LOVE STORIES OF THE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN THE JEWISH MUSEUM AND TOLERANCE CENTER IN MOSCOW

KADRI ÇAKRANI. A HAPPY STORY FOR ALBANIANS, JEWS, AND THE WORLD.

MATTER OF CONSCIENCE. A SMALL-TOWN PREACHER CARL LUTZ.

AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR CHILDREN. YAD VASHEM ONLINE EXHIBITION.

EVENTS COMMEMORATING JUNE 14 WITH NATIONAL PATRONAGE OF THE PRESIDENT OF POLAND
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We invite all of you to work closely with us. We would be grateful to receive information about events, projects, publications, exhibitions, conferences or research that we should share with our readers. We also accept proposals for articles.

Please do share information about this magazine with others, particularly via social media.

Paweł Sawicki, Editor-in-Chief

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A HAPPY STORY FOR ALBANIANS, JEWS, AND THE WORLD

February 20, 2020 was the 29th anniversary of the removal of the statue of dictator Enver Hoxha from downtown Tirana, the capital of Albania, by Albania’s citizens. The author wrote this essay in Berat, Albania on that day. This reflection was then the basis for the writer’s video testimony, filmed by renowned Albanian film director Kujtim Cashnu a few days later, for use in the creation of Albania’s Holocaust Museum.

When my mother was a young girl in the 1950’s in Philadelphia, all she wanted was to fit in as a new American. The tangible expression of fitting in was the hair bows worn by Debbie Reynolds in the movies. She wanted to have those hair bows so she could be more like Debbie Reynolds.... She remembers focusing an inordinate amount of time on Debbie Reynolds and on hair bows....

During this time, she remembers being a bit sassy to her father. When she looked at him, what she saw was an older, Old-World, foreign gentleman—especially when compared to the parents of her elementary school classmates. Her father was Kadri Cakrani from Albania. He one day held his lower back and told her, “I spent so many nights sleeping on rocks in the mountains, my back will never recover.” And here came the sass. She said, “Baba, if you did so many important things, why don’t I know what they are, and why don’t my friends know who you are?”

She recalls clearly his response. He said, “Because I didn’t do what I did for your friends... I did it because it was right, and history will know I was right. What was done will be in history books. You’ll see.”

It took my mother until March 2019 to learn what he meant by those words. It was then that we saw an article on-line about a letter discovered in Albanian archives. The letter was written by her father, as he was sheltering Jews from the Nazis.

Kadri Cakrani wrote a letter as Commandant General of the National Front in Berat, Albania in September 1943 during Nazi Occupation. His letter states, in part:

“....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.”

-Commandant Kadri Cakrani

One of the things that jumps out from this letter is that school history has taught that the Allies and people in Europe didn’t fully know what Nazi Germany was doing to Jews until the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945. Yet here in this 1943 letter my grandfather was writing: “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.”
Kadri Cakrani's daughter, with hair bow, and Kadri Cakrani's son (Hope and Iz).
Commandant Kadri Cakrani (Center) with fellow soldiers in Berat, Albania in 1944.
Letter from Commandant Kadri Cakrani in September 1943, excerpted and translated in this article.
He’s not alive for us to ask him if he was referring to concentration camps or what he knew about the Holocaust and the persecution of Jewish people throughout Europe at that time. But there is a previous sentence that can simply be taken at face value: “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.” “Under the bullet” could be a literal reference to mass shootings of Jews and others by Nazis that happened in Europe. We do know that he knows the stakes for the Jews in this moment are life and death. We do know that he knows that the Nazis will seek to collect Jews and kill them. We understand that he has been helping them stay sheltered. And he has decided to continue to try to save their lives, despite the peril to his own life and to the community he serves as a leader.

The courageous actions of the people of Albania who sheltered Jews from the Nazis during World War II constitute some of the Finest Hours in Albanian and European history. The facts about this story that have been uncovered recently are now being disseminated and processed with increasing momentum around the world. History as we know it is being rewritten. Albania has the best record for sheltering Jewish people during the Holocaust in all of Europe. Before WWII, there were approximately 200 Jewish people in Albania. After WWII, there were over 2,000 Jewish people in Albania. And the people of the medium-sized Albanian city of Berat alone kept over 600 Jewish people sheltered.

In February, I spent a few days in Berat, which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. I walked where my grandfather Kadri Cakrani once lived, worked, and walked. I asked to be referred from museum director to archivist to tour guide to anyone with knowledge about WWII in Berat. If you, likewise, were to make coffee appointments and lunch appointments with the Albanians of Berat, you would learn as I did:

(1) The people of Berat have a strong oral history about their sheltering of Jewish people during WWII. They know what they did and who did what.

(2) The people of Berat did not speak publicly about the sheltering of Jews during their Communist Reign of Terror (i.e., 1945-1991, behind the Iron Curtain under dictator Enver Hoxha). Hoxha did not have diplomatic relations with the West, with the U.S., or with Israel; Albania was isolated from the outside world. Albanians knew they would endanger family and friends if they talked openly about having saved Jews from the Nazis. Families destroyed documents that proved their assistance to Jews sheltered in Berat, in case their homes were searched. Under Hoxha’s ideology, listening to Beatles music or chewing gum could get you arrested and religion was outlawed, so the people of Berat chose the sensible and cautious course of staying quiet about this story at that time.

(3) With the recent discovery and disclosure of the correspondence of Kadri Cakrani, the Berat story is spreading world-wide.

(4) After the fall of Communism in Albania in 1991, History’s Helper appeared: Professor Simon Vrusho. A life-long teacher and intellectual based in Berat, Professor Vrusho collected testimony and documents from the people of Berat including its Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. He conducted over 150 interviews over 20 years and collected supporting names, documents, letters, and photos. He opened a private museum in 2018 with his own money in order to share the story. If that’s not God’s work, then I don’t know what is. Professor Vrusho passed away in 2019, and the Solomon Museum in Berat is now run by his wife Angjelina, with funding from the Toska Foundation. The museum has had visitors from over 40 countries thus far. Kadri Cakrani’s portrait hangs on the wall, and his story is told publicly for the first time.
(5) Kadri Cakrani’s vision and execution is what made the good works of the people of Berat have such a high rate of success. If Commandant Cakrani wanted to turn over Jews to the Nazis, he could have. People in Berat probably still would have tried to shelter Jews, and they would have still been able to shelter some people it would seem; but they would not have had the rate of success they did under the leadership of Kadri Cakrani. As we say with CEOs, “Tone comes from the top.” The ethics and conduct of leaders ripples out and effects everyone in an organization/community. In this case, Cakrani brought his soldiers and the people of Berat together for a coordinated effort as the Nazis ravaged Central Europe. Because Commandant Cakrani used his authority to shelter Jewish people from Nazis, the community was empowered to shelter Jewish people from the Nazis successfully. For Commandant Cakrani to tell enquiring Nazi officials over and over again that he had no list of Jews to give them displays strength of character and a blood-chilling courage.

At the Solomon Museum in Berat, the work of Professor Vrusho is on the walls, in his writings, and in his archives. The work of Professor Vrusho and the displays in the Solomon Museum teach us the following:

- Commandant Kadri Cakrani never turned over even one Jewish name to the Nazis in WWII.
- Commandant Kadri Cakrani told the Berat community when and where the Nazis were going to conduct searches for Jewish people. This allowed the Jews being sheltered, who were refugees from Central and Southern Europe, to move from one part of the city to another in order to stay undiscovered and safe.
- Commandant Kadri Cakrani sheltered Jewish people in his own home as well.

Now we see a beautiful, and critical, piece of missing WWII and Holocaust history coming into focus. With time, obstructions are removed, and perspective is gained. My grandfather trusted the people of the Berat community—both those who were sheltered and those who did the sheltering. He trusted them with his life, and they trusted him with theirs. He trusted them to remember and to tell each other and others, to keep the story alive of humanitarian work in the face of hatred. He trusted the country of Albania with his military correspondence, knowing that his democratic vision of Albania and the people of Albania would out-live the dark days of Hoxha’s cruel dictatorship. He trusted the goodness of people. Albania has now returned to the light of democracy, with a bright future ahead. People can safely talk about the brave acts of Berat and Albania during the Holocaust.

Commandant Cakrani escaped from Albania in November 1944 with the assistance of British Intelligence, as Enver Hoxha sought to capture and kill him; Hoxha did capture and kill his uncle and brother. Cakrani became a political refugee in Italy and Syria. He was placed at the top of Hoxha’s enemies list, for opposing Hoxha and the rise of Communism. Although Cakrani was from one of the Founding Families of Albania (his father signed Albania’s 1912 Declaration of Independence from the Ottoman Empire), and he himself was a distinguished military hero and dutiful public servant, Hoxha perpetrated fabricated stories to discredit Cakrani’s reputation and legacy. Hoxha held a treason trial for Kadri Cakrani in Albania, for which Hoxha was unable to extradite Cakrani, despite having written the leaders of the Western World: President Truman, Prime Minister Churchill, and General Secretary Stalin.

The United States granted Kadri Cakrani political asylum. Cakrani worked with U.S. Intelligence for the rest of his life to bring democracy back to Albania. Family celebrations in Philadelphia toasted “Rrofte Shqiperia! Vitin tjeter ne Shqiperi!!” [“Long Live Albania! Next Year in Albania!!”]. In May 1972, Cakrani waited in Spain with a group of Albanian patriots to be parachuted into Albania as its new democratic government; the mission was called off by U.S. Intelligence. When Cakrani died, his death certificate listed “Stateless” as his citizenship, because he believed he would return to a democratic Albania.
The writer at the Solomon Museum in Berat, Albania with Mrs. Anjgelina Vrusho, Director of the Solomon Museum and the widow of Professor Simon Vrusho, in February 2020.
Sparked by student protests, on February 20, 1991, the citizens of Albania tore down dictator Enver Hoxha’s statue in Tirana.

1991. © Gani Xhengo

The tearing down of dictator Enver Hoxha’s statue in Tirana, Albania by the citizens of Albania on February 20, 1991.
Now back to his little daughter with the hair bows.... “Why don’t my friends know who you are?” she asked him. As an effective and wise leader with a strong sense of duty and honor, he didn’t need to instruct his daughter in that moment as to what she could tell her friends about him so they would admire him as a war hero. For him to speak of his deeds would imperil innocent people living in Hoxha's Communist Albania. He could just let this story sleep until the time was right. “What was done will be in history books” he told his daughter during the 1950’s. He was right. The story of Albania’s own “Oskar Schindler”—who saved hundreds of peoples’ lives—that was suppressed by an evil Communist dictator and then given oxygen and sunlight by the testimony of witnesses, survivors, and age-stained letters and photographs, will be added to history books. His saving hundreds of people’s lives during WWII means thousands of their descendants are alive today. And my mother, when now asked to name the person she wants to be most like, will say “my father” (with continued respect and admiration for Debbie Reynolds).

Isn’t that a wonderful story for the 29th anniversary of the toppling of the dictator Enver Hoxha’s statue by the people of Albania? :)

The author is a graduate of NYU Law School and a Truman Scholar. Most importantly, she is the proud granddaughter of Kadri Cakrani.
“(Not) a Good Time for Love” is an exhibition project about Holocaust through the eyes of lovers and survivors. It recollects 11 love stories – Inge Katz and Shmuel Berger, Roshelle Shleif and Jack Soutine, Mani Nagelstein and Meyer Korenblit and other witnesses and victims of the tragedy who lived through separation, death of their loved ones, friends and relatives in the time of war.

Why are we talking about love? Love, just as a people’s memories of genocides, is a personal matter. One has a choice to live without love, focusing on his or her own egocentric pleasures and interests. But one does fall in love. Likewise, one has a choice of living with no memory of people who were repressed, killed, and exiled in the 20th century – the century of progress and the century of terror. But one does remember.

“(Not) a Good Time for Love” is based on the diaries published recently, memoirs and biographies of the concentration camps’ prisoners, Jewish guerillas and members of the political underground as well as their children, grandchildren and biographers. The exhibition is filled with memories of the weddings, dates in ghettos, forbidden presents, mutual care, dreams of home, family and own land – Palestine. Witnesses’ stories engage into dialogue with works of contemporary artists exploring the history of the Holocaust and other military conflicts and trauma they inflicted.

Artists on display include: Christian Boltanski from France, Miroslaw Balka, Polish sculptor, along with drawings by concentration camp prisoners Gabi Neyman, Esther Shenfeld and Ilka Gedo as well as installations by contemporary artists from Europe and Israel – Sigalit Landau, Tal Shohat, Michal Rovner, Lee Yanor, Rami Ater, Mosh Kashi, Nelly Agassi, Bogna Burska, William Foyle, Roni Landa, Mira Maylor, David Palombo, Khaim Sokol, Lior Vagima and others.

Six million Jews died in Europe, Asia and North Africa during the Holocaust. Most were killed or died of diseases and starvation in concentration camps and ghettos. We know this number of “six million” as well as the names ‘Auschwitz’, ‘Buchenwald’, ‘Dachau’, ‘Treblinka’ that many of us remember from the school bench.

But the names Edith Khan, Inge Katz, Isadore Rosen, Rosalia Baum don’t cause familiar feelings. In a great tragedy their stories seem to take up such a small space. Their faces could be lost in a crowd of refugees and prisoners, each of whom carried about luggage of their own destiny.

Nevertheless, individual memory is certainly that one thing that makes our knowledge about a Holocaust more comprehensive. The story of Reni Spiegel, a young girl who wrote about her experiences in her diary, is not less important for us than the statistics of deaths. Our knowledge of the tragedy arises from the polyphony of voices. The possibility of familiarizing with different stories is the only right way of becoming critical thinkers.
LOVE STORIES OF THE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN MOSCOW

All pictures in the article: The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow
(Не)вре́мя для любви́
In the 21st century travelling became widely accessible, and the history of the Second World War is available at Wikipedia just using a smartphone. In that case visiting the Holocaust memorials and the mass graves became as ordinary thing as visiting Acropolis in Athens or the Eiffel Tower visiting.

Does this depreciate memory? Unlikely. Is visiting Auschwitz enough to believe that the tragedy has really happened? Absolutely not.

The Holocaust is real, and ‘(Not) a Good Time for Love’ reminds of it by specific details of everyday life like clothes in some girl’s suitcase who ran fled from the Nazis to Palestine, like smell in a bunker for thirteen people, like hands that have aged 50 years in 5 due to hard work.

Today in self-isolation we continue to share ‘(Not) a Good Time for Love’ project online while the Jewish Museum in Moscow is temporarily closed. Love Stories of the Holocaust Survivors are still being told and voices of our heroes can be heard in this pause of our lives.
As of March 18, 1944, Hungary remained the last area under the influence of Nazi Germany in which the “Final Solution” had yet to be implemented. That changed a day later when the Nazi Wehrmacht invaded Hungary and swiftly undertook the genocidal aims of the Third Reich against the Hungarian population. By early July, around 438,000 Hungarian Jews were forced onto trains and sent mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Approximately 90% were murdered shortly after arrival.

As the Nazi reign of terror bore down on the Jewish population in Hungary, there was a Swiss diplomat stationed in Budapest by the name of Carl Lutz. Vice Consul Lutz, introverted but skilled in diplomacy, was serving as the head of the Section for Foreign Interests for the Swiss Legation. As he witnessed the deportations and threats to the Jewish population, he decided to act. Lutz would soon launch one of the largest rescue efforts implemented during the Holocaust. Yet, his rescue operation cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, his actions in Budapest in the waning months of the war were influenced by his earlier life and career experiences far from the banks of the Danube.

Lutz turned to the diplomatic service and graduated from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. in 1924. He spent the next decade serving in various diplomatic appointments throughout the country, once even returning to the American heartland he’d left years earlier. Lutz stayed in the United States far longer than he anticipated and did not return to the other side of the Atlantic permanently until the mid-1930s.

Beginning in early 1936, Lutz served as a diplomat in Mandatory Palestine, a territory then under British rule. Although he had initially hoped to return to Switzerland, Lutz’s appointment in Palestine proved to be of great consequence for his later efforts in Budapest, a fact he could not have known at the time. After the Second World War began in September 1939, approximately 2,500 Germans found themselves trapped in the British territory. Germany asked Switzerland to appoint a neutral arbiter to mediate the return of the displaced citizens and Lutz was assigned to handle the task. He successfully negotiated the release of all 2,500 Germans, impressing his superiors and colleagues. Praise for his skilled work even reached the Führer’s office in Berlin. Lutz then aided Jews in Palestine with German passports. He was able to procure protective papers from the British, which allowed their holders to remain in exile in Palestine and distributed them among the population.
MATTER OF CONSCIENCE.

A SMALL-TOWN PREACHER CARL LUTZ.

Carl Lutz in Budapest. FORTEPAN / Archiv für Zeitgeschichte ETH Zürich / Agnes Hirschi
During Lutz’s time in the mandatory power, an American newspaper in St. Louis, Missouri, where the diplomat had once lived printed a full-page article describing his new position on the other side of the world. In the final paragraphs of the piece, the author wrote, “In the consular service, one never knows where he may be sent next.” The sentence rings with unintended prescience. Lutz’s succeeding appointment, which was influenced by his experiences in the United States and in Palestine, would be his most consequential.

In 1942, Lutz was transferred to Budapest. Following the Nazi invasion in March of 1944, Lutz recalled the protective papers he used to assist German Jews in Palestine and determined that they could be utilized to protect Hungarian Jews. While it was unlikely that anyone could find a way from Budapest to Palestine in the chaos and terror of 1944, those holding the protective papers were considered under Swiss protection and mostly exempt from the dictates of the “Final Solution,” including deportation to camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau. Lutz was able to procure 7,000-8,000 protective “units” and launched a complex system of negotiations to ensure their approval by relevant ruling authorities. He soon realized that his efforts would be for naught if he did not ensure the Nazi forces governing Hungary would honor them. He scheduled a meeting with a Nazi official who had just arrived in Budapest – Adolf Eichmann.

Eichmann did pass the request on. Soon after, Lutz received word that the protective papers would be authorized by Germany, in part out of respect for Lutz’s previous work in Palestine.

Lutz immediately launched a plan to rescue far more than 7,000-8,000 people. While Eichmann assumed that the “units” the Swiss diplomat requested meant individuals, Lutz determined that “units” meant “families,” thereby increasing the number of people he would be able to protect. Immediately, he began to disseminate the papers throughout Budapest. Forged Swiss protective documents also began to appear in the city, but Lutz looked the other way. He also placed 76 buildings under Swiss diplomatic protection, where he was able to house thousands of Hungarian Jews who had lost their homes and property. Lutz frequently stepped in to rescue individual Hungarian Jews, once jumping in the Danube River to rescue a Jewish woman shot by fascist militia.

In December, Lutz, his wife, and his staff took shelter in the basement of the British Embassy, which he was legally required to protect as part of his diplomatic duties. Outside, the Siege of Budapest raged. In early 1945, after spending two months in a cramped basement, the group was finally liberated. After returning to Switzerland, Lutz wrote reports about his work in Budapest, but the only initial reaction he received was about his expense report: A finance official contacted him complaining about a glass of orange juice he had ordered for breakfast in Istanbul—his first stop after escaping the hell of Budapest.
Eventually, Lutz was harshly criticized by his superiors and colleagues, who contended that he was “not authorized” to oversee his complex system of rescue. Switzerland refused to acknowledge his rescue efforts officially and nationally until 1995, twenty years after his death. He did receive international praise, however. He was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize three times, never winning. In 1963, Lutz was named “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem. Trudi Lutz received the same honor in 1976.

In a 1949 report, Lutz summarized his motivations behind his rescue efforts, writing that he did not consider himself a “Christian in name only” and therefore found it a “matter of conscience” to rescue the Hungarian Jews “condemned to die.” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates that Lutz saved approximately 62,000 souls, likely making him responsible for the largest civilian rescue mission of the entire Holocaust. Yet, it is a rescue operation that cannot be considered merely considering the events of 1944 and 1945. Lutz’s heroic actions had roots in both the rural United States and in the far corners of the British Empire.

Amy Lutz is a historian and graduate student from St. Louis, Missouri in the United States. She graduated from St. Louis University in 2013 with honors and a Bachelor's Degree in History. She is currently finishing a Master's Degree in History at the University of Missouri, St. Louis. Amy is also a docent at the St. Louis Holocaust Museum & Learning Center. She first learned about Carl Lutz as a child, when she saw a photo of him in a school textbook. Although she is not a direct relative of Carl Lutz, she was intrigued by the heroic story of someone with whom she shared a surname. For the last fifteen years, Amy has continued to conduct research into Carl Lutz and his story remains her primary area of focus during her graduate education.
“AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR CHILDREN”

In this online exhibition through the photos, the artifacts and the personal testimonies, Yad Vashem explores and remember some of the ways Passover was observed throughout Europe prior to the Holocaust, during the Holocaust years, and in the displaced persons camps and children’s homes following the war.

The imperative to remember is a significant element of the Passover holiday, and part of its tradition and rituals.

Among the artifacts presented in the exhibition is The Passover Haggadah that 17 year old Elimelekh Landau prepared as his father quoted from memory when the family of five were in hiding in Boryslav.

The Landau family, Shmaryahu and Sarah and their children Elimelekh, Judah & Tamar lived in Borislav, Poland where they enjoyed a comfortable life. Shmaryahu Landau was a central figure in the Jewish community and was the owner of an oil field and a sizeable sawmill that supplied wood for export.

In 1939 the Soviets occupied the area but after the German invasion of the Soviet Union the lives of the Jews in Borislav became intolerable between general abuse and roundups. Shmaryahu and Elimelekh obtained work as “essential laborers” which enabled them to survive the roundups, but after one particularly harsh roundup in February 1943, Shmaryahu and Sara understood that all the Jews were destined for annihilation and they realized that in order to survive they would have to act.

Judah Landau wduring the war. Photo: Yad Vashem.
Zdjęcia w artykule: Andrzej Rudiak

Judah Landau during the war. Photo: Yad Vashem.
The song Ma Nishtana in the Haggadah. Photo: Yad Vashem
The Passover Haggadah that 17 year old Elimelekh Landau prepared as his father quoted from memory when the family of five were in hiding in Boryslav. Photo: Yad Vashem
Sara sent Salka Horowitz who worked in the store to search among their clients of well-known Polish families for someone who would hide the Landau family. Salka found Anna Kushiotko who agreed to hide them for a short period. The feeling was that after the battle of Stalingrad, the German collapse was imminent. The Polish family’s home, surrounded by a high wall was on the outskirts of the city. In one room with shuttered windows, the Landau family hid along with Salka Horowitz for a year and a half. Many times, they were forced to hide in the dark, airless space under the floorboards without food or drink until the danger passed.

The Kushiotko family took care of the Landaus with dedication. On Passover they allowed the Landaus to Kosher their oven and prepare Kosher matzahs from grain that the Landaus ground in a coffee grinder. Shmaryahu Landau recited the text of the Haggadah from memory to his son Elimelekh, who wrote and decorated it.

At the end of the war Shmaryahu helped Anna and her two daughters to leave the Soviet area and move to Krakow.

After the war, Elimelekh made his way to Eretz Israel on his own, arriving already in 1945. Tamar was placed in the children’s home run by Sarah Stern-Katan and in 1946 she came to Kvuzat Yavneh. Judah immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1947 and Sara and Shmaryahu followed a year later. Salka Horowitz immigrated to Israel in 1963.
Following the request of the Museum, President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda took National Patronage over the events commemorating the National Day of Remembrance of the Victims of German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps that will take place on 14 June at the Auschwitz Memorial. On that day, 80 years ago, Germans deported from Tarnów the first transport of Poles to the newly created concentration camp.
‘In previous years, the main commemoration event consisted of three elements: a Holy Mass at Saint Maximilian’s Center in Harmęże – sacral space particularly connected with the prisoners from the first transport, official commemoration within the historical space by the Witold Pilecki State School of Higher Education in Oświęcim where the first transport had arrived, as well as symbolical homage paid to the Victims of Auschwitz by the Death Wall at the former Auschwitz I camp,’ said Dr. Piotr M.A. Cywiński, the director of the Museum.

Due to the unprecedented situation of the epidemic threat caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the commemoration of the anniversary of the deportation of the first transport of Poles to Auschwitz camp will be different from what was originally planned.

‘Unfortunately, it will not be public, mass commemoration. Many of the planned events, especially the exhibitions, will be moved into the Internet space. We are also preparing a special online lesson on the history of Poles in the German Auschwitz camp. A lot of information will also appear in the social media in order to reach the widest possible audience in the world with the history of the first transport and the beginnings of Auschwitz. The main, however, will be adapted to the limitations resulting from the threat of a pandemic. Together with all the co-organizers, we will be discussing in the coming days how best to commemorate the June anniversary in these extraordinary circumstances,” added director Cywiński.

Prisoners of the first transport of Poles at the train station in Tarnów
Prisoners of the first transport of Poles in the streets of Tarnów

Photo: Holocaust History Archive - Noordwijk, the Netherlands
The organizers of commemorative events:

- Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum
- Auschwitz Memento Association
- Bielsko-Żywiec Diocesan Curia
- Castle Museum in Oświęcim
- Department of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Kraków
- Foundation for the Memory of Auschwitz-Birkenau Victims
- Foundation of Memory Sites Near Auschwitz-Birkenau
- Foundation Monument-Hospice for the Town of Oświęcim
- Faith and Truth Foundation
- International Youth Meeting Center in Oświęcim
- Jewish Center in Oświęcim
- Kraków Foundation Center for Information, Meeting, Dialogue, Education and Prayer in Oświęcim
- the town of Oświęcim
- Oświęcim commune
- Oświęcim County Office
- Province of the St. Anthony of Padua and Blessed Jakub Strzemię of the Order of Friars
- Remembrance Museum of Land of Oświęcim Residents
- Roma Association in Poland
- Society for the Protection of Oświęcim (TOnO)
- the town of Tarnów
- Witold Pilecki State School of Higher Education in Oświęcim

On 14 June 1940, the Germans deported a group of 728 Poles from the prison in Tarnów to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Among the deported prisoners were soldiers of the September campaign, members of the independent underground organizations, school pupils and students, as well as a small group of Polish Jews. They received numbers from 31 to 758 and were placed for the quarantine period in the buildings of the former Polish Tobacco Monopoly, near the site of today's Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (today, houses the Witold Pilecki State School of Higher Education in Oświęcim).

The first camp numbers were given to German criminals brought earlier by the SS men to Auschwitz from Sachsenhausen concentration camp, who assumed the position of prisoner functionaries.

Out of 728 prisoners deported to KL Auschwitz on 14 June 1940 from Tarnów, 298 survived the war, 272 perished, and the fate of 158 of them remains unknown. Kazimierz Albin, the last witness of the first transport, passed away on 22 July 2019.

After the end of the war, some prisoners got involved in commemorating the tragedy of Auschwitz by publishing their memoirs, presenting accounts or organizing the events dedicated to subsequent anniversaries of the arrival of the first transport to the camp.

Since 2006, 14 June is commemorated in Poland as the National Day of Remembrance of the Victims of German Nazi Concentration Camps and Extermination Camps.