

## Memories of the Holocaust and Genocide

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### Session 3 Holocaust and Albania – A Story of Courage and Survival

#### The Untold Story of the Jews of Albania in WWII

Van Christo

In her book, *Escape Through the Balkans: the Autobiography of Irene Grunbaum* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), translated and edited by Katherine Morris, Irene Grunbaum describes, in the extensive section on Albania, her parting thoughts as a Jew after having been protected and sheltered by Albanian Muslims and Christians during Nazi German WWII occupation of Albania:

*"Farewell, Albania, I thought. You have given me so much hospitality, refuge, friends, and adventure. Farewell, Albania. One day I will tell the world how brave, fearless, strong, and faithful your sons are; how death and the devil can't frighten them. If necessary, I'll tell how they protected a refugee and wouldn't allow her to be harmed even if it meant losing their lives. The gates of your small country remained open, Albania. Your authorities closed their eyes, when necessary, to give poor, persecuted people another chance to survive the most horrible of all wars. Albania, we survived the siege because of your humanity. We thank you."*

Too little is known worldwide that only Albania in Europe protected its own Jews during the Holocaust while also offering shelter to other Jews who had escaped into Albania from Serbia, Austria, and Greece.

In the interests of historical accuracy, I want to include the facts that Denmark and Bulgaria also saved their own Jews during the Holocaust while Finland saved most of its Jews; however, all three of those countries refused to open their borders to other Jews seeking to enter them from Nazi-occupied countries. Only Albania opened its borders permitting other Jews to enter.

Yet, an American Jew named Harvey Sarner of Palm Springs, California, and London, England, who, after finding out that Albanian Muslims and Christians risked their own lives to shelter Jews, made it his personal mission to know more about those extraordinary Albanian humanitarian deeds. While much of Europe willingly gave up its Jews to the Fascists, Sarner was amazed to learn that the Albanians, whose renowned hospitality is deeply steeped in their traditions and culture, went to great lengths and personal risk to shield Jews from Nazi German occupiers of Albania during WWII.

With the advent of democracy in 1991, almost all of Albania's Jews immigrated to Israel, and it was there that Sarner learned of their heroic rescue after reading the names of Albanian Muslim and Christian saviors of Jews listed and commemorated as "*Righteous Among the Nations*" at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. Moved by such humanitarianism, in 1992 Sarner arranged, at his own expense, a joyful reunion in Israel between the Albanian Jews and their Albanian Muslim and Christian rescuers. Again, at his own expense, Sarner also made it possible for an Albanian-Muslim, Ledio Veseli, to attend a university in the USA as his personal expression of gratitude to the Albanian rescuers.

And Sarner didn't stop there: He was so impressed by the obvious warmth between seemingly disparate peoples that he was moved to research the history of the Jews in Albania from Roman times to the present day story of Joseph Jakoel, the Albanian Jew who led his people from Albania to Israel in 1991. With the help of Jakoel (who passed away in 1995), Sarner assembled a compelling history of Albania's Jews and their amazing survival in his 1994 limited-edition booklet *"The Jews of Albania."*

I first learned about Sarner after reading a short article about him and the salvation of Albania's Jews in *"Albanian Life"* published in London. After contacting its editor who gave me Sarner's address, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Sarner was an American who divided his time between California and the UK.

I contacted Sarner seeking to purchase copies of *"The Jews of Albania"*, and he generously donated a quantity of the booklet for fund-raising purposes to Frosina, a non-profit, IRS Section 501(c)(3), charitable organization that I formed in 1994, in part, to provide assistance and counsel to Albanian newcomers arriving in the USA.

After turning over my own extensive research files on Albania's Jews as an encouragement to Sarner (having originally intended to write my own article about that little-known subject), Sarner updated his book in 1997 by publishing *"Rescue in Albania: One Hundred Percent of Jews in Albania Rescued from the Holocaust"* which more fully described how and why not one single Jew was taken to a Nazi concentration camp in Albania. I was asked by Sarner to review, correct, and update the galleys of the new book, so he graciously designated Frosina as co-publisher of "Rescue in Albania" and asked me to write the Foreword.

Sarner, born in New York City, served earlier as an attorney and has a long list of credentials and honors. The author of seven books and countless articles, Sarner has received numerous awards and citations including the Order of Merit Medal from the President of Poland. An Honorary President of the Albanian-Israeli Friendship League, he is also a Board Member of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers, and co-producer and writer of a documentary "*Jews of Albania*" with Israeli TV.

On February 1, 1995, during ceremonies unveiling the names of Albanian protectors on its "Rescuer's Wall" at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, the then-Museum Director, Miles Lerman, gratefully declared "*Albania was the only country in Europe which had a larger Jewish population at the end of the war than before it!*"

An Israeli-Albanian concert was held in 1995 in Tirana, Albania, to commemorate the protection of Jews by Albanians during the Holocaust. Participants were the Kibbutz Orchestra of Israel, the Opera Orchestra of Tirana, the National Choir of Albania, and the Israeli-Albania Society. The idea for the commemoration came from Stephen Moskowitz, a Fulbright Scholar and former English Lecturer at Tirana's Polytechnic University who, after learning of the little-known Albanian humanitarianism towards the Jews, broached the subject of a joint Albanian-Israeli commemorative concert in Albania with conductor Doron Salomon when he attended a performance of the Kibbutz Orchestra in Macedonia.

After plans and preparations were finalized, the Israeli-Albanian concert was performed on November 4, 1995, in Tirana's Pyramid Center where the Kibbutz Orchestra was joined by members of the Opera Orchestra of Tirana and its leader, Bujar Llapaj, who conducted the national anthems of Israel and Albania before handing the baton to Maestro Salomon who led the orchestra and the National Choir in Mozart's Requiem.

In 1996, an Albanian scholar, Apostol Kotani, had also written a book about Albania's Jews titled "*The Hebrews in Albania During Centuries*" that was published in Tirana, Albania, wherein Kotani cited case-histories and listed the names of some 98 known Albanians - 58 Muslims and 40 Christians - who had protected Jews during the Holocaust. As further evidence of legendary Albanian hospitality and religious tolerance, it may be interesting to note that the majority of the Albanian rescuers of Jews were Muslims.

Early in 2008, I was contacted by Vandolin Palokaj, a representative of an Albanian intellectual group *in* Zabreb, Croatia - *FORUMI I INTELEKTUALEVE SHQIPTARE NE KROACI* – [FORUM ALBANSKIH INTELEKTUALACA U HRVATSKOJ] who sought my written authorization as co-publisher of “Rescue in Albania” to translate and publish “Rescue in Albania” in the Croatian language. As the surviving publisher of the book, (Harvey Sarnier had passed away in 2007), and after several exchanges of information between me and the Croatian-Albanian organization, I gladly granted authorization to have “Rescue in Albania” published in the Croatian language as “Spac U Albaniji.”

I want to thank Dr. Victoria Khiterer for including today's Albanian segment in this important conference, and Agron Alibali for organizing the Albanian portion of the program and for inviting me to present my paper on how Albania saved its Jews during the Holocaust. It is my goal to see "Rescue in Albania" reprinted in English and translated into many other languages so the story of the Holocaust and the little-known, but important, part that Albanians played in rescuing its Jews in Albania can remain an active part of our collective history.

In closing, I am distinctly honored to participate in this conference because Holocaust survivor Johanna Neumann is present today. Johanna was born in Hamburg, Germany, and survived the Holocaust in Albania with the help of the Pilku family who hid Johanna in their home during Nazi German occupation of Albania in 1943.

Thank you.

Van Christo

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