

## Family Memory: Seen through the (Auto)Biographical Prism of *Aegeans*

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**Abstract:** This text has been conceived with the aim of, once again, articulate a topic that has been systematically repressed, both internally (personally, within me) and externally (within my/our cultural and social abode). Let us consider the /accords of European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) that define the right of each individual and state to its/their own history, culture and tradition, i.e., the right to protect one's own interests. Along those lines, is Macedonia allowed/afforded the right assured by this same principle? Since questions tied to memory do not necessarily refer to one's past as they do to one's current political issues. Kica B. Kolbe's novelistic autobiography *Aegeans* (in the Macedonian original: *Ezeju*), which contains also the biography of Efrosina Grezhova Klee, daughter-in-law to the famous Swiss painter Paul Klee, allows us the opportunity to become more than mere observers of all that negates us, while trying to explain who we are and what we are, namely, by placing value to all that is our history, culture and tradition, i.e., all that belongs to us.

**Keywords:** family memory, (auto)biography, *Aegeans*, Kolbe, value

I've lived for some time with the need to write this text. And equally long enough with the thought of postponing it. I locate this ambivalence in the primal fear of sounding impersonal, unauthentic. To borrow from Branislav Sarkanjac (Бранислав Саркањац), that the 'rub'. "How can you locate your own discourse, so that it's legitimate in the eyes of the one who denies it, so that much like the character of Angela, the old woman from Milcho Manchevski's *Dust* (Милчо Манчевски, 2001), you can tell them your story? And with that, not to sound like the proverbial frog with its upright leg, whose story reads funnily due to its particularity?" (Sarkanjac, 2009: 17) In order to be authentic while critical, I keep asking myself if the praxis of forgetting is harmful to the truth or to justice itself. However, I am comforted by Zlatko Kramarić's sentiment, who when speaking on memory and anguish, writes that "each one of us is bound not to

forget the past, but rather to speak of/about it" (2012: 143). "Since, as Hannah Arendt tells us, in her Isak Dinesen [Karen Blixen] essay, that "all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them", and this very thought is rendered necessary by authors such as Kiš, Kovač, Šnajder, Janevski, Andonovski, who embrace the storytelling of/about pain and anguish as their duty, their obligation..." (2012: 144).

My main concern, the one I mostly struggle with, is how to free my discourse from those who had previously written on this topic, i.e., lesser and greater authorities on the topic itself, that is to say, how to begin theorizing (through/with) my own feelings, since "theories come from feelings, from those little things that upset and startle [us]" (Sarkanjac, 2009: 56). And the 'Aegean theme' (questions/texts that treat the exodus of Aegean Macedonians, during and after the Greek Civil War), as part of my own family memory, has not been story-told fully and comprehensively. This text comes out of a need to enliven said memory, but at the same time, it is an attempt to re-visit the already published when examining its (the topic's) current status. I wholeheartedly agree with Sarkanjac's understanding of current Macedonian citizenship, namely as a combination of total citizenship and politically marginalized happenstance. "He [Macedonian citizen *exemplar*] is a total citizen in the private sphere, while being rendered politically unnecessary and useless in the public arena." (2009: 27) Thus, my own feeling of being at odds with the now rejected discourse – the Marxist narratives (of past times and social systems), and the newly offered – the discourse that accompanies liberalism as a political system.

Yet, my paper is borne with the aim to actualize a topic that had been systematically repressed, markedly so within my own consciousness, as well as within my/our cultural and social abode. Quite therapeutic, I might add, this self-centering and self-effacement. As a matter of fact, "the act of reconstructing traumas can never be finalized" (Kramarić, 2012: 143), thus my own act of writing can also stand as a small offering towards this reconstruction. For "[r]eturning to the origins of trauma is a way to *heal while forgetting*. By having the refugee return to his abandoned hearth, the fatality of the rhythm of memory is subverted, the silence and dismay that have resulted from the lived horrors overcome, thus the pain accompanying the separation is relieved." (Kolbe; Колбе, 1999: 13)

My father managed, only once in his life, to pass by his (forcefully) abandoned home; I see this paper, my act of writing it, as my own symbolical return to that home, to the home of his parents, my grandparents, his grandmother, a kind of metaphorical (re)visit to their (forcefully) forsaken hearth. In the consciousness of many Macedonians, the Damned Wall, the one the narrator of Dragi Mihajlovski's novel *The Prophet of Diskantrija* (Драги Михајловски, 2001) talks about, since it stands as a reference point to the limits and limitations, not only those that ensure our statehood by guaranteeing our sovereignty and that of our neighbour, but also those "other ones" – the imaginary, the symbolic, the politically solicited ones we call Our Name (Banovikj-Markovska; Бановиќ-Марковска, 2012: 227), is seen in relation to the theme of the exile/forced removal of Aegean Macedonians (Macedonians from the northern region of Greece); in other words, it raises itself up, tall, out of the drama of

our South, i.e., the Exodus tied to the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). This Exodus took place in front of the indifference of the political powers in the former Yugoslavia, and many of the political forces in the then socialist Macedonia as a constitutive part of that Yugoslavia, who by claiming the inferiority status in front of the European intellectual and diplomatic corps, senselessly allowed for the Exodus to be seen, as Banovikj-Markovska points out, “a local issue, some sort of a Balkan provincial syndrome, since the Balkans is not really Europe ...” On the other hand, “this well-controlled display of anemia gave the official Greek state politics its needed platform” (2012: 228). Here’s how Kica B. Kolbe, a Macedonian intellectual with Aegean roots, living and working in Germany, describes the trauma of her exiled family’s conscience: “The family I come from, whose roots can be found in the Kostur-Lerin region, the border always meant a patch of land alongside the state lines between Macedonia and Greece in the vicinity of Bitola. This bit of land contained the magical and the wondrous, but at the same time the terrifying meaning of the world “border”, which at home in Skopje, in the countless and endless narrations of moments and instances became a large monster, a horrifyingly impenetrable wall. (...) [h]ere, behind this invisible wall of air, behind these foots of land, behind the greenery of the Bitola-Lerin valley is that “home”, dreamed of, yearned for, ached by my father that February winter night in 1947...” (Kolbe, 1999: 94-95).

Those new to the topic, as well as those with short memories, not to mention those with no real understanding for the horrors that accompanied this Exodus, could say that we are in fact, once again, voicing tiresome questions, bring up old arguments,

although come to think of it, aren’t we opening up the conversation to subaltern hermeneutics and ethnic tensions? But there is Hegel to consider, who clearly stated that reality is always concrete, i.e., that “philosophy is put to shame if it does not reference reality” (quoted in Sarkanjac, 2009: 16), which implies that this Exodus cannot be forgotten, and with that “The Aegean Question” [1] cannot be closed (if it was ever truly “open/ed”?). Such a traumatic past, whose consequences make their home in the present, cannot be left to forgetfulness. Past traumas must be recognized/actualized, since this is a part of the process of forging a common (shared) European identity; thus, what can be done, officially speaking, is “to foster a European way of remembering the violence of the past, which can allow for such violent events – such as the Aegean Exodus – never to be forgotten” (Georgievska-Jakovleva; Георгиевска-Јаковлева, 2011: 375).

For Kolbe, “the question about a working paradigm, one overseeing the research process of the personal biographies of cultural and political historical figures in the Balkans and in Macedonia, is essential to the “Europeanization” of said Balkan biographies and conditions, since it would help surpass the provincially-minded divisions into “us” and “them”. (...) The condition of exile, the trauma of the exiled, however, speaks quite clearly of people’s rights to their origins and personal biographic continuity. Only a tolerant and de-politicized cultural and historical memory can demote the most hermetically sealed borders in Europe, i.e., those between the Balkan nations”, concludes Kolbe (1999: 204).

Hence, the unique power of literature to keep reminding us of the past, or as LaCapra says – “the past

comes to us through texts, analyzed bits of data – fragmented remnants, through all those bits of memory that need to inform us, as readers, that a certain event had in fact happened” (quoted in Kramarić, 2011: 140).

That is why Kica Kolbe (Кица Колбе), in her work *Aegeans*, offers a possible answer to the question – “can an ethno-national sentiment, one prone to conflicts, be eliminated by excluding a part of the nations’ collective memory or will it continue to breed conflicts, until the moment it gets integrated within the collective’s memory?” (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2011: 371); which at the same time stands as a possible answer to the ever-present dilemma with the uprooted, exiled expatriates, and that is, should they integrate within their new life (should they conform, should they acculturate), or are they to remain mere passive observers of their existence, having succumbed to the constant urge for their true “home”?

Kramarić tells us that if we truly wish to speak the truth about those topics that bring us tremendous pain, then “we need to understand that [such unearthing] is not possible by simply relying on strictly traditional narrative techniques. Since these same techniques, tools, are deeply embedded in the process of the same model of “cultural remembrance” that the official authorities have deemed legitimate / relevant / prescriptive” (2012: 143) And Kolbe is much aware of this, so in her interview for Deutsche Welle (DW), conducted by Zoran Jordanovski (Зоран Јордановски), she stated that *Aegeans* reads as a lengthy philosophical essay or a novel in/of essays, with a good deal of political capital (potential). This (sort of a) confession brings forth an untraditional narrative move next to a self-awareness that this work is one of

those the audience would experience as “a Pandora’s box of “memories”/testimonies belonging to those victims of crimes we are not allowed to speak of in public, while those same memories help us outlive the losses.” (Kramarić, 2012: 142-143) She is the first one who has quite openly and critically spoken about the situation of the refugees from Aegean Macedonia, i.e., Northern Greece, but also the first one who as early as 1999 (when the book came into print) pointed out to certain issues that have plagued the politics of the last few years in this new millennium. That is why in this interview for DW she is critical of all Macedonians who did not really “feel” the Aegean story until the moment they themselves were placed in similar circumstances, i.e., when the drama of the political negation of the Macedonian identity had taken hold, not that dissimilar from the way/s it were denied to the Macedonians in Greece after the Balkan Wars (1912-1913).

And for Macedonians, the question of sovereignty is far more delicate than the question of identity, language, name/naming. Sovereignty for small states is all about the presence of the Great Powers. In the words of Sarkanjac, “For Macedonians, a sovereignty of the highest order is represented by the US, the EU, the UN and NATO. Along those lines, the presence of organizations such as the UN, EU, IMF, the World Bank, and NATO in Macedonia is the presence of a kind of sovereignty that guarantees the political framework my own active citizenship.” (Sarkanjac, 2009: 37) While the Balkans, as an occult zone of instability, with Macedonia at its core, from the position of the Mind of the Great Powers has to be under constant supervision by the stabilizing forces that they are. Which is why, as Sarkanjac points out, it is quite

politically justifiable that “all of Eastern Europe sees the issues with sovereignty and the problems of the newly derived natural circumstances as separate. However, whilst Macedonia is concerned, all of these issues are seen through the prism of the question of identity. Macedonia, as far as this issue is concerned, is not that dissimilar to the countries of the so-called Third World, which are often seen as post-colonial” (2009: 39-40).

Hence, the strength of this moment’s feeling, namely that we are all, more or less, Aegeans rather than Macedonians. I say Aegeans, in the spirit of a catechesis, which “springs up when there is no befitting term for a condition/situation, hence a synonymous one is borrowed. This latter expression now changes its primary and true meaning so that it can reference that of the former expression, the one that lacks a true expression...” (Sarkanjac, 2009: 59). Or as Kolbe states it: “*Aegeans*. At first a name-stigma, while later on, either due to their hardships or a deep desire to be accepted, embraced as a moniker by the refugees themselves. But even in such circumstances, this term could not and it still cannot hide the repulsive, offensive and demeaning content it stands for, through till this day it remains ‘a go-to cliché’ for all who wish to express openly their position of privilege, one that is merely a product of their ‘being from these parts’. (1999: 9; my italics) This stigma transfers to their descendents too. “Even we, third generation born post-exile,” writes Kolbe “**are still called Aegeans**, since the name itself serves as a continuation, including those who denounce it, for the consciousness of the longevity of the trauma experienced by the refugees from Aegean Macedonia.” (1999: 13; my bold italics)

Today’s culture theorists differentiate between two kinds of nomadism. The former, characteristic of intellectual and psychological refuge, since the home is seen as a suffocating space, often prone to demotivational frustrations, hence this kind of nomadism favors the act of traveling, which seems to release, cleanse the spirit, but one that also favors the possibility of avoiding the need to claim any responsibility for one’s own life, and even for the lives of family, people, country. The latter, namely the migratory or diasporic kind of nomadism, is dictated by political and economic reasons, and thus conditioned by an unacceptable home environment, including the idea of home itself (Gjurchinova; Ѓурчинова, 2008: 231-237).

“Exile disrupts the continuity of biographies, of lifelines,” stresses Kica B. Kolbe in her *Aegeans*. Exile, though a vastly quoted and researched literary topic, is most strongly and deeply felt by those whose personal history has been marked by it. And grief itself becomes a means to get to know one’s own identity, to cleanse the soul, something Kolbe knows too well, for these strong feelings, as a descendent of Aegeans, have been hers to wrestle with since childhood. Exile forces us to be born once again. It “opens another space-time dimension that may be of great use when seeking the true value of each task. (...) Exile, that always accompanies a kind of a defeat, does not always imply painful experiences.” (Zanini, 2002: 67; my own translation). It can also be seen “as retribution, but at the same time as an act of freedom and responsibility” (Zanini, 2002: 68; my own translation). “If people do not wish to turn their post-exiled lives into the pathology of repression and enforced forgetting, they cannot live without memories, without memory. (...)

the suffering of real people, of real refugees, such as the ones in my own family, the suffering of my grandfather, of my father is neither fiction nor **cultural mythology**. It is the unsurpassable legacy of their permanent trauma..." (Kolbe, 1999: 12; my bold italics).

Rossi Braidotti, almost with ease, manages to theorize the term nomadism, both the intellectual and migratory kind. However, exile, unlike nomadism, "as Braidotti herself tells us, is not a "theoretical figurative representation", a "myth", a "political fiction". Henceforth, exile cannot be derived at through the use of metaphor, as Braidotti does with nomadism." (Smilevski; Смилевски, 2012: 94). The difference between a nomad, an exile and a migrant is reflected on the relationship between the subject and language; thus, the style with which the exile expresses himself/herself has been marked by a pronounced feeling of non-belonging, and in said context, his/her favorite tense is past perfect. Edward Said, whilst defining exile (the act and the man), deems it important to define the points of crucifixion for the exiled himself/herself, which are: nostalgia, sorrow, envy, bitterness. This, the closest possible definition rests with Paul Friedrich, who says that the exiled man is "the one who either willingly or forcefully has been translocated, physically or mentally or both, to other universes of discourse, be they cultural, linguistic, or most typically, political." (quoted in Smilevski, 2012: 95).

The historically instigated trauma of un-rootedness, which is characterized by "the pains of personal non-belonging or turning away for one's origins, or past, or more precisely, the amnesty disparity with one's home, has been often called (opposite to home-rootedness)

house-rootedness. With that, this latter category brings forth negative connotations, since the notion of home is not seen through the lens of the personal, the intimate, but rather as a case of claustrophobia, an unwanted pact made with the wrongfully planted tree inside. Here, we come into contact with the so-called repressive function of the home." (Sheleva; Шелева, 2005: 26). The work *Aegeans*, which speaks of enforced uprootedness, one that begets an enforced denouncement on the behalf of the subject of all that he/she represents, testifies to a fated un-rootedness, i.e., the un-rootedness of subjects – the Aegeans.

If we are to take a closer look at the categories connected with exile, those suggested by Paul Friedrich, Kica B. Kolbe's life in Langenfeld, Germany, could be deemed "voluntary exile", something that Goce Smilevski (Гоце Смилевски) recognizes in the living arrangements of Macedonian playwright Goran Stefanovski, in Canterbury, England, and which the young novelist himself [Smilevski] likens to the voluntary exile of James Joyce. In Joseph Škvorecký's novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*, a girl says that she's not an immigrant but rather an exile. When asked what the difference is, she says: "I cannot return home. Immigrants can." (quoted in Smilevski, 2012: 92). Along those lines, Kolbe's words ring true: "My father's yearning for his "home" grows ever more familiar, particularly when I try to imagine how I would feel, if someone, for whatever reasons, forbade me from ever being able to visit my birthplace." (1999: 19). "The image of exile suggests a rebellious fragmentation, but also a servile obedience to the process of acquiring a new home. The only way exiles are able to leave trauma behind is to not leave it behind at all, but to live it as a permanent state, to turn their waiting room into

a cheery ideology of life, to live the schizophrenia of exile as the norm of normalcy and to revere only one god: the suitcase." (Ugresic, 2008: 12) "The refugee... the one who hails from another geographical space, from another country, when entering his new surroundings, he immediately understands that he has not merely relocated from one space into another, but rather distanced himself from his hearth", stresses Kolbe (1999: 23), hence the painful understanding that from the moment of exile until his dying days, as a fugitive he must carry within him the lived-out storyline - "He must carry it within himself. It legitimizes his existence, whilst weighing him down. He resembles Sisyphus, with the heavy stone, overarching him with all of its preciousness, and the wealth of memories he only is privy to." (Kolbe, 1999: 23) "The alien or refugee is not a fragmentary figure," states Kolbe, although he "in the new surroundings, almost in passing, must become like a fragment, a man made of meshed-up parts" (1999: 24). "Although a fugitive, he is not an empty vessel, without words or commitments. He is not a representative of a single group of people, but rather a man with his own life-content", concludes Kolbe (1999: 30-31). This transition, this crossing of borders, changes the character of the person involved, says Piero Zanini, since simply put, once we cross a border, we become foreign, alien, different, immigrants, not just in the eyes of others but also in our own understanding of ourselves. "And by returning to the point of departure does not always mean that we can find all that we'd left behind." (Zanini, 2002: 21; my own translation).

In this context, Kolbe's *Aegeans* is a confessional narrative encompassing her father's and mother's

stories, memories, hers and those of her ancestors, a tale of identity loss, of living between two stories, an (auto)biographical narrative, something that is justified by the incorporated story of one Efrosina Grezhova Klee, the daughter-in-law of the Swiss painter Paul Klee, Aegean in origins. "If we believe that our relationship with our ancestors defines our relationship with our descendents, then we need to pay dual tribute to the forsaken links tying us to the world that we've always been a part of", writes Olivera Kjorveziroska (Оливера Корвезироска) in her popular text published in the magazine "Klub 360" (2007: 16). In fact, as Kjorveziroska tells us "...very few of us know that the famous painter Paul Klee had a "family" connection to Macedonia. Namely, that he regularly ate and adored Macedonian lokum [2] and halvah which his daughter-in-law, married to his son Felix, Efrosina Grezhova Klee, would bring from him from "the far Southeast" (2007: 16). In her text, Kjorveziroska offers a rather bold but nonetheless possible suggestion. Namely, in the famous Klee painting titled "Ad parnassum", dated 1932, she traces the "presence" of Efrosina herself, through "the author's attempt, through "the visible" (house - a fortified piece of endless sky, sun and a door with an unexpected line posed as a riddle), to shed light on the invisible) though, essence, being, and most importantly, the presence of Froska Grezhova). (...) Imagine", Kjorveziroska tells us further, "that in the creation of this famous painting, Froska's "eyes" took part, lodged behind the artist's back." (2007: 17).

The personal tale, the one that loses those that have lived it into existence, only at a first glance, Smilevski tells us, "confirms Braidotti's claims about the exile as a subject turned towards the past, which in fact

actualizes Said's thesis on the exile as a being that lives out in parallel two storylines, thus conjoining them into one, which in turn helps activate our consciousness about the plurality of culture." (2012: 96). All of this is reflected in a confession Kolbe makes towards the end of her confessional tale, where she states the following: "for a long time I used to believe that the "Aegean Question" was only a problem my own family faced, but not my own, since as an emancipated European woman I am free of "banal" problems, such as yearning for one's birthplace. Efrosina's story convinced me that this trauma is experienced everywhere, perhaps quite ardently in the lives of "Europe's aliens" (1999: 208). On the other hand, Efrosina's tale, entwined with Kolbe's parents' stories, affirms Sarkanjac's claim, whilst paraphrasing Hegel, "that each is born to his own people and belongs to the spirit of that same people. And, as such, through religion, science, arts, fate, existence, and not a people's natural predisposition or certainty, gets his character molded." (2009: 101-102)

This text, in turn, came to be due to my own search for my personal and Macedonian Sittlichkeit [the concept of "ethical life"], one of those Hegelian terms that escapes translation, which I chanced upon when reading Sarkanjac's text (2009: 116). It unites the objectivity of abstract law and the subjectivity of morality, all with the intent of concretizing freedom. I needed such a quest so as to strengthen my own sense of belonging and liberal activity, and not merely theorize the various discourses and then choose the one I find most appealing. Hence, this text has allowed me to afford my father the opportunity to encircle his own journey, which is mine as well. Since leaving "home" implies a separation, a severance of bonds, the

abandonment of one condition for the next, which in turn becomes a kind of a synonym for leaving home, then the process of going back implies a return to the place of original departure, once again conquering a forsaken and lost place, thus encircling the journey itself. Instead of a post scriptum: a real journey back to the place of my father's and his family's departure.

Translated by  
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#### ENDNOTES

- [1] 1948 saw a displacement/dislocation of the Macedonian population in northern Greece, after the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) lost the war effort. Namely, this is a patch of history that speaks of a brutal enforced removal of the Macedonian ethnicity from their home territory in Greece, as none were allowed information on the whereabouts of their dislocation or whether they could return home ever again (they could not). What is more, during the Civil War, Macedonian Aegeans also suffered another unspeakable loss: 28.000 children between the ages of 2 and 14 were forever uprooted from their homeland, never to return again. This is sample endnote formatting.
- [2] Macedonian "lokum" is synonymous with Balkan, i.e., Turkish lokum. Otherwise called a turkish delight, lokum is the name for a family of confections based on a gel of starch and sugar. Premium varieties consist largely of chopped dates, pistachios and hazelnuts or walnuts bound by the gel; traditional varieties are mostly gel, generally flavored with rosewater, mastic, Bergamot orange or lemon.

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