

Ismail Kadare

*Pasardhësi: Roman [The Successor: novel]*

Tirana. Shtëpia Botuese 55. 2003. 164 pp. ISBN 99927-820-9-9.

*Le Successeur: Roman*. Tr. Tedi Papavrami.

Paris. Fayard. 2003. 206 pp. ISBN 2-213-61647-7.

One of the most dramatic events in the long decades of the Stalinist dictatorship in Albania was the murder or suicide of the communist political leader Mehmet Shehu on December 18, 1981.

A member of the Politburo from 1948 to his death, Mehmet Shehu is remembered as one of the cruelest members of the communist regime and was responsible for many a bloody purge. For decades, he was the number-two figure of the party and government leadership, after Enver Hoxha, until he finally fell victim to a purge himself. After an apparent power struggle with the aging Hoxha, Shehu was found shot dead in his villa in Tirana one winter morning. The death was initially reported as a suicide, the tragic consequence of a “nervous crisis,” but one year later, Hoxha accused Shehu of having been a “polyagent” working for a number of foreign secret services. Shehu’s whole family clan was subsequently arrested and interned. His wife, Fiqrete Shehu, also a member of the Central Committee, died of a heart attack in 1988, and one of his sons committed suicide by throwing himself onto the electric wires surrounding the prison. The other son, noted writer Bashkim Shehu (see WLT 71.1, p. 196), survived the torment and now lives in exile in Barcelona.

Much has been written and speculated about Mehmet Shehu’s death, and new information has recently come to light in the Albanian press about the event. Nevertheless, an aura of mystery still hovers over the whole affair, and foreign visitors to Tirana are often taken to see the “villa where they killed Mehmet.”

Ismail Kadare’s latest novel revives the mysterious death of the longtime would-be “successor” of communist dictator Enver Hoxha and evokes the surrealist atmosphere that reigned in Albania during the 1980s. The literary adaptation of this ultimate enigma of Albanian history, brought to a climax in seven gripping chapters, has been well received by the Albanian public, even though market conditions for the Albanian novel are far from favourable.

A myriad of new translations of foreign literature, long missing in Albanian, has largely deflected public attention from creative writing in Albanian itself, making most Albanian novels unsellable. Kadare is still the exception, although he, too, has suffered from a certain degree of public indifference since his return to Tirana after a decade of absence in Paris.

*Pasardhësi* was published by Kadare simultaneously with another new novel, in Albanian and French editions, entitled *Vajza e Agamemnonit / La Fille d’Agamemnon* (The daughter of Agamemnon), which is also set in the communist period.

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