

Who Are the Lumbrosos, Anyway? George Allen's Ancestors

by [Robert Satloff](#)

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Virginia Senator George Allen says he takes "great pride" in learning about the Jewish roots of his mother's family, the Lumbrosos of Tunisia. There's actually a lot for him to be proud of. After four years of research, I just completed a [book on the history of the Holocaust's long reach into Arab lands](#). Tunisia -- the only Arab country to suffer a full-fledged German occupation -- is at the center of the story. And members of the Lumbroso family played a heroic role in the fight against the Nazis.

First, some background. "Lumbroso" is an Italian surname derived from a Spanish word meaning luminous or illustrious -- evidently a name originally given to people of special honor or station. According to the Tunisian Jewish historian Paul Sebag, author of *The Names of the Jews of Tunisia: Origins and Significance*, the first record of a Lumbroso in Tunisia is in the seventeenth century, when a French consular document in Tunis refers to the travels of a certain Samuel Lumbroso from Livorno, a port city on the western edge of Tuscany. Over time, Italian Jews like Samuel Lumbroso -- dubbed "Livornese" by the Tunisians -- became both numerous and prosperous. Many kept their Italian citizenship and maintained close ties with Jews on the northern side of the Mediterranean for generations. And the clan lived up to its name; it produced two of Tunis' long-serving grand rabbis, and its members excelled in social and commercial life, as well. Abraham Lumbroso, for example, was a renowned doctor who served as court physician to three Tunisian rulers in the mid-1800s. But the aspect of Allen's pedigree about which he should be most proud stems from stories about his grandfather's role in confronting Nazi persecution.

Most people don't even know that Tunisia -- a small Arab country at the northernmost tip of Africa -- was ever occupied by the Germans. But, for six pivotal months -- from November 1942 to May 1943 -- Tunisia was in fact the central front in the European theater of war. On November 7, 1942, American and British troops launched their first major offensive of the war, Operation Torch, which, until D-Day, was the largest amphibious assault in history. The Allies wrested Morocco and Algeria from Axis (Vichy French) control in just three days of fighting. Hitler responded quickly, ordering his air force into Tunisia. The fighting, chronicled brilliantly in Rick Atkinson's 2002 epic *An Army*

at Dawn, lasted half a year, until the Allies finally broke through Axis lines. On May 13, the last German soldier fled across the Strait of Sicily to Italy, and the African continent was totally under Allied control.

The least known part of this little-known story is the extent to which Germany and its collaborators -- Italian Fascists, Vichy French, and local Arabs -- persecuted the Jews of Tunisia during that six-month period. Although the Germans barely had a grip on one-third of Tunisian territory and were hounded virtually every day by Allied bombers, they still found time to implement many of the same Holocaust-era methods of persecution that they employed so efficiently against the Jews of Europe. These included confiscations, mass arrests, forced labor, deportations, and even executions. To manage the anti-Jewish campaign, the Nazis dispatched some of their most ruthless SS officers to Tunisia. Leading the effort was the notorious Colonel Walter Rauff, who had already made a name for himself by inventing the mobile gas van, responsible for the deaths of thousands.

During their six months in Tunisia, the Germans interned 5,000 Jewish men in more than 30 labor camps. Jewish workers were often forced, at gunpoint, to perform suicide labor, repairing airstrips or moving boxes of munitions in the middle of Allied bombing runs. In my research, I found testimonies of grisly torture of Jewish men, rapes of Jewish women, and the cold-blooded murder of Jewish invalids. Outside Tunis, thousands of Jews were forced to wear the yellow star.

At first, the Lumbrosos were fortunate. At the outset of the occupation, the Germans deferred to the request of Mussolini's diplomats and did not intern Italian citizens, even Jews. But, when the Allies pressed closer to Tunis, even some Italian Jews were drafted into forced labor. If he had Italian citizenship, Allen's grandfather, Felix, would have been among that group. The details are sketchy, since we don't know which camp Felix was sent to or when.

But, unlike many Jews in Tunisia -- who accepted the harsh indignities of labor camps in the hope that the liberation by the Allies was just around the corner -- the Lumbrosos took matters into their own hands. According to Jacques Sabille, author of the authoritative 1954 book *The Jews of Tunisia under Vichy and the Occupation*, a Tunisian Jew named Sylvain Lumbroso organized a network of spies that provided invaluable information to the Allies. "Thanks to the information from the Lumbroso group," Sabille wrote, "seventeen transport planes were destroyed by the Allies at a Tunisian airstrip occupied by the Germans." For his bravery, Sylvain Lumbroso was later awarded the Croix de Guerre.

I do not know if Felix Lumbroso, Allen's grandfather, was part of that courageous band of spies (Sabille does list several other members of the group, including one more Lumbroso, named Lucien), but they would most likely have been related. Lumbrosos may not have won many football games, but they certainly helped win a war.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of [**Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands**](#), for sale in November. ❖

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