Dr. Anna Kohen, a Jewish daughter of Albania is recognized by Albania’s Head of State in Washington DC.

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In one of the conference rooms at the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in Washington Mr. Bujar Nishani, President of Albania awarded Mrs. Joanna Neumann and Dr. Anna Kohen the medal of Recognition for Civil Merits.

President Nishani was accompanied by Mr. Gilbert Galanxhi, Ambassador of the Republic of Albania to the USA. Among the distinguished guests at the ceremony were Mr. Enver Hoxhaj, Kosova’s Foreign Affairs Minister and Mr. Akan Ismaili, Kosova’s Ambassador. ACJ’s leadership and many personalities of the Jewish American community were present as well, along with representatives of the Albanian-American Diaspora and the awardees’ family and friends.

The ceremony began with a warm and welcoming introduction by Mr. Jason Isaacson, the AJC’s Director for Government and International relations. Then the audience watched the
documentary film “Rescue in Albania”, by director Dardan Islami, a very touching piece, based on survivors’ testimonies, about Jews in Albania and Kosova during World War II.

Mr. Bujar Nishani spoke of the special relationship between the Jewish and the Albanian nation and he elaborated on Albanian hospitality, on the importance of “Besa” and on the value and dignity of human life. He then awarded the medals for Civic Merits to the two outstanding ladies, Mrs. Johanna Neumann and Dr. Anna Kohen.

Several questions were posed to the President, some from the AJC and some from the public, including one by a VATRA member about Israeli policy towards Kosovo. In response to this question, Mr. Nishani graciously shared Albanian’s efforts to lobby on the issue. The President also shared future plans for honoring those Albanians and their families who directly rescued the Jews, in response to a question raised by another VATRA activist. It is a fact that the number of Albanians honored at Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations does not reflect the real figure, which is significantly higher. Dr. Kohen recognized in her accepting speech, for example, the late Mr. Behxhet Reso of Tirana, and the grandfather of Dr. Indrit Reso of Williamsburg, VA. The elder Reso had run an underground network to assist, provide shelter and rescue many Jews of former Yugoslavia in Tirana in 1943-1944, but has yet to be recognized at Yad Vashem.

Mrs. Johanna Neumann, who spent several years in Albania and whose family was protected by the Pilku family, shared her touching testimony. She quoted Talmud by stating that “he who saves one life saves the entire humanity”. Her family spent more than six years in Albania moving from town to village through 17 houses in total. She has four children, 17 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. Their lives are dedicated to the people of Albania who protected and saved Johanna and her family during the Holocaust.

Dr. Anna Kohen, the sweet daughter of Vlora, Albania, the sister of many who know her or have heard about her, the President of the Albanian-American Women’s Organization “Motrat Qiriazi”, was as lovely and cheerful as ever. Surrounded by her family and friends, supported by all who have come to know her, friends from childhood and friends from her professional life, she surely was touched. With a trembling voice, with teary eyes, and with a lot of love and appreciation, she expressed her deepest and overwhelming gratitude to all Albanians. She spoke from the heart, remembering her childhood and her friendships, manifesting her dreams as the realities, inviting Jewish people to visit Albania and invest in Albania. “Dielli” would not miss out on her acceptance speech and is publishing it in full.

The pictures speak for themselves. Dr. Kohen was as caring as always as she asked about everyone’s health, welfare and family. She kindly posed with VATRA members and thanked them all. It was a night to remember! Congratulations to both Mrs. Neumann and Dr. Anna Kohen!