

BESA: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II

Photographs by Norman H. Gershman

The photographs in this exhibition curated by Laura Kruger and toured by the Hebrew Union College in New York City were taken by Norman H. Gershman, a photographer originally from the east coast who is currently based in Colorado. His photographs are not simply portraits, but more importantly, portraits with an extraordinary story to tell. Gershman spent time over a five-year period in Albania and neighbouring Kosovo seeking out rescuers, their descendants and those with knowledge of people who, at great risk to themselves, protected Jews from the Nazis during the Second World War. The photographs in the exhibition, and their stories, are a sampling of the results of that research, undertaken in the ever-difficult terrain of the relations between memory, history and actual events in the past.

The concept of Besa is key to understanding the story told by the photographs, the story of how virtually all the Jews living in Albania survived the war. Besa is an ancient principle that is held to be sacrosanct by Albanians; it refers both to one's word of honour, which must be kept, whatever the situation, as well as to a second principle of giving refuge to those in need. In Albania it was practiced by people of all faiths and persuasions. Jews and others were saved in more or less mathematical proportion to the make-up of the population; i.e., 70% of the Jews saved were protected by Muslims, who made up 70% of the population. Besa, is an Albanian principle, a way of life not tied to any specific religious group. The title of this exhibition is taken from Gershman's book; another larger touring exhibit is titled *Albanians Who Saved Jews*. The book of the exhibition is published by Syracuse University Press and is available at the SFU Bookstore.

The concept of Besa seems increasingly important in our ever-more-fractured world. Even if it cannot solve all the world's problems, it certainly needs to be more widely known; presumably it would be had Albania not cut itself off from almost all international contact until the fall of Communism in 1989. The effect Besa has on people can be profound; Gershman certainly was moved to undertake a lengthy, complex project based on hearing about these stories. The key to Besa's meaning lies not just in its practical effects, but also in the fact that the very idea of it, its existence as a model, can change the tone of a community, and so easily form a basis for tolerance of others, especially for others who are not like oneself.

The people pictured in Gershman's photographs range from those who were young men, women or children during the Second World War, such as King Leka (who was born in 1939), or their spouses and direct descendants. The photographs also capture the material record in addition to the personal; the photograph of Toli Dodi shows him at a table made by a Jew who was protected by his family in 1943 (Josef Abraham Adyzss) and whom Dodi was able to locate and contact (in Jerusalem) after 1989. They tell their family stories here, as oral histories extended by background documentation, and brought into the present by Gershman's photographs. Accounts of this period vary and it may be impossible

to pin down accurate numbers, but these personal stories are consistent with the overall history of the region during the war. The Jews of Albania did not all escape the Nazis – a very small number originally from Albania, and several hundred who were refugees in Albania and Kosovo, did die in concentration camps as a result of Nazi round-ups. The numbers are somewhat disputed, with historians disagreeing about what actually happened; so, while Albanians saved many Jews (an estimated 2000), many of whom were refugees from other countries, round-ups and deportations did occur.

Besa was not the only principle operating at that time; interviewees cite 'being a Muslim' as a reason to behave as they did, as well, in some cases, of a mutual regard for 'giving shelter to fellow royalists.' Whether those who helped like-minded royalists would have acted differently with anti-royalists is not clear, but presumably the principle of Besa would have overruled all other affiliations. It is the strength and depth of the commitment that makes the story of Besa so compelling; in one case (the family of Qani Civeja) Gershman was told that "along with our Jewish guests we moved into the nearby mountain village of Kamcisht ... we told them 'wherever you go we will go.'" At another level these extraordinary undertakings can be made to seem completely normal: Higmete Zyma said to Gershman "Why hide a Jew? We just did it. It was the thing to do."

Variations of the concept of Besa exist in many cultures and in many religions; indeed if the broad versions of caring for others did not exist, life on our planet would be harsher than it already is. Besa is special because it sums up the entire idea of kindness to others in one word, and through Gershman's stories it makes the principles behind it come to life. It is also worth noting that those who were so generous during the war were not necessarily rewarded. Many of the stories told to Gershman emphasize that post-war hardships. Xhuliana Pogu's tale, for example, is extraordinary because after doing so much for so many, she and her husband, who were wealthy, lost everything they owned to the Communists. Her husband spent three years in a labour camp and died in 1957; Xhuliana was still alive to be photographed by Gershman in the early 21st century.

For the past decade I have been astounded at the way cinema and photography can now easily interact as a result of the 'pause' function on DVD players; any cinematic pause may now frame a fantastic photograph. This exhibition sets up the opposite scenario: each portrait, with its story, could be a movie, and that film, *God's House*, is in post-production at this time.

Thanks are owed to many people who have assisted on this project, which is co-sponsored by the Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures at SFU and the SFU Gallery. Randi Winter first brought the show to my attention; without her passion the show would probably never have come to Vancouver.

Bill Jeffries, Director, SFU Gallery

The exhibition's curator, Laura Kruger, will present a talk on the show here in the Gallery at 7pm on October 5th. Other events will be posted on the Gallery's website as they are booked.

For more information on Norman H. Gershman's projects see: www.eyeccontactfoundation.org

The exhibition continues here until October 29; it then transfers to the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre at 950 West 41st Avenue until May 31, 2011.