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TO TELL ABOUT WHAT ONE DOESN'T SPEAK ABOUT

(CARAVAN OF THE SOUTH 2011 IN ALBANIA - EXCERPTS FROM A DIARY)

2.09.
We leave Shkodra, by bus and by taxi. Direction: Zogay by the Montenegro border, a picturesque fishermen village, pressed in between the shore of the Shkodra Lake and the Tarabosh mountain range. There is no TV or Internet here, few tourists reach it here. The taxi driver talks a lot, every now and again he laughs, loudly, coarsely. We go through a Gypsy village, the driver with a broad gesture shows to us the reality around. Justyna translates for us the Albanian word *Madjyp*. The taxi driver bursts with laughter, he says – People without passports! Hahaha! We reach the lake. It is like a combination of paradise and hell: the surfices glimmers fabulously and around it – the mountains. The mountain range is black from fire. We hear that people tried to call for help with fighting the fire, but nobody reacted. (It would not be hard to quench the fire, the Montenegro firemen on the other side of the border were successful). Lack of interest,

lack of equipment. Some political grounds? There can be various motives: dishonest competition of German and Greek pharmacy companies, gaining the wild mountain sage, the practice of lowering the prices of ground under the development of growing suburban settlements or the destruction of illegal marijuana fields... Right... we are outside of the European Union... people have, in joint action, rescued only the cemetery. Mountain slopes are, apart from the lake, the basis of their living. They collect healing herbs, they graze their cows here. The smokes of fires on the slopes of the mountains around the lake – since now it is going to be an everyday view: at night all the more spectacular, because you can see fires from many kilometres' distance.

It is hot. Due to Bayram, the several days feast which ends the Ramazan, as well as because of the yet unfinished siesta, it is too early for our introductory visit at the village mayor. In such a case, we use our time to have a swim. The water is clear and warm, the stone shore covered with garbage. Giant weeds make swimming harder. We learn that the ecological equilibrium has been violated: the weed-eating fishes are gone. The process may be irreversible.

We are complete strangers here, we can only talk to people with the help of Ilir and Justyna. Sometimes we are also helped by Morgan, the young Belgienne, the fiancee of the son of the landlord of the house in which we are staying, who decided – at least now – to spend the rest of her life in the village.

In the evening, the street is full of people – young boys, older men, children. Women can be met when they are

going shopping or coming back from the shop (open till 10 p.m.) or when they are working, together with the men, on fishing boats. It is hard to live out of fishing alone, many families are helped by relatives living abroad. In the old times, people would go to work in Shkodra on foot: two hours one way. For some time now, it has been possible to reach the village by a narrow motorway, winding through the mountains and only weakly secured. Two times a day the bus goes, there are cars.

Ilir and Justyna tell us the basic facts about Zogay. That the last post of the Albanian frontier guard was here, that people here were pushed by the regime to play the role of confidants, reporting on the runaways who tried to cross the border through the mountains or swim it through the lake. The caught escapees (if they had not been shot on the spot) went to meet their death or – rarely – for many years to prison. Enver Hodja died in 1985, the legislation changed, the penalties for escaping were diminished to 6 months' imprisonment. The flow of refugees has grown bigger, but here, on the border, they were shot all the same. The only real change was a bigger number of victims. Persecuting this systematic dirty business of killing and the readiness to help the refugees from one of the blackest communist dictatorship would require international help. A lot goes to show that nobody has been interested: no government, no country. At the beginning of the nineties, more people were killed on Albanian border than before the dictator's death.

Till today, no-one in Albania talks about it. All the more here, in the place where for many years the nightmare has been taking place. This complete silence

strangely resembles the way in which today's world is silent about Albania.

The first rehearsals for "Ziemia" in the newly-formed ensemble, in the evening – a show of "Water" in Zogaj. First we walk round the village, playing music, inviting people for the show. It may be the first theatre show in the history of the village! The children of course came earlier, they helped us build the audience on the narrow terraces which, amphitheatre-like, tower around the "stage" - a patch of even ground, covered with concrete, in front of the local café, which people here call "the club". One could hardly imagine a more picturesque scenery for the show. Our stage lantern dangles in the air and our black screen stands against the background of lake and mountains. Into this bucolic landscape, bitter reality presses: the image of the still burning forest... People are all eyes and ears, they react to every gesture. After the show we meet Nebi and her husband; they stand us all a round of beer.

3rd September
Saturday: rehearsals for „Ziemia" continued, step by step we manage to introduce the first fragments of text in Albanian, e.g from the clown's words: „Ziemia (the Earth), Ziemia, Ziemia. Ziemia has no borders. Ziemia doesn't know where Poland is, where Albania (Squiperia) is, where Israel is...". Yes, indeed, it is a play about this village... but, anyway, we will want to find new scenes, taken straight from here. Morgan joins us with the flute.

In the afternoon, we go to the village: along a path leading towards the border, then behind the mosque where the mortar road ends. The last houses, burnt out

earth, rocks and ashes, empty spaces, finally two not very impressive ruined buildings. Above the gangway, the remnants of a metal sign "Poczta Zogaj"; two letters are left. It was not a traditional post office, but a place of transfer – and control – of foreign mail. At the same time – a post of frontier guards and the seat of the radar. Enormous lights controlling the surface of the lake were installed below. Straight behind the post office – a three hundred metres belt of borderland, behind it – Montenegro. To Montenegro belongs also the island which you can see well from Zogay's stone beach. It was to that island that one had to swim. It is not far from the village, about 2 hours swim. But from here there was close to no chance to go unnoticed: the face of the lake was constantly monitored and the inhabitants of the village were obliged to inform the guards anytime they saw anything suspicious. Even children were entitled to check a newcomer's identity. Sometimes shots would fall from the shore which were not even shot by the soldiers. If the escape was to have any chances of success, you had to get into the water away from the village and the lake. The runaways had to swim about 2-3 hours in the river Buna which connects the lake with the Adriatic Sea and then swim with a wide arch avoiding the shore in Zogay and approach the island from the other side. After an all-year training, a man could do all the way in 18 hours. There are no statistics saying how many people had drowned half-way.

Ilir shows the "post office" to us: here was the radar post (till last year, someone had still been sitting here), here – the commander's room. Here, against that wall, executions were done. Nobody knows, on what ground the decision was made: whether to shoot a man on the

spot or hand him over to the persecutor. Once they caught a couple, a boy and a girl, trying to escape in order to live together without the strict limitations imposed by the communists. Before killing the girl, the soldiers raped her, making sure that the gossip reaches the village. Then the bodies of the both were publicly carried round the local villages.

It is getting late, we go, as we had promised, to visit Nebi's house. Stone steps lead to the door, freshly whitened on the occasion of the Ramadan and the feast of Bayram. Nebi knows old weaving techniques and tapestry techniques, she managed to set her own workshop going. Now there is more than a dozen women working. We speak English, Nebi's daughter, Pranvera, translates for us. She studies Albanian literature in Shkodra. But she wants to come back to Zogay when her studies are over, because it is "the best place you can imagine". We talk about how people used to live here in the old times, about the frontier. There is comparative material – I tell them about the Berlin Wall. Nebi tells us that party membership was in the times of the Hodja a necessary condition to survive. At some moment Nebi says "we were forced to tell on others". Pramvera, however, closes the subject quickly, saying "But now we are better". Finally we manage to hear songs. Wedding songs, fishermen's songs, first shy ("no, we have no songs"), then more and more brave and bold. We are less and less anonymous in Zogay. The basic vocabulary: faleminderit (thank you), mirëmëngjes (good day), people answer us sometimes with a Serbian or an Italian word

4th September
A trial show of the Albanian version of Earth B in Shiroka.

Shiroka lies closer by Shkodra, it has a completely different character from Zogay, there are several restaurants, two internet cafés, and an empty promenade by the lake. Above, the mosque, the church, houses, gardens piled one upon the other under the burnt out wall of the mountain. And the summer residence of Ahmed Zogu, the pre-war Albanian president and king, after the war – changed into a holiday resort for children. Ilir remembers: one would get into the water on the sound of a whistle, the bath lasted the regulation three minutes, not a second more. The king's villa today: broken glass, empty fountain pools, crumbled concrete of the balustrade.

When on the first day we were looking around Shiroka for a place for the show, we were surrounded by a swarm of children – boys only. We decided to do with them a workshop of poyka swaying. On the day of the show, Iza and Justyna come here earlier. They have rice and stockings – the materials for making the poykas. Iza is brilliant at waving the poykas, besides she is quite experienced at yard pedagogy. Justyna acts as interpreter, even though our communication with the adepts of juggling anyway bases on the brief "Supeeeeer!". After some time the rest of the group come, we unpack the props. At the beginning, the scene with the camel: its fall and "recovery" under the influence of music, the way we do it in Węgajty during the Carnival show – the Zapust. We wander along one of the little streets here in the company with a group of boys from the poyka workshop. Our procession is a bit like a circus coming to town. The street, empty at first, fills up with people: they lean out of windows, they come down, the children's excitement reaches zenith.

We reach the terrace in front of Zogu's villa, we put the screen up. In the performance there are more and more Albanian sentences, like David's question: "Are there, behind the village, also playgrounds, or minefields?" Only now we are able to check if the audience are following the events, if the texts come home to them, if the meaning of the scenes gets through. Applause after the deer scene, hustle, careful listening, hustle. In the finale, Iza manages to draw the workshop boys into the action.

Action in Shiroka helped us come closer to our task in Zogay. We are still thinking: what should Earth B sound like in that place? We are, after all, in a completely unknown context: on one hand – the village's monstrous past, on the other – cultural difference. Big risk, lots of questions. Aren't we behaving like intruders, when we are trying to get to know something about the past? How are the inhabitants of a Muslim village going to react to the ribald, erotic scenes in the show? It is hard to ignore the fact that every day at five a.m. we are woken up by the voice of the muezzin... Even Justyna and Ilir feel uncertain in the face of the people living here, even though they have been coming to Zogay for a year already (they are working on a documentary about that place). Example: when we were asking about the possibility of showing the performance in the "club", the owner was suspicious at first: "This club is for everyone – no religious propaganda of any sort! One drinks rakiya here, you see..." But also this: a woman, who grabbed hold of Justyna's hand as she was filming the surroundings of the post-office: "One must not publish that anywhere!"

Time is getting more and more dense, every moment brings something new. We learn next words: peshk (fish), bukë (bread), fëmijë (children), natën e mirë (good night). Pranvera helps us memorize a couple of verses of a wedding song, which has, they say, more than fifty verses.

5th September
Exhaustion, people getting sick, a break in rehearsals. Conversation: Ilir about the film: it is supposed to speak about the long years of Albanian isolation – through people's destinies: the lives of the runaways and of the inhabitants of Zogay. Ilir knows a lot of dramatic stories. Someone ran away three times, twice he was caught and he served many years sentences in prison. He got rich in the West but in the nineties he came back to Albania. He lives in Shkodra, on the verge of complete poverty. Another man, an officer of high rank in some Albanian service, set off on a ship with some ten people's crew in the direction of the island, taking with himself his wife and a several-months-old daughter. From the Zogay village a shot fell, but they managed to get to the island. Only on the spot the crew had revealed the truth: the shot killed the child. The officer never came back to Albania. Another story: a teenager told his mother a strange dream: he dreamt that some portraits of the members of the Political Office fell off the wall. His mother immediately went to the Party Comitee: "My son has wrong thoughts". He was sentenced for fifteen years in prison. Why did she do it? Maybe she was worried about her other children – the boy had eight siblings. Everyone who ran away was aware that his relatives would be punished. "We were forced to tell on others" – what exactly hides behind that confession? The inhabitants of Zogay,

as we were told, signalled to each other the presence of strangers in the village with a special tin bell. Many of them carried weapons.

Another chapter are the stories which happened already after the fall of the communism. A family who for five years have been squatting in one room in the Italian embassy (why were they not given refuge earlier?). The civil war in 1997, caused by the breakdown of the so-called financial pyramids and mass escapes to Italy. Twenty-five thousand Albanians on two small ships in an Italian harbour (I can remember from television the images of people trying to get to the shore, hanging by the sides of the ships, falling off into the water). Another ship with over a hundred refuges – including women and children – smashed by an Italian vessel. Few had survived, the investigations drew on for years. It is known that somewhere there are collective graves of people killed on the Albanian border after the death of Hodja. Sometimes some family manages to collect money, they run the search for the missing ones on their own. Sometimes they find the body. About all that nobody speaks: neither in Albania, nor in Europe. One speaks about the failure to fulfil the conditions to join the EU, about Mafia and smuggling.

Wacek: Three islands come together in my mind. One is the island we look at everyday, the island on the Shkodra Lake, onto which the Albanians had been trying to get for years. The other is the Italian island Lampedusa on the Mediterranean, where the African refugees are trying to get. The third one – the Norwegian island Utøva, on which a rightist extremist killed 69 young people. On the wall of the

Zogay border passage, by which the caught runaways were shot, there is still a sign saying: "Nation above all." Were people shot here in the name of the idea of a nationalist state? Just like Breivik?

We are guests in Zogay – what can we understand within a mere couple of days? How to react to all these stories? From the beginning we wanted to build a new, "local" version of the show – in what way shall we include in Earth B the images which would relate to what happened here? And what should be the function of the show planned for tomorrow? Should it act the way the play did of the actors brought to the Danish court by Hamlet? Or like ancient tragedy, e.g. Antigone? Should it bare the guilt, provoke qualms of conscience or show the tragedy, keeping clear of judgement? How literal can our action be?

7th September
Earth B in Zogay.
The first scene: the camel mask sets off from before the café. We are surrounded by more people than usual, and what's more – exactly at the moment the camel walks out on the street, a man turns up returning from somewhere with his donkeys (!). The camel is followed the character of the "Immigrant" – Emi in the mask of the black-faced shoeblack. Commotion and laughter.

Scene two: we are coming close to the beach. The concrete breakwater looks like a giant stage. A dance of two women against the background of the sky. Their costume is a shared, two-person wedding dress. It makes the bodies of the two dancers unite, then – like a straitjacket – it becomes an instrument of enslavement, or it turns into a deathly shroud.

Zosia and Emilia dedicated their performance to the young couple of shot refugees we had been told about.

Scene three: we sing „By the Waters of Babylon". The lyrics are now fresh, local („We lay down and wept for Thee Zion"). Right on the lake shore two other women are dancing. One of them walks into the water, swims away. We are not singing any more, Iza swims on, heading for the island. Only now do we realize that behind the railing of the café and in the higher part of the beach lots of people have gathered. They watch it all in absolute silence. Iza swims, she is far away already. Two fishermen, whose coming had earlier been arranged by Ilir, get on their boat. They jerk the rope and the engine starts off in a moment. The fishermen help Iza get onto the boat. Applause.

The remaining scenes of Earth are played before the "club", under the swaying lantern. A crowd of people, turmoil, at the end – the boys are performing, the poykas spin in the air. Then – a common singing of the wedding song and Nebi playing the dayra (tambourine), and dancing, and more and more fishermen's songs.

The participants of the Caravan of the South 2011
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