



MACEDONIAN PATRIOTIC ORGANIZATION

of the United States and Canada

2005 MPO Convention Keynote Address

Macedonian-American Jordan Atzeff Reflects on Our Common Heritage

Below is the Keynote Address given at the 84th Annual MPO Convention by Macedonian-American attorney Jordan Atzeff. The 84th Annual MPO Convention was held on Labor Day Weekend in September 2005 at the Renaissance Hotel in Chicago.



Speaker Jordan Atzeff, second from left, pictured with his father, Boris Atzeff, his wife Bonny, his mother Theodora, and his sister, Carol Dymot at the 84th Annual MPO Convention.

Close to the mouth of the Hudson River in New York City there is an island about two and a half acres in size and formerly known as Oyster Island. It's actually in New Jersey, and in 1880, this island was granted to the United States by New York. As immigrants were being absorbed into the U.S., and the conditions here in the U.S. worsened for people who fled poverty, tyranny, and injustice in their native lands, the story of my family, and the stories of your families, began on Ellis Island.

It's 1921, Warren Harding is the President of the United States and, while riding a big boat across the wide Atlantic Ocean may sound like a lot of fun, it wasn't. The

two-week trip was absolutely miserable, and our people who passengers on those boats were not in the upper decks. They didn't ride first class. They were kept in the steerage rooms way down in the bottom of the boat.

These rooms were lined with bunks. They were uncomfortable. They were crowded. The seas were rough. The air was wet. Yet, by the time they sailed into that New York harbor and passed the Statue of Liberty, that all stood on the deck. They got dressed up in their finest clothing, and they cheered and they were delighted. There were delighted in the fact that entered the Harbor of Freedom and Land of Opportunity.

But my grandparents, as did yours, had to pass a medical exam. Those that failed the exam were quarantined, and many were sent back to their native lands. Those fortunate enough to pass the first test for entry into the U.S., but were not yet cleared for entry, would walk down to the gate, as did my great-grandmother, Maria Slevyanoff with her three children, Blaga, Nada, and Tashka; they would go to the gate and look over the water. They wanted, like your ancestors wanted, to see America.

Because of Nada's illness, the question in their minds was "will we ever get through that gate?" Between 1892 and 1924 over 22 million passengers came through Ellis Island, and for many of our people it was the beginning of a dream come true. They assimilated comfortably in the American culture, but they maintained their heritage, their customs, and the love for their native land.

Churches were built. But these churches weren't built with heavy machinery. There churches were built with hard manual labor. The first Macedonian church was built in Granite City, Illinois.

In my case, my family church was built by the Prilepchany in 1909. It was the second Macedonian church built in the U.S. and they named it –what else – Blagoveshtiniya (Holy Annunciation). Why Blagoveshtiniya? Because that was the name of their beloved church in Prilep, Macedonia.



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My great-grandfather Ilia was farmer in what is now the city limits of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and with his horse and plow, he dug the foundation for our church.

Our men worked in the local steel mills and related factories. Some of them practiced their trade which they brought from Macedonia by opening shoe repair shops, convenience stores, barber shops, cafes, and restaurants.

Their wives tended to their homes and to their children. Macedonian women, perhaps as a result of the hardships they suffered in Macedonia, were the foundation of our Macedonian families. They were warm. My Baba was warm, she was loving, yet she was strong in providing the support upon which the family unit was built, just like your babas.

Throughout their struggles in a new land the Macedonian immigrants never abandoned their love for Macedonia as they developed a love and patriotism for the new homeland.

In many cases within merely 20 years after arriving in the U.S., many of our families sent their young sons to fight in Europe and in the South Pacific for their new beloved country. More than 20 young men from our community in Steelton served their country honorably in World War II.

In my family, my father Boris and his brother Koce served overseas as did my mother's uncle Metodija. Of those who served from Steelton, four lost their lives in battle including my great-uncle Metodija who fought in the Battle of Anzio and whose body was never recovered. Two brothers from the Atanasoff family, George and Keto, also never returned home to their families.

Through all of our struggles, your family's and those of mine, our forefathers set the stage for what has become a story of success and a story of pride.

I believe that they are looking down upon us from a place in heaven taking satisfaction knowing that their sacrifices were not in vain. They look upon the fact that we continue supporting this organization, which was formed to insure that a struggle for a free and independent Macedonia would continue. And, even though we have differences, we have different ideas, we have different ideologies, I believe deep down in my heart that these differences are what make us strong as an organization.

The fact that we respect the opinions of one another – that is the glue, the glue that has and will continue to unite us in achieving our common goals. My grandfather liked to say, "We are berries from the same bush," and I believe that simple, yet meaningful statement impresses upon us that we are one and one we shall always be.

Our forefathers also look down upon us and they take pride in our successes. The success that some of us have achieved in our business, that some of us have achieved in our chosen careers, and in our education. But my friends, let me tell you – most importantly, they look down from above and they see that we have followed in their footsteps by teaching our children the moral and civil values that shape their lives and that we taught our children to be proud in their heritage, to never forget the sacrifices that were made by their great-grandfathers and great-great grandfathers because now we are in the fourth and fifth generation of our people.

Can you imagine that? We are now fourth and fifth generation Macedonian-Americans and Macedonian-Canadians.



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Now as we leave this banquet and as we leave the confines of this room let us not only look to a dance that follows and to what has become a very successful convention thanks to those from Chicago and Indiana who have made it a success, but let's look to the future generations that will continue the work of this great organization and who will make us proud.

And the reason I say this is that so when our time comes, they may look upon us, hopefully, they are going to look up, and they will say, "Job well done."

Thank you for extending to me the honor to serve as this convention's keynote speaker. I am truly humbled.

To Michael [Sarafin], Tammy Josifovic, Tommy Lebamoff, to the entire committee, on behalf of all of us, a well-deserved thank you for your dedication and for your hard work and congratulations for making this year's convention an unforgivable, excuse me, an unforgettable, success.

And, I am so glad I made that mistake, because you know, this has been very difficult for me. To my friend Chris Evanoff, and to the entire Central Committee, thank you. Thank you for the many hours you have voluntarily contributed to this organization and to each and every one of you present this evening, let me say from the bottom of my heart, I am proud, I am honored, to me a member of our Macedonian family.