



## Interview with Theodore Gadjev Chronicling our Noble History - to Honor the Past and Inspire the Future (Part 1)



Theodore Gadjev, IHBENA Director

His upbringing has given him a unique and deeply personal perspective on the MPO and its development over the decades. In this feature, Mr. Gadjev graciously shares fascinating stories about his family's roots in Pirin and Vardar Macedonia and their journey to a new life in America during the height of the Cold War. He also offers insights into his father's life passion: the Institute for the History of the Bulgarian Emigration in North America "Ilia Todorov Gadjev" (IHBENA). Founded by his father, Dr. Ivan Gadjev, and now proudly led by Theodore, the Institute houses a rare and valuable collection of books and documents related to Balkan, Bulgarian, and Macedonian history—including a substantial portion of the MPO's historical archives. The MPO has recently established official ties with Mr. Gadjev's esteemed institution, in the shared hope that our collaboration will help preserve and promote the rich history of organized Macedonian life in North America—and that of our beloved MPO.

We are pleased to introduce our readers to Mr. Theodore Gadjev—a dedicated researcher and chronicler of the early Macedonian diaspora in North America, with a particular focus on the history of Macedono-Bulgarian emigrants and that of the Macedonian Patriotic Organization (MPO). Born in Detroit, Michigan, into a family of devoted MPO members, Theodore was raised within the heart of the organization.



Dr. Ivan Gadjev displaying a historic MPO flag, part of the Institute's Museum exhibition

Dear Theodore, can you please tell us something about the history of your family and its roots?

Both sides of my family originate from the geographical region of Macedonia and were directly involved in the legendary Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). My father, Dr. Ivan Gadjev, is from the city of Nevrokop (today Gotse Delchev), Pirin Macedonia and my mother's family is from Bitola and Slivovo - a small village near Ohrid, both in Vardar Macedonia.

My maternal grandfather, Krist Christoff, was an active member of IMRO participating in the Ilinden Uprising of 1903 and would later enlist in the Bulgarian Army during WWI.

My paternal grandfather, Ilia Todorov Gadjev, was a school teacher and an active participant in IMRO as Secretary and Treasurer for the Nevrokop region from 1924 until its disbandment after the military coup in 1934. His involvement with IMRO was one of the reasons that lead to his arrest when the communist regime took power in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944. By the order of the People's Court, he was executed on October 5, 1944 and buried in an unmarked grave with 41 other "convicts". Other prominent members of IMRO he was buried with were Kiril Malchankov and Stoyan Filipov. After the fall of communism in Bulgaria this gravesite was one of the few to be discovered and excavated. That entire group was eventually buried in the cemetery in the neighboring town of Bansko.

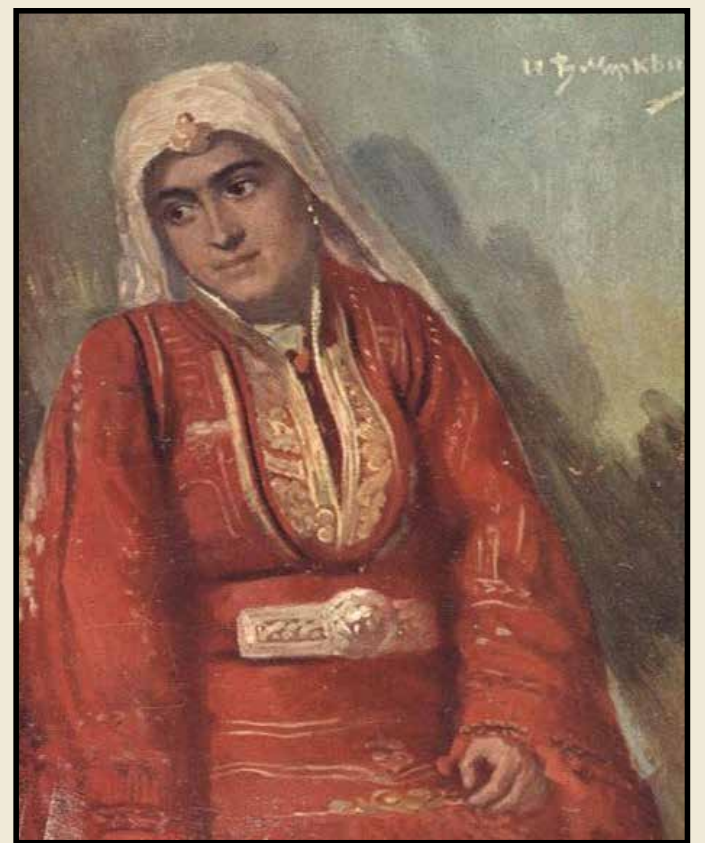
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Ivan and Florence Gadjev celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary



Dr. Ivan Gadjev, speaker at the 1969 Annual MPO Convention



Ivan Mrkvička (1856–1938), Macedonian Girl, ~1920, oil on canvas  
See page 6 for a captivating article that tells a fascinating story behind the renowned Czech-Bulgarian painter Ivan Mrkvička's deep obsession with painting Macedonian women



Boris Nikolov Bunev (the brother of Mara Buneva) with Ilia Todorov Gadjev (right) in Nevrokop, Pirin Macedonia in 1928

**MACEDONIANS,  
IT'S TIME TO  
GET READY  
FOR THE  
ANNUAL MPO  
CONVENTION!**  
August 29th  
- September 1st, 2025

Scene from an  
MPO Convention  
in the 1940s



Library collection at the Institute



The Institute building located in the center of Gotse Delchev, Bulgaria



Historic artifacts of MPO displayed as part of the Institute's Museum exhibition



First pages from the newspaper collections of the Institute



Dr. Ivan Gadjev with Father George Nicoloff, Popadia Vera Nicoloff and their son



MPO President George Lebamoff visiting Dr. Ivan Gadjev at the Institute in Gotse Delchev, 2006

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**How did your family come to America?**

My mother, Florence Christoff, was born and raised in Detroit. Her father arrived in America as a young boy together with his father in 1923. They were joined by his mother and younger brother several years later. Over the years they operated a small grocery store and restaurants.

My father's path was much different, as after my grandfather's conviction the Gadjev's were labelled as "Enemies of the State". All of their property was confiscated and they were relocated from their family home. After graduating High School, he was forced into the labor brigades instead of the regular Army. He was then denied for many years to enroll in a university of his choice. With some help from an IMRO sympathizer of his father, he was able to enroll and would graduate as a veterinarian. After many years of him speaking out to the regime to reopen his father's case and return the family home he was told directly "keep your mouth shut so you don't end up like your father".

He would be appointed as a veterinarian responsible for 16 villages around Gotse Delchev, mostly near the Greek border. Ironically this profession, which was not what he aspired to, would give him a chance at a new life free of persecution. The close proximity to the border would allow him to escape during the night of July 2, 1968. After six months in the immigrant camp Lavrion, located outside of Athens, and with the help of father George Nicoloff he arrived in Detroit just before Christmas.

My parents married in 1973 and had five children - Katerina, Ilija, Theodore, Christopher and Marie. After becoming the first fully licensed veterinarian in America he opened a private practice in 1974 and retired in 2002. His practice would grow to become the largest veterinary hospital, with boarding and grooming facility, in Metro Detroit. This gave him the financial freedom to eventually create and support the functioning of IHBENA without any outside political or ideological influence.

**Tell us about the history of the Institute. How did the establish-**

**ment of it come about?**

My father became active in the MPO almost immediately after his arrival in 1968, as the most prominent members of MPO back then were either IMRO friends of his father or were from the vicinity of his hometown. He would tell me that he "arrived in America not as Ivan Gadjev, but rather as the son of Ilija Gadjev". Over the years he served as President of MPO "Tatkovina", Detroit and after a personal recommendation from Ivan Mihailoff, as Central Committee Secretary.

After nearly a decade of participation at different levels within MPO and observing the change of the national consciousness among the different generations of its membership my father decided to withdraw from any official position in MPO and create an Institute similar to the Macedonian Scientific Institute (MSI) founded in Sofia, Bulgaria in 1923. MSI was founded as a Bulgarian scientific organization to study the region of Macedonia and mostly the Macedonian Bulgarians.

His vision came to be in 1976 when the Macedono-Bulgarian

Scientific Institute "St. Clement of Ochrid" opened in a specially built room in our home, located in the suburbs of Detroit. This was done after consulting with the oldest and most prominent members of MPO, which included Peter Atzeff, Hristo Anastasoff, Kiril Chaleff, Todor Chukaleff, Lazar Koroloff, Dimitar Popov, Elisaveta Daskaloff, Mary Toncheff and Fathers George Nedyalkoff, George Nicoloff and Vassil Mihailoff.

Since the founding of the Institute in 1976 until today, all activities related to its operation and maintenance have been financed solely by the Gadjev family. This is the only way we have managed to maintain the political and ideological independence of the Institute.

**What type of materials are currently housed at the Institute?**

The Institute has a library, archive and museum, which were initially formed after all of the above mentioned, as well as many other active members of MPO and the Macedono-Bulgarian emigration throughout North America, donated or sold their personal collections to my

father.

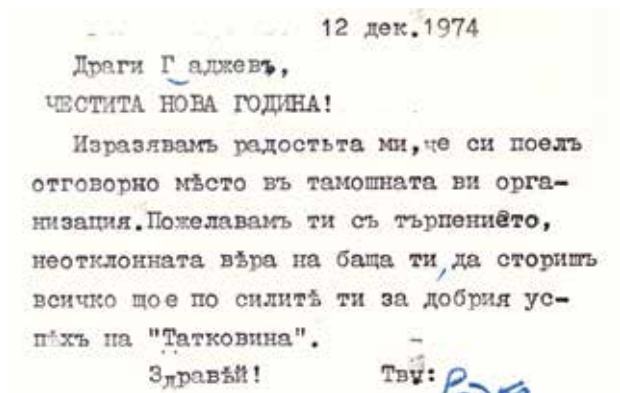
The library possesses the largest collection of scholarly books and periodicals on the problems of the "Macedonian Question" and Bulgarian emigration in North America and the world. The collection of the library's holdings began in 1970. The main part of the book collection (over 30%) is related to the history of Bulgaria. Many of the books on this topic were published in North America and Europe and are bibliographic rarities, because they are owned only by the Institute's library. There is also a significant number of books on the history of the Balkan countries (former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey), as well as books on the history of the USA and a number of European countries.

The compilation of the huge archive collection of authentic documents on the history of Macedono-Bulgarian emigration to North America was carried out over several decades. An impressive volume of archival material was collected, containing about 1,000,000 pages of documents and materials.

To be continued ... ■



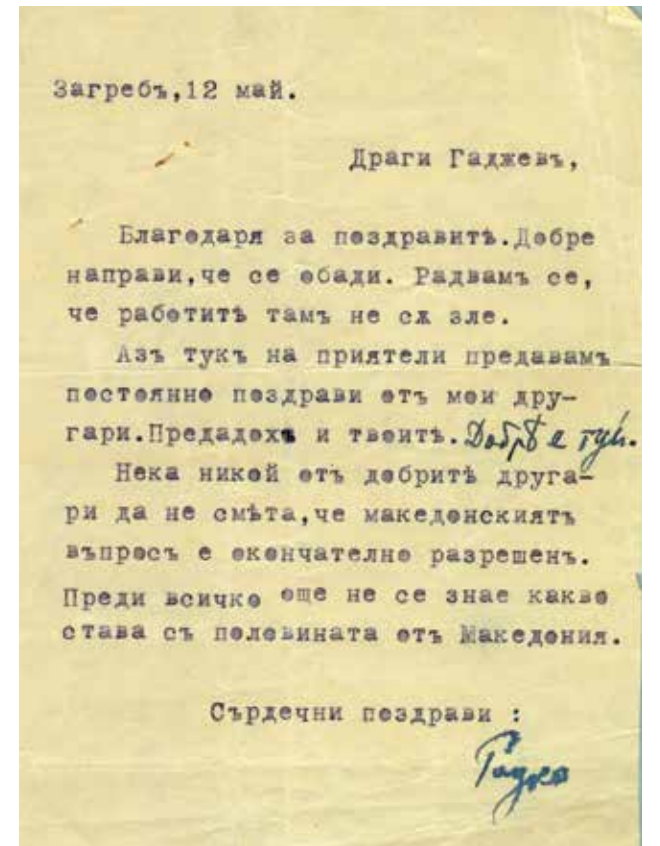
Archive room of the Institute which hosts a significant portion of MPO's historical archives



Congratulatory message from Ivan Mihailoff to Dr. Ivan Gadjev on the occasion of the latter being elected as President of MPO Fatherland Detroit



Declaration of Efrogdita Atzeff with which she donated the full archive and other personal items of her husband Peter Atzeff after his unfortunate passing during the 61st MPO convention of 1982



Message from Ivan Mihailoff to Ilija Gadjev, circa 1940s



The Gadjev family at Christopher's wedding, July 2, 2016. Left to right: Ilia, Katerina, Ivan, Christopher, Florence, Marie, Theodore



Dr. Ivan Gadjev being awarded the "Golden Laurel Branch", the highest distinction of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. Presented by Simeon Stoilov, Bulgarian Consul General in Chicago, 2014



Ivan Gadjev in the Lavrion refugee camp south of Athens, 1968

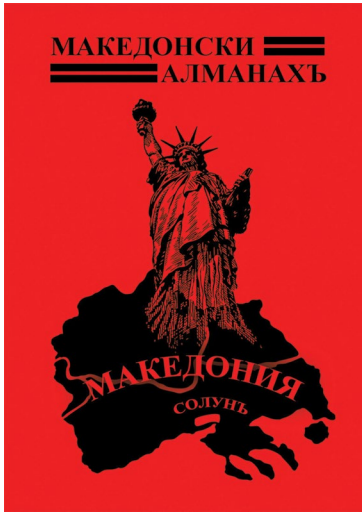


Dr. Ivan Gadjev in his veterinary practice, 1975



Ivan and Theodore Gadjev revisiting the area where he escaped to Greece on July 2, 1968. The Mesta River here is the natural border between Bulgaria and Greece, 2005

## Interview with Theodore Gadjev (Part 2) Chronicling our Noble History - to Honor the Past and Inspire the Future



Cover of the soon to be released re-print of MPO's original Macedonian Almanac from 1940

Of particular value are the documents on the establishment of the Macedono-Bulgarian Orthodox Churches in North America, the establishment and history of the MPO, the Bulgarian National Front, the Macedonian-American People's Union and other Bulgarian emigrant organizations and societies, as well as the personal documents of famous Bulgarian emigrants who contributed to scientific and public life abroad. Also of interest are the archival materials for some of the emigrant newspapers and magazines published in North America and Europe, such as the newspapers "Naroden Glas", "Macedonian Tribune", "Nedelnik",

"Krugozori" and "Narodna Volya", the magazines "Balkania", "Borba", "Svoboda", "Luch", "Svobodno Zemedelsko Zname", etc.

The archive is currently housed in a separate room in the new building of the Institute and are stored in well-protected metal cabinets with a special alarm system and video surveillance.

The museum exhibition displays the establishment of Bulgarian emigration in North America from the end of the 19th century to the present day, which includes photographs and archival documents about our first settlers, the establishment of the first Bulgarian Orthodox churches in various American and Canadian cities, activities of the various Bulgarian emigrant organizations including their cultural manifestations and initiatives and their place in American public life, newspapers and magazines published by emigrant organizations, etc. Of particular interest are the hundreds of portrait photographs of Bulgarian emigrants, found in various emigrant almanacs and albums or from their personal archives.

The exhibition also includes some interesting objects from the activities of Bulgarian emigrant organizations such as typewriters from the editorial offices of the newspapers "Naroden Glas" and "Macedonian Tribune" and the magazine "Balkania", zinc plates

from newspaper articles in emigrant publications, various emigrant badges, emblems and medals, seals and letterheads of the MPO and some of the Bulgarian churches, etc.

Special attention is also deserved by the rich church memorabilia and valuable icons donated by various Bulgarian priests from abandoned Bulgarian churches in North America. All church objects are located in the arranged chapel in the Institute building.

There are several original bricks from the foundations of the first and tenth Bulgarian churches in North America, respectively "St. Trinity" in Madison, Illinois, and "St. Trinity" in Detroit, Michigan, as well as the wedding crowns used in the first church marriages in these cities.

Here you can also see the original censer of Archimandrite Theophylact, the first Bulgarian priest in North America. Also of particular interest are the gospels, which were written in Old Bulgarian and printed in Kiev in the 18th century for the needs of the first Bulgarian priests sent to serve in North America.

• **How did the Institute find its home in the city of Gotse Delchev, Bulgaria?**

The political changes of 1989, like dominoes, led to the fall of communist rule in the countries that remained behind the Iron Curtain. The domino of Bulgaria fell on November 10,

1989. These political events, which the people behind the Iron Curtain had been waiting for with hope, also forced a change in the life plans of the political emigration in North America and Western Europe. The emigrants were able to return to their homeland after a 45-year absence. The fall of communism also gave the leaders of the various political emigrant groups the opportunity to return peacefully and safely to Bulgaria.

Not long after, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia broke up into its constituent parts – Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and Macedonia. The Macedonian part formed its own separate state – the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Bulgaria was the first country to officially recognize the young European state on January 15, 1992.

After carefully analyzing the new political situation in and around Bulgaria, the leadership of the Macedono-Bulgarian Scientific Institute "St. Clement of Ochrid" made several important decisions for the future development of the Institute. First, to change its name and, second, to find a way and form for transferring the Institute's archive and library to Bulgaria to be easily accessible to scholars, students and others researching the history of the Balkans and the "Macedonian Question".

The first question was resolved much more quickly and easily than the second. The chosen name is in memory of my grandfather – Institute for the History of the Bulgarian Emigration in North America "Ilija Todorov Gadjev". The second question required much more

effort, time and finances to be implemented. It was decided to buy the vacant plot of land next to my father's family home in the center of the town of Gotse Delchev and to build a special building there with all the conditions and amenities for work and the proper functioning of the Institute. The construction of the 7,000 sq ft building was completed at the end of 2000 and by the summer of 2004, over 60 tons of books, photographs, archival materials and equipment were sent from the USA.

• **What are the current activities of the Institute? What are your plans for the future?**

Unfortunately, after my father passed in 2017 the Institute has almost completely ceased to exist. I am currently in Bulgaria negotiating with the government for them to take a role in its future, but the constant political instability in Bulgaria over the last few years have made this task almost impossible. Over the last four years there has been seven parliamentary elections with almost all of them ending in the inability to form a government and with the appointment of interim cabinets instead...

Over the last couple of years, we have had visits from the highest level of Bulgarian government officials including both President Rumen Radev and his Vice President Iliana Iotova, Euro Parliament members Andrey Kovachev and Asim Ademov and other members of Bulgaria's Parliament and politicians too numerous to name. Although they have all helped with advice and support in trying to find a solution for the future functioning of the Institute a final decision is de-



Group photos from past MPO Conventions



Students from the American University in Bulgaria visiting IHBENA, December 2009



Dr. Ivan Gadjev next to a portrait of his father outside his office at the Institute



Andrey Kovatchev, Member of the European Parliament (2009-present) visiting IHBENA, May 2023



Theodore Gadjev with President Rumen Radev in the Institute's archive room, May 2023



Conference room at the Institute in Gotse Delchev

pendent on there being a stable government.

In the meantime, while residing in Bulgaria, I have tried to maintain some kind of activity. The Institute has welcomed student groups from different schools in Gotse Delchev, participated in several scientific symposiums and exhibitions, numerous television and radio programs, made new contacts with various government and higher education institutions, etc.

The most recent major activity was our support and participation in a one-hour documentary for the Bulgarian schools for children of emigrants in the USA, which was coordinated and partially financed through the Bulgarian Ministry of Education. The Institute supplied a large part of the documentation used in creating and filming of the documentary.

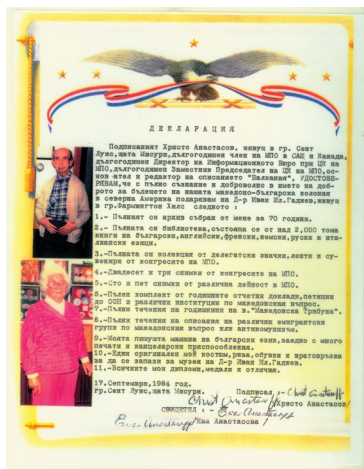
The big news, that is more interesting to those with a connection to MPO, is the re-publication of the historic 1940 Macedonian Almanac, also known as the MPO's "Red Book". This publication is widely considered to be one of the greatest treasures in the organization's history and will be a facsimile reproduction of the original. This is being done through a partnership with Tangra Publishing and if all goes as planned it should be released sometime in July. For generations of Macedonian Bulgarians, this book has been an invaluable source of information on MPO's patriotic activities and its unwavering commitment to the sacred

cause of a free and independent Macedonia.

Parallel to this re-publication, and again with our partner Tangra Publishing, we will be translating the Almanac to English so that the descendants of the older generations of MPO and the global academic community can familiarize themselves with its contents. This version will be much more involved, both timewise and financially, so we aren't expecting it to be completed until sometime next year.

•At the end, what would be your message to the readers?

To not lose their connection to the generations that came to North America before them, many through great hardships and sacrifice. Only this way will their names and accomplishments never be forgotten! ■



Declaration of Hristo Anastasoff with which he bequeaths his entire archive and library, collected over 70 years, and other personal items



MPO memorabilia and convention delegate badges displayed in the Institute's Museum exhibition



The arranged chapel at the Institute in Gotse Delchev



Delegation from the Macedonian Scientific Institute visiting IHBENA, September 2022



Hristo Anastasoff's diplomas, awards and other personal items, displayed as part of the Institute's Museum exhibition



Mayor of Gotse Delchev Vladimir Moskov, Theodore Gadjev, Vice President Iliana lotova, Metropolitan Seraphim of Nevrokop, left to right, July 2021