

The Holocaust's Arab Heroes

Oct 8, 2006



Articles & Testimony

Virtually alone among peoples of the world, Arabs appear to have won a free pass when it comes to denying or minimizing the Holocaust. Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah has declared to his supporters that “Jews invented the legend of the Holocaust.” Syrian President Bashar al-Assad recently told an interviewer that he doesn’t have “any clue how [Jews] were killed or how many were killed.” And Hamas’s official Web site labels the Nazi effort to exterminate Jews “an alleged and invented story with no basis.”

Such Arab viewpoints are not exceptional. A respected Holocaust research institution recently reported that Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia all promote Holocaust denial and protect Holocaust deniers. The records of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum show that only one Arab leader at or near the highest level of government—a young prince from a Persian Gulf state—has ever made an official visit to the museum in its 13-year history. Not a single official textbook or educational program on the Holocaust exists in an Arab country. In Arab media, literature and popular culture, Holocaust denial is pervasive and legitimized.

Yet when Arab leaders and their people deny the Holocaust, they deny their own history as well—the lost history of the Holocaust in Arab lands. It took me four years of research—scouring dozens of archives and conducting scores of interviews in 11 countries—to unearth this history, one that reveals complicity and indifference on the part of some Arabs during the Holocaust, but also heroism on the part of others who took great risks to save Jewish lives.

Neither Yad Vashem, Israel’s official memorial to Holocaust victims, nor any other Holocaust memorial has ever recognized an Arab rescuer. It is time for that to change. It is also time for Arabs to recall and embrace these episodes in their history. That may not change the minds of the most radical Arab leaders or populations, but for some it could make the Holocaust a source of pride, worthy of remembrance—rather than avoidance or denial.

The Holocaust was an Arab story, too. From the beginning of World War II, Nazi plans to persecute and eventually exterminate Jews extended throughout the area that Germany and its allies hoped to conquer. That included a great Arab expanse, from Casablanca to Tripoli and on to Cairo, home to more than half a million Jews.

Though Germany and its allies controlled this region only briefly, they made substantial headway toward their goal. From June 1940 to May 1943, the Nazis, their Vichy French collaborators and their Italian fascist allies applied in Arab lands many of the precursors to the Final Solution. These included not only laws depriving Jews of property, education, livelihood, residence and free movement, but also torture, slave labor, deportation and execution.

There were no death camps, but many thousands of Jews were consigned to more than 100 brutal labor camps, many solely for Jews. Recall Maj. Strasser’s warning to Ilsa, the wife of the Czech underground leader, in the 1942 film “Casablanca”: “It is possible the French authorities will find a reason to put him in the concentration camp here.” Indeed, the Arab lands of Algeria and Morocco were the site of the first concentration camps ever liberated by Allied troops.

About 1 percent of Jews in North Africa (4,000 to 5,000) perished under Axis control in Arab lands, compared with more than half of European Jews. These Jews were lucky to be on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, where

the fighting ended relatively early and where boats—not just cattle cars—would have been needed to take them to the ovens in Europe. But if U.S. and British troops had not pushed Axis forces from the African continent by May 1943, the Jews of Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and perhaps even Egypt and Palestine almost certainly would have met the same fate as those in Europe.

The Arabs in these lands were not too different from Europeans: With war waging around them, most stood by and did nothing; many participated fully and willingly in the persecution of Jews; and a brave few even helped save Jews.

Arab collaborators were everywhere. These included Arab officials conniving against Jews at royal courts, Arab overseers of Jewish work gangs, sadistic Arab guards at Jewish labor camps and Arab interpreters who went house to house with SS officers pointing out where Jews lived. Without the help of local Arabs, the persecution of Jews would have been virtually impossible.

Were Arabs, then under the domination of European colonialists, merely following orders? An interviewer once posed that question to Harry Alexander, a Jew from Leipzig, Germany, who survived a notoriously harsh French labor camp at Djelfa, in the Algerian desert. “No, no, no!” he exploded in reply. “Nobody told them to beat us all the time. Nobody told them to chain us together. Nobody told them to tie us naked to a post and beat us and to hang us by our arms and hose us down, to bury us in the sand so our heads should look up and bash our brains in and urinate on our heads. . . . No, they took this into their own hands and they enjoyed what they did.”

But not all Arabs joined with the European-spawned campaign against the Jews. The few who risked their lives to save Jews provide inspiration beyond their numbers.

Arabs welcomed Jews into their homes, guarded Jews’ valuables so Germans could not confiscate them, shared with Jews their meager rations and warned Jewish leaders of coming SS raids. The sultan of Morocco and the bey of Tunis provided moral support and, at times, practical help to Jewish subjects. In Vichy-controlled Algiers, mosque preachers gave Friday sermons forbidding believers from serving as conservators of confiscated Jewish property. In the words of Yaacov Zrivy, from a small town near Sfax, Tunisia, “The Arabs watched over the Jews.”

I found remarkable stories of rescue, too. In the rolling hills west of Tunis, 60 Jewish internees escaped from an Axis labor camp and banged on the farm door of a man named Si Ali Sakkat, who courageously hid them until liberation by the Allies. In the Tunisian coastal town of Mahdia, a dashing local notable named Khaled Abdelwahhab scooped up several families in the middle of the night and whisked them to his countryside estate to protect one of the women from the predations of a German officer bent on rape.

And there is strong evidence that the most influential Arab in Europe—Si Kaddour Benghabrit, the rector of the Great Mosque of Paris—saved as many as 100 Jews by having the mosque’s administrative personnel give them certificates of Muslim identity, with which they could evade arrest and deportation. These men, and others, were true heroes.

According to the Koran: “Whoever saves one life, saves the entire world.” This passage echoes the Talmud’s injunction, “If you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world.”

Arabs need to hear these stories—both of heroes and of villains. They especially need to hear them from their own teachers, preachers and leaders. If they do, they may respond as did that one Arab prince who visited the Holocaust museum. “What we saw today,” he commented after his tour, “must help us change evil into good and hate into love and war into peace.”

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