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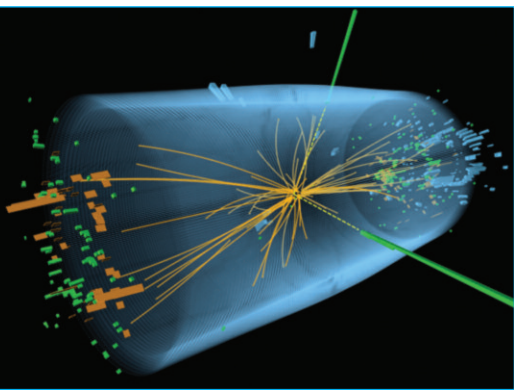


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nuk dalloj shumë
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Albania, a country free from the epidemic of anti-Semitism



By Gjekë Marinaj

Jews and non-Jews alike — including scholars, diplomats, and ordinary citizens — have written and testified that every Jew who stayed within the borders of Albania during the Holocaust managed to survive. But all the studies and proclamations are not sufficient to understand the magnitude of this group demonstration of compassion that took place in Albania during the Holocaust — the worst organized crime ever committed in the history of humankind.

Escaping from such countries as Germany, Austria, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Greece, and Kosova, some 2,000 Jews entered Albania between 1939 and 1944. They joined approximately 200 Albanian Jews who were already residents of the country. The new arrivals carried with them memories of the homes and Jewish communities they had left behind, and mourned family members, children, and loved ones who died of hunger in the ghettos, were executed, or were brutally murdered in the gas chambers by the Nazis. They took a great risk by trusting their lives with Albania, one of the smallest, poorest, and most primitive countries in Europe at the time.

According to many survivors, the decision to come to Albania was one they never regretted, nor were they ever disappointed by their treatment in the country. It is my belief that they survived because they found a country whose people were not affected by the epidemic of anti-Semitism that had been the root cause of the Holocaust throughout Europe. This essay will go even further, arguing the following: The Albanians were well informed that

the Jewish people had been great friends and supporters of Albania. Even further, by recognizing and experiencing the unparalleled religious tolerance found in Albania, the Jews were able to play an important role in the development of the friendship that continues today between Albania and Israel. Indeed, the benefits to local society were not one-sided. The Jewish refugees were able to develop social appreciation in the hearts of the Albanian people. That pushed the Albanian government(s) of the wartime years (including the puppet governments), to act positively by ignoring German orders to enforce laws against the Jews. But most significantly, because it simply was the right thing to do, the Albanian people were willing to take dangerous risks to save the lives of the Jewish refugees they considered to be their guests.

History has proven that the Jewish people have been supporters of the Albanian people through the centuries. As even Albanian legends give evidence, the friendship between Albanians and Jews had started long before the Holocaust — about 2,000 years earlier. The first Jewish slaves being transported from Palestine to Italy were shipwrecked on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. Soon after entering Albania, they were freed of their status as slaves and became active Albanian citizens. They were among the first people to witness one of the most human aspects of that country's tradition: Albanians consider their houses to be the home of God, and guests are to be treated as one of their own.

After they regrouped, the Romans went back to Albania to either recapture or kill the Jews. They experienced another side of Albanian tradition as they encountered a feisty fighting resistance from a people who were deeply offended that their new Jewish guests were being hunted.

According to historian Zef Gjergji,

by the end of the 4th century, Jews had created their own communities in Albania. They not only managed to live independently, but also helped the country to develop an organized economic system, introducing them to “the international trade concept” (Gjergji). Although “there is no knowledge of the number of Jews in the area during this early period, there is conclusive evidence of a Jewish presence. There were some villages in North Albania which had all Jewish populations in ancient times, and some that had Jewish names, e.g. Palasa-Palestine and Orikum-Jericho” (Sarnar 8). After such a good start, the relationship between the Jews and the Albanians reached even higher levels.

Perhaps the greatest support of the Jews came at Albania's most important moment. In 1912, Albania was struggling to win its independence from the Ottoman Empire. The country encountered great resistance from its neighbors, especially from Yugoslavia, which wanted its own territorial access to the Adriatic Sea. Thanks in part to the Jewish people, who had an indirect connection with certain higher-level Austrian officials, on Nov. 28, 1912, Albania was able to declare its permanent independence from the Ottomans. Just months later, fearing a possible international conspiracy to reverse Albanian's independence, *The Jewish Criterion* was among the first foreign publications to print the Albanian nationalistic slogan — “Albania for the Albanians” (The Jewish Criterion — Volume 35 Issue 22 1913-01-03 Page 1).

These large acts on the international stage are rarely mentioned by the Jewish people or the Jewish media. Instead, such Holocaust survivors as Johanna J. Neumann and children of survivors including Dr. Anna Kohen, who crossed the borders into Albania carrying with them nothing but their clothes, tend to remember most the

acts of kindness they received when they express their love and appreciation for Albania and the Albanians.

“I simply loved the school and felt so good that finally I was like other children, a pupil at school...As winter approached and the heavy rains started, it became more and more difficult to get to school, but I don't think that I ever missed a day and I was very happy. On occasions when the teacher had to be out of the class she would ask me to take over and teach the children” (Neumann 43).

Dr. Kohen says:

“There is a small country in the heartland of Europe called Albania where I was fortunately born, where hospitality to foreigners is part of their tradition. During the Second World War, not only did the Albanians save all the Jews who were living among them but they dared to share their homes, their food, and their lives with them. Albania has its share of Oscar Shindlers and, indeed, so many that we could never have thanked each glorious one of them” (A. Kohen).

Albanians were grateful for having the Jews in their midst as well. Albanian scholar Vladimir Qirjaqi praises the Jews of the city of Gjirokastra for not only “improving the city's social life in a way that was unknown to them before, but also for giving it a western outlook including a new way of conducting business” (Shekulli). It was this kind of reciprocal respect and admiration that inspired many Jews — including Pepe Biro Kantos, David Koen, and Josef Bivas — to join the Albanian partisans and risk their lives for the freedom of the Albanian people.

Their sacrifice was well received, especially by the children, who could learn to speak in each other's language and play together freely on the streets. Jasa Altarac agrees. He was about 10 years old when his family arrived in Albania, escaping the mass killings of the Jews in his birthplace of Serbia. As he recalls: “We, the children, had a wonderful time playing in the orchards, in the fields and at a nearby brook. We also went to visit friends in Jewish families around, in our estate and in the nearby estates” (Altarac).

This was possible because the Jews, the Moslems, the Catholics, and the Greek Orthodox all utilized spiritual diversity as a medium to survive hard times. They recognized God as the creator of all people. By doing so, they were able to communicate with one another and to enjoy an unprecedented religious tolerance, which played a great role in the development of a new friendship among all groups:

“One day I had a particularly moving experience. I was playing not far from our house, where there was a big field; Intrigued by the big and plump ears of wheat that grew there, I took one ear full with grain and as I examined the ear and the big grains; the old farmer who was working in the field approached me and said: ‘yes, it is a good year, we have guests and God sent us a nice crop’” (Jasa Altarac).

Neither the Greek Orthodox nor the Catholic Church was particularly active in facilitating the needs of the Jews, but they never launched any campaigns against them.

The Albanian government appeared to be more active in helping the Jews. It understood the feelings of its own people toward their guests and took the risk of ignoring German orders to enforce any laws against the Jews. Even though survivor Rina Shosberger feels that “the Albanian Government did not know the Jews were there” (Shosberger) and she gives all the

Fortunately, the Albanian Catholic Church found itself removed from European Catholic Church tradition and did not participate in the organized campaign to encourage its members and the world to actively employ traditional hatred against the Jews. As an institution, it did not take any notable action to help the Jews, but many Catholics independently joined the call of Moslem spiritual leaders in Albania who utilized their influence to promote social equality among all humans, without regard to their religious faith. The Moslem followers who made up the majority of the religious presence in Albania (along with the members of the other two faiths) were aware of traditional Jewish good deeds and the fact that no Jew was ever convicted for committing a crime in Albania. They recognized the great danger the Jews faced if captured by the Nazis and did everything they could to save them. These acts did not go unnoticed by the survivors:

“The Albanian population as a whole, from all walks of life, helped the Jews all along; from the poorest farmer in a remote village that in the middle of the night would open his house, feed and offer his own bed to the tired refugees, all the way to the very top of the Albanian society, the wealthy families like the Toptanis and the Frasheris” (Jasa Altarac).

Jews, many of whom came from Germany, where their great scientific ideas and inventions were discarded just because they were Jews, never hesitated to go to mosques when invited by their Moslem friends, as Newman remarks: “Our Moslem neighbors also invited us to come to the Mosque with them, which we did. The people were very friendly to us. Albanians are in general very hospitable” (38). Many Jews were so prejudice-free and grateful for their friendly reception by the Albanians that some of them took Moslem names as a disguise from the Nazis. As Kohen elaborates:

“My parents, Nina and David Kohen, came from Janina, Greece. They were living in Vlorë when the Nazis invaded Albania. They fled to the mountains and hid in a small Moslem village called Trevlazer. They took Moslem names, my father David became Daut, my mother Nina became Bule, and my brother Elio became Ali. Everyone in the village knew they were Jews but not one betrayed them” (Kohen).

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Autumn 1944: Jewish refugees protected by Albanians pose for a photo following the liberation of the country. (Photo: Refik Veseli)

credit to the people who “were very helpful and did not betray the Jews to the Nazis” (Shosberger), the government did attempt to be helpful. In fact, the Albanian government was the only government that hoped for an increasing Jewish presence in the country. It helped to provide Jews with false names and documentation, and moved them around the country to confuse the Nazis and make their presence less visible: “As we constantly changed identities, with false documents I did not know who I was supposed to be at the moment” (Altarac). The truth is that Albania needed the Jews. It needed their business experience and innovative ideas, their education, and their expertise in science and art — and it did not hesitate to express this need. According to Harvey Sarnar, while King Zog was in exile in Great Britain during the Second World War:

“A plan was proposed to the British Jewish leadership for settling 50,000 Jewish families in his country. He described Albania as a rich country with poor people and said that the population of one million was in a country that could easily absorb a population of five million. He proposed that each of the 50,000 families be given a small farm from lands owned by the state. The British Board of Deputies, the organization representing British Jews, took this proposal seriously enough to contact the British Foreign Office to see what they thought. The Foreign Office didn't take this proposal seriously, and doubted that King Zog would be able to reestablish the monarchy in Albania after the Second World War. Nothing ever came of this offer and King Zog died in exile” (Sarnar 13).

The Germans knew about Zog's proposal and insisted that the Albanian government provide them with a detailed list of the name and address of every Jew in the country. But that never happened. Johanna J. Neumann regrets that: “Not many Jews knew about Albania and the Albanians. And that is too bad, because if they would have known, many more Jews would have been saved,” (Neumann, personal interview).

Even when the temporary Italian government was replaced by the Ger-

mans in September 1943, the appointed Albanian leader Mehdi Frashëri had little resources and even less political power to seriously attend to the health, financial, and political needs of the Jews. Yet, understanding the circumstances, the little financial aid provided was welcomed by the Jewish refugees. The government never stopped the Albanian donors and the American relatives of the Jews who were willing to help. And there is no evidence that at any point the government pressured the Jews to make quick, important decisions against their will, including about moving in and out of the country.

As most people would agree, however, one of the best things the government did was to refrain from taking any kind of punitive actions against Albanian citizens for helping Jews. Even though there is no evidence available of any Albanians actually losing their lives while trying to protect the Jews, many put their lives in danger by trying to do so. During the course of my research for this essay, most of my sources mentioned the same names and told the same stories I had already read in arguably the best scholarly written book on this topic: *Rescue in Albania* by Harvey Sarnar. It is only fair to use the following examples quoted from his text to illustrate some of the dangerous actions taken by the Albanians to protect their guests:

“In 1942, there were Jewish refugees freed from Italian jails who were moved to Kavaja. The Jewish families didn't have Albanian identification papers, which was a problem. Mihal Lekatari, an Orthodox Christian boy of 17, understood the danger facing the Jewish families. Early one morning, Mihal armed himself and went to the police headquarters. He didn't expect any one would be there that early but found a secretary already at work. He took all the blank identity cards, about 50, and threatened the secretary with death “for you and your family if you report me.

Refik Veseli's family gave the Jewish families shelter for an entire year. There was a cave about 50 meters from the Veseli house, and the Jewish adults went to the cave when Germans came looking for Jews. Not once were they made to feel an unwelcome burden, and all financial compensation

was refused.

Beqir Qogja's Jewish friend, Avraham Eliasaf (who used the Moslem name of Gani), was living in Beqir's tailor shop in Tirana. When the Germans made a ‘sweep’ looking for Jews they agreed it was safer to move Avraham to a remote village where he would ‘pass’ as a Moslem. Avraham had some gold coins that he gave Beqir for helping him. After liberation, Beqir returned the gold coins to his friend and refused all compensation, and took offense at the suggestion that he take the gold coins.

Over 80 fugitive Jews, mostly unknown to her, passed through the home of Nadire Bixhiu, who found places of safety for them. Hoxha Ferri guided many Jews to the village of Zall-Herr, where he had a spacious house. There was a big crowd and they fed 80 people from this house, including some Italian soldiers who escaped from the army when Italy surrendered” (Sarnar 46-48).

While interviewing Felicitä Jakoe, the daughter of the famous Holocaust survivor Josef Jakoe, I asked her if there were traces of anti-Semitism in

Albania. The question, it seemed to me, irritated her: “Look, anti-Semitism never took place in Albania,” she said, slightly raising her voice. In a March 2006 article, the Israeli ambassador Mark Sofer said to the *Southeast European Times*: “Not only in Israel, but all over the world, Jews admired Albania. Not just for the period of World War II, when Albania saved the Jews, but also because the country is well-known for its respect towards us. I can say that Albania has never had anti-Semitism” (Southeast European Times 1). Similarly, the first Jewish diplomat ever to hold the post of the American ambassador to Albania (1930-1933), Herman Bernstein, was quoted by the *The Jewish Daily Bulletin* on April 17, 1934, as saying: “There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hatred do not exist, even though Albanians themselves are divided into three faiths...” (The Jewish Daily Bulletin 1).

My point is that if an ambassador, who lived in Albania nearly eight decades ago, an Israeli contemporary diplomat (who is working on maintaining good relations with Albania) a few years ago, and Holocaust survivors and their children all say that there was no anti-Semitism in Albania, then that is a good indication that it must be true. And I believe that this essay has demonstrated that the Jews managed to survive in Albania because, once more, they found a country where its people were not affected by the epidemic of anti-Semitism that had been the root cause of the Holocaust throughout Europe. It is not as if this Albanian phenomenon made no sense: For many centuries the Albanian people had been slaughtered by Turkish swords, killed by the Italian aviators, and executed by the German Nazis. As a result, they fought with everything they had, endangering their lives in order to be liberated from their ruthless enemies. Then along came the Jews, whose long history of suffering and discrimination reached the highest climax ever seen in the history of humankind, asking for a temporary place to stay, and to survive the brutalities of the German Nazis. Based on a history of mutually beneficial coop-

eration, Albania decided that it was worth taking the same risks to save the Jews that it had taken when fighting its own enemies to save honor, identity and freedom. Albania, indeed, made the right choice!

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Jewish Refugee Children Celebrate at a Birthday Party in Kavaja, Albania, 1942. (Photo: Mosa Mandil)



Johanna J. Neumann (right), a Holocaust survivor and Dr. Anna Kohen, daughter of Holocaust survivor, in front of the photo showing the portrait of the man who saved Neumann's family, during the opening ceremony for an exhibition in the United Nations in New York, honoring Albanians who saved the Jews during the Holocaust, in 2009. (Photo by Ruben Avxhiu)