

Obituary: Berit Backer

Antonia Young, Hamilton College

The news of Berit's tragic death early in 1993, came as a terrible shock, not only to the Kosovar community in Oslo with whom Berit had worked so closely for many years, but also to the international community of anthropologists and her far ranging friends. She is survived by her adopted Kosovar daughter, and her mother.

Berit first became interested in Albania for its political stance. Disregarding any criticisms she may have had for this aspect, her professional interest in the people of Albania developed over many years. She learnt to speak the language fluently (as we may hear in her documentary film "The Albanians of Rrogam", 1991), and spent several months in Albania at a time when few outsiders were welcome there. In the 1980's when it was impossible to obtain government permission, as a foreigner, to carry out anthropological fieldwork in Albania, Berit chose a small all-Albanian village in neighboring Kosova in which to spend a year looking at Albanian kinship systems. Her name, in that village, is still the password to several hundred homes. Her unpublished thesis from this time is an important document in a fast-changing world.

On my first visit to Albania, I had the good fortune to have for my guide, the extraordinarily principled man who was the film team manager working with Berit in 1991. Benefiting neither from the Communist government of the past era, nor from the hopes in the new government, Eduard Kurtezi now works for a Norwegian shipping company - this is thanks to Berit's contacts.

In Albania, Berit's achievements were celebrated in a TV film documentary shortly after her death, in which many who knew her were able to voice their appreciation of her contributions.

As a friend and colleague of Berit during two years in Oslo in the early 1980's, I have found myself in a curious position. It was she who set me on a research path I have pursued for a decade now, during which time, at intervals I made concerted efforts to renew contact with her. On learning of her death, my search has not ended, I wanted to give her the tribute she deserved, but I feel that I am not fulfilling that aim here and will therefore invite other tributes from anyone able to give them (kindly direct these to me c/o Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY 13346).