

The Masonic societies in Macedonia (Interview with Freemason Blagoya Pandovski)

by Boyan Lazarevski



Blagoya Pandovski is a lawyer and philanthropist from the Republic of Macedonia, founder of the "Pandovski Law Office" in Skopje. He is also actively involved in the Masonic societies in the Republic, and agreed to provide our readers with an exclusive insight into contemporary Macedonian Masonic life, as well as an understanding of the ideals and history of Freemasonry in general.

- Mr. Pandovski, can you tell the readers a little bit about your Macedonian heritage?

My mother was born in Veles, Republic of Macedonia, and my father in a village near Kostur called Breschani, in the Aegean part of Macedonia. My Aegean part of the family were partisans during the Greek Civil War, and my father grew up being one of the thousands *detsa begaltsi*. That is pretty much all I can tell about my ancestors, since I am not that familiar with the family history prior to that period.

- You are a son of a "dete begaltsi", that is, a Macedonian child refugee from the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). Can you tell us about their experience during the Greek Civil War.

I was told by my father that his grandfather Mihail owned a watermill in Drama (a town in northeastern Greece, near the sea) and that they were rich. However, after the Civil War my dedo Vangel and my baba Zoya had to leave Greece because they were partisans. They left behind all of their assets, including large real estates and – according to family legends – two big ceramic pots full of golden coins hidden underneath watermill stones. My dedo and my father made their way to a refugee camp in Slovenia, whereas

my baba together with my uncle and two aunts were evacuated to a refugee camp in Poland. They were reunited after two years of separation and settled to start a new life in Skopje, then Socialist Republic of Macedonia.

- You consider yourself a proud Freemason. Before going into details about the history of Macedonian Freemasonry, can you please first explain to us the origins of the Freemasonry in general? When and how did it start?

No one knows with certainty how or when the Masonic fraternity was formed. A widely accepted theory among Masonic scholars is that it arose from the stonemasons' guilds during the Middle Ages. The language and symbols used in the fraternity's rituals originate from this era. The oldest document that makes reference to Masons is the *Regius Poem*, printed about 1390. In 1717, four lodges were established in London, forming the first Grand Lodge of England. From this point onward the records are more complete. The Grand Orient of France – to whose obedience my lodge belongs – is the largest of several Masonic organizations in France, and the oldest on Continental Europe. It was established in 1773, and is generally considered to be the mother lodge of so-called continental Freemasonry, which traditionally attracts liberal people.

It is no secret that most of the leaders in the French, American and October revolution were Freemasons, but these Revolutions were not organized by the lodges. They were result of the political activity of the member's outside of the lodges – yet, they were inspired by Masonic principles of *Liberty and Equality*.

- There are many books, articles and documentaries available online that talk about the Freemasons as a secretive subversive society of people whose goal is to take over the countries they live in. How much of this is true? What are the goals of the Freemasons?

Contrary to the things mentioned in conspiracy theory books and documentaries, there are no secret goals of the Freemasons. The Masonic lodge is a place where men of all backgrounds and beliefs gather to share in fellowship, self-improvement and service

to community. The mission of Freemasonry is to *promote a way of life* that binds fellow humans in a way that transcends all ethnic, cultural, religious, social and educational differences. The main goal, I would add, is to thrive to practically express the great principles of *brotherly love, relief and truth*. The latter principle – "discovering the truth" – is especially important for a Freemason and, in my opinion, can only be achieved on a personal level. There is no absolute truth. Personal truth is formed by individual point of view and personal experience.

- What do you know about the history of Freemasonry in Macedonia? Is it true that some of the Macedonian revolutionaries from IMRO were also Freemasons?

During the Ottoman Empire rule and up to World War II, Macedonian Freemasons actively participated and belonged mostly to Masonic lodges in Sofia, Bulgaria, and to a smaller extent in Serbia. During the communist regime in former Yugoslavia, Masonic lodges were banned and did not exist. Individuals from Macedonia participated in lodges located in Western Europe. Freemasonry in Macedonia was reestablished in the end of the 1990s.

It is true that there were several IMRO revolutionaries that we know with certainty to be Freemasons. Some of the most prominent include Damyan Gruev, Lazar Kiselincev, Pavel Shatev, and Alexandar Protogerov. The latter at one point became the Grand Master of the Grand lodge of Bulgaria.

- What is the situation of Freemasonry in the Republic of Macedonia today? What branch do you belong to?

Currently, in the Republic of Macedonia we have the "Grand Lodge of Macedonia", which is composed of four lodges: "Skopje Lodge", "Unity Lodge", "White Downs Lodge" and "The Morning Star Lodge". We also have one independent lodge called "Vistina - La Verite", which is associated with the Grand Orient de France. I belong in this lodge. Altogether there are around 200 Freemasons in Macedonia.



Masonic symbols on the grave of IMRO revolutionary Mishe Razvigorov

- As a Freemason, what is your take on the contemporary Macedonian question? What would be the Masonic approach to its resolution?

If under the Macedonian Question you understand the conflicting historic and ethnic identifications connected to the word Macedonian, then my position is the Masonic one – equality and brotherly love. Let me give you an example: there are Kosturchani all over the world. Today, most of them (including my family) consider themselves to be Macedonians by ethnicity; there are also Kosturchani that consider themselves to be Bulgarians; and there are even some that identify as Greeks. My approach is to treat everyone equally, with dignity, and with respect to their choice of identity. To be honest, I am not the right person to talk about national identity because I simply don't believe in it. I believe only in personal identity, and not in collectives. I have always considered myself to be cosmopolitan who perceives individuals like humans and not like Macedonians, Greeks, Bulgarians, etc.

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If on the other hand, your question refers to the open political issues of the Republic of Macedonia, then I can tell you my personal opinion about it, and not as a Freemason - because Freemasonry does not relate to political problems. I personally think that Macedonians should accept some kind of a compromise regarding all of the open issues with our neighbors. Holding hard positions is simply not productive. Becoming a part of the European Union should be the primal goal of the people who live in the Republic of Macedonia, and I think that the current government is going in that direction.

- And at the end, tell us please how Freemasonry changed your life? What would be your message for our readers? What can we apply in our everyday routines, or way of working and thinking, on order to make ourselves more enlightened and worthy to the world?

Freemasonry is a fraternity in which a good person is becoming even better. Through the interaction and work in the lodges Freemasons are increasing their intellectual and moral standards and abilities. Every Freemason is working on himself like the stonecutter is working with the stone, creating better and smother shapes. Since I joined Freemasonry I believe to have transcended myself to a higher intellectual and moral level.

My message for the TRIBUNE readers is to work on themselves every day in a way that they will become better persons in every aspect. Or as we say in Masonic terminology: we should smoothen the stone every day (da go delkame kamenot sekoi den).

The motto according to which we must act is “do well to others as you would like well to be done to you”. If everybody acts according to this rule, the world would be a better place.