written and said:

"The last part is true. From the reports I received from NOF (Peoples' Liberation Front) and from AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front), as well as the ones from General Headquarters, the population, especially from Kostur, Lerin and Voden Regions, gave its all. And the youth from the villages truly deserve our respect and admiration. Yes, well said. This will give them recognition. It will encourage them to fight even more… But, what will motivate them? More about that further down the page…

I am certain that we will satisfy the Macedonian people with these words, those from NOF and AFZH and, it is understood that Tito and Kolishevski, because in all the talks we had with them, always called this population 'Macedonian'. We will also satisfy those who, in Northern Greece, settled from the south of the country and from the islands. We will especially satisfy those who, during the population exchanges between Greece and Turkey, were brought here and became a majority. By the name of that part of Macedonia which Greece appropriated during the 1913 division, not only will they say, but they will truly claim to be Macedonians. Different from themselves they will also accept that outside of them, beside them and together with them, lives a Slavic population which fifteen years ago or earlier, we, the Greek Communists, gave the name 'Slavo-Macedonians'. Which means, in this case, both sides will be satisfied. Up to here my write-up is excellent, well thought out and will hold… Let us continue..."

Satisfied with the first part of his write-up, Zahariadis sat more comfortably, put his other papers aside and continued his conversation with himself:

"Now let us see what will motivate the Macedonian or should I say 'Slavo-Macedonian' people to continue to give their all, especially, what will motivate their sons and daughters to fight, be heroic and sacrifice themselves for our cause?

First, we need to tell those in NOF-AFZH and the group of deserters in Skopje that they don't need to doubt the new democratic Greece because we will give them some rights. Second, national rights will be 'revived' in the new Greece. But in order to obtain all this, the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) people must fight and make many sacrifices so that the Democratic Army of Greece can win the war. Yes. These are the conditions for their 'renewal'. Yes. This is the basis…"

Zahariadis, once again repeated his thoughts to himself, took a sharp red pencil from the pencil jar and without rushing, began to write between the already written lines, repeating out loud every word he wrote:

"Δεν πρεπει να υπαρχει καμια αμφιβολια οτι σαν αποτελεσμα της νικησ του ΔΣΕ και της λαικης επαναστασης ο μακεδονικος λαος θα βρει την πληρη εθνικη αποκατασταση του ετσι οπως τη θελει ο ιδιος, προσφεροντας σημερα το αεμα του για να την αποκτησει." (There should be no doubt that as a result of the Democratic Army of Greece and the People's Revolution achieving victory, the Macedonian people will fully acquire their national renewal, which they desire. If that is what they want then they must sacrifice their blood today.)

"This is good!" he said. And after reading the entire line he underlined the words 'national renewal' twice with the same red pencil and loudly asked himself "Will those simple and half literate leaders and activists of NOF even understand the word 'αποκασταση' and how will they translate it into their own language; what do the words 'national renewal' even mean to the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) people, who in Greece are not recognized as a minority? Our Party recognized them as a national minority and in the course of the armed struggle that minority earned all the rights entitled to it. In the new phase of the armed struggle and Peoples' Revolution we will give them new hope…"

He paused for a moment and while tapping the papers with his finger he said:

"Well, yes. These words, 'national renewal', these people need to understand that they mean full national self-determination. The people in Skopje, and through them Tito and our opponents, need to know and understand that these peoples' national question and self-determination in the spirit of the United Nations resolution, can only be achieved through our struggle and through our revolution. They need to know that this can only be done through the Macedonian peoples' heroism and contribution

in blood. In other words, they will need to fight if they want to be nationally separate in the way they want.

Theoretically this is great. We should be able to use this as propaganda against the people in Vardar Macedonia to motivate them to also want to be self-determined, and in that spirit, to seek separation from Yugoslavia. We should be able to motivate them to show solidarity for their brothers who today are suffering. We must convince them to join their struggle and bleed among them. Wanting to separate from Yugoslavia would be the first step towards achieving their aspirations for national unification with their people and for the creation of a single Macedonian state. Yes. Yes, we need to convince them that they will find their best ally in the new democratic Greece if they accept this idea."

He again read the part of the sentence that said "the Macedonian people will fully acquire their national renewal, which they desire".

"And precisely in this, is the key!" happily exclaimed Zahariadis. "If this is how they understand it then their Peoples' Republic of Macedonia will vanish, disappear, go to the devil. There is no room for a Macedonia in this region. There can be no state with the name Macedonia because this name is a historical legacy, exclusively belonging to the Greeks."

He finished writing on the page and then again spoke out loud:

"The Macedonian Communists always stood on the helm of their people's struggle. This for now is no good. And maybe overall it's no good. But the Macedonian Communists acted from the ranks and in the name of the Communist Party of Greece. This means that the head of their struggle is the Communist Party of Greece. If they have AFZH and NOF, and we know how these organizations were formed and who their tutors were, then they should also have their own Communist organization which we can easily control. NOF however cannot be completely controlled but let it vegetate and in its own vegetative state its leaders will eat each other alive. We will oppose the Macedonian communists here. Then we will make those in the Communist Party of Macedonia in Skopje think that the Macedonian communists in Greece are truly at the helm of the Macedonian people. Yes, but of course," he screamed out loud with pleasure "we will form a party organization. A communist organization, their communist organization, of course and it will be directly led by us; by the Communist Party of Greece. They, on the other side of the lake, across the border, have a Communist Party of Macedonia and they here, they here, will also have their own, similar to the Communist Party of Macedonia. If we advocate for their restoration in Greece, then let them have a political vanguard, and let it be a communist organization.

Here is the second key that will open the same door: The Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia. Let the Communist Party of Macedonia across the border fight it out with the Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia here. In the morning we will find several stupid, half-educated, greedy village-type miners from the Lerin and Kajlari mines

to join the Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia and in the afternoon we will appoint several plowmen, shepherds and cow-herders to undertake the roles of leading it. They will be our puppets whose strings will find their way into these hands," said Zahariadis spreading his hands open in front of him. Then shaking his fingers he said: "They [Yugoslavs] can have their own Macedonian people and we [Greeks] will have our 'Slavo-Macedonian' people… let them quarrel among themselves, let them fight until they can't stand each other… Once divided… they will remain divided, at least in this region. Let them be victims of their own doing. Macedonians don't have the talent or the intelligence to become united. Let them remain the way they are 'timid and quarreling among themselves, precisely tailor made to be slaves'. To people like that you just throw a bone and watch how they chew, let them make a spectacle of themselves. That is why ruling them is so easy."

Zahariadis felt tired. He spent the entire night sleepless, writing and correcting his presentation for the forthcoming Central Committee Fifth Plenum. This was going to be one of his most important meetings and he wanted his new position on the Macedonian issue presented just right. He sorted his papers by page number, placed them in a brown envelope and with a red pencil wrote "Strictly Confidential" on the top right hand corner of the envelope. Then, with a commanding voice, he called out to the security officer on duty to take the papers and have them typed (two copies). Extending the envelope to the guard he said: "Take it to Central Committee Headquarters immediately and give it to Vlandas personally!"

He heard some whispers outside followed by the sound of horse hooves and then there was silence. Then Zahariadis, while rubbing his neck and forehead with his hand, slowly returned to the table. He turned the handle on the field telephone several times and lifted the receiver. There was a long pause. He hung up, put the receiver back and turned the apparatus handle again. While waiting for a response he stared at the fireplace, looking at the flames flicker and fade. Finally he heard a voice on the telephone. At first it sounded like someone was splashing mud in a swamp, then a groggy, hoarse voice came on saying: "Go ahead!"

"Dimitri," called out Zahariadis. It was Vlandas on the other side who immediately recognized Zahariadis's voice and, as if splashed by cold water, suddenly woke up, quickly got out of bed and, standing barefoot in his underwear, politely said: "Yes, comrade Nikos, yes, I personally…

"Dimitri," interrupted Zahariadis with a stern tone of voice, "do you hear me?"

"Yes, comrade Nikos, I hear you well… Please continue…" responded Vlandas.

"A while ago I sent you my hand-written manuscript by courier," said Zahariadis.

"Who? Who did you send?" inquired Vlandas.

“I said my manuscript. Study it and today at fifteen hundred hours come and see me at my place. Yes! I am here. Upstairs… Bring Bardzotas with you!

“Yes… I understand…” confirmed Vlandas as the receiver went quiet.

Vlandas waited a while before quietly hanging up the handset. Then as if sitting on pins and needles, Vlandas looked at the clock and cursing the Virgin and Christ, loudly said: “It’s four o’clock in the morning!”

Zahariadis bolted the door and checked the windows to make sure they too were shut tight and then collected the papers he had scattered all over the floor. He then broke some kindling and put it in the woodstove. Water was simmering in the teapot. He placed three teaspoons of Georgian tea into his two handled porcelain cup and filled it with hot water. He then took several large gulps and felt warm inside his chest and stomach. After that he sipped his tea slowly, enjoying the moment while unwinding from yesterday’s thoughts, which he had spent all night putting on paper. The warmth coming from the woodstove and the warmth from the strong Georgian tea made Zahariadis sleepy. He turned down the wicks in the kerosene lamps and without undressing lay down and covered himself with his sleeping bag.

The Great Lie – Chapter 5

A week later in the afternoon, at the agreed upon time, Vlandas, Gusias and Bardzotas arrived at the Central Committee headquarters. They came on horseback escorted by a foot patrol which, in addition to providing security, stomped on the snow in front of the horses to make it easier for them to travel. Later, at dusk they were joined by Ioannidis.

The men added freshness, from the cold, clean mountain air, to the hot room that smelled of burning wood, baked bread, roasted goat and warm wine. They performed their customary greetings with handshakes, taps on the shoulder and a few questions about health and the weather. Then, with a wide sweep of his hand, Zahariadis showed them to the dining room. Zahariadis sat down first at the head of the table.

They ate mostly in silence. Occasionally there was a word spoken here and there but it was by and large about the cold weather and the deep snowdrifts that covered the road connecting General Headquarters and the Central Committee Headquarters. The lavish meal ended with a cup of tea, a favourite drink of Zahariadis.

"It is Georgian tea from great Stalin's homeland," Zahariadis pointed out after taking a sip. "In that case comrade Nikos, I will have a second cup," replied Gusias, who at this time was in tears from having burned his tongue and fat lips.

"This is indeed a great honour for us, comrades, to be able to drink and enjoy tea from great Stalin's homeland, here in the wild mountains of Macedonia…" continued Gusias, placing his cup near the shimmering kerosene lamp, flickering from the uneven use of its old handle, so that he could have a better look at the hot, amber coloured liquid while waiting for it to cool down. After drinking a second cup, Zahariadis gave his corporals the signal to leave the dining room and said:

"Comrades, let us begin our work. Distributed to you is the text of the report for the upcoming Fifth Plenum which today we need to divide into respective subject areas. Of course each one of us will get a part to bring to the Plenum. As I already told you, I wrote an additional piece which, in my opinion, represents our current military and political situations which are of great importance to our Party and to our revolutionary movement. I propose that this be an integral part of the report but as a special resolution. That part of the report reads:

"In Northern Greece the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) people gave their all in the struggle and fought with heroism and self-sacrifice and deserve our respect and admiration. There should be no doubt that as a result of the Democratic Army of Greece and the People's Revolution achieving victory, the Macedonian people will fully acquire their national renewal, which they desire. If that is what they want then they must sacrifice their blood today…"

Zahariadis stopped reading the moment he heard Bardzotas's quiet cough. With half closed eyes and an extinguished smile on his lips, Zahariadis looked at his audience measuring their reactions.

With his head resting on his tight fist, Bardzotas was swaying from left to right, staring into the corner of the room. Vlandas moved back in his chair and leaned his elbows on the table. Gusias rubbed his sweaty beard with his left hand. Ioannidis tightened his lips and began to write. Ioannidis was the first to break the silence.

"Comrade Nikos, this which we heard, I must say for me is something new, unusual and surprisingly unexpected. It is understandable that it made me want to ask many questions and I believe, at least for me, I will need more time to give my final opinion…"

"Who else wants to comment?" Zahariadis interrupted abruptly.

"Will you allow me to continue?" Ioannidis humbly inquired. "Frankly, I would like to take a small break and read the text myself. For me there is a difference between hearing someone else reading it and reading it myself…"

"There is no need for a break," Zahariadis interrupted firmly. "If you want the text on paper, here it is." Zahariadis pulled out several pages from the yellow envelope that lay beside him and tossed them on the table. "Here is the text, be my guests, read it! There, now the text is divided among you," ordered Zahariadis in a loud voice.

Each took a page and began to read the text that followed what Zahariadis had already read earlier:

"The Macedonian Communists have always stood at the helm of their people's struggle. At the same time the Macedonian communists should pay careful attention to the destructive and damaging activities carried out by foreign chauvinistic and reactionary elements bent on destroying the unity between the Macedonian (Slavo-Macedonian) and Greek people, which is only of benefit to their common enemy; the Monarcho-Fascists and Anglo-American imperialists. At the same time the Communist Party of Greece needs to uproot all obstacles from its own ranks. It needs to condemn the gross Greek chauvinistic procedures that cause resentment and anxiety in the Macedonian people. Such obstacles only assist those who, by their treacherous activities, want to do us harm. Such procedures only support the work of reactionaries. The Slavo-Macedonian and Greek people can only win if they are united. That is why unity such as this must be protected and must always and every day be supported and strengthened."

Short-sighted Ioannidis, brought the page of paper close to his thick glasses and while reading, made notes. When he thought the others were finished, he placed the piece of paper on the side but only for a moment, while he stared into the distance through the window. He wrote something down and then tapped the drinking glass with his pencil. When he saw that he had everyone's attention he said:

"Comrades I read the entire report carefully, understandably due to lack of time, not my satisfaction, I am unable to comment on each part separately. Yes, of course, in my opinion the report can be divided into several parts. One part of the report attracted my attention the most. As a first step let us take a look at the text that comrade Nikos read to us. I will divide that into two sentences. The first sentence is well written and confirms the whole truth about the situation. I am convinced that none of us would have been able to give a smarter or wiser assessment of the Macedonian or Slavo-Macedonian contribution than that given by our comrade, Nikos. But that which surprised me and, I admit, caused me some dilemma, is the second sentence from which I will separate the words, 'There should be no doubt that as a result of the Democratic Army of Greece and the People's Revolution achieving victory, the Macedonian people will fully acquire their national renewal, which they desire…' The way this sentence is formulated raises many questions, but one thing is most important. Namely, my dilemma, even doubtfulness is provoked by the words 'will fully acquire their national renewal, which they desire…'

Comrades, this is a serious problem. That is why I pose the question: 'Does this sentence mean their secession from Greece?' If that is the case, so that I don't take too much time, I want to remind you of a part of the oath of the fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece which states:

"Εγω παιδι του Λαου της Ελλαδας και μαχητης του ΔΣΕ ορκιζομε να πολεμησω με το οπλο στο χερι να χυσω το αιμα μου και να δωσω και την ιδια μου τη ζωη ... για να εξασφαλισω και να υπερασπισω την εθνικη ανεξαρτισια και εδαφικη ακεραιοτητα της Πατριδας μου ..." (I, son of the people of Greece and fighter of the Democratic Army of Greece swear that I will fight with a gun in my hand, will shed my blood and will give my life… to acquire and to defend national freedom and the territorial integrity of my homeland.)

Ioannidis collected his notes and after looking everyone in the eye, asked: "Will our fighter, our military and political cadres accept such a stance? It is no coincidence that I read part of the fighter oath. Let me remind you 'our veterans and military personnel are sworn to defend the territorial integrity of Greece'. Comrades, when we have this before our eyes," said Ioannidis while hitting the page with his palm, "we should keep in mind the consequences that will arise in the future. Comrades, I have the best of intentions, I am only attempting to provoke some thought and therefore I propose we find a 'milder' formulation that would still be acceptable. The remaining text is well written and I have no doubt we will accept it. It is understandable that I, generally speaking, do not doubt that comrade Zahariadis, proposing such a text to be presented at the upcoming Plenum as a special resolution to resolve the Macedonian issue, would have already thought of all the pitfalls. Certainly he has thought of them all and it would be good to believe in his infallible objectives. These are all the concrete questions I have…" concluded Ioannidis.

Without allowing anyone else to speak, Zahariadis immediately continued with his presentation:

"The question has strategic, tactical and political aims. Most vital for us is to achieve the first two aims. Those are the most important. The political goal is only a slogan. When we achieve our strategic and tactical goals then the political goal can easily be replaced with a different slogan. I thought about it carefully and the text before you is the result of my thinking."

Zahariadis paused for a moment, drank half a glass of water and then continued:

"I am saying that we need this now, the time is right. It only represents a slogan which tomorrow, no doubt, we will replace with another slogan. The word 'restoration' in the broadest sense should mean and should be understood as a right to national liberation. And what else could it mean? Could it mean the right to autonomy? But if further on we say 'which they desire', it could mean many things; it may mean the right to separation… the right to secession, etc… Yes, this is the essence of the entire notion. This is a great challenge for our Party and a greater blow to Tito-ism, to the Macedonian nationalists and to the traitors. And depending on the situation, especially the political situation, the word that you do not like now, we will replace with the word 'equality'... Easy, isn't it? We will instill these ambiguous thoughts into the Macedonian activists, then we will instruct the Party, in other words we will instruct members of our party and other activists that support our side not to talk about secession, but to talk about creating an independent Macedonian state within a Balkan Federation, and then we will instruct the Greek activists to say nothing. So, comrades, when we change the slogan, the entire responsibility for misleading the people will fall on Tito, on Kolishevski and on those traitors who fled to Skopje… About NOF we will speak later…"

Zahariadis paused for a moment, drank the rest of the water from his glass and continued:

"Let us not forget that in the entire hundred and thirty years since Greece became a state, the Greek people have been educated in the spirit of nationalism which has provoked them the most, has developed their national consciousness and from it they formed their national and state politics, a protagonist of the 'Megali-Idea'. Hence it also caused the Asia Minor disaster."

"Yes, but…" interjected Ioannidis "the Megali-idea at exactly the same time led to the liberation of Thessaly, Crete and Epirus ... With the overthrow of centuries of slavery, freed with the Greeks were also all the powers which led towards the liberation and integration of all territories that were inhabited by the Greeks. Now, understandably, when we Greek communists recognize the right of self-determination of people and equality for minorities; that kind of orientation is wrong and we must

reject it. But then..."

Zahariadis slammed the table with the palm of his hand and with a sharp tone of voice said:

"I am under the impression that someone here wants to confirm that they are not yet free from the dark legacy of the past ..."

"Perhaps so comrade Zahariadis, it may be so," muttered Ioannidis "but how will you explain to the ordinary Greek, who at home, in church, in school and in the army constantly hears about the glory of Greece's great past and ..."

"What is Greece without Macedonia?" shouted out Vlandas, adding "One rocky terrain covered by sea on three sides…"

"If I may ask," inquired Bardzotas "how do you define the word 'apokastasi'? I understand that it could mean 'restoring' and 'rebuilding'. But what will the Macedonians in Greek Macedonia 'rebuild'? To me that means to…" he paused, thought, and afraid of accidentally using the wrong word began to sweat. Then after wiping the sweat from his forehead, he continued: "If I may ask, should it mean 'secession' of Macedonia from Greece? If so, then I think that our fighters and most of our cadres will be against it... They might not oppose it openly but they will be against it silently, I am sure of it..."

"Our enemies will openly and with certainty use this by engaging the State and Church apparatus," interrupted Zahariadis. "It has been said 'which they desire'. I will tell you what they desire. They will desire that which we will tell them to desire. We will persuade the NOF and AFZH cadres to join the new Organization which we will call the 'Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia', which will be exclusively led by our Party, which we will not only instruct but will task, in the name of Party discipline, to act and think as we act and think… They will want what we promise them and take what we give them. And just because we promised them something does not mean that we will give it to them. And what we give them does not mean that we will not take it away… If we take into account," continued Zahariadis, "the current level of development of the national feeling of every Greek, regardless to which ideology and political party they belong, whether it is left or right wing, do you think that they would agree to give up even a small part of the present Greek territory? We Greeks may be a fractious nation among ourselves, but when it comes to Greece, we are united like a single fist. We may quarrel a lot among ourselves but at the same time we know how to quickly forget our differences when it comes to Greece's fate. I don't know of any other such people… Let me ask you Gusias, do you agree to have our Macedonia partitioned from Greece?

"Well ... I, Nikos, fully support your position. Which means that I support the logic of your thinking..." replied Gusias.

"And you, Bardzotas?" asked Zahariadis.

“I, Nikos, what can I tell you, I would be just quoting your words...” responded Bardzotas.

“We find ourselves in an ideological war; I would say more like a confrontation. We are fighting on two fronts: in front of us we fight with fire and behind us with ideology. Which one is hotter? I would say the one that will leave deeper tracks and far-reaching consequences. The second is merciless, fights by all means, have no regrets and expect countless sacrifices. It does not heal wounds, in fact it widens them, it makes them bleed today and it will make them bleed tomorrow non-stop until there is defeat. It never allows for opportunity or time for peace, for dialogue, but mercilessly destroys everything before it. Idea fighting against idea and no one knows when the war will end. Those who will win will immediately impose a dictatorship and then it will be very hard for the defeated...

In the consciousness of everyone, who in the least is engaged in politics, lies defeat: ‘if you want to govern then you must learn to argue!’ Are you ready to accuse me of giving away too may rights? Yes you are. That is correct. However, you refuse to consider the results of having given such rights. First, it will cause the so-called NOF leadership to have a fight and break down. And do you know how? Very easy! I would say there is nothing easier.

One day one of them came to me and said, ‘Comrade Zahariadis, you know this person and that person is doing this and that’. I listened to him carefully, I pretended that I was very concerned, I agreed with him that he was right, I praised him and at the end I told him, ‘You know comrade, by what you are telling me regarding these very important issues, you have shown me courage and that you have a great Party and revolutionary consciousness. You have demonstrated to me that you are completely dedicated to the ideals of our struggle’. The person was simply ecstatic. I then concluded with the following words, ‘You know comrade, that person and that person said this and that about you’. And he said, ‘Comrade Zahariadis that is a lie’. So I handed him a piece of paper and said, ‘Read.’ And he said, ‘But this is a lie, this is slander, it is not true comrade Zahariadis.’ And then I told him, ‘If you insist it is not true then deny it. Here is a piece of paper, write it down.’ And that way, comrades, they slander and spit on one another… That is how they become robots. Learn and you will know. Now they can’t stand one another [the Macedonians from Greece and the Macedonians from the Republic of Macedonia], not even with the ones that remained inside, meaning in Yugoslavia.”

“Goche and Keramidzhiev left Greece for Yugoslavia,” continued Zahariadis “and never came back and that was no tragedy. And do you know why? First, because I agreed that they should go and agreed that I did not need them here. They interfered too much in the military. Secondly because, as political and military activists, I wanted them to have a bad relationship with those we have here. Our struggle had no practical use for them. They were as good as dead for the benefit of our movement.

Understandably they only brought us grief before that and now. Their presence here would have caused us great damage. You know that they caused us damage with their activities!

Someone will ask why we did not prosecute and jail them. Because at that time the population here, the endopi (indigenous), believed them. And they, Goche and Keramidzhiev, knew and understood how to use that against us. Had we tried them we would have made an even greater mistake. So let them stay in Skopje and let them fight and slander one another. Tomorrow they will slander one other even more.

The entire Slavo-Macedonian nation is in the mountains. We collected their children and sent them where we sent them. Now these people are struggling just for their own lives; simply to remain alive. It is a little sad, but that is reality and the truth. And they know very well what awaits them if they don't fight. They know that if we lose the war, everything will be lost. Literally! That is why they are so conscious and why they fight so hard. I must admit that with the rights that we gave them, we helped them develop their national consciousness and sense of freedom. Sadly, the more nationally conscious they become the more they spread the gap between themselves and Greece.

And this part, which they call Aegean Macedonia, is Greece. Do they want to separate? To join Tito? They will lose! Greece will never surrender, it will never die! The price to pay will be their lives, their children, their properties. And in the end they will have nothing to defend.

Look, everything around is destroyed. Thousands lost their lives, we collected them and placed them in camps in Albania, we separated their children from them and who knows when and under what circumstances they will ever see their children again. Who knows we may even raise their children to be ashamed of them, their own parents and their own kind. And I need to tell you that besides all that, there is a need to recognize that they showed examples of unheard heroism, and I admire both the old and the young. If anyone is a casualty of this struggle and of this war it is them, indisputably. Look at the kind of slogans the enemy uses to attack 'forward against Slavo-Communism'! Until now I have never heard our enemy use the slogan 'forward against Greco-Communism'. Doesn't that tell you something?

From a purely human standpoint comrades, what is happening to them now and what happened to them before, is really their great human and national tragedy and should deeply, honestly and humanly make us feel sorry for them; all of us who find ourselves face to face with them in a trench, in a bunker, or in a hospital... It is an individual and collective tragedy.

Without them our movement would not have developed and would not have survived even for a single day. Our Party, in this sense, has worked very well and every Party activist has done their job. This nation has placed all manpower and material needs on the altar of our struggle. Well

comrades, that is why I agreed to allow NOF to exist and most responsibly I say that NOF and all the others were a necessary evil. Who does not understand that, does not understand our struggle and the future of Greece...” concluded Zahariadis noticing that Bardzotas, covering his mouth with his hand, was whispering to Vlandas.

“Nikos is right. What he is saying is correct. I got to know those people… They are tame, peaceful, patient, durable even in the most difficult marches, in heat and cold, hunger and thirst and always obedient and loyal. Excellent fighters, capable of almost anything. If they have distant roots extending to the ancient Macedonians, which many people suspect they do, then it is not surprising... if they were well-armed and say we had a hundred thousand of them in our ranks it would have been possible to go and conquer Athens...” whispered Bardzotas.

“Come now…” responded Vlandas, but instead of answering Bardzotas he spoke to Zahariadis, “if that’s the case then what will mobilize the Slavo-Macedonian people?
Like what? Promise them freedom, national liberty, equality… While we are discussing this I want to underline that minorities are still not fully included in the armed struggle and in the Peoples’ Revolution. A large number of the villages in the plains of Lerin and Voden Region are outside of the ranks of the Democratic Army of Greece. In order to attract them we need to further engage NOF and AFZH and get them involved in the mobilization, we also need to come up with a new slogan to show them the way to their ‘national restoration’. What does this mean? This will motivate the Slavo-Macedonians to fight even harder, to stop deserting and close the mouths of the nationalist and chauvinist troublemakers and deserters who hide in Skopje and have the support of the Yugoslav authorities...”

“Will they in Skopje quit interfering in our affairs and support NOF, which you allowed to be formed?... inquired Gusias.

Barely visibly smiling, Zahariadis quietly said, “Facts speak differently. I did not agree to form NOF, but I did recognize it and for that there were many reasons. NOF was formed during the occupation. They fought in the ranks of ELAS (National Liberation Army of Greece) but had their own organizations, and even their own units.

Then where was the Party to stop them? Comrades, the time will come when I will explain to you in detail NOF’s position, especially my opinion on the leadership of NOF. That is one of our Party’s greatest mistakes, mistakes which, through attempting to resolve the national question, cast a different kind of shadow on our situation.

Yesterday and today’s situation forced us to accept the approach we took. Personally I am convinced that without NOF and AFZH, without their work among the Macedonian masses, without their full engagement in the Macedonian youth mobilization in the ranks of the Democratic Army of Greece and the Macedonian population, which represented a

great logistical strength, we could not have continued with our movement. Thanks to NOF we were successful in raising the youth and the general civilian population. They gave their all, in spite of our Party evaluating NOF as a 'mistake'. What could we do? The front and our freed territory were both located in the lands inhabited by a Slavo-Macedonian population and exactly that together with Gramos, which today is partially lost, represented our strategic point.

The Slavo-Macedonians are industrious, tame, loving, humble and slavish… They don't know and they don't even have the slightest idea that they can be dignified and brave to madness. They do not even complain about impositions on their destiny. And in God's name, these people gave their all, a large number of fighters from their ranks demonstrated exemplary heroism. I think this simple, tame, quiet, poor, work exhausted and terrorized little people exist for one purpose; to be slaves.

I believe our Party is great in the way that it reveals such people and encourages them to find their way to freedom and dignity. But what am I talking about. These people who now occupy the ranks of DAG are the grandchildren of the still living Ilinden generation. Imagine the irony! Their parents were children when the Ilinden uprising broke out. Yes, Children. Some were younger, some were older and some were just born in the flames and smoke of a rebellion. Children, the same as those we sent to the Eastern European Block countries. I am convinced that they are deeply influenced by their grandparents or by their parents who experienced the Ilinden Uprising firsthand. Or by other people who knew about their grandfather or grandmother being direct participants in the Ilinden Uprising.

If I may say, these children who grew up at the bosom of their grandmothers and grandfathers were very happy. I never had the opportunity to grow up with my grandfather and grandmother. My father was a merchant and had no permanent residence. I grew up in bustling cities, in the shops and trailers, in commerce chambers constantly traveling all over the world. I saw and heard plenty and I learned plenty in my pursuits. And these people I came to believe are tailored to be slaves…

I used to believe that they were simple, uneducated and gullible but a part of them surprised me with their devotion to the Party and to our work. And let us not forget the most important thing 'we are in their homes, we eat their bread and we don't even know how to console the little women, to say a kind word to them about their husbands or children who died for our cause. Instead we make them promises and slogans for national freedom. And another thing. We made promises to those in Belgrade and in Skopje. What, do you think Lazo Kolishevski is stupid? He knows exactly what he wants. He wants all of Macedonia, but not under the conditions that Chento wanted it, like Tito and his general, what's his name, Apostolski? Imagine if Tito did not force them to go to the Srem front, what would have happened then?

They already had a slogan which called for ‘To Solun’ and that was not only for those who live in Vardar Macedonia, but also for those who live here in our Macedonia and they did not need a strong power or a great army. Under those conditions and especially since Greece was busy with its own problems, mostly dealing with British intervention, it was certain they would have arrived in Solun. And who was defending Solun? Markos? A regular lieutenant and still a tobacco picker? Do not kid yourselves. They would have involved the entire Slavo-Macedonian nation and much faster than we did with our promises. No promises are needed to convince them when it comes to the unification of Macedonia and the taking of Solun. This is the hope and legacy left for them by their older generations…

Even if they were unable to take Solun, they certainly would have been able to occupy Lerin, Kostur, Kukush and if not the cities then the surrounding villages and mountains. This would have given them tremendous moral support and an historic message for future generations!... I would love to know what you would have thought if this were to happen. They would force Greece to negotiate. And something is always gained from negotiation...” concluded Zahariadis.

“Yes, but that for Tito would have meant war on two fronts, and besides then he was obedient to Moscow. Stalin would not have been happy,” added Ioannidis.

“The war at that point in time would have ended even without Tito. Tito needed Trieste. The Slovenes were under pressure but had smart people and strong and capable commanders and would have won the war on their own… responded Zahariadis.

“Luck,” weighed in Vlandas, “it was Greece’s luck that Slovenia asked for Trieste. Tito got caught on Kardeli’s hook. That’s why Lazo was left with empty hands and barefoot. If the Skopjans were a bit smarter, more insistent and faster, the fate of Solun may have been under question for us…”

“And they would have pushed Athens into negotiations…” interjected Zahariadis, then took a moment to drink a glass of water before continuing: “I of course agreed that NOF and AFZH should function, even with their own detachments and commanders. This was the only way that we could have made them our allies and fully mobilized them. That was and still is a necessary evil. That was our tactic, a part of our strategy. Do you think I want their Skopjan Republic to be strong? That goes against Greek logic. And what is Greek logic? That which is ruled by Greece to be held at any cost…

A strong Macedonian Republic or state means a weak Greek north. I am convinced that Athens and Solun will never find a common word. That is because Athens lives on account of Solun. I realized that a long time ago. If we now had the necessary forces to occupy Solun, Athens would

fall to its knees. The Macedonian issue must one day be resolved but it has to be resolved fully to Greece's benefit. That's the only way..."

Zahariadis stopped talking, stood up, opened the balcony door and went outside. A cold blast of air parted his curly hair. He turned, pointing to the north and said: "Those from there don't think too well of us. And that is why I want to turn the text sitting there before you, regarding the Macedonian question, into a resolution during the Fifth Plenum…"

Zahariadis grabbed the papers from Bardzotas's hands, raised them above everyone's heads and with his hand motioning in a comical way, yelled out: "This will make those in Skopje think. Here is what we are giving our Slavo-Macedonians! But that is exactly what the Skopjans don't want us to do.

We and our Party, comrades, are now beginning the realization of a single correct slogan 'equality for minorities with the right of secession'. No other party has ever done this. We will be the first. It will be good for us… And with this, comrades, I will stick it to Tito because this kind of opportunity will push the Skopjans to think and re-think what is better for them, to be a federal republic of a union or to be entirely independent with their own independent state?

That which they have in Yugoslavia is very little in comparison. They need to have more and they need to be told that… I will toss an apple between Belgrade and Skopje… Now that relations between Tito and Stalin are strained and thousands are lost to UBDA in the prisons, do you think no one will be there to accept our idea? Surely there will be some. Do you know why they locked up Chento and others? Because they wanted a united Macedonia, even if it was only part of Yugoslavia. Imagine if they had many rights, even greater rights along with the right to self-determination, even to secession. This is what we will announce today in this resolution with guarantees that our Slavo-Macedonians will have all these rights. That is why I say that those in Skopje will have something to think about. So that you know…"

"Wise and very shrewd," said Vlandas "well thought out, but…"

"The essence of our idea is self-determination," interrupted Zahariadis "do you not think that those in Skopje will not see the opportunity for unification and independence? Tomorrow we may even ask them: 'Do you want an independent Macedonia?' Then join us. Which means we will start a conflict in Yugoslavia. And Yugoslavia deserves this because it is an artificial country and needs to be gone. Molotov told me this. And you should know this.

The fact that Greece, to this day, has not lost Macedonia, hinges on its joining the allies against fascism. If Greece had fought on the side of Germany, the way some Megalo-Idealists wanted it, then it would have paid. And its price would have been the loss of our Macedonia."

Noticing that it was getting late in the evening, Zahariadis looked at his pocket watch. "Comrades, that's enough for today. Tomorrow we will

once again examine the text and afterwards we will schedule our Party's Fifth Plenum. It will be an important and historic plenum…"

Vlandas then added: "The contents of the report are excellent and the text for the resolution regarding the Macedonian question is fantastic ..., the Fifth Plenum will be one of our greatest military gatherings brimming with tremendous hope and enthusiasm."

While leaving, Vlandas allowed Ioannidis to go first and, with the door half-closed, quietly asked: "Nikos, do you truly want to turn this text into a resolution to solve the Slavo-Macedonian question? Have you considered the possible risks and consequences?"

Staring into his eyes sternly, Zahariadis, with a confident tone of voice, said: "I am sure that because of this Slogan many of our comrades who today are imprisoned in the camps and prisons will suffer. They will be interrogated to confess that they agree with this resolution and those who agree will surely be tortured and even executed. In the name of our ideals they will accept their sacrifices and with them they will affirm their loyalty to the Party. And those who will succumb, who will not acknowledge, who will give up, after the victory of our movement will have to justify themselves. And we will not waste our time with them. They will justify themselves before our judges in our Party's courts. And you don't need to worry… I have thought of everything. This resolution will not even have a single day of practical significance. It is only a tactical step in the war against Tito-ism… You will see that life will confirm my words…

The Great Lie – Chapter 6

"We had success on the battlefield," continued Zahariadis, after taking a large piece of Prespa, baked carp from the pan, "especially during the battle for Malimadi and the capture of towns in central Greece, confirming that creating a regular army is the right approach. But in spite of all our success, there are forces in our Party and in the Central Committee that still oppose the idea of having a regular army…"

Gusias, after lightly tapping his water glass with his knife and getting everyone's attention, interjected: "Nikos, I am sorry for interrupting you but I think your manner and worries, which are the manner and worries of our Party, are correct and we need to implement your ideas to the end. We need a monolithic Central Committee. If we want this, then it is time to purify the Party of those who are in opposition…"

"Implement what ideas?" asked Zahariadis.

"The idea of creating a regular army... and the idea of fighting an open front..." responded Gusias.

"Yes, exactly that!" Zahariadis responded with approval, "Hence the urgency for convening a Central Committee Plenum. I thought about it and in general terms I will put together a number of theses. The first thesis will be about dangers in the ranks of the Communist Party of Greece and our greatest enemy being opportunism. Let's take Markos's thinking into consideration for example. Among other things Markos wrote in a letter that if we continue with the idea of forming a regular army we will be forced to defend ourselves by sticking to specific enemy positions, which will make us give up our energetic Partisan-style warfare…"

"But, comrades, our policies so far, and our military experience above all, as I stated earlier, prove the opposite. Unfortunately, Markos is unable to grasp the new role of the Democratic Army of Greece and in his way of thinking, I am telling you, he is working against our Party's position and will lead us to lose our armed struggle…" Zahariadis concluded and, looking into everyone's eyes, paused.

There was silence. Zahariadis raised his hand and while pointing into the air with his index finger, asked: "What does that mean?"

Zahariadis then stood up and slowly, with measured steps, walked around the table. There was silence. This was a method Zahariadis often used to motivate his audience to pay careful attention.

"Comrades, that means he is unwilling to recognize that we have acquired Gramos. Of course it is understandable that the battles fought were severe and that they unfortunately broke Markos's spirit.

I visited him in Tirana. And what did I see? A skeleton… Only a skeleton remained of him. He was totally broken both physically and psychologically. He is sick. And I must openly say that with his letter he wants to prove to us that, from a political stand point, the dramatic events connected with the battles of Gramos are not a result of the superiority of

the enemy and of great difficulties, but are due to some kind of deep-rooted political crisis.

This kind of thinking on Markos's part, comrades, calls for the Political Bureau to investigate his style of fighting and to uncover the root of his problem. I must admit that Markos has always been burdened with a sick feeling that the Party belittled and persecuted him. I also believe it was a great and fundamental error on the part of our Party to have appointed him Commander and Chief of the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG).

At this point it is necessary to clarify the legacy of ELAS (National Liberation Army of Greece), the same bad legacy with which Markos is burdened. Despite the many mistakes he made, which are now coming out, Markos was allowed to continue to carry on with his wrong, Partisan-style tactics. He should have been condemned for that a long time ago but instead he was allowed to carry on, thus completely ruining the Party line.

Markos did a great deal of damage to our movement… We need to speak about this openly because this is the only way we can clean our ranks of opportunists such as Partsalidis. We also need to take a strong stand against the traitors and agents such as Markos and Karagiorgis…" Zahariadis concluded.

Without eliciting comments or questions, Zahariadis looked at everyone for reaction. He wanted to see the reaction on their faces, look into their eyes and listen to their breathing. He was fully aware that while he was talking about a very important issue he was also condemning ELAS, in whose struggle he himself had participated. He was not sure if they would accept his judgment without any objections, but the tone of his voice and his choice of vocabulary, were aimed at having his judgment accepted without objection. And in order not to give them time for reflection, he continued:

"The second thesis should be this: the liberation of Greece! Irrespective of the large external assistance that the regime in Athens is receiving, the liberation of Greece should be exclusively the responsibility of DAG. But DAG will be capable of carrying out such a task only after it is organized as a strong, regular people's revolutionary army, an essential task of the Communist Party of Greece (KPG). This is our fundamental position.

A concrete frame for this should be determined during the upcoming Plenum, which means that we need to come up with a report which must cover the following problems:
First – the Monarcho-Fascist situation in Greece, second – the People's Democratic camp and DAG, third – today's situation and our tasks, and after that fourth and final, our current political commitments. All this put together under the title 'Greece on its way to victory and the decisive battle'.

I believe we all understand what needs to be said, correct? However, about the part that refers to our political commitments, I have an idea but it still needs more work, I will be able to put it on paper in a few days. I will take responsibility for writing the entire report which should take me about ten days. Your responsibility will be to carefully read the report and add your comments and my amendments if any, so that the report will be embraced by all members of the Political Bureau, in other words by all five of us.

I will take responsibility for writing this report but for future meetings we will divide that task between us. And let us not forget. We need to be united in the upcoming plenum especially when different and conflicting opinions arise from the Central Committee membership. If we five members of the Political Bureau are united then we will have a monolithic Central Committee. Also, consider the best way to clean the opportunists from our ranks, which understandably will have to be done by naming names." concluded Zahariadis.

The dinner that began around eight o'clock in the evening ended at the crack of dawn.

The Great Lie – Chapter 7

In a semi-dark, cold, damp underground hangar, covered with three rows of oak logs and stones, resting on a moldy bed of dried ferns were two units of the 103 brigade. The units were formed the day before, immediately after the fighters returned from a battle they had lost.

"If the fog had not lifted Yana, Socrates and Panaiotis would not have been left hanging on the barbed wire," sobbed Tsilka to Mita in a whisper. "I saw how they threw the crosses with dynamite. But a machine gun burst tied them to the wire and nailed us to the ground. Yana was yelling, begging for help - but who was going to raise their head? It was raining bullets…"

"And Kire smashed as he was, we carried him in his overcoat, still alive… I feel so sorry for him…" cried Mita in a choked voice and then tapping on her chest said, "I feel a lump of pain…right here."

"Yesterday he sat there, where you are sitting now. Quiet, almost invisible, his shadow on the wall was more visible than he was. He was curled up with his chin resting on his knees, staring into the fire and warming his stiff fingers. Nobody noticed him. When his number was called during roll call he responded in a quiet voice. I think it was tuberculosis or some other ailment that exhausted his voice. He wasted away like the dwindling flame in the fire… The man sat opposite to me and all I could see was his shadow. The flame went out, the place became dark and all I could see was the glow of the coals on his face. Then he completely disappeared, like he went underground and vanished deep into the earth. I felt a cold chill all through my body when I heard someone yell out during the next roll call that he was 'dead' … His body was lying over there…

The Commander unbuttoned his handbag, pulled out a notepad, spit on the tip of his dry ink pencil and wrote something. Then he drew a line from one side of the page to the other. The man who was now absent from roll call was also absent from the Commander's note book, which he put back into his handbag, as if it was nothing, and in a cold tone of voice said: 'Bury him.'

We did not dig a grave by measured depth. We dug to bury him as soon as possible. Two of us grabbed his legs and one grabbed his underarms and we dropped him in the hole. We only covered his face with a half-burned overcoat which we found thrown in the thorn bushes before we covered him with soil. We did not put a marker on his grave. He, like many others, will now remain unknown… If we are still alive, sometime in the future we will ask to return here, back to this cemetery, to visit our friends, friends we made in the battlefields, trenches and in hospital beds, so that we can have our proper goodbyes…" concluded Mita.

Tsilka then quietly said: “Talk… talk, say something… Talk… there will be less darkness in our souls and thoughts if you talk. Continue talking.”

“The Commissar,” continued Mita “gave a good speech. He spoke well and while I listened I asked myself why not tell the person what they are like and how important they are while they are alive? Does one need to die to be acknowledged by friends and elders to have their good attributes uncovered? Nobody talks about their sins and weaknesses when someone dies... just toss on them two or three handfuls of soil and let the earth cover up their sins. I guess a person needs to be gone in order to be cleansed from all their evils and vices. Only then can they be clean. So I thought to myself - one needs to stay around the grave, it is necessary for them, while a person is being buried, to find out who they were and what they were like. Would it be that difficult, while the person was still alive, to say to them – you are so and so and you are like this and like that…? Not doing this shows us that, while we are still alive, we do not respect one another and we avoid showing compassion. And now, here, sitting beside the fire in this damp underground hangar, it seems to me like he is sitting over there in the corner and, even though he was always cold and the first to sit down and warm up, warmth radiated from him. One time when I told him his hands were the warmest, he smiled with a sad smile, feeling a bit shy and said to me, ‘I am always, I am always cold…’ I took his hands into mine and as much as I could, I warmed them for a long time. For a moment there I thought he was asleep… I placed my lips to his ear and quietly asked, ‘Are you asleep?’ ‘No,’ he said ‘I am looking at the fire…’ ‘And what do you see?’ I asked. ‘I see bread, I see a lot of bread…’ he replied” moaned Mita in a sad, crying voice.

“Calm down, calm down,” begged Tsilka, while covering Mita’s bare shoulder with half of her overcoat. Then while offering to hold Mita’s cold hands Tsilka said, “Only seven remain alive from my platoon… two were wounded, the rest I am sure are stone cold…”

Mita and Tsilka would be together for ten days. Tsilka returned to her platoon from the hospital in Elbasan two weeks ago and Mita returned from the hospital in Korcha eight days ago and was immediately sent to fight a battle. Tsilka has severe pain in her back and right hip. She also has pain from her severed fingers. They told her in the hospital that she would experience pain when the weather was bad. Now she tolerates both the pain and the bad weather.

Mita has a hollowed out cut on her face, covered by a brown scab extending from her left eyebrow to the bottom of her chin. She has reddish spots on both sides of her cut. They are marks from the stitches.

The two women and all the others in the hanger are lying crammed together side by side. Next to Mita is Mare. Mare is shaking and her teeth are chattering. She has been in her unit for only two months now. For a year from last autumn she, with hundreds of older men and women and

teenaged girls and boys (those twenty years or over were fighting in the front lines), worked transporting ammunition and food. Every morning they loaded horses and mules in Prespa and then traveled all day and night in a long column to take the cargo to Aliabitsa. Give or take a month or two, Mare was only sixteen years old when the fighting ended in Aliabitsa. She was tall and physically developed, mature for her age, so those in NOF (Peoples' Liberation Front) and AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) decided it was time for her to do something more. They sent her to the Partisan hospital in Grazhdeno where, for three months, she patched up wounds, transported the wounded and learned how to stop the bleeding and change dressings.

With her purse over her shoulder, marked with a red cross, they deployed her in a combat unit. Now Mare, with her teeth chattering, is lying in the hanger leaning on Mita's shoulder and rubbing her swollen legs and bleeding heels from the chafing of her heavy military boots. Beside Mare is Traianka and beside her are Ilia, Mite, Krste, Kolio, seven young men and three young women from Kostur, Lerin, Epirus and Thessaly Region villages. Among them is Yannakis, a talkative, cheerful thirty year old man, who talks about himself non-stop, repeatedly saying that he is a confident civilian sailor working on a ship in the harbour; a proletariat and a good communist. He wants to talk all the time but he is frequently interrupted by a long, wild, dry and suffocating cough. Accompanying Yannakis's conversation are incessant drops of muddy water, dripping from the oak logs above and forming little puddles of water on the ground.

Yannakis was the last of the thirty or so dock workers and sailors who were brought into the brigade after the end of the great battles for Gramos. They were specially trained emissaries, hunted down to work in the cheap French and Italian restaurants and hotels in the ports in Odessa, Gdansk, Constanta, Varna, Rieka and Split, promised that they would be sent to the Soviet Union and to the People's democratic countries for military and naval training in various academies. They were promised that in the new democratic and socialist Greece there would be no place for capitalist captains and admirals and for the children of the rich. Those positions would be given to them, the children of the docks and the poor from the dirty suburbs.

The dock workers and sailors were brought to Prespa through channels unknown to them and after two weeks of military training they were allocated to units in the Macedonian mountains. They brought them to Macedonia and told them that they would be fighting against imperialism and domestic service exploitation. They were also told that they were much too valuable to be fighting in Rumely, the Peloponnesus, Crete and other parts of Greece where the opponent was much too weak and it would be a shame for such capable men to fight a weak opponent. They brought the dock workers and sailors to Macedonia to show the unworthy, local

village boys and crybaby “chupres” how to fight. They called the armed Macedonian young women “chupres”. But these young women who were in the first line, especially those brought from Bulkesh, were former sergeants, second lieutenants and first lieutenants of the Royal Army and later they were the so-called “kapetanios” of ELAS (National Liberation Army of Greece). Now the same women, with minor exceptions, are the commanders and commissars of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) and there is nothing that they don’t know.

So they dragged the sailors and dock workers from unit to unit telling the units “Avrio sto tmima sas tha erthun i naftergates” (Sailors and dock workers will be coming to your units tomorrow).

They made the sailors and dock workers famous before they even entered the war. They turned them into heroes just by going from unit to unit and from command to command. They made a great name for them so that every unit wanted to have them and was waiting for their arrival with great anticipation. They were all waiting to see, meet and admire the seasoned fighters, the brave men and heroes of the working class who had spent such an exhausting time to reach the mountains of Macedonia.

The thirty or so men, who were deployed in Brigade 103, were expected to smell like sea salt and have the aroma of distant lands; but they smelled more like the sea, like salted cod, soap and cheap perfume; the kind found in brothels. They were everything, except fighters. They were out of breath even on the gentlest of marches and would quit half way through a march. They were afraid of the dark and of dark forests. During the short rest periods they rubbed their swollen feet and blew air on their chafed to the bone heels. They also swore profusely and cursed in many languages. They were number one in story telling and boasting. The seas, bars, taverns and brothels were all theirs. The trenches, bunkers and minefields, on the other hand, belonged to the “village children” from Kostur, Lerin, Voden, Kozhani, Grevena, Thessaly, Epirus and other regions... Their mouths were full of flattering words, always trying to get a look and a smile from the ladies, not like the rude, unworthy young villagers whose character was their strength and courage in battle, endurance on marches, the cold, rain and hunger.

The ones who boasted the most about the dock workers and sailors being good fighters were the people in high command, the high commissars. Here is an example of what one of their leaders said about them: “…protopori ston agona, protopori tis ergatikis ke tis proleteriakis epenastasis” (… champions in battle, champions of the working class and of the proletarian revolution), which they have yet to initiate after these “village children” [Macedonians] conquer Anglo-American imperialism and Monarcho-fascism.

That is what the commissars preached because that is what their leader commanded. The dock workers and sailors brought mandolins, guitars and bouzoukis and during short rest periods they played their instruments in

the name of the leader. They had orders to play, sing and dance until exhaustion. Everyone was joyfully distracted by the song and dance, leaving no time to think. While attached to the units, these working class champions played their instruments well; it was their duty as fighters.

With the greatest of pleasure they played the rebetiko and sirtaki but most of all they played sad songs about the painful fate of sailors stranded at sea. They played their instruments well and sometimes quietly sang sad songs and cried about their troubles. However this type of behaviour tended to affect the morale of the fighters, so someone from the top ordered the commissars to ban these types of songs and only allowed them to play revolutionary songs about the struggle.

"Ma then ta xerume!" (We don't know them!) They complained.

A local commissar, a twenty year old man from Prespa who barely knew how to speak Greek, with his bad pronunciation and Prespa accent yelled at them with a threatening tone of voice "keratades ta ta matete" (scoundrels you will learn them). It did not matter to the young commissar where the emphasis fell on the Greek words; he did things his way, the way things were done in Prespa.

They felt insulted. When they heard conversation spoken in the Macedonian language they made remarks to one another: "ma edo then ine Eladha" (this is not Greece). When they listened to Macedonian songs they lightly hit the strings and said: "Omorfa, poli omorpha tragudia" (Beautiful, very beautiful songs).

The unit commissar, trained in Bulkesh and before that a horse groom of some Capetanios, staring at the Prespan sarcastically asked: "Where did those strings come from? Bitola or Skopje?"

The Prespan commissar, looking serious, replied: "From your mother's fleece…" and after a short pause he added: "understandably, comrade, unit commissar, they came from Russia…"

They played "Eleno mome" (Eleno girl), "Mlada Partizanka" (Young Partisan girl), "Na Vicho planina" (on Vicho mountain), "Vo borba, vo borba" (In battle, in battle) and again began playing those sad sailor songs. They sailed the high seas and met thousands of individuals, learning to make no distinction between people. So they had no problem befriending the young Macedonian men and women and they found it easy to learn a few Macedonian words from them.

They were indifferent until the commissars started pushing them to join the Party. The commissars worked on them day after day and it seemed to the sailors and dock workers that someone was out to darken their serenity, which they had brought with them from the seas and from foreign environments. It seemed to them that someone wanted to stifle their laughter and remove the old smell of the sea and the warmth of the women they knew everywhere. They felt like eagles in a cage.

The barracks where they were kept, to which they were not accustomed, seemed like the cages they had in the ships. They knew how

to cook, wash cauldrons, wash and mend clothing, repair clocks, tell all kinds of jokes, sing and swear in many languages but when it came to fighting battles, they lost their perkiness, became sad and their smiles wilted. They looked like abandoned wet cats without their sailor courage. They completely lost themselves. They hated the war.

They appreciated hard work, honesty, laughter, singing and sincerity. They did everything and worked on everything that they had learned on the ships, at the docks and around the world. They came to love the mountain air, the dew on the grass, the mountain flowers, the mountain sunrise and sunset, but still they felt like they were caged; the mountains had shrunk their world. Here they were afraid of the dark forests and craved the wideness of the sea, the city hustle and bustle, the cafés and taverns and the women who would be waiting for them in the various seaports that they visited around the world.

During the cold nights and mornings they missed their rum and whiskey and the salty sea breeze. They spoke of bananas, pineapples, dates, oranges, avocados and about life on boats and at sea; a bitter life full of torture, sorrow and loneliness. Yet they wanted everything from life, a sailor's kind of life, the kind of life they were used to living in the ports, a life that had nothing to do with war. They did not want to go to battle. They were accustomed to duty, responsibility, diligence and freedom but were not ready to die on the mountains. They knew how much to work and for how much and wanted to have some free time for themselves to visit the big wide world, but without orders and away from the barracks.

Here everything was different. Get up, line up, lie down, forward, march, clean, sing, dance, finish, listen and don't think. And as the others dreamed of bread, warm clothes and a sound sleep, they dreamed of the sea, ports, docks, boats, bars and brothels. From the great sadness, which for them was life, now only a daydream remained and a sickness for home. They now said, "On the ship there was much to mourn, but here in the mountains there is even more, and that's what hurts the most, especially during the nights..."

They complained it was cold and uncomfortable during the night and one by one they would abandon their posts. They acted like civilians, the way the sea had taught them, the way they acted in city ports, coffee shops, taverns and in life ashore with all its vices.

In the beginning they went after the young ladies and forced themselves upon them. But when the law caught up with them some were sent before a military court and were executed. Then even the higher ups in the leadership discovered what kind of people these highly praised sailors and dock workers were. To quickly cover up the shame and put it in the background, they pretended that it was necessary for these people to be there because they were educated and experienced cadres.

Finally when they removed them, the talkative non-stop chatterers and flatterers quickly succeeded in pushing their way into the supply corps,

kitchens and storerooms. And there, clean and well fed, they stayed in warm rooms with different commissars who smelled more of cologne and less of gunpowder. They trained these highly praised dock workers and sailors in the arts of leading a proletarian dictatorship.

Away from the damp bunkers and underground hangars these people were happy chatting the nights away. They slept like the crickets in the dry grass and woke at daybreak to the song of the nightingales. They forgot their own pains when they saw stretchers with wounded young men passing by but were most hurt when they saw wounded young ladies. They sobbed in secret and cursed loudly. There was no comparison to equal their swearing and cursing in the groups with whom they congregated.

Only Yannakis now remains in the Cheta (Unit). He is quiet, collected, distracted and often withdrawn. There is always a playful, cheerful, gentle, timid and good hearted smile on his face, which is barely visible and fully blooms and warmly spreads along his cheeks at the ends of his mouth, and with his trembling lips hanging down he provokes trust in everyone. But in his eyes there is a sinking and disturbing sadness hinting of pain and sorrow which grows more intense when it is quiet, not so much for himself but he hums for his mother and for the woman he loves. In this ugly and dirty world he has only his mother and it seems to him that he can stop his pain and unrelenting grief with a song. He believes that those now lying beside him in the underground hanger and in other hangers like it love him. But not once have they given him a piece of their bread or allowed him to get closer to the fire, or have substituted for him on guard duty or even carried his backpack full of ammunition. His stories about distant lands and people are filled with gaps and his knowledge of the world is scanty at best.

"Has any one of you seen the sea?" Yannakis went on to say "Ah, the sea, the sea… It is endless and all encompassing and it seems like a person is nothing next to it but it needs people to rule over it. When the sky is covered by clouds it is black, when the sky is clear, it is azure blue, it has the colour of steel, of sapphire. When a cloud appears, it is reflected in the water and its reflection travels in the water. But when winds blow the water gets angry, nasty, unrestrained, enraged, infuriated… Just then you know you are at sea. Exactly then you prove to yourself that you are in a fight with it, that you defy it, you laugh in its face and you hold it in the grip of its own will. Oh, the sea, the sea, it knows how to be wild, how to roar like a wounded beast and how to rumble, and when it slowly subsides, it becomes tame and you think it is whispering to you. But then when the wind starts to blow again, it knows how to whip a wave clear and blue, silver, white like wool, roaring and thundering, long and tall… Ah, the sea, the sea… When the wind subsides the waves calm down, they pile up, roll out and burn one another out, calmly unwinding on the shore. The froth returns to the bosom of the wave and calmly rolls to shore, telling something untold, whispering and rustling softly…"

Yannakis paused for a moment and while holding his chest with his hands, coughed for a long time. He wiped the sweat from his temple. Someone came out from the hanger and did not lower the blanket acting as a door. Through the narrow opening a foggy arch of the moon could be seen in the distance. Far away, a red rocket flared up in the sky and as its brightness slowly diminished, the darkness returned. But those inside could only see the flame from the fireplace flare up and diminish again, creating shadows on the wall. Yannakis leaned on the damp wall, took a deep breath and continued:

"At night when the sky is clear, the sea is embroidered with pearls created by the reflection of the stars. They move around, pile up, flash and disappear but only for a moment before they return in the calm and after that they quiver in the gentle sea waves… If you look up you will see the stars in the sky, if you look down you will see the stars so close you can catch them with your hand… Above there are stars, below there are stars and you stand between them… They twinkle and quiver. Sometimes one comes loose and as you look at it in the water it seems to be coming out of the sea and flying towards the sky… The fishing boat, floating, cuts the sky, cuts the stars, and cuts the full moon in half. When gilded by the moon if you touch the water it will look like it is kissing your hand. Listen… someone is playing the mandolin on the shore…"

Yannakis paused again for a long and enduring cough. This time he lost his voice. In the dark he could not see the staring eyes of his comrades gazing at him. He spit out what he had coughed up and reached for his mandolin, leaning on the wall beside his automatic machine gun. He lightly and gently placed it in his arms and braced it on his left knee. His trembling fingers caressingly stroked the strings, gently pushing on them. Silence filled the hanger as Yannakis played a sad song without words, touching even the strongest of hearts, in some softly and deeply squeezing out a sigh and in others squeezing tears of pain down their cheeks and bitterness, sadness and grief…

Yannakis again gently squeezed the strings and paused. The sound of the mandolin lingered on in the hanger. Someone sighed aloud, and leaned their head on his shoulder. It was a woman's touch. He felt something warm drip on his hand and slowly cool down. He raised his right hand and ran his fingers through the mandolin strings. Stretching and with a torn up long vocal tremble, which for a moment broke up and died out, he shook and roared; his roar slowly diminishing out there somewhere. It seemed to him that everyone had felt the storm in the sea, which they had never seen, and the storm in their own souls… He paused for a moment and when he began to play again his voice choked. His mandolin suddenly went quiet, as if the strings were cut with a sharp knife and in place of melody Yannakis's voice came back on:

"When you stroll along the shore, the sand rustles under your feet, little well-washed white stones crackle and the water is peaceful; so peaceful

and tame that it makes you want to caress it… And when you do touch it, it feels like a hand gently caresses you back… Yes…" said Yannakis quietly.

His voice was now completely gone, there was only silence…

The Unit commissar lifted the patched up blanket that hung over the entrance of the underground hanger and with his shining, battery powered flashlight broke the tranquility. From his officer's case he pulled out his thick notebook, turned over some pages and said:

"There are some weaknesses noted by the Brigade Command, especially when we march as a column. Of course there are many more marches that await us, be it day or night, which is why Command has developed certain rules. But so that I don't take too much time, it is better that I read them to you and then my courier will give each rank a page. You and your superior can then study and memorize them. Listen carefully."

While shining on his papers with his battery powered flashlight, the Unit Commissar began to read:

"If every fighter assists in the run of the march, then the march will not be as difficult and we will achieve our objectives. Second, when you are traveling in a column, you do not need to leave empty space, because the column opens and breaks up. Third, if it is very dark and you can't see in front of you, then either place a white piece of cloth on the person's back in front of you or hang on to their overcoat. Fourth, do not talk or even whisper during the march, do not smoke and do not use your flashlight because you could cause a lot of damage. Fifth, do not exit the column without permission from your superior or from the political commissar, do not go for a drink of water, to the toilet or stop for a short rest, because you will be breaking up the column and exposing yourself and the rest of the fighters to danger. Sixth, load your draft animals well. Before pulling out with the column make sure the load sits well on the saddle. If the load shifts or falls you will have difficulty and you and your pack animal will get tired and you will break the column, so do everything possible to secure it before leaving. Seven, do not allow your pack animal to leave the column for a drink of water. If a pack animal stumbles and its load falls, then immediately take it to the side, so that the rest of the column can pass. Then load up again and enter the column. Make sure that your pack animal walks at the same speed as the rest of the column. Eight, help, encourage and show solidarity for those getting tired during the march and do everything possible to make sure the march does not weaken. Nine, your hands must be free at all times during the march so that you can use a weapon. Ten, before pulling out make sure your boot laces are nice and tight and your provisions are packed well in your backpack. This way your hands will always be free and you can walk easier. Eleven, when you run into an obstacle on the road do not stop to look at it or fix it. Go by it without hesitation so that the column is not slowed down. Twelve, if

during the march you hear gunfire, continue marching without fear. The column command has taken all possible measures. But if you receive orders from command to respond to the gunfire, then do so quickly and decisively.

Fighters and comrades, this is all I wanted to tell you today." The Commissar then put his notebook back in his case and left the hanger with the greeting, "All to arms - everything for victory."

The hanger was silent. Mita was first to break the long, deep, difficult and wicked silence:

"It seems to me that, from the political speech sung to us, there must be something cooking… That's what I think. What day is it today?"

"December 16th. We are still in 1948 and eight days before Christmas," replied Kolio.

Mita put on her overcoat and, leaning forward to avoid hitting her head on the low ceiling of the hanger, went out. She covered her face with her hand. The brightness of the snow caused her half opened eyes to tear. The entire region, as far as the eye could see, was covered in snow. She took a few steps out and noticed the snow was knee deep.

"Come out! Get into formation!" a firm voice was heard outside of the hangers and bunkers issuing a short but sharp order.

"Get into formation!" ordered the unit commanders.

"Get into formation!" the order echoed everywhere.

Mita, taking two steps back, returned to the hanger and yelled out, "Wake up! Did you not hear?!"

"What is it?" someone asked, but before Mita had a chance to reply the Cheta Commander abruptly flung the blanket substituting for a door off the hanger and yelled out: "Come out and get into formation!"

There was a line up which, including the commander, numbered eighteen people of whom seven were young women. They left for the flat place on the hillside where the Cheti were gathering. Tsilka suddenly stopped, turned around and ran back into the hanger. She picked up a dirty blanket that had been thrown out, rolled it up into a roll and tossed it over her shoulder.

"What are you doing with that rag?" asked Mita.

"Be quiet! It will be needed…" replied Tsilka.

"Didn't I tell you, from the political song and dance we received earlier, that something big was cooking?" retorted Mita.

"Stop! Don't talk in formation!" the sergeant yelled.

Everyone took their place in the lines and lined up in Cheti formation. The battalion was standing in wait. A cold, harsh wind blew, turning faces red, biting ears, making eyes cry frozen tears and freezing toes and feet.

"Comrades, fighters! Greetings! At ease! Stand in a semi circle." ordered the Brigade commander. "Today we are going on a long march. The path we take will be difficult, but you battle hardened fighters are used to long marches, for you the obstacles will not be insurmountable. It will

be hard. The march will last a long time, you will pass over difficult terrain and you will endure bad weather but all this will be worth it after our military victory – there will be great joy! Onward to new victories!" the Brigade Commander concluded.

During a secret meeting the Cheta Commanders were briefed and told that their task would be to battle their way into and take a city, but they were not told where the road would lead them. Their subordinates were told to order everyone to pack food for three days and take as much ammunition as possible.

While everyone worked hard preparing for the great march under the veil of fog that had engulfed the land during the day, no one took notice of the day passing. Then just before darkness had almost covered the brooks and hills of the land, the column was ready to move. People with loaded horses and mules were set in motion. The fine snow that began to fall did not hinder the march. The fighters and their pack animals were well rested and easily kept up the pace even in the path of the deep snow that had covered the terrain the previous day. Without difficulty and in great silence they crossed the front lines between the hills of Mounts Kula and Plati, they took the path west of Vicho and in the deep darkness of early dawn they entered the villages Lagen, Dolno and Gorno Kotori and disappeared into the houses. And while they recovered from fatigue and dried their clothing in the fireplaces, vigilant guards kept a watchful eye on all approaches, especially on those leading to and from Lerin. In the morning, to avoid being attacked from the sky by airplanes, they left the houses early and while laying down in the snow hidden in the nearest groves, they received orders to not move, not light fires and to not speak loudly. The day slowly passed in complete silence under the low overhanging clouds.

All Unit Chiefs were invited to gather at the house where the Brigade Commander was lodging. Standing in front of an operational map with his pointer pointing at a line on the map, the Brigade Commander outlined the road that would fulfill their objective, which the brigade would travel over the course of the night.

"In complete silence," the Brigade Commander continued, "the units, I emphasize in the greatest of silence and under all precautions, measures of care and under great alert, must travel across the Lerin Plains and take their positions in the tree covered hills near the villages Krushoradi and Tsetina by early dawn. The march is about forty kilometers long and we will have to travel on a rugged and hilly road under treacherous conditions. The Command's evaluation of yesterday's march was excellent; we have exemplary fighters with great physical endurance. The Unit Commanders showed exemplary conduct and I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of Brigade Command to express my gratitude. Now go back to your units and prepare your fighters for departure. The hour of departure will be communicated to you by a courier." concluded the Brigade Commander.

None of the Unit Chiefs, during the meeting, had asked what the purpose of the march was.

Tsilka, lying down near Mita and Yannakis quietly asked: “What day is it today?”

“December 18th. And why do you want to know? So we don’t get lost in time? Did you know that the Commander has been gone for a long time? I heard that all the Unit Chiefs were called in by the Brigade Commander.” replied Mita quietly.

“No one said anything about where we are going and why. Before they used to tell us, right?” asked Tsilka quietly.

“They used to, but now they say nothing. The Major said we are going on a long march and that was that.” whispered Mita.

“No, no one said anything. Did you ever hear of anyone coming to tell us? And what, that we are walking into a trap?” replied Tsilka while their conversation was abruptly interrupted by the voice of the Cheta Commander ordering “Get into formation!”

The Commander did his inspection, praising some while reprimanding others and, as he stood in front of the formation, asked: “Is anyone here sick?”

There was silence in the formation. He continued.

“After a while we will continue with the march ordered by General Headquarters. The Brigade Command wants us to resume the march with the same persistence, discipline and mutual assistance we demonstrated during last night’s march for which we were all well praised and…” the Commander was interrupted and did not finish his sentence. It was the voice of the neighbouring Cheta Commander who yelled out:

“Attention! Attention! To the left…” A wave of strong and noisy wind could be heard. The march had begun. With weapons on ready, the forward guard walked in front of the column, five men in total, stepping onto the deep snow, making a path. Behind them was a chain of armed men with horses and mules loaded with ammunition. In the middle marched Mita, behind her Yannakis and behind him Tsilka, Traianka, Mite, Krste, Ilia, Kole and Mare weighed down by her backpack and bag with the Red Cross symbol on it. The falling snow that started out as granules turned to sleet and was now blowing into their eyes and faces. There was only darkness in front of them. The narrow winding path was covered in deep snow and was obstructed from view. Mita was hanging on to the tail of the horse walking in front of her when the animal slipped down the hill. Mita managed to hold her step firmly. Yannakis, hanging on to Mita’s belt, let out a long sigh as he began to lose his step. Tsilka, holding on to him, gave him her support and encouraged him to untangle his leg and move on. She then slowed down to catch her breath.

In the dead of night they managed to cross treacherous brooks, travel uphill and descend on flat ground. They traveled the mountain where strong winds blew in waves and descended upon the flat fields, carrying

with them rings of snow. They bore the wild winds that beat the flatlands with snow, depositing it in one place, brushing it off, waving it around, blowing it into their eyes and faces and then transferring it somewhere else. They marched with frozen cheeks, cold foreheads and frost bitten ears.

With his stiff, frozen fingers Yannakis rubbed his ears, cheeks and forehead and cleaned the snow off his shoulders. His pace slackened and he was slowing down. Bent over and blue from the cold, he pushed on, finding it difficult to move his frozen feet and barely able to hold his jaw from chattering. He felt that the cold was getting under his skin and numbing all his muscles. He was exhausted, his body was trembling. He could barely stand the strong, icy mountain wind and the drifts of snow blowing in his face and eyes over and over again, beating him like a whip, touching every naked spot, stretching it out and stiffening it.

The column was slowing down. The Chiefs gave much encouragement, helped out the weak by supporting them by their shoulders and begging them to hold on with promises that they would soon arrive at their destination.

"Rest! Fifteen minutes rest!" a voice was heard calling out. The entire column fell to the ground, covering the snow. The storm was howling. In the short and sudden bursts of wind voices were lost and shouting sounded like whispering. The whistling wind came down in waves losing its intensity as it dissipated down in the fields, but only for a moment, until new and louder waves arrived bringing with them more snow, waving it around and piling it up in drifts.

Tsilka took the blanket off her shoulder and spread it in front of her.

"The knife, give me your knife," she said to Kolio. "Mita, you hold here and pull."

With the sharp knife Tsilka cut the blanket into long strips and said: "Wrap your heads, legs, neck, face…"

Mita took a strip and wrapped it around her neck the said: "Now I know why you carried this dirty blanket."

A voice called out, "Depart!" but the order was barely audible.

Lazily the column straightened and began the steep uphill climb. The fighters were slipping and falling over one another.

"Belts!" called out the Unit Commander. He then undid his own military belt, stood up in front of the column and handed one end to the fighter closest to him. Those leading horses and mules tightened the reins on their pack animal and with their entire might pulled on the animals to hold them steady.

They arrived at dawn and held their position in the forested hills outside the village Tsetina. They were exhausted from the long march. Wet to the bone they looked for a place to sit in the snow. The chiefs would not allow them to lie down because if they did in their wet condition in the cold they would freeze. They gathered together in groups, encircled

tree trunks and huddled together tightly blowing warm breath on each other's necks, backs and arms. They slept standing on their feet and that is how they spent the day in this dense forest until dusk.

"Depart!" The order resonated strongly in the forest, echoing against the tree trunks and slowly diminished. The fighters uncoiled themselves from the tree trunks and began to form the column. They departed at dusk and marched all night, whipped by the snow storm and the vicious wind.

At the break of dawn on the fourth day of their march they finally arrived at the village Krontselevo.

Mita, Tsilka, Ilia, Traianka and Kolie huddled together in a group breathing in each others faces and in tears whispered: "We are alive, we are alive…"

Mita suddenly pulled away and yelled in Greek: "Yannakis! Yannakis! Come to us!"

"Don't yell…" whispered Mare with her eyes pointing towards the hill.

Tsilka also looked towards the hill and made a gesture that ravens were now pecking on Yannakis's frozen eyes.

On the night of December 22nd, the Commanders of the 14th and 103rd Brigades and the Commanders of the Units operating in Kajmakchalan Region were called to a meeting at one of the houses in Krontselevo village. Presiding over the meeting was General Gusias, representative of the Chief of Staff, who had arrived here two days before by way of Yugoslavia.

"Comrade Commanders," continued Gusias with a serious tone of voice, "tonight we are going to attack Voden. I repeat. We will go tonight. The presence of so many of our units in Kajmakchalan could be detected by the enemy, which for us would have tragic consequences. Exactly because of this we don't have the luxury of giving the Units any more time for rest."

General Georgiadis, Commander of the 14th Brigade, finally broke the silence that followed.

"The fighters are extremely exhausted from the long and arduous march which took place under very tough winter conditions and are overwhelmed by the super human effort they went through. I suggest the attack on Voden be postponed twenty-four hours to allow the fighters to recover, eat and rest."

Georgiadis was a lone voice; no one gave him support.

"There will be no delays to the operation," Gusias yelled out. "The order from Headquarters is as follows:

'All available means to carry out an attack on the city of Voden will be synchronized to commence on December 22nd, 1948 at 3 o'clock after midnight.'"

The fighters, half asleep, were pulled out and gathered from the houses literally by force. They all stood in a semi-circle shaking from the cold, bumping their feet together and rubbing their ears. Their teeth chattered,

their toes in their wet boots were numb, they shed frozen tears under their eyes, their cheeks were red and their lips were turning blue. In the cold night wind, their wet clothes froze and became stiff. Their fingers froze from having to hold the barrel and handle of their frozen cold rifles and machine guns.

The Cheta Commander addressed them with the following words:

"Tonight we continue the march. This leg of the march will be even more arduous but if you could endure the last four nights, you can certainly endure this one. Today we are setting out to attack Voden, the city."

There were no outbursts of joy or of calling out combat slogans and as dusk arrived and darkness descended a loud voice broke the silence.

"Depart!"

Only snow could be heard crunching under their boots as the fighters lined up in a column and began their march. All around the fog was frozen and the trees were covered with white frost. The fighters were wobbly on their feet, half asleep they would often trip and fall, breaking up the column. On a downhill climb one of the loaded horses slipped and the crates it was carrying broke off and from them tumbled mines and hand grenades, rolling downhill.

"Halt!" ordered the Cheta Commander. "Take off your overcoats and place them on the ground for the horses to walk on. Quickly!"

They passed one more hill and in front of them, some distance away, they could see the shining lights of Voden.

"Forward!" ordered the Unit Chiefs.

The Cheta Commander looked at his watch. It was past three in the morning and they were far away from the city. It was late. It took them another half hour before they arrived at their destination by the river Voden. The river was loud and its water flowed violently. With their weapons ready, they stood by the shore. There was no bridge or cable. A long machine gun burst was heard coming from the distance in the south and after that the sky was lit with bright flares.

"Forward!" ordered the Cheta Commander and was the first to plunge into the fast flowing water.

Tsilka and Mita, holding on to one another, stepped into the river together. The cold water covered them up to their waists and took their breath away.

"Hang on! Hold on to me tight!" Mita yelled out. Tsilka took her backpack from her shoulder and put it down in the water. She then grabbed Mita's belt and together they made it to the other side. Their pants were soaking wet.

"Charge!" roared the Commander in a loud voice.

The frozen pant legs were welded together and the ice on them was impeding their ability to move. They could hardly separate their legs. The ice had tied them down.

"Forward! Charge!"

Light flares exploded above their heads and the river bank lit up like daylight. Just then, from the surrounding hills, the enemy began to bombard them with volleys of machine gun fire. Mita and Tsilka were hit in their legs. They were both left there to bleed at the river's bank.

The enemy was not at all surprised by the three thousand five hundred exhausted DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) fighters who, while initiating an uncoordinated attack on the city of Voden, suffered a total defeat. Mutilated and in disarray they were pursued by aircraft while they withdrew to the forested slopes of Mount Kajmakchalan.

The same day and night and the next day and night the mobilized women and young girls from the villages surrounding Kajmakchalan in the Lerin and Voden Regions collected the wounded and carried them on stretchers to first aid stations in the villages Dolno and Gorno Pozharesko.

Here, bandaged up, warm and fed, they waited for the day to pass. In the evening the wounded brought here on stretchers formed a column and took the narrow, steep uphill winding path leading to the peak of Kajmakchalan. At the front of the column were two armed men and following them were about a dozen lightly wounded fighters making a path through the snow. After some time an order was given for the column to stop and move away from the path. Shortly afterwards five armed men passed by. One of the wounded recognized Gusias. He was returning to Prespa via Yugoslavia after the battle had been lost.

In the morning hours the head of the column stopped at the border line. The leader walked over to the Yugoslav border checkpoint. A sergeant came out. The interpreter, mixing some Serbian words with his local Voden dialect, told the sergeant that they had many heavily wounded and asked if they could take them to hospitals over the border.

"Immediately now it is not possible," replied the sergeant and pointed towards the sky on the other side of the border. "You see the airplane up there? It is filming, taking pictures."

"At least give us some bread and some water. The wounded are thirsty and hungry." pleaded the leader.

"Go away and wait. You will get some later. Wait until the border checkpoint Commander returns. Go away. Don't stand here." ordered the sergeant.

In the meantime the wounded one after another protested. A man with bloody bandages on his head and around his shoulder, spit on the side, and began to curse: "We will die here. Tito has gone to the American side. Believe me it's like that. I am telling you. We will die here from hunger and the cold. Tito will help the Americans do this to us. I am telling you..."

Later in the afternoon the leader was summoned to the checkpoint. An officer, Captain by rank, gave him the following message:

"The trucks cannot travel because the snow drifts are very deep. The villagers from the surrounding villages are mobilized to clear the road. As

soon as they finish their job, you will get your hot food and water. At nightfall all the wounded will be transferred to those huts over there.” the Captain pointed.

The Great Lie – Chapter 8

In front of the double doors of the hospital entrance that was chained with barbed wire, stood a dirty truck. The guard, with his neck wrapped in the wide collar of his sheep-leather jacket, looked through the tinted glass of the kiosk, came out and in a mild tone of voice asked: "Documents!"

The driver of the truck handed the guard a card with a number written on it – it was the hospital cipher. The guard took the card and returned to the kiosk. A private conversation took place over the telephone. The driver heard the word "good" and was confident that he had permission to enter. He started the engine. The guard returned, gave back the card and asked: "And they," with his chin pointing at the two men who sat beside him, "who are they?"

"They are doctors," replied the driver.

"What?" asked the guard.

"They are doctors," the driver repeated.

The guard stared at their tired faces and bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep.

"Hello, how are you?" the guard greeted the passengers but did not get a reply. "Are they mute?" he asked.

"No. They don't speak Macedonian. They are Greeks," said the driver.

"What the devil are they doing here?" inquired the guard.

"They came here to examine the wounded," replied the driver.

"Wait!" said the guard and went back to the kiosk. He then picked up the telephone, said something and quickly returned. He then quickly opened the door and yelled out, "Enter!"

In front of the main entrance of the hospital there were a number of stretchers lined up and orderlies were standing beside them. They were offloading wounded from the trucks and taking them to the receiving rooms. The newly arrived doctors were sent to the washrooms to clean up. When they were ready, one of the nurses took them to the administrator's office to meet with the hospital administrator.

"Please sit down. The administrator is doing his morning rounds. We have informed him of your arrival," said the nurse.

"We are sorry but we don't speak Serbian," said the man closest to the nurse.

The nurse did not reply.

"Do you speak English?" asked the same man.

"No, no I don't speak…" replied the nurse.

"Parlez vous Francais?" asked the same man.

"No, I don't parlez vous…" replied the nurse.

"Ponjmaish po Ruski?" the same man asked again.

"No. I only speak Macedonian," replied the nurse in Macedonian.

"What did she say?" asked the other man in Greek.

“From what I understood she said she speaks Macedonian…” said the man closest to her.

“So she understood you. Then ask her in Russian if she can serve us some tea?” remarked the other man.

“Сестра, пожалуйста, можете нас угостить чаем?” (Nurse, please, can you serve us some tea?) asked the man closest to her.

“You want tea? With pleasure. What kind of tea?” asked the nurse.

“What did she say?” asked the other man.

“She said with pleasure and asked what kind of tea?” replied the man closest to her.

“But of course the kind that Stalin drinks,” said the second man.

“What? Stalin?” interrupted the nurse “You like him?! There is no Stalin here! Down with Stalin!” The nurse turned red in the face and walked away angry.

The two men were surprised at the nurse’s reaction. The one that spoke Russian to her immediately understood what the problem was and quickly went after the nurse to apologize.

“Простите, сестра. Не уходите, подождите, подождите пожалуйста. Нам нужен…” (Sorry, nurse. Do not go, wait, wait please. We need…) said the man that was closest to her.

“The hell with him…” replied the nurse and wanted to say something else but at that very moment the hospital administrator arrived.

“What is it nurse? I can hear yelling from all the way there,” said the administrator to the nurse and then turned to greet the guests: “Здравствуйте товарищи. Добро пожелавали!” (Greetings comrades. Welcome please!) The administrator greeted the men in Russian and with a wide sweep of his hand asked them to sit. Then, pointing at the nurse with his head, inquired: “В чём дело, о чём шла ссора?” (What is it, what was all that yelling?)

-Да нет, доктор. Она не ссорилась… Всё в порядке…(No, doctor. She was not yelling… everything is okay…)

The administrator smiled and then turned to the nurse, who stood quietly by the door, and said: “Nurse please bring us some of the hot stuff from your grandfather’s stash to warm our guests. Please hurry.”

“And tea?” asked the nurse in a shaky voice.

“Товарищи, чай пить будете?” (Comrades, will you have some tea?) Inquired the administrator.

“С удовольствием!” (With pleasure!) answered the men, breaking into loud laughter.

After they explained what the laughter was all about, the administrator raised his eyebrows slightly, picked up the glass of hot rakia (homemade alcoholic beverage), took a deep breath and said: “Too bad the times are clouded… Cheers…”

“Is igia” (cheers) replied the guests in Greek.

A moment of silence followed and afterwards the discussions continued in Russian.

The administrator asked: “I have heard you had some difficult days…”

“It has been difficult. We have had heavy losses, especially after the unsuccessful battle for Voden and S’botsko,” replied one of the men.

“Yes. Almost all the wounded were brought here from there, we have them all here,” said the administrator.

“Were they heavily injured?” Inquired one of the men.

“Yes. Very much so. Most are wounds to the chest, belly and leg areas from infantry weapons… And that from close proximity,” replied the administrator.

“How many wounded do you have now?” inquired one of the men.

“We have two-hundred and sixty all together. Some, tomorrow or the day after, will be transferred to Belgrade. We don’t do major surgery here,” replied the administrator.

“Doctor, tell me, please, how many have you admitted?” asked one of the men.

“Are you asking me how many have we have admitted all together?” the administrator asked curiously.

“Yes,” said the man.

The administrator opened a drawer and took out a thick book, leafed through several pages and said: “In total so far we have admitted approximately six thousand.”

“How many died?” inquired the man.

“Many. About ten to fifteen percent. Unfortunately many of the wounded arrived here late, sometimes too late to help them. We had patients here who were admitted ten or even twenty days after they were wounded. Too often the wounds were infected and gangrene had already set in. A lot of the first aid field medics are inexperienced and don’t know how to deal with complicated wounds… We are making every effort however to train our people, even some of the wounded girls here, to professionally assist with proper medical care. They learn quickly but…” replied the administrator as he was interrupted by one of the men who said: “Yes, but instead of a medical bag, they give them a machine gun…”

There was silence. The administrator broke the silence when he said “How about one more?”

“There is no problem, as long as it’s just one more. But doctor, let us get back to the reason for us being here,” replied one of the men.

“It’s okay with me. Go ahead do your duty. When would you like to start?” asked the administrator.

“We should rest a little today and we will begin tomorrow morning after your rounds,” replied the man.

The next day.

“Given name, last name, date of birth, rank and unit?” is the order of questions.

“Wounded – when and how?”

“Strip… Kneel down! Repeat three times!”

“You are free to go!”

“Next!”

“Close your eyes! Touch your nose with your finger!”

“You are free to go!”

“Next!”

“Run to the door and back!”

“You are free to go!”

“Next!”

“Lie down. Face down! Turn three times!”

“You are free to go!”

“Next!”

“Kneel down! Take a step forward with your left leg! Now with your right leg!”

“You are free to go!”

“Next!”

“Bend forward! Hands in front of you! Raise your right arm! Now your left!”

“You are free to go!”

“Next!”

“Not well! Return to your bed!”

“Are there any more?”

“Yes there are.”

Let them in, but one by one!”

The examinations took until late afternoon. The next day the doctors came back ordering that washed and mended uniforms be given to the patients found fit. Then they gave each a backpack of dry rations to last two days.

After saying their goodbyes the patients climbed aboard the five old “Jemps” (military trucks) parked inside the hospital yard. Nurse Sevda came out and went over to Tsilka and Mita, hugged and kissed them both on the cheeks and on the eyes, took out two buns of bread made from rye from her apron and gave them to the ladies, “For later, so that you have something to eat, and… dears, please be careful… ladies… take care of yourselves…” said Sevda.

At nightfall the trucks left the hospital.

The road to Mount Babuna was snowed in. After taking a sharp turn the first vehicle ran into a deep drift of snow causing the “Jemps” (military truck) to stall. The driver got off and after loudly cursing and spitting, yelled out: “Get off the truck and start clearing the snow!”

There was only one shovel.

“Why are you standing there! Start clearing the snow with your hands, with your mouth if you have to! Quickly, if you don’t want to spend the night here,” yelled the driver at the thirty people in his truck as if it was

their fault that the truck was stuck in the snow. By the light of the truck's high beams, the passengers used their hands and feet to clear and level the snow.

"Good! Now get back on the truck!" the driver called out in a hoarse voice.

The truck's engine roared and the truck shook as it slowly freed itself from the snowdrift and continued the uphill climb. Then just as it passed over Mount Babuna its passengers could see the city lights of Prilep. Downhill the driver kept his foot on the brake. On the left, high above the mountain, a full moon could be seen. There was a bluish reflection on the cobblestone road, covered in a thick layer of snow, compressed and beaten down by truck tires. Before the city entrance there was a man holding a machine gun in his hands. Beside him there was a well-lit battery powered lamp flashing the words "stop"!

"Militia! Documents!" said the armed man.

The militia man recognized the code on the documents. They were expected. He had orders to let them through without inspection. He knew where they were going and what and who they were carrying in the trucks.

"Have a nice trip and good luck…" said the armed man and waved as he sood still.

"Thank you," replied the driver.

At dawn, before entering Bitola, they were stopped by a military patrol. An officer came out of the jeep and, after looking at the documents, told the driver: "You will follow us through the city to the other side with lights off."

They drove through the quiet city streets at a slow speed with lights off. At the city limits the jeep turned on its high beams and sped up. Prior to arriving at the village Kazhani, the jeep turned left and stopped in a designated grove.

The snow around the grove was brushed off by the strong and cold wind. The same officer got off the jeep and, covering his face with his wide jacket collar, gathered all the truck drivers together. Carefully, slowly and in military style, in a tone as if every word counted, he informed them: "You will remain here the entire day. You are only allowed to exit the trucks one by one and only as needed. You are forbidden to light a fire. We will bring you food during the day."

The officer saluted, climbed back onto his jeep and left for Bitola. Soon the jeep disappeared down the snow covered road. Snow fell all that day. Blown wildly from the fields by strong winds the snow was twisted around and deposited in waves of drifts. The sky was lost in the dark snow clouds.

People, in groups of five or six, regularly got off the trucks and went to warm up in a nearby cabin. There they thawed out their frozen hands and feet and with their warm palms rubbed their cold faces, noses and pale ears. After spending a few minutes in the warm cabin they then ran back

under the truck tarpaulins while others quickly took their place. They spent their entire day doing this. Then under the cover of darkness the trucks rolled out again, maneuvering with difficulty on the uphill, snow covered road on their way to Gjavoto. Occasionally they stopped because the tires were stuck, spinning wildly on the slippery ice. Everyone was ordered off the truck to push and as the truck tires regained traction they had to run to catch up. Out of breath and sweating, they leapt under the tarpaulin and began to freeze all over again. They felt cold chills run through their faces, shivers up their backs and the sensation of crawling ants all over their hands and feet.

The Resen flatland welcomed them with a clear sky and a full moon. In every village they passed, hordes of unleashed dogs ran after the trucks, on the left and on the right, barking at them and escorting them out of the village. And then those villagers already awake knew what kind of trucks were passing, where they were going and who and what they were carrying. Before midnight the trucks stopped in front of the Markova Noga barracks but only for the border barricade to be raised. After crossing the border, everyone got off the trucks. They got into formation in a column and left in the dark. They marched to Medovo where they spent the night in designated village houses. There they slept for the remainder of the night and were awakened at early dawn the next day.

They did not take them to the local squads. From them and others who arrived later from the hospitals in Albania, they created a new squad, a sabotage squad. For three days they ran, squatted, crawled and hid in the barns and narrow streets in the villages of Medovo and Shtrkovo. They practiced street fighting. After that they gave them German panzers with which they practiced targeting imaginary bunkers. One week of practice was enough to master the skill of street fighting and destroying strong enemy defenses.

February 8th arrived with a thick layer of snow. They lined them up early in the morning and, based on the way the speaker's stage was arranged on the platform on the narrow balcony, they knew that now, today, they would be going on a long march. Their objective would be to attack, occupy and liberate Lerin.

"In Lerin," spoke a woman, "with a strong blow of our army's mighty and powerful fist we will crush our enemy, liberate the city and declare it the capital of free Greece, a worthy place for us to establish a temporary democratic government. Once this is done, many governments and countries worldwide will immediately recognize us and send us much needed help. Tanks, airplanes, large cannons... Fifteen thousand new fighters will join us in Lerin and in the Lerin plains villages and with them together we will go to Solun. Today on your way to Lerin you will be joined by six thousand fighters from the Democratic Army of Greece. You, the saboteurs, will have the privilege of opening their way to Lerin by destroying the enemy's bunkers, barbed wire and other obstacles."

Tsilka shook the snow off her shoulders and whispered to Mita: “Do you think it’s her?” pointing with her head to the balcony, “the same woman who gathered us and took us to Gramos by telling us that there we would be washing and mending clothing and knitting sweaters and gloves?”

Mita furrowed her eyebrows and took a good look at the balcony. “Yes, it’s her… it’s her, but I don’t seem to remember her name…”

“Her name is Vera, is it not?!” asked Tsilka.

“Yes, Vera, that is correct… It’s Vera, may God will that her name never be heard again…” cursed Mita.

The speeches ended with the shouting of slogans, war songs and the battle cry “To Lerin! To Lerin!” The column then began its march into the deep snow. Wet and exhausted from fatigue, they arrived in Zhelevo in the afternoon. Among them was Vera.

“There are many soldiers passing by the road going up to Psoderi,” said Baba (Grandma) Yana, looking through the partly undraped, narrow window.

“Who is coming?” asked Dedo (Grandpa) Kiro in a sleepy voice.

“No one,” replied Baba Yana in Dedo Kiro’s ear, with a slightly raised voice, “no one is coming, I said going, they are going.”

“Okay then… Where are they going?” inquired Dedo Kiro.

“They are going up the road, towards Psoderi,” replied Baba Yana.

“Really? In this snow and cold!” remarked Dedo Kiro curiously. Then after coughing and spitting in the fireplace and pulling his feet under the thick woolen blanket, he asked, “Did you say they are going?”

“Yes they are going…” replied Baba Yana.

“And where are they going in this deep snow and awful cold?”

“A couple of days ago someone said they were going to attack Lerin… Lerin, I said Lerin, they are going to attack Lerin!” repeated Baba Yana loudly.

“They are going to do what?” inquired Dedo Kiro loudly.

“They are going to attack it, attack, I am saying they are going to attack Lerin!” answered Baba Yana in a loud voice.

“Oh, well…” mumbled Dedo Kiro. Then, while taking a long puff on his tobacco pipe and swinging his head from side to side with concern, he mumbled, “Oh well, if that’s how it’s going to be then let it be that way.”

Sadly Dedo Kiro was deaf from old age. So he asked again “You are saying that in this cold and snow they are going to Lerin? And what are they going to do there? Did they say?”

“All week they have been saying that they will free Lerin!” responded Baba Yana.

“What will they do?” asked Dedo Kiro again.

“They will free it! That’s what they will do!” Baba Yana yelled back.

“May God look after them and protect them! Really? In all the snow and cold!?...” remarked Dedo Kiro, crossing himself three times. He then yelled back at Baba Yana saying, “I am not deaf you silly old woman…”

Soldiers with mules and horses loaded with ammunition passed through Zhelevo all night long, singing and cheering with excitement. Behind them, 380 women followed from the Koreshtanski and Prespa villages - mobilized to carry the wounded. They were the last group in the formation.

They spent the 9th of February in Psoderi and in the fields and forests of the surrounding villages. The sky cleared allowing a wide view of Lerin, resting in the palm of the land. Beyond, under a clear sky was Mount Bel Kamen. Frozen snow crackled under their feet and the cold winter wind nipped at their bare faces.

“Breakfast! Cheti (detachment) Commanders report to the gathering!” echoed the couriers.

All wrapped up in their overcoats, with their heads hunched into their shoulders, they began to line up in front of the cauldron. Stamping their feet together they inhaled the delicious aroma of the boiling, rice-shaped pasta. The server filled their bowls to full portions. They warmed their hands on their hot tin bowls while looking for a place to sit or lean against a tree trunk. From their backpacks they took out dried bread, broke it into small chunks and placed it into the hot soup. Some burned their cold, numbed lips on the hot liquid, feeling its warmth going down their throats and chests. The commanders returned. They conveyed confidence towards the fighters. They said that, according to High Command, the battle for Lerin should only last a couple of hours, but did not say when the attack was going to take place. Confident that they would have a victory they waited, rigid from the cold, for nightfall.

Tension grew in anticipation of the arrival of early morning February 10th. But no one believed that they would attack in daylight. They remained huddled together around the trunks of the beech trees and warmed themselves with their breath. Before nightfall the units were ordered to prepare for departure but still there was no order to initiate the attack. Unrest grew during the long wait. Now they were told that the attack was postponed for 24 hours. All preparations, hope, fighting spirit, the assurances of a sure victory, faith in success all began to evaporate in the cold snow.

Some said that the units expected to attack the city from the north and from the south had not yet arrived at their designated places. There was much disappointment, mistrust and profanity. Another night passed and then just about an hour before the night was over, the order arrived: “Charge!”

The saboteurs first. With their panzers they needed to open the gates of the city. The city lights were visible. They descended down the snowed in trails, brooks and fields, trotting through the deep snow. Then suddenly the

sky was brightly lit by light rockets and long machine bursts thundered terribly…

Tsilka and Mita did not take nurse Sevda's advice to be careful…

Much later, a lonely woman all dressed in black, with braided hair, asked: "Dear, my dear did you see my daughter Zoja? They told me they brought her here wounded. Did you see her?"

The woman ran from person to person begging for information. She stopped and then started her pursuit again and again asking every person and looking at every stretcher. She stepped off the road, tripped and fell in the snow but never stopped asking: "My daughter's name is Zoja, have you seen her? She has long braided hair – I sent her with long braided hair when they collected all the young ladies. Zoja has always had long braided hair and even over there I believe she has had her long dark hair braided. I don't know if last year, up there in Gorusha, when the airplanes dropped burning barrels above the trees and were burning everything to the ground, if Zoja's braided hair had been burned?"

Someone called her: "Come, come help. My shoulder is killing me. Grab here, grab the stretcher."

At dawn they arrived in Zhelevo. There was a truck waiting at the bridge to pick up the wounded. An older man, a doctor, quickly examined each patient and directed the stretcher carriers. Some were loaded on the truck and others were left on the side of the road. The patient on the stretcher carried by the woman in black finally arrived before the doctor. The doctor removed the blanket from the patients face and said: "Not this one, leave her by the side of the road."

At that moment a loud cry of despair was heard. "Zoja my child!" cried the woman in black. Her knees gave way. She knelt down and embraced her daughter, her face touching her daughter's face and, her body shaking, she gently rocked her lifeless child in her arms… She sobbed quietly and her quiet sob was filled with pain and sorrow and with immeasurable and inconsolable anguish… Heartbroken the woman in black wanted to yell and curse but smothered by her strong emotions all she could do was cry, plead and sob. Here, beside the little brook, under a weeping willow on which broken icicles hung from the lower branches – her life broke, she fell into nothingness, everything that was dear to her was lost… Her life, more than once broken, was now filled with hopelessness, emptiness and despair…

Her hopes and wishes were blown away down the brook by the cold and bitter dusk wind, she felt her heart empty and everything living in her was gone, all that she thought about and dreamed up to now had left, it had been torn away from her heart and tossed down into the dark and deep emptiness… Everything she had up to this day was gone…

The pale blue full moon shone over Zoja's peaceful white face. Her mother's quiet whispers of repeated pleading, crumbled like sounds

without echo and with them disintegrated all that meant something, losing themselves in nothingness.

The stretchers one after another passed by all day long, women tromping through the mud mixed with snow and her, the woman in black, in whose lap laid Zoja's peaceful face, sitting all day at the side of the road, with no one asking her name.

It was almost sunset before she took to the road, to level ground, where she dug a grave and in it she buried her sadness, despair, darkness, apathy, misery, broken life and all her emptiness – everything that the woman in black carried on her shoulders, in her thoughts, soul and heart was buried.

The stretchers one by one kept on passing, women tromping in the mud mixed with snow and blood. Crowds of women carrying stretchers constantly passed by looking at the woman in black kneeling by the road and to them it seemed that she was there only for a moment, trying to catch her breath…

There was a gust of cold wind. It loosened some snow from the tree branches and trunks and then it died down beyond the highway… It died down and went to hell. And what would ease the pain and bring comfort to the untold, burned and immeasurable suffering? What would stop the tears, calm the heart which bleeds and tears and replace the despair with hope when the pain was so great? Quietly, gently, softly she sobs… Her silent voice quivers from the pain and anguish she bears at the bottom of her heart… She is surrounded by the abyss and feels the abyss within her…

The frozen snow crunched. The soil groaned under the steps of heavy boots. Two shovels made a pile. One beside the other – five young men and two young women were laid down, resting peacefully, together, at the bottom of the pit. Giorgi and the other five men crossed themselves, spit on their frozen palms, breathing deeply and sweating from the exertion, tossed on them soil mixed with snow. They flattened the soil and compressed it with their dirty boots and then they went to take more bodies from the stretchers that kept coming. They took the bodies off the highway and to the left and right they dug graves and buried them…

High up over the snow covered mountain, hung a full moon stretching and elongating the woman in black's shadow. Constantly passing beside her were more and more stretchers carrying mutilated and moaning young men and women…

The trucks found it difficult to turn around in Psoderi. The drivers drove them to the wide area at the top of the village, from where Lerin could be seen, but the open area was dangerous and they fell under enemy fire. Because of that they could not take the wounded any further. The main doctor sat beside one of the drivers, opened his notebook and while writing something down, said: "One thousand-five-hundred wounded."

"How many?" gasped the driver. "Too many," replied the doctor.

"That is how many we admitted… We gave them all first aid. The heavily wounded we dispatched by truck, those for whom we had no space

we put on stretchers and sent them down the highway loaded on horses and mules cared for by the women. Hopefully they will survive the cold…" concluded the doctor.

The highway from Psoderi to Smrdesh was a chain of trucks, women carrying wounded on stretchers, horses, mules and many, many lightly wounded fighters.

In addition to the fighters, a river of men and women, civilians, flowed from the houses in Zhelevo, Oshchima, Trnaa, Rula, Breznitsa, Smrdesh and from the houses in all of Prespa. They were leaving their homes to save themselves, refugees from an imminent attack by enemy forces and aircraft. There was much crying and moaning. There were many loud, strong, angry and rebellious cries of swearing, cursing and anathemas… There was so much crying and wailing taking place it could be heard all the way to the heavens…

"Oh God, we lost our children, we lost them all in Lerin!"

And in Lerin the victors, the government forces, brought priests and buried each of their fallen with military honours in an individual grave marked with a cross and with the person's name inscribed on it. But the others; the bandits as they called them, numbering about eight-hundred, them they buried in a mass grave, unmarked. They brought bulldozers to dig a large pit in an abandoned field and buried everyone dead or alive. Lerin eyewitnesses swear that they saw them burying living wounded along with the dead.

The Great Lie – Chapter 9

"In order to realize our plan we will need at least five to seven thousand fighters. But from where, where can we get these fighters? I know, from the refugee masses. Not from Albania, we can't do it from there because there we only have older people and mostly crippled fighters. But we can get some three to three and a half thousand from the ranks of the refugee children, the ones we sent to Eastern European countries. The remainder, the larger share, we can get from Yugoslavia. Unfortunately our job will be difficult because of Tito's betrayal. As a last resort we could always talk to and negotiate a deal with him but without the knowledge of comrade Stalin. It would be very bad for us if comrade Stalin found out that we had negotiated with Tito. I once agreed to send Mihali, Vangeli and that madman Goche there but up to now I have no desired results. Instead of letting them go we should have killed them and declared that they were spies and traitors to our movement and our Party. But it is still possible! There is time! I want Miltiadis," said Zahariadis.

When Zahariadis wanted to entrust a very important job to one of his close associates he always addressed them by their first name.

"Miltiadis, I want to entrust you with a very important task. I want you to go to Skopje, but not alone. Take Paskalis, Mitsopoulos, Mangos and Marika Elkova with you. There you will meet Nikos Daphnis, the person who manages our affairs in Skopje," said Zahariadis.

"Understood!" said Porphirogenis in a quiet tone of voice. "What am I to do there?"

"You are to lead the entire group. In the beginning you will only listen to what they have to say, the Slavo-Macedonians, and you will note everything. At the end, you will act harshly. How? We will decide. Those who will keep you company will each have a separate task and their own say. I spoke with each of them separately and everyone knows their role. The aim of the visit and talks in Skopje are; the mobilization of four to five thousand fighters and more if possible," concluded Zahariadis.

"And the children? I think the older ones?" asked Porphirogenis.

"It will be easy with them. You will be responsible for that job too. You will select several good speakers and propagandists and, as you know yourself, you will excite the fighting spirit in the children and after that all you have to do is open your notebooks and enlist volunteers. The rest will be done by others…

Our representative in Skopje has already been informed about your visit and has made arrangements for you to meet with the people you are going talk to in Skopje. Pay careful attention to Keramitzhiev. He is sly and does not easily lose his nerve. He knows how to listen and how to convince others. Always speak on behalf of the Party and act harshly…" advised Zahariadis.

Late at night on February 8th, Porphirogenis sent a coded message, via the contact office in Skopje, to Zahariadis informing him that he had run into difficulties and as a result he wanted to return for more consultations. About an hour later he received a coded reply which simply read "Return immediately!"

Before dawn Porphirogenis crossed the border at Markova Noga and in the evening he reported to Zahariadis.

"They left me with the impression that they don't trust us and they ignored us. We will require more time to explain the position of our Central Committee and define what we meant in the Fifth Plenum. And did you know what Oche (Father) told me? This is what he said: 'With the decision that you made during your Fifth Plenum you sentenced to death the thousands of Macedonians and Greek Communists who are now in prison camps. Be assured,' he said, 'that they will now have to sign statements that they agree with your views.'" concluded Porphirogenis.

Zahariadis stopped pacing for a moment and said: "Party discipline is important for all. And he, Oche, I know him, he is an OZNA (Peoples' Security Department) and UDBA (State Security Bureau) collaborator who we were supposed to execute last year."

Zahariadis went closer to the window and opened it. He looked far away into the mountains. He always felt terrible being closed in. He did not like small windows or dark, narrow rooms. They felt like cages. He often said to his associates that his prison cell in Akronavplia was larger than the largest rooms in these damn village houses. He never stayed more than one or two days in the same house. There was a deep sense of mistrust imbedded in his temperament. He did not trust anyone.

Zahariadis turned and said: "Let us go out for a walk. Let us breathe some fresh mountain air…"

They went outside. Cold air was blowing on their faces. The frozen snow was crunching under their feet. A dog was barking. They walked side by side. The road was leading them to the house at the end, at the village exit, closest to the forest. They entered the last house. It had a large spacious room. A wood burning stove was stirring in the corner. They took their boots off. Zahariadis stood by the stove and extended his hands, rubbing them vigorously. He was warming up. With his back turned to Porphirogenis, he went to the window, opened it and looked outside. High up on top of Mount Pelister was a full moon. The wavy waters of Lake Prespa were almost invisible in the moon's reflection on the whiteness of the snow. Far away to the north, the lights of Resen twinkled and above them was the Golema Mechka (Great Bear). Whenever he found the Great Bear in the sky his thoughts turned to Prague. He closed the window, turned around and went to the kerosene lamp. He raised the wick. The dim light illuminated the room. He saw Porphirogenis place his officer's briefcase on the table and from it take out his thick notebook. Porphirogenis opened it and stood there waiting. Water was boiling in the

large kettle. Zahariadis opened the cupboard and took out two glass cups and brought them close to the lamp and wiped them, one by one, with a white towel. He put them on a silver tray (a gift from Stalin), placed a teaspoonful of tea in each and filled them with hot water, which slowly acquired a warm amber colour.

"Please, help yourself," Zahariadis addressed Porphirogenis. "It's Georgian tea sweetened with honey. Strong. From comrade Stalin's fatherland. It's best when it's hot. It refreshes and soothes the spirit. Drink…"

There was silence in the room. The silence was interrupted by the quiet steps of the guards in front of the house. The frozen snow could be heard crunching under their feet.

Zahariadis drank the tea and, while reaching for the tea kettle, said: "Докладивай…" (Report…)

In his circle of closest associates, he had a custom of starting and ending a conversation with the Russian words "докладивай" (report) and "понятно" (clear).

Porphirogenis opened his notebook and, after clearing his throat, began his report:

"In accordance with your directives, our contacts in Skopje called a meeting with Goche, Keramitzhiev, Aianovski, the so-called Oche (Father) and Slavianka. We agreed that Stavros Mangos (whom they called Krste Mangov), who knew the four who are sheltered in Skopje, would speak first. He began by giving us information regarding a NOF (Peoples' Liberation Front) Plenum during which a decision was made to call a second Congress, during which discussions were to take place for resolving the Macedonian National Question and strengthening of the Macedonian Peoples' Struggle and to amend the program and status. His talk was not well tied. He jumped from subject to subject. He spoke an hour about the desertions and an hour about the weaknesses, about successes, etc. At one point he literally said: 'The Macedonian people, after Greece's liberation, will take the opportunity to self-determine, self-separate with the right to establish an independent Macedonian state.' He also stressed that the Macedonian people would be free and equal in a Balkan Federation."

Porphirogenis turned the page and continued: "Mangos also indicated that there are many desertions among the Macedonians, which the people condemn and view as cowardly and for their acts to be forgiven they need to return. He said that the new government must have a Macedonian minister and there must also be a Macedonian member in Headquarters who would form a separate Macedonian communist organization as part of the Communist Party of Greece. This Organization will then manage the 11th Division of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) which will carry the name 'Macedonian Division'. Mangos also quoted you often. Among other things he said that, according to Zahariadis's assessments, as long as

DAG possesses more troops, then it will hold Olympus and that is why it is very important that those who fled Aegean Macedonia to Yugoslavia be mobilized. There was strong discussion among them, which sounded more like a squabble and mutual accusations. Ours, if I may call them that, performed sternly. Here are some statements: 'I do not agree with you here. In my opinion your posture is incorrect. Perhaps because you are dissatisfied!' That's one. Here is another: 'Comrades, I want to know what your reasons are for staying in Yugoslavia? Please explain! What is keeping you here? You need to return. You are not helping the leadership of NOF by staying here. It is important that you return as soon as possible at this critical time when the people, young and old, are all struggling at the forefront. If you don't return the people will condemn you. If we don't achieve that which we want to achieve, you will be blamed for it. Zahariadis openly told us that you can come with one or two divisions and you can organize your own leadership and you can even lead Tito's politics if you like…' And here is one more: 'Your stay here represents a centre which influences all disillusioned and frightened elements and creates further division. Whether you like it or not, you are responsible for this whole situation for which you will be characterized as traitors. Our NOF movement today is facing many difficulties, there is a struggle for life and death and in such a situation your stay here inflicts great evil on our movement. If you return it is possible that this evil will disappear and, from another side, you will correct your past errors. But before you return it would be a good idea if you could find an understanding with the authorities here, ask them to close the doors on all deserters…' Nikos, these few statements confirm that in the NOF leadership exists…"

"Shorten it," commented Zahariadis. "It is good that they are not united… That I know. Tell me what did they say with regards to your mission, that's important. Continue," concluded Zahariadis.

"They, Nikos, most brazenly and harshly attacked our Party's policy with regards to the Macedonian question, insisting that you personally are responsible. In short, they claim that they had been lied to and that they are not in a position to mobilize Macedonians that had been lied to. He, Goche principally, with an elevated tone of voice literally said… one moment I have written it down. Yes I have it. He said, 'The issue of establishing Macedonian units is a lie. This is your demagogy and we here believed you and, based on your lies, we also deceived our own people. How can we tell this was a lie? By the fact that it was by your initiative that Macedonian Partisan units created in Prespa were dismantled. And that the agreement which NOF and CPG (Communist Party of Greece) signed in 1946 was not honoured…'"

Porphirogenis paused for a moment and then said, "Paskalis reacted to this."

"What did he say?" asked Zahariadis.

"Paskalis basically echoed Mangos's words indicating that the Macedonian people in Aegean Macedonia were granted the right to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent Macedonian state, and that..."

"Give me the short version!" interrupted Zahariadis.

"Okay!" continued Porphirogenis. "Regarding the 1946 agreement between NOF and CPG, Paskalis said 'I will argue that work was done in honouring that agreement. We as the then leadership strove to achieve unity and in pursuit of this, we broke up the existing Macedonian units.' Paskalis later said, 'I personally do not agree with comrade Oche's assessment that the Macedonian people in Aegean Macedonia have no confidence in the democratic leadership and no desire to continue to fight. The truth is that there are a small number of injustices and under estimates of the Macedonian cadres by the Greek party and military officials. The truth is that there was nothing achieved in practice by the 1946 NOF-CPG agreement. But we should not duel on such trifling matters and we should have confidence in Comrade Zahariadis to do the right thing for us Macedonians. For example, let me remind you what Comrade Zahariadis said during the Second Plenum of the Central Council of NOF. He said that the National Question of the Macedonian people will be declared with their participation in today's struggle and that will go a long way towards creating an Independent Macedonian State… Is this a small thing?'"

"And you Miltiadis, what did you say?" inquired Zahariadis.

"I, as we agreed, listened and made notes. I left them to argue amongst themselves and persuade each other and then realized that, how can I say, 'our side came up insecure and without arguments. I got the impression that the only argument was the frequent reference to your last name, which probably convinced them that its very mention was enough to be convincing.' What did I say? One moment please…" paused Porphirogenis as he flipped through some pages in his notebook, coughed a while and then took a sip of his cold Georgian tea and continued.

"Ah, here it is, I found it. I have written it here. This is what I said: Comrades, by Zahariadis's orders, I brought here Comrades Paskalis, Mangos and Marika Elkova with aims to do whatever is possible to find and send back new Macedonian fighters – reservists. I and you together, we need to help our comrades to achieve success. In my thinking here, in Yugoslavia, we need to find and send back to Aegean Macedonia five thousand Macedonians, which means we need to fulfill fifty percent of the plan put together by the General Staff. Finding five thousand Macedonians and sending them back can be done voluntarily or by force, meaning by forced mobilization. In addition, I gave them a wider explanation of our Central Committee's resolution drafted during the Fifth Plenum indicating that we dismissed a few opportunists, such as Markos, from the ranks because they were incapable of understanding the capability of the Democratic Army of Greece in leading a frontal war against the enemy.

These people were weak and only knew how to survive through Partisan style warfare. Furthermore I emphasized that any misunderstandings between NOF and CPG were meaningless and only principled in character. Then I finally told them to declare in writing that they would immediately begin mobilization of the Aegean Macedonians and send them back to the front. They did not say that they would not come back or would not mobilize fighters, I believe they will do that, but under certain conditions."

"And what did they want?" asked Zahariadis.

"They want us to admit that we have not approached the Macedonian issue properly with regards to the composition of DAG to form separate Macedonian units, a separate Macedonian headquarters with an all Macedonian command to act independently on Macedonian soil. They want us to remove Koichev, Kotsopoulos and Gisopoulos from NOF command. They want us to give permission to all the sick, to those who are unable to work and carry ammunition, to all the old men, old women and children to leave for Yugoslavia. They do not want us to mobilize children ages 14 and 15 and women older than 36 years old. They do not want us to mobilize the high spirited Macedonian children who feel Macedonian in their souls and who have already been sent to Eastern European countries. They want us to allow the Macedonians from the two parts of Macedonia to have free contact with each other. They want us to allow NOF to speak freely about the Macedonian Question and how it was correctly solved by the Yugoslav communists and to stop the propaganda against Tito. They want the Communist Party of Greece to apologize to those so-called deserters and to publicly admit that it made many mistakes with regards to the Macedonians. They do not want us to hold accountable those Macedonians who fled to Yugoslavia and they do not like us calling them deserters and traitors. And all these things they are asking for they want listed in a written and signed agreement and if we don't agree, they will hold us responsible for all the resulting consequences. At the end they said that all their comments and requests would be their official position, which would soon be submitted to us in the form of a letter," concluded Porphirogenis.

"Понятно…"(clear) said Zahariadis in a stretched tone of voice. He then got up, walked around the table in a circle and went to the window. It was early dawn and the tops of Mounts Pelister and Bela Voda were hidden in the clouds. The lake was covered with fog. Zahariadis opened the window and the room suddenly became cold. Small cold flakes of snow were blowing from the north. Zahariadis turned, came close to the table and filled his cup with tea. He then went to warm up his hands and muttered something quietly. He said: "Like hell you understood each other. I admit I made a mistake. Not that they believed Goche and Keramitchiev. No! Them they never believed, like I don't believe Paskalis or the entire NOF. But, tell me, what are our chances of bringing those five thousand here?"

"In my opinion, Nikos, we have no chance. Tito is on their side. If it were not for the Cominform resolution ... But I, Nikos, think that we should not leave things to chance. Those who found shelter in Yugoslavia are our citizens and therefore we are entitled, according to Greek law, to mobilize them, even by force. If Tito will not allow us, then we will declare ideological warfare on them and their communist party…" replied Porphirogenis.

Zahariadis put his cup down on the table and looked into Porphirogenis's eyes. He looked for a long time while Porphirogenis looked down and bowed his head.

"We should declare ideological warfare you say?" asked Zahariadis.

"Well, not exactly like that, but…" replied Porphirogenis while being interrupted by Zahariadis who said:

"And you like the others, always rushing. Don't rush. We have time. Everything has its time. Tito is still on our side. The border is still open, material arrives regularly and hundreds of our fighters are hospitalized in the Yugoslavian hospitals. Our bases are there full with ammunition and food. And as long as things remain this way we will not say a single bad word publicly about Tito or his Party. We have already taken our position and reported it to Comrade Stalin that at the right time we will perform our obligation to the Informbureau. When that time comes we will harshly criticize Tito and his Party, in other words, we will attack them…" concluded Zahariadis.

"Yes, of course, Comrade Zahariadis, you are right, it is understandable. I may be rushing and sometimes I am not careful about what I say. We are under extreme pressure which, unfortunately sometimes, leads to uncontrolled thoughts. Forgive me..." replied Porphirogenis.

"And Kolishevski?" inquired Zahariadis.

"Kolishevski? I believe he is stirring up things. We spoke for more than an hour. I informed him of all our needs, especially of our need to mobilize our Slavo-Macedonians," replied Porphirogenis.

"And what did he say?" asked Zahariadis.

"He said that their side would deliver on the 1946 promise to continue to equip us with weapons and food and provide hospitalization for our wounded fighters. But when I mentioned to him that we needed to mobilize our Slav-Macedonians, noting that they are our citizens and under our laws we have the right to mobilize them, even by force, he strongly objected and told me that we have no such right. We are the first, he said, who strongly supported your movement and we are the first, despite our difficulties, who came out to help you, but, he said, no one recognized you or your laws and therefore you have no legal rights. During the meeting I familiarized him with the decision our party made at the Fifth Plenum, noting that the Macedonians in Northern Greece would have the right to self determination and to create their own state. I told him

that they would have their own communist organization, one member in the interim government and membership in the General Staff and that it was decided that the Eleventh Division of DAG is to be renamed the Macedonian Division…" concluded Porphirogenis.

"And what did Kolishevski say?" inquired Zahariadis.

"Here is what he said: 'The Macedonians,' he said sharply, 'have their own country, which they won by struggling and making great sacrifices. Their country was not created by some Plenum decision.' This is what he told me. I got the impression that he was protecting those culprits and deserters. He is certainly giving them shelter. After leaving his office he added: 'You underestimate the Macedonian Organizations NOF and AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front). You are nothing without them in that part of Macedonia. Have you not realized that they are your central strength? Without those Organizations you would have no Macedonians in your ranks, except for those few who are devoted members of your party. Don't forget that it was with NOF's help that you succeeded in mobilizing the Macedonians'…" concluded Porphirogenis.

Zahariadis took a walk around the room and said: "If it wasn't for that damn Informbureau, I, through Tito, would have boiled Kolishevski's wheat. If he acts this way then you know for sure he has Tito's support. This is more confirmation of Tito's treason… You say that we have no chance of collecting the Macedonians?"

"Honestly, Nikos, we have none… I want you to know that Kolishevski wholeheartedly supports our deserters. This is what I was told by our contacts in Skopje," replied Porphirogenis.

Walking towards the exit of the room, Zahariadis turned and said: "Maybe someone from our NOF or perhaps they in Skopje will be pleased by the decisions we made to bring changes to the NOF leadership…"

"And I, Nikos, think…" interrupted Porphirogenis.

"What do you think?" inquired Zahariadis.

"I think that they are asking for too much under these war conditions," replied Porphirogenis.

"Again that which they sought they obtained. We promoted many military cadres to high ranks and they had their own representative in the government and in the military and council… their children over in the Eastern European countries are learning Macedonian, and in the units in which there are a large number of fighters of Macedonian origin they are organizing classes to learn the Macedonian language… Soon we will also establish a communist organization for them… Our Fifth Plenum decision was unexpected for them and in that spirit we should hold NOF's second Congress. We are well aware that we are doing harm to the pure Greek character of our movement, from which we have negative reactions from some members of the Central Committee, and let us not speak about the reactions of our enemies… It is clear that we need to meet their demands, because only that way will NOF be able to succeed in mobilizing those

people, and it is possible that our struggle can be taken away from us… And for that not to happen, we must not allow the NOF leadership to unite. There has been animosity and suspicion between them for a long time and that situation needs to be fostered carefully and diligently…" concluded Zahariadis.

The field telephone rang loudly. Zahariadis quickly turned the handle several times and picked up the receiver.

"The Units are in motion… operations have commenced…" said the voice on the other side of the telephone.

"Good… I wish them much success…" said Zahariadis with a trembling voice and slowly hung up.

The Great Lie – Chapter 10

In a half-lit room, sitting by the table placed in front of the window with a view of Mount Bela Voda, Zahariadis was writing something. He took a small break, just enough to take two or three sips of his tea, and at that moment he heard a quiet knock on the door. He put his cup to the side, collected his papers and placed them inside a newspaper. He opened his appointment book and looked to see with whom he had an appointment. There was a second knock on the door. He stood up, walked to the door and pulled the latch. The platoon duty officer from the General Secretary Security services stood at attention and announced:

"Comrade Bardzotas has requested to see you sir! He awaits your response. What should I tell him Comrade Zahariadis?"

"Let him in…" responded Zahariadis with a disappointed tone of voice as he walked back to his table.

"Moments later Bardzotas appeared at the wide open door and after entering he apologetically said: "Forgive me Nikos, for disturbing you so early…" and, while looking out the corner of his eye at the mass of unfinished papers, asked, "Did I interrupt your work?"

"No, not at all. The newspaper," said Zahariadis in a stretched, yawning voice while pointing at the newspaper tossed in a pile of maps and papers, "I have been browsing the newspaper and drinking tea. Tea, will you have some tea? It is Georgian you know. Even Comrade Stalin drinks tea in the morning. Will you have some?"

Zahariadis, in the morning and evening, always served his guests Georgian tea, be it his visitors, people he had conversations with, or his closest aids. They all drank with him and continued to drink with him for as long as he was drinking. It was considered a special honour and despite burning their lips they slurped the tea to let him know that they were enjoying it; a sign of great pleasure. After that they often, in their circles, would say in passing: "You know, yesterday I had tea with Comrade Zahariadis…" just to let everyone know that they had friends in high places and to watch with whom they were messing!

When there was no Georgian tea, mountain tea harvested from Mount Gramos, Odreto, or from Mount Vrba in D'mbeni was brewed in the large teapot.

People from the Security Services platoon knew his weaknesses and always made sure that they brought him mountain tea in their backpacks.

"Georgian tea?!" inquired Bardzotas with an expressionless but captivating tone of voice.

"It would be a sin if I did not have tea from the homeland of the great Stalin. Of course I will have some… please." He knew that if he refused he would offend Stalin and Zahariadis. "I will have some, why not, even two cups! It is cold this morning and it will feel good to have some tea…" said Bardzotas with an appealing smile on his face.

While Zahariadis filled the cups with tea and placed them on the tray made of pure silver, Bardzotas justified his unannounced arrival:

"I, Nikos, came early to see you because I received an interesting letter from Paskalis."

Bardzotas pulled out an envelope from his officer's leather briefcase, opened it, put it on the table and asked: "Will you read it or should I read it to you?"

Zahariadis handed him a cup of tea, looked at the letter and with an indifferent tone of voice said, "You read it!"

Bardzotas detected some dissatisfaction in Zahariadis's tone of voice but it seemed more like impatience. He reached for the letter but with the outside of his hand he knocked Zahariadis's pile of papers causing some dust to fly and then began to read:

"Dear Vassilis,

We are thinking about the congress. We believe there should be a formal part, with a festive event, one colour and celebration which will increase interest and strengthen the fighting spirit. It will greatly help our preparation and appearance if we had slogans photographs, symbolic shows, etc.

For that purpose we consider it necessary to put together several illustrated displays.

First. We will put together an illustrated poster symbolizing unity between a Slavo-Macedonian man and woman and a Greek man and woman, fighters of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece). Standing opposite one another they will be holding a rifle in one hand and offering their other hand in a gesture symbolizing a call to arms in a joint struggle. Standing behind them will be other fighters, men and women.

Written on the poster will be the slogans:

BROTHERHOOD
UNITY
INDEPENDENCE
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC"

Bardzotas stopped reading for a moment and, while extending the letter to Zahariadis, he pointed with his finger:

"Look Nikos, Paskalis wrote a slogan in their language. It has been written in Slav letters, and further down, here you see it? Here is the written translation in the Greek language."

Zahariadis read the Greek text and while shaking his head said: "The part that has been written in their language looks to me like it was written in broken Russian. Vassilis, continue reading…"

Bardzotas shook the page and continued:

"Second. We will put together another poster that will symbolize the national liberation fighters and the national aspirations of the Macedonian people."

Zahariadis raised his hand and repeated, "The national liberation fighters and the national aspirations of the Macedonian people… Too many words, too many words, don't you think Vassilis? Too many…" muttered Zahariadis and motioned for Bardzotas to continue reading.

"The poster will show a representation of a Macedonian man and woman…"

Bardzotas stopped reading for a moment and looked at Zahariadis's face, gesturing that he wanted his opinion, but before Zahariadis had a chance to react he asked: "Further up Paskalis wrote about a Slavo-Macedonian man and woman and here, as if changing his position, he writes a Macedonian man and woman! Did you notice this, Nikos?"

"Yes, Vassilis, I noticed it, it is sad. The man, but not only him, seems as if he is lost or pretends that he is lost. Here Slavo-Macedonian, there Macedonian. He still has no clear idea, the poor man… of the concept. Continue reading!" responded Zahariadis.

"I will continue. Here is what he says further down: '… in folk dress and with chains on their feet, tossed and broken. In the middle and slightly ahead there will be a Partisan carrying a shmaizer (rifle) that will represent the combat vanguard…'"

"What?!" Zahariadis shouted angrily.

"What, what?" replied Bardzotas.

"What is this Partisan with a shmaizer who will represent the combat vanguard? Did it not enter into his head our Fifth Plenum, during which we definitely decided that we are already an army? We always talk about an army, about a peoples' revolutionary democratic army and here he writes about some Partisan! Good that he did not write Komita (armed revolutionary from the 1903 Ilinden Uprising against the Ottomans)! You should personally explain to him our Fifth Plenum resolutions. Continue reading," Zahariadis angrily exclaimed and began to pace around the room.

"Okay. I will continue… Here is what he wrote further down: '… and behind him Partisans and others will follow as proof of the mass participation of our people in their unified struggle, workers and peasants fighting side by side with the progressive intelligentsia…'"

"Again he got mixed up, the poor man," said Zahariadis mockingly. "He is really mixed up. A true 'buchkurush' salad. In one poster, think about it Vassilis, Slavo-Macedonians, Macedonians, DAG fighters, Partisans, village people, workers, progressive intellectuals, but he forgot what's most important! The Party, Vassilis, he forgot the Party! He forgot that at the head of that table stands the Party! The Party, he forgot the Party which is the heart and brain! You should remind him of that when you see him! Read!"

"Okay. I will remind him. I will continue to read: 'At the front and on top, on one side there will be fire, which will represent military action and on the other there will be a sun which will rise, as an expression of the peoples' national liberation which is forthcoming…'" Bardzotas was interrupted.

"Фантазер изобразителъного исскуства" (dreamer of fine arts) said Zahariadis in Russian as he laughed quietly. "Read!"

"Okay. 'On the front and side of the poster the following slogans will be written:

STRUGGLE
VICTORY
NATIONAL LIBERATION'"

"Let me see that!" interrupted Zahariadis extending his hand. "This is almost written in Russian! If only the last two words were written 'националъное освобождение' (national liberation) then the entire slogan would be written in Russian and some would say that the Russians, not our Party, are in charge of NOF (Peoples' Liberation Front). There is a great similarity. They are almost the same! What can you do, they are Slavic languages! And they are nicely set – ordered like steps on a staircase, of course, first comes the struggle, followed by victory and after victory comes national liberation. Vassilis, read!" concluded Zahariadis.

"Three. We will create badges, in honour of and in memory of the Congress. On top of the badge it will say 'NOF' and on the bottom 'II Congress'. We will make 500 copies of each illustrated poster and of the badges. We here do not have the means or the capability to do these jobs. Therefore we ask that you accept our proposal and have them made abroad. We can send you a person who has some ideas and understanding of painting and who can help. You should be aware that we have scheduled the Congress to take place on March 25th. It would also be a good idea if at this Congress we give each delegate a gift; a pack of cigarettes for each man and a chocolate bar for each woman…"

Bardzotas stopped reading.

"Is that it?" asked Zahariadis.

"That's it in regards to the Congress but there is something else," said Bardzotas opening a second envelope.

"Nikos, I have one more letter from Paskalis…"

"Does he want something again?" inquired Zahariadis.

"He wants something but it's mostly information…" replied Bardzotas.

"What about?" interrupted Zahariadis.

"About some irregularities, according to him…" replied Bardzotas.

"Read…" interrupted Zahariadis.

"Here is what he has written: 'Another issue that we need to consider and which I bring to your attention is the desperate economic situation of

the population in the areas of Popole and Kostenaria in Kostur Region especially after the recent massive expulsions. Many families took whatever they could carry, grain and livestock and fled for the free territories. Their grain however was confiscated by our army because it was needed for its own consumption. Similarly, their sheep were also confiscated under the condition that the army would return them after the families were settled in the villages in the free territories. Unfortunately many of the flocks have already been slaughtered for our Army's consumption and what remains has been mixed with our trophy sheep, looked after by our 14th brigade. The families have now been settled in the free territories and are asking for the return of at least some of their sheep, which to date the brigade has not yet returned. Please look into these complaints and see what you can do. I must emphasize that in economic terms their situation is dire and their lives are in peril.

Also, our cadres working in the Kostur Region village fields have informed us that our quartermasters have been taking the entire crop from the villagers and have been leaving nothing for the families to eat. This has happened in the villages Tikveni, Zhilanishta, Izglebi and Zhelin.

On another matter, many Slavo-Macedonian cadres in DAG are underestimated…" paused Bardzotas, turning the page and continuing "… and they are treated as ordinary fighters while Greek cadres from Bulkesh are immediately promoted to assistants to the political commissars in the brigades responsible for the security of the battalion, quartermasters, etc…'

In addition here is a summary of what Paskalis wrote…"

"Don't summarize, read!" ordered Zahariadis.

"Okay then. Here is what Paskalis wrote: 'the attitude of some Greek cadres such as Patsouras and Araianos for example, is appalling, especially when they yell orders like 'kill everyone who does not listen', in public. This was happening at the beginning when territories were being establishing and people were shuffled from one place to another and did not know what was expected of them. This heartless attitude was also exhibited by the carriers of the wounded and by the workers, thus creating unfavourable working conditions for people, resulting in the desertion of many women... Some quartermasters and Partisans from the 107th Brigade also engaged in tyrannical and anti-social behaviour in the villages Armensko and Buf. One old Partisan terrorized the population in Armensko and did whatever he wanted. He literally took the bread out of peoples' mouths. He was reported to the authorities but instead of arresting and trying him by military court, they allowed him to continue to go to the village and still terrorize the people.

On another matter, apples and tobacco were stolen from the village Buf. Quartermasters from the 11th division went to some houses in Armensko and took hay and grain without permission. They took 320 oki (an oka is a Turkish measure greater than a kilogram) of grain from

Stavrovitsa Kurteva. From Ilia Tsutsov, a Partisan, they took 5 loads of hay and 40 oki of grain. From Iliov, a Partisan, they took the entire crop of tobacco that he had stored in his house. From Iovan Iovanov, a Partisan, they took 8 loads of hay. From Ristovitsa Iliovska they took 20 loads of hay and they took all of Kosta Markulov's hay.

On another matter a quartermaster from the 107th Brigade, by the name of Spiros Pirei, was overheard advising young ladies in Buf to 'take up guns and then desert to the Burantari (the enemy)'. A brigade chief was heard cursing the carriers of the wounded, wishing for them all to 'die' and afterwards he kept them out in the rain isolated in the forest for twenty-four hours. Some who had no overcoats he sent to Kolomnati to sleep in the church.

This kind of cruelty motivated Atina Gelemisinova to desert from the worker's brigade. She, along with her mother, is now in jail at the Peoples' Militia prison in the village Zhelevo. This woman had two brothers, DAG fighters, one was killed and the other was crippled in the battles in Gramos. The Peoples' Militia has behaved very badly and has shown extreme cruelty towards the people…'"

Bardzotas stopped reading, placed the letter back into his briefcase and, after thinking for a moment, pulled out a yellow envelope, looked at Zahariadis and said, "This, Nikos, is addressed to you…"

"Who is it from?" inquired Zahariadis.

"It's from Paskalis…" answered Bardzotas.

"Open it and read it to me!" requested Zahariadis.

"Give me a moment," replied Bardzotas while attempting to break the wax seal with his trembling fingers and open the envelope. The letter he pulled out was written in pencil on both sides of the paper. Bardzotas examined the writing carefully on both sides and said, "It's good his handwriting is clear…"

"He is educated… A lawyer… Now read!" ordered Zahariadis.

"Okay," replied Bardzotas and began reading.

"Comrade Nikos,

The information about the cruelty that occurred in the villages Gorno and Dolno Drenoveni, Kolomnati, Pozdivishta and Gabresh, about which I informed you a few days ago, was given to me by a person named Dimitrios Soukaris from the village Tsrnovishta. He is responsible for the refugee children in Oshchima. The woman's name that was assaulted is Lambrovitsa Petropoulou and she is from Gorno Drenoveni. The Partisans who assaulted her are from the 14th Brigade. Dimitrios does not know their names, they were at the village during the night. At the same time they slaughtered a pig and took it, cracked a cask of wine, took about 50 oki and left the rest to drain into the ground. At the same time they assaulted two more women from the same village and forced the three to dance the 'Eleno Mome' dance. Lambrovitsa Petropoulou has three sons, Partisans, who served in DAG. One was killed and the other two were

wounded. She also has a daughter serving as a Partisan and a second daughter assisting the refugee children in the Eastern European countries.

Dimitrios Soukaris also mentioned that the fighter Dime Popadin from the village Gorno Drenoveni who was serving in the 14th Brigade of DAG went to the village for something and found his wife and mother distressed from the assault and abuse they received from the DAG fighters from the 14th brigade. The next day Dime and his wife surrendered to the enemy in the Bukovik Locality. Dime was a Partisan since May 1947 and was wounded in the Gramos battles.

Dimitrios Soukaris also told me that several DAG fighters from the 14th Brigade broke into Petros Panopoulos's house in the village Tsrnovishta and wanted to take things without permission. Petros Panopoulos is the father of three Partisans who have been wounded in battle. Petro's wife tried to stop them but they overpowered her, beat her and one of them stepped on her stomach. Panopoulos told Soukaris that after that incident every night he stood in front of the house with an axe in his hands and he was prepared to kill everyone who came to the house. And if this situation continued, he said, he would burn his house down and flee to Kostur where he would report the incident to the newspapers…

Soukaris told me that at night when Partisans come knocking on their doors, people hide in the attic because they are afraid..."

"That's all there is in the letter, Comrade Nikos…" concluded Bardzotas.

"Did Paskalis propose anything?" inquired Zahariadis.

"Yes he did… He proposed that appropriate measure be taken to punish the perpetrators..." replied Bardzotas.

"And you, Bardzotas, as a political commissar of the General Staff, do you have any knowledge of what the people are saying?" inquired Zahariadis.

"The people? The people, Nikos, are cursing. They are cursing," replied Bardzotas.

"That's bad, very bad… When the people curse it means that they are dissatisfied and are losing confidence… Yes… We need to restore their confidence, right?" added Zahariadis.

"Yes, it is understandable," confirmed Bardzotas. He then went on to read what Paskalis wrote:

"Here is a statement from three women from the village Visheni, Kostur Region. They have complained about their children who we recently brought back from the Eastern European countries and mobilized in our army. They argue that their children are only 15 years old and are now serving in the 8th Unit of the 3rd Battalion. This is a serious issue being discussed in wider circles of people and there are criticisms, protests and controversies associated with it. Other mothers that have children in the Eastern European countries are angry, coming here crying and complaining and having fears that we will mobilize them as well and as

such are seeking to have them returned to them. This kind of bad publicity is sure to be used by our enemies and rogue elements to create a negative atmosphere for us. There are rumours circulated that the majority of the mobilized children have been killed and wounded and some have been captured by the enemy. It is important that we, from our side, put together a commission to investigate this. It would be good if you too would look into this matter, of course, in the framework of determining our military needs."

Zahariadis stopped pacing. Standing with his back to Bardzotas, thoughtfully and with a stern voice, said: "A strictly kept secret has been leaked. This is not a matter for NOF, but a matter for the General Staff, especially of the Second Bureau! Immediately, today, now, start the investigation. The culprits that did this must be found and severely punished!" ordered Zahariadis.

"This is not all, Nikos. Paskalis also wrote..." replied Bardzotas.

"You came to me with good news, Vassilis!" interrupted Zahariadis.

"Here is what else Paskalis wrote," continued Bardzotas. "Another issue to consider is the question of the Slavo-Macedonians, in the Eastern European countries, not being schooled in the Macedonian language. This is a weakness of the Organization that to this day this issue has not been resolved. We will need your help. We want you to give us the teachers serving in DAG, who, as a result of bad wounds, can no longer fight. We can use them as teachers to teach our people."

Zahariadis suddenly stood up in front of Bardzotas, stared him in the eyes and with a quiet, calculating, hissing and threatening voice, asked:

"Tell me, did we have or did we not have Macedonian schools working in the free and semi-free territories from December 1947 to February 1948? Yes or no?!" demanded Zahariadis.

Bardzotas adjusted himself, fixed his glasses and said:

"I, Nikos, as you know am responsible for military issues and not for education…"

"But you are a member of the Central Committee Polit-Bureau," yelled Zahariadis in an angry voice, "and your duty is also to be interested in these things! Aren't you a political commissar of the General Staff? If not you then who will comprehend the political damage done, eh?! And why do you think Paskalis sent you the letter, and not someone else? If the children were learning their native tongue under war conditions here then why have provisions not been made for them to learn their native language under the more ideal conditions, eh! Can you explain that to them?" demanded Zahariadis and after taking a few nervous steps around the room, stopped behind Bardzotas's back and yelled out:

"I will tell you why, because someone out there is bent on sabotaging our entire political work with the Slavo-Macedonians. What we say? Whatever we promise? Whatever we ask of them? We need to begin an investigation immediately, find the culprits and send them to the front!

Call Paskalis and tell him that we in the Polit-Bureau have carefully read and analyzed his letter, drawn some conclusions and will be taking severe measures to uncover the culprits. And also this; he is to call a meeting with his people from NOF and from AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) and let them know that in regards to learning their native language we have contacted the highest political authorities in our Party and they are doing everything they can to push aside these problems. Tell him we have taken all necessary measures to improve all conditions.

They will be happy to hear of this and they will be proud. Paskalis too among them will improve his situation of disunity. Also, give Paskalis my regards and assure him that I personally have pledged to make things right. Don't stand here, go now and ask for him to come to you. Find him before those in Skopje find out about this. Go! If those in Skopje find out about this there will be problems for us. Go, you are free to go!" concluded Zahariadis.

The Great Lie – Chapter 11

During the Main NOF (People's Liberation Front) Council meeting a checklist of people expected to speak and the sequence in which they were scheduled to make their speeches was made. Then after some discussion it was decided to welcome a representative of the women's division responsible for digging trenches and carrying logs and stones for building bunkers in the Vicho Region. But despite the warm welcome there were some opposing voices.

"And what will an uneducated woman have to say?" the AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) secretary for Kostur Region was first to object. "How will she react in front of so many people? I understand these women's capability to heroically carry large and thick logs uphill to build bunkers, but to speak in front of so many people and especially in front of Zahariadis, that I don't understand. Why have her speak, I ask you?"

"Well, you know," replied Paskal with a conciliatory tone of voice, "this may be true but these women working in the terrain represent a very important part of the general effort to stop the enemy and I think it is good for at least some of them to welcome the Congress."

"I am in agreement with comrade Paskal's idea. He is right and no one else. We have already decided how we have decided, why have we returned to this subject again?" said Vera with a tone of protest. "I think, through the entire discussion," she loves to use some foreign words because it makes it seem like she has a richer vocabulary than the others, "according to our friend, is if there is a need or not to allow a woman to speak, so to say, a woman who is working in the first lines on the front. Is it or is it not like that?"

"Please friends, let us not continue with this. We have decided what we have decided, but the problem remains. It is true that they are ordinary women, uneducated peasants. But, I think among them we will find a smart, shrewd and let me say more intelligent woman," said Paskal with a conciliatory tone of voice, "and let us prepare her, teach her what to say and how to say it, okay? I suggest that Vera, who is a good speaker, accept responsibility for finding such a woman. We all agree, right?"

Women, mobilized to transport wounded during the Lerin battle, were detained and temporarily settled in an underground hangar dug in the shaded beechwood forest, located between Zhelevo and Psoderi. Men were also detained but settled in separate hangers located near the Prespa and Koreshnitsa Region villages. Jointly this group of people was called the "working Brigade" which worked in two shifts, day and night.

The workers got up early in the morning, ate breakfast consisting mainly of sheep's cheese and stale bread and at sunrise began to work. Axes cutting, saws scraping and the occasional shout "look out tree falling!" could be heard all day long until the mountain's shadow on the other side fell on the forest.

Many beechwood trees fell under the axe and saw. Cleared of their branches, the hard and heavy logs were measured and cut at four, five and six meters long. The heaviest logs were pulled uphill by oxen and the rest were carried on the shoulders of women. Step by step all day long until dusk, oxen and women moved slowly uphill, bodies trembling from the weight of heavy logs.

After dropping off a log at its destination they took a short rest, enough time to wipe the sweat off their faces and gather some strength, then following the same path they descended again to pick up more logs.

The night shift, consisting mostly of women, was tasked with carrying the same logs on their shoulders and transporting them over open space, over the bare hills where other women and men, escorted by DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) fighters, carried and placed the logs over dugout holes. The logs were piled over the holes in rows. First a row of logs, then a row of rocks and soil then a second perpendicular row of logs on top followed by more rocks and soil. The process was repeated five, six, seven, or eight times.

Vera came here to find a suitable woman to welcome the Congress of NOF. First she met with the sector commander and political secretary to whom she announced the purpose of her visit, or as she put it, to fulfill her "task in the political struggle" and requested to be allowed to meet with the women. Her request was granted and they took her to meet with the head of the working brigade.

A tall, slender stocky man, whose moustache Vera openly admired, led her to see the women of the night shift.

"During the day," explained the moustached man, "we can't work in the open space. The women are resting."

"And why are you not working?" inquired Vera.

"Because this here is a battle zone, constantly monitored by the enemy. We need the cover of night to dig trenches and transfer logs to build the bunkers…"

"And where are the bunkers? I don't see any bunkers," interrupted Vera.

"Of course you can't see them because they are covered with branches. They are 'camouflaged' as they say in military words," explained the moustached man.

"Can I see one?" inquired Vera.

"Since you are from High Command, I don't think the sector commander would have a problem… It's a military secret, you know… Follow me. There, under the branches, that is a bunker. From the distance it looks like a small wooded hill," explained the moustached man.

Vera entered from the west side. The sun was shining inside through the two machine gun hole openings. She went closer to one of the openings, looked outside through it and asked: "What is this hill we are standing on called?"

“Iorgova Glava,” replied the moustached man.

“Is it high?” inquired Vera.

“Yes it is,” replied the moustached man.

“How high is it?” asked Vera.

“It is 1858 meters above sea level,” explained the moustached man.

“It is very high up here… Especially to carry logs?” said Vera in a sober tone of voice.

“Yes, this far and even further…” added the moustached man.

“And what is the name of those mountains to the left, to the right and in front of us?” inquired Vera.

“To our left, the great one is Bela Voda… To our right is Chuka, following is Moro and Lisets and past that is Mali-Madi…” explained the moustached man.

“You can see Mali-Madi from here? I know that mountain very well…” interrupted Vera. “And in front of us?”

“In front of us is Lundzer. Like a palm, Lerin can be seen from there, the entire Lerin Region flatland, Kaimakchalan, and even Vicho… To the right of Lundzer is Golinata, then Kulkuturia, further to the right the elongated one is Plenata… and behind the Plenata is Baro, Roto, Glavata, Kresto, Plati…” continued the moustached man.

“We have very beautiful mountains… Are they all ours? I think that they are all under our control,” inquired Vera.

“Yes, all of them,” added the moustached man.

Vera moved away from the machine gun hole. Looked up at the cover and asked: “How many rows of logs are there above our heads?”

“Five rows of logs and an equal number of stones...” explained the moustached man.

“That’s a lot. If we build this kind of bunker all over these mountains, then truly, as our comrade Zahariadis said, our enemy will never pass Vicho. And who brought these long and thick logs all the way here?” asked Vera.

“The women… and… and the oxen…” explained the moustached man.

“How could the women have done this!?” asked Vera with an astonished tone of voice.

“Yes the women carried the logs on their shoulders…” responded the moustached man.

“The women you say? So we have very strong women, right?” asked Vera.

They came out of the bunker. Vera turned facing east and before her she saw wide open space. Delighted, she shook her head and with a sigh of admiration, said: “No one is going to eject us from here! Now let us go to the women.”

“Ladies, I come from the Central Council of NOF and bring you warm greetings and gratitude for what you are doing here. Comrade Zahariadis, our favourite and clever leader, also sends you his regards and gratitude. I

came here today to tell you that the Second NOF Congress will be held soon and important decisions regarding the continual struggle and full participation of our people will be made in which you will also participate. It is therefore necessary that you speak in the Congress and inform everyone of what you have done and how much you have contributed to the struggle and to personally thank comrade Zahariadis for leading us and our fight to victory.

I don't know if you understand me, but from now on I will speak with simpler words. During the Congress you will tell everyone everything you have done until now and what needs to be done from now on for us to win. Is that okay or is it not okay? I understand that it's okay. I understand very well that you want to tell everyone in the Congress, especially comrade Zahariadis, what you have done and what you are doing and how much you believe in victory. But all of you can't do that. Only one of you, who today you will select, on your behalf, there at the Congress, will tell everyone how you work here on the second front. You will select her and she, there in person in front of Zahariadis and in front of all the others, will tell everyone how you work here, how you believe in victory and I know that you believe in victory because you trust the Party and Zahariadis…" continued Vera.

Vera, involved in her own speech until now, failed to notice that many of the women were sleeping or dozing off, leaning on their elbows. Exhausted from fatigue and sleeplessness, the warmth of the day had put them all to sleep.

Vera took the hand of the woman closest to her and yelled at her: "Why are you sleeping? I am talking to you here about the Congress, about our victory, about Zahariadis and you and the others are sleeping! You should all be ashamed of yourselves…"

"Young lady," the woman quietly said, "leave us for a while and let us take a nap, to regain our strength… You can speak as long as you like much to your delight. Everything you say let it be the way you say it but please let us sleep for a while. I hear you. We know how to sleep with our eyes open… we walk with logs on our shoulders and sleep and only then, when someone trips or falls, then we wake up and stand on our feet and we go uphill, uphill, uphill… and you, young lady, can talk…" yawned the woman and fell asleep.

Vera could not hold back. She stood up, slapped her dirty boot with her whip and yelled out: "All of you, all of you listen and pay attention when I speak. If you act this way then you have no faith in victory! What do you say? Who are you going to appoint to represent you?"

"Take Evgenia. She has worked at this job the longest and is the most talkative of all of us here… Take her!" a voice was heard saying.

"Okay ladies, it seems we have solved that problem. Now who is Evgenia? Are you her? Good. Today you are going with me where you are needed," commanded Vera.

Vera rode a horse while Evgenia and her courier followed behind on foot. They arrived in Zhelevo before nightfall. The NOF village committee responsible for lodging people accommodated the three in Stavrovitsa's house. There, while alternating between spooning lentils without oil into her mouth with a wooden spoon and breaking chunks of dry rye bread without salt, Vera, with a slight smile and an insulting tone of voice, asked: "Stavrovitse, are you feeding us your leftover lentils from two days ago?"

"Vera, this is what God gave us today," responded Stavrovitsa and, while placing the earthenware jug with a slightly broken mouth on the table, said: "We have no bread because we donated all of our wheat to the struggle. We have no roasted meat to serve you because, with your help, our sheep and goats were taken in aid of the struggle. Our plates, spoons and forks, again with your help, have all gone to the struggle. And now Vera, three days ago the struggle took our oxen along with the yoke… With what are we now expected to plough our fields?"

"Come now, don't complain. Our friends from the democratic countries have already started loading trainloads of tractors and other machinery that they will send us. The question now is who is going to operate them…" said Vera with self-assured confidence.

Stavrovitsa crossed herself three times and, with the palms of her hands, covered her face, mouth and eyes to hide her astonishment and got up and went to the next room. Then through the open door said: "I will prepare your beds here…"

Vera stopped spooning the lentils into her mouth and, while collecting crumbs off the table, stared at Evgenia's face wondering if this simple village peasant had the ability to give a speech? She remembered the other women praising her, telling her that she was the most talkative, most assertive, most self-assured and bravest of them all… There were moments however that Vera blamed herself for this, for having accepted the task of finding a woman to participate in the Congress. "It is easy for those who can read written words and written slogans," she thought, "but I must teach her word for word not only to make the speech, but also how to make it… It is best I write it down." Happy with this thought she asked Evgenia: "Can you read?"

"No, I can't. Why do you ask?" inquired Evgenia.

Vera did not respond.

They walked all day and finally reached Nivitsi. At the checkpoint before the entrance into the village Evgenia was detained. Vera's explanation and assurances, even her threats to complain to Main Headquarters and even go to Zahariadis himself, were not cause enough to satisfy the security people. Not even her certificate which identified her position in large Greek letters was of any help. The patrol commander returned Vera's certificate and said: "Her," pointing at Evgenia with his handgun "take her to command and you, comrade, be on your way…"

Vera grabbed her horse and went to the house where command was stationed.

"Move out of my way!" she yelled at the guard and, after tying her horse to the fence, kicked the door in with the heel of her boot and went inside. "Where is your commander!" she demanded.

"I am him…" replied a young man.

"Are you now!?" asked Vera with an astonished tone of voice. She did not expect that such a young person could be a commander. "And do you know who I am?" she asked as she shoved her certificate in front of his face and, as if expecting no reply, she raised her voice and said: "You sit here and daydream, while your constables out there are detaining my people!"

By the time the commander recovered from Vera's surprise ambush, two militiamen brought in Evgenia.

"Here," said Vera "is the woman who needs to work with me. Evgenia, come here and don't be afraid. And you, I want you to immediately give her a pass and make two copies! Write down that she is a delegate of the NOF Congress."

The commander opened the folder that lay on the table and, dragging his finger along the list, said: "A delegate by that name is not on the list…"

"Damn you, if she is not on the list then put her there, she is my responsibility and I made the list; give it to me so that I may sign it for you! And don't forget my name, understand? Let's go Evgenia. And don't be afraid, I will tell your superior that you are with me, who by the way is a good friend of mine. Goodbye and farewell…"

During dinner Vera, without a break, continued to look for words needed to be woven into the content of Evgenia's speech. Like beads collected and strung on a string, she selected the right words and strung them together into meaningful sentences filled with expression and influence for those who needed to hear them.

"Evgenia," Vera called out as she pulled out a fishbone lodged between her teeth, "you have to give each word power, colour, meaning, warmth, clarity and all the words must radiate confidence and trust in our leader, our Party and NOF, certainty in victory and hope for its speedy end… Finish your dinner and go to bed. I will go to the office to meet with my friends from the council."

The next day Vera and Evgenia first went to examine the village church, Sveta Bogoroditsa, where the Congress was scheduled to be held in two days. The village's narrow cobblestone lanes were jammed with all kinds of people including many wearing military uniforms.

Woolen covers, blankets, overcoats, old army blankets with Greek and Italian markings, were all hanging to air out in the breeze all over the village outside of windows, on fences and on balconies. Fires were burning in the yards boiling clothing in large cauldrons in need of a wash.

There was a guard at the church entrance inspecting all who entered. Evgenia went inside and was shocked to see what was done to the church. She turned to Vera and with a choked voice, asked: “What have you done to this sacred place? Why have you placed white sheets over the walls and covered all the icons of the saints? Look what you have done to the altar!... In front of what should I be crossing myself now?”

Vera smiled and asked Evgenia: “Do you see what’s over there?”

“Where?” asked Evgenia.

“Where the altar was, over there, can you see it?” repeated Vera.

“Yes, but there is no saint… And who are those people in the large photographs?” asked Evgenia with surprise in her voice.

“The man with the moustache is Stalin, the greatest leader, and that beside him is Zahariadis,” Vera announced proudly.

There was an expression of dismay in Evgenia’s eyes but she said nothing… not a word.

They left the church. Evgenia looked at the clear, cloudless March sky and without looking away, quietly said: “Here, outside, one can breathe much easier, right?”

“Oh you poor Evgenia, I can teach you faster to read and write than I can to give a speech…” commented Vera. This was the second day that Vera was teaching Evgenia to speak. “Your voice should be determined, confrontational, courageous, provoking and harsh and when you speak about Anglo-American imperialism, speak mockingly. And your look, your look Evgenia, when you speak about the enemy, should be heartless, silently loud and sparks should fly out of your eyes. Your head should be proudly held high and your stare should be eagle like and full of disdain, it should convey death, retaliation, fire, heat… And when you look at the first row where comrade Zahariadis sits, you will look with confidence but lovingly, mildly, warmly and sweetly like milk and honey flowing out of your mouth… Do not forget. We have now discussed your voice and your look. And now we will discuss your movements.

Your hand and head movements, Evgenia, are very important especially your hand movements, they can show dignity, determination, impulsiveness, rage. For example, when you speak about the struggle, you must raise your left hand up high, always remember, the left hand not the right, make a tight fist and turn to the east, I said east, because Vicho is in that direction. You will then shake your fist hard making threatening gestures…”

“Wait, wait,” interrupted Evgenia quietly. “The altar is on the east side of the church, the Virgin Mary is there… Should I be threatening her? That is a sin; it is a great sin to be threatening the Virgin Mary…”

“Okay, don’t do it in the east…” murmured Vera.

“The west then?” asked Evgenia.

“God protect us! Albania is in that direction. We will offend Enver Hodzha,” replied Vera.

"Then how about the north?" asked Evgenia.

"We can't do it that way either… Do you want to threaten our Macedonian brothers?" responded Vera.

"What about south?" asked Evgenia.

"Let me think about that. What do we have south of us? South of here we have the seat of our Headquarters and our Central Committee. You know, it would be best if you don't raise your fist too high. Just a little above your head. That would be best… Ah, good thing I remembered! Do not forget to occasionally stop and call out some slogans for our comrade Zahariadis, slogans such as 'for our struggle', 'for DAG', 'for our fighters'. First and foremost you should call out a slogan about our comrade Zahariadis, you should greet him first with a warm and sweet voice… tell him that he is the greatest and most beloved son of the Slavo-Macedonian people…" explained Vera.

"And why, Vera, should I not say 'Macedonian people', are we not Macedonians?" interrupted Evgenia.

"You will say what I tell you!" replied Vera angrily. "We are what we are but Party politics and Zahariadis want us to be Slavo-Macedonians. Whatever Zahariadis says, goes. He knows what's best for us…"

"Maybe it's like that," responded Evgenia after being silent for a long time, "but we at home, in the villages and up there in the mountains always call ourselves Macedonians… And now you tell me that we are some sort of…"

"And never, you cursed woman, ever mention Tito or Lazo. If you do our heads will roll in the mud. You will remember that!" interrupted Vera angrily.

"I will remember about mine, but about yours I am not sure…" said Evgenia and laughed out loud.

"Please do remember…" replied Vera.

The next day from morning to evening the two, one beside the other, walked the narrow village cobblestone lanes, passed by the compost heaps, descended down, passed by the dung laden waterhole, muddied by the oxen and then took to the lakeside coast. There away from the listening ears and prying eyes, the kind that follow people and lurk at every corner and tell and re-tell everyone what they heard and saw. Away from the women who carry tables and chairs, heat ovens, bake bread, cook meals, shake bed covers, pillow cases and area rugs. Away from those who secretly watch and whisper wondering what possible secrets Vera could be telling that strange woman? Everyone in Nivitsi of course knew Vera. And even though they all carried on with their jobs, their thoughts were with Vera and the strange woman, who now sat at the coast, took her socks off and submerged her feet into the cold, lake water.

"Vera," said Evgenia, turning her head away from her, "your feet and socks smell bad as if something died in them… Toss them in the water before we get attacked by vultures; please for Virgin Mary's sake…"

“Come now, don’t worry so much. It is fashionable for fighters to be like that… Do you know how long it has been since I have had a shower? The only showers I have had lately are rain showers…” replied Vera.

“And the lake, is the lake too small for you?” Evgenia asked sarcastically.

“The lake is not small, but I rarely have time. Here, for example, instead of getting a good wash with hot water, I am spending my time teaching you and still I have not finished teaching you… And do you know how much time it takes for you to learn our ways? Such is our struggle…” replied Vera while shaking her head.

“Do you want to stay dirty?” asked Evgenia.

“This, Evgenia, which you said goes contrary to my liking… Watch what you say, because for such things one can go to Drenovo, under a wall…” threatened Vera.

Evgenia, as if she heard nothing, kept rubbing her feet with sand and splashing water on them: “We, Vera, in the brooks and in the woods from where we take logs, when we have a bit of time, we splash water on our faces, foreheads, necks, underarms and between the legs. We are clean enough not to attract flies. And around you and the others up there, at!...” Evgenia pointed at her big thumbnail, “flies this big circle around them… Go ahead, ask Risto…”

“Which Risto?” asked Vera.

“You know, Risto, our commander. He always tells us, ‘Wash so you don’t smell. It is embarrassing for a woman to stink…’” replied Evgenia.

“And he, what did you call him, Risto, is he the moustached man, is he a bit of a woman chaser? Does he grab women there in the grove, maybe in the gullies or the brooks? To ask you to be clean and not to stink like something dead, eh?” asked Vera.

“Vera, you have a foul mouth. He, he is like Christ to us. You have heard of Christ haven’t you?” replied Evgenia.

“Forget about Christ. If he behaved himself he would not have had to hang from a pole. He was not a revolutionary like us, but wanted to do things with kindness and with good words. And that is why the Jews, with the help of the Italians had him crucified. And don’t talk about flies any more… We fight against them as well. We fight against everything that stands in our way of victory. I have been teaching you for many days and you still seem to be uneducated. Look at you, you now mixed Christ into all this!” Vera snapped angrily and tossed a rock into the water. “Did you see that?” Vera pointed at the place where the rock landed in the water. “That is what we are going to do to all our enemies… Did you see that? Plunk and it disappears…”

Evgenia adjusted herself, collected her wet socks and when she tried to stand up, Vera asked her: “And you, where do you think you are going?”

“I am going to the women. My place is there. To help them do laundry, bake bread, cook, and shake lice out of clothing… Take someone else and teach her how to spread feathers… Vera, in this that you call struggle, I did not walk in blind. I gave it everything I had and if I had more I would give it. All I have left is my own life and you are prepared to take that too… And if you ask me to give my life, that too I will give you…” replied Evgenia.

“Come now, sit down and wash yourself. Who is more outspoken than you? No one! Only you deserve to speak tomorrow at the Congress in front of Zahariadis. You speak the way I taught you and everyone will praise you. Come, humour me. The struggle needs that. Do you understand me?” said Vera.

“I understand very well, but what and how much others understand, that I don’t know…” replied Evgenia.

The opening speeches were scheduled to take place during the afternoon of the second day of the Congress. Vera stood behind the stage, waited for the hand-clapping to subside and then announced: “And now here to welcome the Congress is Comrade Evgenia, responsible for transporting wounded, digging trenches… Please Evgenia come up and tell us your role in support of the struggle and your personal fight against the enemy… Please come up on the stage…”

Evgenia, looking shy, with her head slightly bowed, straightened up and slowly climbed on the stage. Vera gave her a hand, leaned over to her ear and whispered: “Be careful you don’t fall…”

“Don’t be afraid… I am steady on my feet… don’t be afraid… Go back to your place…” Evgenia whispered back.

“And like I told you,” emphasized Vera, “gently, only gently, very gently… start that way, the way I taught you…”

Looking at Vera, Evgenia closed both her eyes letting her know that she understood and then climbed the stairs that led to the stage. She paused for a moment, looked at the hall and noticed the many people present. She stepped on the stage and someone showed her where to stand. She looked around. She felt faint and weak in her knees, her throat tightened. She looked into the hall again. She noticed Vera sitting in the first row, motioning with her head, giving her encouragement. She slowly walked to the podium and leaned on it. She looked again. Sitting in the first row were Zahariadis, Mitrovski, Ioannidis, Bardzotas, Gusias, Koichev and Vera. Except for Zahariadis, all the others sitting in the first row had crossed their legs and wore long, well polished leather boots.

Sitting in the second row were the Brigade and Battalion Commanders. Evgenia recognized Pando, Lambro, Naso and Ahilea and as she looked further she saw prematurely aged men and women wearing black. Their eyes looked gloomy and dark. And when she noticed that they were all looking at her, she felt a lump in her throat. She had never seen so many eyes looking at her before. But the most penetrating and pressing eyes

were those of Vera. Her gaze pierced her, probed her and for a moment Evgenia in her thoughts attempted to uncover what more this woman could possibly want from her. She could not figure out what fears and doubts lurked behind her smile and face. At that moment she felt immeasurable pity for her.

She coughed quietly and with a pleading tone of voice Evgenia began to speak in her Kostur Region dialect:

"Ladies and gentlemen, comrades, dear commanders and fighters of DAG, Party nobles. Greetings, my name is Evgenia, greetings to all of you here, to the fighters in the mountains, to those in the hospitals recovering from serious wounds and from every kind of ailment and to the women dedicated to the service… I bring you greetings, I am Evgenia the woman who they say has cared for many, many wounded, carried many heavy logs and stones and dug many trenches… They told me…, this is what they told me, in the name of all those like myself, to give a speech at this Congress. I told them, 'I am a simple village woman, how can I give a speech in front of so many important people, in front of the heroes of DAG…? I know how to till soil, collect crops, bake bread and look after the house… Here… I gave birth to children… they have grown healthy… They have grown big, my dears and may they be safe and healthy and may God protect them…'"

Evgenia paused for a moment, looked up at the church ceiling and felt Almighty Christ looking down on her with his wide open eyes. She felt like crossing herself, like praying, but remembered what Vera told her the day before: "Don't do it, you will insult all the communists…" So, in place of prayer, Evgenia swallowed the lump stuck in her throat and continued with her speech:

"They grew big and healthy, they grew up, up there and joined the struggle, and the younger ones, the younger ones… I am saying are now in the [Eastern European] countries, they… how do you say…? Oh, they are in the republics of the people's democracies… The truth is… I have been carrying wounded, logs, stones, digging bunkers for two years now, but I am not alone. There are many with me, but like me they are very tired with sore shoulders, blisters on our hands and feet, lacking sleep and hungry. The women, the wounded and all those left behind in Bela Voda, Mali-Madi, Lundser, Bukovik and the other war zones, and many from outside of Lerin and from inside Lerin are very tired, hungry and suffering… Thank God and the Virgin Mary for keeping me alive and well and here I am before you, speaking to you. And what should I speak to you about? It would be best for me to once again wish you good health and not speak any more. There are others here who can speak. They know how to speak better than they know how to carry logs and wounded, dig bunkers under fire while bombs are dropped on them. They know how to speak better than they know how to endure the thunder of cannon and mortar fire and to avoid being cut down by machine gun fire…"

Vera jumped up and signaled Evgenia to get to the important point. Evgenia noticed and resumed her speech:

"It is best that you ask me some questions or would it be better if I asked you some? But first let me tell you something. For two days now, Vera, our comrade sitting there in the first row, two days, she has been teaching simple me how to give a speech. She told me first and last to greet our great, smartest and most…" here Evgenia forgot what the third most was… She paused for a moment, thought hard but could not recall what it was… What was it? Vera gave her a signal and quietly said, "son, son…"

"Ah, I remember now… and the greatest son, yes, son, the greatest son who leads us from battle to battle… so we may fight…" Vera from below was counting on her fingers, "and led us from victory to victory and for that may he be clever and well to lead us from battle to battle, to battle, to…" Evgenia was interrupted by a lone loud voice calling out from somewhere in the centre of the church: "Long live Comrade Zahariadis!"

"Zahariadis, Zahariadis, Zahariadis!" roared the entire assembly in the church. Everyone stood up and clapped loudly and shouted out the name of the greatest son.

This was the first time Evgenia had heard such loud shouting. When she recovered and the hand clapping and shouting subsided, she continued:

"Long live he and the others. I can see him well from here. He is sitting quietly in the first row… and he is looking directly into my eyes. I too from here am looking directly into his eyes… and… I want to continue to look directly into comrade Zahariadis's eyes. I want to ask him about many things that come to mind when I carry wounded young men and women on stretchers, in blankets or in overcoats, when they die in my hands, when they beg me to help them, when they are thirsty and hungry, when they can't move because their legs are frozen or badly wounded. At those times I tell myself 'when will the day come when I get the chance to meet and see, how do you say, our dear and beloved Zahariadis, so that I can ask this celebrated, clever and brave great son of ours, not only for myself, but for the many mothers out there, outside of our borders, in the mountains and on the battlefields who, before everything else brave the war to bring water, bread, ammunition and bombs high up the mountains and then to bring the wounded and dying back.' I often thought of asking our great son Zahariadis, on behalf of all the mothers out there, who cried while burying the dead, especially the barely grown young men and women consumed by this war, the mothers who while burying someone else's child receive bad news from whispers that 'her child was just lost'. I would like to ask our esteemed guest: 'Zahariadis, why must we carry such great fear, day and night, for our children, for our homes, for our crops, for our livestock, for our closest and most beloved?' In front of us and behind us, dear Zahariadis, we see only mourning, only fear, only trembling and tightening of our hearts, only evil all around us.

Did I say something bad, something incorrect?

And you Vera, down there, stop showing me your teeth and stop shaking your hands at me. I forgot what you taught me… I swear… Now allow me to say what I have in my heart… allow my pain to come out, to lighten my burden because this is what the women had told me… they told me, Evgenia, do not make a fool of yourself when you speak in front of all those people in the Congress, but speak the truth, tell the truth and ask for the truth… Everything from us and for us… And, here, I, here at the Congress, as the women instructed me, mothers and widows, I want to tell you everything that has collected here in my soul and in my heart, but not in my mind, because I don't have a mind for thinking, like the great ones here do… My words come from my heart and soul and from my pain, bitterness and anguish…

Did I say something bad, something incorrect?...

If I said something that is not correct then please tell me, I will stop talking… Did I say something wrong?..."

Evgenia paused. There was total silence in the church. Everyone stood in astonishment and fear, it seemed like they were gripped by fear...

"What do I want dear Zahariadis?" Evgenia cut through the silence like a knife with her loud voice roaring through the church. "I want our girls and boys to grow up, to be brides and grooms, to take over our jobs when we grow old. We are teaching them to relieve us when we grow old and you are taking them away, turning them into soldiers, teaching them how to kill… may lightning strike you and put you to death!... So said God did he not? Isn't that right? Our young women lay in hospitals mutilated… some are without legs or arms… how will they dance the bridal dance? And we, all their lives, have prepared them to be brides… To be brides dear Zahariadis, to be brides… And now our boys and girls have prematurely aged in the mountains, and you dear Zahariadis, the commanders that are here, are proud because they turned our children into soldiers, or fighters, as you call them, and we here are dying of fear… of receiving bad news every day…

You say you have proudly turned them into fighters, who know how to kill… Is that what God says? Is that what he says? That our girls be maimed for life, dear Zahariadis? How will they now serve water to their aging fathers and fathers-in-law, how will they go to the spring to fetch water? How will they carry the earthenware water jug without legs and arms? How will they bake and weave…?

They, young people in their prime, now rely on crutches to walk, go to Elbasan or to any of the other hospitals and see them for yourself…"

Vera was going crazy down in the first row, twisting her face, widening her eyes, gesturing with her hands, cracking her knuckles… "Enough," she whispered, "enough, bitch, stop talking, shut up, shut up, may God turn you into a mute… Oh God, what have you done to me? Why did I have to pick you? Shut up bitch!…"

Evgenia paused for a moment and removed her black kerchief revealing her long graying braided hair. She wiped the sweat off her face and forehead, swallowed hard and with the same tone of voice continued:

"Dear Zahariadis, is that why you collected our young children and sent them to the [Eastern European] countries so that you could bring them back? Turn them into fighters too? They have hardly grown [ages 2 to 14] and you took them… may evil take you!"

Vera jumped up and screamed, "Enough! Enough! Get off the stage!..."

"No, no Vera, these are not the words of our enemies… A few days ago Donovitsa saw her own son returned, he was barely fifteen years old… You collected our children, sent them away and now you brought them back, here in Prespa, to turn them into soldiers… And what did you tell us? What did you promise us, dear Zahariadis?

Why dear Zahariadis?

Did you not tell us to give everything for the struggle? We trusted you and we gave everything we had. You said all to arms and we all went to arms. We did exactly as you asked. Now our villages are desolate and our homes are empty, only spiders live there weaving their webs…

Why dear Zahariadis?

When you asked us to give everything we had to the struggle, we gave everything we had. When you said the enemy must not pass through Vicho we did everything to stop him. We dug all the hills and mountains, from here to there and deep in the holes we buried ourselves. We dug hangers and bunkers with these hands. You told us to do that and we did as you asked. Bunker by bunker, ditch by ditch, we dug without making a sound. Who now has the power to evict our people from there? Not our enemy, not even a bird can fly unnoticed. You told us to do that and that is exactly what we did.

Unfortunately you have pushed us into darkness. Look, dear Zahariadis, do you see any happy women? Do you see them going about their lives happy, smiling and wearing white?... We are all dressed in black.

When night falls we rush to see our little ones hidden in the leaves in the forest and in the brooks. Afterwards, step by step, we carry logs and stones on our shoulders, climbing up to Lundzer, Bela Voda, Chuka, Lisets and other hills… The mothers lost their milk, it dried up, diminished, from pain and exhaustion, but they have not lost their step and their will to fight on in the struggle…

But, Comrade Zahariadis we live in constant fear. Great fear that, if not today, then tomorrow, a new tragedy will befall us. We are in constant fear that we will receive bad news about our children, husbands, brothers, friends and every day more darkness falls on us.

Did I say something bad? Tell me did I say something incorrect?

They told me to give a speech. But I don't know how to give a speech. I speak directly from my soul, dear Zahariadis… And now you tell us that victory is near? Near for whom? Who is going to remove the darkness from us? You say victory is near, but when it comes will there be anyone left to give birth, to make a home, to light a fire? Our fires have been put out, my dear Zahariadis… We are not what we used to be and what we want is no longer there for us, it is all gone…"

Evgenia clasped her hands and placed them on the podium, then placed her temple on them and began to cry loudly. There was silence in the church. It seemed that even the angels and saints, silent for centuries, were astonished and humbled before her…

"What more can I say, dear Zahariadis?... We did everything you asked and now we want to know, why did such evil befall us? Darkness, dear Zahariadis has fallen upon us as we anxiously wait for the victory that you, every day, promise us, but that bleak and so close victory you speak of we pay for with more and more of our children, with our homes and villages being burned to the ground and pushes us further into the dark abyss…

You say victory is near?… But for whom is it near? For us? Even the walls of our homes are now gone, they have been leveled to the ground by our enemies… You say victory is near, but will there be anyone to greet it, to be happy, to rebuild, to plough, to sow, to give birth, to sing…? I ask you, eh???! I ask you… I can't help but cry… cry not only for myself but for all the mothers, for all the widows, for all the wounded and maimed… I want to cry because of this, this," Evgenia touched her chest, "where it hurts… where it squeezes, where it chokes… What else can I say? Let me speak to the commanders and say to them to look after our children up there in the front and let them know that we, their mothers, care for them a lot, love them and beg them to 'be very careful… please be very careful… may God and the Virgin Mary protect you…' That is all from me; that is all I want to say…" concluded Evgenia.

Silence hovered over her as Evgenia felt sad and choked in emotion. Then at that moment someone in the crowd called out a slogan in respect of the leader and the entire church thundered and came alive again.

Evgenia covered her face with her hands and placed her elbows on the podium looking as if she was praying. She was sobbing and sobbing and while sobbing her shoulders trembled and the podium creaked under her great pain… Then carefully she left the stage and walked down the steps, which visibly bent under the weight of her tired feet.

Zahariadis stood up. He turned towards the crowd, raised his arms and motioned to them to stop. Then he stepped up on the stage. His footsteps were silent as he walked up the stairs made of rough oak planks. His steps were silent not because they did not make a sound but because everyone's ears were deafened by the loud shouts and exaltation. They all stood up, clapped their hands and some called out more slogans. Only Evgenia, as if guilty of something, quietly, barely noticeable sat on the bench far from

Vera and shrugged and scrunched up her shoulders. Tears, like pearls, hung from her long black lashes. She placed her black kerchief over her head and covered her face with her rough palms.

The leader stood behind the podium. He looked near and far, high above everyone and far behind the crowd. An almost visible smile appeared on his face looking like it was straining out his partly closed eyes. Vera immediately climbed on stage, turned towards the crowd and with all her might yelled out: "Long live our great leader, our wise, brave, worthy and much beloved son of the Greek and Slavo-Macedonian people!"

No one heard the last part of what Vera shouted. It got lost in the thundering noises yelling 'e-e-e-e-e-e' and behind the new slogans being loudly proclaimed in honour of Zahariadis who now, without a doubt, was the most important and greatest person in the place and everything said up to now, today and tomorrow, was, is, and will be about him.

Zahariadis looked at the main slogan and at the hand drawn symbols on the large cover covering the church altar. In the foreground, looking enthusiastic with great faith in the leader are a man and woman Partisan. They are ready to fight. Behind them are the mountains and hills over which the sun of victory rises. In front of the man and woman Partisans are explosions of bombs and grenades and they fearlessly and victoriously march forward. But the praise does not end there. The Sveta Bogoroditsa Church in Nivitsi had never before heard or seen such expressive and happy people. Zahariadis again raised his hand. There was a barely visible smile emanating from his eyes and, without waiting for the crowd to calm down, he began to speak:

"Comrades! Here, today, a natural, noble, simple and benevolent Macedonian, blood and flesh, from the flesh and blood of her much victimized and much suffered Slavo-Macedonian people, who shoulder to shoulder, hand to hand, step to step, are fighting together with their brotherly Greek people for social rights and for freedom from the Anglo-American imperialism and their local servants…

Down with Anglo-American imperialism!" said Zahariadis, the slogan master "…those who fight against imperialism, from here from this holy stage of struggle, have told us the truth, the bitter truth which, not that our Party does not know. It knows. But it is also important that the people know it too. And that woman, our friend, sent by the people, has told us the truth, I mean the great and bitter truth, which we all, and especially our Party, know and feel the pain, that is why it hurts us all. But comrades, this is the kind of struggle we are leading. I am wholeheartedly on your side and you, comrade Evgenia, you are right and I bow before you, I lower my head before your pain and I kiss your rough and chapped hands. But the struggle is harsh and our suffering has been cruel but our swift revenge for the injustices and suffering we have endured will also be harsh and cruel. Today we lead a struggle on two fronts – against Anglo-American

imperialism and its Greek servants and against… I will speak about that later… I, therefore, from this podium, promise all Slavo-Macedonian mothers, who lost their beloved children, I solemnly swear that we will win the struggle because with this kind of fighter born out of the Slavo-Macedonian people, it is impossible not to win, and we will win for sure, I promise you that!

I promise, but my promises will mean nothing if you over there don't fight and don't sacrifice yourselves and be an example of fighting spirit, courage, self-sacrifice and devotion. This is exactly why, a month and a half ago, our Party in its Fifth Plenum adopted a resolution whereby, you, the Slavo-Macedonians, as a result of DAG's victory, and the People's Revolution, will earn the right to self-determination and to have your own country which will unite all Macedonians. With a people like yourselves, a people who bore such brave and fearless fighters, it is impossible to not win. Here comrade Vlandas, yesterday, welcomed the Congress, and said that the Slavo-Macedonians are the best fighters in the Democratic Army of Greece. And he is right. I too say it, openly and honestly 'the Slavo-Macedonians are the best fighters of DAG'. Is this not a great recognition for you? And that is why we will win. We will win. Onward to victory. All to arms, all for victory!" concluded Zahariadis.

"Zahariadis! Zahariadis! Zahariadis!" roared the crowd.

It seemed as if the church roof was going to fly off from the loud cheers. Slogans and more slogans! The church roof was shaking. Vlandas leaned his fat cheeks to those of Ioannidis and whispered in his ear: "Kitakse poso poli i Slavo-Makethones agapane ton arhigo mas. Apo singinisi mu erhete na klapso." (Look how much the Slavo-Macedonians love our leader. I am going to cry from excitement).

Ioannidis nodded with his head, and quickly took out his handkerchief and wiped his ear. Zahariadis, with eyes half closed and with a slight smile on his face, put his hand out to calm the cheerful Congress attendants. But they kept shouting, clapping their hands and, once in a while, calling out new slogans. There were outbursts of joy and excitement, seeming that in their elation they forgot what they had gone through, what they had undertaken and everything that remained for them to do. Now, only satisfaction radiated from their eyes. He managed to enflame the masses, to make a single voice out of them, powerful like lightning, strong as a hard iron fist, which he alone, at his will, directed its blow.

The Congress ended in late afternoon.

That day and the previous two days there was no sound of airplanes above Bela Voda, Bigla, Lundzer, Iorgova Glava, Golinata, Chuka and Lisets…

The night during which Evgenia and the other women were returning to Zhelevo, three men surrounded them on the road and asked, "Which one of you is Evgenia?"

"I am…" replied Evgenia.

“Come with us!” one of the men ordered.

“Where?” asked Evgenia.

“To a new assignment…” replied one of them.

One day after the NOF Congress, on March 27th, 700 delegates were elected in Nivitsi, out of whom 163 were Macedonian communists, who, under orders and under Zahariadis’s watchful eye, formed the Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia (KOEM).

In the big room in the Trendafilovski house, the newly elected NOF Central Council and members of the newly formed KOEM prepared refreshments in honour of the leader, for the successful completion of the Congress and for the formation of the new vanguard.

On the table, covered with a red tablecloth (someone jokingly said it was the same tablecloth used to cover the table in the Congress) were two large baskets full of pieces of bread resembling nafora (Communion bread). Beside them were plates, full to the top, of fried Lake Ohrid trout and Lake Ohrid carp. In the middle of the table were two large baked fish (carp). At the end of the table glasses, collected from the village (Nivitsi), enough to serve the thirty or so guests present in the big room, were being filled with red wine. Serving near the table were two women dressed in military uniforms. Four kerosene lamps hung in the corners of the room emitting a pale light, providing light for the party. People were scattered around the room in small groups anxiously waiting for dinner to be served, secretly glancing at the food on the table while smelling the delicious aroma of freshly baked bread and fried fish.

They were waiting, waiting for the leader to arrive. Then suddenly the room went quiet, silent. Zahariadis entered. They all turned towards him and made way for him to get to the table. Vera stood up on her toes and yelled at the top of her voice: “Long live comrade Zahariadis!”

The entire room roared, voices could be heard beyond the upper village neighbourhood, voices accompanied by the song that was like a party anthem:

“Zahariadis arhigos… (Zahariadis the leader…)”

It seemed that some people hardly had the patience to finish one verse before jumping into the next:

“To budrumi then ton liga (Prison cannot break him)
Ke i skepsi trehi gorga (And quickly his thoughts fly)
Stis sindrofus pu polemun (To the friends who are struggling)
Apta katerga gia na vrun… (From slavery to break away…)”

And before the final word in the verse was finished, another word was thrown in and sung with more devotion, a higher tone, more confrontational and louder:

“Orko perni o vulevtis (The worker curses)
Sto onoma tu o mahitis (In his name swears the fighter)
Ke htipai tin mavri sklavia (And beats down black slavery)
Gia na vri o laos lefteria. (So the people can have freedom.)”

Zahariadis stopped clapping, picked up a glass of wine and said: "Comrades, allow me, with this glass, to convey to you my first toast…"

Zahariadis toasted when he wanted to be like Stalin. His toast had to have an introduction which contained a 'basic thought' – the resolution in the execution of the task done in the name of the person being toasted. The order was as follows: first praise the people, the masses, with common words, then bestow big praises on the middle political and military cadres, who most likely were illiterate or semi-illiterate, the bootlickers and yes-men, whose only job, only by directive, was to mingle with guests and raise the fighting spirit and praise and popularize the leader. These middle cadres were first to swear in his name, first to glorify him, first to celebrate him and first to praise him – "cheers to them!" It was compulsory for someone else, someone persuaded beforehand, to repeat and add to the middle cadre praises, someone who inspires and, understandably, that would be Zahariadis – "cheers!" And of course it was compulsory for Zahariadis to 'downplay' these high praises of himself in the following fashion: "I, comrades, appreciate so and so, we are old friends, but I don't agree with him."

With this he showed that he was superior and able to limit his own significance, merit and importance. Finally, again someone persuaded beforehand, would add: "We are so lucky to have such a wise leader and such excellent middle cadres."

Then they all, with a single voice, would toast, "Cheers to our leader and the middle cadres!"

He then pretended that he did not deserve all those praises because there was only one of him. The words spoken were always enriched with promises, which for him had no meaning. The most important thing for him was to establish a connection with the masses; for the individuals he had a different dictionary. The masses, which he sometimes called "the flock", he was able to grab by the legs and sow into them the spirit of faith and hope and make them believe that he was indeed their saviour… and the masses placed their unquestionable trust in him. He knew how to stand before the masses and speak to them, he knew how to raise them up high and bring them down low. He knew how to converse with villagers even though he knew nothing about farming, about ploughing, hoeing, or shoveling. He spoke with the workers as if he was a worker himself even though he had never been in a factory. He knew how to talk and dance with the fighters even though he had never held a gun in his hands…

With the help of the narrow-minded, boot-licking middle cadres, he was a villager, a worker and a soldier. And that is exactly how the individuals and masses wanted him to be – one from respect and others from fear. By words and by looks he knew how to reward, criticize, boast and penalize and by his suspicion he knew how to destroy…

Such rarity was this Zahariadis, for whom songs were sung and miracles and legends told. And most villagers in the Kostur, Lerin and

Voden Regions believed in those miracles and legends, which by the merit of his middle, low and lower cadres, their beliefs were turned into a ‘burnt offering’ and a ‘heroic suicide’…

The Great Lie – Chapter 12

In April, newspapers with news about the Central Committee's Fifth Plenum and about NOF's (Peoples' Liberation Front) Second Congress arrived at the Prenies Refugee Camp in Albania. Lazo, who never passed up an opportunity to go to the camp office, was not feeling well that day so he asked his wife to ask Kuze to go to the office and bring him some newspapers.

"In this rain?…" mumbled Kuze and, scratching his neck, looked out the narrow window. He then asked: "How is he doing? Has he recovered from his cold?"

"It's nothing. He got a bit of a cold yesterday when he was at the meeting with his superiors. He is complaining a bit about his throat and his nose is running…" replied Lazovitsa (Lazo's wife).

"It sounds like he was talking a lot," interrupted Kuze.

"I guess so. You know my Lazo very well. When he starts talking," she boasted, "only his voice is heard and not even a teacher or a priest can out talk him, let alone this shameless guy, you know the one-armed man from the office who has no shame or subtlety.

"Yes you are right, Lazovitse," muttered Kuze.

"Kuze, I should go and you can run the errand and bring Lazo the newspapers. He said to bring him both the Greek and Macedonian newspapers. That's what he said…" trailed off Lazovitsa.

After Lazovitsa left, Kuze stepped outside and noticing that it was pouring rain he stepped back in. His mattress made of straw looked inviting so he lay down and covered himself. Disturbed at the thought of Lazo asking him to walk in the rain just so that he could get his paper, Kuze began to swear and curse out loud: "That bum, so he wants to read the newspaper eh? Why doesn't he mind his own business, instead of…"

"Who are you talking about?" interrupted Kuze's wife.

"Lazo, who else?" replied Kuze.

"Well, since he asked you then go," advised the wife. "What are you afraid of, getting wet? Put this bag over your head."

"What?" inquired Kuze.

"I said put the bag over your head so that you won't get wet," repeated his wife.

"Are you out of your mind? Me with a bag over my head?" replied Kuze.

"Well, we don't have an umbrella!" complained the wife.

"I prefer to get wet over putting a bag over my head. Those who see me will make fun of me. Got it?" protested Kuze.

Kuze tucked his head into his shoulders, covered his neck with his collar and skipping over the mud puddles ran to the office. From there, with the Macedonian newspaper "ΗΕΠΟΚΟΡΕΗ" and the Greek newspaper "Προς τη Νικη" tucked in his underarm, he went to visit Lazo.

“Lazo my friend,” Kuze complained “you sure found the time to send me to get the papers in this awful rain. Look at me I am drenched!”

“Ok, ok,” said Lazo attempting to calm him down “you are not made of sugar and you won’t melt. My neighbour mentioned that there are some important things about us Macedonians in the papers, so I thought how is it possible that my half literate neighbour knows about these things and we don’t? Give me the Greek newspaper, let me read what they said…. My, my, Kuze miracles are about to happen. Did you know that?”

“Where?” asked Kuze.

“There, in the free territories…” replied Lazo.

“Okay Lazo, enough with the lies…” interrupted Kuze. “What free territories are you talking about? The one that comes and goes through our village? You consider that a free territory? If there is such a ‘free territory’ as you say then why are we here in Prenies, in Albanian territory and not in our own so-called ‘free territory’, ha?”

“There,” continued Lazo, as if he heard nothing that Kuze had said, “our dear Central Committee did a very important thing for us. Finally! I told you, some day a smart person would come along and find a solution for us. Listen now,” said Lazo as he took a deep breath and read to Kuze the Resolution that the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Greece undertook regarding the Macedonian question.

Kuze stood there with a stunned look and, while staring at Lazo’s eyes, slowly said: “Nothing, I swear, I understand absolutely nothing about this.”

“Well Kuze, you don’t have to understand it. What is there in here, what can’t you understand? Everything is clear. Only comrade Zahariadis can write this clearly. This certainly comes from him. No one else can write like this,” replied Lazo “and what Zahariadis says and writes about us is like he is ‘Our Father’.” Finally God gave us a smart man who is telling us ‘listen, your way is this way!’ He has shown us the way, all we need to do is now follow it. Yes… Isn’t that what I was telling you Kuze, that one day we would create our own Macedonia? So, now the way is open. Zahariadis is very clearly telling us ‘you will create your Macedonia, the way you want to… Bravo Zahariadis. Bravo!” exclaimed Lazo loudly.

“I don’t know, Lazo if that’s the way it is… My mind cannot fathom this… How do we know it is not a clever trick?...” asked Kuze.

Lazo read the part about the Resolution again and placed his finger on the newspaper and proudly said: “There it is, clearly written wiser than what Solomon himself could have done. I told you Kuze, one day a smart man would come along, a great man, a leader… yes a leader!”

“Let it be that way Lazo, but… But to me it seems like something is not right. And why are you boasting and rejoicing? Isn’t it this kind of rejoicing and boasting that divides us? Are we not of the same blood and religion as those in Vardarsko? Dear Lazo, find me a smart person, more

educated than the two of us and let's ask him to enlighten us on this…" replied Kuze.

"There is nothing to be enlightened about," replied Lazo angrily. "The Party said it and it will be done!.."

"It will be that way because we have no thoughts of our own, our heads are filled with other people's thoughts and that is how they make fools of us. Who, dear Lazo wants to dance with a fool? Doesn't it seem to you that someone is playing mind games with us?" replied Kuze.

Lazo angrily tossed the newspaper on the ground and jumped to his feet. "Now I should whack you one!" yelled Lazo "Is that how you feel? You should not talk like that. Do you know who talks like that today? The Contra! I want you to know. The Contra! And don't push me or I will whack you one across the eyes so that you can see more clearly and if I whack you one across your big mouth then maybe you will speak wiser… Do you understand?!"

"I understand, Lazo, how can I not understand? I understand…" replied Kuze feeling hurt and insulted.

"Come now, don't be bitter," said Lazo. "We are just having a friendly discussion…"

Kuze did not reply. He took his hat, bowed his head and left.

The same evening the two met again. Side by side they stood in the line, waiting for the cook to serve food from the cauldron. Lazo was first to speak.

"What do you say, Kuze, can I come to your place after supper for a smoke?"

Extending his metal dish towards the cauldron, Kuze whispered, "The door will be open."

Later in the evening Lazo and Kuze sat opposite one another and while taking puffs of tobacco smoke, continued their interrupted conversation from earlier.

"I am saying," said Lazo, "that this is written by Zahariadis. Look how he praises our people? These people, he says, gave all they had for the struggle and are fighting with unprecedented courage and sacrifice, that is why they will have the right, after the victory, to live as they see fit… and even to create their own Macedonian state… Here, see for yourself what it says in 'НЕПОКОРЕН'… Let me find it. Here is what it says: 'There is a need by the Congress to declare the Macedonian people's national question, a people who by their own participation in today's struggle have the right to form their own independent Macedonian state…' It also says the same thing in the Resolution of the Second NOF Congress. Did you read it? No? You need to read it…"

Kuze was silent.

"Why are you so quiet?" asked Lazo.

"What can I say now? I told you what I thought earlier and you accused me of being a Contra. You ask me if I read it. Yes I read

everything but understood very little. For example, this is what is written about Kostur Region."

Kuze took the newspaper from Lazo, turned the page and began to read: 'There is a need for particular district boards to establish unity in the villages in the shortest possible time. It is of importance for personal reasons to stop the whining and establish internal organized democratic life and function. In today's conditions, this type of shaky situation should not be allowed to continue especially between the various organs and all cadres are invited to establish normality and internal unity of the bodies'. "Okay Lazo, now you explain to me what you got from all this?" asked Kuze.

"Well, what can I tell you, I think this was not written for us, because we are absent from it. We have now been absent from Kostur Region for more than ten months… Right?" replied Lazo.

Kuze did not say anything. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, looked at the corner, shook his head and began to sway back and forth.

"What do you think Kuze?" asked Lazo.

The flame emanating from the candle began to dwindle. The wick was burning out. A few breaths later they found themselves in the dark.

Two months after this conversation had taken place, Kuze and Lazo sat silently on the beam outside the barracks. The sharp smoke coming out of the thickly cut tobacco rolled in a piece of newspaper, torn from the same newspaper which they were reading two months ago, brought tears to their eyes and burned their lips.

"Yes, yes… Who would have thought, eh?" said Lazo in a stretched out tone of voice.

"Ah?" said Kuze.

"Don't 'ah' me, who would have thought?" repeated Lazo.

"What?" asked Kuze.

Lazo spit the bitterness out of his mouth and at the moment when he wanted to explain the meaning of his questions, Numo, the one legged invalid, stopped in front of them. He tossed a newspaper at their feet and, with a slight smile on his face, asked: "Eh brothers, did you welcome the news? Did you read what comrade Zahariadis told the Macedonian cadres? Did you not read? Eh brothers, daydreamers, listen and learn! Zahariadis changed his song."

"What?!" Lazo asked indignantly. "What song?! What song?!"

"That song, which you comrade Lazo together with this bootlicker here were singing about an independent Macedonian state…" replied Numo.

"It was decided like that during the Plenum, right? Did you not hear?" replied Lazo and asked: "And that song which you are referring to, what happened to that?"

"Well brothers it happened, the big guy gathered all the Macedonian Cadres. He first criticized them and then he told them that the Central Committee's Fifth Plenum decision regarding the Macedonian question,

you know the one regarding self-determination, with which your brains were filled, and the one for an independent Macedonian state, was a mistake. He added that the resolution was taken under pressure from some divisive and treacherous elements at an inappropriate time for the requirements of the revolution, and because of that they should immediately forget the slogan about self-determination and start chanting the slogan about equality... And what? You Lazo, what were you going to say?" concluded Numo.

"Well, if that is what the Party decided then let it be that way," answered Lazo. "It doesn't matter what the slogans is, if the Party rejected it, surely it is in its right to do so. And you, Numo or whatever your name is, it is best that you keep quiet and not confuse the people… It is shameful for a fighter, former fighter, to talk like that. Do you understand? Also remember that our existence lies in the hands of the Party… You should know that… And don't think that you will not be a marked man for what you have said to me…"

Numo left without saying a word and disappeared around the corner of the barracks. But Lazo and Kuze could still hear the creaking of his wooden leg.

The Great Lie – Chapter 13

"Ladies, I came here today to see you, to bring the women of the first battle line greetings from your children who are now in the [Eastern European] countries. I, as head of a delegation, as requested by our comrade Zahariadis who is very concerned, was sent to visit the children. They are all well. How can they not be well when the Party and comrade Zahariadis cares for them like a mother and father? They are happy, very happy. They are joyful, very joyful. They are dressed in new clothing and new shoes. They are fed, well fed. Their cheeks are as red as Prespa apples and pomegranates. Each sleeps in his or her own bed. They have dances, songs and play every day. And food… as much as their hearts desire. What else can I tell you?…" concluded Vera.

"Vera, keep going, keep telling us…" begged Stavrovitsa. "Tell us Vera, did you see my Kirche? Did you see him? He is a tall and handsome boy…" Stavrovitsa could not finish her sentence before her eyes filled with tears. She began to whimper and lost her voice.

Vera was silent. With sad and moist eyes the women looked at her anxiously waiting for her to tell them more about their children; about their loved ones who were sent far away to the countries.

"Vera, please tell me, did you see my Kirche? A tall, slightly blond, handsome boy…?" Stavrovitsa asked again.

No, Vera had not seen Stavrovitsa's tall, blond and handsome boy. She had not seen Kirche, in fact she had not seen any blond, brown eyed, dark eyed, or blue eyed, tall and handsome boy at all because there were none left there to see. Age of the tall boys was not important, as long as they looked big and mature they were prime candidates for the draft. They were mature alright; war tends to do that to people. Only a short while ago, no more than three or four months ago, all the tall boys were collected, dressed in military uniforms, issued backpacks and heavy boots and readied for shipping out. Then, away from prying sympathetic eyes, they were escorted to a vacant railway station, loaded on empty railway cars and unloaded in Bitola in the dark of night. Again under the cover of darkness they were rushed onto trucks and before dawn were offloaded in a secluded willow tree grove somewhere near Lake Prespa. From there they were taken to Markova Noga where they were given rifles and turned into soldiers.

While marching on the drill grounds in Shtrkovo and Rudari, the boys sang the battle songs and shouted out the slogans they had learned in those distant countries, which for a while they called their second home. Only after ten days of training, the taller, more compact, wide shouldered boys and the ones with firmer legs and shoulders were sent to the front lines to reinforce the fighting units in Mali-Madi and the surrounding mountains. These boys Vera did not see at all. And as long as the women were staring at her mouth and begging for more words to come out, Vera needed to tell

them something, but what?... Then, as quick as lightning she thought of a different memory, one she had experienced in Poland. But of this memory she had told no one except for Zahariadis. Upon her return from the countries she went to see Zahariadis and told him this:

"Our children, Comrade Zahariadis are best cared for in Poland. They are located in one of the richest places in the country. There are groves and meadows all around and the entire place is surrounded by flowers and ornamental trees. There is also a large resort equipped with hot baths. Many Poles care for our children. The large number, around one hundred or so, of young ladies that we sent to escort the children also care for them. Some have become their teachers.

I noticed that there are around three hundred or so grown children there, ages 15 to 16. They are strong and able to fight. I called a meeting under my own initiative and informed the children about our successes with our struggle and about the heroic acts of our fighters who courageously fight under your wise leadership. With one word I was able to lift their fighting and revolutionary spirits and they in turn showed willingness and readiness to enter the ranks of our army. We had already started preparations. However, the Poles found out. They questioned me. A tall, bold Pole, I forgot his name, I did not make an exact note, in a calm and confident tone of voice said to me:

'My superiors authorized me to ask you to inform your top leadership that Poland will not allow mobilization of children ages 15 and 16. We accepted these children and gave them all our love. We are doing everything we can to make them forget the horrors of war. We are striving to restore their smiles and erase the sadness and pain from their faces. We want them to be happy here to play and learn. Tell their parents that we will return their children alive, healthy and well, not as soldiers but as doctors, engineers, architects, professors; as capable people able to rebuild their country from the ruins of war. We will also not allow mobilization of the Macedonian teachers, who the children now call mothers. They will remain here with the children so that they can care for them and teach them their Macedonian language, customs, songs and dances and make sure the children do not forget the traditions of their mothers and fathers… This is the wish of the Polish people and this is what you will pass on to their parents…'

This is what the tall, bold Polish man told me, which made me very angry. I wanted to tell him that at the moment we were involved in a bitter anti-imperialist war against the Anglo-Americans and their Greek lackeys and this kind of talk and behaviour was reactionary, but I held myself back…"

Vera took this as a personal failure. After this, what kind of praises and words of recognition would she receive from the leader? For days now her name was circulating from the centre of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) Headquarters to the centre of the Politburo. They were all

wondering; would she succeed in bringing the teachers, the teacher's aides and the young boys from Poland to Prespa? That many people would make an entire battalion!

At night, lying down on a braided straw mattress, or on a bag filled with straw, or in a traveler's bed in some house in one of the Prespa villages, if she even managed to fall asleep, which rarely ever happened, Vera inevitably entered the same dream listening to the words of the tall, bold Pole and felt horrible, awful, troubled, smothered, tortured, caught by the throat. Trapped in a nightmare she felt strangled and then awakened drenched in sweat and shaking with anger. She cursed and swore until dawn with the dirtiest words she could find…

"Vera, please tell us more…" a voice was heard saying.

"What more can I tell you? Only joy! When the children found out we were there, they gathered in a large yard and when they saw us they were all happy telling each other that 'Aunt Vera was here to see us!' They were very happy. I went from child to child, stroking their heads and they were very happy and rejoiced. I visited every one and patted them on the head, the youngest I picked up by their underarms, like this, and lifted them up in the air," Vera lifted her officer's briefcase, "and others I hugged and held in my lap for a while. They were all happy, joyful… And they, the older ones always asked about the struggle. I told them what I could and they were happy and begged me, asking:

'Aunt Vera, when you return tell our mothers and fathers, our brothers and sisters to fight the Anglo-American imperialists and their Greek servants, harder and more courageously and not to worry about their own lives and about spilling their blood and to never let the enemy take Vicho.'

That's what the older children told me and that's what I am telling you. Ah, before I forget. A boy approached me. I think his name was Done. He said this to me: 'Comrade Vera, my father was lost in Gramos last year…' and like this, Done lifted his fist to greet me. I told him: 'You, Done, should be very happy and very proud and should always feel glad that your father was lost in Gramos. You should be happy and very proud my dear', that's what I told him and stroked the hair on his head like this," Vera stroked her own knee to show the women how she did it. "And then I told him 'all of you dear children, you must study, you must study a lot. Every letter you learn is a bullet in the heart of our enemies. Make many bullets with your learning so that we can use them against our cursed enemies…'

After that I called a meeting with all the women responsible for the children, you know the ones we sent with the children to look after them. Do you know why I called a meeting with them and why I had to reprimand them? I will tell you. I saw many boys with black patches sewn on the left side of their collar and many girls wearing black headscarves. I was angered by that and I made my feelings known to the women. I said to them, 'Why are you dressing the children in Black!? You should be ashamed of yourselves'. The women said: 'Comrade Vera it is not us who

are doing this… The children learn of those who perished from the letters they receive from their mothers… The children are simply mourning the loss of their loved ones, according to our customs…'

Ladies now I am going to be mad at you," said Vera with a raised voice. "Don't write your children telling them about who was killed. It is you who are dressing your children in black, right? Okay, but from now on you are not going to write them, agreed? You should write to them about our heroic struggle, about the heroism of their fathers, brothers and sisters, and let them know that we are fighting the enemy on all fronts and we are winning. You should also write to them and encourage them to study and learn so that when they grow up they can take their place with pride in the front lines of the struggle. Let the children now play and be happy, let them learn and you here, together with all our people do everything we can not to allow our enemy to take Vicho.

And do you know what else I noticed in our children? I noticed that they hardly know anything about our comrade Zahariadis. They know about Stalin, Tito, Enver, Dimitrov, Rakochi, Dezh, Gotvald and about this Pole, what was his name, Bairam or Biro? No. What was his name? It's on the tip of my tongue and I am sure it starts with a 'B', but why can't I remember the other letters, I don't know? Anyway, it is not important. What is important is that the children must know about out greatest son and leader, comrade Zahariadis. For that I instructed the teachers. And when I returned from those countries I went to АГИТПРОПОТ where I found our poet, I think his name is Paskalevski. I took him aside and told him: 'You constantly write poems about the birds, the grass, the stars and the moon. Poets in the entire world,' I said to him, 'write about Stalin, people in Yugoslavia have ripped their throats singing songs about Tito, but our children out there in the countries and our people here in the mountains and in the hills and in the free territories know nothing, not even a single poem about our beloved and greatest son and leader, comrade Zahariadis? Aren't you ashamed,' I yelled at him and asked him, 'why haven't you written anything about our dear Zahariadis?' The poor man lowered his head and kept quiet. I told him not to worry and asked him to now write something. He took my advice. So I gave him a revolutionary task to write a poem about Zahariadis, the kind that can be recited in four voices. The first to ask who Zahariadis is and the others to answer it. And the four voices to stand in four places, I think four sides. For example one voice on this hill, the second on that hill, the third on the hill past that and the fourth way beyond there. That way the voices will echo on four hills and in four winds. And there in АГИТПРОПОТ I told them when the poem is ready, to publish it and send it to all the countries, to the villages in the free territories and occupied territories, to the combat units, to the front line and to you the workers here who are responsible for preventing our enemy from passing over Vicho.'"

Vera stopped talking. She looked around expecting applause from the women. Disappointed she then said: “And now we should talk a bit about your assistance.”

Vera took a notebook from her officer’s leather briefcase, placed it on her lap, and then looked at the women sitting in front of her for a long time. She coughed slightly, opened the notebook and with a formal tone of voice began to read:

“For the people’s hospital, the women from the village Zhelevo willingly and happily donated 10 woolen bedcovers, 17 shirts, 17 facecloths, 7 pairs of socks, 9 pieces of clothing, 2 white aprons, 56 plates, 85 forks, 49 spoons and 17 cups.

The women from the village Gabresh donated 20 white pillows, 9 woolen pillows, 1 bed, 2 woolen bedcovers, 1 area rug, 8 cups, 2 water bottles, 11 forks and 7 chairs.

The women from the village Posdivishcha donated 1 bed, 4 sheets, 17 facecloths, 2 pairs of socks, 29 plates, 19 cups, 2 shirts, 11 spoons, 2 water bottles, 1 frying pan and 3 kerosene lamps…”

Vera paused. Then after coughing several times, she licked her finger and turned the page and resumed reading:

“The village Oshchima donated 62 forks, 35 spoons, 39 plates, 5 aprons, 8 pillows, 10 shirts, 3 sweaters, 3 pairs of underwear, 10 facecloths, 2 meters of fabric, 1 pair of pajamas, 4 woolen bedcovers and 2 empty sacks.

The village Drenoveni donated 3 facecloths, 2 shirts, 5 pullovers, 1 pair of slippers, 2 frying pans, 4 chairs and 1 water bottle. In the village Tsrnovishta we collected 18 plates, 6 pairs of socks, 4 facecloths, 2 sweaters, 13 pillows, 9 cups, a bed, 1 woman’s dress and 1 chair…

For our brave troops from the village D’mbeni we collected 15.5 oki (Turkish measuring unit heavier that a kilogram) of flat breads, 17 oki of granular pasta, 22 oki of beans, 38 oki of onions, 72 oki of potatoes, 164 oki of bread, 1.5 oki of pork lard and 12 pullovers and 30 pairs of socks.

In the village Labanitsa the following voluntary donations were made for the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG): 65 oki of grain, 45 oki of potatoes, 23 oki of beans and 10 oki of lentils. The women from the village Lagen, 70 in total, donated their labour and cleared the road from Lagen to Bapchor to make the trip of our fighters easier. The women from Lagen also donated 700 oki of grain and 6,000 oki of potatoes. The people of Rudari donated 47 eggs, 1 oka of pork fat, 10 oki of flour, 43 oki of cheese, 1 oka of tobacco, 4 oki of onions and 1 lamb, for the people’s hospital…

Vera paused her reading for a moment and said: “The assistance we received is not as good as last year’s, right?

“Well, last year,” offered Sotiritsa, “we had more so we gave more…”

“That’s true,” confirmed Vera with sudden vigour in her voice. “Ah, here is the photographer. Hey you, you, give me your revolver and the

hat," and after strapping the revolver around her waist and putting the hat on slightly crooked she said, "and you women, go to the side, over there, a little that way so that the mountain will be in full view. Now my friend Marika and I will have our picture taken… Like this?" she smiled and they all saw her gold tooth which she had acquired in Bitola a while back.

"No, no, from this side," she adjusted herself, turned her face, smiled, looked at the distant mountains from top to bottom, then looked at Vicho and Mali-Madi. Her golden tooth sparkled with her wide smile.

"Hold it," yelled the photographer, "look at the birdie here!"

"Ah, that's good, a picture for the history books… And you women be patient, be patient for a while longer. Freedom is on its way. A little bit longer and it will be here, before you…"

There was silence. Everyone was quiet.

"But what will freedom mean when everything is destroyed? My son is dead, my daughter is crippled, my home has been burned down, there is nothing left of our livestock, you took our sheep, goats and horse for the struggle, our fields have not been ploughed, the soil is poor and barren, everything you asked us, Vera, to give we gave for the sick, for the hospital, for the struggle. I, as you can see, am now all alone here and can't seem to distance myself from carrying logs… What use to me is this kind of freedom," insisted the woman, "when everything is desolate?... You know that…"

"And with whom," another voice was heard from the other side, "with whom am I going to share this freedom here where it is desolate. Everything is empty and what kind of freedom will it be in this emptiness?"

"My husband is locked up on some island…" another woman complained.

"Why fret so much?" Vera yelled. "He is not the only one on the island! The islands are full of our people. They too we will free. Once we win up here at Vicho we will free them too, we will push our enemies out and force them back all the way to Athens. When that happens I will be the first to free your husband and sit him here on your lap… I will do that for you, I promise you… Only please don't pause when you are carrying logs because that's how you block progress… Do you understand me?"

"I," said Tina "have two girls who carry rifles. And you, I see, don't even carry a pistol…"

Stavrovitsa leaned towards Tina and whispered in her ear: "Don't say that, she does carry a gun but as an ornament, for showing off…"

"One of my daughters," continued Tina, "is 19 years old and the other only 17…"

"How is it Vera that they," uttered Stavrovitsa "did not collect you like they collected our daughters?"

"I am from High Command and people like me fight on different fronts. And this is the truth. Last year when the NOF (Peoples' Liberation

Front) and AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) cadres were mobilized, Iannidis personally told me that there was no law for mobilizing women…" replied Vera.

"You are saying there is no law? He told you that?" inquired Stavrovitsa.

"That is exactly right." said Vera.

"And that is why you don't have to carry a rifle?" Stavrovitsa again inquired.

"Exactly like that," replied Vera.

"So with which law did you draft the two young ladies? One 19 and the other 17. Under which law?" inquired Tina loudly.

"I told you there is no law for the women, I did not say there is no law for young ladies…" Vera replied angrily and changed the subject: "I want you to know that the entire assistance our people provide, they provide it for our victory. And victory, dear women, is not far…"

At that moment a horse was heard neighing. Vera jumped to her toes and yelled out: "Get up! Get up! Look over there! Do you see the horse? It looks like a red horse, yes, red… It is running, it is running towards us! You see? It is running… That horse is carrying our victory! Victory, dear women, is coming; it is coming riding on a red horse… Look? It is coming towards us to give us the news that our enemy will never cross Vicho!"

Just at that moment a man came out of a bunker on the opposite side of the hill and at the top of his voice began to yell: "Hey you down there, the commander's horse is running towards you! Turn it back! Hey you over there! Turn it back because it is headed straight for the mine field!"

Moments later there was a thundering sound and dirt flew up in the air. Vera went pale and tucked her head into her shoulders. The Unit Commander ordered them to collect the horse's remains and take them to the kitchen.

Vera did not stay for dinner. She left with her courier and stopped off at Zhelevo for the night. Then while spooning her diluted lentils into her mouth, on top of which she had broken up chunks of unsalted rye bread, she began to write:

"I am in Zhelevo. Stop. I gave a speech at a popular rally close to the battle line front. Stop. In attendance were the women from the working brigade. Stop. I raised their fighting and revolutionary spirit with strong revolutionary words. Stop. I will rest a while now and afterwards I will head on to the designated place. Stop. I greet you with revolutionary greetings. Stop. Death to fascism – freedom to the people. Stop. All to arms – everything for victory. Stop. Vera. Stop."

She folded the page four times, gave it to the courier and said: "Tomorrow early in the morning take it to the designated place. Understand?"

The Great Lie – Chapter 14

It was announced that a letter from Mihail Keramitchiev and Ilia Dimovski – Gotse, dated June 2nd, 1949, had arrived for Zahariadis at the headquarters of the CPG (Communist Party of Greece) Central Committee in Mala Prespa. It took ten days for the letter to arrive.

Zahariadis was expecting the letter, but not what it had to say. After reading it he called a meeting with his closest associates and read the letter out loud to them. He then made comments about each item he had read, emphasizing that everything in the letter was a slanderous lie and that the entire letter was directed against the Party. He then concluded that the authors of the letter should be strongly condemned. "Comrades what do you think?" he asked.

"I, comrades," offered Vlandas, "fully support comrade Zahariadis. The letter is not only directed against our Party but it is also slanderous against our democratic movement and the struggle we are leading."

"We should call an emergency meeting with the Central Committee," proposed Porphirogenis, "and decide…"

"Call a session with the Central Committee," interrupted Partsalidis, "such disgusting slander cannot remain without a very strong response."

"Comrades, there is no need for this to be discussed by the Central Committee," interrupted Zahariadis. "We don't need to give it importance, significance and weight or debate with the Central Committee the lies these traitors and deserters are spreading. I propose that we make the contents of the letter known to the Macedonians. Let the Slavo-Macedonian Cadres of NOF (People's Liberation Front), AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front), the Commanders of DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) and the seven or eight members of KOEM (Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia) know what's in the letter. Nearly all of them are familiar with Keramitchiev and Gotse. After all, they founded NOF and AFZH together. Let us invite them to a meeting and familiarize them with the contents of the letter and let them condemn these traitors and deserters who wrote this slander. We will help them with the condemnation by giving them intellectual and moral support. In fact, to make it easier for them to condemn these traitors, we will write a resolution for them and have them sign it. Afterwards we will make the resolution public by announcing it over the radio and publishing it in the newspapers…"

Even though the cave, located between the village Nivitsi and Orovo, was too small to fit the 45 or so KOEM activists, DAG political representatives and Unit Commanders, it was chosen as the place to hold the meeting.

They all knew they would be meeting with Zahariadis so some felt satisfied, thankful and proud to have the rare privilege to meet the legend

of their own creation. The strong grip of the hand and the cheerful smile were all indications of such sentiments.

Others, on the other hand, received the news with some suspicion. In any case, almost everyone either knew everyone else or had heard of them.

The cave was buzzing with conversation thundering through the grove. Two lamps giving off pale light made the inside of the cave visible as guests began to arrive. Two people from security services were doing their rounds checking everyone. There was a faint smell of mold inside the cave and a huge portrait of Stalin hung on the front wall.

There was only one table in the place, covered with a red tablecloth, and beside it were four chairs. There were however many benches made of rough cut boards.

Zahariadis, Portsalidis, Vlandas and Bardzotas entered the cave at a quick pace and took their place at the table. Everyone stood up and the place went silent as people looked at each other. A fly was heard buzzing in the cave when suddenly a loud voice thundered in the middle of the cave calling out: “Long live comrade Zahariadis!” It was Vera.

Zahariadis stood up, raised his arm and threw a sharp glance at everyone. They understood the look – the meeting was not a rally. There was silence. Then there was anticipation. The laughter died out and so did the smiles from people’s faces. Now there was only the worm of doubt scratching. Vera stood wide-eyed, frozen with her mouth gaping wide open. The awkwardness was interrupted by Zahariadis who first started speaking quietly and later raised his voice.

“This acting body of KOEM is assembled here under the initiative of the CPG Central Committee Politburo. The reason for the assembly is a letter sent to us by the traitors and deserters Gotse, Dimakovski and Keramitchiev. We will familiarize you with the letter to which we will need to respond. The CPG Central Committee has proposed a resolution for the traitors Gotse and Keramitchiev with which you need to become familiar and adopt.

Among those present I don’t believe there is anyone who does not know Gotse or Mihali. That’s right Mihali is what they called Keramitchiev; Mihali from Gabresh and Gotse from Statitsa, both from Kostur Region, now living in Skopje.”

Perched at the head of the table, with his certain gaze, Zahariadis had everyone under his control. It was as if he had caught them in his spider web. No one dared to even move, not even breathe loudly. Only the damn fly could be heard buzzing and buzzing and buzzing as it flew around inside the cave… They thought, as he stood before them looking over them with that piercingly menacing look, what had happened to those peaceful, familiar smiling eyes they had seen of him in so many of his photographs? On top of that they were also bewildered as to why he did not greet them with the familiar “comrades”…

"Your conference today," echoed Zahariadis's voice inside the cave, "extends the circle of aspiration of the Macedonian people towards their struggle and their liberation…"

He paused for a second to tell everyone that those who wanted could take notes.

Kole quickly opened his officer's briefcase, took out a notebook, leaned over to the person next to him and quietly whispered: "What is the date today?"

"June 12th…" he whispered back with a terrified sounding voice.

"The formation of the Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia (KOEM)," continued Zahariadis, "was a serious, decisive and definite step in the struggle. KOEM was created in a time full of hope and at the same time full of difficulties. With Tito's betrayal the people of Aegean Macedonia experienced strong fears, much stronger than those of the Greek people. With this betrayal some hopes and dreams collapsed and KOEM is now going over the ruins to fix them and to build new buildings which will result in the creation of a multitude of hopes.

Before KOEM's formation our difficulties with the struggle were great, but in some respects we can say that these difficulties have prompted the formation of KOEM. Here we should also mention that with the creation of KOEM we cleared up some old accounts. The Macedonian nation was created, developed and cast off with its own national revolutionary mission, traveling a hard road and breaking barriers such as the Ilinden Uprising, whose anniversary we celebrate to this day. The aim of all these necessary historic struggles is to create a free People's Republic of Macedonia which will follow the road of socialism and communism.

In a historical reversal of this history the Macedonian nation found itself without a helmsman. Our movement, even before the occupation and to some degree the serious difficulties experienced, is to blame for that. And now the question is, 'why doesn't this leadership have a helmsman?'

Well, because we have had external interference in the people of Aegean Macedonia's national democratic movement development processes. We have had external interference from Tito's opportunistic and chauvinist clique, which explains the absence of a helmsman.

The Macedonian people followed the road to their revolutionary development together with the Greek working people led by the Communist Party of Greece (CPG) and with all the mistakes made and weaknesses experienced in the past, we had much success in establishing proper policies that took root in the Macedonian people. Our alliance with the Macedonian people is necessary for the successful execution of the revolution, for victory and for the creation of a People's Republic in our country. This way our movement won the missions on the road to victory. But, the movement in our country because of economic, political, geographic and military reasons encountered certain specific difficulties,

especially during and after the Second World War, which needed to be evaluated and removed.

The Red Army liberated South-Eastern Europe and the Balkans, but the English entered our country. That, for us, was the main difficulty. The various conditions which existed, emphasizing particularly the relations between the powers in the Second World War and afterwards, increased our specific difficulties creating a need for another resistance.

These difficulties were used by imperialism. But, outside of them, new ones appeared for which the Macedonian sector KOEM will play a big role to overcome.

So, what happened? We need to reply clearly. The problems appeared when our two nations were fighting. Tito and his nationalist, chauvinist program undermined and broke our unity. He used the party cell of the Macedonian People's leadership and from it he created his own authority and without doubt broke the national democratic movement in Greece. That which the Anglo-Americans were doing before, Tito is doing today. He strives to secure a base in South-Eastern Europe. We can conclude from this that Tito's work evidently began in 1943. But here only now he is clearly revealed as an Anglo-American authority and bearer of their goals in South-Eastern Europe working against the Soviet Union. Under the guise of communism, Tito was posing as a friend which had a decisive influence on the leadership of the Macedonian people's struggle. Tito strove to place his own chauvinistic policies in NOF in order to bring it under his own authority and to lead it into splinter…

The truth is that you were not the only guilty party in the 1944 split. The CPG is also guilty. It truly was a mistake, but Gotse had no right, on account of some of our mistakes, to take the army and leave for Yugoslavia. You needed to think like communists and fight in the ranks of the CPG. In the past, however, the NOF leadership failed to meet its set duties, it did not make any effort to organize its work to systematically begin to address the implementation of tasks for a comprehensive assistance of DAG, especially in recruiting men and women for DAG, food and other assistance, transfer of weapons and wounded, etc.

NOF not only did not make any progress in its massive political and ideological work, it primarily invested its energy in dealing with fractious issues such as the rivalry between Keramitchiev and Mitrovski struggling for a higher position in the leadership, which resulted in organizational stratification. The fractious struggle that erupted between the leading Cadres of NOF – Mihailo Keramitchiev and Paskal Mitrovski, led to a split in the leadership of NOF. The leadership became divided into two opposing groups which is a reflection of how the Slavo-Macedonian nation is leading the struggle. This is a reflection of its character and awareness and of the authority of the CPG.

And in place of NOF taking a firm line, it busied itself with internal strife, quarrels and reciprocal slandering. To sort out its problems, NOF

solicited assistance for help and advice from the outside with which it became a spy-ring impeding the implementation of the CPG line the result of which caused trouble and inflicted damage on the general democratic movement in the country. But even after NOF came under the leadership of the CPG, it continued its links with the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. You were not honest towards the CPG and you did not help it. They worked in Aegean Macedonia and still had connections to three spy rings – one with OZNA (People's Security Agency), another in the Information Service and a third with Kolishevski, which controlled the remaining spy rings. Today these imperialistic and chauvinistic aspirations of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) have been uncovered and for that we have the documents in our hands.

Zevgos's assassin was an agent of OZNA who passed through Skopje. All agents submitted written statements. When last year we imprisoned two agents in Prespa and asked the CPY if they were its people so that we could free them, the CPY said no, so we executed them. That was the end of the agents. The CPY uses you and at the end sacrifices you. The Party, on the other hand, wants to help you and save you. Terminate all connections with the CPY and pull yourselves away ideologically. The CPY has connected itself to the imperialists and has turned against the Soviet Union and the people's republics. Today those communists who have openly expressed support for the Inform Bureau have been thrown into prison where they are tortured and destroyed. If any of the prisoners sign a statement against the Inform Bureau, abandon their convictions and agree with Tito's line then they are immediately freed. They are using similar tactics to those used by the fascists during the Metaxa era when prisoners were forced to sign political declarations against communism. They wanted to use Markos's case, for which Piade wrote an article in which he praised Markos, but Markos responded with a letter of his own.

The national question is the reserved strength of the struggle. According to the conditions it either gains ground by setting the daily agenda or it is again left behind… The position on self-determination that we adopted was premature because it was adopted before the creation of the conditions. We adopted that position under pressure from the Tito regime. Tito's agents agitated the Macedonian masses and the masses in turn challenged us with the desertion of Gotse and Keramitchiev. The stand we took caused us a lot of harm. The reaction, based on my attitude, has strengthened their ideological front. In the various camps where various fighters and patriots were imprisoned, the Monarcho-Fascists came and told the prisoners that we sold Macedonia, that we were fighting for foreign interests and as a result many, under pressure, were forced to sign statements against the CPG and DAG. The CPG always, as it is now, is fighting for the freedom of the Macedonian people. The traitors who wrote this letter and had no courage to sign it, are accusing us of supposedly

having made some written agreement. Such an agreement with NOF does not exist…

Tito did everything against the victory of the People's Republic of Greece and that's why he is fighting with such rage against the CPG. His aim is to implement the aggressive Anglo-American policy. The fact that a strong political line exists among the Aegean Macedonians has enabled and has helped his deed…"

Zahariadis paused, placed his hands on the table, looked up and stared at everyone with a long, shrewd and untrusting look. He then said:

"As I pointed out at the beginning of my speech, the CPG's Central Committee has prepared a resolution for you to authorize and confirm with your signature. This is your chance to condemn the treacherous role and activities of the deserters, national chauvinists, Tito's agents and breakers of our unity. On the table you will find the text of the resolution and a list of your names..." rang out his cruel, voracious and authoritative voice.

To everyone it seemed like the voice of the leader echoed in the distance, came back and hung over them like a hot, sharp knife spinning over their heads, darkening their cognitive abilities, muddying their awareness and stiffening their thoughts.

Kole felt chills all through his body. It seemed to him like he was attacked by an entire ant colony crawling all over his body. He bowed his head low and barely noticeably wiped the sweat from his forehead. In the scorching heat of the night filled with the smell of sweat and mildew, quietly, with a lowered, frowning, muddy look on their faces and with bowed heads, clenched in their tight shoulders, all of them, all forty-five cadres of NOF, AFZH and DAG, who, a few months before were inducted into KOEM, now in front of the leader were feeling very guilty. They looked helpless in their movements. They dragged their stiff legs towards the table. There was a look of bitterness, alarm, anxiety and endless dismay on their faces… They listened to Zahariadis's report to the end and not a single one of them said a word. They listened but could not believe what they had heard.

In front of them, like thunderbolts in the middle of a storm that came and fell hard and angry, threatening and abusive, cruel and disturbing, were words – some more dangerous than others – threaded one after the other like machine gun bursts. It seemed that he, the leader, had slapped countless blows with both his hands. Staying in line, they obediently approached the table and looked for their name on the list…

That day, June 12th, 1949, all forty five invited leaders and activists of NOF, AFZH and KOEM, standing one behind another, signed a pre-prepared resolution.

There was silence. Only the creaking of the rotten boards could be heard under the pressure of heavy shoes and military boots. No one looked anyone in the eyes. They exited the cave all sweaty, silent and scared, with their heads bowed. They spit a bitter spit as they inhaled fresh air. A tall

and slender man wearing a military uniform without markings leaned over to the man closest to him and whispered: “What shame was this? When I listened to him it felt like he was reading a death sentence and when I signed I thought I had signed that death sentence… What shame, what humiliation…” They separated without saying another word.

Missing from the talks were the smiles and the hard grip of hands. It seemed like they were not the same people as yesterday. Only a few of them, stood aside, argued, but up here away from Kole and Krste, where they could not be heard. And those two did not join the others. They tightened their belts, threw their backpacks on their shoulders and left.

The security people checked their passes and pointed them in the direction of Vineni. They walked one behind the other until dawn and not a word was exchanged. Further down they took the same narrow and steep rocky path which only yesterday took them up hill, but today perhaps from fatigue or from the long trip or the long day of excitement meeting with the leader, the road seemed to be much steeper. The sleeping waters of small Lake Prespa reflected the dim moonlight of the full moon. The mooing of a cow was heard coming from Sveti Aihil Island. A bird was heard squawking in the coastal reeds. The sky over Mount Bela Voda and beyond, over Lisets, began to take on a pale pink colour. They were in Peroo by the time the sun came up. Here was another checkpoint where they were required to show their pass. By noon they were on the road to Preval. To the left of the road was an oak forest where axes could be heard cutting trees. Uphill were two pairs of oxen pulling a large oak trunk. Further up, on the bare hilltop, the base of a bunker being built could be seen. Fresh trenches were dug to the left and right of it.

“They are digging everywhere,” said Kole and after a long sigh he continued, “we have ploughed all the mountains… We have changed their character. They no longer look like our mountains or like trenches, not even like bunkers… They are ugly…”

“We did it so that our enemy could not cross Vicho,” Krste responded and continued to walk.

Those were the only voices that were heard this far as they came to an intersection on the road, which on the left headed for Zhelevo and on the right for Rulia. They stopped.

“Now what?” asked Krste.

“Why don’t we rest under that pear tree by the river?” replied Kole.

They crossed the road and walked through the meadow to the other side. A few steps later they were in the shadow of the pear tree. They unloaded their backpacks from their shoulders and took their boots off. They dipped their hot and tired feet into the cold mountain water. A hawk appeared high above the forested hills. It flew in circles. They muddied the clear water with their, for who knows how long, unwashed feet as they watched the hawk fly.

“It looks like we have harvested our grapes…” said Kole in a stretched out tone of voice.

“What?” asked Krste.

“That, which our leader read to us…” replied Kole.

“Yes… He scolded us…” said Krste.

“Was that appropriate? I swear on my mother’s life I heard what he said but I don’t believe what I heard. I don’t know if you are going to believe me, but the entire time he was speaking, it seemed like he was passing judgment on us and while I was signing my name I thought I was signing a death warrant… Is this not shameful for us, not for you and me specifically, but for our devoted people who have become a burnt offering, to be so harshly accused like that? Did you see how he stared at us? Did you see how much scorn there was in his eyes? Did you see how he was shaking his finger? NOF he said is a spy ring. In other words, all those who lit the fires, who strengthened the spirit, who ignited the coals, who sparked the flames and jumped into them, were all agents?

Are we not the ones who went from village to village, from house to house carrying the torch of great hope? Who would he and those around him be if it were not for us?! We and no one else, we and our simple people raised his name, made him great, celebrated him and turned him into a god! Are we not the ones who planted the faith of him into our people and persuaded them to join the struggle on his behalf…? It took great courage to defend Gorusha and Krusha, Nikoler and Amuda, Alevitsa and Charno for seventy days and nights. It took great courage for old men and women, working for two months delivering hundreds of horses and mules loaded with ammunition from Prespa to Gramos during the night. It took great courage to march on a long march from Koreshta, over the Lerin plains to Voden and Negush. It took great courage to engage the enemy in the battle for Lerin…

Was it courage or madness?! And what was it that we signed today? And because of it did we not just enter the great descent? And who knows where it will take us? You were not at the Congress in Nivitsi. It took courage for a simple village woman to go on stage and throw a burst of burning questions at Zahariadis. Who, since then, has had the courage to question him?” concluded Kole.

“And what did he say, I mean Zahariadis?” inquired Krste.

“What did he say? Wait, I have it written down… Ah, here it is. ‘I from here, from this podium,’ he said, ‘promise, I promise to all the Slavo-Macedonian mothers who lost their most beloved children and most solemnly promise that we will win the struggle, we will win it because with these kind of fighters, the kind born of the Slavo-Macedonian people, it is impossible not to win and for certain we will win; I promise you that. I promise you,’ he continued, ‘but my promises will mean nothing if you don't fight and sacrifice yourselves and show examples of courage, self-sacrifice and devotion. Exactly for this reason about a month and a half

ago our Party, during its Fifth Plenum, made a decision by which you, the Slavo-Macedonians, as a result of DAG's victory and the success of the people's revolution, will earn the right to self-determination, which means you can have your own country in which all Macedonians can unite…'

This is exactly the answer he gave the woman and this is exactly what he told us. And this is why we ripped our throats cheering and calling out slogans and swelled our hands clapping to praise and honour him… And now that I think about it, I constantly ask myself how did this person manage to turn us into a single voice, a single fist and to be used at his will? How did he manage to sow into us such vast, unlimited, unconditional, immeasurable, huge, deep, persistent, unbreakable and blind trust and faith in him before everything, so that when his name is mentioned we feel hope, like being rescued and a sense of security. How did he do that? Do you know?" asked Kole.

"I don't know, but I want to ask you something. You, the activists of NOF and AFZH, all this time, where have you been and where are you now? And let me ask you, did you ever, at any time, make any decision without his knowledge or approval? Did you ever speak publicly without his knowledge?

I did not attend the First or Second NOF Congress but let me ask you, were your articles, speeches, decisions, positions and even the lists of delegates attending the Congress and those NOF delegates being voted in, not personally selected and approved by him? Can you recall, outside of yelling out slogans in his honour, ever doing anything without his knowledge and consent…? Why the silence? So be silent… and save your notebook… Keep writing in it… write some more… maybe someday your notebook will talk back to you…" concluded Krste.

There was silence. Only the flow of the crystal clear mountain water could be heard gently rushing down the stream. There was something flying high above the hills but it did not look like a hawk or an eagle. Kole licked his finger and flipped the pages in his oily and dirty notebook. He paused and asked:

"Is that what you think? Maybe you are right. We worked along the Party line directives. Do you understand what is meant by 'party discipline?' It is more than just an order. Tomorrow they will curse us, not him, for the senseless loss of so much young life, for the burned houses and for the torn up life… We made our people homeless… Do you see how we are divided and some of us have taken his side and argue that he, our leader, is right?

He attacked Keramitchiev and silenced Mitrovski. He accused Keramitchiev and protected Mitrevski. Why? What will I, tomorrow, tell the mothers, the wives, the engaged young women? How am I going to explain to them the loss of their most beloved, the burning of their homes, the loss of their livestock, crops and belongings…

Yes.. We are standing at a crossroad deprived and divided among us… He finds Tito at fault for his own problems. Yes, today Tito, tomorrow us, we will be the ones at fault. Our entire self-sacrifice and dedication has been tossed in the mud, spat on and stepped on. He has sown the seeds of discord, irritation and loathing and has dug a big divide between us.

Dreadful, isolated and ruined we sleep in hatred. And those over there in Skopje, far from hell, did they ever think that this may be the wrong time to write such a letter? Did they ever consider to whom they were writing the letter? Such a letter was not needed just on the eve of the greatest and most fateful battles. Did they make that decision with or without the knowledge of anyone? Was there no one in their right mind to advise them to abstain from sending the letter or to advise them that now was not the right time to write such a letter? Did they not consider the kind of damage it would cause and who was going to suffer the most? Did they give it a thought and were they aware of the consequences and of who was going to be the victim of this 'great truth' of theirs and of the allegations they made?

Did they not know who they were dancing with? Did they not know who Zahariadis is and who is his teacher? They must have known that such a letter in Zahariadis's hands would be a knife stuck in the back of our people? They must have known that their letter, in Zahariadis's hands would be an indictment against the very people on whose behalf the letter was written?

Did they not know that they too would be included in these convictions and sentences? Did they not know that even a note of best intentions in the hands of Zahariadis becomes proof of allegations?

Once Zahariadis began to speak about the letter with such anger and fury, humiliating our people, I figured there must have been a great deal of truth in it. He told us that he would let us read the letter, familiarize ourselves with its content but did he give it to us?

No! Why not? Can you think of anything as to why he did not give it to us? Is it because there is resistance to knowing the truth? This is exactly the kind of letter Zahariadis needed. Exactly with this kind of letter he will justify his own mistakes and look for perpetrators among us. That's all Zahariadis, and those he surrounds himself with, will need. We are now at a crossroad. We have now become WE and THEY, quarreling brothers. He smeared us with a lot of filthy words, US here and THEM there, now with a greater conviction and with filthier words we are going to continue to smear one another…

Why is it allowed to be this way, to blindly believe without thinking and understanding and to have that same belief passed on and planted into others? Why are we so very obedient… Do you remember, on the way, he, Lazo told us 'from today on you will listen to Zahariadis, meaning the CPG'. We listened to him all right and look where we are. Others did the judging and we signed the verdict. Did you hear what Zahariadis said,

shaking his finger in front of our noses? 'NOF,' he said, 'was a spy ring organization that impeded the implementation of the CPG line… You were not honest towards the CPG and you did not help us…' Did you hear your wise man say these things? He said he would be creating a Macedonia for us with resolutions and with plenum decisions and even before the ink was dry, he gave up, he changed his mind… Did you hear him?!"

Kole raised his voice and looked into Krste's eyes.

"Look, here, I have it written down, exactly what he said right here on this page of my shabby old notebook. 'History has proven,' he said, 'that NOF has had many gaps and deficiencies. In NOF, because it was not led by the Party, there appeared petty bourgeois and chauvinistic tendencies'. And he, Zahariadis, found the solution. The entire Macedonian self-sacrifice he considers a merit of the CPG. Without an ounce of shame he openly says to us 'so, comrades, our party made a mistake here. Conditions were premature. We made a mistake, but we recognized our mistake,' he says, 'and here is our strength, the strength of the Party which recognized its mistakes.' But do you know why Zahariadis is so mad at Keramitchiev and Gotse? You don't know? I will tell you…

Those two promised him that if they were allowed to go to Skopje they would mobilize around five-thousand Macedonian refugees who had fled Aegean Macedonia and make arrangements to return them. But instead of doing that, they began to criticize the CPG for not acting favourably on the Macedonian question… Zahariadis, of course, has not forgotten this and when he was preparing for the battle of Lerin, he sent Mangovski, Mitrovski and Marika to Skopje, with Porphirogenis in charge, in order to remind them of their obligations and to begin with the mobilization. Of course Keramitchiev and Gotse not only refused to mobilize the refugee Macedonians, but also subjected Zahariadis's policies to harsh criticism..."

"And you, Kole, from where do you know all these things?" asked Krste.

"From where? People talk… Marika, the woman that was with them in Skopje, said a few things… she told people how they welcomed them and what they said… Zahariadis was prepared to do everything, to meet all their demands just so that he could get his five thousand new fighters. But as you know he did not get them… There was nowhere for him to get fighters to replace those lost in the Voden, Sobotsko and Lerin battles. And what did he do? He sent the same Porphirogenis to mobilize the children…" concluded Kole.

"I have heard about that… They brought ten children to my unit. I returned them to Prespa…" replied Krste.

Kole swung his arm and angrily interrupted: "You returned them but they then sent them to Mali-Madi…"

"I have heard about that too…" replied Krste.

"We have all heard about a lot of things, we heard and hear things and fill our mouths with water… Why? Why do we only listen and… and wait

to be complimented? Five days before the start of the NOF Congress in Nivitsi, Bardzotas, one of his shadows, in front of the DAG political commissars for Vicho Region, said: '…the Slavo-Macedonian fighters and officers are the best fighters of DAG. They fought and are still fighting heroically. But lately we have had quite a few desertions from the ranks of the Slavo-Macedonians, especially Slovo-Macedonians...' Did you hear me? Whack! Not on the forehead but on top of the head… He strokes us with one hand and beats us on the head with the other. And further down he says: 'What is the reason for the desertions? The great difficulties experienced by the Slavo-Macedonian people. That heroic nation gave it its all; it gave its children, its possessions, its homes. Every house has at least one dead and one wounded and with all that, how can there be no effect on the Slavo-Macedonian people? Those difficulties are used by the enemy and by hostile elements to bring discord…' And do you know who they are blaming? Listen to what he said further down. I have written exactly what he said. 'To overcome the difficulties and to comprehend the actions of the hostile elements,' the person surely was thinking of someone in NOF, 'we need to expand our political and advisory work between the Slavo-Macedonian fighters and their families. In the last days, the eleventh division undertook a good initiative. It sent a number of its leading cadres to speak at important conferences in the villages,' more like frighten the people, 'during which they condemned the slogan "Go to Yugoslavia to save yourselves" and called on the people to fight against the difficulties…'

Well, think about this. They had to tell those heroic best Slavo-Macedonian fighters and officers and their families that they are politically immature… And look what kind of names they labeled us with… Sometimes they call us Macedonians and other times they call us Slavo-Macedonians and even Sloveno-Macedonians… This is not because of ignorance but because of disrespect… And he, Zahariadis, spit in our eyes when he said there was absolutely no agreement between NOF and CPG… There are, there are, but he wants to convince us that there aren't and we, in the name of Party discipline, will say, of course Comrade Zahariadis, there aren't any.

I however, have written it down in this notebook… here, I found it, I have written that the agreement to join NOF to the CPG took place on October 14, 1946 and on November 21 of the same year NOF together with all Macedonian detachments came under the leadership, meaning under the control of the CPG. And do you know what our people were asking from them? They were asking to be given leadership positions for the leaders of NOF… Not much, only a secretary here, a secretary there and some unit commanders. And what did the CPG do once it took control of NOF? It promised them everything and then it disbanded the Macedonian units.

Immediately after that Markos began to send radio-telegrams asking for more and more Macedonian fighters to be sent to Thessaly and Rumeli to help him develop a Partisan movement there. As a result about 1,000 fighters, one unit from the Kostur and Lerin Regions and one unit from Voden Region were ordered to go there. The Macedonian fighters, is understandable, spoke Macedonian and sang Macedonian revolutionary songs. And do you know how they welcomed them? As a foreign army! Rumours began to circulate that foreigners had arrived … The Greek newspapers went wild claiming that Bulgarians had arrived and nothing more was needed for those in Thessaly and Rumeli to flee to the cities.

Instead of going to the Partisans these people left for the cities. A lot of damage was done. To stop the exodus the Macedonians were prohibited from speaking Macedonian and singing Macedonian songs. And to the people of Thessaly and Rumeli, they had to explain that the newcomers were Greek Partisans, indigenous to Northern Greece…

They should have promptly sent the Macedonians back before something awful happened to them… Zahariadis did the same thing with KOEM. NOF he says, has national liberation aspirations, but lacks communist ideals and communist leadership, with which only the right CPG leadership could bring the Macedonian people to victory… Have you ever heard that?" asked Kole.

"Yes, I have heard that…" replied Krste.

"I know you have heard it but did you understand what it meant? And speaking of NOF, let me tell you this: Partsalidis, you know the guy who is now president of the interim government, while feasting on roasted carp in a house in Nivitsi, and while talking about the Second NOF Congress, said to his friends, 'anyone who sees NOF as an equal to DAG and to the revolutionary movement is a candidate for a psychiatrist...' Okay now if you are so smart, tell me with whom have we partnered when our own president thinks of us like that?

I once heard how General Kikitsas stood up to Vlandas. 'What do you think,' said Kikitsas, 'there would have been a national resistance against the occupier in this part of Macedonia? Or do you think that today, now, there would be a movement? You had best understand that it was those cadres who today have been tainted in the books of the A2 Bureau, exactly those same cadres created the movement here, they are well known and trusted by the people and they also have influence and trust in the people and the fighters. Without them here there would be no resistance in this region and DAG would not exist…'

And you can't but ask yourself: did they not distinguish us from the newcomers [Christian settlers brought from Turkey in the 1920's], at home and in school, in church and in the army, and call us like that twenty years ago? Were they not teaching the newcomers to hate and despise us? And now you believe that they are thinking of respecting us? And what if all this fails? Will they not then put the entire blame on us? Or will they like

us only until we are useful and then discard us? Blindness… Sometimes I think to myself that blindness is our worst sickness? Or perhaps it's our mutual put-down and informing on each other? What do you think?" concluded Kole.

"I am a military man, my job is to execute orders, not to think," replied Krste, turning, stretching out his arm and pulling on his backpack. He then took out half a loaf of brown bread and an onion and with his knife opened a can of meat. He cut it into pieces and said: "Help yourself, the table is set and lunch is ready. Everything you say may be the truth, but it is no reason not to eat…"

Kole closed his notebook, put it back in his backpack and asked: "Do you see that hilltop?"

"Yes I see it…" replied Krste.

"We made it to there… What's behind the hilltop?" asked Kole.

"Do you want to know what there is behind the hilltop? Of course there is the downhill…" replied Krste.

"Well, we've reached that now…" concluded Kole.

Kole looked at the sky and said, "Look at the hawk, it is still circling…"

"Yes it is… circling," repeated Krste, "but it's not a hawk, it's an airplane… it's an airplane… It's one of those that watches all the time and reports our movements in the mountains and hills… It tells them there and there are new bunkers and new trenches. Then those on the ground mark them on the maps. In other words, we, ourselves tell them 'hey, you up there, we are here… Yes… For two and a half years the government forces could not remove us from Vicho… They fought us in various military offensives with a large army and many cannons but were not successful in removing us from here… And do you know why? Because then we were not hiding in bunkers and we did not lead a trench war. We fought the enemy on our terms. Last year we initiated a frontal war in Gramos and the enemy fought us where it wanted to fight us and took us out of Gramos. And now the enemy will fight us where it wants to… Understand?"

The Great Lie – Chapter 15

The machine for sending and receiving encrypted telegrams suddenly came on and began to type. The decipherer, who at the time was leafing through a newspaper, looked at the calendar pinned to the wall. The date was July 5th, 1949. After the machine finished typing he took the paper out, spread it on the table and, with surprise on his face, began to read: <<Μοναρχοφασιστικ‘α στρατ‘ευματα περν‘οντας απο γιυκοσλαυικ‘ο ‘εδαφος, καβ’αλησαν τις θ’εσεις μας και κατ’ελαβαν την εκλης’ια.>> (Monarcho-Fascist units passing through Yugoslav territory attacked our positions and occupied the church.)

The decoded part of the tape that came out of the machine read: “Monarcho-Fascist units, in agreement with the Yugoslav border units, entered Yugoslav territory and fiercely attacked, units of the DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) XXIV Brigade from behind, killing and wounding many and inflicting great losses.”

After a short pause, the machine resumed typing, repeating the same message. The duty officer cut off a long piece of paper with the recorded message and without delay ran to General Headquarters. Vlandas then conveyed the news to Zahariadis by telephone who, without delay, called a meeting of the Military Council. As a first measure, a decision was made to announce the contents of the telegram on Radio Free Greece the same day.

By the afternoon the news was transmitted on radio stations all over Europe. There was shock in Belgrade and Skopje, joy in Athens and restraint in Moscow…

A response from Belgrade was eagerly awaited by DAG at the General Headquarters.

Three days after the radio announcement, early in the morning, the General Headquarters decipherer delivered to the duty officer a message which read: “Today, July 10th, 1949 there will be an announcement on Radio Belgrade at 10.00 hours with a direct transfer from Pula where Marshal Tito will be speaking and Radio Skopje will carry the same message at 14.00 hours.”

“Tito,” said the decipherer, “attacked our movement with a strong message and ordered the border to be closed.”

There was surprise, silence and anticipation at the DAG Central Committee and General Headquarters when the news first arrived. Seeing the calm reaction in the others, Zahariadis also reacted unemotionally. He then ordered the technicians to move the radio to the larger barracks and to let everyone know that their presence was requested there at 13.55 hours to listen to the program and hear Tito’s speech.

The technicians changed the batteries and moved the radio from the cave to the barracks. A few minutes before 14.00 hours members of the Supreme Military Council and the General Staff gathered in the barracks.

Zahariadis sat in the front row with a bunch of papers in his hands and ignored questions from Vlandas and Bardzotas.

The barracks went silent. There was a table in the corner. A middle aged woman was sharpening pencils with a pocket knife. Next to her was a man with headphones on his ears. The radio operator turned on the radio. Radio Skopje was broadcasting Macedonian folk songs. Suddenly there was a break and a voice was heard over the speaker:

"This is Radio Skopje. This is Radio Skopje. Dear listeners we present the speech of Yugoslavia's Marshal, Comrade Tito, who today is attending the great national rally in Pula."

The silence that followed was broken by Tito's loud voice and immediately after that by the sound of the translator who translated the speech from Serbian to Greek.

Vlandas leaned his head towards Zahariadis and with a smiling tone of voice said: "He is talking about internal matters…"

"Keep quiet and listen," ordered Zahariadis.

The translator was calm; he knew both languages well and accurately translated the speech. There was a small pause. A quiet knock was heard. "Tito must be drinking water," piped up Bardzotas.

"Comrades," thundered the speaker on the radio, "I now would like to elaborate with a few words on the question of our relations with Greece. Almost daily you read in the newspapers about conflicts often occurring at the Greek border where Monarcho-Fascists cause disruptions while blatantly crossing the border. If you recall a while ago 18 of our soldiers who lost their way and accidentally crossed into Greek territory were wounded or killed. You will also recall that recently there was an attack on our village Skochvir, where more of our people were killed. We protested against these acts yet still we don't know how our protests will be treated at the United Nations and whether there will be a positive response or not.

Some time ago there was an incident of Greek troops crossing into our territory, where a Greek soldier was killed. Shots are heard every day and hundreds, hundreds of grenades and bullets fall on our territory as if a small war was taking place. We have taken measures and have requested that the United Nations put an end to that. Our appeals to the Greek government however have yielded no results. We can't appeal to Tsaldaris's regime because we know very well that they are Monarcho-Fascists. Our protests are constantly being ignored. Their behaviour is arrogant and that, of course, can have very bad consequences for which we cannot further bear responsibility.

Now allow me to tell you about another side of Greece and the reverse of that. A few days ago the radio station Free Greece broadcasted information implicating us as having an agreement with the Monarcho-Fascists to allow their army to enter our territory for the purpose of attacking the Democratic forces.

More treachery, greater notoriety! This information, I am sure, was not invented by our Greek comrades. I am sure it was invented somewhere else, they are only repeating what they heard, I am convinced of that.

But then, when Monarcho-Fascists spill the blood of our people, these other people accuse us of negotiating with the Monarcho-Fascists. This can only mean that these other people in Democratic Greece are inclined to believe in the one thing that could, and probably would, have fatal consequences for the Greek liberation movement.

Callously, these people are playing with the blood spilled every day, heroically, by the fighters fighting against their oppressors. They soil that blood for their own dishonest purposes, in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of their decisions. They want to blame us for their mistakes. They blame us for the losses experienced by their Greek Democratic Army even though we bear none of the responsibility. But, I assure you that they will fail.

So, where is all this leading to? On one hand the Monarcho-Fascist provocations endanger the lives of our citizens and on the other they slander us. We have arrived at the point where we must now completely shut down the border in order to protect the lives of our working people in that region. I think these are the wishes of our people, who often have asked, 'how long is this going to go on and where is it leading to?' This problem, one day, needs to be solved and of course we will defend our country without hesitation and we will not let our citizens suffer. That is all I want to say regarding this issue with Greece.

We need to defend the peaceful development of socialism in our country and we will do it against all opposition! I therefore appeal to Western countries, primarily to Britain and the United States, to take these provocations seriously and to put an end to them. At the same time we will not allow our people, our citizens, to suffer. That is all I want to say about Greece," concluded the broadcast.

"Turn it off!" motioned Zahariadis with his hand and, leaning towards the stenographer, said: "Re-type the text, make several copies and bring them to me. He then looked at his associates and without saying a word, dismissed them.

In the evening Zahariadis invited Vlandas, Gusias, Bardzotas, Stringos and Porphirogenis to a meeting. "Comrades," he said. "The situation is obvious. Tito has openly revealed his intentions. We can now announce our own intentions, the intentions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Greece (CPG). We now will fully support the Inform-Bureau's position. In other words, we will now fully support Moscow's position in relation to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and Moscow's attitude towards Tito.

We need to immediately send instructions about this to our contacts in Belgrade. Radio Free Greece needs to be informed to commence broadcasting part of Tito's speech and emphasize the part in which Tito

says that he is closing the border on us. I want the message about that part to be repeated every hour. We need to also prepare and broadcast a message with strong criticism against Tito and make him look like the destroyer of our movement and an agent of the imperialists.

Find every word in his commentary that characterizes him negatively and all the ugliest words spoken by the Inform Bureau and printed by communist publications and use them. With a single word we, the Greek communists, will wage a full blown, open ideological war against that imperialistic agent and lackey, Tito.

Also, put the entire NOF (People's Liberation Front) leadership under control. Shoot anyone caught attempting to escape to Yugoslavia and isolate all suspects. Place all intelligence services, political commissars and party secretaries on alert. From today on our movement begins a difficult period, perhaps the most difficult period since its inception. So, go now, think about what further steps need to be taken and I will see you at my place at 21.00 hours.

They left.

Zahariadis read the entire speech one more time. He thought for a moment and, after slamming the papers on the table with open hands, yelled out: "I've got you fatso, I've got you now… If by any chance my movement fails, you will be my biggest excuse… Yes, I have the culprit!" Zahariadis whispered out loudly and, with both hands, scrunched up Tito's speech. He kept squeezing the paper and clenching his fists until they began to hurt.

In the evening of the same day, uphill, along the crooked, narrow path leading to the meadows under the Kajmakchalan hilltop, was a stretched out column of wounded DAG fighters on the move.

"Halt!" yelled out a sharp and authoritative voice. The head of the column stopped. "Who are you?" asked the same voice.

"Partisans, fighters of DAG…" answered the leader of the column and walked towards the Yugoslav border patrol. "We are bringing wounded… friend."

"Wait," said the Yugoslav soldier in a quiet voice.

The column stopped and the wounded fighters sat down for a rest. Many could be heard moaning in pain. They were tired, irritated, thirsty, hungry and in pain and could not tolerate the wait. The column leader and his patrol approached the Yugoslav soldier and asked to meet with the Yugoslav Border Checkpoint commander.

"Wait…" replied the soldier.

"Comrade, I can't wait. Over there," the leader pointed with his head, "I have about fifty wounded fighters, some heavily wounded. Call your commander…"

"I told you to wait!" repeated the soldier with a firm sounding voice. "Step back! You are on Yugoslav territory. Step back!"

“Please, call your commander, I beg you. I want to speak with him. I know you have your orders to stop us… Tell him we have many wounded. Call the commander,” insisted the column leader.

“He has been summoned. Have some patience…” answered the soldier.

A little past midnight the column leader was summoned to the checkpoint commander’s barracks.

“I am Lieutenant Mihailovski,” the officer introduced himself and extended his hand for a handshake.

“Mavridis,” said the column leader, shaking the extended hand and in poor Serbian said: “On the other side there I have thirty lightly and heavily wounded fighters. I am asking for permission to have them cross your border and be immediately taken to the hospital.”

Lieutenant Mihailovski put his cigarette in the ashtray and sharply said: “We will take the wounded and we will send them for treatment, but not because you asked us to!...” his sharp tone of voice loudly filled the entire room.

Mavridis wanted to say something, but was interrupted. “We accepted 80 wounded fighters yesterday and all were placed in hospitals. My soldiers transported the wounded on our territory. You will have to wait until the trucks arrive. And after that they will be seen by doctors and will be fed…” concluded the Lieutenant.

After some moments of silence Mihailovski asked with a milder tone of voice: “Where did you learn Serbian?”

“In Serbia, in Bulkesh. I was there for two years,” said Mavridis.

“Are you Greek?” asked Mihailovski.

“Yes, pure blooded…” answered Mavridis.

Mihailovski looked at him and hid his smile with his hand.

“Why do you ask?” asked Mavridis.

“Under hung eyes, vulture-like nose, black hair…” answered Mihailovski.

“Yes, my parents were from the Caucasus but I was born in Greece…” replied Mavridis.

“Ah, and that’s why you are a pureblooded Greek ha? But let’s leave it at that… As I understand it, as soon as you began the battle for Kajmakchalan you lost it…” said Mihailovski.

“Sadly that’s correct. But…” replied Mavridis.

“But what?” asked Mihailovski.

“Our brigade political commissar told us that you, the Yugoslavs, allowed Greek government forces to enter into your territory and to attack us from behind,” replied Mavridis.

“And you believed that?” asked Mihailovski.

“Personally I don’t, but whatever the brigade political commissar said took root. We suffered much loss due to the mistakes of our leaders and

their inability to command but those mistakes are now being blamed on others…" said Mavridis.

The conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. The guard on duty reported that the trucks had arrived and asked if they could now start loading the wounded.

"Drive the trucks under the trees and cover them with branches," ordered the Lieutenant. "We cannot allow the other side to see us transporting people."

The wounded, along with their leader, Mavridis, were transported to the hospital in Esenovo which the Yugoslav National Army had set up especially for the DAG fighters. Here, some ten days after the Kajmakchalan defeat, Greek hospital administrators, by order from a representative of the CPG's Central Committee stationed in the Headquarters in Prespa, were sent to visit the hospitals in Esenovo and Katlanovo where they brought news to the wounded of the alleged 'behind the back attacks' and the reasons why the Yugoslavs closed the border.

Even though there was no gathering and no meeting between the patients and the hospital administrators, word got around and the patients prepared for resistance. They began by resisting the Yugoslav doctors and nurses and not allowing them to enter their hospital rooms, and then they refused to allow change of bandages and would not take their medication. Some days later they called for a general strike, demanding to be transferred to Czechoslovakia for treatment.

News of this reached Skopje first and then Belgrade and after much discussion a decision was reached and those who requested to stay in Yugoslavia in writing were allowed to remain there, the others were to be loaded on a train and sent to Czechoslovakia. And that is how it was done. But somewhere north of Kumanovo something unexpected happened. Two trains stopped side by side parallel to one another. Boarding the one were the wounded DAG fighters headed for Czechoslovakia and on the other were a bunch of happy Yugoslav youths going to work. The youths were singing songs and shouting slogans praising Tito and criticizing Stalin. This angered the DAG fighters and they then began to sing songs praising Stalin and Zahariadis and shouting criticism against Tito.

Then while the singing was going on, a Yugoslav youth carrying a bucket got off the car and with a large brush painted the words "Long live Tito – death to Stalin!" along the entire length of his car. Seeing this, Mavridis jumped off his car, grabbed the brush and bucket and painted the words "Ζ'ητω ο Στ'αλιν – κ'ατω ο Τ'ιτο" (Long live Stalin, down with Tito) on his car. Someone then jumped Mavridis from behind and hit him on the head with a shovel. So, instead of going to Czechoslovakia he ended up going to a hospital in Belgrade.

The Great Lie – Chapter 16

During the first half of May several hundred men from various prison camps were brought to the Drepano locality near the town Kozhani. Working under tight guard day and night in shifts, they built bunkers of various sizes and strength similar to those built last year in Gramos but now they were built in Mali-Madi, Bela Voda, Bigla, Lundzer, Iamato, Baro, Roto, Lisets, Polenata and on other hills in the Vicho Sector. Following about a month of forced labor, prisoners were then returned to the camps.

Without delay, as soon as the newly constructed polygon was completed, Greek Royal Military units of the II, IX, XI, XV Divisions as well as officers of the I, X and VIII Government Divisions began intensive training exercises. For a month these soldiers and officers were subjected to military training to master military skills and the use of new weapons such as bazookas and 75 mm cannons that had recently arrived in Greece from the United States.

In combination with tanks, artillery and airplanes, they were training to fight active combat for both day and night conditions; skills they would require in order to defeat a well established, strong opponent.

Priority was given to the Air Force, which, well stocked with new bombs and rockets, was responsible for destroying well-established enemy positions such as bunkers, command posts and observation towers… After that came the artillery whose objective was to destroy the bunkers and trenches leading up to strongholds and the minefields and obstacles surrounding them such as barbed wire. The infantry rehearsed coordinated night attacks and by day carried out charges assisted by tanks.

Additionally, training exercises were also important in strengthening the fighting spirit of the officers and soldiers, increasing the level of combat readiness and raising the army's faith in the upcoming summer offensive designed to destroy their opponent once and for all.

All training exercises were designed to master the new weapons, especially the piloting skills required to fly the advanced military aircraft such as the Dakota, Harvard and Spitfire, which were constantly under the watchful eyes of United States and British military specialists and instructors all reporting directly to U.S. General Van Fleet.

Two days after training was completed the battalion, regiment, brigade and division commanders, as well as high ranking air force officers, were invited to a meeting at the City Council Great Hall now converted into a military operational headquarters.

Inside, beside the front wall, there was a long table covered with a white tablecloth and behind it sat the Chief Commander Marshal Alexandros Papagos, Chief of Staff Kozmas and the commanders of the I, II and III Corps Tsakalotos, Manidakis and Grigoropoulos. Sitting in the first row was General Van Fleet with his associates and staff.

Chief of Staff Kozmas lightly tapped his pencil on his crystal glass and stood up. The quiet conversations died down and everyone stopped talking.

"Marshal, General Van Fleet," Kozmas greeted the two with a slight bow as he turned to face each. He then continued: "Generals, officers…" He paused again for a moment, seemingly listening to his own voice echo in the great hall. "The day when we combine forces is coming closer and when as allies with massive firepower we will finally subdue our enemy at Vicho…" He paused again.

At that moment Colonel Zafiropulos pulled a white canvas off the wall exposing a large operational map. General Kozmas stepped back from the table, stood next to the map and with a trembling voice continued: "Gentlemen, I am honoured to express my gratitude to the highly respected General Van Fleet and his colleagues with their vast military knowledge who have helped us prepare this operational plan, which will carry the secret name <<ΠΥΡΣΟΣ>> (Torch). [The information referred to in this chapter, has been taken from the book "Ο αντισυμμοριακος αγων 1945-1949" (Anti-Bandit War 1945-1949) by D. Zafiropoulos, Major General, 1956.]. I want to express my gratitude to our Chief Commander Alexandros Papagos who spared no expense or energy in the preparation of this plan…"

Kozmas bowed slightly, wiped the sweat off his forehead with his white handkerchief and continued:

"Gentlemen, I need to emphasize that all materials, presentations and matters discussed in this meeting are military secrets and strictly confidential. Gentlemen, it is my honour and pleasure to familiarize you with the basics of the operational plan. Layout details of each combat division, brigade, regiment, battalion and reserves, as well as combat activities of the artillery, tanks, military aircraft, supply centres and ancillary services you will find sealed in envelopes that you will be given after the meeting. Over the course of the next few weeks you are responsible for studying the plans in detail and preparing your units for combat operations under the combat tasks assigned to your unit..."

Kozmas turned to the operational map. "Gentlemen, I will resume going over the plan. Our main objective is Vicho Region. But in order to achieve a strategic surprise, we decided on two secondary steps. The first step is to clean up the Kajmakchalan Region with the forces of XI Division, where, according to our information, there are approximately 800 communist bandits. By implementing this step we will take our enemy's ability to transfer forces from Vicho to Kajmakchalan. According to our operational plan, combat actions in this region will commence on July 4th and end on July 8th. Immediately after that, most of the forces of Division XI will become available to join the Second Corps and participate in the Vicho area operations.

The second step is even more important. The objective of this step is to make the opponent think that our main thrust is directed at Gramos. From here, we predict, the forces of the First Corps, specifically the First and Eighth Division with the 73rd Brigade, and the 8th, 15th and 24th Infantry Regiment, together with the artillery and aviation will make a strong impact on the opponent's established strongholds and nail him down at these positions and thus prevent him from transferring his forces to Vicho when the major offensive begins.

According to our information, our opponent is defending Northern Gramos with 4,900 men and women, 16 cannons, two 120 mm mortars and many anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons for which he has limited grenades. This operation, gentlemen, according to our plan, will commence on the night between the 2nd and 3rd of August and must end on the 9th of August...

I will now speak about the main target. Vicho! Vicho Region is a mountainous area with many forested patches. Compared to Gramos, there are no high rocky peaks, deep gorges, or numerous goat trails. The key mountains in Vicho Region are Bela Voda on the north, Vicho on the east, Mali-Madi on the south and Chuka and Lisets on the west. Belitsa River, which passes under the village Psoderi, flows to the south and divides this region between Mount Vrba on one side and Prespa and Lake Prespa on the other. It then turns southeast near the village Breznitsa splitting Mali-Madi from Iamata, Baro, Roto and Polenata further up.

Characteristic of this region is that it has two very important roads. One road travels from Kostur through the village Aposkep along the Belitsa River, then north of the village Breznitsa it intersects with the road that travels from Kostur over Maniak, Tikveni, Chetirok, Sveta Nedela, Kosiners, Smrdesh, Breznitsa, Zhelevo and Psoderi then crosses over Mount Bigla and ends in Lerin. The map will show that the road forks before Zhelevo with one fork heading up to Prespa. The road section between Smrdesh (Greek-Albanian border), Psoderi-Bigla and Zhelevo-Prespa is invaluable to our opponent. Their entire supply of weapons and food supplied by trucks from Albania and Yugoslavia is stored in depots and dugouts along this road.

Of course these roads also have enormous strategic significance for us. A rapid penetration with our tanks on these roads…" Kozmas paused, stared at the audience for a moment and with a wide circular sweep of his hand, finished his thought, "will mean that the roads will be closed to our opponent and will stop him from retreating to Albania and Yugoslavia. In other words his escape route will be closed…Yes, gentlemen, just like that, his escape route will be closed... And now let's see with what and how we will confront the enemy.

Thanks to our scout planes, our brave and heroic air force and to our fearless intelligence, we now have an accurate picture of the terrain. We know exactly how many bunkers there are and their durability. We built

exactly the same kind of bunkers at the polygon in Drepano, used them for target practice and now we know exactly how to destroy them with all of our weapons. All their positions of strength are known to us and so is their whole line of defense, minefields, obstacles, barbed wire, etc.

Enemy forces will defend Vicho Region with Division X, Brigades 14 and 102 and with Division XI, Brigades 18 and 103. Specifically, their forces will be deployed on the northern front spanning along the Bela Voda-Bigla-Lundzer-Kulkutria line with 4 infantry battalions, 8 mountain, 5 field and 5 anti-tank cannons. Enemy forces will total about 1,450 fighters of whom thirty percent will be women.

The central front spanning along the Polenata-Plati-Kula and Roto line will be defended by 3 infantry battalions, 12 mountain, 4 field and 10 anti-tank cannons. Enemy forces will total about 1,250 fighters.

The second line spanning along the Baro-Iamata-Lisets-Moro-Chuka line will be defended with 3 infantry battalions, 6 mountain and 6 anti-tank cannons. Enemy forces will total about 1,060 fighters.

The south front spanning along the Mali-Madi line will be defended with 3 infantry battalions, 6 mountain and 3 anti-tank cannons. Enemy forces will total about 1,250 fighters. Brigade 105, consisting of about 1,000 fighters, will remain on reserve in the region around the village Smrdesh as well as about 500 fighters from the School for Officers in the region near the villages Breznitsa-Trnaa. Enemy reserve forces will total about 1500 fighters.

From the information given above we can see that the enemy line of defense to the north is located along Bela Voda and Vicho (with a very strong foothold in the middle along the Bigla-Lundzer line) and continues from there to the east along the Kula-Plati-Glavata-Roto line and south where it leans on Mali-Madi with particularly fixed positions on the hills above the villages Kosinets and Labanitsa from where the entry into the village Smrdesh is defended.

In depth analysis shows that the enemy is organized around two defensive lines. The first is drawn from Bigla-Lundzer linking the hills of Iorgova Glava-Golinata-Chuka-Lisets-Baro-Iamato with trenches, bunkers and minefields. Behind this defensive line is the road linking Smrdesh-Breznitsa-Zhelevo-Psoderi. The second defensive line lies to the north around Bela Voda turning south to cover Preval and Vrba and ends in the valley near Smrdesh. The final defensive stronghold is in Prespa beginning in the hills between the villages Shtrkovo and Rabi, following along the Lake Prespa peninsula and encompassing the villages Nivitsi, Vineni, Orovo and Grazhdeno.

Our research has confirmed that the enemy's morale is high. This is due to last year’s combat successes in Gramos and Vicho (during the battle of Mali-Madi) where they had some successes in the battles for the smaller cities and in taking Gramos in the spring.

During the winter and in the spring our enemy reorganized its units and improved its supply of food and clothing. This situation instilled confidence in High Command in believing that 1949 will be a year full of victories, thus raising the morale of our opponent.

What is their aim? Their aim is to preserve the last "free space", by decisively defending the mountains Bela Voda, Vicho and Mali-Madi. During the offensive, believing that the enemy (us) has been actively engaged and nailed down, they will wait for the situation to change and when conditions are right, they intend to destroy our forces with a counter offensive."

Kozmas paused and stared at the packed hall with people listening to his speech. He filled his glass with orange juice from the crystal jug and drank it slowly. His Adam's apple jumped up and down violently with every swallow. He then placed his glass to the side and opened a new envelope.

"With what forces will we defeat our enemy? Ready for combat we have Infantry Divisions II, IX, X and XI with a total of eleven brigades; Search and Destroy Division III with two infantry brigades, one light infantry regiment and six National Guard battalions. In terms of artillery we have 4 field cannon regiments, 3 medium cannon units, 5 mountain cannon units and nearly half of the available tanks and battle cars that we have, as well as 90 aircraft.

Division XV will remain in Rupishta and the 32nd Brigade will remain in Derven as reserves of Supreme Command. The main and major battle task of the Second Corps will be to overpower enemy positions and destroy the opposing forces. The offensive in Vicho Region will take place in four phases.

The first phase will commence on August 10th, 1949. The day after the airplane bombings and artillery preparation, Brigade 22 will depart at 10:00 pm and head in the direction of Derven-Kulkuturia-Polenata to take possession of Polenata Hill, elevation 1685 located behind the first line of defense. There it will set up a base and create favourable conditions for further attacks and for the penetration of the Statitsa defense line where our forces will surprise the enemy and occupy the Chuka-Lisets hills.

The second phase will commence during the night of August 10th and 11th with a number of synchronized attacks. Division X will depart from Bukovik in order to overcome enemy positions on the Iamata-Baro line, elevation 1,709. Division XI will commence its attacks from Derven-Kulkuturia and continue to attack the Chuka-Lisets line. At the same time the Third Search and Destroy Brigade will commence its attack on the Bigla-Lundzer-Gogova Glava line, elevation 1695, and Brigade 36 will attack Mali-Madi in the south. The 21st Brigade will commence its attacks at the north end, from village Dolno Kleshteni then go over Buf in the direction of German and eventually close the escape route to Yugoslavia after it captures the village Rabi in Prespa Region and closes the Kula road

located between the two Prespa lakes. The time for commencing these attacks will be 8 pm on August 10th.

The third phase will commence during the night of August 12th and 13th, 1949 with the transfer of our forces to the Vrba-Preval-Korben line and the infiltration of the Prespa valley with the aim of closing off our enemy's escape route into Albania and Yugoslavia.

The fourth phase will commence during August 14th to 16th with the clean up of the Lake Prespa Peninsula area and Vicho Region.

Two powerful artillery groups will be allocated to support the infantry. The northern group located in Lerin and south of Lerin and the southern group located in Kostur will have all kinds of immobile cannons. The mechanized artillery units, consisting mostly of tanks, will also provide support. The offensive will commence in the morning with our glorious aviation attacking and destroying set enemy targets and continuing with the destruction of enemy artillery and mortar nests. The aviation will also perform reconnaissance flights by air in order to inform us of ongoing enemy developments and take photographs of the current situation on the front. Ninety combat aircraft will be participating in total."

Kozmas paused for a moment, looked down the hall and, pointing with his finger on the map, said:

"At any rate, at the start of the offensive we need to intensify the interaction between our aviation, artillery, infantry and mechanized units. This is especially important during the assault on Polenata and Hill 1685, which Division III will be attacking first while the task of Divisions X, XI and IX will be to prevent enemy forces from escaping to Albania.

You will find details of each phase in the envelopes that you will receive after the meeting. In the Divisional Headquarters of the brigades, regiments and battalions it would be good for the troops and their leaders to study their combat actions and memorize the details of the battlefield.

Gentlemen! Until now the Greek army has never handled such a huge combat force of people, assets and equipment. Thanks to our friends and allies, the United States, whose officers and team of experts under the command of our dear and respected General, Mr. Van Fleet, we are more than ready to exterminate our enemy. We are interested in one thing: victory! There will be no negotiations. Only our weapons will speak. No capitulation. There will only be defeat from which they will never recover!

Gentlemen, it is my honour to tell you that the offensive will commence on August 10th at 5 am."

The hall thundered with applause.

Before Kozmas had a chance to sit down, General Van Fleet stood up and, like a victor parading before an army in formation, stood in front of the map, looked at everyone with a measured look, covered the entire area of Vicho with both his hands and loudly said:

"Well, dear generals, you only have to take two handfuls of space. Two handfuls of space and nothing more! We dressed and fed your army

well and armed it with the best weapons we have. Now you have everything! The most modern aircraft, the most modern cannons, mine throwers, mortars, napalm bombs and bazookas!"

Van Fleet paused for a moment, looked at the audience and continued:

"Being in possession of such weapons should boost your courage but for only five days, gentlemen, in just five days you can put an end to this war. Here, he hit the map with his left hand, "here 90 aircraft will drop their bombs and napalm, hundreds of artillery pieces will thunder and just as many mortars will be dropped. On top of that, nearly 80 thousand troops, assisted by over two hundred tanks and armored cars will be stomping this ground! For no more than five days! Don't take the communists out of the trenches and bunkers, leave them there dead…

You have five days and if you don't destroy the enemy in these five days, adios amigos, we're gone... The American taxpayer spent a lot of money for you and for this war," concluded Van Fleet.

The Great Lie – Chapter 17

The area near the seat of the Democratic Army of Greece's (DAG) General Headquarters and the area in front of the cave and everywhere around it were secure and tightly guarded. It was two o'clock in the morning and the Military Council was gathering for a meeting. Included among it were members of the Military Council, the General Staff and the commanders of major military units deployed in Vicho. Zahariadis was chairing the meeting. Inside, hanging on the front wall was a large map.

In a confident voice of a sure winner, Zahariadis began with his opening speech.

"Great battles are coming to Vicho. Unwilling to admit their defeat, the Monarcho-Fascists are now forced to fight by initiating a major offensive at Vicho because otherwise they will lose 'the eggs and the basket'." This was one of Zahariadis's favourite sayings that he would express whenever someone wanted to undermine him or present him as incapable.

He paused for a moment and looked at his audience. There were shadows of smiles on people's faces with a touch of intense looks. He continued:

"Our enemy is losing the war and the peace. In places where he wanted to show courage and claim victory, he must admit that he was incapable of overpowering the Democratic Army. And precisely for that reason he is forced to come to Vicho. It is now a matter of pressing need, political and military, as well as moral. And therefore whether he wants to or not, he will have to drink from the bitter cup called Vicho. We need to take this to the end; the destruction of Monarcho-Fascism in Vicho which will be the beginning of his end. The Monarcho-Fascists are incapable of carrying out intense and continuous military actions this year not like they did last year - four months of continuous Gramos and Vicho campaigns.

This year all winter long and during the spring we will not allow them to rest. There are all kinds of indications that their morale is low to the final frontier... Now more than ever, military morale will be very low because they are in a state of worry... Here lies one of the most important reasons as to why they will not lead any battles in Gramos this year. They will not again open themselves to significant bleeding or expose themselves to trauma like fear frozen soldiers when they hear the word 'Gramos'.

Based on the above, I came to the following conclusion: despite the poor state of morale the Monarcho-Fascist is forced to lead a major campaign at Vicho. If he does not undertake such a military campaign he will have to accept defeat. We have but one task to accomplish here - destroy him at Vicho. And we will destroy him. To achieve this, it is imperative that we engage him in small battles to further erode his morale. In that regard Gramos gives us fantastic daily examples, but it should be mentioned that the major achievements will be at Vicho. There, with a

strong defense when it is needed, we will force him to bleed to exhaustion. With a firm defense we will hold him back and then with an element of technical reversal we will counterattack.

We also need to acquire more troops. We can do this by providing enhanced education, organizational and political work inside the Monarcho-Fascist army, where events will be taking place because exactly there is one of our most crucial reserves. Anyone who today does not understand this is making a big, a giant mistake. Can anyone imagine what it would be like when, at a critical moment, an entire enemy battalion rebels?

Having a battalion rebel today is not an abstract concept but a possibility. We have many examples of this. A soldier refusing orders to go to battle is a daily occurrence for the simple reason that the soldier is already soaked in blood. He does not want another war. His view is directed towards his home not towards a coffin.

We know what the soldiers thought when they put a time bomb in the luggage of Kotsalu and he was liquidated together with the plane in which he was traveling. They thought that for the duration required to replace him with his deputy they would have 15 to 20 days rest. And that was gain for them. And that is the way the soldiers thought. Why not find hundreds and even thousands of soldiers in Vicho who would try to gain 15 to 20 days of peace, life and a return to their homes? They can be found. Suffice it to say that we will help them.

With a strategic counterattack from all sides, and we do have such abilities, it is okay to believe in the fact that we will firmly hold Gramos and at the right moment, perform a twist on the Monarcho-Fascists.

The enemy will come to Vicho, mainly with Search and Destroy units (LOK) and with a great aviation and artillery force. But, unlike last year, the question now is whether they can endure more than a month of fighting. Meaning, the great battle will have to be settled in 20 to 30 days. That is why we need to be ready all around, militarily, practically, technically, politically, morally and materially. And in fact, we are ready. We anxiously await our enemy. There is a need for intense effort from all of us. We all need to take part in the great battle. We all need to be active. Everyone needs to respond with great honour in the protection of Vicho, accordingly, all without any distinction. We will break the enemy on Vicho and we will not let him pass..."

The last words spoken by Zahariadis aroused the audience into a hand clapping frenzy. Gusias stood by the military map, tapped the map handle several times with his pointer and when the audience calmed down, he began his presentation:

"Comrades, the General Headquarters, in close cooperation with the Military Council, has prepared a plan in defense of Vicho and set the following objectives to be achieved in two phases.

The first phase will provide defense of the free territory in the spirit of the slogan ‘the enemy will not pass Vicho’. In its good judgment, DAG Headquarters, in March of this year, issued an order to build strong fortifications in Mali-Madi, more precisely on the Buchi-Orlovo-Sveti Atanas line (elevation 1,186) continuing on the hills between the villages Kosinets and Labanitsa along the Albanian border. The line continues west of Orlovo establishing a link to Rabatina and Buchi extending up to the rocks above the village Smrdesh.

The aim, at all costs, of this section of the front is to prevent enemy penetration into the village Smrdesh from where - this can only be an unreasonable assumption – the enemy would try and take the Smrdesh-Zhelevo-Psoderi road with military vehicles and tanks.

This will mean cutting the free territory into two parts with disastrous consequences for us. We are well established north of Mali-Madi in the Polenata-Kula-Plati line of hills extending to the Roto-Baro and Iamata line. This is our central front behind which, similarly, we have built strong fortifications in Lisets and its southern approaches and in Moro, Chuka and Iorgova Glava north of Lisets. This is the second defensive line that should ensure free flow of communications and supplies to the front along the road Smrdesh-Zhelevo-Psoderi.

At the north end, at the Yugoslav border, which as you know is now closed, is the chain of hills called Bela Voda. The fortifications here connect the Bigla-Lundzer line to Kulkuturia hill, elevation 1,694, northwest of the village Neret. This is our northern front whose aim is to stop enemy attacks from Lerin. The area west of the road Smrdesh-Zhelevo-Psoderi is not without significance.

Here is our third line of defense whose aim is to protect the approaches to the valley of Prespa. But, comrades, the stated facts are not our main strength. Our main strength is well established in the field and it is very important, and perhaps more important is our fighting spirit and strong belief in victory.

Behind us is the great practical experience that we gained from last year's struggles. The Gramos retake in April, the successful struggles in Mali-Madi in September, the destruction of the 22nd enemy brigade, the deep penetration behind our opponent and the capture of the strongly defended cities Karditsa-Karpenisi-Negush, the reorganization of our troops, the improvement of our clothes, food and weapons supplies. These are all factors that will ensure our victory.

In regards to the upcoming battle for Vicho we will need about twenty days to endure the enemy blow. We will need to nail him down at his starting position and force him to lead positional warfare during which, with our defensive-offensive tactics, we will deal him a huge blow in manpower, material and technical losses which will break his morale, then when we are good and ready we will go on the attack.

I visited all our positions. I visited and spoke with all the commanders of the larger units and with some commanders of the smaller units. I found the entire sector to be ready. I want to underline with acknowledgement that there is not a dot anywhere that is not under our watchful eye. Everything that needs to be seen from the bunker gun hole is at the centre of our view. When I observed the terrain and everything that is there, I had a serious thought - is it possible for anyone living to pass unnoticed? Is it possible to break such a defense as this? Is it possible for even a bird to fly unnoticed? The experience in Gramos has taught us how to defend ourselves, how every hill, how every stone and boulder, every corner, are literally, to make a point... the Vicho sector, comrades, is a large fortress.

It is now up to all the command units, from the smallest to largest, to make this fortress invincible. We have all the opportunities here to break the enemy and, at the appropriate moment, switch to a counter offensive," concluded Gusias confidently, taking a sip of water from his glass he asked: "Are there any questions?"

"Comrades," replied Bardzotas, Political Commissar of General Headquarters, "Zahariadis's report is sufficient guarantee of our victory. Any question you pose now would take valuable time…"

Gusias, who was still standing beside the operational map, spoke:

"I have only presented the actual state of our defense. But I have the impression, comrades, that we haven't sufficiently analyzed all possibilities from where the enemy may strike. According to my observations and assessment, the most likely place our opponent will first attack is Bela Voda, elevation 2,156, from the direction of Lerin in order, of course, to break down our defense of Prespa. This is the shortest route to Prespa. Here," Gusias hit the map with his fist, "this is where our opponent will close the road to stop us from our eventual departure..."

"Will this be a scheduled departure?" asked the XIV Brigade commander in charge of the defense line Lundzer-Bigla-Bela Voda.

"Of course not, but..." replied Gusias as they all noticed his chin trembling.

"Continue!" requested Zahariadis.

"Yes. Comrades, the opponent will consider whether to attack here or to target other sectors. According to my thinking, I came to the conclusion that because the Mali-Madi sector would be a hard nut to crack for the opponent and because we made an impenetrable defensive wall at Bela Voda, which no doubt would be further from the opponent's consideration, then the question to ask is 'where will he strike?'

Take a look," continued Gusias covering that part of the map with his palm, "here is Bigla and Lundzer. It is not difficult to see that this is the middle, the middle between Mali-Madi and Bela Voda. Here," Gusias raised his voice and hit the map with his hand, "he will attack exactly here! Why exactly here?! Because if he breaks through the Bigla defense, where we have situated a Positional Battalion, think of our battalion, composed

of experienced and hardened fighters, all lost, then the loss of this defense will introduce tanks and they will occupy the Lerin-Psoderi-Zhelevo road..."

When Gusias spoke about Lerin, the audience noticed that he was losing his voice. For him Lerin was a nightmare and the mere mention of that name gave him chills. He was one of the architects of the Lerin battle in which DAG suffered catastrophic losses. The approach to Lerin was a slaughter house, a suicide mission with horrific consequences.

"Bigla-Lundzer, elevation 1,922," Gusias continued, "needs to become the new strong fortress. The opponent needs to be made to bleed here. I repeat, if our opponent breaks through Bigla and Lundzer then he will break our entire defense. Therefore we should devote most of our attention…"

"And Lisets? What about Lisets hill?" interrupted the commander of Division X.

"Lisets? Look at the map," suggested Gusias. "Do you see how far it is from the first line of defense? There are well established defenses before Lisets located on the hills in the Plati-Kulata-Roto-Polenata-Baro-Iamata line and south to Mali-Madi…"

Zahariadis halted Gusias's explanation, slowly stood up, turned to the map and, after tapping it with his finger, began to count:

"We need to break the enemy here, here, here and here. And you, why do you worry so much about Lisets, what about Lisets?"

"I comrades," the Division X Commander straightened himself, "do not know all the hills from the map which comrade Zahariadis just pointed out, but every hill and brook, stone and boulder I have traveled and I know them by sight, I have passed over them on foot. It is very important for our defense, I would say most important, to know where our opponent will attack and exactly why there…"

"Here, here, here and here," Zahariadis again tapped the map with his finger.

"I don't doubt you, but why there?" asked the Division X Commander. "My thinking is that he would attack at the centre but his main goal will be to take Lisets. He will do everything to take Lisets. And if he succeeds in taking it he will have us in his palm. The entire region is visible from the top of Lisets. He who holds Lisets under his control holds everything around it…"

"That is your opinion," interrupted Gusias, "you've had your say and we understand your concerns. So, comrades, we have a very strong defense, that is why it will be very hard for our opponent to take that damn Lisets. Isn't that right?"

"Maybe it's like that," continued the Division X Commander, "but I still say Lisets is the key. If Lisets falls then our entire solid defense will fall, comrades and…"

Zahariadis interrupted before the commander could finish what he was saying.

"Comrades, in these trying days we don't need faintheartedness. Are there any more questions and opinions?"

There were no more questions and no one answered the questions already asked.

The Great Lie – Chapter 18

Last year, all through the fall, at the foothill of Lisets, opposite the village Kolomladi, in the thickest clump of old oak trees, secretly at night, around one hundred trusted villagers from the surrounding villages, in shifts and under the leadership of Risto, dug a large network of bunkers with branching tunnels.

Again during the night for months, caravans of horses and mules driven by old women and men, transported weapons, ammunition, clothing and food from warehouses in Rula, Trnava and Oshchima and filled the tunnels in Lisets.

The approaches to the tunnels were well guarded by crippled fighters brought there from the hospitals in Albania and Yugoslavia. Their commander was also crippled.

On the other side of the road, between Dolna Statitsa and Kolomladi, under the shade of a branching walnut tree was a water spring. A man kneeling on his one knee filled his palm with water and splashed it on his face. Risto got closer, and before removing his backpack from his shoulder, he greeted the man.

"Good day" said Risto.

The man raised his head and looked at Risto.

"Good day" he answered and continued to look at Risto with a surprised look in his face. "Do we know each other or am I wrong?" the man spoke slowly without taking his eyes off Risto's face. "You look familiar… Wait… the moustache… I used to know someone with a fancy moustache… like yours… is that… is that you Risto?!"

"Yes it is me…" answered Risto.

They hugged and in their long and tight embrace memories began to unfold…

"Do you remember, Risto, you carrying me when I was wounded at Ivan Mountain? I am in your debt. You saved my life." said the man.

They were in the same unit fighting the Italians in 1940 at the Albanian front during the Greek-Italian war.

"And you Stoian, do you remember looking after me at the prison camp when the Greek gendarmes beat me to pulp?" replied Risto.

A year after the war ended, in gratitude for fighting to save Greece from the Fascists at the Albanian front, the heroic fighters were sent to prison at the concentration camps on the island Ai Strati. Then after the coronation of king Konstandinos to the Greek Royal Throne, the sick, the invalid and the adolescent prisoners were amnestied. Among them were Risto and Stoian.

They sat down. Risto noticed that Stoian's left sleeve was empty. Pointing at it with his eyes, Risto asked: "And that?"

"That is my reminder of last year…" replied Stoian.

"Where?" inquired Risto.

“At Gramos… more precisely at Gorisha… yes…” Stoian exhaled noisily a long sigh. “When they released us from the prison camps, I didn’t go home. Ever since the police in Kostur interviewed me and gave me a mandatory order to report to them every third day, I left the city, and during the night, I took the road to the mountains, to the Partisans.

There too they asked me many questions and kept me under watch. They didn’t believe my story, and here I thought they would welcome me with open arms. I guess they finally realized I was not the person who they thought I was, the heavy machinegun gunner they were looking for, so they gave me a job to lead horses.

I led horses for a long time sometimes loaded with ammunition, other times with food, pots, caldrons and sometimes I held the horses steady so that the unit commanders can get on them.

One night, the second platoon had returned from battle during which they had seized a heavy machine gun. So now the unit had a heavy machinegun but not a gunner. The unit commander admired the big gun and caressed it with both hands, complaining: “Ah, dam, now if I only had a gunner!”

“I approach him and quietly asked: ‘Comrade Commander, will you allow me?’ He looked at me menacingly, took out his pistol and yelled: ‘If you wreck it I will kill you!’

‘Don’t worry’ I said quietly, kneeled down, lay my coat on the ground and, like a miracle, rapidly dismantled the entire machinegun into pieces. I then took my shirt off and with it I cleaned all the parts and rapidly put the pieces back together. And from that day forward the commander took away my horse strap, promoted me to machinegun gunner and hurried to inform high command that he now had a heavy machinegun and a smart gunner. My promotion was approved and I was transferred to Gramos.

We loaded the heavy gun on a horse and ten of us left that evening. They sent us to a battle position at Kopanche. There were bunkers there to the left and to the right everywhere with five, six and even more rows of thick logs. They were well camouflaged. It was a well established defense line spanning along Sveti Ilia, Gorusha and Krusha hills and beyond up to the Albanian border.

On June 16th, last year, before dawn, we were attacked by airplanes. They pounded us for twenty minutes and just as they left we came under cannon fire. They pounded us at a fast rate in rapid fire volleys. The artillery barrage lasted thirty five minutes and just as they were done, we were attacked by the infantry. During the course of that day we repelled four attacks. By the evening, before sunset, it was all quiet again.

Orders came from Command to repair the damaged bunkers and trenches. In the night we were again pounded by cannon fire. In the morning, precisely at 5 o’clock, the airplanes came back and pounded us again, same as the previous day. By the afternoon we were forced to withdraw to the second line of defense at Sveti Ilia and Krusha.

They did this everyday until June 22nd but could not remove us. That day the airplanes came shortly before noon. They did not drop bombs or fire on us with their machine guns. First they flew low then high and we could see barrels being dropped from not too high above our positions which exploded about fifty to a hundred meters above us. Fire and flames fell on us. Everything began to burn. Everything burned, the ground, the trees, the rocks, the mountain, we were burning too… Those people, who unfortunately got splashed by this never before seen burning fluid, caught fire and burned like candles.

There was squealing, screaming and many sounds of horror as people rushed out of the trenches looking to the sky and begging for help. All you could see are flames running at you screaming and begging for help, flames that you had to put out with your bare hands?! We fought the flames all day, then, at night, under the light of a full moon, we buried the burned corpses in mass graves.

The aircraft attacked us in this manner, with that damn fire, several more times, but we quickly learned we could avoid being burned by burying ourselves deep into the ground. We dug tunnels in the bunkers and trenches and before the barrels fell we hid underground like moles.

It is one thing to see a cut tree falling down and another to see it burning. And how does a man fall when he is shot compared to being burned? This is something that no one should never even think about never mind see it…

And as long as we were burning, our opponent, step by step, came closer, about 100 to 200 meters bellow us and dug himself in. Perhaps that was the reason why the aircraft stopped dropping barrels on us, and the cannons began firing behind our positions.

Suddenly there was silence, no cannon shelling, not even a bullet was fired. There was no movement at all, not from our side and not from theirs. We waited patiently in silence. Then the silence was broken by the roar of airplanes. There were six of them and flew in three's. The first three made a circle above us and didn't drop anything, not even a burst of machinegun fire. The other three did the same.

They kept circling above but we didn't dare fire at them in fear of uncovering our exact positions. I don't know how many times the aircraft circled but suddenly the sky was filled with colourful leafs of paper. There was no wind to blow them so the clouds of paper fell directly on top of us. The sun was shaded and the earth became covered with paper. I took a few and began to read:

'Communists, bandits surrender! Tito has come to our side. There is no salvation for you Slavo-Macedonians! Surrender! Tito gave you up! Stalin and Tito had a fight! Tito has come to the American and English side! Tito has closed the border! Tito is our Ally now! You are all alone! Gramos is done! Don't expect any help from Tito! You will die of hunger!'

The entire front, all combat positions were covered with leaflets like this… It was June 29th. They dropped the same leaflets the next day and several days after that… These leaflets had the effect of large and scary bombs falling… They were an assault on our spirit, our faith and our hopes… They made our effort seem fruitless and empty, they seized our soul, torn our hopes apart and killed our dreams. This is how I felt and so did many Macedonians… Most of us were at the north-eastern front… The political commissars kept telling us that the leaflets were only enemy propaganda but still that didn't help ease our fears.

The front was peaceful for three days and during those three days our opponents on the other side ridiculed us and profanely swore at us.

One day the political commissars were invited to go to high command. They returned late at night and explained to us that one of the communist party information bureaus in power, under Soviet Union control, accused Tito of not following Informburo rules, as the others did, so it sent him a message, a letter, asking him to reconsider and leave things to comrade Stalin because comrade Stalin knows best and for Tito not to think himself smarter than Stalin.

Tito replied to this by saying he will do as he pleases. In other words, Tito became disobedient and because of this the advanced and progressive communist and workers' parties, shunned him and called on the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to fight against him and his associates.

The commissar also told us that the Communist Party of Greece (CPG) on account that today it is leading a merciless struggle against Anglo-American imperialism, silently agrees with Stalin, and will openly state its position under better conditions. That's why the Party is inviting all fighters to fight more vigorously to break the enemy at Gramos. That's when we learned that the enemy Division XV, considered to be elite, after six days and nights of un-relentless bitter fighting, despite the major air and artillery support, failed to break us at the northern front and close the door to the Albanian border.

On August 2nd, after forty-one days of lying in trenches in a defensive position, I returned to the starting point and saw action after the fall of Kleftis Hill at the south end of the front. Our east side resiliently held Sveti Ilia, Gorusha, Krusha, Bel Kamen and Kula on top of the village Koteltse for forty-five days and nights.

In the course of the heavy fighting for every inch of ground, few of the fighters thought as to why Tito and Stalin had a fight. But the worm of doubt began to eat away, scratch and dig deep. And the planes, in addition to dropping bombs, continued to drop leaflets inviting us to surrender, continuously reminding us of what awaits us because of what Tito did.

One morning, at the top of the hill, our side opened a white cloth on which written with large red letters was the message:

‘Your leaflets are printed on thick and hard paper. Print them on thinner and softer paper so that it would be easier for us to wipe our asses with!’”

Stoian stopped talking. He felt like he was loosing his voice. The silence was broken by Risto who asked: “And what happened next?”

“The aircraft continued to fly and drop rockets and bombs on our bunkers and trenches and…” Stoian moved his arm and shook his empty sleeve “a piece of a bomb like a knife…” he then pointed with his eyes at the empty sleeve. During the silence that followed the men broke eye contact, immobile and dazed they silently thought about their bitter experience in which they left part of themselves and wondered where all this was going to take them. Stoian took a deep puff from his cigarette made from strong and thickly cut tobacco twisted in a paper ripped out of a newspaper, and began a long stretched out caught.

“The tobacco is no good for you” said Risto with a sad voice while gently tapping Stoian’s back.

Stoian spit out after he coughed and added: “Up there in the tunnels” pointing with his head at the foot of the mountain “I have loads of it in paper bags but it’s too weak for me. It’s not just plain tobacco. It is beautifully rolled up in thin paper without markings. You smoke it and nothing. Only smoke. I take the cigarettes up to the positions at night along with other provisions.”

“In paper bags you said?” Risto asked with a surprise in his voice. “And do you have any empty paper bags?”

“Piles of them…” answered Stoian.

“What do you do with them?” asked Risto.

“I burn them” replied Stoian indifferently. “I always burn them. By order, I have been ordered to do so. I have a written order on which it clearly says ‘the sacks from sugar, rice and all other papers must be burned to leave no trace of them…’ A few days ago a man from Military Intelligence came here, allegedly to inspect the place, and when he saw a whole bunch of empty bags of paper, he threatened me with court martial. ‘Did you know’ he said to me ‘you jack ass, you villager’ yelling at me ‘if the enemy came in possession of these bags, he would discover our military secrets?’ After that he opened a great big book and wrote an order for me and in accordance with that directive I had to order my people to burn the papers…”

“And what about up there at the positions how do you deliver the rice, sugar, flower, cigarettes?” asked Risto.

“In bags… I load them on donkeys and horses, but mostly on the backs of the village men and women from the surrounding villages…” answered Stoian with a heavy, long and protracted sigh. “I have to load them on the backs of old men and women like on beasts of burden and send them uphill to way up there.” Stoian pointed in the direction of the surrounding hills with his good arm.

"Self composed they go up quietly and carry the load, along with their broken souls, to the destination. I feel like crying when I look at them. The poor people, on their backs they carry crates of ammunition, of food, and when they return they carry back wounded.

They carried me the same way to the main hospital in Gramos where they amputated part of my arm and later they amputated the rest of my arm at the hospital in Elbasan, a reminder of my fate… When my wound was closed they took me to Suk. And there, what can I tell you! In the barracks there were people recovering, crippled, blind, deaf, mute, they were all our people, there were also epileptics, crazy people, informants and some sly and sneaky people." Stoian stopped talking for a moment, looked around and, shortly afterwards, whispered: "There was also one among them from the 2nd Bureau…"

"I didn't hear you." said Risto and leaned his ear towards Stoian. "What did you say?"

"They say, Risto, the walls have years… and here even the mountains have ears, and that's why I am whispering to you, understand?" replied Stoian.

"Of course, I understand" said Risto, raised his eyebrows and closed his mouth.

"I thought you should know…" replied Stoian, spit on the side and continued. "At Suk, once a week they brought recovering patients by truck from the hospitals for a short rest and upon return they took them to the battle lines. We, the ones with one leg, one arm, one eye, mute, deaf, were asking to also return to the formations but the camp commander, some Thessalian, also with one leg, was telling us there is no more formations for us.

So, we waited there with our idle time being filled with lectures about what Marx said, what Lenin did in Russia but mostly about Stalin. Our teacher was a former long time prisoner from Rumeli. He wore glasses with thick lenses and his hearing was not very good. People said that he studied in Moscow with Zahariadis and that he was imprisoned by the dictator Metaxas. They said he was in Bulkesh and that many became political commissars under his tutelage. But he was not just our teacher. In time we found out that the man established an entire network of spies, informants, whistle-blowers and other undesirables with whose help he placed us all in his book and pegged some of us as nationalists, other as chauvinists, opportunists, autonomists, Titoists…

The last two categories were considered the most dangerous. So, we, the Macedonians were the most dangerous. But that was not all, not enough for him. He infiltrated our group with a spy and a provocateur. They too were our people. We quickly uncovered the spy and brought him into line. He told us about the book. And look what happened. That book began to work on our minds. Every time we came near the man, day or

night, all we could think about was which one has he fingered now? Which one has he labeled autonomist or Titoist, or both…"

"And the spy?" inquired Risto.

"The poor guy slipped on a watermelon peel and broke his neck. We all felt sorry for him… So I tell you, we all began to wonder how we can get our hands on that book. We thought about it but nothing good came of it. Then one day one of the so called 'marked man' spoke up: 'brothers, I can see that you have heads on your shoulders but I have to wonder what they're filled with, straw or hay'. So I casually remarked… why don't we outfox the bugger…? Let's do it! I will go inside the clinic and take an alcohol bottle. You know the man has a passion for drinking? I have seen him mix half a glass of alcohol with half a glass of water. At knight when he finishes making notes he will drink and pass out. Without him knowing, I will leave the bottle on his table. I will be damned if he does not plaster himself. Then, quietly I will enter and finish the job. Smart, don't you think?"

Stoian took a puff from his cigarette, spit after coughing and coninued:

"We were not sure if it was a smart thing to do, but we accepted it because our fellow countryman often entered the storehouse unnoticed and returned with pockets full of the type of food the chiefs of staff ate.

The next morning, after waking up, the public announcement speakers went silent for a moment. The blazing songs praising the struggle were finally interrupted for an announcement from the commander: "Προσοχη! Προσοχη! Αμεσος ολοι στην πλατεια!" (Attention! Attention! Everyone report to the square immediately!)

"We line-up. Those without legs were wheeled there on wheel chairs. We stood there and waited. Fifteen minutes later the commander and the teacher who taught us about Marx, Lenin and Stalin and fingered us in his notebook, arrived. They frowned, looked hostile and had malice in their eyes. They climbed on the stage.

"Comrade fighters…" began the commander, but at the same moment the teacher pushed his way in front of him, all red from anger and malice, swung his right arm, pulled out a wrapped newspaper from under his arm, quickly unwrapped it with his trembling hands and low and behold, the book fell out of it on the floor!

With his finger pointing to the book on the floor the teacher, like a crowing crow, yelled out with a pounding voice that worked its way up from his neck: "The person that defecated in my book report here immediately!"

"At that moment everyone thundered with a loud and elongated laugh. Unfortunately our laughing made things worst. Days afterwards they called us in, one by one, at the chief's office at headquarters. They interrogated us, threatened us with court-martial and took away our privileges. At the end we endured that too.

After the battles for Negush, Voden and Lerin an order was issued recommending to those who wanted to 'volunteer' for various behind the scenes services to signup.

At the end of May the trucks came and everyone left except those with no legs, the blind and the mad. All others, some missing two or three fingers, some missing hands, arms, a leg, an eye, those who were deaf or half deaf, were all free to go. A little later in May the trucks came again and during the night took us to Breznitsa. There we received military deployment orders. They sent me here and appointed me commander of the storehouses…" concluded Stoian.

"And what happened to the provocateur?" asked Risto.

"He came with us. He sat at the end on the truck. The truck took a curve too fast and he, the poor man, was not hanging on very tight, and fell off into an abyss and disappeared in the darkness. We yelled at the driver to stop but he could not hear us and continued to drive. Later, when we asked why he did not stop, he said he did not hear us, the engine of the old American truck was too loud.

Yes… That's that brother. A bit of carelessness and you are swallowed by the abyss. What a misfortune… He was one of ours too, that idiot… a sly dishonest fellow.

Sown in the pocket of his backpack we found the names of thirty of our boys written on a list. They were all accused of planning to escape to Yugoslavia. And you know what happens to those accused of desertion? They get buried under a wall…" concluded Stoian.

While Risto listened to Stoian telling his story, he kept wondering what happened to the paper bags, so he asked again: "What do they do with the paper bags up there?"

"I don't know what they do with them up there, but I know what I need to do with them down here when they are empty… I burn them… Those are the orders. And why are you so interested in the paper bags?" asked Stoian.

"Well… what can I say." responded Risto.

"So direct… so open." replied Stoian.

"Listen, Stoian… My work involves digging trenches and building bunkers." remarked Risto.

"Oh, so that means you are in command of the women?" mockingly replied Stoian.

"Not me, I am not in command of the women. Others are in charge of them." answered Risto.

"Okay then, you are not in command but you do tell them how to dig and how to carry logs from the forest." jokingly remarked Stoian.

"Something like that…" answered Risto.

"And…" inquired Stoian.

"And those who don't know how to write, I write letters for them when they want to send a letter to their friends and relatives in the units, but

mostly to their children in the [Eastern European] countries. But…" paused Risto.

"But what?" inquired Stoian.

"There is no paper to write on…" replied Risto with a complaining tone of voice.

"I don't have that kind of paper in my storehouses." answered Stoian.

"I am not asking you for paper from the storehouses…" remarked Risto.

"Ah, you want the paper from the bags?" commented Stoian.

"Yes. Can I have it?" asked Risto.

"To take with you? Go ahead" replied Stoian "but remember; I saw nothing, I heard nothing!"

"Me too Stoian…" added Risto.

They both looked into each others eyes and a barely visible smile appeared on their faces.

The Great Lie – Chapter 19

Since then, Risto, along with some of the women, regularly, secretly visited the bunker storehouses and kitchens. Secretly during the night, before they were burned, they collected all the paper bags in a hurry, placed them into a single bag and hid them. During the day, when they were resting from the night's work of carrying logs, Risto fetched the bags and one by one, placing them on a flat surface, smoothed them out removing all wrinkles.

Flattened out he folded the bags and with his dagger, which he always carried on his belt, cut them into straight, rectangular pieces as wide as his hand. He then blew off the dust, placed them on top of one another and put a stone on top to keep them flat.

Then during rest time, at lunch or at dinner, the women would gather around Risto and tell him their problems and pains and beg him to give them a larger piece of paper so that they could write a longer letter with many words. When he did, he cut the paper from the scraps because he knew they couldn't write. They were illiterate.

But they took the paper anyway, kept it in their hands and caressed it on their knees, just as they would caress their children who were sent to the [Eastern European] countries. They caressed the paper because on it they wanted to send their children their love and warmth and hope that soon they would receive the letter, along with their love, wishes and prayers.

Every day the women begged Risto to write a letter for them, thanked him and every day kept asking when they would receive a reply.

"Oh, Risto, God bless you, why don't you write a letter to my Paskal," she said and then continued:

"Paskal, my dear son, my beloved child, my light, my dewy May flower..." Angelina whispered warm words, words of affection, hopeful words, repeating them again and again…

With tears in her eyes she looked far away at the hills, at the forest, into the sky, at the clouds, at the birds and caressing the grass and the flowers by her legs, she lifted her head, looked at Risto's face, moved closer and looked at the paper to see how much space was left. Her face became sad and her wrinkles filled with tears when Risto said: "There is no more space…"

"How can that be Risto?" she asked, surprised. "Yesterday I told you more and the paper was smaller. Please just a little bit more, please write a little bit more right here at the corner so it won't be empty and, here on this side write, make a cross like a prayer to God to protect my Paskal, my dear boy, my happiness, my most beloved… my falcon, my eagle, my strength… Here, Risto," she touched the edge of the paper and with tears in her eyes and a choked up voice continued: "Write something from

yourself, tell him to be good and to study hard… write… and when you finish, let me kiss the letter…"

The woman undid her black kerchief and covered her crying face with it. Her shoulders trembled from her crying. She got up quietly and walked away and from the distance she thanked Risto: "May God bless you with good health and peace, Risto… Thank you and be well…"

"Who is next?" Risto asked without raising his head.

"I am..." said the woman.

"Forgive me, but I don't know your name..." replied Risto.

"Stoia. My name is Stoia. I was named after my grandfather Stoian. My oldest son's name is Traiko, named after my father's grandfather. My daughter's name is Traianka, she was named after my mother. My second son's name is Trpo, he was named after his uncle, and my husband's name is Zhivko… Everything comes from grandfather and grandmother and from father and mother. And that way we are Stoianovtsi, Traikovtsi, Trpovtsi, Zhivkovtsi… And after the last war we adopted some new names like Slobodanka, Pobeda, Slobodan, Mirka… And after this war? Maybe there will be a Traiko and a Traianka, a Stoian and a Stoianka to give birth, so that our roots are not lost… What names will there be, only God knows… There are not many Stoianovtsi, Traikovtsi, Zhivkovtsi, Trpovtsi left in our village now… Some left their bones at Gramos, some at Mali-Madi, some at Voden, some at Lerin. A total of forty-eight dead up to now and I have no idea how many wounded and crippled. Everyone young is dead… gone… These are bad times… Is this our fate, is this what has been written for us?" Risto's hand began to shake. A muscle in his right cheek began to quiver. His forehead began to wrinkle. His throat contracted. His stare was pointed somewhere far, far away. He was silent…

"Risto, are you listening to me?" asked Stoianka.

"Yes, I…" replied Risto with a choked up voice.

"Oh, not today… We will write mine tomorrow then," said Stoianka and left.

"Who is next?" asked Risto after he composed himself.

Lina sat beside him and took out a piece of paper from her chest. It was folded in four. The yellowed paper shook in her hand as she extended it to Risto and said: "That's all I could get my hands on. The others were quicker than me… The women were ripping from the bags, but the commissar, who forgot his briefcase in front of the bunker, got annoyed with them, and began to yell and chase them… When I saw all those pencils neatly arranged in his briefcase, I took one. Here it is…" She reached into her chest and pulled it out.

Risto, showing her with his facial expressions that he was not happy, shook his moustache and with reproach in his voice said: "So you are the one who stole the commissar's pencil?"

"I hope nothing bad comes from this, please don't talk like that Risto, I took just one pencil… And why does he need so many pencils anyway?

Do you think he is smarter than you? He had so many in his leather briefcase and they were lined up like machine gun cartridges… Here, take the pencil, you need it more than him. He only struts around with those pencils and who knows what he writes about us to those above him." She stopped talking for a moment, looked into his eyes and with an inquiring glance, whispered:

"Don't look at me like that… So I took the pencil and what, the world fell apart? I did not steal it… I took it. If I stole it I wouldn't have told you… The women had had an eye open for the commissar's pencils for a long time. They were saying why does he need so many pencils? Our Risto has only one and that is enough to write all our letters. Isn't that right Risto?

I didn't take the pencil for myself, I took it for the women, for you, to write our letters. They deserve to have a pencil like that. That's what I thought and said to myself, 'I will give Risto the pencil'. Here, take it and stop frowning at me…"

Risto looked at her harshly and threatened her with his finger and after a long silence, asked: "What do you want me to write?"

"First write that," she spread her hand wide open and began to list on her fingers one by one, "I wish them to be well and I am hopeful that they are alive and in good health, I love them very much, my love for them is great, greater, I warmly kiss them on the mouth, cheeks and eyes and I want them to be clean and beautiful in body, spirit and mind, I want them to be happy and cheerful as the spring is joyous and merry, to be blessed with peace and kindness, to be fair and merciful, to have understanding for all, to not be envious or jealous, to not want power over others, to not be blind to evil, to love everyone and to be blessed... May the sun shine on them, may God protect them… may they always be safe and protected... They are my eyes…

Tell them not to forget their mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, their numerous relatives, our Christian Orthodox faith, our blue sky, green meadows, forests, our home, vineyards and fields, and to look at the world before them with wide open eyes.

Tell them to believe in God and to pray to God for the wellbeing of everyone. Tell them not to forget to cross themselves and to be good, smart, brave, proud and without fear of looking into people's eyes…

Tell them not to forget our songs and dances and that they are always in my thoughts, which fly towards them and nothing can prevent them from getting there, not the wind, nor the clouds, nor lightning, nor thunder. Tell them that my soul hurts and aches for them when I think of them and that my concern for them is great... I want them to return to me as soon as possible...."

She paused and looked far into the distance as if looking for her children there.

“Ah, if only I was a bird I would fly there to see them… And here in my chest I have a great big lump, here it brews in me and torments me, the sorrow is biting my insides, the pain is eating away in me, the anguish is poisoning me… with tears in my eyes I beg God to keep them safe and to return them to me, to fill my arms with them… they are my dreams, I dream about them and they appear in my dreams, they keep me company in my thoughts… The heart can’t keep silent when we are separated like this and they are gone so far away in unknown alien lands… can the mind be darkened and the thoughts be frozen…? Can they?

Let them be alive and well and clean like a tear, in body, spirit and mind… just let them be alive and well… a mother will endure… a mother will always endure like a stone, a boulder, or a mountain endures… each with their own problems… with their own pain…”

Her words started to come out broken from her lips. Her voice became quieter resembling the fluttering of trembling leaves. She paused and to Risto it seemed like her voice just died and her breathing come to an end. Inquiringly Risto looked at her face and realized that everything in her had turned upside down, she was covered by a shadow of immense sadness and depression.

She moved and leaned her chin on her stiff and hardened hands marred with premature wrinkles and speechlessly stared ahead. Her stare pleadingly flew downhill in search, searching, shifting and probing, greedily pressing into the cracks of time and returning disappointed. She let out a long and deep sigh, waved her hand as if chasing away a bad thought, moved her head slowly and let her eyes relax. There was a barely visible gentle smile beaming from her eyes into her brightened face. She spread her arms as if wanting to hug someone, but to Risto it seemed like she was hugging her children sitting on her lap. She remained that way for a moment and then, after taking a long and peaceful sigh, she crossed her arms, lifted up her eyes towards heaven, and in a humble quiet voice she recited a warm prayer.

Risto stirred with his head, looked at the piece of paper, turned it several times and said: “And you think everything you said I can put in this little piece of paper?”

“Yes Risto, it can be done, why not?” she answered.

“How can I accommodate so many words that you told me?” inquired Risto.

“Well, Risto, then don’t write words…” she replied.

“Not write words? What then should I write? Words are written in a letter because words speak… What kind of a letter would it be if it had no words? Words my dear woman, words speak…” added Risto.

“So it is… words speak, but you don’t need to write words…” she replied.

“So then, what should I write?” asked Risto.

“Write a flower, an eye, a tear, a bird, a heart…” replied the woman.

Risto wrote exactly what Lina told him.

"Okay. Here is a flower, an eye, a tear, a bird and a heart. I wrote them…" answered Risto.

"Let me see them," she said and took the piece of paper, looked at it, and a hidden smile appeared in her eyes. "Not like this, not like this, write a flower… write a flower, like that, like the one that grows by your feet… Do you see it?" replied the woman.

"Do you mean I should draw a flower?" inquired Risto.

"Yes, like that… Did you write it? Good, but make the leaves a little longer… Now write an eye… Here, write my eye… Under the eye now write a tear, my tear that fell and beside it write a bird… write a bird with an open beak and open wings… Did you write it? Now write a heart… write a heart… and under it a drop…" ordered the woman, but before she could finish talking a painful sigh and a moan cut off her voice, tears filled her eyes, overflowed and glistened like pearls on her long, thick dark eyelashes...

She bowed her head down and stared at her crossed hands lying in her lap. The shaking of a leaf in a tree was loud, the buzzing of a bee flying around a flower was noisy, the water running down the brook was thundering… the wind became wicked, infuriating and started howling, the sky went dark, the roads and highways became narrow and screams were pouring, flooding the valleys, a blunt blow to the plough pushed it further into the ground, a crow crowed on the crest of the oak tree… silent whimpers, distant shouts and pleading cries…

Lina wiped the hanging tear, searched in her chest, took out a crumpled up piece of paper and, extending it to Risto, said: "Now put in this…"

"And what is this?" asked Risto.

"It is, how they say… It is the place where their father lives. There the way it is written, lives their father. So they can write him a letter, but with words… Put it inside and fold it like you fold all the letters and throw it over there in the bags… The women said the man from the big post is coming today…" replied the woman.

It is like this every day, at midday, under the thunderous roar of aircraft, under the thick shadows of the beech trees, Risto writes the letters and adds more from himself than they tell him. He knows their wishes, their great and immense pain and love for their children, their concern and care and the hundreds of doubts they have and questions they want to ask.

He knows what words will make them secretly smile and which ones will make them sigh a long sigh and remove their black kerchiefs and wipe their tears with its corner. He knows when they lose their voice and how long it takes before it comes back and before they can say more kind and gentle words…

He knows the secrets that hide in their hearts and thoughts, he comforts them, he reassures them and he implores them not to worry so much, to be calm and to hope and believe… He knows how a woman will speak to her

child or children and what words she will use to express her love and concern, what prayers and wishes and how to end the letter.

From himself Risto adds that they should be good and study hard, behave and appreciate the mothers who care for them very much.

And when there are no replies to the letters, Risto tells the worried and anxious women: “What do you think; those countries that your children were sent to are close by? Believe me, it is a long road from here to there with many bridges and it takes a long time to get there. These countries are far, very, very far…”

The Great Lie – Chapter 20

The “big post”, that’s what the women from the villages who dug trenches and built bunkers called the courier service that delivered letters. In a desolate old house in the village, Vineni, three officials from the Censorship Service were discussing a letter on which a man’s address in Detroit, Ohio, United States of America was found. But what attracted their attention most was the drawing of a flower, an eye, a tear and a bird.

“The drawing seems very strange. This is the first time I have seen a letter drawing. It could have been written with words and a flower drawn on top, but an eye, a tear and a bird; those carry a lot of human feelings. But only drawings… It really looks very strange,” said the first official.

“So? Is this the only time we’ve had such an incident? No, that’s why we are here, to uncover such phenomena,” said the second official.

“As I understand it, it seems to me that there is something hidden in the drawing,” said the third official.

“I agree with you that the flower, the eye, the tear and the bird have hidden symbolism. But what? Can human feelings be expressed through them?” asked the first official.

“It is possible, but… Let’s take the flower for example,” said the second official.

“Perhaps through it the writer wants to express his hope, love, kindness, joy, happiness and many other wishes...” said the third official.

“Well, can the flower symbolize something else? For example flowers like this grow in such and such a place. And in those places people now dig trenches and build bunkers. In other words it identifies a specific location where something is being done, but what is done, for now, remains a mystery. What other things can the flower symbolize? Besides its basic function to convey something, it symbolizes wilting or evil… It may mean delivering news that many lives were lost, as the saying goes ‘the flower of youth is lost’, in other words; they died in their prime… Comrades, pay attention… There is hidden meaning in the drawing of the flower! Now let’s take the eye. The flower is an indication of the location and the eye sees what is happening there. Events are seen, recorded and memorized. It makes sense right?” asked the first official.

“So, the eye together with the flower is spying!” concluded the second official.

“Yes, comrades, spying!” agreed the first official.

“And the tear?” asked the third official.

“Yes, the tear, comrades, symbolizes pain, sorrow or perhaps joy… But in this case the tear may mean great losses, crying, suffering, and misfortune, a reflection of disappointment, lack of fighting spirit, low morale, mistrust and lack of confidence in our struggle… Look at the drawing of the bird. What do you see?” asked the first official.

“An open beak and spread wings,” said the second official.

“Wings spread wide means information must be delivered in a hurry and the open beak means reveal all locations identified by the flower, everything the eye sees and what the tear says. And where should all this information be sent? Of course to America,” said the first official.

“That is confirmed by the address written below the drawing…” said the third official.

“It is obvious, comrades… We have a case of espionage…” said the second official.

Located two houses over was the headquarters of the Military Security and Intelligence Bureau known as A2. It is the former service which the Greek communists formed in Bulkes with aims of not only maintaining order there, but above all keeping an eye on the refugees. The Yugoslav UDB-a (State Security Bureau) also required this of them. Later, with assistance from the Yugoslav Special Services, it had grown into a security service.

In September 1947 when senior party officials, Ioannidis and Stringos, left Bulkesh and moved to the village Vineni in Prespa Region to the seat of the interim government, they brought the notorious service with them. After a short time this service was reorganized and renamed Bureau A2 in whose structure the Military and Security Service was also included.

Apparently, Bureau A2 was now directly managed by DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) Headquarters after serving Ioannidis and Stringos in Bulkes for a year. A while later, this powerful Special Service with its own bodies was expanded to all DAG units. Appointed as heads of the various Bureau A2 branches were associates of political commissars who were given powers to act independently as enforcement authorities, reporting directly to their superiors. They were feared by all but mostly because of their notoriety for filing false accusations against any one fighter or officer alike, especially against devoted fighters and proven officers.

The person in charge of Bureau A2 was a man of great confidence. Those on top trusted him but also feared him. Every word spoken in his presence had significance, the tone of voice, the movement of hands and facial muscles, expression in the eyes and even the way a person laughed. No one laughed out loud in front of him. Conversations were mostly official, specific and brief. His motto was “trust no one, doubt everyone”. He had great abilities for remembering everything including all informants by name and never forgot his victims and the means by which had he caught them. He wanted everyone who met him to be afraid of him. He stared into the eyes of those he had conversations with for long periods of time and if they looked away or to the side, he knew he had them and they were under his control.

After a while Bureau A2 field agents slackened their discipline and lost the trust and friendship of the units and the fighters. The agents began to doubt everyone and their monitoring and checking activities increased

dramatically. Recording information about fighter, officer and civilian activities took on a frightening dimension. There were all kinds of "people from the field" visiting, as the informants used to call them. The spies visited only at night. They would enter and after a brief stay they would exit through another door. There were always five members of the Security Service present at each interrogation session, listening and documenting everything that was said and done, preparing reports and making judgments, usually with a pre-determined result.

It was exactly these people who contacted the Department of Censorship on the telephone and had a conversation during which they expressed their suspicions about the sealed envelope with the letter-drawings.

"Of course it's a letter from a spy!" yelled out the chief after a quick look at the letter. "Call someone from the Censorship Department!" he ordered.

Bureau A2 calls were treated with urgency, no one dared ignore them or be late for an appointment when they were summoned. But at the same time they were also not sure if they would ever return after attending such an appointment. The mere mention of that service caused people to gasp and go weak at the knees. That's precisely why the officer from the Department of Censorship ran to the place and stood at attention with contained breath and a rigid look.

"When did the letter arrive?" asked the chief in a stern tone of voice.

"Two days ago…" answered the officer.

"From which sector?" asked the chief.

"From Vicho..." answered the officer.

"Specifically?" asked the chief.

"According to the code on the bag it does not belong to a military unit. It belongs to one of the working brigades..." replied the officer.

"Be more specific!" yelled the chief.

"The bag carried the code RB/1-7," replied the officer.

The chief picked up several folders. Identified the folder containing codes, opened it, leafed through it, put it to the side and said: "Go now..."

"By your command, Comrade…" said the officer who knew the chief's name but at that very moment he had forgotten it because he was afraid. He was familiar with A2's role and he understood very well what A2 was capable of.

The chief sat at the end of the table, opened the folder and muttered: "It's true. It's the working brigades in Bigla, Lundzer, Golinata, Chuka, Polenata, Baro and Iamato. Three-hundred and sixty women ages thirty-five to fifty-five. Managing the brigade is one Hristos Papadopoulos, now he calls himself Risto Popovski… Born in 1901. Literate. Did not finish gymnasium. Participated in the Greek-Italian war. Demonstrated courage at the battles in Ivan Mountain. Ranked corporal. Awarded medal for bravery. In the spring of 1946 assisted in the attack and destruction of the

police station in Makrohori or as they call it, Konomladi. Accused by collaborators, was beaten by the police in Kostur and then sent to a prison camp on the island Ai Strati. Was sent home with broken ribs and a broken left leg. Active in the National Liberation Movement. Because he was incapacitated he could not serve in the military as a fighter so he was given a job in Mali-Madi where he worked until the end of 1948. The Greek government's Military Court of Division XV, based in Kozheni, sentenced him to death in absentia. He is father to four boys. His oldest son, Traiko, was killed last year at Gorusha during the battles for Gramos. His younger son Trpo is serving in the DAG 18th Brigade and his two youngest sons were sent to the [Eastern European] countries. His wife serves at the working brigades digging trenches and carrying logs for the bunkers at Bela Voda. Distinctive characteristics: long black moustache.

"That's all we have on him in our files. It seems that he could be trusted. At least until now, I say until now because a few days ago he lost the support of the people who trusted him. Because of that all Bureau A2 chiefs at military positions Bigla, Lundzer, Golinata, Chuka, Polenata, Baro and Iamata must be notified by encrypted radio telegrams and ordered to immediately commence inquiry proceedings against this Hristos Papadopoulos or Risto Popovski, as he likes to be called… Carry on!" ordered the chief.

The Bureau A2 field chief in command of DAG Brigade XVIII, after reading the telegram, called in his deputy and passed on the order.

"Does this mean that I need to bring this Risto here?" asked the deputy.

"There is plenty of time to bring him here. First, we know that Risto is suspected and that makes our job easier. Second, we don't know if he is acting alone or with accomplices. That's why we need to investigate all those under his command," replied the field chief.

"Do you mean those from the working brigades? Those who carry logs and build bunkers?" asked the deputy.

"Exactly! It would be easiest to begin with the women. One by one, talk to them about home, about their husbands, about their children, about their troubles and how they are coping. Do that so that they think you are making ordinary conversation. Talk nice and gentle to gain their trust. And if you learn something do some more inquiring and try and get more information. Catch them on a string and after that we will reel them in and slowly things will unwind. Do you understand?" replied the field chief.

The deputy confirmed by shaking his head, unfortunately he was not one of those who knew how to speak gently. Everyone he spoke to seemed suspicious to him. He spoke loudly and with a high tone of voice intimidating his interviewees and causing them to feel uncomfortable. And the uncomfortable feeling they projected was wrongly interpreted as guilt. He claimed that he was satisfied that every person he met and asked questions of was guilty and he entered their name in his book of suspects.

The basis of his assessment was that everyone, in whom Bureau A2 was interested, needed to be placed under the shadow of doubt. It was okay to mention their name. That's what his friend from Bulkesh, and current Bureau A2 chief, taught him to do. And why shouldn't some woman who carries logs for covering bunkers and digs deep trenches, that needs to be questioned, not be suspected. The fact that she needs to be questioned is reason enough for her to be a suspect. And then who is to know if, through her or some other woman, a hidden dangerous enemy would be uprooted?

The next day, dressed in village clothing and leading a pair of oxen downhill, a man arrived at the beechwood forest where the men were cutting thick and tall beechwood trees with their axes. After he greeted the men he asked: "Who is the person in charge here?"

"That person, the tall one," responded one of the men.

"Him with the large moustache?" asked the stranger.

"And what do you need him for?" asked the man.

"To tell him that the People's Committee village President ordered me to lead these oxen to drag logs," replied the stranger.

"Risto, hey Risto! Come here, someone is looking for you," called the man.

The stranger did not wait and immediately went towards Risto.

"Are you the leader?" inquired the stranger.

"Yes I am," replied Risto.

"Take these oxen and give me confirmation that you have taken them," said the stranger.

Risto took a paper bag out of his leather pouch, tore a piece of paper the size of his hand, spit on his ink pencil and wrote: "The signatory Risto Popovski today received a pair of oxen."

"Here!" said Risto and handed him the piece of paper.

The stranger folded the piece of paper, squeezed it and with his fingers felt its thickness and rigidity.

"Anything else?" asked Risto.

"No. That's all. Water, do you have some water?" inquired the stranger.

"Wait. Someone has already gone to get some from the spring," replied Risto.

"No, I don't have time. Another job awaits me. I will drink from the spring on my way. I am going. Be well," and with the greeting, "all to arms and everything for victory," the stranger turned around and went.

The winding path led him to the spring where two women were slowly filling a bucket with water. He slackened his pace and went behind the thick trunk of a beechwood tree. He listened for a while but could not make out what the women were saying; they were speaking quietly. He moved and at that moment a rock slipped from under his feet and rolled downhill. The conversation stopped and the women raised their heads.

They noticed a man coming slowly in their direction. Three or four steps before reaching them the stranger greeted them and sat down on a stone near the spring. He took out a dirty handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat off his forehead, face and neck.

"It's hot," he said, "the heat is burning the grass… Can I drink some water?"

"Here, help yourself," said the woman in the black kerchief whose gray hair was barely noticeable. Without looking at his eyes she handed him the ladle. He drank eagerly, holding the ladle with both hands. Water ran down both holes where the ladle was tied to a chain and made his chin, neck and chest wet.

"Slowly, drink slowly," remarked one of the women, "the cold water will give you a headache."

The stranger shook the ladle and while handing it back to the woman said: "Thank you for the water. May God bless you with good health and long life. You too," he said to the other woman. "I was very thirsty… The weather is hot, very hot…"

"Where did you come from?" asked one of the women.

"I was up there," he pointed with his hand. "I led a pair of oxen to drag logs. I saw how women carry long logs on their backs. Poor women, look at them, I feel sorry for them. Do you also carry logs?" asked the stranger.

"We've been carrying logs for the entire month," said the older woman; at least that's how it's been for us.

"Have you been home?" asked the stranger.

"We do go home but not every day…" answered one of the women.

"Don't they stop you from going home?" asked the stranger.

"No. No they don't. Risto let's us go…" answered one of the women.

"And who is that Risto?" asked the stranger.

"The one who is in charge of us, he is like our commander…" replied one of the women.

"He must be a good person," said the stranger.

"He is a very good person. Gentle. He always speaks to us kindly and with respect. He never scolds, he does not yell when a woman is too tired to carry a log, he lets her rest, to catch her breath, sometimes he lifts the log to her shoulder… That's how he is… And he allows us to go home. To prepare some food for the old, to wash their clothes and those who have very young children, infants, he allows them to go three times a day to feed them and change their diapers…" replied one of the women.

"And with the Partisans, do you have anyone with our military?" asked the stranger.

"My husband is with the 103rd Brigade. I also have two brothers…" the woman turned her head, her shoulders shook as she quietly wept and with the corner of her black kerchief collected her tears. "The younger, the eighteen year old, died last year, somewhere in Gramos, and the older one, the twenty year old, died in Lerin…" she said.

“I am sorry for your loss…” said the stranger “I am very sad… etc., etc., what can we do… And you, where are yours?” he asked the other woman.

“I am left all alone. I have no one at home. My in-laws are both dead…” replied the other woman.

“And your husband?” asked the stranger.

“My husband is in America…” said the other woman.

“And do you have anyone with the Partisans?” asked the stranger.

“Yes I do…” replied the other woman.

“Who?” asked the stranger.

“A son and a daughter,” said the other woman.

“Volunteers?” asked the stranger.

“They were collected two years ago. Some people came and took them,” replied the other woman.

“And in the [Eastern European] countries?” asked the stranger.

“My youngest son…” replied the other woman.

“How old is he?” asked the stranger.

“He just turned sixteen… they took him too…” replied the other woman.

“And how do you know?” asked the stranger.

“The women saw him in Zhelevo. There were many boys like him there. They collected our boys, may sickness collect them…” replied the other woman.

“And what did you do?” asked the stranger.

“We cursed and stopped carrying logs and building bunkers. Some of the women fled. Then we wrote a letter to those above and asked them to return our children…” replied the other woman.

“Can you write?” asked the stranger.

“Some of us can write but most of us can’t that’s why we asked Risto to write the letter to those up high…” said the other woman.

“And did he write one?” asked the stranger.

“Yes he did. And all those who couldn’t write signed it with a cross…” replied the other woman.

“And where did he get the paper?” asked the stranger.

“From the paper bags they carry up there. We secretly collect them before they burn them…” replied the other woman.

“And do you write your own letters to your children and relatives?” asked the stranger.

“Well, those who can write, write their own letters. And we who don’t know how to write, we ask Risto to write them for us, he writes what we tell him…” replied the other woman.

“And he writes them?” asked the stranger.

“He always writes if we ask him…” replied the other woman.

“That Risto is truly a good person, right?” asked the stranger.

“You can’t find a better person…” replied the first woman.

“It’s getting late, I need to go. Thank you for the water and for the chat. My work awaits me and they up there are waiting for the water. Hurry. They are thirsty up there…” concluded the stranger and left.

By midnight they had completed writing the report in which they wrote:

“In accordance with the orders received the previous day we started and finished the investigation. We came to the following conclusion. First: letters written to the children in the [Eastern European] countries and the letter written to General Headquarters were written on paper obtained from paper bags. The writer is Risto Popovski. Second: He allows women to leave the combat zones, meaning, they abandon carrying logs and digging trenches. We are awaiting further orders.”

In accordance with the encrypted radio telegram the Bureau A2 office composed a report and sent it to DAG Headquarters. The following was written in the report:

“Bureau A2 has received information that Hristos Papadopoulos or Risto Popovski, the lead of the working brigades, has stolen paper from the paper bags used to store sugar, rice and other food items sent to us by our allies. He was also the one who wrote a protest letter regarding the mobilization of a number of former children who were sent to the [Eastern European] countries. By this act he uncovered strictly confidential military secrets. He also allowed people, especially the women in the working brigades, to leave their jobs. This is done deliberately to slow down the building of bunkers and digging of trenches, which is pure sabotage. The occasional absence of women may give them opportunity to escape and go to Tito, our enemy, and provide him with information regarding our hiding places and locations of our bunkers. Many defectors and refugees were arrested last week at the Yugoslav border. Adult refugees and defectors, according to our current directives, are to be shot on site. Juveniles are to be taken to the camps in Drenovo. In anticipation, we wait for your orders. Greetings, your comrades.”

The next day a reply came from General Headquarters:
“The perpetrator of these hostile acts is to be immediately arrested, court marshaled and executed.”

Risto was arrested the same evening, tied and taken to prison in the village Drenovo in Prespa Region.

The Great Lie – Chapter 21

The stretched out column of loaded trucks with ammunition, food and 280 previously wounded and crippled fighters from the hospitals in Korcha, Elbasan, Tirana and Suk was rolling with lights off. They arrived at the village Breznitsa at dawn. The ride for the crippled fighters ended here. After sunrise they were settled in a meadow a short distance from the main road. Five men in officer uniforms, without insignias, conducted reviews. One, with a high pitched hoarse voice ordered:

"Heavy machine gun gunners and assistant gunners take three steps forward!"

The steps taken did not look like those of military men. There was creaking of wooden braces in the shuffle as the fighters made their way forward. Among them were one-legged, one-armed, one-eyed, mute and deaf men. One of them was the one-legged Numo.

He and those like him leaned on their crutches, firmly holding their bodies upright. Half of the newly formed squad was assigned to the 18th Brigade and was ordered to, immediately and without delay, take battle positions on Baro Hill.

They left in the afternoon, traveled all night and reached the hill early in the morning. From there, at sunrise, warmed by the rising sun in the valley of the gleaming oak forest, they traveled to a flat valley, an open space in the middle of the mountains. On the left there was Polenata and over past it were Golinata, Bigla and Lundzer and to the east was Vicho. To the right extending up to the Kostur Region flatlands, was Mali-Madi and further beyond Kostur stood Siniachka, engulfed in fog.

They spent the day in the valley sleeping and at sunset they were wakened and taken to the bunkers where they were deployed in two's and three's.

"I know it is difficult for a one-legged man to drag his wooden leg and lean on a heavy wooden crutch," said the Unit Commander to Numo. "But your bunker is at the centre of Baro. To the left there are three bunkers and to the right about ten. There are thirty bunkers in the second row. You have the best sight. On your right you have part of Iamata in your sight, the entire space in front of the village Gabresh, including the village itself, is also in your sight. On your left you have the hills above Konomladi, the southern part of Polenata and south of it, you have Roto Hill in your gun sight. In front of you are the villages Pozdivishcha and over there a little to the right is Drenoveni and a bit to the left is Tsrnovishta and Zherveni. Everything is in your palm. Clean space. The entire plain is yours.

Did you take note of where the other bunkers are located? No? Look and listen. All our bunkers make a triangle. If the bunker on your left or on your right is taken by our opponent, you have them in your sight so let them have it. The gunner on the other side can also fire at them. In other words, each of our bunkers is protected by two other bunkers. This way

the opponent is prevented from rapidly progressing. Do you understand?" asked the Unit Commander.

"Clear!" replied Numo.

"Everything is clear up to now, right?" asked the Unit Commander.

"Clear!" replied Numo.

"Let's go on. Your task is to keep the area in front of you on target. Always remember you hold the centre. Our opponent will attempt to place a wedge in our defenses by attacking the centre. We need to hold him back with every available means. You can be certain the attack will be fierce. If you allow the infantry to come close, say fifty to one hundred metres, then there will be no aircraft or artillery support. They would not fire for fear of hitting their own. Then you open fire on them. Don't wait for orders just begin firing, fire long bursts. From today forward you will exercise every day. You will aim here and there and anticipate where the enemy might attack and, when the time comes, you will fire long bursts and cut him down to pieces.

Also, I want you to keep your gun clean, so clean that you can see your face on it. Do you understand? If I find a single hair on it or something even tinier then I will be forced to send you running up there, through the brook and beyond. Understood?" ordered the Unit Commander.

"Yes sir!" replied Numo.

Before leaving, the Unit Commander looked Numo in the eyes, gave him a friendly slap on the back and said: "For us there will be no orders to retreat from Baro. Our orders are to defend Baro at all cost!"

When the Unit Commander's wooden leg could no longer be heard tapping, as he walked away, Numo tightened the belts on his wooden leg, stood up straight and after taking a few laps, spoke to his subordinates:

"We now have our own home. What a home; it's a palace. What do we have here?" he pointed to the left corner where boxes were arranged one beside the other. "What's in them? Numo asked.

"The Unit Commander said they are full of ammunition," replied one of his subordinates.

"And in those metal cans there?" asked Numo.

"They are canisters full of water. Enough for twenty days," replied the same subordinate.

"And in that wooden chest?" asked Numo.

"Canned food and bread…" replied the subordinate.

"Three, five, six. All full. And in those there?" inquired Numo.

"There are hand grenades in those. In this box there are two machine gun barrels," replied the subordinate.

"Excellent, then we won't need to pee on the barrel to cool it when it gets hot," added Numo.

"What else did the Unit Commander say?" asked Numo.

"He told us to only look forward…" replied the subordinate.

“Well then that’s exactly what we will do! Behind us there is a wall,” interrupted Numo.

“…and to not even take a single step back…” added the subordinate.

“Of course that’s what we will do… I haven’t forgotten. Did you say you are nineteen years old?” asked Numo.

“Yes, nineteen. And you?” replied the subordinate.

“I am a little older,” answered Numo.

“Are you married?” asked the subordinate.

“I am married and last year around this time my daughter was born…” replied Numo.

“Congratulations I wish her well! Have you seen her?” asked the subordinate.

“No,” replied Numo.

“Not even your wife?” asked the subordinate.

“I haven’t seen her for two years. I asked around and they told me she is somewhere in those hills carrying logs and building bunkers…” replied Numo.

An involuntary, long, deep and violent sigh surfaced from Numo’s chest. There were signs of uncertainty painted all over his face and forehead. He experienced a nagging anxiety and felt a strong pain in his heart. His soul was troubled. Dark thoughts began to enter his head…

The subordinate’s voice brought Numo back: “Lucky you…” he said. “You did well in the time you had. Let me ask you something. May I?” and without waiting for a reply he continued: “How are we the crippled, some without arms, some without legs, without an eye, deaf and mute going to find wives?”

“I don’t know! Ask the political representative…” replied Numo.

“I did ask him,” said the subordinate.

“And what did he tell you?” asked Numo.

“He told me not to worry and to not concern myself with such matters. The Party will worry about that right after our victory and they will find us young wives, intact, just barely flowering,” replied the subordinate.

“Is that so… And where is he going to find them? Did he tell you?” asked Numo.

“Yes he did. He told me to fight bravely, to not let the enemy pass, to hold my position firmly… do not back off, not even a step. In the homes he said, there in the [Eastern European] countries our brides are growing and maturing. That’s what he said… Those there, I mean the brides, are growing and maturing, maturing in the homes in the countries from where the Party itself will place them on our laps… That’s what the political representative told me… And they, he was boasting, I mean the brides, will be proud, very proud because they will be marrying the heroes of Gramos and Vicho…” replied the subordinate.

“Is that what he told you?” asked Numo.

“Yes,” replied the subordinate.

“And you believed him?” asked Numo.

“Yes... They say that is why he is in this position of trust to be believed. Right?” replied the subordinate.

“Yes, for sure. And did you ask him why stupid people don’t grow horns? Go, go away. Go away I tell you!” Numo ordered angrily.

“Where should I go?” asked the subordinate.

“Go to the political representative…” replied Numo.

“Go to the political representative did you say? And what the hell am I going to do there? Are you okay? Are you sick?” complained the subordinate in a loud tone of voice.

“Okay, okay calm down. Look at you, yelling at me… Now let me ask you a question. Our orders are very clear; you and I are not to take even a single step back. But let’s say that they do, for some reason, order us to retreat, then tell me, how are you and I and all the others that have one leg, going to blow the hell out of here?” asked Numo.

“It’s easy, very easy. You have your right leg, I have my left. We will grab each other and boom, boom, boom we will blow over the hill. Right? Come here, come here,” said the subordinate.

“Why?” inquired Numo.

“We will practice. Grab me by my waist. Like that. Now move forward…” instructed the subordinate.

When the wood from the two wooden legs side by side began to creak as the two men attempted to run in a tragically comical manner, the bunker filled with giggles and bitter laughter. Tired the two men sat down next to one another on top of the hand grenade case. Numo wiped the sweat off his forehead, leaned against the bunker wall and said:

“When you were talking to me about the political representative, I remembered something. Last year when our opponent managed to uproot us from the bunkers and we took new fighting positions, the battles subsided for a while. The political representative, the one that promised you a bride, brought a large funnel to us and said: ‘Every morning and evening, when there are no attacks, use this funnel and call on the government soldiers to surrender.’ The girls were also given a similar order.

Our opponents meanwhile, on the other side, were swearing at us, especially at the girls. With their pants down they shook their genitals and yelled, ‘Come here, come here you bandit communist whores so we can nail you.’

Then my turn came to speak. The political representative gave me the funnel and a piece of paper on which he had written what I should say to the soldiers on the other side. I hid behind the trunk of a thick oak tree and in a loud voice, began to read: ‘Brothers, soldiers. One of your brothers is speaking to you…’

Huge laughter came from the opposite side followed by severe swearing.

‘Brothers, soldiers, one of your brothers is speaking, who, like yourselves, has a mother… yes she is a mother of bandits!’

‘And your sister… bring that communist whore here!’ yelled someone from the other side.

That was it for me, I couldn’t take it any more so I threw the funnel away, took my machine gun, fired a few rounds and yelled, ‘Come here you cowards and bring your queen with you, so that I can stuff her along with you!’

Suddenly there was a barrage of mortar grenades thrown at us. Two were killed and five wounded. My commander took my machine gun and exchanged it for the horse reins of his horse. That was my punishment.

Up to that day we ended our battles with words. After that there were days when we engaged in heavy fighting.

When they threw us out of our defense line there were moments when the guns went silent, and that’s when the war of words would start. There was an awful lot of swearing. We offered them freedom and democracy and cursed their Greek queen, America, along with Truman, and England and its queen. They offered us bread and water (assuming we had neither bread nor water) and many derogatory curses that included swearing at the Virgin Mary, the cross, the Party, Stalin and Marcos (at the time Markos was on good terms with Zahariadis but I can’t remember for sure), they called us bandits and whatever else they could think of. After that they played songs.

We sang songs too but through the funnel, while they played their songs through a big box. They swore through the big box too. There was an awful lot of bad swearing but the swearing at our women fighters was the worst.

The commander called me and said: ‘You are the best marksman we have. Grab a gun and come with me. Do you see that tree?’

‘Yes I see it,’ I said.

‘What do you see there?’ he asked.

‘In my site I see a box,’ I said. At that moment they started playing a song. Sofia Vembo, a famous singer from the Greek-Italian war was singing. She sang beautifully and I even remembered the words of that song:

Τωρα που αιμα ελληνικο το χωμα ιδρωνει
Κ’η Ελλαδα σφαζει την Ελλαδα απ’ τα βουνα
Ξυπνα απ τον ταφο Θωδορη Κολοκοτρονη
Να δης πως Ελληνας τον Ελληνα σκοτωνει

(Now that Greek blood is watering the earth
And Greece is slaughtering Greece from the mountains
Rise from the grave Theodore Kolokotrone
To see how a Greek kills a Greek)

‘Now take aim,’ said the commander, ‘and shoot!’

I took aim and bang. It went silent. I killed it…” said Numo.

“The singer?” asked the subordinate.

“No you idiot, the song…” said Numo.

“And here I thought you killed the singer… Look, I broke into a sweat. I am going outside,” said the subordinate.

He left and returned about half an hour later. He sat on the ammunition box and dropped his head.

“Why are you all wet?” asked Numo.

“What can I say. I went to the bunker of Manolis…” said the subordinate.

“The guy with the glasses missing a left leg?” asked Numo.

“Yes at his place. And what do I see? He holds a book open and writes. ‘What are you writing,’ I asked.

‘Everything that happens,’ he said.

That’s when I broke into a sweat. The same as before. And do you know why? …Because I am illiterate…” said the subordinate.

“All he has finished is gymnasium, right?” asked Numo.

“Yes gymnasium, but not like me. I have only completed grade two, primary school. I worked nine years as a shepherd and two years as a Partisan… That’s my education. And who knows how many books he has read. And that, they say, is education, to know how to read books and to understand them... If I only knew half of what he knows, then I too, I swear on my mother’s life, I would take a notebook and I would write all the swearing done by the other side, I would write how we responded, I would write how in the early Partisan days they told us we were fighting to free Macedonia, and after that, after they made their agreement, they then told us that from now on we were fighting against Anglo-American imperialism and its Athenian lackeys.

I would also write how, last year, we defended Aliabitsa for 59 days and that we started out with 500 fighters and ended with 90 heavily wounded survivers. I would write that in the fall of 1947 under the beech wood trees in Gramos, we were cleaning old rusted out rifles, all naked without clothes, hungry and barefoot, singing Partisan songs and thinking that it would all be worth it after our victory.

I would write that then, with only several days of learning and practice, we were sent to battle and learned the practical side of war while bleeding. I remember we were very hungry and they fed us grass, there at Gramos, do you remember? And that too I would register in my notebook.

I would write about how we dug trenches and built bunkers up at Pindus Mountain. I would write about Kopanche, Sv. Ilia and Gupata, about Gorusha, Bel Kamen and Krusha, about our retreat from Gramos. I would also write all the names of those who we permanently left there...

I would write how I carried Manolis on my back after last year's great battle at Mali-Madi, when we broke the government 22nd Brigade's back and chased the Royal goons all the way to Kostur. My unit had reached Maniak when the order was given to break off the attack. We needed only twenty more minutes and we would have taken Kostur from where the Royal armies, the police, the collaborators, the priests along with the bishop, were fleeing to Kozheni.

'Break off the attack,' the order was given and we broke off the attack. I found Manolis under the village Sliveni all covered in blood. 'Adelfe,' (brother) he begged me, 'don't leave me here. Save me,' so I returned, put him on my back and carried him all day until we reached the hills above the village Sveta Nedela. That's when the airplanes came. I could also see dust clouds in the valley; they were tanks charging at us. The airplanes pounded us for twenty minutes and after that the tanks began to shell us with hundreds of shells. We needed only about twenty minutes of running time to take Kostur, at least the first houses.

We seeded the entire valley from Kostur to Sveta Nedela with the bodies of our people and with my leg. If I were literate I would write exactly about this in my notebook, just like Manolis does. And did you know what Manolis said to me?" asked the subordinate.

"I don't know," replied Numo.

"He said that 'Only what's written will remain forever and everything else will be forgotten, it will die when the person dies.' He also said, 'Do you know why we Greeks have a great history? Because our predecessors wrote everything that happened.' That's what he said. Do you understand?" concluded the subordinate.

"Why shouldn't I understand? I understand completely," replied Numo.

"I will say it again and again, it is a loss, a great loss, that I don't know how to write. Take Manolis for example, he sits in the bunker and writes, he writes every day. He says, 'I write in my journal how we Greeks fight.' I asked him if he also writes about us the Macedonians? And he said, 'But you are not Greeks!' So I asked him if he writes about me on account that we are together, him a Greek, me a Macedonian, fighting side by side, suffering in these dark humid bunkers, sharing lice and bread crumbs? Again he said, 'But you are not Greeks! I only write about the Greeks!'

Well now let me ask you this but I don't know if you can understand me. Here is Manolis writing something every day, documenting what is happening and nothing is written about me, a Macedonian. I am sure there is nothing written there about you there either. You understand? There is nothing written about me in his daily journal, which means I will remain nameless, because there is no one to write down that I, a Macedonian, am here in this bunker, that last year I was in Gramos and that I ran from Mali-Madi to Maniak, and that I only needed twenty minutes to enter Kostur. There will be nothing there about me having to carry Manolis on

my back and about the circumstances under which I lost my leg. There will be nothing written about how and why my brother fought in Voden and lost his life in Lerin.

Manolis's words 'only what is written will be remembered' ring very loud in my mind. And for God's sake, look, a little piece of paper tomorrow will be one hundred times, no, a million times more important than me because when I am gone it will remain, it will be protected and I will become dust and all forgotten because nothing will be written about me. That is why my pain and my dilemma are so great.

Wait. Don't go, I have more to tell you. Stay and hear what I have to say, it's a big concern for me, I swear on my mother's life.

Again I will tell you, but I don't know if you will understand me. First they told us this, then they made us do that and at the end they stuck it to us, so what do you say to that, do you understand me? And who knows how much more they will be sticking it to us… Listen, for God's sake, all this time we are in the mountains they are telling us we are the same as them and tomorrow when the books will be opened it will come out that we are not the same, as if we did not exist, and how can you not swear and say that someone is not lying…?

You're laughing? Why are you laughing? Did I say something funny?" concluded the subordinate.

"No, what you said is not funny…" replied Numo.

"What's so funny then?" asked the subordinate.

"I thought of something and it made me laugh…" answered Numo.

"What was it, tell me?" asked the subordinate.

"Last year the Unit Commander, somebody from Rumeli, ordered me to bring him honey. So I asked, 'Where do I find this honey?' And he said, 'Do you see that flower?' 'I see it I said.' 'What's on it?' he asked. 'A fly,' I said. He said, 'It's not a fly, it's a bee'. 'Chase it and follow it, it will take you to the honey. I did as he said and where do you think the fly led me?..." asked Numo.

"I understand… What can I say?" replied the subordinate.

"Don't say anything; just get some canned meat out of that case… You can think better on a full stomach…" concluded Numo.

The Great Lie – Chapter 22

"To the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Greece (CPG)

There are residents from various villages in the free Vicho territory who, when the battles for Vicho begin, will probably do a lot of damage behind the DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) lines. According to the information we collected and from the assessments made by our services, we expect they will inflict major damage to our cause and such activities will also encourage others to do the same. During the course of the battles they will probably provide shelter to enemy agents (the Monarcho-Fascists and Tito) who will penetrate our background in order to gather information, carry out sabotage activities and provide targets for enemy air force and artillery attacks.

These people will try to influence the population and through various hostile slogans, break its unity and bond ... These people will flee to the enemy (to the Monarcho-Fascists or to Tito) and provide them with information about DAG's combat positions, bunker locations and minefield sites. They will encourage our fighters to desert DAG and flee to the monarcho-Fascists or to Tito. Some villagers from this region have been caught and jailed but have not gone before a military court because, through the party line, we received orders to re-educate them by pointing out the damage that they have caused. We did not punish them with harsh penalties.

We cannot decide every case separately so we often have to apply collective punishment such as hard labour to be served by digging tunnels for the storage of weapons. When our friends from the courts were looking for statements or for evidence, we were able to provide it, but with our informants fleeing to the enemy, our evidence disappeared. Our military courts will not put cases before the people without evidence. So we are limited in this regard and we can only monitor people, assess their liability and provide advice. As such we prefer to apply penalties rather than go to trial in military courts. From our information we can conclude that when the enemy offensive begins, these people will cause great damage to our movement and to our defense.

Therefore we propose and seek approval to collect all those people (lists to be provided) and send them to a secure area behind the scenes where, as their punishment, they will be put to work, which will also limit their opportunity to flee to our enemy Tito. Then, anyone caught attempting to escape can be executed. We already have a list of our people who will be placed among them to collect information on them.

This way we will remove the danger that threatens us. In place of holding these people in isolation, which would be utterly useless, we propose that we use them as a work force which is now lacking in DAG.

We submit this proposal because all these elements will be activated the moment the military operations in Vicho are launched.

We also have another proposal. The region around the border sector, currently defended by a section of the people's militia located in German, is okay in terms of forces available to it (35 people), but we propose that we further secure the border by other means, such as barbed wire, bells, empty meat cans, mines and other items.

Given the urgency of the situation, we anxiously await your response."

Zahariadis read the letter from Bureau A2 carefully and called a meeting with Bardzotas, Vlandas and Gusias for noon, to take place in the cave above the village Vineni. The Politburo was unanimous in its assessment that the situation was serious and required serious measures to be undertaken. The same day a letter was sealed in an envelope and sent to Vineni. Written in the envelope margins in great big red letters was:

"You have our approval and consent, however we do not approve that you run the entire operation alone. Continue to monitor the situation and immediately contact all members of the Central Council of NOF (Peoples' Liberation Front) and ask them to report to DAG General Headquarters."

It took about two days to locate all the NOF members and for them to arrive at the designated place. They met in the same cave, during the night of the second day, where Gusias informed them as follows:

"Comrades, by comrade Zahariadis's orders, I asked you to come here so that I can convey to you the decision reached by our Politburo and by our General Headquarters. As you well know soon we will begin the Vicho campaign. I must insist that you accept what I have to say as well-intentioned criticism, for as long as the preparations for defense are ongoing, you, Comrade Vera, and when I say you I think of the entire NOF and AFZH (Women's Anti-Fascist Front) leadership. You have somewhat slowed down in doing your duty, your long visits to the villages in Prespa have become comfortable, at least this is what we are told by the field agents, your fighting spirit and revolutionary enthusiasm have slackened...

I have heard, and I think the Chiefs of Staff at General Headquarters have heard, rumours that you rarely visit the Koreshtanski villages, they say that you rarely pass by there and some even say that you don't go there at all. I want to inform you that we here in the Politburo and in General Headquarters have seriously considered how to protect the population in Koreshtata and other Kostur and Lerin Region villages.

Let us not forget that this population, as comrade Zahariadis has said, is full of heroism and selflessness and has given its all to the struggle, which calls for admiration and because of that our enemy will strike there first and these people will become the first casualties of the offensive. That is why they deserve to be protected. We owe it to them.

To be protected. Exactly for that reason, comrades, we at the Politburo and at General Headquarters have decided that you, the leaders of NOF

and AFZH, together with all your activists should go to the villages, to every house and speak to every man and woman, speak with the old people, with everyone who is still left there and persuade them to leave their villages. Tell them to go behind the front line. We here at the Central Committee and at the General Headquarters assessed the situation and understand the dangers threatening the villagers, that is why we decided to undertake such a task. Of course the move will be assisted with the help of the National Militia because the people deserve to be safe while being relocated. We could do the move with the help of our army, but the army is needed elsewhere.

When the enemy launches its offensive, it will not only attack DAG combat positions, it will also attack the villages and the houses, it will attack every house, and most of all it will attack the houses and people who took our side. The enemy will direct its retaliation on them, on the people who took our side and will commit unprecedented crimes against them.

Many crimes will be committed by the enemy infantry, police and by the evil paramilitary groups. They will leave no stone unturned, every house will be burned down and anyone caught will be tortured and killed. We have reliable information regarding enemy intentions and their plans for revenge. That is precisely why we need to protect the population.

Our first step will be to draw a line behind the front. You must explain this to them very carefully, in a convincing way. In fact you must tell them that the 'worst' awaits them if they stay in their villages and in their houses. You should also explain to them that they should leave nothing for the enemy. In other words, they should take everything with them, livestock, oxen, sheep, goats and even their donkeys to carry all the valuable things that they take with them. They should take as much furnishings and food as they can carry, especially food to last them about ten days because that's how long it would take for us to eject the enemy out of Vicho. Of course, they should also bring all items that carry high value such as money, gold, silver, cheques...

Now the villages we plan to evacuate are Smrdesh, Vmbel, Breznitsa, Rula, Trnaa, Oshchima and Zhelevo. When we eject the enemy out of Vicho, then all will be returned to their liberated villages...

Your job is to activate the entire village apparatus. In other words the People's Village Councils and where there is resistance you should personally participate in clarifying matters…" concluded Gusias.

Some time later.

Horse hooves pounding on the village cobblestone road were heard late in the evening. Vane opened his window slightly, peeked outside with one eye and saw two people on horseback standing outside in his yard. Silently he closed the curtain and went to turn down the flame on the kerosene lamp which, at the time, was emitting a trembling pale, white light. He again returned to the window. The riders now stood in front of his thick

oak door, nailed with several rows of thick nails. Vane perked up his ears but failed to capture anything from the quiet conversation. Suddenly there was a knock on the oak door and a quiet muffled voice was heard calling out: “Vane! Vane!”

It was a woman’s voice, a familiar voice. Vane quickly put on his woolen pajamas and while going down the stairs, with both hands, slipped his long colourful belt around his waist.

“Vane!” The same voice was heard calling, mixed with the noise of moving horse hooves.

“I am coming, I am coming…” Vane was heard saying as he rushed to the door, unlocked it and flung both sides of the door wide open. “Come in!” he whispered.

“Hello Vane. Are you well? How is your wife?” whispered Vera.

“Thank God, so far I am well Vera. My wife is okay too but has problems with her hip. She can’t stand up straight and can’t move that well. She was injured while carrying logs. Come in, tie your horses and come into the house… And you… if I may ask… what are you doing out here this late at night? Does this visit have something to do with your work or is it a casual visit?” asked Vane.

“It’s about work, Vane, about work and it’s a big job,” replied Vera.

“Is it about that?” Vane pointed at the mountains with his chin. “If I have to go, I swear on my mother’s name, God bless her soul, I will not be able to go. I have pain in my waist and in my neck and my wife, unfortunately, is not well…” said Vane.

“It’s not about sending you to the mountains, Vane…” replied Vera.

“If it’s not about that then please go ahead, straight up the stairs…” said Vane.

Menka, holding her sore hip with one hand, came to the top of the stairs and greeted the guests pointing the way to the balcony.

“Please come in, come in, good to see you. It’s dark out there, you can’t see. Wait while I get a lamp,” said Menka.

“No need Menka, we won’t be here for long. We will just say hello and we will go,” replied Vera.

“It’s okay, it’s okay… Please come in…” insisted Vane.

“Vane,” Vera began to explain, “we are here on orders from the highest level of authority. We know that you, Vane, that you are the wisest and most respected person in the village. If you get going so will the others, they will follow you and you will save them from anything bad happening to them. Do you remember how it was when the wounded needed to be transported from Lerin? You went first and then the entire village followed. Now again you will have to do the same, you will have to go first…”

“Go where?” asked Vane.

Vera repeated what she was told by the higher authorities, explaining everything convincingly and persuasively. Vane turned his head, a

reflection of doubt flooded his eyes and with every quiver in his face he showed that he had no confidence in the plan.

"No, things are not what they seem…" said Vane thoughtfully.

"No, it can't be done that way…" added Menka.

"What, now the both of you are going against me? No, no and only no? Don't you know how to say anything else? You all have been ordered to go and you will go!" said Vera in a loud voice.

Vane straightened himself and furrowing his eyebrows with every word, said:

"Vera, many times you have said the words, 'You are going against me,' words which we do not understand. I can see it in your eyes that these are bad words. And don't yell at me in my own house!"

Vane paused for a moment and continued: "We will go, of course we will go… But know that this to me looks like an expulsion… If that is true then may God be your judge and from us you will be forever cursed… Why not, of course we will go… Last night the highway was full of people and goods… Now it's our turn… Of course we will go…

What should we take and what should we leave? All the bad luck that has befallen our house… The items in this house have been building from the time of our great grandfather, from our grandfather, from our father and now from us. We used to say 'our house is full and may we leave it full to our children'. Is there ever a full house without children? A house is empty without children… What can you take and what can you leave? Everything is precious. Everything was achieved through the sweat of our ancestors and on their sweat we added our sweat… What to take and what to leave?" asked Vane.

"Just take the most valuable things," added Vera.

"The land," said Vane, "the land is the most valuable thing. Everything we have comes from the land. The land feeds us. How can we take our land, how can we bring it with us? If I was in good health and in good shape I would have no problem supporting my family and building a house in foreign lands. But abandon our land? We would have to be mad to do that! Can one abandon their land that easily?

Okay then… We will do what we can… Of course, yes, of course we will go…" said Vane in a confused tone of voice.

"Okay then… You need to go first, before the others," said Vera and while leaving, added: "We will see you there…"

Vane did not reply.

The People's Village Council President was waiting outside. He leaned towards Vera's ear and said, "There is great resistance; the villagers don't want to leave."

"What do you mean the villagers don't want to leave? Did you explain everything to them?" asked Vera.

"I couldn't have explained it any better…" replied the President.

“Take me to the houses of the people who did not want to go!” ordered Vera.

A little while later.

“All of them, to the last one,” yelled Vera, “will be coming and will be robbing you…”

“I have no reason to leave. I don’t have anyone on your side. I am all alone. My house is empty, you took everything. What will they take from an empty house? The stones from my yard?” replied an old woman.

“They will take you, they will take you and kill you, they will skin you alive and toss your body to the dogs… They will be dropping bombs, barrels of fire, flames and coals, they will burn everything. Last year we barely saved the villagers from the other side of Mali-Madi. There they were dropping flames and fire from the sky out of airplanes. Everything burned, the trees, the soil, even the rocks were exploding from the heat. We barely saved the people and moved them into the free territory with great difficulty,” explained Vera.

“Did they return to their homes after that?” a woman asked.

“Who?” asked Vera.

“The people you saved,” replied the woman.

“Oh, them? There is nothing for them to return to… The enemy burned their houses to the ground, there was not even a stone left standing…” explained Vera.

“These women standing here and I are not leaving,” said the woman.

“Ladies!” yelled out Vera “We are not here to expel you, we are here to evacuate you…”

“Even if it is for evacuation… We are not going. We will stay home behind locked doors and we will not let anyone in… We will wait for our husbands to return…” said the woman.

“You are going to wait for them to return from where?” inquired Vera.

“From the prisons and from the Islands,” said the woman.

“Do you truly believe they will release them?” asked Vera.

“Yes one day they will release them,” said the woman.

“Where is your husband?” asked Vera.

“Exiled on the island of Aegina,” replied the woman.

“And yours?” asked Vera pointing to the next woman.

“At Yura Island…” replied the second woman.

“And yours?” asked Vera pointing to the following woman.

“Mine is at Ai Strati,” replied the third woman.

“You poor women… They will take you and torture you because your husbands are in prison on the islands. They will torture you the most, the soldiers will rape you and after that they will parade you naked and pass you on to others. Do you want that? And… dirtied like that what good would you be to your husbands? Will they then want to look at you when… when they return home alive and well? Don’t delay, take the most

valuable things and when you are told to leave, be among the first to go," insisted Vera.

A while later.

"Your People's Village Council President was right when he told you what awaits you if you don't leave. Did he explain it to you or did he not?" asked Vera in an angry tone of voice.

"And what is there to explain? We told him we are not going. Whoever is afraid may go. What will they take from me? I am an old woman without any teeth, what will they do to me? Who wants a woman like me? From everything that I had, only my icon remains. And half of it is burned. Jesus' legs have been burned by the fire and so is the Virgin Mary's arm. When my house was burning down, the wall on which the icon was hanging fell and that way at least part of the icon was saved. That's all that remains in my possession… Who is going to take my crippled Virgin Mary?... asked the old woman.

"You have nothing else? Why did you take that black icon?" asked Vera.

"I took it so that the Virgin Mary is not abandoned… so that she could be with us, with the people so that she can protect them from evil mouths and eyes and from…" muttered the old woman.

At Vane and Menka's house.

"And the copper jug, I said the copper jug," yelled Vane angrily at Menka, "why are you taking it? You took the kettle too?"

"And where do you suppose I am going to keep water? You need to drink water wherever you go… The kettle too will be needed…" replied Menka and after a short silence asked: "Are you sure that's what she said?"

"Forget what she said! Okay… We gathered what we gathered, now let's load them up. Bring the donkey here," ordered Vane.

Vane bolted the thick wooden door from the inside and then jumped over the wall surrounding the yard and tied the double doors together with a chain and padlocked it from the outside. He turned the key twice and then hid it under the large rock near the door. He crossed himself and said: "It is terrible when one has to padlock his own door…"

"Blankets, pillows, plates, spoons ... everything that we have left..." said Menka.

"And you, woman, are you going to load the entire house?" replied Vane.

"No, I took only what they left, after you voluntarily gave them everything for the struggle. It's better to take things with us where we can keep an eye on them rather than leave them here unattended. This way at least we will have something left…" said Menka.

"Did we forget anything?" asked Vane.

"Let me think… Yes we did forget… the cheques. And the Napoleons (gold coins)? I said the Napoleons did you hide them well?" asked Menka.

Vane grabbed Menka by the arm, took her aside and whispered in her ear: “I have some of them here,” he tapped his chest, “but most of them I buried in the outhouse. Nobody is going to look there, right? The box with the Napoleons is buried deep down in the hole. No one is going to look there…”

The night was hot and humid. The Koreshtanski valley was very hot. The grain heads in the wheat fields were yellowing and the seeds were maturing in the summer heat. The crickets were singing, the dogs were barking and the clouds covered the full moon. The horses were neighing, the cows were mooing, cowbells were ringing, there was yelling, cursing and cries of desperation…

The column was long. It moved very slowly, it dragged its way along the highway from Gabresh, around the wide turn, to the bridge. Here it divided itself into two columns; one column extended from here to Breznitsa, Smrdesh and Dmbeni, the other column extended from here all the way to Zhelevo.

The trek continued the next day and all through to the next night … There somewhere at the exit of the wide turn, Vane turned left and, slowly guiding his donkey, took an uphill path and entered the dense forest. The deep darkness of the night did now allow them to travel past the forest and to the boulders above. It wasn’t until the break of dawn that they resumed their trip along the narrow forest path.

“It has to be here somewhere…” said Vane while breaking the branches that were blocking his way. He took a few steps further up and stopped. He turned, and pointing with his hand, whispered: “It’s here…”

He pushed the low hanging branches to the side. There was a deep gap in the boulder. With his stick he pounded the inside of the rock a few times. Several bats flew out. He stepped inside. He lit a match and, holding it up high, illuminated the entire cave. He looked around until the match went out. He came out. It was still dark outside.

“Quickly!” he said and went downhill, “Quickly, let’s unload everything and bring it here while it’s still dark.”

When they had brought everything into the cave, Vane said: “We left the donkey down there; I will go and secure it. It can graze in the forest. We will remain here until the bad passes.”

“But Vane, when they see that we are missing from the others in the village, will they not look for us?” asked Menka.

“May God protect and defend us!” Vane crossed himself. “Don’t say it twice… No one invites the bad, it comes on its own. Come inside, sit down and stop fretting. I will return soon…” ordered Vane.

He went down the hill and suddenly stopped. He hid in the tall bushes.

One behind another, about ten men and women loaded with sacks, bags and blankets were coming towards him. They passed him by quietly and stayed on the path that led to the cave.

“Wife, prepare our things… people are coming…” called Vane.

“Who?” asked Menka.

“People… They too are hiding. Move our things and make room for them!” ordered Vane.

“This does not look good,” said Vane after being silent for a few seconds. “In earlier days some of us hid in the forests and in the mountains to avoid the bad but then we always returned to our homes. Now they told us that we all have to leave, all from across… It doesn’t look good. Two nights ago the people from Dmbeni, Setomo, Tiolishta, Kondorobi, Zagoricheni, Chereshnitsa, Bapchor, Sheshevo, Visheni, Aposkep… all passed by here. Now it’s our turn. The people from Nered, Turie, Konomladi, Gorno and Dolno Statitsa have passed over Lisets. They took their cattle, donkeys, sheep and goats with them. The people were loaded like horses with sacks and bags… Who knows where all this is going…” muttered Vane.

“They say a great battle will take place and because of that the People’s Government and the Party want to save us from the bad. Vera was saying that the enemy will be dropping large bombs, they will be dropping flames and fire from the airplanes and everything will burn…” said Menka.

“The further you hide from the village the worse it is. The old people hid in such caves, forests and mountains to avoid the bad during Turkish times. They dug themselves into pits and stayed there until it all passed. People hid in such caves and pits during the Ilinden Uprising [1903]… They hid here when that blood thirst no good, may he rot in hell, together with his band of butchers was burning the houses and slaughtering people in these villages… And here we hid, running away from the Italians and Germans…” muttered Vane.

“And those who Vera said they were saving last year, what happened to them?” asked Menka.

“One of the drivers told me that they relocated them to a village, I think it’s called Prenies; it’s in Albania near the Yugoslav border. The driver said they now live in horse barracks and eat from a communal cauldron,” answered Vane.

“Perhaps they want to save us in a similar manner too?” remarked Menka.

“I don’t know if that’s what it is, but I do know that it’s wrong to leave our homes…” replied Vane.

“Vera said that once our people eject the Greek army from Vicho, we can all go home…” said Menka.

“They told the people from the villages on the other side of Mali-Madi the same thing. After they defeat the enemy at Gramos they will allow the people to return to their homes… It’s been a year since then and in place of sending these people back to their homes, they packed them in horse barracks and made them wait in line in front of a cauldron for their food… The driver, who takes wounded from here to Albania and brings back

those who have recovered, told me this. I say this does not look good… it does not look good when they chase people from their homes… I will it say again; I don't see this as a good thing," concluded Vane.

The Great Lie – Chapter 23

Vicho region was their last hope. For the defenders it was their last hope of defense. For the attackers it was their last hope for victory. Both sides believed in their hopes. Both sides were fighting for freedom but here in the Macedonian mountains Bela Voda, Lundser and Bigla, Kulkuturia, Plati, Kresto, Glavata, Polenata, Roto, Baro, Iamata, Mali-Madi, Golinata, Chuka, Moro and Lisets they were fighting for their own freedom.

At 05.00 hours in the summer on August 10th, 1949, fighter aircraft launched their attacks on Mount Polenata, elevation 1,685. At 05.30 hours the artillery opened fire, lasting half an hour. This was the centre of defense. Military aircraft flew in waves of three and with bombs and rockets attacked the bunkers. Hell opened up and broke loose out of the earth on top of Bigla and Lundser, Polenata and Roto, Baro and Mali-Madi.

At five o'clock in the morning seventy aircraft flew out of Government bases in Lerin, Rupishta and Kozheni and attacked DAG (Democratic Army of Greece) positions. Half an hour later one hundred and forty cannons and equally as many heavy guns and mine throwers began their attacks on the trenches and bunkers. The thick smoke was still hanging low when 8 divisions, more independent battalions, tanks and military vehicles launched their attack.

At 06.00 hours, assisted by tanks, 22 Government military divisions attacked Polenata, elevation 1,685, but the attack was unsuccessful. They were facing strong resistance. Aerial and artillery attacks continued until 13.00 hours. A second wave of infantry attacks were launched on Polenata at 13.00 hours. Resistance at Polenata died out at 18.30 hours along with everyone who resisted. No one from the resistance side came out alive. The central front was broken.

In the meantime the villages Turie and Gorno Statitsa had fallen into the hands of Government Division XI from where Government troops launched their uphill attacks along the bare patches of the mountains in the direction of Lisets and Moro. Government troops jumped and stepped over the dead bodies of their own soldiers as they ran uphill. Three hundred meters before reaching the bunkers the attack died out. Government forces stopped their advance and began to dig themselves into the ground. They lay flat on their stomachs and dug with their shovels to hide their heads. They were being fired on from above with long machine gun bursts. The ones who came closest to the bunkers and trenches were cut down by the long bursts of machine gun and automatic rifle fire and by hand grenades.

The elite Government forces maintained their attack all night long.

The same day, before nightfall, at 18.30 hours, in the direction of the village Drenoveni, Government Mountain Division III began a vicious attack on the well-established DAG position on Baro Hill with aims of

penetrating Lisets. At 08.00 hours, after the place was bombed and pounded by artillery for an hour, and after heavy, hand to hand fighting, Baro Hill fell. Then at 12.45 hours Dapche Hill also fell into enemy hands.

There was a sickly, stretched out pleading sound heard coming from the rubble of a destroyed bunker. A sharp cry of pain, despair and horror filled the air.

"Is there anyone alive?!" a muffled voice called out from beneath the soil. It was a pleading, hoarse, burned out and broken down from pain voice, lost to the deafening whistle, roar, thunder and growl of exploding cannon shells.

"Is there anyone alive?!" the same voice called out again.

Numo lifted his head for a moment and instantly felt a burning sharp pain. He froze. He only heard the sound "alive". He opened his eyes but he could only see what looked like fog, after that everything went black. He moved his hands around but felt very weak. His ears were ringing but he could hear loud thundering, growling, blasting, swishing, howling, screaming, sharp roars and reverberations in the air… He tried to take a step forward but instantly fell down and his face hit the burning soil mixed with congealed blood. A strong sharp smell of gunpowder, burned clothes and burning human flesh hit his nose… It felt like his forehead was frozen and his legs were numb. He suddenly thought that he was a little boy and it seemed to him that someone was calling him by his name… He tried to raise his head and at that moment, one after another, like water in a level meadow, his life's memories began to flow before him… he was amazed by how rapidly the images were changing, how his life was unraveling like a long and thick braid of hair, like threaded pearls falling from a broken golden string and rolling down a long and steep hill…

The hill, dug up by aerial bombs, cannon shells and mortars, was now silent. The tips of the trees were trimmed. There were broken tree branches and most tree trunks were left naked. There was a downed tree burning. A split tree stump smoldered in the burning coals. A red flame was nearing a couple of dead bodies. The wind blew and the flame came alive, shimmering gently. People and trees burned together and filled the air with a strong, irritating, suffocating stench of death.

"Is there anyone alive?!" a quieter and weaker voice called out.

From the place where the dying breath was heard, a black, thick, strong and bitter smoke was spinning out and whirling, reeling and folding making large circles and irritating eyes and throats. A hugging heat wave had blanketed the area. The air was hot, heavy and stuffy. There were mixed smells of burning flesh, gunpowder and decay…

Government Units that left from Kulkuturia, after heavy and bloody fighting, took Moro Hill at 18.00 hours on August 11th and without delay left for hill 1,554, located on the footstep of Lisets, elevation 1,827. However they were unable to breach its defenses.

At the same time the 35th Brigade of Division X, during the night of August 10-11 at 02.00 hours, advanced to within 500 meters of DAG positions at Roto Hill and stopped. It resumed its advance after the artillery pounded DAG positions for half an hour. A vicious battle ensued which forced the brigade to dig itself deep, about 150 meters from DAG positions. At that point the artillery resumed its pounding for another half hour. Then, at 03.00 hours, Government troops renewed their attack and on August 11, at 13.30 hours they took Roto Hill.

Quietly, barely audible, a transmission was made: "We are surrounded!"

"Break through!" came the reply.

They left their trenches and bunkers in darkness but by the time they completed their reconnaissance it was almost dawn. The sky was turning pale over the hills. Before the sun was up military aircraft began to fly over Bigla, Lundzer, Iorgova Glava, Chuka and Moro. They were dropping fire and as soon as they flew away the cannons began to thunder.

They could not leave in daylight so they spent the day there, hiding in the bush inside the oak forest. They sat there silent, quietly sharpening their bayonets and daggers all day until darkness came. Then during the night the order to "break through" was quietly given.

All night long, the base of Mount Baro was overrun by DAG units pulling out from Plati, Krstot, Glavata, Roto and Polenata. They followed the flow of the River Belitsa, fighting their way to reach Breznitsa. Urgently they rushed to cross the gorge separating Mali-Madi and Iamata on the road to Breznitsa. Salvation waited there for them…

Resistance at Chuka was destroyed. No one counted how many were left alive. The wounded were either slaughtered by knife or shot dead by a bullet to the head. Moro was still defended. The battles forced DAG's General Headquarters to flee along the shallow trenches dug over the village Vineni. Here it was away from the loud aircraft and from the thundering bomb explosions. Piles of soil thrown into the air and clouds of dust could be seen only through binoculars. Lisets had fallen. General Headquarters, in a written statement, ordered the Commanders of DAG Division XI to abandon Lisets. It was estimated that the enemy would overpower the entire sector by the morning of August 12th. A new order was then quickly issued, "Do not abandon Lisets until new orders are issued." The 102nd Brigade, formed some time ago, mainly from older and crippled men, was left to defend Lisets.

Only now did DAG Command finally understand the significance of Lisets. It now understood that Lisets was the key to the entire front and, in spite of the strong resistance offered, Government forces still focused their main attacks there.

DAG Command with its strong defenses in Vicho, leading the battles from its capital in Vineni on the other side of Lake Prespa, only now understood the strategic significance of the bare Mount Lisets peak. 'He

who holds Lisets has control of all the surrounding hills and most importantly, he controls the highway to Preval and the road to Prespa.'

"Officer's school to assist!" a command was issued.

They set off in silence, then at the approach to Lisets they covered themselves with beechwood leaves and proceeded.

"Marksmen forward!" another command was issued.

They bowed and after taking several long steps they came closer to the Lisets access. Long bursts of machine gun and automatic rifle fire was heard being fired from the hills above. Kiro was able to ascertain that Iamata, Baro and Roto had not yet fallen and were still defended but in the absence of much gunfire he also ascertained that the defenses were weakening. Polenata was fiercely defended. The surrounding hills were on fire. There were sudden bursts of gunfire and hand grenade explosions. Kiro, as if being cut down by gunfire, dropped down under the trunk of a beechwood tree. There were only about one hundred meters of bare treeless space between here and the slopes of Lisets.

"Kiro!" a quiet and frightened voice was heard calling.

"What is it?" responded Kiro.

"The Commander…" replied the voice.

"The Commander what?" responded Kiro.

"The Commander is dead…" replied the voice.

"You are lying!" Kiro said in disbelief. "Where is he?"

"Here, he is lying under the beechwood tree," said the voice.

Kiro crawled his way to the dead Commander. He felt his throat and found it to be tight. He looked around. The officers were crawling, making their way closer to the enemy away from the machine gun fire. There was a strong and vicious fire fight in the dark. Kiro stood up behind the thick trunk of the beechwood tree. He surmised that the enemy was not dug in. He heard branches breaking beside him. It was sub-Lieutenant Kostas, a young man from the Thessalean villages. Kiro leaned over and said: "Run over to the fourth line and tell the Commander to attack the left wing. Quickly!"

They crawled another hundred meters forward with restrained breathing and eyes fixed ahead. A white rocket was fired into the sky. Everything became illuminated. They lowered their heads into the burned grass. The rocket went out. Automatic rifle fire was heard coming from the left wing. Two machine guns were heard going off. Kiro deduced that that was the fourth line firing. Voices were heard speaking and swearing about fifty meters ahead. Kiro gathered that these were the voices of enemy officers directing the battles on the hills above. Dawn was fast approaching so Kiro crawled to within 20 meters, stood up and at the top of his voice shouted: "Charge! Bayonets!"

"Bayonets!"

"Bayonets!"

The order was also heard coming from above: "Forward! Bayonets!"

Kiro failed to pull out his sharp Finnish bayonet on time before his opponent, a LOK Government officer with the mountain Special Forces, pulled out his hand gun and fired at him. Kiro dropped to the ground on his stomach just as he saw the flash of the gun go off. He felt the bullet whistle past his head.

While Kiro was down, the LOK officer jumped on top of him and began to choke him from behind with both hands. Kiro twisted his way and managed to get to his side and with his left hand, grabbed the officer by the groin and squeezed tightly. He felt the officer's hands slowly releasing.

Abruptly Kiro kneed the officer between the legs. Then with his right hand he grabbed the officer's face and with his left squeezed the groin even harder, like a vice grip. Still being squeezed on the neck, Kiro, with all the strength he could muster, butted the officer with his head, once, twice, three times until the officer let go of his neck.

Upon releasing Kiro's neck, the officer reached for his knife. At that point Kiro, with his left foot, kicked the knife out of the officer's hand. Kiro then grabbed the officer by the hair, pulled him to his side and, with his left fist, punched him a couple of times in the ear.

Half sitting, Kiro grabbed his knife and jammed it into the officer's chest. At the same moment he heard the sound "aaah!" behind him. He turned, looked and saw two LOK officers stabbing Kostas with their bayonets.

Kiro pulled out his knife and with a strong swift swing, threw it at one of the officers. Kiro was the best knife thrower in the Officer's School. The LOK officer, recipient of the knife, who at the time was leaning over Kostas, suddenly stood up but his legs could not hold him and, as if kneeling to pray, he fell down in front of Kostas. The other LOK officer turned abruptly and faced Kiro. Furious Kiro charged him and punched him between the eyes several times until he was down on the ground. At that point Kiro tried to give him a swift kick but the officer suddenly moved and rolled away.

Half bent over, Kiro saw a flash. It was the officer's bayonet reflecting the rising sun. Kiro suddenly jumped out of the way as the officer swung the big knife at his head. Kiro then kicked the officer's hand, dislodging the knife from it. Then in the same instant, Kiro punched the officer in the face, over and over again until he fell to the ground.

Kiro quickly retrieved his own bayonet and, in the manner in which he had been taught in school, he slipped the blade under the officer's main bone and held him tight with all his might. It felt as if he was crushing the officer's ribs but Kiro used all his strength to hold his opponent until he was no longer moving. Then the moment he put him down he saw the horror and pain in the dead officer's eyes.

When he regained his composure Kiro noticed that the shooting had died down. The battle was subsiding. He looked up at the hill. He saw the

Commander of the fourth line approaching slowly with a heavy and tired pace. They both had bruised faces and blood-stained uniforms. They sat next to each other.

"Did we take Lisets?" asked Kiro, spitting to the side.

"Of course we did. Let's go up there… I am sure they will regroup and attack us again. Get up!" replied the Commander.

At this very hill, near the bunkers and trenches barely fifteen meters away from them there were dead bodies. There was the stench of clotted blood and gunpowder. Wounded were moaning everywhere and calling for help. The sun had risen and was climbing high in the sky. Kiro shaded the sun from his eyes with his hand and looked down towards Iamata, Roto, Baro and Polenata. They were all covered with smoke. He looked to the south towards Mali-Madi and saw fire and flames everywhere. The airplanes were circling like vultures over carrion. They were firing machine gun bursts, rockets and dropping bombs. They would drop their bombs and fly away and others would come to take their place. While standing in front of a bunker, Kiro heard a hoarse voice. It was Pavle, one of his neighbours from his village.

"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 meters 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 at the foot of Lisets, on the western side of the slope and brought with them their wounded. The field medics took over and carried the wounded to the highway where trucks, with their engines running, waited 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.

The enemy fired bullets at them with both short and long machine gun bursts but they pressed on with only their heads bowed to avoid being hit. Thirsty, hungry, sleepy, they moved on ahead jumping over obstacles. Then, as they neared the enemy an order was given and quietly passed on from mouth to mouth: "Prepare your bayonet!" They crawled flat on their stomachs when they reached open space.

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. Like hail, mortars and cannon shells were hitting Lisets. 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 and ordered 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 and its echo was 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 he 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 meters 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 meters 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 his 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 packing 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…

The thick smoke generated by the cannon and mortar fire covering the mountains and valleys was blown away by the wind and the sky had opened up. The broken stones were warmed by the summer sun. No one was allowed to travel. The hill seemed dead. They were monitoring the region with binoculars from over yonder. They were combing every bush and every stone. The slightest movement awakened the cannons and the hill was on fire again. They burned the piles of broken rock. The days in August are long. Tired, numbed, faces glued to the ground, coiled they squatted in the shallow trenches. The sun was hot and the earth was burning. The Sergeant repeated the order: “Not a single step back, hold your ground to the last one!”

Every attempt to take a new position was met with death. There was not even 300 meters to the forest behind them. It would be safer there. The space between them and the forest was bare like a shaven head. The silence and anticipation was torturing them.

The earth was baked by the sun and burned by grenades. They broke stone with their dull pickaxes. They shoveled soil and broken stone with their bare hands. Their hands were raw, bleeding and full of sores. Their bodies baked, burned and blistered with bubbles full of yellow fluid.

"The trench is too shallow!" the Commander was heard saying.

"Do you see? Look," one of the fighters yelled. "How am I going to use these hands? How am I going to carry my ammunition? It's best you send me to the first line… I will be more useful there."

"Patience," said the Commander in a gentle tone of voice. "Give yourself a day or so and this here will be the first line. Now dig…"

"How can I dig with hands like these?" the fighter opened his hands in front of the Commander.

"Dig… You can dig even with hands like that. Dig and you will see how easy it will be when the cannon shells start falling on you. Dig, dig as deep as you can so there will be a place for you to hide your head. Then you will forget the pain in your hands… Dig now…" ordered the Commander.

All night they carried water from the brook and filled the newly dug trenches. Wet, the soil softened and was easier to scoop out. They dug and dug and kept an eye on the hill to their left. All night the machine guns fired with out interruption. It was dawn. The noise of flying aircraft was heard. Moments later the hill was covered in thick black smoke. Stacks of soil and fine stones were flying in the air as bombs hit the ground. After three circles the planes left and soon after that the artillery began to fire. It seemed like there was no end. Their ears hurt from the whistling of cannon shells flying over.

"Hey, you with the turban!" said the Commander. "Get off your butt and keep on digging!"

He lifted the pickaxe and at that very moment the whistling sounds of flying shells stopped. There was a strange silence in the air. He thought he had gone deaf. It seemed to him like someone was yelling in the distance. He dropped the pickaxe and turned towards the valley. There, down there at the bottom of the hill he could see spots, spots that moved with every heartbeat, grew and came closer. The hill was quiet, waiting. The spots grew larger.

The spots were now visible to the naked eye. They were sunlight reflected off the helmets, bayonets and machine gun barrels of enemy soldiers running.

Soldiers could clearly be seen running upright in rows yelling e-e-e-… He now understood what was happening. The enemy soldiers were yelling "Forward!" He could see a second and a third row of enemy soldiers.

Those in the first row were now leaning forward and seizing the bottom of the hill. But not so fast, machine gun fire was heard and the first row fell flat on the ground. The second row slowed down and the third row shortened its step.

The hill echoed. Thousands of hot bullets buried themselves into the hill entrance. How much time had passed since the fire invigorated the hill? He didn't know but he could see the opponent withdrawing and he could hear thunder again… The hill was covered in smoke. The wind blew the smoke away. It thundered again. The cannons stopped firing. The enemy infantry charged. Bent forward soldiers made their way towards the hill all hidden in the smoke. The wind blew the smoke away. The artillery thundered again. It stopped thundering…

He watched the soldiers run uphill again and again and heard the volleys of machine gun fire and explosions of hand grenades pushing them back.

"So, the hillside is alive, our fighters are still alive..." he muttered to himself, spit on his hands, raised the pickaxe and hit the rock with all his might.

Orders came during the night to leave the hill… Before that a rider came and ordered the men to take out the mines so that those leaving could pass through safely. Those who had planted the mines unfortunately were not there and there was no one to tell them where the mines were planted. There was also no one to tell them which path was safe to take. They walked straight into the minefields ... From the 28 that were sent to defend the new positions only five returned alive...

At another location.

The Commander of the Government Second Corps gave an order to Division IX to attack well-established DAG positions at the Kosinets and Labanitsa Hills. The attacks were to take place during the night of August 11-12.

The road to the village Smrdesh passed through the Labanitsa hills and so did the highway from Korcha to Lerin. So, Division IX's task was to destroy all resistance between the villages Labanitsa and Kosinets and take the village Smrdesh. The idea was to close the road to Mali-Madi in order to prevent resistance reinforcements from getting through.

After that Division IX was to secure the road Smrdesh-Breznitsa-Zhelevo and close the escape route from Vicho so that existing DAG units would find themselves surrounded.

In order to strengthen Division IX's attack capability, the 42nd Infantry Brigade and two Artillery Regiments, stationed in the village Tikveni, were placed at its disposal. They were ordered to join Division IX in the morning hours of August 11th.

The column of trucks took its time slowly moving down the Chetirok-Sveta Nedela-Osheni-Dolno Papratsko road where, in Krchishta, at a

designated location, it was to join up with two Battalions from the 41st Brigade.

Unfortunately Division IX arrived at its destination too late and, while attempting to deploy, was suddenly bombarded by DAG artillery stationed over Labanitsa basin near the Albanian border.

Because of the unexpected delay, Government Division IX failed to surprise the enemy. The plan was to have Division IX, in the course of the evening hours, synchronize its attacks with Brigade 41. Brigade 41 was to break through the hills that divided Kosinets and Labanitsa and take Smrdesh. Brigade 42 meanwhile was ordered to protect the left flank to the north along the Greek-Albanian border. Brigade 43 was to take the Kosinets hills. But because the artillery failed to take its positions in a timely manner, to execute a half hour bombardment, the entire plan was delayed.

The synchronized attacks were then rescheduled to commence at 21.00 hours, but the artillery again failed to execute its bombardment on time, so the attack was delayed again and did not commence until 24.00 hours.

A vicious battle followed, with opponents fighting in close proximity for approximately five hours. The battle lasted until 05.00 hours, August 12th when all attacks were suspended because Brigade 41 could not break through the resistance at the Kosinets-Labanitsa hills. At that point the Brigade was ordered to penetrate Albanian territory, enter Smrdesh from the hills west of the village Labanitsa, close the road to Albania and prevent DAG units from escaping.

Unfortunately during the Albanian border penetration the Greek Government Brigade invaded the villages Trstenik and Kapeshtina on the Albanian side of the border. Here it was met with stiff resistance from the Albanian Army, DAG Units and the armed civilian population. Greek Government forces were pushed back and withdrew from Albanian territory but not before suffering heavy casualties.

Government forces had no choice but to retreat and regroup. By noon they were again ready to go on the offensive. Then, after vicious air and artillery attacks on DAG positions, the three Division IX Brigades launched their attacks at 21.00 hours, August 12th. But, even with their renewed vigour, they still had no success penetrating west of the River Belitsa. Division IX's progress was again hampered that day and with 350 officers and soldiers lost, its ability to engage in further combat was diminished. August 12th was not a successful day for the Government army.

DAG forces, at least for this day, managed to hold on to their current positions but not without great sacrifices. After the attacks, DAG reinforced its internal defenses in hopes of preventing the opponent from taking Smrdesh and from blocking its escape route to Albania.

The next day, on August 13th, Division III Government Units were taken from Chuka and Lisets and sent to Preval and Vrba. After capturing

the hills to the left and right of Preval, without significant resistance from the opposition, they continued their advance to the village Orovnik. On their way they established control of the Breznitsa-Zhelevo-Psoderi road, closing the gap on the opponent.

During the afternoon of the same day, DAG Units took up combat positions at the westernmost hills in Mali-Madi and on the elongated Mazi Hill, elevation 1,676, to the right of Prevolot, in order to secure the withdrawal of the larger DAG units.

A general withdrawal of DAG units began the morning of August 14th. They were headed towards the village Smrdesh, the mountains Vrba and Preval and towards Lake Mala Prespa. All units located north of Prevolot and everything down to Bela Voda, were headed in the direction of the villages P'pli, Rudari, Shtrkovo, German and R'bi. Their objective was to quickly pass the valley between the two Prespa lakes and cross the lake peninsula. Units south of Preval retreated in the direction of the villages Vmbel, Smrdesh and the Albanian border.

Overpowered, frantic, exasperated and bitter they were under constant attack from aircraft, artillery and tanks.

On the evening of August 14, with the exception of the Prespa Lake peninsula, the entire Prespa basin was under Government army control.

The Great Lie – Chapter 24

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. Engraved 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 a stepped up 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, he 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 one beside the other, 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 spit to the side, puffed and spit 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 machinegun? 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 shoulder. 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,

like 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 beechwood 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 ‘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 and began 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 ship, filled with men like him, set off from Solun and after two days of being whipped and abused, the prisoners were offloaded onto the dry Aegean Island, Aegina. He spent an entire year, with hundreds of people like him, breaking stones and building a new prison. This time too, like the last time he was in prison, there were those who filled his head with communist ideas. He listened well and looked forward to a brighter future.

One day the party instructor asked: "In what language do you speak with your friends?"

"In Macedonian…" he replied.

"Is there such a language?" asked the instructor.

"For us, yes there is, but for some others… maybe there isn't…" replied the man.

"Are you not Greek citizens?" asked the instructor.

"On our land, Comrade, we have our native (mother tongue) and a state language. We have our own life and our own affairs. We also have two names and two surnames. One name is for our home, for our neighbours and for the entire village to use, the state uses the other [Greek] name. To some the state gave new names and to others it added the endings 'os', 'is' and 'ou'. And this way 'Popovski' became 'Papadopoulos', 'Ristovski' became 'Hristidis', 'Petrovski' became 'Petrou'… 'Petre' – 'Petros', 'Yane' – 'Yannis', and so on… The teacher, the policeman, the judge, etc., call us by that [Greek] name. It is the same here on this desolate island, the prison guards and our Greek communist comrades call us by the state name… And you, our Greek communist comrades, have now given us another name; 'Slavo-Macedonians'…

The name given to us by the state is in all our papers; government, church, military, police, prison, etc. We use our [Macedonian] names at home, in the fields, in the local market and with our friends and relatives… There, at our place, at home, we are known as Popovtsi, Nakovtsi, Petrovtsi… We were this way during Turkish times. We spoke our native language for centuries. We understood one another, we argued with one another and we made peace with each other, we shared our joy and we buried our departed in that language… That's the way it was, Comrade…

The Greek language, on the other hand, we learned under duress, with beatings, salted herring and castor oil…" concluded the man.

"Are there no Greek schools where you come from?" asked the instructor.

“Yes there are. There are schools, kindergartens and nursery schools. All the children are gathered there so that the parents can go to work without worry… And at night, all the adults go to night school and learn Greek by force and others of course learn the Greek language in prisons…” replied the man.

“This will not happen in a communist society…” said the instructor.

“We will see… Let me tell you this; there, at our places all villages, rivers, lakes, mountains, etc., have two names just like the people...” replied the man.

It was October 1940. Italy had declared war on Greece and the Party called: “All communists to the front.” The man was among the first to request to go. They freed him.

“Here the state spends money on them to rot,” said the camp commander, “let them go there and get killed, from one side it’s the same, but from another, let them prove how much they love their fatherland.”

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 28 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 and returned 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 like 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 determination. 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 at 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 Great Lie – Chapter 25

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. At 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 did they send 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 in 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 begin to scream and wail in their own language because only through it they can 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 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, in 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 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

was still unable. 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 grow 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 of 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.

On August 14th the bridge near the local tower, where the water flows from the large into the small Lake Prespa, was destroyed and DAG units from the 14th Brigade were left behind, cut off from their escape route. Along with them were also fleeing civilians who hid in the reeds between the bridge and the village Rabi. (There is a span of 5 kilometers from the bridge to Rabi). Here is where DAG's greatest drama, outside of the Lerin battle, unfolded where defenseless people bravely fought with their will and bare hands. Here is where tens of low flying fighter planes unleashed terror with their bombs, rockets and machine gun fire. After the planes were finished the tanks, cannons and mortars were unleashed. And when they were done, the Greek Government unleashed their LOK (Special Forces) and Mountain Units which fiercely pursued the DAG fighters. They shot and killed all the wounded.

In the morning of August 15th, DAG detonation specialists blew up the bridge between the two lakes. All hope for those living and wounded DAG fighters left behind was lost. Those attempting to swim across the lake were killed by flying aircraft. Others fought their way to the last bullet and then hid in the sand and amongst the reeds. The slaughter continued all day on August 14th. Part of the 14th Brigade that had defended Bela Voda, using the thick willow trees near the lake's coast for cover, put up a fierce fight and after dark, slipped away and withdrew to the Yugoslav border. Yugoslav officers at the border proposed that the DAG fighters surrender their weapons as a condition for entering Yugoslav territory. The fighters, after long and fruitless discussions, refused. Being given some food and water they divided themselves into three units and, during the night, retreated to Bela Voda.

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 though 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 passes 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 at intervals of five minutes 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 dammed, 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, candle lights 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.

Behind them quietly, a village church bell was heard ringing intermittently. Three times and all night dong-dong-dong… ringing three times for everyone in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN…

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.