

United Nations inspires visitors with "Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust" Exhibit

By Randi Winter / The Eye Contact Foundation

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United Nations Hosts The Eye Contact Foundation's Exhibition of Norman Gershman's "Besa: A Code of Honor. Albanian Muslims Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust" curated by Yad Vashem as part of the world holocaust remembrance ceremonies.

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UNITED NATIONS TO HOST THE EYE CONTACT FOUNDATION'S EXHIBITION OF NORMAN GERSHMAN'S "BESA A CODE OF HONOR ALBANIAN MUSLIMS WHO SAVED JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST" CURATED BY YAD VASHEM AS PART OF WORLD HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE CEREMONIES

Basalt, Colorado How many countries' principles are aligned between what they preach and what they practice? Few would guess the irony of these answers would develop from a little known secret hidden behind the shroud of the iron curtain for over fifty years and from a most unlikely source.

A show of photographs by Norman Gershman, depicting Albanian Muslims who rescued Jews during World War II opens at the United Nations Visitor's Lobby in New York City the evening of January 29, 2008, and runs until early March. <http://www.un.org/holocaustremembrance/remembranceday08.shtml>

This is the first travelling exhibition sponsored by Yad Vashem, the Museum of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, which has United Nations NGO status. It first opened November 1, 2007 at Yad Vashem in Israel. The subjects are Albanian Muslim families who have been designated as Righteous Among Nations by Yad Vashem. Each photograph is accompanied by a defining quote and insight from Gershman's visits with each family telling their story.

http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_yad/what_new/gershman/temp_index_whats_new_Gershman.html

Albania, an Atheist country, and one of the poorest, is the only Nazi occupied country that sheltered all the Jews within their borders and actively accepted all who came from other countries. Albania's population mix is 70% Muslim, 20% Orthodox and 10% Catholic. Albanians take great pride in their religious tolerance. They credit three things as the source of their good deeds, the Albanian tradition of Besa, the Kanun, a codified body of laws and the Koran. The power of besa is epitomized in the spirit of Albania's Mother Teresa.

Norman Gershman traveled extensively through the fledgling democracy of Albania for more than 4 years, searching for families who opened their doors to strangers in desperate times, and what he found was a culture dedicated to helping those in dire need. Yet, saving Jewish families and others from almost certain death, to them was an integral part of their daily life. "Any Albanian would do this," they would say. He found that to be true. While Yad Vashem has designated some thirty Albanian families (63 people) as Righteous Among Nations, Gershman has already found evidence of over 150 families who sheltered Jews during the Nazi occupation, with many more accounts to be corroborated. Records from Albania now show over 2000 lives were saved.

Five years ago, Gershman, who is Jewish, and has studied the Sufi tradition of Islam, traveled to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem to gather information on the Righteous who are getting older, and little known about them after their original recognition. Mordicai Paldial, then director of the Righteous Program at Yad Vashem, opened his records for Gershman and piqued his interest in this small group from Albania and Kosovo, Muslims Who Saved Jews. The Israeli – Albanian Friendship Association, founded by Jews rescued in Albania guided him to The Albanian – Israeli Friendship Association who became his hosts and living experience of the principles of Besa during his travels. Led by Professor Petrit Zorba, and using the documentation and personal experiences of Professor Apostol Kotani, a noted scholar and partisan during the war, Gershman has been able to visit and photograph over seventy Albanian families who rescued Jews during World War II. Mustafa Reznqi founder of the Kosovo-Israel Friendship society and one of the first Kosovars actively being considered by Yad Vashem for Righteous status will be in attendance at opening night at the UN as well as others who have either saved or been saved.

The UN show, sponsored by Yad Vashem shows Muslim families that have been designated as Righteous Among Nations. This designation only comes about when initiated by a saved Jew, and indisputable proof of rescue is presented. As Albania came under a strict and repressive communist dictatorship immediately after the war, which continued for over 50 years, contact between rescuer and rescued was almost impossible. There are many stories Gershman collected that end with "...and then all contact was lost. We never heard from them again." Followed by, "please help us find them so we can return items they left in our trust".

A more extensive show of the project and their stories (many of the 40 profiles came to light in the course of Gershman's research and not all designated as Righteous by Yad Vashem at this time) will open at Hebrew Union College in New York in February of 2008, with a special opening February 28, 2008 and will be exhibited for approximately 6 months. On April 14th, the 92nd Street Y will host Gershman and Jason Williams of JWM Productions, the producer of the upcoming film, "God's House", scheduled to be released in 2009, based on the work done by Gershman and The Eye Contact Foundation. A book about the project is nearing completion and will be published in 2008 by Syracuse University Press. A preview from the movie will be shown at the opening ceremonies and is available online at <http://www.eycontactfoundation.org>.

Gershman was assisted by photographer Stuart Huck. Both trained in the Ansel Adams tradition of fine photography. Huck concentrated on the technical end while Gershman concentrated on creative portraiture. Huck crafted a 25 minute movie about the project, utilizing only the still photographs they made in Albania. Steve Kaufman, a videographer and television producer, also based in Basalt, recorded an interview with Gershman (Gershman, Huck and Kaufman are the principals of The Eye Contact Foundation.) When Gershman heard the story of the Weitzman family being rescued by King Zog from her daughter who lives in Aspen, he flew to New York to interview and photograph Fritzzy Owen (nee Weitzman), who, as a young girl lived for 2 years sheltered under the umbrella of Besa. Elan Bogarin of JWM Productions videoed that interview. Those three video pieces and the film introduction will be show at The 92nd Street Y. All of

these videos, photographs and more information are available on the Eye Contact Foundation website, <http://www.eycontactfoundation.org> .

These exhibitions, which are designed to travel the world, were shot in black and white, fittingly chosen as each of the subjects and their families understood that when it comes to saving a life, there can be no shades of grey.

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About The Eye Contact Foundation: Our Mission is to use art as the primary form of expression, in geographic areas of instability, in order to break down stereotypes and build upon the deep roots of humanism that cross racial, ethnic, religious and national boundaries.

We want to foster and inspire other photographers to continue this project and to use their hearts and camera to make eye contact and find the goodness in the world one soul a a time.

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