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Sarner's hardback book is a revision of his pamphlet The Jews of Albania (Brunswick Press, 1992. 44p. plus photographic plates) which he wrote with Joseph Jakoel and Felicita Jakoel.

Both publications give a brief history of Jews in Albania and emphasize their exodus in 1991. The later work concentrates on possible reasons for the exceptional situation of Jews in Albania during the Second World War in that not a single Jew was taken to any of the Nazi concentration camps. This accounts for the extraordinary fact that by War's end there were more Jews in Albania than before, due to an influx of Jews fleeing from other countries - not only surrounding countries, Yugoslavia and Greece, but also from further afield, Germany and Austria for example (p. 32-3). Initially Albania was seen (as, more recently, it has been seen by Asians) as a loophole into other parts of Europe. However, as the Nazi stranglehold over each European country tightened it became harder for Jews in transit through Albania to find another destination.

Sarner discusses the extremely tolerant situation between all religions of pre-War Albania, one which has brought frequent comment and citation of the phrase of the publicist and writer Pashko Vasa (1825-92) "The religion of Albanians is Albanianism". This phrase was also used by Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha to disclaim Albanians' need for any religion and the justification for his proclamation of Albania as the world's first atheist state, implemented 1967-90. Hoxha's atheist stance placed people practising any religion as equally culpable. Hence anti-semitism did not exist in Albania.

Central to Sarner's history is Josef Jakoel (1922-91), spiritual head of the Jewish community in Albania, whose perseverance in his faith managed to prevent the very small
Jewish community in Albania from completely losing touch with their roots and with each other although travel even within Albania during the Communist period was extremely limited, and the few Jews were scattered between Tirana, Durres, Vlora and Shkodra.

In 1990 it was possible for the first time since the War for Albanians to leave their country even for short periods. By this time Jakoel was too sick to undertake investigations abroad on behalf of Albania's Jewish community. His daughter Felicita was chosen and left for Greece to make contact with the Jewish Agency and continue on to Israel, despite this entailing her visiting a country with no diplomatic relations with Albania. She was able to set in motion the exodus of Albanian Jewry to Israel which came about in 1991 when 300 "Jews" left for Israel (some were gentiles married to Jews - a situation which the small isolated Jewish community had come to accept).

A second important theme of Sarner's account is the story of Albania's "Righteous" (those non-Jews identified and honoured by the State of Israel as people who risked their lives to rescue Jews during the Holocaust). Sarner gives details of some of these people and families (Moslems and Christians) who housed and hid Jews, some for years; he remarks on the extraordinary generosity of those hosts, their refusal to accept recompense and their ungrudging giving even in situations of extreme danger. Not only were Jews offered hospitality by individuals and families; the Albanian government also heeded the code of honour for guests and refused to obey the command of the Italian occupies to expel all foreign Jews, and even provided a small stipend for needy refugee families (p. 40). Sarner himself was impressed by the indelability of the Albanian code of honour when interviewing members of a family who each confirmed the importance of a guest's life before their own (p. 50); "there are no foreigners in Albania, there are only guests", he was told (p. 63). The author finds the key to this universal care and protection for the Jews in the roots of Albanian civilization: the priority given to The Guest.

This has also been observed by Dr. Kazuhiko Yamamoto in his research where he likens Albanian reverence for guests to the Japanese Guest God. In both societies honour is at stake should there be any question that any guest, for any length of visit, is not given the very best care and attention. This is also at the root of the Kanun (the set of laws codified by the 15th Century nobleman Lek Dukagjin, and strictly adhered to to this day).
These oral laws were finally written at the turn of the twentieth century. Several sections specify the correct conduct of a host. Article XXXI (b) notes that a woman may be shot in the back for betrayal of hospitality.

Legend also has it (p. 8) that 2,000 years earlier a shipload of Jews destined as Roman slaves, but shipwrecked on Albanian shores received traditional hospitality. These would have been the builders of a synagogue whose remains Sarner claims were found at the ancient Illyrian port of Dardania (p. 9).

Sarner's informative slim volume gives a brief history of Albania, a few current statistics, a short bibliography, a useful map (p. 30) showing the four Albanian vilayets within the Ottoman Empire (until 1878) (explaining the strong Albanian links with the Jewish community of Janina), and some interesting photographic illustrations. One can ignore several minor typographical errors, but Sarner cannot claim Miranda Vickers as a Jew by naming her Martha in his bibliography!