

Introduction

Albania's history and culture are not particularly well known abroad, a phenomenon that is regrettable but perhaps understandable for a small and traditionally isolated country and for a people who speak a language that is rarely learned and studied. One can equally state that the country's history and culture are not well understood by the Albanians themselves.

The course of Albanian history has been one of flux and turmoil, with political instability and underdevelopment as far back as one can remember. This painful history brought about the destruction of much material culture and the disappearance of just as much immaterial culture, i.e. the loss of collective memory. Rare is the Albanian village that has not been burnt down at one point or another and whose inhabitants have not had to flee for their lives. Few and far between are the mosques and churches that were not destroyed - most of them were razed to the ground - during the utopian campaign of the country's Stalinist leadership in the 1960s to make Albania the first atheist state. The nation's museums and libraries were plundered and emptied over the course of time, in Albania most recently during the uprising of 1997 and in Kosovo during the 1998-1999 war. Thus, much of the nation's traditional heritage has vanished. Young Albanians in search of their identity often sense that the concrete vestiges of their history are missing and that they have been left with nothing but legends.

One great institution of Albanian culture has, however, survived - the Marubi National Photo Archives (*Fototeka Kombëtare Marubi*) in Shkodra. After the Albanian State Archives and Albanian National Library in Tirana, the Marubi National Photo Archives could be regarded as the third depository of the nation's memory. Indeed it houses one of the most valuable photo collections in Europe.

Much has been written about the three "fathers" of the Marubi collection: the Italian political refugee Pietro Marubbi (1834-1904), known in Albanian as Pjetër Marubi; his apprentice, Kel Kodheli (1870-1940) who took on the name Kel Marubi; and Kel's son, Gegë Marubi (1907-1984). Their work, in three generations, forms the core of the collection, which was nationalized and taken over by the Albanian state in 1978.

The Marubi National Photo Archives, that contain about 500,000 photographs (no one knows the exact number of images for sure), had its ups and downs in the 1990s, during the period of transition from the communist dictatorship to a free market economy, and it was for some time in jeopardy. Since 1994, with UNESCO funding, attempts have been made to preserve it and in recent years, much has been done to make this depository of the nation's memory more readily available to the public. In particular, numerous spectacular photo albums have been published, recently on an almost yearly basis, each of which has been a qualitative improvement over the last.

The images presented in these Marubi albums have fascinated the international public and Albanians alike. For the first time, the Albanian people can see into their past in a very concrete way. They are no longer dependent on the interpretations of historians and pseudo-historians but can now envision a good century of Albanian history themselves. Books can and do falsify the past, and as a result many Albanians have viewed their national history from a slightly distorted perspective. The cult of the heroic still weighs heavily upon them and obscures reality.

Historical events can be misinterpreted and documents can be forged, but photographs tell the truth (that is, of course, until recently in our age of digital manipulation). They provide

a scrupulous documentation of the past. It could thus be said that the Marubi National Photo Archives have done more recently to tell the Albanians about their past than all the books of history. It is a national institution of more importance than most people realize.

What is often not known about the Marubi National Photo Archives is that they preserve not only the photos of the three above-mentioned generations of the Marubi dynasty, but also the works of other great, if little-known Albanian photographers. One of these is Shan Pici, to whom this volume is devoted.

Shan Pici (1906-1976) was raised in Shkodra and learned the art of photography from Kel Marubi. It was in the master's studio in 1922 that he took his first photo, when he was eighteen years old. Two years later, he opened his own business with the help of his brothers, Ndrekë and Tefë Pici. Shan Pici began with portrait photography and learned increasingly to capture street scenes and public life. He is remembered for his portraits of athletes and of sporting events, but above all, he made a name for himself as a pioneer of Albanian landscape photography.

Up until the time of Shan Pici, photography in northern Albania had been very much focused on the town of Shkodra at the foot of the northern Albanian Alps. In the 1930s, Pici took the art of photography into the mountains. He was the first Albanian photographer to open his eyes, and his camera lens, to the beauties of nature.

The mountains of northern Albania, accessible only by narrow mule tracks, had fascinated travellers to the region since the nineteenth century, as did their unique tribal culture. The reports brought back by the first climbers and adventurers captivated the European public. Among the turn-of-the-century visitors to these mysterious reaches were the French diplomat Baron Alexandre Degrand (1844-1911); the Austro-Hungarian diplomat Theodor Ippen (1861-1935); the much-lauded British traveller and writer Edith Durham (1863-1944), later to be known as the queen of the highland tribes; the Italian botanist Antonio Baldacci (1867-1950); the south Tyrolian missionary Ernesto Cozzi (1870-1926); the Austrian engineer Karl Steinmetz; and the great Austro-Hungarian geologist and scholar Baron Franz Nopcsa (1877-1933).

A generation later, the American writer Rose Wilder Lane (1886-1968), working for the American Red Cross after the First World War, was about to leave a refugee camp that she was visiting in Shkodra and to carry on for Turkey when a fellow American Red Cross worker, Frances Hardy, persuaded her to join a small party which was about to embark on an expedition into the northern mountains to set up schools.

“Constantinople’s nothing. Everyone goes to Constantinople. But if you don’t see Albania, you’re wasting the chance of a lifetime. Up in those mountains – right up there in those mountains, a day’s journey from here – the people are living as they lived twenty centuries ago, before the Greek or the Roman or the Slav was ever known. There are prehistoric cities up there, old legends, songs, customs that no one knows anything about. No stranger’s ever even seen them. Great Scott, woman! And you sit there and talk about Constantinople!” “But if nobody goes there, how can we do so?” I said. “How does anyone ever do anything? Simply do it. Hire horses, get on them, and go.” “Carrying our own guns?” “Oh, we’ll be safe enough! We may run into a blood feud or two, and get our guides shot up, but nobody ever harms a woman. Nobody even shoots a man in her presence.”

It was this expedition in 1921 that inspired her book *“Peaks of Shala, Being a Record of Certain Wanderings among the Hill-tribes of Albania,”* London 1922, one of the most delightful contributions to America’s discovery of Albania in the early decades of the

twentieth century. She also took pictures, as had Durham, Nopcsa and Steinmetz before her as they clambered over the high mountain passes into the remote valleys of Dukagjini.

In 1936, in the time of King Zog, a road was finally built over the mountains to Theth in Shala tribal territory which opened the region up to modest extent. Shan Pici was there with his camera two years later, in 1938, to take the first pictures of the mountain region ever produced by a professional photographer. His images of the mountain tribes of Shala and Shoshi, of Pult and Puka, and of the wild and savage natural environment in which they lived, or better, struggled to survive, constitute a zenith of his art.

The mountain valleys of Dukagjini are still among the most isolated in Europe. Shan Pici was first to capture their primeval splendour. It is thus a particular delight that the Marubi National Photo Archives are now making his stunning images available to the public after three-quarters of a century of oblivion. Shan Pici has found his deserved place in the history of Albanian photography.

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