

The 1990 Historic Meeting between Albanian President Ramiz Alia and Congressmen Joe DioGuardi and Tom Lantos

When I began to serve the people of my Congressional District in Westchester County, New York, on January 4, 1985, after a very tough race to win a seat in the US House of Representatives, I had absolutely no idea that the Albanian people in Yugoslavia would need my voice in Washington. I ran as a “common sense” Italian American Certified Public Accountant to bring fiscal responsibility and financial accountability to the budget process of the United States, which was beginning to experience large annual budget deficits and a fast rising national debt. I was born in the Bronx on September 20, 1940, and raised there until my parents moved in 1957 to Westchester County, where I ran for Congress in 1984 (after leaving a twenty-two year career as a CPA in what was then America’s largest accounting and auditing firm).

It took less than nine months of my first two-year term as a US Congressman for Albanians to discover that my father was an ethnic Albanian (as well as an Italian American), and for me to discover that a large Albanian American population from the Yugoslav Republics of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia’s Presheva Valley, and the autonomous Yugoslav province of Kosova resided in and around my Congressional District. The rest is history. I was at the right place at the right time for the long suffering Albanian people of Yugoslavia. In 1987 the genocidal war criminal Slobodan Milosevic became the President of Serbia and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. And, life for the Albanian people, especially those in Kosova, would never be the same.

Now, thirty years later, I believe that all Albanians know what I did as a new Member of Congress to free Albanians from Serbian barbarity, especially in Yugoslavia. But, what is not appreciated enough is what the Albanian American Civic League did when Shirley Cloyes came on the scene in 1994, just after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Shirley, then publisher of Lawrence Hill Books, specializing in international politics, became my partner in our quest for justice for all Albanians, and this led to the arrest, criminal trial, and death of Slobodan Milosevic in The Hague for crimes against humanity in 2002 and independence for Kosova in 2008. (Shirley and I were married in 1998, and we will celebrate our 20th anniversary on June 28, 2018.)

Returning to 1990, there is an important part of the story of what I was able to accomplish in the early years of the Albanian American Civic League that is still largely unknown. And, that will now change, since Shirley recently was able to obtain from Albania’s National Archives the official written transcript (from the archives of the Communist Party of Albania) of the two-and-a-half hour meeting that the late Congressman Tom Lantos and I had with Albanian President Ramiz Alia on May 30, 1990. This meeting resulted in two groundbreaking developments: first, the diplomatic recognition of Albania without preconditions by the US State Department under President George H. W. Bush within a month after Tom Lantos and I returned from Albania; and second, the discovery that all Jews in Albania during World War II were rescued from the Nazi Holocaust. The latter was the result of the proactive and extremely risky actions of the Albanian people and their government to save every Jewish family living in Albania for centuries and the thousands more who were able to flee Western Europe and Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia (with the help of Albanians there) into Albania, which was occupied by the Italian fascists until Italy left

the Axis in 1943 and the German Nazis took over.

On May 30, 1990, the President of the Peoples' Assembly of Albania, Ramiz Alia, hosted a meeting in Tirana with Congressmen Tom Lantos, an important Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the US House of Representatives and Chairman of the permanent delegation of the US government at the European Parliament, as well as former Congressman Joe DioGuardi. What follows are the most important excerpts from the historic meeting between President Ramiz Alia and Congressmen Tom Lantos and Joe DioGuardi.

Ramiz Alia started the two-and-a-half hour session by saying:

“I have heard a lot about you personally, Mr. Lantos, and about Joe DioGuardi. I am pleased to meet you. Albania and America have a big thing in common: In America there are many Albanians. Our brothers and sisters have found a big fatherland over there, and what is important is that they have kept ties with their fatherland. They fought and helped work for the freedom and independence of the Albanian people. America has helped them, and Albania has accepted them as their own children. They have maintained and still maintain ties with their country. This is a very important thing, which, surely, as it has helped in the past, will help in the future as well as reinforce friendly relations between the Albanian people and the American people. In Albania, America has a good name, and this is also to the merit of Albanian Americans, and to the great Americans who have worked for Albania. I have in mind US President Woodrow Wilson, who was against Albanian disintegration. For us Albanians, Mr. Lantos, the freedom issue is above everything. For sure, Mr. DioGuardi is Albanian by blood, and he knows what Albanian ‘besa’ is. Therefore, whoever respects Albanian people, respects their freedom and independence. We Albanians give them our hearts.”

Congressman Lantos replied to President Alia’s surprisingly soft and agreeable opening of our meeting:

“My friend DioGuardi is returning to Albania after 500 years and he returns as its true son, proud of the fact that he is of Albanian descent. He may be the most remarkable example, Mr. President, of the extraordinarily high success of Albanian people in the United States of America. All Albanians are looking for equal opportunities, be it in New York or Tirana or in Kosova. They are not asking for special privileges, but they want what we call a well-leveled playing field. They do not want to be discriminated against, and when there is a well-leveled playing field, an Albanian guy becomes a very successful businessman and a partner in one of the most respected international accounting firms, a Member of the Congress of the United States of America, and when he, Joe DioGuardi, finds that he wants to dedicate himself to broadening relations between Albania and the United States, I respect him for that.

“I always wanted to come to Albania. I have been married to my wife for 40 years now, but I knew her much earlier, and she can witness that during all these years I wanted to come to Albania. Therefore, I thank you in person that you made possible our arrival here.”

(It should be noted that Lantos had confided in me earlier that he first read about Scanderbeg and his Hungarian partner, Janos Hunyadi, in seeking freedom from the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century, when he was a little boy in his native country Hungary, and he told this to Ramiz Alia.)

Ramiz Alia replied:

“We as a nation are highly proud that in our national history, which is the history of over two to three thousand years, Albanian people have never waged the war against any other people. That has never happened, either against Greeks with whom we have been thousands years beside, either against Slavs, or from the sea side. We have emerged outside of our borders for only one reason: to help other brotherly nations. Since ours is the history of Scanderbeg, Scanderbeg went and helped Alfonse of Naples, but not to occupy Italian lands. Albanians took part in the 1928 Greek Revolution for the independence of Greek people. Also during the Second World War, I in person crossed the Yugoslav border with a partisan division. I fought along with Yugoslavian partisans in Kosova, in the Sanjak, and up to Sarajevo for the liberation of the Yugoslavian people. We Albanians are proud that we never went to fight against other people. We love and value our freedom and independence. Therefore we know how to appreciate and respect the freedom and independence of other people. We like sincerity, and we like to be open, because only in that way others understand us, and we understand them. Our history, as an old history, has taught us many things such as without freedom and independence, there is nothing.”

Alia continued:

“Let us return to Scanderbeg one more time? Scanderbeg came to Albania using the road that you came. He parted Hyundai in Fushë Kosova and came from Kukësi to Albania. What did he do as soon as he came here? He gathered all Albanian princes in Lezha. You have passed that way. He gathered all Albanian princes and established the first Albanian Alliance for resistance against the Turks. Why am I mentioning this fact? It is in our tradition that Albanians must be united because if they are divided the national unity will weaken. This is the path we follow. We want to have our people united. For if we are not united, if we are divided into five pieces, we as a small country cannot survive.

“Today, all over the world many problems are raised, which we see through a prism of Albanian interests. We work on our future development by taking into consideration the Albanian reality. We are not conservative, in the sense that we are defiant towards new things, even toward progress. How can somebody blame us by saying that we are against progress? We have risen from illiteracy to the level of the Academy of Science, and now we have 75 percent of youth in middle school? That would appear to be absurd elsewhere. But, unfortunately, people don't know about Albania. Perhaps we could be blamed for that as well.”

(After Lantos also talked about the great accomplishments of the United States, Ramiz Alia emphasized the great culture of the Albanian people, which enabled them to resist all occupiers of Albanian lands and their attempts at assimilating them.)

Ramiz Alia: “Albanian people are not people without a culture. They were without education, but not without culture. These are two different notions. If they were without culture, 500 years under the Turk occupation, we would have been assimilated because we were a small nation. Why weren’t we assimilated? Exactly because we had a more advanced culture than our occupiers. The occupier didn’t bring higher culture. It is simple logic. Albanian culture has resisted; the Albanian language has resisted. This means that it had a better organized structure in speaking, syntax, and so on.

“You have seen the ethnographic museums and other museums. Today, you saw paintings in Berat and other works of art in the churches. They mirror the people’s culture, its education and its spiritual values. Well, should we who fight for these people erase this culture? If we did that, we would be criminals and anti-nationalists. But, in order to preserve the culture, we isolated ourselves from those who would change us.

“Many friends are telling us to develop tourism because you will make money. It is clear to me that tourism is an important business. Can we do more? I agree that we have to think about it, but I would not agree if tourism became the reason for drugs to enter Albania, prostitution to enter, HIV, terrorism to enter, and other phenomena that are unknown to us.

“My message will be that Albania is ready to establish diplomatic relations with the United States. There are no obstacles in this regard. Even more so, our Ambassador to the United Nations, upon his return, will be tasked to contact American officials in order to discuss this issue because these are only administrative procedures. I don’t believe that there could be any principal problem that will become an obstacle.”

(Congressman Lantos agreed with Ramiz Alia that it was the right time to establish diplomatic relations.)

Alia replied:

“We are of the same opinion as well. We are also interested in this. And we are even more interested in another point as well. We are a small country. America is a huge country. We are a poor country and America is a rich country. And so from every point of view, Albania could have more interests in America than America could have in Albania.”

Lantos then said:

“There is not going to be, and I am sure about this, any kind of pre-conditions. The relations are going to be good for both Albania and the United States. The relations would offer both countries advantages and would be seen as mutually beneficial.”

And Ramiz Alia responded:

“Very well. It is true, and it is important that relations between the United States and Albania

should be established on sincere grounds, on the grounds of mutual trust, without interfering in internal affairs, and with no political pre-conditions because this makes for friendship between peoples. We don't have two-face politics. I would like to move to another topic, Yugoslavia, and I hope that you are not getting tired of me."

Tom Lantos replied:

"Not at all. We are very excited. Before you go to this topic [of Yugoslavia], I would like to tell you something. Please believe what I'm telling you because it is coming from my heart. You are one of the most liked and charismatic leaders that I have met. I have met many leaders in the world starting from China, Japan, Britain, and others. I am very happy that you are not my opponent at the election campaign for my seat in the American Congress because I would lose. "

Ramiz Ali replied:

"Agreed. It is a great pleasure for me to talk with you, because I see that to my sincerity, you respond with sincerity."

"Now I want to point out one thing that you should be clear to you about Yugoslavia. Our interest is for Yugoslavia to be united. Our starting point is national interest. I said that our most important thing is the matter of freedom and independence. This is our perspective, and there is no Stalinist angle or any other. From this angle we are interested in Yugoslavia to be the one that it is, federative or confederative in these matters, but not divided."

Tom Lantos: "I fully agree. This is also in our interests. And we have said this to you all the time. I also said this in Kosova a few days ago (at the Grand Hotel in Prishtina)."

Ramiz Alia: "For sure Kosova's problem is of very great importance. We are 3 million, and two and half million Albanians are over the border of Albania. Nobody can be in between us. However, we never raised, and also we are not going to raise, the issue of a union. We raised the issue that Kosova should have all the rights as other nations in Yugoslavia. In a multinational country such as Yugoslavia, Kosova should be part of a whole. Kosova should have a room to act as a nation in the entire territory of Yugoslavia. Therefore, our politics is for Kosova to have its place in the Yugoslav federation. We are interested in a democratic Yugoslavia. I would even say that the Balkans is interested in a democratic Yugoslavia. An undemocratic Yugoslavia poses a danger for the entire Balkans.

"Mr. Lantos, I, as the President of the Republic of Albania, I answer for my people, for freedom and independence. But when I know that in Kosova, on our border, there are 15,000 soldiers with tanks, airplanes, helicopters, and cannons who continuously make maneuvers at our borders, how can I be calm?"

Ramiz Alia: "An Albanian book cannot go there, a book from over there cannot come here. Albanian families on this side and on the other side of the border do not communicate. They do

not allow a single person to go over there. You are the first ones after many years to cross the border at that border crossing. That border crossing has remained closed.”

Tom Lantos: “That is insane.”

(At this juncture, I decided to come into this wonderful give-and-take on Yugoslavia and Kosova.)

Joe DioGuardi: “Once we studied the issue of Kosova and Albania for several years, by hearing various opinions, one opinion we must keep in mind, Mr. President, and I am sure that you know it, now that you are building this bridge with the United States of America. All peoples in Yugoslavia are becoming very nervous. This is not just a recent occurrence. This is connected to unfair images and negative propaganda that have been created for some time and that could be created against Albania as well in the future.”

Ramiz Alia: “What Mr. DioGuardi said is connected exactly with the image that Yugoslavia has attempted to create for Albania as a closed country—Stalinist, Orthodox, etc. But, relations with the United States of America, our politics of inclusion in European problems etc., and your arrival in Albania goes against this image. However, we will try to have good relations with Yugoslavia in any case.

“We Albanians are known as ones that hold some grudges, but in politics we are not such. In politics one should have a fresh mind. We do not hold grudges, no. We think that in the interests of our people, Albanians of Albania and Kosova, our relations with Yugoslavia should be good, because from our good relations Kosova will benefit as well. But, I am saying one thing: that Albania will never have good relations with Yugoslavia at the expense of Kosova. We will never do that.”

Ramiz Alia continued: “I said that we will make the effort to have good relations with Yugoslavia. We asked to have contact with them. The foreign minister of Yugoslavia could come here. I am also of the opinion that it is good if he comes, but I will have difficulty talking with him. For what reason? Because he does not have anything in his own hand. This is the situation in Yugoslavia, but again we are not the ones that would fix the situation there. That pertains to the people of Yugoslavia. We would respect the wishes and will of the Yugoslavian people, and we will make a full effort to really have friendly relationships between our people and the peoples of Yugoslavia.

“We follow the same politics with Greece, where we also want to have good relations. Our relations with them are sometimes good, and sometimes bad. They change according to the weather. But I think that is not a serious problem.”

Tom Lantos replied: “I believe that by having an American Embassy in Tirana, the whole situation will become normal. The current situation is abnormal. There is an American Ambassador in Belgrade, in Sofia, Athens, Bucharest, but not here. That does not make any

sense. I believe that the United States will be able to carry out a very good function by maintaining relations in a more harmonious way. I really think so.

“I, Mr. President, will do whatever is possible to tell all my colleagues in the US Congress that they must come and pay a visit here. I think that the more visitors you have from the American Congress, the more friends Albania will have. I am sure about this.”

Ramiz Alia replied: “Thank you. I said that in our entire history Albania always had a need for friends. We say that in the worst time, our mountains were our biggest ally.”

(Feeling that this meeting was about to come to a close, I knew that it was important for President Alia to know my perspective on Milosevic and the good history of Albanians in Southern Italy after the Ottoman Turks succeeded in occupying Albania in 1488.)

Joseph DioGuardi: “Let me talk also about another issue, and concretely about the Yugoslavian position. Some time ago Milošević had a speech, where he said that America interferes in their internal affairs, but he is very arrogant towards Albania as well. Serbs know one Albania, the one that Enver Hoxha created, a closed Albania. We are sure that Serbs always have created various tensions. I don’t know if the US State Department is aware of all of the problems created. It is important that the history of this area is known. In every step that could be taken it should be kept in mind that it is the Balkans, and not the “Balkanized” Balkans. The second point, you mentioned that for 500 years the Turks were unable to assimilate Albanians. Italians as well did not do that. Today, there are 38 Albanian villages in the Calabria region of southern Italy alone. My father is from Greci, further north, where Albanian is also the original language. When a child is born in my father’s village, they lift up a child and face him towards Albania, even though 500 years have passed since Albanians fled to the Italian peninsula.

“I was born in the United States of America where my family moved in 1929. My father was not able to survive the terrible economic conditions in Italy in those years. America gave us a chance and also to my family, and to the family of the Congressman Lantos, to immigrate today. We strive to help further our peoples in Europe.

“I believe that we kept our traditions, which you mentioned, about which my father also spoke to me. So if I was simply interested in publicity I would have come alone. (You know that I had several invitations to come alone for this trip, but I wanted to make sure that when I came to Albania, my arrival would have true meaning for my father’s people here and for Albania, Mr. President.)

“I have a very good friend in Congress in Tom Lantos, who has stood by me for the Albanian cause every day. And in that persistence of mine, like a “Shkodran” (and I don’t know if my father was really from Shkodra, since I do not have any documents from the 15th century when Albanians fled to Italy), I knew that the time had come for Congressman Lantos and me to come together. I did not want to betray my word that I gave to the Albanian people. But, I also I did not want to take your time if I came alone and accomplished nothing of importance. Now the

time has come that when we return to the United States we will do something of great significance. I did not come for my name to be shown in the newspapers. On the contrary, my aim was to do something important for Albania.

“Also, you should know that Congressman Lantos is a man from the United States who is very much respected in Europe, but also in the Jewish community all over the world, since he is a Jew who escaped the Nazi Holocaust. But some others know him as Hungarian, since he fled Hungary to come to the United States.”

Ramiz Alia: “Thank you for reminding me about the matter of Jews. I do not know whether you know that Albania is the only country in Europe where no single Jew was handed over to the Germans.”

Tom Lantos: “I didn’t know this, and this is something that we will make clear worldwide.”

Ramiz Alia: “I am saying to you, and I am the witness in person that in the time of the Second World War when Germans entered Yugoslavia many Jews from Yugoslavia came to Albania. Germans entered Yugoslavia in 1940, whereas the Italians were already in Albania. Germans came after Italy capitulated, and their first task was to look for Jews.

“Before the war I had known a Jewish doctor in Tirana. When I returned from the war I saw him again in Tirana. I learned that villagers took him and hid him, and Germans, with all their operations were unable to catch him.”

Tom Lantos: “I am very happy to hear this (about Jewish survival in Albania). I have heard a lot about this, but I am very happy that you are telling it to me.”

Ramiz Alia: “Germans made a huge terror on us, since 3 percent of our population was killed. This is a huge percentage in Europe.

During the war, I was where you were recently, in Berat. I was born in Shkoder, and grew up in Tirana. I finished middle school in Tirana, but during the war I was in Berat. I remember very well that in September of 1943, in Berat, there were lots of Jews who came from Yugoslavia. When Germans entered Berat, all Jews came to the liberated area, in Skrapar, at that mountain that you recently saw, Tomorr. We partisans were there. They remained there until the end of the war. Once the war ended, they returned to their homes in Yugoslavia. A letter that Jews sent to Comrade Enver Hoxha was published in our press at that time. They thanked the Albanian government, by pointing out that Albania was the only country where no single Jew was handed over to Germans.”

Tom Lantos: “I personally will take care that this history will be known much more.”

Ramiz Alia: “These are features that our people have. Should we forget them? No, if we did, we would make a mistake.

“We, I said, follow our path. The society that we want to build is supported by our beliefs, but on these grounds, by respecting our customs, and traditions. This national tradition is as the water that feeds the plant’s roots, and it grows the branches, leaves, and flowers. This is the path that we follow. This is the Albanian way.

“Maybe I pictured it with very beautiful colors, but Joe DioGuardi moved me—he made me a little bit nationalist.”

Joe DioGuardi: “I want to tell you that it is important (by risking to make an analogy that might not be modest), by comparing my return in America with Scanderbeg. You said that 500 years ago Scanderbeg gathered all Albanian princes when he had a problem with the Turks—whereas, I have tried to unify “Albanian princes” in America. There is the Albanian lobby I founded, the Albanian American Civic League, whose first problem is Kosova. I would like to present to you a copy of the Albanian American newspaper, *Shqiponia Shqiptare*, that I created with the young “Albanian princes” in America who want to help solve Kosova’s problem.”

Ramiz Alia: “Thank you very much. You brought an important issue to my attention. I definitely wanted to greet you and to thank you for the noble work that you are doing, and which the entire Albanian American Civic League is doing in Washington, DC, for the Kosova issue. It is a noble issue to stand up for a people who fight for their rights. It an honor for every citizen. And, naturally, as we meet you, I recognize the great contribution that you and Mr. Lantos gave for this issue, which cannot do anything else but revive my great respect for your humanism, for your free spirit of democracy, independence, and respect for people that fight for their future. Kosovars are our brothers, and the work that you are doing for them is the same as doing it for Albania as well. It is the same thing.”