

Christmas, 1995

Dear Friends,

It's Christmas in Tirana, our second in Albania. Most of our American friends are going somewhere else but we're staying here. Brian and Kevin have joined us and we will celebrate Christmas eve with Albanian friends. This year we brought a CD player and I'm listening to my favorite Christmas songs. As Nat Cole sings about chestnuts we're enjoying them, fresh from Northern Albania, along with Mandarin oranges from the south.

On December 1, plastic Christmas trees, ornaments and Christmas cards appeared for sale on the streets. There are toys every-where. Even the Palestinian eatery "Jeruzalem" is into the spirit. They had the first Christmas tree of the season. On the construction scaffolding over the new Catholic Cathedral a big Christmas star flashes. While this is nominally a Moslem country, Albania, alone in the Balkans, demonstrates the that Christianity and Islam can live together in harmony. At the same time Albania is trying to reach out culturally to Western Europe so Christmas is much bigger than it was two years ago.

While Suzi got out the cards and put up the tree, I've been gathering tape for a Christmas Eve program for Radio Tirana. I want to share some of the things I've collected for the program.

I taped members of the Albanian Opera Chorus (performing as the group "Pax Dei") when it preformed portions of Handel's Messiah on December 20 with an American baritone and tenor but I'm not sure I'll use the tape. The evening was cool and the hall unheated. The hall was the former "Pioneer Palace," a young communist building. It's been used as the International Church since then. Perhaps because of that there was piped in gospel rock before the concert and a lot of young Albanian Christians were rocking back and forth and clapping. Those of us who came for classical music thought we had come to the wrong place. It seemed like a revival meeting. When the concert started it became clear that this was the wrong place. The piano in the hall hadn't been tuned since the revolution and we got a dissonant cord with each note struck. That made it hard to hold a key and when the baritone sang "and we shall be changed" in "The Trumpet Will Sound" I thought he was singing "and the key shall be changed." Nat Brodsky, the baritone, the leader of the concert and a friend of ours had a three piece suit made for the concert by an Albanian tailor. He was surprised when he got it. It was black with shiny brass buttons. When he told the tailor he was a conductor I think the tailor thought he was a conductor on the Aticheson, Topeka and the Sante Fe. He wore it with good humor and during the Hallelujah Chorus it was appropriate. The temperature in the hall had dropped and the bass section was puffing up a lot of steamy breath while singing "king of kings." The Opera Chorus did a set of Christmas carols. I was happy that they brought out their own keyboard. I thought anything would be better than the piano. I was wrong. The "KROG 13" synthesizer not only provided piano sounds, but also drums, both steel and snare, and a techno-disco beat that made "Joy to the World" quite unforgettable. The young Christians liked it considerably better than George Frederick and gave it a standing ovation. The chorus director provided some tense moments. She wore a long, flowing, black gown that threatened to brush the candles on the stage that served as footlights. Fortunately the spirit of Christmas protected her, and despite the strangeness of the concert the tenor and baritone were very good, the young Christians well behaved, and the Christmas spirit somehow prevailed.

The National Gallery of Art opens an exhibition of Icons on Christmas day. The Icons date from the 12th to the early 20th centuries. This is the first time they've been seen in public in 50 years. The director of the gallery said that during communism Icons were housed in "cultic curiosity" ware houses. In the 1967 cultural revolution many were destroyed. These were ones that were saved. He says one goal of the exhibit is to show that this Moslem country treasures it's earlier Christian heritage and honors the

Christians living in the country. He expects it to be the biggest exhibition of the year.

In Northern Albania the practice of blood vendettas has revived with the fall of communism. The ritual of blood revenge is outlined in the Kanun of Lek Dukagjin. According to information gathered by one of my students there are 2,100 active vendettas in Albania. A newspaper estimates that 10,000 able bodied bread winners in Albania are in hiding because of blood feud threats. In one district of Northern Albania 60% of the families are involved in a blood feud. Since 1993 there have been over 350 documented cases of blood killings. As people move from the country into Tirana, the problem is spreading from the remote northern mountains to the capital. The U.S. Embassy even pulled the visa from an Albanian who they suspected was headed to New York to carry out a revenge killing.

The Kanun predates Islam in Albania and there is a Christian ritual of forgiveness that can end feuds. The ritual is performed on Christmas day, when, Father Dionis Makaj says, people are "more disposed to be saints and angels." Father Dionis works with the Catholic "Mission of Blood Forgiveness."

Fr. Dionis is an old priest who was imprisoned for years under the Communists. He now spends his time trying to reconcile feuds. While he actually arranges many of the reconciliations in advance, he follows the ritual of forgiveness on the feast day. He goes to homes where there is a family in feud on either St. Nicholas Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day saying he is visiting for the season. He does not give his true intention. Because of the Kanun of hospitality, the families receive him. At the proper point he says "Christ is suffering because a sin has been committed." and tells the story of St. Gilbert, who forgave the murderer of his brother on Christmas Eve. He asks the family for forgiveness. It is important that the whole family agree, down to the age of 10. It does no good if one member of the family does not agree and carries on the feud. If the family agrees the family leader kisses a cross in front of the fire. Then a member of the other family is brought in, his head bowed and his hands bound. If there is forgiveness the leader of the family cuts the rope binding the hands. Then both families go to a neutral home and share a holiday feast.

Finally there is a story that I'm not sure I will put on the radio for fear that it will endanger the people involved. The students I talked with on tape were very candid. About 25% of my students are from the former Yugoslavia. The Serbs deny them education in Albanian even though their families have lived in Kosovo for over 500 years. Albanians are 90% of Kosovo's population but are being forced into Serb assimilation. The best students try to get an education in Albania.

While the Dayton peace accords brought the hope of peace to the region, they made the lives of my students very difficult. The students used to travel home with the smugglers who brought fuel from Albania to Yugoslavia. They would take a cab to a remote border village, pay someone around 30 Deutsche Marksv (around \$20, a little more than a week's salary) and get across. Now that the embargo is lifted they have lost their transportation. Some of the girls have decided to test the Dayton accords and applied for visas to legally go home. One girl actually got one. I'm worried about the legal approach because the Serbs don't want students educated in Albanian, and even though "Julie" has gotten a "tourist" visa and is "visiting family" she could still be in trouble. The boys, who are all of draft age, face prison and then the army if they are caught at home. As the illegal traffic ends the students are making the border run earlier. Each day one or two students ask my permission to cut the rest of the classes before Christmas. In the cafes they discuss back roads into Kosovo that are not patrolled, hug, and wish each other luck. Each time I wish a student a "Gazur" for the New Year I wonder if I'll see him or her in class in January. This Christmas our prayers are especially with them. I hope you will join us.

Our family is together for the holidays. As Americans we cross borders freely and practice religion without fear. Sometimes we forget how special a thing that is. We're thankful for the experiences we're

having and the friends we've made around the world, including you.

Merry Christmas,

Rich and Suzi McClear