

The Stories that Make Us: European Holocaust Narratives and the Promise of Albanian Cosmopolitan Memory Practices¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore how Holocaust memorial narratives are utilized in the contemporary Albanian context – to engage the country’s direct relationship with that history as well as debates over how to count, mourn, and represent those lost during the country’s socialist regime, from 1944 to 1991. In particular, I focus on post-1991 efforts by local historians and politicians as well as foreign amateur and expert historiographers to exemplify Albania as a safe haven for the Jewish community during the Second World War and more recent efforts to commemorate the socialist era Tepelena Internment Camp, which took on the unofficial name of Albania’s Auschwitz during my fieldwork. I approach these narratives through the lens of memory appropriation (Subotić 2019) to understand how Albanian narratives contribute to the de-territorialization and de-contextualization of what Levy and Sznajder (2002) call a cosmopolitan memory culture. I argue that both appropriations, while different, ultimately speak to the intersection of the following tracks: Albanian efforts to participate in broader European memoryscapes through the reproduction of their own nationally specific narratives and broader European efforts to secure memory narratives through the inclusion of southeastern European ones.

Keywords: *Albania, Holocaust, cosmopolitan memory, memory appropriation, (post)socialism*

Introduction

Recently scrolling through my inbox, an email caught my eye: “Invitation to ‘Besa: The Promise’ Movie Screening,” an event to take place in downtown Vancouver, B.C.² As indicated by the names of its sponsors - organizations such as the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre and the Eagles Land Albanian Society of BC - the screening promised to link two topics: the small southeast European nation-state of Albania and the Holocaust, specifically the heroic response of Albanians who hid Jewish families fleeing Nazi persecution. This email blended into similar Holocaust memory narratives that had crossed my desk in the last few years. In 2018, multiple news articles came out

commemorating the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz, who used his job at the Swiss Consulate in Budapest to save tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews between 1942 and 1945.³ In 2019, the *Sarajevo Times* published a story about the Bosnian Jew Eli Tauber and his mission to share the stories of Bosnian families that had risked their lives to protect Jews from religious and ethnic persecution. For Tauber, this work was an important aspect of community-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina following the breakup of Yugoslavia, which also occurred along ethnic, gendered, and religious lines.⁴ In a similar vein, the US-based film director Sabina Vajraca drew on her experience fleeing from war-torn Bosnia in the 1990s to make the film *Sevap/Mitzvah* (A Good Deed) about the Bosnian Muslim woman Zejneba Hardaga, who at risk to her family's wellbeing, facilitated the escape of the Jewish Kabiljo family from Nazi-occupied Sarajevo.⁵ Read in this context, the 2023 viewing of *Besa: The Promise* in Vancouver follows a rich history of news stories and documentary coverage coming out of Eastern Europe over the 2010s, demonstrating the heroic actions that local families and individuals took to alleviate the colossal tragedy of human loss, often at great costs to themselves, while living and working in states that were either occupied by or directly colluding with German National Socialist forces in the 1940s.

Initially released in 2012 following a book publication, the film *Besa: The Promise* is born out of a collaboration between the Jewish American photographer Norman Gershman and the Muslim Albanian Rexhep Hoxha, whose family harbored a Jewish family during World War II. The story follows the present-day journey of Hoxha to return a set of books left behind by his family's *mysafirët* (guests). While Gershman and Hoxha share this story to present a counterpoint to contemporary depictions of "violent Islam and anti-Semitism... so often portrayed in media," this story is just as much about depicting the past as it is the present.⁶ With a dearth of material on the subject in either archival or research form (Perez 2013), oral history projects become an important source for portraying how both Albanian families and the state related to the Holocaust at the time, which carries weight in a global, particularly Western European, context now.

During ethnographic fieldwork in Albania in 2017 and 2018, I witnessed a different application of Holocaust memory – one associated with the material culture of the country's socialist period from 1944 to 1991. Dark heritage sites, such as former prisons, labor camps, and internment facilities, were sometimes publicly likened to or spoken of in terms of their imagined connection to well-known Holocaust sites, despite their documented and known temporal and spatial distance from the latter. The most notable example, which I take up in this paper, is the former Tepelena Internment Camp located in southern Albania. Through a series of debates about the site's history and contemporary legacy that occurred during my fieldwork, Tepelena Camp took on the unofficial moniker Aushvici Shqiptar or the Albanian Auschwitz.

Tepelena Camp began as an early socialist period internment camp for Albanian families, following the end of World War II, the victory of Albania's National Liberation Front, and the establishment of a domestic government led by the Albanian Party of Labor. As few administrative documents exist to describe the camp, Albanian historians

have relied heavily on the testimony of camp survivors, from contemporary oral history projects or memoirs published since the 1990s. These historical accounts have also drawn on declassified foreign intelligence reports from the 1950s - based on camp survivor accounts from that time period. From these accounts, Tepelena Camp emerges as a place where the families of military deserters and those arrested for political or other reasons – in particular women, children and the elderly – were kept in poor living conditions following the government’s confiscation of their land and wealth (Dervishi 2015, 12). While the site initially served as barracks for the Italian military during Italy’s wartime occupation of Albania, there are no historical accounts that came out during the course of my ethnographic fieldwork in 2017 and 2018 that link Tepelena Camp to the genocide of European Jewish populations during World War II or any other direct connections to Holocaust concentration camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau. In this instance, references to the Holocaust become a way to comprehend and give meaning to accounts of Albanian suffering and victimization in contemporary debates about a different historical period that is still figuratively and quite literally “in the dark.”

In this paper, I make sense of these different narratives tying Albania to Holocaust memory by incorporating Levy and Sznajder’s cosmopolitan memory framework with Jelena Subotić’s concept of memory appropriation. The Holocaust is not only considered a German-Jewish tragedy but a tragedy of modernity itself and fodder for a global, cosmopolitan memory culture that expands beyond national and/or ethnic ties (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 88). Holocaust narratives are also ripe for appropriation, as specific actors and states combine and rehash historical memory to secure their own ontological being as localities, nation-states, or even larger entities like Europe (Subotić 2019). Through this frame, I argue that both applications of Holocaust memory in Albania, while seemingly very different at first glance, are products of two interconnected and ongoing processes: efforts to *ballafaquar*, or confront, the post-war, socialist past in Albania and efforts to participate in the construction and securitization of a pan-European memory schema that emphasizes Albania’s identity as a nation-state and its place in Europe.

Efforts to *ballafaquar* the country’s socialist past have been ongoing since the early 1990s, bringing together a *mélange* of personal memories and experiences of that period with the expectations for and frustrations of political concepts such as democracy and justice in the present. While many Albanians had hoped that the first set of criminal trials would secure justice for victims of executions and forced internments at places like Tepelena Camp, that hope was tainted when members of the *nomenklatura* were convicted only on mundane charges like economic transgressions (Austin and Ellison 2008; Kalemaj 2021). This discrepancy between expectations and outcomes has provided the grounds for a lively, ongoing, and overtly politicized debate about the historiography of the twentieth century and what role (or roles) it can play in defining Albania’s socio-political position in Europe, particularly the European Union. Importantly, it is the politicization of this post-war, socialist-era history in Albania that creates space for distinct appropriations of Holocaust memory.

Between Cosmopolitan Memory and Memory Appropriation

To write about Holocaust memory is to write about a form of memory that expands beyond ethnic and national boundaries, to bring into being scenarios like the one that opened this article – the showing of a Muslim Albanian and Jewish American film collaboration in Vancouver, Canada. This is the foundational premise of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider’s argument for the cosmopolitan memory concept, which they argue represents the form that collective, or group, memory takes as it becomes divorced or decoupled from national histories in the face of globalization and transnationalism (Levy and Sznaider 2002, 89). While I find cosmopolitan memory a useful concept to explore the diverging Holocaust narratives in the Albanian context, I am also a proponent of focusing on the utility of Holocaust memory as a discourse that transforms to meet the needs of its mediators. The Holocaust is certainly a part of a transnational European terrain, as Levy and Sznaider (2002) argue; however, through its application, or better appropriation, such memory narratives are simultaneously dependent on and in some cases reinforce ethnic and national boundaries.

Levy and Sznaider (2002, 91) draw on Maurice Halbwachs’ distinction between social and historical memory to emphasize the important role mediation plays in the production of cosmopolitan memory around the Holocaust by and for individuals and groups who largely have no direct experience of the event to claim it as a part of their personal experience (Halbwachs 1992). While there may be utility in differentiating between a memory that stems from direct experience versus mediation, such distinctions are troubled by other formulations of social memory, such as Paul Connerton’s notion of memory that becomes embodied, and Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory concept. For the anthropologist Paul Connerton (1989, 3), social memory does not necessarily represent personal experience of an event but the shared historical narratives and ritualized activities that stem from them ultimately to produce the very substance that defines group identity. Through continued practice and performance, certain histories, behaviors, and memories become embodied, meaning they take on a natural quality and can even become a part of one’s habitus or disposition (Connerton 1989, 104; Bourdieu 1977). The embodied nature of mediated memory is particularly felt in Hirsch’s postmemory concept, which reflects her own deeply affective experience of her parents’ stories of survival during the Second World War and the Holocaust. In Hirsch’s words,

“‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2012, 5 – emphasis hers).

Such memories, learned through “imaginative investment” (Hirsch 2012, 5), blur the boundaries between Halbwach’s social and historical memory and give perhaps even more weight to the role representation can play in the construction of a cosmopolitan

memory culture around the Holocaust.

While Levy and Sznajder (2002) are concerned with different applications of Holocaust memory culture, drawing on examples from a variety of contexts across the world – notably the United States, Israel, and Germany – more can be said about motivations for the appropriation of Holocaust memory in the context of (south)eastern Europe. As Katherine Verdery (1996, 38) clearly lays out in her treatise on the rise and fall of Eastern European and Soviet socialism, the effects of socialism's collapse did not just mean a “massive political and ideological upheaval... restricted to the East.” The end of the Cold War represented a pivotal moment for the construction and institutionalization of a cosmopolitan memory culture for European, Eurasian, and international actors that had been involved in the long conflict (Levy and Sznajder 2002, 96). To represent this point, Levy and Sznajder (2002, 97-98) use the example of international involvement in the breakup of former Yugoslavia, with responses to the Kosovo War setting the ultimate tone for the de-contextualization and de-territorialization of the Holocaust in the European memoryscape. International actors, including Germany, justified their intervention as a moral obligation born out of the “lessons of the Holocaust.” This example does highlight the appropriation of Holocaust memory in the literal context of southeastern Europe and makes the point that cosmopolitan memory is tied to the Euro-Western human rights framework; however, it only forefronts the voices of the interveners and not those of Kosovars or others involved in the conflict on the ground. Ultimately, I am left with the question what constitutes Europe and how do countries like Albania and Kosovo fit into the cosmopolitan memory framework?

Political scientist Jelena Subotić offers a solution to this question by foregrounding Eastern European voices in the cosmopolitan memory project, decades following the end of the Cold War and the European socialist project and more than half a century following the Holocaust and Second World War. In her book *Red Star, Yellow Star*, Subotić (2019) develops the memory appropriation concept to follow the various trajectories of Holocaust memory and its representation in Serbia, Croatia, and Lithuania. In general terms, for Subotić (2019, 9) memory appropriation refers to the use of Holocaust memory to memorialize a different kind of suffering, one born from the ontological anxiety that stems from the ongoing legacy of Cold War binary logics and, in the case of former Yugoslavia, ethnic victimization realized in its breakup. Through appropriation, or representation, actors redirect narratives of suffering away from groups victimized during World War II and the Holocaust to narratives of suffering more broadly related to the twentieth century. In Serbia, political actors invert Holocaust memory to focus on the crimes of communism and the suffering of ethnic Serbians; whereas, in Croatia the Holocaust becomes a uniquely Nazi or German problem, and in Lithuania the Holocaust and socialist period are subsumed under one dimension of terror (Subotić 2019, 25-6). Caught between the red star of communism and the yellow star of David, postsocialist states appropriate Holocaust narratives and symbols in a variety of ways to reinforce their place in Western Europe and reaffirm their identities sans communism. Yet to be explored is how actors both inside and outside of Albania utilize the cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust.

Importantly, memory appropriation within cosmopolitan memory has the potential to help scholars focused on other European contexts oscillate between different scales, from global and transnational to national and local – all with the intention of understanding how actors from various perspectives combine and rehash memory narratives in their own terms and towards specific ends. At stake is the ontological security, or safeguarding of a group’s sense of self (David 2018), in the ongoing post-Cold War moment for all European actors involved – transnational, national, or otherwise. While Levy and Sznajder (2002, 92) contend that national perspectives do not disappear in the face of globalization or a global memory culture, it is important to recognize how cosmopolitization can influence categorization and differentiation. For sociologist Lea David, categories like nationalism and ethnicity become more prominent as a human rights-focused cosmopolitan memory culture takes hold globally. With growing pressure from international actors to memorialize atrocities like the ethnic cleansing associated with the breakup of Yugoslavia, David (2020, 4, 10) demonstrates how such societies experience more destabilization as ethnic divisions are reinforced by human rights mechanisms or as powerful state agents enforce their own political agendas. With an eye to these different scales, I use memory appropriation as a lens to explore how various local and international actors are drawing on the de-territorialized and de-contextualized narrative of the Holocaust in Albania to reinforce what it means to be Albanian, European, and cosmopolitan today.

Albania and the Holocaust: “No Jews Died”⁷

In spring 2022, a prominent Albanian diaspora group in the United States was one of 140 users to share a digitized scan of Albert Einstein’s passport on the Facebook platform. Their caption read:

In order for Einstein to come to the US, he first received and [sic] Albanian travel documents during the holocaust [sic], stayed in Durres for approx [sic] 1 month at the Albanian Royal Palace before arriving to the US. / Those documents have finally been found. / It’s possible, that if it wasn’t for Albanians, the greatest mind to have ever existed... might have never existed at all!

While there are very few sources supporting the Einstein-Albanian connection, many of which continue to be contested as evidenced by the debate that followed in the comment section of this post,⁸ the Einstein story continues to resurface in online media and even academic sources.⁹ For the purposes of this article, I am not concerned with the veracity of the Einstein-Albania connection; instead, I am interested in the staying power of its story, which parallels the overarching narrative of Albania’s direct connection to the Holocaust in a post-war, post-socialist, even cosmopolitan setting. Since the mid-1990s, local and international actors, from scholars to media to local politicians and foreign diplomats, have portrayed Albania’s role in the Holocaust as the country that was “a safe haven for Jews” (Perez 2013, 30) – both the small pre-war

population, as well as the hundreds to thousands of foreign-born Jews that transited through the country during the Second World War. While this narrative is based on oral history testimony and archival research of the time period, in this paper I demonstrate how it also reflects Albania's complex relationship with its more recent socialist past and attempts by local politicians and scholars as well as foreigners to redefine Albania in the post-Cold War moment as a country full of humanity, a narrative which finds hold in the European transnational memory project.

Of note and often cited in studies pertaining to Albania's relationship to the Holocaust is the following sentiment shared by the former German diplomat to Albania Bernd Borchardt (2022, 81): "Albania was the only country occupied by the German Wehrmacht in which far more Jews lived after the war than before... In an admirable effort, almost all the Jews in Albania were saved." While most historic studies cite census data and state administration documents from the 1930s and 1940s to capture statistics about Jewish presence in Albania and some rely additionally on oral history data (Luku 2019), few sources try to capture a holistic or deeper picture of Jewish presence in the region in order to contextualize those numbers.¹⁰ During Albania's interwar period scholars document a small community of about 200 Jews in Albania with only 191 registered by March 1937 (Dell'Era 2021, 314) – ultimately comprising a small proportion of Albania's prewar population of about 803,000 (Luku 2019, 33). Later under occupation by axis forces, first Italy in 1939 and later Germany in 1943, Albania, in contrast to its neighbors in the region, saw a dramatic increase in foreign Jewish residents and refugees –from Hungary, Austria, Germany, Greece, and ex-Yugoslavia. While historians have debated the number of foreign-born Jews that transited or hid in Albania during the Second World War, there is a general consensus that hundreds to thousands may have found a temporary home in the country. Italian administrative statistics put the non-native Jewish population in Albania at 1,000 by June 1943 (Perez 2013, 26). Israel's World Holocaust Remembrance Center Yad Vashem includes a total count of 600 by the start of the war with some hundreds more refugees from former Yugoslavia finding entry into Albania in the following war period¹¹ and the General Directorate of Albanian Archives submitted a list of 2,394 names of Jews to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2005 (Borchardt 2022, 84).

However, as recent scholars of Albanian and Holocaust studies have pointed out, there is a dearth of studies exploring Albanian history during and prior to the Second World War, making it challenging to understand in depth Albanian-Jewish relations during the Holocaust and, ultimately, to make sense of the safe haven narrative (Perez 2013, 51; Kedem-Tahar 2014, 19; Borchardt 2022, 84; Duka 2021, 299). For Historian Daniel Perez (2013, 28-9) who provides a detailed analysis of the politicization and appropriation of the Holocaust narrative in Albania through 2013, these numbers often focus on survival rates in Albania proper and exclude zones that had been annexed (e.g., parts of Kosovo) during the war by axis powers – disassociating the greater number of Jewish lives lost in Kosovo. While scholars have since conducted more detailed analyses of both Albanian and Italian archival sources to start accounting for this gap in the literature (see Dell'Era 2021; Borchardt 2022), it is still unclear the role that

Albanian authorities may have played in the German deportations during the Albanian-Serb conflict in wartime Kosovo (Perez 2013, 29) even if the same authorities continued to issue visas, grant citizenship, falsify paperwork, transfer refugees, or refuse to share lists with German forces in the context of Albania proper.¹² According to both German and Italian documentation, “more than 1,000 Jews were arrested on the territory of today’s Republic of Kosovo” and at least 92 of the documented 264 Jewish prisoners from Prishtina transferred to the German Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp on June 5, 1944, died there (Borchardt 2022, 87).¹³ Albanian scholar Valentina Duka (2021) suggests that the challenge of studying the Holocaust-Albania connection partially stems from the field’s young age, only taking hold in the 1990s following the collapse of the European socialist project and nearly half a century following the Second World War. According to Duka (2021, 299) “during the Communist era, Albanian historiography was forced by state policies into oblivion – with little interest in the study of the Holocaust or even the protection of the Jews.” And while the Holocaust has become a topic of study in the last three decades, as Perez (2013, 51) demonstrates, it still occupies a marginal place in Albania’s twentieth century narrative and twenty-first century attempts to deal with that past, which I address in the next sections.

In spite of these gaps and maybe because of them, Albanian scholars have focused a substantial effort on determining the root of the safe haven narrative (Duka 2021, 305), which has garnered much state and international appeal since the 1990s and relies heavily on the oral testimony of Albanian families that saved Jews in Albania proper. While a number of factors have been identified, many explanations have sought answers in the nature and/or customs of Albanians themselves. Some prominent figures in the field like Shaban Sinani have promoted a “race-based approach to social behavior” (Perez 2013, 40) by arguing that people with an Albanian “ethno-type” are predisposed to protecting those in danger;¹⁴ whereas others like Nika and Vorpsi (2006) have looked to the country’s harmonious religious background as the impetus for welcoming those of the Jewish faith. One of the most promoted theories by politicians, foreigners, and media appeals to the cultural tradition and humanity of Albanians. In the first monograph-length study of Albanian-Jewish relations first published in 1996, Apostol Kotani (2007, 77) drew on the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjin, the earliest codified canon of northern Albanian oral tradition, to explain that Albanian society had an obligation to protect their Jewish guests per the norms of hospitality (*mikpritja*) and oath (*besa*). According to Cara and Margjeka (2015, 179), per the Kanun, sharing your home and safeguarding your guests, even after they leave, is taken very seriously. An Albanian’s pledge to honor their guests extends beyond the grave, meaning that any grievances or shortcomings that befall guests should be avenged or prevented, even at the cost of one’s own life to avoid ruin or dishonor (Cara and Margjeka 2015, 180). For Kotani (2007, 85), in the face of the German military’s demands for lists of Jewish residents, the onus of protecting these guests extended beyond the goodwill of families to society as a whole.

Kotani’s argument about the traditional principles of *mikpritja* and *besa* has taken hold in popular discourse, especially in twenty-first century narratives shaped by

local political elite and Euro-western actors (Perez 2013). One notable example is the work of Jewish American photographer and amateur historian Norman Gershman that provoked the very movie showing in Vancouver, Canada, that opened this paper. Inspired by Albanians' efforts to save Jews during the Holocaust, Gershman embarked on a journey in the early 2000s to meet, photograph, and interview some of those families. During the project, he documented the efforts of sixty-five Muslim Albanian families, many of whom are recognized as Righteous Among the Nations – an honorary designation granted by Yad Vashem “to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.”¹⁵ Gershman's book, film, and online exhibition on the Yad Vashem website¹⁶ are all named after “the ancient and sacrosanct Albanian principle... Besa...” to quote the former Director of Yad Vashem Mordecai Paldiel (2008, xiii) who wrote the foreword to Gershman's book. While his depiction of *besa* comes from the oral testimony of his interviewees, it is important to note that it simultaneously simplifies or condenses Albanian subjectivity, the concept of *besa*, and the country's historical relationship with fascist occupation: Albanians are reduced to the subset of the population that practice Islam; *besa* becomes a specifically Islamic behavior (see Paldiel 2008); and this narrative begins in response to the country's German occupation in 1943.

Holocaust Remembrance Day has been observed on January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, in Albania since its adoption by Parliament in 2004¹⁷ and has, as Perez (2013) shows, become a platform for Albanian politicians to engage the promise of the safe haven narrative for both local and foreign audiences. While Fatos Nano saw the opportunity to reference the Albanian people's innate resistance to xenophobia and speak of the challenges they have had to overcome in 2005 (Perez 2013, 37), more recent political addresses have reinforced the notion of *besa*. Less than a month after the 2023 Holocaust Remembrance Day, the state and local municipal governments in Tirana announced an international competition to design, curate, and create two new museums that would be dedicated to Albania's Holocaust history – one in Tirana, the other in the port town of Vlora. Titled the “Besa” Museum project, it promised to mark Albania as “a destination of the glorious history of Jewish salvation during the Second World War” to quote a part of Prime Minister Edi Rama's speech.¹⁸ In a later communication about the project on the Prime Ministry's website in May 2023, Rama emphasized the importance of these museums for both Albania and the world: for Albanians, these museums signify a common history that should be safeguarded for future generations to know where they came from; and for the world, they signify a lesson that societies everywhere should safeguard humanity to build a deeper sense of belonging amongst each other.¹⁹

Mutually reinforcing each other, local, political, and foreign renditions of Albania's Holocaust history create a space that endorses an exceptional and unique Albanian identity that is, at the same time, a part of a larger cosmopolitan memory culture with the capacity to offer hope for humanity in a time where concerns for antisemitism are again on the rise.²⁰ This point is perhaps best captured by a multimedia, educational briefing organized by the Permanent Mission of Albania to the United Nations and the World

Jewish Congress in observation of the 2019 International Holocaust Remembrance Day:

Recognizing Albania's response as an example of moral courage is an important aspect of Holocaust education and commemoration. The Albanian response embodies the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that every human being has the inalienable right to be treated with dignity and afforded the right to a life that is peaceful and just.²¹

The Tepelena Internment Camp as *Aushvici Shqiptar* or the Albanian Auschwitz

As previously introduced, the Tepelena Internment Camp was an early socialist period holding site that operated from 1949 through the early 1950s. During this brief period, the camp housed thousands of Albanian families – particularly women, children, and the elderly – following the nascent socialist state's confiscation of their land and wealth (Dervishi 2015, 12). The Tepelena Internment Camp may not have housed Jews during the Second World War but its unofficial nickname – *Aushvici Shqiptar* or the Albanian Auschwitz – reveals how Holocaust memory can be used to make sense of the losses of a different era that are unique to Albania, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of the pan-European cosmopolitan memory project. In this example, the politicization of mid-to-late twentieth century history and a dearth of historical documentation provide space for distinct manipulations of Holocaust memory narratives and subsequent public debates about those manipulations.

In an environment where few administrative accounts exist to document the nature of the site, the few that do exist have garnered much interest and inspection over the years. During my fieldwork, the historian and former head of the Albanian State Archives Kastriot Dervishi publicly released an image of an administrative document from the Ministry of Interior's archives. Like many, I stumbled across it in Facebook posts and local news sources. Completed in neat cursive handwriting, the hand-drawn table depicted the number of men, women, and children who were located at Albanian internment camps like those at Tepelena and Porto-Palermo during the year 1950. The chart, which displays the live counts of individuals month by month, shows a steep decline in the number of interned children at Tepelena Camp in the Fall of 1950. While the chart itself does not appear to indicate what proportion of the population decline is due to deaths or transfers, survivors' oral testimonies tell of high death rates among children at the camp. As a rare physical artifact from the administration of Tepelena Camp, this chart provokes the following questions: what sort of life did the camp offer its internees, many of whom were victims of early socialist state tactics to create and control its growing internal enemy class (Këlliçi 2020)? Were its conditions comparable to other internment facilities that had proliferated across Europe during the Second World War?

While the term the Albanian Auschwitz is not an official designation for Tepelena Camp, references to the Holocaust or to Nazism have proliferated in scholarly writing

as well as the public imagination of these sites. In the last decade, Albanian scholars have drawn on the image of the Holocaust concentration camp to make sense of the gaps in administrative knowledge of Tepelena Camp and the recent spate of oral testimonies of camp survivors describing their childhood and young adult years at the site. In his discussion of Albanian internment camps from 1945 to 1953, Kastriot Dervishi (2015, 7) writes that while such camps were commonly found in communist states, they were very similar to Nazi-era concentration camps. In an interview with Dervishi published in 2015 in conjunction with the International Day of the Disappeared, he even went as far as to describe the Tepelena Camp facilities as a death camp that had been directed not at the regime's offenders but at their relatives – the wives of military deserters, the parents of fugitives, the children of political prisoners.²² Political scientist Klejdi Këlliçi (2020) also draws on the concentration camp and death camp terminology to clarify that while these camps began as internment or “hostage” facilities meant to combat political insurgency in a volatile state, they quickly became deadly spaces – where internees faced hunger, malnutrition, and exposure because of the family they were born into.

In 2018 controversy erupted around whether Tepelena Camp could be compared to German concentration or extermination camps.²³ On a national broadcast, Medieval historian Pëllumb Xhufi questioned the inhumane conditions of the camp and its comparison to Nazi concentration camps, provoking public reaction from both scholars and individuals who had survived internment at camps like Tepelena.²⁴ The historian Enriketa Papa critiqued Xhufi's overreliance on state archival sources and used the opportunity to emphasize the important role that oral history should play in constructing a collective memory culture.²⁵ Others such as Fatbardha Millet Saraçi, a scholar who was formerly interned in Kavaja and who has since conducted research on women's experiences of suffering during the socialist regime (notably at Tepelena Camp), told reporters from BIRN that Xhufi's comments were inhumane, especially “toward those who lost their lives in prisons and labor camps.”²⁶ From these different accounts of Tepelena Camp, we start to understand that the reference to the Holocaust is not temporal (e.g., a reference to Tepelena as a Holocaust period concentration camp) but a means through which to count individuals who died in Albanian zones of indistinction during the socialist period with the aid of human rights rhetoric: countering the “inhumane” by acknowledging “human dignity” and celebrating “human life.” As Jelena Subotić (2019, 25) notes, Holocaust memory “becomes a proxy for remembering something else, in this case communism.”

Tepelena Camp was a site of trauma and loss for many families – something that Albanians such as my interlocutor whom I call Reshat (pseudonym) are learning how to face today. In early 2018, I met Reshat, a young staff member of a state institution studying the crimes committed during Albania's socialist period. While we were touring his office, he told me something that has always stayed with me: “They even interned small children – 1 or 2 years old – in horrible conditions. In Tepelena, it is said that over 4,000 children died, so we call that [place] the “Auschwitz of Albania.”²⁷ Four thousand is not an accurate depiction of how many children or individuals died at Tepelena

Camp. The memorial plaque at Tepelena Camp states that 500 individuals perished there, and 300 is often the estimated count of children the camp claimed. Reflecting on his comments later, I realized that Reshat had latched onto the number 4,000 because it felt big – just like the death toll at places like Tepelena felt. I could only imagine that he wanted me, a foreigner and an anthropologist, to understand the gravity of that loss when I visited the site, which had lost its appearance as a makeshift internment facility over the decades. Thinking of Reshat’s words, I revisited my notes from my first visit to the former camp in 2017. Many of the outer buildings skirting the site stood roofless and exposed, and those with roofs had been converted into makeshift homes for local farm animals (see Figure 01). And as present-day children from Tepelena played in the shade of one of the buildings near me, a former internee who had spent his childhood at Tepelena Camp drew an outline of his family’s compressed living quarters in the dirt for me to see. Looking out over the central yard, he recalled watching children play at Tepelena, more than half a century before – unfortunately some of them did not survive the camp to tell their story.



Figure 01: An image taken by the author in August 2018, depicting the rebar and concrete remains of a building at the former Tepelena Camp.

Following the installation of a plaque to commemorate the camp’s victims in 2015, the independent state organization called the Authority for the Information of Former State Security Documents (henceforth, the Authority) incorporated the memorialization of Tepelena Camp into its mandate after its own foundation that same year. This meant that, in addition to collecting, declassifying, and granting access to the former socialist state’s security documents, the Authority saw its societal duty as participating in the commemoration of victims from the socialist period. In 2017, the Authority hosted

what would become an annual commemorative event at the site of the camp itself called *Dita Muze / Memorial Tepelenë* (Tepelena Camp Memorial Day). While the first event was relatively simple with a small collective of camp survivors and members of the diplomatic international community, the 2018 event was anything but. In partnership with a whole host of organizations such as the Tepelena Municipality, the United Nations Development Program in Albania, the Italian Embassy, and the US Embassy among others, the Authority hosted an event that began at noon and went well into the night; guests were even invited to camp among the ruins if they desired. This event wasn't just bigger than last year's ceremony; it had notably shifted dates from August 30 to August 23 – the date acknowledged across Europe since its adoption in 2008 as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarianism (specifically, Nazism and Stalinism).

This date – August 23 – signifies a shift in the cosmopolitan memory landscape, as narratives of victimization pertaining to the Holocaust make space for different narratives of victimization in other European contexts, notably that of socialism, or Stalinism as it is often reduced to (Subotić 2019). The European Parliament chose this particular date because it was the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 or the day that “the Soviet Union and Germany divided Europe into two spheres of interests...” both of which led to “mass deportations, murders and enslavements [... that] fall into the category of war crimes and crimes against humanity.”²⁸ The simplified umbrella of victims of totalitarianism in its very framing encourages the blending of memorial narratives – all in service of building an active pan-European remembrance network that safeguards against the repetition of twentieth century crimes.

While Albanian elite have used the Holocaust narrative to speak to the victimization of ethnic Albanians in other contexts before the institution of the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarianism (Perez 2013), commemorating the victims and survivors of Tepelena Camp at “the Albanian Auschwitz” on this day in particular reinforces the de-contextualization of Holocaust memory that Levy and Sznajder captured with the cosmopolitan memory concept via the hyper-contextualization of the socialist past. Gentiana Sula, the head of the Authority, captured this sentiment with her speech at the 2018 ceremony in which she explained why the Authority had chosen to begin its commemorative efforts with Tepelena Camp: “First we need to commemorate victims of all totalitarian regimes (including Albania's Stalinist regime) ... Finally, so many former persecuted were produced here, have died here... This is also for them.”²⁹

Conclusion: The Promise of Albanian Cosmopolitan Memory Practices

While Figure 02 depicts a three-slabbed memorial erected in 2020 to commemorate the salvation of the small Jewish community in Albania amidst the tragic loss of six million individuals across Europe, the latter shows a single plaque installed in 2015 dedicated to the hundreds of Albanian men, women, and children who died at the Internment Camp of Tepelena in southern Albania following the Second World War (see Figure 03). If the former monument has become a landmark in the middle of a prominent Tirana park, the latter is located on a concrete slab in the middle of a dormant, patchy field



Figure 02: Image taken by the author of the Holocaust Memorial formally inaugurated on July 20, 2020 in Tirana, Albania. The memorial, composed of three granite slabs states in Albanian, English, and Hebrew the story of Albanians' efforts to honor their besa by protecting the Jewish community during German occupation.



Figure 03: Image taken by the author of a memorial plaque installed in 2015 in the center of the former Internment Camp of Tepelena

at the former camp itself – careworn and already a little chipped in the corners. If the former draws on oral testimony to reveal hidden acts of grace and kindness, the latter draws on oral testimony to reveal hidden acts of the state to conceal the graves of its victims. If the former monument is about commemorating the power of humanity in times of war, the latter is about dealing with the corruption and loss of that humanity in times of state repression. While the two monuments seem to have little in common, it is through reading them together that one gains a deeper understanding of cosmopolitan memory and how its appropriation in Albania contributes to the ontological security of the nation-state and Europe.

Albania’s relationship with twentieth century history as well as other European actors blurs the divisions between Subotić’s different categories of memory appropriation, making it useful for both Albanian-specific and pan-European memory narratives. Through the narrative “No Jews died in Albania,” the work of divergence is at play. Given the limited research into the role that the Albanian state may have played in the deployment of antisemitic policies by occupying forces and the ambiguity of its borders during the Second World War, the Albanian-Holocaust salvation narrative represents a simplified, yet potent story of humanity that gets deployed both inside the country and beyond, as Vancouverites gather to watch Norman Gershman and Rexhep Hoxha’s documentary *Besa: The Promise*. In this instance, crimes, blame, and victimization are not the focus at all – as Holocaust memory is shifted to account for the stories of survivors and the Albanian families who housed European Jews during the Second World War. The documentary showing also demonstrates how a narrative of Albanian humanity, drawn from an appropriation of Holocaust memory culture, can, in return, contribute to the continued expansion of a cosmopolitan memory culture oriented toward a future that rejects antisemitism and promotes religious tolerance.

As Albania’s historiographic relationship to the Holocaust focuses on survival, life, and humanity, the second discourse about the country’s own Auschwitz introduces the dual work of inversion and conflation. With the aid of Holocaust imagery, the former Tepelena Internment Camp becomes a site where the history of the Second World War is adapted to tell a story of Albanian suffering during the following socialist period. While some scholars, public figures, and former internees have argued that the comparison to Nazi concentration camps is important for mediating the experience of camp survivors, the public debate and response to historian Pëllumb Xhufi’s comments questioning this comparison highlights even more the work that this appropriation of Holocaust memory is doing in Albania. The comparison between Tepelena Camp and Nazi-period concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau provides various actors a template to discuss the former socialist state’s tactics to convert their own into an enemy class that was *homo sacer*.³⁰ While this discourse emphasizes suffering and victimization that is specifically Albanian, at the same time, it also reinforces recent Europeans efforts to expand cosmopolitan memory culture through a focus on commemorating the victims of totalitarianism, which simultaneously simplifies and conflates complex and varied state socialist projects across Europe with Stalinism and Stalinism with Nazism.

These different applications of Holocaust memory are both born from efforts to

confront the socialist past and its effects on historiography, a messy process that has been ongoing since the early 1990s when the decentralization and transformation of the state opened up space to re-envision Albania as a democratic nation-state. In this socio-political context, the Holocaust is appropriated to show Albania as a nation full of humanity and a nation full of suffering, as a burgeoning democratic nation in its own right and as a part of a growing European memory network. Through the promotion and participation in Albanian-specific narratives of cosmopolitan memory, the broader European community can find an example of twentieth century totalitarianism that participates in the expansion/decontextualization of Holocaust memory culture and inspiration for pathways forward that emphasize humanity when conflict and indifference are challenging pan-European narratives of unity.

ENDNOTES

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2 This paper includes and builds on material from my dissertation titled “Translational Justice: Facing the Past to Take on the Present in Albania”. Specifically, it expands on material from a case study presented in “Chapter 1: Building a National Monument for the Victims of Albania’s Socialist Period.” (see Rucker 2022)

3 BBC News. 2018. “The Forgotten Swiss diplomat who rescued thousands from Holocaust.” BBC News Website, January 4. Accessed September 3, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42400765>.

Blakemore, Erin. 2018. “The diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.” History.com, July 23. Accessed September 3, 2023. <https://www.history.com/news/carl-lutz-saved-jews-holocaust-nazis-world-war-ii>.

4 Sarajevo Times. 2019. “How Bosnian Muslims back in 1941 told a lie and saved hundreds of Jews in BiH.” Sarajevo Times Website, March 17. Accessed September 3, 2023. <https://sarajevotimes.com/how-bosnian-muslims-back-in-1941-told-a-lie-and-saved-hundreds-of-jews-in-bih/>.

5 Sito-sucic, Daria. 2022. “Film tells of Bosnian Muslims and Jews saving one another in wars.”

Reuters Website, June 17. Accessed September 3, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/film-tells-bosnian-muslims-jews-saving-one-another-wars-2022-06-17/>.

6 Besa: The Promise. N.D. "The Film." Besathepromise.com. Accessed September 3, 2023. besathepromise.com/thefilm.html.

7 The quote is taken from a short feature article published by The Peninsula Daily News in Port Angeles, Washington, USA in July 2020. The full quote reads: "The Nazis murdered 6 million people, but Albania was the only country where no Jews died or were handed over. Albanians protected their few hundred Jewish friends, and helped other Jews who fled from Germany and Austria."

8 Some of the comments disputed specific elements like the number of days Einstein was in Albania ("Ai ka ndejtur 3 dite sipas dokumentave! [sic]"), while others challenged the idea that Einstein was ever in Albania by critiquing the evidence of the passport ("Ky Dokumente është Zvicrran jo Shqiptar" [sic]).

9 In 2009, Kosovar Alush Gashi directed and released a documentary titled *Rescue in Albania* which included the Einstein-Albanian narrative. In 2013, Dalip Greca published the news article "Albert Einstein in Albania and the Albanian Passport" in *Gazeta Dielli* with material that he could find to support the story. In 2019, Esilda Luku included the Einstein story in the introduction to her article on the motivations behind the Albanian effort to save Jewish people during the Holocaust for the *Hiperboreea Journal of History* (Luku 2019, 34).

10 See Kotani 2007 and Duka 2021 for sources that address in some detail the history of Jewish settlement in Albania. Although, as Bernard Borchardt (2022, 81) points out, this area is still understudied and could be better documented.

11 Albania's profile of the Yad Vashem website is sparsely populated with some uncited historical information that captures an overall net positive number of Jews, including native-born and foreign, in Albania.

Yad Vashem. N.d. "Albania." The Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center Website. Accessed September 6, 2023. <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/about/o5725>.

12 Albanian and foreign historians commonly attribute these tactics as ways Albanian authority figures could subvert anti-Semitic policies in country (See Luku 2019; Dell'Era 2021; Sinani 2021; Borchardt 2022).

13 Borchardt draws his numbers from the Yad Vashem database and the memorial book of Bergen-Belsen.

14 Sinani, Shaban. 2005. "Hebrejtë në Shqipëri dhe shpëtimi i tyre në periudhën naziste." *Shekulli*, January 27, 2005.

15 Yad Vashem. N.d. "FAQs: the Righteous Among the Nations Program." The Yad Vashem Website. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/faq.html>.

16 Yad Vashem. N.d. "Besa: A Code of Honor." The Yad Vashem Website. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/besa/index.asp>.

17 Holocaust Remembrance Day was established by Law Number 9280, adopted on 23rd September 2004.

18 Top Channel. 2023. "Shpëtimi i hebrenjve në Shqipëri / Në Tiranë do ngrihet muzeu 'Besa.'" The Top Channel Website, February 17, 2023. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://top-channel.tv/video/top-channel-shpëtimi-i-hebrenjve-ne-shqiperi-ne-tirane-do-ngrihet-muzeu-besa/>.

19 See paragraph 7. The Prime Ministry. "Muzeu Hebraik Shqiptar, Historia e Rrallë Shqiptare e Shpëtimimit të Hebrenjve – Prezantohet Projekti Fitues." The Prime Ministry's Website, May 17, 2022. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://www.kryeministria.al/newsroom/muzeu-hebraik-shqiptar-historia-e-rralle-shqiptare-e-shpëtimimit-te-hebrenjve-prezantohet-projekti-fitues/>.

20 Taylor, Alice. 2023. "Albania to open Holocaust Museum after Israeli call for Europe to step up antisemitism fight." The Euractiv Website, March 2, 2023. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albania-to-open-holocaust-museum-after-israeli-call-for-europe-to-step-up-antisemitism-fight/>.

Exit News. 2020. "Prime Minister Edi Rama Speaks on Albania's History with Jewish WWII Refugees." The Exit News Website, June 17, 2020. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://exit.al/en/prime-minister-edi-rama-speaks-on-albanias-history-with-jewish-wwii-refugees/>.

21 Asia News Monitor. 2019. "United Nations: United Nations to Hold Briefing at Headquarters on Rescue of Jews in Albania during Holocaust, 31 January." ProQuest, February 20, 2019. Accessed September 7, 2023. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2183239503?accountid=14244&forcedol=true>.

22 Voice of Albanians. 2015. "Kastriot Dervishi: Kampi i Tepelenës ishte kamp vdekje – ku u zhdukën 300 fëmijë." VOAL.ch, October 19, 2015. Accessed September 8, 2023. <https://www.voal.ch/kastriot-dervishi-kampi-i-tepelenes-ishte-kamp-vdekje-ku-u-zhduken-300-femije/multimedia/dossier/>.

23 Notably, this application of concentration camps is in stark contrast to definitions of Albanian concentrations camps that had housed Jewish refugees in the World War II context. In line with the country's claim of protecting its Jewish population, some local and foreign scholars have argued that World War II era Albanian concentration camps, while basic, did not set out to restrict the rights of their Jewish residents. Bernard Borchardt (2022, 83) writes that "the camps in Albania were not comparable to concentration camps in Nazi Germany. For the most part, the inmates were able to move freely in the communities, and the government provided for them until November 1942, albeit at a low level and in the most basic conditions."

24 Xhufi's comments were a part of a debate on twentieth century Albanian history/historiography aired and moderated by the Albanian news outlet Ora News on March 29, 2018. You can find the debate posted to the Ora News website: <http://www.oranews.tv/article/xhufi-historia-menderhyrjet-e-politikes-eshte-deformuar-ne-menyre-te-frikshme>. The discussion of Tepelena Camp, introduced by Pellumb Xhufi starts near the 43-minute mark.

25 Pandelejmoni (Papa), Enriketa. 2018. "Debati mbi Tepelenën, kujtesa mbi të dhe objektiviteti historik." Panorama. April 15. Accessed on April 15, 2018. <http://www.panorama.com.al/debati-mbi-tepelenen-kujtesa-mbi-te-dhe-objektiviteti-historik/>.

26 Erebara, Gjergji. 2018. "Albanian Historian Angers Survivors of Communist Camp." Balkan Transitional Justice, Balkan Insight. March 30. Accessed May 28, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/30/albanian-historian-angers-survivors-of-communist-camp-03-29-2018/>.

27 Reshat (staff member for a 'Dealing with the Past' project), Semi-structured Interview, 19 January 2018.

28 European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, P6_TA(2008)0439.

29 An approximation of Gentiana Sula's speech from my notes taken at the Tepelena Camp Memorial Day ceremony on August 23, 2018.

30 Used by Giorgio Agamben in his theorizations of the politics of life and death in contemporary states, homo sacer refers to the life that can be killed but not sacrificed. In other words, to kill a homo sacer one would not have committed murder, as the body and image of homo sacer no longer represents life that should be protected or safeguarded as sacred (Agamben 1998, 47). Agamben famously draws on the Muselmann of German concentration camps to make this distinction. Suffering from extreme exhaustion and starvation, the Muselmann epitomizes life in its barest form – a life that has no political associations and waits for an unceremonious death (Agamben 2003).

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