

# Zorba the Greek Unmasked

## Chorba the Macedonian

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To make a good soup you have to collect the ingredients and cook it very slowly.

My Dedo Naumche was born in Macedonia way back about 1870. I never met him but I've heard lots about him. Sometimes I think about him. Apparently he really liked soup and I imagine that he enjoyed it ever since he was a child. He enjoyed soup as an experience and everything that went into making and eating it. He enjoyed the whole process. He loved having food in the house. He enjoyed the aroma of the dish as it bubbled and simmered slowly in the big pot that hung on a rack in the fireplace. And just as much, he loved that first taste, every mouthful and particularly the last spoonful.

In my mind's eye, I can see him when he had finished his soup that he had eaten with home made bread. I see him brushing aside his long moustache to either side of his face with the back of his hand and hear his sigh of satisfaction. I am sure that at moments like that he was a contented man who knew two essential things: who he was and what he liked.

The soup he liked best was a "CHORBA". It is sometimes made using a cow's belly or tripe. It's a robust lively soup, a soup that sings in the mouth, that makes the taste buds come alive and dance up and down. It is a soup tasty beyond belief and fully satisfying. Chorba is a man's soup, and women love it. Who wouldn't? It gives such life-giving energy to everyone.

It's easy enough to make: Wash the tripe and boil it then simmer it with salt, garlic and black pepper; add a cup of hot broth spoonful by spoonful into a bowl of two beaten eggs, some lemon juice and do this slowly so the mix doesn't curdle; add a cup of light cream into the mix and then pour the whole thing back into the pot stirring all the while. Of course, while the tripe is simmering you can add whatever vegetables you wish. To dress it up sprinkle the top with whatever happens to be around like some chopped green onions or leeks, some chives or some parsley. Voila! There you have it, "CHORBA".

Other countries might have different names for it. Certainly Chorba does not have an international reputation. But if it were advertised widely enough, given some

publicity, show famous movie stars eating it in a movie, give it an eye catching name, why it could become as famous as anything. It could become as famous as "Zorba The Greek" and known the world over. It might even become popular. But it would still be Chorba as we know it.

But enough about soup. Let's change the subject.

## **Changing Names**

People sometimes change their names, especially when their original names are not socially or politically acceptable. There was a lot of name, changing in our part of the world. Common Macedonian names were transformed slightly so that they would appear to sound and look more Greek, or more Serbian or more Bulgarian. It all depended on which one of the surrounding nations had occupied which part of Macedonia after 1913. So totally did the neighbours divide up Macedonia, that there was no Macedonia left. Although Macedonia appeared on maps for thousands of years it very suddenly vanished. But it continued to exist in history, in people's minds and in people's hearts. In the long run these are the most important places.

The Macedonian people were still there, those who hadn't emigrated and spread throughout the world. But the Macedonians who remained were fearful, and with good reason, to call themselves Macedonians or to use their historic names.

The skies were to darken even further for the Macedonians in Greece. As most Macedonians know and as the world is slowly learning, in and around 1928 the Greek government began to change all Macedonian village names to Greek names. And they did that for the mountain ranges and for the rivers. Thousands of years of history were wiped out with a pen for the government wanted the territory to 'look' like Greece. For example, the village where my grandfather Naumche was born, Oshchima, probably meaning 'there is still more' was changed to Trigona, Greek for 'Three Corners'. It was a new name plucked out of the air! Not very imaginative either, but the significance of the change was enormous.

Seeing which way the political boundaries had shifted, watching how historic place names were being changed all around them, seeing how the Greek language was being pushed throughout the schools, the people realized quickly enough that their whole way of life at the dominant political level had shifted and changed. Many frightened people for honest reasons of survival did a quick make-up job on their own names as well.

Abracadabra! Greeks seemed to rise up everywhere where only Macedonians had lived for many, many centuries. Many people fled, those who could, to surrounding countries, and to Canada, the U.S.A. and to Australia and elsewhere. But those who could not escape began TO DISGUISE THEMSELVES for protection from the government under new, Greek-sounding names.

Survival, survival, stoic survival is the strength of peasants. Not only survival against the chance devastations of weather, storms, floods, but survival in the face of being shot dead by the politicians and their armies.

The problem for the people that remained is easy enough to understand and to accept. They were given no real choice. Change your name or suffer the consequences. The choice was really change your name or die! One can almost hear the old folk speaking among themselves: "What if we change our names, change the sound a little, change one or two letters on a piece of paper? What does it matter if they will only let us live? There is nothing to it! What's in a name? It is food we need in our bellies, food in our children's bellies, food for our cattle and animals. It doesn't matter what name you call it, serve up the, "Chorba"! We can at least get our tongues around that, get some food into our bellies so that our families can live. We'll manage somehow to get our tongues around the new language, the new names later. SURVIVE FIRST!"

I doubt if any one of them ever forgot their real historic family names. How could they? The reality was that the Greeks had captured the land, the people, the stage on which life is played. The children were taught to play in Greek, to speak in Greek, to read in Greek. Like in classic Greek theatre, a mask had to be worn.

And the Greek government could say, "See they have Greek Masks, they speak Greek, there are no Macedonians here". Sadly, oh so sadly, the Greek Orthodox Church also played a role like an attendant lord, sacrificing and serving up one of the oldest Christian people to political masters.

### **The Drama Continues**

If you have not already met with him, allow me to introduce a real life historic character on to the stage. George Zorba. He is the real person on whom the novel and movie, "Zorba The Greek" is based. This is where the soup thickens, and the plot unfurls.

He was born in 1865, in a Macedonian village (now called Kolindros) about 25 miles from Salonika. Curiously, Dedo Naumche was born a few years later only

about 80 miles to the northwest as the stork flies from where Zorba was born. That whole area was under the occupation of the Turks until 1912. Life for poor Macedonian peasants was probably not too much different from one small village to the next. Clearly Zorba was not born a Greek citizen. And from his name it is fairly certain that he was not a Turk. What was he?

In a fascinating article, "Searching for the Real Zorba" written by Alan Linn and published in the Canadian MD magazine, the author doesn't ask or answer the question of Zorba's ethnic identity. The article gives an historic account of the real Zorba; how Zorba's father quarrelled with a Turk and fled his village, travelled south into Greece taking his family with him where George Zorba grew up; how his mother died when he was 19 years old; how his father retired to a monastery at Mt. Athos; and how Zorba, penniless, began to make his way back to his father's village. From these facts it looks as though he wanted to go back to where he was born, where his roots were, where he must have felt he belonged, and where perhaps some relatives still survived.

We are told that he worked as a herdsman, tending sheep and goats, as a woodcutter, as a digger in a mine, as a pedlar, a blacksmith, a labourer, a smuggler, beggar and musician. He was a talented survivor by all accounts.

In 1912 he "joined the fighting". But from the article we do not learn who he was fighting with, against whom, or where. One biographer apparently describes him as burning and pillaging "Bulgarian Villages." Where? Where were these "Bulgarian Villages"? In Bulgaria? This was a war against the Turks wasn't it? What was going on?

If we look to the novel we learn that Zorba fought in the mountains of Macedonia with Pavlos Melas, a Greek Officer, who distinguished himself in the war against the Bulgarian 'Comitadjic' or guerilla fighters. In the novel Zorba describes how he cut the throat of a priest, a Bulgarian comitadji. From this information taken by itself one might prematurely conclude that Zorba had become politically Greek. But follow, the story further to see what Zorba does. A few days later, Zorba says he encountered five little children dressed in black, barefoot, begging, three girls and two boys, the oldest ten years old and the youngest still a baby. On learning that it was the children's father that he had killed, he says tears came to his eyes, and "the earth spun like a millstone." He took his purse and gave the children all the Turkish money and gold he had and all his supplies, and then he tore up the Saint Sophia medal he had embroidered with the hairs of his own head and threw it away and ran. He says he rescued himself from the ideas of country, the Church, and money, all at once. He said "he used to" think of men as Greeks, or Bulgars or Turks and burned

villages, cut throats, robbed and raped women, but he calls himself "a swine" for having done so. He says to himself, "To hell with you right away, you ass." He denounces and gives up all ideas of country, of nationalism and says, "...But I am delivered from all that. God be praised! it's finished for me!" As indeed, in his day, was Macedonia finished.

Zorba was ashamed and hated himself for the part he had taken in the war, and the killings. One wonders, had the real George Zorba become a pacifist? Had he reverted to becoming a peasant without a country and hating the very idea of country because of what had happened to him? Had he become apolitical as well?

From that part of the book what seems to remain is a deep sorrow and compassion for his fellow man regardless of their nationality.

Let us return here to the historic facts of George Zorba's life. After fighting against the Turks in the war of 1912, he retreated to the monastery at Mt. Athos like his father before him but he could not stand the place. Shortly thereafter he met the author-poet Nikos Kazantzakis and together they planned their adventure to develop a mine. This project was quite simply a hoax, a sham to avoid conscription into the Greek army in the war of 1914-1918 as apparently mineworkers were exempted from military service. The mine had a timely collapse in 1918 when the war ended.

Apparently George Zorba and Kazantzakis next met on a trip to Russia that Kazantzakis had organized to "rescue Greeks fleeing Bolshevism". That too sounds very strange. The two men stayed in a hotel housing refugee dancing girls and Zorba returned back to Greece with three beautiful Russian women. None of that sounds as if he rescued political dissenters or heavyweights.

George Zorba drifted north into what is now Yugoslavia and settled in a village a few miles from Skopje. For almost the last twenty years of his life the historic George Zorba lived in the centre of the Macedonian countryside until he died at about the age of 77 in 1942.

A magnificent soup can move the taste buds in all kinds of directions and an open mind can move around just as easily. Why, as a middle-aged man in his late 50's, would Zorba move north into the Macedonian heartland? If he were Greek, why wouldn't he have moved south and lived anywhere in Greece? Having deserted the Greek cause in 1912 in the war against the Turks, was he afraid for his life? Was he choosing to spend his last years among a strange people and culture, or was he going to live with the people he knew, with the people with whom he felt closest? Would

he speak Greek in a Macedonian village, or would he speak Macedonian? Was he a Greek among Macedonians, or was he... a MACEDONIAN?

### **Changing the Name of the Novel**

The book was written by Kazantzakis and published in Greek in 1946 during the civil war between Macedonians and Greeks. The original title was "The Life and Times of Alexe Zormpa". Zormpa? How peculiar? But you did notice that the book originally was not called "Zorba The Greek".

When the book was first translated into English in 1952 the title of the book was changed to "Zorba The Greek." Why? And it was under the new name that the movie was made in 1964 that further helped to make the character of Zorba world famous. It is because of the new English title of the book and the movie that the whole world has been led astray as to the real ethnic and national identity of the legendary character. The world has come to think of Zorba as Greek, but is he?

### **A Close Reading of the Novel: Great Truths Revealed**

There is no better evidence as to the ethnic and national identity of Zorba than the text of Kazantzakis' book itself.

When the main character in the book first meets Kazantzakis, but before he reveals his name he offers to work for the author as a cook. He says, "I can make soups you've never heard of, or thought of." That is Kazantzakis dropping the first clue about the name, Zorba as Chorba in Macedonian.

When asked his name the character replies as follows: "Alexis Zorba. Sometimes they call me Baker's Shovel because I'm so lanky and my head is flattened like a griddlecake. Or else I'm called Passa Tempo because there was a time when I hawked roast pumpkin seeds. They call me Mildew too, because wherever I go, they say I get up to my tricks. Everything goes to the dogs. I have other nicknames as well, but we'll leave them for another time..."

Look now! As soon as we meet Zorba we find out he had many names! What is truly fascinating is how the nicknames he gives show a progression of decay, from a name associated with baking fresh bread, then the passing of time, and then mildew when bread turns bad and can't be eaten. What kind of tricks is Kazantzakis talking about? Is it tricks with names? Is that a clue from Kazantzakis to look out for word tricks?

Kazantzakis provides a further clue in the book when he writes further on, "Everything in this world has a hidden meaning ... men, animals, trees, stars ... (and notice that last one) ... it is only years later, too late, that you understand." Kazantzakis tells us that there are hidden meanings and to look further.

Let's look closer. The author has Zorba describe Macedonia. Now notice that in another separate paragraph he has Zorba speak about Greece, Bulgaria and Constantinople. Why does he place these in separate paragraphs you might wonder? Kazantzakis was a master writer, a master craftsman, and perhaps the greatest writer that Greece has produced in this century. It is not simply chance that he makes that separation.

Then there is the greatest revelation about Zorba. In the book, Zorba, talking about himself says,

"O wonderful Slav, may you live a thousand years!"

Are Greeks Slavs? Do they ever speak of themselves as being Slavs? Macedonians are Slavs, in an ethnic sense and a religious sense.

In the novel, Zorba sings Macedonian songs, a synthesis of "poetry, music and thought" as Kazantzakis describes them. Do you remember Zorba singing Macedonian songs in the movie? No, neither do I. Kazantzakis spoke Greek. He knew the difference between a Greek song and a Macedonian song. He did not use the name Macedonian to mean Greek. Kazantzakis was nobody's fool.

The author even asks Zorba to sing a song, "A Macedonian Song of your own country, Zorba". Oh mark Kazantzakis words well!

To mark the difference clearly, at another point Kazantzakis writes, "And don't forget, Zorba is a foreigner, a Macedonian, and it is the greatest disgrace we Cretans can bring on ourselves to raise a hand against a guest in our country..."

Perhaps the saddest and most telling evidence of all about the distortions to Zorba's name is a letter Zorba writes from Romania that he signs, "Alexis Zorbescu". Later he also sends Kazantzakis a card, a postcard, from Serbia that is signed, "Alexis Zorbic". The last time Kazantzakis hears about his friend is a letter that he received from a schoolmaster in Skopje telling him of the death of Alexis Zorba.

## **Kazantzakis Respect for Zorba**

For Kazantzakis, Zorba was a hero, and he placed him along side of Homer, Nietzsche and Bergson whom he called "the bodyguards of the Odyssey", men who protect and develop man's freedom to think in the progression of human history. He elevated Zorba to the very pinnacle of human evolution, human achievement.

Kazantzakis believed that what Zorba was offering in his understanding and philosophy of living was a new Decalogue, nothing less than a new set of Ten Commandments for man in this world. He placed Zorba, in the illustrious company with Christ, Dante, Buddha, El Greco and others. It is astonishing, but here we have Kazantzakis, one of the great intellectuals of our age, a one-time Education Minister in the Greek Government, a writer who almost won the Nobel Prize for Literature, placing an ordinary Macedonian among the world's greatest philosophers, poets, painters, and spiritual leaders. Amazing!

That is a kind of respect that Macedonians seldom receive openly and publicly. It is also the kind of respect we must learn to give towards ourselves and our history.

Kazantzakis knew our history. In the preface to the English translation of his 'Alexander the Great', the translator, Theodora Vasilis, writes, "Zorba, the most popular of his (Kazantzakis') creations was fashioned in the image of the crafty Odysseus." If Odysseus was crafty and cunning we must open both of our eyes! Why did Kazantzakis reject the name 'George' and choose the name 'Alexis'? Was it because he simply liked the sound of the name and pulled it out of a hat? Or was Kazantzakis the writer acting as a 'koom', as a godfather and deliberately chose the name 'Alexis'? Did he do this so that the name would ring a bell of remembrance in our minds, a name associated with somebody? Who? What name? Very likely to remind us of Alexander the Great, the Macedonian who struggled to bring the whole world together, east and west.

Notice how both names have three words, the same balance, the same form: Alexander the Great - Zorba the Greek. If we search for the meaning of names we find Alexis means 'to ward off, keep off, protect'. Was the book about Zorba meant to be more than just a novel but a way of speaking to the world about the Macedonian Spirit?

Consider the initials of Kazantzakis' hero, 'A.Z.' - like the beginning and the end of the alphabet that Kazantzakis loved so much. And there too is the mysterious biblical "alpha and omega".

Was Kazantzakis hiding the true identity of his hero and sending forth a hidden message to the world in his hero's name! Was he doing what Zorba himself had done, changing a letter here and there as he did Romania and Serbia.

It was in 1952, three years after the civil war between the Greeks and Macedonians ended, that the book was translated into English with the new title, "Zorba The Greek". Kazantzakis was still alive and surely he knew of the translation. Surely he approved of the name and title to the book, and the question that arises is why did he do it? Why, if Kazantzakis was clearly giving the message throughout his book that Zorba was a Macedonian, with his own country, a Slav who should live for a thousand years, a man whom he admits he loved dearly in his life and for whom he had such respect and regard -- why would he allow the translation into English to be "Zorba The Greek"? What a puzzle?

### **Kazantzakis the Classic Scholar**

Kazantzakis knew well enough that English is one of the great international world languages. No doubt he wanted his ideas and philosophy and those of Zorba to spread around the world. He even refers to Zorba as the new Sinbad the Sailor and he clearly must have had a world audience in mind.

One moment then! Was adding the words "The Greek" some kind of a sham, a trick, a disguise? Was this a hoax, just like their "mining operation" during the war? In the book itself in a dozen different ways he invites the reader to dig, dig, dig for the truth about his much-beloved character.

Was the new English title and translation of his book meant to be a mask for Zorba/Chorba? Was "Zorba" intended to go around the world, disguised as "The Greek", fashioned and crafted to become world famous, and irony of ironies, in the end to reveal himself and to confront and confound the Greek politicians for their conduct towards all Macedonians. Is that what he was letting us know right at the beginning of the book when he was talking about names and wrote, "I get up to my tricks, Everything goes to the dogs?"

Observe the classic tradition in story, poetry, songs. In the classic epic songs of Homer, and in the epic songs in the Slavic oral tradition a hero frequently travels in disguise for the real purpose of making a rescue. When there is a disguise there must eventually be a recognition when the disguise is stripped away. In these recognition scenes, almost like a signal there would always be present at the moment of recognition a song or a musical instrument.

## **What Do We Find in the Novel?**

True to classic tradition, when Zorba reveals himself as a Slav, a Macedonian, he sings and plays the santuri.

Who can doubt that Kazantzakis, whose greatest work was *The Odyssey, A Modern Sequel*, knew of these themes, these traditions of disguise and rescue.

## **Open Letter to Kazantzakis**

"Nikos! Kazantzakis! I cry out to you in the beyond! I may be wrong about what you have written, what you intended, but I may be right? Throughout your work you called on the human spirit to dare, to look behind the masks of everything as you had spent your life doing. It is still worth doing Nikos!"

"I do not think that you meant to cast any insult on the memory of your friend who was dead by misrepresenting him around the world. I do think that you may have been trying to provide him with a kind of peasant's revenge after his death. Did you not, by writing, preserve and rescue for the world that Macedonian whom you had come to know and admire and respect. You rescued him from an almost total oblivion and through your spirit transformed the man into the undying literature of Freedom."

"Da ti ye arliya, Nikos"

"Nikos, is it time now to take away the disguise of "The Greek", from your friend George Zorba? What a wonderfully crafted mask Nikos, worthy of Odysseus himself. What a comic mask! And beneath that what, the mask of tragedy, the tragedy of Macedonians in Greece?"

"But you wouldn't want to leave us with another mask, one of comedy and one of tragedy would you? Where would the rescue and the resurrection be? Didn't you intend that Zorba should hold up and represent, not only the national ethnic identity of man, but much, much, more than that, the classic universal human craving for the ideal of freedom for the body of man."

"And didn't you Nikos want the world to know that you and Zorba were the best of friends on a personal level, on a human level, Macedonian and Greek. Weren't you describing a universal human brotherhood of work and struggle together for a kind of freedom for everyone with a decent respect for each other. And wasn't it above all petty politics? Wasn't it a message for politicians too? And wasn't one of the great

messages that you wanted any reader to take from your story, your book, "Peace ... for the sake of the children?"

Nikos Kazantzakis died in Friburg, Germany, on October 26th, 1957. His body was taken to Athens to lie in state. The Archbishop of Athens of the Greek Orthodox Church refused to permit the national honour or to celebrate a funeral mass for him. Kazantzakis name and the name of his hero Zorba/Chorba live on around the world and will to the end of time. I don't remember the name of the Archbishop.

## **Conclusion**

"Zorba the Greek" has been a great international commercial success and a lot of people have been able to eat steak because of it. But steak is a passing thing, and TRUTH STICKS.

The evidence from George Zorba's life and from the novel clearly points to the conclusion that Zorba the Greek is in truth, Chorba the Macedonian.

Kazantzakis, a one-time Minister of Education in the government of Greece, and perhaps the greatest Greek writer of this century, hails and affirms a Macedonian and places him among the world's leaders.

By creating a mask, by writing an excellent novel, by contributing to the great literature of the world, Kazantzakis hid a great Macedonian, to protect and preserve him.

He saved, not the man Zorba/ Chorba, but even more important, the memory, the image, the philosophy, the life-view and the world-view of the Macedonian mind alive in the world.

The marvelous achievement of Kazantzakis is that he created an indelible universal statement of Freedom and Human Rights with the essential message of "Long Live the Macedonians".

And, Kazantzakis did that by beginning with one word SOUP. CHORBA!