

LESSON 2: RESOURCE 3

ALBANIA and BESA

“There is no trace of any discrimination against Jews in Albania, because Albania happens to be one of the rare lands in Europe today where religious prejudice and hate do not exist, even though Albanians themselves are divided into three faiths.”

Albania, a small and mountainous country on the southeast coast of the Balkan peninsula, was home to a population of 803,000. Of those only two hundred were Jews. After Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, many Jews found refuge in Albania. No accurate figures exist regarding their number; however, different sources estimate that 600-1,800 Jewish refugees entered that country from Germany, Austria, Serbia, Greece and Yugoslavia, in the hope to continue on to the Land of Israel or other places of refuge.

Following the German occupation in 1943, the Albanian population, in an extraordinary act, refused to comply with the occupier’s orders to turn over lists of Jews residing within the country’s borders. Various governmental agencies provided many Jewish families with fake documentation that allowed them to intermingle amongst the rest of the population. The Albanians not only protected their Jewish citizens, but also provided sanctuary to Jewish refugees who had arrived in Albania, when it was still under Italian rule, and now found themselves faced with the danger of deportation to concentration camps.

Besa

The remarkable assistance afforded to the Jews was grounded in *Besa*, a code of honor, which still today serves as the highest ethical code in the country. *Besa*, means literally “to keep the promise.” One who acts according to *Besa* is someone who keeps his word, someone to whom one can trust one’s life and the lives of one’s family. Apparently this code sprouted from the Muslim faith as interpreted by the Albanians.