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**AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHT INTO THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
DIMITAR (MITE) PRSTENAROV (1913 - 1996) FROM THE VILLAGE OF
VISHENI, AEGEAN MACEDONIA**

Abstract: This paper draws on the life story of one Macedonian man from the Aegean part of Macedonia and elaborates his autobiography preserved up until now in a manuscript form. In addition to the life story, the manuscript makes an attempt to contextualize the military-political events, the social and ideological circumstances that are described from the author's perspective. Special attention is put on the language and the linguistic influences that are noticeable in the manuscript, which are a consequence of inhabiting several countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: autobiography, biography, Dimitar Prstenarov, partisanship, Aegean Macedonia, Visheni, Kostur, communist movement, World War II, Greek Civil War, Greek Democratic Army, exodus, socialism, Macedonia, Yugoslavia.

Inquiring about the history and life of my ancestors, close and distant, I often asked about my parents, relatives, and friends and read a lot of literature. For a long time, I knew about the materials left by my grandparents, about several photo albums as well as about some manuscripts that my grandfather once wrote.

Although I knew about the manuscripts, I have never before had the opportunity to look at them, to see what they included. I was always more interested in albums, rich in photos from my family life, while I considered the manuscripts less important. Since they were handwritten, they were difficult to read. Thus probably no one had continued to read them more than the first two pages. What I found, what I read, was fascinating to me. The manuscripts comprise the

materials for the village of Visheni (Aegean Macedonia). They contain data on the history of the village, descriptions of holidays and customs and list of neighbourhoods in the village and surrounding areas, and many other data related to Visheni and the villagers of Visheni, that my grandfather published in a book about the village of Visheni. The other part of the manuscript materials consists of the autobiography of my grandfather, Dimitar - Mite Prstenarov (1913-1996).

The autobiography is handwritten on ninety pages. It was written in the late seventies of the 20th century when Dimitar Prstenarov was in his sixties. Most of the sentences are on the front side of the sheet. Sometimes there is a continuation of the thought and additions on the second side of the sheet. To several sheets there are also added (glued) pieces with additional thoughts. In some cases, I had to peel off the glued pieces to read part of the manuscript that were covered. It caused the danger that the second layer would be damaged. Fortunately, anything was destroyed, but it took a lot of my patience and attention.

The manuscript contained also damaged sheets, some pages were torn. In some parts handwriting was smudged and almost illegible. Some of the sheets were shuffled; it took time to find their correct order. Therefore, reading, transcribing and understanding it was a really big challenge.

The autobiography is written in Macedonian, in the dialect of the city Kostur, but there are also noticeable various linguistic influences to which the author was exposed during his life. These are Russian, literary Macedonian, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian. Some of sentences and expressions were constructed in the particular Yugoslavian way of communicating. One can also notice various forms of handwriting in which there are parts with legible and ordered handwriting as well as such which are illegible and chaotic. All this gives us a picture of the life of Dimitar Prstenarov in a historical perspective, but also of Dimitar Prstenarov's life in the period when he was writing his autobiography.

Presentation of himself and his family

Dimitar Prstenarov, born on October 12, 1913 in the village of Visheni - Kostur region, was the fifth of the six children of Kuzo and Kaljopa, of whom the first, the third¹ and last died and he did not met them.

Writing about his parents and the set of conditions of their life, Dimitar describes events in Macedonian history by telling the personal stories of his parents:

¹ In the manuscript Dimitar Prstenov mentions Labro as a third child, but Kole should be on his place instead.

“Father and mother and daughter-in-law, Labrovica, with many other villagers, adults, fathers, mothers and grandfathers were expelled from the village by the Greek authorities because of which their sons, daughters and grandchildren joined the partisans... they moved to the partisan-ruled area and they contributed to the struggle in the auxiliary services.

After the liquidation of the movement, they moved to the People’s Republic of Poland in the town of Legnica and in 1960 I brought them to my place in Skopje and they stayed with me until the end of their life”.

Introduction to communist ideology

After he began to occupy the tailoring, Dimitar met people who strongly appreciated the communist² ideology. Thus, daily surrounded by the idea of communism, he started to be interested in it. The Master’s friends gathered in the sewing shop. Among them was Nikos Papademos, who was a communist by ideology. Nikos often supplied Dimitar with literature which was later shared with other villagers.

In 1932, a communist organization was formed in the village of Visheni. It was made up of locals, but was run by the Kostur branch of the organization.

Participation of the Macedonian diaspora in the organization

Dimitar testifies about the role and activities of his brother Labro, who emigrated to work in Canada in 1927. There he joined socially supportive fraternities, ie. societies organized on the principle of rural or regional affiliation. As a strong supporter of the “progressive movement”³ which was banned he was often imprisoned. Labro had a great role in propagating the communist ideology in his native village:

² I refer to the term “Communist” because it is the same term that Dimitar Prstenarov is referring to in his autobiography. However, the meaning refers to a socialist ideology and movement.

³ A term that Dimitar Prstenarov is referring to in his autobiography in the specific context.

“... my brother Labro, who from 1927, contributed a lot to the good orientation and strengthening of the organization. Going to work in Canada, he joined the progressive movement and became a strong activist. He was detained several times by the Canadian authorities; they were photographed in a Canadian newspaper with four other activists on the front page with a chain tied to each other.

In 1932 he came for a year, he visited us and that time he gave us a lot of lectures on ideological and political topics, which were very useful for us.” (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

The period of Metaxas’s dictatorship

An Australian author, Bert Birtles, in his book writing in 1938 “Exile in the Aegean” states: “If Greece has no problem with the Jews, then it has them with the Macedonians” (Birtles 1938:131). The repression of the Macedonians reached its most brutal form during the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas (1936-1940). This is what Dimitar writes about it:

“With the establishment of the dictatorship of Metaxas, the Greek people were deprived of their liberty and for the Macedonians the harm was double. They were deprived of their national rights, the few that remained. But the worst thing was that by law they were forbidden to speak their mother tongue, the Macedonian language. Whoever dared to speak Macedonian was immediately sued and fined by the law with 500 drachmas and a half kilo of castor oil and a piece of salted fish to get released.

In the evening, the police were going by the windows to listen to the villagers talking at home. There was one case, 90-year-old Vasilica Kalkova, Pando Kalkov’s grandmother, after she asked for a match from the shopkeeper Kolto Kalkov in the presence of a horofilako (a Greek police officer), who then filed a lawsuit, and took the nephew with his mother to the court door, as she could not walk, and the judge released her because she did not know Greek and she was very old. (...) The horophilas (policemen) even went to the fields to listen how they plowed and how they made the oxen plow whether in Macedonian or in Greek language”. (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

Despite the fact that the inhabitants of Visheni and Kostur region were subject to repressions due to their ideological and ethnic affiliation, the Visheni communist organization continued their activities, significantly defying the strict laws and the punishments by the Greek authorities.

Forms of resistance

The first act of resistance was the boycott of the police in the village⁴ as well as against certain teachers who were “Graecophiles”. The boycott culminated during the St. Athanasius Summer Festival, when some people considered “Graecophiles” and “Spies” were severely isolated. Concurrently many other people, including members of the communist organization, refused to accept them in the village celebration, i.e. in the common dance called *oro*.

In 1939, turbulent events took place in the region. Albania was occupied by fascist Italy, and Greece was under constant threat. During these political turmoils, the Greek army constantly mobilized the population. Dimitar rejoined the Greek army, but he was demobilized shortly afterwards.

Shortly after the demobilization, members of communist organizations began to be arrested in all Greece, including in the Kostur region. They believed to have been discovered by the Greek secret intelligence services with the help of infiltrated agents in many branches. Many of the activists were sentenced and punished. Dimitar was sentenced to one year in prison on the island of Anafi. However, it did not happen. To be released, he signed a “Declaration of resignation from the party”.

The Albanian front

In the autumn of 1940, Dimitar was again mobilized in the Greek army. He served in an artillery unit stationed above the village of Sveta Ana on Mount Alivica.

After the capture of Konica, Dimitar’s unit continued on foot to the town of Korça in Albania where they were redeployed to other com-

⁴ From today perspective, it is hardly possible to gain a clear picture of the relevance of the police boycott, being that a drastic measure, especially because until the unfortunate events, the police had a completely normal interaction with the village inhabitants and they were more or less considered a part of the village community.

bat units. “I was sent to the brigade as a telephone operator as I was a telephone operator indeed, entire winter in the snow for six months.” - writes Dimitar (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov).

He remained there until April 1941, when the Greek Army units were disbanded following the capitulation of the Greek state. After all these events, Dimitar returned to his native village.

Establishment of armed organization

After returning to Visheni, Dimitar and other members of the communist organization reactivated in order to organize themselves in the fight against the new occupiers.

It was decided to start the process of arming, and to establish new communist organizations in those villages where there were no such.

In order to capture the communist organization where Dimitar was a member, certain actions were carried out by the Italian army. After several months on the run as fugitive, Dimitar and another friend of the organization, Spiro Spasov, decided to surrender.

In the beginning of May 1942 he left first for Bitola and after about 15 days he moved to Sofia.

During his stay in Sofia, Dimitar realized that partisan groups had been formed in the Kostur region, and thus he returned to Visheni in early May 1943.

The emergence of the “counterorganizations” (kontrashi) in the Kostur region

After returning from Sofia, Dimitar found himself in an awkward situation in his homeland. New armed groups were formed, instigated and organized by the Italian and the Bulgarian military authorities.

The organization of the fascist groups, which Dimitar calls “kontrashi” (counters) or “Komitagji” in the text, for the purpose of “Fight against the Greeks” (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov) but also for the fight against the “progressive”⁵, communist movements.

⁵ Progressive movement - a term used by Dimitar Prstenarov to name the communist groups / organizations.

„At first, I do not know exactly whether, in late 1942 or early 1943, everything seems to have been instigated by the fascist Bulgarian agents who collaborated with the Italian fascist authorities, a counter-organization of the Macedonian population was established to oppose the progressive movements. And they easily found an interest and achieved their goal with the slogan “Fight against the Greeks”. It was possible because Greek authorities disenfranchised and discriminated against the Macedonian people. They did not allow Macedonians to have schools in their mother tongue, but as well they prohibited songs and customs and forbade Macedonians the most basic right, that is to speak their mother tongue“. (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

The intensified presence of partisanship

In 1943 the partisan movement became more intensified in the Kostur region, organized and supported by the Communist Party of Greece.

“The same summer, another group of Greek and Macedonian partisans visited our village, led by comrade Ariano. People became enthusiastic, rejoiced, giving them full confidence and support because the partisans saw them as saviors from the “counter” groups and from the Italians.” (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

In the same year, 1943, the “Lazo Trpovski” detachment was formed, composed, as Dimitar states, “of a large number of people from Smardeshcheni, Dzupanishcheni, Aposkep and some other villages and with the Commander of the group Micho Topurka (Titan)” (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov). Dimitar later joined the partisan movement in this detachment.

During the same period, certain disagreements within the Communist Party of Greece occurred on the political scene.

In April 1944, the Greek party leadership decided to disband the Slavo-Macedonian National Liberation Front (SNOF) and the Slavo-Macedonian Liberation Army (SOV). A large group of Macedonians, fighters and activists of the Communist Party ELAS and other political organizations, in the protest on May 16, 1944, broke away from the CPG – ELAS. With the consent of the General Staff of the National Liberation Army

and Partisan detached forces of Macedonia they moved to Karaorman where they organized a battalion called Kostur Battalion.

“I was thinking for a while, but being influenced by the good impression they left, with our Macedonian songs and dances and most importantly the Macedonian language they spoke and the red star they had on their hats when they visited our places, it attracted me and I decided to go, me, too, believing that it is all the same, the struggle is equal, with the same goal, without even thinking that it will mean a split with ELAS and will bring harm to the Greek Party, which was not as I liked it.” (DAE-AR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov).

The secession of the Macedonian partisans from the ranks of ELAS was not acceptable to the Communist Party of Greece leadership. Due to this issue, the relations between the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Communist Party of Greece were disturbed.

Dimitar also testifies about this historical event in his autobiography:

“At the end of the second month, one day the political commissar of the headquarters, Cvetko Uzunovski, gathered us and gave us a speech. In short, he promised us that we should return to our region and fight there together with our Greek comrades against the common enemy. It seems that the two parties agreed and found it convenient to be that way and so it happened.” (DAE-AR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

In continuation of this testimony, Dimitar describes the entry of the Macedonian partisans in the territory of the Kostur region and their usage of the Macedonian and the communist symbols. They were later banned and removed by order of the CPG.

“On the same road we reached the Wambel Mountain again; there were two sheepfolds that fed us well and from there through the village of Labania - Kosneci we reached the village of Dambeni. We, the desolate Macedonian people, oppressed, disenfranchised, ~~thirsty for national rights~~⁶ deprived of the bourgeois rights of Greece and now thinking that we have that right, we made a Macedonian flag, with five pointed star on the hats and with the flag raised we passed the abovementioned villages to the village Pozdivishca.

6 Traced over originally in the text.

Our appearance did not correspond to the set line of the Communist party and so the flag and the five-pointed star were removed.“ (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

After numerous upheavals at the political level, it was decided to secede the Macedonian units from the composition of ELAS, in order to be transferred to the Yugoslavian territory, in the Vardar part of Macedonia, and to be placed under the command of the General Staff of the National Liberation Army and the Partisan detached forces of Macedonia.

According to what was written, Dimitar was not informed about these political developments, so in his autobiography he recorded these moments from his own perspective:

“The joy was great within us, on the one hand, freedom was already in front of us, and on the other hand, it bothered us because we did not know how things would develop with this damned agreement reached in Lebanon by representatives of PEA-EAM⁷ and the immigrant government of George Papandreou. In addition to this trouble we have had, another one has appeared. Our leaders came to a misunderstanding with the Greek leadership. I do not know what the reasons were, but the disagreements reached such a level that ours decided to withdraw an entire brigade from the territory we intended to... “(DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov.

The Greek Civil War

After leaving Bitola, the group in which Dimitar belonged headed through Kajmakshalan⁸ to the village Popadija. From there, through Lerin Field, they ran and reached the village of Prekopana, where a battalion led by Major General Pando “Vaena” was stationed.

By the spring of 1948, they moved almost all over the Kostur region, fighting the monarcho-fascists. From there, after leaving the battalion on Mount Gramos, they continued towards Mount Vicho. Dimitar remained in those positions until April 1948, after which he was trans-

7 The left-wing National Liberation Front (Greek: Εθνικό Απελευθερωτικό Μέτωπο, Ethnikó Apeleftherotikó Μέτωπο (EAM), and the Political Committee of National Liberation (PEEA).

8 Dimitar Prstenarov names this peak in his autobiography as Kajmakshalan, i.e. the current mountain top Kajmakchalan.

ferred to the positions on Mount Gramos. From the unit in which Dimitar was a member, composed of 24 people, 13 were killed.

During the fighting, Dimitar was wounded and treated in Albania. In the spring of 1949, he again went to the military positions on Vicho Mountain. This time he stayed in an artillery unit and remained there until the withdrawal of the Democratic Army of Greece.

Departure to the USSR and return to the Socialist Republic of Macedonia

Like most partisans, Dimitar and his unit withdrew to the territory of Albania, to the town of Korca and from there to the town of Burel. In Burel, Dimitar and his wife, who had meanwhile been in the Democratic Army of Greece support units, left for Elbasan to meet with Dimitar's parents, who had fled there. From Elbasan they headed to Durrës and from there they were transferred by boat to the Soviet Union.

“The Soviet authorities kindly welcomed us, giving us all the amenities for living. Even on the train they have left at our disposal various musical instruments for entertainment.

When we arrived in the town of Chirchik, everything was ready... beds with white sheets, a huge restaurant, fully equipped. They gave us two pairs of suits, one official and one simple, as well as shoes and a coat, etc. Beyond those mentioned above, they gave us 500 rubles each, so we continued to live and eat without paying anything.” (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov)

At first, Dimitar and his wife were employed in a certain institution office⁹, and after 2-3 months, Dimitar was hired as a seamstress in a sewing workshop.

After a year or two, they were transferred to the town of Jangul. There Dimitar was employed in “a factory with various professions for his friends, exclusively for us who were disabled and in weak health.” (DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov). In the factory, Dimitar became a head of the sewing sector.

A year later, Dimitar and his wife were relocated to the “12th Town”¹⁰ near Tashkent, which was inhabited only by “Greek Political Mi-

⁹ Dimitar Prstenarov does not provide additional information.

¹⁰ No further explanation is given as regards the name of this place.

grants¹¹ and employed in another factory where only disabled people and women with small children worked.

They remained in that settlement until 1957. During the stay in “12th Town”. A decision was taken to deliver them ID cards. In the ID cards, all emigrants from Aegean Macedonia, Macedonians and Greeks, were to be registered as Greeks. In response, the majority of Macedonians rebelled and demanded to be registered as a separate, Macedonian, people.

“At the time when we were in 12th Town, it was decided to give us ID cards.

Until then, we Macedonians also figured as Greeks by name and surname, and that caused a pain in our soul to us as Macedonians, why could not we consider ourselves who we were, and so, on that occasion, the Macedonians thought that the moment came and so on we would write according to our Slavic name. At that time, the Greek party did not protest but also did not help us, and that was supposed to make us Macedonians take our proper, national name and surname.”(DAEAR, DEM_1530, Autobiography of Dimitar (Mite) Prstenarov).

In March 1957, Dimitar and his wife came to Skopje. At the beginning, the life in a new place was challenging for them, but over the years the situation improved.

In the last part of his autobiography, Dimitar writes that after twenty years (of what?) he retired and leads a retirement life.

Dimitar Prstenarov died in Skopje on November 6, 1996.

Conclusion

Dimitar Prstenarov was born in 1913 in the village of Visheni in Kostur region. During his life he experienced several events important for the regional, Macedonian and even European history. In his autobiography, Dimitar first writes about his family, he lists the relatives on the paternal and maternal side and continues with his lifestory. Dimitar spent his entire life as a supporter of the idea of “communism” and as such, in his autobiography, he focuses on the political developments from his youth and the political activism in his hometown.

¹¹ At that time, all emigrants from the Aegean Macedonia were registered as Greeks. This situation later has changed.

Thus, Dimitar describes his acquaintance with the communist ideology, which is spreading in the village and the surrounding area, the formation of organized groups based on the communist ideology. He mentions various events, both pleasant and unpleasant; He describes the position of the Macedonians and the repressions towards them. Dimitar writes about his trial and serving a sentence on one of the Greek islands, the beginning of World War II, his mobilization in the Greek army, the Greek-Italian war, the Albanian front, the capitulation of Greece. Furthermore, he writes about the events in the village and the region during the Italian occupation, the emergence of the pro-fascist “counter/*Komitaaji*” groups composed of the local Macedonians, and thus the division of the population according to political and ideological views. He tells about various unfortunate events such as the organization of “communist groups” against the “fascist groups”. He describes many events, murders, battles; his entry into the partisan detached units and events related to the partisanship. He describes the fall of the fascism and the destruction of the pro-fascist organizations in the Kostur region, the re-emergence and the new change of the world and the regional politics and the transition of the partisanship to illegality in the new Greek state, the transfer of his partisan unit to Yugoslavia, his commitment there in building the local infrastructure.

He further describes the beginning of the Greek Civil War, his return to his homeland in Aegean Macedonia, and his participation in the Democratic Army of Greece.

After the defeat of the Democratic Army of Greece, he tells about the emigration from his birthplace, first in Albania and then in the Soviet Union, about the life there until his moving to the People’s Republic of Macedonia.

Thus, Dimitar Prstenarov, writing about his life, actually tells us a part of the history he participated in. He eyewitnessed several important historical events and he shares his experience with us.



Dimitar with the dog Bobi - 1925 Dimitar in military uniform



Thessaloniki – 1934



The first house in Skopje - 1957



Cotton Harvest – Tashkent

Source

Авџиобиографија на Димиџар (Миџе) Прџенаров, ракопис, 1-70, Дигитален Архив за етнoлошки и натрополошки ресурси (ДЕАР), ДЕМ_1530, Институт за етнологија и антропологија, Природно-математички факултет, Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ - Скопје.

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