



BESA

A CODE OF HONOR

Exhibition based on the project of photographer Norman Gershman, who documented the Albanian Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust

Photographer: Norman Gershman

THE HOLOCAUST



A British army chaplain recites Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, over a mass grave in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Germany, April 1945

The Holocaust is the murder of six million Jews perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. The Jews were the only ones, of all those who suffered under Nazi Germany, for whom a total worldwide annihilation program was initiated. This is the uniqueness of the Holocaust.

The plan for systematic extermination derived from a virulent antisemitism that, accompanied by the belief in "Aryan" race superiority, evolved into laws of "racial purity". Its goal was the extermination of the Jews, thereby bringing about the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem".

In order to realize the Final Solution, Nazi Germany mobilized its national and military resources and co-opted in its actions hundreds of thousands of Germans and other peoples. Only a small minority tried to help the Jews. Most European citizens were either hostile or indifferent to the fate of their Jewish neighbors.

The Jews were rounded up from all over Europe, held in conditions of starvation and overcrowding, and sent to improvised sites to be killed by shooting, or to the death camps to die in gas chambers. Millions of men, women and children of the Jewish People were exterminated, entire communities destroyed and worlds of culture extinguished forever. The need to confront the loss and the moral crisis caused by the Holocaust will endure.

YAD VASHEM

The World Holocaust Remembrance Center

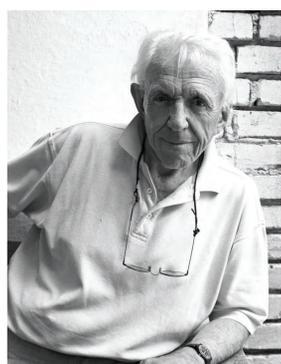
"And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (a "yad vashem")... that shall not be cut off."

(Isaiah, chapter 56, verse 5)

Yad Vashem was established in 1953, as the world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust. As the Jewish people's living memorial to the Holocaust, Yad Vashem safeguards the memory of the past and imparts its meanings for future generations.

NORMAN GERSHMAN

PHOTOGRAPHER



"I find it comforting and strangely connected to this project to be a secular Jew, in the Catholic chapel of an Albanian nun who lived in India, offering a simple prayer in Arabic. Over and over, Muslim families told me: 'To save a life is to go to paradise.' The sons of one rescuer told me what their father had taught them and what they live by: 'If there is a knock on the door, take responsibility.'"

Norman H. Gershman embarked on his career as a photographer at a relatively late age. He studied with and was influenced by the works of the photographers Ansel Adams, Roman Vishniac and Arnold Newman, as well as under the tutelage of Cornell Capa, the founder and director of the International Center of Photography in New York. Ultimately, Gershman developed a personal style focusing on portraiture, in which he lends a personal touch emphasizing the special personality of the subject.

For four years Gershman focused on photographing Muslim families who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, converging between two seemingly opposed worlds.

Norman Gershman's works are to be found in a variety of public collections, including the International Center of Photography, New York; the Brooklyn Museum; the Aspen Museum of Art and a number of galleries in Russia.

Gershman lives and works in Aspen, Colorado.

ALBANIA

On the eve of WWII, Albania, a small and mountainous country on the southeast coast of the Balkan Peninsula, was home to a population of a million people, of whom about 70 percent were Muslim, 20 percent Greek-Orthodox, and 10 percent Roman Catholic. The Jewish population numbered some two hundred.

From 1933 until the outbreak of WWII, approximately 800 persecuted Jews from the Reich arrived in Albania. During the war, some 1,000 more Jews fled to Albania, most of them from Yugoslavia and Greece which were occupied in 1941.

From April 1939 until September 1943, Albania was under Italian control. After the German occupation in September 1943, a collaborative government was set up in Albania, which led to the establishment of an Albanian SS division - the 21st Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Skanderbeg - that was active for about six months in the Kosovo region.

Early in 1944, the German military authorities demanded that the Albanian government arrest all Jewish refugees and incarcerate them in camps, in order to cleanse the country of Jews. Although lists of names were compiled by the Albanian authorities, they were never turned over to the Germans. Moreover, various authorities provided many Jewish families with false documents that allowed them to intermingle with the rest of the population. In the critical, and relatively short, period of the German occupation, many Jews found sanctuary in Albanian homes, mostly in the center of the country.

The remarkable hospitality afforded to the Jews was grounded in an Albanian tradition known as *Besa*. During the fifteenth century, an Albanian knight and Catholic prince composed a *Kanun* - a set of guidelines - that includes the directive:

"The house of an Albanian belongs to God and to the guest... After you have said 'Welcome,' he [the guest] must have no fear and know that you are ready to defend him against any danger."

Although not enshrined in law, and only recorded in writing in the twentieth century, this traditional concept served as a code of behavior for many Albanian rescuers of Jews during WWII.

The fate of the Jews in Albania during the Holocaust was exceptional in its outcome: All Jews living within Albanian borders during the German occupation, Albanians and refugees alike, were saved, except for members of a single family. Astonishingly, there were more Jews in Albania at the end of the war than beforehand. This resulted from the combination of situational, geographical and behavioral factors, of which *Besa* was an inspiring component.

THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS

“He who saves one human being is as if he saves an entire world”

The primary purpose of the law that established Yad Vashem was to create a memorial to commemorate and perpetuate the memory of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Yet, an additional stipulation in the law requires Yad Vashem to honor “the Righteous Among the Nations who risked their lives to save Jews”. This concept, the only one of its kind in the world that honors the actions of those individuals who rescued Jews during the war, has gained universal recognition and stands as an important symbol.

Since 1963, a commission headed by a Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court has been charged with the duty of awarding the title “Righteous Among the Nations”. The commission is guided in its work by several criteria and meticulously studies all pertinent documentation, including evidence by survivors and other eyewitnesses.

A person recognized as “Righteous Among the Nations” is awarded a specially minted medal bearing his name, a certificate of honor, and the privilege of having his name added to those on the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The awards are presented to the rescuers or their next-of-kin in moving ceremonies in Israel, and throughout the world.

The Righteous Among the Nations represent the preservation of human values in the midst of absolute moral collapse. They prove that despite the grave dangers involved, there were still those who were willing to take life-threatening risks in order to fulfill the precept “Love thy neighbor as thyself”. The Righteous Among the Nations are role models, a source of hope, and an inspiration.

By 2016 Yad Vashem recognized over 26,000 Righteous Among the Nations from 51 countries, among them 73 from Albania.

The actions of the Righteous Among the Nations were the only rays of light during the dark period of the Holocaust. These women, men and children teach us that it was, and is, possible to act with courage, morality and compassion even in the worst of circumstances.



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www.yadvashem.org



I have always been a devout Muslim. During the years of Communism all the institutions of God were closed, but not the heart. I did nothing special. All Jews are our brothers.

BEQIR QOQJA



Beqir Qoqja

I am ninety-one years old and in good health. I live in the same house now, with my son and his family, as I did when I sheltered my close Jewish friend, Avram Eliasaf Gani, in 1943 and 1944. At first I hid Avram here, but when the persecution of Jews became more horrible, I sent him to the home of my parents in a remote district of Krujë. There were no roads for cars back then so each week until the end of the war I traveled on horseback to my parents' home to provide food and all the necessities for my friend.

During those years, no one except my family knew of our sheltering a Jew. After the war, Avram returned to Tirana and we remained good friends. I have been a tailor all my life. Now I am retired and everyone calls me Babai (Father). I still like to dress with style.

Story as told by Beqir Qoqja

On July 21, 1992, Yad Vashem recognized Beqir Qoqja as Righteous Among the Nations.



My father said that the Germans would have to kill his family before he would let them kill our Jewish guests.

BESIM AND AISHE KADIU



Merushe Kadiu

We lived in the village of Kavajë. In 1940, for a short time, our family sheltered two Greek Jews from the Italian fascists. Their names were Jakov and Sandra Batino, and they were brother and sister. They came to us from Tirana. Their father had been interned in a camp by the Italians. Later, in 1944, both Jakov and Sandra again sought shelter with us, fearful of the Nazis. Another family took their parents into hiding.

Sandra, Jakov and I were close friends. We all lived in the same bedroom. I remember we cut a hole in the bars of our rear bedroom window so they could escape if the Germans discovered that they were hiding with us. We were constantly watching for German patrols. When the Germans began house-to-house searches, looking for Jews, my father took Jakov and Sandra to a remote village. We then supplied them with all their needs until the liberation. There was a great celebration in Kavajë. I remember the telegram we received from Jakov and Sandra and the joy of liberation. Soon they left for Tirana and then for Israel.

I have so many wonderful letters and pictures from Israel. In 1992, I was invited there to receive the Righteous Among the Nations award on behalf of my family, and for a time I was the head of the Albanian-Israeli Friendship Association. Those years were fearful, but friendship overcame all fear.

Story as told by Merushe Kadiu (daughter of Besim and Aishe Kadiu)

On July 21, 1992, Yad Vashem recognized Besim Kadiu, and his wife, Aishe Kadiu, as Righteous Among the Nations.



**My father, who is still alive,
is a secular Muslim.
He says: "Only trust in God."**

MEFAIL BIÇAKU AND HIS SON, NIAZI BIÇAKU



Elida Biçaku with photographs of her father, Niazi Biçaku, and her grandfather, Mefail Biçaku (left)

When the Italians capitulated in 1943 and the Germans entered the area, my father was only twelve years old. His father – my grandfather – owned a shop in Tirana. My grandfather and father led seventeen terrified Jews out of Tirana. They traveled twelve hours on horseback to the village of Qarrishta, my father walking barefoot. The Jews were hidden in a large barn in the hills near the village. Some more Jews joined this group later. There were doctors, dentists and many other professionals, and their wives and children.

They called my grandfather “godfather”. He would travel regularly from Tirana with food and provisions, while my father guarded the barn with a gun. They sheltered the Jews for over one year. After a while, the townspeople in the village became fearful that the Germans would discover the Jews hidden in the hills and they wanted the Jews to leave, so my grandfather and father left the village to live with the Jews in the mountains. In the autumn of 1944, my grandfather and father walked the Jews to the border, from whence they left for Yugoslavia.

From there, in the 1960s, the Jews departed to many countries – Argentina, Italy, and Israel. Then we lost contact with them. After the war, the Communists imprisoned my grandfather for three years. I remember him as a devout Muslim. He wouldn’t have hurt a fly.

Story as told by Elida Biçaku (granddaughter of Mefail Biçaku and daughter of Niazi Biçaku)

On May 5, 1996 Yad Vashem recognized Mefail Biçaku, and his son, Niazi Biçaku, as Righteous Among the Nations.



Why hide a Jew? We just did it! It was the thing to do. After all, our Jewish guest was a friend of our friend. Yes we are Muslims, but liberal Muslims.

BESSIM AND HIGMET ZYMA



Hignet Zyma with portrait of her husband, Bessim Zyma

The year was 1944. A friend of ours asked us to shelter an aged Jewish man from Poland. His name was Lew Dzienciolski. Why not? My husband Bessim was a wonderful physician. He worked at the hospital and we had a clinic in the basement. I recall Mr. Dzienciolski could only see from one eye. What my husband did was to bandage his entire face and hide him in our clinic. The Nazis did not bother us then.

I still live in the same apartment as I did then with my husband. I am an artist. This is my painting of tulips and of Bessim, now deceased.

Story as told by Hignet Zyma

On July 25, 1999, Yad Vashem recognized Bessim Zyma, and his wife, Hignet Zyma, as Righteous Among the Nations.



As devout Muslims we extended our protection and humanism to the Jews. Why? Besa, friendship and the holy Koran. This is a picture of my father that I hold to my heart.

NURO HOXHA



Sazan Hoxha with photograph of his father, Nuro Hoxha

I am the oldest son of Nuro Hoxha, who was well known as a teacher and a religious Muslim here in our community of Vlorë. I remember those terrible times when the Nazis moved into Vlorë from Greece, and the Jews went into hiding. I was ten years old. The Jews in Vlorë, Berat, and Elbasan had been living in Albania since 1490, and many fled here from Ioannina in Greece.

My father sheltered four Jewish families. They all were his friends. I remember my father's words to those he took in: "Now we are one family. You won't suffer any evil. My sons and I will defend you against peril at the cost of our lives."

We hid the families in underground bunkers that protruded from our large house. There were three generations of the extended families of Ilia Sollomoni and Mojsi Negrin, comprising twelve people. There were others whose names I do not recall. The bunkers were connected, and had many escape routes. It was my job to take food to the families in the bunkers and to shop for necessities. All the inhabitants of Vlorë were anti-fascist and all knew that many families were sheltering Jews.

Story as told by Sazan Hoxha (son of Nuro Hoxha)

On July 21, 1992, Yad Vashem recognized Nuro Hoxha as Righteous Among the Nations.



Both Hamdi and Zyrha were devout Muslims. They believed that it is a moral duty to help one another. Religion was part of our family education. It would have been unthinkable to denounce Jews in need. Fifty years of Communism has diluted our piety.

ZYRHA KASAPI AND HER SON, HAMDI KASAPI



Adile Kasapi with photograph of her husband, Hamdi Kasapi

Hamdi Kasapi, my husband, died in 1989. He was a cinematographer and was proclaimed an Albanian Hero of Socialist Labor. He and his mother, Zyrha, have been honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. I and my sons, Naim and Francis, treasure what Hamdi and Zyrha did for the Jewish family of Mose Frances, his wife, two children and mother. They came from Skoplje in Macedonia, and were sheltered in our home in Tirana. Hamdi spoke the Macedonian language. During the German occupation, we sheltered them in our small apartment in Tirana and the home of friends in the nearby village of Babrru. It was very difficult as we had only two rooms.

In 1944 the German terror was very intense, with house-to-house searches in Tirana. By then we had given the family Albanian names and clothing and moved them to Babrru for greater safety. One day, Mrs. Frances and her children had walked to our home from Babrru for a visit, but then they were obliged to stay the night because of German patrols. That night the Germans pounded on our door. Mrs. Frances escaped through the back door that connected to another house, and the children hid in the bed with the children of our family. The Germans beat Hamdi until he was unconscious, then they left. The Frances children witnessed the Germans' brutality against their protector. The family survived the war and returned to Macedonia.

In 1948, they immigrated to Israel. We lost all contact until 1990 when the first Albanian recognized as Righteous Among the Nations, Refik Veseli, made contact with the Frances children, Marcel and Esther, in Israel. But that was after Hamdi had passed away.

Story as told by Adile Kasapi (wife of Hamdi Kasapi)

On February 14, 1995, Yad Vashem recognized Zyrha Kasapi, and her son, Hamdi Kasapi, as Righteous Among the Nations.



We have been a family of Muslims for 500 years. "To save a life is to go to paradise". Besa came from the Koran. I salute all the Jews. May their homes be their sanctuaries. I drain my glass of raki as I want to honor all my Jewish friends. I am proud to be honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

KASEM JAKUP KOCERRI



From left to right: Burbuqe, Kasem Jakup Kocerri, Bino, Ana

I was born in 1915. All my life I have been a shepherd from Vlorë. I lived with our livestock in the hills. In Vlorë we had many Jewish families who were long-time members of our community. I remember Jakov Solomoni acted as the rabbi at Jewish holidays. We were the best of friends. Jews and Muslims are cousins.

In early 1944 a retreating German division came to our village from Greece. Our entire village was part of the national front of partisans. If the Germans killed one Albanian we felt the right to kill 100 Germans! The Germans were looking for Jews "to burn them alive with gasoline as Christ-killers". I took Jakov and his family with horses at night into the hills and hid them in a barn where I kept the sheep. Part of the family were separated and hidden with other villagers in the forest. Our dogs kept all strangers and patrols away. Others in our village took the remaining Jewish families into hiding.

We sheltered parts of the Solomoni family for six months until the Germans left in late 1944. All the Jewish families of Vlorë survived. The Jews did not know of the survival of their family members until they were all reunited after the Germans left. The Germans massacred many of the partisans of Vlorë and some were deported to death camps. The Jewish families stayed in Vlorë all through the Communist period until 1991. Some then went to Greece but most immigrated to Israel. We still correspond with Jeannette Solomoni, the daughter of Jakov, from Israel.

I remember Jakov taking me to a tree where he had hidden ten gold coins, which he offered me. I refused. I took no money from my Jewish friend.

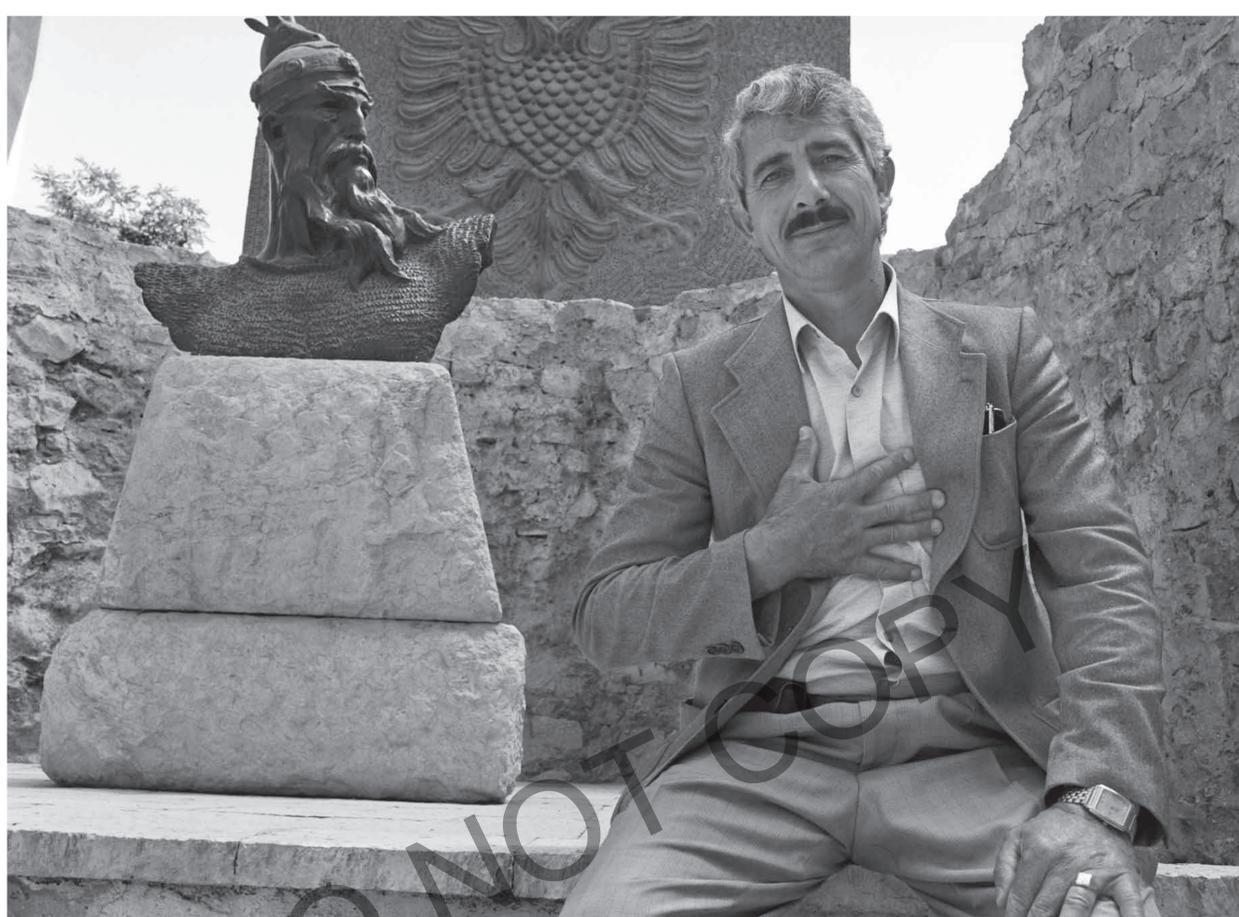
Story as told by Kasem Jakup Kocerri

On March 31 , 1993, Yad Vashem recognized Kasem Jakup Kocerri as Righteous Among the Nations.



Why did my father save a stranger at the risk of his life and the entire village? My father was a devout Muslim. He believed that to save one life is to enter paradise.

ALI SHEQER PASHKAJ



Enver Pashkaj with statue of Albania's national hero Skanderbeg

Our traditional home is in Pukë. My father owned a general store with food provisions. It was the only store of its kind for many miles around. One day a German transport rolled by with nineteen Albanian prisoners on their way to hard labor, and one Jew who was to be shot. My father spoke excellent German and invited the Nazis into his store and offered them food and wine. He plied them with wine until they became drunk.

Meanwhile he hid a note in a piece of melon and gave it to the young Jew. It instructed him to jump out and flee into the woods to a designated place. The Nazis were furious over the escape, but my father claimed innocence. They brought my father into the village and lined him up against a wall to extract information about where the Jew was hiding.

Four times they put a gun to his head. They came back and threatened to burn down the village if my father didn't confess. My father held out, and finally they left. My father retrieved the man from the forest and hid him in his home until the war was over. His name was Yeoshua Baruchowicz. There were thirty families in this village, but no one knew that my father was sheltering a Jew. Yeoshua is still alive. He is a dentist and lives in Mexico.

Story as told by Enver Pashkaj (son of Ali Sheqer Pashkaj)

On March 18, 2002, Yad Vashem recognized Ali Sheqer Pashkaj as Righteous Among the Nations.



Our parents were devout Muslims and believed, as we do, that “every knock on the door is a blessing from God”. We never took any money from our Jewish guests. All persons are from God. *Besa* exists in every Albanian soul.

THE BROTHERS: HAMID AND XHEMAL VESELI



Hamid Veseli (left), Xhemal Veseli

Our deceased brother Refik was the first to be honored in Albania as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. Now we both have been given the same honor for sheltering the family of Joseph Ben Joseph as well as the Mandil family. Under the Italian occupation, Joseph worked for me (Hamid) in my clothing shop and Moshe Mandil worked in our brother Refik's photography studio. Both families were refugees from Yugoslavia.

With the coming of the German occupation in 1943, both Jewish families were moved to our family home in Krujë. Xhemal walked the parents night and day for 36 hours to reach our family home. We dressed them as villagers. Two days later we transported the children to Krujë. During the day we hid the adults in a cave in the mountains near our village. The children played with other children in the village. The entire neighborhood knew we were sheltering Jews. There were other Jewish families that were being sheltered. One day the Germans were conducting a house-to-house search looking for a lost gun. They never found the gun and executed the soldier who lost it. We sheltered the Jews for nine months, until liberation. We lost all contact with the Ben Joseph family. They left for Yugoslavia too early, and we fear that the retreating Germans may have killed them. The Mandil family also left for their home in Yugoslavia. Our brother Refik visited them after the war, and studied photography with Moshe. The Mandil family subsequently immigrated to Israel.

Four times we Albanians opened our doors. First to the Greeks during the famine of World War I, then to the Italian soldiers stranded in our country after their surrender to the Allies, then the Jews during the German occupation and most recently to the Albanian refugees from Kosovo fleeing the Serbs. Only the Jews showed their gratitude.

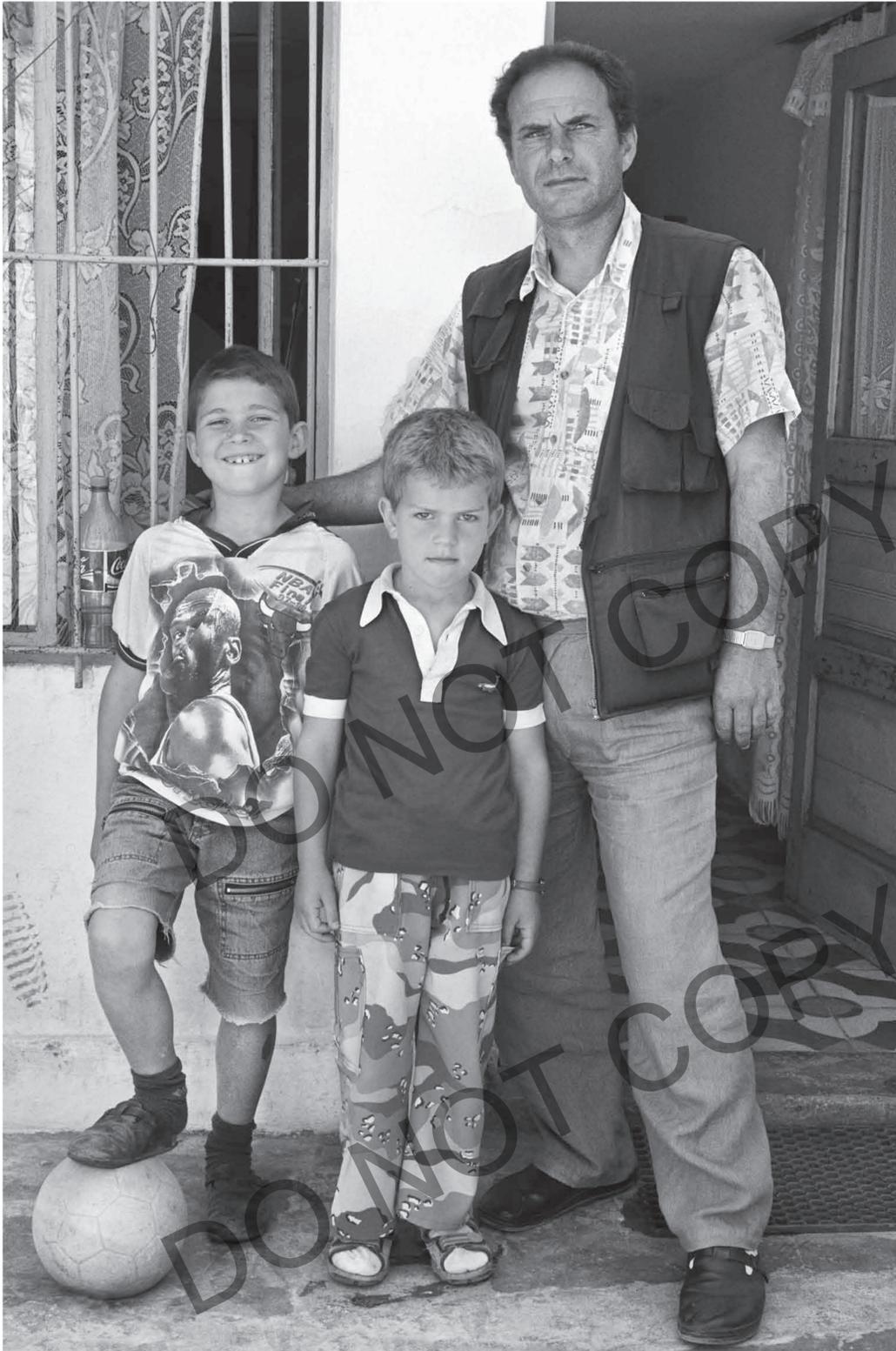
Story as told by Hamid Veseli and Xhemal Veseli

On May 23, 2004, Yad Vashem recognized the brothers, Hamid and Xhemal Veseli, as Righteous Among the Nations.



It seems strange to be asked why my father did what he did for this Jewish family. *Besa* is a tradition of the entire nation of Albania.

ESHREF SHPUZA



Ismet Shpuza with his sons

My parents lived in the town of Durres. In 1944, my father befriended the Jewish family of Raphael (Rudi) Abravanel. They were originally from Yugoslavia. He provided fake passports for Rudi, his aunt and uncle and their two children, and escorted them to the border. They escaped first back to Yugoslavia, then to Italy. Then our family lost all trace of the Abravanel.

It was through the help of another Albanian recognized as Righteous Among the Nations, Refik Veseli, that in 1990 we again made contact with Rudi and his family, now living in Israel. We received letters and exchanged telephone calls.

Story as told by Ismet Shpuza (son of Eshref Shpuza)

On March 31, 1993, Yad Vashem recognized Eshref Shpuza as Righteous Among the Nations for saving the Abravanel family as well as two members of the Philosof family.



All of us villagers were Muslims.
We were sheltering God's children
under our *Besa*.

DESTAN AND LIME BALLA



Lime Balla

I was born in 1910. In 1943, at the time of Ramadan, seventeen people from Tirana came to our village of Shengjergji. They were all escaping from the Germans. At first I didn't know they were Jews. We divided them amongst the villagers. We took in three brothers by the name of Lazar.

We were poor - we didn't even have a dining table - but we never allowed them to pay for the food or shelter. I went into the forest to chop wood and haul water. We grew vegetables in our garden so we all had plenty to eat. The Jews were sheltered in our village for fifteen months. We dressed them all as farmers, like us. Even the local police knew that the villagers were sheltering Jews. I remember they spoke many different languages.

In December of 1944 the Jews left for Priština, where a nephew of ours, who was a partisan, helped them. After that, we lost all contact with the Lazar brothers. It was not until 1990, forty-five years later, that Sollomon and Mordehaj Lazar made contact with us from Israel.

Story as told by Lime Balla

On October 4, 1992, Yad Vashem recognized Destan Balla, and his wife, Lime Balla, as Righteous Among the Nations.



Our home is first God's house, second our guest's house, and third our family's house. The Koran teaches us that all people, Jews, Christians, Muslims are under one God.

VESEL AND FATIME VESELI; THEIR SON REFIK VESELI



Drita Veseli with photograph of her husband, Refik Veseli

My husband was a photographer. He learned his trade as a teenager from a Jewish photographer by the name of Moshe Mandil. The Italians had deported the Mandil family from Priština in Kosovo to Tirana. When the Germans occupied Albania, my husband got his parents' permission to hide all four members of the Mandil family, as well as three of the Ben Joseph family, in the family's home in the mountain village of Krujë. All seven Jews were hidden until the liberation. Refik Veseli and his parents, Fatime and Vesel Veseli, were the first Albanians recognized as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

When my husband was asked how it was possible that so many Albanians helped to hide Jews and protect them, he explained: "There are no foreigners in Albania, there are only guests. Our moral code as Albanians requires that we be hospitable to guests in our home and in our country." When asked about the possibility of Albanians reporting the presence of the Jews to the Germans, my husband said that while such a thing is possible "if an Albanian did this he would have disgraced his village and his family. At a minimum his home would be destroyed and his family banished". The discussion was pointless as "no Albanian disgraced us".

The Veseli photography studio is now operated by my son in Tirana.

Story as told by Drita Veseli (wife of Refik Veseli)

On December 23, 1987, Yad Vashem recognized Vesel Veseli, his wife, Fatime Veseli, and their son, Refik Veseli, as Righteous Among the Nations.