

## RESCUE IN ALBANIA\*

Forum of Albanian intellectuals in Croatia, in Zagreb, published in 2008 “SALVATION IN ALBANIA, HUNDRED PERCENT OF JEWS IN ALBANIA SAVED FROM HOLOCAUST”, by Harvey Sarnier, in A5 format, on 114 pages. The book, in addition to the *Preface* of the editor, whose author is M.A. Muhamet Morina, *Introduction of the author*, *Preface* in English language by Van Christa, and in Croatian language by Prof. Dr. Ivo Goldstein, has *11 chapters*, “*Short (incomplete) bibliography*” and several photos, including the photos of the children, victims of Holocaust and several *Righteous*.

The book is based on testimonies and documents, and talks about Albanians and Jews in the WWII and depicts many, for a long unknown facts about Albanians and their nobleness and humanity and highest moral values in conditions in the gravest conditions of fascist occupation. The book is about the Albanian Righteous who were saving and saved Jews.

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Holocaust is a unique genocidal event in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Nazi Germany and its collaborationists killed, in a planned manner and systematically, in the period 1933-1943, around 6,000,000 Jews, of which 1,500,000 children. This was the most systematic and the most horrific genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (according to the duration, size of the territory in which it was committed, and by the number of victims).

The Nazis, in accordance with their racist ideology, politics, and practice, aimed at, *inter alia*, achieve the “*Final solution of Jewish issue*”, that is, to destroy the complete Jewish population in Europe.

The Decision on “final solution of Jewish issue” in the occupied Europe was made by the closest circle of highest ranking Nazis on 20 January 1942, at the secret conference in a luxurious villa at the lake of Wannsee near Berlin, where the highest ranking functionaries of Nazi party and the German government held an extraordinary meeting and approved,

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harmonized and increased the number those needed for the implementation of the “final solution of Jewish issue”.

“Final solution” is a coded name of the Nazi regime for willful and planned massive killing of all European Jews. During the meeting in Wannsee, the functionaries of the government made the decision to exterminate Jews, without any hesitation or remorse. Having adopted the most effective way of extermination of Jews, they immediately started with the transformation of the concentration compass to the extermination camps, with the use of poisonous gas. Train compositions full of Jewish men, women, and children, kept arriving from all European countries to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and other camps for the extermination in the occupied Poland.

Jews were selected for extermination, only because they were born as Jews. Several centuries long anti-Semitism made Jews a targeted group in Germany and it direct its brutality and ruthlessness on their persecution. Jews were defined by Nazis as inhuman beings who “deserve” the extermination, like Roma people, homosexuals, Jehovah witnesses, political opponents, and “civilians who lived in valleys” in the occupied countries.

The occupation, quisling creation Independent State of Croatia took part in the extermination of Jews, especially in the concentration camp of death **Jasenovac** (between August 1941 and 22 April 1945), where, in addition to Serbs, Roma, Bosniacs, and other antifascists, many Jews were from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia were killed on a genocidal basis.

The collaborationist, quisling Serbia took part in the extermination of Jews, where among the Serb nationalists, including the Serb Orthodox Church, the anti-Semitism is a historic fact, which is commonly uncommented in Serbia while forcing a false thesis on exclusively friendly attitude of Serbs towards Jews throughout the history of Serbia. In the course of the WWII, Serbia was the first *judenfrei* – first country in Europe “cleared” of Jews. Even in August 1941, Jewish prisoners were transferred from all the camps in Serbia to a newly established concentration camp Staro sajmište in Zemun – near Belgrade. By the mid December, the remaining Jews were from Serbia were captured and brought to the camp. Mainly women and children were then in the camp, and several hundred of surviving men performed various tasks in the camp. In the eve of New 1942, there were 14,000 Jews and Roma in the camp. By the spring 1942, they were all killed. The last 5,000 were suffocated in April 1942, with gas, which was for that purpose transported from Germany in a vehicle known in a Serbian language as “*dušegupka*“. That was the reason that the functionaries of the occupation forces in Serbia praised that Serbia was the first country free of Jews.

Many Jews from Belgrade and other places in Serbia were also killed in the concentration camp at Banjica (Belgrade), as well as collective (Kragujevac, Šabac, Niš) and labor (mine in Bor) camps.

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A number of non-Jews participated, under the terms of Nazi occupation, in saving Jews. Individuals exposed their lives to danger to save Jews and others, exposed to the Nazi extermination.

The story about those Jews who escaped the planned execution are imminently related to this horrible genocide. In other words, it is the story about Jews who managed to survive in the areas under the control of Nazis and/or thier collaborationists and the fifth column.

Albania is the only country in the occupied Europe in which Jews were not killed, and they were not the victims of Holocaust, as the author of the book “RESCUE IN ALBANIA ...”, Harvey Sarner, called “**Nazi death machine**”. That was the only occupied country which managed to escape the Nazi extermination of Jews, and which ad a unique survival rate of 100%. The most important reason for this Nazi failure is, in addition to the small number of domestic Jews, a comparatively small number of refugees from other European countries, a danger from the allies, is the fact **that the Jews had an assistance from the Albanians who helped them and protected them.**

The book of Harvey Sarner speaks about that assistance and protection. According to the author, it was “**primarily written to describe the miracle way how Albanians reacted at the time when foreign and Albanian Jews sought protection while facing Holocaust**”.

In early 1938, 300 Albanian Jews lived in Albania, whose number was significantly increased in 1938 and 1939, as well as number of those who came to Albania.

It was not so difficult to get visa for Albania as a transit destination in Europe, given that Albanian government was liberal in the matters of granting and issuance of transit visas.

Albania was a useful stop on the way to another country. First Jewish refugees came to Albania in 1933, mainly from Germany and Austria, while they were on the way to the United States, South America, Turkey and other destinations.

In February 1939, one hundred Jews who came from Vienna, were granted permission to build a settlement in Albania (60 in Tirana and 40 in Durres). In March 1939, another 95

Jewish families arrived. The King Zog allowed Jews to settle in Albania. But, while saving his life, less than a month later, he escaped to Greece, after the Italians occupied Albania.

The Fascist Italy committed the aggression against Albania on 7 April 1939 and completed the operation within seven days. After the aggression against Yugoslavia (18 April 1941) Italy expanded the occupied Albania to a significant portion of Yugoslavia (Kosovo, western Macedonia, and parts of Montenegro). Following the capitulation of Italy, the armed forces of the Third Reich continued with the occupation of already expanded Albania.

Jews from Albania and Kosovo, which was annexed to the occupied Albania, were lucky to be situated in the Italian occupied territory, with significantly less severe anti Jewish regime of the fascist Italy. During the Italian occupation of Albania, many Jewish refugees lived normal lives, without concealing their identity. They celebrated Jewish holy days, and earned for living as they could.

Following the attack against and the occupation of Albania, Italy exerted pressure on the Albanian government to expel foreign Jews and impose additional restriction onto the domestic Jews. However, Albanians resisted to this pressure and no Jew was expelled from Albania.

Jews were comparatively safe in Italy until the capitulation in September 1943, when the Nazi Germany replaced the marionette government with the four-member Grand Council. Nazis arrived to Albania. Around 800 Jewish refugees, who came to Albania from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Germany, Poland, and Austria, faced then the fear of death and the need for protection and salvation.

In Prishtina, the capital of the annexed territories, local authorities pleased the German requests and imprisoned 60 Jewish men. Doctor Spiro Lit convinced the Mayor that he cannot allow Germans to take 60 Jews to Poland and kill them there. He also convinced the German authorities that Jewish prisoners had typhus and that they should be sent to hospitals in Albania to avoid the epidemia. Jews were taken to Berat, where they were issued false documents and then spread throughout Albania, and stayed mainly with their friends of Dr. Lit in the towns of Lushnja, Shijak, Kavaja, and Kruja.

The survival rate of Jews in Kosovo was sixty percent, which means that Kosovo is one of the territories with comparatively biggest survival rate in the occupied Europe.

Around the late 1943, Germans asked the Jewish leaders to provide them with the list of Jews who lived in Albania, which was the first step towards the deportation of Jews to the concentration camps. However, the Jews did not provide this list, but in the course of 1944 there was still a danger that the Grand Council would meet the German request.

In the spring 1944, Nazis asked the Grand Council in official capacity to provide the list of Jews, demanding to gather them in one place. The Albanian marionette government rejected this request. Minister of the interior, Xhafer Deva, succeeded to convince the Nazis to accept his refusal to provide them with the list of Jews.

Albanian Jews, just like the others who were lucky enough to reach Albania, were hidden by Albanian Muslims and Christians, thanks to which they avoided the Holocaust.

The truth about the salvation of Jews in Albania, these noble deeds, due to the isolating and anti-Israel politics of the communist dictator Enver Hoxha, was hidden for four decades. After Albania “opened” itself, these actions of Albanians were finally widely known, the Albanians who protected Jews during the Italian and German occupation.

Every Albanian Jew survived Holocaust. Every Greek, Yugoslav, Austrian, and German Jew who was lucky enough to reach Albania also survived Holocaust. Albanian reality, according the findings of the author, are even more important as the result of the fact that majority of Righteous (saviors) were Muslims, although there were people of Eastern orthodox or Roma-Catholic religion. Another fact is also important which is that no Albanian ever took any compensation for hiding Jews.

Situation in Albania, among other things, was also different from the situation in other occupied countries. The period in which the Jews were exposed to a serious threat was comparatively short, between the autumn 1943 and October 1944. Unlike other occupied countries, Albania was the only occupied country which had more Jews after the WWII than before the war.

While the evil was savaging in the neighboring European countries, Albania, according to the author, was, as one of the survivors named it, “heaven” for Jewish refugees.

Harvey Sarnier presented numerous examples of saving of Jews by Albanians (Refik Veseli, Sulo Mecaj, Mihal Lekatari, Atif and Ganimet Toptani, Vasil and Adelina Nosi, Beqir Qoqja, Metin, Azis and Shpresa Ruli, Ali Kuci, Besim and Aishe Kadiu, Shuqyri Myrto, and others). Refik Veseli did not allow Nazis to enter his home. Mihal Lekatari went to police, stole empty ID cards and distributed them among Jewish refugees.

**The surviving Jews, as the author stated, gave recognition to the people of Albania, its brave, courageous, strong, fearful, and faithful sons, who did not fear even of death; they protected Jews and refugees (Jews), and did not allow anything to happen to them, even at cost of their personal lives. The doors of this small country were widely opened to Jews, a haunted group, and they gave them an opportunity to survive the worst of all wars. Jews survived thanks to the generosity of Albania.**

The author also indicated in this book several interesting and very important issues, which along with the research provide reliable, corroborated, authentic and valid answers. More specifically, these are the issues: how to explain that the Jewish community survived in Albania, as well as foreign Jews who were lucky to come inside its protected borders? Why did Albanians expose themselves to danger to protect Jews? He found the answer to these questions in a moral code of Albanians “*kanun*” and the notion “*besa*”.

According to the author, **Jews in Albania were Albanians. Albanian Jews were members of the community, so little of them spoke Yiddish or Ladino. They spoke Albanian or some Greek, just like their neighbors. They were all just like all other Albanians, although they lived in small Jewish settlements.**

Based on this moral code, Albanians, the author concluded, are different for all other nations in Europe. This small group, which lived in difficult economic conditions, appeared as the most moral society in the difficult days of the WWII.

Albanian Jews fought in guerilla groups, mainly with partisans. As an illustration, Pepe Biro Kantos was a partisan and he remained in the Albanian army after the war, and he became one of the highest-ranking officers.