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Magic Moments – early memories of Albania

Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers

The pictures that I still have in mind of visiting and conducting research in Albania in the late 1980s and the early 1990s represent what I've always secretly referred to as 'magic moments' in my life. These are moments of personal memories which, in their beauty and emotional resonance, be this for their interpersonal connectivity, spatial situatedness, or their sights, scents and sounds, deeply engraved themselves in my heart and mind. Perhaps their strong sensual imprint arose from the fact that they conjured up, and I perceived these through, the prism of earlier experiences dear to my heart, when partly growing up in the Balkans. My father's work as an archaeologist led us to live in Greek villages, off the tourist track, each year for several months from the late 1960s. It was through him that I first knew of Albania and met Albanians. However, post-socialist Albania of the early 1990s also produced new and very different, formative experiences. Not every magic moment was captured on camera. Several are preserved as photographs, not least thanks to the fact that Robert Pichler and I repeatedly worked and travelled together during the early 1990s in Albania.

These jointly-experienced magic moments included a visit to Mirëdita in 1992, ascending stunningly beautiful mountain paths to remote villages; meeting local dignitaries; being invited into large local families and experiencing their hospitality, celebrations, kindness and resilience at a time of utmost scarcity; in the same year, as observer, partaking in a failed

attempt of reconciling a feud, under the auspices of the Franciscan priest, Ernesto Troshani, in the outskirts of Shkodër; and conducting interviews in the Albanian prison of Shënkoll in Lezha. Earlier the same year, even working in the National Library's main reading room, diffusely lit by sunlight through the shutters of the metal-framed windows, felt magic. One of our Albanian colleagues, Shyqyri, introduced me to the only other foreigner present, a 'cool dude' from Austria with his dark pony tail who sat just a row or two behind me. This inaugurated not only several collaborative journeys with Robert Pichler to Albania, north and south, as a gender-balanced research team,¹ but a lifelong friendship that expanded into collaborations with further colleagues from our home universities in Graz and Berlin.

Beyond the shared magic moments skilfully captured on camera by Robert, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on some earlier, personal memories of what took me to Albania, starting before the 1990s. Although I did not know it at the time, I had met Albanians and encountered Albanian culture during my childhood and youth many times before I conducted my first long-term ethnographic research in the early 1990s and, eventually, was appointed the first Nash Fellow for Albanian Studies at the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, in 1997. In hindsight, it was several magic moments related to my father's work and interests which must originally have set me on this career path. His photograph of my younger sister's first day at school in Munich, in 1971, shows my mother and I wearing Greek, or possibly originally Albanian, customary clothes, probably purchased in Athen's Plaka neighbourhood around that time and, arguably, documenting my family's romantic penchant for identifying with Balkan cultures. Other magic moments remembered from my childhood include, for example, our beloved Greek hostess, on the patio in the village next to my father's excavation site on an island near Athens, serving us children spoon sweets in the summer heat under her vine-leaved pergola. She was Arvanite,

¹ This meant that in particularly sensitive situations, for example during parts of the reconciliation process when I, as a female researcher, was not permitted into the men's room, I had the privilege to talk to the equally excluded, yet deeply affected, women of the house. I have discussed these gendered research situations in Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, *Securing 'Safe Spaces': Field Diplomacy in Albania and Kosovo*. In: Martha Huggins and M-Louise Glebbeek (eds), *Women Fielding Danger: Negotiating Ethnographic Identities in Field Research*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield 2009, pp. 173 – 198.

although she remembered Arvanitika from her own childhood only faintly. I also remember, whenever we crossed the Strait of Otranto by ferry from Italy to Corfu and Igoumenitsa, my father pointing to the mysterious and forbidden, hazy landmass of Albania across the sea and provoking my curiosity. Later, in 1980, when still a teenager, I volunteered on one of his excavation sites near Preveza in north-western Greece. I overheard some workers talking in an unfamiliar language, but they fell silent when I asked them, curiously and in Greek, what language they were speaking. They came from one of the nearby ethnic-Albanian villages not far from the impenetrable southern border of Albania. It must have been 1986, immediately following the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Germany and Albania, when my father, as member of the German Archaeological Institute, invited several of his archaeology colleagues from Tirana to Berlin, and I was enlisted to show them around. The friendships evolving from these first contacts became my first social entry point into Albania a few years later.

At the time, I had just extended my study of social anthropology at Free University of Berlin (FU) to a double master's degree in 'Balkanologie'. When commencing this degree, I was specifically interested in learning about Albanian history, politics and culture. In 1988, I had the chance to attend the University of Prishtina's Seminar for Albanian Language, Literature and Culture which that year, for reasons of the deteriorating political situation in Kosovo, was held in the stunningly beautiful city of Prizren. For the same year, FU's Institute of East European Studies had secured an invitation by the, then, still staunchly communist Albanian Academy of Sciences, for a field visit of approximately 20 staff and students to Albania. All of us had prepared well, read and shared what we could find about the country, its history, politics and economics, and were trained in critical thinking. Specifically interested in culture and society, I had focussed on descriptions of Albania's cultures by 19th and early 20th century German, Austrian and other travel writers, diplomats and ethnographers; as well as on studies of the country's minorities. My core question, which pre-empted much of my subsequent academic research and later proved to strongly align with Robert's interests and that of the other colleagues' of Graz University, was whether and how these historical descriptions of culture and society compared to contemporary social realities in the present

(at the time of the visit) after more than 40 years of dictatorship, and independently from the regime's celebrations of the Socialist Accomplishments of modernisation.

I remember the magic sense of arriving where I wanted to be, when walking with my colleagues across the tarmac towards the ochre-coloured arrivals building of the old Rinas airport, its entrance framed by palm trees. From this moment in 1988, this feeling would repeat itself upon every visit to Albania until modern Tirana International Airport Mother Theresa opened in 2005 as the new 'gateway to the country, changing the image of Albania'.² From this trip, when in the northern town of Kukës, among many magic moments I particularly remember, when a student colleague and I decided to walk across the high plain towards the mountain peaks, aiming at photographing the socialist-planned town from above. The air and scents of the open fields were mesmerising, yet we never arrived at the mountain peaks. Soon, local Albanian cooperative workers from the surrounding fields accompanied us; women in Turkish trousers on horse carts passed by, and men offered us cigars which we put behind our ears for later; just like them. We tried out our fledgling Albanian on our companions. Only later did I realise the anxiety we must have caused them, two foreigners walking away from their state-sponsored chaperones (the bus driver and the group translator). They took us to the next village, from where we were soon escorted back to the Albturist hotel in Kukës.

It was in Kukës, too, where another magic moment arose when some of us joined a boat trip on the artificial lake of Fierzë, created when a major hydroelectric power station was built in 1978. The human pain and ambiguities involved in Socialist Accomplishments such as this was demonstrated to us when an elderly man threw a bouquet of flowers onto the water, just above where he had located the graveyard of the flooded village of his forefathers.

² Gateway to Albania: International Airport Nënë Tereza. Tirana: TIA (airport brochure), no date, p. 6; available at https://www.tirana-airport.com/media/15831582891599Company_Broshure_ENG.pdf [accessed 06/08/2020]

Magic moments can be as sad as they can be joyful. They are always deeply emotional and about human connection and engagement with place. They might be informed by an arguably, hopelessly romantic 'tourist gaze'³ with its specific sense of aesthetics, in my case originally built on a search for 'the authentic' into which I had long been socialized. But can this be explained, critically, in terms of Orientalism or Balkanism alone? With art critic Berger we know that our 'ways of seeing'⁴ and their accompanying aesthetics are always predicated on what we know already. When our Albturist bus first approached Kukës in 1988 and our chaperone exclaimed how beautiful the buildings were that to us, young students from Berlin, seemed just ugly remnants of late Socialist modernity, he elaborated: but there are all modern amenities inside!

Robert's evocative documentary photography encourages us to critically reflect on why some of us tend to see beauty in the outdated, ordinary, and peripheral; and ugliness in modernity; or vice versa, through the coincidence of the wider historical context within which we, as individuals, have learnt to see and experience the world. Yet magic can be tragic, depending on one's perspective. It is our responsibility to try to understand what the realities of that which we see, might mean to those who live them, anywhere.

³ Urry, J. 2002 [1990]. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage.

⁴ Berger, J. P. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin books.

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Albania's 90s: Photographs and Narratives

(Not for REF; outreach / non-academic reflections of research journey in conjunction with photographic exhibition of R. Pichler)
