



Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach Into Arab Lands

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Thousands of people have been honored for saving Jews during the Holocaust--but not a single Arab. Looking for a hopeful response to the plague of Holocaust denial sweeping across the Arab and Muslim worlds, Robert Satloff sets off on a quest to find the Arab hero whose story will change the way Arabs view Jews, themselves, and their own history. The story of the Holocaust's long reach into the Arab world is difficult to uncover, covered up by desert sands and desert politics. We follow Satloff over four years, through eleven countries, from the barren wasteland of the Sahara, where thousands of Jews were imprisoned in labor camps; through the archways of the Mosque in Paris, which may once have hidden 1700 Jews; to the living rooms of octogenarians in London, Paris and Tunis. The story is very cinematic; the characters are rich and handsome, brave and cowardly; there are heroes and villains. The most surprising story of all is why, more than sixty years after the end of the war, so few people-- Arab and Jew--want this story told.

Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach Into Arab Lands Details

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Karen says

Fabulous historical research yielding stories we need to read. I had lived in Morocco for 12 years when I read it and never knew about the railroad built by forced labor (European Jewish prisoners) under Vichy France's control. More work like this needs to be done before the stories are lost.

Mohammed Saad says

[illegible]

Carol says

Important research that unearthed the Holocaust experiences of the Jews of North Africa. Satloff learned of Arabs who assisted the Vichy French and the Germans as they sent Jews to death in the labor camps of N. Africa. He also found and interviewed Jews who were rescued by Arabs. Finally, he questions why Israel has never recognized any Arabs among the Righteous who rescued Jews. He also discovered a complete ignorance among Jews and Arabs alike concerning this hidden part of WWII history.

Karen says

An important look at an often forgotten arena of WW2.

Laurence says

Very interesting though quite factual and dry. This is a non fiction by a Jewish PHD in Arab Studies who seeks to know if any Arabs helped any Jews during the Holocaust. What we find by association is that Arabs living in proximity to Jewish life was in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Libya..) and that there were over 100 concentration camps in these areas during the war. Being a Moroccan Jew, this was a fact I was totally ignorant of. It also sheds some life on what life was like in German-occupied North Africa.

I learned much, the subject was interesting, but again, due to the factual nature of the writing, I did find it dry.

Jennifer says

Maybe it's that I watched the documentary first, and the documentary focuses its attention very differently than the book, but I found this book quite disappointing. That's not to say that it wasn't well researched and written--although Satloff has a tendency to be extremely dry--but that it wasn't what I expected it to be.

Among the Righteous bills itself even in its subtitle as a book about trying to find stories of righteous (according to the Jewish definition) Arabs who helped Jews escape the Germans (and Vichy) during the North African occupation. What it actually is is an entire history (although a brief one) of the Vichy and Nazi occupations of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. This means that instead of focusing on redemptive stories (as the documentary does), the book focuses most of its attention on Arab participation in the occupation, period. We're told a lot of stories about Arab neighbors betraying Jewish families, of Arab guards tormenting Jewish prisoners, and of Arabic indifference to Jewish suffering. Despite the fact that Satloff mentions more than once that this is pretty much the same thing that happened in Europe, it feels divisive and condemning, and isn't what I'd been lead to believe the book would be like or about by the covers and my experience with the documentary.

When Satloff finally does tell about his success in finding compassionate Arabs who hid or helped Jews, he spends two chapters on them before moving on. In a book that's meant to be about connection and community, this just seems lacking.

While a lot of the information given was interesting and relevant to the topic, I really do feel that the book would have benefited from focusing more on the redemptive stories of help given and received, and less on the overall story of the Holocaust's long reach into Arab lands, if I may quote the subtitle.

Not horrible, but be aware that the book uses confusing language to bill itself.

Bruce says

The author states he set out to find out if a single Arab helped a single Jew during the Holocaust. What he found was some Arabs helped some Jews but they and/or their family did not want to reveal it or have it made known. Nazis controlled parts of North Africa for a fortunately brief time during World War II but they started to implement the 'final solution'. Many Jews were sent to labor camps to build the trans-Saharan Railway. A few were sent to death camps in Europe. However, it was not much different from Europe in that a few of the 'monarchs' attempted to ameliorate the effects of Nazi actions. Though you had Arabs helping the Nazis it did not seem to go to the extent that anti-Semitism did in Europe. There was little history of pogroms in North Africa and some Arabs realized they would be next anyway. Perhaps what one can take away from this book is a difference in definition of various words and views of the results of the Holocaust between Arabs and Jews and that is the basis of much of the problems in the Middle East. They communicate with different vocabularies.

R.K. Gold says

I can see why so many of the featured reviewers said this book would be controversial, but honestly this book was just heart breaking. When I first purchased a copy I figured it would take me maybe 3 days to read based on the length. I was wrong. I had to keep putting the book down, not because it was bad, but just intense. Satloff accomplished a tremendous amount of research on the subject and immerses the reader in a full sensory experience describing the harsh conditions for Jews in Northern Africa during one of the world's darkest times.

Anyone looking for an introduction to World War 2 in Africa should pick up a copy of this book. It goes into how Operation Torch was successful, and in its short length (under 300 pages) its dense with information that will stay with you long after you put the book down.

5 stars for sheer impact on my life. The stories of this book will not be easy to forget.

Ice says

Robert Satloff is a man with a mission. He believes that if contemporary Arabs knew about Arabs who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, they would reject the Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism that are now so prevalent in the Arab/Muslim world. This book tells of his quest to track down the history of those Arabs' deeds.

Satloff begins by relating the oft-ignored story of how Nazi Germany, Vichy France and fascist Italy exported their anti-Semitic policies to North Africa. They deprived Jews of their civil rights, confiscated their property, forced them to do slave labor and established concentration camps across the Sahara. Had Germany prevailed, North African Jews would have been annihilated.

Many Arabs willingly -- and, according to survivors, gleefully -- played an essential role in this persecution, serving as camp guards, clerks, policemen, foremen, overseers and torturers. Some assisted Germans as they went door to door hunting Jews. One Arab volunteer military unit, after being flown to Berlin for training, fought with the Germans in Tunisia. Some Arabs were so closely aligned with the Nazis that they fled to Germany when the Allies landed.

But Satloff has discovered "noble, selfless deeds" by Arabs. In normal times, such acts would have been routine, but during World War II, routine kindness was in short supply. When Vichy officials offered Algerian Arabs windfall profits if they took over Jewish property, not a single Arab in Algiers participated. (Vichy had no trouble finding willing Frenchmen.) On a Friday in 1941, religious leaders throughout Algiers delivered sermons warning Muslims against participation in schemes to strip Jews of their property. Some Jews were able to get false identity papers at the Grand Mosque in Paris. In 1940, two months after the Germans entered Paris, the Germans warned the head of the mosque to cease assisting Jews. In short, Arabs behaved like many Europeans during the Holocaust: Some helped Jews; others persecuted them or benefited from their persecution; the majority looked the other way.

The most interesting aspect of this story is the reluctance of contemporary Arabs to acknowledge noble past acts. Satloff speculates that Arab attitudes toward Jews are now so hostile that to acknowledge the help given Jews by preceding generations would inflame Middle Eastern passions. It would run counter to the prevailing myths in the Arab world about the Holocaust, which range from crude Holocaust celebration (in which Hitler is a hero) to Holocaust denial.

As Satloff notes, the Holocaust has become part of the high-stakes battle against Israel -- a battle in which history itself has been turned into a weapon. Some of the most virulent Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism today emanate from mainstream figures in the Muslim world. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, alas, is not alone. Typical of the anti-Semitic invective that has become so common in the Arab world was a 2002 article by the editor of Egypt's state-owned al-Ahram, the largest newspaper in the Arab world, entitled "Jewish Matza Is Made from Arab Blood." In popular Arab culture, Satloff observes, Zionism is a more heinous crime than Nazism.

Satloff believes that if Jews and Arabs were less reluctant to address the history of Arabs and the Holocaust, relations could be improved. He faults the custodians of Yad Vashem, the Israeli national memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, for not being more energetic in seeking out Arab rescuers. Jews from Arab lands have also been strangely reluctant to address their experiences -- positive and negative -- during the Holocaust.

But Satloff is being a bit naive here. It is strange that the highly respected executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a well-trained historian should have convinced himself that history could serve as an antidote to irrational hatred. Holocaust denial is a form of anti-Semitic prejudice. The etymology of the word "prejudice" illustrates the futility of Satloff's mission: Prejudice means pre-judging. It amounts to saying, "Don't confuse me with the facts; forget evidence; I have already made up my mind."

The deniers' arguments are a tissue of lies. This was the finding of Judge Charles Gray of England's High Court of Justice, who presided when Holocaust denier David Irving sued this reviewer for libel. He concluded that deniers' claims are "unreal," a "travesty," and "unjustified." Deniers, he found, "pervert" and "distort" history. Rationally telling stories of Arab rescuers, however admirable, will not change the minds of those whose views of history are rooted in unreasoning bigotry.

To be sure, Satloff's efforts to tell the story of Arab behavior -- both complicity and heroism -- during the Holocaust are important. The stories of rescuers of all faiths and ethnicities should be told. Not only is their courage part of the history of the Holocaust, but it also gives the lie to bystanders' claims that nothing could have been done. But these stories should be uncovered for the sake of history, not for the purpose of changing irrational attitudes. Satloff has told an important story and told it well, but he has done so for noble but misguided reasons.

Karen says

Robert Satloff wrote this book after 9/11 wondering if there were Arabs who protected Jews in North Africa during WWII. This fascinating book took him to Morocco, Tunisia (which was the only country in North Africa occupied by the Nazis), Algeria and Israel. What he learned about how most Arabs view the Holocaust and how Jews who lived in these countries at this time view their experiences is amazing.

Steve Cran says

Contrary to popular belief the long arm of the Holocaust did in fact reach the Arab world. During World War 2 it is a known fact that Nazi ideology had a profound impact on the Middle East. The author, an American

Jews who has studied the arab world for twenty five years finds himself pondering what great idea would help break the ice on Arab silence over the Holocaust. The author then goes on a quest to find heroes who helped Jews during the World War 2.

After 1940 France fell to Nazi forces and Petain set up the Vichy french government. One of the first things the Vichy French did was enact laws that limited the rights of Jews. In ALgeria they were stripped of their citizenship. Later on they would be herded into labor camps and others would find their way to Europe. Most of the Free french Partisan fighting the Vichy French were Jews. Out of 374 partisan 319 were Jewish. During this time most Arabs in North Africa were mostly concerned with their survival and feeding their families hence a air of indifference by most of them especially if they lived in the city. Jews found themselves confined to certain neighborhoods and were forced into work battallions. While in these work battallions the Jewish community had to pay for the workers food and clothing. This was in addition to high taxes imposed on them for being jewish.

Before the author describes the heroes he first describes the Arabs that acted dishonorably. In Tunisia the Scemla family tried to make it to the Allied side. An Arab business partner gave them a place to stay and helped them over the border. Yet upon their arrival at the border they were met by German guard. The arab recieved money for turning them in. The father and two sons were executed. The father before being executed had to watch his two sons die. Later on this arab would spend a good number of years in Prison. Many arabs would join German or Vichy french militiaas other would work as prison guards for concentration camps. These guards were often more brutal than the european guards. Jews found themselves tied up and beaten. Arabs would often bury prisoners up to their necks and urinate on their head. Jews were also subject to a French punishment called "The Tomb" They dug their own grave and would be forced to lay there during the freezing nights and blistering hot day. They were given limited food and water and relatively few times to use the rest room. Arabs also informed on Jews and helped the German loot Jewish home and at times rape Jewish women.

There were numerous instances though of Arabs helping Jews. Certain Arab leaders like Sultan Muhammad the fifth and Tunisian Moncef Bey would lessen the restriction against Jews imposed by the European overlords. Moncef Bey went so far as to help hide Jewish workers on his property. A mayor of Tunis, Si Ali Sakkat, 60 jews from the German by claiming they were his workers. Khaled Abdelwahhab upon hearing that Germans were planning to rape a jewish woman helped a Jewish family escape. Many Jews who made it to the mountain were often housed by the Arabs and fed by them as well. When these arab families were asked the arab would say that the Jews were cousins of theirs. In France there is a big mosque. The leader Benghabrit helped close to 100 Jews.

Arabs are not keen to be recognized for helping Jews and Jews are not keen on recognizing them due to political circumstances. There are several reasons why the Holocaust's impact is not well known. One is that Arabs themselves either deny it or feel that it is strictly a European thing. African Jews downplay the impact while the Ashkenazy like to focus on themselves. But slowly things are changing.

Phoenix says

A Jewish Diogenes in Search of the Righteous. More needed.

The book opens with a reference to a line in Casablanca by SS Major Strasser: "It is possible that the French Authorities will find a reason to put him (Victor Lazlo) in a concentration camp here." I never found that line remarkable because where the Nazis went, so did concentration camps, but I never before considered the corollary that there were also local collaborators who built, supplied and manned the camps and helped to round up Jews, as well as the antithesis of these, righteous people who came to their aid.

Satloff believes that Arab acknowledgment of their past vis a vis the Jews could lead to an acceptance (in Arabic "sulha") of the State of Israel. He also feels that there are several reasons for this not occurring and he encountered resistance amongst both Arabs and Jews telling the stories. For Arabs to reveal the acts of honor and sacrifice they would also need to bring forth the acts of shame and conflict with a tendency of modesty towards acts of generosity. In the cases where Satloff interviewed family members of rescuers he discovered that the stories were not passed down, at least not in any detail. Another reason is that the generation who opposed the Nazis were also seen as collaborators with the Free French and Italians - the liberation of Arab countries from Nazi/Fascist rule was replaced by other European colonial rule. A third is the myth amongst Arabs that the creation of Israel was compensation for a European crime in which the Arabs had no complicity at all. To speak Amongst Jews still living in Arab countries (there are about 5000 in Morocco, 2000 in Tunisia) there is a fierce loyalty and fear of the rulers on who's protection they rely and a reluctance to show any appearance of potential disloyalty.

Still Satloff is able to uncover several positive stories that deserve to be celebrated.

I highly recommend this book to begin understanding what happened to the now vanished Jewish communities of North Africa. More scholarly research such as this is needed now as the generation of primary narrative sources are now old and dying of old age. More also needs to be told of the other inhabitants of the camps as well as what happened to them afterwards, not just military prisoners, but also those who were rounded up for ideological reason.

Also recommended: Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries

Seth Kaplan says

This was a fantastic work of non-fiction that at times read like a great mystery novel. Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, sets out to find an Arab hero of the Holocaust, in an effort to craft a response to the plague of Holocaust denial sweeping across the Arab and Muslim worlds. He describes his experiences in Tunisia and Morocco, unearthing information about forced labor camps that existed during World War II in both countries. He gathers much information about Arabs that both helped the Germans and helped the Jews during the war. This is not a story that is easily told, as many of the participants are dead, and many did not willingly speak of what they did. In addition, the Jewish communities of these countries have not always been forthcoming about what may have happened, as they

did not want to upset their relationships with the current rulers.

Having visited both Tunisia and Morocco in the last several years, I found his research and storytelling fascinating. I wonder, however, if the willingness to tell such stories may have changed even more now after the Arab Spring.

As Satloff write, "This book is the most hopeful story I have ever told....(it) illustrate(s) the resilience of hope, if we can allow ourselves not to be blinded by either cynicism or despair." Given the complexities of the Middle East conflict, this really should be required reading for all to better understand one of the lesser-known stories of Arab and Jewish history in North Africa.

For me, it has rekindled a love for reading history, which I hope to further pursue alongside reading fiction.

Danny says

The research underlying this book is remarkable, the sort of challenging work that requires real passion to see through to the end. Satloff casts light onto what seems to be a largely unknown story: the Holocaust's reach into north Africa and the Middle East. And Satloff's underlying goal, to improve Arab-Jewish relations through demonstrating how that relationship was better in the past, is an admirable one.

But I can't help but think that Satloff set his bar too low. Early in the book, he explicitly states his objective of finding *one* Arab who saved *one* Jew with the hope that such an example could help defuse current tensions between Arabs and Jews. But that concedes too much to those who see the Arab-Jewish relationship solely in terms of conflict. To suggest that one example of Arab selflessness would modify our understanding of that relationship implies that Arab selflessness would be a shock, even that basic human kindness among Arabs would come as a surprise. While those presumptions might exist among certain segments of opinion today, it's not something to be encouraged.

Matthew says

A very interesting look at the Holocaust outside of Europe, an area we don't normally think about. Doubly interesting given the way politics evolved after the Holocaust.
