A Little Sad for the Old Country

By Victor Bivell

A long time ago I used to joke that every Macedonian in the world has a relative in Melbourne. At the time I had some first cousins and their families there, and I had heard there were a few other more distant relatives. Little did I know. A few years ago I started doing family trees of my four grandparents, and what an eye-opener that has been. I now know I have many hundreds of relatives in Australia, Europe and North America as well as in Macedonia and northern Greece. And, almost suddenly, I have a lot more relatives in Melbourne, far more than I ever imagined.

I grew up in Perth and live in Sydney. I mention Melbourne because I have been visiting the city, usually once a year, for over 30 years. Last month I had dinner there with two third cousins and one of their husbands. I had only found out about them through doing the family trees and it was the first time I had met them. Our host was another cousin and her husband, whom I had met as adults only two or three years earlier. All of our families, except the husband of one of the third cousins, are from our village of Neret in Aegean Macedonia. So we had a lot to talk about. It was a wonderful evening that started early and finished late with no let up in the great conversation.

The next day I had lunch with two other third cousins from our village and the husband of one of them who is from a nearby village. Like the previous night's cousins, I had only found out about them through doing the family trees and it was the first time I had met them. And like the previous night's dinner, the conversation didn't stop and lunch turned into a long lunch that finished over four hours later in the early evening.

A few months earlier I visited Melbourne for a funeral and met four brothers who are third cousins. Last year I visited Melbourne and separately met with another three second and third cousins. Again, all of these cousins were people I found out about through doing the family trees and had never met before.

I am glad to say that all of these 'new' cousins are good people. All of them are friendly and interesting. And I am especially impressed that all of them are caring people. They care for their families, and they care for Macedonia and the Macedonian people.

Give or take 10 or so years, all of us are of a similar age. So as I left dinner late in the evening, and again the next day as I left lunch late in the afternoon, I couldn't help but feel a little sad. We are all from the same village, I am related to all of these people, our parents and grandparents knew each other and lived with each other, yet until recently I didn't even know these cousins existed. Had our parents and grandparents not left the village, we would have been kids together, we would have grown up together, we would have known each other all of our lives.

Instead, I had to wait until I was in my late fifties and early sixties to find out these people existed and to meet them. Instead of being lifetime relatives and friends, I am lucky to have met them in later life and to have enjoyed a few hours of warm and friendly talk catching up

on our extended family and beautiful village. If I am lucky, I may get a few more wonderful hours. Not a lifetime, but a few hours here and there.

And I have many more second, third and fourth cousins and their families in Australia, North America and many countries in Europe. Some I may meet. Most I will never meet.

Such is the unknown, silent, evil price we pay every day for the division of Macedonia, for the way our people were conquered, divided, and scattered around the world.

It doesn't have to stay that way. I hope that we can undo some of this tragedy. I hope the uncounted tens of thousands and possibly more broken Macedonian families around the world can start to reconnect and slowly grow closer together again.

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