

Albanian Album: Courage And Compassion In The Holocaust

By Jack Goldfarb

The pumpkin-colored bus in the main square of Tirana, capital of Albania, is about to burst from the overload of passengers jammed inside. Two Albanian friends — Refik Veseli, a professional photographer, and Sirgen, his English-speaking nephew — have been waiting with me over an hour for this bus. We plead with the driver to let us squeeze aboard.

When the scowling busman shakes his head for the third time, Refik and Sirgen shout, "But there's a foreigner here — an American!"

Suddenly the door springs open. The compacted passengers squash each other still tighter as we shoehorn ourselves inside. I hand the driver three 100-*lekke* fares. He waves the money away and smiles.

A small incident but it exemplifies the legendary Albanian regard for foreigners. The *Kanun*, the traditional "code of honor," obliges Albanians not only to be hospitable to "guests," (read "foreigners") but to be responsible for their safekeeping.

The *Kanun* largely explains why the Albanian people in an extraordinary demonstration of national courage and compassion provided a safe haven for hundreds of Jewish refugees who fled Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria to this little Balkan land during the Hitlerian Holocaust. This predominantly Moslem country, where religious differences have always been played down, shielded its own Jewish community so vigilantly that not one single Jew, foreign or Albanian, fell into the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

For 50 years, the story of the rescue of the Jews in Albania, numbering about 1800, was little known because of the country's total isolation from the world under its xenophobic Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha.

According to Michael Berenbaum of the Washington Holocaust Museum Research Institute, "Albania was the only country in Europe to have more Jews at the end of World War II than when the war began."

On the bus with me, Refik Veseli, president of the Albanian-Israel Friendship Society, and Sirgen, acting as interpreter, were taking me to meet some of the Albanian "Righteous Gentiles," those brave souls who had personally shielded Jews during the Nazi occupation. A kindly, soft-spoken man in his 60's, Veseli, as a teenager, had helped his parents hide several Jewish families.

"*Falumenderit!*" I said (the only Albanian word I know), thanking the driver as we got off the bus in a

they are in Israel, and I still worry about them when I hear of a bus bombing in Tel Aviv."

A few streets away we called on Beqir Qogja, a 70-ish erect man who had provided a hideaway for a Jewish friend in the mountain village where he lived during the war. Avraham Gani gave Qogja a store of gold coins to pay for his expenses and to "hold" for him. When the war ended, Qogja handed back the gold. When Gani insisted Qogja keep some, Qogja was offended. "My help to you was for friendship," he reprimanded Gani.

Sitting around an oval table laden with fruit and Coca-Cola bottles, in a tiny flat across town, 86-year-old, blind Xhemile Budo told us of the two Jewish families she and her late husband had hidden in a Tirana storage basement. Later, the Budos escorted them, disguised as farmers, on horseback to safety in the town of Kruje. The grateful Jews offered money to the Budos, but they too declined to accept any such "rewards."

Refik Veseli explained that under the Code of Honor taking payment for such acts of rescue was unthinkable. The group of Yugoslavian Jews that his parents had sheltered in the Veseli home in Tirana, sharing rooms and food, had offered payment, but the Veselis had never considered accepting money. "We are still as one family," he said, his voice choking, "even though they now all live in Israel."

Refik told us about the family of Qemal Bicaku who had lived in a northern mountain village. The Bicakus had hidden six Jewish families — 26 persons — sharing cornbread, beans and dried meat with them for many months. Everyone in the village knew the Jews were there. When bandits in the area suggested to Grandfather Mefail Bicaku that they turn in the Jews and share the loot, an indignant Mefail made it clear that if anything ever happened to the Jews, his children "would be branded with shame for life." Years later the saved Jews wrote from Argentina, "The bread you gave us is still in our mouths...."

In the honor roll of countries who resisted the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jewish people, Denmark, Finland and Bulgaria are remembered as defiant beacons of light in the pall of Europe's genocidal darkness. Albania's achievement in saving all its Jews is even more remarkable when contrasted with the fate of Jews in neighboring Greece, where 90% of the Jewish community perished.

He opened the gates, advised all the internees to flee, and told them he would burn the camp's records.

It is believed that Jews first arrived in Albania in Roman times as slaves from conquered Judea *en route* to Rome. When the Roman ships were blown off course to what was then the ancient Illyrian coast, many captives escaped. The Romans were sure the escapees would be devoured by wild beasts. But even as in recent history, the native Illyrians provided help to the "fleeing refugees."

Historian Flavius Josephus has recorded that several all-Jewish villages existed in the south of the country during that period, most likely founded by the escaped Judean slaves. In the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela, famed traveler of the ancient world, reported that there were people living in the area who "call each other by Jewish names, and some say that they are Jews."

The most famous Jew in Albanian history was Shabbetai Zevi, the self-proclaimed "Messiah" of the 17th century. Following his arrest by the Ottoman authorities and his astonishing conversion to Islam, the Grand Vizier of Constantinople hoped to put an end to the controversy surrounding him by exiling him to Albania, then an occupied region of the Ottoman Empire. Shabbetai Zevi spent his last years near the town of Berat where he died suddenly on the Day of Atonement at the age of 50 in 1676.

In his last letter, written six weeks before his death, though outwardly now a Moslem, Zevi asked Jewish friends in Berat to send him a prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Today controversy continues over Shabbetai Zevi, but mostly over the location of his burial place. Several sites are mentioned, one in Dulcigno (now in Montenegro) and one near Berat, where an annual fair is held, it is said, in honor of Shabbetai Zevi. Recently an Israeli archeology team has sought to definitively determine the exact gravesite.

As to Zevi's enduring "presence" in Albania, some historians believe his legacy is the social revolutionary ideas and religious motivations that still run strong in southern Albania nowadays.

Today there are only 61 Jews left in Albania. For half a century religion was banned in what dictator Hoxha proclaimed "the world's first atheist state." But Jews managed to secretly gather in private homes, observing high holidays and sharing

Crisis in Kosovo

Albanian album — courage and compassion in the Holocaust

by Jack Goldfarb

Special to the NJ Jewish News

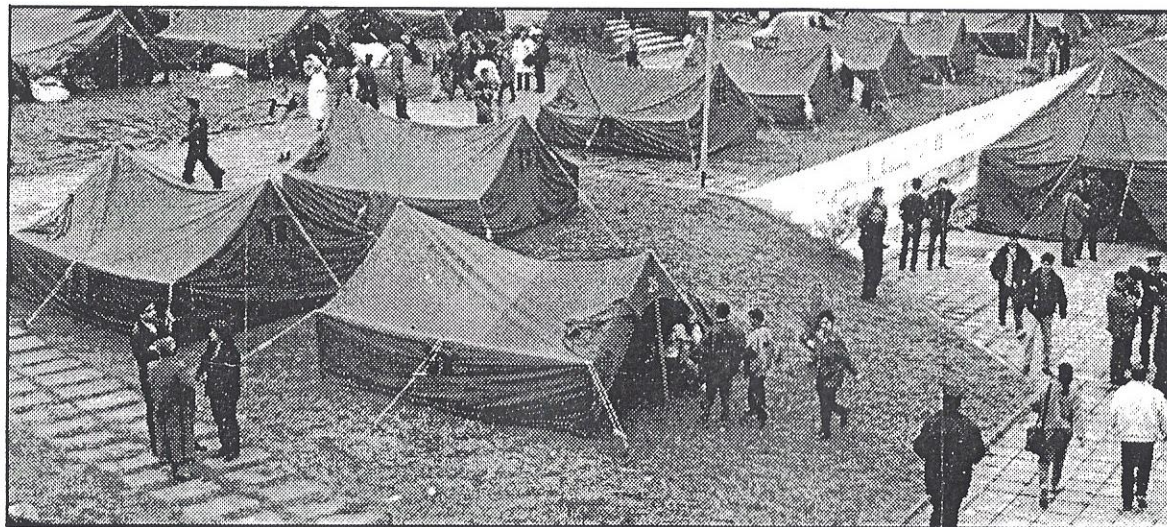
The pumpkin-colored bus in the main square of Tirana, capital of Albania, is about to burst from the overload of passengers jammed inside. Two Albanian friends — Refik Veseli, a professional photographer, and Sirgen, his English-speaking nephew — have been waiting with me more than an hour for this bus. We plead with the driver to let us squeeze aboard.

When the scowling driver shakes his head for the third time, Refik and Sirgen shout, "But there's a foreigner here — an American!"

Suddenly the door springs open. The passengers squash each other still tighter as we shoehorn ourselves inside. I hand the driver three 1000-lekke fares. He waves the money away and smiles.

A small incident but it exemplifies the legendary Albanian regard for foreigners. The Kanun, the traditional "code of honor," obliges Albanians not only to be hospitable to "guests," — read: "foreigners" — but to be responsible for their safekeeping.

The Kanun largely explains why the Albanian people, in an extraordinary demonstration of national courage and compassion, provided a safe haven for hundreds of Jewish refugees who fled to this little Balkan land from Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria during the Hitlerian Holocaust. This predominantly Muslim coun-



A matter of Kanun — tent city in Tirana where 4,500 refugees are housed

Photo by RNS/Reuters

A white-haired couple, Petro and Magdalena Shkurti, surrounded by younger relatives greeted us with wide-eyed curiosity. Who was I with my interest in the events of so long ago? I already felt a reverent admiration for this elderly pair. Refik had told me they had saved six members of a Jewish family in the southern town of Berat by dressing them in peasant clothing and guiding them to a remote village monastery. Magdalena and Petro, who had been teenage friends then, had remained with the hidden family for weeks on end to "watch over them."

"I loved them too much," Magdalena said, dabbing her eyes, "to let them stay there alone. Today they are in Israel, and I still worry about them when I hear of a bus bombing in Tel Aviv."

Refik told us about the family of Qemal Bicaky, who had lived in a northern mountain village. The Bicakus hid six Jewish families — 26 people — sharing cornbread, beans and dried meat with them for many months. Everyone in the village knew the Jews were there.

When bandits in the area suggested to Grandfather Mefail Bicaku that they turn in the Jews and share the loot, an indignant Mefail made it clear that if anything ever happened to the Jews, his children "would be branded with shame for life." Years later, the saved Jews wrote from Argentina, "the bread you gave us

is still in our mouths...."

In the honor roll of countries whose people resisted Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jewish people, Denmark, Finland and Bulgaria are remembered as defiant beacons of light in the pall of Europe's genocidal darkness. Albania's achievement in saving all its Jews is even more remarkable when contrasted with the fate of Jews in neighboring Greece, where 90 percent of the Jewish community perished.

In keeping with the prevailing character of their country, in which anti-Semitism was never a problem, Albanian underground fighters issued an order in 1943 that

anyone refusing to give refuge to those in need would be subject to execution "for the crime of disgracing the Albanian people." It is believed no one betrayed this order. Albanians never turned over lists of Jews to the Germans, nor were Jews ever compelled to wear the yellow star.

Even the Italian occupying forces in Albania, whose withdrawal in 1943 brought in the Germans, went along with the Albanian protective policy toward the Jews. At Kavaje internment camp near the city of Durres, the Italian commandant, on the night before the Germans were to arrive, assembled the detainees, including hundreds of Jews. He opened the gates, advised all the internees to flee, and told them he would burn the camp's records.

It is believed the Jews first arrived in Albania in Roman times as slaves from conquered Judea who were en route to Rome. When the Roman ships were blown off course to what was then the ancient Illyrian coast, many captives escaped. The Romans were sure the escapees would be devoured by wild beasts. But even as in recent history, the native Illyrians provided help to the "fleeing refugees."

Historian Flavius Josephus

Continued on next page

Albanian Album: Courage And Compassion In The Holocaust

By Jack Goldfarb

The pumpkin-colored bus in the main square of Tirana, capital of Albania, is about to burst from the overload of passengers jammed inside. Two Albanian friends — Refik Veseli, a professional photographer, and Sirgen, his English-speaking nephew — have been waiting with me over an hour for this bus. We plead with the driver to let us squeeze aboard.

When the scowling busman shakes his head for the third time, Refik and Sirgen shout, "But there's a foreigner here — an American!"

Suddenly the door springs open. The compacted passengers squash each other still tighter as we shoehorn ourselves inside. I hand the driver three 100-*lekke* fares. He waves the money away and smiles.

A small incident but it exemplifies the legendary Albanian regard for foreigners. The *Kanun*, the traditional "code of honor," obliges Albanians not only to be hospitable to "guests," (read "foreigners") but to be responsible for their safekeeping.

The *Kanun* largely explains why the Albanian people in an extraordinary demonstration of national courage and compassion provided a safe haven for hundreds of Jewish refugees who fled Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria to this little Balkan land during the Hitlerian Holocaust. This predominantly Moslem country, where religious differences have always been played down, shielded its own Jewish community so vigilantly that not one single Jew, foreign or Albanian, fell into the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

For 50 years, the story of the rescue of the Jews in Albania, numbering about 1800, was little known because of the country's total isolation from the world under its xenophobic Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha.

According to Michael Berenbaum of the Washington Holocaust Museum Research Institute, "Albania was the only country in Europe to have more Jews at the end of World War II than when the war began."

On the bus with me, Refik Veseli, president of the Albanian-Israel Friendship Society, and Sirgen, acting as interpreter, were taking me to meet some of the Albanian "Righteous Gentiles," those brave souls who had personally shielded Jews during the Nazi occupation. A kindly, soft-spoken man in his 60's, Veseli, as a teenager, had helped his parents hide several Jewish families.

"*Falumenderit!*" I said (the only Albanian word I know), thanking the driver as we got off the bus in a

they are in Israel, and I still worry about them when I hear of a bus bombing in Tel Aviv."

A few streets away we called on Beqir Qogja, a 70-ish erect man who had provided a hideaway for a Jewish friend in the mountain village where he lived during the war. Avraham Gani gave Qogja a store of gold coins to pay for his expenses and to "hold" for him. When the war ended, Qogja handed back the gold. When Gani insisted Qogja keep some, Qogja was offended. "My help to you was for friendship," he reprimanded Gani.

Sitting around an oval table laden with fruit and Coca-Cola bottles, in a tiny flat across town, 86-year-old, blind Xhemile Budo told us of the two Jewish families she and her late husband had hidden in a Tirana storage basement. Later, the Budos escorted them, disguised as farmers, on horseback to safety in the town of Kruje. The grateful Jews offered money to the Budos, but they too declined to accept any such "rewards."

Refik Veseli explained that under the Code of Honor taking payment for such acts of rescue was unthinkable. The group of Yugoslavian Jews that his parents had sheltered in the Veseli home in Tirana, sharing rooms and food, had offered payment, but the Veselis had never considered accepting money. "We are still as one family," he said, his voice choking, "even though they now all live in Israel."

Refik told us about the family of Qemal Bicaku who had lived in a northern mountain village. The Bicakus had hidden six Jewish families — 26 persons — sharing cornbread, beans and dried meat with them for many months. Everyone in the village knew the Jews were there. When bandits in the area suggested to Grandfather Mefail Bicaku that they turn in the Jews and share the loot, an indignant Mefail made it clear that if anything ever happened to the Jews, his children "would be branded with shame for life." Years later the saved Jews wrote from Argentina, "The bread you gave us is still in our mouths...."

In the honor roll of countries who resisted the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jewish people, Denmark, Finland and Bulgaria are remembered as defiant beacons of light in the pall of Europe's genocidal darkness. Albania's achievement in saving all its Jews is even more remarkable when contrasted with the fate of Jews in neighboring Greece, where 90% of the Jewish community perished.

He opened the gates, advised all the internees to flee, and told them he would burn the camp's records.

It is believed that Jews first arrived in Albania in Roman times as slaves from conquered Judea *en route* to Rome. When the Roman ships were blown off course to what was then the ancient Illyrian coast, many captives escaped. The Romans were sure the escapees would be devoured by wild beasts. But even as in recent history, the native Illyrians provided help to the "fleeing refugees."

Historian Flavius Josephus has recorded that several all-Jewish villages existed in the south of the country during that period, most likely founded by the escaped Judean slaves. In the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela, famed traveler of the ancient world, reported that there were people living in the area who "call each other by Jewish names, and some say that they are Jews."

The most famous Jew in Albanian history was Shabbetai Zevi, the self-proclaimed "Messiah" of the 17th century. Following his arrest by the Ottoman authorities and his astonishing conversion to Islam, the Grand Vizier of Constantinople hoped to put an end to the controversy surrounding him by exiling him to Albania, then an occupied region of the Ottoman Empire. Shabbetai Zevi spent his last years near the town of Berat where he died suddenly on the Day of Atonement at the age of 50 in 1676.

In his last letter, written six weeks before his death, though outwardly now a Moslem, Zevi asked Jewish friends in Berat to send him a prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Today controversy continues over Shabbetai Zevi, but mostly over the location of his burial place. Several sites are mentioned, one in Dulcigno (now in Montenegro) and one near Berat, where an annual fair is held, it is said, in honor of Shabbetai Zevi. Recently an Israeli archeology team has sought to definitively determine the exact gravesite.

As to Zevi's enduring "presence" in Albania, some historians believe his legacy is the social revolutionary ideas and religious motivations that still run strong in southern Albania nowadays.

Today there are only 61 Jews left in Albania. For half a century religion was banned in what dictator Hoxha proclaimed "the world's first atheist state." But Jews managed to secretly gather in private homes, observing high holidays and sharing

A small incident but it exemplifies the legendary Albanian regard for foreigners. The Kanun, the traditional "code of honor," obliges Albanians not only to be hospitable to "guests," — read: "foreigners" — but to be responsible for their safekeeping.

The Kanun largely explains why the Albanian people, in an extraordinary demonstration of national courage and compassion, provided a safe haven for hundreds of Jewish refugees who fled to this little Balkan land from Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria during the Hitlerian Holocaust. This predominantly Muslim country, where religious differences have always been played down, shielded its own Jewish community so vigilantly that not one single Jew, foreign or Albanian, fell into the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

For 50 years, the story of the rescue of the Jews in Albania, numbering about 1,800, was little known because of the country's total isolation from the world under its xenophobic communist dictator, Enver Hoxha.

According to Michael Berenbaum of the Washington Holocaust Museum Research Institute, "Albania was the only country in Europe to have more Jews at the end of World War II than when the war began."

On the bus with me, Refik Veseli, president of the Albanian-Israel Friendship Society, and Sirgen, acting as interpreter, were taking me to meet some of the Albanian "Righteous Gentiles," those brave souls who had personally shielded Jews during the Nazi occupation. A kindly, soft-spoken man in his 60s, Veseli, as a teenager, helped his parents hide several Jewish families.

"*Falumderit!*" I said, the only Albanian word I know, thanking the driver as we got off the bus in a neighborhood of dilapidated houses and streets without names. Refik led the way through potholed alleys to a drab wooden cottage, encircled by bright sunflowers.

so long ago? I already felt a reverent admiration for this elderly pair. Refik had told me they had saved six members of a Jewish family in the southern town of Berat by dressing them in peasant clothing and guiding them to a remote village monastery. Magdalena and Petro, who had been teenage friends then, had remained with the hidden family for weeks on end to "watch over them."

"I loved them too much," Magdalena said, dabbing her eyes, "to let them stay there alone. Today they are in Israel, and I still worry about them when I hear of a bus bombing in Tel Aviv."

A few streets away we called on Beqir Qogja, 70-ish, who had provided a hideaway for a Jewish friend in the mountain village where he lived during the war. Avraham Gani had given Qogja a store of gold coins to pay for his expenses and to "hold" for him. When the war ended, Qogja handed back the gold. When Gani insisted Qogja keep some, Qogja was offended. "My help to you was for friendship," he reprimanded Gani.

Sitting around a table laden with fruit and Coca-Cola bottles, in a tiny flat across town, blind, 86-year-old Xhemile Budo told us of the two Jewish families she and her late husband hid in a Tirana storage basement. Later, the Budos escorted them, disguised as farmers, on horseback to safety in the town of Kruje. The grateful Jews offered money to the Budos, but they too declined to accept any such "rewards."

Refik Veseli explained that under the code of honor, taking payment for such acts of rescue was unthinkable. The group of Yugoslavian Jews that his parents had sheltered in the Veseli home in Tirana, sharing rooms and food, had offered payment, but the Veselis had never considered accepting money. "We are still as one family," he said, his voice choking, "even though they now all live in Israel."

beans and dried meat with them for many months. Everyone in the village knew the Jews were there.

When bandits in the area suggested to Grandfather Mefail Bicaku that they turn in the Jews and share the loot, an indignant Mafail made it clear that if anything ever happened to the Jews, his children "would be branded with shame for life." Years later, the saved Jews wrote from Argentina, "the bread you gave us

remembered as a light in the pall of Europe's genocidal darkness. Albania's achievement in saving all its Jews is even more remarkable when contrasted with the fate of Jews in neighboring Greece, where 90 percent of the Jewish community perished.

In keeping with the prevailing character of their country, in which anti-Semitism was never a problem, Albanian underground fighters issued an order in 1943 that

the Roman ships were blown off course to what was then the ancient Illyrian coast, many captives escaped. The Romans were sure the escapees would be devoured by wild beasts. But even as in recent history, the native Illyrians provided help to the "fleeing refugees."

Historian Flavius Iosephus

Continued on next page

When the scowling busman shakes his head for the third time, Refik and Sirgen shout, "But there's a foreigner here — an American!"

Suddenly the door springs open. The compacted passengers squash each other still tighter as we shoehorn ourselves inside. I hand the driver three 100-*lekke* fares. He waves the money away and smiles.

A small incident but it exemplifies the legendary Albanian regard for foreigners. The *Kanun*, the traditional "code of honor," obliges Albanians not only to be hospitable to "guests," (read "foreigners") but to be responsible for their safekeeping.

The *Kanun* largely explains why the Albanian people in an extraordinary demonstration of national courage and compassion provided a safe haven for hundreds of Jewish refugees who fled Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria to this little Balkan land during the Hitlerian Holocaust. This predominantly Moslem country, where religious differences have always been played down, shielded its own Jewish community so vigilantly that not one single Jew, foreign or Albanian, fell into the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

For 50 years, the story of the rescue of the Jews in Albania, numbering about 1800, was little known because of the country's total isolation from the world under its xenophobic Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha.

According to Michael Berenbaum of the Washington Holocaust Museum Research Institute, "Albania was the only country in Europe to have more Jews at the end of World War II than when the war began."

On the bus with me, Refik Veseli, president of the Albanian-Israel Friendship Society, and Sirgen, acting as interpreter, were taking me to meet some of the Albanian "Righteous Gentiles," those brave souls who had personally shielded Jews during the Nazi occupation. A kindly, soft-spoken man in his 60's, Veseli, as a teenager, had helped his parents hide several Jewish families.

"*Falumenderit!*" I said (the only Albanian word I know), thanking the driver as we got off the bus in a neighborhood of dilapidated houses and streets without names. Refik led the way through potholed alleys to a drab wooden cottage encircled by bright stalky sunflowers.

A white-haired couple, Petro and Magdalena Shkurti, surrounded by younger relatives greeted us with wide-eyed curiosity. Who was I, with my interest in the events of so long ago? For my part I already felt a reverent admiration for this elderly pair. Refik had told me they had saved six members of a Jewish family in the southern town of Berat by dressing them in peasant clothing and guiding them to a remote village monastery. Magdalena and Petro, who had been teenage friends then, had remained with the hidden family for weeks on end to "watch over them."

"I loved them too much," Magdalena said, dab-

bing the tears from her eyes. When Gani insisted Qogja keep some, Qogja was offended. "My help to you was for friendship," he reprimanded Gani.

Sitting around an oval table laden with fruit and Coca-Cola bottles, in a tiny flat across town, 86-year-old, blind Xhemile Budo told us of the two Jewish families she and her late husband had hidden in a Tirana storage basement. Later, the Budos escorted them, disguised as farmers, on horseback to safety in the town of Kruje. The grateful Jews offered money to the Budos, but they too declined to accept any such "rewards."

Refik Veseli explained that under the Code of Honor taking payment for such acts of rescue was unthinkable. The group of Yugoslavian Jews that his parents had sheltered in the Veseli home in Tirana, sharing rooms and food, had offered payment, but the Veselis had never considered accepting money. "We are still as one family," he said, his voice choking, "even though they now all live in Israel."

Refik told us about the family of Qemal Bicaku who had lived in a northern mountain village. The Bicakus had hidden six Jewish families — 26 persons — sharing cornbread, beans and dried meat with them for many months. Everyone in the village knew the Jews were there. When bandits in the area suggested to Grandfather Mefail Bicaku that they turn in the Jews and share the loot, an indignant Mefail made it clear that if anything ever happened to the Jews, his children "would be branded with shame for life." Years later the saved Jews wrote from Argentina, "The bread you gave us is still in our mouths...."

In the honor roll of countries who resisted the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jewish people, Denmark, Finland and Bulgaria are remembered as defiant beacons of light in the pall of Europe's genocidal darkness. Albania's achievement in saving all its Jews is even more remarkable when contrasted with the fate of Jews in neighboring Greece, where 90% of the Jewish community perished.

In keeping with the prevailing character of their country in which anti-Semitism was never a problem, Albanian underground fighters issued an order in 1943 that anyone refusing to give refuge to those in need would be subject to execution "for the crime of disgracing the Albanian people." It is believed no one betrayed this order. Albanians never turned over lists of Jews to the Germans, nor were Jews ever compelled to wear the yellow star.

Even the Italian occupying forces in Albania, whose withdrawal in 1943 brought in the Germans, went along with the Albanian protective policy toward the Jews. At Kavaje internment camp near the city of Durres, the Italian commandante, on the night before the Germans were to arrive, as-

wered sure the escapees would be devoured by wild beasts. But even as in recent history, the native Illyrians provided help to the "fleeing refugees."

Historian Flavius Josephus has recorded that several all-Jewish villages existed in the south of the country during that period, most likely founded by the escaped Judean slaves. In the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela, famed traveler of the ancient world, reported that there were people living in the area who "call each other by Jewish names, and some say that they are Jews."

The most famous Jew in Albanian history was Shabbetai Zevi, the self-proclaimed "Messiah" of the 17th century. Following his arrest by the Ottoman authorities and his astonishing conversion to Islam, the Grand Vizier of Constantinople hoped to put an end to the controversy surrounding him by exiling him to Albania, then an occupied region of the Ottoman Empire. Shabbetai Zevi spent his last years near the town of Berat where he died suddenly on the Day of Atonement at the age of 50 in 1676.

In his last letter, written six weeks before his death, though outwardly now a Moslem, Zevi asked Jewish friends in Berat to send him a prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Today controversy continues over Shabbetai Zevi, but mostly over the location of his burial place. Several sites are mentioned, one in Dulcigno (now in Montenegro) and one near Berat, where an annual fair is held, it is said, in honor of Shabbetai Zevi. Recently an Israeli archeology team has sought to definitively determine the exact gravesite.

As to Zevi's enduring "presence" in Albania, some historians believe his legacy is the social revolutionary ideas and religious motivations that still run strong in southern Albania nowadays.

Today there are only 61 Jews left in Albania. For half a century religion was banned in what dictator Hoxha proclaimed "the world's first atheist state." But Jews managed to secretly gather in private homes, observing high holidays and sharing Passover matzot sent from Holland. Even circumcision was clandestinely performed by Moslem clerics in lieu of a *mohel*.

When Communist rule collapsed in 1991, about 400 Albanian Jews emigrated to Israel. With sad farewells they left a country where they had maintained strong ties to their Moslem and Christian neighbors. They left a country, small and disadvantaged, but one that proved its eminent greatness in human terms.

Two centuries ago Lord Byron wrote:

"Fierce are Albania's children, yet they lack not virtues ...

Their native fastnesses not more secure

Than they in doubtful time of troublous need:

Their wrath how deadly! But their friendship

a foreigner here — an American!"

Suddenly the door springs open. The compacted passengers squash each other still tighter as we shoehorn ourselves inside. I hand the driver three 100-*lekke* fares. He waves the money away and smiles.

A small incident but it exemplifies the legendary Albanian regard for foreigners. The *Kanun*, the traditional "code of honor," obliges Albanians not only to be hospitable to "guests," (read "foreigners") but to be responsible for their safekeeping.

The *Kanun* largely explains why the Albanian people in an extraordinary demonstration of national courage and compassion provided a safe haven for hundreds of Jewish refugees who fled Yugoslavia, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria to this little Balkan land during the Hitlerian Holocaust. This predominantly Moslem country, where religious differences have always been played down, shielded its own Jewish community so vigilantly that not one single Jew, foreign or Albanian, fell into the hands of the Nazi occupiers.

For 50 years, the story of the rescue of the Jews in Albania, numbering about 1800, was little known because of the country's total isolation from the world under its xenophobic Communist dictator, Enver Hoxha.

According to Michael Berenbaum of the Washington Holocaust Museum Research Institute, "Albania was the only country in Europe to have more Jews at the end of World War II than when the war began."

On the bus with me, Refik Veseli, president of the Albanian-Israel Friendship Society, and Sirgen, acting as interpreter, were taking me to meet some of the Albanian "Righteous Gentiles," those brave souls who had personally shielded Jews during the Nazi occupation. A kindly, soft-spoken man in his 60's, Veseli, as a teenager, had helped his parents hide several Jewish families.

"*Falumenderit!*" I said (the only Albanian word I know), thanking the driver as we got off the bus in a neighborhood of dilapidated houses and streets without names. Refik led the way through potholed alleys to a drab wooden cottage encircled by bright stalky sunflowers.

A white-harried couple, Petro and Magdalena Shkurti, surrounded by younger relatives greeted us with wide-eyed curiosity. Who was I, with my interest in the events of so long ago? For my part I already felt a reverent admiration for this elderly pair. Refik had told me they had saved six members of a Jewish family in the southern town of Berat by dressing them in peasant clothing and guiding them to a remote village monastery. Magdalena and Petro, who had been teenage friends then, had remained with the hidden family for weeks on end to "watch over them."

"I loved them too much," Magdalena said, dabbing her eyes, "to let them stay there alone. Today

some, Gogja was offended. My help to you was for friendship," he reprimanded Gani.

Sitting around an oval table laden with fruit and Coca-Cola bottles, in a tiny flat across town, 86-year-old, blind Xhemile Budo told us of the two Jewish families she and her late husband had hidden in a Tirana storage basement. Later, the Budos escorted them, disguised as farmers, on horseback to safety in the town of Kruje. The grateful Jews offered money to the Budos, but they too declined to accept any such "rewards."

Refik Veseli explained that under the Code of Honor taking payment for such acts of rescue was unthinkable. The group of Yugoslavian Jews that his parents had sheltered in the Veseli home in Tirana, sharing rooms and food, had offered payment, but the Veselis had never considered accepting money. "We are still as one family," he said, his voice choking, "even though they now all live in Israel."

Refik told us about the family of Qemal Bicaku who had lived in a northern mountain village. The Bicakus had hidden six Jewish families — 26 persons — sharing cornbread, beans and dried meat with them for many months. Everyone in the village knew the Jews were there. When bandits in the area suggested to Grandfather Mefail Bicaku that they turn in the Jews and share the loot, an indignant Mefail made it clear that if anything ever happened to the Jews, his children "would be branded with shame for life." Years later the saved Jews wrote from Argentina, "The bread you gave us is still in our mouths...."

In the honor roll of countries who resisted the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jewish people, Denmark, Finland and Bulgaria are remembered as defiant beacons of light in the pall of Europe's genocidal darkness. Albania's achievement in saving all its Jews is even more remarkable when contrasted with the fate of Jews in neighboring Greece, where 90% of the Jewish community perished.

In keeping with the prevailing character of their country in which anti-Semitism was never a problem, Albanian underground fighters issued an order in 1943 that anyone refusing to give refuge to those in need would be subject to execution "for the crime of disgracing the Albanian people." It is believed no one betrayed this order. Albanians never turned over lists of Jews to the Germans, nor were Jews ever compelled to wear the yellow star.

Even the Italian occupying forces in Albania, whose withdrawal in 1943 brought in the Germans, went along with the Albanian protective policy toward the Jews. At Kavaje internment camp near the city of Dures, the Italian commandante, on the night before the Germans were to arrive, assembled the detainees, including hundreds of Jews.

Illyrians provided help to the "fleeing refugees."

Historian Flavius Josephus has recorded that several all-Jewish villages existed in the south of the country during that period, most likely founded by the escaped Judean slaves. In the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela, famed traveler of the ancient world, reported that there were people living in the area who "call each other by Jewish names, and some say that they are Jews."

The most famous Jew in Albanian history was Shabbetai Zevi, the self-proclaimed "Messiah" of the 17th century. Following his arrest by the Ottoman authorities and his astonishing conversion to Islam, the Grand Vizier of Constantinople hoped to put an end to the controversy surrounding him by exiling him to Albania, then an occupied region of the Ottoman Empire. Shabbetai Zevi spent his last years near the town of Berat where he died suddenly on the Day of Atonement at the age of 50 in 1676.

In his last letter, written six weeks before his death, though outwardly now a Moslem, Zevi asked Jewish friends in Berat to send him a prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Today controversy continues over Shabbetai Zevi, but mostly over the location of his burial place. Several sites are mentioned, one in Dulcigno (now in Montenegro) and one near Berat, where an annual fair is held, it is said, in honor of Shabbetai Zevi. Recently an Israeli archeology team has sought to definitively determine the exact gravesite.

As to Zevi's enduring "presence" in Albania, some historians believe his legacy is the social revolutionary ideas and religious motivations that still run strong in southern Albania nowadays.

Today there are only 61 Jews left in Albania. For half a century religion was banned in what dictator Hoxha proclaimed "the world's first atheist state." But Jews managed to secretly gather in private homes, observing high holidays and sharing Passover matzot sent from Holland. Even circumcision was clandestinely performed by Moslem clerics in lieu of a *mohel*.

When Communist rule collapsed in 1991, about 400 Albanian Jews emigrated to Israel. With sad farewells they left a country where they had maintained strong ties to their Moslem and Christian neighbors. They left a country, small and disadvantaged, but one that proved its eminent greatness in human terms.

Two centuries ago Lord Byron wrote:

"Fierce are Albania's children, yet they lack not virtues ...

Their native fastnesses not more secure

Than they in doubtful time of troublous need:

Their wrath how deadly! But their friendship sure..."