

## **Why I Love the Balkans**

E-mail message home from Ohrid, Macedonia, August 3, 2000:

Hello all,

Hope all is well with you at home. I've been having a lively good time. And now I'm in Ohrid. I just arrived a couple of hours ago. Got set up in the hotel, shower, clothes washing and hanging out to dry on the hotel room balcony and now I'm out in the town. It was easy to find this internet place. Down in the tourist strip near the water and town center.

The last week and a half has been fun. Oddly enough I speak better Macedonian than in the past. Maybe all the reading and writing I do. Of course, I've had some of the usual trials. Sunburn at Mavrovo Lake, bee sting over in Leshok, headache and stomach ache for a day after celebrating Ilinden in Ratae in the morning, Brvenica in the afternoon, and Leshok in the evening. Sometimes maybe I try to pile too much into these trips.

I was interviewed on television in Tetovo the other day. It was part of a promotion of my book that Ruzha organized. Of course, I was worried that I might say something that would entertain everybody more than I might like. But from what I hear, it wasn't bad. About ten minutes after the evening news on the only Macedonian station in Tetovo. After that, I'd meet people who saw the interview. That included folks in Ratae, who learned that I was visiting through seeing me on television.

Of course, there had to be some exciting moments. Probably the trip to Mavrovo with Zhivko, Jana, Elena and one of Elena's girl friends gets the highest rating so far. The five of us crammed into Zhivko's ancient, tiny Fiat (about the size of our friend's old little car.) It had some sort of problem with the carburetor and dripped gas the whole way. To make things more interesting I suppose, Zhivko wouldn't let his rich American guest buy any gas and he put in about two liters to get us up over a mountain pass and some 40 kilometers to the lake. Then about halfway there on a narrow winding mountain road, the fan belt had to break and we struggled to put on a questionable replacement. (The car never did run right after that, the

engine got hot, the battery didn't get recharged, etc.) We crept along for another half hour with all sorts of unhappy drivers behind us. ...

I grew up with a burning curiosity to know all I could about the half of me that originated in the Balkans. This was certainly fed in no small part by my parents' decision to name me after my Balkan grandfather. Although I never met him, I was told the story of how pleased he had been to learn that the child that my mother was expecting, if it was a boy, would be named after him. But he died a few months before my birth, so I could only imagine him. And I hung on every word ever spoken about him. He had been a skilled craftsman, I was told. A shoemaker, a baker, a blacksmith and a builder. He spoke five languages, and he fought in a Balkan war of liberation against the Turks at the turn of the century.

There was also the mysterious words of my grandmother. The way she always gazed at me with such love, as she uttered the only word that I could understand of her foreign language, "Mihail." Because she and my father spoke Romanian during those visits, I had assumed that my grandfather was also Romanian. Until one day when, as a child, I was watching a movie on television about Alexander the Great, and my father came into the room, and he said, "We're Macedonians!"

Then, in 1973, after completing college, I set off for Macedonia for the first time. I was armed with only a couple hundred words of Macedonian learned from an elderly uncle, a thousand dollars earned working in a Detroit car factory, and the name of the ancestral village and of an elderly half- brother of my father there, known only from lost letters from back in the 1940's. And there were the less than comforting words of my old Uncle Trifun, who had said to me, "Why in the world do you want to go there? Everybody who lives there just wants to get out." Trifun left there in a time of war and poverty much worse than that wreaked by the breakup of Yugoslavia...

The old bus rumbled noisily along the narrow asphalt road between the towns of Tetovo and Vratnica. The hot August sun shone brightly, while a thin haze blurred the distant mountain peaks and the more distant fields of corn. Little trails of dust rose out across the fields where a horse drawn cart made its way along some narrow country road. Every so often the bus driver would honk the horn and all of the passengers would be tossed to one side as he swerved to avoid a horse or ox drawn cart.

The countryside was alive with activity. People tended gardens. Men cut hay with long scythes. Others drove cows or sheep from one pasture to another. Birds sang out raucously from the tree tops and insects buzzed monotonously in the tall grass along the roadside.

The bus was crowded with people on their way home from a morning in town. Sun-burnt men with weathered hands and faces, dressed in cheap baggy suit clothes, stood or sat in weary poses. There were also women in long skirts and with scarves on their heads, and Moslem women who wore long overcoats as well. Everyone had a small bundle or two, and some of the women held a small child or led one by the hand.

As the bus pulled off to the side of the road at the entrance to one village, I, a young man in my 20's in an American sports shirt and levi trousers, carrying a small green duffel bag, stepped off and down onto the dusty shoulder. I set my pack on the ground and watched as the bus slowly rumbled off down the road. As the dust cleared, I began to look around me and up the rutted road toward a small sea of whitewashed houses with red clay tile roofs that ended abruptly in forest that extended far up the mountain beyond.

Then I shouldered my bag and walked on up toward the village. I had only gone a short distance when I was intercepted by several young men and boys. They stared at me curiously, this obvious stranger in their midst. I spoke to them in a broken and halting Macedonian, "Moj dedo bil roden ovde."

And I pulled out my passport and showed them my name and surname, the name passed on to me from that grandfather, who had emigrated from this village to America some sixty years before, fleeing from poverty, and after years of fighting in a war of liberation that had yielded none. Each of them examined the passport in turn, and after some excited talk among themselves, they led me to a building on up the hill.

I waited impatiently there in a chair in a room where a man at a desk went about his business, oblivious to my presence. After a time a small, sun-weathered old man with sparkling eyes entered and smiled broadly at me and said in Macedonian, "Welcome, child, your grandfather was my father. I'm your Uncle Tome."

I visited Macedonia for the first time out of curiosity, but because I was free to stay and explore their society, to take the time to get to know their ways beyond the superficial images in tourist brochures or through the primitive communication of pidgin or sign language, I was rewarded by insight and understanding available only to the patient few. I still laugh when I remember the day my uncle told me that the Albanian village up the mountain was so primitive that an anthropologist had come to live with them! (I never could get myself to tell that dear old uncle precisely what it was that I had studied in college.) Yet, for all that my

study of anthropology did to prepare me to view their society without preconceived notions, I have never been a detached scientific investigator in their culture. I made an emotional as well as a physical leap into their society that no scientist I know would allow himself. If this often leads to subjectivity, I'm not so sure that it doesn't also lead to deeper growth and awareness on levels many scientists must deny themselves.

I met my cousins Trpana, Mitra, Trpko and Bogdan for the first time that first visit. Later, I would meet my father's other brother, Boris, and his wife and my cousin Zhivko, as well as my Aunt Toda and her children. In the months to come, I helped Tome bring hay in from the fields with an ox-cart. Trpana and I harvested chestnuts on the mountain. I spent two weeks in a stone-walled thatch-roofed shepherd's hut on the higher slopes of Shar Mountain with a cousin who tended and milked a flock of a hundred sheep. A feta-type cheese was made from the milk, and once a week they would load a donkey with two wooden barrels of cheese in salt brine and lead him down to the farmers market in Tetovo. My cousin Zhivko and I went trout fishing on the Vardar River and hunting for wild boar in the Suva Gora Mountains with his hunting dogs. I attended weddings and religious celebrations. I was a guest and a foreigner, but one who was taken into the heart of the family and given every opportunity to understand the language, culture and society of that Balkan land intimately. I stayed six months that time, until my savings were exhausted and my father, who had joined me there at Christmas time, suggested that maybe I had free-loaded off his poor village relations long enough!

Yet, there was one more magical experience that still awaited me that first visit to Macedonia. December 22 was cold and bright, and there was freshly-fallen snow on the ground. We all rose early that day, and as soon as breakfast was over, Aunt Darya wrapped a freshly-baked loaf of bread in a clean white linen cloth, Uncle Tome poured hot sugared brandy into a small flask, and cousin Trpana prepared a small bowl of boiled wheat grain sprinkled with sugar. When all was ready, Uncle Tome and I, dressed in our Sunday best, collected these items and followed the sound of the tolling church bell up the narrow, winding stone-walled streets of the village until we arrived at a white-washed little Eastern Orthodox church.

Almost all of the men-folk of the little village had gathered in the church; the women had visited the church the night before. Each family carried a loaf of bread, a bowl of wheat, and a flask of brandy like our own. The bearded and black-robed priest chanted and read the short service to us. Then he blessed our small round loaves of bread topped with their shaped-dough crosses, and each of us in turn kissed the small silver cross that he held as we filed out of church.

Everyone then gathered in a back alcove of the church, and members of each household approached a neighbor. Each took a small bite from the others bowl of wheat, a tiny sip from his neighbor's flask of brandy, and then wished the other health and prosperity in the coming year.

That was on St. Nicholas Day in 1973. It was the first Macedonian village saints day celebration that I had ever experienced. It took place in a small agricultural village in which my relatives have probably observed some form of this celebration for over a thousand years. It is one small part of the ancient mosaic of village culture in their homeland and my Balkan second home.

Needless to say, I've never been the same since that visit. At times I become absolutely obsessed with getting back there. I start to dream in Macedonian at those times, and I visit the villages in my dreams and have long conversations and get reacquainted with cousins and aunts and uncles.

Eventually I do return for a month or more. I've done so nine times since 1973, my most recent visit being in August of 2000. When I'm not there I read newspapers, magazines and books from my chosen Balkan land, and for a number of years now I have been translating Macedonian literature, writing occasional scholarly articles, and I have written one scholarly book, my doctoral dissertation on Macedonian literature, published in 1996, and most recently I have completed a novel, a mystery set in Macedonia, as yet unpublished.

Some things have changed over the years. For one thing, my Macedonian continues to improve. One cousin commented that I wasn't as much fun to listen to as I used to be. Apparently some of my more creative mistakes in the language were quite entertaining, though they were much too polite to show this to me on their faces at the time.

Now there are internet cafes and cell phones, traffic jams and new buildings in the cities and villages. Some things, however, haven't changed. Regrettably this includes the ubiquitous trash in public places and most noticeably along the shores of what would otherwise be pristine beautiful lakes and rivers. And then there are the excursions like the visit to Lake Mavrovo that I began to describe in my e-mail letter home that began this account. So typical in ways. Dangerous old cars and absurd notions about the proper role of hosts and guests. But, as usual, we had great fun and a memorable experience. And we did eventually make it to the lake that day. We basked in the warm Mediterranean sunshine. The lake was cool, clean and refreshing. The skara, the roasted peppers and homemade sausage rolls, bread and tomatoes were delicious. The company delightful.

Of course, when we got ready to leave the car wouldn't start, so my cousin had me and his wife and the two girls try to push start it in the sandy stretch of beach, without much success. Fortunately, our Albanian neighbors on the beach were most kind about helping out, and we were soon off and running again. Okay, well, sort of running. The damaged fan belt only allowed us to limp along at about 30 k/hr, which didn't make fellow motorists very happy, and prompted a lecture by my cousin's wife about why he should go back to Australia or America and earn some more money in order to buy them a decent car. (He promptly went out the next week and bought a better used car.) But the mountain road provided lovely vistas, and

the slow pace allowed me to savor the scenes as we passed from wild mountain parkland into rich valley farmland - fields of ripening grain and vegetables and fruits - and on through dusty villages with their noisy flocks of chickens and pigs and sheep, cows and horses, raucous crows, and the people - as uniquely beautiful as their land, sometimes cruel, but most often warm and decent and kind. If the harsher economic reality of the Balkans has forced many people to live in close quarters, with children and with grandchildren and with elderly parents, is this more humanly comforting than America's fragmented society of rugged individualists?

Now that I am back home in America, and as I look back at Macedonia, the poor, chaotic and ever so beautiful land of my grandfather, I realize that for me it is an immersion. I refer mainly to village life. It is like plunging, body and soul, into another world, with different sounds and smells and touches and sights than those of my native land.

I also think of it as a gift from my grandfather. He once fought for Macedonian freedom and happiness. And it falls to me and my kinfolk to enjoy those today.

I love the old stone walls and barns and houses and medieval fortresses and crumbled ancient palaces and temples. The donkeys and the little horses that pull weathered old wagons full of hay or grain. And the sturdy sun-burnished village folk whose thoughts and speech are charmingly artless and artful both at the same time. And the simple bounty of their land - wheat and corn and potatoes, squash and tomatoes and onions and peppers - mild green, yellow, or red hot. And sweet luscious melons, pears and plums, apricots and apples, and the thick juicy clusters of grapes, everywhere just waiting to be plucked from the vine. And the delicious daily bread, the cheese, yogurt and baked tomato, pepper, rice and bean dishes. Simple shared pleasures of the earth's bounty. In a land like America, where so many eat food that has lain on store shelves for a month, or fast food from cans or frozen packages, people have no idea how much better their "poor" Balkan neighbors often eat.

Of course, it isn't heaven though, by any means. Sometimes it is god awful hot and sweaty and gritty, and all you smell is manure, and flies land on nearly everything you try to eat outdoors in the villages. And I've learned to take care to avoid being mistreated by strangers, in a society where people learn early that they must take care of their own, and strangers and outsiders should take care of themselves. Although I have also been pleasantly surprised often enough when the kindness of a stranger saved me from harm.

It will probably always be an exotic land for me. And I may always merely be one who dips in only occasionally and lingers for a while, filling all the pores of my being with Macedonia, and finally emerging again from that satisfying soak to return home. Though I sometimes consider the possibility that there may be some niche there for an extended teaching stay for me some time in the future.

Some of the best things in life defy any easy explanation. My delight in Macedonia, even if it is only my occasional Balkan promised land, is such a thing, and lasting and ever so real for me.

Michael Seraphinoff, Greenbank, Washington, USA, October 2000