

Chapter 1

IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT GOD, WE WILL MEET AGAIN TOMORROW

Berti Dosti faced a terrible but intriguing dilemma. He was an Albanian army captain and his job as a radio specialist was to listen into the world's airwaves during the 1980s, because his country feared they were about to be invaded by the West. He was in the middle of a 24-hour shift and he was getting tired and bored, as he had had to do more than his fair share of duties recently. As he idly twiddled the radio dials, he heard a voice saying, "If you want to find out more about God, we will meet again tomorrow."

Like all Albanians, 32-year-old Berti had been told God didn't exist and that anyone caught showing an interest in religion could expect a huge punishment to be imposed not only on him, but also on his family, his children and even his grandchildren. Still something intrigued Berti; something stirred deep inside him. But how could he dare take up that invitation, putting his whole family at risk? And anyway, how could he listen in secretly when one in two Albanian army personnel were reckoned to be government spies?

For five nights a week Trans World Radio, a Christian

station in Monte Carlo, beamed a fifteen-minute programme in Albanian on 1467 kilohertz (kHz), 600 miles over Italy and across the Adriatic into this secretive and unknown country. Although these two places were only a few hundred miles apart and both were in Europe, there the similarity ended – in reality they were worlds apart.

Monte Carlo was a luxury resort, a tax exile and home of millionaires in the principality of Monaco, in the south-eastern Mediterranean corner of France. It wanted to attract visitors, preferably the super-rich, whether they were film stars on location, gamblers at its casino, or Formula 1 stars racing in the Monaco Grand Prix.

On the other hand, Albania, just above Greece and opposite the heel of Italy, had a slightly different tourism policy – no visitors welcome under any circumstances. The nearest any foreigner from the West was likely to get to visiting Albania in the 1970s and 80s was if a sun-worshipper on the nearby Greek island of Corfu in a boat or an inflatable dinghy happened to stray into Albanian waters. The watching Albanian military would quickly show them the error of their ways and force them into an about-turn back to the island's beaches.

After taking power in 1944, Enver Hoxha had turned Albania into the world's most isolated country, ruling it with Stalinist tyranny and fear. He was determined to wipe out religion, proudly declaring in 1967 that Albania was the "first atheist country in the world". Hoxha, repeating a phrase taken from the nineteenth-century nationalist leader Pashko Vasa, said, "There is no religion in Albania, except being an Albanian."

With a ruthless campaign, the fanatical despot waged war on religion just as he had done against the Fascist Italian and German occupiers during the Second World War. He destroyed churches

or converted them into post offices, schools, weapon depots, cafés, barns, storehouses, or museums. The cathedral at Shkodra was even turned into a volleyball court, and in 1972 a museum of atheism was opened in that city. For the last twenty-three years of his Communist rule there was not a single functioning church in the country. All 2,169 religious establishments, which included mosques, 268 Roman Catholic churches, and buildings of other denominations and other faiths, were closed. Of the country's 1,600 Orthodox churches, monasteries, and cultural centres in 1967, fewer than eighty were still standing when Communism ended in 1991.¹

Many Orthodox priests and evangelical Christians were sent to prison, tortured, and then executed by firing squad. During Hoxha's reign of terror, 335 Orthodox priests died by execution, or from mistreatment, untreated illnesses, and exhaustion. By the time it finished, only twenty-two Orthodox priests were still alive. Religious institutions were forbidden to have any connections or headquarters outside Albania, so the Roman Catholic Church had to cut its links with Rome and was designated instead as the Independent Catholic Church of Albania.

The constitution banned all "fascist, religious, warmongerish, anti-socialist activity and propaganda". Prison sentences of between three and ten years were imposed for "religious propaganda" and for the production, distribution, or storage of religious literature. Another decree targeted Christian names. Any citizen whose name did not conform to "the political, ideological or moral standards of the state" was required to change it. To help parents, the government published lists with pagan names to choose from, including newly-created names such as Marenglen (a combination of Marx, Engels, and Lenin). A new girl's name, Enveriada, was invented in honour of Enver

Hoxha, while his nicknames of Shpati and Tarasi also became accepted names for children.

Despite this, Albanians were proud of their history and knew they had a rich religious heritage. In the Bible, in Romans 15:19, the Apostle Paul states, “So from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.” Illyricum was the Roman province that covered part of present-day Albania, the Dalmatian coast, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, with the River Sava forming the northern border.

The Catholic historian Daniele Farlati stated that Paul came to Dyrrachium, the modern port of Durrës, and many Albanians believe it, although there is no proof. However, the biblical historian F. F. Bruce points out that in Acts 20 Paul travelled through Greece, and it was likely that he travelled along the Egnatian Way, which continued to Thessalonica and on to Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Dyrrachium was the western end of that great Roman road.² By AD 59, Dyrrachium had its first Christian bishop and up to seventy Christian families were living there.

Ironically, while Hoxha was trying to tell the world there were no Christians and no religion in Albania, one of the most famous Christians in the world at that time was Albanian-born Mother Teresa, who became a Catholic nun and whose work with the poor in Calcutta, India, attracted world headlines.

Meanwhile, Berti had been taught Albanian history at school without reference to the country's religious heritage. This made his current dilemma about a sudden interest in God much more difficult. He wanted to listen to the following night's Trans World Radio broadcast without anyone knowing. However, he knew that

if he were caught he could be stripped of his uniform, thrown out of the army, and sent to jail. That would bring disgrace on his family. His father and his brother had both been soldiers – what would they think of his “treason”? His Communist Party biography, or record of achievements, would mean nothing, and he probably would never work again, or he would be sent away to a remote part of Albania. His wife and children would suffer, their party biography would be blemished, and his children and grandchildren would not be allowed to go to university and would lose all the privileges that being a good member of the Party brought. Finally, it would bring an inglorious end to a brilliant military career for Captain Dosti, who was now in charge of his military base and who had already, at twenty-nine years of age, been awarded the third highest military medal in Albania, which made him one of the youngest ever winners of the Urdhëri i Shërbimit Ushtarak të Klasit III.

As Berti pondered all this, he suddenly realized how he could listen in to that Trans World Radio programme – and no one would know.

Chapter 2

A PIONEERING SPIRIT

Being born into an army family was not easy for Berti, who lived in six different homes across Albania in the first ten years of his life. What made it more difficult for him was that his parents, Shefit and Antoneta, divorced when he was just three years old. He and his older brother, six-year-old Iliri, were separated and never lived under the same roof again. Berti stayed with his father, an army officer, while Iliri went to live with an uncle, and neither of them saw their mother again for thirty years.

Berti was born on 11 April 1957, in Korçë, the regional capital of south-east Albania and not far from the Greek border. He has few memories of his early years there, though he was to return to Korçë later in life on a very poignant mission.

Although it is a bit out on a limb, this attractive town with interesting Ottoman buildings has played an important part in the country's rich religious and historical heritage. One of its most famous residents was Gjerasim Qiriazi, a nineteenth-century evangelical preacher and a pioneering educationalist who, with his sister, set up a school for girls in Korçë. In 1882 he started the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania, to unite people to work for the good of the nation.

Another famous resident was the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha. Although born in Gjirokastra on 16 October 1908, the son of a cloth merchant, he moved to the French Lycée in Korçë,

where he studied French, history, literature, philosophy and the Communist manifesto. Ironically, with a state scholarship given by the Albanian Queen Mother, he went to study biology at the University of Montpellier in France before moving to Paris, where he joined the French Communist Party. In 1936 he returned to Korçë to teach and helped found an underground Communist organization. Following the 1939 Italian invasion, he was dismissed as a teacher for refusing to join the Albanian Fascist Party. He then opened a tobacconist's shop, called Flora, in Tirana, where a small group of Communists began to gather, until the government closed it down.¹

After the divorce, Berti moved with his father from Korçë to Kamëz, near Tirana, where Shefit's brother lived. They stayed there for three years, with the family looking after Berti whenever Shefit was working. At the end of this period, however, Shefit remarried. Six-year-old Berti took a dim view of this, as did the military authorities. Even in Stalinist Albania, divorce was frowned upon. Within a few weeks, the family were sent to Sazan Island. This island, measuring just four kilometres by five kilometres, lies in the Bay of Vlorë off the south-western corner of Albania. It has always been of strategic importance, occupied by the Italians before the First World War, an important Soviet base in the 1950s, and housing United States military advisers to the Albanian Government in the 1990s. It was the one place a soldier never wanted to go to. Officers would threaten recruits: "If you don't behave, you will be posted to Sazan Island."

Berti remembers the island, about forty-five minutes' boat ride from Vlorë, as a huge forest with a field in the middle where there was a military base and a small school for officers' children. For a young boy growing up, there were plenty of places to

explore. But as no one could leave this strategic island, which would probably have borne the full force of any first assault if the West had ever attacked Albania, the novelty soon wore off.

Within two years, the grateful Dosti family were packing again to drive up the Albanian coast to the north-west of the country, almost to the Montenegro border, where the town of Shëngjin awaited, with its long sandy beach and a history of political intrigue. Early in the twentieth century it was the centre for international tension involving the Russians, the Austrians, the Serbs, the Montenegrins, the Yugoslavs and the British. Sir Harry Eyres, whose whitewashed house is still on the waterfront at Shëngjin, was a former Lloyd's shipping agent who became a spy in the 1920s and later became the first British diplomat to be resident in Albania.²

Berti lived there for less than a year in a condominium on the beach, where he enjoyed beachcombing for seashells and his "treasure" – plastic bottles that were washed up on the beach. In the early 1960s, plastic bottles were rare in Albania, and Berti enjoyed putting them on a shelf by his bed – with the ultimate find being a plastic Coca Cola bottle.

It wasn't long before Berti and family were off again in an army lorry and heading for nearby Lezha, one of the most famous towns in Albania. It was where people came to visit the tomb of their national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Skenderbeu. Born in 1405, Skenderbeu was taken hostage by the Turks with his three brothers in 1423, and when their father, Gjon, died, three of the brothers were poisoned. Gjergj was the only one who survived. He joined the Ottoman Turks' army and did so well that he was hailed "Chief of the League of the Albanian People" and was given the name Skenderbeu, after Alexander

the Great. He then reconverted to Christianity, changed sides and was named “Champion of Christendom” by Pope Nicholas V for his battle with the Turkish invaders. He died in 1468 of fever and was buried in Lezha on 17 January. However, the Turks had their revenge. When they took the town at the end of the fifteenth century they dug up his body in St Nicholas’ Church, dismembered it and made charms out of his bones. Today a bronze bust of Skenderbeu stands on the nave floor, with replicas of a sword and a helmet.³

By now, Berti was used to moving school and found it easy to make new friends, partly because he much preferred to be out exploring rather than stay at home. He was very intelligent and could soon adapt, as the syllabus was the same at all primary schools – writing, reading, a little Albanian history and geography, plus the most important subject, education. This was studying what Enver Hoxha said and how everyone in Albania should behave. To remind them of their allegiance, all pupils had to gather outside their school every day and a teacher would ask them, “Pupils and students at war, for the sake of the Party and the nation, are you ready?” To which they would reply in unison: “Always ready.”

Just eighteen months later, Berti was again putting his worldly possessions and treasures into an army van, as the family headed a few miles south to the industrial town of Laç – and two life-changing events.

The most important occasion for Berti and all young Albanians was when they reached the age of nine and became Pioneers. Berti remembers his own special Pioneers’ day, when the whole class was taken to the Place of the Heroes graveyard and had to line up in front of the Albanian flag. This flag, with a black

double-headed eagle on a dark red background, is one of the most ancient in Europe and very emotive to the Albanian people, as it was Skenderbeu's flag when he fought for his country's independence.

When the National Assembly of Vlorë proclaimed Albanian independence on 28 November 1912, it approved the flag as a symbol of the Albanian nation. The double-headed eagle shows their dual Christian heritage through the Western Catholic tradition and the Orthodox East. The horizontal open-winged eagle also symbolizes that the highland Albanians will not submit to foreign conquest. When the Communists took control after the Second World War they added a yellow, five-pointed star to the flag, but this was removed after independence in 1990.

The director and vice-director of the school asked the youngsters to swear allegiance before the flag. They would reply by promising "to give our lives, our last drop of blood for the Party". Each pupil was presented with a triangular red scarf symbolizing the blood of the heroes who had given their lives fighting the enemy. It was considered a holy scarf, which they were expected to wear all the time. If they didn't, they were insulting the national heroes and their sacrifice.

Berti said that at an early age you were taught to be careful what you thought and what you said. If you ever misbehaved, you were asked, "Is this the behaviour our Party wants? Do you want to oppose the Party? Do you not want to honour the heroes?" The ultimate discipline at every school was the threat to take away the scarf. If a young child went around without their scarf, it was obvious they had done wrong and so were open to persecution and ridicule.

Other than the Pioneer ceremony, Berti remembers little of Laç, as every year he was sent all the way across Albania to

spend the summer with his stepmother's family at Melcan, a small farming community near Korçë. Berti thoroughly enjoyed his holidays there, playing in the fields with his stepmother's four cousins and living a simple, rural life looking after their cows and sheep – from the age of seven, all the village children went to the local primary school six days a week and then helped on the land on Sundays.

All young Albanian children had divided loyalties regarding their mothers. From an early age, they were taught: "I have two mothers. The first and the greatest one is the Mother Party, and then my mother." Although Berti went to his stepmother's family for a number of holidays, he was never allowed to go back to the nearby town of his birth – his father did not want him to have any contact with his natural mother, Antoneta. Ironically, the only time he did go to Korçë was when his stepmother's father took him for a treat on his horse to the town market. Suddenly, he went white and quickly turned the horse in the other direction, and Berti saw a face in the crowd. To this day, he is convinced that was his real mother.

After the summer break, Berti would take the long journey across Albania by bus back to his father and stepmother in Laç and return to his own school. He didn't realize it then, but the second oldest of his stepmother's nieces, Tatjana, was to play an important role in his life – and when later in life he returned to Laç, from the south of Albania, it was in much more frightening circumstances.