

My life in The Green Planet

Selected articles published in "The Connaught Telegraph"

Ndrek Gjini

2005

Introduction

The Voice of Ndrek Gjini

By Michael Mullen

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 Ink flowed through in 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**

Michael Mullen is Castlebar's most prolific author with over 30 novels to his name. He is novelist, children's writer, historian, and playwright. International reputation with novels published both at home and abroad, written historical and mythological works for children and adults, given innumerable workshops, conventions, recently appeared on Television. Also has to his credit numerous short stories, articles and radio plays. He is regarded as one of the finest historical writers now at work in Ireland. A few of his 30 publications are Pillars of Fire, (1997); The Darkest Years, (1996); Flight from Toledo, (1996).

Diary of a migrant



Ndrek Gjini

Democracy is establishing itself only slowly in Albania, a small country of 3.5 million inhabitants located in the Adriatic Sea some 80 kilometres east of Italy. Journalist **Ndrek Gjini** fell foul of the authorities three years ago for writing articles critical of the Government and was forced to flee his native country with his wife, Arta and two children, Klajd (now 13) and Najada (8). Now resident in Castlebar with his family, Ndrek has been keeping a diary in which he chronicles the good, the bad and the (infrequently) ugly side of life for migrants in the new Ireland. Rainy weather and high food and clothing costs, on the one hand, are usually balanced by a generosity of spirit towards the newcomers.

Today, we publish the first of a series of random extracts from Ndrek's diary chronicling the highs and lows of trying to forge a new life in a strange place where the customs, language and laws are totally alien.

January 1st 2005

A new year but same old weather. The wind blows 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. Socialising in Mayo is difficult for foreigners even if my English has improved in the three years that we have been here. It is also expensive. All of those hours on the computer have definitely improved my Desktop Publishing and Photoshop skills

January 15th 05

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 might 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...

January 22nd 05

We live in a housing estate on the north side of Castlebar. The countryside is only a few minutes away. Today is a Saturday and this morning I took my son Klajad on a walk to the top of the mountain with the TV transmitter station. Klajad 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 the long winter...

January 24th, 05

When I came here three years ago, I did not know how to say, "Yes" or "No" in English. I did not have anything. All my "property" was one small bag with clothes and another one 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 here.. Most of the people here are very kind and friendly. I am happier than at the start. Here I am studying, I am writing, even the odd pint of Guinness or glass of wine at my friend, Pablo's Restaurant. I like it there, the 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.

January 26th, 05

One of my few regrets about living in Ireland is that I have been unable (so far) to publish any further books here, I have published many books in my own country. They are in Albanian language, so no one can read them here. But for more than one year, I am trying am trying to translate my poems into the English language and then after that to publish them. Do you know why? Because I really would love to share my feelings with these people. With my friends who are very nice to my family and me. It is not easy; perhaps my poems will lose very much of their meanings compare to the native language. However, still something of my feelings will be left on them. 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 Jim Brett, his wife Ann and daughter, Ann Marie; 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.

January 31st, 05

For the past year I have been doing a Journalism course at Castlebar College of Further College Education. This morning I am excited. I have begun a two week Work Experience course at the Connaught Telegraph. 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, about my books, about my poems about everything that happened to me. But I was not able to do that. Therefore, I went back to my house, which was placed in Foxfield near Garryduff Park and I was very sad.. Nevertheless, still I was not able to do anything more but just being sad. I didn't know how to speak English, or how to share my feelings with my colleagues. After that, I made a decision to learn English. I started to do that intensively. A number of kind friends gave me presents of dictionaries. A year ago, one of those friends, Christy, told me if I really wanted to improve my English to get my head out of the books and get out and meet people. It is one of the best pieces of advice I have received here.

Ndrek Gjini... To be continued.



Mother Teresa, Ireland and Albania

By Ndrek Gjini

The most famous Albanian woman Mother Teresa was just 12 years old when she came to Ireland. She joined the Sisters of Loretto, a community of Irish nuns, in 1928. Mother Teresa lived in Dublin for short period and after that, she travelled to Calcutta.

There she started work as a teacher. After training as a nurse in 1948, she founded her Order of Missionaries of Charity to serve the blind, diseased, and dying among the city's poor.

In 1964 was open the Shanti Nagar leper colony near Asonol. From that year, her order runs 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 1979.

Her real name was Agnes 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 writer is a native of Albania now living at Rathbawn, Castlebar.

association and a local resident.

Writers Group newsletter

The second issue of Castlebar Writers Group's newsletter, 'By Mondays,' is in circulation.

The newsletter invites writers from the town to submit articles and creative work for publication. They can be e-mailed to Ndrek at ndrekgjini@hotmail.com.

In this month's publication, there are contributions by **Caroline Dyer, Owen Hughes, Peter Jordan, Rosalind Pulvertaft, Ndrek Gjini and Anna Coogan.**

Diary of Migrant

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

Ndrek Gjini

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February 14th, 05

Tonight as usual, I went to the Linenhall Centre for a meeting with Castlebar Writers Group. It is great for me because every member is reading loudly his own creative work, be it poems or short stories. Since I started going there, 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 feelings.

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

At the end of that 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 lighting speed

*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 last 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.

February 15th, 05

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 that the health services here are better. New buildings, new technology, everything clean and high standard of service.

However, I have to say that not everything is perfect. Many patients are on trolleys in the hall



Ndrek Gjini

ways. This is not good for a country like **Ireland** which ranks so highly in the table of wealthy nations. I have read this fact in a book, "Top Ten of Everything 2005".

Not to have enough space for patients where suggests to me that the Irish Government needs to put more money in health system for extending hospitals.

On a more positive note, I would like to write down some brilliant facts about the hospitality here.

My son's friend, **Conor**, came there and he spent all the day staying and playing with my son. We stayed just two days in the hospital and in these days, we had many cards, flowers, magazines, books, and flowers from our friends who are living here in Castlebar. This makes my family and me very happy.

Last night our neighbour, **Christine** with her children, **Darragh** and **Sinead** came to the hospital and spent more than two hours staying with us.

Today in the afternoon next-door neighbour, **Loyola** came to our house with pot of stew. She cooked especially for us be-

cause she thought we were to the hospital so we hadn't time to cook something. These wonderful things could be done just from generous people as Irish are. So, when people are treating you like this you could feel like you are living in your native home.

February 16, 200

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** is a gift from a woman 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. This lady likes **Pablo** and a few days later she arrives at his restaurant. **Pablo** must have impressed the lady for with the gift she had enclosed a 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 got 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 as if I am Saintlike.

Ndrek Gjini- To be continued

My friend, Fr. Michael likes to disco

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February 24, 05

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 GMT, 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 somebody, who seemed shocked by the idea, told me that 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.

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 like his missionary field. Here he got to talk to the

GMT students on equal terms as a fellow young person and a human being.

I see now that socialising with students at their regular discos is 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 so old-fashioned nowadays. Priests are human beings, so why are they forbidden to get married and have children like everyone else? The rules should be changed to allow not only married priests but also women priests.

February 26th 05

I have taken a book from the Library, which is about Irish folklore. Reading that book I founded that, fairies, snakes, and dragons are among the prin-

cipal figures in Irish mythology. Similar things you could find and in the Albanian mythology. Numerous words allude to some phenomenon in Albanian folklore such as kuçedër (a snake or dragon with many heads), shtrigë (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." Zana, mythological figures of Albanian women who help mountainfolk in distress are legendary, while the ore (fairy) also appears frequently in Albanian folklore but sometimes as an expression of fate i vdiq ora (his luck ran out).

February 28th 05

A friend of mine who is leaving in London sent me e-mail. He wrote: "You are lucky to live in Ireland, because Irish people are responsive and sociable and you could have great fun with them. Here in London most of people are cold. They really don't like foreigners". After I received his



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e-mail, I went home and decided to write something about interpersonal relations in Albania. For the reason that I think there were many things same in Ireland. To this day, there is an elaborate protocol of greeting 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 inquire about the health of each member of the hostess' family in a careful and deliberate manner. Then the hostess would, in turn, inquire about the health of each member of the visitor's family. Only after this procedure is completed, would 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-besën" 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-pabëse", that is to say someone who has broken his word or who is disloyal or without honour.

February 27th 05

Today is Sunday. I go to McGoldrick'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 Tirana 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.

Ndrek Gjini- To be continued

Diary of a migrant

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

Ndrek Gjini fell foul of the Albanian authorities three years ago for writing articles critical of the Government and was forced to flee his native country with his wife, Arta and two children, Klajd (now 13) and Najada (8). Now resident in Castlebar with his family, Ndrek has been keeping a diary about aspects of his new life here.

Monday, Feb 28th 05

This morning, I call to the Internet Café in Linenhall Street and log onto the websites for some of the Albanian daily newspapers. There is no news about Ireland, has not been for weeks. The last mention of Ireland in the Albanian press came in the wake of the big bank robbery in Belfast before Christmas which has been blamed on the I.R.A. 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 haven. They are more used to seeing Gerry Adams' bearded face on the television than that of the Taoiseach, Mr. Ahern or of the President, Mary McAleese. Thus, Albanians, 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 in literature than Spain and Italy together. They do not know that Ireland is placed fifth in top ten countries with the highest proportion of adults in higher education and is sixth in top ten 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.

Tuesday, March 1st, 05

My spirits are lifted by a concert of Irish traditional music which I attended with my son, Klajd, at the Royal T.F. Hotel. The concert was to raise funds for St. Dominic's Homes for the Elderly and Day Care Centre in Newport. Joe Byrne was the master of ceremonies. He is a very funny man. 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 is slow to arrive on stage he fills in the gap by reciting a wonderful poem by one of my favourite Irish poets, Patrick Kavanagh. One of the acts which greatly took my fancy was a performance by Joe Burke. He is known as a "box player", or "bosca ceoil" player in Irish, my friend, Christy Loftus, one of the concert organisers tells me. Joe Burke has a white, whiskery beard. He would make a great Santa Claus. Now and again he makes droll comments such as: "I hope ye like this tune. If ye don't I'll play it again". Mr. Burke is a big hit as is the smiling lady with a big bun of hair on her head who accompanies him 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.

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. Patrick'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. That night, when we went home, I found myself reflecting on the fact that the majority of Irish musical instruments are similar to Albanian musical instruments. Albanian folk music is national in character but to some degree is influenced by 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 çifteli (a long-necked two-stringed mandolin) and the gërnëtë (a type of clarinet for popular music). Other instruments are the gajda and bishnica (wind instruments) and the sharkia and lahuta (stringed ones).

Thursday, March 3rd 2005

I went to Davitt College to meet Joseph McGowan who is a teacher in this College and editor for the Davitt News newsletter. I have been producing this newsletter since September 2004 every two weeks, with Transition Year students. It is very nice to have an editor like Joseph. He is a great teacher. Every time when I go there I could see on his desk many pages of information, photos, poems, and short stories. He is collecting them from students and after that making suggestions on correcting line or sentences or improving the newsletter. Today Joseph told me about his idea to put in the newsletter the names of all of the College's former students who finished University. He worked very hard for many days trying to find their addresses. He is going to send a letter and a copy of Davitt News newsletter to every one and ask them to write an article for newsletter about their own experiences. The experience of the graduates should make worthwhile reading and, hopefully, will prove inspiring to the present crop of students.

Friday, March 4th, 2005

Eugene Burns, a student at Castlebar College of Further Education was asking me about the Albanian language. I was trying to explain to him everything about my own native language. When I told him that in 1988 I have got honours degree in teaching Albanian language and literature he suggested to me that I should write an article about the Albanian language.

I promised him to do that. So when I went home I was sitting at my computer for many hours and writing these things about my own language.

The Albanian language is not derived from any other language, that is, it does not have a Slavic or Greek base as is commonly believed, but is, in point of fact, one of the nine original Indo-European languages. The other eight Indo-European languages being 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 ë and ç 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 Ghegs 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 Ghegs 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 Gheg would pronounce it as "asht" (AH-sht). The Tosk dialect is the official dialect of the entire country.

Ndrek Gjini-To be continued



Diary of a Migrant

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

Journalist Ndrek Gjini fell foul of the Albanian authorities three years ago for writing articles critical of the Government and was forced to flee the country. Now resident in Castlebar, with his wife and family, Ndrek has been keeping a diary about aspects of his new life here.

March 7th 2005

Tonight, for first time since I came to Ireland I read my poems in front of people in the Linenhall Arts Centre in Castlebar. Poetry Night took place there in association with Poetry of Ireland.

A well-known poet **Moya Cannon** was invited to read her poems. Before she read her poems three local poets were invited to read their own creative work. A woman from Newport was first and after that I was invited to read my poems.

My hands were shaking, I was nervous, but still happy, because after three years in this town I was going to read my poems to those Irish people who were present. Remember, when I first came here I had hardly a word of English except for "yes" or "no". I read my poems very slowly, trying to pronounce every word properly.

I think I did it well. After me a woman from Ballina read her poems.

After that, **Moya Cannon** was invited to read her poems. Her poems were excellent.

When the Poetry Night was over, we went to a pub for a short drink.

Talking to my friends there, I learned that **Moya Cannon** was born in Dunfanaghy, Co Donegal. 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, Britain, Germany and Austria, and has been published in many international journals and anthologies.

She has broadcast on RTÉ radio and TV and on BBC Radio, and has edited *Poetry Ireland Review*. She is a member of *Aosdána* and lives in Galway.

Moya Cannon asked me about my own country. She told me that in the Celtic language Scotland is called *Alban*. I had read something about that but I thought there was not any real link between Albania and Scotland.

March 8th 2005

I spent many hours today trying to discover throughout my books and from the internet about any connection between Albania and Scotland. I find out that the derivation of the name Albania is of considerable antiquity, dating back perhaps to the pre-Celtic *alb* (hill), from whence *Alps*, or possibly from the Indo-European *alb* (white), from whence *albino* and *Albion*.

In 'History' written in 1079-1080, Byzantine historian **Michael Attaliates** was first to refer to the *Albanoi* as having taken part in a revolt against **Constantinople** in 1043 and to the *Arbanital* as subjects of the duke of *Dyrrachium*. The *Italo-Albanians* and the *Albanian minorities* (still present in Greece) have been called in different ways with the passing of the years: *Arbënuer*, *Arbënor*, *Arbëneshtë*, *Arbreshë*.

The Albanian name of the country, *Shqipëria*, translates into English as "Land of the Eagles", hence the two-headed bird on the national flag and emblem, and because of the large presence of these animals in the mountainous zones of Albania.

I know that during a visit of former Albanian communist dictator **Enver Hoxha** in the Soviet Union, **Stalin** asked his employees if *Caucasian Albania* had something to do with the present *Albania*. Actually he came himself from *Georgia*, and *Georgians* claim that they are descendants of *Caucasian Albanians*. The answer was that they have nothing to do with each other except the similarity of the names. There is a theory that the *Scots* came originally from *Albania*. I have read that an *Albanian* surname *Tare* in *Celtic Scottish* means "those who have not returned".

March 9th 2005

Here in Ireland I found many traditions, which are similar to my own country. Additionally, there are not just similar customs but also similar types of clothes.

I think it is more than coincidence 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-system 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 *Gjirokastrë* area and in the *Albanian* regions of *Montenegro*, *Kosova*, *Serbia*, *Macedonia* and *Greece*. And the *Albanian* and *Scottish* clan-systems have a number of similarities. **Noel Malcolm** makes reference to them in his '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 fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Scottish* clans also developed the idea of common ancestry... But back to the kilt, two noted writers referred to it, in **CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE**, they observed the "...*Albanian* kirtled to the knee", while **T.S. Finlay** in his *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."

Ndrek Gjini



Diary of a Migrant



EVER GROWING CASTLEBAR NEEDS AN URBAN TRANSPORT SYSTEM

Journalist Ndrek Gjini fell foul of the Albanian authorities three years ago for writing articles critical of the Government and was forced to flee the country. Now resident in Castlebar, with his wife and family, Ndrek has been keeping a diary about aspects of his new life here.

March 16th 05

What of the things that constantly amazes me is the continuing growth of Castlebar. Older residents tell me that sixty years ago it was a very quiet place with a few donkey and horse carts competing for space on Main Street with the odd motor vehicle. 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 town and adjacent countryside must now be around the 15,000 mark. Every weekday morning, as I make my way to 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 with such large scale employers as the Mayo General Hospital; Mayo County Council; the GMIT; the many factories, not to mention the hundreds of small firms which employ perhaps between 10 and 40 workers each. Many people don't have cars so a public transport system would fulfil two needs. It would provide transport for those who have no private means of transport and 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 services but they can be a little expensive. I believe that despite the strict drinking laws, some people are being tempted to drink and drive. If there was an alternative to taxis, such as a public transport system, I believe a lot of people would avail of it. Come on Mayo County Council. How about an initiative on urban transport in the county town?

March 17th 05

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 at the various parades? Will there be many bands? Will there be much entertainment for the children? Nobody need have worried about the quality or turnout at the Castlebar 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 moved 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 shamrock, paper hats and green clothing that was evident. 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 had been made an opportunity for over-indulgence.

March 18th 2005

Following the excitement of St. Patrick's Day, I got to thinking about similar type celebrations in my own country, Albania. During the Communist era in my own country, there were some armed forces parade. Post-communism that time there were small scale parades to celebrate the national day, which is on November, and which is called 'Independence Day'. Leaders like the Prime Minister and President are now holding small meetings to mark that day and that's all. Albanians wherever they are located in the world, joyously commemorate November 28th as Albanian Independence Day (Dita e Flamurit). For it was on that day in 1912 in the Albanian seacoast town of Vlorë, 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, Easter, etc. 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." Dita e Verës (Spring Day), derived from an ancient pagan holiday, is still celebrated in mid-March in Albania.

Ndrek Gjini- To be continued



Diary of a migrant

New opening hours needed for library



Ndrek Gjini

Continuing our series of random extracts from the diary of Albanian migrant Ndrek Gjini as he makes a new life with his family in Castlebar

MARCH 23RD 2005

Eighteen months ago a friend of mine, Ernie Sweeney was asking me did I use the Library. I replied: "Yes I do, I go there every single day. The Library is my church". When I was not going to the College, the Library was really my church. Currently I have no time to go there every day. Still I am going there every weekend. The people who are working there are very nice and very helpful. There is a modern Library and services are very good. But I think it will be very beneficial I for the community if the library were open not just for Saturdays but also on Sundays. 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 are going there to take out books and to use the Internet, which over there is free. This is wonderful thing. Nowadays here in Castlebar are two Internet Cafés but not every one can go there because they cost too much money. So, if the County

Council decided that the Mayo County Library to 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 Internet Cafés.

MARCH 24TH 2005

Last night I read very interesting news. Out of every ten migrants, here in Ireland, four of them had third level education but their skills are not being used. I know that here in Castlebar, for example, are living hundreds foreigners who have honours degrees in their own country but they cannot make use of them because they do not know enough English. 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 call the Library and log onto the websites for some information of the facilities about education for refugees. In

one of the Government's website I found 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 is just one option to learn English free; going to Citizen Information Centre to Cavendish House and taking just one lesson per week. I think this is very little for people who really want to learn English properly.

MARCH 25TH 2005

Today I meet some Irish friends to discuss a proposal for an EU Celebration of Cultural Diversity. We hope this activity will be held in midsummer. (Bonfire night). What an ideal venue the grounds of Turlough Park House, if could secure it, would make for such an open air celebration. We decided that as a theme for this activity is that a European Community Celebration of cultural diversity recognising the new east European, oriental, African and north and south American influences in our community. More about this as plans unfold.

Diary of a migrant

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

CONTINUING our series of random extracts from the diary of Albanian migrant Ndrek Gjini as he makes a new life with his family in Castlebar

March 25th 2005

It is Good Friday, one of the most important days in the calendar of the Catholic Church. Today I fulfil a personal promise to climb Croagh Patrick which, I am told, is "Ireland's Holiest Mountain". With me is my twelve year old son, Klajd, and a Castlebar friend, Johnny Oosten. Johnny has been up and down the mountain more times than the sheep which graze the slopes. And he is just as nimble. Since I came to Castlebar, I had 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 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, which is perched in such an inaccessible place, in top condition. Johnny, who is good with a paintbrush, commented also on the condition of the exterior of the building and told me he would love to paint it if he could get permission from the Catholic Church to do so. 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. John Kilgariff from Dunmore is nearly 80 years old. He climbs the mountain every month. 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 commented to me: 'the only way to get into the Heaven is the hard way. There are no escalators'.

March 28th 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 me today and he told me that a team of medical staff from Galway will travel to Albania at April 9 for a two-week 'operating marathon' in which they hope to help at least 50 patients. He said that, led by Galway-based consultant plastic surgeon Jack McCann, the trip 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 much recovered on returning home, she needs further help, and it is hoped that many more children and adults suffering from congenital mal-



Ndrek Gjini

formations, burns, scars, and post-traumatic injuries. The team travelling from Galway on April 9 include two surgeons, two anaesthetists, seven nurses, and a person responsible for instrument sterilisation, and the equipment they will need to bring with them includes anaesthetic and surgical equipment, sutures, dressings, and medication, said 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 volunteering their expertise free of charge. Moreover, an urgent fundraising campaign is 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 are helping my people.

March 30th 2005

I received an e-mail from a student who is from Westport and studying here in Castlebar. I thought it would be better if I will publish it without any comment. "Dear Sir, 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 5.20 for a bus back to Westport. There is no bus service between 1.30 and 5.20 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. Ndrek Gjini- To be continued.

Diary of a migrant

Days of mourning for Pope

Communist Cuba

3

Catholic Ireland

0



Ndrek Gjini

Continuing our series of random extracts from the diary of Albanian migrant Ndrek Gjini as he makes a new life with his family in Castlebar.

April 8th 2005

THE FUNERAL of Pope John Paul II was the biggest funeral in history. I think he deserved that because he was a great Pope. However, all these days I was wondering about a small mistake that many journalists made. They claimed that Pope John Paul II was first non-Italian Pope for more than 450 years. That was not true, because there was an Albanian Pope, from 1700 to 1721. His name was Pope Clement XI (Gianfranco Albani (1649-1721)). Moreover, it is very easy to find out right through the Internet that there were and three more Popes of Albanian origin. San Eleuterio (175-189), San Calo (283-296) and San Giovanni IV (640-642).

I was surprised about the national day of mourning dedicated to the death of Pope John Paul II. After the death of Pope John Paul II Irish Prime Minister 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 the different radio stations and there were many thousands of calls outlet demanding a national day of mourning for the pope so dearly loved by the Irish people. After that, Prime Minister Ahern 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% voted in support of the National Day of Mourning Mr Ahern quickly clarified his position, saying that schools would be allowed to close on Friday and state employees could take time off work to attend church services. That was the sum total of remembrance and mourning wise country like Ireland where 95% of population are Roman Catholic. I have been comparing this to other countries all over the world. Days of mourning have been declared in many countries. In Poland six days,

Portugal three days, Brazil seven days, in Albania one day, in Kosovo, where 90% of population are Muslim, two days and in a communist state like Cuba three days of national mourning were declared. These facts do not need any comment.

April 9th 2005

Today I read an old copybook containing some of my notes about the visit of Pope John Paul II to Albania in 1993. I decided to translate some sentences. In that 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. One day before that visit, I met a priest who spent 18 years in jail. Interviewing him, I wrote these notes and today I decided to translate them. The Albanian Church triumphed at a high price. Of 156 priests before the persecution began, 65 were martyred, 64 died during or after imprisonment. Tens of thousands of common people perished for religious reasons.

He was telling me that in the prisons camps the slow torture took many forms. Most of priests were beaten on their bare feet with wooden clubs; the fleshy part of the legs and buttocks were cut open, rock salt inserted beneath the skin, and 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; put in the ice and icy water until nearly frozen; had electrical wires places in their ears, nose and mouth; burning pine needles placed under fingernails.

Forced to eat a kilo of salt and having water withheld for 24 hours; boiled eggs put in their armpits; teeth pulled without anaesthetic; tied behind vans and dragged; left in solitary confinement without food or water until almost dead. Forced to drink their own urine; put in pits of excrement up to their necks; put on a bed of nails and covered with heavy material; put in nail-studded cages which were then rotated rapidly.

I saved that copybook for many years and now I decided to translate these sentences and publish them because I think no nation passed through a worse trail in the 20th century like Albania did. During that visit Pope John Paul II has said: "History has never seen before what happened in Albania. Dear Albanians, your drama must interest the whole European continent. Europe must not forget."

Ndrek Gjini

"Coming to Live in Mayo" is a very useful book but it needs to be promoted

Continuing our series of random extracts from the diary of Albanian migrant Ndrek Gjini as he makes a new life with his family in Castlebar

April 15th 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 education, employment, accommodation, social welfare, money matters and the health services. 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. It was with great relief and pleasure that I received a presentation pack today at a function in the T.F. 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

April 18th 2005

It was a surprise for me when I received 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 new-found 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 20 June 2005, when the opportunity arises to reflect on the challenges faced by refugees and to celebrate the positive aspects of 'new beginnings', as refugees settle into new homes and new communities, said the letter. They announced that 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 for these kind people I am not anymore just a number.

April 20th 2005

In St Patrick School in Castlebar are 19 pupils from asylum seekers and refugee families. They are from Nigeria, Congo, Zimbabwe, Ukraine, Albania, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Cameroon, and Kazakhstan. Therefore, there are represented approximately 7 different languages, and many different religions like Christians, Catholic, Muslims and Born Again Christians. In general, they are getting on quite well. They receive language support from the resource teacher for non-nationals for a forty period each day for their first couple of years in the school. 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 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 is any special program for involving the children in the local community. She told me the support teachers for non-nationals follow the Integrate Ireland Language and Training program. (IILT). This program is designed for second language learners. Moreover, she said that in the school the children take part in hurling, rugby, football, and soccer. Teachers and coaches from the local clubs train them. They are 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 of refugees and asylum seekers. The 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 language barriers.

Ndrek Gjini



Diary of a migrant

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

CONTINUING our series of random extracts from the diary of Albanian migrant Ndrek Gjini as he makes a new life with his family in Castlebar

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 sixty years ago, when horses were used to plough the land and there was very little agricultural machinery, were very similar to those which exists in many parts of my native country today. Since my son brought home the information pack about Bóthar from school I have been carrying out some research about 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 despatched 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 Gjakova region. The dairy heifers, all of whom are spring-calvers, will each help a family to rebuild their lives following the devastating war. On behalf of my people, I say: "Thank you, Ireland".

Every time I visit the Country Life Museum in Turlough, 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 colorful rugs for floors as well as sweaters, socks, gloves, etc. Albanian women and even girls as young as 8-years old have always been praised for their intricate embroideries (qëndisje), which they create to decorate dwelling interiors. Indeed, in preparation for their dowries, several young women will get together to make beautiful dollies (çentro) to place on furniture.

Using a small loom (vegël), they create colourful rugs for floors and with other hand tools produce sweaters, socks, gloves, etc. using wool, cotton, acrylics, and fur. "Punë 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 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 well known for its delicate pen-and-ink drawings as well as for its acrylic, watercolour, and oil paintings. 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. 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 region, 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.

Diary of a migrant

Irish plastic surgeons perform 'miracles' in Albania

April 28th 2005

Seventy Albanian patients were operated on and another one hundred and sixty visited by 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 in the beginning 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. The operated included burn scars with severe contractures, practically of the face and limbs, birth malformations of the face or hands and as well as advanced skin cancer. Some of the team also visited and helped in a home for 45 homeless children, ranging in age from 1-17 years. They provided some new clothes, shoes, food, and medicine. He

said these 45 children are sleeping in three bedrooms and two livingrooms. The team planned to help these children to get a bigger house with a garden for kiddies to play in. This team brought to Albania a truck-load of surgical equipment and supplies including two aesthetic 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, he said. All patients and their families were very thankful to the team and to all those Irish people who have contributed so generously to this fund to make this mission possible. He told me that the medical personnel involved were volunteering their expertise free of charge. Moreover, a fundraising campaign is underway to fund next trip.



May 2nd 2005

The symbiosis between Irish and the foreigners is now well known fact. Irish exiled from greatness and a parallel between Jewish and Irish leaving out from the most important modern of European life. And I think the symbiosis between Irish and Jews is the supreme thing that illustrates how generous Irish people are. Religious toleration and social non-discrimination exists in the Irish Republic and Jews have prospered by the absence of 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 "Rescu-

ers 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 had 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 November 4, 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. However here in Ireland is a museum that called "The Irish Jewish Museum." I have been there 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 is shame but in my own country, we have not any museum like this, where these great things can be showed.

Ndrek Gjini



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

May 9th 2005

A FRIEND of mine said me that he found a job for his wife but if she is going to work, his family needs to pay about two times more money than his wife's income.

This money needs to be paid for childcares because they have two children. I was surprised to hear that.

Moreover, I think the government needs to do more to increase its state sponsored childcare schemes. This expansion should be placed in early childhood care and education at the social development strategy; supporting employment and allowing parents to play an active role in the workforce; supporting parents in their parenting role and providing both an opportunity for the transmission of values and a stimulating environment in which children could learn, develop and grow.

In attempting the problems of childcare, there need to be facilitating parents to decide what best suits their own requirements.

Moreover needs to be recognized some of the school-aged childcare schemes already in operation. Modern society now demands a complex approach to childcare. If parents want to take responsibility in the provision of varied and suitable childcare programmes, I believe the state should play its part in gathering that confront.

He explained me that the costs per hour of childcare here in Castlebar tend to turn down as the hours required by families increases. The most expensive is the hourly cost (€8) of minding 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 of another explanation for the perceived increase in cost for caring for school-aged children. Anecdotaly it would appear that private child-minders 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 carers' hours fall so the

relative cost per hour rises.

May 12th 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 seven hundred years, Irish people were not allowed to learn their own language.

Now we are living in Ireland, so there is nothing wrong if she could learn perfect Irish language.

Therefore, I think nowadays every Irish needs to have high passion in learning their own language as part of their own history their own culture, as nation. Moreover, when learning Irish is free in every school.

My own country had had similar fate for hundred and hundred years under 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, 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 with the American Vocational School (Shkolla Teknike) established by the American Red Cross in 1921, which eventually became part of the University of Tirana when it 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%).

Ndrek Gjini



Musings on Castlebar's "French Market" and the lack of English classes in Mayo for migrants

I LIKE mostly everything about Ireland, with a few exceptions. For one thing, the weather, apart from a few weeks in summer, is disappointing, especially when, like me, you come 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 letdown. I always read that Ireland was an agricultural country so it was a bit of surprise when I came here to find so many unfilled fields and the produce people ate, was mostly processed food, 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, multi-layered pastry sheets, or fërgesë (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 Markets were 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 is 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" is, I feel, a little bit misleading.

By Ndrek Gjini



While discussing the so-called Castlebar "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.

GEZUAR

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.

Need for English classes for migrants

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 citi-

zens 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 all over Ireland.

Poland has a significantly higher unemployment level. I feel sorry for these Polish migrants as most of them know very little English. Most of them have finished University in their own country but now because their poor English they are working in the construction industry.

Moreover, as I wrote weeks ago, there is no opportunity for them to learn English in Mayo.

Ireland is the only EU state had offering equal work and welfare rights to citizens of the 10 new EU members. Britain since last year declared restricted access to welfare benefits. When 10 new countries became member of 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 May 1st 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 that means same as Irish citizen.

The Irish government is also giving priority to Eastern Europeans for work visas/permits over other non-EU nationals. Well done, Ireland.

Will be more specific in terms of...
...pletely rebuilt in recent months...
...ity for the re-... ward as minister of rural...

THOUGHTS OF A MIGRANT

"Pirated" DVD's on offer at car boot sale

LAST week I attended my first car boot sale in Ireland. I went mostly out of curiosity but if I saw something that was old and typically Irish that I thought was a bargain I would buy it.

My son, Klajd, was delighted when he saw some DVD's which cost just €10 each.

There were DVD's of some movies which are now showing in the movies 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 the 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 that people who were selling these DVD's have 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, pirated and counterfeit products, because of the high profit margins are often used to fund organised crime, paramilitary or terrorist activity. Apart from the poor quality of the goods, this is a compelling reason to avoid them.

COPYRIGHT PIRACY

Customs seizures of CDs (audio, games and software) and DVD's at the EU external borders were nearly 25 million for the first half of 2003-showing 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. I learned that under the 2000 Act,

By Ndrek Gjini



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

However, I think most important is that to know about penalties on these offences. People guilty of these offences can be fined up to €1,905 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 going to say anything to them or to explain that they are violating the laws and that they can be fined for this.

Why aren't the laws implemented?

Finding peace at Ballintubber Abbey

ONE 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 9a.m. The serenity and the stillness of the place was 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 reading quietly with 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, Croagh Patrick, to the west and 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 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.

FAVOURABLE

All of the comments were favourable. "Splendid"; "Most Educational"; "Inspiring" were some

Abbey

By Ndrek Gjini



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 lays claim to be the oldest church (in Ireland ?) where there has been continuous religious celebration.

It was founded in 1216 by Cathal Croidtearg 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 - clearly Tribunals are not a new phenomenon in Ireland (the outcome is unknown).

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 res-

torations were carried out in 1846 and 1889 but the abbey was fully restored in time for the 750th anniversary in 1966.

I was really impressed about this story and in my memories I was comparing these things to my own country Albania. In north Albania there is a church which is the biggest Roman Catholic Church in the Balkans. It is old as well but not older than 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, Islam became predominant in Albania with about 70% of the population 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 most 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.

A woman with Irish blood was Queen of Albania

I WAS having tea with a friend of mine, who is a former journalist from South Africa.

He was telling me about Albanian King Zog's life in South Africa. I was impressed with his knowledge, on the subject.

When I came home, I started reading a book, which is about the monarchy in Albania.

It is in the Albanian language. 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 Prime minister, President and after that King of Albania from 1928 to 1939.

Geraldine Apponyi was born in Budapest in 1915. Her father was the Hungarian Count Gyula Appoonyi 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 in her diary had written that she arrived in Albania shortly after Christmas in 1937. After accepting his New Year's Day proposal, she was made princess.

Geraldine stayed a Catholic while her husband King Zog

By Ndrekgjini



was a Muslim. She got married in a civil ceremony on 27th April 1938. The New York Herald Tribune observed, "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 just 15 months. When she and her husband left Albania, they had a son Leka (catho-

lic 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 with their son left Albania, 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 to this country, which 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.

THOUGHTS OF A MIGRANT

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

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 one hour. They asked me about my own country Albania and about what are similarities and differences between Irish and Albanian.



By Ndrek Gjini

I told them that similarities are that both Irish and Albanian have two noticeable things in common- they both like to have a drink and are very friendly.

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 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 reflected many of the unique traditions of the Albanian highlanders. The Kanun unbelievably, was passed down 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. **NORTHERN PRINCE**

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 guest that happen to pass by your lands.

An example of a Kanun law that I think was very interesting is the following: 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 enforce 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 are 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, this code is very hard to be stopped, because the government there is not doing its job in punishing the guilty. In Foxford, the Argentinean journalist told the blood feud did exist and 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.

WEEKLY

THOUGHTS OF A MIGRANT

By Ndrék Gjini



Gender change and blood feuds in Albania

By Ndrék Gjini

WHILE 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 that a similar situation used to exist in my home country, Albania. Attitudes there have changed also.

I was able to tell my Irishman friend of an unusual custom in rural parts of northern Albania.

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 men'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 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 pro-

vide 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 socialize with other men in a room women are not permitted to

enter (except to serve food). In fact, in some cases, the village forgets her true gender. He asked me 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 and his two sons have been 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 had cropped her hair short. Now she dresses as a man.

So there you have it. Customs going back thousands of years still survive in isolated parts of my beloved country.

Thoughts of a Migrant

Employment is crucial for proper integration



By Ndrek Gjini

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, at least understood.

I think a lot of the apprehension and tensions between Irish and immigrants in modern day Ireland comes from 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.

How many times have I personally been told when being turned down for a job: "You do not know the Irish language". This is soul and morale destroying for the job seeker.

Lack of equal opportunities in accessing education result in marginalisation and disadvantage of the entire social group.

Another thing is recognition of qualifications. Lack of recognition of qualification is a most important factor preventing refugees from continuing their careers and forcing them to take up employment that does not match their skills.

In the ach country has a different view 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.

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 program 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.

So, I think, they also want also their children to be enriched by their cultural values 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

IRISH people are among the most tolerant people in Europe. While other E.U. 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 is always renowned for religious toleration. 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 Kosove 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



By Ndrek Gjini

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, Kosova, and Serbia. Today, there are almost 2 million people of Bosnian descent and some 1

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 15-16th 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 3 million nominal Muslims in Albania; 2.3 million in Kosove and Sanxhak; 2 million in Bosnja; 2 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 Slaviceze 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 being and after that we may by chance be Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Muslim, Orthodox, or Atheist.

Long live diversity.

Thoughts of a Migrant

Death is the same everywhere but customs are different

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 he explained to me many things about Irish customs of 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 weeps, for people think of wailing, they think of senseless screaming and crying, but it is much more than that. It is crying with words, and, yes, to some ears it does involve screaming. Women much of the time cries



By Ndrek Gjini

so long until 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.

GRIEVING

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 can 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 difference 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, but I think the Irish and Albanians in the same way show respect for important citizens by flying the flag at half-mast, and lighting candles or placing flowers on the grave in remembrance of the loved one.

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 our selves. 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.

ALLVA

Let it be a big Christmas card



By Ndrek Gjini

A well-known writer observes: You can write a book about China after you are there for a week. However after a month of stay, you probably find that you can only write a few pages."

And living there for a year, you may end up writing nothing. I do agree him. But his sentences are not correct for my Irish friends and me. This because I am here for four years and I am still able to write good things about Ireland and the Irish.

Nevertheless I could say that, in fact, many people in their home culture would not mind if they find themselves different from others. They may even try hard to make themselves stand out, since difference could mean being distinguished, original, or ingenious. People who deliberately distinguish themselves from others can be satisfied with what they did, as they know what they want and they do things according to what they want. Even if they were not satisfied with what they did, they then can easily revert to the shared social norm.

way to retreat either. The differences between themselves and others cannot be a luxury they want to enjoy, but a flaw they want to cover or get rid of.

The mirror a foreigner is facing is a distorting mirror. The figure in front of him or her is not what one has expected to see. One becomes very cautious and carefully adjusts oneself to make a better image. It is not an easy job at all.

Now it's Christmas time so I'd like to write a few sentences about Christmas in my own country. Albanians respect family values very much. So whenever they decide to celebrate, they do it together with their entire family. Albania has a mix of Christian and Moslem population. Although New Year's Eve is the most celebrated day, Christmas is very well celebrated, as well. The tradition of gift giving is maintained on the New Year's Eve for a long time. Feasting takes a prominent place during the Christmas. Almost all Christian families go for special cooking for their Christmas meal or dinner. There's the turkey, stuffing, and different side dishes. And dessert takes a special place. Albanians call it 'baktlava'. It's like a pie, but far more complicated. Albanians also have a big and nicely decorated Christmas tree, in the centre of the capital.

SOME days ago my daughter asked me to put up a Christmas tree. I did it. But when I started to put on the decorations, which were in a big box, my daughter was surprised when she saw there many Christmas cards and other cards, which we received from many Irish friends in the four years we have spent living here in Castlebar. There are more than 300 cards. Every time I look at them, they tell me about how generous Irish people are. They tell about how they treat my family and me.

To be honest with you I did not send many cards, and this because these cards had had just their names and not their own addresses. I know them all. I met them all and I visited most of their own homes.

They are still sending me cards and I am not able to do anything good for them. Possibly saving these cards in this big box for a long time is kind of respecting them. I am foreign in this town. Although being in company with these very kind friends know I not scared anymore.

Many people do feel shocked when they face an overwhelming culture. We do hear people say: "In this culture, I feel I am like a new born child." The experience of a new cultural world is no less a shock. I am not a foreigner in this town. I am a foreigner in this town. I am a foreigner in this town. I am a foreigner in this town.

This does not happen to foreigners. Foreigners usually only have the idea of conformity to the dominant culture, but do not know exactly how they can achieve that, and they feel they are not doing it. They are not doing it. They are not doing it. They are not doing it.

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