

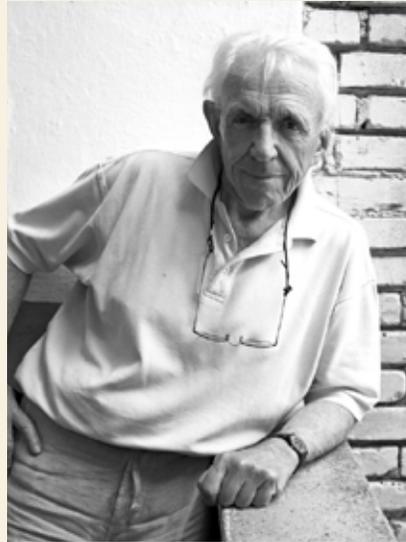
# Muslims who saved Jews

A remarkable photographic exhibition of Albania's inspiring record in saving Jews from the Holocaust

### Muslims Who Saved Jews? Who Ever Heard of It?

When I first learned of the WWII rescue of Jews in Muslim Albania and Kosovo, my reaction was visceral. Muslims who saved Jews? I must record this forgotten event with my camera and tell the story through the various family histories of the people I was to meet. As a Jew and a Sufi, my spiritual connection with the beauty of Islam and Judaism is seamless. The old adage of "A picture is worth a thousand words" is manifested in our photographic project.

For more than six years, I have been traveling to Muslim Albania and Kosovo, documenting and doing portraits of Muslim families that saved Jews in World War II. Although besa is a traditional Albanian code of honour, many Muslim families have incorporated it into their religious beliefs and often were inspired by their faith in saving Jews from the



Nazis. The rescue of Jews in Albania was a unique experience in Holocaust history as Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler were welcomed not as refugees, but as guests.

*Besa* is a message to the world of brotherhood and compassion for those in need and unique to the

Albanian people. Equally important is the message, through my portraits and stories, of the compassion extended to Jews by Albanian Muslim families during the Holocaust.

As a Jew, and a student of the Sufi tradition, I always made it a point to thank those Muslim families I photographed for the saving of Jews during those harrowing times.

— Norman H. Gershman

*Norman H. Gershman established The Eye Contact Foundation to promote religious, political, cultural and economic understanding and tolerance among people worldwide through the use of portrait photography. Its origins lie in the citizen diplomacy of its founder, through his years of international humanistic portrait photography. And they lie in the Albanian honor code of besa, which requires individuals to protect anyone in danger regardless of all religious and political affiliations.*

### Baba Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi (Previous page)

For fifteen years, I have been the head of the worldwide movement of Bektashi. There are more than seven million Bektashi in the world, including in the United States. Our sect derives from the Shia. We trace our heritage back to Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet Mohammed.

We are the most liberal of Muslims. Our religious practices are in the language of the country where we live. Many of our rituals are secret. Atatürk expelled our order from Turkey in the early 1920s because we refused to take off our religious garb in public. It was then that we moved our centre here to Tirana. All around us is the colour green. This has been the colour of our mosques for 800 years. Green is pure, peaceful and clean. It is the colour of the earth.

At the time of the Nazi occupation, the prime minister of Albania was Mehdi Frashëri. He was a member of the Bektashi. He refused to release the names of Jews to the Nazi occupiers. He organized an underground of all Bektashi to shelter all the Jews, both citizens and refugees. At that time, nearly half of all Muslims in Albania were Bektashi. Prime Minister Frasherri gave a secret order: "All Jewish children will sleep with your children, all will eat the same food, all will live as one family."

We Bektashi see God everywhere, in everyone. God is in every pore and every cell, therefore all are God's children. There cannot be infidels. There cannot be discrimination. If one sees a good face, one is seeing the face of God.

God is Beauty. Beauty is God. There is no God but God.

### Abaz & Zade Sinani (facing page)

I was nine years old. We lived in a big house in the village of Lushmja, in southern Albania. My parents took in a Croatian Jewish family of three — Fritz, Katherine and their daughter, Gertrude. I do not remember their family name. A fourth member of the family was sheltered with our cousin. We gave them false passports, and Gertrude went to school with me. Fritz was a carpenter, and I remember that the family was educated. We always treated Fritz and his family as guests. We never gave them work assignments. We were secular Muslims. In our home, we celebrated all the holidays — Jewish, Muslim and Christian.

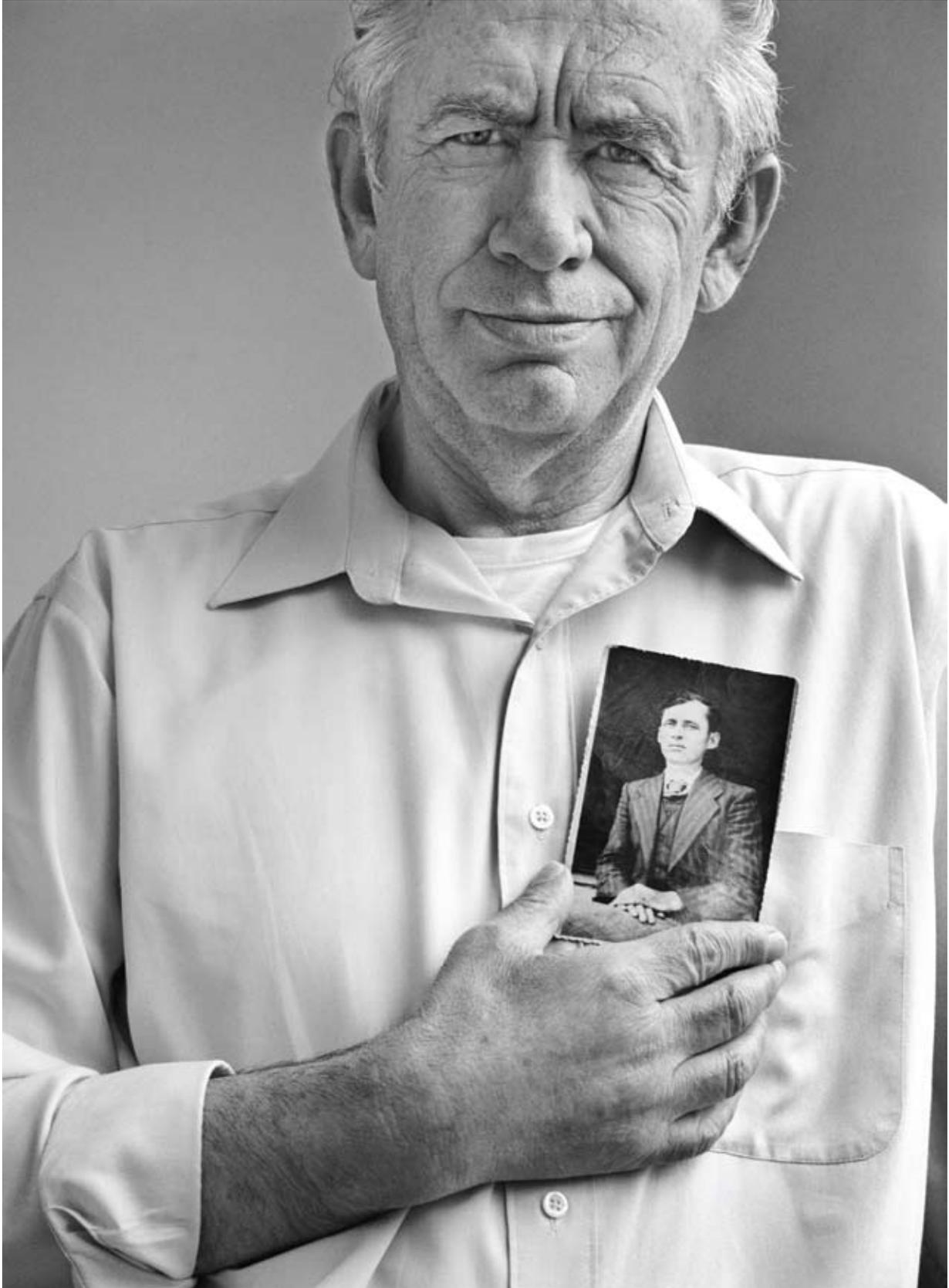
At times, the situation became dangerous because of German patrols, so we would move the Jews back and forth between our home and our cousin's home. They stayed with us for six months and at the end of the war, they left for England. After the war, we lost contact with all those we sheltered.

Why did we shelter the Jewish family? We had the biggest house in the village. Any villager would have done the same.

We also sheltered two Italian soldiers during the German occupation. And in 1912, after the war with Turkey, my mother's family sheltered Turkish soldiers.

Why should we be honoured? We did nothing special. We did what any Albanian would do. We are all human.

This is a picture of my father. All else has been lost.





**Beluli Sadik & Son Rruzhdhi** (above)

We lived in the small village of Novosel in Kosovo. My father owned a pastry shop. Our entire family fought against the Italians, the Bulgarian fascists and the Germans. The Bulgarians jailed me in 1941, when I was 20 years old. It was easy to bribe them with a chicken and I was released.

In 1942, a prisoner train from Serbia came through our region. Chaim Cohen escaped with 72 other Jews into the mountains near our village. We sheltered Chaim in our home when he sought asylum. At first, we found it strange that he never took off his clothing. He even slept in his clothing. It was because Chaim had sewn gold coins into his garments. We assured him that no one in our family would steal from him. We then dressed Chaim as a woman in traditional Muslim clothing, including a veil. After three weeks, we sent him to my sister's house where her father-in-law provided him with false Albanian papers. My father then walked Chaim to the Albanian border.

We know that he spent three years in Elbason, Albania, and opened a textile shop. After the war, he immigrated to several countries in South America, to Italy, Israel, Serbia and then finally to Brazil. We know all this because Chaim visited us with gifts, first in 1957 and then again in 1981. We also were privileged to meet his family on his second visit. Under the communists our family suffered. My father, as a nationalist, was first condemned to death and then his sentence was commuted to 10 years in prison.

Our family are Albanian nationalists and devout Muslims. It was through the Koran and Besa that we felt the courage to shelter Chaim. No one in our village knew. We acted from our hearts.

**Esheref & Easuere Shpuza** (facing page)

My parents lived in the town of Durrës. In 1944, my father befriended the Jewish family of Raphael (Rudi) Abravanel. They were originally from Yugoslavia. He provided the family with false passports for Rudi, his wife and two children, and escorted them to the border. They escaped first back to Yugoslavia, then to Italy. Then our family lost all trace of the Abravanel.

It was through the help of another righteous Albanian, Refik Veseli, that in 1990 we again made contact with Rudi and his family, now living in Israel. We received letters and exchanged telephone calls. It seems strange to ask why my father did what he did for this Jewish family. Besa is a tradition of the entire nation of Albania.





NE KETE VEND KANE PIRE UJE  
SOLOMON ADIXHES ME TE BIRIN  
ISAK ADIXHES NGA IZRAELI, TE  
CILET U STREHUAN NGA ALI DHE  
RAGIP KRAJA NGA NDJEKJA QE U  
BEHEJ NGA NAZISTET GJERMAN.



**Family Of Ali & Ragip Kraja** (facing page)

Solomon Adixhes, his wife and son Isak escaped certain death in Skopie, Macedonia, by bribing a guard and crossing at night over to Albania after the entire Jewish community in Skopie had been rounded up for transport to a death camp. A courier brought them to our fathers who were twins, shoemakers. The times were difficult and dangerous for any family to harbour Jews, but we sheltered the Jewish family in our village near Shkoder from 1943 until the end of the war. All three families lived under one roof. We often dressed Solomon in peasant women's clothing to hide his identity. Sometimes he worked in a garment factory owned by a friend of our father's. Once Solomon cured a peasant of an infection, and the villagers then revered him as a healer. Isak was always peering out the window in fear of a Nazi patrol.

After the war, the Adixhes family settled in Israel. In 1994, Solomon and Isak came from Israel to visit our families. What a joyous occasion! A film was made of that trip: *One Wants To Remember — One Wants To Forget*. Last year, Isak again visited us from Los Angeles. We have many pictures from his trip.

We are gathered near the sign that we erected: "The Jewish Refugees of Solomon Adixhes and family drank from this nearby well while being sheltered by Ali and Ragip Kraja when being chased by the Nazis." We sheltered the Adixhes family out of the goodness of our hearts. We are all brothers and proud of our heritage. If need be, we would do it again.

**Family Of Ali & Nadia Kazazi** (above)

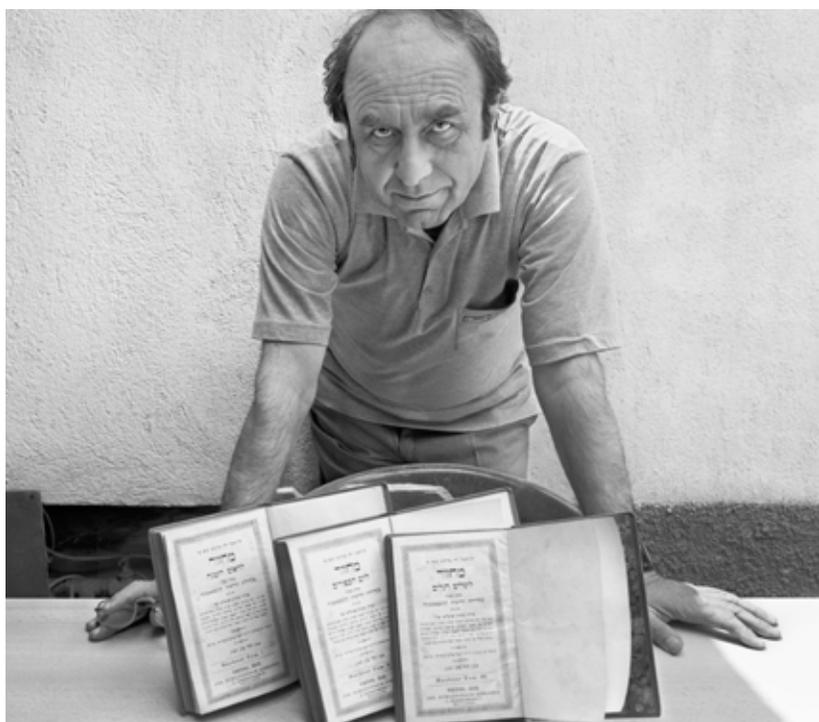
Our grandfather sheltered refugees from the war in Yugoslavia in 1913. Our father was illiterate, and very kind-hearted. He was a baker.

This is the neighbourhood in Tirana where we lived and sheltered the Solomon family. It was a very friendly neighbourhood and everyone, including the children, knew we were sheltering a Jewish family. We gave the family Muslim names. Matilda and Memo played with us in the inner courtyard. The father and mother were terror stricken, but when there were searches, our Jewish guests were able to hide by scrambling through connecting doorways to other homes. Those were dangerous times.

For six months in 1943, we sheltered the Solomon family — David and Esther Solomon and their children, Matilda and Memo. We now know that Memo's real name was Mori Amarilio Solomon. Esther was a dressmaker. She sewed gold into her dress as a potential source of survival.

Memo became a teacher of music in Beersheba, Israel. He now lives in Jerusalem. Matilda is a businesswoman in Israel.

Our parents were not very religious, but they believed in the Koran and Besa. Without the Koran there is no Besa. Without Besa there is no Koran. For the heart there is no colour of skin. No man or woman can forget God.



**Rexhep Rifat Hoxha** (above)

I was born after the war. My father only told me of his rescue of a Jewish family shortly before he died, when I was 17 years old. He waited until he felt I was mature enough to accept the obligation he had committed to and would be unable to complete.

In 1944, under the German occupation, my parents sheltered the (Bulgarian refugee) family of Nesim Hallagyem, his wife, Sara, and their son, Aron. They stayed with my parents for six months. Fortunately, my father spoke Bulgarian, and he and Nesim became good friends. There were times of great danger, when German patrols went from house to house seeking Jews. My father then arranged shelter for Nesim and Sara in outlying villages, safe from German patrols. Aron, who was 10 years old, stayed in my parents' home, pretending to be their son.

Toward the end of the occupation, my father escorted Nesim and his family to the port city of Durrës, where they embarked as refugees, hopeful of gaining access to Palestine. Just before leaving, Nesim entrusted to my father three beautifully bound books in Hebrew to keep until he could retrieve them "when the waters are still," after the war. "Save them as you would save your eyes," he told my father.

After the war, my father did receive a letter from Nesim that he and his family were safely in Palestine. This was during the communist period in Albania, when any correspondence from abroad was considered a crime, subject to arrest. My father was prohibited from answering the letter, and that was the last time there was any communication.

My father gave me both the honour and the responsibility of safeguarding these Hebrew books until Nesim or his descendants return to retrieve them. This is a heavy burden and I will be saddened if I have to pass this responsibility on to my son. Perhaps Aron is alive in Israel. Perhaps there are grandchildren. I have never been outside of Albania and do not have the means to travel.

The books remain in my home. They are a treasure. I still await the Hallagyems' return.

**Basri Hasani** (facing page)

I do not remember my parents. I am an orphan. I have lived all my life in Mitrovica, Kosovo, and have been the city administrator for many years. Our town is known as Red Mitrovica because we have seen so much bloodshed. We suffered under the Nazis from 1941 to 1945, then experienced the Serb ethnic cleansing and NATO bombing in 1998 and 1999. I lived through it all. I know the history and suffering of the families, and especially of the Jews.

Before the war there were 11,000 inhabitants of Mitrovica. There were Turks, Serbs, Jews and Albanians. All citizens worked together and respected the individuality of all.

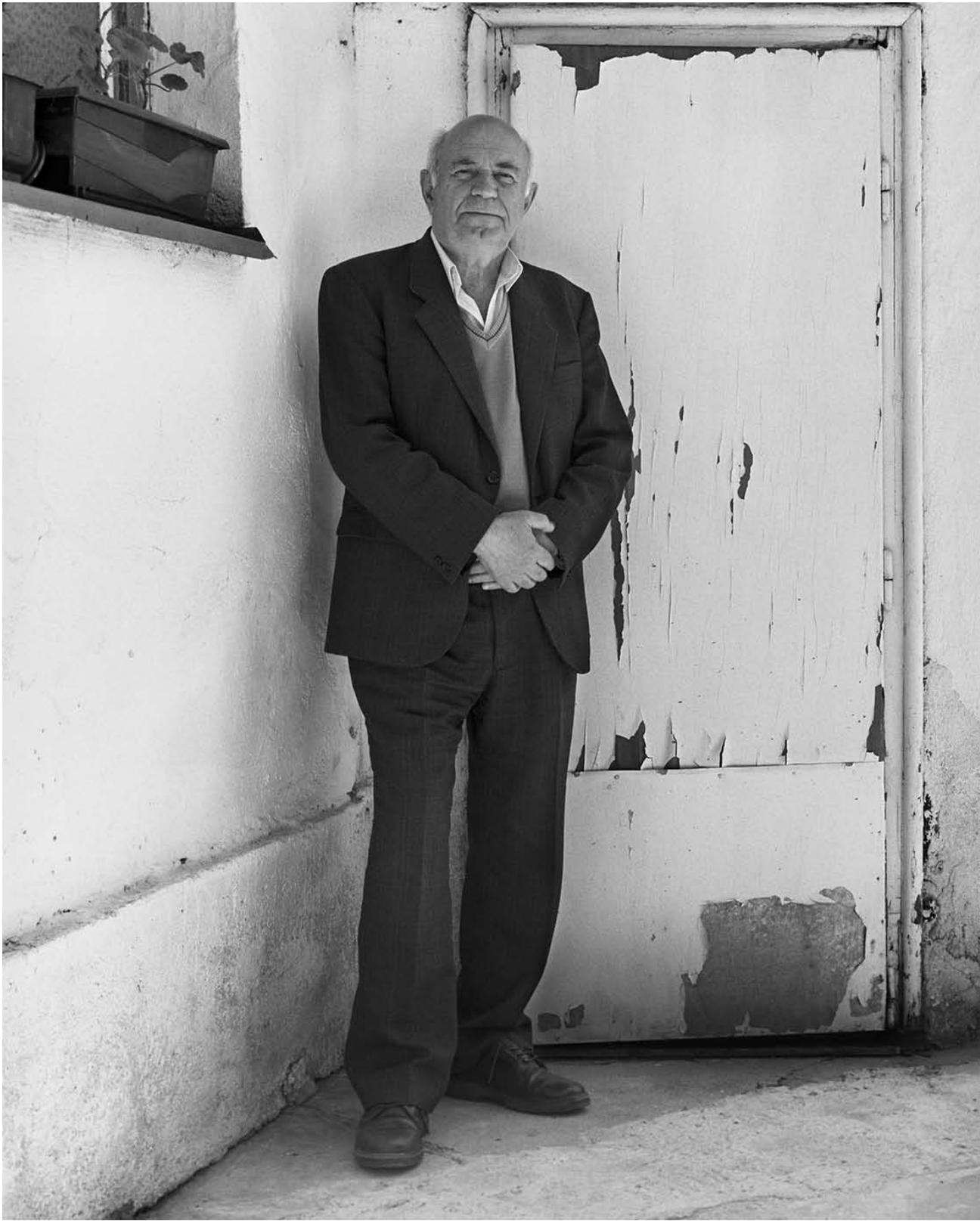
The Rubenovic brothers were my next-door neighbours. There was Rakamin, Aron and my best friend Moshe. Moshe's uncle was the Rabbi of Mitrovica. The Jewish families of our town were religious and prayed at the synagogue. Most of the Jews were traders.

In 1941, the Germans occupied our town. Rakamin's shop was closed. The Prefect of Mitrovica organized an escape for the Jews. They were hidden in surrounding mountain villages. We also helped to shelter Italian soldiers whom the Germans were killing.

The Nazis captured both Rakamin's and Aron's families. We never heard from them again. Moshe joined the partisans in 1941 and fought the Nazis throughout Albania and Kosovo. He came back as a captain of the partisans and I sheltered him in my home while he and his band fought the Nazis in our town.

In 1945 Moshe left for Israel and then I think he settled in America. I don't really know as I have lost all contact with my friend. Forgive my tears, but Moshe was such a good friend during those years. I long to be reunited with him.

I do not go to the mosque, but I am a true Muslim. The Holy Koran is in my genes. I say my prayers each evening. My door is always open to anyone in need.



# Understanding besa, the Albanian code of honour

“All Jewish children will sleep with your children, all will eat the same food, all will live as one family”

— Albanian Prime Minister Mehdi Frashëri, 1943

By Randi Winter



JWM PRODUCTIONS, LLC

Rachel Goslins, director of the upcoming film, *Besa: The Promise*, with Baba Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi, in Tirana, Albania.

As the only country in Europe whose Jewish population grew 10-fold during World War II, and included refugees from all over Europe, Albania, with its 70 to 75 percent Muslim population, would seem an unlikely candidate to stand alone in its way of providing unwavering support of Jews.

Yet, King Zog and his foreign minister led by example, rescuing people from outside their borders, and most often unknown to them. People from every walk

of life joined the informal underground to shelter anyone fleeing the Nazis. It was reminiscent of the underground railway between the North and the South during the U.S. Civil War.

A secret statement by Prime Minister Mehdi Bej Frashëri, a Bektashi Muslim, declared: “All Jewish children will sleep with your children, all will eat the same food, all will live as one family.”

Here, Jews, who had escaped from other countries and who had literally been

branded on the forehead with a J, were astonished to learn that the local population was jostling amongst themselves for the honour of sheltering them, for the honour of saving their lives.

Neighbours even shared the privilege, based on their ability to contribute to the welfare of their “guest.” In one case, a rich neighbour fed the people in their care, while a poor neighbour gave them a bed to sleep in each night. No threats of punishment or death could cause these people to waver in their commitment.

Now, as these extraordinary, ordinary individuals are rightfully coming into the world’s consciousness, we need to honour their simple requests. In some cases, they want to restore to the Jews the things — the money, the possessions — they left behind for safekeeping. After these 60 years, they hope that someday, some way, a letter or knock on the door will reunite them with the people who temporarily became family and, for most, are still sought out as long-lost relatives.

Beyond their wish to find the people they sheltered, they are perplexed at the attention — at why someone would even want to photograph them and tell their stories to the world. Some 50 years of oppressive dictatorship and then the harsh rule of Communism has dampened but not defeated their spirit. Each one said that if the knock came to their door today, they would answer it again. Some of them answered the knock many times, giving shelter not only to Jews, but also to some 25,000 Italians fleeing the Nazi wrath — and even to Nazi defectors. It must be noted that Muslims were by no means the only rescuers, though being the predominant group in Albania, they saved the largest number of Jews. In fact, relative to their populations, Catholics and Orthodox Christians equally sheltered and protected Jews.

When he heard of these stories, photographer Norman H. Gershman, a former Wall Street broker and headhunter, felt compelled to

document them. The results of many years of travel, interviews and photography are three-fold. There are photographic exhibitions that travel the world; there's his book *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in WWII*; and there's the soon-to-be-released film *Besa: The Promise*, originally titled *God's House*.

After speaking with many Albanians and Kosovars, Mr. Gershman came to understand how a deeply-ingrained cultural virtue saved thousands of lives from the Holocaust.

For centuries, Albanian conduct has been guided by the Kanun and besa. The Albanian word besa is usually translated in English as "faith," "trust" or an "oath of peace," but its real spirit is "to keep the promise." Besa lies at the heart and soul of trust in Albanian personal and familial life.

Besa first gained prominence in the Kanun, a set of customary oral laws started in the 15th Century, passed down through generations, and not written down until the 19th Century.

The Kanun says: What is promised must be done. According to the Kanun of Lek, article 601: "The house of an Albanian belongs to God and the guest." Article 603 says: "The guest must be honoured with bread and salt and heart." Article 609 adds: "Receive a guest also with a fire, a log of wood and a bed."

While the *Kanun of Lek* (the best-known kanun) is often perceived as archaic or even feudal, its modern interpretation is really the essence of honour. Mr. Gershman was told: "Without the Koran, there is no besa, and without besa, there is no Koran."

He established The Eye Contact Foundation to use art as the primary form of expression to break down stereotypes and build upon the deep roots of humanism that cross racial, ethnic, religious and national boundaries. His photographs are purposeful. What is reflected in his portraits is his overriding belief in the goodness of people.

Besnik Konci, Albania's ambassador to Canada describes besa as an Albanian code of honour that means "to keep the promise" and "word of honour" and "to protect someone in need regardless of faith, race and nationality."

"Besa is an important part of personal and familial standing and is often used as an example of 'Albanianism,' he says. "Based on besa, Albanians saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. During one of the darkest period of human history, Albanians, by their example, showed that the spirit of humanism was alive, and even strong.



The Et'hem Bey Mosque in Tirana circa 1940.



From left: Neil Barrett, director of photography, with film director Rachel Goslins, and photographer Norman H. Gershman on set in Tirana, Albania.

"Promoting the principles of besa is a great service to the peoples of our world. We all want to live, and can live, in full peace and harmony free of prejudices and mistrust. This is the fundamental message found in Mr. Gershman's photos, exhibits, books, videos and upcoming documentary."

**H**ow can we learn how to "keep the promise?" Promise implies taking responsibility for others. We should ask ourselves: If there is a knock on our door, would we, as individuals, take responsibility?

If those are the questions, then the principles of besa is an answer. Mr. Gershman's photographic exhibition should

serve as an inspiration, on its own, for generations to come. Many around the world have already seen it.

Yad Vashem, also known as the "Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority," is Israel's official memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and was established in 1953. The name comes from a Biblical verse: "And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (Yad Vashem) that shall not be cut off." The organization opened the first exhibition of Gershman's work in 2007, finally bringing faces to a story shrouded for 60 years behind the Iron Curtain. It's had subsequent international showings in South Africa, Italy, Turkey, the U.S. and Israel and at the UN



JMW PRODUCTIONS, LLC

JMW Productions, the Emmy-award winning film crew producing the movie *Besa: The Promise*, visit a synagogue in Vidin, Bulgaria. The story of Rexhep Hoxha, the main character in their film, appears on page 46. Here, he's the synagogue where he learned the man his father had sheltered was married in 1928.

and the European Union for the 60th anniversary of its founding declaration. Its newest international exhibit, specially designed for Canada, will be opening in Toronto in November and will see a 2011 date in the UK.

Yad Vashem, which on behalf of the State of Israel and the Jewish people, gave the official title Righteous Among the Nations to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust, has already documented 63 Albanians who saved Jews. Recently, with help from Mr. Gershman's Eye Contact Foundation, Yad Vashem awarded the Rezniqui family from Kosova the "Righteous Among the Nations" designation. (Mustafa Rezniqui was also co-founder of the Kosova-Israel Friendship Society with Xhangyle Ilijazi.)

Mr. Gershman has since found many more rescuers with help from Apostol Kotani and Petrit Zorba, both of the Albanian-Israel Friendship Association, as well as from the corresponding Israel-Kosova and Israel-Albania Friendship Societies and from Mordechai Paldiel, former head of Yad Vashem's division to honour righteous non-Jews.

But, as the war gets further and further away, time is running out. The Eye Contact Foundation and Yad Vashem are looking for people who were saved — or those who saved these fortunate Jews. Stories and photos are not enough. Corroboration

is needed to help honour those who have done so much and who expect nothing in return.

Mr. Gershman has also taken on a promise, his own besa. He believes that every story of heroism, anywhere in the world, even incomplete, may be a missing piece of an important puzzle. Wherever they are, people must be inspired in these troubled times to choose dialogue, goodness and trust. The Eye Contact Foundation's mandates are specifically to continue the recognition of those rescuers from this period, and to encourage young photographers to look for goodness in the world and to document it for future generations.

"During my travels in Albania, I met the children of rescuers, their widows and, occasionally, the elderly rescuers themselves," says Mr. Gershman, "people like the Hoti family, who sheltered a young Jewish girl named Rashela Lazar for almost a year, even though Germans occupied the lower floor of their home.

"(I met) people like the Veseli family, whose youngest brother, at 13, smuggled Rina Mandil and two Jewish families out of Tirana dressed like Muslim villagers, through a German checkpoint, and then walked with them for two days to the safety of their mountain village."

Photographing these rescuers in Albania was not easy. Mr. Gershman rarely saw

a lamp. Electricity and even water were rationed. "Yet the people always welcomed me with fruit, candy, their national drink of raki (distilled from fermented grapes and other fruits), and warmth. None spoke English and none sought any compensation. They wished only to honour their family tradition and to be remembered. In turn, I gave them unadorned portraits that, I believe, reflect their simple dignity, and I thanked my Muslim hosts on behalf of the Jewish people for what they had done during World War II."

No fewer than three separate travelling photographic exhibitions are on loan around the world in Holocaust memorial and education centres, galleries, museums, synagogues, churches, community buildings, universities and soon, Islamic centres.

In addition to Yad Vashem's on-line and worldwide travelling show, currently in Vancouver, Simon Fraser University's Teck Gallery and Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures are sponsoring The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion exhibit until October 29. The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre at the Jewish Community Centre houses the exhibit from Nov. 8, 2010 through May 27, 2011, creating educational programs for students, teachers and community groups. This exhibit normally only tours within the U.S.

A third exhibit, *Besa: Albanians Who Saved Jews During WWII*, is curated by the U.S. Embassy in Albania and primarily tours the Balkans. It is the most comprehensive as it includes all rescuers of Albanian descent from Albania and Kosova.

All three exhibits feature up to 70 compelling photos and stories that give a glimpse into the mettle of Albanians and why they chose — and as importantly, still choose — to exercise a moral honour to protect and shelter any "guest in need" in their home. The answer often heard by Mr. Gershman was that it was "not their house," in fact it was "God's House."

Shining the light of recognition on all acts of goodness anywhere in the world is the greatest gift and inspiration we can give to ourselves and others. Towards this goal, we have miles to go and promises to keep.

Randi Winter is a Vancouver-based travel writer. To contact photographer Norman H. Gershman, email [normgersh@sopris.net](mailto:normgersh@sopris.net) or see The Eye Contact Foundation at [www.eyecontactfoundation.org](http://www.eyecontactfoundation.org)

Norman H. Gershman:

# The photographer who documents heroes

By Randi Winter

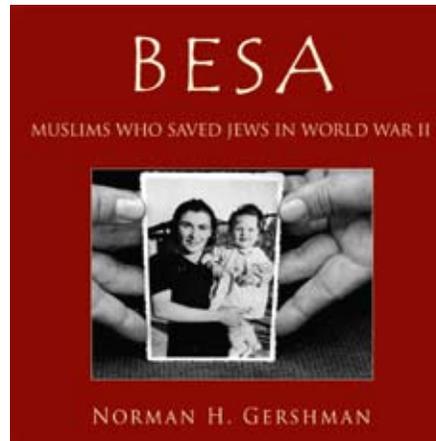
People are his passion. It was Norman H. Gershman's Wall Street headhunting skills (he founded Consultants Period, Ltd.) that gave him the patience to track down an almost unknown story in a country cut off from the rest of the world for 50 years.

But it was his passion for people that led him to the quest to find and document the stories of the Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust. He used Yad Vashem's archives as his reference and traveled to Albania and Kosova with Stuart Huck, a photographer based in Aspen, Colorado. Over a period of six years, they searched for, met and photographed Albanian rescuers or their descendants.

In his interviews, he always asked them why they had rescued Jews. Their response was besa, the code of honour deeply rooted in Albanian culture and incorporated in the faith of Albanian Muslims, who believe that every man is his brother's keeper. It exemplifies what is possible when humans act at their highest potential.

Mr. Gershman, at age 44, studied with some of the greatest portrait photographers of our time — Ansel Adams, Roman Vishniac, and Cornell Capa of the International Centre of Photography (to whom this book is dedicated). Even today, at age 78, Mr. Gershman continues to collect and deal in fine art photography. Travelling and documenting unique human conditions and stories is nothing new to him. His first project, commissioned in the 1980s by singer-songwriter John Denver, was to photograph concerts in the Soviet Union.

When he was researching his book, every story he heard from Albanian Muslims included a different description of how besa influenced their lives and actions. The mayor of Tirana told the Nazis: "We don't know any Jews, we only know Albanians." They gave the Jews documentation with Muslim names and opened their



**MANY JEWS PASSED THROUGH ALBANIA, INCLUDING ALBERT EINSTEIN. IF YOU ASK THEM, ANY ALBANIAN WOULD HAVE DONE THE SAME. THEY WERE SIMPLY KEEPING THEIR PROMISE.**

homes to them.

People fought for the privilege of saving a Jew, not killing one. Albania's King Zog personally issued more than 400 visas. Among the people he rescued were 13-year-old Fritzi Weitzman and her family of 11, from Vienna. He helped them to re-establish the family's photography business in Albania, and rescued one of their relatives from a concentration camp.

Years later, King Zog, in exile, found out that the Ostereichers, Austrian court jewelers whom he had rescued, were alive but destitute in England. He promptly returned the crown jewels he had commissioned from them, to give this family an opportunity to rebuild their lives.

"There was no government conspiracy, no underground railroad, no organized resistance — only individual Albanians acting to save lives," says Mr. Gershman. "My portraits and their stories are meant to reflect their humanity, their dignity, their religious and moral convictions, and their quiet courage."

The book is a tribute to the courageous people whose remarkable, humble actions resulted in 10 times more Jews living in Albania after the war. Many Jews passed through Albania including, as Prince Leka, King Zog's grandson, reminded me, Albert Einstein. If you ask them, any Albanian would have done the same. They were simply keeping their promise.

Albanians say: "If there is a knock on the door, take responsibility because every knock on the door is a blessing from God." A guest's safety and honour become the responsibility of the extended family. To allow harm or insult is the deepest disgrace. A guest, protected by besa, is shielded by an invisible army.

Mr. Gershman often heard these words: "To do good is to get good from God" and "Everybody knew; nobody told."

He called the portraits and profiles "bittersweet — so many more stories, so many more heroic people."

He continued: "I don't know the end to this story. I only know that there are wonderful people in the world. I choose to look at (them) and honour them, as opposed to chronicling war. This is visceral in me, important to me and I hope it is important to the rest of the world to know that there are so many good people in the world, regardless of religion."

"I believe in the goodness of people."

*Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews During WWII*, by Norman H. Gershman, was published by Syracuse Press in 2008. It is available online [www.amazon.ca](http://www.amazon.ca), [www.eyeccontactfoundation.org](http://www.eyeccontactfoundation.org) and at bookstores.