We have been a family of Muslims for 500 years. “To save a life is to save a soul”. I find it comforting and strangely connected to this tradition known as Besa. During the fifteenth century, an Albanian knight and his family were saved by another Albanian knight and his family. The Albanian knight was a protector. The family survived the war and returned to Macedonia.

In early 1944 a retreating German division came to our village from Greece. Our entire village was fearful, but friendship overcame all fear. Four times they put a gun to his head. They came back and threatened to burn down the house. Meanwhile he hid a note in a piece of melon, and gave it to the young Jew. It instructed him to call “Besa”. In the end, the Jews were saved.

By then we had given the family Albanian names and clothing and moved them to the hills. In Vlorë we had many Jewish families who were long-time members of our community. They called my grandfather “godfather”. He would travel regularly from Tirana with food and provisions, while my father guarded the barn with a gun. They sheltered the Armenian refugees and the Jewish refugees who fled to Albania under Nazi Germany, for whom a total worldwide annihilation program was charged with the duty of awarding the title “Righteous Among the Nations”. The family was awarded the title “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem.

We never took any money from our Jewish guests. All that “every knock on the door is a blessing from God”.

All Jews living within Albanian borders during the German occupation, Albanians and Muslims alike, sheltered Jews, an action that was, and is, possible to act with courage, with love, and with Besa. These Albanians saved individual lives in high stakes situations, without any return. Out of 700,000 Jews who perished in the Holocaust, about 14,000 were saved by Albanians. These Albanians were honored by Yad Vashem as “Righteous Among the Nations”.

The Mandil family had two children, Edith and Jakov. We knew them as good neighbors and friends. In 1943, in the early days of the German occupation, they were asked if they were Jewish. They answered yes. They were then arrested and sent to Auschwitz. We were fearful, but friendship overcame all fear. We never took any money from our Jewish guests. All that “every knock on the door is a blessing from God”.