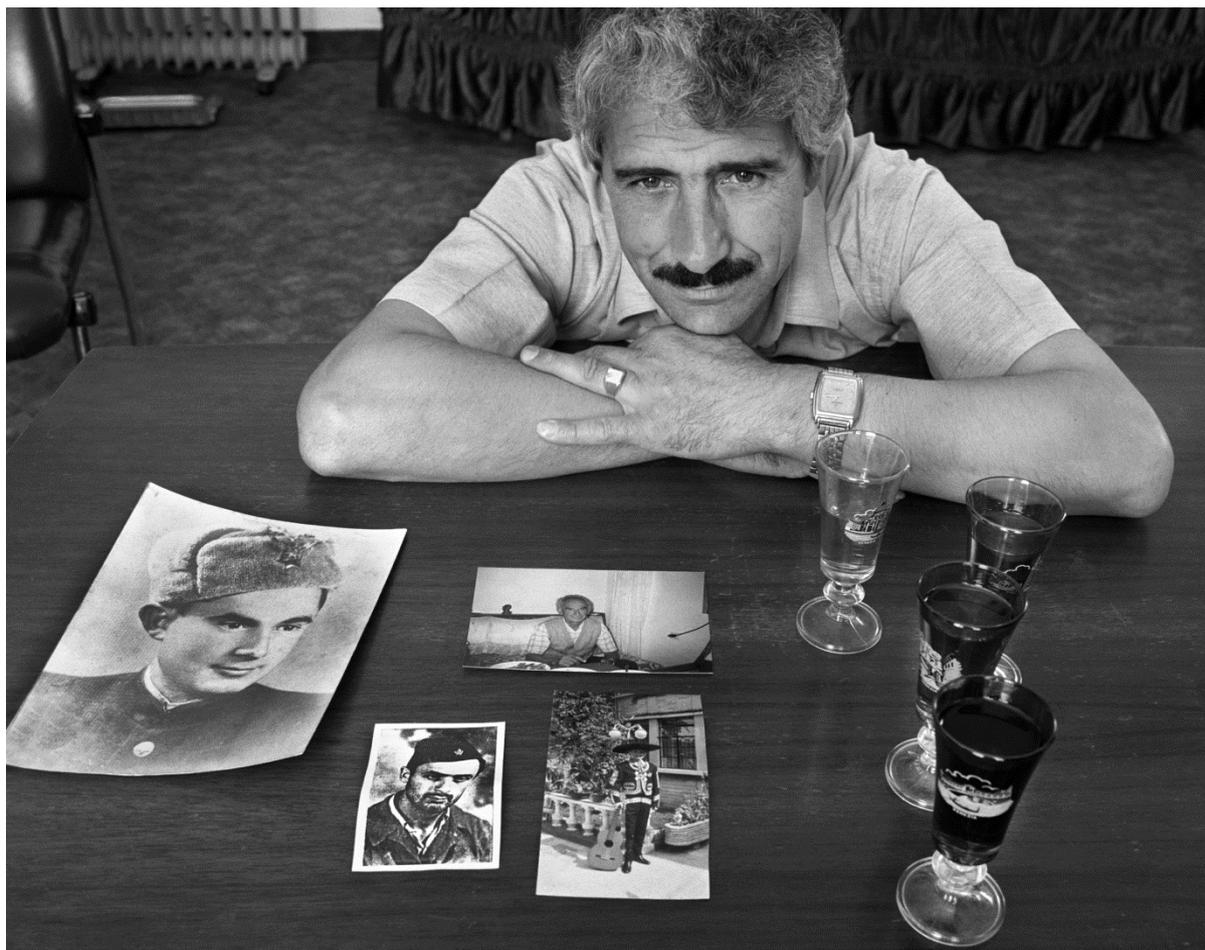




HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

## MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA

This is a photograph of Ali Sheqer Pashkaj's son which shows him with photographs of his father on the table.



History tells us that during times of hardship communities who have lived side by side peacefully for generations and even centuries can be persuaded to turn on each other with murderous intent. During the Holocaust, under Nazi persecution and during the subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur people were betrayed by neighbours who they had lived next to all their lives. They were quickly removed from the safety of their former neighbourhoods and communities and subjected to extremes of violence and injustice simply because of their beliefs or ethnicity.

Today we can draw on the courage and determination of those who survived and rebuilt their lives. Many of those who survived were protected by brave members of their communities, whose selfless actions reaped no reward and often posed a risk to their own lives and the lives of their families.

Many Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, Serbia, Greece and Yugoslavia found refuge in Albania during the Holocaust. Throughout this time many Muslim communities in Albania chose to save Jews. They did so by refusing to comply with the Nazi occupiers request to hand over information about the Jewish population residing there and by providing many Jewish families with fake documents, which did not disclose that they were Jewish. However most of the rescues that took place were by Albanian individuals. They saved Jews by providing hiding places and misdirecting Nazis. Amazingly, the Albanians did not only protect their own Jewish communities but also helped the Jewish refugees from other Nazi occupied territories who sought asylum in Albania.

The reason behind why many Albanians chose to save Jews is grounded in *Besa*, a code of honor, which still today serves as the highest ethical code in the country. *Besa*, means literally 'to keep the promise.' One who acts according to *Besa* is someone who keeps his word. This code is thought to have grown from the Muslim faith as interpreted by the Albanians.

The acts carried out grew originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even if they were from another faith or origin. They show a responsibility to others in times of need and stand for social justice and human rights.

At the end of the Holocaust, Albania was the only country in Europe where the Jewish population had increased during the years 1939-45.

Yad Vashem recognises people who risked their lives to save Jews; these include over 44,000 men and women. The Muslims who were honoured were called the Righteous Muslims, 70 of these were from Albania.

One of the Righteous Muslims was Ali Sheqer Pashkaj, as Albanian who owned a convenience store in Puke. One day after the German invasion of Albania, a Nazi transport lorry rolled up containing 19 Albanians on their way to prison and one Jew who was going to be shot. The Nazis stopped at the cafe and Ali, who spoke German, invited them in. He supplied them with food and drink and deliberately fed them more alcohol than he needed too, getting them drunk, there they all fell asleep. Whilst they were asleep he passed the young Jewish man a melon containing a note which said 'get out of the lorry, jump down, run into the forest and hide there, I'll help you', and that is what the man did.

Eventually the Germans woke up and realised the prisoner had gone and were furious at Ali. They drove him into town, held him against a wall, put a gun to his head and interrogated him. They threatened to shoot him and destroy the whole village. Eventually they became fed up because as Ali refused to confess. They let him go and he went back to his store and for the rest of the war he hid the young Jewish man, whose name was Yeoshua Baruchowic. After the war Baruchowic who went live in Mexico and be a dentist.

Today we can use the story of the Albanian Muslims to think about our own moral choices, the way in which we act in our own communities and to those that are different from ourselves.

We can start by learning about the diverse communities in the UK and the individuals who make up the whole. Learning about other people and the communities they are from can help us to understand the decisions people make in their lives and respect each other's

differences. By making these connections between communities we can all help to prevent hatred and discrimination in the UK.

**Discussion questions:**

During difficult times, why do you think that some individuals choose to help others in need?

What motivated the rescuers to help those in need?

What other choices did they have?

What can we learn from the Muslim communities in Albania during this time?

What are the factors that contribute to decision-making in times of moral crisis?