

Arabs and the Holocaust

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Of the more than 100 countries that have formally endorsed today's convening of the special U.N. General Assembly on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, not one is Arab. In the West, this is viewed as another manifestation of Holocaust denial, an increasingly commonplace feature of Arab politics.

For their part, Arabs would retort that the Holocaust is not their history, so why the fuss?

The answer: They are wrong. The Holocaust, although overwhelmingly a European story, was an Arab story, too. Indeed, the Arab lands of Algeria and Morocco were the site of the first slave labor camps -- the term "concentration camps" was used at the time -- ever liberated by Allied troops.

From the outset of the war, 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 a half-million Jews.

Though the Germans and their allies controlled this region only briefly, they made substantial headway toward their goal. In the three years prior to the final expulsion of German troops from Tunisia in 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 statutes depriving Jews of property, education, livelihood, residence and free movement but also torture, slave labor, deportations and executions. There were no "extermination camps," but thousands still suffered, especially those consigned to the region's 40 or so labor camps, many solely for Jews.

Luckily, a relative few -- probably between 3,000 and 4,000 -- perished under Axis control. If U.S. and British troops had not launched Operation Torch in November 1942 and then pushed Axis forces completely from the African continent six months later, the Jews of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and perhaps Egypt almost certainly would have met the same fate of their co-religionists in Europe.

In all of this, Arabs played a central role. Indeed, Arabs 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; a brave few even helped to save Jews.

Over the past three years, with the support of more than a dozen researchers and interviewers in as many countries, I have been searching for these Arab heroes and villains of the Holocaust. The stories I found are uplifting in their humanity and heartbreaking in their depravity. Most of all, I found a forgotten chapter in the memories of two peoples -- Arabs and Jews.

Collaborators were everywhere. These included Arab overseers of Jewish work gangs, Arab guards at Jewish labor camps and Arab translators who went house-to-house with SS officers pointing out where Jews lived.

In Tunis, I tracked down the oldest living relative of the only Arab ever to be convicted of a "war crime." The man, Hassen Ferjani, had been hired by a Jewish family to aid in their escape to Allied lines. Instead, he turned the hapless Jews over to the Nazis, who subsequently beheaded them. Mr. Ferjani was eventually convicted by a French military tribunal of conspiracy to murder. The Ferjani family, his nephew Mustapha told me, forever viewed Hassen as the real "victim."

Heroes, though fewer, provide inspiration beyond their numbers. Arab inmates of labor camps shared the suffering of Jews and at times forged an antifascist bond with them. 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. Not one Arab broke ranks to take up the collaborationist French regime's lucrative offer.

The most remarkable story I found was in the small Tunisian coastal town of Mahdia. There, I tracked down the Chlaifa sisters, Muslim septuagenarians who confirmed a tale told to me by an elderly Jewish woman about a local notable, Khalid Abdulwahhab, who saved the lives of her family. He had whisked them away in the middle of the night to his countryside farm to escape the predations of a German officer bent on rape. He then guarded the Jews on his farm for several weeks, until German forces were expelled from Mahdia. He was a true hero.

To many Arabs, discussing the Holocaust is radioactive because they fear it lends justification to Israel and its policies. But even that deep political dispute cannot obscure the fact that Arabs have a relationship with Jews that predates the establishment of Israel, a complex history that provides sources of pride as well as reasons for shame. Accessing that history would bring Arabs into a universal discussion of the Holocaust's message.

One of the many reasons to convene the U.N. assembly on Auschwitz is that it would be an excellent opportunity to launch this discussion. With some courage and ingenuity, viewing the Holocaust through this prism could transform it into a bridge between civilizations, not another excuse for a clash.

Robert Satloff is executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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