

The Land of the Dawning Sun

Italian gazes out to Albania from the beginning of 1900 to present day

Dott.ssa AnnaMaria Calore

Head of the Social Activities and Volunteering Department at ANRP,
Italian National Association of Veterans from Prisoning

Abstract

Over the first forty years of the last century the Italian View of Albania has changed in different ways, but always maintaining strong interest. Both the surprised and sometimes the astonished gaze of travelers and the one of those attracted by possible trade exchanges or the gaze on the soldiers convinced of having the task to Italianize Albania in 1939 “the land of dawning sun” separate frontally by a narrow stretch of the sea, symbolized hopes and promises. In the text of the country across the water that borders with itself the story the specific view (from francone wardon) to stand guard inevitably changed in to watch (from Sanskrit) that means to observe and know.

Keywords: Albania; Adriatic; Salento; Ugo Ojetti; Arturo Galanti.

The Country across the Water that Borders with Itself

Legend has it that, the inhabitants of Apulia were those who gave the name Albania to the land from which, looking East, they saw the dawning sun that slowly brought the darkness of the night towards the West, far beyond the Pillars of Hercules. This legend is awesome and full of meaning because both the Italian gazes out to Albania and the Albanian gazes out to Italy have crossed each other many times throughout the history of the two countries.

Over the first forty years of the last century, the Italian view of Albania has changed in different ways, always maintaining a strong interest: Both the surprised and, sometimes, the astonished gaze of travellers and the one of those attracted by possible trade exchanges. But also, the gaze of farmers, from southern Salento and, such as feasible settlers, attracted by the land beyond a narrow stretch of sea and they knew it was rich in plots of cultivable lands, less water supply system problems than the one of the land they were cultivating. These were all gazes filled with hopes and promises on the Land of the Dawning Sun. What about the gaze of the Italian soldiers in 1939, who docked simultaneously at all the Albanian harbour cities like Saranda, Vlorë, Durrës, Shëngjin and Bishti i Pallës? Was it the gaze of soldiers convinced of having to Italianize Albania aiming to expand the Italian Colonial Empire? All this happened over the first forty years of the last century.

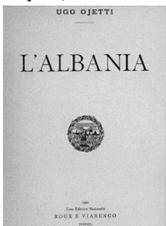
To get into the topic, I would like to begin with an acute reflection of an Italian writer who was also an art critic, journalist, and specialist of aphorisms. The reflection quoted below dates back to 1991 and it is characterised by a feeling of great sorrow and a sense of identification with the fate of the Albanian people, at the time, under the Ottoman Empire. The reflection contains also the primordial unconcealed fear of the possibility of being unable to defend the Salento peninsula, and so Italy itself, from an enemy attack coming from the East:

“It seems to me as if a period is about to end... Those who have not seen the Vlorë’s gulf, cannot comprehend the surge that pervades each Italian every time they think of it in enemy’s hands, even for a single day. Beyond this stretch of sea, only forty miles wide, our shore is visible to the naked eye during clear mornings with the area of “Punta del Sapone” and “Punta della Contessa”, low, defenceless, rather indefensible up above the little hills that from Zollino and from Lecce descend towards Brindisi”¹

Ugo Ojetti, a correspondent of the Italian newspaper “Corriere della Sera”, went to Albania in the late spring of 1901. The impressions that moved his gaze, his curiosity and his astonishment for places and landscapes of great splendor, as well as the great dignity of a proud community, were collected in a work published in 1902, considered one of the most beautiful Italian books concerning Albania. Here there are some significant excerpts for reading full of images and insights, veiled with a slight vein of irony. From this descriptive reading, I have deliberately omitted the many historical quotations, which fill - perhaps even too much – the lines of this beautiful book of Ugo Ojetti.²

“I disembarked one night in Shëngjin, a stopover on the way to Shkodër. By the falling lights on the opposite side of the shore, the ashy rocks of the bare steep mountain on the sea became pink. And, after dinner, while the sun went down, we went riding, leaving from Lezhë, and we followed the Drin river, wide as the Po, which flows between the tree-filled shores, black in the night without the moon with some trembling star reflections – in a fluorescent forest of diamonds. At the head of the group the Italian cavàs, then me, and then a Franciscan monk, named Umile, who I met in Saranda, lost in a glowing forest. At the head of the group the Italian cavàs, then me, then a Franciscan monk named Umile, who I met in Saranda, lost and scared, without any

¹ Ojetti, U. *L'Albania*, Publishing House “Nazionale”, pg 93-94, Turin, 1902



² Those who wish to read the complete work can easily find the book on the ASA website - *Archivio Studi Adriatici* - (The Archive of Adriatic Studies), by searching *Il Viaggio di Ugo Ojetti in Terra Albanese*.

passport, coming from Assisi and heading to the monastery of Rubik, north of Shkodër. Speaking no other language than the Perugian dialect, with one hundred lire for the whole journey and the blessing of Francis of Assisi, with a bearer with a loaded down a horse and finally the Austrian and the French postmen armed as if we were to clean up the whole world of men. – Do we leave without a guard to escort us, Shtjefen? – I ask my cavàs – It is more prudent for your Lordship – answer the cavàs, upright in the saddle, one of the strapping descendants of Scanderbeg, who, when he saw Jacopo di Niccolò Piccinino, went towards him, grabbing him under his arms, picking him and bringing him to his face to friendly kiss him... The thirteen hours everlasting ride, almost always along the river, with a hut every three hours and a càn every five hours, proceeds, at the beginning, with continuous mysterious stops. At the first càn, during the first cup of coffee, around a smoky fire lit to expel mosquitoes, I demand an explanation. It is very easy. The inhabitants of the Mirditë district, whom the Turkish Government owed some credits of men and money to, have closed, for the moment, the street between Shkodër and Prizren, and they have also stopped the Turkish guards a few nights ago, promising to stop them also this night. They are hungry but also a prudent tribe and they dare not to make such jokes to the postman of European power. So, in the darkness of the night and along the unsafe street, the eight inhabitants of Sovari, who escort the Turkish postmen, make sure not to distance themselves too much from us, although we try, at all costs, to distance ourselves from them. If our Christian brothers need us, we must go with them, the good monk Umile from Petignano observed on his old white horse. But the cavàs do not feel such kind of fraternity so they stop until the soldiers' footsteps end, due to the gloomy distance, in the rumble of the great river. Then we amble among poplars, oaks, alders, and behind me the monk Umile, a lay brother and a pharmacist, complains because the Turks at the customs have seized some of his books like the "Filotea", "Massime Eterne", the "universal Pharmacopoeia" and his prescription pad. He tells me, with his voice broken by tears, about the faraway Assisi and about San Damiano among the olive trees and about the Eremo delle Carceri among the holm oaks, and about Porziuncola where Francis of Assisi died ... And it is a long night on the black river, on the dark wide valley; and the sun never rises. We catch sight of the distant first minaret of Shkodër only when it appears from the mountains, on the foggy lake, on the Drin and Buna river, the first ray of sunshine" ³

In this text, Ugo Ojetti carefully describes the fields cultivated by Albanian farmers, rich in plants, olive trees, vines, and fruit trees. He also goes into a detailed description of the traditional clothes, which travellers from all over the world, considered to be the most beautiful among the Balkans.

"Curated and clean tobacco fields, free from every single wild grass, with all the plants protected and cleansed of the corroded leaves day by day, cornfields, rice fields, gardens of onion, cantaloupes, beans, tomatoes, incipient vines, olive trees, burdened orchards, big and airy houses, and farmers within peaceful Catholic and Muslim villages, some of them dressed in pure white trousers and black doublet, others with red tunic and tight

³ Ojetti, U. *L'Albania*, Publishing House "Nazionale", pg 97-100, Turin, 1902

*trousers made of a heavy white cloth decorated with black parts, others dressed in a white kilt and a turquoise vest, others in a red fez, others in a white fez, creating a mix of multicolour and manifold clothes, which, for those who reside here, define exactly the village and the religion to which they belong. Every farmer, both if he tills or if he looks after his four sheep, has his own beautiful bandolier rifle and the shining cartridge belt*⁴

In addition, the description of his experience in an Albanian bazaar, where it is possible to find, sell or to buy everything. Both, from mountains and plains, people arrive from far away, even walking day after day.

*“This crowd of men and women dressed for a celebration, sparkling with gold and silver, fearful or arrogant, sometimes with a shaved head with only one lock on the nape and sometimes long-haired people like barbarians, black braids or white locks of hair, buyers or sellers, rulers or ruled, friends or enemies to the death. They meet, they greet each other putting their hands on the friend’s shoulder and passing over his face from right to left, speaking quietly for five minutes in their monosyllabic and prehistoric language, then they go saying tee “tungjatjeta” which means “hope you can have a long life”, without a too loud exclamation or an improper gesture.....”*⁵

Ugo Ojetti also tells the reader about the blood feud in a peculiar way, observing deeply, the pride in young women’s eyes encountered along the way, disfigured by a red scar replacing their noses:

“One of the most common causes of revenge – Albanian women are very beautiful and they have black eyes, white skin, and red lips – is adultery. The husband, who avenges “him or her”, incurs a double blood debt with his and her family. To avoid the insufferable bore of at least one of these two debts, he has to be patient – less rare than in the west – and collect the proof of his disgrace, take them to the bride’s father or brothers, convince them and receive from their hands a cartridge for his rifle.

*Only then, can he freely kill his wife because he will do it with the cartridge received by her family. For the mere suspicion of adultery, the husband can himself cut his wife’s nose. It is not rare to meet those strong, young and statuesque women, who disfigured with the red flat scar on their faces, look you in the eyes, with such pride for their sin of love and for their husband, who is looked at with admiration rather than disdain of your western skepticism”*⁶

A Railway Line and an Italian Sailing Project on the Shkodër Lake

Arturo Galanti (the member of the Central Council of the Dante Alighieri Society) devoted himself to the circulation of the Italian book, *“L’Albania, nei suoi rapporti con la storia e con la civiltà d’Italia”* among our community abroad, based on a text

⁴ Ojetti, U. *L’Albania*, Publishing House “Nazionale”, pg 112, Turin, 1902

⁵ Ojetti, U. *L’Albania*, Publishing House “Nazionale”, pg 118, Turin, 1902

⁶ Ojetti, U. *L’Albania*, Publishing House “Nazionale”, pg 123-124, Turin, 1902

written by him in 1892, *The Italian language and culture outside the Reign*. The Dante Alighieri Society was founded in Rome in 1889 and the first article of its Statute aims at *safeguarding and spreading the Italian language and culture outside the Reign*. Is this an educational project? Not only, because the Dante Alighieri Society was also deeply motivated to spread the “*native culture*” during a phase of greatly increased migratory flow from the peninsula to other countries, protecting a culture which was risking to be threatened by a “*denationalization*” abroad both for the Italian emigrants and above all for their children.

In the text about Albania (Dante Alighieri Publishing House), written in 1901 at the same time of the one written by Ugo Ojetti, Arturo Galanti, in the VII chapter, analyses the economic conditions of Albania, focusing on the increase of trade between Italy and Albania through a series of considerations and proposals:

“Currently, Italy ranks fourth among the European countries which trade with Albania. I will add here some of the latest news, collected by me when the book was already sent for print, from which it emerges how the commercial relationships between Italy and Albania could develop in a short time and have an importance which they should have but do not have at present time. The Apulia Society, adhering to a vote expressed by The Geographical Congress in Milan, is working on a sailing project on the Shkodër, a lake in Montenegro, regarding the transport of goods, using steamboats, which go upstream from Shëngjin, via Obot to Shkodër and from there they will reach other areas of the lake, like Glavnitza, Vir and Rjeca, which is not actually located on the lake, but is connected by a wide stretch of water. The maritime service between Italy and Epirus now functions every two weeks (Brindisi, Sarandë, Corfuz, Prevezë, Salahora) but will function weekly.

The Italian Commercial Agency, founded in Janina last year, proceeds quite well. A recent article written by Charles Loiseau, appeared in the Revue de Paris (on May the 1st 1901), speaks in favor of a railway project, which I have already mentioned, and which should connect Shkodër and Shëngjin with the Serbian railways.

This project, useful to Montenegro, without any doubts, would undeniably be useful also for Albania, which, as we already know, doesn't have railways that connect the inland with the coast. This railway would start from Niš and reach Prishtinë and Pejë, entering Montenegro and passing through Andrievitsa and Podgoritsa and would end at Shkodër, where it forks, one towards Tivar -Bar (Montenegro) and the other towards Shëngjin (Albania), constitute a path to the sea. However, I think that Albania needs, also for its commercial relationship with Italy, a railway line, that going in the heart of

*the Albanian territory would lead to the sea at Durrës and Vlorë. Anyway, one project does not exclude the other. They could all be carried out, but it is not so likely nowadays*⁷

Naturally, given the obvious mission of the Dante Alighieri Society, the text of Arturo Galanti, could not omit to mention the scarce number of Italian schools in Albania, despite the knowledge of the Italian language among the Albanian people:

*“Italy, which has to maintain both ancient cultural roots and the spread of the Italian language, as well as to renew the commercial and neighborhood relations between the two opposite shores of the Adriatic Sea, manages only one technical –commercial school, two elementary schools (one male and one female) and a garden for children at Shkodër. Despite this, the Italian language is the best known foreign language, especially in the northern part of the country, where many people speak Italian. Many Italian words entered the Shkodër dialect during the Venetian domination: but this does not exclude the fact, that many inhabitants of the Albanian mountainous area ignore the name and even the existence of Italy”*⁸

Tourist Gazes over Albania through the Watercolor of Luigi Piffero and Fadil Pellumbi

Even if the first cameras started improving from 1936 (ICAF was founded in Milan in 1937 and then it became the Bencini Company, which offers well-made cameras), in 1940 the artistic illustrated postcard was still very popular, for the possibility it provided of having an immediate image of the most beautiful glimpse of the place from which it was sent.

During the years of which we are speaking about, mailing was the most common way to communicate and the postcard was also the cheapest way to do it, due to the low cost of the stamp (a letter guaranteed privacy but was more expensive). The tourist postcard aims at making the addressee aware of the beauties of the country being visited and, consequently, at encouraging tourism.

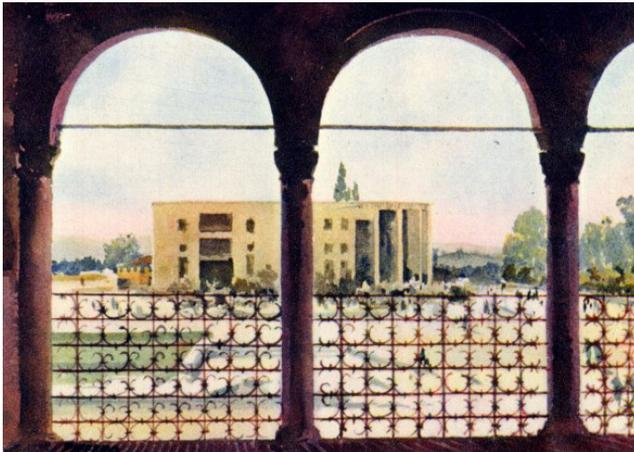
⁷ Galanti, A., *L'Albania, nei suoi rapporti con la storia e con la civiltà d'Italia*, Publishing House “Dante Alighieri”, pg 237-238, 1901



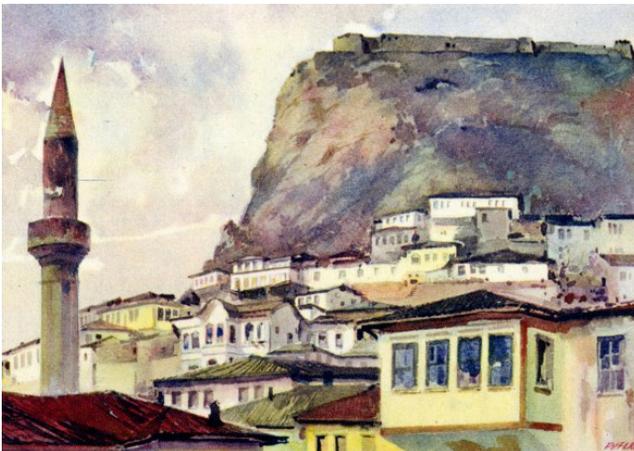
⁸ Galanti, A., *L'Albania, nei suoi rapporti con la storia e con la civiltà d'Italia*, Publishing House “Dante Alighieri”, pg 59, 1901



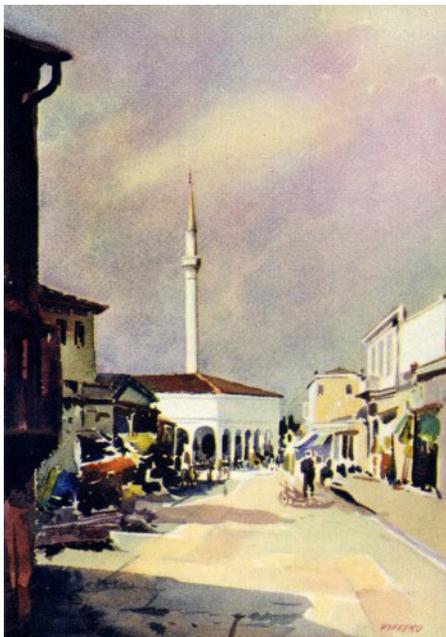
Picture 1: Albania, Shkoder, Post Card by Luigi Piffero and Fadil Pellumbi, 1940



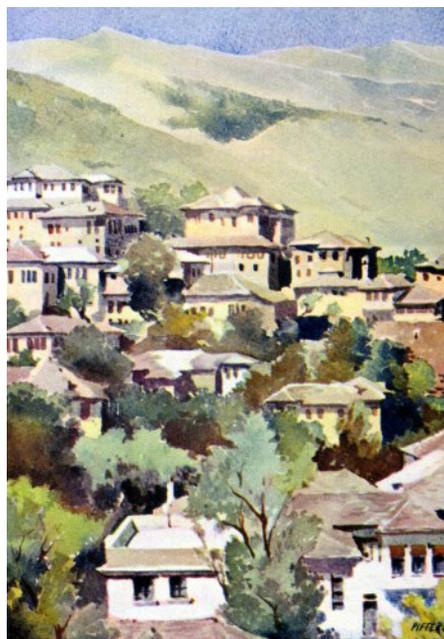
Picture 2: Albania, Tirana, Post Card by Luigi Piffero and Fadil Pellumbi, 1940



Picture 3: Albania, Berat, Post Card by Luigi Piffero and Fadil Pellumbi, 1940



Picture 4: Albania, Vlorë, Post Card by Luigi Piffero and Fadil Pellumbi, 1940



Picture 5: Albania, Gjirokastra, Post Card by Luigi Piffero and Fadil Pellumbi, 1940

Among the initiatives of the Albanian Tourist Board, during the period of the Italian officials' management after the occupation in 1939, the administrators decided to reawaken a stronger interest in visiting Albania as a tourist destination, through

the elaboration of the watercolors of two artists: Luigi Piffero (from Italy) had the assignment to paint Albanian landscapes, and Fadil Pellumbi (from Tirana) had the assignment to paint Albanian customs. The paintings were printed as illustrated postcards and distributed in 1940. In the same period, between 1939 and 1943, a series of restorations of old hotels started in Albania, a new catering institute was launched and The Albanian Tourist and Catering Board was founded. The latter was founded thanks to the active partnership of the Italian Government (1940) between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Italian Popular Culture, in agreement with the Albanian Government.

And it is at this point that, the gaze towards Albania, concerning the last century, ceases, omitting all the events connected to World War II which would require a separate article and which anyway have been addressed by historians on several occasions.

Now, we would like to pay attention to the first two decades of the new millennium, years during which fear and hope overlapped and continue to overlap in an increasingly frenetic way. Achievements that seemed to be consolidated but instead are crumbling, new ways of communication that go beyond the time required for knowledge and actions to settle ... so a world that continually changes and constantly touches extreme antipodes between hopes and fears.

Looking to the East or to the West, Beyond the Adriatic Sea, Could Also Mean Looking to the Future

There are many young Italian people who moved to the other side of the Adriatic Sea and among them also the children of those migrants arrived in Italy in the Nineties, escaping from a country, Albania, which could not offer anything for its people's future. The migrants, arrived to Italy on big overloaded boats, became the second foreign community present in the country, after the migrants coming from Morocco.

According to the latest data provided by the "Report on the Albanian Community in Italy 2008" of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Albanian Community seems to be stabilized both for the number of people and the type of residency permit (long-term). More than half of the students with Albanian parents, attending Italian schools, are born in Italy. Children and young adults, attending Italian schools, regardless of their familiar origin, learn how to live in the world within their classrooms, experiencing a multicultural environment, open to an always bigger, more interdependent and more interconnected world, focusing on the continuous transformation of the school system, where the presence of foreign students represent an invaluable resource and an opportunity for change, learning how to live together and discovering a new citizenship.

In this scenario, Albania is the first country of origin of the non-EU students: there are 114.240 Albanian students enrolled in the academic year 2017/2018, which corresponds to 17,5% of the non-EU school population as a whole.

Reading a recent article “We are the Italians from Albania” by Leonard Berberi, published in the Italian newspaper “*Corriere della Sera*”, I was impressed by a testimony of a young thirty-year-old Italian father, who works as a computer technician in Tirana in a call center managed by Albanian people but owned by Italian companies. The phrase that moved me, reported by the journalist, is the following: “Do you know what was the first word of my son? “*Babi*”, it means father in Albanian language. Maybe it is a sign, how can I move to Italy if my son was born and raised here?”

According to the other testimonies reported in the article, the reasons for leaving Italy to work in Albania are emblematic, and I cite only one of those; the one of a young man coming from northern Italy, that perfectly explains the difference between our country and Albania:

“Albania is a country with an incredible growth margin, instead Lombardy is in decline. In the area around Lecco, the companies that have characterised my childhood, now have closed one after the other and I have lost my points of reference. Here, if you are willing to work, you will always find a job..... “

The stories collected by Leonard Berberi are telling us another story, different from the one known by the Albanian people who were looking for a future, which the Albania of the Nineties of the last century, could not offer them and so they came to Italy on overloaded and crumbling boats. And while this story is happening under our very eyes, the data collected by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, show us children and young adults who are self-educated, thanks to their capability of living together and the discovery of new citizenship. So, reality can and must change, evolving and modifying itself for the better; this is what every civilized, inclusive and the optimistic person hopes for.

The narrow stretch of sea that separates Italy from Albania is eternal, and tells us with the words of Ugo Ojetti:

“Our home is beyond this stretch of sea, which is only forty miles wide, visible to the naked eye in the clear mornings with Punta del Sapone and Punta della Contessa, low, defenseless, rather indefensible, up above the little hills that from Zollino and from Lecce descend towards Brindisi”⁹

⁹ Ojetti, U. *L'Albania*, Publishing House “Nazionale”, pg 93-94, Turin, 1902

and given the fact that a flight from Rome to Tirana takes less time than a flight from Rome to Palermo, the gaze of two populations, who live at the opposite sides of the shore, sharing the same sea, start to cross and recognize each other, while from the “Land of the Dawning Sun”, the sun peeps out every day, to drive away the darkness of the night to the West.

Bibliography

1. Ojetti, U. *L'Albania*, Publishing House “Nazionale”, Turin, 1902
2. Galanti, A., *L'Albania, nei suoi rapporti con la storia e con la civiltà d'Italia*, Publishing House “Dante Alighieri”, 1901
3. ASA website, *Archivio Studi Adriatici - (The Archive of Adriatic Studies)*,
4. Leonard Berberi, *We are the Italians from Albania*, “*Corriere della Sera*” (Italian newspaper)
<https://www.corriere.it/reportage/esteri/2014/noi-gli-italiani-dalbania/>
5. “Report on the Albanian Community in Italy 2008” of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Italy