

## Macedonians in Toronto: From Encampment to Settlement

Lillian Petroff

Numéro 2-78, octobre 1978

Immigrants in the City

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019425ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019425ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Petroff, L. (1978). Macedonians in Toronto: From Encampment to Settlement. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (2-78), 58-73.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019425ar>

## MACEDONIANS IN TORONTO: FROM ENCAMPMENT TO SETTLEMENT

- - - - -  
*Lillian Petroff*

In a postscript to his short study, Cities and Immigrants, David Ward observes, "the behavioral motivations of immigrants constitute an important but neglected aspect both of the cityward movement and of residential choice during the nineteenth century." Ward continues by arguing that similarities in antecedent behaviour from immigrant group to immigrant group did not result in identical residential patterns. This was true of Toronto's immigrant communities in the early twentieth century, and the pattern of Toronto urban settlement which shaped the genesis of Toronto's Macedonian community is an interesting case in point.<sup>1</sup>

The key to understanding the growth of the early Macedonian community in Toronto and the nature of housing choice in that community is the collective product of individual commitments to remain in the New World or return to the Old, that is, whether one is a migrant or an immigrant. The distinction is important. For the overwhelming majority of Macedonians who came to Toronto before the First World War, the New World was regarded as a source of upward mobility, but upward mobility at home and not in the New World. Before World War I, many of the young southern European "birds of passage" working in the United States and Canada were clearly migrants. Many worked, saved their earnings, and then returned to the Old Country. They felt little or no commitment to life in the New World, and women and families were usually left behind when the men came to North America. The predominance of males in Toronto before World War I served to indicate the establishment of a similar migratory pattern in Toronto. Of the over 1,000 Macedonians estimated to be in Toronto before 1914, the overwhelming majority consisted of either

---

<sup>1</sup>David Ward, Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth Century America (New York, 1971), p. 148.



*Macedonian men gathered near the Baptist Mission Labour Agency, begun to protect immigrant workers from exploitation, c. 1912. (Women's Baptist Mission).*

bachelors or married men with families remaining in Macedonian villages.<sup>2</sup>

These men were on the move and harboured a strong commitment to their family's holdings and home villages. Macedonians in Toronto might sympathize with the young Lebanese who wrote home:

It is true that my brother wants to sell his share of the land? If so, let me know how much is the amount, and I shall send it to you; then you will transfer his share to my name . . .<sup>3</sup>

Contact with the ways of the New World had, in fact, not lessened the migrant's commitments at home. Even long-time wanderers from the home village had not yet become strangers.<sup>4</sup> Although physical distance served to separate Macedonians from their villages, the fact remained that men still retained a duty and attachment to the village and family. The men from Zhelevo, for example, frequently gathered together after work in Toronto to discuss the affairs of the village.

Many such meetings were held and finally it was decided to ask that Zhelevo be put under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Exarchate. Their decision was made known to the leaders of the village, with whom they were in constant contact.<sup>5</sup>

The men in Toronto contributed not just emotion and words, but also money towards improvement of village facilities such as the building of a new bridge.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the men from the village Tersie closely followed the affairs of the Old World. At the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in 1912, men from these villages hastily returned home to take up arms.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the men of the villages saw their home, family,

---

<sup>2</sup>Sts. Cyril and Methody Macedono-Bulgarian Orthodox Cathedral, 50th Anniversary: 1910-1960 (Toronto, 1960), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>A. Tannous, "Emigration, A Force of Social Change in An Arab Village," in A. Lutfiyya and C. Churchill, eds., Readings in Arab Middle Eastern Societies and Cultures (The Hague, 1970), p. 308.

<sup>4</sup>Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (Boston, 1951), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup>Foto Tomev, Short History of Zhelevo Village Macedonia (Toronto, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Mr. and Mrs. B. Steffoff, interview (Toronto), December 17, 1975.

and future in terms of the village and its familiar way of life.

The Balkan War in 1912 signalled more than just the end of harsh Turkish rule. The conclusion of hostilities brought with it the emergence of Greek rule.<sup>8</sup> Macedonian hopes for a liberal regime faded quickly. Soon Bulgarian language schools and churches were ordered closed. Villages were forced to billet Greek soldiers who conducted comprehensive searches for the hidden rifles and ammunition of rebellious peasants.<sup>9</sup> One oppressor had clearly been changed for another.

The confused and unhappy situation in the Old Country convinced many men abroad that any future for themselves and their families lay in the New World. With the cessation of hostilities and emergence of the new political regime men began to send for wives, families, and prospective brides. The temporary world of migration gave way to one of permanence. Migrants, for the most part, had now become immigrants. Unhappily for some, Canada was now to be home.

This watershed, the psychological change from migrant to immigrant, from a sureness in knowing that one worked toward a successful return to Macedonia to a new and often uneasy commitment to life in the New World, changed among other things, disposition of available capital, including that for lodging.

In the years after the turn of the century, Macedonians in Toronto established two areas of settlement in both the east and west ends of the city. Drawn by ready lodging and the employment available

---

<sup>8</sup>Prior to hostilities the Ottoman Empire included Macedonia, Albania and Epirus, so that with Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro allied against them, the Turks were forced by the geographical situation to fight three distinct campaigns. The Turks, as a result, were defeated. With the conclusion of hostilities the powers submitted to the terms of the Treaty of Bucharest (August 10, 1913). Serbia and Greece received large accessions of territory. Serbia acquired central Macedonia, including Ochrida and Monastir, Kossovo and the eastern half of Novi Bazar, the western half going to Montenegro. Greece, on the other hand, obtained Epirus, southern Macedonia and Salonica.

<sup>9</sup>Foto Tomev, Short History of Zhelevo Village Macedonia (Toronto, 1971), p. 9.

at the nearby Massey-Harris Company, the agricultural implements manufacturer, Macedonian labourers settled in the Niagara-Wellington West area. A western settlement developed in the Junction Road, Keele Street, and St. Clair Avenue West area. Settlers in the extreme west-end of the city found employment in the slaughterhouses of Swift Canadian and the Harris Abattoir Company.<sup>10</sup>

Some Macedonians had already settled in the city's east end, the area bound in the north by King Street East and in the south by Front Street East. This district was bordered in the west by Beverley Street and the edge of the Don River in the east.<sup>11</sup> Easily accessible from the Don railway station, this first area of settlement provided industrial and service employment for the initial group of Macedonian labourers who provided a large labour pool for the local sheet metal industries, iron and steel foundries, and leather and fur processing companies.<sup>12</sup>

Small in number though they might be, this collection of single, often transient Macedonian men required communal services. To meet their needs several Macedonian entrepreneurs opened restaurants, butcher shops, and grocery and dry-good stores, and these entrepreneurs, in turn, hired Macedonian workers. Thus, the outline of a small and stable community took root near the factories and boarding houses where large numbers of workers lived.

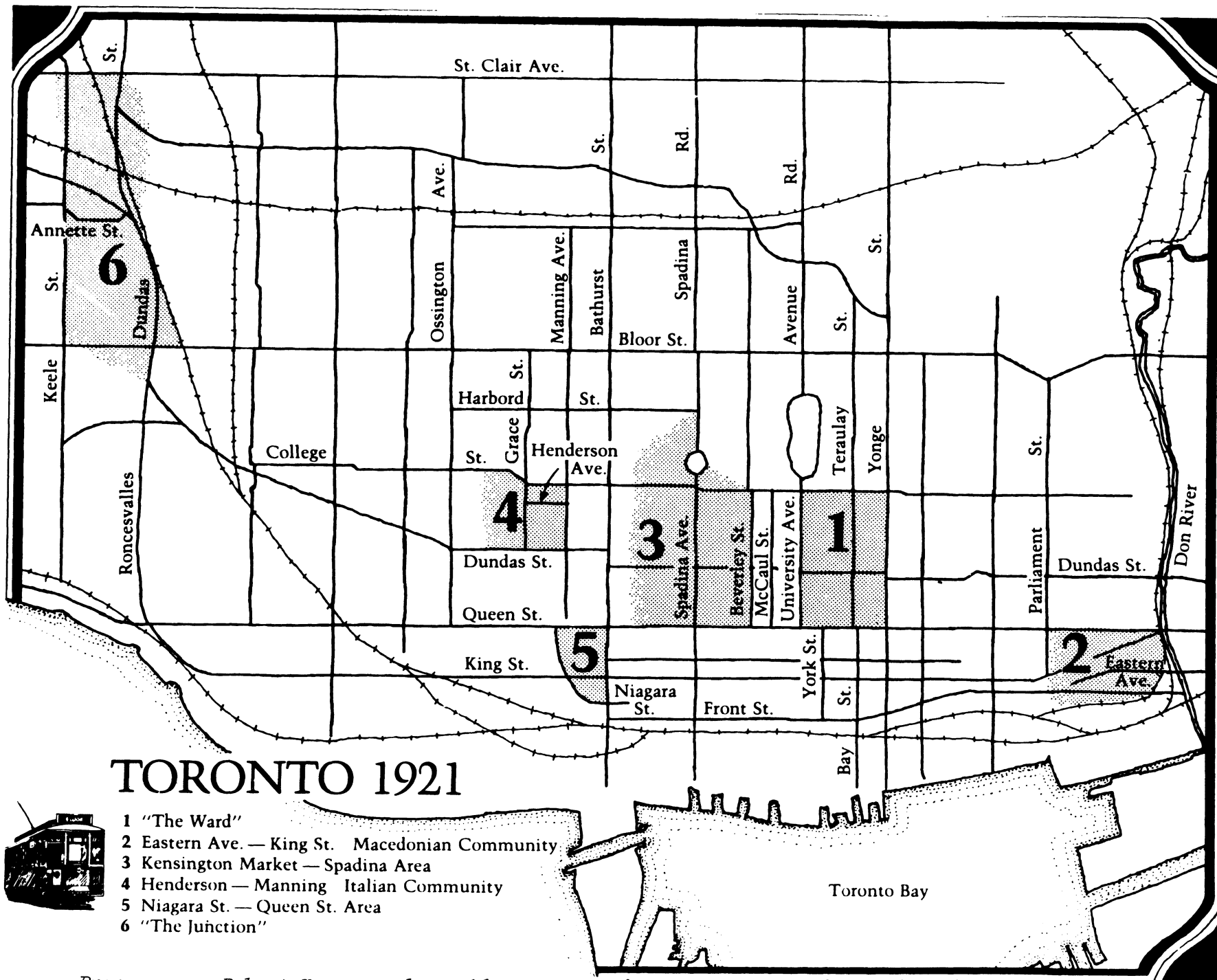
Yet if the majority of Macedonian men continued to live in boarding houses close to work where rents were low and services available, there was still room for some leeway. Bonds of friendship, for instance, might challenge the convenience of living close to work. In one case, a group of young men lived with fellow villagers on Trinity Street in Toronto's east end while they held jobs at the Massey-Harris plant across town. A well-developed public transit system allowed

---

<sup>10</sup> Might Directory Ltd., Toronto City Directory (Toronto, 1903 through 1930).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



# TORONTO 1921



- 1 "The Ward"
- 2 Eastern Ave. — King St. Macedonian Community
- 3 Kensington Market — Spadina Area
- 4 Henderson — Manning Italian Community
- 5 Niagara St. — Queen St. Area
- 6 "The Junction"

Provenance: Robert Harney and Harold Troper, *Immigrants: A Portrait of the Urban Experience, 1890-1930* (Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1975), p. 27.

friendship and familiarity of surroundings to take precedence over proximity of lodging to work.<sup>13</sup>

Loyalty to cultural, religious and village groups affected settlement choice as well. One Macedonian immigrant, for example, explained that he sought living quarters near the facilities rented by the Balkanski Unak, a newly-formed Macedonian cultural and athletic society.<sup>14</sup>

The structure of anti-immigrant prejudice also served to define the immigrants' choice of lodging. Fearing both verbal and physical attack, many Macedonians hesitated to venture beyond the bounds of King Street East. Prejudice set harsh restrictions upon other aspects of immigrant life. For example, it exerted influence upon the availability of housing. In remembering her search for family accommodations in Chicago, one Italian immigrant woman, Rosa, recalled, "I couldn't find no more good reasons because nobody would rent to Italians." Similarly, one of the early Macedonian women settlers in Toronto recalled, with some bitterness:

Many places told me [sic]. They said, "You a foreigner."  
They slam the door.<sup>15</sup>

Before 1914, for the majority of single men, most of whom dreamed or actively planned an eventual return to Macedonia, the boarding house conditions in which they lived proved well below general community standards. In his 1911 investigation of Toronto slum conditions, the city's Medical Health Officer, Dr. Hastings, found the Eastern Avenue and Niagara Street districts, where many Macedonians lived, to be in a serious state of decay. The rooms in many houses were found to be insufficiently lighted and badly ventilated.<sup>16</sup> In cellars and basements

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mr. N. Temelcoff interview (Toronto), July 9, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs. F. Nikoloff interview (Toronto), August 15, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> Toronto. Department of Health, Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing with the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto, Embodying Recommendations for the Amelioration of the Same (Toronto, 1911).



where men might bed down at night, dampness was also a serious problem. Indeed, one home in the Niagara Street district was found to have four inches of water in the cellar.<sup>17</sup>

The Medical Health Officer also cited serious problems with respect to the absence of adequate water and sanitary facilities. Many residents, for example, had no running water in their lodging and were forced to use outside taps. Other homes were without drainage systems or baths. A sample of eight hundred and fifty-one units in the Eastern Avenue district revealed the presence of only one hundred and ninety-three baths.<sup>18</sup>

Equally concerned with the state of affairs on the surrounding lot, Dr. Hastings observed:

Some of the yards . . . were found filled as high as the roof of the house. Both the backyard and the front have bottles by the thousands: beds, mattresses, old furniture, junk . . . is piled out to the edge of the sidewalk. Garbage in the lane and yards is very carelessly dealt with.<sup>19</sup>

Turning to the effects of these conditions on local residents, Dr. Hastings expressed grave concern over the serious consequences of overcrowding.<sup>20</sup> One four-room boarding house on Eastern Avenue, for example, provided accommodation for twelve to fifteen men. Each room, with the exception of the kitchen, had been converted into mens' sleeping quarters with three or four beds.<sup>21</sup>

Hastings outlined two causative factors to explain widespread overcrowding and unsuitable housing conditions, that is, landlords' greed and newcomers' ignorance.<sup>22</sup> While waiting to sell to commercial

---

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>21</sup>Mr. D. Ralley interview (Toronto), July 4, 1975.

<sup>22</sup>Toronto. Department of Health, Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing with the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions (Toronto, 1911), p. 10.

developers, absentee landlords profited from their holdings by letting accommodation to migration. Many landlords crowded a large number of tenants onto their property and, subsequently, forfeited responsibility for ongoing maintenance and upkeep. They also charged the highest possible rents.<sup>23</sup>

Yet immigrants, in the doctor's opinion, were also victims of their own ignorance. Harsher critics chose to equate "dirty and unkempt property with sloth and neglect."<sup>24</sup> Dr. Hastings was less harsh. Acknowledging the difficulty of adjusting old country habits to the strange ways of the New World, the Medical Health Officer simply stated, "their ideas of sanitation are not ours."<sup>25</sup>

As a result of his findings, Dr. Hastings recommended to Toronto city council a program of increased supervision and inspection of housing according to municipal building regulations. Foreign lodging houses should be placed under especially strict sanitary inspection. The 'foreign' resident, in turn, should be educated about North American sanitary standards and protected from the exploitative demands of unscrupulous landlords.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Dr. Hastings, like many of his contemporaries, failed to fully understand the 'foreigners'' situation.<sup>27</sup> Far from holding sanitation ideas contrary to those of the receiving society, many immigrants understood all too well the degree to which their living conditions were sub-standard. Yet many immigrants were willing to continue living in these miserable surroundings. What had gone unnoticed by many Canadians was the newcomers' sense of purpose and fierce

---

<sup>23</sup>R. Harney and H. Troper, Immigrants: A Portrait of the Urban Experience, 1890-1930 (Toronto, 1975), p. 32.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>25</sup>Toronto. Department of Health, Report of the Medical Health Officer Dealing with the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto, Embodying Recommendations for the Amelioration of the Same (Toronto, 1911), p. 8.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>27</sup>Harney and Troper, Immigrants, p. 28.

determination to better their lives, originally in the Old World or, after 1912, in Toronto.<sup>28</sup> Accumulating the capital necessary to guarantee a better life in the village was made possible only if men pursued a frugal way of life in the New World. Money saved for purchase of a piece of land on return to Macedonia, remittance money to send home for a sister's dowry, or, in the wake of the Balkan War, to bring families to Toronto or establish a small business precluded major expenditure on housing. Observing a similar pattern of frugality in an austere Macedonian boarding house in St. Louis, biographer Stoyan Christowe wrote,

It was more like being "on location," a kind of on-the-job indoor camping, the object being to work long hours and live as inexpensively as possible in order to return to the Old Country with as much money as possible.<sup>29</sup>

Out of necessity men, therefore, displayed an amazing tolerance for the poverty of their temporary surroundings. The shabby physical surroundings of the boarding house could be eased, however, by the warmth of human relationships strengthened by ties of language, custom, and hard work. Men from the same village often shared friendships, memories, and moments of light-heartedness.<sup>30</sup> A Macedonian boarding house in the St. Clair Avenue-Keele Street district close to the abattoirs was dubbed the "Macedonian City Hall" by the local police. Former residents still remember that life in the boarding house was punctuated by music, drink, and conversation.<sup>31</sup>

If the boarding house, in spite of its physical condition, proved to be a much warmer place in which to live than outsiders imagined, it also provided to be much more complex and ordered in its routines

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> S. Christowe, The Eagle and the Stork: An American Memoir (New York, 1976), p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Harney and Troper, Immigrants, p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> Mr. A. Petroff interview (Toronto), December 6, 1975.

than first appearance indicated. Complexity and order co-existed in each establishment and were maintained through the development of house rules and codes about residents' responsibility. In many boarding houses cooking and other household chores were often performed by tenants on a rotating basis.<sup>32</sup> Responsibilities in other households were, in contrast, assigned on the basis of age, not equality. Remembering the additional duties he performed as one of the youngest members of a Macedonian boarding house on Front Street, one immigrant recalled:

The young fellows in the house (14 or 15 years of age) were responsible for washing the older fellows' clothes.<sup>33</sup>

Most men honoured their obligations. The few who shirked household responsibilities were, more often than not, asked or forced to move out.<sup>34</sup>

As already noted, events in Macedonia, especially the negative effects of the 1912 Balkan War, drastically changed the situation of the migrant Macedonian with respect to Toronto. What was once a temporary exile for economic reasons was now a permanent home. Dreams of returning to Macedonia gave way to planning for a family in the New World. Savings set aside for a piece of land near the village were now earmarked for business or property in Toronto.

Individual case histories serve to underscore the new dynamism which marked the change in attitude toward the New World with its consequent effect on population growth and residential patterns. For example, after rooming on Eastern Avenue since 1909, one Macedonian immigrant decided to move to Front Street in 1911 after finding larger quarters. When he entered into his own business in 1912, this immigrant moved yet again to a location near his store on King Street East.<sup>35</sup> Rent increase forced a Macedonian and his new family to abandon a house

---

<sup>32</sup>Mr. D. Ralley interview (Toronto), July 4, 1975.

<sup>33</sup>Mr. D. Evans interview (Toronto), August 2, 1975.

<sup>34</sup>Memo to conversation with Mr. C. Mitanis (Toronto), October 10, 1975.

<sup>35</sup>Mr. M. Tallin interview (Toronto), August 25, 1975.



*Reverend John Kolesnikoff, a Macedonian Baptist preacher, conducting a street meeting near the Russian Baptist Mission on King Street (Women's Baptist Mission).*

in the King-Sumach Street area. In their effort to accumulate a small pool of capital for later use in Toronto, they moved first to Wascana Avenue and again to Trinity Street.<sup>36</sup>

The boarding house was unsuitable to newly married men. One Macedonian, for example, left a boarding house in the Keele Street-St. Clair Avenue area of the west-end settlement, and, with his new wife, found a flat on nearby Mulock Avenue. He remained close to work and close to his fellow villagers, but, by taking a wife and moving into a flat, removed himself from the ranks of the migrant workers to become an immigrant.<sup>37</sup>

The resettlement of men and now families was not solely confined to the existing area of settlement. Macedonians also moved across town to join countrymen in other settlement areas. Spurred by the opportunity of employment in the west-end slaughterhouses, one Macedonian left his east-end residence and job in the Toronto docks along Cherry Beach and moved to the Old Weston Road area.<sup>38</sup>

While there was much movement both between and within the established areas of settlement, movement by Macedonians outside either of these areas began only in the period before 1930. Those who moved outside Macedonian areas were often more adventurous businessmen sensing the opportunity of entrepreneurial success in serving a non-Macedonian clientele. One Macedonian merchant gave up a small restaurant in the east-end settlement, and moved to the Coxwell and Queen Street area to open a candy store and hot dog stand.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, movement out of the existing neighbourhood by immigrants did not result solely from a desire to follow entrepreneurial instincts or from the development of new priorities for family life in Toronto. The decision to move out of the settlement was frequently imposed upon

---

<sup>36</sup>Mrs. M. Kercheff interview (Toronto), November 25, 1975.

<sup>37</sup>Mr. A. Petroff interview (Toronto), December 6, 1975.

<sup>38</sup>Mr. N. Temelcoff interview (Toronto), July 8, 1975.

<sup>39</sup>Mrs. H. Paliare interview (Toronto), July 15, 1975.

immigrants by local redevelopment and the encroachment of new industry and public institutions. Just as Jewish and Italian immigrants in the "Ward" were forced to make way for the expansion of Toronto General Hospital,<sup>40</sup> those Macedonians who lived in the area of Front and Cherry Streets before 1930 relocated as local industrial expansion undermined their settlement.<sup>41</sup>

Except for establishing a family in the New World, nothing reflected a clearer break with the migrant mentality than the purchase of homes or business properties, not in Macedonia but in Toronto. In 1913, merchant Tipe Tiponloff and his partners secured the property on which their east-end store stood.<sup>42</sup> By 1915, Naum Phillips, the community's steamship agent, also purchased property. After renting two locations, a restaurant and a dry goods store, on King Street East, Phillips purchased the property on which his restaurant stood.<sup>43</sup> In the west end, grocer Chris Petroff and confectioners Dimitre H. Paul and Jovan Nicoloff purchased property on Niagara Street and Mulock Avenue, respectively.<sup>44</sup>

While some men bought land for business purposes, others bought residential property for personal use or investment. The community church treasurer and grocer, Dimitri Petroff, bought homes at 18 and 20 Eastern Avenue and a rear residence at 24 Eastern Avenue in 1913.<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note, a labourer such as Soter Lazaroff was able to become a homeowner with the purchase of property on Turner Avenue in the west-end settlement.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>Harney and Troper, Immigrants, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup>Might Directories, Ltd., The Toronto City Directories, 1903-1930.

<sup>42</sup>City of Toronto, Tax Assessment Rolls, 1921.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 1916.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 1931.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 1914.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 1931.

The acquisition of property by Macedonians in the period before 1930, although symbolic of the new attitude toward remaining in Canada, was not extensive. However, property owners were represented in both merchant and labouring ranks. As for the reasons behind a relatively small proportion of land ownership among Macedonians one can, at best, only offer suggestions. Some oral sources cite the unwillingness of owners in existing settlement areas to sell while property values were rising. Many landlords, it seems, were prepared to retain their holdings for the more lucrative rewards or rumoured commercial redevelopment and institutional expansion.<sup>47</sup>

Corporate landlords such as the Union Stockyards in the west-end area and the Canadian Northern Ontario railway in the east proved unwilling to sell to interested individuals. Corporate holdings on Keele Street and Eastern Avenue were withheld from the market for company development projects.<sup>48</sup>

Most important perhaps, for many Macedonian immigrants even after 1912, property ownership was never a major priority. Earlier the purchase of property had been regarded as an undesirable responsibility and an unacceptable commitment to stay. Men who planned a return to the Old World would not become landowners in the New World.<sup>49</sup> If attitudes toward permanent residence were drastically revised after 1912, property ownership still lacked the central importance it acquired for other immigrant groups.

For example, while patterns of purchasing of property indicate that this was a principal objective of immigrant Italians, it was not so pronounced among Macedonians in Toronto. The successful establishment of a commercial enterprise, with families living in the rented quarters about the store or restaurant, seemed more practical and far more

---

<sup>47</sup>Mr. M. Tallin interview (Toronto), August 25, 1975.

<sup>48</sup>Full details are available in the Toronto Tax Assessment Rolls, 1903-1931.

<sup>49</sup>Mr. M. J. Grudeff and Mrs. E. Mallin interview (Toronto), August 1, 1975.



sensible than the mere ownership of a family homestead.<sup>50</sup> Yet, the settlement pattern of Macedonians in Toronto had been established. The temporary quarters of the boarding house, the sense of impermanence of men whose priority was to a home and family in a Macedonian village gave way before men who had a stake in Toronto. The end of the dream of return created new realities. It remade attitudes, stimulated local family life, created new Macedonian residential patterns in the existing settlement areas or stimulated expansion into new areas, and, perhaps most important, led to a new generation of children and families who moved from the shadows of Toronto life into its mainstream. In doing so, demands were generated for new community services and institutions which reflected the transition from a Macedonian village past to an urban North American present.

---

<sup>50</sup>Mr. M. Tallin interview (Toronto), August 25, 1975.