



# Albania's Dawn

The only country that officially declared itself atheist opens its doors to Adventism.

by Ray Dabrowski

**A**PRIL 15, 1991, WAS MEMORABLE FOR THE Albanian people. Their freely elected parliament met for its first session. It was also a memorable day for me. John Arthur, director for the Trans-European Division of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and I became the first Seventh-day Adventists to visit the country in almost 50 years. We didn't know what to expect or how to approach the state officials, but with a prayer on our lips we plunged in.

After acquainting ourselves with some of the country's needs, we asked our hosts from the Health Ministry to allow us to visit the city of Korce, four hours south of Tirana, the capital of Albania. In Korce, during a luncheon with Dr. Edmonda Prifti, the local health authority director, I mentioned the name of Flora Lewis, and asked where her street—Rruga Quemal

Stafa—could be found. Dr. Prifti seemed surprised. "That's my street," she said, "and number 28 is almost next door." I asked if we could visit Flora Lewis, to deliver a gift—medicine, toiletries, and sweets—from her friends in Italy. Permission was granted.

Rruga Quemal Stafa, like many of the streets in old town Korce, proved to still be paved with cobblestones. It is lined with neatly-painted Mediterranean style houses with red tile roofs. Terraces shaded with creeping vines provide some relief from summer's heat.

Flora Lewis's daughter came to the door. Flora, we discovered, was across town visiting relatives. When I said that we brought greetings from their friends in Rome, Flora's daughter welcomed us into the home.

I asked if I could empty my travel bag, and was directed to the kitchen. While my traveling companion, John Arthur, engaged the others in conversation, I quickly explained to Esther that I was a Seventh-day Adventist. Tears filled her eyes as she kissed me on both cheeks and hugged me. "So," she asked, "missionaries are coming to Albania?"

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I gave her two copies of the New Testament and a few copies of the book of Matthew in the Albanian language. Her eyes brightened and she kissed the books quickly. We promised our new friends that we would return to visit, and to bring medical supplies for the children's hospital in the city.

In July of 1991, I returned to Albania and met with Esther again. Her mother, Flora Sabatino Lewis, 75, the widow of the last Adventist minister in Albania, was in Italy. Flora Sabatino, originally from Italy, met Daniel Lewis, an Albanian from Boston, Massachusetts. Daniel had been born and raised in Albania, but moved to America and became a pharmacist. He first returned to Albania in the 1930s. In 1939, the *Review and Herald* reported that there were five converts in Albania, with six more waiting for baptism. In the early 1940s, Daniel briefly left Albania, met Flora, and married her in 1943. After the end of the war in 1944, Daniel took Flora back to Albania and resumed his activities as a Seventh-day Adventist missionary.

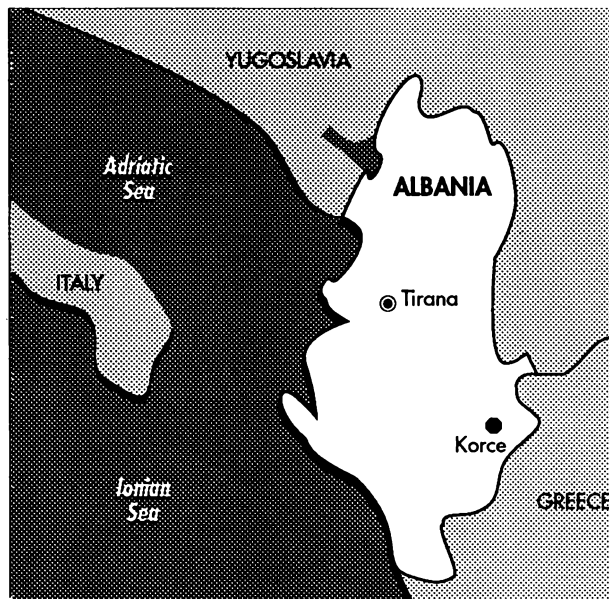
On the same July 1991 trip, I met another important link to Albania's Adventist heritage, one of Daniel Lewis's early converts to Adventism. Meropi Gjika, now 87 years old, remembers when she first met Daniel Lewis, 50 years ago. Meropi recalls,

His first words were, "Have you read the Bible?" I responded in the affirmative and from then on I began to study the Bible with him. After the first meeting was over, Daniel asked me if I could come the next time with my daughter. See,

there was another woman who used to come for Bible studies with Daniel, and there were rumors spreading around town about them. So, the next time I saw Daniel I took my daughter Pandora with me.

Meropi remembers that it was Daniel's wonderful style of preaching that so impressed her. Once she was so overwhelmed that she took out all the money she had with her and gave it to him in gratitude. Daniel explained to her that she should not pay him for his preaching, but explained that tithing was the best way to show her gratitude. For five years, Meropi passed her tithe on to Daniel. Later, she continued to save her tithe in a wooden box hidden under her bed.

Both Flora Lewis, Daniel's widow, and Meropi Gjika remember that after World War II, life became more and more unbearable. Enver Hoxha, a teacher from Korea, became the General



Secretary of the Communist Party of Albania in 1941. The communists declared Albania the People's Republic in 1946. Hoxha remained First Secretary until his death in 1985.

Throughout his 40 years of rule, Hoxha remained loyal to Stalin and his policies. He also sided with China, though after the overthrow of the "Gang of Four" he broke off the Chinese connection. Constantly fearful of revisionist tendencies in the world of communism, Hoxha isolated his country from the international community, creating his own version of a socialist society. His version of communism excluded, among other things, freedom of religion. His hatred toward "foreign influences"

fostered a campaign to destroy every form of religion in Albania, and in 1976 religion was outlawed. At that time, Albania's constitution stated that "the State recognizes no religion whatever and supports atheist propaganda for the purpose of inculcating the scientific materialist world outlook in people" (Art. 37).

The Christian community—including the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches—can join the Muslim community in citing the names of thousands who were tor-



*Esther, daughter of Daniel Lewis, and Pavullo Misbo, her husband.*

tured or executed.\* The regime closed more than 2,000 Christian churches and other places of worship. Some were completely destroyed. Others were turned into sports stadiums, cinemas, workshops, or warehouses. Clergy, together with thousands of Christians, ended up in prisons, labor camps, or as exiles to distant parts of the country. The fate of many will never be known.

The Bible and Koran were banned and, when discovered, publicly burned. Sharing one's religion brought harsh punishment under a penal code designed to punish every form of religious "disobedience." Even names given to newborns were screened, so as not to reflect the Christian, Muslim, or Jewish heritage of the family. "Thunder sheets" (Flete-rufe) were

posted in public denouncing parents who had given their children religious names.

After World War II ended, life was unbearable for most Albanians. Daniel Lewis, the Albanian who had lived in America, rebelled early when the state ordered registration of every religious denomination. Lewis felt that registration meant state control of their funds and activities, and he refused to comply. By 1947, the Lewis family decided to leave Albania. But all four members of the family—Daniel, Flora, and their son and daughter, Jony and Esther—were arrested. Their rights as citizens were taken away and their property was confiscated.

Flora Lewis tearfully recalls that after two days in prison, her two children, Esther and Jony, were taken from her and placed in an orphanage. Meanwhile, Daniel Lewis was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Later, his sentence was reduced to 10 years. But in 1951, after only four and a half years in prison, Daniel died. He lies buried in a cemetery in Elbasan.

Meropi Gjika recalls how she used to visit the Lewises when they were in prison:

The moment they were imprisoned the news spread all over the town. After one or two months a letter came from Daniel. He pleaded with me to take care of them. No one went to visit them and they were suffering much. So I went to the jail, and continued to do so month after month. I used to wash Daniel's clothes and bring him food. Flora was separated from Daniel and stayed in a different prison block.

After about two years, Daniel was moved from a prison in Korce to Elbasan. Meropi recounted what happened then.

The jail in Elbasan was terribly overcrowded, but later I was told that Daniel was...much loved...by his fellow inmates. He preached to them every night.... Those who knew him and were later released [said] that he died all of a sudden. He was gone in a minute. It was a heart attack, I suppose.

Daniel Lewis had survived only four and a half

years in prison. Jony, the Lewis's son, remained separated from his parents. He never recovered from the ordeal of his arrest, imprisonment, life in the orphanage, and the trauma of his father's death. He died in 1971 in a mental hospital.

Flora and her daughter Esther were released from prison and survived. When they went home to Korce, they had nothing to return to. But people like Meropi and their former neighbors gave them shelter and whatever food they could spare. For many years, Flora was accorded no rights because of her faith. But it was her faith—and the generosity of her neighbors—that kept them going.

I asked what it was like to be a Sabbath-keeping Adventist in Albania during those days. Meropi responded:

At first, we used to meet regularly. I still remember who was meeting in Korce. . . . But then my husband didn't like this and prohibited me from having these people studying the Bible in my house. Some people in the neighborhood used to spread rumors about me. They said, "She is keeping the Sabbath; she is crazy. She is a Jew."

Her son, Viktor, noted that Sabbath keeping for them was important even when religious practice was completely forbidden. "And we still do it today," he added, "though probably not in a perfect way."

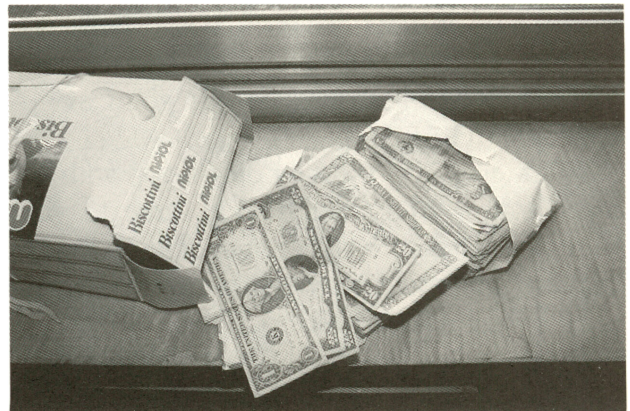
At one point, Meropi's husband became so angry with Meropi's dedication to her faith that he asked her to pack her things and leave. He threatened to divorce her. Finally, in desperation, he visited the local Greek Orthodox priest to ask support for his decision. The priest asked about Meropi's faith and when he discovered that she was an Adventist, he told her husband that Meropi's faith was not to be denied, and that he should accept it. The priest explained that he saw faith as a column bridging heaven and earth. At the bottom of the column, embracing it, were the Muslims; then, further up, came the Roman Catholics and his own Orthodox believers; finally, above them all, were the Adventists.

During my visit, Meropi brought several

notebooks into the sitting room. Each was filled with hand-written Bible texts and comments. Her granddaughter, now employed as a secretary in the newly re-established Albanian Adventist mission, explained:

My grandma used to distribute pieces of paper with messages translated from the Bible. She gave them to everyone she met. I remember that whenever I visited my grandma she used to give me these letters. She put them in my pocket.

Meropi's son Viktor, now one of Albania's prominent film directors, explained further:



*Meropi's tiibe: 47 years of faithfulness.*

My mother had a little book from Italy. It was printed in 1947 and had a list of daily Bible verses. I copied this particular book by hand and still have those pages at my home. Whenever I met my mother she inquired, "Have you read the verse for today?"

All Meropi ever asked for as her birthday gift was a new notebook and a ballpoint pen. She put them to good use. She had kept a copy of the Greek Bible hidden away, which she translated and copied into the Albanian language by hand.

Meropi's influence on her son was strong, and eventually Viktor eventually also translated books of the Bible into Albanian from French, English, and Russian versions he had smuggled into the country. The risks he and his mother took were not small. Thanas, another

son of Meropi's and now an associate professor of history of the Albanian literature at the Albanian Academy of Science, explained:

My mother not only translated the Bible verses, but she used to write down some of her own comments and thoughts. Religion was prohibited and if anyone should discover these notebooks—one for every year—they were reasons enough to be arrested. These notebooks were considered to be religious propaganda. But we have been fortunate all these years.

Thanas went on to say that Meropi's convictions were strong and that her influence on her children was evident. Often, Thanas said, she would stop him as he left for work and ask, "Have you read your daily Bible text today?"

"Only when I said yes could I go to work!" Thanas laughed.

But Meropi's witnessing didn't stop with her own family. When her friends came to visit, Meropi was eager to talk about her faith. Thanas says that he would often tell his mother, "Hold your tongue. Don't talk about religion. You are going to destroy this family!" But Meropi would respond, "You are a coward and you are nothing else! You must not be afraid because it is the hand of God which is protecting us."

One of Meropi's greatest desires, when I visited with her, was to be relieved of the burden of keeping her tithe hidden. "What must I do with my tithe, which I have saved all these years?" she asked me. "Can you take it?" Meropi's two sons explained that their mother wouldn't keep the money in a bank because she didn't trust the authorities. Agreeing to return her tithe to the church, Meropi brought a plastic bag out from under her bed. In it was a carton full of Albanian leke and a few American dollars. For more than 20 years she had been on a \$4.00 per month pension, yet she paid her tithe and offerings. When we opened the carton, we found 24,629 leke and \$41.00 in US funds. All told, she had saved the equivalent of \$533.89 in U.S. dollars.

At the end of my fourth, most recent visit in January 1992, I was privileged to study and



*An Albanian Christian woman from Shkodra.*

pray with more than a dozen Adventist believers who are awaiting baptism. Four families in Tirana and a number of people in Korce form the nucleus of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Albania.

Before leaving Korce in July 1991 we met with the Lewis and Gjika families and others for the first organized Adventist worship service in decades inside Albania.

Meropi's sons—Thanas, the professor of literature and Viktor, the prominent film maker—spent time with me discussing the present state of religion in Albania. Thanas's first concern was that not all modern Bibles in Albanian are well translated.

The old New Testament which you gave us, the one in the old Tosk-Albanian, has a soul. It is a spiritual translation. A modern translation from Norway or Sweden, which was recently distributed, was not very accurate. If you need good translators, we can help you.

One of the first projects they will undertake is the translation of *Steps to Christ* and *Christ's Object Lessons*. Thanas and Viktor introduced

me to other sources of information about religion in Albania.

According to several sources, the majority of Albania's population—more than 60 percent—is still affiliated with Islam, although Tirana's Islamic leadership says that "there are only 100 Muslims in the country who know how to pray properly." Of the rest of the population, 20 percent are Orthodox Christians and 10 percent are Catholics, mostly located in the northern part of the country.

Both the Orthodox and Catholic communities have begun reconstructing their cultic life. Supported by the Vatican, which has already re-established diplomatic ties with Albania, Father Simon Jubani is regarded as the most influential person in northern Albania. He has set out to turn Albania into "a spiritual kingdom," and seeks to enlist the help of the other religious leaders in the country. Also supporting his cause is Mother Teresa, a native of Albania, whose works of charity for the homeless and orphans take her from town to town. (At one of her homes for the poor in Tirana, she thanked me for helping Albania.)

The Orthodox community, chiefly located in the southern part of the country, is also reclaiming its religious identity. Their churches are being restored, after having been used as industrial and cultural facilities, and members are returning icons and religious objects that they kept hidden during the years of suppression.

This new freedom of religion, with the new Provisional Constitution recognizing freedom of conscience, is already challenging society.

Youth from Muslim homes often become fascinated by Christianity, much to their parents' distress. Dr. Elira Cela, a sociologist at the newly established department of sociology of religion at Tirana University, says that identity is a problem for many once religious people. "It appears that those who bring material help from abroad have the edge. Their brand of religion becomes appealing."

Currently, our two international religious freedom organizations (the International Religious Liberty Association and the International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty), in cooperation with the University of Tirana, are staging an international symposium titled "Freedom of Conscience: Basis for Social Peace." This conference was organized in response to requests from Albania's legislators, the intellectual community, and many Christians. It is an opportunity to ensure that the abuses of Enver Hoxha's era will never be repeated.

It came time for me to say goodbye to Korce—to Flora Lewis, to her daughter Esther and her family, as well as to Meropi Gjika, her sons Thanas and Viktor, and their families. I ended up in the tiny one bedroom flat where Meropi lives with her children. We didn't need to speak. Finally, I walked down the stairs and out of the apartment building. I looked up at Meropi's balcony. She was waving. Then she paused and raised her hand heavenward.

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\*The 1938 census revealed that 69 percent of the population of Albania was Muslim—54 percent Sunni and 15 percent Shiite—primarily Bektashi.