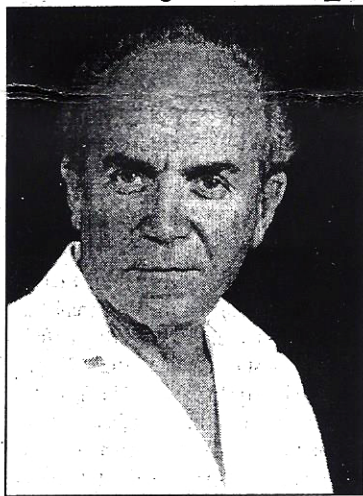


Remembering Refik Veseli: A Portrait of Compassion

By Ledio Veseli



Refik Veseli

On November 24th, 2000, Albania lost one of its best well-known photographers since the Marubi family, the man who became a bridge to build a strong Albanian relationship with Israel. His family lost a wonderful man whose honesty and virtues made us all proud.

Born on June 26th, 1926 in the mountainous town of Kruja, Refik Veseli grew up in a middle class family with 2 other brothers and 2 sisters. After finishing elementary education in his hometown, he pursued his education in Durres, and then graduated from the School of Commerce in Kavaja, established and run by the American Red Cross. His artistic skills started to show and his passion for photography became more than a hobby; it became a sixth sense to him.

At first, he began taking pictures of his hometown and its people dressed in traditional costumes, surrounding unique landscapes, the famous castle of Kruja as well as the cobble-stoned Bazaar.

During the WWII, Refik worked as an assistant/student at a photo studio in Tirana. There his artistic life took a decisive turn. He got to know Moshe Mandil, a distinguished Jewish photographer from Novi Sad. Conditions were extremely hard and life threatening for the Jewish people all over the Nazi-occupied Europe. In Albania, the occupying troops of Hitler had already taken over the country. After consulting with his family in Kruja, Refik offered to hide Mandil and his family of four; and another Jewish family at their house. It was as brave as dangerous because if the German Gestapo would discover them, not only the Jewish would be killed, but also the Albanians who hid them.

Nonetheless, the legendary Albanian traditions and moral obligations of saving someone's life were stronger than the fear of having one's own family perish. Thus, after taking a risky journey to Kruja, dressed in traditional Albanian clothes and accompanied by Refik, his father and brothers, the two Jewish families arrived safely at the Veseli house, where they hid for a year. This story and other ones of saving Jews in Albania has been told by Mr. Harvey

Sarner in his book, "Rescue in Albania" (Brunswick Press, 1997). The heroic actions of the Albanian people during WWII made Albania the only country in the Nazi-occupied Europe where, after the War the number of Jews was greater than at its beginning. When Yugoslavia was liberated, the Mandil family decided to return to their hometown of Novi Sad. Then 18 years old, Refik accompanied them all the way to the border, across the snow-covered mountains to make sure they would be safe.

During the time they were hiding, Mandil taught the ever-curious Refik more about photography. Their professional relationship continued after the war as well. In addition, Mandil invited Refik to live with his family in Novi Sad and learn more about the fine art of photography. Refik went as an amateur photographer and returned as a highly skilled professional, whose artwork soon became something Albania could be proud of. In August 1944, after having been involved in the Resistance Movement, young Refik took up arms to fight the invaders.

One thing I remember well about my uncle, he didn't like to talk much about himself. That is why only after his death was I able to know more about his professional achievements. Later I learned that he took about 90% of all photos taken during the battle to liberate Tirana and now they constitute an important part of the archives of the National Museum of History.

In 1952 he was hired as a photographer by the Institute of Sciences [now the Albanian Academy of Sciences] where he set up the first photography laboratory.

At the same time, together with other Veseli family members, he was running "Foto Studio Sporti" in Tirana, until the Communist regime banned all private enterprises in the country. I remember as a child going through the old negatives (most of them were glass) and the photos kept meticulously in the archives of the Studio. Patrons often returned for additional photos. Even today it makes me very proud to hear people say that photographs taken at Foto Studio Sporti are the finest they have seen.

Many earlier patrons were delighted when Refik re-opened his studio in 1991. Patrons rushed to congratulate him...and have their pictures taken.

In 1965 Refik began working at the Institute of Cultural Monuments. This position gave him the opportunity to show his talent and almost-magical artistic skills, as well as preserving Albanian culture. Refik loved his country and wanted to

show the best of it. Beautiful scenes of Berati, Gjirokastra, Kruja, Shkodra and other old cities are now "engraved" on film.

Growing up, I remember how my uncle used to teach us to view objects from a different angle and perspective, and then capture them on film in a way that people would react, "Wow! I've passed by this house hundreds of times but I never saw it this beautiful." Then too, I only recently learned that Refik designed the lighting system for the very first Albanian TV studio.

When the National Museum of History was preparing to open, Refik was hired to work there. Although faced with constant challenge from bureaucrats, he was able to build the most modern photo lab in Albania there and his aim was to present the history of our country in the best possible light. According to Mr. Moikom Zeqo, the Museum's Director, most of the pictures that are displayed there bear Refik's signature.

Although during the peak years of his professional career Albania was virtually isolated to the outside world, his work made it to other countries and was warmly received by audiences there.

In 1990, after a long series of efforts by the Mandils, the family he had rescued, Refik was invited to officially visit Israel. He became the first Albanian to receive from Yad Vashem the high honor "Righteous Gentile" for his parents and himself. This award is given to non-Jewish people who risked their own lives to save Jews during WWII. When Refik returned to Albania, he made great efforts to find many other Albanians who had saved Jews. He sent their names to Yad Vashem so they too could get recognized for their contribution. He helped organize the 'Albania-Israel Friendship Association' and from 1992 until he passed away, Refik served as its president.

Through photo exhibitions, TV programs and concerts, Refik has helped promote Israel in Albania.

People who knew him always remember Refik with a smile on his face. His lively eyes, modesty and extreme honesty characterized the man who didn't say much, but was always ready to offer his help to whoever needed it. He especially loved children, and to those interested in photography, he tried teaching everything he knew.

I remember how he taught my brother and me to always be truthful and respect others. He didn't press us, or his children to imitate him, but it was impossible not to learn from his ability to recognize something beautiful, whether it was people, a simple object or a landscape. If we made a mistake he would criticize us even more than our parents did - but then whenever we accomplished something, he would praise and reward us.

Refik left a lovely wife, three children, six grandchildren and many people who admired him. His two sons, who reside in Tirana, have become outstanding photographers with solid professional portfolios. His only daughter and her family reside in Haledon, NJ.

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Konto Staszowskiego Towarzystwa Kulturalnego: