

Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh
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Images available by request

BESA: Albanian Muslims Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust

AMERICAN JEWISH MUSEUM OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER OF
GREATER PITTSBURGH • OCTOBER 3–DECEMBER 30, 2011

Opening Reception • October 3 at 7 p.m

Reception sponsored by Bernard & Marsha Marcus

The American Jewish Museum (AJM) of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, the Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Area Jewish Committee collectively present the exhibition *BESA: Albanian Muslims Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust*, on display at the AJM from October 3 to December 30, 2011.

Stuart Huck, photographer and *Besa* project associate, will speak at the opening reception on Monday, October 3. In addition to Huck's presentation, Jewish and Muslim teens will be available during the reception to present information about customs, attire, foods and symbols shared by Jews and Muslims. The reception is free and open to the public. Space for evening prayer will be available

Mr. Gershman and Huck spent over six years in Albania documenting the stories of Albanian Muslims who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Forty-one black and white portraits, accompanied by personal narratives, reveal insight to the Albanian Muslims' unique integrity grounded in a moral code called *besa*.

Besa is an Albanian moral code that means "to keep the promise." Abiding by *besa* entails helping anyone in need, even at the risk of one's own life. Albanians, therefore, saw protecting Jews during the Holocaust not as an act of heroism but as an ethical responsibility. Albanians, ranging from politicians and religious leaders to tradesmen and farmers, sheltered, fed, and provided illegal documents for Jewish citizens and refugees alike.

Occupied by Germany from 1943 to 1944, Albania was the only occupied country to have a larger Jewish population after World War II than before. The Jewish population increased from about 200 to an estimated 1,800.

The Albanians' success of rescuing Jews during the Holocaust is not well known. From 1946 to 1992, Albania's Communist government effectively cut the country off from the globalizing world. Many of the rescuers were unable to maintain communication with the people whom they welcomed into their homes and risked their lives to save.

The events narrated in this exhibition represent a momentous achievement of cohesion between Jews and Muslims, and demonstrate that global understanding and compassion among people of different races and ethnicities are achievable ideals. 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 share this little known historical event to illustrate that religious, social, and political differences can be overcome, even under extreme circumstances like those of the Holocaust.

Underscoring the importance of promoting understanding among people of different backgrounds, J-SITE, the AJM and PAJC will also be hosting a discussion surrounding exhibition topics led by Jewish and Muslim teens for teen audiences on November 2nd from 6:30-8:30 pm at the AJM. For more information about this event, contact Melissa Hiller, AJM Director at 412.521.8011 x105.

Exhibits at the American Jewish Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, a non-collecting contemporary Jewish art museum, explore contemporary art in as wide a scope as possible and facilitate dialogue about Jewish art, philosophy, and culture. The Holocaust Center of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh is devoted to heightening public awareness of the Holocaust through educational and commemorative programs and exhibitions. The Pittsburgh Area Jewish Committee strives for a pluralistic society in which the rights and dignity of the Jewish community, as well as all other religious, cultural, and racial communities, are respected and secure.

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.

Major funding for the American Jewish Museum is provided by the Allegheny Regional Asset Board, the Anna L. Caplan & Irene V. Caplan Fund of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, the Robert C. and Gene B. Dickman Fund, the Nancy Bernstein and Robert Schoen Fund, the Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts, and individual support. Exhibition funding for the Holocaust Center is provided by the Holocaust Center Endowment Fund.

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