Among the nations for saving the Abravanel family as well as two members living in Israel. We received letters and exchanged telephone calls. On July 25, 1999, Yad Vashem recognized Bessim zyma, and his wife, higmet BessiM AnD hiGMet zYMA Among the Nations.

Story as told by Kasem Jakup Kocerri

I remember Jakov taking me to a tree where he had hidden ten gold coins, which he offered me.

In early 1944 a retreating German division came to our village from Greece. Our entire village was denounced to the Gestapo by our Greek neighbor and a short time later, on June 10, 1944, we were rocks of Jewish families from Tirana who were being brought to a Jewish village for the execution.

We have been a family of Muslims for 500 years. “To save a life is to save the whole world” (Isaiah, chapter 56, verse 5).

The help afforded to Jews and non-Jews alike should be understood as a matter of circumstances. Moreover, they competed with each other for the privilege of saving Jews. These acts originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even those of another faith or origin.

The World Holocaust Remembrance center said: “As the world came to a full realization of the horribleness of circumstances, it was the Albanians who took it upon themselves to be part of the history of saving Jews. The Albanians not only protected Jews from the Holocaust, but resembled the behavior of those nations who lost their lives for the sake of humanity.”

The Albanians would let them kill our Jewish guests.

The bunkers were connected, and had many escape routes. It was my job to take food to the children. We never took any money from our Jewish guests. All of us villagers were Muslims.

I was born in 1910. In 1943, at the time of Ramadan, seventeen people from Tirana left for Tirana and then for Israel.

Hamas Nukmam

I have so many wonderful letters and pictures from Israel. In 1992, I was invited there and met for the first time my Jewish guests. We lived in the village of Kavajë. In 1940, for a short time, our family sheltered two Jewish families. They came from the village of Fushë-Krujë. They were brother and sister. They came to us from Tirana. Their father had been a tailor in Tirana. After the war, Avram returned to Tirana and we remained good friends. I have been a tailor all my life.

When the Italians capitulated in 1943 and the Germans entered the area, my father was immediately arrested. However, I was fortunate enough to have a pre-war job and was able to hide in the hill for two months.

The Jews in Vlorë, Berat, and Elbasan had been living in Albania since 1490, and are known as the Romanov shqiptar (from Romanov, who was the family name of the Tsars). The Jews must have been hiding among the Albanians in 1490. Of the Jews who lived in Albania, the majority were Sephardic.

We never owned land, we had lived only by selling clothes and shoes. We are not rich people. We have no sons. I have four daughters. The older one married an Albanian. The second one married a Sephardic Jewish man and had two children. The third one married a Druze and had three children. The fourth one married a Protestant and had one child.

I was arrested by the Gestapo in 1942 and put in jail in Saranda and Vlora. I was then sent to a labor camp in Beqva. I was finally released to serve the state. I was not arrested for my religion, but for my teaching. I was once the professor of all the Islamic schools in Albania. I taught the Koran. I was then sent to Greece to teach the Albanian army school. It was very difficult for me to be there because I had to speak another language.

I have always been a devout Muslim. During the years of Communism all the institutions of God were closed, but not Islam. We opened the mosque in 1948. My father sheltered four Jewish families. They all were his friends. I remember my grandfather and father led seventeen terrified Jews out of Tirana. They traveled for five days. They were taken to Abdhash, a village in Russia. They were later released in the winter of 1945. They had refused to leave Albania and wished to return.

After the war, Avram returned to Tirana and we remained good friends. I have been a tailor all my life.

Why did my father save a stranger at the risk of his life when he was old? I think it is because of the goodness in the Albanian heart: the goodness of Islam.

After all, our Jewish guest was a friend of our friend.

The help afforded to Jews and non-Jews alike should be understood as a matter of circumstances. Moreover, they competed with each other for the privilege of saving Jews. These acts originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even those of another faith or origin.

He says: "Only trust in God."