

Mother Teresa in Macedonia

By Chris Deliso



Mother Teresa's September 4th canonisation at the Vatican brought new attention to Macedonia and her hometown of Skopje—where travelers are increasingly keen to visit the memorial house in her honor.

After her death in 1997, Mother Teresa was fast-tracked for sainthood by Pope John Paul II, being beatified in 2003. Pope Francis' approval of her second miracle last December set the stage for her canonisation to take place, fittingly enough, during the pope's declared Jubilee Year of Mercy, the day before her annual feast day of September 5th.

Even for non-Catholics, Mother Teresa is an instantly recognizable figure, one eternally associated with piety and service to the poor and sick. Yet since her mission was carried out in India, not as many may be aware of her Balkan roots and how her early experiences there shaped her and influenced her decision to make the long and uncertain journey that ended up becoming her life's vocation.

Teresa was born in August 1910 as Gonxha Agnes Bojaxhiu. Today the capital of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje then was part of the Ottoman Empire, as was neighboring Kosovo, from where Teresa's parents had roots. The nun's memory is preserved particularly strongly among Albanians here.

Just a few years after the 2003 beatification, initiatives were being made for commemorating Mother Teresa in both Skopje and Prishtina (the capital of Kosovo,

a 90-minute drive to the north). The latter would receive a grand cathedral, now mostly finished, while the former city committed to building a memorial house in her honor. Since the Bojaxhiu's ancestral home has long disappeared, city planners chose an appropriate place to build the memorial house, and indeed one where the young Goxha spent much of her time: the site where Skopje's historical Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart had stood until the 1963 earthquake, an event that devastated much of the city.

Designed by noted local architect Vangel Bozhinovski, the Memorial House of Mother

Teresa combines aspects of a cozy museum and a symbolic fusion of the traditional Ottoman-era home, with its stonework, gate and inner well, and the spiritual, crowned by a splendid chapel where masses are held on Tuesday mornings. (Visiting groups of pilgrims can also pray and hold special services here). There is also a small gift shop at the ground level, selling multi-lingual books about Mother Teresa and hand-made religious jewellery.

According to the memorial house's director, Renata Kutera-Zdravkovska, "we receive over 100,000 visitors a year." Noting that the museum has already gone through



Memorial House of Mother Teresa, 9 Macedonia Str.



seven thick guest books since opening in 2009, she adds that this number of visitors has made the Mother Teresa memorial “one of Skopje’s most-visited sights.”

Here, friendly guides take the visitor on a chronological tour of Mother Teresa’s life—lending insight not only into her personal experiences, but into the history of a city and society of a bygone era. Historic photos, original handwritten letters, religious medallions and one of Teresa’s iconic blue-and-white saris are among the exhibits presented.

Yet beyond these physical remnants, one appreciates also the insights they provide





into the sort of life the young Gonxha had. They attest to the inspirational priest whose letters from missionaries in far-off India sparked her passion, and detail the daily life of an eclectic, multi-ethnic city. And they reveal centuries-old traditions enjoyed by Catholic families like the Bojaxhiu clan, such as the annual summer pilgrimage across the Skopska Crna Gora mountain range separating Macedonia from Kosovo, to the village of Letnica for the Feast of the Holy Mother of God. It was there that the girl resolved, at the age of 18, to give her life to missionary work.

While the memorial house is worth visiting on any day of the year, special events, such as exhibitions and presentation of documentaries are held annually on Mother Teresa's birthday (August 26) and on her feast day of September 5th.

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articles on the author's website, www.chrisdeliso.com

