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**Father Arthur Liolin: The Man Under-Credited for Reestablishing Albanian-American Diplomatic Relations**

What he thought was another trip to Albania to continue his work in helping the locals recover from the decades long Communist dictatorship turned out to be a trip that made a significant impact on him as well as on the relationship between Albania and the United States. When he was leaving the tarmac in Tirana, he was shocked by the thousands of people who had come out to greet him in his return to their still newly developing independent country. When anticipating this trip, he was looking to advance the service work he had done during his prior two trips, which included holding religious services, speaking with the locals and looking to learn from them as well as help them, and be a guiding force in their newly independent home. Prior to this third trip, Liolin had been in contact with government officials in Albania regarding trying to reform diplomatic relations between the United States and Albania, when he commented to the Los Angeles Times, “They are very interested in the United States”.

Father Arthur Liolin, from a boy who built a simple x-ray machine to a priest of almost 47 years, grew up in New York, New York. He was the oldest brother and part of a family who was active in their local Albanian church where Arthur and his younger brother Nikon helped as alter boys. As a boy, Arthur was fascinated with the field of science and attended Princeton University undergrad studying pre-med. While he was there, the professors strongly encouraged the medical students to take a course that was not about science so as to expose them to intellectual ways of thinking that were not scientifically based. He decided to take a course in archaeology. And, with that educational exposure and with an increased interest in the arts and renaissance, he became a priest. He has been a priest at St. George Albanian Cathedral in South Boston since he was ordained in 1970. During his time at St. George, he has welcomed several high officials from Albania.

During his time there, he has evoked so much change, not only in the church community, but also internationally. He has been a resource for communication and reunion for many Albanians looking to come to America to reunite with their relatives. Liolin describes St. George Cathedral as “ha[ving] become a beacon for many in Albania as an image of ethnic identity in the U.S. and even world-wide for democratic principles and the freedoms associated with the U.S.A”. As a result, he has emerged as the leader of a highly prestigious church in the Albanian and Albanian American community.

Albania had been a country plagued for decades in the 20th century under a strict dictatorship under their leader Enver Hoxha, which lasted for 40 years. There had been no contact between Albania and the United States since 1945. Communication finally came out of Albania in the late 1980’s and in 1990, right after Liolin’s second, and before he was to leave for his third trip. “In 1990 between March and September,” Liolin remembers having received, “over 4,000 telephone calls from Albania”. The main objective of those phone calls, he recalls, were people trying to find and contact relatives here in America. At that time, Liolin described his third trip back to Albania as having the “most visual impact” on him as well as the people and towns he visited.

Going into this third trip in 1991, he was focused on continuing to spread the word of God and helping to continue to rebuild the country, but he additionally wanted to work to rebuild diplomatic relations between the United States and Albania, revealing “that was one of my intended goals”.

This trip was monumental for the goals Liolin had for Albania. That particular year, Albania had begun reopening churches that had been closed for four decades. When he performed sermons, Liolin recalls the size of the crowds. He described how thousands of people came out to hear him spread the word of God and experience a religious ceremony, something some had never partaken in. So many people came out that Liolin was forced to hold services outside to fit the crowd, so they could all be a part of the ceremonial service. Liolin was swarmed with the Albanian press following him. He found himself at the center of a media frenzy. With all the attention and fascination surrounding Liolin, he was then contacted by government officials from Albania wanting to meet with him to discuss rebuilding diplomatic relations between the United States and Albania.

With the help of the initial conversations that he started with the leaders of the newly independent nation, Liolin was able to convince the Albanian government to be in contact with the United States Government to start talks of rebuilding a broken relationship. Along with that major success, he was able to also help reunite families and bring religion, a major part of their former life, back to them and their community. He was able to continue to help make Albania feel like home again, a home that many thought was broken forever.

Because of Liolin going on this trip and connecting with so many people and getting the media attention he did, he was able to make a lasting impact on the history of the United States and Albania. Because of his belief in the future of these two countries, he was able to reestablish a relationship between the countries that decades before was viewed as never happening again. Liolin was excited to be able to see the future and potential of a country that was damaged and lost after a four-decade long dictatorship that had ripped the core beliefs out of its national identity.

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