Hidden History of the Arabs

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A moroccan cartoonist recently took top honors, worth $12,000, in a contest lampooning the Holocaust, sponsored by Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Instead of echoing the crass anti-Semitism that nowadays issues from Tehran, Moroccans and other Arabs might better have cited their rich history with Jews and the Holocaust to put Ahmadinejad in his place.

In North Africa and the Middle East, discussion of the Holocaust has tended to take one of three forms. One is outright denial, favored by demagogues ranging from secular nationalists like Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser, who 40 years ago said that "no person takes seriously the lie of the six million Jews that were murdered," to religious radicals like Hizbullah’s Hassan Nasrallah, who once proclaimed that "Jews invented the legend of the Holocaust." At the opposite end of the spectrum are what I call Holocaust glorifiers. These Hitler cheerleaders are best exemplified by the editorial writers at Egypt’s state-owned al-Akhbar newspaper, who have praised the Final Solution and only lamented the fact that the Nazis didn’t finish the job.
Most Arabs settle between these extremes in a sort of "Holocaust relativism." They admit that Jews suffered during World War II but dispute both the numbers and the unique depravity of the Final Solution. "In war, bad things happen," they tend to say, citing mass killings of Armenians, Kurds or Cambodians to suggest that the Jewish experience was nothing special. Thus Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told U.S. TV host Charlie Rose earlier this year that he doesn't have "any clue how [Jews] were killed or how many were killed," while moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas authored a Soviet-era doctoral dissertation that questioned the number of Jews killed. Even for the most empathetic Arabs, the Holocaust is still a faraway event—Europeans killing their own—for which, they say, the Palestinians have paid a price in the creation of Israel.

Five years ago, shortly after September 11, my family and I moved to Rabat to begin a research project that I hoped would change the way Arabs think about the Holocaust. My man-bites-dog idea was simple. Not a single Arab is among the more than 20,000 non-Jews recognized by Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the Holocaust, for rescuing Jews from the threat of death. This didn't make sense to me, given that North Africa, with more than a half-million Jews, was such a critical front of the war. If I could find even a single story of an Arab who saved a Jew, I thought, perhaps it could serve as a tool for transforming the Holocaust into a source of pride for the region, rather than a target of denial.

I soon learned that the Holocaust, while overwhelmingly a European story, was an Arab story, too. From June 1940 to May 1943, the Nazis and their allies controlled North Africa and exported across the Mediterranean many elements of the Final Solution, from slave labor camps to the Yellow Star. Arabs responded remarkably like Europeans: most were indifferent to the fate of the Jews, a sizable percentage willingly collaborated in the persecution of Jews, and a small but symbolically important group of Arabs helped and even saved Jews.

Perpetrators ranged from Arab guards who tortured Jews in Vichy "punishment camps" in Algeria and Morocco to Arab interpreters in Tunisia who went house to house with SS officers pointing out Jews. These ordinary Arabs are best represented by a Tunisian named Hassen Ferjani, convicted by a Free French tribunal in 1943 for a conspiracy that led to the deportation to Germany—and subsequent execution—of three Jewish men, a father and his two sons.
The heroes have names, too. They include men such as Si Ali Sakkat, a former mayor of Tunis who opened his mountainside farm to 60 Jews escaping from a labor camp, and the dashing Khaled Abdelwahhab, son of a celebrated Tunisian author, who spirited several Jewish families from their hostel in the middle of the night to protect one of them—a beautiful blond, blue-eyed Jewish woman—from being raped by a German officer. I also found tales of many Arabs whose names we don’t know: the Arab wet nurse who took in Jewish children when milk was scarce; the Arab baker who squirreled away extra bread for Jewish families when Vichy rations penalized Jews most of all; the Arab shepherds who opened their modest homes to Jewish families fleeing bombed-out villages.

These stories of villains and heroes constitute the real-life Arab experience of the Holocaust. Arabs don’t have to take a lesson from the president of Iran. In fact, they could teach him a few things.