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Mill manager risked life to save Jewish farmers

It's been 66 years since Martyn Vitiuk sheltered three Jews from certain death during the German occupation of Ukraine. And now he is being recognized in another country, worlds away from where he risked his own life to carry out his heroic deeds.

Better late and far away than never says his proud grandson, Vladimir Muryne, 68, who will, along with his wife, Valentina, and his son, Andrij, attend a ceremony at the Israeli embassy that will see Vitiuk posthumously honoured as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations."

In the 1940s, Vitiuk was the manager of a mill in Lvov, a town whose population was more than two-thirds Jewish. Many of the Jewish farmers used his mill for their
wheat and knew him as an honest man. When the Germans moved in, many fled, many were killed, and three -- namely Leib Blaustein, Benyo Ponikwer and Kalman Harnik -- sought shelter in one of Vitiuk's barns. From June 1943 until March 1944, he kept them safe, warm and fed while also keeping their secret -- both for their protection and for his.

"He kept them in a secret place, and he kept it a secret," said Vladimir Muryne, who was an architect in the former Soviet Union before he emigrated to Canada with his architect wife 11 years ago.

In 1944, when the Soviets liberated the town, the thankful Jews made their way to Israel and soon after, they sent two letters, one written in Yiddish, one in Ukrainian, to Vitiuk to thank him for risking his own life to save theirs. It was that letter that served as proof of his actions. He lived to receive the letter, and to be drafted for a year into the Soviet army, but was murdered in 1946 in Ukraine under unclear circumstances.

The road to today's certificate and medal presentation began in 1998. Vitiuk's great-grandson, Andrij, who had moved to Ottawa previously, recognized the Ukrainian accent of one of his customers in the auto repair shop where he worked. They started chatting and Andrij discovered the man, Stefan Moldovan, was a Ukrainian Jew. He shared his great-grandfather's story and asked him to read a copy of the Yiddish letter his grandmother had always kept. Moldovan, who had also been sheltered by a kind Ukrainian during the war, offered to contact Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Remembrance and Education Centre in Jerusalem, to see about

recognition. In 2004, Moldovan received a letter asking for contact information for Vitiuk's remaining family members. Vladimir's mother, Stefania, died in 2000, making him the closest remaining relative.

"Jewish people helped me personally in my past and I feel a connection," Vladimir said. "It's important to remember. I will tell my eight-year-old grandson to respect Jewish people."

Vitiuk will be honoured by Israeli Ambassador Miriam Ziv and Yaron Ashkenazi, executive director of the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem. The title of Righteous Among Nations is given when documentation or survivor testimony demonstrates that a Gentile risked his or her life for the safety of one or more Jews. About 22,000 people in 44 countries have been so honoured.