

BOOK REVIEW

Gershman, Norman H.. 2008. *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II*. Syracuse University Press. (Hard cover) 121 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0815609346, US\$ 39.95.

This photographic book by Norman H. Gershman recounts the stories of 65 Albanian families who saved over a hundred Jews during the Holocaust. The book is organized as a series of personal stories of Albanian family members that saved Jewish families accompanied by poignant black and white portraits of the families. The author travelled at various times to Albania and Kosovo to meet and photograph the descendents of these families. Italy and Germany occupied Albania and Kosovo during World War II, and the Nazis tried to capture Jews and send them to concentration camps. In this context of occupation, courageous everyday people in the poorest European region provided safe haven to persecuted Jewish families. Almost all of the 156 native Jews and hundreds of non-native refugees survived World War II in Albania. Their stories and the accompanying photographs are a deeply moving reminder of the great lengths people will go to aid others.

What makes this book timely is the question of why Muslims, who are often portrayed as arch enemies of the Jews, would risk the lives of their own families to save those who were persecuted. The creation of the state of Israel after Nazi Germans killed approximately six million Jews in World War II fostered an ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. In more recent times, the September 11th terrorist attacks by an extremist Islamic association created the perception in the United States that Islam somehow promoted violence. Scholars like Samuel Huntington spread the theory that the clashes between religious groups will dominate the post-Cold War period. Alternatively, in Albania, a group of historians,

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intellectuals and journalists are using the survival of Jews in Albania as a celebration of the righteousness of the Albanian nation. So, why did almost all of the Jews in this region survive during World War II?

According to Gershman, Albanian Muslims saved the Jewish families according to their own conscience, following traditional beliefs of Besa and Islam. An Albanian code of honor, Besa compels the host to be hospitable to the guest as part of his duty. Gershman then argues that Besa was connected to the Islamic duties of helping the needy and honoring fellow people of The Book, including Jews. Hence, Albanian Muslims had an inherent belief system that obliged them to save these outsiders.

Despite the appeal of this message, the author's argument is flawed. Gershman assumes that cultural beliefs do not change over time, and therefore both Besa and Islamic values seem static in this book. An emerging consensus in social science is that culture is not an essential and timeless set of values, but is embodied in shifting and contested beliefs. Social norms are more likely to shift in wartime, as neighbors may denounce or fight each other.

Even if we assume that Besa and Islamic beliefs do not change over time, the argument does not have logical consistency. If Besa was the main source of motivation for these Albanian Muslims, the religious argument is undermined. The Albanian family members give diverse responses as to why they protected the Jews, and it is hard to disaggregate their religious motivation from Besa or a general sense of duty towards others. Some families explain that they saved the Jews for religious reasons, but more claim that they acted exclusively because of Besa. A few individuals attribute their actions to both Besa and religious beliefs that compelled them to open their meager homes to these people in danger. From a historical perspective, Besa is a code of honor that predates the Ottoman conversion of Christians into Muslims in Albanian territories. Besa is part of the Canon of Lek Dukagjini, a customary body of law that regulated social relations in Albanian highlands before the formation of the Albanian state in the Twentieth Century. In the book, secularized Muslims and religious Muslims both claimed to have saved Jews in accordance with Besa principles. Indeed, both Christians and Muslims in Albania presumably shared Besa as part of their cultural beliefs. Therefore, even if we assume that people acted upon their timeless beliefs, Islamic beliefs were overall less compelling than the shared commitment to Besa.

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By focusing mainly on individuals' motivations, the book also does not address the broader political context of the Albanian occupation during World War II. Scholars do not know whether the Italians or Germans had a policy to punish Albanians for protecting Jews, nor whether any policy was implemented extensively on the ground. In the book itself, we hear that some Jews felt safe enough to walk in the streets of Tirana, Albania. Also, it is unclear whether Albanians who saved Jews were aware of the Final Solution—the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews in Europe (Perez 2010). Instead, Gershman portrays a high risk for the Albanian families who harbored Jews and a definitive awareness of the genocide, both of which may not have existed.

The question of why some Albanians saved Jews while others handed them to the Nazis is also overlooked. The author assumes that all the Jews in Albania and Kosovo were saved, and he only interviewed the descendents of the Albanian rescuers. Further research should be done to explain why some collaborators in Kosovo handed Jews over to the Nazis. Occupying Italy united Albania and Kosovo during World War II even though Kosovo had been part of Serbia and then Yugoslavia since 1918. There are no stories in the book about Jews who were not saved. In one story, we hear that the Jewish family had escaped from some Albanian collaborators. The family of Hysni Domi (pg. 114) also refers to the family of David Levy that was later captured by the Nazis. In 1944, Albanian Nazi collaborators in the Northern Kosovo district of Mitrovica arrested 281 Jews and sent them to the German army; these Jews were later killed in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The Nazis also killed 210 of the 551 Jews living in Kosovo before World War II (Elsie 2004: 86-87). In other words, not all Albanians who had the opportunity saved Jews. The book's essentialist argument that Albanians saved Jews because of their inherent beliefs is therefore unfounded.

Albanian saviors as well as collaborators presumably shared the same cultural and religious beliefs in Islam and Besa. Why then did some Albanians collaborate with the Nazis during WWII? Albanian historians and intellectuals need to tackle this question before assuming the intrinsic righteousness of their nation. One possibility is that some Kosovo Albanians may have collaborated with the Nazis in order to guarantee their political support against future Yugoslav-Serb rule (Perez 2010). Thus

strategic interest must also be examined as a motivational factor for Albanians who either saved or surrendered Jews during World War II.

Gershman's book raises interesting questions that should be explored empirically. Research should address the extent to which the local government mattered in issuing orders to protect or hunt these Jews. At the individual level, the role of peer pressure in explaining why some Jews were saved should also be explored. Sometimes the saviors claimed that when the whole village knew about the Jews in their homes, the community ostracized Nazi collaborators. Others claimed that nobody knew about the Jews they protected, and they feared that Nazi collaborators would denounce them. These mixed perspectives highlight the need for a more nuanced analysis of these historical events and a rejection of essentialist justifications.

Overall, however, this book does provide a timely message. The thesis that Muslim people are inherently in conflict with Jews or Christians is unfounded since it does not explain the cooperation between the different religious groups and the diversity within each tradition. This book provides evidence for both the cooperation between Muslim and Jewish families as well the diversity within the Islamic faith. The Albanian Muslim families interviewed in the book were Bektashi (a Shia group), Sunni, and secular. While the book's main argument is flawed, it opens important avenues for further research investigating the broader political and cultural conditions under which peace-building occurs.

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References

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