Righteous Muslims, Then and Now

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

Jan 27, 2015

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

As the French beef up their counterterrorism units and the Americans dispatch more advisors to Iraq and Syria, the wider battle cannot be won unless more Muslims stand tall in the face of extremism, as many already have.

Several years ago, I walked up a dimly lit staircase in a working-class district of Paris and knocked on the door of a cramped, two-room apartment. There, I met Joseph Naccache, an elderly, bedridden Jew. I had found Joseph's name on a list of survivors of Nazi labor camps in his native Tunisia and I had come to interview him on his wartime experience.

Joseph had not had an easy life, either in Tunisia or his adopted France, and he was full of bitterness and melancholy. Muslims were among the chief villains. They had cheered when the Germans paraded Jews through the streets of Tunis en route to forced labor, he said; and two generations later, they were now hounding Jews in the streets of Paris. He had escaped a Muslim land, Joseph said ruefully, but he was still in a land of Muslims.

And then, almost as an afterthought, he reminded himself about a Muslim named Hamza Abdul Jalil who, he said, saved his life. This is the story of Hamza and Joseph.

In the warren-like neighborhood of Tunis where Joseph lived, where the sounds of stonecutters and street merchants competed with the muezzin's call to prayer, the center of social activity was the hammam, or Turkish bathhouse. More than just a place to wash, it was a gathering spot where men and women (separately) shared news, spread gossip, told jokes and relaxed.

On the main street near the narrow alley where the Naccache family lived, Hamza Abdul Jalil owned just such a hammam. The family-owned bathhouse was where both Jews and Muslims sat side by side on low benches, filling bucket after bucket of steaming hot water.

It was December 1942, a month after the first German troops arrived in Tunis, when the SS ordered Jewish men to gather for forced labor. When few showed up voluntarily, Nazi troops went from synagogue to synagogue, hospital to

hospital, even house to house to find Jewish men and drag them to perform such deadly tasks as clearing bombs and repairing runways in the middle of Allied air raids.

Hamza Abdul Jalil knew that it was a dangerous moment for the Jews of his neighborhood. When the roundup of Jews began, Hamza told Joseph that if he ever needed a place to hide, he should come to the hammam. When Joseph began to fear that the German dragnet was closing in, he took Hamza up on his offer. For two weeks, Hamza protected him deep inside the labyrinth of the hammam, providing refuge and food, so that Joseph could evade his pursuers. Hamza neither requested nor accepted any payment.

After he left the hammam for another hiding place, Joseph was eventually captured by the Germans and sent to labor camps in the Tunisian hinterland. A lifetime later, he still remembered the kindness of the proprietor of the local hammam.

"One cannot say that the entire world was evil," Joseph told me. "Some people were kind. Some were humane."

Soon after I heard this story, I traveled to Tunis and looked for the hammam. It was right where Joseph said it would be. And, almost frozen in time, I found the current proprietor sitting in the small entryway. He was Faruq Abdul Jalil, Hamza's son.

After I told Faruq why I had come, he apologized that he had not before heard this story about his father. But it made sense, he said. Why would his father help Joseph? This elderly Tunisian man, dressed in a felt cap similar to the traditional fez worn by his father in a picture that hung on the wall, answered matter-of-factly: "He hid Mr. Naccache because Muslim and Israelites -- 'Jews' as you call them -- they were almost like brothers."

I was reminded of this story reading of the heroism of Lassana Bathily, the Malian-born Muslim man who saved up to 15 people, including many Jews, by hiding them in a freezer in the besieged kosher market attacked in Paris a few weeks ago. "Yes, I helped the Jews. We are brothers," he told an interviewer. "This is not a question of Jews, Christians or Muslims, we are all in the same boat."

These stories are important. To be sure, they should not be used to gloss over the real dangers posed by what French prime minister Manuel Valls bluntly calls "radical Islamism" or to inflate the numbers of righteous heroes -- Muslim and otherwise -- willing to risk their lives to save innocents, whether during the Holocaust or today. Rather, the reason to retell these stories as loudly and often as possible is as a compelling reminder of the power of free choice. People who take mainstream ideas like nationalism or Islam and warp them into the extremes of fascism or jihadism are making a choice. And people who stand tall in the face of those who tyrannize others on the basis of those warped extremes are making a choice, too.

As the French beef up their counterterrorism units and the Americans dispatch more special forces "advisors" to Iraq and Syria, the central reality remains that the battle raging from Paris to Raqqa will be won when more people -- in this case Muslims -- make the choice that Hamza and Lassana both made.

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute's executive director, is author of the book Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/among-the-righteous-lost-stories-from-the-holocausts-long-reach-into-arab-l)** *, the* ***PBS film version (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/among-the-righteous)*** *of which tells the story of Joseph and Hamza.* ❖

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