



# Letter From Tirana— A Prayer for Albania

A top University of Tirana student becomes an Adventist and a member of Albania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

*by Migen Shebu*

As the plane takes off and I leave the United States, I have a special feeling in my heart. I leave a part of myself with these people who have become part of my extended family. I'd often thought about America, but never imagined that in the spring of 1993 I would find myself there, part of the family of God. The flight is long, and the continent unrolls below me like a giant map. In my mind, I look back on my time spent in America—and on my whole life.

God must have wanted my life to be different from those of my friends. I was born 22 years ago in Tirana, the capital of Albania. The country's official name is Shqipëri, The Land of the Eagle, and it is an apt description of a country where 70 percent of the land is wild and mountainous.

From the end of the Second World War until 1985, this tiny Balkan state was in the grasp of a ruthless Stalinist dictator, Enver Hoxha. Those who dared to criticize his totalitarian regime were declared "enemies of the people," removed from jobs and homes, and either killed or exiled for life with their families to labor camps. My grandfather on my mother's side, a professor, ended up in jail because of his democratic ideals. Because of my grandfather's

beliefs, my father, a lawyer, was not allowed to practice, and my mother was barred from attending university. All forms of religion were outlawed. Life was a nightmare.

In December of 1990, students first began to protest against the most severe totalitarian regime in Europe. At the time I was in my third of four levels of study at the university, concentrating on foreign and Albanian literature, syntax, stylistics, and so on. I joined with thousands of others in shouting "Freedom! Democracy! Albania like all of Europe!" Each one of us was in danger of being killed, expelled from the university, or having his or her family suffer reprisals. The image is still in my mind of a police officer beating a young girl who could not run as fast as the others.

Even after the revolution, I was unhappy. Books seemed to be the only things able to bring me peace. I tried continually to forget reality, but inside I felt empty. I didn't understand at the time that what I was longing for was a special feeling. I needed to be loved in a particular, divine way, and to return that love in a way I had never done before.

Until January of 1992, I had never seen a Bible. This may be hard for some to believe, but during the long period of communist rule, owning a Bible or even acknowledging a faith in God were crimes punishable by imprisonment. I began to study the Bible with a group of friends, including three

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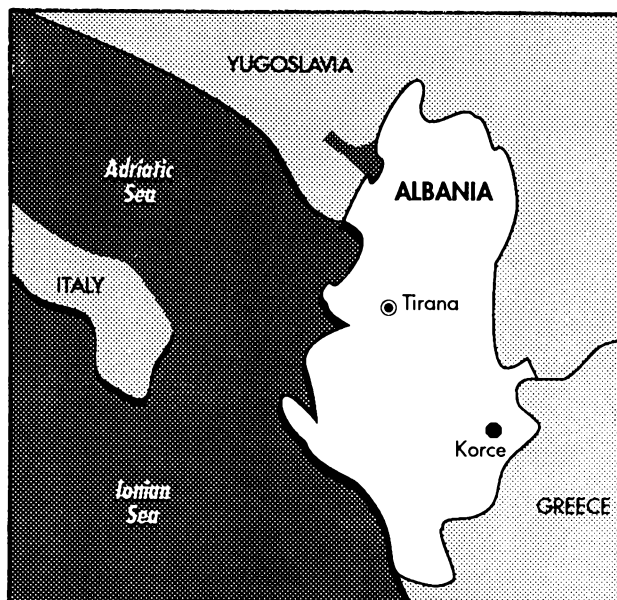
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Americans who had come to Albania for a year to share the Word of God with Albanian students. I was told that I could find truth in the Bible about every aspect of life, about becoming a better individual, and about life after death. As I studied, I felt as though a light were shining in my soul, and I began to see the world in a different way.

From time to time I had opportunities to meet believers from other countries who visited Albania. Once, a group of students from Norway came and we shared testimonies with them. When my turn came, I told them that I was a Christian. It was the first time I had really accepted it with all my heart, and expressed it to others. It was a moment I will never forget.

**M**y decision astounded my parents. My grandparents on both sides were Muslims. My father's father had been a muezzin, daily calling the faithful to a mosque for prayers. My parents practiced no religion, since it was forbidden, but they claimed to be Muslims by origin. Since I also had never prayed to God as a Muslim, nor been to a mosque, I insisted—to them, and to my close friends—that I was not converting from one religion to another. Most importantly, my decision made me happier, and I was sure that people who really loved me would want my happiness.

After declaring myself a Christian, I visited many churches in Tirana, looking only for a place to worship God with a group of people. At first I didn't really see a difference among the churches, but found that I fit in best with Adventist believers. The first Adventist church in Tirana was established in



the spring of 1992. David Currie, a pastor from England, held a series of lectures illustrated with pictures from around the world. While attending these meetings, I met an Adventist from the United States. He was a special guest, and was invited to speak. When he explained his plans for publishing Christian literature in the Albanian language, I was immediately interested. I approached him after the ceremony but wasn't able to speak to him, since others were already waiting to talk with him, and he needed to leave.

The following day there was another meeting scheduled at the church. I was very busy with examinations at the university and hadn't planned to attend, but at the last minute I changed my mind. Once at the church, I found myself seated next to the guest from the United States. Not long after that meeting, I began the translation of literature from English into the Albanian language.

I do not think our meeting was merely accidental. Translation helped me learn the essential differences between churches and religions, and brought me to a fuller understanding of what it meant to be an Adventist, and why this church kept the Sabbath. I regularly attended the Sabbath morning services of the Adventist congregation in Tirana. Its 100 members are mainly students at high schools and the university, though retirees as well as uneducated and highly educated members also attend. One is a professor of literature at the University of Tirana, another is one of Albania's most prominent film directors.

**I**n the late spring of 1992, I graduated from the University of Tirana with highest honors, and was invited to take part in a competition organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When I won the competition and an invitation to become a diplomat, I realized that my life was in God's hands. The feeling of emptiness was gone.

In September of 1992 I was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. One week later I flew to Switzerland with a group of diplomats to study international relations and diplomacy. When we returned, we began work as members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. All the while, I was privately translating Christian literature. A friend from the United States brought me an Apple computer, which made my work easier, and I translated the first Bible studies into the Albanian language.

In January of 1993 the U.S. Department of State organized a training course in Washington, D.C. for Albanian diplomats. I was selected to attend along with nine others, including the chief of staff of the

president, an old friend of mine. The president's foreign-policy advisor was also selected. As soon as I arrived the next month in the United States I tried to contact fellow believers. I spent my first Sabbath in a church in Martinsburg, West Virginia. It was unforgettable. I was nervous at first since I knew no one, but people spoke to me as if we were friends—brothers and sisters. I spoke in front of the church, bringing the members greetings from the church in Tirana.

The next week I attended Sligo church, in Takoma Park, Maryland. The Adventist church in Tirana is very small, and meets in a hall that served as the museum of the former dictator. Sligo church, with its 3,000-plus members, was impressive. Again, I had the opportunity to bring greetings from my home church, and to discuss Albania in Sabbath school classes. My only regret was that I wasn't able to accept all of the invitations from Adventists to visit and fellowship with them. I did notice differences

between Albanian Adventists and some strict American Adventists. For example, our economic situation does not permit us to be as selective in our food as some American Adventists are. Also, in reaction to the communists' interference in every aspect of our private lives, Albanians highly value their new freedom in areas such as dress and hairstyle. So do Albanian Adventists—more so than some rather strict American Adventists.

**I**n the late spring of 1993, as my plane returns me to Albanian soil, I thank God again for his love and generosity. After nearly half a century, Albanians have come in from the cold of communism, and religious ideology often terrifies them, for they see it restricting their new-found freedom. At the same time, Albanians need God, for they need hope and the inner strength to change. As I do every day, I say a prayer for Albania.