

December 10, 1996

Dear Friends,

When we wrote our last "Christmas" letter the last thing we thought was that we would still be in Albania to write this one, but here we are. In December last year Rich got a 3 month extension on his Fulbright and in April, after a break in Minnesota to celebrate Suzi's dad's 80th birthday, Rich took the job as Resident Advisor for the ProMedia program, a program to foster independent media in Eastern and Central Europe. Suzi extended her contract and is still teaching American History and writing at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Tirana University.

A year ago at Christmas both boys came to visit us in Tirana, and Brian stayed on for a month. This year we are going home to Alaska for Christmas with the boys, with visits on each end in Minnesota or New Jersey.

When the Berlin wall came down we could not guess the personal impact it would have on our lives, but since then we have been traveling and working throughout the former "evil empire." We have seen tremendous changes; mostly advances but also a few steps backwards.

A year ago we were worried about our ethnic Albanian students crossing back to their homes in Yugoslavia. They had to make moonlit border crossings. Now busses run regularly, thanks to Dayton. We've seen tremendous economic development, but in Albania we've also seen steps back from Democracy.

The elections in May were marred by intimidation and corruption and the protests afterward were put down with brutality. We sat on the rooftop terrace of the Tirana Hotel and watched opposition leaders and journalists clubbed down. Rich documented 15 cases of journalist beatings and we left for July and August wondering about our future here.

By July we needed a break. We spent a week in the States, visited the Winnipeg Folk Festival in Canada, and took Rich's mom to England and Ireland (the highlight being staying in Rich's great grandmother's home in Ilfracombe, England.) The rest of the summer we both taught at a journalism summer school in Aarhus, Denmark. We had a mixed group of Danish and Albanian students.

Kevin joined us in Albania for 6 weeks in the spring and early summer in Albania, after finishing his freshman year at St. Olaf, but we didn't see Brian this summer because he had taken a job at the Summer Shakespeare Festival in Williamsburg, Virginia.

We came back to Tirana in late August. In September, Dave and Carol Lam, college friends, came down from Brussels, where Dave works for NATO, and spent two weeks with us touring Albania. It is a wild and beautiful land. We visited the citadel towns of Gjirokaster, Berat and Kruje, uncovered ancient mosaics in Burtint, saw the Miss Europa contestants do a film shoot in the ancient amphitheater in Apollonia, and watched stars shoot through the milky way on the white beach at Dhermi.

In October we both were part of the international monitoring team for the local elections, and we saw a marked improvement over May and we reported that. Politics intervened again in November and Rich was told to stop teaching at the University, mid semester, because of "contract problems." So he continues to work on developing private media outside the University.

While Balkan politics continue to trouble us, our friendships with Albanians continue to grow, and that is what keeps us here.

We still spend many nights over coffee and raki discussing the changes in life with our neighbors. But the friendships are not only with Albanians. Our small "All Souls Fellowship" had an Anglican priest make his Advent call from Naples last week and our group of Americans, Brits, Canadians and one South African; Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Dutch Reformed, and Unitarian; had a potluck and traditional ceremony of lessons and carols. We started with "Once in Royal David's City." Most of the carols had the English tunes by Wesley and Vaughn-Williams rather than the German tunes more familiar to the Americans, but on "Joy to the World," and "Hark, the Herald" the Commonwealth and Americans sang with one voice.

So the Christmas season has come. The weather is Mediterranean, sunny days with temperatures in the 60's and clear, frosty nights. Christmas trees are going up in this still nominally Moslem country known, alone in the Balkans, for its tradition of religious tolerance, and people are wishing us a Happy Christmas for our trip home to Alaska, to family and friends.

Merry Christmas,

Rich and Suzi McClear