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MY RETURN TO ALBANIA
by Gjon Sinishta

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Walking the paths of my childhood
I became lost in darkened alleys
The night was fearful and long.
Lord, lead me to morning brightness;
Let me cross each street of my town.

Lead me, Lord, on my journey
Because I am so far from home.
I have travelled so long, so many decades,
I want to return. Lead me
To the wounded homeland where my heart lies.

Show me Albania once more lit up by dawn
Blessed at last, after so many dark nights.
For I will not ask you anything more;
Only lead me as I walk,
Because I must go back home!

Uproot the spirits of evil from the soil,
Wipe away the filth and the symbols of hate
Let Albanians cleave to good will forever.
Lead me, Lord, step after step
Just us together, on Albanian soil.
In the streets of my Shkodra, we will not be alone!

Translated by
Paloke Plaku and Stephen Schwartz

The Road to Shkodër

In the summer of 1993, I had the great pleasure--and the sobering experience--of visiting Albania after forty-six years in exile. It was a homecoming that I had prayed and hoped for through the years. I never expected to return to a land so utterly destroyed. There remains much to be done. The roads in Albania may be open now, but they need to be paved. There may be freedom to enter and leave the country--but true freedom can only come when the people of Albania live with dignity.
My companion on this journey was Fr. Michael Walsh, a Catholic television producer in San Francisco. We met an old Albanian professor one day, who summed up the bitter reality of this journey. In our conversation, Fr. Walsh remarked that in Central America, the poverty is just as severe as in Albania. However in Central America, the people still sing, and music fills the air. The old man responded:

"Music and song stopped in our throats in 1944 when the Communist took over. After that, in our stomach we had a big scared rabbit, thanks to the Communist Party and the Sigurimi (Secret Service). Whenever we wanted to complain or cry out our real beliefs, the rabbit silenced us. After we pulled down the statue of Enver Hoxha, the rabbit turned into a dog, and is now barking all the time."

Early in my trip, on September 15, 1992, I visited the Jesuit Father's Sacred Heart National Shrine in Tiranë. The last time I had seen the church was in May 1946. I served Mass there for Fr. Pjetër Meshkalla, S.J. During the intervening years, the Church was converted to a Concert Hall and Cinema. Fr. Meshkalla was sent to prisons and labor camps, where he died a martyr for the faith. It was a typical example of encounters on our journey. We often stopped at places that were now connected to their rich past only by memories. It was a heart-rending stop on the road to Shkodër, the country's Catholic center.

We stopped at Lezha, the sight of a centuries-old Franciscan church and monastery. Evidence exists that this is the place where St. Francis stopped on his way back from the Holy Land and established his first community. If circumstances were different, this would be an international pilgrimage place that would draw many pilgrims to Albania. As it is, the place was nearly destroyed by Communists in the late 1960s. It is only now being restored, by the generosity of the Franciscan Order in Italy and elsewhere.

This monastery and Church reminded me that all too often, the Catholics in Albania have led two lives, one beaten into submission by an atheistic government, the other holding fast to the faith in a losing battle against all odds. Just as they did during the Turkish era, Catholics in Albania assumed two names during the Communist years. At home, their Christian names--Peter, Matthew, Mary--were used. Outside the home, they used 'public' names accepted to the authorities.

The dictator Hoxha issued a decree that his framed picture be displayed in every household. Reverence to the saints on their feast days was punished. Violators were 're-educated.' All the same, in some homes, families would slip a print of their patron behind Hoxha's picture--St. Francis, St. Anthony, Our Lady of Shkodër--and display that picture on their saint's day.

The old professor told me that the sacrament of baptism was one of the few remaining remnants of the faith for many during the persecution. Special lay ministers, like those developed by Archbishop Pal Engjulli under the Turks in the 15th century, administered the
sacrament of baptism because the priests were mostly in jail. The children were taught the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Sign of the Cross. Marriages were blessed. Prayers for the deceased were recited. The help of the saints was sought. But the faith, like the monastery and other churches, bore a scant resemblance to what it once was. The church struggled to survive amidst the oppression of the communist system.

I remembered the road to Shkodër as it once was—with the streets decorated for the saints’ feasts. I remembered the processions, filled with song and joy, as people cheered the saints in the streets. I remembered the liturgical hymns we would sing and how even some of the Muslims learned the Latin responses so that they could join in. There was no more song on the road to Shkodër.

These memories came to me at Lezha. They were the sort of thoughts that kept me going for so long, strengthened me in the midst of my work. They formed me into a man and sustained my youth as the years passed. But Albania is no longer what I remembered it to be. It made me feel as if a part of myself had been stolen away.

As we approached Shkodër, we stopped outside the town at the site of the shrine of Our Lady of Shkodër, patroness of Albania. It was razed to the ground. In 1968 on this spot, Enver Hoxha declared that "Our party first cut off the Catholic Church’s arm—and now we have cut off her head!" He made those remarks at the holiest shrine of Albanian Catholics, the place where Skanderbeg himself once prayed for victory over the Turks. How foolish and short lived his pride turned out to be!

Hoxha’s legacy of destruction remains. As we entered Shkodër, the extent of the destruction began to sink in. Churches and convents have been virtually eliminated. In their place, secular schools and other buildings stand. The beautiful Jesuit campus with its classrooms, chapels, sports fields and courts, its gardens and walkways were gone. Destroyed. Only the Pontifical Seminary building is left, dilapidated, and used as a night school.

We stopped at the dormitory where we were packed like sardines and forced to stay the night the Communists rounded us up at the seminary. They packed us into the building so that we had to lay on the floor and sleep as best we could. Then, they executed our superiors and took us to see the bodies. I looked once again in those windows and remembered that night in 1946 when I lay on the concrete floor and made my besa—my solemn promise to God that I would tell others about the suffering and persecution. And I remembered being led to freedom from here, by a long road that led from Shkodër through the labor camps, through communist Yugoslavia, to Europe and then to Michigan and California.

My cousins and friends who remained behind told me that Hoxha was obsessed with destroying the Catholic Church and Faith. He particularly hated the Jesuits. He set about destroying them, obliterating every vestige of them. I, with many others, have been similarly obsessed with preserving the memories that Hoxha was destroying. On behalf of those Jesuit
and Franciscan teachers, the diocesan clergy who taught here and then were left in a pool of
blood, I wanted to preserve what Hoxha was destroying. Now, here I was, amidst the ruin
he left, in a place that is alive only in our memories now, waiting to be rebuilt.

Now, along the road to Shkodër, and in the areas surrounding Tirana, fields are strewn
with concrete mushroom bunkers. The huge unused defense systems are like monuments to
Hoxha's paranoia, the inevitable result of his mistrust of divinity and humanity. But in
Tirane and Shkodër I had the great honor, joy, and privilege of meeting those whose faith
stood like true bulwarks against Hoxha in the path of his destruction. Priests such as Mikel
Koliqi, Simon Jubani, Nikolle Mazreku, Luigj Kqira, Zef Simoni, Ndrek Kiroqi, Gjergj
Vata, S.J., Anton Luli, S.J., the Franciscans Aleks Baqli, Zef Plumbi. The Jesuits were my
teachers. Each of them experienced Hoxha's hate firsthand, and withstood it. On average,
each spent some 26 years in prison. The stories they told me were horrific but were also a
beautiful testimony to the strength of their faith under persecution.

I particularly appreciated meeting Marta and Injac Kabashi. These two were a
tremendous witness to the faith of the laity amidst the extremes of what would seem
insurmountable persecution. They were the ones who offered the rooms and protection of
their homes to Fr. Pjetër Meshkalla, S.J., Fr. Lazër Jubani and other priests who offered Mass
and the sacraments there. These and many others like them were the lay people who bravely
cared for their priests.

The road to Shkodër was long because Albania has spent much time on the road leading
away from its glorious past. It will be traversed, though, with prayer and hard work.
Ultimately, we have more than our memories to sustain us. Jesus Christ himself, the strength
and power of the Church, has showed us the way and promised to accompany us as we travel
it. As Pope John Paul II so often says when he speaks of Albania, it is through his suffering
that Christ reached the triumph of resurrection. So will it be with Albania.

I cannot over-emphasize the message of reconciliation. Many great men agree.
Forgiveness is the only viable option for Albanians. Osman Kazazi, the president of the
Association of Former Political Prisoners, a Muslim veteran of 40 years in prison, along with
the president of Parliament, Pjetër Arbnori and Father Simon Jubani, who led the resistance
movement several years ago, have learned from hard experience what we only know by faith.
These men who have suffered so much see this so clearly, and we should see it more clearly
still. We have suffered with Jesus. If we are to triumph with him, we must forgive with him.

This road, the road of reconciliation, may be the hardest of all. I am reminded of the
many letters I have received from men and women whose lives have been wrecked by the
Communist persecution. People whose families have been literally destroyed tell me that it
is easy to write from so far away about forgiveness. One woman wrote that, "It is easy to say
Jesus pardons, but I am not Jesus." But what choice do we have? We can either add
destruction to destruction, or we can rebuild. We can extend the love that we have for the brothers and sisters who were taken from us, or we can extend the hate of those who killed them. We can salvage what is left of our homeland or finish Hoxha's job by destroying for him what he did not already destroy.

The answer, I think, is clear.

But the road back to Shkodër was a sad one, all the same. As the plane left Albania, I felt inside me my childhood memories were gone forever. Hoxha and his armies had rooted them out. I was distraught and disillusioned as Fr. Walsh and I returned to Rome, dejected and depressed.

Then, as we were unwinding during our first evening back in Rome, a messenger came for us. He said that Fr. Walsh and I were invited to join Pope John Paul II at Castel Gandolfo the following morning for Mass in his private chapel. My heart immediately began to revive. Mass was at 7:00 in the morning, and so it was doubtful that we could find a taxi at that time. The messenger said he could provide us with a ride. Neither of us could sleep that night, in excited anticipation of the next morning's event.

On September 24th, Fr. Walsh concelebrated Mass at Castel Gandolfo with the Holy Father and six other priests. Following the Mass, we were received by the Holy Father one at a time. It was a grace-filled moment for me, and it made up for the pain I felt in Albania. His words were encouraging and helpful, and the aura that surrounds this holy Pope is unforgettable.

I told him that after 46 years I finally got to visit my home country, and I was distressed by the suffering and pain I met there. But I said, "for the past 30 years I have been working from America for religious freedom. I think soon the people will come out from this period of darkness."

The Holy Father responded, "God's work never ends. We should be grateful for the peaceful way the change came to Albania. It was God's grace and God's promise. We should continue to implore the help of Our Lady of Shkodër who has kept Albanian Catholics faithful throughout the centuries."

He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "There is much to be done." As a gift, we have given him copies of the Albanian Catholic Bulletin. Perusing the books, the Holy Father remarked:

"Your publications and the work of your newly-established institute [the Daniel Dajani Institute] will certainly be of help at this particular time for the Church in Albania. I will pray for you and for your institute and all who are involved with it, so that you may work again in another kind of atmosphere--an atmosphere of peace for the benefit of the Albanian Catholics and all Albanian people."
I told him that "the Albanian people love you dearly. You were the only person to publicly defend their religious and human rights." I asked him when he would visit Albania and he answered "soon." His staff decides such things, he said, but he reiterated that he "loves Albania and Albanian Catholics, and that he wanted to visit soon."

After the depressing atmosphere of Albania, our visit with the Holy Father was like a breath of fresh air. It is like the experience of losing one's breath and then being given oxygen. The memories I once had of Albania are gone. But in their place, in the glow of the Holy Father's words and example, a new hope will grow. A new Albania will grow, too. No longer isolated from the Western world, but rebuilt with the help of the Western world, Albania will be strong again one day. Following the lead of Pope John Paul II, we can only look forward, toward the goal, and not be daunted by the difficulties on the road to Shkodër.