

## REMEMBERING PROFESSOR PAUL HENRI STAHL

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### ABSTRACT

The article evokes the personality of Professor Paul H. Stahl and the atmosphere of his classes at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris in the early 1990s, through the lens of the author's personal experience.

**Keywords:** Paul H. Stahl, South-Eastern European Ethnology, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS).

I met Professor Paul Henri Stahl at a defining moment of my life, in September 1991, when I went to France to pursue my Master studies (in French, *Diplôme d'Études Approfondies – DEA*) in Ethnology/Anthropology, on a French Government scholarship. An unexpected, but rather fortunate decision of the scholarship committee led me to École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, where Professor Stahl was assigned as my supervisor, or *Directeur d'Études*. Coming out of Albania in the early days of post-communist era and being only at my second trip abroad, I knew very little at the time about EHESS and Professor Stahl and the horizons they would open to me. As I entered his office at the *Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale*, 52 rue du Cardinal Lemoine, with curiosity, timidity and unease, a touch of the world I grew up in welcomed me. Surrounded by books, the Professor greeted me smiling and serene. He offered me a chair close to him and immediately started to question me about my family name and origins. Not before long, I realised he knew more about my country than I did, and that through his knowledge, he had created for me a piece of home away from home. Little did I know back then, of the key role my *Directeur d'Études* would have in shaping my educational and professional leap into the future, while steadily laying the bricks of my academic and intellectual foundation.

Professor Stahl was a researcher of complex systems, which he observed with the loupe of an ethnographer. His courses of *Ethnologie de l'Europe du Sud-Est*

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and *Ethnologie des sociétés paysannes* helped me adopt a very different perspective on the realities of my origin and opened up windows to a world which looked distant and familiar at the same time. The foundational concept of *la maisnie*, as he crafted it, not only was the primary cell in the structure of societies, but also the entry point to understand how they developed and the dynamics of their evolution. Equally important, it established an element of comparison between them, transcending singularities, and implying a message of openness and unity through diversity. Having grown up in a country closed to the outside world, and nourished in the spirit of its particularity, attending Professor Stahl's classes equalled tearing down the walls of my initial worldview. His erudite knowledge of the Balkans and Eastern Europe made me realise the limitations of my world and provided a system and tools to my desire to explore.

Surrounded by Greek, Romanian, Serbian, Italian, and French students, the day-by-day at the EHESS was an experience of great consequence for me. My colleagues profoundly marked my understandings and expanded my horizons with their life stories, their knowledge and their friendship. Zoe, Philippou, George, Christina, Carmen, and Ana were an important part of my broader education in Paris. Philippou's dance group was an excellent immersion in a cultural pool similar to the one I grew up in; conversations with Zoe, George and Christina further pushed my intellectual boundaries. It was not a coincidence that we all were brought together by Professor Stahl, who taught and guided us.

The topic of my DEA thesis (*Le rituel de la mort parmi les habitants de la région du Dukagjin, en Albanie du Nord*) and the preparatory process were closely steered by Professor Stahl. His advice to focus on a death ritual performed by men in the Catholic communities of Northern Albania, heavily suppressed during the communist era, opened up an unfamiliar path to me. The literature and the field work proved to be quite revelatory in understanding my own country and its place in the wider Balkan space. Equally unforgettable were his tips on how to use the participant observation method and what to look for in my interviews. One day, over coffee somewhere in Paris, he explained patiently how to make the most of my new camera, which I had just bought on his advice, and the kind of lenses that would increase the quality of my photos. I went to the field with many questions to explore and a list of names from his personal network, in my country.

Shortly after my graduation, I came to understand that I had been living in a comfortable bubble during the DEA year. "We always have problems with you Albanians!" the contact person from the fellowship services told me, the moment I sat in front of her. My plans to continue the Doctorate were shattered by unrelated events back home. The new "democratic" government, which had come to power in March 1992, in a gesture reminiscent of the past, had asked the French government to discontinue the fellowships of all then Albanian students, and to replace them with other candidates, selected by the new political establishment. Few people in my entourage those days understood the peculiarities of post-communist transition like Professor Stahl. His support for a grant from the

EHESS ensured that I pursued another year of my Doctorate studies, which I had to complement, while working part time. Then the politics hit again, this time from inside of France: the arrival of Charles Pasqua as Minister of Interior Affairs made it very difficult for foreign students to find additional jobs. With no means to sustain myself financially, I had to leave France.

My studies and work took me to the USA, but despite the distance, Professor Stahl continued to play a key role in my choices, advising me on the steps to follow and sharing news from my *alma mater*. The academic foundations that he and EHESS laid were a solid ground for my further studies in New York, whilst the theoretical framework, research methods and fieldwork were invaluable well beyond the academia. Later on, as I decided to pursue a different professional path, working for the United Nations in post-conflict countries of Southeast Asia, the Balkans, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, I found my studies particularly useful to understand the local societies and their internal dynamics. Often, I caught myself using the ethnographer's loupe of Professor Stahl to explore the components of *la maisnie*, how birth, marriage and death regulate social relations, what shapes conflict and potential courses a society might take. This kept me grounded and humble, qualities that I always valued in Professor Stahl.

In retrospect, as I look back to the fateful year of 1991 when I left Albania to continue my studies in France, there could not have been a better place to study than EHESS, like it could not have been a better *Directeur d'études* than Professor Stahl. As the decision was not mine to boast about, I always appreciate the fortuity of that moment. At the meeting point between a post-communist Eastern Europe and the West, EHESS was a liminality space and Professor Stahl a honourable guide who enabled the rite of passage for those who aspired to make the transition. And he did it with wisdom, humility and a smile, true to his conviction that societies always find ways to get along.

