

## **Mi Casa Es Tu Casa – The Story**

On the edge of the Alps, on the shores of the lake and between two rivers, lies the city of Shkodra, shadowed by the castle which belongs to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. In Shkodër there's this house where I, **Alma**, live, while becoming an addition to its history. And I get proud when often, I am reminded that in this house lived for 7 years, Pietro Marubi, the first photographer in Balkan, Albania AND Shkodra.

Thus, I love this house, and in 2014, I decided to share this love with the world – **Mi Casa Es Tu Casa**.

200 years earlier, the Russians would invest in the Orthodox church close by and later on would enable Pietro Marubi to live in this building. The reason was, that Pietro, being a renowned artist, painted the church dome. The plans for the building were made in a colonial style and afterwards, this building would serve as the Russian Consulate for years to come.

I was led to believe that afterwards the house belonged to an *Italian family*, but after some documents came to light, the history of the house was much more complex. And the surprising part (a good surprise mind you) was how after so many years, the spirit of the building remained the same. Let me explain.

In the first half of last century, an name came to light: Ida Melgushi. She was actually the owner of the building during that period. At the time Ida was a force to be reckoned with. A woman ahead of her time, she was a linguist (more than 3 languages spoken), a musician, an avid chess player and last but not least, a person with novel ideas about the roles of women in society, especially in a patriarchal one like Shkodra (which still continues to be, even though it's less than before). And the history of the house does not end with Ida.

Starting the year 1939, Ida sells the house to another woman, named Marie Tedeschini. Marie, the wife of a doctor, would soon resell the house back to Ida, in the year 1941.

Afterwards, Ida would give the ownership of the building to her niece, Esterina Fabiani, who was living in Shkodra with her family, which went back to Italy in 1944, after the Communist Party came to power. But Esterina made a tough decision. She decided to stay in Albania, after falling in love with a young talented medic, whom she later married and lived with, till the end of her life. But who exactly was Esterina Fabiani? *She was my mother-in-law.*

Meanwhile, the house was confiscated from the communist state and was given to the homeless in exchange of a small payment. After the year 1990, with the fall of the communist state, my mother-in-law was reinstated as the owner of the house. Me and my husband bought the house from her. All of this, while we lived and worked in Italy.

At the time I didn't know, but the world works in mysterious ways. Because now I know that me and my daughter Ani, have now become part of a list of women, each of whom left a trace in the history of the building. We had become part of the spirit of the house, a house which was and will be owned by women.

Afterwards, with the death of my husband, nothing linked me with the city and the house. It was time for change. I decided to sell the house.

Different offers came but the aim was ever the same: building a big residential building. A concrete block on top of a work of art didn't sit well with me and was a contrast to my beliefs. The in-and-outs with Italy became frequent. The offers continued. I decided – I will make a hostel out of this house. This idea was in accordance with my sometimes bohemian nature. With a lot of determination, I started planning.

In these round-trips to Italy, coincidentally I met Giorgio, while he was giving a university lecture on the environment. I followed activities of this nature and fell in love with the energy and the wisdom of this white-haired man. I trusted him with my decision to open a hostel and he became my biggest support.

Our energies resonated amazingly with each-other.

Since a lot of tenants had lived in the house for more than half a century, a lot of work was needed to restore the house to its original architectural glory. With love and courage, I and Giorgio worked hard. The hostel was opened. Giorgio now would touch his love, the virgin mountains of Albania, with his own two hands.

We started the hostel with a recycling philosophy, renting bicycles with social prices and new, enjoyable common spaces for the youth of Shkodra. Our hostel became a meeting point for youngsters with different interests, an open center to all, where different cultural events took place, like fairs, art exhibitions, recitals and modest concerts from musicians, both up-and-coming and well-known, local and foreign. The vicious cycle Shkoder-Valbona-Theth-Shkoder, soon became a commercial itinerary, a source of both pleasure and income. Giorgio decided to trek the trail between Shala river and the valley of Kir. This way, backpackers could explore other options and among others, help the development of other northern local areas. And so, mountain after mountain, Giorgio wanted to discover new trails and unexplored paths. Then one day, in one of his trips to the mountains, the car where Giorgio was, crashed down the mountain. Out of the 7 people in the car, 2 lost their lives. One of them was Giorgio.

After the death of Giorgio, I broke my links to Italy and was dedicated thoroughly to the hostel. I bought a piece of land 6 km away from the city. There, we plant corn and different vegetables, with the sole aim of providing the hostel. I go there frequently, and sometimes I also take guests with me. Not only to assure them that everything we plant and grow, is bio and without added pesticides or hormones, but also because the connection with the earth is noble.

In recent years, in our hostel, except our family dogs, you can also find one or two more, available for adoption. The young volunteers of the local animal shelter, often bring me the young puppies after vaccination, because in the different and multiple events that are organized here, a lot of young people take part, from Shkodra and abroad, and this makes for a good opportunity for their adoption.

With our work, we try to change the concept that the hostel is just a bed for sleeping, but it's also an entertainment option – a stroll at the lake, a hike to the ancient citadel of Rozafa, kayaking and not to forget, very good connections with other hostels, in and outside the country.

In this home-hostel, life continues with fulfillment.

### **Welcome at 'Mi Casa Es Tu Casa'!**

Sharing this story with your family and friends, you are helping the hostel to survive during this pandemic of COVID-19, and to stop gentrification by preserving the house with its original characteristics.

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