

D'MBENI – A little History, a Lot of Memories

by Virginia Andreoff

November 2004

Macedonians who live outside of Macedonia still ask the question “What village are you from?” The village defines us and reinforces our cultural identity. It is where many of us come from--our clan binds us. That is why for the *Dambensko Benevolent Society* the celebration of its 60th anniversary on May 1st 2004 in Toronto this year was significant. The attendance was excellent, with many children, grandchildren and friends of *D'mbenchari*. The number of real D'mbentsi--those actually born in the village--is shrinking. As a result, there were two kinds of people at the celebration—*D'mbenchari*, and those who wanted to be! The President and Treasurer spoke about the history of D'mbeni the village, as well as the Society in Canada with some interesting facts and myths revealed.

For those who have not been to D'mbeni, it is in the Kostur region (*okolije*), northwestern corner of Greece, 20 km from Albania. In its hey day, with a population of two thousand, it had 400 stone houses, fourteen stores and one church. Andrejko Andreofski in Skopje built a scale model of D'mbeni with every house replicated in miniature. In his video, he recounts the names of the families that lived in each house. This was a labour of love for his village.

The way Louis told the story everything has a beginning, and D'mbeni came about this way: a cow belonging to a man from an adjoining village ran away. Now a cow in those days was a prized possession so the *dedo* immediately went in search of it. He discovered the cow by a running brook, plenty of grass and an abundance of forest and oak trees. *Dedo* liked what he saw and eventually moved his family there, and others followed him. In Macedonian, an oak tree is called “*dump*” and therefore D'mbeni was born and it became a village. An imaginary line running down the middle of D'mbeni divided the village into east and west. The east side was named *Kamenska Mala*, and the west side *Klanchenska Mala*. A great deal of good-natured rivalry

entertained the young men of the day such as the *Koleda* celebration and who would be successful in putting the torch to the *paleshka*!

As for the actual boundaries of D'mbeni there was another folk tale. D'mbeni was built at the base of the mountain that rose high to the north. However it had an immense area surrounding the village to the east, west and south. This large area came about thanks to an enterprising person named *Dedo Zugla*. When the Turkish overseer laid out the boundaries, *Dedo Zugla* accompanied him. It came about that wherever they walked during the day, the overseer asked Dedo, if he was stepping on D'mbenski soil. His reply was "*Falla boga*, I am stepping on D'mbenski soil." The boundaries were recorded and set. Unbeknownst to the Turkish overseer, *Dedo Zugla* had put soil of his beloved D'mbeni in his shoes and in the process of walking with his *bastoon* (cane); he was truly stepping on D'mbenski soil. This is an actual account of the boundary process. Drenoveni, Smurdesh, Aposkep and Gabresh are D'mbeni's neighbours.

The following geographical names also had great meaning to the villagers, and invoked memories that were both happy and incredibly sad:

Planinata, (mountain) *Rekata*, (river) *Poliето*, *Urlovo*, *Karanzovo*, *Pandarnitsa*, *Arbenishka*, *Livadidsa*, *Spiliato*, *Klisoura*, *Vulcov Reett*, *Yanoff Reet*, *Dumbo*, *Kostolata*, *Oraete*, *Malio Gornoff Reet*, *berik*, *Koviltsa*, *Kotsovi Koree*, *Pachkoff Bunar*, *Tumba*, *Grobishteta*, (cemetery) *Chirskata Neeva*, *Sternata*, *Tserkvata*, and "*Lokvata and Viniary*", which was the title for Lazar Pop Traikoff's epic poem about the struggle for freedom from the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the 20th Century.

To escape Turkish persecution after Elinden, many people fled D'mbeni and emigrated to Canada and other foreign countries in the early 1900's. They continued to emigrate right up until the 1950's, after the Greek Civil War. They sought each other out in Toronto and decided to form an association. Giving aid or doing good to others describes "Benevolent", while "Society" is the apparent companionship that many have found within the association. It is probably why the organization has been in existence for 60 years. It has provided aid to their members, especially in the early days, e.g. at

the death of a member. It was part of the original Constitution. In 1959 a benefit of \$150 was sent to the family of a member upon his/her demise, along with flowers. Some of these benefits have had to change in recent years, because of the declining membership.

The Society also kept a Minute book, which became an important part of the written Canadian Macedonian history. The first meeting of the society was held on May 28th, 1944 at 386 Ontario Street. Twenty people attended for the inauguration of the *Brotherhood of Lazar Pop Traikoff*, which was shortly to become the **Dambensko Benevolent Society**. The dues in 1944 were \$3.00 each, which was to be collected until a member was 60 years old. (Presently membership fees are collected from all members, regardless of seniority.)

The first President and executive were: Kosta Pachkoff, Blagoy Stefkoff and Andy Ralleff, while the *Kontrolna Komiteja* included Rizoff, Ralev and Popovsky. Regular elections were held and various people held positions such as Evan Rizoff, Peter Mousmanski, Tommy Popvsky, Vasil Bouzoff, George Baloff, Evan and Labro Andreovi, Chris Rallis, Steve Theodorou and Dono Rizeff. These were only a few of the names mentioned--these early pioneers of the Society--the ones with vision and on whose shoulders the Society stands today.

The women were very active. Women like Nada Raleva, Lexa Andreova, Vana Mousmansky, and Leena Popovska were just a few of those whose job it was to visit the members on the occasion of name days, solicit donations, while leaving postcards depicting *Selo D'mbeni*. They were the fund-raising backbone of the Society. The women, then and now, along with their continuing contributions of time and effort, made the social events enjoyable and profitable.

The first-ever dance was held at Ontario St with the band called *Mopey 5*. It was noted the occasion also had a buffet, as food was always an important ingredient at celebrations. The Society also voted to send a delegate to Gary, Indiana when the American D'mbeni Society had a picnic and Canadian members were eager to support them. (There are D'mbeni village organizations throughout the world.) Dances

continued to be held at Ontario Street in the 1940's and then at Sts. Cyril & Methody Church. A clock was presented to St. Cyril's in memory of D'mbeni. It is still working, just like the Society! St. George's Church also was a venue for "vecherinki", on occasion.

The Dambensko Benevolent Society had a history of helping the Macedonian community at large when they contributed specifically to the refugees in Bitola from *Aegeska* Macedonia in 1945, after the horrors of WWII. Contributions to various Macedonian churches and cultural institutions, both here and in Greece, have continued to the present day.

Most of the Minutes kept by the Society were written in English, while much of the earlier ones were in Bulgarian, the only written language Macedonians learned at that time, except for the imposed Greek. They should be commended that the Society kept records, as most organizations were primarily interested in "money in or money out". We need to mention here that they were way ahead of the times, by having a young woman--a teenager--act as secretary back in 1946. Mary Rizoff was thrilled to read her Minutes again, 60 years later.

There were summer picnics in the Don Valley, when it was still an urban park, before it was converted into a highway. Most of the community had no cars, which made this location attractive. Now we drive by, oblivious to the fact that celebrations and even Elinden picnics were held in this place. The tradition of picnics was continued at the property owned by D'mbeni in Bowmanville, right on Lake Ontario, and then for the past 25 years in Uxbridge on Zephyr Road. It is where corn roasts are held annually after Labour Day in September: old style picnics, with races for the kids, and ladies competing to see who can throw their shoes the greatest distance! And let's not forget the ever-popular bottle filled with *fasul* (beans) as the crowd guesses the number to win a prize. It has always been a perfect opportunity to re-connect with *selyani* and friends. And they still have a piece of land that is called D'mbeni!

D'mbeni is one of the many destroyed villages in Macedonia. All that remains now are the church and the village well (*boonaro*). The buildings are stone shells.

However it still lives on in the hearts and minds of the men and women who lived there and later had to flee to foreign lands. Because many of the villagers had to leave in haste, remembrances and costumes were often left behind, and are now impossible to find. Many D'mbenski children joined the thousands that had to be evacuated in 1947 - 49, for their own safety to the host countries of the Eastern Bloc. Unfortunately, returning to their birthplace was not an option, as Greece has populated many destroyed Macedonian villages with non-Macedonians.

It is amazing that the Society is still thriving, although it is getting harder and harder to get people to take on various duties. But as the Minutes indicate, the problem was ever thus, even in the early days. Various secretaries would complain about the lack of cooperation. Some things never change. Many of these events would not have happened without the continuing work and dedication of a small group of “movers and shakers” in the Society. People like the Mousmanis and Popovsky families, who were involved through two generations, made our annual dances and gatherings more enjoyable and well organized. The baton has been passed to members like Connie Parkinson and Virginia A. Evans. However, as in many organizations, the struggle to find dedicated and dependable members is ongoing. Every volunteer hour given is precious, and as our members age, it is difficult for the younger generation to exhibit the same commitment as the original members.

There is a heritage and history here, which should be maintained before it is forgotten. Coming together for their 60th anniversary, highlighted the need to keep alive our stories, memories and contacts. The following few lines from Vasko Karadza's poetry about **D'mbeni** reflects the thoughts of the people of D'mbeni, either now or then.

*“We were born with D'mbeni in our hearts,
We grew with D'mbeni in our hearts
We thrive with D'mbeni in our hearts.”*

Virginia Andreoff can be contacted by e-mail at: books@macedonianhistory.ca