

THE RESCUE OF JEWS IN KOSOVA

World War II in Europe began with Albania's invasion by the Italian Army on 7 April 1939. As a result, Albania lost its independence to become a protectorate of Italy's Kingdom officially and existing as an autonomous part of the Italian Colonial Empire. The freedom of Albania was *de jure* reestablished in October 1943. Albania was *de facto* an occupied country by the Italian or German Armies that had unlimited authority over WWII.

The German, Italian, and Hungarian Armies invaded ex-Yugoslavia in the period of 6-17 April 1941, and the German Army invaded mainland Greece in the period of 6-30 April 1941. Then, the German Army controlled the north of Kosova, including the north of Presheva Valley. In addition to most of Macedonia and eastern Greece, the Bulgarian Army controlled a small section of the southeast of Kosova and the south of Presheva Valley. Besides Montenegro, inner Albania, and two-third of Greece, the Italian Army had the most considerable part of Kosova and western Macedonia.

Within the German sector in northern Kosova was the town of Mitrovica and its mine of Trepça. Without that pit, the Reich III military industry could hardly keep the war machine moving on. The head post of the German Army was in Vushtri, 27 km away from Prishtina, the capital of Kosova, under Italian control. The German and Italian Armies had an agreement that allowed the German Army to enter the Italian sectors in Kosova anytime and without permission. The German Army occupied the Italian areas after the Italian Army capitulation on 8 September 1943, and adjacent Bulgarian sectors after the Bulgarian Army changed side and joined the Soviet forces of the 3rd Ukrainian Front on 9 September 1944.

From April 1941 to November 1944, the central and southern Kosova, western Macedonia, south and southeastern Montenegro joined Albania. They were some of the Albanian-inhabited areas that European powers had previously taken away from Albania and given to Yugoslavia. Only the Southern Albanian province of Çamëria (occupied by Greece in March 1913) did not become Albania yet throughout WWII.

Documents from Albanian archives recently published help for an accurate view of what happened in the province of Kosova for the duration of WWII. In the period of WWII, the Albanian Prefectures were complementing segments of the overall salvation of Jews from Albanians during the Holocaust and cannot be disjointedly comprehended. For instance, the main channel for Jews pouring into central Albania was starting from the Prefecture of Prishtina. The Prefectures of wartime Albania had not even a Jew wearing any badge or sign that would distinguish him or her.

The anti-Semitism was well spread in Serbia before WWII and supported by politics, Army officers, and the Serbian Orthodox Church; it flourished in wartime. On 20 January 1942, a meeting of the Reich III senior officials took place in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. It has been known as the Wannsee Conference that specifically decided to complete "the final solution to the Jewish question". It assigned the numbers of Jews that should exterminate in each of the European countries. Within three months and without German interference, the Serbian state and Chetniks completed the task to make Beograd the first "Judenfrei" city in Europe and liquidated almost all Jews in Serbia. Jews who could escape the Holocaust in Serbia were bringing themselves into Kosova the dreadful message of the Holocaust conscientiously performed by the Serbian state and Nazis.

The resident Jews of Kosova lived in towns and numbered 409 persons (the list exists). The Italian Army gathered resident Jews of Kosova and those caught as escaping the Holocaust in ex-Yugoslavia and other countries into its military camp of Prishtina. It is the same spot of today where stands the Faculty of Philology of the University of Prishtina. The Italian Army had gathered more than 3000 Jews in that camp. Jews in Kosova were in non-stop danger by Nazis and Serbs and were not free to move in the open. The only survival option was to move deeper into Albania. Albanians did whatever they could and what their governmental authority could help. The Albanian officials in Tirana and Prishtina organized the rescue of Jews from the Prefecture of Prishtina in undisclosed cooperation with the highest Italian power in wartime Albania. The Albanian officials in the Prefecture of Prishtina related to that operation were: Riza Drini, Prefect of Prishtina 1941-1942, Hysen Prishtina, Prefect of Prishtina 1942-1944, Preng Uli, Secretary of Prishtina Town Hall, 1941-1944, and Dr. Spiro Lito.

Sooner or later, the German Army would lethally deal with Jews in the Italian military camp of Prishtina. Therefore, Halim Sh. Spahija, Arslan Mustafa Rezniki, Kol Biba, Hysen Prishtina, Preng Uli, Hasan Rrem Xerxa, and Dr. Spiro Lito set a plan up. The Prefect of Prishtina, Hysen Prishtina, and Secretary of

Prishtina Town Hall, Preng Uli, declared the camp infected by typhus. Then, Halim Sh. Spahia transported almost all "infected" Jews by trucks or buses to Kruma, Kukës, Burrel, Tirana, Durrës, Kavaja, Berat, Vlora, etc. A few Jews did not want to go, and those who were still there when the German Army reached the camp in September 1943 sealed their fate.

Halim Sh. Spahia and his brothers were businessmen from the town of Gjakova. They used their business buildings in Kukës, Kruma, Prizren, Tirana, and Durrës to lodge in relocated Jews before they found safe houses in Albanian towns and villages or reliable ways to travel by sea from Durrës to safer countries. Arslan Mustafa Rezniciq built another house in his court to house Jewish families. His family rescued 42 Jewish families. In 2008, he received the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" from Yad Vashem. Arif Musa Aličkaj was an employee of the Town Hall of Deçan. Like Preng Uli, he made and issued false passports or documents for Jews of ex-Yugoslavia by registering them as Bosnian. With such papers, they traveled south to safer locations in Albania. Hasan Rrem Xerxa from Gjakova transported with his car Jews from Shkup to Deçan and deeper to Albania. Other Albanian families sheltered Jews in Kosova until they ensured their safe journey to inner Albania. Some of them are the following: the families of Bajram Voca and Sejdi Sylejmani in Mitrovica, the family of Sabit Haxhikurteshi in Prishtina, the families of Ruzhdi Behluli and Riza Çitaku in Gjiilan, the families of Hasan Shala Mullashabani and Asim Luzha in Gjakova, and the Belegu family in Peja.

Only through official channels, Jews were sent from the Prefecture of Prishtina to central Albania in dozens and hundreds. Since the transfers were in haste, it is common to find Albanian archival documents written in Italian or Albanian languages with lists of names each associated with the number (only the figure) of the family members accompanying that name. The publications by Harvey Sarnier, Martin Gilbert, Ariel Scheib, Gavra Mandil, etc., have mentioned those rescuing transfers.

Some typical examples from the Central Archive of Albania (CAA) follow. An archived dossier (F.152, V. 1942, D. 319) contains 551 Jews relocated from Prishtina to Berat in 1942. The document has 87 individuals and 94 heads of families associated with their own family, "*con la famiglia*". In a report of 30 March 1942, the Internal Ministry of Albania ordered the Prefects in the "liberated lands" to reposition all Jews of their districts into "old Albania". On 1 April 1942, the Internal Ministry of Albania ordered the Prefecture of Prizren to send all its Jews to a gathering field in Kosova. Together with 69 Jews from the prison of Prishtina, trucks soon relocated them to Kavaja, Burrel, Kruja, and Shijak. On 5 April 1942, a group of 100 Jews arrived in Berat. Some days later, 79 Jews from the town of Peja came to Preza, near Tirana, and so on.

The Lieutenant of the Italian King to wartime Albania, Francesco Jacomoni, in his book "La Politica dell' Italia in Albania (The Italian Politics in Albania), Cappelli Ed. 1965", on pages 288-289, affirmed another salvation case. Francesco Jacomoni asserts the secret cooperation with the Albanian Prime-Minister Mustafa Merlika Kruja and the Confidential Affairs Department's chief in the Italian Foreign Ministry, Luigi Vidau, for saving Jews in Kosova. In April 1942, two months after the Wannsee Conference, the German Consul General had required the delivery of more than 300 Yugoslavian Jews that had taken refuge in Kosova from the Albanian Prime Minister. Mustafa Merlika Kruja had immediately sent his officials to Kosova for issuing Albanian passports to those Jews and transported them to Gjinokastrë in southern Albania by buses [of the company SATA].

Another rescuing example is 256 Jewish families, totaling 860 persons, who temporarily sheltered in Kosova before being relocated to central Albania in 1942-1943. This comprehensive list comes as a courtesy of the Friendship Association Kosova-Israel "Dr. Haim Abravanel". It is a list of 55 ex-Yugoslavian Jews appearing on pages 101-102 of the book "Jevreji Kosova i Metohije, Beograd, 1988" by P. D. Ivanov, who has reported them as transported from Prishtina to the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in 1944. But, the documents in the Central Archive of Albania prove that they survived the Holocaust by being relocated to central Albania. This information with extensive archival references saw the publication for the first time in the book "Jews in Albania: The Presence and Salvation, Naimi, Tirana, 2009; pages 297-301" Shaban Sinani.

After the Italian Army capitulation on 8 September 1943, Albania *de jure* reestablished its independence on 16 October 1943 and declared its neutrality. *De facto*, the war atrocities, military operations, and fighting continued without interruption, though Reich III and its passing Army recognized Albania's independence and neutrality. Things looked better in an instance, and 185 Jews from Prishtina, who were safely residing in Berat, went as families back to Prishtina. When they arrived there, they found themselves trapped; some could return with time to Berat while others remained in hiding. Khaim Adizhes (heading the Jewish Community in Prishtina after the war) was a small boy who returned to Prishtina with his family. According to

his testimony, when the German Army was making massive arrests, Serbian neighbors spied on them. As a result, many Jews got arrested, and the rest could escape to inner Albania. Those arrested were sent to Sajmishte Camp near Beograd and later to the concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen. A few of them survived the war, and Khaim Adizhes was one of them. The arrests and transportation to the Sajmishte field occurred in May or June 1944. Khaim Adizhes and his family were not in the "Transportenliste" of August 1944 from Prishtina to the site of Sajmishte.

The conclusion is that the salvation of Jews in Kosova was not different from that of inner Albania. They were complementing parts of the overall salvation of Jews from Albanians and cannot be separately understood. Jews were rescued entirely by the Albanian governments and population in the entire Albania of WWII. When the German Army entered Kosova in September 1943, almost all Jews of Kosova had by then relocated to inner Albania. An acknowledgment comes from the Encyclopedia "Pinkas haKehillot Yavan, Yad Vashem, 1998, p. 413-425" in writing that Germans requested from the Albanian government in Spring 1944 the list of Jews and permission to act on them. The Albanian administration did not supply the records and declared that the Jewish community was an internal Albanian affair and gave no consent to operate against Jews. Albanians saved Jews wherever they had jurisdiction over Albanian lands. Çamëria was not part of Albania during WWII, and Jews suffered there, though many could reach Albania and survived the Holocaust. If Çamëria had been part of Albania, all Jews would have seen the salvation there. Absolutely.



Arif Musa Aličkaj, 1939. Town-Hall Registrar of Deçan, issued false documents to Jews.



Halim Sh. Spahia, Gjakova, set up receiving centers in Deçan, Prizren, Krume, Durrës for Jews from ex-Yugoslavia.



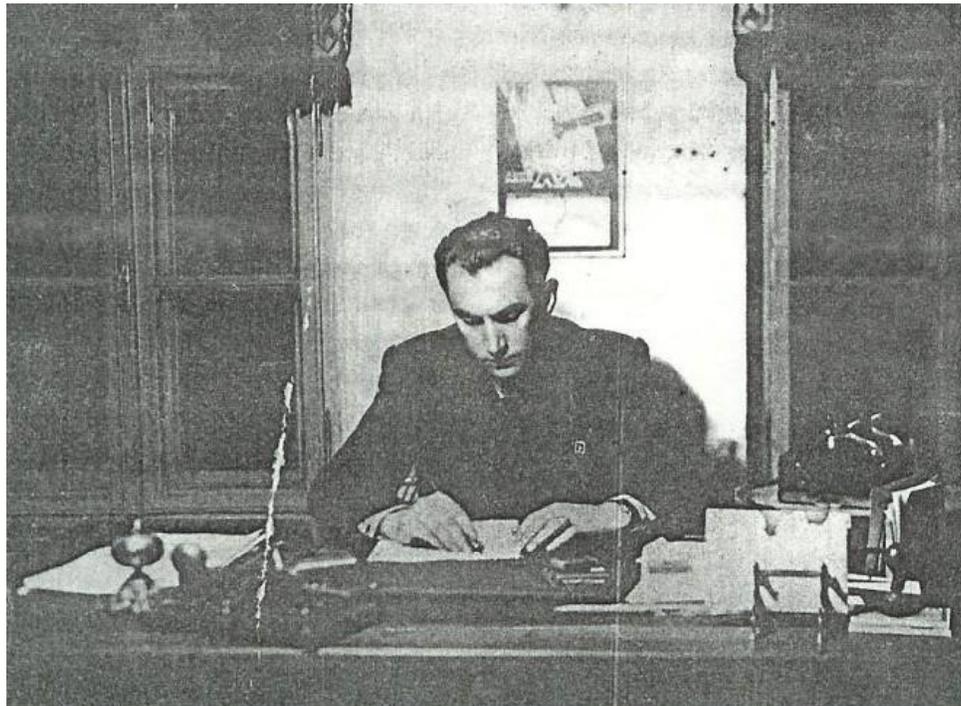
Dr. Spiro Lito, Prishtina, 1943.



Preng Uli, Secretary of Prishtina Town Hall, 1941-1944.



Dr. Haim Abravanel (center) and Arsllan Mustafa Rezniqui (right) with their families, Deçan, 1943.



Hysen Prishtina, Prefect of Prishtina 1943-1944.



Ex-Yugoslavian Jews in the Italian military camp of Prishtina, 1942, together with the Italian guard and the Albanian guard (with white cap).



Mustafa Arslan Rezniqui with his family in Deçan, who saved 42 Jewish families.



Righteous Among the Nations, Yad Vashem
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