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Kadri Cakrani - An unknown Albanian hero of the Holocaust

He served as a commandant-general of the town of Berat, and in 1943, he called for help as he tried to protect the Jews in his area.

By ELIZABETH J. VRATO AUGUST 22, 2020 21:10



JEWISH MUSICIANS perform in the streets of Tirana, Albania, in preparation for Passover.
(photo credit: ARBEN CELI/REUTERS)

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Albania was the only country in Europe to end World War II with more Jewish residents than before the war, and it was partly thanks to men like my grandfather, Kadri Cakrani.

This month that remarkable fact was recognized by a new Holocaust memorial unveiled in the nation's capital of Tirana. It honors not just the suffering of the Jews of Europe under the Nazis, but the Albanian Muslims and Christians who risked everything and put themselves "under the bullet," as my grandfather said, to protect men, women and children who were different from them, and in many cases, complete strangers.

My grandfather was a leader of the National Front, which was fighting the **Nazis**. He served as a commandant-general of the town of Berat, and in 1943, he called for help as he tried to protect the Jews in his area.

"We need to urgently transport a big number of people from Berat. I am talking about the Jews who are in the hundreds here, and if they are found, they will all be put under the bullet. You never know what might happen to them, and I cannot trust anyone because even if I hide them with... documents amongst our families, I do not know how the word might get out and then I will have put all of Berat under the bullet. They shouldn't fall into the hands of the Nazi army that is on its way here, because we know what the Nazis will do to them... send someone back immediately with my courier."

My grandfather's role was recognized in an article in the April 2020 issue of Auschwitz Museum's magazine, *Memoria*. It tells the story of how he brought together the people in his region to fight the Germans and worked to protect Jews. Under repeated questioning, he lied to Nazi officials, saying he had no information about Jews in his area. In doing so, he showed great courage.

The penalty for lying was death.

When he got word of Nazi sweeps to find Jews who were sheltered in Berat, many of whom were refugees from central and southern Europe, he moved them from one part of the city to another, keeping them alive and one step ahead of the patrols.

But my grandfather did more. He took the enormous personal risk of hiding Jews in his own home, providing for them and keeping them safe.

The penalty for doing so was, again, death.

Many of these stories are just coming to light now, more than 70 years after they occurred, because antisemitism flourished during the totalitarian rule of Communist leader Enver Hoxha (1945-1991). Religion itself was outlawed, and the tiny nation had diplomatic relations with neither the United States nor Israel to keep their families safe, in the face of frequent police raids, people destroyed documents proving how they had helped Jews.

Over the 20 years since the fall of Communism in Albania, Prof. Simon Vrusho conducted more than 150 interviews and collected names, documents, letters and photos now on display at the Solomon Museum in Berat, which he opened in 2018.

Kadri Cakrani's portrait hangs on the wall in the museum, and his place in WWII history is being shared with the public.

My grandfather helped Jewish refugees until he himself became a refugee. He escaped Albania in 1944, ahead of a death warrant from political leader Enver Hoxha. My grandfather's uncle and brother were not as lucky. They took refuge in Italy and then Syria, far from the home his family helped found, with his own grandfather signing the 1912 Declaration of Independence from the Ottoman Empire.

The United States granted my grandfather political asylum. He worked with US intelligence services for the rest of his life, trying to bring democracy back to Albania, until he died in Philadelphia in 1972. He is now remembered for saving hundreds of people's lives the war, their descendants now numbering in the thousands.

The writer is a graduate of NYU Law School and a Truman scholar. Most importantly, she is the proud granddaughter of Kadri Cakrani.

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