

“There are lessons to learn here. We see that prayer is key to making things happen ... We see that perseverance in preaching the Word is essential ... We are reminded that there are corners of the world that we do not know about even though the world is shrinking. Missionaries are needed to preach the gospel in those places, and this book reveals just how much spiritual hunger there can be in those who have never heard.”

Rico Tice, Associate Minister at All Souls Church,
Langham Place, London

“John Butterworth’s wonderful story about the life of the Albanian army officer Berti Dosti, shows us that God calls people from every possible background and changes their lives for ever. The story of what happened to Berti is as enthralling as a spy thriller. And it leaves the reader asking: If God can call people like this, might He be calling me too?”

Gordon Mursell, Former Bishop of Stafford

“This extraordinary story is a powerful testimony of the way that human beings need to worship. The God-implanted impulse to worship, found in every human heart, does not change whether it is confronted by militant atheism in Albania or, as in the case of much of the West, with materialism. John Butterworth’s account of Berti Dosti’s life will inspire Christians around the world to share their faith confidently in word and deed.”

Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans

GOD'S
SECRET
LISTENER



GOD'S SECRET LISTENER



JOHN BUTTERWORTH

10 Publishing
a division of **10** of those.com

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (Anglicised Edition). Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica (formerly International Bible Society). Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790.

Copyright © 2022 by John Butterworth

First published in Great Britain in 2022

The right of John Butterworth to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher or the Copyright Licensing Agency.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-914966-27-9

Designed and typeset by Pete Barnsley (CreativeHoot.com)

Image credits:

Albanian soldier, File ID 166166172 | © Cateyeperspective, Dreamstime.com
Albanian landscape; The approach to Thethi, Albania, by 45ossington – CC BY-SA 3.0

Printed in Denmark

10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com
Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

Email: info@10ofthose.com
Website: www.10ofthose.com

1 3 5 7 10 8 6 4 2



CONTENTS

Foreword	1
Preface	3
Introduction	5
1 If you want to find out more about God we will meet again tomorrow	9
2 A pioneering spirit.....	15
3 We're in the army now	23
4 Officer material	35
5 Tears as Enver Hoxha dies	41
6 From Russia with love.....	49
7 We both changed each other's lives	57
8 A high point – and a low point.....	69
9 Monte Carlo – and nearly bust	77

GOD'S SECRET LISTENER

10	Once I was blind, but now I can see	87
11	We know you are a CIA spy	103
12	The times they are a-changin'	117
13	I think I recognise your voice said the government official	125
14	A letter from Albania – at last	141
15	God has been stolen from us for 47 years	151
16	Face to face with an angry mob in Laç	165
17	A tearful reunion	171
18	Starting a church from scratch	177
19	1997 – a baptism of fire	187
20	Victory after a year of anarchy	199
21	Coping with half a million refugees	209
22	I will build my church	221
23	Behind every door there's a story	229
24	Let your light shine	237
25	Berti puts on his radio headphones again	247
	Addendum	251
	Postscript: Closing thoughts by Berti	259
	About the Author	263



FOREWORD

I can still remember the sense of excitement as my plane approached Tirana airport. The year is 1994 and the excitement is tinged with apprehension. Tirana was an airport without meaningful radar cover and the runway infamous for being cobbled! A very bumpy landing, a long wait to be let off the plane, and then down some rickety steps into a freezing winter night.

Once over the physical concerns, the political, cultural and spiritual questions filled my mind. What will life be like in this avowedly atheistic state? How will people be adapting to life now that the dictator, Enver Hoxha, is finally gone? Has the church survived and what does its future look like?

I discovered a land trapped in a 1940's time warp – economically impoverished, politically isolated and spiritually barren. And yet ... God's people were still to be found! Small in number, lacking in leadership

and bereft of resources ... but strangely peace-filled and certain of faith. It was thrilling to preach to a small group of believers on a Sunday in the Albanian capital – a wonderful demonstration of the resilience of the church under pressure, a living example of the fact that even the ‘gates of hell’ will not prevail against the Body of Christ!

It was with the backdrop of these experiences in Albania that I read this manuscript by John Butterworth. What a pleasure to read the inspiring story of Berti Dosti. A story of transformation, hope, conversion and mission. God is at work in individuals and nations, in Britain and in Albania...no less in 2022 than in the first century.

May your faith be encouraged as you read this compelling salvation story.

Steve Gaukroger, Clarion Trust



PREFACE

For a long time, Albania lurked just within my radar. Initially I was no more than inquisitive about a nation that had banned religion and any semblance of Western influence and values.

Then Albania gradually moved more to the centre of my attention.

First because I found myself interviewing a young missionary who'd visited, as a tourist, to see how things were. She'd returned with details of an almost undocumented reign of terror that had set out to eradicate all places of worship and those who would wish to use them. She also told of her divine encounters with several maintaining their faith in secret and against all odds.

Then, for several years, I led Christian groups at a holiday centre in Corfu, directly opposite Albania. Here I'd led special prayer times looking across the sea between the two – thanking God for what we were sure He'd be

doing by his Spirit there and asking for a day of freedom to come.

Our prayers were a mere fraction of those prayed both within Albania and round the world. And God did what God does. He answered and freedom came. Over the following months I heard first-hand accounts from those who were now sharing God's love in word and action – and seeing New Testament things happen as people came to faith and a fledgling church discovered how to fly.

All the while I was convinced, I knew only a fraction of what had gone on during the dark days of vicious persecution. God had been at work behind all our backs and one day it would be told. Now, this very important book draws back the curtain.

John Butterworth brings his considerable skill and experience as a journalist in order to both document and bring to life this remarkable account of how Captain Berti Dosti became Pastor Berti Dosti.

It is written with great attention to detail. And though this may focus on just one person and one story, through it you capture the even greater narrative of an amazing God who is on a mission.

The transformation that has come to Albania is nothing compared to the transformation God is bringing to lives there – as this valuable book reveals. Read, wonder, and enjoy.

Peter Meadows, Associate Director, Bible Society



INTRODUCTION

Most people have heard of evangelist Billy Graham, very few have heard of Billy Sunday.

Yet Billy Sunday has played probably just as important a part in Christianity as Billy Graham has.

In 1924, Billy Sunday ran a Christian campaign in Charlotte, USA, out of which came the Charlotte Businessmen's Club, who invited Dr Mordecai Ham to one of their meetings. He became a Christian at one of the rallies and ten years later, the club invited Dr Ham to lead another campaign, where a 16-year-old became a Christian in 1934. His name was Billy Graham.

It is interesting to trace back whom you have met on your life journey and what influences they have had on you, and I would encourage every reader of this book to do that.

For many people they are just meetings of coincidence, but Christians believe they are God-incidences and that

God brings people into contact for a purpose, such as to help someone discover Christianity.

Also, it is fascinating to trace back and see how many people over many years have been involved in bringing someone to faith.

One such person is Berti Dosti, who became a Christian even though he was a Communist captain in the Albanian Army. This closed country had a dictator, Enver Hoxha, who ruled with a rod of iron from 1941 until his death in 1985. He proudly declared in 1967 that his nation had 'abolished God' and it had become the world's 'first atheistic state'.

I first met Berti Dosti in May 2009 when I had been made redundant after 37 years in journalism and was wondering what to do next. I wrote to six charities I had supported all my life and offered to write for them for free. One of them invited me to go on a trip with them to Albania. I was delighted as I had always been intrigued by this country which had been cut off to the rest of the world for more than 40 years.

There I met the former Captain Dosti, and now Pastor Dosti. As I talked to him, I was staggered by how God spoke to Berti and the number of people He had used all over the world, and in the most unlikely places, to help bring him to faith, and this gave me the idea for this book.

Albania, or in Albanian Shqipëria, translated as the Land of the Eagle, had been a forgotten country, but when Hoxha died in 1985, it opened its borders again to the rest of the world. People began to take notice of it,

especially when England drew Albania in the 1990 World Cup qualifying competition. But the English team was so suspicious about this secret country that they brought their own food, their own chef and flew home immediately after the away game in March 1989, which they won 2-0, Bryan Robson and John Barnes scoring the goals.

However, Albania, which is just north of Greece and across the Adriatic from Italy, is waking up after more than 40 years of living under probably Europe's cruellest and severest totalitarian regime.

The country, which has a surprising Christian heritage, has now gone from a dictatorship to a democracy, from a badly-resourced military force to a member of NATO, and from an isolated state without a friend in the world, to wanting to become a member of the European Union and from a closed country to an open one welcoming tourists.

This book is the journey of how Captain Berti Dosti became Pastor Berti Dosti against a backdrop of a radically changing country that is rejoining the world family.

I am indebted to many, many people on my own life journey and their help with this book.

I would like to thank Richard Tiplady, the former British director of the European Christian Mission, who sent me to Albania and started me on this fascinating project. Thanks to all at ECM (European Christian Mission) and all at Trans World Radio.

The book would not have happened without the help of Berti and Tatjana Dosti and translator Alma Sylá who have all become close friends. It is amazing to think that if

I, as a journalist and Christian, had met Captain Berti some years ago in Albania he would probably have arrested me.

To be fluent in probably two of Europe's most difficult languages is no mean achievement, especially when Alma didn't learn English until her early-20s and mostly taught herself under candlelight at night.

I am also extremely grateful to my journalist colleague and sister-in-law Jackie Gregory, who cast a careful sub-editor's eye over the manuscript.

Finally, my eternal thanks to someone who inspired me to write the book, who gave me many constructive comments and ideas and who has been my best friend and closest companion on my own life's journey – my wife Jan.



1

IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT GOD WE WILL MEET AGAIN TOMORROW

Berti Dosti faced a terrible but intriguing dilemma. He was an Albanian army captain and his job as a radio specialist was to listen in to the world's airwaves during the 1980s, as his country feared they were about to be invaded by the West, particularly by Russia, the USA and Britain. He was in the middle of a 24-hour shift and he was getting tired and bored, as he had had to do more than his fair share of duties recently. As he idly twiddled the radio dials, he heard a voice saying: "If you want to find out more about God we will meet again tomorrow."

9

Like all Albanians, 32-year-old Berti had been told God didn't exist and that anyone caught showing an interest in a Western radio programme and religion could expect a heavy punishment for not only them, but also on their family, their children and even their grandchildren. Still, something intrigued Berti. But how could he take up that invitation putting his whole family at risk and how could he listen in secretly when one in two Albanian army personnel was reckoned to be a government spy?

For five nights a week Trans World Radio, a Christian station in Monte Carlo, beamed a 15-minute programme in Albanian on 1467 kilohertz (kHz), 600 miles over Italy and across the Adriatic into this secretive country. Although these two places were only a few hundred miles apart and both were in Europe – in reality they were worlds apart.

Monte Carlo was a luxury resort, a tax exile and home of millionaires in the principality of Monaco in the south eastern Mediterranean corner of France, attracting the super rich, including film stars, gamblers or Formula 1 stars racing in the Monaco Grand Prix.

On the other hand, Albania, north west of Greece and opposite the heel of Italy, had a slightly different tourism policy – no visitors welcome under any circumstances. The nearest anyone had of reaching Albania in the 1970s and 1980s was if a sun worshipper on the nearby Greek island of Corfu on a boat happened to stray into Albanian waters. The watching Albanian military would quickly

show them the error of their ways and force them back to their island beaches.

Since taking power in 1944, Enver Hoxha had turned Albania into the world's most isolated country, ruling it with Stalinist tyranny and fear. He was determined to wipe out religion, repeating a phrase taken from the 19th century Nationalist leader Pashko Vasa who said: "There is no religion in Albania, except being an Albanian."

This fanatical despot waged war on religion just as he had done with the Fascist Italian and German occupiers during the Second World War.

He destroyed churches or converted them into post offices, schools, weapon depots, cafes, barns, storehouses or museums. The cathedral at Shkodra was even turned into a volleyball court and in 1972, a museum of atheism was opened in the capital Tirana. For the last 23 years of his Communist rule there was not a single functioning church in the country. All 2,169 religious buildings, including mosques, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches were closed. Of the country's 1,600 churches, monasteries and cultural centres in 1967, fewer than 80 were still standing 23 years later when communism ended in 1991.¹

Many Orthodox priests and Christians were sent to prison, tortured and then executed by firing squad. During Hoxha's reign of terror, 335 Orthodox priests

1 *The Resurrection of the Church in Albania. Voices of Orthodox Christians.*
Jim Forest, WCC Publications.

died by execution, mistreatment, untreated illnesses or exhaustion. By the time it finished, only 22 Orthodox priests were still alive. All religious institutions were forbidden to have any connections or headquarters outside Albania, so the Roman Catholic Church had to cut its links with Rome and was designated instead as the Independent Catholic Church of Albania.

The constitution banned all “fascist, religious warmongerish, anti-socialist activity and propaganda”. Prison sentences of between three and ten years were imposed for the possession of “religious propaganda and for the production, distribution or storage of religious literature.”

Another decree targeted Christian names. Any citizen whose name did not conform to “the political, ideological or moral standards of the state” was required to change it. To help parents, the government published lists with pagan names to choose from, including newly-created names such as Marenglen (a combination of Marx, Engels and Lenin). A new girl’s name, Enverjada, was invented in honour of Enver Hoxha, while his nicknames of Shpati and Tarasi also became accepted names for children.

Despite this, Albanians are proud of their history and believe they have a rich religious heritage.

In the Bible in Romans 15 verse 19, the Apostle Paul states: “So from Jerusalem all the way round to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.”²

2 New International Version of the Bible.

Today the Roman Illyricum would be part of Albania, the Dalmatian coast, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro with the River Sava being the northern border.

The Catholic historian, Daniele Farlati, believes the Apostle Paul came to Albania.

He is supported by the theologian FF Bruce, who points out that in Acts 20 Paul travelled through Greece and there would have been time for him to call in to Albania. Because he travelled by ship round the Mediterranean it was likely that, to get to Thessalonica, he went along the Egnatian Way, which begins at Dyrrachium, the modern port of Dures in Albania, goes through Greece and ends in Constantinople (modern Istanbul).³

Some Albanian Christians believe Paul preached in the centre of Apollonia, a city 10 km from the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea near Fier which flourished under Roman rule. Today many tourists visit these impressive ruins. Whether Paul stopped in Albania cannot be proved, but what is fact is that by 59AD, Dyrrachium had its first Christian bishop and up to 70 Christian families were living there.



Meanwhile, Berti had been taught Albanian history at school without the religious heritage. This made his

3 *The Message of Acts*, John R W Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*, IVP, Page 316.