

LETTER FROM TIRANA



JACK GOLDFARB

Albanian Honor Code

In Albania it is called *Kanun*, a prescribed set of ethical rules that obliges its citizens to protect anyone in need of refuge, even a sworn enemy. During World War II, the Albanian underground was known to have issued orders that any Albanian not granting safe haven would be executed for "disgracing the Albanian people." The remarkable record shows that not one Jew within the borders of this little Balkan land fell into the hands of the Nazis, though eight Jewish partisans were killed in combat while fighting.

During a recent stay in Tirana, Albania's capital city, I realized that *Kanun* could apply to possessions as well as people.

I had been invited by the Albania-Israel Friendship Association to speak at a ceremony at the National Museum observing the 55th anniversary of V-E Day and the 52nd anniversary of Israel's independence. I paid tribute to the Albanians' courage and compassion and to the ethical code of *Kanun*.

At a reception afterward, a young man approached me holding a well-preserved, beautifully illuminated Hebrew prayer book. He explained that his parents had sheltered a Bulgarian Jewish family named Allagemi. When they later left for Israel, they entrusted three volumes of these "holy books" plus other valuables to the care of his family. The Allagemis promised to return one day to retrieve them. For two generations this young man's family has been zealously guarding the books and valuables waiting for the owner or his heirs to claim them.

Albania's religiously diverse population is 70% Muslim, 20% Albanian Orthodox Christian, 10% Roman Catholic. The Jews are a tiny remnant. Most of Albania's several thousand Jews abruptly immigrated to Israel when the country's postwar communist regime fell in 1991. Today, Albania's Jewish "community" numbers about 40 souls, including octogenarians and teenagers.

Historically, Albanians have played down their religious differences. Even the xenophobic communist dictator, Enver Hoxha, who ruled for 40 years, cynically exploited this tradition in 1967

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when he banned all religions, proclaiming Albania "the world's first atheistic state."

When Communism collapsed in 1991, the mosques and churches reopened their doors, but Albania's Jews, dispersed mainly in the towns of Tirana, Elbasan and Valona, had no synagogues to return to. The last existing synagogue in Albania was destroyed in Valona during a battle in World War I.

Jews are believed to have first arrived in Albania when a Roman ship transporting Jewish slaves from conquered Judea was wrecked off the country's coast on the Adriatic Sea. The slaves fled ashore, and were aided in their escape by the Illyrians, the Albanians' ancestors who then inhabited this land.

That episode in ancient history eloquently repeated itself in World War II when hundreds of European Jews fleeing the Nazi Holocaust managed to reach Albania. The Jews were allowed to take refuge in the country, then under Italian occupation. When the Italians withdrew in 1943 and the Germans moved in, the Albanians secretly began to shield their own Jewish citizens and the refugees who had sought haven here. Government officials resisted Nazi demands for lists of Jews. No Jew was asked to wear the yellow star. Faked identity documents were provided. The Albanians hid Jews in the villages, the countryside and in the cities.

Today, Albania's few Jews gather three times a year in Tirana to celebrate Rosh Hashana, Passover and Chanukah. The subdued, "left-behind" ambiance, however, brightens up when the Joint Distribution Committee representatives arrive from Rome bringing holiday provisions and gifts. Festivities break up early, though, as members feel safer returning to their distant towns before nightfall.

It is a little over a year since the Albanians were called on yet again to flex the principles of the *Kanun*. During the 11-week NATO bombing campaign to drive Serb forces out of Kosovo, some 440,000 ethnic Albanians fled southwest from Kosovo to northern Albania. One refugee camp was set up by

Suzannah Cullufi, whose brother Dr. Max Cikuli is Albania's former health minister and a member of the Albanian parliament. Dr. Cikuli is one of three members of the Jewish delegation to the Albania-Israel Friendship Association.

Led by 65-year-old Refik Veselaj, the first Albanian awarded Yad Vashem's honor of "Righteous Among the Nations," the association, with branches in 6 cities, boasts over 500 members.

Among them are many of the 57 others who also carry the title of "Righteous" for saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

The friendship association has an energetic agenda sponsoring cultural programs, exhibitions, and discussion forums. Veselaj says there is a deep reservoir of admiration and goodwill for Israel in Albania.

The association often acts as a "surrogate" for the tiny Jewish community. Members tend Jewish graves, recite traditional Hebrew graveside prayers (in Albanian Translation) and grace tombstones with flowers.

The association's newest project is a planned "Jewish Museum," to be erected in the southern town of Berat. The museum will depict the 2,000-year-old Jewish history in Albania and particularly focus on the rescue of Albania's Jews during the Holocaust.

Berat is the favored site because Shabbetai Zevi, the notorious Jewish "False Messiah" of the Middle Ages, is believed buried there. The Ottoman Turkish Sultan had exiled Zevi to the Albanian region of his empire, where Zevi died on Yom Kippur in 1676.

Leaving the National Museum after the association's ceremony, I walk down Durres Street past the shuttered and cordoned off Yugoslavian Embassy. Its snarled flag still drooping from a balcony, the building has been closed since the Kosovo crisis, when Yugoslavia severed relations with Albania. The shopkeepers across the street tell me about the two dogs abandoned in the diplomats' rush to leave. They are being fed twice a day by a kindly neighborhood lady.

— JACK GOLDFARB