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MACEDONIAN AND GREEK REFUGEE CHILDREN IN EASTERN EUROPE: LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND IDENTITIES

Abstract: The paper uses life stories and archival evidence to explore the relations between Macedonian and Greek refugee children who escaped the violence of the Greek Civil War and grew up in children's homes in Eastern Europe. More in particular it examines the dominant role of the Greek Communist Party on the refugees' lives, the organization of Macedonian-language education and the tensions created by the anti-Tito campaign launched by the Cominform countries. It discusses the short-lived establishment of an autonomous Macedonian organization in Poland during the early 1960s. And finally, it analyzes the oral memories of both Greek and Macedonian refugee children about their mutual – largely harmonious - relations. The paper argues that the recovery of such memories in light of contemporary conflicts between the two countries might be an important resource for the future.

Key words: Greek Civil War, refugee children, Macedonian language, ethnicity, Eastern Europe, KKE, oral history, memory

Introduction

In January 2019, during the televised debate on the Prespa agreement[1] in the Greek Parliament, Dimitris Koutsoumbas, the General Secretary of the

1 The agreement was signed on 17 June 2018 by the Foreign Ministers of the Republic of Macedonia and Greece on the Greek shore of Lake Prespa. It was intended to solve the 30-year old conflict between the two countries over the name issue. The Republic of Macedonia accepted to change its constitutional name into "Northern Macedonia" and Greece recognized the Macedonian language and citizenship. In spite of mass protests in Athens and Skopje, the agreement was ratified by both Parliaments by 25 January 2018 and entered into force on 12 February 2019. Since fresh elections were held in Greece in July 2019, the newly elected right-wing Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has changed completely his stand on the Prespa agreement: instead of his pro-election promises to revoke the agreement, his main concern now is to check its proper implementation.

Greek Communist Party (KKE), emphatically declared that "a historically formed unified Macedonian nation has never existed on the Balkans, neither has there ever been a unified Macedonian language".[2] He explained that his party rejected this "despicable" agreement, among others, because it believed that the recognition of a Macedonian nation and language would open the door to future irredentist claims from Greece's northern neighbor. Thus aligning himself with the position of Greek nationalist politicians and far-right activists, he tried to erase from public memory a crucial part of his Party's history, which included the organization of primary education for Macedonian children in their mother tongue. Such classes were set up in Macedonian villages in Greece under control of the partisans during the fall of 1944 and in 1947-1948.[3] Macedonian refugee children who settled in 1948-49 in children's homes in Eastern Europe received their education both in Macedonian and Greek. As it seems hard to believe that Mr. Koutsoumbas was unaware of his own Party's history, and as we know that silence may be full of memories, we need to conclude that he was actively avoiding an "open secret"[4]: the KKE's past policy in favor of the protection of the cultural and political rights of the Macedonian minority in Northern Greece. It was this policy which motivated many Macedonians to support the Party in the 1930s and 1940s (Van Boeschoten 1999, Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 35-36).

A significant percentage of the political refugees from Greece who settled in Eastern Europe after the end of the Greek Civil War were Macedonians.[5] By the summer of 1949 about 27.000 refugee children were living in Eastern Europe, among whom about 7.000 lived with their parents in Yugoslavia and about 20.000 lived in children's homes run jointly by the Greek Communist Party, the Red Cross and local welfare authorities. The percentage of Macedonian refugee children, according to the available data, varied from 0% in East Germany to 85% in Yugoslavia, but on average amounted to about 50% (Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 299, note 19). Most of the children evacuated in 1948-1949 by the partisans – voluntarily or by force (Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 54-58) - came from the battlefront zones in Northern Greece, an area largely under control of the partisan forces. The children of this area were forced by the circumstances of the war to leave their homes or pressed by the partisans to do so, according to what may be called a "spectrum of coercion" (Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 58-63), but they were not physically "expelled" by the Greek state, as often claimed by Macedonian nationalist authors. Between 1998

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=mkIBlQrcZ1s.0:22:20. Accessed on 21/9/2019.

3 For the Macedonian classes in 1944 see Koufis 1996, 25-30 and interview to author (10/2/1998). For the "Macedonian schools" during the Civil War, see Decree by the General Headquarters of the Democratic Army, Act 5, 10 August 1947, in Kiriazovski & Simovski 1980, 234-235; Martinova-Buchkova 1998, 98.

4 For a sociological analysis of "conspiracies of silence" and denial, see Zerubavel 2010.

5 Between 35% in 1950 according to the statistics of the Greek Communist Party, which excluded Yugoslavia (Kiriazovski 1989, 53-56), and 60% if the 30,000 Macedonians living the same year in Yugoslavia (Kofos 1964, 186) are taken into account.

and 2006 my co-author Loring Danforth and I have researched the fate of these refugee children through ethnography, archival research and oral history.[6]

One of our main concerns has been to juxtapose and compare the experience of those ignored by one-sided versions of history. For example, Greek historiography mostly ignores the presence of Macedonian refugee children in exile, while Macedonian historiography largely ignores the presence of Greek children. In my view, one of the most interesting aspects of this history is exactly the co-existence of Macedonian and Greek children in the same institutional framework. According to their narratives, many Greek children did not even know that other languages were spoken in Greece, whereas many Macedonian children did not speak a word of Greek before they came to Eastern Europe. This unique moment in history of co-existence between the two ethnic groups needs our attention, because it can tell us a lot about the dynamics of inter-ethnic social relations, when the latter develop in an extra-territorial setting beyond the control of their respective nation-states. How did these two groups of children relate to each other? Did they develop animosities, mutual suspicion or friendships? Were they able to cross boundaries set by their communities or by official policies back home? To what extent were they influenced by the power structures that dominated their daily lives? What was the role of the adult supervisors in their lives?

The cultural process of identity formation among these two groups of refugee children raises a number of theoretically interesting questions. There are at least two reasons why the study of this group seems important.

First, ethnicity and the construction of ethnic identities have mainly been considered within the bounded territory of a nation-state. In this view ethnic groups appear as localised and sedentarised units marked by historically constructed boundaries that separate them from the majority group of their own nation-state. Less attention has been paid to the processes which are set in motion when such ethnic groups cross the borders of their nation-state and become de-territorialised (Appadurai 1996, Malkki 1992, 1995). When Greek and Macedonian refugee children arrived at the reception centres of their new host countries, they had to leave behind their old clothes and any objects that linked them to their home villages. Through this process, which could be understood as a rite of passage, they were reborn as extra-local, de-territorialised subjects. How did this new identity influence the ways in which they came to imagine their homelands, their pasts and their possible futures? By analysing the life stories of these refugee children, whose fates were initially decided by adult others, we can reconstruct their multiple subjectivities and thus de-essentialise and historicise the notion of “refugee”. This does not mean that their stories reveal necessarily a counter-narrative, but they

6 Our book has been published in English (2012), in Macedonian (2015) and in Greek (2015). The moving oral histories of 7 refugee children were presented on stage during the Athens Festival in June 2017. http://greekfestival.gr/festival_events/maria-savva-theatre-company-paiktes-2017/?lang=en

provide insights into the multiple meanings people ascribe, individually or collectively, to lived experience (Eastmond 2007). By listening to their stories, we can deconstruct the image of a "universal" refugee as a vulnerable depoliticized subject and restore power and voice to those who today are all too frequently regarded as "speechless emissaries" (Malkki 1996).

Second, by focussing on the political tensions within the refugee community and between individual host countries, we can improve our understanding of the paternalist communist nation-state (Verdery 1996), which, in contrast to the Western nation-state, was both national and transnational in nature. The discussion of the vicissitudes of Macedonian-language education against the background of the Tito-Stalin split of June 1949, on which I will focus in this paper, will not only show the relative failure of the homogenizing project of the communist parent-state, but also the survival of nationalist attitudes behind the façade of "proletarian internationalism". This, in turn, may explain not only the recent discourse by Koutsoumbas with which I began this paper, but also some of the dynamics which transformed the very countries that welcomed the refugees from Greece in the late 1940s in such a hospitable way into the most nationalist and xenophobic nations of Europe today.

Refugees and the Greek Communist Party

The daily lives of Macedonian and Greek political refugees from Greece in Eastern Europe were controlled by the apparatus of the Greek Communist Party-in-exile, in cooperation with the authorities of each host country and the local branch of the Red Cross. Transnationally, a central role in this process was allocated to the "Association of Political Refugees from Greece", directed by a Central Committee (KEEPPE). This body was responsible for all practical aspects of the refugees' lives, from the allocation of jobs, housing and pensions to the granting of visas and the reunion of families. A second transnational body was the EVOP (Committee Help the Children), responsible until 1956 for the education of young refugee children in their mother tongue. Both transnational bodies had local branches in each host country. Through these power structures the basic needs of refugees, such as food, shelter, education, work and health care were provided for, but instead of enjoying citizens' rights, refugees depended on the goodwill of the communist state. In other words, they were integrated into the structures of what anthropologist Katherine Verdery has aptly called the "parent-state".

> *Socialist systems legitimated themselves with the claim that they redistributed the social product in the interests*

> *of the general welfare. Using this premise, socialist paternalism constructed its 'nation' on an implicit view of society as a family headed by a 'wise' Party that, in a paternal guise, made all the family's allocative decisions as to who should produce what and who should receive what award – thus a 'parent-state'* (Verdery 1996: 64).

A central concern of the parent-state was to remove previous social divisions, such as class, gender and ethnicity, and to homogenise society into a "fraternity" with the paternalist Party at its head. This created in turn a dependent attitude among its subjects towards the Party, which expected "gratitude" for its parental care (Verdery 1996, 66). In this view, the local "parent-states" of Eastern Europe did not recognise the Macedonian refugees as a specific ethnic group, but included them in the general group of refugees from Greece. The so-labelled "Greek refugees" received neither refugee status nor citizenship in their host country, but were included in the category of "socialist workers" and builders of "international socialism". Spanish, Greek and later Korean refugees were considered to belong to the transnational community of "international socialism" and as long as their original "homes" were considered "enemies of socialism" they ought not be repatriated. Moreover, many refugees had been deprived of their Greek citizenship by the Greek state (Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 299, n.22), so a large number of adult refugees were in fact stateless subjects.

What was, however, the position of the Macedonians inside this larger group of "Greek refugees"? Ethnic relations within the refugee community were, as all other relations, the sole responsibility of the KKE, which functioned as a transnational mini-parent-state within the parent-states of the host countries. In the official rhetoric of the Party, these relations were inspired by the spirit of "Unity and Brotherhood" ("*Bratstvo i Edinstvo*")[7]:In this discourse Macedonians and Greeks were united and fought as brothers against "monarcho-fascism" to create a free and socialist Greece in which Macedonians would enjoy national rights. Therefore, a Macedonian identity was recognised and respected, but only within the institutional framework of the KKE. Indeed, from 1948 until the 1970s Macedonian refugees in Eastern Europe enjoyed certain cultural rights: part of their children's education was in their mother tongue; there was a Macedonian branch of the Greek refugee press, which published reviews, books and a Macedonian page in each country's Greek newspaper; a Macedonian radio programme broadcast by the *Voice of Free Greece* operated from Bucarest; "Ilinden" was celebrated together with Greek national holidays; and Macedonian literary circles, theatre and

7 The term was originally invented by Tito in his effort to unite rivalling ethnic groups in the Resistance in Yugoslavia during World War II.

folklore groups were established. At the political level, the leadership of the Association of Political Refugees from Greece and of the EVOP included a member representing the Macedonian refugee community. During the first years of exile, Macedonian political organisations controlled by the KKE continued to operate, but Macedonian refugees were not allowed to set up their own independent organisations.

In spite of the recognition of a separate Macedonian cultural identity, tensions between adult Greek and Macedonian refugees rose high, almost immediately after their resettlement in Eastern Europe. New divisions were added to old ones[8], as the KKE leadership was looking for scapegoats to explain the defeat of the Democratic Army and its own vacillating policies concerning the Macedonian minority in Greece.[9] But most importantly, the spirit of "Unity and Brotherhood" was seriously undermined by the Party's position in the international conflict opposing Tito's Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union (the so-called Tito-Stalin split) between 1948 and 1955. In July 1948 the KKE had adhered to the Cominform Resolution on Yugoslavia condemning Tito, but kept that decision secret until the final defeat of the Democratic Army in August 1949. Most probably the main reason for keeping this decision secret was to maintain much needed loyalty of Macedonian fighters. Then in October 1949, at the 6th Plenum held in Albania, the Party singled out Tito's policies as the main reason for the partisans' defeat, denounced the NOF[10] as a Titoist organisation and arrested nine NOF leaders. From that moment on a witch-hunt against suspected "agents of Tito" started that reached its climax in 1951. Many Macedonian political refugees, including newly appointed Macedonian teachers, were expelled from the Party, sacked, arrested or sent into internal exile, often for completely arbitrary reasons. Many Macedonian women who had accompanied the children from their home village and now worked in the children's homes were also sacked. Of course, both Greek and Macedonian refugees were liable to be suspected of being "Titoists", but Macedonians were in general considered less trustworthy because of their language and their links with Tito's Yugoslavia. The political tensions linked to this conflict had serious consequences for the refugee children's education in Eastern Europe.

8 Old divisions included the competing claims of Greek and Macedonian nationalisms, which often burned beneath the surface of "proletarian internationalism".

9 It had supported self-determination, including the right to secession in 1924, equal rights within the framework of the Greek state in 1935, and in January 1949 returned suddenly to its position of 1924 (Kofos 1964, 177-179, Kofos 1995, 310-311).

10 NOF (= "Narodno-Osloboditelen Front": "National Liberation Front"), a Macedonian partisan organisation, created in April 1945 by left-wing Macedonian fighters from Greece who had fled to Yugoslavia. It first acted independently, but was then integrated into the Democratic Army set up by the Greek communist leadership.

Can a language be suspicious? Macedonian teachers and language policies in the children's homes of Eastern Europe

During the first two school years in exile (1948-1950), the education of the refugee children settled in the homes of Eastern Europe was organized by EVOP (Committee Help the Children). This was a difficult task, as most children had received hardly any education at all in Greece, no textbooks were available and trained teachers were hard to find. To face these challenges, some professional teachers who were fighting with the partisans in Greece were brought in from the battlefield, teacher training courses were set up in each host country and new textbooks were published both in Greek and Macedonian. In their second school year, refugee children began to study the local language. From the third year on, they were integrated into the local education system and all classes were taught in the local language. In addition, they attended special classes in their own languages for a few hours a week. Macedonian children also studied Greek, but Greek children did not study Macedonian. In 1956 the children's homes were closed, EVOP was disbanded and refugee children joined their local peers in the national education system of their host societies (Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 73-74).

From the beginning [autumn 1948], the education program set up by the EVOP was inspired by the spirit of "Unity and Brotherhood". At that time, at the height of the Civil War, this was indeed a strategic necessity, as the Democratic Army badly needed the support of its Macedonian fighters. In a bitter reflection, more than fifty years later, one of the Macedonian refugee children commented: "The Greeks had to do it [to set up classes in Macedonian], because they relied a lot on us."[11]

In order to ensure the full participation of Macedonian teachers in the education programme the Central Committee of the EVOP included one Macedonian teacher (Done Sikavitsa) and two Greeks (Athanasiadis and Roumeliotis).[12] In each country the EVOP appointed two representatives, one Greek and one Macedonian, who were to coordinate the education programme within their country and with the Central Committee of EVOP.

Macedonian teachers, recalled from the battlefield to organize from scratch the teaching of Macedonian classes, initially embraced their new task with enthusiasm. Some of them had acquired a first experience in teaching Macedonian in Northern Greece during the Civil War and had attended teacher training courses in the area under control of the Democratic Army. It had been the first time ever that Macedonian kids

11 Ilya Bitovski, interviewed by Loring Danforth in Toronto, Canada, 11 August 2000.

12 Letter Stavros Kotsopoulos to Sikavitsa, (9.1.1949), AM [Archiv na Makedonija] 997.1.16/21-22

in Greece were taught in their own mother tongue. Refugee children who had attended such classes in their village, remembered it vividly, a sharp contrast to the harsh language repression in Greek schools before the war.

Macedonian teachers were at first mainly concerned by the many practical problems they had to solve. Philip Malkovski, a schoolteacher from the area of Kostur-Kastoria, was working on the partisans' newspaper *НЕПОКОРЕН*, published in Macedonian and Greek, when he received an order from the NOF, in October 1948, to organize Macedonian classes in Czechoslovakia. In the absence of any textbook, he produced handwritten texts on grammar and arithmetics, some of it translated from Bulgarian textbooks. With the help of refugee children, he reproduced this material with a mimeograph. Some terms were difficult to translate into a language which was still in the making: "I wrote the decimals first in Greek – I had learned them in Greek back home, but now I needed to translate them. We worked very hard."[13]

Very soon, however, as the anti-Tito campaign gained momentum, educational needs would come into conflict with political needs, and in the end this would cost Malkovski his job as a teacher. He arranged with Czech officials to bring in new textbooks from Skopje, drafted in the newly standardized literary language based on the Prespa dialect. The agreement was that any references to Tito were to be erased from the texts. However, the new books were soon to be proscribed by the Party, as the Macedonian language was labeled "Titoist". Instead, Macedonian teachers were instructed to develop a new language, free from "serbisms" and based on a mixture of Bulgarian and Russian grammar and local dialects from Greek Macedonia (Kiriazovski 1987, 265). In practice this meant that they had to adopt the "politically correct" Bulgarian alphabet. As can be imagined, this decision did not go down very well with Macedonian teachers, as the memory of the Bulgarian Occupation of Greece in World War II was still fresh in their minds. As for Philip Malkovski, he was accused of being an "agent of Tito" and sacked as a teacher. Eventually, he found a job in a factory producing bicycles.

During the whole duration of the anti-Tito campaign, relations between Greek and Macedonians involved in the children's education program were characterized by mutual suspicion or even open hostility. The Greek communist leadership found it increasingly difficult to present bilingual education in the homes as an expression of "Unity and Brotherhood". In order to mitigate protests from the Macedonian side, it tried to employ Macedonian communists who had remained faithful to the party line, including in its denunciation of Marshall Tito as an "agent of the West". Yet even these trustful Macedonians could not be sure of their fate.

The case of Done Sikavitsa is an illustrative example. Born in 1914

13 Philip Malkovski, interviewed by Riki Van Boeschoten, Toronto, 20 October 2003.

in a village of Kostur-Kastoria, he had worked as a teacher of Greek before the war, but he had always dreamt of teaching Macedonian children in their mother tongue. During the Resistance, he had a leading position in the local organizations of the communist-led National Liberation Front (EAM). During the Civil War he fought in the Democratic Army, was a member of the Central Committee of NOF and, like Malkovski, served on the editorial committee of the partisan newspaper *НЕПОКОРЕН*. Both in 1944 and in 1947-48 he played an active role in the organisation of Macedonian schools in northern Greece. In 1948 he accompanied a group of children to Eastern Europe (Martinova-Buchkova 1998, 179-180). This profile made him an ideal candidate to organize Macedonian classes in Eastern Europe. He was a trained teacher, fluent both in Greek and Macedonian, he had always been faithful to the KKE and ... he had never been in Yugoslavia!

In his correspondence with the Macedonian representatives of the EVOP in other countries,[14] Sikavitsa showed his enthusiasm and his sense of responsibility in assuming the task of establishing a Macedonian school "in the fire of war and revolution".[15]Faithful to the spirit of "Unity and Brotherhood", he expressed his belief in the common struggle with "our Greek brothers, with whom we live and die together" and which had given the Macedonian people the right to "have its children educated in its own language and to build its national culture".[16] He explained that education should follow the teachings of the "great Stalin, socialist in content and national in form". This meant that "Greek and Macedonian children [were to be] educated in the spirit of friendship and unity" and that they would "learn to hate fascism, tyranny, robbery and exploitation" and to "love their people, their fatherland and its culture". But he also pressed upon Macedonian teachers that they had to stick to the correct political line and to "denounce the treacherous clique of Tito".[17] Although in December 1948 Sikavitsa himself participated in the effort, mentioned also by Malkovski, to bring in Macedonian textbooks, from Skopje,[18] by November 1949 he wrote that "the traitor Tito has poisoned everything, even arithmetics" (sic!) and that Macedonian teachers, in preparing their classes should rely on texts in Greek, Russian and Bulgarian.[19] One month earlier, he

14 Poptrayanof in Romania, Siapkarev in Poland, Simos Papadimitiriou in Hungary. Sikavitsa himself was based in Czechoslovakia. The data refers to 1949.

15 Done Sikavitsa, Results and Problems of the Macedonian schools, hand-written report, in Greek (1949), AM 997.1.22/35-39.

16 ibid.

17 Done Sikavitsa, typed and revised version of the previous document (1949), AM 997.1.23/40-49.

18 Central Committee of NOF to Central Committee of the Communist Party of Macedonia, 17.12.1948 (in Macedonian), AM 997.1.14/19.

19 Letter to Poptrayanof in Romania, 18.11.49, AM 997.1.31/68-69.

had warned Macedonian teachers that "whoever thinks differently has no place among our children. We need to be vigilant".[20]
The awkward position in which Sikavitsa had found himself in the context of the Tito-Stalin split is reflected in a more confidential letter he sent in July 1949 to Michalis Mallios, NOF leader and secretary of the Macedonian communist organization KOEM.[21] In this letter he claimed that his relations with the Greek leadership were good but expressed fears that they suspected him of pro-Yugoslav attitudes. He also voiced some complaints, for example about the efforts of the Greeks to Hellenise Macedonian children in Romania. Finally, he implicitly recognised that "disruptive" [i.e. pro-Tito] slogans spread by relatives in Yugoslavia "may have some appeal to a few of us" and therefore stressed the need to stick to the correct party line.[22]
Sikavitsa's fears proved to be right. Despite all his efforts to apply correctly the spirit of "Unity and Brotherhood" and the party line regarding Tito's Yugoslavia, in 1950 he was himself labelled an "agent of Tito", discharged from his duties and sent into exile to the Romanian town of Kluj. He thus became a victim of the "vigilance" he had himself advocated. In 1956 he was rehabilitated, but embittered by this experience decided to leave for Skopje, where he died in 1995 (Martinova-Buchkova 1998, 180).

Macedonian activism in Eastern Europe: "*Egejska Zora*"

No doubt the anti-Tito campaign of 1950-51 and the Greek communist leadership's tight control of all aspects of the refugees' lives (cultural, social and even private)[23] had reduced the impact of "Unity and Brotherhood" and produced serious conflicts among the refugee population. It would be wrong to label these conflicts as primarily "ethnic", as Greek and Macedonian refugees were affected in similar ways and the resulting tensions also produced a split *within* the Macedonian community. These were primarily political conflicts, which gradually led many refugees – Greek or Macedonian - to disengage themselves from the Party and to "mind their own business" within the host society or to

20 Instructions by EVOP to Macedonian teachers relating to the organization of political and cultural activities with Macedonian children, 23.10.1949 (in Greek), AM 997.1.30/64-67.

21 The KOEM (Communist Organization of Aegean Macedonia was established at the second congress of the NOF, in March 1949, in which the NOF aligned itself with the Cominform decision on Yugoslavia (Kofos 1964, 183, Kiriazovski 1985, 293-312). In October 1949 Mallios would be arrested and sent into exile in the Soviet Union (ibid. 378-381 and interview of Vera Foteeva to author, Skopje, 25/10/97).

22 Done Sikavitsa to Michalis Mallios, 8.7.1949 (in Greek), AM 997.1.25/52.

23 For examples of conflicts between Greek refugees and the communist leadership in the private sphere, see Van Boeschoten 2000.

emigrate. However, when political conflicts develop in situations where inter-ethnic relations are characterized by unequal power relations, they may be reinterpreted in an ethnic key. To some extent this happened with the Macedonian youth in Eastern Europe, but at the same time their discontent about unequal treatment by the Greek leadership was also nurtured by more global aspirations for emancipation. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the refugee children had moved out of the homes, they had begun to socialize with their coevals in the host country, many of whom were questioning the control on their personal lives exercised by the Communist Party and were eager to adopt Western models in dress styles, haircuts and music[24]. In addition, demands for recognition of minority cultural rights also found some inspiration in anti-colonial movements in the wider world (see below). Thus, the combination of internal and external factors led some rebellious Macedonian youngsters, especially in Poland, to question the power of the Greek communist authorities and to reclaim separate rights for their community.

It was in this context that a secret Macedonian organisation independent of the Communist Party was set up in 1960-1961[25] in southern Poland. Although short-lived and extremely marginal in terms of membership, it represents an interesting and unique case of Macedonian activism in Eastern Europe. The organisation was called *Egejska Zora* ("Aegean Dawn"). It was set up by Macedonian teachers, young intellectuals and adolescents after all efforts to set up a legal Macedonian organisation free from control by the Communist Party had failed. It was based in Legnica and Wrocław and had members also in Police and Zgorzelec. It had a flag which travelled from city to city upon which new members took an oath to "keep the secrets of the organisation and to fight for the unity of the Macedonian refugees and against Greek and Bulgarian chauvinism" (Vragoterov 1962, 162; Kiriazovski 1987, 255). Among its aims were the promotion of Macedonian culture among refugees in Poland, the fight for the rights of Macedonians in Greece, the fight against the current attitude of the Greek and Bulgarian Communist Parties on the national rights of Macedonians, the rejection of Bulgarian propaganda among the refugees and the improvement of relations with the People's Republic of Macedonia, including the right of Macedonian refugees to resettle there (Kiriazovski 1987, 254). The wider international context of the organisation appeared from a flyer distributed in Zgorzelec in March 1961, which, in a curious mixture of socialist internationalism and nationalist patriotism, ended with a hail to the new independent Republic of Congo and to its communist leader Lumumba.[26]

24 For the case of Hungary and the impact of such movements on adolescent refugee children, see Van Boeschoten 2010.

25 One of its adult leaders was Kostas Vragoterov, born in 1920 in a village near Lerin-Florina, who had joined the communist youth organization at the age of sixteen. In his unpublished manuscript about his life as a refugee in Poland (1950-1962), he describes the process which led to the creation of Egejska Zora in January 1961 (Vragoterov 1962, 162-165). On Egejska Zora see also AM 997, box 3 and 4, Kiriazovski 1987: 248-259, Martinova-Buchskova 1998, 62-63.

26 Kiriazovski 1987, 255. Interestingly, this seems to be an early example of the political resonance of the anti-colonial movements of the 1960s among young people in Eastern Europe. Patrice Lumumba was the first Prime Minister of the independent Republic of Congo

Some activities of *Egejska Zora* exacerbated the tensions not only between Greek and Macedonian refugees, but also within the Macedonian refugee community itself. For example, it published caricatures representing Greeks or pro-Greek Macedonians as donkeys with the inscription "without you Macedonia will become as the Macedonian people wants it". Or it published a caricature representing two shepherds, one Greek and one Macedonian, the former tending goats and the latter sheep. The caption read "Time to separate the sheep from the goats!"[27].

One of the youngsters who put up such posters in the Greek club in Legnica was George Plukovski, a refugee child born in 1938 in a village near Kostur-Kastoria. When he finished his education in the children's home of Police, he joined his elder brother in Legnica, who was one of the leaders of *Egejska Zora*. When we asked him why he followed his brother's footsteps, he replied:

> *... in order to express our unpleasant experience with the Greek Party. Macedonians were the majority among the refugees in Poland, but we didn't have a say. [...] The children that were learning Macedonian in Polish schools still were learning the Bulgarian alphabet instead of learning Macedonian. And we tried to put an end to it. We wanted representation, Macedonian people to be able to meet [directly] with Polish officials. Many times we asked for meetings with the youth organizations in Poland. But the Greek Party would stop that relation, because they didn't want the Macedonians to be seen as a separate national group.*[28]

Plukovski's personal memories focused mainly on the Macedonians' conflicts with the leadership of the KKE and on the desire for autonomous action. Of course, we have to take into consideration that at the time of the interview, our narrator had become a Canadian citizen and that the end of the Cold War had changed many people's perceptions of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. The difference will become clear when we compare his words with a Proclamation published by *Egejska Zora* in Polish in 1960 or 1961.[29] In this text, the authors did not distance themselves completely from the KKE, but tried to convince its leadership to take more decisive action in support of the human rights of the Macedonian people.

> *The Greek Communist Party for us Macedonians is close and dear, despite its hesitant policy towards the Macedonian*

(1960), but less than a year later he was executed by the Mobutu regime that took power with the support of the Belgian former colonial rulers.

27 Vragoterov 1962, 163-164. On the metaphor of sheep and goats in Macedonian nationalist discourse see Danforth 1995, 224.

28 George Plukovski, interviewed in English by Riki Van Boeschoten and Loring Danforth, Skopje, 25 July 1998.

29 The "Proclamation to all Macedonians and Macedonian Youth" was found in the Polish archives. I am grateful to Anna Kurpiel for bringing this document to my attention and translating it into English.

> *people, toward our nation. [...] Macedonians are raising their voice about their most elementary human rights and demanding from the KKE a clear resolution of the matter without any deviation inspired by fear. It is high time that the Communist Party of Greece revised its indecisive stance towards the Macedonian people. [...] It is high time that Macedonians cease to be considered a victim of one or another country and look at them as people who spared nothing in the fight for socialism, for people's democracy.*[30]

At the end of the text, however, which was drafted on the occasion of local elections for the Association of Political Refugees in Legnica, the divisive tone which we saw earlier in the "sheeps-and-goats" symbolism returns, calling to vote only for the "true defenders of the Macedonian nation".

The experience of *Egejska Zora* was short-lived. In 1962 the organization was disbanded, some of its members were arrested with the help of Polish authorities and others were forced to leave Poland and resettled in Skopje. But the idea that ethnic or national minorities are entitled to rights - cultural rights, inscribed in the Polish constitution, as argued by Plukovski in his interview, or more broadly human rights as in the Proclamation - travelled a long way with the former Macedonian refugee children and re-emerged in the early 1980s in multi-cultural Canada. The "Association of Refugee Children from Aegean Macedonia" was born in Toronto in the late 1970s. Macedonians who emigrated to Canada from Poland and had participated in *Egejska Zora* played a leading role in its establishment and its later development into a transnational human rights organization (Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012, 251).

"Then there was no difference": oral histories of inter-ethnic relations

It would be wrong to focus only on the conflictual aspects of inter-ethnic relations, as exemplified by the consequences of the anti-Tito campaign and the case of *Egejska Zora*. Individual life stories show that at least until the 1980s, social relations between Greek and Macedonian refugees were quite harmonious. They worked and lived together, they were bound together by a common history and a common refugee identity and, most importantly, they were transformed together from rural peasants into industrial workers and technicians living in a modernised urban environment. Through their integration into the structures and networks of the host society they discovered new values and new possible futures. Through this process of transformation, questions of ethnic identities were pushed into the background.

Despite all the problems, if we look at the history of the Macedonian minority of Greece retrospectively, this was a period in which for the first time it

30 Polish National Archive, Wrocław (APWr). Document KW PZPR, 74/XIV/34, k. 78-79 – Odezwa EZ „Do Wszystkich Macedończyków" (EZ Proclamation "To All Macedonians").

developed close relations with the Greeks. Especially the oral memories of Greek and Macedonian refugee children clearly show that mutual respect and social mixing can become possible when divided ethnic groups are removed from the totalising and essentialising discourse of the nation-state and are instead actively encouraged to mix. This relative success of "Unity and Brotherhood" at the level of daily social relations is confirmed by the increased rate of intermarriage, almost non-existent before the war (Martinova-Buchkova 1998, 162).

In analysing the retrospective oral narratives of former refugee children we need to take into account that since the early 1980s the two groups were separated again in two opposing camps and their relations were "renationalised". Renewed tensions were triggered by two different historical events: the Greek Ministerial Decision on repatriation issued in 1982[31] and the declaration of independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991. While during the long years of exile Greek and Macedonians were united in their aspirations to return to the country of their birth, after 1982 their futures began to diverge. Most Greek refugees were able to return to Greece, while Macedonian refugees who were not considered "Greek by birth" were excluded from repatriation. As a consequence, refugee identities were superseded by national ones. The second question that has empoisoned relations between the two groups over the last decades was the formation of the independent Republic of Macedonia and the long-lasting international conflict over the name issue (Danforth 1995). Since the mid-1990s, this conflict was largely mediated through a "diasporic public sphere" (Appadurai 1996) in which Greek and Macedonian diaspora communities crossed their swords over conflicting "politics of memory".

The interviews Loring Danforth and I carried out for our research were realized during a period in which these debates were in full swing. No doubt both narrators and researchers were influenced by the "cultural circuit"[32] of these debates during the interview process, a process that "involves the dynamic interaction of subjectivities" (Abrams 2016, 58). Nearly all Macedonian narrators stressed the perceived injustice denying them the right to return to the village of their birth and denounced other basic human right violations by the Greek state. Yet the life-story format of our interviews (we invited our narrators to recall in detail the whole process of their lives, from the Civil War until the present day) created ample space to reconstruct their earlier selves as members of an "experiential community of memory".[33] Within this space of personal memories, our narrators, Macedonian and Greek, remembered inter-ethnic friendships, linguistic integration, and shared practices. In the following pages the voices of these refugee children will present some snapshots of a shared past, since long forgotten in public memory.

Antigone witnessed at the age of four how her father was beaten to death by Greek soldiers. In spite of this traumatic experience she remembered her

31 Ministerial Decision no 106841, 29.12.1982, Official Journal, vol. B., no 1. The text established the right of repatriation for all Civil War refugees, but restricted this right only to individuals who are considered "Greeks by birth".

32 By "cultural circuit" oral historians mean a "process by which personal memories of events and public representations of events inform each other" (Abrams 2016: 59).

33 For a definition of "experiential communities of memory" and their difference from "political communities of memory", see Danforth & Van Boeschoten 2012: 226-227.

relations with Greek children in the homes of Hungary as harmonious. Later she even married one of them:

> *Then there was no difference, whether you were Greek or Macedonian, we loved each other as brothers and sisters. The only difference was that when we had our Macedonian classes, the Greek kids were playing outside. And we were jealous of that. That Macedonian problem and the Greek problem, that is now. In those years we didn't know what it meant. The Greek kids respected us as Macedonians, and we respected them as Greeks.*[34]

Mirka, another Macedonian girl, who grew up in Romania, remembered similar experiences:

> *At first, in 1948-1949 I think, we were only Macedonian kids, plus fourteen Greek children who came from the Grevena area. Later more Greek children joined us from other homes and so we lived all together. We didn't have any problems... I mean the kids. We used to sing together, to cry together, to play together. We all had the same problems, as children of partisans fighting with the Democratic Army. And that's how we lived. I had Greek girlfriends and many Greek children learned the Macedonian language as well, while we were learning Greek. In other words, how can I say this... we lived a brotherly life with the Greek kids.*[35]

Even in Poland, where, as we have seen, relations were rather tense between the two communities, the children were not affected by the conflicts which marked the lives of adult refugees. Sofia, from a village near Lake Prespa, remembers:

> *One of my dearest girlfriends was Greek, her name was Sofia Tsanaka. We children did not have any problems, we lived as brothers and sisters. That was a matter for adults. But later when we grew up, we saw that... as soon as they saw that a child was doing well in school, we saw that just because he was a Macedonian... And woe on that child that would say he had some relatives in Yugoslavia. You see, I'll tell you the truth, I had my father in Greece and nobody bothered me. I didn't have any problems. But those that had their parents here [in Skopje] were in trouble.*[36]

34 Antigone (pseudonym), interviewed by Riki Van Boeschoten, Budapest, 19 May 1999.

35 Mirka (pseudonym), interviewed by Riki Van Boeschoten and Tasoula Vervenioti, Skopje, 28 October 1997.

36 Sofia Savva, interviewed by Riki Van Boeschoten, Skopje, 29 July 1998.

Inter-ethnic friendships could even counter instructions by the Party. Sofia was able to attend the Youth Festival in Berlin – a very popular event among the youth of Eastern Europe – because she was selected by her Greek classmates, even though the Party had favoured another girl:

> *Because I used to help the girls, that's why, not because I was somebody special. And I told them so. I was not selected by the Party, but by the rank-and-file, the girls. Because I used to help them, I was... kind to them. Between us there were no... We really had "unity and brotherhood" as they used to say.*[37]

We can find a similar spirit in the narratives of Greeks who lived together with Macedonian children in the same homes. Petros, born in a village near Konitsa (Epirus), grew up in Poland and soon developed a keen interest in other languages. In the following excerpt he explains how he learned Macedonian, not only on the playground, but attending Macedonian classes in school.

> *We were together [with the Macedonian kids]. When we were learning Greek, Russian and Polish, they were learning their Slav language as well, Macedonian. I volunteered to attend the class, even though I was Greek, I went with the Slav-Macedonians and we learned Macedonian. Why not learn one more language? It was free, anybody could come. [...] We were friends, there was no difference between us.*[38] [...]

Even children who had received from home negative attitudes towards Slav-speakers in Greece learned to socialize with Macedonian children and developed a better understanding for their culture. Ariadne was born in an Albanian-speaking village near Konitsa, Epirus. Her grandfather fought against the Bulgarians during the so-called Macedonian Struggle (1904-1908) and her father was a schoolteacher with strong nationalist and conservative beliefs. During a group interview with the whole family, her very stern mother told us that Ariadne had been kidnapped by the partisans and removed by force across the Iron Curtain. However, Ariadne herself had excellent memories of the time she spent in a children's home in Hungary, together with Macedonian children. Although she believed God had saved her from communist propaganda and from assimilation by the Slavs, she told us her best friend was a Macedonian girl and Ariadne herself had become fluent in Macedonian.[39]

As this last example makes clear, the development of friendly relations between children with a different ethnic background was not always easy. The following account exemplifies in a very suggestive way the feelings of mutual suspicion or hostility Macedonian and Greek children had often brought with them from home.

37 Sofia Savva, same interview.

38 Petros (pseudonym) interviewed by Loring Danforth, Ioannina. 8 June 2001.

39 Ariadne (pseudonym) interviewed by Loring Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten, Plikati, 13 June 2001.

> *In Tulghes [Romania] at first we were only Macedonian kids, but later we were joined by Greek kids. As we had these problems with the Greek state, when we heard the Greeks would come, for us the Greeks... were bad people. That's what we thought. We were just children. And so we decided to hide in the fields, ready to start the battle! These were large fields with nice grass, and we hid there to wait for them to come. Next morning, we looked out and what did we see? No Greek soldiers but only little children like us! So, no battle, no nothing. Our teachers mixed us up in the dormitories: one Macedonian, one Greek, one Macedonian, one Greek. And so, we learned each other's languages. Later we became very good friends, we developed very good friendship with the Greeks. Very good friends, without nationalism and hatred in our hearts.*[40]

As we can see in the above narrative, schoolteachers, who lived day-and-night with the children in the homes, played a crucial role in "breaking the ice" and facilitating inter-ethnic relations. The Greek children from Evros – a region on the eastern border with Turkey and Bulgaria - were very surprised when they met Macedonian children for the first time. They didn't know that other languages than Greek were spoken in Greece. Their first reaction was to avoid contact. Christina left her home village in Evros when she was eight. After two years in Bulgaria, she was sent to Hungary. When she arrived with other Greek children at Lake Balaton, the only residents of the children's home were Macedonian kids. Just like in Tulgesh, the Macedonian children were scared and shouted "Greek fascists have arrived"! So, in the beginning relations were tense.

> *When we arrived we did not mix. And our teachers used to go around during playtime and said: 'Well, let me see, why are you only Greek kids in this group? Why are you only Slav-Macedonians?' We had to mix, even against our will. And often we were forced to. But later of course we developed relationships and my best girlfriend was Slav-Macedonian. I even remember her name. And my sister-in-law married a Slav-Macedonian and became fluent in the language. We often went out together.*[41]

Later, when they finished their education, Greek and Macedonian refugees worked together in the same factories. Andonis, from a village near Konitsa, had learned many languages in the children's homes of Hungary: Hungarian, Russian and Greek as part of the curriculum, and Vlach and Macedonian on the

40 Krste (pseudonym) interviewed by Riki Van Boeschoten and Loring Danforth, Skopje, 22 July 1998. The narrator's mother was killed in the Civil War by the Greek National Army. The same episode was remembered also by Greek children, who could not understand why the other children went into hiding instead of waiting for them in town!

41 Christina (pseydonym) interviewed by Riki Van Boeschoten, Thessaloniki, 12 May 2001.

playground. “We were from many different villages, all friends. We didn’t feel any difference”. These linguistic skills proved to be to his benefit for the rest of his life.

> *Later in the factory we were six refugee children, five were Slav-Macedonians and only I was… [Greek] (laughter). I had to be able to speak their language. And I am still competent in Macedonian. I understand everything. Either I go to Bulgaria, or to Yugoslavia or Poland, I won’t starve!*[42]

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of oral history and archival research has revealed the close links between language, party politics and identity formation in the education and social life of Macedonian and Greek refugee children in Eastern Europe. Since the mid-war period the Greek Communist Party had actively supported the affirmation of a separate cultural identity for the Macedonian communities in Northern Greece. It continued to do so during the 1940s, organizing “Macedonian schools” in the area under partisan control. This had been the first time ever that Macedonian children had enjoyed the opportunity to receive some education in their own mother tongue. When the first refugee children arrived in Eastern Europe, the KKE continued this policy, partly because it served its strategic interests, partly because it attached great importance to the preservation of the refugees’ cultural identities during the years of exile. Macedonian teachers in Eastern Europe embraced at first the Macedonian language program with great enthusiasm. Cultural activities in the Macedonian language, even though they were organized under the vigilant eye of the Party, strengthened feelings of belonging among the Macedonian refugees. Yet very soon tensions arose between Greek and Macedonian refugees due to the anti-Tito campaign launched by the KKE and many teachers - even those who had remained faithful to the Party line - lost their jobs. The newly standardized Macedonian literary language became suspicious and textbooks were “bulgarized”. In the late 1950s, when the refugee children had grown into adolescence and had become part of the urban environment of their host societies, ethnicity moved to the background. They had opened their eyes to the wider world and joined local peer groups in their aspirations for more autonomy and interests in alternative youth cultures. Yet, as illustrated by the case of *Egejska Zora* in Poland, the relative emancipation of the young from authoritarian restrictions could also go together with a strengthening of ethnic belonging. On the other hand, the life stories of both Macedonian and Greek refugee children showed that social mixing, often encouraged by their teachers, led to multi-lingual competence, mutual respect and “brotherly” relations in daily life. As they gradually stepped into adulthood, many close friendships between the two groups evolved into lasting relationships and marriage. As I suggest in

42 Andonis (pseudonym) interviewed by Loring Danforth, Konitsa, 11 June 2001.

this paper, in retrospect this appears as a unique moment in the history of the two nations. Oral histories convey memories which do not fit very well in the master narratives of the nation-state, Greek or Macedonian, but are all the more valuable for the future.

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Photographs

1. The flag of Egejska Zora, held by the woman that embroidered it. Author's collection.

2. Holiday camp for Greek and Macedonian children, Poland 1952. Author's collection.

3. Philip Malkovski and Done Sikavitsa, Czechoslovakia 1949.
Courtesy of Philip Malkovski.

4. Macedonian classes in Poland.
Courtesy of Gigo Chachkirovski.