

Arabs Who Saved the Jews

By Will Sullivan

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Since 1963, Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, has honored more than 21,000 people for rescuing Jews during the Holocaust. None have been Arab, and little has been written about the persecution of Jews in the Middle East and North Africa during World War II. It is a gap **Robert Satloff**, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, tackles in his new book, *Among the Righteous*, where he looks for hope in a region rife with Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism.



REMINDER. The remains of a camp in eastern Morocco
JENNIE LITVACK

What inspired you to write the book?

The emotional trigger was being in Manhattan on 9/11 and having the image of a puff of smoke emerging from the north tower [of the World Trade Center] morph in my mind into the chimneys of Auschwitz. That got me on the trail of thinking about Holocaust denial throughout the world. The political rationale was to try to find a single Arab who saved a single Jew, which I thought would be a twist that might help lance the boil of Holocaust denial.

How did you find these stories?

Without the Internet, I don't think this book could have been written. I had, for example, a posting on a website that serves the Jewish community of Tunisia. I'm living in Morocco, and I received an E-mail from a 71-year-old Tunisian Jewish woman living in California who tells her story of how when she was 11 years old, an Arab in her hometown in Tunisia saved her and her family.

How does the experience of Jews in the Middle East and North Africa compare with those in Europe during World War II?

The Holocaust is overwhelmingly a European story, and I think that's important for me to say. But for the people in Arab lands who suffered, their suffering was real and powerful and gripping and painful. When you look at the total experience, there were no death

camps set up in Arab lands. There were over 100 sites of forced labor that have been recognized by the German government. In one Italian camp in North Africa alone, where 2,500 people were interned, more than a quarter of them died from the terrible conditions.

How common were Arabs who saved Jews?

First, one should not make the yardstick too high. I myself found a handful of stories. You had examples of government officials warning Jews that the SS was going to come and arrest them. You had examples of government officials providing protection. I also tell stories of Arabs whose unusual kindness for Jews probably saved Jewish lives. It could be Arabs who took Jews into their homes after they'd escaped from bombed-out villages or Arab wet nurses who took in Jewish babies because Jews were at the bottom rung of the ration ladder.

Why have Jewish groups like Yad Vashem not pursued these stories more aggressively?

It's not Yad Vashem's job to track down rescuers. Their function is to vet the people who are proposed to them by others. However, at the same time, because of the powerful symbolic value and the importance of including a story of the Holocaust in Arab lands, I would have hoped that other institutions and other scholars would have done this before me.

Many of the relatives of Arabs who saved Jews did not know about their ancestors' actions. How did they react to your research?

I was surprised about how reluctant many of [them] were to join with me in celebrating the wonderful humanitarian deeds of their fathers and grandfathers. I don't want to say it applied to everyone I talked to. But I was shocked, for example, when I went into the home of the children and grandchildren of one humanitarian in Tunisia, and I wanted to ask their help in bringing to light this gentleman's great deeds. They said they had no idea, that they wanted more proof, and they were very happy to see me leave. Sometime over the last 60 years it became unacceptable to be seen as having saved Jews.

What reaction have you gotten from Arab readers?

The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. I think the most poignant response I received was from one Arab who wrote me and said, "Thank you for telling the stories of

heroes, but thank you also for telling the stories of villains. It is so important for the world to know that we Arabs are not cardboard cutouts."

You describe the book as "the most hopeful story I have ever told." How so?

I believe it provides tools to help to open people's minds. For me, the main target audience in the Arab world is not the jihadists. Their minds are closed. It is the vast middle, whose main characteristic is either ignorance or disinterest or being susceptible to various ideas. They're the people on the front lines of the greatest battle of our day, the battle against the ideology of radical extremism.

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