

The Muslim Observer

Celebrating BESA: Muslims Who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust

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By Brenda Naomi Rosenberg and Samia Mustafa Bahsoun—a Jew and an Arab Muslim – partners in building a new future



Brenda Naomi Rosenberg (l) and Samia Mustafa Bahsoun (r)

We are two women from radically different professions, backgrounds, cultures, ideologies and beliefs who share a passion to bring our opposing communities together. When Stephen Goldman, executive director of the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in Farmington Hills called to say he secured the BESA exhibition from Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Memorial Center) in Jerusalem, we were elated! So few people in either of our communities know the story of BESA – Muslim Albanians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. “BESA literally means to keep the promise. A code of honor. One who acts according to BESA is someone who keeps his word, someone to whom one can trust one’s life and the lives of one’s family. The help afforded to the Jews and non Jews alike should be understood as a matter of national honor. The Albanians went out of their way to provide assistance, moreover they competed with each other for the privilege of saving Jews. These acts originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even those of another faith or origin. Albania, the only European country with a Muslim majority, succeeded in the place where other European nations failed. Almost all Jews living within Albanian borders during the German occupation, those of Albanian origin and refugees alike, were saved, except members

of a single family. Impressively, there were more Jews in Albania at the end of the war than beforehand.”

BESA resonated with us. It mirrored one of the guiding principles of our Tectonic Leadership model – being committed to care equally about self and other. We began to think of ways it could be an effective tool to bring our communities together. Divine timing rang Brenda’s phone. She received a call from Sheryl Olitzky who lives in New Jersey. Sheryl had just finished reading *Friendship and Faith: the WISDOM of women creating alliances for peace*, the book Brenda inspired, and wrote with 29 women from WISDOM’S a women’s interfaith group. Sheryl was starting Sisterhood of Shalom Salaam, an organization to bring Jewish and Muslim women together and wanted Brenda’s insights. You can imagine Brenda’s delight and surprise when Sheryl shared she was presenting the BESA documentary at Rutgers with Norman Gershman, the photographer and writer of the BESA book, and Majlinda Myrto, one of the most renowned and important leaders of the Albanian-American community in United States.

We began emailing and talking with Norman and Majlinda. We learned Majlinda was born in Albania and has lived in the United States since 1993. She holds a Master Degree in Public Affairs (receiving the distinction award for “Recognition and Awareness of Human Rights”), and an MA in Political Science. She is the Director of the “Eye Contact Foundation” an organization that promotes religious, political, cultural and economic understanding and tolerance among people worldwide. Part of her work is dedicated to establishing school curricula for teaching tolerance through BESA as manifested in the saving of Jews by Muslim Families. Majlinda’s in laws Shyqyri and his *Celebrating BESA: Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust* by Brenda Naomi Rosenberg and Samia Mustafa Bahsoun a Jew and an Arab Muslim – partners in building a new future parents Abdullah and Lje Myrto are honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among Nations. And we learned that “Norman Gershman spent four years photographing Muslim families who saved Jews during the Holocaust, converging between two seemingly opposed worlds.” His photographs are to be found in a variety of public collections, including the International Center of Photography, New York; the Brooklyn Museum; the Aspen Museum of Art and a number of galleries in Russia”

The four of us met last fall in New York City. We saw how the BESA exhibition and our TECTONIC LEADERSHIP model can work together to engage our communities. And we saw the power and the necessity of pairing. Their relationship is based on positive inter dependency just like ours. On March 9th we are co sponsoring with the Holocaust Memorial Center, the ADL, AJC Detroit, WISDOM, and VOICE VISION the BESA exhibition and we are presenting our Tectonic Leadership model for systemic change.

Join us and hear our story of how we chose to use the tension that once separated us to cement our relationship, seal our friendship, and develop a model for creating the next

generation of leaders. Learn how our Tectonic Leadership model pairs leaders from across divides to face challenges together and find solutions that benefit both communities by building social and business enterprises and creating policies together.

At the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus 28123 Orchard Lake Road Farmington Hills MI: BESA- a code of honor Muslim Albanians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust

The photographic exhibition: on view February 13th – May 11th ADMISSION: free with museum admission

TECTONIC LEADERSHIP A road map to systemic change. Presentation and round table discussion on March 9th from 3 pm to 5 pm. Discover how you can use Tectonic Leadership to transform conflict in your personal life, on campus, in the work place and in your community Admission: free – Light refreshments at Roundtable Discussion.

DOCUMENTARY FILM: BESA – THE PROMISE: showing: Thursday, April 3 at 7:00 p.m. Admission: Free with museum admission