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Macedonian Questions

ISTANBUL, Turkey

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By Whitney Mason

The evening was unseasonably balmy for March in Sofia, Bulgaria, and my fellow passengers and I lounged on park benches outside the bus office as we waited to leave for Skopje, Macedonia. Several were middle-aged women, their thick winter coats buttoned up despite the warmth. The men drank beer and chatted quietly. I doubt that an uninformed observer would have discerned from anyone's demeanor that every generation of every one of these people's families had seen a relative die violently, as historians have said is probably the case. Nor would he necessarily have guessed that we were on our way to the capital of an unceasingly turbulent country on the very threshold of a vicious war, as Macedonia a couple of weeks later would be. These people simply had the tired but relaxed air of people going home.

History books had told me that these people's families had been ravaged by various violent attempts to settle what European diplomats of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called the "Macedonian Question": Who would rule this territory wedged between Greece, Albania, Serbia (Kosovo province) and Bulgaria? With the war in Kosovo just 20 miles from Skopje, the Macedonian Question has been re-opened and the danger of instability in Macedonia has returned to the forefront of international concerns. As the saying goes, the past is never history... it isn't even past.

Macedonia remains a microcosm of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire of which it had been a part for 542 years. According to Macedonian government statistics the Albanian minority represents about 25 percent of the population, while the Albanians say the real figure is closer to 40 percent. Many of these Albanians feel more integrated with Kosovar Albanian society than with their Slavic compatriots in Macedonia, and they share some of the same grievances. Serbia has threatened to attack Macedonia for allowing NATO to use its territory and the 40,000 or so ethnic Serbs living there have staged violent protests against NATO air strikes against the former Yugoslavia. Greece relaxed its crippling embargo only in 1996. And frosty relations with Bulgaria began to thaw just in February.

The back of the bus was empty and in order to have legroom I took a seat above the stairs of the rear exit. Half an hour into the trip a forty-something man with a boyish haircut came back and sat down next to me to smoke. He offered me a cigarette with such a guilelessly friendly expression that I didn't have the heart to refuse. He lit the cigarettes and in silence smoked his down to the butt, which he tossed onto the staircase floor below me. I had taken one drag, to be polite, and thrown mine out the window. To clear the smoke out, I slid open a window. The driver had turned off the interior lights and the sky outside was brilliant with stars. The heat was on high, roasting my legs, so I left the window



open, the chill mountain air rushing around my face and neck. Not surprisingly, sitting on this windy perch left me wide awake, with only my thoughts for entertainment. Happily, my background reading on Macedonia had revealed an epic on which to muse.

Both because of the diversity of its population and its enormous strategic value the Question of Macedonia was bound to be answered through violence. And because it was answered through violence instead of consensus, its resolution remains precarious.

A variety of Slavic and Turkic peoples as well as Illyrians and Greeks had already occupied the southern

Balkan peninsula before the Ottomans appeared in the fourteenth century and began "to add to and rearrange the pieces," as historian Dennison Rusinow has written. Macedonia occupied the heart of the southern Balkans. It included two major river valleys and Salonika, the region's leading port, making it too important for either Greece or Serbia to allow it to be dominated by Bulgaria, despite its strong linguistic and cultural affinity.

The competition to dominate Macedonia began as soon as the Balkan nations reached the threshold of independence in the nineteenth century. Bulgaria held the early lead. With extensive help from Russia, Bulgaria

reached the outskirts of Istanbul and was able to force on the Porte the Treaty of San Stefano, making Macedonia part of a large Bulgarian state. To redress the imbalance of power created by an oversized Bulgaria, Britain and Austria-Hungary convened the Congress of Berlin in 1878, at which the great powers allowed Bulgaria to retain its independence but returned Macedonia to the Ottoman Empire. The future father of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, witnessed this turbulence as a military cadet in the provincial capital of Monastir, now a city in Macedonia called Bitola.

The question of what should be done with this territory was confused by the difficulty of distinguishing between Macedonia's Slav inhabitants who, unlike the other nationalities, could not easily be differentiated on the basis of language. Macedonia was "a transition zone between Bulgaria proper and the Serbian kingdom," historian Barbara Jelavich has written. The territory had also been part of the medieval empires of Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia. Amid this confusion, some inhabitants undoubtedly also thought of themselves first and foremost as Macedonians.

In the late nineteenth century Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Macedonian groups vied for influence in Macedonia through both cultural associations and terrorist groups. The most famous of these was the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, or IMRO, founded in Thessaloniki in 1893. IMRO's campaign of terror against both the Ottomans and domestic political rivals early in the century made it the model for modern terrorist groups such as the IRA.

In 1908 despair over the Ottomans' deteriorating authority in Macedonia prompted a group of Ottoman officers stationed there to rebel against the authoritarian Sultan Abdulhamit II and force him to restore a constitution abrogated in 1877. Austria-Hungary took advantage of the Ottoman instability by immediately annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina, which alarmed Russia and prompted St. Petersburg to encourage the Balkan states to form a system of alliances.

With this unprecedented united front, in 1912 Montenegro, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Because of its proximity to Ottoman troops in Thrace, Bulgaria did most of the fighting. In the meantime Serbia and Greece occupied parts of Macedonia, with Greece beating Bulgaria in a race to occupy Thessaloniki. After a brief truce, in 1913 Bulgaria attacked Serbia and Greece, which had signed an agreement to divide Macedonian lands between themselves. Bulgaria was crushed within a month. The resulting Treaty of Bucharest created an independent Albania and divided Macedonia. Bulgaria was allowed to keep Pirin Macedonia, the sparsely populated, mountainous region to the east; Greece took Aegean Macedonia, including Thessaloniki and its hinterland; and Serbia acquired

Vardar Macedonia, including the cities of Skopje, Bitola and Ochrid, nearly doubling its total territory.

In newly independent Vardar Macedonia, now awkwardly named the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Yugoslavia," this turbulent history has yielded a Slav majority suspicious of its neighbors, an uncertainty about whether to feel Macedonian, Bulgarian or Serb, and a large and volatile Albanian community. In many respects Macedonia's identity crisis resembles Turkey's, where the Turkish majority remains preoccupied with its own ongoing search for identity even while suppressing the Kurds' assertions of a separate one.

WELCOME TO SKOPJE

Around midnight the bus stopped in what appeared to be a small town. It was midnight and there was no sign of life except for a kiosk, to which we drifted. People smoked cigarettes, ate candy bars, found places to relieve themselves, stomped around to keep warm. The driver, I noticed, was not sharing our recreation. After nearly 40 minutes in this no-frills rest stop I saw the driver walking toward the bus from the direction of an apartment building down the road. He was in the company of a middle-aged woman I hadn't seen before, her hair dyed blond, her face worn but sensuous under heavy blush and eye shadow.

During this break I noticed a group of three nice-looking people, two young women and an older man, whom I took to be a family. I approached them and asked whether they spoke English. "Of course," both girls answered in unison. One, blonde with a thin, animated face, was named Mary. The daughter of a Croatian who had been a sergeant-major in the Yugoslav National Army and who now held that rank in the army of Macedonia, Mary had studied philosophy in Skopje, where she became a Pragmatist and a fan of William James. She had been in Sofia to get a visa to go to Britain, where she was engaged to a farmer from Northern Ireland. The other girl, a plump brunette with rosy cheeks and wholesome smile constantly on her face, was named Julia. She was 22, reported on children's issues for a youth newspaper in Skopje and volunteered with a charity that worked with needy children, especially Albanians and Gypsies. The man told me, in Russian, that his name was Joe and he ran a small trading company dealing with Russia. His passport noted that he was born in Greece — that is, in a Slavic-speaking Macedonian town that until World War II had been part of "South Serbia" and is now part of Greece.

I asked them whether they'd been struck by how long a stop we'd made in the middle of nowhere. No one had noticed. "We have so little work in Macedonia that we just don't think about time that way," said Mary. "Just sit back and enjoy — and welcome, to the country of relaxation!" I explained that I'd seen the driver with a

woman who was certainly his lover. They laughed, agreeing this was a splendid reason to have been kept waiting for 40 minutes.

I asked them to list the leading sectors of Macedonia's economy. "In the first place are mortgages, and in second is humanitarian aid," said Mary, her face erupting in mirth. As soon as Macedonia had declared independence from the already splintering Yugoslavia in 1991, Greece had imposed a crippling embargo, declaring that the new state had no right to its name, its flag or its coat of arms, and demanding a constitutional renunciation of any claims to parts of Macedonia annexed by Greece in 1913. One consequence of the Greek embargo was Macedonia's ungainly official name, "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" or FYROM. Another was economic ruin. According to one official estimate the Greek embargo — along with the economic disruption caused by the war in Yugoslavia — had cost Macedonia 60 percent of its trade.

Mary confessed that when she'd seen me smoking in the back of the bus she'd assumed I was Albanian. Seeing my bewilderment, Julia explained that Albanians are known for their bad hygiene and loud behavior.

When the bus arrived at the border and we disembarked to have our baggage inspected, a rumpled man approached me, anxious to talk. He spoke only a few words of Macedonian. He was, he said, a "Shqip" — an Albanian. Somehow I understood he wanted to know where I was from and his face lit up when I said "America."

"Brat" he said, using the Slavic word for brother. "America. Tekhas." His brother, he was telling me, lived in Texas. For seven years, he conveyed, using his fingers. From his expression I could see that this fact filled him with pleasure verging on awe and that he wanted to celebrate it with me. But since we had no words in common I could only smile and give him a thumbs up as he continued to repeat, almost to chant, "brat"... "America"... "Tekhas."

Back in the darkness of the bus I asked Mary how she felt about the new government, a center-right coalition led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization along with the Democratic Alternative party and

the Democratic Party of Albanians. The stupidest thing it had done so far, she said, was to join the tiny group of countries that recognize Taiwan. The hope was that the grateful Taiwanese would quickly invest \$250 million in the country. The immediate result had been China's vote in the UN Security Council to cancel the UN peacekeeping force that since July 1993 had been in Macedonia to prevent a spillover of violence from the former Yugoslavia.

A rather more promising foreign-policy initiative had been a joint declaration signed by Macedonia and Bulgaria in which Bulgaria recognized Macedonian as a distinct language. In 1992 Bulgaria had been the first country to recognize Macedonia's



A turkish café in the old part of Skopje, known in Turkish as Üsküp

independence, but had continued to insist that the Macedonian language was just a dialect of Bulgarian. This incensed Macedonians because generations of governments in Sofia had used the two countries' linguistic and cultural similarities as a pretext for a creeping irredentism. The official declaration notwithstanding, dozens of Bulgarians with whom I've spoken are certain both that Macedonian is a dialect and, rather more surprisingly, that the linguistic connection destined the two countries to someday be united. In any case, Bulgaria followed up the agreement with a gift of 150 tanks, of which Macedonia had had just four, and 150 artillery pieces, of which they'd had none.

At about 1:30 in the morning we arrived in the bus station in the center of Skopje, which looks like a provin-

cial American city built in the early sixties. Nearly all of it was in fact rebuilt following a devastating earthquake in 1963. My new friends pointed me toward the Hotel Bristol some 50 meters away. It was in front of the Bristol in the summer of 1995 that Kiro Gligorov, the president from the neo-communist Social Democratic Union, lost an eye and part of his skull in a barely failed assassination attempt. Ghosts of violence past don't have to be sought out here, I thought. They are everywhere.

FROM THE PROVERBIAL DUSTBIN, A CACOPHONY OF VOICES

The next evening I'm walking through Skopje with two young journalists, Roberto and Zhana, formerly reporters for Macedonia's most critical and respected magazine, *Focus*, who now work for a USAID-funded organization called the Macedonian Press Center. We mount a pedestrian bridge covered in old cobbles but edged with metal, temporary-looking guardrails. Below us the Vardar River is roaring with snow-melt from the Tetovo mountains just a few miles to the west. Seen from the far bank, the bridge's graceful arches suggest a classical origin. Zhana tells me the bridge was in fact built by Justinian, the Byzantine emperor of law-code fame, who was born in Skopje.

History is thick on the ground here. North of the Vardar, Zhana points out the ruins of a fortress built by the medieval Serbian king Stefan Dushan. We cross an overpass above a six-lane highway, a strangely generic shopping mall on our right, and before us suddenly appear the stone walls and domes and minarets of an Ottoman city.

At the end of one of the winding, cobbled streets of the Turkish quarter we see a smart café, through the open door of which we see a large portrait of a stern-faced man.

"It's Tito!" exclaims Roberto.

"Actually, I think that's Atatürk," I say.

We walk inside and we may as well be in Istanbul. The café is full of men playing backgammon, drinking tea. A Turkish football match is playing on a big TV flanked with pennants from two of Istanbul's clubs, Galata Saraj and Beshiktash.

Outside, the lovely cobbled streets are deserted. We walk on to another tea house run by a friend of Roberto's wife. Over a succulent tea called "Russian Earl Grey" Roberto explains how until 1993 the Turkish quarter had been the most vibrant in the city. Then Macedonian police raided the district's bazaar and beat up an Albanian boy. Two hours later, riots began. Two days later Roberto came over and found a ghost town. Since that day, Roberto says, Macedonians haven't felt comfortable in

this beautiful part of town and it has never recovered its previous vitality.

We walk on through an arch and enter a courtyard dotted with mulberry trees and surrounded by a two-story stone-and-plaster building that served for centuries as a caravanserai, a rest-stop for travelers from the western and northern Balkans to Istanbul and points farther east. The Greek restaurant where we eat dinner occupies what used to be stables. The beauty of such places, to be found in most towns in Macedonia, is certainly one of the most positive of the Ottomans' legacies in the Balkans. As a nineteenth-century travelogue says: "A Turkish city has a charm of its own whatever its situation, and looked at from what point of view you please. True to the pastoral instincts of his ancestors, the Turk ever seeks to absorb the prosaic town into the poetry of nature; he multiplies spires to atone for roofs, and wherever he builds a house he plants a tree."

I ask Roberto and Zhana how they feel about the diplomatic agreement with Bulgaria. Zhana snorts. "This is just a ploy so they can try to dominate us in a new way. They'll never give up — they're always trying to steal our identity," she says. "Bulgarians claim that all the great figures of Macedonian history were actually Bulgarian." Macedonia's most famous revolutionary, Gotse Delchev, Zhana insists, wanted autonomy for Macedonia, not union with Bulgaria, contrary to the impassioned assertions of many Bulgarians.

Roberto explains that Macedonians consider themselves more western than Bulgaria and thus superior to them. In the town of Ochrid, Macedonians formed the first university in Europe, he explains, and all the teachers in Macedonia outside Salonika during the Byzantine period were Macedonian Slavs. Based on stories such as these, Roberto says, Macedonians' attitude toward the Bulgarians is: "Who are these Tatars and Huns to talk to us about language when they got all their Slavic words from us?"

During World War II Bulgarians were briefly welcomed as liberators from the Serbs, who had half their gendarmerie stationed in Macedonia. After communist Partisans defeated fascist Bulgaria and established Yugoslavia, while Bulgaria fell under the shadow of Moscow, Macedonians enjoyed much more exposure to the capitalist West. They also became much more affluent than their Bulgarian cousins. During the communist period, says Roberto, Macedonians said that Bulgaria wasn't a state, it was a place where one half of the population were spies and police and the other half criminals and thieves. After the collapse of communism many Macedonians regarded the proliferation of mafia groups in their neighbor as proof that Bulgarians were congenitally doomed to criminality.

Though they loathe Slobodan Milosevic, both Roberto

and Zhana say that if Macedonia had to join one of its neighbors, they would prefer to live with Serbs. "We know them, we follow events there, we understand their mentality," explains Roberto.

At the next table two young Italians from the NATO force stationed in Skopje are wooing two Macedonian girls, gallantly trying to make jokes in phrase-book Italian, English and Macedonian. When they get up we see that the soldiers are tiny young men, built like fencers. "And they're supposed to defend us from the Serbs," scoffs Zhana. (In fact, they are on stand-by waiting to enforce an elusive peace agreement in Kosovo, not to defend Macedonia.)

HISTORY AS A POISON

Of all the guerrilla and terrorist organizations to arise in Macedonia during the twilight of Ottoman power, none matched the reputation for ruthlessness of the above-mentioned Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization. IMRO was banned by the various regimes ruling Macedonia between 1913 and 1990. A new center-right party created for the first multiparty elections in 1991 assumed IMRO's name and identified with its nationalist tradition. After the 1998 elections this new IMRO became the senior partner in the ruling coalition. With IMRO in power, Macedonian nationalists are finally free to recount their own version of the bloody history that they did so much to write. Roberto had arranged for me to meet with V. Perv, a well-known IMRO activist in the Yugoslav period who also had close contacts with the nationalist group's American auxiliary.

Perv's family history was exceptionally bloody, even by Macedonian standards. Three of his mother's uncles died violently: the first was killed by the Turks in 1903, the second by Serbs in 1923 for belonging to IMRO and the third by communists in 1946. Perv's own uncle spent 15 years in prison under the Yugoslav communists and his father did three years. In 1963 Perv himself was arrested for trying to organize IMRO and spent three months in prison.

We sat down at a sidewalk café outside the offices of *Focus* and I asked whether Perv would like to share a bottle of wine. "No, no – I drink only *mastika*," he said, referring to a licorice-tasting liquor similar to the Turks' *raki*, but sweeter.

Perv asked whether I'd like to talk about anything in particular. "Actually I'm hoping you might divulge some state secrets to me," I said. He sucked on his cigarette and flashed me a lupine smile.

There was, in fact, a fascinating topic I felt sure he'd be happy to discuss, a seminal event in which IMRO had played a starring role. I had first learned about the 1934 assassination of Alexander Karageorgevitch, the king of

Serbia, in a college history course. I remembered the murder had been organized by an international coalition of terrorists whose combination of operational sophistication and spiritual depravity had seemed to presage, like the dive bombers that made their debut in the Spanish Civil War, the adept barbarism that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century. It was the king's murder in the streets of Marseilles that had inspired Rebecca West to make the tour of Yugoslavia immortalized in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. I asked Perv to tell me the tale from the standpoint of the perpetrator.

"We'll start a century before that," Perv said, "when the [Ottoman] Sultan still ruled all of Macedonia and Bulgaria." Communities in the Ottoman Empire were organized on the basis of religion and in this period, Perv explained, Macedonians and Bulgarians were upset about being counted as Greeks because they hadn't been allowed to form a separate church. In 1860 Macedonians and Bulgarians in Istanbul, many of them falconers and other members of the sultan's household, began lobbying for an independent church. At Easter in 1870, the Sultan issued an edict that Orthodox who considered themselves Bulgarian could form an independent church in places where it was supported in a referendum. In all the big cities, the referendums passed and Bulgarians formed an independent church.

Majorities in several smaller municipalities, however, voted to remain part of the Greek church. Pro-Bulgarian minorities in these towns formed organizations that later metamorphosed into the separatist groups that would terrorize the region for half a century.

After the 1878 Congress of Berlin restored Ottoman authority in Macedonia, Macedonians reacted to this retrogression in their status — what Perv called the "hostile action" of the Berlin Congress — by creating secret paramilitary organizations that staged two small uprisings over the next 15 years. For ten years IMRO prepared to launch a massive insurrection. The revolutionaries struck on St. Elija's Day in August 1903. At first they succeeded in taking control of most of the Bitola district on the Greek border. There is disagreement about the aims of the rebellion: Perv and other Macedonians told me that Gotse Delchev and his comrades wanted only autonomy within the Ottoman empire, while many scholars say the rebellion aimed at either achieving independence outright or attracting international intervention — much as the Kosovo Liberation Army war formed to provoke NATO intervention.

The rebellion was badly organized; Gotse Delchev was captured even before it began and the Ottoman authorities decapitated the organization. Younger, more ruthless militants rose to fill the vacuum and around 1910, two years before the eruption of the first Balkan War, Todor Alexandrov took IMRO's helm. In this period all IMRO members, including the Muslims according to

Perev, considered themselves Bulgarians and fought on the Bulgarian side. Their goal was either to restore the Great Bulgaria created in San Stefano or to achieve a separate independence for Macedonia.

Perev's version of events diverged from the official line in just one crucial respect: Macedonians believe that by making Macedonia a part of Bulgaria, San Stefano was merely trading the Ottoman yoke for a Bulgarian one. "But this is ridiculous," argued Perev. "We have the same culture and the same language. Macedonians in Bulgaria had exactly the same rights as other Bulgarians."

In 1918, Macedonians found themselves, along with Bulgaria, on the losers' side of World War I. The victorious Serbs occupied Macedonia and, according to Perev, began a reign of terror, first targeting intellectuals, then the bourgeoisie, and finally peasants who refused to become Serbian.

At the same time, IMRO found itself at an ideological crossroads: the Russian Bolsheviks offered to secure Macedonia's independence if it would become communist. Todor Alexandrov met in Vienna with agents of the NKVD (predecessors of the KGB) and signed the "May Manifesto" agreeing to the Soviet deal. "Communists were never much loved in Macedonia," said Perev, and under pressure Alexandrov recanted his agreement. But by this time, Macedonian separatists on both the left and right felt betrayed and in 1924 Alexandrov was assassinated. "Alexandrov had good intentions," said Perev, "but as they say, 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions'." Three investigations of the murder concluded that it had been carried out by Bulgarians with Soviet help.

IMRO's next leader was Ivan Orvancho Mikhailov. Under his leadership, terrorism and assassination became IMRO's standard method of operation. Since IMRO's members came mostly from the universities and the small professional and merchant class, in 1926 the Serbian authorities arrested nearly all Macedonian students and sentenced them to death for sedition. Under international pressure the death sentences were commuted to long prison terms.

At this point, a 30-something *Focus* reporter named Dima interjected that his grandfather had been among those convicted of sedition. He served ten years in prison under the Serbs, was free to experience the war and then was killed by communists in 1946. And yet, said Dima, when he was ten years old Dima would tell classmates



Perev: die-hard nationalist or agent provocateur

that he was part Serbian himself. "My family hadn't told me what had happened to my grandfather, because they were afraid that I would tell other kids and get in trouble; and in Yugoslavia the Serbs were a great nation and I wanted to believe I had a connection with them."

Prevented from liquidating Macedonia's students legally, the Serbs began a campaign of extra-judicial executions. IMRO shielded the Serbs' targets and responded to terror with terror. Describing the cycle of violence that has blown like a tornado through Balkan history, Perev's tone was casual, even jolly. "IMRO sent kamikaze assassins to kill Serbian officials with Macedonian blood on their hands. In revenge, the Serbs killed the IMRO chief's father and brother, though they had nothing to do with the organization. It was after their deaths that Mikhailov determined to kill the Serbian king, Alexander Karageorgevitch.

In their hatred of Serbia, IMRO partisans made common cause with the Croatian Ustashe, nationalists who would later become zealous quislings of the Nazis. To train assassins for action against Serbia, the Ustashe and IMRO formed a joint training camp at a Hungarian village called Janka Pasta. Rebecca West commented on this camp: "There could be no more convincing proof of the evil wrought on our civilization by the great cities and their spawn, for in not one state in pre-war Europe could there have been found any such example of an institution designed to teach the citizens of another state to murder their rulers. The existence of these camps and the necessity felt by human beings to practice any art they have learned explain the assassination of King Alexander without properly conveying its indecency."

After the failure of two Ustashe attempts to kill

Karageorgevitch in Zagreb, the Croats asked IMRO for help. The hit was assigned to an accomplished IMRO assassin named Vlado Tchernozensky. He spent the next six months preparing at Janko Pasta. Arms, money and fake passports were supplied by Mussolini's secret service.

After the death of Karageorgevitch, said Perv, the first era of Serbian rule in Macedonia ended and a process of democratization began. In 1941 Bulgaria, again on the side of Germany, entered Macedonia with 150 tanks. They were welcomed as liberators, said Perv, since Macedonians at the time regarded themselves as Bulgarians. In 1945 Tito's Partisans triumphed in Macedonia, opening the era of Serb-dominated Yugoslav communism and forbidding Macedonians to identify themselves as Bulgarians, which by then was in the orbit of Moscow.



Roberto exhausted from interpreting Perv's ravings

"They wanted Macedonians to identify with their ethnic name, even though everyone knew that Macedonia and Bulgaria were settled by the same people and shared a long history together," said Perv.

"All we wanted was freedom from the Turkish and the Serbian slavery," said Perv. "Here in Macedonia you could call yourself Albanian or Greek or even Chinese. The only forbidden affiliation was Bulgarian." After 1945, if you said you were Bulgarian you'd be imprisoned; all members of IMRO were liquidated," said Perv.

Meanwhile, IMRO's struggle was taken up by their cousins overseas — in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, to be exact. Ft. Wayne was home to a sort of IMRO auxiliary called the Macedonian Patriotic Organization. Members of the MPO sought Perv out in Skopje in 1983, he said, and invited him to their annual meeting, that year held in Toronto. What he saw there was a room full of aging men fighting a losing battle to get their thoroughly North American children to listen to Macedonian folk music and to care about its political destiny. Perv told them the group was dying.

"An old man who had worked for the OSS in Vienna

told me, 'You're a fool. This is an American organization. If the US wants to keep it alive after we're dead, the government will take a hundred 'niggers,' pay them a thousand dollars a month and the organization will live on.' I pictured this charming Macedonian-American, combining the conservatism of Dan Quayle, the immigrant's boundless faith in American power, and the murderous grudges of the land of his forebears — all festering in the flat isolation of Ft. Wayne.

Predictably, the MPO was virulently anti-Communist and was rewarded for this stance with support from the US government starting in the twenties. After the Bulgarians and their German overlords "liberated" Macedonia from the Serbs, the MPO became pro-German and remained so until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. With the US at war, MPO members pushed their sons (!) to sign up and defend the freedom the US had given them. Meanwhile, many other MPO members had returned to Macedonia to collaborate with the Nazis.

Perv saw no contradiction in MPO members fighting as allies of both the US and the Nazis. "In April of 1941 the Germans brought democracy to Macedonia and the MPO supported them. In December the Japanese tried to destroy America and again the MPO was on the side of democracy."

Nowadays the MPO focuses on lobbying for American investment in Macedonia — "because capital is indestructible," said Perv, ignoring many examples of countries destroying their own nationals' wealth abroad, as did the US in Vietnam. The MPO took Perv to Washington — "the one place in America I never wanted to see" — and introduced him to such senior Republicans as Jeanne Kirkpatrick and Bob Dole. "The tragedy is that only in the US can I drive a big Jeep, hunt, take a shower every day," said Perv.

"Now the new generation doesn't speak Bulgarian, there are no good roads or railroad connections to Bulgaria, no Bulgarian TV here," Perv continued. "In the last 40 years we've developed a new Macedonian identity. Under both the Serb and communist slavery we were forced to feel anti-Bulgarian. They were our main enemies and we were constantly told that they were determined to destroy us as a people. We are people who were pulled out from the ground and now we have to make a new nation and a new language."

Serbia, said Perv, has been the top issue in the 20th Century. "Three million pig farmers became part of Europe, and formed an army to fight anyone. This nation was the cause of World War I, chose the right side in World War II and in gratitude the West awarded them 24 million people to enslave under communism. Serbia is now working hard to create another war. This time the international community isn't

willing to support this nation of pig farmers.”

After three hours we interrupted Perv's soliloquy to say we had to go. Though Perv had done all the talking, I felt exhausted. And yet I knew that if we'd sat for twice as long, Perv's role, for all its stridency, would have remained an enigma.

Those convicted of organizing seditious groups in Yugoslavia were usually sentenced to many years in prison and I'd wondered Perv had managed to get out in just three months. As we walked along the darkened streets, Roberto told me that he and some friends believed Perv cut a deal in prison to work as an *agent provocateur*. Educated as a lawyer, as he himself had told me, Perv now had a job serving coffee on the set of the state television news, a position that allowed him to spend most of afternoons in cafes expounding his pro-Bulgarian and anti-Serbian views. Other Bulgaphiles, Roberto said, often sought Perv out; during the communist period these kindred spirits would often disappear. Nowadays, according to a contact of Roberto's in the Interior Ministry, which Perv has been observed visiting frequently, the Bulgaphiles are merely put under surveillance.

MAY THE BEST STATE WIN

Another evening I discussed the “Macedonian Question” with Ljubisha Georgievski, a theater director who during the Yugoslav period had had six plays banned by the communist authorities and was even arraigned, like Socrates, for corrupting youth; the charge was dropped after a defense speech by a poet who was also a member of the party's Central Committee.

In 1994 Georgievski had been badly defeated as IMRO's candidate for president. IMRO's name and fiercely patriotic mystique, Georgievski explained, was resurrected during the process of Macedonia's secession from Yugoslavia. “In 1990 unionists accused us of being terrorists. But the secession succeeded and it's historical justice that we seized power through democratic elections.” The modern party of that name, the senior partner in the ruling coalition, is in fact a center-right party committed to free markets, honest government and good relations with Europe and the U.S.

It was IMRO that had pushed the language deal with Bulgaria, and Georgievski was convinced that it was entirely to Macedonia's benefit. The regional competition to dominate Macedonia, Georgievski said, is balanced by the four-way competition between Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Albania to carve it up. “Bulgaria has now abandoned its Byzantine approach and will try to dominate Macedonia legitimately. We're not afraid of competition with Bulgaria in technology, politics or culture. We're thirty years ahead — in roads, level of education, culture. Under Yugoslavia we had only half the plague of communism they experienced,” he said. “So we have

no inferiority complex. And we have to shed our historical baggage and look forward to technological improvements; after all, the beginning of the next millennium will be dominated by technology, not history.”

A YUGOSLAV MEMORY

It is a spring-like morning, sunny and mild, and Roberto is talking about his year of mandatory service in the Yugoslav army as we drive in his old Yugo toward the Albanian enclave of Tetovo. In 1990 and '91 Roberto served in an anti-aircraft brigade devoted to the defense of Belgrade. Roberto recalls how the brigade became radicalized in the last two months of his enlistment as 1,800 green, nationalistic young Serbs from near the base were added to the brigade's peacetime strength of 600. These young nationalists considered Macedonians harmless, just southern Serbs. But they had their daggers out for other nationalities, including Bosnian Muslims and Croats.

Roberto's commanding officer, Second Lieutenant Mario Raguz, was a Croat and the model of a spit-and-polish career JNA (Yugoslav National Army) officer. “He was a very intelligent and very cool, by-the-book officer. He was ruled by self-discipline and he demanded discipline from everyone else,” says Roberto. One day the brigade received orders to prepare to go into combat against Croats, driving through the town of Djakovo on the way to join the action in Vukovar. Djakovo was Lt. Raguz's home town. After receiving orders to attack it, a lost and haunted look never left his face and he would spend all day lying on top of the anti-aircraft batteries. “In that period he was just a piece of meat lying on the rockets,” Roberto recalls.

After receiving orders to attack Croats, Raguz asserted his authority only once. “Several Serb soldiers left the camp, got drunk and stole an old man's bicycle in the town of Shabby. When the police brought these soldiers back to base, Raguz was pissed off. He ordered them to dig a hole of one square meter in area and two meters deep in solid concrete. After a few days of working on this, one of the soldiers being punished came to him and said something like: ‘We'll probably be going to war together, so we should watch out for one another. But what you've ordered us is humiliating and it is hurting our honor’.”

Raguz replied: “Your honor is that of a soldier, but mine is that of an officer. By pulling that shit in town you ruined my honor as well. As for our going to war together, I'm going to be leaving the army soon. When I heard one Serb reserve soldier saying how the only good Croat is a dead Croat, I knew I was finished. But until then I'm an officer of the JNA, and you will respect me and keep the reputation of this unit at a high level.”

A couple of weeks later — and just 11 days after

Roberto was demobilized — the brigade destroyed most of Džakovo *en route* to Vukovar, where it was decimated in the first scorched-earth clash between Croats and Serbs

A CRY FOR HELP — AT 100 MILES AN HOUR

Driving conditions don't allow us to dwell for long on the poignancy of Roberto's story: car after car races at us in our lane, crossing back into their own with just feet to spare. This, says Roberto, is typical Albanian driving. Because this kind of suicidal behavior is often infuriating, I tell him, I've developed a mnemonic device for reminding myself of where it comes from: "MMM, the machismo of marginalized men."

Rebecca West raises a similar point in the prologue to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*:

"There is phase of ancient history that ought never to be forgotten by those who wish to understand their fellow men. In Africa during the fourth century a great many Christians joined a body of schismatics known as the Donatists who were wrecking the Church by maintaining that only sacraments administered by a righteous priest were valid, and that any number of contemporary priests had proved themselves unrighteous by showing cowardice during the persecution of Diocletian. They raved. . . but though these people raved they were not mad. They were making the only noises they knew to express the misery inflicted on them by the economic collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Since there was no economic literature there was no vocabulary suitable to their misery, so they had to use the vocabulary given them by the Church; and they screamed nonsense about the sacraments because they very sensibly recognized that the Western Roman Empire was going to die, and so were they."

I suspect that most of the Donatists were young, or at any rate single, men. When women, children and mature men feel powerless, their response is generally private and practical, sometimes even creative and noble. Young men, on the other hand, or older men without the calming benefit of a wife and family, nearly always find ways to be destructive of themselves and others.

Speaking of being self-destructive reminds Roberto of a story about Franjo Tuđman, the nationalist president of Croatia. *The Feral Tribune*, Croatia's legendarily irreverent tabloid, reported that in a meeting with Carlos Westendorp, a liberal Spaniard who is the High Representative overseeing civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia, Tuđman said: "One day the West will remember me as one of the great defenders of Western civilization — like Franco." For this winsome pro-

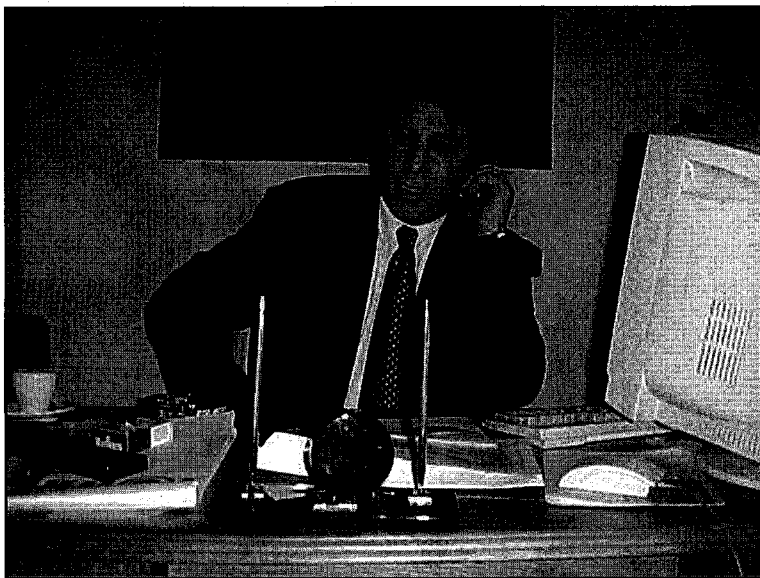
nouncement the *Feral* named Tuđman "Shit of the Year".

TETOVO

The town of Tetovo is humming with energy. Streets are crowded with well-dressed, vivacious-looking people, nearly all of them young. Most of the older men wear white skullcaps. The streets are clogged with BMWs, Mercedes and Audis.

Contrary to my expectations, many Albanians, certainly those in Tetovo, seem to be better off than most Macedonian Slavs. The farmland is fertile, says Roberto, and many Albanians are involved in lucrative smuggling of drugs and weapons. But the majority of Tetovo's relative wealth comes from relatives working in western Europe.

We park in a lot and ask the middle-aged attendant



Demiri in the Tetovo office of the Albanian Democratic Party

for directions to the office of the Democratic Albanian Party, or DPA. "Ah, you make my heart sing," says the attendant.

We climb the stairs in an apartment building and enter an office full of black and red Albanian flags and mustachioed men. There is only one woman present. She is professional-looking and ushers us, in English, into the cramped office of Aladin Demiri, Tetovo's former mayor until he was imprisoned last year. After studying political science in Sarajevo, Demiri worked for a year as a TV journalist, then spent several years teaching philosophy and social studies in a university preparatory school. In 1983 he fell victim to a Yugoslav purge called the "Ideological and Political Differentiation Program" in which Albanians were required to swear fealty to Yugoslavia. "Bad Albanians" who refused to pledge their loyalty were fired from their state jobs. Demiri lost his teaching posi-

tion. The next year he got a job in a library, from which he was later fired in another purge.

Unemployed, in 1990 Demiri went to study literature in Lausanne, Switzerland, home to one of Europe's biggest Albanian communities, and became involved in Albanian politics. He returned to Tetovo and was elected mayor in 1996. He had problems with the authorities from the beginning. The constitution Macedonia adopted in 1991 had enshrined the principle of "one man, one vote," which meant that Parliament's one hundred or so Macedonian deputies would always overshadow the 20 to 23 Albanians. Some rights Albanians were guaranteed under the Yugoslav constitution of 1974 — including the right to use Albanian in official communication and the right to higher education in Albanian — were lost under the new Macedonian one. That's why, according to Demiri, the Albanian problems were resurrected, including attacks by police that resulted in civilian deaths and imprisonment of many Albanian leaders.

In June 1998 Demiri was sentenced to two years in prison for raising an Albanian flag, along with the Macedonian one, above city hall. "If I hadn't been imprisoned for raising the flag, I would have been locked up for writing in Albanian or some other cultural expression."

Still, I ask, why make a provocation by raising the flag?

As usual in Macedonia, the explanation begins years ago. In 1903 Macedonians had rebelled against the Ottomans and tried to form the Krushevo Republic, which was brutally crushed after 12 days. Be that as it may, Demiri emphasizes that while it lasted Albanians helped to support it under their own flag. In 1945 Skopje and Tetovo were liberated from the Bulgarians and Germans by troops under a variety of different banners, including the Albanian. A Yugoslav law of 1973 allowed all nationalities to fly their own flags. And under the Macedonian constitution of 1991 anything not expressly forbidden is allowed.

After local elections in 1995, the city councils of 25 municipalities controlled by Albanians decided to raise Albanian flags above their respective city halls. When this was done, the parliament passed a law expressly allowing the use of national flags. But the very same day, police moved into Tetovo and Gostivar, another important Albanian city in the area, and arrested Demiri and three other Albanian leaders. An investigation by the Ministry of Justice has found no order for the arrests, suggesting that it had been what Demiri calls a "mafiosi decision" by a few Macedonian politicians to try to decapitate the DPA.

When the police surrounded city hall riots broke out. The police responded by viciously beating the Albanian protestors. Demiri believes the most brutal police were

Serbs bussed in for the occasion. He cites the fact that two days before the police attacks and riots, President Gligorov had met with Slobodan Milosevic. On the day of the riots two police buses that arrived had Serbian plates. Albanians on the scene heard the riot police speaking in Serbian (which is unmistakably different from Macedonian).

What is certain in Demiri's mind is that the former Minister of Justice was an "Albanaphobe." As mayor of Tetovo, Demiri would write his official correspondence with the Minister in Macedonian with an Albanian translation *en face*; the Minister would return it with a note ordering him to use only Macedonian.

Demiri says he'd rather not discuss prison, but when I press him he says that what struck him most was the demographics. Of the 19 guards only one was Albanian; of the 60 or 70 prisoners, all were Albanian — most of them heroin addicts. When Demiri asked whether there weren't any Macedonian addicts they said of course there were, but they didn't generally get arrested.

After the DPA became part of the governing coalition following the October elections, Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski amnestied the four Albanians arrested for raising flags. "The last elections showed no will to destroy interethnic harmony," says Demiri. "I'm optimistic about the future here. We've learned lessons from Kosovo and we know we have to maintain a balance of power." The current governing coalition, including the resurrected IMRO, the New Democracy Party (the one that normalized relations with Taiwan) and the DPA is giving Albanians a chance to solve their problems politically, he says. It is the first time that center-right parties have come to power in Macedonia and Demiri hopes they can convince Macedonians to respect Albanians' cultural rights without seeing them as a threat. "If we don't succeed, no political solutions will have any chance here in the future. There will just be rough boys with radical solutions."

MARGINALIZED U.

Roberto and I hail a taxi and ask the Albanian driver to take us to the University. We drive for a mile or so down a bustling street and stop at an intersection in a residential neighborhood. We are surrounded by open-air cafes thronged with young people. The buildings are the large chalet-style houses found all over the former Yugoslavia. They are home to Tetovo University, which was founded in 1995 by the 25 municipalities controlled by Albanians as an alternative to the state universities teaching in Macedonian.

We ask someone for directions to the office of T.U.'s Rector, Professor Dr. Fadil Sulejmani, and are directed to a house freshly painted in green and white. We mount the porch, poke our heads inside and see a 60-something-

year-old man wearing the heavy, self-important expression that is the hallmark of accomplished older men from the Rhine to Vladivostok.

He tells us, in a tone more of command than invitation, to sit. He asks me, again in a voice tinged with authoritarian pretension, whether I speak Italian or German. Roberto has warned me that the Rector may be reluctant to speak in Macedonian. I say I'm prepared to communicate in English, French or Russian but that I suspect our best bet for mutual understanding would be for Roberto to translate between Macedonian and English. Looking as if he's passing a gall stone, Sulejmani accedes.

The Rector begins to speak. Questions from me are apparently not necessary and, I sense, would be an unwelcome interruption of the following talking points.

- 1) Tetovo University was founded by the declaration of 25 municipalities that committed themselves to fund the institution and to help find jobs for its graduates.
- 2) The university works in both Albanian and Macedonian, it is multi-national and multi-lingual. Everyone is welcome to study and teach here. There are, according to the Rector, four Macedonian professors and four Macedonian students. (The total student body numbers 2,208 with a faculty of 347.) "Tetovo U. gives opportunities to every citizen of Macedonia to study and work in his mother tongue." This multiculturalism, says the Rector, is the essence of the university and the basis of its claim to be more "liberal and democratic" than Macedonia's two state universities.
- 3) T.U. has no quotas limiting the number of Macedonians attending, unlike the state universities, which he says allow only 2% of each entering class to be Albanian. There are rumors that the quota will be raised to 10%, but this still isn't sufficient considering that Albanians officially represent 23% of the population and in reality, according to Albanians in Macedonia, up to 40%. ("That guy's a liar," Roberto tells me after the interview. "There is discrimination in university admissions, but it's positive. All Albanians who qualify for admission in competitive exams are admitted, plus the universities admit an extra 2% of Albanians who satisfy the minimum standard but would not qualify competitively.
- 4) T.U. has the same exams, curricula and requirements as the state universities, the idea being that the government should be left with no excuse not to absorb Tetovo into the state system.
- 5) For now the university is financed primarily by donations of one DM (about U.S.\$65) per person, per household in the participating municipalities. Students who can afford it pay 100 DM per semester, those who can't attend for free. Some

180,000 Albanians contribute, along with a few bigger donors. Last year's budget was three million DM, (about U.S.\$2 million).

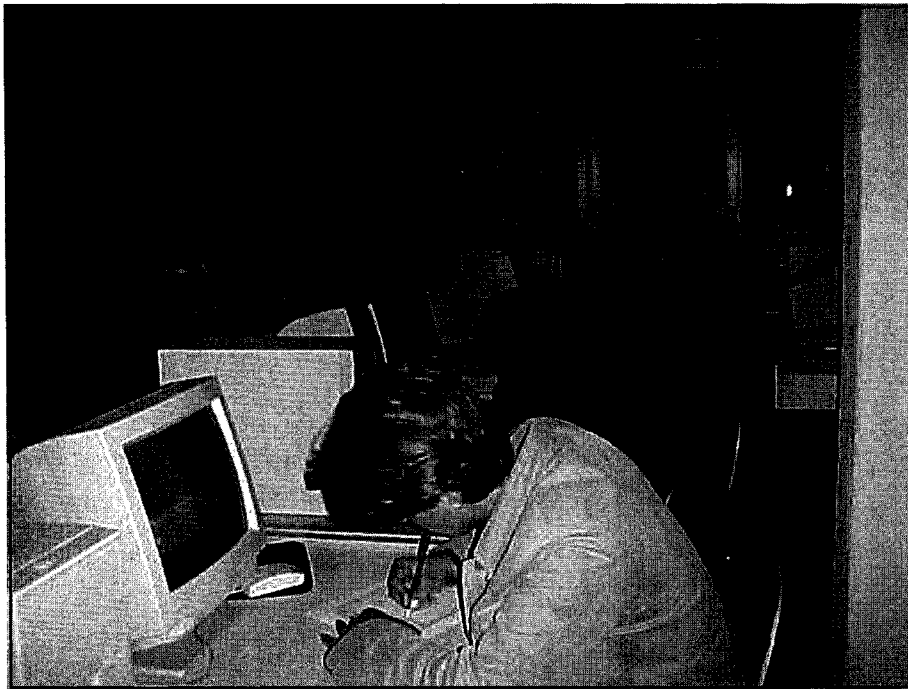
"We still hope the Macedonian government will support us. We're on Macedonian territory, we're all loyal citizens of Macedonia, we pay our taxes." (Roberto tells me that in fact it is widely understood that most Albanians' income is off the books and so is tax-free. Demiri told us that no one in Tetovo even uses *dinars*, Macedonia's national currency; his own wallet, Demiri had said, typically contained only Deutsche Marks and French Francs.)

"In the Balkans things are complicated," the Rector continues. "The hatred between Macedonians and Albanians is imported from outside. It isn't easy for Macedonians and Slavs to accept that there can be well-educated Albanians. They're used to thinking of Albanians only as field workers and cleaners." Macedonians, says the Rector, are afraid that if Albanians are educated, they will become a threat. "This is a problem of how Macedonians have been educated when they were young. We must first teach Macedonians that this university is open for everyone and that if Albanians are educated they'll be better prepared for cooperation. So we're working for a better Macedonia here."

In the first three years after Tetovo opened, the government was openly hostile. In clashes between police and students, one person was killed and over a hundred wounded. Thirty students and five faculty were imprisoned. In the last couple of years the government has become more tolerant. "I don't want to dwell on the past, but I can't understand why the state wants to kill people for wanting to have their own notebooks and pencils," says Sulejmani. The Rector himself spent ten months in prison simply for opening the university. Like Demiri, he says virtually all the prisoners were Albanian while all the guards were Macedonians or Serbs. "The new government admits that the university exists and needs to be dealt with. So that's a step in the right direction. The new government shows good will toward the university but we'll see whether they'll recognize us as a state university and provide funding as such.

"If the state doesn't accept Tetovo as a state university, we will establish a private foundation to fund it, drop bilingualism and teach only in Albanian. As happened in Kosovo, Tetovo could become the nucleus of a parallel Albanian state structure within Macedonia. If this happens, we don't want to be blamed for the state not accepting the university."

Before beginning the interview I'd told Roberto that since the Rector would probably be inclined to hold forth for hours, when we decided we'd had enough we should be emphatic about leaving. The Rector's



A computer exam at Tetovo U.

culture and political influence dominate the world," I say.

"That's not the reason," he says. "It's because last year I had an American roommate for a semester, an Albanian from New Jersey."

"You mean an American, then," I say.

"No, he's Albanian. Though he was born in the U.S., he loves it here and after finishing some courses in the States, he's going to come back here to live." We'll see, I think to myself. Another thought I keep to myself is that this Albanian-American patriot may well be preparing at Langley to come back to this hotbed of Greater Albanianism and try to head off another Kosovo.

mouth is poised to continue when I say quickly, "Sir, we can't take up any more of your time. Thank you so much."

Out in the sunlight again, we walk down toward the cafes. We buy two *burek*, the cheese- and meat-filled pastries traditional throughout the Balkans and Turkey, and take them to one of the few free tables on the terrace. There is no beer available so we order two Cokes. After eating we walk over to a table where three sharp-looking young men have just said good-bye to several attractive, stylishly-dressed female students.

All of them, serendipitously, are students of English. They introduce themselves as Basri, Shpend (meaning "Bird") and Isa Ahmet. They are anxious to speak with us. Basri, a handsome guy exuding a youthful pugnaciousness, leans forward, his eyes unnaturally intense. "What do you want from us? What do you want to ask?" he demands in a stentorian volume and an excellent English accent. In a western country I would guess he was on speed.

I explain that I'm moving to Turkey and am interested in the Ottoman legacy in Macedonia. Basri interrupts. "What do you know so far?" he demands. "Do you think you understand this place?"

Again I begin to say that I'd lived in Bosnia and have read quite a bit about the former Yugoslavia. Again he interrupts. "I'm sure I know much more about America than you know about this place," he says, glaring at me.

"That may well be true, considering that American pop

Basri demands to know whom we talked with so far.

I tell him we've met with Demiri and Sulejmani, the Rector. "If you've talked to them then you know less than nothing!" he says with a contemptuous sneer.

As my assets are being thus degraded by this young buck, a waiter appears to ask what we'd like to drink. Feeling a bit wild, I ask for a mix of peach and banana juices. The others order Cokes.

I ask Isa Ahmet and Shpend whether they ever drink alcohol. Isa Ahmet has never tried it. Shpend has, but didn't care for it. Basri, I think, would benefit from marijuana, but I don't feel like indulging his egoism by asking.

"So, ask anything!" Basri shouts.

I ask a question about how they feel about something or other "as Macedonian Albanians".

"Don't call us 'Macedonian Albanians'," Basri snarls. "You're here now and you've got to learn."

"Fine," I say. "What am I supposed to learn from what you just said?"

"We're all Albanians, just Albanians. Where we happen to live — Kosovo, Albania, here — doesn't matter. We're just Albanians."

I tell him that I've heard that Albanians in Albania proper don't identify so strongly with Albanians outside

and are less nationalist in general. "For instance," I say, "I understand that they don't mind being called 'Shqip' (which simply means 'Albanian' in Albanian), whereas Albanians here find it offensive when Macedonians call them that."

"That's because they intentionally mispronounce it," Basri yells back. "They do it intentionally, to degrade us. If they pronounce it correctly, we don't mind." (Roberto tells me later that this is nonsense; the fact is that Albanians call one another *shqip* but no one else can. This reminds me of many American blacks who call one another "nigger" but understandably would be horribly offended to be called such by a non-black.)



Isa Ahmet, Roberto, Shped ("Bird"), me and Basri in front of Tetovo's computer facility

"Look," I say, conscious that my own relative youth makes me a lightning rod for his frustrations, "if you think you're going to impress me or scare me by being aggressive, forget about it."

Basri looked shocked and said he hadn't been acting aggressive. His two friends, much to their credit, told him that indeed he had been. Basri apologizes and sits back, looking a bit stunned.

In the pause that follows I turn to Isa Ahmet. "So, how are you doing today?"

"Not very well," he says, looking genuinely down. "I was supposed to graduate today but first I had to take one final exam, in modern American literature. But my professor didn't make it."

His professor, Isa Ahmet explains, commutes twice a month from Pristina, in Kosovo. With the problems in the build-up to NATO air strikes, the border may have been closed. (Since air strikes began and the Serbian pogrom shifted into high gear, apparently targeting especially Albanian intellectuals, it seems certain that this expert in American literature is either in hiding, on the run or dead.) The three students tell me that most of their best professors come from Prishtina and some others from Tirana, Albania. The Albanian university in Pristina, as Mr. Sulejmani indicated, was the nucleus of the Albanians' parallel society in Kosovo. It seems very likely that those Albanian intellectuals who survive the Serbian onslaught, now more nationalistic than ever, will look for a new home in Tetovo.

I ask the guys whether they're religious. They believe

in Allah, they say, but, like most Albanian Muslims, don't go to the mosque regularly. Isa Ahmet says Albanians can't be religious fanatics because half of Albanians are Christian. He mentions Mother Theresa, the outline of whose tiny house in Skopje is marked in a central square and honored with flowers. For this reason, says Isa Ahmet, they have to be Albanians first and Muslims or Christians second.

Isa Ahmet and Shpend tell me about the riots last year in Gostivar in which police severely beat many protestors and some were killed. Isa Ahmet says most Albanians in Gostivar blame Macedonians in general and can't distinguish between ordinary people and the government. And, Isa Ahmet says, shaking his head, they want revenge. "The only solution," he says, "is the education of Albanians."

Roberto is impressed. "You don't often hear Albanians saying they have to take responsibility for themselves," he tells me later. Education, in any case, will require increased state support. According to Mr. Sulejmani, for 73,000 Albanian children currently in elementary schools in Macedonia there were only 3,000 teachers; within the next ten or 15 years Albanian children will number about 120,000, requiring some 8,000 teachers.

The guys say they have to look in on a practical exam in computers that's required of all students. None of the three is actually taking the exam himself, but for some reason they can't explain they still have to have a look. We walk down the street to an ordinary-looking house, climb a flight of stairs and enter a dark room full

of old computer terminals and students staring intently at them. The instructor whispers us a greeting and as he turns to face us I see half the students turn to their neighbors for a bit of help.

I am struck by the number of girls in the classroom. Being generally more traditional than their Slav compatriots, Albanians are notorious among Macedonians for treating women like chattels, though I can't say I've seen any abuse or oppression myself. Tetovo's official information sheet says: "Among the students, half are females to whom UT has opened the doors toward knowledge and emancipation, thus helping them advance jointly with women of other Balkan countries toward modern European civilization. Among the lecturers are 47 women with the relevant Masters and PhD qualifications, which is a great accomplishment for Albanian women in Macedonia."

After posing for a group picture outside the computer building, Isa Ahmet tells me how disappointed he is with the university. He entered the university's first class with high hopes that its administration would share his idealism. He had his first clash with Sulejmani when, as editor of the student paper, he proposed various ways the school might devolve authority and liberalize. The rector, he says, has no interest in sharing power to improve the quality of students' experience. "All he cares about is collecting his money, which gives him power over everyone else," says Isa Ahmet.

Darkness is falling as Roberto and I take a taxi back to the parking lot in central Tetovo where he'd left his Yugo. After struggling for a few minutes with traffic that Roberto finds chaotic and hard to negotiate, we reach the two-lane road back to the capital. Suddenly, we find ourselves facing two sets of headlights, one in the opposite lane and one in ours. We both draw in a sharp breath. The passing car swoops back into its lane with just a few meters to spare. I feel the itch of anxiety all over my body. "Cigarette?" I offer.

"Yeah," says Roberto.

Before he's finished the cigarette another passing car has come within meters of killing us.

"I've never driven this road at night," Roberto says tensely. "It's nothing like Skopje or other parts of the country with mostly Macedonians. This is how Albanians are — they're wild, they pay no attention to any rules at all."

This disregard for safety extends beyond driving. Roberto tells me that so far only 17 cases of AIDS have been reported in Macedonia. Only in the first case was homosexual activity suspected. But there are an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 heroin addicts, nearly all of whom re-

use dirty needles. A friend of Roberto's who is a former addict and now counsels addicts for a nongovernmental organization called Health Option Skopje says there are many more unrecorded addicts in what she calls, using the politically correct term required by HOS's American patron, "the Albanian-speaking community." She has seen entire extended Albanian families shooting up together. An estimated 80 percent of heroin addicts have Hepatitis C from sharing needles; once the first addict contracts AIDS, it could spread like wildfire.

Adding this information to what Sulejmani and Demiri had said about their fellow prisoners all being Albanian reinforces my impression that in many ways the Albanians' situation mirrors that of African Americans. According to an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* called "Prison-Industrial Complex" (Eric Schlosser, *The Atlantic*, December, 1998), between 60 percent and 80 percent of all inmates in America's jails and prisons have a history of substance abuse. The percentage of Americans arrested for violent offences has changed little over the past 20 years. Among those arrested for drug offenses, the proportion who are African-American has tripled. The prevalence of illegal drug use is roughly the same among white men and black men but blacks are FIVE TIMES as likely to be arrested for drug offenses. Consequently, about half the inmates in American jails are African-American, though they represent only about 13 percent of the general population.

I mention to Roberto the apparent parallels between Albanians and African Americans and that, in this light, Tetovo University seems a heroic effort by the community to help itself.

"But in the civil rights movement all black Americans wanted a chance to integrate," Roberto replies, "whereas here they want to separate."

In fact, I say, there were two powerful streams of thought within the black community: one led by Martin Luther King, Jr. that favored integration, and another led by Malcolm X that favored segregation. Demiri, Isa Ahmet and Shpend, all the most impressive Albanians we'd met, would side with King; Basri and Sulejmani would probably support the separatists. Thirty-one years after King was killed by black separatists, both schools of thought survive and it seems likely that the same will be true for the beleaguered Albanians.

A WHIRLWIND TOUR IN A TEACUP COUNTRY

Roberto picks me up at the hotel early the next morning and within minutes we are on the road heading south to Ochrid, the cradle of Orthodox Christianity in Macedonia. After climbing steadily among vertiginous mountains for 40 minutes Roberto pulls over at a low-slung café called "Prince Marco." The café's namesake

was an Ottoman vassal revered by Serbs and Macedonians as their heroic defender from Turkish oppression. The Serbs like to say "Prince Marco arrived too late at Kosovo," the battle where in 1389 they suffered a decisive loss to the Ottomans that eventually resulted in their subjugation for five centuries. It's just as well for the sake of the legend that Marco arrived late, since he, like many other Serbs, would have fought on the Ottoman side. On the café wall hangs the IMRO crest and a row of black-and-white photographs of about a dozen fiery-eyed young men in bandit garb — the entire IMRO pantheon of revolutionary heroes.

Signs of political ardor continue outside. The café sits at the top of a pass and IMRO signs appear every 50 meters on a retaining wall running along the road, along with a few Albanian double-eagles that have been crossed out with spray paint. The region is predominantly Albanian but the community around the pass seems to be Macedonian and it clearly feels on the defensive.

We enter the town of Kichevo, marked by a billboard on a bare slope advertising Boss cigarettes. It is, says Roberto, perhaps the best integrated Macedonian-Albanian community in the country. But the villagers in the surrounding hills are staunch Albanian nationalists who in World War II supported German-Italian quislings known as the Balikompitar. The group's leader, Jemo Hassa, is still regarded by many Albanians as a national hero. The Balikompitar fought the Yugoslav Partisans throughout the war and continued even after it ended, fearing revenge. "There was no concept of amnesty," explains Roberto, "especially among communists just after the war."

For another hour we thread our way through tooth-like mountains, which then open into a valley dotted with grazing sheep and 60's-style Yugoslav apartment buildings. The buildings congeal into a small town and then we are at the edge of a tree-lined lake stretching between snow-capped peaks into a misty distance. This is Ochrid, where in 1937 Rebecca West had been struck by a superior species of "slender old ladies with shapely heads, feline spines that are straight without being rigid, fine hands and feet, and a composure that sharply rather than placidly repulses recognition of all in life that is not noble." Dame West went on to explain their nobility thus: "It was not that these old duchesses could not sew and cook and sweep, it was that Ochrid had a long past. Before it was Byzantine it was within the sphere of the lost Illyrian empire, it had been a Greek city, and in its beginnings it had formed part of the settlement of a pre-Mycenaean civilization. That is to say that for thousands of years there have been gentlefolk here, people who preferred harmony to disharmony, and were capable of sacrificing their immediate impulses to this preference."

The twentieth century, as we all know by now, has not shown much respect for centuries-old traditions of

civility. I am sorry to say that in the afternoon I spent in Ochrid I did not see a single "old duchess," either feline-spined or of the more usual variety. In fact, as Roberto and I lunched on pizza at a lakeside café, it occurred to me that the women around were unusually unattractive. Roberto confirmed that nowadays Ochrid is known for having the ugliest women in Macedonia.

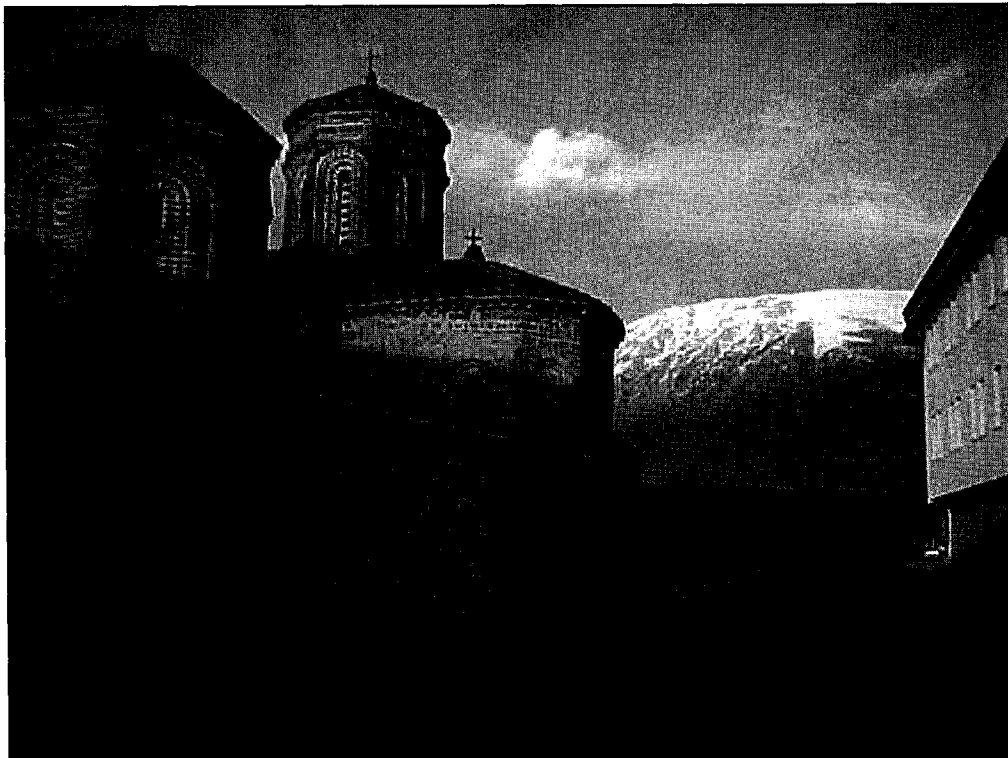
"In 1988 it was hilarious", says Roberto laughing at the memory of a vacation here. "That was the last successful tourist season here and they organized what they called a 'safari.' Their idea of a safari was to put tourists on mules and take them up to a village on the lowest slope of that hill over there," he says pointing. "And this is that famous center of Slav culture and site of the first university in Europe!" says Roberto.

The tune "Hotel California" is playing on the café's speakers, as at any given moment it probably is somewhere near every hallowed cradle of culture these days.

Ochrid has faced more serious threats than The Eagles or tacky tourism. The Ottomans had closed the last Macedonian archbishopric under Greek pressure in 1786. It was re-established in 1960 but still is not recognized by any other Orthodox national church. One reason is that the Macedonian church no longer has monks. On Mt. Athos, the Holy Mountain home to the leading monasteries of Orthodox Christianity, the Serbs' Hilander Monastery is now helping the Macedonians found a monastic order of their own. Though the church has long been a repository of Serb nationalism, the monks hold no truck with Slobodan Milosevic. After the Serbian president visited the monastery in the early nineties, by helicopter and uninvited, the monks spent three days scrubbing every place he had touched. They wanted to leave no physical trace "that Satan."

Ochrid itself looks very well scrubbed. We walk along its narrow streets, crowded with tasteful homes, some of them magnificent examples of Ottoman architecture with tudor-patterned box windows cantilevered above our heads. Most of the churches for which Ochrid is famous are themselves the size of houses, but older. The most famous, Sveti Sofia, is the size and shape of a reasonably big barn, but with a tiled roof and a crudely proportioned and shallow porch. Unlike many Orthodox churches, Sveti Sofia is airy and light. The interior is being renovated and the likenesses of saints that have been restored look balefully at their visitors, as if tired of waiting for their mates to be brought out of cryogenesis.

We walk along a track etched into a steep hillside, reminding me of the Cinqua Terra in Liguria, to the church of Sveti Yovan, St. John. It is exquisitely perched on a flower-covered promontory high above the lake that is dazzling in late afternoon sunlight. Inside the little church, the size of a cabana built windowless stone, the air smells stuffy and heavy with incense. The only light



Sveti Naum Monastery south of Ochrid

comes from small votive candles, dramatically revealing the grave faces of bearded saints in sumptuous robes in dark blue and red, especially red, reflected from the gilt of the iconostasis, the screen that Orthodox priests use to shield worshippers from the full mystery of the Eucharist. I feel as if I'd stepped into the boudoir of an ancient and extravagant courtesan; as many sympathetic observers of Orthodox have remarked, an excellent place to make magic.

Twenty miles down the shore south of Ochrid, just before the Albanian border, lies the preternaturally beautiful monastery of Sveti Naum. A cold, dark, mountain stream, the Crni Drim, rushes beneath magnificent willow trees to join the lake. Snowy peaks tower over us, a Balkan Shangri-La. This place, consecrated for centuries to a life based on celibacy, makes me feel helplessly romantic.

The monastery sits on a hill overlooking the tenderly violent union of mountain stream and tranquil lake. Its base is made of stone, the second story cantilevered in the Ottoman style. It is now being used a hotel, waiting for the young monks to finish their preparation on Mt. Athos to restore the monastery to its original use. We pass under a stone arch and enter the courtyard with the monks' residential buildings around and the small church in the center. The far edge of the courtyard falls away steeply to the lake. The mountaintops glitter above the church.

St. Naum founded the original chapel in 900. That building was razed by the Ottomans soon after their conquest of Macedonia in 1371. Reconstruction began in the

early 16th century and finished by 1711. Restoration of the frescoes by painters from Kortcha, a town now in Albania, was finished in 1800. The current building is a homely construction of rough stones, crudely fashioned arches and tiled roofs, reminiscent of mission Spanish architecture in California.

A solidly built, bearded priest mans the ticket booth on the porch. We pay the small fee and the priest flips a switch, illuminating the richly frescoed interior better than its builders and painters ever could have seen it. Between the church dedicated to St. Archangels and the chapel housing Naum's tomb, the priest points out a wall that is the only surviving element from the saint's original church. We pass through the narthex and into a small octagonal room where the bones of Naum have lain for a thousand years. Above his final resting place a fresco shows six saints, haloed and bearded, looking down on the recumbent Naum as Mary waves a censer over him. Over a thousand years later he is gratefully remembered for his humane example and contribution to the development of the Macedonian written language invented by the Byzantine monks Cyril and Mehodius, and their protégé and Naum's mentor, St. Kliment. Not a bad life.

I tell Roberto I can understand, for the first time, how a person could be tempted by the monastic life.

"But this is just an escape from the responsibility to do something in the world," he says.

"But what," say I, "if under foreign occupation as

Macedonia was for five centuries, 'the real world' has been reduced to dirt farming for landlords of an alien religion or rich Christians who collaborate with the enemy? Why wouldn't it be preferable to live in a beautiful place like this where you could focus every moment on absorbing the best of your own Orthodox tradition and preparing for the world that seemed more real than this vale of tears?"

Roberto and I sit on the terrace of the restaurant under the peaks, now an ethereal pink in the day's last light. We are quiet, he drinking a Skopska, Macedonia's national beer, and I a glass of red wine. From a stereo inside we hear Harry Belafonte singing "Oh my love, my darling, I hunger for your touch."

Roberto asks whether I'd like to drive straight back to Skopje or take a slightly longer route that will take us through two of Macedonia's other major cities, Bitola and Prelim. Macedonia is a small country, with a population of just over two million and a territory that can be crossed by car in an afternoon. But because almost all of it is mountainous — "Macedonia" comes from the old Macedonian words "*makos*" (big, high) and "*don*" (land) — every ten miles or so one finds a new microclimate good for growing a particular type of crop, a different social atmosphere and often, a different ethnic group.

We enter the agricultural hub of Ressen and in the darkness pass what looks like the city hall of a provincial center in France. It was built in the nineteenth century by an Ottoman *beg*, or aristocrat, whose brother was living in France and had sent him a photo of a building he found magnificent as an inducement to his brother to come visit. Instead of making the trip, the brother in Ressen built a façade that was an exact replica of what he could see of the building in the picture. He sent his brother a photo of his construction with a note saying, "Why live in France when we have buildings just like that here in Ressen?"

Fifteen minutes later we are in Bitola. With a population of 120,000, it is Macedonia's second biggest city. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was known as "the City of Consuls." Like Salonika, Bitola was a prosperous trading center with a large Jewish population and a cosmopolitan air. All the major European countries maintained diplomatic missions here. The consulates occupied ornate buildings lining Bitola's main pedestrian thoroughfare, Shiroki Sokak, which has been amusingly translated as "Broadway." The French and the Turks have recently reopened their missions here, sharing a single building.

Bitola has the reputation of having the best-looking girls in Macedonia. Roberto speculates that this is thanks to the admixture of Jewish blood. We are less than a two-hour drive from Ochrid, with the country's worst-looking girls; It's as if Macedonia had been exposed to some

mysterious cosmic force that compressed it beyond the possibility of normal physics to yield a density of differentiation not found anywhere else on earth.

After walking the length of Bitola's Broadway, admiring the number of smart cafes and bars, we stop for a *gyros*, what the Turks call a *doner kebab*. A middle-aged man, the restaurant's owner, greets us in heavily accented Macedonian and relays our order in Greek. Roberto speculates that he probably commutes from Greece; the border is just six miles away.

Our next stop is Prelip, Roberto's hometown, known for being a bastion of conservatism. "A good place to develop character," says Roberto with a twinkle in his eye.

We're hungry and Roberto has a good place in mind for dinner. He pulls up to a ramshackle building with a sign saying "Macedonian-American Association."

"It's actually a fascist organization," Roberto explains. "They hate Albanians and gypsies and Serbs and anyone else in Macedonian who isn't Macedonian. But their restaurant has good food."

Unfortunately for us the fascists' exclusionary instincts outweigh their culinary pride: they turn us down flat, saying the entire restaurant is booked. We go to a cheaper place that Roberto says used to be decent and order a ground beef patty stuffed with cheese and vegetables that should be called "the sclerosiburger."

The place is seedy — soiled tablecloths, harsh lighting, a dim waiter. At the only other occupied table sit two tough-looking men and a sleazily attractive woman. Roberto overhears the woman saying she doesn't want to have to sleep with Albanians. Her pimp is unhappy about this, saying Albanians will make up most of her clients.

Before hitting the road for Skopje, we stop by an old watering hole of Roberto's where we run into his brother and some old friends. One of them, a long-haired 22-year-old named Ilia, had been planning on going to Skopje by bus the following morning and decides to come with us instead. Ilia is a young man of parts, all of them cutting-edge: a conceptual artist, an internet expert, the DJ of a contemporary music program on state radio, a performer and producer of techno music. As we drive through the moonlit mountains, Ilia asks me about my interest in Turkey and the Balkans. I explain my interest in the potential for both conflict and fusion created by the disappearance of physical and political barriers in Eurasia.

Ilia doesn't like the mention of conflict. "The world is coming together," he says. "Young people don't care about old history, they just want to be peaceful and enjoy themselves." Ilia tells me he's looking for funding for a conceptual-art project based on recording natural sounds all over the former Yugoslavia, putting them on

an internet site and allowing individuals to adjust the level and combination of the various sounds to make a personalized version of the "song of Yugoslavia." He has already used the Net to meet a girl from Hong Kong with whom he had a thrilling affair when she visited Macedonia. And just the other night an 18-year-old with whom he'd been chatting on-line but never met face-to-face asked him to come immediately to her family's apartment and have sex with her as her parents slept.

We enter Skopje and drop off Ilia, who until the last

moment is spouting optimism about the future that has no resonance with anything I'd heard during my week in Macedonia. I say to Roberto that Ilia's views seemed dogmatically escapist. "He's a member of a tribe too," Roberto remarks.

Or perhaps it would be fairer to say that Ilia belongs to a contemporary equivalent of the ancient monastic orders, one based on faith in a new conception of the power of the unseen and devoted to harnessing knowledge and technology to subdue not nature but history. □

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