

Attitude of Collaborative Governments in Defense of the Jews during the War



History

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Abstract

The Albanian traditional historiography, to the extent it dealt with the question of rescuing the Jews in Albania, sustained an almost folk explication that everything happened owing to the Albanian traditional hospitality, faith and generosity. This view is also embedded in the studies of the foreigners. The Albanian virtue as a popular quality in front of a racial philosophical doctrine elaborated in an almost mathematical way, namely the Hitlerian doctrine of the “final solution”, does not suffice. During 1938 and 1939 the Italian diplomatic and consular service in Tirana, found it sufficient to just convey notifications to their center regarding the movement of the Jews in Albania without proposing any measures. Anagrama model 23, was a questionnaire of racist character applied in Italy for years. Despite being called “the filing-card of the foreigner”, actually it served to set the Jews separately, because all its columns were intended to conceal the fundamental question: “What is your race?” which contained two optional responses: “ariana” or “ebraica”. But in occupied Albania, certain laws tried to be adapted by the legislation of fascist Italy. Therefore, in conclusion we would say that it was fascist Italy which decided not to impose an anti-Semitic legislation on Albania, either the same with or similar to the one in force in Rome. Meanwhile, the Albanian government as a non independent subject on its part, could not react independently versus such an important question as “the preparation of Jews’ lists in Albania”. Certainly, assertion of the merits of collaborative governments in defense of the Jews does not justify other actions committed by them, but it merely enables a balanced historiographical analysis. This in no way overshadows the merits of the Albanian people, nor the values of their tradition, faith and hospitality, but it makes the war reality reliable. The people were willing to provide the Jews with shelter and food, false name and clothing. Meanwhile, the question of Jews’ lists depended on those who governed and it is for their merit that these lists were never handed over to Reich authorities.

The Albanian traditional historiography, to the extent it dealt with the question of rescuing the Jews in Albania, sustained an almost folk explication that everything happened owing to the Albanian traditional hospitality, faith and generosity. This view is also embedded in the studies of the foreigners. Actually, this line of reasoning has been thoroughly limited. The Albanian virtue as a popular quality in front of a racial philosophical doctrine elaborated in an almost mathematical way, namely the Hitlerian doctrine of the “final solution”, does not suffice. It is widely known that the Wansee Conference of the highest Nazi authorities, convened in 1942, adopted the final Jews’ numerical lists who were to be subject to the radical extermination and Albania made no exception. In decisions of this Conference, it turns out that in Albania 200 Jews had to be found and victimized, a number actually proclaimed as their official number in the census of population during 1929-1931. Apparently, Nazi organizers of the Conference were unaware of the multiplied number of non-resident Jews coming to Albania from the Central Europe and the Balkans during the royal period and in the early years of the war. The attitude of the collaborative governments towards the Jews in the course of the war can be divided into two periods, corresponding to the exchange of the occupying armies.

The history of the Jews and their legal conditions in Albania during the last months of the reign of King Zog (summer 1938 – April 1939) and during the four and a half years of the Italian occupation (April 1939 – September 1943) has remained little known as yet.

Such knowledge per se, apart from its importance as a constituent part of the Jews' history in Albania has another important component; precisely the fact how harsh was the anti-Semitic policy during the time of fascist Italy in Serbia occupied by the Third Reich or in Macedonia occupied by Bulgaria. This comparative situation reveals the advantageous positions of the Albanian authorities and the Albanian people to this population at risk of extermination. This paper summarizes the initial results of a scientific research on a specific aspect of the Jews' history in Albania, precisely the general legal situation of the Jewish refugees under Italian occupation.

During 1938 and 1939 the Italian diplomatic and consular service in Tirana, found it sufficient to just convey notifications to their center regarding the movement of the Jews in Albania without proposing any measures. Anagrama model 23, was a questionnaire of racist character applied in Italy for years. Despite being called "the filing-card of the foreigner", actually it served to set the Jews separately, because all its columns were intended to conceal the fundamental question: "What is your race?" which contained two optional responses: "*ariana*" or "*ebraica*". In fact, neither Zog's government nor successive governments imposed by the Italian occupation prohibited granting Albanian citizenship to foreign Jews. In a Jews' list already present in Tirana in 1939 it is found the note according to which four paterfamilias (a group consisting of 10 persons) had obtained Albanian citizenship respectively in April 1932, in April and July 1938 and in February 1939³³.

But in occupied Albania, certain laws tried to be adapted by the legislation of fascist Italy. In an archival document of 1939 it was found a secret letter of the Central Directorate of the National Bank of Albania sent to subordinate branches to be alert against the Jews having no Albanian citizenship who must be expelled from Albania³⁴.

In another document of the file entitled "*Legata italiana*" (Italian Legation), the Italian consulate in Tirana delivers to its superior offices through a notice dated 28 February 1939, the order for non-recruiting in the diplomatic service persons of Jewish origin³⁵. There were cases where during the Italian fascist regime Jews of Albanian citizenship were arrested and send to camps for being suspected as refugees. Also, somewhere was found a circular of the Ministry of Education on the measures taken against the high school students in Shkodra, Tirana and Vlora for misbehavior. Among them, were Israelis as well³⁶. On the other hand, documents reveal also the attitude of the fascist government. According to Albanian archive sources, Italo-Jews result initially mobilized in the war similar to all other nationals; for example in a document of that time it is written that by the end of May 1939 the Command of Ferrara Division in Vlora required through a telegram, information about the soldiers Romano Israele and Minervino Lecce, both effectives of Fanteria 48, regarding their Jewish race³⁷.

³³ AQSH, 152-2. V. 1939, D. 60, fl. 11

³⁴ AQSH, F. 179; V. 1939; D. 47

³⁵ AQSH, F. 163, V. 1939, D. 32, fl. 4-9

³⁶ AQSH, F. 195; V. 1940; D. 868; fl. 1

³⁷ AQSH, F. 160, V. 1939, D. 43, fl. 3-4

Shortly after occupation, Rome asked the Albanian collaborationist government to deport 400 non-resident Jews present in Albania, but the Albanian government firmly rejected it and nor did it enforce such a request ever³⁸. But apparently, there were cases where documents show a certain kind of institutional resistance. In a communication of the Ministry of Internal Affairs dispatched to prefectures on executing the order of Vicegerency General, it is observed the note to deport from Albania only those Israelis temporarily present in Albania but not those settled there since long ago and conducting commercial activity³⁹. Still from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, it is released an order dispatched to prefectures on permitting Israeli citizens to liquidate their interests and then leave Albania to return to their country of origin⁴⁰. This order of the Vicegerency General for the return of all Israeli citizens was released as of April 30, 1940 and the Ministry of Internal Affairs circulated it to the Prefecture of Tirana, Tirana Police Office and the Command of KKMM Group⁴¹. But returning to their country of origin, for Jews implied going to certain death. Hence, they resorted to every means possible to stay in Albania. The first thing they did without hesitation was their conversion into Catholics or Muslims, as precautions to escape any unpleasant surprise, to avoid problems and hide themselves at their utmost possibility. Such a formal conversion of religion, upon granting to individuals new names of another religion, was deliberately made to conceal their Jewish identity for reasons of their safety and, in fact was not a real and forced conversion, given that Jewish belief was not banned in Albania⁴². By looking into the Albanian Official Gazette we do note that the criterion of being or not Aryan, constituted one of the conditions for job positions and, even as a “temporary teacher of Italian Language” in primary schools⁴³.

Therefore, in conclusion we would say that it was fascist Italy which decided not to impose an anti-Semitic legislation on Albania, either the same with or similar to the one in force in Rome. Meanwhile, the Albanian government as a non independent subject on its part, could not react independently versus such an important question as “the preparation of Jews’ lists in Albania”. Thus, for example on September 10, 1942 the Secretary of the Vicegerency General asked the Albanian Minister of Interior to retrieve “permission to exercise the doctor’s profession” for two Jewish female doctors, maintaining that they carried Albanian citizenship and “*furthermore, Albania had no laws applicable to this kind of discrimination based on the race*”.⁴⁴ As of October 29, the Minister responded through a letter that he had conveyed his order to the relevant prefecture on the ground that “*Albania has no anti-Semitic laws in place*”.⁴⁵ This decision of the Italian authorities represents a significant fact that has to date remained completely unknown and fully unanalyzed.

³⁸ Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, Holt Paperbacks, New York 2004, fq. 242.

³⁹ AQSH, F. 152/2; V 1940; D 228; fl 1-2, F 235; V 1940; D 105; fl 1, 2, 4-7

⁴⁰ AQSH, F 271; V 1940; D 170; fl. 1-7.

⁴¹ AQSH, F 379; V 1940; D 69; fl 1- 22.

⁴² AQSH, F 153; V 1940; D 79; fl 59- 69 (Gjendet një lutje e Siegfried Schëart drejtuar Kuesturës së Shkodrës, letërkëmbim i Drejtorisë së Përgjithshme të Policisë me Kuesturën e Tiranës dhe Shkodrës për tu kthyer në besimin mysliman.)

⁴³ Njoftim për konkurs për 50 vende mësuesish të përkohshëm në shkollat shqiptare të Shtetit, 30 korrik 1940; në “Fletorja Zyrtare Mbretinija Shqiptare”, 21 gusht 1940.

⁴⁴ AQSH, F 161; V 1942; D 288; fl 2 (Lutje e Dr. Lubica Dajc Mijuskovic dhe Margarita Gjuvoshkovovic, nënshetare shqiptare me kombësi izraelite dhe banuese në Ulqin. Letërkëmbim i Mëkëmbësisë së Përgjithshme, Ministrisë së Punëve të Brendshme, Prefekturës së Shkodrës dhe Nënprefekturës së Ulqinit për dhënien e lejes për të ushtruar profesionin e tyre si mjeke në Ulqin. Lutja miratohet).

⁴⁵ AQSH, F 161; V 1942; D 288; fl 2, 346; 1942; 85; 22-23.

Secondly, we should emphasize that during the period of fascist ruling, the collaborationist governments did not cease asking systematically through circulars and instructions, the prefectures and sub-prefectures to officially inform as to who were the foreigners with temporary residence in Albania⁴⁶. It is not difficult to understand that in fact were required lists with Jews' names in Albania, their location as well as the political position they maintained. But the Jews' lists during the period 1939-1943 were almost entirely in the hands of the collaborative governments⁴⁷, hence it is realized that they were in the hands of the Italian Police Headquarters (*Questura*). But this is precisely the time of Jews' mass arrival in Albania. Hence it is clear that fascist authorities in Albania respected the Albanian attitude and that every foreigner in Albania cannot be affected. The slogan of fascist period was: “*sorvegliare e non punire / surveillance, not punishment*”, a slogan that Rome adhered to until the occupation period⁴⁸.

Third, Italian sources stored in Tirana, mainly of diplomatic character cover a period of more than 10 years (1932- 1943). These sources are significant not only to understand the importance of the Albanian state actions in defense of Jews prior to and during World War II but also to escape a somewhat traditionalist overview of history, which has often stiffened the assessment for events, developments and personalities of our world.

After September 8, 1943, a more difficult period ensued. Deployment of German troops in Albania aroused much uncertainty and fear among the local Jewish community and among numerous newcomers as well. This urged them to start moving in different directions where they also found the Albanian traditional hospitality. One of the numerous Jewish refugees, Samuilo Mandil, recalls those days in this way: “It was a real panic for these long-suffering people because we knew what type of barbarian beasts were coming to Albania. Amidst these difficult moments the Albanian people demonstrated their true benevolence,...they sheltered them in remote villages, where the Germans could not find them; the poor villagers, upon hearing on the arrival of innocent people chased by the Hitlerian beasts, shared even their last morsel with them”⁴⁹. In fact, there were many arrests of Albanians suspected as communists or members of the Yugoslav army but also numerous recruitments of those who had served as henchmen of Italians and even spies among their ranks. Also, there were mass arrests, thus for example in Durrës during November of 1943 the German government arrested about 2000 persons in collaboration with Osman Vela and held under surveillance about 300 persons⁵⁰. Accordingly, under an act of the German Foreign Ministry it is clearly discerned the caution of higher authorities about the Albanian regent representatives, without prejudice to mutual interests.

⁴⁶AQSH, F 153; V 1940; D 79; fl. 75, 76, 125, 147

⁴⁷AQSH, F 379; V 1940; D 69; fl 23- 27; F 161, D 956/ 3; fl 109- 120; F 153; D 79 fl 56

⁴⁸ Monika Stafa, “Politika italiane dhe pranimi i hebrenjve në Shqipëri”, *Gazeta Shqip*, 9.9.2007, f. 18

⁴⁹ Samuilo Mandil, “Izraelitët në Shqipëri: para okupacionit, gjatë okupacionit dhe mbas clirimit nga okupatori”, gazeta *Bashkimi*, 20. 02. 1946.

⁵⁰AMPJ, D. 21, V. 1943, fl. 73/1.

We further come to understand the course of events from the conversation between the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Reich III, Eberhard fon Tadden and the Chief of the Gestapo, Hajnrh Myler as of 17 October in Berlin. This conversation as a report belongs to the Section II which in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dealt with internal issues of Reich⁵¹.

In the spring of 1944, for the second time the Nazis asked officially the regent government to draw up a full list of all Jews currently present in Albania and then group them in one venue⁵². Josef Jakoel's father, Rafael Jakoel and Mateto Matathia, the two heads of the Jewish community in Albania were now quite aware of the danger threatening them by the Germans and their political goals. They thought that all Jews in Albania were exposed to the risk of being arrested. Therefore, in the quality of leaders of the Jewish community they appealed to one of the regents of the government, Mehdi Frashëri⁵³ for help.

Frashëri recommended that they contact the Minister of Interior, Xhafer Deva, who had a good reputation concerning protection of Jews even though he had been a Nazi agent in the "lands liberated" during the Nazi occupation there. Now as a Minister of Internal Affairs, Xhafer Deva, had become known for the terror he exercised across the streets of Tirana along with his hordes⁵⁴.

The Jewish delegation knew very well that they were taking risks by going to meet the Minister Deva and gave salutations to their families because the risk was too great not to come back anymore. Fortunately, the Minister's nationalism exceeded anti-Semitism and he reached an accord with them, to protest on this matter to the Germans. Deva managed to convince Germans accept his refusal to their request regarding Jews' lists but memories fade away and time goes by. For the sake of truth, there is another version of this story. According to this version, Minister Deva refused the German request and then informed the heads of the Jewish community that Germans accepted his decision and accordingly it was not necessary to draw up lists.

⁵¹The whole document cited here: Më 17 Tetor 1943, LR. v. Thadden, and along with it also the Commander of Müller group required information on Jews' situation (Judenfrage) in the new occupied areas which, given the reports of the Foreign Ministry coming from Denmark would be of interest if the drives against Jews in the new occupied areas would be undertaken with substantial means and preparation in order to avoid any political complication. Now, the Commander of Müller group and the Security Chief of Reich (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) – the Security Chief of Reich since 1939 was Heinrich Himmler*) have learned from the experience acquired in Copenhagen. But time, while we are still at war, does not suffice to increase forces in these areas for a quick final solution of Jews' question. Therefore, it is required that, with means and forces available, we do our best so as to achieve the required success in this action. Regarding the particularity of each country the Commander Müller added as follows: **Albania** – Such an action against the will of the current government or better to say without informing the Albanian government, would lead to painful consequences; for this reason the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expresses its desire that measures planned for Albania, be taken only when conditions for such an action are ripe and coordinated between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Albanian government. **Croatia**- Here implementation of an action against the Jews does not seem actual, given that the Italians grouped them in a coastal area and now they are in insurgents' hands. Whether or not such an action will be possible in the future, it depends on the developments in Croatia. **In the Italian occupied areas in Greece**: Actions against Jews undertaken so far in the Thessaloniki area, have now been extended even to other areas of Greece. The action already seems to have ended and gives the impression to have been conducted under the forces we have had there. **In the Italian occupied areas in France**: In these areas there are many Jews, most of them of Anglo-American citizenship. Implementation of such an action, for the police constitutes a first-hand problem.

⁵²Harvey Sarnier, *Rescue in Albania: One hundred percent of Jews in Albania rescued from Holocaust*, Brunswick Press, 1997, fq. 42

⁵³AQSH; F 392; V 1944; D 1063; fl 5, 6 – Raport i Komandës së Xhandarmërisë Vlorë mbi gjendjen politike në këtë qytet si dhe një thirrje e nënshkruar nga disa qytetarë nacionalistë vlonjatë mes të cilëve dhe Mateo Matathia.

⁵⁴Aleksandar Gaon, *We Survived... Yugoslav Jews on the Holocaust*, The Jewish Historical Museum (2005), Belgrade, fq. 278.

In my opinion, it does not matter which version was accepted given that the result was the same; Albanians opposed the Nazis at this point and refused collaboration to prepare lists of Jews registered in Albanian territories.

When Minister Deva refused the request, based on documents, he said to Germans that he considered this request a flagrant violation of their agreement and interference in Albanians' internal affairs⁵⁵. He told the representative of Jewish community on the respond he had given to the Nazis giving assurances that in so far as the Albanian government would be still in force, they should not be feared. Indeed, the ensuing events proved the truthfulness of this statement. But the fact that the Albanian government and the people did not collaborate with the Germans, did not imply that the danger was gone for Jews or any Muslim or Catholic Albanian protecting them. Meanwhile, all Jews scattered across Corfu, Ioannina but also in Albanian annexed territories, were transported in death camps. Surely, the importance of the rejected request for preparation of the Jews' list is not exaggerated since there was absolutely a correlation between rejection to prepare lists and percentage increased among the survivors by 10%. The collaborationist governments of the Nazi period considered the Jews' question as an internal affair.

As stated by Sir Martin Gilbert, Nazi authorities asked again the Jews' lists even in June 1944, but still, the Albanian government refused them. After that, such requests did not recur any longer. As I have already had the occasion to communicate during an international Conference organized on the same subject in Paris, this year, it is evidenced through documents that even opposing political organizations of the wartime, namely the National Liberation Front and the National Front, although in conflict with each other, shared the same position concerning the attitude to Jews. Such agreements were reached in Gjirokastra and Berat. Certainly, assertion of the merits of collaborative governments in defense of the Jews does not justify other actions committed by them, but it merely enables a balanced historiographical analysis. This in no way overshadows the merits of the Albanian people, nor the values of their tradition, faith and hospitality, but it makes the war reality reliable. The people were willing to provide the Jews with shelter and food, false name and clothing. Meanwhile, the question of Jews' lists depended on those who governed and it is for their merit that these lists were never handed over to Reich authorities.

⁵⁵Harvey Sarnet, *Rescue in Albania: One hundred percent of Jews in Albania rescued from Holocaust*, Brunswick Press, 1997, fq. 43