

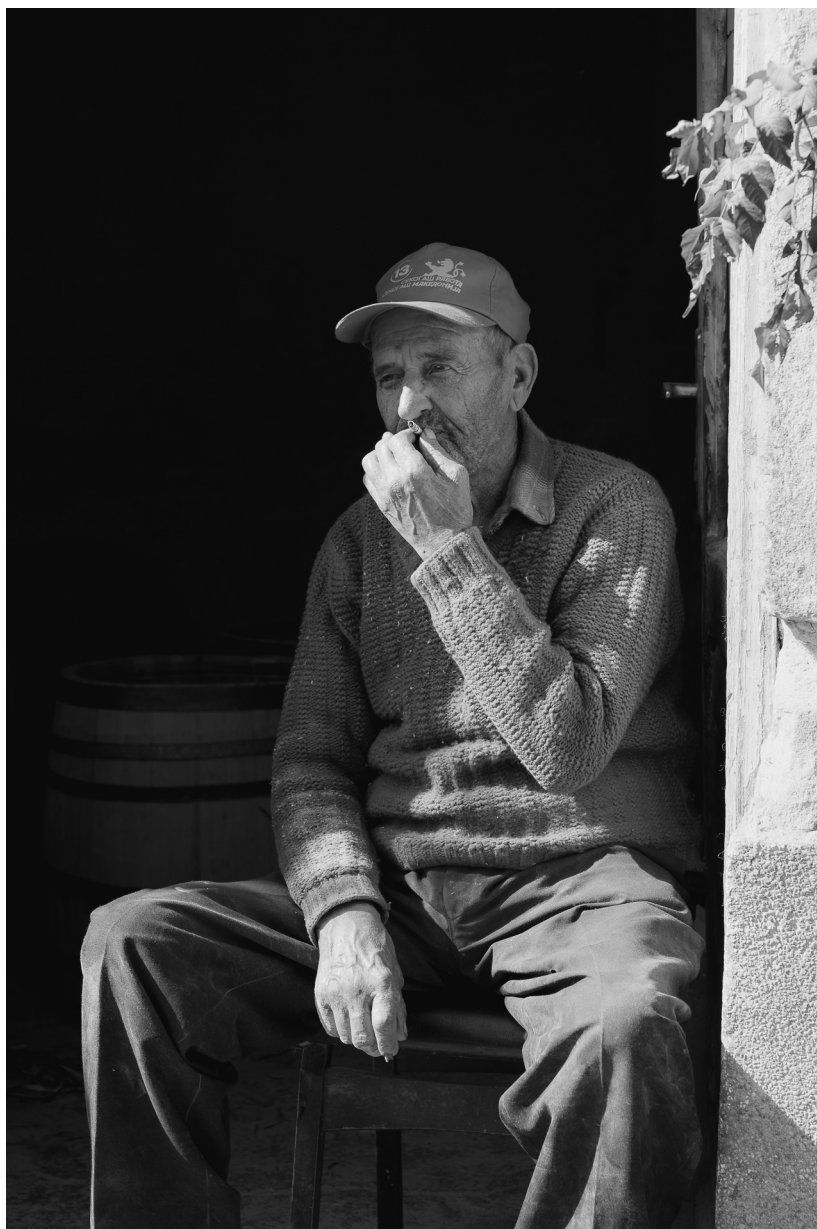
# Inside Macedonia

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There are so many histories of Macedonia, a country that does not have an official name, one that is bordered by four different nations and has undergone waves of immigration and invasion through time, a nation that has suffered a long civil war and many years under communist rule. With this legacy the people have had to be resilient and resourceful. There was one particular story that I heard from an 84 year old man called Mile Talevski which I could not get out of my mind. He is a bit of a celebrity in his hometown of Krushevo and was the subject of a documentary film. He produced a dossier of cuttings to prove this, to affirm his past life of fame. Now he works as a cooper, still making barrels in his workshop, the walls of which are hung with an array of lethal looking tools. In the 1960s Mile spent 11 years in jail, charged with anti-communist activities. As a soldier he had been a border guard and had aided many refugees fleeing from the soviet regime in Hungary into Macedonia and beyond. This was the story he told.

"..... I was on duty one night in winter when it was extremely cold, -20 or thereabouts and there was deep snow on the ground. A young girl arrived out of the darkness at our border post. Well she was staggering rather than walking when I found her. She could barely speak and what she did say we could not understand as she was a Hungarian. She was very weak and almost frozen to death, so I called the Croatian doctor who was close by. He told me I should rub her body with alcohol, so I recruited the other soldiers and we all rubbed her body with alcohol and then wrapped her in a blanket. She recovered and she was so grateful that she offered me her gold ring but I did not accept as it was not allowed in my job to take gifts or. Some 30 years later the woman who is living in the United States of America tracked me down in order to thank me again."

This story was chilling and revealed the vulnerability of refugees everywhere. Mile portrayed himself as the good man, the hero. I hope that he was. There are perhaps others who were not. But it spoke of the brutality of the time and the place. The dangers that he faced and the risks he took led him to spend 11 years in jail. But here he was surviving into the next century, smoking upwards of 40 cigarettes a day and living a life that might have been lived 100 years ago and fiercely supportive of the right wing Nationalist Party. For me he encapsulated Macedonia, a blend of kindness and grit, light and dark, a mixture of humanity and fearlessness. That precarious balance is an undercurrent that is reflected in the landscape of Macedonia with its sheer mountains and endless forests and brooding lakes. it is everywhere you look.



















