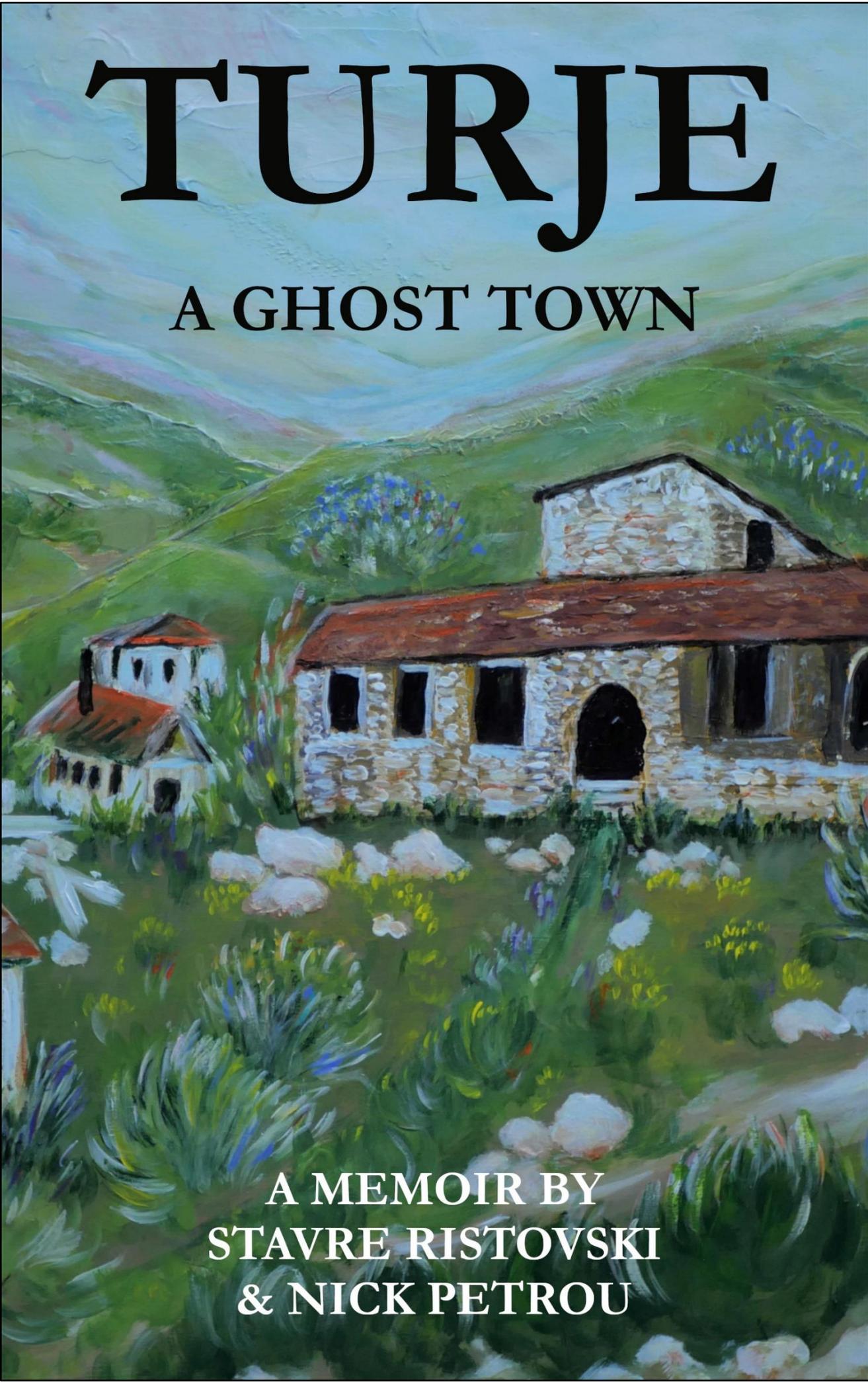


# TURJE

A GHOST TOWN

A painting of a ghost town in a valley. The scene is dominated by a large, two-story stone building with a dark, tiled roof and several dark, empty window openings. To its left, a smaller, similar stone building is visible. The foreground is filled with lush green vegetation, including tall grasses and various flowers in shades of blue, purple, and yellow. The background shows rolling green hills under a pale, overcast sky. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a soft, atmospheric quality.

A MEMOIR BY  
STAVRE RISTOVSKI  
& NICK PETROU

## **Turje: A Ghost Town**

The memoir of Stavre Ristovski, accounting for his childhood in Macedonia and immigration to Australia

Written by Stavre Ristovski and Nick Petrou.

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## **My Story**

The village of Turje, built among the mountains of Macedonia, is home only to ghosts. The world grew smaller, and the villagers sought an easier life overseas, my family among them. But even now, at 80 years of age, I can see Turje as though I am still there, waiting for my father to return from cutting timber or for my brother to return from war. I am Stavre Ristovski, and this is my story.



## Turje

My father, Risto, and mother, Jana, had seven children before they had me. Their eldest, Georgi, was born 25 years before me, and three of their children (Mara, their first Sotir, and Fanija) hardly had a chance to live, succumbing to basic illnesses not so long after they were born. My mother birthed me at home on the 10th of August 1941, the youngest of her five surviving children. Such was life in Turje.

Turje stood near the city of Lerin (Florina) in Greek Macedonia. Now the village goes by Koryfi or "the ghost town" and falls to ruin. Our dialect of Macedonian was of the Slavonic language family and had most in kind with Bulgarian. Despite the Greek-language school the older children were made to attend five days a week, we spoke Macedonian in the village, where we carved out a life from the land and lived as one big family. Everybody knew everybody.

Turje was a village of some 140 stone-and-mud-bricked homes built among the mountains some 2,000 meters above sea level. Rivers ran through the village, and the surrounding forest-covered mountains sheltered the paddocks and fields below, where we tended to our livestock and crops. There were no sealed roads, only beaten tracks. If the weather permitted it, the trek to the closest major city, Lerin, took three hours on foot, and you would never go alone. Wolves and bears stalked the mountains, and whenever we thought of leaving the safety of our village, we recalled the story of our postman, whom the wolves dragged away. As such, we lived very isolated and communal lives, dictated in all ways by the seasons.

Winter was hard, though not without joy. Snow and blizzards made leaving Turje all but impossible. The closest hospital was in Lerin, and we had no medicine. A spoon of olive oil or some garlic and hot water would alleviate a sore throat. Olive oil was a remedy for an earache, too. That was it. Anything more serious than that became a matter of life and death. We sheared sheep

and produced our clothing on the loom, using needles and buttons we'd purchased in the city. Wool was heavy but versatile. In winter it would keep us warm; in summer it would keep us cool. We wouldn't go outside without gloves in winter, and often we let our pets and livestock into the house, too. They would sleep in the above-ground cellar while my family shared a single bedroom on the floor above. Otherwise, the cold or the wolves would get them. Little black-and-white birds tapped on our windows when the land froze over, as Mum would often leave bread crumbs for them on the window ledges (we Macedonians love our animals). Despite the cold, Turje's children couldn't wait to get outside, often waking before the sun; the starlight reflecting off the snow made it bright as day. We had snowball fights and made snowmen and sled down the hills in the same wooden troughs we washed our clothes in. By the time our parents woke, we were soaked. But that was okay—we had a whole other set of clothes. Luckily, we children didn't have to work. Our parents took care of that, planting the rye and wheat before the snow arrived. The seeds would remain dormant until the snow melted in spring and they germinated.

Spring was the best time of the year, and most welcomed by the farmers. But it brought dangers, too. The bears came out of hibernation, and the melting snow bloated the rivers. The danger of getting swept away was very real. One summer, it rained and rained, and the rivers swelled. My Uncle Todor's father was working near a river when the torrents swept him into it. The villagers found his body three kilometres downstream and returned him to the village on a blanket. My memory of the village women crying still brings me to tears.

Our harvesting season was late summer to early autumn. The farmers would bring the rye from the fields to some flat land in the village and tie an ox, donkey, or horse to a wooden post in the centre. The animal walked in circles, crushing the rye and releasing the grain from the husk. One time, my second oldest brother, Stoiche, born in 1931, left me to guard the grain from the chooks. Stoiche left for a minute, and being a child, I ran off to play. The

beating he gave me when he found me is still fresh in my mind, as are the songs the village women used to sing when they would sit in circles grinding corn from the cob—songs of love and patriotism. We children helped with the harvest in our own way. In gangs, we would go out and raid our neighbours' trees for cherries, apples, pears, and even quince in late autumn. One kid would be the lookout while the rest of us climbed the trees for the sweetest fruit. I was never lacking for playmates.

Turje, as I have said, was very much a commune. We sang and danced and held many celebrations. The whole village was invited to every wedding. Whatever we could produce ourselves, we did. For things we couldn't produce, such as salt, sugar, and oil, we would have to go to the city. While many of the adults worked the land, some had specialist occupations, working as kovachi (blacksmiths) berber (barbers), for example. The miller owned the watermill on the river, and the other villagers would pay him to mill their grain. My grandfather was a tailor. In 1910, he ventured to America—a month-long voyage—with my young father to learn his trade. Returning to Macedonia, he put it into practice. This was how Turje acquired new skills, and often the villagers would pool their money to send someone abroad. My grandfather also learnt the value of a good education during his trip to America and decided that his daughters, including my mother, Jana, should go to school just like the boys. If it wasn't for my mother's wit and intellect, this memoir may have been very different. As a trade, my brother Stoiche—the one who beat me for running off to play instead of watching the grain—made latischcha (wooden frames) for cartwheels while he was in the village and then took them on a mule to sell in Lerin. He did this so we had the money to buy the things we couldn't produce ourselves. My father often worked away for this same reason.

Many of the men from Turje joined my father in this. They would travel to Agios Oros in Greece and work with Greeks, Bulgarians, Russians and men of other nationalities to cut and saw timber for use at one of the eight nearby monasteries or to sell elsewhere. They went in the summer and worked for as

long as the warmer Mediterranean climate permitted. When Dad came home, he told me stories about the wolves and bears he'd killed. He often went hunting in the wilderness surrounding Turje as well, mostly for hares, sometimes boars.

Dad was a fine hunter and kept a hunting dog, a beagle. As soon as Dad went to get his shotgun from beside the front door, the dog would be out the door and halfway up the village, barking with excitement. Whenever the dog chased a hare, the hare would bolt far away and then bury itself in the snow, where the dog couldn't follow. When the dog gave up, the hare would return in a circle to where the chase started so that the dog would lose the hare's trail. Dad understood this behaviour, and would always wait where the chase started instead of pursuing the hare with the dog. When the hare came back, Dad would get it with his shotgun. That's how a good hunter thinks. We ate a lot of rabbit stew.

The men hunted boars in teams and shot slugs from their guns instead of pellets. If they didn't stand on higher ground than the boars, the boars could easily rip them to shreds with their tusks. When the men got a boar, they would cut it up and put it in a barrel of salt, layer upon layer. This would help the village through the winter periods. We did the same thing with domestic pigs.

Dad's shotgun saved his life more than once. When my brother Stoiche was just 10 years old, he was helping Dad till a field when they heard the crack of gunshots in the forest. A moment later, a bear barreled out of the trees, pursued by the hunters and running straight for Stoiche and Dad. Dad had the shotgun and told Stoiche to pick up an axe. He said, "Stand next to me. If the shotgun doesn't kill it, you'll have to give me the axe." My brother was so frightened he wet himself. Dad shot the bear point-blank, but it didn't go down. It ran right past them, and fled. The villagers found the bear dead in the mountains a few days later. They salvaged its ears and feet, which they later hung up to scare off evil spirits.

I have mentioned Stoiche several times, but he was just *one* of my four living siblings. Georgi, 25 years older than me, got married in 1936 and stayed in Turje. More than anything, he wanted to become a priest and sing in the village church. But when the Second World War spread across Europe, everything changed, including Georgi. He fought in the Yugoslav People's Army, and this experience helped to shape him into the fighter he became in the civil war that was yet to come. Stojanka, born in 1924, was my second oldest sibling. She left Turje when I was young, and went to live in the village of Mala, near Lerin. My brother Sotir, born in 1936, was the closest in age to me. We played together in the village, and I always looked up to him, especially when the Greek Civil War tore our family apart. Before that, we enjoyed the relative comforts of our little clay-tiled home among the mountains.

On the top floor of our house, we had a rogozina (platted straw mat), and we slept on the ground between velence (heavy woollen blankets). Mum and Dad slept together when Dad was home, and I slept under the same blanket as my brothers. Other than our bedroom, the top floor of our house included a combined kitchen and living room and a small balcony. We often ate from one big pot of beans in the middle of our table. Downstairs in the cellar was where we stored things like flour (which we kept in wooden boxes to stop the mice from getting to it), and sometimes, as I have said, our livestock slept down there, too. At night, we sat around our fireplace, and whenever Dad was home, he told us bedtime stories. That was how we entertained ourselves. I especially enjoyed it when my Dedo Kole, my father's father, visited. He used to love me because I was the youngest, and he always smoked a pipe. He'd say, "Stavre, go and get me an ember so I can light my pipe." I would take an ember from the fire and put it in his pipe, and he'd let me sit on his shoulders while he smoked it. I used to slap his bald head like a bongo drum, and laugh and laugh.

These were happy times, but I suppose I didn't understand some of the things that were going on around me—how much the Greeks were

influencing our lives. I mentioned Turje's Greek-language school earlier; Stoiche was the only one from our family in the right age bracket to go there. He went five days a week and was made to speak Greek and sing Greek songs. The church made us sing in Greek too, and held Greek services. Technically, the Greek Civil War started in 1943, but it only started to take a serious toll on our lives in 1946, when I was five years old.

## Civil War

For hundreds of years, Macedonia was a part of the Ottoman Empire. In the First Balkan War in 1912 and 1913, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro banded together to drive the Turks out of the Balkans, Macedonia included. But Macedonia wasn't free. Some of it went to Serbia, some to Greece, and some to Bulgaria. The Serbians weren't oppressive. They let the Macedonians keep their schools and religions. The Greeks and Bulgarians said there was no such thing as Macedonia as a country, and Greek Macedonia became official in August 1913, after the Second Balkan War, in which Bulgaria turned on Serbia and Greece, and lost. Then the Greeks tried to get all of the Macedonians out of Greece. They changed people's names (Petrev became Petrou, for instance). They renamed villages and towns, mountains and rivers. Anything Slavic became Greek.

In the Second World War, the Axis invaded and occupied Greece, and Georgi went off to fight the Germans in the Yugoslav People's Army. Greece suffered terribly, and many different resistance organisations fought against the Axis and each other. The largest organisation, EAM (with ELAS, its military wing) answered to the Communist Party of Greece. After the Axis occupation ended in October 1944, fighting among the resistance organisations continued, and from 1946 to 1949, the communist partisans fought the Kingdom of Greece and its Hellenic Army. This was the bloodiest phase of the Greek Civil War. It was during this time that the communists came to the people in Greek Macedonia and said, "We will give you your schools. We will give you your language. We will free you. You will be a nation within a nation." Really, they just wanted more men to fight the monarchy. With weapons from Yugoslavia, the communists began arming Macedonian sons, fathers, and brothers—often by force. Georgi *chose* to fight, however. He wanted recognition and freedom for Macedonia. He sent his wife and two children to the Serbian part of Macedonia and became a partisan commander

in 1946. I'm not sure what horrors he faced in that time; we were frightened enough in Turje as it was.

The surrounding settlements were bombarded, and many innocent people were killed. We couldn't leave to get supplies, and lived under a blanket of fear. If the Greeks didn't come for our men, the partisans would. That didn't break my father's spirits, though. When Dad wasn't working away, he ran a Macedonian school inside our little house and took charge of the village. He taught us not to wear bright clothes in the fields, to run into the forest if we heard planes, and to lie flat if we heard bombs. He trained the village to survive, and Stoiche and Sotir helped. My brothers worked as lookouts on the outskirts of the village, watching for soldiers. I was too young to join them.

When Dad was at Agios Oros one time, Mum saved him from a beating—or worse. About ten men from Turje were at Agios Oros with him when he received a letter from Mum just before he was set to return. She wrote something along the lines of "Risto, stay there another season. Everything is okay at home. We brought in the harvest. Stay a bit longer." Dad read the letter to his friends, and they started laughing at him, saying, "You haven't got much to harvest; you haven't got any sheep." Dad listened to Mum, and when the rest of the men returned to the village, the Greeks seized the men and whipped them until they bled. The villagers wrapped the men in sheepskins to ease the pain. When it was all over and Dad was home, the wounded men told Mum that her letter had saved Dad. You see, the letter was an on-the-fly code. Dad knew Mum wouldn't have brought in the harvest yet; he knew something was up.

Mum was very smart and taught herself to read and write Greek. With her help, Dad evaded the Greeks on more than one occasion. One day, we had a male relative visit our house; he was about the same age as my father.<sup>1</sup> While our relative was there, two men in plain clothes knocked at our door. As was customary back then, my parents told the men to come in and sit down. Dad

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<sup>1</sup> I can't remember who our visiting relative was, unfortunately.

was immediately suspicious. Who were these men? Were they Greek police in disguise? While the mysterious men were talking, my father stood to get a glass of water, and when the men weren't paying attention, Dad slipped out the front door. At this point, the mysterious men asked for Risto (my father) because they weren't sure if Risto was our visiting relative or the man who had just slipped out the door. Mum then told Stoiche to go and find Dad, and Stoiche realised that Mum was up to something because Dad had just left the house. Stoiche also realised that *he* might be in danger. Pretending to go and look for Dad, Stoiche ran into the forest and hid, and our visiting relative soon revealed himself as someone other than Risto. Unable to find my father, the men left empty-handed. If they had been able to identify Dad, they would have shot him for running the Macedonian school. Other families weren't so lucky. One day, the Greeks came looking for a man named Stoyan Minchev. They couldn't find Stoyan, so they set his house on fire. I stood next to a Greek soldier and my mother, who was trembling with fear, while Stoyan's house burned to the ground.

Nodding at me, the soldier said, "Where is the child's father?"

"He's working away at Agios Oros," said Mum, "earning money to support us."

"Good," said the soldier. "Not like these bandits here."

As the smoke billowed into the sky, my mother assured me that everything would be okay. But when the war came to Turje, that was hard to believe.

In 1947, an English or American plane entered the skies over Turje and strafed one of the rocky hills behind the village. The plane flew so low that I could see the pilot seated in the cockpit. It was likely the Greeks thought the partisans were hiding among the rocks, having heard about them through their network of spies. There were spies everywhere in those days (often the priests were spies). If the wrong person heard you speaking Macedonian, the Greek police might have taken you away and beaten the shit out of you or killed you. Fortunately, no partisans were in the hills behind the village at the time of the strafing. No lives were taken in Turje that day.

On another day in 1947, the whistling of artillery shells spread terror through our village. The shells you *didn't* hear were the dangerous ones, though. That meant they were close. The next thing we'd hear was the shrapnel clattering on our tin roofs. We were lucky the Greeks had terrible aim. No one was hurt.

In the middle of the night sometime in 1947, the partisans arrived at our house in secret and with a familiar face. Georgi had come back—but he was wounded. His comrades gave us some medicine to help Georgi, then left. My brother lived with us, unbeknownst to the rest of the village, for several weeks while Mum tended to his wounds. He carried a submachine gun, a German MP 40 "Schmeisser," and he often let me play with it. It was so good to have my brother home, but the partisans needed their commander, and he left as soon as he had recovered. It wasn't long after this that the partisans came for Stoiche. He was just 16, and if it hadn't been for Georgi, I can't say what would have happened to Stoiche. When Georgi found out about Stoiche joining the partisans, he pulled some strings to have him released from duty and sent to safety in a neutral part of Macedonia. Now only Mum, Dad, Sotir, and I remained in Turje. With the war seeming like it would never end, fleeing to safety sounded like our best bet. The partisans could help us children escape, but they couldn't help Mum and Dad. Sending Sotir and I away must have been one of the hardest decisions they ever had to make.

With Mum, Dad, and a group of maybe 20 people from the village, we left Turje on the 15th of March 1948. I would never call it home again. The last of the snow had just fallen. We took a pass through the mountains, wearing dark clothes to hide from the planes. A child of six, I soon grew tired and asked my father to carry me, to which he said, "You're a big boy now. You can walk." Even then I understood the look in his eyes. It was fear. We walked through the day and stopped at night, when we hung our blankets over the bushes to escape from the freezing rain. We couldn't light fires. That would attract the enemy.

On the second day, our party arrived in the village of Rula in a neutral zone in Greek Macedonia, next to the border of the newly formed Republic of Macedonia, which had been a part of Serbia just a few years before. Sotir and I were not the only children who had gathered there. Children had come from all over Macedonia, ages six to 13. Before I knew it, Mum and Dad were saying goodbye to us and leaving back through the mountains. The only adults from Turje who stayed with us were four women, selected by the partisans to care for the Turje children under the age of 10. I was glad I had my big brother Sotir with me, but that wouldn't be for much longer. After half a day's wait in Rula, the partisans packed all of the children under 10 into ox-drawn carts. Sotir walked alongside my cart. I didn't know where we were heading, and the motion started rocking me to sleep.

Dozing, I'd cry, "Sotir. Sotir, where are you?"

"Tuka si, Stavre," said Sotir. "Ne Plachi." *I'm here, Stavre. Don't cry.*

From the carts, the partisans loaded us into canvas-covered army trucks, which took us to Bitola, the main city in this neutral zone. Here, the Red Cross took us into their care. They stripped us naked and shaved and powdered our heads to kill the lice. Then they dressed us in clean clothes and took our old ones into a field and burnt them. With all that going on, I hardly noticed the Red Cross organising us into two lines: one for children ages 10 and up, and one for the younger kids. In our two lines they walked us to a train, a train with an engine at each end. While we waited outside the train, they fed us bread and marmalade. It was the first time I'd tasted marmalade in my life. Now I can't even smell marmalade without returning to that moment in 1948. One line of children boarded one train cart and the other line another. We were still enjoying our food when the train split in two, tearing Sotir and I apart. We young children realised what was happening all at once, and all at once, we started crying. Those four women from Turje were there to comfort us, though. We were told to refer to them as the mothers from then on.

Both trains went to Belgrade in Serbia—although to different parts of the city—until they figured out where each group would go. The socialist

countries Serbia and Slovenia were taking refugees, but they could only take so many. After a day or so in a dormitory in Belgrade, our group was placed upon a second train, bound first for the Croatian capital of Zagreb. I didn't know it at the time, but Sotir's group went to Bela Crkva (White Church) in Serbia. In Zagreb, the Red Cross worked with the Croatian government to take us to the baths and get us checked by doctors and nurses. From Zagreb, we travelled to Crkvenica, where we stayed for three or four months.

Crkvenica is a beautiful city overlooking the Adriatic Sea, the buildings white with wrought iron gates. We stayed in a dormitory and had to wake up early for exercise. The people running the dormitory thought we were Greek, so all of our exercise instructions came in Greek. "Anapapsi," they would say. "Prosohi." Eventually, the mothers were able to communicate that we were Macedonian, but we'd soon be moving on anyway.

During our stay in Croatia, the Red Cross had organised more long-term accommodation in Slovenia. For the next year and a half, we stayed at a number of locations in Dutovle, a town near the Italian border in Slovenia's white wine region. At first, we slept on army stretchers in a large church surrounded by vineyards and a dark forest. Frescos covered the church walls and ceiling. One painting depicted a saint upon a horse, spearing a second man into the ground. The painting frightened me. Every morning before exercise we had to make our beds. They would then feed us bread, milk, and soup. There wasn't much else to go around. We went to school inside the church. Like in Croatia, they at first taught us in Greek and then realised we were Macedonian. From then on, we learnt in Slovenian (there's some crossover between Slovenian and Macedonian). The summers were warm and the winters freezing. When we weren't in school, we played on the grass and in the snow. We were children.

Later, the Red Cross and the Slovenian government moved us to a dormitory, where we got proper beds. I'm not sure how many times we moved around in Dutovle. My memory fails me here.

Meanwhile, Mum and Dad returned to Turje and then fled a week or two later, leaving our house and most of our possessions behind. The Greek soldiers were sweeping through the countryside, and they had Dad's name. If Dad had stayed in Turje, they would have killed him, as with anyone else they considered a threat. At this point there was no hope for the partisans; America had entered the war on the side of the Greeks. Mum and Dad ended up in Skopje in the Republic of Macedonia, where they worked in the fields and waited to see their children again. Through the Red Cross, they would get their chance.

About a year into my stay in Dutovle, Mum and Dad visited me. I recognized my father by his Hitler moustache, but I didn't recognise my mother. She cried and said, "Why don't you come to me, Stavre?" It took me a minute, but I put two and two together and went to her. They were able to stay for a week, and when they were leaving, I cried. My father said to me, "Ne plachi, Stavre. Ti si sega golemo dete." *Don't cry now, Stavre. You're a big boy now.* He also said that he would eat bread and salt and do everything he could to save up the money to get his child to Skopje and put a roof over his head. As a parting gift, Mum and Dad handed me some small Yugoslavian dinar bills to play with, and a photo of Mum. There was a blemish on Mum's face in the photo. Taking it to my bed, I thought Mum had something wrong with her eyes, so I kept rubbing at the blemish with my nail until I broke the surface of the photo. I was horrified. Why did I do that to my mother? I didn't stop to think that it was only a photo. That is how a child's mind can work sometimes.

Soon after their visit, Mum and Dad started filling in the paperwork to take me to Skopje, where Stoiche had ended up after Georgi freed him from the partisans. The Red Cross needed proof that I was my parents' son, as well as proof that Mum and Dad could look after me. They couldn't just take my parent's word for it. Mum and Dad needed to get witnesses from Turje and signatures from the four "mothers" who were looking after us in Dutovle. They went through the same tedious process with Sotir.

About six months later, after the paperwork had been approved, my godfather came to the dormitory as my guardian and brought me, along with his two sons, to Skopje. Just two months after I arrived, Sotir joined us. Mum, Dad, Stoiche, Sotir, and I were together again. We lived in a two-bedroom government unit in the city for about four years. I went to a Macedonian school and learnt Macedonian, French, and Serbo-Croatian. The Greek Civil War war was over now, and we could finally get back to our lives. Many people had lost loved ones during the conflict, but my family was lucky. Skopje was a time of peace and joy, and as I grew to a boy of 12, I rarely thought about my childhood in Turje.

As for my brother Georgi, he had moved his family to a place called Banat Bachka in Serbia while he was still fighting. After the war, he fled across the Albanian border with the partisans. For a short while, Georgi stayed in Poland. Then he moved to Uzbekistan, where he stayed alone in Tashkent for seven years, studying Russian and engineering. His family joined him after that. After a further seven years, Georgi and his family moved to Skopje, where his daughters became doctors. But the rest of our family had long since left Macedonia—and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> After my family left Skopje for Australia, I never saw my sister, Stojanka—who had largely been living a separate life from the rest of our family—again.

## Australia

In 1954, our lives underwent a drastic but welcome change. Back in 1937, my mother's sister moved to a place called Jardee in rural Western Australia. She wrote to my mother over the years and made it clear how good life was in Australia. In Skopje, my father was becoming unhappy. He had previously spent some time in Australia and believed that, if we stayed in Macedonia, we would always be poor. In Mum's next letter to her sister, she asked her sister to sponsor our family's immigration to Australia. The passage alone cost 1,200 pounds, which was a lot of money back then. But my Auntie Menka and Uncle Todor still agreed, and soon we were packed and on our way to Trieste, a neutral city on the border of Slovenia and Italy. Aboard the *Castel Verde*, an Italian ship, we began a 21-day voyage from Europe to our new home. All they fed us on the way was bloody pasta, but we survived, arriving in the port of Fremantle in WA on the 6th of April 1954.

Menka and Todor owned a tobacco farm in Jardee, a milling town about five kilometres from Manjimup. We lived with them on the farm for about six months. My father and brothers worked at a timber mill, and Dad also worked on the railways as a fettler. Jardee and Manjimup were packed full of Macedonians, some from Turje and many from villages near and very similar to Turje. Free of oppression, our culture and community were able to thrive. We'd endured the hard times in the old country, and now we could express ourselves. We blossomed. We had picnics and dances, and everyone was invited to everyone else's weddings. It was a beautiful life.

I went to school in Manjimup, riding my bicycle to and from school with my Jardee friends, often along the railway tracks. At first, going to school was a traumatic experience because of the language barrier, but my saving grace was maths. Before my primary school teacher, Mr Hackett, could finish writing a problem on the blackboard, I'd have the answer. He'd see me sitting

patiently at my desk and ask me why I wasn't doing the work, to which I'd say, "Me finish."

After living in our own house in Jardee for about five years, we sold the house, bought a place in Manjimup, and moved there. At this point, there were over 1,100 Macedonians in Manjimup. After completing my education at Manjimup High School, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. Because I could communicate with his Macedonian customers, the owner of the hardware store Clarsons offered me a job. At about this time, I helped a friend install a gutter on his house for a bit of extra cash. From that day forward, I knew I wanted to work with my hands. I stayed at Clarsons for five years and learnt the basics of what would become my passion and trade.

Meanwhile, in 1958, my brother Sotir moved to Melbourne, where Mum's other sister, Auntie Petra, had made a life. He never came back. My older brother Stoiche bought a 110-acre farm to grow tobacco like Uncle Todor. They both got a nasty shock when, in 1962, it was announced that no more tobacco would be grown in Manjimup; it would now be sourced from Rhodesia at a lower price. Many hardworking people went into debt. Many Macedonians left Manjimup, some moving to Melbourne and some to Perth.

Working at Clarsons, I saved up enough money to buy my first car, a Volkswagen Beetle. It marked my independence, and I couldn't have been more excited. With Stoiche's livelihood undone by tobacco giants, he soon sold his land, and in January 1963, I left Clarsons to drive across the country to Melbourne with Stoichie and his wife and daughters. Mum and Dad were upset to have our family broken up once more, though I promised I would come back to them soon. By Christmas, I had left Melbourne and driven back home to Manjimup; Stoiche stayed in Melbourne with Sotir. I quickly came to miss the hustle and bustle of Melbourne, but I planned to tough it out for the sake of my parents. As it would turn out, returning to Manjimup was the best decision I ever made.

Taking a job at Westfarmers—where they sold farming equipment and produce, among other things—I earned more money than I ever had before.

My popularity grew, as did my social life. I went to dances on Saturday nights with Macedonians and Australians alike. In my early 20s, Mum and Dad offered me a lot of wisdom. *Never drink and drive. Never mix with bad company.* Above all, however, my father insisted on one thing:

I needed to marry a younger woman so she could look after me when I got old. And she needed to be Macedonian, of course.

I was helping a customer at Westfarmers on a Friday afternoon in 1965 when a beautiful girl in a yellow dress entered the store with her mother and father. I knew it was the beginning of something, but I didn't know what. I just made sure I was at the front of the store every Friday afternoon so I could see the girl in the yellow dress. I wanted to know more about her, but she was Macedonian and therefore came from a strict family; I had to tread carefully. If I handled the situation improperly, I risked embarrassing her in front of her parents. So I turned to my female Macedonian friends (spies!) for help.

The reports soon came back: she didn't have a boyfriend, she came from a good family, she didn't mix with bad company, she was a kind and caring person, her name was Yana Velios, and she was seven years younger than me.<sup>3</sup>

That was all I needed to know.

Now I needed to show Yana that I was interested in her without sparking rumours throughout our small town. When I found out she worked as a cashier at a local butcher, I made it my job to buy the meat for my family. Yana became shy and nervous whenever I visited the shop, so I knew she was interested in me too. Two of Yana's friends, Chrissy and Kathy, worked at a lunch bar in town. The lunch bar became our secret meeting place, and Chrissy and Kathy acted as our eyes and ears while we spoke behind a dividing wall, where the customers couldn't see us. Still, word that Stavre Ristovski was courting Yana Velios eventually got around.

On the drive home from work one day, a car overtook me and stopped in front of me on the road so I couldn't drive onwards. I had seen this car before.

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<sup>3</sup> Yana's name was originally spelt Jana, the same as my mother.

It belonged to Yana's father. I got out, and Mr Velios told me to get into his car.

I was terrified, but I did my best to appear mature and calm. Mr Velios's first question was "What is going on between you and my daughter?" He then said that if I intended to play around with Yana, it wasn't on; I should leave his daughter alone.

"I am interested in your daughter," I said, "and my intentions are honourable. I would, in the future, like to get engaged and married to her."

Mr Velios needed to see it for himself, however, so over the next few months I proved I was worthy of his daughter. Our families met and got along well, and soon I made a special trip to Perth to pick out a ring. It was a simple yet beautiful ring; Yana has never been a materialistic person. Even engaged as we were, we were heavily restricted. If we wanted to go out on a date together, one of Yana's brothers would have to accompany us. That would change with marriage, however.

Our big day was the 17th of April 1966, about six months after our engagement (a short engagement was common back then). Macedonian weddings are massive events. Over 300 people came to our wedding in St Martins Anglican Church in Manjimup, and we danced to a traditional Macedonian band long into the night. While Stoiche was unable to make it to our wedding, Sotir flew over for the event, and we visited Stoiche during our honeymoon on the east coast. He was shocked by the beauty of my wife.



After our honeymoon, our fun came to a grinding halt, as my young bride and I had to move in with my parents until we could afford to build or buy our own home. Enduring about six months of that, we moved into a one-bedroom rental on Mount Street. After about 10 months in the rental, we bought a block of land for 1,000 dollars and built our first real house. It was around this time that Mum and Dad moved to the east coast with my brothers; it really was the best decision for them.

Unfortunately, my father passed away in Melbourne in 1969. One of my biggest regrets is not spending much time with him in his final years. I remember him how he was in Turje, with his moustache, his shotgun, and the forest behind him.

Back in Manjimup, Yana planted many bushes and trees and quickly turned our house into a home (she always loved gardening and worked as a florist later in life). What came next was only natural.

Our first beautiful girl we named Elizabeth, our second Rene, and our third Anita. To put food in their mouths, I took on extra work installing gas stoves on the weekend. I also worked as a ticket hop at the drive-in cinema, a total

of three jobs. With the girls growing up, relocating to Perth or "The Big Smoke," as some called the city back then, became more and more logical. There would be more opportunities for the girls; they would flourish. Through contacts I'd made in the building industry, we built a wonderful home in the northern suburbs, where Yana and I still live to this day.

In the same year we moved from Manjimup to Perth, 1977, my mother died. I went to the funeral heartbroken because I didn't see her towards the end. She was a highly intelligent woman for her time. It was a great loss to our family.

How the years go so fast.

In April 1993, Elizabeth bore our first grandchild, Nicholas. Between our daughters Elizabeth and Rene, and their husbands, Les and Peter, three more grandchildren came into our lives over the next 10 years. The union of Rene and Peter marked a significant change for me. You see, Peter was Greek. My daughter and I fought and fought when I first heard of their relationship. How could Rene be with a Greek after all that had happened? But the Civil War was a different world and different time, and people change. Peter turned out to be a gentleman, and I could see how happy he made my daughter. I couldn't be more proud of the life they've made together.

I worked for a company named Combined Hardware (which sold to Whitakers, then BBC Hardware, then Bunnings) from 1977 to 2002, a period of 25 years. After leaving Bunnings, now in my 60s, I took a few casual handyman jobs for a real estate company and quickly gained a reputation as a hard worker and skilled tradesman. The calls kept coming in, and I built a business with my own hands. I was my own boss, and in terms of my career, I had never felt more fulfilled. My joints weren't too happy about it, though, so after 10 years, I retired. I still make things with my hands almost every day, however, including canvases and frames for Yana's paintings. She has grown into a wonderful artist, and I am blessed to have found her. The girl in the yellow dress became the love of my life.

## **A Full Life**

It has been a long, tough journey, but my disrupted childhood taught me the value of family. Without family, what do we have? Mine was torn apart by war. But against all odds, we came back together, and now I have created a family of my own. Turje is home only to ghosts, but my life in Australia is full.