

2.11. PHOTOGRAPHY

By Genc Myftiu & Blerina Berberi

The legacy left by Marubi dynasty is one of the best-known in the field of European photography of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

This famous dynasty began with Pjetër Marubi (Pietro Marubbi- b. 1834, Piacenza, Italy), who arrived in Shkodër in 1856 after persecutions by Austro-Hungarian occupiers. Marubi's artistic activity developed in several fields simultaneously as a photographer, architect, painter and sculptor. With his "magic box" in 1858, he photographed the life outside his studio including political events of the time such as, "The Uprising of Mirdita" (1876-77), the Albanian League of Prizren (1878-81), which were



"Rozafat castle" in Shkodra.
Photo by Kel Marubi, 1915



Pjetër Marubi



Kel Marubi



Gege Marubi

printed on the pages of renowned European magazines of the time such as "La guerra d'Oriente", "The Illustrated London News", "L'Iustration", etc.

"Marubi" Studio (1885-1900) was similar to any advanced studio in Europe. At that time, Pjetër Marubi decided that the sons of Rrok Kodheli from Kodheli of Kodrima should continue his work in the studio — starting with Mati (who had a short life, 1862-1881), followed by Mikel, nicknamed Kel (Marubi), inheriting this new surname in honour of the great master.

Kel Marubi (Mikel Kodheli, 1870-1940) began to work at "Marubi" studio in 1885 at the age of 15. After master Marubi's death, Kel



Durres Port. Photo by Kel Marubi, circa 1889-1912



Two alpine soldiers of the French army.
Photo by Kel Marubi, 1914

Marubi became the legitimate inheritor of the studio, transforming it into a true art atelier. He enriched the photograph library with best-known figures of the time such as Gjergj Fishta, Migjeni (Millosh Gjergj Nikolla), Koliqi, Galica, Ded Gjoluli, Bajram Curri, Fan Noli, Ahmet Zogu and others, as well as with photos from common people with characteristic national costumes, pictures from town and country life, landscapes and other aspects of Albania of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. He became one of the leading European figures in public and chronicle photography of the time because he succeeded in following all of the most important Albanian events for nearly 55 years. Kel Marubi was also an ardent patriot and became involved in the movement for the independence of Albania by taking part in founding many societies, such as the "Albanian Language Society" in 1908, and in publishing the newspaper "Zëri i Shkodrës" (The Voice of Shkodër). Kel Marubi was also known beyond Albania's

borders and was often invited to the Court of the King of Montenegro for various works in photography.

After Kel's death, his son *Gegë Marubi* (1907- 1984) took his place. He had studied in Paris at the Lumière brothers' school, the first cinematographic and photographic school in France. In 1970, the entire collection of 150,000 negatives passed to the Albanian state. The "Marubi Photograph Library" has been useful for various publications and albums published in France and Italy. Part of Marubi's photographs has been published in the album "Traces of National History in the Shkodër Photograph Library" (1982), while selected photos, accompanied with a preface by Ismail Kadare, had a high-quality publication in an album entitled "Ecrit d'Lumière".

On early XX century Shkodra became a world known centre of photography. According to writer Fadil Kraja, the "Musketeers of Shkodra" were Ded Jakova (1915-1973), Shan Pici (1904-1976), Gege Marubi (1907-1984), Pjeter Rraboshta and Angjelin Nenshati (1929- 2008) who produced and preserved 500,000 photo negatives of history, people, nature, culture, education, sports, etc. Each of the photographers had their own style, taste and view point. *Shan Pici* was recognized as "the king photographer of nature". He was an alpinist and took



"Musketeers of Shkodra".
Photo by Angjelin Nenshati, 1946

photos of canyons, forests, valleys, avalanches and of most beautiful landscape of North Albania. Pici's photos traveled in Europe, some were sold as postcards, others as stamps and decorative posters. While *Ded Jakova*, who had his studio next to Marubi's house, in front of the oldest public garden in Albania "Milet Bahce" (People's Garden), framed with his camera moments of the Shkodra youth, students from the city and those coming back from abroad hanging out in the city, the beautiful girls and handsome boys, and all these photos defined his role as "the photographer of joy, beauty and youth". The "photographer of the kids" was *Pjeter Rraboshta*, who for 50 years took photo portraits of many children, including those from famous and important families at the time. The photographer *Geg Marubi*, was the "dean of the photographers" who documented the most important events and people. *Angjelin Nenshati*, whose son is a photographer too, has preserved most of the photo films and continued to teach professionalism in photography. Their works are currently found at the National Phototeca "Marubi".



"Jani Ristani".
Photo by a
Russian master
on the day of
Hrushov's visit
in Albania

Other talented photographers with international experience are summarized in following account:

Kol Idromeno (Shkoder, 1860- 1939) was a versatile artist, who learned photography from Pjetër Marubi and translated it into passion, and committed himself to painting. He was outstanding particularly in portraits. In 1922 he was known as the first person that developed motion pictures in Albania or the first steps of cinema.

Ymer Bali (Tirana, 1894- 1967) completed his studies in Austria and had a great activity. He excelled in portraits and collective pictures. He did not marry and left no heir to manage his rich archives. After his death, his niece donated his collection to the State Central Archives in Tiranë.

Jani Ristani (Gjirokaster, 1913- 2005) at a young age went to "Robert College" in Istanbul, a technical-engineering school, where he was acquainted with galena radio reception and photo romanticism. He received the first lessons from the Turkish master of photography Niko Huzuri and began a fervent activity in Turkey fixing with his camera Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and "Miss Turkey, 1933" which were published in the "Cumhuriyet" newspaper under Ristani signature. In 1935 he returned to Tirana where he opened "Studio Ristani", the first modern studio



"Ristani
photo shop"
located in the
Ahmet Zogu
boulevard

distinguished particularly for its laboratory. He was awarded an Honorary Diploma by “Fiera del Lavante” which was equivalent to that of Marubi. Among the most well known of Ristani’s photos are those of downtown Tirana in 1938, several pictures of partisans’ life, various pictures from the battles for the liberation of Tirana and pictures of partisans parade in Tirana. Some of his landscape photos of Albanian nature are also remarkable. In 1947 his studio was nationalized and he was forced to hand over tens of thousands of negatives to the state without any official records. Later he was often forced to work part-time in retouching the photos of the dictator Enver Hoxha without any remuneration. Ristani established the archives of infrastructure and construction works in Albania. In June, 1965, he won three first prizes at the international festival of photography in Berlin with pictures from the construction of hydropower plants, and other works. Since 1954 Ristani developed colour photography in his laboratory by becoming its pioneer in the Europe as well, and by 1957, he began printing colour pictures. Following his lead was Vasil Ristani, who worked at the “Studio Ristani” until its nationalization in 1947. This tradition and the Ristani name continues to the present day with Petrit Ristani, who has himself established a modest studio.

Mihal Popi (Shkoder, 1909-1979) in 1921 moved to Tirana. After the occupation of the country, he committed himself to photography and for some time worked as a photographer at “Radio Tirana”. Later he opened a studio at the “Pazari i Ri” (New Market). He served and contributed during the War by taking pictures and copying documents. With the foundation of the “People’ Theatre”, Popi was one of the first artists whose career was a real success story and he was awarded with the title “Artist of the People”.

Misto Cici (Pogradec, Oct. 10, 1902- 1981) together with his brother, committed to photography. His trips to Greece and Italy played a great role in their dedication to the field. In 1925, the Directorate of Tourism Press and Propaganda assigned him to take a series of artistic pictures of Pogradec. This engagement would highlight him as the first photographer of artistic photography in Albania.



Kristaq Sotiri

Petro Dhimitri (1861-1946) nicknamed “The Photographer” or “The Albanian”, worked his lifetime in Greece.

Kristaq Sotiri (1883- 1970) in 1922 worked as a photographer and excelled in portraits. Throughout his lifetime he worked in the city of Korçë.

Agim Verzivolli (1934-) photographer of “Shqipëria e Re” (New Albania) film studio, opened a photography training course on his own initiative for young people at the Pioneers’ Hall in Tirana. It became a great training centre for new photographers.

Gjon Mili (Korca, 1904- 1984, U.S.A.) at a young age moved to Romania with his family. After finishing the high school "George Lazaru" in 1923, his family moved to the U.S.A. He continued his studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and after graduation he began working at "Westing House". In Boston, Mili established contact with other Albanians and became active for the "Vatra" society and as editor of the Albanian "Dielli" (The Sun) newspaper. At the same time he met with Faik Konica, who convinced Gjon Mili to keep his Albanian name Gjon, instead of John. In 1937, Mili met with Prof. Harold Edgerton, who invented the electronic flash, and decided to continue his career in photography, starting at "Life" magazine. He photographed musicians, sportsmen, dancers, painters, etc, and in 1942 he photographed the famous "Lindy Hop" with the dancers Leon James and Willa Mae Ricker. Mili opened his studio on 23rd Street, New York and during his "Jam Sessions" all artists and others in the creative industries, such as Duke Ellington, Billy Holiday, Lester Jung, Gene Krupa, etc. gathered and discussed their creativity and other enthusiastic subjects. Henri Cartier- Bresson called Gjon Mili the "Athens of New York". In 1944, he returned to cinematography and produced "Jammin's the Blues" a short documentary on jazz. At the time that Mili's photos were on the cover page of "Life" magazine, which was selling million of copies in the U.S. In 1946, Jean Paul Sartre held a warm speech during Mili's exhibition in Paris. In his lifetime, Mili photographed President Truman, Minister Molotov, painters like Picasso, Braque, Matisse, composers and musicians like Stravinski, Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra, and writers such as John O'Kejsi. In 1971, the Photography Biennale in Arles, France was dedicated to Mili's career. Some of his photos are parts of publications, such as "Gjon Mili: Photographs & Recollections" by the New York Graphic Society, 1980; "The Photo Book" 1999; "Portraits of World People" from "LIFE- The Classic Collection", 2008, and since 1998 the Institute of Technology Massachusetts has organized the photo competition "Mili & Edgerton". The largest collection of Mili's photos is to be found at MOMA, New York. According to Arthur Miller "Mili loved folk dance and every week he would go to Broadway to dance with other Albanians...", and Jean Paul Sartre said "For him there are infinite ways of photographing, like it is the infinite number of things that surround us" and John Swarovski, ex-director of MOCA thought that "...Mili had a great mind, and maybe he was more of a thinker than a photographer".



Gjon Mili
(1904-1984)



"Picasso painting with light" photo by Gjon Mili, 1949



"Solitude" by Itsasne Casas (Belgium), 1st Prize "Sotiri International Photo Competition 2009"

After the 90s, like anywhere with the rise of technology, also in contemporary Albania, the use of digital cameras effected not only the style, but also the organization of events, concern and reflection over social issues, environment, tourism, marginalized people, etc.

New **educational programs** were introduced at the Albanian arts schools and academies, so the students would practice and learn more about reproducing digital images. For example,

at the Art High school "Jordan Misja", new digital photography courses have opened, and the Arts Academy (aside courses such as Graphic Design), organizes exhibitions at its gallery and other spaces in cooperation with international artists and supporters. Private courses, schools and non-governmental organizations encourage trainings,

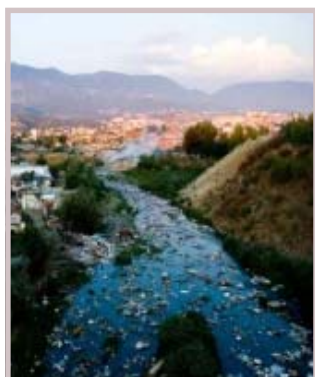
learning and discussion through various digital photos and software, such as Projekt 56- The Albanian School of Photography that also organizes the annual international photo competition "Sotiri".



"World Press Photo" Press Conference, National Arts Gallery, 2007. Photo by B.B.

Tales From a Globalizing World in Shkodra and Tirana, and at the International Center of Culture and the National History museum most of the photo exhibition are documents of the early and late 90s political, social and economical events and people's response. Photo *competitions* take place in Shkodra, Tirana and Korca, and sometimes are associated with an international exhibition in cooperation with international organizations in the country. "Sotiri" continues to be an international photo competition while the "Marubi" photo competition lasted only for a few years.

Photography **activities** are held in gallery spaces and online. The Netherlands Embassy has organized the *World Press Photo Exhibition* in 2007-8 at the National Arts Gallery Tirana, the Swiss Development Office supported the traveling exhibition



"Albanian Tourism" by Bevis Fusha, World Press Photo, 2008

Projects where cooperation and exchange are encouraged, are initiated and organized by Albanian artists, curators, managers, researchers, etc, such as "Adriatic Euro-Region In Focus" from *Lab For Culture* organization, supported by European Cultural Foundation, the International Digital Photo Exhibition "Living Together" by the British Council in Albania, etc.

There are several private business photo shops that develop images in different formats and have digital equipment for self-service. As a *profession*, photographers also exercise their skills in various media studios, channels, newspapers, special family events,

freelance, etc.

Several Albanian **photographers** reflect their social, environmental and economical concerns on the contradictions and paradigms of contemporary Albania. New generation of artists/photographers *can be listed* :

Bevis Fusha, who is a well known Albanian photographer, participant at World Press Photo and other European and North American events, has held exhibitions in several countries.

The first and only “photographer from the sky” is *Alket Islami*, who is also participant at the Albanian Paragliding Competition in Llogara, Albania. He has held exhibitions since the year 2000, with photos of Albania from the sky in Belgium, France, NATO, Strasbourg, etc. has published a successful photo book “Albania from Air” as well as video documentaries on “Discovery Albania”.

Other active Albanian photographers are: Lala Meredith Vulaj, Besim Fusha, Petrit Kumi, Niko Xhufk, Armand Habazaj, Burim Myftiu, Fadil Berisha, Blerta Kambo, Leonard Qylafi, etc.



“Albania from Air”
photos by Alket Islami,
2006

International photographers for Albania

Much like the European travellers during Romanticism, foreign artists continued to travel and explore Albania by showing a keen interest in documenting the folklore, people, geography and events in Albania. According to Robert Elsie, *Johan Georg von Hahn* (1811-1869) the German scholar who is commonly regarded as one of the fathers of Albanian studies, came into close contact with Albanians and their country during his work at the Austrian vice-consulate in Janina. He wrote several books on Albanian history, philology and folklore and took the first 50 photographs in his 1863 expedition. He then wrote to the Vienna Academy of Sciences asking for a competent photographer to accompany him and *Dr. Josef Szeleky*, 25 years old at the time, arrived in Albania, taking a long and difficult task of documenting the landscape



Max Lambertz in Albanian
costume, Shkodra, 1916

and people of Albania and the Balkans. Mark Cohen rediscovered these photos in 2000 at the Austrian National Library.



Baron Franz Nopcsa in Northern Albanian Costume, circa 1916

Later photographic missions in Albania have included the photo collection of *Max Lambertz* in 1916, who visited northern and central Albania as a member of the Balkan Commission of the Austrian Academy of Sciences for comparative linguistic and folklore research. He studied the language dialects in the country, collected folklore materials and produced a collection of photographs. On his second visit, same year, he became member of the Albanian Literary Commission and with Gjergj Fishta was member of the editorial board for the *Albanian Post (Posta e Shqypnies)* newspaper where he published several articles on Albanian Folk Poetry. Later in his life, he remained in contact with Albania and wrote several books on Albanian Studies.

Other photos were taken by the Austro- Hungarian scholar, Baron Franz Nopcsa (1877-1933) during his numerous visits in 1903, and the Dutch Military Mission to Albania in 1913-1914 that were for the first time published in the album *Writing in Light: Early Photography of Albania and Southwest Balkans*, Prishtina, 2007.

In post-communist Albania, 1990 and on, international photographers were very keen to re-discover the country of eagles, its tradition, culture, urban, country landscape or communist remnants (like thousands of bunkers all over the country), etc.

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