

**Among the Righteous
Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands**

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Chapter 5

“The Arabs Watched Over the Jews”

At every stage of the Nazi, Vichy, and Fascist persecution of Jews in Arab lands, and in every place that it occurred, Arabs helped Jews. Some Arabs spoke out against the persecution of Jews and took public stands of unity with them. Some Arabs denied the support and assistance that would have made the wheels of the anti-Jewish campaign spin more efficiently. Some Arabs shared the fate of Jews and, through that experience, forged a unique bond of comradeship. And there were occasions when certain Arabs chose to do more than just offer moral support to Jews. They bravely saved Jewish lives, at times risking their own in the process. Those Arabs were true heroes.

For both Arabs and Jews, war brought hardship. Wheat, sugar, oil, cloth, and other goods were scarce; disease was rampant; medicines were virtually impossible to find. For the first time in memory, black bread made its appearance on the shelves of local bakeries. Some relief came in 1941, when the United States—trying to keep Vichy from falling even more deeply in the Nazi orbit—reached agreement with Pétain’s government on a controversial plan to provide France’s North African possessions with some basic commodities, on condition that the goods not end up in German hands.¹ Even so, the situation remained stark. Jews suffered more than non-Jews—their rations were less than those of both Europeans and local Arabs—but survival was a struggle for all. At times of such severe privation, the old Arab adage—“Me against my brother, me and my brother against our cousin”—was the guiding principle. Families did what they could to secure the necessities of life; clans clung together against outsiders.

In such circumstances, simple acts of human kindness take on a far greater meaning than they would in normal times. Decades later, those Jews whose lives were touched by the generosity of Arabs recalled these deeds with a special fondness. To the Jews facing hardship and deprivation, it made little difference whether the Arab was a passing acquaintance or a total stranger; it only mattered that he or she was a guardian angel in a time of crisis. The Arabs who performed these noble, selfless deeds may not qualify

under technical definitions of wartime “heroes,” but theirs were acts of unusual sympathy and compassion at a time when they, like all other commodities, were in short supply.

Here is the story of Mirella Hassan, a Tunisian Jew who responded to an Internet posting I made soliciting stories of Arabs who helped Jews during the war:

When I was a little girl, my parents told me often of the difficulties they had to survive in this period, and above all of the help they received from their Muslim neighbors—for food, for milk—because I had two sisters at a very young age. They [eventually] died during the war, of malnutrition. My father used to go look for goat’s milk, at night during the bombardments, at the [home of local] shepherds. Mother also was nursing. A Muslim wet-nurse came to help nurse my sisters. That’s all I remember; I don’t recall the name, but only this help given by these Tunisian Muslims, in their own way, what they could, a gesture often made with selfless friendship, which enabled the saving of many lives...That is my humble testimony.²

Similarly, David Guez, who passed the war in the Tunisian city of Sfax, recalled what he termed “the fair and exemplary” attitude of Arabs toward Jews. “Really, their behavior was wonderful,” he said. “I won’t forget the Arab who helped me and allowed me to get an extra loaf of bread every day. Even though it was difficult to obtain bread—you had to wait in line—he [the Arab baker] would give me an extra loaf. That was a great thing.”³

Abraham Cohen related the story of his family’s flight from the Allied bombing of Tripoli. Arabs took them in and rented the family an apartment, but Cohen remembered the episode as much more than a financial transaction. “[The Arabs welcomed us] in an extraordinary way, the truth has to be told,” he later said. “They received us, they gave us water and food and whoever was missing things, they brought it to us. [They were] simply partners with all of this, together; what was ours and what was theirs was the same.”⁴ Ezra Yosef, also from Tripoli, had a similar recollection: “Every evening there [were] bombings in the city...so we fled to the fields and the Arabs gave us their

homes—for money, of course. [We] paid them and they went to sleep outside or made themselves tents but [there were] always good relations.”⁵

Emile Tubiana, who wrote an unpublished memoir of his childhood in the Tunisian town of Béja, scene of heavy wartime fighting, gave this account of his family’s flight into the countryside:

Around noon we reached the Nezer farm which had become a commune, housing thirty families. We were warmly welcomed with hugs and kisses. The farmer set aside a stable as a dormitory for us and delivered a cartload of hay for bedding. Everyone tried to make us feel at home, they warmed us up with a rich soup after our tiring journey. At last we felt secure and happy.⁶

Victor Cohen, from Tunis, differentiated between the hostility toward Jews displayed by Arabs in the capital city and the welcoming approach of Arabs in the hinterland. “[I]n the south, the Arabs helped the Jews. They took them to their homes in the mountains. In my family, I have uncles who got shelter at the homes of the Arabs—they gave them food, everything kosher, they had it good—but in the city they [the Arabs] gave them [the Jews] a lot of problems.”⁷

Some Arabs even stepped forward to protect Jewish property from predators, be they European or other Arabs. Yaacov Zrivy, from a small town near Sfax, recalled how the Germans and their Arab collaborators instilled fear in the hearts of Jews. But still, he said, “the truth was that not everyone was like that. There were those who would hide the money of the Jews. They said: ‘We will keep watch over you, that way nothing will happen to you, no Arab will do anything to you.’” And, as he said, “The Arabs watched over the Jews.”⁸

And then there were Arabs who protected Jewish lives, not just safeguarded Jewish property. Tzvi Haddad, whose mother was knifed in the throat by an Arab during the

Gabès pogrom, a story I told in Chapter 4, recalled an act of kindness by another Arab that occurred just seconds later:

Who saved her? Another Arab ...I remember his name and the way he looks, he came with a bicycle, passing from there. When he saw me he said: “Are you the son of Rabbi Yehoshua?” I tell him “Yes.” He started to yell at that Arab [who attacked my mother], he smacked his hand, and the guy fled away.⁹

During a May 2004 visit to Tunis, I was escorted around the city’s Jewish landmarks by an engaging professor named André Abitbol. As we walked the streets, he told a captivating tale of one of his wife’s relatives, a well-to-do man named Albert Bessis, who evidently passed much of the German occupation hiding in the cellar of an imposing townhouse at one of the city’s most fashionable addresses, 19 Avenue de Paris. German officers had requisitioned the residence, one of the city’s finest, and were living just upstairs. Every day, said Abitbol, an Arab chauffeur—a man remembered only as Kaddour—brought messages, packages, and mail to the Germans above and took the opportunity to deliver a parcel of food to Albert below. Thanks to Kaddour, Albert survived the German occupation.¹⁰

One of the fondest recollections of Arab attitudes toward Jews—moving in its simplicity—was offered by the Libyan-born Israeli Victor Kanaf, who had been known in his hometown of Benghazi as Vittorio Janch. The relationship between the two communities, he said, was “as if in a honeymoon.”¹¹

A number of testimonies recount stories of Arab camp guards who specifically opted out of the sadistic torture their European overseers (and many of their fellow Arabs) inflicted on Jews and other prisoners; some even secretly found ways to ease the discomfort of Jews. For example, Yehuda Chachmon was a Libyan Jew in an Italian internment camp at Giado, south of Tripoli. In this desolate spot, mistreatment was atrocious but disease even more feared. Of the approximately 2,600 Jews herded into Giado, 562 inmates died in less than a year, mostly from typhus; the death toll at Giado was the highest of all

North African labor camps.¹² Still, Chachmon recalled that whereas the Italian guards treated the Jews “with brutality,” the attitude of Arabs under Italian command “was excellent.”

We were in good relations with them. When they see a Jew, they don't talk to him, they don't torture him, they don't make trouble for him. The trouble only came with the Italian major in the camp.... The attitude of the Italian police was different from the attitude of the Arab police.¹³

Even the account by five Polish Jews of barbaric treatment at Vichy labor camps in Morocco included references to humane acts by the Arab guards. In describing the setting at the discipline camp of ‘Ain al-Ourak, an especially hellish place outside the southern Moroccan transit and mining town of Bou Arfa, the former internees noted that thirty Arab guards patrolled the camp, supervised by a French sergeant. According to their account, the guard troop “was changed monthly in case the Arabs began to sympathise with the prisoners.” This was evidently not such an unusual occurrence, as the onetime prisoners went on to add that “there was no fear of this with the others”—that is, the French officers and Legionnaires stationed at the camp.

Indeed, in a report that recounts numerous episodes of sadistic torture meted out on hapless prisoners—Jewish and gentile alike—the flashes of humanity of the Arab guards of ‘Ain al-Ourak at times peek through the story's grisly, numbing details.

Once, when the temperature was 80 degrees centigrade [*sic*] and they had been given no water all day, the prisoners refused to work any more and went to the lieutenant in charge of the camp—Lt. Grunter (formerly an adjutant chef, a German naturalized French)—to ask for water. He refused and ordered them back to work. When they would not disperse he ordered the guards to open fire. The Arab guards purposely shot wide but two French guards wounded two men.¹⁴

In “shooting wide,” the willful disobedience by some Arab guards almost surely saved some Jewish lives; the prisoners were aware of what the Arabs had done, were grateful to them, and reported it to the British for posterity.

Not to be forgotten are those Arabs who were persecuted, and sometimes killed, alongside Jews. In Morocco and Algeria, some Arabs were dispatched to desert concentration camps at the same time as Jews and other Vichy opponents. In Tunisia, as the Allies were on the verge of breaking through Axis lines, the Germans ultimately drafted Arabs into forced labor when the Jewish community exhausted its own manpower.

In his brutally realistic camp memoir, a Jewish internee named Jacob André Guez tells a complex story that, on the one hand, features violent Arab camp guards and Arab profiteers and, on the other hand, fellow Arab laborers and even Arabs who—on two occasions—help him and a comrade escape from Bizerte and go back to Tunis. Some Arabs are good and some are bad, but as Guez’s story unfolds, Arabs come across as increasingly sympathetic and human. His story ultimately ends with Guez making his way home after an Arab wagon driver hides him among sacks of black-market coffee.¹⁵

Sometimes, unusual expressions of comradeship between Jewish and Arab internees at Vichy labor camps buoyed the spirits of imprisoned Jews. At Cheragas-Meridja, in the Algerian desert, Vichy banished thousands of Jews who had enlisted in the French army to fight Germans. They were designated as *pionniers Israelites*, a special status that made them prisoners in all but name. The camp also housed Arab prisoners, interned for their opposition to French colonial rule. There, a Captain Suchet, the commandant, repeatedly tried to incite tensions between Jews and Arabs. He failed, however, when the bond of their common Fascist enemy proved stronger than the mutual enmity that Suchet had counted on.¹⁶

It was not unusual for Arabs and Jews to face the pain and torture of Vichy labor camps side by side. At the Djenien Bou-Rezg camp, also in the Algerian desert, Lieutenant

Pierre de Ricko, the sadistic White Russian who served as commandant, gave Arab, Jewish, and French anti-Fascist prisoners the same heavy workload, fed them the same inedible food, and imposed on them the same harsh discipline.¹⁷ Similarly, at the Djelfa camp—scene of Harry Alexander’s two-year ordeal described in Chapter 4—a number of Arabs suffered alongside Jews, Spanish Republicans, and other inmates. A Czech businessman who survived eight months at the camp and later gave a riveting account of its cruelties, specifically recalled the names of several prisoners killed on the watch of its depraved commandant, J. Caboche, one of whom was an Algerian named Kaddour Belkain.¹⁸

If the story of Nazi, Vichy, and Fascist persecution of Jews in Arab lands is not well known, then the story of Nazi, Vichy, and Fascist persecution of Arabs in Arab lands is even less so. In the grand sweep of history, it is but a footnote. Nevertheless, these stories—and the images they conjure up—are important. Not only do they underscore the larger reality of the Holocaust’s long reach into the Arab world, but they help recall a moment when at least some Arabs and some Jews shared in the suffering imposed by common persecutors.

Algiers was the setting for one of the war’s most remarkable episodes of Arab solidarity with Jews.

Unique among French overseas possessions, Algeria was neither a colony nor a protectorate; it was instead an integral part of France. According to French law, Algiers was as French as Nice, Marseille, or Bordeaux. But though the land was French, its inhabitants were not. In the early decades of French control, the native peoples of Algeria—Muslims and Jews, there were no native Christians—were not counted as French *citoyens*. Although they had some of the obligations of citizenship (taxation, for example), they had none of its rights. Instead, they retained their status as indigenous people and governed themselves under their own communal and religious laws.

For Jews, that situation changed in 1870, when the Crémieux decree offered French citizenship to all Algerian-born Jews who were willing, in return, to agree to submit to French personal law. To Jews who had looked to France as their life preserver against the rising storm of Arab cultural and, later, political consciousness, the Crémieux decree was a godsend. Thousands of families accepted the bargain and became French citizens.

The Crémieux decree had its enemies. It was the *bête noire* of France's anti-Semitic political right that—especially after the Dreyfus affair—demanded its cancellation. One constituency that lobbied strenuously against the decree was Algeria's French colonists, known as *colons*. Many of them were unreconstructed anti-Semites who argued that the Crémieux decree not only opened the doors of France to noxious Jews but also set a dangerous precedent that would one day be extended to Muslims. It was no surprise when the Pétain regime, in one of its very first acts, did precisely what the *colons* demanded and annulled the decree.

But the Pétainists went even further: They retroactively stripped citizenship from *all* Jews (and their descendants) who had ever earned it under the terms of the decree. Of the 106,986 Algerian Jews who enjoyed French citizenship on the eve of France's surrender in 1940, Vichy summarily removed citizenship from 98.5 percent. In so doing, Vichy France joined Hitler's Germany as the only two countries during the war to strip citizenship legally and systematically from their Jewish population.¹⁹

Satisfying the demands of French colonists was not the only reason that Vichy officials canceled the Crémieux decree. They also believed it would help bolster their flagging stature among Algeria's Arab population.²⁰ As noted earlier, France's swift and embarrassing defeat by Germany had hurt its prestige, a key element in keeping any restive population at bay. The Germans themselves had made further inroads among Arabs by releasing hundreds of Arab political detainees held by the French, providing special services (mosques, Arabic newspapers, and so on) to the 90,000 Arab soldiers held as French army prisoners of war in Europe, and setting up Arabic radio stations broadcasting in local dialects.²¹ Vichy found itself engaged not so much in a battle *for* the

hearts and minds of Arabs but rather in a struggle *against* the erosion of its power and the rise of German influence in its stead. Vichyites looked for ways to win Arab support but did not want to raise the status of Arabs to achieve it. Instead, they figured they could accomplish the same ends by lowering the status of Jews.

They were wrong. By and large, Algerian Arabs saw through the French ruse and generally refused to take part, even though some may have enjoyed short-term political benefits. “Your racism runs in all directions,” nationalist leader Ferhat Abbas commented on Vichy. “Today against the Jews and always against the Arabs.”²² On the cancellation of the Crémieux decree, Messali Hadj, jailed head of the Parti Populaire Algérien, said: “[This] cannot be considered as progress for the Algerian people—lowering the rights of Jews did not increase the rights of Muslims.”²³

Surprisingly, one of the main sources of pro-Jewish sympathy among the Arab population of Algiers was the Muslim religious establishment. Here, the shining star was Abdelhamid Ben Badis, leader of Algeria’s *Islah* (Reform) Party. Ben Badis was an intensely devout man with a modern, open, tolerant view of the world; among his many achievements was the founding of the Algerian League of Muslims and Jews. Regrettably, he died in spring 1940, before he could lend his personal strength and charisma to the Muslim response to Vichy’s coming to power.

During the Vichy era, that mantle was worn by Shaykh Taieb el-Okbi. Like Ben Badis, el-Okbi was a reformist leader who cultivated close ties with the leading Jews of Algiers; the latter, in return, repaid the favor by directing Jewish donations to el-Okbi’s favorite charities. El-Okbi showed his mettle in early 1942. When he heard rumors that leaders of a French pro-Fascist group, the *Légion Française des Combattants*, were prodding Muslim troops to launch a pogrom against the Jews of Algiers, el-Okbi did all he could to prevent it, including issuing a formal prohibition on Muslims from attacking Jews. Indeed, one historian favorably likened el-Okbi to the celebrated philo-Semitic French archbishops Saliège and Gerlier, both of whom have been recognized by Yad Vashem for rescuing Jews. This historian, however, noted one difference—that the level of “great personal

risk” el-Okbi bore for campaigning on behalf of Jews exceeded those of these French Catholic prelates.²⁴

From the pulpits of Algiers mosques, imams also issued instruction to local Muslims not to take advantage of Jewish suffering for financial gain. This act of self-denial, at a time when many French colonists were getting rich at the expense of Jews, was an especially noble act on the part of the local Muslim community.

Vichy law required Jewish property owners to turn over their fixed assets to conservators who would manage the business affairs in trust. In reality, this arrangement presented the conservator with a lucrative opportunity to make windfall profits; not only did the conservator receive a fee for his services, but he also had the leeway to manage the business so that it was advantageous to his own personal interests. Although a few conservators accepted the job as a way to safeguard the goods of Jewish friends, these people were—in the words of one historian—“absolutely exceptional.”²⁵ Much more frequently, Vichy administrators used the appointment of conservators as political plums, both to reward loyal supporters and entice reluctant ones into the fold. As part of their effort to bolster popular support for Vichy, local officials repeatedly tried to enlist Arabs to serve as conservators. Everyone knew that the appointments were thinly veiled bribes.

To their great credit, not a single Arab in Algiers stepped forward to accept Vichy’s offer. One Friday in 1941, religious leaders throughout the city gave sermons warning all good Muslims to refuse all French offers to serve as conservators of Jewish property. They even forbade Muslims from purchasing auctioned Jewish goods at below-market prices. Despite the economic difficulties faced by Arabs during the war, they refused to take advantage of Jewish suffering for personal gain. And, true to their imams’ call, not a single Arab took the opportunity of quick financial gain either to serve as a trustee-conservator or to purchase Jewish property at Vichy-mandated fire-sale prices.²⁶

In a postwar interview, José Aboulker—the brave hero of the largely Jewish resistance of Algiers—praised the city’s Arab population this way:

The Arabs do not participate [in the fight against Vichy]. It is not their war. But, as regards the Jews, they are perfect. The [Vichy] functionaries [and] the German agents try to push them into demonstrations and pogroms. In vain. When Jewish goods were put up for public auction, an instruction went around the mosques: “Our brothers are suffering misfortune. Do not take their goods.” Not one Arab became an administrator [of property] either. Do you know other examples of such an admirable, collective dignity?²⁷

Taken together, these stories of Arabs helping Jews offer testimony to the fact that even the harsh realities of war could not extinguish simple human generosity. At another time, in another place, many of the acts they describe would not be noteworthy. But because of when they occurred and where they occurred, these stories are truly extraordinary.

So far, most of the Arabs whose stories I have told—the camp guards, fellow prisoners, and mosque preachers cited above—have been nameless. It is only through the memory of those Jews who benefited from their kindness that we are able to recount their good deeds; these Arabs never received public recognition for opening their hearts to Jews facing persecution. Not all are anonymous, however. Thanks to testimonies, archives, memoirs, and sometimes, sheer serendipity, we are privileged to know the names of some of those Arabs who helped save Jews from pain, injury, and perhaps death.

The most famous was Sultan Muhammad V of Morocco, the third son of Sultan Moulay Yusef, scion of the Alaouite family that had ruled Morocco since 1649. Born in 1910, Muhammad was handpicked by the French to succeed his father when he was just seventeen years old. The French thought that the young prince would be a compliant client in their colonial adventure, but it was not too long before Muhammad V showed flashes of independence. Indeed, his support for the nationalist cause eventually became a nettlesome thorn in the side of the French, so much so that Muhammad V was exiled to Corsica and then Madagascar in the early 1950s. But France’s strong-arm tactics

succeeded only in feeding nationalist sentiments. In November 1955, the French changed tack and brought Muhammad V back to Morocco, where he was hailed a hero. In February 1956, he concluded an agreement with Paris for Morocco's full independence. The following year, he took the title of king and reigned until his death in 1961.

For Muhammad V, World War II was an especially precarious time. As the sovereign of a French protectorate, he reigned but did not rule. Apart from the small Spanish zone in the north,²⁸ French troops controlled the country, and the French resident-general presented recommendations to the sultan that were commands in all but name. Still, he was not entirely powerless; the symbolic influence of his office meant much to the French, and the sultan often used it to his and his country's advantage. By all accounts, Muhammad V did not share the pro-German sympathies that were common among Arab elites of the day. He was especially appalled that Vichy based its anti-Jewish laws on race (how much Jewish blood someone had) rather than religion (whether someone professed to be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim). This violated a central tenet of Islam, which welcomes converts as full members of the faith, juridically equal in status to other Muslims. Vichy's anti-Jewish laws declared people Jewish if their parents were Jewish, regardless of whether they professed to be Jewish. Not only did the new French edicts offend whatever sensibilities Muhammad V may have had regarding his concern for his consistently loyal Jewish subjects, but they also insulted the sultan's generations-old role as descendant of the Prophet and "Commander of the Faithful."

On October 31, 1940, less than a month after Pétain signed Vichy's anti-Jewish statute, the sultan affixed his royal seal to the application of the law in Morocco. But he did so only after wringing from the French two concessions: first, that Jews in Morocco would be defined by religious choice, not by race or parentage; and second, that prohibitions against Jewish professionals and quotas on Jewish students would not apply to exclusively Jewish institutions, such as religious schools and communal charities. The second concession had a very practical implication—Jewish communal life in Morocco continued without much disruption by Vichy authorities. Not only did Jewish schools escape the suffocating strictures that Vichy applied to schools in Algeria, but they

continued to receive much of their budget—up to 80 percent— from the government treasury.²⁹ As for the first concession, its implications were more symbolic than practical. Very few Jews in Morocco avoided Vichy penalties on property and professions by proclaiming themselves Muslim. But some Moroccan Jews did take comfort from the fact that the sultan refused to allow the outsiders from Vichy to discard one of the fundamentals of Moroccan society—that his subjects were defined by faith, not by race.

In private, Muhammad V offered vital moral support to the Jews of Morocco. When French authorities ordered a census of all Jewish-owned property in the country, the Jewish leadership feared this was the precursor to a general confiscation. Secretly, the sultan arranged for a group of prominent Jews to sneak into the palace, hidden in a covered wagon so he could meet them away from the prying eyes of the French. According to one of those present, he promised the Jews that he would protect them and assured them that the census was not the first step in a plan to seize their goods and property. (After the Anglo-American invasion of Morocco, the sultan arranged for the destruction of the census documents.)³⁰

As important as these private statements were, public statements the sultan made on behalf of his Jewish subjects burnished his reputation even more. At the annual Throne Day ceremony, with the elite of Moroccan and Vichy officialdom gathered at the royal palace, the sultan made a point of welcoming the leaders of the Jewish community in attendance. “I must inform you that, just as in the past, the Israelites will remain under my protection,” he said in a voice loud enough for Vichy officers and at least one French journalist to get the message. “I refuse to make any distinction between my subjects.”³¹

Thanks to such acts of solicitude toward his Jewish subjects, Moroccan Jewish lore celebrates Sultan Muhammad V as a savior, one of the finest, fairest, and most tolerant rulers Jews had ever known. His reputation has taken on mythic proportions, with Moroccan Jews even inventing tales of his heroism.³² The truth is that the sultan’s statements and actions on behalf of the Jews, however noble they were in sentiment, did not substantially affect the implementation of Vichy’s policy of “state anti-Semitism” in

its Moroccan protectorate, which the French executed either directly or through their agents in the sultan's court, such as El Mokri, the anti-Semitic grand vizier. Still, the sultan remains a beloved hero to Moroccan Jews, inside and outside the kingdom.³³

Less famous in terms of protecting Jewish interests, but no less deserving of recognition, were Tunisia's wartime rulers, Ahmed Pasha Bey and, especially, his cousin Moncef Bey, heirs to another North African dynasty, the Husseinids. ("Bey" is an honorific title of Ottoman Turkish origin adopted by North African princes.) Like the sultan of Morocco, the beys of Tunis operated within the tight confines of a French protectorate and had little room for independent maneuver. When a Vichy emissary demanded that Ahmed Pasha sign a local version of the anti-Jewish statute, the bey had no choice but to acquiesce. And like the sultan, the Tunisian princes offered vital gestures of public support for Jews facing Vichy persecution, such as Moncef Bey's statement soon after ascending the throne expressing concern for "*all* the population of the regency."³⁴

But, in some respects, the Tunisians did even more. A loophole in the Tunisian version of Vichy anti-Jewish laws gave the ruler the right to grant exemptions to native Tunisian Jews who had performed exceptional service to the state. Ahmed Bey took advantage of this oversight to exempt two leading Jewish personalities—Roger Nataf, an ophthalmologist, and Paul Ghez, the man who later served as head of the Jewish labor bureau during the German occupation. Ahmed Bey's successor, Moncef Bey, went even further. He signaled his solidarity with his persecuted Jewish subjects, as well as his independence from Vichy, by brashly awarding the highest royal distinction to about twenty prominent Jews just eight days after he ascended the throne.

Five months later, the Germans arrived. With thousands of German troops occupying his country and the prospect that the fate of the entire global conflict could be determined on its soil, Moncef Bey faced a set of circumstances that no other Arab leader had to confront. His self-interests were in conflict. A proud Tunisian, he wanted to tap the surge of nationalist spirit that accompanied France's military defeats in 1940 and 1942, but unlike so many other Tunisian patriots of the day, he knew that the Germans were

themselves no friends to the idea of Arab independence.³⁵ A modern man, he appreciated the contributions Tunisian Jews had made to the social, economic, and cultural development of his country and wanted to do what he could to protect them from the greed and brutality of the invaders, but he did not, in the process, want to do anything that might trigger the Germans' wrath against him or his country.³⁶

So, Moncef Bey played a double game. On the one hand, in November 1942, he refused President Roosevelt's direct appeal to side with the Allies and did not put up even symbolic resistance to the arrival of German forces.³⁷ On the other hand, he was responsible for numerous individual acts of protection toward Jews. His handpicked prime minister, Mohamed Chenik, a businessman with long-standing ties to the Tunisian Jewish community, regularly warned Jewish leaders of German plans, helped Jews avoid arrest orders, intervened to prevent deportations, and even hid individual Jews so they could evade a German dragnet. Acting in the name of the bey, cabinet ministers gave special dispensations to some young Jewish men so they could avoid forced labor and tried to intervene with German authorities on behalf of Jewish hostages. Even members of the royal court hid Jews who had escaped from German labor camps. All the while, Moncef Bey invested great effort at promoting a sense of Tunisian nationalism, across regions and religions. He not only traveled to some of the most remote parts of the country, but he also offered funds from the royal treasury to build mosques, schools, and even a mausoleum to a revered Jewish holy man. As one historian wrote, "The actions of Moncef Bey and his government prevented the Tunisian people from letting themselves be seduced by the German sirens and above all to maintain unity."³⁸

Like Sultan Muhammad V in Morocco, Moncef Bey is certainly remembered with fondness by Tunisia's Jewish community. "The Bey of Tunis did a lot to save Jews," recalled Mordechai Cohen.³⁹ He "actually gave the Jews equal treatment," said Shlomo Barad. "He did not allow them to be discriminated."⁴⁰ To the credit of the Bey, said Mathilde Guez of Sousse, he gathered all the senior officials of the realm at the Bardo palace and reportedly issued the following warning: "The Jews are having a hard time but

they are under our patronage and we are responsible for their lives. If I find out that an Arab informer caused even one hair of a Jew to fall, this Arab will pay with his life.”⁴¹

Although some of these memories have surely grown over time into legend, reflecting perhaps wistfulness for a bygone age, they do seem to express accurately the sentiment that many Tunisian Jews had for their country's ruling family. A sizable Jewish contingent marched in Moncef Bey's funeral procession, in 1948, despite the fact that the Free French had deposed and exiled him for allegedly collaborating with the Germans. Indeed, the gratitude of Tunisian Jews toward the princely family continued decades after the war.

When I visited Tunis in May 2004, Professor Abitbol took me to pay a call on the elderly Grand Rabbi Haim Madar, whose book-filled apartment was on the second floor of a nondescript building on Rue de Palestine. (A chief rabbi living on Rue de Palestine—such is the complexity of Jewish life in an Arab land!) His next-door neighbor, remarkably enough, was Sidi Chedli Bey, the ninety-four-year-old son of the last hereditary ruler of Tunisia. Without prior introduction, Chedli Bey warmly received us. Bedridden and shrunken with age, he nevertheless was lively, alert, and eager to talk. He told this story: When Tunisian nationalists, led by Habib Bourghuiba, declared independence in 1956, they deposed the bey and confiscated the princely family's wealth and property. Tunisia's Jews, he said, stepped forward to help. They not only paid for his apartment, but they also paid the fees for his son's education. Given the anti-royalist political environment in which it occurred, such generosity could only reflect the genuine gratitude of the bey's Jewish subjects for his support in times of crisis.

Moncef Bey was not the only Tunisian leader to trigger fond memories among Tunisia's Jewish community for helping Jews during the war. At that critical moment in the country's history, when the great powers played out their global contest on Tunisian soil, Moncef gathered around him a court and government composed of Tunisia's most worldly and enlightened men, such as the prime minister, Chenik, and the court minister, Aziz Djellouli, a liberal Muslim thinker and former mayor of Tunis. Balancing between

the French authorities, the German occupiers, and the insurgent Allied forces, their task was to safeguard Tunisia's autonomy, or what was left of it, and to protect Tunisians. Helping Jews—often individually, sometimes collectively— was a constant effort. They did not always succeed. Indeed, when Claire and Lila Scemla pleaded with Djellouli to intercede to save their husbands, the story I told in the opening chapter of this book, the Arab notable wearily admitted that he was powerless.⁴² But sometimes they did succeed, quietly, to secure the release of Jewish hostages, warn Jewish leaders of impending arrests, or slow down the execution of an anti-Jewish statute. For this reason, Jews in Tunisia remember Chenik, Djellouli, and their fellows as friends in times of need.⁴³

One of the most remarkable examples of Arab generosity toward Jews in distress is the story of Si Ali Sakkat. At least two postwar accounts of the German occupation written by Tunisian Jews makes at least passing reference to his exploits.⁴⁴ But his selflessness is long forgotten. His is truly a lost story.

Born in the 1870s, Si Ali Sakkat hailed from a noble Muslim family, the ahl Quraysh, which traces its lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. From an early age, Si Ali dedicated himself to a career in public service. He rose from being a humble prefect in out-of-the-way provincial towns to become the appointed mayor of Tunis. He was eventually named a minister in the princely court, where he served as *ministre de la plume et la consultation*, a position whose quaint title possessed some of the most important powers in the government, including many of the responsibilities of a modern-day minister of justice, minister of internal affairs, and chief of staff.

Si Ali was the product of the Arab liberal age of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a brief but intense burst of enlightenment and modernism that brought important European political, social, and cultural reforms to Arab societies. With its vibrant and diverse population of Italians, French, Maltese, and other Europeans, Tunisia was especially receptive to these liberal ideals. To be sure, the moment was fleeting, and the reforms— from modern dress to written constitutions—often consisted of shallow imitations of Western style. Nevertheless, the short-lived liberal age is still cited by

today's Arab reformers and democrats as proof that they are returning to their roots, not breaking wholly new ground.

Like other shining lights of the liberal age, Si Ali was known to be an enlightened, modern man, open to debate and tolerant of opposing views. Family members praise him and his wife—Lilia Baccouche, the daughter of a prominent Tunisian general—for instilling these ideals in their five children. After Si Ali's long and productive career in government, he and Lilia retired to a 740-acre farm he had purchased in the mid-1920s. There, he spent more than twenty years as a gentleman farmer, away from the nationalist maelstrom in Tunis, where men of his generation—who saw no conflict between their national consciousnesses and their loyalty to the royal court—were being squeezed, first out of politics and then out of history. Si Ali eventually died in 1954, two years before Tunisian independence replaced the ruling family with a republic.

The Sakkat family farm lies in Bir Halima, at the base of the 4,248-foot high Jebel Zaghouan, in the valley that bears the name of the mountain, a lush, broad, cereal-producing breadbasket south of Tunis. Zaghouan is celebrated for being the source of fresh water to ancient Carthage, Rome's historic competitor for dominance over the Mediterranean. Parts of a forty-mile aqueduct still tower over the road to Tunis today.

When Si Ali bought the farm, it was already a fully functioning operation. Fields of wheat took up much of the land, but there was still room for hundreds of sheep and groves of olive and almond trees. A small wadi ran through the property, feeding the well that was set up in the back of the large garden that unfolded for more than a hundred yards from beneath the window of the main house's master bedroom.

What set the Sakkat farm apart from others in the Zaghouan valley was its Spanish-style hacienda architecture. It was built in a square with a large courtyard, at the far end of which was the main house, with garages, a barn, storerooms, and other structures filling in the four sides. The most striking feature were the castles, turrets, and ramparts, and a tower that topped the hacienda walls. Inside the main house, the central hallway was

graced with a ceiling that rose nearly twenty feet high, with rooms off to every side. The door to each room was decorated with inlaid tile atop the doorpost. On top of each door was an Arabic inscription beseeching Allah to grant prosperity to all who dwelled therein.

I have provided this detailed account of Si Ali's farm because that is where this story takes place. I visited the site in May 2004, escorted by Kamal Sakkat, eldest son of Hedi, the son of Si Ali to whom had fallen responsibility for the farm's upkeep. I had been looking for relatives of Si Ali for months, without success. Thanks to a stroke of good fortune, a close Tunisian colleague of mine introduced me to Kamal after realizing that he and Kamal shared the same coffee klatch in an upscale café in La Marsa, a chic suburb of Tunis. In the rundown state in which I found it, the farm looked like a ramshackle countryside ranch that Don Quixote might have stumbled upon in his wanderings through Andalusia. Seventy years ago, when Si Ali settled into the life of a gentleman farmer, it must have been paradise.

Based on the sketchy details of postwar memoirs and other sources, Si Ali Sakkat's story is as follows: At a critical point of the battle for Tunisia, fighting raged in the Zaghuan valley. With cannons firing and bombs falling all around them, a group of about sixty Jewish workers at a nearby Axis labor camp took the opportunity of the battle to escape. Seeking refuge, they found their way to the walled gate of Si Ali's farm. The former government minister turned country squire opened his home to all of them, provided them with lodging and food, and safely kept them under his care until the Allies took the Zaghuan valley on their way to Tunis and Bizerte. Thanks to him, the sixty survived what might have otherwise been a dangerous, perhaps deadly, ordeal.⁴⁵

I went to Si Ali's farm in Bir Halima hoping to learn more. In Kamal, I had an obliging host. As he escorted me about the farm's grounds, he offered a loving sketch of his grandfather's simple kindnesses—to workers, to neighbors, to others—that provided adequate explanation of motive for Si Ali's generosity toward the Jewish laborers. Visiting the farm itself and seeing the geography also gave me a clear understanding of the opportunity Si Ali Sakkat had to lend a helping hand to Jews in need.

Kamal showed me that Si Ali's farm lies just several hundred yards from the site of a small airstrip that, he said, the Axis forces built hastily in early 1943. Indeed, it is the first property on the far side of a transit road that separated the farm from the land that housed the airstrip. Jewish laborers were evidently dispatched from Tunis to Zaghouan first to build the strip and then to clear it of debris from Allied bombs. By a contemporary account, Zaghouan was one of the worst labor sites, especially in the first days of the occupation, with Jews crowded together in hangars under the open sky, exposed to cold and rain.⁴⁶ As the Allied noose tightened around Tunis, the Zaghouan valley was on the front line. Whether the Jewish workers actually escaped or found themselves caught in the middle of the battle is uncertain; what does appear clear is that they made their way across the wheat fields and sought refuge at the imposing, fortress-like gates of Si Ali's compound.

They were lucky to come knocking at Si Ali's door. Not all landowners would have so readily offered to shelter Jews escaping from an Axis labor camp. After all, Tunisia had been the setting for pitched battles for several months, with both Axis and Allied forces winning some territory, losing it, and then winning it back again; one could never truly be sure which side would come out on top—or for how long. But the Jews who arrived at Si Ali's farm found what they were looking for—and more.

From a springtime visit to Zaghouan today, it is surprisingly easy to conjure up an image of Si Ali Sakkat, a stately Arab nobleman, opening his rambling property to a group of ragged, fugitive Jews. The Spanish-style courtyard included a warren of garages, storerooms, closets, and other potential hiding places. The main house itself contained one high-ceilinged room after another, all with the same Arabic inscription overhead. And behind the main house was an animal pen—large, broad, and deep—in which some from the group most likely found shelter. Sixty fleeing men is no small number, but Si Ali's compound could accommodate them.

Though the farm had lost some of its luster, it had lost none of its mystique. As Kamal led me through the grounds, a wife of one of his current workers came up to him and kissed his hand, just as one might imagine workers' wives kissing his grandfather's hand decades ago. Kamal asked me not to discuss the circumstances of his grandfather's act of kindness toward Jews in front of the farm laborers; they just would not understand, he said, with a hint of sadness. But back then, the bonds of loyalty and honor that defined the relationship between his grandfather and his workers were such that if Si Ali told his farmhands to open the gates, make coffee, and fetch blankets for the newcomers, they almost surely did so both in haste and in silence.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Si Ali's story—as told to me both by Kamal during our visit to the farm in Bir Halima and by his younger brother Ali, with whom I sipped beer at a Left Bank café in Paris eighteen months later—is that no one in the Sakkat family had ever before heard about their grandfather's generosity toward Jews. Even though references to Si Ali's exploits appeared in at least two books describing the wartime experience of Tunisia's Jewish community, no one had ever brought this to their attention. And according to both brothers, none of the escapees ever contacted the Sakkat family after the war to express his gratitude. Evidently, I was the first person to present the Sakkats with the story of Si Ali's heroic gesture, more than six decades after the fact.

Perhaps more amazing is the fact that Kamal and Ali had the same reaction when I described what happened in Bir Halima in 1943. Each said the story of their grandfather's generosity toward Jews rang true. That is because it sounded eerily similar to a different Sakkat family story, a tale of their grandfather's generosity toward Germans.

According to both Kamal and Ali, who each told me this story in such similar words and phrases that it seemed to have become the accepted family version, the gang of ragged men that knocked on the gate of their grandfather's farm were German soldiers who arrived after the Allied victory, not Jewish labor camp escapees who arrived before. When the Allies finally pushed the Germans out of Tunisia, forcing a crazed withdrawal of more than 200,000 German soldiers from the Cap Bon peninsula to Italy, many were

left behind. A group of defeated German troops—ordinary soldiers, the younger Sakkats made clear, not SS men—found their own way to Si Ali's compound. Si Ali evidently opened his gates, gave them shelter, and put them to work on the farm, so they could evade arrest as prisoners of war. How long they stayed on the farm is not clear.

Were there really two groups of escapees who sought refuge at Si Ali's farm? Or was the story of the German troops a fictitious tale, more in tune with Tunisia's anti-French political sensibilities, concocted to cover up Si Ali's generosity toward the Jews? It really does not matter. The two Jewish historians who wrote about wartime Tunisia more than a half century ago had no reason to fabricate a story of Si Ali's courageous rescue of Jews, so we have no reason to doubt it happened.⁴⁷ The fact that Si Ali never spoke of this, that it never became part of the proud Sakkat family legacy, and that its place in family lore was taken by an alternative, more politically correct, tale of wartime hospitality does not detract from that. And even if the two tales are true, the fact that Si Ali's farm was a place of refuge for young, scared, defeated German conscripts a continent away from their homes does not lessen the importance of what Si Ali did for the Jews. It only confirms his basic humanity.

Notes

1. For a firsthand account of the Murphy-Weygand Agreement, as the accord was commonly called, see Robert Murphy's memoirs, *Diplomat Among Warriors* (Doubleday, 1964), chaps. 5 and 6; for the official British history of this episode, see W. N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, vol. 1 (His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952), chap. 16; more generally, see James J. Dougherty, *The Politics of Wartime Aid: American Economic Assistance to France and French Northwest Africa, 1940–1946* (Greenwood, 1978).

2. E-mail correspondence with Mirella Hassan, May 22, 2003.

3. David Guez interview, January 12, 1965, in the archives of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

4. Abraham Cohen interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3558528.

5. Ezra Yosef interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3558537.

6. Emile Tubiana, unpublished memoir, 2004, p. 19.

7. Victor Cohen interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3562862.

8. Yaacov Zrivy interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3562517.

9. Tzvi Haddad interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3563297. Regrettably, Haddad did not name the Arab do-gooder.

10. Interview with André Abitbol, Tunis, May 2004.

11. Victor Kanaf interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3564406.

12. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times*, p. 122.

13. Yehuda Chachmon interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3562945.

14. "Barbaric Treatment of Jews and Aliens Interned in Morocco," PRO FO 371/36244, March 4, 1943.

15. Jacob André Guez, *Au Camp de Bizerte* (L'Harmattan, 2001), pp. 136–141.

16. See the report on Cheragas-Meridja, July 1943, CDJC 385–387. For more on this, see Jean-Dominique Merchet, "Quand Vichy internait ses soldats juifs d'Algérie," *Libération* (Paris), December 30, 1997.

17. Secours Populaire Algérien, *Le martyre des antifascistes dans les camps de concentration de l'Afrique du Nord*, pp. 11–14. For more on Arabs and Jews at Djenien

Bou-Rezg, see André Moine, *La déportation et la résistance en Afrique du Nord, 1939–1944* (Éditions Sociales, 1972), pp. 184, 214–215.

18. “Conditions in the North African Prison Camps—Told by Those Released,” press release of the International Brigade Association, London, March 3, 1943 (Karl Marx Library file).

19. The small number of Jews who retained citizenship usually owed this to their extraordinary service to France, such as having been a decorated war veteran. For a breakdown of Jewish citizenship, before and after the abrogation of the Crémieux decree, see Msellati, *Les juifs d’Algérie sous le régime de Vichy*, pp. 70–71.

20. Levisse-Touzé, *L’Afrique du Nord dans la guerre*, p. 107.

21. The 90,000 Arab POWs included 60,000 Algerians, 18,000 Moroccans, and 12,000 Tunisians. On prisoner releases, see Msellati, *Les juifs d’Algérie sous le régime de Vichy*, p. 91; on the POWs, see Levisse-Touzé, *L’Afrique du Nord dans la guerre*, pp. 109–110; on the radio stations, see *ibid.*, p. 107.

22. Quotation cited in Msellati, *Les juifs d’Algérie sous le régime de Vichy*, p. 99. Msellati also noted that when the Crémieux decree was reinstated in 1943, there were no protests by Algerian Arabs. To the contrary, nationalist leaders had confirmed to de Gaulle that the Arabs did not oppose the restoration of French citizenship to the Jews. See pp. 248 and 252.

23. Quotation cited in Aouate, “Les Algériens musulmans et les mesures antijuives du gouvernement de Vichy,” p. 190. In November 1940, one Arab member of the Algiers municipal council was even courageous enough to protest publicly against Vichy’s exclusion of a Jewish colleague from the annual Armistice Day commemoration—one of the most sacred days on the Pétainist calendar—by pointedly refusing to participate (p. 192). For more about Arab attitudes on the cancellation of the Crémieux decree, see Mahfoud Kaddache, “L’opinion politique musulman en Algérie et l’administration française (1939–1942),” *Revue d’Histoire de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* 114 (1979), pp. 95–115.

24. Testimonials about el-Okbi’s efforts on behalf of Jews were offered by Ferhat Abbas and the son of the leader of the Algiers Jewish community. For details discussed in

this paragraph, see Aouate, “Les Algériens musulmans,” pp. 195–198. Also see Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, pp. 194–195.

25. Msellati, *Les juifs d’Algérie sous le régime de Vichy*, p. 79.

26. See, for example, Levisse-Touzé, *L’Afrique du Nord dans la guerre*, pp. 154–155.

27. José Aboulker, “Témoignage: Alger, 8 Novembre 1942,” *France 1940–1945: Des juifs en résistance*, *Le Monde Juif* 152 (September–December 1994), pp. 146–147. Also, one of Aboulker’s co-conspirators in the Algiers resistance confirmed to me that two Algerian Berbers—Mohamed Sayah and his cousin Moamar—led another subgroup of saboteurs, the Orleansville cell. Private correspondence from Mario Faivre, handwritten, n.d. They are not listed in the detailed roster compiled by Msellati, *Les juifs d’Algérie sous le régime de Vichy*, pp. 276–281. For further details, see Gitta Amipaz-Silber, *The Role of the Jewish Underground in the American Landing in Algiers, 1940–1942* (Gefen, 1992).

28. The Spanish permitted the rise of even more virulent anti-Jewish and pro-Nazi sentiment in the area of northern Morocco under their control, although at times Franco expressed sympathy with the plight of Sephardic Jews under French control as a way to tweak the French. See Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les juifs du Maroc à l’époque de Vichy*, pp. 141–144, and Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa During the Second World War*, pp. 79–80.

29. Some ascribe this to a shrewd policy of the French resident-general, Noguès, who thought it wiser to keep Jews in Jewish schools than to have Jewish students expelled from state schools roaming the streets making mischief. See, for example, Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century*, p. 64.

30. Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les juifs du Maroc à l’époque de Vichy*, p. 161. Also, private discussion with Serge Berdugo, head of the Jewish community of Morocco, whose father, also head of the Jewish community, participated in the secret meeting with the sultan, April 12, 2006.

31. For a sympathetic account, see Assaraf, *Mohammed V et les juifs du Maroc à l’époque de Vichy*, pp. 129–133, 161.

32. In one story, a variation on the celebrated but equally apocryphal stand attributed to Denmark's King Christian X, the French resident-general announced that all Moroccan Jews had to wear the yellow Star of David. The sultan replied that the French had better order twenty extra, for him and all the members of the royal family. In another, the Germans informed the sultan that they planned to deport Moroccan Jews to death camps in Europe. According to the story, the sultan bravely came to the Jews' defense, declaring that none would be deported because all Moroccans are his children. There is no historical basis to these legends. (Regarding the latter, there is no evidence the Germans ever sought the deportation of Moroccan Jews.) See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 161.

33. Michel Abitbol goes even further: "To our knowledge, no anti-Jewish measure was ever suppressed or slowed down as a result of the Sultan's intervention." Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa During the Second World War*, p. 187. Ironically, the sultan's reputation among certain Muslims has also taken on legendary proportions. See, for example, Eqbal Ahmed, "Questions of Rights," *Dawn* (Pakistan), September 27, 1992.

34. Cited in Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa During the Second World War*, p. 76; emphasis added.

35. Habib Bourghuiba was an exception. Despite offers of support from the Axis, he never wavered in expressing sympathy for the Allies. See, for example, Levisse-Touzé, *L'Afrique du Nord dans la guerre*, pp. 361–364.

36. For a sympathetic account of Moncef Bey, see Said Mestiri, *Moncef Bey: Tome 1, le règne* (Arcs Éditions, 1998).

37. See Boretz, *Tunis sous le croix gammée*, p. 65.

38. Quotation from Rey-Goldzeiguer, "L'opinion publique tunisienne." Also see Nataf, "Les juifs de Tunisie," pp. 207–208, 225; and Juliette Bessis, "Les États-Unis et le protectorat tunisien dans la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale," *La Tunisie de 1939 à 1945: Actes du Quatrième Séminaire sur l'Histoire du Mouvement National* (Tunisian Ministry of Education, 1989), p. 204; Sabille, *Les juifs de Tunisie sous Vichy et l'occupation*, p. 137; and interview with Nataf, Paris, January 2003.

39. Mordechai Cohen interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3543755.

40. Shlomo Barad interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3543756.

41. Mathilde Guez interview, Yad Vashem oral history no. 3559094.

42. Gasquet manuscript, p. 21.

43. For example, interviews with Claude Nataf, Paris, January 2003, and André Abitbol, Tunis, May 2004.

44. “Si Ali Sakkat, former beylical minister, lodged sixty Jewish workers at his property in Zaghouan at a critical moment of the battle,” wrote Sabille, *Les juifs de Tunisie sous Vichy et l’occupation*, p. 137. A similar account can be found in a book written by the son of the wartime head of Tunisia’s Jewish community. See Borgel, *Étoile jaune et croix gammée*, p. 192.

45. Regrettably, no source states precisely when the Jewish escapees arrived at Si Ali’s farm so it is unclear how long they remained under his care.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

47. Despite my best efforts, I had no luck finding corroborating evidence in the form of personal testimonies from any of the sixty Jewish escapees.