I lived with Kosovo Albanians for eight years, between 1981 and 1997: first as an anthropologist and later as a humanitarian aid worker. My understanding of Albanian life came slowly, through all my senses - dancing for hours with village girls and sharing their secrets late into the night, sweeping the courtyard at dawn, pouring tea for visitors, roasting peppers and eating *fli* with my neighbours, sitting cross-legged by the fire with the old men and receiving their wisdom.

This little book is a collection of these experiences. It's a travelogue, ethnography, and memoire - and intimate glimpse into the traditional lifestyle that has, for the most part, dissapeared. It is my odyssey with a people poised on the brink of war, ready to give their lives for self-determination - for freedom from Serbian rule.

It is intended for people outside of Kosova who want to know more about the Albanian people and their traditions. And it is for Albanians: a chance to revisit their traditions and learn about remote regions they may have never visited. It is also an expression of gratitude, affection, and deep respect I have for the Albanian people and their country.

I also wrote a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation about Kosova, but those are detailed academic works. This book is my personal story.

Janet Reineck, PhD - July 2022

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Janet Reineck An American Woman in Kosova 1981-1997 Cuneus

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CUNEUS
2022

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An American Woman in Kosova
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CUNEUS
Prishtina, 2022

This book is dedicated to the Albanian families who welcomed me into their lives, helped me understand their world, and shared with me their joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams.

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Note on the English version of the book

The Albanian version of my memoire was published in Kosova in July 2022. The English version was published a few months later, so there are differences here and there between the two versions.

Book Comments

American anthropologist Janet Reineck, or Xheneta, as Kosova Albanian families called her, lived in Kosova for eight years, between the period 1981-1997. She researched the culture and behavior of Kosova Albanians for her postgraduate studies for master and doctorate studies in cultural anthropology at UCLA, Berkeley/USA. Her territory has been all of Kosova, but with focus on Opoja, Rugova, Gollak and Has. She wrote about traditions and customs, patriarchy and gender, migration, about the continuities and changes and the many transformations in the village and the city for the life of Kosova Albanians under former Yugoslavia.

Following the entry of Serbian tanks in Kosova (1989) and the usurpation of autonomy, Xheneta returns to Kosova as a humanitarian worker of OXFAM and other international organizations and starts numerous projects, mainly in the municipality of Vitia. In 1997, Serbian authorities expelled her from Kosova, but she continues her work to recognize the American public with Kosova, during and after the 1998-1999 war, and at the same time continues her work as a humanist. Later she also launched her organization World Dance for Humanity to help poor families in Rwanda and now those affected by the war in Ukraine.

But Xheneta has never forgotten her Kosova! She has written a book about her memories in Kosova, a personal and extremely important book for recognizing Kosova's history of that period.

A wonderful book is added to the little anthropological literature on Kosova!

Arsim Canolli, Publisher

It has been a great pleasure to give my small contribution as a co-translator and proofreader in this extraordinary memoir of the American anthropologist Janet Reineck PhD, who lived with the Albanians during their difficult times (1981 – 1997) until she was expelled by then Serbian regime before the outbreak of war. Her love for Kosova and Albanians, detailed descriptions of her life in Albanian families, traditions, hospitality, generosity, as well as the help she provided to Albanian schools and girls' education in difficult times, are magnificently described in this memoir.

Through her masterful narration, the author will take you back in time to experience the organization of life at that time, the traditions and customs that have now faded or completely disappeared. The author has made it possible to download the Albanian and English version of the book for free.

For my international friends, who served in Kosova after the war, this will be an extraordinary journey to Kosova's past, narrated by an American who experienced it herself.

Artan Aliu, Translator

PREFACE

I lived with the Kosova Albanians for eight years, between 1981 and 1997: first as an anthropologist doing research and later as a humanitarian aid worker. My understanding of Albanian life came slowly, through all my senses—dancing for hours with village girls and sharing their secrets late into the night, sweeping the courtyard at dawn, washing my hair with a cup and bucket, pouring tea for visitors, roasting peppers and eating fli with my neighbors, and sitting crossed-legged by the fire with the old men, receiving their wisdom.

My memoire is a collection of these experiences—an intimate glimpse into a traditional lifestyle that has, for the most part, disappeared. It is my odyssey with a people poised on the brink of war, ready to give their lives for self-determination.

It is intended for people outside of Kosova who want to know more about the Albanian people and their traditions. And it is for Albanians—a chance to revisit their traditions and learn about remote regions they may have never visited. It is also an expression of gratitude, affection, and deep respect I have for the Albanian people and their country.

I also wrote a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation about Kosova, but those are detailed academic works. This book is my personal story.

I started writing the book on September 11, 2001, when the image of two airplanes exploding into the World Trade Center sent shockwaves through a frightened, bewildered world. In the weeks that followed, Albanians in towns and villages throughout Kosova held nightly vigils for the American lives lost, declaring that they were ready to take up arms for the USA. That's when I began to write. I added to the book little by little over the next ten years while working full-time and raising my son as a single mother. Here and there, whenever I found time, I scribbled down my Kosova memories. I'm finally publishing the book, twenty years after I began it.

In twenty years, less than a generation, Kosova has undergone a complete transformation. It took the war with Serbia in 1999, a surge of inter-

national agencies bringing aid and advice, the mass migration of Albanian young people to Europe and their assimilation into western culture—to alter a way of life that had been the basis of Albanian identity for hundreds of years.

This book is not about modern life in Kosova. It's about the traditions, beliefs, and worldview I encountered at the close of the 20th century. It is a window into the deep Albanian past that is gone forever.

My years in Kosova changed me fundamentally and altered the way I view life. The hardship and suffering and collective pain that I witnessed opened my eyes to the conditions people endure all over the world. It made me grateful for every day I have on earth, and instilled in me a determination to use each day to help ease the suffering of others and bring people together. It led to the creation of my non-profit, World Dance for Humanity, and our work in Rwanda, where we are helping 13,000 Genocide survivors build new lives.

I owe all of this to my experience in Kosova.

Walk with me as I retrace my steps into the mountain valleys and golden plains of Kosova where I fell deeply in love with a people, a place, and a way of life…

INTRODUCTION TO KOSOVA

Kosova is a fertile, mineral-rich, diamond-shaped region, an area of 4,203 square miles– about the size of Los Angeles County, the state of Connecticut, or a big Texas ranch. Bordered in the north and east by the Republic of Serbia, in the west by Albania, and in the south by Macedonia, it is chiseled with dramatic alpine ranges and deep gorges which surround its fertile plains.

Kosova's population in 2021 was 1.87 million: 92% Albanian, 4% Serbian, with a small number of Moslem Slavs (Bosniaks and Gorani), Turks, and Roma. Half of the people live in towns and cities, half in villages. Of the 8 million Albanians on the planet, half live in Albania, a third in Kosova, and the remainder in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and beyond. Facebook is the connective tissue keeping everyone in touch.

The majority of Kosova Albanians are Sunni Moslem, with a smaller number of Shiite Moslems and Catholics. Unlike Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Moslems, whose ethnic identities are inextricably linked to their religion, Albanians have a saying: "The religion of Albanians is Albanianism."

The Albanian language is Indo-European, thought to be the sole surviving relic of ancient Illyrian, replete with borrowings from Latin and Turkish. There are two major Albanian dialect groups: Gheg, spoken in northern Albania, Kosova, Montenegro, and western Macedonia; and Tosk, spoken in southern Albania, southern Macedonia, and northwestern Greece.

NOTE: The Serbian and international spelling of the region is "Kosovo." "Kosova" is the Albanian name for the region. As the majority of people living there are Albanian, I use the Albanian form. "Kosovar" refers to an Albanian from Kosova.

The Balkans (Map by Reineck & Reineck – San Francisco)

Kosova's Ethnographic Zones (Map by Janet Reineck)

Janet's Fieldwork Regions, in orange
(Map by Reineck & Reineck – San Francisco)

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PART I

My Early Years in Kosova
1981 – 1983

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Finding Kosova

My "hiraeth" - Opoja

You may be a person drawn to a geography far from your birthplace or ancestry. There's a beautiful word for this in Welsh: *hiraeth* [he RAITH], the place where your spirit feels most at home, the place that stirs your soul. For various friends of mine, it's the misty mountains of Scotland, the temples of Bali, the hills of Tuscany, the African savannah, or sage-filled canyons on the California coast.

For me, it was Southeast Europe. In the late 1970s, I was a student of Dance Ethnology at UCLA, scouting around for a research subject for my Master's thesis. For several summers I had traveled through Eastern Europe, seeking access to intimate human territory. Dancing was my modus operandi, my ticket of entry into exotic hidden worlds. I danced my way through the Balkans—with Hungarian Roma (Gypsies) in subterranean wine caverns of Saraspotok, with Transylvanian shepherds

in the Romanian highlands, with dark-eyed Bulgarians on the Black Sea.

But more and more I was drawn to Yugoslavia, the least oppressive of the Soviet satellites, and the land most open to the West. As the decade drew to a close, I found my way into strange, enticing, often precarious situations in the Yugoslav countryside—the green rolling hills of central Serbia, pastoral lands of the Vlachs on the Romanian border, the Renaissance beauty of Adriatic ports, steep mountain villages of western Macedonia, and the barren highlands of Montenegro. Kosova remained a mystery—to most of the outside world, and to me.

I had been told by my professors that I'd be crazy to do my research in Kosova. Who knew what those Albanians would do with a young American woman on her own? Who had ever learned Albanian? I had sidestepped the place for years, deferring to my mentors.

But during my travels in Yugoslavia, I kept meeting Albanians—selling silver filigree in the street markets of Macedonia, gelato on the Croatian coast, and roasted corn on Serbian street corners. I met them on trains and buses—the kind faces of women shrouded in pale headscarves and raincoats with strawberry-blond kids in tow, and the bronzed, shrunken, leathery faces of their husbands.

Folklore festivals are a wonderful part of the Yugoslav summer landscape, and they gave me a chance to get up close and personal with these "exotic" people. They're delightful for tourists—a chance to feast their eyes on the quaint and colorful. They offer village kids in amateur dance groups from around the country a rare chance to get away from home, see the sites, and meet their counterparts from opposite sides of the country. It was a great chance to practice *bratsvo jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity) the ideology that Josip Broz Tito, President and chief architect of the Yugoslav Socialist Federation, was attempting (with limited success) to cram down the consciousness of the Socialist youth.

For me as a dancer and budding anthropologist, these festivals were pure bliss—a cornucopia of culture: swirling couple dances from the Hungarian border; farm boys in long white linen dancing tight, bouncy circle dances from the Croatian plains; mournful a cappella dance-songs from the Bosnian highlands. There were even some imported groups: tongue-thrusting Maoris and sword-brandishing Turks. There were scores of these performances—the homegrown, the real, and the slightly fabricated. For me, this kind of thing is what opera is for some—a bountiful tapestry of sight and sound.

First time dancing with Albanians

But I kept gravitating to the one group at each festival that didn't quite fit in: the Albanians. The costumes were rough and real; the music, played by dark-skinned Roma (Gypsies), was dissonant and deep. The dances had that quality I'm always drawn to: the epic. The boys were short and wild-eyed. The girls were younger than the girls in other groups, and stayed close together, hardly venturing out. And they were so kind to me, so embracing. An exceedingly gentle exterior overlaid upon rough, tribal, thoroughly un-modern souls. I was attracted to them irresistibly, like a moth to the flame.

Finally, in the summer of 1980, I followed the Albanians home.

On a hot Balkan day, I stepped off a train in the town of Ferizaj in central Kosova, clutching a crumpled scrap of paper given to me by the kids I'd met at the Zagreb *Smotra Folklorica*—the big folklore festival held every year in Croatia. With the name of a village "Germova" written in old-style cursive hand, I somehow found my way there, using the limited Serbian I knew, to the home of Afrim and Bukuria Lamallari.

There I sat for the first time at a *sofra* and shared my first Albanian meal of spinach *pite* and drank my first glass of Albanian tea. The smells, tastes, sounds, and gestures were drawing me in. The thick, engulfing vigor of Albanian hospitality was quickly drowning out everything else in my life.

Josip Broz Tito—champion of the ethnic minorities and cult hero of the World War II generation—had died in the spring. Old men and young girls wept as they watched his speeches on TV. This was the man they believed would liberate them from their underclass status in Yugoslavia. I was just beginning to get the feel of their lives and had no idea what Tito's death

would mean to Kosova.

I spent two weeks in Germova, this small village in eastern Kosova, experiencing my first Albanian wedding. It was a grueling exercise in complete surrender. A constant throng of girls pressed against me—singing, dancing, chatting, whispering, holding close, all to the droning beat of *daire*. I was never alone, not for a moment. There were always a few girls at my side, whether I was brushing my teeth at the spigot out in the yard, making my way to the outhouse at night in the dark, or dropping into deep sleep when night fell. Most Americans aren't used to non-stop humanity. Even for someone like me who requires almost zero personal space, living in a constant embrace of relentless hospitality was a new kind of challenge.

My first days in Kosova in the village of Germovë

But there was no doubt about it, and no turning back: Kosova had taken hold of me. With summer ending and my destiny beckoning, I made my way back to Prishtina (Kosova's capital city) to catch a train for Beograd (capital of Serbia) and the flight home to Los Angeles.

Before leaving, I made one important visit, to Kosova's professional dance ensemble, "Shota." Sitting jauntily on a desk at the entrance was their Artistic Director, Xhemali Berisha. Xhemali welcomed me, charmed me, and invited me to come back to Kosova and dance with the ensemble.

I had a feeling at that moment that my life would never be the same. And I was right.

Xhemali leading the rehearsal with Shota

Dancing with Skender during that first visit

Back in America, I finished my coursework at UCLA and was granted a Fulbright scholarship to do research in Kosova. Happily gearing up for this adventure in the spring of 1981, I was unaware, as were most foreigners, that the cauldron of ethnic enmity in Kosova was about to boil over, and that the dissolution of the country of Yugoslavia was only a decade down the road. A few days before my departure, the boiling began. Tito had been in the grave only a month, and already his tight grip on a country composed of rival ethnic groups was loosening. A small protest by Albanian college students seeking better living conditions in the miserable cold dank dormitories had spread to factory workers. Angry and emboldened, mobs of Albanians were filling the central boulevards and back alleys of

Prishtina. Yugoslav troops were deployed, tanks rolled in, and with them two decades of civil unrest that culminated in a bloody siege.

Should I call off my research, put a brake on my plans, cancel my destiny? My brain (and my parents, advisors, and friends) said: CANCEL. But my gut said: GO! Days later, I set off for a country teetering on catastrophe, filled with the naïve optimism that so typifies Americans—and mystifies and annoys everybody else on the planet.

Arriving in Beograd in June of 1981, I contacted the authorities at SANU, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, who could make or break my ability to live and work in Yugoslavia. They informed me that the few foreigners living in Kosova had been expelled, and that my work there would have to be postponed indefinitely. After a few days swirling in despair, I received word from my appointed Kosova mentor, the white-haired, well-respected Professor Shefqet Pllana: I was to sit tight in Beograd and wait for the situation to cool down.

Thus began my six-month exile from Kosova before ever arriving there—an exile based in Beograd, in a Slavic language and ethos. The first step was finding lodging, which meant reading newspaper ads in Cyrillic—an alphabet I learned in Serbian classes at UCLA, but never really mastered. I finally found a place to live under the heavy eaves of a pre-war stucco home with a Montenegrin widow and her daughter. I ate sausage and drank brandy with widow Radmila, listened to her private tragedies, and tried to comprehend the streetwise socialism of modern Serbia.

I waited for the call from Kosova, for the door to open. It was a hot summer in Serbia and a cold standstill for me.

My UCLA adviser, Elsie Dunin, who did research in Dubrovnik in the summers, told me that Shota would be performing there soon. Figuring this would be a way to connect with Kosova, I hopped on a bus for the cross-country trek to the Adriatic—a long, aching arch through the mountains of Montenegro. Nearing the coast, wooded forests give way to cascades of rocky peaks that suddenly open on to a view of the sea. The dramatic descent to the shore is dotted with the dark green of ancient cypresses and the red of ripe pomegranates. Down below, a pastel pallet of fishing villages comes into view.

Eventually, as the impossibly narrow road winds its way along the shoulder of white cliffs, Dubrovnik appears. It is an exquisite place, "pearl of the Adriatic," fully intact fortress city on the coast, on three sides enclosed by high stone walls, on the fourth by the crystal-blue sea. Cross the drawbridge into the town, and you enter the Renaissance.

With Elsie Dunin

Dubrovnik

Taking a room with a fisherman and his wife, I began to explore this delectable town. I was basking in the sweet summer glow of the central square, pigeons underfoot, watching tall, dark Croatian lads try their luck with European girls on summer holiday, when I saw Shota's bus arrive. I was thrilled with the promise of spending time with the Albanian dancers, and they were friendly and open to me.

They performed at night, so they were free during the day to walk the cool white marble of the *stradun*, Dubrovnik's seaside promenade, bright summer light reflecting on whitewashed balconies and beating down on fields of red tile roofs.

During the warm afternoons I sat in my landlady's garden, thick with the fragrance of roses, ripe figs, and salt air. Sometimes she cooked for me: mussels in garlic and wine, *blitva* greens smothered in olive oil, tomatoes, and cucumbers fresh from the field, red wine, and young grapes. In the evenings I attended Shota's concerts, and afterward strolled the streets of the town, sipping tiny cups of Turkish coffee at sidewalk cafes, chatting with the dancers, fluently it seemed, far beyond what I thought were the limits of my Serbian.

When Shota's stay was over, I took the long bus ride back to Beograd and returned to my room with the Montenegrin widow. By day, I diligently practiced my Serbian, trying to absorb Cyrillic, an alphabet that didn't agree with my brain. (I always found it curious that all the signs in Beograd's bus station, a hub for south-bound travelers from all over Europe, were in Cyrillic and thus unintelligible to foreigners.) I also started studying Albanian, an Indo-European language in a category of its own, which

my mouth, ears, and brain found altogether appealing. And I made friends at Beograd's Ethnology Institute, puzzled by the fact that these Yugoslav scholars were loath to study the part of their country called "Kosova" only a few hours south.

This is what Albanian looks like (above) – which means:
"One-liter bottle, the best way to buy Coca Cola"

Still unable to begin my research in Kosova, I continued my exile in Beograd, biding my time until I would be granted permission to cross into this forbidden territory. It wasn't hard to find Albanians in Beograd, mostly low-paid laborers or street vendors. In the summer, they peddled grilled corn. In the fall, they roasted chestnuts. Autumn is the sweet, heavy aroma of fresh chestnuts roasting on a Serbian street, a changing color in the atmosphere, burnt-orange leaves falling on Beograd streets. And autumn was when I got the news: My proposal to do research in Kosova had been approved. I could finally go south.

That afternoon, I packed my bag, boarded a bus for the five-hour ride to Prishtina, and never looked back.

Traveling south through Serbia, lush green rolling hills eventually give way to plains. Further on, something appears on the landscape that immediately strikes the eye: high stone walls surrounding the houses, protecting them from the scrutiny of passers-by. These walls, hiding the lives within from view, tell you that you have entered the Albanian world. As you travel further, there are more telltale signs: women in pastel-colored raincoats with headscarves drawn forward over the forehead (a modern version of the hijab), and men in white felt skullcaps.

With that bus ride, I began an all-consuming quest in this ancient island of humanity: to sort out an intricate ethnographic landscape and burrow

into the Albanian worldview while dodging political quagmires and falling irresistibly in love with a place and a people.

Behind stone walls

Albanian women chatting in town

2

Life on Sunny Hill

After waiting so long to come to Kosova, my arrival there was a bit anti-climactic. It was a cold grey day. Beograd's autumn gold had dissolved into colorless drizzle on the drive south. Unceremoniously deposited in Prishtina's old, sordid, smelly bus station on the wrong side of the tracks, things looked bleak, and I was on my own.

Hoping to find someone who spoke English, I made a beeline for the English department at the University of Prishtina. On that rainy day, its halls were cold and clammy, crowded with a shivering throng of Albanian students. Most of them were village kids—tough, resilient, hopeful. With just enough money to squeak by, they rented basement apartments, bunked six to a room, and lived on bread and beans. They had taken the bus from villages deep in the countryside and, arriving finally in Prishtina, were determined to escape the inertia and economic doldrums of village life, to invent a new future for themselves. By being there, they had also placed themselves at the epicenter of political dissent.

At its best, the University of Prishtina was a bastion of Kosova's Albanian intellectuals and the hope of its youth. At its most menacing (to Serbs), it was a hotbed of anti-Yugoslav sentiment, a direct threat to the Serbian regime. It's where the civil unrest of 1981 began and was the first place subjected to political purges throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

On that first day in Prishtina, I found my way to the English department, and met three teachers, all British, who I later learned constituted the whole of Kosova's international community. They welcomed me and brought me into their small circle, commenting that their students were looking "exceptionally high-cheekboned" (a euphemism for "very Albanian") that day. They led me to their neighborhood, *Bregu i Diellit* (Sunny Hill) to find lodging.

Sunny Hill was a microcosm of Kosova. Lining the streets were the elegant three-story homes of well-to-do Albanians and Serbs. These were the university deans, hospital directors, public administrators, and politicians who had been agile enough to climb the economic food chain without falling off the political ladder. There were nice cars in the driveways, rose bushes, honeysuckle vines, fancy doorbells, and lots of marble—an affluent lifestyle built on socialist salaries, combined in many cases with some graft to support their small families of two or three children.

That was the front row of houses. Just over the back fence, but a world away, were the homes of villagers. These were poor families from the mountains of Gollak in eastern Kosova who had migrated to Prishtina after World War II in search of work, which they found in the coal mines. Somehow they had acquired small parcels of land in the town, built their simple adobe houses, planted corn, leeks, spinach, onions, apple and plum trees near the houses, lived in crowded rooms with extended families—grandparents, five or six children, the sons' wives, and grandkids.

The room the Brits found for me was in one of the big fancy houses in front. There were always extra rooms in these houses. Isa, my landlord, was an "ethnic Moslem" from Montenegro, neither Serbian nor Albanian, speaking Serbian but born to the Moslem faith. He was now a high-level government administrator, i.e., a good communist professing no religion. When asked how he had built such a house, his answer was always: "loans."

Isa's wife, Ferka, was the quintessential Balkan landlady: gregarious, unabashed, a bit greedy, but exceedingly affectionate and good-hearted. The daughter of a successful Albanian merchant, the ever-jolly Ferka had only one child, a daughter, having suffered five miscarriages. This is a calamity for any Albanian family who considered the birth of sons crucial. But what she lacked in number of children she made up for in sheer verve. Ferka kept her eye on the neighborhood and knew everyone's comings and goings.

For two years I lived downstairs at Ferka's in one room consisting of a little kitchen and sitting/bed area. I shared my hallway and bathroom with a succession of other tenants, heating the boiler for a bath once a week. I became part of Ferka's family, part of the neighborhood, and there began my life in Kosova.

In the Balkans, the workday starts at 7:00 a.m. A cold face wash and a cup of thick Turkish coffee is all it takes to get most folks out the door. The harsh winter mornings are dark and uninviting, but by dawn the city streets are bustling with a shivering proletariat. Once settled into a daily routine,

I became one of the anonymous faces in the post-dawn procession into town.

Xhemali, Shota's director, had arranged for me to attend the daily rehearsals based on my experience as a dancer and my interest in Balkan folklore. This would be my first entry into the culture. Each morning I set off to Shota's rehearsal hall on the other side of town. It was a straight walk down Sunny Hill, through a few back alleys, past throngs of students at the colleges of Economy and Law, across the central square, behind the soccer stadium. It was a thirty-minute walk, just enough time to memorize a page of Albanian vocabulary or learn words to an Albanian song.

The walk was a bit tough in the winter when the route became a frozen obstacle course. The young men liked skidding all the way down Sunny Hill to their college classes, using their shoes as skis and creating a slippery ice slick for the rest of us, a guaranteed hip-breaker for the older folks. Beyond this, the city steps, packed with snow, lost all definition, requiring the deftest footwork to stay upright. The central plaza, built of marble sheets, was slippery as glass. The ditch in front of Shota's rehearsal studio became a moat of mud and sludge that made a clean approach impossible.

With my landlady, Ferka
(My hat was problematic: red and black, the colors of Albania,
a forbidden place at that time)

Ferka's daughter, Valentina

Ferka's house – I had the studio apartment in the basement

The neighbors visiting me in my apartment (I am bottom left)
The long fabrics on the walls are headscarves from western Kosova

My mother Merilyn (white sweater, white hair, pants) during a visit to Kosova, enjoying the company of the neighborhood women and kids

Albanians, like many people still close to their rural roots, have a thing about clean shoes. It's a mark of civility. It also demonstrates the diligence of the women of the house, whose job it is to polish everyone's shoes and display them neatly by the front door each day. The Shota dancers were amazingly adept at tiptoeing, boots unblemished, through ankle-deep slush. This was a skill I never acquired, arriving each day with a thick layer of mud up to my booted shins.

Getting to the rehearsal hall was a bit treacherous, but dancing there, especially in the winter, was wonderful! Roma musicians—on clarinet, violin, lodra, and zurla—put out that aching, bluesy, raw syncopation that goes up through your bones and *makes* you move. We danced with snow falling outside the large windows, a springy wood floor underfoot, an old oil-fueled heater cutting through the morning chill, and live music. It was heavenly.

There was some real talent among the dancers: Haki, a tall, powerfully built man with a generous smile and masculine grace; Fatmira, a voluptuous young woman with a low, sultry voice to match her slow, sensuous moves; Skender, a green-eyed Roma, a perfect, light-footed dancer, impeccably dressed and irrepressibly enthusiastic; Gani, the Turkish singer and Tony Bennett look-alike; and his Albanian wife Kiki, matronly, kind, and graceful. They accepted me right away into their inner circle; they were my friends.

As Artistic Director and Choreographer, Xhemali led the rehearsals. The state-mandated repertoire included suites of dances from Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosova—then all still parts of Yugoslavia. I was treated as one of the regular dancers, receiving no special favors just because I was the only foreigner. But during the breaks, Xhemali would teach me dances and songs from the region he came from, Opoja.

In other parts of Yugoslavia, and most of Kosova, the oldest dance forms were fading away, being preserved by folklore groups like museum pieces. In Opoja, the old traditions were still alive. The girls still sang in intervals of minor seconds (two notes right next to each other on the piano). This sounds dissonant to our ears. To the people of Opoja, it is the sound of home.

Men were still dancing eleven epic sword dances known as *Këllçoja*, in a rubato rhythm and in 7/8, 9/8, 11/8, or 12/8—everything heavily, wonderfully syncopated. As Xhemali taught me these dances, I analyzed the patterns he hadn't discerned, hadn't needed to, as they were inside his bones.

With friends in Shota ensemble

After rehearsals, I went in search of scholars at the university and at the Albanian Institute who could articulate Albanian culture from different points of view: archaeologists, linguists, ethnologists, folklorists. One of my new friends at the Institute was a literary critic named Ibrahim Rugova, who would become President of Kosova in 1990 and lead Kosova through a ten-year political minefield using his own brand of "passive resistance" to Serbian hegemony, charming the international community with his intellect, modesty, compliance, and quirky silk neck scarf.

Scholarship at these institutions was solid, if limited. Fieldwork was rare, but there was a store of knowledge to be gleaned, and every day I came home with articles to be painstakingly translated from Albanian to English.

After rehearsals, meetings with professors, and hunting expeditions for ethnographic manuscripts, I would hike up Sunny Hill hungry and tired, with a brain spinning in Serbian and Albanian, spent by adjusting to this new life, and being tossed around in the scary socialist bureaucracy like a little boat in stormy seas.

Every day my exhaustion was mitigated by dinner at 3 p.m. By starting work so early in the morning, Yugoslavs entitle themselves to an early

dinner and an evening of neighborly visits. This afternoon social time was precious for me: a chance to penetrate the little world of my village neighbors, to sort out the matrix of class and custom, to absorb Albanian life.

In the early eighties there were regular shortages of milk, coffee, and sugar; other commodities appeared and disappeared willy-nilly. But despite hard times, the afternoon meal promised two standard cuisines, for two kinds of people living in the city, *qytetarë* and *fshatarë*. While there are clear gradations of wealth and prestige within these groups, "city" and "village" are the key social distinctions, labels that Yugoslav communism failed to extinguish, and which define and circumscribe lives.

Turkish customs, which for five hundred years seeped into the sinews of Albanian life, made their way, of course, into the kitchen. The influence was greatest in the city. Dinner with city folks, with my landlady Ferka, for example, was a delicious, if muted, version of Turkish fare. Chicken soup laced with yogurt and parsley started things off. The main dish would be *birjan* (rice and chicken), *sarma* (stuffed peppers), or *qofte* (meatballs). On the side would be *taratur*. For dessert, there was black, hot, very sweet tea served with a generous helping of neighborhood gossip.

Normally, city and village people stayed within their own social ranks for the afternoon ritual of tea and conversation. Not Ferka. She had no pretenses and was always on the lookout for good gossip and fun. She liked to spend her time not among the upper class families in the fancy houses next to hers, but with the village families behind her home—humble, generous people who treated her with deference, respect, and warmth.

After dinner at three o'clock, Ferka and I would often venture out together, arm-in-arm, down the narrow, twisting paths behind her house, where the large, well-appointed houses of the upper class gave way to a dense maze of small, tidy homes of the villagers, alive with action. In some of the houses lived extended families: grandparents, sons and their wives, and grandchildren—sharing meals, chores, salaries, and frustrations. In other families, the brothers had divided, often setting up households right next door to each other. There was a constant coming and going—everyone duty-bound to fit into a tight physical space, and into even tighter configurations of behavior.

Often, we would go to the home of our neighbor Xhyzide, a village woman whose house was behind Ferka's. While city families ate western style, sitting on chairs at a dining table, most village families still ate at the *sofra*—an excellent way to accommodate many people in a tight space.

Eight adults can easily crowd in, legs tucked underneath, this way and that, blue gingham tablecloth spread out *under* the table, and *over* laps. If there are more than the table will hold, family and guests eat in shifts—men first, then women, then children.

Ferka joined me on a visit to the Rugova mountains and read the women's fortunes in their coffee grounds

It is also convenient, in large groups, to eat out of a communal dish. Albanians have a saying: "Only animals need their own dishes. People are civilized enough to share." Everyone has a spoon and a hunk of bread and uses these with fingers of the right hand to take their fill. Eating from a common dish also reduces dinner conversation: talk too much, and you risk losing your share to hungrier, quieter mouths.

Dinner might be *birjan*, or a vegetable goulash of potatoes and paprika. But the most common fare among Albanian villagers is *pite* with spinach, or cabbage, leeks, or, when times are hard, with nothing. Every culture has its own way of making flour and water edible, even delicious. Albanians have two ways to do this: one is *pite*. The recipe is flour, water…and time. Around noon, women all over Kosova are bent over sofras, rolling and stretching out the dough that magically expands to an exquisitely fine consistency. It is an art that feeds many hungry mouths for very little money.

Xhyzide Planting Onions and Making Baklava

After dinner, family and guests thank the cook with "*të lumshin duart*" or "*zoti ju dhashtë bereqet"* and relax back on couches or floor cushions lining the room. The sofra is swept of crumbs, stood on its side, rolled out of the room, then meticulously scrubbed and readied for its next use.

By this time, water for tea is boiling on the stove. Tea among Albanians requires two kettles: a big one on the bottom for water, a little one resting on top which holds a rich brew of black tea. This is the Albanian version of a samovar—a means by which each glass of tea can be served according to taste. Concentrated tea from the little pot is poured over heaping teaspoons of sugar into each little tea glass according to taste—a lot for Grandpa, medium for Ferka, very light for Janet. Then boiling water is added from the big pot: a sweet, delicious dessert and lovely custom.

Like *pite*-making, serving Albanian tea is an art form that offers a woman the chance to demonstrate her poise, her skill, her grace. If possible, tea-pouring is done by the woman most recently married into the family—*nusja,* the bride. Lacking a bride, the custom falls to a daughter in the family, or the mother, or me. It's all in knowing exactly how each family member and guest takes their tea—how strong, how sweet, how many refills, and doing it all quietly, smoothly, perfectly.

Spinach pite – my favorite!

In my neighborhood, after dinner, as the room filled with the aroma of steaming tea and the tinkling of tiny spoons in fine glass cups, guests arrived. When anyone outside the immediate family came, a strict protocol was followed: children were quickly hushed or sent out. Women served and remained quiet, or silent. Men prevailed, doling out cigarettes and humbly deferring to guests.

But when it was just family and close friends, these afternoon visits became softly, warmly intimate for me. Taking a break from their endless chores, the women would relax for a while. These were the times I would lay my head on Xhyzide's lap and find the ultimate repose. As she combed her fingers through my hair and laughed and chatted with the others, my American self began to disappear. Every afternoon, the Albanian *melos*—the sound, the touch, and the feel of their lives—bled into me, an osmosis through the now permeable membrane of my consciousness.

By seven o'clock I was ready to retreat into my own space. As darkness fell, I would slowly pull myself away from the thick warmth of Xhyzide's home, from the laughter, the light, the tea, and the coming and going of friends. Making my excuses, I would slip away into the cold, up the dark path to my room for an evening of solitude and study.

Learning Albanian

My first year in Kosova, I spoke Serbian most of the time while I tried to get a grasp of Albanian, a branch of Indo-European not closely related to any other language, with borrowings from Turkish and Latin. I had studied Serbian, a Slavic language like Russian or Bulgarian, at UCLA before I knew I was going to do my fieldwork in Kosova. I spoke Serbian while living in Beograd and waiting to enter Kosova. When I was finally allowed entry into Kosova, I kept speaking Serbian, which most Albanians knew (except for women in remote villages), just because it was easier and faster than communicating in my rudimentary Albanian.

I never had formal training in Albanian. Instead, I studied a children's grammar book smuggled in from Albania, memorized folk songs, and translated newspaper articles and studies in ethnography.

The special challenge in learning Albanian is that there is a literary and a colloquial dialect. These are mutually intelligible, but quite distinct. In literary (Tosk) Albanian for example, "I will go" is *Unë do të shkoj*. In colloquial (Gheg) form, it's *Unë kam me shku*. A lot to grasp when you're first learning the language!

My language book from Albania

Literary Albanian comes from *Tosk*, the dialect of southern Albania and southern Macedonia. It had become the official language of the country of Albania because their dictator, Enver Hoxha, was Tosk. As the state language of Albania, it had also become the "high" form of Albanian in Kosova. *Gheg*, the language spoken traditionally in northern Albania, Kosova, and western Macedonia, had become the "low" colloquial form, unsuitable for official or academic use. This presents a very interesting conundrum: an unschooled Tosk villager speaks and writes "better" than a Kosova college graduate whose native dialect is Gheg. For me, it meant the language I was reading, translating, and hearing on the evening news, and the grammar I was learning, weren't what people actually spoke!

Despite these challenges, I loved learning Albanian! I found the language to be utterly charming and melodic, with beautiful expressions that graced everyday language, such as:

- *Falemnderit:* I give you the honor (thank you)
- *Ju bëftë mirë:* Let it be good to you (enjoy your meal)
- *Zoti ju dhashtë bereqet*: May God give you plenty (said at the end of meals)
- *Ju lumshin duart*: Bless your hands (gratitude for the meal)
- *Ju lumshin këmbët*: Bless your feet (a compliment for good dancing)
- *Tungjatjeta*: Long life (used for greetings and goodbyes)

Shnosh is a wonderful expression that deserves its own mention. When something bad happens to someone, the response is *Shosh* (from *Shëndet*, Albanian for health), meaning: a bad thing has happened to you, but at least you have your health! When my passport was stolen, when someone missed a train, when anything went wrong… *Shnosh!* There's nothing quite like this in English, and I've found it to be a very useful expression in many situations. I still use it all the time.

Someone once told me that you really know a language when you can pray, make love, curse, and tell a good joke in it. This all came gradually to me, and served me well.

3

The Rugova Gorge

For a relatively tiny spot on the planet, it is a place of great complexity, of many variations upon historical, social, and cultural themes. There are sixteen ethnographic regions in Kosova, each with its own dialect, traditional costume, and its own version of Albanian customary behavior. Each displays its own degree of conservatism, relative to the influences of Islam and Catholicism, isolation, and contact, in its past and present. My plan was to get to know each of these regions. I wanted to start with two of the most remote territories, Opoja and Has in the mountains of the southwest. The problem was that both of these regions were on the Albanian border, which in 1981 was a military zone off-limits to an American researcher.

While I was free to come and go as I pleased in Prishtina, my movement outside the capital was supposed to be closely monitored. The person who was to keep tabs on me was Shefqet Pllana, a literature professor who, through correspondence in 1980, had graciously consented to be my mentor before my arrival in Kosova. I was indebted to him for having been allowed to work there at all. It was not a small responsibility for him. Inasmuch as all foreigners were highly suspect, he was going out on a limb by virtue of our association. Then again, he probably received some kind of compensation (political or otherwise) for keeping an eye on me. You never knew about things like that.

With his hawk-like profile, bright shock of thick white hair and endless diatribes, Shefqet was a rather intimidating figure. I could never quite get a word into the conversation when he spoke. I quickly understood that in Kosova, students are to be seen, not heard. Soon after my arrival, we were at odds. All I wanted was to get to the villages. This was not what Shefqet wanted. He had to keep track of me, which would be easier if I stayed

in Prishtina. Besides, there was the law in Yugoslavia about fieldwork: Any foreigner conducting research must be accompanied to the field by a scholar from within their discipline. This didn't sound so bad. The problem was that most professors were happier in their offices than out in the field.

I wanted to get out of Prishtina; Shefqet wanted to keep me there. Every time I arranged to go to the field, he would stop my plans. What was an annoyance to Shefqet became a small battleground for me.

Dushe

And then I met a girl named Dushe Gjevukaj who opened the door for me, who introduced me to the place where she grew up, the Rugova Gorge—a remote, beautiful region of Kosova which was on the Montenegrin border and therefore, at the time, politically benign.

Dushe was one of many Albanian village girls attending high school in Prishtina, hoping to become a nurse. She was a girl of impeccable integrity, spotless morality, self-sacrifice, reliability, and rock-hard resilience. Having excelled all the way through school, having earned the trust of her elders with her exemplary behavior, and having extricated herself from the village, Dushe exemplified the convergence of virtue and drive.

With Dushe at a road sign near her village:
"At all times fresh trout"

Both far from home, we bonded as sisters, as friends and confidantes: an American woman raised in western ease, and an Albanian girl reared in mountain poverty. She was seventeen; I was twenty-seven. She had never known anyone from outside Yugoslavia, had never been beyond the stretch of land linking her mountain home and Prishtina, never had the chance to imagine much beyond this landscape. But she was curious, and clever.

Dushe as a nurse

A slender girl with wavy, golden hair, blue eyes, and a lean, carved classic Albanian face, Dushe had a quality I was later to find in village girls throughout Kosova who had broken through the mental and physical confines of their lives, who had scaled the stone walls. Eventually I was able to spot these girls pretty quickly. It was a certain mix of intelligence and ingenuity—a spark, an inspiration—that was visible in their eyes and bearing and set them apart from their peers.

While in Prishtina, Dushe boarded at a dorm for high school girls where conditions were harsh. Sharing a small room with five other girls was fine, but the building was rarely heated, and hot water was a once-a-week luxury. Meals consisted of bread, preserved meat in small tins, and "tea" made of hot water mixed with burned sugar to make it brown. But as I said, Dushe was tough, and determined. I would visit her at the cell-like dorm which was a great chance for me to get to know village girls from all over Kosova. And she would visit me in my cozy little room at Ferka's, enjoying the warmth, the food, the relative luxury.

When she could, Dushe went home to see her family in the mountains of Rugova in northwestern Kosova, and she invited me to join her. Unlike Opoja and Has, which were on the Albanian border and thus off-limits to me, Rugova was neutral territory. I presented the case to Shefqet and he finally said yes.

So it was that on a wintry day in 1982 I made my first official trip to the field—to Dushe's home in Rugova.

The Rugova Gorge

Gryka e Rugovës (the Rugova Gorge) occupies a special place in the minds of Albanians, for its dramatic beauty and resistance to domination. Surrendering later to Ottoman rule and to Islam than other regions of Kosova, the roots of paganism and Catholicism are strongly felt there. It is also known for a long history of blood feuds, which functioned as the principle form of self-governance up until World War II. In the 1980s, old men in Rugova were still wearing white cloth turbans—symbolic of the cloth used to wrap the body of the deceased before burial.

Kuqishte village

Unlike other regions of Kosova that depend largely on the out-migration of men and their regular remittances of wages to their families back home, Rugova had a healthy pastoral economy supplemented by trade. In addition to their mountain holdings, many Rugova families also owned land in the lowlands near the town of Peja where they spent the winters, ascending the hills again in the summer to graze their sheep on the high pastures. Part of the family stays in their mountain homes, while others take the sheep to even higher pastures, living in *stani*—primitive cabins where the milk products from sheep are processed and stored.

To get to Rugova, you drive 90 minutes due west from Prishtina and cross through the town of Peja, to the foot of the gorge. After an hour's harrowing ascent up the narrow, unpaved road carved between craggy granite peaks, the first village appears: Kuqishte, Dushe's home.

At the first bus stop there's an old and weathered signpost welcoming weary travelers with an advertisement for *Troftë të Freskët* – Fresh Trout. Down in the gulch below the sign is Rugova's only public building: a somewhat seedy café that provides respite for cold and hungry travelers. That was our stop, that's where we got off the bus for my first tromp up the snowy hillside to Dushe's home.

Unlike the densely settled villages of the lowlands, the houses in Rugova are spread far and wide on the mountainsides. Nowadays almost all the families are gone from these houses in the winter, migrating with their flocks down to the lowlands for part of the year. Until 1984, Dushe's family had no land of their own in the plains below and were still in the mountains when we arrived.

Walking up the mountainside to Dushe's home in the winter, a beautiful pastoral scene comes into view: flocks of sheep crowded together in roughly-made corrals, the clanking bells of the lead sheep echoing through the canyon, and blond, red-cheeked children sliding down the snowy hillsides on old plastic bags—their version of sledding.

Dushe had six brothers and one sister. Her brothers, skinny and shy like her dad, were mountain boys, helping with the sheep, running free through their pasture lands. Her sister, two years older than Dushe, unschooled and compliant, helped her mother at home and obediently awaited the marriage that was being arranged for her.

A traditional Albanian neighborhood, the *mahalla*, is comprised of families related through the patriline, and is named accordingly. Dushe's neighborhood was known as Kelmendit, after Kelmend, her great-grandfather. In Rugova, the homes are the old-style *kulla*, built of stone and

mortar. Resembling small fortresses, they were built largely for defense in the hostile environment of blood-feuding, pre-World War II Kosova. Two small openings on the upper floor are the only windows. The animals live on the ground floor. The kitchen is in an outbuilding near the main house.

A few bedrooms are upstairs, as is the all-important *oda*—a multi-purpose room where the family eats, lounges, some members sleep, and where guests are entertained. After each activity, the women sweep out the room with an oversized whiskbroom, making it clean and tidy for its next use. In the past, the oda was the schoolroom where sons acquired knowledge of history, politics, family lore and custom. Still today, it is where the family's honor is put on display in the form of hospitality and of *muhabet*—rich conversation and camaraderie.

In Dushe's home, the oda is a bare room painted pale turquoise. The only piece of furniture is a cupboard displaying a precious collection of coffee cups, cut-glass finery and cherished knickknacks. Soft foam pads along the floor's perimeter make up the seating area. Thick sheepskins and old hand-loomed carpets of red and black cover the floorboards. A wood-burning stove provides the only warmth.

When guests are present, a hierarchy of seating is observed. The place of greatest prestige is opposite the entrance near the warmth of the stove. The other guests arrange themselves along the walls according to age and rank. Young men and boys sit near the door, where they can run in and out to fetch things for their elders.

Electricity came to Rugova in 1984. During my early visits there in 1982, gas lamps still hung on the walls of the oda, providing the only source of light at night. Women's evening work—preparing dinner, washing dishes,

laying out beds, seeing to guests, children and animals—was all done in semi-darkness.

When we arrived at midday, the men were still out working, and the yard and house were filled with the clutter, chatter, laughter, familiarity, and tedium of the Albanian woman's world. Without knowing quite what was going on, I was ushered into one of the tiny bedrooms. The winter sun cast a bright, cold light onto the high wooden bed where an old woman was reaching her fingers down the throat of a crying young boy. When she was finished, she wiped her bloody fingers on the threshold above the bedroom door—*për shëndet*—for the health of the house. Dushe explained to me (in Albanian that I was still struggling to understand) that she was a local healer and was pressing on the boy's tonsils to relieve swelling, or something like that.

This was my first afternoon in an Albanian mountain village. It got more interesting as time went by.

Dushe became my companion for fieldwork in those early years, accompanying me to villages around Peja, the city nearest to Rugova, where she had friends and family. She was a wonderful guide to me, helping me gently enter the world of Albanian village families and ritual life.

What did people think of my presence there? I was a bit of a novelty, being American, but when it came right down to it, I was just a friend of Dushe's, enjoying the family, the beautiful surroundings and their special Rugova version of Albanian hospitality. It was all quite natural and entertaining—for me and for them.

When the men arrived home after work, we all went to the oda of Dushe's uncle. Her father, Uk, was a shy, mild-mannered soul, the classic Albanian shepherd. Her uncle was quite the opposite. The reigning communist official of Rugova's thirteen villages, Salih had real clout there, calling the shots, swaggering with authority. That night, as every night, he dominated the gathering.

The sallow, dim light of the gas lanterns cast heavy shadows in the early dark of that evening in the crowded, dense atmosphere of the oda. Dushe was my guide to the evening, helping me sort out the cast of characters in the room. Her description of who was who got a bit hazy when she came to the three women who were all somehow connected to her uncle. As it turned out, two were his wives; the third, his mistress—the waitress from the tavern down the hill. This will take a bit of explaining.

Yugoslav law prohibits polygyny—the practice of having multiple wives. According to the Koran, however, a man can have up to four wives if he

has the means to care for them equally. As in many aspects of Albanian life, custom prevails over constitutional law. In Kosova, it isn't common for a man to have more than one wife, but it does occur, usually when the first wife fails to bear children. After a number of years have passed and it is evident that she is barren (it is assumed that the fault lies with the woman), the man takes a second common-law wife. The practice may not be legal or popular according to modern Albanian thought, but sustaining the patriline is second to nothing, and the custom is tolerated for practical reasons, *i.e.*, the perceived need to have lots of children (read: sons).

In several of the families I knew where polygyny was practiced, the second wife started having children within a year or two soon after her arrival. In one case, the first wife, childless for fifteen years, conceived a child not long after the arrival of the second wife.

While the first wife, if she is childless, has the option of returning to her father's home, she almost always opts to stay with her husband, as it is thought that she has no rightful place in the home where she grew up. Once the second wife settles in, the relationship between the co-wives is generally congenial, with the first wife taking on the role of "auntie" to the children, and the husband sharing his nighttime attentions equally between wives. How, you may ask, is this possible? Why, in heaven's name, do women put up with it?

No Albanian girl dreams of sharing her husband with another wife. But in the traditional Albanian household, where women have no economic independence, where divorce isn't really an option, girls are educated from an early age to acquiesce, to accept the fate imposed upon them. It's no wonder that Albanians use the same word, *fati* to mean both destiny and husband.

Pajtim is a powerful word, very frequently used in Albanian. And while it is a key concept for all Albanians, among women it is a *state of being*, the key to social and psychological survival, and one of the most commonly used words in their vocabulary. When asked whether they are satisfied with the husband chosen for them (or, for that matter, with any aspect of their lives), they invariably respond: *S'ke çare pa me pajtu*. They know they will only cause themselves misery by going against their families. The girl who makes the best of her lot in life is considered to be the wise one.

With ruddy cheeks, dancing eyes and short-cropped, thick black hair, Sabrije (wife #2 to Dushe's uncle) expressed no discontent about her situation. A lively, energetic woman, she shouldered the care of her eight children and the backbreaking rigors of a pastoral livelihood with grace

and vigor. Fakimje (wife #1), ten years her senior, was slower, calmer, a matronly woman with ribbons of long black hair down her back. She shared the burden of chores, quietly, peacefully, and enjoyed the respect of the family.

As if all this husband-sharing wasn't enough, in Dushe's family the plot thickened even more. That first night in the oda, the atmosphere thick with yellow lamplight and heat of a wood stove, I couldn't keep my eyes off of Vida, the waitress, with her short skirt, thin sweater and surly disposition, being waited on by Fakime and Sabrije (wives #1 and #2). The fact that she was Salih's mistress was no secret. No one objected, because no one had the leverage to object to anything. *Pajtim*. She sat with Salih, sharing his brandy, his conversation, and later that night, his bed.

The night wore on, the atmosphere dense and stifling with the smell of alcohol, kerosene, and warm bodies. At midnight the pace of hospitality slowed to a trickle and the women finally sat down, watching, listening, as the men talked on and the children nodded off to sleep where they lay.

Finally, it was time for bed. After formal goodnights all around, we stepped outside to breathe in the immense, starry sky in this spectacular wilderness. Then we made a dash for bed, two or three girls to a mattress, under the dead weight of quilts stuffed with wool. Sabrije came in to say goodnight and to wrap my head in tattered wool sweaters, to prevent (it seemed to me at the time) my brain from freezing. We fell asleep that way, clinging tightly to each other against the biting cold, with family intrigues and structural delicacies dancing in my head, and everything, everyone, smelling of sheep.

So ended my first day in Rugova.

In the spring and summer, Rugova is breathtaking. Wildflowers carpet the alpine meadows. Gangs of children race up and around the craggy cliffs and pastureland. I returned many times to visit Dushe's family there, basking in the colossal beauty of the place.

During these visits, I relished the time spent in the presence of Dushe's mother, Halime. With pale blue eyes, white skin drawn tight against a chiseled face, and jet-black hair pulled back by a scarf, Halime was the cherished, long-suffering heroine of the family. Her long, narrow dress hung limply on a thin body that had endured eight births and nine abortions. (At that time, coitus interruptus and abortion were the Albanians' only means of birth control. Couples for whom the first method was unsuccessful resorted frequently to abortion—an unsavory, difficult, often dangerous practice, but one fully accepted by the social and medical establishments.)

Halime was always at work—chopping wood, pumping water, washing dishes outside under the water pump against a backdrop of steep pastures, seeing to the children, the sheep, and the guests. Like most women in traditional Albanian households, during mealtime she would stand completely still, hands folded at her waist, watching the family and guests sitting at the sofra, her lips curving into a quiet smile. Here was the quintessential Albanian mother—in endless service to family, of infinite strength and grace—silent, secret, deeply loved.

Halime, Dushe's mother

Dushe's parents milking the sheep

Sometimes we would visit in the *stani*, the shed where milk products were made and stored, its pine walls reflecting golden light from the wood-burning stove. The shelves were stacked with yogurt, cheese, and *kajmak* (a boiled milk concoction) in various stages of development and fermentation. "Want to try a Rugova specialty?" Dushe's mother asked graciously one night, at which point I was offered warm milk with salt—one of the least delightful beverages I have ever had the misfortune to try. But everything else was delicious and hearty. Not surprisingly, almost everything you eat in Rugova is white. Even the peppers are smothered in kajmak.

By 1983, I was visiting Halime in their new home in the lowlands near the town of Peja where the family had acquired land. They descended the mountain in October, winding through the narrow gorge with their flocks in tow for the winter hibernation.

It was then that my mother and stepfather came to Kosova to visit me, and their first village outing was an afternoon with Dushe's family. It was one they would never forget as they left their tidy, upper middle-class life in the coastal suburbs of Los Angeles and entered an entirely different world. Dushe had let her family know we were coming, and by the time we arrived, her father had slaughtered a sheep, barbecued it, and mounted an afternoon of supreme Albanian hospitality. The *meze* (hors d'oeuvres) consisted of freshly roasted sheep giblets, fresh green onions and fresh white, salty sheep's milk cheese, with fresh, ninety-proof r*akia* as a chaser. The giblets were so fresh you could almost hear the bleating of the sheep, the brandy so harsh it burned on descent. The main course was freshly barbequed mutton.

Visit to Dushe's family, with my mother and father, and Ferka (on the right)

The meal made quite an impression on my mother, who was used to buying her meat in neat little white styrofoam trays at the supermarket, removed in time and place from the slaughterhouse. (Her father had worked as a butcher during the depression, but that was a long time ago.) They were used to brandy more thoroughly distilled and less corrosive on the way down. And they were used to toilets that flushed.

The inevitable need for a trip to the ladies' room presented a problem for my mom. I knew this was going to be a problem. Imagine my mom dealing with an Albanian outhouse. Not to be indelicate, but in the spirit of making the ethnographic record complete, let it be said that the traditional, rural outhouse in Kosova is a small, rickety wooden structure with a door

that usually has a broken latch, an old plastic container with some water for washing, and a hole in the floor over a heap of waste. Not a pretty picture – not even a tolerable picture. My mother never got over this and always brought it up when she talked about the Kosova trip. As she described it: "It was a family of ten with several grown men, and it didn't occur to anyone to build a real toilet!" At the time I countered her objections, arguing that it was all they knew, and that in their estimation it wasn't broken and didn't need fixing.

Notwithstanding the outhouse expedition, my parents savored for many years the memory of their visit to Dushe's lowland home. We had had a wild time of it, engulfed in the raw, effusive hospitality of these good folk. As we started our goodbyes, Dushe's sister took my mother aside, and with great pride and solemnity, revealed her çejz (hope chest). In preparation for her upcoming marriage, the old wooden trunk was filled to the brim with the handwork of her trousseau: doilies and tablecloths tatted from fine thread and the starched white shirts and headdresses of the Rugova costume, including woven aprons with decoration of deep purple on black. Carefully she pulled out a set of white napkins embroidered in blue and handed them to my mother—a gift of the heart that my mother cherished for years.

Dushe's family

With Dushe's family in Rugova

A typical Rugova meal: sheep cheese, pickled peppers, bread, and yogurt

At Home with Dushe in Her Village, Kuqishtë

Dushe's aunt in her everyday costume, the "look" in western Kosova

Grandfather eating pite, baked in a spiral, Rugova style, with a bowl of yogurt in the middle

In Kuqishtë with Dushe and Lise Liepman, a friend visiting from Berkeley

Dushe dressed in the traditional local bride's costume, her grandmother spinning wool

Singing to the rhythm of the spinning "tepsi" (pan), a Rugova tradition

Women of western Kosova – an evening chat

Pulling apart a chicken to cook for dinner

At night the living room becomes the bedroom

The Wedding of Dushe's Cousin Shahe
Her Transformation from Girl to Bride

Kanagjegj – the night of henna
Her face is covered ceremoniously to hide her crying

Shahe (in checkered shirt), the day before the wedding

Becoming a bride dressed in the traditional costume of western Kosova

A while later, being made up by a family friend and dressed "a la franga" in a western-style wedding dress

The last moments with her mother

Shahe as bride, standing "divan"

Her mother-in-law puts candy on her head to ensure a sweet marriage

Shahe's family hovers as the car from the groom's family prepares to depart – this is the moment of partition from her natal family

Dushe tearfully helps Shahe into the car that will take her to her new life with her husband's family

Members of Shahe's husband's family guide her up the stairs to her new home

4

Dushe's Destiny and Mire, The Sworn Virgin

Dushe was a treasured companion who had introduced me to the beauty, the harshness and the intrigues of her mountain home, and who had somehow grasped what I sought to understand about Kosova and its people. She was a very special woman. Her ingenuity and drive set her apart in her family and her region. By 1984, she was a nurse with a good job in Prishtina's University Hospital. Her keen, quick mind, her authoritative presence and her compassion served her well in the trying, painful, often grotesque conditions of the hospital. She certainly had what it took to go to college, to pursue a career in medicine, to set an example of excellence and achievement for other village girls. This was her plan, and it all would have come to pass, if it wasn't for a fateful night when brandy flowed and a combination of custom and bravado converged to derail Dushe's future.

As was the custom, on one wintery night, the men from Dushe's village had gathered for conversation and brandy. It was just as Xhemali Berisha describes in a song he wrote in his early twenties, *"Some Words on the Buying and Selling of Girls."* The men spoke of one thing and another, long into the evening. At some point, the conversation came around to Dushe. She was nineteen, and it seemed to the men present that the time was ripe to settle her future. By the end of the evening, Dushe's domineering uncle had promised her in marriage to the son of a friend, ending, in one brief moment, her plans for study, for a career as a doctor, and for a marriage of her choosing. Her shy father had no say in the matter. Her uncle had spoken.

While the marriage of Dushe's sister had already been arranged, everyone, especially Dushe, had assumed that her situation would be different. Her valiant departure from the status quo (leaving home to go to high school in Prishtina) should have released her from the grip of that

custom, but it didn't take much for the men in charge of her life to ignore all that and to revert to the conventions they knew best. Why this particular match? As far as Dushe knew, it was a whimsical decision, made between two old friends, over brandy, for old time's sake.

I'll never forget the day Dushe called me with the news that she had been promised to a boy she had never met. I was shocked.

Dushe's betrothed lived in a small house the family had built on the outskirts of Prishtina, with his parents, his two brothers, and their wives and children. He worked as a waiter and his brothers did car repairs in their courtyard for extra cash. Both of the brothers' wives had come into the family through arranged marriages. These were village girls from western Kosova who considered themselves lucky to be living in somewhat better conditions in Prishtina. Neither had attended school beyond the fourth grade. The whole family was living a life within the smallest porthole of Albanian worldview.

In no time at all, Dushe became a wife and mother. Within five years, she had three toddlers underfoot and a baby at her breast. She occupied a small bedroom in the house decorated with a few fancy pieces of furniture befitting a bride, a few precious possessions displayed in the cabinet, and a few sheepskin rugs—her piece of the mountain. By virtue of her skills and reputation, she commanded authority in the house and was highly respected by the whole family. She had made the best of her situation—a skill that Albanian women have mastered.

Arranged marriages have become a thing of the past in Kosova now. But up through the 1980s, especially in rural areas, they were common. In the more distant past, they were the rule. The *Canon of Lek Dukagjin* is the Albanian legal code handed down from ancient times that rules on every aspect of life and still echoes in the minds of Albanians. Paragraph 43 of the Canon:

> *Even if the girl refuses to go to the husband who has been chosen for her, she will be forced to; and if it is discovered that the girl has escaped, her husband can kill her with the bullet her parents sent in the hope-chest, and no blood is owed over it [no blood revenge is warranted].*

Even in the 1980s, an arranged marriage was part of a whole social system built on life in an extended family, and the need for everyone to sacrifice personal needs and desires for the good of the group. A village boy once explained it to me this way:

"If we date a girl, we cannot take her for a wife. That's our tradition. If you are still living with your parents in a big family, you have an arranged marriage so you are guaranteed that your wife will obey your parents and be there to help your family, not just be there for you. I could find a girl anywhere to fall in love with and marry, but she wouldn't necessarily come and be a help to my parents. When you marry through the matchmaker, you know how things will be. You do it for the good of the family."

Dushe had dreamed of another kind of life but got trapped in the last hurrah of a dying tradition. How did she feel about her fate? Sad, disappointed, but resolved. "I had always wanted to know the boy I would marry. But once you're engaged, what can you do? You wanted another life, but your obligation is to go. *Pajtohesh*."

Again, the operative word here, as in many parts of Albanian life, is *pajtim*. While decisive and forthright in contrast to her village counterparts, Dushe, like most of the girls around her, had been socialized, programmed, to obey her family's wishes—no matter what. All her life she had been busy constructing the persona of an exemplary woman, but in traditional families in Kosova, to be an exemplary woman meant surrendering to the dictates of family above one's own plans and desires. This is how it seemed to Dushe, how she explained to me this unexpected derailment of her life.

"Some Words on the Buying and Selling of Girls"
(A very clever song written by Xhemali Berisha in 1960 about the sinister custom of arranged marriages)

I would like to talk about a few things with you, friend,
Some customs of old, some relics of the past,
Which are slowly rotting away in our land,
But which have stayed at our door, lingering with us even today.

I want to talk about marriages, arranged with words.
I want to touch upon a custom, which has been with us for a hundred years,
Selling the girls, exiling them,
Promising them away while still in their cradles.

Some say it's fate.
It is not fate, nor is it written, but is decided on a winter's night,

Near the fire, near the coals,
While drinking brandy like water from the Drin.

There's talk of one thing and another,
And then the matchmaker begins to drive his bargain:
"Do you know, dear friend, why I have come this evening?
That you may give up your daughter."
Oh, honored friend, when the matchmaker speaks, his voice is heard,
As he gestures to the rooftop, that all may know what a devil he is.
This matchmaker is a devilish one.
A good hide he calls bad, an old one he calls young, a scoundrel he calls honorable.

"Oh, dear friend,
How much do you give me for my daughter?"
"A million dinar,
And another five-thousand for the wedding guests!"

Now the girl has become a bride,
For fifteen gold pieces she was purchased.
These things are against our faith,
We must cast them to the clouds!

When the girl returns to visit her kin, her friends go out to wish her well.
"Have you missed us, dear girl? Are you weary, or forlorn?
And with your husband, how have you fared? Has he hit you, has he hurt you?
Or has he loved and caressed you? Tell us of all these things."

Xhemali Berisha
singer, songwriter, choreographer

Gifts from the groom's family for a village bride in the traditional "ark" chest

More gifts for the bride

City bride in the 1980s with some of the groom's gifts – dresses and gold

A Sworn Virgin

Dushe had a very special relative who lived not far away on another small plot of land near Peja. This was her Aunt Mire [MEE re], a "sworn virgin" *or virgjiresh* [veer gjeer ESH]. This is a woman who, from an early age, takes on a male identity. A cultural phenomenon well-documented by scholars, "sworn virgins" are found in cultures all over the world. In the Balkans, they're most numerous in Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, and Kosova.

Mire, the sworn virgin

With Mire

There are various circumstances that gave rise to the phenomenon. In the old days, swearing virginity for life was the only honorable way a girl could refuse the man to whom she had been promised. She would, in effect, swear off her womanhood, donning a man's clothes, renouncing future marriage or children.

But avoiding marriage to an unsuitable candidate was only one explanation for the practice. In many cases, when a family had no sons, a daughter would be enlisted to act in the capacity of a son. As she grew older, she would take on men's work and the corresponding responsibilities in the family. Sometimes this was for life. Sometimes it was temporary, the "boy" becoming a girl again when it was time for her to marry.

When I met her, Mire was forty-five, and spent her winters in the lowlands running a small sawmill. But before that, she had spent her life as a shepherd in the mountains of Rugova. Mire's case seemed to be unusual

in that, as she tells it, she just *felt like* being a shepherd. At a young age, she made the choice to live as a male, and everyone just took it in stride. She wore men's clothes and lived a man's life—a shepherd's life. Everyone around knew the situation and accepted it as totally normal, treating her with the respect and deference any Albanian *man* would receive. Women served her as they would serve a man; men included her in their work, their conversation, in the inner sanctums of their community. I think we can assume she had no sexual partners, a sworn virgin in all respects.

Mire and I felt a special camaraderie from the start. I was the first woman she had met who wore pants, sat cross-legged on the floor as the men did, and engaged in *muhabet*—men's talk about history, politics, business, and things outside the family.

You may wonder how I could be accepted into the inner sanctum of women's lives in Kosova and also enter the men's world when the situation called for it. It's simply because I was a foreigner. As such, I was accepted in both circles, but not held accountable to the complete spectrum of behavior or responsibilities in either one. The fact that I could act according to these traditional roles was appreciated, but wasn't demanded. The Albanians tolerated "American" behavior from me, as an outsider, and still treated me as an honored guest.

When I wanted intimate access to women's circles—to their preoccupations, secrets, and private thoughts about their lives—I could have it, by virtue of being a woman. When I wanted to leave the women's world and go where the men were, I could do this, too. They knew that in America I lived what they considered a man's life: paying the rent, driving a car, making decisions for myself—things a woman didn't do at that time in those villages.

This dual gender identity worked out so well for me, I often wondered how male scholars could really conduct social science research in places subject to the great gender divide, where women, by reason of propriety (and male jealousy) couldn't possibly allow a foreign man to enter their social space. I felt very lucky to be able to live in both of these worlds.

Mire and I had lots to talk about! What I found most fascinating was how "normal" her situation seemed to her and to everyone around her. In a place where all women subscribe to the strictly defined role of obedient, gracious, noble wives and mothers…Mire was living a totally different life—and no one cared.

I set out to understand how this all worked in her mind, and in the minds of those around her. I asked her all kinds of questions about her childhood,

her life with the sheep, whether she regretted not having children, what she thought of Albanian women's lives, etc. At the end of one particularly long talk with Mire, trying to get her perspectives on the choices she had made, hoping for some profound statement about her unique identity, I tried one last time with: *"Mire, what has been GOOD about your life, and what has been BAD?"* After thinking about it for some time, she answered like the shepherd she was:

"Summers…were good. Winters…were bad."

In the end, she convinced me that the cognitive dissonance was in my head only, and we left it at that.

Thus, on my first trip to the field, I learned from Dushe's family (which included multiple wives, an in-house mistress, and a sworn virgin) that the rules of Albanian society, which had been explained to me as sacrosanct, actually allowed for colorful deviations. Still, in most situations the strictly determined social conventions were inescapable. It soon became clear that this would be Dusha's destiny.

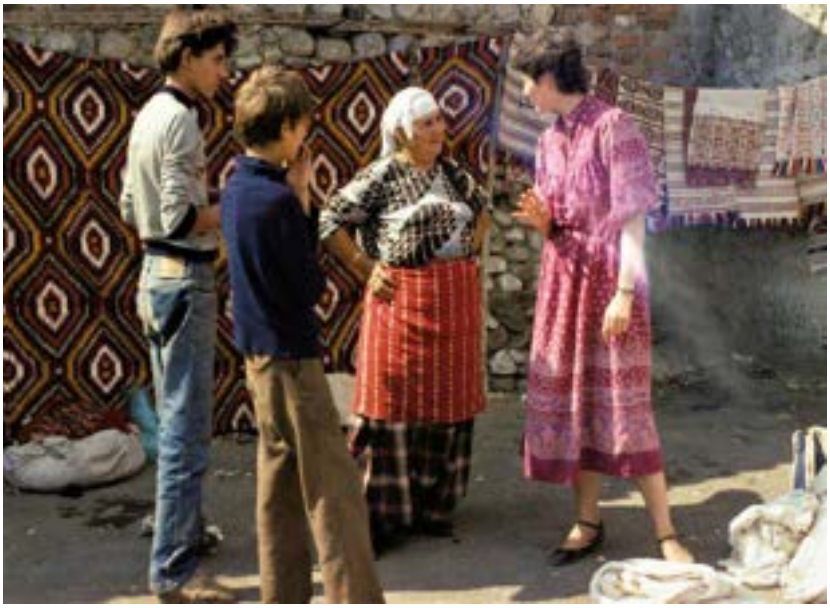
Out and About in Kosova – The Early Years

Dancing with a local girl

With the Susuri family, in Zhur near Prizren

With the girls

With Sadete before a TV interview



In the Peja market

5

Dodging Political Landmines

During those first years in Kosova, I navigated through a world that blended the east and the west, the archaic and modern. I wandered through the maze of Albanian thought and expression, constantly trying to get my bearings in an exotic mental map.

As I mentioned, being an outsider, I could enter the intimate inner sanctum of women's lives by virtue of being female. But I could also enter the men's world because I was a foreigner. I traveled on my own, drove a car, wore pants, and talked about issues and ideas beyond the family. These were things only men did in rural Kosova in the 1980s, and it allowed me entrance into their social space. Sitting cross-legged on the floor with the elders long into the night, we spoke about lineage, land, economics, and history. Sitting with the women on rough-hewn stools in the afternoon as they plucked chickens, cleaned rice, embroidered, or sipped their tea, we spoke about family, neighbors, household concerns, marriages—the endless dramas that were their whole world.

Having access to both the male and female experience was a remarkable privilege and gave me a critical advantage in my research. But as an outsider, there was also a whole world I was forbidden to enter: *the political*. Any conversation that even touched upon the political was forbidden. Everyone around me knew it; I only gradually understood it. The reason for this was the extraordinary sensitivity of Kosova in the general scheme of Yugoslav politics. The "Kosova problem" posed a direct threat to the future of the Yugoslav federation, because Kosova Albanians in the 1980s wanted one thing: status as a Republic in Yugoslavia. This would give them, among other things, the right to *secede* from Yugoslavia. Ultimately, they could then choose to become part of the country of Albania, to create a greater Albanian state encompassing what was seen as the Albanians' rightful

lands: Albania, southern Montenegro, western Macedonia, and Kosova. This, of course, was *out of the question* in the minds of other Yugoslavs.

This desire for status as a Republic and ultimately for partition from Yugoslavia was a sentiment that held Kosova on a razor's edge. And there was one word that embodied the sentiment: "irredentism." The word was a screaming symbol of Kosova's growing threat to a Yugoslavia clinging precariously to its identity as a federation. It enraged the rest of the country, utterly determined, at that time, to remain a nation. The threat of Kosova partition also functioned as the ultimate side show, distracting a disappointed Yugoslav proletariat from a plummeting economy and failed ideology. Like all political discourse in Yugoslavia, the issue was distorted, manipulated, and explosive.

Uttering the words, "*Kosova Republik*," or making any reference at all to the country of Albania—openly or whispered—was enough to get you in serious trouble. Accusing the Kosova Albanians of irredentism was the Yugoslav government's most powerful propaganda tool against the Kosovar. Think McCarthyism in the USA, when a single word, *"Communist,"* could destroy people. In the same way, accusations of irredentism were often based on trumped-up charges, and were used like a wrecking ball to destroy reputations and sabotage careers.

"Kosova Republik" scrawled on adobe walls, a double-headed eagle embroidered on a pillow or painted on a baby's cradle, a song from the country of Albania sung at a wedding—all of these were suspect. My landlady was appalled when I put on a red hat with a black ribbon I had brought from America. "You're certainly not planning to wear that out, are you?" she scolded. Red and black, the colors of the Albanian flag, were another symbol of Albanian ethnicity…and resistance. I took the hat off, and never wore it again.

Albania & Kosova

Most Albanians feel a visceral connection to the country of Albania—the "Motherland." Moslem or Christian, speaking Gheg (the language of northern Albania) or Tosk (the language of the south), living in Kosova or Macedonia, in New Zealand or in the Bronx, the Albanians' most celebrated and powerful self-image, their foothold in reality, is the experience of themselves as part of a greater Albanian nation.

Historically, Albanians have been plagued by deadly clan rivalries brought on by competition over scarce resources and the absence of a stable

government. But a collective ethos overrides this. In their minds, Albanians constitute a virtual nation irrevocably bound by blood, by ancient history (real and idealized), and by what is perceived of as an utterly unique set of cultural laws. This sentimental imperative, this mythologized sense of unity and continuity is, for Albanians, a *religion*.

The Albanian flag

In reality, the Kosova Albanians are profoundly different from their brethren across the mountains in the country of Albania. Since the borders were drawn between Albania and Kosova in the early 1900s, these two groups have led very different lives. Here's a quick glance at how this played out…

The fall of the Ottoman Empire after the Balkan War in 1912 led to a land-grab by Europeans eager to claim former Turkish territories in the Balkans and Middle East. In 1913, the "secret" Treaty of Berlin was signed, creating an independent country of Albania. In 1918, Kosova was incorporated into the "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" that became Yugoslavia in 1929. This is when final borders were drawn that left a half-million Albanians outside of "The Motherland." Kosova was under-populated after decades of war and emigration, and the Yugoslav government encouraged Serbs to colonize the lowlands. Kosova Albanians experienced extreme persecution at the hands of the Serbs during this time. Meanwhile, in Albania, Ahmet Bej Zogu, the son of a clan leader, was emerging as that country's leader, rebuffing Serbian advances and looking to Mussolini for patronage. In 1928, he proclaimed himself King of Albania, but was overthrown when Italy occupied the country in 1939.

By the end of the Second World War, two men had emerged who would alter the fate of all Albanians: Yugoslavia's Josip Broz Tito and Albania's Enver Hoxha. During the next five decades, the two groups of Albanians—those in Albania and those in Kosova—so deeply bound by blood and by history, would evolve into very different kinds of people, cajoled and coerced into new forms by the power of these two men.

Both Tito and Hoxha had been given mandates to build modern Socialist states out of what were impoverished lands governed by foreigners and inhabited by feuding clans and "backward" peasants. Each sought to rid his country of class inequality, illiteracy, and poverty through the means at hand: land collectivization and re-education. But in 1968, their tactics diverged. Tito towed a softer socialist line; Hoxha went in the opposite direction.

Tito

Tito was a maverick in 1945, with his own ideas about running the new Yugoslav government and what relations he would foster with other Balkan countries. He objected to Stalin's attempt to subordinate smaller socialist countries under Russia's shadow. In retaliation, Stalin ousted Yugoslavia from Cominform, the official forum of the international communist movement. Tito was on his own. He seized upon the opportunity to create his own brand of socialism with a decentralized economy organized under an innovative policy of "workers' self-management."

In the 1950s, the Kosovar suffered severe repression under Ranković, Tito's head of the Secret Police. In the spirit of collectivization, land and property were confiscated. An Albanian friend described the era to me: "1955 and 1956 were the worst years. The state took most of our grain. With our house right on the border with Albania, we were a prime target. Usually they accused us of hiding arms and being part of the anti-Communist Ballista's. My grandfather was imprisoned several times. My uncle was in jail for three years."

In 1966, Ranković was ousted for abuse of power and his selective reign of terror was over. The Kosovar started agitating for equal rights in Yugoslavia. Tito, an ethnic Croatian always holding off Serbian hegemony, lent a sympathetic ear, and Albanians were given some increased rights, including a university in the Albanian language.

After Stalin died, Tito made some overtures to Khrushchev, until a new policy of equality between Socialist states was undermined with the

invasion of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Tito, again the maverick, conceived of a new alliance between neutral countries, and became the leader of the Nonaligned Movement. Unlike his East Bloc neighbors, Tito opened the door to the West, inviting economic aid and tacit military cooperation. He sought labor agreements with Western Europe, and impoverished Kosovar migrated in droves in search of migrant work. They brought back money…and ideas.

Like Hoxha, Tito was trying to secularize his country, but stopped short of banning religion. In 1945, he prohibited the wearing of Islamic chador (veil), but the mosques remained intact, as did the customs and dogma that informed Albanian life.

Hoxha

Like Tito, Hoxha was an early East Bloc member allied with Stalinist Russia. He also broke from the pack after Khrushchev came to power, but for different reasons. Where Tito's break with Russia had to do with his desire to open up to the West, decentralize, and promote nonalignment, Hoxha took up where Stalin had left off. In 1960, he sided with China in a Sino-Soviet dispute and forged a fateful pact with Mao. In 1978, after a dispute with China, aid from China and all ties with that country were cut off, and Albania was completely on its own.

Between 1945 and 1991, Hoxha took an impoverished land lacking industry and education, and used every trick in the Stalinist book. In his zeal to force progress, and at the same time to rid his country of any western influence, Hoxha created the most xenophobic, Draconian state in the Western Hemisphere. He sealed off his people from the rest of the world and threw away the key.

Hoxha's Albania was a cruel concoction of Stalinism and Maoism taken to their logical extreme. He forged an obedient proletariat, an educated urban population, and the semblance of a "modern" state from the wreckage of the Ottoman backwash. In the course of this transformation, religious rituals and archaic customs that dictated behavior and hid women behind stone walls were systematically destroyed. Albania was declared *the world's first atheist country*. Religious leaders were imprisoned and executed. In 1967 alone, more than two thousand religious buildings were demolished or converted to other uses. Mosques were turned into basketball courts.

The Lure of the Motherland

For nearly fifty years, from the end of World War II to the death of Hoxha in 1991, the people of Albania formed a completely distorted notion of what was happening on the other side of the border. Through radio and television broadcasts from Tirana that infiltrated the Kosova airwaves, through cultural exchanges and the publication of textbooks and scholarly works, the Hoxha regime manufactured and exported a version of Albania that the Kosovar hungrily consumed and built their dreams upon. Occasional visitors from Kosova were shown carefully sanitized portraits of the country. One could see women in skirts, their veils gone, delivered from the shackles of conservatism and poverty to the factory floor and collectivized farms. Once barren mountainsides were terraced and planted. All the children were in school. The State had replaced God.

Villagers in western Kosova near the Albanian border were treated to *TV Tirana* whenever the signal was clear enough. The Kosovar were an underclass in Yugoslavia glued to images of Albanians living unfettered in their own land. Young girls stared in amazement as their would-be compatriots staged spectacular folklore exhibitions, swam in an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and strolled freely on wide, well-appointed boulevards.

The brutal system and enduring poverty were hidden from view. It was perfect propaganda, played out on a hapless population. Only that which ennobled Hoxha's hardline experiment could be seen. And the Kosovar believed it. They dreamed of unification with the Motherland, a place where Albanians ruled the day, where the culture was pure and unadulterated, where communism worked. I'll never forget the first time I heard this expressed at my neighbor's house in Prishtina: "In Albania, there is real communism—everyone is equal. If you have a watch, I have a watch."

The problem was, of course, that in Albania, no one had a watch . . . or a radio, or a car, or the vaguest notion of what lay beyond the country's self-imposed iron curtain. No one had access to the outside world. Nor did they have a day, or an hour, of freedom as we know it. A man could be arrested for installing a radio antenna on his roof. A woman could be punished for asking why there was no bread at the bakery. Wives informed on husbands, brothers on brothers. Other countries knew this. We knew that the reality of Albania was colossal repression, xenophobia as a national neurosis. But this was all lost on the Kosovar, for whom Albania was a promised land.

My friend Xhemali Berisha, the choreographer, was the first person I knew who had been to Albania. He went there in 1971 with a student folklore group, the first visit of its kind. In 1980, he went again, this time as Shota's Artistic Director. Driven in an official state car with the Minister of Culture as his guide, he visited historical monuments, factories, and farm cooperatives. He saw, in triumphant display, the symbols of communism's victory over ignorance, inequality, and pre-war feudalism.

"My most striking memory was seeing a woman painting the outside of a hotel," Xhemali remembers. "Where I was from in Kosova, you rarely saw women out in public, certainly not doing men's work. This looked very modern and progressive. But I also remember seeing peasants working in the field—in the rain. Kosova farmers come in when it rains. Something was definitely wrong with that picture." This was a detail that belied a catastrophic reality, a socialist experiment taken to extremes.

These memories notwithstanding, Xhemali's impressions of that time were obscured by the elation of being in the Motherland. "We saw a country run by Albanians, for better or worse. Setting foot on Albanian soil, touching the ground, was all we cared about."

Mental Minefields

My official mandate as a guest in communist Eastern Europe was to stay precisely clear of politics, to keep my ears and mouth shut, and be mindful of everything I said. The other foreigners in Kosova were English professors. I was the only outsider there who was trying to figure out what was going on in the society. It was as if my chest was emblazoned with a big "R" on it. Not for Reineck, but for *Rrezik*—danger. Everyone avoided talking politics with me—lest they get themselves, their families, or me, in trouble. So there I was, trying to find out everything I could about what made this population tick, but prevented from discussing the very issues that would make or break its future.

Having tiptoed on the thin ice of shifting political ideologies their whole lives, most Yugoslavs (and East Europeans in general) were used to avoiding "dangerous" topics. It was very normal for them, but not for me. Even Xhemali, the one person with whom I was surely entitled to discuss anything, would get very impatient with me if I asked a question that was in any way political. He couldn't understand why I had never learned the art of self-censorship. How could I possibly be so naïve? I tried to explain that this kind of paranoia was an acquired, not in-born trait, and that I needed

time to get used to it. With much exasperation, he persisted in steering me clear of "the subject." I slowly learned to be careful about everything I said. While trying to master both literary and colloquial Albanian, I also tried to learn how to read between the lines of these languages.

It was only later that I found out how interesting my activities were to the local police. I eventually came to understand that I had been followed, that families I visited and my friends in town were called in for questioning about my motives, that my dossier down at the *Sekretariat za Inutrasni Poslova* was piling high. No one I knew at the time let me in on this. It was just one of those cultural nuances that, as an outsider, I couldn't comprehend.

A Political Oasis

There was one place where I could talk politics: the American Embassy in Beograd. Most of the folks in the political sector knew more than I did about what was going on in Serbia and Kosova. It was their job to know and to report daily developments back to Washington. Understandably, many of them were eager to get my impressions of Kosova. All I knew was what it was like to live in Kosova. My job, as I saw it, was to deconstruct the stereotypes about Albanians they'd been handed as part of their orientation packets.

I made a very special friend there, a seasoned diplomat with deep affection for Kosova. I'll call him "Steve," and his wife, "Sally." Steve was the quintessential Foreign Service officer, the kind of diplomat you want representing your country out there in the world. Here was a man who embodied all things good about America: outgoing, kind, astute, optimistic, open-minded, very smart, and very compassionate.

Steve's job required him to be knowledgeable about Kosova. During his visits, he would meet with officials and try to understand what was really going on. As we walked the streets of Prishtina, I came to understand something about his life as a diplomat. "Did you see that man in the restaurant, the same one we saw in the bazaar? He's walking behind us, in the shadows. I'm always followed when I'm here. It's an occupational hazard." He longed to visit the villages and I longed to show him the more intimate side of Albanian life, but we knew this could create problems for the families he visited. The police were highly suspect of anyone being visited by foreigners, especially someone from the U.S. government. That's

when I decided that the Foreign Service wasn't for me. The prestige, the exotic posts, the access to foreign power brokers and important work were seductive for sure. But these were no compensation for being cut off from ordinary folk who were, for me, the heart and soul of Kosova.

6

Back in the USA

Hawaii

In the fall of 1983, after two years of work in Kosova, it was time to go back to California. My Fulbright grant was finished. I had gathered a respectable amount of knowledge about Kosova. I understood the ethnographic makeup of the place and could expound upon the subtle distinctions among fifteen ethnographic zones. I spoke the language and I had a deep sense of the people. I had everything I needed to complete my Master's thesis for UCLA. I had tiptoed quietly around political quagmires and stayed out of trouble.

No sooner had I arrived in California than the University of Hawaii's World Cultures department called, seeking a semester replacement for a professor on leave. I was offered a position teaching "World Cultures" at the University, a class which presented me with a wonderful assignment: finding people from Honolulu's diverse ethnic communities—Thai, Balinese, Samoan, Hispanic, Japanese—and enlisting them to help me give students a real sense of the world.

Hawaii is truly a tropical paradise. When you step off the plane in Honolulu, you are caressed by soft, warm breezes infused with the fragrance of plumeria, tuberose, and rain. You enter a different life tempo—slow and undulating.

The social life is that way, too. Easy informality is the rule, which proved to be a problem for me, an American girl wound up as tight as a watch spring after two years in the constrained morality of Kosova. The free and easy Hawaiian way tried to unwind me too quickly, and I bristled against it. I was coming from a place where every bit of behavior was elaborated and assessed. Walk into any room in Kosova, and everyone gets up, shakes your hand, greets you warmly, and asks after your family, acknowledging your existence and place in a complex scheme of relationships and obligations. Enter a room in Hawaii, and nobody really notices. At the university where

I was teaching, professors lectured in shorts—casual and friendly. *Oluolu a hoomaha*—easy and relaxed. It all felt so alien to me.

For the first few months in Hawaii, I lived with my paternal uncle, Colonel Rollin Reineck. Uncle Rollin was enjoying retirement in Kailua with his adoring wife Esther. True to his world, the Colonel was a staunch Republican. I was fresh from a Socialist regime, and despite its obvious failings, at the time I championed its basic tenets ("If you have a watch, I have a watch"). Rollin of course put forth the "Yes, but nobody has a watch" argument which had been used while in Kosova. We were amicably locked in an affectionate debate: Capitalism vs. Socialism. Our politics could not have been more opposed, but something in our Reineck sensibilities clicked.

Teaching Albanian songs in Hawaii

With Uncle Rollin and Aunt Esther

University of Hawaii, where I taught

My commute to work over the "Pali"

To reach Honolulu (where I was teaching) from Kailua (where Rollin lived), you pass through the dark hush of a lush, tropical mountain valley. This was my daily carpool commute to the university. Every morning Colonel Reineck rose in the pre-dawn hours to give me a formal send-off, like waiting with a kid for the school bus. Wearing his Hawaiian shirt, shorts, socks, and wingtip shoes, flanked by Esther in her eternal muumuu, they would wave a cheery goodbye from their closely clipped lawn . . . an impossibly beautiful canyon awash in brilliant green just minutes away from their suburban neighborhood.

I arrived at the university just after sunrise each day, when all I could hear was the crackling of bamboo tree trunks stretching in the morning breeze outside my office. It's an extraordinary sound that soothed my bones and excited something deep inside, like the rumble of summer thunder, or the groaning of ice under a frozen lake.

The ocean glistened; the heavy skies sang. Mangos dropped all around like summer peaches on the sidewalk. Notwithstanding the gecko lizards that frolicked in my bathroom sink and occasionally fell from the ceiling onto my bed (eeks!), the aura of Hawaii moved like a wave through me. My senses were in the tropics, but my heart was still hardwired to Kosova.

Berkeley

When my job in Hawaii ended, I returned to my default persona: student. Having finished a Master's Thesis on Kosova for UCLA's Ethnographic Arts program, I was ready for more. I'm not a scholar at heart, nor by any means an intellectual. I never had a family legion challenging me to greater accomplishments, except for my dad's classic one-liner: "No matter what you do, get the damn Ph.D." And I'm not ambitious. What drove me to return to academia was the desire for an intellectual toolkit I could use to understand what makes societies, in various spots on the planet, tick.

So I entered the University of California at Berkeley as an anthropology graduate student, thanks to the brilliant and generous Professor Eugene Hammel. A long-time student of Yugoslavia, and Peru before that, Gene's passion lay in unraveling social history through demographic portals. A Renaissance man par excellence, Gene is a scholar, electrician, builder, winemaker, sausage-maker, computer wizard before people knew what to do with them, exuberant and exquisite writer with amazing intellectual rigor, and a loving and involved grandfather. With a gentle smile under a big gray mustache, he graced Berkeley's hallowed halls.

Gene had always been curious about Kosova, which is why he helped me gain entrance to this esteemed institution. I had the great good fortune of having Gene as my anthropology mentor.

My other professors at Berkeley were also a stellar crew. Nelson Graburn headed Kinship Studies. A sharp-witted, spirited, red-mustached English gentleman of the old school, Graburn embodied the scholarship and esprit de corps of anthropology's British heyday. One could imagine Nelson on safari with fifty natives in a serpentine column carrying provisions for a scholarly expedition—then sipping cocktails in the evening as lions roared in the distance. Actually, Nelson's field site was Alaska, but you get the idea.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes was the youngest of the crew. Brilliant, beautiful, fearless, and feisty, Nancy had attained early activist credentials in the American Civil Rights movement and cut her intellectual teeth on studies of schizophrenia among Irish bachelor farmers, the madness of hunger and infanticide in Brazilian shantytowns, and the deinstitutionalization of the

severely mentally ill in South Boston. She advocated something called "Applied Anthropology"—the scholar as activist. Years later, when my role in Kosova had changed from passive researcher to active aid worker, I understood what she meant, and wished I had listened much harder back then.

Laura Nader (sister of the famous consumer advocate Ralph Nader) was the reigning matriarch of the department. She'd been around during the 1960s, when Berkeley's Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) achieved international infamy in its indictment of the United States government, culminating in protests against the Vietnam War which all but closed down the university. A student of Lebanese (her own roots) and Mexican societies, Laura's message was political and unequivocal: ideology is dangerous, and America is the sneakiest ideological regime to date. At least in Communist states, it's obvious when ideology is being crammed down your throat. In America, it's woven into popular culture in a cunning way that people don't notice.

As a student at Berkeley

With students and professors - University of California, Berkeley

As graduate assistants, we ran the courses for legions of undergrads, whom we were tempting away from the evening news and the popular rhetoric of American hegemony. Our job was to get them to question things. What was REALLY going on in Nicaragua, Bangladesh, and Brazil? How were multi-national corporations unraveling the lives and economies of indigenous peoples? What was America's secret role in atrocities taking place in these countries? We were undoing, undressing the evening news before our students' eyes. Sweet girls from the suburbs, perky smart pre-med guys, and half-asleep football hunks alike were bewildered, then amazed. Rattling the worldview of complacent youth, that was our mission.

In my own course of study, I was part of a group of twelve graduate students all on the road together to a Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology.

These folks were the cream of the crop. Most had graduated from top-notch universities like Stanford and Yale, had impressive gray matter, and loads of scholastic verve. All of my colleagues were passionate about the piece of the planet they had set out to study, but few had actually been there. Thus, while my classmates had the credentials, I had the fieldwork. We would take an anthropological theory, slice it, dice it, try to bite into the underlying logic, and see if the theory held up. I certainly enjoyed these mental gymnastics, but in the end, I held every theory we examined against one standard: is this going to help us figure out how the heck the people we're studying experience their world?

Small graduate seminars were the testing grounds for us: Ace it or you're out. Our professors had a collective mission: training us to question every inherited assumption about how various societies organize and perceive their lives. We made our way painstakingly—here nimbly, there clumsily—through the works of intellectual giants, some old-school, some new: Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Levi-Strauss, Chomsky, Foucault. It was a weighty game, testing to see whether you had the mental vigor to *get it*. During our graduate seminars, almost everything we read, every nuanced theory of social organization based on work in other parts of the world jumped out at me in neon lights as a way to expose underlying patterns. Every theory and cultural comparison helped bring into bright relief the human puzzle I had lived in Kosova.

7

The Anthropologist's Toolkit

Often when I tell someone I'm a cultural anthropologist, they say something like, "I *loved* my anthropology courses at college, I would have liked to major in that." Of course, most of these folks were fascinated by the subject, but they went on to more practical careers in law or dentistry or something. Not me.

When cultural anthropologists go to the field to study Inuit igloo-makers, schizophrenic Irish bachelors, or Guatemalan laborers, we're trying to figure out an implicit, unspoken rulebook that creates the framework of social life, and explain it to others. We're trying to understand and explain a highly complex way of life. Using theories and paradigms that scholars have constructed based on work with other societies, we sort out and try to make sense of unfamiliar systems of logic and belief.

In figuring out who Albanians are, it's helpful to compare them to people related to them ethnically, geographically or on the basis of history or religion. It's fascinating to discover what Albanians have in common with some of their neighbors, and how strikingly they differ. Equally interesting is what they share with peoples far away in time and space.

Much of my understanding of Albanian culture came through the heart and my intimate entry into the world of my new friends and loved ones. But my brain was also engaged in the enterprise. Here are some of the research tools in the anthropologist's toolbox.

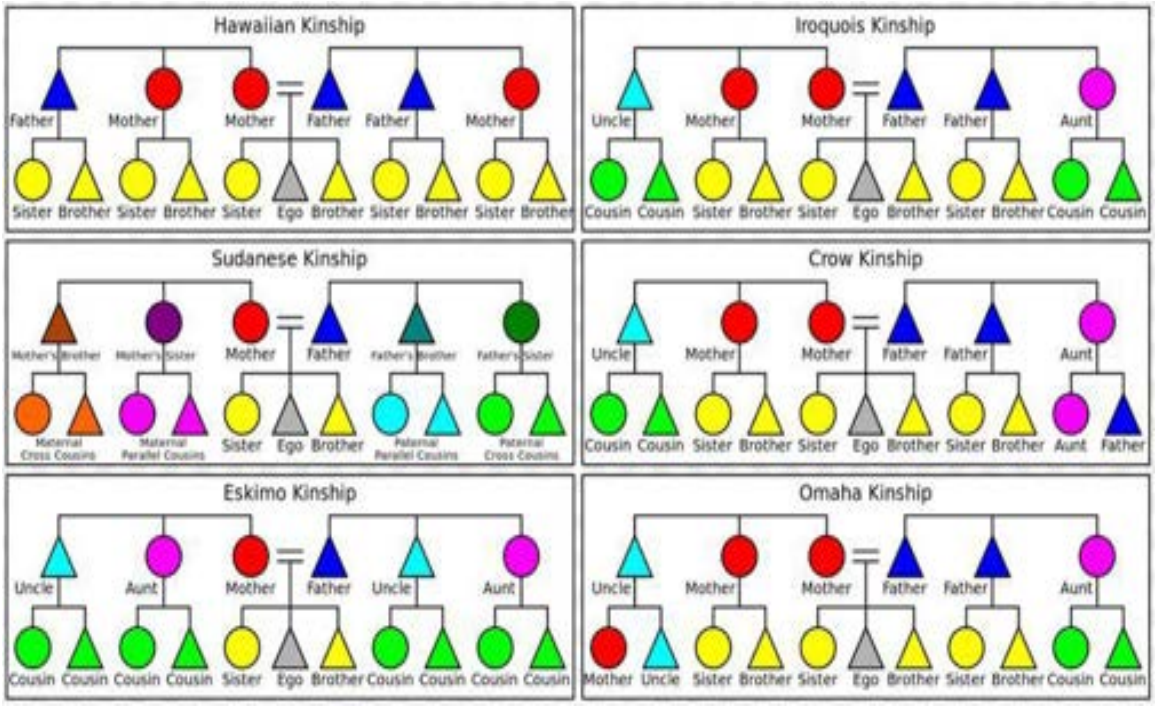
Kinship Terminology

Anthropologists spend a lot of time figuring out the terms people use for their relatives. It tells us a lot about the relationships an individual is expected to have with close and distant family members, and how those relationships inform behavior and perception.

Americans, for example, use the same kinship categories as Eskimos (in Alaska), using the same name for mother's sister and father's sister, and mother's brother and father's brother, and combining all the offspring of our mother's siblings and our father's siblings under one name, "cousin.". That's because, as a rule, our relationship to these sets of individuals on our mother's and father's sides is pretty similar.

The Albanian system is very different from this. It is actually closest to the Sudanese (African) kinship system. Unlike Americans and Eskimos, Albanians and the Sudanese have very different terms for (and relationships with) relatives on their mother's side vs. their father's side.

Unraveling kinship terminology with a family in Zhur



Comparing kinship systems

Hence:
- The men on your father's side are called *axha* (your father's brother's son, father's father's brother, etc.)
- The women on your father's side are called *halla*
- The men on your mother's side are called *daja* [pronounced DA-ya]
- The women on your mother's side are called *tezja*

The reasoning starts with being "patrilocal," meaning that upon marriage a woman goes to live with her husband's relatives, returning to her own natal family only occasionally after that. In extended families, the brothers, with their wives and children, all live together under one roof, or close by. Thus, most children grow up with their father and mother, the paternal uncles, the paternal uncles' wives and their uncles' children, who become like brothers and sisters to them.

A family compound with the wives and children of all the brothers living as one extended family

Here's the crucial point in understanding Albanian social structure: For Albanians still living in large extended families, the *axha* (father's brother) is an extension of the father. The axha commands unquestioned authority over nieces and nephews. A household boasting several well-respected, authoritative males projects an image of strength to the outside. Prior to becoming a "modern" nation in the 20th century, tribal law dominated Albania, blood feuds were common, and that image of strength was key to survival.

In contrast to the relationship to one's *axha*, one associates *daja* (mother's brother) with a deep sense of affection and ease. A visit to one's mother's brother is, both for these nieces and nephews, a respite from the

duties and constraints imposed in one's own home. While the relationships at home must contribute to a family's reputation of order and control, the mother's childhood family is not judged by the behavior of its nieces and nephews, who are much freer there. The mother's brother has no rights over his sister's children and is outside quarrels over inheritance. He is usually physically distant from the everyday problems and the hierarchy of authority the children live with and may be looked to for support and affection. As the saying goes, *Nipi të daja, si pula n'kollomoq, si bleta n'mjaltë* (A nephew at his mother's brother's is like a hen loose in the corncrib, like a bee in honey).

Albanians also attribute the special quality of one's relationship to the *daja* to the fact that a man knows that his sister's children are indisputably her children, he knows that they are definitely "related" to him. In contrast, while a man regards his brother's children as part of the all-important patriline, ultimately he is never sure if they are really his brother's offspring. This is another reason given for why he is more affectionate with his sister's children.

Bride Wealth

One of the keys to Albanian social life is something called "bridewealth"—the money and property a groom's family gives to a girl's family for the privilege of marrying her. This is key to understanding traditional societies because it gives rise to a whole array of customs, rituals and relationships between individuals, families and clans. Many Albanian fathers work abroad for years to raise the funds needed to provide the bedroom set, closet-full of gowns, and gold jewelry for his son's fiancée.

This custom of "paying" for the bride exists in many societies, but, interestingly, the Greeks (only five hours south of Kosova) have the opposite tradition. Their marriage customs revolve around "dowry"—the apartment, furniture, clothes, and money the bride's family must come up with to land a suitable husband. This is a crucial element organizing social life. It's fascinating for anthropologists that two societies, so close geographically, have completely opposite ideas about something quite fundamental to social life.

Exogamy

Albanians share the custom of bridewealth, and many other traditions and customs, with nearby Turkey and the Middle East. A fascinating

question is why, in the face of similar historical factors, Albanians and Middle Easterners have opposite beliefs when it comes to whom you're allowed to marry.

Albanians are highly *exogamous*—they never marry anyone to whom any genealogical link can be traced on the mother or father's side. According to Albanian logic, the purpose of marriage is to create an enduring bond with another family. Before incorporation into a nation state, when blood feuds ruled the countryside, these bonds guaranteed alliance in times of conflict, provided a friendly outpost on a potentially hostile landscape, and supplied economic links, all essential to the survival of the family.

This is in stark contrast to the practice of *endogamy* (cousin marriage) found in the Middle East. While the Koran does not advocate this practice, marriage with father's brother's son (*bint 'amm* in Arabic) occurs frequently. It is argued that this practice prevents the fragmentation of estates, strengthens the position of individuals within the lineage, and in this way maintains the solidarity of the group. A father's brother's daughter cares about her husband and his property *because they're also hers*. The marriage is also thought to be more affectionate, based on childhood closeness and shared interest. Women feel more secure and powerful in the marriage, surrounded by their own natal families. The functional arguments against endogamy and exogamy are truly a puzzle, when looking at cultures so similar in so many other ways.

Honor & Shame

Take then the notion of honor and shame, ndera and marre. I could write a book about this – it is absolutely key to Albanian worldview. I also have a great deal of personal experience with the powerful effect of this in all aspects of behavior in Kosova. Suffice to say here it's about the responsibility of women in upholding social mores, which reflects on men and their ability the behavior of family members – all of this as a way of demonstrating the STRENGTH of the family to outsiders. The dialectic of honor and shame is, of course, a guiding principle that can mean life or death in many parts of the world, from Sicily to Japan, Beirut to Bangladesh, but is not the prime directive among Albanians' closer neighbors, the Slavs and Greeks.

My Doctoral Research in Kosova

After two years of field research in Kosova for my Master's Degree, followed by several more summers in Kosova and two years of coursework at Berkeley, I was ready, in the summer of 1986, to return to Kosova backed by a dissertation research grant from Fulbright and the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX).

I had learned the languages fluently: formal and colloquial Albanian, and a version of Serbian spoken by the Kosova Serbs (that happily, as far as I was concerned, does away with a few grammatical declensions found in "proper" Serbian). I understood the ethnographic makeup of Kosova and could expound upon the subtle distinctions among its ethnographic zones. I was starting to understand the Albanian worldview: the flavor and shape of beliefs and convictions, the norms, the deviations. It was time to look deeper at all of this, equipped with the tools of anthropological analysis acquired at Berkeley.

In returning to Kosova, I wanted to:

- Tell about a population the world knew little about
- Report on individual perceptions of women's roles as compared with other Moslem and Mediterranean societies
- Uncover contrasting interpretations of the same reality—by women, by men, by conservatives and innovators
- Test the relationship between economic hardship, ethnic marginality, and the out-migration of men, and understand the degree to which these reinforced traditions from the past

As the outside world knew very little about the Kosova Albanians, I felt the responsibility of accurately representing a cross-section of Albanian life, from western-style city lives to the entrenched conservatism found in villages. I wanted to address the popular misconceptions of Albanians held by other Yugoslavs—to confront stereotypes of backward, fanatical, unschooled, uncouth, hot-headed Albanians. I wanted to tell the untold story about the modern Albanian lifestyle and worldview, to characterize Albanian lives without creating caricatures.

I also wanted to look at social issues simmering in the mainstream of Albanian life: the denial of high school education to many village girls, problems of high birthrate and infant mortality, the increasing reliance on

male out-migration, and ideological conflicts between past and present, fanaticism and modernity.

In 1986, I settled back into life in Prishtina, making frequent trips to villages in outlying areas. While I concentrated on the regions of Opoja and Has in the southwest, I also spent time in Gollak in the east, Llap in the north, and Rugova in the west. During previous fieldwork, I had developed a network of contacts throughout the province, and now made visits to families I knew or had introductions to. I participated in daily life, interviewed, and videotaped. People were happy to tell me about Albanian customs and their family's history, and were very open to being recorded and filmed. This is because they trusted me and understood my intentions, and were happy that I appreciated their culture so much and wanted others to know about it.

This arrangement gave my research both depth and breadth. It allowed me to become intimately involved in the domestic relationships, rituals, and intrigues of Albanian villagers negotiating city life in Prishtina. By developing long-term relationships with village families throughout the province, I could gain an understanding of pan-Albanian culture informed by regional variation. Living in Prishtina also allowed me to compare the cultures of different social classes with different relationships to change, from newly-arrived villagers, to their children reaching toward modernity, to the elite strata of officials and intellectuals.

The Past as Refuge

For my doctoral dissertation, I chose to focus on Albanian "fanaticism"—the adherence to old, outmoded, often abusive traditions and beliefs as a psychological refuge in the face of modernization happening all around Kosova. Since the rest of Yugoslavia, and Albanians themselves, were at once intrigued and victimized by the presumption of Albanian "backwardness," it was a subject ripe for observation, discussion, and debate. The specific topic gradually came into focus: It would be a study of out-migration as an agent in upholding conservatism in the region of Opoja.

These were my hypotheses:

1. Opojans appropriate tradition to elevate personal and ethnic identity in the face of economic and political marginalization. As villagers, Opojans

are seen as backward and are considered peripheral to a Kosova society trying to modernize. As Albanians in Yugoslavia, they are considered a disparaged minority. As Moslems in a land of Christians, they are seen as an uncivilized "other." When they're living as migrant workers abroad, they're an ethnic underclass. They respond to this by seeking refuge in the one thing that offers them a sense of personal and collective dignity: TRADITION. By grounding their behavior in the customary law that's passé in other parts of Yugoslavia, they see themselves as part of a unique moral community. *By appropriating the absolute authority of the past, they dignify their present lives*.

2. The migrant's experience abroad increases his moral conservatism at home. He maintains self-esteem by taking refuge in conservative ideologies of the past and by condemning modern lifestyles. His home community ascribes him status based upon the appearance of control, order, and the adherence to gender and age hierarchies in the extended family back home. Inspired by the "myth of return," (the often false assumption that his stay abroad is temporary), the migrant comforts himself during his tenure abroad with the knowledge that when he returns home to visit his family, the lifestyle, social roles, and values will be as he left them six or nine months ago. His negative perception of women's emancipation and his belief that it leads to family degradation further inspires an insistence on restraining women's actions back home.

3. With husbands away, the moral constraints on women are compounded. It is felt that families with husbands and fathers away in foreign lands for the better part of the year are more vulnerable to harm than families whose men are present. Rigid codes of behavior are imposed on the migrants' families, especially on the women, as a form of "protection." The absence of a family head also means there is no one present to assimilate or implement the incremental changes taking place in other regions.

4. Migration becomes a self-perpetuating economic and ideological force reinforcing conservative trends.

With the increase in material comfort brought by migrants' remittances, a vicious cycle is created: needs and expectations grow, and a subsistence-level economy is no longer adequate. The perceived necessity for hard currency is thus perpetuated. Women's acquiescence about the patriarchal structure is strengthened by increasing emphasis on material comfort. Recent innovations, such as the introduction of indoor plumbing, hot-water heaters, electric stoves, washing machines, the acquisition of status symbols (cars and TVs), and the huge investments in wedding costumes

and gold jewelry is thought to pacify women and tells husbands and fathers that they are providing a "good life" for their families, further encouraging out-migration.

I spent the next two years, from 1986 to 1988, living with Albanian families—talking about how they lived and what they thought about this way of life. This yielded hundreds of hours of taped conversations, videos and photographs, documenting a way of life that would, within two decades, be changed beyond all recognition.

A 1980s version of this (on the way to Prizren) built with migrant remittances – the brothers each have a house, close together, maintaining the extended family ethos

PART 2

Doctoral Research in Kosova
1986 – 1988

8

Return to Kosova for Doctoral Research

In 1986, with my coursework in anthropology at UC Berkeley complete, I was ready to return to Kosova for doctoral research. This time in my goal was to take a deeper look into Albanian culture—in particular, the effect of the out migration of men on identity, tradition, and ideological conservatism back home in Kosova.

During my first two years in Kosova, I had lived with Ferka, Isa, and Valentina in the basement room of their fancy three-story house in the capital city of Prishtina. Ferka, the quintessential urban Balkan landlady, had been kind and caring, and a supportive friend. When I returned to Kosova in the summer of 1986, I moved in with one of my favorite families in the neighborhood, the Sadiku's.

The Sadiku household consisted of mother Feride, father Feriz, and four of their five grown children. During the two years I lived with the Sadiku family, they experienced an entire spectrum of life-cycle rites and celebrations: engagement, marriage, migration, childbirth, and death. Both Feride and Feriz had grown up in villages on Kosova's eastern border. Betrothed at 14 to a boy she had never met, Feride was the quintessential Albanian peasant woman: strong as steel, completely self-sacrificing, no frills, unschooled but clever. Her quick, caustic wit was imbued with deep empathy. Her large, flowing dimia and pastel blouse sat squarely on her hearty frame. Her thin-lipped smile, small bright eyes, and large, high cheekbones were framed by a thin cotton scarf drawn tight around her head, revealing a little henna-dyed hair. Feride had a wonderful laugh, but her burdens were always there right behind her smile. Like all Albanian mothers, Feride bore mountains of trouble and sorrow that touched her through hundreds of close and distant relatives to whom she felt allegiance.

The marriage of Feride and Feriz, negotiated thirty years before I met them, was one of those arranged marriages that worked the way they're supposed to. The first time they saw each other was on their wedding night. Feride had grown up getting ready for the role she knew she would play, marrying a man she had never seen, dedicating her life to the family, upholding honor at all costs, and becoming an expert in the skills of *pajtim*. What she and girls like her hoped for was a husband who would provide for them and their children, treat them decently, and defend their honor. The boys hoped for a hard-working, modest, well-mannered girl who would bring no shame to the family, and who, above all, would give them sons. It's much easier to stay with a partner for life when the rules of the game are simple, when expectations are clear, when the goal is achievable.

The key to my life during those years was my relationship with Feride and Feriz, who became my surrogate parents, who saw me through difficult times, nourished my body and soul, and taught me the meaning of pain and joy, family, desperation, fortitude, and honor as experienced by Albanian villagers. Feride's reality was far from mine. Yet it was Feride who best understood me, and who, at the break of dawn on snowy mornings, helped me carry cameras and bags to the car, wishing me well on a trip to the field.

I always wish I had taken a picture of my boots when I returned from the field in wintertime—so thick with mud they had to be soaked and chiseled. I wish I could have bottled the sensation: my hair and clothes smelling of wood-burning stoves, my mind spinning with all I had experienced, the nobility of the Albanian spirit fueling my endeavor. My camera film and video cassettes used up, audio tapes full, and notebooks overflowing with stories, I returned to Prishtina to sift through the sensations, to order the experience, to refuel.

Feride

With Feride, my surrogate mom

Harvesting leeks in our garden

Making "fli" by setting a metal lid full of hot cinders on top of a pan with layers of huge pancakes

Cleaning rice with a neighbor – picking out a few tiny pebbles

Making baklava with the neighbors

Feasting on fli!

Buqe and Jasmine,
the two "brides" of our house

Tefik, Feride, Feriz, Rafete

Feriz's mother and father

Feride was the one who understood my exhaustion and brought me leftovers of food she had saved. She knew when I was sick or despairing and brought me soup and talked to me as she warmed her hands by the fire. While her adult children mocked my desire to record village life, in an attempt to distance themselves from their village roots, Feride caught the meaning, watched me, fed me, trusted my intentions.

Each morning at home would begin with the brushing and swishing sound—Feride washing the steps and sidewalks. Getting up early has great symbolic weight among Albanians—a sign of industriousness and devotion to the cause of the family. I was an early riser, often up early to help Feride or work on the computer. Feriz, sitting on the porch and dragging slow on a cigarette, pondering things, would comment, "Nusja e mire" (Good bride), referring to the fact that I was up early and already at work.

The atmosphere created in the few small rooms in that house, with such an abundance of family and humanity, was to me completely wonderful. Lunch at 3:00 p.m. consisted of beans with a few hunks of meat, or pite with spinach, or birjan. Afterwards, there was always tea.

Feride and Feriz were practicing Moslems. For Feriz, a man typical of his generation and class, this meant a Friday trip to one of Prishtina's mosques, where old men in white felt skull caps, and blue-collar workers like Feriz (the miners, the laborers, the janitors) all in jaunty dark blue berets, would crowd together in tight rows of straight lines on great Turkish carpets to bow, kneel, rise up, and kneel again *Me fal Gjyma* (to pray the Friday prayer). Feride prayed two times a day. When there was a lull in her work, she would go into one of the little bedrooms and lay out the cloth used by Moslems everywhere to define their personal, portable sacred space. Facing Mecca, she would begin her recitations in Arabic, comprehending only a few of the words, but internalizing the full meaning of this do-it-yourself communion with God. Children dashing in and out, TV on, me sitting there watching her or filming her—nothing bothered her.

Feride and I were good friends. We would sit together on tiny stools on that cold basement floor tackling together a mountain of dinner dishes—her leathery hands enduring the scalding dishwater, mine in rubber gloves. Feride in layers of hand-knitted sweaters, me in my heavy jacket as we worked. We talked of many things as we skinned the peppers, cleaned the rice, and peeled potatoes.

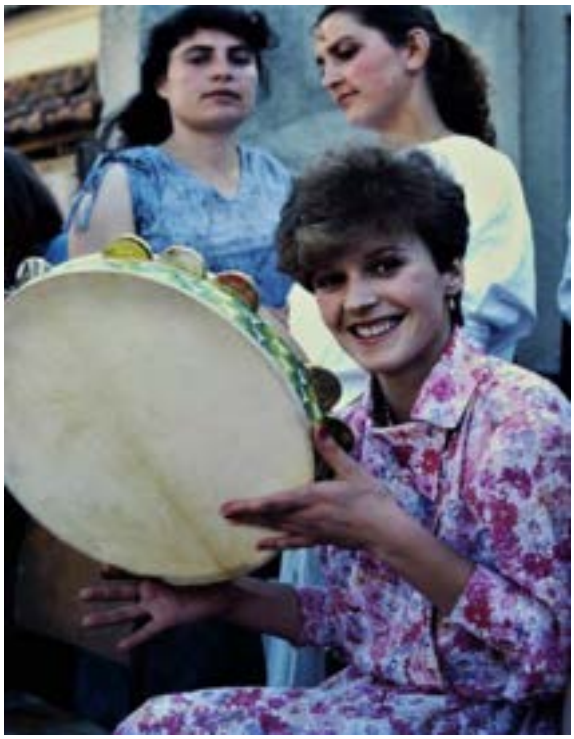
Feriz was also my pal. As we sat in the garden watching Feride tend her leeks or hang out the laundry, he would tell me of his work in the mines, his troubles, his jobless son, a house that needed expanding but had nowhere

to go. When the guests had left and just family was around, Feriz would lie on a cushion by the stove as I walked on his back, Thai massage style, to work out the knots and the troubles.

The neighbors, in houses connected by narrow pathways, though unrelated to the Sadiku's, were all like extended family. One of the women I was closest to was Nurie, a "bride" married to one of the brothers in the house next door. She was from a village in the region of Llap, north of Prishtina, and was one of the wonderful women I met in Kosova: strong, hard-working, always pleasant and gracious, modest and dignified, a beautiful dancer, and under it all, eager for knowledge. We spent many hours together at her house, as I continued to slowly learn the ways of Albanian women – their joys, and their worries, frustrations and dreams, and the acquiescence, *pajtim*, the key to survival as "bride."

Nurie

Neighborhood Weddings



My Orange K-14

By the time I returned to Kosova and set up house with the Sadiku's, the Secretariat for Internal Affairs (SUP) must have decided that I wasn't a CIA agent after all, as my movement around the province seemed to be of less interest to them. I could finally get around the rule of registering in every little place I visited. With Feride's house as my home base in Prishtina, it appeared that I was finally going to be able to really reach the remote villages I'd been waiting so long to learn about. For this, I needed a car.

Like everything else that should be a straightforward transaction, buying a car in Yugoslavia was an exceedingly tricky proposition. A Yugoslav couldn't buy from a foreigner; a foreigner couldn't buy from a Yugoslav. Thus, the pickings were slim for the few of us ex-pats floating around the country. Finally, I got a lead on a 1974 Volkswagen K-14, which, I'll bet, is a car you've never heard of. I traveled all the way to Istria, the peninsula at the top of the Adriatic Sea linking Italy and Croatia, to take ownership of the car. The car was a boxy, cartoon-like, four-door pumpkin-colored highly utilitarian vehicle that drove like a truck, but that's not all. The car had a history.

In Prishtina with Igballe Rogova and my K-14

Did you ever see the old movie, "The Yellow Rolls Royce"? If so, you'll know what I mean. The film follows the adventures of the car's three owners: an English diplomat (Rex Harrison), an Italian mob boss (George C. Scott), and a socialite (Ingrid Bergman). Each adventure climaxes in a forbidden love scene in the Rolls that forever changes the lives of the players. In the last story, Ingrid, a wealthy aristocratic traveling in Yugoslavia, is re-

luctantly drawn into the fray of World War II by a dashing peasant partisan (Omar Shariff). Omar persuades a reluctant Ingrid to turn the Rolls into a mountain taxi and transport the freedom fighters to and from their village strongholds in the thick of the fighting. This all climaxes, of course, in a steamy love scene with Ingrid and Omar in the back seat, bombs exploding in the distance. Great scene. I hope I've put you in the mood.

My pumpkin-colored K-14 was a real life, if more pedestrian, version of that yellow Rolls Royce. It had been in the hands of several Fulbright scholars in Yugoslavia who had used it during their research and had enlisted its service in their own adventures. I was to be the next and last owner of this strong and solid machine and did my part to add to its colorful story.

Igo, My Close Friend & Confidante

Around this time, I met Igballe Rogova, a young woman in her early twenties who was like no one else I knew in Kosova. The last born in a family of nine children, Igo, as she was called, carved a very unusual path for herself. While most girls her age, when not at school, were concerned with things "appropriate" for girls—maintaining their reputations, being dutiful daughters, and finding husbands—Igo was out exploring life, meeting people, doing things, and learning karate so she could defend herself in any situation! She had an amazing knack for languages and had picked up English so well, on her own, that she got the job as translator for the television station, creating the Albanian subtitles for their English language films. That's what she was doing when I met her. Her family had always been city people, originally from Gjakova, and she was keen to accompany me to Opoja and to Has. Unlike most city girls who wanted to keep their distance from village culture, Igo was fascinated by it and drawn to the people and their stories. These early expeditions were to have a major impact on Igo's life. In the 1990s Igo founded a group of women's activists in Has, which evolved into the extraordinary "Kosova Women's Network" [Rrjeti i Grave] representing the interests of women's organizations all over Kosova.

With Igo in Has

Igo and Bajram In Opoja

On TV with Igo

Igo - Leader of the Kosova Women's Network

9

Xhemali Berisha and the Mountains of Opoja

I had come to Kosova to document a culture by observing, asking questions, and collecting cultural artifacts. This I did, studying ethnographies, talking to scholars, and recording what I saw. But the real understanding of a people comes very slowly, through all the senses: sitting by the fire with old men reminiscing about their history, talking late into the night with young girls about their dreams, dancing to the powerful, penetrating sounds *of lodra and zyrla*.

Much of my understanding of Albanian culture came from my time in Opoja, a remote region in Kosova's southwest corner where, in the 1980s, archaic traditions were still the way of life.

To find Opoja, go to Prizren, head west toward the Albanian border, make a sharp left turn at the village of Zhur, then drive 45 minutes high up a serpentine mountain road. At the top, the beautiful Opoja valley unfolds before you, shimmering green in the spring and summer, snowy white all winter long.

Nestled in the arms of looming peaks, Opoja's twenty villages are spread out along the broad shoulders of majestic mountains under a vast open sky. Keep driving along the main road, past the clusters of villages, past the county seat of Dragash, and the road narrows into a twisting, chiseled path through the region of Gora into Macedonia.

The vistas of Opoja are stunning, the crystal-clear air intoxicating. But sadly, under all this beauty is a painful history of relentless poverty and suffocating conservatism. There's no doubt about it: Opojans, until recently, were one of the most old-fashioned, deeply traditional populations in Europe. This was due in large part to sheer isolation. Through the ages, those thirty-six kilometers of steep, twisting mountain roads served as a

mighty barrier between Opoja and the world beyond. The roads were often impassable in winter, cutting the region off from the rest of Kosova for almost half the year.

The conservatism was also due to the limited amount of arable land [tokë e punueshme], and the resulting out-migration of Opoja men seeking work abroad to keep their families alive. Migration brought more than livelihoods; it brought a stubborn allegiance to the past. The men lived in foreign cities, but their sense of self, of purpose, their manhood, stayed behind in Opoja. As long as everyone back home upheld the old-fashioned code of honor and decorum, their identity was safe. This was how Opoja culture had survived as the world changed around it.

Xhemali's Opoja

My friend Xhemali Berisha, Shota's Artistic Director, is the person who introduced me to Opoja, his homeland. He told me everything about his childhood in the place he loved so deeply— his *hiraeth*, the place where his spirit dwells. Like most Albanians, Xhemali found his identity in the history, culture, and ethos of his birthplace. Certain memories brought out the drama and romance of the place. He loved to tell these stories, and in doing so return to the nobler, more heroic era he remembered. His stories awakened in me a fascination for the place, and for the history it held. During breaks at Shota's rehearsals when I was dancing with the ensemble, he also taught me Kellçoja – the series of eleven men's dances that Opoja was famous for.

Xhemali was born in 1949 in Buqe, a small village of 500 people on the mountainside near the top of Mount Koritnik, gateway to the highlands of Northern Albania. The village was made up of the Berisha's and the Krasniqi's, two of Albania's thirteen original tribes. Xhemali's home was built by hand by his great-grandfather in 1890. It was constructed in the traditional style of the Albanian highlands, with walls of mud and stone, a meter thick, and a slate stone roof. For decades, the headman of the household had been Xhemali's grandfather, known as Veli Buqe.

"My grandfather Veli had six wives," he told me. "This wasn't so unusual then. According to Islam, a man can marry as many women as he can reasonably support, and our family was relatively prosperous. The family lived as Albanians had lived for centuries, in a large extended family, with everyone taking orders from Veli, *Zoti i Shtëpisë*. No one ever questioned his word. Everyone had to uphold the honor of the family at all times. Honor and reputation were everything."

By the time Xhemali was born, communism was dominating life in Eastern Europe. To turn a self-interested peasantry into a selfless proletariat, the governments of every East Bloc country set out to collectivize all property that had been in private hands. This meant that families with large holdings were forced to give the bulk of their land and property to the state. Party bosses and their minions ran the collectives. Farmers and shepherds, deprived of land and livestock, had no choice but to work for the collective, earning low wages and receiving social benefits in exchange for labor. A communist *esprit de corps* was expected to make up for individual initiative and incentive. This system was enforced with revolutionary zeal in most Iron Curtain countries.

Tito's version of communism was less draconian than in other East European nations. At least, that was the case in most parts of Yugoslavia. The situation in Kosova was different, due to the excessive demands of Aleksandar Ranković, the head of the Secret Police under Tito. Ranković had a special grudge against Albanians because of their irredentist tendencies. Many Albanians were suspected of being Ballista, a political group with anti-Yugoslav sympathies and allegiance to the neighboring country of Albania.

Xhemali (middle) with his father and brother Bajram

As Xhemali tells it: "Most Albanians had guns and other ammunition in their homes. It was part of being Albanian, part of our tradition. Ranković and his emissaries went house to house to find the weapons and brutalized many families, including mine. They would torture and imprison people who had guns, and beat up people who said they had none, accusing them of hiding the weapons. This happened to my father and one of my uncles. Another uncle spent two years in prison after one of these raids."

Ranković's brutal enforcement of the Communist party line brought an era of privation and misery to the Kosova Albanians. Veli (Xhemali's grandfather) had considerable holdings of land and livestock, and a grain mill in service to nearby villages. Everything was taken away in the late 1940s, leaving Xhemali's family in poverty. "It was a catastrophic time for us," Xhemali recalled. "It was like feudalism. No one could own anything. We were just surviving."

Veli died in 1948, the year before Xhemali was born. With the old man gone, the large Berisha family was divided up into smaller family units. Though smaller and poorer, the family still upheld the rigid social structure and moral code handed down from centuries past. The head of the household ruled, commanding absolute respect from all family members. Everyone's lives, including those of women married into the family, were dedicated to the survival of the group, and the honor of the Berisha name.

Village Life in the 1950's

When Xhemali was a boy, the men of the village spent the evenings in the company of their neighbors. While women and girls remained home, squatting on small wooden stools by the wood-burning stove, tending to chores and children, the men and boys paid visits to each other's houses. These were favorite times for Xhemali. It was during these evening visits that the real lessons of history, politics, and tribal lore were learned. And it was on those winter nights that Xhemali found his singing voice and his talent for telling tales.

Sitting cross-legged on *shilte*, the men told jokes, talked politics in low voices, told stories, and sang epic songs of tragedy and heroism in the style of Homer. With crude wall lamps fueled with pine sap casting long shadows on chiseled faces, those with a gift for spinning a yarn could weave a tale into the late-night hours. Legends and lessons were passed down through the generations in this way. Xhemali listened, and, in this way, learned the history of his people and the art of song and storytelling.

For most Opojans, the lessons learned in the company of older men were the only education they received. Before World War II and the birth of Tito's Yugoslavia, there had been almost no instruction in Albanian. Xhemali's father had completed only five years of formal schooling, learning to read and write in Serbian, in the Cyrillic alphabet—not the Latin alphabet in which Albanian is written. Xhemali's was the first generation of children to attend school in Albanian. In the early 1950s, a school opened

in the village of Brodosanë across the valley, and Xhemali was among a handful of boys from each village chosen to attend. He completed eight years of primary school in Brodosanë, a ten kilometer walk from Buqe.

In contrast to the intensely close, honor-bound village life that closed in around Xhemali were the wild meadows and forests surrounding his small village. At harvest time, Xhemali worked with his father at his grandfather's mill, a lonely place far from the village. "We would carry the heavy sacks of wheat and barley to the stone grinder and watch it turn into fine flour. We went in the afternoon and stayed until morning, sleeping on sacks of grain, lulled to sleep by the rhythmic grinding of the mill wheel," he remembered. "Before electricity came to Opoja, the nights were dark as ink. Not just dark as you and I know it today, but absolute black. There was much for a young boy to be afraid of out there in the night. The legends of *shtrige* and *zana* inhabiting the woods and fields, so much a part of our folklore, made it even scarier."

The walks to school in Brodosanë were long and lonely, especially in winter months with strong winds and snowdrifts up to a man's shoulders. "Our schoolroom was heated by a wood stove. Between my house and the welcoming embers of that stove . . . was wilderness. Every day I carried a hunk of bread and a piece of cheese to last the whole day. Sometimes there were wolves on the prowl…."

Xhemali's boyhood was full of adventure. A life that concealed and confined women and girls presented abundant opportunities for a mischievous mountain boy. Sometimes, when the snowdrifts were too high, or other enticements lured him off track, Xhemali would stop off on the way home from school in the village of Kosavë not far from Brodosanë. Kosavë was the village his mother came from, and home of his *dajallart*.

An Albanian's relationship with the people in his mother's clan is a very special one. At home, one lives with one's father and paternal uncles (the *axhallart*) and their wives and children. Everyone in this household must behave according to strict rules at all times, to uphold the reputation of the family. In contrast, one's mother's family is not judged by the behavior of the nieces and nephews, and a visit to one's mother's natal home is, for them, a respite from the duties and constraints imposed at home.

As a prankster, singer, storyteller, and all-around charmer, Xhemali was a favorite nephew, and he loved spending time there, away from the control and rigidity of his own village, where he had to behave properly.

Migration Blues

When Xhemali was only nine years old, his life changed forever when his father Gani Berisha left home in search of work to support his growing family. The out-migration of men had long been a way of life in Opoja, which never had enough good pasture or farmland or any indigenous industry to support its population. To be an Opojan was to be a migrant, or to be the son, brother, father or the wife, sister or daughter of a migrant.

In the early 1920s, many Opojans had traveled to Turkey and found work selling sweets—an occupation that became their trademark for decades to come. In the 1950s, when the integration of Yugoslavia under Tito coupled with Rankovic's brutal policies encouraged internal migration, the men of Opoja made their way to northern Yugoslav cities. Opojans sold ice cream in tiny ice cream stores all over the country—from Adriatic ports to bustling Slovenian boulevards and sleepy Serbian towns. They were also employed as physical laborers wherever they could get work. In the 1970s, West Europe beckoned, and hundreds of Opojans, alongside masses of other Yugoslav peasants, answered the call, scrambling to do the dirty work that Germans, Swiss, and Austrians were ready to hire out.

Gyrbet was the curse of existence for families left behind. The bitter longing for sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers living far from home was a fact of life in Opoja, lamented in countless sayings and songs:

> *Kush s'ka hangër merzinë e gyrbetit nuk e din qysh është, kjo jetë.*
> He who has not tasted the sorrow of migration doesn't know what this life is about.
>
> *I ndam dhe i perqam, veq për një dinar*
> Separate and exiled, just for one dinar.

Most Opojans agreed that despite the hardship that migration inflicts on the man working abroad, and on his wife and family back home, the sacrifices made were worth the improved living standard back home. When I asked whether it would be preferable to have a lower standard of living but have the men at home, a typical response was, "No! Everyone is used to the idea that it's normal for one man to sacrifice for the good of the rest. One goes, and the rest live well."

When Xhemali's father left for Beograd in 1958, he first got work as a laborer. Eventually he became a fireman in a Serbian factory. In those days, Beograd was the destination for many of Opoja's men living away from

home to earn money for their families. They lived on beans and bread, sharing tiny flats with several other men, saving all their money to send home. For Gani, living in a Slavic, Christian Orthodox, Socialist town, was like living in a foreign country.

Though Beograd was only a ten-hour bus ride from Prizren, Gani's visits home were rare. "To save money," Xhemali told me, "the men came home just twice a year—for a month in the summer to harvest crops, and few weeks in the winter to cut wood that would last the year. My father lived in Beograd for 26 years. This wasn't unusual. Many Albanian boys grew up without fathers."

Gani & Azemine

Gani was a man who lived by the strictest version of Albanian tradition. Even during his rare visits home, the family deferred to him completely. "We all showed great respect for my father. We were careful of everything we did and said around him. One 'psst' from him and there was silence. As the eldest son, my relationship with him was the most formal. I said nothing unless he spoke to me. I never looked my father in the eyes."

But underneath this formality was a deep bond between Xhemali and his father. "I remember so well, burying my face in the shirt my father left behind to feel close to him."

As the eldest of seven children, and with no other able men in the house, it fell upon Xhemali to care for the others and bear, as much as he could, the mantle of the household. Like all the boys his age, he worked the fields,

cutting and threshing the grains alongside the men at harvest time, caring for the cows and water buffalo, and hiking up the mountain for firewood he carried home on his back.

His mother, Azemine, did everything she could to keep the family going in the harsh mountain setting. Even water was scarce. The plentiful mountain run-off ran to other villages, leaving Buqe with very little water. The twelve-meter well that grandfather Veli had dug by hand decades earlier had nearly run dry. Xhemali's father sunk the well further, digging, again by hand, to a depth of 21 meters, and installed a pump so they would have a little water for the family.

Xhemali remembers learning the skills of surviving: "My mother worked day and night, like all the Opoja women whose husbands were away. There were eight children in our family, but two of my sisters died—one at thirteen of heart trouble; the other as an infant. When my mother was busy tending the fields or livestock, I watched over my younger brothers and sisters. When the twins Ridvan and Shirine were babies, there was no bottle to feed them. So, swaddled and strapped together, head to foot, in a rough wooden cradle, I gave them cow's milk with a spoon. Sometimes I would steal a handful of sugar that was hidden away for a special occasion. That's my only memory of sweets," he said. "The only grains we could grow were corn, oats, and barley. Wheat didn't grow well in Opoja, so we lived mostly on cornbread, beans, and milk products. Meals with meat were rare—usually just when important guests came to visit. When things were really bad, when I was young, airplanes dropped bags of wheat flour on our village. This was the first time I was aware of a place called America."

Leaving Home

Xhemali's generation was a historic one in Opoja, as the first to attend elementary school in the Albanian language and go to high school and beyond. It was a monumental turn of history, ushered in by Tito's vision of an equalitarian, educated country. Until the 1960s, there were few choices open to the young men of Kosova, especially those in isolated rural areas. Either they made a meager living in agriculture, followed the path of Islam and attended a *madrasa*, or became migrant laborers. In Opoja, migration was the answer for most men. But they paid with their lives for the income they brought to their families: decades of deprivation, living a shadow life as second-class citizens in a foreign land. Gani was determined that his sons would become educated and help lead the family, and the region, out

of poverty and dependence.

Xhemali told me that one of his strongest memories was during a visit to his father in Beograd with his younger brother Bajram. “Walking through the streets one day, my father pointed to some ditchdiggers and declared, ‘If you don’t do well in school, that’s how you’ll spend your lives!’ My father’s words became our destiny; whatever happened, we were going to finish school and avoid the migrant’s life.”

Shota

It was Gani’s dream that his eldest son become a doctor, but by the time Xhemali was ready to start high school, it was clear that his future lay elsewhere. He was already well-known in Opoja as a singer, dancer, and musician, and was determined to study at the Music High School in Prizren.

Xhemali directing Shota

Nexhmije Pagarusha

In 1969, the Shota Ensemble performed in Opoja's little town of Dragash. After the performance, the locals wanted to show the visitors the rich folklore tradition of their region and insisted that Xhemali perform. He impressed everyone, including Shota's Director Naire Surroi and Kosova's most famous singer of the era, Nexhmije Pagarusha, who was performing with Shota. Shota was in search of young talent, and Xhemali was invited to join the ensemble. Within a year, they offered him a chance to attend choreography school in Bulgaria. When he graduated, he became Shota's Artistic Director, and through the years created a repertoire that brought the best of Albanian dance and music to Kosova, Yugoslavia, and beyond.

We are all influenced, more or less, by the events of our early lives. Xhemali spent his childhood in poverty and isolation set against extraordinary natural beauty, and then spent his adulthood as a well-known choreographer, living comfortably in Prishtina and traveling the globe. But his connection to the Albanian deep past, as revealed in the traditions of Opoja, are what fueled his spirit and gave him his identity.

Xhemali drumming for Shota

Xhemali with çifteli

10
Fieldwork in Opoja

From my earliest days in Kosova, I had a great desire to do my research in the remote mountain regions of Opoja and Has on the Albanian border. Given Yugoslavia's difficult relationship with Albania in the 1980s, my mentor (and the police he was undoubtedly conferring with) wanted to keep me away from the border zone. This was easy for them, given a law that said all foreigners conducting field research in Yugoslavia had to be accompanied by a local expert in their discipline.

There were a handful of ethnologists, folklorists, and archaeologists in Kosova who would have made suitable chaperones, so it wouldn't seem too difficult to find a willing collaborator. But it was more complicated than you would think. The problem was that most of the people in my field were men, and traveling alone with a man you weren't related to didn't look good when arriving at a village.

As for the female ethnologists, there were two at the Albanian Institute, but both were very busy taking care of family and home while trying to research and publish. They had no particular incentive to take on the extra task of accompanying me to do fieldwork. Some were hesitant to be associated with an American, given the tense political environment. Any American, even one speaking with poor farmers in remote villages, could be suspected of being a CIA spy trying to uncover state secrets.

The fact is, none of the ethnologists were very interested in much fieldwork. This was quite ironic. They were, after all, professional academics whose research and writing depended on cultural artifacts found in the countryside. In truth, they made the minimum required number of fieldtrips each year, always in organized groups, descending upon a village for a fact-finding mission like vultures on a fresh kill, returning home in time for dinner.

Back in January of 1983, more than a year after I first arrived in Kosova, a woman from the Albanian Institute agreed to accompany me to Opoja. I was so excited to get there after hearing so much about the region from my friend Xhemali, but the trip was a disappointment. When we met at the bus station for the three-hour trip to Opoja, she had arrived without even a pen or piece of paper. So much for ethnographic preparation.

First trip to Opoja with a colleague from the Albanian Institute

Finally we ascended the winding road up into the Sharr Mountains and I saw the wide, beautiful, wild alpine valley for the first time. But when we arrived in the little town of Dragash, I quickly understood how my colleague's presence would confine me. Our interactions were limited to formal meetings with approved local representatives in their cold, stale, Socialist offices—not the warm and informal village visits I was hoping for.

The trip was unremarkable, except for one thing. While there, a government official advised me to seek out Sadri Qaflesh in the village of Bellobrad. "He's an unusual, gregarious fellow, someone who might not fear contact with an American." It would be three and a half years until I could return to Opoja and meet this extraordinary man and his family.

Dissertation Research in Opoja

The purpose of my earlier years in Kosova, from 1981 to 1983, had been to complete the research for my Master's thesis. I returned in June of 1986 to conduct fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation. This time I was determined to reach the remote regions I wanted to study. Three things made this possible: I wasn't given an official mentor to watch my every move, the political situation had relaxed a bit, and . . . I had a vehicle! I immediately made plans to get to Opoja.

This is where I had longed to be, far above the Kosova plains, up in the ancient highlands. I made my way to Opoja and settled in to document a way of life, to understand the traditions of engagement, marriage, and the politics of the extended family, and to experience this world in a deep way.

Opoja had been isolated for centuries from the forces of trade and politics and the ideas and developments that had influenced Kosova's lowlands. It is a place of extraordinary contrasts. The brilliant greens of spring and summer give way to five months of dense snowy winter. One family barely survives on marginally productive land, while their neighbors live in relative luxury, thanks to generous remittances from sons and husbands living abroad.

The out-migration of men brought more than new cars, fancy furnishings, and elaborate weddings. It carved out a certain way of life and inspired an unyielding obedience to the past. The Opoja that I came to know well, at the end of the 1980s, was just beginning to peel back centuries of fanaticism.

Bellobrad

When I arrived in Opoja in 1986 I went straight to Bellobrad, where I was told I could find Sadri Shefiku, the man I learned about on my first trip to the region. As promised, Sadri was a man of odd distinction, a rare bird in a community bound by conformity. He was eager, outgoing, and immensely helpful to me. It was with Sadri's family that I established a base for my fieldwork, and a second home.

Sadri was unique in many ways. You could tell right away by his clothes. In the 1980s, most Opoja men over fifty either went hatless, wore the modest blue beret of the socialist proletariat, or the traditional *plis*. Sadri, in strange contrast, was never seen without his old gray hat. Where the beret and *plis* said "Tradition," Sadri's hat was an attempt to say "modern." In all seasons, day and night, at the dinner table or hanging out with friends

on the village street corner, Sadri sported his signature outfit: old suit, crumpled tie, hat. In the remote, dramatic mountain expanse of Opoja, he was one of a kind.

Sadri was also a relic of a young Socialist government trying to bring a new Yugoslav culture to Kosova. Sadri navigated the village politics that balanced old-style tribalism and the mandates of new-style communism. Sadri had been a low-level official in his early years, but by the time I met him, he had been relegated to running the village library he had built. The job lacked prestige, but no other Opoja village had a library . . . because no other village had Sadri. He was very pleased to host the only American in Kosova, relishing in the special status this gave him. He would invite local leaders to the house to meet me so they could educate me about Opoja—its troubles, past and present.

Like many men of his generation who had chosen to get an education instead of becoming a migrant, Sadri had been underemployed for a long time. His brothers had all left home to make money abroad: one in Sweden, one in Beograd. To make ends meet, his wife Hana took in work as a seamstress. Her kitchen was filled with cascades of white satin for Opoja's bridal costumes. This is how they kept the family going.

Sadri and Hana with Flamur

Besa

A bride serving refreshments to Sadri and guests

The Bellobrad girls

By the time I met Sadri, his sunken and yellowed eyes, thin and reddened cheeks, and frail frame left no doubt that he was an alcoholic. Everybody knew it; nobody talked about it. Religious Albanians didn't touch alcohol. But in the sixties, drinking *rakia* was another grasp at modernity. No men's gathering at Sadri's home was complete without brandy all around. Islam and abstinence were the past. Communism and *rakia* were symbols of the future.

His drinking and political dealings aside, Sadri was a kind man, a big dreamer in a landscape of social conformity and political compliance, and a beloved and loving Dad. Of course every Albanian family has to have a son. In Sadri's case, it took six tries to finally accomplish this.

While other Opoja girls spent their adolescence carefully cultivating a reputation of chastity and industry by working on their çejz, Sadri's five daughters were out and about. This was all Sadri's doing. With no patience for Opoja's old-fashioned ways, he had opened the door for his girls. Two worked at the yarn factory in Dragash, one was in medical school, one studied dentistry, one had plans to study architecture. All were destined to find husbands on their own. Arranged marriages? Not for Sadri's girls!

Sadri's wife went along with this emancipated thinking. An astonishing woman, Hana was hardy, hard-working, and selfless—the anchor of the family. Laughter spilled easily from her small rosy lips and danced in her twinkling dark eyes. Her smiling, red-cheeked face and large, soft figure framed in flowing white, gathered *dimia* offered comfort to all. Her small home business, sewing Opoja bridal costumes, filled a corner of the kitchen with piles of white satin so incongruous with the rough exterior world beyond the kitchen door. Hana and her home became a haven for me. Each time I returned from long, baffling, exhilarating, exhausting fieldwork in nearby villages, she was ready with good company, steaming tea, and her specialty: thin squares of homemade cheese, fried on the outside, soft and tasty on the inside. This cheese, *Djathi i Sharrit* (cheese from the milk of Sharr mountain sheep) was prized all over Kosova.

There's nothing like a household of vivacious young women to lift the heart. While I delighted in the swirl of Sadri's girls, they delighted in the diversion my visits offered, and in being "the family hosting the American."

Of all the girls, I was closest to Besa. A girl of 18 when we met, Besa was working part-time at the local factory. Unlike any of the other Opoja girls, as Sadri's daughter, she was free to travel around with me. This was a godsend. It wouldn't have done for me to go out alone, and Besa was a willing helper.

There we were: two pals out on our own, on the mountain roads, bouncing along in my orange K-14. The car stood out like a lone pumpkin in a big empty field. In 1986 Opoja, no women drove cars, which made the sight of us even more striking. We made it a habit to give rides to women and children walking between villages, much to their astonishment.

Another advantage of staying with Sadri's family in Bellobrad was their other home industry (in addition to sewing for brides). For many generations, Sadri's family had run the village *mulli*. This was, to me, the jewel in the crown of that lively little village. It wasn't just an ordinary mill for grinding wheat and corn or cutting lumber. The stream that turned the grinding stone and the saw also powered the *valavicë*: an amazing ancient contraption consisting of two giant wooden hammers that pounded raw wet wool into felt for the *tirq*, traditional men's costume. When the stream was running strong, the wheels would start to move, turning huge wooden pistons that rotated the stone that ground the grain, activated the saw that cut the wood, and set in motion the giant hammers that pounded the wool.

The mill was in back of Sadri's house, down a little hill, by the stream. On a warm summer afternoon, you could escape into the cool darkness of the old mill shed, thin rays of sunlight dancing on the old stone wheels, and experience a beautiful portal into antiquity.

Ah, but at night . . . I would go to sleep in my little room upstairs, the last embers of a fire crackling in the pot-bellied stove, the night outside still, cold and black, with the hammers of the *valavicë* pounding away like a heartbeat, as they had done for centuries. Bliss.

During those early months in Bellobrad, there were many trips to other villages to talk with people about their lives, observe rituals, document celebrations, take part in daily life. Opoja became a home to me, as I carved out my own relationship to the breathtaking landscape and the contradictions and conundrums of the human space.

The power of this mountain wilderness hit me most when driving alone, as I occasionally did, on the long stretches of road between villages. Sometimes the vastness was welcoming, like being held in the cupped hands of a gentle giant. At other times, especially as night approached, the place was ominous, threatening. On one such night I was out alone in the K-14 returning to Bellobrad after filming a wedding. The sky had been heavy all afternoon, holding back a summer storm. Finally, it let loose: a wild and magnificent mountain downpour—a dark, huge, electric drama. Suddenly, with a loud boom and slow hiss, my front right tire blew. No houses in sight, no other cars. Slim chance that anyone else would be

out on the road in this weather. So I kept going, thudding and scraping rhythmically into the wild night. At last, I arrived at the junction of the main road—tire worn down to the metal, nerves frayed. Standing alone in the storm, in the dark, I got my bearings and realized where I was. The first car along brought folks I knew who stopped, took control, and put the pumpkin and me back together.

On occasions such as this, I was always glad to return home to Bellobrad. Arriving bedraggled and exhausted, I escaped into the luxurious fortress of care and the embrace of the Qaflesh family, the hammers of the *valavicë* beating their rhythm into the night and into my being.

Sadri & Bajram with my K-14

An Opoja Wedding

Summertime is wedding time in Kosova, and Besa and I were frequent guests at these long, intense, intricate dramas. One of the weddings we took part in was at her cousin's house, just across the village from Besa's. As her family was very much a part of this celebration, my vantage point was intimate, the experience very revealing.

The groom, Fatmir, was a handsome young man who had previously caused a scandal by falling in love with a girl from his own village. Exogamous to the core, Albanians avoid at all costs marrying someone from within their own village, even if the boy and girl are unrelated. So even though the girl was not related to Fatmir, the family wouldn't let him marry her because she was from Bellobrad, and because they had no hand in arranging the union. Though modern in some ways, Bellobrad just wasn't ready for a love match without *msit*.

So, much to his heartbreak, the girl Fatmir loved was married off to someone else in the proper way, according to the wishes of her parents, and he faced a similar fate. He had never seen the girl his family had found for him. Happily, he would soon discover that Sadete, his bride-to-be, was a real beauty—his perfect complement, small and slender, with long black hair and doe eyes [drenushë].

Among Albanians, as in many societies, weddings are the quintessential expression of tradition. The rituals serve two important functions: They express what it means to be Albanian, and they put the prestige and honor of the bride's and groom's family on elaborate display. In America, though preparations stretch over many months and frequently drive the bride and her mother crazy with to-do lists, the actual wedding and related festivities take just a day or two. An Albanian wedding, in contrast, begins weeks before the actual wedding day, the groom's entire village celebrating with music, dance, and the gradual arrival of kin from near and far. While the groom's village celebrates, the bride's extended family prepares, with solemnity and sadness, for her departure and complete transformation into a *nuse* – bride.

The bride's ritual separation from her nuclear and extended family begins on Saturday during the *kanagjegj* (night of the henna) from the Turkish *kina gecesi*. With her female friends and relatives gathered around, the girl moans and cries until late at night, driven by the sobbing and the pained embraces of the family and friends she is soon to leave, and by the

sad songs of parting sung to drive home the point. It's as if the women in her life are spinning a protective cocoon of love around her. After two days of embraces and tears, the bride has purged herself of emotion. The catharsis has left her drained and numb—perfect for the ordeal she is about to endure.

Example of a Kanagjegj Song:

Kaj oj moter, niu të ura	Cry, sister, let them hear you to the bridge
T'kanë mastru fustanet me lula	They fooled you with fancy dresses with flowers
Ani kur t'vin tuj vjetru	When you get old
Ani vjen mërzia tuj tu shtu	Your heartache will increase
Kaj oj motër, o lotet sa gruni	Cry, sister, tears as big as grains of wheat
Çka pat baba e moj qe t'përzuni	What did you do to make your father kick you out?
Unë babës ju mërzita	You made your father sad
Bajram e Shingjergj fustan i lypa	Asking for new dresses for Bajram and St. George's Day
Kaj oj moter, fustanin me via	Cry, sister, in the striped dress
Ani po t'thirr nana me qitë flia	Your mother calls you to make the "fli"
Kur ti pa e o gishtat me kanë	When I saw the henna on your fingers
Shpresa e çikës m'paskat lanë	The hope of my girlhood was gone
Çu oj motër, lute nanën	Get up, sister, ask your mother
Mos e le o me ta ngjit kanën	Don't let them put the henna on you
Çu oj motër, lute tezën	Get up, sister, ask your aunt
Mos e le me ta bo t'zezën	Don't let her do you wrong


Kanagjegj in Bellobrad

In the morning, the bride is physically transformed from an unadorned girl—her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, her clothes hanging loosely on her frame—to a regal, resplendent Opoja bride. Her hair teased and molded into a high hair-sprayed nest is topped by a crown of tatted wire flowers. Her face is painted a pasty white, her lips red, her forehead and cheeks adorned with tiny swirls of fine glitter like the sky in van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Several gold rings and a new watch are worn over white gloves. Fancy gold earrings and layers of gold necklaces and medallions bear witness to the investment her soon-to-be in-laws have made in her. Her costume is all white: twelve meters of white satin gathered together into *dimia*, and the *minton*—a tight-fitting white satin vest with enormous puffed sleeves. From girl to bride, in a matter of hours.

From the moment she is dressed in the bridal costume, the girl becomes silent, still, and stoic, standing *divan*—locked into a rigid pose, physically and mentally, which will be her defense in the exhausting days and weeks to come. Slowly Sadete was led to the veranda and placed in the line of other women who were married into the groom's family for all the other women gathered to inspect. Once everyone had a good look, Sadete was led to the threshold of the house where she would perform the first marriage ritual: dipping her lace-gloved fingertips in honey water and lightly touching the top of the doorway three times to ensure a sweet, harmonious life with her in-laws. She stepped across the threshold, right foot first for good luck, and so ritually entered her new life.

While all this was going on, the groom had been celebrating in a neighbor's house with the men of the village. We had all inspected his bride from head to toe, but he still had no idea what she looked like.

After days of preparation and ritual songs and visits, at the end of this long day of dancing and feasting, it was finally time for the highpoint of

the wedding when the two young people would meet for the first time. Sadete was led to the *xherdek*, the bridal chamber, before Fatmir came near the house. A few girls sat silently by her side as she waited—anxious and exhausted. I sat next to her, and felt her shiver with the excitement and trauma of her situation.

After half an hour, we heard the distant squeal and rumble of the *zyrla* and *lodra* in the groom's entourage as he made his way through the neighborhood, past the mosque, through the courtyard, to his awaiting bride. After farewells and blessings from the *Imam*, the throng of male family members pushed him with a hoot and holler into the room where his bride stood motionless, speechless, eyes cast down.

Sadete later described this first encounter to me: "Fatmir welcomed me to his house and I did the *temena*. I said nothing. He told me to make a coffee for him and for myself on the little hotplate there. I lit his cigarette and three times he blew out the flame. He stepped on my foot and hung his jacket on the nail over mine, all of this to tell me I would be under his command. He didn't talk much, just told me not to worry. His sister had told me what to do. I didn't sleep at all that night."

She was awakened at 4 a.m., dressed again in her full bridal regalia and prepared for a morning of special Opoja wedding rituals—each one designed to test her and bless her, to bring her quickly, publicly, seamlessly, into the heart of her husband's family.

First the close family members gathered for the ceremony of the *petllat*. Without touching or making eye contact, the bride and groom pulled at opposite ends of a pancake to see who would get the larger piece—symbolizing dominance in the relationship. (This was, of course, just a game; we all knew who would dominate.) Then they each sipped from the same spoon of sugar water so that their union would be sweet. Once this was done, Sadete left the room, quickly, silently, walking with her back to the door, eyes cast down, modesty and subservience expressed with every step.

Then it was time for the songs of the *temena*. For an hour the girls crowded together at the feet of the bride, singing about her beauty and requesting variations on the temena—a lavish, elaborate, highly stylized hand gesture performed by the bride as a sign of respect to those around her. Standing erect and silent, she lifts her hands ever so slowly and dramatically in a solemn, graceful gesture to her heart, above her head and back down the sides, adding her own special flourish at the end. It's a beautiful ritual, and an important chance for the bride to demonstrate her grace, beauty, and poise, and for those assembled to evaluate her. Many brides utter a deep

sigh with the out-breath at the end of the movement, as if to recover from both the exertion of the movement and the burdens of her new life.

The *temena* is performed by brides throughout Kosova, but is much more elaborate in Opoja than in any other region. Each bride creates her own trademark style of performing the gestures, enticing her onlookers like a spider inviting its prey. She fixes her facial expression: a discrete smile, her eyes cast low, catching and holding her subjects. The contact is powerful but fleeting—a magical moment of empathy and commiseration between the bride and her audience. As Besa told me: "It's like saying, 'With the heart I love you, with the mouth I speak to you, with the eyes I see you.'"

After the temena ceremony, at 9:00 a.m. came the Groom's Dance—a spontaneous performance of the beautiful cycle of Këllçoja, the eleven men's dances found only in Opoja. Then back to the girls, the bride pouring the water for each girl to wash her face and hands—without a word, gently smiling, her gestures delicately expressing precision and care. Then suddenly all this discretion and modesty are cast aside as the girls enjoy some special fun, performing skits that include comical, sometimes lewd cariacatures of family members. The bride is tasked with setting things right, rearranging the clothes and hair of the actors to return them to their proper roles, sweeping up corn kernels and pebbles the girls keep throwing on the ground. It's all in fun, but makes a serious statement about the bride's service and subservience to her new family.

In the hours, days, and weeks following the Bellobrad wedding, Sadete was on display, standing or sitting in full bridal regalia, surrendering herself to the scrutiny of onlookers. The groom's female relatives came from near and far to see the new bride, now a member of their family for life. During every social event she was placed *në zid* (against the wall) next to other women married into her husband's family to be judged against these other brides—for her bearing, her beauty, and the finery she was wearing. With each "performance" she had a chance to show her own worth and represent the status and honor of her husband's family.

Sadete later told me, "You cannot cry when you get to your husband's house – it's *marre* (shameful). Nobody does. When you're on display there you're preoccupied with how you look, at looking better than the other women. You forget the other things. You just have to concentrate on how you're presenting yourself, not on what you feel. If you show your sadness, they give you a bad time. Occasionally it happens that a girl is so unhappy about the marriage, not knowing anyone from the family, that she can't help but express this. Or sometimes a girl can't keep standing up as you're

supposed to. Then they all make fun of you. From five in the afternoon when I arrived at their house until nine at night I never sat down, and they were impressed. They could see I wouldn't collapse, that I was a strong one."

Sadete waiting to meet her husband for the first time

Temena

Sadete on display for all the village women to judge

Opoja Wedding Dances

The Sound of Opoja - Zurla

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Opoja Village Visits

Summer's Eve (Verza) in the Village of Shajne

Besa, my friend from Bellobrad, was a wonderful companion and guide during my visits to the villages of Opoja. One of these visits was to Shajne, a mountain village just above Dragash, Opoja's little town linking Kosova and the region of Gora which leads to Northern Macedonia.

After a long climb up a winding dirt road to Shajne, Besa and I made ourselves known to one of her cousins there who brought us to meet an old wise man, a keeper of village lore and history, and we made a gentle beginning, slowly learning who he and his family were and how they saw their lives. I settled into my familiar role as foreigner, researcher, witness to Albanian life—and gathered what I could of the history and economics of the village, their migration patterns, kinship structure, customs of engagement and marriage, views on women's roles, education, and religion. As always, I did my best to lean into the logic of the old man, trying to follow the subtle paths of his way of thinking.

There was much to learn from the man, but Besa and I were drawn to something else quite wonderful unfolding in the village that March day: preparations for *Verza*, short for *Dita e Verës*, Summer's Eve. Verza was once a pagan holiday from the time before Islam, before Catholicism, before organized religion was imposed on the Albanian highlanders. The day began with the coloring of Verza eggs, just like in America! Fascinating how pagan rituals like this have survived into the modern era, shared by people of all religions and locales. Easter has never seemed the same to me.

As with most Kosova holidays, on Dita e Verës the teenage girls ruled the day, appearing here and there on the village road, clinging to each other in tight little groups of three or four, saucy and carefree, giggling,

whispering, celebrating the special freedom of the day. We joined in with the wonderful custom so important to Albanian girls.

As darkness fell, bonfires began to appear on the village road. Teenage girls gathered around the fires in tight little groups, singing their Verza songs in that half-step harmony that sounds like home to Opojans. The boys stood around in the shadows, leaning into darkened doorways, watching the girls, listening to their songs.

I later learned what I was seeing was *nothing* compared to how it *used* to be. In the old days, they lit huge bonfires. As the girls danced around the fire, the boys took turns leaping over the flames, showing off their fearlessness and prowess. Usually their efforts were lost on the girls gathered around, who, for the most part, were related to them by blood, and were thus unmarriageable. But the boys never knew when a guest from another village might be eyeing them for a sister or cousin. While that present-day Verza lacked the jumping lads, the blaze of the night fires and the midnight songs charged the night with energy and excitement.

Verza traditions

We stayed in the home of Besa's cousin that night, and the next day made a visit to the home of Shirine, Xhemali's sister. As is customary, when we arrived at the big turquoise metal gate in front of the house, Besa's cousin called out to *Zoti i Shtëpisë* (the Lord of the House), Shirine's father-in-law. Following protocol, Besa's cousin introduced me as a researcher from America who had questions about the culture and history of Opoja.

We gathered in the *oda* that warm spring afternoon, sitting cross-legged on floor cushions. Like most Albanian village women, Shirine was part of an extended family composed of her husband's parents, brothers, and their wives and children—twenty people in all. Even though she had been married to her husband Shazi for several years and had children, she was still called *nuse* (bride) which meant a woman married into the family. It wasn't long before she appeared dressed in the billowing white satin of an Opoja bride, her crown of teased black hair framing a heart-shaped mouth, wide, high cheekbones and darting blue eyes.

After a hearty midday meal of *pite* and pickled peppers, other guests arrived, men of the village who had been summoned to meet "the American." We settled into *muhabet* - good serious conversation, about the family lineage, their pattern of labor-migration, the commonalities with other Opoja villages, and the things that made this place unique.

Typically, women appear only occasionally when guests are present, silently pouring pitchers of water for handwashing, serving food, carrying dishes. The senior woman of the household might sit silently in the shadows—but not the brides (in-married women) of the family. Shirine, in contrast, was ever-present. Instead of disappearing, as most brides did, she knelt down on one knee each time she finished a task, like a runner at the starting line, ready to spring into action—to re-fill a tea glass or empty an ashtray. She didn't say a word, but I sensed her lively spirit, her cleverness, from the start.

When it was time to go to bed, she brought me to her little bedroom which was heavily adorned in the Albanian style, with embroidered doilies, roses in vases, portraits done in beautiful needlepoint and the sacred souvenirs from family members living abroad. We had the room to ourselves, her husband Shazi bedding down in the *oda*. Silent and expressionless all day, once we were alone that night in her room, she opened up and we had a wonderful conversation about her life. As I succumbed to sleep under the heavy, heavenly quilt covered in pink satin, I felt the warmth of the connection we were making.

Shirine woke at dawn to heat water for the men of the house to wash themselves. When she returned to the room, we continued our conversation while ShIrine made herself beautiful with a dap of face cream, a dash of red lipstick on her mouth and cheeks, teasing her black hair and pinning it up high, putting on three gold necklaces. While she adorned herself for the day, she let me in on how things worked in her world and told me of her marriage and her husband Shazi. The story of their engagement was typical of her generation, and, once again, of how the rigid Albanian moral code could be bent, as long as it wasn't broken.

"As a good Opoja girl," Shirine told me, "I was supposed to marry a man my family had found for me—a man I had never met. But once we found out who we were engaged to, we did meet, several times, in secret places in the woods between our villages. He gave me a chocolate bar the first time we met. I'll never forget it. We didn't question whether we were suited for each other. In Opoja, once you're engaged, there's no turning back. But I liked Shazi from the start."

It was definitely a case of opposites attracting. Where Shirine is energetic, clever, and outgoing, Shazi is quiet, gentle, and exceedingly agreeable. He seemed to me to be a very "modern" kind of guy who would have been more at home in America than in the mountains of Opoja. Given his gentle, acquiescent nature and her intensity and drive, Shirine and Shazi had a good balance. There was love, there was care, there was stability and loyalty in this match.

The couple had three children. With the devilish good looks of both his parents, at thirteen their son Sheki was already a real charmer. Daughter Lule, next in line, was a quiet, industrious girl who dutifully shared her mother's burden of labor in the household.

Tragically, Ilirjana, their third born, was badly disabled. When she was six months old, she had a bad fever. Nobody at the clinic in Dragash knew what it was. They finally arranged for her to be seen at the hospital in Prizren, but by then it was too late. Too late to discover acute meningitis. Too late to prevent paralysis and cognitive impairment. The preferred practice among Albanians in situations like these is to see to the needs of disabled family members at home. No institutions separating family members, no modern technology easing the burden. Ilirjana was loved and cared for, carried from place to place in her father's arms and cheerfully attended to by Shirine and the other children.

Shirine's big complaint was their low standard of living. Shajne had a tradition of heavy out-migration, and many of the men in the neighborhood

worked in Beograd (Serbia) or beyond—in Switzerland or Austria. Shazi, in contrast, held a stable but underpaid job as an x-ray technician just down the hill in the Dragash health clinic. Shazi was always nearby and could attend to the needs of his family. He was dependable, thoughtful, and kind. But he made barely enough to live on. Only the collective economy of the larger family kept Shirine's nuclear family afloat.

Shirine as a bride, with Shazi and his mother

Like most other Kosova brides, while skilled in smoothly navigating life in an extended family, she dreamed of the chance to build her own home and raise her children alone with her husband. She longed for the money foreign work could bring—even if it meant living without Shazi for years or even decades. But uprooting and living abroad to send remittances home just wasn't in Shazi's nature. So Shirine had to wait and endure.

As I learned of Shirine's life during those precious days in Shajne, I was struck over and over by the ironies of her situation. Dressed in white satin from head to toe and revered by her husband and family, she prepared food in a primitive outbuilding. She enjoyed the security and camaraderie of the extended family—but had to live under the authority of her mother-in-law. She was blessed with a caring, adoring husband—but wanted nothing more than for him to leave and create a decent livelihood for them.

Shirine impressed me as smart, quick-witted, and shrewd. If she had been born in California instead of on an Albanian mountaintop, she would have been a lawyer, a politician, or a corporate CEO. In Shajne, Shirine used her cunning to work the system in her favor, wielding authority in the inner recesses of her family life. During our few visits together and our intimate conversations, Shirine helped me understand the nuances of her life, and helped me let go of my generalizations about "Moslem women."

St. George's Day (Shingjergj) in the Village of Kosavë

Kosavë, a village not far from Bellobrad, was the home of Bajram and Xhemali's *dajallart* (mother's brothers and their family), the Spahiu family. I was warmly welcomed by this lovely family and learned much about Opoja customs and worldview during my visits there.

The thirty-member family lived on remittances from men working away from home—one worked in a factory in Beograd, two had been employed for decades with the railroad in Linz, Austria. Like many Opoja families, the Spahiu's had much to show for decades of migrant work: a very nice two-story house, complete with a color television, satellite dish, and Mercedes in the driveway. The house, car, and TV were new. But the worldview was very traditional. Few of the girls had attended school past the fifth grade; one of the sons was preparing to enter a *Medrezë* to become an Imam (Moslem priest).


With the Spahiu family in Kosavë

My first visit to Kosavë was on May 6th, *Shingjergj* (St. George's Day). Like most Albanian holidays, this was originally a pagan holiday which had been appropriated by the priests in the Middle Ages when most of the northern Albanian tribes were Catholic, before the Moslem Ottoman Turks took over the Balkans. It was an important holiday in Kosova, an anchor in the mental calendar. I was told, "In the old days, people didn't keep track of birth dates much. My mother always said I was born 'a month after Shingjergj,' and left it at that."

An important ritual of that day is the bathing of babies and small children in water infused with wildflowers. Beyond that special tradition, Shingjergj is like most other Kosova holidays, dominated by the teenage girls who stroll through the village, visiting each house to enjoy a sweet treat and compare all the *nuse* (brides) married into that family.

At each house, the girls are brought into the *oda*, where, seated on low couches, they are given tiny glass teacups filled with orange soda, and sweets—store-bought cookies or chocolates, or the Albanian version of baklava dripping with melted sugar. But it's not about what you eat there, it's who serves it: *Nuset*! The girls' visits are all about these women who come from other villages and even other parts of Kosova. They stare and whisper, critiquing the clothes, jewelry, make-up, and the poise and dignity with which each bride serves the sweets and performs her *temena* (ritual gestures of respect).

An Opoja holiday wouldn't be complete without song and dance. On that first Shingjergj, we gathered in a meadow and the girls started up, keeping rhythm with their *defat*, and launching into song. Every part of the Balkans has a unique musical sound that calls out to the native soul. In Bulgaria, it's the lilting, bowed *gadulka*. In Macedonia, it's the piercing, sweet sound of a simple single-chanter bagpipe, the *gajda*. Croatians love their *tamburica* string orchestra, the Balkan equivalent of a Mariachi band. In Greece, it's the clarinet that sends hearts soaring.

In Kosova, the beat of the *def* calls out to the Albanian soul. But Opoja also has a sound like nowhere else in Kosova: the dissonant harmony of girls' songs, sung in a minor second (a half step apart in the scale)—mournful and beautiful, a relic of an ancient sound sensibility.

Certain rhythms also pluck the heartstrings of Balkan people—the Greek *tsamikos* in 9/8 time, the Bulgarian *dajčovo* in 9/16, the Macedonian *pajduško* in 5/8. But in most parts of the Balkans, these more complicated rhythms have been replaced by simpler ones: 2/4 or 7/8.

The traditional rhythm that says "Opoja" to its native sons and daughters is 12/8:

By the time I arrived in Opoja, songs in this rhythm, and the dances of the girls' mothers and great-great-grandmothers that went with them, had all but disappeared from most villages. Xhemali knew all the old dances and songs and had taught me well. And so it was that in an open field under rows of flickering aspen trees I taught the girls of Kosavë their own dances, which had nearly been lost for all time.

In that meadow, my first day in Kosavë, we danced and sang—just the girls, no men in sight. Back home at night after dinner, with just the immediate family gathered, one of the girls brought out the two-stringed

çifteli for Bajram, Xhemali's brother who was in Kosavë, to play. Like Xhemali, Bajram had grown up entertaining the villagers with songs they loved. Among the favorites were "migration blues"—songs that lamented the absence of fathers, brothers and husbands, whose years abroad left aching hearts back home. In the low light of a single kerosene lamp, the girls gathered close to Bajram and sang in Opoja's half-step harmonies:

Kush ma s'pari mori,
More djalë gyrbetin
Mos ja dhashtë allahi
Kurrë selametin!
Kur ma s'pari dola
Pa bukë me shkoj dita
Jabanxhi qillova
Ku me lypë nuk dita
Larg prej nënës e fëmijëve
Zemra gjithë m'u dridhke
Për me pa shoqnijen
Merhami s'mu hiqke
Keq kryet ish tuj m'dhimtun
S'kish kush m'freskon ballin
Jabanxhisë së mjerë
Nuk ja din kush hallin.

He who first took the migration trail,
May God never give him peace.
When I first set out the days went by
with no bread to eat.
I was a stranger and didn't know where
to turn.
Far away from my mother and my
children, my heart was always aching
to see my companions.
My desire was never satisfied.
How my head throbbed, and there was
no one to wipe my brow.
Oh, pitiful migrant, no one knows his
troubles.

When the others had gone to bed, the girls snuck away to watch their favorite TV show, *Dynasty*. Sitting on thick white sheepskin rugs in nylon, leopard-print, floor-length *kule* (pantaloons), their thick black hair pulled back in waist-length ponytails, the girls stared, transfixed, at the small screen. Up in these remote mountains, suspended somewhere between Europe and the Middle East, between the ancient and modern, the girls couldn't get enough of the dashing Blake Carrington and his lovely new wife Krystle, the wicked ex-wife Alexis, and the assembly of adulterous, scheming, greedy folks that represented America to these highly impressionable girls. It wasn't the storyline that held them—the subtitles were in Serbian, in the Cyrillic alphabet, which none of them could read. It was the opulence—the dresses, the makeup, the jewelry, the sparkling signs of American affluence that captivated them.

Officially, *Dynasty* was a show good young girls in remote Kosova villages didn't watch. If an older brother appeared, the television was turned off and everyone scurried to bed. But as long as no one discovered them, they watched eagerly, transfixed. That night, I sat with these beautiful, wide-eyed girls as they watched the show past midnight, and we stretched out on *shilte*, under heavy quilts, to catch a few hours of sleep before dawn.

(Years later, back in California, I met John Forsythe who played Blake Carrington in *Dynasty*. He was a spokesperson for the charity I was working for. Sitting on the porch of his house in Santa Ynez Valley, I too was bewitched by this charming eighty-year-old. I told him about those nights in a Kosova mountain village . . . the doe-eyed girls who couldn't get enough of "Blake." He was very flattered.)

I awoke the next morning at sunrise—beams of shimmering light drifting over the mountain peaks and down into the village stillness, between the haystacks, across the freshly-washed front steps and into the cool darkness of the basement kitchen. I spoke quietly with one of the brother's wives as she stood at the *maxha*, a wooden bin worn smooth with age where flour was stored and dough was kneaded into the daily bread. These were precious moments, sharing in the women's world before anyone else was awake. It was during moments like these that I fell more deeply in love with Kosova, with Opoja—a feeling that has never left me. It was becoming my *hiraeth* – my spiritual home.

Opoja girls, constantly close
For me, this photo expresses the essence of Opoja, and of Kosova where it's ALL about friends, family, and community

12
Bajram - Research Collaborator

While in Opoja I became friends with Bajram Berisha, brother of Xhemali, who became a great help to me in my research. Their family is from Buqe, a village renown for strictly upholding tradition, and for some of the best male dancers in the region. Bajram and Xhemali had attended high school together in Prizren – Xhemali studied music while Bajram got a degree in nursing.

Upon graduation at 18 years old, Bajram had hoped to stay in Opoja to work at the health clinic in Dragash. Instead, Kosova's Minister of Health assigned him to a remote outpost in Gollak on the other side of Kosova, on the eastern border.

Opoja and Gollak are both pastoral regions—beautiful, but with marginal farmland and no other economic prospects. There the similarities end. Opoja is densely settled, the houses packed tightly together behind high stone walls. Gollak, in stark contrast, is sparsely settled, with small adobe houses set far apart on a wide-open landscape. Another crucial difference between the two regions has to do with the out-migration of males. While a lack of economic prospects forced Opoja men into labor migration after World War II, the men of Gollak became day-laborers in the lowland towns of Kamenica and Prishtina, which meant more contact with people from outside their region. This contact, in contrast to Opoja's isolation, led to a less rigid moral code.

Bajram arrived in Gollak with the medical training he received in high school, but he was skilled in the main occupation of all Kosova nurses: giving injections. He quickly learned that he was the sole medical practitioner living in the region. For seven years he walked the pastoral landscape and shared in the lives of the people there. He sent home his small earnings to sustain his mother and four siblings back in Opoja. He survived, for the most part, off the goodwill of the local people. Though his medical knowl-

edge was limited, no one took that into consideration. Bajram was the man in the white coat with the black bag everyone called "Dr. Bajram."

It was up in the Gollak mountains that Zymrie, a girl from the village of Tuzhevc, fell in love with Dr. Bajram. Had he stayed in Opoja, Bajram's marriage would have been arranged for him. Back in the 1970s in Opoja, he would have been lucky to have seen his fiancée, much less meet her. But given the less rigid moral codes of the Gollak highlands, and Dr. Bajram's special status and freedom of movement as a "doctor," he and Zymrie had met many times and had grown fond of each other.

Their marriage was timed to coincide with Bajram finally getting a job back home at the health center in Dragash, Opoja's county seat. On the day of the wedding, twelve cars of *krushqit* (wedding guests) made the four-hour journey across Kosova, from its western to eastern border, to fetch the bride. Opoja weddings are grand affairs—an exposition of ancient customs, every element displaying the honor and status of the family. Given this rare chance to show off to another region, Bajram and Zymrie's wedding took on special significance. The best zurna players were hired to provide accompaniment so the Opoja men could show off their dance skills.

Most Albanian women leave their village for another village in the same region or nearby and were able to visit home regularly. Zymrie was leaving Gollak for the other side of Kosova—as far away as you can get and still be in the province. She was going off to live with a family completely foreign to her. A stranger in a strange land, with no escape. The Albanians have a saying about girls, "*Vajza është në derë të huaj*" (A girl is at a stranger's door). For Zymrie, this was bitterly true.

Bajram - Long shifts as a male nurse in the Dragash health clinic

Bajram singing migration blues songs to his children, accompanying himself on Sharki

Zymrie - Gollak

Bajram and Zymrie in Gollak

Zymrie's grandmother at their home

Lunch outside with Zymrie's family

Zymrie & her daughter cleaning leeks in the stream

Bajram with old friends in Gollak, debating tradition and change

Zymrie's arrival in Buqe, was celebrated with hours of *Këllçoja* (men's dancing), bareback horseracing, and *Pelevan* (men's oiled wrestling). While the men relished in the splendor of their rituals, Zymrie was brought into the courtyard of Bajram's home by the women of his family. She was embraced within the garden walls that would enclose her life for the next twenty years.

Zymrie knew that Bajram came from a place called "Opoja" somewhere on the other side of Kosova, but she had no idea what that distance could mean to her life. In Gollak, sheer distance between houses afforded families the privacy and discretion imperative to Albanian moral codes. There were no high courtyard walls to hide a young woman. She followed her flocks of sheep across the hillsides, tended the small fields, rested in the shade of the giant pear trees, and breathed in the open skies of her world.

Buqe was as compact and closed in as you can get, bound by an unquestioned ideology and strict tradition that confined a woman's life within the high stone walls of her courtyard. Upon arrival in Buqe, Zymrie's long, silky black hair, which a few days before had fallen freely down her back, was teased and sprayed into a high, sticky pile on top of her head under a sheer white scarf, as was the Opoja custom. Her simple long skirt was traded in for 12 meters of shiny white satin, gathered together in the traditional *dimia* (ankle-length pantaloons). Her plain nylon blouse was exchanged for a sheer, stiff, itchy white chemise edged with highly starched *oja* (hand-tatted lace). This was topped with a rigid bridal vest covered in gold braid. Four gold necklaces with gold medallions completed her new image.

Zymrie's fate was sealed. After a lifetime spent in the relative freedom of her mountain home, she was now bound within one of the most conservative villages in the Balkans. But, as other brides before her, she was upheld, revered and supported by the women who made up her new social universe.

I've never met anyone like Zymrie. She possessed all the qualities of the ideal Albanian woman: exceedingly good-humored, infinitely giving, utterly resilient, endlessly empathetic, and extraordinarily strong. But Zymrie also had a very special lightness of being, and amazing *speed*. Her mannerisms reminded me of a hummingbird. She attended to everyone's needs, with quick, darting movements and relentless cheer.

Zymrie immediately and completely endeared herself to the family and the women of Buqe. She bore for Bajram three daughters and a son, and Bajram's little family was sealed into their little mountain life. With an

insufficient water supply and meager provisions, hardship was certain. But Zymrie had the ultimate advantage: a loving, gentle, supportive husband by her side.

Dragash, where Bajram was working, is perched in a mountain valley between two ethnographic regions, Opoja to the south and Gora to the north, bordering Macedonia. Where Opoja is almost pure Albanian, Gora is home to a different ethnic group: the Gorani—Moslem Slavs who speak a language akin to Macedonian, a language they simply call *Nashki* (Ours). With very little arable land, the Gorani depended on the out-migration of men even before Opoja got the idea. Their profession was making and selling sweets—a skill learned in Turkey in the early 1920s. Since then, they had established their shops throughout the former Yugoslavia.

Gorani in Dragash

Most Albanians I know had never even heard of the Gorani, a people who lived in a world unto themselves and had a distinctive culture and worldview. The region of Gora is impossibly rocky and rugged, but almost a century of heavy out-migration has created stunning contrasts there: Picture a narrow unpaved road passing stone houses with cow dung on outer walls drying in the sun for fuel and a brand-new Mercedes parked in front. On Fridays, market day in Dragash, the Gora women stood out like exotic dolls in their tight black silken Turkish-style coats over gold and silver embroidered skirts and trousers.

Working as a male nurse in the Dragash health clinic, Bajram dealt with life and death daily: babies on the verge of dehydration, children with fevers, women in labor, and many cases of diabetes, high blood pressure,

and heart disease. Forty beds, minimal supplies and a small crew of doctors and nurses in a cold, ill-equipped, but life-saving little clinic. This was Bajram's world. He worked a twenty-four-hour shift, then was off for two days. This is what made it possible for him to help out with my research and become my chaperone to the field.

Bajram's world had consisted of the familiar corridor between his family's ancestral home at the top of his village down the narrow, windy, potholed, mile-long path to the main road, and the twenty-minute bus ride through the majestic Opoja highlands to the Dragash clinic. Very content in his quiet and peaceful life, Bajram had never been interested in anything beyond his home. Having attended high school in Prizren, and with two years in the military in Bosnia and seven years in Gollak, Bajram knew something of Kosova. But he had never explored the towns and villages, or mental terrain, beyond his home. Unlike Xhemali, who, as the Artistic Director of Shota, had traveled throughout Yugoslavia and to several foreign countries, and who loved getting out, Bajram had no interest in the world beyond his home.

His willingness to accompany me in my research changed all this. Understanding the world view of the families we visited became the objective of our work together. Every few weeks I would fetch Bajram at the health clinic, take him away from the patients who loved him so much, from the comfort of his village and his world, and embark on a two-day fieldtrip to "places unknown." Zymrie and I were friends, and she was supportive of our work together. And his family respected the work I was doing, learning about Albanian culture.

You can't just knock on the door of an Albanian house "cold," without introduction. Bajram and I always found some connection to a family in the village we were going to visit through a relative or friend of Bajram's or through someone I knew. I had been interviewed on Prishtina television a few times, and this became a helpful "calling card," legitimizing our presence and the questions we posed.

A man of few words, Bajram had always tried to keep out of any arguments or debates. But gradually during our fieldwork he found his voice and engaged people in lively discussions about the customs that ruled their lives, and what they thought about it.

13
A Visit to Has

My first ethnographic foray with Bajram was to a region not far from Opoja, but different in every way. After descending 45 minutes down the winding road out of Opoja, you pass through Prizren and head north toward Gjakova on Kosova's western border. Twenty minutes north of Prizren, before you reach Gjakova, you take a left after crossing the bridge. As the asphalt turns to dirt, the modern world fades away. You are entering a unique part of Kosova: Has.

Like Opoja, the region of Has (rhymes with "toss") extends over the mountains from Kosova and into northern Albania. It is part of the same larger ethnographic region, Luma, which stretches across the two countries. The thirteen villages that make up Kosova's side of Has is called Hasi i Thatë (Dry Has). Not only is there little arable land, there's also very little water. So, like other mountainous regions of Kosova that suffer from the lack of natural resources, the people of Has had to come up with their own survival scheme. While the men of Gollak became day-laborers in nearby towns, the Gorani opened sweet shops throughout Kosova, and the Opojans worked as laborers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, the men of Has became Yugoslavia's bread bakers.

Wander into a bakery on an Adriatic island, in a Bosnian town, or in a suburb of Prishtina, and you'll find men from Has at the window, the delicious aroma of their freshly baked bread wafting through the air. Usually leaving women and children behind and returning home just a few times a year, their lives can be grueling. Every migrant group faces its own kind of hardship. For the bakers, it's the hours, the hard labor, and the social isolation. Up all night at the ovens, the fathers, sons, uncles, and cousins who work the shops sleep while the town is awake, and rarely become part of the life there. Like other migrants who leave their families behind, they depend on those left back in the village to sustain the way of life that defines

them, that gives them their sense of self-worth, their identity.

You can't tell a man from Has apart from any other Albanian in Kosova. But you can spot the Has women from a mile away! From head to toe, every inch of the Has costume is an artistic expression. The intricate red, black, pink, and yellow designs (in the old days they were geometric patterns; now they're roses and hearts) on the sleeves, vest, apron, and leggings are not just embroidered; they are painstakingly woven as tapestry and applied to each piece. If you've ever explored the artistry of Guatemalan, Persian, or Navaho carpets, you'll know what I mean. Tapestry weaving is incredibly labor-intensive, with each piece of colored thread placed with care between the lengthwise threads (the warp) of the loom. In the case of Has, it means a girl's adolescence spent at the loom instead of at school.

A Has woman getting water from the well

It's not just the costume that makes the Has women look exotic to outsiders. The hairdo is also completely distinctive. A married woman's shoulder-length hair is straight and black (dyed if necessary), shaved back at the temples to create a taller forehead, and held in place by a decorated headband and scarf. From the neck up, the Has women look like Native Americans.

So far, all this is quaint, colorful, ethnic. But one part of the costume is truly unique on the planet: the triangular, padded wooden platforms extending out from each hip, mounted on a wide belt-like harness. They wear

this extension all day, removing it only for bed, when they take off the outer layers of the costume and sleep in the white homespun chemise that they've had on underneath all day.

Needless to say, the Has women are a sight to behold on Wednesdays—market day in Prizren—when they come to town to buy yarn or peppers or a new tea kettle. You can't miss them standing around in the bus station waiting for the next connection. Imagine these women trying to fit on the bus when there's standing room only, as is always the case. Two Has women are hard-pressed to fit on the same seat *if* there is room to sit on the bus, which there never is.

The Hasjan themselves know very well that the platforms extending from their hips are, shall we say, unusual, and they have various ways of explaining why they wear it. There's the functional rationale: With the men away from home, many women work the fields all day and the platforms provide a handy way to carry water, wood, and babies (swaddled, tied into their wooden cradles, and strapped to a woman's back) to and from distant fields. From the artisan's point of view: The flat back of the harness allows the women to best display their handwork—like a personal, portable wall hanging. Then there's the historical-political notion: The platforms hid the attractive figures of young women from foreign armies during the Ottoman occupation, discouraging soldiers from abusing the Has women.

I had endless discussions about how they came up with, and why they continue to wear, this contraption. In the end, I concluded that it was probably a combination of all these explanations (and others long forgotten), each one contributing to the survival of the custom. Whatever the reason, through the centuries the platform has become the preferred aesthetic. When it comes right down to it, the Hasjan just think it looks really good. It also *feels* good. I can tell you from personal experience that it is very comfortable, providing nice lower back support. Think of construction workers happily lifting sacks of cement, supported by those wide black back-support belts.

By the 1980s, most Has brides were married *a la franga*, in long white western-style dresses, but donned the traditional costume once they were married. The women who lived with their baker husbands in other parts of Yugoslavia dressed like the local women when away, reverting to "old school" dress whenever they came home. These practices created a brisk business in black hairpieces for the women who modernize their styles for life outside Has.

There's actually another version of the Has costume, with a smaller harness and a shorter hairdo—cut just below the ears, thick black curls jutting out under a white scarf. These two little details tell volumes about political domination and social configurations in this tiny, dusty spot on the planet. The ladies with the black curls are Catholics. Of the thirteen villages in the Kosova side of Has, five of them secretly maintained their Christian beliefs throughout the Ottoman period and to the present day.

You can tell you're entering a Catholic village and not a Moslem one at a glance: women with pads on the hips instead of wooden harnesses and short black curls instead of long straight hair, pigs in the yard, and a church steeple instead of a mosque's minaret. And during weddings, when the bride passes through the threshold—symbolizing incorporation into her husband's family—she blesses the top of the door frame with the sign of the cross, not a kiss on the Koran. These are surface distinctions. When it comes right down to it, the lives of these Catholics and Moslems are quite similar. Religion is not the ultimate principle organizing consciousness in Kosova, but rather scarcity, isolation, and vulnerability. These, together with moral mandates combining Christian, Moslem, and tribal conventions, all lead the people of Has to an ethic of extreme conservatism, especially in the realm of engagement and marriage.

My home base in Has was with the Totaj [TOEtie] family in the village of Gjonaj [JONai], one of the first villages you come to when entering the region. The family was typical in many ways. With the grandfather dead and buried, the family included the grandmother, one of her three sons, the three wives of all three sons, and three or four children per couple. The other two sons were bakers working elsewhere in Yugoslavia. Custom dictated that one of the sons had to stay home to rule the household. When guests came, he acted as host, but for all practical purposes, the women ran this household, except when the other two husbands returned for a visit. The two teenage boys were streetwise lads, having spent some time abroad with their baker dads. Their futures were uncertain.

The most remarkable structure in the large Totaj family compound was the old stone *kulla* (the traditional Albanian mini-fortress home), no longer inhabited. The main house that the family lived in was typical 1960s Kosova: a tall, plain cinderblock cube with two rooms symmetrically situated on each of two floors. In the yard around the house was an outbuilding for cooking, a corncrib, haystacks, a barn, a primitive wooden outhouse, a long clothesline slung between trees, a tree stump for splitting wood, and,

behind the house, a creek which had once been clean, but wasn't anymore.

The rooms were bare, except for the oda, the sitting room, which was covered with a Persian carpet. The floors were of raw wood and the only object in the place was an old pot-bellied stove. The décor consisted of a few old photographs of dead relatives placed oddly high on unadorned concrete walls. Each of the "brides" (women married into the family) had a small collection of keepsakes left over from their weddings, but these were stowed out of sight. The only thing going on in these rooms, as in the rooms of many thousands of similar dwellings all over Kosova, were the people.

Old house in Gjonaj

Grandmother

During the day, with Gjonaj as our base, Bajram and I made excursions to neighboring villages, seeking out elders with a special reputation for knowledge and wisdom. After hitching a ride on a horse-drawn wagon or hiking up a mountain, accompanied by a couple of boys or young men as guides, we would finally arrive at our destination. Calling out from beyond a stone wall or a rickety fence, we would ask for the man of the house, and then request his permission to enter the property. Once admitted to their oda, observing delicate protocols of speech and manner, we would gradually, gently, present our mission in being there, along with our credentials: the people we knew who had sanctioned the visit. And, as I mentioned before, I had been interviewed a few times in the newspaper and on television, and usually there was someone in the group who knew I was "the American woman studying about Kosova."

As the conversation and the day wore on, men from the neighborhood would join us. After obligatory coffee and soft drinks followed in due course by a simple but hearty meal, we would retire to sit on the *shilte*, cushions along the wall. Then, with tiny spoons clinking in tiny tea glasses and cigarettes tossed all around until they collected in little piles on the red carpet in front of each guest, the real *muhabet* (conversation) would begin. Together with the men gathered there, Bajram and I would wander down various cognitive corridors, exploring topics that shed light on local lineage, history, and economics. We'd eventually wind our way to more delicate topics: gender roles, the relic of arranged marriages, the denial of high school education to the majority of girls, and other customary contortions that left the majority of the Has youth under-educated with marginal, or migrant futures before them.

That's when the conversations got really delicate, and really interesting. The subject always struck a nerve. After all, many of these men had lived outside Kosova, even abroad, and they knew well that the practices they were upholding were a total anachronism in the context of a Kosova crying out to shed its associations with the Ottoman past and the present East European economic riptide, and to become part of the West.

Keep in mind that Bajram, before we started this fieldwork together, was a very quiet guy who avoided conversation, let alone confrontation, at all costs, and spoke only when absolutely necessary. But things started to change once we got into the rhythm of these conversations. He started to engage in our debates with the locals. He started to get curious, to get interested in things beyond his own narrow experience in Gollak and Opoja. These conversations became our modus operandi for research. The cultural nuances of the region started to reveal themselves, and Bajram's understanding of Kosova started to expand.

During the course of the day, I would find my way to where the women were and learn what I could about their lives, their joys, their woes, their acceptance of dark destinies. Some of the brides I met lived in dire poverty. Their "wedding chamber" might be a raw wood room, with a crude bed and cupboard, and a life of endurance and travail ahead. With hardly any schooling or exposure to new ideas, they were conditioned to make the best of the destiny they had been dealt. I was often astonished by their circumstances – third-world conditions in 1980s Europe.

One of the families we visited was in the midst of a blood feud—another "vanquished" custom which was, in fact, still very much alive in

Kosova. It was said that in the 1980s, there were six hundred active feuds going on among Kosova families. The one we happened upon had started in a bakery in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. A man from the family we were visiting had been fatally stabbed over the ownership of a watch. This meant that the family of the dead man was in a feud with the family of the murderer. The practical ramifications were staggering. If any male member of the murderer's family were to be seen by any male member of the family seeking revenge, that man could be shot. It meant that men who worked in town had to commute during darkness, and that women had to do all the fieldwork on the farm while the men were sequestered inside. It was fascinating to encounter another set of draconian customs (like sworn virgins and arranged marriages) that had officially "disappeared" in Kosova but were very much alive and considered an odd but accepted part of life.

With the Totaj kids – getting their thoughts about education, migration, arranged marriages…

During our time in Has, Bajram accompanied me out on visits to the crude medical clinics that served the locals, putting tough questions to the people on duty about health problems plaguing the area. What was the most common childhood disease you see there? How many infants had died of dehydration? Had they seen any cases of polio? Why was there toxic waste in the trashcan? What would it take to clean the floors or wash the linens?

The clinics were visited weekly by the region's doctor who administered endless rounds of shots and antibiotics (the preferred response to all ill-

nesses) or gave orders to see specialists in town. While this was going on, we would speak with women who lined up for their visits. Dressed in well-worn but elaborate costumes, bearing wooden cradles on their backs, with runny-nosed, feverish kids in tow, the women were kind and forthcoming, tough, and sadly reconciled to the inevitability of illness and loss in their families.

One afternoon in late fall, with the grip of winter starting to close in, we found that, having overstayed a visit with a baker's family in the village of Krushi, night had caught us unaware, and to reach our next destination we had to ford a shallow but rushing river by tractor. I became the designated driver, and with my head wrapped in wool scarves against the icy winds, I somehow maneuvered that tall blue mechanical beast through the black, swirling waters, my companions enjoying the notion of an American girl in this predicament. You might know the feeling of cold night biting at your face—painful, and exquisitely invigorating.

Exhausted after a day of fieldwork, Bajram and I would arrive home at the Totaj's and, warmed by the fire and the gathering of kids and cousins, would share a tasty late evening supper of roasted potatoes or corn. This was followed, delightfully, by a village treat: çaj i bjeshkës (mountain tea)—a fragrant local herb served steaming hot with heaps of sugar, smelling of wild meadows in bloom.

While the older women of the household saw to the last chores of the day, Bajram would go off to bed in the men's quarters, and I would spend precious time alone with the unmarried girls. After a day or more of slogging through dust and mud, scrambling up dry rocky hillsides and down barren roads with Bajram and our chaperones in search of the Has story, I got to indulge in the ultimate luxury: having my feet washed by one of the girls in a plastic basin filled with water heated on the wood stove. Meanwhile, the girls from the immediate family, accompanied by cousins from the neighborhood, gathered to chat in hushed voices about delicate intrigues, worries, secrets, desires. They told tales of unrequited love ruined by tragic turns of arranged marriages. They knew I was tape-recording these conversations and were happy to be educating me about their way of life.

Only 30 minutes or so from the bustling urban centers of Gjakova to the north and Prizren to the south, Gjonaj could have been a thousand miles away from those towns, judging by a few of their more fanatical practices. The most salient of these: arranged marriages when the boys and girls were

in their early teens. Up until the mid-1980s, most Has marriages were between young men and women who had never seen each other. When I talked about this with my family in Prishtina, they couldn't believe it. But it was all true.

I recorded many of these stories with permission, on cassette tapes, which I later transcribed to include in my dissertation. Lumnije, a cousin of the Totaj family, said this about the arranged marriages typical in Has:

"I found out from my sisters that I'd been betrothed to a boy from Has. I felt terrible. If I had ever seen him, it would have been fine. But I won't see him, because now he's a soldier. I have no photographs, no letters. If he were to send a letter now, people would talk. The women, not the men. That's the way it is here. If a girl's parents find out she has seen her fiancé, there's big trouble. They don't let her out of the house anymore."

When Bajram and I talked to the boys, we would hear stories like this one from Haki, betrothed in 1986:

"Nowadays many boys are able to spot their betrothed if they have seen a photo and know the girl's house. But there are no secret meetings. We can't! A letter could be passed to arrange a meeting, but you're afraid it will be intercepted. If a girl's father hears that she has done this, he tells her she is no longer his daughter. Meeting a fiancé before the wedding is considered among the lowest things a young person can do. It is immoral. It is shameful. After you've been engaged three or four years, you finally see her when she gets out of the wedding car. It's quite a surprise. Maybe you've heard her name, but you don't know who she is. Maybe you know where her house is, but out of five or six girls there you don't know exactly which one is for you."

Why was it so important to in traditional families to arrange the marriages of their children? Much research has been done on this custom, which has existed throughout human history. In many cases it has to do with marrying off children at an early age to reduce a daughter's economic burden on the family (the need to feed, clothe, and educate her) by sending her off to her husband, to ensure her financial security with his family, and to reinforce social ties that are advantageous to the families. These are all part of the story with Albanian arranged marriages. I think that, as with many archaic customs, it's all about demonstrating honor and strength to others. An arranged marriage shows control, structure, and obedience within the family, which are prized among Albanians. When it comes right down to it, there's just a general feeling among traditional families that arranged mar-

riages are HAPPIER, because they're based on the wise choices of one's elders rather than the vagaries of romantic young love, and because they have the full backing of both families.

In those late-night hours alone with the girls, we would speculate together about engagements that were afoot, about the negotiations the girls themselves were barely privy to. Once it was known to whom a girl was betrothed, they could put money on how her fate would unfold. Some girls were getting married to a boy whose folks had "papers" in Switzerland, and oh what a life she would lead! Some were married into "intellectual" families in Prizren to educated husbands who were not seeking an unschooled bride. In such cases, she might even learn a trade and get a job. Others would wind up as their mothers had, with migrant husbands they saw a few times a year—the visits frequent enough to fill the house with babies and leave behind hardship, only made tolerable by the comfort of community.

These whispered late-night sessions were my school, the girls my teachers, as I came to know what Has was all about. By midnight the little kids were fast asleep, each curled up like a kitten in someone's lap. Soon, *shilte* (foam pads) had been laid out on the bare floor and the girls headed straight for sleep in the clothes they had on. Finally horizontal, under heavy old quilts, lulled by the slow, peaceful breathing all around, in minutes we'd all be deeply asleep.

One of my fieldwork sojourns with Bajram ended in a near-death experience. The air was heavy with mountain mist as we started home from a distant village. We spoke of one thing and another as the K-14 negotiated the hairpin mountain turns. Suddenly, with no warning, I lost control of the car. The wheels took a wild slide across the damp road, the car did a half spin and rolled over once, then again, finally settling upside down, silent, still, in the middle of that deserted mountain road.

Stunned, I looked over and saw that Bajram was conscious and unhurt. We were both suspended, upside down, held in space by seat belts, like astronauts in zero gravity. Once we got our bearings and figured out which way was up, we were able to crawl out the windows, get on our feet and take stock of the fact that we were, miraculously, alive. It wasn't long before we heard the most welcome rumble and clatter coming down the road: a tractor and cart appeared around the bend carrying a gang of farmers. Concerned, able, and more than happy to assist, with one big hoist they righted that good old indestructible K-14. We assessed the damage: dents and dirt and a shifted windshield. To our collective astonishment, it started up like a charm. The mechanic fellow down in Prizren had this to

say: “These K-14s are built like tanks. If you’d been in some other kind of car, you’d be dead.”

After getting things checked out by the mechanic, I still had to drive Bajram home, up Opoja’s 45-minute switchback ascent, and up that steep, unpaved, narrow, horrific road to Buqe that a steady rain had made into a slimy sea of mud and slush. Once we’d managed that, once Bajram was safely home, I had to get myself back to my home base in Bellobrad across the valley. Still reeling from our little near-death mishap, I gingerly made my way down the hill of silky sludge. In no time at all, the wheels under me jerked into a side-winding slide. By the time I reached the bottom of what felt like a water park ride to hell, my nerves were utter mush, and I was a quivering heap of tears and terror.

Somehow I navigated the rest of that long, dark road through the black night and, at last, reached the embrace of my Bellobrad mother and her lovely daughters who welcomed me with steaming sweet mountain tea and clean white sheets. I dove into sleep surrounded by the wild darkness of the Opoja night, the relentless beating of the *vallavicë* hammers set free with the gush of a swollen stream, pounding into me.

In the morning I awoke to a quaking fever, and a cousin of the Bellobrad family who was studying medicine was called into action. No matter what ails you in Kosova, a big injection is always the preferred treatment. I had no choice but to be the obedient patient.

Surprisingly, the shot did the trick, and the next day I headed out again in the intrepid K-14, now a bit crooked and worse for wear, to fetch Bajram for our next research trip.

Has Women at Home in the Village

Dressed up for a wedding

Making pite in Has

Young bride

Weaving on a loom

Has Women Out and About

Moslem Costume

Catholic Costume

Dance in Has

Young girls washing my feet

Filming the wedding from the window

Interviewing one of the Totaj brides

Driving a tractor in Krusha e Vogel

PART 3

Returning to Kosova as Aid Worker and Mother 1994 – 1997

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Baby Jeremy
And a Secret Visit to A Shadow Society

Jeremy

By the fall of 1988, the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation was drawing to a close and it was time for me to return to America to finish writing my dissertation and prepare for the next chapter in my life. I said a long goodbye to the people and places I had grown to love in Kosova, knowing I would return.

In 1990, I gave birth to my son, Jeremy McIvor Berisha Reineck. I'm proud to say that Jeremy is half-Albanian, the product of a long relationship and deep love with a Kosovar Albanian. But that's another story, for another time. Suffice to say that since his birth, Jeremy has been the light of my life, my joy and inspiration!

Jeremy was born in Santa Barbara and spent his first year there. When he was on e and a half years old, we moved to beautiful Monterey, California, where I pursued a Master's degree in TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. This was after I received my Ph.D. from Berkeley. I wanted to get the TESOL degree because I knew I would be a single mother, raising Jeremy on my own, and I wanted to keep my options open for making a living outside of academia. I love teaching, especially teaching English – connecting with the world through my students. I also wanted to be able to live and work in other countries and give Jeremy that experience if the opportunity presented itself.

By 1993, the war was raging in Yugoslavia. I knew we couldn't go back to Kosova, so instead, after receiving my TESOL degree, we moved to New Jersey to be close to the Albanian community on the east coast. My main connection was with the journalists at Illyria newspaper in the Bronx. During that time, I wrote about the oppression and civil unrest in

Kosova for various publications, including "Poised for War: Kosova's Quiet Siege," for a collection of essays in the book Neighbors at War. I also organized a conference at Columbia University with Kosova leaders and scholars to discuss the crisis we could all see coming.

Monterey

Santa Barbara

Slovenia

Kosova

With Grandma Merilyn in Monterey

Clandestine Visit to A Shadow Society

When I left Kosova in 1989, in the bleak snows of deep December, I didn't foresee the tide of events that would rip through the land in the coming years. Looking back on my last months in Kosova, I remember a Sunday afternoon sitting with a village family watching the snow fly outside. As we warmed ourselves by the wood stove, we listened to reports of demonstrations in Prishtina and heard about crowds of Albanians walking across Kosova to make their voices heard in the capital. The news held us in its grip, a mix of danger and possibility charging the air. We had no premonition of the hardships that were to fall upon every town, every village, and every family in Kosova in the next few years.

Immersed in all this, I decided I needed to make a short visit to Kosova to find out, first-hand, what was really happening. Leaving Jeremy with friends in New Jersey, I caught a flight through Zurich to Macedonia's capital, Skoplje, 90 minutes from Prishtina. Once aboard, the passengers were given the confounding news that the plane was actually headed for another Macedonian town, Ohrid, which would mean that those of us bound for Kosova would have to cross the Kosova border in the middle of the night. Tension mounted, sharp words were exchanged between distraught passengers and the airline's representatives; a fistfight was narrowly avoided.

Arriving in Macedonia, our first hurdle was the customs line where we caught a glimpse of a new reality: "Where is your visa for Macedonia? You'll need Macedonian money for the telephone." Oh, right, Macedonia had become a country since I was there last. But as I stepped out into the darkness, under a midnight sky crowded with stars, political realities faded away as I surrendered to the intense, familiar feeling of being on Balkan earth, and its deep and painful past.

We were shuttled into a bus for Skoplje, the arrangements unrevealed and beyond our control—my first taste of the new state of collective fear. Were they really taking us to Skoplje? Would we be stopped on the way? Would they take me (the only foreigner) aside for questioning and then "do something" with me? Underway at last, some of the tension was broken by good-natured squabbling over the music being blasted into the bus. No one was in the mood to listen to Macedonian pop music for three hours. The driver had an Albanian tape but quickly tired of it. A compromise was found in the Gypsy café music that everyone could tolerate.

All passengers were Albanian, except for me and a young Macedonian girl. She sat in the seat nearest the driver, alert and tense, speaking to no

one. In contrast, I felt right at home, secure in the knowledge that I was surrounded by Albanians I knew would help me if there was trouble.

Among my fellow travelers were two young Albanian men who had been trying to find work in Zurich and had been turned back at the border. "No one in our families has a job. They need us to work abroad. We had jobs lined up in Zurich. How will we support them?" An older Albanian woman was returning alone to the Macedonian town of Tetova after visiting her sons in Switzerland. She begged the driver to make the extra stop there. A group of men bargained with the driver on her behalf, and one, headed for Kosova, abandoned his own journey and got off with the woman, promising to help her find her home.

The rest of us were preoccupied with the unknown predicament of crossing the border at Kaçanik. We spent the duration of the bus ride worrying about what the crossing would be like. Uncertainty and apprehension wired us together like an electric current. A group of men from Gjilan paid the driver to take them to the border at Presheva: it might be easier there, less threatening. After much deliberation, I decided to face the Kaçanik border alone. Arriving in Skoplje, I paced around the bus station, waiting for the suggestion of sunrise.

At 4:00 a.m., I found an Albanian taxi driver and placed my trust in his skill at maneuvering the situation. We stopped at a hamburger stand on the way. What a shock: the pre-dawn throngs of young Macedonians enjoying the freedom of the night – a stark contrast to the psychological curfew weighing down their Albanian counterparts in Kosova.

By 4:30 a.m., I reached the border at Kaçanik. The first rays of morning light revealed a long line of cars and trucks held hostage by the whim of border guards. This was no surprise. But where I had expected to see the reassuring "PR" registration of Prishtina cars bound for Kosova, I saw only scores of "SK" (Skoplje) plates. My driver explained: "Because of the UN sanctions against Serbia [including Kosova], they have no gas. Macedonians drive across the border each day, selling their tanks of gas, returning to fill up again in Skoplje." A steady income for the Macedonians that made fools of the Great Powers—so much for sanctions. I learned that most goods headed for Serbia were getting through. The American soldiers posted above the border crossing weren't there to enforce the sanctions, but to document the extent to which they were being violated. Embargo runners were getting rich, the black market was booming, the outside world mitigated its collective guilt about inaction against Serbia and the Kosovar and Serbs paid the price.

My plan was to bypass the cars and trucks resigned to their six-hour wait. Cutting down into a dirt ditch on the side of the road, my driver deftly skirted the line and delivered me, on foot, to the hands of the border guards. Alone in the half-light of a Macedonian dawn, I was placed squarely at the mercy of the police basking in their petty power. As countless travelers endured the wait, the guards smoked and chatted, their indifference flagrant and foul. Perhaps tomorrow, or in a week, or in a year, the tables would turn and the guards who today ordered us around, ripped open trunks, and harassed old ladies would tomorrow be asking for mercy. But for today, they commanded this dusty outpost.

Finally, they let me pass through and I started walking north. Finally, I found a driver who would take me to Prishtina. After passing the border unscathed, it took a while to get back to my senses after a night of numbing fear. When I finally looked up, I saw the pink skies of the Kosova sunrise warming the early summer wheat fields, the snow-capped peaks of the Sharr mountains in the background. I was home.

For the first 15 minutes of the trip north, it looked like nothing had changed since I had left. Then I noticed the sign for the Albanian town of Ferizaj was written in Serbian only: "Uroševac." The ethnic breakdown of the past five years was condensed into that one word.

The driver made his way through a labyrinth of side roads to avoid checkpoints on the way to Prishtina. Before long, the town's urban sprawl stretched out before us, washed gray in the stillness of a Sunday morning.

We neared my old neighborhood around 6:30 a.m. I descended into a familiar back alley, and arrived at the home of Feride and Feriz, the family I had lived with from 1987 to 1989 while finishing my doctoral research—my Albanian mom and dad.

From the looks of things, not much had changed. Large gaping cracks on exterior walls cried out for repair. But life was on hold. No one was repairing or building; they were lying in wait.

The garden was lush. Corn and leeks, tomatoes and peppers grew in neat, abundant rows. Sweet arches of honeysuckle lazily dangled their bouquets across the walkways. Past the garden and over our fence, a big group of twenty-something Albanians were gathered, chatting away, at this very early hour. I learned that the basement of our neighbors' home had been given over to university classes. Feride told me that a week before, Serbian authorities had descended on the makeshift classroom, and the students threw their papers over the fence into her garden to avoid having them confiscated. She had dutifully gathered them up from among the beans and

onions, placed them in a plastic bag, and returned them to their owners the next day. Kosova's "shadow" society, and the spirit of sacrifice and solidarity it brought with it, was everywhere.

My arrival slowly woke the family members from their Sunday slumber. Before long I caught a glimpse of Feriz, *Zoti i Shtëpisë*, Master of the House, folding up sheets and quilts to be stored in closets and tidying the living room. I had never seen this before in Kosova—a man doing this women's work. Feride's son's wife was now the only one employed and left early for work, and Feride couldn't do all the work alone. Her son, who had recently lost his job, changed the baby, bathed her, fed her. Amazing!

We ate beans and roasted peppers and caught up on current events, especially the departure of family members to Europe and the birth of children. Most of the young mothers in the neighborhood had given birth to one or two children since I left, all with trepidation. Prishtina's Albanian obstetricians had been fired and Prishtina's hospital was in the hands of Serbian doctors. There were conflicting reports about the experience of childbirth at Prishtina's hospital.

Feride's daughter had traveled to the town of Gjakova, 90 minutes west of Prishtina, to have her baby. "I was so scared of trouble along the way that I wasn't even thinking about the birth," she said. "It was miserable in the hospital—two recovering women to a bed, no supplies, so much fear. I had my second child in Prishtina with a Serbian doctor and had good care, no problems." The wife of the other son had a miserable experience in the same hospital. I examined the scar from her Caesarean: the skin was folded over and stitched rather than sewn neatly together—a botched job. The wound would have to be re-cut and sewn by a private doctor.

By noon that day, a storm was brewing and by afternoon, sheets of rain began to drench the town. As I walked up the hill to meet friends that evening, an electrical storm engulfed us. How ironic it would be, I thought, if, having made it this far, I would be struck down by a bolt of lightning, like an unlucky, lone shepherd on the peaks of the Sharr mountains.

Monday morning, my precious week in Kosova began. My focus: the social response to the political conflict and impending violence. We had heard so much about the remarkable ways in which Albanians had risen to the occasion, surviving the Serbian crackdown through community mobilization and the creation of a "shadow" society. I wanted to see this with my own eyes. My first stop was the headquarters of the Mother Teresa humanitarian aid organization that had become the Albanians' de facto welfare and health ministry, tasked with relieving the economic plight of

some 52,000 Kosova families and providing healthcare throughout the province. Every parcel of aid from abroad was registered and signed for by Albanians and Serbs who received it. The professionalism, scope of aid and cadre of volunteers who kept it all going was very impressive.

I spoke to doctors and nurses who offered their services free in makeshift hospitals and clinics all over Kosova. Even in cramped conditions with limited supplies, the clinics were clean, efficient, and humane—a far cry from their state-run equivalents.

I encountered a spirit of dignified generosity in the "parallel" schools. A hundred pairs of shoes neatly lined up outside a neighborhood house was the first sign that a private home, once the comfortable living space for a well-to-do family, had been transformed into a high school. In one neighborhood, three families had turned several homes into classrooms for 1,600 students each day in three shifts. Hour lessons were condensed into thirty minutes. The seventy teachers worked for $30 a month—a token wage that bought little but was a badge of solidarity and honor. The homeowner I visited provided electricity, tea, coffee, food for the teachers, and rugs and floor pads for the students, asking only that the students and teachers attend class regularly and study hard. I learned that many students walked an hour or more to attend lessons. The walls were bare, the few blackboards rough improvisations, the textbooks worn and ragged.

As I watched the students sitting *këmbëkryq* (cross-legged), eyes bright with youth and possibility, minds alert, I thought of the "old days" when the *oda* (the traditional Albanian living room) served as the place of learning, where old men passed down their wisdom to sons and grandsons—no books, no paper, no blackboards. I spoke to the students, urging them to think of those days past, challenging them not to dwell on the poverty and instability of their circumstances, but to focus instead on the historical significance of this moment in their lives. Unsure of the future, constantly wrestling with fear, confusion, and hopelessness, it was hard for these students to invest themselves in their studies.

Their world was on hold and only one thing was sure: It would never be the same. Socialism, as they knew it, was dead. No matter what the future held, competition would be a determining factor in their lives. Those best prepared would survive and prosper. Those who succumbed to the failure of the present would languish in the residue of the past. "Seize the chance to study, no matter what!" I told the foreign language students my own story: I learned Albanian without a teacher or a classroom, with a children's grammar book in one hand and a dictionary in the other. Ten new

words a day, one new grammar lesson and a desire to learn.

My last days in Prishtina were spent meeting with Albanians, learning about the recent resolution of blood feuds, about the excuses used by the Serb authorities to fire public employees from their jobs, about the closure of the Albanian Institute and Academy of Sciences, about the efforts of churches to promote cultural activities for children, about the attempts to place orphans with foster families. I learned of cruelty, excesses, and exaggerations on all sides.

I also encountered unexpected ironies. Prishtina's television had been shut down, but satellite dishes were bringing CNN, European news, and TV Tirana (from Albania) into many homes. Albanians weren't going to the movies, but video rental stores were everywhere, and VCRs were standard equipment in Albanian homes. High school students lacked pens and paper, but many Albanians now had personal computers and did a brisk trade in desktop publishing. The state health system catered to Serbs, but private dentists, internists and surgeons were everywhere.

I left Kosova with very mixed impressions about what was going on. The sons and daughters of city people and villagers alike were now in the distant landscapes of Germany and Sweden, London and New York, seeking jobs to support their families. Hearts were numb with uncertainty and dread. But there were positive forces at work, too. I saw big changes in my Albanian friends now engaged in the survival and future of their society as teachers, healthcare providers, political activists, and humanitarian workers. I saw local village leaders seeing to the needs of poor families, truck drivers delivering aid to distant villages. These people had a mission, a purpose, a sense of self-worth based not on family honor and right conduct as before, but on their individual contribution to a common cause. There was an intensity, a clarity of purpose, a drive I had rarely seen in the old, socialist Kosova.

Many times during my visit I heard this newfound spirit of solidarity and self-sacrifice expressed in a single word: euphoria. In most cases, it was used to describe the spirit of the early days of the movement that had transformed the collective consciousness of Albanians but was fading with the passage of time and self-help fatigue. While some were still infused with the spirit of volunteerism and activism, the masses were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain hope and commitment as the months passed.

My week "back home" in Kosova had passed quickly. As I waited outside Feride's house for my ride out of town, the scent of summer roses gracing

nearby terraces hung heavily on the steamy air. A Serbian soldier passed by with his Russian-made rifle and, I assumed, a senseless, bloody errand. My body shook with tears as I pulled myself away from the embraces of my Kosova family and neighbors. I promised I would soon return.

Back in the U.S., I longed for the day I could bring my son to Kosova, to play with the children in the back alleys of Prishtina, to romp through the fields with village kids, to know the Kosova I had known.

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Kosova in the 1990s - A Quiet Siege

Following my brief visit to Kosova in 1993, I wanted so much to return there, but knew it would be next to impossible to get a visa for an extended stay. Then one day, out of nowhere, the phone rang, and a soft, civilized English woman spoke: "I'm calling from Oxford, England, from the offices of OXFAM. We've learned of your work in Kosova. We were wondering if you would be interested in starting a project for us there." My answer was immediate: "Yes! Absolutely! I'm on my way!"

The assignment was to investigate the possibility of conducting an aid project in the midst of Yugoslavia's disintegration and the political and humanitarian crisis in Kosova. Before talking about this new chapter in my life as a humanitarian aid worker, let me set the scene for you: Kosova's quiet siege.

Serbia's Crackdown on Kosova

In 1991, as the Berlin Wall fell and a cry of freedom rang out in Eastern Europe, the country of Yugoslavia was in the throes of disintegration. The Republics of Slovenia and Croatia seceded in 1991. Not long after, the Moslem Bosnians, East Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats who made up the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina began to agitate for territory. Catholic and Moslem neighbors whose families had lived together in peace for a hundred years were suddenly pitted against each other, and the expulsion of one or another religious group from their villages gave rise to atrocities the likes of which Europe hadn't seen since the Holocaust. Western leaders were very slow to respond to the genocide taking place in front of their eyes. By the time the Dayton accords were signed in December of 1995, ending the war in Bosnia, hundreds of thousands of people had been tortured, raped, or exterminated.

While all this was happening, Kosova was in the midst of a quiet siege. The animosity between Serbs and Albanians was coming to a climax after four years of draconian measures imposed by Serbia in an effort to quell the Albanians' desire for independence. This new wave of oppression had started in the late 1980s when Slobodan Milošević played the Kosova card in his rise to power in Serbia as President of the Communist Party. In a rousing speech at a huge 1989 commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosova (an event of mythic proportions in the Serbian mind—their defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks), he turned the eyes of the Serbs to their medieval heartland and fueled the fires of nationalism by calling for a return to absolute Serbian rule in Kosova.

This ideological campaign climaxed when Serbia drew up a new constitution, ending fifteen years of Kosova's nominal autonomy within the Republic of Serbia. The legislation placed control of Kosova's police, courts, legislature, educational system, health and social services in the hands of the Serbian government. These moves ushered in widespread civil rights abuses and ethnic violence in the province. To many Serbs, this crackdown was a much overdue move to stem the tide of intolerable "Albanian chauvinism and irredentism." They were pursuing what they saw as their "manifest destiny"—control over what they considered Serbia's rightful territory. Albanians saw the takeover as an illegal regression to pre-1974 statutes and a prelude to Serbia's takeover of the Province. Held tightly under Serbian control, the Albanians seethed with quiet rage.

In 1990, a "Law on Labor in Special Circumstances" was passed, giving Serbia the legal basis for the systematic firing of some 120,000 Albanians from public sector jobs. The government justified the firings as "ideological and political differentiation" intended to purge the system of dangerous elements. To Albanians, these moves were a calculated element in a larger strategy of ethnic cleansing.

The manner in which the firings took place and the rationale behind them took many forms. While some Albanians lost their jobs when they refused to sign oaths pledging loyalty to Serbia, others were dismissed for negligible infractions of work rules that would have been ignored before 1990. A university professor might be cited for being out of the office at a certain time and return the next day to find he or she had been fired and could not enter the building. Thousands were dismissed on fabricated charges of misconduct. A history professor I knew who had minimal knowledge of English was asked to proctor the oral examinations of English students. She declined and received a dismissal notice based on noncompliance.

Physicians were told to write prescriptions in Cyrillic (the alphabet of the Serbian language, which many Albanians cannot read or write) and in

some cases even to speak to Albanian patients in Serbian. Serbs considered this fair: Albanians live in Serbia and should speak Serbian, even though more than 90 percent of Kosova's population was Albanian. Most Albanian doctors refused and were fired, some after suffering harsh treatment during physical expulsion from their hospitals or clinics.

Many Albanians were fired on the grounds of "technological surplus," which translates as too many people working at unproductive state jobs. It should be understood that corrupt management practices had indeed resulted in decades of redundant hiring practices throughout Yugoslavia, and many Serbs were also fired for this reason. In addition, the war in Bosnia and the sanctions imposed against Serbia had devastated the Serbian economy, causing thousands of Serbs to be laid off.

But the job loss in the rest of Yugoslavia paled in comparison to the widespread firings in Kosova, which catapulted many families into poverty and wrought havoc on civil life. There was no unemployment insurance for those fired from their jobs, and in a system where only working people and their families received social benefits, many lost their right to pensions, loans and healthcare. Most families survived on savings, the remittances from family members living abroad and profits from marginal business ventures. Professional workers—engineers, professors, policemen—tried to make ends meet by driving taxis, opening dry good stores, or selling goods imported from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Turkey.

A former policeman in Viti, fired during the Serbian take-over, trying to support his family by working in the 1990s as a taxi-driver

The Albanian Response: Creating a Parallel Society

Refusing to abide by Serbian rule but lacking guns or any assurance of outside support for their independence campaign, in the early 1990s Albanians began a program of systematic and, at first, nonviolent resistance. They had formed their own parallel government, the Democratic League of Kosova (LDK), in December of 1989. They chose as their President Ibrahim Rugova, a mild-mannered journalist and outspoken anti-communist, whom I had known during my early days at the Albanian Institute in Prishtina. The plan was to boycott the Serbian state by creating a "shadow government" complete with its own taxation system, ministries, media, trade unions, and education and health systems.

A Shadow Health System

The dismissal of most Albanian doctors and nurses from their state jobs had a devastating effect on healthcare in Kosova. Diarrheal diseases, tuberculosis, and hemorrhagic fever were epidemic. In 1993 alone, 221 children died from infectious diseases and around 350 people from dysentery or malnutrition. The elimination of Albanian vaccination teams and the reluctance of Albanians to send their children to Serbian doctors resulted in 24 cases of polio in the early 1990s.

Childbirth struck fear in the hearts and minds of Albanian women. In 1990, the majority of Albanian obstetricians quit or were fired from their jobs. Albanian mothers were left with the choice of going to a Serbian doctor at the state hospital or paying $100 for an Albanian doctor who had opened a private clinic. Afraid they would be mistreated at the hands of Serbian doctors and unable to pay for private care, many Albanian women gave birth at home, resulting in a sharp rise in infant mortality and death among women in childbirth. It was said that during the 1990s in Kosova: "Out of every two graves, one was that of an infant."

The crisis spawned an alternative healthcare system known as "Nëna Teresë" (Mother Theresa). Hundreds of volunteer doctors and nurses started caring for the sick in eighty clinics supplied by international relief organizations. Ironically, with the dearth of medicine and supplies at state-run institutions due to sanctions and empty state coffers, the Albanian clinics were often better equipped, and Serbs also took advantage of their services.

Shadow Schools

The crisis in Kosova's schools began in the late 1980s when Serbia introduced Communist Party-approved humanities curricula that replaced the Albanian renditions of history and literature with Serbian ones. Teachers who did not accept the new texts were faced with dismissal. From the Serbian point of view, the move was necessary to stem the tide of "Albanian irredentism" and "anti-state propaganda." In 1990, a completely new curriculum was proposed for all schools. Albanian school directors and teachers rejected the plan and were collectively fired for insubordination. There were many instances of brutality against teachers, parents and students who protested. Serbian parents, in fear of Albanians, who the press portrayed as dangerous irredentists, demanded segregation in the schools.

The Albanian shadow government responded by creating a parallel educational system. In primary schools, Albanian children attended classes in state school buildings but were separated from Serbian children either by occupying different floors or sections of the building or by attending in different shifts (Serbs in the morning, Albanians in the afternoon, or vice versa). Given the large number of Albanian children, in many schools there were multiple afternoon shifts lasting only three hours each and extending well into the evening. Small children set out for school in the dark of night or rose before dawn to make their classes.

In many schools the physical conditions (dilapidated buildings, lack of sanitation or clean water) were equally abysmal for Serbian and Albanian children. The only difference was that teachers' salaries, educational materials, and wood for winter stoves in the Serbian classes were paid for by the state; Albanians had to collect the money from the community and from Albanians living abroad.

High schools and college buildings were off-limits to Albanians, and the community responded by holding classes in the basements and garages of their homes, a desperate effort that soon evolved into a full-fledged shadow school system on the secondary and college levels. Conditions in these home schools were primitive: students sat on the floor or on rough-hewn benches and read textbooks ragged with use. University classes were the hardest hit, with no laboratories or technical equipment. With no state support, professors' salaries were paid by student fees of $100 per year.

Xhevdet Doda home school (Photo: Shyqëri Obërtinca ©Balkaninsight)

One of the many Mother Teresa health clinics

Serbian and Albanian Views of the Conflict

Serbs and Albanians explained the conflict between them in diametrically opposed ways, consistent with the way each group defines the boundaries of its political universe. Many Serbs see Kosova as a small enclave within a Greater Serbia stretching from the borders of Hungary in the north to Macedonia in the south, from Romania to the Adriatic. They see the Albanians as barbarian intruders, latecomers, a backward minority in the Serbian homeland, and, as the fastest growing population in Europe—a serious threat to their hegemony over what remains of Yugoslavia.

In contrast, Albanians identify with an Illyrian past that places them—in what is present-day Kosova, Albania, Northern Macedonia and northern Greece—at the dawn of history. They see Kosova as an Albanian world, by virtue of history, culture, religion and population (about 90 percent of Kosova was Albanian), with the right to self-determination.

Serbian woman (left) and Albanian woman (right) at the village water source, no longer speaking

To Serbs, the political takeover of Kosova in 1989 represented a just response to what they saw as Albanian nationalism and separatism. The constitutional changes were imposed on Kosova to "protect Yugoslavia from irredentist forces." They say that the "special measures" that brought about massive firings were introduced to prevent a further worsening of the situation. They tell themselves that Albanians were cut off from public institutions and social services because they chose to boycott the Serbian state, that they brought on their own social calamity.

To Albanians, the events were part of Belgrade's plan, already well developed in the 1930s, to take control over the region.

Each group blames their desperate condition on the other. Albanians believe that Belgrade systematically expropriated their mineral wealth and stole from Kosova's coffers at every turn. Serbs maintain that the investments that poured into Kosova in the 1970s and 1980s was misappropriated, mismanaged, and systematically pocketed by Albanians. They believe that the Albanians owe their chronic economic malaise to their own overpopulation, ineptitude, laziness and corruption, and their current woes to international sanctions, which have crippled Serbia as a whole.

Demographics were a key part of the equation. Serbs believe that the Slavic presence in Kosova has dwindled for two reasons. First, because Albanian terrorism and abuse forced Serbs to head north, and second, because of Albanian nationalism, Islamic fervor and cultural backwardness that has resulted in the highest birthrate in Europe. Albanians see the exodus of Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosova as a response to the greater appeal of life in the north. As for large families, most Albanians actually want only three or four children. But their desire for sons and the logistical impediments to birth control often caused them to exceed this number. Most deny that their high birthrate reflects a political agenda.

Cultural stereotypes also need to be understood here. Albanians were infamous throughout former Yugoslavia for their "exotic" blend of moral conservatism and cultural fanaticism. To outsiders, the archetypal Albanian man is a sword-wielding, warrior martyr for whom clan loyalties define the social world and blood revenge functions as law. The Albanian woman is a figure from the past secluded behind high stone walls, hidden under headscarves and raincoats. Most Serbs think Albanians are "dangerous subversives" seeking to take possession of Kosova and create a Greater Albania. Most are also in denial about the brutality wielded against the Albanian population. They generally recognize that Albanians have suffered some discrimination during the political overhaul but believe that the Albanians brought on their own hardship. They believe Albanian joblessness and inadequate schooling and medical care is a result of the Albanian boycott of the Serbian state.

Serbs seek to maintain control over Kosova. But while reluctant to give up what they have believed is the "cradle of their ethnicity," in the 1990s they were growing weary of the conflict. In some ways, the Albanians were faring better than Serbs, especially in access to goods and assistance. (Albanians were already engaged in private businesses before the collapse of socialism and their political movement inspired a highly developed network of assistance and unprecedented spirit of mutual aid.) It was also clear that the international community supported the Albanians. The

Serbs believed the world has been duped by anti-Serb propaganda, but nonetheless felt the heat of international recrimination. While some Serbs were ready to fight to keep Kosova, others were tired of the malaise, and would accept a return to 1974 statutes.

Many in the Belgrade opposition believed that Milošević was waging a campaign to maintain his sovereignty in Kosova in the wake of the Bosnian tragedy and his failure to create the Greater Serbian state he championed. The aggression in Kosova was not about preserving the "cradle of Serbian culture." It was about saving face, about defending a precarious political career with an anachronistic, contrived nationalist crusade. As a Beograd Serbian taxi driver explained it to me: "When we fought in Bosnia, we were fighting for Serbia. If we fight in Kosova, it will be for Milošević's throne, and I wouldn't give a hair on my head for that." While there is much apathy about the Kosova cause among Serbs in Serbia proper, those in Kosova reluctantly believe they are defending their homeland against the Albanian secessionists and protecting their wives and children against terrorists.

International Intervention

The international community seized upon the plight of the Albanians, decrying these injustices and tacitly supporting independence for Kosova, but unwilling to intervene in the matters of Yugoslavia, a sovereign nation.

Expressions of polite outrage and haphazard forays into mediation were meted out during quick diplomatic expeditions into the dark and wild underbelly of southern Serbia. Arriving in Prishtina, foreign diplomats and other well-meaning outsiders were drawn to the plight of the Albanians like bees to nectar. Down a few side streets, dazzling new pizza parlors, through a muddy field by the soccer stadium, a constant stream of diplomats made their way to the seat of Albanian "government." The tiny bungalow-turned-ideological-axis was always humming with the political posturing and vague promises of western diplomats. After impassioned embraces, lots of Turkish coffee, and heaps of contrived optimism, they were on to the next stop—an architecture class being conducted in someone's basement, a garage-turned-health clinic, an unemployed professor—feeling needed and wanted, and helpless to offer any real solutions.

It was different when the foreigners visited local representatives of the Serbian government. Though defiantly perched in imposing gray administration buildings on Main Street a few blocks away from the muddy barracks of Rugova's shadow government, they were much harder to pin down. Serbs were loath to receive Westerners, especially Americans, who,

they believed, had mistakenly demonized the Serbian nation throughout the war in Bosnia. Meetings with Serbian officials required appointments weeks ahead of time, and were often canceled arbitrarily. After all, "Priština" was their town, "Kosova" was their Province, and foiling diplomatic visits was an irresistible power play.

The discourse between outsider and power holder was routine and reductionist. Foreigners decried the treatment of Albanians on moral and legal grounds. Serbs portrayed the Albanians as terrorists who merited swift, harsh retaliatory gestures and preventative measures.

The international presence also included foreign relief agencies and private teams of idealistic conflict mediators, educational advisors, feminist activists, human rights advocates and journalists. Of particular interest were the "peace workers" who did their best to understand what was going on, penetrate Serbian and Albanian social networks and enlighten die-hard nationalists. Gravitating toward receptive subjects, they always found locals willing to attend conflict resolution workshops and engage in dialogue with their adversaries. These notions were easily embraced, as long as the local participants were young and bright with eyes to the West, eager to stretch their imaginations beyond the mental straitjacket of Balkanism. The workshops on "conflict resolution" and "gender equality" with these folks looked great in reports sent by the internationals to their headquarters. But for the most part they were preaching to the choir. Sit down for cigarettes and brandy with hardcore nationalists on either side, and the conversation about reconciliation or civil society didn't even begin—or it began on the bloody Field of Blackbirds in 1389 (the infamous battle between the Serbs and Ottomans) and never left.

The most pervasive force of international intervention and influence was the armada of international relief agencies. The first big organizations on the ground were the Red Cross, Mercy Corps, Doctors Without Borders and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, joined later by Doctors of the World, Oxfam, International Rescue Committee, Catholic Relief Services, the Soros Open Society Foundation, and Handicap International. By the end of the decade, Kosova was swarming with aid groups who brought medicine and medical training, wheelchairs and birthing clinics, food, clothes, water pumps, seeds and farm tools, computers, English classes, debate clubs, and encounter groups. They paid astronomical salaries to otherwise unemployed young locals who were lucky enough to speak English or French, or were the landlord's son or daughter.

And they brought ideas. Each agency walked a tightrope: appeasing the local Serbian government by delivering enough aid, money or infrastructure support to be tolerated, while weaving ideological threads into the fabric of

care and relief.

To the Albanian mind, the foreigners were bringing solace, the hope of rescue, a mind-meld with the world beyond the Balkans. The Serbs were suspicious, resentful, and, on the whole, unimpressed. They perceived the foreigners' attraction to the Albanian cause as misguided, repugnant and insipid. With the exception of the few Kosova Serbs who had been educated abroad, their imagination, if it took them beyond their garden walls at all, took them to the bright lights of Beograd, not New York. Even those who were trying to get work in the West didn't embrace the West.

They merely tolerated it.

16

Returning to Kosova as Aid Worker and Mother

In 1994, Jeremy and I returned to Kosova. Jeremy to enjoy the challenges of this new life, and I to assume an entirely new role: humanitarian aid worker. As a cultural anthropologist in the 1980s, my job had been to observe, understand and r eport. I was not supposed to influence people's lives. Now, happily, I was going to have the chance to do just that—to help relieve the needless suffering in the villages, to offer models of change.

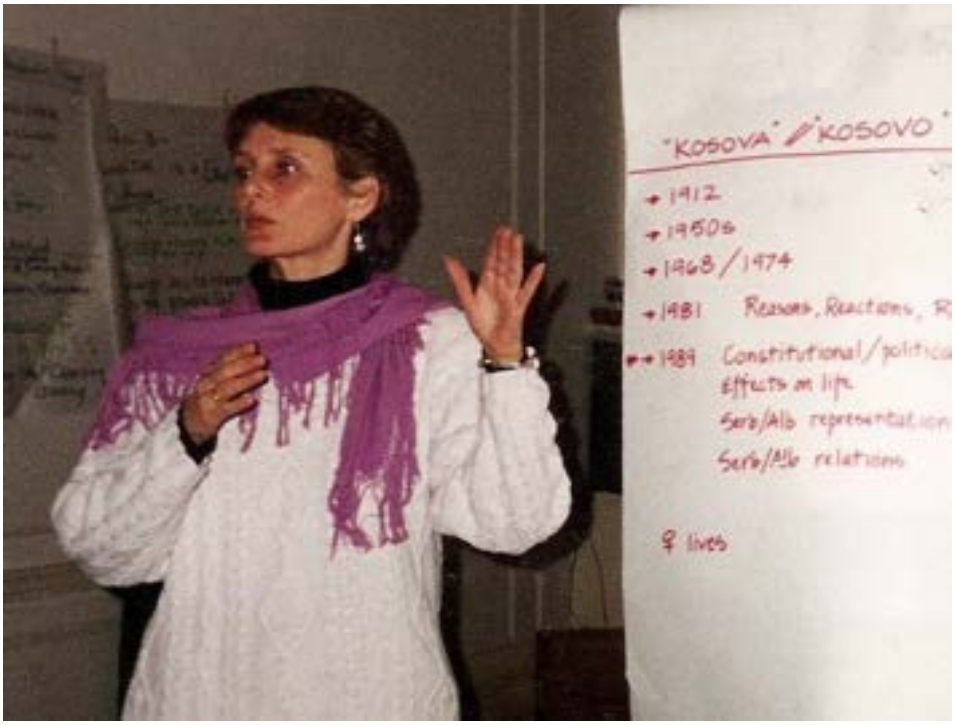
I was to conduct a needs assessment for OXFAM which would hopefully lead to a longer assignment as the coordinator of whatever rural development project we were able to embark upon. The job offer did not, however, come with a Yugoslav visa; it would be up to me to make that happen.

Within a few weeks, Jeremy and I were driving down Interstate 95, destination: the Yugoslav Embassy in Washington, D.C. With their country at the boiling point politically, the Serbs had no use for foreigners in their midst, and I knew the chances of an American getting a visa were slim. With so much riding on this meeting, I planned it carefully, using all I had learned about Yugoslav officials. I played the "lighthearted American woman with a happy little kid going to see the sights in Serbia" routine, cajoling with all my might, bringing Jeremy into the act for added appeal.

Incredibly, I was issued a tourist visa on the spot. Within a few days, Jeremy and I had given away our furniture to Albanian friends, packed up what belongings we could into our Honda Civic and parked it in a friend's driveway, and said goodbye to New Jersey.

Our first stop was the Oxfam headquarters in Oxford, England, for a two-week orientation period. Rather than stay in the Oxfam accommodations, Jeremy and I stayed in London, settling in with Rafete Sadiku, the daughter of my beloved Prishtina family, in her little downtown flat. Rafete was the

spunky, modern, English-speaking one who, with characteristic verve and tenacity, had managed to get herself, her husband and their two boys to England years before. She and her husband both had jobs in restaurants and were working hard to make ends meet and have something left over to send home.



Lecturing in New York before returning to Kosova

Rafete immediately brought us into the heart of her family. Jeremy and his new little pals had a great time visiting the dinosaurs in London's Museum of Natural History, riding in fancy black taxis and, of course, paying homage to Peter Pan's statue in Kensington Park, where as a baby, Peter had reportedly fallen out of his pram and promptly escaped to Neverland.

Each day I took the bus to Oxford, delighting, as everyone must do, in the uplifting, reassuring civility and beauty of that historic, cobblestoned town. I got to know Oxfam's protocols and programs as quickly as I could. Most folks leading projects in developing countries have a degree in International Development, and plenty of experience organizing community projects in all kinds of crisis areas, against all odds. I was just a cultural anthropologist. What did I know about irrigation systems, leach fields, rehydration salts or micro-enterprise? Very little. What I did know was Kosova: the language (Serbian and Albanian), the worldview, the political minefields. And, as it

turned out, most importantly, Kosova knew me.

Back Home with Feride

It was in this context of suspicion, instability and tension that Jeremy and I arrived in Kosova in the fall of 1994 to begin our needs assessment for Oxfam. I had three months to conceive of a project that was needed, feasible, and, most importantly, was considered benign enough for the Serbian government to give Oxfam permission to work there. For this temporary stay, we moved back in with Feride. We could have taken a room in one of the modern houses other foreigners stay in, but we went straight to the neighborhood of my surrogate mother. I had left them as a childless woman. What a joy it was to come back as a mom with my son!

Here's a letter I wrote home during those first days back with Feride:

September 27, 1994, Prishtina

Dear Family,

It's early morning, two weeks since our return to Kosova. At 4:45 a.m. I heard the Moslem priest calling the faithful to pray. The sky is clear; it will be another hot day. They call it "Gypsy summer." It feels like we've been here for a month. In a way, it feels like we've always been here. We're staying with Feride and Feriz in the room downstairs next to the basement/kitchen. They had been using our room for storage all these years, but when they heard I was coming back, they took everything out, whitewashed the walls, washed the rug and put all the furniture back the way it was when I lived here before. It feels like time travel, except with Jeremy here, adding delight to it all. It feels so normal to see him here. It feels like home.

We are 14 people in the house: seven adults, five kids, two babies. There are three small rooms upstairs and ours downstairs. Feride and Feriz are as I left them six years ago: solid as the earth, affectionate and constant, timeless. Jeremy is taking to all this like a fish to water. We have an abundant garden full of tomatoes, leeks and peppers, and a tiny strip of grass where Jeremy runs up and down, making up games with the other kids. He delights in eating apples straight from the tree. This is one of the things he has learned to ask for in Albanian, along with "Where's my sword" and "Can you come out to play." His favorite playmate is Korab, a seven-year-old ragamuffin from the house behind us. Korab's older brother Ekrem takes them up to the grassy hill to run around. I told Ekrem we're boiling Jeremy's drinking water, so on their first neighborhood outing he went into a local store and had them boil and cool a glass of water for Jeremy. Everyone loves him.

He's happy going on neighborhood adventures without me. He's not real fond of everyone pinching his cheeks all the time, but is getting used to constant hugs and kisses.

The families we know here live on very little money. I don't know how they do it. Bread is cheap, but everything else costs what it does in America: a gallon of gas is $3.50, a pair of shoes $30. Most families depend on help from relatives living abroad, or profits from small, makeshift, private businesses. Little private stores are everywhere: video clubs (we rented a blurry copy of "Lion King" for one deutsche mark), hamburgers, dry goods — everywhere. America's sanctions against Serbia are a joke. With bribes to border guards, everything gets in through Turkey or Greece.

Now Jeremy is awake and Feride is doing her morning prayers in our room, facing Mecca. It's the first time Jeremy has seen this. He's just holding his sword and watching her get up and down, counting her beads and whispering to herself. Many things are normal for him now: eating at the foot-high round table that barely accommodates all of us, drinking warm boiled milk and eating two-inch thick chunks of fresh bread, taking off his shoes every time he goes inside the house, wild kittens, mice in the house, communicating with kids through adventures instead of words. From time to time, Jeremy runs outside to watch Feriz building things with wood. Soon the neighborhood kids will be running and squealing all around the garden. Yep, here comes Korab, inviting Jeremy to come chase the cat. That's all for now. Love, Janet

Jeremy at Home with Feride and Feriz

Discovering Terpezë

Obtaining a visa to visit Kosova hadn't been easy, but getting permission to stay in the province was a bureaucratic nightmare. My first job was to find out who held the key to our ability to work in Kosova, and to get in their good graces. The high man in the hierarchy turned out to be Dr. Tmusić, the Minister of Health for the province of Kosova. As I investigated the rules of bringing foreign aid to Kosova, it quickly became clear this man had the ability to make or break Oxfam's intended project and my presence in the region. Tmusić was a hard-core Serbian bureaucrat, and within minutes of our first meeting I knew that it would take all the ability I had in the Serbian language and protocols, and every bit of cultural dexterity I could muster, to earn and maintain favor with him so we could do our job.

Over the course of many meetings, it was decided that an appropriate region for our work would be the County of Vitia, just an hour southeast of Prishtina. The appropriate project would be: "Improving sanitation in primary schools." Quite prophetically for me, it was in a Vitia village, Germova, that I first set foot in Kosova as a wide-eyed anthropologist in 1980. I was returning fourteen years later as an older and slightly wiser aid worker—to do what I could for Kosova.

In stark contrast to the mountainous isolation of Opoja, Vitia was flat and easily accessible. Despite this, the region was beholden to its own binding notions of tradition and conformity. Within a few months, I had visited many of Vitia's thirty villages, spoken with the requisite officials, both Serbian and Albanian, and had a pretty good sense of some of what was needed in the villages and what Oxfam could accomplish there. I was set to return to Oxford and submit my report when I received a tip from a local physician. "There's a village up the way called Terpezë with a natural spring that could provide clean water for the school and the whole village," he said. "They've never been able to make this happen. It's worth a visit."

On the day before I was due to return to Oxford, I traveled to this village with a team of local Albanian health workers, administrators, and teachers. By this time, I had visited many schools, and was accustomed to hollow conversations heavy on pleasantries and coffee, light on ideas. I expected another dingy, windowless room painted Socialist slime-green and reeking of stale cigarettes and brandy, and I expected a set of dingy bureaucrats to match.

But it was immediately clear to us as we walked up the clean, well-lit stairs and along a spacious, whitewashed hallway to the Director's

office on the school's second floor that this was no ordinary school. The Director's office was bright with sunlight and optimistically appointed with a dozen healthy houseplants arranged on the windowsill, shiny trophies in a well-dusted cabinet and a new, neatly organized desk set. Behind the desk sat the school's Director, Mustafë Tafa, dressed in a crisp, white shirt and smart black jacket. He immediately charmed us all with his gentle humility and interest in new ideas. Several teachers were summoned to join our conversation. The fact that I was an American woman speaking fluent Albanian and was in love with the Albanian culture and people went a long, long way with these folks. We passed the afternoon in delightful banter, our excitement growing with the possibilities we saw for this school and the project as a whole. We left Mustafë's office with a harvest of ideas and goodwill—everything I needed for the plan I would present to Oxfam and to Dr. Tmusić.

I was hoping to include in my report some facts and figures about the village that weren't on hand when we had met with Mustafë that afternoon, and he generously offered to get the information I needed and deliver it to us in Prishtina. But a heavy snow fell, and I was sure this would prevent him from meeting with us. I was mistaken. Mustafë was determined to be part of whatever Oxfam had to offer, and he braved the treacherous highway to bring me the information and give us a proper send-off.

Returning to Prishtina as Oxfam Project Manager

Back in Oxford, I was able to present a solid plan to Oxfam that the Serbian official might very well approve. We would endeavor to improve sanitation in a number of Vitia primary schools by building proper latrines and septic pits, and by testing the water and constructing new wells where needed. That was the official plan. Once we were working in the villages, we would embark quietly and cautiously on an array of projects to ease the suffering we saw. Oxfam accepted my proposal and gave me the job of Program Manager for Kosova.

Within weeks, Jeremy and I returned to Kosova. This time we had to set up a formal office with living space, so we joined the throngs of aid workers renting rooms in one of Prishtina's affluent neighborhoods—an array of opulent, overbuilt homes crowding the narrow streets and alleyways. Imi, our new landlady, came from a long line of urban Albanians. Her husband, a retired administrator, had accumulated enough wealth to build a large home alongside other Albanians clever enough to prosper under

Socialism. A former English teacher, Imi— and her two grown sons and her teenage daughter—spoke English very well. They lost no time getting work as drivers and translators as a wave of international NGOs (non-governmental organizations) made inroads into a besieged Kosova. The expansive balcony of our three-room flat on Imi's upper floor overlooked a city getting ready to erupt.

Jeremy's Prishtina Friends

Jeremy's Village Adventures

Jeremy and Veli during our visit to Opoja

A few houses up the street lived a good-natured, easy-going eleven-year-old Albanian boy named Fidan. Fidan's father had been a policeman in pre-1990s Kosova. Like most other Albanian civil servants, he had been fired from his job due to "special circumstances." With three sons at home and one unemployed in Sweden, he was trying to make ends meet driving a taxi.

In no time at all, Jeremy and Fidan became great pals. Just across the narrow street was a bakery owned by a family from Has (that region in Western Kosova that produced the "bread bakers" of Yugoslavia). Like most kids in Prishtina, Jeremy and Fidan had the job of buying the daily bread each morning. This is one of Jeremy's strongest memories of Kosova: handing his coins to the boy at the tiny bakery window, the aroma of fresh bread filling the street, and carrying home the golden loaf, hot

out of the oven, so steamy and fragrant he could barely resist (and often didn't) digging into the steamy, sweet center and pulling out a delectable soft white snack.

Our first year there, Jeremy turned five. Had we been in America, he would have been in kindergarten. In Yugoslavia, children started school at age six. To our surprise, we found a private preschool for Jeremy not far away that was attended by well-to-do neighborhood kids whose parents owned private businesses in Kosova or elsewhere in Europe.

The next fall, Jeremy was enrolled in the large primary school not far from our home. The school Jeremy attended was crowded, dank, and dilapidated. There were two shifts: Albanians in the morning, Serbians in the afternoon. For the most part, the Albanians and Serbs didn't speak to each other at all, even though they were sharing the same building.

So, Jeremy began his formal education at the age of six in a class of 30 Albanian first-graders in a "parallel school" considered illegal by the Serbian authorities. I was often out working during the day, and Fidan's family would step in to help take care of Jeremy, getting him to and from school and giving him nourishing hot meals in the afternoon. Jeremy picked up the Albanian language quickly, as kids do, mastering some of the grammatical structures (like the "surprise" tense) unique to Albanian that had eluded me even after years of practice.

Schools in Yugoslavia, even primary schools, are heavy on memorization and recitation, and Jeremy held his own on this front, reciting Albanian patriotic poems with gusto. He learned to read playing "Reader Rabbit" games on the computer and from the Albanian primers about medieval battles and partisan heroes. Albanian children learn to write in cursive from the beginning, so Jeremy skipped "printing" altogether. Aside from the whacks he endured from the teacher's ruler when he misbehaved, he enjoyed school and a neighborhood overflowing with children and fun.

17

Life with the Tafa Family in Terpezë

With Jeremy enrolled in school, an office set up in a room in our flat in Prishtina, and a station wagon issued by Oxfam, I was ready to embark on my rural development project. My first visit was to the village of Terpezë, where I hoped to once again meet up with Mustafë Tafa, the man who had given me the idea, and the confidence, to begin the project.

That first day, driving up the mile-long unpaved, severely pot-holed road to the village, I was filled with hope and anticipation. Sure enough, there was Mustafë standing with teachers at a crossroads near the grammar school: the welcome committee. Mustafë's quiet, polite demeanor, and his openness and sincerity assured me once again that I had found a good home base in this village, with this group of teachers and this community.

During the three years I was in Kosova doing aid work, Mustafë proved to be a loyal friend and an able guide through the almost impossible job of implementing community development projects in a mixed Serbian-Albanian region on the brink of a civil war. He welcomed us into his family of eight adults and thirteen children in three nuclear families. While we maintained our office/flat in Prishtina, Mustafë's compound became our base of operations when we were working in the villages of Vitia. His family became our family, and his home became our refuge, in the same way that Bellobrad had been my refuge when I was doing fieldwork in Opoja. After a long day of negotiating, cajoling and trying to understand and be understood, I would arrive back at Mustafë's home drained of all thought, ambition and patience. The hot meals, the warm and thoughtful conversations with the men, the intimate connections with the women and the affection of a crowd of kids, sustained me, body and soul.

With 21 people living in the house, including 13 children under the age of 14, Mustafë's family offered Jeremy a wonderland of adventure and camaraderie. On weekends and in the summer when Jeremy was out of

school and we could stay for longer periods in Terpezë, he had a great time taking part in the lives of these fun, friendly village kids. He ate his meals with the crowd of Tafa children, gobbling up hunks of sheep cheese and bread, bowls of bean stew and piles of roasted peppers spread out on a blue-checked tablecloth on the floor of the sitting room.

When Mustafë's sisters came to visit, the number of children grew to 18—a larger circle around the tablecloth and more playmates. Jeremy was often an unwitting accomplice in secret trips to the village store to buy candy and chips, on my tab. He rode tractors and wagons through the nearby farmland and woods and spent lazy afternoons playing in the fields while the older kids and adults hoed the corn or harvested beans. When he was sick, he was given traditional remedies, like vinegar-soaked socks to draw out a fever. I remember Jeremy sweating out a fever in the shade of a giant haystack, a gaggle of concerned buddies keeping him company throughout the ordeal. All in all, the experiences in Terpezë were among Jeremy's most precious childhood memories.

The Tafa Home

The various buildings that comprised Mustafë's family compound represented three epochs of Albanian life. At the foot of the property was a humble adobe building adjacent to the old barn. Plastered and whitewashed countless times, this relic of pre-WWII poverty was used now for storage and doubled as an extra guest room for the many visitors.

Midway up the property was a newer two-room adobe dwelling built in the 1950s. This is where Mustafë and his five brothers and two sisters were raised in the poverty of that post-war decade. One of the rooms now served as a place for food preparation. Here the women churned butter, roasted peppers, carved meat and pickled vegetables. The other room was where Mustafë's father slept. There was no furniture, just a perfectly swept Persian carpet and covered foam pads along all four walls. It was a cozy, old-style sitting room suited for informal gatherings, ideal for getting cool in the summer and for warming by the pot-bellied stove in the winter.

At the top of the long rectangular property was the new three-story house where Jeremy and I stayed. Like most of these big houses found all over Kosova, it was still unfinished, with only the first two floors habitable. Even so, each floor had a showy balcony extending out toward the yard—the top one adorned with sculpted dolphins and palm trees, a popular Vitia motif, a sign of prosperity and an immediate giveaway that the family had

people working abroad and sending back money. Of the six Tafa sons, three were working in Germany and one in Switzerland.

The layout of the house was typical for Albanian families still living ne *bashkësi* (in an extended family), with married brothers and their wives and children all under one roof. On the first two finished floors, there were four small bedrooms, one for each of the brothers living at home and their children, one for the brother whose wife and kids still lived at home, and one for the brother who had recently married and promptly left for Germany. Each bedroom was appointed with a large bureau containing the wife's knickknacks and the family's clothes and bedding, and two sofas that served as single beds. The mom and dad slept on these and the children slept on foam pads on the floor between them.

Mustafë's mother slept in the sitting room with one of her grandchildren to keep her company. Her husband, the *Zoti i Shtëpisë* (Lord of the House), slept in one of the older adobe buildings on the property. The third floor, still unfinished, would eventually accommodate two more brothers, if they ever returned from Europe.

Albanian Family Life in Transition

The Tafa family typified Albanian extended families in Kosova – engaged in an assortment of economic strategies and moral protocols combining the distant past and a changing present. The family, the neighborhood, the village, were all navigating an inevitable path to modernity. In this way, the Tafa household was a perfect microcosm of what was going on all over Kosova.

The design of the house upheld the traditional notion that all the brothers would continue to live together as a collective, as they had done in the past. In truth, few migrants ever returned home to live with the extended family. If they have the means to return to Kosova to retire, they build their own elaborate houses within the family compound. Furthermore, most young brides want to live alone with their husbands, apart from the in-laws. Most extended families wouldn't live together for long, and everybody knew it. But everybody still built the biggest house they could afford. The plan didn't correspond with reality, but it said to everyone involved: This is who we (still) are—this is what it means to be Albanian.

Mustafë's home offered us significant creature comforts, including our own bedroom. It was actually Sadbere's bridal chamber, but as long as her husband Xhyma was still looking for work in Germany, and until she could

join him, she spent most of her time at her own parents' home. A typical bride's room, all the wedding gifts were eternally on display: the fancy double bed adorned with a pale blue satin bedspread, ornate little bric-a-brac on display on the bureau and a little armoire filled on one side with long sequined dresses and matching shoes, the other side stacked high with brand new satin quilts and pillows.

The compound also boasted a huge yard the children and men used for judo practice, serious neighborhood soccer matches, and basketball games—the hoop installed on the side of the barn. It's the only Kosova compound I ever saw that was set up for this—and Jeremy and I loved being part of spontaneous neighborhood sports. We spent many happy summer days relaxing with the family out on the lawn under the apple tree, feasting on homegrown watermelon and Kosova plums.

Each time we visited the Tafa family, staying for a night or an extended weekend, we delighted in the boisterous household and developed special relationships with everyone—from toddlers to grandparents. We taught the children songs in English, organized hikes through the woodlands and picnics at a local lake and bought the family a washing machine. We luxuriated in the warmth of this welcoming, lively, loving family.

The Family

Mustafë's mother was the behind-the-scenes [mbrapa skenës] pillar of the household. Her name was Hamide, but we all called her *Lokja* (sweet granny). Hamide was the ideal Albanian mother: kind, gentle, but decisive and strong. In her quiet way, she was the source of life in the family, the motor that kept life going, the head chef, the baker, the counselor and consoler, the person everyone turned to for comfort and calm. When Jeremy and I were at the house Hamide was in her mid-sixties, but looked much older, having spent her adult life working hard to keep her family fed and clothed. I remember lovely conversations with her as we peeled potatoes or sliced peppers – about her childhood, her engagement and marriage, the way things used to be and what she felt about change. I am so grateful for her hospitality to Jeremy and me, and her tender-hearted care.

Mustafë's father Elmi, with his carved face, thin, wiry body, gentle dark eyes and white *plis* (felt skullcap), personified the traditional Albanian man. Having grown up as a farm boy, Elmi's sensibilities were rooted in the poverty and isolation of pre-WWII Kosova. His marriage to Hamide had been arranged when they were teenagers. Like many of their friends,

they had managed to meet secretly in the fields between their villages of Terpezë and Sllatina. After 30 years of marriage, they were basking in the radiant humanity of their large and ever-expanding family.

Elmi and I spent many hours sipping tea and talking into the night about village life in the 1930s—the hardship, the customs, and a sense of identify and honor that was carved in stone. He described to me in detail being conscripted as a teenager to join the Partisans in 1945, at the end of World War II, with three Albanian brigades. Their mission: to root-out any remnants of the Germans or their Serbian sympathizers. Ill-clad and hungry, they walked for weeks—all the way through Kosova and Albania to Tivar in Montenegro. It was an epic journey for Elmi and his compatriots. Typical for Albanian men of his generation, Elmi's formal education ended after primary school, but the way he expressed himself in telling me his stories was eloquent and profound, in the style of traditional Albanian oratory. It wasn't always easy to follow his logic, which serpentined around and about in unexpected directions toward surprising conclusions. I listened intently, following Elmi's ideas and recollections, until the boundaries of logical progression softened and revealed themselves.

Elmi's eldest son, Emrush, had been working in Germany for 26 years when Jeremy and I began our visits to Terpezë. Like so many men of his generation, he had taken the migrant road as a young man in the 1970s when jobs were plentiful to ensure the survival of his family back home. This was old-style migration: the man working abroad for most of his adult life, leaving his wife and children in the care of his extended family. Emrush had been living in Nuremberg a few years when he received news that his parents had found a bride for him in Buzovik, a village across the valley. He came home for the wedding, then promptly returned to Nuremberg. Many visits and four children later, Emrush still lived in Germany most of the year—returning home to lavish gifts on everyone, enjoy vacation time with family and neighbors and act as presiding brother in the household until his next departure.

Like thousands of Albanian women whose husbands had lived abroad for decades, returning once or twice a year for a week or two, Emrush's wife had to accept a painful social paradigm: She lived her life *"ne derë të huaj"* (in a stranger's house), with no man at her side, no special favors or support when he did come home (to avoid jealousies in the household), and was compelled to maintain the highest standard of modesty and seclusion, lest her husband's family's reputation be scarred by perceived indiscretions. Like most Albanian women of her generation, Fakije had

been programmed since childhood to accept her fate, especially when her husbands' remittances sustained the entire family. As the eldest bride of the Tafa family, and having raised four good, kind, respectful children, she was a proud and dignified woman, respected by everyone in the family.

The next eldest brother in the Tafa family, Hazir, typified the more recent wave of migrants who brought their families to live with them once they had a life set up abroad. Hazir had migrated to Geneva 15 years earlier. He had married a woman of his own choosing from a nearby village and had brought her to live with him as soon as he was established in Switzerland. Hazir had a steady job as a gardener, eventually establishing his own landscape company. He and his wife and son had a comfortable apartment and were upwardly mobile immigrants living the way their Swiss neighbors lived. But Hazir felt a tremendous responsibility to help his family of 21 people back home and sent regular remittances.

Mustafë's two youngest brothers had recently made it to Germany under the radar—part of a new tide of Albanian migrants who crossed the border to a country overflowing with Bosnians, Serbians, Turks , Algerians and all the other southern migrants seeking a living wage. With little hope of getting work permits, they took on odd jobs and hoped to somehow work their way into the system. One of the younger brothers, Xhyma, had been recently married. Where Emrush's wife had only a few years of schooling, Xhyma's wife Sadbere was finishing a college degree in chemistry. Where Emrush's marriage had been arranged and the couple married sight unseen, Sadbere and Xhyma had dated for years and were very much in love. Upon marriage, Emrush's wife immediately moved in with her in-laws, while Sadbere was given the choice of staying with her parents until she could join Xhyma abroad.

With four brothers away in Europe, it fell to Mustafë and Mujo, the two middle brothers, to care for their own wives and children, their parents, and the wife and children of their eldest brother. They both had college degrees in Physical Education and were both employed at the village primary school where Mustafë also served as Director. In a way, the two brothers led similar lives, bound to home, obligated to parents, dependent on paltry, ever-shrinking salaries and unpredictable remittances from brothers abroad to sustain a large family. Their situation burdened and confined them both, but they responded in opposite ways.

A slender, golden-haired, charming man, Mujo looks just like actor Leslie Howard (the Ashley character in "Gone with the Wind"). Mujo was married to Zoja, a sweet, lively girl from a neighboring village with

whom he had fallen in love as a young lad. They had three healthy boys, an exceptionally bright daughter, Laura, and a solid, loving, extended family.

Mustafë, gentle and true to the core, lived a contented life with his wife Dyze. They had met in high school and courted for years. Slender like Mujo, but black-haired and blue-eyed, Mustafë was kind and caring to the extreme. In Mustafë, Dyze had a man entirely devoted to her, their children, his parents, the family name and all of the children under his watch at home and at the school. Of all the brothers, it was Mustafë who took after his father, inheriting the best of Albanian character: selfless, wise, and compassionate. Dyze was abundantly sweet and generous—a devoted, hard-working, beautiful, and abundantly kind woman.

Mustafë and Dyze had five children—four daughters and a son. They loved their four beautiful daughters no less than they loved their son Gramoz, a boy Jeremy's age. But for all Albanians there was pressure to have more than one son. "I'm just like you," Dyze pointed out to me numerous times. "Only one son—one child to care for Mustafë and me in our old age—and what if something happens to him?" In a patrilocal society in which girls always leave home to live with their husband's family, to be left with only one son at home could have dire consequences. "You see how we are taking care of Mustafë's parents? It's the boys left at home, and their wives, who care for the old folks. People lose sons—some go work in the city or abroad. Sometimes a son gets sick or dies. To make sure someone is there to take care of you when you get old, to beat the odds, you must have many sons."

Of course, with the majority of Kosova's youth now migrating to Europe in search of work, the idea of a son staying behind with his wife to care for elderly parents is a thing of the past. Mustafë takes a modern point of view: "Why should I interfere with the future prospects of my children just so they can take care of me for a few years at the end of my life? Sons or daughters, let them create their own destiny, wherever that takes them, let them thrive!"

The lives of Mustafë's sisters also reflected the shifting tides of traditional Albanian life. Syndyze, the eldest of the Tafa children, was an excellent student but wasn't allowed to finish high school due to the worldview held among many villagers when she was young. Her marriage had been arranged for her and she had four children. In contrast, Shyrete, Mustafë's younger sister, had finished high school. Witty and light-hearted, she was married to a delightful young man and had two sweet boys. She lived with her husband's family in the little town nearby. She loved her devoted

husband, but more than anything wanted him to get work abroad for a few years so they'd have enough money to set up their own household—or better yet, get a permanent job abroad and send for her and children to live with him there.

Albanian Women's Lives: An Assessment

Having lived for so long among Moslem women, I often find myself embroiled in discussions about the relative happiness of Moslem women in comparison to their Western, non-Moslem counterparts. The lesson I learned from the Tafa family and from families throughout Kosova was that in Kosova, as in the West, the relative happiness of the women is situation-specific. Each of the Tafa women experienced life differently, depending on (in this order): their relationship with the other *nuse* (women married into the family), with their mother-in-law, and with their husbands.

On the whole, I must say that the women I knew in Kosova were on the whole more contented and fulfilled than those I knew in America. One reason: security. When I lived in Kosova, divorce was virtually unknown. Marriages were, for the most part, guaranteed for life. And so was being looked after in one's old age. As part of an extended family, an Albanian woman would be cared for—by her sons and their wives and by the larger family group—for the rest of her life.

Also, and crucially, living in the collective, women were not solely dependent on their husbands for emotional sustenance. They lived in a world of women . . . and were never alone.

Above all, their expectations were very different from the expectations of Western women. In the West, women expect a marriage to deliver on many fronts—emotional, financial, intellectual, and social. The ideal is difficult to achieve. The women I knew in Kosova who were leading traditional lives were hoping for a situation much easier to come by. All things being equal, a village woman was happy if: her husband was a good man, her mother-in-law was kind and fair, she got along with the other women married into the family, and she had at least two sons.

At Home in Terpezë

The Tafa women relaxing after breakfast before the day's chores begin

Breakfast in Terpezë (Jeremy is left in red shirt)

Mustafë and Dyze

Mujo with the kids - Jeremy with green Robin Hood hat

Muja's wife Zoja churning butter

The house in Terpezë

Grandmother "Lokja"

Grandfather Elmi – Head of the household

Jeremy in school in Terpezë

Celebrating Jeremy's birthday in Terpezë

Jeremy playing with kids in Terpezë

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Life as a Humanitarian Aid Worker

Follow a humanitarian aid worker into the Kosova countryside in the 1990s and you could see Kosova's privation, privilege, suffering and stoicism in vivid relief. To the international aid workers sent to Kosova in that period, the place was exotic, appalling, and compelling—a slice of the Middle East wedged into southern Europe, a cultural island where logic and reason are often sidestepped in favor of honor and tradition. Western feminists visiting village families were appalled by the silent, servile women in floor-length satin dresses and extravagant gold jewelry washing their guests' feet, pouring endless glasses of tea and then disappearing from view. Aid workers, journalists and diplomats held discourse over cocktails and steak dinners on the fear and hatred tearing apart this otherwise enchanting place. They were all new to Kosova. For me, Kosova was home.

The Mandate

As Program Manager for Oxfam in 1994 and 1995, and for the IRC (International Rescue Committee) in 1996 and 1997, my mandate was to improve the water and sanitation conditions in primary schools and provide health education for village women in Vitia and Gjilan, two ethnically mixed counties in eastern Kosova. Beyond this, my job was to resuscitate waning vestiges of community spirit, to ignite sparks of civil society and to implement projects that would enlist cooperation between Serbs and Albanians—at a time when the two factions were barely speaking, and violent clashes between the two were on the increase.

The role of an anthropologist is to observe and decipher the Albanian world view but "leave no footprints." As an aid worker, my job was the opposite of this. It was to be a catalyst for change, which suited me well! I set out to challenge the parts of village life that brought unnecessary hardship

and suffering: epidemics of diarrhea among children when formula with unclean water was substituted for breastfeeding; an outbreak of polio when Albanians feared the Serbs had contaminated the vaccines and refused to be inoculated; children with disabilities hidden from the outside world by well-meaning parents; Albanian girls losing their adolescent years to needlepoint and tatting for fear that going to school would jeopardize their chance at a good marriage.

These problems were ubiquitous throughout the region. Every village also had its own array of vexing issues, its special angle on hardship. But with their country of Yugoslavia falling apart all around them, Milošević angling to "take back Kosova for the Serbs," the Albanians barely holding together their "shadow society," and unemployment dragging everyone down, neither the Albanians nor the Serbs could even contemplate fixing the problems that afflicted their communities.

The Team

During the first years of aid work I was employed by Oxfam, a UK-based international aid group. For the very challenging projects we faced in the schools, I had a wonderful, talented, dedicated team of village leaders helping and guiding me: Hetem Kurteshi, Isa Shabani, Mustafë Tafa, and Samet Dalipi. My engineer was Feriz Sinani, a very skilled, honest man, a delight to work with, who knew all the villagers and was adept at navigating the precarious relationships with Albanian and Serbian school personnel.

The amazing female activists who made our Vitia health education program possible were Ganimete Hebibi (my co-organizer and guide), Drita Xheladini, Fatmire Shabiu, Habibe Osmani, Kimete Zeqiri, Haxhere Pira, Latife Neziri, Meliate Osmani, and Xhevahire Sylejmani.

When my Oxfam contract ended, I was offered the chance to work for the International Rescue Committee (IRC) by a New York-based physician named Alan Ross. An extrovert of the highest order, behind his disheveled appearance that made him an Albert Einstein look-alike was a man of intellectual brilliance and limitless imagination, energy, and enthusiasm. Alan worked at the emergency room of a New York hospital so he could get plenty of time off to pursue his passion: connecting people around the world to solve irascible health problems. We had met many years before in New York, and when he got a notion to get a project going in Kosova, he found me and asked me to be his project leader. I jumped at the chance.

We devised a plan to do the kind of projects we had completed in Vitia, but this time in the County of Gjilan, another ethnically mixed region just east of Vitia. This time we had a broader vision of what we could accomplish and assembled a stellar project team equal to the task.

Qemajl Murati was our first choice to run the project with me. I had known Qemajl from my early days in Kosova when he was an English teacher in Prishtina. Alan's a very persuasive guy and talked Qemajl into leaving his lucrative job with a major NGO for the chance to work on grassroots community projects with us. Highly educated, savvy and sophisticated, an elegant tactician with street smarts, Qemajl had grown up in Kabash, a Vitia village, was well-respected and trusted by Albanians, and the quintessential diplomat, adept at appeasing Serbian officials. He was the perfect man for the job.

For our second engineer, we hired Isa Shabani, also a native of Vitia county, who was a smart soft-spoken man, open-minded, and well-known and trusted in the local community. We brought an environmental engineer from America, a young woman named Jamie, who was very excited about the prospects of sharing her knowledge of septic pits and leach fields with the locals.

Qemajl

Fieldwork in Viti

With engineer Feriz, explaining a project to villagers

Engineers Isa & Jamie

Serving soup to Samet & Hetem

With Feriz, convincing villagers to embark on a project

Viti team consulting on a project in Buqe, Opoja

With Qemajl & Isa

Alan visiting village families

Alan modeling compassion for patients as medical students look on

The Challenge

A quick tour of the villages we were working in will give a sense of Kosova's political, infrastructural, and psychological quagmires played out in miserable variation.

Gërmovë

We'll start in Germovë, the village I visited in 1980 where I was becoming captivated with Albanian life and where I returned in 1994 with a mandate to give the schoolchildren clean drinking water. By the look of things—muddy, pot-holed roads, water buffalo rambling around, horse-drawn carts stacked high with corn husks, that sleepy, disheveled, "any century" look—we could be in Tunisia, Iraq, or anywhere in between. But this wasn't the Middle East – it was Europe on the eve of the 21st century.

It was easy to tell who was who. Two-story, cinder-block homes, fancy balconies decorated with palm trees and dolphins, the favorite ornamentation of that era, satellite dishes and high garden walls, women in the ubiquitous pastel scarves and raincoats, light-haired, green-eyed children, old men in white skull-caps . . . this was Albanian turf. One-story, white-washed adobe houses, cackling pigs, dark eyes, women in knee-length skirts and men sporting partisan caps . . . these were the homes of Serbs. A new orthodox chapel, paid for by the government, said "Serbia." An old minaret poked up tiredly from the Albanian quarter, calling out to Mecca.

Gërmovë's school was built in 1950. The schoolyard had long been given over to pigs, geese and goats; county officials had been trying unsuccessfully to enforce an ordinance against the neighbors grazing their livestock at the school for twenty years. Serbian children studied in one room, Albanians in four others, in two shifts. The two Directors, in a school the size of a baseball diamond, had had no contact with each other for eight years. The piles of wood used for heat were kept separately. For the Serbians, wood, teachers' salaries, school maintenance and scant materials were supplied by the government. Albanians, trying to maintain their shadow school, paid for these when they could, with donations from family members living abroad. They had no educational materials and a worn-out blackboard that was barely usable. The well water, rife with nitrites from fecal matter, was used for washing floors. There was no clean water for the children to drink. An unfinished concrete shell not

far from the schoolhouse was a failed attempt to build a decent outhouse, the plan aborted after a fight broke out over who was to finish it. Inside the classrooms, sections of the ceiling hung precariously above children's heads—the whole thing ready to collapse.

It only took a month for us, working with the two communities, to fix the roof and build a well and a new outhouse with a two-chamber septic pit. But it had taken a year to convince the villagers it was possible and worth the trouble. In the end, Albanians did the carpentry and dug the septic pit; Serbs drilled the well. The funds were collected (squeezed) from villagers by their respective leaders and matched by a grant I was able to secure from a group of Dutch lawyers.

Gërmovë – Before & After

Zhiti

Down the road from Germova, east toward the Serbian border, we pass Zhiti. The local bus, emblazoned with a huge poster of Miloševiċ across its windshield, delivered Albanian and Serbian farmers who receded, unspeaking, into the respective quarters of their village. Zhiti boasted a new primary school that only Serbian children were allowed to use. Local Serbs explained that the large number of unruly Albanian children would damage the property. Albanian children, who far outnumbered Serbs, were relegated to multiple shifts in an unfinished storeroom off someone's house. The official policy that all primary schoolchildren, parallel system or not, were allowed to use state buildings, was a façade.

Talking to students in Viti

Ballancë

Past Zhiti, up a steep, potholed road, all but impassable in the winter, lies the small Albanian village of Ballancë, its tiny white schoolhouse adorning the peak of a hill just above the mosque. A few months before, the schoolhouse was in ruins, another crumbling post-war adobe. The villagers had gathered funds to renovate but were afraid that once they began work the Serbs would stop the project, leaving them with no school at all. Our team worked with village leader Hetem Kurteshi, a soft-spoken, inspiring young man, who helped us engage the community members to build latrines and repair the water source. This project gave the villagers

the confidence they needed to fix the school. The sad little building had been crumbling for many years. It took less than a month to rebuild it and make it a strong, clean, bright little structure on the hilltop – a symbol of solidarity and defiance for all to see.

Ballancë - Before and After

Beguncë

One of our most successful projects was the renovation of the school in Beguncë, a beautiful mountainside village near the town of Vitia. Like the other villages we worked in, there was a great need and shared desire to improve the old school that was in a state of decay. But in the tense political situation, Albanians were reluctant to start any major projects in fear that the Serbs would shut them down. As in the other villages, somehow my involvement as an American working for a British NGO (Oxfam) boosted the community's confidence enough to go forward with the project.

We had a stellar team to lead the effort: Samet Dalipi - an Albanian political leader in Vitia County, and Isa Shabani - our excellent structural engineer. We gathered funds from villagers, talking with each family and asking to contribute whatever they could afford in Deutsche Marks (DM), the common currency of that era. When the villagers came up short, I was able to find 6,000 DM in additional funding so they could build a second story on the school to accommodate all the students. This had great significance for the community—to be able to build a beautiful school in spite of the dangerous political atmosphere that impacted all parts of their lives.

Samet and I had many conversations about the future of Kosova, and the question of Independence from Serbia. I had great doubts about whether this could be achieved, given the power of Serbia, backed by Russia, to maintain the apartheid situation. Samet was entirely confident that independence would be achieved – and he was right! But neither of us knew it would take a war and a NATO bombardment in 1999 to create the conditions needed to gain independence from Serbia in 2008. When I visited Vitia after the war, I told Samet that he had been right all along. The question was, could Kosova live up to the grand ideal of its sovereignty.

Beguncë - Before and After

Klokot

Klokot is a small Serbian village near Terpezë, well-known locally for the mineral water that came out of the well at the school yard. When we arrived to learn about the water and the sanitation in the school, we found the old outhouse dumping right onto the village stream. We set to work testing the well and making a plan of action. All of this required careful maneuvering, with an Albanian team working in a Serbian school in the midst of the incredibly tense political situation and ethnic enmity. Finally, with the help of young village lads, we were able to dig a new well, which, for the first time, delivered clean drinking water to the school.

Stublla

Venturing eastward from Ballancë was the Albanian Catholic village of Stublla, which boasted primary and secondary schools in good condition and a small regiment of clergy and nuns educated in Italy. The village was so poor that early on most men took to migration. By the 1990s, two-story, finely built homes were the rule. Beautiful homes, but no work. Every boy hoped to leave the village, to settle abroad. No girls attended high school. Instead, they bided their time, calculating how to land a husband whose prospects were abroad. To counter this trend, we banded together: foreign aid workers, schoolteachers, and community leaders. We visited families one by one. We met with fathers, uncles, mothers, or the girls themselves, examining together a contradiction: they cried for independence, and said they will die for it, but weren't willing to go to school, to give Kosova the professionals they needed to rebuild their society.

Binçë

The tiny village of Binçë was a very unusual place to work - home to Serbs, Albanians and Croatians—the latter, descendants of a medieval mining community. A roadside spigot—the village water source—had been broken for months; it seemed too daunting a project for this mixed community to do anything about it. We were invited to build a latrine and water source for the dilapidated school. Albanians agreed to take part in the project. The Serbs called a village meeting. Fifteen men gathered in the candlelit schoolhouse on a cold October night. One was drunk, the others got rowdy, no consensus was reached, and my engineer and I were advised to leave before someone got hurt. Before consensus was reached on how the project was to be undertaken and who was to dig the septic pit, early snows came and the project was aborted. A month later, an Albanian man was killed by a Serb in their village bakery. The community was paralyzed.

Cernicë

Further east, up another green valley, lies the Albanian-Serbian village of Cernica. The state-run health clinic serving this large village was open to all, but the building was in shambles. Its water source was contaminated and piles of its toxic garbage accumulated nearby. About 120 Serbian students attended Cernica's primary school in the morning. To separate

the two populations, the 700 Albanian children were packed into four short afternoon sessions that extended into the evening. Girls from small neighboring mountain villages could no longer attend school; afternoon classes meant they would have to make the hour walk home through darkness. Any rapprochement from either the Serbian or Albanian Director of the school was looked down upon as treasonous by their respective compatriots. The two Directors had hardly spoken since 1990. The Serbian Director was proud of the basketball court and modern locker room he had built. He apologized about denying access to the Albanian children, but he thought there were so many of them that they would ruin the facility.

My team dug a new well to serve Cernica's clinic, created a garbage collection program, constructed a septic pit and leach field for the school's putrid outhouse, began a women's health education program, a men's discussion group and English classes. George Soros' Open Society Foundation provided computer and science equipment for a new lab to be shared by Serbs and Albanians. But these improvements and new ideas did little to quell the fear and loathing that continued to permeate every part of life.

These snapshots reveal the ruin, recalcitrance, and apathy brought on by decades of economic and political corruption and oppression. We were working inside a ticking time bomb ready to detonate.

A Letter Home from Terpezë - June 13, 1995

Dear Family,

The sky is a brilliant blue today. Perfectly defined cumulus clouds make the place majestic. The roads and village pathways are lined with beautiful splashes of color: bright red poppies, electric purple lupine and white daisies against a backdrop of ripening wheat. My senses are charged with the colors and earthy smells—at dawn, in the heat of the midday sun, through the summer evenings. Always in view is Mount Luboten, a snow-capped peak is in sight from our office in Prishtina and on the 90-minute drive all the way to the Vitia villages where we're working.

I feel so lucky to be here, so passionate about the people, the work and the stunning landscape. My days are filled to the brim with Jeremy and the village work. Jeremy is totally at home now with Imi's family in Prishtina, and with Mustafë's family in Terpezë where we stay when I'm out working in the villages. As soon as we arrive in Terpezë, he leaps out of the car and

jumps into the throng of 13 kids waiting to run around and get into all kinds of farm mischief.

A wonderful person has come into our lives: Ganimete. She is finishing her chemistry degree at college, but in between exams has time to be with us much of the time. She has a quiet, warm, gentle presence and is a wonderful help to me, with work and with Jeremy. We love having her in our lives.

The main thrust of my work is water, sanitation, rebuilding schools and women's health. My job, besides running the project, is to get under people's skin—to inspire them to care about the dismal conditions in their villages that make life so hard. Serbs and Albanians are both in deep doubt about their futures. Lacking the means to do anything about it, they hibernate in a tangle of local intrigue, jealousy, suspicion and sabotage.

For months we've been jumping through bureaucratic hoops, trying to get permission for different parts of our projects. There's no precedent. No foreigners are working in this way, deep in the communities—there's no established protocol. The Serbs are afraid to go out on a limb for us--one false move and they could lose their jobs. The Albanian leaders are behind us, even though it's tough for them to stomach the fact that I must work through the Serbian government and communities. I have to convince them that it will be worth it, that it's okay if I'm talking to the Serbs, as long as they don't have to do the talking.

Both sides are watching my every move. The Serbs suspect I am an American spy plotting to cleanse Kosova of Serbians. Some of the Albanians think I'm a Serbian sympathizer. There's never a dull moment. Every day we are stopped by the Serbian police or army. Jeremy has learned not to speak any Albanian when people in uniform question us, and to say hello and goodbye in Serbian, just to be safe.

Yesterday we visited a health clinic in one of the villages that was a horror. The "technician" (male nurse) was there all morning just giving people shots, mostly antibiotics, for anything that ailed his patients. Syringes, bloodied bandages, and other lethal trash were thrown in an open box in the corner. The supplies were strewn on a bare table. The technician never washed his hands while I was there. We asked him why things were this way. His answer: "No water." I said, "You mean to tell me the neighbors can't come up with a pitcher of water each morning for you to wash your hands?" No, that wouldn't happen. He said there was no cloth on the table because of "poverty." I said: "You're telling me these families with a Mercedes and satellite dish can't come up with one clean sheet for you?" He started thinking.

People are so used to blaming their problems on something outside themselves: the Ottomans, the Serbs, the Communists, the Serbs, no water, no rights, no jobs (Serbs again). There's no tradition of self-examination or self-help. But times are changing. Albanians are connected to the outside as never before, now that every family has someone living in Europe and the disintegration of Yugoslavia is front page news. I'm hoping that in this context they'll respond to some new ideas.

So far, we have been successful in pushing the bounds of our official mandate of water and sanitation to include school reconstruction, health education and persuading Albanian families to let their daughters attend secondary school.

We hold Health Education talks every two weeks in all the villages we're working in. We've found a few young women in each village with the imagination and verve to think beyond their household chores and envision something different in their lives. They have become our aktivista (activists) and have named their group Legjenda (The Legend). Women who rarely venture outside of their family compound are starting to attend the health meetings, thanks to the persuasive powers of these young women, including our own Ganimete.

We put lots of energy into getting girls back to school. Secondary education has been a short-lived phenomenon for Albanian girls. The first Albanian language high schools opened in the 1970s when Kosova became an Autonomous Province. This was a huge victory in the Albanians' long struggle for equal rights in Yugoslavia, and many young women were able to attend high school for the first time. This has fallen apart in the 1990s within the new climate of ethnic conflict and instability.

Getting to know many Albanian families during our projects, we learned that the families of many Albanian girls weren't allowing them to attend school, so our team set out to find out why and do something about it. We talk about this whenever we meet with the villagers. Sometimes we go house to house, talking to fathers and uncles—trying to convince them to change their minds.

The girls' families come up with lots of excuses: "It costs too much to pay for her bus fare and the food she needs to take with her to school." "Her dad is in Switzerland and he's the only one who can give her permission to attend school." "Serbian boys will accost her on the bus." "We would send her if President Rugova told us to, but he hasn't."

The truth is, it was okay for girls from traditional families to go to school when they would get a job afterward and enter a "modern" marriage with

a boy whose family wanted an educated (read: liberated) daughter-in-law. Otherwise, the exposure to boys outside her family would compromise her reputation, diminishing her chances of a good marriage. With the economic downturn of the 1980s and the turmoil of the 1990s, there's little chance of the girls finding work when they graduate from school, so they're keeping them at home.

We counter each of their excuses with cogent arguments. We call migrant fathers on the phone. I go and talk to the migrants in Switzerland. I convinced President Rugova to take a stand about the need for girls to go to school and got him to write a letter to our villages. I speak about it at every village meeting. When the discussion reaches a climax, and the moment is right, I exclaim, "Ju po doni m'u kon pjesë t'Evropës, por po leni gratë n'Arabi!" (You want to be part of Western Europe, but you're leaving your wives in Arabia!). That pretty much hits the nail on the head and gets these men to think about things.

For fun, I teach English to Albanian kids on our weekends in Terpezë. These are very lively classes. I'm trying to engage the students with all of their senses, singing rock and roll songs together and using games to bring the language to life. It's a bit chaotic doing this with kids used to memorization and recitation, but it shakes things up in a good way.

I've even taught a few times in Klokot, the Serbian village not far from Terpezë. The Serbian parents are wary of me, associating with Albanians as I do, and are less than inviting. But their kids are all for it, and clamor for the chance to learn. Yesterday, after the Klokot class, I set out to walk home ALONE to Terpezë—something completely ill-advised and out of place in rural Kosova. I left the classroom, made my way through the Klokot, turned on to the main road, then started up the village road to Terpez—all in full view of Serbian and Albanian onlookers. As the setting sun cast a golden light over the fields of wheat and I luxuriated in the soft, exquisite radiance of the summer evening, I was crossing a dangerous divide between Serbian and Albanian worlds. The event caused lots of talk in Terpezë, and I got a scolding by the family for going by myself. But it's a moment I'll never forget.

We hear about hostages being held in Bosnia. In Kosova, midnight arrests confound the fanatical, convoluted mindscapes of Albanians and Serbs. Meanwhile, we're just trying to repair some schools, dig some wells, and get some girls to school.

Much love, Janet

Ganimete with the Terpezë kids and Jeremy piled in our IRC vehicle

Ganimete, Janet, Habibe, and other Legjenda activists at an event in Viti

A traditional midday meal (chicken and rice, sheep cheese, tomatoes, bread) with Ganimete, her family, and our engineer Jamie

"Legjenda" Women's Activists

Legjenda activists with Kosova's President, Ibrahim Rugova

Health Education Meetings






My Role: Activist & Organizer

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Banishment

Within three short years, our Oxfam and IRC team had made significant strides in the counties of Vitia and Gjilan. Together with the local people, we brought clean water and sanitation to schools, rebuilt schools, started health education courses, launched a women's empowerment organization, convinced many families to send their daughters to high school and generally made waves.

By this time, I had learned that the most important things we could bring to Kosova were MODELS of different ways to do things. There was great joy in finding people who were open to these ideas, whether they had to do with healthcare, hygiene, community activism, or the potential for young women to do something more with their lives.

A Letter Home from Prishtina - March 23, 1996

Dear Family,

I'm so happy because we have finally put together an excellent, dedicated team for the work with IRC and Alan. It's new for me, coordinating the work of other people so the projects can come to life. If we're successful with our new plans for water and health education, women's empowerment and educational initiatives, our work will become a model for other projects of this kind, in Kosova and beyond.

With Alan, there's no bureaucracy, no holding back—just creativity, energy, and always the notion of expansion, not contraction. He always has many irons in the fire at once. In addition to the Kosova project, he has projects happening in Israel and in Russia. He's here for two days, then to New York for a week, then back here. He inspires people wherever he goes. Yesterday, while touring the local hospital, Alan gathered a throng of young

interns who were on rounds, sat at the bedside of a sick woman, held her hand, and spoke softly to her about what ailed her. He wanted these future physicians to see an example of "gentle bedside manner," something that isn't practiced in the Balkans, but could be.

I love working with Qemajl, too. He's so smart, easy-going and a born diplomat. At public meetings he'll kick me under the table when I'm being lured into saying something political. He always keeps me on track and out of trouble. Riding through the mountains with Qemajl, Alan, Jami, and Isa is a joy. I can't imagine a more exciting and invigorating way to live.

Alan has rented for us a big three-story house to accommodate our team and all the projects we envision. There are nine bedrooms, four bathrooms, large meeting spaces and lots of sunlight. Jeremy loves it, with so many people around all the time to take him on adventures. We put our mattress out onto the balcony so we can sleep outside and enjoy the summer nights. The house was a wreck when we got it, so the rent is cheap. We "re-invented" it to accommodate everyone who will be staying here: Jamie, Alan when he's here, young village women (my Vitia activists) who help us in the field and at the house and the visiting physicians and scientists Alan is bringing here for visits to advance the knowledge of their Kosova counterparts.

Our projects in Gjilan are picking up speed. The prospects are very exciting: mobilizing women activists and doctors for the health education courses, rebuilding more schools, cleaning up the trash, getting all the girls back to high school. We're planning a summer camp for village kids—something they've never had here before, which will include, in addition to the fun stuff, courses in biology and eco-systems, health education, intro to computers and English. We're confident we can get funding from George Soros, who is getting more active here and loves these kinds of projects.

This is the perfect job for me—room for maximum creativity and the possibility of making big changes in these communities—despite the political minefields that hold everyone down. Yesterday I felt completely fulfilled while driving through Cernica on the way to a health education meeting, the van loaded with Albanian girls playing tambourines and singing out in full voices.

When the meeting was over, I returned to Terpezë and joined the family for some late afternoon work in the bean fields. Jeremy and the kids romped about, wild, and free, as I hoed and weeded with Mustafë and his wife. The setting sun cast a golden light on the land. A perfect day—a perfect time of life. I envision wonderful years ahead, helping the communities, and giving Jeremy a childhood full of love and community. We drifted off to a peaceful

sleep that night with the lights of UN Peacekeepers poised for action on the Macedonian border twinkling in the distance.

Much love,
Janet

The day after this letter was written, we returned to Prishtina to take care of business, including the renewal of our visas which was required every three months. By then I knew the Serbian police in this office quite well, having done my best to stay on good terms with them through the years. (I learned later that they had been tracking my movements in Kosova throughout my early years in Kosova.) This time, the way they looked at me told me something had changed.

They opened my papers, stamped them, and handed them back to me. "DENIED" was printed in Serbian, in the Cyrillic alphabet. Seeing this word for the first time sent a shockwave through my body. At first, I didn't believe it, but no amount of reasoning, cajoling, pleading or tears could get them to change their minds. I called the American Embassy in Beograd and used every connection I had to get the Serbian government to reverse their decision—all to no avail.

Jeremy and I had only a few days to pack up our lives and leave the country.

This should have come as no surprise. The situation in Kosova was deteriorating week by week. While we worked to normalize the relations between Serbs and Albanians through projects that would benefit both communities, Serbian attacks on Albanians were on the rise and the Albanian Liberation Army was strengthening its clandestine operations. Kosova was bracing for war, and, one by one, they were expelling the internationals so no one would be there to bear witness to the violence to come.

Our close friends came to the airport to see us off. We were all in tears. In the midst of this heart-wrenching scene, I made the mistake of trying to take a last group photo. One of the airport police grabbed my camera and ripped out the film as a final gesture of power and malice.

Our exquisite last moments in the golden light of the bean field, captured in the camera, were lost forever.

20

Kosova Goes to War

Our Return to America

After my visa to stay in Kosova was denied in 1996, I tried for about a year to get permission to return there. The other foreigners were also expelled. With war on the horizon, the authorities were making sure there were no outsiders around to observe the military build-up. I was working for the International Rescue Committee at the time, but there was nothing they could do to help me. I went to the American Embassy in Beograd, hoping they could intervene. They tried to arrange an exchange of Serbs stuck in the U.S. or some such thing, to no avail.

Jeremy and I finally started heading home to America by way of Zurich to make one more attempt at securing a visa at the Yugoslav Embassy there, but this also failed. Either my name was blacklisted, or, with Kosova so unstable, they just weren't letting in any foreigners.

We finally gave in and headed back to America, stopping in New Jersey where we had left all of our belongings. While there, I made calls to the State Department, trying to find someone to help get back to Kosova. In the end, I had to abandon our attempt to return. We headed to Santa Barbara where my mother was living. My heart was so heavy during those first months in America, having left our home, our friends, and our terrific aid team, when our work was going so well and the projects were taking off into new dimensions. On the other hand, we knew it was only a matter of time before the unrest in Kosova would turn into a full-blown conflict, and foreigners like us would be caught in the fray.

Once settled in Santa Barbara in the fall of 1997, I started job-hunting and soon heard about Direct Relief International, a locally based aid organization that sends medical aid around the world. I knew immediately that's where I needed to be. I offered to fill any spot they had—in program,

administration, grant writing, anything.

The one opening they had was in fundraising. I had no formal training in this and had to compete for the job with professionals in the field. The man interviewing me, David Kaplan—one of the top fundraisers in California—realized this but chose me above the others because of my strong program background. He knew I could "talk the talk" about international aid, and could also talk people into things. While working in Kosova, I convinced the Serbian authorities to let us start each new project, got unemployed villagers to contribute money to rebuild their schools, talked Serbs and Albanians who hadn't spoken to each other in years into constructing septic pits, and persuaded conservative Moslem families to send their daughters to high school. I was passionate about humanitarian aid, and could get others to feel passionate about it, too. David could see this and knew he could teach me the nuts and bolts of fundraising without much trouble.

Meanwhile, Jeremy started back to school as a second grader at Montecito Union School, located in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in America. Needless to say, this was a huge change for him. As a light-hearted seven-year-old, he seemed to take the changes in stride, but the emotional adjustment he had to make did create challenges for him in the coming years. Above all, he loved living with Grandma Merilyn, and she delighted in every moment they spent together.

I enjoyed the work I was doing and was grateful to David for teaching me a new trade, Jeremy grew into his new life as an American boy. And all the while, the Kosova conflict was escalating. There were more and more headlines in the newspapers about a place few Americans had ever heard of.

The War in Kosova

In the early 1990s, with the Serbian apartheid regime holding the Kosova Albanians tightly in its grip, Albanian militants were frustrated with President Rugova's attempt to counter Serbian aggression with passive resistance, and began organizing a clandestine liberation army, the KLA. Most members were young men adrift in a desperate society with no future before them and a dream of independence flaming ethnic fervor. They believed that no matter what legal structures or civil rights were secured, they would never have equal rights within a Serbian state, and this was their last chance. They were willing to lay down their lives for independence. As attacks between the two sides increased, Albanians were radicalized and the ranks of the KLA grew.

Meanwhile, Serbian police and paramilitary units prepared for an all-out assault to put down "terrorist" activities. In March of 1998, Serbian troops attacked the villages of suspected KLA leaders in the Drenica region of central Kosova, killing more than 70 people during two weeks of bloodshed. In the following months, nearly 300,000 Albanians were driven from their homes in the crackdown by Serbian forces. Dozens of villages were burned. Armed with weapons smuggled in from Albania and Macedonia, the KLA fighters responded to the attacks, waging rag-tag guerrilla warfare against the Serbs. Serbs defended the bombings and murders as an attempt to counteract terrorist activities. The KLA claimed that their attacks against Serbs were in retaliation for atrocities committed by Serbs.

As villages smoldered, snipers ripped through the countryside, and Albanians fled, the patriotic dreams of Serbs and Albanians became bloody nightmares. An Albanian friend in the Bronx, Isuf Hajrizi, summed up the situation when interviewed for *Illyria Newspaper* in the summer of 1998:

"A cousin tells me he may have seen my parents fleeing among the thousands of Albania-bound refugees in a CNN story. In the villages under siege, the phone lines are cut, water has become a luxury and the voices of children are silent. I was born and raised there. I recognize the remains of the houses that were leveled. As far as I know, my parents, and the other old people, women, and children have abandoned their homes and are fleeing Kosova, but two of my brothers have armed themselves and are trying to defend the village with the men who have stayed behind.

What should I call them? 'Freedom fighters?' Or desperate people who have been pushed against the wall and are defending homes where our

ancestors lived for centuries. The Serbs, Russians, Greeks, French and members of our State Department call them terrorists. But they don't know my brothers. If they are terrorists, so are the men who liberated America two centuries ago. One man could end this. His name is Bill Clinton. He has been telling us that he won't allow another Bosnia. If Clinton were watching the footage of bombed-out villages and refugees freezing in mountain hideouts, he would realize that Kosova is already Bosnia."

It is one of the curiosities of modern international politics that in 1999, an impoverished little region in a little-known part of Europe with a population of only two million erupted into one of the bloodiest and most vexing conflicts of the late 20th century. Appalled by the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and determined not to let this happen again, in 1999, President Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Madeline Albright, U.S. Special Envoy Richard Holbrook and British Prime Minister Tony Blair embarked on a crusade to enlist NATO in a "just war" against Milošević, whose oppression of the Albanian majority in Kosova had finally become intolerable.

For the first time, America and its NATO allies were ready to attack a sovereign nation to halt a humanitarian crisis. But NATO's "decision by committee" approach prevented military commander Wesley Clark from mounting a full-scale assault. There were going to be no boots on the ground in Kosova.

On March 24, 1999, NATO launched a bombing campaign to stop Serbia's aggression against the Albanians. In all, a coalition of 13 countries deployed 1,000 aircraft that carried out 38,000 sorties costing tens of billions of dollars. At the peak of the operation, 42,000 allied troops from 36 nations were deployed, including 7,000 U.S. troops.

Despite intense negotiations between Washington and Geneva, Clark could not get authorization from NATO to mount an overwhelming first strike or to order low altitude sorties more likely to hit their targets. As a result, there was massive "collateral damage." Homes, hospitals, schools, roads, bridges, factories, water supplies and power plants in Serbia proper were all destroyed.

As NATO bombs began to drop, Albanians all over Kosova cheered them on. Even when the bombs exploded near their houses, and as errant bombs missed their targets and hit civilians: the Albanians. "We all went out on our rooftops, crying out with joy," one of my Prishtina neighbors later told me. Even though there were 13 countries involved in the air assault, to Albanians, it was America that had come to their rescue. "If it weren't for Bill Clinton, we would have all been driven from this place, or killed."

With no NATO ground troops to stop the Serbian assault, Milošević was emboldened. An all-out assault began to drive the Albanians out of Kosova, creating a refugee crisis, the likes of which had not been seen in Europe since World War II. It is estimated that 850,000 Albanians were forced to leave Kosova in a brutal exodus into Macedonia and Albania, facing unimaginable atrocities as they fled. All told, more than 7,000 Albanians and 500 Serbian civilians were killed during the war in Kosova.

Most of our Albanian friends had horror stories to share about their ordeals. Our helper and friend, Ganimete in Vitia was now married and had a baby. Her husband, like most able-bodied men his age, was fighting with the Kosova Liberation Army. Left to fend for herself and her aging parents, she carried her baby over the mountains to the south to find refuge in a camp in Macedonia. ShIrine in Opoja trekked with her husband's family east to the Albanian highlands, pulling her twelve-year-old disabled daughter over the mountains in an old wooden cart. They were greeted in Albania by a population so poor that the UN was air-lifting food just to keep the people alive. And on and on . . . enough stories of needless grief to fill volumes—all real, personal, intimate, and tortuous.

Finally, 78 days after the NATO air strikes had begun, Milošević agreed to withdraw troops from Kosova, and NATO called off its bombardment. On June 10, 1999, the United Nations adopted Security Resolution 1244, establishing Kosova as the first "UN Protectorate" in history, the only entity with indeterminate final status to be administered by the UN with the goal of establishing self-government.

With the war over, the refugees made their way home, and the international community inundated Kosova with aid and advice. The UN established the United Nations Mission in Kosova (UNMIK) and set up a Kosova Peace Implementation Force (KFOR) made up of 5,000 troops from around the world. Battalions of governmental and non-governmental agencies from around the world raced to help repair and transform the social, infrastructural, political and military landscape. The goal was to help Kosova achieve self-governance and establish a robust capitalist economy, with democratic, stable, transparent institutions. The plan was to spend $3 billion over two years (America's contribution not to exceed 15 percent). The U.S. also spent $1 billion on Bondsteel, a military base in Vitia, the region where I had worked, to establish a presence in the region.


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KFOR


Thank you
NATO


OJ KOSOVA
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JETIME

Watching from Afar

We watched the war in Kosova unfold from the calm and safety of Santa Barbara, following the news as closely as we could, and keeping in touch with Albanian friends in Kosova and New York. I gave talks around town about Kosova, trying to give people some insight into the war their country was fighting, in a place hardly anyone had heard of until then. National Public Radio (NPR) asked me to lead a team of reporters to Kosova in the wake of the bombing, and I anguished over what to do. I longed to immerse myself in events unfolding and interpret them to the American public, and agonized over whether to go or not, but as a single mom with the responsibility of raising Jeremy on my own, I just didn't feel I could risk being in Kosova at that time. I turned them down, and for the next few years, watched from afar as Kosova recovered from a decade of despair, celebrated Independence and began its arduous path toward self-reliance.

In September of 2001, Jeremy and I had two Albanian refugees living with us, young men who had been brought to California as translators. They were helping an Albanian boy and girl, victims of NATO's "collateral damage" in Kosova, who were undergoing plastic surgery by a Santa Barbara doctor who had seen the kids on a CNN story and was donating his services.

That's when I started writing this memoire—in the wake of 9/11, as Kosova called out to America, offering to come to our defense. There was an unshakeable belief that America had saved the Kosova Albanians from extinction, and they were ready to fight to the death for us.

Epilogue

Post-war Visit to Kosova 2002

In 2002, the summer before Jeremy started 7th grade, we returned to Kosova to visit friends and see for ourselves the post-war reconstruction and reinvention of this beloved country. The trip was extraordinary and haunting. With every visit to a friend or colleague, we heard nightmarish accounts of attacks on their villages, hiding from the Serbian police, escaping capture. There had been so much suffering—we did our best to comprehend what had happened, listening to story after story of what it was like living in fear, misery, and sorrow.

We visited a family in Drenica, central Kosova, where some of the deadliest fighting took place, and learned about the horrifying slaughter that happened there. During one of the Serbian attacks in their region, *seventy members* of their extended family had hidden themselves in the basement of an unfinished building on their property. Catching sight of them, Serbian soldiers threw grenades through the windows, and killed all but two of the family members who lay for hours among the victims, feigning death to avoid capture. These are the two who lived to tell the tale. They had watched as Serbian soldiers threw the bones of the dead down the family well to contaminate it for all time. Somehow they survived it all, and turned their home into a shrine for the family members who perished in the massacre. This story was like many we heard…one that will never be forgotten.

As Kosova struggled to heal its war wounds, profound changes were taking place, largely due to the presence of the international aid agencies that had come in to help rebuild what had been ruined, provide aid, and invest in infrastructure. The money and might they brought with them meant that many building and social projects could be accomplished, fast.

The basement where the family was hiding, where the Serbs threw grenades

The well where Serbs put the bones of the dead to contaminate the water

Some of the family members who perished in the attack

Vitia

During the 2002 visit we traveled to Vitia and gathered everyone we had worked with during the 1990s, in our modest efforts to fix the schools, bring health education to the villages, and challenge the communities to take action and solve problems. In contrast to the work that was now going on, post-war, with the backing of major aid agencies, I thought the projects we had done together in the nineties would seem small and insignificant. It had taken us so many months to get agreement on building latrines for a school, for example, and to come up with the workforce and resources to make it happen. In 2002, with the United States Army in Vitia ready and willing to apply its brains, brawn, and money, projects like that were being accomplished in a matter of weeks. But to my delight and surprise, there was a feeling of tremendous satisfaction and pride around the work we had accomplished with the Serbs, who were in charge, watching every move we made. The fact that we had been able to bring the communities together at a time when fear and apathy were holding everyone down meant so much to these people. We had shared a critical moment in their history, and we celebrated this with great emotion and devotion.

Bondsteel

While in Vitia, we managed to visit Camp Bondsteel, the American army base in Kosova, the largest and most expensive U.S. military base since the Vietnam War. I was able to get permission to bring Jeremy, our friend Mustafë, and his father Elmi onto the base. This was something I *had* to do once I learned that Bondsteel was located halfway between Elmi's village, Terpezë, and Beguncë, where his wife Hamide was from. The base was built on the very spot, a gentle hilltop, where Elmi and Hamide met secretly as teenagers and declared their love for each other. It was quite something to see this weather-worn old Albanian man in his white skullcap and cane greeted with respect by young Army recruits who barely knew what Kosova was or where they were on the planet. The ultimate moment was treating Elmi to a McDonald's hamburger and watching his amazement, experiencing this potent piece of America right in his own neighborhood.

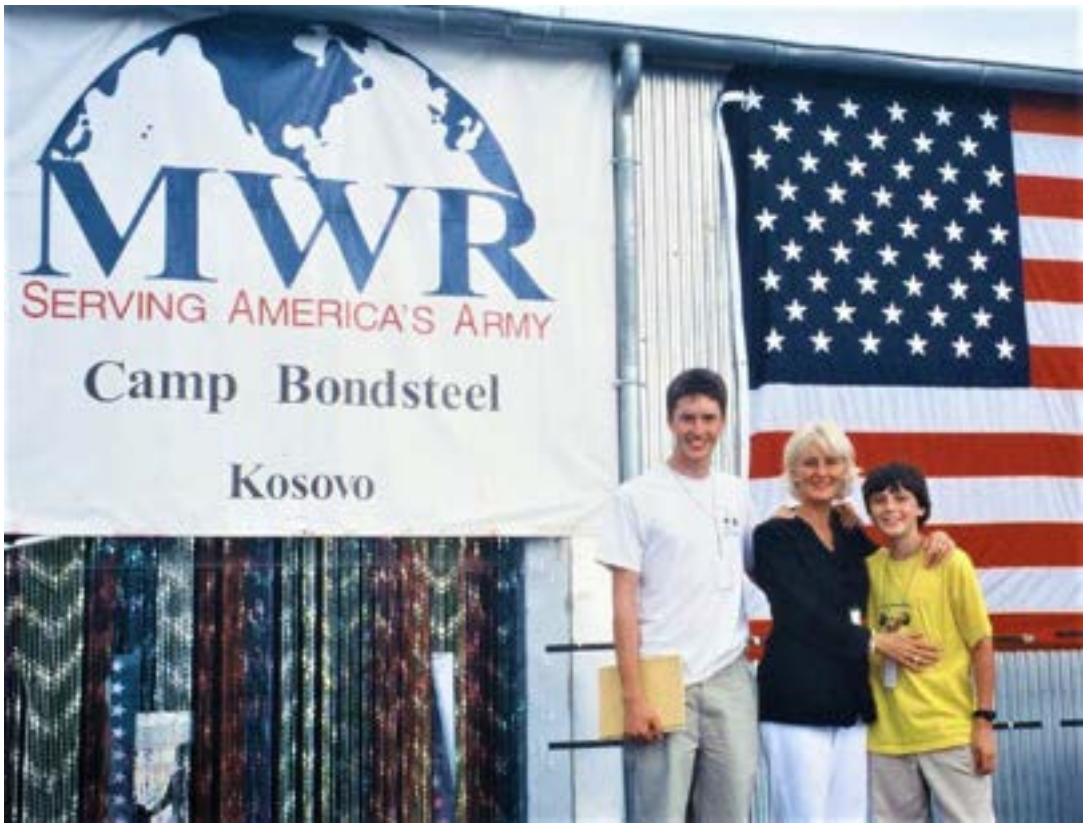
The actual story behind Bondsteel is incredible, as is the extent to which American taxpayers are unaware of the cost of military projects like this or of the identity of the evildoers who profit from them. In the case of

Bondsteel, the villain was former Vice President Dick Cheney. Halliburton, a scandal-ridden company Cheney ran in the 1990s, makes millions every time the U.S. military sees action. In the 1990s, whenever U.S. troops went abroad, Halliburton contracted a company called Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR) to build the barracks, cook the food, clean the latrines, transport goods, supply electricity, and everything else needed before and after the soldiers arrived. This is what they did for Camp Bondsteel—and Halliburton (Cheney) benefitted from every bit of it. The Bondsteel contract included roads, power, water and sewage, housing, a helicopter airfield, guard towers, a detention center, movie theater, churches, workout facility…and the McDonald's. Kellogg Brown & Root billed the U.S. government *$2.2 billion* for its "logistical support" in Kosova, nearly one-sixth of the total spent by the U.S. military on operations in the Balkans. In 2006, KBR paid $8 million to settle fraud claims over its construction contract in Kosova for the millions of dollars wasted on excess.

Why was all this money spent? Why have a military base in eastern Kosova? Could it have something to do with the fact that it was built in the path of the Albanian-Macedonian-Bulgarian Oil (Ambo) Trans-Balkan pipeline that connects the oil-rich Caspian Sea region to the rest of the world? Another mystery that deludes and eludes the American public.

Elmi Tafa at Bondsteel

Elmi Tafa at Bondsteel Burger King



With Jeremy and our friend Matt O'Meara at Bondsteel

Opoja

After our wonderful visit to Vitia, we traveled to Opoja for a second "homecoming." A wedding was in full swing when we arrived at the home of Xhemali's sister ShIrine. Years before, she and her husband had left his parents' home in the village to start a new life close by in Dragash, the little town nestled between Opoja and Gora, gateway to Macedonia. Jeremy and I jumped right into the circle of dancers and were embraced as family. It was Jeremy's 12th birthday, and after the wedding, as a summer storm descended and thunder rolled through the mountain valley, we celebrated at ShIrine's home. They went to great lengths to make the most of this special occasion—an American birthday party in the highlands of Opoja—by getting hold of a roasted chicken, Cheetos, Coke, and their version of a birthday cake. As bolts of lightning lit up the skies around us, we reveled in the love and affection of our Berisha family.

President Rugova

At the end of our 2002 visit, I had a wonderful meeting with President Ibrahim Rugova. It was so good to sit with him, to talk about the future, to shake hands. It felt like America and Kosova were shaking hands, celebrating an unwritten kinship and commitment to a shared future. I felt such a closeness with this wise, gentle man whom I had known as a writer and prominent intellectual in the 1980s, before the bloody war and the hard-won peace. As Kosova's leader in the 1990s, Rugova championed a policy of peaceful resistance in the style of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the end, it took the NATO bombing campaign to put an end to Serbia's rule in Kosova, but it was Rugova who had won the admiration and empathy of the West and is credited with leading his people toward independence. He was Kosova's first President, serving from 1992 to 2000 and from 2002 until his death from lung cancer in 2006, just two years before the country formally declared independence from Serbia in February of 2008. Ibrahim is buried in Sunny Hill, not far from my first home in Kosova.

President Clinton

After this visit with Rugova, Jeremy and I returned to Santa Barbara, where Jeremy entered the 7th grade I and began working as development director for a non-profit, the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation. Not long after our return, I was at a pharmacy picking up prints from photos we had taken on our Kosova trip. As I was leaving, I ran into Jim Buckley, editor of the Montecito Journal, who gave me a hot tip: President Clinton was down at the Nugget, a local café in Summerland, having lunch with Congresswoman Lois Capps. "I need to talk with Bill!" I exclaimed, and, inelegantly clad in sweatpants and an old turtleneck, jumped in my car and hightailed it to the restaurant.

The secret service guys posted out in front let me pass, and I made my way to the circle of politicians and wealthy supporters gathered for lunch. When I arrived, the former President was busy talking with someone. I approached Lois, whom I knew from my days as a fundraiser for Direct Relief International. I told her I had just returned from Kosova and asked

if she thought I could have a few minutes with Bill. Before I describe what happened next, let me give you a sense of what Clinton means to Kosova Albanians.

Most Kosova Albanians are unequivocally, profoundly devoted to America. Caught for centuries between the ravages of Serbian hegemony and international power plays, for a long time the Albanians have put their trust and their hope in America and the West. They say it began with President Woodrow Wilson's attempt in the 1920s to return the Albanian's rightful lands to them. Then again in the 1950s, when the newly installed Yugoslav communist regime under Ranković took revenge on them. Food was scarce, and boxes of flour labeled "American Red Cross" fell into their villages like gifts from God.

In the 1990s—when the Serbian apartheid regime held the Kosova Albanians tightly in its grip—their only hope was that America would recognize the menace posed by Slobodan Milošević, President of a fallen and dismembered Yugoslavia, and be compelled to act. In the spring of 1999, Serbian paramilitary troops unleashed a wave of terrorism and violence in Kosova, and the Albanians retaliated. They called for help, but they weren't waiting for the world to respond. They were waiting for America. And they were not waiting in vain.

On March 11, 1999, President Bill Clinton gave the order for NATO to begin an air attack on military targets in Serbia and Kosova. We had been too late in Bosnia, but we were determined to be on time in Kosova. For Albanians, this was a mission of deliverance. As word spread that NATO had begun bombing, Albanian men, women, and children in Kosova emerged from hiding, walked out into their gardens, onto rooftops, into the streets, into the blast and peal of bombs, the blackened air, knowing they had been "saved by America."

NATO is not, of course, a branch of the American military. The UN Security Council is not, of course, an arm of the American government. The attack on Serbia was implemented by a coalition of thirteen countries. But don't try to tell an Albanian that. The general belief is: "If it weren't for America, we would all be dead, or driven from this place. It was only a matter of time. The Europeans never would have intervened without America."

For most Albanians, America equals deliverance, and Clinton is second only to God.

Back at the Nugget… I asked the Congresswoman if I could speak with President Clinton, and she said "Sure!" When Bill was free, we were

introduced and had a very spirited chat. I showed him the freshly developed photos I'd taken of American flags gracing corner stores and cafés in Albanian mountain villages, adorning wedding processions everywhere, and waving patriotically on mountain peaks in the remote Opoja highlands. I told him about my experiences in Kosova, and how the people loved him and felt they owed their lives to him. Clinton had visited Kosova and knew there was nowhere on earth he was more popular. I knew he knew this, but I figured it was something he hadn't tired of hearing.

He told me stories about the Albanians who lived in his neighborhood in Arkansas. When things weren't going so well for him, they always cheered him up. In person, Bill was surprisingly tall and immensely charming. Our conversation about what Kosova had been through brought tears to his eyes.

Kosova in 2022

Kosova gained independence from Serbia in 2008. It is now recognized as a sovereign republic by 117 countries. Notable exceptions are Serbia (which still claims Kosova as part of its territory), Russia (which backs Serbia due to historical and religious ties), and China (because of the obvious parallels with their denial of independence to Tibet).

Migration to Europe

Though much progress has been made in Kosova on many fronts, the population still finds itself in an existential struggle for economic and political stability. As of 2021, unemployment is at 25% among all adults and 48% among young people—by far the highest in Europe. This means that no matter how much they love their homeland and cherish its hard-won independence, most young people are compelled to seek work abroad. Most of this is through "chain migration," getting help from families already situated in the destination country. The thing that determines the future for a young Albanian is whether the person they find to marry has the ability to make a life in Europe. That's what it's all about.

Of the families I wrote about in this memoir, the majority of young people are living and working in Europe. The sons of the Sadiku's (the family we lived with in Prishtina), and their children, are in Zurich. Of the Tafa family we stayed with in Vitia, almost all of the adult children are in Nuremberg or Geneva. The Berisha clan is in Geneva or Vienna. All of these young people are married, all to Albanians, and all have at least two children.

When I studied Albanian migration to Europe in the 1980s, it was all about men living abroad to support their families back home. They assimilated into the local culture very little, and lived very simply, saving every Swiss franc, Austrian schilling, and Deutsche mark to send back home. Their identity and their self-worth remained entirely in Kosova. All this has changed, as Albanians settle in as families in Europe, getting good jobs, and living as locals. Their identity is still very much Albanian, and their affection for Kosova, the beloved homeland, is boundless. But they are living a European life and their children know Kosova only as a quaint place to visit. Will the families return to Kosova? Just for vacation. Do they help family members still in Kosova? A bit.

Their investments in Kosova are all about the conspicuous construction of a home they will probably never inhabit. Everyone working abroad, who is able, has built or dreams of building a fancy house back in Kosova, and, if they can, a vacation house in the mountains or on the Albanian Riviera on the Adriatic Sea—a favorite new summer destination of the Kosovar. Building these ostentatious houses is understandable, given the importance of family prestige among Albanians.

But this kind of spending does not bode well for Kosova's future and the desperate need for investment in productive enterprises that will create

jobs, exports, and a healthy economy. Crucial to the healthy economy of course is political security. As long as outsiders fear instability in the Balkans, they are hesitant to invest in infrastructure or business deals. As long as real productive enterprise eludes them, the youth will go abroad, and their show houses back in Kosova will keep getting bigger and fancier.

Tradition and Change

The rural lifestyle I documented in the 1980s, that had existed for hundreds of years, was already on the wane in Kosova when I lived there. After the war in 1999, with the influx of foreigners, the massive migration to Europe, and the modernizing effect of all this, village life has changed forever. Most of the customs I witnessed are now extinct, existing only as cherished memories among people in the older generation, like Xhemali, who find their identity in a humbler, nobler past. The low round *sofra* where we ate *pite* and drank tea has been replaced by dining room tables. Instead of *shilte*, the floor cushions where we sat for hours in good company and conversation, there are couches. Electric ranges instead of woodburning stoves. Weddings in hotels instead of courtyards and meadows. The old music and dances are still heard, but for the most part, a modern version of all this has taken root.

Of course, this move into modern times has also had many positive outcomes for the society. The standard of living has risen almost everywhere. Life isn't as hard as it was, physically or mentally. The narrow, unyielding, ancient ethos has lost its grip on this new generation. The girls are all in school. People have much more choice in how they want to live their lives. There are no arranged marriages, at least none from which there is no escape. Patriarchalism has softened—though not nearly enough for young women fighting for equality on all fronts.

With all the changes taking place and with the desire to modernize, Albanians still treasure the qualities they feel make them unique in the world. What are these? First and foremost, being Albanian is about blood, lineage, and a distant belonging to tribe and ancient territory. Tied to this is an unwavering allegiance to one's Albanian ethnicity, which is above family, regional, or political affiliation. And it's about culture—a special kind of hospitality, the language, food, music, dance…a collective memory of customs and behaviors that creates an unspoken bond.

As I watch this Albanian identity adapt to new realities, I feel so privileged to have experienced a precious, fleeting moment in the history

of the Kosovar, when traditions of the past were giving way to the present, thanks to the families who let me into their lives.

Our friend in Has – 1988 and 2002 – same wood to cut, different outfit

World Dance for Humanity & Rwanda

When I returned to California in 1997, I spent most of my time raising Jeremy as a single mother and working for non-profit organizations. I also started dancing again, taking African, Brazilian, and Salsa classes around town. The teachers were very good, the dance forms were beautiful, but there was never enough JOY among the dancers. Everyone seemed to be dancing for themselves, and taking the dancing, and themselves, oh so seriously. This was foreign to me, very different from what I had experienced in Kosova.

One Sunday, I was jogging around my neighborhood listening to ethnic music, and it dawned on me: I should start teaching dance again. The class wouldn't be about us, the dancers, it would be about the world. "World Dance," that's what I would call it! Within a few months, the class was on its way. I chose the best music I could find—African, Brazilian, Irish, American, Italian, French, Indian, Tahitian—anything with a great beat and a melody that stirred the soul. I created dances everyone could do, using movements that felt natural, that even people who had never taken a dance class could relax into, that would connect them to other cultures beyond the comfort bubble of Santa Barbara. Classes would be very inexpensive, and on a sliding scale, so that anyone could participate.

And here's the kicker: I would teach for free, donating all the proceeds to humanitarian aid projects. The World Dance motto would be: *"Get over yourself . . . and do something for the world."*

For the first few years, every three or four months World Dance selected a new, stand-alone aid project to support. Our classes raised enough money to build an exam room in a remote health clinic in Nepal, send a woman to nursing school in Kenya, support women's literacy in Guatemala, contribute to micro-enterprise projects in Ghana, pay for healthcare in Liberia, and support training courses for women in Uganda.

In December of 2012, one of my dancers told me she was buying goats for Rwandan families through a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit called "Goats for Life." This became the World Dance project and took my life in a totally new direction. For several months, we directed all of our efforts to buying goats and cows for Rwandan families. Through time, we became more involved in this work, learning more about the lives of the people we were helping, and getting to know Justin Bisengimana, the Rwandan man coordinating the program for Goats for Life. After several months, the Goats for Life's founder told me she wanted to retire and asked if I would

take over her work. "Yego," (Yes in Kinyarwanda) was my answer.

In 2013, World Dance became a nonprofit: "World Dance for Humanity." We are now helping 12,000 people in 28 communities lift themselves out of poverty. These people survived the 1994 Genocide, but emerged from the collective insanity and brutality with nothing—no income, no businesses, very little land, no animals, no basis for survival. . . no hope. World Dance for Humanity (WD4H) provides goats and cows, farmland, student stipends, support for community-run businesses, training (in agriculture, business, and leadership), and community support of all kinds. We have a five-person team of Rwandans entirely devoted to the communities we are serving. I communicate with our Rwanda team every day—and even though I'm in Santa Barbara, our team makes it possible for our work to be direct, personal, and incredibly impactful. We receive a constant stream of reports from the field with photos and videos, so all the donors and World Dancers see where their donations go and experience the satisfaction in knowing they are truly changing lives. We are helping these people rebuild their lives, regain hope in the future, and believe in each other and in themselves. It is a constant joy and an enormous privilege to do this work.

With my son Jeremy happily married, living in New York City, and studying to be a therapist, my life for the past decade has been focused entirely on running World Dance for Humanity and our work in Rwanda. We have created a wonderful community of dancers, donors, and advisors who help with all aspects of what we do. It truly takes a village and a devoted team!

There is one extraordinary person, Genevieve Feiner, who has been by my side every step of the way. She and I met when she joined the WD4H team as an unpaid intern after graduating from college in 2015. Within a few months she was living with me and working with me full-time. Ever since then, Genevieve has been my helper, confidante, advisor, friend, and family. Smart, beautiful, exceedingly generous, and remarkably talented on all fronts, Genevieve's presence in my life has made all things possible. And it has put my mind at ease. I know that if something happens to me, Genevieve will carry on our work with passion, excellence, and deep dedication.

My life is devoted to serving humanity, and it's all because of the time I spent in Kosova. My experiences among the village families, the deprivation, courage, and resilience I witnessed, and the suffering my Albanian friends endured during the war, taught me what life is like for a people struggling to be free. My life in Kosova chiseled into me a particular way of seeing

the world and living my life: with relentless purpose, extravagant gratitude, and excessive enthusiasm for the work to be done.

Genevieve and Janet

Our Work in Rwanda

The World Dance for Humanity Team
(L to R) Dany Rukundo, Janet Reineck, Chantal Kubwimana, Justin Bisengimana, Judy Rwibutso, and Genevieve Feiner

With the women of Urumuri Cooperative in Rwanda, 2019

World Dancers and Rwandans – Celebrating our work together at one of the women-run businesses we funded: "Café Dignity"

World Dance for Humanity - I'm still dancing...

And still planting onions!

Kosova, 1981

Rwanda, 2019

"Do good . . . and disappear." I first heard this expression in a 1959 Audrey Hepburn move, "The Nun's Story." It's actually a quote from Genevieve Hennet De Goutel, a French nurse who died in World War I. It took many years in Kosova, and our work in Rwanda, to fully embrace this notion and live it. It has become my guiding principle, taking me through this life with

purpose, passion, and constant forward motion.

Every morning I wake up astonished that I am in a bed, with a roof over my head, clean water coming right out of the tap, and plentiful food a few steps away. How is that possible? What random twist of fate landed me in a life equipped with all these creature comforts when the majority of the people on Planet Earth are lacking these basics? It is this awareness, acquired in Kosova and deepened in Rwanda, that lights a flame in me each day, compelling me to jump out of bed at 5:00 am in a big hurry to make life a little better for the people around me and those a half a world away.

The joy I have found in connections to people in Kosova, Rwanda, and in the World Dance community is boundless. All the strands of my experience have led me to a sweet spot in life, where it's all about giving and gratitude. I am in constant awe of the fact that I hit the jackpot and got a chance to be a sentient being on this planet for a little while. Each morning I'm flabbergasted that I have yet another day to live and see if I can do some good in the world, then happily disappear.

For Jeremy

Janet Reineck, PhD – Bio

Janet Reineck is an anthropologist and humanitarian aid worker from Santa Barbara, California. She lived in Kosova for eight years, between 1981 and 1997, learning everything she could about Albanian culture and then using this knowledge to help improve conditions in village schools and build civil society in rural communities.

In the early 1980s, Janet did research for a Master's in Dance Ethnology for UCLA. Her thesis, "Wedding Dances from Kosova: A Structural and Contextual Analysis," focused on the dances and customs of rural Kosova, including Has, Rugova, and Gollak, with a focus on the rich tradition of Opoja with its women's song-dances and men's 11-dance cycle, Kellçoja.

In the late 1980s, she continued her research, this time for a PhD in Anthropology for University of California, Berkeley. Her dissertation "The Past as Refuge: Gender Migration, and Ideology Among the Kosova Albanians" is a detailed study of Albanian traditions and worldview, looking specifically at the effect of the out-migration of men on worldview and behavior in the sending communities.

In the 1990s, Janet directed humanitarian aid projects for Oxfam and International Rescue Committee in the counties of Vitia and Gjilan. Together with her Albanian team and local leaders, she organized projects to rebuild decaying schools, founded the women's group Legjenda, provided health education courses for women, and convinced families to send their daughters to high school.

In 2010, Janet brought together her background in dance, anthropology, and humanitarian aid to create World Dance for Humanity, a nonprofit based in Santa Barbara that offers daily dance classes with all proceeds going to projects in Rwanda, where the organization is helping 13,000 Genocide survivors in 28 communities lift themselves out of poverty.

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