

VISAR ZHITI: VICTIM OF THE SURREAL

Robert Elsie

Half a century of Stalinist dictatorship has left deep wounds in the souls of Albanian writers and intellectuals. Under the iron rule of Enver Hoxha (1908-1985), virtually no one was allowed into or out of a country transformed into a planet of its own. Among the writers, only Ismail Kadare, the literary showpiece of the Communist regime, was free to travel abroad and enjoy an international reputation as a novelist.

The government used two strategies to keep writers and intellectuals under control. The classic form of censorship known to most dictatorships ensured that anything which might be construed as critical of the political system and its leaders was removed from manuscripts before publication. A volume of Albanian prose or poetry in the 1970s and 1980s had, for instance, to go through the hands of 10-15 politically vigilant 'revisors,' and a play had to be read by at least 30 such 'experts.' The latter explains the lack of good Albanian theatre.

The level of censorship varied considerably over the years and was a good barometer of the political situation in the country. Some years it was possible to publish politically ambiguous works if they were skilfully packaged; in years of major political purges, nothing but Party propaganda was printed. Albanian writers were quick to adapt and learned to judge the limits of the permissible to such a degree that this form of censorship became superfluous in most cases. In Albania, as in many other countries, censorship was soon replaced by self-censorship.

The second strategy was a system of arbitrary persecution. No writer could feel secure unless he or she had close family ties with a member of the Politbureau. The principle of class struggle stated that the political enemy was not only abroad in the capitalist and revisionist countries but also within the country itself. A certain portion of the population, the so-called *armiq të mbrëndshëm* (internal enemies), had thus to be combated continuously. Directives were issued to local Party officials every year for arrests by professional category: a certain number of teachers, for instance, or civil engineers, or writers. Who was to be arrested, tried and imprisoned depended very much on the whims of local officials. Many latent political opponents were indeed 'uncovered,' imprisoned or sent into internment. But in most cases arrests and convictions were quite arbitrary. Particularly vulnerable to such prosecution were individuals with so-called 'bad biographies.' A bad biography could, for instance, be the result of a grandfather, an uncle or a cousin having escaped from the country 20 years earlier, or of some distant relative having been convicted of 'agitation and propaganda.'

Whereas Russian writers were able to breathe a sigh of relief in the 1950s with the death of Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) and the Khrushchev reforms that followed in 1956, constant purges continued in Albania right up to 1990. The intellectual community in Albania was kept in a state of fear until the very last days of the Communist dictatorship.

Among the many talented writers to have suffered appalling persecution for no apparent reason was Visar Zhiti. Born on 2 December 1952 in Durrës of an actor father, he grew up in Lushnja, where he finished school in 1970, and taught in the northern mountain town of Kukës. Zhiti showed an early interest in verse and had published some poems in literary periodicals. In 1973 he was preparing the collection *Rapsodia e jetës së trëndafilave* (Rhapsody of the Life of Roses) for publication when the purge of intellectuals was unleashed at the infamous Fourth Plenary Session of the Party. Zhiti, whose father had earlier come into conflict with the authorities, was one of the many scapegoats selected as a means of terrifying the intellectual community. The manuscript of the verse collection which he had

submitted to the editors of the Naim Frashëri Publishing Company was seen to contain grave ideological errors and interpreted as blackening ‘our socialist reality.’

The absurdity of most political judgments on works of literature in Albania is illustrated by the reaction to Zhiti’s couplet:

*Mos lyeni këpucët tek Illustraxhintë
s’i dua njerëzit tek këmbët e mia.*

(Do not have the shoe shiners do your shoes,
I do not want people at my feet.)

On the basis of these two lines, Zhiti was accused of being against the working class. The manuscript was then re-interpreted as ‘agitation and propaganda’ and there was nothing Zhiti could do or say to his interrogators to prove his innocence.

After six years of uncertainty, Visar Zhiti was finally arrested on 10 November 1979 in Kukës, where he was still teaching.

He spent the following months in a cell in solitary confinement. To keep his sanity, he composed and memorised 97 poems.

Sentenced in April 1980 to 10 years in prison, Zhiti was transferred to Tirana prison and from there to the infamous concentration camp at the copper mines of Spaç and to the icy mountain camp of Qafë-Bari, where he worked until his release on 28 January 1987.

He was subsequently allowed to work at a brick factory in his native Lushnja until the end of the dictatorship. In the autumn of 1991, Visar Zhiti fulfilled a dream and spent a year working in Italy and tasting freedom for the first time.

Robert Elsie

[published in: *Index on Censorship*, London, vol. 22.4 (1993), p. 23; reprinted in: *Albanian Catholic Bulletin / Buletini Katolik Shqiptar*, San Francisco, vol. 15 (1994), p. 128-129.]