

Albania After Hoxha's Death

PAULINE HODGES

During 1983 and 1984 it was clear from the pages of the main Albanian daily paper, *Zëri i Popullit* (Voice of the People), that Enver Hoxha's public appearances were becoming increasingly rare. Photographs of him still appeared frequently in the paper, but they were usually old pictures — Hoxha in his youth and prime. The occasional contemporary photograph showed a haggard old man who had obviously become very frail. He was represented by Ramiz Alia on visits to different parts of the country, where he brought Hoxha's greetings and was enthusiastically welcomed. He was obviously being groomed to take over as leader, although one wondered if he would disappear in a power struggle after Hoxha's death.

In April 1985 the inevitable news at last came — the heart of Albania's beloved Uncle Enver had stopped beating. The man the people had looked on as their saviour, even as their god, had died. But he remained very much alive in the media.

Enver Hoxha died.

He was . . .

No, He is!

. . .

He died; He was . . .

No, He is, He is . . .^{1*}

An interesting theory developed by Heinz Gstrein² suggests that in his later years Hoxha had mellowed, and become “a thoroughly spiritual patriarch”. Gstrein bases his theory on recent developments in Albanian literature, and, apparently, on a tourist visit. He is of the opinion that the situation for believers in Albania has become easier since Anastas Kondo was appointed Deputy Minister for Culture and Education shortly before 1981. He reaches this conclusion because many religious buildings are being restored, and religion is now mentioned again in Albanian literature “after 14 years of silence”.

*for a fuller version of this poem, see *RCL* Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 196.

Yet religion was mentioned in Albanian literature written and published even during those "14 years of silence", and there appears to be little evidence that the rebuilding of certain historic churches and mosques, (although a welcome change from the iconoclasm of the 1967 Cultural Revolution), had done much to prevent Albanians from reacting with fear if a foreigner mentioned religion to them. Gstrein's claim for Hoxha's change of heart seems to be based on the latter's support for Khomeini (against the Americans), and for Afghan religious guerrillas (against the Russians) — positions which could well have been adopted for purely political reasons — and on his statement that Albania's religious buildings should be preserved as part of her cultural heritage. Gstrein also attaches much significance to the fact that Hoxha's daughter designed the "round, church-like monument to . . . Skenderbeg in . . . Kruja. The monument has a chapel, and a copy of the first Albanian Bible is kept in its library." The "church-like" shape of the monument may well have been the original form of the castle, of which it is a reconstruction. The castle would, indeed, have had a chapel. But the book referred to was certainly not the Bible, as the Bible has not yet been published in its entirety in Albanian. In short, Gstrein's theory seems thin on facts and rich in fantasy. He concludes: "One thing is certain, members of churches and mosques have not only been strengthened by the years of persecution, but will go forward enriched along a new path." Yet the evidence suggests that institutional religion has been immeasurably weakened, although the faith of those individual believers who have clung to their beliefs despite persecution has indeed been purified and strengthened. But how many such believers are there? And how many more have lost their faith after up to forty years without a shepherd?

What was life really like for Albanians, and particularly for believers, under Enver Hoxha? The following reminiscences show that not even privileged party members could feel secure:

A security man slammed a car door shut on the fingers of a foreign guest and was sentenced to six years' hard labour. The guest pleaded for clemency, on the grounds that the injury had been unintentional. Hoxha replied that six years' hard labour was a very lenient sentence: "If I had my way he would get a bullet through the head. If he is careless with our friends, how can he be vigilant with our enemies?"

Someone said: "I have known 11 party Secretaries from Shköder. They are all dead." He drew his finger expressively across his throat.

There was a plan to force Hoxha to practise self-criticism at a

party meeting. The *Sigurimi* (Security forces) found out about it and gunned down everyone in the building. "The place was running with blood."

The atmosphere of fear seems to have become more oppressive during Hoxha's last years. A tourist who, on an earlier visit, had expressed surprise at the friendliness of the Albanian people, found a very different atmosphere in 1983:

People were afraid to talk to me on the street. Even those who did dare to talk became very frightened and often hostile if I mentioned religion. I felt that the people had been brainwashed, that they had no concept of independent truth. They said what they thought I would like to hear, or what the authorities would like to hear them saying. The very concept of a personal opinion, as opposed to what one is required to believe, seemed alien to them.

What effect has the rise of Ramiz Alia had on life in Albania? It has been said that, while Alia constantly stresses that he is continuing to do exactly as Hoxha would have done, in fact he does things a little differently. He is said to have been a member of a fascist youth movement before he saw the light and joined the Partisans. This stage of his life is naturally not mentioned in the Albanian media. Yet it could indicate that he is a man who can think for himself and dare to act on his principles. He is said to be the only member of the Shkodër party group to have survived the political disgrace which fell upon the whole group. Maybe the fact that his wife came from southern Albania, as did the rest of Hoxha's ruling clique, was his salvation. It has been said that he is more moderate than most of the Politburo: "He will do what he can to make the situation more liberal, but it won't be much." He appears to have taken over much of Hoxha's personality cult: "Happy Festival, Uncle Ramiz!" In his 1986 May Day speech he declared "Comrade Enver is again among us, and throughout the centuries he will be present at our festivals, as he is present in all our life through his immortal work."³

A tourist visiting the country after Hoxha's death noticed a different atmosphere. He felt there was:

. . . more inner security, resulting in less fear of foreign invasion, and some recognition of the need for aid from other countries. There were slight changes in propaganda presentation. Previously, the only colours I had seen on the posters were red and white. This year I also saw blue, green, yellow and brown. The commonest slogan was: "Long live Enver Hoxha!", implying that Albania owes her nationhood to him, and that he will live in

the people's hearts as long as they remain a nation. He is the expression of their independence.

The tourist saw little propaganda about Ramiz Alia, though he did see the slogan: "Long live Ramiz Alia!", and another poster saying that Albania would continue along the same lines as before.

Perhaps the most striking difference since Hoxha's death is that Albanians now seem much less afraid to meet foreigners. Before Hoxha's death, a visitor who had the rare privilege of being invited into a private home was afterwards reprimanded by an apprehensive *Albturist* guide, who had himself been upbraided for allowing a member of his group to visit a home without his knowledge. In 1985, however, Albanians frequently invited tourists into their homes. "An old lady pulled us into her house and closed the door. She turned out to be a Christian." Another visit to a Christian is described in more detail:

We knocked on the door. She answered almost immediately, and took us in with great delight. She had opened the door cautiously, but her expression changed as soon as she saw my friend. She had obviously been expecting us. I crossed myself, to show that I too was a believer. I found I could communicate fairly easily with her. She's Orthodox. She doesn't appear to know any other believers. Her husband is dead. Her two daughters are both married and living in another town. Either she has no sons, or they are dead. We thought that she was in her seventies. The town used to be full of churches, but they were all demolished. She mimed this. There used to be many believers, but they are all dead. If I remember rightly, she mimed slitting their throats. Certainly they were killed, presumably for their faith. I tried to explain about the Christian radio programmes, but I don't think she believed me; all she said was that she was old and useless. She had never been to school and couldn't read. I gave her a gospel and told her what it was, hoping that she would know someone who could read it to her. She gave it back, saying that she was useless. She mimed Enver Hoxha smiling and kissing people, and then pulled a face. She mimed him dead, and looked pleased. "Ramiz Alia is much better," she said, and obviously meant it. We suggested praying with her, but she refused, presumably because of her Orthodox background, which would mean that she wouldn't be accustomed to free prayer. My friend prayed for her in his own language. I didn't translate, but merely told her what he was doing. She really appreciated it. Then I said the Lord's Prayer in Albanian. Obviously she understood and remembered it. She interrupted me at: "Give us this day our daily

bread" and "Forgive us our trespasses". Her interruptions were agreements. She obviously enjoyed our visit and our fellowship together. She is a lovely, radiant person. I felt that she had suffered a great deal over the years. Presumably she knew the possible consequences of our visit, but the risk was obviously worth it. She didn't appear to be afraid, perhaps because she'd seen it all before.

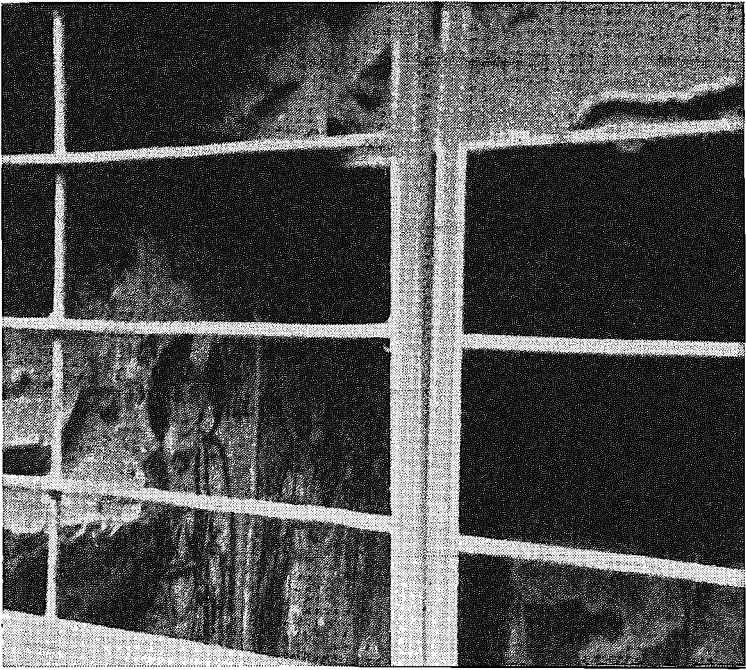
Yet surveillance continues and fear remains. Alia is reported by a Czechoslovakian *samizdat* source⁴ as saying that Christians should not be persecuted for their faith. This report is as yet unconfirmed. If true, it would be very significant. It seems that Alia is seeking to liberalise the country, little by little, which, one hopes, might eventually reduce the degree of persecution which believers suffer. But that time has not yet come. The same document reports the arrest of Father Pjetër Mëshkalla, one of the very few priests who had until then escaped death or imprisonment. His crime? Celebrating the Mass.

¹ *Zëri i Popullit*, 13 April 1985

² "Albania: Religion on the Upswing", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* Vol. VI, No. 1, February 1986.

³ *Zëri i Popullit*, 2 May 1986.

⁴ *Informace o církví*, No. 1, 1986.



Albania. See article on pp. 268-272.

Above: Chapel dedicated to St Stephen, found during excavations under the Roman Arena at Durres. (Photo courtesy Keston College.)

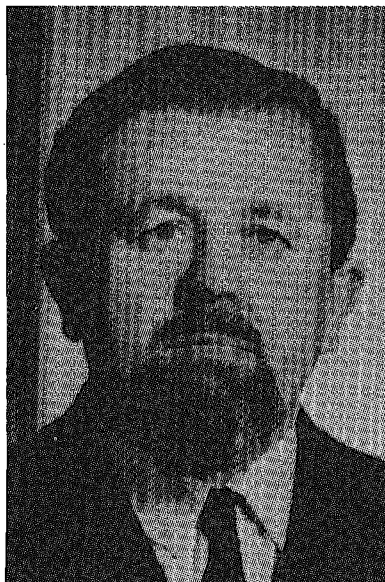
Below: The “leaden” mosque in Berat, now restored as a museum. Inside are inscribed Hoxha’s words “We must preserve our cultural heritage”.

(Photo courtesy Pauline Hodges.)





Sergei Khodorovich. (Photo © Posev.)



Pavel Kampov.
(Photo courtesy Keston College.)



Viktor Walter with his family. (Photo courtesy Keston College.)

See Sources item on pp. 297-303.