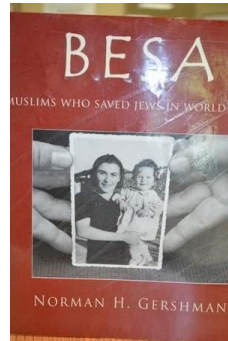


***South Brunswick Public Library photo exhibition sheds light on Muslims who saved Jews during Holocaust***

Written by Michelle H. Daino For the Home News Tribune May 21

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Thirty-one images of Albanian-Muslim families who saved and provided a safe haven for Jews during the Holocaust have been gripping the attention of visitors to the South Brunswick Public Library during an eye-opening program, “BESA: Muslims Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust.”

Staged until the end of the month and open to the public, the photographs by Norman Gershman are being exhibited courtesy of the Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom (a group of Muslim and Jewish women) and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum. The photography show followed an invitation-only screening of the award-winning documentary, “Besa: The Promise,” which is the foundation of the exhibit. Although Besa has been shown around the world to sold-out crowds and has taken first place at numerous film festivals, this was the first time the film was shown and sponsored by a collaborative group of Muslims and Jews.

From 1943 to 1945, it is believed that roughly 150 Muslim families helped rescue Jews, with the people of Greater Albania saving between 2,000 and 3,000 Jews. The Muslim religious belief in Besa — honor — is the basis for these righteous deeds of valor. To this day, Besa is considered the highest moral law of the region. This photography exhibition, which is the result of a five-year project involving the photographing and collecting of personal stories not previously told, has been shown at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Israel, as well as the United Nations in New York City as part of a worldwide tour. Syracuse University Press published a companion book to the exhibition.

**Man behind the images**

“When I first learned of the World War II rescue of the Jews in Muslim Albania and Kosovo, my reaction was visceral,” Gershman said. “There is a perverse paranoia swarming through West regarding Muslims. My work in photographing righteous Muslims saving Jews during World War II is an unknown story in which the Western world should know. “This exhibit is the result of a 10-year project involving the photographing and collecting personal stories of the Albanians who sheltered Jews during World War II. This exhibit has been shown in 150 venues from Knesset Israel, Strasburg, UN, Tirana and many other places in United States and Europe.”

With regard to Besa and what visitors to his exhibition may learn, Gershman believes that honoring the faiths of others is what all are called to do. “To love one brother or sister of different faiths is to be with the divine,” he said. Gershman, who is primarily an environmental portrait photographer, has been represented in many museums throughout the world. “I am known as a humanistic photographer,” he said, adding that he has been a well-known collector and dealer in fine art and 20th-century photography. “I have been a series photographer for over 50 years and in my early years studied with great photographers such as Ansel Adams, Eugene Smith and many more. “Photography and portrait photography, in particular, have been and continues to be my passion.”

## **Right platform for peace**

Christopher Carbone, the director of the South Brunswick Public Library, was approached by the Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom early last year about staging the exhibition. “The exhibit was of interest because it meshes well with the library’s efforts to provide lifelong learning opportunities and to promote and celebrate cultural awareness,” he said. “It is a story that is not well known and we felt would be of interest to many in South Brunswick’s diverse community.

Atiya Aftab, co-founder of The Sisterhood of Salaam/Shalom, read an article about Gershman’s photographs and sent it to the organization’s other founder, Sheryl Olitzky. “Within 24 hours, I was on the phone with Norman and had a commitment to exhibit the photographs and screen the documentary,” Olitzky said. “Norman was a partner to us in the whole process from the first phone call. We have developed a friendship and I am committed to doing whatever I can to expose as many people as possible to both the exhibit and the documentary film.”

“The feedback from the exhibit has been tremendously positive,” Carbone said. “A number of patrons have thanked us for hosting the exhibit and offering the opportunity to view it.” “Very few, if any, knew of this incredible story of Muslims saving Jewish lives before they came to view the exhibit and see the film,” Olitzky said. “It was wonderful to see between 150 to 200 people, of which the majority were Muslim or Jewish, meeting with each other for the first time, viewing the exhibit together and crying together watching the documentary. “We received so many calls and notes of thanks from the participants with mentions of how this has impacted on their views. That is what it is all about.”

## **Spreading peace, changing perceptions**

Olitzky and Aftab are proud that the message of peace between two groups of different faiths has come to the forefront. “Our goal is to rid the world of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish sentiment,” she said. “We want to make this world a better place for our children and grandchildren. We need people to understand that both faiths follow the shared principle of he/she that saves a life, it is as if they save the world. By focusing on our shared commonalities, instead of our differences, we can build strong relationships and help to rid the world of hate.” “The timing of this exhibit is critical. We have seen an increase in negative feelings towards Muslims that has spread since the horrific Boston bombings. It is our hope that this exhibit will help to remove negative perceptions.”

Carbone agreed. “The story is compelling and not well known,” he said. “It shows the greater good of humanity and promotes tolerance and people helping one another. It is a message that is always timely and topical and can hopefully inspire others to do good deeds.”

Olitzky and Aftab hope the library exhibition will help to discourage stereotypes and hostility between Jews and Muslims. “That is the goal,” Olitzky said. “If more countries in Europe would have been like the people in Albania, which was predominantly Muslim, we would not have lost 6 million Jews and another 5 million people whom the Nazis viewed as unacceptable. “One of the world’s worst atrocities, the Holocaust, would have been even worse had it not been for a country full of Muslims who saved the Jews. And, they did this without taking money and without force. It was the right thing to do and they sacrificed their own life and their physical comforts to do this.”

Aftab added, “There are so many chapters in our world history where Jews and Muslims have worked together, lived together and flourished. Besa is one example. We hope to bring more of these stories to light and to live this history with our friendships.”



More than 150 people attended the unveiling of an exhibit about Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust and the invitation-only screening. The exhibit can be seen at the South Brunswick Public Library. / Photo by Amar Bukhari