



**The Rescue of Jews in Albania Through the Perspective  
of the Yad Vashem Files of the Righteous Among the Nations**

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Since the inception of the Righteous Among the Nations program some 45 years ago, Yad Vashem recognized over 22,000 men and women from 44 countries as Righteous Among the Nations. The Department of the Righteous' archive contains close to 15,000 files with hundreds of thousands of pages of documentation – it is a wealth of testimonies, photos, official and personal documents, newspaper clippings and other material with information about rescue efforts during the Holocaust.

It is therefore only natural that this repository is of great interest to scholars, and that it is being used in attempts to statistically and otherwise evaluate rescue efforts or to explore rescuers' profiles and motivations. Before embarking on such studies, it is however important to note the methodological constraints and problems of such research.

The criteria used by the Righteous program were defined with the purpose of bestowing an honor; they need not necessarily accord with the criteria set forth by historical research. In other words, the questions asked by the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous reflect the requirements for the title, and may differ from the questions posed by scholars. Not using the same tools and methodology also bears on the nature of the gathering of documentation. The Department focuses on the rescue attempts, and once the necessary material for the recognition process is assembled, the file is submitted to the Commission, and thus the process of search for documentation usually ends.

The Righteous Among the Nations, as defined by the law establishing Yad Vashem in 1953, are persons “who risked their lives to save Jews”<sup>1</sup>. The lawmaker thereby defined a small group of rescuers within a much wider circle of people who helped or assisted Jews in a myriad of ways – ways which did not necessarily involve danger to the rescuer. Over the years, the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous developed a series of regulations and measures in the attempt to draw a clear line within the diverse and nuanced range of conduct and attitudes – a division that separates the acts of rescue that qualify for recognition

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<sup>1</sup> Yad Vashem Law, 1953



from other manifestations of help and solidarity to Jews. The challenge of drawing such a line is compounded by the fact that the same set of criteria is used for all cases and countries.

The basic requirement for submitting a case to the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous is survivor testimony that attests to the nature of the rescue attempt. Such testimonies are indispensable – only in few cases will the Commission accept archival documentations as sufficient proof – and often testimonies constitute the sole evidence for the recognition process.

As stated above, the questions we ask for the purpose of recognizing people as Righteous are not necessarily the questions asked by historians who wish to delineate trends or general outlines of the story. It's the individual and his motivations that we are interested in, not the description of broader patterns of behavior or mentalities. Since acts of rescue during the Holocaust were, by their very nature, performed in secret, leaving no paper trail, they make it very difficult to obtain evidence. This is why, with few exceptions, the main piece of evidence contained in the files, on which recognition as Righteous will be based, will be the survivor testimonies. The Department also tries to obtain statements from the rescuers or their families to complete the picture.

Hence before drawing any statistical conclusions one should bear in mind that the cases recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations do not necessarily reflect the full extent of help given by non-Jews to Jews during the Holocaust, nor can we be certain that they fully represent the full extent and variety of rescue; they are rather based on the material and documentation that was made available to Yad Vashem. Most Righteous were recognized following requests made by the rescued Jews. Only a smaller number were generated by the rescuers' side, by researchers or other third parties. Sometimes survivors could not overcome the difficulty of grappling with the painful past and didn't come forward; others weren't aware of the program, did not believe it was important or couldn't apply – especially people who lived behind the Iron Curtain during the years of Communist regime in Eastern Europe; other survivors died before they could make the request. Another important factor is that most cases that were recognized represent successful attempts – the Jews survived and came forward to tell Yad Vashem about them.

These restrictions apply also for the Albanian files - perhaps even more so.



The first Albanian file dates from 1987. The Righteous Program was into its 25<sup>th</sup> year, when Gavra Mandil, a well-known Israeli photographer, whose family had emigrated to Israel from Yugoslavia in 1948, turned to Yad Vashem with a request to recognize his rescuers.

“After many years of hesitation and delay due to my lack of knowledge about what needed to be done and how I was to deal with the matter – it is only now that I am taking upon myself to write to you and tell you an important story of the Holocaust time. I am doing it for two reasons:

- a. Because I want to inform you about a story of the Second World War that is not so well known in Israel in order for it to be registered, documented and kept in your archives.
- b. Because I want to nominate a man for the title of Righteous Among the Nations, who during the Holocaust saved my family and other Jewish families. He lives in Albania and we have kept in touch until these very days.”

After describing the family's story and rescue, he ended his testimony with the following words:

"The Albanians are simple people, but very kindhearted, warm and humane. They may not have been educated on the heritage of Goethe and Schiller, but they attach the greatest importance to human life, in a most natural and unquestioning way. In those dark days when Jewish life in Europe didn't count much, Albanians protected the Jews with love, dedication and sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>"

The following files regarding rescuers from Albania were submitted after the change of the regime. About two-thirds of the recognitions date from 1991-1993. Until today, 63 Albanian rescuers were recognized by Yad Vashem. The 30 files comprising the stories of these rescuers contain mostly the testimonies of the rescued and rescuers. With very little existing research or archival resources, these statements are the only evidence recognition could be based on. It was by no way an impediment in the recognition process, but it makes the researchers' work all the more difficult.

The radical nature of the Communist regime in Albania and its long-term effects probably contributed to the scarcity of information. It was in many cases only after the change of regime, that contact was re-established between the rescued and the rescuers. The effects of isolation was described by rescuer Nora Sheko in her letter to the Department of the Righteous, 21 November 1992:

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<sup>2</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/3768



"I am sorry to say that I have no more their letters and addresses, because during 45 years we have suffered too much under the Communist regime, so we have burned every letter that came from other countries, sure to be treated as agents and propaganda, and that was at least ten years of prison. My husband was three years in prison only because we were very rich...Please excuse me for the bad English, but I have so many years that I have not written anymore in this language".<sup>3</sup>

The language barrier was overcome with the help of Jews who had arrived in Israel from Albania, but the statements on the rescuers' side often bear the effects of the Communist regime. One possible result of decades of isolation was that perceptions and terminology of the Holocaust, which had meanwhile become widely spread in the West, had not been adopted by Albanians. On the other hand, the effects of the Communist regime left traces even after the political change. Thus for example there are sometimes contradictions between survivors defining their rescuers as rich, while the rescuers themselves state that they were simple workers. Such contradiction may be distortion created by memory or changing perspectives, but they may also be due to the fear of being tagged in the "wrong" social group, in case of Communist return to power.

Consequently, one of the main questions we ponder is whether the material gathered in the files of the Department of the Righteous Among the Nations can provide sufficient documentary foundation for historical research. Can we collect enough data that will enable us to reach any valuable, valid and statistically significant conclusions? Does the fact that we have a relatively small number of cases, prevent us from reaching conclusions and comparing the Albanian case with other cases of rescue of Jews during the Holocaust?

Starting from the assumption that we are dealing with incomplete and partial data, we can nevertheless try and reach some historical conclusions. Moreover, in our viewpoint, this data enables us to pinpoint some open questions and propose venues for further research, which will include a comparison with other countries. We will therefore address three main aspects that are generally considered in any research about rescue: the rescued, the rescuers and the rescue.

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<sup>3</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5858

**A. The rescued:**

From the material analyzed for this paper, we found that most of the rescued are families, not individuals. In most of the cases the Jews rescued were foreigners: 5 families from Kosovo, 7 from Macedonia, 4 from Serbia, 6 from Greece, 2 from Poland, 1 from Germany. Only 5 of the rescued families were originally from Albania. Among the foreigners, we see that most of them were refugees, who had arrived in Albania at the beginning of the 1940s, when Albania was still under Italian rule.

In their testimonies, the rescued describe their lives in Albania until September 1943 as being relatively safe; some of them were even able to operate small businesses. In some of those cases, it was their very work in commerce that enabled them to get to know the people who eventually would become their rescuers. It is not surprising that in most cases these refugees lived in very modest economic conditions.

This data comprises a very interesting starting point for research on the topic, especially in comparison with other countries. We know that in other countries the fate of foreign Jews – especially refugees, who had arrived only a short time earlier – was usually harsher than that of local Jews. Newcomers usually faced more obstacles in receiving help from the local non-Jewish population. Many factors played a role: the lack of a common language and ensuing communication difficulties; economic hardship that undoubtedly reduced the possibility of obtaining help; the lack of knowledge of local circumstances reducing the chances of survival, etc.

This leads to a series of important questions: Does the fact that most of the rescued Jews were foreigners make Albania an exceptional case? And if so, how can we explain it? Are there any special cultural or social factors that make a certain society more susceptible to care for foreigners in its territory? To what extent did the small number of Jews in Albania contribute to the willingness to help them? These issues are usually linked, among others, to the nature of contact with the local Jewish community. In this case the small size of the Albanian Jewish Community – only some 40 families – certainly played a role in the developments. In the testimonies in the files of the Righteous Department we find little mention, if at all, of contacts with the local Jewish community. However, here again, it must be remembered that this is not something that concerns the Department when dealing with bestowing the title, so it may not be the absence of such relations, but merely the fact that the survivors didn't mention such contacts in their testimonies, that was the decisive factor for this lacunae.



An interesting question is the small number of rescue cases reported by Albanian Jews – they were, after all, much more likely to have friends who would protect them. This is worth further exploration, but from the evidence on hand we learn that Albanian Jews felt a lesser need to go into hiding; they say that they trusted that their neighbors would protect them. On the other hand, it is also a fact that the only family that was living in Albania during the German occupation and that perished in the Holocaust was a local family: Yitzhak Ardit (born 1880), wife Luna (born 1888), their three sons: Leon (born 1913 - pharmacist), Daris (born 1917- physician), Ugo ( born 1922 - violinist), and their daughter Lucia (born 1910) from Shkodra, were arrested in October 1944 and deported to Pristina. Only the father survived, but was totally broken, made several suicide attempts and died only several months after liberation. Another son of the family, Moise Ardit, went into hiding with his friends, Vasil and Kristina Kona. His relatives, who reported the victims' names to Yad Vashem, strongly believe that the Arditis had been caught because of their deep confidence that they were safe and that nothing could happen to them. Members of another family – originally from Kosovo – were arrested in Shkodra and deported to Pristina, but survived – as will be mentioned later.

### **B. The rescuers:**

This is one of the most difficult aspects in this kind of research. Quite often research on rescue during the Holocaust attempts to draw a “profile” of the rescuers. In our opinion such a profile would be extremely inaccurate, nevertheless, it is significant and important to collect information about the rescuers, since it enables us to suggest and highlight different factors that may have influenced rescue activity.

As mentioned before, in some Albanian files, we find inconsistencies in the data reported about the rescuers, especially about their economic situation. For example: Kasem Kocer describes himself as a simple shepard, while the survivor, Moshe Salomon, claims that he was a farmer and describes his economic situation as average<sup>4</sup>. In some cases the testimonies don't provide any information on the economic situation of the rescuer or his profession. Nevertheless, it seems that in about half of the cases the rescuers were either well-to-do businessmen or a landowners. At least 13 cases speak of their rescuers as being rich (factory owners, owner of a brewery, cattle dealer, estate owners, merchants, well-known physician, etc). On the other hand, there are some cases where the rescued mention the low economic status of their rescuers – several peasants, a cabdriver – emphasizing the financial effort and generosity of these persons. It should of course be noted that these are retrospective

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<sup>4</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/6736



evaluations of survivors – some of whom were very young at the time. Moreover, these are personal assessments, and no consistent yardstick was applied in appraising the rescuers' situation. Even though this data may not enable us to reach any comprehensive conclusion, it would be worthwhile to compare the economic and social distribution of rescuers in Albania with other countries. These questions may shed light on a possible connection between the economic situation and the ability and willingness to save Jews.

Other parameters are mostly absent from the profiles, as documented in the Department of the Righteous' files. These are rescuers' ages, education and even their religion. From analyzing the names, we may conclude that more than half of the rescuers were Muslims.

This last factor is of special interest, since obviously most of the Righteous Among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem over the years are Christians of different European denominations. Albanians, together with Bosnians, a Turkish diplomat and most recently, a rescuer from Kosovo, constitute the only Muslims among the more than 22,000 rescuers that received the title. In view of the role Christian antisemitism played in the attitude towards Jews during the Holocaust, the examination of these Muslim rescuers may contribute yet another dimension to the exploration of this heavily debated question.

### **C. The rescue:**

The third aspect in analyzing rescue efforts deals with the dynamics of these deeds. Looking at the location of rescue activity, it is quite clear that Albanians rescued Jews both in the cities and in rural areas. In most cases the Jews were hidden in the homes of their rescuers. Only in a few cases the Righteous saved the Jews by moving them to a safe place or by providing them with false papers and by helping obtain their release from detention (Pilkus<sup>5</sup>).

As already mentioned, we find that in many cases the rescuers previously knew the rescued. In some cases the contact was of professional nature; in other instances it started with local Albanians who had rented some property to Jewish refugees before September 1943; in a few cases, we found an already existing personal friendship, as in the case of Kona and Arditi<sup>6</sup>, which after September 1943, developed into a bond of rescue. It is perhaps interesting to mention in this context that in three cases (Kilica, Kona, and Orgocka)<sup>7</sup>, the bond deepened after the war into marriages between members of the rescuer and rescued families.

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<sup>5</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/7450

<sup>6</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5665

<sup>7</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/8574a, 5665, 4922



It is in this context that the term “besa” became an object of our inquiry. In several testimonies people used the term “besa” and referred to it as the guarantee of trust. (Hoxha, Koceri, Kona, Nosi, Vesel, Myrto, Budo, Shpuza files)<sup>8</sup>. Marco Menachem (rescued by Nosi) says: “There is an Albanian word ‘besa’ which means the word of honor. There is nothing holier for an Albanian than his besa. When he gives it, he’ll go through hell and fire, but he’ll keep his word of honor. Besa was the key which saved the Jews”.<sup>9</sup> This last sentence is worth further exploration. Here we are challenged with questions such as: what role did “besa” play in rescue activity of Jews in Albania? Does it make the Albanian case unique? and most importantly - What can be learned from Albanian culture about the dynamic of rescue? These questions request further investigation.

It seems that in general when an Albanian decided to save a Jew, many members of his family were aware of it and became involved. In many cases this included the extended family and even some close friends. Often the Jews were divided between relatives and friends in order to facilitate the hiding operation.

Only few of the testimonies describe the Jews living in hiding in the sense of staying in a hideout, totally invisible to everyone but their protectors, as was the case in eastern European countries, for example. The Fraggi family was hidden in a hut in the mountains near Struga by Mufail Bicaku and his son Niazi<sup>10</sup>; Miro Hoxha hid the Solomoni family in his cellar<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, in most cases the Jews lived with their rescuers and tried to blend in with their surroundings. At the same time, fear is certainly present in some testimonies. For example: the Altarac family from Belgrad had arrived in Albania in 1942 where they had been sent by the Italians with other Jews who had been detained in Pristina. In his testimony Jacob Altarac, who was nine-years-old when the Germans entered Albania, describes how his family lived in fear in a room they had rented from two widows. “My father didn’t dare leave the house. We, the children, played only in the closed yard. Our savings were diminishing, and my mother and aunt Sida decided to try and make a living from knitting sweaters and selling them in a prestigious shop in town.” It was thus that Mrs. Altarac met Ganimet Toptani, who invited the Jewish family to stay at their estate in Kamza, where they remained between February and August 1944. During that time Altarac remembers a house search by the Germans who were looking for arms after the partisans had attacked a German convoy. Altarac tells us that some of the uniformed men spoke Serb with a Bosnian accent. These may have been members of the Hadjmar SS Division. It needs, of course, to be examined to what extent a child who was

<sup>8</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/4992, 6736, 5665, 5368, 3768, 5323a, 5323, 5666

<sup>9</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5368

<sup>10</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/8830

<sup>11</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/4992



seven-years-old when he left his native Serbia would be able to recognize the Bosnian accent, but then he may have echoed a distinction made by his parents at the time.

The crucial question for the Department of the Righteous' investigation is the extent of danger to the rescuers – the element of risk being central to the decision whether to award the title. It was here that the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous was challenged by the need to evaluate the specific circumstances in Albania, and to examine to what extent each case accorded with the program's criteria. For the historians it is important to go on and to ask if Albanian rescuers were endangered only by the German occupiers or whether there was danger also from collaboration by locals? Was the fear of denunciation a real threat, as in other countries?

Although most accounts highly praise the Albanians' attitude, when describing the element of danger, several testimonies mention denunciations or hostile attitudes. This suggests that, as in other places, in Albania too, rescuers had to face the danger of denunciation by neighbors or strangers who decided for different reasons to turn in Jews. There is however insufficient information to determine if such acts of collaboration targeted Jews as such, or if they were part of other rivalries and disputes.

In the Shpuza file, Rudi Abravanel reports that a group of his relatives were murdered by the Albanian smugglers who were supposed to help them cross into Albania<sup>12</sup>. In another case Shyqyri Abdullah Myrto, who was recognized as Righteous with his parents, says – in this case it is the rescuer speaking: “In April [1944], during an inspection in Tirana conducted by an organization that was collaborating with the Nazis, they took the passport from Josef [Jakuel], an act that pre-announced his arrest. The same evening Josef was hidden at a friend's house, and in the next morning, with a false passport and together with his sister, he was sheltered in our house in the town of Kavaja”<sup>13</sup>.

Yaffa Reuven née Bachar who fled with her family from Pristina to Berat was thirteen-years-old when the Germans entered Albania. Her family was living with the Shkurti and Sfechi families. She says: “They knew we were Jews and helped us, protected us. Every time the Germans appeared in town, they would warn us and hide us outside the city until the difficult situation passed, when they would return us home.” When the danger increased, the Bachars moved to Shkodra. “We thought that in a bigger city they would not find us. We lived in a

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<sup>12</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5666

<sup>13</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5323a



small rented apartment and hid there. Unfortunately there was persecution also in Shkodra. One day the Germans came to our home with a list of the entire family. My late father was not at home, and I was playing with the children of the neighborhood. My mother, sister and my two small brothers were taken to Pristina". From Pristina the deportees were taken to Bergen Belsen. Fortunately, they survived and returned after the war. In her testimony Yaffa Bachar goes on to describe her fate: "I stayed alone and didn't know the fate of my father. The landlord kept me until my father learned of my location. The landlord blackmailed my father – all the furniture, money and jewelry remained with him"<sup>14</sup>. It was the Shkurtis who sent them money, so that father and daughter were able to leave Shkodra for the countryside and hide there.

The final issue that needs investigation concerns anti-Nazi undergrounds. One of the questions we ask when analyzing rescue in various countries is whether and in what ways anti-Nazi underground organizations were involved in helping Jews. The cases in the Albanian files appear to be individual initiatives, not organized ones, and in most Albanian files we don't find any hint of resistance groups' involvement. Bearing in mind that most testimonies date from the first years after the change of regime in Albania, this may be attributed to the imprint of the Communist era, causing people to fear being linked to the "wrong" resistance group, even after the regime had been changed.

It is therefore practically impossible to use the information in the Righteous Department's files in an attempt to evaluate the attitudes of the different partisan groups to the Jews – if this was at all an issue for these organizations. There is, however, mention of a network in the testimony of Naftali Konforti who wrote to Yad Vashem to have Mihal Lekatari recognized as Righteous Among the Nations for having provided his family with false papers. Konforti describes the warm and sympathetic attitude of the inhabitants of Kavaja, where his family had fled to from Belgrad. It should also be noted that he compares the warm welcome his family received after they had arrived in Albania with the hostile attitudes they had encountered while they were transiting in Kosovo. This disparity certainly merits further investigation. Describing their experience in Kavaja, Konforti goes on: "We realized that a network of patriots, that was politically positively inclined towards us, was active in town, and that Lekatari was certainly one of the activists. When I heard that the locals are using a Turkish term for the Jews, that was considered derogatory in Serbia, I complained to Lekatari,

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<sup>14</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5370



and the following day it disappeared from use. From that moment on they called us 'Israelite'”<sup>15</sup>.

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In conclusion we can say that the data existing in the files of the Righteous Among the Nations Department can provide a very interesting starting point for a comparative study, which will enable us to analyze the Albanian case within the general context of rescue in Nazified Europe. The challenge would be to integrate the data in the files with other sources, to explore the questions already mentioned, and to go on to grapple with the existence of a possible uniqueness of the Albanian case – its reasons and the relations between local culture and the dynamic of the rescue efforts in Albania.

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<sup>15</sup> Yad Vashem M.31/5324