

Another Way to Reunite Village Families

By Victor Bivell

When you start something it can lead to unexpected outcomes and that is what happened to me when I did the family trees of my four grandparents. Along the way I collected the names, photographs and other information on about 427 deceased people from our village and I have now put these online.

The great majority of these fellow villagers were born between the 1860s and 1950s. Many are together for the first time since they left the village. In fact there are more villagers together online than now live in our village.

Our village is Neret in south west Macedonia, and which since 1912 has been part of north west Greece. My father once told me it had about 3,000 people but nowadays it has about 250. Like most Macedonian villages in Greece it experienced mass migration and those who left and their descendants are now buried in faraway cemeteries in Australia, North America and numerous European countries.

I have called the collection Neret Families as the photographs are grouped by extended families. The photographs are of headstones and portraits. Where I only have certificates and death and cemetery notices I have put these online in their stead.

It can be quite an experience to go through so many photographs of close and distant relatives and their friends, to see people where I had previously only heard their names, to see people I never knew had existed, to see that so many people in our village were closely or distantly related or connected by marriage and lifelong friendships, to wonder what life was like in such a closely knit community where everyone knew everyone, and to see and feel how history tore that community apart and sent it around the world.

There is also a very practical side to the collection.

Putting the photographs together is a way to remember these people, to honor them, and to make available photographs and information about them to distant family and friends.

Like me, many people will see photos of relatives and their gravestones for the first time, including those who lived in faraway countries.

As well as personal and emotional value, this can help to reconnect families and strengthen family connections. The initial over 300 photos in Neret Families are grouped under 88 family names. I know our village had well over 133 family names so there is plenty of scope to add more names and grow the collection.

At its launch, Neret Families has the names of about 732 people. It has photos of or information about 427 Neretsi including spouses from other villages. In addition, there is a monument with the names of 305 people who died in wars in the first half of the 20th century. These 305 people are from 15 villages that comprise Neret and nearby villages.

The images and information can be useful for those doing family trees – and this is particularly so for Macedonians as documents are often non-existent, have been lost or destroyed, are in distant lands, or are in a foreign language.

An interesting aspect of putting Neret Families together is that I have found there are distinct styles of headstones in different countries.

The Australian headstones have the most information. Along with the name, age, birth and death dates, and spouse, they typically also include a photograph, where they were born – which makes finding our village people easy – the names of children and grandchildren, and a message of love and remembrance.

There is much less information on the headstones in Greece and the United States, although at this stage my samples are small. So far, in the United States, these typically only have the name, photo, spouse, and the birth and death dates; while in Greece they typically only have the name, photo, age and death date.

The majority of Australian headstones are written in the English alphabet but the words may be Macedonian or English. Only a small number are written in Greek. The names are usually their Macedonian names with some using their English or Greek equivalent.

For place of birth, the great majority use the Macedonian name of the village, Neret, and only some have the Greek name Polipotamo. A mixture of language names is not unusual, for example, Macedonian words for the text with the Greek version of the family name and the Macedonian name for the village.

This contrasts with the headstones in the village, where everything is in Greek and there are only Greek versions of all names.

In the United States, the headstones are in English but the names can be Macedonian or a mixture, for example an American first name and a Macedonian family name.

There is room for much more research into Macedonian headstones around the world, how and why these differ in style, and what they can tell us about Macedonian migration. Perhaps more important is what they can tell the families and friends about their loved ones.

Macedonians have been migrating around the world for a long time and particularly so in the past 120 years. From Australia, Neret Families has identified people buried in Melbourne, Perth, Manjimup, and Sydney. From the United States it has people buried in Fort Wayne and Ohio. From Europe it has people in Macedonia and Romania as well as the village. But I know there are Neretsi buried in many more countries, and that each has a story.

Macedonian headstones have been an under-utilized resource for passing on family information and connecting distant families and villagers. The internet has changed that and given those who have passed on a global voice.

The collection, Neret Families, is here.

<http://www.pollitecon.com/html/essays/Neret-Families.htm>

If you have photographs of people from Neret that you would like to add to the collection, please contact me at info @ pollitecon.com.

I encourage other Macedonians to develop similar collections about their villages, and to put them online.

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