

# Albania: The Country That Actually Saved Jews During the Holocaust

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Situated on the Balkan Peninsula in Southeast Europe, with its coastline facing the Adriatic Sea to the northwest and the Ionian Sea to the southwest along the Mediterranean Sea, sits the country of Albania. Albanians are generally recognized as the oldest inhabitants of Southeast Europe, and are descendants of the Illyrians, the core pre-Hellenic population that extended as far as Greece and Italy.<sup>1</sup> Albania is a relatively small county of 11,000 square miles with a present population of just under three million people; yet within the mountains and hills that run in different directions across the length and breadth of the country lies a little-known story of preeminent heroism. Despite being a predominantly Muslim nation<sup>2</sup> and the only majority Muslim nation in Europe at the time, Albania is the only European country able to arguably claim that every Jew within its borders was spared from death during the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> The assertion, while not completely accurate,<sup>4</sup> is even more compelling because the result was unequivocally not due to an organized effort, nor by a governmental decree. It was, however, surely not accidental. Despite being occupied by Italy and then Germany during World War II and being ruled at different times by two very distinctive forms of government, Albania not only protected its meager Jewish population, but offered refuge to Jews from wherever they came.<sup>5</sup> The explanation for this occurrence is greatly summed up in one word: Besa, an honor code unique to Albania, which simply and concisely means “to keep the promise.”<sup>6</sup>

On the eve of World War II, Albania remained an impoverished feudal kingdom, largely inaccessible, lacking railways, telephone lines and electric power beyond the capital of Tirana. “To complete this picture of backwardness, there were few public schools; the population was largely illiterate, and people lived as serfs in mountain clans whose only system of justice was an ancient code of honor and blood vengeance called *Kanun*.”<sup>7</sup> In 1935, with a total national population of 803,000,<sup>8</sup> there were but 156 documented Jews residing in Albania.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, at said time, Albania remained the only country in Europe still issuing legal visas for Jews, action which continued until 1942.<sup>10</sup> After the occurrence of “the Night of Broken Glass” or “kristallnacht” on November 9-10, 1938, many Jews from Europe fled to Albania, some with the intention of staying and others with the hope of further passage to safety. Though at first most of

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi, “Jewish Survival in Albania and the Ethics of Besa.” Congress Monthly January/February 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Aida Cama, “Albanians saved Jews from Deportation in WWII.” Deutsche Welle December 27, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival.”

<sup>4</sup> Sally Mairs and Briseida Mema, “In Albania, a Unique Jewish History Museum on the Brink.” The Times of Israel, March 4, 2019. {Reference is made to one family that was deported and executed}.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Heggen, “The Muslim Nation that Saved Jews.” RN, ABC.net.au., April 12, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Johnson, “Why no Jew in Albania was Turned Over to the Nazis,” Jewish World, April 24, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Shucard, “King Zog and the Secret Heart of Albania,” Geist.

<sup>8</sup>Yad Vashem, “Besa: A Code of Honor, Muslim Albanians who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust.” www.yadvashem.org

<sup>9</sup> Apostol Kotani, “A History of Jews in Albania.” 2012, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Cama, “Saved.”

the applicants for visas were from Germany and Austria,<sup>11</sup> many of those who later entered came from Kosovo.

From 1922 to 1939 Albania was ruled by King Zog, first as Prime Minister, then as President and finally as the country's only (self-proclaimed) King. Zog issued an order to issue as many passports to Jews as they desired.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a secret statement by Prime Minister Mehdi Bej Frashëri, a Bektashi Muslim, declared: "All Jewish children will sleep with your children, all will eat the same food, all will live as one family."<sup>13</sup> Shortly thereafter, however, on April 7, 1939, Albania was invaded by the Italian military, which was met with little resistance.<sup>14</sup> King Zog was forced to flee in exile. In July of 1940, the Italian Royal General Stewardship in Albania, via order number 47115, directed that "All Jews with foreign citizenship, citizens of neighboring countries, within a reasonable period of time, should be taken out of the country and (be) returned to their country of origin."<sup>15</sup> The "reasonable period of time" was thereafter defined as five days.<sup>16</sup> The Albanian people and their government, however, despite being "occupied" by Italy, totally disregarded this and many other orders, "paying no attention to the consequences of sheltering and hiding Jews."<sup>17</sup> The same lack of compliance was later repeated when, both in late 1943 and early 1944, the Germans demanded a list of all Jews living in Albania<sup>18</sup> It has been written that "acting as one, the entire nation, from their king to members of government down to the humblest peasant, made them all "Albanians," issuing passports, letters of transit, identity cards, work permits, whatever documents were necessary to protect them, and welcomed them into their homes as aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, grandmothers and grandfathers, at great risk to their own lives."<sup>19</sup>

Why would a greatly undeveloped nation composed of 70% Muslims aid foreign Jews, while world powers such as the United States and Great Britain generally turned their backs of refugees? The answer to this question seemingly lays in both the uniqueness of Albania's remote location and backward development, and its moral traditions with underlying threads to their religious derivation.

One line of thought is that the "relatively benign nature of German occupation may have played a role in why Albanians were more willing to take in Jews than were Poles, Ukrainians and others in occupied Europe. According to historian Daniel Perez, "German authorities did not aggressively seek to deport or exterminate Jews from Albania proper after occupying the country in November 1943."<sup>20</sup> Jewish refugee Aron Aladjem, however, asserted that he witnessed a "different reality," while hiding in Albania. Aladjem contended that "the Germans ruled there

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<sup>11</sup> Harvey Sarnier, "Rescue in Albania" Brunswick Press, 1997, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Marzouk, "Rescue in Albania: How Thousands of Jews were Saved from the Holocaust." Balkan Insight, May 11, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Randi Winter, "Understanding Besa, the Albanian Code of Honour," Diplomat and International Canada, September 2, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Sarnier, "Rescue", p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Apostol Kotani, "A History of Jews in Albania." 2012, p. 22-23

<sup>16</sup> Kotani, p. 23

<sup>17</sup> Kotani p. 36.

<sup>18</sup> Sarnier, "Rescue," p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Shucard, "King."

<sup>20</sup> Caan Liphshiz, "What made Muslim Albanians risk their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust?" The Times of Israel, January 19, 2018.

and, on every tree, every electrical pole we saw partisans hanging-many of them hanged to scare people into not hiding partisans and Jews.”<sup>21</sup>

Others have opined that, because Albania had been isolated from centuries of institutional antisemitism that had arisen in Western Europe, the same was not a predicament that prevailed in Albania.<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon was well explained by the United States Ambassador to Albania Herman Bernstein, who served from 1930 to 1933. Bernstein said, “there is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands of Europe today where religious prejudice does not exist.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most significant factor though, as referenced earlier, was the existence of a distinct moral compass that prevailed across diverse forms and wide spectrums of Albanian life and culture, defined by the word “Besa.” Based on the teachings of the Kanun, the text of which is most often attributed to Leke Dukagjini, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Albanian prince,<sup>24</sup> Besa is a code of honor deeply rooted in Albanian culture and incorporated in the faith of Albanian Muslims. Per Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi, Executive Director of the Albanian American Foundation, “Besa has multiple meanings ranging from faith, inviolable trust, truce and word of honor to a sacred promise and obligation to keep one’s word to provide hospitality and protection. It involves uncompromising protection of a guest even to the point of forfeiting one’s own life.”<sup>25</sup> It has also been suggested that “Besa dictates a moral behavior so absolute that nonadherence brings shame and dishonor on oneself and one’s family. Simply stated, it demands that one take responsibility for the lives of others in their time of need.”<sup>26</sup> It has been opined that “it is a matter of national pride to be able to help one’s fellow human beings and the Albanians saw this rescue as an opportunity to fulfill their duty.”<sup>27</sup>

The Kanun has been the foundation of Albania society for many centuries. In the introduction to his 1989 English translation of the Karun, Leonard Fox wrote that “it is an expression and reflection of the Albanian character.”<sup>28</sup> In Book 8, Chapter 18 of the Kanun, it is written that the maxim “the house of an Albanian belongs to God and the guest” is followed by “a weary guest must be received and surrounded with honor. The feet of a guest are washed. Every guest must be given the food eaten in the house and, upon entering the house the guest must give you his weapon to hold as a sign of guardianship, since you have said ‘welcome’ he must have no fear and know that you are ready to defend him against any danger.”<sup>29</sup> The Kanun says: What is promised must be done. According to the Kanun of Lek, article 601: “The house of an Albanian belongs to God and the guest.” Article 603 says: “The guest must be honoured with bread and salt and heart.” Article 609 adds: “Receive a guest also with a fire, a log of wood and a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival”.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Norman H. Gershman, “Besa, Muslims Who Save Jews in World War II”, Syracuse University Press, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Sandy Abramson, “A Matter of Humanity: The Rescue of Jews in Albania During the Holocaust.” Women of Reform Judaism, wrj.com, February 6, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival”.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

bed.” While the Kanun of Lek (the best-known kanun) is often perceived as archaic or even feudal, its modern interpretation is really the essence of honor.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most compelling example of the Albanian implementation of Besa occurred in 1942. The Italians had imprisoned in Pris(h)tina, Kosovo, 120 Jews who had fled from Belgrade. In March, the Germans arrived at the prison and loaded a truck with half of the Jews, who were subsequently transported to the Sajmiste concentration camp where they were executed.<sup>31</sup> Fortuitously, and at the insistence of the Mayor of Pris(h)tina, the remainder of the prisoners were transported to Albania.<sup>32</sup> Those who arrived in Kavaje were housed at an army camp, were free to move around and were welcomed by the inhabitants. When concerns arose as to the ongoing safety of these individuals, local resident Mihal Lekatari facilitated the refugees move to Tirana, where it was perceived that it would be easier to hide them. In response to the issue of inadequate documentation, Lekatari stole blank identity papers and stamps from the municipality of Harizaj and ensured that each Jew received an identity paper with a Muslim name upon it. In 1992, Yad Vashem recognized Lekatari as Righteous Among Nations.<sup>33</sup> One of those relocated and hidden, Felicita Jakoel, later related an anecdote that while she was in hiding, there was a knock at her door, which she feared signified the presence of Germans. To the contrary, the knock was facilitated by “an old villager on a donkey” who placed a sack of flour at her feet “and left.”<sup>34</sup>

When asked to give his interpretation of Besa, Dashmir Balla, the former president of the Albanian-Australian Islamic Society stated that Besa is “a code of respect deeply embedded in Albanian culture.”<sup>35</sup> Evidence of such code was provided by the actions of Refik Veseli, a 17-year-old Muslim from Kruja. Veseli had been sent to Tirana to apprentice with a photographer. There he met Moshe and Gabriella Mandil, Yugoslavians who had fled to Albania, and had been taken in by local Neshad Prizerini. Like Mihal Lekatari, Veseli feared that the Mandil family’s safety would ultimately be compromised in their place of hiding. Consequently, in conjunction with his family led by his parents Vesel and Fatima, Veseli moved the Mandils to an outpost in the mountains, where they were clothed as Albanian farmers and hidden in “plain sight.”<sup>36</sup> When later asked why he felt the Mandils would be safe living among Albanians, Refik Veseli stated that anyone betraying the Jews would have disgraced the family and the entire village, and, at a minimum, the betrayer and his family would be banished. Veseli’s brothers, Hamid and Xhemal, later related that the Veseli family not only sheltered the Mandils but also the family of Joseph Ben Joseph. They related that “during the day we hid the adults in a cave in the mountains near our village. The Veselis noted that the Ben Joseph family “left for Yugoslavia too early and we fear that the retreating Germans may have killed them.” Most noteworthy of the Veselis comments was that they emphasized that the care provided to the Jews was not an aberration. “Four times we Albanians opened our doors. First to the Greeks during the famine of the World War I, then to the Italian soldiers stranded in our country after

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<sup>30</sup> Winter, “Understanding.”

<sup>31</sup> Yad Vashem, “Lekatari.”

<sup>32</sup> Marzouk

<sup>33</sup> Yad Vashem, “Lekatari.”

<sup>34</sup> Marzouk, “Rescue.”

<sup>35</sup> Heggen, “Muslim.”

<sup>36</sup> J. Kile, “Refik Vesili” Moral Heroes.org, May 8, 2012.

their surrender to the Allies, then to the Jews during the German occupation and most recently to the Albanian refugees from Kosovo fleeing the Serbs.” The Veselis noted that “only the Jews showed their gratitude.”<sup>37</sup> On April 23, 2017, the Veselis were honored at Congregation Adas Israel in Washington D.C. Hamid and Xhemal Veseli are quoted in the event program as stating “our parents were devout Muslims and believed, as we do, that every knock on the door was a blessing from God. We never took any money from our Jewish guests. All persons are from God. Besa exists in every Albanian soul.”<sup>38</sup>

Dashmir Balla further elucidated on the tenets of the *Besa* ethos stating that it goes hand in hand with the teachings of the Koran. “It dictates a moral behavior so absolute that non-adherence brings shame and dishonor to one's self and one's family. Balla said that “(t)o look after your guests, your neighbors, is a matter of national honor.”<sup>39</sup> As a result, Albania has no concept of 'foreigners' and visitors are regarded as guests. This honor system has remained constant throughout the country's long history of being invaded.

The importance of the principles of Besa is given greater foundation by the words of Sulo Mecaj, a farmer from Kruja who sheltered ten Jews in his attic. When Mecaj was asked what would happen if the Nazis burned down his house, Mecaj stated “my son will go to the attic with the Jews and suffer their fate.”<sup>40</sup>

In congruence with Mecaj's line of thought were the actions of Ali Sheqer Pashkaj, a general store owner in Puka. In 1943, a German transport of nineteen Albanian prisoners, including one Jew Yeoshua Baruchowitz, stopped at Pashkaj's store for a brief respite. It was clear that the Baruchowitz was to be executed at the opportune time. After plying the Nazi's with alcohol, Pashkaj handed Baruchowitz a melon with a note he had embedded inside with direction to flee to the woods and wait. When the Nazis discovered the occurrence, they dragged Pashkaj to the woods and repeatedly threatened to kill him at gunpoint unless he confessed his complicity and disclosed Baruchowitz' whereabouts; however, Pashkaj never relented. After the Nazis left, one prisoner short, Pashkaj retrieved Baruchowitz and hid him for two years.<sup>41</sup> Pashkaj's son Enver Alia Sheqer later related that “there were thirty families living in this village, but no one knew that my father was sheltering a Jew.” Sheqer also related with pride that Baruchowitz was living in Mexico practicing dentistry.<sup>42</sup> While Pashkaj was able to avoid the complete wrath of the Nazi's vengeance, such result was not universal. “In one brutal instance” the SS “machine gunned” an entire Albanian village for refusing to provide a list of Jews within their bailiwick.<sup>43</sup>

While Besa was a significant impetus for the actions of the Albanian, their altruism was not limited to Muslims, as the 30% Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) minority similarly offered

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<sup>37</sup> Yad Vashem, “Besa: A Code of Honor, Muslim Albanians who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust.” [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)

<sup>38</sup> George E. Johnson, “Why no Jew in Albania was Turned Over to the Nazis,” *Jewish World*, April 24, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Heggen, “Muslim.”

<sup>40</sup> Jean Dunn, “Albanian Muslims Who Sheltered Jews Honored at Program.” *Voices News.com*, The Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival”.

<sup>42</sup> Yad Vashem, “Besa.”

<sup>43</sup> Shucard, “King.”

refuge.<sup>44</sup> In an article written by Aida Cama, published in 2012 and titled “Albanians Saved Jews From Deportation in WWII, the author quotes Balkans expert Michael Schmidt- Neke as stating that “the willingness to help persecuted Jews ran across social, religious and political spectrums.”<sup>45</sup> Schmidt-Neke further articulated that “there were people who worked with the communist resistance that saved Jews as well as those who cooperated with the occupiers while they (too) hid Jews in their homes.”<sup>46</sup> It is also noteworthy that the aid provided to the Jews was universally without financial contribution nor expectation of reimbursement, to such an extent that “no incident has been found where (Albanians) accepted compensation.”<sup>47</sup> Beqir Qoqja and his family sheltered a Jew named Avraham Eliasef from 1943 to 1944, without restitution. Qoqja is quoted as saying “Albanians give Besa to a friend, but never sell it.”<sup>48</sup>

Additional explanation for the actions of the Albanians has been offered by Mehmet Hysref Frasheri, a descendant of one of the most influential families in the political history of Albania. Frasheri stated “people in Albania are not surprised, they thought it was normal to save Jews.”<sup>49</sup> Beqir Qoqja, whose actions were noted supra, supplements Frasheri’s thoughts. In 2004, the then 93-year-old Qoqja told an interviewer, “we did nothing special; all Hebrews are our brothers and sisters.”<sup>50</sup>

Yad Vashem has recognized many Albanians as Righteous Among the Nations. Include within said honorees are Besim and Aishe Kadiu, whose actions were celebrated on July 21, 1992. The Kadiu’s daughter Merushe recalled that the Kadiu family sheltered two Greek Jewish siblings, Jakov and Sandra Batino. Kadiu related that “we cut a hole in bars of our bedroom window so they could escape if the Germans discovered they were hiding with us.” Kadiu added that “when the Germans began house to house searches, looking for Jews, my father took Jakov and Sandra to a remote village. We then supplied them with all their needs until the liberation.” Kadiu’s story did not end there, however. She related that upon liberation “there was great celebration in Kavaje. I remember the telegram we received from Jakov and Sandra and the joy of liberation. Soon they left for Tirana and then Israel. I have so many wonderful letters and pictures from Israel.” Kadiu, who was at one time the head of the Albanian-Israeli Friendship Association, summarized the unique symbiotic relationship between Muslim Albanians and Greek Jews as “those years were fearful, but friendship overcame all.”<sup>51</sup>

Another Albanian honored as Righteous Among Nations was Nuro Hoxna. His oldest son Sazan related to Yad Vashem that his father, a teacher and religious Muslim in Vlore, sheltered four Jewish families. Hoxma related that they hid three generations of the extended families of the Sollomoni and Negrin families in underground bunkers. “The bunkers were connected and had many escape routes. It was my job to take food to the families in the bunkers and to shop for necessities.” Hoxna added that “all the inhabitants of Vlore were anti-fascist, and all knew that many families were sheltering Jews.” Hoxna noted that his father has said “now

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<sup>44</sup> Johnson, “Why”.

<sup>45</sup> Cama, “Saved”.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, “Why”.

<sup>47</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival”.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Yad Vashem, “Besa”.

we are one family. You won't suffer any evil. My sons and I will defend you against peril at the costs of our lives."<sup>52</sup>

Another family with a last name similar to that of Hoxna was featured in an award-winning 2012 documentary film titled "Besa: The Promise."<sup>53</sup> Per an article published in the Times of Israel,<sup>54</sup> reference is made to an encounter Jewish refugees Nissim and Sarah Aladjem and their son Aron had with Albanian police in 1943, that the author argued "would have likely sealed (the family's) fate," had it occurred "most anywhere else in Nazi-occupied Europe."<sup>55</sup> To the contrary, however, it led to a fairy tale with a happy ending, still being woven. The Aladjems, while fleeing Bulgaria, were detained by five Albanian police officers. Instead of turning the Aladjems over to the occupying forces, one officer facilitated the sheltering of them with local pastry shop owner Rifat Hoxha. According to the Aron Aladjem, as depicted in the film, to accommodate the Aladjems, Hoxna shuttered his bakery at the busiest time of the year, just before the Eid-al-Fitr holiday, and brought them to his home. Hoxha then hosted the Aladjem family in a room that had been occupied by his in-laws, who temporarily moved out to make room for the guests. Hoxha's son, Rexhep, stated at a 2015 ceremony in Israel, that posthumously recognized his father as Righteous among the Nations, that "my grandfather was a Muslim cleric. For him to leave his house and make room for this Jewish family, there is no tolerance more beautiful than this."<sup>56</sup>

The actions of Yad Vashem, in honoring predominantly Muslim Albanians for rescuing Jews has sparked some debate on the topic of the role of religion in the efforts. Petrit Zorba, director of the Albania-Israel Friendship Society, has argued that the rescue of Jew in Albania was strictly "a matter of tradition and had very little to do with religion."<sup>57</sup> Zonda claimed that Yad Vashem has no insight into what role religion played in the rescue effort. Contrarily, Baba Mondi, the leader of a secretive Bektash Shiite sect situated in Albania stated that religion's role in the rescue was both central and indirect. Mondi stated that "I wouldn't mind my children marrying a Jew, a Christian, whoever. So, while the rescue maybe didn't come from a religious commandment, it grew out of a religious environment where all fellow human beings are our brethren."<sup>58</sup>

Life for Jews in Albania was not often as simple as hiding in one location due to the altruism of a single Albanian or even that of many villagers. Many refugees were caused to relocate numerous times to avoid increasing peril. A monumental memoir relating her experiences as a Jew hiding in Albania was written by Johanna Jutta Neumann in 1990, titled "Escape to Albania, Memoirs of a Jewish Girl from Hamburg."<sup>59</sup> Neumann's autobiography recalled how her family arrived in Durazzo, Albania on March 1, 1939. She related how "the ship docked in what was a very primitive one-dock harbor. The only thing in sight was a huge pile of charcoal... and a few Gypsies standing around using jute sacks as their only protection

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Cama, "Saved".

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Joanna Jutta Neumann, "Memoirs of a Jewish Girl from Hamburg", Center for Albanian Studies, 1990.

from the rain. The sight was sad and deeply depressing ---so much so that it is still vivid in my memory.”<sup>60</sup> Neumann added that “my poor mother’s first reaction was ‘I will not disembark. I will go straight back.’”<sup>61</sup> Neumann wrote how her family’s initial impressions were quickly dissuaded by the welcome they received from other emigrants who had arrived previously and assisted her family and others in acclimating to life in Durazzo, where the Jewish immigrants lived in a “Kibbutz system” in hostels. Of note is Neumann’s acknowledgment that the emigrants housing and food was funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Center.<sup>62</sup> In 1942, the Neumann family was later “deported” to Berat, a southern Albanian town with a population of approximately 14,000. Shortly after arrival she and her mother became afflicted with malaria. Thereafter the family moved to Lushnja, and other locales before returning to Durazzo and then ultimately Tirana. Neumann’s tome is noteworthy as she relates incidents such as that of February 13, 1942 and early 1943, when her family was living in Shkozë. On the February night two Italian soldiers tried to break into the house but were deterred by a dog. In 1943 her parents were arrested and temporarily detained by an anti-Semite police lieutenant. It was not until 1946 that the Neumann family finally reached the United States. Despite years of unrest, in an article written in 2012, Neumann was quoted as saying “the Albanians were fantastic” and that “it was wonderful. People treated us like their own family.”<sup>63</sup>

Over a five-year period, photographer Norman H. Gershman collected moving stories and photographs relating Albanian altruism during the Holocaust, which were published in a book titled “Besa, Muslims who Saved Jews in World War II.”<sup>64</sup> Among the stories told are those of the family of Ismail Gjata. His daughter, Berushe Babani, related that within her town was a Jewish family, led by Nesim Bahar, who were refugees from Macedonia. When the Germans occupied the village in 1943 “we dressed the Bahar family in peasant clothing and moved some of them to the nearby village of Levan.” Babani reflected that “my father and his entire family were very kind people. It is hard to believe, but my father gave the clothing business to Nesim, accepting no compensation. Nesim was a good employee and we were happy that he was now the owner.” Babani noted that the Bahars returned to Macedonia in 1944, after which they sent many letters of appreciation. She recalled one in which Nesim Bahar wrote “(i) f I had wings to fly, I would come to kiss the sainted Albanian land, which saved our lives.”<sup>65</sup>

Another historical reflection in Gershman’s book was related by Adile Kasapi. Kasapi recalled how her husband Hamdi and her family sheltered a Jewish family, the Moisi, in their small two room apartment in Tirana. In 1944, the Germans conducted house-to-house searches for Jews. One night the Germans pounded on the Kasapi door. While Mrs. Moisi escaped through a door connected to another house, the Moisi children “hid in the bed with the children of our family.” In retribution, “the Germans beat Hamdi until he was unconscious. Then they left. The Moisi children witnessed the Germans’ brutality against their protector.” In the Gershman book, Kasapi is quoted as saying “Religion was part of our family education. It would

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 49

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, “Why”.

<sup>64</sup> Gershman, “Besa”.

<sup>65</sup> Gershman, “Besa”, p. 48.

have been inexplicable to denounce Jews in need.” Most noteworthy, however, is Kasapi’s statement that her family “treasured” what they were able to do for the Moisis.<sup>66</sup>

One additional biography of note within Gershman’s book relates to that of Qani Civeja, who with his family sheltered ten Jewish families in their Berat, Albanian home. As told by Kuhtim Civeja, “we gave the Jewish family our large home. We moved to a smaller house.” When the Civejas were caused to relocate due to German bombings and “Germans hunting Jews and partisans with a scorched earth mentality” they relocated to the village of Kamsisht. Civeja noted that “we dressed the Jews in ill-fitting peasant costumes. We told them ‘Wherever we go you will go.’” The Civeja story concludes with a quote from Kujtim Civeja: “Our generation has a special feeling for the Jewish people. Our father wrote that when he had the opportunity and privilege to shelter so many Jewish families it gave his joy to put into practice his Islamic faith. To be generous is a virtue.”<sup>67</sup>

In an interview given to the Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, Gershman advised that photographing these rescuers in Albania was not easy. Mr. Gershman rarely saw a lamp. Electricity and even water were rationed. “Yet the people always welcomed me with fruit, candy, their national drink of raki (distilled from fermented grapes and other fruits), and warmth. None spoke English and none sought any compensation. They wished only to honour their family tradition and to be remembered. In turn, I gave them unadorned portraits that, I believe, reflect their simple dignity, and I thanked my Muslim hosts on behalf of the Jewish people for what they had done during World War I.”

At the conclusion of World War II, Albania was ruled by a Marxist-Leninist government from 1946-1992. Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi Executive Director of the Albanian American Foundation wrote that “communist dictator Enver Hoxha subjected the country to 46 years of one of the most centralized and repressive totalitarian regimes that the world has ever known. Hundreds of thousands of Albanians were murdered and imprisoned until Hoxha died and the regime of his successor, Ramiz Alia, collapsed in 1991.”<sup>68</sup> When the regime collapsed many of the remaining Jewish community left for Israel. Marilena Langu Dojaka, who was born in Albania in 1942 after her mother fled there from then-Czechoslovakia, is one of those who stayed. “We are not yet free of our fears,” she says, of the terror that has stuck with her decades later.” “When the Nazis passed through the village... our host family hid us in the mountains, in a cellar until the danger had passed,” she told AFP, welling with emotion. Clutching a framed photo of relatives her mother left behind, she says softly: They all died in the camps.” Dojaka has kept close ties with the Albanian family who protected hers. “They shared everything with us: bread, pain and joy.”<sup>69</sup>

The culture of silence under communism partly explains why the rescue of Albanian Jews has remained relatively unknown for many decades, according to the Yad Vashem researchers. The imprint of the communist era caused “people to fear being linked to the ‘wrong’

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>67</sup> Gershman, “Besa”, p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival”.

<sup>69</sup> Mairs and Mema, “Albania”

resistance group, even after the regime had been changed.”<sup>70</sup> Dardan Islami, a documentary filmmaker, stated “nobody had heard about this story because it was closed inside the Communist regime in Albania.”<sup>71</sup>

The extensive and rich story of the Albanian efforts have only been recently revealed. Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi wrote “we might never have known the extent of Albanian efforts to save Jews during the Holocaust if it were not for the trip made to Albania in 1990 by Congressman Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary, and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi, as the first U.S. officials to enter the country in 50 years. Seeking to ingratiate himself with Congressman Lantos, dictator Ramiz Alia presented never-before-seen archives containing letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings about Albanians who saved Jews during World War II. DioGuardi subsequently sent the files to Israel, where they were authenticated by Yad Vashem.”<sup>72</sup>

Due to the recent disclosure of the Albania efforts, ceremonies honoring those who provided aid were greatly deferred until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2008 one such event occurred in Waterbury, Connecticut. Albanian Muslims from Waterbury’s Albanian-American community were guests of honor at a Holocaust Remembrance program sponsored by the Federation, Jewish Communities of Western Connecticut. Reminding those present that two out of every three Jews in Europe were murdered in the Holocaust, Rabbi Eric Polokoff of B’nai Israel also spoke of “acts of courage, kindness and commitment” that marked those years, particularly among the Muslims of Albania. “Here is a narrative that must be told,” he said, “especially today,” for it confounds prejudice at a time when Muslims themselves are frequently the targets of bigotry.<sup>73</sup> Told from the perspective of both the rescuer and the rescued, the program relayed story after story of Jews being hidden from the Gestapo by Muslim Albanian families. Imam Qemal Lami of the Albanian American Moslem Community explained that “in Albania, Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews are like one family.” He then relayed the story of a German-born Jewish professor who escaped to the U.S. after securing a new passport in Albania. “I think you should know the name of the professor,” he said. “It was Albert Einstein.”<sup>74</sup> While in transit through Europe to America, Einstein stayed in Durres on the Albanian coast for three days. When he departed, he was equipped with an Albanian passport.<sup>75</sup>

Speaking at the Waterbury event and representing the rescued was Dr. Anna Kohen who was born in Vlorë in southern Albania. After Hitler invaded Albania and the hunt for Jews began, her parents fled to the mountains and hid in a small Muslim village. “Everyone in the village knew we were Jews,” she said, “but no one betrayed us. What I remember is what my parents told me: They were very nice to us, they fed us, they saved us.”<sup>76</sup> Kohen has also been quoted as saying “I always felt like an Albanian of Jewish heritage.”<sup>77</sup> “I would not be here speaking to you today if not for the courage and generosity of my fellow Albanians.” “I am

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<sup>70</sup> Liphshiz, “What”.

<sup>71</sup> Marzouk, “Rescued”.

<sup>72</sup> DioGuardi, “Survival”.

<sup>73</sup> Dunn, “Honored”.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Marzouk, “Rescue”.

<sup>76</sup> Dunn, “Honored”.

<sup>77</sup> Cama, “Saved”.

honored to celebrate a people's humanity and compassion during the horror of the Holocaust. Regardless of race or religion, they restored hope in our souls.”

Albania currently has 75 so-called Righteous Gentiles — a small number in absolute terms but one that, examined relatively, means that a Jew there was at least 10 times likelier to be rescued than in Lithuania, which has almost 900 righteous, or Poland, which has 6,706.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps the most apropos statement as to the Albanians aid to the Jews during the Holocaust was offered by documentary filmmaker Dardan Islami in an interview with Prishtina Insight. Islami said “If every country and every nation had done what the Albanians did, the Holocaust may never have happened.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Liphshiz, “What”.

<sup>79</sup> Marzouk, “Rescue.”

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