

MACEDONIAN AGENDA



16 essays on the development of Macedonian culture in Australia. Includes cultural values, language, religion, arts, identity, women's issues, the elderly, immigration, politics, the "child refugees", human rights and more

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*Front cover: February 2, 1960, Bitola Railway Station, Macedonia:
Mr Aleksandar Kolupacev is farewelled by his village, Gjavato, as he
sets out for a new life in Port Kembla, Australia.*

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Macedonian Values in Multicultural Australia <i>Zoran Coseski</i>	9
Some Observations on the Speech of Bilingual Macedonian- Australians <i>Betty K Stewart</i>	15
The Australian-Macedonian Drama Group <i>Stefo Stojanovski</i>	27
The Macedonian Orthodox Church: Its Role in the Moulding and Maintenance of Ethnic Identity in Australia <i>Dr Christopher Popov and Michael Radin</i>	36
Barriers to Social Change for Macedonian Women <i>Malina Stankovska</i>	53
A Study of Women Activists in the Macedonian Community <i>Malina Stankovska</i>	62
The Macedonian Elderly: A Needs Study of the Macedonian Elderly in the Western Region of Melbourne <i>Macedonian Community Welfare Association of the Western Region Inc</i>	74
Features of Settlement in Australia by Macedonians from the Aegean Region <i>Michael Radin</i>	113
Proud of the Macedonian Heritage <i>Faye Kolev</i>	132
Assimilation and the Public and Private Identity of Macedonians: A Dialectical Expose <i>Pandora Petrovska</i>	135

Declaration of the "Child Refugees" <i>The Association of Refugee Children from the Aegean Part of Macedonia</i>	185
Submission on the 28,000 Ethnic Macedonian "Child Refugees" <i>Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia</i>	189
A Political Strategy for the Macedonian Diaspora <i>Victor Bivell</i>	204
The Political Future of the Macedonians in Australia <i>Zoran Coseski</i>	213
Australian Law, International Treaties and the Government's "Slav" Prefix <i>Risto Balalovski</i>	215
Why Australia? <i>Bob Spasenovski</i>	223
The Authors	226

A Study Of Women Activists In The Macedonian Community

Malina Stankovska

This paper was written in 1991 as part of a Graduate Diploma in Community Development

Introduction

The number of Macedonian women who have worked in Macedonian community affairs in Melbourne is very small and as a result of this, their involvement has been quite limited. This indicates that there is a huge, untapped field of resources which our under-resourced Macedonian community could take advantage of - if they had awareness of its existence and if the contributions of women were as valued as those of men.

As there is so much scope to improve the rate of participation by women, I was interested in learning those factors which have enabled activists to become involved with the Macedonian community so that these factors could be duplicated, thus inspiring and empowering other women to become active. This was the primary motivation for the research, as well as the opportunity to learn of the consciousness of fellow women activists, their experiences, trials, successes, etc.

The research was conducted by means of an informal group session to which five women activists were invited. The participants were familiar with each other and this facilitated frank, open discussion which proved very fruitful in response to the research question.

The outcome of the discussion was that motivations for community participation stem from a number of internal factors such as an expressed need to be involved, as well as external considerations such as the benefit which they felt they could bring to the community.

One of the most significant findings of the research was the importance of the establishment of the activists' identity as Macedonians - people had to contend with this before they could become involved. (Appendix 1)

The research enabled me to realize that to encourage the long term participation of women in this community, an educational program would be needed, both for men and women, so that their value as potential

contributors to the community can be realized.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The research undertaken had a participatory framework and used a feminist approach.

The aim of participatory research is "to develop critical consciousness, to improve the lives of those involved in the research process and to transform fundamental societal structures and relationships..." (1. p3) According to Patricia Maguire, it is a process of social investigation, education and action in order to share the creation of social knowledge with oppressed people so that their social reality can be transformed. This approach has some overlap with the feminist approaches which also seek to generate action and social change arising from the recognition of oppression and the identification of power inequalities.

The feminist premise of the personal being political is embraced and the focus of the project is experiential, conforming to the feminist view that "personal, direct experience underlies all behaviour and action". (2. p165)

Stanley and Wise have suggested that "our consciousness is always the medium through which research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher." (2. p157). I accept the position that every researcher is a social being who brings his or her values into the research process. My position is as both researcher and participant.

My participation in the project leads to an introspective method which is also relevant and conforms to the view of the naturalists who believe that "reality should be represented as it is experienced and lived, that is, for those people themselves to present their own analytical accounts of their own experiences." (2. p167)

With regard to the content of the research, *A Framework of Participation in Community Organisations* by Abraham Wandersman provided the most useful tools for breaking down the elements which encourage participation. Wandersman identifies environmental, ecological and social characteristics of community as antecedents of participation. The most relevant to the study of Macedonians is the social characteristics category which refers to factors such as social networks, norms, traditions, race, class and homogeneity. These factors will be discussed in relation to the material derived from the group discussion.

In relation to the participation of women of non-English speaking background in community affairs, the source I referred to was *Italian Migrant Women, Participation and the Women's Movement* by Anne

Sgro, Pieria Stefania and Mirna Risk. The most relevant point in this book was that a history of participation in their country of origin can work as an impetus to participation in Australia.

Other theoretical works briefly referred to are *Three Worlds of Inequality - Race, Class and Gender* by Jennett and Stewart and *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression* by C Ramazanoglu. It was in these works that it was acknowledged that racially based oppression cuts across oppression resulting from either class or gender.

Research Question

To investigate the motivations, experiences and constraints of women activists in the Macedonian community.

Purpose Of Research

The purpose of the research was to learn of factors which enabled Macedonian women to participate in Macedonian community affairs as well as to provide a forum where activists could be encouraged to recognize their own and their peers' roles and contributions to the Macedonian community. This exercise had the additional purpose of clarifying the conditions which are conducive to participation so that the involvement of a greater number of Macedonian women could be encouraged.

Objectives

1. To undertake the first research project on Macedonian women's involvement in the community.
2. To produce a credible document to be published within Macedonian community circles about Macedonian women.
3. To gain recognition within the community about the contribution of Macedonian women to community affairs.
4. To raise community awareness of the potential of Macedonian women to make a more effective and substantial overt contribution to the community.
5. To enable Macedonian women activists to recognize their role in challenging social norms.
6. To provide a basis for further investigation into reasons for the lack of involvement of Macedonian women in the community.

Aims

To encourage Macedonian women activists to relate their experiences in working with the community so that they can identify the importance

of their contribution and be aware of the social implications of their activities.

Accountability

Accountability will be to the discussion group who will receive a copy of the research document on its completion and will be consulted before it is made public.

Methodology

The methodology I adopted was to hold an informal meeting of Macedonian women activists, including myself, at my home. I had contacted nine women by telephone, explaining the reason for the discussion and inviting them to attend. Five agreed to attend and together with my involvement, the group comprised six women. The women were all known to each other but with varying degrees of familiarity. The sample was limited by the specificity of the research question.

My role was to facilitate the process - and I use the term "facilitate" loosely. I outlined the purpose and objectives of the research and posed the questions which I had earlier constructed. The questions were:

- * What are the areas and capacity of your involvement in the Macedonian community?

- * What factors motivated you to become involved in Macedonian community affairs?

- * Did you encounter any barriers/constraints to your involvement and what were they?

- * Did you overcome these and how?

- * What factors made your involvement possible?

- * How do you see your role in the organizations you have been involved in and in the wider community?

I informed the participants at the outset that they would be able to reflect upon the processes and content of the discussion in an evaluation at the end of the session. In fact, the session lasted three hours and by that time we were all happy to finish. There was no time to do the evaluation at the end of the session, but the response of the women to what was done was very positive. Three of them expressed the desire to hold informal discussions like this more often, and one woman said she thought the process was excellent and the whole idea was very interesting.

Results of Group Discussion

In order to put the data into context, it is important to note that some

of the activists interviewed had considerable direct involvement with Macedonian community organizations, whilst others had been involved predominantly through their professional work. They had experience in a wide range of community fields such as education, welfare, drama, business and academia as well as in students' associations, a teacher organization, a folkloric group, and women's organizations. Most of the women were university educated.

In posing the questions, I found that we talked of constraints, motivations, and factors that enabled our participation just by relating our experiences, so these questions were answered simultaneously.

When asked about the factors which enabled them to become involved in Macedonian community affairs, the responses encompassed a wide range of reasons. Firstly, there were practical reasons such as time availability. In addition all the married women expressed the importance of flexibility in their family situations - that is, they had support from husbands in principle, as well as in terms of looking after domestic concerns, children, etc.

These same reasons were factors which had constrained the involvement of some of the women. Time constraints was a serious factor with one respondent saying that time had to be divided between care for young children, work, business, and the community.

Another constraint expressed by some of the women with younger children was the guilt felt at dropping children at creche, or leaving them with spouses to go to work or to meetings, and the emotional cost of having less time for the family. One woman mentioned that she was unable to become involved until her children grew up.

With regard to motivations for becoming involved in the community, people expressed their personal and inner needs as reasons which seemed to compel them to be involved. One woman expressed "the need to belong". Statements such as "I needed to fill a void" were common as was the need to learn about one's identity, ie "curious about my Macedonian heritage". When this line of thought was pursued, it was revealed that there was not just the need to belong to a group, but to actually affirm one's identity by being active in Macedonian community affairs. There was also the view that it was time for women to become more involved and this motivated one woman in particular.

Two of the activists who are now teachers of Macedonian expressed their love of and passion for the language as motivations for them.

Further, some of the women had grown up in environments where their fathers had active involvement in the community and doing work of this nature just became a part of life. This can be related to the work

done by Sgro, Pieria and Risk which suggests that Italian women had a history of this type of involvement in their homeland and so it was not strange that they became involved here.

Apart from these personal motivations, there were reasons which focussed on the benefit and development of the community. One woman said she wanted the Macedonian community to have status in the wider Australian community and that she thought her involvement would improve the quality of the activities of the organization she joined.

Another woman stated that the area of her involvement was necessary in terms of trying to improve the profile, resources and development of community structures so that Macedonians would be better able to access the services offered here.

The final question pertained to the role of the women in the community and how they perceived their contribution. Generally, they perceived themselves as educators - of their own children, of the community's children, as educators to people in the wider community on Macedonian matters such as history, language, identity etc. One woman articulated her view of the importance of the academic work in presenting the Macedonians' side of the story in order to offset the enormous amount of misinformation in the wider community about the Macedonian community and who we are.

Another role was that of being role models to younger girls. One activist mentioned her role as "mother" for the children whose parents work until late and, because they are so tired, they have little time to spend with their children. She says she tries to fill some of the void left by training the children in the finer skills which is known as "kultura". No word in English meets the meaning of this, but it is a mixture of etiquette, culture, respect, self esteem and skill in interacting.

Discussion

The most significant fact to emerge from the research was the struggle of the activists to come to grips with their identity. This is indicative of the lack of confidence felt by Macedonians as Macedonians. One woman, from Aegean Macedonia, expressed her feelings of shame at being Macedonian until a few years ago. She said that she had been frustrated at their "backwardness" and had only in more recent times been comfortable with her Macedonian identity. Indeed she had felt a negative Macedonian identity until she had the opportunity to learn of the history and background of the Macedonians - something which had not been available to her before then.

Her view was shared by a participant who had grown up in Skopje (in the Republic of Macedonia) with the idea that they were more cultured and of a higher class than other Macedonians because of the Serbian influence. She said that in her younger years she was ashamed to be Macedonian, that she was ashamed of her parents as they were so typically Macedonian and that she did not want to be a part of that scene. She told us an example of the "off the boats", a term referring to the newly arrived Macedonians, and their different cultural position which had served to alienate her from things Macedonian.

It is interesting that these two people, from two different parts of Macedonia, had the view that the Greek and Serbian languages, cultures and peoples generally were superior to that of the Macedonian. The reasons for this are very complex, suffice to say here that the eighty year division of Macedonian territory and the resulting racial oppression has taken its toll on the identity of the Macedonians.

Both of these women admitted to previously having limited knowledge about the partition of Macedonia and it is interesting to note that their negative opinions of their identities turned positive when they were able to learn of their history. As one participant pointed out, "Macedonia was divided nearly eighty years ago so what exists is Macedonians growing up and living in totally different contexts - that is, different countries, different political systems, different economic structures and so on. And then we wonder why in Australia we are not united and have to struggle to be one homogeneous group. It takes time and knowledge to reach that state."

The discussion seemed to focus on these issues of identity and the women felt a need to relate their struggles in this regard. For some of the women who had grown up in an environment where their Macedonian identity was positive, the need was focused more on the need to understand and explain the reasons for the negativity. As was articulated by one activist, "Being Macedonian is a struggle and this becomes a part of our identity."

Although there was a strong expression of the need to affirm ourselves, our potential and our contributions in the community as women, this element took second place to the need to affirm ourselves as Macedonians. This suggests that the racial oppression we feel as Macedonians is felt more keenly and renders us more powerless than our gender oppression.

Ramazanoglu has stated in her work that the oppression which men and women face together is a bridging force which helps to unite them in a common struggle. This is certainly true for Macedonians and this has implications for the women's movement and its relevance to women of

non-English speaking background. As both males and females share this form of oppression, relations between them are "not reducible to sex oppression... but [are] often characterised by solidarity in resistance to racial oppression." (8. p266)

Achievements

The achievements of the women were considerable, and there was a great deal of natural affirmation of the contribution of the women in their different areas of involvement. The teachers were able to articulate that they had seen at their schools where the Macedonian language and culture were taught a new confidence in the children - they were proud to be "Maco". (Appendix 2) They felt that "It's okay to be Maco and to have this culture." This differed to the older students who had not experienced the Macedonian language program from a young age. The positive identity was shared by Anglo-Australian teachers. There was affirmation by the group at the enormity of this development.

The group realized that this was the first generation of Macedonians who have a positive Macedonian identity and are proud of their heritage. This is an historic achievement because, for all the racism of our society in Australia, these children have the opportunity to develop in a way that is still not allowed in their homeland.

One of the most inspiring thoughts came from one of the younger activists who said that "we survived 550 years under the Turks and we are still surviving under the present divisions."

There was the realization that before we can move forward as a community, "we need to get rid of the illiterate enemy in our community". This refers to the process of "conscientisation" which Freire has maintained as relevant for oppressed peoples. As was aptly stated by one of the participants, "za celi ima mesto, samo treba da se nauci nekako ovaj narodot nas." This translates into "there is room for everyone to contribute, but our people have to learn this somehow."

The general feeling was that the situation of the Macedonians can only improve and that the work we had done had made a difference.

The next most striking outcome was the very solid awareness amongst us of the problems encountered as a result of our gender.

There were numerous examples related by the women which illustrated their feeling of being inferior. One activist shared with us an incident regarding a meeting of about six men at her home. She placed drinks and savouries on the table as was expected of her, but when she tried to contribute to their conversation, she was told openly by one of the

men that she was a woman and that she should not speak. The group participants were indignant, saying that on the one hand they were expected to stand up as professionals and advocate for the needs of the Macedonians whilst on the other hand they were told that they had nothing to contribute simply on the basis of their gender. As one of the participants said, "Our men have been conditioned to think that our women have no intelligence" and "men are ignorant of women and that is why a lot of problems exist - they simply do not know any better."

Many other instances were related illustrating perceptions regarding the position of women in the community. (Appendix 3)

Frustration was expressed with the culture in its imposition of rigid sex roles. The group felt that "women have brains and can make a contribution, but unfortunately, our culture does not recognize this." One of the most powerful ways this manifested itself was with inferences made about the moral status of women who were involved in community affairs." To be fair, this is breaking down amongst the more progressive organizations, but some sections of the community still entertain such myths.

An example which cannot go unmentioned is that of one of the activists at a village meeting (Appendix 4) where she was one woman in a sea of men. Having prepared a proposal as to why she wanted to be in the all male committee, she attempted to speak to it. As soon as she mentioned the term "Macedonian" (in a group which saw itself as pro-Greek despite their use of the Macedonian language) she received a tirade of abuse regarding her moral status and was literally shouted down. She recounted her experience of standing up, stamping her feet and shouting "Sakam pravina, sakam zbor" (which translates into "I want justice, I want to speak"). She was given no such opportunity and has had to live with being judged negatively by these people since then.

This activist received accolades from the other women in the group about her courage in such a difficult situation, and her contribution was affirmed. This incident is very powerful in illustrating that issues of racial oppression, which manifest themselves in problems with identity, are actually transformed into gender-related ones and this diverts attention from the real problem. This requires far more analysis on a psycho-sociological level and is one which would be very interesting to pursue.

Discussion around the achievements of the women led to the conclusion that the teachers were able to contribute a visible amount as they have control over students. Those women working directly in the community had no such control, nor status, next to the men. One woman said she felt "abused" by the community and had withdrawn and felt fulfilled

in her withdrawal because she had turned to academic work which analyzed the reasons for the failure of the community to develop. As was pointed out however, "You can't reach the masses by putting pen to paper."

Another issue which emerged was that of a participant who related her feelings of inadequacy when she was about to deliver a paper on the contribution of Macedonian women to culture at an academic conference. She was not confident about the academic competence of her work - whether it would be good enough and what the male academics would think of it. This merely reflects the inferiority women face on traditionally male turf.

As one of the participants succinctly said "We undermine ourselves [as Macedonians and as women] because we've been so oppressed, but we have to keep telling ourselves that we are good, worthy ... we must fight back."

The final point worth mentioning is the support the women had given to their husbands in the latter's community involvement by raising and taking responsibility for children. This was acknowledged by the group as a form of activism as it nurtured the culture and was seen as fundamental to involvement by future generations. The meaning of activism thus took on a new dimension, and if this meaning is accepted the involvement of women becomes quite extensive. This becomes problematic as it changes the entire meaning of the research from what was intended. For that reason, I felt that it would be appropriate to acknowledge the importance of this support work which is not recognized in the mainstream of Macedonian community affairs, and also to name it as basic for activism.

Appendices

Appendix One

Despite the partition of Macedonia in 1913 by the Treaty of Bucharest, the Macedonian people in all four parts of Macedonia are a nation with the same language, culture and history.

Appendix Two

A Macedonian language program where the Macedonian language and culture are taught as part of the normal school curriculum from grade prep through to grade six exists at Thomastown West Primary School in

Melbourne. This is continued up to year 12 at Thomastown Secondary College. Thomastown West Public School is one of the feeder schools of Thomastown Secondary College so Macedonian children at these schools have the opportunity to learn their language, culture and history uninterruptedly and with the status and esteem of it being a part of the normal school curriculum.

Appendix Three

At a Macedonian Conference in 1991 there were some fundamental problems with the organization which reflected the marginalization of women.

The first example of this was the lack of women speakers at the opening ceremony. The next example was the scheduling of workshops. There were workshops on human rights issues and community issues and these were scheduled at the same time as workshops on women's and aged issues, welfare and education. This served to inhibit the attendance of women at the "male" workshops due to their involvement professionally in traditionally female areas. In another incident, female activists were not acknowledged appropriately at a social function. The male activists were acknowledged by the positions held in their organizations. The women activists were not.

Appendix Four

The Macedonians in Australia originate largely from villages in rural areas of Macedonia. In order to retain links with their village folk, many organizations have formed in Australia around these village identities.

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