

BESA: Albanian Muslims Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust

Located in the Balkan region of southeastern Europe, Albania is about the size of Maryland.

Albania has a population of less than three million people.

Albania is 70% Muslim, making it the only European country with a Muslim majority.

Of all the countries occupied by Germany during World War II, Albania was the only one to have a higher Jewish population after the war than before. The number of Jews increased from about 200 to 2,000. Albanians, from craftsmen and farmers to political and religious leaders, saw it as their responsibility to protect Jewish citizens and refugees.

Albanian rescuers attribute their integrity to *besa*, a traditional Albanian moral code that entails risking one's life to help *anyone* in need. Each portrait by Norman Gershman shows Albanian Muslim individuals and families who abided by *besa* and risked their own lives to protect Jews.

Albanians developed *besa* via their interpretation of Islam. Meaning "to keep the promise," *besa* is integral to Albanian life and to the events of Albanian Muslims saving Jews during the Holocaust.

Albania was under Communist rule from 1946 to 1976, when all religious practice was banned and the nation was declared atheist. The government promoted self-sufficiency by limiting trade and international relations, which effectively cut Albania off from the

globalizing world for nearly 50 years.

Famous people of Albanian heritage include missionary and humanitarian Mother Teresa, and comedians Jim and John Belushi.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?

What do the topics narrated throughout this exhibition reveal about religion and ethics?

In different situations, religion can inspire harmony among people as well as discord. Which is more prevalent in your experience? Why might other people's experiences be different?

Through portrait photography, what does Gershman reveal about his subjects?

In Albania today, all religions are legal, and the Jewish population is estimated at 160. Lonely Planet, the world's largest travel guide company, ranked Albania first on its 2011 top ten list of travel destinations in the world.

The communist government essentially limited the arts in Albania to political propaganda. Since 1992, however, artists have made efforts to establish an arts scene independent from politics. Notable contemporary Albanian artists include Stefan Capaliku and Adrian Paci. The Albanian University of Arts was founded in 1966, and the Tirana Institute for Contemporary Art was founded in 2006.

BESA is sponsored by the American Jewish Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, the Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Area Jewish Committee.

Community Partners include: Classrooms Without Borders, Congregation Dor Hadash, J-SITE, Light of the Age Mosque, Muslim Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, Muslim-Jewish Discussion Group, National Catholic Center for Holocaust Education, SFH Islamic Interfaith Network and Turkish Cultural Center Pittsburgh.

PAGE

PAGE 1