

Open Door to Albania

Having found the article on the Peoples' Republic of Albania by John Nelson Washburn in the October issue of the *International Lawyer* [Vol.6, p. 718 (1972)] very informative, the author would like to extend his support to Mr. Washburn's plea for an early opening of diplomatic doors between the United States and Albania.

While on trips to Yugoslavia, where the author was born, in 1964, 1970 and 1972, being near the Albanian border, he spoke with friends and authorities about visiting Albania, but it was not to be. First it was prohibited by our government, and then he was told by friends that it was dangerous, and last the Albanian authorities said no, at least not on a United States passport.

Since returning to America and in anticipation of going back to the Balkans this year, the writer and his wife have written various places for a possible tour which would include American visitors to Albania. They had heard that this could be arranged through agencies in France and England. The response has been discouraging because they are unable to obtain entry permits from Albania for American citizens.

Apparently, only with the resumption of inter-governmental relationships by reopening diplomatic doors, or otherwise, will it be possible for the ordinary tourist to be able to visit Albania on an American passport. For the author, with his native background, proximity and experience in the Balkan area, this barrier is particularly disappointing.

The writer was born not far from Albania in Tetovo, Macedonia, about half of whose people are of Albanian origin. He has known a number of Albanians, some of them close friends, here in America. The social, political, legal and economic structure and folk customs of Albania, now in a stage of revolutionary transition, evoke interest and have made him try to visit the country and to make the attempt last June when he was in Europe. At that time, he was making a survey of legal education and practice of law in the Balkans and eastern European countries and wanted to include Albania.

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While in Belgrade, he visited at the American Embassy several times. It is located on Knez Milosha Avenue where many embassies are situated. The author was startled to see, right by its side, cold shoulder to cold shoulder, the Albanian Embassy. After passing back and forth in front of it a number of times, he decided to take a chance and try for a visa. What happened next is entered in a memorandum on the flyleaf of the illustrated book *Shqipëria* (Albania) which I received inside the Embassy, and is as follows:

—MEMO—

On Monday, June 19, 1972, after a visit at the U.S. Embassy on Knez Milosha Street., Belgrade, I thought I would knock on the door of the Albanian Embassy, one building away, and see what happened. A man opened the door partway and peered out. After I told him my name, place of birth and American citizenship, I asked about entry into Albania and he invited me in. He showed me to a large, well appointed reception room, bade me sit down and tell him again my wants. He said no entry was allowed to American citizens because of the state of relations between our countries. I explained this was too bad because it prevented both peoples from becoming acquainted with each other and particularly disappointing to me because I was born in Tetovo, close to Albania, where half or more of the people were Albanians and I was interested in the country. He again said entry was impossible to American citizens. He then went out and while out, I looked at a book which was on a table; it was a beautifully illustrated book about Albania. He came back and reaffirmed the entry situation even though I was from Tetovo. I then mentioned the book and asked where I might be able to get one. He said there were none available for distribution, but I could look at one at the Albanian U.N. mission in New York. He went out again and after about five minutes returned with this copy of the book and another book about Albania and gave them to me. This was the first time being from Tetovo opened diplomatic doors! I thanked him very much; we shook hands and bade each other goodby. I felt the mission had accomplished a good deal even though I could not personally enter Albania; this book was a pretty fair substitute."

Belgrade, Yugoslavia
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Since returning to America, the author had occasion to show the book to some friends and they were so interested that they passed it around from person to person, including a number of geography teachers who have made use of it in their classes. It was placed for a time in the reading room of the International Institute of Flint. Now it is a part of the Flint Public Library for use by the general public.

The book, with whatever reservations one may wish to make, still shows that Albania is a land of much natural and created scenic grandeur, and has a people of considerable strength who have made substantial economic and social progress pretty much on their own.

Although no international giant, Albania has played a very important

world role by its leadership for the admission of China into the United Nations, even showing the way to America.

Albania is an ancient land located in the southwest of the Balkan peninsula, northwest of Greece, southeast of Yugoslavia and bordering on the Adriatic Sea, across from Italy. It is very mountainous and approximately 11,000 square miles in size, about the same as the state of Maryland, with a population of a little over two million.

Its people are decedents of ancient Illyrian tribes, Indo-European in origin. These Illyrian tribes formed a kingdom in the middle of the third century B.C. in the region of Albania. Down through history, interactions with the neighboring countries and peoples and with Turkey have deeply affected the religious, cultural, social and political life of Albania. However, except for a relatively small minority of Greek origin, the population is ethnically very homogeneous, being over 96 percent of Albanian stock.

While Albania does not have ethnic minorities comparable to those of many other countries which have had to cope with the ensuing problems, quite a few Albanians have emigrated to other countries. These are over a million Albanians in Yugoslavia, living mostly in the autonomous region of Kosmet, which is adjacent to Albania. In fact, there are 1,300,000 in Yugoslavia and the importance of this may be seen when it is realized that there are only 1,200,000 Macedonians in Yugoslavia, and Macedonia is an integral part and a constituent republic of that country.

In traveling through the Kosmet region of Yugoslavia, the presence of Albanians is everywhere evident. One noticeable characteristic is the homes, whether individually, in clusters, or in villages, surrounded by walls like fortified medieval towns. It is said that this may be due to the need for protection from inter-family blood feuds, which still exist to a certain extent, as well as the Moslem custom of keeping their womenfolk home and out of sight of prying strangers, or vice versa.

For camera fans the reluctance of the people, particularly the women, to have their picture taken is quite noticeable. The author has a prize movie showing an Albanian woman, dressed in native costume with an earthen water jar on her shoulder, walking back and forth from one side of the street to the other and turning her face away from the author while he was trying to take her picture. On another occasion, as he was trying to photograph some children who were playing near the road and who seemed quite willing to pose, their grandfather ran up with a stick and chased them away. On another, a militiaman stopped the writer from taking pictures of some Albanian children who were clustered around the back of his car, singing gypsy songs into his tape recorder.

Many of the women wear long smocks to cover their body from neck to toe, and kerchiefs and veils to cover their heads and faces. In many places they come to the shopping areas only in the evening, when the stores are closed and the crowds have thinned out; more to look in the store windows than to go in for purchases. Later they will tell their husbands what they would like to have them buy. The American husband, forever teetering on the edge of bankruptcy because of the charge accounts rung up by his wife, may find this custom interesting.

When the author went through Kosmet, and its principal city of Pristina, the Albanian flag was flying along with that of Yugoslavia, in celebration of "Prva Pushka Dan," the day when the first shot was fired in the liberation struggle against the Axis occupiers. The flag is very impressive, showing a two-headed eagle, black on red, five pointed star above, talons and wings spread, screaming in defiance and preparedness for any eventuality.

It is a very apt symbol of the words of their President, Enver Hoxha, contained in the gift book: "No one has been born so far to intimidate the Albanians. The borders of Albania and the Albanian soil are protected by a brave people and an eagle-like Party who will shower bullets into the mouths of all who will dare encroach upon it."

The Kosmet region has been contended over in the past between the power in control of the area now known as Yugoslavia and those in control of Albania, and during some parts of its history was actually under Albanian rule. However, it was while a part of Serbia, that it gained fame in history. It was there, in the Kossovo Plain, where the Turks, in their drive to extend their hegemony over the Balkan Peninsula, won a decisive battle against the Serbians and sealed their 500-year reign over the country, ending just before the first world war.

Albanians live in many other parts of Yugoslavia besides Kosmet. Perhaps the largest number is in Macedonia, which also adjoins Albania. The writer has mentioned his native town of Tetovo. It is a good example of the influx of Albanian people and resulting tensions. Three years ago, the Albanians had sufficient voting power to elect some of the city officials. Public buildings and stores as well as communications of a public nature have been carrying the Albanian language designations as well as the Macedonian. How persistent may be ethnic differences, with the best of intentions, may be evident from the fact that conflicts prevail even though the peoples of both Macedonian and Albanian stock have been living in Tetovo, as well as other areas, more or less together, since time immemorial.

Three years ago, the tensions and expressions of power reached such a heated stage that physical encounters took place in which the Macedonians

called for assistance from neighboring cities. Happily, this is in the past as while in Tetovo last June for about ten days, he saw no visible evidence of any continuing state of confrontation.

Tetovo is but a half-hour drive from Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. On the map, it is even closer to Albania. If the land in between were flat, with good roads, it would be but a few minutes drive by automobile. However, because of the mountains standing in between, Albania is practically inaccessible to Tetovo by any ready means of transportation. The northerly road to Albania goes a long way around, north of Skopje, west to Prizren in Kosmet and then into Kukes, Albania. The southern road goes by way of Debar which itself is very heavily populated with Albanians, or through Struga, near Ohrid, and this road is longer and very mountainous all the way.

In and around Tetovo while the manufacturing and commercial enterprises are peopled by predominantly Slavic Macedonians, they are surrounded by the Moslem Albanian population in the agricultural countryside. Market day is the day of reckoning—Macedonian buyers facing Albanian sellers in one of the most ancient forms of adversary proceeding—bargaining over the price of cheese. It is no place for amateurs!

We speak of hopes of reopening lines of communications between Albania and America and there is no doubt that good must surely come of this. For one, there are some 80,000 Albanians living in America and many of them would very likely welcome the existence of recognized friendship with their native land, a situation which more often than not gives a foreign-born person a sense of worth which makes him that much a better and happier citizen in his adopted land.

By coincidence, although the author has seen no Albanians in America for many years, yesterday he saw three in the court house in Detroit. They were young people who had come here four years ago from Montenegro, Yugoslavia. They spoke among themselves in Albanian which called his attention to them, and then they conversed in Serbian, as they seemed to speak very little, if any, English. The author does not know whether it was real or imaginary on his part, but they seemed to have a defiant bearing like the eagle on the Albanian flag!

The reopening of communication would be but a step in the direction of understanding and harmony. As the history of ethnic and international relationships shows this is a never ending process. The author encountered a particular example of this while in Macedonia on his most recent trip.

One day, when in Skopje, he received a message that the mayor of Tetovo had invited him to come for a visit at the city hall. In fact, he should have gone to call on the mayor earlier as he was a relative by

marriage. One of his cousins, who was well acquainted with the mayor, traveled with him. When they entered the city hall, they were stopped by the doorman, according to the continental custom in all public and semi-public buildings.

In the author's travels through several other countries where he could not speak the language, he was somehow able to negotiate his way past the doorman in most every place. He never made it in the city hall in Tetovo, his birthplace. The doorman was Albanian and his employment was an instance of what might be called "affirmative action" in this country. His instructions were simple, his discretion was none and his responses to them very direct. They could not go to the second floor where the mayor's office was located without a written invitation from the mayor himself, a paper which they did not have.

"But I am from America and we are his relatives and he has invited me to come see him."

"No matter. You cannot go. Besides, the mayor is busy with a delegation."

"But his message was that when we came he would drop everything so that we could have a visit."

"No matter."

"Would you go upstairs, and tell him that we are here?"

"That is impossible, I have to watch the door."

"There is a telephone near you. Will you call him and let him know we are here, and he will surely tell you to allow us to go up or he will come down to greet us himself?"

"That is impossible. I have instructions not to call him on the telephone."

"Well, then call his secretary."

"That is impossible. It is the secretary who told me not to call."

By this time all were shouting, and while there was a lot of vocalizing there was neither communication nor understanding, and the author and his cousin soon gave up in disgust and turned to leave the city hall. As they were leaving, the last gesture of their Albanian friend at the door was an unmistakable "good riddance." The author's cousin's parting comment was "That's what you get for hiring an illiterate peasant." The author never did see the mayor, relative or no, American or no.

While the writer has related some examples of misunderstanding and disharmony there are many experiences which indicate the presence of mutual good will, common sacrifices, and good relationships between the Albanians and other peoples in Yugoslavia, be they Macedonian or otherwise.

In 1970, while proceeding from Belgrade towards Skopje, they stopped overnight in the neighborhood of Vranje, which is in Serbia. Grazing near the motel was a flock of sheep guarded by two Albanian shepherds, one of whom was about ten-years-old. When the author was ten years of age and living in Macedonia, he too had tended sheep in the foothills of the Sar Mountain, just outside of Tetovo. He was very much attracted to the two shepherds in Vranje and they had a very friendly visit. Surprisingly, the shepherds welcomed having their picture taken and they have corresponded with the author since his return.

During their 1970 visit, the writer and his wife were in Bihac, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is also a constituent republic in which there are many Albanians. Bihac was the site of the first governmental organization meeting of the Tito forces. Just outside of town, there is a partisan memorial cemetery, with row upon row of gravestones with the names inscribed, and the dates indicating young men of 16 to 24 years of age for the most part. For every stone with a typically Yugoslav name ending in "ich," or some variant, like Yovanovich, there was another with an Albanian name, some in the original form and others with "ic" or "ich" endings which showed an ethnic adaptation. They had all died fighting for a common cause.

On his 1972 trip, while traveling from Sofia, Bulgaria towards Skopje and in the region of Kumanovo, in the northern part of Macedonia, he stopped to view a memorial to a fallen partisan heroes, all of whose names were inscribed on a marble monument. The author counted 12 Evanoffs-Ivanovski-Ivanovic-Yovanovich, all basically the same name but there were as many or more names of Albanian origin with some designated as officers.

They too, Macedonians, Albanians and Yugoslav from all part of the country, fighting in Macedonia to liberate that land, along with the rest of the Balkan peninsula, from Fascist occupation, had all died together for a free and united Yugoslavia, under the banner of "Bratsvo i Jedinstvo," "Brotherhood and Unity."

An ironical twist, indicative of disharmony, suspicion and misunderstanding, was that shortly after leaving the area of the monument, to proceed toward Skopje, his 18-year-old second cousin, Miroslav, "Mickey," Ivanovski, who was traveling with him, and the writer were flagged down by a militia cruiser which had caught up and intercepted them. They wondered what they could have possibly done to violate any law. Mickey had just graduated from high school and was going to take the qualifying examinations to enter the law faculty at the University of Skopje, so they immediately thought in legal terms.

Several evenings before, the author had been stopped for a burnt out lamp. His lights had been O.K.; one must have just burnt out, he thought. Why should he be blamed? They fined him anyway, cash on the spot! Not for the burnt out lamp but because he did not have a spare, as required by law!

No, they had not violated any law but the militiamen wanted to know what they, with a car bearing a German license plate, were doing nosing around in the park with the memorial to the fallen heroes, and taking pictures to boot. They were not troubled long with the cousin but it was another story with him. He was a foreigner, even though in his native land. The militiamen were Macedonians. As a matter of fact, they were quite polite and very apologetic for having to stop them, but there were some people who came to make trouble, they explained. It took almost a half an hour of his best Macedonian to convince them that the writer was really a native from nearby Skopje and Tetovo and his intentions were honorable.

Later, when it was time for the writer to depart from Skopje, back to Belgrade by way of Kosmet, Pristina and the predominantly Albanian section of Yugoslavia, he had no sooner reached the outskirts of Skopje when he became completely lost. By this time he had traveled through seven Balkan countries and became lost in each of them on endless occasions. Street names and road signs are either non-existent or a glorious challenge. The author has driven by car all over America, much of Canada, in Mexico and a fair amount in England, but he always managed to find his way around without going too far astray. Not so in the Balkans! The night he arrived in reconstructed Skopje and headed toward Tetovo, at first the new boulevards had the name Tetovo, with an arrow painted right on the pavement, but soon the pavement gave out and the names and arrows disappeared.

The writer could not recognize the area from previous trips. The Turkish mosque which told him where the Tetovo road started was gone. Before he knew what had happened, he was hopelessly lost in a housing construction site, in the middle of night, pitch dark, surrounded by piles of building materials. Obviously, he somehow found his way out of the trap and eventually found his way "home" to his birthplace of Tetovo. It seems that street names and road signs and directions are on a very low priority, close to that of public toilets, and must wait until the completion of other projects, more necessary for domestic improvements. Still, with the help of the sun, moon and stars and a sense of which way is up and which way down, one does get around, even in the Balkans. He recalled the saying that if you want to find Turkey, take a left turn in Bulgaria. Many is the time when he would come to a fork in the road with no sign which

indicated the way to "Kriva Palanka," for example. But being lost was not really a loss because it only made it possible for him to see more of the country and people and to visit places which the well-conducted tourist would never see.

But to return to his departure from Skopje towards Pristina. After becoming "lost" he looked for help and before long saw a man walking along the side of the road. He stopped, hailed the man and he got in the car with the writer to show him the way. They drove for a while and then the man pointed ahead and said, "That is the way to Pristina," and he was right. He knew—he was an Albanian from Pristina. The friendly help of this Albanian in Skopje was in contrast to the "affirmative action" Albanian doorman in the city hall at Tetovo.

These and other experiences he has related are tied in with the common destiny of Albania and Yugoslavia. The liberation forces of Yugoslavia, and particularly those of Macedonian origin, had much to do with the start of the liberation movement in Albania during the last war. The movement in Macedonia was combined with that in Albania.

The principal emissary sent by Tito to Macedonia and Albania for this purpose was a lawyer of Montenegrin birth, who later became a vice president of Yugoslavia. He began his efforts in Skopje and Tetovo, and then went to Albania. While he was in Skopje, the very cousin who had been barred along with the writer at the Tetovo city hall, provided him with a hiding place in his home at great personal and family risk. The doorman, a likely beneficiary of such risks probably knew or thought little of this. But the writer's cousin had to turn away and swallow his chagrin. He is a very gentle and friendly man, well liked by all. Later he felt very bad that he had called the doorman "illiterate," (*nepismen*), which is about the worst thing you can call a person in those parts.

Truly, open doors, open minds, and hearts and understanding are a process which needs constant nurturing. That it takes much time and sometimes even that seems to have failed of little accomplishment, is illustrated once more by an experience on the author's flight to Yugoslavia.

His seat companion on the plane was an obviously peasant lady, who spoke no English. With shakes of her head she rejected all meals. When in time she showed signs of illness the writer became concerned about her and tried to speak to her in Yugoslav. All she would say was "Struga, Struga." To his mind came the words of a Macedonian song, "How dear it would be to me to have a shop in Struga where I could sit on the counter and watch the Struga girls go by."

Struga is a beautiful town in the southern part of Yugoslav Macedonia, near Ohrid, and is a border entry point into Albania. It turned out that the

lady was an Albanian, a native of Struga, and was returning home from a visit to her sons who had gone to America to make their fortunes. Her family lived in seclusion in an Albanian neighborhood in the Struga area and she knew very little of the Macedonian language. What the author is telling here briefly took a long time to glean from her.

Although she had learned very little of the Macedonian language, she had, as the writer soon noticed, absorbed some of the Macedonian gestures, which are common in the Balkans. She was nodding her head for "no" and shaking her head for "yes." He then realized why she was getting no meals. When she shook her head to say "yes" the stewardess thought she meant "no," for two meals! This was soon corrected and she had her first meal shortly before the end of the flight.

The author and she became quite good friends after that, and as they parted she invited him to her family's home in Struga, and they made out a little sketch to show how he could find it. The writer had been to Struga twice before, but to his regret, he was unable to go there this time. On his forthcoming trip, however, he will surely go to Struga to visit his Albanian friend and her family, perhaps to sit on a shop counter and watch the girls go by (while his wife watches him) as he did when a boy in Tetovo in his Uncle Joseph's store, selling harness to Albanian villagers, and also to try again for a visit to Shqipëria. So, he hopes the doors are open! If not to enter Albania, then at least to get past the friendly doorman at the city hall of Tetovo, to visit his kinsman, the mayor, a Macedonian guarded by an Albanian!