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CANNOT GO UNNOTICED

Mal Berisha



## No one else in the world has matched Erickson's descriptions about Albanians

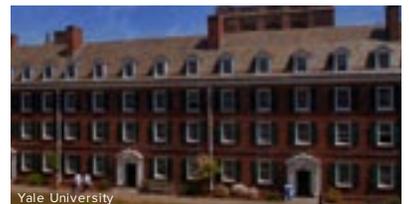
The distinguished Albanian diplomat and scholar, Mr. Mal Berisha, has shrewdly combined his successful tenure in London, where he served as Ambassador of Albania to UK (2012-2015), with his extremely particular research works. Also subject to his studies were the life and the contribution of the extraordinary US missionary, Charles Telford Erickson, to Albania.

"The life of Erickson is perhaps my favorite topic to discuss or explain. I believe Erickson had an unusual power to help people while he was alive...But I believe that he has had a deep and personal transformational impact on my own life because I see in him a man of virtue, sacrifice, and great dedication to the causes he believed in," said Mr. Mal Berisha, who has dedicated 4 volumes to Erickson.

In the following interview, he penetrates into the character and the sacrificing life of this unique friend of Albania:

Can you tell us who was Charles Erickson, what did he do, why did he come to Albania and what did he accomplish there?

Erickson was the son of two immigrants from Sweden. His father was a trumpeter in the American Civil War. He was reared and educated exceptionally, not only through the Protestant Church, but also in such a fine university as Yale.



Yale University

Being educated in such a humanitarian spirit, he was chosen for a post in **Burma** and spent some years there together with his wife Carrie. But his wife could not handle the rigors of missionary life there.



She suffered from the deprivations that seem to accompany the lives of such people. Thus he needed to return to the USA. But his desire for missionary work with the poor, with those who had great needs, never ceased.

So he applied to the American Board of Missions, which after some time and difficulty offered him a post. "We have a station in Albania in the Ottoman Empire and if you agree to go there, we can offer you a post," they said to him.

### What were two or three of Erickson's most important achievements?

It is a very nice question and indeed I could list so many, but I'll choose just a few.

First, Erickson was one of the people who informed the international public opinion about Albanian issues (and perhaps better than anyone else.) Another great achievement was that in 1919, he was the most active member of the Albanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference.

I am strongly convinced that President Wilson's famous decision NOT to sign the peace accord if Albania's political borders would be compromised, this decision evolved based on daily information over a course of 15 days, in which Erickson sent him a letter every day and, thanks to the acquaintance that Erickson had with President Wilson's wife (who had also worked for the International Red Cross and Erickson had recently left Italy where he had been the general director of the International Red Cross of Italy).

So he managed to ensure that his letters to President Wilson would be on top of the mound of papers and briefings that he received each day. It is thought that

### *Erickson goes to Korça (Albania)*

*From Salonica, through Monastir (Bitola), he travelled seven days to arrive in Korça where Phineas Kennedy was serving as a missionary.*

*There he joins the missionaries and in 1908 he preached his first service in the church of Korça. Fifteen days later, this great man realized that Korça is more advanced than he expected and thought, "Korça does not need my work as a missionary; I need to go somewhere more primitive, with greater needs." So the next place would be Tirana.*

Wilson received between 1000-1200 letters each day from various persons in the Balkans, all claiming the rights to portions of one another's lands.

So, by sending these daily letters each and every day - I believe that the fruit of that effort was Wilson's declaration, published in the French press in the final days of the Conference, when Wilson wrote that the American delegation would never sign a declaration compromising Albania's political borders.

### What motivated Erickson's efforts for Albania?

My answer to this is that he was a great

believer. He believed in his faith; he was committed to it. He was inspired by extraordinary motives and by wonderful moral and human virtues. He esteemed the fate of a nation higher than his own fate, and even higher than the fate of his own family.

Because, in fact, many others have made sacrifices for the Albanian nation or for other various causes. But Erickson is rare because he also sacrificed his most precious loved ones, his own family.

So I believe that what inspired him was the faith that Protestants have and the high moral values that they hold and embody. The Evangelicals were those



Charles Telford Erickson

### *Erickson in Tirana*

*So he began his missionary life in Tirana - and according to my research there was not one Christian there. There were 12,000 inhabitants. Obscurantism dominated all around. There were no schools. The Ottoman Turkish administration was backward beyond description. And Erickson, together with his wife and children, found a house somewhere at Dibra Street (I have tried to find the house but still have not succeeded). He took walks in the town, spoke to the people, and very soon was learning Albanian. Their life was tremendously difficult. Carrie was not coping with this life. There are some touching episodes - I will tell you one...*

*One day he went into the town. He came home and told Carrie "Today I have learned several Albanian words." And Carrie replied: "Erik, yes, but did you learn how to say "Please take me home!" (Laughing)*

*Later on, he went to the city of Elbasan where his family was added to another daughter, so now they had four children. Later they opened a school, but not long after there was an incident with the Turks in which they "needed" the school building as a gunpowder and arms warehouse. Apparently their warehouses were not sufficient so they needed to take Charles Telford Erickson's school. Later they took him and detained in Monastir for several months under repressive conditions under the care of the Turkish authorities at a place where there were scores of foreign consulates. Monastir in that time was a significant center of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. There is an episode which is among the most interesting of Erickson's life - and I want to share it. In that time, the USA had an Embassy in Istanbul. The Turks allowed Erickson to go make a complaint to his embassy (The Embassy in Istanbul was responsible for the care of Americans living in the Ottoman Empire.) When he arrived - I think the ambassador's name was Strauss -they spoke face-to-face. And the ambassador said, "Erickson, yesterday the foreign minister of the Ottoman Empire was sitting in that very chair you are sitting in now. We talked about you and I asked, "Mr. Minister, what's the issue with Charles Erickson? Why are you nagging him so? He seems very honorable, good and wise. He is not a troublemaker, has a great family - what's your business with him?"*

*And the Turkish minister replied, "No what's YOUR business with him? Because he is not an American..."He is an Albanian who is hiding behind an American passport, because in his house, he receives in the same manner Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and all find peace and teaching, and everyone communicates with him. We make extraordinary efforts to teach Albanian to our troops and administrators, that most difficult language and none of them have emerged from that training with fluent Albanian. Whereas this man learns to speak Albanian fluently in such a brief time period and speaks with people on the streets as well as with the intellectuals of Elbasan."*



who brought great moral values to Albania.

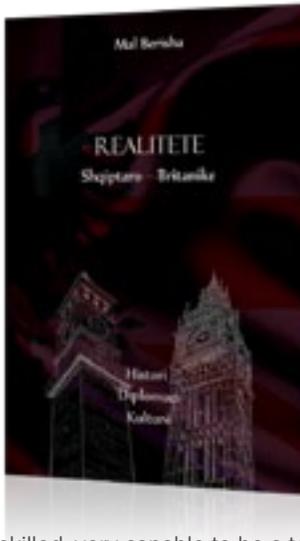
The Albanians are believers of different religions, and the Evangelicals do not make up a large percentage. In fact, their numbers are very small. But based on their values or worth, I would place them at the top of all the others. And Erickson was as such - That's what I believe.

### **What are the most significant values that you glean from Erickson's life?**

First of all, I am not proud of the fact that I was reared in an atheist state that did not permit us to learn the values and morals of religion. But he was a great and extraordinary moralist - he had such wonderful values. He was also a man of principles: if he committed himself to a cause, he would see it through to completion.



And indeed he did see things to completion thanks to the great sacrifice required to do it. He was a man - well I would not call him an ascetic - but he never lived a life of ease at a time when, as an American, he could have had a wonderful life.



He was highly skilled, very capable to be a teacher or to lead a church, and could have led a comfortable life. But he didn't want that. So he lived with people in poverty and need, among a nation that was being broken up. And I would advise this to my fellow citizens: If you can spare some time, if you can just read about the work of Erickson on behalf of Albania, you will become a better person, more patriotic.

*You will love Albania more, your family more, yourself more. And you'll understand more about who you are. No one else in the world has matched Erickson's descriptions about Albanian 'besa' (honor), virtue, hospitality, and tradition.*

*So, I feel indebted to that man, so much that the five years of work I did to publish that book seem almost completely insignificant.*



Ambassador Berisha and his Spouse, meeting with 103-year-old, Grace Johnson Erickson, the daughter of Charles Erickson. March, 2014

## Who is Mr. Mal Berisha?

Mr. Mal Berisha, KCFO, has served as the Ambassador of the Republic of Albania to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Ireland from 2012 to 2015. Previously, Berisha served as General Consul of Albania to Istanbul from 1993-1997. Following his assignment in Turkey, Berisha joined the Pan - Albanian Federation of America "VATRA" in 1998, contributing to the indefatigable efforts of Albanian Americans to resolve the Kosovo question. Berisha appeared on U.S television as an expert and historian shedding light to the unjust treatment of Albanians in Kosovo and presenting to the American public the values that the two nations inherently shared. In 2000, congruous to these beliefs, Berisha joined the United Nations (UNMIK) in helping Kosovo construct its own democratic institutions. Having spent roughly a decade in Kosovo, Berisha returned to Albania where he was appointed General Director of Regional Affairs and Initiatives at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Berisha is a history scholar and has published a number of books and articles as well as translated material surrounding Albanian history and culture. Berisha's books include: a translation of the book "Southern Albania or Northern Epirus in the European International Relations" written by Edith Pierpont Stickney of Stanford University in addition to the translation of "Rescue in Albania", outlining the history of the Albanian "Besa" and telling the gripping story of the Jews saved in Albania. Other books include: "Albanians, Oaks on the Illyrian Soil" (2007), "Albanians, the youngest and most ancient Europeans", (2008), "Charles Telford Erickson, A Life Dedicated to Albania" (2012).



Ambassador Mal Berisha presenting his Credentials to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, June 27, 2013

In 2014, Berisha presented his first English book in Manhattan at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Studies and the U.S Embassy in London: "Herman Bernstein, U.S Ambassador to Albania" where he detailed the close relations between Jews, Albanians, and the United States Government. Berisha's latest book "Realities of the Albanian-British Relations" was published in 2015 on the eve of closing his mission to the UK. The book was launched at the Regent University of London and the British Embassy in Tirana. Berisha is an honorary member of the Pan - Albanian American "VATRA". Berisha is a Knight Commander of Royal Order of Francis I. Currently he is Diplomatic Adviser of the Chairman of the Albanian Democratic Party, Mr Lulzim Basha. ([Malberisha.com](http://Malberisha.com))