

## An American Story

The approach is breathtaking. A newly asphalted highway is strangely empty in comparison to roads elsewhere in the country, which are mobbed by tourists this time of year. Adjacent hills are steep, thick with pine, and roads spin off, left or right, to tiny mountain villages. In the last stretch before the border, the forest gives way to a lunar landscape, deforested, incised – a sheer devastation, an emptiness that is a fitting preamble to wastelands on the other side. We clear an army checkpoint, produce passports and car registration, and then cross a watershed. Albania looms in the distance. We are a group of five American and British archaeologists.

The border is hideous. Customhouses of brutal reinforced concrete crowd the road. The way is dusty now, the pavement broken and stirred incessantly by the tires of long-haul rigs that wait endless hours in queues to carry goods into Albania. The soil next to the road has long since eroded, exposing bare rock. It is 1994, just three years after this once iron-clad passage opened to traffic other than an occasional government vehicle.

There is no secure parking lot, only a bulldozed field: most Albanians travel by bus or foot; wise foreigners arrange taxis.

These borderlands of Epiros, as the area has been known since Antiquity, suffered much after Ottoman control evaporated in 1912. Fleeing poverty and war, refugees came to the United States, even to Cincinnati. Some spoke Greek, most Albanian, others Slavic, and allegiances, alliances, and ethnic identities shifted as the winds blew.

Nicolas Lambrinides, founder of Skyline Chili, opened his first restaurant in Price Hill, escaping his ancestral home in the lakeside city of Kastoria, "Beavertown," during one such crisis, the so-called First Balkan War of 1912-13. Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece ganged up against the Turks, winning a decisive victory – but with terrible casualties, and disputes among the winners continued.

From this disorder rose the nation-state of Albania.

As nationalism worked its black magic in the Balkans over the next half-century, cities, towns, and villages that had been multi-ethnic and multi-cultural for centuries

were homogenized and purified by state policies that forbade the teaching of histories, literatures, religions, or languages other than those officially sanctioned by central governments. Dissonant groups were expelled, tens of thousands of people displaced at a time, and a rich cultural, linguistic, and religious tapestry began to disappear.

The borders of the nation-states of Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia were not simple to define in 1912. Muslim villages were then interlaced in the landscapes with Christian; Greek-speaking lay adjacent to Albanian and Slavic. And there were Gypsies and Romanians.

International commissions, of course, thought they could sort things out.

The allies who fought against the Turks pursued their individual ends, scrapping over the spoils of war, trying to maximize the extent of their territories. In contested areas, armies passed out flags and taught children how to greet commissioners when they visited: *Καλώς ορίσατε*, *Mirë se vjen*, *Dobredoydovte*, etc. "See! This village must be Greek," the commission was meant to conclude. "Its children speak Greek and are waving the Greek flag. This village should belong to Greece." That

was the logic, and the commissioners determined borders.

And so it came to pass that a commission drew a new border between the old nation-state of Greece and the brand new nation-state of Albania. Lambrinides's Kastoria became Greek with a stroke of the League of Nations' pen. [Despite Wilson's urgings, the United States had played no role.]

Nobody was completely satisfied with the commission's decision, and the border is disputed still today. More than a third of modern Albania falls within an area that Greeks call Northern Epiros, home to one of the largest populations of Greek-speakers outside Greece. According to the government in Athens, people in Northern Epiros exhibit a Greek consciousness, and Greece has periodically laid claim to it as an "unredeemed" part of the Greek nation-state.

Our gang of five, on the other hand, had no political agenda, but had come to Northern Epiros on a mission of mercy, one that was a direct consequence of revolutionary events in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Communist Albania foundered in its wake.

Albania's path to democracy was long. Mussolini had

invaded in 1939. With the surrender of Italy in 1943, Albania regained its independence, but found itself enmeshed in a civil war. The socialist party of Enver Hoxha, a teacher of French literature, won the struggle, and Hoxha then ruled Albania with an iron hand for four decades, banning all religion and brutally imposing his will.

But after Hoxha's death in 1986, the state apparatus began to lose control. Albanians risked entering Greece or Italy illegally, and a flood of economic refugees was unleashed, one that reached a crescendo in the early 1990s. Formal border crossings were established and legal immigration became possible for the first time since the 1940s. Nearly 450,000 Albanians came to Greece looking for work in those years, at first mostly men and boys who provided seasonal labor for the olive and grape harvests. Families followed.

And it was one of these boys, an ambitious 19-year-old named Yianni, whose plight brought us to the Albanian border in 1994. Yianni had come to Greece a couple years earlier, reaching the valley of Nemea, an hour southwest of Athens. Nemea in ancient times had been the seat of a famous sanctuary dedicated to the god Zeus, one first excavated in 1920 by a member of the Literary Club of

Cincinnati, Carl William Blegen. Blegen's was the first archaeological expedition in Greece to be sponsored by the University of Cincinnati.

After WW II Nemea suffered a drastic depopulation, as did rural Greece in general. Agricultural production shrunk dramatically everywhere. Families, sometimes even entire villages, emigrated to Athens, the United States, Australia, or Canada. But in 1981, after Greece's admission to the European Union, increased production of high-value specialty goods followed, and the rural economy began to expand.

Farmers in Nemea concentrated their efforts on vines, as grassroots initiatives took hold in nearly barren soil – and the wines of Nemea are today synonymous with quality. The expansion of viticulture of course required ever more tilling, pruning, and harvesting – in short, more labor. It was a perfect storm for the exploitation of immigrants, and homeless Albanians like Yanni flooded into the valley, willing even to live in chicken coops and to work in the fields for \$20/day.

Yianni was desperate to earn money, all the more so since, at age sixteen after his father's death, he had become the default sole breadwinner for his mother, three

sisters, and little brother. His real name was Fatmir and he was Muslim, but he had paid two hundred dollars (a small fortune) for a forged passport produced in Spain; his Greek name, Yianni, was lifted from a tombstone in the cemetery of one of the Greek-speaking villages of Northern Epiros. The Greek state favored Greek-speakers and granted them special privileges.

And so Yanni lived in a chicken coop at Nemea, sending remittances to his mother. He was determined to do what he needed to do to get his entire family to America. Greece was only a first step.

It was particularly urgent for Yianni to extricate his sisters from Albania. Etleva and Luanesha were at risk of losing their virginity, even their lives. With the implosion of the Communist state, an uneasy lawlessness had taken hold as the Italian mafia operated unfettered. The kidnapping of girls was rife, many sold as sex slaves, spirited away to Venice in cigarette boats that somehow always managed to evade Italian patrols.

In Nemea, an unexpected opportunity presented itself to Yianni when he made the acquaintance of a forty-year-old American archaeologist named Bill, a graduate of the University of Cincinnati - a chance introduction that

might open the door to fulfillment of his dream.

Bill is a Connecticut Yankee without a drop of Greek blood, but an inspirational high school teacher infused him with a love for all things Hellenic. He soon had coaxed his father, a Woolworth's five-and-dime executive, into sending him to Athens College, Greece's most exclusive boarding school and then, as now, a breeding ground for the country's political and cultural elite. After graduation Bill was determined to pursue studies at the University of Cincinnati, where I had arrived as a graduate student in the same year, forty-five years ago.

But Bill couldn't stay away from Greece. He returned to Athens a few years later, beginning to teach English and write ESL textbooks. In summers he worked with me in Nemea on an archaeological project, where his charm and fluency in Greek won him many friends in the village: he was so beloved that one family made him an honorary son and gave him a vineyard.

Bill met Yianni several years after our archaeological program ended. Bill was unmarried, and Yianni and he soon concocted a plan that would be to their mutual advantage. Yianni would find Bill a wife (unspecified, to be named later) in Albania. But then Yianni returned to his

village and, without telling Bill, proposed to his mother that sister Luanesha should be Bill's bride.

Yianni's village, even for Albania, is in the back-of-beyond, perched on a weathered knoll of marl, where the soil powders and leaves your shoes coated white as snow. You can reach the village in two ways, only one of which I would recommend. A mountainous shortcut involves driving a course so exhilarating as to discourage me, at least, from taking it a second time. Any car risks falling hundreds of feet down a steep slope into the valley floor below. An alternate route, along a badly wash-boarded track, takes three times as long but has the virtue of being flat.

The horror of driving in Albania in the 1990s was compounded by the fact that until 1991 there were no private vehicles. By 1994, however, there were tens of thousands, most stolen from Western Europe. Moreover, only a handful of previous chauffeurs had been on the road for more than three years, and the accident rate was high. Imagine an entire country of teenage drivers.

Yianni's family house consisted of two rooms with a concrete veranda in front. Mud for its adobe-brick walls had been dug from a nearby slope, tempered with straw,

pressed into a wooden mold, and left to dry in the sun. Handmade, crescent-shaped tiles covered a low-pitched roof. The function of the two rooms changed in the course of the day - alternately sitting rooms, reception rooms, and bedrooms; the hallway between them and the veranda served as spare bedrooms.

To the left of the house was a privy, a simple wooden structure with a pierced bench, the waste periodically mucked out for fertilizer. A bucket of water was for washing the left hand. There was no toilet paper, but a copy of the collected works of Enver Hoxha represented a concession to the modesty of western visitors. We were the first, and probably the last.

To the right of the house was a second shed, a kitchen. Inside was a clay Dutch oven, a *saç*, set into an earthen floor; its bell-shaped lid would be covered with hot coals. No man ever entered this sanctum. And no woman ever ate with men - excepting the eldest woman within the extended family. She could also smoke.

Before 1991 there had been thirty families in the village, all members of a collective farm that had its headquarters in the smoke-filled "clubhouse" that doubled as coffeehouse and bar. It was the only entertainment in

town.

Seemingly all was clicking for Yianni. He had secured his mother's approval for the marriage. But while hitchhiking back to the Greek border, there was a freak accident. The mirror of a truck, forced onto the berm by a passing car, caught one strap of his backpack, dragging Yianni along until he hit the abutment of a bridge and crushed his skull. Albanian doctors patched him up, but he needed more expert care.

Thus our mission in Albania was to get Yianni's visa in his forged passport renewed so that he could return to Greece. It had expired while he was in the hospital. We would first travel to Yianni's village so that Bill could meet his intended, then to Tirana, the capital of Albania, and finally to the Greek consulate at Gjirokastër (Αργυρόκαστρο, the "Silver Castle," in Greek).

The first order of business, however, was make secure a van that we had driven from southern Greece, since it was not insured for Albania. Bill had a buddy who lived nearby, on the other side of the border. When his friend wasn't involved in smuggling, his day job involved supervision of construction at the Greek customs post - a vocation that naturally facilitated his nightjob. We

would leave our vehicle in Greece, and hand our car keys over to the smuggler's wife.

And there our own adventures began. We had just begun to cross the border with a washing machine, a present for Yanni's mother. Ironically, an Albanian man, one of hundreds waiting to enter Greece, seized on that exact moment to insult a Greek border guard's mother. The policeman returned the favor by closing the crossing, and two of us found ourselves trapped in no man's land with several hundred angry Albanians.

It was there I first met Yianni, when he suddenly appeared on the Albanian side of the fence and slipped me a cigarette through the wire mesh. We bonded over it, and I became "Jack-aga," "Mr. Jack."

An hour later, the gates did reopen, and we walked to the village where we would leave the car keys - almost without incident. (A guard did point an AK-47 at us, but he was mollified with a cigarette.) The village was a type of mountain settlement characteristic of Northern Epiros, upper and lower neighborhoods separated by steep, rocky slopes. The smuggler's wife was home, but in the upper neighborhood, and we were in the lower. Fortunately generations of practice have taught Northern Epirots how

to handle such predicaments. The first random woman we met, after she learned what we wanted, let out a scream that would have raised Lazarus from the dead. A half hour later, our contact arrived.

"Where are you kids going?" she asked. We told her our destination. "It's dangerous in Albania," said she who lived there. "You might want to rethink your plans."

Indeed, there was danger, not only from bad drivers, but also bandits. One of Enver Hoxha's strategies for controlling dissonant Albanians was to transport entire villages to places where they could cause less trouble. Along our way we passed one such village: Muslims famous for their ferocity who had been implanted in an area of Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians. They were unhappy, and, after the end of Communism, it was payback time. The villagers, as a collective, from time to time would divert traffic from the main highway, rob travelers, and send them on their way poorer.

As we continued in the direction of Yanni's village, we witnessed further signs of lawlessness. Concrete guardrails had been ripped out and smashed with sledgehammers so that fragments could be used as building stone. Black-topped roads had been pickaxed by tar

thieves. Gas station attendants were locked in protective cages, parking lots surrounded by barbed wire, and private houses by walls topped by razor wire or broken bottle glass.

And the best lay ahead.

My first trip to Albania lasted only five days.

When we woke in Yianni's village on Day 2, we learned that it was his sister, Luanesha, who would be Bill's bride. (Bill had agreed the night before.) We decided to take the couple to lunch at a restaurant to celebrate. But Luanesha had never before sat at a table with men and was so uncomfortable that she couldn't eat. Instead she sat at another table and cried.

On Day 3 we rode four uncomfortable hours to Tirana to hunt (unsuccessfully) for a wedding dress – without the bride this time. On the return trip our driver's van broke down, and we were invited to spend the night at his house. His wife treated us to a sumptuous chicken dinner, after which four of us suffered food poisoning. But in the morning the van was ready.

On Day 4 we travelled seven even worse hours over steep

roads with hairpin turns, our goal, on Day 5, to visit Gjirokastër. Gjirokastër is the district capital and metropolis of Northern Epiros, although Greek-speakers are in the minority. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the city was, in fact, a stronghold for Ali Pasha, the legendary Albanian warlord, friend to Lord Byron. A century later, Enver Hoxha was born in Gjirokastër.

The city retains an Ottoman appearance, having been preserved by the Communists as a "museum city." Lining cobbled streets are two-storey stone houses constructed in traditional Balkan style, with *σαχνισιά*, enclosed projecting balconies. An Ottoman castle sports exhibits that commemorate Albanian resistance to foreign aggression, including American, since an alleged U.S. spy plane is on display. Hundreds of political prisoners faced the firing squad here during Hoxha's reign.

Day 5. At the foot of the castle of Gjirokastër is a broad square, the principal mosque of the city on one side, the Greek consulate on the other. Tensions between Greece and Albania had mounted in the mere four days since we entered the country. While we were in Tirana a private Greek plane violated Albanian airspace, dropping leaflets that encouraged Greek-speakers to revolt. The Albanian government was not amused.

We had spent the previous night in a small Greek-speaking village. Its mayor was, of course, a friend of Bill's and had agreed to help us in our quest for Yanni's visa. In the morning, our bellies stuffed with thick slices of soda bread and poached eggs swimming in olive oil, we headed for Gjirokastër, an hour away.

Insofar as we had a plan, it was to march ourselves into the Greek consul's office, without Yianni, and to try to persuade him to stamp the forged passport. We drove as far into the town as possible, then proceeded on foot.

The square between the mosque and the Greek consulate, when we reached it, was packed with very agitated people who had been waiting days to make visa-application appointments. To complicate matters, the Albanian police who guarded the approach to the consulate with clubs were Cam, Muslims who had been expelled from Greece following WW II and lost their property through confiscation - today not the biggest fans of Greeks. On the steps and porch of the central mosque sat a throng of boys, legs dangling, cheering each time the Cam shoved or beat the crowd back from the entrance to the consulate.

Our friend the mayor advised us to force our way through the crowd, single-file, holding our passports over our heads until we reached the guards. At that point we should announce. "Jemi amerikanët. We have come to see the Greek ambassador." We were not at all convinced that this plan would work ... but it did.

The Cam, confronted with five genuine foreigners sporting authentic American and British passports, perhaps the first they had seen, stood slack-jawed for a few moments, then responded: "Of course, comrades, right this way." They knocked, the door opened, and an Albanian servant asked us to sit on benches in an empty corridor. We sweated, nervous as cats over the crime we were about to perpetrate.

An uneasy half-hour later the servant returned and invited us to enter a room at the end of the corridor. Confronting us behind a long table sat a consular attaché, the consul, and three factotums. "What can I do for you?" asked the consul. "We have come to request a very small εξυπηρέτηση," we responded in Greek and then described Yianni's misfortune. "Fine," he replied, "but why on earth did you come here in the first place?" We explained that we were archaeologists and had an intrinsic interest in Albania. "Archaeologists, really?

Do you know my cousin?" We did (another friend of Bill's, of course), and our *bona fides* was established. The consul slid Yianni's passport to the factotums, they stamped it with a one-year entrance visa, and after a bit more banter we left.

The following summer I returned to Albania for Bill and Luanesha's wedding. You may, however, be curious why an attractive, educated American would consent to marry a peasant girl sight unseen. At the time Bill told me that he was fed up with liberated Greek girls and wanted a more traditional spouse. That may well have been a factor. But Bill always marched to a different drummer, living on the edge of several cultures and reveling in his alternative lifestyle. In the end, I am afraid that I myself don't entirely understand his decision, and, in any case, my story is the diary of a road trip, not a psychological evaluation.

Yianni's motivation is more clear. He returned to Greece with his visa and is still there, married, raising two lovely boys, and working as a baker. Since 1994 there has been remarkable progress toward the fulfillment of his dream: moving his entire family to America. Bill and Luanesha live in North Carolina, where they have just celebrated twenty years of happy marriage; both agree

that it has been happy). Their oldest son, Arjan, is in his first year of university, their youngest, Daniel, in high school. Yianni's mother, Drita, is in North Carolina too, accumulating residency time toward eventual naturalization. Papers have been filed for others, and nobody plans to return to Albania. When they leave Greece, it will be for America, despite the fact that Albania's economy is growing as Greece's shrinks.

Last month Bill wrote me: "I am not sure where we are going to put them if their numbers ever come up, but we will cross that bridge when we come to it."