Ihsan Bey Toptani

IHSAN BEY TOPTANI was the last direct male descendant of the great Toptani family who dominated the Albanian capital for 150 years, and the last living man to hold the rank of Ottoman bey to reside in Britain. But despite these extraordinary and archaic origins, and after a prominent role in the Second World War, he lived a modest life in south London in the last 40 years, a victim of the post-war Communist victory in Albania, and was well known as a leader of the Albanian emigre world in London.

The Toptani family were in many ways the founders of contemporary Tirana, and played a crucial role in the political intrigues surrounding the foundation of modern Albania in 1912. His most notorious ancestor was Esad Pasha Toptani, the mentally disturbed traitor who plotted with the Venal Serbs and Greeks against the fledgling state.

Returning to Tirana, he found little Ihsan was a boy of five years of age, and after elementary schooling in Tirana he was sent away to Austria, Albania's traditional friend among the European powers, for his later education. He impressed his teachers with his intellectual ability, and had science, politics and philosophy as his main interests. He was also a skilled photographer, and good at languages, and was awarded a doctorate in political sciences at Graz University.

Returning to Tirana, he found the country being drawn increasingly into the maw of the Italian Fascists, and the old dominance that the Toptanis had enjoyed in Tirana society being eroded by the brash new men who had allied themselves with the Italians. He was involved in a short, unhappy marriage arranged by his family. King Zog was never very keen on the Toptanis, and Ihsan lacked a political party to advance his interests.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, as Albania was used as a base for invasion of Greece, Toptani joined the resistance as an independent nationalist, and was in contact with the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), who were beginning operations to help the anti-Axis forces in Albania. This was not a simple relationship, however, and he also had contact with the Axis occupiers, and later wrote quite sympathetically of those Albanians who had been active collaborators and who had seen the best interests of their country as resting with a German victory in the war.

In the complex intrigues within the Resistance, his finest moment was at the Toptani estate hill village of Muhik in August 1943, when he persuaded at talks held between the Communist-dominated National Liberation Council, led by Enver Hoxha and the rightist Kombetar. Both sides agreed to fight for an independent Albania, although of a slight frame had a resilience that enabled him to carry on the struggle against Serbia until near the end of his life. His last direct male descendant of the Toptanis, and Ihsan lacked a political party to advance his interests.

JAMES PETTIFER

MAY I correct one inaccuracy in James Pettifer’s otherwise excellent obituary of the Albanian patriot Ihsan Toptani [1 June]? writes Richard Houghton. Far from being evacuated to Italy after the Communist victory in Albania and the expulsion of German forces from the country in 1944, he had to make his own way there, succeeding in procuring a small boat which ran adrift for several days in the Adriatic. The British military mission, including “Billy” Maclean, Julian Amery and David Smiley, were expressly forbidden to bring any of their Albanian friends with them when they themselves withdrew from the country.