

The Last Village in Greece: ' Nivitza,'; Psarades' and Miss Edith Durham: a note
By
James Pettifer

In *The Burden of the Balkans*, published in London in 1905, Edith Durham, the famous traveller and Balkans expert, described her visit to Lake Prespa, among many other places. Nowadays the lake straddles the borders of Albania, Greece and FYROM; in 1905 it was still in Turkey-in-Europe. Like the rest of Macedonia, the region was still recovering from the aftermath of the Ilinden Rising in 1903 and its bloody suppression by the Sultan's troops. The villages around the lake were in a desperate state, it seemed to her, and one in particular - Nivitza.

"We scrambled by a stony mountain-track to Nivitza, a wretched little fishing village on the other side of the lake. The people here had fled to the island of Grad during the insurrection, so had escaped; but the village had been robbed, their fishing tackle destroyed, they had an outbreak of smallpox, and were in great distress. It was a miserable hole of a place, but possessed a brand new church that was surprisingly fine. This had been robbed of its silver candles and altar-plate, but was otherwise intact. One day, said the people enthusiastically, that great and good man the Russian Consul had come here with some friends to shoot birds. He had stayed for a week, paid them lavishly, and has asked if they would like to have a church of their own. Here was the church. He must have been immensely rich."

Nowadays, it is impossible to find Nivitza on a Greek map. It survives as 'Nivitza' on the 1931 German atlas map of the locality, then disappears altogether on the Greek atlas of 1954, but has now reappeared on all post-1974 Greek maps as 'Psarades.' As the last village in Greece in the region, quite literally, twenty minutes from the FYROM border as the crow flies, and a hard walk through the dwarf oak forest into Albania. 'Psarades' has reappeared in the world of modern government, a stout little community of about two hundred people, still heavily dependent on fishing for cash, a very short and modest tourist season and very small scale farming. A small hotel was built three years ago to provide jobs for local women, with EU money. But there are few visitors.

On the one hand, Nivitza/Psarades has been isolated from the main currents of Balkan and European history in the last seventy years - there are no factories at all in the entire region, except for the bean canning plant a few miles away, and on the surface the wooden houses are much as they might have been in late Ottoman times, with crumbling wooden balconies, outside privies, and huge log piles ready for the severe winter. Many local traditions still survive, weddings are vast and generous to strangers, the whole village is suffused with the smell of roasting peppers in September, many dogs are nearer wolf than dog, the brown bears from the National Park come down to drink from the lake in the very early morning.

Why did Nivitza disappear? Or - has it really disappeared? The answer on one level is very simple - it was a strong communist village during the Greek Civil War. Nearly everybody who lived there, then and now, is an ethnic Slav, and it was the closest village to the hillside underground headquarters of the Democratic Army guerrilla leader Markos Vafiades. This was bombed by the RAF in the final stages of the war in 1949, so there is a small British component in the Prespa regions rich and complex history. Vafiades himself had a safe house in the middle of the village that he used for clandestine meetings, a fact the present elderly inhabitants are very proud of. Vafiades' hillside HQ is now overgrown with dense beech woods and carpets of cyclamens in spring, but is very difficult to find without local assistance.

Nivitza was renamed 'Psarades' by Athens in the aftermath of the civil war, although nobody much seems to have been told about it, even in Athens. It all but disappeared from history, with most male inhabitants leaving altogether for political exile in Hungary and Romania. Older women stayed behind to try to save the family property and land. Some old men in the vicinity who were returnees after the PASOK amnesty in 1982 still speak good Hungarian, strange vowel sounds near a Balkan lake. Nivitza/Psarades did survive, though as a Slav settlement, unlike some nearby villages, now in total abandonment and ruin on the road to remote Vronderon; or like Pili, now more or less a hundred percent Vlach, but most of these people are interlopers, Nivitizians say, who moved into houses emptied by the government forces political cleansing after 1949. most of their old Slav owners are in Skopje.

Until 1982, it was very difficult to visit Psarades, as it lay within the army controlled 'security zone' that reached as far as 'Wolfs Pass', five miles to the south. Life for thirty odd years was life under military occupation. But rebellious habits persisted. In Psarades I have met the only man who to my knowledge has ever sought political asylum in Enver Hoxha's Albania, Germanos, who was not allowed to use a rifle in his national service as he came from a politically suspect family, took a swing as the NCO one day and went on the run. He ended up in Patos, and spent two years working in the Albanian oilfields.

Many people speak Slav in private, although the school only teaches in Greek. This seems to be accepted, although strongly resented by the more culturally assertive Vlachs in Pili and elsewhere nearby. The government in Athens have remembered 'Psarades' in other ways now, although it might be said many things have been forgotten, such as basic, efficient health care, but officials have erected a small concrete monument by the lakeside to remind anyone who may have forgotten that Macedonia Greek. In the same way, the church has become Hellenised; in many visits over the years, I cannot recall anyone ever mentioning the generosity of the Russian Consul, although it happened almost within living memory. Russia, once so close, became politically very incorrect after 1949, and local tradition has been adjusted.

Nonetheless the military period in Psarades life had some practical advantages, and the end of it, and the end of Albanian isolation, takes us straight back to Edith Durham's time, to 'Nivitza.' Until 1989 there was a freefire zone across the lake, and fisherman stayed on their own patch. Nowadays the Albanians come across and steal the high quality Japanese monofilament nets used by the Greek fishermen. As Miss Durham wrote "their fishing tackle destroyed" in much the same way as the ancient Slav invaders would have destroyed the Illyrian equipment. Although some Albanians

work locally as builders and shepherds and are welcomed, many are not. Those wolfish dogs are owned for good reasons. For two or three years after the end of communism, the Greek State appeared to be incapable of even patrolling let alone defending this border. Now a special unit with a helicopter has been set up to patrol the lake.

But the real threat is natural, not political. The water level in the lake itself is falling, and there is a major long-term threat to it. Important wildlife such as the Dalmatian pelican survives under UNESCO and Audubon Society protection, but the general environment is under real pressure. There is massive water extraction on the FYROM side for the agri-business fruit plantations near Miss Durham's Resna, modern Resen. A fissure in the bed of the lake caused by an earthquake is also said to be causing problems of water loss.

But 'Nivitz'a' survives, under 'Psarades.' The lonely island of 'Grad' with its abandoned Byzantine church looks exactly as it must have done in 1904. Now it is in 'FYROM', and called 'Golemgrad,' having been given away by King Constantine of Greece as a wedding present to King Alexander of Yugoslavia in 1922. Cynics, or those with any knowledge of local history, might say, just another example of Balkan Monarchs giving away something that never belonged to them in the first place.

Post-communist, 'Nivitz'a' is coming alive all the time, the past and the old village returning, as Athens' material neglect and movements of population bring back old identities. The 'Albanians' who steal the nets are actually themselves ethnic Slavs, as almost everybody is who lives around Lake Prespa, in Greece, Albania, and FYROM. The 'Albanians' come from despised villages like Liqenasi and Lini that a friend Tirana once told me "were the dirtiest villages in Albania"

Maybe. The lake and its three nations are small and on the surface a not very important place by comparison with Sarajevo, Zagreb, or Nis. But it is perhaps as good a place to understand the failure of the Europeanist, modernist project for the Balkans as anywhere. The 'Albanians' have little time for things Tiranian, the 'Greeks' do not speak Greek by choice and many feel abandoned by Athens, the 'FYROM' citizens majority political loyalty in Resen is to VMRO, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (which in the fixed 1994 election they were not able to vote for at all), and so on. But that is another story.

Notes

- 1 See *The Burden of the Balkans* by Edith Durham Arnold, London 1905 p. 126ff
- 2 *Stielers Hand Atlas* Map 51, Gotha, 1931
- 3 I doubt if most Vlach scholars would support this local tradition. See T.J Winnifrith, in *The Vlachs*, Duckworth, London 1987.p.19 ff.
- 4 See *Blue Guide to Albania* by James Pettifer, A and C Black, London, 1996 p.216 ff.