

The Refugee Children

Detsa Begaltsi

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February 2003

A woman walks with quick pace towards the village cemetery. She is around 50 years old and her pace is stable and decisive. She seems to know well her way round. Two men in some distance from each other follow her with the same pace and determination; they look rather older. The woman opens the small iron gate, looks right and left, as if she was trying to recognize something or to orient herself and then walks with certainty to the center. Once she is almost there, she turns to the right, slows down her pace and starts to look carefully at the ground, as if she was searching for something she had lost. The two men follow her, tracing the same route. Suddenly they realize that all the three are at the same place since they are at breathing distance from each other. All three of them look for something among the grey erect gravestones. They look each other right in the eyes. The glances of the two others reminded something to each one and a thought electrified all the three. The woman utters the phrase: “majka mi” (my mother). The two men also utter the same words and simultaneously with tears in their eyes, with cries and sobs, the two men shout the name “Jana” and the woman the names “Laze” and “Lesko”. They embrace each other and fall upon some earthed-up plaques that seemed to be a grave. The three bodies were shaking over the grave. The erect grey gravestones that marked the place of tombs looked as if they have awoken from a longstanding lethargy, because it seemed that all were raising their height to observe and understand what was going on with the bundle of the three persons that were sometimes woefully crying and uttering words in three different languages and sometimes look at each other insatiably.

We had heard that the children of the refugees and those forcibly recruited and taken away by the army would be coming to our village. Some had heard it from the television and some confirmed it since they had read it in the newspapers; in fact, they said, they shall not come only to our village, but to the entire Macedonia. Some commented the news saying ‘Why they want to come and see our misery? Aren’ t they well-off where they are settled?’ Others said “They want to take away from us our fortunes, which of course belonged once to their parents, but the State then granted them to us; we have papers, we have titles”. Others got furious, because some newspapers were writing that “these were autonomists and want our Macedonia. They will make, as it is said, one state with Skopje”. «Yes», said the more sober-minded ones «they will come down with helicopters, they will load Macedonia on them and move it further north! Let the children come and see, those

who were born here, where they cut their umbilical chord, where did they parents live, where are the graves of their ancestors and how at the end of the day is their place of origin. This is homesickness, you people, ‘nostos’, haven’t you heard anything like that before? Those of you who did not go abroad have never felt that feeling. Besides, most of them are our relatives. Aren’t you even curious to see them, to hear them? And don’t think that those who come will be children; most will be in their fifties, if not older. Don’t forget that in 1948 we got desolated».

Discussions were held then and again at the village coffee shop. Some received letters as well, others spoke on the telephone and the news that initially had upset us was blunted and some started to comment on it positively and then all concluded: “On the other hand, they are our own children, our relatives, our cousins, some are our brothers”. It was even suggested that we organize some formal welcome for them “and why not, they are our own people”.

With the correspondence and the phone calls the news was enriched. We learnt that children from various countries shall be coming, even from Australia and Canada. Those who were younger were asking how is it possible that there are people in the entire world who originate from our tiny village. “Our village Сетина, Skopiá as it is called nowadays”, said the older and more informed ones, “was a big village once. It had a population of almost 2000 people, together with Papadija, Kalivia and the other villages of Kajmakalan. All those pasturing grounds nearby were then fields sown with rye. Thousands of sheep and kettle kept our villagers busy. Each summer two parochial field guards were appointed so that the fields were not damaged. The villagers were not cultivating the same fields every year. When they were cultivating that ‘exposed to the sun’, the one ‘not exposed to the sun’ was used for pasture and vice versa next year. All the villagers had fields and folds of both categories.

The fact of the forthcoming visit livened up the discussions about our village, their history and our memories. The day when the ‘children’ would be coming was the feast of Saint Nicholas ‘the summery’ on the 20th of May, the day when we have our little fair at the chapel of Saint Nicholas¹; indeed, soon after the Divine Liturgy had commenced, they started to enter the chapel one by one and somehow timidly. Upon entering they would rather looked straight to the eyes the other people, than the Icons of the Saints. Perhaps, they were hoping that a glance might remind them of something or they could recognize someone. With respect and a little bit

¹ This is the feast of the translation of the relics of St. Nicholas from Myra (the city in modern Turkey where he was a Bishop) to Bari in Italy. According to the calendar of the Slav Orthodox Churches it is celebrated on May 9/22 and it is a very popular holiday (*Летен Св. Никола*). In Greece it is celebrated in certain monasteries of Mount Athos, in some of the Ionian islands and parts of Peloponnesus, as well as in some villages of Epirus, Thessaly and Macedonia on various dates (May 9, 10, 20 or 22) depending on local traditions; it is not however a major feast of the Greek Orthodox Church and it is virtually unknown in the Aegean islands, in Crete and Cyprus.

awkwardly they were lighting candles at the candlesticks, they were making the sign of the cross, some were kissing the Icons and perhaps were making a wish or saying a prayer. The chapel soon was full and thus most of them stayed outside. Many were equipped with cameras and video-cameras.

Tables were set and food was served for everybody and especially for the guests. The visitors were treated with great willingness; in fact many of them were once hosted at the hospice of Saint Nicholas when they were children. Some of them remembered old Tanas, the one who looked after them when they were children and their parents were working at villages near Saint Nicholas' chapel.

From very old times Saint Nicholas' chapel had a hospice which hosted passers-by and those who were working nearby, particularly when there was a sudden shower. The income of the chapel has always been from voluntary offers and that custom went on until today.

The 'children' were scattered in groups, almost all had found their relatives, they were chatting, taking photographs and recording with the video-camera. Emotional scenes were taking place when an old woman was 'discovering' her grandchildren or even her great-grand-children. Some of the children had difficulty in communicating with the others, since they did not know Greek and had forgotten their mother tongue. Thus, children from Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Canada, Australia and other countries, were uttering words with difficulty and their participation was limited to some names, smiles, nods of head and some times they were asking for interpreters. They were enjoying the food of their motherland and asserted they were pleased, although the step-mother countries had got them used to other tastes.

Once they had finished eating, they boarded the coaches and headed to the village. They were dispersed at the village, they were taking photographs, they were videotaping the ruins that might have been their house, whereas some were taking a stone or a slate from the ruins. The village was revived!

A group, following my invitation, came to my house for a treat – *na rakija*- and we sat at the veranda. I asked them what they would like to drink: some asked for coffee, however most of them preferred local rakija.

They asked various questions and I was answering all that I could, given that we had approximately the same age; thus I did not know the refugee fellow-villagers and they did not know those of us who had stayed behind. They were however certain families who had been divided and so we could find common points of interest. I was impressed that certain pictures were indelible in their memories,

although fifty years had passed. They knew Kajmakcalan, Visima and almost all the mountains around the village. They remembered the river and some were looking for certain trees or large quartz stones that were scattered in the village. The atmosphere would alternate from emotion to laughter.

Often they would press me with details I did not know, as where were their fields, how many animals they had, which one was their house and the like. I did remind them that I was of the same age with them and whatever they remember of our village before the Civil War, that is what I also remember myself.

Suddenly strange voices were heard from the village cemetery which is near my house. Sometimes they were heard as cries of despair and at other times like laments. We could not understand what was going on. Out of curiosity and fear lest something bad had happened to someone, some of us got up and went to the cemetery; soon they returned together with three persons, a woman and two men who walked embraced and were constantly changing position and trying to utter a few words, even though the sobs would not let them do so. They sat with us at the veranda and asked for water.

I had already seen these three persons at St. Nicholas' and, now that I was looking at them more closely, I observed that they were looking quite similar to each other; the most strange was that they could not understand each other and thus, necessarily, had to speak to each other via interpreters. Fortunately the 'children' were from many countries and were thus covering a broad range of languages.

At the veranda of my house, after a temporary upset, their story started to unwind; we were understanding more from their body language, than from what was said by the interpreters. Lesko, who was the oldest, helped us with Macedonian which he knew pretty well, as in Czechoslovakia he had attended lessons about our language. The memories of all three of them concerning the village started from their mother's funeral and her grave and ended there again.

Their mother died at childbirth when Jana was 4 years old, Lesko 8 and Lazo 6. Jana, who is now a doctor, was explaining that the most possible cause of death for their mother would have been a dead fetus whom she was carrying and that must have been due to some blood disorder their mother was suffering from, something Jana had also detected in herself. They held their mother's funeral and then stayed with their grandmother, inasmuch their father was a rebel fighter and left his bones in Mount Vici.. The three children for months used to visit their mother's grave, it had become some sort of play for them and that is the reason they never forgot its location.

And then there came the recruitment of children that was done in the 'free territories' that were then under the control of the Democratic Army by the rebel fighters, and in the other areas where the National Army was the 'sovereign' by the Royal Providence.

The three children were given all at one go by their grandmother to the Democratic Army officers, because, as she believed even herself, they would be safer, since they would not be in danger because of the atrocities of the Civil War and, moreover, they had promised to her that the children would be looked after and educated.

The three kids throughout the route to the borders were together and the boys many times carried in their arms little Jana. They were received at the borders by a special mission of the Socialist Republics and a first separation occurred. Thus, they initially separated boys from girls. Jana was finally led to Hungary, where she was at first offered hospitality in children hostels. In the mid-50's, they asked the children if they had any relatives in other socialist countries so they could go and live with them. Jana, who did not know if she had any relatives or where her relatives could have been, was left 'unclaimed' and then a Hungarian family volunteered to adopt her. The family was childless and thus Jana, who was renamed 'Emma', became a member of that family and was brought up as their true child. She studied medicine and made her own family. Nevertheless, she never forgot her mother's grave and her two brothers. When she read the invitation to the 'deca begalci' to visit their land, she responded. At the border control she had no problem, since her passport, first name and family name were all Hungarian.

Lazo got ill from measles on the way and stayed at some hospital of Yugoslavia. When he recovered he was taken to Romania; from Romania, after he had finished High School he managed to emigrate to Canada. There he became naturalized as a Canadian citizen under the name John Lazo.

He became a very good mechanical engineer, prospered and got married. He was childless and that was due to the measles he had become infected with when travelling through Yugoslavia. When he found out the children's movement to visit their land he asked to take part with great joy and there he is now with his brother and sister, something he had always had as a secret hope kept inside him.

Lesko was found in Czechoslovakia along with Greek children, he was the oldest, he remembered his first name and his surname and thus he kept them. He also remembered the name of his village and he declared it as place of birth when he got naturalized in Czechoslovakia. It had never crossed his mind that to know your name and land of origin causes problems. The consular authorities however were

of the opinion that there was not any village with such name in Greece, since the name of the village had been changed. After many difficulties he eventually got a visa, but that did not free him from all troubles, as he was kept for a few hours at the borders, whilst the officers were checking his documents.

The sun was ready to set and the three 'children' sitting close to each other started to talk about their own affairs. They were talking about their kids, their homes and their lives. That day of May was creating a most appropriate scenery for a happy and totally unexpected meeting. Today the three of them were living something they could not even imagine or dream about..

The 'children' came and most of them did not see something of what they remembered: the only changeless things were the churches, the cemetery and the nearby mountains. Some of them left feeling bitter and disgusted from the behavior of some settlers and new owners, who did not let them enter their houses, the places where they were born. They bid us farewell with the promise to come back again. We were seeing them boarding the coaches and felt guilty that we could live in our land and they had been converted to foreigners, mere visitors of their motherland.