FAU to Host ‘Besa: The Promise’ Documentary and Survivor Johanna Neumann on the 75th Anniversary of Kristallnacht

BOCA RATON, Fla. (October 10, 2013) — The Jewish Cultural Society at Florida Atlantic University will commemorate the 75th anniversary of Kristallnacht by hosting a screening of “Besa: The Promise,” a documentary about the Muslims of Nazi-occupied Albania who saved thousands of Jews during World War II, and speaker Johanna Neumann, a Holocaust survivor featured in the film, on Sunday, Nov. 10, at 3 p.m. at the Barry and Florence Friedberg Lifelong Learning Auditorium, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton campus.

Kristallnacht, also known as The Night of the Broken Glass, occurred Nov. 9-10, 1938, when Nazis in Germany destroyed synagogues, looted more than 8,000 Jewish shops and removed tens of thousands of Jews to Nazi concentration camps.

Neumann, born in Germany and now on staff at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., recalls walking to school in November 1938 and seeing crowds throwing stones into the synagogues’ windows and the Torah scrolls and Judaica scattered in the street.

During World War II, Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christians and others in Albania sheltered, hid and protected Neumann and other Jewish refugees from the occupying German troops, invoking the ancient moral code of “besa,” a vow to care for anyone facing danger.

“Somehow my mother found out that King Zog of Albania told his border police that if Jews came and wanted to enter the land, not to ask questions, but to let them come in,” said Neumann, who fled to Albania with her family in 1939, and remained there, moving from one town to another, staying one step ahead of the Nazis, who occupied Albania in the summer of 1943.

“Besa: The Promise” addresses the broad history of the rescues by following Rexhpet Hoxha, a Muslim-Albanian storekeeper, and Norman H. Gershman, a Jewish-American photographer, two characters affected by the experience. Toward the end of the war, Hoxha’s family had provided shelter to a Bulgarian Jewish family who had been forced to leave behind
their sacred prayer books when they fled to Palestine. The film focuses on the attempts of Hoxha and Gershman to return the books to their original Jewish owners.

Excerpts from the film and Gershman’s photographs have been showcased worldwide since 2007 and the film has received awards from some of the top film festivals. The documentary, directed by Rachel Goslins, is being shown at FAU courtesy of JWM Productions, LLC.

“The Jewish Cultural Society (JCS) is thrilled to kick off our season by bringing this important and little-known chapter of history to the community,” said JCS president Evelyn Solomon, whose grandparents came to the U.S. from Germany in 1935. “Besa is a reminder of the good and righteous in people.”

The goal of the JCS, which organized in 2008, is to advance Jewish cultural traditions and education at FAU and its libraries through philanthropic endeavors. The organization is the lead sponsor of FAU Libraries’ annual Kultur Festival, a celebration of Jewish music and arts that runs next year from March 1- March 8, 2014, on the Boca Raton campus.

Admission to “Besa: The Promise” is free for FAU students with an Owl Card, $15 for the general public, $12 for JCS members and $20 for JCS member couples. Group discounts are available. Call Jackie Simpson at 561-297-3921, email jewishculturalsociety@fau.edu or visit fauf.fau.edu/jcs-events to purchase tickets.

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Photo Captions
Besa1.jpg: “Besa: The Promise” title card courtesy of JWM Productions, LLC.
Besa2.jpg: Holocaust survivor Johanna Neumann is featured in the documentary “Besa: The Promise.” Photo is courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, where Neumann works.

About Florida Atlantic University:
Florida Atlantic University, established in 1961, officially opened its doors in 1964 as the fifth public university in Florida. Today, the University, with an annual economic impact of $6.3 billion, serves more than 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students at sites throughout its six-county service region in southeast Florida. FAU’s world-class teaching and research faculty serves students through 10 colleges: the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters, the College of Business, the College for Design and Social Inquiry, the College of Education, the College of Engineering and Computer Science, the Graduate College, the Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College, the Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine, the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing and the Charles E. Schmidt College of Science. FAU is ranked as a High Research Activity institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The University is placing special focus on the rapid development of three signature themes – marine and coastal issues, biotechnology and contemporary societal challenges – which provide opportunities for faculty and students to build upon FAU’s existing strengths in research and scholarship.
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