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Plenary Session 3: Combating anti-Semitism  
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It is a great honour and a privilege for me today to be here and moderate this important session on Anti-Semitism and tolerance. I would like to start this session by telling something from the remarkable story of how Jews were historically saved in my country and always found a home in Albania.

The relationship between Albanian and Jews is a case study, not only because every life of the Albanian Jews was saved in Albania, during the time of Holocaust but also because the number of Jews, who were fleeing Europe, sheltered and saved in Albania, was doubled and tripled during the W.W.II.

The history of Albanian – Hebrew relations go back at the time of Romans and continue to be strong, peaceful, and excellent in the course of centuries. There is no pogrom, crime, offense, persecution whatsoever, performed by Albanians as a native population in their country against the Jews or any other population either autochthone or migrating in in the Albanian soil. The history of Jews in Albania is more than two thousand years old. There are signs of Jewish presence in Albania, such as a Basilica of 5th century BC in the southwestern city of the country, Saranda, a large archaeological excavated area of one of the biggest synagogues of the Balkan region. There are some very well-known Jews who have been related to Albania such as Sabatai Zvi, a famous traveler Nathans of Gaza, Albert Einstein, Herman Bernstein, etc.

In 1930 the United States assigned an Ambassador in Albania named Herman Bernstein – who was a Jew. Born in Lithuania, he had covered the Soviet Revolution for the New York Times. He took a serious interest on the Jewish History in Albania. Among things that he learned and discovered there was the Life of the Messiah False, Sabbatai Zvi. In the Middle of the 17th century a soothsayer born in Izmir, Turkey known as Sabbatai Zvi proclaimed he was the Messiah and convinced thousands of Jews to sell their belongings and go with him to the Promised Land. His story goes on and on but finally he perished in Albania where he established a very liberal Muslim – Jewish sect named Bektashi which is still in existence in the country. He died in 1673 as the most famous non-Albanian Jew in the Albanian history.

There are many newspapers that have published articles about a possibility that Albert Einstein was provided with an Albanian Passport when he left Europe for the United States. It was said that he went to Albania, got the passport and the US Visa and after 3 days he travelled to the United States. There are many Albanians who have given testimony about this fact. However, no records were found about this interesting fact. It might've been concealed for security reasons of that time. This fact makes Albanians also very proud for what they have done. It is estimated that in the beginning of 1930, Albania had about 1000 Jews located mainly in Vlora, Durrresi, Tirana, Berat and Elbasani In 1945 this number was about 3000. The Jewish population increased in Albania three times while in many places in Europe it was reduced in millions.

When the Nazi started to chase Jews in Europe, it was the Albanian King, Ahmet Zogu who instructed all his Consular Missions to grant visa to every Jew, who, despite the fact that his or her passport had a sign "J" for "Jew" stamped in it, should be allowed to enter Albania for an indefinite period of stay. From 1937 to the end of the war a big number of Jews entered and were sheltered in Albania, staying there or making their way out to other safe countries.

One of them is Professor Scarlett Epstein, a Jewish young Lady from Vienna, now a British Citizen, who escaped with her family after the crystalnacht. She was granted a visa by the Albanian consul in Zagreb, while the doors of all the other embassies were shut at her face. She went to Albania, in Durres, and afterwards she came to Great Britain. She is more than 90 years old now, a living legend, a witness of this wonderful story of protection, promise and acceptance.

I am proud to state in front of this much respected audience in this OSCE conference, that Albania is the country in Europe where no life of a Jew was lost, no Jew was handed over to the Nazi and they were all sheltered by Albanians simply because they did pursue their Code of Honor - BESA. There was no government in place, to force them to do that, but they did it and they did not act for

money.

There are 69 Albanian Righteous Among the Nations at the Yad Vashem. To better understand why that miraculous behave was performed by Albanians I have to explain you one of the most unique, special, rare, righteous tradition of Albanians which stands above any other moral value which is named: Albanian - BESA

"Besa is a noble principle that has originated from the soul of Albanians. Besa is the fundamental part of the Kanun. The Kanun is a very old code for the Albanian society. According to this Code/Kanun: "The house of an Albanian belongs to God and to the guest" Every hour of the day and night, a man must be ready to receive a guest with bread, salt, and an open heart. He must offer him a bed, a pillow and a worm hearth. To the delight of the Jewish refugees seeking shelter among Albanian gentiles, from the Nazi killing machine "Guest" meant guests in the country as well guest in the house. Everyone can see himself as a good man when he is addressed as a man of honour." A man must defend his guest of honor even if he endangers his own life in doing so."

Saving lives of the Jews in Albania was not something that was performed only from one segment of the population, one religion group, or one segment of the government. Jews were saved by Muslims, Roman Catholics and Christian Orthodox, alike. They were saved by the King, when he was in power, by the consular offices of Albania abroad, granting visa to them, by the governmental and local administration, by the residents of the cities and peasants in their farms. It was the Moral Code which prevailed over any other religion, ideology, class, position in society – it was the Albanian Besa.

Albanians have had a rich and sometimes tragic history, but in their long history of relations with neighbors, invaders, guests, sojourners, minorities, people in need, the story how they saved 100 per cent of Jews during the time of Holocaust is like a jewel in their crown.

I would like to close this speech quoting memories of a Jewish survivor, Irene Grubman while she was leaving Albania: “Farewell, Albania, I thought. You have given me so much hospitality, refuge, friends and adventure. Farewell, Albania. One day I will tell the world how brave, fearless, strong, and faithful your sons are; how death and the devil can’t frighten them. If necessary, I’ll tell how they protected a refugee and wouldn’t allow her to be harmed even if it meant losing their lives. The gates of your small country remain open, Albania. Your authorities closed their eyes, when necessary to give poor, persecuted people another chance to survive the most horrible of all wars. Albania, we survived the siege because of your humanity. We thank you”.

Thank you for your attention and there is no place, no room, no sense in the world to hate or fight another ethnicity or race.