

Dini

When Abedin Shahini, immediately and ever after known as “Dini”, was born in Lezhë, Albania, April 29, 1957, he was the fourth son of his parents with another brother to follow and two sisters, one of whom died when she was three years old. Though very poor they had a few meager amenities not available to most of Albanian society, including a two bedroom single family home in a better section of the city of Lezhë. Most of the urban population lived in very small one bedroom apartments. Dini’s father was a native of Orenjë, a small mountain village in northwestern Albania. When Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini invaded Albania in 1939 and overthrew the government of King Zog, Dini’s father joined the Communist partisans waging war first against the Italian invaders and then against their German successors when the Italians surrendered to the Allies in 1943. He came to Lezhë after the war in 1945.

There were other partisan groups fighting the occupiers but the communists, better organized and more avid about actually engaging in battle, were favored by the British and American forces who were focused on defeating Germany and willing to back any group actually taking the field no matter their ideology. Under their leader, Enver Hoxha, (pronounced “Ho-jah”) the Albanian communists were not only the most active resistance force, but also determined to be the most dominant force in the country when the war ended and in position to take over the government. To that end they also fought other partisan groups they viewed as possible rivals as well as the Germans. Hoxha’s scheming was successful and when the German’s retreated from Albania, the communist forces marched on the capital, Tirana, and with Allied backing formed a new government of Albania. Dini’s father was rewarded for his service with the partisans and commitment to the communist party by being assigned a lot on which he built their home and was assigned a good job as a technician working with medicinal herbs.



Enver Hoxha - 1944

Enver Hoxha quickly solidified the communists’ power by ruthlessly eliminating anyone deemed to be a threat to his rule, both in and outside the party. He organized and ran the party on the lines of Stalin’s Russian communist party. He remained an admirer of Stalin even after succeeding Russian rulers repudiated Stalin. The Albanian Communists commanded obedience through fear. Any deviation from the party line was punished by execution or jail for long prison terms. Not only those found guilty of sins real or imagined were punished, but by including the offender’s family in any punishments the fear was compounded. The near relatives of anyone punished by the regime were ostracized by friends, neighbors and family for the very real fear that being seen as friendly to them would result in punishment as sympathizers.

The communist government assumed ownership of all assets in the country. There was no private property excepting small personal items. Private ownership of real estate, vehicles and tools of production was prohibited. Citizens were assigned to jobs by party officials, given residences and allocated basic food supplies. Practically all major decisions that individuals make in free societies were made by the government. Though the theory of central planning for an economy looked good on paper it didn’t work well. No one was allowed to leave the country,

most western music was deemed inappropriate and banned, blue jeans were prohibited, only literature approved by the party was permitted. Albania was very much a closed society and frequently compared to North Korea. It was the poorest country in Europe.

Education was given attention because it was important to indoctrinate students in the communist party line and to prepare workers for jobs the government deemed important. Students were tested early and often, then assigned to study programs the party chose. Dini early exhibited an interest and aptitude for the arts, especially dance, and was assigned to his school's arts program and dance group. When he was in the fifth grade he was chosen to transfer to an arts school in Tirana but the morning he was to depart, as he waited for the bus, a party official informed his family that there had been a mistake and he would not be going to Tirana after all. It wasn't that he didn't qualify, but the party was punishing his father in the first of a series of steps that would eventually lead to his father's expulsion from the party and loss of his job.

The punishment was mostly for the sins of his eldest son who was prone to get drunk and consequently into fights with the police because he despised them. He was sentenced to short jail terms on eight separate occasions. When his father was expelled from the party in the mid-1970's and dismissed from his job and re-assigned to a construction job of hard labor he was fifty seven, three years short of the communist Albania retirement age of 60. His sons, none of whom ever joined the party or had any love for it, despite their father's devotion to it, decided that the work would be more strenuous than he could stand and took it on themselves to support him and their mother for the three years until his retirement date. As a true believer who had supported the party all his adult life and believed the promises communism promoted, the expulsion and loss of his job was devastating, resulting in a depression he never fully recovered from. A quiet, honorable and respectful man, the betrayal by the party greatly shortened his life in his family's opinion.



Dini Shahini in local dance troupe - front row 3rd from right - 1984

Dini remained in the dance group and continued to dance with the district dance group well into his 30's. Dini also excelled at soccer, the national sport, and played on the school team. While still dancing in the local group he pursued his love of soccer by serving as a National Soccer referee. By dint of hard work and willingness to travel, he climbed the officiating ranks until he was refereeing at the highest

level and during his officiating career, worked at every stadium in Albania.

Dictator Hoxha, always hostile to religion, declared Albania an atheist nation in 1967. Dini's elementary school dance group was part of a welcoming celebration for a major speech Hoxha gave on the hillside above the town square in March, 1967. There he declared any

observance of religion outlawed, repeating Karl Marx's statement that "religion is the opiate of the masses." Churches and mosques were destroyed or turned into civic buildings for secular use. Religious leaders were deported or executed and all religious practice banned.

The Shahini's were nominally Muslim but didn't practice the religion or attend mosque or pray, even before the proscription against religion. Dini doesn't recall ever visiting a mosque or participating in any religious service. They were Muslim by virtue of their ancestor's faith, not their own.



Abandoned coastal artillery caves - 2023

In 1977 Dini was drafted into the armed forces and served as an artilleryman on a shore battery of 122mm howitzers overlooking the Adriatic Sea at Shengjin just outside Lezhë. This heavy artillery was housed in caves hewn in the side of the mountain and the crews did dry runs daily, loading the guns, running them out, taking sight and pretending to fire. Once a year they actually fired the weapons with echoing booms that shook the mountain. Though they were defending against American invasion, it

never came and the guns were never fired in hostilities. The artillery is gone but the caves remain.

Klementina

Përmët, in southern Albania, was the birthplace and home of Klementina, born in 1959, the youngest of seven siblings, six sisters and one brother. Hers is a very close knit supportive family. Like the Shahini's they were Muslim but of the Baktashi Order, a Sufi sect more tolerant of other faiths than most of Islam. Their membership was only in name by virtue of ancestry and they did not practice the religion. Like Dini's father, Klementina's father was a proud communist who had fought with the partisans and was an honored member of the party and had been given a plum job assignment after the war as reward for his service and loyalty. Klementina was a very bright and accomplished student and in early testing identified as a prospect for important work for the state. In high school she was assigned to the diplomatic school in the capital, Tirana, where she lived in the dormitory and took classes designed to prepare her for a career in the diplomatic service, including training in English and Russian languages.



Klementina on left



Klementina in the middle

Then in her high school freshman year... disaster. Her oldest sister, some ten years her elder and almost a second mother to her, a member of the communist party and working for a local communist official in Përmët, wrote a letter to President Hoxha, reporting a local official who was misusing state funds. She was sure he would be interested in learning about it and correcting it.

One of Hoxha's peculiarities was that he read every letter sent to him personally. It was almost a hobby for a man who had none. This may seem an onerous chore but with a population of only three million, all of whom were fearful of the government, the reading took less time than one might imagine.

While Hoxha cultivated a public persona of cheerful joy and concern for the people, he was a cold, ruthless, narcissist totally dedicated to retaining personal power. His practice of removing anyone he deemed a possible threat permeated fear through the ranks where a denunciation could quickly lead to dismissal, imprisonment or death. Late in life he capriciously turned on the last remaining co-founder of the Albanian communist party, neighbor and lifelong "friend", his second in command, for the sin of approving his son's marriage without receiving party permission to an unacceptable girl whose family's allegiance Hoxha questioned without reason. His old friend and comrade, reading the writing on the wall, committed suicide in hopes of sparing his family the coming punishment. It didn't work for Hoxha jailed his surviving wife and son anyway.

Instead of sparking a reform, Klementina's sister's letter resulted in her expulsion from the party and a ten year jail sentence. As part of her punishment, her father was also expelled from the party and lost his job. As all of her other siblings had by then married and left home, they were required to sever all ties with their sister Klementina and parents upon pain of similar punishment. Further, her sister's husbands were required to divorce their wives if they did not comply. Her father wrote each of them telling them to follow the party's direction and to cease all communication with their parents, eldest sister and Klementina for their own good. Klementina was allowed to finish her last years of schooling but was ostracized. While there might be a table of a dozen chattering classmates and now former friends, in the cafeteria, Klementina ate alone, everyone afraid to associate with her.

During her last year of high school her jailed sister sent a letter that she wished she could see her youngest sister, Klementina, one more time. Their father, using his friendships and contacts was able to arrange a clandestine meeting and Klementina took the trains from Tirana to Kosovë e Vogël where her sister was jailed and her father met her there. They waited



Klementina Shahini, 3rd from left, at high school in Tirana, Albania 1970's

until nightfall to be escorted through a back door into the prison where Klementina was greeted by her sister with “you look like you’ve gained some weight”. It was a treasured meeting and the only one they would have during her sister’s ten year incarceration.

Upon her return to the dormitory in Tirana the following day, Klementina was summoned to the office and closely questioned about her absence. She was accused of vile sins and called degrading names because the administrators thought she’d spent the night with a boy, a cardinal offense in that conservative society. Klementina accepted the accusation and curses but refused to answer, letting them assume what they might, for if she’d confessed to visiting her sister in prison, she would have been imprisoned too. She told no one for the consequences were too dire. Had it not been for the presence of a family friend in the school administration who protected Klementina as best she could, it is likely she would have been expelled.

After graduation in June, 1978 she was removed from her diplomatic track and assigned to a labor battalion where she did manual labor in agriculture, in factories, on the railroad...wherever she was assigned with no appeal or chance of improvement. As an outcast she was shunned by old friends now afraid to associate with her. Even fellow laborers under similar punishment kept their distance from each other from fear of punishment for any connection with each other. It was a dreary, lonely existence of hard labor.

One of her jobs was in a cannery where she was the only “white” worker, all the others being Roma, gypsies, who, already at the bottom of the social ladder, had no compunction about talking with and including her. The job, cleaning and packing sardines in tins was smelly, dirty and nasty. They worked without gloves. Years later at a national Roma day celebration Klementina attended, she was approached by a Roma woman who reminded her that they had worked together in the cannery and that she had been so impressed with Klementina’s kindness and spirit that she had named her son and daughter after her, “Klement and Klementina.”

Klementina’s time with the Roma women gave her a heart for the Roma and provided the impetus for special outreach by the church and school to the Roma community.

Dini & Klementina

Dini’s first sight of Klementina was on the train from Tirana to Ballsh, the last stop on the line from where one took the bus for a three hour ride to Përmët, which had no train station. Klementina was on her way home from a distant job assignment that had been completed. Dini was on the same train with a group of friends. Dini’s friends tried to flirt with Klementina and were ignored. Dini was so dumbfounded by her beauty he found himself unable to join in and remembers this first vision of her: “She was so little, so beautiful. Like a child.” But their paths crossed from time to time and they’d nod wordlessly to each other.

One of Klementina’s assignments was to work on a railroad repair in the village of Milot near Lezhë and here Dini approached and talked to her and they began a long correspondence. Dini recalls “I was scared to propose to her that time because she was so beautiful and I was afraid of being rejected. I considered rather to have a friendship with her than nothing.”

Albania was then, and still is a very conservative society with the mixing of young people only permitted under a chaperon’s watchful eyes. Dating was unknown unless engaged and just being alone on a sidewalk walking together signaled to passersby that a couple was likely engaged. Arranged marriages were the norm and parental permission and party approval was required.

Dini's mother and father had met because his supervisor was impressed with his work ethic and sense of responsibility and when he told a friend about this impressive young man was asked "why don't you fix him up with your daughter?" And though she was ten years younger than Dini's father, her father made the arrangements for what became a long and happy marriage. Following the marriage, Dini's mother worked as a laundress in a kindergarten.



Dini's mother, farthest right, with her kindergarten workmates - 1971

Despite the societal and personal roadblocks, even after Klementina warned Dini of her pariah status, he was smitten and made a trip to Përmët to meet her parents. Her parents were not impressed. He was a northerner and there is definite antipathy between southern and northern Albanians, each disapproving of the other's perceived negative proclivities. Besides, his hair was too long and he looked like a gangster to them. No, her father would not give permission to marry Dini. Though they continued to exchange letters, the romance didn't appear possible.

New Year's Eve, 1980, Dini traveled to Përmët to celebrate the holiday with friends, with no plans to see Klementina. New Year's Day is an Albanian national holiday. Nobody works. Dini was in his hotel room early New Year's morning and looking out his window across the cold snowy square, he saw a lone, slight, bundled figure leaning into the wind, walking slowly across the empty square carrying a shovel. Even at the distance and with the bulky clothing and snowy distortion he recognized her. Klementina. Dressing as quickly as he could, Dini dashed downstairs and caught up with her. Recognizing him she stopped. When she told him she was on her way to work he was incredulous. Impossible, there is no work on New Year's Day. There was for her, she told him, there were no days off, not even this day.

Her job was a two hour walk through the snow and she would be digging holes outside when she got there. With only thin rubber boots her feet suffered frostbite almost daily which she treated by soaking them in salt water at the end of each long day. On impulse he asked her to marry him. She laughed and told him it was impossible. They parted, but continued writing each other more often. When he returned home Dini told his father of the incident and his father informed him that as he had offered marriage, honor required that he follow through.

In 1982, Dini's brother was engaged and planning to be married in October and Dini saw his chance. He got in touch with Klementina by telegram and asked her to be at the post office at a certain time so he could call her on the phone there as there were no phones at their homes. She was there when he called at the appointed time and told her his plan...to piggyback on his

brother's wedding by getting married at the same time even without permission from her parents or from the government or the communist party. She agreed and took the train to Lezhë without telling her parents where she was going or why. One of her sister's, surreptitiously in on the plan, informed her parents a couple days after she had left and was already married to Dini.

Albanian weddings are a grand affair lasting two days with a ceremony on the first day at the bride's home and the second day at the groom's. Relatives and friends knew about Dini's brother's wedding but nothing about Dini's. Both couples would be living with the Shanini parents after their respective weddings but because the plans had been long laid for his brother's wedding the groom and bride's bedroom was fitted out with everything they needed and their bed laid for reception of gifts. There was nothing in Dini and Klementina's bedroom, only a bedframe with a sheet stretched across it. No mattress, no gifts, no furniture.

Because all religion had been banned, the ceremony was civil and two days after the wedding they went to the government offices and registered the marriage. Because they had not obtained government permission to marry, they were not assigned living quarters and remained with Dini's parents for over a year. Now that she was no longer in her parents' household, Klementina's assignment to the labor battalion was ended and she was free to find other work but unlike approved citizens, she wouldn't be assigned a job by the government, she had to find it on her own.

Living with in-laws, three families in a small house designed for one family, is not easy



Ardian's first birthday - Shengjin, Albania

and after a year with Dini's parents and short stays with Dini's brothers and even a winter season in the coastal Shëngjin resort, they moved to a hotel in Lezhë where they lived in one room with a single bathroom at the end of the hall serving the entire floor. They were on the fifth floor with no elevator. There was no bathtub or shower and bathing was done for a basin of water heated in a pan over a smoky kerosene cookstove in the hallway.

Dini had been assigned work as a refrigeration mechanic after his term in the navy and had earned the highest rating in his occupation and was supervisor of the refrigeration department in a milk processing plant. He earned a decent income relative to most. Though they made application for an apartment, the opprobrium of her earlier association with her sister's conviction and their unsanctioned marriage followed them and none was forthcoming. Their first child, Ardian was born in February 1984 and now there were three in the family in this tiny hotel room and then she was pregnant again.

Dini had parlayed his love of soccer into a hobby, an avocation of soccer referee and over several years rose through the ranks until he was officiating games in the highest national league level. Soccer was one of the few approved escapes from the grim reality of daily life the communist government



Dini - National soccer referee at Lezhe stadium

encouraged and Albanians were avid and demonstrative fans. Fights between rival team supporters were common and fans were apt to flood the field if a call on the field went against their team and officials were frequently the targets of thrown bottles and attack off the field. After one match Dini officiated, fans of the losing team stormed the locker room and carried their striker onto the field and forced him to kick a goal, assuaging their pain at the loss. Being a soccer official was not for the cowardly or faint hearted and as his family responsibilities grew with the addition of children and the level of violence seemed to be escalating, Dini resigned his officiating position and gave it up.

With the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985, his successor, Ramiz Alia was faced with the extreme poverty of the nation and in attempts to improve the nation's economic position, allowed minor reforms and shuffled officials while still retaining dictatorial rule by communist principles. One of the officials changed was the local Secretary of the Communist Party who was assigned to Lezhë. He stayed at the same hotel where Dini and Klementina lived while his house was being readied. Klementina did her best to avoid him, to stay out of sight and hopefully out of mind, believing the safest course was to simply not come to the government's notice. But others at the hotel told her that the man had been asking about her. Fortunately, and unlike most of his compatriots, he was compassionate and approached the local housing directory and asked:

"Do you know there is a couple living in the hotel and have been there for some time?"

"Yes, we know" was the reply.

"Do you know they have a child and are expecting another?"

"Yes, we know" was the reply again.

He ordered the housing authorities to find them an apartment.

Klementina was not assigned a new job when she married Dini but was free to find one on her own. Through a friend of her mother-in-law she found a job, but it was hard manual labor. Sometime later another Shahini family friend helped her get a position as student nurse at a local children's hospital and she was working there when they were assigned an apartment. She was on duty when a fellow nurse came to tell her that Dini was at the entrance asking for her. Realizing that only very good or very bad news would bring him to the hospital she was relieved and very happy when he told her that they'd been assigned an apartment.

While it wasn't much larger than their hotel room, being only about 581 square feet/54

square meters, it did have a kitchen with a sink and a bedroom separate from the living area. The bathroom had only a hole-in-the-floor “Turkish” squat toilet and a sink. No bathtub or shower. Cooking was on a smoky kerosene single burner stove so noxious that she did all cooking in the bathroom, trying to keep the smoke out of the living area.

Ramiz Alia, Hoxha’s handpicked successor had been a partisan communist fighter in the war and had sufficient political acumen to rise through the ranks without appearing a threat to Hoxha and avoided the dire fate for anyone Hoxha had perceived as a threat. But he was not Hoxha and he lacked the ruthlessness by which Hoxha had held onto power.

Albania’s economy was failing in 1985. At times only leeks were available in the market and became a symbol of the nation’s poverty. Rather than repress with force, Alia permitted some small reforms aimed at improving the economy and loosened some of the restrictions. Citizens were allowed to watch Italian or Yugoslav TV stations, political prisoners’ sentences were reduced, farmers were allowed to own two sheep as long as they were the same sex and open debate about what to do was permitted in the legislature, hitherto a rubber stamp body. But changes in communist Europe made these improvements too little, too late. The Berlin Wall fell in November of 1989 as the Soviet Union collapsed. A month later Romanians overthrew Nicolae Ceausescu who had ruled Romania since 1965 and executed him and his wife on Christmas day.

Students at Enver Hoxha University in Tirana were becoming restless and began marching, making demands for more freedom, more openness; shaking the system and wresting increasingly liberal concessions from the government but never enough to satisfy the protesters. In December 1990 the ban of religious observance was officially lifted, just in time to allow thousands of Christians to attend Christmas services and the competing Democratic Party was openly established after the Central Committee of the Communist Party authorized a multi-party system. When a hunger strike by students in early 1991 morphed into a mass movement attracting workers, citizens and students with demands the government would not concede, they led a mass march through the center of Tirana that culminated in the crowd toppling Hoxha’s statue, a symbolic event that marked the fall of the last ruling communist party in eastern Europe.



Enver Hoxha statue pulled down - 1991

Dini was in the square, in the crowd when the statue was toppled, having come to the capital with friends to support the hunger strike. When later asked if Klementina approved of his going, he replied that she approved whatever he did, it was the nature of the paternalistic, male dominated Albanian society, before adding with a grin, “she thought I was crazy.”

By June the Communist Party had disbanded and re-established itself as the new

Socialist Party of Albania. Free elections were held twice in 1991, the United States established relations with Albania for the first time since the war and as communism died the nation adopted

the free market system with a vengeance. Albanian citizens, barred from travel or emigration for decades voted by the thousands with their feet, or oars, and fled across the Adriatic to Italy or south across the border to Greece. It was a heady, chaotic, scary and promising time as a populace trained for decades to allow the state to make every important decision for them were suddenly free and expected to be self responsible.

What is good for some was not for others. The milk processing plant for which Dini worked found itself unable to survive the change and he lost his job when it closed.

Though they didn't know it then, the change that would most affect them was the approval of freedom of religion.

Not just evangelical Christians took advantage of the religious expression permission. After decades of forced atheism there was a curiosity and interest in religion. Imams sent instructions to Islamic congregations who had long forgotten the rites and a new mosque was built in Tirana while the Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox re-opened long closed churches and built new ones. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation was more common than competition.

Gesina Blaauw, a Dutch Mennonite woman, had moved to Sicily in the 1980's to establish a Christian bookstore with the Christian Literature Crusade and while here she connected with the Mennonites in Sicily where Willard and Eva Eberly were serving as missionaries. Inspired by her involvement with an



Shahini family in their apartment - 1989

Albanian community in Sicily she was moved to witness to tightly isolated Albania just across the Adriatic and had undertaken trips there, once spending months in jail for distributing religious literature and had been banned from the country in 1987. But she continued her work with the Sicilian expatriate Albanians and studied the language, preparing for the day when she could travel back to Albania.



The City of Lezhë, Albania - March 2016

When Albania dropped its prohibition against religion, Gesina traveled to Albania despite her ban, apparently then forgotten, and consulted with government officials to see if an evangelical crusade would be permitted in Tirana's arena. It would be. She returned to Sicily and began organizing a multi-organization crusade under the rubric "God Loves Albania" and sought participants across the evangelical spectrum. The title prompted skeptical wags to ask "if God loves Albania, where was He the past 50 years?"

Cornerstone Church near Harrisonburg had organized a team to visit Nigeria in 1991 when they received warning that it was likely unsafe to make the trip because of civil unrest in the country. Willard Eberly, now back in Virginia, suggested they re-route the group to Albania to join the "God Loves Albania" campaign. They did.

Nightly meetings were held in Tirana's main soccer stadium July 1-5, 1991 and missionaries from 17 nations presented the gospel to curious crowds numbering up to 10,000 people plus small groups daily. When the meetings were completed the Minister of Culture, Prec Zogaj, asked if they would go to his hometown, Lezhë, and hold the same sort of meetings. Prec Zogaj, in addition to being one of the founders of the Democratic Party of Romania was a childhood classmate and friend of Dini Shahini and a popular author. Sam Scaggs who had accompanied the Cornerstone group to Tirana was sent to Lezhë with a smaller entourage and with Gesina Blaauw as translator where he addressed a crowd of 3,000 - 5,000 in the town square. Ironically, this was just down the hill from where Hoxha had declared Albania an atheist nation almost a quarter century earlier and the picture of the current, now ex-communist President Ramiz Alia was plastered across the municipal building facing the stand from which Sam preached.

Dini and Klementina were walking down the street when they spotted the crowd listening to Sam's preaching and Dini suggested they go see what was going on. It was the first time they'd even considered the concept of God or heard of the Bible. At the end of the service Sam

asked anyone who wanted to change their life to raise their hand. Dini's job had recently disappeared when the milk plant failed and he was worried how to support his family in the maelstrom of change and uncertainty the country was experiencing.

Yes, he wanted a change and raised his hand as did Klementina, with no real idea of what they were volunteering for. Sam asked all who had raised their hands to gather round after the service. When they found that Klementina spoke English they were especially interested in



Sam Scaggs & Gesina Blaauw preaching in Lezha's square - July 1991

talking to her.

The team gave New Testaments to the new Christians and urged them to read, study and pray. Dini began reading that night, thinking it would be like reading a novel. It wasn't quite the same. This initial small group began meeting at Dini and Klementina's apartment, drinking coffee, reading scripture and then discussing what it could possibly mean. Sam Scaggs followed up with a visit from his station in Sicily every other month or so until he was moved back to the U.S. and the visits were taken up by his successors. While the new Albanian seekers prized the infrequent visits, it was from the Bible itself that their faith took root.

About a year after that initial encounter Klementina's neighbors told her there were Americans who had visited and asked for her. It was a gospel team following up to see what the seeds planted in the town square had produced and there being no email or telephone at that date, they had simply come to where they knew she lived and asked for her. She spent the few days they were there translating for them and when they left they asked if there was anything they could send her. She asked for books in English she could use to teach English and they sent a box of children's illustrated Bible books which she used to teach English and Bible while learning herself.

Cornerstone Church and Virginia Mennonite Missions (VMM) began sending small teams to Albania. A medical team came to work in the hospital to see if there were services and improvements they could offer. A business team looking for investment opportunities and to train Albanians with no experience running their own businesses arrived. Gospel teams to assist in spreading the gospel came. Though none came for long their presence was always appreciated. When they visited, the teams were farmed out to stay at Dini and Klementina's friends as there



Baptism in the Adriatic - June 16, 1993

were no hotels then and as courtesy hosting of visitors was a cultural norm they thought nothing of it, except to admire the humility of their guests who they imagined lived in mansions in America, coming to work and stay with them in the small, shabby apartments of Lezhë.

It being impossible to prepare the big meals to feed their guests on a single burner kerosene stove, Klementina parceled out responsibility

for various dishes among her friends and neighbors with one preparing one thing, another doing another dish and then gathering them all for a full meal.

During a team's visit in June, 1993, Dini became the first Albanian convert to be baptized when the ceremony was performed in the Adriatic Sea in Shëngjin. Klementina was baptized at the same time.

The fledgling congregation had no regular meeting place, sometimes meeting in the school where Klementina was then principal and other times in congregants' homes. Pastor Paul and Regina Maynard and Cornerstone Church thought it would be better if they had a dedicated meeting space and they began a search for a space they could afford. The best they could afford was a former bar in the center of town but Dini was opposed because it had been a bar.

When they were preparing to hold the church's first communion, Sam Scaggs asked Dini if perhaps they could do it in the bar.

Dini said, "No, because it's a bar and I don't like to go there and bring my family. I know what's going on there. It's not a place where we take my family."

"Do you believe God can turn the bar into a church?" Sam asked.

"Have you taken your pills this morning?" Dini retorted, "You're not in America, you're in Albania"

Nevertheless, they rented the space for two and a half years though it was very small, only a bit over 600 sq feet and when the owner decided to sell, they obtained funds from the Albanian Encouragement Project, a group that provided funds for new a new church location.

When Paul and June Kropf were assigned to Lezhë to begin the formal establishment of a church, Sam Scaggs informed Klementina that they probably would not eat food prepared in the bathroom. The kerosene burner being noxious and dangerous in the living area, it was located in the bathroom. Dini used his technical expertise to manufacture a one burner electric hot plate so they could safely cook food in the kitchen.

James Bergey came with a business team in 1993 and returned in 1994 with his wife Mary to live in the city and assist in the establishment of the church. They found a third floor walk-up apartment (no apartments had elevators) just down the street from the Shahini's. As they found it difficult to use the warm water in a basin method of washing, they had Dini and his friends install a shower in their bathroom. This was the first shower the Shahini's had seen but when Mary ordered a sit-down toilet from Tirana, that was a real prize and a convenience. Klementina wanted one too, and soon had it. Dini was very handy.

The Bergey's were the most welcome of all the many visitors to Lezhë over the first years. They came for longer than a short visit. Though they spoke almost no Albanian they were warm and open, enjoyed meeting the Albanians and hosting them for meals. Mary taught eager youngsters how to play guitar, hosted the wives and children and played games with them. James worked at remodeling the new church facilities, a small space formerly a bar. There is a telling



Converting a bar to a church. Paul Kropf & James Bergey - 1995

picture that Dini took showing James on his knees with a hammer, working while the young pastor watches, his hands in his pockets. James also worked with fledgling businessmen offering advice and most notably, taught one of them how to make ice cream and guided him through setting up an ice cream store that is still operating today. In short, they were open to the Albanians and made themselves useful for more

than just preaching and pontificating and were well loved for it. While there is no question of Paul and Joan Kropf's dedication, she was very shy and kept herself apart from the Albanian people and neither ever learned the language well.

By mid 1994, Cornerstone was investigating the possibility of opening another church in another city and approached Dini and Klementina about moving south to Përmët, her home town, to start a church there. In Albania's patriarchal family oriented society, such a momentous decision as moving to another city required consultation with the extended family. When Dini asked his family about it during a family gathering, his brothers exploded in disbelief and opposition. After some emotional discussion and condemnation, Dini asked his mother for her opinion. She addressed her sons, saying "It is better to be a Christian like Dini than a Muslim like you." and with that blessing they decided to take the plunge.

Cornerstone had offered a stipend of \$150 per month, not enough to live on, even in Albania, but this was a matter of faith more than money. Dini said about the decision:



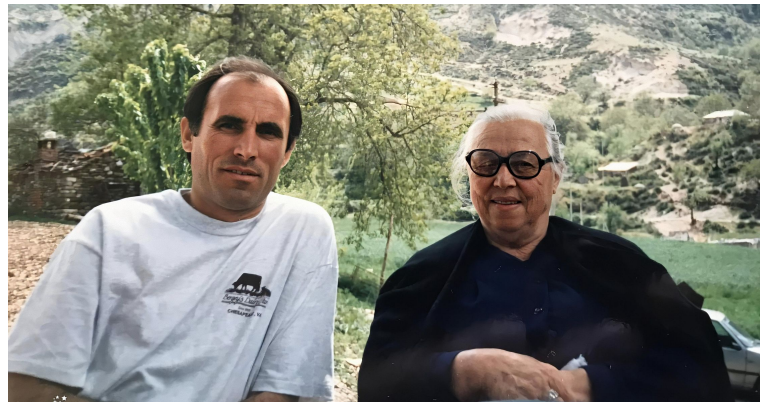
Mary Bergey & Dini eating sugared walnuts, Permet - mid 1990's

"What was interesting, Sam was talking to us, he said 'God has such big plans for you, but you just have to obey'. Is different from what we believe today but at that time we did not have this insight."

There were no believers in Permë when they arrived. Klementina's family of course welcomed them gladly.

James and Mary Bergey came to visit

shortly after they'd moved and over time, other groups and teams also visited but in the main they were on their own. James Bergey loaned them \$5,500 to set up an office services shop with copier, fax machine, and other business machines not generally available so they could be partially self supporting. Klementina got a job with the local government. Cornerstone was at that time organized around cell groups and they encouraged Dini & Klementina to do the same, beginning with meetings in their home. Their mission was joined by Tina & Mary, English teachers, in 1996 and they invited their English class members to the meetings.



Dini with his mother in Permet mid 1990's

The town of Përmët had no water. There was water available but a damaged pump for which there were no funds to repair meant that there was no water at the tap. Working with German and Italian Mennonites, a pump costing \$10,000 was obtained for the city and installed. It was a huge event gaining much good will for the church. When Willard Eby's musically talented daughter visited, Klementina used her position with the city to organize a city-wide musical event featuring her and local musicians that was a great success.

By measures like these and personal witness the church slowly added attendees, still meeting at the Shahini's home.

In 1995 they were invited to a church conference held in Italy. It was the first time they had ever been out of Albania and they were very nervous. How would they be received? Would somebody be at the airport to pick them up? But in the event it went well and while there someone bought them a very good Italian camera. It wasn't digital but it was a good camera.



Francesco Picone introduces the Shahini's

After almost 50 years of communism, Albanians took to free market capitalism with reckless verve and dash. The transition was swift but without a culture of private enterprise or a body of commercial law to guide, disaster was all but guaranteed. With the first burst of capitalism Albanians were too trusting in the free market's ability to make them rich. They were especially easy marks for operators who offered returns of 6%

to 10% per month return on investments that were actually Ponzi schemes where old investors were paid from the deposits of new investors rather than from actual earnings. By 1996 there were over 200 such schemes with billions of Leks invested and by early 1997 the thing had run its course and when investors lost confidence and tried to withdraw their money, the schemes collapsed with billions of Leks vanishing and the general economy suffering a severe recession. The blowback from investors angry at their losses and at the government for the economic troubles caused a period of civil unrest and chaos, especially in the south where an outright civil war was threatened as mobs stormed government buildings in towns surrounding Përmët. The government controlled Përmët but the Shahini's were warned they were in danger and if the rebels captured Përmët they would be targeted. With no time to gather more than a small bit of personal property they left immediately in March 1997. They sailed to the Greek island of Corfu just a few miles off the coast of southern Albania and the church in Përmët vanished.



Ardian, Klementina, Kledia & Dini in Corfu - 1997

They stayed on Corfu for nine months, doing laundry, cleaning and maintenance work at the hotel where they lived in return for lodging. They were also hired by a wealthy English lady to do landscaping and general maintenance work on her estate. She was so pleased with their work that she offered them full time positions but as the Greek schools were less than desirable, they declined the offer and when things had quieted down in Albania, returned to Lezhë in December, 1997 to their old apartment.

As they were in the process of leaving Greece, Klementina saw a notice in a Greek newspaper reading: "If you want a green card, send information here" and Klementina, having the time to do it, replied to the address given with the information requested. Several months later they received a reply telling them that if they had the additional information requested in the reply they would be eligible to emigrate to the U.S. She

completed those forms and as Dini also had to sign the application but was then in bible school in Tirana, she had his brother give her a ride the Tirana to get his signature.

Dini, less than positive, asked incredulously, “Why are you doing this? Do you trust it?”

His brother answered for Klementina, “We are here. We are not paying any money. Sign.” He signed.

After their return from Corfu to Lezhë, Cornerstone suggested to Dini that he attend the Albanian Bible Institute in Tirana, a school set up by a consortium of churches ranging from independent evangelical to Reformed from the U.S. and Europe. They offered a stipend for support and he agreed to attend. It was a fortuitous decision for in addition to learning the Bible in greater depth, he made friends and contacts with other Albanian men who would be church leaders across the country in the coming decades. Klementina got a job teaching high school English and did side jobs as well.

It took six or seven months for the authorities to check their medical records, criminal backgrounds and history but when complete, sent permission to emigrate and they began making plans immediately to move to the U.S. They had planned to move to Harrisonburg, Virginia in June, 1999 as most of their contacts and support had been from Cornerstone churches around Harrisonburg and they wanted to stay connected but they weren’t sure which airport they should choose to reach Harrisonburg so they called Sam Scaggs to ask.

He told them that he was leaving Harrisonburg and moving to Virginia Beach, Virginia and if they wanted to move there, they would be welcomed, but if they opted for Harrisonburg there would be people from Cornerstone to greet and welcome them. They asked who was in Virginia Beach and when told that James and Mary Bergey were there, changed their plans immediately and bought tickets to Norfolk, Virginia

Initially they lived with James and Mary in the upstairs apartment at their home and began immediately looking for work to support themselves. Their son found work first, in a fast food restaurant, and then Klementina got a job at Cedar Road Christian Academy, first with the kindergarten, then third grade. She asked the principal for more hours because they needed the money, offering to do any task needed, and was given a part-time bookkeeping position for three hours a day after her regular workday.

As Dini’s English was almost non-existent, his options were limited but he applied at Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). His interviewer sent him to talk to Bob Fiedler, head of maintenance for CBN where Dini produced a picture of his family and managed to convey that he needed a job to support his family. When Bob called the HR Dept to let them know he wanted to hire Dini, they were incredulous.

“You want to hire the man who can’t speak English? How did you talk to him?”

“He spoke to me with his heart,” Bob replied, and Dini had a job.

The family pooled all their money, bringing paychecks to the kitchen table for deposit in a common account from which living expenses were paid. It was rough as they had arrived in the states with nothing, but in the manner of penniless immigrants from time immemorial, hard work and frugality slowly brought their American Dream to fruition.

Dini had always had a good work ethic and was determined to succeed despite the difficulties and he was avid in his job, happily working overtime when needed and volunteering for whatever assignment was open when he’d completed his tasks. When he volunteered for electrical repairs, Bob wondered if he’d be able to do them because he didn’t have any formal electrical training but he was capable and to rectify the lack of credentialing, took classes at



Dini & Kelly Keffer with her father's photo in Dini's office - 2023

Tidewater Community College where Klementina helped him read and understand the nomenclature. He passed the exams and was granted a journeyman's card which proved his ability and earned a pay raise. A year later, with a letter from Bob Fiedler certifying he had years of electrical experience in Albania, Dini sat for the master's exam and earned certification as a Master Electrician and another pay rise.

Bob Fiedler became a close friend and mentor to Dini, one of the men he

most admires and when Bob died of cancer in September, 2005 he was devastated.

There are few pictures in Dini's office but a prized one is a picture of Bob Feidler. Bob's wife, Doris, crocheted an American flag as a gift when they were naturalized as American citizens and the flag returned to Albania with them in 2011. When Klementina was looking for a flag to display at Lezhë Academic Center its first 4th of July and was unable to find one, remembered the crocheted flag and proudly hung it from the second story railing. Mennonite connections began early, for Bob and Doris Feidler are Kelly Keffer's parents.

Klementina took classes too, earning two degrees in education oversight and management and was hired by Cradock High School in Portsmouth, Virginia to teach English and American History. She later transferred to Churchland High School, also in Portsmouth where she chaired the English Department.

They bought a house in Albemarle Acres and were well on their way to achieving their American Dream when a friend who was a real estate agent told them she could sell their house for significantly more than they'd paid for it. Without considering they'd have to replace it, Dini told her that if she could get \$175,000 for the house, they'd sell. The next weekend she had a contract for more than the asking price and they were suddenly in the house market with a maximum of \$200,000, in Dini's conservative opinion. Their agent showed Klementina house after house but none were really much better than what they were selling and none they looked at really appealed to her. Finally Klementina asked to see a house in a new subdivision off Fentress Rd and when her agent told her the house was well out of their price range, Klementina said she wanted to see it anyway. It was perfect. Much more than they'd figured they could afford, but perfect. Klementina called Dini to tell him and when she told him the price, but that she really loved it, he told her to go ahead, they'd figure it out. They did. Later when they moved back to Albania they kept the house as a rental property and over the years as rents and values have increased it has proved to be a sound investment.

After arriving in the states, Dini and Klementina attended the Dove fellowship that James and Mary Bergey's son and daughter-in-law, Daniel and Dorcas, had started with Merlin and Linda Miller in Great Bridge because that was where James and Mary attended. When that church failed, James and Mary began attending Landstown Community Church so they did too. Later they moved their membership to Mt Pleasant Mennonite Church and it was from Mt Pleasant they were commissioned for the work they went back to do in Lezhë in 2011...to start the Lezhë Academic Center and pastor the church in Lezhë.

Klementina began dreaming of a school long before they left Albania. When appointed principal of a gifted students' school in Lezhë that was run down and in poor repair, she worked hard to resurrect the school and improve the teaching. At the time she told Dini, "If one day you become rich, this is what I want to do. I want to have my own school the way I want it." But the dream seemed only that and she kept it to herself.

When considering her Master's thesis at Regent University, her list of topics included how to start a Christian school.

Meeting with her mentor, she told him, "This is what I want to do. What do you think?" He replied, quietly negatively, "Oh, I helped lots of people studying a Christian school." She said, "But I don't want it to be in the US, I want to do it in Albania."

He perked up, "That will be fun." And so it was.

After she'd been awarded her Masters degree Klementina began sharing her dream, first with Dini and their children who told her, "Mom, you always wanted to do this. We're growing. Why don't you do it?" Then she began sharing her idea with others and looking for support.

Beginning with Sam and Beverly Scaggs, Paul and Linda Overholt she gathered a support group with Virginia Mennonite Mission and Cornerstone people that began monthly meetings in Richmond, Virginia in 2003. By 2006 they were sufficiently along to form an organizing board and begin raising money.



First LAC organizing meeting 2006 Richmond, Va - Lauren Horst, Keith Blank, Marvin Charles, Klementina, Dini, Ken Horst

In 2007 Klementina traveled to Lezhë with Marvin and Sarah Slabaugh, Don and Rita Steiner and Jackie Hartman just to see if the school the envisioned would be welcomed, would even be possible. They met with Albania's Prime Minister, the Minister of Education, the Mayor of Lezhë and others. Klementina was assured by one and all that they would be welcomed and promised that paperwork would be processed quickly, a bit of an over-promise as it turned out.

With that assurance they formed the Albanian Mennonite Education Foundation, an Albanian foundation requisite to obtaining the license to operate the school as a non-profit. At the same time they formed the Albanian Christian Education Foundation in the U.S. to handle donations and the Lezhë Academic Center for the operation of the school.

At a 2010 meeting in Richmond, Marvin Slabaugh, a member of the group and a businessman from Harrisonburg, Virginia, said, "If you don't go, people will not give. People don't give for something that does not exist." With a \$15,000 stake from VMM and promise of support from Cornerstone and other sources, plans were made for the Shahini's to move back to Albania. Klementina immediately turned in her resignation at Cradock High School but agreed to stay on until January 2011 to allow time for her replacement to be found.

Klementina reported of the flight to Albania in March 2011, "It was bad. I left the U.S. by myself and I think that I cried from U.S. to Albania. I don't know what the people in the plane thought when they saw me, because I would cry and stop and cry and stop."

Dini followed in April.

Klementina had her first clash with corrupt bureaucracy when she went to get the shipping container in which their furniture and school supplies had been sent from the states. The first day she went, officials kept her waiting and finally reported they weren't ready yet, that they were waiting for some papers; the obvious but not stated implication being that the payment of a bribe would cause papers to appear. Klementina ignored the hint and returned the second day and sat in their office reading a book. Waiting.

When it became obvious that she wasn't going to move one of the officials told her, "Ok, we've got the papers but your container has a red line."

"What does that mean," Klementina asked innocently.

"That we need to check the container", he replied.

"That's fine. Go ahead and do it," she answered.

"But you have to be there," he said.

"That's fine," Klementina said agreeably.

"It takes a long time," he replied, "because we have to go through everything."

"Hey, if that's what you have to do, let's do it," she answered, still ignoring the silent plea for payment.

The official turned on his heel, went to his office and came back, handing her the needed documents with a curt, "Take it."

They had earlier made a deal to rent a former hotel in the city center. The building had two apartments and the Shahini's lived in one and two teachers recruited from Harrisonburg lived in the other. The building was in very poor condition and needed a lot of work to be usable as a school for the first semester to start the following September. Dini and Klementina plus a custodian they hired, worked through the spring and summer cleaning, moving doorways and walls but despite their efforts, the building still suffered and the landlord was completely uncooperative in making repairs that should have been his to make. And the roof leaked.

Lezhë is a small but growing city with a population of about 14,000 and the Shahini's were well known. Their return was met with some incredulity as their neighbors wondered why they'd returned from the golden streets of America. Was the school a scam? Had they lost their minds?

While working on the school facility and answering questions, Klementina was also working on obtaining a license to open the school for grades 9-12, recruiting students by word of mouth and lining up teachers. That first year, excepting one part-time Albanian teacher needed to teach the required Albanian language and history classes, the four other teachers were volunteer missionaries from the states who raised their own financing. Three were friends from Eastern Mennonite University who had been students there.

Klementina filed the application for license in May, 2011 and despite earlier assurances that their papers would be processed in six days, she began hearing reports that many other groups had applied for the license and been denied. By August the approval had not yet been given but Klementina sent out invitations for the school opening ceremonies.

The Wednesday before opening ceremonies were scheduled there was to be a final meeting of the Council of Ministers to get licensing approval. On Monday, Klementina took the teachers and Dini to their offices. The official there told Klementina to take the American's out and he and she could talk. When Dini had taken the teachers out of the room, Klementina pleaded, "Please, help me."

The official picked up the phone and called the Minister of Education and told him, “One more signature required but that the person who could sign is on vacation and his signature was needed before the Wednesday meeting for final approval.”

The Minister of Education asked, “ Who are these people?”

“Mennonites”, was the reply.

“Did you check on them?” the Minister asked.

“Oh, they’re good people,” he affirmed.

“Then call the person and get the paper signed,” the Minister replied.

The Shahini’s had rented a villa to house guests coming from out of the country, from Cornerstone and from VMM and when Dini went to the airport to pick them up on Wednesday the approval had still not been given. Things were strained between Dini and Klementina as time marched forward with no resolution.

At one point Dini asked her, “What will you say to the people in the crowd in they ask you ‘do you have a license?’”

Klementina answered, “Honey, if it’s God’s will, we’ll get it.”

“If not?”, he was practically screaming, “Don’t tell me, because it’s only two more days.”

About 2:00PM, Wednesday, Klementina and Elaine Moyer and others were walking when Klementina’s phone rang. It was the official who said, “You’ll get the papers, but I just want to let you know that your license is granted.”

Klementina screamed. The startled people with her looked to Dini who commented, “the only thing that will make her scream is the license. Probably we got the license.” And so they had.

By the time the inaugural ceremony was held on Friday, Klementina was exhausted from the tension surrounding obtaining the license, the work getting the building ready, the coordination and entertaining visitors. Besides students, teachers and invited guests there were city officials and a host of curious townspeople. In the midst of translating for a VMM speaker, Klementina collapsed, completely done in. Her daughter, Kledia, continued translating for her mother but having been out of the country so many years, she’d lost some of the language and greatly amused the crowd trying to find the right words.

With desks and chairs donated by a Mennonite school in Germany, school opened with seven pupils and four teachers in September 2011. During that first year, another private school in Lezhë was closed by the government and LAC accepted their 10th and 11th grade students, increasing the enrollment to 31 by end of school year. The school was very much seat-of-the pants that first year with teachers and Klementina writing the lessons as they went, day by day. But it worked.

Klementina had her second bribery attempt from the electric meter reader who informed her that she was paying too much. Klementina asked him if the meter was working properly.

“Yeah, it’s ok, but there is nothing we can do,” he answered.

Klementina played dumb. Her custodian, Tony, told her, “Mrs. Shahini, he wants money so you can pay less.”

Klementina knew what he was offering but had early on determined to never pay a bribe on the grounds that it was wrong and that one bribe would lead to another. Despite many attempts, she never gave in. One of the Shahini’s friends who works in city offices told them that she’s known in city hall as “The Lady Who Won’t Pay.”

The building however, proved to be a horrible disappointment. Cold in the winter, falling apart with cracks making the outside visible even where there not windows, roof leaks. They almost immediately began looking for another building.

One of Dini's friends... Dini seems to know everyone in town...suggested a building south of the town center. It was a five story building that a wealthy local businessman had built in anticipation of his son returning from medical studies in London to open a hospital in. The son didn't return from London but stayed and established his practice there so the owner turned it into an apartment building.

LAC rented the entire building. They tried to persuade the owner to delay charging rent until the next school year began in September, 2012 but he was adamant: if they took over in May, rent started in May. Not wanting to pay rent on two buildings, the Shahini's and their staff moved the desks, chairs and other items from the original school to the new building over Memorial Day weekend, closing school in the old building on Friday and opening in the new one the following Monday. It was a monumental undertaking but it got done and the first school year ended in the new building. The new building had some issues too but the owner was very cooperative in making repairs and adjustments.

The first floor housed the cafeteria while classes were held on the second and third floors with Dini and Klementina living on the fourth and fifth floor along with some offices. Like most buildings in Lezhë there were no elevators, just stairs.

The second year there were 64 high school students and the numbers increased every year thereafter until there are 219 enrolled for the 2025-2026 school year, all classes are full and there is a waiting list. One of the attractions was that the school issued dual Albanian and American diplomas, expanding further education possibilities for its graduates.



Lezhë Christian Academy - June 2015

Though she'd not planned to offer elementary education, which required a special license on its own, plans changed. They found that students coming in at the 10th grade had academic deficiencies, motivational and behavioral problems because of lack of discipline in the public schools from

which they came. Thinking that if they had students from the first grade they could more easily train them into the type of students they wanted, plus they had the space with the new building, Dini completed the application and it was quickly approved.

The first year of elementary school saw only seven students but Klementina insisted on teaching each at their grade level rather than lumping them together and the extra effort paid off when parents saw the results and as parents talked to parents, enrollment grew.

Some of the students came from almost serendipitous happenstance.

The first year back in Albania, Klementina wanted to celebrate 4th of July and sent Linda Buckwalter and Inga Mast, who were visiting, to go find potato chips. They found a store with chips but the owner didn't speak English and had to have her daughter translate. During the course of the transaction they learned about the school and enrolled daughter, Gerda in the school. The wife began attending the church and Dini and Klementina witnessed to the whole family.

The family had problems. Two older sons were physically abusing Gerda who came to Klementina for help and she subsequently set up a meeting with the parents and Gerda. After hearing his daughter's complaint, her father asserted that it had been a one time event and had not happened again.

Gerda confronted her father, "Yes, they do it often."

He replied, "It will not happen again."

She responded, "Dad, this is what I've heard since I was in the fourth grade and it still continues the same."

Finally he admitted frustrating defeat, "I don't know what to do. I have to kill them or let them kill her."

Seeking guidance, Klementina called Elaine Moyer and related the events. Elaine suggested that it should be reported to the police.

"That won't work," Klementina told her, "If I report it they will burn the school. The government won't protect us."

Believing a possible solution would be to get Gerda out of the country, Elaine found a family in Chesapeake, Va who agreed to take her in. However, Klementina still had to get the permission of Gerda's family. She met with Gerda's brother.

"Hey, there is the option for a student of my school to go to U.S.," she told him. Then making a family connection, so important in Albanian society, "Dini is good friends with your uncle. We have family connection. What do you think if we could send Gerda?"

He thought it a good idea and agreed to help get the paperwork his family would need to complete. Gerda was able to emigrate and once free of her family, didn't contact them for several years. But time and change of hearts makes a difference. Gerda's mother was baptized and has been a stalwart in the church for the past fourteen years. Though not a regular attendee, her father appears at special events. Gerda's brothers completed school, got married and have gotten respectable jobs and become honorable citizens. The family dynamics have greatly improved...all begun with a bag of potato chips and personal witness.

Over the years Klementina has been able to inculcate her ideals into the school's teachers and students. Parents asked for and Klementina agreed to school uniforms now required of all students. Her hope that getting students from the first grade would result in students with better work habits, more motivation and discipline proved to be true. The vast majority of graduates have gone on to college, many in other countries on scholarships. Most who studied abroad have remained abroad...lawyers in the U.S., Canada and England. Doctors, bankers and engineers there and in Austria, Germany, Holland, Australia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Italy. While she would like to see more return to Albania, Klementina says that so long as they're successful and follow Jesus, she's good, no matter where they reside.

The school has also reached out to the Roma population, the underdogs of Albanian

society. The Roma attach little importance to education and are trapped in the most menial jobs with a reputation for dishonesty and laziness. Klementina has made special effort to reach out to them, offering scholarships to a number of Roma children each year and seeking greater involvement of the Roma community.

EARTHQUAKE

Albania sits astride the Alpide Belt where the Eurasian and Adriatic tectonic plates converge, with many fault lines criss-crossing the mountainous country and experiences frequent earthquakes. Most are minor with little damage but in November, 2019 a massive quake centered in Durrës, Albania registering 6.4 magnitude caused extensive damage. Fifty nine people were killed and another 1000+ injured. 11,000 buildings were destroyed with another 200,000 suffered extensive damage, exacerbated by the shoddy construction of the earlier communist era and lack of stringent building codes.

Though Lezhë is about 40 miles north of Durrës, there was still a lot of damage. Klementina was home alone the morning the earthquake hit and said, “The sound of items rattling and falling, the shaking of the bed and all the house, the electricity off, the idea that the building was going to crash, everything together was so frightening. God was with me as I was going down the stairs, seven floors of stairs in darkness. I got out to see people getting in the cars and leaving the city, panicked and terrified. The earthquake last only 30 seconds, which seemed like 30 hours for me; the worst 30 seconds of my life.”

The Shahini’s original apartment which they had retained as a rental property, was destroyed. Even their new apartment where they resided was sufficiently damaged that they had to move out for several months while the damage there was repaired. They moved back to their old apartment in the school which fortunately only had light, mostly cosmetic damage such as cracked plaster and water damage from broken pipes. The school was shut down while repairs were made.

The event was traumatic for most who experienced it, especially Klementina. When their apartment had been repaired she didn’t want to move back into it. The LAC Board of Directors, aware of the situation, recommended that she seek counseling and recommended a Serbian Mennonite counselor who had worked for the MCC. Klementina and Dini traveled to Belgrade and met her. The counseling was effective and in March, 2020 they moved back to their apartment just as the COVID-19 outbreak became a crisis.

COVID-19

For the first years, the school relied heavily on missionary teachers who volunteered their time for most classes, with Albanian teachers hired to teach Albanian language, literature and history. The COVID crisis of 2020 changed this completely. In the early, chaotic days of the COVID pandemic, with fear and unknown effects, all of the non-Albanian teachers fled the country and went home, hoping to return shortly but the pandemic was longer and deeper than hoped and Klementina was forced to replace them with Albanian teachers.

The Albanian education system is not at the levels Klementina had inculcated at Lezhë Academic Center. Local teachers didn’t have the same work ethic, students were undisciplined and not expected to excel as they were at LAC. An early hire was an Albanian teacher who had been a superintendent with the public school system. One day he had an errand to run and simply

walked out of the classroom to attend his chore, leaving the classroom unattended. The American teachers were freaking out and came to Klementina, exclaiming “Mrs. Shahini...he left.” Upon his return, Klementina heatedly made him aware of his transgression...something of a surprise and shock to him, but well taken.

When hiring Albanian teachers, Klementina’s interviews are intense, probing and instructive. All teachers are required to have degrees in the subject matter they’ll be teaching. They are informed that the lackadaisical practices they may have been used to are not the norm at LAC and more than just showing up for class, they are expected to be prepared and timely. She conveys her conviction that teaching at LAC is not just a job, it’s joining a family and that they will be expected to participate in the school’s extracurricular activities and to teach and discipline in accordance with her expectations.

Interviewing a prospective teacher she later hired and who is still at the school she asked “Adelina, how do you handle thirty students in a class when you issues with ten students in the class?”

Adelina replied, “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes I do,” Klementina said.

“We scream at them and we beat them in public school,” was her answer.

“Not here,” Klementina responded.

Though teachers are not required to attend the church, only Christian teacher’s are hired. While not included in the teacher’s contracts, prospective teachers are informed that because the school is a mission of the church they will be expected to embrace the mission and be part of it, attending joint church/school celebrations such as Easter and Christmas.

Non-resistance is one of the defining beliefs of the Mennonite Church and applied to a particularly Albanian cultural trait at the school. Family blood feuds are an ancient custom in northern Albania and carry on through generations long after the originating cause has been forgotten. Forgiveness or even compensation is eschewed in an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth retributive cycle that never ends. The school teaches forgiveness, not revenge. Love, not hate, aware that changing mores learned at parents’ knees may not be immediate, but the seed is sown.

One of the innovations, foreign to the top down hierarchy typical of Albanian organizations is leadership style Klementina learned at Churchland High School. Teachers are invited to work together on projects with one teacher appointed leader of each project or concern, seeking their input in decision making. Klementina absents herself from most of such meetings to give the teachers experience as leaders. The effect is deeper involvement by the teachers and closer identification with their school. It’s apparent from observing the interactions and in conversations with the staff that they think Klementina walks on water and are fiercely loyal to her and the school.

With the school at maximum capacity and more students wanting to attend, a search for another building, or raw land on which to build was begun in 2023. A building was found but the owner rented it to another party before funding could be raised to make the move. In lieu of moving, arrangements were made to add five additional classrooms at the current site which will be ready for the 2026-2027 school year.

Though the school has become something of a college prep high school, the board recognized the need for skilled trades training.

Horsch Maschinen GmbH, a German multi-national farm equipment manufacturer owned

by a Mennonite family has been a strong supporter of LAC from the outset and Cornelia Horsch, one of the founding generation in the family, serves on the LAC Board of Directors. In 2024 Horsch donated machinery and tools to the school and assisted in setting up mechanical training for students plus night classes for local adults.

Though the school has an excellent reputation and has been ranked as the top private school in Albania it faced a mini-crisis in early 2025. An anonymous Facebook post supposedly by “a group of parents” accused the school of various shortcomings and malfeasance including:

- Refusing water to students until after 2PM if they forgot to bring bottles of water

- Lack of communication transparency

- Non-recognition of national holidays

- Erratic and sudden schedule changes without notice

- Exorbitant fees...and other failings.

Klementina was stunned at the unexpected vitriol and initially feared it would redound negatively on the school but was re-assured by an outpouring of support from students, parents, teachers and Lezhë citizens and responded civilly and directly with a rebuttal issued jointly with the Board of Directors

Then she received notice that the police Section for the Investigation of Economic and Financial Crimes had initiated criminal proceedings against her, charging that the school didn't have a license to teach primary education and had hired seasonal teaching staff without declaring their legal employment to avoid payroll tax obligations. This without anyone visiting the school, talking to her or any of the school leadership. The memory of life under a communist government, her sister's arbitrary incarceration and knowledge that the current government was corruptly riddled with cronyism left her frightened, but determined. It was especially troubling and puzzling because the school had recently passed its annual government inspection with flying colors...the inspector noting that everything exceeded expectations.

The grapevine of personal connections hummed with conversation, speculation and attempts to learn the source of the complaint and criminal proceedings.

In late June 2025 Klementina received notice that all charges had been dropped.

Klementina visited the chief of police, asking for a copy of the document dropping charges. The chief refused to provide it but at Klementina's insistence, called her superiors in Tirana who commanded her to give the document to Klementina.

It was subsequently learned that the entire thing had been the effort of one parent, a nephew of the mayor, whose child attended LAC. The parent had been upset because his child was required to wear the complete school uniform and sent home if she came to school missing the neckerchief and that his daughter wasn't allowed to just leave school when she wished. He was also perturbed that the school grounds locked out visitors for safety, meaning he couldn't wander in when he pleased and mistakenly believed he was being overcharged for being required to pay for all of June when school ended in early June. In short, a school's nightmare self-important, meddling parent.

The Mayor, a strong supporter of the school was reportedly outraged and embarrassed that his relative had caused this needless uproar and rumors flowed that the man had left town.

The Church



First location of Lezhë Mennonite Church, Lexhë, Albania - 2015



Site of first church, now a clinic - 2025

When the Shahini's returned to Albania in early 2011, the church in Lezhë was pastored by Leon Zimmerman who was scheduled to return to the U.S. later that year. A church council, it's leadership, was comprised of three Brazilians sent by VMM: Pastor Rafael and Solange Tartari, a married couple and Norma Telos, in Albania as a missionary, with three Albanians: Besnik - language teacher, Dila - an elderly lady, and a young man named Bentar. Not only were they the church leadership, they were practically the entire congregation as attendance rarely exceeded the number of Christ's disciples. The little church in the former bar had not required expansion.



Pastor Rafael & Solange Tartari - June 2016

Cornerstone and VMM suggested that Zimmerman be succeeded by Dini, but because he wasn't familiar with the current council members or the few members of the congregation, Dini declined. He suggested that instead he would serve as an elder, having been an elder when the emigrated to America, until he knew everyone better and was assured they would be comfortable with him as pastor. So

it was decided that Rafael would succeed Zimmerman and Dini would serve as an elder.

This new combination had the desired effect and church attendance increased until the small building the owned was too small. They proposed to VMM the idea of getting a new place and they agreed it was a good idea but required that the Albanian church pay at least 50% of the cost of a new location. They found a spot in a commercial/residential block of flats recently constructed on the southern flank of the expanding city but raising the purchase price was the problem as the church didn't have that kind of money.



Norma Telos - April 2015



Lezhë Mennonite Church - 2023



Lezhë Mennonite Church - 2023

Dini talked to his good friend, Deda (pronounced Data), a wealthy developer and resort operator, who agreed to buy the old church property for €65,000. Borrowing another €30,000



Deda & Dini at Deda's resort in Shëngjin, Albania - 2023

from the Albanian Mennonite Foundation at no interest they were able to make the purchase. They moved into the new church in time to celebrate Easter in 2017.

For two years they made payments on the loan when VMM decided to merge the Albanian Mennonite Foundation with the Lezhë Mennonite Church, effectively negating the balance as they would have been repaying themselves.

There was a sense in the Albanian church that they were the red-headed

step children of VMM. Any major decisions had to go through VMM. The Albanians began to feel that they, being on the ground and knowing the culture, were better placed to make some of the decisions themselves, especially when they believed some of VMM's decisions seemed out of touch with the reality of Albania. One VMM board member, Janet Blosser, who had served in the field as a missionary took the Albanian's side and they were appreciative of her support. Dini,



Lezhë Mennonite Church - 2023

especially, citing his experience as the first convert, the first baptized, the first to give testimony in the streets, the first to begin a second church, with 30+ years supporting the Albanian work felt he was never completely trusted by VMM, perhaps not even particularly liked, and he didn't understand it.

When the Covid pandemic panicked the world in early 2020, VMM recalled their missionaries to the U.S. They didn't recall Dini and Klementina though they were technically missionaries under VMM auspices but they planned to stay in Albania anyway. Was not

God in Albania too, they wondered. Wouldn't the people feel doubly abandoned if even they left? Missionaries went on summer vacation in July and August, went away on major holidays...Albania wasn't their home. The church shut down in the summer when the missionary pastor was there and it evolved into current practice when member used the hiatus to work tourist jobs at the resorts. Another couple, Jim and Pam Beachy, who came to serve with LAC as teachers in 2016 and decided to remain for a longer term after Jim was appointed Principal of LAC shared the Shahini's views and also planned to remain in Albania but then airline tickets arrived uninvited from VMM and though they felt guilty going, went home too.

In August 2020, well into the COVID-19 pandemic, Dini's complained of feeling fatigued and out of sorts on the way home from a conference. Both Dini and Klementina took the COVID test which showed he was positive for the virus but Klementina was not. But by the next day she began showing the first symptoms. Dini's case was relatively mild but Klementina got worse and over the next day experienced a climbing fever, joint pain and diarrhea. She went to the doctor and learned she'd contracted the disease too.

"On the seventh day I started to have breathing issues, diarrhea, pain, and was extremely tired. I was put on oxygen and the next day I was put in one of the local hospitals in Lezhë, the town where we live" she later recounted. But her condition worsened. She assured Dini that she was going to recover and encouraged him in his despair and tried to allay his fears.

When the doctors admitted there was nothing more they could do for her and that she would likely die in the next few days Dini pulled strings to get her airlifted to Italy to a more modern hospital. Her Albanian doctors were so sure that she would not survive the trip they refused to release her until she and Dini signed release forms absolving them of any responsibility if their fears were realized.

"When the doctors in the air ambulance checked my vitals and the symptoms, they told me that they were afraid I would not make it to Rome," she reported. I was intubated and also put in a kind of box for more protection."

Once in the Instituto Clinico Casalpallocco in Rome, Italy she was put in a ward with about thirty other COVID-19 patients. "I looked around me and all the patients in my room were guys and all of them were intubated. So basically, I was living with dead people that were still breathing. I saw people dying in front of my eyes," she recalled. As patients around her lost their battle for life and were one by one carried to the morgue, Klementina later said it never occurred to her that she might die. She was making plans for the future.



Dini & Klementina's Kitchen - 2023

Back in Albania, Dini went into a deep depression and locked himself in their apartment, refusing to see anyone, not answering the door when concerned friends came to see him. It was a black time in a slough of deep despond.

After ten days on the ventilator she was able to breathe on her own and on November 17 was returned to Albania. She was still very weak and required assistance and her recovery would be long and slow with some lingering "long haul" COVID

effects. As no self-respecting man in Albanian society would consider cooking or cleaning, that being woman's work, Dini had to learn by doing but did so, even finding he enjoyed cooking and continuing it even after Klementina recovered completely though she remarks that he needs an assistant to clean up after he's done.

Though not ordained, Dini took over the duties pastoring the church while the missionaries were back in America, riding out the pandemic. At some point, Jason Showalter, a VMM director asked Dini, "Have you been ordained?"

Dini said, "No."

"Are you considering that?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. It is not something I can decide for myself." Dini answered...and it wasn't mentioned again.

Later Greg Mayo told him, "Dini, it has been overdue because you have served as a pastor of this church for a long time and you should be ordained."

Dini told him that if ordained, he would like Sam Scaggs and Nevin Mast to be present because Sam is a sort of father of the Albanian church and Dini recognized Nevin, pastor of Mt Pleasant Mennonite Church as his pastor.

Greg didn't let the ball drop this time and got the ordination organized. Nevin, thinking the ordination would be held in America agreed to be there, but finding it was going to be in Lezhë, wasn't able to make the trip. But in early 2022 Sam Scaggs and Gerald Morton, a senior Cornerstone pastor involved in the beginning with the Albanian ministry, came for the ordination and Dini was finally the official pastor of Lezhë Mennonite Church.

Since that time the church has cut ties with VMM, both because of some differences and VMM's decision to cut its ties to the school on the grounds that they supported missionaries, not educational organizations and because Mt Pleasant Mennonite Church switched from the Virginia Mennonite Conference to the Rosedale Network of Churches. The Lezhë Mennonite Church is unaffiliated but would like to affiliate with the Rosedale Network. It is a member of the Albanian Evangelical Brotherhood (VUSH) a pan-Albanian organization of all evangelical churches and of the Mennonite World Conference.

The church has thrived under Dini's leadership with Sunday attendance up from a dozen or fewer to 35 to 40 per Sunday with 70-80 on special occasions like Easter and Christmas.

It's been a long and difficult road between Klementina's dream and its fruition...from first tentative exploration to the thriving, functioning school and growing church. That she and Dini have successfully coped with the changes required at every stage of development is tribute to their God directed partnership.

From the few of the first year to an enrollment of 220 students for the 2025-2026 school year, LAC has steadily grown by word of mouth from parent to parent wanting their children to have the advantage a good education brings. Though fewer than 1% of Albanians are Evangelical Christian, there were none in Antioch when Paul and Barnabas made their first journey and from the seeds first planted decades ago, the message of Christ is being spread in Albania through the Lezhë Academic Academy and the church in Lezhë.