

**When Reading the River: A Traveller's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River was published in 2005, I was invited to the 2006 Moose Jaw Festival of Words.**

### **The River Vardar**

#### **Skopje, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 1995**

I liked Skopje. On my way to the Turkish market (or was it Albanian?) in the Old Town for a coffee, I tramped along the riverside promenade, following the waters of the Vardar that will empty into the Gulf of Salonica among the Greeks, and enjoyed the contrasting sights - of the Benetton clothing shop and around the corner a man wheeling his bicycle with two lambs hog-tied to the handlebars, of the hole-in-the-wall grill shops and a Mozart recital announced for the concert hall. The ideologist of the Macedonian national liberation movement against the Ottoman Turks, Goce Delchev, is entombed in a sarcophagus in the yard of the Church of the Holy Saviour, hard by a sixteenth-century Turkish caravanserai decorated by gorgeous woodwork; the canvases of the Yugoslav avant-garde hang on the walls of the exquisite fifteenth-century Daut Pasha baths. Fortresses abut mosques, pastry shops huddle in the shadow of a scabrous shopping mall in whose forecourt small but ferocious taxicabs churn in frustrated circles, trying to exit from the gridlock around the money-changing kiosks.

In the study hall of the orphanage in Bitola, the young Kole Mangov came across a book that crystallized his inchoate identity – *Macedonian Men of Renaissance and Revolution*, profiles of poets, agitators and revolutionaries of the nineteenth century. From their biographies an idea dawned on him, that “Macedonia” is an integral, national territory. Its division among the Vardar (within Yugoslavia), Pirin (inside Bulgaria), and Aegean (inside Greece) Macedonias he has experienced as “ a separation of my heart.”

One of those Renaissance men of letters was Krste Misirkov (1874-1926), whose career as teacher, writer and propagandist was lived all over the old Cyrillic

world: born in a village of Greek Macedonia, he studied in Belgrade, Sofia, Poltava, Petersburg, and Odessa, and worked in Bitola, Petersburg, Sofia, Odessa and Kishinev, criss-crossing his own tracks on an itinerary of speech-making, editing and publishing that eventually led to a ferocious campaign against him in Bulgaria. For the aim of a “Macedonian consciousness” was to separate Macedonian interests from those of Bulgaria by introducing a Macedonian tongue which would serve as the literary language of all Macedonians. Government officials collected copies of *On Macedonian Matters*, published in Sofia in 1903, and destroyed them, and forced Misirkov to flee Bulgaria threatening him with death, if he ever set foot in Macedonia.

His grand-daughter, however, lives in Skopje, with a fierce defiance of Bulgarians, Greeks, male writers, and publishers. Kata Rumenova, novelist, has baked us a huge leek cake in her small kitchen and serves it in fat slices while she announces that “no one” is invited to these rooms, meaning no male person. “My male colleagues hate me. If I had been born a man I’d have had my work collected between hardcover by now. I’ve done translations and never been paid. I’ve done translations and then been informed that the publisher was going to use a male Academician’s name in my place. That’s why I have nothing to do with that Mafia. And *no one* is invited into this room. When I was young and beautiful they tried other ways...” While writing a novel all about women, some years ago, she was supposed to have been dying of cancer but didn’t, ha ha! thus thwarting her enemies. To top it off, because her illustrious grandfather belonged to an anti-Bulgarian faction of the Macedonian liberation movement, her own books for children have been black-listed by the current Macedonian government which harbours pro-Bulgarian elements.

This is all fascinating, but I’ve been brought here to talk about Thessalonica. Kata Rumenova was born in Pella, not far from Thessalonica, in the town that had been the royal seat of the kings of Macedon, and it was her family’s fields, she claims, that covered the ruins of Pella, the ruins of a court in which poets and

musicians were welcome: Euripides, tragedian from Athens, lingered amiably in the palace for months at a time, strolling through arcades of Ionic columns, along floors laid with blue and white mosaic tiles. I notice that Kata has propped up a pen-and-ink sketch of the head of Alexander the Great, who himself must have had the run of Pella, but she does not make a direct claim on him, only dismisses him as half-Greek. "Macedonia has been a territory always criss-crossed and settled by all kinds of people, so how can it be Greek? It's all mixed up and the worst thing here in the Balkans is that everyone wanted to make us Macedonians slaves. We make good slaves and bad masters. While the kings of Europe were still illiterate we were literate."

It is unclear which historical period she is referring to. That classic of Greek history, H.D.F. Kitto's *The Greeks*, describes the Macedonia of Philip, Alexander's father, as a "wild and primitive country, barely united under a royal family that made pretensions to Hellenic descent." And does her "we" and "us" include both Greeks and Slavs of today's Macedonia? In any case, that fused Macedonian world of Illyrians, Hellenes and Slavs has been sundered, and because Kata reads and speaks Greek, "I know what they've said and written about us, so I write about Greek atrocities on the Aegean Macedonians."

One of her novels concerned three women in Yugoslavia, 1945-1990, and how the wars of the 1990s separated them, but her best novel, she said, is linked with historical incidents in her husband's life. He was a Slav from Thessalonica, summoned back to his birthplace to bury his brother. In his youth he had loved a woman, another Thessalonian Slav, whom he now meets again after 45 years; she hangs herself shortly after the reunion. "This is a very strong metaphor for Macedonian history."

I left Skopje with the conversation of Slavko Mangovski, editor of *Makedonske Sonce*, a weekly magazine of history, culture and politics, as the last word on the subject. It had long grown dark in the leafless, cobble-stoned December streets

of the old residential quarter where he had his office, and dried-up coffee silt smeared the little white cups set beside files and clunky computer monitors, and his staff had gone home, but he was willing to go over this story one more time. “We are sitting here in Skopje, capital of Macedonia,” I began, “and that’s what we are calling it, *Macedonia*, not Former Republic or whatever...but I have noted that Greeks and Bulgarians always write ‘Macedonia,’ as though it were a hypothetical entity. Maybe even a joke. But you and I know that it is a very real place.”

I was thinking mainly of Macedonia’s long installation— five hundred years – within the Ottoman Empire and its odd integrity as a shared space of Greeks, a variety of Slavs, Turks, Jews, Vlachs, Albanians, Roma, before the violent national revolutions that were so eager to carve out exclusive political spaces. Poor Macedonia: in 1913 its avaricious neighbours in Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia divided it up, and repressed what is now known as the Macedonian language and literature, so that, said Mangovski, “there was absolutely no way a Macedonian could express his identity.”

This is a region with too much history. “Governments and states, in order to create their national myths, usually go back into history and sometimes they create their mythology as a way of state building. If you go to Greece, the official Greek state policy will tell you that the Greeks are direct descendants of the ancient Greeks. Bulgarians also feel they are direct descendants of medieval Bulgars and their state. If we look at what science says, we find that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the peoples of the Balkans had only one identity and that was Christian. The Ottomans divided people according to religion - Muslims and Christians. That was the real Macedonia, before partition.”

The good old days, when Macedonia was a single unit and its capital was Thessalonica. Solun.

*Ohrid, 1988:* I watch Goce across the café table, his dark face disappearing into the shade of the chestnut tree, and around us dark men drink red wine while pieces of lamb, jasmine and garlic, lemon and salt, sizzle on the grill. On Goce's face I watch the aggrieved expression of an ancient disappointment: the Slav who was thrown back by Greeks from the sea at the mouth of the Vardar and who now stands with his back to the lake at Ohrid, which, to comfort himself, he calls the Macedonian Sea.

Goce was turned away at the Greek border. What are they afraid of? "Write this down!" he shouts at me. "The Greeks force the Slav Macedonians within their borders to write the epitaphs of their tombstones in Greek!" I write this down, swallowing a large mouthful of wine to stop my protest that Cyrillic is after all based on Greek letters, so..."And this! Marshal Tito, super-partisan of partisans, Communist scourge of fascists during the Second World War— may his memory be eternal – directed his Yugoslav partisans at the end of the war to head north in pursuit of the retreating Germans instead of unleashing them to go south to Greece. South! South all the way to Solun...to get it back."

Goce did live there once, or may as well have done, so intensely can he taste the dust off the red Byzantine brick and the salt of the gulf. He had a garden and cultivated gourds and vines, combed the fleece of his sheep and built a stone altar to his gods. Then a Greek saint threw him out.

### **The River Dnipro**

My Ukrainian-Canadian ancestry was firmly located in a land called Rus' whose glory was the many-domed city of Kyiv and from whose dazzling medieval princes, bishops, iconographers and hymnodists we claimed direct descent, uninterruptedly - in spite of intervening Khazars, Pechenegs, Polovtsians, Mongols and Tatars, Russians, Poles and Lithuanians – in a line to the homesteads of the Canadian north-west. It was not a gene pool we were

prepared to share with anyone, least of all those who appropriated the name for themselves, the Russians, thereafter confusing generations of non-Ukrainians who, quite naturally, would assume those shaggy forest-dwellers, the Moscovites, were people of Rus'. (Kiev the *Russian* city, mother church of *Russian* Orthodoxy, Ukrainians the Little *Russians*, and so on.)

In fact, Rus' was likely the work of Scandinavians, merchants and mercenaries, who united scattered Eastern Slavs on the Dnipro River during a process of incorporating into a political entity some twenty towns and lands all along the Baltic-Black Sea trading route beginning mid-ninth century. In Kyiv, when they had suspended their ravages, they traded slaves, furs, honey and beeswax, and launched their cargo in armadas for Constantinople. A ninth-century Arab traveller, Ibn Khordadbeh, travelling around the Black Sea, watched them load swords and pelts of beaver and black fox.

*The generous earl, brave and bold, who scatters his bright shining gold, Eirik with fire-scattering hand, wasted the Rus' monarch's land with arrow-shower, and storm of war, wasted the land of Valdemar.*

So it is told in the Scandinavian saga of Erik who ravaged the dominions of the tenth-century Scandinavian prince who I grew up knowing as St Volodymyr (and the Russians as Vladimir): there he was in pride of place on the icon screen in front of the sanctuary of a Ukrainian-Orthodox church. I hadn't the faintest inkling that St Volodymyr and his grandmother St Olha (Helgi, Olga), who had privately converted to Christianity in 955, were in fact linked by royal bloodlines to the great sovereigns of Scandinavia, including, of course, Erik.

The Scandinavian sources knew Rus' as *Gardarike*, "land of towns" – Pereiaslavl, Kanev, Liubech, Chernihiv, up and down the Dnipro and its tributaries. In 997 CE they plundered it and slew many of its inhabitants, burning the villages and towns behind them, besieged castles, laying waste Gardarike far

and wide: *Aldeiga burns, and Eirik's might scours through all Rus' by its light.*[Heimskringla: Norwegian Kings, Vol 3]

In summer, 1988 in Kyiv, I met Victor, who had once been an engineering student. Some time ago, though, he had dropped out of university to become a homeless memorialist of his native city's cultural genius, and so it was I found myself wandering with him through a park while he discoursed passionately about the Ukrainian opera singers, poets and theatre directors and actors whose busts decorated the lawns and pathways – his knowledge was practically subversive - as we made our way to the riverbank overlooking the Dnipro. On the cool descent to the river, under the heavy, broad-leafed canopy of trees, we came upon a ramshackle gazebo which Victor identified as a nineteenth-century church rotunda erected on the very spot where the ninth-century Kyivan earl Askold had been murdered by the treacherous Oleh of Novgorod who lured Askold and Dir, another earl, outside the walls of Kyiv, slew them and established himself as lord of Kyiv, declaring it would become the “mother of all the Rus' cities.”

Askold and Dir were buried on the bank of the Dnipro, or at least this is where the dreamy passerby can imagine their martyrdom, ashes and bone chips deep within maternal earth

“The name Askold,” I said to Victor, “sounds Scandinavian to me.”

Balts, Slavs, Turkic tribesmen, Christian Greeks, all lived in Rus', arguably more “civilized” in the ninth century than western societies, without their feudal relations, nor corporal nor capital punishment, nor judicial torture, but with a brisk trade in slaves with Constantinople. The Dnipro river basin may not have been the Slavs' original homeland – linguists judge that *Dnipro/Dnieper* is of Thracian origin, wherever that was– but, on the basis of proto-Slavic names for deciduous trees, that homeland is north and northeast of the Carpathian mountains and the

Middle Dnipro regions (between Northern European coniferous forests and the Mediterranean evergreen olive groves).

But by the fifth century BCE, Greek historian Herodotus, writing Book IV of his *History*, located Slavic ploughmen already sowing wheat “not for food but for sale,” along the Borysthenes [Dnipro] A millennium later, Slavs would be on the move, northwards up the Vistula, Oder and Elbe rivers, east to the Don, south-east to to the Black Sea and south-west to the Danube, on their way out of Rus’.

In the Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity in Saskatoon, there hangs the iconic representation of the Baptism of Ukraine. Saint and Prince Volodymyr, dressed as a Byzantine knight in long white tunic and bejewelled belts, looks Mongol, high-cheeked and mustachioed, not at all Nordic, as he supervises the rite. His people throng waist-deep in the Dnipro river while priests lean over from the riverbank, blessing the waters; soldiers stand in disciplined ranks before them. Here then are all the social orders. From Volodymyr’s hand spills a scroll: *God Almighty who created heaven and earth, look now upon these new people, and grant, Lord, that they acknowledge you the true God as the Christians nations have done.*

Marriage forced Volodymyr’s hand. The Byzantine emperor, Basil II, would betroth his sister to this barbarian chieftain on condition that the bridegroom convert to Christianity, baptised by a Byzantine bishop. Anna walked solemnly out the gates of Constantinople accompanied by a retinue of priests (who would duly baptise Rus’) and a loud and eloquent lamentation that she was being married to no better than an idol worshipper and slave trader. With the ardour of the newly-converted and politically astute, Volodymyr ordered that the idols should be overthrown. His people fell upon them with axes and built a pyre of them and burned them: they tilted woefully on the riverbank, awaiting their fate. Almighty Perun, god of thunder, was tied to a horse’s tail and dragged about the



city. Citizens wielding sticks bashed pitilessly at him, seeking vengeance on the Fiend who had chosen this attractive form – the silver cap, the golden mustache - to walk among them - before tossing him ignominiously into the river where he disappeared over a waterfall. Then Volodymyr sent the children of the noble families to school, to learn to read Greek and Slavonic, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah: "In that day shall the deaf hear the words of a book, and the tongue of the dumb shall be clearly heard."

*When the people were bapitized, they returned each to his own abode. Vladimir, rejoicing that he and his subjects knew God himself, looked up to heaven and said: "O God, who hast created heaven and earth, look down, I beseech thee, on this thy new people, and grant them, O Lord, to know thee as the true God, even as the other Christian nations have known thee".[Medieval Russia's Epics, 71]*

In 1240, the Mongols, under the leadership of Batu, grandson of Genghis Khan, arrived at the Golden Gates of Kyiv (immortalized in Moussorgky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*) and sacked the city, then moved on to Poland and central Europe. Kyiv never recovered (regional power moved north to Moscow, founded in 1147). Plano Carpini, papal envoy to the Mongols, mentions in 1246 the "countless skulls and bones of dead men lying about on the ground," as he travels, elegant figure on horseback, on the left bank of the Dnipro, his horse skittishly stepping through the ossuary of the steppes. The Mongol invasion was followed by famines, locusts, forest fires and plague. At the beginning of the eleventh century, Kyiv had boasted four hundred churches; almost nothing remained in the stinking smoke and weed-infested rubble in this charnel house of Byzantium's gift to the Slavs.