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Life in Albania Captured in Photographs

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

THE BRONX
IN the late 1890's, H. N. Hutchinson, a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, produced "The Living Races of Mankind," an illustrated book designed to popularize the study of ethnology. A Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, Hutchinson believed that closer acquaintance with people in and outside the British Empire would enable the empire to "maintain a lasting supremacy in trade" while at the same time turning "the half-clothed savage" into what Sy Sims would call an "educated consumer."

Though a period piece and hence full of unintended comedy, the work is surprisingly up-to-date on the subject of Albania, or so it seems from "Long Life to Your Children! A Portrait of High Albania." This is the show of black-and-white photographs by Stan Sherer on view at the Lehman College Art Gallery here, and it comes with a book of the same title, a joint effort by Mr. Sherer and Marjorie Senechal, published by the University of Massachusetts Press in Amherst.

Measuring roughly 250 miles in length and 50 miles across and running along the east coast of the Adriatic, Albania is a mountainous country, which as part of every Mediterranean civilization including that of Illyria produced at least one Roman emperor, Justinian.

When Hutchinson wrote about it, Albania had been under Turkish rule since 1482; when Mr. Sherer and Ms. Senechal paid their first visit in 1992, the country, though officially independent since 1921, had just emerged from Chinese-style Communist domination.

Impressed by the good looks and hardiness of Albanian men, Hutchinson reported approvingly that they "supply valuable recruits to the Turkish army" but chided them for failing "to develop an organized state." He might not have done so had he seen Mr. Sherer's photographs of the land, the northern part of which appears to be one vast crag after another.

Geology may be destiny, but in the case of Albania, which enters recorded history as part of ancient Illyria, it has had plenty of political help, particularly from a Communist administration, which the book



Photographs by Stan Sherer at Lehman College Art Gallery include a woman hoeing in front of a lone tree, above; Ardiana Smajlaj in the pantry in Lepushe, Albania, top right, and a bicycle repair shop in Shkoder, Albania.

"Long Life to Your Children!" says was the most repressive in Europe.

Still, if evidence of the past remains, Mr. Sherer has not documented it. There are few automobiles and trucks to be seen in his pictures, and the most advanced appliance may well be the hot plate on which an old man makes a tiny pot of Turkish coffee.

On the other hand, the people look healthy, are respectably dressed and live in circumstances that are no worse and sometimes better than those endured by ordinary Americans in the Depression. But there is no telling if this is true of the country as a whole, for the photographer focuses on rural communities with plump pigs and other prosperous farm animals but are conspicuously without dogs and cats.

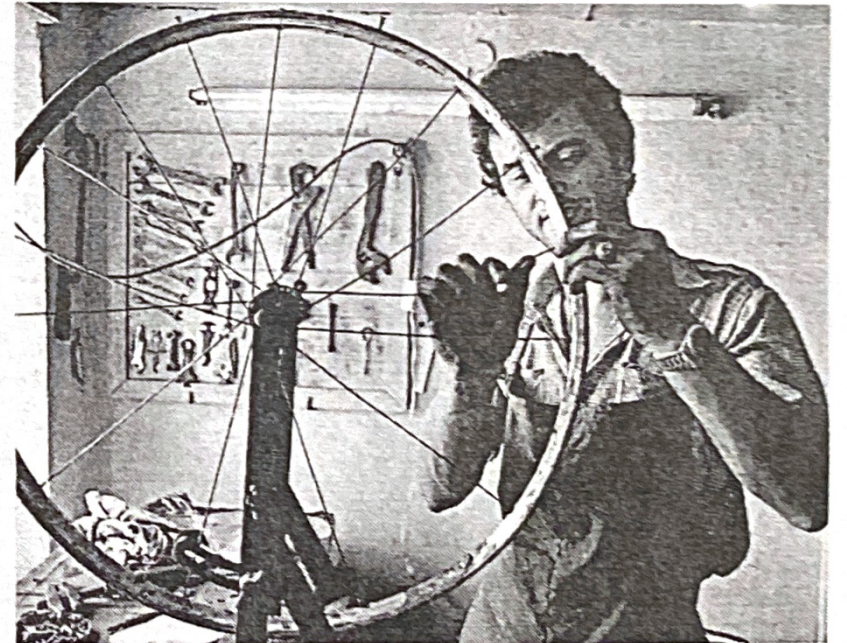
Some of the people interviewed in the book complain about present conditions, and at least one Catholic expresses animosity toward Mus-

lims, saying, "They don't have culture" and even today possess the best land in his region. He has his opposite number in a Grand Mufti who poses before a picture of Mecca crowded with pilgrims but complains only of 30- to 50-year-old parishioners who "have been educated with atheistic ideas." Unlike many news reports, this book implies that the Balkan conflict is as much religious as racial.

In Albania, life is lived according to laws that probably go back to the Bronze Age but are nonetheless named for Lek Dukagjini, the 15th-century lord who put them in writing. The canon Dukagjini includes rules for just about everything from dog control (the animal is to remain chained from dawn until sunset) to the revenge for plundering, which is plundering, and though it calls a woman "a sack, made to endure" and does not allow her to own property or choose a husband, it is not

without merit as a code of behavior and in modified form still exerts a powerful influence on etiquette.

Round skulls and large noses are so noticeable in Mr. Sherer's photographs as to suggest that the almost three million inhabitants of Albania belong to the same race. Enhancing this impression are the head scarves and elaborately curled hair (could they be wigs?) worn by many women, not to mention the homemade, one-stringed instruments played by some of the men. At the other end of the social spectrum, however, are the professionals — teachers, scientists, artists, a doctor, engineers and scientists, attired in shirts, slacks, jackets and so on. Incidentally, the handlebar mustache, which was undoubtedly introduced by the Turks and once the badge of the Balkan troublemaker, has all but disappeared. Although some photographs are intrinsically beautiful, notably one of a woman hoeing against a



backdrop of a solitary tree against misty mountains, another a view of a stunted fir gamely growing out of rocks, Mr. Sherer is plainly more interested in bringing news of the poorest and probably most isolated country in Europe than in exploiting its picturesqueness. Born in the

Bronx, the photographer has a string of solo exhibitions to his credit and during his career of three decades has covered several African countries.

The closing date is next Saturday, and the information number is (718) 960-8731.