

on In The Holocaust

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 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..."