

Interviews and Presentations

Remembering the Holocaust in Tunisia

[Robert Satloff](#)

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Stories of Arabs who helped Jews, often at great personal risk, are part of the history of the Holocaust and the history of Tunisia, and they deserve their rightful place in both stories.

On December 14-15, a conference was held in Tunis in remembrance of the 5,000 Jews subjected to forced labor during the Nazi occupation of Tunisia, and to commemorate Arab Muslims who saved Jews during this period. Cosponsored by the Tunisian Association Supporting Minorities and the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, it was one of the first conferences of its kind to be held in an Arab country. Dr. Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute and author of [Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands](#), spoke to attendees in Arabic via Skype. The following is an English version of his remarks.

Friends, colleagues, I am honored to participate in this special conference, convened to commemorate a forgotten chapter of the Holocaust -- the German occupation of Tunisia and the persecution of its Jewish community by the Nazis and their collaborators. I congratulate the organizers of this important event, especially Yamina Thabet, director of the Tunisian Association Supporting Minorities.

I am especially pleased to note the participation of some of Tunisia's finest historians, including my dear friend Habib Kazdaghli. This forgotten chapter of the Holocaust is, at the same time, a forgotten chapter of the history of Tunisia. I congratulate Habib and his colleagues for their courageous and vital efforts to fill in the missing pages from their country's history book. This task will benefit all Tunisians.

I would like to tell you a story. Ten years ago, I received an email from an elderly Jewish woman. I was living in Rabat, Morocco. The woman was living in Los Angeles, California. The woman, named Anny Boukhris, was impatient. She had a story to tell me and was eager for me to know all the details. It was the story of her childhood in the small coastal fishing town of Mahdia. It was the story of her experience during the German occupation, when German soldiers confiscated her house and threw out her family. It was the story of a man warning her father that a certain German officer wanted to rape her mother. It was the story of that man taking the family in the middle of the night to his farm in the village of Tlelsa, many kilometers outside of Mahdia. It was the story of that kind, generous man protecting Anny's family for the rest of the war.

Why was Anny so eager to tell me her story? What made her story so unusual? The man was Khaled Abdul Wahab, the son of one of Tunisia's most famous writers, Hassan Husni Abdul Wahab. Anny wanted to tell me the story of a Tunisian Arab Muslim who saved her family from the Holocaust. But was it true?

Two weeks after Anny told her story, she died. Thankfully, I had it all recorded on tape. And with that tape, I went to Mahdia, a town I had never visited before. And there I met Anny's childhood friends, the Chlaifa sisters. They hadn't seen Anny in 40 years but when I mentioned her name, one of them said, without hesitation, "The farm -- Anny was protected on the farm by Khaled Abdul Wahab." I immediately knew the story was real. And later that day I visited the farm where Anny and her family stayed for several months. It was exactly the way she had described it -- the trees, the houses, the pool. Anny was there. Khaled was there. And a wonderful act of kindness and courage had happened there.

The story continues. I met Khaled's daughter, Faiza Abdul Wahab, who inherited both her beauty and tenacity from her father. She was proud to be the daughter of a man -- an Arab Muslim man -- who protected Jews during the Holocaust. When I filmed a movie about the Holocaust in Arab lands, she came with me to the farm in Tlelsa and there she met Anny's cousin, Edmee Masliah, who was with Anny on the farm in 1943. A woman saved from the Nazis met the daughter of the man who saved her. It was an unforgettable reunion. They live only a few miles away from each other in France but they had their reunion in Tlelsa. Today, they are like mother and daughter -- the Jewish mother and her Muslim daughter.

This is part of the history of the Holocaust and part of the history of Tunisia. It deserves its rightful place in both stories.

Yes, the Holocaust happened in Arab lands. The Nazis came to Tunisia to fight the Allies, but with the Vichy French and the Italian Fascists, they also came to persecute Jews. Quotas. Arrests. Confiscations. Hostage-taking. Torture. Labor camps. Deportations. Executions. Everything that happened to the Jews of Europe happened in Tunisia, in different ways and to differing degrees, except for the most important aspect of the Holocaust -- extermination.

But that was more by luck than by design. If the Allies had not defeated the Germans by May 1943, the Jews of Tunisia would have known the same fate as the Jews of Poland.

That was the fate of Gilbert Mazuz, a handicapped boy from Tunis who was shot by a German soldier in cold blood during a forced march. And that was the fate of Joseph, Jean, and Gilbert Scemla, the three men of the family who were betrayed by an Arab friend, arrested by the Germans, deported to Dachau and executed.

Along with the dark side of history, there was also light -- stories of Arabs who helped Jews and even risked their lives to protect Jews. There is the story of Si Ali Sakkat, the former mayor of Tunis, who gave shelter to 60 Jews who escaped from a German labor camp in the middle of the battle. There is the story of Hamza Abdul Jalil, who owned a *hammam* in Tunis and hid there a young Jewish man, Joseph Naccache, who was running from the German secret police. And there is the story of Khaled Abdul Wahab.

These are important stories. They deserve to be remembered, by both Jews and Arabs. It is important to remember the stories of evil and the stories of hope. Together, they constitute the history of the lost chapter of the Holocaust in Tunisia. Thanks to all of you who are here today, and all who will read of this event in the years to come, this history will no longer be lost. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this historic event.