

## INTERVIEW

Those of us whose Albanian language talents are strictly limited to asking for *raki* in a Tirana tavern - then raising it in a *gëzuar* salutation - greatly envy people like Dr. Robert Elsie.

Robert speaks perfect Albanian. Furthermore, there are few people alive who could tackle the translation of Albanian poetry and literature with more enthusiasm and expertise. We have Robert, among others, to thank for spreading the Albanian cultural gospel to the widest possible English - and German - audiences. (Robert is as proficient in German as he is in Albanian.)

Two recent projects serve as good examples. Just published is his *Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture* (Hurst & Co. 2001) and *Flora Brovina. Call me by my name. Poetry from Kosova in a bilingual Albanian-English edition* (Gjonlekaj Publishing, New York 2001). Pretty weighty stuff, you may say, for a Canadian whose mother-tongue is English, but Robert Elsie is one of a rare breed who are helping to perpetuate the considerable talents, sensitivities and richness of language that is expressed by Albanian writers and poets.

"But there is still much to do in the field of Albanian studies," he insists, before adding ruefully, "One lifetime is hardly enough." The remark illustrates his total dedication to the task in hand.

Robert, 50, is a Canadian who does not let the grass grow under his feet. Born and bred in Vancouver, he now lives and works in Germany, high in the Eifel mountains close to the Belgian border. But his journey to Olzheim has been a circuitous one. Having studied at the University of British Columbia where he graduated with a diploma in Classical Studies and Linguistics, he continued his post-graduate work at the Free University of Berlin, then at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris, then the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, and finally at the University of Bonn where he finished his doctorate.

Strangely, it was at Bonn that he was introduced to the fascinations of Albania. (He had always delighted in rare and little-known languages and cultures such as Welsh, Lithuanian...) Out of the blue, his professor received an invitation from the Albanian Academy of Sciences to visit Tirana. The extraordinary thing about his was that the invitation was extended also *to the professor's students*.

Thus, in 1978, Robert made his first trip to Albania and began his love-affair with the country that has endured and strengthened. So fascinated was he with every aspect of "this remarkable land" that he promptly became accomplished in its language (linguists have a habit of making it sound so easy!). Soon he was proficient enough to join the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an interpreter.

With twenty years of experience under his belt as a conference interpreter, Robert has worked for German government ministries and international organizations throughout Europe. He is a member of the Conference Interpreter Association of the German Federation of Interpreters and Translators.

Currently, Robert is busy republishing works that have not been on the market for some time: a revised English translation of the poet Migjeni, a collection in English of Albanian folk tales and legends, and the Albanian version of his own *History of Albanian Literature*. These will all appear shortly in Prishtina. He has also discovered, in France, the first full history of Albania ever written: *Histoire d'Albanie* by Jean-Claude Faveyrial, written between 1884 and 1889. Hopefully, he will soon find a publisher. Watch this space. Drita will report on Robert's success with this huge project.

[first published in *Drita, Newsletter of the Anglo-Albanian Association*, London, April-June 2001, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 21]