Poetic justice

Albanian author Gjekë Marinaj finds refuge in Richardson

SAYING THANKS
Network volunteers honored at luncheon

GIRL SCOUTS
Local teens receive Gold Awards

DALLAS SIDEKICKS
Fans celebrate return of soccer team
Power of a poem

Gjëkë Marinaj’s words inspire, help defeat communism in Albania

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ON THE COVER: KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOR

He heard the sound of approaching Albanian soldiers before he got to the border. He thought he had outrun them, wearing his blanket through the barbed wire — only a kilometer from the former Yugoslav border near Prishtina, Mongolia — to block the senses that would alert the communist army of his crossing. But his plan failed. They were coming to take him home.

So just after midnight on Sept. 11, 1990, 25-year-old Gjekë Marinaj started running.

When I got on the top of the hill and across the border, I had a chance to look over the whole field where I was going to be. You’re going to say goodbye to that forever, because at that time, it was still communism in power,” said Marinaj, 46, who moved to Richardson 20 years ago. “You just had to turn down running towards your face.”

In 1990, when native journalists who did not work hard enough to promote the Communist Party of Albania were imprisoned, Marinaj had written and published a radical anti-government poem that helped trigger the uprising that would eventually free his people.

The 22-line poem called “Horses” ran in the country’s leading literary publication, Drita. The horse served as a metaphor for the Albanian people — who were robbed of free will.

“Then people started to go on demonstrations and read the poem aloud,” Marinaj said.

But in the rush of freedom, and his attempt came with a price. Just two weeks later, as part of the secret police approached Marinaj and told him to appear at police headquarters.

I knew what was going to happen. I was afraid and I left the country that very evening,” said Marinaj, who had to leave the country really, and going to a new place. It’s overwhelming,” said Dusita Marinaj of Richardson. “On the inside, I feel that I am the luckiest person because we got a chance to meet each other and have a new life. I found something being a good thing in the end.”

Over the past 20 years, Marinaj has made a life for himself in Richardson. He earned his associate degree and then a man of letters. Within six months, he would apply to the American Embassy and make his move to San Diego.

“They were speaking Albanian,” Marinaj said of the immigrants. “They said, ‘What’s your name?’”

Marinaj made it to the West Coast with only a small amount of Albanian cash and no understand- ing of the language. Within six months, he had made his way to Texas, working as a runner, fetching pillows and fresh towels, for Westin Galleria Dallas.

That’s where he met his wife of 20 years, Dusita, 45, who came here from Romania.

We have no names. We are all called horses: we don’t cry, we don’t laugh, we silence ourselves.

We listen, we eat what we are given, we go where we are told. None of us is shape enough. For the horse of the king, they made a high post. For the horse of the princess, they made a gold saddle.

On the horse of the peasant, they tossed a saddle of straw. As for the wild horse, they threw him outdoors.

Yet before the people, we were and remain horses.

Make headlines

It was nighttime when Albanian police officers led Marinaj into a dark room and locked the doors behind him.

He had been based with other immigrants to a refugee camp in the United States. When he was nervous and locked in a dark room described by the US Embassy, and make his move to San Diego.

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“Everything I do now, I just think what kind of impact that piece of work is going to have on behalf of humanity,” said Marinaj, who teaches English and communications at Richland College. “I feel like I am very lucky I didn’t get killed for it and very honored and humbled I could write something which could make such a difference in the world.”

After the fall of communism in Albania, Marinaj returned home to visit family and do a few local interviews in 2005. He stayed only four days because he was afraid to stay longer, he said. He went back in 2008 and then again last year to do research for his dissertation, he said.

But, Marinaj said, the past two decades do not tell a story about only him and his struggles.

“I think it’s a story really about America more than about me because lots of people like me have taken the same path — left their country for one rea- son or another to come here,” he said. “No other country is like this one. It meets your expectations, and I am just as amazed that proves that. I am just one piece of the puzzle.”

Lindsey Bever is a neighborhood reporter and can be reached at 214-977-8051.

HORSES

All our lives we keep running, we look only ahead.

What happens behind us, we fear to know.

We have no names.

We are all called horses: we don’t cry, we don’t laugh, we silence ourselves.

We listen, we eat what we are given, we go where we are told. None of us is shape enough.

For the horse of the king, they made a high post.

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Yet before the people, we were and remain horses.

Gjekë Marinaj revisits Hotel Avala in 1990 where he was imprisoned nine years earlier.

“Just think about leaving your life behind, leaving your family, leaving your friends, leaving your home, and going to a new place. It’s overwhelm- ing,” said Dusita Marinaj of Richardson. “On the inside, I feel that I am the luckiest person because we got a chance to meet each other and have a new life. I found something being a good thing in the end.”

Over the past 20 years, Marinaj has made a life for himself in Richardson. He earned his associate degree in science from Brookhaven College and his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in literature studies from the University of Texas at Dallas. He is cur- rently completing his dissertation for a PhD in human- ities doctorate.

Marinaj has continued to publish his poetry and freelance articles, interviewing public figures such as former President George W. Bush, Brazilian foot- baller Pelé and Israeli President Shimon Peres.

In 2000, he interviewed Albania’s former presi- dient and communist leader, Ramiz Alia.

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Top two: Marinaj’s poem “Horses” appeared in Deres in 1990. Third: A 2006 article in Drita that covers several of his works. Fourth: Marinaj was featured in the January National for his recent award.

Twenty-five-year-old Gjekë Marinaj poses for a photo only five hours before he fled his country. Sept. 11, 1990.