

Department of Global Communications

Civil Society Briefing

January 31, 2019

A Matter of Humanity: The Rescue of Jews in Albania During the Holocaust

Today's briefing is based on a chapter of Holocaust history that is little known. Albania's response to the plight of the Jewish people, both those living within its borders at the beginning of the Holocaust period and those who came from other European countries seeking safety, is unique in Europe. Not one Jewish person residing within Albania during the Holocaust was killed by the Nazis. By the end of the war, there were more Jewish people alive in Albania than had resided there before the war.

Today's briefing considers how the historical example of Albanians during the Holocaust might illuminate factors that can encourage civil society to stand up for the human rights of all. The one fact that stands out is that the survival of the Jewish people in Albania was not the super heroic work of a few brave individuals (although there were many super brave heroes who risked their lives and families) but rather the work of all Albanians according to the accepted cultural code of honor called BESA. With BESA, the Jews were guests in the homes of the Albanians. They were not foreigners or strangers, but rather guests who were accepted as family and one did not betray guests. They were protected - by all. People in the villages knew that there were Jewish people living among the Muslim and Christian Albanian families but no one would betray them. It was a matter of national pride, their honor and their duty.

There were two short clips from the documentary film, *The Albanian Code*, directed by Professor Yael Katzir. One showed a Jewish woman who had been saved, along with her family. She had traveled back to this village in Albania recently, as an older woman, to say a very emotional thank you.

Today's panelists were impressive. The program was moderated by Ms. Alison Smale, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications. H.E. Ms. Besiana

Kadare, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Albania spoke of Albania's tradition of hospitality and the strong sense of national honor. She said that when Albania's response to the plight of the Jewish people was lauded, when the documents were revealed after the fall of communism, the Albanians were surprised by the reaction. They could not understand the fuss. They felt they had done what anyone would do.

Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, spoke a bit about the history, noting that all the other countries in Europe had tried to appease the Nazis. Winston Churchill had at one time been the lone voice of European leaders to stand up to the Nazis. Mr. Lauder pointed to the resurgence of Neo-Nazis and their statements of hatred. How is it possible that now, over 70 years after World War II, we are allowing Nazis to again spread antisemitism and hatred. He attributed it to an absence of leadership in the world.

Dr. Anna Kohen was born in Vlora, Albania to parents who had been sheltered and protected by the local villagers. She spoke of the need to reaffirm our respect for all human rights. She also proudly told the audience that The Republic of Albania had been proclaimed as the "House of Life" by the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation.

Majlinda Myrto, Executive Director of the Eye Contact Foundation, an organization that promotes religious, political, cultural and economic understanding and tolerance among people worldwide through the use of portrait photography and film, spoke about her family's experiences sheltering Jewish friends throughout the war. In Albania the Jewish guests did not have to remain hidden but were in the open, given Albanian names and for all purposes were family members and protected from the Nazis by the entire village - even when villagers were taken by the Germans.

David Estrin is the founder and CEO of "Together We Remember" an organization that he founded while at Duke to honor his Holocaust survivor grandparents. The organization uses social media and other emerging technology to bring people together to create vigils of remembrance of the holocaust and other genocides and atrocities all over the world. The hope is by remembering humanity at its worst, we can together bring humanity to its best.

Robert Singer, the CEO of the World Jewish Congress was the closing panel speaker but there were several prominent speakers from the audience.

Three different people spoke of the need to include Kosovo and other countries that border Albania in the tribute to the rescue of the Jewish people in Albania. We were reminded that 50% of Albanians live outside the borders in the neighboring countries. They too helped with the rescue of Jewish refugees trying to escape in Europe. Representative Eliot Engel, the New Democratic Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee said he was in Kosovo in 1994 and was given a large file that first made people aware of the courageous actions by Albanian people in WWII. Also the Israel Ambassador to the UN spoke, as did the Austrian Ambassador.