

Rescue in Albania

ONE HUNDRED PERCENT OF JEWS IN
ALBANIA
RESCUED FROM HOLOCAUST

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

ALBANIAN AMERICAN CIVIC LEAGUE

Throughout their long history Albanians have desired and promoted peace and cooperation among all peoples. They have welcomed foreign visitors to their shores in a spirit of friendship. And, when Jewish refugees found their way to Albania, often fleeing for their lives, the Albanian people gave them shelter and protection.

Under fascist rule in Albania, as in other occupied countries during World War II, the Nazi authorities maintained strict surveillance over the Jewish population, registering both natives and new arrivals, and then herding them into camps. In Albania, Jews were removed from Burrese and Vlora, because these towns were strategic transportation links, and while the Nazis tried to deport all Jews not of Albanian citizenship, the Albanian people helped them escape concentration camps by taking them into their homes, giving them food and shelter, and hiding them.

At first, individual Albanians saved Jews on their own initiative. Later, when it became more dangerous, the task was organized by National Liberation Councils in the towns and villages. There were cases where Jewish families, in great danger of discovery, were moved from family to family and village to village, from town to country and back again. Sometimes Jewish families traveled with false passports given to them by Albanians. Often Jews were disguised as Albanian peasants and covertly relocated. In the process, many Albanians were arrested and shot to death for their heroic activities.

The Albanian American Civic League was founded in January 1989 to express the concerns of 400,000 Albanian Americans about the national identity and well-being of seven million Albanians living side by side in their original Balkan homeland - - in Albania, Kosova, western Macedonia, southern Montenegro, southern Serbia (Presheva), and northern Greece (Chamria). As a Member of the House of Representatives from 1985 to 1989, and as chairman of the Albanian American Civic League since that time, I have repeatedly sounded the alarm about Slobodan Milosevic's brutal treatment of the Albanian people of Kosova and in other parts of the Balkans under his influence.

During my many trips to Kosova, Macedonia, and Albania, I led delegations of congressmen, human rights activists, and journalists to expose the horrific conditions under which Albanians have been forced to live - under communism in Albania for fifty years since the end of World War II and under hostile Slavic regimes in the former Yugoslavia since the death of Marshall Tito in 1974.

It was my first trip to Albania in June 1990 with Congressman Tom Lantos, himself a Hungarian Jew who survived the Holocaust, that the then Communist Party leader and Albanian President, Ramiz Alia, in order to curry favor with Lantos, handed us a file containing the unpublicized heroic deeds of Albanians in rescuing Jews during World War II. These documents led to the research that resulted in the corroboration by Yad Vashem in Israel that the Albanian people deserved special recognition as a nation for their unique and courageous actions, which saved all Jews who resided in Albania and all who fled the Nazis from other European countries and made it to Albania.

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Albanian population in the province of Kosova and in Macedonia. While these Albanians share the same language, culture, values and commitment to justice of their relatives who live within the boundaries of Albania, they have faced a far different situation in their own lands.

Albanians in Kosova have been denied the most fundamental of human rights. The autonomy, which they enjoyed earlier under the government of the former Yugoslavia, has been systematically restricted and destroyed under an increasingly nationalist Serbian regime over the past ten years. Albanians who seek to exercise their fundamental civil rights have been systematically arrested, beaten, and tortured, and more recently have been subjected to violent military action and ethnic cleansing by Serbian authorities.

Albanians in neighboring Macedonia have also faced discrimination. Attempts to open a university in Tetova with a curriculum taught in Albanian and attempts to raise an Albanian flag alongside the Macedonian flag in Gostivar were prevented by police action.

It is a tragic irony that the children and grandchildren of the Albanians who helped Jews in Albania to escape during World War II now face discrimination and violence in Kosova and Macedonia. It is important to understand the background of these Albanians, and it is for this reason we urge you to take the time to read *Rescue in Albania*. This is a compelling story, and one that all of us can benefit from reading. At the same time, we must commit ourselves to see that the children and grandchildren of the brave heroes whose story this volume tells do not become victims of the forces of evil and repression that in every age work to suppress human freedom.

Benjamin A. Gilman

Member of Congress

Tom Lantos

Member of Congress