WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

GASTON MONMOUSSEAU

FATHER TOMOR

or Albania according to Jean Brécot

"A very pleasant book about our country
by a glorious veteran of communism."

ENVER HOXHA

Publisher's Note

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WARNING TO MY READERS

"One cannot please everyone and their mother."

Someone has already written to me complaining about a lack of objectivity in my prior book describing my trip to China.

I fear I will incur the same reproach today in connection with my trip to Albania.

It seems that I saw China and the Chinese people with enthusiastic eyes, and according to them that distorts my view. Nobody sees things with purely neutral arbiter eyes and I am the first to admit I am far from it. I think of the story of the girl who set her sights on a boy who, according to the opinion of the neighbours, did not have the best looks, but through her eyes he was stunning.

One cannot please everyone and their mother.

Going back to how perception is relative, it is true that for countless people a wooden pole is never more than a stick with no other use than to excite dogs who never fail to wag their tail when they see one.

But in a very backward mountainous country, for example, where people still use kerosene for lighting up their homes, the erection of the first pole in the ground for the construction of a power line, providing these people light, is something like a revolution on

the scale of a household.

So if the eye of a journalist or a writer on an excursion in the said country does not penetrate his preconception about sticks, his objectivity, cold as a winter's evening, will make him scoff at people celebrating a mere stick in the ground.

In Albania, as in China, an event has happened which is quite rare on the scale of all of world history and only ever happens once in the history of a people: people's state power has replaced feudal power. It is an enormous event: in my opinion, it is the most important of any events which can occur, on the same level of importance as the conquering of our galaxy which seems likely to occur in just a few decades.

I mean this with all honesty, however sensational it may be. it will only provoke frustration on the part of those who are still chained to the implacable laws of the capitalist system or who, in any case, prefer to never progress beyond their position as wage slaves. The collapse of the capitalist system of exploitation, the collapse of feudalism and their replacement by people's state power is the most exhilarating event imaginable if viewed through militant eyes.

As soon as we look at it with those eyes, we see everything that changes and that will change in the life of the people and in the conditions of life for each worker, in the city as in

the fields. But for a supposedly objective mind, a post can only be a post, and a wool spinner walking on an Albanian road with her distaff and spindle would be the same wool spinner that one might have encountered under the old regime of Zogu. It is not objectivity but blindness.

Objectivity consists of first seeing a primary event and in seeking, if necessary, the immediate and distant consequences of said event. An objective mind can only be enthusiastic, and enthusiasm, far from being a distorting mirror, is the mirror of life. I agree that one must know how to look from a certain objective perspective, and that not everyone does, but to be truly objective about Albania and China one must have suffered the struggles common to a whole class, and still suffer with it from arbitrary injustices.

You have to nurture your aspirations for freedom in your heart, participate in struggles, defeats and successes, feel your flesh and blood — then you can be fully objective.

Then, each step forward is no longer a banal fact marked by fate, but an event which shakes the foundations of the old world.

All the more so when the step accomplished is a giant step in that it substitutes people's state power for feudal power and opens the way to all the political, social and cultural achievements it entails, all the initiatives put in place and even further, to all the

dreams that are born in the human heart in toiling for the benefit of all, in justice for all and in peace.

It is by placing myself in these shoes that I looked at Albania.

But since we can't please everyone, I dedicate this book to you, readers of my class — it is for you, brothers and sisters who dream of a better tomorrow, old people who listen to me, children who smile thinking of a better future; it is for you first that I tried to write down what I saw and felt the urge to call a spade a spade and call the old masters of Albania the wretched bastards they are.

We can certainly see parallels with the leaders of France... who still govern it behind ministerial screens of varying names.

JEAN BRÉCOT
January 1957

INTRODUCTION TO MY TRAVELS IN ALBANIA

Comrade Zihni Sako and I had decided that day to go to Korça, in what was known as the mountains of the devil, in the extreme southeast of Albania. Halfway there, the mountain road suddenly came to the Kraba Pass.

I have crossed many mountain passes, and not one is like the other — there are curvy ones, steep ones, snowy ones and I could describe the road that came out at the Kraba Pass ten times to you, but you would still not understand what I saw.

The Kraba Pass was rather dramatic — when you get to the highest point, if the car doesn't make a sharp turn to the right, you will fall off the cliffside, onto the roof of the café which, at eight hundred metres below, is roughly in the centre of the city of Elbasan.

However, we did turn sharply to the right and as we drove through seemingly endless bends in the road lined with olive trees, we came to Elbasan, located in a vast plain where a river wound like a snake, and finally to the door of the café which, at that hour, was filled with people from the surrounding mountains.

Having begun to chat with a group

my presence aroused, I asked them how things were going and if they found life good to live compared to the past.

"Oh!" replied one of them, "everything is fine, we have our Father Tomor." And saying this, he pointed with a gesture over his shoulder in the direction of Greece, the location of Mount Tomor.

* * *

Dear little Albania, how much trouble have you been given! You have seen enough of the foreign hordes attracted by its vast plateaus and rich valleys, by its splendid Riviera, covered with olive trees at the foot of which play, under the bronze sun, the blue waves of the Adriatic!

We understand that Albania provokes covetousness and bad humour on the part of its neighbours. Small Albania, Father Tomor's children, which amount to just over a million, is a model of a People's Republic, a People's Republic which, marching patiently, silently but willingly on the road to socialism, does not like being pushed around.

The transition from feudalism, where the peasantry owned nothing, to agricultural cooperation was made immediately with the enthusiastic support of the masses. Today, peasant cooperatives are thriving and have no remains of feudalism.

Except in the mountains where large-scale farming is impossible to carry out, I have not seen the slightest plot of unused or misused land in the middle of this vast movement of collectivization. I hope that our agricultural workers from France will one day be able to carry out this feat!

Why does this cooperative movement arouse such enthusiasm? It was the peasants themselves who gave me the answer: "Before, we cultivated these lands for the lords. By dividing them between us, we had about one hectare each — it was be a lot of trouble and we could not survive off our land. Now look at us!"

* * *

Perhaps there will be people who disdainfully think that the Albanian people are only a small people and that it is land which is great.

Yes, but if a million men, women and children constitute only a fragment of humanity, the conquest of happiness has no less value for the little countries than for large ones. Each human being — you know this well, those who have read my previous works — constitutes in itself a person within a nation with needs of its own, specific aspirations and dreams that seem impossible in the current system and this raises questions for leaders. The solu-

tion is the liquidation of capitalism and the construction of socialism both on the small scale of Albania as well as on a massive scale like China.

In Albania as in China, everyone knows that without the victory of socialism in the Soviet Union, that without its enormous sacrifices during the last war against the most colossal army that the capitalist system has ever produced, no people would have been able to break its chains and to this day the Albanian people, as well as their brothers from the Balkan countries of Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria would still be plunged into the night of feudal barbarism.

Attracted by the courage of this small people who, imprisoned by their geographical situation, conquered their independence arms in hand, I wanted to visit Albania, this harsh and beautiful country.

Luck favoured me because I had as a guide a veteran of the National Liberation War, a member of the National Assembly, a member of the Institute of Sciences, and a man who has mastered the French language, Comrade Zihni Sako.

With him, I travelled almost all the highways, visited all the major cities, made contact with populations of different nationalities, made many discoveries in contact with the workers, the peasants,

the children and the students of the Pedagogical Institute, everywhere I've tasted the sweetness of a warm hospitality, in the heart of the mountain ranges, on the Albanian Riviera and on the shores of lakes of wild beauty that the plundering and uneducated bourgeoisie has not deflowered.

Dear little and beautiful Albania where beneficent freedom flourishes, what good memories I owe you!

FATHER TOMOR

Tall, massive and prominent in the centre of southern Albania, Mount Tomor looks upon these lands.

It would have been a breeze to fly from Sofia to Tirana if the plane which connects the two capitals had not been forced to make a very wide and expensive detour via Belgrade from where, subsequently, it must legally cross the Albanian-Yugoslavian border at a designated flight path 6,000 metres above sea level to fly over the Montenegrin massif.

Nevertheless, I saw him quite closely, Mount Tomor, during my hikes on the mountain roads.

Ah! If only he had a mouth, he could tell stories about its long history to us tourists!

It has witnessed countless foreign invasions over the centuries, great battles and bloodshed which flows towards the Adriatic, fertilizing the plains in their path.

Joyous Albanians who have, in addition to the People's Republic, a great father, Mount Tomor with them: everything grows abundantly thanks to him — wheat, maize, beets, tobacco and grapes suitable for wine.

Except in the Soviet Union, I have never seen such rational use of land on

such vast expanses anywhere else, and I was greatly surprised to discover vast cotton plantations that dominate the landscape from Vlora to Durrës, on the shores of the Adriatic.

It was no small feat to achieve this, especially the cultivation of sugar beets. The farmers of the Albanian plains, accustomed to growing maize for large landowners, initially resisted this change. It was necessary to explain to them that sugar, which used to be imported before the People's Republic, was an enormous source of wealth for them and the nation. Not far from Korça, I saw the first sugar refinery, built on the edge of the fields that stretched as far as the eye could see. For the first time in Albanian history, long convoys of sugar beets were converging towards it, coming from huge silos concentrated on the outskirts of the villages.

Mount Tomor is like an old sorcerer who, by summoning storms over the region, enables immense herds of sheep to collectively earn their living by grazing on the aromatic grass among the arbutus trees and boxwoods on the mostly forestless mountain slopes.

I have seen countless sheep, sometimes numbering in the thousands, crossing the road we drove on under the guidance of a single shepherd!

They made our driver grumble — drivers are always in a hurry — but they allowed me to get out of the car and greedily inhale the fragrant smell of the mountains, isolated from the smells of the big cities. I gazed upon the magnificence of the horizon under the gentle embrace of a sky that was as beautiful as a spring morning in France!

I saw Father Tomor again when we were at the edge of the Korçan plain, not far from the Greek border. We could catch a glimpse of the first major village I saw nestled in a fold of the mountains.

It was evening, and the setting sun, which had disappeared from our view, cast fiery glimmers on the peak of the mountain, which soon faded into slate-coloured reflections.

As night fell, house after house, each hearth lit up like the stars in the sky, and it was delightful to hear the laughter of the grape pickers returning to the village.

Some may argue that the laughter of grape pickers can bring joy without needing to travel so far and that there are vineyards in France as well. That is true, and I have often spoken of grape harvests and grape pickers. But do you know what laughter means in the serenity of conquered freedom after centuries of slavery?

THERE WAS A SHEPHERDESS

I saw many children in Albania barely out of diapers: they didn't wear glasses, moustaches or smoke pipes.

What I say about it is not addressed to you, modest readers, more adept at handling the file or the hammer, the pick or the trowel than the thick books of Marx and Engels. You have, in fact, more savvy in your little finger than many little radicals (vultures who gnaw on the carcass of metaphysics) carry in their heads while claiming to illuminate the path to socialism by talking out of their intellectual asses.

I am not here to provide an account of my journey to Albania for those high and mighty dogs; they would find nothing but all the prickly thorns that come with revolution and would yelp about how things are not perfect until the cows come home.

Have you heard them talk about our capital? They only see the Champs-Elysées, luxurious shops, hotels, taverns and bistros, jewelry, makeup and fashionable frolics in the eccentric neighbourhoods.

But what about the people, what about their lives, what about their slums, what about their atrocious miseries, what about

their struggles against capitalist exploitation more than a century and a half after the French Revolution?

The question an honest observer should ask when visiting a country on the path to socialism is this: How long has the people's state power been established? What was the situation under the old regime? What is the meaning and what is the scale of the transformations that are taking place?

It is at this point that a comparison can be honest, not by contrasting the situation of the masses in socialist and people's democratic countries with the affluence and luxury of the owning classes in a capitalist regime, but by comparing the size of the gap between those certain social classes enjoying a privileged position compared to the vast majority of workers.

* * *

To tell the truth, I have encountered neither luxury nor opulence in Albania. There are no towering buildings that characterize the grand neighbourhoods, no glittering stores where the genius of national production is concentrated after 150 years of capitalist experience which cannot obscure, in the eyes of a conscientious observer, the genuine state of the proletarian condition contrasting with the

excess of wealth displayed by the bourgeoisie.

I have seen Albania as it is after twelve years of people's state power, and I am attempting to describe it, asking my readers to give it time to grow.

But to understand the true majesty of Albania one must go to Shkodra, crouched on the edge of its lake, sheltered by a feudal fortress, perched on a mountain ridge, where Skanderbeg, the national hero, lived and died during the time of Turkish domination.

The road from Tirana to Shkodra is an Albanian road one of a kind in its magnificence: it is paved.

The road is crisscrossed by carts pulled by small horses and donkeys loaded with goods going back and forth between villages, and you will come across herds of sheep and cows, ducks and geese that, not under the jurisdiction of any police force, do not observe the local traffic laws.

Because of this, cars go slowly: I thought to myself, that duck is an asset more important than the old do-nothing king who, for 10 years, reigned over Albania.

I have time while waiting to thoroughly analyse my surroundings and to dismount from time to time, allowing herds to pass, crossing the road, completely indifferent

to the technological progress represented by our car which has the power of 12 horses.

Arriving halfway through our trip, in a village overlooking the bed of a river obscured by the greenery, there are tall wild plane trees, as you can see everywhere in Albania, except for large cities that have domesticated trees. We stop next to a small gathering of people, men, women and children who soak up the sun at noon.

Did I already mention that there are neither restaurants nor hotels for tourists on the roads of Albania?

That is why I was accompanied on this drive by a basket filled with provisions: ham, hard-boiled eggs, chicken, cheese, bread and bottles of beer.

There are no restaurants, but there are cafés where one can dine. The one we entered was almost full, filled with Albanians, accordion music and smoke. It smells of life, nature and good spirits for us, who are not royalty and eat like everyone else, sitting on a stool.

* * *

The road from Tirana to Shkodra marked the beginning of my journey in Albania; it was a road full of surprises. We had left the capital behind us for quite some time, and we were in the midst of

the countryside. To the left, there was the plain bordering the Adriatic, and to the right, the mountains. It was then that I spotted an Albanian woman walking slowly towards us.

She carried her child on her back, following the Muslim custom, and was spinning wool with a spindle and a distaff.

"It was a shepherdess," the memory of the old song my grandmother used to sing to me came to mind, many years after the use of her distaff and spindle had ceased.

But this Albanian woman was not a shepherdess; she came from a neighbouring village, across the mountains, and was wearing a traditional costume made of coarse wool, adorned with red and blue handwoven embroideries.

The regional costumes of both men and women are the dominant and almost exclusive feature in all Albanian countryside areas. They bear the mark of the traditional methods of production that have been used by the inhabitants for centuries.

The landowners and speculators who operated until Liberation used to sell the wool abroad and left the people to fend for themselves as best they could.

This woman did not find her work tiring or tedious; she spun the wool just as her ancestors had done.

I encountered hundreds of spinners on

the roads of Albania. They have the bright sun above their heads, freedom in their arms and time ahead of them — the time that carries progress and prosperity under the banner of the Democratic Republic.

But the path to socialism will not follow the same route as that of capitalism to reach modern technology: in Tirana, the first textile combine is already in operation, others will be built, while regional costumes will find their place in the museums of Albanian history.

MOTHER ESMA

I saw Mother Esma one day in Shkodra; we had entered a shop, just to browse through the shelves and the women who were feeling the fabrics spread out on the counter caught our eye.

Most of them were Muslim women, although they were not veiled. I could tell by their clothing, especially their headwear.

Among them was a woman from a nearby village who, upon noticing the man that I am, bareheaded, moustachioed and armed with his cane and pipe, exclaimed aloud, "He's a Soviet!"

They corrected her, and she replied, "It doesn't matter where you are from, you must come to my place. I'll show you the shack where I was living until recently. You must come; I am wealthy today."

Wealthy, Mother Esma? I simply did not believe it. Under her large shawl of pink and white checkered wool, which she habitually draws to the edge of her eyes, Mother Esma looks like all the women I meet in Shkodra. She resembles a woman of the people, dressed neatly, true, but that's all. There is no hint of wealth to be seen anywhere.

"Is she a miser?" I thought to myself. A miser never admits to being rich. Mother Esma intrigues me with her wealth, and as

she insists, having finished her shopping and being ready to return to her village, we get back into the car. Mother Esma can be quite talkative, all the while guiding our driver through the winding and muddy roads around Shkodra!

* * *

Near the village, we pass by peasants returning to the fields — pigs race through the fallow land, ducks and chickens quickly gather at the sound of the car, and geese chatter nonsense to us in a language that is quite unfamiliar to me. Finally, we arrive at a dusty crossroads, around which stand old mud-walled huts. "This is it," says Mother Esma.

There it is, a real house — a little more than "new," since it's unfinished, with walls of raw stones intermingled with rough bricks. In the middle of the facade is a raised porch without a balustrade, which you reach via a cement staircase without a handrail.

Standing on the edge of the porch, little Drita, who is only three years old, looks at us with her surprised black eyes while showing us her bare belly. She is Mother Esma's niece.

Mother Esma's family, her two sons, two daughters-in-law and two grandchildren, manage to make do in there as

best they can: each household has its own space, and the kitchen is shared.

This house was paid for by saving everyone's earnings. How good it is to make a better life for yourself, Mother Esma rubs her hands as she shows me her palace.

At Mother Esma's place, it is actually quite nice: the walls are adorned with framed chromolithographs, the pine floor with wide planks is polished, and there is a dresser, a table, chairs and shelves.

Then Mother Esma, her left arm crossing her chest, pointing with her other hand, showing what she is most proud of, says: "I have a fireplace, and I have a mirror."

Indeed, there is a fireplace in the corner and a mirror on the mantelpiece — a large mirror in its gilded frame. Mother Esma even looks at herself in it insistently.

Nevertheless, if everyone in France who had a fireplace and a mirror were considered rich, there would be far fewer poor people than the statistics show. I do not doubt that the metaphysical nitpickers in our midst, who always see the glass half empty, would find material to argue that socialist Albania is not as successful as us as it is no accomplishment to have a fireplace.

They should come back down to earth

because Mother Esma has opened the window and with her finger, she points to her old house, her shack, as she calls it, just a few steps away from there.

Her shack is in complete disrepair. The mud walls are cracked, the door and window gape open everywhere, and the roof is torn apart. As for the fireplace... The old house of Mother Esma did not have a fireplace, just like hundreds of thousands of Albanians throughout the country.

She used to make a fire on the beaten earth floor, right in the middle like everyone else, and the smoke went out wherever it could, after thoroughly filling the room and people with its presence.

Only the wealthy had the right to have a fireplace back in the day, which was a mere 12 years ago. Even today, when you talk to Albanians in rural areas about adding a fireplace to their new home, they still hesitate. They say with concern, "But we are not rich, we don't have the right to have one."

But yes, they have the right now, and this is what brings joy to Mother Esma, who had never even had the right to look at herself in a mirror in the prior regime, as a large mirror is meant to lean against the mantelpiece of a fireplace.

Mother Esma explained these changes in her own way, offering me small cakes.

She said, "You see, God is in all of nature, and the Communist Party is in all of our hearts." And as she had been busy at the cooperative milking cows, she concluded, "I have milked the cows, and the cooperative is moving forward!"

I think, as I faithfully recount this truth from Mother Esma, that socialism doesn't necessarily begin with a refrigerator or luxury cars in places where people were once not allowed to have a fireplace in their homes.

IT IS A QUESTION OF ARITHMETIC

"The cooperative is moving forward!" Mother Esma had told me. A cooperative that is moving forward is always better than one that is moving backward.

The issue of cooperatives moving forwards and backwards reminds me of a cooperative I visited more than 30 years ago in the Soviet Union, deep in the Ukraine.

In the Ukraine, I heard the story of a kind-hearted railway worker, at a station in the middle of the plain, who took the initiative to gather the peasants who had been given land confiscated from the kulaks. He explained to them that by forming a cooperative, things would improve because they were all working hard on their individual plots, and the profits they derived from them were quite minimal.

So they created the cooperative, which meant gathering all the agricultural equipment, wooden ploughs, carts, horses, spades, rakes, etc. into a central farm.

They also gathered the cows and even the chickens, and the peasants, both men and women, began working together in the combined fields.

At the end of the year, they settled the accounts, and well, the peasants realized that they were not making much more profit than before, and the cooperative started moving backward.

Old habits resurfaced, "So-and-so does less work than me, my horse is better than the old nag next door, I am a good milkmaid, but my milk doesn't earn me any more, and my land is more fertile than Mr. So-and-So's," etc., etc.

One by one, the peasants left the cooperative and went back to their own struggling routine, trying to make ends meet on their own.

Our poor railway worker was tearing his hair out when he got the idea to request a tractor from the Soviet government. He eventually received one, and from that moment on, the cooperative was re-established and moved forward.

It was a significant victory, greater than many can imagine. When the distribution of land among the peasants doesn't lead to cooperation, that is, collectivization within a certain period, it reactivates all the mechanisms of the capitalist system based on private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of man by man.

The distribution of land cannot be achieved according to ideal rules of equal-

ity. Inevitably, there are inequalities in the real value of land parcels, agricultural tools, the capacity of the peasants, the development of each household, family responsibilities and more. Some become richer while others become poorer, and the wealthiest eventually monopolize the land of the poorest and exploit them.

This is how capitalism is reconstituted and develops in rural areas, and the question of working-class and peasant power is sooner or later called into question.

So, Mother Esma's statement that "the cooperative is moving forward" was of significant interest to me. That's why we went to visit the cooperative where Mother Esma was milking cows.

Let me explain why collectivization is a question of arithmetic.

Before the advent of the People's Republic, five wealthy families owned everything in this area: land, people and livestock, totalling 332 hectares of land and 105 peasant families, which amounted to 670 inhabitants.

There were no schools, grocery stores or doctors. The wealthy families went to Shkodra for their healthcare needs and the population lived in miserable conditions.

In Dragoçi, as in all the rural areas of Albania, the land reform transitioned the land directly to the cooperative stage

without any transition, using a simple calculation.

If the 332 hectares were divided equally, each peasant family would have received approximately 3 hectares, and each inhabitant, out of the 232 capable of working, would have barely received half a hectare.

Dividing the 332 hectares wasn't just about splitting the land among families; it also meant dividing the cultivation for each of them: the three hectares were distributed for wheat, maize, tobacco, animal feed and orchards.

Peasants have common sense, and the 332 hectares were cultivated according to cooperative rules, with 120 hectares for wheat, 55 hectares for maize and 50 hectares for tobacco, leaving room for orchards, animal feed and individual gardens.

The cooperative harvests 1,700 kilograms of wheat per hectare, 3,500 kilograms of maize and 1,100 kilograms of tobacco.

Could such results have been achieved through individual farming? Obviously not, and that's why Mother Esma could say that "the cooperative is moving forward."

The means of production in the cooperatives range from iron ploughs

pulled by oxen to tractors. In a little while, tractors will become the general rule, resulting in much less effort and significantly higher yields.

The Dragoçi cooperative now has 40 cows, 120 heifers and 600 sheep, not to mention a large number of pigs.

Tobacco cultivation is not an innovation of the People's Republic, but under the old regime, tobacco leaves were exported, and there was no tobacco factory in Albania. Today, a tobacco factory built in 1950 is in full operation in Shkodra. It employs 800 women who, coming from the countryside, are now skilled workers.

Thus, the new society is being built step by step, marching confidently on a road that appears very secure to me.

In the evening, as we dine in a small restaurant in Shkodra, Abaz Bekteshi joins us. He is wearing the traditional white Albanian kaftan, a vest with embroidery crossing his chest, his legs covered with pants, white lace-up gaiters and a revolver with a silver handle tucked into his embroidered woollen belt.

Abaz Bekteshi, the artisan embroiderer from Shkodra, moves from table to table, very tall, as straight as an oak tree and full of vigour. He intrigues and impresses me when he reaches us, twirls his moustache and introduces himself to me,

clearly seeing that I don't fit the typical Albanian mould.

"I'm almost 90 years old," he tells me, "and I still work. No work, no man."

He doesn't have a single wrinkle, walks with the confidence of a drum major and I would estimate his age to be around 65 to 70. Abaz Bekteshi might be trying to make himself seem older, or perhaps he doesn't remember accurately.

It is a curious phenomenon that I must be cautious of: after a certain age, people take pride in adding extra years to their age, and I have a feeling that if I were to return to Shkodra soon, Abaz Bekteshi would introduce himself to me as someone over 100 years old.

"So, how are you doing?" I ask him.

"I fought with the partisans, here and there, during the war. Today, I'm doing well, and I'm happy to know there are men like Enver Hoxha because if I die, I won't have to worry about my children's future."

"But," I pointed out, "what's the purpose of the pistol you're carrying at your waist?"

"Ah, well, in Shkodra, we've always lived with freedom in our hearts and a pistol to defend it," he replied.

ON THE ROAD TO THE SOUTH

It seems to me that one can assert without exaggeration that our extensive road network, with its numerous secondary roads branching out, is the most beautiful in the world, the best maintained and the most drivable, considering the terrain. I want to mention the local roads as well, those gravel roads that go from one village to another through fields. Cyclists, scooter riders and drivers often take a detour of several kilometres to avoid them.

Sometimes you risk the adventure: everyone gets sick of it, you worry about the tires and you lament over the mechanics while driving on the not-so-precisely calibrated stones scattered in piles on the sides of the road.

Believe me, readers, if you decide to follow in my footsteps on the road to the south in Albania, don't act like know-it-alls: don't bring a French driver, even if they are an expert, or a car, even if it won the latest auto show. Instead, prepare your nerves and get vaccinations checked for fear and vertigo. Do as I did: trust the Albanian drivers completely and let them navigate the mountain roads that aren't really roads, and put your soul in the

hands of fate.

One hundred kilometres south of Tirana, the road that leads to the south, winding through the mountains and along the coast, ceases to be a road in any sense of the word.

Where I have passed during my travels, an ox-drawn cart from France would never dare to go, and I believe the oxen would be right.

We drove on a mountain path dusty and barren, with its slopes and jumps, its rolling stones occasionally falling down the cliffs, its abrupt inclinations towards abysses without guardrails, without the slightest embankment to pull into if the car breaks down and without any road signs.

The road very rarely resembled a dry riverbed, and the car rolled along, and I mean roll in a literal sense, not on the flat backs of donkeys as we say back in France, but as if on giant camel skeletons, we went from lowland to highlands and highlands to lowlands for hours.

We saw no houses, not a single place for refuge, apart from the rare villages we pass through when we reach the plains or the high plateaus. If we have the slightest mechanical incident, it will be a breakdown with no prospect of turning back. You can't backtrack on such roads or

move forward if luck isn't on your side and you can't get a tow.

When we occasionally ran out of gasoline, I pushed the car forward as much as I could: with my chest, arms and legs. As for the brave chauffeur, always smiling, even-tempered and attentive, he seemed to be in his element, just like his car, a Soviet model that made it through this 400-kilometre ordeal without a single scratch or flat tire, leaving me with a taste of an experience that I remember without the slightest bitterness.

"Fortunately," I thought to myself, "we are alone, and no vehicle is coming towards us: no chance of a car crash!"

Well, I was wrong! Mistakes on the road are possible, a bus makes this journey every day and one of them suddenly appeared in front of us at a turn. It pulled over to our left: the two right wheels gripping the mountainside caused it to tilt at a 45-degree angle. I sat next to the driver, overlooking the abyss, and I wasn't feeling too comfortable, but you get used to it over time.

* * *

Certainly, some gentlemen well-versed in the study of Albanian history might say that this road has no relation to the realization of socialism in the People's Repub-

lic of Albania, and Jean Brécot dares to blather on about it?

No, the southern road does not directly relate to the realization of socialism at the moment, but it has everything to do with the state in which the neighbours of Albania, the predators from Turkey, Greece, Germany and Italy, as well as the national plunderers, left this country after centuries of domination and until the establishment of the People's Republic.

The southern road? It is a faithful reflection of their greed and their disregard for humanity, and there are others like it.

Well, as my comrades there explained to me, the road has been like this for centuries. It was originally carved into the mountains as a route for invading armies, and over time, snow, rain, storms and landslides have eroded, deformed and pockmarked it. It can still be used for a few more years, but there are so many urgent tasks at hand.

I was lucky to arrive in time. I loved this southern road because we could only drive at 10 or 15 kilometres per hour. This gave me the time to see our surroundings clearly, and I was mesmerized by a splendid panorama of forests and the deep abysses with villages down at the bottom. I would stop to feast my eyes and pick wild strawberries in the bushes.

Now try to do that on the side of the motorway in France!

Our motorways are flat and lacking bumps with smooth curves, with well-marked clear lanes that let you hurtle down the road without ever slowing down. When a glimpse of beauty appears, by the time you catch it with your gaze, it's already passed. You feel bad that you missed it, but that is our modern life.

We never had the feeling that we missed something on the southern road, and that's how I was able to see little Albania, nestled in the heart of its mountains, in its fierce beauty.

FATHER KOLIPOSTALE'S SUITCASE

To the southeast of Pogradec, on the edge of the lake that bathes the mountains of Yugoslavia in front of us, the line of hills that connects the two mountain ranges from right to left crosses the horizon.

Korça is on the other side, about 30 kilometres to the south, and as soon as we crossed the hill range, a plain stretched out towards it. The road then abruptly veers towards the Greek border, which we can see on the horizon.

Halfway on route to Korça we stumbled upon a village with a café in the centre, and nestled against the mountain, a brand new sugar factory in operation.

Rows of carts loaded with sugar beets come from all the village cooperatives we can see scattered across this fully collectivized plain.

It seems to me that this is called moving towards socialism for the peasants who, 12 years ago, were miserable while working the same land without owning anything, to grow maize that the landowners exported for their exclusive benefit.

The socialization of the means of

production? If there are several paths to achieve socialism, it is true that they inevitably must go through this process, or else capitalism will be restored sooner or later. That's why the government of the People's Republic, led by Enver Hoxha, is strong.

In a country where the proletarian class was almost non-existent, he relied on the peasantry who seized the land with weapons in hand. This sugar factory is not just a means to produce sugar; those who work there have come from the countryside and thereby constitute a contingent of the proletarian class. Enver Hoxha told me: "We are creating a new working class."

The changes in the working and living conditions of the peasantry through agricultural cooperation, as I have seen up close, as well as the emergence of industry, remind me of stories my father told me of the peasants in my hometown of Azay-sur-Cher 60 years ago. They told that the collectivization of land would be necessary and beneficial. In Albania, it has been done to the greatest extent.

I also remember my dreams of anarcho-syndicalism from 40 years ago when I imagined that all we had to do was get rid of the capitalist state and everything would fall into our lap: "mines for the min-

ers," "railways for the railway workers," "wheat for the peasants," "bread for the bakers," right? And shortly thereafter, the liberation of the individual, with a capital I, from all systems, from all discipline.

The bourgeoisie allowed the preachers of anarchism to pontificate freely in these philosophical swamps, but things began to sour precisely when we tackled the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist state. Lenin, who explained this to me in a meeting I had with him 34 years ago, clarified that the socialist state was necessary for a long period before the transition to communism.

We are not yet at communism in Albania, as we know. The state has not withered away, and the Albanian people are still fighting for the many accomplishments they have won.

* * *

Father Kolipostale does not indulge in philosophical anticipations about the withering away of the People's State of Albania: he is replenishing himself.

I met Father Kolipostale in a house at the cooperative centre of Terova, along with a group of peasants with whom we raised a glass and chatted.

This house belongs to the mother of

the hero Terova, who was killed during the National Liberation War. There are two rooms furnished with beds covered with sheets, a wardrobe and a table, and right next to it, another room opens to the courtyard where I see a large pile of magnificent apples, which Mother Terova wants to stuff into my pockets.

The cooperative of Terova, about 15 kilometres from Korça, is centred around the village, which currently has 250 inhabitants, including Father Kolipostale. The entirety of equipment, village, people, livestock and land was in the hands of three owners before Liberation.

The distribution of land would have given each household about one-third of a hectare, barely enough to starve to death from evening to morning, much like it used to be in the old days.

That's why Father Kolipostale left for America 15 years ago, along with thousands of other Albanian peasants who, like him, couldn't take it anymore.

Father Kolipostale returned not long ago, after many difficulties, given that the American authorities did everything to keep him from returning, just as they still keep many by telling many immigrants about the "atrocities" that Albania has suffered since the arrival of the People's Government.

Finally, one fine day, he returned to his village and went to see his friends, the cooperative peasants, saying, "I am here again, do you accept my return?"

Of course, they said yes, since he is here with them, chatting with us in Mother Terova's new house, where one of the owners used to live.

They calculate their balance sheet in front of me: we have 230 hectares of land in a single field, planted with wheat, beets, potatoes, barley and maize.

This year, they harvested 1.9 tonnes of wheat per hectare and 20 tonnes of beets. They still have what they claim to be the best potatoes in Albania to harvest alongside barley and maize.

They also have an orchard that yielded 60,000 kilograms of apples for export.

They have cows and sheep; the cows provide them with 15 litres of milk per day.

Everyone has their own house, a garden, a pig and a more than sufficient share of potatoes and apples.

"This was unthinkable only 15 years ago," Father Kolipostale says, "when I left for the America."

"Well," I said to him, "you spent 15 years in America, so what did you bring back?"

Father Kolipostale ran his thumb and

index finger through the grey hairs of his moustache and swayed from one foot to the other. "I'll tell you," he said. "Here, those pigs left us with nothing, not even a piece of leather to mend our boots. Over there, in the Americas, I didn't have an easier time, and I didn't get rich. But I left with nothing but a sack of clothes and all I came back with was a suitcase made of wood fibre."

Father Kolipostale has a sense of humour.

SOCIALISM ON THE RISE

Nothing is more moving for a militant who has kept the flame of communism burning in their heart for years than a visit to the Terova cooperative, whose village, in the middle of the plain, can be seen from afar as soon as you leave Korça.

However, we are accustomed to observing rural life as it still exists in France under the system of private property, with its seemingly independent small- and medium-sized peasantry, even though they are, in reality, subject to the laws of competition imposed by large landowners, we need to adjust our perspective to appreciate the cooperative movement in Albania after several years of people's state power.

In the plains of Korça, this village in its middle, these peasants who cultivate the land don't offer anything new to a superficial mind. Nothing has changed in appearance.

However, an extraordinary transformation has already taken place: before the advent of the People's Republic, everything belonged to the master — the land, the village and the people.

One of the landowners wanted to sell his property, and he determined its value and price: a certain number of hectares,

a certain number of livestock, a certain number of houses and a certain number of peasants to work the land. Nothing was overlooked; everything was included in the deal.

* * *

Can one imagine the change that has occurred both in the minds and daily lives of the Albanian people?

They are free.

The village belongs to them. Even in their rather old houses, they are truly at home. Everyone has their garden, a pig and chickens.

This land, still with rudimentary means of cultivation, but where steel ploughs and tractors are starting to appear, is their common property.

Together, they once toiled like dogs for the master, but now, in their village committee, they discuss and decide their own fate. Politically and morally liberated by the revolution, cooperation both economically and physically liberates them from feudal oppression. With the collectivization of land, they have taken a decisive step, making way for a happiness they didn't dare dream of before. This is achieved through the more or less rapid, yet certain, introduction of modern technology in their vast plains causing a rad-

ical transformation in their living conditions.

Everything will be renovated, including their houses and furniture. There is no running water, gas or electricity in the village, no school, no post office, no doctor, no sports field, no cinema and not even a street. But all of this will come, they know it, and the People's Government is truly their government. Woe to anyone who tries to harm it and turn the wheel of history backward.

* * *

Everything seems simple in hindsight, it is always simple for those who look at what has been done. People are surprised that it took so long to invent the wheelbarrow by placing the wheel between two planks of wood. In reality, the transition to the cooperative system in Albania was not as simple as one might imagine.

A transfer of responsibility from the master, who used to decide everything, to the community on which everything now depends, disrupts many habits and ways of thinking. It completely dismantles them, and it takes fresh ideas in people's minds to create something new.

We were talking about it one evening as we returned from the village, and I was told the following anecdote. It's a story

that echoes throughout the Albanian plains and, as it is, it accurately conveys what happened at the end of the battles against the invader.

At the end of the war, with the People's Republic proclaimed, it was necessary to think about building the new, first in the countryside. There it was important to explain to the peasants, who were unfamiliar with the concept, what socialism was and how to achieve it.

There was no shortage of fighters to liberate Albania, almost as many as there were Albanians. Daring and intrepid individuals came from all corners of the country.

But fighting is one thing. It was another to thing explain to all these brave individuals the path to follow after the victory, and this had to be done rapidly and everywhere across Albania at the same time.

What would you expect the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Albania to do, newly emerged and formed primarily in the midst of the struggle, if not to send instructors to all the villages?

The instructor who came to the neighbouring village, near Lake Prespa and at the foot of the mountains, was a brave man, having earned his place at the head of the local partisans. However, he hadn't taken the time to read Marx, Lenin and

Stalin. There is a strange condition that happens to some men who are educated and uneducated on Marxism alike. They prattle on, quibble and extract from a single word they've read a pretext to argue with you, all while flattering their own ego.

Such was not the case for our man; he did everything he could and shared what he knew with the assembled peasants in front of him.

"Now we must build socialism," and the peasants perked up their ears. "There are challenges," and the peasants scratched their heads. "We must climb, always climb," some peasants felt the splinters in their wooden clogs. "Sometimes, you must descend, but you must not be discouraged. You must overcome the obstacles and climb again," and with his arm outstretched towards the horizon, he pointed to Mount Tomor, whose peak emerged on the horizon like an everlasting symbol of socialism.

"We will get there, my friends, believe me. Who would like to speak?" concluded our orator.

It was then that an old peasant, after brushing his moustache with a sweep of his hand, explained the following:

"I have given everything I have for communism. I don't have much, but I

have given it. But I am unsure if I can climb up there, for I am too old now. The youth should be able to do it, as it will be good for them. I will just stay down here to work the land, our common property."

* * *

The sun was about to set in the shadow of Mount Tomor, and our visit concluded as we made our way back.

Emerging at the entrance to the village and coming from the fields, in a running and grunting band, in single file, all the pigs of the area, without a shepherd or dog at their heels, cut off our road out.

And I saw them each turning in their own direction, some to the right, some to the left, heading back, fresh and plump, to their new master's house.

A BOAT ON A LAKE

"Of course, there are fish in Lake Pogradec, but we also have them in our Lake Prespa, in the 'wolf's maw.'"

As soon as someone mentions a lake to me, I listen eagerly. Even if it's in the maw of a wolf, I'm tempted to snatch its fish.

But it is still far: Lake Prespa is at the bottom of the plain, nestled in the mountains, in the extreme southeast of Albania, just a stone's throw from the Greek border.

As we cross into Korça, we come across Vimitri, who, with her shopping bag on her arm, is heading to the market. Vimitri is the leading actress in the folklore club of Korça. We pick her up in our car, she looks at herself in the mirror, pouts, adjusts her hair, powders her cheeks and squeezes herself as best she can at the back between my two travel companions. With the engine setting the rhythm, we tell each other stories that make us burst into laughter. It's much more entertaining than speeches about the withering away of the state after 12 short years of people's state power.

Things are clear to me: the whole plain is before my eyes — in the background, to the right, to the left. The whole plain forms a single whole cultivated according to a judiciously established cultivation

plan for maximum yield. In the province, there are 1,500 hectares of arable land for 200,000 farmers and 10,000 skilled labourers, 34,000 sheep, 20,000 goats and large herds of cows. These are the conditions of Pogradec province.

"We hold the high the banner of friendly competition, and we are winning," the workers from Korça told me. "We'll take away that banner from those Korçan guys," the workers from the Gjirokastra sector told me a few days later. We'll see who wins...

Bumping along, we approach a crevasse on the side of the road along the feet of the mountain where the famous lake with its wolf's maw is nestled.

This time the engine struggles, and so do I. We cross ravines, climb over stone blocks and sink into the muddy ground up to the axles. The wolf's maw awaits us, waiting for us on our two legs, and it absorbs us as soon as we cross a small wooden bridge connecting the rocky mountains on the right and left, under which the lake water flows to irrigate the plain.

Small fish form entire clouds that wiggle in the blue water — there is everything, trout, gardon and carp. The large fish linger further away in a veritable forest of long reeds dotted with clearings which give me the sinful desire to fish to

my heart's content.

The edges of the lake are not sandy; with each step, I stumble on roughly hewn stones. But the lake is there in all its wildness, with only one hut to my right, a fishermen's hut, in case of a storm.

A lake under a forest of reeds with clearings? No competitors within sight, not even a boat! And to think that I didn't dare bring with me from Paris my reel, long-range landing net and half-cubic metre keepnet!

But then I see two fishermen who, having set out from the opposite shore, came towards us, rowing with a short wooden paddle while standing in what serves as their boat: a hollowed-out trunk of a large oak, shaped to a point at the front with strokes of an axe.

So, centuries have passed over Albania, conquerors succeeding other conquerors, traffickers following traffickers, King Zogu — most recently — following other monarchs, without the slightest change occurring in the simple life of these mountain fishermen.

Boats other than oak trunks? They don't have that idea because they have never seen any.

Their fishing method hasn't changed either. From the lake's edge where we were and where these fishermen had landed, a

coarse net was stretched towards the open water for about 15 metres, leaning against the reeds and held by stakes.

But some perpendicular corridors leading to the net are arranged in this forest of reeds, and the fishermen armed with poles drive the fish into the trap, where it gets caught like a fool with a makeshift landing net.

Good people received us with inexpressible joy, not accustomed to seeing visitors in this place where the mountain and its silence reign, and where one can go nowhere but by bumping against the rock walls to return to the "wolf's maw."

"How was the catch?" I asked. One of them unrolled a mat of reeds before my eyes and revealed to me, turn by turn, the product of their morning catch: a hundred kilograms of beautiful trout, carp, huge lively and twitching gardons, eels of all sizes stretching and trying to return to their old, swaying, blue palace adorned with reeds.

Wow! If only I had my fishing gear, spinning reel, long-handled landing net and half-cubic metre keepnet, I would have gone there, to the clearing beyond the reeds, in that oak trunk boat, and I would have shown the fishermen how to prepare some fried fish as we do back home in Touraine!

But how could we prepare fried fish on the edge of a lake, without fire, without a frying pan, without flour, without oil and without a knife or fork?!

Perched on a promontory jutting out over the waters of the lake, hair in the wind and pipe in mouth, I talked about our fried fish from the shores of the Cher and the Loire for a while when the fishermen presented their way of cooking fish: trout on a plate of newspaper, grilled over a fire of twigs — as has been done for centuries in the village near the lake, perched mountainside.

If you are moulded by 150 years of bourgeois civilization, go un-mould yourself and have lunch on the shores of Lake Presba. As for me, Jean Brécot, I know how to transport myself more than a century back to see what needs to be seen.

My companions and I relive the old traditions. The grilled fish was good, and the table was sturdy under the ceiling of the sky. I filled my pipe, sang a song and left the wolf's maw. Nearby are the vineyards of the neighbouring cooperative, young and dense vines where the grape pickers of the new era are working. I had a nice snack by biting into the bunch.

As for wine, we'll talk about that later. That night I drank beer; it was good, and the brewery was nearby in Korça.

THE FESTIVAL OF FIRE

We visited the vineyards, hillside vineyards that reminded me of the hillsides of Layon in Anjou, the vigorous vines composing their bouquet in light and stony soil, and pumping their sugar in the warm rays of the sun at 800 metres above sea level, carrying their bunches of grapes in full abundance.

And what bunches they were! I could see different kinds of them, white and purple, some enormous, with the main cluster having, like the arms of Vishnu, multiple sub-clusters filled with grapes shaped like large olives in shades of polished gold, others with grapes pressed against each other, black and perfectly ripe, all distributed haphazardly in the rows — grapes for the table, grapes for the press picked at the same time, in the same basket and thrown into the same barrel.

This vineyard belonged to a village cooperative located not far from Lake Presba, deep in Albania and newly planted: an innovation for these peasants who, unlike us winemakers, cannot claim a tradition of wine, nor a skill at the art. they have at best the goodwill of Mother Nature to make such wonderful grapes.

But one thing they were skilled at was harvesting and my visit coincided with

the harvest: all the women of the village were on site, going from vine to vine, the harvest was superb, and I really couldn't resist the urge — a desire that I felt rising from the depths of my youth — to do my little share of work, and in the evening, at dinner, we talked about it.

"Dear friends from Korça, it is not enough to just plant any kind of vine to make wine capable of leaving a visitor from Touraine speechless!

"Know that the plants must be rigorously selected based on the nature and exposure of the land, and that you should not mix different types of grapes, neither red nor white. In short, you must know how to compose your vine to be able to compose a great wine.

"Know also that the proverb saying that wine becomes good in old skins is false when the skins are not thoroughly rinsed and free of aftertaste.

"Barrels, tanks and bottles for wine, thoroughly cleaned and smelling good, are indispensable conditions for having good wine when the grape variety is good and the harvest is ripe. There are other little secrets of winemakers that you will need to know because, on your hills of Korça, you can produce wines of not too harsh vintages, aromatic and of very high quality. To put it plainly, you should be able to

impress our connoisseurs.

"As soon as you embark on this path, follow it to the end: organize a wine festival every year with a competition of vintages between your cooperatives!"

That was roughly my harvest speech in Korça. As we sat at the table musicians, singers and dancers prepared to present their folklore productions, and I could feel all the nostalgia of the mountains.

This idea of the wine festival plunged my friends into a reverie! Daydreaming of such a festival brought back a memory from the past for them.

In the province of Korça, they told me, there was a tradition, now somewhat forgotten, of the festival of fire, which took place in spring.

On that day, at the entrance of each village, a flower arch was erected, and all the fires were extinguished in the homes. Under the flower arch, they followed the ancient tradition of the first fire of the warm months using a wooden log they spun around in a hole carved in a stone until the first spark appeared. With this spark, they lit twigs and then a real fire, which was carried into the hearths amid general joy, dances and songs.

In my opinion, it was an admirable tradition, and how touching was this festival of fire passed down from generation

to generation through the ages. It connected people, and in their minds, each step taken by humanity on the path of progress, from antiquity to the discovery of electricity and its application to various needs of modern life, was linked.

For the Albanians, there is a long journey from the first ancient fire to the first power plant that operates today beneath the mountains of Tirana! However, everything is linked from one discovery to another in order to ultimately ensure the prosperity of all in a society where capitalists can no longer interfere, as is the case in Albania.

And since the capitalists are no longer there, dear friends from Albania, I humbly ask you to invite me to a wine festival — and the harvest festival — as soon as you have learned the secrets of our winemakers.

And if it happens that I return to see you, with a bottle from back home for such a special occasion, I'll bring my goblet, which was baptized with only the finest wines from the Vouvray wine fair in Touraine.

THE PASS OF THE STRAWBERRY TREES

On Sunday, October 14, it was decided that we would embark on a great adventure. Travelling by mountain road in Albania is always an adventure. You bring provisions to have lunch in a place not planned in advance, arrive in the evening for dinner and lodging when no one expects you, and there is always the risk of being delayed by a road incident. This is what I call travelling according to my preferences when it comes to Albania because everything is unforeseen, surprising, simple and charming, provided you're not too delicate, not afraid of a bit of roughness and not wearing polished shoes.

This great adventure in Albania is about 400 to 500 kilometres roundtrip from Tirana, taking the grand tour in three stages through Berat, Gjirokastra, Delvina and Vlora, making it a remarkably impressive five-day journey.

From Tirana to Berat, we drive on asphalt, which is a treat. From there, the road splits into two branches: one goes to Pogradec and its large lake, then to Korça and the Greek border to the southeast.

The other one goes south, along the Greek border, turning towards the Adri-

atic in the direction of Corfu, reaching Vlora, and through the splendid Albanian Riviera, brings one back to Durrës and Tirana.

We chose the latter, where we will bump along after admiring Berat, this lovely little town that, gracefully leaning on the Osumi River, arches its enticing back against the mountain, under the rays of the sun and amidst islets of greenery.

It is Sunday, the whole population is in the main street, by the river, on the terrace of cafés; everything here exudes prosperity and emancipation in the tranquil joy of a people after centuries of servitude.

* * *

Before reaching Berat, we crossed a plain that seemed immense to me from Durrës and of extreme fertility: everything is cultivated there — wheat, maize, olives, cotton, fruits — the figs of Berat are famous. I saw numerous herds of cows, sheep, goats, horses and donkeys.

The nitpickers can always quibble about the fact that after 12 years of the People's Republic, there are more donkeys than motor cars on the roads, but in the meantime, it is the donkey that carries the man in Albania. It doesn't get carried by him, and certainly not governing him as before.

* * *

Having left Berat, crossing the river and climbing the first pass, we found ourselves in complete solitude on the most picturesque and incredible road I have ever travelled.

We drive along the ridge, and on my right, far below, is the relief of the massif whose colours blend under the fog of this October morning, feeling like a summer morning under the blue sky.

I glimpse at a few villages here and there lost in the depths of this chaos, and I can't see any means of communication to connect them or reach our road: the paths are too narrow, too erratic to be visible from where I am.

That means some people live around here isolated from the rest of the world, who probably don't know what the words "city," "cars," "telegraph," "radio" or "train" mean, and I made these observations to my guide.

"It's true," he told me, "they have always lived like this, with their traditions. Until the advent of the Republic, no one ever thought about them, except to plunder them, but not a single one of these villages is unknown to the partisans, who led the struggle for the independence of Albania, and all these mountaineers fought

at our call. We are here precisely in the region where Enver Hoxha came from, where I also fought, centred around the city of Gjirokastra, where we will spend the night. Everything will come in its time, everything will transform, we will march on," he concluded.

We chat at the top of a high pass in an admirable location. Here, the mountain is so kind with its forest of strawberry trees with red fruits!

Not a soul in sight, not a sound, how pure and sweet the air is to breathe! On my left, a few dozen kilometres away and overlooking the vast and splendid panorama, Mount Tomor finally has snow on its peak.

THE MARRIAGE OF LULE

When she came into the world, her parents gave her a name that carried the scent of maternal love; they called her Lule, meaning "flower" in Albanian, a flower from a village nestled in the mountains, among the few that I glimpsed along the way after leaving the pass.

Lule was born 16 years ago, the earliest possible age to get legally married since the advent of the People's Republic's laws against child marriage.

It is a long 16 years, and I am not sure if Lule's parents forged her date of birth on the civil registry to comply with the old tradition that girls are obligated to get married as soon as they reach 14 or 15 years old.

Whatever the case may be, the time has come: she is getting married.

But there is one hitch: they haven't found her a husband.

Where will they find one? There isn't one in the village, according to her parents, who don't ask what she thinks about it or if she is in such a hurry to tie the knot.

She has parents who love her a lot, and they want to ensure her happiness and leave nothing to chance.

Fortunately, there is Petrit (the matchmaker), the great specialist in these mat-

ters. He travels the entire region on horseback and knows all the villages, all the families, all the girls who are ready to marry and all the boys willing to take a wife.

He kept his calendar up to date, this famous Petrit, and as soon as he noticed that Lule turned 16, he didn't waste a day before going to her parents' house through the mountain paths.

"Well, I know a young man who wants to take a wife, he lives in a village 30 kilometres from here, does that suit you?"

"Why not? We can always see," and so Petrit, having mounted his horse, goes to present the matter to the boy's parents, after which he organizes a meeting between the two families halfway between the two villages.

Lule doesn't need to worry about such things; they discuss, each one praises their own child, and it's clear that Lule, who is not present at the meeting, is quite sought after. According to her parents, she is the most beautiful girl Albania has ever seen, she is hardworking and knows how to do everything.

"And our boy?" the other parents boast, "there is no one more handsome, more robust, and more honest in the world!"

Then the focus is on the dowry; it's not about rivers of diamonds or government

bonds, and even less about shares in an oil company. Lule's dowry is a painted wooden chest that contains clothes and shoes.

Finally, the wedding date is set, a Sunday in autumn.

Petrit has completed his mission; he receives a pair of shoes as a gift from the future groom and sets off again on his explorations.

* * *

For an entire week leading up to the set date, there is are celebrations in each of the villages. On the eve of the wedding, both families gather friends and relatives to bake a large loaf of bread for the wedding day.

Then, early on this blissful day, at least for Lule's parents and friends, they set out for the groom's village.

It was Lule and her fellow villagers who were coming towards us on that same road that Sunday, as we were heading to Gjirokastra.

A pretty little horse walked at the forefront, accompanied by a painted wooden chest attached to its side.

Following the horse there was a group of riders — they wore a white cap, embroidered woollen vests, embroidered jackets with wide sleeves, trousers tight at the calves with cloth gaiters, wide woollen

belts and revolvers at the waist.

Finally, here is Lule in the rear, appearing to my inquisitive gaze in the form of a sugarloaf of scarlet red, well-balanced on the back of a charmingly harnessed little horse whose tail tries to sweep away the dust of the road.

Lule, tightly wrapped in red cloth from head to the thighs, impervious to prying eyes, unaware of where she is going, seeing nothing around her, is heading towards her destiny, towards a man she has never seen, who has never seen her, and who awaits her there in his house, nestled in the mountains.

As soon as we saw them, we stopped as we were on the extreme edge of the road to give them passage, the horsemen — the father of the bride, his brothers and friends — dismounted and came to meet us, all joyful, handsome fellows, very open and courteous. "Friends, today is a beautiful day, let's drink," and each of them presented us with a small flask of alcohol, and we had to taste it as a treat. Our driver, however, was offered none, as the horsemen explained, "the road that way is difficult." Indeed, the road to Gjirokastra was not easy.

* * *

Lule passed in front of me in the form

of a scarlet sugarloaf.

In the chest, there is the famous bread, and when Lule arrives at the threshold of the house where her fiancé awaits, the bread will be broken into two parts over her head. When Lule enters the bridal chamber, she will hold them under her arms as a sign of prosperity.

But before that, a handful of wheat, rice, sugar and small change will be thrown at her as a sign of abundance. Then honey will be put on her fingers so that she can mark the door with it as a sign of love.

It is then that she opens the door, her veil is removed, she steps back and her new husband presents himself: they see each other for the first time.

It's very picturesque, but what could be happening in the consciousness of little Lule who doesn't even have the slightest clue of who she is going to be wed to?

I questioned, and no one could answer me, but a marriage in the Albanian mountains is not a bargain, despite appearances; it is a tradition born of geographical and economic conditions very easy to understand for anyone visiting this country.

She is soon to enter the bridal chamber with honey on her fingers, and her soon-to-be husband is a mountaineer, of whom all the ones I have met are both brave and beautiful. Does love often find its way into

our "developed" countries when it is the fruit of a more or less long-term illusion?

These customs are no longer practised in the cities. The time will come for the mountain dwellers of the new Albania — both girls and boys — to approach things differently, with the help of communist thought, and to seek love at higher levels, in the same struggle for a common ideal.

AN EXTRAORDINARY VILLAGE

No matter how long the path is and how much time it takes, when climbing a mountain range, one always ends up landing in a plain, unless one gets lost in the depths of a valley and pitches their tent there.

We spent four hours driving, from crest to deep valley and from valley to crest, bouncing, turning, plunging, and sometimes stopping to fill up on fresh air while chatting, picking up here and there a story with the scent of the local landscapes hanging around us...

This story, for example, is one that I remember...

"There was Drita, named after light, and Agim, named after the dawn. Drita was as pretty as a button and Agim was handsome, but too busy learning veterinary science to pay attention to her. They were put side by side in the back of the bus driving to Tirana.

"They arrive in a neighbouring village, surrounded by cows and bulls, without knowing each other anymore, indulge in their own way in the pleasures of love... Our veterinarian continues to read, but Drita gets annoyed and thinks he reads

too much.

"'Do tell me, you who study animals,' she finally said, nudging him with her elbow, 'how is it that they understand each other so well without speaking...'

"'They understand each other with their noses,' Agim replied, persisting in his reading.

"'Ah!' sighed Drita, 'I understand, my friend, you must have a cold...'"

After our chauffeur told us that story, we got back inside the car and crossed the last pass. There was a green plain, surrounded by a river and, nicely nestled between two mountain ranges, there on our right and clearly visible, was Gjirokastra, the extraordinary city where we would spend the night.

I don't know, my dears, if my travel stories will whet your appetite. If they do, and you feel like it, go to Gjirokastra, preferably on a day with clear skies, and above all, leave your lovely little Louis XV heels in the suitcase.

Have you been to Mont Saint-Michel? The mountain is covered from head to toe with houses fitting together. Gjirokastra is something like that but ten times larger. However, while Mont Saint-Michel has stairs, Gjirokastra does not. It is not streets or alleys that connect the houses clinging to the side of the mountain;

it seems more like torrents that, during storms, spill from top to bottom, carrying all the excess from the heavens down to the river.

To be fair, there is a central street, the main collector of the crowd, with a crossroads that serves as a forum and testifies to a bustling life. Elbowing is necessary to make your way through.

It was a Sunday when I was there. I saw the artisans on the threshold of their shops, the cobblers hawking settled on sidewalks, the merchants of fabrics, kitchen utensils and the merchants selling actual kitchens, shopkeepers hammering on copper, iron and leather, and others praising their merchandise, while the crowd was coming and going, creating a beautiful concert.

I love being immersed in this atmosphere, filling my ears with and feasting my eyes on it. I had to tear myself away from there; my poor shoes, with their propeller-like tips all curled up, couldn't take it anymore, nor could I, after walking around the city, going up and down on sharp stones of all sizes and in perfect states of unevenness.

Enver Hoxha was born here, in one of the multifaceted houses constructed from rough stones and covered with flat stones of various sizes, extracted from the moun-

tain many centuries ago.

Gjirokastra is like an old clock infested with worms — nothing can be changed or patched up. Everything intertwines like the links of a chain. Each ground floor becomes a story from one window to another, embedding itself in the walls of the neighbour below, just as Gjirokastra is embedded from top to bottom in the mountain. Here and there, one can see the emergence of a large fig tree inside the courtyards, perhaps serving as landings, extending its fruit-laden branches to everyone around it.

My guide, Comrade Zihni Sako, is here as if he were at home. At every street corner, someone will recognize him: he is a former partisan, an active officer, a Mr. Everything.

Good God, how tired my legs were, my feet were sore and my head was buzzing when, finally, the time came for dinner... in a hotel? No, there doesn't seem to be a hotel, not in Gjirokastra or in mountain cities. But a house, an old house of a former bourgeois reserved for passing visitors, from where, through the open window, I discover the city slopes down to the threshold of the plain.

In the evening we are to visit a reception at the officers' club where we will see and hear music, songs and folk dances.

Tomorrow, before heading south, we will climb all the way up to the terrace of the old feudal fortress from which the princess of this place jumped to her death in the dark valley to escape the Turks.

How many of these cities and towns have I seen clinging to the slopes of the mountain during my journey!

I noticed that with the plains down below, welcoming and watered by a clear stream, there would have been room to build a city more suitable for agriculture.

I soon remembered that we were on the route of the invaders, and I understand now: the Albanians were safer in the mountains, they could defend themselves better than in the plains against the invader.

Now Gjirokastra represents a page of a bygone history, and the city, like many others in Albania, has begun to build the new, especially along the road where I see a brand-new hospital and groups of houses being built with real streets for the new generations.

The old people of Gjirokastra built their old town with their flesh and blood during their historic struggles.

I have experienced similar things, by the way, but it is not the same thing.

The journey was worth it: Gjirokastra, I will remember you.

A SCHOOL IN THE VILLAGE

The southern road, where we crossed paths with little Lule heading towards her unknown fiancé, long before our stop in Gjirokastra, goes straight to Greece. A few kilometres from the border, we will have to turn to our right to avoid falling into the arms of the monarcho-fascists.

The plain of Gjirokastra, watered by a river, will also, like the river and our road, lead into Greek territory. Over the centuries, the populations of these regions have settled on both sides of the border, forming national minorities.

A few kilometres from Gjirokastra, nestled against the mountain on our right, is an important village: a Greek village in Albanian territory.

One might ask "How have these people been there since the advent of the People's Republic? Are they not subject to the propaganda of reactionary emissaries from their country of origin, do they not constitute a hotbed of rebellion against the people's government? How does the Albanian government deal with them?"

This minority of Greek peasants, settled in Albanian territory, has the same rights as the Albanians. Like Albanian peasants, they cultivate the land under the banner of the cooperative movement.

They, like the native Albanians, are free from feudal serfdom and able to cross the border to settle in Greece if they so wish. If they stay in Albania, it is because they feel comfortable in Albania and they look to the future with the certainty of achieving the happiness of living in a flourishing socialist society.

The Greek minority in Albanian territory has retained their national characteristics: language, customs and costumes, but it shares something far from unique for the Greek people, a crisis that united both Greek and Albanian peasants — illiteracy.

There were no schools in the villages before the establishment of the Albanian Republic, even elementary education was a privilege of the rich who sent their offspring to the few prestigious schools in the cities specially created to teach them the various forms and means of bargaining and pillaging, an education for brutes, where they were taught "savoir vivre,"* this schooling reserved for the uppermost caste with their worldly relations with the wealthy mafia of the Italian cities.

At the end of a lovely garden, the entrance of which borders the road, there is a brand-new building overlooking the val-

* A term for the formal customs and manners unique to French high-society.

ley. It is the school of the Greek village of Sofratika.

Upon our arrival, the male and female teachers, who are of Greek origin but have completed their exams at the Tirana Institute, welcome us surrounded by about 40 boys and girls. We visit the classrooms, the arrangement and internal atmosphere of which would make many teachers in France envious, who are well aware of the difficult conditions in which they must fulfil their mission due to the contempt of capitalist rulers for the children of the working people.

In this school, children learn their original language alongside the Albanian language; the teaching of their home language is not a matter of tactics by the state aimed at establishing good relations with their parents, but a matter of principle dictated by respect for national minorities.

And I naturally thought about the "civilizing mission" accomplished in Algeria, as our rulers say, which consists of teaching French to a privileged minority of Muslim children in that country. However, it is not a national minority within French territory but a nation oppressed by imperialism. There are no schools in the majority of villages after more than a century of occupation.

This phoney generosity, these "sacrifi-

ces" as they say, are not selfless. Their goal is to establish a kind of shield between the colonizers and the oppressed people through education that aims to crush any national sentiment in the service of imperialism. Fortunately, this often backfires.

The school in the village of Sofratika reflects the tremendous upheaval that occurred in Albania through the establishment of the people's state power. It is in the Albanian village school that the young masses of students are now being shaped to carry the spirit of socialist revolution into the countryside and to supply the basis for forging the pedagogical, technical and scientific frameworks of the new society.

This has become so true that when I asked a student from the prestigious Pedagogical Institute of Tirana which Albanian province she came from, she replied, "I come from the humble province of Gjirokastra."

THE CAT OF GJIROKASTRA

With its belly partially pressed into the soft thickness of piled wool carpets on the back of a horse, its two legs stretched diagonally, its fixed gaze looking at us without seeing us, a cat followed the caravan that stretched out in a long silent line along the edge of the road heading south.

Men, mostly young, handsome and robust, young women with sharp features under their black hair adorned with scarves, children of all ages following their parents or sleeping in wicker cradles suspended on the sides of horses — a society like I encountered at the exit of Gjirokastra, with its customs, laws, language and sense of life, had carved out a unique place within the new Albanian society.

It gave the word "freedom" an interpretation in line with its traditions but by no means incompatible with the rules of the People's Republic.

They were Gypsies, traversing the same road that their ancestors had travelled for centuries, completing their cycle of seasons.

There are no cumbersome, unusable carts in this country where the road which leads us to the Adriatic is the sole means of communication. The horse, on the other hand, goes everywhere — climbs

slopes, crosses torrents, finds its food in the mountains, carries the camp, the carpets, the children, the familiar objects... and the last in line carried a cat.

This cat, like the men and women of the tribe, like the horse carrying it, has traversed all the paths of the mountain. It knows all its secrets, pitfalls and contours. There is no doubt that every summer, it pays a visit to Mount Tomor, whom I always see in the distance on my left, and towards whom no paved road leads.

How many young blackbirds and finches has this marauder taken down during its journeys through the bushes and groves?

But these nomads, who appear to me dignified, very neatly dressed in their picturesque costumes, with their small horses gleaming under finely crafted leather harnesses, are not marauders. They live honestly off their flocks of sheep, using the wool to weave blankets that they sell at markets or to the people's state according to its needs. They also raise horses and engage in commerce.

Sheep provide them with meat for their food, ewes supply them with milk, and the wool is used for their own clothing. They live in this way without ever encroaching upon the property of others.

It was mid-October, and I was on this journey along the southern road. The no-

mads, leaving their summer quarters in the highlands, were descending towards the Adriatic, where the mountainous slope knows no winter.

Throughout the course of the road, we passed by their encampments and caught up with their caravans. Thousands of human beings have lived like this for centuries, stubbornly refusing to settle down, adapt and merge into the great collective movement that has taken hold of the young Albanian Republic.

Apart from its marauder instinct, the cat, luxuriously rocked by the steady pace of the horse, seemed to me the symbol of the kind of freedom cherished by the nomads: life in the open air on the fringes of society, yet in contact with it, without attachment to an immutably fixed home on the earth, unconcerned with the noises of a world in the grip of its convulsions.

There will be among us, dear readers, I am sure, those who, pondering on the disquieting and sad aspects of the present times under capitalist rule, will cast an envious look at these nomads I encountered on the southern road.

Do you dream of a return to a primitive life? Do you really envision millions of human beings, organized in small tribes within the mountains, grazing their sheep?

To retrace the course of civilizations is to relive the history of the struggle for bread, with its battles between rival clans, wars of domination, ruins and countless massacres.

Fortunately, we do not go back in history — we make it by organizing ourselves and fighting against the last representative of ancient barbarism: capitalism.

The course of history is pushing the world towards socialism, and the entire world will proudly march down this road. Little Albania is on its way!

THE GREAT CORNICHE

At the end of the plains overlooking the city of Gjirokastra, the road turns sharply to the right and follows the Vjosa for several kilometres through a deep gorge of black rocks dotted with groves.

The Vjosa is the torrential river that, originating in Greece (not that it's the river's fault that Greece is in the hands of monarcho-fascists), crosses Albania from east to west and, after many twists and turns, flows into the Adriatic.

Then, once again, we climb the mountain in our car, continuously descending and ascending from pass to pass towards the sea.

We arrived at the last major pass. On the horizon, I discerned a blue line, cut off at sea by a very rugged dark mass whose tip blends far away to the west. That blue line is the Ionian Sea, and the dark mass is the island of Corfu. I recognized this magnificent sight that I have kept in my memory.

Nature has changed its attire from this final pass onward. It is nothing but olive and fig trees along the roadside and on the mountainsides. In the valleys, there are orange, mandarin and lemon trees bursting with greenery.

The weather is pleasant, the warm

mountain scent is delightful, the sunlight is gentle and the people of the Albanian villages we pass through welcome us with oranges, mandarins and grapes. As soon as the children are informed of a foreigner's arrival, they load our arms with flowers.

This is southern Albania, the Albania with warm blood, challenging the comrades from Korça, bearers of the flag of socialist competition.

Finally, after a few hours of plunges and ascents through the last foothills and in a setting resembling a grand opera, we descend to the coast, facing the island of Corfu.

We arrived at a small fishing and artisan town, with a beach of golden sand where children swim and that is it. Not a single pavilion, nor a single hotel. Only a house built next to the sea in recent years to accommodate visitors, a small café-restaurant, and the beginnings of a garden along the sea, marking the start of the grand coastal road we will take the next morning to reach Vlora.

From where I am, you can see the bay, which ends suddenly towards the north, at the foot of the steep mountain, but you can't get through there.

We approach it from its flank, then we return to the ridge and follow the sea

along the mountain, a mountain shimmering with greenery and light, the waves endlessly lapping at its feet.

It is the Albanian Riviera that we travel slowly for kilometres to descend into a small bay before making a big stopover at Mount Llogora, the smaller brother of Mount Tomor.

Drive up Llogara? Where, how? I see the colossal cliff face, dropping abruptly from its 1,800 metres of altitude into the brightness of the waters.

However, it is on its edge that we must drive to reach Vlora, further north. We move cautiously, without guardrails or signage, after seemingly endless turns that seem to me a marvel of balance, and we finally reach the very peak of the colossus.

I was not scared, but I felt good up there.

We stop, I get out, take a deep breath and look at this gargantuan beauty that unfolds before my eyes in its pristineness, in its solitude and its complete silence.

Generations of conquerors, wealthy bourgeois and rich feudal lords have passed through here for centuries. The last one, King Zogu, left to dine in Paris with the fruits of his plunder. No place on this coast, impressively captivating with its climate, fine sandy beaches and gentle

waves can ever compare to the lush beauty of the mountains.

Life in this area of Albania is simple, there are a few fishing villages, with no villas, hotels or roads other than the corniche we followed, located on this great colossus of a mountain. Even the road is paved with the bones of the mountains, their rocks.

Capitalist civilization, wherever it has dominated and still dominates, accumulates only ruin and misery for the majority alongside immense wealth for a privileged minority.

Usually, it leaves behind the imprint of its claws, the testimony of its opulence and a certain culture.

Our Albanian friends have inherited nothing but the Albanian land, its fertile plains, its splendid sites and its indomitable people.

As for their old masters? They have either fled or have been punished like the criminals they are.

Such is, in its broad strokes, Albania as I have seen it. Its plains make it a true granary of abundance; its mountains conceal incalculable wealth. A small people is hard at work to make it one of the most prosperous and beautiful lands in the whole world.

Think about this, dear readers: the

Paris of today, of which you are rightly proud, was built through four centuries for the kings — imagine what progress will be achieved in two or three decades by our Albanian brothers, thanks to their Communist Party and their unions.

They are already ahead of us: they have chased away their vermin.

A MARKET IN TIRANA

"You say it's too expensive? But I don't want to sell my jacket for nothing. Do you really want to buy it from me? Well! If I sell it to you, it's to do you a favour because you are a friend, but don't tell me it's too expensive."

The man with the jacket — holding a somewhat worn jacket on his arm — kept returning to the subject, tapping on the shoulder of his reluctant haggler. Tired of waiting for the conclusion of this debate, I continued my way through the Albanian crowd, which, coming from nearby villages and probably the nearby mountains, crowded all the streets of this old quarter of Tirana where the traditional market is held every week, much like the "flea market" in Saint-Ouen.

I feel comfortable amidst the noise: the uninterrupted trampling of thousands of men, women, young and old on the uneven cobblestones; passionate discussions between sellers and buyers around the most unlikely goods; the hammering of coppersmiths on copper or iron cauldrons, set up at the entrance of old shops; elbowing and shoving at every step passing groups that exchange greetings, disband and greet a different group.

My guide lets me wander as I please,

and I only decide to leave when I am sufficiently exhausted not to leave with regret.

All of Albania is there, before my eyes, it seems, just as I wanted to capture it in its uniqueness, vibrant and fraternal in its extreme diversity of costumes and language.

There are elderly Albanian women squatting in front of a display of handwoven and embroidered tapestries and veils. They let me closely inspect their goods, unfolding them willingly and without admonishing me, as someone who came "to see" rather than to buy.

There are young Albanian women, mountain dwellers with exceptional grace and delicate features, framed by multicoloured veils or light shawls, wearing silver or silver-plated earrings. There are young mountain men in regional costumes, their hair in the wind, also very handsome and robust.

There are no disputes between the faiths, Muslims and Catholics, who are only distinguished among women by their costumes (and even Muslim women only wear a loose hijab rather than a burka) and live in perfect national harmony in Tirana as in all of Albania.

I enter small artisan workshops, especially those of embroiderers. I see them at work with skeins of gold and silver, em-

broidering jackets, woollen belts, veils, squares and table throws.

Elsewhere, there are goldsmiths who, meticulous and leaning over the workbench, set precious stones and glass beads in finely crafted pieces, intended to make pendants and bracelets.

This market in Tirana is the market of an old world barely emerging from the Middle Ages, persisting amidst the transformations brought about by the People's Republic in industrial and commercial life.

It is located at the edge of the city: beyond it, towards the mountain, is immediate access to the countryside; on the other side, there is immediate access to the modern city, with its brick-and-mortar shops where you can find ready-made clothing, shoes, household items, bicycles, etc., from Albanian factories or imported from Czechoslovakia in exchange for agricultural products like apples, oranges, lemons, olives and tobacco.

One must go to these countries just emerging from feudal darkness to grasp the tremendous leap now taking place which would normally take centuries, this transition without interruption from medieval means of production and ways of life to the present era. This is made possible by the existence of the Union of Soviet So-

cialist Republics, which, after 40 years of effort and progress, serves as a support for the People's Republics and prevents them from falling back under capitalist domination through the classical paths of economic and financial dependence.

The laws of the capitalist system cannot change relations between states any more than they can between employers and employees. The fundamental law of the capitalist system is that of profit: I assist you, lend you money, build a factory for you and equip it, but on the condition that I make a profit from it. To ensure this, I mortgage your assets, control your finances and influence your politics.

There is not, and there cannot be, unselfish mutual aid between capitalist states aimed at fostering the development of the weaker nation's prosperity and thus placing it in a competitive position.

This is even more true when it comes to capitalist countries "coming to the aid" of a socialist state or one in the process of socialism.

It took an immensely large country like the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to be able to stand alone within a capitalist world fiercely opposed to it. No People's Republic could currently survive if the USSR ceased to exist as a socialist country, even assuming that capitalist states

did not intervene politically or militarily against their existence, which goes against the laws of the capitalist system, as confirmed by the events in Hungary.

Proletarian internationalism is not limited to relations between the working classes worldwide; it necessarily extends to relations between socialist states or those on the path to socialism, due to the very nature of socialism, which abolishes competition and replaces it with mutual aid.

A MASTERPIECE LIKE FEW OTHERS

It is true, dear reader, that my brother, who is rooted in the soil like my father, mother, grandfather and my grandmother's father, bequeathed to me a love of agriculture. It is true, dear reader, that we need bread and wheat to make it, grain to produce wheat and farmers to sow it. All of this is true in Albania and elsewhere.

But in capitalist societies, who makes the handle and the ploughshare for your plough? Who digs your horseshoes, weaves and sews your pants, builds your barn and your house, hauls the coal for your stove, crafts the harnesses, your barrels, your knife, fork, bed, mattress, and so on?

It's neither the bourgeois, nor the broker, nor the banker and his lackey journalists.

That is the problem: there is work here, work there, everything in life is connected, and nothing lives without the work of the community. All that remains is to organize it at the expense of the parasites.

That is socialism, and isn't it strange that such a simple and just reasoning has taken hold of this small people in Albania, newly emerged from feudalism, with

little education, almost entirely illiterate, without prior political education, and with little to no contact with the so-called "civilized" world, to embark resolutely and enthusiastically on the path of socialism, while for us, we must have protested and gone on strike so many times yet we still have not achieved it.

In Albania, the peasants still work with very backward means compared to ours, and their general conditions of existence are far from equalling ours.

But they have the land; they cultivate it collectively, have no more parasites to maintain and can give the people's government the means to create and develop industry, which in turn will gradually provide them with everything they lack to develop agriculture, ensure comfort and prosperity, with less fatigue and worry.

One must be patient when it comes to building on new foundations, starting from scratch, and the Albanians are patient.

If soldiers come from civilian life, industrial workers come from the peasantry. However, it is quicker to trade the plough for the machine tool than to change one's state of mind and become aware of one's new responsibilities toward the nation.

The change in social environment, especially direct contact with the city where

the achievements of economic and cultural character as well as imported products are concentrated, plays a certain role in the moulding of the new workers. Sometimes needs grow more quickly than the means to satisfy them, and political education, along with sufficient professional experience, is necessary for the working class to fulfil its role as a vanguard in the development of a society moving toward socialism.

This is true for all cases and especially for Albania, where industrial workers account for less than 10 per cent of the workforce as compared to the peasantry, while everything must be done to meet the nation's demands and ensure its independence.

Thus, what a surprise it was when I visited the first hydro-electric power plant in Albania.

Built according to plans and under the guidance of Soviet engineers, the Tirana Power Plant, which receives water from the junction of two underground rivers through 42 kilometres of tunnels, is entirely constructed under a mountain at mid-altitude. It provides power and light to the region and supplies water to the capital.

This achievement is a true masterpiece, and it was built because of volun-

teers responding to the government's calls for a necessary workforce.

The majority were young shepherds who enthusiastically signed up to volunteer for this giant project.

This example of patriotism illustrates the immense possibilities of Albania in creating a working class conscious of its national responsibilities.

The new textile factory in operation not far from Tirana was created under similar conditions.

Such are the new developments that opened up before the young People's Republic, freed from the parasitism and obstacles of feudalism.

From the platform that provides access to the hydro-electric power plant, you can see the mountainous massif covered with olive trees and strawberry trees, serving as the gateway to the capital.

Tirana, too, sheds its old feudal skin to gradually spread into the plain with its new neighbourhoods and gardens, already displaying great beauty.

PARIS WAS NOT BUILT IN A DAY

During my successive travels to socialist countries, known as People's Republics, I have never concerned myself with salaries and their relationship to the price of goods to form an opinion on the value of the government.

Even when in Albania, I did not raise this question. Even if, in our capitalist countries, the working class, led by its vanguard, the Communist Party, manages — as was the case in 1936 — to significantly increase its standard of living by distinctly limiting the margin of capitalist profits through struggle, a comparison between purchasing power in a people's democracy and under a capitalist regime cannot constitute a measure of value between the two systems. Even if the purchasing power happens to be higher in a capitalist regime at a given moment, it is never definitive; the class struggle continues inexorably until the defeat of the capitalist regime.

Paris was not built in a day; it is the work of five centuries, and there are proletarians in it who have a purchasing power of zero.

The change of state power from the bourgeoisie to the working class is not

sufficient to suddenly change the economic and social condition of a people, but it creates the indispensable conditions for it.

I know many French workers who, unable to find housing, have saved for years and even mortgaged their future salaries to buy an apartment, to furnish themselves or to provide themselves with the basic transportation means to cope with the demands imposed by their working conditions. Can one evaluate their purchasing power based on their salary, without taking into account their deprivations?

This is how the question of purchasing power arises on the collective level in a country where workers' state power has achieved final victory against the bourgeoisie, requiring the building of a new society, heavy industry, technical equipment, means of communication, light industry to satisfy the diverse needs of the urban and rural population, schools, universities and means of defence against capitalist forces.

No working class in the world will henceforth make as many sacrifices and exert as much effort as the Soviet proletariat did in the 15 or 20 years following the Great October Socialist Revolution to reach the level the USSR did when Hitler's armies took action to end the socialist experiment.

The victorious experience of socialism in the Soviet Union paved the way for the liberation of all peoples of the world from capitalist yoke, primarily the peoples of all the People's Democracies. It serves as a bulwark for all, against the enemies of freedom and peace, against warmongers and imperialist counter-revolutionaries.

The question in Albania is not the current relationship between the wages of the Albanian working class and the French working class, but in its changing situation compared to the past and the possibilities opened up before it by the construction of socialism.

Albanian workers do not have and cannot yet have a standard of living equal to that of most French workers.

But one cannot ignore the fact that a century and a half after the French Revolution and the advent of capitalist power, hundreds of thousands of workers in our country still live in slums. Hundreds of thousands of children are horrendously sacrificed to the greed of the rich and several million wage earners have a purchasing power far below a minimum level to survive.

The pauperization of the working masses in the face of the constant enrichment of a privileged class is a fact, but it is a fact that only applies to capitalist re-

gimes.

The advent of the People's Republic of Albania has liquidated parasitism: not a penny of the product of labour is taken for the profit of a privileged class. All the weak arguments used by reactionaries against the socialist system shatter against the reality of this new era. Therefore, following the example of the Soviet Union, the victory of socialism is a certainty in Albania as well as in all the People's Republics.

THE BRAINS OF A NEW ALBANIA

The Pedagogical Institute of Tirana is located on the outskirts of the main avenue, which descends in a straight line from the hills surrounding the city to the south, leading to the monument erected in the memory of Stalin and providing access to the old city.

The visit to the Institute built by the people's government will be the last stop before my departure to return to Paris.

Everything in the Institute is perfectly realized according to modern design: very bright, well-furnished classrooms, laboratories, libraries, reading rooms and areas for recreation. For now, it is the only institution to exist in Albania where the bourgeoisie has never dominated and therefore there is zero bourgeois influence, there is no teaching of how to plunder the country, no classes on how to sell out your nation for one's personal gain and no tests on how to maintain the servitude of the masses by perpetuating obscurantism.

There are 500 boys and girls aged 16 to 20 who, in addition to general knowledge, are studying chemistry, geology, biology and other sciences in order to form the first wave of teachers to educate the Al-

banian youth.

By 1960, the Institute will have 3,000 students eventually teaching a country of just over one million people in total. This would be equivalent to 120,000 teachers on the scale of current-day France, which is not bad after only 15 years of people's state power.

What interests me is the origin of these male and female students, although I know that there are no sons or daughters of "rich" landowners, speculators and merchants, as those species have disappeared forever from Albanian soil.

"Are any of you from Korça?" I asked as I walked through the classrooms. Hands were raised. I continued, reviewing all the Albanian cities I had visited in these past few days, and each time, hands were raised. They come from all the provinces.

I observed them wearing city clothes and saw the stupendous manners that study has given them, erasing some aspects of the more rural and antiquated traditions of Albania, which I have tried to faithfully convey in this book.

There is very little in common anymore between these students and the inhabitants of the provinces moulded by centuries of life in isolated plains and high in the mountains. Yet all these students are the sons and daughters of the people who

live in these small towns and villages, who grew up in houses without chimneys.

If one student from the province of Gjirokastra whom I questioned in chemistry class hadn't come to the Institute, she could have been someone like Lule, riding a horse and tightly veiled, going to her never before seen fiancé's residence.

A person walks through life with what they have in their head, their social status, alongside their cultural knowledge, all of which leave their mark on them morally and physically.

These students resemble students from all countries, and taken as a whole, they have exactly the same capacity as those in capitalist countries to assimilate knowledge and solve technical and scientific problems, but there is one big difference: they are the living, breathing testaments to the victories of people's state power, and they are aware of it because they don't have to look far behind them. Their Albania, 12 years after Liberation, still wears its old traditional coat, while their education brings them to the level of modern life.

What they learn frees their Homeland from the economic, political and moral chains of feudalism, and they know that capitalism was also responsible for those chains. But the depiction of a comfortable life of luxury displayed in auction hous-

es and exalted by advertising propaganda cannot be ignored by them. They know that despite their fatal flaws, capitalist regimes are materially wealthier than the fledgling People's Republics formed a mere 12 years ago.

For these young student forces, counter-revolutionary propaganda finds fertile ground: "In France, as in America, the fruits of technical progress are within reach for the elites of society, scientists and technicians. What is your people's government doing to give you access to modern comfort? And what is the value of the socialist system that tends to subordinate your means of existence to the general development of the state and the equal distribution of the national income among all the forces of production, despite the intellectual capital you represent?"

I must be sincere with the reader: these reflections did not arise from my contact with the students of the Pedagogical Institute in Tirana, but from the events in Hungary that occurred a few days after my return to Paris. It is not a small lesson when we know that students in Budapest, incited by emissaries of the counter-revolution, demanded, among other political claims, the abandonment of Marxist-Leninist teachings at various levels of education.

This is because Marxist-Leninist education and its assimilation forge class consciousness in student youth. It affirms itself as the common source of all analyses and knowledge, engraves in their minds the indissoluble link between theory and practice, and confronts individuals with their contradictions and duties.

Dear little student who came from Gjirokastra to the Pedagogical Institute of Tirana, whom I questioned and who answered me, "We also study Marxist-Leninist science." Since my return from your Homeland and in the light of the events in Hungary, I have often thought of you, and I have something to say to you and all students in the countries of socialism, the People's Democracies, not forgetting those in our country.

In our country, there are great scientists and young talents whose history, role and name will remain forever engraved in the memory of our people.

Paul Langevin and Irène Joliot-Curie were great scientists; they discovered the meaning that life should have by dedicating it to their scientific research — whose value is unquestionable — and by giving only one purpose to their arduous work: the happiness of the people.

Solomon, who was a student of Paul Langevin and Politzer, who was a phil-

osophy professor, followed the same path: they were assassinated by the fascists for refusing to put their thoughts and means at the service of the enemy.

To put it simply: professors and teachers, who bring great honour to our national culture and could sit at the end of the capitalist feast table alongside many others, prefer to content themselves with a modest life. This is to draw joy from their work, from the class struggle for progressive humanity.

All who followed or are following the teachings of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the path of struggle, honour and hard work are immunized against the degradation of the mind and morality that befalls all those who deviate from the great human ideal face. The latter live on the margins of society and proclaim themselves "independent," picking up their wages by selling out their people and their nation.

If the people's government of Albania founded the Pedagogical Institute of Tirana, it is certainly not to give the sons of former landowners the thought and means to reconquer and re-evaluate the paternal capital that the Albanian Revolution has transferred to the people, nor is it for the sons of the people to establish themselves as a privileged class, but rather for the nation, which has won its independence

and freedom, to find in themselves capable leaders to help build socialism and worthy of serving it by opening the doors of knowledge. The people's government does not create a career in the bourgeois sense of the word; it entrusts individuals with a succession within this immense collective construction site where everything is linked and conditioned — political, economic and cultural life — all leading to communism. The teaching of Marxism-Leninism is as necessary as bread.

This is how the Pedagogical Institute of Tirana appeared to me as the brain of the new Albania.

Located in the southwestern part of the Balkan Peninsula, Albania shares borders with Yugoslavia and Greece. The Adriatic Sea and the Strait of Otranto wash its western border. The total area of the country is 28,700 square kilometres, a little over 5 per cent of the size of France. In the 1955 census, Albania had 1,394,000 inhabitants, with 110,300 in the capital, Tirana.

High mountains, with peaks reaching and surpassing 2,000 metres, cover most of the country. Underneath these mountains, Albania is rich in oil, copper, lignite, chromium, bitumen, iron ore, copper, salt, gypsum and more. Forests cover 47 per cent of the territory. The main crops in Albania are maize and wheat, as well as rye and rice. Industrial crops (sugar beet, cotton, hemp, flax and alfalfa) play a growing role in the nation's economy. The number of olive trees exceeded 1,700,000 in 1950. As for livestock, it represents a little over one-third of the total rural production in value.

The history of Albania has been very tumultuous. In the 1st century B.C., the Illyrian and Thracian tribes that inhabited the present-day territory of Albania fell under Roman rule. They later became part of the Byzantine Empire. Facing attacks from the Bulgarians, Normans (in the 11th century) and Serbs, the Albanians fell under Turkish rule in the 15th century.

Between 1443 and 1467, the Albanian people, led by Gjergj Kastrioti, also known as Skanderbeg, managed to liberate themselves. However, after the death of their national hero, they succumbed to the combined attacks of the Venetians and the Turks. The Turks imposed heavy oppression on Albania, lasting for 450 years, isolating the country from the Slavic world and maintaining the feudal system despite numerous uprisings.

In the second half of the 19th century, Albania became the battleground for fierce struggles among imperial powers in the Balkans and, in 1912, gained a certain "autonomy." In 1920, it was admitted as an independent state to the League of Nations.

Albania was annexed by fascist Italy in 1939, and the Albanian people bravely resisted, organizing a widespread movement for national liberation against the fascist and later nazi occupiers (who invaded the country in September 1943 after Italy's surrender).

The heroic struggle of the Soviet Union

and all the allies of the anti-nazi coalition created the conditions for the country's liberation, led by the Communist Party of Albania (which became the Party of Labour of Albania in 1948). On November 17, 1944, the troops of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Army liberated the capital, Tirana. A people's government was formed, with Enver Hoxha at the head. On January 11, 1946, the Constituent Assembly proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of Albania. In December 1955, Albania was admitted to the United Nations.

Under new conditions created by the democratic government, land reform, nationalization of industry and banks, the national economy and the well-being of the people have experienced significant growth.

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