

In Death's Queue

An Irishalb Diary

By Ndrek Gjini

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Note:

This is a work of non-fiction. These stories contain neither fictitious persons, nor fictitious events. To avoid hurting the living or distressing the dead, some names and place names have been changed. Certain characteristics of the persons and places involved, including the author's, have been altered. Though this is a work of non-fiction, I have taken certain storytelling liberties. However, everything written here really happened.

I

In Death's Queue

*Forwarded by Máire Holmes**

To the heart of hidden lives

Ndrek Gjini's core is Albanian. His vision promotes peace.

His book, 'In Death's Queue', engages the reader to the heart of hidden lives and introduces us to other souls. His personal sense of aesthetic reveals truth, beauty and love; illuminated here with powerful insight by using the dark contradictory opposite: calumniations, distortions and indifference flourish, showing scenes of retaliation. The following harrowing stories are showered with empathy.

Knowing about the Kanun is painful, it is a practice carried out to this day. Death by the ritual of Kanun has been and remains the fate of many innocent people. Gjini's style of writing encourages the reader to reflect. He places each true story in location, time and situation. He draws us immediately into the conflict, both historic and personal. Shame and honour are like victorious flags, strangling each other, to make honour glorious. To feel honour, one must not be shamed; what remains uppermost in the mind of this Irish reader; is the shame of what it means to be honourable.

The loss of life and promotion of this custom brings fear to families. In the aftermath, destroyed hopes, unfinished dreams and lives are cut short. It amounts to toxic pride, particularly for those who act in revenge. Counting bodies, leave us turning pages in a book as we sink into a world of deep distrust. It is a haunting impression of an ancient shadow.

Gjini shows his own personal courage. Sharing his knowledge he delves into Albania, and tells what is not widely known. He cares for those killed in the past, is anxious about the present and paves a proposition for the future. Gjini is to be trusted. His first hand encounters fill us with dread, knowing his sensitive nature. He has met or known many of the real people in these stories. He has suffered immeasurable loss. His cries of help are full of anguish. His tears spill for humanity and for his Country. He has lived this reality and it echoes in the knell of sorrow.

His writing touches the spirit of Albania and his stories here reflect a dispirited people clinging to the bullet as revenge lies in waiting - be it near a forest, a house, a taxi or in an Irish pub. The Kanun, respected by some, disregarded by others seeks no respect from neighbouring nations. It spreads across boundaries and borders, killing sons of Albania, wherever footfall finds a target. What may look like a random killing in a small village, is telling a story of a life for a life. The value placed on life is undermined by what is deemed honourable. To estimate is to terminate.

When Ndrek Gjini was studying for an M.A. in Writing at the National University Galway, Ireland; his fellow students were astounded by his command of English. His interest in all things Irish and the depth of his poetic abilities impressed everyone. It occurred to me on first hearing Ndrek Gjini reading one of these stories, that he felt safe. He felt secure among those who valued his passion for honesty. He was willing to share insights to an audience who did not judge Albania on the basis of the Kanun. He was greatly encouraged to read and write more stories.

There is an immense difference between writing; recording the event and being privy to central characters during the real experience. Meeting the survivors, and in some cases the accused, Gjini has brought us as close to the situation as is possible. Gjini is able to transcend law by empowering emotion, imagery and dialogue without trespassing into a cloud of censorship.

Here as poet and writer, he uses depth to get us beneath veiled truths. His words need to be heeded to stop the spilling of blood.

Where death leads to more death, it can never annihilate the birth of new hope. Ndrekgjini spreads wings across his vision. He lifts our level of consciousness.

Gjini is a gentle man. He hosts a gentle soul.

If he does not raise a flag of awareness, who will?

*Máire Holmes is an Irish poet and playwright. She was the outreach writer for the National University of Ireland, Galway from 1998 to 2008.

I

In Death's Queue

The Book of Death Called Kanun

When I worked as a journalist in Albania from 1988 to 2001, I investigated a number of cases in which individuals' lives were shattered as a result of Kanun. This is an ancient code of law by which Albanians have policed one another since the 13th Century. In the 21st Century it still holds sway in some regions of the country—particularly in the North. The Government does not have the power to administer justice in those regions; ancient custom fills the gap. By the law of Kanun, private citizens may kill private citizens. The problem is not dying out; it is getting worse.

Kanun is a highly structured code. Its main purpose is to regulate blood feuds (gjakmarrja). These feuds arise from mutual 'honour killings'. If a person from family A is killed or injured, or even shown a disgraceful lack of public respect by a person from family B, all those in family A have the right, even the obligation, to murder the person from family B who showed disrespect. Once vengeance has been taken, however, all members of family A become targets for reprisal by B. After something like this gets started, you can appreciate how wildly and rapidly it can spread. It can go from family A to B to C, all the way to Z.

Revenge killings occurred for generations. They still occur in Albania. Once a chain reaction of killing gets started, it cannot be stopped. The Kanun states, "Blood is under no circumstances lost." A comparable English proverb is, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Those who have not taken vengeance fall into dishonour. At public meetings, they are served brandy in a glass, or coffee in a cup, and in the bottom of the drinking vessel there will be a bullet. This means revenge is coming.

The only place where it is not permitted to shed blood is in the home of the victim. As a result of blood feuds, houses in North Albania are like limestone forts. They have tiny

apertures, not really windows at all. In order to escape from death by revenge, some people stay inside for many years. Sometimes they stay inside until they die.

The Kanun does not permit the killing of children under 12 years of age. However, when a child turns 12, he had better be careful.

The Killing of Arben Kola

22nd February 1997: Another blood feud killing hit County Korce. Arben Kola, a 14-year-old boy from a small village in Korce was killed this morning. The editor told me to go to Korce and gather as much information as I could about the murder. The first person I met was the superintendent of Korce Police Station, Mark Molla. He gave me a big file to look at, telling me that another detective would soon give me another file about the murderer as he had been arrested just two hours earlier. After about an hour, the other police detective entered the room. 'It was a blood feud case again', he said and dropped another file on the table with the murderer's name and his picture. 'We got him. He has been arrested and charged for killing Arben Kola'.

After five hours reading through endless documents and looking at many pictures of Arben's face and body covered in blood, I was feeling dizzy. There were pictures of him in his house, pictures of him playing, pictures of the road through the village where he passed every day. I needed to rest for a little while. I closed my eyes for two or three minutes. Unconsciously, I started to reconstruct in my mind the last hours of Arben's life and his unfinished journey towards the border of Greece:

There is a small house. There are nine children. All they have is a little kitchen, which they also use as a sitting room, and two bedrooms. He moves about the house in the darkness automatically, as if guided by radar. A quick mouthful of water from the bucket in the corner, he dries himself with the flour bag hanging behind the door and is now ready for adventure. Out and away, no goodbyes or cheerios in his house; they are so poor they cannot afford formality. He is the only man in this house since his father was jailed for murdering his boss. Arben decides to leave the country without telling anyone. It is a cold, windy morning that meets him, with the moon scuttling across the sky. Not a sinner in sight. Hugging the wall, he scurries along. He tries to run to keep his bare feet warm. With the long 'cabbie's' coat flapping around his legs, he heads down a frost covered lane. He passes the millpond, down along the sides of the woods. Every hedge hides a phantom. '*I must keep going,*' he says to himself. He passes the graveyard where some of his ancestors lie. He says an '*Ave*' for them. There is the old oak tree, which in summertime he climbed looking for nests. He turns the bend in the road. The moon has lit

up the landscape. There before him stepping out from the shadows of the hawthorn hedge is a huge man. He is dressed in breeches, leggings, and boots that squeak – a strangely, strong, aristocratic sound – and a heavy coat, grey in colour, topped off with a deerstalker hat, doubled up and tied.

‘Hello young man,’ he says to Arben in a deep voice. ‘What are you doing up so early?’

‘I am going to Greece, I am leaving the country’.

‘How can you leave? You are the only man in the house as your father is in prison. He killed my brother. Did you know that?’

‘No I didn’t.....I don’t know who you are either. Can I go now please? I have to leave, I need to go to Greece... to work there... we need money for food’.

The man takes out a revolver and shoots him three times.

The Story of Linda and Her Grandson, Andy.

I

23rd April 1998: Linda is a very distant cousin of mine. I hadn't met her for many years, I think since she was 13, when her mother and her grandfather were killed in a blood feud fight. Some years ago, I heard that Linda's brother had taken revenge. He had killed the man who assassinated their mother and grandfather.

Many years pass. I live and work as a journalist in Tirana now, while Linda is still living in County Shkoder. Today, I drove up there to meet Linda, but it was not our relationship that brought me there. I had to interview her after her grandson was killed yesterday on the way back from the maternity hospital.

After the interview, I spent three or four hours with Linda just talking about her life. On my way back to Tirana, I reconstructed all her life as she told it to me.

II

It was 3:30 pm when Linda Drini opened her eyes after she had given birth to her baby boy. The first question that she asked was, 'Where is Andy? Did he arrive yet?' No one there answered her question because no one knew who Andy was. They knew very little about Linda either. She fell asleep again for another hour or so. Linda was delighted to have another baby, almost 32 years after having her first child.

She had experienced a very difficult and dark upbringing. Her mother Lume and her grandfather were killed when she was just 13 years old. Her father Skender became an alcoholic. Linda had left school at just eight years old and had given birth to a beautiful baby daughter just six years later. Just to please her father she decided to name her little girl Vera. The reason for this was that Vera was the name of Linda's grandmother on her father's side. The village gossips said that the father of Linda's baby was Skender. Not Skender Drini, the head schoolteacher, but Skender Drini, Linda's father. She herself was not able to prove or disprove that because during that time she worked as a prostitute. When the pubs closed, she used to go out and follow some rich drunk people - bankers, businessmen, teachers, priests and so on - and have sex with them. Every night she had sex with more than eight or ten of them. When she arrived home with lots of money, her

father Skender, who was always drunk, often demanded sex from her. When Vera was born, Linda dedicated her life to her. Until now, Vera had been Linda's only child.

Vera was everything to her; a daughter, a sister, a mother. Linda had nobody except her daughter. Vera herself had a life similar to her mother's, but worse. She, too, got pregnant when she was 13 years old. It was a rainy winter's night when Vera's uncle Petrit, who had been a police officer, raped her. Three months later, discovering that she was pregnant, Vera told her mother about the rape. Linda took her daughter to the police station and reported the incident. Her uncle Petrit, the police officer, left the country two days after the rape was reported. At 14, Vera had given birth to a son, whom she had named Andy. However, nine months later, Vera herself had been killed in a car crash. She and Father Martin, the local priest, were both drunk when the accident happened. Vera was in Father Martin's car. They were driving very fast when their car hit a truck. They both died instantly. Since the death of her daughter in that tragic accident, Linda had been her grandson's only guardian. She became reclusive, and only left the house to run errands. So, Andy had become her main focus in life.

She devoted her life to him. Her love for Andy was an obsession. Andy grew up very quickly. He looked like Petrit, very tall and handsome. Andy left school after he finished sixth class. Based on the rules of Kanun, he was forced to stay inside the house to escape from the blood feud. 'He is a man now,' his grandmother pointed out. 'He has to take care of me and look after the house'. Linda started to drink heavily, not in pubs, but at home, where the bar never closed. Some nights after drinking, she would tell Andy that she was feeling cold, and after giving him plenty of brandy to drink, she would ask him to stay close to her to keep her warm.

III

At 4:35 pm, Linda opened her eyes again. She repeated the same question, 'Where is Andy? Has he arrived yet?' Now Andy was there, standing very close to his grandmother's bed, gazing at her and the baby that suckled her breast fervently. Just then, a nurse with a folder in her hands entered Linda's hospital room. 'I think it's time to call this baby's father so he can come and collect you both,' she said, smiling broadly. 'I'm afraid we must ask you to leave the hospital today as we have a lot of patients waiting

for beds.' Andy looked at her. 'I am the father of this baby', he said in a timid voice, 'and I would be grateful if you could arrange a taxi home for us, please.'

On their way home, someone mysteriously killed Andy. Detectives say it was blood feud revenge.

The Accident

I

22nd October 2000: Murat Gurra and his son are sitting on a bench in the first row of the courtroom of Tirana Court House. Many years ago, Murat's brother killed a man from Kopliku's family in a blood feud clash, based on the old custom called Kanun. This custom is still strong in Lezha region. Murat and his son are forced to stay inside their house nearly all the time. This is only their second time to come to Tirana in 21 years. They are here to attend a court case against Edi Kopliku, who killed Viron Boga.

Actually, the story about Viron's death has its roots in a December night 21 years ago, when Murat and his son Latif decided to break the rules of Kanun. They went to Tirana for a night out. That night, however, was a very unlucky night for them. They were injured quite badly after their car hit a tree on their way home. Since then they have been permanently disabled.

After I attended this court case four days in a row, and listened to all the stories that were told before the judiciary, I decided to rebuild their life story, as a plot for a future book. I thought it could be interesting for younger generations to see how Kanun destroyed many lives.

II

'Get up and answer the door', said Murat to his son Latif.

'You go and get it', replied Latif, 'I told you that I'm feeling very sick today'. They did not know that this doorbell ring was going to change their lives forever.

Murat Gurra is nearly 65 years old now, while his son Latif is 42. They live together in a small country house near Lezha. As they have both been disabled for many years, they have rented out all their land just to get enough money for good care. In the accident Murat had broken his vertebrae; his son Latif had lost his left leg. On the night of the accident they had drunk far too much. Leaving Tirana on their way back home, Latif was driving very fast. His father told him to slow down. He didn't listen to his father's advice and their car hit a tree. They say that they do not remember much about what happened after the accident, and who brought them to the hospital. However, they remember and argue many times about an event before the accident during their night out in Tirana.

Latif was the one who got a lady that night in the pub. She was in her 30s while Latif himself just had turned 21. She was drunk. She started smiling and talking to him with deep admiration. She told Latif that her name was Ana Boga and that she was a secondary school teacher. She said she had been engaged for nearly seven years to a headmaster in Kruja town called Edi Koplaku, but she left him one month previously, as one day she caught him having sex in his office with a new teacher. After an hour or so of talking, Latif took Ana out of the pub to the rear of the hotel next door, and in a dark place had sex with her. Latif did not notice that his father, who was completely drunk, was following them. After he had sex, Latif ran into the pub ahead of her. He started to drink, while she was still outside trying to put her clothes on. While going back home, just two minutes before the accident happened, Murat told his son that he had sex with that lady too, minutes after Latif had left her alone in the dark. He said he raped her. 'Bastard, shame on you,' Latif said to his father. 'It was an accident, I was drunk, extremely drunk,' replied his father. A minute later their car hit the tree.

That night was a horrible night. Three more accidents happened within six hours. Two children died in a house fire in Shkoder. A priest in Burrel hanged himself. A distressed lady in her 30s ran over an old man and killed him. One day later, all the accidents that happened on that tragic night were mentioned in newspapers including their names. Ana Boga's name and her picture were on the front page of one of the papers: "A drunk teacher kills an old man'. No one was jailed for all the accidents that happened on that night, except Ana who killed that old man. She then spent two and half years in prison for this. She was pregnant during the trial. Ana was in prison in Tirana when she gave birth to her son whom she named Viron. Her son was one and half years old when she was released from prison. In her later years, she never got married or had any other children.

III

Ana died six months ago, after suffering from cancer for a long time. Until the last weeks of her life, every time that her son Viron asked her about his father, she used to tell him a lie. She told him that she was married to a man from Mirdita; that her husband emigrated to America when Viron was just two years old; that he died in America, while working in an underground mine; and that she didn't succeed in bringing his body back home

because he was working under a false name.

Two weeks before her death she decided to tell her son the truth about her life. 'I don't want to die without burning the chapter of my made-up story,' she said to Viron. Full of tears, after taking a deep breath, she began to tell the truth about how she went to Tirana for a night out. It was around Christmas time, just one month after her relationship with her boyfriend Edi Koplaku had ended. She told him that she got drunk that night and had sex with a handsome young lad. Within minutes while she was dressing, another man appeared in the darkness and he raped her. Ana told Viron everything. She left the pub drunk, and driving home she killed an old man. Ana told her son that she was pregnant during her trial. She gave birth to him on the following August 28, while she was locked up in jail. Telling the truth to her son was a great release for her. Just one day before her death she said, 'The days after I told the truth to my son Viron were the brightest days in my life.'

IV

Viron is 20 years old now. He is living alone. Two months after the death of his mother, all the media started to mention his name, as he was the youngest man ever in this country to win 100 million leke, equal to €1 million in the lotto. He was not fazed by this big amount of money. After the death of his mother, Viron was very busy trying hard to find his real father. After he won the lotto money, the first thing that he did was visit his neighbour Miri, a retired detective. He asked him if he could do something to find out the truth about his father. Miri told Viron that he would try to do his best to fulfil this mission. Meanwhile, Viron got a phone call from a man who told him that his name was Edi Koplaku. He told Viron that he was a 55-year-old widower....and some day would love to meet up for a chat. Viron told him that he would give him a call back, but he did not. Ten days after the visit to his house, Miri, the retired detective, rang Viron and asked him to come to his house. When Viron arrived Miri had everything for him in a big folder; everything about the accidents that happened during the unfortunate night 21 years ago. On the cover page of that file were the names of Murat Gurra and Latif Gurra, and their address. Viron grabbed the folder, ran out, got into his car, and sped up towards that small country house near Lezha.

He was waiting outside the door of this house, and had rung the bell many times, while Murat was arguing with his son Latif about getting up to open the door. Viron did not have the patience to wait any longer. He pushed the door open and went in. After saluting them he sat on an old sofa without their permission. 'Who are you?' asked Murat, while Latif was gazing at him in silence. 'I am your...' replied Viron breathing very fast, 'I am your son'.... 'I mean if I am your son,' he said looking at Murat, 'this man here is my brother', pointing his finger at Latif. 'And if this man here is my father', said Viron pointing his finger to Latif, "you are my grandfather" 'So.... I.... I am your...I mean I am all yours...."

V

Viron stayed there with them for two or three hours. When leaving the house he promised them that he would come back in three or four days and talk more about the future of the family. But, unfortunately someone murdered him just half an hour after he left that country house, while driving towards Tirana.

When eight months later Edi Kopliku was arrested and charged with Viron's murder, he said to the judges, 'I killed him, firstly because he didn't accept me as a father. Secondly, he told me that he was Murat Gurra's son.If he was Murat Gurra's son, based on the Code of Kanun I was forced to kill him, because Murat's brother had killed my father. You know very well that, 'Blood for blood'; Kanun states this, not me. I could not live with dishonour. I am not a chicken-hearted man to let people serve me coffee with a bullet in it. No. No way, Edi Kopliku is not that kind of man, you should know that.'

The Story of Besnik Biba and Kate White

25th August 2005: It was 1:20 am when my phone rang. It was a lady from 'Lionbridge', a translation company in Dublin. After apologising for the inconvenience at this late hour, she asked if I could take an assignment at 9:30 in the morning at Stepside Garda Station in Dublin. A young man from Albania had handed himself in to the police after he killed a barman. 'The detectives want to question him, but he has very little English. We need your help please'.

I arrived at Stepside at 9:15 am. A young Irish lady was waiting outside the front door. 'I am Kate, Kate White. Are you the Albanian interpreter?' she asked. 'Can you please give these cigarettes to Besnik Biba?' 'I will ask the police officer to do so,' I answered. A police officer on the front door said, 'I will bring them to Besnik, no problem.'

I spent four hours inside Stepside Garda Station. I am not allowed to repeat verbatim what was said in there, but this is Besnik's story:

'You should go and kill Duda's son, so, you should! You are a man now. Do you hear me or not? We can't live any more with this shame. The entire village is saying we are not brave enough to fulfil the obligation of Kanun. Revenge is blessed by God. Murat Duda murdered two of your brothers. I resent being served coffee and brandy with a bullet in the cup or glass. This is shame for me, shame for my family, and shame for all our tribe'.

This was Besnik Biba's father talking to Besnik, when he was just 16 years old.

'No', said Besnik, 'No. Never.' His eyes were wet with tears. 'I can't, you know that Murat Duda has just two sons. After Murat was sent to jail, one has gone abroad and the other one is my close friend. We went to school together. I can't. Believe me, I can't'.

He walked towards the door and left. He disappeared.

After eight months, Besnik rang his family. He was settled in Rome. His mother cried every time she talked to him. His father's talk to Besnik was always brief. He still blamed Besnik for the shame that he brought on the family by not being brave enough to kill one of Murat's sons. He never forgot to finish his conversation by saying that he is still being served coffee and brandy with a bullet in the cup or glass. These words were a nightmare for Besnik.

After working for many years as a builder, Besnik started studying architecture in Sapienza University in Rome. Over there he met Kate White, a first-year Irish student from Dublin. They fell in love. When the summer exams were over, Kate invited Besnik Biba to Dublin for holidays.

He spent nearly two months at her house. One day, Besnik got a call from his father. He told Besnik that Murat Duda's oldest son was working as a barman in Johnnie Fox's pub, in Glencullen on top of the Dublin Mountains. He had arranged everything for him. He gave Besnik the address of another Albanian man. From him, Besnik could get a revolver "for free". He said to Besnik that he couldn't live with the shame anymore. 'Kanun', 'revenge', 'blood feud', 'killing' – those words were like bullets. Besnik was feeling dizzy. The last words he heard from his father were; 'Listen to me my son, if you are not going to do this right now, tonight, I will kill myself. Everything is ready, everything, ok'. You have to do it. I cannot hold this shame on myself any longer. Go. If you are my son, go now. Now, Ok'.

Besnik started crying. He went to a shop, bought a bottle of whiskey, and drank it. He got a taxi, went to that Albanian man, got the revolver, and after that went straight to Johnnie Fox's pub. He entered the pub, ordered a double whiskey and sat at a table.

'Is there an Albanian barman working here?' he asked.

'Yes', replied a young waiter, pointing at a tall man behind the bar. Besnik Biba went over. 'Are you Murat Duda's son?' he asked the barman. 'Yes, I am indeed', replied the man behind the bar with a big smile on his face. 'I am Besnik Biba,' said Besnik and shot Murat Duda's son five times.

'At least my father will feel proud of me now,' he murmured to himself, and ran to the taxi, which was waiting outside. He told the taxi man to bring him as quickly as possible to the nearest Garda Station. Besnik gave the revolver to the Gardaí and told them that he had just killed a barman at Johnnie Fox's pub.

When I had finished interpreting, while walking towards my car, I saw Kate White again. She was still there.

Kate White was pregnant. 'A baby is going to be born soon,' I said to myself, getting into my car. 'He will have Albanian blood, but not the Albanian 'blood feud'. Maybe, he will

hold an Albanian name, but not the Albanian revenge. Perhaps he will learn the Albanian language, but not the Albanian Code of Kanun. He will never be served coffee or brandy with a bullet in a cup or a glass'.

A Letter from my Father

23rd February 2008: Today I got a letter from my father. Aleks Mudi, who used to live next door to us, has been killed; It was a blood feud killing.

Twenty years ago, Aleks came to live in Tirana, in the hope of escaping from the blood feud (gjakmarrja). His brother Kujtim had killed Bislim Kodra, a police officer, in County Kukes. When Aleks came to live next door to our apartment, he was in his early 20s. We became friends. He told us the truth about his life, about what his brother did, and about his idea to escape being murdered by moving to Tirana. He told us of his idea to change his name and surname. It took him more than three years of running from one office to another before he succeeded. Aleks Mudi was his new name. Just our family and his family knew his story and his real name. After Aleks came to live in Tirana, every day he used to wear sunglasses and put on a big hat. He worked as a taxi man. Aleks got married and had three sons. He was really dedicated to his family. His death was such shocking news for me.

It was nine years ago when I met him for the last time. I remember that day very well. He rang me and asked to meet up. He said he wanted to tell me something very important. His marriage had broken up more than one year before our last meeting. He was living alone. We met around 8 pm in a quiet pub just a few miles out of Tirana.

‘A happy father of three children, I thought I was for more than 15 years,’ he said to me that night.

‘A taximan, yes I am still a taximan, but not a father of three lovely children as I thought,’ he continued his speech in tears.

The story about his marriage break-up has its roots one year before our last meeting. I am going to write it down as he told it to me on that night.

It was September 27th, around 2:30 am, when a lady in her 30s raised her thumb asking Aleks for a lift to the maternity hospital. ‘As soon as you can please, please,’ the lady said to him. She told him to which hospital she wanted to go. ‘A lovely baby is on the way,’ he thought and sped towards the maternity hospital.

When they arrived the lady asked him if he could give her his phone number and address. ‘Just in case,’ she added with her soft voice. ‘Maybe I will need your help again when

going home...with my baby,' she said while closing the taxi door after she paid the fare. 'Ok,' he replied and gave her a small printed card with all his details on it, without thinking that this card was going to bring a horrible disaster to his life.

Three days later, his home phone rang. 'Hello is that Aleks Mudi?' the voice from the other side of the phone asked. Without waiting for any answers, the voice continued to explain that he was to go to the maternity hospital to take home his wife and their lovely baby girl.

Aleks was asleep. It was his wife who answered the phone. She rushed into his bedroom. 'Get up you bastard,' she shouted to him. Waking up suddenly, he was very confused. What on earth did he do wrong?

Days and weeks passed. His wife kept screaming and blaming him, saying that he was not faithful to her. His life became miserable. Aleks wondered what he should do to solve this horrifying problem. Where would he start?

'I sold some land and my parents' house,' Aleks moaned. He said he needed money as he had decided to get a DNA test for himself, for the little girl who was born that night, and for his family.

'The DNA test proved that the little girl is not mine. The DNA test also proved that, none of my three sons were mine either,' Aleks whimpered in.

More than nine years had passed since the night we met for the last time. Aleks is dead now. Someone killed him just a few metres away from his apartment door. In his letter, my father told me that a 17-year-old man called Lulzim Kodra had been arrested. Lulezim is Bislim Kodra's son, my father explained. He said that Aleks's wife has been questioned about this killing. She admitted that it was she who told Kodra's relatives the story how her ex-husband Aleks had changed his name and surname in order to hide and escape from the blood feud.

Last year, on a trip to New York, I bought a copy of a book called Kanun. It is written in both Albanian and English. I read it. There is just one article in that code of the Albanian ancient law, which mentions the blood feud and honour killings. In the rest of this ancient code, there are 274 articles which prohibit the killing for revenge, and suggest peaceful solutions when the murder occurs.

Yet, as there are still people in Albania who read just that one bloody article, and not the other 274, when I will go to Albania next month to visit my father, I will definitely lay a wreath at Aleks Mudi's grave. I will pray for him. I have decided to take the book of Kanun with me. I am going to burn this book, all 275 articles, at Aleks Mudi's grave. This is all I can do for him and for Albanians.

A post war crime

5th July 2011. Tony Duri, a former commando soldier to Afganistan kills both his parents today. He returned from military duty in Afganistan just two days ago. This morning, he went to visit his brother Berti in the orphanage where he has taken up residence for the last three months. Berti's story is a shocking tale. I first met Berti just two days after he joined the orphanage, and subsequently published a short article in the newspaper about him. I never thought I would shuffle back on my notebook pages to read the notes of his story again. Here is all I wrote about Berti on the day I went there.

'Berti Duri is new to this orphanage home. He is just nine years old. Berti is not like the rest of the children here, he is not an orphan child. Berti has his mother and father; he has brothers and sisters too, but he doesn't like living with them anymore. He said he hates his father so much, and he said he hates the war too.

Berti's story is not that simple. Last month he went missing for four days, after skulking away from home around midnight. The media and papers did not pay any interest to this missing child but the news of finding him and his flat refusal to go back home and live with his family became a big hit on the radio, TV and papers.

However, I am not going to tell the story about how all this big virtual storm was created. Instead, I am going to reproduce the conversation Berti had with a psychologist on the day he was found.

- Why did you leave your home and go missing, hiding in the forest?

- Because I hate my father so much.

-Why?

- He wants to sell me to NATO, as he did with Tony, my brother.

- What happened to Tony?

-Tony is gone to Afganistan. My dad sold him for 3000 euro.

-How?

-Jimmy, my dad's friend who lives in the capital city, came to our house last month. He said to my father that if he pays 3000 euro he could take Tony to go to Afganistan as a soldier for nine months. They pay the soldiers very well, Jimmy said to my father. The

payment of 2,500 a month is going to be paid to Tony's joint bank account here, and he said my dad can use all Tony's money because NATO will give Tony free food and accommodation. Jimmy said to my father that if he pays this 3000 tip to him, this thing may well be done very soon as he said his uncle is the Minister for Defence.

We are eight children and very poor. Tony is the eldest child in our family. Daddy is unemployed. We had no money to give to Jimmy as a tip. Daddy and me went to town and sold two of our cows, and six sheep to secure the money for Jimmy.

After Tony was gone to Afganistan on that night when Jimmy came to take the money, he slept over at our house. Daddy and Jimmy were drinking and talking until very late.

- What were they talking about?

- About everything. They were sitting around the kitchen table and drinking too. We have an old sofa at the corner of this room. I felt asleep for a while. Daddy went and got a blanket and put it over me so I couldn't feel the draft coming from the kitchen door.

While he tried to cover me with the blanket he woke me up, but I was pretending as if I were asleep.

- What was the subject of their conversation?

- Oh, please do not ask me about this! It was horrible talk. Jimmy said he had secured up to now 40 young lads to bring to Afganistan. All of them, he said, paid 5000 but you are my friend, that's why I took your son for 3000, he whispered to my father. Daddy said he is thankful to him. But, I was nearly dying from listening to their conversation and their plans. I went all red with anger when I heard Jimmy saying to my dad how lucky he would be if Tony was killed whilst in Afganistan. He said, if that happened, daddy would get Tony's pension for the rest of his life. Daddy stood up and started praying for this to happen; by saying that he hates Tony so much since he thinks Tony is not his real son and he would pray for him to die over there in Afganistan.

He told Jimmy that my mum had an affair with the school principal on the first year of their marriage, while she was working as a school cleaner. Daddy said he kept that secret to himself because he didn't want her to lose her job.

-What else did you hear that night?

-Oh, yes. Jimmy said he hopes that the war is going to last and he will make my dad rich because my dad's other children, he said, were growing up and they would reach the age of going to war. When daddy mentioned my name, I mean about selling me to Jimmy, to bring me to the war, when I will grow up, I found it very hard to breathe. While listening to the conversation, after two minutes, I got up and left the room telling them that I was going to go to the toilet. I stealthily opened the front door, left the house and walked through the forest. I tell you that, I am never going to go back home. Never. I hate my daddy so much. I hate going to war.

The death of Lieutenant Bali

21st November 2011. It was around 5.30 pm, when the next-door neighbor, Sonila, knocked to our door. She asked me very politely, if I could edit and proofread some of her daughter's stories. There were nine lovely short stories, which she had written on that copybook, but one of them thrilled me very much. That's why, I decided to share it with the reader of this diary.

'I am Anita. I am in sixth class. Our English teacher asked us to write about the most interesting story of our lives. Thank God she gave us a week to do it. In the beginning I had no idea regarding what story to write about. I was totally lost. Firstly I thought it will be interesting to write about how Simon, my classmate, kissed me one evening when we were coming back home from Rachel's birthday party. No, I said to myself, no, this is not a good thing to tell. After that for a moment I thought- what about writing about seeing my mum and dad naked one night, when I was terrified from an explosion that was very close to our house and I ran into their bedroom. Oh no, no, this is a shameful thing to write about, I said to myself.

After pondering upon it, shrinking and my mind excluding several stupid things, I decided to write about Mark, an old man who lived next door to us.

Yeah, I think this is the story to write about, because Mark Bali was a very well known man. Moreover, he was very good to us. I mean to all the children in our estate. Every week he bought us sweets. He was a very nice friend of ours. Some years ago, he bought us a ball and two small goals. And he helped us to put the goals up on that small field in front of our homes. Mark was a soldier in the Second World War. No,... sorry, he was not a soldier, but a commander-in-chief, because every one use to call him 'Lieutenant'. He told us many stories about the war. Some were good but some of them were very boring indeed. Anyway, he told us he gets lots of money every week as he gets his pension and a special pay for his role in World War II. He told us that his wife died many years ago after a long and painful struggle with cancer. He was living with his son Noel, his only child. To be honest none of us liked Noel. He was not married. He didn't go to work at all, just to the pub and back home. On the many occasions we had to

retrieve our ball from his garden, we would find him drunk, speaking and screaming very bad words to all of us.

Anyway, I don't care about Noel at all. And I really don't want to talk about him. I want to talk about Mark Bali, the Lieutenant, Noel's father, because he was our friend. Last year, he was sick. The ambulance came one night and took him to the hospital. One Saturday afternoon four of us went to visit him. After three weeks, he left the hospital and came home. But he didn't come out to play with us anymore or buy us sweets. Noel didn't allow us to go inside his house and visit him. One day we decided to knock on his door and ask Noel about Mark. We asked him when Mark would be able to come out to play with us. Actually, we were thinking about sweets and maybe asking him to buy us a new ball. 'Mark has gone. He has gone to live with his younger brother in Medignal town, Ok? Don't come to my door anymore, Ok! That's it.', Noel said and closed the door in haste.

But,... we knew that Noel was not telling the truth. We all knew that Noel wasn't a good man at all. We said this many times to each other and every one of us agreed on that.

Nearly five months from the day that we knocked for the last time on that door, (while we were playing outside), we saw two police cars and one emergency ambulance that stopped in the front of Noel's house. They went in, and when they came out, one of the police officers had chained his arm to Noel's. After them, the people with the white uniform who came with the emergency ambulance car were holding something big covered in white sheets.

We were terrified. We asked each other many questions about what had occurred. I think every one in our estate, be it young or old, was shocked and left wondering what really happened. I didn't sleep at all that night. Just thinking and thinking about those scenes.

The next day in a national newspaper, we saw Noel's face behind a big head line, which said, 'Son hid his dead father for four months in a rubbish bin just to get his pension and other benefits as a war veteran'

We all knew that Noel was a bad man. I told you that didn't I?'

II

My life in The Green Planet

*Forwarded by Michael Mullen**

A stranger to the town

I cannot recall the exact date and day upon which I met Ndrek Gjini. He was a charming man, quiet of voice and possessed an intelligent eye. He was a political exile from his country, a most respected journalist and writer and well established in his own country. It was his journalistic honesty which caused both himself and his family to flee from Albania and seek refuge in the West. First they came to Dublin and then to Castlebar. The events of the first two years in exile are Kafkaesque, sad and taste of bitter salt. Both he and his family were thrown a new culture. They lived in a single room in Castlebar, their language skills were limited and there were two children to rear. Ndrek Gjini was locked out of a literary culture and poured patiently over dictionaries trying to come to terms with a new language. Then one day, like the young gull on a high Aran rock face, he threw himself into the air and learned to fly. He emerged from his limiting space and began to talk. Quietly both he and his family found their voices and their friends. Thanks to a kind neighbor, they moved into a good house, sent their children to school and began the process of integration. Ndrek had found his voice. He began to write in English. First he wrote poetry which I regard as firm, sad, heart warming and unusual. It has a definite tone and deep maturity. It looks at the world in an unusual way. Formerly I ink flowed through his veins, then it was frozen by tyranny, and now it is flowing freely again.

Like many literary exiles he has begun to keep a diary. It has been published in the Connaught Telegraph weeks by week and how honest and moving it is. As a stranger to the town he looks upon us with a novel eye. He observes things which we take for

granted. He looks upon everything freshly as if the world has been newly made for him. It was slowly and with difficulty that he has reached that position but one must remember that there have been fine writers in English who were born abroad. Tom Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia and Conrad was Polish. Samuel Beckett wrote in French.

Ndrek Gjini's diary is wonderful to read. Every page is human. Every page tells you something about the man and his family and the small domestic adventures which are part and parcel of living and always have been so. His writing is never sycophantic. He states his truth plainly. He set things down as he sees them in an easy fashion.

Such voices are wonderful to listen to. I am sure that these writings will be enjoyed by a wide range of people.

*Michael Mullen is an Irish novelist with international reputation, with over 30 novels published in Ireland and abroad.

II

My life in The Green Planet

Castlebar and its generous people are feeding my dreams

1st January 2005

A new year but same old weather. The winds blow and the rain falls. The gales never seem to stop whistling in the chimney but I console myself that spring, with its gift of brighter days, will soon be here. In winter, the west of Ireland can be, what do you say, hard going for someone who has lived most of their life in a Mediterranean climate. I hear the wind, especially late at night when the house is quiet, the children are asleep and I am working on my computer. I use the computer a lot. It is my hobby, my passion, as I am home mostly. Socialisation in Mayo is difficult for foreigners even if my English has improved in the three years since we have been here.

15th January 2005

I am feeling better about myself and my new environment. Castlebar is constantly growing. New houses are being built all the time. What is practically a new town centre has been built. It is work in progress. Sometimes I feel I am living in a city. That may not necessarily be a good thing in the long run though. I don't like cities much. We picked Castlebar as a place to live when we came to Ireland. I felt it would be better for the children if we lived outside Dublin. I am glad we made this choice.

22nd January 2005

We live in a housing estate on the north side of Castlebar. The countryside is only a few minutes away. Today is Saturday and this morning I took my son Klajd for a walk. We walked to the top of the mountain – the mountain with the TV transmitter station on it. Klajd is still in primary school but he is getting stronger all the time. The walk was no bother to him. I make a note that we both should try to climb Croagh Patrick soon. It is good to get out of the house after a long winter.

24th January 2005

When I came here three years ago, I did not know how to say, "Yes" or "No" in English. What's more, I did not have or own anything. All my 'property' was one small bag of clothes and another bag with books and dictionaries. I was a former journalist and writer from Albania, forced to leave my country, trying to escape with my life. Now, I could say that this town is my second native home, because my life has been reborn. Most of the people here are very kind and friendly. I am happier than at the start. Here I am studying and writing. I manage to squeeze in the odd pint of Guinness or glass of wine at my friend Pablo's restaurant. I like it there - their pizzas are the best. Just as importantly, it is easier to talk to my friends there. Irish pubs can be noisy when very busy - a bit uncomfortable.

26th January 2005

One of my few frustrations about living in Ireland is that I have been unable (so far) to publish any book here; I have published many books in my own country. They are in the Albanian language, so no one can read them here. But for the last year, I have been trying to translate my poems into English with a view to getting them published. Do you know why? I really would love to share my feelings with the people here, especially my

friends who are very nice to my family and me. It is not easy; perhaps my poems will lose much of their meaning once translated, but still some of the feelings in them would remain. Castlebar and its generous people are feeding my dreams. I have written a book of poems, *The Clouds Hands*, which I would love to have published. I dedicated it to two families: Jim Brett, his wife Ann and his daughter Ann Marie; also to Christy Tynan, his wife Mary and his daughter Fionnuala. They opened up their homes and their hearts to us when we were having a very difficult time.

31st January 2005

For the past year, I have been doing a journalism course at Castlebar College of Further Education. This morning I am excited. I have begun a two-week work experience stint with the *Connaught Telegraph* newspaper. I have missed working with journalists. I wanted to share my feelings with journalists in Castlebar, to talk to them about my life and my career, about my country, my books, my poems - about everything that has happened to me. But I was not able to do that. So I went back to my house in Foxfield, near Garryduff Park and I was very sad. All I could be was sad. I didn't know how to speak English, so how was I to share my feelings with my colleagues? After that, I made a decision to learn English. Intensively. A number of kind friends gave me presents of dictionaries. One of those friends, Christy, told me if I really wanted to improve my English, I needed to get my head out of the books and get out and meet people. It is one of the best pieces of advice I ever got.

The Connaught Telegraph 16 February 2005

Mother Teresa, Ireland and Albania

8th February 2005

Mother Teresa, the most famous Albanian woman, was just 18 years old when she came to Ireland. She joined the Sisters of Loreto, a community of Irish nuns, in 1928. Then she lived in Dublin for a short period before travelling to Calcutta where she started work as a teacher. After training as a nurse in 1948, she founded a new order, the Missionaries of Charity, to serve the blind, diseased, and dying among the city's poor. In 1964 she founded Shanti Nagar, a leper colony that was built near Asansol, West Bengal. From that year, her order ran schools, clinics, children's homes, and hospices in cities throughout India and in other developing countries. She was a tiny woman with evident political skills as well as a constant sense of purpose and now is revered throughout the world. Her many honours include the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Her real name was Age (Gonxhe) Bojaxhiu. 'Gonxhe' in the Albanian language means 'bud', while 'Bojaxhi' means 'painter'. Mother Teresa started her career in Ireland so this country needs to be proud of her.

The Connaught Telegraph 16 February 2005

Patients on trolleys in Mayo General Hospital...not good for a wealthy nation

14th February 2005

Tonight, as usual, I went to the Linenhall Centre for a meeting with Castlebar Writers' Group. It is great for me because every member gets to read his or her work to other members, be it poems or short stories. Since I started coming here, I feel much better than before. I feel much more confident and better able to express myself in English, my adopted language. Four members of the Ballina Writers' Group were guests at tonight's meeting. They read a number of poems they had written about the Tsunami disaster. In these poems, I detected generosity of spirit and deep fillings.

One of things I heard tonight which surprised me was the fact that, in the past few months, Irish people have given more to the Tsunami Disaster Fund than the entire US Government. This information serves to highlight for me what a wonderful place Ireland is, a place where the people are really generous and sensitive.

At the end of the meeting, I asked one of the Ballina poets, Marty Walsh, for permission to publish part of his poem "Blink of an eye" about the Tsunami tragedy:

*In the blink of an eye in the sparkling sand
We sat on the beach I held your hand.
And as we kissed all my dreams came true
You went for a swim then I lost you.
From under the sea came the kiss of death
In the blink of an eye, the scene was set
In the blink of an eye, I heard the quake.
My heart stood still the earth did shake
Across the continents the seas did roar,
In the blink of an eye from friend to foe.
In the blink of an eye devils of the sea
Up from the deep came after me.*

*In the blink of an eye with lightning seed
That wave of sea it covered me
In the blink of an eye panic all around
As building and trees fell to the ground
Like a scene from hell death came at will
In the blink of an eye so many killed.
In the blink of an eye distraction and pain
Sadness and madness people insane
On the wet sand a mother and child
Wrapped in each other they close their eyes
In the blink of an eye its vengeance spread
I looked around thousands dead
In the blink of an eye rich and poor
Just disappeared heard of no more
I then reached out to a dying friend
His lent words to me, Is this the end?
In the blink of an eye you never can tell
At any given moment, its either heaven or hell.*

15th February 2005

My son Klajd is sick with a severe tummy bug. I spend the first of two nights in Mayo General Hospital with him. The doctors and nurses are very kind and helpful. Compared to my own country, Albania, I have to say the health services here are better.

New buildings, new technology, everything clean and a high standard of service. However, everything is not perfect. Many patients are on trolleys in the corridors. This is not good for a country like Ireland, a country which, according to the new book *Top Ten of Everything 2005*, ranks high in the table of wealthy nations. A shortage of hospital

beds suggests to me that the Irish Government needs to put more money into the health system for extending hospitals.

On a more positive note, I would like to mention some brilliant examples of Irish hospitality experienced as a result of our hospital experience. My son's friend Connor came to the hospital where he spent the whole day playing with my son. We were just two days in hospital yet, despite the short stay, we received many cards, flowers, magazines, books and flowers from our friends in Castlebar. This is the kind of thing that makes my family and me happy.

Last night our neighbour, Christine, with her children Daragh and Sinead, came to the hospital and spent more than two hours with us. This afternoon our next door neighbour, Loyola, came to our house with a pot of stew. She cooked especially for us because she thought we were going to the hospital and hadn't time to cook. These wonderful things could also have been done by people in our own native home, from people just as generous as the Irish. So, when people are treating you like this here in Ireland, you feel like you are living in your native home.

16th February 2005

Dropped in to my friend Pablo's restaurant for a quick coffee. I always feel very proud of my native country, Albania, when I see Mother Teresa's photo hanging on the wall. Pablo tells me the picture of Mother Teresa was a gift from a diner who is now his girlfriend. It seems this woman was having a meal in Pablo's and got into conversation with him about Mother Teresa and their mutual admiration for her. A few days later this lady arrived at his restaurant with the framed photo together with the enclosed message: "This picture of Mother Teresa, the most famous Albanian women, is just a small gift for your great kindness."

I met Mother Teresa twice when I was working as a journalist in Albania. Her goodness touched everyone. Even now, here in Ireland, when people get to know where I am from, they mention this great woman. When I say I met her once, people want to touch the hem of my jacket - it's as if I am saint-like.

The Connaught Telegraph 23 February 2005

My friend, Fr Michael likes to disco

24th February 2005

One of the people I have befriended since I came here with my family three years ago is Fr Michael Murphy, the priest and chaplain in GMIT, Castlebar. Fr Michael gets on well with students. They find it easy to talk to him. He is easygoing, friendly and seems to have a perpetual smile on his face.

One day an acquaintance told me Fr Michael was a regular visitor to the Mantra Disco, which is held on Thursday nights in the Welcome Inn Hotel. "If he wants to drink and dance with young women then maybe the priesthood is not for him and he should leave", this person said, not in an unkind or indignant way, but obviously shocked at the idea that this priest was frequenting the disco. It was only later, the penny dropped. Fr Michael was not a regular visitor to the disco to chat up young ladies. The weekly disco was his missionary field. Here he got to talk to the GMIT students on equal terms as a fellow young person and a human being. I see now that socializing with students at their regular discos was Fr Michael's way of getting through to the young people who are lucky to have him as their chaplain.

Anyway, there should be no big deal if priests like Fr Michael wanted to get married. Something should be done to change all those rules in the Catholic Church, many of which seem old fashioned nowadays. Priests are human beings, so why are they forbidden to marry and have children like everyone else? The rules should be changed to allow not only married priests but also women priests.

25th February 2005

I have borrowed a book about Irish folklore from the library. Reading this book I discover that fairies, snakes, and dragons are among the principal figures in Irish mythology. This is not dissimilar to Albanian mythology where we have 'kuceder' (a snake or dragon with many heads), 'shtrige' (witch) and 'stuhi' (a flame-throwing winged

being that guards treasures). To call someone a 'kukudh' (goblin) is the ultimate insult, its full meaning being "a dwarf with seven tails who can't find rest in his grave." The Zana, meaning 'fairy of the mountain', is a legendary Albanian mythological creature who helps mountainfolk in distress, while the 'ore' (fairy) also appears frequently in Albanian folklore although sometimes as an expression of fate: "i vdiq ora" (his luck ran out).

26th February 2005

A friend of mine living in London sent me an e-mail. "You are lucky to live in Ireland," he wrote, "because Irish people are responsive and sociable and you can have great fun with them. Here in London, most people are cold. They really don't like foreigners." After receiving his e-mail, I went home and decided to write something about interpersonal relations in Albania, as it struck me that they are not dissimilar to interpersonal relations in Ireland.

To this day, there is an elaborate protocol of greetings and exchanges when entering the home of an Albanian family. For example, after first being served the 'qerasje' (treat) consisting of 'liko' (a jam-like sweet) along with a drink or coffee by the hostess or other female member of the family, the visitor would enquire about the health of each member of the hostess' family in a careful and deliberate manner. Then the hostess would, in turn, enquire about the health of each member of the visitor's family. Only after this procedure is complete can people relax and begin normal conversation. The Albanians are very expressive people, using their eyes (rolling upwards), hands (approval/disapproval), and bodies (shoulder shrugging, etc) to reinforce their statements. They are great mimics and have a good sense of humour. Sacrosanct to all Albanians from olden days to more recent times is the concept of the 'besa' or pledged word. More respected than a written contract was the verbal 'besa-besen' agreement, sealed by a handshake or embrace, and woe to the person who violated it! The greatest insult in Albania is to call a man 'i-pabese', that is to say someone who has broken his word or who is disloyal or without honour.

27th February 2005

Today is Sunday. I go to Mc Goldrick's bar in Castlebar with friends to watch the rugby match between England and Ireland. Such passion and excitement! It reminded me of international soccer games back home in Tirane when Albania was playing. Rugby is not popular in Albania but it seems to have a big future in Italy, just across the Adriatic from us. Today's rugby match was a big family occasion. Everybody seemed happy that England was beaten. The Irish don't seem to like the English much. I wonder why.

The Connaught Telegraph 2 March 2005

Bombs, bullets, bank heists. Only the bad things about Ireland make news worldwide

28th February 2005

This morning I call to the Internet Cafe on Linenhall Street and log on to Albania's daily newspapers. There is no news about Ireland, has not been for weeks. The last mention of Ireland in the Albania press came in the wake of the big bank robbery in Belfast before Christmas, which was blamed on the IRA. Only the bad news about Ireland makes the papers in Albania. As a result, most Albanians have a perception of this country as a terrorist's haven. They are more used to seeing Gerry Adams' bearded face on the television than that of the Taoiseach, Mr Ahern, or the President, Mary McAleese. Thus Albanians, and indeed the inhabitants of all Balkan countries, have a distorted image of Ireland. They do not know, for instance, that Ireland has the lowest crime rate in the EU. They are ignorant of the fact that the Irish are a friendly, peaceful race and that they are extremely tolerant of foreigners. They do not know that Ireland just 30 years ago was the poorest country in EU and now is the third richest in the world. They do not know that this small country has won more Nobel Prizes for literature than Spain and Italy put together. They do not know that, on a worldwide scale, Ireland ranks in fifth place for having the highest proportion of adults in higher education and in sixth place for exporting high-tech industry. I think something should be done to promote a truer image of Ireland across the world. In Italy, Greece and the rest of the Balkans, there are almost 1,000 Irish pubs, yet there is not one centre or institute where the history and identity of Ireland can be explained or explored. There's more to Ireland than pubs, you know. What a shame and a pity the message about the real 'emerald isle' isn't getting through to the worldwide audience.

1st March 2005

My spirits are lifted by a concert of Irish traditional music, which I attended with my son, Klajd, at the Royal TF Hotel. The concert was to raise funds for St Dominic's Home for the Elderly and Day Care Centre in Newport. Joe Byrne, the master of ceremonies, was very funny. When introducing the first act, a group called "The Border Collies", he got the audience to bark like sheepdogs. Later, when one of the acts was slow to arrive on stage, he filled the gap by reciting a wonderful poem by one of my favorite Irish poets Patrick Kavanagh.

One of the acts, which greatly took my fancy, was a performance by Joe Bruke. He is known as a 'box player', or 'bosca ceoil' player in Irish, according to my friend Christy Loftus, one of the concert organizers. Joe Bruke has a white, whiskery beard. He would make a great Santa Claus. Now and again he makes droll comments such as: "I hope you like this tune. If you don't I will play it again". Mr Bruke is a big hit, as is the smiling lady with a big bun of hair on her head who accompanies on the guitar.

Two elderly men, the Lennon brothers, played some old tunes on their violins in beautiful harmony. Their bows hit the strings like bees alighting on summer flowers. But the liveliest and most enjoyable act of all, for both Klajd and me, was a slim young man in jeans called Sean Keane who played the whistle and sang. Klajd's music teacher in St Partick's National School was sitting beside him and they had a great chat. I expect Klajd will take an even greater interest in his tin whistle classes from now on.

When we went home at the end of the night, I found myself reflecting on how the majority of Irish musical instruments are similar to those in my home country. Albanian folk music is national in character but also has some Turkish and Persian influences. It sounds typically Balkan, but mainly polyphonic in the south and homophonic in north and central Albania. Music is played on folk instruments such as the cifteli (a long-necked two-stringed mandolin) and the gërnetë (a type of clarinet for popular music). Other instruments are the gajda and bishnica (wind instruments) and the sharkia and lahuta (stringed ones).

3rd March 2005

I went to Davitt College to meet Joseph McGowan, a teacher there and editor of the *Davitt News* newsletter. I have been producing this fortnightly newsletter with Transition Year students since September 2004. It is very nice to have an editor like Joseph. He is a great teacher and his desk is always groaning with pages of information, photos, poems, and short stories. He collects written work from the students and makes suggestions on how it could be improved for inclusion in the newsletter.

Today Joseph McGowan told me about his idea to feature graduates of the College in the newsletter. He has worked tirelessly to find their addresses and plans to send a letter and a copy of *Davitt News* to each, asking them to write an article about their own post-college experiences. Their stories should make worthwhile reading and, hopefully, will prove inspiring to the present crop of students.

4th March 2005

Eugene Burns, a student at Castlebar College of Further Education, was asking me about the Albanian language and I tried to explain to him all I knew about it. When I told him I received an honors degree in 1988 for teaching the Albanian language and literature, he suggested I write an article about the Albanian language. I promised him I would. When I went home later, I sat at my computer for hours, writing down all I could about my own language.

The Albanian language is not derived from any other language. It does not have a Slavic or Greek base as is commonly believed but is, in fact, one of the nine original Indo-European languages. The other eight Indo-European languages are Armenian, Balto-Slavic, Germanic, Hellenic, Indian, Iranian, Latin, and Celtic. As such, Albanian is one of Europe's oldest languages. The Albanian alphabet is Latin-based, and similar to that of English except that it is comprised of 36 letters including e and ð and nine digraphs (dh, gj, ll, nj, rr, sh, th, xh, and zh) which are regarded as single characters. The Albanian

alphabet does not have the letter w.

The Albanians are essentially a homogenous people but have been divided traditionally into two basic groups: the Gëgs in the North; and the Tosks in the South - the dividing line being the Shkumbini River which runs west-east almost across the centre of Albania. Both Gëgs and Tosks speak the same language but pronounce it with some differences. A simple example is the Albanian word for the English verb 'is'. A Tosk would say 'është' (EH-shtah), whereas a Geg would pronounce it 'asht'(AH-sht). The Tosk dialect is the official dialect of the entire country.

The Connaught Telegraph 9 March 2005

‘I was so happy after reading my poetry for the first time to an Irish audience...’

7th March 2005

Tonight, for first time since arriving in Ireland, I read my poems to an audience. The occasion was Poetry Night in association with Poetry of Ireland and the venue was the Linenhall Arts Centre, Castlebar. First, three local poets were invited to read their work: a woman from Newport, next me, then a woman from Ballina. My hands were shaking; I was nervous but happy, because after three years in this town I was finally going to read my translated poems to Irish people. I read them very slowly, trying to pronounce every word properly. I think I did well.

After the local poets, it was poet Moya Cannon’s turn to read. Moya Cannon was born in Dunfanaghy, Co Donegal and currently lives in Galway. Her first collection of poetry, *Oar*, was published in 1990, and won The Brendan Behan Memorial Prize. Her second collection, *The Parchment Boat*, was published in 1997. Moya has given many poetry readings in Ireland, Brittany, Germany and Austria, and has been published in many international journals and anthologies. She has also broadcast on RTE radio and TV and on BBC Radio, and has edited *Poetry Ireland Review*. The poems she reads at tonight’s event were excellent.

When Poetry Night was over, we went to the pub for a short drink. There, Moya Cannon asked me about my own country. She told me that Scotland is called Alban in the Celtic language. I had read something about that before but didn’t think there was any real link between Albania and Scotland.

8th March 2005

Today I spent hours scouring the Internet and pouring over books, trying to see if indeed there was any connection between Albania and Scotland. I discover the name Albania is of considerable antiquity, dating back perhaps to the pre-Celtic alb (hill), taken from Alps, or possibly from the Indo-European alb (white), taken from albino and

Albion. Byzantine historian Michael Attaints was the first to refer to the Albanians as having taken part in a revolt against Constantinople in 1043 and to the Arbanitas as subjects of the duke of Dyrrachium. The tab-Albanians and the Albanian minorities (still present in Greece) have been referred to in various ways over time: Arbenuer, Arbttnor, Arbeneshe and Arbreshe.

The Albanian name of the country, Shqipëria, translates into English as “Land of the Eagles”. No surprises, then, that there is a large presence of these animals in the mountainous zones of Albania. This would also explain the two-headed bird on the national flag and emblem.

I know that during a visit of former Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha to the Soviet Union, Stalin asked his employees if Caucasian Albania had something to do with the present Albania. Actually Stalin himself came from Georgia, and Georgians claim that they are descendants of Caucasian Albanians. But the answer to Stalin’s question was that Caucasian Albanian and the present Albania have nothing to do with each other except for the similarity of the names.

There is a theory that the Scots came originally from Albania. Indeed, I have read that the Albanian surname ‘Tare’ in Celtic Scottish means, ‘those who have not returned.

9th March 2005

Here in Ireland I have found many traditions similar to those in my own country. Additionally, there are not just similar customs but also similar types of clothes. I think it is more than coincidence, for example, that the kilt is worn in both Scotland and Albania. True, there is little comparison between the design of the ‘fustanella’ (or, to give it its full name, ‘Fustanella e Fameshme e Shqipetarit) and the tartan-patterned kilt of the Scottish clans, but isn’t it strange that even the two countries’ clan-systems bear a remarkable resemblance.

The Hungarian sociologist, Baron Nopcsa, believed that the Albanian or Illyrian kilt set the original pattern for the Roman military dress and, because of its similarity to

the Celtic kilt, he also theorized that the Roman legions in Britain, through the presence of its Illyrian element, could have started the fashion among the Celts. The Albanian kilt was common dress for men in the 13th Century, where it was regularly worn by a tribe of Dalmatians, one of the Illyrian ancestors of the Albanians. At that time, the kilt was called “Dalmatica”. But theories exist that the kilt had its origins during much earlier times as a long shirt called ‘linja’ which, when gathered at the waist by a sash, gave the appearance of a knee or calf-length kilt. Depending on the social status of the wearer, materials used in fabricating the fustanella (thereby defining the number of pleats) ranged from coarse linen or woollen cloth for villagers, to luxurious silks for the more affluent. Although the kilt was worn by men throughout Albania, today it is seen only on special occasions in southern Albania, especially in the Gjirokaster area and in the Albanian regions of Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Greece.

The Albanian and Scottish clan-systems have a number of similarities too. Noel Malcolm makes reference to them in his book, *Kosovo: A Short History*: “. . . at some time in the sixteenth century the Ottoman authorities gave up trying to impose their normal administrative or feudal system... letting the clans run their own affairs in virtual ‘zones of self-government’ instead.” Curiously, the development of the clan system in Scotland was taking place at precisely the same time, and for much the same reason: a breakdown of central power and feudal structures in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Scottish clans also developed the idea of common ancestry.

But back to the kilt. Two noted writers have referred to it in their work: Lord Byron in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, observed the “Albanian kirtled to the knee”; while T S Finlay in *Travels through Greece and Albania* states unequivocally that “it was the fame of the Albanians which induced the modern Greeks to adopt the Albanian kilt as their national costume.”

The Connaught Telegraph 16 March 2005

Ever growing Castlebar needs an urban transport system

16th March 2005

One of the things that constantly amazes me about Castlebar is its continuing growth. Older residents tell me that 60 years ago it was a very quiet place with a few donkey and horse carts competing for space on Main Street with just the odd motor vehicle here and there. Now the town is bustling. Housing estates are creeping out into the countryside and gobbling up what once used to be farmland. I have no firm statistics on this but the population of the town and adjacent countryside must now be around the 15,000 mark. Every weekday morning, as I make my way to J classes in Castlebar College for Further Education, I notice the cars, lines and lines of them, tailbacking at the town's traffic lights. So many cars, so few passengers. I often ask myself why there is no organised transport system. Such a large and developing town surely deserves one. Look at the flood of people who travel every day to work for the large scale employers such as the Mayo General Hospital, Mayo County Council, the GMIT, the many factories, not to mention the hundreds of small firms who employ perhaps between 10 and 40 workers each. Many people don't have cars so a public transport system would fulfill two needs: it would provide transport for those who have no private means of transport; and it would take vehicles off the road, making Castlebar an even more agreeable place.

One of the things I have noticed since coming here is that Castlebar has a busy nightlife. Taxis provide a good service but they can be expensive. As a result I believe that, despite the strict drinking laws, some people are tempted to drink and drive. If there was an alternative to taxis, such as a public transport system, I think a lot of people would avail of it. Come on Mayo County Council! How about an initiative on urban transport in the county?

17th March 2005

St. Patrick's Day dawns bright and clear. At least it is much brighter and milder than some of the days that have gone before. For my Irish friends, I am glad their national feast day will be marked by fine weather. For weeks, all the talk has been about the parade. The word I find in my dictionary to best describe the mood is 'ebullience'. The questions mostly go like this. Will it rain? Will the sun shine? Will there be many floats? Will there be many bands? Will there be much entertainment for the children? Nobody need have worried about the quality or turnout at the Caslebar parade - it seemed like every man, woman and child in the area was there even though there were plenty of competing parades in the region. The theme of the parade, which set off from the industrial estate (beside McHale Park) at 3 p.m. was 'The Wearing of the Green'. Most people seemed to take it literally such was the amount of greenery in the form of shamrocks, paper hats and green clothing. Amongst the happy throngs at the parade I sensed a mood of patriotism about being Irish. Afterwards the celebrations began and the pubs and restaurants did a booming trade until about midnight. The next day, however, I noticed curious, pale yellow, circular spots on the pavements and streets- patches of vomit. What a pity that, for some, a glorious, musical, happy day became an opportunity for over-indulgence.

18th March 2005

Following the excitement of St. Patrick's Day, I got thinking about similar types of celebrations in my own country, Albania. During the Communist era in my own country, the armed forces would have parades. In post-communist times, there were small scale parades to celebrate the national day (Independence Day) in November. Today, leaders like the Prime Minister and President hold small meetings to mark the day and that's all. Other Albanians however, wherever they are located in the world, joyously commemorate Albanian Independence Day (Dita e Flamurit) every year on November 28th. For it was on that day in 1912, in the Albanian seacoast town of Viora, that the venerable Albanian

patriot, Ismail Qemali, first raised the Albanian red and black, double-headed eagle flag and proclaimed Albanian independence from the Ottoman Turks after almost 500 years. Albanian Christians celebrate the traditional holidays of Christmas and Easter too while Albanian Muslims observe Ramadan and other religious holidays. Whereas other peoples in the Balkans refer to themselves as Christians or Muslims, an Albanian invariably says, "I am an Albanian", rather than a "Christian" or "Muslim." One other Albanian celebration is Dita e Veres (Spring Day), which derives from an ancient pagan holiday, and is still celebrated in mid-March every year.

The Connaught Telegraph 23 March 2005

New opening hours needed for library

23rd March 2005

Eighteen months ago a friend of mine, Ernie Sweeney, asked if I used the library. My reply was: "Yes I do, I go there every single day. The library is my church." When I was not going to the College, the library really was my church. Currently I have no time to go there every day but I do every weekend. The people who are working there are very nice and very helpful. It is a modern library and the services it provides are very good. But I think it would be very beneficial for the 'weekend' community if the library were open not just on Saturday but also on Sunday. Moreover, for weekdays I think it is very important that the library stay open up to 9 o'clock in the evening. This is because people need to use these public services after they have finished their own work. People go there to take out books and use the Internet and there is no charge. This is a wonderful thing. Castlebar has two Internet Cafes but not everyone can go there because they cost too much. So if the County Council decided that the Mayo County Library should stay open for weekend days and late evenings, this public service would be very useful for many citizens and for students who do not have enough money to use the services of the Internet cafes.

24th March 2005

Last night I read some very interesting news. Out of every ten migrants here in Ireland, four of them had third level education but their skills were not being used. I know that here in Castlebar, for example, there are hundreds of foreigners with honours degrees attained in their own countries but who cannot make use of them because they do not know enough English. Either the Government is paying for their unemployment assistance or they are working in menial jobs. If there were facilities for learning the English language here in Castlebar, they would be able to take up their own professions again after six months or a year.

This morning I am on a mission as I call to the library and log onto the Internet. I am looking for information on educating refugees and wondering what facilities are out there. In one of the Government's website I see that refugees in Ireland are entitled to free third level (university or college) education and adult refugees may have free English language classes. However, here in Castlebar, there is just one option to learn English for free and that involves going to the Citizen Information Centre in Cavendish House and attending just one lesson per week. I think this is very little for people who really want to learn English properly.

25th March 2005

Today I meet some Irish friends to discuss a proposal for an EU Celebration of Cultural Diversity. We are hoping this open air celebration will take place in mid-summer (Bonfire Night) and consider the grounds of Turlough Park House as a location. What an ideal venue this would be, if could secure it. We decided that a central theme for this event would be recognising the new Eastern European, Oriental, African and North and South American influences in our community. More about this as plans unfold.

The Connaught Telegraph 30 March 2005

Church on Croagh Patrick badly in need of a lick from a paintbrush

25th March 2005

It is Good Friday, one of the most important days in the calendar of the Catholic Church. Today I fulfill a personal promise to climb Croagh Patrick which, I am told, is Ireland's 'holiest mountain'. With me is my 12-year-old son, Klajd, and a Castlebar friend, Johnny Oosten. Johnny has been up and down the mountain more times than the sheep that graze its slopes. And he is just as nimble. Since coming to Castlebar, I have heard and read many stories about the history of the mountain, how St Patrick spent 40 days and nights praying on the summit. I found it a difficult climb with the coming down worse than going up.

I still have aches in the backs of my legs from the effort. It was no problem, though, for either Klajd or Johnny. The last stretch was a bit hellish with broken stone everywhere which moved back an inch or two with every step we took forward. It was a relief to emerge on the summit's plateau and take in the wonderful vista of islands which dot Clew Bay. I found the church on top to be a bit of a disappointment with the walls all scratched and flaking.

I know it must be difficult keeping an old church in top condition, especially as it is perched in such an inaccessible place. Johnny, who is good with a paintbrush, commented also on the condition of its exterior and told me he'd love to paint it if he could get permission from the Catholic Church. Perhaps some kindly paint supplier would like to donate some of their products for what would be a very worthy project?

There were many other climbers on the mountain. The place was like the United Nations. There were Irish, English, Scottish, Australian, Spanish and American climbers amongst the groups we met as we ascended and descended. One man stood out for me, however, and his name was John Kilgarriff. From Dunmore, John is nearly 80 years old and climbs the mountain every month as it gives him a spiritual lift to do so. When we reached the bottom I was tired and remarked on the spur of the moment

that a cable car from Murrisk or Lecanvey to the summit would be a great attraction and benefit. I don't really believe that though. As one old pilgrim said: "The only way to get into the Heaven is the hard way. There are no escalators."

28th March 2005

Every single day I am learning something new about how generous Irish people are and, to be honest with you, I feel lucky to live in this country and to be a part of these kind people. A friend of mine rang today to tell me that a team of medical staff from Galway will travel to Albania on 9th April for a two week 'operating marathon' in which they hope to help at least 50 patients. He said the trip, led by Galway based consultant plastic surgeon Jack McCann, is being organised by a newly founded charity called Friends of Albania Ltd. The impetus for the trip originated with the treatment of a four-year-old Albanian girl who was brought to Galway for treatment through the Children First Foundation, he said. While her condition has greatly improved, she needs further help, and it is hoped that many more children and adults like her who are suffering from congenital malformations, burns, scars, and post-traumatic injuries, will also benefit from this 'operating marathon'. The Galway medical team includes two surgeons, two anesthetists, seven nurses, and a person responsible for instrument sterilization. The equipment they need to bring with them includes anesthetic and surgical equipment, sutures, dressings and medication, according to my friend. While the trip is expected to cost in the region of €50,000, the cost can be considerably reduced if the equipment needed is sponsored or donated. He told me that the medical personnel involved are offering their expertise free of charge and that an urgent fundraising campaign was underway to fund the trip. Thank you Ireland - you have come up trumps twice for me: once, personally, when I arrived here with my family; and now you are helping my people.

30th March 2005

I receive an e-mail from a student living in Westport and studying in Castlebar. “Dear Sir,” it begins, “I read your article in the *Connaught Telegraph* on transport in Castlebar and the need to improve it. I agree with you on this matter and I believe it is long overdue. My own concern is with the present bus service between Westport and Castlebar. It is far too infrequent. I go to College in Castlebar five days per week and finish at four o’clock and then I have wait until 5.20pm for a bus back to Westport. There is no bus service between 1.30pm and 5.20pm in the afternoon, a period of four hours. This is not satisfactory and needs to be improved”.

Good to see that, in my modest campaign to have public transport provided in the Castlebar area, I have an ally.

The Connaught Telegraph 13 April 2005

Days of mourning for Pope: Communist Cuba 3, Catholic Ireland 0

8th April 2005

The funeral of Pope John Paul II was the biggest funeral in history. I think he deserved it because he was a great Pope. However, over the last few days I have been pondering a small mistake made by many journalists. They claimed Pope John Paul II was the first non-Italian Pope for more than 450 years. That is not true, because there was an Albanian Pope from 1700 to 1721. His name was Pope Clement XI (Gianfranco Albani (1649-1721). Incidentally, a quick search of the Internet proves there were three more Popes of Albanian origin, namely San Eleuterio (175-189), San Caio (283-296) and San Giovanni IV (640-642).

I was surprised about the mixed opinion on the national day of mourning dedicated to the death of Pope John Paul II. In Ireland, Taoiseach Bertie Ahern announced there would be “no national day of mourning as such”. The public’s reply was speedy and angry. I was listening to different radio stations and there were thousands of callers demanding a national day of mourning, especially as this was a pope so dearly loved by the Irish people. In response to this outcry, the Taoiseach said he had “no problem with people calling it a day of mourning”. When two polls, one on radio programme and one on TV3, showed that 81% and 93% respectively voted in support of a national day of mourning, Mr Ahern quickly clarified his position, saying that schools would be allowed to close on the day and state employees could take time off work to attend church services. That was the sum total of Ireland’s remembrance and mourning, a country where 95 % of the population are Roman Catholic. I have been comparing this response to other countries all over the world where national days of mourning were declared as follows: Poland - six days; Portugal - three days; Brazil - seven days; Albania - one day; Kosovo (where 90% of population are Muslim) - two days; Cuba (a Communist state) - three days. These facts do not need any further comment.

9th April 2005

Today I read an old copybook containing my notes about Pope John Paul II's 1993 visit to Albania. At the time, I was working as a journalist for a national newspaper. Albania was the first Balkan country visited by Pope John Paul II after the collapse of Communism. During that visit, the Pope nominated four Albanian bishops. During the Communist regime, Albania was the first atheist state on the planet.

Prior to Pope John Paul II's visit, I interviewed a priest who had spent 18 years in jail. Here, I am going to translate and share my notes from that interview:

The Albanian Church triumphed at a high price. Out of 156 priests that existed before the persecution began, 65 were martyred and 64 died during or after imprisonment. Tens of thousands of common people perished for religious reasons. Slow torture took many forms in the prisons camps. Most of the priests were beaten on their bare feet with wooden clubs. The fleshy part of their legs and buttocks were cut open, rock salt was then inserted beneath the skin, and the open skin then sewn up again; their feet, placed in boiling water until the flesh fell off, were then rubbed with salt; their Achilles' tendons were pierced with hot wires. Some were hung by their arms for three days without food; partially immersed in icy water until nearly frozen; had electrical wires places in their ears, nose and mouth; burning pine needles placed under fingernails. Other forms of torture involved being forced to eat a kilo of salt and having water withheld for 24 hours; boiled eggs were put in their armpits; teeth were pulled without anesthetic; they were tied behind vans and dragged; left in solitary confinement without food or water until almost dead. Forced to drink their own urine; placed in pits of excrement up to their necks; laid on a bed of nails and covered with heavy material; put in nail-studded cages which were then rotated rapidly.

I have saved this copybook for many years and now have decided to translate my notes and publish them because I think no nation passed through a worse trail in the 20th

Century like Albania did. As Pope John Paul II said during his 1993 visit to Albania: ‘History has never seen before what happened in Albania. Dear Albanians, your drama must interest the whole European continent. Europe must not forget.’”

The Connaught Telegraph 20 April 2005

“Coming to Live in Mayo” is a very useful book but it needs to be promoted.

15th April 2005

When I moved from Albania to Mayo three years ago, it was in many ways like transferring to another planet. I knew nothing about the education here, nor anything about the employment, accommodation, social welfare, money matters or health services here. Three years on and these matters still remain much of a mystery to me. It is the same, I presume, for all the new migrants to modern Ireland. So it was with great relief and pleasure that I received a presentation pack today at a function in the TF Royal Hotel and Theatre from my friend Tomas Lally who is Development Manager for Mayo Citizens' Information Service. The main item in the pack was a copy of “*Coming to Live in Mayo - A Practical Guide*”. The book is now my bible. It contains a wealth of information about essential services which, I imagine, will be useful for the native Irish person as it will to me. The launch was carried out by John Waters, the author and journalist. The fact that this book has been published makes me feel even warmer inside about my adopted country. It is like handing me and my family a greeting card proclaiming, “YOU ARE WELCOME TO SHARE YOUR LIVES WITH US IN IRELAND. HERE IS A PUBLICATION WHICH MAY MAKE YOUR EXISTENCE HERE A LITTLE BIT EASIER.” I am a little concerned, however, that this valuable book, the first of its kind in Ireland I'm told, may not reach the entire audience for which it is intended. I think it would be very beneficial if the Mayo Citizens' Information Service was to hold a meeting or seminar to which all non-nationals living in the county were invited. I hope my suggestion is acted upon.

18th April 2005

It was a great feeling to receive a letter today from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, (Reception and Integration Agency), and UNHCR (The UN

Refugee Agency) inviting me to a poetry competition. Worldwide, refugees flee terrible persecution every day. They are forced to seek protection in countries often far from their own and start anew. Refugees are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, making the best of newfound freedoms, the opportunity to live in safety and to be valued for their contribution. Along with many other countries, Ireland will participate in World Refugee Day on 2nd June 2005. This is an opportunity, according to the letter I received, to reflect on the difficulties faced by refugees and to celebrate the positive aspects of 'new beginnings', as refugees settle into new homes and new countries. Poetry Ireland UNHCR and the Reception and Integration agency wish to mark the positive aspects of new beginnings by inviting submissions for a poetry competition. I picked three of my best poems and forwarded them. I don't care about winning any prizes but I am extremely happy because, thanks to these kind people, I am not any more just a number.

20th April 2005

In St Patrick's School in Castlebar there are 19 pupils from asylum seeking and refugee families. These pupils hail originally from Nigeria, Congo, Zimbabwe, Ukraine, Albania, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Cameroon, and Kazakhstan. They therefore represent approximately seven different languages, and many different faiths such as Christian, Catholic, Muslim and Born Again Christian. In general, they are getting on quite well. For their first couple of years in school, they receive forty minutes of language support daily from the resource teacher for non-nationals. These children add to the experience of the school. The other children love to hear stories of their countries and to learn about their language, culture etc. For example, one of the pupils grew up in a mud hut in Zimbabwe and he has told his classmates of his experiences there. I asked Ms Lane, a teacher in the school, if there was any special programme for involving the children in the local community. She told me the support teachers for non-nationals follow the Integrate Ireland Language and Training programme (IILT), a programme

designed for second language learners. Moreover, she said the children take part in hurling, rugby, football, and soccer at school with teachers and coaches from the local clubs training them. They are then encouraged to join the local sports clubs. Also, the children are given the opportunity to learn music and they represent the school in the St Patrick's Day Parade. Some children also perform in the school choir. All children are encouraged to join the local library and regularly go with their classes during and after school hours. As part of the Green Schools Project, the children are encouraged to recycle both at home and at school. The Irish children are very accepting of the children from refugee and asylum seeking families. These immigrants add an extra dimension to the school in terms of their language, music, and culture. Their parents also integrate well into the school system, despite the language barriers.

The Connaught Telegraph 27 April 2005

St. Patrick's N.S. in Castlebar raised € 1,000 for Bóthar

24th April 2005

Today, heartening news reaches me via a calendar that my son, Klajd, brings home with him from St Patrick's National School. I learn that the school has donated €1,000 to an Irish organisation which supplies farm animals such as goats, in-calf heifers and cows to rural families in poorer countries. Compared to Ireland, rural Albania is a poor place. I would imagine that conditions in Ireland 60 years ago, when horses were used to plough the land and there was very little agricultural machinery, were very similar to those which exist in many parts of my native country today. Since my son brought home the Bóthar information pack from school, I have been researching the organisation.

Bóthar in Ireland is part of a community of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) using livestock in development aid. Just two months ago, this organisation sent 67 in-calf heifers to Tirana. The heifers came from all over Ireland and were dispatched from Shannon airport in late February. This was the sixth consignment of Irish heifers to be sent to needy families in Albania since 1999. These heifers will help alleviate the suffering and poverty of some families and bring them out of the poverty trap. All the recipient families are sufficiently trained in the upkeep of the animals and are capable in the provision of shelter, and of hay and silage making. Each family must have these requirements in place before they can receive an animal. Great thanks is due to all volunteers and all the people who donated money and heifers towards this airlift to Albania, and also to all the farmers who took a day out of their busy schedules to bring the heifers to Limerick. Bóthar delivered 70-in-calf dairy heifers to 70 impoverished families in Kosovo just in time for Christmas in late December 2004. These families are living around villages in the Gjakove region. The dairy heifers, all spring-clavers, will each help a family to rebuild their lives following the devastating war. On behalf of my people, I say: "Thank you, Ireland".

26th April 2005

Every time I visit the Country Life Museum in Turlough Park, Castlebar, I feel as if I am visiting a museum in my own country. Many objects on display are similar to those which would be found in a museum back home. On my last trip to the museum I saw a small loom, which had been used to create colourful rugs for floors as well as sweaters, socks, gloves and so forth.

Albanian women and even girls as young as six-years-old have always been praised for their intricate embroideries (qendisje) which decorate their dwellings. Indeed, in preparation for their dowries, several young women will get together to make beautiful doilies (centro) to place on furniture. Using a small loom (vegel), they create multi-coloured floor rugs and with other hand tools produce knitwear such as hats, scarfs, jumpers and so on using wool, cotton, acrylics and fur. Pune me grep' (lacemaking) is a traditional folk art form that has been passed down from generation to generation. Men usually work with metals such as copper, brass, and aluminium to craft decorative plates, wall hangings, and utensils like they did here in Ireland did years ago. Portraits of Skanderbeg abound as well as pastoral scenes featuring the beautiful mountains and lakes of Albania. The capital, Tirana, is becoming recognisable thanks to the number of delicate pen-and-ink drawings that depict it, not to mention other versions in acrylic, watercolour, and oil. Regular hobbies such as stamp-collecting, birdwatching, plants, butterfly collecting, storytelling, etc., are favourite pastimes all over Albania.

Women were previously relegated to a secondary role to men in Albania, especially to the eldest son. They were taught by the age of 10 to get ready for marriage by preparing dowries, but that procedure was largely abandoned by 1950 even though some Albanians occasionally practice it still. In olden days, Albanians could identify each other by the way they dressed because each region had its own characteristic style of clothing which was influenced by ethnic tradition and religion and differentiated by clan (fis), sex, and age. In medieval times, Albanians tended to spend a remarkably high proportion of their income on dress. Lord Byron, visiting southern Albania in 1805 (where he wrote a good portion of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), called Albanian dress 'the most wonderful

in the world.' Nowadays, this type of distinctive clothing may be seen chiefly at theatrical or folkdance performances.

The Connaught Telegraph 4 May 2005

Irish plastic surgeons perform ‘miracles’ in Albania

28th April 2005

Seventy Albanian patients were operated on and another 160 visited by the Galway-based plastic surgery team in their mission to my native country. Sixteen members of this team returned from Albania just two weeks ago. A friend of mine who worked with this team in Tirana stated that, “a very successful mission was completed.” The Galway team worked extremely hard in the national (and only) plastic surgery centre in Albania’s capital city Tirana and both Albanian and Irish medical teams collaborated to accomplish this vital work. He said that many patients and their families had queued from very early in the morning and travelled for up to six hours, often by foot, after hearing of the visit through local and national media. All types of patients were seen including those with burn scars resulting in severe contractures of the face and limbs, those with birth malformations of the face or hands, as well as those with advanced skin cancer. Some of the team also visited and helped at a home for 45 homeless children, ranging in age from 1-17 years. They provided some new clothes, shoes, food, and medicine. My friend who was there said these 45 children are sleeping in three bedrooms and two living rooms. The team planned to help these children get a bigger house with a garden to play in. This team brought a truck-load of surgical equipment and supplies to Albania including two anesthetic machines donated by the Bon Secours Hospital in Galway and other equipment from the University College Hospital Galway and Crumlin Hospital, Dublin. Another surgical team from Galway will come to Albania to continue this work and other Irish specialists have offered to come to Albania and undertake similar work in their field. All patients and their families were very thankful to the team and to all the Irish people who had contributed so generously to this fund to make this mission possible. My friend said the medical personnel involved were offering their expertise free of charge and that a fundraising campaign was already underway to fund the next trip.

2nd May 2005

The symbiosis between Irish and the foreigners is now a well known fact. And I think the symbiosis between Irish and Jews is the supreme thing that illustrates how generous Irish people are. Religious toleration and social nondiscrimination exists in the Irish Republic and Jews have prospered with the absence of such barriers. However, it is a little

known fact worldwide that the Albanians protected their own Jews during the Holocaust while also offering shelter to other Jews who had escaped into Albania from Austria, Serbia, and Greece. The names of Muslim and Christian Albanian rescuers of Jews are commemorated as “Righteous Among the Nations” at the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem and are inscribed on the famous “Rescuers Wall” at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. At the presentation of the names of Albanian rescuers, the museum’s director, Miles Lerman, gratefully stated, “Albania was the only country in Europe which had a larger Jewish population at the end of the war than before it!” A joint Israeli-Albanian concert was held in Tirana on 4th November, 1995 to commemorate the protection of Jews by Albanians from Nazi occupiers of Albania during the Holocaust. Its participants were the Kibbutz Orchestra of Israel, the Opera Orchestra of Tirana, the National Choir of Tirana, and the Israel-Albania Society.

Here in Ireland there is a museum called The Irish Jewish Museum and I went to visit it last year. It is located at 3-4 Walworth Road in the Portobello section of Dublin, the old Jewish Quarter of the city. A modest museum, the first floor is devoted to a pictorial and literary account of the Irish Jewish community, while the Old Synagogue occupies the second floor, which is no longer in use. It’s a shame we have no museum like this in Albania where these great things can be showed.

The Connaught Telegraph 4 May 2005

The government needs to do more to increase its state sponsored childcare schemes

9th May 2005

A friend of mine who has two children was telling me that he had found a job for his wife. However, if she was going to take the job, she would need to pay about two times her income in childcare fees. I was surprised to hear this and it got me thinking. I think the government needs to do more to increase its state sponsored childcare schemes. The emphasis needs to be on early childhood care and education and this should be looked at in more detail as part of the social development strategy. Of equal importance is allowing parents to play an active role in the workforce which, in turn, also means adopting a pro-employment stance. As an alternative, there should also be systems put in place that help and support parents in their parenting role and provide both an opportunity for the transmission of values as well as a stimulating environment in which children can learn, develop and grow.

Modern society now demands a complex approach to childcare and parents should have several options to choose from in order to best suit their own requirements. My friend told me that the cost of childcare here in Castlebar tends to decrease as the hours required by families increases. The most expensive is the hourly cost (€8) to mind school-going children for less than 10 hours a week. This may however be due in part to the additional costs associated with collecting children from school and providing other facilities.

While this statement may be true, there is anecdotal evidence that explains the perceived increase in cost for caring for school-aged children. It appears that private childminders operating in the black economy are demanding €100 per child per week, 52 weeks a year, regardless of the hours worked. From this it can be seen that as the carers' hours fall, so the relative cost per hour rises.

12th May 2005

My daughter Najada is in first class and she very much likes the Irish language. She knows Irish better than her brother who is in fifth class. And I am proud of her, because I read that for more than 700 years, Irish people were not allowed to learn their own language. Now we are living in modern Ireland, there is nothing preventing her from learning to speak Irish perfectly. Therefore, I think nowadays every Irish person in the nation should be passionate about learning their own language as part of their own history and culture. Moreover, learning Irish is free in every school. My own country had a similar fate for hundreds and hundreds of years during the Ottoman occupation. Education in Albania has been stimulated and nurtured by nationalistic roots. It is supposed to have been developed in Albania during Illyrian times chiefly for military and physical purposes. Under the Ottoman repression for almost 500 years, the teaching of the Albanian language was strictly forbidden, and Albanians of the then Greek Orthodox religious faith were required to attend Greek schools, while Catholics were taught Italian or Austrian German, and Muslims taught Turkish. The opening of the first school in 1887 to teach in the Albanian language was a landmark. The first Albanian-language elementary school for girls was opened in 1892. Higher education in Albania really began when the American Vocational School (Shkolla Teknike) - established originally by the American Red Cross in 1921 and which eventually became part of the University of Tirana - was founded in 1957. Other institutes of higher education were located in North and South of Albania. Since the overthrow of Communist power in 1992, these institutes have changed to universities and new universities have been founded in South Albania. Albania has one of the highest literacy ratings in the Balkans (88%).

The Connaught Telegraph 4 May 2005

Musings on Castlebar’s “French Market” and the lack of English classes in Mayo for migrants

20th May 2005

I like mostly everything about Ireland, with a few exceptions. The weather is disappointing, apart from a few weeks in summer. This can be hard for someone like me who comes from a Mediterranean type climate where the sun shines strongly for four or five months of the year. I find the food here also a bit of a let down. I always read that Ireland was an agricultural country so it was a bit of surprise when I came here to find so many untilled fields and so many people eating mostly processed foods, bought in the shop or local supermarket. Often, I long for native Albanian dishes such as lakror (a mixture of eggs, vegetables, or meat, and butter encased in thin, multilayered pastry sheets, or fergese (a dish frequently made with minced meat, eggs, and Ricotta cheese). Lamb, rather than beef or pork, is a relatively staple Albanian dish. Albania is also blessed with truly delicious seasonal fruits such as grapes, cherries, figs, watermelon, peaches, quince, and oranges, along with almond, walnut hazelnut, and olive trees that grow in abundance everywhere.

The other week I was delighted to learn that the French Market was coming to my adopted Castlebar for two days. I thought, *“Here will be a rare enough opportunity to excite the taste buds by sampling some international cuisine.”* How wrong I turned out to be. There were few French products, apart from French bread, on sale in the stalls which covered almost all of the plaza at the Market Square. All around me was Pakistani food, Turkish food, Russian food. There’s nothing wrong with these foods except that a French market is hardly the place to market them. To describe the food bazaar in Castlebar some weeks ago as a ‘French Market’ was, I feel, a little misleading. While discussing Castlebar’s so-called ‘French Market’ with a friend, he asked me about Albanian cuisine. It was a rare opportunity for me to wax long and lyrical about native Albanian dishes. Albania manufactures beer and both red and white wines although the national drink is

grappa ‘Raki’), a clear, colourless brandy produced from grapes. Albania also produces an award-winning, 3-star cognac named “Skanderbeg” that is prized throughout Europe. Anyway, enough about food and drink. ‘Cheers’ or, ‘Gezuar’, as we say in Albania.

25th May 2005

Thousands of migrants in the new Ireland have reasons to be grateful for the fact that Ireland is the only EU state offering equal work and welfare rights to citizens of the 10 new EU member nations. The influx to Ireland continues. I heard recently that there are hundreds of workers from Poland living in Mayo and 32,000 Polish people all over Ireland. Poland has a significantly high unemployment level. I feel sorry for these Polish migrants as most of them know very little English. Most of them have finished university education in their own country but now, because their English is poor, find themselves working in the construction industry. Moreover, as I wrote weeks ago, there is scant opportunity for them to learn English in Mayo. Unlike Ireland, Britain declared restricted access to welfare benefits last year. When 10 new countries became members of the EU, British Prime Minister Mr Tony Blair said he would consider whether Britain’s benefits system was so generous that it would attract unmanageable numbers of immigrants from the former communist countries of Eastern Europe after they joined on 1 May 2004:

‘We will take whatever measures are necessary to make sure that the pull factor which might draw people here is closed off,’ Blair told the House of Commons last year.

Britain thus becomes the 14th of the 15 existing member-states to exercise their right under the accession treaties to restrict immigration from the new members for up to seven years after they join. However, the Irish Government has taken the view that unrestricted access of Eastern Europeans seeking work will be beneficial to the economy.

Most EU governments had indicated they would maintain restrictions on immigration from the new members for at least two years. Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands initially announced last year that they would welcome workers from the new member states from 1st May 2004 on the same basis as workers from existing

member states. However, three of these have gone back on this position, leaving Ireland as the only member state doing so. Moreover workers coming to Ireland from 10 new EU member-state are being treated the same as workers coming from Germany, France, Italy or Spain. In other words, they are being treated the same as Irish citizens. The Irish Government is also giving priority to Eastern Europeans for work visas/permits over other non-EU nationals. Well done, Ireland!

The Connaught Telegraph 1 June 2005

Pirated' DVD's on offer at car boot sale

3rd June 2005

Last week I attended my first car boot sale in Ireland. I went mostly out of curiosity but said I would buy something if it was typically Irish and if it was a bargain. My son, Klajd, was delighted when he saw some DVDs which cost just €10 each. They were DVD's of movies now showing in the cinemas and Klajd wanted me to purchase them for him. It was easy to see that these DVD's had been copied, or "pirated" from the original. They were bad quality and I told my son so. I also told him that the people who had copied the DVD's were now selling them illegally. If they had copied them for their own use it would be okay but to copy them and sell them to another person was an unlawful act. From my studies in journalism at Castlebar College of Further Education (CCFE) I know a little about copyright laws here in Ireland. A copyright is the legal right of an author, composer, playwright, and so on, to stop others using their work without permission. I think the people selling these DVDs had no permission to do so. Many people buy counterfeit or pirate products at markets, or in foreign holiday resorts, and don't view piracy as a serious crime. However, the high profit margins gained from these pirated and counterfeit products are often used to fund organized crime, paramilitary or terrorist activity. Apart from the poor quality of the goods, this is a compelling reason to avoid them. Customs seizures of CDs (audio, games and software) and DVDs at the EU external borders were nearly 25 million for the first half of 2003 - showing just how large the profits of copyright piracy are for organised criminals. On the other hand, I think nowadays it is important for everyone to know what is allowed. Under the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000, it is an offence to import, loan, make, and rent or sell unauthorised copies of work for profit. However, copying, importing, or loaning to family and friends for private use is allowed. It is illegal to import, lend, make, possess, rent or sell special equipment to make copies for profit or defeat protection devices (for example, on software) for this purpose. Providing information or services to help other people do these things is also forbidden. Other copyright infringements include public performance, as

well broadcasting, playing or showing in public a sound recording, artistic work or original database film.

However, I think it is most important to know about the penalties for these offences. People guilty of these offences can be fined, up to €1.905 euro for each infringing copy, article, or device on summary conviction (in the District Court). They might also be imprisoned for up to 12 months. If they are convicted on indictment (in the High Court) the maximum penalty is €126.974, imprisonment for 5 years, or both. Despite these stiff penalties, these traders were selling illegally copied DVD's in the heart of Castlebar. No one was there to say anything to them or explain that they are violating laws and that they can be imprisoned or fined for this. Why aren't the laws implemented?

Finding peace at Ballintubber Abbey

5th June 2005

On a recent Sunday morning I fulfilled my ambition to visit Ballintubber Abbey. I had heard a lot about the place and now I was about to find out a lot more. I arrived just after 9am. The serenity and the stillness of the place were beautiful. There was nobody in the church apart from a man in black with glasses. He was sitting in a small room off the main altar quietly reading his breviary.

This was my first introduction to Fr Frank Fahey. I had been told he is in many ways the guardian of Ballintubber Abbey. I was also told he was a gifted historian and teller of tales about times past in the Abbey when the waves of Lough Carra lapped against the chapel walls and monks prayed there before Cromwell came with his army and tried to wreck the place. Although time was pressing and he had Masses to celebrate elsewhere, Fr Fahey was very nice to me, a stranger with broken English. He listened to me attentively and answered my questions patiently.

The area all around the Abbey is now dry land. Fr Fahey told me of a time in centuries past when one could tie a boat near the church door. He also pointed towards the great mountain in the west, Croagh Patrick, and explained how pilgrims would set off from the Abbey along a twisting path to climb it. The path, I learned later, was called the Tochar Phadraig.

Before he left, this kind priest invited me to rest myself and watch a video explaining the long and rich history of the Abbey. I learnt many things over the next hour. I enjoyed my visit. If I hadn't gone I would not be as well informed about the history of the church in Mayo and the roots of Irish Christianity. Within the Church itself there is a large book where visitors write their names.

All of the comments were favourable: "Splendid", "Most Educational" and "Inspiring" were some of the remarks I read from tourists who travelled from places as far as away as Japan, Europe and the United States.

In the grounds of the Abbey I met many tourists. They were from the USA, England,

Germany, France, Spain and Australia. I longed for the knowledge and fluency of Fr Fahey to be able to tell them that the Abbey claims to be the oldest church (in Ireland) where there has been continuous religious celebration. It was founded in 1216 by Cathal Crovdearg O'Connor, who was the King of Connacht at the time, on the site of a monastic settlement associated with St Patrick. In 1465, the Abbott was investigated for misuse of the Abbey resources but the outcome to this is known.

Clearly Tribunals are not a new phenomenon in Ireland. In 1542, the monastery was dissolved, and in 1635, the Augustinians petitioned successfully to take over the Abbey. However, in 1653, Cromwell's troops laid waste to the Abbey, leaving only the shell. Partial restoration works were carried out in 1846 and 1889 but the Abbey was fully restored in time for its 750th anniversary in 1966.

I was really impressed with Ballintubber Abbey and the story behind it and started comparing it a North Albanian church which is the biggest Roman Catholic Church in the Balkans. It, too, is old but not as old as Ballintubber Abbey. Until the 16th Century, almost all of Albania was Christian, the Orthodox religion being dominant in the south and the Roman Catholic in the north. In the 17th Century, the Turks began a policy of Islamization by using, among other methods, economic incentives to convert the population.

A simple example is that some Albanians who adopted Islam received land and had their taxes lowered. By the 19th Century, 70% of Albania's population was Islam while some 20% remained Orthodox and 10% Roman Catholic. These groupings remained in effect until the Communist Government outlawed religion in 1967 making it the world's only atheist state. Freedom of religion in Albania was restored only in 1989-1990 but it must be noted that the overwhelming majority of Albania's population was born under a Communist regime, which pursued an aggressively atheistic policy. Although reliable statistics are lacking, observations and anecdotes demonstrate that the historical 70-20-10 percentages are no longer valid.

The collapse of the old Communist order has seen a religious revival of sorts, and some now believe that the religion with the mostly new adherents in Albania are Christian evangelicals such as the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. The current Albanian government is comprised of Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox members.

The Connaught Telegraph 15 June 2005

A woman with Irish blood was Queen of Albania

17th June 2005

I was having tea with a friend of mine, a former journalist from South Africa. He was telling me about the life of Albania's King Zog's in South Africa. I was impressed with his knowledge on the subject and on returning home started reading a book in the Albanian language about the monarchy in Albania.

I was surprised when I found that a woman with Irish blood was queen of Albania. Her name was Geraldine. She was the wife of King Zog who was first Prime Minister and then President before becoming King of Albania from 1928 to 1939. Geraldine Apponyi was born in Budapest in 1915. Her father was the Hungarian Count Gyula Apponyi de Nagy-Appony, and her mother was the former Gladys Virginia Stewart, a member of an old Irish-Virginian family. Geraldine's father died in 1924 and after that her mother remarried a French army officer. Her family insisted Geraldine and her two sisters be educated in Hungary

Geraldine was 17 years old when her photograph was taken several times at a ball given by Hungarian monarchists. She didn't know that one of those pictures would change her life. Albanian monarch King Zog, who was called at that time the Balkan Napoleon, fell in love with Geraldine when he saw a photograph of her. King Zog invited her to Albania. Geraldine's diary entry says she arrived in Albania shortly after Christmas 1937. After accepting his New Year's Day proposal, she was made princess. Geraldine stayed a Catholic while her husband King Zog was a Muslim. She got married in a civil ceremony on 27th April 1938. The *New York Herald Tribune* observed that "Geraldine, 22 years old, seems to be marrying the Rome-Berlin axis as well as her king". In addition to the Mercedes from Hitler, gifts included copper vases from Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini and a rare cabinet from Spanish dictator Francisco Franco.

On 7th April 1939, Italian troops invaded Albania. Moreover, that day King Zog and Queen Geraldine fled. In that time, the immediate pretext for the invasion was the Italian accusation that the king was abusing Italian money. However, many suggested that

Mussolini was jealous of Hitler's conquests and that Albania was nearby. Geraldine lived as Queen in Albania for just 15 months. When she and her husband left Albania, they had a son Leka (Catholic name) who was just four days old. Though this woman stayed in Albania a very short time, she spoke fluent Albanian for the rest of her life. She was a woman full of energy and a very generous person. When Albania's vice president gave her a velvet pocketbook containing the equivalent of €600,000 as a gift on her wedding, she directed that it be given to the National Albanian Charities. After King Zog and Queen Geraldine left Albania with their son, the crown passed to King Victor Emanuel II of Italy and the couple's wanderings began. They passed through Greece, Turkey, Romania, Poland and the Baltic States, Sweden Belgium and France before landing at the Ritz Hotel in London. Once it was clear they would be unable to return to Albania they moved to Egypt, where King Farouk welcomed them as exiled royalty. However, when Farouk was overthrown in 1952, they moved to Paris, where King Zog, who had survived numerous murder attempts, died in 1961. After that Queen Geraldine with her son, Leka, lived in Spain and South Africa.

The most interesting thing is that when Geraldine was feeling sick she wrote a letter to the Albanian Parliament where she asked them to allow her to go back to Albania because her wish was to die and to be buried there for it was a country she loved very much. After her letter, the Albanian Parliament made a decision to let Queen Geraldine and her son come back. She was back in Albania just four months before she died on 23rd October 2002. Therefore, she really deserves to be called an Albanian Queen.

The Connaught Telegraph 22 June 2005

Albania needs to end “blood feud” tradition if it wants to join EU

12th July 2005

Some weeks ago I was in Foxford for a function in honour of Admiral Browne, founder of the Argentinean Navy. By chance, I met two Argentinean journalists and we had a very nice chat for more than an hour. They asked me about Albania and about the similarities and differences between the Irish and the Albanian people. I told them that the Irish and Albanians have two noticeable things in common: they both like to have a drink; and they are both very friendly people. However, I told them about one very important difference between the Irish and the Albanians. The Irish respect their laws and are very strict in imposing them. This is a great thing. I can give one great example to illustrate how respectful the Irish are about their laws. When the smoking ban was imposed here I was sceptical. I thought people would try and get around the new legislation in some way. But, surprise, surprise (for me), from day one, there was no smoking in the pubs.

Back in my native Albania it is so different. I doubt if a smoking ban were applied in Albania tomorrow that it would be adhered to. In fact, I am certain it wouldn't. Many Albanian citizens are still following an unwritten law called Kanun and they are violating the modern laws. In some parts of Albania, particularly in the north, families follow a code of ethics called the Kanun. The Kanun is not a religious document (Kanun followers may be Christian, Muslim, etc.), but is sacred even so. Its laws reflect many of the unique traditions of the Albanian highlanders. As hard as it is to believe, the Kanun was passed down only orally from generation to generation, until the late 1800's when an Albanian priest decided to put it down in writing. Apart from being a great connoisseur of the Kanun himself, he also travelled and reconfirmed its laws in the Albanian Alps with others, and hence the law was finally made into a book.

It is said that the Kanun is a book that was first written by a northern Albanian prince Lek Dukagjini who thought well ahead for his time, while trying to put down or impose the rule of law in the unruly region dominated by the highlander population and mentality. The Duke (a title he gained in Italy), studied in Venice, and when he came

back to Albania, it is said that he had already comprised a version of the Kanun code of ethics.

Lek Dukagjini used the existing culture and customs in order to map the Kanun code. Some of the caules professed in the Kanun code are those of respect for women and children, respect for another person's honour, respect for other's property, and especially respect for guests that happen to pass by your lands.

Here is an interesting example of a Kanun law: When someone happens to pass by your lands and needs assistance, even if they are part of the family that you have a blood feud with, you still have to take that person into your home and give them food and shelter, and everything they need for their journey home. You are supposed to accompany them to the end of your property line, and then warn them that once they are off your lands they are once again still "blood feud" as prior, and give them one hours time before you are allowed to go after them, if that is what you intend to do. The Kanun enforces blood feuds. This code states that if one man kills another "blood should always be avenged by blood" and lays down precise rules for how. Kanun law was suppressed by Albania's harsh Communist regime but revived when it collapsed in 1991 because in the mountains the laws of the weak new government were rarely enforced.

However, I think Albanian citizens now need to learn that this traditional law should be just history. Blood feud killings give a very bad impression of this country - especially at a time when Albania wants to attract more foreign investors and we hope to join the European Union. Nevertheless, it is very hard to stop this code because the government there is not doing its job in punishing the guilty. In Foxford, the Argentinean journalist I met told me that the blood feud did exist in Argentina and in Ireland, but not any longer. My new Argentinean friend informed that one of the prominent institutions among the Celts was the blood feud, in which murder or insults against an individual would require an entire clan to violently exact retribution.

The Connaught Telegraph 27 July 2005

Gender change and blood feuds in Albania

6th August 2005

While I was holidaying in Italy last month, I met an Irishman who has seven daughters and one son, the latter being the last of his family. This man had been looking forward to having a son. Perhaps this was due to his upbringing back in Ireland. In olden days, baby boys were regarded as more important from a property rights/succession point of view. Nowadays, most Irish parents don't care if they just have daughters.

I was happy to tell my new friend how a similar situation used to exist in my home country, Albania, but that attitudes there have changed also. I told him about an unusual custom in rural parts of northern Albania where girls or women may essentially change their gender to that of a male by taking an oath to become a “sworn virgin”. Basically, the girl or woman promises to never marry, never bear children, and to remain celibate.

She then crops her hair and dresses as a man, adopts the mannerisms of a man, performs man's labour, and is accorded the status and respect deemed worthy of a male.

I told him this custom, which is hundreds of years old and still around, is thought by scholars to be a response to a shortage of young men to head families. Many young men in the region, for example, are lost to conflict, including ‘blood feuds’ between family groups. Often, a “sworn virgin” takes on the masculine role as a child or teenager in order to provide a family with someone who can inherit the family's land (women are not permitted to inherit land or head a household, but a “sworn virgin” may do both). In other cases, a girl or woman chooses to become a “sworn virgin” to avoid an unwanted marriage (marriages are arranged). It's not a bad deal, as women in the region are regarded as lesser than men and play a subservient role in the family.

Once a woman takes the oath, she really is regarded by the village as a male and may do many things a woman cannot, including socialising with other men in rooms women are not permitted to enter (except to serve food). In some cases, the village forgets her true gender. My new friend enquires if the “sworn virgin” can change her mind and

become female again. “Not really,” I answered. There have been cases of “sworn virgins” breaking the oath and even marrying, but it’s a risky proposition, the oath is taken seriously and to break it brings shame onto the entire family group. Breaking the oath could even initiate a “blood feud” and place the “sworn virgin” and male members of her family at risk of being killed. This may happen in cases where the “sworn virgin” breaks her oath to marry. Her previous, (rejected) fiancée (and his entire family) is thus dishonoured and is obligated to avenge the dishonour.

My Italian/Irishman friend told me he has an Albanian friend whose two sons were killed in 1997. After that he said his friend’s daughter became a “sworn virgin”. She promised to never marry, never bear children, and to remain celibate. She then cropped her hair short and began dressing as a man. So there you have it. Customs going back thousands of years still survive in isolated parts of my beloved country.

The Connaught Telegraph 10 August 2005

Employment is crucial for proper integration

18th August 2005

If one is foreign, it is not easy to be part of the community. But the thousands of non-nationals in Ireland must try to find work and make a sincere effort to be accepted and valued and, at the very least, understood. I think a lot of the apprehension and tension between Irish and immigrants in modern day Ireland comes from a lack of ability to be direct and open about our thoughts and feelings. I have been living in Ireland for three and a half years with my family. I have made lots of good friends. For me, integration is a feeling of normality, about feeling the same way as in my home country, about equal participation and membership in society. However, it is important for immigrants to maintain their own culture whilst integrating fully in their new, adopted, community. In my view, inability to communicate is the largest obstacle to integration. Without a working knowledge of English, refugees cannot access employment, training or other services. The possibilities for social interaction are limited, if not impossible. Employment is also a crucial factor of integration. It is difficult to access the jobs market here. Lack of knowledge of the Irish language is far too often thrown out as an obstacle or an excuse for not hiring a migrant. I have lost count of the number of times I have been turned down for a job because I did not know the Irish language. This is soul and morale destroying for the job seeker. Lack of equal opportunities in accessing education results in the marginalization of the entire social group. Another thing is recognition of qualifications. Lack of recognition of qualifications is a most important factor preventing refugees from continuing their careers and forcing them to take up employment that does not match their skills.

Other countries have different views about how to take care of refugees. In France integration can be perceived as assimilation. The French government and society view the country as a great homogenous nation with a strong centralised state. All are citizens and thus equal to the formal rights under the law and all have the same rights and entitlements. The British model seems characterised by a more flexible system and a focus

on “race and ethnic relations” rather than “integration”. There is no significant expectation that immigrants should become good English, Scots or Welsh people. But there is a focus on people being loyal and law-abiding British citizens. In Sweden, the National Integration Office has responsibility for implementing integration policy objectives. Under the Swedish refugee integration programme, the municipalities are responsible for the care of refugees on an individual basis. Under the programme, the municipalities aim to give each refugee housing, financial support and a working knowledge of the Swedish language and culture to facilitate the refugee’s participation in working and social life. In Denmark, responsibility for integration lies with the local government, whose refugee integration programme consists of language and culture classes and vocational guidance and is available for three years. The programme is obligatory and an allowance is paid to participants.

But I think everyone has to know that all the immigrants come from different backgrounds, faiths and ethnic origins, yet they rise above differences because they aspire to integration and enjoyment of their uniqueness as a migrant community. By the same token, I also believe immigrants want their children to be enriched by the cultural values of their adopted country including learning the language, traditions, and to take pride in their identity and dissimilarity.

Ireland is setting the world an example in the way it is treating Muslims

30th August 2005

Irish people are among the most tolerant people in Europe. While other EU nations are treating Muslims very badly, the Irish Government has not attracted any anger within the Muslim community. They have taken a more tolerant approach, the welcome attitude being: 'Not guilty until proven guilty.' But there is a very real fear that the Irish Government might come under pressure from outside and start victimising and picking on Muslims.

There are many mosques in Ireland and, moreover, there are many more associations like the Muslim Association of Ireland, Islamic Foundation of Ireland, Islamic Cultural Centre in Dublin and many more. So, Irish people should be proud of their tolerance.

I am Catholic myself and I can say that my country, Albania, was always renowned for being tolerant of other religions. Muslims drank and celebrated Christmas and Easter; Catholics often observed Ramadan; Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic Albanians mixed freely and without the slightest rancour. Every member of Albania's small Jewish community was hidden from Nazis and Italian fascists.

However, I think no one could forget that Serbia's savagery in Kosovo in 1999 finally exposed one of Europe's darkest secrets - the long racial and religious war against the Muslims of the Balkans. Hatred of Muslims is the 1990's version of the anti-Semitism of the 1930's that led to the extermination of Europe's Jews. Just as many Europeans were overtly or secretly happy during the Nazi era to be rid of the Jews, so in 1999, some modern Europeans actively or tacitly supported the latest campaign by Serbia's Muslim-hating racist regime to impose a 'final solution' to the 'problem' of the Balkan Muslims.' After the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe collapsed in 1912, hundreds of thousands of Muslim Turks were slaughtered or driven out. At the end of the Turkish-Greek war 1920-1928, 400,000 Turks were expelled from the Balkans; simultaneously, one million Greeks were driven from Aegean Turkey.

From 1912-1928, large numbers of Slav and Albanian Muslims were expelled from Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia. Today, there are almost two million people of Bosnian descent and some one million of Albanian origin living in Turkey. These vast expulsions still left some Turks, and millions of native Balkan Muslims, the descendants of Serbs, Albanians, Greeks, and Bulgarians who had voluntarily converted to Islam in the 15th and 16th Centuries to escape fierce religious persecution by the Catholic or Orthodox Churches, or to avoid a head tax on Christians levied by the Ottomans.

Today, there are some 10 million Muslims in the Balkans: nearly three million nominal Muslims in Albania; 2.3 million in Kosovo and Sanxhak; two million in Bosnia; two million in Bulgaria; 180,000 in Greece; and 600-700,000 Muslim Albanians in Macedonia.

In the 1980's, Bulgaria expelled 300,000 Muslim citizens and forced the remaining Muslims to Slavicize their names and adopt Orthodox Christianity. A few years later, Serbia began attempts to exterminate or drive out Bosnia's Muslims. France and Britain, nervous over their own large Muslim minorities, and traditionally anti-Muslim because of their colonial past, thwarted US efforts to halt ethnic warfare against Bosnia's Muslims. Greece, Bulgaria, and Macedonia gave the Serbs economic and diplomatic support. The west's tacit approval, or ineffectual opposition, to this ethnic-religious warfare opened the way for Serbia's 'final solution' in Kosovo. And I think we should learn from these very sad stories, because we are all human beings and after that we may by chance be Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim, Orthodox, or Atheist.

Long live diversity.

Death is the same everywhere but customs are different

8th September 2005

Talking to a friend of mine about Hurricane Katrina in the US, he said that he was surprised about the national day of mourning in the US and other countries for the thousands who died in the tragedy. After that, we had a discussion about Irish customs in relation to death and funerals. He said that, here in Ireland, death is still the final barrier and the way we treat our dead reflects on our society and its values. Wakes have long been a traditional way of sending the dead on their last journey and even today this custom is still held in rural areas of Ireland. There death is supposed to be heralded by the wailing of a banshee, a fairy woman. On the lonely Aran Islands each family has its own knitting patterns so that if disaster struck one of the fishing vessels, the bodies could be recognised by the pattern of the jumper a drowned fisherman wears.

In my country Albania, if you didn't wear black to the funeral you would embarrass your family. And if the women didn't weep and wail for their departed loved one, it just wouldn't be an Albanian funeral. Some people may think: *'Why would people do this to themselves?'* But to us, it is the way we mourn for our departed relatives. Even now, many people still weep for their loved ones years after they have died. Their weeping is not just weeping but wailing and senseless crying. It is crying with words, and, yes, to some ears it does involve screaming. Women often cry so much that they faint or are too weak to walk. To some, it is even considered an art form. Some rhyme the words so beautifully together while the feelings and emotions surge from the deepest part of the soul. There are actually women famous for their grieving cries in Albania; it's like they were born to mourn. It is possible for the women to have heart attacks and seizures, brought on by the ritual. To mourn for a loved one in Albania is to give your whole heart and soul and tears and even your life in remembrance. Albanians also have some other grieving customs that may also appear strange to Irish. We cannot serve sweets in our house or listen to music for one year after the person dies. No one can even think of listening to music! Everyone there thinks music is a sign of happiness, and when a person

passes away we are not happy. Of course, living for three years in Ireland with my family, my children think, “*What kind of customs are these?*” Even so, we can’t forget our heritage and who we are, just because we are living in another country.

As I look at the differences between Albania and Ireland I began to notice that other cultures have their own customs and rituals concerning death. In China people wear white at a funeral. In Mexico they celebrate a whole day of the dead. Egyptians mummified their bodies to preserve spirit for an eternal afterlife. But sometimes, somewhere, only a little time is devoted for grieving the dead. However, both the Irish and the Albanians show respect for important deceased citizens by flying the flag at half-mast.

They also both observe the tradition of lighting candles or placing flowers on the grave in remembrance of their loved ones. These tokens are beautiful but do not last long; yet they remind mourners that all life has to end. These customs gives a sense of identity, a boundary for ourselves. However, during natural disasters such as the recent Tsunami, or Hurricane Katrina, customs are forgotten, boundaries are crossed and identities are lost. Life is “swallowed up in death.”

But even though I am living in Ireland, I love the Albanian customs, and I can’t forget my roots and heritage. So I hope that when I die, no matter how old I am, or where I live, that my family will weep and wail for me, and give me a real Albanian send-off.

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