

Xhevahir Spahiu

A mad age

[*Kohë e krisur*].

Tiranë. Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve. 1991. 122 pages

The region of Skrapari at the foot of lofty Mount Tomorr, the legendary Father Tomorr of Albanian mythology, is noted for its excellent *raki* and its *Sigurimi* agents. Quite independent of this rather dubious fame, it is also the home of Xhevahir Spahiu (b. 1945), one of the most forceful, vociferous and talented poets of modern Albania, a voice of survival. During the 1973 purge of writers and intellectuals, dictator Enver Hoxha referred to Spahiu by name for having composed a short poem reminiscent, though by pure coincidence, of a line by Jean-Paul Sartre. Although the poet had never had an opportunity to enjoy the forbidden fruits of the latter French philosopher, he was condemned as an existentialist (tantamount to the highest treason) and survived only by the skin of his teeth, by channelling his passions into appropriate revolutionary fervour. After a couple of years he was, to his and our good fortune, allowed to publish once again. Now that the red tide has receded, he can go about the poet's business and is quite content to do so.

Xhevahir Spahiu is not a poet of reclusion or of pensive solitude. He is at his best with an audience. It is then that his eyes take on an elfish sparkle (*Xhevahir* in Albanian means diamond) and his voice begins to convey all the emotion of which true verse is capable. His audience is always enthralled. In a country in which until quite recently every poem, every word, every thought was subject to a dense filter of ideological and personal conformity, this habit of spontaneous and passionate declamation on the otherwise bleak streets of Tiranë has made him something of a unique phenomenon.

*Kohë e krisur* (A mad age), written when Europe's most awesome dictatorship was in its last throes, is one of the first volumes of poetry to be printed by the newly-formed publishing company of the now semi-independent Albanian Writer's Union. Spahiu's verse is both entertaining and thought-provoking. The sixty-nine poems in this volume range from striking aphorisms and bons mots, in which Spahiu has always delighted, to passionate verse on the martyrdom of Kosovo, a tragedy in the making which gnaws away at the spirit of Albanians on both sides of the border. *Kohë e krisur* was awarded the 1991 Migjeni prize as the best volume of poetry of the year. In choosing this work, the members of the jury, composed of poets, critics and publishers, praised not only the book's profoundly humanitarian and democratic spirit and its dramatic impact, but also its anti-conformity. Albania has come a long way in one year.

First published in: World Literature Today 66.2 (spring 1992)