

Visiting the Albanian Righteous

By Jack Goldfarb

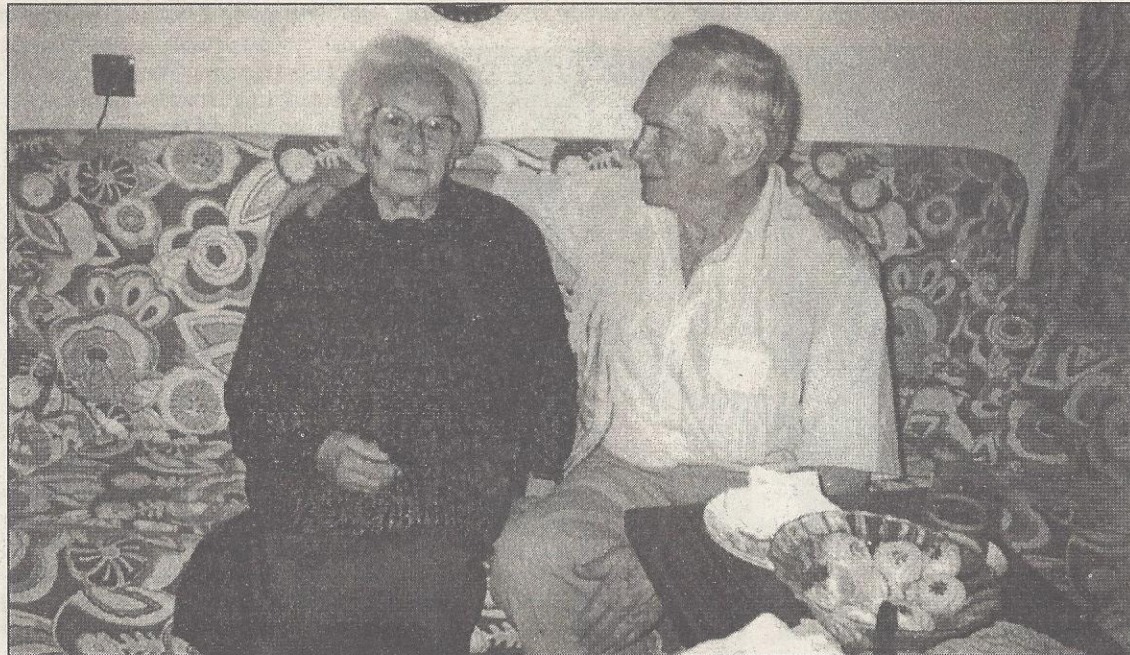
We are warily rolling along in our Mercedes on a twisting mountain road in central Albania. The panorama of distant hills and dark green valleys stretches westward to the blue Adriatic. My Albanian friend, Edison Ypi, is navigating the scary drive on our way to the provincial town of Kavaje. There I hope to find Mihal Lakatari, a legendary "Righteous Among the Nations" hero who was instrumental in saving the lives of 130 Jews during World War II.

Last year I had spoken to Lakatari's son-in-law several times, phoning from New York. He told me Lakatari was suffering from cancer, and if I wanted to meet him, I should come soon. In the summer I was finally able to journey on my "self-assigned mission." I hoped to find six surviving "Righteous Persons" in Albania, persons recognized by Israel's Yad Vashem for their singular courage and compassion. I had their addresses and wanted to pay my personal respects to them.

I have been visiting Albania often in recent years, ever since I first learned the inspiring story that the Albanians had saved their entire Jewish population during the Holocaust. No Nazi-occupied country in Europe had such a stainless record. Albania's 50 years of isolation under xenophobic Communist rule had kept this noble story from being widely known until a few years ago.

Albania's native Jews, together with refugees from other Nazi-occupied countries, had numbered about 2000. But a traditional code of honor – the Besa – obliging Albanians to provide shelter and protection for those in need, had much to do with saving all these Jews.

We arrived in Kavaje just as the evening's chant resounded from a gleam-



Vera Kilic, here with author Jack Goldfarb, is the most elderly Jew in Albania today

ing pink and white mosque across the main square. We asked a group of older men playing shesh besh for directions to Mihal Lakatari's house. His son-in-law had assured me everyone in town knew him.

"Did you know that he is dead?" a gray-headed elder asked Edison. "Four months ago," he added. Edison translated the sad news to me in English. The men directed us to his son-in-law's house, where we arrived just as Lakatari's son-in-law awoke from an afternoon nap. Taulant Biturku, sleepy but smiling, spoke fluent English.

In the sunlit living room, his wife, Mary, cuddled their 4-month old daughter, named Michel, after her late grandfather. Biturku spoke in reverent detail of the audacious wartime exploits of

Mihal Lekatari, who had saved 130 Jewish lives and thus defined his own.

Lekatari was in his late teens when a group of 54 Yugoslavian Jewish families, interned in an Italian-run detention camp in Kavaje, were unexpectedly freed. It was the summer of 1943 and the Italians were withdrawing their military from Albania. The German Army was moving in to occupy the country. The Italian camp commandante assembled his prisoners and told them he was opening the gates of the camp and burning all the records. The Jews fled into hiding in the town, well aware that the Gestapo would be hunting them down and deporting them.

After Lekatari had befriended a Jewish family named Comforti, the clandestine Jewish Council approached him and asked for his help. They needed Identity

Cards to survive, but could not afford to buy them from the Police or the Black Market. Lekatari did not hesitate. Armed with a pistol and an empty cement sack, he wheeled his bicycle up to the Police Headquarters building. A good friend on guard outside, waved him in. Inside, he swiftly cut the telephone line and confronted the solitary officer on duty. At pistol point, he demanded the entire stock of blank I.D. cards. The policeman offered no resistance and Lekatari biked away with his sackful of cards.

A local photographer provided the necessary photos for the 130 I.D.'s. All cards were made out in Moslem names, describing the bearers as Albanians "from Kosova," then a part of Yugoslavia. The grateful Jewish Council offered Lakatari a payment in reward, but he stoutly

refused. After the War, in 1954, these saved Jews held a reunion in Belgrade and, of course, Mihal Lakatari was there as guest of honor.

We are en route again headed for Elbasan along a pot-holed dusty road in the mountainous heart of the country. In Elbasan we are looking for Njazi Bicaku whose family sheltered 26 Jews in a nearby village for more than a year. The postal address I have for Bicaku is vague: "Near Ali Myftiu School."

At the school neither the pupils or the young teacher knew of Bicaku. Obviously someone of an older generation was more likely to know. Finally a grizzly-bearded shopkeeper pointed us toward Bicaku's ramshackle cottage. We edged warily past a watchdog, two tired-looking horses and a noisy gaggle of scrawny turkeys, to be welcomed by Njazi Bicaku into his darkened little dwelling. A large photo of his father Mufail, dominated the cluttered room. Bicaku's wiry frame and dignified bearing belied his 78 years. A venerable patriarch, he had 10 grown children. When I told him why we had come, his face lit up. He opened the window curtains, light flooded in, and, as we sipped our proffered glasses of dhal, a watery yogurt drink, Njazi Bicaku told us his story.

Continued in the next issue

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By Jack Goldfarb

Continued from last issue

In the summer of 1943 a group of Jews fleeing from occupied Shkup in Yugoslavia managed to reach the tiny Albanian village of Qarrisht, where the Bicaku family gave them refuge. They told of another Jewish group of eight persons who had made their way as far as Tirana where they were in hiding, hoping to make it down to Qarrisht some 40 miles away. Njazi's father volunteered to go to Tirane to search for them. There he looked up an old friend, a police official, who knew where the group was. Only after convincing the elderly woman who was hiding them that he had come to help them, did she relent and let him into her house. The elder Bicaku urged the group to come back with him to the village, but he cautioned, "Remember, we are poor!" All eight declared, "Never mind, let's go!"

A total of 39 people lived in the large Bicaku farmhouse and in a nearby hut in a forest clearing for over a year. "We had bread, potatoes, beans," says Njazi, "not much money, but we managed with food for our 'guests' and our family of 13."

He puffs thoughtfully on his smoking pipe, as he recalls one heavily snowing night when Nazi troops suddenly arrived in the village. "The snow was knee deep and the Germans would be looking for places to billet. Most of the villagers knew we were hiding Jews."

"When a neighbor came to warn me that the Germans might demand shelter from us, I told him, 'I have my gun, and if anyone brings the Germans here, I will kill them.'"

As Njazi Bicaku walked with us through the cobblestoned streets of Elbasan back to our parked car, he lapsed into a pensive silence. I sensed that nowadays he seldom had the occasion anymore to speak of that luminous time of his life. For a few hours our presence had evoked memories of which he and his descendants could ever be proud.

We grope our way through a labyrinthine maze of backstreets in Tirana, the Albanian capital, and ultimately arrive at Number 50 Muamet Gjollleshea Street. We climb five flights of stairs to a top floor flat, where Petro and Magdalena Shkurti greet us. The elderly couple are all smiles but offer apologies for our breathless condition. These spry, white-haired octogenarians tell us they manage these 72 steps three or four times a day. Petro, tall, neatly attired in a pressed shirt and tie, is a retired geologist. Magdalena, is a retired economist. They fuss over us, offer fruit, sweets, drinks, tell us they have never had American visitors before.

In tandem they recount how they were teen-age sweethearts in the southern town of Berat during the German Occupation. On a freezing winter night the Rubeni family of 6 persons, including four young children, arrived at the door of Magdalena's parents asking for help. Her mother, Dhoksi Sfeci, unhesitatingly took them in and gave them a room. She explained to Magdalena that these people had come from far-off Prishtina in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia and needed caring for. The Rubenis stayed on. The two families grew fond of each other but the danger of discovery and its consequent

death penalty for everyone always hung over them. Relatives and neighbors knew what the Sfeci family was up to. On occasions when word came that Nazis were combing the area, Petro and Magdalena dressed the Rubeni family in typical Berati women's clothing, mounted them on horses and led them to the houses of trusted friends in nearby villages. Magdalena, Petro and her parents lived together with the Rubenis as a close family for 16 months.

After the fall of the Communist regime in 1991, the majority of Jews

for us while we were in Israel," says Magdalena with innocent modesty, "They took us to weddings, introduced us to their friends, kept us in their home."

Today Magdalena and Petro say they watch the news from Israel every day and worry much more about the Rubenis' safety than when they were hiding in their home. They phone each other often. Though they are Albanian Orthodox Christians, Magdalena and Petro are not avid church goers, "but we believe in God," they say, "and our dream is to see Jerusalem again."

Adelina, widowed for the past thirty years, describes herself deprecatingly as "an old woman." But her memory serves her well as she recalls details of how she and her family conspired to save the life of a Yugoslavian Jew named Manuel Menahem. He had escaped to Albania after all his family had been sent to Treblinka. When he managed to reach Elbasan he asked for help from Adelina's father, Grigor Nosi. At first, the Nosi family hid Menahem in their home, then gave him a job in their commercial alcohol factory on the outskirts of town close by

camp to inquire about Menahem's fate, he remarkably discovered that an old friend with whom he had studied at a university in Austria, was an officer stationed there. Vasil managed to convince his friend to free Menahem.

The Nosi family then hid Menahem in a small hotel they owned in a nearby village. Adelina brought him food and supplies almost daily as he passed the lonely winter of 1944 in the empty hotel until the war ended. Adelina reluctantly bids us goodbye. "Please come again. But I hope I will be here..."

When I ring her doorbell Meti Zyma on the second floor yanks a pulley contraption that clicks the downstairs door open. She greets us with effusive warmth. A vibrant 78 year-old artist, Meti's vitality is like a tonic. Her cluttered living room/studio overflows with paintings: on the walls, stacked behind tables and chairs, spilling out of closets. There are shepherds, peasant women, flowers in riotous colors and portraits galore. From these faces it is obvious that Meti likes people.

She and her late husband, Dr. Bessim Zyma, whose enlarged photograph dominates the entrance hall, went to inventive lengths to shield Jews from the intensive searches of the Gestapo. Dr. Zyma, a pioneer otolaryngologist in Tirana, often rented out part of his clinic to people whom he knew were Jews but he and Meti never asked. Such as the two young women from Italy who kept very much to themselves. When Gestapo officers suddenly appeared at the clinic one day, the terrified women held their breath behind an adjoining door, while Dr. Zyma blocked the way. "I am treating patients in the other rooms," he asserted, "you cannot go in there." Bold insistence on "medical immunity" carried the day.

When Lev Dzienciolski, an ailing Jewish refugee from Poland, who was being sought by the Gestapo, came to the clinic in desperate need of treatment, the Zymas "hospitalized" him for months in an infirmary room. Whenever he ventured outdoors, Bessim and Meti saw to it that his face was well-wrapped in bandages to insure his "anonymity." Dzienciolski eventually left, escaping to Italy, remaining ever grateful to the Zymas for his survival.

Today one of Meti Zyma's closest friends is Lev Dzienciolski's cousin, 80 year-old Vera Kilic, one of the handful of Jews left in Albania. Meti and Vera speak mostly by phone although they live nearby each other. They reminisce about those heroic days of defiance against the Nazis. They recall how the Albanian rescuers and the Jewish rescued were bonded together in their fear and hatred of the enemies occupying the country. But Meti and Vera often remind each other that a far stronger bond was the love and warm personal relationships of the Albanians and Jews in those eventful times.

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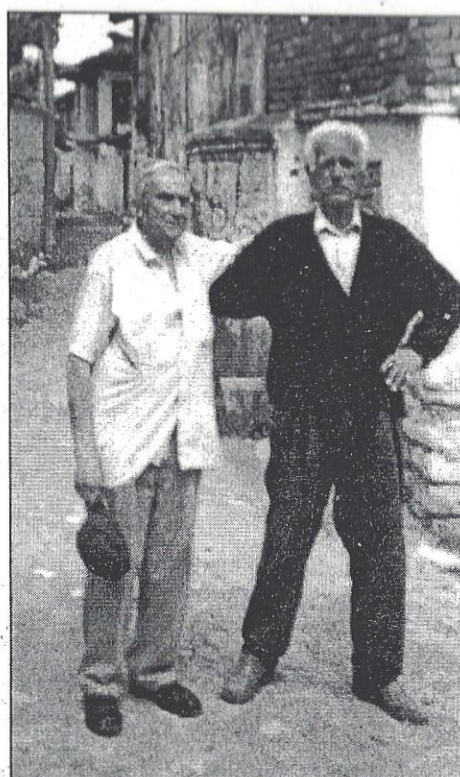
Njazi Bicaku threatened to kill anyone who betrayed the Jews his family was hiding



Meti Zyma, with her husband, the later surgeon Bessim Zyma, hid Jews in his medical center



Adelina Kosturi carried food daily to a Jew hiding in an empty hotel



Petro and Magdalena Shkurti were teenage sweethearts who worked together to save the Jews

in Albania opted to emigrate to Israel. Despite their deep gratitude and strong ties to their Albanian neighbors, the Jews were drawn to their "Promised Land." Most of them arrived there in 1991 while the Gulf War was raging in the Middle East and Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles were falling on Israel.

The Rubeni family also made their way to Israel, and faithfully kept in touch with Magdalena and Petro. When the Shkurtis were invited to Israel a few years ago, to be honored at Yad Vashem as "Righteous Persons," they spent all their time with the Rubeni family. "Maybe we are more in debt to them for all they did

We edge our way past children playing football behind a heap of uncollected rubbish in Tirana's Prokop Myzeqari Street. On an immaculately polished wooden door at Number 7 we press the buzzer and go upstairs. Adelina Kosturi, a well-groomed elderly lady dressed in widow's black, warmly greets us in English. In the modern, marble-floored apartment Adelina's middle-aged son and her daughter-in-law, a plastic surgeon, offer us glasses of arak and salty cheese byreki. They speak little English but smile constantly.

to a German military camp.

A Nazi soldier who frequently came to the factory became friendly with Menahem not knowing that he was a Jew. On one occasion he told Menahem that he had been stationed at a Concentration Camp in Poland and how vast numbers of Jews had been exterminated there. He showed Menahem photos of the bodies of dead Jewish children, and added that the corpses were savaged by dogs.

Menahem killed the German soldier on the spot. He was arrested shortly afterwards by the Germans and awaited execution. When Adelina's brother, Vasil, went to the