

BESA: A Code of Honor

November 2-14, 2015

Extended hours to 8PM, November 10 & 12
open November 11 noon-4PM



MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTRE Gallery

CANVASS

Volume XVIII, No. 5, November-December 2015

<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/programs/gallery/>

hours: Mon. – Fri., 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM; Sat., noon – 5 PM

an institution of Mennonite Church Canada

located on the campus of Canadian Mennonite University

TWO SPECIAL EVENTS

Tuesday, November 3, 7:00PM

BESA: The Promise

documentary

Laudamus Auditorium

500 Shaftesbury Blvd. (CMU north campus)

followed immediately by the launch and kosher reception for

BESA: A Code of Honor

exhibition

MHC Gallery

600 Shaftesbury Blvd. (CMU south campus)

free parking at both venues

Canadian Mennonite University is located at the intersection of Grant Ave. and Shaftesbury Blvd.

The Freeman Family Foundation Holocaust Education Centre is pleased to present *BESA: A Code of Honor* at the Mennonite Centre Heritage Gallery.

This exhibit from Yad Vashem features photographs by the American photographer Norman Gershman of Muslim Albanians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. The only European country with a Muslim majority succeeded where other European nations failed: Almost all Jews living within its borders during the Nazi occupation, those of Albanian origin and the many Jewish refugees who poured into the country alike were saved — except the members of only one family. In fact, there were more Jews in Albania at the end of the war than there were beforehand.

Following the German occupation in 1943, the Albanian population, in an extraordinary act, refused to comply with the occupier's orders to turn over lists of Jews residing within the country's borders. Moreover, the various governmental agencies provided many Jewish families with fake documentation that allowed them to intermingle amongst the rest of the population. The Albanians not only protected their Jewish citizens, but also provided sanctuary to Jewish refugees who had arrived in Albania, when it was still under Italian rule, and now found themselves faced with the danger of deportation to concentration camps. The remarkable assistance afforded to the Jews was grounded in Besa, a code of honour which still exists today and which serves as the highest ethical code in the country. The literal meaning of the word means "to keep the promise." It is also considered a matter of national honour. During the Shoah, Albanian Muslims competed with one another for the privilege of saving Jews. These acts originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even though the recipients were of another faith.

Canvas — a piece of strong cloth on which to paint a picture

TAX DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS: The MHC Gallery's budget is met primarily through private, tax deductible donations. Please, help keep the gallery alive and growing. Make cheques payable to: MHC Gallery. Mail to: MHC Gallery, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4. Credit card donations, contact Connie Wiebe at cwiebe@mennonitechurch.ca. (204) 888 6781; Online at <https://mennonitechurch.ca/project/gallery>

Ray Dirks, curator, rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca

About the film:

BESA: The Promise weaves Albania's heroism in WWII through the *vérité* journeys of two men.

One is Norman Gershman, the renowned Jewish-American photographer (whose photos make up the *BESA: A Code of Honor* exhibit) determined to document first-person accounts of the Albanian Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust.

The other is Rexhep Hoxha, a Muslim-Albanian. Rexhep must fulfill the promise made to a Jewish family his father rescued during the Holocaust and return to them a set of Jewish holy books they left behind. Rexhep's promise is more than words — it's part of his *besa* — an honor code that, among other things, pledges all Albanians to offer safe harbor to refugees.

With Norman's help, Rexhep embarks on a journey to Bulgaria and Israel. His quest brings about an epiphany that he is part of this Jewish family — even as his Islamic faith, long suppressed under decades of communism, is affirmed. Through the stories of Rexhep and his fellow Muslims, we discover a nation of everyday heroes far removed from the narrative of violent Islam and anti-Semitism that's so often portrayed in media today. It reveals how the very symbols that are being attacked today actually saved Jews many years ago: Jewish women who veiled themselves as Muslims were saved from the Nazis; many adopted Muslim practice for several years and were even provided with false certificates of Muslim identity. Through the experiences of Norman Gershman and the first-person accounts of Jewish survivors, we hear stories of gratitude to Muslim rescuers that have gone unheard for almost seventy years.

More than seven years in the making, *Besa: The Promise* presents a powerful human drama compounded by a devastating twist. It is a story that bridges generations and religions ... uniting fathers and sons ... Muslims and Jews.

We are grateful to our partners and sponsors in this event — Canadian Yad Vashem Society, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Province of Manitoba Ethnocultural Community Support Fund, Peerless Garments, the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery and Hillel. *Belle Jarniewski*

Special thanks from the gallery to Belle Jarniewski (chair of the Freeman Family Foundation Holocaust Education Centre, Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada) and Stan Carbone (program director for the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada). It has been a joy working with you.

examine carefully, discuss — **Canvass**

Students' Event on November 5

On November 5 at 6:30 pm at the Gallery, we will be holding an interfaith conversation cafe for Muslim and Jewish university students. The evening will begin with a rescreening of BESA: The Promise while the students dine on kosher falafel and other treats. Nilufer Rahman, an independent filmmaker from the Muslim community will moderate a discussion afterward. Register at kobrarahimi2@gmail.com or hillel@jewishwinnipeg.org



Brothers Hamid and Xhemel Veseli

Fundraiser Update:

Thanks to the nearly 100 people who attended the gallery's annual fundraiser and to all those who have made a donation this year. We are ever thankful for your generous support. To those of you who are still considering a donation this year, the gallery is still in need of support. We thank you in advance!

Cheques: MHC Gallery, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd, Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4
Credit Card: cwiebe@mennonitechurch.ca or 204 888 6781, extension 194

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Marushe Kediu

Mennonite Church Canada assembly juried exhibition

July 6-10, 2016, Saskatoon

The theme of the next Mennonite Church Canada assembly is God~Faith~People. The main text is Jeremiah 31:33, "I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." A more detailed call for artists, focusing on the Jeremiah text and asking artists to explore God's faithfulness will follow in the January newsletter.

Proposals?

Artists, please, submit your proposals to us! The gallery hosts exhibits in approximate two month blocks throughout the year.

Mailing list

To receive CANVASS, invitations to all exhibitions and other gallery updates contact Connie Wiebe, cwiebe@mennonitechurch.ca.

Contact

Ray Dirks, MHC Gallery, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB Canada R3P 0M4. Ph: (204) 888-6781. E-mail: rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca

Thanks

To all who make donations, large and small, we thank you for helping keep the gallery alive and relevant.

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address _____

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Ray Dirks, curator, rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca

A SAD SORT OF CLEAN Hydropower in Northern Manitoba

Nov 20, 2015 - Jan 23, 2016

Opening: Friday, Nov 20, 7:30pm

Manitobans are plugged into a huge northern hydropower system. Our TVs, toasters, and indeed our daily lives depend on the electricity produced by remote dams.

But at the far end of the transmission line lies a reality few of us ever see.

Winnipeg photographer Matt Sawatzky and elder Ellen Cook of the Misipawistik Cree Nation travelled to four hydro-affected communities in 2012 to document the troubling and seldom-reported reality at the northern end of the transmission line.

The images and words they brought back mix beauty and destruction, gentleness and power, hope and sadness. The photo-video exhibit shows the dams, waterways and people Manitobans connect to every time we flick a light switch.

The exhibit coincides with Manitoba Hydro's ongoing and controversial multi-billion dollar expansion.

For the first time, the large scale photos and 30-minute video will be accompanied both by Gerald Kuehl's stunningly detailed drawings of hydro-affected elders and brand new work by Cree hunter, trapper, dog-musher and artist Robert Spence, who, in his words, "was born in the shadow of one dam and will die in the shadow of another."

Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer from Winnipeg Manitoba. He splits his time between photography and studying Landscape Architecture at the University of Manitoba. Matthew freelances for the Mennonite Central Committee publication "A Common Place." He was first introduced to photography at the age of 19 while on a trip to Guatemala, and has had a passion for it ever since.

Ellen Cook is an *Ininiwiskwew* ("Cree woman") from Misipawistik (Grand Rapids) Cree Nation. Growing up little more than a kilometre from a large hydro dam, Ellen witnessed first-hand the effects of hydro development on her community and the environment she was raised in. She recalls travelling the Grand Rapids on the Saskatchewan River before the water was rerouted and the rapids dried up.

Ellen is a semi-retired educator and Cree language expert who worked in Winnipeg and throughout much of the north for 30 years. She is active in the Anglican church and serves as co-chair of the Interchurch Council on Hydropower.

Gerald Kuehl has been described as a historian, storyteller and visual poet. His work, *Portraits of the North*, a collection of portraits depicting the Indigenous people of the north, reflects his fascination with their cultures.

Gerald has met with and photographed subjects from Ojibway, Cree, Dene and Inuit communities, focusing his efforts on their oldest living members, the Elders. He has conducted interviews, researched their cultures and taken part in sweat lodge, traditional pipe and fasting ceremonies.

A self-taught Manitoba artist, Gerald's photographs are used as a point of departure to create pencil portraiture so detailed it is described as super



Gerald Kuehl, "Betsy Flett"

realism, each drawing taking 70 to 100 hours to complete. Gerald has also written riveting biographies to accompany the portraits, each piece sharing poignant stories from their fascinating lives and insightful remarks about the marks they have made on this earth.

The Manitoba Museum began touring 30 portraits and biographies of Gerald's work in 2006. The *Portraits of the North* exhibit has toured nationally and internationally.

"I am thrilled to have my portraits hang next to Matt Sawatsky's compelling photographs. There is, indeed, a severe price to pay in the north for what we take for granted down south. The people I have drawn have much to say regarding how their lives have been forever disrupted by hydroelectric development."



Gerald Kuehl, "Luke Moose"

Robert Spence is a Cree hunter, trapper, commercial fisherman, dog musher, artist and member of the Tataskweyak Cree Nation at Split Lake, Manitoba. Tataskweyak is downstream of the Kelsey Dam-Manitoba's first large northern dam, and just upstream of Keeyask, the multi-billion dollar dam currently under construction. The Bipole III power line is also slated to pass through Tataskweyak territory.

As he has throughout his life, Robert continues to spend a great deal of his time on the land and on the water. Fluent in Cree, English and the mythic language of image, Robert's work is a raw and distinctly Indigenous expression of the reality of hydropower for those most intimately affected by it.

Robert and his wife Melanie have six kids. This will be his premiere public exhibit.

NEXT: Margruite Krahn, January 29 - March 26, 2016. Opening January 29, 7:30pm

Thinking of year end donations? We thank all of you who have supported the work of the gallery this year and those who may yet do so. We receive almost all of our funding from folks like you, and we still need more to finish the year well. We, also, wish you a merry Christmas and all the best for the new year. To donate by mail, phone, credit card or online, see below.

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