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THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
ENTERS ALBANIA, 1992-1999

by
Nathan Pali

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts

Department of Religious Education
Brigham Young University
December 2008

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Nathan Pali

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
ENTERS ALBANIA, 1992-1999

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Master of Arts

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints entered Albania in 1992. Albania was a unique and difficult place to establish the LDS Church. Under the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha religion was systematically eliminated from Albania and replaced with atheism. Additionally, missionaries were twice evacuated in the first decade in the country and the Book of Mormon was not available in Albanian until 1999. Despite these setbacks the LDS Church grew at a steady rate in Albania due to native Albanian interest and individual attention by missionaries.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO ALBANIA

Introduction and Outline

Albania was a difficult place to establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ It has a history of government sponsored atheism, the economy was one of the worst in Europe and there was almost continually some form of upheaval within the country and surrounding region. However, since entering Albania, the LDS Church has grown steadily and consistently, outpacing growth in all its European neighbors. This steady growth stems from the context in which Albanians lived and the manner in which LDS missionaries worked. The Albanian context, filled with communism, atheism, poverty, and war, created a chaotic and unstable situation for most Albanians. After the fall of communism, many Albanians turned to religion to provide a sense of peace and direction for their lives. For some Albanians the LDS Church provided access to the stability they sought. The LDS missionaries worked to create trust and interest in Albanians by forming strong social relationships. These relationships were initiated with humanitarian service and expanded as LDS missionaries learned the Albanian language and taught on an individual and family basis. These relationships fostered trust, spiritual experiences, and consistent conversions among Albanians. The following account will include a brief history of Albania, a detailed account of their struggles under communism, a description of the establishment of the LDS Church in Albania from 1992-1999, and a depiction of how the Church and individuals fared through economic collapse, civil upheaval, and missionary evacuations.

¹ In 1935 my grandfather left Albania at the age of nine with his mother to join his father in

History

Albania is located on the coast of the Adriatic Sea just north of Greece. Macedonia shares a border on the east, Serbia on the northeast, and Montenegro sits almost directly north. The heel of the boot of Italy lies to the west across the Adriatic Sea. Almost 80 percent of Albania's land is rocky mountains and hills, most of which are over two hundred meters above sea level.² The weather is rather moderate with hot summers and mild winters depending on the altitude.³ Of the forty-seven modern languages developing from an Indo-European base, only two languages, Albanian and Armenian derive directly from Indo-European with no intermediary linguistic parent, making Albanian a unique and difficult language.⁴

Even though Albanians are culturally ancient and almost homogeneous in heritage, they were slow to create their own country. The mountains and poor internal transportation system contributed to Albanians maintaining themselves separate in clans. Historically these clans have been organized in two separate subgroups, the Gëgs in northern Albania above the Shkumbin River; and Tosks in the south.⁵ Traditionally neither group has gotten along well with the other.⁶

However, internal disagreement has not been the only hindrance in forming an independent nation. Throughout history, ethnic Albanians living within the borders of present day Albania were conquered and ruled over by one kingdom after another. The Romans were the first in approximately 168 BC. As Roman influence in the Balkans waned around AD 395 the Byzantine Empire filled the power vacuum and ruled Albania for the next hundred years (AD

² Elez Biberaj, *Albania: A Socialist Maverick* (San Francisco: Westview Press: 1990), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Edwin E. Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company: 1995), 44.

⁵ Biberaj, *Maverick*, 9.

⁶ William Bland, "Albania After the Second World War," *Perspectives on Albania* ed. Tom Winnifrith (New York: St. Martin's Press), 124.

395 – AD 489). Next came the Goths (AD 489 – AD 535), followed by the Byzantines again (AD 535 – AD 861), then the Bulgarians (AD 861 – AD 1014), the Byzantines for a third time (AD 1014 – AD 1204), the Normans for two hundred years (AD 1081 – AD1204), and finally the Ottoman Empire controlled the area well into the modern era. In all of this time, ethnic Albanians managed only twenty-five years of independence under the revered leadership of national hero George “Skanderbeg” Kastrioti. In one of Skanderbeg’s first victories he captured Fort Kruja and there raised a banner emblazoned with the double headed eagle of his family crest which is now used as the official flag of Albania.⁷

When Skanderbeg’s “rebellion” was exhausted, the Ottoman Empire returned. Ottoman rulers ingrained themselves into every aspect of Albanian life, including religion. This is seen in the fact that Albania was the first and only country in Europe to become predominantly Muslim. According to a census taken in 1945, 72.8 percent of the country professed to be Muslim.⁸ Before this conversion, the majority of the country was Christian, having converted during the periods of Byzantine rule. Some truly believed and were converted to Islam while others joined for the social opportunities that opened up with Islamic affiliation. For example, in the Ottoman Empire Muslims were *dhimmi*, or protected persons. As a protected person a Muslim did not have to pay the *devshirme*, or child levy, which took children from peasant families and turned them into Janissaries, an elite body of soldiers created for the Ottoman sultan. Janissaries were taken as young men from their families, circumcised, dressed in Muslim attire, and indoctrinated into Islam.⁹ Muslims also fared better in court and paid lower taxes. Christians, on the other hand, could not bear arms, wear certain clothes – including the color green which was sacred to

⁷ The history of the occupiers can be found in Jacques, *The Albanians*, 126.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

Muslims – and they had to dismount horses when a Muslim passed. The Ottoman Empire further exercised dominion over Christian churches by forbidding church bells on their churches and the construction of new churches.¹⁰ In addition to repressing Christianity, at the close of the nineteenth century, the Ottomans also campaigned for the destruction of the Albanian language to help forestall Albanian nationalism.¹¹

Albanians became an independent country in 1912, under the leadership of Ismael Qemal. On November 28, 1912, eighty-three Albanians met at the Congress of Vlore and formally declared Albania an independent state.¹² At that point Albanians possessed a fierce sense of national pride and a common language and heritage but were ill-prepared to become an independent country. There was no constitution, no capital city, no currency, and an incredibly poor infrastructure.¹³

Shortly after independence was established, President Ismael Qemal was forced to resign in a complicated and conspiracy-ridden scandal which involved Turks marching across Albania.¹⁴ The great powers of Europe quickly seized the opportunity and placed inept Prince William of Weid on the throne of Albania in November 1913. William's reign was cut short however when Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 and World War I began. At the first hint of danger, Prince William of Weid fled Albania and without a leader "Albania became everybody's battleground."¹⁵ Northern Albanians fought the Serbs and

¹⁰ Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd: 1995), 10-13.

¹¹ Vickers, *Modern History* 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹³ Raymond Hutchings, "Albania's Inter-War History as a Fore-runner to the Communist Period," *Perspectives on Albania* ed. Tom Winnifrith (New York: St. Martin's Press), 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111

¹⁵ Vickers, *Modern History*, 88. My great-grandfather was one who fled conscription and ended up immigrating to the United States of America.

Montenegrins and the central and southern Albanians fought the Greeks. At one point the Greeks occupied all of southern Albania setting fire to forty-six Muslim villages and conscripting Albanians as soldiers. Consequently a considerable number of Albanians fled the country. During the war, Albania was occupied by Austria-Hungarian troops, Bulgarians, Italians, and the French.¹⁶

In 1920 a volunteer Albanian army fought the Serbs, Montenegrins, and Greeks, and drove them out of the country.¹⁷ After several successive and ineffective governments Ahmet Zogu, gained power and ruled as president and then King from 1925-1939.¹⁸ As king, Ahmet Zogu changed his name to King Zog. Though Zog did away with the crippling traditions of blood feuds and the forced veiling of women, he did little to improve the country economically.¹⁹ Under Zog, Albania remained the poorest and least developed state in Europe. Illiteracy was commonplace and the government was characterized by intrigue and assassinations.²⁰ With the coming of World War II, Albanian independence was crushed by fascist Italy and later by Nazi Germany. Throughout World War II, Albanian communist guerillas fought the Italian and German occupiers. During this tumultuous period, Enver Hoxha (pronounced Ho-jah) emerged as an acceptable “compromise candidate”²¹ to lead the nascent Communist party. After the war, Hoxha solidified his power within the Albanian Communist party and took control of the government. He worked to isolate Albania and eventually made Albania into the first officially

¹⁶ Vickers, *A Modern History*, 89-93; and Pandi Pali, unpublished manuscript in the author's possession, 1.

¹⁷ Bland, “Albania After,” 123.

¹⁸ Jacques, *The Albanians*, 379-382, and Bland, “Albania After,” 124.

¹⁹ Hutchings, “Inter-war,” 119.

²⁰ Vickers, *Modern History*, 101-118, 120.

²¹ Biberaj, *Maverick*, 17.

atheistic country in the history of the world. Following his death, Albania was the last eastern European country to let go of communism and again allow the free practice of religion.

Conclusion

Albanian independence after World War II did not prompt the entrance of the LDS Church. They were a small country without many citizens and a difficult language. Moreover, they were the only European country which predominantly practiced Islam. Finally, centuries of submission to foreign powers made the new communist government deeply suspicious of anything foreign including religion. Following World War II it would still be fifty years until the LDS Church entered Albania.

CHAPTER TWO: COMMUNISM CRUSHES RELIGION

Introduction

At the end of World War II, communist Enver Hoxha seized power in Albania and ruled in Stalinistic fashion. Under his power, Albania became the first officially atheistic nation in the history of the world. He endeavored to eradicate all signs of religion and an afterlife as he isolated Albanians from the outside world. This system of enforced atheism and isolation from western influences was intended to create a classless culture where the people were free from the domination of rich landowners and capitalistic western powers. Communist leaders were understandably suspicious of world powers at the time, for thousands of years they had been pawns of foreign empires. Communist leaders were also suspicious of religious clerics. They believed, rightfully so in some instances, that they were supported by the rich and were loyal to western powers. Wealthy individuals were the ones who maintained clerics and as Catholics they took orders from the Vatican in Italy, the Christian Orthodox religion had strong connections with Greece, and the Islamic leadership in Albania was closely tied with Turkey. Additionally, communist leaders believed that religion deluded the common people and siphoned off energies that could be better applied to making Albania more powerful. Ideally, under communism the people would have more control over their lives. Rather than gain more freedom under communism, in retrospect, one form of repression replaced another. Hoxha and loyal communist party members systematically created a culture dominated by fear and paranoia. By the end of Albania's communist era, the party ideals had been replaced by an economically, culturally, and religiously impoverished society dominated by an class of communist party members and

populated by citizens desperate for more freedom, money, and power, and in many instances more religion. Many believed that religion would give them a sense of understanding of their situation, hope for the future and way to cope with their present situation.²²

Establishment of Communism

An interlude of Albanian independence under King Zog ended when Italy sent 70,000 troops to invade Albania in 1939 at the beginning of World War II. The Italians invaded Albania in order to use it as an Italian colony and to expand their influence in the Balkans. As the Italians invaded, King Zog fled and Albania was again occupied. By 1942, Albanians began to rally under communist leadership and attack the Italians in small guerilla groups. Eventually, the guerilla groups coalesced into a Liberation Army of 10,000 men which forced the Italians to surrender in September 1943. After the Italians evacuated, 100,000 German troops stormed into Albanian and took control of the country. By November 1944, the volunteer Liberation Army forced the weakened Nazis from Albania and the communist party assumed control of Albania.²³

Albanian communism officially began November 8, 1941 when several communist groups met and formed the Albanian Communist Party (ACP). The ACP was the only communist party in Europe that had not been created with the help of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had little interest in Albania because there was no industrial class to participate in a worker's revolution.²⁴ Without Soviet assistance, Albanians held the first ACP conference in March of 1943 and elected seemingly middle of the road "compromise candidate" Enver Hoxha as their leader and general secretary.²⁵

²² Grimci Family interview, August 11, 2008, recording in author's possession.

²³ Bland, "Albania After," 124.

²⁴ Vickers, *Modern History*, 150.

²⁵ Biberaj, *Maverick* 17.

Surprisingly, this “compromise candidate” ruled Albania for forty-one years, longer than any other person in Albanian history.²⁶ Due to the length of his tenure and the long lasting impact of his policies, Hoxha is arguably the most influential man in modern Albanian history. As such, Hoxha has been remembered as everything from “the greatest son” ever born in Albania to “a Communist tyrant as maniacal as any in history.”²⁷ Today, most Albanians and outside observers lean toward the second interpretation. As Albanian ambassador to the United States, Aleksander Salabanda, referring to the dictatorship of Hoxha stated, “This is the part where we suffered too much...it cost too much for what Communism brought to my country”²⁸

As general secretary Hoxha inherited the daunting task of leading independent Albania during a time when its citizens faced a myriad of problems. They were desperately poor and the economy was severely underdeveloped. It was “easily the most backward country in Europe” at the time.²⁹ Additionally, 80 percent of the population was illiterate, 85 percent lived in the country and industry accounted for only 4 percent of the Gross National Product.³⁰

Hoxha Crushes Religion

Hoxha made matters worse for many people in these desperate times by taking away religion. Hoxha justified the purge as necessary for the protection of communism. Hoxha wished to create a classless society in Albania. In his classless society, not only economic classifications needed to be eliminated but also religious ones.³¹ Albanian scholar Tonin Gjuraj, argues that

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁷ Ibid., 15-16. and Kahlile B. Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries Enter Eastern Europe* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 267.

²⁸ Aleksander Sallabanda “Albania U.S. Relations” (lecture presented at Brigham Young University Ambassadorial Insights Lecture Series, Provo, Utah, October 26, 2006) <http://kennedy.byu.edu>

²⁹ Vickers, *Modern History*, 165.

³⁰ Bland, “Albania After,” 129.

³¹ Ibid., 447.

communist leaders saw “religion [as] a powerful counterweight to the state and sought to eradicate all such competition.” He also argued that the eradication of religion was a way for Hoxha to put all Albanians under his absolute control.³²

Eventually, Hoxha was able to accomplish his goal and create the first atheist nation in the history of the world. Albania became known to members of the United Nations as “the worst abuser of religious liberty in the world.”³³ However, it took Hoxha twenty years to completely crush religious liberty in Albania. Partially because 100 percent of Albanians professed to be religious when Hoxha took power, 72.8 percent were Muslim, 17.1 percent Albanian Orthodox, and 10.1 percent Roman Catholic.³⁴ Additionally, the first Albanian constitution written by the communist party on March 14, 1946 guaranteed Albanians freedom of religion.

Hoxha first attacked religion by preaching distrust of any religious authorities who had ties outside of the country which was the case with all Albanian religions. Islam had ties with Turkey, Orthodox Christianity had ties with Greece, and Roman Catholicism was associated with Italy. Additionally, the Agrarian Reform Law of 1945 restricted the power of these religious bodies by confiscating most of their land and redistributing it to peasants.³⁵ The law gave approximately twelve acres to each family, stripping all religious bodies, Christian monasteries in particular of their estates.³⁶

To further limit the power of religion, the regime of 1945 ensured that the curriculum of schools was distinctly anti-religious. Priests were prohibited from teaching in any schools, even

³² Tonin Gjuraj, “A Stable Ecumenical Model? How Religion Might Become a Political Issue in Albania,” *East European Quarterly*, Spring 2001, Vol. 34, No. 1, Accessed EBSCO Host June 6, 2008.

³³ As quoted in Jacques, *The Albanians*, xi-xii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Bland, “Albania After,” 129.

³⁶ Jacques, *The Albanians*, 450.

private ones. Lay people who retained religious inclinations attempted to fill the gap in religious teaching by instructing children in private settings. However, that form of instruction was also banned by the Ministry of Education in February 1947.³⁷ 1945 was also the beginning of government censorship for all religious publications, even personal letters. All publications were censored before going to the public in order to control clerical criticism of the state.³⁸ As if removing religious leaders' income, institutions, programs and freedom of action within their own churches were not enough, Communist leaders also charged religious leadership with treason. They accused Roman Catholic clergy of being beholden to Italy's government. As punishment, church leaders were forced to clean streets and public bathrooms wearing clown suits with signs which read "I have sinned against the people."³⁹

Sadly, this was only the beginning. After confiscating land, banning religious teaching, and censoring religious publications the Hoxha government began torturing and executing religious leaders to systematically eliminate any potential rivals to state authority. In 1945, Hoxha ordered the Albanian Roman Catholic Church to sever ties with Italy, though its leaders refused. Instead, they sent Fran Gjini, abbot of Mirdita, to negotiate the possibility of a continued relationship with the Vatican. Instead of negotiating, government officials accused Gjini of anti-Communism, arrested him, and then tortured him for a year before executing him on March 8, 1948.⁴⁰ Gjini was not the only religious leader killed. Gasper Thachi, archbishop of Shkodra, died under house arrest in 1946 and Vincent Prendushi, archbishop of Durres, died after being tortured in a labor camp in 1949.⁴¹ In addition to these individual attacks, the government also

³⁷ Ibid., 449.

³⁸ Ibid., 450.

³⁹ Ibid., 450.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 451.

⁴¹ Gjuraj, "A Stable Ecumenical Model,".

made group arrests and executions to eliminate entire religious orders from the country.⁴² For example, when two leaders of political protest group called the Albanian Union used a Jesuit printing press to print leaflets critical of the Communists, Hoxha executed the eighteen Jesuits who let the men use the press. Additionally, in 1946, Hoxha ordered the execution of twenty more Jesuit priests and imprisoned forty others, effectively eliminating all Jesuits from the country.

Hoxha also used subterfuge to accomplish his purposes. On December 19, 1946, the Ministry of the Interior found guns and ammunition in Catholic churches run by Franciscans. In retribution, the Franciscan order was banned from Albania and all its property, including personal clerical items, was confiscated and twenty priests were executed for storing the guns. Later, in 1948 Pierin Kchira, a former lieutenant of the Shkodra (city in Albania) secret police, was arrested and given a fifteen-year prison sentence for having too close of a relationship with the Catholic Clergy. In his final statement, which was broadcast on national radio, he described the arms raid on the Franciscan churches saying, “You commanded me to go at night to hide arms in the churches and monasteries so you would have a pretext to eliminate the clergy and to destroy the Catholic Church. I confess to the entire Albanian people. My personal disgrace is not important.” At that point Kchira was interrupted and the radio transmission was cut. The judge immediately changed Kchira’s prison term to a death sentence and the latter was executed without delay.⁴³

While in prison, another catholic priest, Gjon Sinishta, gathered stories about torture of religious prisoners. Some prisoners were forced into slave labor while others had their legs and arms broken or received sharp shocks of electricity to their head and mouth. One man was drug

⁴² Jacques, *The Albanians*, 451.

⁴³ As described in Jacques, *The Albanians*, 451-53.

behind a truck for twenty-five miles. Another Jesuit priest described how lacerations were made in the flesh of religious offenders and rock salt was planted in the wound and then the wounds sown closed.⁴⁴ Known religious leaders were systematically eliminated through imprisonment, torture, exportation, and execution. Of the ninety-three Catholic priests in operation in 1945 only ten priests remained in Albania seven years later. Twenty-four were murdered; thirty-five were imprisoned; ten went missing; eleven were drafted, and three managed to escape the country. The Orthodox Church suffered in a similar fashion. By 1947 all Orthodox churches and monasteries were confiscated and some like the St. George Cathedral in Korch, were bulldozed. The Albanian Orthodox archbishop was arrested and tortured in 1949 and eventually died in prison in 1958. The new head of the Orthodox Church, Pashko Vodica, was appointed by the government. Vodica was a defrocked priest and an active Communist whose son was a prominent member of the Central Committee. The Muslim hierarchy suffered less physical persecutions but was forced into other professions as their mosques were confiscated and destroyed.⁴⁵ In the midst of this religious genocide, Hoxha declared that Albanians had religious liberty. However, religious leaders were appointed by the government and the leaders were mandated to promote communism in their programs.

Switching Loyalties

As Hoxha fought the “destructive” influences of religion within his country he also had to face threats of national destruction from outside the country. The Yugoslavian dictator Josip “Tito” Broz had Stalin’s consent to dominate Albania. As far as Stalin was concerned, the Soviet Union had “no special interest in Albania and that Yugoslavia was free to swallow Albania any

⁴⁴ Ibid., 452-54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 455-57.

time it wished to do so.”⁴⁶ American reporters at the time in the *Saturday Evening Post* described the relationship with a babysitting analogy. Since the Soviet Union was busy taking care of more important babies “dropped on their doorstep” at the end of World War II, they let Yugoslavia baby-sit Albania.⁴⁷

However, Tito fell out of Russian favor and lost his babysitting privileges. In June 1948, Yugoslavia was kicked out of the Cominform (a Communist alliance) and Hoxha scrambled to eliminate all ties with Yugoslavia and all Yugoslavians were removed from the country.⁴⁸ To solidify the separation, Albanian children tore pictures of Tito out of their textbooks and stopped singing his praises in their songs and Hoxha denounced Tito as a capitalist and colonial exploiter. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union sent planeloads of advisors to Albania and took on the brunt of supporting economically weak Albania.⁴⁹

Along with Russian financial assistance and military guidance, Hoxha also gained an opportunity to purge the country’s leadership. The first to fall was Albanian government official Koci Xoxe. While Albania was working with Yugoslavia, Xoxe worked to undermine Hoxha’s leadership. Without Yugoslavia’s protection Xoxe was arrested in November 1948 and in June 1949, he was tried, convicted, and executed by a firing squad.⁵⁰ His execution was the first of many bloody purges Hoxha would instigate in the next forty years.

The independence Albania gained with the fall of Yugoslavia came with the price of increased dependence on the Soviet Union.⁵¹ In supporting Albania, the Soviet Union gained an

⁴⁶ Vickers, *Modern History*, 170-72.

⁴⁷ Ernest O. Hauser, “The Red Rape of Albania,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 26, 1949, 27.

⁴⁸ Vickers, *Modern History*, 173.

⁴⁹ Hauser, “The Red Rape,” 116.

⁵⁰ Vickers, *Modern History*, 174.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

excellent port on the Adriatic for shipping and military operations. It also gained power over Albanian banks and oil operations. Soviet advisors were placed in leadership positions throughout the army and raw materials were shipped back to the Soviet Union.⁵² While enjoying these benefits, the Soviet Union failed to improve the poor state of the Albanian economy.

Under the influence of the Soviet Union, particularly Stalin, Hoxha and the Albanian Communist party opted for a centralized economic model, which emphasized the development of heavy industry. In order to create an industrial base in a non-industrial country, resources were taken from agriculture, causing food production to suffer. Attempting to fairly allocate food, the government began using fixed prices and ration cards in January 1949. Following this adjustment, the Albanian government embarked on its first five-year plan from 1950-1956. This plan called for peasants to pool their lands and create collective farms. This, coupled with two major drought years caused massive food shortages and during that time some medicines could only be found on the black market.⁵³ The Albanians suffered through these shortages and rations believing that things were not that bad. After all, according to Enver Hoxha, Americans were so poor that they had to eat grass.⁵⁴ Moreover, rationing and food shortages were all part of the greater cause of protecting one's country from invasion.⁵⁵

Albanian fears of invasion were not unfounded. From 1949-1952 the British and American governments tried to overthrow Hoxha by parachuting military groups into the country to stir up rebellion and overthrow the government. The American Central Intelligence Agency coordinated the operation with the assistance of British agent Kim Philby. Problematically,

⁵² Hauser, "The Red Rape," 117-8.

⁵³ Vickers, *Modern History*, 176.

⁵⁴ Christopher Phillips, interview by author, transcript, Pleasant Grove, Utah, 12 November 2006.

⁵⁵ Daniels "In the Shadows," 25.

Philby was a double agent for the Soviet Union and betrayed every group to the Soviets. When each group landed in Albania they were caught and executed. Over 300 men died in this manner during the course of the three year operation.⁵⁶

By 1955 Nikita Krushchev had solidified his leadership over the Soviet Union and he denounced the former Soviet leader Joseph Stalin for his cruelty. Putting themselves at loggerheads with the Soviets, Albanian leadership continued to believe in Stalin's methods of leadership and economic growth. Additionally, Soviet military campaigns in Yugoslavia meant less goods and assistance for Albania. Consequently, Hoxha paid a visit to Peking in 1956 looking for a new source of revenue.

Following the visit Albania experienced some economic success from 1957 to 1959. Known later as the "Golden Years," serendipitous financial aid from eastern bloc countries and China helped contributed to economic growth and improvement in general living standards while malaria was practically eliminated. Moreover, in 1957 the University of Tirana was established. At the end of this brief golden era, Nikita Krushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, visited Albania in May of 1959. Krushchev's intent in visiting Albania was to convince Hoxha to shift focus away from his Stalinistic plans for heavy industrial development and center Albanian economic efforts on agriculture, specifically citrus fruit production. Hoxha interpreted this advice as an attempt to turn Albania into a "fruit growing colony" for Russia. Thus, Soviet-

⁵⁶ Vickers, *Modern History*, 179; and Anthony Cave Brown, *Treason in Blood: H. St. John Philby, Kim Philby, and the Spy Case of the Century* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994, 421-22); and Philip Knightley, *The Master Spy: The Story of Kim Philby*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 159-161; and S. J. Hamrick, *Deciving the Deceivers*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004), 194-202.

Albanian relationships continued to deteriorate.⁵⁷ Two years later, December 1961, the Soviet Union ceased all shipments of industry replacement parts to Albania.⁵⁸

In his anger, Hoxha called Krushchev “the greatest counter revolutionary, charlatan and clown the world has ever known”⁵⁹ and with the help of a 125 million dollar loan from China, Albania stubbornly rejected Krushchev’s counsel and pursued their own course of industrial development.⁶⁰ In return for monetary support, China received the loyalty of Albania. At a 1969 Communist summit held in Moscow, when the Soviets and Chinese disagreed about policies, Albania sided with China. At the summit Hoxha gave a speech that was so vehemently against Krushchev that even the Chinese delegation seemed embarrassed.⁶¹ Following the summit Hoxha never travelled publicly outside of Albania again.

Renewed Religious Persecution

With their new relationship with China, Albanian government officials became interested in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which took place in China during November 1965. In the revolution the Chinese Red Youth Guard eradicated all foreign influences including Christian Bibles and literature. On November 19, 1967 Hoxha used the Proletarian Cultural Revolution as a model for a law called Decree No. 4337 which took Hoxha’s already fervid campaign against religion one step further prohibiting all religious practices and imposing severe penalties for any violation.⁶²

⁵⁷ Vickers, *Modern History*, 183-84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 187-88.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁶² Jacques, *The Albanians*, 88, 485.

Ironically, while Decree 4337 outlawed all religion, the Albanian constitution (chapter 3, article 18) still guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion.⁶³ Hoxha justified increased religious persecution by arguing that religion “impeded social advancement.”⁶⁴ The Albanian government further argued that religion exploited the proletariat and that any religious rite such as baptism was really a mask “to conceal [the church’s] hostile political intentions.”⁶⁵ Under this decree, church buildings were converted into a variety of secular spaces. They became cultural centers, theaters, gyms, dance halls, workshops, cafes, storehouses, barns, museums, and even public toilets or bars. Others were demolished to make room for workers’ apartments or parks. Under this new law any form of religious worship or ordinance was strictly forbidden.

Under renewed persecution all outward symbols of religion were banned. One could neither own nor distribute Bibles and Korans. Prayers, observances of holy days, fasts, feasts, and festivals all became illegal. Religion was also taken from the dead as any religious symbols were removed from tombstones.⁶⁶ Additionally, the government did not want children to have religious names, so they created a list of approved Albanian names which included names like Marenglen, a mix of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and mandated that all new babies to be named from the list.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, Hoxha proclaimed that Albania was “the first atheist nation in the world”⁶⁸ and government figures frequently paraphrased Vasa Pasha Effendi, a famous Albanian poet, and declared that the new religion of Albania was Albanianism.⁶⁹

⁶³ Ibid., 488.

⁶⁴ Vickers, *Modern History*, 195.

⁶⁵ Jacques, *The Albanians*, 561-62. and Gjuraj, *A Stable Ecumenical Model*

⁶⁶ Ibid., 561.

⁶⁷ Vickers., *Modern History*, 196.

⁶⁸ Linford Stutzman, “New Competitors for Hegemony: Western Evangelicals and the Rebuilding of Albanian Civil Society.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1/2, (Winter/Spring99).

⁶⁹ Vickers., *Modern History*, 489, 559.

With so much pressure placed on outward atheism, an old practice was renewed. During the Turkish occupation many Albanians pretended to be Muslims to gain favor with the Muslim government authorities. In reality, many were pseudo-Muslims and crypto-Christians. This same practice was used for Communism. Outwardly, some Albanians would feign atheistic communism, but inwardly many would continue practicing their religion. Religion was not eradicated; it was simply driven underground.⁷⁰ Without priests and mass, Catholics found other ways to worship. They would listen to the pope on the radio, say the rosary, and participate in the sacraments at home. In many instances children were taught religion by their mothers, fathers or grandparents. One son said his mother hid sacred artifacts in the Communist newspaper; another said they hid a picture of St. Nicholas under a photograph of Enver Hoxha. To maintain secrecy, the artifacts were only revealed on holy days or special occasions. Additionally, some Albanians visited the Atheist Museum in Tirana not to celebrate atheism but rather to look at the replica of the cross and remember Jesus.⁷¹ Evidence of underground religious practice can also be found in the fact that keeping pigs had to be encouraged by the government because eating of pork was forbidden for Muslims.⁷² However, not all Albanians were anxious to practice religion in secret. Some actively tried to catch others practicing religion by offering them food during fast days. If the person refused the food they would turn the offender over to the authorities.⁷³

The lives of a few Albanians who later converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints illustrate the variety of religious practice which existed under Hoxha. Some like Andromaqi Nano became accustomed to no religion because “it was the same for everybody

⁷⁰ Jacques, *The Albanians*, 566.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 565.

⁷² Hutchings, “Inter-War,” 118.

⁷³ Jacques, *The Albanians*, 567.

else.”⁷⁴ Others like Eriola Gjini kept religion alive by secretly going to an old monastery in the mountains to light candles.⁷⁵ Growing up, Monika Kadi said that she did not know anything about religion and was taught in school to criticize those who believed in God.⁷⁶ Others, like Alketa Pernaska, did not consider their parents to be atheists but they did not talk about religion at home.⁷⁷ Another eventual member, Blendi Kokona, gave fear as the major reason that people did not discuss religion. People were afraid their neighbors would hear them talk of God and report them to the police and the police would arrest them. If their neighbors did not knowingly report them then their kids might unknowingly testify against them. In the elementary schools teachers would describe religious practices and ask the students if they still did these things at home. If the answer was yes then they would come and arrest the parents.⁷⁸ Once arrested, people faced terrifying interrogations and the threat of hard labor in prison or exile. If an Albanian wanted to go to school or get a job they would have to write a biography about themselves and their family. If there was a record of religious activity, or if one had a relative that had been put in prison, exiled, or escaped the country, the author would have to record that

⁷⁴ Andromaqi Nano Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁷⁵ Eriola Gjini Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 5, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁷⁶ Monika Kadri Kadi Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁷⁷ Alketa Pernaska Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁷⁸ Grimci Family interview, August 11, 2008, recording in author’s possession.

infraction. Any recorded infraction by the author or his family members or relations would deny study or employment to the applicant.⁷⁹

When Lindita Grimci wrote her biography to get into the university she neglected to include that her aunt's husband had been imprisoned for saying "long live the king." Since he was not a blood relative she was not required to include him. However, when authorities found out that she was related to someone who had been imprisoned she was immediately expelled from the university. Only with persistent protest and proof that she had not known him was she reinstated in the university. When she married Agim Grimci her "bad biography" was united with his "bad biography." Agim's mother was Italian and that alone was sufficient to suspect him of spying for Italy. His mother never spoke Italian because people would listen through the walls of their apartment and any Italian would have been interpreted as for subversive foreign behavior. Even later in life, when Agim was a doctor and had a post on a military base, he was constantly under surveillance. He was even followed on his hikes in the mountains to ensure that he was not transmitting information to the Italians by radio.⁸⁰

Further Effects of Communism

Religion was not the only crime the Sigurimi (the Albanian Secret Police) pursued. Any perceived offense against Communism was sufficient for them. Punishments for non-conformity were severe. "Citizens who dared, even remotely, to criticize his totalitarian regime were declared enemies of the people, removed from their jobs and homes, and either killed or, with

⁷⁹ Blendi Kokona Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁸⁰ Grimci Family interview August 11, 2008, recording in Author's possession.

their families, sentenced for life to labor camps.”⁸¹ Some report that Hoxha killed tens of thousands of his own people, warranting comparisons with Hitler and Stalin.⁸² Saim Kokona, an eventual member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said that when he got a postcard from a friend in Kosovo the government suspected he was spying for Yugoslavia and put him under surveillance for nine years. This made Kokona afraid to write other friends in Czechoslovakia. Also, his family would not write to an Italian friend who they protected during World War II for fear of being accused of espionage. Kokona explained that if he had a foreign visitor come to his home he was supposed to tell the government. Then the government would send a member of the Sigurimi to come and pretend to be a member of the family and monitor all that was discussed.⁸³ A whole family could be exiled because one person in the family told an anti-Hoxha joke.⁸⁴ In essence, “Everyone [stood] hostage for someone else”⁸⁵ and “walls always had ears.”⁸⁶ Albanians had to constantly monitor their actions for their own safety.

During the 1960s there was also a major push for women’s rights. Though the condition of women improved significantly and women and girls could travel alone without fear under Communism, women’s rights were secondary to Communist ideals. Hoxha accentuated this

⁸¹ Charone H. Smith, “Albania, a Labor of Love,” *To Rejoice As Women: Talks from the 1994 Women’s Conference* eds. Susette Fletcher Green and Dawn Hall Anderson (Salt Lake City: Desert Book Co.), 152.

⁸² Thales Smith, “A Balkan Adventure: Humanitarian Missionaries in Albania” *Journal of Collegium Aesculapium* (Fall 1994), 28 and Matt Wirthlin, interview by author, MP3 recording, Salt Lake City, Ut., 10 March 2007; and Matthew Thomas Wirthlin Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, Appendix 1-5 and p. 9, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Jacques, *The Albanians*, religious persecution chapters.

⁸³ Saim Kokona Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 7-8, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁸⁴ Vickers, *Modern History*, 190.

⁸⁵ Daniels, “In the Shadows,” 25.

⁸⁶ Christopher Phillips, interview by author, Pleasant Grove, Utah, 12 November 2006. Quoting the reason people would give him for practicing religion secretly during communism.

point in a speech given in February 1967: “The entire Party and country should hurl into the fire and break the neck of anyone who tramples underfoot the sacred law of the Party in defense of the rights of women and girls.”⁸⁷ Women were allowed in the workforce and had similar wages as men but their ability to gain recognition from the country lay principally in motherhood. A young workforce was needed to drive the industrial based economy so women received recognition for having children. If a woman had six children she received a Mother’s Medal, for nine the Glory Medal, and for twelve the Heroin Mothers’ Medal.⁸⁸

Increased rights for women were not the only advancement of the Albanian Communists. Rampant illiteracy was eliminated with a law that made eight years of elementary education obligatory for all.⁸⁹ Moreover, Albanian medicine improved, creating a drop in infectious diseases⁹⁰ and a jump in life expectancy jumped from fifty-four in 1950 to sixty-seven by 1970.⁹¹

Albanian advancement under Communism came at the cost of terror, coercion, and severe restrictions on freedom of religion and expression. Citing the banning of the works of Albanian Poet Gjergj Fishta, scholar Miranda Vickers argued that under Hoxha, “Albania became an excessively dull and barren cultural desert”⁹² where the party “crushe[d] every aesthetic impulse of the people” and even the apartments blended together in blandness.⁹³ Saim Kokona, an eventual convert to the LDS Church, was a cameraman and director of photography during the Communist era of Albania. He vividly described the hobbles placed on creativity at this time. Saim detailed how the artistic movies that he created were political in nature and

⁸⁷ As quoted in Vickers, *Modern History*, 194.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁹⁰ Biberaj, *Maverick*, 29.

⁹¹ Vickers, *Modern History*, 199.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 200.

⁹³ Daniels, “In the Shadows,” 25.

highly censored. His first artistic film was about two Albanian women who were caught by the Germans and hung with a “thorny wire.”⁹⁴ When the heroines died, Saim filmed the sky. The censors questioned whether he was trying to portray that a heaven existed. In order to avoid punishment, prison, or losing their jobs his crew had to go back and re-film that entire scene. Another example of censorship occurred when a film didn’t include a picture of Hoxha. The censors would question the filmmaker’s Communist loyalty and require them to include a picture of Hoxha in their project. In the post-communist era, Saim rarely sees his films on Albanian television because of the unpopular images of Hoxha that they contain.⁹⁵

Albanians reacted to the oppression, censorship, and mind-numbing sameness with bad workmanship, theft, and absenteeism from work. “Chronic fatigue, stress and boredom” were a part of daily life. Exacerbating the monotony, Albanians were not allowed to escape these conditions through vacation or emigration because travel outside Albania was strictly forbidden.⁹⁶ Moreover, religious persecution continued into the 1970s. In 1973, Father Shtjefen Krti, at the age of seventy, was executed by firing squad for baptizing a child. The charge against him was “subversive activities designed to overthrow the state.”⁹⁷

By June 1978 China became more open to the world and made living conditions worse for everyday Albanians. With their newfound global openness China no longer needed Albania as an ally. Additionally, Albania was a constant economic drain, so China cut ties with them. Fortunately for Albanians, though still poor, they had become self-sufficient in “cereal grain production, oil and electricity” so they could subsist without China’s help.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Saim Kokona, Oral History, 5-6.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Vickers, *Modern History*, 200-01.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 195.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 203.

With its last protector and provider gone, Albania slipped into xenophobic isolation. Isolation, according to party leaders, helped Albania maintain its national identity and ideological purity, while China and others wallowed in wicked capitalism. During the 1970s and 1980s Hoxha cultivated a siege mentality among Albanians. Frequently he would refer to Albania as a granite fortress under attack from a variety of outside enemies. Of these enemies, Hoxha famously declared, “They will never catch us asleep, we will never be lacking in vigilance, let everyone understand clearly: the walls of our fortress are of unshakable granite rock.”⁹⁹ To reinforce Albania’s fortress status Hoxha built more than 200,000 cement bunkers throughout the country for use in case of attack.¹⁰⁰

After China left, Albania survived independently, but did not progress economically over the next twenty years. Even fellow communists were shocked at the poverty in Albania when they visited. Communists from neighboring countries would joke that “the streets of Tirana are so clean because the Albanians have nothing to throw away.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, religious practices were still condemned. Baptism and circumcision for example were declared health hazards and some government officials called for the military to enforce atheism.¹⁰² Notwithstanding the pressure, many Albanians persisted in their religious faith with small acts of defiance such as cleverly arranging the TV antenna to look like a cross.¹⁰³

Because Albania was so thoroughly isolated from the rest of the world it was not until the early 1980s that the world began to take notice of their plight. To help, a radio station in Monte Carlo began broadcasting chapters of the Bible at dictation speed in 1983. Also, Radio Vatican

⁹⁹ As quoted in Vickers, *Modern history*, 203.

¹⁰⁰ Sallabanda “U.S. Relations.”

¹⁰¹ As quoted in Vickers, *Modern history*, 204.

¹⁰² Jacques, *The Albanians*, 570.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 569.

for Catholics and Radio Florina for Orthodox broadcast worship programs early in the morning, when the Sigurimi were less diligent in searching out dissidents. On March 7, 1983 a Delegation from Denmark also assisted by presenting a report on the religious persecution of the Albanians to the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights. In a separate UN report published in 1984, Albania was lumped together with Iran, Cuba and the Soviet Union as the worst offenders against human rights. In the report the conditions in Albania were labeled "exceptionally bad." Following these reports the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities stated on August 27, 1985 that the Albanian leaderships' actions "constitute an affront to human dignity, a flagrant and systematic violation of human rights, a disavowal of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and an obstacle to the friendly and peaceful relations between nations." The official Albanian response in the principal communist party newspaper was reminiscent of something from George Orwell's novel *1984*. They declared, "In the new Albania nobody has ever been persecuted for his religious sentiments."¹⁰⁴

As the United Nations finally became more aware of Hoxha's actions, he died on April 11, 1985 at the age of seventy-six from diabetic complications.¹⁰⁵ Albanians, including future members of the LDS Church mourned his passing. One of them, Alketa Pernaska, said that she and everyone around her cried when Hoxha died because she had lost something. Another, Ledia Kita, said she cried because he was their leader and she had nothing against him. She said Hoxha was handsome and when he talked on TV "it was nice." Another member, Daniela Kita, cried but she was not sure why. She thought it might have been because her friends were crying. She also stated that she was a little afraid that somebody would say, "She is not crying. She doesn't

¹⁰⁴ All quotes in this paragraph are from Jacques, *The Albanians*, 573-575.

¹⁰⁵ Vickers, *Modern History*, 208.

love him” and then she would be punished.¹⁰⁶ There were eight days of official mourning and Albanians lined up for three days to see his body. Then he was interred in the Tirana cemetery for martyrs of the homeland.¹⁰⁷

The End of Communism

With Hoxha gone, Ramiz Alia became Albania’s leader. From Hoxha, Alia inherited a nightmare collection of administrative difficulties. For one, the economy was still weak and inefficient. In some instances so inefficient that imported machines and equipment had sat unused in dock warehouses for years.¹⁰⁸ Economic thinking and general creativity were stunted and the infrastructure, including transportation and telecommunications, was in shambles. Alia attempted to remedy the situation in a variety of ways. First he encouraged writers, intellectuals, and artists to be more creative and create public debate and even criticism. He also looked to reduce the food shortage by promoting private land cultivation and animal husbandry on a small scale. Alia even decentralized economic decision making to a certain extent, giving power to local managers, even to fire employees who stole and implement systems of wage incentives, powers previously unavailable to them. Alia had to battle hard-line Communist party conservatives with every reform. In 1988 and 1989 Alia was discouraged when there was no economic revival. Shoddy goods continued to be produced and the standard of living was stagnant at the poverty level.¹⁰⁹

David Binder, an American reporter, was allowed to visit Albania under Alia’s presidency. He said, “Having worked and lived in communist countries during the previous three decades, I thought I recognized the face of destitution, but I was unprepared for its breadth and

¹⁰⁶ See oral histories of Alketa Pernaska, Ledia Kita, Daniela Kita, and Saim Kokona

¹⁰⁷ Monika Kadi Oral History, 8; and Vickers, *Modern History*, 209.

¹⁰⁸ Biberaj, *Maverick*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 79-83.

depth in Albania.”¹¹⁰ While there, an old Albanian told him a joke that illustrated the poverty, “A man who catches a fine fish in Lake Shkoder and proudly brings it back for his wife to cook. She says the stove doesn't work because power has been cut off. How about a fire? No coal. No wood. In resignation the husband trudges to the lakeshore and throws the fish back in. The fish leaps up and shouts, "Long Live the Party of Labor!"¹¹¹ Though he fell short in achieving economic reform Alia established unprecedented freedoms for Albanians. Albanians were now allowed to hold hands in public and wear blue jeans. Girls could wear shorter skirts and men could wear shorts. Men were even allowed to grow a mustache or beard both of which had been discouraged under Hoxha.¹¹²

With the slightly increased freedom under Alia, Albanians became aware of changes happening in other Communist countries and desired the same.¹¹³ In the spring of 1990 anti-communist demonstrations and labor strikes were violently dispersed by the police. The violent repercussions did not stop Albanians' desires for change. In July 1990 several thousand Albanians sought political asylum in other countries by climbing over fences onto the grounds of foreign embassies in Tirana. 5,000 Albanians were eventually granted political asylum and allowed to leave under foreign protection. Another concession came on December 11, 1990 when the Central Committee of the Albanian government legalized the formation of other political parties. Following the announcement, the Democratic Party was created and announced

¹¹⁰ David Binder, “Approaching Albania,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* Vol. 19 No. 1, (2008), 67.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹³ Daniela Kita reported that under Alia her father began to listen to the Voice of America and she would always tell him to turn it down, afraid that they would get in trouble. Daniela Kita Oral History.

the next day.¹¹⁴ The announcement came in the middle of a violent student led protests. During one protest, students burned Hoxha's books and attacked government buildings yelling "Down with dictatorship!" and "Liberty or death!"¹¹⁵ They said they were protesting because of food shortages and a lack of reforms.¹¹⁶ Ledia Kita, a future member of the Church, was in college at the time. She described being enlisted to participate in a protest. She said, "Somebody knocked on my door and said 'We're going to the street and tell the government that we need light; we need water; we need heat.'"¹¹⁷

The spring of 1991 brought continued chaos. Thousands crossed the border into Greece without the fear of Albanian border guards or the former penalty of a twenty-year prison sentence. Additionally, students participated in a hunger strike and thousands stormed the center of Tirana and pulled down the giant statue of Enver Hoxha. In March 1991, 20,000 unemployed young men commandeered ships from Albanian ports and sailed to Italy. Italians were shocked that Albanians dressed in ragged 1970s style clothing and looked so hungry. For most Westerners however, the Albanian evacuation was overshadowed by the concurrent Gulf War.¹¹⁸ Those Albanians who actually made it to Italy were not repatriated because the calculated cost to send them back was too great. By March 1991, the Western press was wondering when the "last bastion of Stalinism" (Albania) was going to fall. To the western world, the fall of Albanian Communism was less dramatically covered in the media than the fall of the Berlin Wall, but to Albanians it was just as important. Democracy was reinitiated in March 1991 when the first multi-party elections in sixty years were held in Albania. The PLA (People's Labor Party of

¹¹⁴ Vickers, *Modern History*, 217.

¹¹⁵ Binder, "Approaching Albania, 74.

¹¹⁶ Vickers, *Modern History*, 217.

¹¹⁷ Ledia Kita, Oral History, 9.

¹¹⁸ Vickers, *Modern History*, 218-21.

Albania – the Communist party) won a majority of the 250 seats but the Democratic Party won 75. Sali Berisha, a Democratic Party member, won a seat in Durres and declared, “Morally we are the winners. This is the real end of Communism in Albania.”¹¹⁹

On April 10, 1991 the new government created a constitution which included the right to private property, the right to strike, demonstrate, and emigrate. Unfortunately, the new constitution did not solve lingering economic problems. Inflation was at 260 percent per month and 70 percent of the workforce was idle. Furthermore, a food and fuel shortage in late 1992 led people to chop down trees which had been planted in King Zog’s time and mob food processing plants, bakeries and restaurants to feed their families.¹²⁰

In this bleak economic and emotional context the Albanian government also reintroduced the right to religious worship. The 1991 Albanian constitution declared that “The state observes the freedom of religious belief and creates conditions to exercise it.”¹²¹ Since then, Albania has gone from the first officially atheistic country in the world to the country with the highest ratio of evangelical Christian missionaries per capita in all of Eastern Europe.¹²² By 1992 the first missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints joined their evangelical counterparts in Albania and began to have success. Matthew Heiss, principal collector of Albanian oral histories for the LDS Church, commented on this success when he observed that “In spite of the repression [Albanians had] a general longing for something beyond the material world.”¹²³ Years of religious repression in Albania did not crush religious yearning rather it fostered longing for divine peace and spiritual hope.

¹¹⁹ As quoted in Vickers, *Modern History*, 223.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹²¹ Stutzman, “New Competitors,”.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Matthew Heiss Interview, August 15, 2008, notes in author’s possession.

Conclusion

Four and a half decades of communism deeply scarred Albania. The movement was initially seen by the revolutionaries as the best way to shake off foreign powers and colonial oppression. Then it blossomed with the intent to further free the people from poverty by creating a classless society which would work together, grow, and redistribute wealth evenly. To accomplish their goal of classless society working together the communist government sought to eliminate the distinction of religion from Albania so that all were seen as Albanians rather than Muslims, Catholics, or Orthodox Christians. To some extent they were successful. A sense of being Albanian became more important than any other social marker. On the other hand, Hoxha did not accomplish many of his ends. The elimination of religion did not eliminate classes. It simply shifted the marker from religion to party, and rank within that party. Moreover, the elimination of religion did nothing to improve the wellbeing of Albanians. Albania continued to be the poorest country in Europe, with massive infrastructure problems, and individual poverty. Through devious tactics Hoxha and his supporters were able to eliminate outward signs of religion but not inward manifestations.

CHAPTER THREE: THE CHURCH ENTERS ALBANIA

Introduction

As the dam of communism crumbled, religion rushed back into Albania. Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian missionaries all quickly re-established places of worship and contact with members in Albania. Though the years of communism were a very difficult time, some, like scholar Arthur Liolin, have argued that years of atheism and other hardships prepared Albanians to embrace religion. He stated that for Albanians “Religion often provides a grounding certitude in a time of transition, vulnerability and uncertainty. When faced with economic poverty, limited access to levers of power and emotional instability the individual perceives his faith as an outlet for his aspirations.”¹²⁴ Evangelical Christians quickly recognized this desire for religion and began preaching in Albania as soon as they were able. Early on most evangelicals in Albania preached in three main ways: they gave public speeches, distributed New Testaments, and formed bible study classes. They found a measure of success following this pattern.¹²⁵ The LDS Church also entered Albania shortly after the fall of communism but followed a slightly different format for preaching in Albania. This pattern, coupled with Albanian desire for religion has led to steady growth in Church membership even in difficult times. Following established LDS patterns, missionaries focused on creating meaningful social relationships with Albanians. First they created an atmosphere of trust with through humanitarian service. Second, they learned the difficult Albanian language in order to communicate without translators and third, they

¹²⁴ Arthur E. Liolin, “The Nature of Faith in Albania: Toward the 21st Century,” *East European Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 1997): 187.

¹²⁵ Stutzman, “New Competitors.”

taught individuals with personalized care and attention. Once interested, many Albanians had spiritual experiences and found emotional stability and comfort from associating with other members. Solid social networks and spiritual experiences within the LDS Church led to consistent steady growth in membership.

Negotiating to Enter Albania

Establishing the LDS Church in Albania began early in 1991 when Church leaders recognized the political upheaval there as an opportunity to enter and establish a Church presence. Elder Hans B. Ringger of the European Area Presidency had persistently attempted to arrange for Church leaders to visit Albania, but all his requests for visas were consistently denied.¹²⁶ Beverly Campbell of the Church's Washington D.C. Public Affairs Committee had more success. Working with the Albanian delegation to the United Nations, she arranged a first-time visit for Latter-day Saint Church leaders to Albania.¹²⁷

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, an apostle (one of the fifteen principle leaders of the LDS Church) who was then responsible for Europe, and Elder Ringger of the Quorum of the Seventy (a secondary ecclesiastical counsel) were the first to visit. They arrived in Albania in April, 1991, to meet with government officials.¹²⁸ During one of the meetings, an official stated that "The government regretted its actions against religion and that it now welcomed churches back to Albania. One official explained, 'We need the help of churches to rebuild the moral base of our country, which was destroyed by communism.'"¹²⁹ With that declaration, Church leaders and government officials began to establish a plan for humanitarian service missionaries to enter the country and assist in that process.

¹²⁶ Thales Smith, "Balkan Adventure," 28.

¹²⁷ Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 267.

¹²⁸ Charone Smith, "Labor of Love," 152.

¹²⁹ Dallin H. Oaks, "Religious Values and Public Policy," *Ensign*, October 1992, 60.

In October 1991 Elder Ringger returned to Albania with President Kenneth Reber (Vienna Austria Mission President) and Lloyd Pendleton (welfare specialist from the Church Area Office in Frankfurt Germany).¹³⁰ They were warmly welcomed and directed to different government ministries that would help them identify needed projects and expertise.¹³¹ As they met with the Minister of Agriculture, Nexhmedin Dumani, he was quick to point out that there was significant need for tractors. In fact, he requested that the Church send 200 of them. Elder Ringger replied, “You’ll have to get those from somebody with money. We don’t have a lot of money. We have a lot of goods and we have people but we don’t have money.”¹³² Dumani responded that “many people had come with promises, but nobody had done anything yet.”¹³³ During this conversation, President Reber realized that there were practical ways to render immediate assistance to Albanian agriculture. There was a soil research specialist and a horticulturist currently serving in the Austria Vienna mission and Reber informed Dumani that these men could be in Albania the following week. One week later, Theron Sommerfeldt (soil specialist) and George Niedens (horticulturist) arrived in Albania.¹³⁴ During their stay, Sommerfeldt and Niedens assessed agricultural needs and made recommendations to help with disease, insect and weed control, greenhouse production, animal husbandry, and drainage and irrigation systems. As Presidents Reber and Ringger visited other government ministries they

¹³⁰ Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 267.

¹³¹ Thales Smith, “Balkan Adventure,” 28.

¹³² Kenneth Dudley Reber Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1994, p. 75, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹³³ Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 267.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

found that Albanians also needed technology, health care, and business administration assistance, along with English language instruction.¹³⁵

Humanitarian Missionaries

Aware of specific needs, the Church called two senior couples to serve humanitarian missions. Melvin and Randolyn Brady from California were the first to be called. Melvin was a retired professor of Economics and Randolyn was an experienced teacher of English as a second language and piano player. Thales and Charone Smith were the second couple called. Thales was a retired pediatrician and former stake president from Utah and Charone was a registered nurse and mother of seven children.

Following their calls, President Reber of the Austria Vienna Mission who was to supervise the humanitarian missionaries went back to Albania in January 1992 to prepare for the arrival of the two couples. He took with him a list of potential contacts from an Albanian refugee Esat Ferra, who was living in Austria at the time. President Reber experienced difficulty trying to enter the country without speaking Albanian. It seemed to him that the guard kept shaking his head no when he asked to cross the border. Then a friendly Albanian explained to him that in Albania head shakes mean the opposite of what they do in America and the whole time the border guard had been telling him yes.¹³⁶ After entering the country, President Reber found one of the recommended contacts, Dr. Sulejman Kodra, Vice-Rector at Tirana University, who recommended he contact Anastas and Sofia Suli for missionary living accommodations. Anastas Suli was a child psychologist who spoke English and his wife Sofia was a pediatrician. The Sulis

¹³⁵ Charone Smith, "Labor of Love," 152.

¹³⁶ Kenneth Dudley Reber Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1994, p. 76, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah

offered to let the four missionaries stay in half of their home at no cost. A generous gesture since they could normally rent to a foreigner at the rate of four hundred dollars a month.¹³⁷

The Smiths and the Bradys arrived in Tirana, the capital city of Albania on February 17, 1992. The missionaries expected their visas to be waiting for them at the immigration desk, but once they arrived the visas were not there. While in the airport they were closely watched by armed guards while Albanian officials looked for their Albanian sponsor. The sponsor was located, but unfortunately was in Greece at the time. Therefore, the missionaries were marched back to the plane by their armed guards and sent back to Italy. Over the next two days, Church contacts in Albania renegotiated visas and the missionaries returned to Albania. When the couples neared the airport for their second time, the plane kept circling in the air. Wondering why, they looked out the window and found to their amusement that the plane was delayed while sheep and cattle were herded off the runway a testament to the poor economic conditions they had been sent to help ameliorate.¹³⁸

After passing smoothly through customs and driving through the city, the couples arrived at the Suli residence and quickly became friends with their hosts. Even though the Sulis were generous, the missionaries quickly felt the shortages that all Albanians suffered with. Charone recalled that they “felt very much like [they] were camping out.”¹³⁹ The water was generally cold and came only three times a day, once from four to six a.m., then in the afternoon from one to three and finally from seven to nine at night. Electricity was equally sporadic and heat was scarce. In fact, when the sun went down the two couples would frequently go to bed and bury

¹³⁷ Anastas and Sofia Suli Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 8, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 268.

¹³⁸ Thales Smith, “Balkan Adventure,” 29.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

themselves under blankets to stay warm during the frigid Albanian February. Melvin Brady also felt the cold as he taught at the university, the windows in his classroom had all been broken. To compensate he wore his pajamas and two sweaters under his suit every day.¹⁴⁰

Getting to know the missionaries, the Sulis were surprised when they learned that the missionaries intended to stay in Albania for eighteen months at their own expense, especially since the previous political election of April 1991 had been rather violent.¹⁴¹ The dean of the Tirana School of Economics was equally astonished that Melvin Brady was willing to teach at the university without monetary compensation for eighteen months. While there, Melvin taught free-market economics and Randolyn taught English. Eventually, Melvin became the assistant dean of the economics department and helped plan the curriculum for the coming year. In his courses he addressed among other things, the meaning of a market economy, the role of the entrepreneur, the role of government in a free enterprise economy, and the role of professional managers in business development. Melvin Brady's association with both the LDS Church and Western capitalism in some ways made the LDS Church more attractive to investigators. He was perceived as bringing economic salvation as an ambassador of eternal salvation.¹⁴² To improve the quality of scholarship at the university he negotiated to get economic textbooks (in English) from American universities. He was also able to procure money to purchase a copy machine for the university from Italy.¹⁴³ When the textbooks arrived, Sister Brady tutored some of the economics professors in English so they could use the texts more effectively.¹⁴⁴ She had fifty-six

¹⁴⁰ Thales Smith, "Balkan Adventure," 29; and Mehr *Mormon Missionaries*, 268; and Melvin Brady Papers 1992-1993, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹⁴¹ Charone Smith, "Labor of Love," 152.

¹⁴² Melvin Brady Papers.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Suli, Oral History, 16; and Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 270.

professors who tried to get into her first class. After a few months of instruction, she marveled that she had been able to create a college level course with only a dictionary. She felt that it was a gift from God which gave her greater clarity of mind to be able to teach effectively.¹⁴⁵ She also taught English to small groups and worked to translate a number of basic hymns.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, she began a young women's program within the Albanian LDS Church and enlisted young women participate in service activities.¹⁴⁷

While the Bradys provided an outlet for Albanian aspirations through economic instruction and English acquisition, the Smiths worked to improve the quality of life for Albanians by improving health care. They did so by working at the Dystrophy Hospital and in the pediatrics department of the Tirana University School of Medicine Hospital. The Sulis were concerned that it could be dangerous for Charone to travel to the Dystrophy Hospital and counseled her not to go because a couple of days after the missionaries arrived, new government elections were set to take place and the previous elections had resulted in violent riots. Charone responded to their concerns stating that she was on a mission and that God would accompany her.¹⁴⁸

The Dystrophy Hospital was a center for malnourished infants. Of the eighty infants in the hospital, most were brought there when they were three to four months old because their mothers had run out of breast milk. Generally, the babies weighed less when enrolled in the hospital than they did at birth. The conditions at the hospital were in Charone's words "horrendous."¹⁴⁹ The facilities were old and the babies were so poorly cared for that the Smiths

¹⁴⁵ Melvin Brady Papers 1992-1993.

¹⁴⁶ Arminda Suli, interview by author, notes in author's possession, August 3, 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Suli, Oral History, 9.

¹⁴⁹ Charone Smith, "Labor of Love," 154.

found themselves crying after their first tour of the hospital. Nevertheless, they quickly got to work helping the children. For his part, Thales Smith created a nutritional baby formula out of available materials which helped the infants begin to gain weight. For her part, Charone worked individually with a small group of children. She loved them, worked their muscles and helped them to socialize with other infants. Under her affectionate care they gained weight, developed physically and began to smile for the first time. With her enthusiasm she also helped the weary staff gain renewed energy and work more effectively.¹⁵⁰ This not only encouraged hospital workers but also was part of the initial attraction of many to the LDS Church. Their lives were full of instability but Charone Smith seemed to model emotional stability and optimism.

While Charone worked full-time at the Dystrophy Hospital, Thales turned his attention to the medical school hospital. Thales found the facilities better maintained than the Dystrophy Hospital, but still well below western medical standards. There was no hot water, and the cold water was inconsistent. Electricity was erratic at best, and the staff used an outdated twenty-five-year-old Italian pediatric textbook as their only reference. To improve the quality of care, Thales lectured twice a week at the hospital on current pediatric practices. Additionally, with the help of interpreters he consulted with and taught the one hundred hospital doctors.¹⁵¹

While the Smiths and the Bradys were performing humanitarian service they created friendships which led to interest in the LDS Church. When their acquaintances became interested the missionaries would invite them to attend a weekly worship service called a sacrament meeting held on Sunday. After six weeks in Albania, there were twenty to thirty people regularly attending. The sacrament meeting talk, or sermon, was usually given by one of the four

¹⁵⁰ Arminda Suli Interview.

¹⁵¹ Information about the Dystrophy Hospital is from Charone Smith, "Labor of Love," 153-54 and Thales Smith, "Balkan Adventure," 29-30.

missionaries on a basic element of LDS doctrine. Then they would invite those listening to hear more on an individual basis. When time permitted, the missionaries would teach discussions (basic lessons about the LDS Church) in the evenings to those who were interested.¹⁵² Arminda, the Suli's daughter, was only sixteen when the missionaries began meeting in her home and became one of the people the missionaries taught. At first, she went just to learn about American culture but in time, impressed with the missionaries' kindness and love, she became more interested in their message.¹⁵³ Her experience was fairly common. Though Albanians were first attracted to the missionaries because they were American, the optimism and kindness of the missionaries turned casual curiosity of the Albanians in their culture into active interest in their message. Creating these strong social ties was the first step for the missionaries in converting Albanians. By May 1992 there were several Albanians interested in learning more about the LDS Church, but Elder Ringger counseled the humanitarian missionaries to be patient and wait for full-time proselyting missionaries to arrive.¹⁵⁴

Arrival of Full-Time Teaching Missionaries

The humanitarian missionaries did not have to be patient for long. The next month (June 1992) four young Elders (as missionaries are called in LDS circles) were called as full-time teaching missionaries to work in Albania. They were Elders Matt Wirthlin, Paul McAlister, Beau Jarvis and Mark Slabaugh. When they were called, all four Elders were serving in German speaking missions. When the Church decided to send proselyting missionaries to Albania, they asked certain mission presidents to submit names of obedient, hardworking missionaries, who had demonstrated a proficiency in language acquisition, and who had been out less than a year.

¹⁵² Thales Smith, "Balkan Adventure," 33.

¹⁵³ Arminda Suli Interview.

¹⁵⁴ Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 270.

The European Area Presidency (three men in charge of a large geographic area for the LDS Church) discussed the nominees and prayed for revelation about whom to send to Albania. Upon receiving inspiration, they submitted the selected names for approval to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. This was the first time that Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, learned that his grandson Matthew Wirthlin was selected to go to Albania. The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve approved the selection of the Elders and the European Area Presidency extended the calls.¹⁵⁵ Upon receiving the call one Elder recorded in his journal that night, “I don’t even know where Albania is.”¹⁵⁶

On June 11, 1992, Elders Wirthlin, McAlister, Slabaugh, and Jarvis, arrived at the Austria Vienna mission headquarters to meet their new mission president, Kenneth Reber. After interviewing each missionary President Reber instructed them on the practical aspects of opening a new mission including: food issues, economic conditions, finding apartments, and learning local customs. From Vienna, the Elders flew directly to Albania on a Tyrolian Airlines’ small prop-jet plane with about eleven other passengers. To prepare for the coming adventure the Elders spent the flight reading their scriptures and praying. During the flight, the Elders became slightly bothered by a man smoking a large cigar in the back of the airplane. Elder George Niedens, a senior humanitarian missionary then serving in Germany, was traveling with the four Elders in anticipation of extending his mission with his wife to serve in Albania. He also smelled the smoke. In response, Elder Niedens walked back to the man smoking and began a conversation. During the course of their friendly exchange, Elder Niedens discovered that the man smoking was Dhimiter Anagnosti, Minister of Culture and Religion in Albania. As the

¹⁵⁵ Matthew Wirthlin, interview by author, MP3 recording, Salt Lake City, Utah., 10 March 2007.

¹⁵⁶ Matthew Wirthlin, Journal, June 1992 – May 1993, 6-6-92, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Church was established in Albania, Minister Anagnosti helped ensure a smooth transition. He opened the way for missionaries to do street contacting and cleared up occasional misunderstandings with the police.¹⁵⁷

Contacting Minister Anagnosti was not the Niedens only contribution to the growth of the church in Albania. When George Niedens arrived with his wife a month after the Elders, they set to work building the kingdom. Sister Niedens taught piano and they both worked with a small city outside Tirana to create a clean and consistent water supply. As an experienced horticulturist, Elder Niedens also helped Albanians in their greenhouse plant production. They befriended and taught several people and helped in the administration of the growing church. In the words of Matt Wirthlin the Niedens were a “critical piece of the first year” in Albania.¹⁵⁸

When the four proselyting missionaries landed in Tirana on June 12, 1992, they were met by the Smiths and the Bradys who gave them a tour of the city. Initially, the Elders were overwhelmed with the poverty. They were surprised that most of the roads were not paved and were clogged with horses, buggies and sheep. They were also shocked that there were so many beggars. Their apartment though, in the opinion of Matt Wirthlin, was better than many missionary apartments in Germany where he had previously served.¹⁵⁹

Once established in their apartment and injected with gamma-globulin by Elder Smith (to strengthen their immune system), the Elders began an intense study of the Albanian language. It was essential for the missionaries to be able to communicate clearly in Albanian so that they

¹⁵⁷ Matthew Thomas Wirthlin, Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 5, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Wirthlin, Journal, 6-19-92; and Wirthlin, Interview, 10 March 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Wirthlin, Interview; and Mark Slabaugh, interview by author, 14 March 2007. Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession.

¹⁵⁹ Wirthlin, Journal, 6-12-92; and Wirthlin, Interview; and Wirthlin, Oral History, 5.

could further the relationships established by the humanitarian missionaries and clearly teach about the LDS Church. Sister Brady had arranged for three Albanians to teach the Elders at Tirana University. The university was old and not very well maintained. There were broken windows, uncomfortable benches, scratched tables, and no air conditioning. Considering the conditions, the teachers taught very well, particularly without the aid of any textbooks which taught Albanian with English translations.

The missionaries would meet their teacher in the morning at the university and study for a few hours and then take a break for lunch. In the afternoon they would reconvene and study for a couple more hours. They would generally study Albanian six to eight hours a day, five days a week. After the first day, Elder Wirthlin remarked in his journal that Albanian “is not an easy language.”¹⁶⁰ The teachers would rotate teaching and the Elders took careful notes and tutored one another, especially when one would doze off in the suffocating summer heat. With the help of their teachers and in their view the gift of tongues,¹⁶¹ the Elders were able to communicate their basic message within two months. In the evenings, after studying Albanian, the four Elders spent their time doing humanitarian service with Charone Smith at the Dystrophy Hospital or teaching their message to the English speaking contacts that the humanitarian missionaries had prepared.¹⁶²

Growth

While the four Elders studied Albanian and performed service they did not forget their primary focus was preaching the gospel. To accommodate all the people interested in learning,

¹⁶⁰ Wirthlin, Journal, 6-15-92.

¹⁶¹ Latter-day Saints view the gift of tongues as the ability to learn and communicate in foreign languages more than they view it as glossolalia. In several places in his Journal, Oral History and Interview Matt Wirthlin notes that they felt the power of the gift of tongues helping them to learn Albanian quickly so they could teach the gospel in Albanian.

¹⁶² Wirthlin, Interview; and Slabaugh, Interview; and Wirthlin, Oral History, 8.

the missionaries decided to move sacrament meeting from the Suli's living room to a larger venue, a rented room in the Palace of Culture in the middle of Tirana. Upon arriving there for Church the first Sunday, they found the room they rented was given to the Socialist Party for a meeting. Therefore, the Church was relegated to a room on the fourth floor. Though difficult to find, investigators still came.¹⁶³

As the four Elders terminated their day-long study sessions and began to preach in earnest, it was not difficult for them to find new people to teach. In fact, the first day they walked through the streets of Tirana fifty people approached them.¹⁶⁴ As they contacted people, Albanians were impressed that there were Americans who had taken the time to learn their language.¹⁶⁵ However, one difficulty in contacting was that some people just wanted to talk to the Elders in order to be able to say they had met someone from America. To ensure that they were using their teaching time well, the Elders tried to teach only those that were truly interested in the gospel. The first step they took to certify someone's interest in the Church was to invite them to church on Sunday. Generally, more than half the people they invited came. Once people attended a church meeting, the missionaries would teach them more about the gospel on an individual basis. Personal attention was important especially since teachings about God and Jesus Christ had been minimized or in some instances eradicated under communism. Therefore, the Elders spent a tremendous amount of time, compared with what they spent in other areas in Europe, establishing a concept of God and Jesus Christ with each person they taught. For

¹⁶³ Wirthlin, Journal, 6-21-92.

¹⁶⁴ Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 272.

¹⁶⁵ Slabaugh Interview.

instance, when Elders Wirthlin and Slabaugh taught the first missionary lesson to the Sulis, they spent two hours explaining the idea of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁶

Though there were difficulties, after less than a month of preaching in Albania, Elders McAlister and Jarvis committed Blendi Kokona to be the first convert in Albania. Blendi, like many early members, came in contact with the Elders through the humanitarian missionaries, illustrating the importance of using service to create strong social ties. In Blendi's case his first interest in contacting the missionaries was to learn English. An acquaintance of the Smiths, Astrit Basha, had told Blendi he would have the chance to meet some Americans and practice English if he would come to a meeting held on Sunday morning. Blendi went and had no idea that he was participating in a church meeting. He was just happy to be practicing English with foreigners. Blendi commented to his mom that afternoon that it was a good meeting because the missionaries had passed out some bread and water.

After sacrament meeting, Elders McAlister and Jarvis set up an appointment to talk with Blendi under the statue of Skanderbeg in the middle of the city. As they talked and practiced English the subject of religion naturally came up. Blendi, like many other young Albanians, did not believe in Jesus Christ. He had tried to read the Bible in English but found it boring. To encourage faith in Christ, the missionaries gave Blendi an Italian copy of the Book of Mormon (Italian was easier for Blendi to understand than English there was no Albanian Book of Mormon). When Blendi first read the Book of Mormon, he thought that it was an interesting story and “really felt good about what the Book of Mormon had.”¹⁶⁷ After reading, Elders Jarvis and McAlister used a diagram to explain prayer and then invited Blendi to pray about what he

¹⁶⁶ Wirthlin, Journal, 6-22-92.

¹⁶⁷ Blendi Kokona Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, 11, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

had learned. Blendi accepted the invitation. He knelt and prayed alone, with an open mind, willing to receive a confirmation. His response came as a comfortable presence in his room and he knew the things the missionaries taught were from God. He knew Christ was real and that the gospel had been restored through Joseph Smith.¹⁶⁸ Blendi's conversion illustrated how spending time with each person to nurture them in gospel understanding helped them to have a personal experience with the Divine and choose to join the Church.

After receiving permission from the European Area Presidency,¹⁶⁹ Elder Wirthlin interviewed Blendi Kokona on July 25, 1992, and found him ready for baptism.¹⁷⁰ Later that day, in the lobby of the Olympic Pools building, which ironically included an alcoholic beverage bar, Blendi entered the two-foot-deep fountain to be baptized. In front of 30 people,¹⁷¹ Blendi knelt down, and was baptized by immersion by lying down flat.¹⁷² Elder Wirthlin thought that "it was a perfect baptism." He said, "The spirit was very strong and I am sure no one will forget that very important event for the Church in Albania."¹⁷³

While preaching, the missionaries found that they had more success with the younger generation of Albanians. The older generation remembered past religious persecution too vividly. They feared the return of communism and as a result unwilling to join a religion. Some of the older generation who were not afraid of the government, were afraid of offending their

¹⁶⁸ Blendi Kokona, interview by author, March 14, 2007, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author's possession.

¹⁶⁹ Slabaugh Interview.

¹⁷⁰ Wirthlin, Journal, 7-25-92.

¹⁷¹ Anna Charone Hellberg Smith Journal, 1992 – 1993, 7-25-92, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹⁷² Unless otherwise noted, the accounts of Blendi Kokona's conversion come from his Oral History p. 1-14.

¹⁷³ Wirthlin, Journal, 7-25-92.

ancestors by changing religions. In their view, their dead ancestors had belonged to other churches and could not give them their blessing to join a new church.¹⁷⁴

For those that converted, some of the most influential doctrines were the Latter-day Saint understanding our relationship with God and the concept of eternal families. Elder Wirthlin observed that the fact that we are actually His children, and that he is a personal being was very powerful to many Albanians.¹⁷⁵ This was illustrated the first time that “I Am a Child of God” was sung in Albanian. The song was first sung in sacrament meeting in the rented room of the Palace of Cultures. The 100 people in attendance sang with feeling and the Holy Ghost filled the room. After the meeting, the Elders were cleaning and noticed a young woman crying in the back of the room. When they offered assistance, she said she was alright. When the Elders persisted, the young woman said, “Until today, when we sang that beautiful music, I never knew that I was a child of God.”¹⁷⁶

As the Church in Albania grew, most Church activities centered on baptisms. Blendi Kokona reported that he went to the second baptism. Then he and the second person baptized went to the third baptism. When there were twenty members, all twenty went to the twenty-first baptism. The participation of new members in the baptisms of others expanded the LDS social network from missionaries and converts to converts with other converts. In the first year, there was a baptism almost every Saturday or Sunday.¹⁷⁷ With such positive growth fostered by individual attention and service, the missionaries began to train new members to care for the church independent of the missionaries. Initially, the senior missionaries served in most of the leadership callings or shadowed Albanian leaders. In fact, the first branch presidency consisted

¹⁷⁴ Slabaugh, Interview.

¹⁷⁵ Wirthlin, Oral History, 20.

¹⁷⁶ Wirthlin, Interview.

¹⁷⁷ Blendi Kokona, Oral History, 17.

of Elder Smith (branch president) and Elders Niedens and Brady (counselors) with Blendi Kokona (clerk). To further train new members, most of the new member discussions were given by one missionary and one member. This provided the members valuable teaching and fellowship experiences and the missionaries with a chance to give one on one attention to new members and tutor them in the gospel and service.¹⁷⁸ When members were given the responsibility to talk or teach in church, the Elders generally helped them to prepare their lessons.¹⁷⁹ In all these things, the missionaries were careful to set a proper example. They knew that everything they did, proper or improper, would be the precedent for all who followed.¹⁸⁰

Under the careful guidance of the missionaries Albanian Saints were given the priesthood and ecclesiastical stewardships. Blendi Kokona received the Aaronic priesthood on August 16, 1992. Three months later on November 25, 1992, he and Altin Galanxhi received the Melchizedek priesthood.¹⁸¹ By February 2, 1993, there were enough prepared priesthood holders to call the first all-Albanian branch presidency. Alban Vathi was called to be branch president, Blendi Kokona was the first counselor, and Pirro Prifti was the second counselor.¹⁸² While serving as first counselor, Blendi also served as the ward mission leader. This was a “baptism by fire” which prepared him to be called as Branch President a few months later at the age of nineteen, when the first Albanian branch was split in two. Blendi called Pandi Theodhori as his first counselor and Elder Mark Slabaugh as his second. The involvement of Albanians in the leadership of their branches facilitated strong ties between members which were essential in the following years when missionaries were evacuated.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Slabaugh, Interview.

¹⁸⁰ Wirthlin, Oral History, 27.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.; and Wirthlin, Journal, 11-25-92.

¹⁸² Wirthlin, Journal, 2-2-93.

During this time, Charone Smith was diagnosed with cancer. After returning to the United States and having surgery in Salt Lake City she began her recovery. Many would have honorably ended their missions at this time but the Smiths were anxious to return to Albania and serve the people they loved. As a testament of this love, they returned to full service after only a month and a half on December 18, 1992.¹⁸³

While they were gone, four more young missionaries arrived from German speaking missions in November 1992 to help expand the work.¹⁸⁴ They were Elders Sternek, Atkinson, Bott, and Melby. Each new Elder was put in a companionship with one of the four experienced Elders. For the first month that the new Elders were in the country they went to the university and studied Albanian in the mornings. In the evenings, they returned to their companions to do service and proselyte.¹⁸⁵ By March 1993, four more German-speaking Elders had arrived, bringing the total number of proselyting missionaries to twelve. With their arrival, President Reber had enough manpower to expand the work and send missionaries to preach the gospel in Durres the second largest city in Albania.

When President Reber received permission to open Durres, he asked Elder Wirthlin and his companion to go on a fact-finding trip to the city of Durres, which was an hour away from Tirana. When they first visited Durres, Wirthlin stated that he and his companion “were absolutely led by the Spirit.”¹⁸⁶ They sensed that this was the correct place for Church expansion. While in Durres, they easily found a place to live and made friends with helpful government

¹⁸³ Charone Smith Journal, 10-30-1992 through 12-18-1992; and Thales and Charone Smith Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1995, p. 24-25, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹⁸⁴ Thales Smith, “Balkan Adventure,” 33.

¹⁸⁵ Slabaugh, Interview.

¹⁸⁶ Wirthlin, Oral History, 25.

officials. On March 8, 1993, four Elders were transferred to the city of Durres and began preaching following the established pattern of service and individual attention. One of the first people the Elders contacted was a man named Piro Dolani – head librarian at the Durres City Library. Dolani helped the Elders contact people all around the city and also helped them to rent a room for church meetings at the Durres Palace of Cultures. Dolani also introduced the Elders to his friend Plarent Toci. Plarent's father was a famous archeologist in Albania who had excavated an enormous amphitheater in Durres. After meeting the missionaries, Plarent was soon baptized in the Adriatic Sea and soon served as the first branch president there.¹⁸⁷

While walking in Durres one day, Elder Wirthlin and his companion were prompted by the Holy Ghost to turn and walk down another street. On this street, a man stopped them and pleaded with them to come and see his mother right away. The Elders complied and went to meet the man's aged mother (nearly eighty-years-old). As they spoke with the mother, she told them through tears that when she was a little girl her father had informed her about a reoccurring dream of his. Her father explained that his dream meant that someday men would come to Albania in white shirts and ties and bring the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Her father told her that he would not live to see this time, but that one day those men would come to Albania. The mother said that she had always thought her father was a dreamer but now she believed him. This and other experiences impressed the missionaries that the Lord had prepared individuals even during communism to receive the gospel.¹⁸⁸

Dedication of Albania

With two branches of the Church well established in Tirana and another growing quickly in Durres, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the quorum of the twelve Apostles came to dedicate Albania

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Wirthlin, Interview.

for the preaching of the gospel. Elder Oaks arrived with Elder Dennis Neuenschwander of the Seventy and President Kenneth Reber on April 21, 1993. Shortly after arriving in Albania, Elder Oaks met with the missionaries. He told them that President Ezra Taft Benson had asked him to give each missionary a hug. So he enclosed each missionary in a “bear hug” which expressed gratitude and recognition of their hard work.¹⁸⁹ The missionaries were also grateful for the two pound bag of M&Ms that Elder Oaks gave each of them. When given the chance to ask questions, the missionaries asked why the Church had waited to dedicate Albania for the preaching of the gospel. Elder Oaks responded that First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve had “wanted to make sure that the blood of Israel was present.” Oaks then added, “Obviously from the fruits of your labors, the blood of Israel is present and strong.”¹⁹⁰ The next day, Elder Oaks traveled to Durres and gave a fireside to twenty-five people with Elder Wirthlin translating for him.

On Friday April 23, 1993, Elder Oaks dedicated Albania for the preaching of the gospel. The dedication took place at the “Pallati I Brijadave” or Monument of Heroes Park which is located on a beautiful hill overlooking Tirana. Many Albanian Latter-day Saints attended with their families, friends, and other investigators. Blendi Kokona attended with his father Saim, who filmed the event.¹⁹¹ When the group of Saints arrived at the monument, they found Elder Oaks at the site preparing for the dedication. He emerged alone from behind the monument to address the Saints. In his address he quoted Parley P. Pratt and said that it was truly “the dawning of a brighter day” in Albania. Then the congregation sang “The Morning Breaks” by Parley P. Pratt

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Wirthlin, Oral History, 21; and Wirthlin, Journal, 4-21-93. In LDS theology, missionary work is not just an effort to gain new converts but also a belief that the lineage of Abraham was literally scattered throughout the earth and that those of that lineage are the ones attracted to joining the LDS Church, therefore his statement on the blood of Israel being present.

¹⁹¹ Saim Kokona, Oral History, 11.

and Elder Oaks began the prayer of dedication for the country. In the prayer, Elder Oaks asked Heavenly Father to “bless this land and people.”¹⁹² He also asked that families would accept the gospel and join the church as family units. Elder Oaks then promised that if the Albanian Saints were faithful that they would be able to have all the blessings of the gospel, which Elder Wirthlin interpreted as temple blessings. The final blessing was that one day Albanian Saints would have The Book of Mormon in their own language.¹⁹³ Elder Slabaugh commented that this event was “absolutely the most spiritual thing that happened” on his mission.¹⁹⁴ Blendi said that it gave him “more perspective of what an apostle is,”¹⁹⁵ and Elder Wirthlin wrote that it was “an once-in-a-lifetime experience that will always be a highlight in my life.”¹⁹⁶ They were not the only ones touched by the event. By the end of the prayer many had tears in their eyes and were deeply touched by the experience.¹⁹⁷

As Elder Oaks traveled to other assignments, the missionaries and members worked with renewed vigor to establish the LDS Church in Albania. As they worked, Pope John Paul II visited Albania with Mother Theresa in April 1993. Charone Smith met with Mother Theresa and received a silver medallion from Mother Theresa’s order. Mother Theresa counseled Charone to continue to “lessen human suffering” in the world.¹⁹⁸

The following summer the first missionaries to Albania began to leave for home. Elder Wirthlin departed in May – the first of the younger Elders to complete his two year mission. The Smiths and Bradys left in August. They left the Church in the hands of capable, hard working

¹⁹² Wirthlin, Journal, 4-23-93.

¹⁹³ Wirthlin, Oral History, 13.

¹⁹⁴ Slabaugh, Interview.

¹⁹⁵ Kokona, Interview.

¹⁹⁶ Wirthlin, Journal, 4-23-93.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries*, 273.

missionaries and enthusiastic members. As they left, they were pleased to note an increased hope and optimism in the members. In addition to the spiritual growth of the Church, the Smiths in particular were excited that of the eighty infants in the Dystrophy Hospital under the care of Charone, all but three had become healthy enough to return home.¹⁹⁹

As these first missionaries left for home, Albanians began to leave on missions. Blendi Kokona visited a zone conference for missionaries where President Ringger of the European area presidency was speaking. As Blendi entered the conference, President Ringger was telling the missionaries that one day there would be missionaries from Albania and pointed to Blendi. At first, Blendi thought “no,” but after some time, careful thought, and prayer he decided to serve a mission. Since he was a branch president at the time, Blendi was interviewed by Elder Smith who was serving as the District President over the branches. Then Blendi was interviewed by President Reber. A few weeks after submitting Blendi’s mission papers, President Reber was worried that it would be difficult for Blendi, an Albanian, to get visas. When President Reber called Church headquarters to express his concern, Church headquarters informed him that Blendi had already been issued a call. A short time later, Blendi received notification that he had been called to serve in the San Diego California mission, a call he accepted and faithfully fulfilled.²⁰⁰

Conclusion

The fact that the first LDS missionaries to Albania were American was one of the most important factors in creating initial interest in the LDS Church for Albanians. In 1992 America was the antithesis of Albania. It was democratic, capitalistic, and religious where Albania was dictatorial, communist, and atheist. Where Albania was the poorest of poor eastern European

¹⁹⁹ Thales Smith, “Balkan Adventure,” 30; and Charone Smith “Labor of Love,” 154.

²⁰⁰ Blendi Kokona, Oral History, 28.

countries America was considered the richest of rich countries in the world. Where America wielded power on the world stage and English was the world's lingua franca Albania and Albanian were almost universally unknown. America was a symbol of hope for Albanians. Under the American model Albanians hoped to enjoy more freedom particularly in religion and more wealth. The American LDS missionaries were a living symbol of this hope for Albanians and they offered specific benefits for their association. The Smiths offered American knowledge and training to improve Albanian health care. The Bradys offered capitalistic know-how and access to English. LDS missionaries were not the only American evangelists in Albania but their approach to preaching was unique. They distinguished themselves with systematic humanitarian service in the beginning and individual attention after they were established. In their initial experiences in Albania most American evangelical missionaries focused on public speeches and group New Testament study groups, both mostly facilitated through translators. Contrastingly LDS missionaries learned Albanian for themselves and focused on individual instruction. Americanism served as an initial attraction for many Albanians to the LDS Church but additional efforts to form meaningful relationships led to continued interest and conversion on the part of Albanians.

Commenting on the establishment of the Church in Albania, Blendi Kokona declared "We have a God of miracles."²⁰¹ The selfless service of the first missionaries piqued the interest of many Albanians and motivated them to further investigate the LDS Church with the proselyting missionaries which resulted in 147 people joining the Church by the end of 1993. The initial growth of the LDS Church in Albania is evidence that consistent application of simple missionary tools such as service, individual attention, and native language acquisition opens the

²⁰¹ Ibid., 38.

door to the spirit and yields consistent growth even in the chaotic country of Albania. From 1994 to 1997 missionaries continued to utilize these tools and the Church grew to include 587 members.

CHAPTER FOUR: EVACUATION

Introduction

In February 1996 the magazine *CondeNast Traveler* included an article on Albania entitled “Can Albania’s Beauty Survive Freedom?” It proved to be an appropriate title considering what would occur the following year. While visiting Albania for the article, author Jason Goodwin made two observations that proved very telling. First, he noted that “Albania has paid for its years of fierce isolationism: it is poor, poorer than anywhere in Europe.” Second, he observed the sharp tempers and short fuses of many Albanians.²⁰² The next year economic instability lit those short fuses and armed insurrection exploded in Albania. As a result, the LDS missionaries were evacuated. This slowed Church growth but did not stop it. In the midst of chaos, many Albanians turned to religion in order to find something upon which to center their lives. Throughout communism Albanians had little access to levers of power. They were to do what the government mandated how they mandated it. With the advent of capitalism many discovered new power through the accumulation of wealth. When the Albanian economy collapsed Albanians lost this power. Though the LDS Church did not offer money to its members it did offer support in troubled times. This support came in the form of missionaries who were concerned for their welfare, they wrote to them on a regular basis while evacuated and upon return visited them and helped them to cope with their problems. The support also came from the

²⁰² Jason Goodwin, “Can Albania’s beauty survive freedom?” *CondeNast Traveler*, February 1996, 119.

organizational structure of the Church. Leaders and other members offered emotional support to those who struggled during the collapse and subsequent uprising.

Economic Collapse

Albania has always been a poor country. According to one scholar, “The basic continuity in Albania's economic history is poverty, constant for long periods at little better than subsistence level.” Fifty years of communism did nothing to help their economic standing. At the beginning of capitalism in 1993, “Albania had the lowest per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Europe making it arguably Europe’s poorest country.” However, with the fall of communism Albanians embraced capitalism and the guidelines established by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In fact Albania became known as a “model country.” It was the only Central or Eastern European country that met all of the standards established by the IMF for developing countries. From 1993 to 1996 the nascent Albanian capitalist economy began to grow, inflation was contained, the GDP increased and unemployment decreased. Despite strict adherence to IMF standards and promising growth, the Albanian economy and society experienced a catastrophic breakdown in the spring of 1997.²⁰³

In the period of economic growth from 1993 to 1997 there were three main sources of extra income for Albanians. First, Albanian nationals, working mostly in Italy and Greece, faithfully sent money to their families in Albania. Second, there was a United Nations embargo in place against Yugoslavia. Some Albanians violated the embargo and smuggled goods into Yugoslavia for a substantial profit. Third, Albania received a tremendous amount of aid from the

²⁰³ Michael Kaser, “Economic Continuities in Albania's Turbulent History,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 4 (Jun., 2001): 627, 630; and Dirk J. Bezemer, “Post-Socialist Financial Fragility: The Case of Albania,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 25, no. 1 (2001): 1-2; and James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers, *The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans* (New York: I. B. Tauris 2007), 4.

European Union. Most of this aid came in the form of goods rather than currency but it freed up earned currency to be used of in other ways.²⁰⁴

With surplus capital, the next logical step would be to invest the money in order to gain interest or create an enterprise which would produce future dividends. However, Albania's banking system did not provide a good outlet for investment because it was deeply dysfunctional. The three existing state banks did offer real interest rates but the rates were small and they had a large portfolio of bad loans which prompted them to impose tight restrictions on credit access. In addition to the initial difficulty of loan approval, the borrower also had to bribe the loan officer with a sizeable portion of the loan in order to be approved. The process for loan approval illustrates that even under democracy and capitalism Albanians had little access to levers of power. In order to gain access to power or to the person with power they had to use bribery. With the process of legitimate loan approval difficult, Albanians began to seek for other forms of credit and investment. Most met their needs for credit through family loans or informal credit companies and met their desires for investment through pyramid schemes. To invest in a pyramid scheme Albanians simply went to the market, found a pyramid scheme booth and paid the scheme their investment. In a couple weeks or months the investor would then return to collect his capital with interest.²⁰⁵

Most banks or credit institutions use deposited money to make investments in growing business ventures. Then they use the capital gained from profitable ventures to pay interest to their investors. Unlike normal banks, the pyramid schemes in Albania did not invest deposited

²⁰⁴ Bezemer, 6.

²⁰⁵ Pettifer and Vickers, *Albanian Question*, 4; and Christopher Jarvis, "The Rise and Fall of Albania's Pyramid schemes," *Finance and Development: A quarterly magazine of the IMF* 37, no. 1 (March 2000); and Clarissa De Waal, *Albania Today: A Portrait of Post-Communist Turbulence* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 215; and Jarvis; and Jason Hover, interview by author, June 29, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author's possession.

money into business ventures rather they paid investors with the money collected from subsequent investors. There was no product. They simply moved money from one person to another.²⁰⁶ Therefore, the only way to continue to pay interest was to continue to have investors pay in. No surplus money was generated through business investments in which to supplement their interest payouts. The only way for pyramid schemes to continue to pay interest was to continue to have investors. Eventually, the pyramid schemes simply ran out of Albanians that were willing to invest in their schemes and when that occurred they were unable to continue interest payments.²⁰⁷

Albanians were attracted to the initial success and seeming stability of the pyramid funds. Initial investors received up to 30 percent monthly returns on their investments and were able to purchase previously unattainable consumer goods. Some investors were so successful they quit their jobs and lived off income from pyramid scheme. One businessman reportedly lost sixty employees in this fashion. Pyramid schemes provided a way to access power outside of the structure of the government. Pyramid schemes leveled the playing field in Albania, factory workers and farmers could access money in a way that was previously only available to high ranking party members. Investor prosperity, though primary, was not the only motive for investing. The schemes also had effective marketing and advertising strategies that ran on state television. Furthermore, government officials gave credence to the schemes by frequently appearing at company functions, the prime minister and speaker of parliament even accepted medals of Honor from one company in November 1996. Several pyramid companies made campaign contributions to the ruling Democratic Party and salesmen told investors that government officials had invested their own money in the schemes. To newborn capitalists

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Bezemer, 4.

pyramid schemes appeared to be a safe goose that laid golden eggs. At their peak in 1996 there were twenty such schemes operating in Albania with regular returns of 30 percent per month. Eventually two thirds of all Albanians invested approximately two billion dollars (one half of the Albanian GDP) into pyramid companies.²⁰⁸

Early in 1996 the World Bank privately warned the Albanian government about the precarious situation in which pyramid schemes had placed their country. When the government did not respond they made their warning public. The IMF did not issue a warning until October 1996 when it was probably already too late.²⁰⁹ Neither the Albanian government nor the general population heeded the warnings. Albania's president Sali Berisha paid no attention to the warning and one government minister even argued at the time that, "The IMF wants to sabotage investment in Albania."²¹⁰ Though most disregarded the warnings, some heeded and began to withdraw their investments from pyramid schemes in Tirana. Predictably, the schemes did not have sufficient capital to pay the withdrawals. This caused runs on the pyramids, panic and protests. Some investment schemes suspended payments for 3-4 months and others lowered interest rates but with no real assets these measures were insufficient to stop the eventual collapse. After Christmas of 1996 protests continued and intensified in front of certain pyramid offices in Tirana.²¹¹

On January 2, 1997 Albania's Finance Minister Ridvan Bode warned that Albania faced a major catastrophe if these banks failed. Later, on January 16, 1997 the façade of pyramid financial security was completely shattered. On that day, the Sudja operation, which was formed by a Roma woman who claimed to be able to foretell the financial future by looking in her

²⁰⁸ De Waal, 214-15; and Bezemer, 7-8; and Jarvis; and Pettifer and Vickers, 4-5.

²⁰⁹ Bezemer, 8; and Pettifer and Vickers, 4.

²¹⁰ Pettifer and Vickers, 5.

²¹¹ Ibid, 5-7.

crystal ball, declared bankruptcy. Other schemes followed suit and Albanians suspected that those who declared solvency were lying. Thousands of Albanians lost everything. The story of one Albanian, Zef, is representative of what happened to many Albanians. Zef worked in Greece for five years and carefully saved \$10,000. When he returned to Albania he looked for ways to invest his money. He heard the arguments against pyramid schemes from friends but he also knew people who were making money and so he invested \$8,000 in a scheme. When the pyramids collapsed he lost it all. Five years of hard labor disappeared.²¹² Like Zef, farmers were left with nothing after they had sold their animals to invest in pyramids and many investors were homeless after mortgaging their homes to raise funds for investment.

Uprising

In desperation, Albanians took to the street to protest and force pyramid owners to return their money. When crowds protested in front of the Sudja headquarters, company officials poured dirty water and urine on them.²¹³ In an attempt to settle the situation the government arrested leaders of pyramid schemes, refused to make payouts, froze pyramid bank accounts and limited withdrawals. But it was too little too late. On January 22 protestors turned their anger to government officials and took to the streets of Tirana shouting, “Down with the Berisha dictatorship” and, “We want our money.”²¹⁴ Tirana protests were violent but were mild compared with cities in southern Albania. On January 24 protestors took over the city of Lushnja. The local pyramid boss had been arrested and the people blamed the government for taking their money so they cut off the railway line, set a police truck on fire, built barricades out of wrecked cars, burned the town hall, wrecked a cinema, and beat up the visiting Democratic

²¹² De Waal, 214-15.

²¹³ Pettifer and Vickers, 9.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 10.

Party Foreign Minister. Similarly protestors took complete control of the city of Vlora in the first week of February.

President Berisha tried to squelch the uprising with force. He sent the army south with tanks and even had the Air Force drop bombs on one rebellious southern city. He also gave the SHIK (the Albanian Intelligence Service) free reign to make arrests, perform violent interrogations, and shoot any violent protestors. Additionally, he authorized a dusk-to-dawn curfew, media censorship, and roadblocks with car searches on all main roads.²¹⁵ The show of force did not overwhelm protestors because they were able to arm themselves. Arms depots, stocked with small arms and ammunition were located throughout the country and every adult was proficient in small arms operation. The weapons and training were left over from Enver Hoxha who wanted Albanians to be able to fight off foreign invaders. Now protestors broke into the depots and distributed guns to all who wanted them to use against the invading Albanian army. Fully armed, Albania was split into factions of Democratic Party supporters in the north vs. Socialists in the south and almost all Albanians vs. government officials. By March 13, the Southern Socialists were winning more ground and support and armed insurrection spilled into the North engulfing Tirana.²¹⁶

By March 13, guns were everywhere. One group of people even went to smaller villages and distributed guns and ammunition in order to ensure that no rural families were unprotected. A fourteen year old boy who received a gun at the arms depot in Gjegjan, said that the man handing out the guns was very responsible, meaning he was careful to show all the children who received the guns how to properly use them. Newly armed, people raided food storage centers and guarded their stores with machine guns. With food raids there were also violent robberies,

²¹⁵ Ibid, 10-19.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 20-41.

bus hold ups, and attacks on the police. Rioters also robbed businesses and hospitals, vandalized schools and even stole wire from the phone lines further crippling their already weak infrastructure. Worst of all blood feuds were revived in the chaos. For example the great-nephew of a man killed forty years earlier was encouraged by his grandmother to get revenge. To get revenge in a blood feud the person does not have to kill the original murderer just a close male relative. So in this case he killed the grandson of the murderer. Others who were pressured into such revenge killings by family members were so nervous they accidentally killed bystanders which set off a string of additional revenge killings.²¹⁷ By the end of the last week in March, government officials began to believe that they might be seeing the end of the Albanian state.²¹⁸ They were not alone in this sentiment one student at the time described the feeling of the time saying, “You can’t imagine what it feels like to wake up and know that there is no government at all.”²¹⁹ In confirmation of their fears an Albanian Newspaper wrote during the chaos, “For the moment just assume Albania doesn’t exist.”²²⁰

Missionary Evacuation

In the midst of such chaos, LDS missionaries worked in peace. One Elder even remarked, “Life was fairly normal” in the beginning of March. Many people were joining the Church and the mission was preparing to expand by introducing missionaries into new cities.²²¹ Though at peace, the missionaries were not ignorant of the situation. Elder Jeff Sanders began to see food shortages particularly of bread, which is an Albanian staple. At a small store near their apartment, people lined up well before dawn to get bread. As the bread delivery truck pulled up,

²¹⁷ De Waal, 218-222.

²¹⁸ Pettifer and Vickers, 31.

²¹⁹ De Waal, 218.

²²⁰ Bezemer, 1.

²²¹ Josef Szamosfalvi, interview by author, June 29, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession.

people surrounded the truck. When somebody took some bread without paying the store owner fired his gun into the sky to settle things down. Besides food shortages, the missionaries were aware of the riots and the armed insurrection but they never felt threatened.

In a letter dated March 3, 1997, Sister (title used for female LDS missionaries) Heather Corrigan commented on the financial collapse. She noted that “Almost every member of the Tirana Second Branch lost money in the pyramid schemes but it seems to be strengthening their testimonies as they’re realizing what is truly important in life and are finding hope and peace in the gospel.” She also commented that the government had set a curfew of eight o’clock in the evening. Then she concluded with, “It’ll be interesting to see what happens.”²²² Even though the missionaries watched tracers fly through the air at night and heard the reports of fired rounds throughout the day, most felt like Albanians were just having a war with the sky and maintained their primary focus on preaching the gospel.²²³ They just kept working, serving, and preaching. As the chaos continued, Laurel Holman, president of the Albanian mission, asked the missionaries if they wanted to leave. Reflective of their love for Albanians, even in the middle of armed insurrection, all the missionaries asked to stay. Despite their pleas to stay, the European Area Presidency for the Church decided it would be best, given the intensity of the situation, if the sister missionaries were evacuated.²²⁴

Though disappointed about being unable to stay, the sister missionaries in the port city of Durres dutifully bought tickets for all the sisters in the mission on a ferry leaving the next day (March 13, 1997) and spent the rest of the day busily contacting members and investigators and

²²² Ethington, Tammy Maria and Heather Marie Corrigan Oral History, Letter, an addendum.

²²³ Jeff Sanders, interview by author, June 18, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession.

²²⁴ Christopher Phillips, “An Account of the Evacuation and Happenings Surrounding It,” unpublished, copy author’s possession, 1.

letting them know what was happening.²²⁵ That same day the United States Embassy in Albania counseled President Holman to have his missionaries stay in their apartments and informed him that they would contact him if anything changed.²²⁶

The next day, March 13, 1997, the sister missionaries in Tirana paid a minivan taxi to take them to catch the ferry in Durres. As assistant to the mission president, Elder Josef Szamosfalvi accompanied the sisters to Durres. To ensure safe passage, Elder Szamsfalvi, with President Holmans consent, took the mission's petty cash to use as bribes, in case rebels stopped them on the road.²²⁷ As the sisters in Durres waited for the others to arrive, they decided to get out of their apartment briefly to take the garbage out to the dumpster. As they walked to the dumpster, they noticed people running past them in a panic. When they asked somebody what was happening, they responded, "The war has exploded!" The sisters dropped their garbage in the middle of the street and quickly returned to their apartment. Safely in the apartment they worried about the sisters traveling by van to Durres because they had heard that rebels were blockading roads and commandeering vehicles. At noon the other sisters safely arrived and they all traveled to the port. At the port they found that the ferry company, nervous about a repetition of the mass exodus of 1993, which had sunk boats, refused to bring their boat into the harbor.²²⁸ Stranded, the sisters paid the minivan driver more money to take them all back to Tirana.²²⁹ On

²²⁵ Amy Nelson, "Operation Silver Wake or Albania – Days of Rage," unpublished manuscript, copy in author's possession, 4.

²²⁶ Holman Laurel Leroy Papers.

²²⁷ Laurel Holman, "Mission Historical Summary," Albania Tirana, March 12, 1997, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2; and Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²²⁸ Nelson, "Operation Silver Wake", 3-8.

²²⁹ Laurel and Louise Holman, interview by author, June 9, 2008, Provo, Utah, notes in author's possession.

the way back, Sister Holman, the mission president's wife, found herself spending most of the journey on the floor of the van out of fear of gunfire and bandits.²³⁰

That same morning the Elders in Durres went to the Church for district meeting. Shortly after they started the meeting, the Durres Branch President came in and told them to stay put, "because something was going on outside." As they rushed to the window they saw "people running everywhere kind of like in a horror movie"²³¹ or the running of the bulls in Spain.²³² Troubled by the increased chaos, the missionaries ran to their houses and called President Holman to report the situation. The phone connection was bad but after a couple of tries they got a hold of him and explained the situation. He said the situation was also chaotic in Tirana and asked them again if they wanted to evacuate the country or stay: they reaffirmed that they wanted to stay. For the rest of the day they stayed in their apartment listening to constant gunfire in the streets. As two of the older missionaries played an Albanian language game to pass the time, a younger missionary, Ryan Stewart, was not quite as tranquil and remembered thinking, "Am I going to die here?"²³³ At two in the afternoon the government cut the electricity so that Albanians would not watch what was happening on the news.²³⁴ That afternoon, Elder Christopher Phillips reflected the thoughts of most of the missionaries, writing in his journal, "Hopefully Albania can get things worked out so that the work can go on."²³⁵

The missionaries working in Tirana also spent the day indoors. Elder Jeff Sanders and his companion were in the stairwell of their apartment talking with their neighbor that day when a

²³⁰ Holman Laurel Leroy Papers.

²³¹ Christopher Phillips, journal, March 13, 1997, 347.

²³² Ryan Stewart, interview by author, June 26, 2008, Spanish Fork, Utah, notes in author's possession.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Christopher Phillips, journal, March 13, 1997, 348.

²³⁵ Ibid.

hand grenade went off outside of their building. Needless to say they quickly retreated to their apartment where they spent the rest of the afternoon. Even with gunshots and hand grenades, most missionaries still did not want to leave. They were concerned for the welfare of those they were teaching and serving and wanted to continue to help them.²³⁶ Nonetheless, President Holman received instruction from the First Presidency to evacuate the missionaries.²³⁷ Obedient to the instruction, he gathered all the missionaries serving in Tirana to the mission home and then instructed the Elders in outlying cities to likewise report to the mission office.

Elder Rowell and Quinlin had just opened up the city of Elbasan when they were informed of the evacuation. They had worked hard and had several people scheduled for baptism and had arranged to perform the ordinance in a river near the city. Nevertheless, President Holman called and told them to pack one bag and come to the mission home in Tirana. The next morning they asked their landlord who was a taxi driver to take them to Tirana. However, since Elbasan was between Vlora (the major rebel city) and Tirana, he was nervous about his car being hijacked and told them he would not take them. Consequently, they left their bags at their apartment and went to the center of the city where taxis and buses usually waited, but when they arrived there were none. As they waited a van drove by and a passenger leaned out the window and fired a machine gun in the air. With that, they knew it was time for them to leave the square. As they were leaving, an Albanian approached them and told them that a minivan taxi was about to leave on the other side of the square. After negotiating the price with the driver and bargaining

²³⁶ Jeff Sanders Interview.

²³⁷ Samuel Hobi, interview by author, June 25, 2008, Spanish Fork, Utah, notes in author's possession.

to go back to their apartment to get their bags they traveled safely to the mission home in Tirana.²³⁸

President Holman also called the missionaries in Durres and told them to come with their bags to Tirana so they could all wait together. He wanted them to come that night but it was not an option so they said they would be there as early as they could the next morning. At 5:30 a.m. the next morning President Holman called again and told them to go to the port with one bag because there were other Americans at the harbor waiting to be evacuated by ferry. As they walked to the port around 7 a.m., they saw men with machine guns guarding sacks of stolen flour. When they arrived at the port, they found out that American ferry had left half an hour before they arrived. Not knowing what to do, they sat on the dock and watched people shoot guns into the water, steal things off parked cars and break windows.

After returning to their apartment and contacting President Holman, the Durres missionaries decided to gather with the other missionaries in Tirana. With the help of a local member of the Church, they convinced a bus driver to take them to Tirana for twice the regular fare. Along the way they saw more guns and more stealing. Since they were the last Elders to arrive at the mission home, everyone in the small close-knit mission was excited to see them. Now all together, they waited for the American Embassy to call and tell them how to evacuate. While they waited, concerned parents called to ask why they had not yet evacuated. Finally, President Holman contacted the embassy. They apologized saying they forgot to phone them and explained that the missionaries should come to the embassy immediately with one bag and their passport. Everyone assembled their things quickly, including the mission computer hard drive,

²³⁸ Michael Rowell, interview by author, June 24, 2008, Spanish Fork, Utah, notes in author's possession.

and left for the embassy.²³⁹ The sisters got a ride with a former investigator²⁴⁰ and the Elders walked the thirty minutes distance along different routes in small groups of three or four in order to avoid attracting any negative attention.²⁴¹ On the way to the embassy the missionaries saw tanks in the middle of the city streets and heard continual gunfire. Some missionaries ignored the direction to be discreet and stopped to take pictures of the tanks before quickly moving on.²⁴²

Once at the embassy, they passed through metal detectors and registered.²⁴³ Elder Hover had accidentally left his passport in Durres and was berated by an embassy official.²⁴⁴ Fortunately, he found a photocopy of his passport in a suit pocket which was sufficient for them to let him through. After berating Elder Hover the embassy official turned to President Holman and asked “What other surprises do you have for me today?”²⁴⁵ He told her just one and then informed her that one of the missionaries he was trying to evacuate, Elder Jozef Szamosfalvi, was a Hungarian. Elder Szamosfalvi had an American student visa but it had expired, so embassy officials had to clear his exit with the state department, which would take a while.

While President Holman and Elder Szamosfalvi waited for evacuation clearance, the rest of the missionaries took a bus a mile down the road to the embassy compound. The compound looked, to the missionaries, like a little American suburb with small houses, grass and garages.²⁴⁶ At the compound, marines with guns patrolled the in full camouflage and face paint. Some were even dug into foxholes or surrounded by sandbags. After a short wait, the marines helped the

²³⁹ Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁴⁰ Holman Interview.

²⁴¹ Jeff Sanders Interview.

²⁴² Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁴³ Samuel Hobi Interview.

²⁴⁴ Christopher Phillips, Journal, March 17, 1997, 358.

²⁴⁵ Wenda Louise Holman Journal, March 14, 1997, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

²⁴⁶ Christopher Phillips, Journal, March 15, 1997, 350.

missionaries put on life preservers and helmets and then loaded them fourteen at a time onto double-rotor helicopters. Once loaded, the missionaries sat sandwiched between gunners who manned the open side doors ready to fire. After flying for just fifteen minutes some missionaries were worried about where the helicopter was going to land in the middle of the Adriatic until they saw the *USS Nassau*, an aircraft carrier designed specifically for helicopters.²⁴⁷ According to the missionaries, the Navy was a model of efficiency and order in greeting and feeding them. They were grateful for the good food and especially impressed with the cinnamon rolls and availability of peanut butter. At the same time however, they were worried about the Albanians they had left behind to fight over flour.

That evening all evacuees were scheduled to be flown to Italy, but there was not enough room so Navy officers asked for volunteers to stay aboard. All the Elders volunteered. This plus their clean appearance and optimism impressed those aboard the ship. *The Boston Herald* carried this account:

There are some things that you can always count on, even in the midst of anarchy and chaos in Albania. Like the neatness of Mormon missionaries” U.S. Navy Commander Gary Burchill, supply officer aboard the *USS Nassau*, helped take care of Albanian evacuees. He describes the people that came on the boat. “The first group included 60 or 70 peace corps workers. They were haggard and dirty, carrying backpacks. Then there were about five families with children, who were very distressed and tired. Then they brought in 30 to 40 freshly minted Mormon missionaries. It was the damndest thing. They were as brightly dressed and chipper as you would expect in your own neighborhood, they were wearing white shirts, ties and pressed suits, like they were walking through downtown Arlington.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Jason Hover Interview.

²⁴⁸ Jules Crittenden, “Evacuees Find Safety on Ship,” *Boston Herald*, March 15, 1997.

As it turned out the Elders did not have to stay the night because the Navy found a way to evacuate everyone to Brindisi. The whole affair, helicopter rides, battleship tour and complementary meal, cost each evacuee \$450.²⁴⁹

When they arrived at the Brindisi Airport, the missionaries ate military rations and tried to decide what to do next. While waiting, a man in the airport gave one of the missionaries, Elder Gary Jensen, the phone number for the mission president in Rome. When they called the Rome mission president helped them arrange for hotel rooms and informed them that some General Authorities would meet them in the morning.²⁵⁰ At ten the next morning the missionaries began a devotional by singing “Called to Serve.” As they sang, President Holman and Elder Szamosfalvi arrived with Elders F. Enzo Busche and Neil L. Anderson of the European Area Presidency.

After the other missionaries had been evacuated, Elder Szamosfalvi and President Holman went under a tree at the embassy and prayed that the government officials would clear Elder Szamosfalvi for evacuation. Then they waited. At one point, Elder Szamosfalvi suggested to President Holman that he could just stay in Albania alone and function as the Church’s eyes and ears, but President Holman immediately vetoed the idea.²⁵¹ After a long wait, the ranking embassy official decided to let Elder Szamosfalvi leave and attached a yellow post-it note to his passport which simply read “let him go” and he was cleared for evacuation. As he and President Holman were about to evacuate, rebels fired on the approaching helicopter. It returned fire and the evacuation was postponed for the night.²⁵² As they waited one of their main frustrations was being unable to communicate with the rest of the missionaries. They did not know if everyone

²⁴⁹ Christopher Phillips, Bill from State Department.

²⁵⁰ Samuel Hobi Interview.

²⁵¹ Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁵² See U.S. Department of Defense News Transcript March 14, 1997.

was safe and were unable to inform the rest of the mission of their welfare.²⁵³ At four or five o'clock the next morning the helicopters returned and evacuated President Holman and Elder Szamosfalvi directly to Brindisi Italy.²⁵⁴ They had arrived at the Brindisi airport early in the morning and had no idea where the rest of the missionaries were. Officials at the airport told them that half of the missionaries had gone to Rome and that there was a bus heading there now. Feeling prompted to wait, they stayed in the airport for an hour and then Elders Busche and Anderson arrived and picked them up.²⁵⁵

After a warm reunion between the missionaries and their president, Elders Busche and Anderson spoke to the missionaries and told them that the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles “had been personally concerned and very interested in [their] welfare” and were praying for them.²⁵⁶ Following their remarks, the missionaries were taken to another Italian town called Martina Franca, where each missionary had an interview with either Elder Busche or Elder Anderson.²⁵⁷ After their interviews the missionaries were given permission to call their families. Elder Phillips recalled that his parents were worried and that many friends and relatives were also concerned. He also found out that the missionary department at Church headquarters had called his family everyday to give them a report. After hearing all this, Elder Phillips thought, “Wow I didn’t realize that we were such a big deal.”²⁵⁸ On the same phone call his dad told him that he was likely going to be reassigned to a mission in England. Sister Nelson’s

²⁵³ Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁵⁴ Holman Interview.

²⁵⁵ Holman Laurel Leroy Papers.

²⁵⁶ Christopher Phillips, Journal, March 15, 1997, 353.

²⁵⁷ Nelson, Nelson, “Operation Silver Wake,” 13-14.

²⁵⁸ Christopher Phillips’ Journal March 15, 1997 354.

parents also told her that the missionary department said something about being reassigned to London and all she could think was, “I didn’t pack for London.”²⁵⁹

The next day the missionaries were given new assignments. Elders Busche and Anderson were careful to emphasize that “the First Presidency had personally reviewed and approved” each call the night before. Sixteen Elders ended up staying in Italy, six in the Italy Catania mission and ten in Rome. The rest of the Elders and all the sisters were sent to England.²⁶⁰ The sixteen Elders who stayed in Italy were some of the older and more experienced missionaries, while those sent to England were the younger Elders and all the sisters. Before heading to their respective areas, all the missionaries traveled to the American embassy in Rome to receive proper visas. While waiting in the embassy, they heard officials inform other Americans that visa clearance would take at least six weeks. Fortunately for the missionaries, the Rome mission president was well connected at the embassy and at his request embassy officials dedicated workers to interview and clear the missionaries and they received their visas within a matter of days. While waiting for their visas the missionaries were able to see famous sites in Rome, tour the Vatican, and preach with missionaries in the Rome Mission.²⁶¹

After receiving their visas the England missionaries said goodbye to the others and boarded their plane. Being split up was particularly hard for those sent to England because they felt that, in a way, the Albanian mission was breaking up.²⁶² Sister Heather Corrigan told her family in a letter that she wanted to work as hard as possible while in England to accomplish whatever the Lord wanted her to do there so that she could return to Albania. In another letter she described England and closed her letter with, “P.S. this is the hardest thing of my whole

²⁵⁹ Amy Nelson, 14.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 356.

²⁶¹ Randall Wilson Interview.

²⁶² Amy Nelson 16; and Ryan Stewart Interview.

life.” Eventually she and the other sisters settled into missionary work in England and began to have success. The mission president in the Bristol England mission trusted Sister Corrigan so much he sent her to open a new area; the other sisters were not at all behind in hard work, obedience and success. Throughout their missions in England the Sisters continued to demonstrate their love for Albanians by thinking about, writing to, and praying for their friends in Albania.²⁶³ As insurrection was accomplishing nothing to restore their lost assets, it was comforting for Albanians to have the emotional support of missionaries. As the government only reluctantly responded to their desires under the duress of gunfire the missionaries offered support through a solid social network simply because they were members. The missionaries that stayed in Italy also had some difficulties as they learned Italian and began to preach with Italian missionaries. They were impressed with the much higher standard of living in Italy but missed the receptive Albanians and longed to return.²⁶⁴

Further Chaos in Albania

Though the missionaries were anxious to return and teach the gospel they were much safer in Italy. Two days after they left, bullets fell from the sky all day long in Tirana killing 11 people and wounding another 150. Additionally, all the prisons were emptied in massive escapes. Criminal gangs armed themselves with machine guns, missiles and tanks and Albania became a transit center for hard drugs into Western Europe. To escape the turmoil, 10,000 Albanians crossed the Adriatic to find refuge in Italy, including an Albanian jet pilot who flew his MIG to

²⁶³ Heather Marie Corrigan Stonely Correspondence, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

²⁶⁴ Christopher Phillips, Letter to his family, March 21, 1997; and unless otherwise noted most of the history regarding the missionary evacuation can be found in Christopher Phillips, “An Account of the Evacuation and Happenings Surrounding It,” 1-7.

Italy and asked for asylum. Three Albanian helicopter crews did the same.²⁶⁵ In short, it was safer to be outside of Albania.

During all of this upheaval, the countries bordering Albania did not try to annex any land or enter Albania to restore order, rather they tried to seal the borders and let Albanians deal with their own problems.²⁶⁶ Finally, in mid-April the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the European Union formed a multi-nation protection force named Operation Alba. This operation was intended to strengthen the all-party government, restore peace, provide humanitarian aid, and assist in preparation for free and fair elections.²⁶⁷ The troops from Operation Alba quickly established peace, brought humanitarian aid and brokered a deal between all the political parties and President Berisha to hold a new election on June 29, 1997. The political campaign, though more peaceful than the uprising, was still chaotic. During the campaign, someone tried to assassinate President Berisha with a hand grenade, Berisha's democratic supporters regularly clashed with the discontented socialists. Additionally, Leka Zog, son of the former king of Albania, who had only lived in Albania for two days in his life, was campaigning for a referendum on reestablishing the monarchy in Albania with him as king.²⁶⁸ With the help of Operation Alba the elections went off smoothly. The socialist party gained control of parliament, replacing the Democratic Party and Berisha. Leka Zog, whose passport identified him as King of the Albanians, lost the monarchy referendum and was sent back home to South Africa.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁵ Pettifer and Vickers, 37,44, 53, 55, 56, 90.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 59.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 60.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 61, 80-2.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 85.

Missionaries Return

While the politicians were campaigning in Albania, President Holman, now with the title mission president in exile, worked in the Rome Mission office, helping to organize their records.²⁷⁰ After nearly a month of exile, on April 11, 1997, President Holman, Elder Lester and Elder Hess (both senior missionaries) were granted permission to return to Albania to gather missionary belongings out of their apartments and evaluate whether or not it was safe for the other missionaries to return.²⁷¹ About one week later on April 19 Sisters Holman, Lester and Hess joined their husbands in Albania.²⁷²

Meanwhile, Albanian missionaries felt like refugees in Italy and England. At first, the six missionaries in the Catania Italy mission were frustrated with the situation. They did not speak Italian nor did they know how long they were going to be in Italy. Moreover, the Catania mission did not know quite what to do with them. Part of the time they stayed in the mission office and helped with administrative duties and other times they were able to go out and help preach with other missionaries. Early in their exile some Albanian missionaries learned how to say “Do you speak English” and “Do you want a Book of Mormon?” in Italian and went out to public areas armed with these two phrases and tried to be useful. Eventually these missionaries were put into other companionships and worked in different areas around Italy and England. Though separated, the Albanian missionaries continued to think about the friends they had left in Albania and remained anxious to return.²⁷³ Like the sisters in England, the Elders wrote letters to

²⁷⁰ Holman Interview.

²⁷¹ Holman Interview; and Laurel Holman, “Mission Historical Summary,” 3.

²⁷² Holman Laurel Leroy Papers.

²⁷³ Christopher Phillips, interview by author, June 23, 2008, Pleasant Grove, Utah, notes in author’s possession.

members, investigators and the branch presidents in Albania to remind them they were loved and to strengthen them during this difficult time.²⁷⁴

On May 6, Elder Christopher Phillips and Elder Josef Szamosfalvi returned to Albania from Italy.²⁷⁵ President Holman had informed Elder Szamosfalvi that he was going to return and asked him to choose one Elder to go with him. Though it was a tough decision, he chose Elder Phillips for his experience, work ethic and love of Albania.²⁷⁶ Elder Phillips' parents received notification of the reassignment from Elder Enzo Busche in a letter dated May 9, 1997 which simply stated: "You probably have heard by now that under the inspiration of the Lord your son was called together with an Elder from Hungary to go back to Albania. They have by now joined their Mission President and wife and two other couples in that beautiful country."²⁷⁷

Upon arriving, the missionaries immediately went to work. Their first priority upon arrival was to care for and teach investigators and new members. In order to reach all the people Elders Phillips and Szamosfalvi decided to divide and conquer. Elder Szamosfalvi was responsible for the west half of Tirana and Elder Phillips was responsible for the east half of Tirana and the city of Durres. Elder Phillips usually worked with President Holman and Elder Szamosfalvi worked with Elder Lester. In the first days they visited the members and certified they were in good spirits. In the following days they fell into a pattern. They would leave the house as soon as they could in the morning, usually around 8:30 and then work throughout the day, skipping lunch and coming home right before the government-imposed curfew. Elder Phillips was impressed by President Holman's stamina walking all day in the heat. He also loved

²⁷⁴ Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁷⁵ Laurel Holman, "Mission Historical Summary," 3.

²⁷⁶ Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁷⁷ Dallin Phillips, Letter from F. Enzo Busche, May 9, 1997, copy in author's possession.

having all day to learn from his mission president. Usually during the day they would take care of any administrative duties in the morning and then visit those who had been committed to baptism by other Elders. Then they would visit recently baptized members and strengthen them. Finally, if they had time, they would visit those who had recently stopped coming to Church. In addition to their own experiences and commitment to the LDS Church, visits from the missionaries helped Albanians to feel more secure. The visits let LDS members know that they were not alone and that they were part of a large and stable social network when other networks like the government and economy seemed to be collapsing.

The evacuated missionaries did the best they could to support Albanian members and investigators in their absence but, the onus of support fell to local leaders. In order to help the evacuated missionaries stay in touch with what was happening with their investigators in their absence President and Sister Holman organized the first Albanian Mission newsletter to send to them on May 8, 1997. The letter demonstrated the individual care that the missionaries had for the Albanians by listing the names of investigators and reporting how each was doing. The letter also included a section by President Holman who reported, “When we arrived back in Albania we found all Branch Presidents magnifying their callings and doing wonderful. In every branch we found many strong and faithful members and also many who had not been out since the missionaries left.”²⁷⁸ While the missionaries were evacuated the structure of the LDS Church became important in maintaining activity among members. The LDS Church in Albania is organized into small geographic areas called branches. Each branch has a presidency of three men called to look after the members located in that branch. As the missionaries were gone the men in these branches were in charge of visiting members and making sure they were okay and

²⁷⁸ Albania Tirana Mission, Newsletter 1 nol. 1, May 8 1997, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

that they continued to attend Church meetings. To help these men all adult members are assigned to look after individual members by visiting their homes, teaching them, and helping them in difficult times. This organization created a safety net social network which offered support to members who had lost their money in the pyramid schemes or who felt afraid during the chaos.

Although Elder Phillips and Elder Szamosfalvi enjoyed the work in Albania they were anxious to have other missionaries return and assist them. To ensure it was safe for others to return they would read the newspapers, listen to the news and talk to Albanians to see how safe things were. Though there was still gunfire at night and even a bridge bombing in Tirana, the missionaries never felt threatened. They eventually reported that it was safe for the others to return.²⁷⁹ On May 16, Elder Didier of the Seventy arrived in Albania to evaluate whether more missionaries should be sent back. Unfortunately, the night that Elder Didier was touring the mission some election news triggered more machine gun fire than on previous nights. Elder Phillips and Elder Szamosfalvi feared that because of the disturbance Elder Didier would not allow other missionaries to return, but the next morning Elder Didier remarked with some nostalgia that it reminded him of when he served in the military. Then he probingly asked each of them if they really thought it was safe for others to return.²⁸⁰ With their affirmative responses and his own evaluation, Elder Didier authorized the return of some missionaries and declared if the situation became unsafe during the coming elections the missionaries could stay inside or, if needed, be flown out for a week.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Josef Szamosfalvi Interview.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Christopher Phillips Interview.

At his recommendation, eight more missionaries arrived from Italy on May 29, 1997, and according to President Holman the work “just started right back up.”²⁸² President Holman tried to return at least one Elder from each area of the mission or at least a district leader who was familiar with the area so the work could recommence smoothly. In many instances the local branch presidencies were also involved in reestablishing contact with those who had been interested in the Church demonstrating the importance of social networks in helping to grow the LDS Church.²⁸³ Additionally, the missionaries reinitiated humanitarian service which included helping in orphanages and hospitals, teaching English, and picking up trash around the city.

Since the Church was so young in Albania, the branches relied heavily on the missionaries to teach lessons and organize meetings and activities. When they were evacuated some members were apprehensive about what would happen to the Church without their leadership. One even commented, “You can’t leave us without the priesthood.” The missionaries responded that the Albanian Saints had the priesthood and now was the time to rely on it. Even so, some members thought when the missionaries were evacuated; the Church was also evacuated with them and thus stopped attending Church. Overwhelmingly though, most members continued actively attending their meetings and helping one another without the missionaries. According to President Holman, given the amount of time and experience the local leaders had with the Church, they did well. Missionaries helped bring some members back to activity and helped meetings to run smoothly and then returned to teaching investigators.²⁸⁴

Though the evacuation and civil unrest created a rather unique context for missionary work, curiously most missionaries felt that things were rather normal. In the middle of political

²⁸² Holman Interview.

²⁸³ Michael Rowell Interview.

²⁸⁴ Holman interview.

chaos, missionaries simply focused on individuals and tried to meet their needs. Elder Samuel Hobi had been a district leader in Tirana before the evacuation. Upon returning, he and his companion had responsibility for a district which formerly had six missionaries. Elder Hobi found that most members were anxious to get things back to normal, feel the Spirit, and help the Church to grow. Investigators were also anxious to reinitiate contact with the Church. At the first baptism in his area following the evacuation members packed the meeting hall to feel the Spirit and support the newest member of their branch.

Elder Hobi noted that although poverty and suffering do not automatically lead to humility, the situation in Albania provided many opportunities for Albanians to turn to God for help. This combined with diligent and careful teaching on the part of the missionaries helped the Church continue to grow.²⁸⁵ The Fifo family was an example of this model. They were interested in the Church before the evacuation and maintained interest during the missionary absence. After the missionaries returned the Fifo family decided to be baptized. They prepared for their baptism by coming to Church, studying the Bible and becoming integrated in the social network of the branch. One week before their baptism their daughter disappeared with her boyfriend. Her parents initially did not know if she had been kidnapped or had left willingly. They later found she had willingly left the country. This situation, combined with the chaos of upheaval and missionary evacuation would have made it easy for the Fifos to give up on the Church at this point. However, they used gospel principles that they had learned to successfully cope with the situation. They prayed, studied the Bible, sought for counsel from ecclesiastical leaders and continued to come to Church. Though they delayed their baptism for a short time they were

²⁸⁵ Samuel Hobi Interview.

baptized and continued to attend Church. The gospel, carefully taught by the missionaries, helped them to cope with a series of difficult situations.²⁸⁶

On August 18, 1997 the second wave of missionaries returned to Albania from the Rome Italy mission. While in Italy for almost five months most of the missionaries were able to learn Italian rather well. Some observed that learning Albanian had prepared them well to learn Italian because they had become so versed in language acquisition.²⁸⁷ While in Italy, some missionaries worked principally with Italians, while others focused their efforts on Albanian refugees or on immigrants (principally African) who spoke English. Though the missionaries were impressed with the beauty and civilization of Italy (not to mention the fact they could drink water directly from the tap and that the bricks were actually straight on the buildings) they were anxious to return to Albania. In contrast with Albanians, missionaries found most Italians to be less welcoming and investigators more difficult to find. Therefore, they were delighted to return to Albania.²⁸⁸

The missionaries returning from Italy were put into companionships and everyone returned to the work. For some it took a little while to get used to speaking Albanian again but they were all excited to be back. With additional Elders they were able to reopen areas that had been shut down and begin to find people to teach as they had before. The missionaries did not feel that the evacuation inhibited their ability to teach. If anything, the economic difficulties and social upheaval caused some to seek for something more substantive to help them.

Stavri Risto was one of those who was seeking for something more after the evacuation. One morning as Elder Jeff Sanders and his companion were out working with a member family

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Jason Hover Interview.

²⁸⁸ Jeff Sanders Interview.

Stavri spotted them and called them over to talk to him. He asked the missionaries, “Who are you guys? . . . What are you doing here?” After they responded that they were missionaries for the LDS Church and that they were teaching about the gospel of Jesus Christ, Stavri asked them when they were going to come to his house. The missionaries were happy to schedule to meet his family that same evening. Unfortunately, somewhere between the morning meeting and the evening appointment the missionaries lost the paper with his address. Doing their best to find the apartment by memory, they found the building but did not know which apartment he lived in, so they planned to knock on all the doors until they found the right one. However, the woman at the first door they knocked on said “Oh you are looking for Stavri, he’s next door.” Talking with Stavri and his family, the missionaries learned that they were skilled and well educated. Stavri had worked for the railroad and his wife taught French. To earn more money they had immigrated to Greece and performed menial jobs, but Greece was unpleasant for them so they returned to Albania and suffered through the economic collapse with other Albanians. After the Elders taught them for six weeks, Stavri, his wife, and their two children were all baptized. They felt that the gospel of Jesus Christ helped them to better deal with the economic crisis around them. They were not the only ones. Many others resonated with the missionary message and the manner it was presented and joined the Church.²⁸⁹

In May, June, July, and August, twenty-two people were baptized into the Church. Many of whom had waited for the missionaries to return, showing faith during in a tumultuous time. By September 24 the five Elders who had been sent to the United Kingdom returned.²⁹⁰ The five Elders had been away for the longest time, almost seven months. During that time, similar to other Albanian missionaries serving in the United Kingdom, Elder Ryan Stewart served in three

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Holman Interview; and Laurel Holman, “Mission Historical Summary,” 4.

different areas in the Bristol England mission, with a variety of companions. In one area he participated in a baptism and trained a new missionary. By September he had grown to love serving in England and had essentially given up on the idea of returning to Albania. Late in September his mission president called and told him that he had received a message from Church headquarters which stated that if Elder Stewart wanted to go back to Albania he could. His mission president emphasized that this was completely his decision and that either choice would be acceptable. Having had a good experience in England and having forgotten most of his Albanian made the decision difficult. Eventually, he and the rest of the Elders in the United Kingdom decided to return to Albania. Randall Wilson also served in England. After six months he was anxious to return to Albania where people were willing to listen to his message.²⁹¹ Because there was still some measure of unrest, the Church decided not to send any sisters back to Albania at that time. Upon returning, the five Elders were shocked by the poverty of Albania but excited about the camaraderie among the missionaries and the energized by the growth of the Church.²⁹²

Conclusion

During the whole process of evacuation and reestablishment, President and Sister Holman were impressed by the missionaries' love for the people. They said the missionaries "broke down" when they had to evacuate because they were so dedicated to the Albanian people. Many missionaries pled to be allowed to stay declaring that they would be safe but they were obedient to the evacuation orders. After the evacuation, even though the country was still unstable, not one missionary had resisted returning. When it was time to return they all did so

²⁹¹ Randall Wilson interview.

²⁹² Ryan Stewart Interview.

anxiously. From September to December their zealous work and careful attention brought thirty-three more people into the Church.²⁹³

The Albanians who joined the Church at the time were humbled by the economic collapse and subsequent uprising and looked to religion both in comforting theology and solid social networks for security they could not find in everyday life. As important as LDS theology was in providing comfort for Albanian members in this chaos, social networks facilitated through the organization of the LDS Church were also very important in attracting and maintaining members in this difficult time. Missionaries perhaps did a better job at facilitating strong relationships after they returned because they felt a greater appreciation for the privilege of serving in Albania. In the midst of chaos, the missionary pattern of love, individual attention and service helped seeking Albanians desire to join the Church.

²⁹³ Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE: TERRORISM AND TRANSLATION

Introduction

In the movie “Wag the Dog,” Robert DeNero and Dustin Hoffman create a fake war in Albania in order to divert American attention away from a presidential sex scandal. When President Bill Clinton became embroiled in a similar scandal with Monica Lewinsky, some thought he was “wagging the dog” when he launched a missile attack on terrorist camps in Sudan and Afghanistan. With Clinton, the war was not in Albania but the situation affected missionary work there, as missionaries were again evacuated. Adding to the chaos, shortly thereafter Albanians were slaughtered in acts of ethnic cleansing in neighboring Kosovo. During this pandemonium, the LDS Church continued to grow in Albania because of the love that was shown to the Albanian people through humanitarian service and the much-anticipated translations of the Book of Mormon and temple endowment into Albanian.

Terrorism and Albania

Since at least 70% of Albanians are Muslim, scholars have wondered, since the fall of communism whether Islamic extremism would manifest itself in Albania. Most have come to the conclusion that the old statement, “the religion of Albania is Albanianism” remains true. Since national not religious heritage is most important to Albanians there remains little risk of an Islamic state in Albania.²⁹⁴ However, in 1994 Osama bin Laden visited Albania as part of a “humanitarian organization.” He also invested in the establishment of an Islamic bank in the

²⁹⁴ Gordon N. Bardos, “Balkan Blowback? Osama bin Laden and Southeastern Europe,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 13, no 1 (2002): 45.

Albanian capital of Tirana.²⁹⁵ Further tying the terrorist to Albania, Susan Sachs of the *New York Times*, later reported that part of bin Laden's funding for terrorism came from pilfering money from a charity for Albanian orphans.²⁹⁶

At the time of bin Laden's visits to Albania, he seemed insignificant but, in 1998, U.S. intelligence agents linked him to the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In response, President Clinton ordered U.S. warships to launch cruise missiles at terrorist training complexes in Sudan and Afghanistan that were linked with Osama bin Laden. The missile attacks destroyed buildings and killed twenty-one people in Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Clinton, the attacks came in the midst of the media circus surrounding his relationship with Monica Lewinsky making it appear to some that the missile campaign was simply a distraction. After the attacks, government officials including Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were quick to warn "that there may in fact be retaliatory actions" from the terrorists. In confirmation of this concern bin Laden himself declared to a London newspaper through a spokesman that "the battle has not yet started."²⁹⁷ Shortly thereafter, American officials closed the U.S. embassy in Tirana on information that there was an imminent attack planned.²⁹⁸ After the evacuation of U.S. diplomats, the Central Intelligence Agency worked with Albania's intelligence service to arrest members of a terrorist cell associated with bin Laden who were plotting to bomb the embassy in Tirana. After their arrest, the suspects were sent to Egypt to stand trial.²⁹⁹ Following

²⁹⁵ Bardos, "Balkan Blowback," 50.

²⁹⁶ Susan Sachs, "A Nation Challenged: bin Laden's allies," *New York Times*, November 21, 2001, 1.

²⁹⁷ Richard J. Newman, Kevin Whitelaw, Bruce B. Auster, Mindy Charski and William J. Cook "America Fights back," *U.S. News and World Report*, August 23, 1998.

²⁹⁸ John Kifner, "U.S. Removes Its Diplomats From Embassy in Albania," *New York Times*, August, 17, 1998.

²⁹⁹ Philip Shenon, "Fear of Attack Cancels Cohen's Trip to Albania," *New York Times*, July 17, 1999; and Alan Cooperman, Stefan Lovgren, Kevin Whitelaw, Richard J. Newman,

the extradition of the terrorist cell, a group called Islamic Jihad threatened to retaliate against Americans for foiling the Albanian bombing: “We inform the Americans . . . of preparations for a response which we hope they read with care, because we will write it, with God's help, in a language they will understand.”³⁰⁰ Not long after the threat, in mid-October, two suicide bombers crippled the *USS Cole* in Yemen, killing seventeen American sailors. *The U.S. News and World Report* tied the bombing of *USS Cole* with the capture of the Albanian plotters stating that “this is revenge for Albania.”³⁰¹

As President Clinton bombed Afghanistan and Osama bin Laden threatened Americans, President Stephen Lenker, the second full-time mission president in Albania, was faced with the difficult decision of what to do with his American missionary force in Albania. The Lenkers had received their call to preside over the Albanian mission in March 1998, later than most calls were extended because the person who had originally been called had suffered a heart attack. After spending one night in the first week of July with the previous presiding couple, the Lenkers began working with their twenty-one man (no sisters had been returned by this point) American mission force.

One Friday in August 1998, six weeks after their arrival, Sister Nancy Lenker received a phone call from the United States embassy in Albania. Once she answered the phone, the person from the embassy declared they had been evacuated due to a terrorist threat and read a message to Sister Lenker which stated that it was not safe for Americans in Albania and that if possible they were encouraged to evacuate the country. When she informed President Lenker of the call

Bruce B. Auster, Kenneth T. Walsh, Thomas Omestad and David E. Kaplan, “Terror Strikes Again,” *U.S. News and World Report*, August 9, 1998; and Warren Strobel, “A War in the Shadows,” *U.S. News and World Report*, December 31, 2000.

³⁰⁰ Cooperman, “Terror Strikes Again,” *U.S. News and World Report*, August 9, 1998.

³⁰¹ Strobel, “A War of Shadows.”

he in turn called the embassy and an official read him the same statement. With that, President Lenker called Church headquarters in Salt Lake City for instruction on how to proceed.³⁰²

Missionaries Again Evacuated

While awaiting word, President Lenker ordered his missionaries to stay inside their apartments. The missionaries complied but quickly found staying inside all day to be tedious. They cleaned their apartments, practiced Albanian and read the LDS Church magazine, *Ensign*, but as one missionary said, “There’s only so much reading in the *Ensign* you can do.” When they had to go out on the street the missionaries were directed to try and blend in as much as possible. They wore jeans and t-shirts with no missionary tags and were forbidden from speaking English in the streets.³⁰³

The following Sunday President Lenker and his assistant Elder Randall Wilson went to the U.S. embassy in person to try and get more information. They found the embassy locked and all the personnel evacuated. Marines with grenade launchers and machine guns surrounded the perimeter to protect the buildings from any attack. While there, they were able to talk with the regional security officer who had helped to uncover the plot to bomb the embassy. They asked him if they were safe in Albania and he replied, “Absolutely not.” He then added that there were known jihadists training camps in Albania and that the participants knew who the missionaries were and were watching them. Since the embassy had been put on bunker status he opined that the terrorists would be looking for soft American targets. He warned that the terrorists would

³⁰² Stephen and Nancy Lenker, interview by author, April 18, 2008, Salt Lake City Utah, notes in author’s possession.

³⁰³ Ryan Stewart, interview by author, June 26, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession; and Ty Johnston, interview by author, July 28, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession.

watch the missionaries and then plant a bomb to try and kill them.³⁰⁴ So President Lenker asked the officer, “Knowing what you know about the situation at hand – if you had a son or daughter would you be concerned for their welfare?” The officer replied that he would want them to be evacuated.³⁰⁵ After reporting to Church headquarters, leaders in Salt Lake considered the information prayerfully and decided to evacuate the missionaries and the Church travel department began making arrangements for an orderly evacuation.

On Monday morning President Lenker called the missionaries and informed them they were going to be evacuated. Two hours later half of the missionaries went to the airport for evacuation. In order not to draw attention to themselves they entered the airport one by one in regular clothes. Half of the missionaries were evacuated on Monday and the other half on Tuesday and President Lenker and Randall Wilson left on Wednesday. Since the missionaries had to leave so quickly, they were unable to inform the members and their investigators that they were being evacuated again.

For Elders Ryan Stewart and Freebairn the evacuation was an abrupt end to their missions. They were both present for the evacuation in 1997 and had one month left on their missions. Elder Stewart requested permission to extend his mission but was informed that he was going to be sent home honorably instead. The rest of the missionaries were sent to England. While in the airport they saw for the first time on the news of the Lewinsky scandal. At the airport in England, officials were hesitant to let the missionaries in because they did not have visas. Eventually they granted them entrance with tourist visas which did not allow them to proselyte.

³⁰⁴ Randall Wilson, interview by author, August 14, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession.

³⁰⁵ Stephen and Nancy Lenker Interview.

Once in England the missionaries settled in uneasily for a couple of weeks. Sister Lenker spent a few days in the hospital because after drinking unfiltered water in Albania she had become very ill and lost 20 pounds in two weeks. Following her hospital stay, President and Sister Lenker worked in the temple and stayed in apartments on the temple grounds. The rest of the missionaries were spread throughout different missions in England and worked with English missionaries. After two anxious weeks, the missionaries were called to different missions throughout England and they traveled to Italy for a weekend to obtain the proper visas which would allow them to proselyte.³⁰⁶

For most of the missionaries working in England was initially difficult. For President Lenker it was hard because his missionaries were spread throughout various missions and there was not much for him to do without them. For the missionaries it was difficult because they did not want to leave the people of Albania. England was quite a culture shock to the missionaries. They were used to being intimately involved with their small branches planning activities and helping with the organization of the branch meetings. In England, with well established wards and stakes, they felt less included and essential to the branches. Also the missionaries were used to a mission of about twenty Elders. All the Elders knew everyone else and they felt more like a tight knit group. President Lenker was able with such small numbers to be very hands on. He would do companionship study with missionaries, go on splits with them and counsel with them regularly. In England the missionaries were in missions with well over 100 missionaries. The English missions were different and bigger but, Albanian missionaries were careful to point out that serving in England was not bad, it was simply different. The Albanian Elders were paired with Elders already serving in England and they worked hard together to build the kingdom.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

Some of the Albanian missionaries were able to participate in baptisms while in England and had wonderful experiences.³⁰⁷

Returning to Albania

After being in England for a month, President Lenker returned to Albania with Elder Randall Wilson and Elder Mark Stringham. They surveyed the security and ensured that local Church leaders were doing well. In order to evaluate how safe missionaries would be, they met with the Tirana Chief of Police and officers for Albanian secret service. The officers assured the missionaries that things were under control and that they would be well protected. For the first couple of weeks in Albania, Elders Wilson and Stringham lived in the mission home with President and Sister Lenker. Elder Wilson reported that it was very much like being home with mom and dad. Every Sunday they traveled together to a different branch to speak in sacrament meeting and consult with the branch presidents. They were impressed with how smoothly the branches had operated in their absence and how much the branch presidents had grown in confidence and ability to lead.

After they established that it was safe to return missionaries came back in pairs over a period of two months. By mid-November all of the missionaries had returned.³⁰⁸ They were ecstatic when they got phone calls telling them they were going to return to Albania. Since the ones who returned in November were new to the mission when it was evacuated and were gone for up to three and a half months some of them had forgotten a lot of Albanian but this in no way dampened their enthusiasm to return.³⁰⁹ Additionally, the mission received reinforcements from a new group of missionaries who had been held up in arriving because of the evacuation and had

³⁰⁷ Ty Johnston Interview.

³⁰⁸ Stephen and Nancy Lenker Interview.

³⁰⁹ Ty Johnston Interview.

spent the intermediate time in Florida. For the rest of 1998 the missionaries rebuilt relationships with investigators and reestablished their places in the branches. Throughout their reestablishment they were careful to keep a low profile as Americans. To do so they taught in jeans and t-shirts and were careful to speak only Albanian in the streets.³¹⁰

Refugees Flood Albania

Just as things were getting settled for the missionaries thousands of ethnic Albanians flooded into Albania in the spring of 1999 fleeing violence in Kosovo. In Kosovo, many Serbian soldiers and police tortured, raped, and violently killed ethnic Albanians. They also used helicopter gunships and mortars to destroy Albanian houses and any who stayed behind to defend them.³¹¹ By June 1999 the United Nations estimated that 300 ethnic Albanians had been killed and 12,000 had become refugees in Albania.³¹² The refugee tent city in Albania quickly became a mire of mud. Knowing the poor state of the camp, President Lenker doubled the service time for missionaries per week and sent them to the camps to help. The missionaries helped serve food and unselfishly tackled tough jobs like cleaning toilet facilities. The missionaries, unlike the personnel of most other aid organizations, could speak Albanian, so they spent time listening to the refugees and consoling them in this difficult time. The missionaries' enthusiasm and dedication to service in the refugee camps reflected one of the reasons they continually had success in helping the Church to grow in Albania. They unselfishly and consistently gave humanitarian service with no expectation of remuneration. Their service in the refugee camps helped three Kosovar women to become interested the Church and join. When the

³¹⁰ Stephen and Nancy Lenker Interview.

³¹¹ Rod Norland, "The Wolf is at the Door," *Newsweek*, March 16, 1998.

³¹² Rod Norland and Zoran Cirjakovic, "The Reluctant Warriors Of Slobodan Milosevic," *Newsweek*, June 22, 1998.

sisters returned to Kosovo, a humanitarian aid worker and member of the Church traveled to their homes and taught them the new member discussions.³¹³

The Book of Mormon in Albanian

After most refugees were repatriated, members of the Church in Albania received a long awaited blessing in November 1999: The Book of Mormon in Albanian. Since the Church started in Albania members and missionaries had anxiously awaited the arrival of an Albanian Book of Mormon. With no Book of Mormon in that language the missionaries developed a variety of ways to help people gain testimonies of the truthfulness of the LDS Church. If the person could read another language, most commonly English or Italian, the missionaries would simply give them a copy in that language and let them read it. Some who did not speak any other languages learned English one word at a time with a dictionary in order to be able to read the Book of Mormon.³¹⁴ With other investigators the missionaries used home-grown translations of excerpts to give to investigators. Usually these were handwritten chapters that missionaries had either translated themselves or copied from another missionary's translation. Frequently, missionaries would also translate verses and stories in their own words into Albanian as they read aloud for the benefit of members and investigators. In addition to these tools, the missionaries frequently assigned investigators to read chapters from the *Gospel Principles* manual (a collection of basic doctrines designed for new members) or the New Testament. The first copies of *Gospel Principles* were translated by Kosovar Catholic Albanians who were living in the United States. The translation mentioned things like Mother Mary and the Hyrum Smith picture looked like

³¹³ Stephen and Nancy Lenker Interview.

³¹⁴ Arben Vogli Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 1-2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Eriola Gjini Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 7, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Enver Hoxha so the first missionaries tore it out of every book they distributed. Overall, President Kenneth Reber the mission president in Austria who had responsibility for Albania thought the *Gospel Principles* book was “pretty weak.”³¹⁵ However, they were what the missionaries had and did provide a basis to begin from. Frequently, the missionaries would encourage those interested to pray about the Book of Mormon. They would tell them that even though they could not read the book God could still witness to their hearts that it was true through the Holy Ghost. Many faithful Saints received a witness in this manner.³¹⁶

The translation of the Book of Mormon into Albanian began before the Church had even entered the country. In 1988 Gaspar Kici, a non-member professional Albanian translator was commissioned by the Church to translate the Book of Mormon. In 1992 Stephen Spainhower, supervisor for the translation, took the completed copy to Albania for members to examine. There, Spainhower, “Found Mr. Kici’s translation to be almost flawless Albanian language, understandable, and beautiful; however, it did not conform well to the literalness policy.” To help the translation more accurately reflect the English Book of Mormon, Spainhower assembled a team to review the content and improve the literalness and doctrinal purity. Prinvera Vathi was one of the first recruited to the team but, after completing 1 Nephi 1-10, she accepted a job with an airline company, moved to New York, and was no longer able to work on the translation. Pandi Theodori took over for her but was soon asked to translate the Guide to the Scriptures which functions as a Topical Guide, Bible Dictionary, and Index in one. Since there were very few qualified Albanian members, it was difficult for the translation supervisor to keep a qualified

³¹⁵ Kenneth Dudley Reber Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1994, p. 84, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³¹⁶ Ty Johnston interview.

translation team during 1993 but, by 1994, Brikena Ribaj and Juventila Sinamati were assembled as the main team members.³¹⁷

Brikena had been introduced to the Church through her high school literature professor. Her school was tailored to the linguistically gifted and Brikena specialized in English and German. When she met the missionaries for the first time they asked her to translate a verse from an English copy of the Book of Mormon. To her embarrassment, she was unable but she was fascinated by the language in the Book of Mormon. The structure was unlike anything that she had been exposed to previously. While discussing language issues with the missionaries the topic of religion naturally came up and she became interested and committed to be baptized. Before her baptism a member of the Albanian translation team from Salt Lake City visited Tirana and tested her linguistic aptitude and chose her to work as a translator. He also gave her a basic training in performing a content review for the scriptures which seeks for a verbatim translation while insuring the content is not changed. Brikena and Juventila received packets to translate through the mission president who was in Switzerland at the time. The size of the packet depended on the linguistic difficulty of the chapters, for example, packets which more archaic or poetic material were shorter than others. Since the initial translation had already taken place it was their job to make corrections. Some parts were satisfactory as previously translated but other parts required significant revision to the point that there was more red ink on the page than black.³¹⁸

When Brikena and Juventila completed their draft, Daniela Kita and Monika Kadi worked through the book verse by verse looking for key words and ensuring that they had the

³¹⁷ Holman Laurel Leroy Papers.

³¹⁸ Brikena Ribaj, interview by author, August 16, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author's possession.

same meaning in English and Albanian. Finally, the book was reviewed by Blendi Kokona, Arminda Suli, Brikena Ribaj and Arben Vogli to ensure that Church doctrines were being clearly and correctly represented.³¹⁹ Blendi Kokona and Arminda Suli were both attending Brigham Young University at the time. They would read their assigned sections alone and then meet together to discuss what they had found. When they felt that a section was correct and they were at peace about it they would approve that section and move on to another part.³²⁰ Brikena commented that working to translate the Book of Mormon from the age of eighteen to twenty-three provided “a strong sense of possibility . . . [and] a fresh sense of optimism, a sense of hope and sense of the Divine that [she] hadn’t experienced before.” She declared, “Spiritual nourishment that comes from that setting is incomprehensible.”³²¹

In November 1999 copies of the completed translation arrived in Albania. The missionaries received the copies of the Book of Mormon during a monthly zone conference and were moved to tears with gratitude and excitement to share them with members and investigators.³²² Missionaries delivered copies to surprised members in Tirana that same evening. Members in the city of Elbasan received their copies the following Sunday in Church. They were overjoyed to be able to read the Book of Mormon in their own language and missionaries were amazed to see members become reconverted to the Church through the Book of Mormon. Reception of the Book of Mormon and serious study of its contents strengthened branch

³¹⁹ Laurel Leroy Holman, Papers 1994-1998, microfilm #1078, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Monica Kadi, interview by author July 30, 2008, notes in author’s possession; and Blendi Kokona, Oral History, 23.

³²⁰ Arminda Suli, interview by author, August 3, 2008, Spanish Fork Utah, notes in author’s possession.

³²¹ Brikena Ribaj Interview.

³²² Stephen and Nancy Lenker Interview.

leadership and commitment of members to the Church and enabled them to use restored gospel texts more easily in their talks and lessons.³²³

Reception of the Book of Mormon in Albanian helped missionary efforts. Previously, the missionaries had been the principal source for all teachings. Now the missionaries could use the Book of Mormon as a tool that people could touch, hold and, most importantly, read for themselves in order to gain a witness that they should join the Church. Missionaries held open houses in the local chapels where they showed hundreds of people copies of the Book of Mormon in an effort to interest them the Church. They also placed posters explaining the Book of Mormon all over the cities they were in. With the help of the Book of Mormon Church membership increased in 1999: 175 people were baptized, more than in any previous year.³²⁴

Translation of Temple Ceremonies

Shortly after Albanians received the Book of Mormon, temple ceremonies were also translated into Albanian. Albanian culture is family centered and the message of eternal families and sealing ordinances performed in temples had been appealing to potential converts from the beginning. When Monika Kadi, an early Church member in Albania, first learned about the temple she deeply wanted to go. When she learned about doing ordinances for those who had passed away she asked the missionaries if there was a way that somebody could go through the temple for her while she was still alive. When the missionaries replied that it was not possible to do ordinances for somebody else while they were alive she was so devastated she cried. She felt hopeless about getting to the temple because there was no temple in Albania and not many chances to travel to another. Fortunately, shortly thereafter she was called to serve as a missionary at Temple Square in Salt Lake City (initially she thought this was a call to clean the

³²³ Ty Johnston Interview.

³²⁴ Stephen and Nancy Lenker Interview.

temple and was rather disappointed). Once on her mission (teaching not cleaning) she was able to go to the Provo Temple and received her own endowment.³²⁵ Other missionaries from Albania were also able to receive their endowment as they embarked on their missions.

In mid-June 1997 the Church assembled a small team to translate the temple ordinances into Albanian. The team consisted of Monika Kadi, Blendi Kokona, Daniela Kita and Brikena Ribaj. The translation took place in the Salt Lake Temple and it was a powerful spiritual experience for those involved. Though they found the task rewarding, they also found it challenging because of the terminology used in the temple ordinances. After years of enforced atheism in Albania many religious concepts and words had been forgotten. To translate the words properly, Monika called older Albanians and asked them about archaic Albanian or synonyms. With some terms the translators simply created new words or transliterated English words into Albanian.³²⁶

With the words translated, a group of Albanians were selected to record the endowment into Albanian. A group of fifty Albanians were chosen as candidates based on Church attendance and testimony. Those fifty then recorded their voices and individuals at Church headquarters selected the best voices to participate in the official recording. For the official recording the selected Albanian Saints were brought to the United States and received their own endowment in the Bountiful Utah Temple. Agim Grimci, who was chosen because of his deep voice, brought his wife and they were able to be sealed together after they were endowed. All the missionaries who had taught the selected recorders joyfully participated with the Albanians, demonstrating the type of love that helped Albanians convert to the Church in the first place. Following their

³²⁵ Monika Kadri Kadi Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 25, 33, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³²⁶ Monika Kadi Interview.

endowment, the selected recorders traveled to Salt Lake City where they recorded their parts for the endowment ceremony.³²⁷ With the recording completed, Albanian Saints were able to begin to travel to any temple, receive their own endowments, and be sealed to their families. Today, most travel to the Frankfurt Germany Temple to receive the ordinances.

Conclusion

Under the leadership of President and Sister Lenker the LDS Church continued to grow in Albania for several reasons. First, since LDS missionaries began to preach in Albania, members and investigators have been interested in going to the temple to be sealed to their families. The translation of temple ordinances into Albanian provided access to this ordinance and motivated some to join the Church. Second, the translation of the Book of Mormon into Albanian allowed investigators to explore it for themselves and through personal exploration become convinced that they should be baptized. Third, during the evacuation members supported one another and the LDS Church functioned effectively without missionaries. The strong relationships within the Church were a magnet which persuaded some Albanians to leave other social networks unite themselves with the LDS congregation.

³²⁷ Grimci Family, interview by author, August 11, 2008, Saratoga Springs Utah, notes in author's possession.

CHAPTER SIX: JOINING THE LDS CHURCH

Introduction

As the LDS Church grew from 1992-99, each new member had a unique background and experience. However, there were certain aspects to each story that form a pattern of conversion. It started with a whole generation of Albanians growing up without any public manifestations of religion under communism. Without public practice of religion most Albanians had no significant ties to traditional Albanian religions (Islam, Catholicism, Orthodox Christian) which made it easier for LDS missionaries to meet and interest them in the LDS Church. Most Albanians were initially interested in talking with the LDS missionaries because they were American but the missionaries' kindness and optimism prompted further curiosity. As Albanians explored the LDS Church for themselves some found things they liked. Some were attracted to the organized and peaceful manner in which the LDS members worshipped, while others appreciated the opportunities for friendship and leadership within the Church. Beyond these attractions Albanian Saints almost universally reported that they chose to join the LDS Church because of individual spiritual experiences, most of which centered on an increased sense of divine peace in their lives.

Elimination of Religion

Under Dictator Enver Hoxha's regime, religion was systematically eliminated from the public sphere. Albanians were taught that religion was a second government used by political

leaders to brainwash people and keep them in ignorance, darkness, and submission.³²⁸ The government also taught that practicing religion created “foreign attitudes.” In their view it was unpatriotic to be religious.³²⁹ The formal school system reinforced these views by teaching lessons which proclaimed that God did not exist and that priests just used people for their money.³³⁰ Teachers also proclaimed that the teachings of Jesus and Mohamed were vain nonsense, mistakes and fairy tales used to hold the poor in slavery to the rich.³³¹ They also presented, as historical fact, that clerics were involved in collaborating with Nazi invaders. Many students were also required to read textbooks which argued that religion was opium for the people, though one student commented that since he did not know what opium was he did not really get the point.³³²

The Hoxha government used a strong hand in enforcing the ban on religion. One Albanian, Qirjako Lula, was told in 1967 that the youth were the ones that destroyed all the churches in Albania, but he saw the mosque by his house torn down by grown men with a large tractor. This blatant deception confirmed to him that “people had to hide their religious feelings”

³²⁸ Adriatik Jace Rama Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 3, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³²⁹ Alketa Pernaska Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2-3, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³⁰ Daniela Kita Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³¹ Plarent Toci Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2-3, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah and Nano Family Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 3, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³² Pandi Paul Theodori Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 3, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

to be safe. If a person revealed their religious inclination, one witness was enough to send them to prison³³³ and some Albanians were known to spy on and witness against their neighbors.³³⁴ One such informant was known to plant small microphones in peoples' houses or under the seats of their bicycles and would turn them into the police in return for special favors.³³⁵ A person could be sent to prison for an infraction as small as making red eggs on Easter.³³⁶ With such harsh consequences many Albanians began to keep all religious sentiments to themselves, opting for instance for silent prayer.³³⁷ In the absence of organized religion, some Albanians claimed Hoxha tried to make himself a god. One reported: "He wanted to nurture the people with the conviction that he only was the lord."³³⁸ People even used religious terms to describe opposition to the government; as one had it, "To talk about religious things was considered heresy."³³⁹

As a result of state sponsored atheism, a whole generation of Albanians grew up without religion. Albanians reacted to the lack of religion in three different ways: (1) indifference, (2) atheism, and (3) seeking for God. Those who were indifferent simply were not taught anything

³³³ Qirjako Lula Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2-4, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³⁴ Jason Dean Burgess Papers, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³⁵ Corey Smith Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 10, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³⁶ Ethington, Tammy Maria and Heather Marie Corrigan Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 13, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³⁷ Suli Oral History, 2; and The Nano Family 4.

³³⁸ Ethington, Tammy Maria and Heather Marie Corrigan 13; and Kristiqi Family Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 6, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³³⁹ Kristiqi Family, 2.

about God in their homes.³⁴⁰ This did not mean necessarily that their parents were atheists, but rather that they were hesitant to talk about religion and were not active in passing on their traditional religious ideas or rites.³⁴¹ These individuals became accustomed to not having religion because no one else did.³⁴² One woman used a clever analogy to describe the situation. She knew a man who only had one leg. Frequently, people would ask him what it was like to only have one leg and he would respond that he did not know because it had been that way his whole life. Likewise, she stated that she did not really know what it was like to not have any religion because she did not know any different.³⁴³ As for the second group, they saw themselves as atheists who did not believe in God, the gospel, or any form of life after death and frequently discouraged others from also believing.³⁴⁴ For the third group, the lack of religion simply increased their thirst for spirituality. One of these seekers, Ledia Kita felt that the time of communism “was the worst time, because [Albania] was an atheist country.”³⁴⁵ Another, Plarent Toci, felt the need for religion because without it he said, “Death scared me.”³⁴⁶ Some started to believe in and seek for God as a result of the anti-religious instruction they received in school. Monika Kadi, who had never really thought about religion because her own parents were strong

³⁴⁰ Adriatik Rama, 2.

³⁴¹ Alketa Pernaska, 2; and Anastas and Sofia Suli, 2.

³⁴² Nano Family, 2

³⁴³ Daniela Kita 5.

³⁴⁴ Arben Vogli Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 1-2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Entela Galanxhi Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 10, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; and Kristiqi Family, 2.

³⁴⁵ Ledia Kita Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³⁴⁶ Plarent Toci, 5.

atheists, began to feel drawn to God after reading *Religion is Opium to the People*.³⁴⁷ Eriola Gjini began to wonder about God after a lesson on evolution. She asked herself if man came from monkeys and monkeys from plants and plants the earth, where did the earth come from?³⁴⁸ Another Albanian commented that as a young boy he went home and asked his mother if there was a Lord because his teacher said there was not one and he had felt offended at her statement even though he had not been taught about God at home.³⁴⁹

Covert Religious Instruction

With government sanctions against religion, faith in God was covertly nurtured by many grandmothers. In almost every interview of early Church members, Albanians commented that their grandmother was religious and taught them about God and religious rites.³⁵⁰ Muslim grandmothers taught their descendants that there was a God and that it was important to know him. They also taught their grandchildren that Mohamed was God's prophet. When one girl asked her grandmother why there were no prophets today like Mohamed, the grandmother replied that people now were not worthy of such a blessing.³⁵¹ Some Muslim grandmothers even taught their children about Jesus Christ. Another girl, whose parents were both avowed atheists, remembered her grandmother telling her every night that God was alive.³⁵² Though some Islamic

³⁴⁷ Monika Kadi Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 13, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah Oral History.

³⁴⁸ Eriola Gjini Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 7, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³⁴⁹ Kristiqi Family, 4-5.

³⁵⁰ Matthew Heiss, interview August 15, 2008, notes in author's possession.

³⁵¹ Alketa Pernaska, 7-9.

³⁵² Entela Galanxhi, 2.

traditions were passed on, most Albanian Muslims were only Muslim by heritage. Some were not even sure if their family was Muslim: it merely seemed probable.³⁵³

Where there is usually no tolerance for Christian missionaries among Muslims throughout the world, this is not the case in Albania. According to one Albanian, “We were not raised as a religious people, but as Albanian people . . . Albania came first, and religion after that,” therefore religion has not become an area of conflict as it has in other places.³⁵⁴ With a peaceful co-existence between Muslims and Christians, Albania is one of the few places in the world where LDS missionaries teach Muslims. Though there is peace between Muslims and Christians there is still pressure from some Muslims to prohibit others from joining the LDS Church. One girl’s Muslim friend refused to talk to her after she was baptized in the Church.³⁵⁵ Another girl, after she was engaged to a Muslim man, was banned by her family from attending the Church out of fear that her attendance would offend the groom’s family.³⁵⁶

Grandmothers were also the principle carriers of religion for Orthodox Christian Albanians. One way grandmothers taught their children and grandchildren about Christianity was by dyeing eggs red on Easter. The red was a symbol of Christ’s blood and the egg the creation of new life. Together it symbolized Christ’s power to help a person change their lives.³⁵⁷ After dyeing the eggs, the grandmothers would bury the shells or wrap them in newspaper and carry them in the garbage to the other side of the city to avoid getting caught by informants.³⁵⁸ In addition to red eggs, some grandmothers were brave enough to keep copies of the Bible in their

³⁵³ Adriatik Rama, 2.

³⁵⁴ Ledia Kita, 2.

³⁵⁵ Alketa Pernaska, 11.

³⁵⁶ David and Joan Haymond Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 20-21, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³⁵⁷ Eriola Gjini, 4; and Kristiqi Family, 2; and Anastas and Sofia Suli, 3.

³⁵⁸ Jason Dean Burgess Papers.

house. One girl tried to read the family Bible but with little practical instruction in religion she was unable to “get through it.”³⁵⁹ Other courageous grandmothers took their grandkids to abandoned monasteries to light candles.³⁶⁰ Though courageous and faithful most grandmothers only managed to pass on rudimentary aspects of religion. If nothing else, they would simply tell their grandchildren that there was a God and that they should pray to Him and follow Him.³⁶¹ In the absence of public religious leaders grandmothers took it upon themselves to be the principle carriers and transmitters of religious knowledge. Despite their best efforts most were only able to pass on rudimentary elements of religion, basic facts like there is a God. With, at best, a rudimentary foundation in religion most Albanians did not feel bound to any one religion. Some felt drawn to God but few felt bound to a certain sect. This left more Albanians open to listening to the message brought by the LDS missionaries at the close of communism.

Meeting the Missionaries

Most early Albanian converts were not looking for a new church when they met the missionaries. Most were introduced to the missionaries through a common acquaintance. Some, like the Grimci family, met the missionaries through the Suli family, who rented rooms to the missionaries.³⁶² Others met the missionaries when their member friends invited them and the missionaries to the same birthday parties.³⁶³ Monika Kadi, for example, met the missionaries at a

³⁵⁹ Daniela Kita, 8.

³⁶⁰ Eriola Gjini, 5.

³⁶¹ Arminda Suli Interview, August 3, 2008, notes in author’s possession; and Frida Pazolli Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 2-3, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, and Ledia Kita 2, 15 and Pandi Paul Theodori 1-4 and Nano Family 5-6

³⁶² Arminda Suli Interview; and Grimci Interview.

³⁶³ Ledia Kita, 16; and Daniela Kita, 7.

Christmas party.³⁶⁴ Others met the missionaries after their friends converted to the Church and made the introductions,³⁶⁵ and some met the missionaries at missionary-led English classes.³⁶⁶ Other Albanians met the missionaries without introduction during the course of their daily lives. Arben Vogli, for example, was on his way to the Catholic Church one Sunday to tell the priest he wanted to be baptized. While on the bus he saw a pretty girl, Marinella Kulla, and followed her to the LDS Church instead. Once there, he loved the meetings from the start, especially the songs about Jesus. After the meetings he met the missionaries and shortly thereafter decided to be baptized as a Latter-day Saint.³⁶⁷ Another family, the Kristiqis, was invited to a baptism by the missionaries as they were walking through the Palace of Culture.³⁶⁸ One young man, Pandi Theodori was riding his bike one day and saw two Americans in white shirts and ties and stopped to ask if he could help them.³⁶⁹ Finally, Qirjako Lula met the missionaries outside his apartment as he was pondering about what he was going to believe now that he was free.³⁷⁰

As Albanians met the missionaries, most were quickly and deeply impressed by them. When David and Joan Haymond were called to be missionaries they were asked to “be very sensitive, make friends, and try to be reasonable in [their] ideals and find something useful to do.”³⁷¹ The Haymonds and other missionaries fulfilled this charge by becoming friends and making good impressions. The Sulis, who were very close to the Smiths, one of the first missionary couples, were impressed with Charone Smith’s courage and optimism as she went to

³⁶⁴ Monika Kadi Oral History, 14.

³⁶⁵ Eriola Ginji, 8-9.

³⁶⁶ Entela Galanxhi, 11; and Saim Kokona Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 9, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³⁶⁷ Corey Smith, 24; and Arben Vogli, 4.

³⁶⁸ Kristiqi Family, 8.

³⁶⁹ Pandi Theodori, 10.

³⁷⁰ Qirjako Lula, 5.

³⁷¹ David and Joan Haymond, 5.

work in the difficult conditions of the dystrophy hospital.³⁷² Those who worked with Charone Smith there were also impressed with her optimism. Even though she did not speak Albanian, the workers claimed she always found ways to uplift them.³⁷³ Those who worked with Thales Smith at the pediatric hospital were likewise impressed with his ability and spirit.³⁷⁴ Overall, converts were impressed with the love and kindness that missionaries showed them. They were also impressed that the missionaries did not try to force them to get baptized, but rather taught them with love and invited them to make changes.³⁷⁵ Adriatik Rama echoed the sentiments of many when he said that he wanted to be like the missionaries. When he contracted a severe case of pneumonia, the doctor thought that he might die because his lungs were filling with fluid. After he received a priesthood blessing, which relieved his pain and allowed him time to sleep he spent time thinking about his life. The things that he most enjoyed remembering were experiences with the missionaries. Because of their example, he decided to become a missionary himself.³⁷⁶

Though most Albanians enjoyed being around the missionaries, they found many of the concepts they taught difficult to understand. For example, one Sunday Sister Tammy Ethington brought an Albanian to Church for the first time. As the sacrament was being prepared she told him that this was a time to sit quietly and ponder on what Christ had done for them. He turned to her and asked, “What has he done for us?”³⁷⁷ Likewise, Adriatick Rama found it difficult to understand how somebody had died for him 2,000 years earlier. Moreover, he did not feel that he had done anything bad enough to merit someone’s death.³⁷⁸ Concepts such as prayer, faith,

³⁷² Anastas and Sofia Suli, 8.

³⁷³ Arminda Suli interview.

³⁷⁴ Anastas and Sofia Suli, 15.

³⁷⁵ Arminda Suli interview; and Frida Pazolli, 5; and Kristiqi Family, 9.

³⁷⁶ Adriatik Jace Rama, 11, 15-16.

³⁷⁷ Ethington, Tammy Maria and Heather Marie Corrigan, 23.

³⁷⁸ Adriatik Jace Rama, 11.

baptism, the Holy Ghost, life after death, and the idea of a corporeal God were all new and difficult to understand without a Christian background.³⁷⁹

Spiritual Experiences

Though impressed with the missionaries, conversions were largely the result of personal spiritual experiences. These experiences of divine power enveloped a wide range of phenomena. For some, participation in the Church simply felt familiar. Doctrines like the pre-mortal existence and eternal families were comforting and felt like Albanian culture because most Albanian activities center on their families.³⁸⁰ Others felt increased motivation in their lives to become better. Others felt a divine power helping them quit using tobacco, coffee and alcohol. They also felt better able to perform responsibilities that seemed beyond their capacities.³⁸¹ Agim Grimci said feeling his life change gave him strength to talk about the gospel with others. He said, “If I didn’t feel the quality of my life change I would not be able testify of the gospel.”³⁸² Some experienced more dramatic healings and signs they took as spiritual evidence they should join the Church. In one instance, the Dena family’s grandmother was very sick, but after she received a priesthood blessing she recovered. Her family was baptized in part due to her miraculous healing.³⁸³ Another Albanian, Gago Nano, fell on his electric stove and burned himself. In his time of need the missionaries came to his house unexpectedly and attended to his wounds. He interpreted their sudden arrival as a sign from God, which deepened his conviction in the Church.³⁸⁴ Entela Galanxhi was confused about the many different churches and wanted a

³⁷⁹ Ethington, Tammy Maria and Heather Marie Corrigan, 24; and Monika Kadi Oral History, 15; and Pandi Theodori, 11; and Plarent Toci, 18.

³⁸⁰ Monika Kadi Oral History, 15; and Monika Kadi interview; and Grimcis interview.

³⁸¹ Frida Pazolli, 6; and Grimci Interview; and Pandi Thoedori, 12; and Saim Kokona, 12.

³⁸² Grimci interview

³⁸³ Corey Smith, 37.

³⁸⁴ Nano Family, 10.

clear answer as to which one to join. So she said a prayer and told Heavenly Father that whichever missionaries came to her house the next day would represent the Church she would join. In her prayer she declared if the missionaries were Bahai she would choose them. If they were Baptist she would become Baptist. The next morning, in answer to her prayer, missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came to her door and she joined the Church.³⁸⁵

Peace

While there is diversity in the manner in which Albanians receive spiritual confirmations, the overwhelming majority of converts reported feelings of divine peace as the principal spiritual experience that motivated them to join the Church. With the chaos of communism and the emotional instability of economic upheaval many Albanians had a heightened desire for peace in their lives. Arben Vogli, an Albanian convert said, “Because the people of Albania have suffered so much, they are really willing to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ.”³⁸⁶ Likewise, Lindita Grimci said “Absence of religion was like a hole in our lives. It was like there was something missing.”³⁸⁷

Arminda Suli, who met the missionaries as a teenager argued that, “After communism, even as a child, you are craving hope.” Arminda said that hope and peace came to her in the Church as she learned that she was a child of God and that He was mindful of her. However, as a sixteen year old she wanted more before she decided to join the Church. During one sacrament meeting, the missionaries got up and sang “The Spirit of God.” Arminda reported, “I had never felt the Spirit like I did that day. I was speechless and teary eyed and I didn’t understand why.

³⁸⁵ Entela Galanxhi, 11-12.

³⁸⁶ Arben Vogli, 8.

³⁸⁷ Grimci interview.

The singing was beautiful but there was something else that was touching me and I wondered, ‘What is going on?’” Later while reading the Book of Mormon she felt the same powerful feelings and decided to join the Church.³⁸⁸

Like Armindia, Adriatik Rama also felt unsettled as things changed from communism to democracy. He was apprehensive about the unknown. During these political changes and an intense school schedule he visited a Catholic church for the first time and felt so peaceful that he began to take pictures so he could remember the feeling. After he met the missionaries, he found that same peace in the LDS chapel and therefore joined the Church.³⁸⁹

Daniela Kita received her peaceful confirmation while reading the Book of Mormon. The missionaries asked her to read 3 Nephi 11 but for some reason she read 3 Nephi 13 instead. While reading she was impressed with the concept of God taking care of the lilies of the field because she had always been one to worry about her future. As she read she said, “I felt so good inside. That was an answer to my questions. It was good to know that somebody takes care of all these things, and I don’t have to worry much about tomorrow.” She also found peace in attending the Church meetings. “It was so good. I could read Italian, but I wasn’t too good at it when reading the Bible or the Book of Mormon. It was hard, and I couldn’t understand it very well. But I loved the spirit in the Church. It was so good, so peaceful, so great.”³⁹⁰ Her sister Ledia Kita also received a spiritual answer while reading the Book of Mormon. While home alone one day, she felt so afraid that her hands were shaking. To help, she read 2 Nephi 31. As she read, her feelings of fear disappeared and were replaced with feelings of divine happiness.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ Armindia Suli interview.

³⁸⁹ Adriatik Jace Rama, 7, 10.

³⁹⁰ Daniela Kita, 8-9.

³⁹¹ Ledia Kita, 19.

For Alketa Pernaska, when democracy came she read the Bible and learned about Jesus Christ. As she read the Bible for the first time, “It provided something that isn’t provided any more. It was a feeling that I felt throughout my whole body. I knew it was the Holy Ghost that was passing through my body, and passing through my spirit.” She said she knew she was supposed to join a church but didn’t know which one. When she prayed about the Church she said she felt the same peaceful power which she felt while reading the Bible – only stronger and she knew she should join the Church.³⁹² Suzana Hasanaj had a similar experience. When she read the Bible she felt the Spirit. She tried to find the same feeling in a variety of churches but she only found it again when she read The Book of Mormon. She felt a strong good feeling inside her which told her that it was true and so she was baptized.³⁹³

Arben Vogli said he felt the Spirit giving him peace for the first time while he was working in Greece. His employer there had not treated him well so he decided to return home to Albania. As he began his journey, he was worried that he would be accosted by thieves but had a comforting feeling. In his words, “There was a small voice that told me, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be with you.’” When he went to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for the first time he enjoyed the meetings especially the songs about Jesus. That night he had a dream of two heavenly beings and light over his house. He interpreted the dream as confirmation that he should be baptized. Additionally, when he was with the missionaries he reported, “Not one time before had I had the feelings I felt when I went with them. It was like I was in the air. There was great happiness in my heart.”³⁹⁴

³⁹² Alketa Pernaska, 10.

³⁹³ Suzana Hasanaj, interview August 15, 2008, notes in authors possession.

³⁹⁴ Arben Vogli, 3-5.

Eriola Gjini received her spiritual confirmation at the first meeting she attended The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the meeting a young Latter-day Saint, Evis Fraka, bore her testimony of the truthfulness of the Church. At that point Eriola knew that the Church was true and wanted to stand up also and add her witness but felt too shy. From that point on she felt “happiness or something very special in [her] soul” that motivated her to join the Church even though she felt that she did not understand all of the doctrine.³⁹⁵

For Monika Kadi it was simple. As she listened to the missionaries she felt that what she was hearing was right.³⁹⁶ Plarent Toci was one whose grandmother taught him to believe in God. She would say things such as, “There is a Lord. There is a Christ.” And he would respond, “No they don’t exist, these are vain things.” But as he got older his opinions about religion began to change. He said that he began to feel that there was a supreme power that would help him on his tests and that prevented him from doing immoral things. With these feelings, Plarent began to search for this supreme power. He visited the Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox churches and read pamphlets from evangelical churches. In his search the one thing that was most important to him was a copy of the New Testament. As he read he said he began to feel what he later recognized as the Holy Ghost. It was “a very good feeling, a warmth in my bosom and a feeling like God was looking down on me.” After reading in the New Testament about Christian unity he began to search for a church to attend. Since he believed in Christ he did not believe the Islamic faith, he also did not agree with some of the teachings of the Catholic church and he did not feel the same peace he felt while studying the New Testament in either the Orthodox or the Disciples of Christ Church. So he decided to stop looking and just live Christ’s teachings. When he met the

³⁹⁵ Eriola Gjini, 10, 12.

³⁹⁶ Monika Kadi Oral History, 16.

missionaries for the LDS Church he felt the same peace and power he had felt while reading the New Testament and decided to be baptized.³⁹⁷

Two older men, Qirjako Lula and Gaqo Nano, who had lived through communism and atheism, both described the spiritual peace they felt as they discovered the Church. Qirjako Lula said, “Above all I found spiritual calmness, which I’d never had in my life before. I’d never known who to pray to, who has given me my life, who made it possible for me to have a family... I have the goal to become perfect and to live eternally with all of my family. I haven’t had these feelings before.”³⁹⁸ Similarly, Gaqo Nano related, “I feel so much peace in myself. Before finding this religion, I thought after I died I would get lost. But now I know that after death there is life and my spirit will be resurrected. I feel so much peace that I will live together with my family.”³⁹⁹

Social Networks

The above mentioned accounts of individuals experiencing divine manifestations were facilitated by social networks. Most of the early converts came from friendships that the early humanitarian service missionaries had made. The missionaries made friends in their service at the university or hospitals and those friends in turn introduced them to more Albanians. Not all of these acquaintances joined the LDS Church but many did. Though most converts in their oral histories and interviews give credit to divine spiritual experiences for motivating them to join the Church social networks seem to also have a profound affect. Those who made friends with the missionaries and or other members of the church tended to commit more easily to baptism. Since missionaries only stay in a certain area or city for a limited amount of time, those who only make

³⁹⁷ Plarent Toci, 8-14.

³⁹⁸ Qirjako Lula, 6.

³⁹⁹ Nano Family, 14.

friends with the missionaries soon lose that acquaintance and tend to stop attending Church in spite of past spiritual experiences. Those who develop strong social ties not only with the missionaries but with other members of the Church tend to remain actively involved after the missionaries leave to other areas or when they experience significant difficulties. If social networks are one of the significant reasons for joining the Church they are also one of the significant reasons for leaving the Church. Old friends of new members often invite them to do things which are against Church commandments but acceptable in Albanian culture like Sunday shopping⁴⁰⁰ or coffee or alcohol drinking.⁴⁰¹ As members are presented with these situations they feel torn despite previous spiritual experiences and many leave the Church. As social networks develop within the Church disagreements occur. Some members unfortunately are offended and stop coming to Church. Most other churches have paid clergy to care for the worshippers and regulate congregational unity. The LDS Church is run completely by laypeople. Since the Church is so young and many of the converts are either young men or women, it has been difficult to find qualified priesthood leaders.⁴⁰² Qualified men are usually called to leadership positions within a matter of months after being baptized.⁴⁰³ After their appointment they are in charge, among other things, of helping members of their congregations form meaningful social relationships with each other so that they will continue to come to Church after the missionaries who taught them leave. One missionary noted that those Albanians who made friends with

⁴⁰⁰ Arben Vogli, 12; and Eriola Gjini, 16; and Pandi Theodori, 17; and Qirjako Lula, 8; and Saim Kokona, 14. Monika Kadi interview; and David and Joan Haymond, 28.

⁴⁰¹ Corey Cragun Oral History, interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, 1996, p. 14, 17, The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁴⁰² Corey Cragun, 14; and Corey Smith, 6; and Plarent Toci, 20.

⁴⁰³ Grimci interview; and Saim Kokona, 12; Gazmend Abdyl Kongoli was called into the branch presidency the day he was baptized see "The Truth" dated March 27, 1995, Archives Division, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

active members of the Church tended to remain active themselves.⁴⁰⁴ Also, those members who had support of family and friends were more likely to continue coming to Church.⁴⁰⁵ In addition to forming meaningful social relationships within the Church Arben Vogli, an Albanian member, said he felt it was important to learn more about the gospel everyday and continue to keep the commandments in order to maintain a strong testimony of the truthfulness of the Church.⁴⁰⁶ According to another early member, Arminda Suli, “If you are going to Church and have a responsibility you are really invested” and will continue to come.⁴⁰⁷ Gerta Grimci is evidence of the importance of having a responsibility within the Church. Before she was even baptized she was called to be the branch pianist. When she would not want to go to Church at times, in order to go to the beach or some other activity, her parents would remind her that she committed to play the piano and needed to go.⁴⁰⁸

Albanian Saints tended to agree that continuing to attend Church meetings and practice gospel principles has helped reaffirm, in their minds, the decision to join the Church was correct.

Arminda Suli, for example, declared:

Everything I have done I can attribute to the Church. It has given me comfort away from home and a way to cope with difficulties. It has given me direction and comfort that Heavenly Father is mindful of me. It is amazing to see Him lead my life. I think he has really led me and I don’t think my life would be the same without that guidance. The Church is not just something you do on Sunday; it is how you live, who you are and how you get answers. I could not ask for a better thing in my life. My life will never be the same.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁴ Corey Smith, 48.

⁴⁰⁵ Arminda Suli interview.

⁴⁰⁶ Arben Vogli, 10.

⁴⁰⁷ Arminda Suli, interview.

⁴⁰⁸ Grimci interview.

⁴⁰⁹ Arminda Suli interview.

Conclusion

Early LDS experience in Albania demonstrates the importance of positive relationships and responsibility within conversion. Though each convert to the LDS Church reported some sort of spiritual experience as the catalyst for their conversion these experiences are hard to measure and impossible to control. What future missionaries can control is the relationships they create with converts and members. Early Albanian Saints appreciated the kindness and optimism of early missionaries. These characteristics are attractive to Albanians whose situation economically and politically often appears bleak. These positive social relationships created a strong pull for Albanians to join the LDS Church. Another aspect within the control of missionaries is the ability to give members responsibilities within the Church. Responsibilities reinforce that an individual is needed and useful within the organization. Helping individuals feel cared for and needed seems to supplement individual spiritual experiences and encourage Albanians to both join and attend the LDS Church.

CHAPTER SEVEN: EPILOUGE

Growth

The LDS Church has grown steadily in Albania since the first missionaries entered the country. The total number of people joining the Church each year in Albania is nowhere near the totals in African countries like Ghana and Nigeria or Latin American countries of Brazil or Mexico. The growth, though modest by global comparison has been steady. From 1993, the first full year that missionaries were in Albania, through 2006 the Church grew by an average of 125 members per year.

Year	Number of People Baptized
1992	40
1993	107
1994	153
1995	101
1996	109
1997	77
1998	93
1999	175
2000	96
2001	136
2002	145
2003	148
2004	149
2005	124
2006	135

Additionally, the Church is growing much more in Albania than its immediate neighbors Greece and Serbia. Likewise it has outpaced the other Eastern European countries of Croatia, Latvia,

Slovakia, Belarus, Estonia, Romania, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and the Czech Republic.⁴¹⁰

The following chart shows no other country besides Latvia and Ghana come close to equaling the Albanian Church's growth rate.

Country	Members 2000	Members 2007	Percent Increase
Albania	881	1,730	96%
Africa			
Ghana	18,630	36,242	94%
Nigeria	49,935	83,919	68%
Latin America			
Mexico	884,071	1,121,893	27%
Guatemala	179,258	210,101	17%
Brazil	775,822	1,018,901	31%
Chile	509,592	548,726	7%
Europe			
Greece	515	661	28%
Serbia	203 (2001)	275	35%
Croatia	319	503	57%
Latvia	508	966	90%
Slovakia	105 (2001)	124	18%
Estonia	551	927	68%
Romania	1,770	2,672	50%
Hungary	3,448	4,380	27%
Lithuania	554	833	50%
Poland	1,173	1,527	30%
Czech Republic	1,680	2,028	20%
Uk	177,917	181,756	2%
Germany	36,359	37,159	2%
France	30,912	34,638	12%
Italy	19,188	22,633	17%

As the number of members has grown, missionaries have expanded the areas they work in from the original cities of Tirana and Durres to also include the cities of Schoder, Vlore, Fier, Elbasan, and Lushnja.

⁴¹⁰ Membership and Statistical Records Division of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Membership and Unit Statistics by Country/State and Area, 1992-2007.

Challenges

As in other locations, as the Church grows in Albania it continues to face three main difficulties. First, many strong Church members leave Albania for better economic opportunities in America and Europe. Many talented and young first-generation members in Albania found their way to the United States for either missions or schooling or both. Once established in America, they found opportunities for economic stability and career advancement which were unavailable in Albania. Many also married Americans. The combination of marriage and money made staying in America a logical step which several have taken. The same can be said for Albanians who traveled to Europe. Second, there are not enough qualified priesthood leaders to run the Church. In some instances qualified leaders have been baptized, ordained to the priesthood, and called to leadership positions all in the same day. As in other areas of the world many of the people interested in the LDS Church are young or women. It has simply proven difficult to attract many men to the Church. A more concerted effort to befriend trustworthy men would help alleviate the leadership shortage in Albania. Third, the major difficulty remains retaining converts. Since creating strong friendships with missionaries is one of the main reasons Albanians choose to join the LDS Church it is not really surprising that when these missionaries leave to work in other cities or return to their homes that new converts stop coming to Church. In order to increase retention of new members they need to become linked socially with other members of the Church. Strong friendships with other members will mean that new converts will continue to feel cared for after missionaries leave and will therefore continue to attend Church services.

Conclusions

This steady growth was due to the combination of Albanians seeking more stability in their lives and missionaries working in a way which created friendships and opportunities for personal spiritual experiences. Though essential to growth this combination is in no way unique to Albanians. Their desires for more strength in their lives stemmed principally from a historically repressive government regime, social upheaval, and economic instability. While other countries have experienced similar episodes Albania provided a unique context in which to establish the Church. Though there have been other religiously repressive regimes, the government's efforts to make Albania the first atheist country in the history of the world and eradicate every aspect of religion from the country make it unique.⁴¹¹ Additionally, other regimes may limit worship to one particular religion, but they do not seek to systematically exterminate all aspects and outlets of the divine from their country. Albania is unique in the measures the government took to eliminate all religion from their country. That unique repression, coupled with poverty, economic instability and social upheaval created a context where many Albanians needed something upon which to found and anchor their lives. In the midst of chaos they craved peace. When missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints learned Albanian to communicate effectively, performed humanitarian service to build trust, and helped Albanians feel loved through individual teaching and attention they provided opportunities for Albanians to have their own spiritual experiences and find the peace that they were seeking. This format is far from unique. Every missionary sent out for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is trained to follow the previous pattern in their teaching. The opening years of missionary work in Albania is not an argument for a revolutionary new way of teaching and serving, but rather is

⁴¹¹ Jacques, *The Albanians*, xi-xii.

evidence that the established pattern for performing missionary service works. Create warm friendships and put people in a position to try the gospel message for themselves. Once that occurs, investigators have opportunities for personal spiritual experiences and can decide whether or not to join the Church. Consistent growth with the LDS Church is possible in turbulent conditions; in some cases it may even be probable as those who experience difficult circumstances seek for peace through religion and find it in the friendships, experiences and teachings of the LDS Church.

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