

ANTEA GARO

**COMMUNISM AND SOCIAL LIFE:
HOW PHOTOGRAPHY REVEALS THE IMPACT
OF COMMUNISM ON THE PEOPLE
OF SOUTHERN ALBANIA**

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THE BLACK AND WHITE OF PHOTOS AND THE BLACK AND WHITE OF TIME:

Photos that could not express the thousandth word!

Destiny wanted me to know the artist and photographer Jorgo Vaso from afar. During my childhood, in Saranda, on the wide historical sidewalk by the sea or on the street parallel to it, where the photographers had their shop, a tall man distinguished himself. To me he seemed even taller than he really was, holding a camera in his hand; very rarely around the neck. The man and the camera were one and the same to me. At that time photography was something rare, really rare, and actually the tall man with the camera looked almost as a magician to me. This master of photography, not well known to the public, because he was both on the edge of the Albanian public life and lived in the most southern city of the country, has created a collection of eighty thousand photos. Though in a long distance from Tirana, the capital of Albania, Saranda was among the most developed and brightened areas of the country with an illuminated and well-educated and hard-worker population.

Destiny wanted me to know the author of this book as well, the great granddaughter of the photographer Jorgo Vaso. Antea Garo, a passionate and scrupulous girl, a student at Princeton University, is a future researcher, who has already confirmed the signs of her talent. In the book that she is introducing to the reader, come together her long selective work, the ability to choose topics that arise complex interests: historical, cultural and even political, the encouraging family environment, the family cultural heritage and, above all, the depth of analysis and the writing skills.

Between these two acquaintances of mine of four generations stands the book "Communism and Social Life: How Photography Reveals the Impact of Communism on the People of Southern Albania", which I have the pleasure to introduce to the reader.

Social life has been complex during the communist regime, as in any form of government. No doubt the lives of all citizens, without any exception, have been under the pressure of the regime's political lines. No detail or desire of individual lives, even in the most remote part of the country, could escape the so-called "revolutionary vigilance", which as a matter of fact was the strict ideological, political and state control over life and social behavior.

Photography was a luxury for the time and as Antea underlines, a form of expression for the urban areas and main cities of the country. In this context, the mastership of master Vaso was that he, with his objective, went beyond the limits of the time and

introduced us the richness of the Albanians' life in its entirety, moreover in the most southern part of Albania.

From this entirety Antea has selected to analyze some of the most meaningful parts, which she groups as the Communist Propaganda, Presence of Military or Armed Forces, Labor Activities, Industrialization, Traditional Events, Ceremonies, or Customs, Recreational Activities, and Exceptions.

Another richness of this life, reflected by master Vaso and analyzed by Antea, is the coexistence of the Greek community with the Albanians, which I should say was neither affected, nor influenced by the communist regime. This coexistence penetrates all the above typologies of the Albanians' life. Vaso, a member of the Greek community, has worked and created in Saranda, among Albanians and Greeks who have lived and live in complete harmony.

In fact, the communist propaganda of the time when these photos were taken, was suffocating. In a sample of 850 photos Antea has chosen, we face it in 218 of them, which is about one fourth. However, the spaces of its dominance in social life were not the same. Considering what Jorgo and Antea offer us, communist symbols are most visible in the ideological and political activity, military life and the armed forces, the education system and labor relations.

However, the army and the armed forces, as a totalitarian institution, theoretically with a lot of secret data, instinctively are given us more sparingly in the sample of the master of photography. Antea has discovered 113 in the sample of hundreds of photos. The signs of communism are quite visible, in terms of intensity right after the propaganda.

While the other, non-ideological and non-political signs of life, are more visible in the other typologies reflected by photographer Vaso and analyzed by Antea.

The more we move from the central areas of the communist regime (Communist Propaganda, Presence of Military or Armed Force), to the semi-central areas (Labor Activities, Industrialization) and the peripheral ones (Traditional Events, Ceremonies, or Customs, Recreational Activities, Exceptions), the more a certain broader breathing is noticed, which however cannot be called liberation from the regime's pressure.

Thus, even though social life was systematically politicized and social behavior systematically controlled, some spheres of it, especially in customary life and traditional norms, were less imposed and deformed by the communist propaganda. We are in the first decades after the establishment of the communist regime and the coexistence of communist ideology with customary

norms is more tolerable. This tolerance would go towards minimization, not to say disappearance, following the adoption of the 1976 Constitution.

The ability of the artist and witness of the past, Jorgo Vaso, is that with his black and white photos, carefully respecting the limitations of that time, i.e. the black and white imposed by the regime, he could reflect the beautiful colors of life, its joys, refractions and problems.

Due to the historical-political circumstances, the photographs of master Vaso, which, as the significant expression says, speak more than a thousand words, leave something unsaid and they cannot articulate the thousandth word.

The merit of today's witness, the young researcher Antea Garo, is that, although in a short book, she tries to reveal us the unsaid of the photographs, which her great-grandfather was obliged to cover with the political enthusiasm and optimism of the time when he created. What are these untold? Part of the untold is narrated by Antea. I tried to tell you a part of them. You will discover and rediscover the rest every time you read and re-read this book.

Prof. Kosta Barjaba, PhD

Member of the Academy of Sciences of Albania

Tiranë, January 2023

***“Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again
in new shapes of your own choosing.”***

George Orwell¹

¹ George Orwell, 1984, (New York, Berkeley, 2017), 238.

