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# Author promotes Albania's heroic, little-known role rescuing Jews in WWII

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TORONTO - Vera Held was astonished when she first heard about Albania, a tiny country in southeastern Europe where the number of Jews was ten times higher than it had been before the Second World War.

The Toronto author had grown up hearing chilling stories from her father, a Holocaust survivor, who told of how more than 35,000 Jews in his hometown in Hungary — his parents among them — were rounded up and sent to the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp, where nearly all perished.

He also told her about the doctors and nurses who saved his life by keeping him in the hospital, even though they knew he was faking his illness in an effort to remain alive.

So, when an Albanian-Canadian gym instructor she met eight years ago told her that not a single Jew had been killed by the Nazis in his native country, Held was puzzled, and decided to do her own research.

What she learned has made her a woman with a mission.

"I want more people to hear about this story," said Held, who recently returned from 11 days in Albania — a country half the size of Nova Scotia that's struggling to overcome 50 years of a Stalinist regime.

"I want to put Albania's role in the Holocaust on the map."

There were only about 200 Jews in Albania before the war. More than 70 per cent of the population of about 900,000 was Muslim. By the end of the war, it was home to more than 2,200 Jews who had come from neighbouring Italy, Macedonia, and Serbia, and even from as far as Austria and Poland, to escape Nazi persecution.

It wasn't just the Albanian farmers and villagers who shielded the Jews from the Nazi occupiers. The government at the time also issued them Albanian passports to help them blend in with the local population and offered them employment.

To some historians, it's a rare and remarkable story of Muslims saving Jews. To Albanians, a people known

for being pragmatic and tolerant about their religion, it's about keeping the "Besa" — an ancient Albanian code of honour that means keeping the promise.

"It was Besa that helped save Jews in Albania," said Held. "That's because if you practice Besa and tolerance, who cares what everybody's religion is?"

Michael Shani of Mississauga, Ont., knows all about Besa.

His Catholic grandfather Agostin Ciftia offered it to a Jewish family from Macedonia that he picked up on the way back from a trip to Belgrade.

"He was driving his truck loaded with Philips radios for his family store when he noticed a man standing on a bridge, waving his hands in the air and looking frightened," Shani recalled.

The man, Shalom Adishes, had been hiding under the bridge with his wife Nina and daughter Sonia. They asked for a ride to Albania and offered to pay, handing Ciftia a small wooden box with jewelry and gold coins.

It was September 1943. Ciftia didn't know at the time that by keeping the promise he made on that bridge near the Albanian-Macedonian border, he was joining the ranks of what history now calls the relative few who helped Jews endure their darkest hour.

With the Adishes family hiding in his truck, the Albanian father of four crossed the border into Albania and invited them to stay in his house, where they were treated as honoured guests for nine months. Six of them were spent under the nose of the enemy: armed Nazi soldiers stood guard across the street, where a high-ranking Nazi officer was renting an apartment.

In June 1944, fearing for the safety of his guests, Ciftia moved them to a village outside the city and into the custody of a trusted friend. He visited them once a week, bringing them food, clothes and eventually fake Albanian passports that they would use to leave the country.

But it was Ciftia's final gesture that made Shani most proud.

"Before he said goodbye, my grandfather gave them back the box with jewelry and gold coins, and said, 'You're going to need this.' He risked his life and the life of his four children to save theirs. He didn't do it for money."

It's this little-known piece of history, brought to life with touching stories like Ciftia's, that Held wants other Canadians to know about.

She is behind one of the events taking place Sunday in Toronto as part of Holocaust Education Week, "Besa: The Albanian Rescue of Jews," that brings together members of the Jewish families who were rescued and members of the Albanian families who saved them – all of them now living in Canada. The event is scheduled for 7 p.m. Sunday at the Villa Colombo in Toronto.

Nearly all of the Jewish population left Albania after the war and before the Communists established a Stalinist regime, one of the harshest and most isolated in Eastern Europe.

Albanians were not allowed to travel abroad, make international phone calls or receive letters from

foreigners, which meant Jews who were rescued during the war were unable to stay in touch with their rescuers.

For more than 50 years, Mesut Salillari wondered if he would ever see little Cuci again.

Cuci is the Albanian nickname his parents gave Bina Hajon, the three-year-old daughter of a Jewish couple from Belgrade who arrived in the capital of Tirana in 1941, just after Adolf Hitler launched the invasion of Yugoslavia.

Her parents, Schmucl and Dorica, spent several months staying with the Salillari's, a Muslim family of four. When they decided to move again for safety reasons, Mesut's parents, Kadri and Bejixhe, offered to look after Bina.

"She stayed with my father's family for three-and-a-half years," said Mesut's son, Admir, an electronics engineer with the Toronto District School Board.

"My grandmother taught her Albanian. She bought her toys and gave her an Albanian name. Cuci played outside with the neighbourhood kids and no one could tell she was a foreigner."

When the wait was over, the Hejons picked up their daughter and moved back to Belgrade. They later moved to Israel and the two families lost contact.

It was only after the collapse of Communism in 1991 that Admir and his father travelled to Belgrade to look for Cuci and her family. They didn't find them.

"One day, the phone rang. My dad picked it up and I saw his hand start shaking, tears rolling down his face," Admir recalled.

"It was Schmucl Hajon calling from Israel to say, 'Thank you.'"

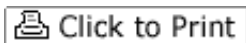
The State of Israel has granted dozens of Albanians the title of Righteous Among Nations, the highest honour awarded to "the few who helped Jews in the darkest time in their history." Their names are inscribed on the Righteous Honour Wall at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem.

Held calls Albania "the little country that could, and the little country that did."

"I wish my grandparents had gone that way," she said. "I wish more Jews had gone that way."

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