

Yad Vashem's Arab Blinders

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Why won't Israel's Holocaust memorial recognize the righteous Arabs that saved Jews from the Nazis?

Let's give two cheers to Yad Vashem, Israel's respected Holocaust memorial, for recently bestowing its "Righteous among the Nations" award on the late Egyptian physician Mohamed Helmy. With the honor, the organization for the first time recognized an Arab for saving Jews from the Nazis. Despite the sad but predictable rejection of the award by Helmy's relatives in Egypt, news of his heroics will be a powerful tool in the battle against Holocaust ignorance and denial in Arab and Muslim societies.

Why only two cheers? Because in making the announcement about Helmy, who courageously saved Jews in Germany, Yad Vashem director Avner Shalev also explained why his institution had rejected well-documented cases of Arabs who protected Jews in the Arab world itself.

Shalev said Arabs from Tunisia -- the only Arab country occupied by the Nazis -- were nixed for the righteous honor because the Nazi occupation there was brief (only six months) and that local Arabs helping Jews faced little physical threat. In other words, instead of judging individual cases on their merits, he suggested that circumstances in Tunisia made it impossible for anyone there ever to meet the test of "righteousness." Given the real-life stories of Tunisians who put their lives on the line to protect Jews from the Nazis, this is not just some esoteric, theoretical issue.

I have spent more than a decade researching the history of the Holocaust in Arab lands, unearthing depressing stories of Arab connivance with the Nazis as well as life-affirming stories of Arabs selflessly protecting Jews. My 2006 book, *Among the Righteous* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/among-the-righteous-lost-stories-from-the-holocausts-long-reach-into-arab-1>), and a 2010 documentary (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/among-the-righteous/>) film of the same name broadcast nationally by PBS, detail not only the torture, deportations, executions, and personal agony of Jews dispatched to more than 100 sites of forced or slave labor in Arab lands, but also tell the stories of Arabs who -- like the more celebrated "righteous" of

Europe -- took great risk to aid Jews in distress.

In this context, the first part of Shalev's statement -- about the brevity of the occupation -- is profoundly sad. Any amount of time under the thumb of Nazi rule resulted in unspeakable tragedy, and this is the first time Yad Vashem appears to have made the duration of occupation a condition for "righteousness." This is especially odd given that Yad Vashem has previously recognized rescuers of Jews in areas of the Soviet Union, such as the Caucasus region, where the German military presence was even shorter than the occupation of Tunisia.

If such standards hold, Yad Vashem would automatically rule out recognizing the brave exploits of someone like Hamza Abdul Jalil, an Arab who owned a bathhouse in a mixed, working-class neighborhood in Tunis. During my research, Joseph Naccache -- now an octogenarian in Paris but in late 1942 a young Jew on the run from Hitler's notorious SS -- told me that Abdul Jalil hid him for two weeks in the bowels of his bathhouse. Evidently, Yad Vashem's leadership believes Abdul Jalil didn't risk his life long enough.

The second part of Shalev's statement, that Arabs who helped Jews did not face a threat, also does not hold up to scrutiny. The Nazis aggressively pursued their campaign against the Jews in Tunisia: Jews there were subjected to mass arrest, hostage taking, torture, slave labor, deportations, and executions. If Jews faced such threats, how could Yad Vashem reach the conclusion that their protectors had no legitimate fear of retribution should they be caught?

In adopting this dismissive approach, Yad Vashem brushes aside not just the bravery of Arabs who protected Jews. It also implicitly demeans the Holocaust-era suffering of those persecuted Jews themselves. Survivors and rescuers are fundamentally linked: If, as Yad Vashem argues, there could be no "righteous" in Tunisia, then it only stands to reason that there were also no survivors in Tunisia. After all, one of basic characteristics of a "survivor" is someone who could have been rescued by a "righteous."

This is the argument made by three cousins who grew up together in the small Tunisian town of Mahdia -- the late Anny Boukhris, Eva Weisel of Los Angeles, and Edmee Masliah of France. These three women presented testimony to Yad Vashem that Tunisian farm owner Khalid Abdul Wahab saved their lives by protecting them and their family from violent attack by German officers. Despite this, Yad Vashem twice rejected Abdul Wahab for the righteous designation. The only plausible explanation for dismissing these claims -- and the claims of other Jews who have praised Arabs for saving their lives -- is that Yad Vashem doesn't really believe Tunisia's Jews were under threat.

If true, this would be scandalous. It would mean that Yad Vashem made a terrible blunder by chiseling the names of Tunisian cities and towns into the granite of its gut-wrenching Valley of Lost Communities. It would mean that Yad Vashem has been duped into convening an annual memorial ceremony to commemorate the Nazis' December 1942 roundup of the Jews of Tunis.

Of course, none of that is the case. Yad Vashem's recognition of the Holocaust-era suffering of Tunisia's Jews is entirely appropriate, because it is a historical fact. Indeed, in 2010, Yad Vashem even published a book that chronicled in great detail what happened to the Jews of Arab lands during the Holocaust; I should know, I wrote the Hebrew edition. If the Tunisian Jews who lived through the camps, raids, arrests, beatings, and hardships are legitimately termed "survivors," how could Yad Vashem rule out the idea that some Arabs were also rescuers?

I remain hopeful that Yad Vashem will right this wrong. As an ever-optimistic Mrs. Weisel wrote in the *New York Times* in December 2011: "Sixty-nine years after pinning a yellow star to my chest in my native land, I know that I was able to enjoy a long, full life because Abdul Wahab confronted evil and saved me, as he saved other fortunate members of my family. I hope that Yad Vashem reconsiders his case before no one is left to tell his story."

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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