

Whereas in 1938, approximately 300 Albanian Jews lived in the Republic of Albania, and more than 1,900 escaped to Albania from Nazi-occupied Western Europe and the former Yugoslavia during World War II;

Whereas Albanians in Albania and Kosova, based on their unique history of religious tolerance, considered it a matter of national pride and tradition to help Jews during the Holocaust, and due to the actions of many individual Albanians, the entire native and refugee Jewish community in Albania during World War II survived the Holocaust;

Whereas Albanians sheltered and protected Jews in Albania and in Kosova, even at the risk of Albanian lives, beginning with the invasion and occupation of Albania by Mussolini's Italian fascists in 1939;

Whereas after Nazi Germany occupied Albania in 1943 and the Gestapo ordered Jewish refugees in the Albanian capital of Tirana to register, Albanian leaders refused to provide a list of Jews living in Albania, and Albanian clerks issued false identity papers to protect all Jews in the country;

Whereas in June 1990, Jewish American Congressman Tom Lantos and former Albanian American Congressman Joe DioGuardi were the first United States officials to enter Albania in 50 years and received from then Communist Party leader and Albanian President Ramiz Alia a thick file from the government's archives containing hundreds of news clippings and personal letters sent by Jews to their Albanian rescuers after World War II, but that the Communist government prevented from being delivered for 45 years;

Whereas Joe DioGuardi, upon returning to the United States in June 1990, sent the file to Elli Streit in Tel Aviv, Israel, for delivery to appropriate officials at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem for authentication;

Whereas Josef Jakoel and his eldest daughter, Felicita, Albanian Jews, led the emigration of nearly all Albanian Jews to Israel in 1991 as the Communist regime was collapsing;

Whereas Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Museum) has thus far designated 69 Albanians as "Righteous Persons" and Albania as one of the "Righteous among the Nations";

Whereas in February 1995, Congressmen Tom Lantos, Benjamin Gilman, and Jerrold Nadler and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi spoke at a ceremony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, commemorating the addition of Albania to the museum's "Righteous among the Nations" installation;

Whereas based on the information authenticated by Yad Vashem, Jewish American author and philanthropist Harvey Sarnet published "Rescue in Albania" in 1997, to call international attention to the unique role of the Albanian people in saving Jews from the Nazi Holocaust;

Whereas in October 1997, the Albanian American Civic League and Foundation began the distribution of 10,000 copies of "Rescue in Albania" with forewords by Congressmen Lantos and Gilman to bring to the attention of the Jewish people and their leaders the plight of Albanians in Kosova living under a brutal occupation at the hands of Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic, in order to forestall another genocide in Kosova;

Whereas in a statement at the 2005 Albanian American Civic League and Foundation's "Salute to Albanian Tolerance, Resistance, and Hope: Remembering Besa and the Holocaust", on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps, Dr. Mordechai Paldiel, then Director for the Righteous at Yad Vashem, commemorated the heroism of Albanians as "the only ones among rescuers in other countries who not only went out of their way to save Jews, but vied and competed with each other for the privilege of being a rescuer, thanks to besa", the code of honor that requires an Albanian to save the life of anyone seeking refuge, even if it means sacrificing one's own life;

Whereas in 2006, Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi, Balkan Affairs Adviser to the Civic League and Executive Director of the Albanian American Foundation, published "Jewish Survival in Albania & the Ethics of 'Besa'" in the journal of the American Jewish Congress to document the saving role of Albanians and how that role was revealed, in spite of the Communist effort to suppress it;

Whereas, on December 2, 2008, Arslan Rezniki was the first Kosovar Albanian recognized by Yad Vashem's "Righteous among Nations Department", for leading 400 Jewish families from Decan, Kosova, into safety in Albania, and his son, Mustafa Rezniki, who aided him as a teenager during World War II, accepted the award from Yad Vashem for him, posthumously;

Whereas Arif Alickaj, the Secretary of the Municipality of Decan, risked his job and his life helping the Reznikis rescue Jews in Nazi-occupied Kosova by issuing false identity papers to insure their safe passage to Albania and for whom (like so many other Albanians from

Kosova and Albania), Jewish survivors could not be found to validate his role, even posthumously, because of the Communist cover-up for 45 years of the archives documenting the many stories of Albanian heroism;

Whereas Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi addressed the 2010 International Oral History Association Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, and brought Leka Rezniki, the grandson of Mustafa Rezniki (who died in May 2008), to join her in revealing the “underground railroad” between Albanians in Kosova and Albania that was essential to the rescue of Jews; and

Whereas Albania is the only country in Europe that had more Jews in it after World War II than before it: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That the House of Representatives—

2 (1) commends the people of Albania and
3 Kosova for protecting and saving the lives of all
4 Jews who either lived in Albania or sought asylum
5 there during the Holocaust;

6 (2) commends Yad Vashem in Israel for recog-
7 nizing Albanians who took action at great risk to
8 themselves to protect Jews during the Holocaust, for
9 their humanity, courage, and heroism;

10 (3) reaffirms on the 100th anniversary of Alba-
11 nia’s declaration of independence in 1912, its sup-
12 port for close ties between the United States and Al-
13 bania and between the United States and Kosova,
14 which declared its independence in 2008; and

1 (4) commends the officers, board of directors,
2 and members of the Albanian American Civic
3 League and Albanian American Foundation for their
4 unstinting work, since 1989, to bring the plight of
5 the Albanian people and the unique historic connec-
6 tion between Albanians and Jews to international at-
7 tention.

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109TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. RES. 521

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

JUNE 27, 2006

Mr. SCHUMER (for himself and Mr. McCAIN) submitted the following
resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations

RESOLUTION

Commending the people of Albania on the 61st anniversary
of the liberation of the Jews from the Nazi death camps,
for protecting and saving the lives of all Jews who lived
in Albania, or sought asylum there during the Holocaust.



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 110th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

House of Representatives

Lantos Recognizes Yad Vashem Ceremony Honoring Albanians Who Saved Jewish Lives During the Holocaust

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, November 7, 2007

Madam Speaker, I would like to call the attention of my colleagues in the Congress to a ceremony that was held on November 1 at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. This ceremony, which recognized the unique role that Albanians played in saving every Jew who either lived in Albania or sought asylum there during World War II, marking the opening of "*Besa: A Code of Honor/Albanians who Rescued Jews during the Holocaust.*" This exhibit by Jewish American photographer Norman Gershman documents the heroism of the rescuers and their families—65 percent of whom were Muslim—who saved more than 2,000 Jews from the ravages of the Nazi Holocaust.

Few people are aware that all Jews who lived in Albania during World War II or sought asylum there were saved from likely death during the Holocaust. Approximately 200 Jews lived in Albania during the early 1930s, while nearly 2000 Jews resided there by

the end of the war – making Albania the only nation that can claim that every Jew within its borders was rescued from the Holocaust. When the Italian fascists invaded Albania in 1939, followed by the German Nazis in 1943, the Albanian population hid Jews; furthermore, Albanian government officials refused to comply with the order to provide a list of Jews living in Albania. While many Albanian citizens hid Jews on their own initiative, the rescue operation became more coordinated as the danger increased and "national liberation councils" in towns where Jews were hiding moved them from place to place—either with false passports or disguised as Albanian peasants. Albanians living in Kosova, Macedonia, and Montenegro, then part of the former Yugoslavia, were instrumental in gaining safe passage for Jews into Albania.

Not only were the Albanians isolated from centuries of institutionalized anti-Semitism, Madam Speaker, but they also have a his-

tory of religious tolerance based on the *Kanun* (a set of customary laws developed in the 15th century and passed down through the generations). Its underpinning moral code of *besa*, which is celebrated in the Yad Vashem photo exhibition, emphasizes a sacred promise to keep one's word as well as to provide hospitality and protection. As the Western concept of 'foreigner' does not exist within the *Kanun*, Albanians did not see Jews as 'foreigners' but rather as 'guests' who needed to be protected even at great risk to their hosts.

Information about the safe haven that many Albanians provided to Jews who were being persecuted during the Holocaust was suppressed by the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, who controlled the country for five decades. When former Congressman Joe DioGuardi and I became the first U.S. officials in 1990 to enter Albania in 45 years, Albania's new leader, Ramiz Alia, showed us never-before-seen archives with letters, photographs



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 110th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

House of Representatives

Statement from the Congressional Record – November 7, 2007 – Page 2

and newspaper clippings about Albanians who saved Jews during World War II. Congressman DioGuardi sent this material to Israel, where the documents were authenticated by Yad Vashem. In cooperation with former Congressman Ben Gilman and the Albanian American Foundation, Albania was added to the “Righteous among nations” section of the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum in 1995.

The Yad Vashem exhibit was created with the help of the Albanian American Civic League and financial support from the Righteous Persons Foundation, the Jewish Communal Fund, the New York State Department of Education, the McBride Family Foundation, and the Albanian American Foundation. It will be on display for two months at Yad Vashem before traveling to museums and Holocaust memorial sites in around the world. It will be displayed on January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance

Day, at the United Nations headquarters in New York City.

Madam Speaker, as a Holocaust survivor who survived certain death due to the kindness of strangers, I am immensely grateful to the Albanian people for their bravery, selflessness and generosity in risking their lives to hide and protect so many Jews during one of the world’s darkest hours. I am delighted that this exhibition is finally giving Albania the recognition it deserves for the vitally important role its citizens played during World War II. I am grateful to my former colleague and friend Joe DioGuardi and the Albanian American Civic League for their efforts in ensuring that this information becomes publicly available. Madame Speaker, I wish to formally recognize the opening of this remarkable memorial and encourage all of my colleagues to visit it where possible.

ALBANIANS AND JEWS
AN HISTORIC MILESTONE IN ISRAEL

by Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi



Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, November 1, 2007: From left to right, Albanian Charge d'Affaires Qirjako Kureta; Albanian-Israeli Friendship Society Co-Director Apostol Kotani; historian Larisa Lexha, the National Archives in Tirana; Albanian-Israeli Friendship Society Co-Director Dr. Petrit Zorba; Joe DioGuardi; Shirley Cloyes DioGuardi; Kosova-Israel Friendship Association Co-Directors Mustafa Rezniqui and Xhangyle Ilijazi, and Felicita Jakoel.

On November 1, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, recognized Albanian heroism in saving every Jew who either lived in Albania or sought asylum there during World War II with the opening of "*Besa: A Code of Honor/Muslim Albanians who Rescued Jews during the Holocaust.*" This exhibit by fine art photographer, Norman Gershman, an American Jew, documents the courage and compassion of the rescuers and their families—approximately 65 percent of whom were Muslim and 35 percent of whom were Orthodox and Roman Catholic—who saved more than 2,000 Jews from death at the hands of Italian fascists and German Nazis.

As Yad Vashem exhibition curator Yehudit Shendar said in her opening remarks on November 1, Norman Gershman's exhibit is unique in a number of respects. His "sensitive photographs combine to highlight a little known, but remarkable aspect of the Holocaust." In addition, Shendar said that the exhibit brings to light "the extraordinary story of Albania—where an entire nation, both the government and the population—acted to rescue Jews."

This is the real significance of the Albanian response to the Holocaust: It is not only that every Jew was saved, making Albania the only European country with a larger Jewish population after the war than before it, but that Albanians everywhere hid and protected Jews. They did so out of the predominant moral code of *besa*, which was described by Avner Shalev, chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate, at the ceremony on November 1 as "a basic, human value of helping one another, even at the risk of one's own life." This value of *besa*, Shalev said, "goes much further than the culture of higher education that did not stem the cruelty and brutality in Germany and elsewhere in Europe." Albanians, he concluded, "showed what humanity can be at its finest."

The role of Albanians in rescuing Jews is virtually unknown in the West to this day, because it was concealed throughout forty-six years of Enver Hoxha's Stalinist Communist dictatorship in Albania. The stories of Albanian religious tolerance and heroism were also suppressed under Marshal Tito in the former Yugoslavia (Kosova, Montenegro, Macedonia, and the Presheva Valley), where three and a half million Albanians have experienced torture, arrest, expulsion, and genocide for more than a century. Although the Albanian American Civic League and the Albanian American Foundation share Norman Gershman's principal and important concern of demonstrating, in the aftermath of 9/11, that there are Muslims who have saved Jews, we are equally concerned with the ongoing suppression and distortion of Albanian history, culture and reality that puts the Albanian people at risk.

The continuing challenge for Albanians is to uncover a buried history, to reveal that Albanians are Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians who have lived side by side in harmony for centuries, and to counter the misrepresentation of Albanians in the Slavic and Western press as a potentially terrorist, fundamentalist, Muslim force in the heart of Europe. Even though this is not his focus, Norman Gershman has made a significant contribution to this Albanian effort through his photographs, which were created through the help of Professors Petrit Zorba and Apostol Kotani in Albania, rescuer Mustafa Rezniqui and Xhangyle Ilijazi in Kosova, and the Albanian American Foundation in New York.

As the timeline that follows demonstrates, the revelation of Albanian heroism during the Holocaust began with the 1990 visit of Congressman Tom Lantos and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi to Tirana, as the first U.S. officials to enter Albania in fifty years. Seventeen years later, it is fitting that Congressman Lantos commemorated the November 1 ceremony at Yad Vashem on the floor of the House of Representatives. At the conclusion of his remarks, he turned to Speaker Nancy Pelosi and said: “Madam Speaker, as a Holocaust survivor who survived certain death due to the kindness of strangers, I am immensely grateful to the Albanian people for their bravery, selflessness, and generosity in risking their lives to hide and protect so many Jews during one of the world’s darkest hours. I am delighted that this exhibition is finally giving Albania the recognition it deserves for the vitally important role its citizens played during World War II, and I am grateful to my former colleague and friend Joe DioGuardi and the Albanian American Civic League for their efforts in ensuring that this information becomes publicly available.”

As the timeline that follows demonstrates, the unique role that Albanians played in saving Jews during the Holocaust was buried for more than forty-five years because this information was suppressed by two Communist dictators, Enver Hoxha in Albania and Marshal Tito in the former Yugoslavia. The revelation of Albanian religious tolerance and heroism in World War II began in 1990 because of two pivotal developments: The Albanian government gave the archives about Albanians who rescued Jews to Congressman Tom Lantos and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi, when they traveled to Albania as the first U.S. officials to enter the country in fifty years, and Josef Jakoel and his daughter, Felicita, embarked on the secret and dangerous mission that would lead to the exodus of 300 Albanian Jews to Israel in 1991. Seventeen years later, the vast majority of Westerners still do not know about the saving role of Albanians during the Nazi Holocaust and its roots in the Albanian moral code of *besa*. Because of this, and because the history, culture, and reality of Albanians has been concealed and distorted for more than a century by their oppressors, it is important to document and understand how this story came to light and is still unfolding.

May 1990 Congressman Tom Lantos and former Congressman Joe DioGuardi are the first U.S. officials to enter Albania in fifty years. Seeking to ingratiate himself with Tom Lantos, a Jewish American Holocaust survivor, then-dictator Ramiz Alia presents never-before-seen archives containing letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, and other records of the unpublicized heroic deeds of Albanians who rescued Jews during World War II. Upon returning to the States, DioGuardi sends the files to Israel, where they are authenticated by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem.

Josef Jakoel, a leader of the Jewish community in Albania, and his daughter, Felicita, meet with DioGuardi in Tirana to tell him about their plan to arrange for the exodus of Albanian Jewry to Israel. Felicita subsequently obtains an exit visa to travel to Greece and then, in violation of Albanian law, travels to Jerusalem through the help of the Israeli ambassador to Greece. Felicita gives a secret list of all Jews living in Albania to the Jewish Agency in Israel. The Agency in turn solicits the Israeli and Italian governments and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to prepare for the Albanian exodus.

January – May 1991 Josef and Felicita Jakoel lead 300 Albanian Jews out of Albania to begin a new life in Israel.

1992 Josef Jakoel, who was in ill health before arriving in Israel, dies. The Albanian-Israeli Friendship Association is formed, and Refik Veseli, who was the first Albanian rescuer to be recognized by Yad Vashem as a “Righteous Gentile,” becomes its first president.

1993 All Albanian Righteous Gentiles are invited to Israel as the guests of Jewish American philanthropist Harvey Sarnet and are honored by the State of Israel for their heroism.

February 1995 The Albanian American Civic League and Foundation makes the addition of Albania to the “Righteous among Nations” section of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum a reality. Three Jewish Congressmen—Ben Gilman, Tom Lantos, and Jerrold Nadler—cochair and speak at a Civic League-sponsored ceremony and reception commemorating the installation.