
Albanian Album: Co

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 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