



KOMITETI SHQIPTAR I HELSINKIT ALBANIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

Introduction:

For nearly half a century Albania experienced a brand of communism unknown to the rest of Eastern Europe. A fateful blend of isolation and dictatorship kept this tiny Balkan country the poorest and most repressive in all of Europe. During his forty-year reign (1944-1985), the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha banned religion, forbade travel and outlawed private property. Any resistance to his rule was met with severe retribution, including internal exile, long-term imprisonment and execution. His domination of Albania's political, economic and social life was absolute. Under his dictatorship, around 34,000 people were imprisoned for political reasons, around 7,000 died in the camps and prisons and around 6,000 were executed.

The official purpose of detaining political prisoners was "re-education and rehabilitation" through suffering and labor, so that, the regime began building labor camps. Almost all inmates who were able to work were assigned to these labour camps and, over the years, the number of labor camps exceeded that of "regular" prisons. The largest construction projects in Albania during the communist years were realized through the forced labor of prisoners (both political and ordained prisoners) and interned, who were forced to serve in these works also to maintain themselves.

Forced labour wasn't the worst thing of these camps. "*Beaten bloody with a wooden stick. Red-hot wire driven into the body. Electric shocks. Exposed naked to the cold. Genitals burned. Sleep deprivation. Put alive in a coffin. Grave preparation. Pushing elders from heights*", the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes in Albania lists 36 torture methods used by the country's notorious secret police, the Sigurimi. Some sound like they were lifted from a splatter movie script, and some are simply unmatched in their perfidy.

Enver Hoxha was initially secretive so people couldn't know the ways, tactics, methods and tortures that was done to the opposing people of the government in these facilities. All Political opponents were called enemies of the state by the regime.

In Hoxa's Albania nobody was safe and untouchable. After 1948, "enemies of the people" included people that held important leadership positions in the party and state structures of the regime. This was used to justify ending of an international alliance, or when it needed to justify the failures of its economic, cultural and military policies. General insecurity and fear was widespread throughout the entire population.

The history of Dom Shtjefni, the priest who was executed because he baptized a child

Originally from Kosovo, the priest Dom Shtjefen Kurti, was very vocal against Serbian treatment against Kosovars. Because of this he feared for his life and decided to go to Albania. After serving at the church in the capital of Albania, he was arrested in 1946 accused of being a collaborator in a terrorist organization and for agitation and propaganda against the government of the time.

Before his arrest he refused a request by dictator Enver Hoxha to take over the leadership of the Catholic and Orthodox religion in Albania, on condition that he cuts ties with the Vatican.



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Many believe this was the cause of his arrest. He was initially sentenced to the death penalty, but in court because he declared "I have not served anyone, only God", the sentence was replaced to 25 years in prison. He was later transferred to Burrel prison where he served 17 years, released in 1963.

In 1967 when the religion was banned, Dom Shtjefni was followed and monitored everywhere by the state security. He was arrested again at the age of 73. According to records, he was accused because he "Has performed religious services and secretly baptized a child." Based on false testimonies during his trial, Dom Shtjefni was sentenced to death and he was later executed.

In Hoxa's Albania, people were not only sent to labour camps for opposing the regime, sometimes they were sentenced for being related to an "enemy of the state"

The history of Simon Mirakaj who went to prison just two weeks old:

Simon Mirakaj's father was an anti-communist who later fled the country. He was considered one of the worstkinds of enemies of the Hoxa regime. As the son of a leading anti-communist, Mirakaj was imprisoned with his family when he was just two weeks old and spent 46 years in prison. During his life there he had to dig graves, fell trees and drain swamps.

He took his first steps while in the Berat labour camp, learned to play football in Tepelenë, reached puberty in Lushnjë and became an adult in the Dschasa camp. So many sad things happened in that time, Mirakaj says. The worst camp of all, he recalls, was Tepelenë. Prisoners there were forced to eat vomit or faeces, and were submerged in latrines as punishment. He described how 20 children once died there within 24 hours because of the lack of hygiene. Yet those were not the only reasons why Tepelenë was so feared. "The camp was located on the courtyard of a military site that was still full of landmines from the Greco-Italian war of 1941. The mines would explode and we'd see body parts flying through the air," says Mirakaj. The labour camp drove many prisoners to suicide. In the hope of finding salvation, prisoners would flee so that they would be shot, or they would run deliberately into the minefield. People were very scared. "When we went to work and came back, we would say goodbye and greet each other as if every day was our last."

Even though it often seemed like they would never be free, Simon Mirakaj and his brother never gave up hope. Their solidarity and a forbidden radio strengthened their faith. "Many of our fellow prisoners had studied abroad. They told us about the world, which made us hope that we would also be free one day." Mirakaj and his brother often used their radio to listen to foreign stations: "That's how we knew what was going on in the world." People would always stand watch outside to make sure that no one caught them listening to the radio. They heard the news about the 1989 events in East Germany huddled together in a wooden barrack, scared that they would be discovered at any moment. The fall of the Berlin Wall gave them hope. "We heard the people in Berlin crying, and we cried too because we empathized with them."



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Current situation

In light of this history, Albania has made substantial progress toward respect for human, civil and political rights in the past 28 years. Democratic elections in March 1992 swept the communist party from power, installed a new government led by the Democratic Party, and paved the way for a series of liberalizing reforms. New democratic laws have entered into force but the path towards the EU standards alignment hasn't been simple but progress has been made by the government with the help of Albanian civil society and international partnerships. It took almost 30 years to get where we are today but more is still needed. There are still some people who feel nostalgic for the way the Hoxha regime used to function. On the other hand almost 2,700 former prisoners are still alive. Embittered and impoverished, they have received only a fraction of the compensation promised by post-communist governments.

Apart from the laws, the practice has changed as well. Any kind of tortured act from the state bodies is highly punishable by the law and the society. The civil society and joint projects of AHC and NHC have highly contributed especially in the treatment of the inmates these days. A series of protocols and administrative guidelines have been drafted in order to prevent any torture and abusive acts by the authorities. Also a long time of providing training for the prison staff in this regard contributes to a better living climate in the prisons.

And one key thing remains to help prevent inhumane and degrading treatment: remembering the deep suffering of our relatives in the past...

**This speech was presented during the 2019 Night of Dictatorship in The Hague, in partnership with the Netherlands Helsinki Committee.*





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