



Preface by Kate Holman - British-Belgian journalist

Dr Jorgji Kote's account in this book of life in 'red Albania' is an intriguing insight into another world, which nonetheless existed so nearby, so recently. He tells his stories with characteristic humour and little trace of bitterness, which nevertheless cannot disguise the hardship of those days.

Since it came into being more than a century ago, Albania has faced more than its share of challenges. Jorgji has lived through some of the most turbulent times, and his career as youth activist, teacher, interpreter, civil servant and diplomat brought him into contact with many influential personalities. These *True Stories from Red Albania* reflect personal experiences, and illustrate vividly how a resourceful population drew on the strength of families and communities to confront formidable problems. At the same time, they comprise a historical record offering foreign readers a better understanding of the country, and young Albanians an insight into the tribulations of earlier generations. Yet Jorgji's perspective is always constructive and hopeful, and this bodes well for the future.

Like millions of Europeans, in the 1970s and 1980s I knew nothing about Albania. I had visited China in 1979 when the borders were still closed to independent travellers, but then everyone had heard of Mao Tse Tung and his Red Army. Albania seemed infinitely more distant and mysterious, more unfathomable and intimidating.

In the 1990s came images of boats crossing the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, overflowing with thousands of desperate asylum-seekers – images that seemed more reminiscent of what we knew then as ‘the third world’ than of Europe.

And my knowledge of the country might have stopped there, had it not been for Brussels’ remarkable Albanian residents. A chance encounter, and I was hooked, astonished to discover that the community has existed here in Belgium since 1956, now numbers tens of thousands, and its members can be found in all walks of life. And yet everything Albanian still seemed so exotic, so dangerously foreign.

The sudden realisation 10 years ago that the country is, in fact, quite close and easily accessible, was like a bolt from the blue. Could I visit Albania? Yes, why ever not?!

In 2006 I took the plunge, with two close Calabrian friends. They were charmed, not only by magical Berat, the vertiginous descent from Llogara, Gjirokastra’s graceful Hotel Kalemi with its unique Ottoman room, swimming in Ksamili ... but also by the best coffee outside southern Italy!

I had an ally. My cousin Sir Patrick Fairweather was British Ambassador in Rome when the regime collapsed, and was closely involved in setting up the British Embassy in Tirana. He fell in love with Albania, and for many years was a dedicated Director of the Butrint Foundation, receiving the Naim Frashëri medal for services to Albanian culture.

With his encouragement I arranged travel, car hire and hotels with surprising ease. It was a weird experience to walk along the promenade in Saranda and watch a film presentation about Butrint, featuring my cousin! When I visited the archaeological site again some years later, I was received by a young, enthusiastic female archaeologist. Albanians like her are now safeguarding the future of this world-renowned treasure – and that is as it should be.

In June, in 2006, I first realised how badly the international media misrepresented Albania and its people at that time. It was logical that I, as a journalist, should try to tell the truth. On my return to Brussels this led me into deeper research and a broadening network of Albanian friends, culminating in Genti Metaj’s invitation to get involved in the Konitza cultural association, which I accepted with pleasure. Since

then, it has been a privilege to take part in many events organised at the Embassy by Albania's official representatives in Brussels, and as a result to get to know Jorgji Kote.

In 1905, George Santayana famously wrote that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it". Now Albania is in a new phase, with its place in Europe universally acknowledged, and its decision-makers will need to learn from past mistakes and make wise choices in order to steer the country towards a positive future. It is poised to open accession talks with the EU, and proud to see its young people looking outwards and forging their own lives across Europe and the rest of the world. But wherever they go, as Jorgji illustrates, Albania's strong identity, language and culture will bind them proudly together throughout their lives.

CHAPTER I

From 'Hot Peace' to 'Cold War'

During the 1950s, the world was affected by many striking and far-reaching political events.

Abroad, almost 10 years after the end of the war, the world was living through a 'hot peace' It had to grapple with poverty, famine and the devastation of war. The peoples in both systems were hoping for a safer world in peace, security and solidarity. But in 1949, the 'Iron Curtain' divided Europe and Germany into two parts with diametrically opposed systems. To our bad luck, the Cold War became the co-traveller of my generation and part of the daily vocabulary for over four decades.

The US Marshall Plan helped the western countries leave behind the ruins of war, putting them on the track of development, modernisation and civil values. The West was drawing the proper lessons from the slaughter of World War II. It had restarted to evoke love instead hatred, justice instead of revenge, pluralist democracy instead of dictatorship, tolerance and multiculturalism instead of racism and xenophobia, integration instead of isolation, peaceful cooperation instead of military confrontation. Within less than 10 years, Western Germany had become a new social and economic world wonder. In response to the historic appeal by Robert Schuman, together with France its former traditional enemy, Italy and the three Benelux states, it laid down the foundations and in 1958 set up the European Union.

Totally the opposite was happening in the former socialist camp, after Stalin broke off with Tito in 1948, which also led to our break-up with Yugoslavia. 1953 marked the death of Stalin, the 'Red Tsar'. He was replaced by Nikita Khrushchev, whose advent to power triggered other breaks and splits within the Warsaw Treaty. After the uprising

in Berlin and Leipzig in 1953, in 1956 it was the turn of the Hungarian counter-revolution, which was repressed by Russian tanks, to shake Eastern Europe to its very foundations. In 1961, China broke off from the Soviet Union, deepening the large split within its own camp. Albania then split with the Soviet Union to gain a new great ally, China. On 13 August 1961, Berlin awoke to find itself barbarously divided by the gigantic Wall of Shame, 156 km long! Its construction coincided with the serious missile crisis in Cuba, which strained to breaking point the relations between the USA and the Soviet Union. The latter directly challenged the USA even in the space, reaching it first with Yuri Gagarin, our hero and idol at that time. Meanwhile, the USA in 1961 elected its 35th President, a brilliant representative of the new post-war generation. With the aspiration of the dream of Martin Luther King for a new world. Unfortunately, Kennedy's reforming agenda was fatally disrupted after six months in Dallas. A little later, Khrushchev was forced to resign and the situation within the socialist camp became more and more worrying.

In Albania: Amid the enthusiasm and promise of a new life, the first signs of the new red totalitarianism were noted with the division from the big western allies, especially the USA and Great Britain. However, they seemed to be overshadowed by the dynamic pace and enthusiasm for the country's reconstruction, with youth on the front line. Within a very short period of time, new roads and railways, factories and plants were built, schools, crèches, kindergartens and hospitals were opened up everywhere. A frontal campaign was launched all over the country against prevailing illiteracy. Today, it is impossible to imagine the exceptional backwardness in such a vital area as public education and health at that time. Hundreds and thousands of young folk were trained in ad hoc short-term courses to serve as teachers for elementary schools. True, the level and infrastructure in these schools cannot be compared at all with the current ones. Yet, as one can learn from several publications referring to that time, there was an unparalleled spirit, courage and motivation there.

Meanwhile, the persecution and condemnation of the intellectual elite, trained abroad and with prestigious public authority, was escalating. Those aspiring to a genuine pluralistic democracy, civil society, and free and fair elections were disappointed and cruelly eliminated. These ideas and principles were soon going to be replaced by the 'socialist and proletarian democracy', which was quite the opposite, in spirit and in letter. It brought serious consequences for the lives of thousands of such progressive intellectuals. At the same time, an intensive campaign of dispatching so-called bands of 'armed groups of diversionists' to Albania's mountains to overthrow by force the communist regime continued until 1955; but they failed for well-known reasons, with the great service of Kim Philby. The well-known spy played an important role, informing the Albanian security forces of the plans made in Italy, Germany, Greece and elsewhere. In 1956, the notorious Party Conference of Tirana became the starting point for cleansing all pro-Soviet and Khrushchev elements from the Communist Party

ranks (from 1948 it was called the Party of Labour of Albania – PLA). Enver Hoxha decided to stand by Stalin until the end and Albania became the staunchest Stalinist regime.

Well, this was the climate, the environment, the background we were born into at that time. That was the 'the bread and butter' with which all the party and state machinery started to nurture our hopes and expectations, together with our mothers' breast milk, as well as the tales they never failed to lull us to sleep with every night.

Toys and Joys in Poverty

During those years, extreme poverty was translated into food rationing and food-buying card systems for almost all of us. Long queues for bread and milk very early in the morning, even 15 years after the liberation, had become a dreary routine for us all. During those years, to be able to eat a slice of bread spread with a little butter and marmalade was indeed a luxury: most of us could afford it only when going on an excursion or just once a week, as a reward for doing well at school. Usually, for many of us breakfast and dinner consisted of two slices of bread with sugar, with some drops of water and, if one was lucky, a few drops of olive oil. Others enjoyed bread with cheese and tomatoes or melon in the summer time. Our good parents saved their own portion of meat and milk for their little children, even though they were exhausted at work. In the countryside, until 1970, we had electricity and wheat-made bread only in summer time; while in winter it was maize bread. We had to study usually under the light of a candle, lamp or lantern. The situation became even worse with the beginning of the absurd process of extreme collectivisation of animals and even poultry. They became collective property. Each farmer was allowed to keep only five chickens and nothing else. Due to that, milk, cheese, butter and wool used to knit pullovers could be bought only in the shops, in the markets and later on only in towns. This was the root cause of the unprecedented food crisis in the 1980s, and the restoration of the rationing system for major food stuffs or 'basket' commodities, as they were called, which started in the early 1980s and continued throughout that decade.

In the 1970s, being in my twenties, I was not able to make an analysis of the 'socialist nature' of these drastic measures, which would very soon devastate the countryside and the Albanian economy. I have to underscore this, since unlike other countries, agriculture in Albania accounted for over 70 per cent of the population and GDP. I noted this in the very first year I went to my village to see my beloved and unforgettable grandparents in the south. They were deeply depressed without cows, sheep and goats; their life without animals at that time was unimaginable. They had to leave home early in the morning to go to the village centre to buy basic commodities - milk, cheese, butter and others. But the worst had yet to come in the 1980s when they were forced to go to the town to buy them.

Our wonderful parents!

Our parents - mothers, in particular - made exceptional human sacrifices, by 'emptying their bellies out' so that we never or rarely missed any meal or drink. The Albanian writer Elvira Dones is perfectly right when she mentions that to be able to survive for a period of 15 days (since salaries were mostly distributed twice a month) was the greatest human heroism of that time. One had to calculate every cent: as children we kept asking to buy candies, ice creams or baked chestnuts, although our demands cannot be compared in the least with the current consumer society. Thus, our generous parents were fighting with self-denial to accommodate both positions - satisfy our demands and at the same time keep the modest budget under control for every situation.

During that time, fixed phones were very rare. This meant that guests, friends and cousins could drop into our houses from remote districts at any time for different purposes, and they had to be welcomed according to the tradition. But our parents and the grand parents performed that with an undescrivable delight. It was their greatest happiness to keep us safe and sound, happy and in perfect health, so that nothing should be lacking despite their poverty. Besides, despite the self-imposed isolation, they were surprisingly open-minded. Thus, when finishing 8th grade school, I had no idea about future studies. At that time, for boys it was customary to attend a school for mechanics. Even the range of aspirations at that time was very limited. It was mainly defined by the socialist actuality and propaganda. The favourite crafts or professions for boys were pilot, sailor (we were crazy about their uniforms), border patrol, tank driver, miner, or agronomist, whereas for the girls it was teacher, singer, engineer or especially doctor. However, while watching the few beautiful cars with diplomatic CD plates in Tirana, we boys were also driven by the desire to become diplomats, even though this seemed an unachievable dream. Well, I had no other wise relative to offer me any suggestion or advice on my future when I was only 14. But thank God it was my beloved mother, Katerina, who did that. She advised me to attend the special newly opened Foreign Languages School in Tirana, because after finishing it I could become an English teacher, translator or even a diplomat. Hence, as it was said at that time, I would be able to 'travel and see the world'. Thanks to her useful advice, I completed secondary school and entered the Faculty for Foreign Languages. Then, my dream to become a diplomat came true.

My unforgettable father-in-law, Vesel Nova, a well-known teacher in the district of Kruja, was equally open-minded and cultivated. He worked for 27 years in the highlands, making an exceptional contribution to fighting illiteracy and spreading progressive living standards and customs there. Even now a few of his pupils are alive, just as many of their sons and daughters, and they never fail to remember and pay homage to his tremendous service from 1949 to 1976 when he retired. He studied hard by himself and had a perfect command of Italian. He could speak for hours on

end about Rome, his favourite capital, and its civilization. The desire of his life was to spend at least some days in Rome! Unfortunately, this wise and beloved man, father and teacher, passed away just two years before the fall of the Iron Curtain, without being able to make his dream come true.

With good friends and neighbours

Good neighbours and sincere friendship were another vital factor, making our lives easier during those hard days. Under the unique circumstances that will be mentioned throughout this book, good neighbourhood and friendship were not a matter of human and social convenience only, but a real MUST for our survival. At that time, most of us were linked to one another with numerous threads: we were coming from the same town, village or region, we had relatives through marriage; our parents and families had worked together in business and professions both before and after the war; or they were together in different youth voluntary undertakings, as soldiers and so on. Thus, one day we found ourselves to be neighbours, school or work mates, and so on. Without the assistance, ideas and courage we gave to one another on both sunny and rainy days during our frequent gatherings at home, at events or even in a modest cafeteria or restaurant where we enjoyed everything to the full, it would not have been possible for us to overcome so many exceptional hardships and problems, stress and great poverty; or it could have come at a much higher cost for most of us. It is a very good thing to see that such old-style friendships continue even these days among us and our children, both in Albania and abroad. The more time passes, the more precious this time-tested friendship becomes. But let me briefly mention here just one from numerous examples.

Among my best neighbours and friends at all times are Flutura and Agron Pipa, currently living in Italy. Flutura was a class mate of my wife's eldest sister. They were bound through a life-long friendship, which involved also their beloved parents, brothers, sisters and us. When Flutura, an English teacher, married Agron, a singer in the chorus of the Army Ensemble, and then I was married, we also became neighbours. During those joyful but also hard years in the 1980s, their apartment furnished and arranged in such a good taste became the vital and happy shelter for both of us. We found everything there, warmth, hospitality, interesting debates, good friends and even the TV set which we bought only years later. Flutura never failed to prepare special sweets and delicacies to honour and please us as a young couple. After 1990, she also became teacher to our son. After the Ensemble dissolved, Agron had to try all sorts of hard jobs, ending up as a cook in the north for a foreign company and then in Italy, working in petrol stations, until he retired a few years ago. They are happy with their two children, nephews and nieces and have remained the same inspiring couple for us and many others. Our friendship has defied the three decades and all its storms, plus geographical distance, and has helped us remain young in spirit. I am sure readers may find any number of true stories like this. True, to be

frank, there are also negative and unpleasant stories in this respect. Yet they cannot overshadow this wonderful phenomenon that helped us a great deal at times harder than those described by Charles Dickens.

The Emblematic Palace of Pioneers

Despite the exceptional poverty, as children we did find opportunities for fun, entertainment and recreation. Beyond a doubt, the Palace of Pioneers in Tirana together with the Houses of Pioneers in each and every other district was the most favourite and beloved venue for the children and their parents. In this wonderful environment full of flowers and evergreen trees, movies and theatrical works were shown every day, and two or three days a week we could attend different groups or courses for mechanics, biology, flowers, singing and dancing, reciting, theatre and much else, all for free. Together with many others, most of our prominent and internationally recognized singers and dancers started their careers in this famous Palace of Pioneers. At the top of these celebrities is Mrs Ermonela Jaho, one of the best sopranos in the world. With her unique talent, Ermonela has taken by storm the greatest operas in Paris, Lyon, Brussels, Berlin, New York, Japan, Brazil and elsewhere! What makes her different from other prominent artists, apart from her extraordinary voice, is her humble, modest and genuine nature, love for her own land and fellow citizens, generosity and readiness to help and be close to those in need. On 15 May 2016 she was honoured with the International Opera Award, the 'Oscar' for this genre.

The famous tenor Saimir Pirgu is Jaho's male equivalent, and they have performed together even at the Royal Opera in London and elsewhere; Pirgu was artistically 'baptised' by the great Maestro Pavarotti and dazzles everywhere just like Inva Mula, our famous soprano at the Paris National Opera. Inva used to be the best pioneer singer almost 40 years ago and an outstanding offspring of the Palace of Pioneers together with the prominent singer and TV show master, Ardit Gjebrea and many others!

The magic of arts and sports

During the years 1962-1969, a moderate liberty breeze was blowing, if we can call it that in retrospect, especially in the field of arts and literature. Apparently, after breaking off with the Soviets and allying with the Chinese, the regime perhaps felt safer. Hence, it wanted to direct young people's attention towards other events and actions. Besides, the great poverty and the 'numerous enemies' that had grown up like mushrooms required some relaxation, detente, fun and entertainment. And who could accomplish that better than our writers, artists, and musicians, especially the cultivated and folk ones. They did indeed warm the hearts of folk in those bitter days. Our prominent singers and artists were like family members for all of us. Frequently,

when I was abroad on business, or in interviews, and was asked about how we faced up to the oppression and dictatorship, I responded precisely that the burden of these sufferings and lack of freedom were made much easier for us by our great masters of arts and culture. The growing number of foreign classic movies, TV series and renown books which passed successfully the multiple regime filters had also its own bearing on our soul and spirit.

Sport in all its genres was another source of strength which enlivened us a lot, It also helped us keep a little distance from politicisation and too much ideology, with which we were bombarded during classes all day long. Today, it is perhaps hard to imagine what vigour and positive energies it unleashed for us! The world and Albanian sports and artists had a very peculiar place in our day to day lives. During the 60, the names of great superstars like Pele, Eusébio, Garrincha, the legendary goalkeeper Lev Yashin and others to come were very common even to the children of that time, although we have never seen them! The victory, although officially it was a draw with West Germany, at that time World Vice-Champion team of Beckenbauer, Schulz, Overath, Netzer, Maier and others, in that unforgettable cold December 1967 has been deeply engraved in the memory and history of our football. During the service in our Embassy in Berlin, in March 2001 I had the chance to watch the match between our national team and Germany in Leverkusen. Germany won with a lot of difficulty 2:1 at the end, thanks to a goal scored by Klose, his first goal with the national team. In a reception on that occasion, in the presence of many stars of those historic teams of both countries, including our emblematic Panajot Pano as well as Berti Vogst and other german football stars, they remembered the bitter taste of that draw which disqualified them from the European finals.

Apart from football, as the most favourite sport, other genres were also widely spread including all ages. Thus, in volleyball, the legendary male team 'Dinamo' in 1972 ranked fourth in Europe; in the Olympic Games in München 1972 our champion Ymer Pampuri won the silver medal in weight lifting; likewise, in basketball, athletics, shooting, weight lifting, wrestling and chess Albania had some internationally recognized players, who unfortunately were not allowed to play for any foreign sport clubs.

But let me add an important point here; we were not simply crazy fans and viewers, but also very active participants at different cultural and sport events. Each school, factory, agricultural cooperative and other institutitons had their own Ensemble of Folk and Light Songs, theatrical and variey groups as well as the various sport teams. They took part in a large number of local and national-wide festivals, contests, national Olympic Games and championships and on tours abroad. At the invitation of the University of Nebraska, inn November 1992 I stayed one month in USA together with 15 Albanians; during an excursion by bus to Kansas City, the US professors were surprised to see and hear us singing a large variety of songs from all parts of Albania.

Whereas the driver thought that we were a genuine musical band! Well, this was not a single case but a wonderful and widely spread occurrence at that time.

Irreplaceable doctors

While reflecting on that difficult but beautiful time for us, one has also to mention and express the deepest homage and greatest gratitude to our doctors and physicians, whose presence and assistance in numerous cases of illness was a salvation for us all. We are talking of a period when in the countryside in particular, clinics and hospital centres were lacking or very rare and without the appropriate equipment. They lacked many necessities, starting with drinkable water and electricity. Only a few privileged people could go to hospitals abroad (Paris for Politburo members, Vienna for ministers and members of the Central Committee, Budapest for heroes and selected persons), and worries, overstress and various difficulties were overwhelming, indeed. It was precisely during those hard times that they made our life better and easier in each and every corner of the country. We have heard their names referred to in voices full of hope by our parents and relatives, whenever they or we the children fell ill or were not feeling well. I mentioned earlier our ballgames especially. However, apart from fun and entertainment, they also had their own costs to our health: injuring or even breaking a knee, hand, foot, and so on. Our quick healing process and treatment was ensured thanks to two of the best folk orthopaedics of that time, who did not ask a single cent for their services!!! Imagine, I remember myself when I was ten and then, 40 years later, returning with the ten-year-old son to the same folk doctor in Tirana!

CHAPTER II

The Dictatorship of Atheism

This was the case in our 'dictatorship of the proletariat' after 1967. The anti-religious fire that broke out following the dictator's speech on 6 February 1967, as part of a revolutionising movement, mercilessly destroyed the religious and faith traditions all over the country. Over 2,000 churches, mosques, shrines, teqes and cult centres were pulled down or burned. During that period, naturally with instructions from the top hierarchy, the pupils and teachers of the Naim Frashëri Secondary General School in the town of Durrës undertook a revolutionary initiative to do away with the old religious prejudices, shutting down all religious institutions and banning freedom of belief. Albania became the first and the only atheist country in the world, overtaking even the Soviet Union of Stalin's time! Ironically enough, the communist propaganda even by the end of 1980 kept on claiming that "it was the people and youth who were against, since they had had no benefits but only harm from religion." But this was far from being true. In fact, most of our parents, relatives, friends and others were and have remained, strong believers in God, practising their faith in churches, mosques

and at other shrines. Although only 15 when religion was banned, I could also easily see that religion had positive effects on their lives and work: it warmed their spirits and reduced the stress of hard toil and numerous sacrifices. What happened at that time is something that seems even more horrible when we remember it today. Many of these religious holy places were turned into warehouses, kindergartens and houses of culture. Much luckier was a large mosque in Durrës, which was turned into a Palace of Youth Culture. Likewise, the largest Catholic Church in Shkodra was turned into a Sport Palace, and so on. Such reflections came to my mind much more vividly on 25 March 1997, when I accompanied Prime Minister Bashkim Fino in Rome and the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II received us with all honours. We, former atheists, during those moments bowed with the greatest respect in the seat of Catholicism, welcomed by this legendary Pope. This meeting, his blessing and the picture with him remain deep in my heart and mind.

From 1967 until 1990, Albanians and believers in particular went through the most difficult times, subject to arrests and persecutions. Even a small religious family celebration on the occasion of Christmas, Easter and others was very hard, not to say impossible to organise at home however secret. Because the authorities controlled even the consumption of sugar, rice, flour and other basic commodities, they were able to detect if this or that family had celebrated. As will be explained later, from 1967 there were no private shops. After 1980 it became even easier for the authorities, since due to terrible shortages, each family had the right to buy only a very limited amount of the basic consumer goods. Thus, the only possibility for believers was to start buying them gradually a long time ahead, but only if their financial situation permitted them to do so! Forced atheism was prevailing everywhere. Whereas religion was considered not simply as something undesirable and unacceptable, but also as a hostile activity. Even worse, for people found practising religious rites, there were also penal and administrative sanctions.

Belated Recognition of Mother Teresa

On the 4th of September 2016, almost all world televisions broadcasted live the exceptionally moving ceremony for the canonization of Mother Teresa by Pope Francis in Saint Peter's Place in Rome. After watching those unforgettable sublime moments it is natural that our mind and memory would go back in time. When the above-mentioned anti-religious allergy escalated further, denouncing as reactionary even acts of charity and philanthropy. The philanthropists and charity workers were considered almost as enemies, since their actions ran contrary to the Party line and ideology. This is why Mother and now Saint Teresa was not recognised by the regime at that time and was not allowed to visit Albania. We did not even know of her existence. Why? Because to accept that Living Saint at that time would mean to undermine the above-mentioned theory. Besides, Catholicism was considered the worst and most dangerous religious faith! Finally, Mother Teresa got a visa to visit

Albania only in 1989, on the eve of democratic change in Albania. She was also received by the widow of the dictator, but that was too late. Besides, it rejected with absurd arguments also her generous offer to send missionary sisters in Albania who would be at least spiritually very helpful and a great relief. The worst aspect was that Albanian communism became horribly orthodox for the country's destiny and people. All this was occurring in Albania at a time when religion itself was becoming more flexible, more open and tolerant with the tendency to keep a distance from many dogmas of the past. It was clear that Albania intended to become the 'Holy See of world communism', even when China betrayed such a course.

The Party instead of GOD!

Apart from other aspects, especially after 1980, a question has intrigued many of us: "Why did the regime at that time, with so many troubles and headaches, with so many enemies and opponents, attempt in vain to challenge GOD and religion?" Why couldn't they behave more properly and in the long run a little more interested in religion? True, there have been and still are negative examples of behaviour by various religious persons worldwide and in Albania and other religious exaggerations, just as there are numerous positive and inspiring examples in this context, both before and after World War II. Thus, we had our former Prime Minister, Fan Noli, founder of the Independent Albanian Church, an outstanding orator, historian and translator of world masterpieces who was also Prime Minister for a short time in 1924, and other prominent priests. The latter were assassinated by foreign occupiers for their patriotic activity. Likewise, almost all our traditional poets, writers, thinkers and leaders of the Albanian Renaissance period were ardent believers in God.

The general opinion is that the major factor contributing to such an unheard criminal attitude was the strategic goal of the regime 'to mould the new revolutionary man' with a Marxist-Leninist world outlook, different from any other socialist country. It was undoubtedly jealous and felt that religion was 'a thorn in its flesh' and a serious hurdle. Therefore, they made excessive use of Karl Marx's statement that "religion is the opium of the people", which would be seen everywhere. This anti-religious crusade, unprecedented in modern times, was designed above all to stop and even delete any references to God, faith and religion and replace them with faith in the Party, its ideology and leadership, in every respect. Here, it seems interesting to mention that regardless of the combat against religion, the communist regime went on and continued to use or refer to religious terminology in its own propaganda, in an effort to 'own' or rather to 'communistise' it. To be more concrete, especially for young and foreign readers, it seems interesting to mention a large number of typical religious and holy words, phrases, expressions and practices, which at that time were replaced and used in a communist context. Here are some of them:

God created man

The Party created the new man

God gave us life	The Party gave us life
For the Lord's ideal	For the Party's ideal
God's works	Party works
Glory and thanks to God	Glory and thanks to the Party
Faith in Christ and Muhammed	Faith in the Party and Comrade Enver
Religious consciousness	Communist consciousness
The sacred cause of Christianity	The sacred cause of communism
Pray and ask for God's help	Ask and seek help from the Party
God will punish someone	The Party will punish someone
As the Lord Almighty says	As our Great Party says
God's 10 Commandments	10 qualities of the communist

Meanwhile, the religious saints were replaced with the four pillars or 'classics' of Marxism-Leninism as they were referred to: Marks, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Christ's disciples were replaced by the 12 members of the Politburo (even the number was the same) – one could see their portraits everywhere, in the most visible public places, especially during celebrations, with the portrait of Enver Hoxha at the head. God's blessings and psalms were replaced with the Party teachings and directives. Religious liturgies in the churches and mosques were replaced with the Communist International, the song devoted to Enver Hoxha and other revolutionary songs.

However, the 'communisation' of these religious words would be only half of the evil. It went far deeper. Thus, religious doctrine was replaced with the ideological doctrine of socialism, religious puritanism with communist purity, religious taboos and dogmas with communist ones. While Marx's quotation that "religion is the opium of the people" was being propagated everywhere, communism itself in Albania turned the whole Marxist theory of capital into a great holy dogma, to the extent that Karl Marx himself was turned into an ideological opium with horrible effects for freedom of belief and consciousness. The belief was that Marxist ideology and its idols could overtake Christianity, Islam and other prophets.

In the meantime, the propaganda of that time was working with the ordinary people to find ways and means to devalue the power of God, replacing it with the love and strength of the Party and its great leader in each and every situation, even private ones, including the birth of a baby. This kind of language was also noted in meetings of simple folks with foreigners at that time. Thus, during a visit by a foreign well-

wisher to the large village of Dervican in the Greek minority area in the south, his question was: “Why don’t you believe and why don’t you have a God?” Then a lady gave the following answer: “Yes, we do believe and we have a real God; it is our Party and Enver Hoxha. Why? Because many years ago, when we asked God to bring us water amidst a big drought, he failed to do so.” (Note how they regarded God as a communal service). “Then we asked the Party. It helped us work hard and now there is abundant water in the village, as you can see. Therefore, the Party is our God!!” This case was publicised and propagated so much that this reply became an example of behaviour towards foreigners to justify the arbitrary ban on religion and belief.

Loyal Believers and Genuine citizens

After release from prison in the 1990, Albania’s religious leaders and hundreds of thousands believers have constantly launched positive messages of forgiveness, love, solidarity, faithfulness to God and their believers. They have displayed these qualities on many occasions, both at home and abroad. On 11 January 2015 they joined the millions of peaceful marchers in Paris to show their strong solidarity with the French people after the terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo. Their outstanding contribution and other historic factors have helped forge an exemplary cohabitation among the major religious faiths in Albania. This is a very positive and inspiring model in our modern times; especially now with the escalation of international terrorism and the radicalisation of certain society segments in western societies and youth in particular. After John Paul II in 1993, it was His Holy Father, Pope Francis who paid tribute to this remarkable tradition during the visit to Tirana in September 2015.

CHAPTER III

The school and the revolutionary triangle

The third major political move which engulfed us directly, without our grasping its real meaning and amplitude, was the ‘Further Revolutionisation of our School’. It led to the adoption of the relevant law in spring 1969. In the framework of the great popular discussion which preceded that law, the most important issue was ‘the ideological axis or backbone’ which would run like a red thread through the whole teaching and educational activity, both at school and elsewhere. Pursuant to this principle, the underlying foundation of the whole teaching process in all school cycles was the M-L ideology, the history of the Party of Labour of Albania (PLA), dialectical and historical materialism. In practical terms, ‘the ideological axis or backbone’ meant that every class, in every theme and subject, math, physics, engineering, should start with the quotations from the PLA, teachings from Enver Hoxha, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. But this was really overdone, and it became a subject of many jokes and anecdotes. I was a teacher in the countryside in 1975-1978 and, believe me, it was so

boring and painstaking. You had to think every morning about a quotation for each subject, even mathematics or natural sciences, and every day this had to be proved and set down in writing! I remember that a colleague of mine, while explaining forests, started the lesson by saying that “during the war, many partisans fighting against enemies passed through this forest near our school”.

The black and the green gold

One of the funniest stories during those years related to a seminar on forests in the picturesque village of Voskopoja, in south-eastern Albania. Following the rules concerning the ‘ideological axes’ the lecturer started his discourse with an alleged quotation from Lenin: “Forests are green gold”. A party official who heard about this had studied in the Higher Party School in Moscow. He knew Lenin’s works by heart. But he had never come across such a quotation. Hence, deeply concerned, he tried and after two weeks met with the lecturer and asked him which of Lenin’s works this quotation came from, since he had never seen it during his five years of studies in Moscow! The lecturer, who was also Chairman of that Commune, found himself in a difficult position; first he was taken aback, but then he pulled himself together and addressed the poor Party official more or less in the following ironic way:

Lecturer: “I thought you were a smart person, but it seems you are dull!”

Party official: “Why on the earth are you talking like this? You had better tell me from which of Lenin’s works and pages you took the quotation that ‘forests are green gold’, if indeed that is the case.”

Lecturer: “First, my dear friend, not everything that comrade Lenin said can be found in his numerous works. Secondly and most importantly, didn’t comrade Lenin say that ‘crude oil is black gold?’”

Party official: “Oh, yes, certainly!” And he mentioned the name of the work and the page of this quotation. (in fact, much later we could verify that many quotations allegedly invented by Lenin were wrongly attributed to him).

Lecturer: “Well, then, dear comrade, when crude oil is like black gold for our country, why on earth can’t the forests with the woods be green gold?” Then, both burst into laughter at such an original explanation.

The most important and critical aspect of this popular discussion was the establishment of the whole educational pyramid under the pillars of the so-called ‘Revolutionary Triangle – studying, productive labour, military training’. Together with the ideological axis, this revolutionary triangle would be the future ‘backbone’ of our ‘new socialist school’. The basic idea here was that following the main political slogan of that time: “with the pick in one hand and the rifle in the other”, the pupils and

students would be ready not only to study well, but also work hard physically to build socialism and at the same time defend it from numerous enemies. It goes beyond doubt that the Chinese experience had a great impact on this aspect; the 'school revolutionalisation' in Albania coincided with the outbreak of the Great Cultural Revolution in China in 1966 as well as with the political needs of the regime at that time. Accordingly, it was decided that in the school curricula of the 8th grade school, secondary and higher education, apart from eight months of studying, two months would be necessarily productive or physical labour and one-month military training in a military unit. The physical labour was done in the youth projects and mainly in railway construction or elsewhere. In 1968 I was a volunteer in the construction of the Rrogozhinw - Fier Railway, in 1969 on the Elbasan – Përrenjas Railway, in 1970 building terraces on the southern coastline and in 1973 back on the Elbasan – Përrenjas Railway. For us, the pupils and students of Tirana, the military training took place in the anti-air force units surrounding the capital. Thus, in 1969, at the end of the 'great popular discussion', these two vital components became obligatory. This practice went on until 1990. Not only that, but if one underrated their importance, they were assessed with negative marks, which caused the loss of the teaching year! Besides, it became a major political issue in every sort of meeting. In the framework of the fight against bureaucratisation and better links with the rank-and-file masses, even public administration officials were obliged to spend 1-2 months as workers in factories, farms, cooperatives and elsewhere. In addition, after higher graduation, we were obliged to do 3-5 months of military training, and three months more every five years.

In the end, I should emphasise that despite the above-mentioned negative occurrences and the extreme politicisation, thanks to intensive and consolidated teaching curricula especially in natural and technical sciences, where politicisation was less intense, the commitment and professionalism of our prominent teachers and professors and the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of pupils and students, a great number of well-known politicians, experts, artists and scientists have graduated from these schools and universities. Many of them were later trained and employed abroad, with brilliant careers in public and private international institutions and organisations.

Nice Memories and Many Celebraties

A concrete example in this regard is the Secondary School and Faculty of Foreign Languages, where I studied from 1967-1974. Now, 50 years on, one may say with pride that its students have contributed in areas much wider than teaching, translation and interpretation. Thanks to their will and passion to go beyond languages, important as they are, many of them have become celebrities in journalism, music, literature, but also in politics, parliament and diplomacy. This applies both to the period before and after 1990. Among them are three Foreign Ministers – *Mrs Arta Dade*, currently Chairwoman of the Parliamentary Foreign

Committee, *Mr Besnik Mustafaj*, Chairman of the Alliance for Civilization Foundation, and *Mr Edmond Haxhinasto*, until September 2016 Minister of Transports. This ministerial list continues with *Mrs Mirela Kumbaro*, Minister of Culture, and *Mr Arben Ahmetaj*, Minister of Finances and *Mr. Sokol Dervishaj*, former Deputy Foreign Minister and now Minister of Transports. Let me also highlight here a radiating personality, former Deputy Foreign Minister and Ambassador, prominent historian *Prof. Dr. Pëllumb Xhufi*.

Graduates from this school have also become ambassadors and successful diplomats of career. I should like to start with my class mates for seven unforgettable years – *Fatos Reka*, our Ambassador in Skopje, *Mrs. Tatjana Gjonaj*, Ambassador in Brazil and *Mr. Viktor Kalem*, former Ambassador in Cairo; my good and close school mates more or less of the same generation - *Mr. Qemal Minxhozi*, former MP and now Ambassador in Kosovo; *Mr. Eduard Sulo*, former Secretary General and now Ambassador in Cairo, *Mr. Zef Mazi*, former Ambassador and in the recent years employed by International Atomic Agency in Vienna, *Mr. Islam Lauka*, former Director General and Ambassador; *Mr. Bashkim Rama*, Ambassador and Director until his retirement; *Mr. Sokol Gjoka*, former Ambassador in Russia and Poland, now Director of International Organizations, who is very keen and a promotor of public and cultural diplomacy; then *Mr. Ilir Gjoni*, former MP and Minister, now ambassador in Switzerland; then representatives of the younger generations: *Mr. Arben Cici*, former Ambassador and Chief of Protocol at the Assembly, *Mrs. Anila Bitri*, former Director and now ambassador in Rome; *Mr. Ridi Kurtezi*, former Director of Protocol and now ambassador in Spain, *Mrs. Elida Petoshati*, former Ambassador in Canada and now Director for Regional Relations, *Mr. Dritan Tola*, our Ambassador in France and others. I may also add here my good long – time colleagues and friends, *Guri Selmani* and *Naim Mandri* up to the youngest one in the Press Department, *Ms. Ira Salataj* and others.

I was also privileged to work closely with my previous ambassadors in Brussels: *Mr Ferit Hoxha*, currently Director General at the MFA, former Secretary General and from 1998 onwards Ambassador in Brussels, Paris and New York; given his bright and multi-faceted career, noticeable pragmatism and flexibility, his commation skills, including the excellent command of English, French and Italian, he ranks among our best Ambassadors for the last 25 years. Then, *Mr Ilir Tepelena*, who has naturally climbed the diplomatic hierarchy step by step – first diplomat in Tirana, moving later on to Paris, Madrid and Rome; then Director and Director General in the Foreign Ministry, from 2010 – 2014 Ambassador in Brussels and currently in Bucharest.

There are also prominent journalists graduated from this school, both in Albania and abroad. Let me mention only three of them here: *Rezar Xhaxhiu*, a former diplomat and *Ilir Babaramo*; their evening programmes “ A night with Xhaxhiu” and “ Five questions

from Babaramo” are very educational and watched by a large cultivated audience. Apart from the high level of professionalism, this is also thanks to their genuine and positive attitude, which the Albanian society needs so much currently. It was 25 years ago that Arben Xhixho started his work in Washington in the “ Voice of America”. He has had a successful career ever since and in the recent years was promoted as Chief of the Albanian Section.

But to be fair, the credit for such a positive record goes first and foremost to our brilliant professors, both in the secondary languages school and especially in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. Apart from being our teachers and professors, they were also like our parents, brothers, sisters and friends. This list is rather long, but let me mention just a few, starting with some of the best English professors of international standards, Muhamed Kapllani, Drita Draçini, Ilo Stefanllari, Refik Kadia, Gëzim Hado, Maja Luarasi, Shpresa Shamblli, Mira Blushi, the French professor and my predecessor here at the embassy, Thoma Haxhi, the favourite professor and friend Edmond Tupe and others.

From the Russian chair, among others, I have to mention Prof. Eshref Ymeri, who in the last 25 years has been living in USA; rarely have I seen such an active person, a real authority in the field of languages and translation who has never stopped working and publishing books and dictionaries in Russian, but also in Italian and English. I wonder if there is any remaining issue or point which Prof. Eshref Ymeri has not exhausted with his numerous publications in the field of teaching, translation, interpreting and others.

Heroism - ‘Political Fashion’

The ground where this ‘revolutionalisation of the life’ was taking place was extremely fertile with heroes and inspiring events at that time. The first convincing hero was Adem Reka, who in November 1966, only one week after the historical 6th PLA Congress, was hit by waves during a severe storm in the largest port of Durrës in an

effort to save other ships with his 120 tonne floating crane, the biggest at that time, which later on bore his name. He became the symbol of self-denial, heroism and of the 'new socialist man', one of the major themes of the 6th PLA Congress. He was awarded the highest title: Hero of Socialist Labour. During the years that followed, Durrës and its port, the biggest in the country, with its floating crane, became a true place of pilgrimage from all over Albania, for young people in particular. Dozens of songs, shows and even a movie were dedicated to Adem Reka, and were awarded top prizes at different artistic events and festivals.

Then, in February 1967, a 15-year-old girl from the remote northern area of Shkurte Pal Vata died while working near the town of Lushnja for the construction of the railway to Fier. She was digging in the ground and was suddenly covered with a heap of earth. Shkurte Vata became the second most telling example of heroism: this time, a symbol of young peasant girls who come to work voluntarily from remote areas. This was a special case, since at that time a nation-wide movement was launched for the emancipation of women and girls, who were suffering from religious prejudices and other negative phenomena. Young girls, for instance, were not allowed to leave their villages and were married in their childhood through an unknown go-between. Therefore, Shkurte Vata became the symbol of the emancipation of young girls and women, which in fact had a wide influence on the public. Under the slogan "One falls down, thousands rise up", many brigades with young girls from her region and elsewhere volunteered to replace her, including her father, Pal Vata, and other family members. Following this political trend, on the eve of the New Year 1968, another hero laid down his life amidst a snowstorm, in order to re-establish the phone connection high in the snow-covered mountains. His name was Pjetër Llesh Doda. Then, it was the turn of the educational system, the largest one in the country to have its own hero. This time, it was teacher Ismat Sali Bruçaj who lost his life trying to make his way to the village school where his beloved pupils were waiting for him.

However, the propaganda machine felt that the country and the people also needed live heroes as a sublime source of inspiration, who could be seen and met by the people and the youth, in particular. They did in fact found put many of them who are known for the Albanian public of that time. As pupils and students, we have been present in different meetings with some of them.

Forced volunteering

During those years, there were also a series of events which galvanised this revolutionary spirit. Thus, at the end of November 1967 an exceptional earthquake shook the north-western districts of Dibra and Librazhdi. Over 100,000 houses, streets, roads, social and educational centres were either seriously damaged or destroyed. Thousands of volunteers 'invaded' these two districts, together with journalists, writers, artists, experts, party and state leaders. The bold decision was

made to build everything new within only one month, without any aid from abroad. The saying was that “earthquakes shake mountains, but not our hearts”. True human solidarity achieved its zenith.

Following this example, three months later in February 1968 the first so-called 'undertaking with concentrated efforts' took place in Dibra, building within one single day a 17 km-long channel, with the participation of thousands of peasants from each village of this district. In this great undertaking, which marked the beginning of a new method of constructing socialism that would go on for two decades, a young couple was present, whose wedding ceremony was scheduled for 17 February 1968, i.e. the same day with the above-mentioned undertaking. The groom has said in a special TV broadcast in 2008 that it was an accidental event. The Party and government leaders in that district had decided to launch such an undertaking, but when they heard about the wedding on exactly the same day, they feared that according to the tradition of these remote villages, and being the first time, the level of participation at this very first undertaking could be low because the people would go and attend the wedding ceremony. Thus, a deal was made that the new couple would come to the undertaking for an hour, and then continue with the wedding. And this was the case, leading to wide-ranging coverage in the media and the press of that time.

A lot of fuss was made about the first ever 'undertaking with concentrated efforts' as a new creative method of solving different problems and not waiting for everything from the state, using the newly married couple to reinforce this message. This also gave birth to the 'new socialist weddings', as well as the organisation of such undertakings every Sunday to solve practical needs and problems, but which later on became unbearable, especially for women. After this event, every week we were sent to the countryside on Sundays, the only day off, to help the peasants, workers and so on. After 20 years it became really boring and intolerable and then it was reduced a little. Imagine not only the youth, but also elderly people and mothers with kids getting up early on Sundays to go to work, and coming back at 14:00 hours. What could they do in a single free Sunday afternoon, when there were no washing machines, refrigerators and other facilities! All this in the name of the revolutionary spirit and volunteering! It did not matter if one had to go to visit a friend to congratulate him or her, to a wedding, a funeral or to other events.

At the National Folklore Festival of Gjirokastra in 1973, a folklore ensemble from the village of Lapardha in Berat turned this situation into art, dedicating a song entitled *The new bridegroom*, which went as follows: “On Saturday, at work/on Sunday married/ on Monday again at work/ej, you new bridegroom/in harvest campaign/ there is no honeymoon/”

Without denying the spirit in principle and some useful values and benefits, these actions, and volunteering as a whole besides their binding nature were exaggerated; to

the extent that besides lacking common sense and economic benefits, they gave birth to absurd practices. Besides, these undertakings or actions, as they were called, became our co-travellers everywhere, even in music, arts, movies, painting, opera and ballet! Everywhere in the country one could see the pick and the rifle, the symbol of our new socialist life, folks singing and dancing with these tools in their hands.

Take the sheep back, but stop that song!

By the end of 1960, in the context of the revolutionary initiatives and solidarity with the backward areas in the north, the shepherds from the southern areas 'volunteered' to give 6,000 sheep and goats as a gift to shepherds in Shkodra. This initiative was accompanied by noisy propaganda, including songs. A folk musical group from a village in Gjirokastra improvised the song entitled *6,000 sheep and goats*. It became famous overnight and was broadcast on the radio several times each day and week at the request of listeners. With its prolonged polyphonic refrain repeating '6,000 sheep and goats' it became really embarrassing for the folks who received them, and even offensive for the inhabitants of the north. As they say: 'enough is enough'. The problem was solved when a great comic actor from Shkodra, in a comedy sketch, told the folk group and Radio Tirana that they were ready to give back the 6,000 sheep and goats but that song must not be broadcast anymore! Thus, this song started to be repeated very rarely, until finally it was erased from the programme.

CHAPTER IV

Anti-Youth Conservatism

Until 1970, in the countryside in particular, old and backward customs and traditions prevailed. They were a serious hurdle for the emancipation of the youth, and young girls, in particular. New living standards were being introduced with many difficulties. Besides, there were very few radio receivers and there could be no talk about TV. The schools and some sanitary workers played an important role, but still it was extremely difficult to cope with that major issue. Therefore, during the period 1969-1972, multiple efforts were made to improve the situation. During those years, the cinema, theatre, opera and ballet gave fine performances, thanks to an excellent cast of actors and artists, but their range of themes was very poor and limited. People could only hear about our national hero Scanderbej, mythic figures, heroes, partisans, the achievements under the Party leadership and other pieces inspired by revolutionary events. With regard to music, it was the folk style which prevailed on all radio, TV programmes and concerts. There was very little modern Albanian music for young people. After 1967 even the songs in festivals became more and more political and everywhere one could hear and see the common words and slogans: "Party, Enver, farms, factories, the pick and rifle, tractor driver, textile workers, miners, soldiers,

enemies, industrial works, steel” and such like. Besides, the years 1965-1975 were also marked by the construction of many huge industrial projects and facilities. To each of them, a special song, poem, painting or movie was dedicated. It is quite interesting to mention that these songs won first prizes, while even the best youth songs with modern music were always awarded either the second or the third prizes! Very little was done for youth entertainment and recreation.

All this was at a time when literature, arts and music worldwide had experienced a new breakthrough. This cultural boom was seen also in neighbouring Italy. We were so eager to hear at that time the famous Canzonissima, the San Remo Festival as well as the great Italian singers and entertainers: Adriano Celentano, Raffaella Carrà, Gianni Morandi, Nicola Di Bari, Albano Carrisi, Little Tony, Loretta Goggi and many others. But most of us had to go to our cousins or friends, who had a TV set, to watch them. At the same time, we were dying to hear world music legends like Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Abba and other famous bands and artists. Although they were officially seen as the incarnation of bourgeois degeneration, we were talking secretly and even trying to imitate them at evening parties. Going abroad or accompanying foreign delegations was a great chance to sing their songs. If there were any critical remarks or even charges against us, it was quite easy to find the justification: it was just a bit of fun to satisfy our foreign guests who live in such a society! And to compensate for that error, we would also sing partisan and revolutionary songs with them!! I was amazed many years ago to see Tom Jones, my favourite youth legend, on stage, for the first time on the TV abroad. The same could be said for famous French and Belgian singers, like Jacques Brel, Claude François, Joe Dassin, Barbara, Johnny Hallyday and many others.

Meanwhile, an excessive control, tutelage and sectarianism was found in the functioning of the youth organisations. All young people at that time were recruited into youth organisations, just as trade unions, women and others were part of the so-called 'mass organisations'. They were considered, as Lenin put it, to be “transmission belts between the Party and the people”. The problem was that we were asked more and more to follow the same organisational style and rules of the Party fora! Could you imagine young folks of 18-20 years having to be like our parents and talk all day long at meetings about initiatives, rules and so on? This was not simply a moral, but also an administrative and even a penal responsibility. There were many instances when a school or a factory director was fired and even put in prison when cases of failure of duty were detected, so as to serve as a lesson for others.

Too many meetings

Let me now describe in concrete terms the boring youth meeting proceedings held on a monthly basis in each class and school. First, we had to elect a presidium with three persons, to prepare the podium with a red tablecloth, and appoint a pupil to keep the

minutes of the meeting, the most disgusting job for a young boy or girl. The meeting started with the roll call, since everyone was obliged to be present unless they were ill. We had to attend each event come what may. The atmosphere at these meetings was too serious also due to the large number of 'delegates' there. At an ordinary class meeting with 25 pupils, there were delegates from the School Management, Pedagogical staff and the Youth Committee, then from the Youth Committee of the quarter and the district, from the Party organisations of the school, and the main teacher responsible for the class, while at more important meetings there were also delegates even from the Party Committee of the region or the Central Youth Committee. Hence, almost a quarter of the participants were delegates and this laid a great stress and pressure on the young folks. Imagine how we had to speak so as to accommodate the positions of all delegates, and especially our own teachers.

'Tricks' for more evening parties!

But we were young and wanted also to attend concerts, make fun and have parties. The latter were very few indeed and very hard to organise, since we needed the *laissez passer* - i.e. permission from the school management for them. Otherwise we could not have the keys to the relevant hall or rooms.

In fact, they were called 'thematic/entertainment evenings'. This meant that they were organised only when there were special occasions, i.e. celebrations, anniversaries, the beginning and the end of the school year, or for the best pupils; but only on Saturday or Sunday evening. These evening parties could not last more than three hours, from 20:00-23:00 punctually. There was no question of drinks, not even lemonade, because there was no money for them as we had to pay for the orchestra ourselves. Beer and wine were strictly prohibited. I remember quite well the long and boring procedures we had to pass through in order to make these events possible. After receiving permission from the caretaker teacher, we had to confirm it with the School Management, on the basis of school results. If they were unsatisfactory, there could be no talk of such evening parties. After the permission was given, a special organising committee was set up, which found the most suitable date and set the programme. Then, an orchestra had to be found with 'good guys' to play good Albanian music: traditional or on exceptional occasions some modern music, but always Albanian.

At that time, there were few celebration days: seven or eight for the whole year, too little. They were New Year, the 1st of May, the Teachers and Mothers' Day, the Party Day. So, in order to have such parties every week if possible, we invented different tricks and reasons: the school achievements, birthdays of friends with good results, a new revolutionary initiative and others. Given the above-mentioned hurdles and procedures, these parties gave us a lot of fun and pleasure. Our class and school mates could hardly wait to finish the obligatory five-minute speech before the 'show master' announced that the girls had to choose their partners. Then we devised some

other formats – separate parties on a class, course and school basis, parties organized from girls who also invited boys, and other options. We also established links with different youth organisations at factories and military units. Since our school had many girls, it was linked to the well-known Army Variety Group. Thanks to these bonds, we had the opportunity to multiply the parties outside school and in much better venues.

Walls in Berlin, Bunkers in Tirana

However, during the early 1970s, the population and youth in particular were enjoying some fruits of a certain cautious liberalism. There was a relaxation of strict rules, more fun and entertainment, more space and place for cultivated and modern music, permitting even foreign singers on radio programmes. There were more Italian, French, German and British songs. The theatre, artistic ensembles, music and cultural institutions were thinking and doing more for the youth. The newly established Albanian Television had started some interesting broadcasts specifically tailored for young people, music contests and other events all over the country. The context and format of musical activities became more pleasant and less politicised. The credit for this went to our talented poets, composers, actors and painters, some of whom continue their activity even nowadays. The practice of having periodic song contests on a local basis and especially at university level started with modern songs and forms of interpretation; they were welcomed by the youth in particular. This period also marked the starting point for some musical bands from the famous General Secondary School - Petro Nini Luarasi (1972) who became very well-known as the Beatles of Albania. This was important since that was the school where the sons and daughters of the major party leaders also studied; thus the hope and expectation was there that something was moving in the right liberal direction. It was in this environment of an expected liberal spring that the traditional 11th National Festival of Light Songs took place in December 1972 in Tirana. But to our bad luck, this Festival marked a turning point for the worse, not only in music and arts, but in all walks of life. Musicians and artists became the first scapegoats for the future gloomy intentions of the regime.

The period on the eve of this Festival was very lively, despite the cold winter. It was largely expected and even predicted that everything there would be different from the previous festivals - the dresses, the music, the instruments, its presentation by our two most popular actors, everything. In a word, that Festival would be a San Remo in Tirana. In fact, this glamorous Festival did not disappoint the youth. It seemed that a new era was coming. The song awarded with the first prize was entitled *Erdh pranvera* - *Spring has come* by the best composer, Pjetër Gaci, interpreted with unparalleled talent by the best male singer of that time Tonin Tërshana. The song *Kafeteria Flora* won the second prize. There was another song in the American style *Natën vonë* - *Late at night* sung with exceptional talent by our best legendary singer of all times Vaçe Zela and others.

Funny stories from the tragic Festival!

Then, the tragic news broke out. We were shocked to hear in early January 1973 that our 'great leader' had denounced the 11th Festival as "the greatest shame, a betrayal and symbol of degeneration for youth". To justify such accusations, almost all the songs were outlawed. Even the winning song, "Spring has come" which sounded quite normal with no 'alien manifestation' and based on our best folk motifs was condemned and even banned, since it had a "religious and church touch". Another strong reason was that the song speaks of a young man who sees the flowers and leaves on the trees signalling the coming of spring, but he does not believe it. He believes spring is coming only when he sees the blonde girl he loves, appearing with a white blouse and a lemon-like flavour on her lips. Here was the implied remark from conservative folks: "Why on earth is there such a lack of trust? Why did he not believe that spring had in fact come in 1944, when the country was liberated and the Party brought the spring, and not that song?"

My school mate and neighbour during childhood, Dorian Nini (who passed away a few years ago), also sang a very nice song with typical folk lyrics *Erdhi djali i fshatit tonë* (*A guy from our village came*). It was banned only because the song said that a young man from a neighbouring village had gone and taken away his girl, since her parents did not allow their love. It was known that at that time there were many prejudices and obsolete customs that hindered young girls from marrying the one they really loved. Under such conditions, there were cases when young boys came during the night or when the parents were not at home and 'kidnapped' their girl. Thus their love won and was supported by the public, by and large.

Another telling example relates to one of the most favourite singers at that time, Francesk Radi. Some of his songs are fresh and pleasant to hear even today. For that Festival he had composed a song in favour of the heroic Vietnamese people fighting against the US Army. He accompanied that song with his guitar. This became a target of severe criticism of his song; "how is it possible that a song for the Vietnamese people could be accompanied with the American guitar, a US imperialist musical instrument!" But in fact the guitar was used only 30 years before by Albanian partisans during the Second World War; we had seen it in one of the touching songs from the movie *Victory over death* dedicated to two heroines who were beheaded by the German Nazis in the southern town of Gjirokastra in July 1943. The film producer, a well-known writer Theodor Laço, has said in public that the Chinese Red Guards in the 1970s wanted to destroy the guitar together with other capitalist musical instruments. But suddenly, one of them who had seen this movie in China a few weeks earlier told them to stop, since the guitar was not necessarily capitalist. It was also used much earlier by the Albanian brother partisans during World War II. Thus, the guitar escaped the Great Chinese Cultural revolution but not the censorship of this Festival!

Political Move or Earthquake?

It became clear that the short-lived liberalism was coming to its end. On 16 March 1973, in the morning, the youth leaders of all schools and factories were told to go to the Party Committee of Tirana to hear a very important speech delivered just a day before, on 15 March, by Enver Hoxha. Well, in the Party protocol of those times, whenever he delivered a speech, the press and media quoted it as “an important speech”. But when mention was made of a “very important speech”, then it was something extremely serious. That was the case indeed with this speech. The atmosphere during the several successive meetings where they read it repeatedly was very tense and gloomy. One could see only dark faces in grey with no words. However, on that day we did not have the time to think over the serious consequences that speech would have for many years to come. We realised that later, and saw that this speech entitled “How to understand and fight against the imperialist and revisionist encirclement” with its not more than 30 pages, was the political ‘Hiroshima’ against the youth, arts, and intelligentsia, that ruled the near future of the country and its destiny. 15 March 1973 was the terrible prelude of all evils that were to come until the collapse of communism in Albania in December 1990.

The question arises: Was Albania really under imperialist encirclement (isolation) as was claimed during that time and later? Was there any real and serious danger or any political or military indication of ‘imperialist/revisionist aggression’? Let us make the following brief review on that.

Despite the Cold War, a detente during those years could be clearly seen everywhere in the world. The Soviet-American talks were underway on the limitation of strategic nuclear weapons SALT. In 1971 US President Nixon made his historic visit to China, opening up new prospects for peace and stability. Talks had begun in 1973 on the European Conference on Security and Stability, which ended in 1975 with the signature of the Helsinki Final Act in July that year. Only Albania refused to be part of that Conference, labelling it as the Conference of Insecurity in Europe, since allegedly it was the US and Soviet Union that threatened peace and security in Europe. In the same period, the USA drew back from its war in Vietnam, which opened up a new chapter in international relations, leading to a detente in that region. Even Albania had considerably improved its situation and in 1973 it established diplomatic relations with Greece. There were no more bands of diversionists and plotters as in the 1960s. In other states of Central and Eastern Europe, by the end of the 1960s a new wave of reforms had started and their relations with the EU and other major international organisations were strengthened. *Ostpolitik* launched by legendary Nobel Prize winner Willy Brandt had charted new prospects in the relaxing of relations between East and West and in boosting the friendly relations between them. In the field of culture and music those were the years when famous artists like the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley and others had rocked the world with their hits. These modern trends were

also noted in other genres of arts, painting, cinema and other areas. In short, isolation and encirclement were to be seen nowhere.

Our famous writer, *Ismail Kadare*, in his novels, as well as others like *Dritëro Agolli*, *Xhevahir Spahiu*, were breaking with the clichés, crafting a new artistic realism. This was also visible in music, theatre and sculpture. These trends were supported by a few liberal communist leaders of that time like Fadil Paçrami and Todi Lubonja, former members of the Central Committee of PLA for culture and arts. Likewise, the youth was seeking more ground, life and liberty, although the politicisation of that time was again cross-legged' in Albania. These trends were also to be seen in the fields of economy, industry, agriculture and foreign trade, with important Politburo members at the head of these progressive processes.

Total Self-Imposed isolation

As a matter of fact, the domestic and international developments had very little to do with 'the imperialist-revisionist encirclement' which was trumpeted at that time. But the top Party establishment feared that the new breeze of liberalism was endangering the absolute power of its leader and the infamous principle of class struggle which had wreaked havoc. Therefore, the regime rejected without any single hesitation the Helsinki process and the *Ostpolitik* of Brandt. It distanced itself from the market reforms in other Eastern European countries, sticking firmly to the fixed idea that Albania was the only genuine socialist country in the world. It had proclaimed the EU, NATO, the World Bank, IMF, USA, Soviet Union and Israel as the greatest world enemies and exploiters. Furthermore, Albania accused China of betraying Marxism-Leninism after Nixon's visit to Peking, which led to the break-up of relations. The dictatorial ideological obsession led to the point where Albania did not accept even taking part in sport matches with these countries, at either European or world level. However, the draconian sword fell particularly fiercely inside Albania. It was precisely the above-mentioned meeting of the Party's Organisation in the Central Committee of PLA on 15 March 1973, which launched a campaign with numerous attacks, executions, imprisonments, internments and other heavy-handed sanctions against all progressive and liberal elements and forces. That cruel offensive started in 1973, first against literature and the arts. Many poets, writers, painters and journalists were fired, then sent to prison or internment; some others like Vilson Blloshmi and Genc Leka, two rising stars and martyrs of Albanian poetry were cruelly executed in 1977. This lynching campaign continued in education, defence, economy, foreign trade, then the controversial suicide of the former Prime Minister Mehmet Shehu, until the death of the dictator in 1985. It was exactly the bitter catalogue of these tough measures which would very soon lead to the political, economic, commercial, educational and cultural 'bunkerisation' of the country, and not simply the hundreds of thousands of pill-boxes, which mushroomed over every inch of the country during the 1970s and 1980s. If the former Democratic Republic of Germany became notorious for its Berlin

Wall, Albania tried to overtake it through the construction of hundreds of thousands of bunkers which still leave their traces.

CHAPTER V

The catalogue of 'alien manifestations'

I think that especially for the youth in our countries, but also for foreigners - even those coming from former communist countries - it is worth exploring in brief and in concrete terms and names the catalogue of so-called 'alien or outlandish manifestations'. They are unique only to Albania and they could send anyone to prison or other hard sanctions. The fight against these alien manifestations (I think it is the best possible translation for the Albanian term *shfaqje të huaja*) instantly took much larger and more dangerous proportions following the speech of 15 March 1973, when these cases were also stipulated in the Penal Codes. Mercilessly crushing hostile party and state groups meant tightening measures at every step of private life, denying it totally. Hence, fighting against these manifestations was not simply a moral logos or a slogan. This catalogue may help understand the wide range of the absurd attacks against individuals. A large number of trained and good folks, most of them Party members and leaders, were imprisoned and even executed. Let us look at the major 'alien manifestations' one by one:

The following were categorically prohibited:

- For teenagers and men: having long hair, wearing the so-called 'favourite' (whiskers down the ears) a moustache or beard;
- Wearing large sun glasses, jeans, and the so-called 'cowboy trousers'; to put on these trousers was the worst demonisation: 'cowboy' was the synonym of the devil.
- Girls were not allowed to wear cowboy trousers and skirts above the knee (miniskirts were out of the question), or the so-called maxi skirts as well, décolleté blouses or skirts and dresses tight to the body; neck chains, jewels (except wedding ring) and other similar ornaments. As for wearing the cross or other religious symbols, this was already considered a criminal act. Girls and women were also not allowed to wear long or shiny boots;
- Following various foreign radio and TV broadcasts, especially the Italian ones, except for the news which was on by Tirana itself at 20:00. Listen to or watch the song festivals and contests in Italy and other countries; the famous Italian Festival of San Remo was the incarnation of degeneration, just like the Eurovision Song Contest.

- Imitation and interpretation of songs by US, British, Italian and other foreign singers. I do not know how some songs by Tom Jones, Humperdinck and others escaped such censorship; they were surprisingly allowed (mostly since they denounced negative capitalist phenomena such as divorce, betrayal and so on) and we knew them by heart and even sang them among ourselves in strict confidentiality. Directing TV antennae at the seaside so as to be able to receive foreign stations and channels. There were teams of retired persons and other folk who checked the direction of these TV antennae every morning, notified the relevant bodies and sounded everywhere the note of alarm. The justification in such cases was that it was due to the strong wind during the night! But, what about summer?! However, they did find the magic cure to such a prohibition. They invented the so-called *kanoçe* - can) a small metal device through which it became possible to receive foreign stations secretly. Some years ago during his visit to Tirana, the giant of Italian TV, the legendary showmaster Pippo Baudo, was stunned when he saw such a *kanoçe*. He wondered how it was possible that such a tiny device could hold such a tall man as he is inside! He considered it one of the most precious keepsakes!!!
- Buying abroad and reading the so-called 'yellows' and crime literature by Freud, Kafka, Camus, impressionism, existentialism, the 'stream of consciousness', the theatre of the absurd and other literary trends.
- Interpretation in the above-mentioned evening parties of foreign music, especially jazz, sax, rock and roll and others.

No love&marriage to foreigners

Love and marriage to foreigners were considered as by-products of 'alien manifestations'; they were categorically prohibited and criminalized. After the political divorce with former Soviet Union, many respectable Albanian citizens and even senior men officials who had mostly Russians but also wives from other former communist countries were forced to make a brutal divorce in order to avoid tough sanctions, internment and prisons as alleged spies or under the influence of 'alien manifestations' from East and West. That is a very sad and tragic history for their families and an extremely interesting subject matter, especially for writers, poets, composers and other artists. However, numerous examples of both Albanian women and men before but also in the last 25 years dismiss and disperse all fears, calumnies and accusations against those married to foreigners and show clearly the multi-faceted benefits. In 2012, our good friends, the experienced journalist Gjovalin Kola and the veteran of TV, Shkëlqim Aliaj who both live in Brussels showed a very interesting documentary movie dedicated to blended marriages, largely by Albanian girls with Belgians. It was quite exciting to see foreign husbands telling in fluent Albanian their happy

marriage, life and career with their Albanian wives and vice versa. A couple of these blended marriages are also touched on in the following chapters.

A Barber at Rinas Airport!!!

After the notorious 4th Plenum of the Central Committee of the PLA in June 1973, in order to protect young Albanians from bourgeois and revisionist influences, besides other tough measures, a barber 'welcomed' foreign tourists, with scissors in hand, at the entrance of the International Rinas Airport near Tirana. He had strict orders to cut or trim the long hair and beards of foreign tourists, if possible before they went any further. This was non-negotiable, otherwise the visitor had to return home on the next plane!

Well, it was really ridiculous and tragic at the same time to see how foreign tourists and visitors felt such shame in front of their girlfriends or family members and other relatives. There were some visitors, the British in particular, who did not take it seriously; on the contrary they poked fun at their 'new socialist faces'. But there were many others who protested and preferred to return home rather than have their hair or beard cut in this way!

This example shows clearly that Albania was also attempting to export the 'new socialist man' abroad and did not care a damn about private liberties and human rights; they did not even exist in the socialist vocabulary at that time. I remember a case when a foreign guest asked a senior Albanian official ironically what would happen to Karl Marx if he tried to enter Albania with his huge beard and moustache. Our host replied with a sense of humour that "If you did only 1/1000 of what Marx has done for revolution, then we would not have your hair cut."!!!

Association 'VLERE' – A Defying Case

To come back to the 'alien manifestations' the most radical measure was to prohibit the young from going abroad, except for sport teams, some artistic groups, diplomats and some others, even then under strict surveillance and for a couple of days only. Students were not allowed to study in western countries, even in those with which we had diplomatic relations. The only exception was for a dozen of them who studied in France in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly for languages and natural sciences. The fear was that they might ask for asylum and above all, they could be 'spoiled' by the bourgeois ideology and then affect others on their return home.

In fact, experience during those years and after the 90 shows a totally different picture. Thus, most of those who studied in France became personalities in their own fields: ministers, members of parliament, academics and so on. To make this point more clearly, let me mention below some more recent examples of young students

abroad, as the best way to dismiss those fears, lies and prejudices about the 'imperialist and revisionist encirclement'.

One of the best examples here is undoubtedly the student organization Vlera (Value) founded in Brussels in October 2011. Its very name clearly indicates that it pursues civil, intellectual and spiritual values. One has to attend only a few public events to realise its significance for the whole Albanian community. This is not just a handful of young boys and girls, but nearly 500 active members. They have been very helpful with their valuable service, image and contribution to different cultural events, most recently in the International Cultural Festival Balkan Trafik, political debates, book launches, culinary events and others.

Its current leader, Ms Tibina Shanaj from Vlora, is a student at the Free University of Brussels in political and social sciences. This smiling, generous and efficient organizer has the vigorous support of its committed Secretary, Egin Zjarmi, the Brussels passionate representative Shpat Myftari and other notable members, as Djellza Beqiraj and Qëndresa Gërlica; the latter has been also elected as Vice President of the Youth of the Free University of Brussels (ULB). Tibina with her associates and other energetic members as Bleona Ngjela are always on the move in different events, working, helping, accompanying guests, talking to them, smiling, sharing with them their future ideas and projects, inviting them to their gatherings and so on. In all these instances, there can be no talk of any single influence of 'alien manifestations' of any kind on them. On the contrary, they shine with such fine qualities as courage, determination, modesty and seriousness in their work. In short, they embody the best qualities of their parents and Albanian traditions combining them perfectly with the best European values.

'Former enemies' hire Albanians

Albania's Constitution enacted solemnly in 1976 defined the EU, the IMF, the World Bank, the USA and Soviet Union as the 'worst enemies of mankind and Albania'. Accordingly, any simple contact or communication with them would be severely punished as act of betrayal or surrender to the enemies of socialism. At that time, one the biggest concerns for Albanian diplomats and other official delegations abroad during conferences, trade fairs, exhibitions and other events was to make sure that no representative from the above-mentioned countries would stay next or appear next to them in the table and in the family photo; a former Ambassador was fired only because he accidentally had a courtesy hand-shake with a diplomat from Soviet Union in a Latin American state!

This constitutional stipulation affected each and everyone including the Albanian celebrities in USA and elsewhere. Just to cite an example, the parents of the great Albanian-American entertainment legends, brothers Jame&John Belushi and the well-

known film director Stan Dragoti were born in Albania and they left for USA before World War I. Yet, the names of their sons could not be mentioned in public in Albania until 1990, simply because they were living, playing and producing in the USA! Jim Belushi could not even visit his parent's native birthplace, whereas James and Stan did that in the 1990s and afterwards. Certainly, they were received with the traditional love and honours and they are a great source of pride and inspiration for us!

I had read a lot about the EU until in December 1988, I came in Brussels on business with two other colleagues from the former Ministry of Foreign Trade. For the first time we had also a formal meeting with two British Europarliamentarians to review the possibility of importing large quantities of grains at a very low price from the EU. But on our return to Albania we were sharply criticized for such a meeting, as a violation of the above-mentioned constitutional clause. However, we had a close escape since our meeting did not take place in the EU Parliament building but in Hotel 'Astoria' 'simply for a coffee' and most importantly, we had a sort of permit by our boss.

Well, this picture is totally different now; Albania is member of NATO and other international organizations and candidate to the EU. During the last 25 years our former 'enemy' organizations and states have employed and host in their international staff many smart Albanian citizens, mostly young.

From 'degenerate' to stars and staunch cultural supporters

It is a sharp irony and testimony against that regime, that many of those former youth leaders, artists, musicians, writers, painters and other rank-and-file citizens, who were looked on with disapproval or even condemned to prison for their "modernist degenerated trends in arts, literature and life" today rank among the stars and staunchest supporters of the country's culture and traditions, in Albania and abroad.

If we refer to the archives of that time, we readily find the hard language used against our best writers and artists, including the internationally recognized since that time Ismail Kadare. The regime did not spare the threats and the worse epithets, labelling them as traitors, ready to flirt and collaborate with the bourgeoisie and others to 'undermine revolution' and such like. But the reality in the last three decades has again disproved these accusations and calumnies. Apart from continuous international success with his famous masterpieces, Ismail Kadare has been at the frontline of Albania's integration into the EU and NATO, Kosovo's Independence, and for the protection of Albanian interests and principles by and large. He has also not hesitated to criticise and denounce negative contemporary events and occurrences in Albania, in Kosovo and wherever Albanians live and work.

Likewise, many prominent writers, poets, musicians, actors and painters in Albania, such as Xhevahir Spahiu, Moikom Zeqo, Visar Zhiti, Frederick Rreshpja, Koçi Petriti and others have devoted their entire life and activity in the last 25 years to upholding and further promoting Albania's best artistic, literary and musical traditions. *Skënder Sherifi*, among the best poets of Albanian diaspora has written amazing poems in which he condemns contemporary evils such as crime, corruption and others. However, his style would not have been permitted in yesterday's Albania since it would be a break-up with the method of socialist realism!

The much younger talented Rita Ora, the international singer from Kosovo living in London would not have had a better chance in 'Red Albania'. Whereas the odds for Angelin Preljocaj, the famous choreographer, dancer and ballet director born and living in Paris would be even worse; not only due to the 'decadent' and 'modernist' dancing style but also because his Albanian parents fled away to France in early 1950s! In Brussels there are also such literary personalities accused or even condemned to prison at that time for 'alien manifestations'. They continue their literary activity with the same passion despite the advancing age. Prof. Dhimitër Pango is one of the most typical of them.

The same maybe said for foreign personalities of arts and culture, who were previously viewed mostly as suspicious, enemies, possible dangers for the degeneration of the youth, propagators of bourgeois art and culture and so on. Again, life has proved that these claims were lies without a leg to stand on. There are many examples showing that numerous international art and cultural celebrities have proved to be Albania's genuine friends at all times. One of them is *Mr Nicolas Wieërs*, director of the non-profit organisation 1001 Valises and production expert at Euronews. He is a tested well-wisher and an authority on the culture and arts of the Balkans and Albania. In April 2016, Nicolas with his committed team organised for the tenth successive year at the Royal Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels the well-known international cultural Festival Balkan Trafik. The Balkan and other neighbouring countries are represented there with some of their best folk, traditional and modern musical bands, art exhibitions, tourist promotion and other events. Apart from concerts inside, they also perform in other venues and even in the most beautiful square of Europe, in Brussels' Grand Place. Many wonder how Nicolas is able to select and find the best new art and musical collections and bands from our region. He has been to Albania and has met the great masters of our folk and traditional music. And yet, during the communist dictatorship, he and others like him would most probably have been viewed with a suspicious eye, instead of gratitude and admiration for his genuine friendship!

CHAPTER VI

Political Mini-Tourism

There was no real tourism in Albania until 1990, despite the perfect conditions for its development and promotion, particularly the untouched coastline of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. Tourism was prohibited from fear of 'spoiling' communist morale. The tragic events in 1973 smashed all hopes and expectations of genuine tourism. Therefore, until 1990, there was only 'mini-tourism'. The major tourist venue was undoubtedly Durrës, the second largest city in Albania and specifically The Centre of Tourist Vacations for Foreigners - ALBTURIST, where together with other school mates I served as a tourist guide for a few summers during the period 1973-1978. This was the first time that I could say we were able to go beyond the self-imposed isolation, certainly as far as it was permitted.

During those years, we accompanied tourist groups from several countries – Scandinavians, British, Germans and a few Dutch. They were mainly organised by the Friendship Associations and young sympathisers of communist parties. With minimum expense, they came to Albania not only for 'refreshment' but above all to learn and be inspired by Albania's unique ideology and achievements as the 'red lantern' of socialism in Europe. There were only a few British tourists. They were rich and visited our country merely out of curiosity. They were accommodated in the noble Adriatic Hotel, the second best after the emblematic Dajti Hotel in Tirana, only a few meters away from the Adriatic seashore.

This sort of tourism served to spread the idea that “true, we are encircled by enemies everywhere, yet, we are not alone. We have a lot of friends all over the world”. The Friendship Associations with Albania were managed by the Committee for Foreign Friendly and Cultural Relations in Tirana. In fact, it was a special department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; its Director was a prominent Ambassador. Albturist, in cooperation with the Friendship Associations and other institutions, signed the relevant contracts for such visits of tourist groups; individual tourism was not allowed. As the Albturist state-owned enterprise had only two interpreters, they hired volunteer tourist guides for the summer season. We were offered accommodation and meals, but nothing more. Many years later, when I saw the terms and conditions of the tourist guide contracts in foreign countries and their cash and fringe benefits, I felt very sorry about all that hard work in the terrible summer heat and the sacrifices we made. But, as it was mentioned above, at that time, money for us did not have the current value and worth; the honour and privilege of being a tourist guide, and other moral and immaterial benefits counted much more. To be at that time a tourist guide was something very pleasant, especially since most of us, coming from poor families, were forced to take much harder jobs during the summer time for very little money, in construction, farming, as waiters, shop assistants and so on. Then, we had the great advantage of practising our English, and gaining knowledge and experience for the

future. It should be said that our English was bookish, since we were categorically prohibited from travelling to UK or USA.

Thanks to the extremely cheap tariffs, the beautiful tourist attractions and especially the virgin coastline, and eager to learn from our own experience as the only 'genuine socialist country', foreign tourists came organised in groups of up to 30 people and stayed usually for 10-15 days, or even less. It is fair to say that some 10 - 15,000 foreign tourists came each year until the 1990s, largely in summer and very few during other seasons. Apart from the modest income, they added a lot to the image of socialism in Albania. These tourists were asked to learn as much as possible through a special thematic programme tailored for them. There were one, two and three-day trips to different cities, visits to state farms and agricultural cooperatives, schools and kindergartens, theatres, sport facilities, museums and elsewhere. There were also frequent lectures with some of our best professors and experts, largely on socialist economy, its advantages over capitalism, our ancient and modern history, socio-economic and cultural developments and others. These lectures sometimes lasted for hours, under an exceptional heat, due to the number of challenging questions. The lecturers were not used to such questions and even less to debates. In the evening, the tourists gathered on the terraces of hotels to drink, watch Albanian movies, and once a week to attend wonderful concerts by some of our best folk and cultivated music bands.

Many years later, during different trips abroad, I occasionally had the opportunity to meet some of these tourists. Despite their disappointment, they have remained Albania's friends and well-wishers. They speak everywhere with passion about our music, hospitality, magical nature, the bio foods and our traditions. Many of them have also visited Albania during the last 25 years.

Some years ago, here in Brussels, I came across the magazine of *Le Soir*, *Victoria*, with a cycle of articles on the wonderful beauty and attractions of Albania. At the end of this positive series of texts, it mentioned that Madame Gerda Mulder, Director of the Photo Museum in Rotterdam, was a tourist in Albania for the first time as early as 1973! Then she continued to visit our country after 1990. She also refers there to the big contrast between tourism at that time and four decades later, the huge investments made and other good developments. She highlights the hospitality of mountaineers, the grandiose landscapes of Albanian Alps in the north and the delightful climate with 2,914 hours of sun in the south! But I felt so sorry when I recalled that she and many others like her were deprived at that time of their photographic hobby.

Foreign Party Comrades

“World revolution is not only an aspiration, but an issue raised for resolution”. This is a quotation from the report delivered by Enver Hoxha at the 7th Congress of the PLA in November 1976. It became the ideological basis and the justification for the PLA's support for the Marxist-Leninist movement all over the world. This was the case notably after the second-largest split at the beginning of the 1960s between China and the Soviet Union, after which new factions came to life. The latter supported the official line of the Communist Party of China and Albania; but in the 1970s, after the break between China and Albania, they split further, bearing new distinctive names from their mother parties such as (genuine) M-L parties, M-L parties (reconstructed progressive) and such like. According to numerous official documents, a significant part of the PLA activity during the period from 1970-1990 was cooperation with these parties, with a view to extending the example of 'socialist Albania worldwide' and launching the world socialist revolution under the above-mentioned directive; the latter was also considered as a novelty by PLA, together with the other 'creative' idea that socialism can win over capitalism even in a small socialist country.

The PLA Congresses were attended by leaders from 40 M-L parties from five continents. As usual, in its reports, a special chapter was dedicated to the state of play of the M-L movement and the necessary support by PLA. The greeting remarks and speeches by the chairmen or high representatives from these parties were received with standing ovations and were by and large a glamorous spectacle and political marketing for public opinion both at home and abroad. After foreign tourists, working with these delegations, apart from the extremely politicised foreign Radio Tirana, the participation of the National Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances abroad, the annual sessions of the UN General Assembly, different quality publications, sport events and cultural festivals (in 1970 our famous Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances won the Golden Prize at the International Festival of Dijon in France), the relations with these delegations were the only remaining forms of activity under the conditions of the absurd self-imposed isolation or encirclement.

The most well-known Marxist – Leninist parties in Albania were the following: that of Italy, with Chairman Fosco Dinnuci, Canada with Hardial Bains, Western Germany with Ernst Aust, Austria with Franz Strobl, Great Britain with Reg Birch, Belgium with Jacques Grippa, The Netherlands with Chris Petersen, Australia with Edward Hill, Brazil with João Amazonas, Sri Lanka with Namingilinin Sammunghathasam and many others.

Well, some of them were known in their own countries; mostly thanks to their contribution to the great anti-fascist war and resolute stances against Soviet revisionism and Khrushchev. However, the electoral power in their countries was insignificant. Thus, Jacques Grippa (1933-1990) the leader of the Belgian Communist (M-L) Party was among the first opponents of German Nazism. In 1967 he was expelled by the mother Communist Party of Belgium and set up the M-L faction, which did not

have any further impact. I was only 17 when I saw him and other foreign party leaders near our house while they were on a visit to the historic Museum House where the Albanian Communist Party was founded on 8 November 1941; he was a charismatic person, shaking hands enthusiastically and raising his fist high, saluting everyone there.

Edward Hill was the leader of the Australian Communist Party, well-known as an advocate for workers' rights. Nonetheless, the impact of his role and ideas was also at a minimum in his country. The same applies to his friend from New Zealand, Ron Taylor. Ernst Aust, in Germany, was editor-in-chief of the Communist paper *Roter Morgen* and in 1964 became Chairman of the CP(M-L) of Germany, with its headquarters in Hamburg. He passed away in 1985, only a few months after Enver Hoxha, with whom relations had cooled off in the 1980s. However, after breaking away from the 'mother' communist party his impact in Germany became also insignificant.

Franz Strobl of Austria was member of the Friendship Association with Albania before his election at the head of the Party. His impact over Austria's political life was totally insignificant; moreover, that his party was considered to be just a 'family business'.

In the early 1980s, Hardial Bains became the most well-known chairman of these newly established M-L parties. He was a frequent visitor to Albania with other comrades and family members. Bains originated from a communist family in India and had emigrated to Canada, where he was distinguished for his communist ideas. He died in 1995, at the age of 59. His strength was in the publication of the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Enver Hoxha through the Publishing House 'Norman Bethune'. I had the opportunity to accompany him and his associates on a visit to Tirana in 1980 as well as two tourist groups sent by his party, who never stopped singing revolutionary and M-L songs translated into English by the above-mentioned publishing house. They looked to be much more politicised!

It is really surprising that such parties were also to be found in Switzerland and in tiny San Marino!!! Likewise, in France and even in Poland! During that period, the Chair of the Communist Party of Poland came illegally to Albania, under the name Kazimierz Mijali. After escaping from a prison in Poland he sheltered for many years in secret in a villa in Tirana, until he reportedly turned out to be a spy, a provocateur or sided with China and was returned to Poland.

It should be also stressed that special importance was paid at that time to the strengthening of the M-L movement in Latin America. This was justified with the escalated political and socio-economic crisis there. Following this line of thought and action, it was decided to open embassies in Chile and in Argentina. Given the special significance of Chile, the Director for International Relations in the Central Committee of PLA, Mr Pirro Biti, was appointed as Albania's Ambassador there. But, he could not

land in Santiago, because during this time, in September 1973, Pinochet carried out his *coup d'état*. This coup against a democratically elected left-wing President seemed to legitimate the thesis that capitalism cannot be overthrown through parliamentary ways and means, but only through the gun barrel and armed revolution. This was and remained the major thesis of Albania's communist Party leadership.

During the talks and conversations with our experts and leaders our foreign comrades raised many questions, concerns and doubts for their activity abroad. Thus, for instance, with regard to popular and guerrilla warfare, one of the major issues addressed in these lectures was that in Belgium and in the Netherlands there were neither hills nor mountains as in Albania. Then NATO was present, so how could they fight there as we did during World War II? Our equivocal reply was that this required creative thinking and initiative and that they should penetrate the army, youth, everywhere. The heated debates went on for hours on end, making translation exceptionally hard and tiring for us at that time, as young and inexperienced interpreters.

Challenges and Problems

Unlike tourists, working with these delegations implied much more responsibility; it was too tiring and often boring. Here I do not mean their reception and accommodation in Tirana and elsewhere. These issues posed no problems. For their reception and activities there was a special Party protocol, which engaged the highest Party and local state structures. In each district, one of the three Committee Party Secretaries and the relevant instructors were entrusted with accompanying these delegations at every step, together with the appointed expert from the International Department of the Central Committee of the Party. The guests were received everywhere, right from the Rinas International Airport, by pioneers with bouquets of flowers. Meanwhile, their visits to factories, mills, farms, agricultural cooperatives, schools, universities, kindergartens and different institutions were turned into festive gatherings, with chanting of many slogans, as well as partisan and revolutionary songs. In fact, I meant the official and working talks with these delegations. Likewise, they had several meetings and talks with the best experts and professors of socialism at that time; they came mainly from the V. I. Lenin Higher Party School, Tirana University and other renowned political and economic institutions. Then there were the long heated debates with prominent Albanian lecturers on revolution, 'the new socialist man', and other topics. Imagine that as interpreters we were accommodated in a villa only 10 meters away from the Adriatic Sea, we were watching our friends and mates bathing and playing, whereas we were burning and bored to death by ideological debates.

In the talks with these guests, just as with tourists, there were also mentioned with a great deal of concern problems, reservations and even objections. In all these cases,

one could see that our senior officials gave the appearance of being wiser, claiming to know everything about world politics and even have access to absolute truth. For example, one of the issues for debate from 1973 onwards was the growing of moustaches and beards, which was considered to be an 'alien bourgeois and revisionist manifestation'. But looking at their portraits hanging everywhere, the foreign tourists and guests drew attention to the beards of Marx and Engels asking us ironically what would happen with their beards if they would be in Albania those days!

Another very hard, if not impossible issue to explain to foreigners was "Albania, the only country in the world, free from taxes and duties". Their question was how, then, was the state funded and how did it function from the financial point of view without such taxes and duties – public administration, kindergartens, hospitals, schools, the army, the police, prisons and other costs? Our experts explained that the above-mentioned financing was ensured through the so-called 'norm of accumulation', which in our country kept on increasing; in 1980 it was as high as 33 per cent of GDP! This high level of accumulation was justified by the growing need for major public works and defence, in order to cope successfully with the 'imperialist and revisionist isolation'. But what was in fact the 'high norm of accumulation?' As our experts explained, 'socialist accumulation' was the amount of money that was saved from salaries and put aside for the state. In reply the guests said: "Well, but this is the same as taxes and duties, only the name differs! But our experts continued with their boring, unconvincing explanations that allegedly the substance and the goals of our accumulation were totally different: they served socialism and the working class and not the rich and imperialist objectives!

No flowers in Rome!?

With regard to our anti-bourgeois party overpropaganda of that time, let me mention here another true story, involving the former gardener of the Foreign Ministry in the 1980s. In 1983, for two months, he was sent to our Embassy in Rome, Via Asmara 9, to care for and plant its large garden with flowers and trees. They could have hired Italian gardeners and services for that job, but it would have cost a fortune! Besides, this was also a way to show recognition for this man's tremendous work over 30 years, being the only chance for him to go abroad and, as we said at that time, to see the world. Going abroad at that time was the happiest event for anyone, of even greater significance than marriage or getting a house. In fact, it was a golden opportunity, although one had to comply with numerous procedures to enjoy that right!

The former Foreign Minister, with his characteristic good sense, invited the gardener to his office before leaving for Rome. After congratulating and wishing him a perfect trip abroad, the Minister told him to be very cautious in Rome, but also on his return to Albania. Most specifically, when speaking to others about his impressions of Rome, he had better "zip his mouth" and not talk about the things he would see there. Our

poor gardener, an honest man, was amazed by what he saw in Rome; he realised that capitalism was not in decay, as was claimed in Albania. He returned to Tirana after a month and a half, and all his friends came to see him in his apartment. Certainly, he could not forget his boss's advice. So when they asked him how he liked Rome, he replied reservedly: "Well, it was not anything special, just normal!!" To questions about living standards in Rome, he said they were very bad indeed! "What about beggars?" was the next question, to which he replied: "There were so many of them in the streets". Asked about strikes and protest rallies, he found it again very easy to reply: "Oh, they were held every single day". In short, he was denying everything he saw there. Then, came the final question with doses of humour and irony: "What about flowers, does Rome have any of them?"

The poor gardener thought that this was the easiest and the most convincing question to answer, without knowing the laughter he would generate with his funny reply: "What do you mean, if there are flowers there, then, why did the state send me to Rome?"

Then everybody burst out laughing. It was ridiculous, but the poor gardener was politically correct. I have to mention this, because there were many others like our gardener, who were carried away by enthusiasm and could not stop talking about the wonders they had seen abroad. But this ran contrary to the official line of the Party. The crushing official reply in these cases was: "How could you come to know the bitter capitalist reality in a few days or weeks? It seems that you are affected by its system and degeneration". There were many other cases when they were fired from their jobs and even sent to prison for such 'capitalist and revisionist propaganda'.

CHAPTER VII

Even Business and Foreign Trade in Bunkers!

I spent almost 14 important years (1978-1992) working as an expert and for a short time in 1991-1992, as Director for Business Advice in the former Ministry of Foreign Trade. It was set up in 1977, after the break in relations with China and the adoption of the most important constitutional principle of "building socialism by relying entirely on our own efforts". During this time, especially in the 1980s, Foreign Trade was in "the front line of the fight against the imperialist and revisionist blockade" (although to be honest, we were isolated from them by our own choice, due to the absurd principles and slogans. Hence it is more accurate to speak about a self-imposed isolation or self-encirclement). Therefore, even foreign trade was based strongly on politics and ideology; from 1975 onward was heavily limited by the new constitutional laws, which

prohibited it from receiving aids, credits and loans, industrial cooperation and other international trading practices.

Accordingly, the guiding principle of foreign trade was 'no imports without exports' i.e. the import volume would depend on the value of exports. Usually, our annual export value never exceeded 300 million US dollars, but the equivalent import value was too little for the growing needs of our economy and people. Our major export commodities were chrome ore, crude oil, vegetable, tobacco, textiles and some other occasional/seasonal products. Whereas imports included a wide range of raw materials for the Metallurgical Complex, chemical fertilizers, mechanical goods and food stuffs.

To cut this story short and to illustrate in plain terms these absurd principles and practices, in the following there are some true stories related to this specific sector of Albania's economy at that time.

Water for the US Army!!?

In 1986, after an investment was made amounting to a quarter of a million US dollars in a wonderful tourist attraction called Cold Water in Vlora city in the south, huge quantities of delicious drinkable water became available for export sale. Accordingly, foreign purchasing companies had to be found by hook or by crook, so that the state could earn several million US dollars. These funds were already included in the state budget, although it was the first time we ever tried to sell water. No one wanted to hear that even this item, which was considered as easily saleable due to its superior quality, had its own difficulties, especially in defining the selling price. At a meeting in France in December 1988, with two of my colleagues and some representatives of a well-known French company, they told us that our water, regardless of its superior quality, was very hard to sell. It needed time, market research and marketing, a totally unknown and unacceptable concept in our country at that time. Hence, Albanian drinkable water could not go to market with the same prices as other countries that had traditions and reputations, despite its superior quality. Secondly, it was necessary to have proper water containers, which we lacked, and there was no hope of that. All these elements had a strong impact on the sale of our water and its prices, especially in Arab markets.

Nonetheless, thanks to our competent experts and lawyers it became possible to sign a contract, which however was not implemented due to lack of trust. Then, another opportunity was detected to sell that water to Malta, which badly needed it, but at a much lower price. But, someone in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the PLA learnt and stated very angrily that our water destined for Malta was going to be used by the US military base there. He posed the killing question for us: "How was it possible that US imperialist soldiers should drink our pure socialist water, and at

such a low price! Never! True, we needed cash badly, yet not at the cost of our sacred principles!”

This was like a real bomb, producing an ‘earthquake’ in our Ministry! Albeit the arguments we provided that, in the final analysis, it was not our business to know about the water consumers since the deal was with the State of Malta! This contract was cancelled and the water was wasted, adding not a cent to our revenues.

Collection of documents - sin and crime?

In many meetings, one of the most frequent words we heard was *incasso*; but I failed to understand the meaning of this word which sounded so strange to me. Even less could I realise why were it was considered as capitalist ‘sin’ and ‘enslaving credit’. Later on, when I was for training at the Economic University in Vienna, I learned that *incasso* was a usual and common form of payment, which in English is called collection of documents. The idea here is that the exporter, thanks to excellent relations and trust, sends a certain commodity, whereas the receiver, after checking its quality and quantity, collects the documents and forwards them to its own bank, which makes the payment. This simple technical and payment procedure lasts from one week to 15 days. It is a very normal form of payment, especially when there are reliable partners involved. This form of trade and payment was common especially with Greece, when we were forced to demand commodities which were badly and urgently needed for our industry, mainly. But, again, the vigilant eye of the Party and State detected this ‘disguised credit’ we were allegedly receiving from the Greek capitalists, in an open violation of our socialist Constitution of 1976!! Despite the technical arguments from our best experts and executive officers, who were also politically reliable, the order was categorical: “Don’t make jokes with *incasso*, or otherwise find yourself in a prison cell!”

Business - not necessarily bad!

One of the basic arguments for banning domestic private business under the Constitution, and especially international business and economic cooperation, was that they could lead to the ‘exploitation of man by man and also spoil the new socialist man’. As I have done throughout this book, instead of academic or theoretical arguments, I shall offer a few concrete facts and names, to show that people, Albanians and foreigners can do business and yet be good social citizens and a friends of Albania.

The German-Albanian Economic Association (DAW) has been very active in the last 22 years. Among its large number of members are also Albanian business people living in Germany. Since November 2005, the DAW President has been *Mr Hans-Jürgen Müller*, a former member of the Board of the Federal Foreign Trade Confederation. With the strong support of the German Government and together with other relevant

institutions, he has offered his contribution to holding numerous official meetings, conferences and missions in Albania with German business people and dignitaries, in Berlin, Tirana and elsewhere. The 'engine' of this association is *Mr. Michael Albert* Michael, doing his best to promote economic cooperation and investments between our two countries. He is a true friend of Albania and knows almost every single inch of the country, thanks

The second case relates to the Albanian Honorary Consul for North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany, our fellow citizen, *Mrs Anduena Stephan*. After studying English at Tirana University, in the 1990s she left for London to study business management. Then, she linked her life with a german gentleman, Andreas and they have a happy family with two children. Anduena started a bright career in Essen, in Germany, becoming Director in the giant German construction company Hochtief. Afterwards, she set up her own private company, Ideal, in Essen, aiming to boost business cooperation with Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and other frontier regions. In the last 25 years, apart from forging the close bonds with her family, friends and fellow citizens in Albania, Anduena has also done a lot to promote friendly relations with Germany. Each time we meet, she keeps telling with joy and concern about her current and future projects, not only in the field of business, but in arts and culture as well. There could hardly be a better choice for Honorary Consul in the largest state in Germany with its 18 million of people.

Moving to Brussels, after graduation from Tirana University and some work experience in Albania in the 1990s, our good friend, *Mrs. Silva Reka* came to Brussels in search of a much better life, where she could develop and demonstrate her strengths and gifts. She did also study for business management and married Jan, a Belgian professor of French and Spanish; they have two nice children. After 20 years of experience in various jobs, Silva is working as Operational Relationships Manager at Ingenico in Brussels. Although in personal and material terms she is quite happy and has accomplished a lot, Silva wants to do much more for her native country and its image. With her modesty, lively nature and open-mindedness, she has gained the admiration of Albanian and foreign friends, including diplomats and other senior officials.

The story of PM

Although we were doing business in foreign trade, it was confined within very strict lines and even to friendly countries. To this, one had to add also the import restrictions under the major slogan of that time 'no imports without exports'. This was a real torture, because our commodity supplies were very poor and almost without a market. So even the talks with some friendly countries had to be stopped or proceed under unpleasant conditions, since we had to refuse many goods and commodities they offered, due to lack of cash on our side. At certain moments, this also produced funny situations and episodes, which have remained even now a source of humour.

Such was the case during a working visit to Turkey in 1986. In the talks at experts' level, we were drafting the list of possible import and export commodities to be included in a formal state protocol. But these talks came almost to a deadlock. The Turkish side offered a series of commodities which we could not afford to buy. They offered tourist buses, but we could not buy them since, as mentioned above, tourism was very limited and we already had some 20 buses which were more than enough. Then they offered refrigerators. Under these circumstances, so as not to spoil the brotherly atmosphere since the 'no' list would be much longer, the chair of our delegation proposed ingeniously to put a 'PM' in the Protocol text, which meant *pro memoire*. The idea was that if and when we would need them during the year, we could address the Turkish side. Then they offered washing machines and again it was PM. Their list continued with offers of colour TV sets and again we proposed to put PM. In short, we rejected all these items, not because we did not need them - on the contrary - but since we did not have the necessary funding. Because the export plan was usually fulfilled only to 60-70 per cent, we had to cut more 'luxury commodities', as the above-mentioned were defined. Then, in order not to put our friendly hosts in an awkward position, especially our Turkish friends who were so kind and generous with us each time we were in Ankara, and in order to avoid another 'no', we proposed maybe for the tenth time to note PM in the list. Meanwhile, this catalogue of PMs had become quite large, accounting almost for half of the total list. Then, at a certain moment when we added another PM, the Turkish director and chair of the working group, a very competent and friendly person, after listening with a great patience all our PMs, turned to us with a little smile and said sweetly: "It seems to me that this protocol has become..." and then he said in Albanian "*Punë Muti*"(bullshit) which coincided perfectly with PM in French! Our chairwoman Fiqrete Sala instantly burst out laughing, with her loud, characteristic voice, and then all of us followed. She asked how he came across this phrase in Albanian, which was in fact the most proper term for that situation. He told us that it was a friend from Kosovo who had warned him to be cautious with Albanians about this PM, which in Albanian did not mean *Pro Memoire* but just 'bullshit'. Later on, with our colleagues, when we were discussing the same thing we asked them humorously whether they liked to put 'no' or PM in the text and everyone laughed, saying PM!

Since we are in Turkey in this time journey, and during those years we frequently went there with official and business delegations, I retain the most best memories both from the competence and the friendly atmosphere that our Turkish friends provided for us there, in every way.

Eyvallah, Mashallah, Inshallah!

In general, all our foreign counterparts had a very fine and elegant way of accommodating the different positions between us and I have learned a great deal in this respect. To be more concrete, below is a true story of a conversation between a

senior Albanian official and again his Turkish colleague during a visit by the latter to Tirana, our capital. To help the reader grasp its context better, let me add here that there are numerous old Turkish words which form an intrinsic part of Albanian day-to-day vocabulary. Surprisingly enough, although there are very nice Albanian equivalents, the old Turkish words have gained ‘citizenship’ in our language and they are widely used even by the younger generation. Moreover, there are some peculiarly vital words, which in certain situations sound even better, thanks to their specific connotation and emotional touch.

Given the sharp differences in our socio-political systems, one may easily note how well the Turkish friends expressed their position during the host’s welcome remarks, through their laconic answers. The following dialogue which despite some exaggeration “in letters” remains true in “spirit” occurred during the arrival of a Turkish senior official and the welcoming remarks by his Albanian host:

- A: “We are delighted to extend our welcome to you!”
- T: “Eyvallah, eyvallah!” (Thank you)
- A: “We have a lot of victories and achievements under the Party leadership in all domains!”
- T: “Mashallah, mashallah.” (Wonderful, God has willed it)
- A: “In the past, the people suffered a lot, they were poor, exploited, homeless and living in miserable conditions, illiteracy, oppression....!”
- T: **“Hallah, hallah!” (what a pity)**
- A. “But we are going to have other achievements in the future, in building a new life.....”
- T: “Inshallah, inshallah!” (By will of God, let us hope)
- A: “We have shut down all churches and mosques. We are the only atheistic country in Europe.”
- T: “Tobestafurullah, tobestafurullah”! (Oh, my God!)
- A: “But we hope that other peoples will follow our example, since religion is the opium of the people.”
- T: “Maazallah, maazallah!” (God ptotect us!)

A pair of laces and buttons, please!

Another funny story to end this chapter with more humour. Since secret state agents had infiltrated the foreign trade enterprises, this certainly did include phone tapping. Under these circumstances, since while talking even to our friends abroad we tended to make some modest requests, mainly for special items which we could not find in Albania, we had to be very cautious and careful. It's quite interesting to recount an episode with my former Director, a very honourable gentleman, former Dean and senior official, during a phone conversation with our Trade Attaché in Prague, a very good friend of ours. To tell the truth, my director wanted his friend to buy for him, and bring when he next came to Tirana, a rain coat and a pair of shoes. This was necessary since these commodities in Tirana were of a very poor quality and not suitable to wear when with foreign delegations. Our foreign colleagues could not imagine we were so poor that we had only one suit and a shirt to put on while accompanying them in Albania or when going abroad, both for winter and summer time. Now, to disguise this conversation, which was tapped, my director asked our friend to buy him a few raincoat buttons, stressing very ingeniously, colour brown and size 56!

Likewise, he said that he needed a pair of shoe laces no.44, the size of his feet! Our friend was first surprised by such funny requests, but then he realised the situation. Thus, even if they overheard his conversation and accused him of corruption, he would say it had nothing to do with that, since he wanted only a pair of laces and buttons for his rain coat and shoes, which he had bought abroad himself!

CHAPTER VIII

Major Socialist Slogans

Our society at that time cannot be understood in all its dimensions without touching on the major socialist slogans, the outcome of all the above-mentioned processes and developments. These slogans occupied a very large and particular place and accompanied us during the whole process of the country's revolutionisation after 1960. Most of them in fact derived from speeches and discourses of the 'great leader', becoming universal truths and maxims. There is a wide-ranging catalogue of these slogans. Therefore, below they are classified as thoroughly as possible, subdivided into the relevant categories of our socialist life, with some short explanations when necessary:

On the construction of socialism

- With the pick in one hand and the rifle in the other

This became the major slogan and motif in life at that time. It was eternalised in the famous martial song written by the greatest composer of that time, Prenk Jakova. It was sung collectively as an anthem at the most solemn national and international events, meetings, congresses, celebrations, even family festivities, weddings, and other occasions. Together with the song *Enver Hoxha Tungjatjeta* (A long life to Enver Hoxha) dating back to the mid-1970s, *With the pick in one hand and the rifle in the other* (*Në njerën dorë kazmën dhe në tjetrën pushkën*) concluded all mass manifestations and concerts everywhere. Our foreign M-L friends, tourists and members of the friendship associations also learned it by heart and sang it in Albanian and translated in English.

- *Think, live and work as revolutionaries*

In the mid-1970s, the last word was replaced with ‘as in encirclement’.

- *Be the first in sacrifices and the last in claims!*

(Note that even a requirement at that time was considered as a ‘claim’), accompanied by the next similar slogan:

- *Place the general over the personal interest*

On the defence of the fatherland and the imperialist-revisionist encirclement (isolation)

- *Albania – the Red Lantern of revolution and socialism in Europe!*
- *Albania – a granite rock and castle of socialism on the Adriatic coast!*
- *Defence of the motherland, a task above all other tasks!*
- *One falls down, thousands rise up* (used in the case of the above-mentioned heroes and martyrs, to replace them by thousands).
- *This is the army of a ‘soldier people’! Everyone is a soldier of the fatherland*
- *The enemy aims us at the gun barrel, we aim them at the cannon barrel!*
- *Hold the eye on the target and the finger on the gun trigger!*
- *Keep the powder dry!* (most common at that time)
- *Kill the enemy with the first bullet!*
- *The borders of the motherland are untouchable!*

- *Chrome ore and crude oil smash the blockade* (since chrome ore and crude oil were our two major export products accounting for 50 per cent of revenues).
- *We dance in the wolf's mouth!*

This slogan, while showing that Albania was surrounded on all sides by imperialist and revisionist enemies, became a symbol in the political language of that time. There was also a special song entitled *We are dancing in the wolf's mouth* which was dedicated to that slogan. As far as I can remember, it went on to say amidst other things that "we are dancing in the wolf's mouth, what a great honour for you Albania to have us like that!" Both prominent singers are alive and have talked in the media about such a strange song.

On the countryside and socialist agriculture

- *Agriculture - an issue for the whole people!*

It should be mentioned that agriculture at that time accounted for over 70 per cent of GNP; 80 per cent of the population lived in the countryside.

- *Take to the mountains and hills and turn them into fertile land like the lowlands!*
- *Become self-sufficient with bread grains!*
- *If I were 20 years old, I would go at once to our beautiful socialist countryside and work there!*

This was a saying by Enver Hoxha in 1975, which was followed again by revolutionary initiatives. Thousands of young folk, teachers and doctors left their towns and went to work on a 'voluntary basis' in villages and remote areas all over the country for 1- 3 years. In fact, this 'appeal and invitation' for youth to go to the countryside was a compulsory call to thousands of young female teachers who were obliged to stay for a long time and sometimes for ever in the countryside and remote areas. Even after many years of work there, no one cared to bring them back to the town near their families to make a living there; only those who had strong Party connections benefited and came back. It should also be said that many of them could not get married and create their own family, due to the backward mentality in the countryside with regard to such girls and women. Under these conditions, their transfer to the town became a great social problem, with no proper solution. Therefore, the appeal by the leader was a direct, high-level call for them to reconsider their lives and stay in the countryside; and moreover to regard that not as suffering or sacrifice, but as an honour and privilege.

On the class struggle

- *The class struggle (Lufta e klasave) develops in continuous waves; it goes up and down, it weakens and intensifies, but it never disappears!*

With regard to this slogan, which produced so many human tragedies even within the ranks of the system's high nomenclature, a true episode took place during an annual analysis of the work of the interior and security agency of the district of Përmet in 1985. Let me add here that Përmet is a small town in the south. It has a kind and cultivated people, some of the best musical and cultural traditions, wonderful roses and many other good things. Even now, there is hardly any petty crime registered in that area, which seems to be blessed by God.

In the said meeting, as usual there was the delegate from Tirana, a member of the Politburo. The District Prosecutor was trying to show his joy and pride with the following remark:

- "It's so nice to be here in Përmet, dear comrade.... And to rejoice in the fact that the prison cells here are empty, without any inmates!"

However, he was totally embarrassed when the delegate gave the following disappointing reply:

- "How is that possible, comrade Prosecutor? Where is the class struggle here, does it take place or not?!!"

No one uttered a word and silence reigned in the room. But, then, the District Party Secretary intervened gently saying that this was right, they were developing the class struggle, but the fact mentioned was much more thanks to the great educational work done there by the Party and other state bodies and the people. Most importantly, he added, the class struggle went on also in Përmet and so there would soon be inmates in the prison there, and this was indeed the case, just to prove the Party directive on class struggle correct!!!

But this issue is much more serious and it certainly deserves more space and attention. Moreover, unlike other communist countries, the problem with the notorious 'class struggle' in Albania was that it was waged and extended on biological grounds. Accordingly, when a family member was denounced and imprisoned, this had instant repercussions on the whole family and their relatives, inventing charges and accusations against them, mostly for 'lack of revolutionary vigilance'. This had serious repercussions on the children's future, since their biographies were examined several times in all their ins and outs, going back to their grandfathers and grandmothers on both sides, uncles and so on.

Former 'Class Enemies' - now prominent patriots

However, the reality and developments in later decades show clearly that these 'class enemies' have turned out to be genuine patriots who, despite their sufferings and decades in prison, set a very good example in Albania and abroad. Here I have to highlight again Brussels, since during the communist regime the European capital was considered as the hotspot of the domestic treacherous reaction, meaning the emigrants, the EU, and NATO:

A bright example here is *Lek Pervizi*, an 86-year-old man who suffered more than others under the previous regime. Just because of his father, who was an army general under former King Zog, defending the lands and due to the class struggle which went deep into the biological roots of a family. For 45 years, he and his whole family spent their life in prison. Nonetheless, here in Brussels for the last 25 years, Lek Pervizi ranks among the most positive-thinking men and with a keen sense of humour. The long time in prison has surprisingly not impaired in the least his faculties of thought, action and literary inspiration. Instead of only complaining about his bitter past, Mr. Pervizi is committed to writing books and poems. He even has his own homepage and journal *Red and black*, which reflects the bitter stories of the past, the current developments and prospects for the future, together with his children who are also good artists. He is also Chairman of the Former Political Prisoners of the communist regime.

Let me now move on to some other prominent Albanians in Belgium, whose families were considered hostile, traitors, or at least were disliked by the former regime. They left Albania in pursuit of a more dignified life and asked for political asylum here in Brussels in the mid – 1950s and later on. One of the most representative of them is Mr *Ahmet Gjanaj* from Kukës in the north. He was born and grew up in Brussels. Despite that, Ahmet has a perfect command of the history of his own native land, its language and culture and last but not least its traditional and folk motives, songs and dances. Not only that, but he was inspired by them and did his best to bring and implant these wonderful traditions here to Brussels as well, not simply for festivals or artistic events, but far beyond that. He wanted them to accompany Albanians from their cradle and throughout their lives. He founded years ago what is now the largest cultural association of Albanians in Belgium and even in Europe, called ALBABEL, and the Albanian language school Vatra with a team of committed Albanian teachers led by Mr. *Ibrahim Dizdari*. They have become indispensable in festive and official events and celebrations. It is amazing to see the little children, pupils, students and their parents dancing and singing together their proud inheritance of songs and dances, with gorgeous folk costumes, and reciting in Albanian the masterpieces of our literature and arts. But this was not easy to achieve. Ahmet has worked with painstaking effort and was elected a member of the local council in the commune of Molenbeek. Ahmet's contribution was noticed also by Belgian socialist leaders and they picked him as a candidate for the regional elections to the Brussels Parliament. Ahmet Gjanaj won in

these elections held on 25 May 2014 and became the first ever Albanian MP in the European capital.

If Mr Gjanaj chose to be engaged directly with parliamentary activity, our friend Mr *Safet Kryemadhi* from Dibra has devoted his life and career to politics and literature. Safet is advisor to the Brussels Parliament. As a well-known writer, he has published some interesting and attractive books in French on Albania's tourist attractions, history, traditions and recently a collection of legends and fables. In April 2016, the Albanian Embassy hosted a very interesting and inspiring cultural event to hand over to Safet the Letter of Acknowledgment from our Foreign Minister, Mr Ditmir Bushati, for his contribution to Francophonie. Our well-known actor, Anila Dervishi, recited with passion and talent some of Safet's best literary pieces, accompanied by Afrim Jahja on the guitar.

Another telling example how the sons and daughters of the so-called class enemies of that time have turned out to be genuine patriots is Mr *Ali Islamaj*. He came here with his parents from Tropoja in an effort to escape the dictatorship at that time. He is director of one of the largest secondary professional schools for cooking and tourism, Coovi. It has 1,800 pupils and teachers, and a 14th-floor glass tower restaurant. The school authorities in Brussels have told us that Ali is the most successful among some 60 directors there. He is really enjoying life with his family and two talented daughters, yet as a patriotic citizen of Albania, he is concerned and wants to do much more for his own country. Given this ardent desire, three years ago, his school established an active partnership with the High School of Tourism in Tirana, becoming the first example of such cooperation between Albanian and Belgian schools. This is being implemented through frequent exchanges of pupils and teachers, both in Tirana and in Brussels. This is largely thanks to the generosity and genuine patriotism of our good friend, Ali Islamaj!

The USA was and has remained the promised land and the ideal place also for rank and file Albanians and prominent personalities both prior and after World War II. Much has been written and spoken about them after the 1990s, depicting them as the incarnation of the finest qualities, as genuine patriots and democrats, freedom loving persons, upholding and fighting everywhere for their native country's lofty interests. Mr. Sami Repishti ranks among many of them as an outstanding writer, humanist and historian. It is quite impressive to see that Mr. Repishti is also generous with positive remarks and appreciation in the media and various events for Albanian "success stories" everywhere in the world; the latter not necessarily VIP or celebrities, but first and foremost young promising talents and citizens in Albania and particularly abroad. This is an important message which cannot be taken for granted, especially at a time when the media is hunting for and rushing to spread negative news.

CHAPTER IX

On the eve of democracy

Thus, slowly we were heading towards the 1990s without any visible prospect of improvement. Everybody felt this, but while working in foreign trade we could perhaps see most clearly the lamentable situation. The country was surviving only thanks to promises for the future, with the Utopic prospect of 'receivable revenues' and with the vanished hope of *insallah*. Each year, a scheduled growth of 20 per cent was announced, but that was only as compared with the performance of the previous year, when the latter in fact had been only 60 per cent of the projected figure! All this at a time when the population was growing rapidly, together with the associated requirements and demands for the most basic imported goods. The situation was very tense, due to large deficits in our exports.

Meanwhile, there were people and experts at that time who raised their voices, demanding changes to various laws and practices. Reformist elements, even in the high party positions and ministers were suggesting reviewing the issue of accepting credits and aids from abroad, as well as the reconciliation and establishment of diplomatic relations with international organisations like the EU, the World Bank and IMF, and with countries like USA, Germany and former Soviet Union. They were also asking permission for private property in its most primitive forms, which were harshly banned in 1967. Because even a shirt or yogurt was not allowed to be produced on a private basis?! They properly argued that the Constitution of 1976 and other principles should not be treated as dogmas and taboos! Given the high rate of unemployment, it was also proposed to send organised groups of working emigrants to some Arab countries, Cyprus and elsewhere. This extremely refractory mentality of the leadership at a time when energetic and bold actions were demanded to overcome that awkward situation was shown, to our tragic cost, even during the three historic visits by former Bavarian Prime Minister, the German legendary politician F. J. Strauss, in 1984 and 1986. All his offers of aid and credits were rejected. In the meantime, the propaganda about the alleged economic growth and prosperity with an 'empty spoon' continued to blow its ridiculous trumpets! The anecdote about social and economic welfare as something that 'grows and grows but no one can ever see it', had become known everywhere.

The irony of such a situation reached another climax in late 1980s, when it was announced that Mexico had awarded Albania the Prize for Food! The people by and large were stunned to hear about it, when we did not have the basic essentials to eat, such as cheese, bread, meat, coffee and milk, and yet were still top for self-sufficiency in food products!! In fact, our country was assessed by an anonymous institution in faraway Mexico, just on the strict implementation of the principle of self-sufficiency in bread grains. That is to say we did not import food commodities, since we were

supposed to satisfy these needs ourselves, which was not the case at all. However, we tried to cling stubbornly to the absurd principle: 'We shall live on grass, but never betray the M-L principles'!!!!!!

Thus, Albanians by and large realised that the regime was not only incapable of bringing the country out of its hopeless situation, but it was even ridiculing us at those moments with the tragedy of its own people! Supplying the economy with the much-needed raw materials had become impossible, since we did not have the necessary funds due to the poor export performance. However, Albania could not import more than it exported and this led to severe cuts and restrictions in the most basic consumer commodities including sugar and coffee – the latter at that time was a vital social and spiritual institution for Albanians, much more than in other countries.

Under such circumstances, when due to energy shortages most of the factories could not operate, the government decided to pay temporarily thousands of workers with 80 per cent of their monthly wages without going to work at all! But this went for months and months! Unemployment was working havoc in our socio-economic life. It was during this time that a funny true story became popular in the country, having its origin in the northern city of Shkodra, 'the capital of humour'. After a lecture on the role of work in transforming ape into man, at the Q&A session, a person asked the following question, which produced a lot of laughter in the room:

"Friedrich Engels is right when he mentions that it was through work that ape became man, like us today. Now I have been unemployed for the last two years, doing nothing in life. Is there a danger that I may become an ape again?!"

Besides, it should be emphasised that the situation was totally different from the 1960-70s, when for the sake of truth, apart from well-known negative events, persecution on the account of political convictions, religion and others, the state propaganda machinery was much more effective. Many hospitals, schools and kindergartens were opened, a large number of factories, mills and gigantic hydropower plants were built and commissioned, there were many cultural festivals, movies, theatre shows, more fun and entertainment. Likewise, various socio-economic measures were taken in the field of education, health, social security and the supply of food and other commodities was much better than in the 1980s. Afterwards things went from bad to worse in all walks of life. There was despair and lack of hope for the future also among our own parents. Therefore, even those factories and inaugurations greeted with a glamorous fanfare, even a great public work like the largest Hydropower Plant commissioned in Fierza in the north, were seen with scepticism. People no longer thought that they would produce any real benefits in their day-to-day life. Hunger for food products and consumer goods had reached unprecedented levels. We had only the right to buy one kg of meat per week - lamb, pork and veal and one kg of chicken. Coffee had become extremely tight, with only 250 gr per week.

The reliability of the political and economic system had almost collapsed. Meanwhile, the 8th five-year plan (1981-1985) with its targets and objectives as the first one under the principle of 'relying entirely on our own efforts', only added to the mounting lack of confidence. People could clearly see that the regime had failed not only to make the world 'speak Albanian', as it was claimed, but Albanians were reduced to such a lamentable state that they were speaking and murmuring to themselves! They had to wake up after midnight to go and buy milk for their babies. Even kerosene was rationed, but without it one could not even take a shower, since the baths functioned mostly with kerosene!

Due to lack of imported coffee, in our cafeterias and houses it became common to have coffee made from barley! We can never forget a respectable grandmother living next to us in Tirana, while we were watching the World Football Chairmanships on the TV. She always prayed naively for Brazil's victory, thinking that in this way coffee would be available for sure; because as it was mentioned above coffee was not a luxury commodity, but a matter of life to her and many, many others! It was the only remaining link between her and the world!

True, by the end of the 1980s there were some liberal economic measures in the context of the so-called 'new economic mechanism'. Yet it was too little and too late, indeed! Albania continued playing the old tune again and again. Under the slogan "Neither open, nor closed, neither east, nor west, neither reform, nor integration, neither here, nor there, neither forward, nor backward!"

It became clear that the regime was attempting to cross the river without getting wet, as the saying goes in Albania. To this end, in May 1990 they tried to make use of the important visit of the UN former Secretary General, Mr Javier Perez de Cuellar. This visit, the first ever in this format, was perceived as a great victory for Albania's diplomacy and they hoped it would play its own role in the country's image and prolong the life of the regime. Our authorities used Mr Cuellar's courtesy for their own domestic propaganda rather than for any progress in the human rights field. Only two months later, on 2 July 1990, and then in March 1991, Albanians challenged the regime by storming the foreign Embassies in Tirana and the Adriatic Sea and fleeing in hundreds of thousands to Greece, Italy, Germany and elsewhere.

Although it was breaking apart, the regime wanted to demonstrate its alleged strength. It ordered the border police to kill all those who were trying to flee from the country through mountains. It did not hesitate to kill other intellectual opponents. A typical case is that of Havzi Nela, an inspiring poet and a permanent opponent who was mercilessly beheaded in 1988!!

In August 1990, the first US delegation of the Helsinki Committee led by two distinguished ambassadors came to Albania for a week. This visit followed the official

demand for membership of OSCE. The talks were led by one of the most influential party leaders and an academic, Secretary of the CC of PLA, Mr Foto Çami. The major demand for Albania was to allow religion, opposition and press freedom as well as free and fair elections. The conservative and refractory position held by Mr Çami was a total disappointment for the US and this Commission. Then, on 25 September, we were at the reception in the Palace of Brigades, on the occasion of the First Balkan Foreign Ministers' Meeting, when we heard that our great writer, Ismail Kadare had asked for political asylum in Paris. It goes without saying that the atmosphere and climate there changed for the worse instantly. This was a very strong and serious warning for the regime. Yet, in its Plenum in November 1990 it still maintained the same hard-line position. It condemned Kadare for his betrayal and expressed determination to continue the course of Stalinist socialism. The monument of Stalin was still there in the centre. Then it was the fall of the Berlin Wall and especially the violent overthrow of Ceaușescu which encouraged the democratic forces in Albania to escalate their activity and resistance, until the establishment of pluralistic democracy in December 1990.

And if we defeat the USA?

Despite these extremely hard times, humor continued fortunately to be an important part of life. There were unending jokes and anecdotes. One of them tells how some wise people met to find a way out and ensure the survival. One of them said that the best alternative would be to declare war against USA. For sure they would win, Albania would be part of USA and thus survive and even live happily.

Everyone felt relieved after such a proposal. However, before the meeting ended, a person from Vlora, a region in the south distinguished for its pride and bravery, asked the rhetorical question: "Wait a little, please. OK, if USA wins, but just think what would happen if we defeat them?"

In another meeting, they were discussing ways and means of bringing down 'S imperialism'. After many proposals, both hard and soft, the cleverest was the one made by a wise man, who made reference of the bad economic system we had, proposing the following:

"Why do you worry so much about how to destroy USA? It is very easy. Just send them 100 Albanian economists and within a year the USA will collapse!"

The party took my life away!

Here is one of the funniest true stories of that time, indicating the deprivations and sacrifices of the prevailing part of population.

A Roma man named Dapi had applied to become a Party member. Under the rules, he had to appear before the Party Committee of the relevant district and reply to the questions from its members. Only if his replies were convincing, could he gain candidate Party member status. Afterwards, one had to go through a so-called 'Party stage' or probation period of three years, usually in a factory or in the countryside, before becoming a full Party member. This is the funny dialogue between him and the Party Committee members there:

Party Secretary of the district (in short Secretary): "So, dear comrade Dapi, you have made up your mind to join our great Party"?

Dapi: "Yes, indeed, comrade Secretary!"

Secretary: "Very good, but it is not an easy task, especially for you Roma, for many reasons. First, you like to have not one, but several wives."

Dapi: "Yes, comrade Secretary, it is so nice and sweet like this, indeed!"

Secretary: "Yes, but the problem is that the Party does not allow you to have more than one, or maximum two wives, is that Ok for you?"

Dapi: "Yes, comrade Secretary!"

Secretary: "Then, you have another bad habit, you go singing and dancing all the day long!"

Dapi: "Yes, comrade Secretary, we are crazy about it!"

Secretary: "Yes, but when joining the Party, you have to forget about fun. You need just to work from early in the morning till late at night, take part in the actions, help peasants during harvests and so on, agreed?"

Dapi: "Yes, comrade Secretary."

Secretary: "Then, you are very dependent on drinking, all sorts, from beer, wine to our traditional raki made of grapes boiled three times!"

Dapi: "Well, it is very nice, isn't it comrade secretary, it helps us forget our troubles and worries!"

Secretary: "Yes, but the Party has prohibited these drinking habits. Just work hard, study and attend meetings! Agreed?"

Dapi: "Yes, comrade Secretary!"

Secretary: “Now the last but the most important thing; There could be cases when for the lofty interests of our Fatherland, you have to make sublime sacrifices and even to die for it! Will you be ready to offer your life for our ideal and country?”

Dapi: “Oh, poor me, I am so sorry, but I have no more life to offer, comrades, because the one single life I had, the party took it away from me!”

Then, all those present burst into laughter, although the matter was quite serious.

CHAPTER X

The past in the future, the future with the past

As it was underlined before, despite the sharply deteriorating socio-economic situation in Albania at the end of the 80s, the regime clung stubbornly to the absurd idea of prohibiting the folks to travel abroad, work and live there; allegedly to prevent them from ‘falling into the trap of bourgeoisie and capitalism’. However, in the last 25 years, without excluding negative occurrences, Albanians and the young, in particular, have clearly proved quite the opposite.

The Albanian cultural associations with their wide-ranging activity worldwide represent convincing evidence of the notable attachment of Albanians to their homeland. It would take long to describe their huge contribution in all areas of life including public, cultural, economic and citizens’ diplomacy. Besides the ones mentioned previously, in Belgium there are many such associations recognized and supported by both Albania and Belgium: ‘Konica’ ‘Eagle Event’ and ‘Writers’ League’ in Brussels, ‘Youth’ in Ghent, ‘Iliria’ in Tongeren, ‘Migjeni’ in Hasselt, and ‘Makowal’ in Namur. Their founders and leaders, respectively Gentian Metaj, Alketa Selimaj, Shqiponja Duro, Adrian Muçaj, Rifat Ademi, Morena Kasa and Mamadali Ahmedi share more or less the same motivating history; they came in Belgium in the 1990s. Although most of them were journalists, teachers and artists, they were forced to do other hard jobs for their survival. Nonetheless, they never lost sight of their major goal – to keep Albanian culture and traditions alive and promote them in Belgium and elsewhere. Therefore, one of the first steps they made upon arrival here was to set up these cultural associations with a large – scale voluntary membership of our fellow citizens and other Belgian friends and well-wishers. They themselves have carved their own personality and are rendering their acknowledged contribution in politics, business, arts, culture, journalism and other fields.

The same maybe said about the small but active cultural association of Albanians in Luxembourg.

Like his above-mentioned colleagues and friends, its chairman, Mr. Bashkim Hazizaj has succeeded in bringing together some of the best citizens and intellectual there with an international echo as well. The most well-known, Mrs. Huyeda El Sayed with blended Albanian and Sudanese blood won the first TV dancing contest “Twelve dancing without a Saturday” in 1994. Afterwards, she has poured down her multiple talent and passion in writing, TV and painting in Albania, France, Belgium and most recently in Luxembourg. Whereas Ms. Besmira Uruçi from Shkodra has gone even beyond the distinct social and human values she inherited from her intellectual parents. She was not self-conceited with graduation in the world famous Sorbonne University and has shown her best at different working posts in France and Luxembourg. Besides, Besmira was a few years ago Albania’s youth delegate and Representative of the 8th Youth Forum at UNESCO, lecturer and Secretary General of the Franko-German University of the Balkans in Tirana, Pristina and Skopje. Currently, she is a lawyer at the renowned company Selectra in Luxembourg.

There are many others elsewhere who have tried to do the same thing by building up strong bridges of friendship with their hosts abroad. Four decades ago, with Mrs. Myzejen Nova (Johansen) from Kruja we studied English and served as part time tourist guides. After the 1990s she travelled for the first time ever to Denmark for a training course. There, in Rønne, a small town near Aarhus, she met her future husband, Ejvind Johansen, a noble person and a great lover of Albania, with whom she has been living ever since. The renowned Rønne High School where she started teaching is unique and practical, with pupils coming from different countries to learn about various skills and professions, computers, communication and other subject matters. There they have the great advantage of coming into contact with mates from different parts of Europe, forging an eternal friendship and becoming somewhat Danish. On the suggestion of the school management and supported by her husband, Myzi as we call her started inviting each year a couple of pupils from Kruja, her native town, and other places to stay in Rønne for a few months. This was and remains an interesting and educational opportunity for all these Albanians and their families. For them, small Rønne has become a large favourite place, an intermediary ‘station’ for their future destinations. This useful tradition has been going on for 25 years. There are nearly 100 Albanian young boys and girls who have been visitors at this school; some of them are married to Danish and thus, an Albanian - Danish community is active now there and in other nearby towns: another vivid example of successful blending.

Thus, this small town and its high school has become a second home for these Albanians, their families and friends. The credit for this goes to all distinguished school teachers and directors during the last 20 years who have been so hospitable and helpful in every situation; the current director, Mrs. Birgit Fuglsberg has made sure that this specific friendly tradition is further promoted. Many of these teachers

and friends from that region have visited Albania not only as tourists but also to offer their generous help in different areas. Among the first whom we met over 20 years ago in Tirana, in Rønne and in Ebeltøft where they live is the venerable 90 – year old Pastor Knud Schjødt Pedersen and his dear wife, Ruth whom we wish all the best and a long life. Then, Mrs. Annette Sørensen and her husband Wagn who are always so kind and enthusiastic about Myzi&Ejvind and our friendship. Myzi and Ejvind celebrated their 65th and 70th anniversary in early May. As her brother – in – law I was there with many other relatives and friends; it is indeed hard to express in words the joy of that festive Danish – Albanian event and the respect they all showed to our Albanian – Danish couple for their long teaching activity and social service there in the last 20 years. Among others, their colleague, the teacher of music and a bright singer Ms. Dagmar Winther touched us all when she sang a beautiful song dedicated to our Danish-Albanian couple.

But, do not forget, only three decades ago Myzejen and many others like her were not allowed to go abroad even for a short stay, for fear that they might ‘betray’ her fatherland.

Besides the above-mentioned examples related to somewhat a more senior age, there also thousands of much younger folks in Albania who were born on the dawn of democracy in Albania; many of them have been living, studying and working under hard conditions, away from their parents, at times short of money, under the growing pressure of the consumer society and other negative phenomena. Yet they have set brilliant examples of unyielding efforts and passion, producing each and everyone his/her own success story for themselves and most importantly for the community.

What a great pleasure and happiness for their parents, relatives and us all to hear their Albanian and foreign colleagues and friends praising them for their noble human qualities, distinct professional skills and excellent multi-lingual communication! Most importantly, they highlight the natural link between the past, the present and the future of modern Albanian society, both at home and abroad.

Let me conclude with the following example:

Ms Ermelinda Hajdari came to Antwerpen with her younger sister Angela when she was 16. Era as she likes to be called (wind) had to choose the most difficult route in life, working hard to pay for the university studies, following the principle “no sweet without sweat” She graduated from the University in Antwerpen and after the first experience in part time jobs at companies with great names Era was hired by a business promotion company in Antwerpen. Recently she moved as a Custom Success Agent to Twieky in Gent, a company managing and arranging automatic online payment services and operations. Apart from her professional commitment, Era is also ‘hungry’ to learn about modern technology, history, arts and literature. Although very

project and target -oriented, she does also devote special attention to social and human goals and values. And now it is time to stop here with some of her moving poetic lines written in a perfect English;

ALBANIA:

I am from Albania;

a country full of contrasts, with claws captivating.

With white beaches and rocky houses.

Where people have the resilience of the mountains,

with hearts big and soft as a cloud.

An eagle on its proudest holds the beacon of her symbol.

Like a rose, its red has thorns;

passionate beauty of Albania.

Dr Jorgji Kote

Dr Jorgji Kote was born in March 1952 in Tirana. He is a graduate in Albanian and English language and literature as well as Industrial Economy at the University of Tirana. He was trained in Vienna, Nebraska - USA, Cairo, Greece and elsewhere. In the 1970s, apart from working as a teacher, he was also a youth activist and he has served as a tourist guide and interpreter with different political and business delegations. He has worked for 15 years in the former Ministry of Foreign Trade as an expert and Director. In the last 20 years he has served as Counsellor and Minister Counsellor in the Embassies of Albania in Brussels and Berlin, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and now again in the Embassy of Albania in Brussels.

In the recent years, Dr Jorgji Kote has published in Albanian: *Berlini pa mure* (*Berlin without walls*), *Në Vetrrethim* (*In Self-Encirclement*) and *Diplomacia për të gjithë* (*Diplomacy for everyone*). *True Stories from Red Albania* is his third publication in English.

Dr Jorgji Kote's account in this book of life in 'red Albania' is an intriguing insight into another world, which nonetheless existed so nearby, so recently. They comprise a historical record offering foreign readers a better understanding of the

country, and young Albanians an insight into the tribulations of earlier generations. He tells his stories with characteristic humour and little trace of bitterness...Yet, Jorgji's perspective is always constructive and hopeful, and this bodes well for the future.

Kate Holman