Enver Hoxha

YEARS OF MY CHILDHOOD

Memoirs of Gjirokastra



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IN PLACE OF A PREFACE

I came to know Gjirokastra not so much through my work-related visits and the trips I made there, as through Enver's stories in the evenings by the hearth, and through the conversations he would have with his mother while we were eating. Later, we would sit beside her bed or by the fireplace, for old age had taken its toll and confined to one place that woman who had been so industrious and patient, whom life's hardships had never managed to bend: her husband's years abroad, the burning of their house, the deaths of her children — experiences so widespread and commonplace in those times.

Comrade Enver had a particular affection for his mother, not only because of the happy memories of his childhood and youth, but also because of all those years of anxiety she endured during the National Liberation War for the sake of her only son, who moved from place to place as an underground activist, constantly risking his life, sentenced to death by the occupiers, or crossing mountains amidst snowstorms and taking shelter in the people's huts, where he would find nothing more to eat than a piece of maize bread with a little brine. Undoubtedly, at such moments

he would remember his mother's good cooking, the warm round loaf she would place in his bag when sending him off to school or on an outing, and the cheese she would toast for him over the embers on a metal trivet.

These conversations enlivened the family atmosphere and delighted his elderly parents, but they also delighted me, for through them I came to know fragments of my comrade's life and of the lives of his family and the people among whom he had grown up.

What struck me most then, and continues to strike me today, is that he would initiate these conversations and immerse himself in memories of the past precisely at moments of greatest preoccupation. It mattered little whether he had just come from turbulent meetings during which he had confronted enemies such as Sejfulla Malëshova and Koçi Xoxe and their associates, or Stojnić and Zlatić. As soon as we sat down to eat, he would begin all manner of conversations, especially with his mother. Enver's father, whom everyone simply called Uncle, would sit and listen, occasionally casting a glance in my direction, shaking his head or pursing his lips as though he wished to say, "Whom does he think he is fooling with all this laughter and merriment?" Uncle and all the other members of the family knew that Enver had a great deal of work to do, that the country was devastated and impoverished, that many people came and went from the house, and that meetings were held there throughout the night, often until dawn. They knew nothing of what was discussed at those meetings, but Uncle had the habit of rising at four in the morning. He would go and light the kitchen stove, prepare his coffee, and then move about the house or the courtyard, depending on the season. Yet he was often surprised, upon waking and leaving his room, to hear voices still coming from the sitting room. When I too emerged, having remained awake waiting for the meeting to end, he would say to me: "My dear daughter-in-law, have they still not finished? What are they doing? Why are they shouting? Are they quarrelling?"

The old man could not understand that it was precisely because his son carried so many burdens that he felt such a need, even if only for a short while, to lock them away and immerse himself in the sweet memories of childhood, as though in a refreshing shower. Then the questions would begin: "Do you remember, Mother, when I went to school for the first time? Do you remember when you made me a ball out of rags? Do you remember when you made me those shoes with wooden soles because I kept wearing them out? Do you remember when I split my head open and you put roasted cheese on the wound? Do you remember when we used to visit my godmother, when we went to see Aunt So-and-so? Do you remember this? Do you remember that?" And so the conversation would continue until we had finished our meal and it was time to leave.

"Ah," his mother would say, "how could I not remember?" Whenever Enver began asking what had become of this or that elderly woman from Gjirokastra, his mother would reply in her own dialect: "Oh, Enver, whatever are you asking? She passed away years ago." Yet she knew, house by house, how many children each family had, who had remained in Gjirokastra, who had moved to Tirana and so forth. From time to time his sisters, Haxho and Sano, who lived with us, would also join the conversation, as would the eldest sister, Fahrie, whenever she came to visit.

Enver's memory is well known, but his mother's was equally remarkable. He would ask her how many provisions were laid in for the year, especially for the winter, as was customary. And she would enumerate them: how many sacks of maize, how many oka* *of butter, how many tins of cheese, what kinds of pies, pickles and dried fruits they prepared. Enver would record all this in his mind, or on a tape recorder, like an ethnographer. Then he would ask her about the verses and songs sung in those days, and she would begin recalling them and reciting all manner of exam-*

* Former Ottoman unit of weight (c. 1.28 kg).

ples for us, whether social, patriotic or otherwise.

These conversations did not merely provide Enver with relaxation; they also served as a kind of "restoration" of his memories, which time and the currents of life might have dimmed, just as frescoes fade or as a stone may come loose from an ancient mosaic.

Uncle, who took little interest in these conversations because they were familiar to him and seemed remote, would sit on the other side of the hearth reading those old books printed in Arabic script, their pages yellowed with age. When he grew bored and wished to steer Enver towards other matters, he would say: "Leave those trifles aside and listen to what this philosopher has said," and would begin reading aloud. Enver would listen for a while out of respect, but eventually he would ask: "Is it a long one? Leave those Islamic philosophies alone, for heaven's sake. Come on, let us sing a song as they do in Gjirokastra." And then they would begin, Uncle singing steadily and slowly, with Enver joining in response.

Whenever my mother heard these songs, she would say to Enver:

"You sing well, but not like Avdalli. Still, our songs seem better to me. Aziz Ndreu surpasses Xhevat Avdalli."

Enver would reply with a laugh:

"What can one do, Mother? Village and trade go together. But I like the songs from your region as well, with the çifteli* *and the* lahuta,** *for there is a reason people say, 'Where are you from? From your wife's village.'"*

Through Enver's conversations I came to know and love Gjirokastra and its people even more. Whenever I visited, I observed everything attentively and with different eyes, for I knew that upon returning home I would have to pass a demanding

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* Traditional Albanian two-stringed folk lute.

** Traditional Albanian single-string bowed instrument associated with epic folk songs.

"examination" by satisfying as fully as possible his curiosity about every change that had taken place there.

I was not going to repeat the mistake I had made when I first went to Gjirokastra. It was after the Liberation, when I travelled there on official business and to become acquainted with my comrade's birthplace. Yet during the four days I stayed there, it rained continuously. The damp and cold penetrated to my very bones; torrents swept stones along the streets, and I had to walk carefully lest I stumble or slip. When I returned to Tirana, Enver asked me:

"Well then, what did you think of my Gjirokastra?"

"How shall I put it?" I replied. "It struck me as a gloomy town, all stone..."

He would not let me continue. Offended by what he regarded as a sacrilege against his birthplace, he cut me short:

"So you have no appreciation of beauty! Did you not see with what elegance and skill those houses are built, one above another, clinging to the mountain slope? Did you not sense the pure spirit of its wonderful people — simple, hardworking, good householders, hospitable as few others are...?"

At that point I interrupted him and halted his flow of praise.

"Please," I said, "I was not speaking about the people. On the contrary, they could not have received me more warmly. Everyone was competing to be the first to invite me for lunch or dinner as the 'daughter-in-law' of their son who had come on her first visit."

In any case, that was how my first lesson in the history of Gjirokastra began. At that time I had not yet heard his conversations about his birthplace and did not fully appreciate the affection and longing he felt for it. During the war we had neither the time nor the inclination for such discussions. Occasionally the subject arose and we would compare our respective native regions, speaking of their customs and shared characteristics. More often than not, the conversation would end playfully, with each of us trying to

outdo the other in praising our homeland. "Very well," he would say, "you people from Dibra are known for cleanliness too, but you have water in abundance. The real achievement is that the people of Gjirokastra, without wells or fountains, maintain exemplary cleanliness by collecting raindrops from the gutters into muslluqe*!* Did you know that?" Indeed, at that time I did not even know what* muslluqe *were. Whenever I boasted about Skanderbeg — whom, naturally, I liked to associate with the Kastrioti family of Dibra — he would reply: "Leave Skanderbeg aside. Do not go so far back and claim him as your own. I do not deny that you have had brave men, but we too have produced distinguished figures, both of the rifle and of the pen." And then he would tell me about Çerçiz Topulli, Bajo Topulli, Çajupi and others.*

After the death of his parents, I continued to be an attentive listener to the memories he recounted about Gjirokastra and the years of his childhood and youth. I came to know its alleyways and squares, its houses and gardens, as though I myself had lived and played among them. I knew not only the brave Baba Çeno and the formidable godmother, but even how Uncle Halil's friend, Uncle Fuat Nano, dressed, with his black cloak draped over his shoulders and his white stockings. I knew more about the elderly people of Gjirokastra than about my own grandparents, whom I had never met and about whom no one in my family had ever taken the trouble to tell me.

I marvelled then, and still marvel today, at the close familiarity and connection that the people of Gjirokastra maintain with one another. Though grouped by clans and neighbourhoods, they nevertheless form a single whole: Gjirokastra. The men gathered at Qafa e Pazarit, the women at weddings, family celebrations and social gatherings, while the children and young people met

* Rainwater-storage cisterns traditionally used in southern Albanian homes.

in schools or in the play squares. Even though "wars" sometimes erupted between neighbourhoods, they still could not do without one another.

By the time I knew Enver's memories by heart, our children had begun to grow up. He started telling them about the town, the members of the household, the school, the excursions and the games (though not about his mischievous exploits, for pedagogy did not permit it). Sometimes the children would come to him almost in tears and complain: "Daddy, Bonia scolded us. She says, 'What have you turned into, just like so-and-so...'" They would then ask curiously who these people were. Enver would burst out laughing and tell them: "Go and tell Bonia, 'Don't scold us like that, because Daddy was very fond of those people.'" Bonia, the caretaker who raised our children, was originally from Shapllo but had married in Hoxhat and knew Gjirokastra well. Whenever the children played wildly, became dirty or tore their clothes and shoes, she would attach to them all manner of local names and nicknames from Gjirokastra.

Enver always travelled to Gjirokastra with great joy and deep emotion. During the first visit he made after the Liberation, in October 1947, he said, among other things:

"The terrible war against the Italian and German occupiers kept me away for a long time from my city, where I was born and raised, where I received my first lessons, where I lived through my childhood with all its joys, sorrows and hopes, where my character and consciousness were formed, and where, like all the ordinary sons of this heroic city, there was implanted in my heart a love for the homeland and for our long-suffering people."*

Enver visited Gjirokastra several times for Party-wide meetings, yet whenever he went there, he invariably made a point of

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* Enver Hoxha, *Vepra*, vol. 4, 227.

meeting ordinary people. He would visit them in their homes, stop to speak with them in the streets, or spend hours with them at public gatherings, addressing them in a relaxed manner as though he were sitting in each of their homes. He would remind old comrades of the games they had played together, recall the advice given by their teachers, and speak to elderly women about the sweets or pieces of fruit they had once placed in the palm of his hand.

When we went there together in March 1978, he stood on the balcony of the house and pointed out to me, one by one, the groups of houses renowned for their architectural beauty: those of the Zekate family, the Skënduli family, the Bakiraj family and the Resaj family. He also showed me the houses of friends whom I had by then come to know, as well as the homes of many comrades with whom we had fought during the war and who were now serving in responsible positions in Tirana and throughout the country.

Enver then took me to show me the alleyways and squares where he had played, the bazaar and other places. However, as soon as we stepped outside, so many people gathered in those narrow streets that not only was it impossible to see anything, but no one would allow him to concern himself with me. The people of Gjirokastra — men and women, young and old alike — surrounded him on all sides. We therefore decided to go out at night, around ten o'clock, when people would have returned to their homes and we could walk freely. Yet no sooner had we reached Çerçiz Square and begun heading towards Qafa e Pazarit than we were surrounded by groups of young men and women who had just finished the second work shift and were on their way home. My history lesson came to nothing, but we nevertheless enjoyed ourselves. Enver joked with the young people, asking whose children they were. More often than not, however, he knew their grandparents better than their fathers and would recount some story he remembered about them. He then remarked on how much times had changed. "Today," he told the young men and women, "you

return home together even at night. My mother, by contrast, told me that she had never in her life passed through the bazaar, because even if a woman was completely covered with a veil and not recognisable, the men would still turn their heads away! On the one occasion when she was obliged to pass through, word reached Uncle Halil, who reproached her for it when she returned home."

What times those were, and what a city! With its own wonders and beauties, its hardships and joys, its struggles for life, for freedom and for learning!

It was in this part of the homeland, among the people of this city, that Enver was born. There he spent his childhood and several years of his youth. It is therefore natural that he should feel a particular affection and longing for it, which prompted him to write these recollections of Gjirokastra and of his childhood years, gathered in this book, whenever he felt the need to revisit cherished memories and find respite. He wrote them at different times, and not with publication in mind, but because I persistently urged him to record them for our children and for the grandchildren who would one day be born.

On the occasion of a family celebration, Enver presented to me and to the children the original manuscripts of this cycle of memoirs, included in this volume, together with those recounting his years at the Lyceum of Korça and the period of his studies and residence abroad. In the note accompanying this gift, he wrote, among other things: "...you asked me to write down some memories of my childhood and youth. Naturally, I could not refuse such a request and so I began these scribblings. They are unfinished, but when I have the time I shall complete them. They are intended only for you and for the children — Ilir, Sokol and Pranvera. They have been written poorly; as you know, the pen moved on without going back to revise or correct anything... This material gift is very modest, whereas the spiritual one is quite different... May we live happily and joyfully with our beloved children, see

them married and have many grandchildren. May we remain strong and healthy, so that we may serve with honour and loyalty, until our dying day, the Party and our people, who gave us birth, raised us and made us communist fighters...”

For me and for the children, this was an invaluable gift. It inspired us to love not only Gjirokastra and Korça, where Enver spent his childhood and youth, but also our entire homeland, for whose liberation he and his communist comrades fought together with the people and under the leadership of the Party, and which they now sought to make ever more beautiful, stronger and more prosperous.

The vivid descriptions of Gjirokastra, of its life, history and remarkable architecture, together with the affection, love and respect with which the author recalls and writes about ordinary people — from members of his own family to childhood friends, and from bakers and Gypsy craftsmen to masons and blacksmiths — are all permeated, like a red thread running through the narrative, by the idea that **love for one’s homeland is not an abstract notion. It is this land; it is the mountains and plains, the towns and houses; it is these people; it is the past, present and future of our forebears, of ourselves and of the generations yet to come.**

Precisely because these memoirs possess such broad resonance, I felt that it would not be right to keep them solely within the family circle. They may bring pleasure to many comrades and friends who are still living, as well as to the children and relatives of those who are no longer with us. Although they are somewhat intimate and familial in character and shed light on a period preceding Comrade Enver’s revolutionary formation, they may also be of interest to a wider audience, helping readers to understand the environment and the people who nurtured and inspired him to embark upon the revolutionary path in the struggle for the people’s freedom and the victory of communism. For this reason, I

persuaded Enver and obtained his authorisation for the publication, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of his birth, of those sections of this cycle of memoirs that relate to his birthplace, Gjirokastra, where Comrade Enver spent his childhood and early youth (1908–1927).

In this volume, the memoirs have been included as they were given to us, without the possibility of engaging the author in revising or supplementing these materials prior to publication. With his approval, we omitted a few paragraphs of an excessively intimate or family nature, as well as certain episodes from the mischievous adventures of his childhood at home, at play or at school. These were indeed beautifully described, but with such "realism" that teachers and parents might have found themselves obliged to convince children that they ought not to imitate the things Uncle Enver had done in his day. Yet it is well known that children were, are and will always remain children, and will continue to get up to "mischief" at home, at school and in the streets and squares where they play. Comrade Enver approved the removal of those episodes which still make him laugh today, though not without regret. Indeed, he even sought to defend them by arguing that, when he and his companions engaged in such antics, there was no Party, nor any organisation of Young Pioneers, youth groups and the like to guide them.

On the seventy-fifth anniversary of Comrade Enver's birth, may this publication serve as a gift to the people, for whom he feels boundless love, respect and gratitude, and especially to the people of Gjirokastra — its brave, patriotic and hardworking inhabitants — among whom he was born, grew up and prepared himself for the path of revolution and socialism.

NEXHMIJE HOXHA

July 1983

I
A CASTLE CITY

TREASURES OF VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

I wish to recount some memories of my birthplace, Gjirokastra. These memories relate chiefly to the period of my childhood and early youth. It is not only I, who was born there, who experiences a particular pleasure in recalling them; anyone who visits Gjirokastra likewise derives pleasure from it, for one sees there a truly ancient city, yet one constructed with such taste that it inspires admiration for the skill of its builders.

When I was a child, I did not possess the impressions of my birthplace that I have today, and this is only natural. I now have a broader understanding of historical questions, of social and political developments and of architecture in general. The work of the Party over several decades, together with the studies and reading I have undertaken and continue to undertake, has enabled me to assess my childhood impressions within a wider political, cultural and social framework. The value of these notes remains for others to judge, for they are largely personal in character and belong to a period before I acquired

revolutionary consciousness. Yet these memories are dear and important to me, because it was in this city that I took my first steps in body, mind and feeling. It was among its stone houses and alleyways that I grew up and received my first lessons in life, within my family circle, from my teachers and school companions, and among the wonderful ordinary people of my native city.

Here I should emphasise that I am undertaking the task of writing these memories of my childhood and youth at Nexhmije's insistence. She has heard them dozens of times during our family conversations, and I am setting them down as they come to me, not with any intention of publishing them, but in order to leave them to my children and to my grandchildren, so that they may come to know this part of their father's and grandfather's life and learn the history of his birthplace, just as they ought to know the history of the whole of Albania and of our people. In this way, love for the homeland, for the people and for the Party — which revived everything in our country, restored to the old monuments of popular culture their former freshness and beauty, highlighted the great achievements of the Albanian people in the past and present, and opened new prospects for the future — will become deeply rooted in their minds and hearts, strong and indelible throughout their lives.

I shall begin by writing about the architectural features of the city. Naturally, I am not an architect, but having known Gjirokastra well since childhood, I believe that I can describe certain characteristics of its buildings, albeit without professional authority, as I see them in my mind's eye and hold them in my memory and affections.

Gjirokastra is not a city that was built without guiding principles. I do not intend here to discuss its ancient origins and shall therefore confine my observations to its more recent condition — by which I mean the period from my birth onwards,



"The houses of Gjirokastra look like... small fortresses surrounding the great fortress."

especially from the time when I became capable of understanding and appreciating the beauty of this city.

As is well known, Gjirokastra is built on the slopes of Mali i Gjerë. This gives it a distinctive beauty, particularly when one approaches the city, whether by day or by night. This location was not chosen by the city's earliest inhabitants by chance; rather, there were several compelling reasons for it.

I believe that one of the principal reasons was the preservation of the plain, in other words the conservation of land capable of producing bread. The choice of this location did not hinder the inhabitants of Gjirokastra, who were also engaged in animal husbandry and who lovingly raised sheep and goats, grazing them on the fragrant pastures of nearby Mali i Gjerë. That is one reason.

Another important and vital reason for building Gjirokas-

tra where it stands, I believe, was the need for protection, not only from foreign oppressors but also from feudal lords and beys, who attacked the city on many occasions.

If we examine the configuration of Gjirokastra closely, we see that, from the lower end of Varosh as far as Kuculla, Dunavat, Manalat and Palorto — its principal districts — the city is supported by the mountain. This meant that its flanks were protected. In addition to leaning against the mountain, parts of its neighbourhoods were built on hills descending gradually towards the plain. The houses were therefore always constructed in elevated, commanding positions overlooking the directions from which an enemy attack might come. If one imagines the neighbourhoods spread across these slopes — for example the Old Bazaar together with Pllaka, the ridge of Hazmurat or the ridge of Cfaka — the city appears almost like the shape of a hand, with the palm forming its central core and the fingers representing its extensions. Between these "fingers" there were, so to speak, spaces occupied by streams, where the inhabitants did not build. These areas generally contained cherry orchards and gardens, through which roads ran and still run, allowing access up into the city. There were also open spaces where no roads existed at all. All of these areas were overlooked by houses situated on the surrounding hills.

From a strategic perspective, the entire city, in my view, takes on the form of a fortress. For the enemies of earlier times, with the weapons available to them then, it would have been difficult to capture easily, provided that the inhabitants organised resistance against them. An attacking force was compelled either to assault the city from above, from the mountain — something both difficult and virtually impossible, since the people of Gjirokastra kept constant watch over it — or to attack from the sides, or through the gaps that existed between the hills upon which the houses had been built.

Judging from such principles of construction, it may be said that the strategic thinking of the early builders of Gjirokastra was extraordinarily well conceived. The neighbourhoods of Çetemel and Palorto were protected by the Çullo Stream, the heights above which were controlled by the inhabitants of Gjirokastra. Manalat could be approached through the Square of the Chains, as we called it. Whoever reached that point would command a view over Gjirokastra. Thus the city's inhabitants always held the enemy beneath them. Should an attacking force attempt to advance through the gaps on either side of the streams or along the lower edges of the hills on which the houses stood, it would find itself exposed to ambush. Viewed from this perspective, the construction of Gjirokastra clearly assumes a strongly defensive character. I believe that this consideration was foremost in the minds of both its earliest inhabitants and its later builders.



Above is the Çullo Stream, which served as a defensive barrier for the neighbourhoods of Çetemel and Palorto.

The first reason I mentioned, namely the preservation of arable land, is easily explained by the care shown by our forebears not to occupy the plain with buildings. This reflects the highly economical character of the people of Gjirokastra and demonstrates that those who lived in such surroundings thought simultaneously about defence, about bread and about the sustenance of their livestock.

The principal activities of the townspeople developed mainly in two directions: agriculture and animal husbandry. Naturally, alongside these there also emerged and flourished various crafts, for the population's needs for clothing, footwear, tools and other services likewise had to be met. Nevertheless, agriculture and livestock raising remained the two principal occupations of the inhabitants of Gjirokastra, and their protection required constant attention.

I do not wish to dwell further on agriculture or animal husbandry, but I should like to emphasise that the very topographical position of Gjirokastra also confronted its inhabitants with the question of what building materials should be used in constructing their houses. It is characteristic that every house in Gjirokastra was built of stone. Stone was not used solely for the city's magnificent castle,* with its strong battlements and its enduring solidity, both in its construction and in the imposing power it lends to the landscape from its commanding hill above almost all the city's neighbourhoods. The castle occupies an exceptionally strong strategic position against attack and was designed in such a way that its defenders could readily launch sorties against the enemy, should the latter succeed in penetrating into the city's quarters.

* The castle is the origin of the city. In its initial phase, the fortifications did not include the south-western section. This section, which constitutes the second phase, belongs to the building activity of Ali Pasha Tepelena, specifically in the years 1811–1812.

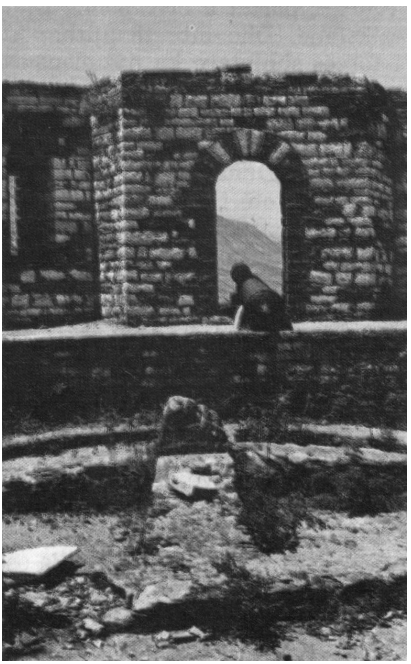
The city's castle is often described as a ship, or, as it appears to me, as a cruiser sailing upon a sea of houses. I say a cruiser cutting through the waves because, with its forward section shaped like a blade, the fortress conveys the impression not merely of defending itself but also of thrusting forward in attack. The principal entrance to the castle, facing the Old Bazaar and the plain beyond, is narrow in form, enclosed by strong battlements and provided internally with two or three levels for military manoeuvres. By contrast, the rear section of the castle, on the side facing Dunavat, is broader, since no danger could be expected from the mountain.

Another characteristic feature of this famous castle — one for which, as far as my studies have shown, there are few parallels in the Middle Ages — is its commanding position atop the hill on which it stands and its generally non-residential character. It was not, for the most part, the dwelling place of feudal lords, but rather a fortress intended for the defence and counter-attack of the entire population in the event of invasion. If one imagines the castle for a moment without the surrounding houses of the neighbouring quarters, one can appreciate the immense gulf encircling it, a feature that must have inspired terror in any enemy attempting either to assault or to besiege it. The interior of the castle was likewise constructed with great military skill. Exits through tunnels that do not open directly opposite the gates reduced vulnerability both during attacks and during retreats. The central part of the fortress was extremely difficult for an attacker to capture without considerable sacrifice. The arcades, tunnels and inner gates were designed as formidable defensive positions. Above all, this magnificent monument to Albanian strength possesses a remarkable elegance.

I said at the outset that I compare the Castle of Gjirokastra to a cruiser, indeed a large one. Viewed from all sides — from the heights of Dunavat or from the houses near those of Aqif

Selfo — one is truly astonished by the grandeur, strength and elegance displayed by its designers and builders, who succeeded in combining these qualities with military functionality. If one studies the castle carefully, it becomes evident that it was not constructed simply as a broad, straight and solid wall. Instead, in many places on all four sides, it is provided with projecting round towers, reinforced by courses of protruding stone that form, as it were, arches, making these sections much stronger and more resistant. These points were undoubtedly strategic positions from which the defenders engaged the enemy. The projecting battlements enabled control of any advance towards the walls, while also providing overlapping fields of defence along the walls themselves. These structures contain loopholes and embrasures through which the besieging enemy could be fired upon.

Particularly striking is the entire system of projecting defensive walls which, with their massive stone foundations, con-

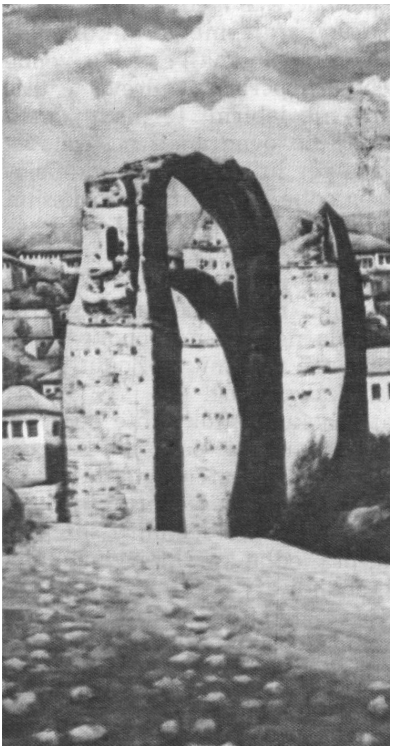


"The defenders of the old castle had positioned a cannon at its base, the barrel of which we children used to climb onto and ride as though it were a horse."

veys a powerful impression of strength. This can be observed throughout the fortress, but especially at the entrance, beneath the clock tower, and at the head of the castle facing Dunavat and Mali i Gjerë. This battlement, above the place known as Dullga — where the defenders of the old castle had positioned a cannon at its base, the barrel of which we children used to climb onto and ride as though it were a horse — vividly conveys the power of the fortress.

Within the castle there is a central area near the entrance. Today, and I believe in earlier times as well, this was an open space, though protected on all sides. Ahead rises the "prow" of the castle, thrusting like a sword towards the plain. Along its sides there still remain large openings or windows from which cannons, bombards or mortars were fired at enemies advancing from the plain or from the Shamaj Stream. These fighting positions were connected further inside by thick walls and tunnels, forming an extensive labyrinth of bridges and arcades that led to the lower central section of the fortress. There, separate quarters existed for the defenders, ammunition stores, prisons, kitchens and other facilities. At the same time, these passages led upwards to the castle's upper open courtyard, from which one could once again descend into vaulted cellars and arcades of similar construction, extending all the way to the rear of the fortress at Dullga. On that side stood the aqueduct* — or the Great Arches, as we called them — built by Ali Pasha to bring water into the castle from Mount Sopot. The ignorant men of

* The castle aqueduct was approximately 10 kilometres in length. Its construction was accompanied by a number of engineering works, among them two large bridges: one linking the Çeribashi Rock with the Dullga Hill within the castle and the other spanning the Manalat quarter. This bridge stands upon a rocky foundation and rises elegantly on an arch 16 metres above the rock, measuring 40 metres in length and 2.3 metres in width.



The elevated aqueduct of the castle, which brought water from Mount Sopot. One of its large bridges, spanning the Manalat neighbourhood, stood upon a rocky foundation.

earlier times, and later those of the Zogite regime, demolished these splendid monuments.

The use of stone in construction over the centuries was not motivated solely by economic considerations, despite the fact that stone, the principal building material, was readily available in the vicinity of the city. Stone houses are many times stronger than those built of brick or adobe. The construction of houses in Gjirokastra from stone therefore had an economic aspect, since the raw material was close at hand, but an equally important reason was defence. Houses had to be strong and durable, capable of withstanding the passage of time, but they also had to be resilient in the face of danger. They constituted, as it were, small fortresses surrounding the great fortress.

Every house in Gjirokastra, whether large or small, is enclosed by walls. These walls are among the distinguishing features of the city's architecture. Over the centuries they frequently collapsed and were rebuilt, a fact attested by the abundance of such stones that can still be found along the roads today. These enclosing walls should not be regarded solely, as some might claim, as an expression of the city's traditional conservatism, intended to shield household life from outside view and, above all, to conceal the women of the family. Nor were they built merely to mark the boundaries of private property, for which a simple fence would have sufficed. Rather, they should also be understood as a first line of defence against dangers that might threaten the household from without, whether a particular threat directed at a specific family — such as a blood feud — or a more general danger facing the city as a whole. Given the character of the people of Gjirokastra, who were not inclined to spend money without careful consideration, the construction



"The great gates of Gjirokastra were built with great care and artistic taste. Every gate differs not only in size and in its doors but also in its stone arches."

of such walls beyond the main body of the house suggests that defensive considerations were also taken into account. The walls surrounding the houses were generally built of medium-sized, roughly dressed stones, sometimes with mortar and sometimes without it, depending upon the family's economic circumstances. The walls of the houses themselves, however, were constructed of larger stones, most often bonded with mortar, frequently more carefully dressed, and usually reinforced with horizontal wooden beams, undoubtedly serving an anti-seismic function.

Many houses in Gjirokastra have their principal gates opening directly onto the street. The *great gates* — that is, the outer entrances — were usually constructed with great care and artistic taste. The upper arch of the gateway was finely proportioned, with the central keystone broad at the top and tapering towards the bottom. Upon this stone, the date of construction was often inscribed or some ornamental design carved. On either side of the central arch, the walls forming the gateway were built from large, carefully dressed stones. Even within the main entrance, however, additional walls were often constructed, leaving a relatively considerable distance between the gate and the house itself. The extent of this arrangement depended upon the wealth possessed by the owner of the property.

The point is that these walls were erected not only because of the size of the plot of land but also for defensive purposes. The defensive character of the houses of Gjirokastra can be seen everywhere, but particularly in the residences of the great landowners, which generally possessed two courtyards separated from one another by walls. One had first to enter the outer courtyard through a gate and then pass into the inner courtyard through a second gate. The first courtyard consisted of a walled enclosure, rather like a broad lane bordered on both sides by gardens planted with fruit-bearing or ornamental trees. Depending on the character of the household, this space was often

used as a garden for vegetables or paved with stone slabs and arranged as a proper courtyard. In times of danger it also served as an obstacle, slowing an enemy's advance towards the house. There are, however, houses in Gjirokastra where one passes directly from the main gate into the *hajat*,* as we called it.

In general, the houses of Gjirokastra are two storeys high, and often three, but always of considerable height. There are also poorer houses where one enters directly onto the first floor. Nevertheless, it is rare to find a house without ground-floor stables, where sheep, goats, a horse, a donkey or other animals were kept. These premises formed the lower level, above which stood the living quarters of the family.

Naturally, there were considerable differences among the houses of Gjirokastra, reflecting the social classes to which their owners belonged. In general, the city contained a class of wealthy landowners, whom we would now describe as kulaks. Gjirokastra possessed powerful kulaks, proprietors with extensive agricultural holdings, estates and large flocks of livestock. Most had inherited their wealth, though some had built up prosperous agricultural and pastoral enterprises themselves and later expanded them through exploitation, seizure and usury, becoming administrators while retaining the character of large landowners. As they accumulated wealth and economic power, they also acquired influence within the city. At the time of my childhood, some sixty years ago, they undoubtedly exercised a degree of influence. Yet among the poorer strata of the city this influence was not profound. Generally speaking, the poorer inhabitants — whether agricultural and pastoral labourers or craftsmen such as carpenters, leatherworkers and others — had not submitted either to the influence of the landowners or, lat-

* Covered transitional space between the courtyard and the house interior.

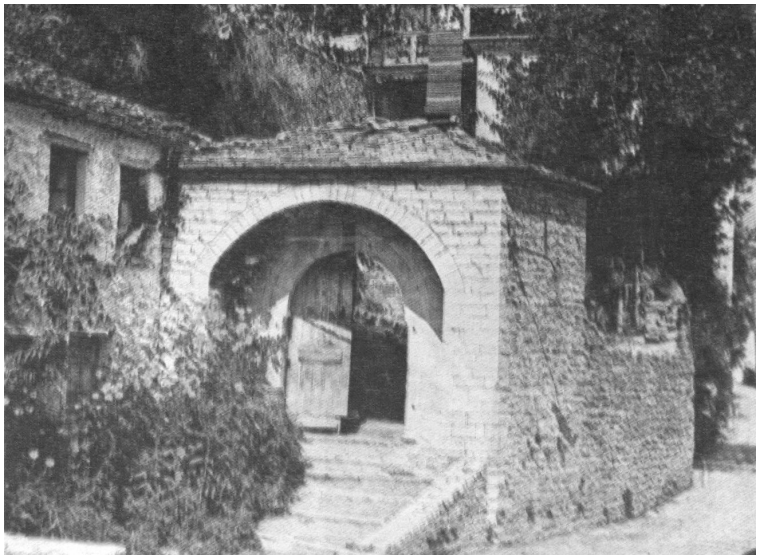
er, to that of the usurers. Their character was independent and the spirit of freedom was deeply rooted in their consciousness. Nevertheless, they could not entirely escape the pressure exerted by the wealthy landowners, the *efendis** and the *arkonds*,** who held economic power in their hands.

It cannot be denied that all these groups played a distinctive role in the construction of Gjirokastra. Their houses were among the largest and, in general, the best maintained, for their economic circumstances enabled them both to build them and later to repair and preserve them in accordance with their needs. Yet any ordinary townsman who managed to build a modest or medium-sized house through his own labour also strove to give it a national architectural character and to create comfortable living conditions both inside and outside, adapted to the climate and to all the considerations I have already described. Why was this so? Because the ordinary citizens of the poorer classes not only had to protect themselves against the possibility of an external enemy — in which case the defence of the city was organised collectively by all its inhabitants — but also against feuds, blood vengeance and even the harshness of the great landowners. I speak only of the landowners because the beys of Gjirokastra had already ceased to exist as a significant feudal class. Their economic power had passed into the hands of the landowners, who had purchased their estates. Even many of the beys' houses had become the property of these landowners.

At that time one scarcely encountered any beys except for a few who retained nothing but the inherited title. There were beys in the city of whom my grandmother used to say: "Abaz Bey built a fountain, but it ran dry." Abaz Bey was one such figure. Reduced to poverty, he owned only a dead horse, upon

* Ottoman urban notables and educated elites.

** Local aristocratic landowners and notables.



"Iinhabitants of a rugged land, where stone dominates every aspect of the landscape, possess a passion for flowers and a longing for greenery."

which he loaded two barrels. Five or six times a day he would go down to the river, fill them with water and sell it in the city. Another bey was Javer Hurshiti, the Prefect of Gjirokastra, whose house had been bought by the landowners. He came from the fallen beys of the Hazmurat quarter but became a servant of Zogu, who appointed him prefect. Later, like many other beys in the country, he embarked upon the path of betrayal, entering the service first of the Italian occupiers and then of the Germans. In the end, after answering before the people's court for his crimes, he was executed as a traitor.

When I speak of the architecture and beauty of Gjirokastra, I do not do so merely out of sentiment because it is my birthplace or because I cherish unforgettable memories of it. Yet even if I do speak with such affection, I remain convinced that I still have not said enough! How far I am from possessing the expressive power required to set down on paper, with authority, the

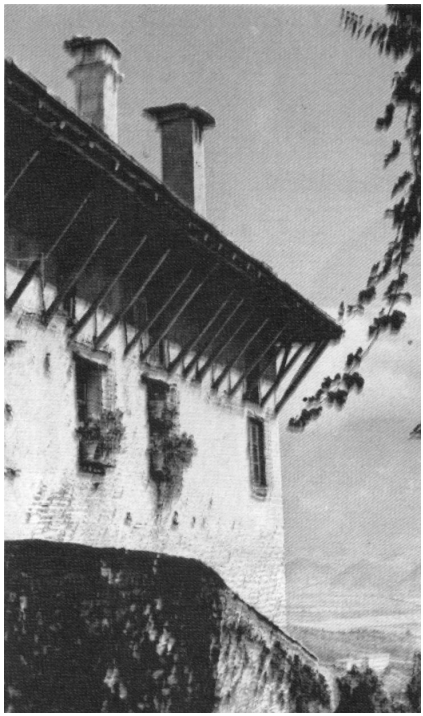
scientific, technical and artistic aspects of its architecture! Nevertheless, powerful emotions seize me whenever I look upon the city, its neighbourhoods, its groups of houses, at once distinct and yet gathered together, each beautiful in its own right — indeed, each seeming more beautiful than the last! Everything in these constructions attracts the eye. They were built with such knowledge, such taste and such elegance of style. The concern for beauty was carried so far that the builder of a house, wishing not to spoil the appearance of the street, would shape the wall of an upper room in such a way that it formed an arch above the roadway. This not only gave the room a more pleasing appearance and relieved monotony, but also allowed the passer-by to enjoy the perspective of the street through the varied recesses and projections created by the walls of the houses.

How far removed this is from long, uniform streets, filled with concrete and lined with identical balconies! No, Gjirokastra's balconies are not modern, but those it possesses are beautiful, astonishingly so! They are known as open divans,* situated between two lofty, fortress-like sections of the house. Sometimes these balconies lie beneath magnificent roofs supported by sturdy beams; at other times they take the form of completely open *kamerje*,** enclosed by wrought-iron railings twisted and fashioned by blacksmiths such as Aziz Buduku and others.

From these balconies, and from the window ledges with their finely worked iron grilles, flowers hang everywhere. Pots of flowers are to be seen in every corner. These inhabitants of a rugged land, a place where stone dominates every aspect of the landscape, possess a passion for flowers and a longing for greenery. Alongside the courage of the warrior, they display a taste for refined and beautiful construction. They delight in the colours

* Covered verandas.

** Open terraces.



"From the iron-barred window ledges hang flowers; everywhere there are flower pots. The people of Gjirokastra do not usually pick flowers. They have a passion for them, cherish them and take pleasure in simply looking at them. Flowers are an integral part of their homes."

of flowers and in the scent of basil, geranium and marjoram. The people of Gjirokastra do not generally pick flowers. They cherish them, caress them with their hands and take pleasure simply in looking at them. Flowers are considered part of the household. Although water was scarce in the city in those days, water was always found for the flowers and they were carefully tended. When women ground coffee on the stone mill, they would often place a sprig of marjoram into the *xhezve*,* so that its fragrance mingled with the aroma of the coffee, producing a distinctive and pleasing scent. Without consciously realising it, I inherited this great respect for flowers myself. I find it difficult to pluck them, and I teach my children neither to trample upon

* Long-handled pot used for preparing Turkish coffee.

them nor to pick them.

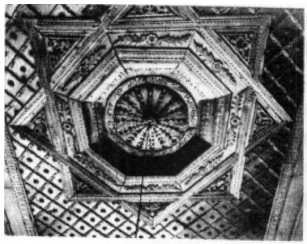
The love of greenery among the people of Gjirokastra, who live surrounded by stone, is a true passion. They seek to cloak stone with trees, flowers and climbing vines. If they possess even a small plot of land, they will plant fig trees, mulberries, nettle trees, medlars and other varieties. They will even throw a little soil into a crevice, plant a seed, and a fig tree will spring up beside an old wall! Some houses are covered with climbing

"The love of greenery among the people of Gjirokastra, who live surrounded by stone, is a true passion. They seek to cloak stone with trees, flowers and climbing vines."

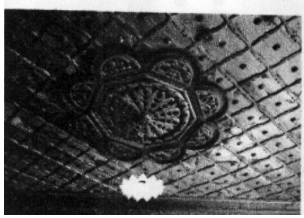


plants not by accident but because they were deliberately planted there. Certain of these plants remain green throughout the year; others take on the colour of gold; still others turn crimson in autumn like poppies! I am neither a poet nor a painter, but I speak of these things as I feel them, for they have been shaped within me by the beauty of the city of my birth.

Whichever way one looks at Gjirokastra, it inspires wonder. From the main road, when one gazes in the morning sunlight at the cluster of houses belonging to the Malilaj, Çuçaj, Halimaj, Muhaj and Uncle Mujman families, one is truly struck by a fairy-tale beauty! These groups of houses, perched upon the hilltops, resemble a unique fortress, while beyond them, to the left on the horizon, rises the mountain of Lunxhëri. Hundreds of windows face the sun!



"What remarkable artists! What artistic sensibility!"





All of these houses differ in their interior and exterior structures and styles, yet everything is harmonised. No building obstructs another, nor do the groups of houses, the walls or the trees conflict with one another. I know these houses well, for at various times my family lived in one neighbourhood and then another. Everything about them is at once similar and different. Their gates appear alike from a distance, but on approaching them one realises one has been mistaken. Every gate differs not only in size and in its doors but also in its stone arches. One has a large arch of substantial stones, another a more delicate arch above it, while a third may have two or even three arches. What remarkable artists these builders were! What incomparable artistic sensibility! And these astonishing constructions are found not only in the grand houses of the Angonat, Hadëraj, Kalaj, Kabilat and Skënduli families, but also in the homes of ordinary people. Indeed, I

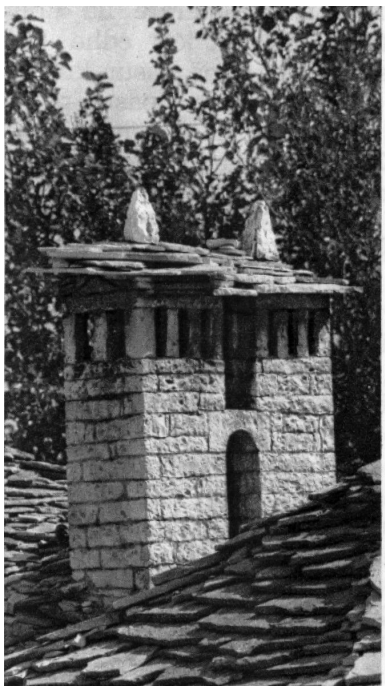
can confidently say that in these modest houses one encounters, at every turn, treasures of popular craftsmanship.

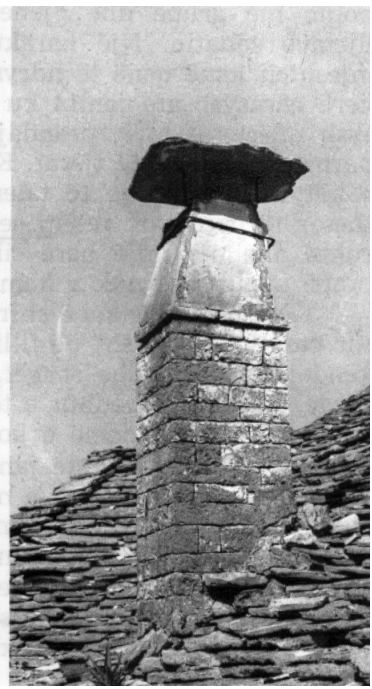
These immortal yet, sadly, anonymous masters were passionate craftsmen and, in spirit, men of the people even in the Middle Ages, for Gjirokastra, as I have heard and read, began to be built as early as the sixth century of our era. They must have been numerous, working in groups and passing their craft from generation to generation. One characteristic stands out clearly: although the builders differed from one another, they always took account of the environment in which they were building and of the structures nearby. Every new construction was designed to harmonise with those around it. Herein lies one of the great achievements of these gifted craftsmen, who left behind an invaluable treasure. It must be preserved, preserved, preserved — and even if I were to repeat that injunction a thousand times, I would still feel that I had not said enough.

These masters made use of every available space while adhering to the principles I described earlier. Land was a jewel! From this arose the roads, the gateways opening onto and beneath the streets, the winding alleyways bordered by house walls, trees and gardens.

The streets of Gjirokastra possess a poetry of their own. They lend the city at once the appearance of an urban centre and of a large, vigorous village. There are alleyways between houses so narrow that two people cannot walk side by side through them. In my youth, the streets and lanes were often paved with worn and damaged cobblestones, though more frequently they were strewn with loose stones, for walls collapsed, chimneys fell and the stones remained where they had landed. Clearing away such debris was an expensive undertaking and few were willing to bear the cost. Today, however, the people's government has intervened. Houses have been restored, broad cobbled streets and narrow alleyways repaired, and it is a great pleasure to behold them!

Even the chimneys of the houses, built of stone, differ from one another. Their openings, through which the smoke escapes, were carefully designed not only to draw the smoke effectively but also to possess elegance and aesthetic appeal. On these chimneys one sees two openings, or three, placed side by side; in some cases the flues are tall, in others low. Even the stone slab covering the chimney was treated with artistic consideration. Sometimes a pointed stone was placed at its centre, resembling a white cap; at other times nothing was added. In the latter case, storks arriving from warmer lands would build their nests there. These nests looked like helmets, and from them could be heard the clattering of the beaks of the "pilgrim storks," as we





"Even the chimneys of the houses, built of stone, differ from one another. Their openings send plumes of smoke curling skywards. At the top, each was crowned with something resembling a white felt cap."

called them, because our mothers told us that these birds came from Mecca and were therefore pilgrims.

I have mentioned the bazaar* of Gjirokastra many times in my memoirs, yet I cannot resist saying a few more words about it. The centre of the bazaar, known locally as Qafa e Pazarit, occupies an exceptionally well-chosen and effective position. All the roads connecting the various neighbourhoods either descend towards it or climb up to it. Qafa e Pazarit is like a balcony upon which people stand. There they meet, converse and observe who is coming up and who is going down, into which shop someone enters, what he buys or does not buy. Nor, when a person emerges from a shop, are the questions ever lacking: "What did you buy? How much did you pay for it?"

For an ancient city such as Gjirokastra, Qafa e Pazarit represents a truly original architectural and artistic solution. All the streets converging on the Qafa differ in length, while their width remains broadly similar, though never monotonous. The buildings, shops, inns and cafés, with their stairways, raised platforms, doors, windows, shutters and stone construction, lend these streets a rare beauty through the variety of their forms, dimensions and structures, not to mention the colourful diversity of goods bought and sold there. Above the Qafa, at the junction of two streets, the shops merge into a tall building with timber-framed walls, large windows and beautiful iron balconies. Its projecting rooms jut out so boldly that they appear suspended in the air. During my youth these rooms often served as the headquarters of patriotic societies and student clubs. Our youth library was located there. We would read books and then step out onto the balconies, playing mandolins and guitars and

* Evidence indicates that the city's market originally stood near the castle, precisely where the "Old Bazaar" quarter is located today. Later, construction began on the New Bazaar, the centre of which is known as Qafa e Pazarit.

entertaining the people gathered below in Qafa e Pazarit.

Let us now look more closely at the interiors of the houses of Gjirokastra. A characteristic feature is the care taken by the builders to create spaces suited to the practical needs of daily life. In general, the lower floor contained the *qilarë*,* as we call them in Gjirokastra, the *muslluk*** and the stable, which was sometimes built separately in the courtyard. These spaces formed the coolest part of the house and were therefore ideal for storing provisions. It should be remembered that the people of Gjirokastra, even when poor, were thrifty. Each household, according to its means, sought to make provisions not necessarily for an entire year, but at least for three or six months, gradually accumulating reserves of fuel and food while taking care to preserve them from spoilage. The rooms on the lower floor thus served primarily as storage areas for foodstuffs and for household items not needed every day, as well as old objects which, rather than being discarded, were repaired and reused. Wealthier families possessed larger and better-ventilated storage areas, naturally because their reserves were greater.

In smaller houses, above the ground floor stood the upper level, which, depending on the owner's means, contained two or three rooms, one of which was known as the *oda e madhe,* or the great room. There was also a *pat**** and an enclosed winter room with small windows. The windows of the great room were either equal in size to those of the *pat* or larger. The great room, reserved for guests, was maintained and furnished with particular care.

Naturally, Gjirokastra also possessed houses of two full storeys. These belonged to families of greater means. In addition to

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* Storage cellars for provisions and household goods.

** Cool pantry for storing foodstuffs.

*** Principal family living room.

the cellars or storerooms and the first floor — which generally served the family throughout the year but especially during the winter — there was an upper floor used as living quarters during the warmer seasons: spring, summer and early autumn. One must remember that the climate of Gjirokastra is continental, very hot in summer and cold in winter. Stone, as we know, not only absorbs great quantities of heat but also retains it, releasing it gradually, especially during the day. As a result, temperatures become high both inside and outside the house. For this reason many families in Gjirokastra did not spend the summer even on the upper floor but rather in the *hajat*, that is, the topmost level where the *muslluk* and the doors of the storerooms were located. These *hajats* were usually paved with stone slabs and coated with a kind of petroleum-based substance, while the joints were coloured either red or white with lime. Along the walls of the *hajat* were placed mattresses and cushions stuffed with maize husks. This was where people spent the afternoon, where the dining table was laid and meals were eaten. For sleeping, however, they would go upstairs.

As a rule, the staircases of the houses of Gjirokastra were built of stone. Both flights — those leading to the first floor and those leading to the second — were attractively constructed from stones carried by the river waters and paved with smooth, carefully dressed slabs. These staircases were often long. Along their sides ran wooden handrails with turned balusters, always kept scrupulously clean. There were, however, also staircases without handrails, which were naturally hazardous for small children. In some houses the lower flight of stairs was made of stone, while the upper one was constructed of planks, as we called them, that is, wooden boards. These boards were constantly washed by the women of the household and always retained a beautiful honey-coloured hue, much like that of the divans. Throughout Gjirokastra it was characteristic that these

surfaces were maintained with great cleanliness. The boards were washed with water and soap. At that time wax polish was unknown, but such treatment not only seasoned the wood but also kept it bright and attractive.

The divans, which occupied a substantial part of the house, were the spaces onto which all the room doors opened. However many rooms there were on a floor, the same number of doors opened onto the divan. These were favourite spaces for the family, particularly in spring and summer. Conversations took place there, and guests too were often received in these areas. The divan, especially in the larger houses — by which I mean the one on the uppermost floor, the second storey above the cellars — was often completely open. Winter and summer alike, the wind passed through it. Such divans or galleries were reached by a staircase, usually of stone. The outer wall of the house beside the staircase rose to the level of the divan. In this wall there were often handsome wooden columns made from well-seasoned timber, sometimes painted, which supported the roof while at the same time creating open divisions resembling windows without shutters. Neither rain nor even the strongest storm winds could enter the divan through the staircase. They were stopped at the raised platform beneath the railing, against the stone wall or upon the stone steps themselves. Everything had been carefully calculated by the builders.

On the other side of the staircase stood an elegant wooden balustrade separating the gallery or divan, whose floor was laid with wooden boards. At its far end there was often what might be described as a raised platform supported by wooden columns. This generally projected above the main exterior staircase and overlooked the entire courtyard, garden and city beyond. Open on all sides, it could be reached from the divan by a few steps on either side. During the summer, mattresses and cushions were spread around it. In winter, any furnishings liable

to become damp were removed. The inner divan, by contrast, remained furnished year-round with mattresses lining its sides. Sitting there in summer was particularly pleasant, and during the hottest weather members of the household often slept there. This space was usually known as the great divan.

Below, on the first floor above the cellars and directly beneath the great divan, stood the main entrance to the house at the top of the staircase. One then passed through a second door, which could also be closed. This led into another divan almost as large as the one above. It was warmer than the upper gallery because it was sheltered from the wind. In winter its doors were shut and secured, preventing the air from the upper divan from entering below. This lower divan had smaller windows and was darker. Onto it opened the doors of the winter rooms, as they were called in Gjirokastra, which the family occupied as soon as the weather turned cold. Among them, depending on the size of the household, one would find either the large *pat* or the principal winter room.

The size of all these spaces depended upon the economic circumstances of the family that had built the house. In wealthier households the *pat* was spacious. In most cases it was constructed facing the sun so that solar warmth might help keep it comfortable. The *pat* generally contained a fireplace built into the wall, with a projecting stone mantel above it. This was usually covered by a curtain hanging halfway across the fireplace opening in order to reduce the size of the aperture through which the fire burned and also to prevent smoke from spreading through the rooms.

A characteristic feature of the *pats* of Gjirokastra was what we called the *musandara*.* Here were stored mattresses, quilts and pillows, stacked one upon another and brought out only

* A built-in bedding cupboard.

at bedtime to be spread on the floor. Some *pats* had wooden platforms built around their perimeter. Upon these were placed mattresses and cushions stuffed with grass or maize leaves and neatly secured with tacks, known in Gjirokastra as *karfoma*. On either side of the fireplace stood low mattresses, often cov-



Musandara: *"...crafted with taste and skill, where mattresses, quilts and pillows were stored, to be taken out when bedtime came and spread on the floor."*

ered, according to the family's means, with blankets or woven rugs. There was also a niche on each side of the fireplace. The kerosene lamp was placed on the mantelpiece, where the head of the household would keep his tobacco tray, sometimes there and sometimes in one of the niches. Also placed on the mantel was the tray containing *filxhanë*,* together with the *xhezve* and small containers filled with coffee and sugar, which the lady of the house would take when preparing coffee for guests. During the winter, visitors were received here in the *pat*; in summer, as soon as the weather grew warm, they were received in the great

* Small cups for Turkish coffee.

reception room. Close relatives, however, were also welcomed in the more secluded rooms of the house.

The construction of the *pat* was attractive. It contained windows set into the walls, sometimes projecting outwards, though these were generally not as large as the windows of the great reception rooms on the upper floor, where the principal guest room was located. In addition to glass panes, the windows of the *pat* usually had interior wooden shutters secured at night with iron latches. Neither these shutters, nor the cupboards, nor the ceilings of the rooms on this floor were decorated with the elaborate ornamentation found in the guest rooms of the upper summer storey. Nevertheless, the lower *pat* possessed a very warm atmosphere. This warmth was provided not only by the fireplace — usually attractively designed, proportionate to the size of the room and positioned so that the south wind could not blow smoke back inside — but also by the wooden cupboard doors, carved with floral motifs, birds and geometric designs. The *pat* often contained one or two cupboards, above which were open decorative sections adorned with carved wooden ornaments. These might take the form of birds facing one another, a circular motif in the centre or other carved embellishments which met precisely in the middle when the cupboard doors were closed. The wood of the doors themselves was likewise carved with flowers and birds. Frequently, at a height of about one and a half metres or slightly more, shelves were built around the room. On these were placed everyday necessities, as well as the turbans and fezzes of guests, which they removed before sitting down. One might also see a plate or other household objects there, although crockery and utensils were generally kept in the kitchen where the food was prepared. At the end of the *pat* there was always a *musandara*, the wooden doors of which, in wealthier households, were usually beautifully carved. Yet even poorer families possessed refined taste.

They either crafted such decorations themselves with considerable skill or relied on acquaintances who helped them improve and embellish their homes over time. Naturally, the *pat* was furnished with mattresses lining the walls. Those who could afford it would also spread a carpet in the centre. Sitting in the *pat* during winter was an exceptionally pleasant experience.

The divan contained a door leading to a room usually situated at the rear of the house, overlooking narrow, dark passageways lying between the house walls and the outer enclosure wall. Naturally, the windows of these rooms were smaller and admitted less light. We called them the "*inner rooms*." Here one found the kitchen, or "*ashef*," with a fireplace of moderate or considerable size, particularly in large households. Cupboards were built into the room, for tables and workbenches were uncommon in those days. There were also hooks upon which cooking pots and other kitchen utensils were hung. This was where the women prepared meals. Some wealthier families even had an oven within the kitchen. Those with sufficient means baked bureks, casseroles and other dishes in their own ovens, while poorer families without ovens took their bread, *shapkat** or *laropita*** to the communal ovens of the neighbourhood.

On this floor there was also a room that was not heated. Nevertheless, it served as a winter room and, in very large families, was used for sleeping. Since it could not be warmed directly, those who slept there either relied upon thick quilts or, during particularly cold weather, placed a brazier filled with glowing wood embers in the room to provide some warmth. Coal was never used, since everyone knew of the danger posed by the carbon fumes it emitted.

In general, houses of this type still exist in Gjirokastra to-

* Traditional flat loaves of bread.

** Traditional layered pie.

day, and their interiors lend a distinctive charm and beauty to living in them. Great care is evident not only in the arrangement of the rooms to meet the needs of the family, but also in the external appearance of the buildings. Both the walls and the roofs — which were invariably covered with stone slabs — were beautifully constructed with arches and careful proportions. This reflected not only the fact that roof tiles were neither common nor especially practical at the time, but also that stone slabs were a local material and therefore more readily available.

A particular beauty was imparted to these houses by their roofs, which were supported by numerous beams because of the considerable weight of the stone slabs covering them. When installed, these beams formed beneath the roof a complex labyrinth of timbers, a space rarely entered by anyone except curious children. The roofs projected beyond the walls of the house and rested upon sturdy beams, often placed close together in order to support the heavy structure. This arrangement gave the houses a distinctive grandeur and elegance. Many houses also featured projecting corners, that is, overhanging roof sections. These gave the buildings a broader and more imposing appearance and made them seem taller. Sometimes, beneath the roofline at the top of the walls, there would be a small round window. Around it, decorative motifs were often painted or carved among the beams: flowers, animals, tulips, circular patterns or inscriptions in Turkish, including verses from the Koran, dates and the names of the builder or owner. These houses are old — many are more than 100 or 120 years old — yet they still stand today. They were built before the adoption of the Latin alphabet for the Albanian language and therefore bear inscriptions in Turkish.

One finds rows of such houses throughout Gjirokastra. They generally share certain characteristics. The windows on the main façade, especially on the principal floor, are large, while those on the upper and lower levels are smaller. During

my youth, in the large reception rooms, particularly during celebrations and weddings, there were several small windows above the entrance door at the far end of the room. These windows were not intended solely for decoration. They enabled the women of the household to observe what was happening below, for behind them were the *dhipato*,* as we called them. These small windows were fitted with wooden lattice screens through which the women could watch the men in the great room while they drank, sang and celebrated at weddings or festivals. The men, however, could not see the women. Beneath these small windows there were usually cupboards with glass-fronted doors in which various glass objects were displayed. At that time such items were among the most prized possessions, since glassware was rare. We referred to drinking glasses as *farfuri* glasses and to lamps as *farfuri* lamps.

All these characteristics of the houses of Gjirokastra that I have described above, particularly their defensive nature, can be seen in their most developed form in the great house of the Zekate family, situated above the city in Palorto. This remarkable building does not resemble an ordinary house but is, in every sense of the word, a fortress. Its commanding presence derives not only from the site chosen by its builder but also from the scale and grandeur that he sought to bestow upon his residence. It stands in a position overlooking the entire city and commands views in all directions. Within this house are numerous stone staircases. The building, with walls resembling the battlements of a castle, rises through three storeys. The windows of the uppermost floor, that is, the third and highest level, are large, while those on the lower floors become progressively smaller. The courtyard walls and the gate are likewise strongly built. It is said that this residence was constructed by the Zekates, who were al-

* Screened gallery overlooking the reception room.

lies of Ali Pasha of Tepelena. As is well known, Ali Pasha fought against the people of Gjirokastra and against the city itself. Opposite it he built the fortress of Shëntriadha, and after capturing the city's castle by force, he established within it positions for the weapons of his time, including bombards and cannons. Ali Pasha, after becoming Pasha of Ioannina, employed French officers in his artillery service. He lived during the reign of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, who at that time controlled Corfu, Cephalonia and other islands. Napoleon's representative commanding these islands, if I remember correctly, was named Donzelot. He maintained continual contact with Ali Pasha, who supplied him with provisions from the fortress of Butrint and from Arta. In a letter that Napoleon sent to this general, which I read in a French volume containing the archives relating to Napoleon's relations with Ali Pasha of Tepelena, Napoleon advised Donzelot to be cautious in his dealings with Ali Pasha. He warned that such a shrewd, intelligent and cunning statesman would outwit him, if indeed he had not done so already. Ali Pasha also installed such artillery in the fortress of Gjirokastra. It is clear that even if these weapons had been used against the city, the damage inflicted upon its stone houses, roofed as they were with heavy stone slabs, would not have been as severe as that suffered by buildings constructed from less durable materials.

Viewed from this perspective, the house of the Zekates undeniably possesses a defensive character. At the same time, it is exceptionally beautiful, and visitors who know nothing of the history of such buildings are astonished by the craftsmanship, skill and artistry of the masons who constructed it. Yet these builders did not demonstrate their abilities only in the houses of wealthy landowners and powerful notables. As I have already noted, such men were never fully able to impose their will upon the poorer inhabitants of Gjirokastra. One characteristic of the city, well known to those of us who belong to older generations,

was the existence of extended kinship groups, or lineages, whose presence is reflected in the pattern of house construction. This organisation limited the ability of the powerful to exercise authority as they wished. For example, a family that had divided over the years into several branches would build the houses of its lineage, whether large or small, close to one another. The positioning of these neighbouring houses creates the impression that the family, despite its later divisions into separate branches, retained a collective capacity for self-defence through its unity. Take, for instance, the Bakiraj families. Their houses were all built within the same cluster, close together and adjoining one another, though naturally separated by walls. One of them, that of Selim Bakiri, is larger, evidently because Selim's grandparents were wealthier. As later generations divided, new houses were built, but these were smaller. Those constructed during the past eighty years or so differ stylistically from Selim Bakiri's house, which is rightly regarded as a building of museum value worthy of preservation.

The same is true of the houses of the Skënduli family. Likewise, our own families, the Hoxhas, were similarly grouped together. The houses of Resul, Fetah, Nexhmo, Muço, Çuço and others all stood within the same cluster. My point is that the landowners and economically powerful families, whether allied with Ali Pasha or with other influential figures and landowners, found it difficult to dominate or attack a member of a particular family among the poorer population. In such cases they faced not only the resistance of the individual household concerned but also the immediate solidarity of the wider lineage and clan.

The house of the Topulli family* is also exceedingly beautiful and has always appealed to me. It is the home of a family

* Today, the Historical Museum, 1839–1939.



"The House of the Zekates is a fortress, with walls and battlements like those of a castle. It dominates the entire city. It is exceptionally beautiful. Visitors marvel at the craftsmanship and the skilled hands of the masons who built it."

from which emerged, as everyone knows, some of the heroes of the Albanian people: Bajo Topulli, Çerçiz Topulli and our partisan comrade Ago Topulli, the son of Halit. This house too, now transformed into a museum — a distinction it fully deserves — is truly a remarkable building. Its value is great not only because of the precious materials assembled within it, including the heroes' weapons, documents relating to their lives and other historical artefacts. For this, the Party deserves considerable credit for having highlighted in this museum the work of the patriotic National Renaissance figures of Gjirokastra. The building is also of great architectural significance, expressing in a striking manner the grandeur and pride of this distinguished patriotic family, which constituted a threatening force to the beys and the Turkophile elements. Kapo Topulli was one of the members of the command in Gjirokastra that fought for the

liberation of the city and resisted, together with Hysen Hoxha, Idriz Guri, Hasan Xhiku and other patriots, both the occupiers and their collaborators. Thus the entire family of Kapo Topulli lived in this house, around which stood the homes of other related families.

Throughout Dunavat and Manalat, during the National Liberation War, the partisan guerrillas possessed strong bases of support. Occupying troops could scarcely enter these neighbourhoods, for they might be cut down in their winding alleyways. Such had always been the character of Gjirokastra. It had been the same in the days of Bajo and Çerçiz. After crushing the Ottoman forces at Mashkullora and breaking through their encirclement, where did Çerçiz go? He crossed Mali i Gjerë and returned to his own home. "Everyone around here knew that Çerçiz was in the house and had their Mausers ready," Baba Çen* once told me. "Çerçiz would come with his band from Korça, spend a few days in the mountain pastures of Mali i Gjerë and then go to Haso's house," the old man would say. Then he would add: "The Turkish enemy could not move through our alleyways, or it would meet the same fate as the *bimbashi*.**"

During one visit I made to the Topulli Museum-House, I suggested to the comrades there that, when circumstances permitted, a broad stone staircase should be built in front of the house, descending as far as Ciu's old bakery. In this way,

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* Hysen Hoxha (1861–1934) — uncle of Comrade Enver Hoxha, patriot, initiator of the opening of the first Albanian-language school in Gjirokastra and chairman of the societies *Bashkimi* ("Union") and the *Pleqësia* ("Council of Elders") of the *Drita* ("Light") Club. In 1912 he was Gjirokastra's delegate to the Assembly of Vlora for the Declaration of Albanian Independence. In 1913–1914 he rose against the Greek occupiers, telling General Papoulas of Zografos: "You cannot burn Gjirokastra because it is too weighty" and "you cannot burn Gjirokastra because it is rock."

** Ottoman army majors.

the birthplace of Gjirokastra's great heroes would acquire even more fully the appearance of a monumental memorial.

In various writings I have spoken of such groups of houses, which are themselves extraordinarily beautiful monuments and should therefore be preserved with the greatest care. I have observed, and have also been told, that the Party and the local authorities in Gjirokastra have attached particular importance to this task. Naturally, it is difficult to restore or maintain all these houses properly within so short a period. Nevertheless, as I have seen with my own eyes, many have already been repaired. In carrying out this work, efforts have been made to preserve the city's magnificent traditional architectural style, techniques and artistic features. It is important that this concern continue into the future. Certainly, such restoration is somewhat costly for the state, but it must be remembered that houses of this kind will never be built again. Most of those who built them were not wealthy. I am not speaking here of the great landowners, for the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of Gjirokastra were ordinary people struggling to make a living. Many of them even emigrated for work, labouring abroad for years in order to save enough money to build a house. It was precisely from the minds and skilled hands of these master craftsmen that these precious buildings emerged, making Gjirokastra a true museum-city.* It is our duty to preserve this city for future generations.

Our builders and architects possess in these structures a valuable resource from which they may draw important lessons in giving the buildings of the socialist era a national character. The issue is not to copy the ancient houses of Gjirokastra, Berat or other cities. Rather, when our architects visit such places, they should observe even the finest characteristic details of these old

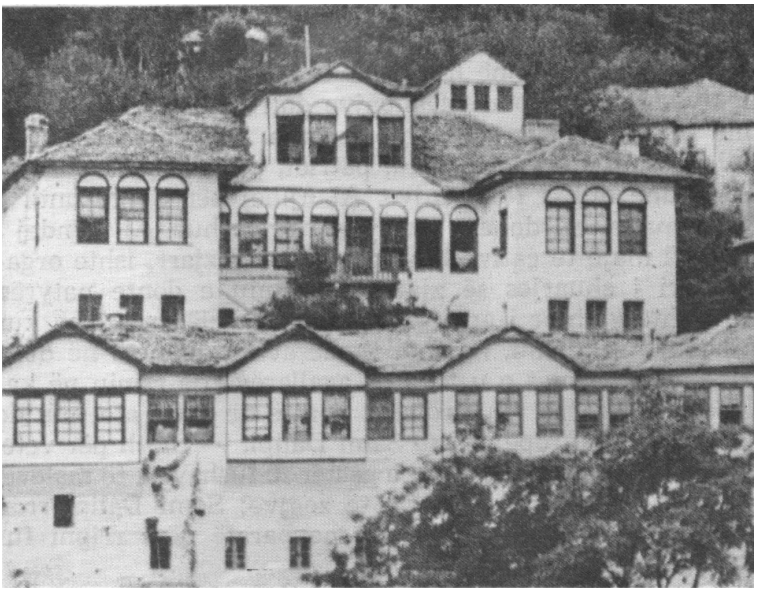
* By a special decision of the Council of Ministers in 1961, Gjirokastra was declared a museum-city and placed under state protection.

dwellings, which form part of the national architectural heritage. These buildings, created by the craftsmen of our not-so-distant past, should inspire reflection. Architects must learn how to develop and incorporate their finest qualities, adapting them creatively to the houses and public buildings of the socialist period that we are constructing today.

It is not merely the materials that confer such a profound national character and distinctive beauty upon the Mangalem quarter of Berat or the districts of Manalat, Palorto and Hazmurat in Gjirokastra — these two museum cities. Rather, in my view, it is the very method of planning and designing the houses. It is the creative imagination of their designers and builders, expressed in both the interior and exterior construction, that gives the built environment a spirit appropriate to its setting and a beauty capable of ennobling even bare rock and caves.

When one observes the cluster of houses belonging to the Angonat family, anyone possessing even a modest knowledge of the medieval history of our people and of other peoples perceives in them a striking representation of a complex that recalls, in a sense, the features of ancient settlements belonging to medieval feudal lords. To be clear, the Angonats were not feudal magnates. Nevertheless, they constituted an extensive kinship group, and the taste and craftsmanship displayed — above all by the builders, for the principal credit belongs to the master carpenters, masons and woodworkers, though also to the owners themselves — were so refined that when one stands at Qafa e Pazarit and gazes upon this group of houses, one is confronted with a truly astonishing tableau.

When I was young, several old structures stood on the far side of the stream, including slaughterhouses, stables and sheds. These remained in place until relatively recent times and spoiled the appearance of the Angonat quarter. I therefore gave instructions that they should be demolished, and they have since been



"When you reach Qafa e Pazarit and cast your eyes over this cluster of houses, a magnificent panorama unfolds before you." The houses of the Angonats.

removed. I also suggested that the Angonat houses should be painted with greater aesthetic care. This recommendation too has now been carried out. As a result, whenever I visit Gjirokastra, I experience particular pleasure in seeing their beauty.

Around this cluster stand other groups of houses, creating the impression that they are suspended one above another. Together they form a continuous ensemble with the houses of the Dalipaj family. From that family came a man respected and beloved throughout Gjirokastra: Sami Dalipi, one of the city's earliest teachers, a patriot, a progressive, an active opponent of Zogu and a friend of the poor. He was known for his boundless optimism and his perpetually cheerful expression. Whenever a fire broke out, Sami was the first to be seen climbing onto the rooftops and organising efforts to extinguish it. He loved na-

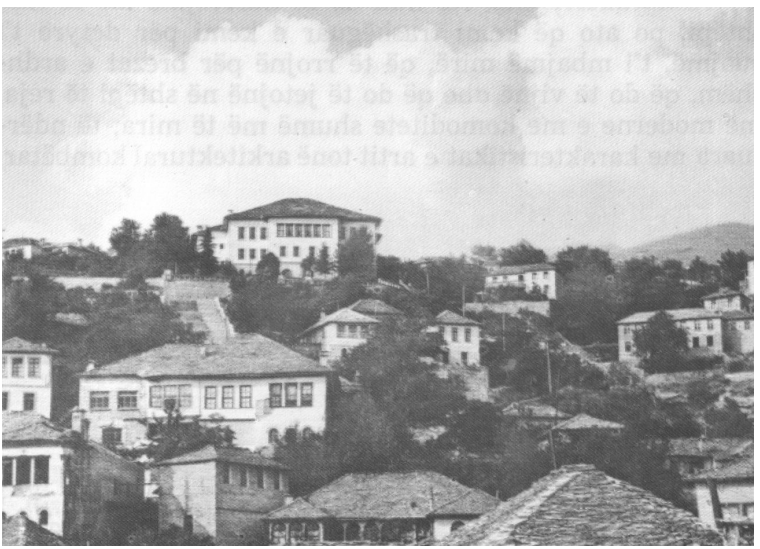
ture and was an enthusiastic hunter. On Sunday evenings, returning from the hunt, he would carry partridges or hares in his hands or hanging from his belt and say to the landowners sitting in the cafés of the bazaar: "May your money serve you well, though you will not take it with you into the grave. As for Sami Dalipi," he would say of himself, "he enjoys life, wanders in the fresh air of the fields and mountains, among flowers and birdsong. Sami Dalipi lives in paradise, while you live a dog's life with the money you have skinned from the poor."

Beyond the Dalipaj houses stand those of old Arshi Ruca, a handsome man with a white beard, drooping moustaches and a chest covered with curly hair that he kept exposed summer and winter alike. He wore a silver pistol tucked into his belt above his black trousers. The cluster continues with the house of Çelo Kalo and the large mansion-like residences of the Karagjozat family, together with a house belonging to the Hoxha family, all clinging to the slopes of Kuculla. Together they form not only an architectural complex but also a defensive one. The buildings of which I speak possess admirable qualities. Everything in them has been used to advantage. Looking across from the Angonat houses, one can also see those of Xheneti and of Uncle Kasëm, a close friend of my father. These too are beautiful houses, built on a rocky site above the stream. Despite the harshness of the terrain, their owners found space to plant trees and climbing vines that surround the house.

Thus, in every district, every neighbourhood and every house of Gjirokastra, our architects have much to observe and much to record. Yet these observations should not remain confined to their notebooks. They should reflect upon them and, just as all our other arts continue to develop and advance — our folk music, painting, sculpture and so forth — so too should our magnificent people's architecture continue to evolve through the creation of new works. We must construct beau-

tiful buildings founded upon this heritage, while at the same time preserving that heritage in its entirety.

There are people who do not understand the importance of this issue. Someone told me that there were plans to build a House of Pioneers within the fortress of Ali Pasha at Tepelena, where Byron himself had once been received. What nonsense is this! Has it really come to the point that the House of Pioneers must be built inside the fortress of Ali Pasha of Tepelena?! Is there no other suitable location there for such a building?! There are plenty of suitable places! Tepelena was little more than a village in my youth, whereas today it has become one of the most beautiful towns in the country. Why then should the House of Pioneers be constructed within the old fortress of Ali Pasha? Such a building would undoubtedly be modern in character and therefore wholly out of place there. Something of this kind is unacceptable. Instead of undertaking such projects, the comrades in Tepelena ought to organise efforts to clear and



"...such clusters of houses are extraordinarily beautiful monuments..."

restore Ali Pasha's fortress, removing all the stables and other structures erected within it in recent times, excavating the site and revealing the foundations of Ali Pasha's palace, so that it may remain a national monument. Yet instead they contemplate actions of this sort.

Naturally, I have spoken here about Gjirokastra, but I should like to emphasise that it is not only the old houses of that city, or those of Berat and Shkodra, that possess beauty and great artistic value. Fine architecture is to be found in every town and village of our country. I stress this point: in the villages and in our mountain regions as well. For this reason, we must not neglect the remarkable buildings of our rural settlements and their characteristic houses. We shall not build such houses again, but those that we have inherited impose upon us a duty of preservation. We must maintain them carefully so that they may endure for future generations, who will live in new houses, more modern and far more comfortable, yet constructed in accordance with the distinctive traditions of our national architectural art.

24 September 1976

THROUGH HOUSES AND ALLEYWAYS

I have written about you, my beloved Gjirokastra, yet in one of my earlier writings I remarked that it remained unfinished, and now I continue it. Some say that it is difficult to describe a single event, let alone an entire city from which one carries so many memories. For me, memories are of immense importance. They come back as though photographed in my mind and arrange themselves like an embroidered album, just as I imagine my Gjirokastra of childhood and early youth.

Let us begin with the Alley of the Madmen.*

"Grandmother," I would ask, "why is it called the Alley of the Madmen?"

She would reply:

"How should I know, my son? I do not know either why they call it the Alley of the Madmen. Perhaps because it is full of stones and, when people come down it, such a noise is made

* Today, "Pioneer" Alley, named in honour of the young stone-pavers who laid it with cobblestones during the 1967–1968 school year.

that it sounds as though madmen are passing by." That is what my grandmother used to tell me.

Yet today this Alley of the Madmen is so dear to me and brings back memories of childhood. I picture myself as a small boy, wearing black shoes studded with hobnails and with their tips turned upwards, descending the alley. On its left side rose the house of the Skëndulaj family, towering high, with an enclosing wall that reached halfway up. At its summit one could see projecting windows fitted with iron grilles and a sloping roof supported by beams lined up side by side like soldiers. Above the roof stood three or four chimneys, slender as my grandmother and as white as she was. When the "pilgrim storks" arrived, they built their nests there and clattered their beaks.

I remember the winter days when, huddled against the cold, I would walk down the alley on my way to school. Before me rose the mountains of Lunxhëri, marked by long ridges and seeming to wear white caps upon their summits. The ridges were the channels carved by centuries of flowing water.

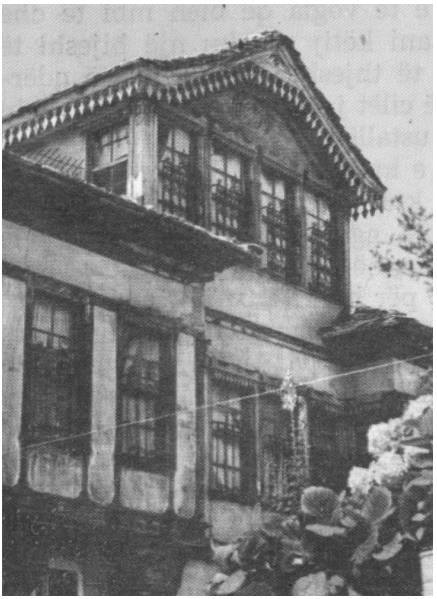
After climbing the alley, I would return home. On the opposite side stood the garden of Asllan Zeko and Isuf Zeko. They were cousins of my grandmother, who herself came from the Zekat family. I knew Asllan Zeko well. As a child I often accompanied my grandmother to his house. His brother, Isuf Arapi, had been a stern officer in the service of Ali Pasha of Tepelena and later of the Ottoman Empire. A song said: "*O Isuf, Isuf Arapi,/ Your sabre is as deadly as the executioner's.*" Meanwhile Isuf would sing to his brother Asllan: "*O Asllan, pockmarked face,/ I could never make you a officer.*" By this he meant that he had never succeeded in raising Asllan above the rank of ordinary soldier. Isuf was severe, whereas Asllan was as gentle as a lamb. I visited both Uncle Asllan and Uncle Isuf, for I was particularly fond of their garden, which seemed to me like an enchanted garden from a fairy tale. There were fig trees, a few plum trees,

several hackberry trees, vine trellises and countless other plants! Uncle Asllan's wife, Myftar's mother, cultivated two or three garden beds with onions, parsley, sorrel and cabbages for making bureks or *shapkat*. Yet the garden became most beautiful in autumn, when the leaves turned yellow and red. Then it appeared to me a true wonder, like a painter's masterpiece.

From the windows of the large room in our house, where I often sat with Baba Çen and a book in my hand, I would gaze upon this splendour of colours spread before me. Beneath my window grew a wild fig tree that had sprung up at the foot of the wall in a small patch of earth. It bore a handful of figs, which delighted me. I guarded them jealously and shouted at Sano not to eat them. Yet sometimes I would find them half-devoured, and then Sano would tell me that "the birds had eaten them."

It has been a long time since I last walked through the Alley of the Madmen. Yet whenever I think of Gjirokastra, my memories lead me there. I am told that the pioneers have now paved it with stone, step by step, with great skill and beauty. The large and small windows overlooking it, together with the white walls, now lend the alley a particular elegance. Between the modest houses lining its sides, built with stone walls whose carefully arranged stones are stacked without mortar, displaying craftsmanship of the highest order, the alley winds its way like a serpent until it reaches Kako Pino's road. How many times I passed along that route, descending and climbing from the bakery and Zemani Square, past Uncle Daut's bakery and onwards to my school, the old lyceum in the building beside the stream where the lyceum first opened.

Crossing the road above the stream, I would always stop in amazement before the house of the Ficaj family, for it was truly beautiful. Even in childhood, though I knew nothing of architecture, its style attracted me. It was a tall house painted a deep yellow, with two storeys and an attic. Its design was genuinely



"Crossing the road above the stream, I would always stop in amazement before the house of the Ficaj family. Its architectural style captivated me..."

elegant. On the ground floor, entered through a large door — for I often visited the house — were the winter rooms and the hall with the staircase leading upwards. Above this rather lofty level projected two symmetrical bays, each with three windows, while between them stood a third bay recessed into the façade. Above this central section, between the roofs covering the two side bays, rose the attic, with large windows on all sides and a triangular roof covered, naturally, with stone slabs, like all the houses of Gjirokastra. The house extended on both sides of this handsome arrangement of projecting bays. The Ficaj family must have been large and prosperous, as people used to say. I always remember the windows hung with white curtains, except for those of the attic and the projecting bays, which were fitted with twisted iron railings. In the garden there was a vine-covered pergola. The windows of this house were large and looked down upon the stream, Varosh and Gjobek. Here was a fine example of a Gjirokastra house — distinctive in style, almost

fairy-tale-like in its appearance.

From the great gate of the Ficaj house rose a stone-paved path along which I passed many times, for there, where the houses stood almost attached to one another, was the home of my friend Kiço Karajani, brother of Minella Karajani. Further on, one entered deep into the property of a certain Abaz Bey. Poor Abaz Bey retained only the title of *bey*, for all he possessed were a few rags and a dying horse, a veritable Rocinante, with which he travelled to the river, loaded barrels of water onto its back and carried them from house to house, selling each barrel for two leks.

Among that cluster of houses stood also the residence of Vesaf Fico. I used to visit there as well, because Vesaf Fico was a friend of my uncle and had married a girl from the Zekat family. Memories of childhood "acrobatics" come back to me. I recall how I had made several holes in the walls of that house and would cling to them as I climbed upwards, emerging onto the Zekat property, then to Asllan Zeko's house and from there to the schoolyard.

I shall not speak about the whole of Palorto, the neighbourhood where I spent the years of my childhood, but I shall say a few words about the staircase of Kamber Xhepi's house. Kamber had a wife who drowned in a well. It was a remarkable staircase and the impression it left on me remains vivid even today. It seemed so high that one might easily fall and break one's legs. One side rested against a wall, while the other had not even the simplest wooden railing. It appears that Uncle Kamber was very poor and lacked the means to complete it properly, for he even sent his young son to work in America. The staircase was built of white stone. As I have said, one side leaned against the wall, which was divided into two sections. One part was whitewashed and led to the entrance of the house, while the other remained unpainted. This latter section was beautiful, its stones

arranged one upon another in an artistic pattern. In the middle of the wall there had evidently once been a doorway, perhaps leading to a stable, though it had been sealed shut. I remember that above it there was an arch, the stones of which had been laid not horizontally but vertically. At the foot of the staircase, in the courtyard, stood a tree whose branches intertwined with a vine trellis. Kamber's wife would give us bunches of grapes from it. The tree appeared almost like a birch, for in autumn, when its leaves yellowed and fell, its trunk remained white like that of a birch. Yet I do not believe it was one, since such trees were rarely found in Gjirokastra.

Somewhere in my writings I have mentioned that, as children, we used to go to the Shamaj district to gather wild berries. I remember it as if it were yesterday: together with my friends, I climbed and descended that road strewn with stones, on whose right and left stood two-storey houses. Almost invariably, the lower floor served as winter quarters and the upper floor as the summer residence. Naturally, the ground floors were generally enclosed by walls concealing the courtyards, whereas the upper storeys opened to the light through large windows, their walls usually plastered and whitewashed, with roofs covered in stone slabs. There too the houses stood shoulder to shoulder, pressed tightly together, as though united in resisting the winds and storms that swept up from the ravine. Yet even in that rocky landscape of cliffs and caves, some tree would grow — a hackberry, a *lofata*,* a vine that turned green in spring, shimmered in the summer heat and then, in autumn, coloured its leaves yellow and red, lending extraordinary beauty to the place and its surroundings. Beyond the last house appeared what was most beautiful and majestic of all: the Shamaj Ravine, or the Çullo Ravine, something mysterious to us children and adolescents.

* The Judas tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*).



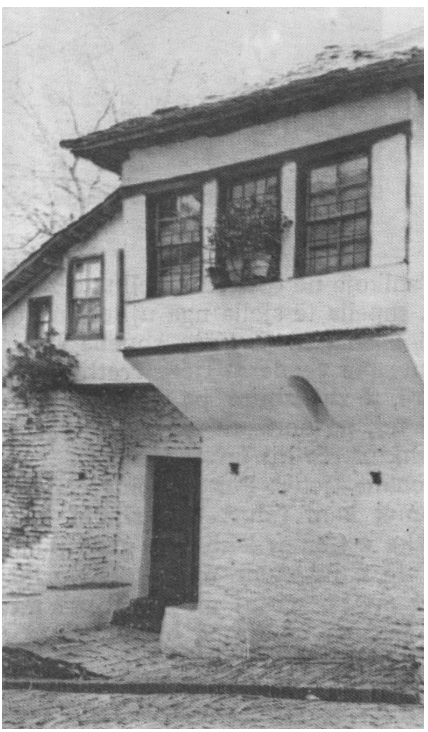
"The Shamaj Ravine was something mysterious to us children; most of the time it carried little water or none at all, but when it did have water, it rushed violently..."

We would go there on holidays in the morning, when the sun shone directly upon it, illuminating one side while leaving the other in shadow. We saw chasms cloaked in darkness, as though wild beasts and spirits lurked within them. When we shouted, the echo of our voices returned. Someone would tell us that the spirits had answered, while another would respond: "Come now, there are no spirits. Our teacher told us at school that such things are merely tales invented by the hodjas." The ravine wound onwards, deep and sinuous. Most of the time it held little water, or none at all, but when water did flow, it rushed violently. One could tell this from the journey up towards the church,* where in the sunlight one saw great pale boulders, caves carved by the water and stones deposited by the Shamaj Ravine. These caves formed a harmonious tableau with the surrounding ter-

* The Church of Varosh, built in 1776 and rebuilt in 1833 after being destroyed by fire.

rain, which rose in bare rocky slopes, stripped of vegetation save for sparse patches of grass. Beyond, on the horizon, the mountains of Mashkullora appeared in all their grandeur — the very mountains where Çerçiz fought.

Let me move on to another neighbourhood. I do not believe I have spoken before about the house of Çome the driver. It was a most pleasant house. Çome's wife was a hardworking woman. Their house was built of stone. First rose a high wall, some three or four metres tall. Then, above the wall or the gate, one saw the large and handsome reception room projecting at an angle, with a timber-framed façade at the front. On all four sides it had walls, and three large windows which, as was customary, were lined with rows of flowerpots, most of them planted with red hollyhocks. The roof, a typical Gjirokastra



"The house of Çome the driver was very charming, highly artistic. On all four sides it had walls and windows filled with flower pots. The characteristic Gjirokastra roof was covered with wooden planks... and on both sides there were stone benches."

roof, was covered with stone slabs. Beside this house, above the gate — on either side of which were stone benches — stood other rooms adjoining the wall of the main reception room and rising from the left. The roof sloped steeply. This part of the house had two large windows and one small one. The entire composition was highly artistic and exceedingly pleasing to the eye.

I loved those houses dearly. Perhaps my youthful spirit possessed a certain romantic inclination, yet it was also my affection for my friends and for the people themselves that made their houses seem even more beautiful to me than they actually were. My feelings and aesthetic judgement did not deceive me. Even after I grew older, and even now, whenever I have visited Gjirokastra or seen those houses in magazines, photographs, films or on television, my heart has been gladdened. I feel proud of those workers and of those extraordinarily talented craftsmen who created such beautiful works, to be found throughout the neighbourhoods of Gjirokastra.

And what of the Lulaj Alley in Hazmurat? How beautiful it must have become by now! Surely it too has been paved with stone. This alley led to the house of Mr. Thoma Papano, my beloved teacher. As one descended from the house of Abaz Çuçi, one saw houses rising on both sides: the Lulaj house and, to the left, the houses of the Çenaj family, which appeared like fortresses dominating those on the right-hand side. Yet the houses on the right were more decorative, whitewashed and more advanced in style than those of the Çenaj side, which loomed overhead like eagles. Here and there one could even find a house with a section of roof covered in tiles, introducing a rare variation into the sea of white or brown stone-slab roofs. Before reaching the Lulaj Alley, one encountered the houses of the Kadare family. I advised the comrades that the Kadare houses, together with several others nearby, should be converted into a

polyclinic, without altering their architectural style in any way. I have been told that the result is magnificent. These houses stand above the road. When one descends from Çerçiz Square onto the main thoroughfare, the entire complex can be seen in all its beauty, lending great elegance to the city of Gjirokastra. I passed many times through the Lulaj Alley and along the winding road that led past the houses of Sollaku, Pleshti, Galanxhiu and Hashorva, before climbing through Varosh on my way to the lyceum. I still retain the sensation of the coolness of those places untouched by the sun, shaded by the lofty walls — fortress-like walls, cracked with age, with occasional projecting windows, sometimes enclosed by iron railings. Around them one would catch sight of a corner of a house whitewashed with lime, gleaming from afar, with the beautiful Gjirokastra windows arranged in rows like a string of beads, one beside another. Above them rose the tall chimney on the roof, sending billows of smoke skyward during the winter cold and frost. A well-constructed chimney was a source of satisfaction for the women of the household. When it failed to draw properly and would not carry away the smoke, however, it became the object of the most bitter curses.

At the lower end of Hazmurat, near the old tekkes,* which by now surely no longer exist or have been converted into dwellings, a long road must have been built, running through Hazmurat all the way to the bazaar, paved with handsome stonework. I have not been there recently, but I imagine it must be a splendid sight if the people of Gjirokastra have cultivated those lower slopes, from the banks below the former tekkes right up to the open ground near the cherry trees, transforming them into terraces, gardens or green spaces, and constructing fine houses and factories there.

* Sufi religious lodges.

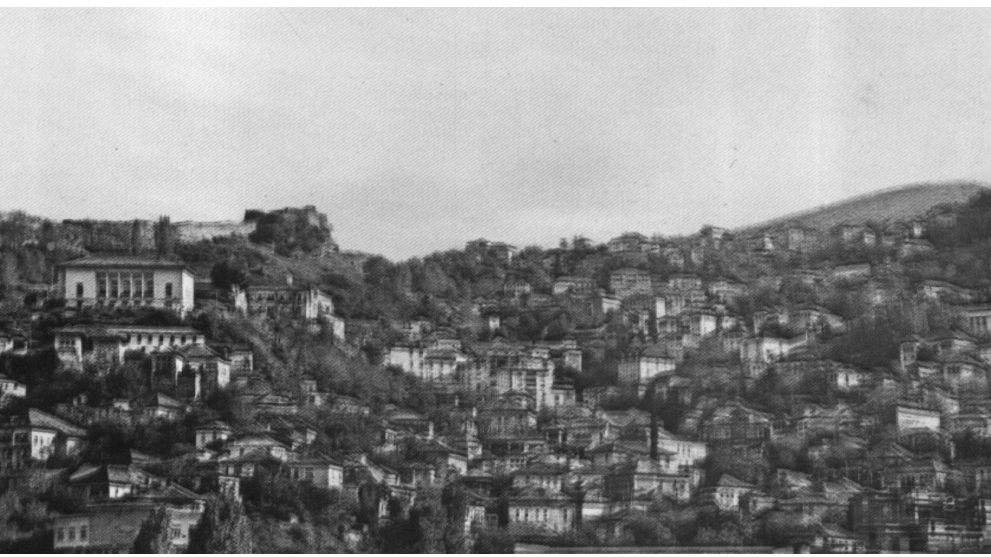


"From the lower end of Hazmurat, near the old tekke, they have built a long road paved with beautiful cobblestones."

As for the houses, I am convinced that they have been rebuilt, repaired and whitewashed, and that they now appear like white doves lined one behind another, with small gardens enclosed within their walls, gates furnished with stone benches and windows turned towards the sun, towards Libohova and Lunxhëri. How much I would like to see those places once again. I remember that, when I was young, we used to wander along the slopes near the tekkes and from there gaze upon the city, the magnificent fortress and its powerful ramparts, while dreaming: there the Albanians fought against foreign invaders alongside Princess Argjiro; there the Zenebishi family fought*; there the Ottoman hordes passed; there our people were besieged and yet did not surrender — within that fortress which dominates the city like an unconquered cruiser weathering the waves of twelve centuries.

Since I am speaking of the hillside of Baba Hasan's tekke, I also picture, across from it, the tekke of Baba Mane, as we called it, standing among the cypress trees with its guesthouses and shrines. We used to visit it with our school on holidays when

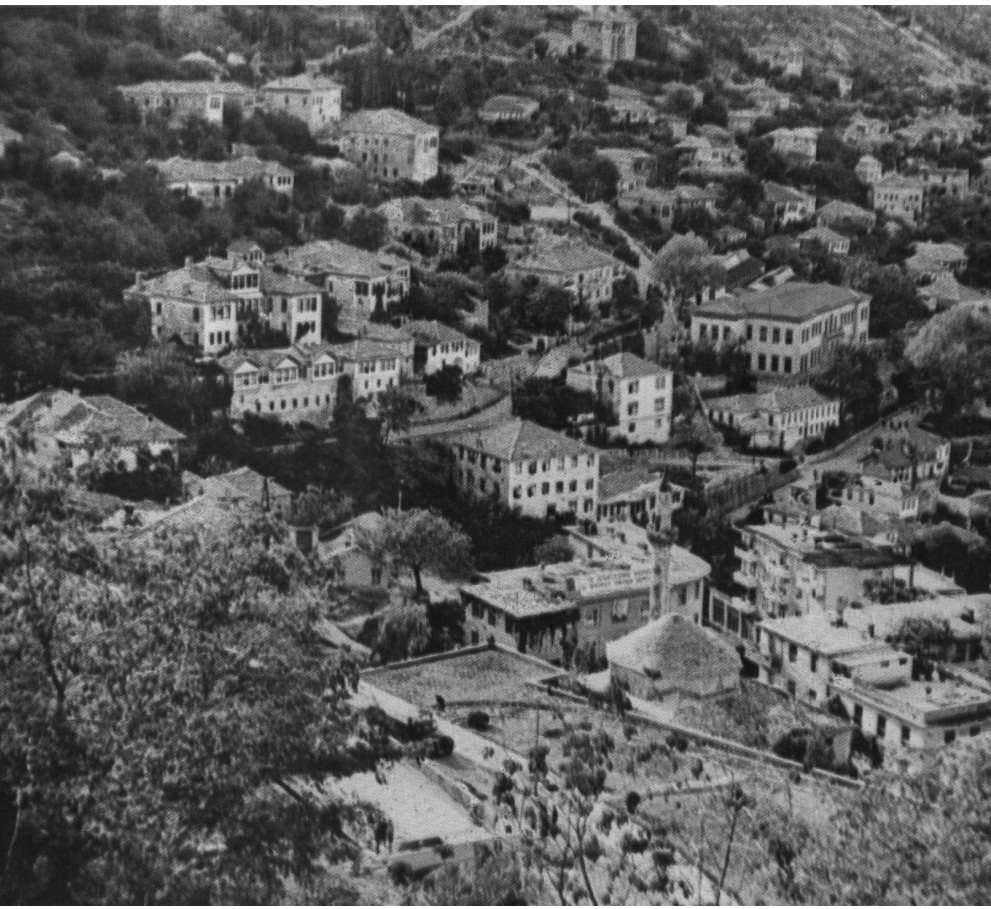
* Gjin Zenebishi and his son Depa, rulers based in Gjirokastra in the fifteenth century, who, at the head of the people, fought against the foreign occupiers.



"Gjirokastra was built on the slope of the Mali i Gjerë. This position was not chosen by chance. The houses occupy commanding positions from which any enemy attack could be observed."



"The city's castle, with its strong battlements, imposing power and strategic position, is the pride of our childhood. It is like a cruiser sailing upon a vast sea of houses. To behold it from any side is to stand in awe of its strength and elegance."



"Strong emotions overwhelm me when I look upon the city, its neighbourhoods and its houses, each more beautiful than the last, built with such knowledge, taste and fine style." Partial view of Palorto.

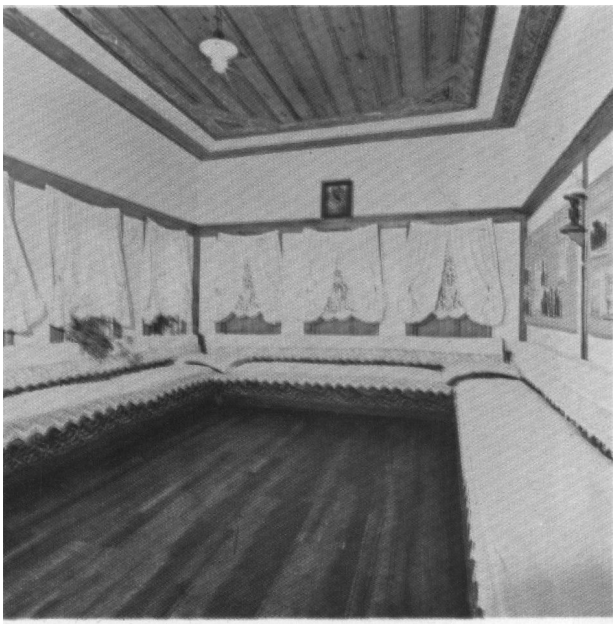
"Our house in Palorto was always full of sisters, nephews, nieces and family friends. Whenever the house filled up, our joy was immense."





Museum of the National Liberation War of the former district — a centre for patriotic and revolutionary education, especially for the younger generation.

A room in Comrade Enver Hoxha's house, furnished with divans, mattresses, cushions and white curtains embroidered with lace.





Interior view of a room in the Topullari house, exemplifying artistic wood craftsmanship.

"Yes, I remember Bajraktari Square, where I played with my friends. It was a small square, but to us it seemed enormous." Partial view of the Hazmurat neighbourhood.





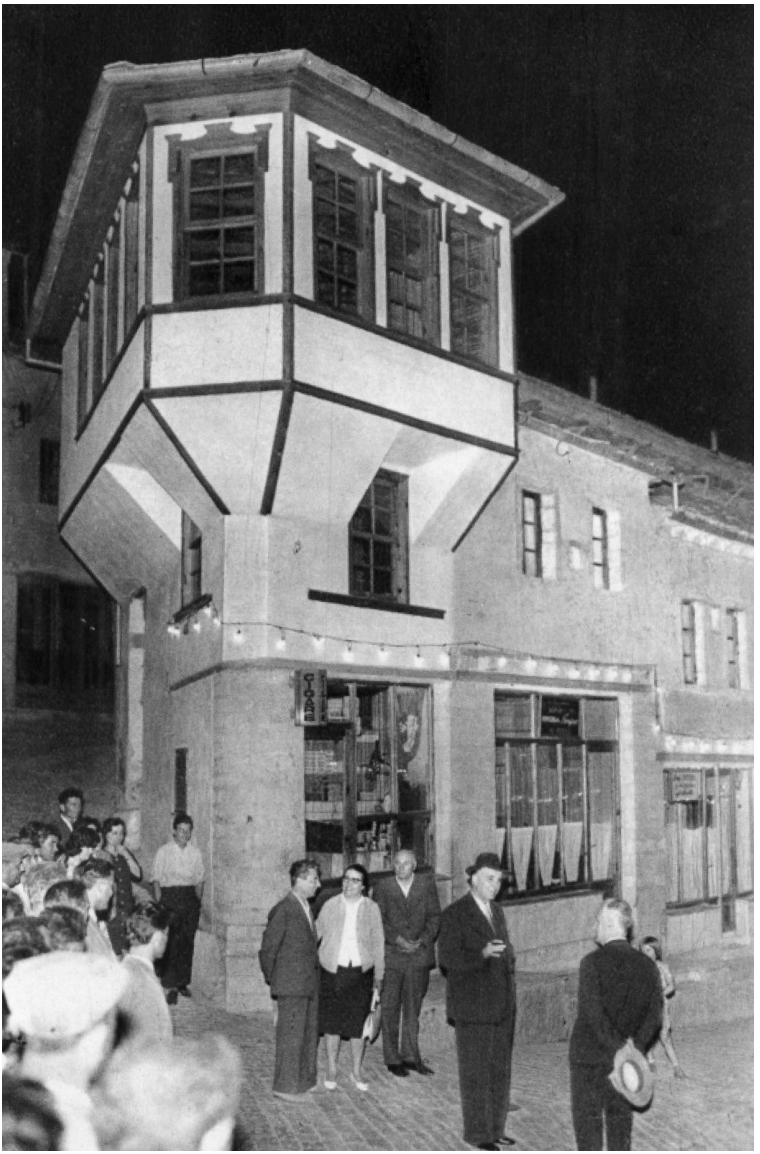


Three houses in three neighbourhoods: Palorto, Manalat and Dunavat.





"The streets of Gjirokastra possess a particular poetry. One feels as though walking upon a beautiful carpet." Cobbled street leading to Qafa e Pazarit.

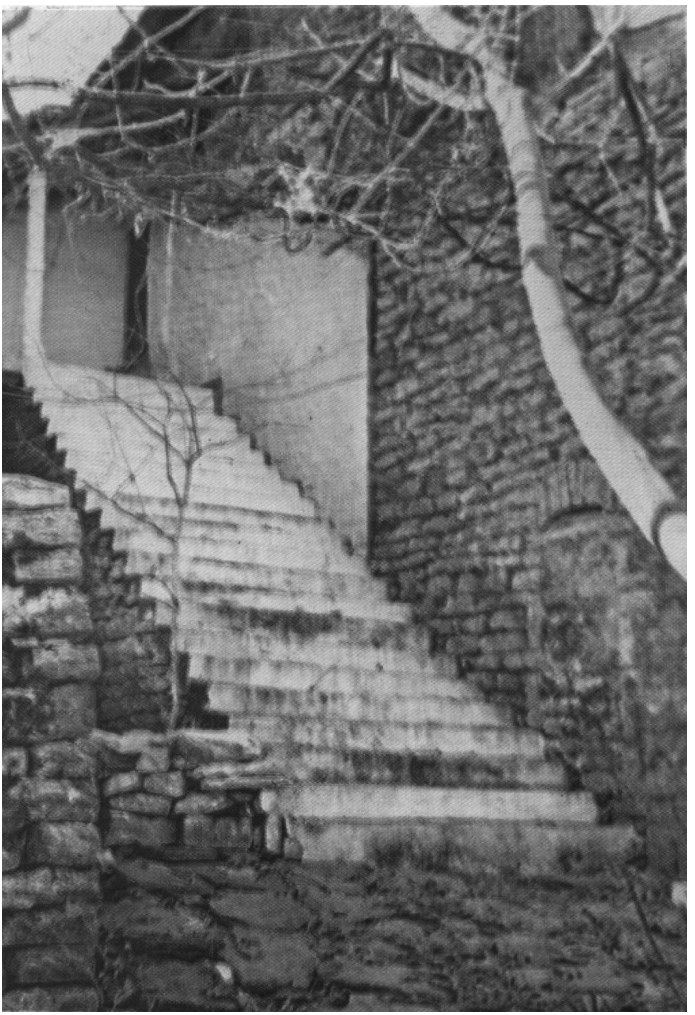


"Qafa e Pazarit is like a balcony where people pass, meet and converse. From this centre all the roads descend or climb..."



"And what of the Alley of the Lulas? How beautiful it must be now! A marvel, for they must surely have paved it with cobblestones. I often passed through that alley and climbed towards Varosh on my way to the lyceum..."

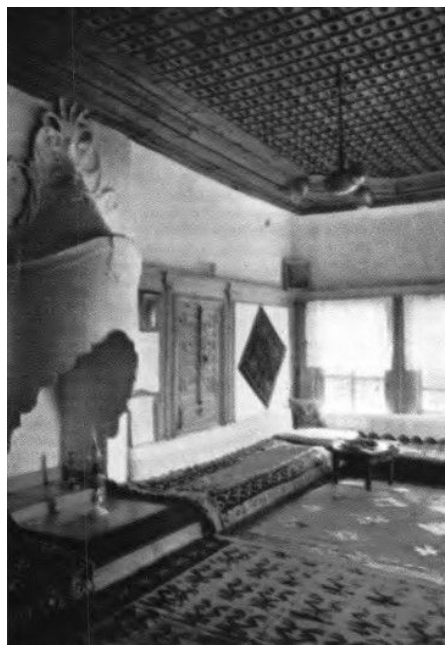




"The staircase of Kamber Xhepi's house was remarkable, built of white stone, with a beautifully crafted wall of artistic design."



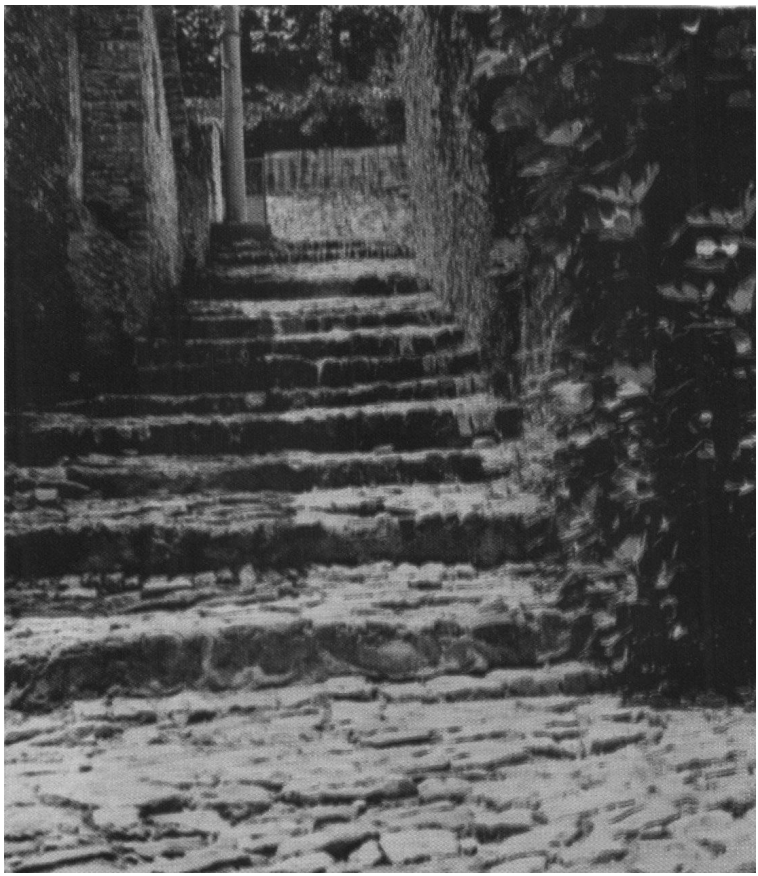
The reception room for guests.



"The House of the Topullaris, where the grandeur and pride of this great patriotic family are revealed."

A visit to the Topullari house, accompanied by Shefqet Peçi, Nexhmije Hoxha and Rrapo Dervishi.





"The Alley of the Madmen seems so dear to me and brings back memories of my childhood. They told me that the pioneers have now paved it with cobblestones, with great skill and beauty."



Young stone-pavers laying the cobbles of the Alley of the Madmen.
In their honour, the street was named Pioneer Street.

we were children. Looking through the windows at the dark tombs of the dervishes,* we youngsters felt afraid, though our teachers would tell us that there was nothing to fear and that the dervishes were ignorant men. I trust that these buildings were not demolished and that those cypress trees were left untouched, preserved as reminders of the past rather than for any attachment to the religion we opposed. No doubt other trees have been planted there as well. I have discussed with the comrades of Gjirokastra the need to build new houses on all those hillsides for working people and for the working class. Yet they should ensure that the houses preserve, to some extent, the external form and style characteristic of Gjirokastra, so that the harmony of the dwellings spread across those "fingers" of the hand — the image by which one may visualise the city's layout — is not lost. At the same time, since we live under socialism, there should be greater space between the houses, more communal gardens, more flowers and more trees, so that there is freshness and room for the breezes that come from the Çullo Ravine, from Lunxhëri and from Zagori. These winds should bring comfort not only to the inhabitants of this neighbourhood but to all the people of Gjirokastra, a city exposed throughout the day to the sunlight which gives life and vitality, even though in summer it can scorch with its heat.

Now I recall Bajraktari Square in Meçite, near Hazmurat, where I used to play with Elmaz, Sado, Xhano i Përroit's son and many other companions. It was a small square, though to us it seemed vast. Above it rose walls supporting genuine terraces — the terraces of the house of Uncle Idriz Konjari, father of my friend Elmaz, as well as those of the Totaj and Çanaj families and others. Elmaz's house was beautiful. Seen from the square, it was truly impressive, with six or seven large windows arranged

* Sufi mystics.

in a row. I spent time there, ate there and even slept there alongside Elmaz. These windows projected beyond the main wall in bays which, when struck by the sun, cast shadows and accentuated the whiteness of both the façade and the wall beneath it. On the right-hand side, the house extended further with two or three additional windows. Beyond a small courtyard enclosed with wooden fencing and containing a well, one descended into Elmaz's garden. It was laid out in terraces, planted with fragrant roses, lilacs, lilies and trees whose greenery provided shade and freshness. During the hottest days we would lie beneath them,



"The tekke of Baba Mane, amid the cypress trees, where we used to go with the school on holidays."

and Elmaz and I would revise our lessons together. Beside this house stood that of the Karagjozat family, equally beautiful though different in design. Its upper-storey windows were not arranged in a single row. Instead, they were divided into sections, some projecting forward and others set back. Yet the windows remained large, and the winter rooms followed the same general pattern.

Here too is my aunt's house above the stream, a house dear to me. I always remember it and Uncle Nexhip, the old man, who loved us and whom we loved dearly in return. During the summer we ate our meals in the house's open gallery, where it

was cool. My aunt would prepare *skordhan*,* made from a few walnuts and some bread crushed in a mortar, together with a clove of garlic. She would then mix everything with water, add a little vinegar and thus make *skordhan*, the food of the poor. The house was small but pleasant. It had a large reception room, a hall and a winter room. Like the other houses, its handsome façade was built of stone walls. The windows of the main room, the hall and the staircase were always large. The central door was likewise quite substantial. In front of it stood a stable roofed with sheets of tin, so that when it rained the sound upon it resembled the beating of drums. Above my aunt's house stood the house of Qamadhi. It had high walls and two large windows on the upper floor, together with a projecting roof supported by beams arranged in rows like soldiers. From its large reception room, on the side facing my aunt's house, one could see the stream and the house of Xhano i Përroit. The old woman of that household was kind. She had a daughter, a friend of ours, who later married and emigrated to America with her husband.

I have never written about the house of Xhano i Përroit, nor shall I dwell on it at length. I shall simply say that this modest house had medium-sized windows and a well of cool water. It was clean and surrounded by wild trees, plum trees, *lofata*, grasses and brambles. The beauty of all these wild plants was most evident in autumn. I do not know why, but my spirit has always been drawn to the colour red.

Now, through the eye of memory, I ascend above Manalat to Mali i Gjerë, to the house of my former teacher, Elmaz Çani. A French teacher also lodged there, a man named Frédéric Marchand. He taught us French and was a talented painter, especially of portraits. Marchand had chosen that house, despite its distance from the lyceum, precisely because of the extraor-

* A garlic, walnut, and bread purée.

dinary beauty of the panorama unfolding before it. From there one could see the whole of Gjirokastra and the broad mountain. Moreover, being an artist, he greatly appreciated the narrow lanes leading to Elmaz Çani's house.

I also remember those narrow pathways, then strewn with stones fallen from roofs and walls. On either side rose walls built of stones arranged symmetrically one upon another. Nearby stood small houses roofed with stone slabs and fitted with smaller windows than those in the city below, for in that northern area the wind inevitably blew from every direction. Nevertheless, one still found various trees there, including fruit trees.

Following a narrow alley, one arrived at Elmaz Çani's house. It had a large double wooden gate, each leaf fitted with its own small knocker. These were called the gate knockers, and one had to strike them so that the household could hear, for the family lived far within the property. First one crossed a beautiful orchard before reaching the house itself. The gate was recessed, sheltered from the rain. In front of it stood two stone benches, and at the top, at each corner of the gateway, there was a carved stone. I no longer remember what was carved upon them, but, like all the gateways of Gjirokastra, the beauty of this one lay in its arch of large white stones. Between the white stones ran parallel rows of pink-coloured stones, which brought the upper arch into graceful relief.

Upon opening the gate, one entered Elmaz Çani's garden. It was a spacious place, entirely unlike the rocky caves and slopes of Mali i Gjerë. Elmaz Çani's family had devoted special care to it, for generations of their forebears had worked there. What immediately caught the eye were the greenery and the trees, which, as I have noted elsewhere, created luxuriant verdure in spring and summer before their leaves turned yellow and red in autumn.

At the far end of the garden stood a two-storey house, with a ground floor and an upper floor. If memory serves me correct-

ly, the entire upper floor consisted of a long open gallery, a kind of verandah with wooden railings, behind which were rooms with medium-sized windows rather than particularly large ones. Half of this gallery was roofed, so that rain could not fall there, and even when it did, measures had been taken to prevent water from entering the rooms. Elmaz's family had filled the gallery with flowerpots containing climbing plants, marjoram, red hollyhocks and many other flowers, the seeds of some of which had been brought by the French teachers. Alongside the house, extending its full length, grew various shade-giving trees that bore no fruit.

Further on, I believe upon a small rise, stood another house. If I am not mistaken, it was already in ruins, roofless. It may once have been a guesthouse where male visitors were received instead of being brought into the main house where the women resided. It was smaller, with a single storey, two or three windows and a large central door. I remember that it too was surrounded by trees and that the ground before it was paved with grey stone slabs. Yet the most beautiful feature there was the well. It was surrounded by carefully laid stonework. The mouth of the well was elegant, shaped like a truncated cone, broad at the base and slightly narrower at the top. It was built from about seven courses of large stones stacked one upon another, giving the impression of great rounded stones piled in succession. This well ordinarily served Elmaz's household, but it was also used by neighbouring families, for water in that area was precious. As is well known, Mali i Thatë — the "Dry Mountain" — owes its name to the scarcity of water. Regarding this well, the French teacher Marchand would say that it was magnificent. He sketched it repeatedly, two, three or even five times, together with the stone slabs surrounding it, which had been quarried and shaped by the stoneworkers of Dunavat and Manalat.

Beyond this house, upon a somewhat pale rocky outcrop,

stood another dwelling, rather elongated in form, with tall windows and a low roof supported not by projecting timber brackets but by stone corbels. Wildflowers had sprung from the crevices in its walls, together with hackberry trees and *lofata* growing all



In the past, the people of Gjirokastra drank water from wells. In the photograph: *"The well of Elmaz Çani's house, beautifully constructed, with several large stone rings and surrounded on all sides by stonework..."*

around, enhancing its beauty still further. Whenever we looked in that direction, we saw not only the house itself but also, beyond it, the mountains of Lunxhëri and the plain of the Drino. On the side of Mali i Gjerë, by contrast, nothing could be seen except the barren rocky escarpments and the mountain's strata of stone lying one upon another. It was from such layers, undoubtedly, that the stoneworkers of Dunavat and Manalat laboriously extracted, with hammers and crowbars, the slabs and flagstones that roofed the whole of Gjirokastra.

When we visited Elmaz Çani's house, we would sit upon the wall and gaze at Mali i Gjerë, its hills rising one after another like the flanks of great horses charging uphill. Between them ran the stream whose waters, in winter, carried stones away and deposited them far below on the gravel banks near Baba Ali's tekke. Today, however, that gravel plain no longer exists, for the area has been transformed into a new workers' district.

Below Elmaz Çani's house stood yet another dwelling, entirely different in form and construction. This was the house of Elmaz Boca. I remember it only vaguely, but I know that he was a friend and companion of Baba Çen and that he too had been a delegate at the raising of the Albanian flag in Vlora in 1912. The house was large and two-storeyed, enclosed, naturally, by a surrounding wall and entered through a gate without doors. Once inside, one climbed a stone staircase leading to the galleries, both the lower and upper ones. These galleries and the upper rooms were what we called *havadane* — that is, well ventilated and airy. I do not recall there being any trees around the house.

Perhaps I shall leave this account unfinished, for memories of Gjirokastra have no end. They are merely recollections from a distant period, and I have endeavoured to remain faithful to them.

II
YEARS OF MY CHILDHOOD

Why, then, from the heaps of childhood comes
this strange song, like a fragile snowflake?
.....
Perhaps this song passes in silence for other people,
it passes as the hands of a clock
pass, but it always stirs and entices me:
*"April violet in the midst of the snow."**

Dritëro Agolli

* Taken from the newspaper *Drita*, 26 June 1983.

DISTANT NOVEMBERS

We have come to heroic Vlora, which has inspired us since our distant youth through its courage and its historic events. These November days in Vlora bring back to my mind those far-off yet dearly cherished Novembers, from which I retain so many memories.

Many years have passed since the time when Gjirokastra was occupied by the Greek army of Venizelos.* I must have been

* Gjirokastra was occupied by the Greek army of Venizelos from 16 March 1913 until October 1916. As early as 26 December 1912, Hysen Hoxha, then Mayor of Gjirokastra, sent the following urgent telegram to Ismail Qemali in Vlora: "The enemy has arrived with considerable force and has once again occupied Saranda. The forces stationed in Delvina are few. We have now received official information that the *myfreze* (defensive detachment — editor's note), which was stationed in Kuç, has departed for Delvina by the shortest route. Therefore, in order to safeguard that frontier, we request that orders be given for the necessary forces to be sent. From the people of Gjirokastra and the surrounding district, all those capable of taking up arms are setting out this very evening for Delvina. We are in great need of Your Excellency's assistance. I await your reply at the telegraph office. In the name of the entire people, the Mayor —

eight or nine years old — I cannot determine it precisely — but our family home had not yet been burned.

On a certain day each year, particularly in November, men would come to our house as visitors. My grandmother would receive them at the foot of the staircase and lead them upstairs to the alcove of the large reception room, where my father awaited them. When they had all arrived, my father would say to my grandmother:

"Daughter-in-law,* besides the coffee, bring us some of those Turkish delights I brought yesterday, the ones wrapped in that coarse paper which I placed in the cupboard in the winter room."

"As you command, Mulla!" my grandmother would reply.

I would follow her as she went back and forth serving the guests, helping her whenever I could. Eventually I would sit near my father and listen to the men as they talked.

I should explain that our uncle, Hysen Hoxha, was called by all of us children both "Baba"** and "Baba Çen," whereas our own father, Halil Hoxha, was called by all of us children, until the day he died, "Uncle." This was undoubtedly because Hysen Hoxha was the elder brother and had become a father earlier. We, Halil's children, who came later, simply continued to call our uncle "father." Indeed, he raised and educated us during our childhood, because my father, together with my elder brother, went to the United States of America to work. I remained at home as the only boy among the girls, for Baba Çen had only daughters, while I, apart from the brother who had gone to America, had only sisters. "You are the pillar of this household," my father would say whenever he called me to his side, stroking

Hysen." (Teuta Hoxha, comp., *Ismail Qemali (Përmbledhje dokumentesh)* (Tiranë: 1982)).

* "Daughter-in-law," here, is a conventional kinship address.

** Father.

my head and giving me a pear which he would take from the pocket of his black *shallvare*.* Janaq Shkrapi, the greengrocer, had no doubt given it to him. My father never ate such things himself; he always brought them home for us children.

In those distant November days, my father and the men gathered in the alcove talked and talked, but I understood some things and not others. They mentioned many names and cursed the Greeks so fiercely that they left nothing unsaid against them.

"Don't speak so loudly, Hysen," the others would say. "The Greeks will hear us and send us into exile."

My father would become angry, and insults against the Greeks were always on the tip of his tongue.

"Damn them! Those scoundrels strut about with swords hanging from their belts and let them clatter on the cobblestones of the bazaar as though anyone were afraid of them!"

Whenever Baba Çen mentioned swords, my thoughts immediately flew to the chests standing on the gallery above the alcove, filled with the swords of my grandfathers and my father. I remember once, when my father was speaking of the Greeks' swords, I leapt up like a little rooster and said:

"Why don't we take out our swords too? They're right here in the chest. Shall I show them to you?"

The old men laughed. Uncle Hasan Xhiku placed his hand on my head and said:

"We shall take our swords out of the chests as well, don't you worry, boy."

Those men who gathered with my father during those November days spoke of freedom, of the Flag of Vlora, of Ismail Qemali, of Çepo and of many other things. Sometimes they would send me away, for they were evidently discussing matters I was not meant to hear. At other times I would hear my father

* Traditional loose-fitting trousers.

call out:

"Enver, tell your grandmother to bring us some tobacco and a tray of rolling papers!"

The conversations would go on for hours. On the wall of the alcove, beside the window, my father had hung a photograph in which many men dressed in black appeared. In the centre stood an old man with white hair and a white beard. It was Ismail Qemali.

"Behind him," my father would tell us, "there am I — see, the one with the white turban. We were all gathered at the assembly in Vlora when we raised the Flag, proclaimed Independence and formed the first Government of Vlora, with Ismail Qemali at its head. But what can one do? Those vile foreign scoundrels will not leave us in peace."

That photograph was among the dearest possessions of our old house, the one that was later burned. Sadly, when the house burned, the chest containing the swords was destroyed, and so was the photograph. Everything was lost in the fire except a wall clock. I later donated* that clock to the "Asim Zeneli" secondary school in Gjirokastra.

I searched for a copy of that photograph of the Vlora Assembly, which had once hung in our burned house, but without success. Decades passed, and then, on 28 November 1972, while visiting the Museum of Independence, I suddenly saw it in one of the rooms — enlarged, displayed before me, the very photograph so dear to my memory. I stood transfixed. I looked at it, and looked again, and continued looking, so long that the guide, who had already finished his explanations, became astonished that I remained standing before it.

"Do not be surprised," I said to him. "I have found a treasure that I thought was lost."

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* See p. 367 of this volume.

Beloved photograph of my youth! How many sweet and bitter memories you awaken in me! Above all, you brought back to me the life and patriotic struggle of Baba Çen, this simple man who died a simple and respected man. No one remembered what he had done except our Party, which, like all other patriots, recorded Baba Çen's contribution and honoured him with a decoration for his patriotic activity.

Naturally, as a child at the time, certain events made an impression on me, although it was difficult then to understand them fully. Now, with the passing of years, they reveal their true meaning in all their simplicity. To me they seemed merely family incidents, but for the adults they carried a different significance.

It must have been the night before 28 November — that is, 27 November. The country was under Greek occupation. There was a severe shortage of everything; bread was difficult to obtain, and even that my grandmother rationed out to us bit by



"Beloved photograph of my youth! How many sweet and bitter memories you awaken in me! You remind me, above all, of the life and patriotic struggle of Baba Çen..." The Assembly of Vlora, 1912. Above, in the second row, from left to right, the sixth figure is Hysen Hoxha.

bit. The Greeks had wanted to remove my father from his position as *belediye reisi* — mayor of the town — but they had not succeeded because the people, Muslims and Christians alike,

protested together.

That day, therefore, on 27 November, my father, who was sitting at the head of the divan with a white woollen blanket draped over his shoulders, called me over and said:

"Put on your shoes and go to Bido Tushja. Tell him Father says to give you a dozen candles. If he says he has none, smile and tell him: 'Father says you had better give them to me, otherwise tomorrow he will close your shop.'"

I put on my shoes and set off at a run. I liked going to Uncle Bido's shop, which stood near the mosque in the bazaar, right at the entrance to the vaulted passage, because there my eyes feasted on all the things it contained. There were all sorts of goods, including Turkish delights and sugared sweets. Uncle Bido would slip a sweet into my mouth while playfully pinching my cheek. I found him talking with another man.

"What do you want, boy?" Uncle Bido asked.

I delivered my father's message. He looked at the other man and then said to me:

"Tell Mulla Hysen that Bido Tushja cannot find candles in times like these. If he wants candles, let him go and ask the bishop, for he has gathered them all for the churches."

At that point I delivered my father's "threat," ending it with a laugh, for I did not quite know how one was supposed to say, "Father will close your shop," with a smile.

Uncle Bido was a good man and a close friend of my father. He stood up, pulled me by the ear towards his counter, which was covered with dusty ledgers, and, opening a drawer, asked:

"Do you see what this is?"

I was frightened. It was a pistol. Uncle Bido said:

"Tell your father that he cannot close Bido's shop, because I shall empty this revolver into Mulla Hysen's stomach."

At once I was seized by indignation. How could Uncle Bido want to kill my father, whom we loved so dearly?! I said to him:

"You cannot kill Baba Çen, because he will cut off your head with his sword." Bido Tushja and the other man burst out laughing, while I stood there glowering. Uncle Bido went into the storeroom and returned with two packets of candles. Tucking them under my arm, he said:

"Tell the Mulla that Bido is an old fox and knows exactly why he needs these candles. That is why I kept them aside for these days."

I was delighted. I took the candles and was about to leave when Uncle Bido stopped me.

"Wait." Rolling a piece of paper into a cone, he took three pieces of Turkish delight from a box, placed them inside and handed them to me. "One piece is for you, one for Sano and one for Bale. But you are to eat them tomorrow, not today."

"As you command," I replied, and hurried off.

As I walked home with the candles under my arm and the sweets in my hand, I thought:

"Uncle Bido really is a good man. But I do not understand why one has to be an 'old fox' to know why Father wants candles — to light the room at night when we eat, when he reads books, when Grandmother sews and Great-Grandmother tells us stories."

Such were the thoughts turning in my young mind as I made my way home to deliver the message. Yet things would prove otherwise. That evening I would understand half the reason, and on the following day and the day after I would grasp the full significance of buying those candles.

That same day, when darkness fell, my father called my grandmother, handed her the candles and said:

"Take these, daughter-in-law. Cut them in half with a knife and place them in the windows outside. Set them on saucers so that they do not make a mess."

"As you command, Mulla!" she replied, taking the candles.

"Wait a moment, daughter-in-law!" Great-Grandmother called out. Then she turned to my father:

"Hysen, leave these things alone. You will bring trouble upon us. They will send you into exile in the Morea."

"Do not be afraid, Jeko," he said to his mother. "Even if they summon me, I already have my answer ready in my pocket. We are not afraid of those scoundrels in the least, by your leave..." — and here he launched into one of his colourful expressions, which I shall not repeat. "We shall do our duty, and they may do theirs."

I followed my grandmother. As she cut the candles, placed them in the windows and lit them, I asked:

"Grandmother, why are we putting these candles in the windows?"

"Because tomorrow is our feast day, my son. It is Flag Day, the day when the flag was raised in Vlora, where the Mulla also went from Gjirokastra. But do not tell anyone, or they will destroy us."

"But why do you say they will destroy us, Grandmother, when it is our feast day?"

"Because the Greek is our enemy. He has occupied our country, and we who celebrate the Flag wish to live free."

Now I understood the matter of the candles more clearly. Uncle Bido, the "old fox," had been right. I now understood why he had told me that we were to eat the Turkish delights only the next day, on 28 November, Flag Day.

"And Uncle Bido," I thought to myself, "must be just like Baba Çen."

When we returned to my father's room, I went over to him and, without saying a word, simply looked at him and looked at him. With a strange feeling, I gazed at that man with his black beard and moustache, sitting cross-legged with a woollen blanket over his shoulders, reading a book by the dim light of the

idare, as we called the paraffin lamp in Gjirokastra. I kept looking at him, and he seemed a great man to me. From time to time I stroked his knees with my little hand. At last he said:

"Why are you staring at me as though you had never seen me before? Go to sleep, and tomorrow morning come to me and I shall give you a few grosh* to buy sweets, because we have a celebration. And do not pay attention to what the women are saying. The enemy cannot do anything to us!"

The next day, 28 November, our family waited anxiously to see what would happen. Only my father and we children seemed unconcerned. I ate my piece of Turkish delight before dawn, went into my father's room and shouted:

"Long live the Flag!"

My father embraced me, while my mother — my father's wife, who was suffering from tuberculosis — said:

"Do not shout like that outside, or you will bring trouble upon us."

Nothing happened to us that day, although people were saying that "Mulla Hysen's house was all lit up. Perhaps he has become engaged to a girl, or perhaps he has received a letter from Halil in America."

Great-Grandmother would say:

"Well, they are trying to explain away what that madman did last night."

The following day, when we sat down at the table to eat, my father said:

"Jeko, the Greek commander summoned me. He smiled at me, offered me a cigarette and asked:

"'Mr. Mayor, I have been told that the night before last you placed candles in your windows. Could you tell me for what reason?'

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* Small Ottoman coin and unit of currency.

"And I replied," my father continued, "'To light the way for the people.'

"The commander opened his eyes wide in astonishment and his hands began to tremble.

"'Mr. Commander,' I said, 'there is no reason for concern. I am the mayor, and it is my duty to light the roads for the people at night. But since you have deprived me of all the means to do so, I am content to light my own road.'

"'Then why do you not perform this trick every night?' the commander asked.

"'Because I have no candles,' I answered. 'Otherwise I would certainly do it — perhaps not every night, but at least from time to time.'

"The commander realised there was nothing he could do to me. He stood up, shook my hand and said:

"'Mr. Hysen Hoxha, it would be best not to aggravate relations between us.'

"'There, Jeko, is the cause of your fear,'" my father said. "'As for me, they may even kill me, but they cannot kill the whole people. I stand with the people and fight for them, and that is why they cannot touch me so easily.'"

"And your grandfather Nexhip's brother, Beqir,*" Great-Grandmother would tell me, "was just as bold. He took part in the opposition to the Ottoman Empire and even drafted telegrams protesting against the injustices of Europe, which sought to partition our homeland."

I remember another occasion, while the First World War was still continuing. After the Greek army had been driven out,

* Beqir Hoxha was a representative for Gjirokastra at the Albanian League of Prizren. In recognition of his patriotic merits, he was decorated by the Presidium of the People's Assembly.

the country was occupied by the Italian army, with its soldiers wearing feathered hats, its artillery, its mules and its military bands. Hunger was everywhere. My grandmother told us that people even mixed sawdust from the timber the Italians were cutting for their barracks into the flour. Baba Çen remained mayor of the town, always defiant towards the occupiers. Around him gathered increasing numbers of the poor, Muslims and Christians alike. The Christians, indeed, sought his protection even more, because they feared persecution. Hysen Hoxha defended them. Some wealthy landowners and merchants began drawing closer to the new occupiers and frequently quarrelled with Baba Çen, who spared them none of his sharp words. Among them was even his own brother-in-law, Xhevdet Selfo, whom he kept, as he used to say, "in the line of fire."

Using the funds of the religious endowment that the old man had taken under his control, together with municipal resources, he organised relief for the poor. He increased the number of municipal street sweepers in order to provide small wages for needy people. Staff in hand, he personally supervised the distribution of foodstuffs wrested from the Italian authorities, ensuring that they went to the poor. He even cut the salaries of the hodjas. They protested, but to no avail; the old man paid them no heed.

Gradually, week by week, an opposition clique was forming against Hysen Hoxha, determined, as people said, "to cut the ground from under his feet" as mayor. But to no avail. They did not dare act openly, for they were afraid of his rough and uncompromising nature. "With Mulla Hysen," the Karagjozats, who wanted to replace him, would say, "stand all the rogues, the sweepers, the butchers and the cobblers."

I remember an autumn day. Baba Çen, who had broken his leg in a lane while coming home at night, had just been discharged from the Italian military hospital, which stood where

the "Asim Zeneli" school is today. At that time it was known as the *mejtep*.*

One morning, after we had eaten *trahana*,** my father took me with him, saying:

"Come along, boy. We are going to visit Iljaz's house" — that is, Iljaz Hoxha's.

I was delighted. I was very fond of Uncle Iljaz. Even though he could be stern, he had whispered my name into my ear according to Albanian custom rather than in Arabic. I enjoyed visiting him because he would always give me a quince, or some walnuts or hazelnuts, whatever he happened to have. I was not surprised that my father took me, because he often brought me along when visiting Selim Bakiri, Hasan Sinoja and others.

When we entered Uncle Iljaz's house, I sensed that something unusual had happened, though I could not determine what. There were many people in the large room. Tugging at my father's jacket, I asked:

"Father, has someone in Uncle Iljaz's family died?"

"No, my son," the old man replied. "On the contrary, today we are celebrating Flag Day."

My face lit up. At the head of the room sat a priest with a white beard, dressed in a black cassock, wearing a golden cross set with coloured stones upon his chest. I was astonished that a priest should occupy the place of honour on the day of our great national celebration. Timidly, I kissed everyone's hand in turn and sat down near the door at the far end of the room. I watched in wonder, curious to see what would happen there on 28 November under Italian occupation.*** After coffee had been served and I had been given some Turkish delight, Uncle

* Ottoman-style elementary school.

** Fermented grain-and-yogurt soup.

*** After expelling the Greek forces, the Italian army occupied Gjirokastra in October 1916.

Iljaz rose, opened a cupboard in the room, took out a flag bearing the black eagle and raised it high, crying: "Long live free Albania!"

Everyone stood up and shouted in unison: "Long live free Albania!" Uncle Iljaz then called me over and said:

"Take hold of the flag by both corners, lift it high as I did and carry it round so that everyone may kiss it."

I did exactly that. Naturally, the first person I carried it to was Baba Çen, because to my childish mind he and the flag were one and the same. Everyone kissed it, including the priest. I was surprised that the priest kissed it as well. After the ceremony the old men resumed their conversation, while I went out into the garden and waited for my father. By the time they emerged it was late, and the men had evidently shared a few glasses of drink. On the way home I asked the old man:

"Father, who was that priest?"

"What, you do not know?" he replied. "That was Papapano, a passionate patriot. He wears the cassock and the clerical hat merely for appearance's sake. He believes in Christ no more than I believe in Muhammad. We have only one 'deity' — the homeland, Albania. Everything else is nonsense. That priest is the father of your distinguished teacher, the patriot Thoma Papapano."

"I like Thoma very much, Father," I said, "because he teaches me Albanian. But I do not like Mulla Kamani, because he wants to teach us Turkish."

"Pay no attention to the mullas," the old man replied. "They are flatterers who live off others. All they know is how to ask for alms and recite the tales of the Koran."

"But you read the Koran too, Father. I see you reading every night."

"I read the Koran? Nonsense! Those books I read are works of history and philosophy — indeed, books against the Koran!"

From that 28 November onwards I became friendly with Papapano Çuçi. He lived in Varosh, near the house of my maternal uncle, who also bore the nickname Çuçi. Whenever I met the priest in the street, I would stop and kiss his hand. He would pat me on the head and say: "Attend school regularly, my son. It will open your eyes."

I remember the later 28 Novembers, after the heroic War of Vlora, when the country had also been liberated from the Italians. By then I was older. We celebrated Flag Day openly, assembling with the school in front of the government building, where speeches were delivered. My grandmother had made me a red scarf with an eagle embroidered in the centre, which I slipped over my head and wore across my chest.

I particularly remember one such celebration when Mr. Xhafo Poshi entrusted me with carrying the flag. What indescribable joy! As we returned from the ceremony and descended through the bazaar with the flag upon my shoulder, I met Baba Çen, who said:

"Does that flag feel heavy on your shoulder?"

"No, Father," I replied.

"It is heavy, my son," the old man said, "because it bears the whole history of our people. Especially in times of danger, hold it firmly, raise it high and never allow it to fall to the ground."

My father was a learned man. He knew Turkish, Arabic and Persian well and studied the Greek philosophers. He was not a religious man. From my earliest childhood he taught us to regard Christians as brothers, and he himself set the example. Among his closest friends were Christians such as Thoma, Kristo Meksi, Uncle Polo, Andrea Konomi and many others. He viewed them all through the lens of the nation.

"Who has this one taken after, Jeko?" her brothers would ask. "He has become a complete infidel."

"Hysen has not become an infidel, nor has Halil," my great-grandmother would reply. "They are simply fond of people."

Yet, on the other hand, she would scold my father, saying:

"Hysen, my dear, be a little more selective with your friends. The others cannot stomach you."

"What concern is it of mine if some people cannot stomach me? Whoever wishes to like me should like me as I am," my father would answer.

He was a simple man, poorly dressed, yet his advice was sound. He had been among the foremost figures in the patriotic movement of the town and a comrade-in-arms of the National Renaissance figures. Baba Çen never boasted and never spoke of what he had done; it was others who told us these things. At school, Mr. Thoma, Mr. Xhafo and Mr. Rexho would speak of them.

"You see that mulla who buys yoghurt from Kapo Bolena by the tin measure?" our teacher would tell us. "He was at the assembly held in Çepo in 1911, where more than 2,000 men gathered with rifles in their hands. Mulla Hysen told the fighters: 'Keep your rifles in your hands and do not lay them down, for only by fighting shall we win our freedom. The people of Gjirokastra are on their feet.' Mulla Hysen terrified the prefect of Gjirokastra, who threatened him for attending the meeting in Çepo. 'Two thousand rifles, Mr. Mutasarrif,' he told him, 'stand ready to surround the town if you interfere with our affairs.'"

Baba Çen was both a patriot and a learned man. He was a member and later chairman of the National Renaissance committee in Gjirokastra. He maintained contacts with Bajo Topulli and with other participants in the Congress of Manastir.



The first Albanian-language school in Gjirokastra, to which the people gave the politically significant name *Liria* ("Freedom").

He was one of the pioneers in opening the first Albanian-language school, *Liria* ("Freedom"),* in Gjirokastra. He was also one of the founders of the *Drita* ("Light") patriotic society** and was elected its chairman. He travelled from village to village, rallying people in support of the Government of Vlora.

These distant memories of my youth were revived in me during the sixtieth anniversary of Independence, when we came to Vlora to celebrate that historic event. I felt profoundly happy as I stood before the photograph of the Assembly of Vlora, in which my father also appeared.

He had been in Vlora sixty years before me. At that time I was only four years old, yet his life and his teachings left a deep

* The *Liria* Albanian-language school opened in September 1908 and was closed on 16 March 1913.

** It was founded on 18 November 1908. Hysen Hoxha was elected chairman of this club in 1910 while simultaneously serving as mayor.

impression upon my consciousness. They nurtured me in a patriotic spirit, and I remain proud of Baba Çen — a simple man, courageous and patriotic.

Vlora, 28 November 1972

MY SCHOOLS

The first school I attended, as far as I can remember, was the *mejtep*, where we learned both the Albanian alphabet and the Turkish *elifbe*.* The *mejtep* stood beside the mosque in Palorto, whose hodja was an elderly man, thin, with delicate features, a few sparse teeth still remaining in his mouth and a handful of hairs on his chin like those of a young goat. He was known as Mulla Kaman and we, naturally among ourselves, called him "Mulla Kaman the Goat." Whenever we saw him emerging from the mosque, we would chant:

"Mulla Kaman the Goat,
Has come out of the goat shed."

After these two lines we would imitate a goat's bleating. With one hand we would grasp our chins, while inserting the thumb of the other hand beneath it, thus forming a make-believe beard; by twisting our hands we would make our voices

* Arabic-script alphabet used for Ottoman Turkish.

quaver like those of goats. Naturally, we hid from Mulla Kaman whenever we engaged in these mischievous antics. At times he pretended not to hear us, locking the mosque door with a large key. At other times he would shout, "*Habis-ollan!*"* We had no idea what this expression meant.

Mulla Kaman supposedly taught us the *elifbe* and made us memorise it by rote. Of the *elifbe*, I remember learning only the basics. Even now I can recall it, especially the first letters, but beyond that I remember nothing.

The Albanian alphabet, however, was another matter entirely. Our first teacher was a certain Vehip Hoxha, the son of Asaf Efendi, a judge and a highly educated man. Their family lived near our house and we were also distantly related. Where Mr. Vehip had learned Albanian, I do not know, though no doubt from the primers published in Istanbul and in secret. At that time Mr. Vehip was a lively young man, full of initiative and enterprise. He was passionately eager to teach us.

Later Baba Çen, who had been a friend, collaborator and fellow fighter of Bajo, Çerçiz and the participants of the Congress of Manastir, told me that one day he had summoned Vehip and said to him:

"So what are you doing, idling away your time and eating Asaf's bread for nothing? Why do you not gather the boys of the neighbourhood and teach them to read and write Albanian?"

Vehip had immediately replied:

"I am ready. But will you free up the hall of your house so that I can turn it into a school?"

The old man answered:

"I shall find you a place — in the mosque."

"Are you serious, Mulla Hysen?" Vehip asked. "Do you

* From Turkish: wicked, evil.

think Mulla Kaman Sejdua will hand over the mosque for such things? Must we end up fighting with him?"

"Do not worry about that," Baba Çen had replied. "If anyone has to quarrel with him, I shall do it myself. You simply prepare yourself, make a list of the boys and tell their fathers to buy each of them a small slate and a slate pencil."

A few days later everything was ready. Mulla Kaman vacated the mosque on condition that we sweep it ourselves, remove our shoes in the mosque vestibule and also allow him to teach us the *elifbe*. Mulla Kaman the Goat had secured a concession for the *elifbe*! Naturally, he removed the mosque carpets, fearing that we would damage them, and left the floor bare, so that we suffered from the cold. Baba Çen and Vehip arranged reed mats for us, while our families each provided us with a small cushion to place in front of us instead of a desk, upon which we rested our slates. Thus our lessons began. Vehip had even prepared a large slate and placed it precisely where Mulla Kaman usually stood to pray.

Under these conditions we commenced our studies with great enthusiasm. With Vehip we learned the Albanian alphabet well, but after a time we left the mosque. What joy for us! We were to attend the "Drita" ("Light") school!* There was no longer any Mulla Kaman there, nor any blows from a cane across the hands and feet. I myself had not escaped that punishment

* The "Drita" school opened on 10 February 1917. On the occasion of its eighty-fifth anniversary, on 10 February 1982, Comrade Enver Hoxha sent a letter to the Directorate of Museums of Gjirokastra, in which he wrote, among other things: "As a son and former pupil of that city, today I remember with profound respect the founders, the talented, patriotic and courageous teachers, the diligent pupils of the 'Drita' Albanian central school and of the other schools which, alongside teaching and the dissemination of knowledge, under the difficult conditions of Italian occupation, worked tirelessly and courageously to advance the patriotic and democratic movements of our people."

— not because I failed to learn, but because one day I committed a prank. The mosque, besides the hall below, had a gallery above. While some of us were learning Albanian downstairs, Mulla Kaman would teach others verses of the Koran in Arabic in the gallery above. One day we downstairs finished our lesson earlier and went out. Looking up, I saw the tail of the hodja's robe hanging over the gallery railing. I tugged at it from below and then hung onto it. The hodja shouted: "*Habis-ollan!* You have torn my robe! Who are you? If I catch you, I shall kill you!" But whom was he to catch? I fled as fast as my legs would carry me. He discovered who I was and the following day, although I sat there as meek as a hen, as quiet and well-behaved as any boy



"What great joy it was for us — we were going to attend the 'Drita' school!"

could be, I could not escape the *fellaka* — the traditional beating on the soles of the feet.

I remember one day when Mr. Vehip, after finishing our

lesson, told us: "Tomorrow morning all of you must come to school wearing short trousers. Tell your families to cut them for you. If they do not, I shall cut them myself with scissors." And he pulled a pair of scissors from his pocket. At midday, when I returned home, I said to my grandmother:

"Cut the legs of my trousers above the knee."

She opened her eyes wide, thinking I had gone mad.

"Are you serious?" she said. "What nonsense is this? Who has been teaching you such things?"

"Mr. Vehip told us to," I replied.

My grandmother went to Baba Çen's room, taking me by the hand, and said:

"Listen, Mulla, to what Enver is saying. Asaf's son Vehip has told them that their trousers must be shortened."

The Mulla became angry and rose to his feet shouting:

"That rascal! I shall deal with him!"

Since our houses stood very close together, he leaned out of the window and called to Vehip at the top of his voice, telling him to come over. Vehip came.

"My boy," the old man said to him, "I thought you were sensible. Your father is a good man. Have you lost your wits? What are you trying to do to these boys?"

"I want to carry out a reform, Mulla Hysen," Vehip replied.

"Do you intend to leave their backsides exposed as well?! Who taught you these reforms?" the old man demanded.

"You did," Vehip answered, "when you tell us about the histories you read." (Baba Çen had a passion for history and in that respect I resemble him.) Vehip boasted: "I am a reformer like Peter the Great. Since I cannot cut off the beards of the hodjas, I have decided to cut the trousers of the schoolboys, just as they do everywhere in Europe. What shame is there in that?"

The old man's beard trembled with indignation and he said firmly:

"Enough of this nonsense! Listen to me! If you cut the legs off my son's trousers, I shall cut off your head!"

And so I never wore short trousers. Nevertheless, Vehip did not abandon his idea and succeeded in persuading some parents, though not Baba Çen, despite the fact that in other matters he was liberal and democratic.

Baba Çen never went to the mosque, not even when he grew old, ceased to be mayor and worked for the *vakëf** foundation. He never spoke to us about religion at home. My own father, whom we called Uncle or Uncle Halil, was somewhat different. He occasionally went to the tekke in the bazaar, though more often in the afternoons for conversation. The women of the household observed Ramadan and the old man did not prevent them. During Ramadan he ate separately with us children. I would ask him:

"Baba Çen, why do you not fast as well?"

He would reply:

"Throw all that into the ditch and forget such nonsense. Do not believe what the hodjas tell you. Listen instead to what I tell you."

Thus, from childhood onwards, Baba Çen taught me not to believe. Yet when Ramadan came, I greatly enjoyed climbing the minaret in the evenings. When Mulla Kaman ascended to light the lamps and recite the call to prayer, he would take one of us boys along, and we would plead with him: "Mulla Kaman, take me! Take me!" As we climbed the steps of the minaret, which creaked and swayed one after another, the hodja walked ahead while we followed carrying the bottle of oil. When we reached the top, near the balcony, he would turn to us and say: "Be careful not to lean too far out and do not look towards Qorri of Ceka." This was a middle-aged man who wore baggy trou-

* Islamic charitable endowment.

sers, a waistcoat and a cloak. He had only one eye, which was why everyone called him "Qorri" — "the Blind Man." He was a shepherd and a brave one; people were wary of him. He believed in nothing and disliked the hodjas as well. His house stood directly beneath the minaret and whenever we climbed up to light the lamps, Qorri would shout from below:

"You've climbed up there, beard-goat! Fall from there and smash your head!"

"And may your other eye go blind too, infidel, scoundrel! May you descend to the lowest depths of hell!"

And so the insults flew back and forth, from below to above and from above to below.

The hodja poured the oil into the lamps himself, with great thrift, while we handed them to him. He stood at the edge and we remained behind him. Qorri of Ceka below wished to continue the exchange and would signal to me to pass on his messages.

"Hodja Efendi," I would say, "Qorri of Ceka is calling for you."

"I told you not to look at that devil," he would answer.

Then Qorri would shout again and once more I would tell him:

"Hodja Efendi, Qorri of Ceka is insulting you." And so it continued until we climbed back down. The people below were cursing "God" above.

From the period of the Greek occupation under Venizelos, Zografos and the others, I do not remember whether Greek schools were opened, for I was still very young. I recall only vaguely, as if in a dream, Greek officers with swords passing along our street. I also remember poor Christians from Varosh passing beneath our windows — masons, vegetable sellers, butchers and street sweepers — who were friends of the old man and whom he protected from the aghas of Gjirokastra.

They would call out:

"Mulla Hysen, do not be afraid of the Greeks, for you have us."

The old man would come to the window and reply:

"Thank you. Go about your work; I am not afraid."

One day, when he came to the window, I followed him and tugged at his robe, saying: "Father, do not go out. Grandmother said the Greeks will kill you."

When the Greeks left Gjirokastra and we came under Italian occupation, however, my memories become clearer. I associate that period with several incidents that have remained vividly in my mind. In Gjirokastra, as throughout our country, there was great hunger. Like everyone else, our family was hungry. One day Baba Çen, who was mayor — or *belediye reis*, as the position was called — went with a group of townspeople to the Italian command and requested that at least a few sacks of flour be provided each day for the schoolchildren, so that every morning, before entering class, each of us could receive a piece of bread. At that time malaria was widespread, and he also asked the Italians to provide every child with two quinine tablets a day together with the bread. Thus I remember that before entering the classroom the school caretaker, old Uncle Vehip — who had no connection whatsoever with Vehip Hoxha, for his surname was Shameti — would prepare long, thin slices of bread, stacking them one upon another. We would then file past in turn, each receiving a slice of bread and two quinine tablets.

When hunger became severe and tormented us, we would sling our schoolbags over our shoulders and, instead of going home, make our way to where the Italian soldiers kept their mules. We would call out: *"Poko çiçibuni, poko çiçibuni!"**

* Albanian phonetic rendering of the Italian *poco ceci buoni* ("a few good chickpeas").

Sometimes they would give us a handful of worm-eaten chickpeas and stale dried beans intended for the mules. To us they were a "delicious" food, for the chickpeas were sweet.

Another memory from the occupation concerns school itself. The Italians began introducing their language into the curriculum. I remember that the man who taught us younger pupils was an officer whom we called "*Signor Genco*." One day, evidently because I had not learned my lesson, Signor Genco gave me a failing mark and pulled my ears so hard that I burst into tears — partly from the pain and partly from fear that I would be scolded at home for the poor mark. Fortunately, I escaped further trouble, because Baba Çen became furious with Signor Genco. He went to the school and quarrelled with him for having twisted my ears.

Another memory. One day Baba Çen slipped and broke his leg. Some men carried him to the military hospital of the Italian army, located in the building we called the *mejtep*, which later became the lyceum and is now the "Asim Zeneli" secondary school. There they put his leg in plaster and he remained in hospital for quite some time. I remember that his bed stood beside a window overlooking the road by the bakery. Men passing below would call up to him:

"Uncle Hysen, how are you?"

"Fine," the old man would answer. "What news is there?" And then a conversation would begin in the street. From that window he even issued instructions, since he was still mayor. The window also became the source of our "rations." Knowing that we had little bread at home and were hungry, Baba Çen would save his hospital ration instead of eating it. Every evening Sano, Bala and I would go there and shout from the street: "Baba Çen! Baba Çen!" He would open the window and throw down pieces of bread or a dry ship's biscuit that he had saved for us. We would snatch the bread or biscuit, run home as fast

as we could and divide it among ourselves. Sometimes we even quarrelled over who should receive the larger share, a privilege that I naturally claimed because I was the boy and the eldest of the three.

I attended school regularly and never missed a day. In winter my grandmother prepared *trahana* soup for me with an onion and poured over it some brine from the cheese barrel. Tiny fragments of cheese floated in the brine, making the *trahana* particularly tasty. At other times she would place in my hand a piece of maize bread and a little cheese, which I would eat on the way to school. When the years of hardship and famine arrived, whenever my grandmother gave me that small piece of bread she would say: "Eat it quickly or hide it. It is a sin, for there are others who have none at all."

I always prepared my lessons conscientiously and received good marks. From time to time Baba Çen would bring me a pencil painted yellow or red at the top. I was delighted whenever he gave me one and would immediately set about sharpening it eagerly with the bread knife. The real disaster came when the point broke, for then the pencil became shorter. In those days we did our homework by the window or lying on our stomachs on the floor or on a divan. In that position we wrote and read. At first my grandmother stitched our exercise books together with needle and thread, but later proper school notebooks began to appear in the shops.

We treasured our books and took great care of them. I remember that the primers were printed in the Latin alphabet, though many of the letters at that time differed from those used today. Reading books were scarce and, although I did not know where they were printed, we struggled to obtain them. The books of Naim Frashëri's poetry, which I loved dearly, Çajupi's *Baba Tomorri* and several others were initially procured for me by Baba Çen, though I never knew from where. I remember

that some had been printed in Sofia or Bucharest; on the final pages of certain volumes appeared the word "Istanbul," while others bore the imprint "'Mbrodhësia' Printing House," and so forth. Later, several books printed in America by the "Vatra" Society reached us. These were readers with light brown covers. Most were translations by Fan Noli, but there also arrived a volume of poems by Ramiz Harxhi,* who lamented with heartfelt sorrow his distant homeland, freedom, the flag and home itself. I developed a particular respect and affection for him because he wrote with simplicity and in the dialect of Gjirokastra. My admiration grew even stronger because of the words of the old man, whom I would ask about Ramiz Harxhi whenever he inquired what I was reading. The old man would say: "Ramiz is an honest man, a democrat. He stood with Hysen, with Bajo, with Çerçiz, with Hasan and the others."

I remember all these things vividly. Whenever I read books with patriotic themes, I became deeply moved. Later we received other works by Sami Frashëri, among them especially *Albania: What It Has Been, What It Is and What Will Become of It*. I also owned a copy of *Erveheja*,** which I remember learning by heart, *hezber*,*** as we used to say. I loved books passionately and read them with tremendous eagerness. Every book I could get hold of I devoured as quickly as possible.

At school I excelled in language and composition, subjects I particularly enjoyed. Yet I did not fall behind in the others either. My father would ask me to calculate the cost of our morning expenses. This was one of the ways in which he encouraged me to learn while also keeping an eye on what I was doing at school.

* Ramiz Harxhi, *Ndjenjat e zemrës — vjersha* [*Feelings of the Heart — Poetry*] (Boston: Shtypshkronja "Dielli," March 1917).

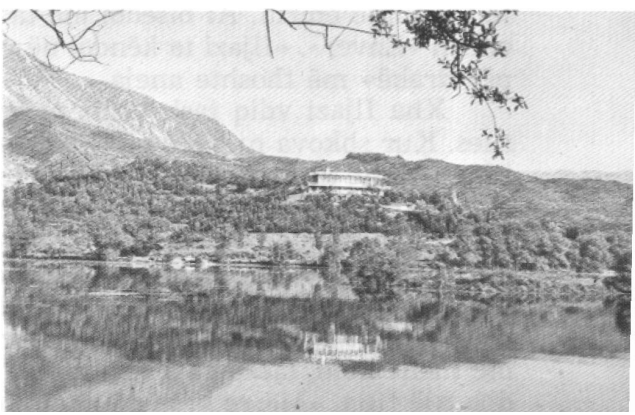
** Written by Muhamet Çami.

*** From memory.

Once we came across a reader containing a beautiful poem written by a certain Shefqet Bajo from Gjirokastra. I had learned it by heart. I still remember it today, for I liked it so much:

"You poor Adriatic,
Why do you not raise waves this time,
Waves, breakers and a storm,
For they have seized Vlora from you,
Vlora and Karaburun,
Vlora and Karaburun
Are my homelands,
Italy cannot hold them from us."

Patriotic feeling burned intensely among the people of Gjirokastra. I recall, as if in a dream, crowds of men wearing cloaks climbing the streets of the bazaar, singing and shouting as they made their way towards the castle, beneath which, at Pasha Kauri, stood the Greek consulate. This demonstration must have taken place during the Greek occupation. Later, and this I remember more clearly because I was older, a great gathering of men was held in the castle and the flag was raised. We schoolboys attended in formation. It was a memorable day for us, especially for me, because my grandmother spent three days making



"We children carried flags in our hands and sang patriotic songs. A rally was held on the hillside, and the volunteers set off towards Viroi..." View of present-day Viroi.

me a flag. It consisted of two long pieces of red and black satin sewn together, with an eagle embroidered in the middle. My grandmother embroidered shirts and waistcoats beautifully. On that festive day we tied the flag across my chest like a sash, as we would call it today. Naturally, I was proud of it and my teacher placed me in the front row.

I remember an even more significant event from a somewhat later period, when I was a little older. The volunteers of Gjirokastra were setting off to join the War of Vlora against Italy. Thousands of men, boys and a few elderly women gathered in crowds. Men carrying rifles, cartridge belts at their waists, cloaks and blankets over their shoulders, wearing white caps or black fezzes, shoes or traditional sandals and a bag slung across the shoulder, departed from the bazaar. They descended past the church of Varosh and climbed the slope near the tekke of Baba Mane, as we called it at the time. We boys carried flags in our hands and sang patriotic songs. A rally was held on the hillside, after which came embraces and farewells. Then the volunteers set off down the opposite side of the slope towards Viroi. There were several hundred of them, forming a long human line. From the hillside we, together with the large crowd, shouted after them, waving our fezzes and handkerchiefs. For me and my companions the scene was profoundly impressive, and from that moment we began to understand much better the meaning of the poem I quoted above.

When the War of Vlora ended, the fighters returned. Some of them came to our house and spoke with the elders while we children listened attentively. The only things I remember from their stories were remarks such as: "The cannons and machine guns thundered from the fortress" (this must have been the fortress of Kanina), "and whenever they began firing, we would say, 'Get down, the fortress has spotted you!' And when they turned the lights on us in the trenches, it became as bright as

day." (These must have been searchlights.)

The teachers of my childhood were Thoma Papapano, Iljaz Hoxha, Xhafo Poshi, Rexho Muçi, Hysni Babameto, Arshi Beu, Sadik Çelo and others. We loved our teachers dearly and respected them just as much. Some we addressed as "Mr. Teacher," "Mr. Thoma," "Uncle Iljaz" or "Uncle Rexho."

Mr. Thoma, who taught us Albanian so beautifully, was a cheerful and kind man, upright in bearing, with dark eyebrows. We used to sing a song about him:

"Thoma, a man of noble mind,
Took the flag into his hand..."

Uncle Iljaz, by contrast, was strict. He would pull our ears if we made noise in class or quarrelled in the corridors outside the classrooms. It was Uncle Iljaz who had given me my name when I was born. As my grandmother told me, the elders had summoned him and asked him to choose a name for me. He discussed the matter with them and together they selected the name "Enver." "Iljaz whispered it into your ear," my grandmother would tell me, "and then we kept him for lunch."

Uncle Iljaz died only recently. He spent his entire life as a teacher. On one occasion, before his death, I visited him at his home in Gjirokastra and saw that he had grown old. We talked at length. He greatly admired the Party. "Ah, Enver," he said to me, "what wonders this Party has achieved, how it has transformed the face of Albania. The country is now full of schools and educated people. I am delighted whenever I meet my former pupils who today lead the country." As he spoke these words, the old teacher rose, opened a cupboard and handed me a quince. "Put this in your pocket. I used to give you one just like this when you were little." We went out into the street together. I supported him by the arm as we climbed the lane. Children followed behind us just as we had once followed our own teachers in childhood.

"Let us go once more to Xhepi Square, Uncle Iljaz," I said. "I miss so much those places where I used to play as a child."

"Let us go, Enver," he replied. "I too have memories there. I played in that square before you did, together with Halil and Hysen."

There we were photographed together, a photograph that I still keep in my album of memories. I sent an enlarged coloured copy to my old teacher, Uncle Iljaz.

Only a few months after that meeting I received a telegram from Gjirokastra informing me of his death, news that saddened me deeply,* for Uncle Iljaz had helped shape my upbringing from childhood onwards. I remain profoundly grateful to him, to Thoma, to Xhafo and to all my old teachers. How much they suffered in life in order to educate us, the pioneers of our newly established schools! Despite the hardships they endured, they were inspired and passionate about their lofty mission and carried it out honourably. Some of them are still alive today, happy and respected pensioners under our socialist system. Others died after Liberation, while some passed away earlier, during the reign of Zogu.

I already knew the story of Mr. Rexho Muçi because it had been told to me, but when I met him later in Gjirokastra, I took him by the arm and said:

"Uncle Rexho, tell me again how you dealt with Sami Kokalari, the mayor of Gjirokastra."

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* On this occasion, on 25 March 1960, Comrade Enver Hoxha sent a telegram of condolence to the wife of his former teacher, in which he wrote: "It was with great sorrow that I learned of the death of your husband and of my dear teacher and friend, Uncle Iljaz. Embracing you as a mother, I offer my condolences both personally and on behalf of Gjulo. May you live long together with all your children. Dear Uncle Iljaz will remain unforgettable to us, his relatives, and to the people of Gjirokastra, whom he served throughout his life in a great cause."

"Leave that old story alone, Comrade Enver," Uncle Rexho replied, though he began telling it nonetheless.

Before continuing, I should explain that Sami Kokalari was a huge, tall man who held his head high even while walking. People called him "Kane Petrili." Sami was the steward of the Libohova beys and the trusted man of Mufit Bey Libohova, who had appointed him mayor after the death of Bajo Topulli, who had been elected to the position. Sami Kokalari was as arrogant as he was foolish. He loved praise. The people did not like him, but in Zogu's regime no one cared what the people thought. Now to Rexho Muçi's story.

"As a teacher," Rexho began, "I received my salary from the municipality. But, as you know, Zogu's government was bankrupt. Zogu and his ministers, men like Fejzi Bey, stole with both hands, while we teachers, like everyone else, scarcely had bread to eat. For seven or eight months at a stretch our wages were not paid, while our children demanded food. Whenever I met Sami Kokalari, I would ask him to pay the salary owed to me. But the mayor would always say, 'We have no money, Mr. Rexho. When we do have some, then we shall pay you.'

"'Mr. Sami,' I would reply, 'your own salary is substantial and yet you receive it regularly every month. Why is there money for Your Honour but none for me?'

"'Are we the same?' Sami would answer. 'Shall we become as equal as a goat's legs? Off with you, Rexho. Stop appearing before my eyes. You have worn me out and one day I shall dismiss you.'"

"I remained constantly at the municipality's door," Rexho continued. "Mr. Sami became so irritated by me that he ordered the gendarme guarding the building not to let me enter whenever I came. One day, frustrated, I went to drink a glass of raki at Murat Toto's shop. 'What is wrong, Rexho?' asked Nexhmo Hoxha. 'Why are you so upset?' I told Nexhmo everything. He

said to me: 'You will never get your wages unless you do exactly as I tell you.'

"'What should I do, Nexhmo?'

"'Listen carefully,' he said. 'Go to the government café, where Sami Karagjozi and his circle gather. They hate Sami Kokalari like cats hate mice because they want to take his place as mayor. When there are plenty of people there, begin loudly praising Sami Kokalari. Argue with Sami Karagjozi and defend Sami Kokalari. If you do not get your wages this time, come back here and I shall pay them myself.' And so," Rexho continued, "I followed Nexhmo's advice. I went there, quarrelled with Sami Karagjozi and praised Sami Kokalari. The next day, knowing that news of my defence of him would have reached the mayor and pleased him greatly, I stationed myself early in the morning at the Neck of the Bazaar in a conspicuous spot, so that when the mayor passed by he would be sure to see me.

"'Kane Petrili' did not fail to appear, walking with his head held high and an umbrella in his hand. He glanced at me from the corner of his eye and said: 'Mr. Rexho, step over there into the office for a moment, I have some business with you.'

"'As you wish,' I replied.

"I went, but the gendarme would not let me pass because he was still obeying the old order. At last I entered the mayor's office. He offered me a cigarette and said:

"'You, Rexho, are an honest and respectable man. That is why I have called you here, to pay your overdue wages, since you have a family to support.' Then he rang the bell. The treasurer, Qemal Kokalari, arrived, and Sami instructed him: 'Pay Rexho his wages.'

"Qemal's eyes widened. 'All of them, Mr. Mayor?'

"'All of them,' Sami replied.

"When I went to Qemal's office to collect the money, he asked me in astonishment:

"'Tell me, Rexho, how did you manage this?'

"After putting the money in my pocket, I whispered to Qemal:

"'Go and ask Nexhmo Hoxha. But do not tell anyone, or you will ruin me when it comes to future wages.'"

This was Rexho's story. He then continued:

"You know the rascals from the Skëndulaj family, Mulla Nustret Hoxha the joker, Tahir and the others. One day they decided to play a trick on Sami. They watched for him to come out of his house, which was nearby, and placed a wallet in the middle of the road. The wallet was filled with dried excrement. Then they hid behind the lattice of a window to see what Sami would do. He came along, spotted the wallet and looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then he quickly bent down, snatched it up and slipped it into his pocket, continuing towards his office with his head held as high as ever. This time, however, he was delighted, believing he had found a treasure in the street and unable to wait until he reached his office to open the wallet."

This was another of the salty tales Rexho told me about the mayor, expressing in this way his contempt for the Zogites.

The school buildings in which I studied in Gjirokastra were located in various places. One in Palorto stood near the old *mejtep*, which later became the city's French lyceum. It was an old, single-storey building with a covered porch below, where we gathered whenever it rained. The building, which still exists, faces the road. Its windows had twisted iron bars, and the rooms were small and cold in winter. Yet to us the school seemed the most beautiful place imaginable. We loved every corner of it, even the little cave by the roadside at the foot of the school wall. During breaks we scattered through the surrounding streets and, since there were no lavatories, relieved ourselves beside the walls of the gardens belonging to the Dalipi or Kokalari fami-

lies. For more serious necessities we went a little farther uphill and used the ruins of Rustem Bey's property, the chief street sweeper of the municipality and a former Ottoman major who had fallen from favour.

Another school building was what we called the "Babathana House." It was a large, old, two-storey house, a typical example of Gjirokastra architecture. I believe we moved there when we began attending what was then called the "city school." Its rooms were large and so were its windows. Around it lay gardens full of plum trees, which naturally never retained a single fruit on their branches. We children would not leave them alone long enough either to ripen or even to grow. This school stood above the Palorto mosque. In the garden below the house, which was larger and where we played during breaks, stood the home of old Uncle Saliko. One day our games came to an abrupt halt because of the sad news and the cries that spread through the neighbourhood: Uncle Saliko's wife had died, and the poor man was weeping and wailing.

One of the sons of the Babathana family was called Zamo. He struggled with his studies and spoke through his nose. He was in my class and always sat at the back, together with a boy from the Xheneti family, hoping to avoid being called upon by the teacher. Eventually Zamo disappeared from school altogether. His father sent him out to herd cattle. I remember that at the top of the school porch, above the washbasin, there was a small room with stone benches running around it. The benches had holes in them where hens used to lay their eggs. Whenever the bell rang, we rushed to see who could sit there first. The school caretaker, old Uncle Vehip, would ask us: "Have you laid any eggs?" One day, instead of finding an egg, Uncle Vehip discovered something else there, something rather unpleasant-smelling. It turned out that foolish Zamo was responsible. After that, the holes were blocked with stones

and planks, and Zamo exchanged the profession of pupil for that of cowherd.

Another school building was what we called the Club. It stood on a hill in the very centre of the bazaar, behind the old municipal building and above Varosh. From there one could see the whole of Palorto, Kuculla and the Teqe Slope spread out like the palm of one's hand. The view was magnificent! The courtyard in the middle, paved in places with stone slabs and grass growing between them, was bordered on the steep side above Varosh by a wooden railing. There we spent our breaks, summer and winter alike. The Club contained perhaps four or five rooms, no more, for there were not many pupils at that time. We called it the Club because before becoming a school, when the first Albanian schools and clubs were established during the National Renaissance and the period of the Congress of Manastir, it had served as the club of the national activists. Baba Çen himself told me that he had been elected its chairman. There Thoma Papapano taught Albanian literacy to the men and read aloud the first books written in the mother tongue. For us this place was doubly sacred, because it had been both a patriotic club and a school. We knew this even then, and we were proud to study there.

Sometimes the windowpanes there were broken by the wind or by stones thrown during our games. Part of the Club was boarded with planks, through whose gaps the wind whistled incessantly, for the building stood on a slope where strong winds blew constantly.

One winter day one of our classmates stood up and asked the teacher:

"Sir, is it true that ghosts exist and that if you go at night and drive a knife into the tomb of Baba Hasan, you will die?"

The teacher replied:

"Let the aghas of Gjirokastra have their joke and place a few gold napoleons on Baba Hasan's grave. I shall go and collect the

money myself and, although it is not exactly a proper thing to do, I shall also drive a knife into the coffin within the shrine. You will then see that nothing happens to me. With the money I collect I shall do something useful: I shall put glass in the windows, because this wind is freezing us to death, and I shall buy a stove for the classroom because we are shivering with cold. No one pays any attention to us, neither the government nor, for that matter, the aghas of Gjirokastra."

Under Zogu's regime, the question of secondary education in Gjirokastra was a serious grievance. Zogu and his government were opposed to the establishment of a secondary school there. My class was the second cohort to complete primary school. The first included Aqif Selfo, Selami Xhaxhiu and others. It was then that public protests began, demanding a *qytetëse* school.* Why it was called a *qytetëse*, I do not know exactly, but the fact remains that Aqif Selfo and his companions went on to continue their secondary education in Korça and Tirana, some with scholarships and some without. The protests of the people of Gjirokastra, together with those of the teachers and pupils, compelled Zogu and his Minister of Education to establish the *qytetëse* school there.

Thus, when the pupils of my class completed primary school, they entered the *qytetëse*. Public opinion in Gjirokastra was somewhat appeased, while we pupils were overjoyed. It seemed to us that we had gained everything. We applied ourselves to our studies with even greater diligence. Our patriotic teachers urged us to excel, so that neither Zogu nor his associates would have any excuse to claim that the people of Gjirokastra were unwilling to study and therefore did not deserve schools.

Yet what would become of us once we completed the *qytetëse*? Our desire to continue our education was immense. To be

* In this context, a lower secondary school.

left without schooling, we thought, would be a kind of self-destruction. For this reason the struggle of the people of Gjirokastra against the government in Tirana continued. Delegation after delegation travelled to the capital, insistently demanding the establishment in Gjirokastra of a lyceum comparable to that of Korça. After much struggle and perseverance, and in the face of the determination shown by the people of southern Albania, Zogu and his government were compelled to open a secondary school.

It was decided that a French lyceum would be established, beginning with the eighth year, which constituted the first class of the lyceum, and that the *qytetëse* would be incorporated into it. Consequently, those of us completing the *qytetëse* that year would enter the sixth class of the lyceum. The joy we felt at that moment was immense. We sang and cheered when the happy news was announced. The entire city rejoiced with us.

I completed the *qytetëse* with very good marks. Summer arrived, followed by the holidays, and we eagerly awaited the arrival of the French lyceum's headmaster and professors. Mr. Hysni Babameto was appointed deputy headmaster. Every day we would stop him in the street and ask:

"Mr. Hysni, when is the headmaster coming? When will the professors arrive?"

"They will come," he would reply. "Do not worry." But we worried all the same. We counted the days impatiently.

At last the long-awaited autumn day arrived. The lyceum opened its doors in Gjirokastra for the first time. I was unable, however, to enjoy directly the excitement of its opening week, for I fell ill — I do not remember from what — and my family would not allow me to leave the house. One can imagine my disappointment!

My first day at the new school was extraordinarily joyful. Entirely new subjects awaited us, things we had never before

encountered. I would meet both my old classmates and the new teachers, and I would finally see the French professors. For that reason I set off for school before dawn had fully broken.

The lyceum initially held its classes in a former primary school in Varosh, a fairly large building with spacious windows and a stone-paved courtyard. Behind it ran the stream, which in winter roared noisily as it carried rocks down from Kuculla, while in summer it was usually dry.* Below our school, overlooking the courtyard, stood another building — the girls' primary school — whose headmistress was the veteran teacher Urani Rumbo. She walked with a limp, yet she was deeply loved and respected by both the townspeople and all her pupils.

The Gjirokastra Lyceum was to have pupils only up to the third class. Beyond that, Zogu did not permit us to continue. To understand the lyceum system more clearly, it should be noted that the classes were numbered in descending order, beginning with the eighth and ending with the first. Thus, after passing the examinations of the first class — that is, the final year (*baccalauréat*, *première partie*) — one entered, according to one's preference, either the philosophy or the mathematics section. At the end of that year one had to sit another examination (*baccalauréat*, *deuxième partie*). If this too was passed, one received the final lyceum diploma. If, however, one failed the *première partie* examination, one could not enter the philosophy or mathematics class and therefore could not obtain the lyceum diploma. In this way the lyceum comprised nine classes in total.

I completed all of them regularly, without ever repeating a year, as I shall explain later. Owing to the various disruptions and irregularities affecting the primary and civic schools, and to the somewhat inconsistent calculations that were made, our

* Today this stream is no longer visible. It has been channelled underground and an asphalt road now passes above it.

education throughout the entire sequence — primary school, civic school and lyceum — was probably extended by one or two years. Thus, having completed the *qytetëse* (whether it lasted two or three years I no longer recall, just as I do not remember whether primary school lasted four or five years), I entered the sixth class of the lyceum.

The pupils and teachers, both Albanian and French, were immensely pleased. The French headmaster was named Victor Coutan. He was a man of upright bearing, with a clear complexion, bright eyes and dark hair that had begun to grey at the temples. His nose was somewhat flattened and he spoke slightly through his nose. Coutan was always impeccably clean, both in his person and in his dress. He generally wore black clothes, a white shirt and a tie. Often he wore striped trousers. From the outset we both liked and respected the headmaster greatly. He was extremely orderly and meticulous, demanding order, discipline and cleanliness from us in everything, from our clothing, personal appearance, books and notebooks to our conduct in the classroom and in the streets.

The deputy headmaster was Hysni Babameto, an experienced arithmetic teacher who was capable, fair, courteous and attentive. We liked and respected him greatly as well, for he never shouted at us. Yet whenever he reproved us, we felt deeply ashamed, and our greatest concern was to avoid earning his disapproval. "Mr. Hysni kills with cotton," we used to say. Among our Albanian teachers and professors were Vesim and Mumtaz Kokalari, both fluent in French, Elmaz Çani, Hysni Babameto, Ilia Dilo Sheperi, Pano Hido and others. The French professors initially included Brezhot and Marchand, and later many others arrived, some of whose names I no longer remember. Marchand and Liézén taught us French language and literature, Brezhot taught history and geography, while Mr. Hysni taught mathematics. Physics, geology and botany were taught by other

French professors.

We studied all subjects with great enthusiasm, especially French, since it was something entirely new and unfamiliar and, without mastering it, one could not follow the lessons. I applied myself diligently to French and soon ranked among the best pupils. I read carefully, paid close attention to pronunciation and followed precisely the methods recommended by our professors. I had a strong inclination towards reading, and at that time the French professors not only introduced French teaching methods but also brought with them the textbooks for every class and subject, just as they were used in the lyceums of France and at the Lyceum of Korça. They also brought simple French storybooks, various illustrated collections and colourful volumes that fascinated us. These books were beautifully produced, well bound and filled with images unlike anything we had previously seen. Consequently they attracted us greatly and, even when we did not initially understand them, we remained engrossed in them. The professors also brought maps, globes and other teaching aids that we had never previously possessed, together with coloured charts depicting animals, flowers, minerals and many other subjects. All these things made the lessons far more interesting. Naturally, the French professors worked diligently to ensure that we learned the language and literature well and mastered the entire curriculum. They paid particular attention to us in the sixth class, making every effort to help us recover the lost time in language study and reach a level where we could understand the curriculum in French. Accordingly, with the exception of Albanian language and mathematics, which were taught in Albanian, all other subjects were taught in French. We succeeded in meeting this challenge. I completed the year with very good results in all subjects. My performance in French was particularly strong and I soon reached the point where I could understand books written in French, reading

both stories and selected poems. I possessed a very strong memory, and the French language teachers held me in high regard.

Each year the number of pupils entering the lyceum increased, as did the number of Albanian and French teachers. Consequently a new building became necessary. The lyceum was therefore transferred to the building that is now the "Asim Zeneli" Gymnasium. Later additional rooms were added to one side because the existing premises could no longer accommodate us.

The organisation of the lyceum naturally improved from year to year in every respect. The curriculum was clearly defined and rigorously implemented. The necessary books arrived punctually from France, so that every year, when school opened, we already had the required textbooks in our hands. The lyceum library was also expanded for both pupils and teachers. Moreover, at the end of each academic year, when classes concluded, prizes were awarded. These consisted of various literary books, distributed according to class and subject. First and second prizes were awarded in each subject, while third-place pupils received certificates of merit. Prize-giving day was a major celebration for us, and the ceremony took place in the school's large hall. Opposite the main entrance stood a large table covered with handsome books tied with red ribbons. Headmaster Coutan sat behind the table surrounded by the entire teaching staff, while the lyceum pupils stood arranged neatly by class on either side of the hall. Headmaster Coutan delivered a speech of congratulation and then began calling out, one by one, the names of the prize-winners. This was the most emotional moment for us. I regularly received first prizes, particularly in Albanian, French, history and geography.

Coutan and the other professors would shake our hands and say, "*Très bien, félicitations.*"* On such occasions, when

* Very good, congratulations (French in the original).

we left the school, as was often the case but especially on that particular day, we would wait for the professors and walk with them through the bazaar. It pleased us, it pleased the professors and it pleased the townspeople as well when they saw us carrying armfuls of books tied with ribbons. Naturally, we were rather proud of this.

The lyceum soon became greatly cherished by the entire population, and its influence was quickly felt throughout Gjirokastra. The French professors behaved very well towards the people, who in turn liked and respected them, greeted them warmly and served them with smiles whenever they entered shops to purchase what they needed. They thus found a very welcoming environment in Gjirokastra. The French professors rented rooms in private houses. They were fond of our picturesque and romantic homes, often with their small gardens, where they began planting flowers and even gave us seeds to cultivate ourselves.

Examinations were of great importance to us, both the written tests and the anxious anticipation of the results. Those who obtained high marks had their names placed on the honour board, which hung on the corridor wall between the headmaster's office and the staff room. There was no greater delight for us than seeing our names displayed there.

It was customary that, before entering our classrooms, we lined up outside in the courtyard. Beginning with the lower classes, we then entered the hall and proceeded to our classrooms in orderly silence. Opposite the entrance, in the main hall, the headmaster or deputy headmaster always stood waiting. We greeted him, and he greeted us in return. I recall two incidents connected with this practice.

One day, while playing in the courtyard, Elmaz Konjari lost a button from his jacket. When he later lined up with his class, one of the Albanian teachers noticed that the jacket was missing a button and said to him:

"Next time you must come clean, properly dressed and with your buttons sewn on. Otherwise I shall send you home."

To everyone's surprise, Elmaz responded rather indifferently to the reprimand. The matter escalated, eventually reaching the teachers' council, which suspended him from school for two days. For us this was a serious matter, and the incident made a strong impression upon us.

On another occasion Professor Salim Kokalari crossed the courtyard. As usual, I greeted him with my hand raised to my forehead. He stopped and said: "Greet me again!" I repeated the greeting, but he said it once more, and I greeted him again. Yet again he was dissatisfied and continued asking me to repeat it, perhaps fifteen times in all. I could not understand why he disliked the way I was greeting him. Everyone was watching and laughing, while I stood there blushing. My arm grew tired, and at last, when he told me to do it once more, I switched to my other hand. That satisfied him, and he did not ask again. Until that moment I had been saluting him with my left hand, which people commonly referred to as the "bad hand." The episode taught me a lesson. Thereafter I was careful to greet people with my right hand, the "good hand."

I was very close friends with Elmaz Konjari. We lived in the same neighbourhood, visited one another's homes, studied together, played together and went for walks together. Elmaz was a calm, upright and honest person; I never quarrelled with him. His father, Uncle Idriz, was a gentle man, though he did not work. Elmaz's mother, Aunt Bako, was a very kind woman who was fond of us and never scolded us. I entered Elmaz's house as freely as if it were my own. Our favourite place was Elmaz's garden. Calling it a garden may be an exaggeration, yet to us it was beautiful because it overlooked Bajraktari Square. The garden consisted of two or three stone terraces, on each of which Uncle Idriz had planted numerous roses, hyacinths, lilacs and

other flowering and fruit-bearing trees that provided welcome shade. There we would lie during the heat of the day, study our lessons and gather bouquets of roses and hyacinths to present to our professors in the morning. Uncle Idriz would say to us: "Do not ruin my rose garden." He had lived in Turkey and spoke Turkish. Perhaps for this reason our teacher, Arshi Bey, would say whenever he saw Elmaz and me together: "Konjari Elmas, Debrari Hasan."

Later, Elmaz left the lyceum and became an apprentice pharmacist with his brother, Sulo, who was forever giving us lozenges and handfuls of citrate *valdë*,* which we would dissolve in our mouths without water. Subsequently, Elmaz went to France, qualified as a pharmacist and later worked very successfully at Profarma in Tirana.

Our first French teacher was Liézain, whom we called "the old man," since he must have been over sixty at the time. Liézain was a French-speaking Swiss from the town of Vevey. Despite his age, he stood upright and walked with a staff tipped with iron, like those used by mountaineers. He dressed in baggy breeches, stockings and alpine boots studded with nails, and wore a roll-neck jumper of the sort favoured by skiers. His head was completely bald, and he always wore a cap, which he rarely removed, even in class, because, as he said, "my head gets cold." He was a very kind-hearted man. We were fond of him and he was fond of us. We teased him, but never maliciously, because we respected him greatly. Liézain spoke affectionately to us about Switzerland and gave us coloured postcards of Geneva, Vevey and Chillon Castle. We looked at these postcards with delight and I remember copying them in black pencil on large sheets of paper and showing them to him. He would say, "*Très*

* Soft, aromatic lozenges kept in the mouth and used to treat sore throats.

bien, mon garçon."* That was what he always said whenever we answered well in class. Out of affection for him, we imitated both his voice and the way he pronounced his expressions, whether "*Très bien, mon garçon*" or "*Très mauvais*."** But more of that later.

Liézain had a great passion for flowers. He filled the house where he lived with every imaginable variety. Whenever he returned from his holidays he brought all sorts of seeds to Gjirokastra, gave some to us and taught us when and how to plant them. He was especially fond of nasturtiums of every colour and inspired the same enthusiasm in us. Through him we learned the names of flowers and plants more thoroughly in French than in Albanian. Many flower names we did not know in our own language, yet we learned them in French. Liézain loved the French classics and knew long passages from their works by heart. With great enthusiasm and humour he taught us and explained Corneille, Racine, Molière, La Fontaine and others.

Liézain was particularly fond of me, Hamit Kokalari and Kiço Karajani because we excelled in French. However, our class also included boys who studied poorly and were rather dim-witted, such as Fejzi Selfo, Mahmut Karagjozi and others. There were also pupils like Nesip Gjebrea, who studied well and possessed a remarkable sense of humour. The most entertaining moments came during Liézain's lessons when questioning began. After explaining the material, the old man would start asking questions and assigning marks. Yet, because of his age, he tired easily. Once he had posed a question, he would sometimes listen while the pupil answered and sometimes drift into a light doze. As a result, a pupil's mark often depended more on us than on him. Whenever we wanted one of our friends to

* Very good, my boy (French in the original).

** Very bad (French in the original).

receive a good mark, we would chant in chorus, "*Très bien, mon garçon*." Conversely, if it was someone like Fejzi Selfo, we would say, "*Très mauvais, mon garçon, asseyez-vous, vous ne savez rien*."* Liézain would glance at the three of us and assign the mark according to our verdict. When Nesip was called upon and began answering, he would sometimes take the old man's cap from the desk. Liézain would ask: "Why are you touching my cap?"

"To clean it," Nesip would reply. He would pretend to dust it, but while continuing to speak he would squeeze and crumple it into a ball. We would burst out laughing until the old man finally looked up and reclaimed it from his hands.

One day Fejzi Selfo begged us to help him obtain a good mark as well. We agreed, but only on condition that he bring each of us — including the old man — one of the finest pears from his family's orchard. Whether he liked it or not, "Kopaçja,**" as we called him, complied. We used that nickname because, as a child, he had burned one hand badly in a fire and it resembled a wooden club. After we had eaten the apples and pears he brought, Fejzi stood up to recite the lesson. Not a word! He had learned nothing. Unfortunately for him, that day the old man remained fully alert, his eyes and ears sharp as ever. The outcome was disastrous for "Kopaçja," despite all the pears he had supplied. The professor dismissed him with his customary phrase: "*Oh! Très mauvais, mon garçon, asseyez-vous, vous ne savez rien*." Our laughter over the incident continued throughout the day, and I remember it vividly even now. Fejzi Selfo later became a despicable Ballist. Mahmut Karagjozi became one of Zogu's gendarmes. Nesip Gjebrea left the lyceum for the military academy in Tirana, where he was accidentally killed by a

* Very bad, my boy; sit down, you know nothing (French in the original).

** Roughly "club-hand."

fellow cadet. We were deeply saddened by Nesip's death because he had been a good friend. As for the first two, we had disliked them even then.

We also quarrelled with Bedri Spahiu over Hamit Kokalari. Hamit had arrived from Turkey with his family, as had another of our classmates, Selahudin Kokona. Hamit was calm and studious; Bedri was not. This bred jealousy in Bedri, who began to resent Hamit and eventually openly threatened to waylay him and stab him with a knife. Indeed, Bedri carried a knife with him. The rest of us tried to reconcile them, but Bedri would not relent. We therefore told him that all of us were against him and took turns escorting Hamit home. The quarrel finally ended when Bedri left the lyceum to attend the military academy.

Hamit also became the target of jealousy from Kiço Karajani, whom we nicknamed "Buzaçi" because his upper lip was thick and turned upward. Kiço too produced the familiar threat of a knife, though not with the intention of killing Hamit as Bedri had threatened to do. Rather, he wanted to scratch him or slash his jacket. To this end, he always tried to sit directly behind Hamit in class. Through a crack in his desk he would insert a knife so that, when Hamit leaned back, the tip would prick his side. One day this actually happened: the point of "Buzaçi's" knife pierced Hamit. We gave Kiço a thorough beating, and he never repeated that particular "joke."

In the Albanian language we had a teacher called Mr. Dilo, from Sheper in Zagoria. He had even compiled a grammar of his own and taught according to "his own language," as we used to say. He was a reserved man, with a broad face, spectacles perched on his nose and a pair of moustaches beneath it. We had even composed a little rhyme about Dilo's moustaches:

"A bitter wind is blowing,
Dilo's moustaches have frozen."

Whenever he saw a window open, he would say: "Close the window, for a bitter storm is blowing."

One day Mr. Dilo assigned us some grammar exercises to complete at home. I did them in my exercise notebook. At home we had neither a desk nor a chair. I studied and wrote either with my notebook resting on a divan while I sat on the floor, or standing up and writing on the upper ledge of the divan, as we called it, at my maternal uncle's house in Hazmurat. The next morning we handed our notebooks back to Mr. Dilo. After correcting them, he returned them to us and, to my great astonishment, I found that he had given me a zero. Indignantly, I said:

"Mr. Dilo, what is this zero doing in my notebook?"

He replied:

"Because you have made fun of me. You handed in a blank notebook without doing the exercise at all. Look for yourself!"

Indeed, there were no exercises where they should have been. Yet I was certain that I had completed the assignment. I said:

"Mr. Dilo, I did do the work and I do not accept this zero. I shall go and complain about you to Mr. Hysni."

Mr. Dilo replied:

"Go wherever you like. Why not go and complain in Tirana as well?"

I left the classroom and went straight to the headmaster's office, where I lodged a complaint with Hysni Babameto. I told him the entire story.

"Mr. Hysni," I said, "I am certain that I completed the exercises."

He asked:

"Then where are they?"

I continued:

"Mr. Dilo must have torn out the page so that he could give me a zero."

"No, my boy," said Hysni, "that could not have happened. Bring me the notebook and let me have a look." When he took the notebook, instead of opening it at the beginning, he opened it near the end or in the middle. He turned several pages and found my exercises. Looking at me with his sharp eyes, he said:

"The fault is yours, not Mr. Dilo's. You were careless when you did the exercises. You opened the notebook at random and wrote wherever you happened to find a page. Mr. Dilo could not possibly guess that you had written the assignment backwards or wherever the mood took you."

I blushed crimson with embarrassment, returned to the classroom, apologised to Mr. Dilo and asked him to review the exercises and amend my mark. He did so.

At the lyceum, Mumtaz Kokalari began organising a Boy Scout movement. Neither I nor many of my classmates liked the idea. We boycotted it completely: we neither joined nor attended, and we even mocked those classmates who enrolled in the "organisation." It seemed that the school itself did not support the initiative either, for it did not last long and soon dissolved like salt in water.

We had great respect for Professor Marchand, who also taught us French. He had an excellent teaching method. He was tall, slender and energetic, with a ruddy complexion, a broad forehead and fair hair. Marchand played tennis well, but he was also a talented painter and portraitist. He painted constantly, especially portraits of peasants and of people whom he considered interesting. He usually worked in oils on thick boards of various sizes that he brought from France. Every day he would go to the bazaar and choose a peasant to paint. He would buy the figs or fruit that the man was selling, ask his permission and begin. The peasant would smile shyly and blush. If Marchand could finish the portrait in one sitting, so much the better; if not, he would ask when the man would next be returning to the market. On

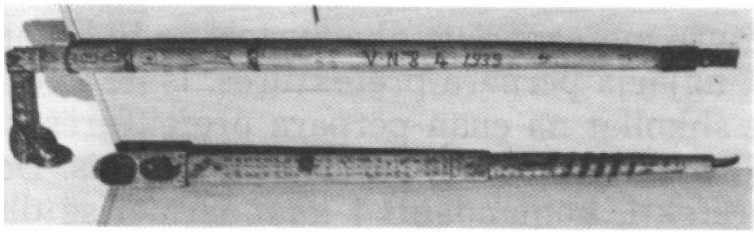
several occasions he took me along as an interpreter. At that time King Zogu had interned in Gjirokastra a tribal chieftain named Preng Cali, a strikingly tall man who was always dressed in richly embroidered northern Albanian national costume. He carried silver-mounted pistols attached by a chain around his neck and smoked from a silver pipe. He became Professor Marchand's favourite model. Goodness knows how many portraits of him, in all manner of sizes, Marchand produced. Later, this reactionary chieftain allied himself with fascism and took up arms against the partisans in Kelmend. We captured him and executed him. Thus, nothing remained of that feudal traitor except Marchand's portraits, now perhaps hanging in some provincial museum in France or preserved in private collections.

Another professor, Brezhot, was greatly respected by us because he was cheerful and approachable. Although still young, he already had a noticeable paunch. As he walked, he carried his head tilted to one side, as though his neck were crooked or as though it were weighed down by the bag he always carried, crammed with books, our exercise notebooks and newspapers. One could find almost anything in that bag. Nevertheless, we listened to him with great attention when he explained history, especially the history of France. The French Revolution, in particular, filled us with enthusiasm, and we compared its events with what we believed ought one day to happen in our own country against Zogu and the beys and aghas who, together with the king, oppressed our people. We made these comparisons among ourselves and only with our most trusted companions. None of us had any affection for the monarchy or for Zogu. My own family was already regarded with suspicion as anti-Zogite because of our connections with Bahri Omari, who was then a political exile. Our hatred was equally strong towards the gendarmes of Hysni Dema and Taf Kaziu, who occupied Gjirokastra as though it were hostile territory under military rule. On many occasions

the people of Gjirokastra openly demonstrated their contempt for these mercenaries and officials of Zogu's regime.

I remember one incident that took place in front of the prefecture. It was Flag Day. We schoolchildren were taken there, together with a large crowd of townspeople, for the official celebration. The prefect, the commander of the gendarmerie and other officials appeared on the steps. The national anthem was sung, and then the prefect began his ceremonial address, naturally praising Zogu and his regime. When he had finished speaking, a powerful male voice suddenly rang out from the crowd: "Down with the thieves of the regime!" Instant chaos followed. We lyceum students applauded. Others shouted for silence, while the prefect hastily retreated inside and the gendarmes began moving through the crowd. The celebration collapsed and our ranks dissolved. The man who had shouted was Captain Idriz Guri. He was a patriot, a companion of Çerçiz Topulli, Hasan Xhiku and Baba Çen. That day he was dressed in a senior officer's uniform, wearing a red-and-black sash across his chest and carrying a sword. We young people gathered around him and accompanied him part of the way to the government café, as we called it. Idriz's face had turned pale, his moustache bristled and his eyes flashed with anger. Completely unshaken, he took a seat and remained outside the café. Soon gendarmes arrived and tried to disperse us. But who was willing to leave? We wanted to see what would happen to Uncle Idriz, whom we admired, especially now that we had witnessed his courage before the entire town.

After about fifteen minutes, an officer from Idriz's own guard arrived with three soldiers wearing helmets and approached him. A grave silence descended! Everyone waited to see what would happen. The officer's words could be clearly heard: "Captain Idriz Guri, surrender your sword. You are under arrest." What would happen next? It was a dramatic mo-



Walking sticks belonging to Uncle Idriz Guri.

ment! Uncle Idriz rose to his feet, stepped back three paces, drew his sword and declared: "Stand back, Captain. Idriz Guri is not accustomed to surrendering his sword. Either you or I will remain here dead!" The officer was stunned! "Hold firm, Idriz! Stand your ground!" shouted a voice from inside the café, and men began pouring outside. We young people shouted: "Stand firm, Uncle Idriz! Long live Idriz Guri!" The gendarmes suddenly found themselves surrounded. Unable to act, they were forced to withdraw empty-handed.

Uncle Idriz's friends escorted him home. Seeing the extent of public support for Idriz Guri, Zogu did not dare arrest him. Instead, he stripped him of his officer's rank and spread rumours that Idriz Guri had gone mad. Idriz Guri was not mad. He simply continued his struggle against Zogu in his own way. He carved walking sticks of various shapes, painted them red and black, inscribed letters along their shafts and decorated them with allegorical figures. Every word of a slogan or phrase was represented by its initial letter or a series of letters.* He would then walk through the bazaar, the streets and the squares, saying nothing to anyone, but always holding the stick high above his head and never lowering it. Thus everyone could see Idriz's stick. All the slogans were directed against the regime. He ex-

* For example, on a walking stick Idriz Guri inscribed: "Sh L 28.XI.1912," while on the other side: "V N 7 April 1939," meaning respectively: "Free Albania, 28 November 1912" and "National Death, 7 April 1939."

plained their meanings only to trusted friends, who then spread them by word of mouth. We greatly respected the patriotic Uncle Idriz, while Zogu's servants would sneer: "There goes mad Idriz through the bazaar with his stick."

During my years at the Gjirokastra Lyceum there was neither electricity nor radio, and therefore no easy means of learning what was happening in the wider world. The local newspaper appeared only once a week, while those arriving from Tirana printed only the news that suited the feudal regime. They regularly denounced the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin. Yet we young people knew almost nothing about this revolution. The French professors at the lyceum never spoke of it. Naturally, none of them sympathised with it, as their complete silence suggested. Nevertheless, we anti-Zogite youths would read in the newspapers from Tirana attacks on "a certain Lenin" and on the October Revolution, and we would say to one another: "There must be something in this. This revolution must be against the king. It must be against the beys and the wealthy classes. It must belong to the poor. That is why they denounce it." And so our curiosity began. We whispered questions, exchanged quiet speculations and held discreet discussions among friends.

At last, one summer during the holidays, our friends who were studying at the Korça Lyceum returned home — Aqif, Selami and others. One day, while discussing these matters with them, Selami whispered to me: "Don't talk about such things in the street. Zogu's spies may hear us. Come to my house tomorrow and I'll show you something." The following morning I went to Selami's house as soon as I could.

"Plaka," as we called Selami, lived in an old house near Mamani Square in Palorto. His father, Uncle Fejo, a bent old man of gentle and honourable character, worked as a municipal street sweeper. He was very fond of us. Selami also lived with his mother and a younger sister. He studied in Korça on a

scholarship and had a passion for French books. To buy them, he economised carefully and took on small errands whenever he could. In this way Selami had managed to acquire several Marxist books, as well as a number of bourgeois works that discussed, from their own perspective, the October Revolution, Lenin, Stalin, Voroshilov and the Red Army. The books he showed me contained photographs as well. These were Selami's secret treasures, which he revealed to me in a mysterious fashion that morning when I visited him. He kept them locked in a box hidden in the attic. For days on end we sat in his house reading in French about what had happened in Russia. We never tired of gazing at the photographs of Lenin, Stalin and Voroshilov, the latter marching in a military parade through Red Square, wearing his peaked cap and broad chest sash.

A new world began to dawn in my youthful mind. **It was the first spark of a great fire, one that illuminated my path in the house of a poor proletarian, Uncle Fejo Xhaxhiu, who swept the streets of Gjirokastra. It must have been the year 1926.**

Thus my mind gradually matured and my intellectual horizons widened. I began to see and understand things more clearly. Many matters that had once seemed obscure became increasingly lucid and took on a definite shape.

I received good marks in my studies, particularly in Albanian language and literature, French language and literature, history and geography. I was always competent in mathematics, though I did not excel in it.* Nevertheless, I passed each class

* In a speech delivered before representatives of the capital's intelligentsia on 25 October 1962, Comrade Enver Hoxha stated, among other things: "Now that I am speaking with such enthusiasm about science and especially about mathematics, young people may laugh, just as I myself laughed when I was young, for I must confess, comrades, that I was not particularly fond of mathematics, and I believe that mathematics lessons at sec-

without difficulty. The teachers liked me and I liked them; not once did they have cause to complain about me.

I learned to read and write French well and could also speak it fluently, at least within the limits expected of my class. This proved immensely valuable, enabling me to read with ease a great many books by novelists, poets, dramatists, comedians and historians. My favourite authors at that time included Hugo, Lamartine, La Fontaine, Alexandre Dumas père, Perrault, Grimm, Corneille, Racine, Molière, Boileau, La Bruyère, Verhaeren, Anatole France, Théophile Gautier and many others. Later I would deepen and broaden my reading considerably, especially after entering the Korça Lyceum, whose libraries were much larger and where I perfected my command of French to a far higher level. I remain profoundly grateful to my first teachers of Albanian, my mother tongue, but also to those who taught me French, which after Albanian proved one of the most useful languages in my life.

While we were attending the third year of the lyceum, new anxieties arose. In Tirana a debate began over whether the Gjirokastra Lyceum should be completed as a full secondary school or whether no second year would be opened thereafter. This created enormous concern among us students and among the education-loving people of Gjirokastra. What would become of us boys who were completing the third year? Were we simply to be left stranded? There was no work to be found. The regime was bankrupt. Teachers and professors often went months without receiving their salaries. Our own family circumstances were dire. It was unthinkable that my uncle could finance my studies at the Korça Lyceum from his own pocket,

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ondary school hastened the growth of my beard somewhat. But the truth is that mathematics possesses its own great poetry; it is fascinating and not nearly as 'harsh' as people imagine." (Enver Hoxha, *Vepra*, vol. 23, 531–32.)

for even providing food at home was a struggle. We students and our teachers were deeply distressed. Both the French and Albanian professors protested to the Ministry of Education in Tirana, but no one listened. Public demonstrations followed, and we students protested as well, yet again no one paid attention. "There is an overproduction of intellectuals," Fejzi Alizoti, the bey who represented Gjirokastra in parliament, would later proclaim.* He was eventually executed after we liberated Albania from foreign occupation and from the domination of the local feudal-bourgeois classes.

The outcry became considerable, but Zogu's obscurantist regime refused to reverse its decision. For the time being, the French Lyceum of Gjirokastra would remain limited to the third year, before being dismantled altogether later on. To reduce public discontent, the authorities in Tirana decided that poor students completing the third year would receive scholarships enabling them to continue their education at the Korça Lyceum. I was among those who obtained such a scholarship. Selahudin Kokona, Hamit Kokalari and several others, whose families were financially secure, continued their studies at their own expense. Others abandoned schooling altogether.

When I learned that I had been awarded a scholarship to Korça, my joy was immense, beyond description. Preparations immediately began. Our imaginations soared. We would finally see beautiful Korça, about which our friends who studied there spoke every summer. From their stories we had already formed a vivid picture of life at the Korça Lyceum — its teachers, its customs and the strengths and weaknesses of its students and staff.

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* In 1935, in the parliament of Zogu's clique, Fejzi Alizoti raised the alarm over the danger of "intellectual overproduction." (See: Enver Hoxha, *Vepra*, vol. 5, 208–9.)

My uncle borrowed money and bought me a thick overcoat for the winter and a pair of shoes. There was not enough money left for additional clothes, but my mother somehow managed to cut and sew two shirts and two pairs of trousers. She also knitted two pairs of woollen socks and two pairs of cotton ones. I packed everything neatly into an old suitcase that had belonged to my poor brother and which he had brought back from America. Only one item remained: the cap, the sole element of the lyceum uniform. My uncle worried himself over the matter until he finally asked the father of Samuel the Jew to bring one from Ioannina. It cost 25 leks. The red band with two black stripes running through it would be purchased later in Korça.

We could scarcely contain our excitement. We counted the days one after another. Our friends from Korça returned for the holidays and throughout the summer we talked, planned and dreamed. At last the long-awaited day arrived. Yet, despite my joy, my heart was heavy with sadness, for I was about to leave behind my uncle, my mother, Sano and all those dear ones whom I loved and who loved me with all their hearts. It was the first time I had ever been separated from them. I felt as though I were abandoning them at a crossroads. They had only me. Their hopes rested on me. In me they saw their future. I was the centre of their world. They had raised me with whatever means they possessed. Together we had endured so many hardships and anxieties, and this made the parting all the more painful, especially when I saw my mother distressed and secretly weeping. Before my departure they burdened me with advice. I was to take care not to catch a cold, to write home regularly because they would worry about me, to study diligently, to behave properly and not bring shame either upon myself or upon the family. My uncle did not fail to remind me: "Look, Enver, you know that we are poor. We have no money to send you. Therefore, you must expect nothing from us. I shall give you one Napoleon as pocket money. Keep it safe and

do not spend it. Save it for a real emergency." At the same time he recited the family accounts: "I borrowed so much. The shoes cost this much, the shirts this much, the socks this much, the cap this much, the fare to Korça this much," and so on. My mother baked me a burek, prepared some dried meatballs, packed a little cheese and a loaf of bread, and placed everything in a bag for the journey, since we would spend one night in Përmet on the way.

In the morning we boarded the motor lorry in Çerçiz Square, where a crowd of men had gathered to see us off. My mother and Sano embraced and kissed me. All three of us wept. They accompanied me as far as the bakery, still in tears. I slung my suitcase over my shoulder while my uncle carried the bag of food and my heavy overcoat. We parted once more, crying and waving farewell to my beloved mother and Sano, whom I was leaving behind alone.

After embracing my uncle and the others in the square, the lorry, packed with students, set off. As we descended the main road we began singing, leaving behind so many sweet memories of our youth and childhood. The road, the hills, the walls, the trees, the cherry orchards and meadows, the bridge over the river — all seemed to wave to us, as though bidding us farewell and saying: "Never forget us, for your heart remains here." A new chapter of my life was opening before me, filled with great hopes, beautiful dreams and an increasing sense of responsibility towards my family and my homeland. The lorry rolled on towards Tepelena, Këlcyra, Përmet, Leskovik, Erseka and Korça. How much we saw along the way. Our country seemed vast, broad and endless. It was our beloved homeland — dear, beautiful and precious — yet poor and miserable beneath the heel of the despot Zogu and the beys and aghas, against whom I would struggle relentlessly until their complete destruction and eradication.

February 1969

HAPPY OUTINGS

I was very fond of these excursions, perhaps because they possessed a beauty of their own. They took us away from the stone-paved alleyways, from the little square by the mosque where we played every day, from Pocket Square and the cave in front of Uncle Riko's gate, and brought us out into the open air and wide spaces. Perhaps we were also delighted because the whole class would go together with our teachers who, on such occasions, seemed much closer to us and more relaxed. Even now, in my advancing years, I cherish these excursions with the nostalgia of childhood and youth. Sometimes I close my eyes and, thinking of those distant times, it seems to me that I can once again sense the fragrance of the grass, hear the wind whistling through the cypresses and the buzzing of bees wandering among the yellow flowers.

When an outing was planned, the teacher would usually tell us:

"Tomorrow, boys, if the weather is fine, we shall go on an excursion early in the morning and return in the evening."

As soon as we heard this announcement, we clapped our

hands, shouted and jumped for joy.

One boy would ask:

"Sir, should we bring food with us?"

He would reply:

"Of course. No one is going to lay a table for us!"

Another would continue:

"Sir, should we bring a bottle of water?"

Someone else would interrupt:

"Where are we going? To Shamanja Stream?"

"What shall we do there?"

"Let us go to Baba Mane's tekke on the hill."

"No, to Mr. Elmaz Çani's orchard." "No, that is too far." "No, it is close." "There is water there." "There is no water." "There is shade." "There is no shade." The teacher would eventually bring our cheerful debate to an end by saying:

"Do not worry. We shall go somewhere pleasant, provided the weather holds."

"Ah, provided the weather holds!"

The moment we left the school building, our eyes turned towards the sky.

"Damn it, there are some clouds!"

"How beautiful it is, clear as glass!"

"What if it changes during the night?"

Before going to bed, we would stick our heads out of the window or step into the courtyard and gaze at the depths and mysteries of the sky. Would it show mercy upon us? Would the weather remain fair? Early the next morning we would again be found at the window or in the courtyard, examining the sky. Whatever the circumstances, we would say: "We shall go on the excursion no matter what — with sunshine or without it, so long as it does not rain."

Yet the "decision" of the teacher and the headmaster hung over us like the sword of Damocles. At that time, of course, we

neither knew nor used that expression. We knew only one thing: the decision depended upon the sun and the blue sky. Whether joy or disappointment would fill our young hearts for the whole day depended upon that decision and upon the weather.

Whenever the teacher announced that we would be going on an excursion the following day, I, like all my classmates, would leave school carrying my bag of books and, with one swing of my arm, throw it over my shoulder like the sack of vegetables my father sometimes made me carry home. Then I would race home at full speed, adjusting my cap from time to time so that it would not fall off. The stones of the streets wore down the soles and tips of my shoes. About this my mother would say:

"Walk more carefully, my son. You have worn those soles away as though you had chewed them with your teeth."

"What can I do, Mother? It is not my teeth but the stones that wear them down."

I would arrive home breathless, hang my schoolbag on a peg near the door of the lower room and go straight to my mother.

"Mother, tomorrow we are going on an excursion and shall be away all day. I must take food with me. What will you prepare?"

She would reply: "God willing, my son, I shall think of something. Now go and play, but do not stay out too late!"

So I would go and play nearby, either beneath Çuço's olive tree or in Karanxha, with the Gypsy boys who were my childhood companions and friends of our family. When I returned home before the men came back, I would ask again:

"Mother, what are you going to make for me tomorrow?"

And my good mother had already thought about it. In truth, there was not much to think about, given how little we possessed in those days.

"I shall give you a boiled egg, some cheese, an onion, two meatballs and a little mixture of salt and oregano wrapped in

paper for dipping the egg into. That will be quite enough."

Delighted, I would embrace her and say:

"How wonderful you are! Will everything be ready tonight or tomorrow morning?"

She would answer:

"Do not worry. Tomorrow, when you leave, I shall tie everything in a handkerchief, put it in your schoolbag and it will be ready for you. Now go and do your lessons!"

My mother never forgot such things. Yet on evenings filled with anticipation I sometimes forgot my studies and would protest:

"But tomorrow is a holiday."

She would answer:

"My son, never leave today's work for tomorrow." Then she would light the *idare*, the little oil lamp.

We had no table. I would lie face down on the floor and write or study until my father and uncle returned from the bazaar and we sat down to eat. In those days in Gjirokastra people did not say that men were going to work or coming back from work. They said that they were going to the bazaar, coming from the bazaar or were at the bazaar. The bazaar was the very centre of the town's life.

On the morning of the excursion we would gather at school and mill about in the courtyard. The weather was fine and sunny. We waited for the appointed hour, chatting happily among ourselves.

"Will the whole school come, or only some classes?"

"Everyone is going. Who would stay behind? Look, even the boys from the other classes have brought food."

Such were our conversations until the teachers emerged. One of them would clap his hands or ring the bell and announce:

"Boys" — there were no girls — "without wasting time and

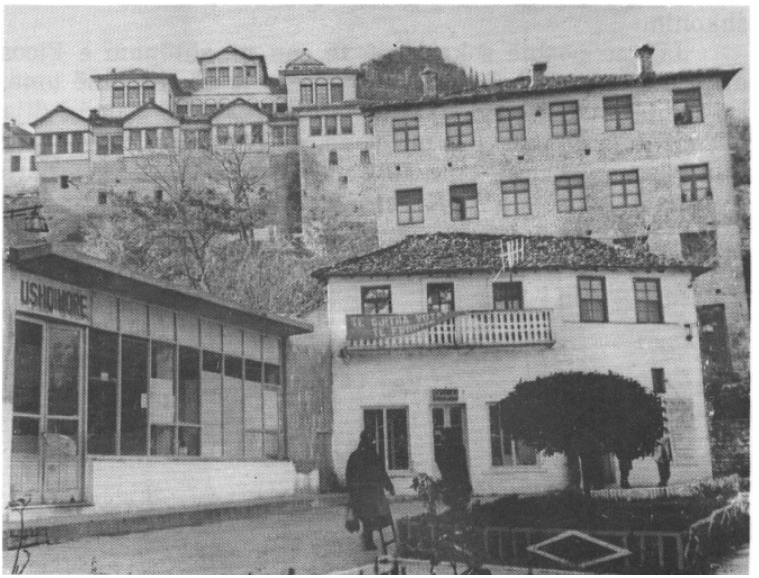
without making noise, line up. Each class separately. We are setting off for the hills near Baba Mane's tekke."

"Hurray!" There would be shouts of delight and frantic rushing about as everyone searched for his class and companions. After a brief period of confusion, we would set off along the road through Varosh. Sometimes a boy's father had given him a few grosh. As soon as we reached the end of the little stone bridge over the stream that descended from Angonat and wound its way through the gravel below the retaining walls of the houses, he would slip away — with or without the teacher's permission — and run back to the small but beloved shop of Shaban Gega, the sweet-seller. There one could find *tahini halva*,* *kadaif*,** ordinary halva and *koshallva*, a white sweet filled with walnuts, which Shaban would chop apart with a little hatchet when someone wanted to buy some. There were also roasted chickpeas, walnuts, slabs of burnt sugar and long sticks of striped confectionery, sometimes entirely white and sometimes white with a red stripe winding around them like a snake. How many wonderful things "the Gega," as we called him, used to sell. We would say, "Let us go to the Gega's shop," or "The Gega has come," whenever he wandered through the neighbourhood carrying on his head a round wooden tray balanced on a ring cushion, laden with all the delicacies I have just mentioned. In one hand he carried a three-legged stand. If you said, "Gega, I want a stick of sweet," or "I want a grosh-worth of tahini halva," he would patiently set down the stand, place the tray upon it, cut the halva with a knife, take your money, put it in his pocket and continue on his way shouting: "*Koshallva*! *Tahini halva*!"

Our column entered the road that cuts through the Varosh quarter. It slopes downhill, paved with cobblestones and lined

* Sesame-based sweet.

** Syrup-soaked shredded-pastry dessert.



"If someone had been given a few grosh by his father, he would make his way back to the little shop — so beloved by us children — the sweet-maker's shop run by Shaban Gega."

with stone benches in front of the house doors. If one looks at those houses today, they seem small, whereas at the time they appeared tall and imposing to us. At the beginning of the street there were also a few shops: perhaps a grocer, a confectioner, a shabby inn or a maker of *opinga* shoes.* Further down, after passing the house of Fane Rodi, a schoolmate of mine, there was a bakery above which stood a shop selling *hindja* cloth.** I remember all these things as though watching an old, very old film, yet one that remains so dear and poignant to me. There, further on, was the alley leading to the house of Fane Hido, a wealthy merchant. I knew his name because, whenever our family bought printed cotton fabric for my sisters and my uncle's

* Traditional leather peasant shoes.

** Fine cotton dress fabric.

daughters, Fane Hido's son would come carrying a bundle of cloth from which the women made their selection, since women did not go to the bazaar.

And there was the alley leading to Fico's house. From there, through the Alley of the Madmen, one reached our own house, where we lived after our first home had burned down. I knew these streets well and loved them dearly, for later, in a school near the stream I mentioned earlier, the first French lyceum in Gjirokastra was opened. It was there that I first attended secondary school. I loved these alleyways also because I used to walk through them with my mother and sisters when we visited my uncle in Hazmurat, passing through Gjobek and by the house of my friend Çome, the son of Lipe Dhrami, who lived near Çoro the butcher, who wandered through the streets selling and crying out: "Fresh tripe! Buy fresh tripe!"



"Our column moved along the road that cuts through the Varosh neighbourhood. It slopes downhill, paved with cobblestones, with stone benches in front of the house doors..."

Along the Varosh road we marched in rows, sometimes two abreast, sometimes three, because the street narrowed in some places and widened in others. As we walked, we sang patriotic songs such as *For the Ancestors* and *From the Time of the Kolozhek*.

At last we emerged from the street, leaving the last houses of the town on our left. We descended into the gravel bed of the Çullo Stream and, like the stream's pebbles, we schoolboys scattered in every direction. There were no more orderly rows there. For a while the road became tedious, since one was obliged to walk over and through the stones. We passed above the church enclosed by its courtyard wall and soon reached the foot of the hillside, a slope of soft tufa earth. Then, as though freed from the tyranny of the stones and eager to spite them, we raced up the hillside like young goats, "in a single breath," as we used to say. When we reached the top, our faces flushed and our bodies drenched in sweat, we paid no attention to our exhaustion. Up there we would sit on a rock or beside a fragment of wall and gaze with satisfaction at the town below and at our classmates still climbing after us. Each of us tried to point out his own house or that of a friend. From that distance we looked with awe at the Çullo Stream, though when we wandered there collecting wild berries it had never seemed so formidable. Perhaps the green berry bushes softened its appearance.

Once we had climbed to the summit and rested for a little while, Mr. Xhafo would lead us away from the path towards the south-western side of the hill and say:

"Boys, it was here, on this very spot where we are standing now, that Çerçiz Topulli and his comrades once waited. He was expecting the return of the two men he had sent into Gjirokastra to assassinate the Turkish *bimbashi*. From here Çerçiz listened intently for the crack of gunfire from across the valley and watched that direction with the eyes of an eagle."

Mr. Xhafo would then point across the hillside towards the other tekke of Baba Hasan and the cherry orchards of Embro Toto, from where Çerçiz's two comrades were expected to emerge after carrying out the assassination.

"The *bimbashi* was to be killed," Mr. Xhafo continued, "and that is exactly what happened, down there on the road leading from the bazaar to Hazmurat, for that tyrant lived in that neighbourhood. Near Jupi's house a shot rang out, and the Turkish *bimbashi* collapsed onto the cobblestones like a slaughtered calf. Çerçiz's two brave men raced down the alley and, instead of emerging below at Baba Hasan's tekke, crossed Lulaj Alley and appeared in front of the church. They moved like mountain deer and ran with the speed of the north wind.

"Çerçiz heard the gunshots and rose to his feet," Mr. Xhafo continued, himself standing up as he spoke. "And Çerçiz cried out joyfully: 'The brute is dead! Long live a free Albania!' Then he gave the order: 'Cartridges into the rifle chambers!' At once there came the sound of 'crack-crack,' and the entire band stood ready. Çerçiz stood before them, his handsome figure adorned with a cartridge belt full of ammunition and his long hair blowing in the wind. 'There are our comrades by the church,' said Çerçiz. To salute and honour them for their courageous patriotic deed, he gave another command to his men:

"'Rifles ready! Aim at the government headquarters of Gjirokastra — fire!' And a volley rang out, as if to say to the Ottoman Empire: 'I have struck your government headquarters and I have killed your *bimbashi* as well.'

"Here the entire band that fought for Albania and for freedom gathered together, just as we, pupils and teachers, are gathered here today to learn knowledge for the good of Albania," Mr. Xhafo went on, leaning forward like our own Çeço, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. We children looked at our teacher with admiration. Our heads barely reached the white watch-

chain stretched across his waistcoat, and at such moments, in our young and impressionable eyes, that chain assumed the colossal dimensions of a cartridge belt.

"Sir," one of the boys shouted, "did you actually see Çerçiz?"

"I did, boys. I saw him, spoke with him and ate bread at his table."

"Could Çerçiz sing well?" another asked.

"Beautifully. Not only could he begin a song, he could answer one as well. There was no one better at leading a Lab dance."

"Sir, tell us what happened afterwards!"

"The rest another time, boys."

"Please, Sir, go on!"

And the teacher continued:

"After Çerçiz embraced and kissed the two comrades who had killed the *bimbashi*, the band set off for Mashkullora. Turn now towards the other side of the hill," he would say, pointing with his finger. "There is Mashkullora, over there in the mountains. This way Çerçiz descended with his band, proud and gallant, rifles on their shoulders. They crossed that streambed over there and reached the village, where their loyal friends from Mashkullora welcomed them. They sat beneath the great historic plane tree and recounted the momentous event to the people.* The tree remained, and will always remain, in history,

* On 20 March 1978, Comrade Enver Hoxha visited Mashkullora and sat knee to knee with the people beneath the plane tree. Regarding this visit, he wrote in his diary: "It was a very beautiful day for me... We passed the stable where Çerçiz fought for hours against the Ottoman hordes... Passing through the cheering crowd, we made our way to the famous plane tree. I gazed with deep emotion at that majestic tree which has remained forever in the history of our country... I have come here to meet the people of this region, to see you and rejoice with you, to behold the historic plane tree... This tree has roots as strong as Mashkullora itself and its people..."

because there Çerçiz and his comrades fought like lions. You know the song," Mr. Xhafo would continue:

"In Mashkullora beneath the plane tree,
The Ottoman major was slain in Gjirokastra
.....
Beneath the plane tree in Mashkullora,
Çeço spoke aloud."

After this historical tale, which made our excursion so delightful, we continued on towards the tekke along grassy paths shaded by trees, flowers and yellow blossoms. We entered the tekke courtyard through the large gate like bees entering a hive and then dispersed again, just as bees do, scattering in all directions through the gardens, meadows and shady places beneath the trees. The courtyard of the tekke was quite large. Here and there it was paved with brown wooden planks, especially the section leading to the house where Baba Mane lived and the path leading to the other end of the tekke where the dervishes resided. The rest of the courtyard was unpaved, consisting of compacted earth, swept clean of animal dung. Evidently this part also served as a sheepfold, for the tekke maintained a sizeable flock. People who became *muhibs** would donate sheep to it.

The tekke had its own circle of *muhibs*, its own "sphere of influence," into which neighbouring tekkes did not intrude, since conflicts would otherwise arise. Baba Mane's tekke counted among its followers several Gjirokastra families, including those of Javer Bey, Sami Karagjozi and other notable landowning families, but its principal "territory" extended to Mashkullora, Plesat, Prongji, Picar and other villages. At the time all this was beyond our understanding. At school we were not only never taught religion, but some teachers spoke openly against it.

* Those admitted into the ranks of the Bektashi order.



The plane tree of Mashkullora *"...remained, and will remain, in history, for there Çerçiz and his comrades fought like lions."*

In our own family, ever since the days of Baba Çen, dervishes and hodjas were regarded as ignorant men. Around the sheepfold courtyard the tekke also had various outbuildings.

The teachers would pay a visit to Baba Mane, who received them in his chamber, offered them coffee and showed them the large room used by the dervishes — a combined hall and kitchen where *ashure* was prepared and where the dervishes spent their time playing cup games. "They have nothing better to do," Mr. Rexho, one of the teachers who most often mocked the dervishes, would tell us. "These men," he explained when we gathered among the cypress trees, "are the greatest idlers imag-

inable. They eat, drink and play games all day. They never wash and they smell of sheep. But what can one do? Just do not repeat what I have told you!"

From the far end of the courtyard we climbed a flight of steps and entered another courtyard paved entirely with planks. On the left stood the retaining wall supporting the hillside; on the right were several rooms and, in one corner, a vine-covered pergola stretched across a wire trellis, casting shade over the yard. At the upper end there was a small wicket gate leading into the open expanse of the tekke's orchards. Through it we poured like bees, scattering in groups in every direction. For hours on end the countryside belonged to us. The cypresses, the poplars, the fig trees, the trellises draped with vines, the grass, the flowers and even the tombs and shrines of the holy men were ours. They had been conquered by us, the schoolboys.

The younger boys, those who were visiting the tekke hill for the first time, would stop at the small windows of the mausoleums. These were usually kept very clean. Around them stood tall, dark cypress trees. To us, these sombre cypresses seemed like silent giants standing guard over the departed *babas*. We peered through the windows at their cold sarcophagi, each crowned with a ceremonial headpiece and draped in green cloth or a prayer rug. A chill would run through our bodies, and we would quickly move away.

We divided into groups and sought out the most pleasant spots in the shade, on the grass. There, beneath a tree, the boys in each group would set down their belongings: one his handkerchief, another his bag of food. Some took off their shoes, others their jackets if they had them, and then the games began. We played every sort of game: *arabadaule*, *turanë*, *pëzja*, *merr zjarr*, *pingëli*, games with flat stones and wrestling matches, with or without hooking one another's legs. Between games we would break into school songs or Lab folk songs. The hillside buzzed

with pupils. What delight! From time to time the teachers would pass nearby and cast an eye over us. We watched for that glance, eager to display our skill in jumping, wrestling or singing.

Looking back now from old age, I remember how swiftly those happy hours of childhood games on our excursions passed by. We played endlessly and never seemed to tire. Yet eventually our stomachs would protest: "I want food!" Then we would decide to eat, sitting together in the shade on the grass, cross-legged in a circle around the provisions we pooled among ourselves, as inseparable companions. Afterwards we would rush to the tekke fountain to drink water. We cupped our hands and plunged our faces into the cold stream that refreshed us so completely. We drank our fill, washed our faces and cooled our heads before moving away to make room for the line of boys waiting behind us.

After that we would lounge lazily in the shade for quite a while like lambs resting after grazing. It was the hottest part of the day. The teachers ate their meal inside the tekke, perhaps with Baba Mane, perhaps because the *Baba* had slaughtered an animal for them, for the tekke occasionally did so when guests arrived. It was a longstanding custom. People might donate five rams to the tekke, and in return it would slaughter a lamb for its visitors. This was so despite the fact that none of our teachers believed in religion, none of them brought offerings to the tekke and Mr. Rexho never ceased mocking its inhabitants.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon we would gather on the tekke threshing floor. It was a spacious area surrounded by stone benches and encircled by cypress trees. From there we could gaze across the plain, the Drino River, the mountains of Lunxhëri and the castle of Shën Triadha. What splendour under the rays of the setting sun! We loved our homeland deeply. We sat on the benches, our legs swinging freely while our eyes wandered across the landscape.

Mr. Arshi, our geography teacher, would join us. He had made us learn by heart all the villages of Lunxhëri, from Erind and Karjan to Kakoz and Stegopul. Here he taught us directly from nature itself. Pointing with his slender finger, he would say:

"There is Qesorat. There is Dhoksat."

"Where? Where?" we would ask.

"There is Qesorat," Mr. Arshi would repeat, "the village of Koto Hoxhi, our great teacher of the Albanian language. Boys, never forget that enlightened patriot!"

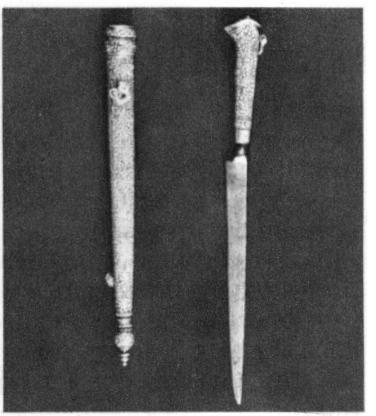
"And there is Dhoksat. This village has patriotic traditions. Muslim fighters who passed through there were welcomed as brothers by the Christians, just as you have heard in the folk songs." Then he would continue: "Listen to a folk song from the days when the villagers fought against armed bands. They ambushed and struck those who passed through Dhoksat:

"'In Koço Duda's guest room,
Hamit Guga joined the dance,
While sweet preserves were served in cups,
O preserve, cup after cup,
Prepared for you by Kaço Shkurta.
O Hamit Guga, gallant man,
At Sopot the mountain pass was cut off before you.'"

Then Mr. Arshi would point with his thin finger towards Sopot, where battles too had been fought against enemies. We would turn our heads as though enchanted. What a remarkable land ours was! In every ravine someone had fought against invaders!

Mr. Arshi would continue:

"There are no villages more beautiful in the world than those of Lunxhëri, with their houses hidden among fruit trees. Pears, plums, wild pears, mulberries, cornel cherries, quinces, figs, cherries and grapevines thrive there. There are magnificent

Kaço Shkurta and her sword. The people sing: *"Kaço Shkurta, scarcely a span tall,/ Yet she brandishes her sword between her legs."*

springs, fountains of clear, cool water flowing from the mountains as though singing. There are reservoirs where water is collected to irrigate gardens filled with vegetables, onions, leeks, pumpkins, spinach, parsley and many other plants, even mint, which the villagers bring for us to the Gjirokastra market on Mondays and Fridays."

"Sir!" one boy shouted from atop a wall. "My aunt puts mint in her stew. Does it grow there?"

Another jumped up:

"My mother puts oregano in her stew, and we gather that in Kuculla."

"Sir Arshi!" asked another. "Does Lunxhëri have clover as well?"

"Yes, it does." And Mr. Arshi pointed with his slender finger towards a mountain pass above Erind. "That pass is called Serpen. Beyond it lies a paradise called Çajup. There is nothing in the world like Çajup!"

"But Çajupi is one of our great poets, Sir!"

Patiently, Mr. Arshi would begin explaining once again.

There, on a wall beside the threshing floor beneath the cypresses, he taught his pupils in a simple and gentle manner the history of the homeland, its geography and its literature.

Evening would come. We would begin our return home, making our way back to our hearths just as the tekke's sheep returned to their fold, led by a bell-wether ram with a heavy bell hanging from its neck. Delighted by the sight of the flock, the boy beside me began singing:

"Oh, how beautiful are your pastures, how gladly the herds come down;
They arrive like a teeming swarm of bees — may God bless them!"

Then he turned to me. "Enver, what does Mulla Hysen say? Is there a God?"

"No," I replied. "Baba Çen says there is no God. He says it is all stories invented by ignorant men."

"But Mahmut told me that his father insists there is a God. He saw Him one dark night during a storm with thunder..."

"A likely story! We shall ask Mr. Rexho tomorrow. Better to believe Mr. Rexho and Baba Çen. They are educated men and they read books."

I returned home happy and not at all tired. In my mind echoed the volleys fired by Çerçiz. I imagined the struggles of Koto Hoxhi, the flowers, the trees, the livestock, the pinecones, the shrines, the dervishes, those tall cypresses and the springs flowing like the verses of Naim. I recounted everything to my mother, my grandmother and my sisters. When my uncle and father returned home, I told them the same stories. Then I ate my supper and fell into such a sweet sleep that the next morning my mother had to come and wake me for school.

Even today I remember those times — so sweet and yet so distant — from my childhood.

OUR AMUSEMENTS

Naturally, when my children read what I am writing here, they will laugh, for many of the games of my childhood are no longer played, having been replaced by others that are more developed and more modern. They will also be astonished and say: "Did Father really do these things?!!" For they have known their father only as a somewhat older and rather serious man. They have never seen me playing football, though they have heard me occasionally strike up a Lab folk song and laughed at it, while Nexhmije often used to beg me to "change the record." Yet this is the record I learned in my youth and, naturally, I sing it now in the manner of an old man and not like Vaçe Zela's brother.

In childhood we played with rag balls. At first my grandmother sewed them for me quite small, but they grew larger as I did. She made them carefully, trying to give them a proper round shape, though they often came out looking more like eggs. Neither she nor we children knew that there actually existed a kind of egg-shaped ball called a rugby ball. It too was made of rubber, but we learned of such things only much later and saw them with our own eyes even later. Occasionally one

of our childhood companions would receive a small coloured rubber ball from relatives returning from Istanbul, Ioannina or America. Such an event was rare in those days and, whenever we heard who the fortunate recipient was, we would gather in the alleyway or square near his house. The good fortune, however, seldom lasted long, for the stone-paved streets of Gjirokastra and our hobnailed shoes would soon tear the beautiful ball apart, and we would return to our traditional toys. We did not see football played as it is today until we attended the civic school. Even then footballs were very expensive and rare.

We did not play with balls only by kicking them but also by throwing them. One game we called *top-meso*. Three of us would play, with one standing in the middle. After marking out the distances, the two on the sides would begin throwing the ball at the one in the centre, while all three used feints and dodges, especially the player in the middle. If he managed to avoid being hit, then whichever of the two outside players had failed to throw accurately took his place in the centre. We aimed at the head because that was where a hit hurt most. Children, after all, possess a certain roughness in their games. Yet this game was less dangerous and more economical than football, and for that reason our mothers approved of it, since football quickly wore out our shoes, especially the toes. To avoid ruining them, we often preferred to play barefoot. We would hang our shoes by their tips in holes in a wall and run about with our feet becoming filthy. Every evening, whether in winter or summer, we were obliged to wash our feet at the fountain with ice-cold water so that my grandmother would not scold us for dirtying the house, the stairs and the rooms. We also had to wash away any blood and clean the cuts caused by sharp stones. I remember one occasion when I could not conceal my wounds because I was limping. My grandmother noticed and said: "Poor thing, you've scraped yourself raw and become a complete mess. Your

foot will swell." Neither my foot swelled nor anything else happened, but I did gain something from the incident. My good grandmother knitted me a pair of woollen socks and stitched thin leather soles onto them. She thought this would protect both my feet and my shoes. It certainly gave me one advantage: I became faster in games.

Another game we played in childhood was called *kut and pingëli*. We competed to see who could strike the *pingëli* the furthest with the *kut*, after which the distance was measured using the same stick. Whoever recorded the greatest number of *kut* lengths won. In the event of a tie, one had to keep the *pingëli* spinning in the air with repeated strikes from the *kut* without letting it fall to the ground, counting the number of hits until it dropped. This required considerable skill. Reflecting on these games, one realises they were not pointless. They helped strengthen the body. The game of *kut and pingëli*, for example, strengthened the back through constant bending and measuring and developed the arms through repeated striking. Yet it also had its dangers. If one was careless, the *pingëli* might strike one's head and draw blood. We had our remedy for that as well. We carried pieces of lime in our pockets, moistened them with water and applied them to the wound. The bleeding would stop. The only difficulty came when one returned home, for then it was wise to keep one's cap firmly on one's head, otherwise one was certain to receive a slap as well. Nowadays people have become very delicate. At the slightest injury and the smallest drop of blood they immediately recommend iodine, a hospital visit, bandages and anti-tetanus injections.

I remember once, during a stone-throwing "battle," being struck directly on the left side of my head. Blood began to flow, and my companions carried me home. My grandmother cursed both me and the boys who brought me back, but she did not panic. She took her traditional remedy of cheese and lime,

packed it into the wound and bound it with a cloth. It stung terribly and brought tears to my eyes. Nevertheless, I fell asleep. According to my grandmother, even in my sleep I kept asking: "Will I be able to go out tomorrow for the Bayram celebration?" In fact, the next day I rose perfectly well.

Running games were another constant feature of our childhood. Indeed, nearly all our games involved running, but especially the game called *merr zjarr*.* This consisted simply of chasing one another. Another player pursued you, trying to catch you, and in order to avoid him you would race back to a designated base, catch your breath, rest for a moment — in other words, "take fire" — and then set off running again, continuing until one of the players was completely exhausted.

Who can remember them all? We had many other games as well. The arenas of our childhood play were the narrow lanes and stone-paved alleyways, Çuçja's garden, Pocket Square, the Mosque Square and Mamani Square.

Finally, among the games of my childhood, I also remember our "wars" fought with stones or with sticks serving as swords, complete with attacks and retreats, prisoners and victories. These games are connected with another memory. In the house that later burned down, in the corner of what we called the "new divan," on the upper landing that led to the rooms above, there stood a chest which was usually kept locked. Yet nothing escapes the curiosity of children. One evening I rose from my bedding to go outside and saw my grandfather had opened the chest. He had taken out its contents and was cleaning them with a rag and some ashes. Standing there in my nightclothes, wide-eyed with amazement, I asked:

"Baba Çen, what are these and why do we keep them?"

The old man pinched my cheek and replied:

* "Take fire."

"These are swords and sabres."

"But whose are they?"

"They belong to us. Our forefathers left them to us."

"And what do we need them for?"

"To kill the Greeks if they try to seize Gjirokastra."

"Can these kill people, Grandfather?"

"They can stab and cut, my boy."

"Will you give me one to play with? May I take it out of its scabbard?"

"No, my son. These are not for playing with. When you grow up, and when the people's need requires it, then you may take them all and use them properly." Unfortunately, this treasure of my childhood, together with everything else, was consumed by the fire.

Since we are speaking of "wars," even when we grew older and attended school we did not abandon this game. I remember how, when we lived in the Hazmurat quarter, we boys of Hazmurat waged stone-throwing "wars" against the boys of Pllaka. Anyone who has been to Gjirokastra will know that between Pllaka and the main road there was once a stream; today schools and houses stand there. The stream formed the frontier. Our line ran from Xhano i Përroit, passed through Bajraktari Square and extended as far as Baba Hasan's well. We boys of Hazmurat defended this frontier under the command of "General" Abdi Zere, a strapping youth, somewhat rough and physically strong, with a weather-beaten face because he spent his days carrying water from the river in barrels and selling it for a living. Malo Zere, Abdi's brother and a friend of mine, was a "soldier" like me. Together we held our positions near Aunt Xhano's plum trees by the stream. We fought for as long as we could, and there was certainly no shortage of stones. Eventually we heard the signal for retreat. We Hazmurat boys were routed and fled uphill through the gardens along the stream towards Hazmurat, with

our opponents in pursuit. "General" Abdi Zere, wounded in the head by a stone, shouted for us to take up positions atop the garden walls. The "enemy" slowed its advance under the hail of rocks we rolled down upon them. Later, of course, we would have to endure the complaints of the garden owners whose walls we had damaged. Exhausted by our retreat, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath, we slipped into the cellar of a woman named Bedulla.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Make us a coffee, Aunt Bedulla," my friend Malo Zere said. "We're tired and worn out. Our hearts are pounding like a chicken's, partly from running and partly from fear."

"Where did I send you, and where are you coming from, that you're asking for coffee?" Aunt Bedulla replied.

"We're coming back from war," I said.

Aunt Bedulla seized the fire tongs and rushed at us, shouting: "Be off with you! Asking me for coffee, indeed!"

Today Malo Zere is a baker in Gjirokastra. Whenever I go there and meet him, we laugh, and I ask: "Do you remember Bedulla's coffee, Malo?"

When I grew somewhat older and, after our house burned down, we were still living in Palorto in Gjulfidan's house, our games extended beyond the confines of the squares I have mentioned above. Kuculla began to attract us, and I shall speak of that later.

Now I shall speak about the Cave of the Zekates. I used to go there with my friends to "ski." It was, however, a special kind of skiing, a distinctly Gjirokastra form of skiing. It was not the silent kind practised on snow with skis on one's feet, but a noisy version. Sitting on a smooth stone placed beneath you, which you carried in your hands while climbing up the cave slope, you would then slide down the bright, polished surface with a deafening racket. We would continue this game for hours,

thoroughly enjoying ourselves, while also admiring beautiful Gjirokastra. When we returned home in the evening, however, the backs of our trousers would be in tatters. My grandmother would notice and scold me:

"You little rascal, you've worn the seat of your trousers to pieces, as though the dogs had eaten them. Where have you been?"

I could not hide the truth, because otherwise she would not mend them.

"The Cave of the Zekates ate them."

"Curse the Cave of the Zekates!" my grandmother would exclaim.

Later I learned that when my grandmother cursed the Cave of the Zekates, it was not only my torn trousers that troubled her. She was also cursing Xhafer Zeko, known as "the Lame," who was a relative by marriage. My grandmother and great-aunt had quarrelled with his family and relations between them had broken down completely; they neither spoke nor visited one another. Although I promised her that I would never again go to the cave, my grandmother, thrifty as she was, took precautions. Thus, not only did my woollen socks have thin leather soles sewn onto them, but the seat of my trousers was also reinforced with leather. As we would say today, I became "armoured."

Games with hazelnuts and walnuts were also favourites among us children, for these games were connected with the stomach and therefore differed from the others in more than one respect. They involved not only appetite but also, in a simple way, personal property and self-interest. We understand such things now, though we did not then. The game was played in two ways. In the first version, a walnut or hazelnut was placed in the centre and players attempted to strike it from a distance. Whoever hit it won all the nuts. This variation required good aim, and I was not particularly successful at it.

The second method involved throwing hazelnuts against a wall. A mark was drawn, and if the nut landed within a palm's breadth of that mark, the player won all the nuts. In this version I did well because I had large hands and could easily claim that my palm reached the mark. Yet the game was seasonal and did not last long. Firstly, hazelnuts and walnuts did not often come our way and, when they did, our appetites usually consumed them before we could gather to play. Secondly, the game was closely associated with the Muslim feast of Bayram.

On Bayram day, after we had been dressed in our new clothes, we were each given a large handkerchief. We tied its corners together to form a sort of bag and then went from door to door among our relatives, ostensibly to offer holiday greetings. In truth, our main concern was to collect what we called the "Bayram fruits": hazelnuts, almonds, walnuts and "*zariko*" sweets, together with the occasional grosh or lek. Thus, during those days children accumulated what might be called "ammunition," both to satisfy their stomachs and to use in games. When hazelnuts were lacking, they were replaced by pen nibs, new and old, white, yellow or rust-coloured — a sign that schools were functioning and pupils were writing.

I remember a period when hazelnuts and nibs were replaced by cartridge cases and bullet heads. These had one disadvantage: they were heavy and tore the pockets of our trousers. But where had all these cartridge cases come from, becoming toys for us children? I shall explain, just as I once explained to Comrade Gogo Nushi, if I am not mistaken, when we were together in Gjirokastra, standing on the balcony of the Party building and looking out over the town. I had fallen into deep thought, staring intently towards the slope behind the House of Culture, the cinema and the former Party Committee building. Gogo was speaking to me, but I was not listening. At last he asked:

"What on earth is there on that hillside that you've been

staring at for the last twenty minutes without taking your eyes off it?"

I replied:

"It is true that you can see nothing there, but I see myself and my childhood friends in that place, spending days collecting bullets and cartridge cases. No battle had taken place there. It is true that, as my grandfather told me, from the slopes near Baba Mane's tekke, Çerçiz Topulli fired his Mannlicher rifle towards the windows of the government building to cover the withdrawal of the comrades who had killed the Turkish major. Yet the bullets I am speaking of were not Çerçiz's bullets. They came from a munitions depot belonging to the Greeks, located precisely where the old Uniate church stood. One night, after the Greeks had departed, I do not know why, the depot caught fire. Throughout the night ammunition exploded all over Gjirokastra with continual bangs and detonations. Once calm had been restored and the danger had passed, we children rushed there and picked through the remains, gathering bullets and cartridge cases like hens pecking grains of maize. That is the story behind our game with bullets."

We had many other games as well, but I might mention *arabadaule* and the "game of the castle." I was very fond of these. They were athletic games, requiring speed, agility and jumping. Nowadays *arabadaule* is called *kala dibrançe* or the "wooden horse," but in those days the horse was our own backs. The game became difficult when one of the players was particularly large and the others struggled to leap over him. I was one of those whom it was easy to vault over but more difficult to clear gracefully. In the "castle" game, however, I was an excellent "horse"; my back was sturdy and one after another my companions climbed onto me.

Another game was what we called *pëzja*, which we continued to play even later, when we were older and attending the

lyceum. In this game one covered one's eyes with one hand so as not to see the others, while the other arm was stretched beneath the armpit, leaving the open palm exposed behind the back. One of the players would then strike that palm with all his strength. The task was to guess who had delivered the blow. If one guessed correctly, the culprit was punished and had to take one's place. Otherwise, one continued receiving slaps. In this game I enjoyed both the advantages that came with having large hands: I could strike hard and I also presented a broad target for others. Thus, after a session of *pëzja*, it was difficult even to raise one's hands, no matter how cold the weather outside might be.

Of a similar nature were the games played with *kokall* and *dizbai*. Punishments were determined by the leader of the game and administered on the open palm with a handkerchief tied into knots and often soaked in water. This punishment was worse than the cane of Mulla Kaman when he struck us in the *mektep*.

Enough now of memories of games. Let me turn to other recollections.

The people of Gjirokastra have always valued education, culture and the arts. Nor was this true only of the town itself. Learned men emerged throughout the region, from Libohova, Dropull and Labëria, the latter distinguished particularly for its warriors. Gjirokastra produced notable *kadis* (judges), doctors and *ulema*, as they were called, as well as writers and poets. Some of the most distinguished men of letters came from Zagoria and Lunxhëri, while physicians emerged from Selo and Dropull. I shall not dwell on these matters here, however, for my concern is with my own memories of youth. In the course of these recollections I shall speak of Andon Zako Çajupi, Koto Hoxhi, old Doctor "Selonë" (as we called him after the name of his village), Doctor Telemahu, Ramiz Harxhi and others. At present, however, my concern is with the people rather than with individuals.

The people are everything. They were everything even in the world of my childhood, though naturally I did not then possess the understanding that I have today. The people of Gjirokastra are brave and courageous. At first sight they may appear reserved and not especially demonstrative. They are measured in both speech and gesture. This stems from their sufferings, struggles and misfortunes, which befell not only them but the whole of our country, though particularly the district of Gjirokastra, which was threatened by Greek chauvinists and oppressed economically by the local aghas. The poor people struggled to wrest a grain of maize from stone and rock, yet they never bowed before the aghas, the beys or the Greeks. The aghas retained their economic power until the liberation of the homeland, but it must be said — although this may seem somewhat "unscientific" to those who classify popular movements into neat categories — that the poor people of Gjirokastra never submitted to the aghas. They never accepted their authority. On the contrary, they openly despised and attacked them. As for the beys, they had long since disappeared from Gjirokastra. From my childhood I remember only one "bey," swollen like a great barrel and enormously overweight. He dressed in anachronistic garments dating from the era of the Ottoman majors, though without the sword. Only the embroidered braid on his chest and sleeves remained, and even that had blackened with age. His name was Rustem Bey and he served as the municipality's chief street-sweeper. We laughed at him and called him the "carnival bey."

The people of Gjirokastra have a reputation for stinginess and frugality. It is said that "Gjirokastra folk tie up the cat when they eat bread." Yet they are not truly miserly. They are economical and good household managers, especially the women, and this is certainly true. But they are not miserly in the negative sense of the word. They never display their poverty before guests

and always have the word "economy" on the tip of their tongues. They do not approve of those who, as they say in Gjirokastra, "have a loose hand." Whenever I speak with ordinary people and urge them to practise economy, I often add: "Do not forget that I am a man of Gjirokastra." On such occasions I tell two stories. One concerns my grandfather, or rather my grandfather's brother, while the other may not be entirely true, though it is very well contrived. Here, then, are the two stories.

1) My uncle (my father) told me that his uncle, Mulla Beqir Hoxha, was a liberal old man who possessed both a strong sense of hospitality and a good sense of humour. Unlike most men of Gjirokastra, who never took wives from outside the town, he had married a girl from Libohova, the daughter of a poor man who came every Monday to Gjirokastra to sell a bundle of firewood and, in summer, a few melons. Naturally, before returning home, this peasant from Libohova would stop to eat lunch with his son-in-law, Mulla Beqir. On one occasion the lady of the house had prepared *qofte bobollaqe*, small meatballs served in a broth with vinegar. (As an aside, I should mention that I still enjoy this dish very much and my cook Niko never fails to prepare it for me, though he cannot make it quite like my grandmother did.) The poor old man from Libohova, tired from the journey and his work, naturally ate heartily at the table of his son-in-law, who was somewhat better off in worldly terms than he was. Whenever he dipped his spoon into the common deep dish placed in the centre of the low table, he invariably "fished out" not one meatball but never fewer than two. Mulla Beqir watched him from the corner of his eye and, after the fourth spoonful, remarked pleasantly:

"Tell me, dear in-law, how do you climb the stairs in Libohova? One step at a time, or three at once?"

The clever peasant replied:

"It depends on the stairs, Mulla Beqir. If they are small and I

am in a hurry, I take them two at a time, sometimes even three."

Mulla Beqir then said:

"May it turn to blood and fat for you. You are an intelligent man."

2) A middle-class man from Gjirokastra lost his mother. For three days his relatives kept him in their house, where people came to offer condolences in accordance with custom. On the third day he returned home. Three or four friends, however, who had never eaten at his house before, conspired among themselves and went to pay their respects, intending — without any invitation — to stay for both lunch and dinner. And that is exactly what they did. The host, who had no idea of their intentions, waited for them to leave, but they showed no sign of doing so. At last he called his wife and instructed her to prepare lunch. A fine meal was served, they ate, drank and then lay down to sleep. They rose late in the afternoon and resumed their conversation. The host realised that dinner would now have to be prepared as well, and so it was, much like the lunch. After dinner, while they were talking, one of the guests said to the lady of the house:

"Tomorrow at lunch we would like you to make us a cheese burek, for which you are famous."

She replied:

"With great pleasure, as the guests wish." And so it was done. The host, too, did not lose his composure.

The guests ate lunch the following day as well. Afterwards they said to one another, "Enough, we have imposed too much," and got up to leave. Their host embraced them and accompanied them to the door. But when they had gone a few steps, he called them back and said:

"Come a little closer. I have something to tell you."

The guests returned to the doorway, and the host, smiling broadly, said:

"Sit down and kiss the threshold, because you will never cross it again." Both sides had matched one another perfectly.

I recount this incident involving the man from Gjirokastra so that people today may learn from it and abandon the old backward customs associated with deaths and weddings.

Yet, despite the hardships of social life, the men and women of Gjirokastra are deeply likeable people. They are hospitable and generous and show particular respect for outsiders. They take an interest in them, help them and create a warm environment for them. But when someone attempts to deceive them, they know how to put him in his place. The people of Gjirokastra value progress. They cherish their folklore, their songs and their dances. They have always sung and danced.

The Lab-style songs of Gjirokastra possess distinctive characteristics both in content and in musical form, as do the dances. The Gjirokastra song, as a variant of the Lab tradition, is performed differently from others: it is drawn out, its refrain returns and returns again and its tone is deeper, tending towards the bass register. Although I sang frequently in my youth, I could never quite perform the Gjirokastra style properly. At most I could join in and occasionally take up the response. My uncle sang well, particularly in his old age. When I asked him to sing quietly by the fireplace, he would do so reluctantly, but he never refused me. He would begin sometimes with a Lab song from Gjirokastra, at other times with a song from Myzeqe.

I remember one of the Lab songs, the song of Balil Nezha:

"Kuç, Kallarat and Bolena
Rose as one with Balil;
By the river they met the enemy,
As the call went from door to door,
Balilo, noble Balil.
At the Pass of Peshkëpi

The son of Xhixhi fought
Against the Ottoman battalions
For Albania's freedom,
Until a bullet struck his chest."

The old man also loved the songs of Myzeqe, which I too like very much, though I could never sing them properly. I remember — and how I regret now that I did not possess a tape recorder to preserve it — that he was particularly fond of a Myzeqe song whose words ran more or less as follows:

"O mountain partridge,
Your sleeves rolled up,
Water-jugs in your hands,
You walked beside the river,
Lifting your kerchief lightly,
O Saint Mary of Strum," and so on.

The people of Gjirokastra sang everywhere: at weddings, in the streets, in the shops where they worked, in the fields while mowing grass, while splitting boards with mallets in the caves of Dunavat and Manalat, while working with horse-drawn carriages, while carrying water in barrels, while fitting hobnails into shoes, while hammering leather upon a stone resting on a calloused knee, while carrying a hundred-kilogram sack on their shoulders or while tending sheep. They sang not only when they were happy but also when their hearts were troubled. A man from Gjirokastra sings even when he is alone, let alone when two or three or more people gather together.

Women sang less frequently than men in Gjirokastra. They treated song as something precious and sang mainly on special occasions — at weddings and celebrations. The songs of the women of Gjirokastra are beautiful and harmonious. Their dances, in particular, delight me greatly, especially the elegance

of their rhythm.

The songs of Gjirokastra are songs of battles and heroes. They celebrate fighters for freedom, but they also honour brave individuals regardless of the reasons behind their deeds. Yet not all Gjirokastra songs are heroic. There are also songs about other aspects of life: love, family, pioneering teachers, court decisions, livestock, peasants and many contemporary events. Their satire is subtle, especially in the songs of women. Together they constitute a vast and inexhaustible treasure of the people among whom I grew up and from whom I drew inspiration during my simple youth. My friend Zihni Sako knows this well, for he has devoted himself passionately to collecting these songs.

My soul is gladdened whenever I go to Gjirokastra and hear the city's group of elderly singers perform under the leadership of Xhevat Avdalli. All those who belong to this ensemble of Gjirokastra singers were companions of my childhood. Xhevat and his friends sing exceptionally well. Perhaps I enjoy them so much because, together with the beauty of their songs, they bring back memories of my youth, when we too sang. I myself sang



"My soul is gladdened whenever I go to Gjirokastra and hear the city's group of elderly singers perform."

with friends during the years when we lived in Palorto, when I was younger, and later, after we had moved to Hazmurat, I sang with Elmaz Konjari, with Poçoli (Çabeli), with Namik Jaho,

Laze Lelo, Sako Lelo, Sami Shupo, Neshet Halimi, Reshat Toto, Malo Kone and many others. After leaving school and finishing our homework, we would gather beneath the portico of the Hazmurat mosque or beneath Reshat's cherry tree, where we ate figs, sang, played, joked and teased one another in good humour.

I remember that we used to say of Malo Kone, who was never particularly orderly at school:

"Cenkua (his father) *was a porter,*
Atifi (his brother) *a bugler,*
Malo a vagabond..."

Yet Malo Kone, that supposed "vagabond," became a partisan, a distinguished and courageous officer, a Party member and a gifted driver. Whenever I wish to tease my driver, Isuf Çoba, I tell him: "There is no driver like Malo Kone."

Such were the friends of my childhood, with whom I attended school, studied, played and sang. At times we quarrelled, though never seriously, and we were soon reconciled. Later, when we grew up and the homeland called upon us, we took up our rifles and fought with determination. Many of my childhood companions went to the mountains to join the struggle. A few betrayed us and joined the Balli Kombëtar, but we captured them and gave them the punishment they deserved. Many other friends of my youth are today distinguished officers, professors, workers, mechanics, drivers, financiers and honoured teachers, such as Sokrat Kutra, Muharrem Gega and others.

Once, when I was at the Party Committee in Gjirokastra, I noticed that the bank branch stood nearby. I had never entered a bank before. "Come," I said to my companions, "let me at least poke my head into this place of money." I approached the wire-screened counter and, smiling, said to the bank employee as I shook his hand:

"I have never had money and never wish to have anything

to do with it."

The employee, who continued holding my hand firmly, replied:

"Then come, Enver, let us sing together once more as we did in the old days."

I looked carefully into his eyes and recognised Poçoli, my old friend who used to provide such a fine vocal response during the evenings of Ramadan, when groups of us climbed and descended the market road on our way to Hazmurat. We played and sang with Sado, with Elmaz and with the sons of Bajo the Gypsy blacksmith, who at that time worked near Bajraktari Square. We also sang with Aqif Selfo and Selami Xhaxhi, about whom I shall speak at greater length, for they were among the dearest, finest, most sincere and simplest friends of my youth, together with Elmaz Konjari and Reshat Toto. But what did we sing? All manner of songs. I can scarcely remember the words now, though they were of the kind I described earlier.

My children! One evening your mother prepared a little trap for me. She switched on the tape recorder while I was humming several Lab songs under my breath, unaware that she was recording me. When I discovered it, I laughed. The recordings themselves have no particular value, yet what your mother did pleased me. For when we grow old, I shall play those tapes and compel her not merely to listen to the Lab songs again and again, but also to learn them and sing along with me.

I regret that, despite all my efforts, I never succeeded in teaching you to sing in the Lab style. You cannot imagine what you have missed.

When one sings Lab songs, one feels more deeply the grandeur of the song of Mashkullora:

"At the plane tree in Mashkullora,
Çerçiz raised his voice:

'Let my men pass,
Or I'll stain you red with blood;
I am Çerçiz Topulli.'"

Or:

"O poor Gjirokastra,
What has become of handsome Çerço?
Poor Haso mourns and weeps for him..."

In the days of our childhood, whenever a death occurred, after the deceased had been laid out in the centre of the room, all the women would raise mournful and terrifying cries to announce the death. This custom gradually disappeared over the years, yet I experienced it myself when my brother died of tuberculosis.

Or let us take some of the other songs we sang in our youth. As for who exactly the figures celebrated in these songs were, Zihni Sako knows the details. At that time we sang them simply as they were written and, in singing them, we admired the courage of these men, their contempt for death and for the enemy or the local bey.

"The snow-covered mountains weep
For the fighters who come and go,
Who make their way to Missolonghi,
To stricken Missolonghi,
Where Lord Byron himself is fighting."

At school we learned where Missolonghi was, who Lord Byron was, how he had travelled through our lands and had written such beautiful things about the Albanians in *Childe Harold*, and who these Albanian "outlaws" were who had gone to aid the Greek uprising.

Or the song:

"O renowned Gjirokastra,
How did Shemo become a hajduk*?*
They bound him and took him to Ioannina,
And forty-two cannons were fired."

Or the song:

"The thirteen Bilbils
Walked to the gallows unafraid.
'Up, Bilbil, throw off the noose!'
'Wait, bey, let me finish my cigarette;
I am no craven weakling —
I am Bilbil, with a sword at my side.'"

Or the verse we used to sing:

"Riza Bey, Riza Kolonja,
Your sword can cut through bolts of iron..."

My mother knows this poem by heart. It is very long. She is old now, yet she has not forgotten it. I have asked her to recite it and, in recent years, she has done so for me. I believe I even recorded it, though I am not entirely certain.

I remember Riza Kolonja and his sword as well. We had a neighbour, a very kind, honest and witty old woman. Her name was Hava Toro. She had a son called Mahmut, who was an honourable man. Mahmut's own son became a distinguished agronomist in the years of the Party. Aunt Hava was very fond of us children. She entertained us and would shake the mulberry tree in her courtyard so that we could gather the fruit. One sunny day an elderly man with white moustaches was sitting on the stone bench in Hava's courtyard. I gathered a handful of mulberries and offered them to him. He patted my head affec-

* Balkan outlaw-rebel, often portrayed as a folk hero.

tionately. I asked him:

"Who are you, sir?"

"I am Riza Kolonja," the old man replied. Whether he was a cousin or some other relative of Aunt Hava I do not know, but I remember that when we played and ate mulberries in her courtyard with Hiqmet Tartala and Rushit, the son of Mulla Refik, Riza Bey Kolonja would tap on the window and call us upstairs to bring him some mulberries. Sometimes we would also bring a jug of water to "Shkularaku," as Aunt Hava called him. In his room he would show us his "famous sword," reciting:

"Riza Bey, Riza Kolonja,
Your sword can cut through bolts of iron..."

One day I asked him:

"Uncle Riza, did your sword not become damaged when you cut through nails with it?"

Uncle Riza stood up, drew the shining blade from its scabbard and said:

"Here, see for yourself. Does it look damaged?" I stared at it in amazement and replied:

"No, it does not." He patted my head and said:

"When you grow up, you will understand how such things happen."

What I am about to recount has nothing to do with songs or dances, but concerns a sad event. Earlier I mentioned Rushit, the son of Mulla Refik Mezini, with whom we ate mulberries in Aunt Hava's courtyard. He was a childhood companion of mine whom we nicknamed "Onion," because he always smelled of onions and rarely washed his hands. Yet he was an excellent swimmer. Every Monday and Friday, market days in the town, he would go to the river bridge and dive into the water — not once, but many times. He did not do this for pleasure. He did it to earn a little money with which to buy books and exercise

books. When the peasants of Lunxhëri came to Gjirokastra for the market, he would stand on the bridge and say to them: "Can anyone jump from the bridge into the river fully clothed? I can do it, if you give me a grosh." And when the peasants gave him a coin or two, he would leap. He had turned it into a trade of sorts. We admired "Onion" for his courage, but we also urged him to abandon such a dangerous practice. One day the poor fellow drowned. He struck his head on a rock and the current carried him away downstream. They searched for a long time before finally recovering his body. We were deeply saddened. We wept for him and for Mulla Refik, for Rushit had been his only son.

As an aside, I should add that Mulla Refik was a tall hodja with a deep voice, large hands and large feet. He served as imam in one of the town's mosques. By character he was a good man, but in matters of religion he was completely ignorant. He neither truly believed nor understood much. He had memorised a few passages which he recited in the mosque by rote, without understanding them, merely to earn a small salary from the religious endowment. When he grew old, he no longer called the *ezan** from the mosque but from the upper room of his house. After the death of "Onion," and once his grief had somewhat subsided, Onion's sister, who was a friend of ours, used to tell us that the hodja was always thinking about his chickens. She recounted how, even when calling the *ezan*, although he would customarily raise his head towards the sky — towards God — his eyes would still wander around the garden and courtyard in case some stray chicken had entered. If one did appear, instead of continuing the *ezan* he would shout: "Bako! (I believe that was his daughter's name.) Hurry and close the little gate — the neighbours' chickens have come in again!" Mulla Refik

* Muslim call to prayer.

was friendly with the elders of our household. He disliked his wealthy merchant brothers, Asllan and Ramiz, who never gave him the slightest assistance, not even a piece of bread. When Mulla Refik sat with my elders in the veranda over a cup or two, they would often break into song. Baba Çen would say to him:

"Refik, you spoil the song. Your voice sounds like a *xhore*."

"As if we were planning to sell it!" Mulla Refik would reply, stuffing a piece of cheese into his mouth.

"You are demolishing all the appetisers, you glutton!" the old man would say.

"Why do we have them if not to eat them? Let us eat while we can; afterwards we shall tighten our belts like Shamo the Gypsy!" Mulla Refik would answer, laughing loudly.

For us, the word *xhore* had two meanings. It could be used both figuratively and literally. A *xhore* voice meant a coarse or heavy voice. A *xhore head* meant a thick-headed person. Simply saying, "You're a *xhore*," was something we told schoolmates who never studied at all. The literal meaning of *xhore*, however, referred to a branch of cornel or some other tree which, where it had broken away from the trunk, formed a large knot. We would shape this with tools. But what did we do with these *xhore* sticks? We played golf. Do not laugh! Golf in Gjirokastra in those days?! Surely not! As though Gjirokastra were London! Our game was not called golf, nor was Gjirokastra London, yet our *xhore* game did resemble golf in some respects. The golf club was replaced by our knotted stick, the elegant holes of a golf course by puddles and the golf balls by corncobs.

We fashioned our *xhore* sticks in my aunt's garden together with Sado Gami, my cousin, the son of my maternal aunt. I called him "Sud Gam." We were nearly the same age. We were fond of one another, quarrelled and fought together through the thorn bushes of my aunt's garden. Garden was perhaps too grand a name for it. In reality it was a steep slope which the old

people had planted, seemingly to prevent landslides that might threaten the house. They had planted whatever they could: oaks, bay trees, a fig tree here and there, vines, a mulberry tree, a wild plum tree, perhaps an elder tree. Yet all of it was overgrown with thorns and brambles. To us, however, that garden was paradise, the forest of our dreams. There we set traps for birds, gathered violets to take to our teachers, hung the slings that my aunt made for us from the branches, ate cornel cherries and counted every fig on the trees.

One day my aunt bought a goat, but the poor creature had to be fed. She put us to work clearing thorn bushes. Each of us was given a small hoe and we worked the entire morning. By midday blisters had formed on my hands. Using the pocket knife I carried tied to a string, I performed an "operation" on myself. Unfortunately, it ended badly. The wound became infected, filled with pus and became inflamed. This time a real operation was required, performed by a real doctor — "Master Telemah," as my aunt called him. I still carry the scar of that "operation" in the palm of my hand. Thus, one operation required a second operation. Because of the pain and infection, the area beneath my arm also became swollen. Master Telemah cut into that as well, and so I still bear a scar there too. When we were young and swam naked in the river, my friends would ask:

"What happened there, under your arm?"

With complete seriousness I would answer:

"I was wounded in battle."

At the time we never imagined that one day we would fight a real war, that we might truly be wounded or even killed — not in games this time, but for the great cause of the people and of the homeland.

The garden was a long strip of land belonging to several owners: my aunt, Uncle Haxhi Shurdhi, Uncle Bastriu, Uncle Mujmani, the Bozgos and Selfo Qoftja. Each person's boundary

was marked by the corners of the houses, but within the garden there were neither walls nor borders for us. We roamed wherever we pleased among the trees. The only difficulty we had was old Uncle Mujman Qosja. He was somewhat cantankerous by nature, though not a bad man. He kept an eye on us because we ate his cornel cherries and pomegranates. We could not get at his mulberries, for those stood directly in front of his house.

"Gjulo," Uncle Mujman would say to my mother, "speak to that boy of yours. He has stripped my cornel trees bare."

"Oh, Uncle Mujman," Mother would reply, "what are you saying? Enver is not one of those boys."

"That may be, Gjulo, but that is what they tell me. I have not seen it with my own eyes."

At home Mother would pull my ears. To improve relations with old Uncle Mujman, whenever I met him returning from the market carrying a bag full of vegetables, I would say: "Uncle Mujman, let me carry the bag for you. You are an old man."

Uncle Mujman would smile slyly, understanding perfectly well what I was up to, yet he would place the bag on my shoulder. Once he said: "I shall repay your effort with cornel cherries." My ears burned with embarrassment, for I was fond of Uncle Mujman. He was an upright man and had no sons. The two he had had emigrated to America when they were young, leaving him alone with Aunt Nazo, his elderly wife.

The garden was also our musical "workshop." Children in our day did not have the variety of instruments available today. Not only were we poor and unable to buy them, but they were scarcely available in the market at all. Yet our hearts were full of music, especially in spring, when the leaves unfolded, violets emerged beneath the brambles and nightingales sang among the thorns of the garden. Then long live the pocket knife! We would begin making our own pipes and horns, particularly from the bark of bay branches. The bark served for our pipes and

horns, while we ate the red flowers of the bay trees like goats. We carefully stripped off the fresh bark in a long piece, twisted it into the shape of a horn and fitted a reed at the end, which we also fashioned from slender branches. To loosen it without damaging it, we tapped gently with the handle of a knife while chanting:

"Come out, nightingale, carnation flower,
And if you do not come out, may you burst!"

Sometimes we also made wooden flutes. This was a craft at which "Çobani," a boy my age from the village of Kardhiq, excelled. His father worked for my uncles. Çobani was a very intelligent boy. He climbed trees like a monkey, could turn somersaults with hands and feet together, tended goats and never attended school. Beneath the large field of my eldest uncle, as we called it, he would carve flutes while I told him stories from books and tried to teach him the alphabet.

Later, small whistles imported from Ioannina appeared in the shops. We nearly deafened the neighbourhood with them. Afterwards local craftsmen began making them from tin.

The only traditional instrument regularly sold in the market was the tin flute. At Malo the tinsmith's shop, hanging beside oil lamps and assorted wares, one could find tin flutes. Shepherds bought them most often. The people of Labëria knew both their craft and their music; townspeople generally did not. In Gjirokastra there were two remarkable and gifted men who played the flute superbly: two blind men, Vehip Qorri and Selman Qorri. They came from villages in Labëria and were desperately poor. They lived in two miserable sheds. Both begged in the streets. Each possessed only a walking stick and a flute — absolutely nothing else. Yet they were wonderful human beings, extraordinary artists of the flute. Amid their boundless misery, their hearts still sang. I loved them dearly from the age

of ten until the day they died. Selman Qorri died during Zogu's rule, whereas Vehip lived to see Liberation. He experienced the care shown by the Party and spent his final years, honoured and respected, in a home for the elderly.

Vehip and Selman played both separately and together. One would begin and the other would answer, according to the listener's request, whether in a sorrowful or a joyful mood. Their fingers — reddened, yellowed and often blackened by tobacco — moved over the flute as though possessed. The sound they produced was enchanting. Few people truly appreciated this marvel. Whenever I think of the flute, I immediately think of Vehip and Selman. Vehip was also a composer of *bejtes* — improvised verse. In the fullest sense of the phrase, he did not speak in prose but in poetry.

When I was ten years old, Vehip must have been about thirty, while Selman was somewhat older. Both lived in Palorto, in our neighbourhood, though Vehip lived closer to our house. I loved him almost as I loved my own father. I shared with him the piece of maize bread and cheese that Mother gave me for my midday meal. He would say: "Eat it yourself, my son. You are young and need to grow." At Bayram, when I collected a few coins, I shared them with Vehip Qorri. We would buy pastries and flutes from Stathi's shop. Whenever we met — when I took him by the hand and led him to his dark shed, black as night, or through the Alley of the Madmen, or when rain caught us in the street and we sheltered beneath a doorway to avoid getting soaked — Vehip would say:

"Shall I play something for you?"

"Play, Uncle Vehip."

"How would you like it?"

"Play something sad, Uncle Vehip." And the flute of that unknown artist would sing with melancholy.

Sometimes I would say:

"Uncle Vehip, play 'Tana.'" And he would begin:

"Tana, dear Tana,
Rise and wake your father;
Our sheep are gone,
And the lead ram is already turning on the spit."

It was the shepherd's song, telling of thieves who had raided the flock, the shepherd announcing the news through the voice of his flute to the shepherd's daughter.

How many *bejtes* I heard from Vehip Qorri. He either composed them himself or improvised them at my request. One only had to give him a subject and within a minute he would fashion a poem. How guilty I feel that in those years of my youth, when I could read and write, I never wrote them down. How badly I acted in failing to preserve them. Yet at that time I did not possess the understanding I have today. For that reason I say to young people: let nothing escape from the wellspring of the people. Record everything!

I wrote down a few of his *bejtes* later in my notebooks, but only a very few. I remember that when I was in primary school we read some small, rare books by Naim Frashëri, printed abroad in the Istanbul alphabet. Baba Çen would find these books for me. Uncle Vehip would ask: "What poem did you learn today, my son?"

I would answer with whichever came to mind — "The Candle," for example.

"Who wrote it?" Vehip would ask.

"Naim Frashëri," I would reply.

"Recite it to me as well." And I, knowing it by heart, would recite it while looking into his sightless white eyes, which somehow seemed to be gazing at me. I remember that once, when I finished the poem, Vehip Qorri exclaimed: "Ah, Naim Bey, may I kiss your forehead!" Then he instantly improvised this *bejte*,

which I still remember:

"In my humble stable
I sit listening to Enver.
Bless you, Naim Bey,
Let me kiss you on the brow.
You are light, pure light,
A lantern in the dark;
You opened Vehip's eyes."

In my brief memoirs, where I also speak of Uncle Vehip, I noted down, if I am not mistaken, several other *bejtes* that he composed after I told him some story. I wrote something as well about the great French revolutionary Robespierre, who had captured our youthful imaginations when we studied the French Revolution that overthrew the monarchy and beheaded King Louis XVI. But I do not know whether I ever recorded this *bejte*, which Uncle Vehip improvised in an instant while I was accompanying him to the tekke gardens on market day, where he would go to beg for a tomato, a leek or perhaps a head of garlic:

"O unhappy France,
Why did you kill Robespierre,
The man who gave you liberty,
And send him to the guillotine?"

Perhaps Lefter Dilo may yet uncover one of Uncle Vehip's *bejtes*, for others of my generation may have been more diligent than I and may have kept notes. As the people say: "Stone by stone, the wall is built."

There is, however, another treasure of Vehip Qorri's that can never be gathered or preserved. That treasure was the marvellous sound he drew from his tin flute, a gift from Malo the tinsmith. Joys, sorrows and sufferings flowed from Vehip Qorri's flute. Those enchanting melodies have remained in the

minds and hearts of all who heard them. They have become part of our flesh and blood, part of our feelings and habits, together with the great treasure of popular folk culture.

When Vehip and Selman Qorri played their flutes, the old men would sit listening attentively, as we said in Gjirokastra, while we younger people stood and listened to the mournful lament of these two folk "bards," beloved by all the people of the town. When the Party liberated the country, Vehip Qorri, who was still alive, was taken to the old people's home in Hazmurat, housed in the Kadare family mansion. There, continuing to play his flute, he spent the remaining days of his life in peace, tranquillity and contentment.

Vehip possessed an extraordinary ear. He recognised my voice even after years had passed without our seeing one another. Thus, whenever I returned from Korça or from France, and even when I came back from the war and visited Gjirokastra after so many years, the same thing would happen. It was enough for me to say:

"Vehip, how is your health?" He would pause for a moment, turn his vacant eyes towards me and answer joyfully, without anyone having told him who I was:

"Ah, Enver, you have come!"

Such were Vehip and Selman Qorri, wonderful yet impoverished sons of a poor people who nevertheless never bowed before adversity.

Musical instruments were used very little in Gjirokastra during our youth. At that time the dominant form was the Lab song, which was sung without instrumental accompaniment. The same was true of both women's and men's dances, which were accompanied only by singing. The tambourine was used very rarely — so rarely, indeed, that I do not remember seeing it during my childhood. The Gypsies used it, together with the vi-

olin and the *jongar*,* and sometimes they formed small ensembles. Their Lab songs, set to melody and accompanied by instruments, had a different sound altogether, far more harmonious than the songs of the Gypsies of Vlora. Even so, such ensembles were not numerous in Gjirokastra, nor were they professional in the way that was characteristic of Gypsy musicians in other regions, such as Përmet or Korça. Only occasionally would they be invited to perform at weddings.

Later, as the municipal school became somewhat established and, subsequently, the French Lyceum of Gjirokastra, musical instruments began to appear in greater numbers. We started to learn musical notation at school from our teachers, who had graduated from the Elbasan Normal School or from other institutions. Patriotic songs, however, were taught to us from the very first year of school. I sang all the patriotic songs of those days with great enthusiasm, just as all my classmates did throughout every grade. The first thing we learned at school was these songs, for there were no others. Curiously, we did not sing Lab songs at school, even though most of us knew them. Presumably this was because the curriculum came from Tirana. We sang Lab songs only outside school, learning them ourselves, informally and spontaneously, simply by listening. Perhaps our teachers considered them somewhat archaic, although most of them could sing Lab songs very well.

When we entered the lyceum, both the Albanian and French teachers encouraged our interest in musical instruments and in organising small orchestras. Our music teacher was Pano Hido, who played the violin. Unlike everyone else, he wore his hair cut square. We formed our own school orchestra at the lyceum. My uncle bought me a mandolin, which was a source of immense joy. Mother even made a case for it. Other classmates

* Traditional three-stringed lute.

— Aqif, Elmaz, Hamit, Selahudin, Fejzi, Kiço, Fani, Nuri, Xhemal, Sedat, Kamber and others — likewise purchased mandolins, violins or guitars. Our orchestra had no wind instruments. The French headmaster of the lyceum, Monsieur Coutan, took a particular interest in the orchestra, and within a short time we learned many songs, both with and without sheet music. We performed concerts at the lyceum and beyond it on festive occasions, on prize-giving days at school, during theatrical performances and even for the general public, playing from the balcony of the students' club, which overlooked the centre of the bazaar. I shall speak later about these clubs and associations. Thus we, the school youth, brought a new vitality to the city in this sphere of art and culture. At first people paid little attention to us. They dismissively called us *jolinxhinjtë*, meaning like the Gypsy musicians. Yet this attitude did not last long. We overcame that obstacle, and the people greatly appreciated what we were doing. Whenever we played our instruments from the balcony, the centre of the bazaar would fill with people. They would fall silent, listen attentively and applaud us.

When our musical activities expanded from the school into the clubs, we encountered some resistance, but we overcame that as well. Aqif, Selami, Elmaz, Kamber, Samuel and I fought persistently for the orchestras, the clubs and the libraries, and we succeeded. All our other friends followed our lead. I can therefore say that we were pioneers of this new cultural activity; others came after us, and the work expanded and improved. Later, those younger than ourselves even formed a brass band with wind instruments. No one in Gjirokastra danced modern dances, neither we students nor anyone else, whether at school or in the clubs, even after girls began attending the lyceum.

Our conduct towards the girls was exemplary. I do not recall a single improper incident, nor did any scandalous rumour ever arise. This contributed greatly to the increasing number of

girls who enrolled at the lyceum each year. They did not participate in our cultural activities, however. There was evidently a degree of caution and conservatism.

With the establishment of our student association, in which friends such as Aqif Selfo, Selami Xhaxhiu and others who returned during holidays played an active role, cultural and artistic life in Gjirokastra became much livelier. The opening of the lyceum contributed greatly to this development, as did both the French and Albanian teachers. We organised activities both within and outside the school. The school possessed a library with books in Albanian and French, but we in the association wanted a library outside the school as well, and we succeeded in creating one.

By collecting contributions from students and local residents, we managed to rent premises in the middle of the bazaar,* purchase a bookcase, gather books, appoint one of our

* Speaking at a meeting of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Party of Labour of Albania on 23 February 1973 concerning the education of youth, Comrade Enver Hoxha stated: "Allow me to tell you something from the youth of our generation in Gjirokastra, 50 years ago. We pupils ourselves, with a single lek each, which our poor parents could scarcely spare for us, established two clubs in the town. We set up libraries with our few books, purchased a few musical instruments ourselves, a mandolin and a guitar perhaps, taught ourselves to play them and performed for the people. Bear in mind that we cleaned and maintained the clubs ourselves in rotation. If one of us knew a foreign language, he would read books and then gather us together and recount the stories to us. My hair has now turned white, yet I can never forget Samuel Kofina, who spent all day carrying bolts of cloth under his arm trying to sell a few metres and who in the evening, despite his exhaustion, would come and speak to us about the ancient Greek authors such as Homer and Aristophanes and sometimes about Allan Pinkerton. Nor can I forget Kamber Bilali, a poor man in torn trousers, who worked and read during the day and in the evening would come and tell us about the novels of Alexandre Dumas, recounting them episode by episode." (Enver Hoxha, *Raporte e fjalime, 1972–1973* (Tiranë, 1974), 232–33.)

friends as librarian and establish regulations for the proper care and timely return of books, so that they could circulate effectively, since books were both expensive and scarce. As I mentioned earlier, many students gathered in these premises every afternoon. We read books, sang choral pieces and our orchestra played instruments from the balcony overlooking the bazaar. It was a fine undertaking and prospered so well that we soon began expanding our activities to include public lectures.

This compelled us to find larger premises. After some effort we secured another, more spacious location a little further along the bazaar, on the street leading to the prefecture. It consisted of three or four rooms on the upper floor above a row of shops. One reached it by climbing a steep staircase. The entrance below was an iron door secured by a large key. I remember that key very well, because we fought hard to avoid surrendering it, and indeed never did, when attempts were made to close our club and dissolve our association.* The authorities claimed that we created too much noise, but that was not the real reason. The true issue was that our activities expressed resistance to the regime and contained satirical criticism of it. We strongly emphasised patriotic themes and sang patriotic songs about freedom at the top of our voices:

"Long enough in bondage, O poor Albania;
Young men, take up your rifles — death or freedom!..."

There we highlighted the revolutionary moments of the French people, which we were studying at the lyceum, and many other such themes. Naturally these activities made a strong im-

* The lyceum director tried but was unable "to obtain the key to the secretariat of the Enver Hoxha Society" (Central Archive of the Party of Labour of Albania, Letër e Kamber Bilalit drejtuar Samuel Kofinës [Letter from Kamber Bilali to Samuel Kofina], 29 June 1925.).

pression on the public, but they displeased the supporters of King Zogu's regime, which was hostile to the development of education, particularly in Gjirokastra. At the club, where we gathered every afternoon, we also discussed and reviewed newly published books.

In Gjirokastra there was a small printing press. The newspaper *Drita* was printed there as well. Before the arrival of Zogu, during the time of Fan Noli, the editor of the newspaper bearing that name had been Veli Hashorva, a friend of Bahri Omari, who fled to Istanbul after Zogu came to power. At the time of which I am speaking, however, the owner of the press that printed the newspaper was a certain Xhevat Kallajxhiu, whom we nicknamed "*Hundashi"* ("Big Nose"), because he had an unusually large, flattened nose and spoke through his nose. We disliked the man. Academically he was hopeless, and this was why he had abandoned his studies. Xhevat was very wealthy, owning hotels, shops and houses right in Çerçiz Square. He liked to present himself as a writer, a man of letters and a journalist. While Zogu was in power, he was a supporter of Zogu. When fascist Italy occupied us, he became a fascist and an associate of another fascist, Vangjel Koça. After Italy's defeat he fled to Italy and from there went to the United States, where he now speaks against our regime on the "Voice of America."

One day Xhevat printed a fairy tale in his own press and offered it for sale. The booklet was perhaps ten or fifteen small pages long. We obtained a copy at the club and read it. We laughed ourselves silly because it was utterly worthless. Xhevat knew that we would tear his book to pieces critically, so one day, I remember, he came to the club to find out what we thought of it. He sat down, but we paid him no attention. He shifted restlessly in his chair, and eventually could no longer contain himself and asked whether we had read it. Kamber Bilali, who was the club's caretaker, sprang up. He was a friend who sang

beautifully and whose coat pockets, inside and out, were always bulging with books. He proceeded to criticise Xhevat's fairy tale mercilessly, reducing it to shreds. *"Hundashi"* protested loudly and tried to defend it. Then Aqif Selfo joined in and said:

"Why not hand that printing press over to us, the members of the club? You have no head for such things, and while it remains in your hands it produces nothing but rubbish fit for wiping one's backside with..." *"Hundashi"* nearly exploded with anger. He was furious, but there was little he could do.

"Do not get upset," said Selami Xhaxhiu, one of our good friends whom we called "The Old Man." "Let us discuss the matter calmly. Personally, Xhevat," Selami continued among other remarks, "I would have preferred you to drown the hero of your fairy tale in the river. That is the fate he deserves."

I joined the discussion as well and, among other comments, concluded by telling Xhevat:

"I agree with The Old Man's assessment, but I would add that, together with the hero whom you ought to have drowned in the river, it would have been preferable for you to drown yourself as well and spare us your presence.

That was how the discussion with "*Hundashi*" ended. We never saw him again at the club. Nevertheless, he spent a great deal of effort trying to have the club closed down.

Besides reviewing books published in Albanian, we also recited poems that we learned both in school and outside it, including works by Naim Frashëri, Çajupi, Vaso Pasha, Ndre Mjeda and others. We also recited poems by Victor Hugo, Lamartine, La Fontaine and many more.

Another literary activity at the club consisted of recounting to our friends the plots of novels we had read, whether assigned by our teachers or chosen independently. I had been given the task of presenting summaries of several French novels, such as *Les Misérables*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, the tales of Grimm and

Perrault and others. Kamber Bilali would recount other fascinating novels. We never knew where he had read them or who had told them to him, since he knew very little French, very little Turkish and only Albanian. Kamber was the nephew of Hysni Babameto, the deputy headmaster of the lyceum. Samuel Kofina, a Jewish boy, knew Greek and specialised in detective fiction. Samuel narrated the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, Allan Pinkerton and others. His retellings of the novels he read were tremendously popular and would continue over many days and evenings.

Samuel was the son of Haham Kofina, the poorest Jew in Gjirokastra. His father was supported by the other Jews of the town, who gave him lengths of cloth to sell as he went from door to door. Haham carried them on his shoulders while Samuel was still a child. Gradually, Haham managed to establish a small shop, and it was there that Samuel, our friend, grew up. We were very fond of him because he was a genuinely good and honest man and not "Jewish" in the pejorative sense in which that word was sometimes used. While Haham was still alive, before going to the club we would pass by Samuel's shop and signal to him from outside with a nod of the head, meaning: "Do we have something on tonight?" Depending on the circumstances, Samuel would nod back either yes or no. Samuel and Kamber smoked so heavily that their fingers were yellow. Whenever Samuel began recounting the adventures of Allan Pinkerton, their cigarettes would be constantly puffing away, and those of us who did not smoke would protest:

"You are suffocating us, Samuel!"

"Very well," Samuel would reply, "then I shall stop the story."

"No, no!" we would shout. "Better that you smoke, so long as you continue the story."

Samuel Kofina, one of my friends from youth, died last year in Gjirokastra. I was deeply saddened. Whenever I visit-

ed Gjirokastra after the Liberation, Samuel would hear that I had arrived, take up position at a corner in the middle of the bazaar and wait for me to pass by so that he could meet me. As I climbed the Bazaar Slope, I always knew where Samuel would be waiting. I would approach him, shake his hand, embrace him as I always did and ask: "Have you forgotten the days of our youth?"

Tears would well up in Samuel's eyes and he would reply: "Even when I go to my grave, I shall remember them." Samuel took great pleasure in seeing that I remained so close to him. He worked as an accountant for the machine-tractor station in Gjirokastra and remained an honest man until the end of his life.

Those who trafficked in intrigue continued their efforts to obstruct our progressive extracurricular activities. They wanted to close our club in order to cripple the association's work. "What need have students for a club? What need have you for a library in the club? The club's books can simply be merged with those of the school," and so on. We refused to yield and continued to resist.

One day Hysni Babameto summoned me to his office and said:

"My boy, hand over the key to the club before matters become more complicated." I replied:

"Mr. Babameto, I will not hand over the key." I then explained my reasons one by one. He listened and watched me. Standing opposite Babameto's desk was the French headmaster of the lyceum, Monsieur Victor Coutan, who also watched me attentively, though he did not understand Albanian. After I had explained the matter and my friends' decision to Mr. Babameto, he said: "Wait outside for a moment." Apparently he wished to confer with the Frenchman, and after they had spoken he called me back in and said: "Very well. We approve your decision. Re-

open the club as before, but try not to make too much noise there, so that you deprive your detractors of their arguments." I thanked them and ran to my friends, who had been waiting anxiously. "We have won!" I told them. "They can no longer close the club." Our joy was beyond description.

Another extracurricular activity of a cultural and artistic nature was the theatre. We students of the Gjirokastra Lyceum, together with our friends from Gjirokastra who studied at the Lyceum of Korça and returned home during the summer, were the first to appear on the theatrical stage. Gjirokastra had not seen a theatre performance since the days of Xhafo Poshi, Idriz Guri and others. Among the people there existed dismissive expressions such as "so-and-so has become a theatre actor," meaning that a person had disgraced himself. Yet hardly anyone had actually seen a stage performance. There was another derogatory phrase as well: "he became a carnival figure," meaning that someone had made himself ridiculous. The origin of this expression lay in a Christian religious festival during which a group of people would dress in festive costumes, wear masks and parade through the bazaar accompanied by a small Gypsy orchestra, dancing and performing the *Gajtanaq*. In this dance one participant held a long pole upright in the centre. Many coloured cords were attached to its top, each dancer holding one. As they danced together, the cords gradually wound themselves around the pole, drawing the circle of dancers inward, and then unwound again as the dance expanded. Naturally, the masks provoked laughter. This *Gajtanaq* dance, as it was called in Gjirokastra, constituted the only popular entertainment with anything resembling a theatrical character.

We students approached the theatre — this entirely new activity — with seriousness and great enthusiasm, though many obstacles had to be overcome. It must be said that the French

culture we were absorbing at the lyceum inspired and encouraged us to develop this unfamiliar form of artistic expression. At the lyceum we studied plays by Molière and Corneille, as well as Racine's tragedies. We analysed many passages from these works and others in class with our French professors, memorised them and recited them before our teachers. Often the professors would have us perform them in dialogue form. This was not theatre in the full sense, but classroom instruction. Naturally, as they analysed these works, the professors explained to us the significance of theatre, comedy and satire. As a result, we students gradually conceived the idea and developed the desire to perform plays for the public, naturally in Albanian. The question was how. Among our classmates was a young man named Naxhi Totozani, who later left school and became a merchant. During our discussions on the matter he told us: "I know someone, a relative of mine named Dine Qadhimi. When he lived in Shkodra he acted in the theatre. He knows something about it and may be able to organise us." And so, together with Dine Qadhimi, we set ourselves to the task.

Dine was a man of about forty, thin and tall, serious and sparing in speech. He was also well educated and a democrat. He had probably once been a teacher or a civil servant, but, as I recall, Zogu's regime had dismissed him, almost certainly because of his political views. Dine did not associate with many people and kept company mainly with teachers. We respected and honoured Uncle Dine whenever we met him in the street. He greeted us kindly and looked upon us with sympathy. A group of us students approached him and asked for his help in organising and teaching us how to perform theatre before the public. I remember that he was deeply moved by our request; tears came to his eyes and he could scarcely speak for emotion.

Dine said: "I shall undertake this work with great pleasure, and together we shall create something fine." And so Dine Qa-

dhimi, this talented pioneer of theatre in Gjirokastra, began his work among us, the younger generation, with great enthusiasm. All our preparations were carried out outside school hours, without neglecting our studies, without spending money at first and without seeking assistance from anyone. At fixed times Uncle Dine would gather us either at the club or outdoors and provide general instruction. First he spoke to us about the educational role of theatre, its importance and the difficulties involved. He explained acting roles, how they should be learned, how words ought to be pronounced, the importance of facial expression, scenery, make-up and many other matters. It was clear that he knew his craft.

We formed a large theatrical group: Aqif Selfo, Selami Xhaxhiu, Naxhi Totozani, Fane Rodi, Nazmi Shehu, Nuri Dërrasa, Masar Kallajxhiu, Elmaz Konjari, Nesip Gjebrea, Stavro Gjollma, Reshat Toto and myself, together with many others whose names I no longer recall. We could scarcely contain our impatience and kept telling Dine:

"Let us begin!" For we were young and lacked patience.

"Do not hurry," he would tell us. "For our first performance we must produce something excellent, something that will astonish Gjirokastra."

At last the day came when we found the play we were to learn and perform. But what should we stage? At that time there was really only one theatrical work available: *Besa** by Sami Frashëri, which we had all read and greatly admired.

"Please, Mr. Dine," we urged him, "let us perform *Besa*."

"No," Dine replied. "Do not rush. One step at a time. It is a fine play, but a demanding one. For our first effort we must choose something simpler and perform it well. Later we shall stage *Besa* and other works too."

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* Albanian pledge of honour or sacred promise.

One day he brought us the play we would perform. It was not printed but handwritten. Perhaps Dine himself had written it. It consisted of patriotic verse about the liberation of Albania from foreign occupiers. We called it *Albania*. The principal role was that of Albania herself, represented by a woman. Since we had neither women nor girls among us, female parts were played by boys. Dine assigned the leading role to Masar Kallajxhiu because he had a voice as high and delicate as a girl's. Masar was a handsome youth, tall and slender. The rest of us were given secondary roles and parts as extras. I remember being assigned the role of a Lab fighter.

In addition, we distributed the roles for a one-act comedy by Kristo Floqi, though I no longer remember its title. I was cast as a coachman. Kristo Floqi had written a number of such farcical comedies, characterised by broad humour and a petty-bourgeois outlook, but there was little else available. He had also written a verse drama entitled *Faith and Nationality*,* which we performed later. However, after Kristo Floqi composed the king's anthem,** which we never sang, we mockingly called him "*Kristo Fëlliq*."***

We generally gave our theatrical performances during school holidays, though we prepared them throughout the year. Thus we worked hard on this first production, preparing carefully, and at the end of the school year we entered a period of intense activity. The lyceum administration placed the large hall and several classrooms at our disposal, though under strict conditions that everything be kept orderly. This was no easy matter. We had to do everything ourselves. Besides rehearsing the play, we had to construct the stage, find materials, procure

* Written in 1920.

** Written in 1928.

*** Kristo the Filthy.

stage equipment, assemble costumes, prepare the hall, arrange seating for the audience, collect chairs and lamps from wherever we could find them and attend to countless other details, including the tickets, which we not only had to print ourselves but also sell to the public.

The students returned from Korça for the holidays and we set to work with great enthusiasm on the construction of the stage. It was not an easy task. We ourselves purchased beams and planks, cut and fastened them together at the front of the school hall according to Dine's instructions. We bought fabric, draped the stage and made the curtain. I remember that we also needed carpets, but where could we find them? We went and appealed to Uncle Idriz Konjari, Elmaz's father. He lent them to us but warned: "You two are responsible if they are torn or burned." We guarded them with the utmost care. For two or three days before the performance, Aqif, Elmaz, Fanja and I slept at the school, on the stage itself, because we worked until late into the night.

After printing the tickets, we sold every one of them. There was enormous curiosity in Gjirokastra about the performance. The tickets were divided into first, second and third classes. Those holding third-class tickets sat on classroom benches, while the others were provided with chairs. The front rows were reserved for the authorities, and so we placed armchairs there. No fixed price was attached to those front seats; whoever wished to sit there paid what he chose, naturally three or four times more than the regular rate.

At last the evening arrived. Everything was ready. The venue had been swept and arranged neatly. The public came, and the hall filled to capacity. We, both on stage and behind the scenes, were extremely nervous, for it was our first performance. Each of us was dressed according to his role. I myself had to change costume twice, and so did many others. I remember that

we tied false beards around our heads, but the real difficulty was with the moustaches. They had to be glued on with gum and a certain preparation supplied by Sulo Konjari. It made our lips feel cold when applied and had a strong smell. Dine encouraged us all, moving constantly from one side to the other. "Do not be afraid," he told us. "Remember this, remember that. You, do not forget to do it this way; you, do it that way. And you, Masar Kallajxhiu, fasten those cloth "breasts" securely so they do not fall off. And keep your "hips" tucked in — do not stick them out like the slopes of Dofti!" (Dofti was a hill near Libohova.)

The performance opened with *Albania*. The audience applauded, for the piece was moving and patriotic in content, but the ending was the most beautiful part. Albania appeared allegorically as a tall, beautiful woman, wrapped in a red flag with the eagle upon it, with long black hair and her hands bound in paper chains. Masar, who played the role, began with a monologue in darkness, then in a dim light. When "Albania" broke her chains, we lit several silent fireworks from the sides of the stage, like torches casting a bright red glow. This was the apotheosis: "Albania breaking her chains." The audience rose to its feet in enthusiasm, and the song of the flag resounded through the hall. For us, it was a great and unforgettable success. After this piece came the comedy.

It too was very successful. At the end, when we appeared on stage, there was tremendous noise. The audience applauded and shouted: "Bravo, boys! We want it again! Perform it again tomorrow!" That was exactly what we wanted. Our fear had disappeared, and we performed it three or four times in succession. On one occasion we organised a performance for women only. The hall was always full. For days and weeks afterwards, Gjirokastra spoke of the performance.

The story of our theatre, however, soon passed beyond the boundaries of Gjirokastra. The municipalities of Delvina and



"We took theatre very seriously. I remember that we tied our beards around our heads, but the real trouble was with the moustaches..."
From left to right: First row: second, Fejzi Hoxha; fourth, Enver Hoxha; Second row: fourth, Aqif Selfo; fifth, Selami Xhaxhiu; Third row: second, Fane Rodi; third, Hamit Kokalari; fourth, Elmaz Konjari; fifth, Reshat Toto; sixth, Kamber Bilali.

Saranda invited us to perform there as well. What joy this brought us! We accepted the invitation with great pleasure. We would see Delvina, Saranda and the sea. What a marvel! We began preparations. Lorries came to collect us. Food, drink and travel expenses were covered by the municipalities. We gave two performances in Delvina and two in Saranda, and achieved great success. Everyone congratulated us. In Saranda we were astonished by the beauty of the sea, which we saw for the first time.

After giving the two performances in Saranda, some of our friends, without telling us, went to Butrint in an old boat. The weather, however, began to worsen. Rain started to fall and the waves rose. As darkness approached, we became afraid that our

friends might drown. We all went to the little pier and anxiously looked out to sea, waiting for the boat to return. At last it arrived. We were overjoyed that our friends had been saved, but we also scolded them. As they told us, they had indeed been in danger of drowning. When we departed, both the people of Delvina and those of Saranda asked us to return the following summer.

Every year we prepared theatrical pieces. We performed all the comedies of Kristo Floqi. We also staged Sami Frashëri's *Besa*, which, like the others, was a great success. By then we had overcome our fear and embarrassment on stage and did not hesitate to perform even lengthy plays. Such was the many-act drama *Faith and Nationality*. It was written in verse. When the roles were distributed, I was given that of Zylyftar Poda, the principal and longest role. My friends entrusted it to me because I was tall, recited well and had an excellent memory for verse, which I learned easily and enjoyed greatly. Thus I had to memorise my entire role. We all dressed in *fustanellas** and embroidered waistcoats, with cartridge pouches and silver pistols at our belts and decorated pipes. The "women" wore loose trousers, white cotton shirts and embroidered waistcoats. It was all very beautiful. The roles of women and girls were played by only four people: Reshat Toto, Naxhi Totozani, Fane Rodi and Stavro Gjollma, and they performed them very well. The play achieved great success. I still remember several lines from my role:

"Poda, Shalës and Barmash
Are home to fighting men.
Flee, Mahmut Pasha, flee —
You have yet to face the men of Kolonja."

* Traditional pleated Albanian men's kilts.

Or:

"Across Mount Melesin, peak after peak,
The cannon and the gunfire thunder."

We performed *Faith and Nationality* several times.

All these performances created a new atmosphere in Gjirokastra and generated great respect and affection for the lyceum, for us and for our teachers. Each performance brought something new. Before the play and during the intervals we also arranged for the mandolin ensemble to perform. Thus we combined theatre with music. I do not know what later became of these activities, for I left Gjirokastra, but they have left me with many pleasant memories of my youth, my school, our sincere and guileless companionship and our anti-Zogite, progressive association.

As for sport, apart from what I mentioned earlier, when we entered the lyceum football was the only and principal game. I played football like all my friends: Fejzi Dobi, Emin Shtino, Fane Rodi, Xhevat Bey "Karkanaqja," Selahudin Kokona and others. We called Selahudin "*Butarafa*," which in Turkish means "throw it here." He had just returned from Turkey, where he had lived with his family, and spoke Albanian awkwardly. During play he could not properly say "throw the ball here," so he would shout "*Butarafa*." I ran quickly and played as an inside forward, a position I often exchanged with "*Butarafa*." The football field lay beyond the river, in the communal meadows. At first we marked the goals with coats. Later we put up posts, though without nets. We could never afford proper football boots, because they were expensive. Sometimes we played in ordinary shoes, sometimes barefoot. After the match we rushed into the river and, still sweating, lay on our stomachs and drank water like horses. We took no precautions, yet nothing happened to us. "River water has no microbes," we used to

say, "because it passes over forty stones."

Once a French professor from the Pyrenees named Garrigue brought us an egg-shaped ball called a rugby ball. He taught us the rules of the game and we began playing it, but soon abandoned it because it left us without trousers or shirts; they were torn to pieces as we grappled with one another. The game did not suit us.

Above the lyceum there had once been several Italian barracks. Naturally, once the Italians had gone, the people stripped them of everything: the asbestos roofing, beams, planks, even the stones. Only the cement floor remained. There was no way to remove that, otherwise even this "state property" would have disappeared. Such was the people's view of state property at that time, for the state did not belong to the people but to the aghas and beys. On that cement surface, the French professors, together with us students, laid out a tennis court according to all the proper rules. After school the professors played, and we retrieved the balls when they flew off into the gardens or even as far down as the Alley of the Madmen. "Fly, ball, fly!" and off we went after it. When the professors finished, they would give us the rackets so that we too could play. Thus I learned tennis using other people's rackets, since rackets were expensive and had to be ordered from abroad. The French professors, who brought two or three each for their own use, would occasionally lend them to us as well.

These were our sports at the time. Apart from the usual gymnastics exercises at school, our group walks outside school, both after lessons and in the summer, hold a special place in my memory and evoke many sweet recollections.

The castle of Gjirokastra was the pride of our childhood and youth. It was the place of history, of manly legends, of ancestral patriotism, courage, sacrifice and struggles against the Turks. It filled our young imaginations. From morning until evening,

wherever we turned our heads, the gigantic castle appeared before us: vast, astonishing, with battlements as strong as steel, its walls covered in creepers like the beard of some ancient old man, yet one that had never turned grey. The castle dominated Gjirokastra like a stone mountain in the middle of the town. I remember the surrounding walls with their openings from which the enemy was fired upon. They looked like embroidery along the tops of the high battlements.

I also remember Baba Çen's great commotion, when he was head of the municipality, because a major named Ismail Haki Kuçi, commander of the town gendarmerie, had levelled these marvels on the pretext that stones might fall on people's heads. "I do not agree," Baba Çen shouted. "Who is giving orders to destroy our castle? Who governs here, I or the gendarmerie?" In any case, that ignorant man destroyed the castle's "lacework." Other ignoramuses of Zogu's regime destroyed the great arches, the aqueduct built by Ali Pasha, which carried water from Mount Sopot up to the castle. Such people knew only how to destroy, not how to preserve. I remember the great arches because, in those days, two and a half of their supports still remained. Now they exist only in our imagination and in photographs. Yet they were monumental, facing the head of the castle, near the cannon of Dullga, as we called it. Until the end, an old cannon from Ottoman times stood there, aimed towards Dunavat. In my childhood it was loaded with a little gunpowder and rags and fired during Ramadan to signal the breaking of the fast.

On the other side of the castle, near the main entrance from Katavarosh, from what we called Pasha Kauri, another tall tower rose above the majestic battlements of the gate, built of stones blackened by time. This was the castle clock. When it struck, it could be heard in Lunxhëri, Dropull and Mashkullora. The Greeks destroyed the clock and took its bell to Athens, the old

people said, although I myself never saw it.*

I am no poet capable of describing the beauty and majesty of this castle, which preserved its grandeur despite the vile regime of Zogu, which closed schools and built prisons in their place, adding to the castle a prison like a terrible boil, a malignant growth attached to its legendary body. Today, under our regime, the castle has become a beloved place for the people, an object of interest and pleasure for tourists. It is well maintained, and everything is being carefully restored. I advised long ago that the debris be cleared from the lower cellars of the castle, and that work has been proceeding for some time. I have not seen those cellars myself, but Shefqet Peçi, who set the matter in motion, told me that below there is something marvellous and astonishing: rooms, barracks, stone stairways, kitchens, storage areas and more. Some antiquities have also been found there. The castle may still conceal other ancient objects within its depths. The people's power in the district of Gjirokastra has paved all the roads around the castle with beautiful cobblestones, like carpets.

In our youth we entered the castle freely through both gates.** We went there with school, but also alone with friends

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* During a visit to Gjirokastra, Comrade Enver Hoxha wrote in his diary on 30 November 1966: "The people of Gjirokastra have rebuilt the tower of the old castle clock and installed a new clock, but the bell has not rung these past few days because they are concerned lest it disturb my sleep. The comrades show such care for me. This touches me deeply. It is the love and loyalty they have for the Party that inspires them to take such measures..."

** On 16 March 1978, Comrade Enver Hoxha visited the castle. He wished to leave through the gate near the Old Bazaar, for which he felt great nostalgia. However, the director of the museums told him: "Comrade Enver, one cannot pass through here; the gate has been closed." To which Comrade Enver replied: "Look me in the eye for a moment! Do not tell me such things! You do not understand that I cannot come here every year and climb up to the castle. Therefore let me pass, so that I may see all these places and satisfy my longing..."

whenever we pleased. We roamed everywhere inside it, though we did not venture deep into the cellars, because people told us, "There are deep pits," or "There are wild cats and beasts that will tear you apart." When we asked the old men where the soldiers besieged by the Turks had found drinking water before Ali Pasha built the great arches, they replied: "There is a secret place somewhere in the castle, known to no one, and from there people descended by steps all the way down to the river to fetch water." This increased both our amazement and our sense of mystery.

Our teachers told us, on the very spot, the famous legend of Argjiro, who, rather than surrender to the Turks, threw herself from the castle battlements while holding the little princess to her breast. They pointed and said: "She jumped from here and fell down there, upon that rock. There, beside that rock, after so many centuries, old women still go to light candles as at a holy place. Around the rock, if you go and pluck certain plants, you will see that they give off 'milk,' which is the milk from Argjiro's breast." For us children this made an extraordinary impression. We opened our eyes wide and were filled with pride in our ancestors and in their profound hatred of the Turks. We never failed to visit the rock, where we found some of the plants we called "milk plants" and said, "What Mr. Xhafo told us is true." Later, at the lyceum, I wrote this legend in a French composition. I remember that the French teacher liked it very much and awarded me the highest mark.

I also remember that, during my lyceum years, when we studied the ancient history of peoples, our curiosity about antiquities was naturally awakened. One day, while walking with some friends beneath one of the castle battlements, we happened to notice that several stones had fallen from the wall above us and that some bones were visible. Our minds immediately made a connection, and imagination did the rest. We concluded that they were human bones and began throwing

stones at them to knock them down, since we could not climb up. We dislodged some and took them to André Bregeaud, our history teacher at the lyceum, so that he might identify them. After examining them, he told us: "They are sheep bones." Apparently, when our forefathers built walls, they would slaughter an animal as a sacrifice.

The castle courtyard also served us young people as a place to play football and practise gymnastics. We went there to watch "Pehlivan Arif," the acrobat who walked on a rope and rode a horse upside down.

Kuculla was another favourite place for us in our youth. We climbed to the rock that dominated the town and the plain either from the house of Hamit Kokalari or from the Dunavat side. We went there with friends such as Fejzi Hoxha, Skënder Topulli, Nesip Gjebrea and others, especially when the cherries and figs were ripe. The rock of Kuculla is like a strange platform. From there the town, the plain, the castle and the mountains lie before you as though in the palm of your hand. We climbed there to admire these marvels, but also, naturally and in secret, to eat the cherries and figs that belonged to the Zekates. By the time we reached the rock we would be drenched in sweat, but because there was wind there and we did not want to catch a cold, we first entered the cave beneath the rock. It was a fairly large cave, full of goat droppings, because goats rested there in the heat. Since it was warm, we stayed there until our sweat dried, looking at the town from the cave entrance. Then we climbed above to eat figs and cherries, ate until we were full and descended again. Sometimes we descended through the great Shamaj Stream, which was frightening, but we went that way because there we gathered a kind of wild vegetable whose root stalk we ate. It was called *bizhgo*, a kind of wild asparagus.

Another place to which we went with the school, when we were in primary or lower secondary education, was the tekke of

Baba Mane. We took our midday meal with us and wandered through the tekke's gardens beneath the cypresses, collecting pinecones, violets and yellow flowers among the brambles. We walked around the mausoleums and peered through the small windows at the graves of the dervishes, covered with green cloth and topped with white ceremonial caps. Baba Mane, an ignorant chief dervish, corpulent and bearded, a friend of the prefect Javer Bey Hurshiti and especially of his wife, who was a devotee, would come out onto the veranda, smoke tobacco and occasionally shout at us not to damage his fruit trees and vineyard.

Aqif Selfo's orchard was another place filled with happy memories for me. Aqif's paternal grandmother was my mother's aunt, and so we visited there as relatives as well, with or without a particular reason, eating and sleeping at Uncle Avduli's house (Aqif's uncle, since his father had died). Aqif lived in a single-storey house with cellars below. Its reception room was handsome and spacious, with many windows overlooking the courtyard wall and garden. There was a large, brightly lit room where we ate and slept, but above all there was the orchard nearby, full of pear trees, wild pears, figs, plums and cornelian cherries. There we sat in the shade, read books and ate whatever we wished and as much as we wished; everything seemed to belong to us. Uncle Avduli was a very kind-hearted man. Beneath the orchard there was a large chasm, a deep cave. We were always very careful there. From time to time I went there with Selamiu and Selahudin and then, in the evening, we descended by the castle road towards the bazaar and followed the main boulevard down to Xhemaliu's melon patch.

The boulevard was Gjirokastra's promenade for all men (though not for women) and especially for us students. Every evening one could see groups of us walking up and down, talking, singing and joking. Sometimes we merely walked the length of the boulevard, while at other times we went as far as Xhe-

maliu's place. Along the way there were certain spots where we would stop if we became tired or did not wish to go any farther. One of our favourite stopping places was the slope belonging to Velo Xheko, above what is now the garage below the Metropolitan Church, near the house of Hysen Pumo, a simple-minded man who wandered through the bazaar with a blanket over his head, repeating: "I weep, I laugh." Those were the only words the poor unfortunate old man ever uttered.

Another favourite place for us was farther down, beside an old wall opposite the house of our friend Siri Shapllo, whose father was Uncle Haxhi Shapllo,* a fine patriot and telegraph operator. Another place we frequently visited was the slope where the graves of the National Renaissance figures now stand and, beyond that, the final stage of our walk, the slope of the Gypsy quarter.

During our evening walks, anyone wishing to meet our group could find us either on the boulevard or at one of these places. There we held discussions and often sang Lab folk songs.

While we attended the Gjirokastra Lyceum, we never went to cafés because we were embarrassed to do so. However, after we moved to the Korça Lyceum and returned to Gjirokastra during the summer, we would sometimes go for a coffee at Cile Muka's after our walk, naturally only if we happened to have a little money. When we had none, we would say to the waiter Ismail, a small man: "We do not want anything today," and he understood that we were penniless. My uncle, when he was able, would occasionally give me half a lek or one lek a day. That constituted the entirety of my student allowance.

* In his diary, on 5 December 1977, Comrade Enver Hoxha wrote: "All the children of Uncle Haxhi Shapllo were good, especially Siri, who was older than I was... nevertheless we always went together... During the holidays we would gather, together with Ikbal and Zija, Siri's brothers... we would stroll along the boulevard, sit in many places and sing Lab songs..."

From time to time Elmaz and I would walk near the tekke of Baba Hasan. In Baba Hasan's mausoleum there was a long "holy" stone that was supposedly growing a little larger each year. The donations left at the shrine were collected and kept by a dervish named Mehmet, a notoriously filthy and foul-mouthed man. One day he was sitting on a wall watching us as we wrote on the "holy stone." "What are you doing there, you little bastards?" he shouted, insulting our mothers.

We became angry and replied, "You filthy-bearded man, why are you swearing at us?" He jumped down from the wall to seize us, but I struck him with a stone slab — bang! — right in the stomach. The dervish fell over and we immediately fled as fast as we could. The following day he had found my uncle and complained about what we had done to him, but we explained to the old man that he had insulted our mothers first.

Our summer outings, when we returned from Korça, also took us to the riverbank beneath the plane trees near the fig groves, together with Skënder and Masar Topulli, Emin Shtino, Shaban Çuçi, Emin's brother and others. Shaban would catch fish for us, which we fried on the spot and ate there. They were pleasant times. I believe I still have photographs in an album from those excursions.

One day Reshat Toto, Bedri Spahiu and I went to Reshat's orchard and were eating figs. A certain Mufit Pirushi arrived there, a neighbour of Bedri's and of the same age as ourselves. Apparently he and Bedri had quarrelled earlier, and he came to the orchard intending to resume the dispute. As we were eating figs, Bedri saw him, climbed down from the tree, went over to him and the two began fighting. Before we could get down to help Bedri, Mufit Pirushi drew a knife and stabbed him in the back of the neck. Bedri cried out: "Mufit has killed me!" We jumped down from the fig tree and saw blood flowing from the wound. I told Reshat to bind it with a handkerchief and carry

him quickly, while I ran after "Baldy," for Mufit Pirushi, who suffered from ringworm on his scalp, was fleeing at full speed. I could not catch him, though he did receive a hard stone on the shoulder. We hurriedly took Bedri to Dr. Kamberi in the neighbourhood. He bandaged the wound and said: "It is nothing serious, the knife has only grazed him slightly." Naturally, we were alarmed. The gendarmerie learned of the incident and arrested "Baldy." We too were questioned and, of course, had to appear in court as witnesses. I remember how excited we were on the day of the trial. The courtroom was full of friends who had come to listen. Reshat and I were called by name. We were required to swear an oath upon the Koran and then recounted how the incident had unfolded. I do not know how many weeks "Baldy" was sentenced to serve.

Like all the boys of the town, I should like to express here my feelings and to say how deeply I loved my town,* its roads, lanes, alleys, stone-paved squares, old wooden houses, their courtyard walls and gardens filled with wild plum trees, stones and brambles, through which I walked, wandered and leapt as a child.

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* After Liberation, Comrade Enver Hoxha visited Gjirokastra for the first time in October 1947. Speaking at a large public rally on 3 October that year, he said:

"The war had separated me from you, but my heart, my spirit, remained with you. My beloved city where I was born, you stone-paved streets and you old timbered houses, which were my whole world and my joy in childhood, you elderly mothers, sisters and brothers of Gjirokastra who raised me, advised me, reproached me and rejoiced in me when I was young — I longed deeply for you and today I am profoundly moved by the joy I feel.

"My beloved city where I was born, it is true that I see you for the first time after so many years of great war, in which the future and destiny of our people were at stake, but you have always been in my heart and in my thoughts. Your heroic struggle for liberation was for me a shining model, the example that I, as your son, had to follow unto death." (Enver Hoxha, *Vepra*, vol. 4, 227–28.)

Strangely, now that I am older, whenever I sit and remember Gjirokastra, everything returns to my mind. In my imagination I wander once more through its lanes and alleyways and say to myself: "There lived so-and-so; that house belonged to him; my friend lived there; the owner of that house was a difficult man; that house was always dark; its door was perpetually closed," and so forth. From my earliest childhood I became attached to the town, to its people, houses, streets and stones. Everything there is dear to me. Everything remains alive and undiminished, indelibly preserved in my memory. All these things form part of my homeland, and through them there took root within me that profound love for the whole country, for the land itself and for everything that grows, is born and is renewed, enveloped in memories, joys, sorrows and griefs. Such, too, are the memories connected with my brother's illness, which at that time was considered incurable.

The doctors advised my uncle and mother that, during the summer, Beqir should be taken somewhere for a change of climate. Accordingly, they did everything they could, borrowed money, received some assistance from my maternal uncle and sent him away three times for convalescence: once to Çajup, once to Dhoksat and once to the village of Stegopul. I accompanied them on these journeys.

When we went to Çajup, I remember that we encountered certain difficulties, because there was nowhere to sleep there. There was not even a hut, let alone a house. My maternal uncle bought my mother a large tent and one morning we set off on horseback. We took everything we needed from home. We passed beneath Topallti and climbed towards Erind. We children rode the horses, while my uncle and the muleteers walked. It was the first time I had crossed the plain of Gjirokastra and I was delighted that at last I would see at close quarters those beautiful villages of Lunxhëri, which we had always observed

from afar from the houses of Gjirokastra and whose names our primary-school teacher, Arshi Çabeu, had taught us to recite in order without making a mistake.

In my youth, Lunxhëri seemed a beautiful and flourishing garden, full of trees, shade, waters and springs, with cool sources, abundant produce and people who were kind, honest and hardworking. Was this merely the romantic imagination of my youth, nourished by books and by the lessons of my teachers, or the dreams inspired by the view from our windows, from which I constantly gazed upon wooded Lunxhëri, with its snow-covered mountain peaks in winter, or upon the village of Qesorat with its white houses? I cannot deny that my imagination was active, yet it was not only that. The life of the town of Gjirokastra was closely bound up with Lunxhëri, its men and its women. Lunxhëri supplied the town with vegetables and various fruits. Every Monday and every Friday, in those distant days, market day was held in Gjirokastra. The grocers and greengrocers of the town would set out before dawn and gather at the bridge over the Drino River, where they would secure a portion of the produce that the people of Lunxhëri were bringing to market. As a child, my elders often took me along carrying a basket or sack, and we would go to the market, which was held in the garden of the mosque belonging to the tekke. My elders knew the men and women of Lunxhëri by name. They never engaged in lengthy bargaining with them. They bought what we needed, loaded it onto my shoulders and I carried it home before going to school.

It is understandable that the summer season was especially pleasant, for I would often be given a fig, a pear, a wild pear or a handful of cornelian cherries, which I ate along the way as I walked home.

The women of Lunxhëri came into the town both in winter and in summer, wearing their beautiful costumes embroidered with braid. Although these garments were thick, they were

practical and wholesome. The women and their produce enlivened the market and beautified the town, inspiring in us young people an affection for those people and for those mountains that yielded so many fine things.

In the village of Erind we stopped at a spring to drink water and refresh ourselves before climbing the steep ascent of the Serpent, with its caves and rocks, in the heat of the day. The village



"Lunxhëri, in my youth, was a blossoming garden, with trees, shade, waters and springs, and warm-hearted people. From there we would gaze out over the plain and the Drino River. What a marvel!" The mountains of Lunxhëri.

was spread out, with small, poor houses and numerous stables. At the fountain there were women filling wooden buckets and tin water-jugs of the sort sold in Gjirokastra by Malo the Tinsmith. Around their feet one could see children my age and even younger. Who could possibly have imagined at that time that among those barefoot children would emerge the heroes of the National Liberation War, Mihal Duri and Misto Mame, who would later become my comrades and with whom I would fight in the streets of Tirana and Peza against the Italian occupiers and for the great ideal of communism and the liberation of the homeland?

When we climbed the Serpent Pass and reached the summit, a magnificent panorama opened before us. There lay the famous Çajup of our dreams: a beautiful plain, like a vast tray, surrounded by mountains, green and covered with yellow clover blossoms. Beyond the pass a small forest darkened the landscape. This was where we were to stay, for there was a spring there with crystal-clear water, cold as snow, about which people in Gjirokastra used to say: "For consumptives, that water either cures them or finishes them off." Our great hope was that my brother would recover.

The old man and the muleteers erected the tent, while my mother arranged the canvas beds inside and spread our winter blankets over the quilts, for the nights there are cold even in summer. We slept as best we could on the first night, though our sleep was light. The next morning my uncle and the muleteers went to the nearby forest and cut several long branches to construct a shelter where we could sit during the day in the sun. There we would eat the lunch my mother prepared for us. There was no one in Çajup except ourselves and a shepherd with a flock of sheep. His fold lay some distance away, and he also had a hut covered with branches, much like our shelter. My uncle went over and spent some time talking with him, and they discovered they were acquainted. He was from Kurvelesh. They called him Uncle Sulo. My uncle arranged with him to supply us with milk every morning and occasionally some meat whenever he slaughtered an animal. He came to meet us accompanied by a small boy of my own age named Muharrem. Another, older boy had remained with the flock grazing in the middle of the plain. During our stay in Çajup we became very friendly with them. Food supplies were sent to us from Gjirokastra every three or four days by muleteer or by some villager from the Zagoria villages passing through the area.

Life in Çajup was naturally monotonous, but the climate

was wonderful. My brother improved day by day, coughed less and we were delighted. The water was so light and so cold that one could scarcely keep a hand in it. Our appetites increased. We had also brought books with us: I had my schoolbooks, while my brother brought works by Fan Noli, Naim Frashëri's *Bagëti e Bujqësia* (*Herds and Crops*), Çajupi's *Baba Tomori* and others.

The shepherd's son and I wandered freely across the beautiful grassy plain of Çajup. Uncle Sulo made each of us a staff. I also became friendly with the dogs. Together we fed them *kaçamak** and sat watching over the sheep. When Uncle Sulo milked them, he would give us some colostrum. He also taught us how to make little wreaths from yellow clover flowers. When we returned home, I took them back to Gjirokastra and hung them on the wall.

Whenever my brother came to visit Uncle Sulo, we would sing Lab songs together. My brother would begin, Uncle Sulo would answer and Muharrem and I would join in. Among other songs, Uncle Sulo sang this one:

"O Gjoleka, Lab of Kuç,
You stride across the plain of Kuç,
Your outlaw's shirt falling to your knees,
A sabre hanging from your shoulder,
A handsome sabre with its tassels,
A polished sabre, flashing like lightning,
Clashing against Gjoleka's belt."

At times I would recite passages from *Bagëti e Bujqësia* aloud. Uncle Sulo listened attentively to the verses and greatly enjoyed them. "How beautifully he has composed it," he would say. Sometimes he would ask me: "Start from that part over there." And I would recite:

* Traditional maize-meal porridge.

"...where the shepherd plays his pipe,
Where the flocks graze,
Where the bell-wearing he-goat roams,
There my thoughts remain."

"Naim Bey truly poured out his soul in that," Uncle Sulo would say. Then he would take up his flute and play a mournful melody in response.

Thus the days and nights passed in that marvellous yet lonely place where, amid a plain of grass and flowers, with pure cold water, mountains on every side, a blue sky above and countless stars at night, there lived only ourselves and the flock of sheep. I was eager to see the village of Çajup, about which we had read the poem dedicated to it, *My Village*. I would ask Muharrem: "Have you seen it?"

"Yes. If you go up to the pass, you can see Nivan, Sheper and the others."

"Uncle Sulo," I would say to the shepherd, "when shall we go up to the pass and see the village I read about in the book?"

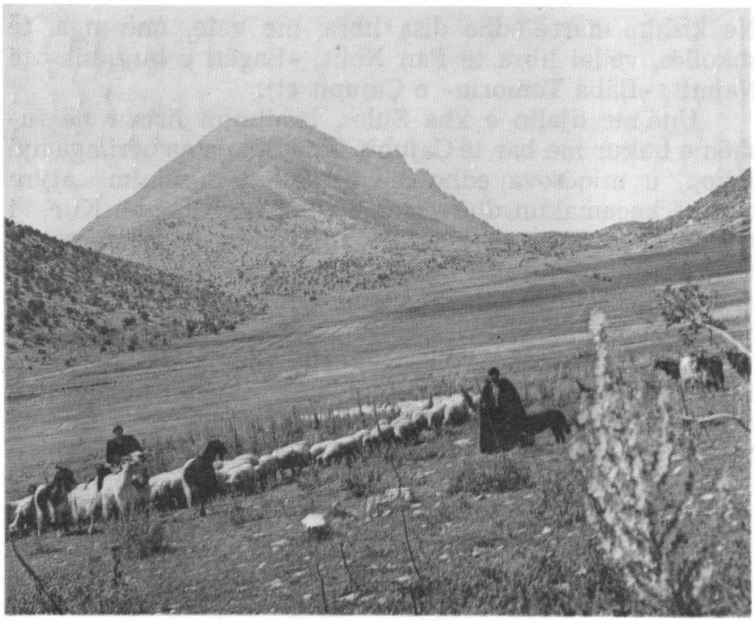
"We shall go there as well, but only after the flock has grazed properly."

And one day we did go up to the pass and saw those villages that Çajupi had celebrated with such longing.

When we returned from Çajup to Gjirokastra, my brother appeared better. My mother was delighted and kept saying, "*Ishalla*,* he will recover." Yet God's will was not to fulfil her wish.

Another year we went to Dhoksat, a small village in Lunxhëri, a beautiful place with trees, cool water, abundant shade and houses built along the hillside. The waters from the mountain springs were collected in the centre of the village, beneath the priest's house, in a small reservoir. From there the water was

* God willing.



"The Plain of Çajup, beautiful as a great tray, encircled by mountains, verdant and filled with yellow clover blossoms."

channelled through irrigation ditches, and the villagers took turns directing it into their little gardens where they cultivated vegetables to sell in the market at Gjirokastra. We travelled to Dhoksat with my uncle and Saliko Reso. On the first night we slept outdoors on a threshing floor at the upper end of the village. Nearby stood a large house, the largest in the village, known as the "Kokoli House," a curious name that I remember for two further reasons. First, we rented a small old house with two rooms at the very edge of the village, and it belonged to the Kokoli family. Second, that family had a boy with whom we played. Several things remain in my memory from our stay in Dhoksat*: the

* On 15 September 1975, Comrade Enver watched a documentary about Lunxhëri in the television series *Të njohim Shqipërinë socialiste* [*Let Us Know Socialist Albania*], which awakened memories of Dhoksat.

small yellow grapes in the garden; the goats returning to the village in the evening, finding the doors of their own houses and pushing them open with their heads and horns; the fountain beneath a tunnel of trees at the edge of the village where I went to fetch water; poor old Aunt Hajdho, a half-mad destitute woman; and the glass of bitter herbal infusion that Uncle Saliko boiled every day and which I was obliged to drink on an empty stomach because, as he said, "it gives strength."

Another year my brother and I again went away for a change of air, this time to Stegopul. It was the last such journey before the poor fellow died. We rented two small rooms in the house of Urani Rumbo's sister, situated on the western side of the village. One first climbed up to the shop, then climbed farther and, after passing along a road through the woods, descended again to the village doctor's house. This was the neighbourhood where we stayed, a hamlet of four or five houses, of which the doctor's was the principal one. We became friendly with the local people and often visited the doctor with my brother. The door was opened for us by a young girl, a little older than myself, with fair curly hair. Her name was Viktori. Later, when she grew up, Viktoria married my violin teacher, Pano Hido.

What do I remember from Stegopul? Not very much. I remember my mother's daily conversations with Urani Rumbo's sister; the shop beside the great plane tree; a small café where my brother would sit during his walks and where we ate pieces of dried red Turkish delight; watching the priest and some villagers playing backgammon with dice; a blackened backgammon

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Inspired by it, he wrote in his diary: "I felt immense joy, an indescribable emotion! Before my eyes passed the things I had preserved in my memory, but this time so beautiful... On television I saw the steep road leading to the top of the village. The same wooden gate, the same stone bench! Oh, how beautiful, whitewashed with lime! What an artistic people!... What a cultured people!..."

board stained with countless cigarette burns; the priest's beard; and his fingers with their long, untrimmed black nails.

Once, after returning from the Korça Lyceum, Aqif, Selahudin, Siri, Asllan and several other friends organised an excursion to the village of Qesorat, the birthplace of Koto Hoxhi.* We spent the day in the shade beside the springs. I also remember the song we sang there, a song associated with those villages:

"...O Hamit Guga, gallant man,
At Sopot the mountain pass was cut off before you."

These, my dear children, are some of my memories from childhood. Smile if you wish, but there is little else to tell; this is how the years of youth passed in those days. We did not then have the Party that we have today to educate us, teach us and guide us in our youth. We grew up, so to speak, as orphans, without the great mother, the Party. Yet we had the people, who raised and inspired us from the moment we first suckled at our mothers' breasts, and they were unconquerable.

20 February 1969

* In his diary on 15 September 1975, Comrade Enver wrote: "Qesorat, the village of the esteemed teacher Uncle Koto. Oh, how I long for his school!..."

JOURNEY WITH "*FLUTURIDHA*"

One year — I do not remember the exact date, though it was still during the period when I was studying at the Gjirokastra Lyceum — my maternal uncle invited me to spend the holidays in Fier, where he was living with his children. My joy was indescribable and I awaited the day with impatience. He even gave my uncle the money needed to pay for my transport by motor vehicle. Travel in those days was extremely difficult. A journey to Vlora could sometimes take as long as two days. One would be told to present oneself early in the morning, but the vehicle would not leave until midday and, by nightfall, after breaking down and being repaired several times along the road, one was fortunate to have reached Tepelena. I remember sleeping in the vehicle there because there was no inn, nor did I have any money. Everything had been calculated down to the last coin in order for me to reach Vlora.

At that time there was only a single motor vehicle in operation, and its owner was Namik Alitja. He was a middle-aged man, dark-complexioned, hardworking and not wealthy. His wife had died and, some years later, he married Munime, the

daughter of Baba Çen. Namik was the first man to acquire such a vehicle, an Italian lorry, naturally second-hand. Namik's vehicle was an event of considerable importance for Gjirokastra, much as Foto Tola's flour mill had been.

Foto Tola's mill, an old contraption which in Gjirokastra we called a *hamoqellë*, had been installed in a wretched shack beneath Çerçiz Square, which at that time did not yet bear that name and had neither retaining walls nor enclosure, being little more than a steep embankment. The mill was inaugurated one fine morning with a siren blast so powerful that it astonished and alarmed the entire town, whose inhabitants were hearing such a sound for the first time. I remember that I was about to leave for school when the wailing began. My mother cried out and together we ran to the window.

"What catastrophe is this? What is that dreadful noise? Good heavens, what has happened in Gjirokastra! Don't go outside, my dear, until we find out what it is, in case something happens to you," she said to me.

"I am going out," I replied. "Do not worry about me. I am going to see what it is and find out."

It was the siren of Gjirokastra's first "factory."

But let us return now to the first lorry. Namik had even given the machine a name: he called it "*Fluturidha*." Its driver, known as "Arapi," was famous both for his skill behind the wheel and for his habit of drinking and swearing, like many drivers of that era. His face was as dark as that of the vehicle's owner, Uncle Namik.

That day the lorry was finally made ready only when the sun had climbed well into the sky. We all found places atop bundles, sacks and crates. The first passenger could scarcely see the second. We were packed so tightly that we could barely breathe. Our heads touched the tarpaulin overhead and we were forced to keep them bent against our chests.

"We are being crushed; we shall suffocate, Uncle Namik," we protested.

"Do not worry," he replied. "You will feel cramped only until we set off. Once we are on the road, the potholes will sort everything out. The bundles and luggage will be compressed and you will find yourselves sitting as comfortably as on cushions."

In those early days Uncle Namik travelled beside the driver himself. Along the way he paid no attention whatsoever to what was happening in the back, where some passengers were vomiting and older people and women were suffering terribly. He would stop the lorry in the middle of the road, chat with a traveller, collect the fare and then tell him, "Get in quickly, you have already delayed me." This continued throughout the journey until we reached Tepelena after nightfall.

At that time Tepelena consisted of little more than a gendarmerie post and a few barracks. A fierce wind blew there, strong enough to lift one off one's feet. We were buffeted by it, but we were obliged to get down and move our arms and legs because they had gone numb and we had become completely stiff. Yet my happiness was immense. I was young and did not care about such discomforts. That night we slept inside *Fluturidha*. The next morning brought the same refrain: "We shall leave shortly... just a little longer... we are waiting for someone... Arapi is having breakfast... the tyre has burst," and so on.

Near midday we finally set out. The ascent began. There were the bends of the road, the groaning brakes, the dust that choked you and seemed to pull your entrails out, Arapi's booming singing and the fear that bandits might block our way. Robbers such as Shaqo Llapi, Mero and Hamit Lamçja, Sulo Bega and others would ambush motor vehicles and strip travellers of their money and belongings. In short, they robbed them clean. I was not afraid of such a thing. I was only a child and did not

have a single coin in my pocket, merely a small bundle containing spare clothes. For that reason I rather liked the idea of seeing bandits stop the road. Whenever the brakes screeched and *Fluturidha* halted at a bend, a woman at the rear of the lorry would cry out, "The robbers!"

"No, sister," a man would reply while making the sign of the cross. "Do not frighten yourself. Why do you bring bad luck upon our journey?"

At every fountain and every stream Arapi stopped the vehicle and "watered" the engine, which emitted smoke as though it were on fire. "Machines are just like people," Arapi would tell us. "When they climb uphill, they sweat and want water to drink because they become thirsty."

At the great plane tree of Sevaster there was a long halt. Both the passengers and the machine rested there, and the rest was well deserved, for we emerged from the lorry white with dust. I looked no different from the others, as though I had just come out of Çiço's mill at Virua, where I had once gone by mule with Resuli (Cule) and Uncle Faro to grind maize. One by one we descended to the fountain, shook the dust from our clothes, removed our coats, rolled up our sleeves, washed our faces and drank the pure, clear, ice-cold water. Then I took out the bread and cheese my mother had given me and began eating with a hearty appetite. There was also a miserable little shack there selling beer. Men such as Arapi drank the beer chilled in the fountain, consuming two or three bottles at a time. I thought to myself: "These drivers are truly vagabonds. They never think ahead. Whatever they earn, they spend at once."

When one man saw that "Arapi" would not stop drinking, he shouted at him:

"Arap, for the sake of the old man's head, do not drink any more, or you will ruin us all and throw us over some precipice!"

"Do not worry," Arapi replied. "It is only when I drink that

my hands stop trembling. So, if you want to reach Vlora safe and sound, buy me a beer." We laughed and admired Arapi. "There is no driver like Neki Arapi," we would later say, just as we said of Arshi Rucaj, Pandeli and Arsen. These were among the most distinguished drivers of my youth.

We climbed back into the vehicle, left behind the coolness of the plane tree and the fountain of Sevaster, the slopes and gorges of Salaria and the fear of bandits, and entered the heroic landscape of our dreams. We were approaching brave Vlora. I was curious, and from inside the lorry, as though from a dark tunnel, I gazed eagerly at the mountains and hills, waiting to see the olive groves we had been taught about at school. I searched for the very olive grove from the book by Justin Godart, a Frenchman who had come to Gjirokastra and whom we, as small children brought out into the square by our schools, had greeted with flowers. Godart wrote a book in French about Albania, which we read at the lyceum. I remember that it contained a photograph of olive trees, beneath which sat refugees displaced and expelled from other parts of the homeland by the Serbian and Greek occupiers. As we awaited our arrival in Vlora, we began to sing:

"I am from Vlora, proud son of Vlora,
The eagle is both mother and father to me.
That brave two-headed eagle
Has its home in Vlora."

In my young mind passed the epic of Vlora, the bravery of Selam Musa, the volunteers, the flags, Ismail Qemali, the assassination of Avni Rustemi, the June Uprising, Baba Çen, Idriz Guri, Çerçiz, Marat, Robespierre and the head of Louis XVI severed by the guillotine. It seemed to me that I would find all these events and figures in Vlora. The great dream of my youth was coming true.

Naturally, we reached Vlora at night, and *Fluturidha* stopped at Hilmi Çipi's Hotel Korça. Hilmi was a cousin of my mother and my maternal uncle. This was *Fluturidha*'s base, the final station of the Gjirokastra-Vlora "train." Many people had come out, some waiting for relatives, others for goods or a letter. No one was waiting for me. There I met Beti Sharra, "the Lame One," a former schoolmate from the lower secondary school who worked as a servant in his maternal uncle's hotel. He took me aside and told Hilmi that I was Shyqyri's nephew and that Shyqyri had instructed him to give me a bed in the hotel for the night and send me on to Fier the next day by some vehicle. That is what happened. I spent one night in Vlora. The hotel seemed to me like a palace. I slept in the same room as Beti. The beds even had mosquito nets, for in those days mosquitoes would devour you in Vlora. As soon as we arrived, our faces and hands swelled. We immediately rubbed them with vinegar, but to no avail.

I wanted to go out for a while and see the Vlora of my dreams. Beti and I emerged from a dark alley into a square.

"There," said Beti, "this is where the Flag was raised."

"Where? Where?" I asked.

"There, in an old house, though you cannot see it now because it is dark, on a wooden balcony."

"Where? Where?" I kept asking him. But Beti, tapping along with his stick like the lame fellow he was, instead of showing me the house where the Flag had been raised, said:

"This is Hotel Gambino, owned by an Italian scoundrel who competes with us because he has several girls who are disreputable and draw customers away from our hotel." Beti had turned into a businessman.

"Show me the sea, Beti," I said.

"Are you mad?" he replied. "The harbour is far away. There are brambles and thorns. You need a carriage. You cannot go

there on foot." And so that night I was unable to see either Vlora or the sea.

Early the next morning I rose and went out alone without eating. I was thirsty to see Sazan and Karaburun, the places of my songs and heroic dreams. Having made sure that a battered Ford belonging to Hiqmet Çipi would leave for Fier around midday, I set off quickly on foot straight towards the harbour. There I sat on a stone by the shore, gazing at Sazan, which Italy had occupied, and at Karaburun. I could not look at them enough, while the songs I had learnt passed through my mind.

The olive trees, the olive trees — those were what I wanted to see. When I climbed into the Ford, I said to Hiqmet:

"Please, show me the olive trees."

"Do not worry," he replied. "We shall pass right through them."

What a wonder that was for me! I was astonished. How could it be? Whole forests of greenery, whereas in Gjirokastra there was not a single olive tree. "Ah," I thought to myself, "these people of Vlora are capable of anything."

When we reached the Koshovica Pass and began descending, the entrance to Fier made an impression on me. From there one could see the plain and the town, the cemeteries on both sides of the road and the thick plane trees. I asked the driver, Hiqmet, about everything.

"Why are there two kinds of graves?"

"On one side," he explained, "are the Muslim graves; on the other, the Christian ones. These plane trees are centuries old. There, on the hill above this river, which is called the Gjanica, stands the house of the lame bey with wooden legs, which go creak-creak when he walks. This here is the bazaar and the pasha's house. All these shops belong to the pasha. Indeed, all Fier," driver Hiqmet said, "belongs to the Vrionis."

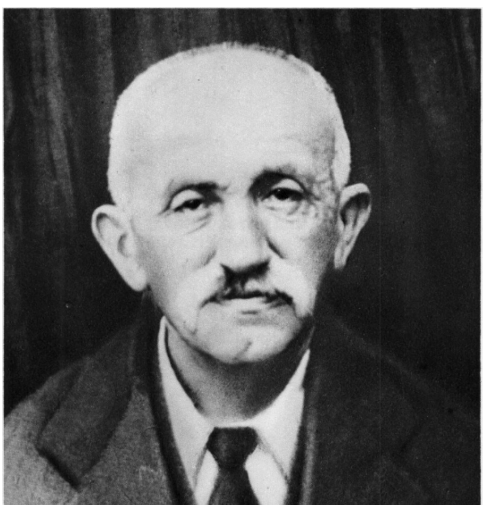
At last I arrived at my uncle's house, a small single-sto-



In this room, on 16 October 1908, Comrade Enver Hoxha, the beloved leader of our Party and people, was born.



"I loved Mother all my life. Through all the vicissitudes of life, she was always by my side."



"My father, Halil Hoxha, whom we called Uncle, was a kind and beloved man..."

In the 1923–1924 school year.

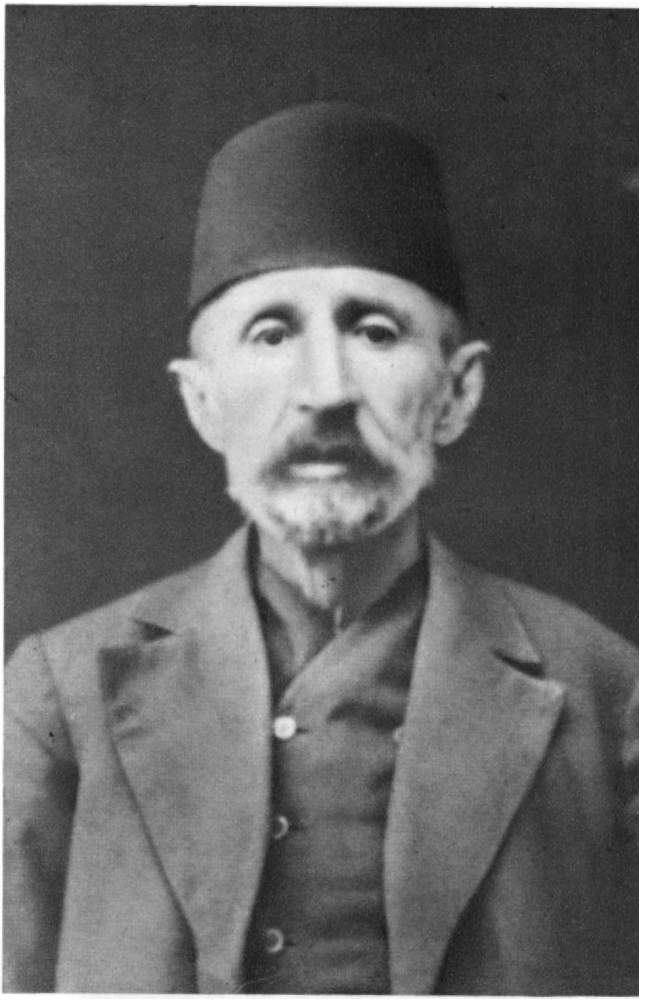




In the 1926–1927 school year.



"Jeko, my paternal grandmother. Even in this photograph she is smiling, just as I remember her throughout my childhood."



"Hysen Hoxha was called by all of us children both 'Baba' and 'Baba Çen.' He raised us and brought us up when we were young... I am proud of Baba Çen — a simple man, brave and patriotic."



"When we returned from Çajupi to Gjirokastra, my brother [Beqir Hoxha] seemed better. Mother would say, 'Ishallah, he will recover.' But that 'Ishallah' would not fulfil her wish..."



"We loved our Aunt very much. She was highly intelligent, with a sharp mind, and was neither fanatical nor conservative." From left to right: Sano Hoxha, Zihni Çuçi, Sado Gami, Aunt Hasije Çuçi (My maternal grandmother), Enver Hoxha, Malo Gami and Zejnepe Gami.



"I cherish these walks as memories of my childhood and youth. When I think of those distant times, it seems as though I am once again close to the scent of the grass and to the hum of the bee wandering among the yellow wildflowers of Cfaka."

From left to right. Bottom row: Skënder Topulli, Siri Shapllo, Emin Shtino, Neshet Dudushi, Selahudin Çano. Top row: Ikbal Shapllo, Ferik Shtino, Enver Hoxha, Masar Topulli, Zija Shapllo.



"The monument to Çerçiz was erected long ago, with difficulty, through the contributions of the people. It was created by our talented sculptor Odhise Paskali. The figure of Çerçiz inspired us, the young, throughout our lives. It is an imposing, majestic and heroic figure..." Çerçiz Topulli Square in the centre of the city.



From left to right: Iljaz Hoxha, Thoma Papapano and Ramiz Harxhi, teachers and patriots who educated generations of young people in Gjirokastra.

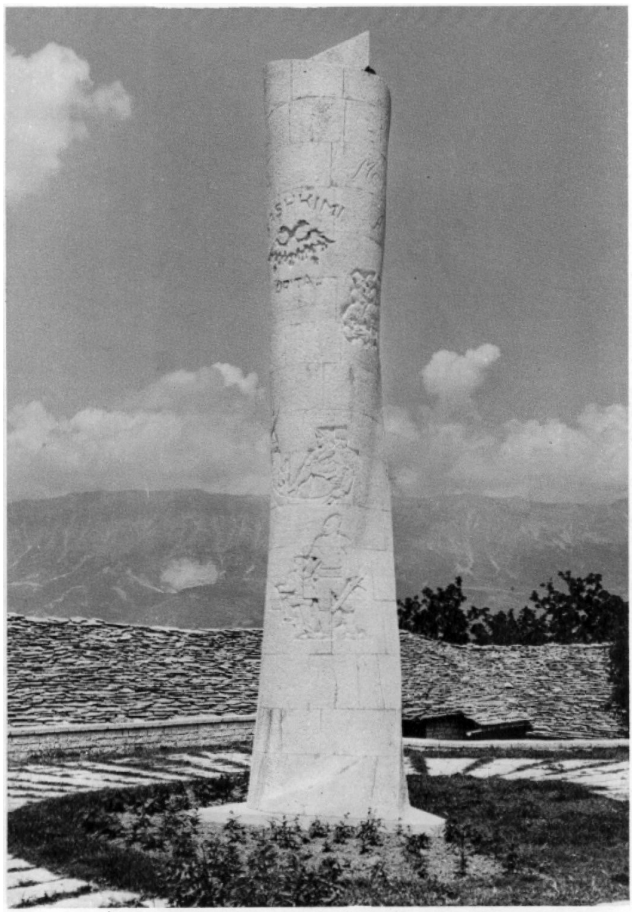




From left to right. First row: Elmaz Çani, Henriette Kutan and Pano Hido. Second row: Hajrulla Harxhi, Hysni Babameto, deputy headmaster of the Lyceum, Viktor Kutan, the French headmaster, and Liézén.



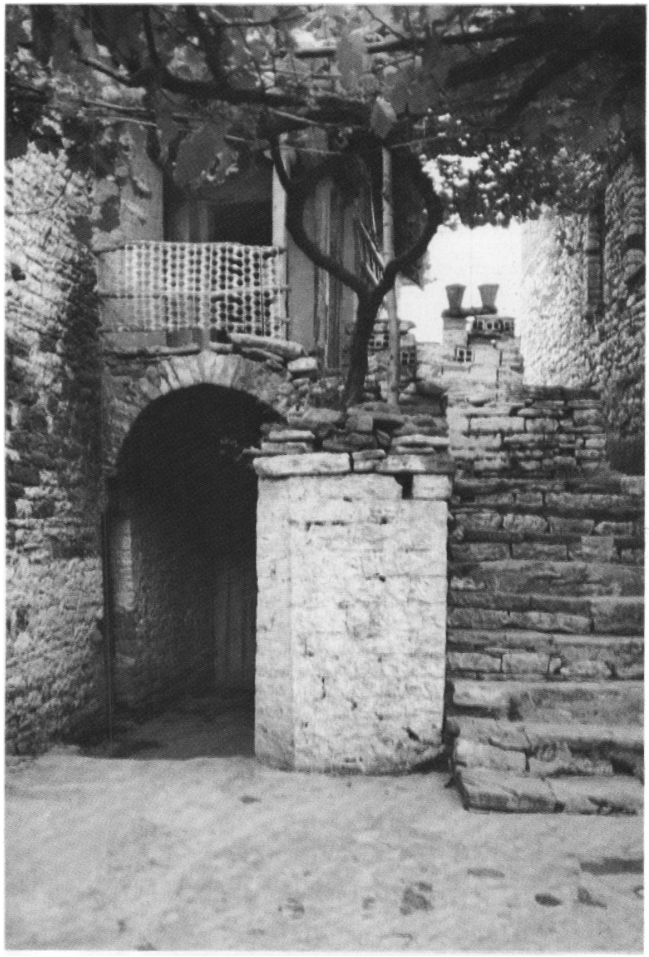
Professors and students of the Gjirokastra Lyceum. From left to right. In the first row, seated: André Brezho, Liézén, Hysni Babameto, Marchand and Elmaz Çani; in the second row, standing, the students: Asllan Muhedini, Fejzi Dobi, Enver Hoxha, Selahudin Kokona, Hamit Kokalari and Reshat Bajo.



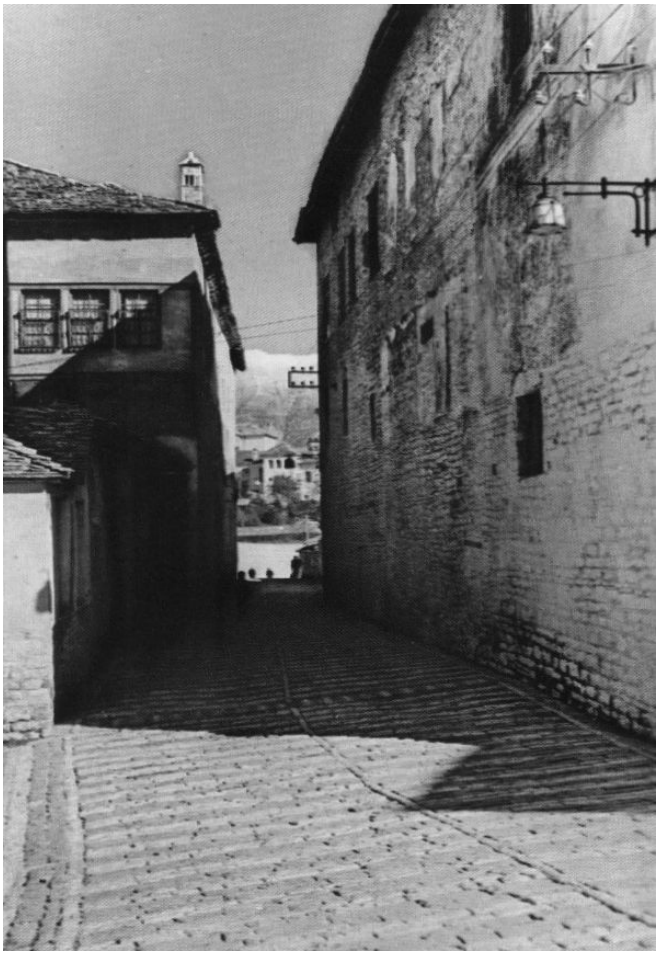
"I am very pleased that I came all the way here, to this historic site where we studied when we were young. Everything surrounding this place is familiar to me..." The Obelisk, in the form of an open book, representing pages from the history of national education, a work by the sculptors Mumtaz Dhrami (People's Sculptor), Ksenofon Kostaqi (Merited Sculptor) and Stefan Papamihali.



"You have made it very beautifully. This monument has pleased me and all my comrades, comrades sculptors. It is a splendid monument, carved in stone, white as mountain snow. I shake your hands in the name of the Party ..."



"When my uncle moved his family to Fier, he left us the house in Hazmurat, and so we settled there once again, leaving Cfaka behind."



Here, the band of Çerçiz Topulli killed the Turkish *binbashı* (major).



"Here is Mashkullora, over there in the mountains! From this way Çerçiz would descend like a gallant warrior with his band, to his loyal friends in Mashkullora."



rey dwelling with three tiny rooms and a storeroom in which even three people could scarcely turn around. The house was enclosed by a fence and, in one corner, there was a well from which drinking water was drawn by means of a windlass. What astonished me most was a small patch of garden that had been cultivated as a vegetable plot. There they had planted a kind of gourd I had never seen before. As my aunt explained, it was not eaten. Instead, it was left to dry, hollowed out inside and then used as a vessel for drinking water. To drink water from a gourd? I was amazed.

My aunt was delighted that I had come. My uncle, however, was not there during the first days, as I recall, but arrived later and was equally pleased to see me. I slept in the same room as my aunt. Every evening after supper we spread mattresses on the floor, while my uncle slept in a bed.

On my first day in Fier I conducted an "inspection" of the yard. I poked my head through the fence, wandered into the road and explored the surroundings. In those days there were not many houses there, only mud huts. Near my uncle's house stood a large two-storey house belonging to the Gurga family from Gjirokastra, who owned two or three estates. "The Gurgas are wastrels," my uncle used to say. "They squander their money on women and gambling." On the other side of my uncle's house stood the home of Nazmi Skënduli, another man from Gjirokastra who, as people said, "had discovered Myzeqe" and leased estates from the local beys. He too had a large new two-storey house. We often went there for lunch or supper because Nazmi was my uncle's business associate, whereas we never visited the Gurgas.

I needed to find a companion with whom I could go out and play. "I know someone for you," my aunt said. One day we went to Çeligrad, which lay nearby on the edge of the town. There stood a small single-storey mud house, but with flowers

at the entrance and a spotless interior. We were received by a young man of the household, with whom I became acquainted. He studied at the Technical School in Tirana and also played football. Consequently, we often went together to Çeligrad and spent the afternoons playing football with other boys from Fier. My uncle, who was frugal, would say to me: "Do not play too much or you will wear out your shoes." But what else was I supposed to do?

I often went to my uncle's shop — if one could call it a shop. It was one of those tiny premises owned by the Vrioni pasha, with wooden shutters and walls and floors made of mud. It had two entrances opening onto two different streets because it stood on a corner. Along the walls were a few shelves displaying a modest assortment of goods. I remember only some small round mirrors, each with the image of a woman on the reverse. This particular "merchandise" my uncle had purchased in Vienna when visiting his son Zihni, whom he had sent there to study. A man named Sotir Goga — at least I believe that was his name — was always in the shop. He was a tall, thin peasant from Myzeqe. Sotir was very kind and took a liking to me. On the very first day he said: "Choose one of those little mirrors and keep it with you so that you can look at yourself." It seemed to me a magnificent gift.

One evening, while my uncle and Sotir were talking in the shop, the latter said:

"Shyqyri, shall I take Enver with me to Roskovec tomorrow?"

"Take him," my uncle replied.

I jumped for joy. I was going to Roskovec! I had no idea what Roskovec actually was, but I was so excited that I could not sleep that night. Early the next morning Sotir arrived with a cart drawn by two buffaloes and took me with him. It was the first time I had ridden in a cart. Sotir drove the animals with a goad while the wheels creaked along. We were travelling

to Roskovec to attend the market. Sotir intended to buy grapes for making wine for the shop and no doubt also had other business to conduct. When we arrived in Roskovec, there was little more than a handful of old barracks, yet a large market was being held and there were many people buying and selling. Sotir greeted one person after another and spoke with peasants wearing skullcaps. Eventually he bought three baskets of red grapes, which we loaded onto the cart before beginning the return journey. "Do not be sparing," Sotir told me. "Eat as many grapes as you like. The master can afford them." I had never seen so many grapes in my life. I ate bunch after bunch until I could eat no more. That journey through Myzeqe remained unforgettable for me, as did a wedding I attended there.

On another occasion Sotir took me to a village — I believe it was Marinëz — where, together with my cousin and childhood companion Sado Gami, I attended the wedding of Uncle Jani's son, who I think was called Joti. Once again we travelled by cart. I still remember the earth, cracked by drought that year, the cluster of mud huts and the peasants sitting together in the square, drinking and singing. From time to time they would rise and dance. I sat at a low table with Sotir and joined in with cries of "eeeee" whenever the wedding guests sang. From that time onward I came to love the songs and dances of Myzeqe, and I still do. The villagers were warm-hearted people. Every so often they would pat me affectionately or embrace me, and one old man repeatedly placed his skullcap on my head and declared: "I shall make a Myzeqe man of you."

Whenever market day came to Fier, I loved wandering about among the stalls. I would stroll here and there, asking the peasants, "How much are you selling this for?" or "How much is that?," though I had nothing to buy. Occasionally my aunt would give me a few leks and I would spend them on fruit. On market days large numbers of villagers came into the town. The

market was held near the residence of the Vrioni pasha, in a square shaded by several tall trees. Along one side of the market rose the high walls enclosing the garden and palace of the pashas. To me those walls seemed dark and mysterious. Nothing could be seen beyond them except the tops of tall trees. "This is where the people's bloodsuckers live," I would think to myself. "Who knows what goes on behind those walls?"

At times Sotir would point through the shop window and say: "There goes Qemal Bey Vrioni. And that one is Kahreman Bey. They flay the skin from our backs." How could that peasant from Myzeqe, Sotir, possibly have imagined that the boy to whom he was speaking and in whom he was confiding would one day avenge him and all the peasants of Myzeqe by cutting off the heads of Qemal Bey and the other Vrioni beys, while the rest of the feudal class would be swept away forever? But that reckoning with the feudal lords lay in the future.

In Fier, by working, I earned money for the first time in my life — exactly 25 leks. This is how I earned it. There was a lawyer there named Rasim Hoxha, a relative of ours and the father of Shpresa and Muhamet. Muhamet was older than I and studied in France. Rasim and his sons were rather arrogant. Only Shpresa was entirely different. She later became a partisan, a committed communist and fought courageously, even against members of her own family, who were not on our side.

One day Uncle Rasim said to me: "Come to my office and copy some documents for me." So I went and spent days writing and copying. When I finished, he paid me 25 leks and also invited me to lunch at his house because Muhamet had returned from France. "Give me the money and I will keep it safe for you," my aunt said. But I refused. Instead, I spent it all during my stay in Fier.

As the reopening of school approached, I returned to Gjirokastra carrying with me many happy memories of those holidays.

III
SIMPLE PEOPLE

THROUGH THE EYES OF MEMORY*

In a book by a renowned foreign physician entitled *Life Begins at Fifty*, the author writes that, as people grow older, they should frequently return to their birthplace, because this is connected with improved health and a longer life. The reason given by this doctor is that the body, the bones, the brain — in short, all the organs of the human body — are moulded, formed and imbued from childhood onwards by the air one breathes, the water one drinks and the nourishment derived from the soil of one's native land. In a person raised within a particular environment, in contact with the people and society around him, sharing in their feelings, troubles, hardships and joys, every cell of the body becomes imbued with all those things that have given vitality to the organism. When a person advanced in years returns to his birthplace, the doctor continues, the cells of the body become electrified. They experience a kind of "shock"

* Comrade Enver Hoxha began writing these memoirs on 4 September 1976 and completed them on 18 September, the day on which Gjirokastra celebrated the thirty-second anniversary of its liberation.

from the radiance of the environment of childhood and are invigorated and renewed. In such surroundings a person feels more energetic, happier, more cheerful and physically healthier.

How true this theory may be, or how much scientific value it possesses, I cannot say. Yet I can affirm something that lends support to the doctor's argument. Whenever I go to Gjirokastra, I experience great joy. I feel different, as though I know everyone there. When I ask someone whom I do not recognise — because he is young — whose son he is and from what family he comes, and he answers me, a thousand thoughts and memories flood over me. I experience a particular satisfaction, because I remember the people I once knew and their lives. Even some small and seemingly insignificant detail comes back before me, though in memory it assumes much greater proportions. My longing does not diminish; it increases.

How greatly I wish to visit my birthplace. Yet my responsibilities do not allow me to do so often and, unable to travel there frequently in person, I make these journeys through memory. Thus I live with Gjirokastra and with the people of my youth, and I assure you that I derive from this both spiritual and physical refreshment. After work, in the evenings, I often sit reflecting and sometimes ask Haxho or Sano: "What was the name of Hasip Kullumbi's mother?" "Who lived in that house?" "And who lived by that bend in the road?" and so forth.

Nexhmije's mother says to me: "What do you want with these old matters from more than seventy years ago? Why burden your mind with them? Do you not have enough worries already?"

We certainly have worries, but the people of those days bore burdens as high as mountains and yet remained standing, stronger than the mountains themselves. I shall write about the lives of ordinary people, for they were the people themselves — those who worked, who sweated, who sometimes had bread to eat and sometimes did not. It is possible that their grand-

children no longer remember them today, but I shall remind them of their grandparents, at least insofar as memory allows. And when I recall them in the evening, it seems to me that I become younger, stronger, sharper in thought and bolder in action. These memories electrify me; they invigorate the cells of my body and mind. For that reason, I am inclined to agree with the doctor whom I mentioned above.

The place where I spent most of my time playing when I was a child, after school had finished, was what we called *Xhepi Square*.* It was certainly not the property of Uncle Kamber, who lived in a little lane on the left before one reached the house of Uncle Vehap Kokalari. Continuing farther on, one came to the houses of Uncle Nuro Çanole and Bejko Gaxhello and then, turning downhill to the right, arrived at a small square with four houses and four gateways: one belonged to Uncle Neim Fino, another to Hasip Kullumbi and a third was a burned-out house, with only its walls remaining and an open gateway like a mouth beneath a rounded arch. This house had belonged to the Ajdini family. I do not remember to whom the fourth house belonged, nor what it looked like.

The street I have mentioned, which began at Xhepi Square and continued as far as the Gaxhello house, was straight, muddy and sparsely paved with stones. On both sides it was enclosed by the garden walls and house of the Hasanaj family and by the garden walls of the Kokalaris and Bejko Gaxhello. The little lane leading to Uncle Neim Fino's house was strewn with stones washed down from the walls by torrents of rainwater because it sloped steeply downhill.

The road leading to the Çanole house, by contrast, was pleasant, with its dark brown stone walls blackened by time and

* "Pocket Square."



"The Road of Çanole is pleasant, with its dark stone walls, blackened by time, and its shade. Along this road we often played with our friends, boys and girls alike."

its abundant shade, for the branches of the garden trees extended above the walls and hung over the street. It was along this road that we often played with our friends, boys and girls alike.

The house of Uncle Vehap Kokalari was a fine one, with two storeys and many windows. Below were the stables and a porch with black wooden boards and beams painted red. Uncle Vehap was a good man and never scolded us. He was a civil servant, a clerk, perhaps in the government offices. He dressed well and his clothes were always neat. I remember that he wore a red fez, which he later replaced with a black one.

Uncle Vehap had several daughters. Of the daughters I remember, one was called Ruho and another Safo. Safo was younger, a playmate of mine who joined us boys in games with hazelnuts and walnuts. Ruho was older and a friend of Haxho. Later Uncle Vehap had a son, or perhaps more than one, but I do not know for certain because by then our family had moved to another neighbourhood.

The house of Uncle Nuro Çanole was more distinctive. One climbed several steps and pushed open a large gate with two sturdy wooden leaves, fastened from within by heavy bars and bolts. "It would be difficult for thieves to get in here," said

Beduni, Çanole's son, my companion in games and at primary school. Beduni was often looked down upon, but he was strong. Whenever we wrestled, he usually defeated us and threw us to the ground. Uncle Nuro was an elderly man with grey hair, ash-coloured moustaches, hair of the same shade and a black fez. His face was dark and weather-beaten, his hands hard and calloused. It was obvious that he worked both in the cherry orchards and at Levend, cutting grass. He must also have been a shepherd because he kept three goats and a billy goat at home. The billy goat had been given the name "Tare Liço Karabini." This Uncle Tare was a pompous hodja whose beard resembled that of the goat.

Sometimes Beduni and I would drive the goats ahead of us towards the vineyards of the Zekate family to graze them and, if we found any, eat a few cherries ourselves.

I was very fond of Uncle Nuro Çanole's house because it resembled a village home. Passing through the large gate, flanked by two white wooden benches, one ascended a short cobbled path where wild grasses grew between the stones. On either side of the path, Uncle Nuro's wife, who clearly had a passion for flowers, planted — or perhaps merely encouraged the growth of — wild roses: some red, some pinkish-lilac and some white. These wild roses grew on long stems, and their blossoms lent great beauty to the approach to Uncle Nuro's house. When the flowers withered, they left behind round seedpods that we called *çirek* ("bread") and ate. They had no flavour at all, yet we ate them nonetheless. Cultivated roses produced a different sort of seed head, covered with fine hairs. We would open them, gather the hairs and slip them down one another's collars. "They itch like lice," said Hajro Gaxhello, Uncle Nuro's neighbour. Whenever we played this game, we would eventually have to take off our shirts and shake them out because our shoulders itched so fiercely.

At the end of the cobbled path one emerged into the small courtyard of the house. The courtyard was boarded with planks and the house itself was small, almost like a box. The windows were attractive. On the outside they were protected by carved wooden grilles, and inside them Beduni's mother placed little tin boxes filled with flowers: red mallows and red and white carnations. The front door was beautiful too, thick and studded with large-headed nails. It had a heavy knocker which, when struck, resounded throughout the house. Around the doorway stood rows of flowerpots containing sweet basil, basil and geraniums with their small pink blossoms. The fragrance was delightful. They were simple people whom one might scarcely notice at first glance, yet they possessed refined feelings. They loved flowers, loved nature and loved the scent of freshly cut grass, which Uncle Nuro stacked in hayricks as winter fodder for the goats. Those goats were his livelihood. The byre and kitchen stood outside the house. Whenever we became hungry, we would go and ask Beduni's mother for a little food. She would give us each a chunk of maize bread, then take a small onion, cut it in half and give us a piece in place of cheese. Simple, hardworking people, like Uncle Bejko Gaxhello.

Bejko worked with horses. He carried water and hay from the fields, transported people's maize to Uncle Dino Çiço's mill for grinding, waited his turn there and made sure that Uncle Dino's sons ground the grain properly. Bejko Gaxhello owned more than two animals and cared for them well, for they were his means of livelihood. Whenever they descended the cobbled streets and stony lanes, they made such a racket that a saying arose: "Like Bejko Gaxhello's beasts." When we children played noisily in the streets, chasing one another and creating a tremendous din, any passing adult would say: "What are you little devils doing? You sound like Gaxhello's animals!!"

Uncle Bejko was a tall old man with white side-whisk-

ers. He must have been very strong in his youth because even in old age, when I knew him, he could still lift sacks and load them onto his horse. His house differed from Uncle Nuro's. It stood within a large muddy courtyard. One entered through a gate without doors and saw the house on the left. It was long and two-storeyed, with livestock stalls below and living rooms above.

Uncle Bejko had a son named Hajro. He was older than I, but he was a pitiable figure. Not only was he blind in one eye, which was entirely white, but his supposedly good eye could scarcely see either. To recognise anything, he had to place his hand above his brow, lift the upper eyelid and shade his eyes. His lower eyelids drooped and were red. His face was disfigured and frightening to look at, and his back was bent. Hajro limped. He walked with one hand over his eye and the other pressed against his back. One leg dragged behind him and one hip protruded awkwardly, making him a sad sight. He was a poor, unfortunate man and I felt great sympathy for him. He dressed in rags and wore a skullcap blackened with grime. Sometimes he went down to the bazaar. He never asked anyone for anything and none of us children ever mocked him. On the contrary, we all tried to help him. Hajro knew me and would say:

"Miller's boy, go to school. As you can see, I am a miserable man. My eyes are always weeping."

"Shall I recite a poem for you, Hajro?" I asked him one day. "It is a beautiful one."

"That would be good, miller's boy. It would be a good deed," he replied.

We sat down on the burned bench beside the ruined Ajdini house and I recited Naim Frashëri's *The Candle* to him. He listened with one hand over his eye and, when I had finished, said:

"May I too burn away like that candle, miller's boy. What use is life to me, crippled as I am?"

At that time, as clearly as if it were yesterday, I remember Uncle Neim Fino coming out of his house. He was a thin, somewhat tall man, wearing black *poture** trousers, a waist sash and a black cloak draped over one shoulder. I rose to my feet and went to kiss his hand where he was sitting on the bench by the gateway.

"What are you saying to Hajro?" Uncle Neim asked me.

"I am reciting a poem to him," I replied. "I feel sorry for him."

"Oh, come now," he said. "Why bother with Hajro? He has no head for such things. He understands about as much as my fool Xhemali understands."

"No, Uncle Neim," I answered. "Hajro understands them and cries when he hears them."

"He cries," said Uncle Neim, "because he is almost blind. But if you are clever enough, why not help Hadër throw some fodder to the mule?"

Uncle Neim was an intelligent man and never scolded us. Murat, his youngest son, was my friend and we went to school together. When we grew tired of playing in Xhepi Square, we would go and sit by the long courtyard wall and wooden gate of Uncle Neim's house. Opposite the large gate stood the two-storey stone house, with rather small windows and a medium-sized door, as Uncle Neim's wife used to describe it. She was an old woman who wore black *çitjane*** trousers and a black headscarf. In the windows stood the customary tin flowerpots found in almost every Gjirokastra household: mallows, carnations and basil. Murat's mother would give us fruit and almonds at Bayram.

As far as I remember, Uncle Neim had two other sons and a daughter. The eldest son, Xhemali, was somewhat disabled and

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* Traditional baggy trousers worn in the Balkans.

** Traditional women's baggy trousers.

had certain peculiar habits. Whenever he entered the house he would shout, "I want bread!" and, as he passed by, would kick Murat and me from behind. Sometimes he would remember some exploit of his and tell me: "I got the better of Mulla Hysen" — my uncle — "and forced him to say, 'May my wife die.'" Xhemali could not bear being pitied. If anyone called him "poor Xhemali," he would chase them and force them to say, "May my wife die, I shall never call you that again." Baba Çen occasionally teased him, but we children never did because he would beat us.

Uncle Neim's other son was Hadër, whom we called "the One-Eyed Man" because one of his eyelids drooped and was red, like Hajro Gaxhello's. Hadër sang Lab songs beautifully and was immensely strong. He could lift a sack or a large water vessel as though it were a feather and throw it onto a horse, for Uncle Neim owned a horse. Hadër worked the family's land. They must have had several strips of fields where he cultivated tobacco and maize and cut hay. Murat told me that Hadër left for the fields before dawn and did not return until late in the evening. He was a brave fellow and no one in the neighbourhood could match him. He used to call Murat and me "little weaklings" or "gentlemen," meaning boys who only knew how to use a pen. "We shall see," he would say, "what good all your schooling and gentlemanly ways will do. Come here for once and help me hold the horse's load instead of talking." So Murat and I would support the sacks while Hadër tied them securely. Whenever the horse relieved itself, Hadër would say: "Well then, gather it up and throw it under the eaves. That is what gives us maize." I was still very young and knew nothing about the value of manure. I would say to Murat: "This Hadër seems a little touched in the head like Xhemali. How can manure possibly produce maize?" But Murat understood such matters and explained them to me.

Uncle Neim owned a café at the very entrance to the bazaar, just before one reached Gega Bridge. It consisted of a single room reached by a staircase with a wooden railing. The old men gathered there to drink coffee or play cards. My uncle went there as well, though he never drank and never gambled. He was frugal because he had little money, but he also disliked drunkards and gamblers. Uncle Neim earned a little money from the café, though he lived mainly from Hadër's labour. Like most people of Gjirokastra, he was economical, though not miserly. He would offer everyone a small tin tobacco tray and say: "Roll yourself a cigarette. This tobacco crackles when it burns." It was tobacco grown by Hadër and ground by Hasip Kullumbi.

Uncle Hasip was a sturdy middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion. He had large hands, with deeply lined palms that remained dark even after washing. He lived in a small stone house with wooden arches, standing in the middle of a little orchard containing a fig tree, a hackberry tree, medlars and wild plums. The wall surrounding Uncle Hasip's garden bordered the properties of the Hasanaj, Fino, Çipa and Ajdini families. I was fond of this little house. After descending a small slope, one came upon a flight of stone steps leading up to the main room and the porch. Beneath the arched staircase, topped by a small terrace beside the front door, was a little doorway where Uncle Hasip worked.

At the top of the steps there was a projection overlooking the garden. There Aunt Dilo, Hasip's mother, a gentle and kindly old woman, had hung a tin water container fitted with a tap. Before entering the house, Uncle Hasip and the others washed their hands there. The water that flowed from it was as precious as gold. Aunt Dilo and Hasip's wife fetched it in metal pitchers from the Hasanaj fountain or from Uncle Neim's supply. For that reason, Uncle Hasip channelled the used water through a small trench into two or three vegetable beds where he grew

onions, chard and tender lettuce. Aunt Dilo weeded these vegetables with a small hoe, because Uncle Hasip had other work to do. He was capable of every kind of labour and was extraordinarily hardworking. During the haymaking season he cut grass for the local landlords, weeded maize fields, harvested tobacco for the Hasanaj family in Pesjak and ground tobacco in his mortar. I never once saw him drunk or quarrelling with anyone. He was a man devoted to work. I liked him because he loved and respected his mother, Aunt Dilo. He kept his tobacco mortar in one corner of the stable, covered it with a woollen blanket and sharpened his knife or cleaver regularly. They shone like silver.

I had seen Uncle Hasip cutting tobacco. He would raise the knife, arranging the crisp dried tobacco leaves in layers. After placing each layer, he would fill his cheeks with water and go "poof," spraying the tobacco as though with raindrops. Then he would place something over it — I no longer remember whether it was a plank or a piece of iron — press down on it with his knee in order to compress the tobacco and begin working with the knife: tap-tap-tap. This task required skill, and Uncle Hasip was a craftsman. I noticed that the tobacco leaves came out of the mortar as fine as strands of hair.

As a child, I would ask him:

"Uncle Hasip, how do you cut it so finely?"

"One must be careful in everything, my boy. Take this advice from me, Enver. If you want to do anything cleanly and well, you must think it through and never become nervous while working. Have patience, otherwise you cannot earn your bread. If I cut the tobacco badly, Vehip Hasani will not pay me."

Honest worker, Uncle Hasip, now that I recall you, it seems as though it were only yesterday that I came to you with a sack containing about 10 kilograms of tobacco leaves. My aunt had sent me to you to have it cut. You had acquired a fine reputation, and that reputation had reached as far as Hazmurat; that was

why my aunt sent me all the way to you. Two or three days later I came to your house to collect it. You had cut it well.

"What is this tobacco like, Uncle Hasip?" I asked.

"Average," you told me, and then added: "Boy, never smoke tobacco, for it is poison." You showed me your blackened hands and said: "Look, my boy, see how it has blackened my hands. It blackens the lungs in the same way."

While I was young, Uncle Hasip, I kept your valuable advice, but when troubles came upon me, I forgot it. Then I ought to have remembered what you had told me, but I heard people say here and there that "when boys become men, they smoke, and tobacco takes away sadness." All of that was false, Uncle Hasip. You, a man of the people, were right, but I had to reach the age of sixty-five before I gave up tobacco. Who knows how many years have passed now since you died — you, your mother and your wife. I do not know whether you left children and, if you did, they now live happily under socialism; they must already be old themselves and should remember you. Today, as I write about you, I remember you intensely. I also remember the day when I gave you the money my aunt had given me as payment for your work. With your sleeves rolled up, you lifted the sack, placed it on my shoulder, patted me affectionately and said: "Give my greetings to Aunt Hasije!"

My aunt approved of Uncle Hasip's work and filled one or two kerosene tins with the tobacco. When guests came, she served it on a tray together with cigarette papers. One day someone came rushing in to warn us that the tobacco-registration gendarmes or guards were coming. My aunt was a formidable woman who was not easily intimidated, and she had no intention of allowing the guards to seize the tobacco. She quickly took out the tins of tobacco, opened a window overlooking a dark, narrow alley between my uncle's house and that of Bastri Çuçi and began throwing the tobacco out there. That alley was

filthy because, when we children were playing, instead of going upstairs to relieve ourselves, it was easier to go into that alley and deposit what had no business being there. I said to Aunt Hasije:

"Don't, Aunt, it is dirty there."

She gave me a sharp smack and said:

"Go away. I have no time either to have my tobacco confiscated or to pay a fine."

The tins were thrown into the alley. The guards came in and went out again; they saw nothing and found nothing. When the inspection was over, we returned and gathered up the tobacco under Aunt Hasije's watchful eye, so that we would not collect anything else along with it. When we had finished and carried the tobacco back inside, my aunt gave me two sound slaps. They took me by surprise, for she had never done such a thing before. I stared at her in astonishment.

"Why are you opening your eyes like that?" she said. "I gave you those slaps as a warning — one for you and one for Sado, my sister's son — so that you will never again soil gardens or alleys. I want them kept clean."

I never forgot that advice from my aunt either. "Cleanliness is health; it fights the germs of disease." "Your clothes may be old, that does not matter, but keep them clean and wash your body," my mother always told me. "Never let your body smell of sweat." Until the day she died, my mother gave us an example of simplicity, thrift and cleanliness. My uncle did likewise, especially in simplicity, honesty and fairness towards others. These are priceless treasures that I preserve from my parents and from the working people whom I met and among whom I lived during the beautiful years of my youth. And beauty, I think, lies precisely in what I am writing here about these people and about the virtues that now crowd my memory.

Now another friend of my youth comes to mind: Emin Shtino. He was the son of Aunt Alo, from the Nishani family,

and the nephew of my honoured wartime comrade Dr. Omer Nishani, a democratic patriot, Foreign Minister of the Provisional Democratic Government that we formed after Liberation and later, until his death, President of the Presidium of the People's Assembly.

Aunt Alo had a learned husband, distinguished in philosophy — Arab philosophy — who taught at the madrasa* in Gjirokastra. This was a long, single-storey building with a row of columns and arches of red brick. The madrasa had a cool porch where, in summer, the breeze blew up from the stream that flowed below the house of the Xhenetaj family and carried water and stones tumbling down to the lower end of Varosh. It was here that Shuaip Shtino taught philosophy.

Near the madrasa stood the grave of the elder of our family, Beqir Hoxha. This madrasa, with its elegant and graceful architecture, rose above the only fountain in the bazaar of Gjirokastra, beside the small square where the father of my school friend Osman Kuçuku kept a popular coffeehouse. Our elders gathered there to drink a cup of coffee and a glass of cold water from Sopot. Yet the local landlords and King Zogu's officials demolished the madrasa. And what did they build in its place? They destroyed a school and erected a slaughterhouse directly beneath the house of Adem Bey.

But let us return to our subject, for if I begin describing the streets, houses, corners and terraces of Gjirokastra — which I loved deeply and which are engraved upon my memory — they will carry me away and I shall lose myself in them. Let us return instead to the people, to Aunt Alo of the Shtino family.

My friend Emin was several years older than I. He was one of the finest teachers of the younger generation: knowledgeable, intelligent and possessed of the same sense of humour as

* Islamic school of higher learning.

his mother. He also had a younger brother named Ferik, who is now likewise a retired teacher.

Aunt Alo Shtino was a remarkable woman, evidently well educated in her youth, intelligent, strong-minded and renowned for her quick wit and subtle, often sharp, humour.

One summer day, after I had returned from France, I said to Emin during a conversation:

"I shall come and pay Aunt Alo a visit."

"Does Alo know you?" he asked.

"She may have seen me when I was a child, wandering out of the caves of the Stream of Shamaj to gather mountain tea. Now I am a grown man and she has not seen me since. That is why I want to visit."

"Do you know why I asked?" said Emin.

"No," I replied.

"When you come, I shall introduce you as a doctor and we shall play a few jokes on the old lady. She enjoys that sort of thing and never takes offence."

"Agreed," I said. And so I went to Aunt Alo's house. Their home was a characteristic Gjirokastra dwelling built into the hillside. When one opened the large gate, reinforced with planks and large-headed iron studs, one entered directly into the courtyard. At the rear, the house rose only two or three metres above the ground, but at the front, near the entrance, it stood nearly 10 metres high. In houses such as these, whenever one descended the cobbled streets with grass growing between the stones, one should not rejoice too soon, for however many metres one descended, one would have to climb an equal number of steps to reach the guest room.

There I met old Aunt Alo. Emin told her that I was a doctor from Vlora. She kissed me. I kissed her hand and told her that I had chosen the same profession as her brother, Dr. Omer.

"Do not mention his name," said Alo. "Zogu's spies will

throw you into prison."

Dr. Omer was an opponent of Zogu, a political exile who, together with Halim Xhelo, edited the newspaper *Liria kombëtare*.*

After some conversation about the rain and the wind, Aunt Alo gave me my opening when, quite innocently, I asked her how her health was.

"Well," she replied, "being an old woman, my legs ache and sometimes I become short of breath."

"That is easy enough," I said. "Without even examining you, I already know what is wrong. But let me have a look at you first."

Aunt Alo stared at me and then whispered to Emin: "This doctor of yours is very self-assured."

"That is simply how he is," Emin replied with complete seriousness.

Aunt Alo was sitting on a cushion by the fireplace. "Very well then," she said. "Examine me."

"Undo your sash," I said, "and open your blouse, because I want to listen to your chest."

Aunt Alo obeyed and I put my arms around her waist and pressed my ear against her chest.

"What are you squeezing me for like that?" she said. "Do you not have a wooden listening funnel like every other doctor?"

"What funnel?" I replied. "Those are for doctors like Dr. Selo, whose ears no longer work properly. My ears are sharp enough. You are fine on this side," I told her. "Now loosen the belt of your *çitjane* trousers so that I can examine your stomach."

Aunt Alo raised her eyes, gave me a suspicious look and

* National Freedom.

turned to her son.

"What sort of doctor have you brought me... What does he take me for..."

Emin, barely suppressing his laughter, replied:

"Come now, old lady, do not be difficult. That is how doctors work."

With great reluctance, Aunt Alo revealed a little of her stomach. When I placed my hand upon it, she asked:

"And have you examined your own mother's stomach?"

"Of course," I said. "I even saw it from the inside, for nine months in a row."

The old woman widened her eyes in astonishment and looked at her son. Before she could speak, Emin said:

"You, Alo, before you came into this world, where did you live? In the Nishani family orchard?"

"No," she replied. "In my mother's womb."

"Well, that is exactly what the doctor means."

"And how is anyone supposed to understand you when you talk like this?"

When I had finished, the old woman asked for medicine and a prescription.

"I do not prescribe medicines, Aunt Alo," I told her, "because I do not want Aleks Çeçi to become rich. I prescribe folk remedies. Tomorrow morning send Ferik up to the slopes of Mali i Gjerë above us and have him bring you *apistja** and mountain tea. Boil the wormwood thoroughly and drink the liquid, bitter though it may be, first thing in the morning. Then eat a bowl of scalded trahana with a little butter and red pepper, grate some cheese into it or, if the cheese barrel has run dry, season it with brine and accompany it with dry onions. After eating, have such a deep sleep that the whole world must sub-

* From Greek, meaning *wormwood*, a medicinal plant.

mit. In the evening drink two bowls of mountain tea and gather some *bizhgo* herbs from the Stream of Çullo. That is exactly what I prescribed for my own mother and she is flourishing like a sapling."

"My boy," asked Aunt Alo, "what is your mother's name?"

"Which mother?" I replied. "The one who gave birth to me or the one who nursed me? The one who gave birth to me is called Gjulo, Gjylistan — a garden of roses. The one who nursed me is called Rabi, the wife of Ramo Jolixhiu."

"That explains it," said the old woman.

"Explains what?"

"Why you are dark-complexioned."

"That is true," I said. "The blood and the milk became mixed together."

At that moment Ferik, Aunt Alo's younger son and also a friend of mine, arrived.

"Welcome, Enver," said Ferik.

"You know this doctor?" his mother asked.

"Know him? Of course I do! We are friends. On Sundays we go to the river, catch fish and fry them in oil on the riverbank. He is Uncle Halil Hoxha's son."

Turning to Emin, she exclaimed:

"You rascal! What a lie you told me. You are always devising these schemes."

The dear old woman took my hand, pulled me towards her and, kissing me, said: "And you, you rogue, wanted me to take off my *çitjane*, didn't you? I shall tell Gjulo what tricks you played on me."

And during the National Liberation War, one night in Gurakuq, while we were walking together, I told this story about Aunt Alo to her brother, my unforgettable wartime comrade Dr. Omer Nishani. He laughed heartily in his characteristic way and the echo of his laughter bounced from the snow-cov-

ered cliff of Muzhaq, gleaming in the moonlight.

These memories come to me one after another — so simple, so seemingly insignificant and yet, for me, they carry profound meaning. They are incidents from the life that was lived in those days, incidents that nevertheless leave a deep impression upon a person. When one does something and does it properly, when one acts honestly, it seems entirely natural and ordinary. Yet I think that life itself, and the struggles of people, have taught us how to think rightly, how to act justly, how to live together with others, how to help one another and how to love and support those who are unfortunate. These things are bound up with the people, with the land and with the homeland. In this way you become theirs and they become yours. The people do not say without reason: "We are joined like flesh and nail."

Why do these memories of the people come back to me in this way today? Why is it that now, when we are preparing for the Seventh Congress of the Party and our minds are occupied with pressing concerns, I still find time to write about such things? I write once again about my people, and the preparations for the Congress are likewise for my people. The people are one and immortal. I write these things because it was from these people, from this nation, from these sufferings, sacrifices and acts of heroism that the Party emerged and fought. We are the sons and daughters of this people and we cannot separate the past from the present, for it is from their unity that the bright future — communism — will be built.

To the left of Xhepi Square runs a proper street — by which I mean a somewhat wider one — paved with stones. It then narrows and, winding between the walls of houses and gardens, leads to the square of the Palorto Mosque, near the house of Hasan Sino, the friend and companion of Baba Çen and my uncle.

On the right-hand side of this road, before one reaches the house of Uncle Selim Bakiri, my mother's cousin, whom we frequently visited for meals and evening gatherings, a stone-paved lane climbs uphill towards a cluster of other Bakiri family houses. Evidently the Bakiris were a clan that, over several generations, had divided into separate households and built additional homes within the same neighbourhood. These houses were smaller — much smaller than Uncle Selim's. My uncle had nicknamed him "Zvingo" because of a certain trick of his, the details of which my uncle once told me but which I shall not repeat here. The other Bakiri houses, as I have said, were modest dwellings, built with stone foundations and timber-and-plaster upper walls, with plank-floored courtyards and flowers everywhere.

All these families must once have owned a little land and some livestock, though in time they had evidently lost much of it. I used to visit one of these houses because its owner, Uncle Vehip — if memory serves me correctly — had two sons: Tahir, the elder, and Murat, who was about my own age. Their father, who appears to have been a progressive-minded man, had apprenticed both of them as shoemakers and they became excellent craftsmen. Tahir managed the shop, while Murat worked as his assistant, together with two or three employees. Tahir gained a reputation as a fine shoemaker and, when I grew older, I had my shoes made there.

"Make them well," I would say to Murat. "Do not let them hurt my feet."

"What are you worrying about?" he would reply. "I shall make them as if they were for myself."

Yet they always ended up hurting my feet. Both brothers were handsome young men, pleasant and cheerful, with a constant smile on their faces and particularly rosy cheeks.

Farther on stood the house of Uncle Fiqo, the father of my companion Nebahet Bakiri. He was a hairy man like my uncle,

with whom he was inseparable. Uncle Fiqo lived together with his brother Shuqo, the husband of brave Keke and the father of our friend Subiu. Their house was new, long and two-storeyed, with many windows and a splendid view. From there one could see Xhepi Square, the river and the plain beyond. Beneath the house Uncle Fiqo had a terraced garden, supported by a wall at the upper edge of Xhepi Square.

Beyond it stood the house of Uncle Huzo Bakiri. I do not know whether Uncle Huzo had sons or daughters. He was a kindly old shepherd with white hair, a woollen undershirt and a shirt with wide sleeves. His hair was worn in side-locks like that of Uncle Faro Hoxha and he had long drooping white moustaches. To enter Uncle Huzo's house one first had to push open the large courtyard gate. Whenever it opened or closed, it emitted a long groan like that of a sick man who has lain bedridden for years. The house itself was interesting, built partly of stone and partly of timber-and-plaster construction. The upper walls had not been whitewashed. The roof, naturally, was covered with wooden shingles from Manalat. The eaves projected widely and were supported by beams and timber brackets. The windows were fitted with carved wooden grilles similar to those of Uncle Nuro's house.

We visited Uncle Huzo every day to collect one and a half *oka* of milk from his cows for my father's sister Bale, who was frail. "Come along, boy," Uncle Huzo would say. "Bring the milk jug. I have just milked Kuqo." Kuqo was the cow's name. Each time, Uncle Huzo would make a notch on an *araush** and place it in a niche by the doorway. When the proper time came, Baba Çen would pay the old man what he was owed.

Descending from the Hasanaj quarter into the alley leading towards the street of Uncle Tile Sherifi, one would wear out

* "Araush" — see the author's explanation on page 318 of this book.

one's shoes on the stones. How many stones there were in the streets in those days! That is why Gjirokastra is called the City of Stone: stone walls, stone roofs, stone courtyard walls, stone verandas, stone enclosures and stone streets. We lived on stone, above stone and beneath stone. We felt secure there. Nothing troubled us, especially we children and young people, who struck those stones with the iron tips of our shoe soles as though they were rubber balls...

Along the winding alley stood several gateways with stone benches. These belonged to the Dobati families. Who were these Dobatis? What work did they do? How did they earn their living? I never knew. Nor had I ever entered their houses, for there was no connection between our families.

Crossing the old and beautiful unpaved road, one came to the house of Uncle Tile Sherifi, a prosperous livestock breeder with many sons and grandsons, who later joined the Party and became partisans. I remember Uncle Tile well. He was a tall, broad-shouldered old man with a ruddy complexion, wearing a white skullcap, white side-locks and long white moustaches. He dressed in white *poture* trousers, white gaiters and a white shirt with wide sleeves and an open collar, with a white woollen cloak draped over his shoulders. Everything about him was white, like the cheese he produced at his mountain pasture and sold by special order in large rounds.

Baba Çen was a friend of Tile's. I do not know what sort of man Uncle Tile was at heart, but I do remember that when our house burned down and we were left with nothing, he sent us a horse carrying a substantial number of rounds of fresh cheese suspended from the saddle. It was both a gift and assistance given to us during our misfortune. I remember my mother cutting the cheese into pieces, salting it, placing it in a barrel and weighing it down with several smooth white stones. After fitting the lid, she sealed the barrel with a kind of paste made from lime



"There were so many stones in the streets in those days! That is why Gjirokastra is called the City of Stone: stone walls, stone roofs, stone enclosure walls, stone verandas, stone courtyards and stone roads. We lived among stone, upon stone and beneath stone..." The road of Uncle Tile Sherifi.

mixed with wool. It would remain closed until the salt had thoroughly penetrated the cheese. My mother understood such matters; she "commanded" the barrel, deciding both when it should be sealed and when it should be opened.

"Open it, daughter-in-law," Baba Çen would say. "The children want some cheese."

"No, Mulla," my mother would reply. "It has not yet absorbed enough salt. If we open it now, we shall finish it too quickly."

And so, for a time, we looked at the barrel almost resentfully, casting sidelong glances at it. Standing there in the corner, it seemed to smile mockingly at us and tease us. We would say to it angrily, sometimes accompanying our words with a kick: "Do not worry. We shall eat your head and everything in your belly. We shall even pour your brine over the warm *trahana* Mother makes for us in the morning."

After passing Uncle Tile Sherifi's road, one arrived at Zemani Square. Sano, who visited Gjirokastra a few days ago, told me: "Enver, I did not go there myself, but they told me that a large school has been built in Zemani Square." Immediately

that square came to mind and for a moment I sat bewildered, experiencing both sadness and joy at the same time. "Have you ever experienced such a state of mind?" I asked Nexhmije, who listens attentively and likes to hear my childhood memories. I tell her these stories not once but twenty times over, until she sometimes laughs and says: "Enver, do not repeat it again. I know it by heart now — not only the story but even Uncle Huzo's white moustaches." I felt sadness and nostalgia for Mamani's bakery, my beloved bakery that had nourished me, where Dauti of the Çiçimako family worked as a baker. The bakery has certainly disappeared by now and the school stands in its place. Yet at the same time I felt joy, because education and knowledge are just as essential as bread.

Today bread in Gjirokastra is baked in modern bakeries. Dauti's bakery has vanished and survives only in our memories. I do not think I have done wrong in writing about it. It was merely a long shed, hardly a "historic monument" and with no remarkable history of its own. Yet, like all the other bakeries, it occupied a place in the thoughts of ordinary people whenever they sat down at the table, cut a loaf of bread or dipped it into stew.

Following the street of Fejo Xhaxhiu and Halit Kadare, the father of Ismail Kadare, one reached a narrow lane. At its upper end, directly opposite, stood the house of a hodja who had several red-haired daughters. It was a small house with a covered gateway. I went there several times because my grandmother sent me nearby to have our umbrellas repaired. The fierce winds frequently damaged them, especially the metal ribs. The umbrella repairer was called Shahin Bakiri. He was an elderly, bearded and rather frail man. He must have been very poor because whenever I brought him an umbrella he would say: "Listen, Halil's son, people are not all alike. Some curse the rain, strong winds and storms, while others welcome them. I, old as I

am, welcome them because they feed me. Your umbrellas break, I repair them, earn a few coins from my work and that is how my wife and I get our bread."

Uncle Shahin had a small brazier, a little hammer, a pair of pliers and various bits of metal. He would put on spectacles tied behind his head with string and begin working away: *clink-clink, tap-tap*. When he finished repairing the umbrella, he would hand it back and I would ask: "How much do I owe you, so that I can tell Grandmother?" He would say one lek or three, depending on the damage. I would bring him the money and Uncle Shahin would say: "May you always have my blessing, boy!" Sometimes he would add: "Listen, Enver. Tell Mulla Hysen not to forget me if the municipality or the religious foundation distributes a little flour." "Yes, Uncle Shahin," I would reply. "I shall tell him."

This entire neighbourhood consisted of winding alleys, paved with worn and broken cobblestones. I wandered up and down them constantly and always found pleasure in doing so. At every bend I felt as though I might discover something new, some familiar or unfamiliar face. How dearly I loved — and still love — those alleys, the world of my youth! It may seem a strange world today, but within those alleys and courtyards, behind wooden gates, stood small houses of unusual design. Some were built of stone and fitted with narrow windows; others had open reception rooms and wooden galleries. In their courtyards or tiny handkerchief-sized gardens a few chickens, or perhaps a rooster, scratched about. Yet one entered those houses with respect and affection. In one of them lived the teacher Asaf Çipi. He was a patriot, one of the earliest teachers. He was thin — indeed, curiously enough, almost everyone I remember from those days was thin. "These people must be poor," I used to think as a child. "That is why they are thin, whereas the landlords, who eat well, are fat." Yet this theory was somewhat undermined by

Uncle Sako the Barber, who was poor but nevertheless stout.

Mr. Asaf wore a small, neatly trimmed beard, narrow and pointed. He was always emerging from his house carrying books in his hands. His house stood on our street, below the Çoktani garden. "He is a good man, an honest man and a patriotic teacher," Baba Çen used to tell me. "I fought alongside him for the Albanian alphabet."

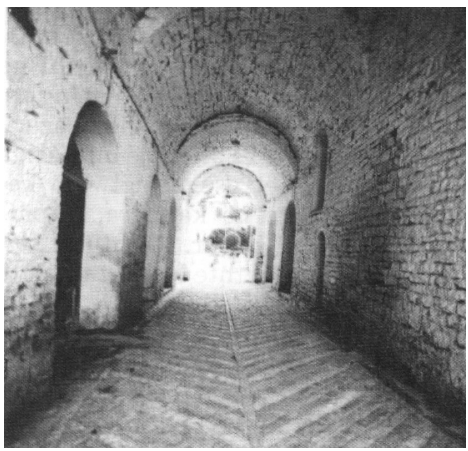
Sako the Barber, on the other hand, was a barber whose shop stood near the bazaar mosque. He was a man burdened by hardship, stout and tall. Not only did he cut hair and shave customers, but he also sold vegetables. I remember that he had a son who was a schoolmate of mine, though I do not know what became of him later in life. He also had a young daughter whom I neither knew nor had ever really noticed. It may be that this daughter was born to Uncle Sako rather late in his life. When the National Liberation War began, this young girl joined the struggle while still very young. She fought heroically and, when the Germans captured and tortured her, she uttered not a single word except: "Long live the Communist Party of Albania! Death to fascism! Freedom to the people!" The Germans killed her. This was Fato Berberi, Hero of the People.*

At home Uncle Sako lived simply and in poverty. His wife, an excellent housekeeper, kept the house spotless, as we used to say. Before opening his shop in the morning, especially on Mondays and Fridays, which were market days, Uncle Sako would rise before dawn and go to the bridgehead. There he bought vegetables and fruit directly from the men and women of Lunxhëria and brought them back to his shop. He arranged them in baskets, sprinkled them with water and prepared them

* 1927–1944. The German nazis hanged her in Salonika, Greece. They told her: "Trample on the star and we will set you free," but she took it and kissed it, without flinching before the gallows standing beside her. Young Fato accepted death, but she did not betray the beloved Party.

for sale. Thus he served two kinds of customers: those whose hair he cut and those who bought vegetables.

Whenever a familiar friend came by, Uncle Sako would order him a coffee. He would open the window and shout at the top of his voice: "Izmet, one medium!" Within three minutes Izmet Doraci would arrive carrying the coffee on a small tin tray with a central handle fitted with a finger ring. He would deliver the coffee and collect a token later when he returned for the cup. Uncle Izmet owned a café — if one could really call it a café — in the *llonxha** of the bazaar mosque, beneath its dome. Along the walls of the *llonxha* were several niches. Poor people had turned these into tiny businesses: one



The dome by the former bazaar mosque, whose walls *"had been turned by poor people into 'various little shops'..."*

repaired shoes, another sold oregano and wild herbs, a third sold tobacco pouches, while Uncle Izmet made coffee. He was a poor, thin man, wearing a black fez and a "white" apron. The little hole that served as Uncle Izmet's coffee stall was so small that it could scarcely contain him. Inside there was nothing except a nail from which he hung his coat during the summer, a small brazier half-filled with ashes and several *xhezve* of var-

* Covered arcaded gallery.

ying sizes. Each morning he opened the shutters of this niche-shop, placed charcoal in the brazier, lit it and fanned it with a bellows. Then he filled the *xhezve* with water and waited for customers.

These customers fell into two categories. The first were the regulars — shopkeepers from the surrounding area such as Uncle Sako, Sefer Koçi, the Çelo brothers, Çali of Galanxhi, Uncle Bido Tushja and others. The second were passers-by. The latter had to stand near the niche, or wait in line, while drinking their coffee. For his regular customers Uncle Izmet offered three grades of coffee. A strong coffee, made with plenty of coffee grounds and sugar, cost three tokens. A medium coffee cost two. A weak coffee, almost nothing but water, cost one token. Three tokens amounted to one grosh. Customers would shout from afar: "One medium!" "One strong!" or "Two weak ones!" Everything was perfectly understood. The ground coffee, so aromatic that its fragrance carried far, and the sugar were kept in two matching metal containers made by Malo the Tinsmith. Between them rested a small coffee spoon that served as the standard measure for the different grades of coffee.

I have mentioned Sefer Koçi. I remember him as a middle-aged man with a small shop outside the *llonxha*. He too was poor. He sold melons, watermelons, yoghurt from Kapo Bolena, milk and whatever else he could obtain. He was simply trying to survive and raise his children. Whenever I was sent from home to buy a melon, I would say:

"Uncle Sefer, choose me a sweet one."

"Do not worry," he would reply.

Sometimes the melon turned out sweet and sometimes it was little better than a "pumpkin." When it proved disappointing, my grandmother would exclaim: "Damn that Sefer!"

And I would think to myself: "What fault is it of Uncle Sefer's? It is not as though he was inside the melon."

One day Uncle Sefer said to me: "Listen, Halil's son. Tell Baba Çen that I am in great difficulty. I have not paid the rent on the shop for four months and I cannot pay it. Then come back and tell me what the Mulla says." Uncle Sefer's shop belonged to the religious endowment and Baba Çen, as municipal councillor, also administered the endowment's affairs. At lunchtime I conveyed the message to Baba Çen and he gave me an answer, which I hurried back to repeat to Uncle Sefer: "Baba Çen told me to tell Sefer: 'Why is he bothering me? Let him never pay the rent at all if he cannot. It makes no difference to me. The endowment's money is distributed to the poor, and Sefer himself is poor. He should not trouble himself over it.'" When I finished, Uncle Sefer handed me two figs and said: "Ah, Mulla Hysen, may I kiss your beard!"

Today, under the Party, Uncle Sefer's son is a Deputy Minister of Education. How the Party transformed Albania! Uncle Sefer could never have dreamed that his son would one day become a deputy minister. The Party brought the poor to power and made them masters of the country.

As I have said many times before, I loved the streets and alleys of Gjirokastra. I knew, and still remember, who lived behind almost every gate in every lane. Often, while bread was baking in the Angonat bakery and I was waiting for it to come out of the oven, I would cross the little bridge over the stream and climb beneath the high walls of the Xhenetaj houses. I would emerge near the homes of Sheikh Durro and Sheikh Hysen, pass the Shah family gate and continue along the road above the stream. There I would sit on a stone bench by a doorway and dream, or silently review my school lessons in my mind.

Sometimes Baba Çen would take me by the hand, or have me walk ahead of him, and we would go to visit Uncle Idriz Guri at his home. If I remember correctly, his house stood near

the *sarai** of Nelo Kabili, a residence with high walls decorated with painted ornamentation. Uncle Idriz would embrace my father, while he would pat me on the head and, depending on the occasion, would either take us out onto the veranda or into the guest room.

My father counted Idriz Guri among his closest friends. At times they would converse calmly, at others they would raise their voices. I would sit at the edge of the divan and eat the Turkish delight and dried figs with which they treated me. I recall one occasion when my father and Uncle Idriz became heated and began cursing Boço Kalo and the Karagjozi family. My father angrily removed his turban and hurled it to the far end of the veranda. Frightened, I got up, picked up the turban and placed it back on his head. "Very well, Enver," he said. "You go and play. Idriz and I have business to discuss." And so I left.

Many times I climbed the road of the Gurat quarter, before reaching the great arches that formed the aqueduct carrying water to the castle. This entire cluster of houses, clinging to the side of a fairly steep hill, has remained vivid in my memory, not because of the people — among whom were landlords, judges and middle-class townsmen such as the Gurri family (including Muharrem Gurri the shoemaker), the Lulo family and Sadik Karagjozi, a landowner, stockbreeder and notorious drinker — but because of the layout and architecture of the houses themselves. These were typical Gjirokastra houses, built of stone, roofed with wooden shingles and supported by projecting timber brackets. The upper-floor reception rooms had large windows, while the lower floor, where the winter rooms were usually located, had smaller ones. The road leading to each house wound steadily upward between the high walls of houses and courtyards. Along the way stood large wooden gates with

* Ottoman grand mansion.

double doors, flanked by stone benches and fitted with heavy knockers that struck broad metal plates. Above them projected wooden roofs. Passing through the gate, one entered paved courtyards. Every house possessed a small "hanging" garden, usually planted with a few shade trees and only occasionally with fruit trees. The houses of the Lulo and Karagjozi families, on the right-hand side of the road as one climbed, overlooked the stream that wound its way below, carrying stones down from Mali i Gjerë.

After the Liberation, I climbed the tall staircase of one of these stone houses. I was taken into the spacious reception room to meet Lutfi Karagjozi and his courageous wife, the parents of the partisan Astrit Karagjozi,* who had fallen as a martyr. While speaking with Lutfi, who suffered from asthma, I said:

"Lutfi, we ought to give you a house lower down in Palorto, so that you do not have to climb this steep hill every day."

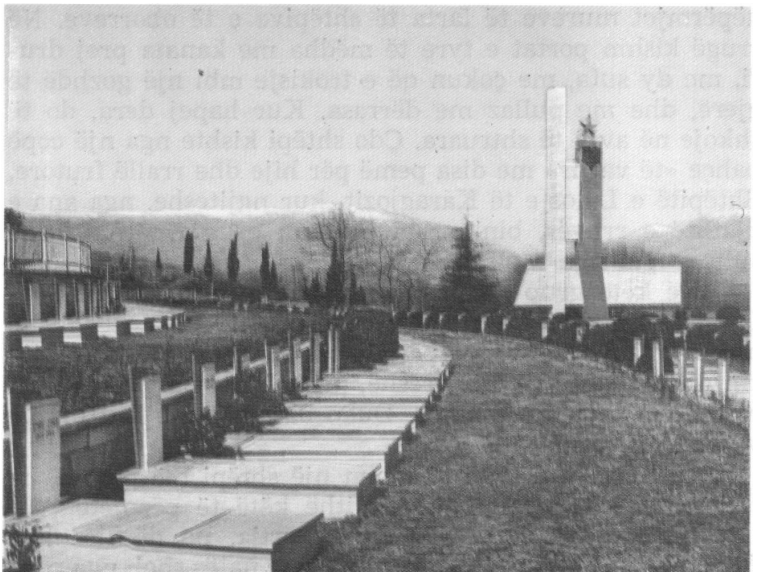
He replied: "Long live the Party, but my wish is to remain here. In the evening twilight I can look from the window and see the lights shining in the cemetery of the martyrs, where the remains of our beloved son Astrit lie at rest."

Qemal Halim Karagjozi was likewise a patriot. He broke with his own class and joined the struggle led by the Party.

Higher up, above the stream, stood the houses of the Reso family. Baba Çen's daughter Hasibe had married into the household of Saliko Reso and we visited them frequently. When we stayed there for supper, I would gather with friends such as Naxhi Totozani, Nesip Gjebra, Bahri Alite and others. We would sit in the *hajsomer*,** beneath the house of Qemal and Hasan Gega, where there stood a great plane tree said to be more than a hun-

* He fell as a martyr on 6 December 1944 in Montenegro, fighting in the ranks of the Albanian partisan forces that had gone to assist in the liberation of the peoples of Yugoslavia.

** Communal square and meeting place.



From a cordial conversation:
Enver Hoxha: *"...we ought to give you a house lower down in Palorto, so that you do not have to climb this steep hill every day."*
Lutfi Karagjozi: "Long live the Party, but my wish is to remain here. In the evening twilight I can look from the window and see the lights shining in the cemetery of the martyrs, where the remains of our beloved son Astrit lie at rest."

dred years old, and tell stories late into the evening. From the road above, descending from Mali i Gjerë, the mules and donkeys of the shingle-cutters would regularly appear, among them those belonging to Vaho Lloçko and Ramo Dudumi. Laden with wooden roofing shingles, the animals made as much noise clattering downhill as Hajro Gaxhello's beasts.

The shingle-cutters of Upper Dunavat were among the poorest and hardest-working labourers of all. In those days there was no dynamite. They worked with nothing more than crowbars, pickaxes, hammers and shovels. They cleared earth away from rock faces by hand until they reached the appropriate layer

of stone. Then they inserted a crowbar, placed a stone beneath it as a fulcrum and pressed down on the iron. The wider the slabs they extracted, the better they were, since broad shingles reduced the gaps in a roof and prevented rain from penetrating. Their hands were weathered and rough, permanently coated with dust, much like those of Master Leko the mason, a friend of our family.

Yet these industrious and honourable men occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy of Gjirokastra's landlords. When they wished to insult someone, they would say: "Go on, you shingle-cutter!" And yet it was precisely these proletarians of my childhood, and of my grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations, together with craftsmen such as Master Leko and many others, who bequeathed to Albania so beautiful a museum-city — a city that will endure for centuries.

The struggle against the occupiers separated the wheat from the chaff. The landlords and all their kin and followers were swept away forever by the Party and its struggle, while the work of the shingle-cutters, builders and masons shines on as a beautiful and enduring monument. When one looks from the summit of Kuculla over that sea of wooden-shingled roofs, one is reminded of the tireless labour, the streaming sweat, the misery and poverty of those skilled craftsmen who, with cracked and calloused hands, gave warmth and beauty to cold stone.

I always felt great pleasure when I visited, either with my mother or alone, the house of my dear friend Aqif Selfo. Aqif and Uncle Avdul also lived atop a hill. Seen from the battlements of the castle, those handsome houses resembled a fortress with its many doors and windows. There were three or four houses in that cluster, but the dearest to me was Aqif's: low-built, with verandas, an upper storey above them and a long reception room with large windows overlooking the garden with its figs, cornel cherries, pear trees and vine trellises, or else facing the house of

Husam. Behind it, adjoining it, stood the house of Uncle Zenel Selfo, crowded with the old man's sons and grandsons. Uncle Zenel himself was short, with white hair and beard, leaning on a walking stick he had fashioned from the wood of a cornel tree growing in his garden below the house. The entire group of houses was surrounded by greenery. I do not know whether the younger generations have preserved the verdant atmosphere of those bygone days of which I speak.

Elsewhere in my recollections I have written about the people, houses and gardens of the Cfaka quarter where we once lived, so some of what follows may be repetitive. There were two routes to Cfaka. One could pass beneath the castle by way of Zerzebil Bridge, about which mothers and grandmothers sang the lines:

"At the Bridge of Zerzebil,
Behançe, son of Bakir,
an infidel's bullet struck you down,
because you lifted the veil from your eyes."

From Zerzebil Bridge one emerged into the Çoçolaj quarter, climbed a steep road and reached the summit of the neighbourhood near the houses of the Zazanaj family. My sister Fahrije lived there, and we stayed with her for several years. Strangely enough, in these quarters, which one might almost call mountainous, some houses stood isolated while others were grouped together. Entire clans lived in clusters: the Zazanajs, the Omaris, the Kuçuks and others.

The second route to Cfaka passed by Pasha Kauri. One descended below the cave of the castle, where we sheltered whenever rain caught us, then followed a road above the stream, crossed an old bridge and began the climb upward. Along this road stood small houses, some with gates and some without, their courtyards overgrown with grass. I remember that one of these houses belonged to Lato Mezini. He was a telegraph operator,

older than I was, thin and always wearing an old Borsalino hat. He was a simple man. To us youngsters, however, Lato seemed important, for not only could he write as we could, but he also operated a little machine at the telegraph office that went *pi-pi-pi* in Morse code.

Higher up than Lato's house stood the house of Malo Kasi's father. Malo was one of our companions, though he was not much interested in school and sometimes spent his days tending sheep. His father owned a fairly large shop selling nails, horseshoes and equipment for pack animals. At that time the shop stood at the entrance to the road leading to Sheikh Durro's mosque, where the market was held. Nearby stood the house of Malo Miko. I had heard the name of this unassuming man, though he is rarely remembered today. Farther on was the house of Isuf Omari. The house of Çufe, as we called him, stood on the hillside. It belonged to Sejdo Omari and Hazbi Omari. The former was a wealthy landowner with large flocks of sheep, while his brother Hazbi, Çufe's father, was a notorious drunkard. I had visited their house because my grandfather's family was connected to them through my grandmother. They possessed a large and beautiful house, but the people who lived there were unpleasant. Sejdo Omari was harsh both in appearance and in character. He had thick eyebrows and moustaches like the tassels of a shoe. The house became a veritable nest of hornets. Sejdo's sons became wealthy merchants and, when Albania was occupied, they betrayed the homeland. They joined the Balli Kombëtar movement and collaborated with the Italians and Germans. They were sworn enemies of ours — enemies of the people, the Party and the National Liberation Front. When the country was liberated, they fled with the occupiers; otherwise, a bullet would have awaited them.

Yet it was precisely in this nest of kulaks and traitors, this thorny thicket, that a rose blossomed: Çufe Omari. He was still

a boy when I was a student — intelligent, lively, with bright eyes and a sharp, finely cut profile. When the Italians occupied our country, Çufe broke with his class origins, joined the communists and began the struggle alongside Muzo Asqeriu. When the attacks and acts of resistance began, Çufe was everywhere — fearless and brave. Muzo Asqeriu fell fighting,* and Çufe Omari** too died heroically in action against the prefect of Gjirokastra, the traitor Tahir Kolgjini, whom he had ambushed with the intention of killing.

Near Sejdo Omari's house stood the home of Asllan Muhedini, whom we called "Kufo" at school because he was hard of hearing. He was a classmate of ours. I visited his house and was struck by the fact that, to reach the actual entrance, one had to pass through two courtyards separated by a high wall. In the centre of the wall stood a gate and, facing the street, another large gateway flanked by two columns. Whenever I asked Asllan why their house had two courtyards and such high walls, he would reply: "To protect ourselves from enemies and thieves."

When we descended with our childhood friends from the clock gate of the castle, we particularly enjoyed passing through the Old Bazaar road. It was a highly characteristic street: narrow, cobbled and not especially well maintained. On both sides stood old-style Gjirokastra houses with stone gateways, stone benches and iron-barred windows forged by blacksmiths such as Qato the Gypsy. Some windows projected so far that they almost touched those opposite. No doubt conversations crackled back and forth between women and girls seated at these windows, embroidering and making beautiful decorative tassels for the scarves they wore on their heads. Many windows at that

* On 19 July 1942 in the field of Gorrica, Lower Dropull, Gjirokastra.

** He fell as a martyr near Uji i Ftohtë in Tepelena, at the foot of Golik, on the banks of the Drino River.

time were also fitted with wooden lattice screens. Such houses generally belonged to Muslim families.

This neighbourhood, which merged into the Pllaka quarter, was inhabited by both Muslims and Christians. They lived together in complete harmony. Religion rarely divided the people of Gjirokastra. This long, winding alley eventually brought one out onto the boulevard, opposite a well. Descending from there led to the hill where we used to play. Later the remains of the distinguished patriot Bajo Topulli would be laid to rest there and I was honoured to deliver the commemorative address.*

Today, upon this sacred hill, the graves of Bajo, Çerçiz and Çajupi — these glorious figures of the Albanian National Renaissance — have been gathered together in a remarkable monumental ensemble. Later, during the era of the Party, a school was built there as well. When I visited Gjirokastra, I went to that place,** first bowing respectfully before the graves of the National Renaissance figures and then visiting the school and speaking with its pupils. The presence of that school is symbolic, for it stands beside those great men who fought with both pen and rifle for the freedom of the people, for the independ-

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* In this speech, Comrade Enver Hoxha stated, among other things: "We who have found this Albania free, this Albania which you prepared for us with your heart's blood, cannot feel proud unless we bring improvement to the Albanian society that you loved so deeply. You did all that you could, but we, during these twenty-five years, have not done as much as we ought. Yet the younger generation that is now growing up pledges, upon this grave, which is a sacred shrine for every Albanian, that neither the will nor the courage will be lacking when the time comes to prepare a happier Albania, a more prosperous Albania." (*Demokratia*, 1 August 1936.)

** On 26 October 1963. Speaking to the pupils of this school, Comrade Enver Hoxha stated, among other things: "...there is no greater honour than to be close to these heroes. It is rare to have heroes so near the grounds of one's school. For this reason, your school must be exemplary..." (Enver Hoxha, *Vepra*, vol. 25, 486.)

ence of the homeland, for the Albanian language and for Albanian schools.

What do I not remember? I remember everything, from Aunt Nasipja, the wife of Uncle Abdullah, who had nothing to eat (which is why she took her two sons and daughter, my childhood companions Muzejen, Haki and Besim, and went to join Uncle Abdullah in Izmir, where she died on foreign soil), to old Pano Buba's widow, who lived in her little house in Varosh, near the old lyceum. She was an old woman who gathered all sorts of herbs and flowers from the hills and mountain pastures, which she boiled and turned into ointments and remedies. She kept these in small boxes made of thin yellowish wood. I remember going to see her with my mother, and we bought a medicine for my father's sister Nado, who was suffering from cancer. People did everything they could to cure illness, while others did everything they could simply to earn their daily bread.

I cannot forget Neime the Gypsy, who was the master craftswoman of whitewashing houses. She lived near Bastri Çuçi's stable. My mother used to say of her:

"There is no one in the world like Neime. No one can equal her at whitewashing. She knows exactly how to slake the lime, how much salt to add and how much indigo to mix in — measured to perfection. And when she applies it with those golden hands of hers, the wall looks like white velvet."

I would ask my mother:

"And what about Katero, Çoro's wife? How did she whitewash?"

I asked because I had seen her whitewashing my uncle's house.

"Katero did it well too," my mother would reply, "but not like Neime. In our house," she would continue, "we used to do the whitewashing ourselves, with these very fingers."

Then, showing me her slender hands, veined and marked by

old age, she would add:

"Refo, Shaqir's wife, helped me too. We regarded her as one of our own daughters. She also whitewashed with love."

My dear mother worked herself, looked after the whole household herself and cared for all of us. She rarely hired outside help and, when she could no longer manage alone, she would employ someone for a single day. Then the two of them would work side by side with their sleeves rolled up. When the job was done, the woman, usually someone known to the family, would eat with us at the same table and, in the evening, my mother would pay her wages: a few coins, a bowl of whatever stew had been cooked and a large piece of cornbread on top.

My mother was an excellent cook. Yet whenever I asked who was the finest cook in Gjirokastra, she would say: "I place no one above Bejeko Kobuzi from Dunavat." This was a poor woman with two daughters who, in order to survive, had perfected the art of cooking to such a degree that no one could rival her. "Hano, Behush's wife, was a good cook too," my mother would add, "but beside Bejeko she was like Kako Rino compared with Kako Pino, who embroidered bridal garments."

At such moments all of Gjirokastra belongs to me: its people, houses, streets, alleys, gardens, vineyards, mountain pastures, churches, mosques, tekkes, cisterns, wells and later its fountains — everything, absolutely everything. Those who have died and those things that have changed since my childhood remain alive in my memory and in my heart. I long for all of them. I cannot travel there as often as I would wish, but memory sees everything. In memory I constantly climb and descend the alleys, enter the houses, sit on the stone benches and the divans of the verandas, converse with uncles, aunts, elderly women, young wives and brides, and play in gardens, streets and squares with my childhood companions, some of whom have died, some of whom fell as martyrs and others who are still alive

and have become grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

These few recollections that stirred in my mind I felt compelled to write down, to commit to paper for myself, for Nexhmije and for my children, for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren who will come after me, so that through them they may come to know, however faintly, my beautiful birthplace, where I lived, played and studied, and where even today a wonderful and heroic people live, work and struggle.

I began writing these memories at a time when my head was full of concerns, for I had to work intensively on the Party Congress, on reports and on many other matters. Yet amidst all that work, as a form of relaxation, I would take this notebook from the drawer and write with pleasure some of the most beautiful memories of my youth. I feel more alive when I do so. I return to my younger days and it seems to me that I draw strength from them. The moment I hear Nexhmije approaching, I quickly hide the notebook, because she scolds me:

"What are you doing, Enver? Why tire yourself even more when you are already so burdened with work for the Congress?..."

"All right, all right," I reply, "but you encouraged me in the first place, and now you tell me to stop!"

Your mother is right, my dear children. She looks after my health. Nevertheless, whenever she is not there, I follow "Ariadne's thread" back into my memories, which have no end. That is why this account remains unfinished. Love for one's homeland, one's people, one's Party and one's birthplace is so profound that one can never reach its end.

September 1976

THE BAKERS OF THE NEIGHBOURHOODS

Some may find it strange that I think about and write of the bakers of Gjirokastra, who lived and worked at least sixty or seventy years ago. Yet that is how it is. I cannot help myself. I feel affection and nostalgia for these simple people of the common folk. They were workers of fire, flame and smoke. Their faces and work clothes were blackened, yet their hearts beat only with the desire to satisfy everyone in the neighbourhood where they worked. No one ever said of the baker that he was "their closest companion." Many neither thought about nor understood this very human and very real truth. The baker? "Come now, he is only a baker. He bakes our bread and we pay him for it." The baker was invited only rarely to weddings, banquets or other occasions, and then almost as an act of charity. Usually someone would send him a bowl of sweet rice pudding, a piece of roasted meat prepared by his own hand and under his own care and, on top of that, perhaps a slice of baklava: "There, that is more than enough for him." Many times he scarcely tasted any of it himself.

This good, simple and kindly man never complained. Beside the oven door, from which the heat of the fire poured out, he would eat whatever had been sent to him or save it and, when he closed the bakery in the evening, weary, blackened by smoke and drenched in sweat, he would throw his coat over his shoulder, pick up the bowl from the "wedding feast" and carry it home to share with his wife, mother, sister and children, all of whom depended upon his labour. He would merely nibble a little himself and leave his portion for the youngsters. As for the baker, he was content with a piece of hard maize bread. He would cut it into slices, draw embers from the hearth of the small room where they lived, place a trivet over them and lay the slices on top. He toasted them, crisped them, browned them and sometimes even burnt them, yet somehow made them delicious. Thus the baker, the best friend of the people in the neighbourhood, would drink a glass of raki to ease his cares and relax, eat his bread little by little with a morsel of cheese and a dried onion for relish and think about his troubles and worries, which were much the same as those of all the people.

I am not a writer who composes novellas. I simply write my memories, at Nexhmije's request. I write them for our children and for the grandchildren who will soon be born to us, so that they may know my peculiarities, my life and the intimate feelings of my heart. I write about the people who surrounded me, the people with whom I lived, who watched me grow up, who taught me and nourished me in their own way, who advised me and who sometimes even pulled my ear or gave me a slap on the cheek because, naturally, being a child did not mean that I was an "angel." Everything they did contributed something to my life and did me good.

I loved these ordinary people from childhood and now, in my advancing years, I still see them before my eyes just as kind as they were then. Undoubtedly they must also have had faults

deserving criticism, but, to tell the truth, I do not remember them. It seems that, with the passing of years, people forget the shortcomings of good individuals, whereas the faults of bad people become more pronounced and remembered, because it is evil that they inflicted upon the people.

In writing some memories of the bakers of Gjirokastra, I am writing neither stories nor imagined novellas. I am speaking about simple people whom no one knows and no one remembers. Those who did know them, their contemporaries such as my uncle and Baba Çen, died long ago and it would never have crossed their minds that their son and grandson would one day concern himself with the bakers of the city's neighbourhoods and write about them. Even many of my own contemporaries no longer remember the bakers of their quarters.

Whenever I think of the bakers, my mind returns to a distant and long-ago memory connected with Daut the Baker, who used to toast pieces of maize bread beside the fireplace. I do not remember his surname, but I know that we called him Daut of Çiçimako. Çiçimako was his mother. That is how my mother referred to him and how we children referred to him as well. The men never called him Daut of Çiçimako, only Daut, because in those days one could not mention another man's wife, mother or sister by name. To do so was considered shameful and insulting. Such were the harsh customs of the sharia.

Daut of Çiçimako was the baker at Mamani's bakery, right in Zeman Square. Associated with this name is an incident involving Sano when she was a little girl. My mother used to send us with trays balanced on our heads to take food to the bakery for baking. It seems that, from constantly carrying those heavy trays on her head, the name of the bakery, Mamani, became fixed in Sano's mind. When she and Bale went to school for the first time, hand in hand, and the teacher who was enrolling them asked their names, Bale, the daughter of Baba Çen, our

uncle, replied: "My name is Bale Hysen Hoxha." Sano, however, answered: "My name is Sano Halil Mamani." The teacher raised her head and looked at them in surprise, for she knew them. "How is it possible," she asked, "for you to have different surnames when you are both Hoxha girls?" "They call me Hoxha too," Sano replied, "but I take the bread to be baked at Mamani's bakery." The teacher was Urani Rumbo. She laughed at the innocence of the little girls.

Daut of Çiçimako, the baker, a middle-aged man, still appears in my memory after so many decades, standing at the fiery mouth of the oven with his sleeves rolled up and wearing only a shirt, for to him it was always intensely hot, whether winter or summer. In one hand he held several rags and in the other, sometimes a hook and sometimes a long-handled peel.

I picture Uncle Daut in his little house on the lane above the bakery. It stood on an alleyway where some walls had collapsed while others remained standing, built of white or time-darkened stone, full of hollows and crevices through which lizards scurried in and out as though they owned the place. They would emerge to warm themselves in the sun or catch a fly and sometimes lose a piece of their tail when one of us nimble-footed boys caught it like a pair of tongs. I was not afraid of lizards, though I was of snakes. Rushit, however, whom we had nicknamed "Onion," the son of Mulla Refik and my companion in the neighbourhood, famous for his extraordinarily large shoes, feared neither lizards nor snakes.

Uncle Daut's house stood beside this narrow alley hemmed in by walls, a winding lane that passed above the large stone-and-timber house of the Kokalari family and that of the pharmacist, Uncle Mujtin, father of Eqrem, whom we called "the Deaf One," because whenever he had not learned his lesson he would tell the teacher, "I did not hear it." Eqrem was my companion at primary and civic school. Later he left school because

he genuinely did become deaf and turned into a "pharmacist" without a diploma, trained at the "university" of his father, the pharmacist Uncle Mujtin, who was a good, kind and courteous man. He was unlike the other Kokalaris. In those days these stony lanes, strewn with pebbles and rocks, became our football fields, where stones or battered tins served as balls and wore down the tips and soles of our shoes. At the time these alleys made no particular impression on us, but now, viewed through the eyes of old age, they seem to me the most beautiful streets I have ever seen.

Uncle Daut the Baker's house was small, a single-storey dwelling built above a storeroom. There were no cows, no sheep, only a few chickens and the occasional ragged-necked cockerel wandering in and out through the doorless entrance beneath a staircase whose iron railing had rusted from mud and rain. Above the stairs, one entered a small open gallery, almost like a veranda, with wooden railings blackened by age. It was exposed to the wind and had a stone bench beneath the railings so that rain driven by storms would not soak the plank flooring. At the far end of the gallery, Çiçimako, Daut's mother, had spread a mattress on the floor made from a sack stuffed with maize leaves and sewn together with what we in Gjirokastra called *karfoma*. These were made from string and coarse fibre.

From the gallery one passed into the small, dark living room, lit by a skylight above and a tiny shuttered window. There was a shelf holding several copper vessels and a wall niche near the fireplace where a small paraffin lamp stood. The hearth occupied the far end of the room. There the fire burned, with its chimney above, the trivet resting upon it, a soot-blackened copper kettle, a toasting rack and, beside the ashes, a broom for sweeping them away. This was the famous rack on which Uncle Daut toasted his maize bread. With it, Çiçimako gathered the embers and covered them with ash before they went to sleep.

All around the fireplace were mattresses: mattresses in the alcoves, mattresses in the corners and others spread across the middle of the room, covered with a Hindu cloth. In the centre lay an old rug.

I visited this gallery in summer or the room in winter several times, either to ask Uncle Daut "to bake our burek well tomorrow because we are expecting guests," or because my mother sent me there during Bayram and Çiçimako would give me some fruit, as custom required.

"Very well, very well," Uncle Daut would say when I pleaded with him to bake our burek properly. "Tell your mother I shall take special care of it, but only if she does not pour in butter by the bucketful, because then there is nothing I can do with the oven fire." I would carry the message back and my mother would say: "A good burek needs plenty of butter, that is the first rule. But where are we to find it? Curse Daut!" Even my mother would grumble at the baker, though without malice, for she was kind-hearted, affectionate and simple in her dealings with people.

Uncle Daut was the king of the bakery, just as Qato the Gypsy was king of the forge. He was the deity of fire. His shadow stretched and grew enormous across the broad blackened baking floor of the oven, which was crammed full of every kind of kitchen vessel: deep trays of risen and thick maize bread, shallow pans of pies, *shapkat*, *laropita*, cheese burek and meat pies with raised edges, filled in the middle with chopped onions and small pieces of meat.

On the oven floor one saw every kind of tray, large and small, holding maize loaves artistically scored with a knife into squares or circles and sometimes decorated with designs traced by the tip of a spoon. My mother always decorated her loaves in this way. There were earthenware casseroles "with ears and without ears," containing various stews with vegetables, with

meat or without it. When rice was required, we brought it separately to Uncle Daut in a glass or small bowl for him to add to the stew at the proper moment.

In the evening, when everything else had been finished and not a single baking tray remained in the oven, especially in winter, people began arriving with large pots in which to boil tripe and trotters purchased from Çoro, who sold them in the neighbourhood, or with pots for boiling maize. They filled these vessels with water and, before closing the bakery, Daut would place them in the oven, shut the door and leave them there overnight. In the morning, when he took them out, each of us would come to collect his own pot.

The boiled maize was eaten warm for breakfast. It was like fruit to us and at the same time served as our morning bread. We were delighted whenever my mother prepared boiled maize. In the morning she would place two cobs in our hands and send us off to school. They filled our stomachs and warmed our frozen fingers. By the time we reached the schoolyard, only the cobs remained and we would throw them at one another while playing our game of *top-meso*.

Our chief annoyance was having to take the trays to and from the bakery. This was also the source of quarrels with Haxho, Bale and Sano. "You take it." "Why should I take it?"

"Come now," my mother would say to me, "enough talking. You will go, because you are a boy!" And before I set off for school she would place the baking tray on my head. Holding it steady with both hands so that it would neither spill nor fall, I would make my way down the stony alley, a narrow lane bordered on both sides by high walls. On one side stood the wall of Çoktani's garden, where we ate mulberries and plums, because Aunt Zurko was our neighbour and our doors faced one another. On the other side were the walls of the house of Lame Çali and of the old patriotic teacher from Çipa. Then I

would pick my way among the stones beneath the stable of the Lab woman Venetike, mother of Hasibe, whom we nicknamed "the little Lab girl," my companion and Sano's, with whom we played every day and regarded as a sister.

From there I descended past the house of Uncle Iljaz Hoxha, one of my patriotic teachers and among the first teachers of the Albanian language in Gjirokastra, and finally reached Mamani's bakery. Quickly I would place the tray on the oven floor, lest I be late for school, and shout to Uncle Daut, "I've brought the bread!" or "I've brought the loaf!," depending on what it was. Sometimes he did not answer us at all. At other times, if he was in a bad mood, he would shout: "Can't you see you've ruined my work by bringing that loaf now!" When we returned to collect it, sometimes it was already baked and sometimes it was not. If it had come out of the oven, we would immediately look around for our own tray. We never made a mistake, though Uncle Daut would sometimes shout: "Careful now, don't mix up the trays, otherwise try sorting things out afterwards with the women!"

In winter, when it was cold and the icy wind blew, we would slip into the bakery, where it was wonderfully warm, and little by little, like cats, we would edge closer to the oven. Daut of Çiçimako pretended not to notice us and continued working, but when too many of us gathered around him and our constant chattering got in his way, he would laugh and say, his face red and glistening with sweat from the heat: "Move away, boys, you're making me feel hot!" In summer, while waiting for the baking to be finished, we played games in Zeman Square with paving stones, spinning tops or whatever happened to occupy us.

On Fridays Uncle Daut closed the bakery and did no baking at all. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew this. It was his day of rest, what people then called *pajdos*. On his day off, Uncle Daut would go into the bazaar, visit Neim Fino's café and

chat with the old baker from the Çipa quarter, distinguished by his side-whiskers, or perhaps stop for a glass of raki at Nexhmo Hoxha's place. He dressed formally, as we said in those days, and always appeared neat and clean. On his head he wore a black plush fez. Winter and summer alike he dressed in black woollen trousers, wore hobnailed shoes with upturned toes in the fashion of the day and a white embroidered waistcoat decorated with black braid. Across the front of the waistcoat stretched a yellow watch chain from one pocket to the other. We were convinced that Uncle Daut's chain must be made of gold.

He carried his jacket slung over one shoulder and swung his arms as he walked, like the old man from Bishtika, yet the jacket never slipped off. Uncle Daut smoked cigarettes through an elder-wood pipe, which he undoubtedly fashioned himself in the evenings beside the hearth in his little room. We children also made use of elder wood. Not only did my mother boil its white blossoms into a tea for us when we were ill, but we also turned its branches into gunstocks for our "weapons," firing from them little pellets made of chewed paper, tiny balls like shot.

Uncle Daut, son of Aunt Çiçimako, the good baker of our neighbourhood, had a pair of moustaches whose ends he twirled upwards "like Bismarck's," as my grandfather used to say. At the time I had no idea who Bismarck was, since I was still in the first years of primary school.

Such was Daut of Çiçimako, one of the good bakers of the Palorto quarter, a friend of my childhood who fed me when I was young by baking our bread. I remain grateful to him for that and have never forgotten him.

Beneath the old *mejtep*, beneath that large building of the town, that old school, at the foot of its courtyard wall, there stood — and still stands — a bakery of modest size which in those days we called "the Bey's Bakery." Which bey it belonged to, I do not know.

After the Liberation I made enquiries about who had worked there as baker. I was told that Malo, Zere's son,* a childhood companion of mine, had once worked there, while now the baker is Xhevat Avdalli, the distinguished singer of Gjirokastra's Lab folk songs.** I have recordings of Xhevat, Lavo and Resul on tape. I listen to them from time to time and take great pleasure in them. I know Xhevat as an excellent singer and I believe he is also an excellent baker.

During my childhood we too used this bakery. We paid for its services by the month or by means of what was called an *araush*, which we kept at home. This was a carved dogwood branch marked with notches, each notch representing a tray or pot taken to the bakery. The marks had to be recorded honestly. My uncle and father were very strict about this and, before the month was out, they would go and settle the account with the baker.

Like all bakeries of that time, it was housed in a somewhat long stable-like building. The "Bey's Bakery" was of medium

* In a conversation with leading officials of the Gjirokastra district on 18 March 1978, Comrade Enver Hoxha remarked, among other things: "I am very pleased that I met the people and, although the crowd would not allow me to move about freely, I still managed to have a conversation with Malo Zere... Malo is of my age. When we were children, we played together. Nearby there was a stream where we waged 'war.' The older boys were our commanders, while we younger ones were the soldiers... We carried on like this until we learned how to wage real war. What we did then was of great benefit later, because through making war we thoroughly rid ourselves of our enemies."

** On 23 March 1978, Comrade Enver Hoxha went for a walk through the alleyways of Gjirokastra. Concerning that day, he wrote in his diary: "Walking through the streets, I reached the top of the Alley of the Madmen, where I encountered the well-known singer of Gjirokastra songs, the baker Xhevat Avdalli. I embraced him and... we began to sing together: *Gjoleka sent out a messenger/ To summon the men of Vlora,/ And up they rose, from Radhima onward...*"

size and had two doors opposite one another. One entered from the side of Kokona Square beneath the lyceum and emerged near the house of the Çipa family, the house of old Aunt Lule, my great-aunt's cousin, where my mother sometimes took us children for supper. Old Aunt Lule was a Lab woman from the villages of Kurvelesh, generous and tidy, with many sons, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She kept her house spotless. The wooden floors of her rooms shone from constant scrubbing, the sheets were dazzlingly white and the courtyard, paved with planks whitewashed with lime and shaded by a vine trellis, contained rows of flowerpots filled with red hollyhocks, carnations, cockscomb flowers and many others.

When one entered from Kokona Square, the bakery had a small corridor and, to its right, a little partitioned room. This must have been where the baker slept. As I recall, he was a man of about forty-five or fifty years of age. He was from Dropull and was called Jani. I do not know from which village of Dropull he came, but neither our family nor we children cared where the baker was from or whether he was Christian or Muslim. He was simply our baker. It made no difference to us that his name was Jani. All the upbringing we received from Baba Çen, my uncle, my mother, my grandmother, my maternal uncle and my great-aunt was free of religious prejudice.

Beyond this little room, at the end of the short corridor, stretched the entire bakery, with its blackened wooden platform stained by baking trays and two narrow passageways running alongside it. At the far end, adjoining the lyceum courtyard, stood the oven where the bread was baked. The passage on the other side was for the public; people brought and collected their trays and dishes from there. At its far end, beside the door on the Çipa side, the bakery had a fairly large window closed with wooden shutters. Only the baker could use it from the inside. He would stand there to get some fresh air, cool himself

or chat with the men who came to pay, advise him or complain that something had not been baked properly, or that he had burned it, and so on. Uncle Jani never took offence. He always had an answer ready for everyone. Some people insulted him and he became angry, but it did not show in his face because he was perpetually reddened by the heat of the oven. When anger made him flush, no one could tell, and the smoke blackened him continually in any case. Only his eyes revealed whether he was upset, especially when he muttered, "*Hajt, stodhiavolo!**"

We children always got on well with Master Jani, not only because he was our baker and baked the loaves and pastries that we enjoyed eating warm with cheese. This bakery was close to our house. We did not mind going there because it was not as far away as Mamani's bakery. It was near both our home and our school. On our way to school it was no burden to carry whatever had to be taken there and, when classes ended at midday, we would rush back, collect the baked food and hurry home with it to my mother because we were ravenously hungry. We were so hungry after school that, when we entered the bakery, we often forgot to shut the door. In winter, however, it was cold and the draught was fierce. Baker Jani would shout: "*Pedhimu*,** shut the door or you'll give me consumption!" We would immediately go back and close it, because we knew that consumption was a terrible disease. We loved our baker and never wanted him to fall ill.

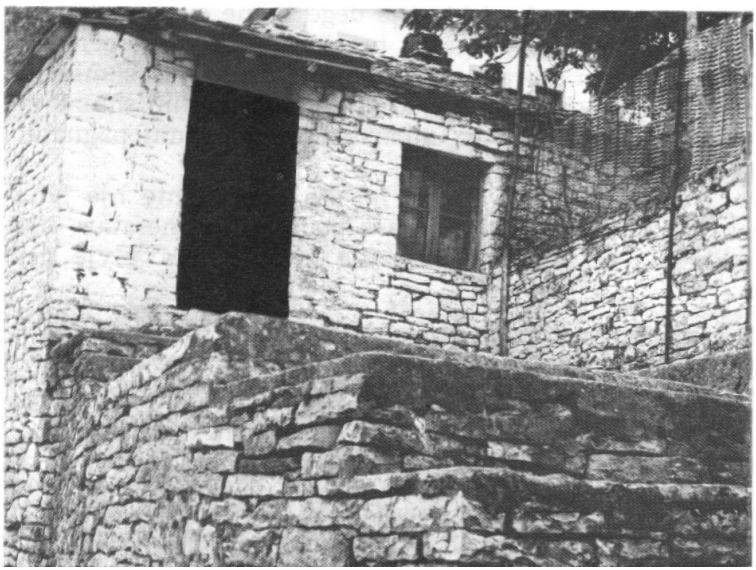
There was another reason why we Hoxha children were fond of Uncle Jani and why he was fond of us: Baba Çen liked him and they were friends. Although Baba Çen was mayor, he was a very simple man. He detested the beys and was one of the common people. When he returned from the municipality in

* To the devil! (Greek in the original).

** My boy (Greek in the original).

the evening, he sometimes carried a bottle of raki in the pocket of his robe and a few pieces of liver wrapped in coarse paper.

Baba Çen would stop at Jani's bakery, climb onto the wooden platform and sit down at ease. He would take out the bottle of raki and hand the liver to Jani. The baker would place it on the embers of the oven and the two of them would begin drinking from the same bottle, eating the liver and raw onions as a relish. Once the Mulla had warmed up with drink, then, "with his beard in battle," as we said, his turban blackened by smoke, he would begin cursing and leave nothing unsaid about the beys: the Karagjozis, the Hasanis and the grandees such as the Papadhopouloi, the Litos, the Lolomanis and the rest. And so, when the bottle was empty, both the baker and the mayor,



"The bakery was a shed, more or less long in shape. You entered it from the side of Kokona Square, below the lyceum. The bakers were workers of fire, flame and smoke, their faces and work clothes blackened, yet their hearts beat with the sole desire of pleasing all the people of the neighbourhood."

their legs unsteady beneath them, would make their way down the Alley of the Madmen and head home. At the gate the baker would try to kiss the Mulla's hand, while Baba Çen would throw an arm around him, kiss him and shout: "Never kiss a man's hand, otherwise you'll no longer be my friend!"

From inside the house we could hear the commotion. My grandmother would say to me: "Go, Enver, take your father by the arm before he cracks his head on the stairs." When Baba Çen finally reached the upper floor and stepped onto the veranda, he would kiss us noisily, smothering us with tears and affection, while he kissed my grandmother's hand. She, remaining serious, would say:

"Hysen, you wretched man, what have you become? You had such a noble father. You should not be drinking with these people. It is not proper. They speak ill of you."

At this Baba Çen would become irritated and reply, though always respectfully because he loved her dearly:

"Then with whom am I supposed to spend my time? With scoundrels like the Hasanis and Sami Karagjozi and their kind? No, Jeko, I shall sit with the poor, with labourers, with Gypsies, butchers and bakers, because these are good, simple people. I know how hard they work and yet they cannot even earn their daily bread, while the others dress in fine cloth, wear boots with shiny buttons and sit counting their prayer beads."

After all these tirades, Baba Çen would hurl his fiercest curse at the beys of Gjirokastra — a phrase I shall not repeat here. My grandmother would lower her head and sigh: "What have we come to with this man?" Meanwhile we children would laugh. We delighted in him, tugged at his beard and wiped his face. Baba Çen would kiss us and, often with tears in his eyes, say: "When you grow up, kill those dogs!" My grandmother could bear no more. She would leap up and exclaim: "Well done, Hysen! What sort of things are you saying in front of the

children? Enver, my dear," she would say to me, "do not listen to your father. He does not know what he is saying!"

My mother would take Baba Çen in her arms, wipe away his tears, wash his face with a damp cloth, undress him, put him into his nightshirt and, just as he was, he would often fall asleep on the divan. We would cover him with a quilt, place a jug full of water beside him and leave him to sleep.

These are some of my recollections of our other baker, Baker Jani. I now remember how, in the evenings, when I came down from Kuculla, where we played, passing through the lane by the house of Kamber Bilali, my friend, and by the house of Muharrem Qemo, I would emerge onto the bakery street and find Master Jani leaning against the bakery window, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette and daydreaming. I would say, "Good night, Master Jani," and he would reply, "*Orkali pedhimu*.*"

He always knew when Baba Çen was returning home and would call out from the bakery window:

"Back already, Mulla?"

"I'm back. Sleep well, Master Jani," my father would answer.

And now, at this age, as Baba Çen's grandson, I feel satisfaction that, as a son of the people and a soldier of the Party, I too did something for my good and brave people, for the sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Master Jani, for our brothers and sisters from Dropull, equal in rights and duties within our socialist homeland.

Whenever, for one reason or another, the two bakeries I have mentioned happened to be closed, our family baked its bread farther away, at the Angonat bakery. This was not a large bakery. It stood near the great gate of the Angonat housing complex and not far from the place where the Friday and Mon-

* Safe journey, my son (Greek in the original).

day market was held, in the square by Sheikh Durro's tekke. The bakery had been built at the foot of a small bridge spanning a torrent that rushed down from the mountain. This stream flowed through the Upper Dunavat quarter, passed beneath the walls of the Resaj house, where I often visited my cousin Hasibe, Baba Çen's daughter, then ran beneath the confectioner's bridge and emerged onto the gravel banks below in Varosh. The torrent carried stones, boulders, uprooted trees — in short, everything it encountered in its path. Sometimes it swept away bridges, sometimes it buried them beneath debris, but that was the municipality's problem. The stream could do nothing to the bakery itself, although its roar certainly tormented Baker Shaban's ears. We were not as close to him as we were to the other two bakers. Perhaps this was simply because the bakery was so far away. Carrying trays of bread and pastries there and back was exhausting, and that made Baker Shaban seem distant as well. He was somewhat irritable and never smiled. He was not a bad man, but perhaps the cramped size of his bakery platform also "narrowed" his heart a little, for he would shout at us: "Come on, stop chattering, take what belongs to you and be off — I've no room left for trays!" Or: "Out you go!"

"But it's pouring down, Uncle Shaban," we would protest whenever it rained.

"That's my concern, is it?" he would snap back.

And so, drenched to the skin, some with sacks over their heads fashioned into makeshift hoods, others pulling the corner of a coat over their heads, we would go outside and huddle together beneath the roof of the great gateway with its stone benches at the Angonat house.

This large complex of houses was magnificent and, viewed through present-day eyes, I would say among the finest examples of Gjirokastra architecture. I had never actually entered these houses, only gone as far as the outer reception courtyard,

because Baba Çen had once taken me there to deliver something to Mulla Idriz Angoni, who was a friend of our elders. Mulla Idriz was one of those companions of Sali Boce and Musa Xhiku to whom Baba Çen, as Gjirokastra's delegate at the raising of the Albanian flag in Vlora in 1912, sent a telegram.*

Nearby, close to the bakery, stood the house of Uncle Kasem Xheneti. Uncle Kasem limped and was one of my uncle's closest friends; they were deeply attached to one another. Uncle Kasem also had a son named Malo, who was younger than I was. In time he disappeared from my sight. I later asked about him and was told that he was doing well and had worked as a teacher in Durrës.

Further on from Uncle Kasem's house, below the house of Adem Bey, stood the slaughterhouse. It was supposedly newly built. There was a small square there and around it stood the butchers' little shops. There they slaughtered animals, skinned them and sold the meat. Anyone wishing to buy meat could choose whichever cut he wanted. Sometimes my uncle took me along so that I could carry his basket or sack. We had our regular butcher and my uncle rarely bought from anyone else. He would say: "Cut me a leg here — one or two kilograms." And the butcher would do so. My uncle never bought beef or goat meat. In general, the people of Gjirokastra preferred lamb or mutton.

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* This telegram read: "Vlora, 23rd day of the third autumn month, 1912. To Messrs Idriz Angoni, Musa Xhiku..., Gjirokastra. We arrived safely. We have spoken at length with Ismail Qemali and the other representatives. There are strong assurances regarding recognition of our independence. Any delay in proclaiming our independence in Gjirokastra and the sub-prefectures of the region is in no way desirable. I inform you, with the utmost urgency... proclaim independence as soon as possible and without losing a single minute following the noble and honourable declaration of the leadership, and raise the national flag. Is Enver well? Hysen."

When I remembered the butchers, my mind turned to a story people used to tell in those days. There was a wealthy young man called Çuço who liked to show himself off. He wore spectacles, a watch chain and shiny patent-leather shoes that creaked when he walked and, eventually, he even acquired a cane. No one paid him much attention, but he was determined to be noticed. One day he bought a ring with a gemstone and went to the butcher.

"Very well," said the butcher. "Where shall I cut it from?"

Çuço raised the finger bearing the ring so that the butcher would see it and said:

"Here."

The devil of a butcher understood exactly what he was up to but said nothing. When he raised his cleaver to cut the meat where Çuço had indicated, Çuço stopped him and, once again displaying the ring, said:

"Not there, the other piece."

This performance was repeated four or five times. At last the butcher said:

"Sit still, man, or I'll cut off your finger. That jewel is blinding me!"

This was exactly what Çuço wanted to hear, and he replied:

"In the end, just cut me three kilos from wherever you like. It is all meat anyway."

Nearby, above the slaughterhouse, on the right-hand side as one descended the road, stood the grave of my grandfather, Mulla Beqir, the uncle of our elders. Next to it were the municipality and the *vakëf* office where Baba Çen worked. If one continued down the slaughterhouse road, one emerged beneath the dome above which stood the old bazaar mosque. But that is another story.

Even when we lived for a time in Cfaka, there was no escaping the bakery. Fortunately, it was not very far from the house.

Going down to it was easy enough, but climbing back up carrying a baking tray, a basket of vegetables from the market and a schoolbag certainly made one sweat. We were young, however, and paid no attention to such things.

The baker was called Uncle Bastri. He was a short man with a small moustache, white like his hair and yellowed above the lip from the cigarettes he smoked through a little amber-coloured pipe, or "amber," as he called it. Although already middle-aged, he was quick and agile. When removing trays from the oven, he handled them as rapidly as he could, flinging them onto the platform because they were scorching hot.

Uncle Bastri was a calm man. Yet from time to time malicious tongues would whisper that he supposedly "borrowed" a spoonful of dough from other people's trays to make his own. Nothing was ever proven, but there was always some murmuring.

His bakery stood in a pleasant location. We played all around it. Behind the bakery there was a small open space, almost like a little clearing, with a few tall hackberry trees and the occasional medlar or poppy. There we played football while waiting for our baking to be ready.

Cfaka had more greenery than most quarters. It looked more like a large village perched on a hillside, from which one could see Zinxhirëve Square, Baba Ali's tekke and Kordhoca.

Not far from the bakery there was a square with a long stone bench, known as the *hajsomer*. This stood near the house of Çalo, Shyqri the Gypsy, the only person in the neighbourhood who owned a bicycle. He astonished us because he could ride it without using his hands. When going uphill, however, Shyqri carried the bicycle on his shoulder and, whenever he put his lame foot down, he never forgot to place a hand on his knee. The old men gathered at this *hajsomer*: my grandfather, Sejdo, Kadri, Eshref and Zeqo Omari, Nesip and Bahri Kore and others. Conversation flowed endlessly there.

We youngsters, after finishing our lessons, would come down beneath this *hajsomer*. There was an open square there and, in its centre, a raised stone platform upon which funeral biers were placed. The imam would recite prayers over the deceased and then the body would be taken away for burial. The cemeteries were scattered about wherever people owned land — in Korovesh, in the groves and elsewhere.

We often went to play in the grove, passing through the alley of Uncle Kadri Omari and of Nesip and Bahri Kore, both barbers from whom we had our hair cut. The lane was full of cow dung and droppings from sheep and goats. It truly smelled of the countryside because the whole neighbourhood kept cows, sheep, goats and poultry, supplying the quarter chiefly with milk but also with meat and eggs. We played in the grove among the slopes and hillsides. There were also cornel trees there. With the sticks we always carried in our pockets, we sometimes fashioned cornel-wood rods to defend ourselves against the neighbourhood dogs, which once tore the seat of my trousers.

I do not think we remained in Cfaka for more than a year, if my memory serves me correctly. Then we loaded our belongings onto our backs and moved to Hazmurat, to my maternal uncle's house at the top of the hill. The house stood empty because my uncle had moved his family to Fier. For me a new phase of life began there, though it was not unfamiliar. I had always visited my uncle's house, spending entire days and nights there. His house was like my own; it was my mother's house and my great-aunt's house as well. This time, however, my great-aunt was no longer there.

In Hazmurat there were two bakeries not far from one another: one belonged to Uncle Abaz Çuçi and the other to Bido Çano.

As children we usually went to the first one because Çano's bakery, which stood near my uncle's house, was not operating and this forced my great-aunt to use Abaz's bakery instead. At that time we did not actually live in Hazmurat but visited my uncle's house for lunch and supper. Sometimes we went alone, sometimes with my mother. We might stay a day and a night, occasionally five days and, at times, even an entire week. From there we still went to school, making the whole journey on foot. We passed along the road by the Sollaks, then by the houses of the Galanxhis and the Hashorvas, through the Gjobek quarter, emerged near Çoro the Butcher's house in Varosh and finally reached school at the appointed hour. Although the route was long, it was enjoyable. At my uncle's house we ate better because he was well provided for. When we set out for school in the morning, after breakfast, my great-aunt would slip into our pockets either a boiled egg coloured yellow with onion skins or two or three dried figs.

My grandmother also sent us to the bakery. At my uncle's house we ate wheat bread. My mother displayed her skill as a cook there, but my uncle's wife, Behije, was no less accomplished in the kitchen. As for the butter, oil, stews, sausages and pieces of meat — both their quantity and size — all these were under the strict supervision of my great-aunt Hasije, who was extraordinarily thrifty without being stingy in the least. She wasted nothing, gave no more than was necessary and never less than was due. Whenever we sat down at the table, my great-aunt gave each of us our proper share and divided whatever remained in the tray among us children. Sometimes we would steal a little from my mother's portion of bread or from the old woman's share. She pretended not to notice, yet she observed everything out of the corner of her sharp eye, for she had the habit of keeping one eye closed while the other remained open like an eagle's. She saw with both eyes even when one was shut.

She was as capable as any man: energetic, quick, strict and yet affectionate. Her husband had died when she was still young, leaving her with two daughters and a son. She raised all three by herself, which is why she was so economical. She could stand her ground before all the men of the neighbourhood and, when she grew old, the elders came to talk with her, seek her advice and consult her on various matters.

Kola, the baker who worked for Uncle Abaz, loved and respected my great-aunt, but he was also a little afraid of her. She did not hesitate to throw a shawl over her head and march straight to the bakery to argue with him. Kola would say: "Very well, Aunt Hasije, the devil take it — I simply put a few extra logs into the oven." Or: "You should have brought it earlier, not so late," and so forth. Nor was Uncle Kola short of explanations. He knew how to answer people. Even so, he treated Aunt Hasije with caution. When we children came to collect things from the bakery, he would say: "Don't try your tricks with Aunt Hasije. Leave her alone. You can shake out your shirt all you like — nothing escapes her."

Anyone can become a baker, perhaps, but to be a true baker is no easy matter. It is a demanding craft and one does not master it overnight. Years of work are required. All the bakers I knew in my youth were older men and must have possessed immense experience. Even then, with a child's understanding, I realised that baking was not simple. As I waited for our tray to emerge from the oven, leaning against the baking platform, I would watch the oven glowing with heat and Kola at work.

A baker had to know precisely when to light the oven and how much wood to feed into it. Every log had its proper place inside. There were no thermometers then, no gauges as we called them. The baker measured everything by time, consulting the pocket watch that Uncle Kola referred to as his "bell." He judged the heat of the oven with his face and eyes and even with

his hand. This first operation was itself a specialised skill and then Uncle Kola would declare: "The oven is ready."

Loading the oven with the things that were to be baked was an even greater art. It marked the beginning of a highly delicate and complex process. The baker had to know his oven as well as the palm of his hand. In his mind he seemed to divide it into sectors: which areas were hottest, which cooler, where the flames reached, where only the heat penetrated, when the fire needed stoking, when the embers should be removed, where they ought to be spread and where the ash should be gathered. It was a major craft because every kind of bread, every tray, every casserole, every burek or *lakror*,* every *qollopita*** *or laropita*, every *shapkat* or cooking pot required its own temperature and its own allotted time — neither more nor less. One might place an item in a certain spot in the oven, but after half an hour or an hour it had to be moved, rotated, shifted elsewhere, pulled forward for inspection to see whether it was baked, whether it had begun to burn, whether it was properly cooked or whether the rice dishes and roasting pans needed a little more water.

What a consummate cook a baker had to be! What an enormous kitchen had been entrusted to Uncle Kola! The contentment of every family depended on his skill and his hand. It concerned their daily bread. Bread! Bread! Our entire people related everything to bread. "I want bread." "I have not eaten bread." "Let us go and eat bread." "We have run out of bread." Always "bread"! At every moment, "bread"! When we gathered around the table, we were taught: "Do not crumble the bread." "Pick up the crumbs and put them in your mouth." "Kiss the bread and touch it to your forehead before eating it." And it was

* Traditional Albanian savoury pie made with thin layers of dough and a vegetable or meat filling.

** Traditional southern Albanian pie, typically baked in a tray with layered dough and filling.

the good baker who baked our bread. Yet this good baker, this master cook of the whole neighbourhood, was often the poorest and most exhausted man of all. Many times he slept on the oven platform itself and very few people showed him the respect he deserved.

I love and respect you greatly, bakers, wherever you may be and wherever you work. I loved you even as a child and a young man, but now I understand properly how valuable you are, among the finest workers of fire and flame.

Old Uncle Abaz Çuçi, the owner of the bakery where Uncle Kola worked, was a short man with white hair that stood upright, white moustaches and a pair of small spectacles tied together with wire. He had a small face, was hard of hearing and earned his living as a watchmaker. He was a good man. He was fond of Uncle Kola and of us as well because he was related to my uncle and my mother. When he returned from his little shop, where he repaired people's watches, he always stopped by the bakery, greeted the baker and invariably asked:

"Kola, how is the *qepa* running?" (By this he meant his pocket watch).*

"Very well, Abazo," Kola would reply.

Whenever it rained and he had to go from his house to the bakery, Uncle Abaz protected his grey head by placing a black cooking pot with a wide opening over it like a German helmet, passing the handle beneath his chin as though it were a chinstrap.

I remember one day sitting beside him on a mattress in the veranda. I said:

"Uncle Abaz, I love Uncle Kola as much as you do."

* A pun based on the similarity of the Albanian sounds *q* and *xh*. Instead of referring to *sahati i xhepit* ("pocket watch," literally "watch of the pocket"), *qepa* ("onion") is substituted for *xhepi* ("pocket"), humorously turning the pocket watch into an "onion watch."

"Why do you love him?" the old man asked.

"Because he bakes our bread and the bureks that my mother makes so well."

"Listen here, little son of Gjulo," old Uncle Abaz said. "In this world there are great people and small people. They are like the mechanisms inside a watch. I know those mechanisms well; they have worn out my eyes through years of work. Have you seen me in the shop where I work with Eqrem? I place a little lens over my eye because only that magnifies the tiny parts. Those little parts are the soul of the watch, not the large plates. Without the small mechanisms the watch cannot function. If the tiny spring breaks, the watch stops. If a large plate cracks, it matters little — the watch will still run. Kola is that tiny spring. That is why I love Baker Kola," said old Uncle Abaz, deaf yet sharp-minded.

I opened my eyes wide and thought to myself: "Uncle Kola, a 'spring'?" and stared at the old man in astonishment. He understood me and, with his small hand and slender fingers, stroked my head and said:

"Little son of Gjulo, remember Uncle Abaz's words. Even though you do not understand them properly now, you will understand them better later, when you grow up."

Now, dear and honoured Uncle Abaz Çuçi, I remember you with deep gratitude. I remember and understand the profound philosophy of your words, expressed in the language of the people, about the great and decisive value, in the development of society and progress, of the humble strata, of the people themselves. My endless gratitude to you and to many others like you, who taught me from youth to love the common people and to serve them faithfully for as long as I live.

The years passed and I grew up. I attended the lyceum regularly and studied. The world, life and people appeared different

to me; I saw them with other eyes and judged everything with greater maturity. Each day the school and our teachers opened wider horizons before us. Our minds and thoughts moved beyond the circle of Gjirokastra. We now knew better and more broadly the great history of our people, their bravery, the wars of Skanderbeg, the National Renaissance figures, Bajo and Çerçiz. We learned songs, which we sang in the Lab style and as school songs; we studied the geography of our country and of the world. Our minds travelled even beyond the homeland. We learned French, the history of the French people, mathematics and much else. When we left the Cfaka quarter and moved to Hazmurat, I was older, the family was poorer, but the knowledge in my mind was broader.

In Hazmurat I felt as though I were in my own neighbourhood. I had many friends there: Elmaz Konjari, Sado, my aunt's son, Laze, Sako, Namik of the Lelaj family, Sami of Shupo's family, Fahri Qofte, Reshat Toto, Malo Zere, Malo Cenko and others. I also became friends with Hulusi Kavo, who lived in the Malilaj tenements near my uncle's house, where I was living. I went with my mother to his house. Because of poverty, he emigrated to the United States while still young, where he laboured hard all his life and became distinguished among the Albanians of America as an ardent patriot for Albania's freedom. Together with my friend Talat Shehu, he remained in the front ranks of those who defended the rights and victories of socialist Albania.

Çano's bakery was open. Its "chief" was the same old Uncle Kola from Uncle Abaz's bakery. Evidently he had moved here and left his former place to someone else at Uncle Abaz's. Children are curious and my friends, as my companion Muhedin Çano, Bido's brother, later confirmed to me, told me why Uncle Kola had left the other bakery. "Uncle Kola had a serious quarrel with the great landowner Mehmet Hadëri," they told me.

"He said to Uncle Abaz: 'I am sorry to part from you, Abazo, but I cannot bear to look at that bearded pig and I refuse to bake for him any longer.' And so he left."

I began to love Uncle Kola even more when I heard this story, for I too disliked Uncle Mehmet. Once, while I was coming from school to my uncle's house and climbing Lulaj Alley, I innocently whistled a new song we had learned at school. Uncle Mehmet, with his enormous belly and thick gold watch chain, his face swollen and flushed from eating, shouted at me: "Hey, you devil of Halil's, why are you whistling as though you were in a brothel?" I blushed and lowered my head, not understanding what he meant by "brothel." I asked my great-aunt about it. She looked at me, closing one eye. "Where are you learning such shameful words?" I told her what had happened. Aunt Hasije closed one eye again, a sign of anger, and said: "I shall settle that buffalo's account."

When I next met Uncle Kola, he greeted me, shook my hand and asked: "How is your health, boy? How is Halil?" and so forth. I too asked after my old friend. "You have grown and become tall, Enver," Uncle Kola said. "Well then! You must find some work and help poor Halil, for he wears himself out all day with the scales on his shoulder, weighing sacks for 10 leks a day."

Uncle Kola's words pleased me, because they were full of compassion for my father and reminded me too of my duties towards my parents. A working man advised others only to work.

Life in Hazmurat and our relations with Uncle Kola remained, as always, excellent. Uncle Kola became friendly with my uncle; they even spoke Greek with one another, since my father knew both Greek and Turkish. We still preserve a stack of his Turkish books at home as a keepsake.

I remember one day when I went to the bakery. Our dish had not yet come out of the oven. Uncle Kola had some leisure and, leaning with both arms on the oven platform, began ask-

ing me:

"Is French a difficult language to learn, Enver?"

"It is not easy, Uncle Kola, but it is a beautiful language. We have to learn every word by heart, remember it and know how to use it."

"Everything has its own craft," said Kola. "The baker's work too is no easy craft. But tell me, boy," Kola continued, "how do they say 'bread' in French?"

"*Pain*."

"And water?"

"*Eau*."

"Oh! Oh! Strange!" said Kola. "That word is easy to remember. We workers, whose backs ache from labour, often say 'oh! oh!' and the people of Gjirokastra too, who suffer for lack of water, can remember that word quite well, because they cry out for it all the time. Their souls have almost left them from thirst."

"Very well, Enver, but how do they say *birjan** in French?" Uncle Kola then asked.

Here I was stuck.

"Ah, I do not know that, Uncle Kola."

"And *shapkat*, *laropita* — do you know those?"

"No, I do not know those either."

Uncle Kola looked me in the eyes and said:

"Listen, boy, pay attention to your lessons. You must study, for your father and mother expect much from you."

"Yes, Uncle Kola," I said, took the tray and left with my head lowered. I had not passed the examination well.

Another day my mother gave me a rice dish with tiny fish, as small as minnows, to take to the bakery. They had been caught in the Drino River by our neighbour and my mother's cousin, Haxhi Çuçi, son of Aunt Temo. He too was deaf, but

* Traditional Gjirokastran dish.

fishing with a *pezevol*, a net, was his craft and he also taught it to Shaban, whom he took with him. Shaban was his nephew, though Haxhi had made him like a son, since he had no one else and was "rootless," as my great-aunt used to say of her contemporary and cousin Haxhi.

When I entered the bakery that day, what did I see? The entire oven platform was covered with pans of fish swimming in chopped onions and oil.

"You brought fish too?" shouted Kola. "Today the whole world has become fish. The oven platform has turned into the bed of the Drino. The Deaf One must have had good luck all day yesterday," Uncle Kola said with a laugh.

At the beginning of this piece I said that the baker is the person closest to the families of the neighbourhood where he works. Many people never think of such a thing, yet the baker lives with the worries and joys of everyone in the neighbourhood. He rejoices with them and grieves for them, not only because he wishes to please them by baking their dishes well, but because he binds his craft to people's feelings, affections, joys and sorrows.

The baker knows people by what they possess, by what they bring to the oven: whether they are a large or small family, rich or poor, generous or frugal, honest or dishonest, peaceful or quarrelsome. He knows many things that happen in the neighbourhood; he understands everything and has his own word, his own judgement, about everyone. The baker feels compassion for the poor and hatred for the rich. Many times, certainly in silence and in the solitude of the bakery, Kola must have taken a little oil from the fish pan of the Halimaj family and poured it into the pan of Avdi Zere, who wore himself out all day carrying water from the river in a wooden bucket.

This good man of the people was poor; he himself was poor, he lived among poor people and his heart was as pure as that of

the people. That is why I have loved and continue to love bakers, why I respect and honour them even now, at this advanced age. I remember with respect the bakers of my childhood and youth. If any of them are still alive, as well as their sons and daughters, who surely now, under socialism, live happily, have children, have completed schools and universities and are building modern bakeries, the metallurgical combine, factories and hydro-electric power stations, let them forgive me for not speaking more and at greater length about these good people, both theirs and ours. Yet this is all that I have been able to remember. More than half a century has passed, but these few things that I recount come from the heart and are true. I remember them all with nostalgia; I remember them all with profound respect and gratitude, because they were workers, proletarians in the fullest sense of the word.

January 1975

MASTERS OF STONE AND IRON

In the courtyard of my uncle's house there was a stable and a guesthouse, consisting of two large rooms with windows overlooking the garden, a recessed ground-floor room beneath them and a small cellar. From my childhood, throughout my youth and until the time of the occupation, when everything was burned, builders — the "masters," as we called them — lived all their lives in my uncle's house and in the rooms around it. These people had come with their families from the villages of Opar in the Korça region and had settled in Gjirokastra. They were genuine proletarians. Men, women and children alike were among the kindest and most honest people I have ever known, from my childhood onwards.

The masters, the men and their "*mickë*" — their children, whom their parents usually trained in the craft of masonry — were highly skilled. They were renowned in Gjirokastra. They built stone houses, repaired roofs, rebuilt courtyard walls when they collapsed and toiled from dawn until late at night. They rose before daylight and returned to their families only after dark. They were among the finest people in Gjirokastra, among

the most honest and indispensable. Yet economically they were also among the most wretched, working merely for their daily bread and often unable even to earn that. The landowners of Gjirokastra regarded them as people of the lowest social rank. My family and I lived alongside the masons, just as we did with the Gypsy craftsmen, sharing with them the joys and sorrows of life. We were like one family.

With boundless gratitude I remember these proletarians: old master Leko and his wife Aunt Maro; Aunt Nine and her two sons, master Xhoxhi and master Tasi, and their wives; master Xheli; master Vasili and his wife, our dear Kate; their two sons and two daughters, who were younger than us; and finally the one closest to me, master Mihal,* the son of master Leko and Aunt Mara, my childhood companion — though somewhat older than me — and later my comrade in the Party.

As a communist, Mihal continued to work and struggle even in old age and retirement. From time to time he comes to visit me, and when I go to Korça I visit him in his home. We sit together, knee to knee, recalling the past that strengthens the present. He suffered a great tragedy. Two years ago his son, Dhimo Dhima, a distinguished jurist of our time, died. I went to offer my condolences to Mihal at his home. This steel-hard proletarian was not broken by grief. Only recently I sent him a signed copy of *The History of the Party* and two other books of mine. Dear Mihal must have been very pleased.

These proletarian masons left an indelible impression on

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* Mihal Dhima, with whom Comrade Enver Hoxha maintained continuous personal relations. In one of the letters he sent him on 1 September 1973, he wrote, among other things: "...Haxho told me that you had visited her, though apparently at a time when I was in Durrës. I was sorry that we did not meet, for I too have been longing to see you. Therefore, when you next come to Tirana, I expect you at my home not merely for greetings, but to stay for lunch as well."

my consciousness and helped shape my character. Among all of us there were no distinctions between families, no walls separating us, no closed doors, no social divisions. No distinction was made between Muslims and Christians, nor was there any fanaticism that required the women of one family to hide themselves from the men of another. Mihal was like our brother; Xhoxhi and Tasi were the same. To them, my sisters were as their own sisters. Maro, Nine and Kate were to me like my mother. Master Leko and the others were like uncles. When I was small, Mihal would carry me on his shoulders or take me by the hand into the thorny garden and make whistles for me from reeds. Aunt Maro loved me as she loved Mihal and, when she had any, would give me a handful of walnuts.

The wives of the masters wore *cipune** and their speech had a different accent from ours in Gjirokastra. I remember old master Leko, a lean middle-aged man who wore a black tunic reaching above the knees. He always had on a leather apron, the strap of which passed around his neck. The apron had a large pocket in which he kept his trowel and hammer, with which he shaped the stones for walls. Later, both the men and the women and girls of their families abandoned the cipune and dressed like us. Their clothing changed, but their character remained as pure as ever, and poverty never disappeared from their hearths in those days.

When we moved into my uncle's house, I was older and attended the municipal school and later the lyceum. Master Leko died, as did Aunt Maro. Mihal became a distinguished mason, married and started a family. I visited Nine, Xhoxhi and their wives, sat with them by the fire and read aloud passages from Albanian readers. Xhoxhi's wife had recently given birth to a daughter named Irini. She would say to me: "If you become a

* Traditional women's vest-like outer garment.

teacher, Enver, teach Irini to read and write as well." Irini later became a partisan and is now married to an officer of the State Security service. Whenever I met her, I would tell her about her mother, who died while she was still small and whom Nine raised. Kice, Kate's daughter, became a good teacher and a Party member. Thuka, the other daughter, and the two sons became factory workers or drivers. Kate, with whom we shared so much of life, still comes to visit us.

Living alongside my family in my uncle's lodgings were master Vasili, master Josif, master Rako and Paro, who married into the Koçollari family and gave her son as a martyr to the homeland.*

All these masters of stone threw themselves into the National Liberation War together with their children, sons and daughters alike. The sons of good Kate and master Jani became partisans. One of them, Rrapi, was the bugler of his unit, just like my relative Fejzo, son of Uncle Faro Hoxha, an officer who emerged from the National Liberation War decorated with medals.

When I finished municipal school and was preparing to enter the lyceum for the first time in the autumn, I fell seriously ill. I do not remember with what disease, but I became gravely sick, close to death, as my mother says. They barely saved me. My mother, my uncle, my brother, Nine and Kate exhausted themselves caring for me. Doctor Harxhi, who lived nearby, came to see me twice a day. "That doctor bled us dry — we paid him all those gold napoleons at once," my mother says, "but he saved you. He was a capable doctor." I remember lying ill in the large downstairs room, while my brother occupied the bed upstairs. For many nights in succession, as I have been told, I was uncon-

* Koço Koçollari, who fell as a martyr in the battle fought at Dukaj, Tepelena, on 28 July 1944.

scious, while upstairs my brother coughed and coughed. Poor mother wore herself out. Kate and Nine helped her day and night. During my illness, old Nine — dressed entirely in black, small in stature, with tearful eyes and reddened eyelids — this daughter, wife and mother of proletarian craftsmen, kept watch by my pillow all night long. She would tell my mother: "Go and sleep. I shall watch over Enver tonight." And she stayed awake all night. Sometimes she placed wet cloths on my head when my fever rose, sometimes wiped away my sweat and sometimes held my head when it ached. Occasionally her eyes would close from exhaustion and lack of sleep, and I felt sorry waking her. "Nine, I want water. I am parched." "Of course, my dear," the old woman would say. "Nine will bring it to you." Such memories can never be erased from the mind or heart. These are the things that leave deep impressions upon a person's consciousness and become woven into his character.

When I remember ordinary people, I cannot fail to mention the blacksmiths, these masters of iron, who performed arduous but indispensable work for both peasants and townspeople. With sledgehammers in their hands they struck iron upon the anvil, heated it red-hot in the forge, bent it into the desired shape, plunged it into water to temper it — and in the process tempered themselves as well.

I can still see before me the blacksmiths of Gjirokastra. Elsewhere I have written about Qato and his smithy as though it were a house, located just beyond Shaban Gega's shop. But now I wish to note a few things about the blacksmith Aziz Buduku, who was a friend of our family. We called him Uncle Aziz, while my mother called him Çelo Aziz. Our two families visited one another regularly.

Uncle Aziz's wife was Aunt Feko. They had two sons and a daughter. One son was called Shaban and the other Muhar-

rem. I do not remember the daughter's name. Uncle Aziz and Aunt Feko were very good people. They were extremely poor, but also exceptionally honest. Uncle Aziz was a blacksmith and gunsmith. His workshop stood halfway up the steps near the prefecture, in a damp cellar. Inside he had an old forge, a vice, an old drill, several hammers, a sledgehammer, some tongs, a few files and nothing more. With these he made all manner of iron objects and even repaired old rifles. Uncle Aziz was a short man with thick eyebrows and large hands. At first sight he seemed intimidating, but on a second encounter one realised what a good, kind and upright man he was. Uncle Aziz was not someone one could easily forget.

My mother used to say: "There is no better man than Çelo Aziz. He is a true 'doctor,' for he saved my daughter." Haxho had broken her leg and Uncle Aziz made her a special shoe reinforced with iron.

I often went to Uncle Aziz's workshop and straight to the forge. I would take hold of the chain and work the bellows that fed air to the burning charcoal. "Keep going, the iron is getting red-hot," the old man would say. When the iron glowed, he would grasp it with tongs, holding it in one hand while, with the other, he and Shaban struck it rhythmically with their hammers. When they had finished, I would take a small hammer and tap uselessly at the vice, merely to make noise. At times I would spin the handle of the drill aimlessly. Uncle Aziz allowed me to do so and never interfered with my activities.

Uncle Aziz's house stood below the main road, on a sloping lane that descended towards the fountains of Meçite, near the Harxhi family's houses and below the house of Sabri the Tinsmith. I occasionally went there because my mother would take me along when she visited Aunt Feko. She was a great talker and, whenever she spoke, she would close her eyes with effort, open her mouth and tilt her head upwards like a hen drinking

water. In front of the house she had a small garden with two wild plum trees. While my mother chatted with Aunt Feko, I would gaze through the windows at the rooftops and at the top of the Meçite mosque, where Arshi Efendi taught. When the conversation ended, my mother would put on her red boots, tie the white face veil, wrap herself in the white cloak and we would bid farewell to Aunt Feko.

From there we usually went on to my uncle's house in Hazmurat. We descended into Meçite, emerged by Xhano i Përroit, climbed past the house of Aunt Sheko — my mother's sister — ascended the alley of Shahin Karagjozi and Idriz Konjari and came out onto the main road. There, at the top of the slope, stood the house of my great-aunt Hasije.

March 1974

THE DESPISED BECAME HAPPY

During my childhood, the Gypsies did not live solely clustered at the entrance to the town,* as was the case in many other towns, but were also scattered throughout all the neighbourhoods. There were some in our quarter of Palorto as well. Their circumstances were difficult. Nevertheless, both the men and the women were hardworking and honourable in every respect. They were poor, but relatively clean. They did not steal, nor were they morally corrupt, neither the men nor the women. They were not wanderers. Their women went about without veils, whereas Muslim women covered themselves.

The Gypsies generally lived in very poor conditions, often in stables or outbuildings. Because of poverty and because they had many children, these dwellings were not always clean. They were dark, sometimes with only a small window, in which there might stand a tin container holding a sprig of marjoram or geranium — their only luxury. Their contact with the world of

* In the former "Dervish Bej" quarter, which after Liberation, at the suggestion of its own inhabitants, was renamed the "Workers' Quarter."

flowers reflected the openness and simplicity of their spirit.

They earned very little and were paid poorly for a day's labour. They were usually fed where they worked and, in the evening, when they returned to their humble dwellings, their employers would send them away with some food and bread — more bread than food — with which they fed their many children. The young children of the Gypsies wore old clothes given to them by the town's "ladies" and, when their daughters grew older, those same ladies would give them an old waistcoat or a pair of worn trousers.

The Gypsy women generally worked in the homes of townspeople. They washed, cleaned, cooked and rocked children to sleep. Sometimes they even breastfed the children of women whose milk had dried up. The men usually worked as porters, swept the streets and shops of the bazaar, chopped wood, cleaned chimneys, made sieves and screens and spent entire days gathering brushwood. In the evening many of them, men and women alike, could be seen returning heavily laden to their cold, muddy and unlit dwellings.

Many of the Gypsies, especially those who lived near the entrance to the town, worked as agricultural labourers. They ploughed, weeded and mowed. They were hardworking and honest people and, although there existed a sense that they belonged to an "inferior race," most inhabitants of Gjirokastra liked them, did not despise them and generally trusted them.

I grew up among the Gypsies because there were many of them around our house in Palorto. They regarded our house and our family as their own, especially the families of Shamo and Xhelal. As I shall explain later, these were highly respectable families of labourers who worked in the bazaar and wherever else they were needed. Every member of their families, men and women alike, not to mention their children, came and went in our household without the slightest reservation.

In those days there was much fanaticism. Women did not go unveiled, not only outside but often not even within the home. Even when visitors arrived, they would not appear before everyone. Yet for Shamo, Xhelal and their sons — Ramo, Mehmet, Ymer, Fejo and the others — the women of our family did not hide themselves. There were many girls in our family, more girls than boys. Baba Çen had fathered eleven daughters, of whom seven survived, and no sons. My father had three sons and five daughters. Yet my grandmother, my aunt, my mother, my sisters and all of us boys regarded their daughters, daughters-in-law and sons as our own sisters and brothers. They often ate with us, moved freely through our rooms as though they were their own and, when the women of our family went visiting, Shamo's sons would escort them.

Baba Çen in particular was not a fanatic. He was an educated man, very simple and close to the people. He was the head of our large patriarchal family. We would sometimes see him sitting knee to knee with Shamo and Xhelal, drinking raki, yet never did a bad word pass between them. Nor do I speak here only of the men. Their wives and daughters-in-law — Rabi, Hanko, Refo, Luko, Shajbi and the wives of Ramo, Mehmet and the others — were, to me, no different from the women of our own family.

My mother told me that, when I was an infant, Rabia had breastfed me because my mother herself had no milk. As I grew older, people in the family would say: "You, Enver, are dark-skinned because you drank the milk of Rabia the Gypsy." Never once did it occur to me to be upset by this, nor did it make any impression on me. I remember Rabia as a woman of medium height, attractive in appearance, with gentle and shining eyes. I remember her kind words when I was a little older and played in Çuço's garden with her son Fejo, who was my contemporary.

The currents of life carried Mother Rabia out of my sight, though never out of my memory. Years passed. I grew up, went to school, fought in the mountains as a partisan and, when we returned from the war, I went to Gjirokastra. I asked for Rabia and she came to see me, as simple and clean as ever, aged by hardship, her face lined with wrinkles but her eyes still bright and full of tears. She embraced me and kissed me. Holding my head against her breast, now dried by the passage of years, she said: "The milk you drank from my breast was not wasted. May it be lawful and blessed for you. You fought for us poor people." That was a great reward for me and for my Party, which had shaped me to fight for the humble people and with fierce determination against racism.

Old Shamo, with his coffee-coloured face, a large lump behind one ear, a protruding belly and a compact build, was the neighbourhood drummer, the "king" of Ramadan festivities, the "clock" of the quarter. We loved him dearly, not only because he was like a member of the household, but because he was the drummer, the only musical instrument in the neighbourhood. And what an instrument! A great drum, blackened by age and by the smoke of the stable, with two sticks like clubs, their thick heads made of cornel wood. Shamo hung the drum on the wall of Karanxha's stable. Whenever I went into his stable, my eyes would immediately go to the drum and I would begin beating on it with my hands: *bam-bam-boom*. Uncle Shamo would laugh, while Qamo, his wife, would eventually grow annoyed and say to me:

"Leave the drum alone, boy, you've split our heads open with it. It's not enough that the old man torments us with it, now you do as well."

"Let him beat it," the old man would say. "I'll make Halil's boy into a drummer." And when Ramadan began and he took up his drum, we would follow him everywhere he went.

As a child, I would naturally ask Uncle Shamo, quite innocently:

"Why do you have that big lump behind your ear and such a large belly?"

He would reply:

"To spite the beys. To show them that what I eat, I earn through my sweat, that it is honestly mine and turns into fat on my body."

I remember that one day I received a hard slap from Baba Çen because I suddenly said to him:

"You don't earn your bread honestly through sweat like Uncle Shamo, because you have neither a lump behind your ear nor a big belly."

Although my cheek hurt, I did not tell him that I had learned this lesson from old Shamo. Instead, I went and complained to Uncle Shamo about the slap I had received.

"Never bow before injustice," he told me. "If he hits you again, come and tell me. I'll tear Mulla Hysen's beard out right in the middle of the bazaar."

That was the world of my childhood around our house, filled with these simple people who loved us and whom we loved, who carried me in their arms. There were Mehmet and Ramo, Shamo's two sons, strong as warriors, hardworking and honest men. There was Refo, Kade's mother, a clean and intelligent woman, now dried up like a little fish, who still comes to our house for lunch and who always calls my mother, now nearly ninety years old, "the bride," just as she did seventy years ago.

Refo lost Shaqir, who was himself an elderly man with a dark complexion and completely white hair and moustache, and who died last year. Everyone from our family — Sano, Nexhmije and the others — went to offer condolences. People did not know the old ties between our families and said: "They are visiting Refo because of her daughter Kade, who is a Party member

and works in Enver's household." "No," Refo would tell them, "they are all coming for me. I raised them. We are one family." When Refo came to my house and I offered my condolences, I apologised for not having been able to visit her personally. She replied: "I forgive both you and your wife, my dear. I know that you thought of me and of that poor man!"

As children, we often quarrelled and shouted at one another and played rather crude practical jokes. But our quarrels left no scars and created no lasting resentment. I remember one incident. I often visited Selim Bakiri's house, to see Selim's aunt, as we called her, because his mother was my mother's aunt. She was a very good woman, tall and beautiful, with a full bosom that pressed against her cotton shirt and the waistcoat embroidered with black braid.

Uncle Selim had a son my own age, Muhedin, who later became a partisan, fought bravely, became an officer and is now retired. Muhedin had a loud, deep voice, like a cavern. His face was broad and he wore his hair in the old shepherds' fashion: everything above the width of his forehead was clipped to the skin, while long side-locks remained on either side. He was distinctive for this appearance and it was precisely because of this that several of us once played a trick on him.

Muho had not forgotten a joke we had played on him and one day suggested that we repeat it on one of our Gypsy friends who lived in Uncle Selim's stable. It was the egg trick. Muho brought an uncooked egg from home and the three of us went to the square by the mosque to play marbles. Muho wanted to set the egg aside so it would not be broken. I said:

"Give me the egg. Go away and don't watch. I'll hide it on Ramiz's body" — I think that was the boy's name, Nazo's son — "and then come back. If you can't find it before I count to ten, the egg will belong to Ramiz."

The poor boy happily accepted the game because he hardly

ever ate eggs. Muho hid himself and I tucked the egg beneath Ramiz's tattered fez. I began counting: one, two... five... nine... Muho searched through Ramiz's pockets and down his legs, while Ramiz waited impatiently for ten, and when ten finally came, so did Muho's palm, striking Ramiz's head like lightning. The yolk and white ran down his face and mixed with the tears he shed over the lost egg, while we laughed. But everything ended well. We went to the well and washed Ramiz's head. Then Aunt Reho, Muho's mother, gave each of us a piece of maize bread with a bit of cheese and the three of us returned to our game of marbles as friends.

When I grew older and began primary school, I was surprised to see that my Gypsy friends did not attend school. I couldn't understand why.

One day I asked one of them:

"Why don't you come to school too?"

"My father won't let me."

"Why won't he let you?"

"I have to work. I have to earn bread. School isn't for people like us."

Only later, when our patriotic teachers opened our eyes, did I come to understand these great social problems. School brought me many friends, of whom I may speak another time, but I never parted from my Gypsy companions. The simple upbringing I received from my family left its mark on my character. Ymer, Xhelal's son, who spent his whole life as a porter, was a little older than I was. He was one of the most honest and hardworking people I have ever known or loved. Throughout his life he loaded and unloaded hundred-kilogram sacks for the Selfo family and for Vasil Shahini. Ymer Xhelali died last year as a distinguished veteran worker. I was deeply saddened when I heard of his death. Whenever I went to Gjirokastra, I would meet him, embrace him and talk with him.

I remember Ramo Jolixhiu. He was fond of drink and of the violin. I still recall him returning home in the evenings with his violin tucked under his arm. He would stop beneath the windows of our house and call out:

"Mulla Hysen, how are you this evening? Shall I play this poor thing a tune?"

"Play!" the old man would reply. And we would rush to the window, for we wanted to hear Uncle Ramo play the violin and sing in his loud voice "At the Plane Tree in Mashkullora," Baba Çen's favourite song, since he had fought alongside Çerçiz. When the song ended, Baba Çen would shout: "Wait there, Ramo!" Then he would hand me a glass full of raki and a small handful of appetisers to take to Uncle Ramo.

I remember Baço the Gypsy, Baço the whitewasher, Çobani's son and my companion. We played together, wrestled with one another and climbed cherry trees. Sometimes he would even give me a slap, since he was somewhat older and stronger than I was. The currents of life eventually separated us as well. After Liberation, when I went to Gjirokastra, I wandered on foot through several of the old lanes of the neighbourhood to satisfy my longing. My mind was full of memories of my youth. I greeted people in the streets without really looking at them. Suddenly I heard a voice nearby shout:

"Stop there, you rascal! Where are you going without greeting me?"

I stopped and saw a bent old man leaning on a stick. "Oh," I said, "Çobani, you're still alive?" And I embraced him. The old man began to weep. I asked where Baço was.

"The old fellow," he said, "is at work."

Poor Baço had lost his son, a partisan killed during the war. The son of my childhood friend had fought alongside me in the mountains and had fallen as a martyr for the freedom of the people. The next day I visited Baço at his house. He said:

"I am proud and happy because of our Party and because of the friendship we have shared. You are a man of the common people. May the blood of my son be blessed in your hands." Among other things, he also told me this:

"Listen, Enver. When my son joined the partisans, one morning on my way to work I met Sami Karagjozi on the road, that foul-faced man with the gold-rimmed spectacles. That despicable Ballist shouted at me: 'Well, you Gypsy, so your son has gone off to the mountains too, together with that scoundrel Halil Hoxha's boy!' I looked him in the eye but did not answer because I was afraid. Sami said: 'What are you staring at? Lower your eyes!' I told him: 'I have no reason to lower my eyes. I have done nothing shameful and I live by the sweat of my brow.' 'Yes, yes,' he said, 'you'll see. We'll wipe out all those rascals who've taken to the mountains.' I could not restrain myself, Enver, and I replied: 'We shall see, Sami Efendi,' and then I left.

"When the Party triumphed after Liberation, I caught sight of Sami Efendi slinking along a wall like a toad. I said to him: 'Well then, Sami Karagjozi, did you wipe them out? Who won?' That coward replied: 'What did you win? You lost your son.' I answered that dog: 'I won the whole world. I won the knowledge that my son rests among the martyrs and that the flags of the homeland bow above him. I won the knowledge that Baço the Gypsy climbs onto the reviewing stand during national celebrations, whereas for you a mouse-hole has become worth 500 grosh.'"

Such were these suffering, simple and hardworking people, despised and exploited by the aghas and beys. But the Party stood beside them, placed them on an equal footing with everyone else, gave and continues to give them the dignity of free human beings, work, education and happiness.

I have read many books about the Gypsies. They are not of Egyptian origin but Indian. In large groups, beginning in the

"We often went to the hillside where the graves of the National Renaissance figures stand today."

"Uncle Bejto's house... had a large mud-plastered enclosure wall. You entered through a gate without a door-leaf. The house was long and had two storeys; below were the storerooms, while above were the reception rooms."





"I am very pleased that I met with the people and, although the crowd would not let me walk freely, I still managed to have a chat with Malo Zere ..."



"...Mihal Dhima, my childhood friend, sometimes comes to visit me at home, and whenever I go to Korça, I visit him at his home..."



At the home of the Hero of the People, Myzafer Asqeri. A conversation with his brother, Dine Asqeri.

"...All these master craftsmen of stone threw themselves into the National Liberation War together with their children..." From a visit to the family of the martyr Koço Koçollari.





The museum-city of Gjirokasra is continually being beautified. The baton of the master stone craftsmen passes securely from generation to generation.



"The clock that I am sending you... has served my family for almost a century. A century is no small span of time, but listen to it carefully: it still sings continuously like a..."



"...when you, my son, and the sons of other Albanian mothers went underground with the Party, when you went off to war and I did not see you again until Albania was liberated, the hours seemed like days to me and the days like years."



"...May we live happily and joyfully with our beloved children, see them married and have many grandchildren..."

time of Genghis Khan and even earlier, they migrated westwards. The great Persian poet Ferdowsi, in ancient times, tells his shah: "We must bring musicians from India." A terrible calamity had struck Persia at that time. Cholera was decimating the population and Ferdowsi wished there to be people who could provide some amusement amidst the misery that had befallen his nation. Likewise, Genghis Khan employed the Gypsies, a civilised Indian people whom he encountered in Khorasan, Baluchistan and Afghanistan, as farriers and caretakers of horses. Genghis Khan's horses, his most powerful weapon, were cared for superbly. The swords of Genghis, Kublai and their horsemen were forged by Gypsy craftsmen. They were the violinists of Ferdowsi and of the Mongols.

When the great Mongol Empire collapsed, the Gypsies remained scattered along the roads of Europe in bands and large clans and spread throughout the continent. Their unhappy history shows that they were persecuted for centuries. Spain, France, Russia, Germany and many other countries persecuted them wherever they went. Various authors and respected historians have noted that neither the Albanian nor the Greek people pursued or persecuted the Gypsies.

According to one French historian, the word *evgjit** does not derive from Egypt but from the Greek *Iftos*, apparently connected with a locality in the Peloponnese. There must once have been a settlement of Gypsies there, from which some later came to our lands. In Gjirokastra we also call them *qifto*.

Our Gypsies have not lost their beautiful traditions. Their hearts are full of song and they play instruments such as the *jongar*, violin, drum, clarinet and lute. Their music is highly melodious. They adapted this distinctive musical heritage to our own songs. One can sense that it is Gypsy in origin: it carries

* Gypsy.

a melancholy quality. They perform beautiful and mournful *kaba** melodies on the clarinet. When, many years later, an Indian film featuring Raj Kapoor singing Indian songs arrived in our country, these Gypsy violinists immediately absorbed those melodies, as though responding instinctively to the call of their ancestral heritage.

Gypsy musicians have played a significant role in our musical culture. They could be found everywhere, playing violins and lutes in villages and towns, at weddings and celebrations. Although the aghas despised them, they nevertheless listened to their music.

After Liberation they contributed to the development of music in our country. I remember attending a concert one year at the House of Culture in Korça. It was impressive to see an orchestra of almost twenty musicians composed entirely of Gypsy performers, led by the famous Çile (known as "The Blind One"), all dressed in white *fustanella* costumes.

The Gypsies also preserved another ancient passion of their people: a love of horses and a skill in working iron. They made horseshoes, door frames, wrought-iron gates and twisted iron window grilles. They were masters of ironwork. Such men in Gjirokastra included Bajo the Gypsy and his sons, Qato the Gypsy, a highly skilled and respected craftsman and many others. I always remember and respect these simple people of the common folk. I also strive to uproot even the smallest lingering weed from past centuries that still harms us today whenever someone speaks of them with contempt.

Today, under socialism, they are no different from anyone else. There is no segregation, racism or apartheid for them among us. They have put down roots, received an education and

* Melancholic instrumental improvisation in southern Albanian folk music.

fought for their country. Many wear decorations on their chests. Some have become Heroes of Socialist Labour, Party secretaries, officers, doctors and more. Such is the great achievement of the Party on their behalf: it raised up the poor, granting them dignity and strength.

1968

SING NOW, O CLOCK*

Dear Uncle Thoma Papapano, pupils and teachers of the "Asim Zeneli" Gymnasium,

I thank you from my heart for remembering me, and I too never forget you. I assure you that I have not forgotten the request you have made of me and have repeated. My heart is full of memories of my first school and of my beloved teachers. Yet I did not fulfil your wish earlier, not because I was reluctant to write — for the school where I learned the alphabet did not teach us idleness — but because I wished to accompany my letter with something you had asked of me, something that would fulfil both your wish and mine, something that would remind me of my childhood.

You know, Uncle Thoma, that forty-seven years have passed since the day I first sat at a school desk before you. An entire life has passed, yet the first day of school is never forgotten. In my

* This letter was addressed to the pupils and teachers of the "Asim Zeneli" General Secondary School.

heart I felt joy mixed with my first fear, but the sweet words of my teacher and the piece of maize bread, with a little cheese and an onion, which my mother had placed in my book bag when she sent me to school, seemed to warm my heart and ease my shyness.

Storms have passed over the homeland since the time when you, Uncle Thoma, opened the first Albanian school in Gjirokastra and I first opened my eyes to life. My family's life and my own, like the life of all my fellow townspeople, passed sometimes in sorrow, sometimes in joy, but always with hope for the future.

You remember, Uncle Thoma, when our house burned down during the first Greek occupation. I was small then, but I remember my mother, terrified, shaking me from sleep and pushing me forward through the flames and smoke to save me. On the burning staircase — I have never forgotten it — I turned my head and saw my mother amid the smoke, holding my baby sister under one arm and, under the other, an old clock that she kept hanging in the bedroom and whose bell had awakened her on that dreadful night. The fire destroyed everything we had. My youngest sister died, but I and the clock survived. This clock, the only precious object I possess from my family, I am sending to my beloved school, to my old teacher and to the new pupils and teachers.

Dear young comrades, I am neither a poet nor a writer, but when I too was young like you, I dreamed of poetry and love. I say this because I believe poets when they say that objects too have their own life and "recount" their own history. The clock I am sending you is nothing more than a simple, old mechanism, painted a little to conceal its age, just as our old mothers once put henna in their hair to hide the white hairs of old age. According to my mother, this clock has served my

family for nearly a century. A century is not little, yet listen carefully: it continues to sing like a nightingale. Do not take offence, honoured Uncle Thoma: you too are no longer young, yet your voice continues to sing as ever, from class to class and from year to year, for more than fifty years, the beautiful poems and songs of Naim, who sang of Albania and the future, and the powerful songs of the young working people building socialism with youthful vigour.

The clock I am sending you as a gift is simple, but it is dear to me. When I asked my mother's permission to send it to you, she said: "May your school have it with my blessing; send it to them. The bell of that clock woke you every morning when I sent you to school, and the school where you studied opened your eyes. We have nothing else from the past to send the young boys and girls, my son." My mother instructed me to tell you that she sends you her greetings and kisses your eyes. She advises you to love the homeland, the people and the Party as dearly as your own soul, and to study well and beautifully. She also asked me to tell you the "life," the history, of the clock.

"Tell the boys and girls of Gjirokastra that this poor clock has seen and heard all the joys and sorrows of the heart; it knows them all. This clock saw the Mulla speaking secretly with Çerçiz, with Duro Gurra and Idriz Gurra. The ticking of the clock beat like our hearts and the hearts of all the people of Gjirokastra when the Mulla replied to the ultimatum of the Greek general who wanted to burn Gjirokastra. We all expected death at any moment; we expected our houses to be burned with us inside them, but we would not surrender to Venizelos and Zografos. Faced with the courage of the people, the Greek general retreated. The city was saved from burning. Later poverty overwhelmed us; this clock knows our sufferings, but we were not dishonoured. I accompanied some of my children to the grave; this clock knows my griefs. It knows my terror when

the Italians and Germans occupied us. The clock knows well the fear and pain I felt in my heart when you, my son, and the sons of other Albanian mothers went underground with the Party, when they fought in demonstrations, when they went to war and I did not see them again until Albania was liberated. The hours seemed like days and the days like years. Every night rifles and bombs cracked in Tirana and it was as though they struck my heart. The bell of this accursed clock would ring. I thought of my son; I thought of the sons and daughters of mothers who had gone to the mountains as partisans and fought for the people with the red flag in their hands... But then they returned victorious from the mountains and all Tirana, all Albania, smiled with joy. Now the bell of the clock sounded to me like a beautiful song. One day, looking at the clock, I said to it: short-lived creature, how much you and I have suffered, but what is there that a human being cannot endure? Man is stronger than you, stronger than iron. Now I said to the clock: sing, for there will be no more black days, neither for the people, nor for us, nor for you."

This clock, then, I am sending as a simple gift to my first and beloved school. I kept it in my study, but I think it will be better with you, because old people rejoice in and need to be among the young, for they remember their own youth, for they always wish to remain young, for they want to rejoice and work like the young, and because, when they are among the young, the old draw new strength to serve, until the evening of their lives, the new, our socialist homeland and our glorious Party.

I too assure you, dear comrades and friends of the "Asim Zeneli" Gymnasium of Gjirokastra, that with all my strength, for as long as I have power, I shall work and fight to the end, as a soldier of the Party and the people, for the happiness of the people of Albania and for the happiness of the younger generation.

May our wonderful people, our glorious Party and our heroic youth live for centuries in glory and happiness!

I embrace you, and until we meet again, my old and new comrades and friends!

Yours,
ENVER HOXHA

Tirana, 17 September 1962