

Where Life Is Empty

By Sami Cohen

This is a story about Red Albania, the small Mediterranean country which rarely admits non-Communist writers. Sami Cohen, a United States-trained journalist who is foreign affairs editor of the Istanbul newspaper Milliyet, went to Albania as a sports reporter with a Turkish soccer team and prepared this dispatch for the Associated Press.

ENNER HOXHA, the Stalinist ruler of Albania—the Lilliput of the Communist world which has challenged the Soviet Gulliver—faces serious political and economic trouble as a result of the split.

The break with Moscow two years ago and the policy of friendship with Red China is hard to swallow for many pro-Soviet elements in the Albanian Communist Party, government and army. In recent months, Hoxha is said to have removed most of these elements from key posts and replaced them with obedient officials.

But despite extreme secrecy, diplomatic observers in Tirana still believe there is a "Russian Wing" among highly placed Albanian personalities and intellectuals. Moscow-trained Beqir Bul-luku, the defense minister, is said to be among them. But the régime prevents any open opposition.

There have been some cases of resistance since the break with Moscow. Late in 1961, an attempted rebellion led by the pro-Russian commander of the naval forces, Adm. Teme Sejko, was crushed. Adm. Sejko and two high officials were executed. Last year, a similar attempt also was put down in the northern town of Scutari. Resistance is reportedly growing in the villages, where peasants have been beating Communist officials.

However, such a movement cannot be successful as long as Hoxha is in power, is the opinion of experts.

THE SOVIET-ALBANIAN quarrel has enabled the Red Chinese to set up for the first time in history a bridgehead in Europe. Nearly 100 Chinese experts have replaced the Russians, Poles, East Germans and Czechs working in Albania.

Throughout the country, slogans praise the friendship of "fraternal" China. By contrast, street posters ridicule Tito and sometimes Khrushchev.

But the people's attitude toward the Chinese is cooler than their attitude toward the Russians. One reason is that the Chinese live in their own quarters without fraternizing with the Albanians. Another reason is that the people blame the Chinese for present hardships. A typical reaction is: "How can China, which is in need itself, help us from thousands of miles away?"

Since the Moscow-Tirana break, the Soviet Union has ceased all economic and technical assistance to its former satellite. As a result, many foodstuffs and other commodities have become scarce.

Housewives daily form long queues before state-owned shops. Fat, beans and rice are among the chief shortages. Milk is distributed only to families with small children. Each family has to buy bread from regional bakeries which keep records.

A factory worker or government official would have to spend two months' salary to buy a suit and almost one for a good pair of shoes. A working girl has to wait in a long line when a new consignment of hosiery arrives from abroad to buy nylon stockings with three days' work. An ordinary working person would have to allocate a whole year's income for a refrigerator.

The average monthly salary of a worker is \$28 to \$40 (a dollar is worth 125 Albanian leks); that of a government official \$40 to \$48. An engineer or a doctor gets \$58 to \$64 from the State. The people in the highest income brackets in Albania are military officers and policemen. An army captain gets \$84, a colonel \$96, with additional allowances.

A locally-made, cheap man's suit costs 8000-9000 leks (\$64-\$72). A badly shaped pair of shoes \$24, a woman's raincoat \$28, a shirt \$6. One kilo (a little over two pounds) of bread costs 20.8 cents, cheese \$2, butter \$3.04, coffee \$7.68, tea \$8.

THE SOVIETS abandoned many unfinished projects when Albania broke with Moscow.

The Palace of Culture in the main square of Tirana, the foundation stone of which was laid by Khrushchev in 1953, remains a skeleton. The Albanians have been able to finish some jobs started by the Russians, with China's aid, however.

The problem is whether Peking will stick by its promise to provide \$125 million to finance Albania's third five-year development plan. Albanian officials believe that it will.

Hoxha seems determined to carry out a "leap forward" by placing a heavy burden on the present generation. The leap forward has brought some progress, particularly in industry. In 1961, (the latest available figures) total volume of industrial production was 71 per cent above that for 1957, the government claims.

But agricultural production has lagged. Communist officials blame drought and bad weather conditions. But observers believe this is the result of collectivization of land. The Albanian government has managed to collectivize about 85 per cent of the arable land. As in many other Communist countries, state farms and cooperatives in Albania have not provided hoped-for results.

Also, as in other Communist countries, rents are relatively low (100 leks [30 cents] per room), education in high schools and the university is free, cultural activities (opera, theaters, ballet) are encouraged, and free sanitary services are provided by the State.

Albanian authorities have recently shown some willingness to improve relations with the three Western nations with which diplomatic relations are maintained: France, Italy and Turkey. France and Italy have sent technical experts to Albania.

Albanian officials have expressed the wish to establish diplomatic ties with Britain. Albania is barred to foreigners except on special permit. The country's borders with Yugoslavia and Greece are fortified by a "wall" of electrical barbed wire. Inside the country, an estimated 10,000 secret police (called Sigurimi) keep a close watch on the people. Even interurban traveling is subject to a special permit. Albania has experienced brutal purges. During 1949-53, about 30,000 people (2.5 per cent of the population) are believed to have disappeared in concentration camps.

Nobody in Tirana knows the exact number of political prisoners in Albania today; diplomats estimate from 20,000 to 30,000.

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Date: 2005