

THE ALBANIAN BESA - THE GOLDEN RULE

FAITH REVELATION

There has been an 80-year-old citation for Albania as constituting 70% Moslem, 20% Eastern Orthodox and 10% Roman Catholic. That religious distribution is nowadays still cited outside Albania. Though such a record is uncertain for its period, it is entirely outdated and incorrect. Albanians do not care for such a "religious distribution" because the religious beliefs are personal, and the Albanian nationhood is above anything private. The confirmation comes from the Parragon Encyclopaedia of World Facts 2002, exposing that about 3/4 of the Albanian population is not religious. The census in Albania in 2012 affirmed that too. Seen in its entirety, the Albanian harmony between believers and non-believers is a sacred Albanian value and one of the nationhood pillars.

Amongst Albanians, Islam does not have any ethnic base, and they belonged to the Christian spiritual domain before centuries-long subjection to the Ottoman occupation. For Albanians, Islam was the religious endowment of the callous Ottoman invaders. The sword of such occupiers that cut off heads and inhumanly took the very young boys away from their families to make Janissaries did not educate love, hospitality, harmony, tolerance, or Besa. It taught only brutality and suppression to the very edge of existence. The Ottoman Empire suppressed Albanians cruelly and their national education and culture. During the Ottoman occupation, the mainstream of Albanian uprisings came from Albanians with Muslim names. From a religious viewpoint, most Muslim Albanians were and are Bektashi, the most liberal form of Islam. In the 19th century, the Albanian Renaissance leaders were of different faith backgrounds and locations. They knew that Albanian's religion was Albanianism, and using this and Besa, they united and enlightened Albanians.

Even before 170 years ago, group conversions to the Muslim side occurred. That typically took place by name change only and for national endurance in the face of Ottoman occupiers and all-time enmity [even today] from neighbors implemented under their Eastern churches' flags. A similar situation appeared after 1990 for many Albanian immigrants who found it obligatory to change their names for working in Greece. From a religious viewpoint, Albanians are liberal, and this gets also affirmed by frequent jumps from one shoreline to another.

An example comes from a picture fixed by the Besa Exhibition <http://ifyokoye.com/2008/12/28/besa-muslims-that-sheltered-jews-in-wwii/>. Here, an old Albanian woman, a savior of Jews, with a book of Koran (pretty sure she cannot read its Arabic language) and with a glass of Raki (a stiff alcoholic drink) on the other hand.

The social behavior towards the complete rescue of Jews during the holocaust and similar cases did not come from religious pulses. All Albanian religious domains acted and cooperated to save Jews, and the rescuers were from the whole population. It mirrors 23'788 persons from 45 countries with different spiritual backgrounds that have been recognized [by the end of 2010] as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem for their heroic deeds in saving Jews during the holocaust. Therefore, emphasizing Muslim Albanians and not the whole Albanian population in saving Jews does give only a portion of the entire picture and does not adequately explain the Albanian social conduct. For those missing full pieces of knowledge of Albanian history and culture and the story of Jews rescued in Albania before and throughout WWII, the hearing of "Muslim Albanians saved Jews" only puzzles or biases their minds. For Albanians, the religion is neither a representative platform nor a unifying one. Therefore, faith usage, which is a personal belief, for explaining such a social behavior for the entire Albanian population does not suit the Albanian case.

In WWII, the Albanian population's education level, including most of the rescuers, was low, and the focus was only on the Albanian language. It was unlikely that people read Holy Bibles, including Koran printed in non-Albanian words, e.g., Arabic or Old Turkish in Arabic letters. Hence, it was unlikely that the Albanian rescuers acted to save Jews and Italians inspired on "a Besa found in Koran"; at least, there is no Besa in Koran and no reason to be. The Albanian loyalty to a community was sociological rather than pious. Religious identity was something that came from one's kinship and family. Inter-faith marriages were not implausible, and today they are universal.

After WWII, education spread to the Albanian population through a communist filter. For half a century, the communist propaganda squeezed people's minds (including the rescuers' children), and they got

older with memories filled with communist propaganda. After 1990, those children of the rescuers still alive were exhausted and too old to read or understand any religious book. Therefore, any saying such as that "there is no Koran without Besa and no Besa without the Koran" is not accurate. What is correct is that the Kanun and Besa bond together unbreakably.

KANUN AND BESA

Besa is an Albanian word. Foreigners say Albania instead of Shqipëria, the language Albanian instead of Shqip, and people Albanians instead of Shqiptarë (in the Albanian language). The Albanian language (Shqip) is the oldest in Europe, and it is at the root of the tree of all Euro-Indian words. Besa is a noble principle that has originated from the soil of Albanians. It cannot be born in a desert. Besa cannot be found in the Koran and does not belong to it because it is not the fundamental part of the Kanun.

The Kanun is an ethnic code and ancient protocol. It has been the foundation of Albanian society for centuries. The Kanun is a collection of Albanian traditional laws and rights that regulate all aspects of conduct within one's family, village, clan, with members of other clans, and with strangers. In lack of an Albanian state, the Kanun acquires that role; the place of obedience to the country is taken by Besa, while the decisions made by wise elders are open and free. It survived under ottoman occupation because the Ottomans had no universal bill of rights that would equally regulate all of its subjected peoples' relations. Under the Ottomans' millet scheme, peoples got only defined as religious communities, headed by spiritual hierarchs, legally self-ruled, with their taxation structure, and vassals to the Sultanate that had to pay *pro-rata* taxes and supply soldiers on demand. The Ottoman millet system embodied another danger to the nationhood of native Albanians. The author of the known Kanun is Lekë Dukagjini, an Albanian knight, a Catholic prince living about 500 years ago and before the Ottomans conquered the Albanian lands. He fought against Ottoman invaders both under George Castrioti Scanderbeg, an Albanian national hero and a European figure, and after his death in 1468.

Besa has several meanings, ranging from faith, unbreakable trust, treaty, and a word of honor to a sacred pledge and responsibility to keep one's saying to provide welcome and security. It engages the stubborn protection of a guest, even to the point of sacrificing one's own life. Besa is a promise, but not merely a commitment. It implies inherently and spiritually not to stay indifferent to someone in need or under persecution. Besa requires an Albanian to open the door to anyone in need sincerely. Besa is a proper pledge (first to self) to live honestly and truthfully and sacrifice oneself for what is right. Above all, Besa is an Albanian legacy and cannot be taken from or gifted to others. In the past, Albanians have lost a lot in their culture (due to ignorance, indifference, etc.) to Greeks, Slavs, etc. Therefore, Albanians have a fundamental mission to care for and secure their heritage, tradition, and history. The expectation is that the genuine friends of Albanians help in this direction. Any misuse of the Albanian Besa is both wrong and invalid.

The ancient Epos of the Albanian Bravehearts (legendary stories) is full of Besa instances. For example, the story of the "Besa of Konstandin" is still preserved and sung by Arbërshes in Sicilia and Calabria, south of Italy. Konstandin kept his promise to his mother to bring back his sister by resurrecting her from the grave. In South Italy, everything is written both in Albanian and Italian; there is an Albanian University, etc. From a religious viewpoint, they are Christian. However, they have the same Besa and Albanian culture and language as all other Albanians. They have always been in the leadership of Albanian national movements. They are an example of Albanian cultural preservation detached from Islam's influence.

The Guest concept, and not of that of the foreigner, exists in the Kanun. For example, Book 8, Chapter 18 of the Kanun writes: "The house of an Albanian belongs to God and the Guest... Every Guest must have the food eaten in the house... The Guest must give you the weapon to hold as a sign of guardianship since after you have said Welcome, he must have no fear and know that you are ready to defend him against any danger". By Kanun, when a person refuses to honor or follow Besa, the society, village, or town condemns him. That person must go away from the place of living because he has so lost all his credentials. If someone cannot protect his Guest, then his honor is spoiled, his integrity and social position become torn down forever. The shelter given to a friend is associated with the honor word of Besa. When an Albanian gives his oath, Besa gets sealed. As an oath, Besa is eternal. Besa constitutes the foundation of the Kanun. Besa is a moral code, a norm of social behavior, and an ancient tradition. Besa given to a friend or Guest gets never sold. When Jews landed in high numbers at the Albanian domains after the Spanish Inquisition of 1492 and Portugal Inquisition of 1497, the Kanun was the Albanians' laws governing body.

BESA THE GOLDEN RULE

Besa is the Golden Rule, and it is sacred by the Kanun. The Golden Rule or the Ethic of Reciprocity requires "treat others the way you would like to get treated" because "*Noblesse oblige*". Besa is similar to another example of the Golden Rule: "*That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn. —Talmud, Shabbat 31a, the Great Principle*".

Albanians exhibited the same social conduct they did to rescue Jews throughout the holocaust in other instances in the 20th century. They saved the capitulated soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1917 and the Italian Army in 1943. They cared for Greek citizens and wounded soldiers in WWII and the following Civil War in Greece. Albania was a warm sanctuary for Albanians expelled by Serbs from Kosova in 1998-1999. If Besa had been of religious Moslem origin, it would have [frequently and with Albanian dimensions] seen the encounter in the Near East, Middle East, Far East, Indonesia, Malaysia, Asia, all Africa, Russian Federation, Europe, etc. For comparison, a very close example is Moslem Bosnia, where there existed no rescuing conditions for Jews throughout the holocaust as it was amongst Albanians.

While Albanians were saving Jews from September 1943 to November 1944, they were protecting ten times more Italian soldiers (more than 25000 soldiers). Those noble deeds had nothing to do with "Moslem" Besa, but they came naturally from the bottom of a generous hereditary spirit. Both for Italians and Jews, the salvation was an Albanian entirety because they were saved not only by those who sheltered them and organized their allocation to safe houses, but also by neighbors who knew, cooperated, and did not spy, and by Albanian officials.

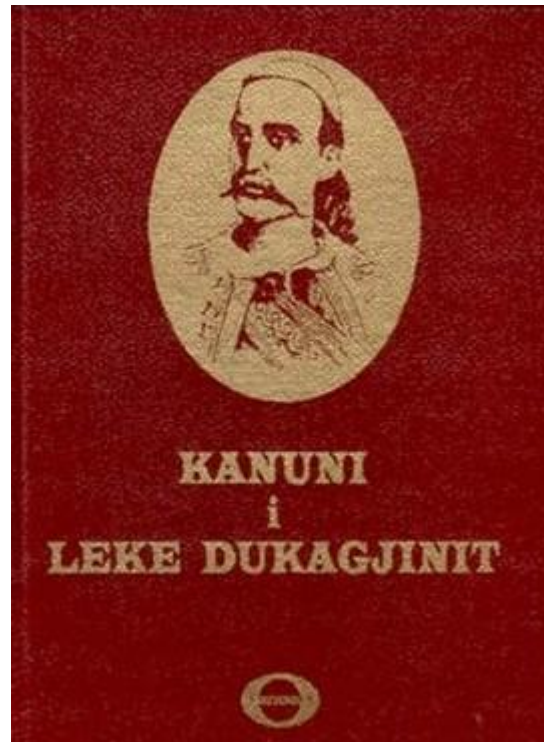
The Albanian newspaper Panorama published the following story on 19 January 2011. It depicted a case of Besa towards Italian soldiers to the heartbreaking extreme. The ex-German soldier (Johann Arendt), who later came to Koplik, Shkodra, after 30 years to retrieve his watch left there, told the following story: "...It was the end of the war in Albania, November 1944. The ex-Italian soldiers were extensively helping partisans. German soldiers had orders to find Italian soldiers and kill them. They went to a house where they suspected was an Italian soldier. The man of the house, Vehbi Hoti, said: No, there is no Italian inside our house. They took them all out of the house, about 10-12 persons. The Italian (Andrea Fabrizi) was among the family, but not distinguished as he had the same clothes. They threatened to kill all the Italian soldiers does not come out. Then, a boy came out of the group and said: I am Italian. One of the German soldiers instantly shot him dead. The German soldiers left. The boy on the ground was the son of the house...".

RIGHTEOUSLY

The communist regime closed Albania, including the rescuing stories of Jews, for 45 years. As a result, many Albanian rescuers and rescued Jews passed away unnoticed. Yad Vashem has awarded "Righteous Among the Nations" only 69 Albanians instead of hundreds.

Albania's Jewish rescue story flew out of Albania for the first time when US Congressman Tom Lantos and ex-Congressman Joseph DioGuardi visited Tirana in June 1990. They received from the Albanian President a thick dossier of letters that rescued Jews had mailed to their Albanian rescuers in the past 45 years. The messages did not reach the Albanian rescuers because State Security (*Sigurimi i Shtetit*) had censored them and hid them in the archives. Those letters were later sent to Yad Vashem and constituted the base for the book "Jewish Rescue in Albania, Brunswick Press, Cathedral City, California, 1997" by Harvey Sarner.

The Albanian Besa is Albanian and cannot be relocated or taken away from Albanians. The Albanian Besa is neither for sale nor on sale. Anytime, it is inappropriate to use Albanian heritage, the Besa, placed on a platform with only one leg, religiously Muslim, for a non-Albanian purpose and contest. It is inappropriate the accentuation of Albanian Moslems in saving Jews instead of the entire Albanian population, wherein every piece is complementary to other parts and cannot be understood or presented alone. It is inappropriate the connection of Besa with the Koran and not with Kanun. It is unsuitable for the presentation of Albanians through divisions of religious beliefs.



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Albanian and Jewish women, Burrel, 1943.



Francis family from Macedonia sheltered by Kasapi family in Tirana.