



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## Assemblyman Mark Gjonaj & State Senator Jeff Klein honor President of Albania H.E. Bujar Nishani for the Albanians role in saving Jews during WWII

JEFFREY D. KLEIN May 5, 2015

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*Legislators also herald photographer Norman Gershman whose work captures the heroism and altruism of the Albanians during WWII*

**ALBANY, NEW YORK** – Assemblyman Mark Gjonaj (D-Bronx) and State Senator Jeff Klein (D-Bronx/Westchester) on Tuesday honored **President of Albania H.E. Bujar Nishani** for the role Albanians played in saving thousands of Jews during the Holocaust and celebrated

photographer **Norman Gershman** whose photographs capture the essence of their history at a reception at the State Capitol in Albany.

“I’m honored to stand with President H.E. Bujar Nishani to share the Albanian people’s history with New Yorkers and the world. Through Mr. Gershman’s lens we see the Albanians’ commitment to care for those in need, to foster hospitality in the face of radical hatred, and to *Besa*, the country's code of honor,” **said Assemblyman Gjonaj**. “It is crucial for us to continue to acknowledge and show appreciation for this unique and honorable display of humanity and compassion, especially in today’s world where we must work together to fight the growing trend of radicalism and stand up for justice, inter-religious cooperation and peace. These stories remind us that we must remember the tragedies of WWII so as not to repeat those events; however, we must also remember and honor the silent heroes of WWII upon whose paths we must continue to follow in order to build tolerant and just communities in our districts, in the Great State of New York, and all over the world.”

“As the grandson of Holocaust survivors, I am especially moved by and grateful to those who risked their lives to shelter and protect millions of Jewish refugees during one of the darkest chapters in human history. Albanians took great risks to save Jews in their country, as well as neighboring nations, and their often unknown heroic actions merit this well deserved recognition. I’m honored to host President Nishani and commend the Albanian people for their compassion and bravery. I’m also proud to recognize photographer Norman Gershman whose work lets future generations learn about this extraordinary relationship between the Albanian and Jewish people,” **said State Senator Jeff Klein**.

“It is not always easy to stand up for what you believe is right in the face of adversity. Even to this day, people all across the world are threatened due to their race, gender and religion. The actions of the Albanian people during WWII were not only heroic, but are also an example of the tolerance and compassion that we should all strive to possess. I would like to

thank Assemblyman Gjonaj and Senator Klein for arranging President Nishani's visit to New York and for bringing attention to the astonishing courage of the Albanian people," **said Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (D-Bronx).**

Speaker Heastie presented President Nishani with a glass apple as a token of his trip to New York State.

"Today, 70 years later, in many parts of the globe, including parts of the European continent, we notice an increasing feeling of anti-Semitism. The most recent anti-Semitic terrorist attack in France, but also in other countries, make us think the goal achieved 70 years ago is being placed in question once again," **President Nishani said.** "We must not permit any kind of question marks and prejudices to affect the young generations, but instead we must act together with determination in the fight against anti-Semitism and in the defense of the United Nations declaration of universal human rights. The lessons learned from history should not be forgotten."

Mr. Gershman received proclamations from Assemblyman Gjonaj and Senator Klein at the noon reception, where his traveling exhibit, "*Besa: Albanians that saved Jews during WWII*," was displayed.

"I discovered this unbelievable code of honor, something called besa, and this code is more than just an Albanian code. It's a code that we all must embrace. When I say, 'we,' I mean that all of us — men, women, children — to honor the cultural differences between various peoples in various countries," **Mr. Gershman said.**

*Besa*, the cornerstone of this event, is a code of honor deeply rooted in Albanian culture and incorporated into the faith of Albanians. It dictates moral behavior and it demands that one take responsibility for the lives of others in their time of need. In Albania and Kosovo, Albanians sheltered not only the Jews of their cities and villages, but thousands of refugees

fleeing the Nazis from other European countries at grave risk to themselves and their families. The *Besa* exhibition and film has been presented at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the United Nations in New York City, the Houses of Parliament in London, the European Union in Strasbourg, in Albania and in many more venues around the world.

President Nishani visited the Assembly Chamber with Assemblyman Gjonaj at 1:30pm.

The Albanian president later visited the Senate Chamber with State Senator Klein and addressed the Senate.

Both houses passed resolutions recognizing the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII; and the remarkable role Albanians played rescuing Jews during WWII. More than 2,000 Jews survived Nazi persecution in Albania, where the local Albanian population hid them at the risk of their own lives, and in some instances, at the ultimate cost of their own lives.

## **BIOGRAPHIES:**

H. E. Bujar Nishani, the President of the Republic of Albania, was born in Durrës on September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1966. He completed his education at Tirana Scanderbeg Military Academy in Albania and his graduate studies in the Defense Resources Management in California. President Nishani also earned a Law Degree from the Tirana University and a Master Degree on European Studies at Tirana University's School of European Studies. He began his political career after teaching at the Scanderbeg Military Academy, serving as the Director of Foreign Affairs at the Ministry of Defense, and on the Cabinet of the Defense Minister. He became a Democratic Party member in 1991, a member of Tirana Municipal Council in 2003, and served as a Parliamentary Member from 2005 to 2012, Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice. On July 24, 2012, he was sworn in as the President of the Republic in front of the

Assembly of Albania. H. E. Nishani is married and has two children.

Norman H. Gershman is a photographer with work displayed in museums throughout the world. In his portraits he captures the souls of people usually through eye contact. He has brought people together with his work in the Soviet Union, Cuba and currently with his 13-year project of portraits and profiles of "Muslim Families Who Saved Jews in WWII." His work is represented in the permanent collection of The International Center of Photography, The Brooklyn Museum, The Aspen Art Museum, Rizzoli and several venues in Russia. Many international leaders and scholars have praised his work such as former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, President Jimmy Carter, Madam Jehen Sadat, Congressman Tom Lantos, Dr. Mordecai Paldiel of Yad Vashem, and Noble Laureate Elie Wiesel. Norman Gershman's collection of the photographs and stories of the Albanian rescuers is featured in traveling exhibitions overseen by Hebrew Union College and Yad Vashem as well as the documentary film "*Besa the Promise*." Gershman is the Founding Chairman of the Eye Contact Foundation, whose mission is to promote peace and unity.