

Courage And Compassion

By Jack Goldfarb

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.

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, assembled the detainees, including hundreds of Jews.