

# My Adventures in Darkest Europe

*By Victor Bivell*

Many citizens of Western countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia believe that their country has a good relationship with Greece, yet Greece regularly denies US, Canadian and Australian citizens entry into its borders, and has done so for many years. The people who are denied entry are those who originate from northern Greece but are of ethnic Macedonian, not ethnic Greek, ancestry. Thus the basis for the discrimination is race.



This practice is common. Over the past 50 years there have been thousands of incidents where people of ethnic Macedonian background have been denied entry into Greece. This Greek Government policy is one which most people, as they find out about it, invariably find abhorrent, and it has rightly been criticized over many years by all of the world's major human rights organizations.

Although political circles in the USA, Canada, Australia and other countries with expatriate Macedonians from northern Greece know about this practice, no government has been prepared to take up the cause. The Australian Government, for example, is well aware of the practice, but does nothing about it, neither in terms of putting pressure on Greece to change its policy, nor to assist affected individuals.

The basis for Greece's behaviour is its 1912 invasion of half of the territory of Ottoman Macedonia during the First Balkan War and its later annexation of this territory, which at the time was overwhelmingly peopled by people of non-Greek ethnicity - including Macedonians, Turks, Bulgarians, Albanians, Vlachs, Jews, and many others.

Greece has "pacified" this multi-ethnic territory through a long term Hellenization program that has included massive population exchanges with Turkey and Bulgaria, and policies of economic underdevelopment combined with ruthless political suppression that have seen many tens of thousands of the local inhabitants migrate to the USA, Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

The Greek Civil War in 1945-49 and the associated Macedonian Freedom War in Aegean Macedonia (northern Greece), where many local Macedonians gave their support to autonomy or independence from Greece, saw many more local Macedonians leave their homeland, some as political refugees, some in the aftermath as economic refugees.

Many of these Macedonians have never been allowed to return, even over half a century later. Over this entire period the Greek government has consistently and assiduously practised a policy that has denied many Macedonians the right to return to their birthplaces, even for short family and social visits.

The Greek Government has excluded three types of ethnic Macedonians: refugees from the Greek Civil War including over twenty thousand children who were evacuated for safety reasons, human rights activists who are of Macedonian background and have campaigned for human rights for the remaining ethnic Macedonians in northern Greece, and Macedonians who in their passports have their place of birth such as their village under its Macedonian name instead of the newer Greek name.

Many of these Macedonians, particularly in the first two categories, have been placed on a "black list". The existence of this "black list" has been well known for decades, and I had cause to wonder if I too was on the list when my wife and I planned to visit northern Greece as part of our honeymoon in October 1996.

Both my parents, my grandparents and all of my forebears as far as I am aware were from the village of Neret. After the Greek invasion and annexation, the village was given the Greek name of Polipotamos. My

parents left their village for Australia in 1955 and in due course became Australian citizens. They spent the rest of their lives in Australia and never returned to their village, even for a holiday. My wife and I planned to spend two or three nights in Greece and to visit the village, which is less than 20 kilometres from the border with the Republic of Macedonia.

I had previously visited the village for a day in 1988. But at that time I still had a Greek surname and was not politically active. By 1996 I had published three books in English on human rights in northern Greece - What Europe Has Forgotten: The Struggle of the Aegean Macedonians; The Rising Sun in the Balkans: The Republic of Macedonia; and Macedonian Agenda. My publishing business, Pollitecon Publications, was also the Australian agent for the 1994 Human Rights Watch report Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece.

At the time I was well aware that there was a possibility that I was on the "Greek Black List" and so I took several precautions to minimize the possibility of arousing Greek hostility at the border.

For example, I knew through my human rights work that any literature or symbol related to "Macedonia" or to the "Republic of Macedonia" would attract the attention of the Greek border guards and would probably be confiscated or damaged. In many instances such literature had been reason enough for the border officials to deny the bearer entry into Greece.

I had brought to Europe examples of my three books plus a fourth, a translation into English of the novel Black Seed, which at the time was newly printed but not yet released. I left all these books in Bitola, the last town before the Greek-Macedonian border, with the sister-in-law of a fellow Australian human rights campaigner. I will never forget our meeting that morning where we had coffee and I handed over all the copies of my books for safe keeping. I had come half way around the world, from Sydney to London, Paris, Rome, and Skopje, but now, to enter Greece, the so called "cradle of Western civilization", I had to leave my books at the gate. I had a sense that I was leaving enlightened Europe behind and was truly about to enter an intellectually and morally dark country.

Soon after on that morning, October 24, 1996, my wife and I arrived at the Greek border. We pulled up at the border crossing in our rented car and entered the building. We were the only people there at that time except for the Greek officials. The official looked at our passports and after some anxious moments on my part he finally motioned for us to move onto the baggage inspection area a few metres further along the counter. However, no one was in attendance there and after we had been waiting for about a minute the official, who looked as if he had been inputting our data into his computer, suddenly called out "Australie" and motioned for us to come back.

Another official arrived, a woman, and the first official began asking me a number of questions about myself, my parents and my grandparents.

It transpired that the computer held quite a few personal details about me such as my parents' names and where they had lived in Greece. I found this out because the border guard who spoke English asked me the names of my father and mother, the names of my father's mother and father, my father's place of birth, the Greek surname under which he left Greece, and my parent's village. He did this, he said, to cross check that I was the same person on the computer list.

When they specifically asked "Where was your father born?", I answered "Florina", the Greek name for the Macedonian town of Lerin which is the town closest to my parents' village. At that point the eyes of the two officials met, as if to say "He is one of them (a local Macedonian)".

The man said my details, such as date and place of birth, matched the description of someone on his computer. This person also had a very similar name to me. The name he gave was my Greek surname - the name the Greek Government gave our family when they replaced Macedonian surnames with Greek surnames.

I was born in Australia, and had an Australian passport with my new Australianized name, having changed my surname from the Greek in 1992, yet the computer was able to make a match.

He also asked if I had tried to enter Greece in 1995, which I had not, but it transpired that that could have been the date when the entry onto the list was made.

My wife and I were then asked to step into the back office. Inside the room there were two more officials. I took one to be the manager of the checkpoint and the other to be a secret service agent or detective type. There was further questioning - in English as I speak no Greek - about my parents and grandparents, and why I wanted to enter Greece.

I was honest in all my answers, explaining that my wife and I were on our honeymoon and wanted to visit my parents' village for just two or three days and would then leave Greece.

However, they said that my name was on a list and I could not enter Greece. My wife could enter, but not me. I was forbidden. I asked why many times, but they would give no reason. The border officials said I was on the list and therefore they could not allow me to enter.

As I had done nothing wrong, and had given them total cooperation and truthful answers to all their questions, I asked that they fax to Athens to check whether there had been a mistake and whether I could enter Greece. They said they would.

Meanwhile they stamped my passport with the Greek word "AKYPON" which translates into "forbidden" or from my point of view "banished".

My wife and I had to turn back, deeply disappointed that at this most important time in our lives we could not visit the village where my grandparents and parents grew up and the only place on Earth where any of my forebears are known to have lived.

On our way back, the Macedonian official at the Macedonian checkpoint could sense my state of mind and when I told him that I was not allowed to enter Greece he turned and spent some long moments staring towards the Greek border. Barely an hour after leaving my books behind,

I was back at my friend's sister-in-law's place to pick them up.



*Victor Bivell's passport as stamped by the Greek border official on 24 October 1996.*

My wife and I returned to the Greek border post the next morning but the officials confirmed that they had been in contact with Athens and that I was forbidden to enter Greece.

The previous evening I had rung an uncle in Lerin and he and his wife met us at the border coffee shop and we had coffee and a long chat. My uncle spoke to one of the Greek officials, who came over and spoke to me in Macedonian. He knew that I had changed my "Greek" surname, and also that I had been involved in a Macedonian human rights organization in Australia, leading me to believe that such information about me may be on file in Athens. Although he was friendly, he could not assist me.

And so it transpired that the closest I got to the village was a week later on the plane from Rome to Sydney, which by coincidence or luck flew over northern Greece and I could for some minutes look down on my ancestral homeland and wonder which dot was our village.

Back in Australia, I made an effort to find out the reason. I faxed a letter to the US Embassy in Athens, but received no response. I telephoned the Greek Ambassador in Australia, but received only a lecture on why "Macedonia is Greek". I telephoned a head official of the European Union mission in Australia but he was pompous and did not want to hear about my issue. I wrote to the human rights organization Greek Helsinki Monitor in Greece and while they were sympathetic they said they could not assist

and suggested I contact the Australian government. I had already contacted the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, both by letter and telephone, and in the end received a bureaucratic form letter saying that it was up to Greece who they let into the country and that I may be again denied entry in the future. The response was very unhelpful and disappointing. A couple of years later I tried again, this time writing to the Australian prime minister, John Howard, but was given the same bureaucratic brush-off.

The only official recognition of my experience came through a friend in Perth who unknown to me notified the Helsinki Watch office in Macedonia. This led to an official acknowledgement in the 1997 Annual Report On Greece by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. This reads:

"On 24 October 1996, Victor Bivell, an Australian citizen, was denied entry to Greece. He and his wife were on their honeymoon and wanted to visit the village of Victor Bivell's parents for a few days. Bivell is the manager of Pollitecon Publications (Australia) which has published or distributed books about the Macedonian minority in Greece."

With no official explanation for why I was not allowed in, I can only speculate about the reason and try to draw inferences from minimal data. I believe I was not allowed into Greece for one or more of several reasons: the books I have published that deal with the lack of human rights for Macedonians in northern Greece, my involvement with the Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia which made numerous human rights submissions to the Australian Government, that I was a spokesperson for the Macedonian community in Australia in 1994 when recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by the Australian Government led to the arson of a number of Macedonian churches and other property in Australia. I also believe there may be a connection with my publication of the book *The Rising Sun in The Balkans: The Republic of Macedonia*, which was authored by the Turkish International Affairs Agency. The publication of this book in May 1995 coincides with one of the dates mentioned by the border official which is possibly the date my name was put on the list. And over the years I have noted especial sensitivity by some Greeks to this

book based on its Turkish authorship.

Another observation. I believe that my name was passed onto the authorities in Greece from someone in Australia, as the name on the computer list was my Greek surname, not my Macedonian name, nor my Australianized name that I had been using for several years up until then and under which I had undertaken all my human rights and publishing activities.

I may never know who gave my name to the Greek authorities in Athens, nor the reason my name was put on the list. This is because Greece practises its policies against Macedonians in secret. It publishes no information and gives the victims no right to freedom of information or other avenue for redress. A second reason is because the European Union and the governments of the United States, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy and other countries in Europe allow Greece - decade after decade - to practise these policies.

Keeping locals away from their homeland is a form of ethnic cleansing, and in my understanding of ethics, such inaction makes these countries and these governments de facto accomplices to these policies. This is made worse because some of these countries are signatories to the treaties that recognized Greece's annexation of 51 per cent of the territory of Ottoman Macedonia; they are among the countries that "gave" half of Macedonia to Greece, or more precisely allowed it to keep its military spoils. There are numerous international treaties that helped form the shape of northern Greece such as the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest, the 1920 Treaty of Sevres and the Protocol Concerning the Protection of Minorities in Greece, and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. But a condition of Greece keeping its war spoils was that Greece respect its ethnic minorities - which it has never done.

Australia was one of the signatory countries to the Treaty of Sevres and the Protocol on the Protection of Minorities that oblige Greece to protect the interests of inhabitants "who differ from the majority of the population in race, language or religion". Australia's hand that signed the paper was



former Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher. Obviously Australia's signature, and the signature of a man who had been Australian Prime Minister three times, like the treaties themselves, are worth, well, what is a polite word for nothing? That is also how much the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs does to meet these treaty obligations.

As for the European Union, by coincidence before leaving for Europe on that trip I read a report that the EU was providing funds to Greece and that some of that money would be used for computers to improve border security. So it could be that the EU unwittingly funded the computers that were and still are used for ethnic cleansing.

Any one of the reasons I mentioned above could have been sufficient to have my name put on the banished list. For example, my books highlight the fact that Greece does not have, and has never had, a policy of multiculturalism. That since Greece annexed half of the Ottoman province of Macedonia, its policies for dealing with its newly acquired ethnic minorities, including the Macedonians, have been denationalization, assimilation and ethnic cleansing, and that these policies are still practised today to the extent that Greece denies the very existence of the Macedonians, and restricts the expression of their culture. In Greece today the Macedonian Orthodox Church cannot operate freely, there are no Macedonian language schools, no Macedonian language newspapers, no Macedonian television programs, nor even a Home of Macedonian Culture despite a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that it allow such a Home. Macedonians who agitate for these essential human rights are discriminated against and persecuted, as documented by the US State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and many other organizations.

And if any of the hundreds of thousands of Macedonian migrants who fled Greece for the safety for the wider world, or their children, show signs of Macedonian consciousness instead of Greek consciousness, or become active for human rights - as I have done with my books - these are put on "the list" and denied entry to their place of origin. It is estimated that at least several thousand Macedonian Australians have been banished in this

way; alongside an unknown number of Macedonian Canadians and Macedonian Americans, among others.

Having experienced this policy, I now see clearly its brutal nature. As I sat in the back room of the border guards' office, the realization sank in that I would not see the village I had waited for years to see. I would not visit our few remaining relatives, I would not see our elderly relatives for a last time, I would not walk down the same streets where my parents and grandparents had played as children, nor see the homes where mum and dad lived before and after their marriage.

I felt that there was now a part of my self, of my history, even of my own heart, that I could not reach. In those moments, as I sat in the back office with these new feelings, I realized what it can mean and what it can feel like to be a victim of ethnic cleansing.

Yet the average person, in the popular mind, in the popular understanding, has no real grasp of what ethnic cleansing 'Greek style' really is. Since 1913, the Greek government has done everything it could to depopulate the Macedonians and repopulate the region with Greeks. But forcing or encouraging the local population to emigrate is only the first stage of ethnic cleansing. The next stage is to stop them from returning. And, if necessary, the third stage is to stop their children from returning. Unfortunately the English language does not have a word for this 'later stage ethnic cleansing', this 'long term ethnic cleansing', this 'multi-generational ethnic cleansing', but I have seen it and felt it and it is this that has denied me access to my parents' village, my parents' ancestral homes, and my roots as a human being.

In my life this Greek government policy is one of the closest things I have encountered to evil.

No person or country has a right to deny a human being these things. Faced with such a reality, I have responded by increasing my commitment to fight this inhumane policy until it is changed. On returning to Australia in late 1996 I immediately launched my newest human rights book, the first

English language translation of the Macedonian novel Black Seed, which is set on one of the island prison camps of the 1940s where the Greek fascist government tortured Macedonians, communists and other undesirables.

In early 1997 I set up the first web site for my publishing business which immediately gave the books and the message a global reach. The web site continues to grow.

Since Black Seed I have published another nine human rights books, bringing the total to thirteen. Among them is A Girl From Neret, which I believe could be the first book published about our village. It was authored by a Perth mother-daughter team. The mother is a Macedonian child refugee from our village who was a contemporary of my parents.

As I was born in Australia I did not want to return permanently to Greece. My simple desire was to visit my parents' village for a few days. If I cannot have that, if I cannot do such a simple, normal everyday human thing, then I am more determined than ever to fight this cause until the Greek Government stops practising these brutal and dehumanizing policies, recognizes its ethnic minorities and respects their rights as people.

To achieve this outcome it is important that those countries that signed human rights treaties with Greece ensure that Greece fulfils its obligations, and that so called "friends" of Greece such as the governments of Europe, USA, Canada and Australia exert pressure on the Greek Government to change its policies. Until now these countries have been part of the problem. With friends like these, Greece, in its 180-odd years since independence, has become a human rights basket case - a country practising a form of social totalitarianism where the dominant force is not a dictator but the dual ideologies of an ultra-nationalistic Hellenism and an ultra-nationalistic form of Greek Orthodoxy. This must change.

Greece needs true friends, not accomplices. Ironically, and although it does not know it yet, Greece's most worthwhile friend may yet prove to be Macedonia, because when the Macedonians finish with Greece, Greece

will have been transformed - kicking and screaming all the way - from a morally and intellectually backward nineteenth century nationalist state into a modern, open and multicultural society that respects all of its ethnic and religious minorities.

*Victor Bivell was born in Australia of Macedonian background. He is a journalist and editor and the publisher of 13 books on the human rights situation of Macedonians in northern Greece. See [www.pollitecon.com](http://www.pollitecon.com).*

*This article was published in MHR Review, September 2014*

*Source: [www.pollitecon.com](http://www.pollitecon.com)*

*© Copyright 2014*