ALBANIA

The Search for the Eagle's Song

June Emerson

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by

June Emerson

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Albania, Albania . . . . . my dear, why *Albania?*
Uncle Julian

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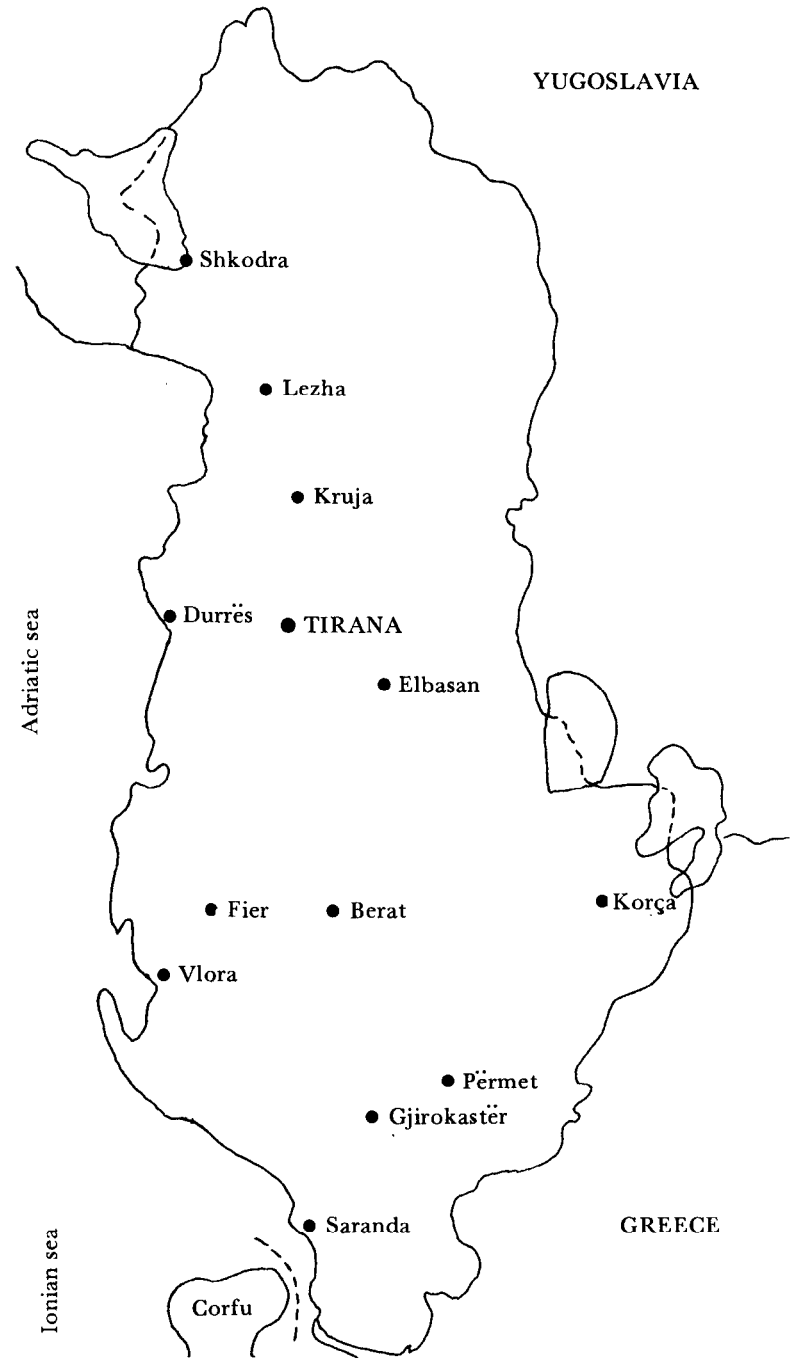
To Feim & Fatime

BRIEF HISTORICAL TABLE

The Albanian people are the descendants of the ancient Illyrians, who migrated from Central Europe into the Balkan Peninsula in prehistoric times.

2nd Century BC	Romans annexe Illyria.
4th Century AD	Illyria part of Byzantine Empire.
14th Century	Slave system had changed to a feudal system, dominated by a small number of aristocratic families. Albania (name probably taken from the Albanoi, an Illyrian tribe of central Albania) threatened by Turks.
15th Century	Gjergj Kastrioti (Skanderbeg) resists Turkish invasions from his stronghold at Kruja.
1506-1912	Albania occupied by Turks, although at first Venetians occupied several coastal towns.
1887	First school in the Albanian language opened at Korça.
1913	Great Powers at London Conference recognise Albania's autonomy, and draw up the boundaries.
1914-1920	Italian forces occupy a large part of the country.
1920	Capital established at Tirana.
1924	New liberal government formed by Albanian patriots, led by Fan Noli.
1925-1939	Ahmet Zogu rules, with Italian support, later renaming himself King Zog.
1939-1943	Zog flees. Italian occupation.
1943-1944	German occupation.
1944	'National Liberation war,' won by the Communists, headed by Enver Hoxha. Population 85% illiterate (women 95%). (women 95%).
1948-1960	Period of Soviet influence.
1961-1978	Period of Chinese influence.
1985	Death of Enver Hoxha.

MAP OF ALBANIA



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CHAPTER 1

ALBANIA – THE FIRST VISIT

It is enough to make you feel young again when a handsome and potentially famous conductor invites you to his home for Sunday lunch. However, my heart sank when I arrived and saw a *raw* joint of beef on the kitchen table.

'Come to lunch and I'll cook it *myself,*' he had said, and here I was, ravenous. It was one o'clock, and he hadn't even started.

I spent the next two hours describing how to make gravy, taking a trip to the corner shop for sprouts, and trying to quell my raging appetite by reading the Sunday papers. It was then I caught sight of the advertisement: *A Long Weekend in Albania. Small group led by a foreign correspondent.* I was transfixed by the notion, tore off the small piece of newspaper and slipped it into my pocket. To be perfectly honest it was not the thought of Albania that had attracted me, but the opportunity to travel alongside a professional writer, and to learn something from him. Delighted by the way this unusual idea had dropped into my life, I followed it up and booked a place.

Finding out about Albania proved difficult. It had apparently closed its borders 40 years ago, and little has been heard of it since, as foreign journalists are not allowed into the country. After reading the entry in The Encyclopaedia Britannica I consulted the Books In Print microfiche and found that there was in fact a 'Guide book to Albania' available. A book-seller advised me to order it directly from the Albanian General Trading Company in London.

I gave them a ring:

'Yes?' said a foreign voice, with its mouth full.

'Is that the Albanian General Trading Company?'

'No, he's out. . . .'

I was given another number to try, but he was out there too, so I gave up, and limited my research to the books listed by the tour organiser:

High Albania by Edith Durham. A marvellous account by an intrepid Englishwoman who lived amongst the hill tribes of northern Albania at the beginning of the century.

Albanian Assignment by David Smiley. A wartime tale of blowing up bridges and people with indiscriminate enthusiasm.

History of Albania by Arbenputo & Pollo. This gives the 'official' story with a lot of political over-simplification.

Albania by Philip Ward. This was the most helpful, a guide book with a great deal of useful information and historical detail.

In addition to those I found *Edward Lear in Greece and Albania* which was a journal of his travels in 1842, and a chapter in Eric Newby's *On the Shores of the Mediterranean* where he passed briefly through the country, and then hurried on to Greece to recover.

The early books gave a picture of a savage and primitive tribal land where the men were proud and fierce, and the women totally subjugated. Their name for their country 'Shqiperia' (pronounced *Styiperia*) means the Land of Eagles; the people The Sons of Eagles. Blood feuds raged from generation to generation and it was a matter of pride for a man to kill in defence of his honour. All moments of joy or celebration, even of everyday homecoming, were announced by the wildly incontinent firing of rifles.

The modern books described Albania, since its final independence in 1944, as the last bastion of pure Marxism-Leninism, which has now broken all ties with 'revisionist' China and the Soviet Union, and enforces Communist idealism within its barricaded borders.

Could it be possible that all the wild colourful past had been successfully tidied up in such a short time? Would we find a cowed and resentful people with smouldering eyes?

On arriving at London Airport, the first thing I noticed was that the bulk of the party seemed to be female. Even the courier we were expecting to meet (Mr. Irving) turned out to be Bridget.

In the Yugoslavian airliner the oddly unsuitable strains of 'Tea for Two' were piped over the air. We settled down for the flight avoiding much contact or conversation for the moment - I think we were all trying to work out what sort of people the others were, and which one was the foreign correspondent.

We were given a light lunch, and then I took a walk down the gangway to stretch my legs. I noticed a slight springiness, which reminded me of a story I heard of a Sudanese airliner in which the crew did running repairs, tearing up the floor-boards, during the flight. Fortunately nothing of that sort happened, and in just over two hours we landed in Zagreb. Watches were put forward one hour, and we then had to sit for another hour waiting for other passengers to make a connection. It was hot and airless, and I couldn't even borrow my neighbour's paper to pass the time as it was printed in Cyrillic. At last the plane took off and flew on to Belgrade where we landed with a BONK. Here we had to change planes, and had an hour and a half to kill in the airport. The Ladies Cloakroom was not the finest, and on the stairs I was accosted by a persistent fellow who kept asking something that started 'Nojni projni. . .' I would have helped if I could.

Still keeping our distance from each other, although I had now identified the F.C. by the label on his flight-bag, we sat around in the oppressive heat, and were later moved to a departure lounge. One or two members of the group began to exchange a few words, in slightly louder-than-necessary voices: 'When I was on the Trans-Siberian a couple of months ago. . . .' 'Tourist Class sounds so much *nicer* than Economy Class don't you think?' 'Think it was when we were in Japan, or was it China. . .'

The flight from Belgrade to Titograd in southern Yugoslavia took another hour, and then we were loaded into a coach. It was 11 p.m., and we had been travelling since lunch-time. All the border restrictions we had read about came flooding into our minds as the coach bumped and twisted along the narrow road from Titograd to the border post at Han i Hotit.

'Avoid any extremes of fashion: mini skirts, long skirts or over-bright colours. You may be asked to change clothing that is not deemed acceptable before passing through customs. Books of a political or religious nature and magazines considered pornographic may be confiscated on arrival. DEFINITELY NO BIBLES.'

Americans and Russians would not be admitted, nor journalists (Our foreign correspondent had 'writer' on his passport, but he was sure they knew all about him and had decided he was harmless). Forbidden were those with long hair or full beards, unless they consented to the attentions of a barber at the border. I mentally checked my sober outfit - blue jacket, navy skirt, sensible lace-up shoes - and felt fairly safe.

At last the coach stopped at a solitary building, we were emptied out at the roadside and the coach turned and drove off into the darkness.

A tense silence fell, as the group picked its way across the unlit stretch of no-man's-land towards the Albanian border.

We could sense the jagged Albanian Alps to our left and the marshy expanse of Lake Shkodra to the right. We could only guess at the defences and gun emplacements pointing towards us. As we approached the frontier a young Albanian soldier came out of the darkness holding a length of flex with a single light bulb which he clipped to the barrier.

We were each called forward by name, and the guard carefully checked our passport photographs and details with those he had on his sheaf of visa documents, and scrutinised our faces in the light of the bulb. Sometimes he would ask a brief question and the courier would explain, to which the guard responded with a quick warm smile before returning to his serious task.

'Look, he smiled!' quipped one of the party, nervously. To me the serious handsome face, huge brown eyes and melting smile promised well, and any nervousness I may have felt had by now completely disappeared into the warm scented air. But then, I had a clear conscience, hardly any luggage, and nothing but affection for my fellow man (or woman) of whatever race, riding this mad spinning ball through space.

As each of us was cleared we went on, ducking under some scaffolding and dodging the builders' barrows, into a dusty customs hall. There we had to fill in two forms: one with our personal details, presumably to compare once more with their documents, and one stating what we had in the way of radios, cameras, watches, tape recorders, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, printed matter and foreign currency. Printed matter in particular was checked carefully and anything written *about* Albania from another country, including Philip Ward's guide book (which contained inadmissable criticisms) would be confiscated and held until we left the country.

After we had filled in our forms we waited in a rather British queue (of our own making) whilst in a side office two returning Albanians were having their bags searched. Through the internal window we could see garments flying in all directions and a stack of cassette tapes being extracted and put on one side. These were probably recordings of western pop-music, which is banned in Albania. Every now

and then a cheerful official in casual open-necked shirt would stick his head round the door to give us a 'not long now' grin.

As we watched, more belongings were scattered in the side room until eventually two rather thoughtful Albanians emerged, carrying their depleted luggage. The outer window of the office, facing towards Yugoslavia, had its curtains drawn and a tea-towel was carefully safety-pinned across the gap between them to exclude any possible influence from that direction.

The cheerful smile of the customs official was next turned on us, and with polite concern for our belongings he briefly checked our cases, leafing through all magazines and printed material. The music I was carrying caused some interest and approval.

Eventually, at midnight, we climbed into a superb Italian-built coach and set off towards Shkodra. As we bounced comfortably over the rough, narrow road our guide introduced himself in an easy style.

'Good evening, dear ladies and gentlemen. . .'

He told us his name, and that of the driver, spelling them slowly so that we wouldn't forget. Then his voice went on in a lulling tone to tell us something of Albania, to which he always referred as 'our country' with an affectionate confidence born of the certainty of knowing that he belonged.

He told us that Albania is about 200 miles from north to south, and only 95 miles across at the widest part. Three-quarters of the country is mountains and hills and the rest is a flat coastal plain, much of which used to be marshy but was drained in the 1960s to make more farm-land. He told us that since the country's liberation in 1944 the people have worked hard to raise their standard of living by their own efforts, and are now self-sufficient in almost everything. They do not have diplomatic relations with either Russia or America as this would bring obligations which they do not want. Their country has been invaded and ruled from outside for so much of its history that they are now determined to stand alone, even if this means a much slower rate of material progress than the rest of the world.

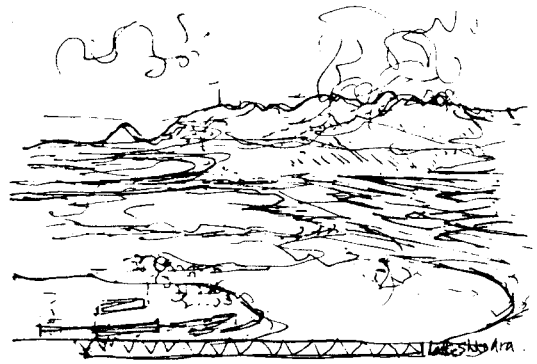
As to tourism, Enver Hoxha, their leader from 1944-1985, having seen what tourists had done to Spain, Italy and Greece, refused to be tempted by the lure of quick profit and said:

"*Why should we turn our land into an inn with doors flung open to pigs and sows, to boys and girls with pants on or no pants at all? Why should we let the long-haired hippies*

supplant with their wild orgies the graceful dances of our people?"

Our guide's gentle confident voice lulled us, and we were nearly all dozing by the time we arrived in Shkodra. The hotel was a concrete structure making a great effort to resemble a good hotel. There were a few potted plants, thin net curtains, stained cord carpet and bright red and green covers on the armchairs in the foyer. A gold stripe had been painted up each concrete pillar in a forlorn effort to make it look special. A notice board had some blurred photographs of landscapes glued to it which we stared at mindlessly until our names were called and rooms allocated. Then, although it was 1 a.m., we were called into the livid green dining-room and given a full scale meal: liver and rice soup flavoured with lemon, tender beef with chips, peas and more rice, followed by grapes and washed down with a bottle of 'Merlot Verë e Kuqe' which was not at all bad, and got the conversations going at last.

In spite of the slight smell of damp concrete, the bedroom was comfortable and sleep was no problem at all.



CHAPTER 2

The morning began with the sound of voices and footsteps. There are no privately owned cars in Albania, so apart from buses and a few lorries and vans the morning rush hour is a quiet affair punctuated with the sound of horses' hoofs. Sun shone on peeling pink, green and cream houses roofed with terracotta tiles, more like a village than a town. There were some larger buildings in the distance, but none of more than four storeys, and behind them towered the grey peaks of the Albanian Alps.

In the centre of the square below was a heavy and purposeful military sculpture. Behind it stood a sports hall, which used to be a Roman Catholic church. According to our guide all religions have spelt domination in the past: Catholicism from Italy, Orthodox Christianity from Greece, Islam from the Turks. In order further to preserve its independence, Albania proclaimed itself an atheist state in 1967, and all churches and mosques have been closed, and many have been either demolished or put to other uses.

I went down early and wandered into the town where some of the dingy little shops were already open, and men sat at benches making shoes, women rearranged their meagre stock of vegetables. Books and pamphlets in wan colours curled up at the corners in the morning sun. Our courier had been right: outside the special tourist shops, where Albanian crafts were on sale, there would not be much that we would want to buy.

After a breakfast of eggs, cheese, bread and tea we were hustled into the coach for a day of sightseeing. First we were taken to see a bridge a few miles from Shkodra. It is said to have been built by the Venetians, and the delicate

curve supported by an unusual mixture of arches spans the river Kir. The water flowed fast, and was greenish-white like glacier water. The banks were a jumble of rugged rocks and wild flowers.

We were allowed the minimum of time to admire the bridge and then were whisked away to visit the Fortress of Rozafat which perches on a rocky height above the converging rivers Drin and Bhuna. This castle was also built by the Venetians, during their period of occupation in the 15th century, and was later strengthened by the Turks.

An old ballad tells that during the building of the castle the walls kept crumbling and falling down. The builders were advised that the only way to stop this was to immure a woman alive. A young woman called Rozafa agreed to sacrifice herself so that the people should be safe from attack, but she begged one favour from the builders. She asked them to leave holes in the walls through which she could suckle her baby.

"With an eye look upon him,
With a hand caress him,
With a foot cradle him,
With a breast suckle him."

From the top of the castle there is a commanding view of the town of Shkodra, and the lake stretching away westwards towards the narrow barrier which separates it from the sea. To the east, from the distant mountains, the two rivers wind across the plain to meet in the lake below.

Delicate flowers were growing in the crevices of the castle keep, which was being renovated and made into a museum. The workmen were cautiously friendly, and were amused by my few words of Albanian.

The coach was parked a little way down the hill, and on the way down I wandered off the track and came across a half-built house. On the unfinished wall was perched a cow's skull, fairly fresh. This is an ancient custom, intended to keep out evil spirits until the roof goes on, and I was delighted to find that such things had not entirely been forgotten in the earnestness of the present regime.

On the next leg of the journey our guide continued his commentary, telling us first about education. Most children attend a crêche up to the age of three, then kindergarten up to 6. From 6 - 13 they go to junior school and then at 14 they can continue at an ordinary middle-school or a professional secondary school for another four years. After this they can go on to university. Children spend some part of each year in productive work (either on a farm or in a

factory), and some time in physical and military training. In this way they are made to understand all aspects of the running of the country, and to feel that they are taking an effective part. Perhaps this is the reason that there seems to be no loutishness or vandalism in Albania.

After they have finished at university, students are allowed two months' holiday, and are then allocated a job. There is no unemployment in Albania, in fact mothers are encouraged to have plenty of children to cope with the increasing amount of work which needs to be done.

Our coach bumped along narrow pitted roads, passing carts pulled by horses, donkeys, mules or oxen. Occasionally a lorry would roar towards us in the middle of the narrow road, somehow passing without either vehicle ending up in the ditch. Most of the farm workers we saw wore ordinary western clothes, but some of the older women wore the old costume of head-scarf, usually white, black tunic over baggy trousers, and striped apron. At every road junction, in the fields and on every hill-side we were watched by the sinister black slit-eyes of bunkers. Most of them were small, just enough for two soldiers, and all were deserted, but we had heard that every Albanian keeps a loaded rifle in his house, ready for the call.

Our next stop was Lezha, where we admired the crumbled walls of the old city, and the even older city on the hill-top which is now crowned with the slogan PARTI ENVER in large red letters. At the ruined church of St. Nicholas we were shown the tomb of Gjergj Kastrioti (Skanderbeg), Albania's national hero who defeated the Turks many times during the fifteenth century.

Lunch was provided near Lezha, where Mussolini's old hunting-lodge has been turned into a restaurant. In its large panelled dining-hall we were treated to excellent fish and extraordinarily pungent yellow-white wine.

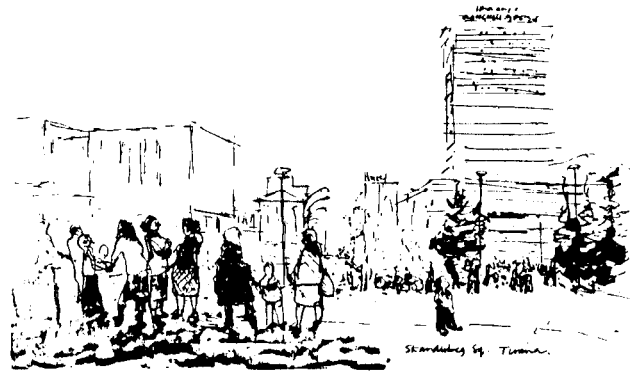
We had been warned not to photograph military installations, soldiers, railways or ports, but I took a chance on the road to Kruja and got a picture of three small boys who kindly raised the level-crossing barrier and allowed our coach to cross the railway-line.

Kruja was the mountain stronghold of Skanderbeg during his struggles against the Turks, and is nearly 2,000 feet above sea level. Edward Lear called it 'A charming little town all up in the sky. . .'. We were shepherded through the ancient bazaar (not much going on there at the time) to the fortress at the top of the town. After coffee in a Turkish Coffee House we were taken to the Skanderbeg museum. Being allergic to museums in general, and this sort of heroic

creation in particular, I slipped away from the group and walked back through the bazaar in the twilight, watching the sun go down and the lights come on in the houses that spilled down the rocky hill.

Later I returned to the museum and spent a merry time with the doorkeeper and her friends while waiting for the group to finish the official tour. With the help of my phrase-book and gestures we learned each others' names, numbers of children and so forth. Fadil, trying to explain to me with dramatic representations that Liri was the mother of twins, was unforgettable.

Weary and limp after another hour in the coach, we were finally allowed to relax at the seaside resort of Durrës, in the Hotel Adriatiku. The hotel is right on the beach, and a quiet walk in the darkness at the water's edge was a perfect ending to the day.



CHAPTER 3

The next morning we were loaded into the coach once more and taken into the town of Durrës, about two miles along the coast from the hotel. Durrës is Albania's second city, with a population of about 60,000, and the main port. Along the coast road were rows of peeling holiday chalets where Albanian workers spend their annual holidays.

First we were taken to see a Roman amphitheatre. Dark galleries run round under the tiers of stone seating, and there is a sinister chamber where the wild animals were kept before being released into the arena. A small chapel, added in the 10th century, juts out incongruously from the galleries and contains some delicate mosaics.

The amphitheatre was first discovered in 1660, and is not yet completely excavated. The whole of the ancient city of Dyrrachium lies below the modern town of Durrës, and the entire town is designated an archaeological site, so that no digging can take place without permission. Dyrrachium was an important port and marked the beginning of the *Via Egnatia* linking Rome to Constantinople.

We were next taken to the Archaeological Museum, which I avoided, preferring to walk in the museum gardens. In the arcades surrounding the garden were various exhibits including a long row of immense earthenware pots which tapered to a point at the bottom. These were apparently sunk into the ground and used for grain storage. There were hundreds of funerary objects including a stele showing the dead man with his parents on each side of him wishing him farewell. His mother's arm rests affectionately round his shoulders.

We met a school party in the garden and one of our

group tried speaking to them in French. They understood a little and their faces were a picture of delight as she talked slowly with them. They were all beautifully dressed for their outing, unlike many British school parties these days.

We were let loose for a while in the centre of town, and each had his own small adventure.

'Look, I bought some *biscuits!* ' cried one of our seasoned travellers as we gathered again. The most ordinary things seemed fantastic achievements in this country, where contact between cultures is so restricted and fragmentary. In my precious minutes of liberty I wandered along the main street looking into the dowdy shops with their meagre stock of goods, and then returned along a back-street to the main square. Away from the staring crowds of shoppers and workers it was quiet, like a village lane of a hundred years ago. The children were dark-eyed and beautiful. Several of our party had tried to take close-up photographs of them, but they had turned their backs proudly.

On the next leg of the journey we shared the sawdusty biscuits and listened to our guide's next chunk of information. We were crossing the coastal plain towards Tirana, and he explained that until the 1960's much of this area was malarial swamp and totally useless. It is now rich farm-land, producing enough food to make the Albanians self-supporting. The well-kept fields of the state co-operative farms stretched away on all sides as we bounced along the (slightly better) main road to Tirana.

'Our capital city has now a population of 180,000. You will notice that many of our people are young. Over three quarters of our population are under 25 years of age.'

Someone asked how many tourists are allowed into the country each year, and the answer was 7,000. 'Not for profit, but just to let people see how well our system is working. Too many tourists would spoil our country,' continued our guide seriously. 'They come from all Europe and from Canada, but not U.S.A. or Russia. It is not allowed.'

The Tirana Hotel is in Skanderbeg Square, right in the centre of the city. The other sides of this vast square are bounded by the National Bank, the National Museum, the Ethem Bey Mosque and the vast Soviet-built Palace of Culture. Leading off to the south is a wide tree-lined boulevard, flanked by official buildings and a spacious park. At the far end is the University. This spacious garden-city centre was laid out in the 1920s, under Italian influence, when it was decided that Tirana should be the new capital of Albania.

As soon as we had checked in I escaped from the claustrophobia of the Group and wandered off round the square. The people were casually but tidily dressed in subdued colours. Several older women wore the traditional dress and head-cloth, and a few gipsies in conspicuously brighter clothes swept the streets with brooms made of twigs. I had asked the guide about gipsies and he had shaken his head.

'They are a problem,' he said. 'We build them houses, but they will not stay in them.' What a refreshing answer in this country where all problems are officially solved.

'I am hungry for. . . . .' murmured a passing lad (in English) with a cheeky grin on his face, but his friend pulled him away before I could hear the rest.

Several young boys walked slowly and proudly in heavy military greatcoats which nearly touched the ground, presumably doing their stint of military training. I sat on a wall, and a slightly tipsy couple of chaps rolled over and asked me the time. I held out my wrist for them to see, and a passing soldier gave me a sharp look, so I grinned and waved. 'No problem,' I called as the couple shambled off, but he did not look pleased, probably because his countrymen were not presenting the necessary good image. These were the only drunks I saw, however, so he need not have been upset.

A many carrying a horn case walked purposefully across the square, and I got up to follow him. He disappeared, and I found myself standing outside the Palace of Culture. This is the home of the opera and ballet companies, and has a theatre which can seat a thousand. There are several smaller halls and recital rooms, and one end of the building houses the National Library. A curving staircase led up beside the library entrance and people were coming and going on it, so I followed them up to see what there was to see. At the top I found a crowded cafe, and trying desperately to look casual I sat down at a small table and ordered coffee. It was Turkish and chewy, but it was a great thrill to have achieved this simple thing alone. Eyes followed my every movement, but nobody spoke to me apart from the waitress.

Outside once more, I passed some small children swinging on the leaves of a palm tree.

'Hello, hello,' they squeaked excitedly, and then rushed off clutching each other. One ran back, wide eyed and daring.

'Stilo? Stilo?' he called, but his friends pulled him away. A 'stilo' (ball-point pen) is a treasure to an Albanian child, but only the younger boys are undignified enough to

ask for one.

It was getting dark, and somewhere across the quiet square I heard a long high-pitched whistle. Could it be a relic of the native skill of communicating from mountain to mountain? It was described by Edward Lear:

". . . .my guides called to them from incredible distances. The acuteness of sight and hearing in Albanian mountaineers is beyond description prodigious, and their faculty of conversing at great distances almost supernatural; the ordinary obstacles which under such circumstances mortals find to communication seem in their case entirely removed."

Later I asked a guide about the Palace of Culture, for I had heard that Albania has more orchestras to the square inch than any other country in the world, and I wanted to know if it was true.

'Yes, we have seven symphony orchestras,' she said. Not bad for a country with a population of only three million. Enver Hoxha was very fond of music, and encouraged its development right from the start of his leadership.

'Can we go to a concert?' I asked.

'I will see,' she said, and went off to make enquiries. It turned out that there was to be a recital at six o'clock. Several of the group wanted to go, and so it was arranged, and we filed across to the Palace of Culture and up to a small recital hall. On the low platform were an amphora, a rubber-plant and a shiny Petrov piano. Grey and white curtains were looped against the wall at the back, and in front were three rows of seating. The front row was a mixture of sofas and armchairs, the second some lengths of tip-up seats, and the back row hard wooden chairs. We were handed programmes, and saw that the music was to be a mixture by well-known 'classical' and Albanian composers.

First a mature and powerful soprano sang some operatic arias, accompanied by an excellent pianist. Then they left the platform and a young girl in long white socks and a short summer dress came on, looking nervous. She sat at the Petrov and wiped the palms of her hands on her skirt. Then, leaning back a little, she let fly from the piano a torrent of sound. This was a selection of music from the ballet 'The Tenth Wound of Gjergj Elez Alia' by Feim Ibrahimi, her father. Suddenly I saw, and heard, all the fire, pride and defiance of the Albanian race which had been absent from the docile and peaceful crowds in the streets. Next she played Beethoven's Sonata Opus 13 No. 8, and once more the strength poured from her slender arms. The opening of the slow movement began with a moving tenderness, but soon her pride and anger were back, and the notes cascaded

brilliantly once more. She finished her recital with a study by Liszt, which was just a little too difficult for her (only a little). Because of this, she attacked it with a different sort of anger, and finished looking rather fed up with herself, bowing quickly and vanishing out of sight.

Lida, the guide who had arranged for us to go to the concert, then took me to meet the pianist, Etrita Ibrahimi, and her parents. Etrita spoke a little English, and her father some French, and we managed to understand each other quite well. At last, through music, I had managed to make real contact with these isolated people.

An idea had been forming in my mind, and crystallising during the concert.

'I have written a book about Egypt recently, and now I would like to write one about Albania and her music. Can we talk about that?'

Feim Ibrahimi looked interested, and wanted to ask more about the idea, but we lacked sufficient words, and it was getting late. He proposed that we should meet the next day in the hotel, and he would bring an interpreter with him. Although the tourist group was scheduled to go to Berat the next day, this was much more important to me, and so I arranged to meet him for coffee the next morning.

That night I sat up in bed making notes. Music, I found, was the possible key to all sorts of knowledge. To get to know about family life I could ask to hear cradle songs, singing games, wedding music, funeral music. To find out about everyday life I could ask to go to hear music in schools, colleges and the Higher Institute of Arts at the University. I wanted to hear military music, dance music, theatre, opera and ballet music. I would want to meet composers, performers and music teachers. I would like to play in an amateur orchestra or chamber music. And then there was gipsy music. . . . . the list went on and on. The best thing about the idea was that it was non-political (apart from political songs) and people of whatever idealogy approved of music - surely there would be no official objection to my searching for information.

The next morning the coach set off for Berat without me. I strolled around the square and the surrounding streets feeling deliciously independent. At 10 o'clock Feim Ibrahimi arrived with his interpreter Fatime Afezolli. I sat between them, and began to explain what I wanted to do. Feim sat on my right smiling gently, and shaking his head from time to time. This did not look too hopeful. I continued, becoming more excited as further ideas rushed into my head. Then I came clean:

'I really want to write about the *people*, using music as the linking theme. All that English people know about Albania is to do with Politics. Politics are rubbish! It is people that are important. When I look around at the people in the streets I wonder where is all that pride and strength which we have always associated with Albanians? Everyone is so well-behaved and quiet. Not until last night did I see any of the old fire, and that was when I heard your daughter play Beethoven . . .'

Here Feim smiled and shook his head even more emphatically. It was then that I remembered: Albanians shake their heads when they mean YES!

I sat back exhausted, and Fatime turned and clasped my hand.

'We like this idea very very much, and we want to help you. What do you want us to do?!

'I need to come back on my own, not in a tourist group. I understand that this can only happen if I have an official invitation from some government department. Could you arrange this for me?'

They offered to try, but did not hold out much hope, and it seemed certain that official visits were more likely to be extended to computer experts or agricultural advisers than to musicians. However they offered to send me tapes and records.

As we parted at the door, Fatime turned and gave me a big hug. I hugged her too, and would have hugged Feim, but remembered that Albanians are not permitted to show affection towards the opposite sex in public.

The rest of the day was my own, as the group was not due back until the evening. I wandered across Skanderbeg Square (the Albanian equivalent of Piccadilly Circus) in a daze. A bus obligingly drove round me. (Surely this is the only capital city in the world where this would happen.) I changed some money at the bank, and then went up to have coffee in the Palace of Culture again.

Afterwards I sat on the steps of the P. of C. in the sun, trying to paint a picture of the mosque. This was not because I can paint, but was an excuse for exchanging the odd word or smile with curious passers-by.

The rest of the day was spent wandering, first down the main boulevard where the government offices, the art gallery and the University are. Here also is Tirana's traffic-light, changing mindlessly from red to green and being ignored by the passing pedestrians. I explored miles of back-streets. Many of the solid blocks of flats were having another storey built on top, but even then would only be four or five storeys

high, and the distant mountains could be seen from the centre of town. The ground-floor windows were rather high, so it wasn't possible to see inside. This is a relic of their ancient fortress-style of building where there were few windows, and those were high up, in case of invasion.

In a book shop I was asking whether they had anything in English when a voice beside me said softly "Hellogood-bye'. I turned to see a lad of about ten years old beside me, eating an apple.

'Si po shkoni?' I replied. (How do you do?)

His smile widened and, carefully changing the apple core to his left hand, he held out a sticky paw to shake mine.

'Au revoir' he said.

Such small contacts were ridiculously touching and important.

Later, back in the hotel, I wrote down some of the facts that Feim had given me about musical education in Albania:

There are 17 Primary Schools specialising in music (for children aged 6-13), 10 Middle Schools (14-17) and the Higher Institute of Arts (18-21).

At the age of six some begin to learn the piano, violin, viola or 'cello. At 10 they can begin on flute or clarinet, then at 14 tuition begins on the larger instruments such as bassoon, horn or any other orchestral instrument. In addition to this they learn general music, singing, history and sol-fa. Western music is studied, with particular emphasis on the classical composers, but not ignoring the modern - Benjamin Britten is quite a favourite.

I was interrupted by the sound of music, and there on the steps of the Palace of Culture was a military band playing marches. A conductor in uniform stood at the front, but a large man in plain clothes seemed to be in overall charge. He moved amongst the men as they played, straightening up their formation here, or encouraging more crescendo there. I couldn't imagine any British musician taking this sort of running correction from anybody.

At six o'clock there was to be another concert in the recital hall. I bought myself a ticket at the kiosk and ran up the stairs only just in time. The audience was sitting quietly, but the performance had not yet begun, so I crept round the back to find a seat. Several people I had met the previous night smiled and waved.

This concert was a violin recital by Anton Berovski of the Radio and Television Orchestra. He began with a Nocturne and two Romances by the Albanian composer Albert Paparisto, which were lyrical and melodic, and not at all what you would expect from a contemporary composer.

This was followed by Beethoven's Sonata No. 5, superbly performed. Berovski's style was completely relaxed, and his face showed none of the tensions of the seasoned London 'pro'. I wondered whether this came from the fact that under the rigid Marxist-Leninist System the worries (choices?) to do with employment, income, somewhere to live, educating your children, health, welfare and so forth were taken over by the state. Ideally this should leave your mind free for other things, but I wondered what other worries took their place (for humans will worry) and whether they were equally damaging to one's mental well-being.

Whatever the truth may be, music poured uninhibitedly from this apparently peaceful and happy young man.

Next came a sonata by Albania's senior composer Çesk Zadeja. This incorporated folk-melodies in the minor-sounding modes of the country, and I didn't find it as attractive as the Paparisto. Çesk Zadeja was sitting in the back row, and looked pleased with the performance. He had been present at the concert on the previous night too, and so had the director of Opera and Ballet, Riza Hajro. This was, in fact, rather like a very active music-club with all members supporting each other.

The concert ended with the César Franck Violin Sonata, which sounded almost pallid after the preceding items, although the last movement was particularly lovely.

After it was over I joined the small crowd congratulating Anton Berovski, and was greeted like one of the club. We talked in a mixture of English and French. They introduced me to a bassoonist from the opera orchestra, and I asked him if he would like me to send him any music from England. (I had noticed that there was very little printed music available, and for the concerts much had been hand-copied.) He said he would like a concerto to play.

'I have only one. I would like very much some Bach or Vivaldi.'

(For the connoisseur: he had a Mönnig bassoon.)

Riza Hajro then told me that the ballet company were doing 'Giselle' in a few months' time, and had only a piano copy from which to make orchestral parts. I promised to try to get a full score for him.

Back at the hotel, the Group had returned, and seemed to have had a marvellous trip to Berat. They said that the south of the country was much more beautiful, and I had missed a treat. However, I think some were a little envious of my independent day in Tirana. The Foreign Correspondent, who had not said anything interesting or helpful so far, suddenly seemed unimportant.

In the bar that night there was some very frisky dancing, not only from some Albanian and Greek business-men, but some of our own party too. Wendy Winfield and her daughter Rebecca, looking much like sisters, held the eyes of the whole room whenever they were on the floor. I had got to know Wendy, having seen her lively pen-and-ink sketches of the places and people we had seen, and later that evening I asked her if she might illustrate the book I hoped to write.

The next day was our last. We were taken to see the Martyrs' Cemetery, set in wooded parkland south of Tirana beyond the University. A massive statue of 'Mother Albania' crowns the hill, her stone tresses and draperies flying in the wind. Behind her, guarded day and night by soldiers, lies Enver Hoxha, flanked by the tombs of his closest supporters. Rows of marble slabs cover the surrounding slopes like a mosaic, 'heroes' and 'martyrs' being identified by either a star or an olive branch carved on the stone. Some had both.

After this there was to be a visit to the museum 'Albania Today', but I preferred my freedom, and once more roamed the streets and squares.

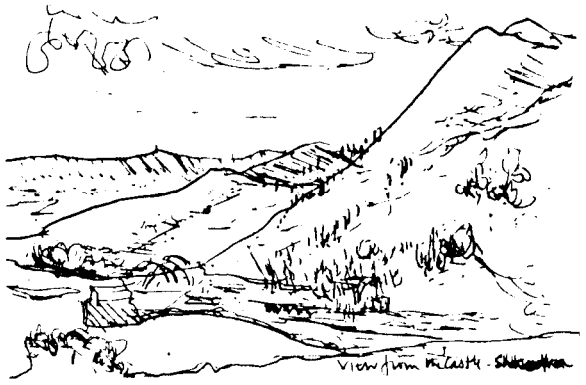
That night we drove to Shkodra, and after a short sleep, left at dawn for the border, Titograd and the flight home. Our guide filled us in on a few more statistics before we left.

The divorce rate is 0.7%. A local tribunal hears the complaints of both partners in the marriage. Efforts are made at reconciliation for a period of two months after which there is a further trial at which the jury decides whether there are sufficient grounds for divorce. The children of divorced parents generally stay with the mother if they are under 16, and the father helps to support them. If they are over 16 they are allowed to decide which parent to remain with, and if they choose the father, then the mother contributes to their support.

There is still the death sentence in Albania for treason against the State, and there are Labour Camps for those who need to be 're-educated'.

65% of the population live in the country districts, and 35% live in towns. . . . this is all I can remember from our dawn lecture.

We were soon through the border, and into our Yugoslavian coach driving to Titograd once more. As we re-entered 'western civilisation', and saw people in jeans, stepping out of private cars and going into brightly coloured shops full of goods, many of us felt a surprising wistfulness. We had been living in the past for five whole days, and we were reluctant to take up the pace and strain once more.



CHAPTER 4

On my return, the first thing I did was to join the Albanian Society. This is an organisation which not only has meetings in various parts of the country to see films or hear lectures about Albania but is also a source of books and pamphlets about the country.

There was to be a meeting in London in January 1988 with two speakers, one on music and one on literature. I rang Wendy, the artist, and asked her if she would like to come.

The next thing was to send some music to the friends I had made in Albania. The postal service is notoriously unreliable, particularly if mail is routed through Yugoslavia, as they are liable to 'lose' things belonging to their old foes. Everything needs to be registered in order to have maximum protection.

I sent bassoon concertos by Bach and Vivaldi to the bassoonist, an Oxford Companion to Music to Feim Ibrahimi, and a dictionary and a copy of my book about Egypt to his interpreter, as she had requested. In all the letters I sent, I mentioned how much I wanted to return. I also set about trying to find a full score of 'Giselle'. After this there was a long silence.

The London meeting in January 1988 was fascinating. The concert opened with 'The Partisan March' by Avni Mula. This was followed by a series of songs, sung by the Polish soprano Paula Bednarczyk, with titles such as 'A pick in one hand and a rifle in the other', 'Keep the Revolutionary Spirit High', and 'Enver Hoxha we wish you a long life'. I began to despair, but then an unaccompanied lullaby, sung very softly, reached out a little to touch us, and was enthusiastically

encored. Although the title was 'The Little Partisan' it was unquestionably lovely.

Enzo Puzzovio, a young Italian performer on lutes and similar instruments, played some folk music that he had managed to learn by listening to Tirana Radio. His dexterity with the rapid 12/8 passages, which divide into bars of alternate 5 and 7, was dazzling.

David Smith, who introduced the music, then played a piano transcription of 'Symphonic Dance' by Thoma Gaqi. The work opened with some grand flourishes, followed by an odd-rhythmed dance. Then came a sort of big-film tune, and the piece ended with the return of the dance.

Little formal Albanian music was written before the 1950s. The first opera 'Mrika' appeared in 1958, and the first concerto (for violin) was written in 1959. Music, as all other arts, is encouraged by the Communist party to 'lead the people forward in the revolutionary spirit'. Composers are encouraged to use Albanian folk songs in their compositions. To quote Enver Hoxha:

> *"We should strive to have our composers base themselves firmly and precisely on these songs. It is not right that pupils begin to learn foreign classical music first, and Albanian folk music later. The overwhelming majority of the repertoires should comprise popular revolutionary Marxist-Leninist Albanian subjects. Foreign pieces should be somewhat less, and be subjected to the most careful selection. . . . Some may say 'But we must make our people acquainted with foreign reality and the finest foreign creative works too.' I am in complete agreement and do not reject this idea. Therefore I say that our people should be given a taste of this healthy dish, but it should be only one among many healthy and delicious dishes from the Albanian cuisine."*

The lecture on literature was excellent, and given by the secretary of the Albanian Society, William Bland. I spoke to him afterwards about the possibility of borrowing tapes to learn the language, for if I returned I wanted as few unnecessary barriers as possible, and had found that, in any country, just a little of the language, even if spoken badly, warms hearts and opens up opportunities.

He not only offered tapes, but also a lesson in the basics of the language. As it turned out this was a tremendous help, as the only tapes available were Albanian/German, so there was a double problem. His house was bursting with books, paperwork, letters and pamphlets, and seemed to be, more or less, an Albanian Embassy. (There are no diplo-

matic relations between Britain and Albania, and consequently there is no Albanian Embassy. This is due to the continued disagreement over an incident in the Corfu channel at the end of the last war, and the consequent detention of a quantity of Albanian gold in the Bank of England). He gave me two or three hours of intensive coaching, interspersed with sandwiches, a video tape of some Albanian folk-dancing and the deft fielding of an assortment of telephone queries.

Wendy and I kept in touch; she sending me copies of her sketches made in Albania, and of others made afterwards from colour-slides. They were full of life and movement, and I pinned them on the wall to remind me of the atmosphere of the country which I was beginning to love.

This was not love for the System, but just for a beautiful mountainous country, unspoilt by commercial development, where life seemed to be so much simpler.

Late in January two tapes of music by various Albanian composers arrived through the post, with a brief message of greeting from Feim Ibrahimi. David Smith sent me another, and William Bland a further one. At last I could begin to listen to their music and find out something of the flavour.

Although all this music had been written during the past forty years, the style is traditional, and could have been written a hundred years ago. The music of Feim Ibrahimi is full of a dark passion, and I could see where his daughter got her musical strength. The very first Albanian symphony, written by Çesk Zadeja, has some surprisingly English sounds in it, and so do some of the Fantasies and Ballades by other composers, although their roots lay in the folk music of their own country. It was all very intriguing, and I longed to be able to go back, so that I could hear more and ask questions.

There was still no news of progress on the possibility of a return visit. William Bland said that even people who have been before on official visits found that the bureaucratic machine worked so slowly that years could go by before another visit could be arranged.

Finally I decided to book myself in on another holiday tour, a longer one this time, and just try very hard to escape from the itinerary often enough to get material for my book. I wrote to Lida, the guide who had helped me so much, and told her when I would be coming, asking for her help.

No sooner had I done this than I received a telephone call from William Bland: the Albanian Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries had sent an invitation for myself and another musician to visit Albania for two weeks. We should pay our fare, and all other

expenses would be met by the Committee. The date was fixed for October 3rd 1988, and Enzo Puzzovio, the performer at the London meeting of the Albanian Society, was invited as the other delegate.

CHAPTER 5

THE SECOND VISIT

As the plane came slowly over the Adriatic and crossed the coastline of Albania there was a sudden feeling of peace. Below were low ridged hills with tawny-roofed farmsteads perched on the tops surrounded by trees. There were no made-up roads in sight, but earth tracks and footpaths made a lattice of human contact between the fields and barns and from homestead to homestead. As we came lower, small bright dots in the fields became women in coloured head-cloths, hoeing between the rows of crops. The tips of the aeroplane's wings traced the edges of ploughed fields and squares of ripened maize. One or two armed soldiers stood at widely spaced intervals round the edge of the airfield, looking very small and lonely.

There were only about thirty passengers on the plane. We walked across the runway and between flowering trees to the airport building. At the end of the path stood a small group of people. I recognised Fatime Afezolli at once, and called her name. Her face broke into a wide smile and she ran forward and gave me an immense hug. I introduced Enzo and then she presented the young man who was standing at her side beaming. He was Thoma Simaku, a young composer, and he was to be our guide for the next two weeks.

With arms around our shoulders we were swept into the small airport lounge and drinks were ordered while we talked excitedly in a mixture of English, French, Italian and Albanian, depending on who was talking to whom, and which you could speak. Fatime spoke English, Thoma and Enzo Italian and French, and I had French and minimal Albanian. Some sentences started in one language and ended in another,

and all were punctuated with laughter and more hugs from Fatime. She told us that she and Feim Ibrahimi had talked about me so much during the last year that Thoma had recognised me as soon as I stepped off the plane. I told Thoma that I had already heard his Ballade for violin and orchestra on one of my tapes, and so I felt that I knew him already too.

At that moment a distinguished figure in a light grey suit came to shake our hands and welcome us on behalf of the Committee for Cultural Relations. He then went off with another group of visitors and we were left to enjoy each other's company. Thoma, with sunglasses slotted into his open shirt-front, his small square-ended fingers drumming the table with high spirits, told me that his Ballade had won second prize in the May Concerts. These concerts take place every year over three weeks in May and new works of all sorts are presented, with prizes for the best.

We noticed that the waitresses behind the bar were clearing up and putting everything away, as our 'plane was the last one of the day (or perhaps the only one), so we went outside to the car park. There, beside a flower bed, stood our suitcases waiting for us.

In the car park we were introduced to our driver and car, which would be at our disposal for the entire visit. The driver was called Burhan (an old Turkish name) and the car was a Volvo. Burhan smiled his welcome and opened the doors for us. He stowed the cases carefully in the boot and then, in a manner which contrasted greatly with his quiet demeanour, we surged off down the narrow bumpy road, tooting loudly at every obstacle, overtaking in the face of oncoming lorries and weaving between carts, donkeys, motor-bikes, bicycles and groups of people making their way home from the fields.

At first both Enzo and I were guilty of uttering the odd shriek, but gradually we realised that Burhan was not really going all that fast, and the rest of the road users were much slower, and had a seemly respect for the official motor-car. The ancient lorries, bought from the Chinese in the days of Albania's association with that country, and held together somehow with home-made spare parts, drive in the middle of the narrow roads unless requested, by hooting, to move over.

People seemed to be peering in at us rather a lot, and some grinned broadly.

'It is Enzo's beard,' explained Thoma. 'Nobody in Albania wears a beard and so they look at you.' This was something that neither we nor the Albanians got used to throughout the visit.

'Here is the beginning of Tirana' said Thoma, as we began to pass blocks of flats, but from here I could already see the minaret of the mosque in the centre, and the mountains on the other side of this tiny capital city.

We were dropped at the Dajti hotel in the main boulevard leading off Skanderbeg Square in the centre of the city, and told to relax until eight o'clock when we would all meet for dinner.

Relaxing was impossible. I dumped my case and threw open the window to savour rush-hour in Tirana: pattering feet and the sound of voices, interrupted occasionally by the grinding of a passing bus. Unable to keep still I went down into the darkening streets and set off to wander and recapture the atmosphere. The only light-controlled pedestrian crossing spans the main boulevard between the statues of Lenin and Stalin (do they meet in the middle at night to exchange views on how things are going?) but this and the other traffic-light are ignored by cyclists.

I went into the square and then, attracted by the dim lights in Ma-Po, the main department store, crossed over and went in. The meagre display of wares reminded me of wartime England. Solid counters and barriers kept the public well away from the goods, and stern-faced women glared at potential customers.

In the luggage department, stocked with cheap plastic suitcases, a small riot was going on. A pile of torn cardboard boxes indicated that there had been a recent delivery, and a shouting crowd was pressing forward against the counter and barriers. Behind the counter, with the air of a solo performer, a sour-faced woman played the crowd with undisguised spite. A forest of arms was thrust towards her, each hand offering a bunch of paper money. She would look scornfully at the faces, some pleading, some aggressive and some laughing and then at random snatch some notes, throw them on the scrumpled pile of money on the table behind her and then hand over the article which everyone was so excited about: a bright red flimsy shopping carrier with white handles and a crude design of white daisies on the side. Sometimes she would give one bag, sometimes an uncounted handful, and sometimes would not serve at all, but shouted petulantly at the crowd, for the counter was swaying dangerously under the pressure. At last the bags, which had been strewn on the floor behind the counter, were nearly all gone. A young schoolgirl, smiling, climbed over the barrier and politely gave the woman some money. She won the last two, and the crowd resignedly dispersed.

Out in the street again, now completely dark, I turned

my back on the lights of the square and the larger shops and walked slowly and aimlessly away from the centre. There were plenty of people around but, although there were very few street-lights, people didn't collide, for they are used to the dark. Many vehicles don't bother to put their lights on and bicycles don't have lights at all. At a small shop window I wondered at the mixture of goods: shaving-brushes, handkerchiefs, socks, buttons and music manuscript-books. An old woman in a head scarf joined me at the window and murmured some comment or question about the goods. 'Sorry, I'm English' I replied, in halting Albanian. She smiled and moved on. An old man walked in front of me, the drooping head of a small child asleep on his shoulder. On a low wall a row of young men sat talking, their presence indicated by the glow of cigarette ends in the darkness. The row of red dots seemed to illustrate the torrent of notes coming from the upper floor of the building behind them where someone was earnestly practising scales on a piano.

Time was getting on, so I turned and wandered back to the central square. On the steps of the Palace of Culture a military band was playing, and on the low wall in front small children sat and listened. Sometimes a tiny one would get up and dance, and an elder brother or sister would always be there, to catch them if they stumbled, or to dance too. I sat next to a bright-eyed little boy who was holding a cricket. The cricket waved one leg in the air, and seemed to be keeping time with the music. The little boy turned to show me, and started to tell me all about it, and to ask questions. I told him I was English and couldn't understand him, but he persisted with his questions until his big sister, all of seven years old, explained. Even then he couldn't quite believe it. He danced the cricket up my arm and giggled mischievously. Another small girl presented herself in front of me.

'You foreign?' she asked in Albanian. I nodded.

'I am *Albanian,*' she replied proudly, and sitting very close beside me on the wall drew herself up tall and clasped her hands tidily in her lap. She soon relaxed, and I tried out some very short simple sentences on her with encouraging results, as the music played and the tinies staggered happily around. I tried to imagine a similar scene in, say, Piccadilly Circus, but without success.

The band packed up their instruments, and the children set off into the darkness, hand in hand, dancing to the memory of the tunes, safe and proud in their own capital city.

In the Dajti hotel the bath-taps trickle slowly, so in the

end I managed in three inches of water to make myself presentable for the evening dinner. Down in the foyer Fatime arrived promptly, bringing Feim with her. It was so good to see his dark serious face break into his lop-sided smile, and feel his warm handshake. With him was Çesk Zadeja, the country's senior composer, and Eno Koço, the conductor of the Radio and Television orchestra. Çesk, dressed in a pale grey suit, presented a statesmanlike figure, and he greeted me with a measured paragraph of sentiments about Music and Life. Eno Koço, in contrast, was lithe and animated with a wicked twinkle in his eye, and a practising musician's incorrigible manner.

At a reserved table in the dining room, with fresh flowers in the centre and a glass of raki beside each plate, we began a long meal with so many courses that we lost count. The raki was followed by red wine, white wine, beer and quantities of mineral water. The conversation ranged over all aspects of music, and was interspersed with toasts to us, to our visit, to our families, to music. Çesk took off his jacket, joined in the laughter and even, after many glasses of wine, promised to write some bassoon pieces for me.

Eno Koço was most amused that I had brought my bassoon reeds with me.

'I would like to borrow a bassoon and play with some Albanian musicians,' I explained. 'I feel this will finally break down all barriers between our two countries, for music knows no barriers!'

'You can play in my orchestra,' he grinned. 'Any time!'

I then asked Fatime whether we could borrow bicycles to explore Tirana. This caused much amusement, and some incomprehension. Why could we possibly want to ride bicycles when we had a chauffeur and car at our disposal for the whole visit? Nevertheless we were told 'no problem', bicycles could be found for us. Progress indeed from the strict supervision of foreign visitors described in the books I had read.

'You look younger than last time you were here,' said Fatime, giving me a hug. 'I think happiness makes you young.'

'You are right, I am happy,' I answered.

******

The next morning we met Thoma for coffee in the hotel bar and he told us that we had been invited to visit the Higher Institute of Arts. It was within walking distance at the other end of the boulevard, next to the University, so we walked down in the bright autumn sun.

We were introduced to the principal, and then taken to the office of the deputy principal who told us something about the Institute. It was founded in 1964 and there are 600 students and 100 teachers, covering all the arts. Both tuition and musical instruments are provided free of charge by the state, and when each student leaves he is guaranteed employment. The concrete building seemed to have no sound-proofing and the corridors echoed with the sounds of practising. We were led to a large bare room containing an upright piano and four or five chairs. A young girl at the piano stood up as we entered and smiled shyly.

'Etrita!' I cried, 'do you remember me? I heard you play last year when I was here.'

'Yes, I remember' she replied in perfect English, for the younger generation is now learning English as a second language.

The principal tapped me on the shoulder and introduced me to Etrita's teacher Nora Çashku, whom I had carelessly ignored. On the piano was a small piece of blackened photocopied music, about eight inches square, which seemed to be the subject of the lesson that we had interrupted.

'Will you play for us?' I asked Etrita. She nodded graciously, and we sat in a small formal row halfway across the room. I felt sorry for her in this bleak atmosphere, but having heard her perform before I knew she would be able to manage.

She leaned forward, paused for a long quiet moment and then Debussy's 'Jardins sous la pluie' poured from under her young fingers. The dusty room was forgotten, even the poor quality of the piano had little significance.

When it was over and we were back at the hotel I moaned helplessly to Enzo.

'I shall never make a good reporter. I should have recorded her playing and photographed her, but she looked and sounded so lovely that I couldn't do either.'

Enzo, whose main interest was folk-music, and who usually had no time for anything more modern than Vivaldi, had to agree that it had been a magical performance, and surprised himself by doing so.

The rest of the day was spent in meeting and talking to Thoma's friends, delivering some books brought from the Albanian Society in London, and posting some letters.

The post office was a long bare room with a counter along one side, and the usual bored looking employees which post offices seem to attract all over the world.

'I have two letters for Tirana, and these cards for England.'

'We cannot take cards for England.'

'Why not?'

'There is a strike in England. We cannot accept these cards.'

I felt embarrassed at my country's incompetence. 'But the strike is over now,' I said.

'Still not possible as there are many letters waiting. Try again next week.'

She took my local letters and laboriously wrote a receipt for each, tearing them out of her book with the aid of a short metal strip used in the absence of perforations. Then stamps were bought and stuck on - I was glad that there wasn't a queue if such a simple transaction took so long. Back at the hotel I noticed a post-box in the foyer, so I dropped the cards in when nobody was looking.

That evening we were told that we must be up early and ready to leave the next day by nine o'clock as we were going to Gjirokastër. The Folk Festival, which takes place there every five years, was to begin on the Thursday, but on the preceding day a new statue to Enver Hoxha was to be unveiled, and our companions wanted to be there in time for the ceremony. We promised to be ready and, to the background of a violent thunder-storm which echoed round the mountains and shook the hotel, we tried to sleep.

CHAPTER 6

Enzo and I met in the foyer of the hotel early in the morning. He had been so excited by the thunder-storm that he had hardly slept, and at six o'clock in the morning had been out roaming the streets amongst the workers going on the early shift. He had found one of the many workmen's stand-up cafes, and had broth, a hunk of bread, a bowl of yogurt and a bottle of beer for his breakfast, which had cost only four leks. (12 leks to the pound.)

'Then I went round some pretty scruffy back streets,' he went on, 'looking for the *real* Albania.'

'It's *all* real Albania,' I muttered, 'the good and the bad,' but he was too high on his discoveries to listen.

At last Thoma appeared. Our early start was not quite so early after all. We drove round to the Union of Writers and Artists to collect Feim. Another long wait, but it was a pleasure to stand in the hot autumn sun under the trees. At last Feim appeared with Vera his wife and Petro Kokushta the secretary of the Artists division of the Union. It was decided that there wasn't room for us all in the car so Thoma, being the junior person present, had to wait and come along later with someone else.

'I am the lower person,' he joked, as he got out of the car again.

'I thought everyone in Albania was equal,' I said innocently.

'Yes, but some more equal!' he replied, casting an affectionate glance at Feim.

At last, over an hour later than intended, we set off towards Durrës and the south. It was a tight squeeze in the back for Enzo, Petro and Feim, but I sat like a duchess in the

front and had a marvellous view of all the goings-on along the road. There was plenty to keep us amused, particularly when we went through villages where donkeys, ox-carts, lorries packed with workers, flocks of goats, herds of cows and crowds of people slowed us down and kept Burhan hooting and weaving in and out. I longed to take pictures, but felt that they would be embarrassed by my interest, thinking that I was mocking their old-fashioned country.

'You do not have horses and carts in England,' said Petro, seeing my interest.

'Not much now, but we did when I was a child,' I replied, remembering those wartime years in Wales when Megan delivered the milk daily in a small trap with a churn in the back. I could see her lowering the dipper into the luscious depths and filling our big china jug which we left at the gate. A plate was put on the top to keep it clean, but if you didn't bring the jug in early you would find slugs had slithered up and, finding the spout, had slipped over the rim and were floating, pale belly upwards. . . . I came back to the present with a jerk as a lorry in front of us stopped suddenly with no warning and Burhan jammed on the brakes, muttering quietly.

South of Lushnja we passed through the oil-producing region. Dotted around the plain were small derricks, looking not much taller than lamp-posts in the wide valley. At the base of each were corrugated iron sheets, presumably covering the actual well. Small donkey-engines chugged here and there, pumping up the thick black liquid, some of which trickled over the ground and thickened the small river which ran under the road-bridge. A few men wheeled oil-drums about, and the whole scene was comfortingly domestic, set against one's general image of the Oil Industry. Further on, however, we passed a full-sized refinery, indicating a large and healthy fuel industry.

At frequent intervals along the road, even in the remotest parts, notice boards with slogans shouted at us from the roadside. 'Unity, readiness, vigilance', 'Keep the revolutionary spirit high', 'Glory to the Party of Labour of Albania'.

'Why all these slogans,' I asked Feim. 'Surely the revolution is all over.'

'Ah, but we must keep the spirit alive,' he said righteously.

By the time we came to Fier the passengers in the back were stiff and aching. Fier is a modern town, founded in 1870, and is in the centre of the cotton growing region. We stopped in the square and went into the hotel. The bar was

closed, but after much knocking on doors they opened up for us and brought strong coffee in tiny cups, glasses of mineral water and thick ice cream, chewy with fruits. It was called 'cassata', but was much more robust than the delicate dish served at home, and far more satisfying.

For the next leg of the journey I offered the front seat to Enzo. Our Albanian friends were horrified.

'The next part of the journey is very difficult, a woman must sit in front.'

For some reason I insisted.

'Nowadays in England men and women are equal you know!' but later I realised my mistake. The next part of the journey wound through the mountains and we were thrown from side to side. In their efforts to be circumspect the other two in the back exhausted themselves with the tension of not leaning on me, and were in agony.

Burhan turned on the car radio, and there was some Albanian folk-music which delighted Enzo. The rhythms are intricate and odd, often in multiples of seven, nine (divided into 5+4), twelve (7+5) and so on. Feim explained that a seven-beat rhythm divided 3+2+2 was typically Albanian, while 2+2+3 was typically Bulgarian.

Jagged ranges of mountains rose up ahead, gleaming white in the sun and we wound amongst them, my fellow passengers groaning and shifting uncomfortably until we reached Uji i Ftohte ('Cold water'). This is a popular stopping place shaded by trees. The land falls away steeply to the left down to the river Vjosa, and on the slope amongst pools, waterfalls and fountains is a restaurant. We unwound ourselves and plodded down the steps on stiff shaking legs. Bottles of wine were brought, and we gave up all idea of reaching Gjirokastër in time for the unveiling ceremony at 2 o'clock and had a generous lunch of soup, fresh fish, salad and grapes.

As we drove along the valley between two long ranges of mountains towards Gjirokastër we kept passing dusty buses draped with red banners proclaiming 'Festivali Folklorik Kombetar' (National Folk Festival), and full of excited laughing faces. I had read about the town of Gjirokastër in the novel 'Chronicle in Stone' by Ismail Kadare, the best known Albanian author. It is crowned with a massive fortress, and the stone houses of the town cascade down steep slopes to the valley below. It has been designated a 'museum town' and is protected by law from indiscriminate development. The most unusual feature of the houses is the roofing with slabs of stone instead of tiles, which not only gives an appearance of great strength, but makes the whole

town shine with a silvery grey light. Many of the houses retain their original interiors of richly carved wood, and some can be visited by the public. Here too is the birth-place of Enver Hoxha, now a museum.

We drove up into the main square and parked outside the hotel. Hundreds of people were milling around, many of them in national costume, and there was a buzz of excitement. The unveiling ceremony at the top of the town was over, and the musicians were coming down through the streets in merry disorder, drums thundering, tambourines jingling, fiddlers fiddling and shawms blaring. A group of girls in striped red jerseys danced past and a man playing a drum twirled slowly after them, with a small boy also playing a drum sitting on his shoulders. I turned on my tape-recorder and let it run.

'Pour le BBC ça va?' joked Thoma, suddenly appearing laughing at my side. Little did he know that this very sound would be introducing a programme on the BBC two months later.

After the crowd had dispersed we went into the hotel bar and had more coffee and mineral water, for we were parched after the long journey. At another table sat two women, talking earnestly, one fair and the other dark.

'Madame Kadare and Madame Agolli' said Thoma nodding towards them. These were the wives of the two best-known Albanian authors, and both of them are writers too: Madame Kadare is a novelist and Madame Agolli a journalist. It seems that the Festival draws everyone from all branches of the arts to Gjirokastër.

We walked up the steep stone streets to see the new statue. It was made of Carrara marble, and was compellingly smooth, bland and white, and of a size too big to ignore. I watched the other people looking at it, trying to divine their thoughts, but my eyes were continually pulled back to the statue itself, and I was somehow glad to get away.

Later that evening, in the sports stadium at the bottom of the town, there was a concert, given by the inhabitants of Gjirokastër to welcome the visitors. Thoma had forgotten to bring our tickets, but muttered something significant to every policeman and ticket-collector we passed, and ushered us into good seats. The terraced stone was cold, but we were packed so closely that it didn't matter. Down in the arena was a brightly lit stage with a choir of about a hundred dressed in red and black grouped at the back. In front was another choir of a hundred children, and in the centre a full orchestra of another hundred. All these were drawn from a town of 20,000, and excluded the soloists and groups of

performers who appeared later.

Rhythmic clapping greeted a man and a woman on the stage who gave a welcoming oration, speaking alternate paragraphs and ending in unison. This was followed by a rousing welcome song in unashamedly popular style written by Feim specially for the occasion. Albanian composers are prepared to turn their hand to anything that is required - marches, songs, film music, symphonies - there are no barriers.

The concert which followed included dances, light music and folk-music, interrupted at one point by a startling performance by a group of children with violins, who played a virtuoso Caprice by Saimir Skenduli.

Not wanting to draw attention to myself, I switched on the tape recorder in its bag, and so have a muffled record of this concert overlaid by the chattering of the crowd and Thoma's explanations in French of what was going on. A satirical song about the ways of bureaucrats raised a lot of laughter. Several songs contained references to Enver Hoxha, and these often got a spontaneous round of applause and cheers in mid-verse from the audience.

Searchlights from the castle high above us were switched on as it became dark, and moved over the town, picking out the new statue, or a minaret, an ancient stone house or the mountains on the other side of the valley. As we sat close together in the warm darkness I turned to Thoma:

'Life is so good,' I said. 'But, oh so *short*,' I added suddenly, for no reason other than the sudden chill of its passing.

Thoma looked serious for the first time since we had arrived.

At the end of the concert the performers began to clap and to shout a rhythmic chant. The audience rose to its feet and joined in, making it sound more like the end of a football match than a concert.

Enver's Party
We will always ready be!

is a rough translation, and it certainly served to emphasise the strength of patriotic feeling in the country. I didn't feel threatened by it, but was glad when they stopped.

'Come,' said Thoma, and began to push his way quickly through the crowd to the exit. The crush was terrifying, and I stumbled up the steps and over the rough ground clutching my bag to my stomach and trying not to panic. The crowd pressed tighter and tighter around me and I lost sight of both my companions. Ahead was the narrow iron exit gate, and it was locked. The wait until it was opened seemed inter-

minable, and the crowd pushed even harder. I remembered my experience on Egyptian trains and in an extremely un-British manner, did a sinuous but vigorous lateral shimmy which took me right through the gate as soon as it opened. The others, panting, joined me a few minutes later, and we went to find Burhan and the car.

Gjirokastër was full, as the people of the town offer hospitality to the hundreds of performers and visitors, and so it had been arranged for us to stay at Saranda, a seaside town about 40 miles away.

As we drove off into the darkness we passed crowds of people strolling arm in arm across the road, lorries crammed full of passengers and coaches with red banners flying. A donkey, blinking in our headlights, stood in the middle of the road ahead, and Burhan drove round it muttering softly 'your ears not working?'

Enzo, hungry for more folk music, turned on the car radio, and we heard just four chords.

'Paganini,' murmured Burhan, and it was. Mentally I notched him up yet another point.

For an hour we drove, at first due south alongside the mountains where clusters of lights showed where small Greek villages nestled against the slopes. Near the village of Glina, where Albanian mineral water comes from, we turned right and started to climb and wind through a mountain range. This is the Muzina Pass, which rises to nearly 2,000 feet at its highest point. As it was dark there were not so many lorries to avoid, just fallen rocks and bits of missing road. At a couple of police check-points we were stopped and Thoma leaned out to explain who we were and where we were going. Burhan got tired of this, so at the next one he just slowed a bit, wound down his window, called out 'Delegation Inglese,' and drove on. This strategy worked excellently, and was used throughout our stay.

Across another plain and through another mountain range and then at last we saw the lights of Saranda twinkling below us reflected in a moonlit sea. We were installed in the Hotel Butrinti and after an excellent supper were glad once more to collapse into bed.

CHAPTER 7

In the brilliant morning sunlight we set out to explore Saranda. It is a modern town, mostly built during the last thirty years, on the site of an ancient Illyrian seaport. A mediaeval monastery dedicated to 'Santi Quaranta' (Forty Saints) gave the present town its name. Only three or four streets deep, the town curves round the bay below the mountains.

A few miles out to sea, usually shrouded in mist, is the Greek island of Corfu. Further down the coast the channel which separates it from Albania is only 3 kilometres wide, and the waters are constantly patrolled by Albanian guards.

The hotel is at one end of the bay, and at the other end on a peninsula several new blocks of flats were being built. We walked through the town looking into the shops and then down to the tiny harbour. The whole harbour area had been built up with scenery to look like a Greek port, complete with miniature lighthouse. This was ready for the making of a film, and some of the crew were on the harbour wall looking at it critically.

Enzo then went off for a while on his own, and I sat with Thoma on the wall of a flower garden by the promenade and took the opportunity to ask questions about a composer's life and the music business in general in Albania.

He told me that a composer is paid a full salary by the state, like every other worker. There is a scale of pay for everyone in Albania, but nobody earns more than twice as much as anyone else. The difference for a composer is that he only has to do four hours work each day, not eight like other workers. (Thoma himself works in the office of the Union of Writers and Artists). The rest of his time is free

for creative activity. In addition to this he is allowed creative leave every year, which can be from one month to a whole year on full pay, in order to research or work on a specific project.

He is entitled to an apartment with one extra room for his work, and many composers are also given a piano by the state.

Being a music publisher myself, I wanted to know about their publishing industry, but it seems that there is only one small publishing house. Not many works actually get into print, and there isn't a complicated system of performing rights, recording rights and royalties for sales of copies such as we have in the West.

When a composer writes a new work he takes it along to the League of Writers, Artists and Musicians, and the Music Committee meets to discuss it, and if necessary offer suggestions for its improvement. If it is well received it will be publicly performed and the composer will receive an honorarium.

'What about broadcasts, performances overseas, or recordings. Don't you get further fees?'

'No. That is not important for us. What is important is the *creation*, and the quality of the creation. Maybe these other things come later, I do not know.'

At this moment we saw a group of tiny children coming towards us, led by their teacher. It was a kindergarten out for a morning walk. Each child wore a white pinafore with his or her name embroidered on the yoke. The whole group was attached to itself, either hand-in-hand or else holding the pinafore of the one in front. They stared wide-eyed at us, and I asked for permission to take some photographs, which caused much excitement. Eventually they moved on, waving, smiling and laughing, and then running to catch on to the pinafore in front again.

At lunch-time we found Burhan sitting on the sea wall talking to other drivers, and asked him to take us to Ksamil, a little way down the coast, for lunch. On the way we passed Lake Butrint, which is divided by the rocky Ksamil peninsula from the sea. The ranges of mountains which form the border with Greece were reflected in its tranquil surface. Enclosures at one side of the lake marked mussel-beds, and Thoma promised excellent mussels for lunch.

Ksamil is a small village surrounded by orchards of olive and citrus trees, which have somehow been persuaded to flourish on this once-barren height. On a promontory there is a restaurant with a good view of Corfu in the distance, and

two or three tiny green islands close to the rocky Albanian coast below.

After lunch it was time to go back to Saranda and prepare to leave for Gjirokastër, as the Festival was due to start at 4 o'clock, and it took an hour's driving to get there. Several other guests had arrived at the hotel in our absence. and I was introduced to the composer Avni Mula in the foyer. We sat on the steps outside the hotel and I asked him about the young violinists at the concert the previous night.

'Do they learn by the Suzuki method?' I asked. He looked blank.

'What is that?'

I tried to explain that it was invented by a Japanese teacher and had produced amazing results. In the early stages the children learn by listening and imitation.

'Playing by ear? That is for amateurs!' he responded scornfully.

Later Avni told me something about his life history. During the 1940s, when he was a boy, an Italian touring company called 'Carro di Tespi' had toured Albania, erecting their stage in the main squares of the larger towns and performing operas. Avni could not afford a ticket, but used to climb a tree to watch the performances in his home-town, Shkodra. Hearing their wonderful voices he was filled with ambition to become one of them.

'It was not until I was 24, after Liberation when the desires of the poor men became reality, that I was able to go to Moscow and study singing.'

During the next twenty years he belonged to the Albanian national opera company and sang major roles in nearly all the well-known operas. It was only in recent years, as his voice began to fail, that he had turned to composition, and was now pursuing his second career with full-hearted commitment.

'Up to now I have composed about a thousand things. All sorts of music. When I have the desire to compose I leave everything!'

The journey from Saranda to Gjirokastër through the mountains was spectacular in daylight. At one point the road circled round on a ledge halfway up a mountain and below were ridged hills of red earth rising out of bright green shrubs and trees. At another point we passed beside a gorge and the strata on the other side swept down from above as if the whole mountain had been tipped on its side.

Gjirokastër was in a ferment of excitement. We parked the car in the square outside the hotel, and climbed up the crowded streets. The road to the castle zig-zags up the rock

giving fine views of the town below.

As we passed the ticket collectors and policemen and went into the massive tunnel-entrance of the castle, I felt a surge of shared memory with the people of the town who had sheltered here from the invasions during the war.

Out in the open again on the very top of the hill, we were surrounded by the curtain wall of the fortress on three sides, and on the fourth was a wide semi-circular stage with a row of wrought iron arches set along the back. In each arch hung a lantern, and above the centre was a huge medallion showing a circle of dancers with 'Festivali Folklorik Kombetar Gjirokastër 1988' in gold letters round the rim.

The ground behind the stage fell away steeply, and the mountains on the other side of the valley provided a dramatic backdrop, although on this first night they were capped with grey cloud.

In the arena were rows of red and grey plastic chairs for the audience, and armchairs at the very front for VIPs. In the second row sat the judges, Feim and Çesk amongst them giving us welcoming waves and smiles as we arrived. We and the other invited delegates had seats reserved in the fifth row.

High up on the crumbling walls behind us hundreds of people perched to watch the show. Groups of flag poles flying red flags were set at strategic points and near the stage an immense portrait of Enver Hoxha holding out a bunch of flowers smiled down on the crowds, reminding them that at the last Festival he was here himself.

The clock tower beside the stage showed four o'clock and the first set of dancers and musicians surged on to the stage in bright costumes. A rousing tune began and everyone rose to their feet for the National Anthem. Halfway through Thoma nudged me. 'Look,' he said, pointing to his bare arm. The hairs on it were standing upright.

There had been two years of preparation leading up to this Festival. Teams of performers in each of the twenty-six districts of Albania had competed against each other, and now the best were to compete for the final prize. Each of the teams was to present a forty-minute performance of songs, dances and music, and there were four groups performing each evening for six days, with an extra two on Sunday morning.

I had arrived knowing nothing about the folk-music at all, but gradually under Thoma's guidance I began to distinguish between the melodies of the north, always sung in unison, and the melodies of the south which were in several parts, often against a drone bass.

The singers of the south made sounds such as I had

never heard in my life before. Edward Lear wrote unflatteringly of them in his Journal:

'But oh! the way in which cats bounce and tear about these places all night long! and then the mode of singing adopted by the Toskidhes Albanians all through the long hours of darkness! There is a large party of them in the next room to mine: four begin to form a sort of chorus; one makes a deep drone or bass; two more lead the air; and the remainder indulge in strange squeaking falsettos, like the whinings of uneasy sucking pigs.'

I learned to distinguish a çifteli, a long-necked instrument with two strings, from a lahouta, which has a short neck often decoratively carved, and is played with a bow and makes a heart-breaking desolate sound. Easiest of all to distinguish is the gaida, a bagpipe made, literally, from an inflated goat: two legs tied off, the third holding a drone-pipe and the fourth the melody pipe. Every time we passed a flock of goats on the road Enzo would point excitedly saying 'Gaida!', as it was his ambition to own one. I was always terrified that the obliging Burhan would run one down for him.

The items followed each other almost without a break, the performers just giving a nod to the applause. The men sang, or rather hurled their voices, as if from peak to peak in the mountains, sometimes with their hands behind their ears to project the sound. The women's voices had a more penetrating quality, sometimes very nasal and eastern-sounding, and everything was amplified for the benefit of those at the far end of the castle.

The clouds on the mountains grew thicker and rain began to fall, but the singing and dancing did not falter, and the audience put up their umbrellas and sat on undeterred. In the interval we went into a café-bar in one of the dungeons of the castle, and I expected it to fill up quickly with people seeking shelter, but very few came down. We had hot coffee and raki, and then went up to sit in the thick drizzle for the second half.

'How many people take part altogether in this Festival?' I asked, 'including all the preliminary rounds.'

'About 50,000,' replied Thoma. 'They spend much time in preparation.'

'It must take up all their free time,' I said.

'Yes, and they travel to small villages and do many performances. The state allows fifteen free days each year to amateur musicians for cultural activity, in addition to their annual three-week holiday from work, so this helps them.'

On the journey home, with all our clothes wet, we shivered and longed for our warm beds.

'I've got three beds in my room at the hotel,' I said. It's nice to have such a large room all to myself.'

'That is because there are not many people at the hotel yet,' said Thoma, and I presumed he was joking. However, when I returned there was another suitcase in my room, and later another arrived, and two very garrulous German ladies with them.

'Are you a Folklorist?' asked one fiercely.

'No, I'm afraid not,' I replied. She gave me an astonished look, and then returned to her unpacking. Both of them were totally uninhibited, and after showering wandered about the room naked for some time sorting out their things. I felt extremely invaded, particularly as I seemed to be developing a cold. My throat was sore and at first I had assumed it to be from inhaling the constant stream of smoke from Thoma, but I was beginning to shiver and feel strange. I wanted to be alone.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning I crept out of the dormitory early, and went for a walk. There is no beach at the southern end of Saranda. The land is a jumble of rocks, rampaging cacti, yuccas, fig trees and tufts of wiry grass dotted with wild cyclamen. The rocks tumble straight into the sea. Leading from the hotel towards the town there is a concrete promenade with rusty iron ladders leading down into the water for bathers. Thoma kept threatening to take us swimming, but to me it looked too rugged to be tempting.

Sitting on rocks at the edge of the water were solitary figures holding lengths of fishing line. Corfu was still covered with mist, increasing the feeling of being cut off from the outside world. Brown rats ran between the rocks by the shore and sat up washing their whiskers, enjoying the early morning sun.

I walked up the road out of the town a little way. There were plenty of people on the move, pushing bikes up the hill, driving antiquated vans or noisy lorries, or just walking in groups. Often I saw two men going to work carrying a bag between them, presumably containing their lunch or tools, holding a handle each, although it was obviously not heavy. The warm friendships between men in the Mediterranean region is something that never fails to surprise and delight me. Every day when we arrived at Gjirokastër Thoma would see friends and embrace them with cries of delight, kissing them on both cheeks, even if we had seen them the previous day. In time we became involved in this too, as we made many friends, and it gives me great happiness to remember how many people in Albania I am on hugging terms with.

This day followed a similar pattern to the previous one; we whiled away the morning in Saranda, and then had lunch, this time at our own hotel. Delegates from many other countries were arriving for the Festival, and there seemed to be two or three from each country; Greece, Italy, Bulgaria, Mexico, Switzerland, Germany, Austria. These were all invited by the Academy of Sciences, and went around in a group together, with several guides.

One distinguished looking Swiss visitor appeared to be on his own, so we invited him to join us for lunch, and he turned out to be Marcel Cellier, who has made one of the few available records of Albanian music. He was there to make an official recording of the Festival, and has been several times before, pursuing his passion for Balkan music. (I was told later that he had provided recordings for the sound-track of the film 'Picnic at Hanging Rock').

I asked him whether recording was his full-time occupation, but he shook his head wistfully.

'Alas, no. For more than forty years I work in a mining company. It was while travelling in this region many years ago for the mining company that I discovered a mine of gold - and that was the music of the Balkans.'

After hurtling once more through the mountain ranges we arrived for the Festival at Gjirokastër, and again climbed the hill to the castle. The tunnel entrance is part of a museum, and in each of the cavernous arches which line the cobbled road is a floodlit field gun, anti-aircraft gun or other machine of war. At the entrance there is always a young soldier holding a machine-gun, usually looking rather tired and far from fierce. An American war-plane, also part of the museum, is parked incongruously on the ramparts outside.

We had arrived early, so leaving my coat on the seat I climbed up on the battlements around the back of the arena taking photographs of the stage from above and also the people as they scrambled up and settled on the crumbling walls.

In the café-bar later I met Tish Daija, another composer who was Feim Ibrahimi's teacher at the Conservatoire. He spoke only Italian, so it was difficult to make much contact, but I liked his friendly energetic manner.

'Tish never walks, but always runs,' said Thoma later.

Each group performed brilliantly, but the piercing voices of the women and the over-amplified voice-hurling of the men seared through my already aching skull. At the end of each performance the rhythmic clapping and chanting of 'Parti Enver' seemed intolerable.

One memorable item was a comic duet sung by two small boys, aged about 10 and 11. They are brothers and well known in their own region of Tropoja in the north. With manly gestures they sang alternate lines in strong confident voices, raising cheers and clapping at the end of each verse from the audience. (I managed to record this, and whenever anybody listens to the tape they can't resist joining in the laughter in the boys' voices, even though they don't understand a word.)

The rain fell once more, but we survived somehow and after the show was over, went backstage where the groups were packing up. (Although there appears to be a precipitous drop behind the stage, when looking from the front, there is actually a large area at a lower level which is ideal for the performers to prepare themselves out of sight of the audience.) There is another way down to the town by a cobbled lane which leads from the backstage area through a tunnel-gateway and curves round the outside of the castle cliff. While the performers waited for this gate to be unlocked for them (there seems to be a lot of locking in Albania) they sang and danced in the lane, and then all the way down the hill to the square. We followed them and had a new view of the town with its lights scattered down the hill-side, and 'ENVER' and '80' flashing alternately in red letters on the skyline, commemorating the 80th year since his birth.

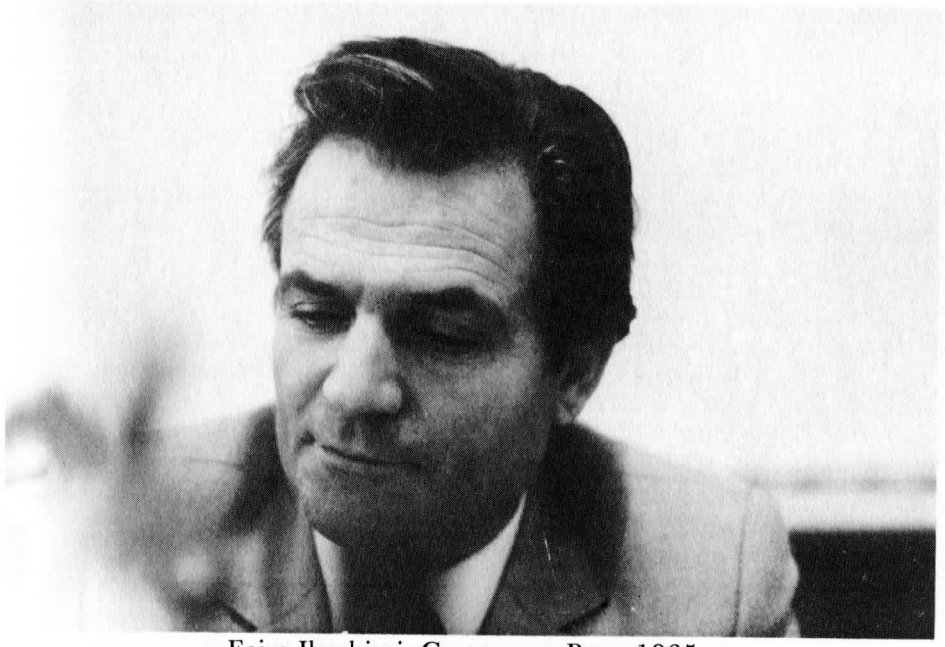
In the square the dancing continued, with the visitors and people of the town joining in. Thoma, with his wicked sparkling eyes and affectionate hands on the shoulders of relevant officials, talked his way past the hotel door-keeper and manager, and took us inside and up the stairs to a balcony where we could get a good view.

At dinner back at Saranda that night Enzo and Thoma were in fine form, and joked together in Italian, leaving me to sniff alone. I felt increasingly dejected, but tried with one ear to follow their conversation. It seemed that Enzo had seen a pretty Albanian girl sitting alone at another table and wanted to invite her over. Thoma challenged him to try, and Enzo when he felt that he had memorised the necessary vocabulary, went over to try his luck. She turned out to be a very self-possessed young woman from the radio and television team, and she spoke fluent Italian. The three chattered animatedly together and my gloom got deeper. I reached for a paper napkin to mop my nose and the girl actually noticed that I was there.

'And who are you?' she asked, with a polite smile.

I pointed to Enzo, and said in careful Italian (I had been working on it for some minutes) 'I am his mother.'

Seeing her face fall for a moment, before the gales of laughter broke out, cheered me up enormously, and after that and several glasses of wine, life didn't seem so bad.



Feim Ibrahimi. Composer. Born 1935

Thoma Simaku. Composer. Born 1958

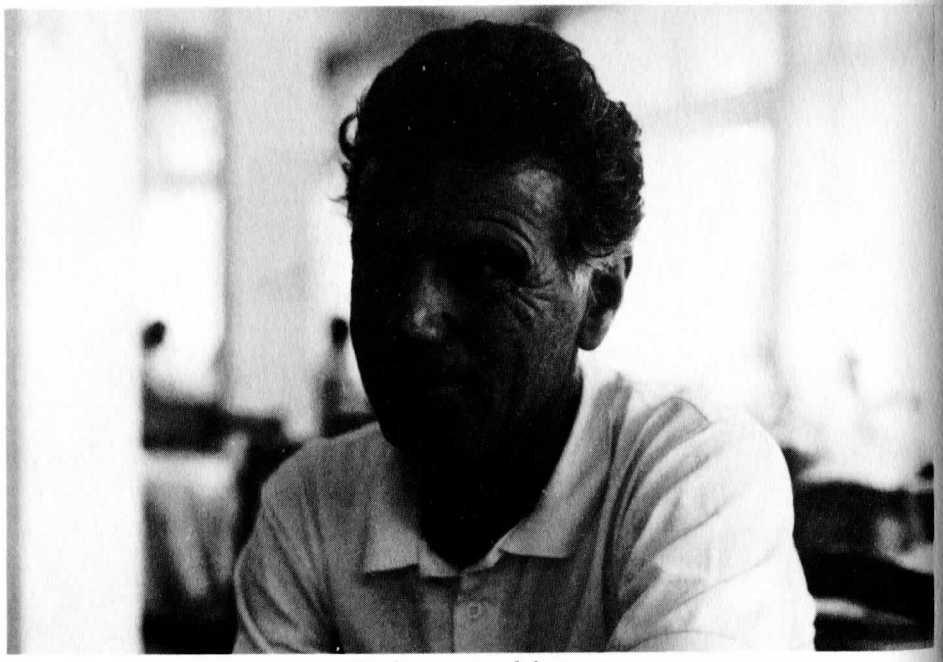
Gjirokastër Folk Festival, 1988

Folk musicians in the streets of Gjirokastër

Folk musicians in the streets of Gjirokastër

A pupil at the Jordan Misja School in Tirana.

Children from a kindergarten, Saranda.



Burhan, our driver.

CHAPTER 9

Once more I managed to get away alone for the morning, and this time went into the town of Saranda. There were peaceful sounds of people getting on with their lives. A murmur of voices and a purposeful pattering of feet - nobody hurrying, nobody dawdling. The squeaky chop of a gardener trimming dead branches off a palm tree, the breathy vocal sound of a clarinet being practised in a block of flats. An old woman in black sat on the dusty pavement surrounded by her shopping bags, waiting for a bus.

I wondered if my reading of them was in any way correct. To me they seemed to be a contented people, and yet they had lived for forty years under the most rigid Communist regime anywhere in the world. There was a passage in the book 'High Albania' by Edith Durham, which might give a clue. She was talking to some bloodthirsty tribesmen in the north of the country:

'These are our worst enemies,' said one, tapping his rifle. 'Bring soldiers, take away our guns, make a good Government and we will obey.'

Nor, if they believed in the Government and were fairly treated, would the mountain tribes be very difficult to govern. They have the most wonderful power of obedience where they believe obedience due,. . .'

Enver Hoxha had been a strict father to them and, as such, seems to be remembered with affection. However, now that he is dead, the colours of clothes which used to be subdued are much brighter, and small relaxations of the old rigid rules are apparent everywhere.

small relaxations of the old rigid rules are apparent everywhere.

'Now that Hoxha is gone, will things change?' I had asked someone one day.

'No, we do not want to change,' was the reply.

'But there are differences,' I argued.

'Yes that is true. Things are developing, but always in the same direction that he set.'

Yes, an uncomplicated people. Simple jokes delight, small kindnesses are given and received with much pleasure, they seem to be appreciative and contented with their lot.

Thoma had said that for his holiday he had gone to one of the many holiday homes, built for the workers and their families on the coast or in the mountains. He and his wife had a room overlooking the sea.

'Every night I saw the sun sink into the sea,' he said, 'It was beautiful.' That was enough for him.

I watched some small boys in shorts, out for a run from school. They leapt and twirled, touching their toes and bending to left and right, delighting in the strength of their bodies and the sun on their skin. I realised that in all the time I had been there I had not seen an angry, sulky or crying child. Plenty of fun, and friendly tussles and chases, but no unpleasantness. The older boys seemed agreeable and polite, with no sign of loutishness, and all children seemed relaxed and at ease with adults.

I tried to think of things that didn't appeal to me about Albania. There were a few, the main one of course being the lack of personal freedom and choice, but set against their turbulent history maybe this seems a small price to pay for their present stability. To quote Edith Durham again:

'One race has never yet seen with the eyes of another, perhaps never will. Universal peace is a far cry. But the perspective of everything, life and modern politics included, depends entirely upon the point from which is is viewed.'

I went back to the hotel and sat sipping coffee, watching a waitress who patiently spent several minutes smoothing a tablecloth and lining-up the scalloped edges with the next one until they were perfectly matched.

That evening the Festival was rained on once more, but this time so heavily that the last group had to be postponed and perform later in a sports hall. Wet and shivering, with my nose streaming I was very glad when it was decided that we would not stay for this later performance but get back to Saranda, as there was to be a special dinner for us, at the invitation of the Minister of Culture.

I went up to my room to prepare for the dinner, but longing to collapse into bed. The larger of the German ladies was there, lying on the bed with very little on, eating

an apple. Overcoming my Britishness I stripped off, had a shower and washed my hair. Suddenly she called out that I could use her hair drier which was in the bathroom. When I was ready, she said 'You look very nice,' and - yes - smiled.

The dinner was a lengthy affair, beginning with the ceremonial arrival of a whole roast lamb sitting up with a carrot in its mouth. It looked far too much like a fireside pet for my liking. There followed innumerable courses and glasses of wine. In addition to the Minister, there was the Director of the district of Gjirokastër and about 30 delegates together with all their guides and also the two authors Dritëro Agolli and Ismail Kadare so it was quite a big party. I think there were some speeches, in fact I am sure of it, but by that time I could hardly keep upright.

Marcel Cellier sat opposite and, in a seductively Maurice Chevalier style, told me more about his work, ending up by presenting me with a tape of his Albanian folk-music recordings. As soon as the meal was over I thanked the Minister, Alfred Uçi, for his hospitality and stumbled up the stairs, praying for a quiet night.

CHAPTER 10

The next morning my insides had 'turned to water' as the saying goes. We had to go to Gjirokastër early, as there were two teams performing in the morning as well as the four in the afternoon, so it was to be a long day.

All the way to Gjirokastër I suffered recurring bouts of severe pain, and throughout the morning performances these seemed to recur with every penetrating sound, of which there were many. All the rain clouds had gone, and the sky was a brilliant blue. The mountains shone silvery-white, peak beyond peak into the distance, and their very sharpness seemed to have a physical effect.

The sun was so hot that even the Albanians were finding it overpowering, and several people sat with copies of the daily paper 'Zëri i Popullit' balanced on their heads to reduce the glare.

Most of the dances were surprisingly economical of movement, a line of dancers taking small steps in a close circle or a weaving line across the stage. They seemed to be the dances of a people who either hadn't much room to move or didn't want to be seen, both of which could possibly be historically true of the mountain tribes. One team from the district of Dropolli did wild dances, much more the sort of thing one would expect from fierce tribesmen, and they came from the southern borders of the country; it was intriguing to speculate on the reasons for this.

For the benefit of those without printed programmes, a girl in a tasselled golden cap and a richly embroidered velvet dress came forward to announce each group of items, and to do any necessary adjustment of microphones.

After the two scheduled teams there was an extra item,

which was a team from southern Italy. These were the Arbëresh, descendants of the Albanians who fled from the Turks in the 15th century, and who have kept the Albanian traditions alive ever since. They received a tremendous welcome from the audience.

Unlike the Albanian performers, these instrumentalists brought chairs and sat down to play, and their songs were of a lilting choral style. My throbbing head welcomed this change of mood, but strangely after three or four songs of waltz-time nostalgia 'We are proud of our name, children of Skanderbeg,' one longed for the powerful certainties of the native Albanian songs.

'I wish that I was a bird and could fly - I would make my home here,' translated Thoma, for although the language of the Arbëresh is separated by 500 years from that of modern Albanians, most of it can be understood by them.

The Arbëresh women wore dresses of crimson velvet, decorated with gold, but they looked like people who had dressed up for a performance. Between items the musicians tuned up their instruments and fidgeted, one pushed his glasses nervously up his nose and I realised that not one of the Albanian performers had worn glasses.

They didn't finish with the 'Parti Enver' chant, but shouted 'Vive L'Albanie' and gave three cheers.

We went down to the square in the town in front of the hotel and every step seemed to bring on shooting pains and cramps; in spite of the heat I was shivering and my mouth unbearably dry. I tried hard to appear normal, but as soon as we reached the hotel I said that I must go inside and sit down.

Feim had joined us and said something to Thoma about an official lunch with the Director of the Union. I touched him on the arm and said 'I'm sorry, but I don't think I can manage it - I will have to lie down.'

Feim, preoccupied with the day's arrangements, told me not to worry, that the lunch was to be held in a quiet private dining-room and I need not eat much, so I tottered up the stairs with him and sat in a state of glazed uncertainty at the reserved table while he went to round up the rest of the party.

The table looked like a tapestry. It was covered with small plates each with different foods delicately decorated. Thin slivers of sausage with piped lace of mayonnaise, salads, strips of fish, vegetables cut into pretty shapes, something whitish with a frilly edge from which I averted my reeling gaze (slices of cold lamb's brain) and tried hard not to remember the sizzling animal of the previous night with the

rich fat running down. . . . .

The rest of the party arrived and the Director turned out to be Dritëro Agolli the prestigious author, at whose right hand I was seated in the place of honour. His wife was at the other end of the table and she seemed a very bright and emancipated person who I'm sure would have understood my plight instantly and whisked me away to a comfortable bed if only I had had the courage to ask her, but I didn't dare to stand up or move in case I passed out.

'What shall I do?' I asked my inner voice, which usually knows the right answer. 'Go on, stick it out, for the Honour of England!' it quipped, nudging me painfully in the ribs.

The waiter came round and started to serve the little delicacies to us. Stringing together the necessary words ungrammatically under my breath I whispered to him 'Sot kam problem! Pak, pak.' (Today I have a problem! Little, little.) He smiled understandingly, and carefully gave me a very small piece of sausage, a sliver of cucumber and a piece of sculptured tomato.

'A toast, to our guests,' said Dritëro Agolli, raising his glass of raki. I lifted mine too, and took the smallest sip possible. It ran like fire between my aching ribs and seemed to consume some of the pain. Sitting up a little straighter, I cut a millimetre from the edge of the slice of cucumber, and tried to think of intelligent things to say to my host.

'Have you been to many other countries?' I asked encouragingly. He looked thoughtful for a moment and then replied.

'Twenty-four.'

I ascertained that none of them had been England, and then felt rather at a loss. His wife, meanwhile, had heard that I had written a book about Egypt, so she asked me whether I would like to write something for her paper. During each of the six days of the Festival a four-page newspaper called 'Festivali' is produced, with details of the previous day's winners and articles about the Festival in general, with criticisms and appreciations by visitors. The writer in me, who always says 'yes' to any commission and then does the worrying afterwards, agreed readily.

The hors d'oeuvres were followed by deep-fried slices of strong cheese, which I couldn't do much with, and then a little round pan of something which smelt rich and herby. Enzo leaned across.

'We have that in Italy - it's sheep's entrails I'm afraid,' he warned quietly. My eyes glazed over. Then followed cannelloni, fish, lamb, a very sweet dessert and coffee.

At the cannelloni Enzo asked 'this is an Italian dish.

Are there any typically Albanian dishes?'

'No,' replied Dritëro. 'We have none of our own, so we take the best from other countries. They take our territory - we take their dishes!'

There were toasts throughout the meal in raki, red wine, white wine and beer. The waiter, showing kind concern, left the little dish of sheep's entrails throughout the meal in case the aroma might tempt me. . . . .

Dritëro Agolli retained his official formality and made many authoritative statements about world literature, and quoted disparaging statistics about the American Way of Life. He pronounced several truisms, as do all Albanians on official occasions, as though he had just thought of them for the first time, and also did a long bit which began 'I am a book. . .' which I didn't altogether understand. His craggy face is highly coloured, and his mouth has a tight and rather bitter set to it, as if he has seen some difficult times. I longed to be able to speak more freely to him and say 'Come on, things are not as bad as all that.'

At last, after two hours, the meal was over and it was time to go up to the castle for the next sequence of performances. As the sun went down the temperature dropped and once more I began to shiver. In the interval I retired to the café-bar and said I would stay there until the end. Shivering, but with a blazing forehead, I wrote my article for Festivali.

GJIROKASTER FOR THE FIRST AND SECOND TIME

Although I have never been to Gjirokastër before, I have lived here for a long time. All through the difficult years of the war I lived here with the neighbours, the wise old women and the pretty young girls. I knew the boys who were so brave, and felt the claustrophobia of the tunnels in the castle, when the people of the town took refuge inside. In 'Chronicle in Stone' by Ismail Kadare, I have seen it all clearly through his eyes.

In the stories of Dritëro Agolli I have shared the preoccupations and frustrations of the people at this time. In the words of Byron and Edward Lear I have seen the mountains, and heard the shepherds call from peak to peak, hands behind their ears, as they call in their songs, still, today.

Everyone that I meet radiates contentment, and the strength of the 'blood-and-fire' history is now only apparent (to me anyway) in the power of your music.

I came to meet 'classical' musicians, but find them all here at Gjirokastër, renewing their spirits at the source of their inspiration.

What I had not learned from my reading was the

warmth and friendship that I would find in this country. In the face of yet another invasion, this time of inquisitive tourists, everyone is kind, thoughtful and friendly. [Do not, I beg you, open your country to mass-tourism. It will be ruined for ever.] I cannot thank sufficiently those who made my visit possible and, as soon as we arrived in Tirana, took us to their hearts.

Even the rain was an old friend, because not only do we have plenty of rain at home in England, but 'Chronicle in Stone' begins with a raindrop which runs down the stones, along the channel and drops, with its friends, into the heart of an Albanian home.

I feel that I have shared some of the experience of this tiny drop.

Feeling sick, I put my head on my arms and waited for the performance outside to finish.

Every curve of the mountain road made its impression that night, and when we arrived at the hotel I leaned on the reception desk, having muttered my room number, 'njëqind trembëdhjeta' (113 - an achievement in itself!) gave in completely.

'I must go to bed,' I told Thoma. His smile faded.

'You must have some supper,' he insisted.

'No, not possible. Please find me an aspirin.' I turned and tottered up the stairs too tired to say any more.

Twenty minutes later, as I lay warm at last in my long thick Yorkshire nightdress, there was a tap at the door and both Enzo and Thoma came in. They brought two aspirins and some water, and Thoma looked anxious.

'I will call a doctor,' he said decidedly.

'No, don't bother. An aspirin will bring my temperature down. I just need to sleep.'

'I will be much happier if you have a doctor,' he insisted. and went off to telephone. I swallowed the aspirins and began to doze.

The large German lady then appeared and started to take all her clothes off.

'You are sick?' she asked, briskly.

'Yes. My friend is bringing a doctor soon,' I answered, wondering how she would react. She went to take a shower and then came and stood by my bedside, drying herself and talking amiably. When she was dressed again she renewed my glass of water, put the light where it would not shine in my eyes and went out quietly.

There was another tap at the door, and in came a procession. At the head was a very handsome young doctor,

followed by a nurse. Behind her came two of the young waitresses from the restaurant carrying a tray with soup and bread. They were squeaking with excitement at being allowed upstairs and started looking at all the interesting things on the bedside tables until they were shooed out by Thoma bringing up the rear.

I sat up in my modest nightdress feeling very much like a small sick child, whilst the grown-ups stood round my bed towering over me.

The young doctor glanced around, saw the tray, grabbed the soup spoon and stood with it hidden behind his back, looking rather embarrassed.

'Open your mouth for the doctor,' said Thoma, coaxingly.

Obediently I gaped while the doctor pressed my tongue down with the spoon handle, and the feel of cold metal brought childhood memories flooding back.

He then unzipped his little leather case and took out a stethoscope.

'Lift up your nightdress,' said Thoma. I began to struggle with it modestly, thinking 'Come on, if you were German you would have flung it off by now.' The doctor pressed the stethoscope on my back.

'Breathe for the doctor,' continued Thoma, and I started to giggle.

'Breathe properly,' he admonished, so I tried very hard. The doctor took my blood pressure and the nurse took my temperature with a thick thermometer tucked under my arm. Then the doctor sat down on the next bed with his prescription pad.

'Emri? (Your name?)' he asked, and I spelled it out for him slowly. He then prepared to ask another question, but good manners inhibited him, so he just stared at me a bit and then wrote something down. Thoma leaned over his shoulder to look, and then grinned at me.

'42,' he said.

'Tell him he is my friend for ever,' I answered, and instantly (having shed nearly ten years) felt a great deal better.

Later Thoma returned from the chemist with three small packets: squares of white paper folded round almost identical white pills. He explained what each was for and put them beside me.

'Is there anything else I can do to make you feel better?' he asked, full of concern. Still feeling like a small, sick child I longed to be hugged and tucked up, but such are the penalties of being grown up that I just assured him that I

would be fine now, and settled down.

Later in the night I woke feeling comfortable, warm and happy. I experienced a sensation of total peace, lying on the curve of the globe as it spins through space, content to ride it wherever it goes.

CHAPTER 11

The buses and cars carrying the visitors away to the Festival had all ground their way up the hill behind the hotel, and Saranda was mine for the day.

It was quite late in the morning when I went downstairs and the staff, who were relaxed and chatting amongst themselves in the foyer, looked suddenly self-conscious, not expecting any foreigners to be about. I went into the bar for a drink of hot chocolate, and the off-duty waitresses who had been relaxing in the armchairs rose to their feet smiling, and would not sit down again until I did. Their movements were gentle and self-deprecating, but also self-possessed. They enquired kindly after my health. I felt better but weak, and returned to my room to doze and read until quite late in the afternoon, when I went out for a walk.

Two women were just finishing painting the park railings. They dipped a rag into the paint tin and then rubbed the paint on the iron rods, making an easy and thorough job of what is usually a fiddly business with a paintbrush. Then, talking cheerfully together they set off up the hill, each swinging one sinister green hand.

I walked up the hill out of town, stopping for a while in a small war cemetery where nearly all the dates on the graves were the same - 1944. Some were decorated with fresh flowers. I sat on the stone wall for a while and watched the sun slip into the sea.

I wondered what would happen if I walked past the police post on the outskirts of the town without benefit of my 'minders'. Nothing happened whatever, and I carried on up to the crest of the hill where the plain stretched away towards the first mountain range on the road to Gjirokastër.

A bus stopped, and several women got off and separated to go home their several ways. A man leading his donkey with a load of firewood on its back turned off the road and wound in between the grey rocks and boulders. There was a tiny house tucked in amongst them, where smoke rose from the chimney and a welcoming light shone out through the vines that hung over the terrace. A horse, on some errand of its own, came through the rocks from another direction and made its way across the road and down the hill into town. A lorry, changing gear noisily, spat a shower of sparks into the air and a soldier swung along past me, singing to himself.

Darkness came quickly and silhouettes with glowing cigarettes passed me in twos and threes, some sharing the small burden of a work-bag swinging between them. A man on horseback trotted down the hill behind me and then swerved off amongst the rocks and cantered off into the dark, the horse's feet thudding softly on the thick mat of pine-needles. The crickets strummed endlessly.

Back in the town the shops, closed for the afternoon, had opened up again. The largest was a vegetable store where there was always a great sound of talking and laughing. At one end they sold drinks of various sorts and there was always a crowd there, some sitting on the counter, some on boxes, and children skipping in and out. I passed the bakery, where brown loaves lay sulkily in a wooden cupboard on the back wall.

In the town square on an improvised stage, backed by the inevitable massive portrait of Enver Hoxha, a folk group was just preparing to perform. The teams from Gjirokastër who are not competing in the Festival on any particular day go out into the villages, so that the people who can't make the journey to the Festival have a taste of the fun. They were a team from Diber that I had already heard in the Festival, but such is the compelling nature of their music that I had to stay and hear them perform again, although they were not so polished in this informal setting. There was a good crowd to listen to them, and lots of children dancing around.

Back at the hotel in the lounge a new group of people had arrived, and were sitting in a noisy group in the centre of the room, watched amusedly by some local businessmen who had come in for a drink. You could tell the newcomers were foreigners as, in contrast to the Albanians, they were so badly dressed.

'What flavours of ice cream have you?' asked a middle-aged woman with straggly fair hair, and wearing a cheesecloth sack and frayed blue jeans. I knew then they must be new

to the country, as there is only *ice-cream* in Albania. It is rich and thick, and sometimes there is fruit in it, but there are no fancy flavours. The group was apparently a film-crew, full of urgency and self-importance, ordering drinks with wide gestures and laughing with tonsil-exposing vigour. Their Albanian guide looked tired, but was always pleasant and laughed obligingly at their jokes. Listening politely to them telling him how Albania ought to be run he found rather more of a strain.

'Just slip the chief of police a bottle of whisky and he'll let us drive the van up there,' one of them was saying. I winced as I remembered the handsome fellow in Gjirokastër who had been so genial and friendly to us.

The delegates began to drift in from the Festival. First came Luigi, a professor of music from Italy with crinkly grey hair, a handsome profile and the ability to talk without taking a breath for up to forty-five minutes. He gave me a cheery wave, but was looking for someone else. Then a lithe dancer from Sweden, with his widely spaced faun-like eyes, unfolded a slim arm and leg round the door and smiled a greeting. The smaller of my German ladies came through talking earnestly, totally engrossed in a thickly moustached Greek for whom she had developed a passion. A very British entrepreneur with a charming but unfocussed smile, swayed in, hips first, fully aware that he was the only male in Albania wearing a primrose yellow pullover.

At last Thoma and Enzo arrived, late and apologetic. Enzo had been talking to the Italian-speaking Arbëresh folk-group and they had invited him to have dinner with them in the 'holiday home' where they were staying a little way down the coast road. These holiday homes are much like hotels, but are normally for the use of Albanian people only, and there are several on the coast and at beauty-spots in the mountains where foreigners never go.

'So,' Thoma smiled apologetically, 'I must go too, and you must eat alone tonight.'

Enzo was perfectly happy to go alone, but Thoma insisted that he must accompany him.

'You cannot speak with the chauffeur,' he argued.

Enzo insisted that he didn't need the car and was happy to walk the two miles down the coast, but Thoma would not hear of it.

'Something might happen to you, and then it would be my fault,' he reasoned, and so they both disappeared. Whether this was the traditional Albanian hospitality, or whether Thoma had been instructed to keep with us I can't say, but I felt sorry for our driver Burhan having been out all

day, and now having to stay up late at night.

After such a lazy day it was difficult to get to sleep. It was hot and the dogs were barking.

*****

'But I haf no skirt,' wailed the younger German lady dolefully the next morning. 'I am thinking this is a cold mountainous country and I haf only these trousers.'

'Why do you need a skirt?' I asked.

'For today we meet Ramiz Alia,' she said. 'I did not think. . .'

'I'll lend you one,' I said. 'Where are you meeting him?'

'We all haf to shake him by the hand,' she said, beaming happily, 'at the Festival this afternoon.'

And so it was that we set off earlier than usual to get to Gjirokastër before the crowds. Thoma leapt out of the car in the square when we got there, but motioned us to stay inside. He went over to the chief of police and, putting his hand on his arm, asked him something and smiled merrily as he came back to us.

'We can drive up if we go now,' he said. 'I told him that you had been ill.'

The crowds were already thick in the steep streets, and Burhan edged forward foot by foot, tooting. Not only did everyone want to see the President, but the home team were performing that evening too. When we reached the castle gateway we got out and left Burhan to edge his way patiently down again to the square. Although there was nearly an hour to go before the performance started, people were already clustered like brightly coloured stonecrop on all the walls and ruins of the castle. Some small boys were taking flat slabs of stone and building themselves little seats in most precarious places, and the atmosphere was bubbling with excitement.

While we waited we went backstage and took some photographs of the performers getting ready. One girl in an embroidered dress, her bodice hung with golden coins, sat posing on a low wall while a row of artists made sketches of her. Instruments were propped in corners, the polished wood glowing in the sunshine, while their owners lounged against the ramparts smoking. Enzo went to talk to some of the performers, examining their instruments and astounding them with his ability to perform their melodies with such brilliance.

As four o'clock approached everyone was asked to take their seats, but we delegates were lined up along the side of

the path each with our interpreters behind us. Thoma looked nervous for once, and asked a friend to introduce us to the President. She quickly asked us what we did for a living, and then nodded confidently.

Soon after four o'clock a small group of men in lounge suits entered the arena. The crowd cheered and clapped, and the President smiled round at them. Somehow resenting the power that Enver Hoxha had over these people, I was prepared to be annoyed by the whole business of greeting Ramiz Alia, his friend and successor, but the relaxed and friendly manner of both the president and the people made it impossible. There was not an armed guard in sight, and the atmosphere was so sociable that, when I had been introduced I was pleased to be able to say 'Tungjatjeta' (Long life to you) and mean it.

When the members of the President's party had taken their places, some of the performers came forward with Festival scarves which they put round the necks of the dignitaries kissing them on both cheeks.

Then, leaping through the arches at the back swinging balls of fire on strings, the first team of dancers spun into action and the Festival was under way once more. The burly men singers came forward, wearing white trousers and embroidered waistcoats. Their soft leather shoes with pompoms on the pointed toes made a gentle thudding on the stage. They took up a tough stance and prepared to hurl their voices at the mountains. The women dancers, hand in hand in a chain, taking economical little steps, acted out the ancient domestic rites: spinning, weaving, cooking, weddings, harvests, and peacemaking between the menfolk. Small boys, as tough as their fathers, paced out the menacing steps of mountain folk at war, and solitary singers sang of exile accompanied by the thin strains of the lahouta, which sounded like a lost soul.

At the end of each performance the teams came forward clapping and shouting

"Parti Enver
jemi gati kurdoher"

and the audience rose and joined in, Ramiz Alia too, while the portrait of Enver up on the battlements smiled down and proffered his bunch of flowers.

As the sun went down the floodlights came on, and above the stage a swarm of crickets flew about in the light like a cloud swirling with the music. They were enormous specimens with a wing-span of about six or seven inches. They dived on to the stage, tangled with the lacy skirts of the

dancers and perched on the shoulders of the musicians, but nothing interrupted the flow of the performance.

I was aware of somebody creeping along the row behind me, and then felt a tap on the shoulder.

'Madame Agolli wants a photograph,' said a voice, 'for the magazine - you wrote something.' There was a flash and then he was gone.

The final team of the evening was Gjirokastër's own, and the cheering and clapping from the ramparts was deafening. And then suddenly it was all over, the Festival was finished, and we made our way down through the town again to find Burhan. One would think that in a Festival city, with thousands of people present, it would be a problem to find a car without knowing where it was parked, but of course in Albania this is no problem at all. There were never more than about two dozen cars in the main square, and ours was one of them. God knows how everybody else got there. We found the car, but couldn't find Burhan. Thoma called, and asked the other drivers. He went into the hotel and asked the chief of police, and then we looked into the car and there was Burhan fast asleep across the two front seats. Willing and smiling as ever, though a little ruefully, he roused himself up and drove us back to Saranda.

That night I decided to telephone home. I was feeling much better, but needed the comfort of contact, so asked at the reception desk what I should do. They called for Teuta, a comforatable woman who obviously enjoyed connecting people to far flung parts of the world. She took me into the telephone room where there was a desk-top switchboard. It looked rather inadequate, but Teuta cheerfully plugged in and appeared to address Albania's international exchange by its Christian name. It took very little time to get through and I could hear the ringing-tone in faraway Yorkshire clearly. Nobody answered.

'Perhaps he is out with his girlfriend!' joked Teuta. 'Try again later, any time you like.' I did try later with the same result, so rang a friend instead and found my comfort there.

CHAPTER 12

We went down the steps behind the restaurant at Ksamil and picked our way under the trees and between small bushes to the end of the peninsula. On a narrow pebbly beach, carpeted with strips of bleached palm-leaf, we sat and soaked up the clean early morning sunlight. The water was of the palest blue-white at the edge, deepening to olive green, and stretched across to two little wooded islands. Today Thoma had his way, and we had come to swim, but the place was so perfect that for a while we just sat.

That morning had begun with a wail:

'But I haf no bathing costume. Alexander vants to take me swimmink.'

'Where are you going swimming?'

'At Ksamil.'

'So are we, but I don't think I shall go in, so you can borrow mine.'

'Oh thank you, thank you,' she cried, and rushed off to try it on.

'Did it fit her?' Enzo asked incredulously later in the morning, for she was young and willowy. Not for the first time I felt the urge to give him a motherly clip round the ear.

For the moment, however, we were alone in this idyllic place. But soon, too soon, along came others from Saranda and the water was alive with splashes and squeals as they dived and chased and swam across to the islands.

A small coastal patrol boat chugged past, for this is the point of Albania which is nearest to Corfu. On such a lovely morning it looked like a marvellous job to have. My bathing costume swam past together with its Greek companion, and I longed to be in the water too, so hailed her and asked to have

it back when she had finished.

Then the Arbëresh party appeared, and the beach exploded into action. 'Now it is just like an Italian beach!' said Enzo as they stripped off and exhibited slender tanned bodies, partly clad in the latest fashions. The men posed exquisitely before hurling themselves into the water.

I began to have second thoughts about joining in, but when my costume reappeared, I disappeared into the bushes and then crept out, clammily cold, hoping nobody would notice. The water was beautiful, and the gentle breeze on my skin made me feel completely well again.

That afternoon we went back to Gjirokastër for the Grand Finale of the Festival: the final results and awarding of prizes. It started at six o'clock, and so the sky was already dark and the floodlights on.

First there was a display of the costumes of all the regions. As each person came forward on the stage and turned round slowly the commentator described the different styles and their historical origins.

'The Albanians, in their dresses the most magnificent in the world. . . . . ' said Lord Byron.

There were hundreds of variations, and each received enthusiastic applause, but none was louder than that for the Arbëresh from Italy. It was not that their crimson and gold dresses were any lovelier than the rest, but the Albanians have a great affection for these exiles, and were expressing their delight that the Arbëresh still keep the old traditions alive.

After the costume parade there was a concert given by the professional group from Tirana 'Ansambli i Këngëve dhe Valleve Popullore.' They were good, but it seemed somehow tame stuff after the music of the countryside.

Then, with great ceremony, a blackboard was brought on showing all the names of the teams. The television camera was wheeled forward, and the points each team had been awarded in the preliminary rounds were read out and chalked up. Then the points they had gained in the finals, and lastly, with increasing excitement, the final totals, and the audience cheered wildly when it became obvious that Gjirokastër had won.

'What is the prize?' I asked Thoma.

'The honour, and a banner I think,' he replied.

Then the fireworks started, and rockets surged one after another into the sky above the castle, bursting into showers of stars and illuminating the town and the surrounding mountains. The rockets were still exploding round us as we made our way out with the crowds through the entrance

tunnels of the castle. Madame Agolli pushed through towards us and fished a photograph out of her handbag. It was the one taken of me the day before, and she said she had liked my little article and wanted to put it into their quarterly arts magazine as well as using it in the Festival newspaper. I was so delighted that I was only a little cross with Enzo when he made the following remark:

'Someone paid you a great compliment when you were away ill the other day,' he said.

'Oh yes? Who was that?'

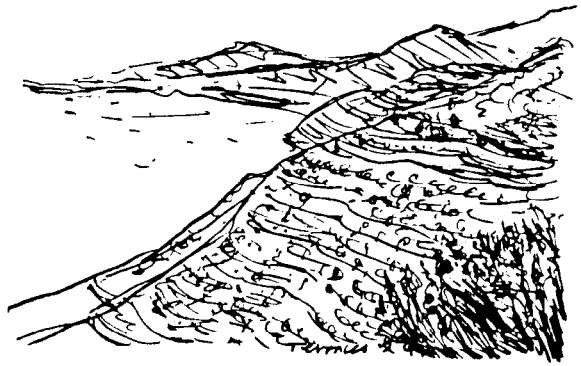
'That composer we met in the bar. He thought you were my wife.'

'Good God!' I cried, 'call that a compliment?' and then, remembering my manners had a good laugh instead.

As we climbed into the car to return to Saranda I sat on something prickly and uncomfortable. Getting out of the car I ran my hand over the seat, but could find nothing, so I got in again. Once more there was something crunchy, and it moved slightly. I leapt out and grabbed at my skirt. A huge cricket had somehow got inside and was clinging there with feet hooked like an ear of barley, and equally difficult to dislodge. I shook it fiercely and it dropped with a thud on to my foot and then flew off, none the worse for its experience.

'One more moment and I'd have had everything off!' I said as I got in again.

'God help us!' exclaimed Enzo. The score was equal!



CHAPTER 13

The following day we packed our bags in Saranda and prepared to go back to Tirana. As I rounded up my clothes from the smaller German lady, and said goodbye to the larger one, I realised that in our enforced companionship I had become quite fond of them. It had been fun to see the younger one having such a happy time with her Greek in my clothes, and the larger lady had shown nothing but kindness and concern when I was ill.

We were to drive back a different way this time, along the coast road. At first it wound through hilly farm-land and then into wild and rugged scenery, where the road had to zig-zag for miles to scale the mountains.

On the way we stopped at a high spot overlooking the sea, and below us all the rounded hills had been terraced and planted with olives and orange trees. At the highest point was a monument with an inscription, commemorating the work of the 20,000 students who did the terracing between 1969 and 1972. Thoma said that he had been one of them, and so had his friend Mira who was with us. I told them that a recent film about Albania shown on television in England had apparently implied that students were used as slave labour. Thoma and Mira laughed, and looked proudly down at the terraces.

'Slaves! That's a joke! We only worked here for three months each, and yes, we worked hard, but only in the mornings. We began early and worked until about 2 or 3 o'clock. Then we went swimming in the sea, and in the evenings we had music and dancing. It was a wonderful time that I shall never forget.'

Twice during the journey we stopped at a roadside

fountain and drank the cold water. At one place in the depths of the mountains some children were playing round the fountain on their way home from school and they began to laugh at Enzo's beard and make cheeky remarks. An old man in breeches and a flat cap came forward and spoke sharply to them, and then addressed Enzo seriously, telling him that he really ought to shave it off. We noticed that in his rough hands he held a new shiny book, bound in red leatherette. I managed a squint at the title and found it was the latest writings of Ramiz Alia.

Our Volvo was making a good job of this arduous journey. In Albania top government officials use a Mercedes, second rank use Volvos, and the lower grades have to make do with a Fiat. Burhan made some derogatory remarks about Russian cars, so to keep him amused we started telling him the latest Lada jokes from England, on the lines of:

'How do you double the value of a Lada?'

'Fill up the petrol tank.'

'Why does a Lada have a heated rear windscreen as standard equipment?'

'To keep you hands warm when you are pushing it.'

I told them to Enzo in English, he told them to Thoma in Italian and Thoma told Burhan in Albanian. It kept us going for miles, with three good laughs to each joke.

Over lunch in Vlora, Thoma treated us to an Albanian joke:

'A Frenchman, an Englishman, a Chinaman and a Jew were drinking wine, and each found a fly in their glass. What did they do?' We couldn't guess. 'The Frenchman threw his wine away. The Englishman fished out the fly and then drank the wine. The Chinaman ate the fly with relish and then washed it down with the wine. The Jew sold his fly to the Chinaman.'

As we got nearer to Tirana the landscape became flatter, and the roads more populated. We passed women walking along the road from the fields knitting as they went. In some of the songs we had heard at the Festival women had carried knitting, and worked as they sang, for this is an old tradition.

As we came into the outskirts of the city I realised that we had never in all our driving stopped for petrol, although we had very occasionally seen a couple of pumps at a cross-roads, usually fenced in and locked up. Burhan had always seen that the car was clean, polished and full of fuel before each journey.

That night after dinner we went down to the Taverna, the bar in the basement where, if there is any late-night

dancing it will not disturb the rest of the hotel. There was a band that night, and one big party of visiting Albanians, some of them from America, who had come back for the Festival. Their host was treating them to a night out, and as we arrived he was declaiming, with generous gestures, his sentiments about them and about his country. There were many toasts drunk and the party got very noisy. They noticed us in our corner and beckoned us over, pulling chairs up for us.

'There are those who say that our country is closed,' declaimed the host, bringing his hands together with a bang. 'To our friends we are open,' his arms embraced the whole company. 'To our enemies, closed.' Bang. He reached out his arms towards us. 'You - are our friends.' Our glasses were filled to the brim with raki, and they drank toasts to us and to our families.

There were more speeches, the speaker often running from one end of the table to the other to emphasise a particular point to a specific person, and the toasts got louder and more frequent.

Kosovo, the province in Yugoslavia which at the moment is much in the news because of the dissent between its Albanian majority and the surrounding Slavs, was mentioned frequently. As we rose to our feet for the third time to drink to the longed-for Republic of Kosovo I wondered if anyone was making a note of our apparent allegiance.

The host struck up the song 'Enver Hoxha long life to you,' which we had often heard as it is almost a second national anthem. It is an infectious tune and soon we were joining in, roaring the chorus time and time again.

The band picked up the 7/8 rhythm and whirled it into a dance. We all joined hands and circled the room, feet irresistibly drawn to the rapid and confusing beat. The music got wilder and we split into pairs, cavorting wildly to each other, hands and feet making bizarre patterns, unable to resist the music. We collapsed against each other at the end, and then, shaking hands all round, said 'Goodnight' and tottered up to bed in a state of blurred euphoria.

Enver Hoxha heu tungjatjeta
Sa k'to male heu sa k'to shkrepa
Zanin shqipes o lart ja ngrite
Gjith' kët' popull në drit e qite

(Enver Hoxha we wish you a long life
Long as the rocks and as long as the mountains
The voice of Albania you raise on high
And the whole people you draw into the light.)

CHAPTER 14

Our visit was drawing to a close. My idea of writing a book about Albania and its people, using the music as a linking theme, seemed to be drifting into the distance. I had heard plenty of folk music, but apart from the two recitals the previous year I had got no further with my main interest, which was their 'classical' music. I knew nothing of their personal lives and hadn't even been into a private house, but had lived a protected existence in hotels and chauffeur-driven cars. I felt dispirited and a total fraud.

One of the other delegates had been to Albania many times before, and I asked him in desperation if he had ever been into anyone's home.

'Just once,' he said. 'One can't ask directly. Because of their fierce independence it might be seen as 'sucking-up' to foreigners to invite them to one's home. I once asked a high-up to arrange for me to visit the home of an employee, and that worked. But it was a dreadfully formal affair and none of us enjoyed it much.'

The problem of finding gifts to take home began to loom, and I felt that the whole visit had just been another tourist trip and I'd achieved none of the things I had intended. When Thoma came to find us that morning I made a last attempt.

'There is so little time left. There are just three things that I would like to do before I go home, if it is possible.'

I wanted to visit a music school, hear an orchestra and interview two composers, preferably of different generations. This would at least give me material for a few magazine articles. Thoma agreed to try and see what could be arranged.

The first he managed. A secondary music school in Tirana would be pleased to see us the following morning, and would put on an impromptu concert. The second he could not manage, as there was no orchestral rehearsal or concert scheduled for that weekend because of the various celebrations for Hoxha's 80th birthday. The third was easy, as he was a young composer himself, and he rang Tish Daija who agreed to come along and represent the older generation. We arranged to meet at 5 o'clock, and then I had the rest of the day free.

Enzo was desperately trying to acquire some good quality folk-instruments, and also to arrange a visit to a collection of old instruments. Thoma began to look pale and tired as he tried to help us follow all these threads and meet the right people.

During the afternoon I went shopping, but the two shops I most wanted to visit were closed. I peered through the dusty windows of the music shop, and all I could see were depressingly dingy copies of accordion music and some song books. There seemed to be no imported music at all, only material published by their own very small publishing house, so their access to a broad range of material must be extremely limited. The same applied to the book shops, most of which were closed, including the foreign language bookshop, which I particularly wanted to see. At a roadside kiosk I bought a tiny children's book containing an illustrated poem and brightly coloured pictures. Although printed on poor quality paper, it was the most attractive one I had seen, and cost only 1.50 leks.

Back at the hotel I met the floor-maid going into my room. In her hands she held all the dirty clothes which I had left on the bed in the morning, neatly washed and ironed. They were still slightly damp, but by evening had dried out in the warm atmosphere. I noticed that the maids swept the rooms and corridors with palm-frond brushes, and I didn't see a single Hoover anywhere.

At five o'clock I met Tish Daija and Thoma in the hotel foyer. Thoma looked refreshed after his sleep, and for the occasion had dressed up in a light blue suit. To complete his new suave appearance his face was mobile with (hitherto forbidden in Albania) chewing-gum. Fatime came too, to interpret for Tish who speaks no foreign languages, and it was good to see her again. There was a lot of hugging and exchanging of news before we finally got down to the interviews.

My notes for Tish's interview are an incredible tangle of scribble. He spoke fast, darted off at tangents with anecdotes and jokes and generally muddled me up. Fatime did pretty well with the translation, but it took some sorting out.

He told me that he was born in Shkodra in 1926. His music master at school was the composer Prenkë Jakova, who formed a wind-band with the children of the town and spent a great deal of his time encouraging their interest in music.

'From this band came many of our well-known composers: Çesk Zadeja, Tonin Harapi, Simon Joni, Tonin Rota and many others.'

Jakova used to take the boys on long expeditions up into the mountains during the summer holidays so that they could study the pure folk-music of the countryside. Tish began to write songs when he was only about seven years old, and one that he wrote when he was 14 is still sung at Albanian weddings everywhere. It was not until 1950, after Liberation, that he was able to study music seriously, and then he went to Moscow for six years and, in spite of his lack of groundwork, was able to study with very good professors.

'My diploma was signed by Shostakovitch,' he told me, 'but I will now tell you a joke. A friend wanted me to write a song for him, and he said to me: "Please, will you write a song of the kind you wrote *before* you studied!" '

My interview with Thoma was easy. We had been together so much for the last two weeks that we understood each other perfectly, even when words failed and we had to go all round a point to reach the centre.

He told me how, when he was young he went to an ordinary school, but at home he used to sing all day and accompany himself by drumming with knives on the table or with sticks on stones. His uncle, who was a clarinettist, encouraged him to take up music so he enrolled for accordion lessons at the local House of Pioneers. There is a House of Pioneers in each town and most villages, where children can go after school and learn subjects not covered by the normal curriculum. After this he won a place at the secondary music school at Durrës, and later a place at the Conservatoire. After graduating he worked in the Palace of Culture at Përmet for three years, a district very rich in folk-culture.

'While I was there I wrote Rhapsody No.2 for orchestra. In this piece I used the essence of the melodies of the region to make my own melodies. In addition to this I have composed two violin concertos, one of which took second place at the May Concerts this year, a Scherzo for chamber orchestra and music for two films. Now I'm doing sketches for my first symphony.

I love Albania very much, and would not want to live anywhere else. I want to spend my life writing music for my own people in a form that they can understand.'

Fatime watched smiling as we talked, and at the end she said 'I think you love Thoma very much!'

'Yes I do,' I answered. 'He has been a wonderful friend to us.'

'Well, you must not love him too much, for I love him also,' said Fatime, 'as a mother of course, you understand!'

Tish had been beaming happily too, and when after two hours of fast scribbling I threw down my pencil and called for raki he said how much he had enjoyed the afternoon.

We drank raki and coffee and mineral water, (the latter makes it easier for the body to cope with the former) and talked about the future.

'Do you want to come again to our country?' asked Fatime.

'Oh yes. I want to hear more music. I'd like to come to the May Concerts to hear all the new works. I haven't been to an opera or a ballet yet, or heard a live orchestra - there's so much more to do.'

'Then I will do my best to help you,' said Fatime. 'And next time you come,' she looked round at the others, 'you must come to our houses, to the homes of Tish and Thoma and me. The coffee is better there than in hotels.'

CHAPTER 15

As we waited for Thoma to take us to the music school the next morning, we heard a buzz of excitement in the street outside the hotel. Hundreds of school children in a long but informal procession were walking down the boulevard towards the University. Round their necks they wore the red scarves of the Pioneers, and as they approached the far end of the boulevard they took them off and waved them in the air so that the impression was of a sea of fluttering red.

This was part of Hoxha's birthday celebrations. A new museum, a great glass pyramid next to our hotel, was opened that weekend too, and in the main square a new statue was unveiled. The statue is made of bronze and gleams like gold against the sky. The figure of Hoxha stands leaning slightly forward with his eyes fixed on a point in the far distance. Fresh flowers were piled around his feet, and small children reached up to touch the giant shoes and wonder.

'It is a custom here,' began Thoma as we drove to the music school, 'when we have special guests, that we like them to buy something to take home, to remind them of our country.'

He handed us each 200 leks. We were both speechless. Everything that sprang to mind was impossible to say. 200 leks was about £20, more than a week's wages for an Albanian. So far, due to their generous hospitality, I had only managed to spend about £8.50 in the entire fortnight, and £5 of that was for a telephone call home. Money, and the value of material things, does not enter into their conversation often as everyone earns a similar amount. By giving this money they were pandering to our obsessions to an extent that they could ill afford. To give it back would be

churlish, to keep it made us feel about an inch tall, and yet we knew it to be a genuine act of friendship. We stammered our thanks.

We pulled up outside a corner building. Four or five people were standing on the steps waiting for us, and came forward to shake hands. From the building issued a torrent of scales and arpeggios. We went into the concrete hall and upstairs to the principal's office. Teenage girls and boys, well dressed and smiling, passed us on the stairs carrying instrument cases, or arm in arm with their friends.

In the office we were introduced to the principal, the deputy principal, the head of violin tuition and an interpreter who spoke good English. Brandy and chocolates were handed round. There were several questions that I wanted to ask, but I had the greatest difficulty in framing them in English, because over the last two weeks we three had formed our own language - mostly French with a smattering of Italian and Albanian. Two or three times I started in this odd mixture and wondered why the interpreter looked puzzled.

This school, the 'Shkolla Artisteve Jordan Misja' is one of four secondary music schools in Tirana, and is the oldest. It was founded in 1946 by a group of artists, and specialises in art, sculpture, music and ballet. It has 800 pupils who spend about half of their school day on their arts speciality and the rest of the time on the normal curriculum.

The secondary schools take children at about the age of 14, and to gain a place the candidate has to give a recital which includes a selection of pieces from the classical repertoire. A pianist, for instance, would probably play some Bach and one of the easier Beethoven Sonatas, but would also have to play something on a folk instrument. All the students are taught to perform their country's folk music; singers usually learn the accordion, dancers learn the piano as well as a folk instrument.

Most of the teachers are also well-known performers, and recently a composition course has been started for the older pupils, given by some of the best Albanian composers.

The school has a full symphony orchestra, which rehearses for four hours each week. That term they were rehearsing the overture 'Rosamunde' by Schubert and Grieg's 'Peer Gynt' Suite, as well as several pieces by Albanian composers including Thoma's Ballade for violin and orchestra. There is also a string orchestra and a choir of 80 singers. During each year over a hundred events are put on which are open to the public. In addition to these, organised by the school, any pupil who wants to organise his own

event, such as a one-man-exhibition or recital is encouraged to do so.

At 18 the pupils try for places at the Higher Institute of the Arts, and some of the most talented go to study abroad, mainly in Vienna, Paris or Rome, funded by the State.

We were taken to the museum, where there is a display of photographs of past pupils, books and manuscripts. At one end was an upright piano and at the other a small row of chairs for us. One or two girls were hovering by the piano, and smiled at us as we came in.

The first item of our concert was a folk-song, sung by a girl of about 15, with all the style and ease of a mature singer. Next Donika Gërvalla, aged 15, played Schubert's 'Introduction, Theme and Variations' for flute, entirely from memory and most beautifully. I was told that she was going on to study in Switzerland. This was followed by two more songs, one by a girl obviously destined for the operatic stage as she filled the museum to overflowing with a rich sonorous contralto. A pianist performed a Waltz by Tonin Harapi and an Etude by Chopin. The piano was hideously out of tune, as was the one at the Higher Institute that we heard the previous week, and one longed to send them a batch of good instruments, they deserve them.

Finally a group of twenty violinists, aged between 13 and 17, came in with their teacher and performed, once again from memory, music of astounding virtuosity. Their stance was relaxed, there was no sign of nervousness, and their fingers scarcely seemed to move as they zipped through the intricacies of an unaccompanied Capriccio by Limos Dizdari. Next came the romantic Paganini 'Variations on a theme of Rossini', played entirely on the G string, each variation exploiting more and more technical acrobatics until our hair was standing on end.

'Would you like some more?' asked their teacher

'Yes please,' we answered breathlessly. 'Anything!'

After some discussion they decided on a Wieniawsky Scherzo-Tarantella, well-known to violinists as an absolute devil to play. In perfect unison, apart from one or two of the very highest notes, somewhere up near the players' noses, they flashed through this piece and came up smiling.

'How about something 'folky' for Enzo?' I suggested.

Another brief discussion and then they launched into 'Albanian Dance' by Pjetër Gaci, full of crazy lop-sided rhythms, such as we had heard at Gjirokastër, performed with tremendous energy, neatness and skill.

Once more the performances had been so magical that, although I managed to organise myself sufficiently to record

most of the concert I hadn't taken any 'action' photographs. I asked them to pretend to play again, and took a few shots, but we were all giggling rather a lot, so they look charming but unconvincing.

Burhan, waiting patiently as usual, drove us back to the hotel, where we collected the minimum bits and pieces for an overnight stay, for we were off to see the city of Berat. But first we drove to Durrës on the coast to have lunch and a swim. After a lazy afternoon, for we were all beginning to feel the strain, we drove on down through the hills to Berat.

For most of the journey it was dark. I sat in the back with Thoma and my tape recorder, as he had brought some tapes of his own compositions that I wanted to hear. He was eager for my opinion and comments, but with my brain whirling and exhausted, it was difficult to organise my thoughts.

The orchestration was good and varied in colour and texture. The style was of long ago, but then life in Albania today is long ago, and it was somehow dogged by its own determined Albanianism. In drawing on the folk harmonies, and sometimes choosing themes of heroism and struggle, as in his tone poem 'Liberation', his music seemed in a way to have a weight tied to its leg which stopped it from rising as it might.

'I need to hear this more than once before I can say anything,' I hedged, not knowing how to explain my feelings. 'Will you make me a copy of these tapes?'

He said he would, and then said 'Here is just one more. This is some music I wrote for a film last year - just short fragments.'

In the warm darkness I heard the limpid notes of a flute melody, delicately framed with a gentle rhythm touched in by guitar and strings. I could almost see sunlight filtering through young leaves, clear water flowing over pebbles, people walking close together. . . .

'What was the story of this film?' I asked, sitting firmly on my hands.

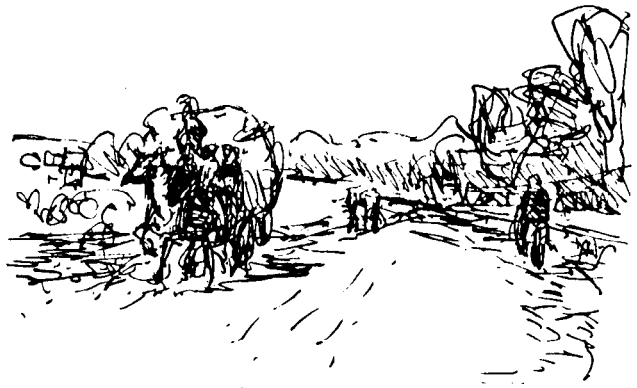
'It was a love story,' he replied, unnecessarily.

We checked in to the hotel in Berat, a smaller replica of every other tourist hotel, and handed in our passports.

'None of this passport nonsense when you come to visit us in England,' I said. 'You don't even have to register in small inns and pubs, we can just stay for a night anywhere we like at any time.' Thoma shook his head in amazement.

Enzo and I, still feeling the guilty 200 leks in our pockets, plotted to treat Thoma at least to a drink. We walked down through the town to a sort of lounge-bar and

sat nursing glasses of fragrant brandy, too tired to talk. When the moment came to settle up I grabbed Thoma from behind and pinned his arms to his sides whilst Enzo paid. The locals looked at us in amazement, and afterwards we too wondered what it was we were trying to do.



CHAPTER 16

It would have been Enver Hoxha's 80th Birthday, if he had still been around. Before the others appeared for breakfast I went to take a look at the town of Berat. It is the site of the ancient Illyrian stronghold of Antipatra, which was captured in the 9th century by the Bulgarians and renamed Belgrad (White City), from which its present name derives.

Beside the hotel a luxuriant garden curves along beside the river Osum towards the town bridge. There was a legend that a woman was immured in the foundations of this bridge to give it strength and protection. When the bridge was being repaired in the nineteen-twenties, a woman's head was indeed found, but fortunately it was made of wood.

Across the square was a memorial slab heavily embossed with figures in military uniform, their leader raising his fist in the air. In front of this monument, echoing his salute, stood two small girls in black pinafores and red Pioneer scarves.

Behind the monument was a bus station and a rather over-preserved mosque, known as the Leaden Mosque, which is now a museum. Beside the bus station is a faded notice advising pedestrians and cyclists how to behave.

At the other end of the town rose a hill piled with houses, built almost on top of each other and crowned with a fortress. This is the old part of Berat, sometimes called 'The Town of a Thousand Windows'.

After a brief walk round the modern streets near the hotel, looking into the shops, which displayed a disproportionately large quantity of jam, I passed the memorial again on the way back to the hotel. The two girls were still standing there, but now a straggling procession of children

was approaching. Talking quietly they filed past, and every now and then a child would detach itself from the group and put a posy of flowers on the ledge at the base of the plinth. Eventually they all trooped off, leaving the two little girls keeping their vigil beside the grim tablet, now slightly softened by the colours of the blossoms.

It was one of those blue-and-gold mornings and I longed to walk up through the narrow twisting lanes of the old town to the castle. But no, we were to be chauffeur-driven once more.

The area of the fortress is so large that many houses and several churches and mosques have been built inside over the centuries, and quite a few families are still living there. The view from the top is of fold upon fold of silvery-grey mountains, the nearer ones terraced with olives. The houses were handsome and strongly built, some with jutting wooden eaves supported by struts, some with massive wooden doors and walled gardens. I wanted to prowl around and explore, but Thoma said we had not much time. We had come to look at a museum of icons housed in the corridors and outer rooms of one of the disused churches.

As we knocked at the door of the museum and stood on the steps waiting for a reply, a local man walking past heard us speaking English.

'I speak a little English,' he said hesitantly, 'I would like to speak with you.'

'Why not come round the museum with us?' I suggested, so he tagged on behind our small party.

The curator was a young woman who took her job seriously. In well rehearsed phrases she guided us from item to item in such a way that it was difficult to capture the full impact of what we saw.

Many of the icons had been painted by the sixteenth century artist Onufri, and were outstandingly physical - the muscles of the arms raised in blessing had been drawn by someone who had studied anatomy. He used brilliant and unusual colours, and some of the draperies glowed with a colour now known as 'Onufri red'. Little is known of this artist, and even his surname has not survived. The first inscription recording his name was not discovered until 1951, and it reads: *"When you lift your hands to God, O priest of God, remember also me, the sinful and ignorant Onufri."*

Continuing her informative discourse, the curator led us into the little church itself. Once inside the doors I could move no further, for this was the first building of real beauty that I had seen in Albania. The walls were white, rising up to a white domed ceiling. At the far end an intricately

carved screen stretched from wall to wall, gleaming with gold tracery and inset with the burning glow of small icons. In stark constrast, the tall pews were like monks' stalls, carved in bare grey wood and of primitive simplicity. I hung back, not wanting to have it all 'explained', and as I thought about all the beauty that the Albanians had destroyed in their rejection of religion I wanted to howl. The man who had followed us saw me standing alone and came over.

'You believe?' he asked quietly.

Unable to say anything, I made an indeterminate gesture.

'I believe,' he whispered.

I left the church and went off to walk alone on the ramparts, asking God, or Somebody, to look after Albania.

Thoma was anxious to get us back to Durrës in time for lunch, so it was back into the car again, and off to the north, with Berat scarcely tasted. There were the usual interesting sights on the road, and as it was probably the last opportunity I took quite a few pictures, at the risk of seeming insensitive. A colourful crowd was working in a cotton field, white sacks piled at the roadside for the lorries to collect. A lorry with a cargo of men in suits, all standing up in the back, solved some local transport problem, but I didn't fancy their chances if it had to stop suddenly. Herds of cows wandered across in front of us, and at one point a soldier from a check-point walked out into the middle of the road and knelt down to do up his boot-lace. Burhan ceremonially drove round him and we all had a good laugh, including the soldier's companions.

Suddenly the car swerved and bumped - a flat tyre. Burhan muttered, and we all got out. Thoma insisted that we should walk on and leave Burhan to deal with it and so, at last, I was able to get a slight taste of walking in the Albanian countryside. Keeping well behind Enzo and Thoma, who were discussing something very intense in Italian, I walked along the top of a bank beside an irrigation ditch. Frogs plopped into the green slime and lizards zoomed out from under dry tussocks of grass. Passing people at their cottage doors and farm workers on the road I said 'Mirëdita' (Good-day) in my best Albanian. Some replied, but many looked extremely puzzled. On reflection this may well have been because they had just seen Enzo and his famous beard walking ahead. I wished we could have walked for the rest of the day. In the southern heat, and possibly due to all the olive oil we had been consuming, all my aches and pains (a touch of arthritis and persistent tennis-elbow for the previous year) had disappeared.

Burhan soon overtook us, and we arrived in Durrës, hot and dusty. We were to be joined by Feim and Fatime for a late lunch, so there was time to go into the sea first. The beach which is flat and smooth, stretches for miles and shelves very gradually. I chose a deserted stretch and walked very slowly into the water. It crept inch by inch up my body, warm and calm. Once in deep water I could lie floating on my back and imagine myself to be nowhere.

We were quite a party for lunch: in addition to the expected friends there was an Albanian poet and playwright who now lives in Damascus, and his sister, also a poet, from Paris. Opposite me a craggy young man, with a black stubbly chin and bright eyes was introduced as Rudolf Marku, an Albanian poet and journalist from Tirana. He spoke good English, and turned hungrily to Enzo wanting to talk about English writers that he loved. Enzo headed him off in my direction.

'If you want to talk about books you had better talk to her,' he said. 'I don't read much.'

Rudolf looked at me, a mere woman, unconvinced. 'Do you know of Graham Greene?" he tried uncertainly, 'and Somerset Maugham?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'I think I've read everything they have written.'

His eyes brightened. 'And the first war poets? And W.H. Auden?'

'Yes, and Robert Graves?'

'Yes, yes, and Wilfred Owen?'

'Yes, and Siegfried Sassoon, and. . .'

'I have been translating some Auden into Albanian,' he interrupted, 'and Owen, and Dylan Thomas.'

I looked at him quizzically. 'Dylan Thomas? That must be difficult.'

'Yes it is difficult,' he replied, 'for the music is in the words.'

We were interrupted by Enzo asking Feim something about similarities between Albanian and Bulgarian music, and Feim had launched into a fervent and emphatic lecture about how it was impossible to confuse them. Thoma tried to interrupt with some remarks of his own, but Feim would not let him - this was obviously a matter of tremendous national pride, and too important to be discussed by junior composers. He emerged, beaming but ruffled, at the end of his discourse, and Rudolf and I were able to continue.

'Do you know the writing of Borges?' he continued. It was unbelievable how many writers we both admired.

'How about Henry Williamson?' I tried, knowing what

the answer would be. It is usually the same even in England.

'No, I do not know this name. Who is he?'

'Well if you are really interested in the First World War poets you should read his novels. His prose is poetic, and the writing so vivid that you feel you were there yourself.'

Rudolf searched his pockets for a scrap of paper, and I wrote some titles down for him. Knowing that there was little chance that he could get them himself, I resolved to send him 'A Fox under my Cloak', which tells of the Christmas truce in the trenches in 1914, illuminating for all time the brotherhood of mankind.

Back in Tirana in the evening, Enzo and I were issued with gold-embossed invitations to an open air concert at the end of the boulevard, outside the University. It was a selection of the best performers from the Gjirokastër Festival, and would be attended by Ramiz Alia.

We dressed up as smartly as possible and set off with our friends down the road. As usual I was with Thoma and Enzo, but Fatime took my arm, and Feim's wife Vera took the other.

'We women will walk together, it is better,' said Fatime inscrutably.

The concert lasted an hour, and had not the same spirit and verve of the performances in Gjirokastër. On the flights of steps at each side of the stage there were groups of schoolchildren with red flags and bunches of red and yellow paper ruffles in their hands. They sat motionless in geometric formations, and during the performance the formations changed suddenly and silently from circles to stripes, to diamonds. I wondered if they knew how much these resembled American High School antics, and how many precious hours they had wasted learning this slick routine.

As usual at the end of the concert the performers and audience joined in the rhythmic clapping and slogan shouting, and it was with much relief that we returned to the hotel.

Feim had booked a small private room for our last evening together. Once more the table was laid with a tapestry of decorative hors d'oeuvres, and course after course was presented to us by a discreet waiter. We drank toasts to each other in raki and wine, and talked over the visit we had enjoyed so much.

Feim cleared his throat and made a short speech, saying how much they had enjoyed having us, and about the warm friendship and love which had developed between us all. When he had finished I looked at Enzo, but he couldn't speak either. I put my hand on Feim's.

'I don't know the words, even in English, to tell you what we feel,' I muttered, 'but I think you understand.' He smiled, and Fatime gave me one of her best hugs.

'I am worried that you have not heard more music,' said Feim. 'Do you still want to write your book?'

'Yes I do,' I said, 'but although this has been a marvellous holiday, I don't think I have enough material yet.' I paused and thought for a moment, then went on.

'Tell me, is it true that the name for your people, *shqipone* means "the sons of eagles"?'

'Yes, that is true,' said Feim.

'Then perhaps I could write a book about *trying* to find out about Albanian Music. I could call it 'The search for the Eagle's Song'.

January 1989

POSTSCRIPT

When I returned to England, I gave a talk on the BBC about Albanian Music. Of the many consequences of this, and by far the most exciting, was a commission to write some entries on Albanian opera for The New Grove Dictionary of Opera. ('Rather like receiving a knighthood,' as one of my friends put it.)

I sent off lists of questions to my friends in Albania, and received some useful factual information from them, but still felt I needed to know more. The remedy was obvious - I would have to go back.

There was a space available on a tour in June, but my idea was not to tour with the group, but to stay in Tirana for the whole week and do my research. This arrangement would be unusual, and until I actually reached Tirana the organisers were not certain that it would be permitted.

As we drove through the familiar streets a loud voice in the back of the coach remarked. 'Came here fourteen years ago. Hasn't changed a bit. Still dead scruffy - can't think why they don't use a coat of paint.' I turned to the guide.

'Please don't change!' I said, happy to be back.

'We would not change, even if you wanted us to,' he replied, coolly.

My friends met me and made sure I could stay in Tirana for the whole week, and the hotel became rather like an office. Each morning I would go down to the foyer and spread out my notebooks and files on a table. Either Thoma, Feim, Fatime or Rajna (a new interpreter who spoke good English) would appear and soon after, due to their organisation, one of the country's opera composers would turn up to be interviewed.

They organised visits to the opera house for rehearsals and performances. I met their leading baritone, Ramiz Kovaçi, and heard him sing magnificently with his whole heart and his whole body. I met the conductor of the opera house orchestra, and also spent time with the director, hearing about their plans for the future.

Many impressions remain from this short visit:

Hearing a loud indignant voice on the telephone bellowing in my ear:

'How long have you been here? *Two days*? Why you wait so long before telephoning me?'

Leaving my tape recorder running as I crossed Skanderbeg Square at midday, and hearing that the loudest sound is

the chirping of the sparrows.

Seeing the mothers waiting at the airport with bunches of flowers, to welcome their daughters back from auditions at the Turin Conservatoire. Seeing Feim's joyful face as he told me that Etrita had won a place, and then his nervous pallor as he watched the small 18-seater plane coming in to land.

Whilst interviewing, seeing a figure stride across the hotel foyer with arms outstretched, and receiving a kiss on both cheeks - from Burhan.

Seeing that the gold of Hoxha's immense statue in the square had begun to dull, but not so the glittering belts which the gypsies sell.

Seeing two armchairs being transferred from one home to another by a group of friends walking in a line across the street: bicycle-person-chair-person-chair-person.

Attempting to pull someone out of the way as a van roared towards him, and being told:

'Don't worry. Maybe in your country you are afraid of them, but *here* they are afraid of *us*.'

Remembering that the bedside radio in the hotel takes a long time to warm up, and that if you sit down suddenly on the bed the room lights flicker.

Spending an hour with Rudolf Marku, and seeing the great collection of poems he has translated: Eliot, Auden, Enright, Lewis, Larkin. . . his depth of understanding revealed in short flashes of communication.

Walking in the park, under the trees with frondy leaves and flowers like pink explosions, and hearing them whisper the same things as English trees.

But the strongest memory of all, and the one I constantly turned to, as I travelled back late at night through London amongst some unwashed, drink-smelling, drug-sodden young of our country, was this:

On the Sunday morning I had walked about four miles out of Tirana into the foothills of the mountains. There I met a shepherd, a roughly-dressed old grandfather, with his grandson of about fourteen, taking some sheep along the road. We talked for a while, and then I sat down in the sun to write while they went on home.

That evening in my hotel room, as I was getting ready to go to the opera, the telephone rang.

'There is someone to see you downstairs.'

I went down, and there was the young boy I had seen in the morning. But what a difference. His hair was washed and fluffy, and he wore a perfectly ironed white shirt. He looked anxiously at me, and stepped forward holding a cheap

biro in his hand.

'This boy here came to find you,' said the porter. 'He says that he found this pen on the road outside Tirana and thought it must be yours, so he has come to return it to you.'

September 1989

STOP PRESS

Since September 1989 tremendous political changes have taken place throughout Eastern Europe. Albania alone at present retains its Marxist-Leninist government.

Six weeks ago I was in Tirana for the May concerts, and the atmosphere was one of optimism. Ramiz Alia had just announced several reforms and more were promised. There were noticeably fewer guards on the public buildings than before. Everyone I met talked freely about their hopes for the future integration of Albania into the new wider European vision.

'Can Ramiz Alia manage this transition smoothly, without bloodshed and disaster?'

'We think so. We hope so.' Glasses were raised solemnly and thoughtfully.

On the last night, May 28th, I walked alone for two hours in the dark streets of Tirana. All was peaceful and silent apart from the song of the nightingale.

Two weeks ago western embassies in Tirana were stormed by Albanians impatient to be free, and yesterday thousands were ferried out of their homeland to the west.

July 1990

Whence do you come?
From the East.
Whither are you wending?
To the West.
What is your inducement?
To find that which is lost.
Where do you hope to find it?
In the centre.

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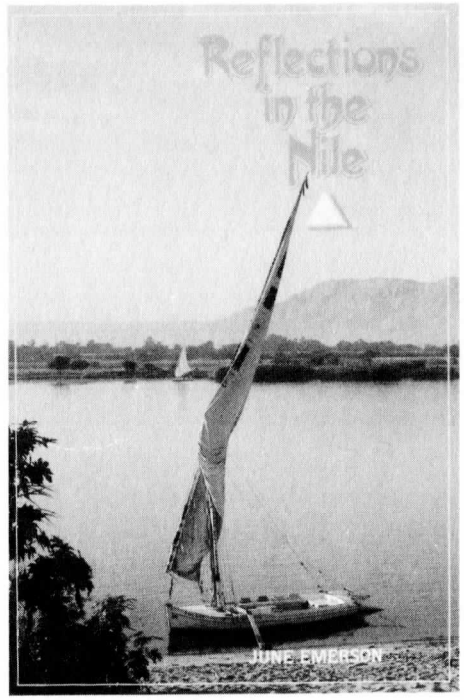
MEDITERRANEAN TRAVEL - EGYPT

By the same author



REFLECTIONS IN THE NILE

This book is about the Egyptians that Packaged Tourists seldom meet. It begins with the author staying with a family in a poor district of Cairo, and then follows her progress southwards by public transport of various sorts via the Fayoum oasis to Aswan and back.

Because the author is a woman, the attitude of Egyptians to women is a recurring theme, and many of their beliefs and customs are illustrated and reflected against the life of western women, but in a balanced way without any breath of 'feminism'.

There are meetings with all the colourful characters and bizarre situations inherent in an unpacked, unplanned journey. The author frequently gets into difficulties and finds her western outlook hilariously inadequate. The detailed glimpses of other people's lives are seen with understanding, humour and compassion.

Reflections in the Nile	June Emerson	£5.95

ALBANIA

The Search for the Eagle's Song

Albania is an isolated country, which has had its borders closed against much of the outside world for the last forty years. Some visitors are now being admitted, but only in supervised groups, and contact with people is almost impossible.

It was in a mood of light-hearted curiosity that the author first visited Albania, but her love of music proved to be the key which unlocked many doors, revealing a warm hearted, affectionate people with a wonderful sense of humour.

In many ways, being in Albania is like going back a hundred years, and Western values and symbols of 'progress' are repeatedly called into question. The author returns again and again, each visit more revealing, and more fun, than the last. A good antidote to political journalism.

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