Visiting the righteous of Albania

by **Jack Goldfarb**

We are warily rolling along in our Mercedes on a twisting mountain road in central Albania. The panorama of distant hills and dark green valleys stretches westward to the blue Adriatic. My Albanian friend, Edison Ypi, is navigating the scary drive on our way to the provincial town of Kavaje. There I hope to find Mihal Lakatari, a legendary "righteous among the nations" hero who was instrumental in saving the lives of 130 Jews during World War II.

Last year I spoke to Lakatari's son-in-law several times, phoning from New York. He told me Lakatari was suffering from cancer, and if I wanted to meet him, I should come soon. In the summer, I was finally able to journey on my self-assigned mission, hoping to find six surviving "Righteous Persons" in Albania, individuals recognized by Israel's Yad Vashem for their singular courage and compassion. I had their addresses and wanted to pay my personal respects.

I have visited Albania often in recent years, ever since I first learned that the Albanians had saved their entire Jewish population during the Holocaust. No Nazi-occupied country in Europe had such a stainless record. Albania's 50 years of isolation under xenophobic communist rule had kept this noble story from being widely known until a few years ago.

Albania's native Jews, together with refugees from other Nazi-occupied countries, had numbered about 2,000. The *Besa* — a traditional code of honor obliging Albanians to provide shelter and protection for those in need — had had much to do with saving all those Jews.

We arrive in Kavaje just as the muezzin's chant resounds from a gleaming pink and white mosque across the main square. We ask a group of older men playing *shesh-besh* for directions to Mihal Lakatari's house. His son-in-law had assured me everyone in town knows him.

"Did you know that he is dead?" a gray-haired elder asked Edison. "Four months ago," he adds. Edison translates the sad news. The men direct us to his son-in-law's house, where we arrive just as Taulant Biturku awakes from an afternoon nap. He is sleepy but smiling; he speaks fluent English.

In the sunlit living room, his wife, Mary, cuddles their four-month old daughter, named Michel, after her late grandfather. Biturku speaks in reverent detail of the audacious wartime exploits of Mihal Lekatari, who saved 130 Jewish lives and thus defined his own.

Lekatari was in his late teens when a group of 54 Yugoslavian Jewish families, interned in an Italian-run detention camp in Kavaje, were unexpectedly freed. It was the summer of 1943 and the Italians were withdrawing their troops from Albania. The German army was moving in to occupy the country. The Italian camp commandant assembled his prisoners and told them he was opening the gates of the camp and burning all the records. The Jews fled into hiding in the town, well aware that the Gestapo would be hunting them down and deporting them.

After Lekatari had befriended a Jewish family named Comforti, the clandestine Jewish Council approached him and asked for his help. They needed identity cards to survive but could not afford to buy them from the police or the black market. Lekatari did not hesitate. Armed with a pistol and an empty cement sack, he wheeled his bicycle up to police headquarters. A good friend on guard outside waved him in. Once inside, he swiftly cut the telephone line and confronted the solitary officer on duty. At pistol point, he demanded the entire stock of blank ID cards. The policeman offered no resistance, and Lekatari biked away with his sack full of cards.

A local photographer provided the necessary photos for the 130 ID cards; all of them were made out in Muslim names, describing the bearers as Albanians "from Kosovo," then a part of Yugoslavia. The grateful Jewish Council offered Lakatari a payment in reward, but he stoutly refused. After the war, in 1954, these rescued Jews held a reunion in Belgrade — Mihal Lakatari, of course, was there as guest of honor.

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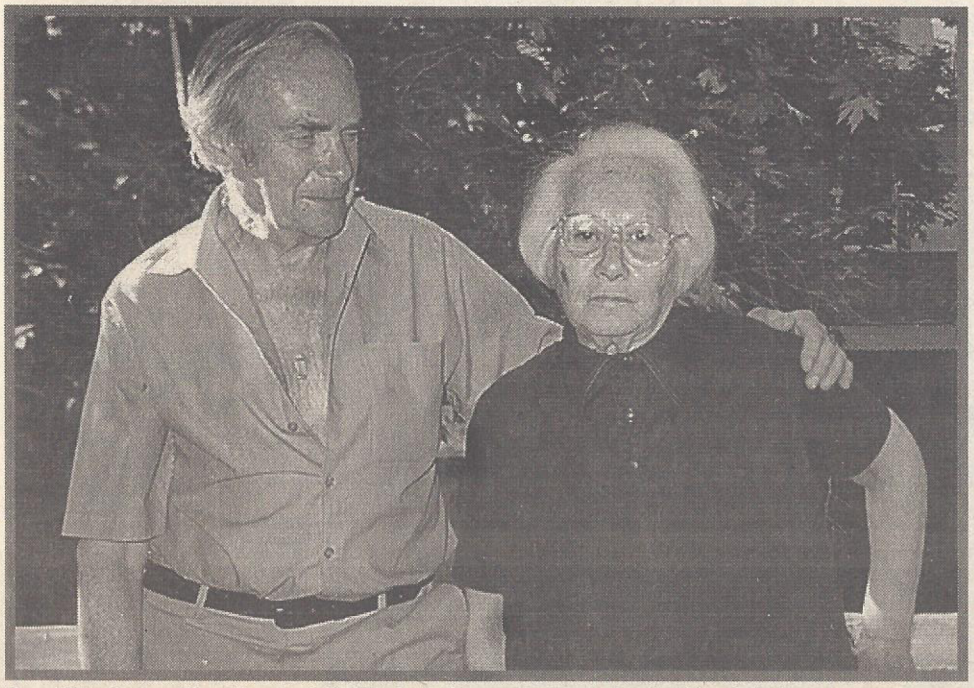
We are en route again, headed for Elbasan along a pot-holed dusty road in the mountainous heart of the country. In Elbasan we are looking for Njazi Bicaku, whose family sheltered 26 Jews in a nearby village for more than a year. The postal address I have for Bicaku is vague: "Near Ali Myftiu school."

At the school, neither the pupils nor the young teacher knows of Bicaku. Finally, a grizzly-bearded shopkeeper points us toward Bicaku's ramshackle cottage. We edge warily past a watchdog, two tired-looking horses, and a noisy flock of scrawny turkeys, to be welcomed by Bicaku in his dark little dwelling. A large photo of his father, Mufail, dominates the cluttered room. Bicaku's wiry frame and dignified bearing belie his 78 years. A venerable patriarch, he has 10 grown children. When I told him why we have come, his face lights up. He opens the curtains, light floods in, and, as we sip our proffered glasses of *dhall*, a watery yogurt drink, Bicaku tells us his story.

In the summer of 1943 a group of Jews fleeing occupied Skopje in Yugoslavia managed to reach the tiny Albanian village of Qarrisht, where the Bicaku family gave them refuge. They told of another group of eight Jews who had made their way as far as Tirana, where they were in hiding, hoping to make it down to Qarrisht, some 40 miles away. Bicaku's father volunteered to go to Tirana to search for them. There he looked up an old friend, a police official, who knew where the group was. Only after convincing the elderly woman who was hiding



Vera Kilic, here with author Jack Goldfarb, is the most elderly Jew in Albania today.

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them that he had indeed come to help them did she let him into her house. The elder Bicaku urged the group to come back with him to the village, but he cautioned, "Remember, we are poor !" All eight declared, "Never mind, let's go!"

A total of 39 people lived in the large Bicaku farmhouse and in a hut in a nearby forest clearing for over a year. "We had bread, potatoes, beans," said Bicaku. "Not much money, but we managed with food for our 'guests' and our family of 13."

He puffs thoughtfully on his smoking pipe, as he recalls one night, the snow falling heavily, when Nazi troops suddenly arrived in the village. "The snow was knee deep, and the Germans would be looking for places to billet. Most of the villagers knew we were hiding Jews.

"When a neighbor came to warn me that the Germans might demand shelter from us, I told him, 'I have my gun, and if anyone brings the Germans here, I will kill them.'"

As Njazi Bicaku walks with us through the cobble-stoned streets of Elbasan back to our parked car, he lapses into a pensive silence. I sense that he seldom has the occasion to speak of that luminous time of his life. For a few hours, our presence has evoked memories of which he and his descendants could forever be proud.

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We grope our way through a labyrinthine maze of back streets in Tirana, the Albanian capital, and ultimately arrive at number 50 Muamet Gjolleshea Street. We climb five flights of stairs to a flat on the top floor, where Petro and Magdalena Shkurti greet us. The elderly couple are all smiles but offer apologies for the climb. These spry, white-haired octogenarians tell us they manage these 72 steps three or four times a day. Petro, tall, neatly attired in a pressed shirt and a tie, is a retired geologist. Magdalena is a retired economist. They fuss over us, offer fruit, sweets, drinks, tell us they have never had American visitors before.

In tandem they recount how they were teenage sweethearts in the southern town of Berat during the German occupation. On a freezing winter night, the Rubeni family of six, including four young children, arrived at the door of Magdalena's parents, asking for help. Her mother, Dhoksl Sfeci, unhesitatingly took them in and gave them a room. She explained to Magdalena that these people had come from far-off Prishtina in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia and needed to be cared for. The Rubenis stayed on. The two families grew fond of each other but the danger of discovery and its consequent death penalty for everyone — the Jews and their protectors alike — always hung over them. Relatives and neighbors knew what the Sfeci family was up to. On occasion, when word came that Nazis were combing the area, Petro and Magdalena dressed the Rubeni family in typical Berati women's clothing, mounted them on horses and led them to the houses of trusted friends in nearby villages. Magdalena, Petro, and her parents lived together with the Rubenis as a close family for 16 months.

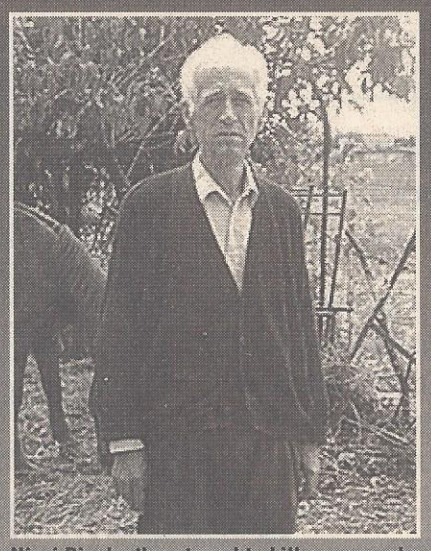
After the fall of the communist regime in 1991, the majority of Jews in Albania emigrated, most making aliya to Israel. Despite their deep gratitude and strong ties to their Albanian neighbors, the Jews were drawn to their Promised Land. Most arrived there in 1991, while the first Gulf war was raging in the Middle East and Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles were falling on Israel.

The Rubeni family also made its way to Israel and faithfully kept in touch with Magdalena and Petro. When the Shkurtis were invited to Israel a few years ago, to be honored at Yad Vashem as "Righteous Persons," they spent all their time with the Rubeni family. "Maybe we are more in debt to them for all they did for us while we were in Israel," says Magdalena with innocent modesty. "They took us to weddings, introduced us to their friends, kept us in their home."

Today Magdalena and Petro say they watch the news from Israel every day and worry much more now about the Rubenis' safety than when they were hiding in their home. The families phone each other often. Though they are Albanian Orthodox Christians, Magdalena and Petro are not avid church-goers, "but we believe in God," they say, "and our dream is to see Jerusalem again."

Adelina Kosturi carried food daily to a Jew hiding in an empty hotel.

Meti Zyma, with her husband, the late surgeon, Dr. Bessim Zyma, hid Jews in his medical clinic.



Njazi Bicaku threatened to kill anyone who betrayed the Jews his family was hiding.

Petro and Magdalena Shkurti were teenage sweethearts who worked together to save the Jews.

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We edge our way past children playing football behind a heap of uncollected rubbish in Tirana's Prokop Myzeqari Street. On an immaculately polished wooden door at number 7, we press the buzzer and go upstairs. Adelina Kosturi, a well-groomed elderly lady dressed in widow's black, warmly greets us in English. In the modern, marble-floored apartment, Kosturi's middle-aged son and her daughter-in-law, a plastic surgeon, offer us glasses of arak and salty cheese *byreki.* They speak little English but smile constantly.

Kosturi, widowed for 30 years, describes herself deprecatingly as "an old woman." But her memory serves her well as she recalls details of how she and her family conspired to save the life of a Yugoslavian Jew named Manuel Menahem. He had escaped to Albania after his entire family had been sent to Treblinka. When he managed to reach Elbasan, he asked for help from Kosturi's father, Grigor Nosi. At first, the Nosi family hid Menahem in their home, then gave him a job in their commercial alcohol factory on the outskirts of town, close by to a German military camp.

A Nazi soldier who frequently came to the factory became friendly with Menahem, not knowing that he was a Jew. On one occasion, he told Menahem that he had been stationed at a concentration camp in Poland and that vast numbers of Jews had been exterminated there. He showed Menahem photos of the bodies of dead Jewish children and added that the corpses were savaged by dogs.

Menahem killed the German soldier on the spot. He was arrested shortly afterward by the Germans and awaited execution. When Kosturi's brother, Vasil, went to the camp to inquire about Menahem's fate, he remarkably discovered that an old friend with whom he had studied at university in Austria was an officer stationed there. Vasil managed to convince his friend to free Menahem.

The Nosi family then hid Menahem in a small hotel they owned in a nearby village. Kosturi brought him food and supplies almost daily as he passed the lonely winter of 1944 in the empty hotel until the war ended.

Kosturi reluctantly bids us goodbye. "Please come again. But I hope I will be here," she says.

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When I ring her doorbell, from the second floor, Meti Zyma yanks a pulley contraption that clicks the downstairs door open. She greets us with effusive warmth. A vibrant 78-year-old artist, Zyma's vitality is like a tonic. Her cluttered living room/studio overflows with paintings: on the walls, stacked behind tables and chairs, spilling out of closets. There are shepherds, peasant women, flowers in riotous colors, and portraits galore. From these faces it is obvious that Zyma likes people.

She and her late husband, Dr. Bessim Zyma, whose enlarged photograph dominates the entrance hall, went to inventive lengths to shield Jews from the intensive searches of the Gestapo. Dr. Zyma, a pioneer otolaryngologist in Tirana, often rented out part of his clinic to people who he knew were Jews — but he and his wife never asked. There were the two young women from Italy who kept very much to themselves. When Gestapo officers suddenly appeared at the clinic one day, the terrified women held their breath behind the door to an adjoining room, while Dr. Zyma blocked the way. "I am treating patients in the other rooms," he said. "You cannot go in there." Bold insistence on "medical immunity" carried the day.

When Lev Dzienciolski, an ailing Jewish refugee from Poland, who was being sought by the Gestapo, came to the clinic in desperate need of treatment, the Zymas "hospitalized" him for months in an infirmary room. Whenever he ventured outdoors, the Zymas saw to it that his face was wrapped well in bandages to ensure his "anonymity." Dzienciolski eventually left, escaping to Italy, remaining ever grateful to the Zymas for his survival.

Today one of Meti Zyma's closest friends is Lev Dzienciolski's cousin, 80-year-old Vera Kilic, one of the handful of Jews left in Albania. Meti and Vera speak mostly by phone, although they live near each other. They reminisce about those heroic days of defiance against the Nazis. They recall how the Albanian rescuers and the Jewish rescued were bonded together in their fear and hatred of the enemies who occupied their country. But Meti and Vera often remind each other that a far stronger bond was the love and warm personal relationships of the Albanians and Jews in those fateful times. ■

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