

Remarks by the Honorable Warren L. Miller
Chairman, U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage
Abroad
at the Signing Ceremony for the Agreement Between the United States of
America and the Republic of Albania on the Protection and Preservation of
Certain Cultural Properties
July 12, 2004 * Washington, DC

Minister Islami, Ambassador Tarifa, Ambassador Fried, guests –

The United States appreciates the Government of Albania's efforts and the leadership of Foreign Minister Islami and Ambassador Tarifa in concluding this agreement. It reaffirms to the world that the people and the Government of Albania respect all cultures and will protect the rights of minorities.

Today's Agreement commits our governments to protect, assist preservation efforts, and prevent discrimination with respect to the cultural sites of all ethnic and religious groups. Historic sites, monuments, places of worship, cemeteries, and related archives are encompassed by the Agreement and a Joint Cultural Heritage Commission is established to assist our mutual efforts.

My government was prompted to seek such agreements in Europe because, as a consequence of the Holocaust, few Jews remained to care for Jewish cultural properties, which were vulnerable to expropriation, deterioration, and desecration.

This is not a problem in Albania. However, today's ceremony provides an opportunity to take note of the remarkable role played by Albania during the Holocaust.

The government and the people of Albania protected their Jewish citizens and gave refuge to foreign Jews. The demands of the Italian and German occupying forces to turn over the names of the Jews and to deport them were refused.

An overwhelming majority of Albania's citizens, who are predominantly Muslim and Christian, hid and protected the Jews in their country, even though it

was at great risk to their own safety. At the end of the war, all the Jews in Albania were saved. Not a single Jew was turned over to the Nazis.

Refik Veseli, the first of 60 Albanians awarded the honor of being a righteous person by the State of Israel for helping Jews during the Holocaust – was asked why so many Albanians saved Jews. He responded that there are no foreigners in Albania, only guests, and the Albanian moral code requires guests to be treated hospitably in their homes and in their country.

The defiance of evil by Albanians during mankind's darkest days is not one of the better known stories of heroism during the Holocaust, but it is one of the most outstanding. The world owes the people of Albania a great debt for their courage and heroic acts.

The United States Government looks forward to working with the Government of Albania as partners in implementing the terms of today's Agreement. Given Albania's history of cultural tolerance, we know that this will not be a difficult task.

Thank you. And congratulations!