

Photo taken in Tunis  
Cimetiere Du Bourgel,  
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The Jews of Tunis During the Holocaust

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**Cover photo:** *The author at the Borgel Cemetery in Tunis by the monument that was erected in 1947 in memory of 39 Jews who died in German forced labor camps. One of the victims, Ja'oui Emile z"l (second name on the right column) was the husband of my grand-aunt Marcelle.*

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## Terminology

**Ashkenazi / Sephardi / Mizrahi:** These three titles are given to various Jewish communities. I will provide a brief history of each term and then explain how they are understood in modern Israel. In alphabetical order:

*Ashkenazim* were Jews from medieval Germany and northern France. The term has now come to refer to Jews of central and eastern European descent.<sup>1</sup> *Mizrahi* is Hebrew for “Eastern,” and it denoted Jews who have settled east of the land of Israel since Biblical times. It also encompassed Jews who lived west of Israel such as North Africa. *Sephardi* is Hebrew for “Spaniard,” originally referred to Jews expelled in 1492 from Spain (Sefarad) and Portugal. Nowadays Sephardi refer to non-Ashkenazi Jews with no relation to those expelled from the Iberian peninsula. Both terms – Mizrahi and Sephardi – are interchangeable today and denote “non-Ashkenazi.” The terms had been meaningful in the cultural and religious sphere, nevertheless, demographically and geographically these terms have become meaningless.

**Dhimmi:** Arabic “protected people,” the term applied to non-Muslims in Muslim-ruled lands, especially Jews and Christians (as “people of the Book”). They were granted certain rights to keep their religious traditions, but in an unobtrusive way, and as second-class citizens. In effect, it served as a protection tax system which was profitable to the Muslim rulers.

**Holocaust / Shoah:** The term Holocaust is derived from the Greek for “burnt offering” עולה while Shoah שואה means “calamity.” The United States Holocaust Museum states that “The Holocaust (1933–1945) was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi German regime and its allies and collaborators.”<sup>2</sup> Yad

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<sup>1</sup> Lyn Julius, *Uprooted: How 3000 Years of Jewish Civilisation in the Arab World Vanished Overnight*, viii.

<sup>2</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Introduction to the Holocaust.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>. Accessed on September 7, 2022.



Vashem states that the Holocaust (Hebrew, Shoah) was “unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people. The primary motivation was the Nazis' anti-Semitic racist ideology.”<sup>3</sup>

**A Note on Translation:** The translation from Hebrew to English for all passages in this project were made by the author.

## Introduction

This research project deals with one of the most important issues in modern Israeli society, the Holocaust (in Hebrew, Shoah). For most Israelis, and indeed for Jews in general, the Holocaust is understood as the murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany. Most Israelis think that Shoah as enacted by Nazi Germany was concerning the annihilation of European Jewry alone.<sup>4</sup> But that narrow definition can be challenged by the experience of my ancestors, namely, the Jews of Tunisia. The Sephardim contend that their experience under German occupation was a facet of the Nazi plan to destroy all the Jews. This research will spotlight the city of Tunis, the capitol of Tunisia, and the period of Nazi occupation in 1942-1943. After evaluating the historical events we will ask: Can Tunisia be included in the geographical envelope of the Holocaust, and can its Jews be considered Holocaust survivors? The project will provide a brief historical background to the Jews of Tunis, follow their degradation during the decrees of Vichy antisemitic laws, and the oppression under German occupation. We will assert that the Germans were motivated to annihilate

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<sup>3</sup> Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center. “What was the Holocaust?” <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about.html>. Accessed on September 7, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Hanna Yablonka, “Oriental Jewry and the Holocaust: A Tri-Generational Perspective.” *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (Indiana University Press, 2009), 94.

Sephardi Jewry but did not have sufficient time to do the mass killing in North Africa.

Yochai Oppenheimer, a literature professor at Tel Aviv University and a novelist, offered the following point of view. "...the Holocaust is a necessary basis for understanding the experience of immigration and displacement of both European and Mizrahi Jews. The Mizrahi migration to Israel and particularly the trauma that accompanied it for over a generation, is seen through the metaphor of the Holocaust."<sup>5</sup>

The Holocaust looms so large that it indeed serves as a metaphor for a calamity of unprecedented magnitude. With deep respect to the suffering of Tunisia's Jews during the war, and their painful displacement after the war, could we call their experience a holocaust? Are we permitted to enlarge the definition of the Holocaust? And if we do so, what are the implications to the survivors, to our very understanding of history, and to Israeli society?

The Holocaust undoubtedly affected Sephardi Jewry. But almost the entire body of history and literature of the Holocaust centers on the European experience. The Israeli Eurocentric approach and the Ashkenazi monopoly on the Holocaust (and on Zionism) has influenced the Israeli public. The educational curriculum in Israel, especially the teaching of history and culture was Eurocentric. Some corrections were made in recent years and the Mizrahi-Sephardi history had been incorporated into the public schools' curriculum.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Yochai Oppenheimer, *The Holocaust: A Mizrahi Perspective*. (Hebrew Studies 51, 2010), 321.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27913975>.

<sup>6</sup> חנה יבלונקה, *הרחק מהמסילה - המזרחים והשואה*. (ידיעות אחרונות ספרי חמד, 2008), 135.

The institution of Yad Vashem – the World Holocaust Remembrance Center - was built to document and validate the specificity of the destruction of European Jewry. Yad Vashem documents the stories of survivors, honors righteous gentiles, and fights against Holocaust deniers.<sup>7</sup> The government of Israel brings world leaders and dignitaries to Yad Vashem as a key stop before they attend important meetings.<sup>8</sup> The goal of Yad Vashem, among others, is to validate the Zionist project. It is a Eurocentric institution that maintains that the Shoah was a European calamity. The importance of the security of Jews in Israel is paramount and the state serves as a guarantor of the mantra “Never Again.” The state of Israel with its strong army will stand to defend all Jews from their enemies.

Israelis believe that the six million victims of the Shoah were Ashkenazi Jews.<sup>9</sup> From its founding, the Ashkenazi ruling class in Israel discriminated against the Mizrahi-Sephardi population. Ignoring the Sephardi experience under the Nazi occupation, especially in Tunisia and Libya, added to the Sephardi sense of marginalization in Israeli society. This project’s goal is not to create an alternative narrative or a secondary Holocaust history. But rather add to the overall knowledge of the Shoah while including the Sephardi Jews, and in so doing, creating a more universal Jewish historical memory of that period.

It is human nature to speculate and ask “what if” questions. What if the Germans had succeeded with the occupation of North Africa? Would they have destroyed the Jewry of that territory? What if America did not enter the war and Britain were defeated by

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Gilson Miller, “Sephardim and Holocaust Historiography,” in *The Holocaust and North Africa*, ed. Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein ed. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 222.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. President Joe Biden visited Yad Vashem on July 13, 2022. Biden participated in a memorial ceremony and met two survivors whom he kissed and spoke to at length.

<sup>9</sup> One European Sephardi community that was destroyed in the Shoah are the Jews of Thessaloniki, Greece. The Hellenic State was occupied by Axis powers in 1940 and Greece is considered a part of Europe.

Germany? Did the Germans have the motivation and means to build extermination camps in Tunisia? Judging by the ways they abused the Jewish population, it seems reasonable to assume that Tunisia (indeed, North Africa) could have turned into another extermination center. But America entered the war, the Germans were defeated in North Africa, and within six months the Nazis were gone from Tunisia. Our “what if” question is moot. But the implication is that Tunisia’s Jewish experience in 1942-1943 is linked to the narrative of the Holocaust and the war against the Jews.<sup>10</sup>

I travel to Israel once or twice a year. On my trip in July 2021, I spent a few days doing Holocaust research. People asked me if I planned to visit Yad Vashem. The answer was, “not this time.” Yad Vashem did not hold a lot of research material on Tunisia. Instead, I did research at a smaller institute called Yad Ben-Zvi. This is an underfunded organization in Jerusalem that holds conferences and supports research on Sephardi history. The paucity of research material and books was not surprising. Online research ahead of my visit to Yad Ben-Zvi already revealed that this is an area of history that was neglected by the academic community. But I was encouraged by what I saw as a revival of interest in Israeli society in all things Sephardi. The music, culture, food, and religious traditions of my ancestors seem to be on the rise. And this makes me hopeful. In the spring of 2022, I took my research (and curiosity) to the country of Tunisia itself.

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<sup>10</sup> Lucy S Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945* (Bantam trade edition. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.), <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999750874502121>. Dawidowicz contends that there were two wars, the visible one – WWII, but a second hidden war whose goal was the annihilation of the Jews.



Tunisia has no diplomatic relations with Israel and its government has made statements that are tinted with antisemitic rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> The Jewish community today numbers 1,400 and most of them live in the island of Djerba.<sup>12</sup> Once a year, around Lag Baomer, the government of Tunisia permits Israelis to enter the country with a strictly limited travel visa. I am an American citizen and could have traveled any time, but I preferred traveling with Israeli guides, which provided us with military security and police escort. This was the proper way to go for all those reasons and more. By sharing the experience with Israelis of Tunisian ancestry, I was immersed in the language, the music, culture, food, and the memories that they shared. While on the long bus ride from the city of Tunis to the Island of Djerba, we had conversations about the war years. The people on the tour related their parents' stories. And they insisted that Tunis was part of the Shoah, and their parents were therefore Holocaust survivors. When I tried to suggest that the Germans did not destroy the Jews of Tunis, one of them went as far as sharing fabricated statistics to prove me wrong. He said that 50,000 Tunisian Jews were sent to concentration camps. This is, of course, not true (as will be discussed.)

My co-travelers self-identified as "Tunisa'im" (Tunisians) and enjoyed their heritage, at the same time they wanted their experience and heritage to be legitimized by Ashkenazi Israelis. They wanted their narrative of overcoming suffering to be as sacred and venerated as the memories of European Jews. The phases of tragedy of European Jews are well known. From discrimination and dispossession of property to living in ghettos, deportation

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<sup>11</sup> "תוניסיה: גל אלימות נגד יהודים - בחסות הממשלה", ידיעות אחרונות, איתמר אייכנר. 2021.07.04

<https://www.ynet.co.il/judaism/article/Hkvc6boHO>.

<sup>12</sup> "אבודים בתוניסיה: המלכוד של הקהילה היהודית." ישראל היום, מוסף שישבת, אלדד בק. 2022.07.27  
<https://www.israelhayom.co.il/magazine/shishabat/article/4385977>.

to concentration camps, death by gas, and burning in crematoria. The tragedy of North African Jewry is not as devastating as the European one. But there are examples within continental Europe of Jews who skirted the Shoah. The Jews of Denmark, for example, were not destroyed because of a dramatic overnight escape to Sweden. Likewise, the Jews of Tunisia were not destroyed because the Allies defeated the Axis forces. The Sephardim arrived in Israel as poor and sometimes detested refugees. The trauma they suffered by this displacement they wish to add to the overall narrative of the Holocaust. They want to widen the definition of Shoah, and thus bring their unique story under that massive umbrella.

Literature on the subject continues to seek an ever-wider array of voices and perspectives about the Holocaust. Some of these perspectives are captured below:

- “North Africa is part of an ongoing (and still incomplete) effort to flesh out the details and push the boundaries of Holocaust history.”<sup>13</sup>
- “We have forgotten this sad chapter. It has been overshadowed by the tragedy in Europe. But the tragedy in Africa, particularly in Tunisia and Libya, is part of the history of the Jews and part of the history of the Holocaust.”<sup>14</sup>
- The event seeks to raise awareness of a little-known episode of the Shoah that took place outside of Europe and to allow the memory of the victims of the Nazis on

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<sup>13</sup> Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *The Holocaust and North Africa*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell M. Serels “Non-European Holocaust: The Fate of Tunisian Jewry.” In *Del Fuego: Sephardim and the Holocaust*, ed. Haham Gaon and M. Mitchell Serels, 129-52. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1995, 130.

Tunisian soil to live on beyond the dispersal of a large part of the Tunisian Jewish community after decolonization.

- “Only through proper knowledge of the Holocaust period would it be possible to instill a sense of **Jewish shared destiny** and tighten the emotional ties with the entire world Jewry. If we teach the Shoah by explaining that all the Jews alive today are survivors of the machine of death, only then will there be a true shared fate.”<sup>15</sup>

### Personal Memory and Historiography

Personal diaries and eyewitness testimonies are important sources for historians. A few diaries were written in Tunis during the German occupation. Most famous among them are the diaries of the Tunis Jewish community's leaders, Robert Borgel and Paul Ghez.<sup>16</sup> In their books, Borgel and Ghez described the day-to-day circumstances and their dealings with the Germans. The books were published in 1944, about a year after Germany's defeat in North Africa. In the diaries they shared the dilemmas that they faced in dealing with the SS and the difficult decisions they had to make. Another famous author, Albert Memmi used a literary device, an autobiographical novel, to describe his childhood in Tunis and the period of occupation.<sup>17</sup> More recently, in 2013, the diary of Clement Hori was published in Hebrew in Israel. The diary was written in French in 1942-1943 and was discovered by Hori's daughter in 1987. Hori shared his personal experience and his family's travails. In a small

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<sup>15</sup> חנה יבלונקה, *הרחק מהמסילה - המזרחים והשוואה* (מכון בן-גוריון לחקר ישראל והציונות, אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב: ידיעות אחרונות, 2008), 144. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Borgel, *Etoile jaune et croix gammée: récit d'une servitude* (Tunisia: Editions Artypo, 1944.)

Paul Ghez, *Six mois sous la botte* (France: Editions Le Manuscrit, 2020.)

<sup>17</sup> Albert Memmi, *La Statue de Sel* (Paris: Corrèa, 1953), <https://books.google.com/books?id=Q7YrtAEACAAJ>.

141-page book, Hori described the almost daily bombing of Tunis. His reflections on the events brought to light the relations of Jews to Germans and Jews to Arabs.<sup>18</sup>

Integrative writing of history is based on eyewitnesses, interviews, diaries, and personal records. But there is tension between history as an academic discipline and individual memory of events. In this historiographical project, the author's family story will be interlaced with the world events.

Throughout this project, we explore the Jews of Tunis from the French protectorate and Vichy rule, to the German occupation, and liberation (1939-1943.) The narrative's lens will shift from social and political landscape to personal recollections. It will weave the story of my family with the history of the war, zooming in for personal recollection, and zooming out to provide historical context. The sections that cover family memoirs will be indented. This will enable the reader to distinguish between material derived from family history and material pertaining to world history

### **My Mother's Story**

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<sup>18</sup> (ירושלים: הוצאת ספרים יד בן צבי, 2013) *כיבוש טוניסיה על ידי צבאות הציר*, קלמנט הורי<sup>18</sup>

My mother's name is Leah Katz. At birth in the city of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, she was named Helene Massouda Guetta. She was born on October 19, 1929 and lived in Tunis until she made Aliya to Israel in 1949.

My research of the Jews of Tunisia is motivated by a thirst for knowledge about my Tunisian heritage. I grew up in a family that was half Sephardi and half



Ashkenazi. My father, Yekutiel Katz, was born in Vilna, Lithuania, and immigrated to Israel before the rise of Hitler. My four siblings and I grew up in a small, isolated, and entirely Ashkenazi community. Our Sephardi experience was sporadic and occurred during visits to our aunts on holidays or family celebrations. Disappointed that I was disconnected from my Tunisian heritage motivated me to explore it. Hence, deepening my knowledge about Tunisian Jewry is a path of self-discovery. This project is an effort to connect to my roots on both intellectual and physical levels. I traveled to Tunisia in May 2022 and explored the country, from its beautiful beaches to its bustling shuks (markets), its synagogues, the tombs of revered holy rabbis, and the desecrated cemeteries of the exiled communities.

## The Jewish Community of Tunisia

Tunisia rests in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea basin. Its geopolitical location, population diversity, and the historical exchanges with other cultures made it and its Jewish community a source of fascination to social scientists. In a relatively small Jewish community, there was remarkable social, intellectual, and political activity. "Judging by the

breadth of the Rabbinic literature [produced by Tunisian Rabbis<sup>19</sup>,] the number of Jewish newspapers, the published literature, Jewish involvement in the country's politics and society, and the internal controversies that characterized the Jewish community, one can be impressed by the diversity and richness of the community."<sup>20</sup>

This land on the western part of the Mediterranean, which later on became called Tunisia, was known from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE when the Phoenicians established the city of Carthage. According to Josephus Flavius, Roman Emperor Titus exiled 30,000 Jews to Carthage in the first century CE. However, the Jews of Djerba island in the south of Tunisia contend that their ancestors arrived in Tunisia almost 600 years earlier, after the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>21</sup>

In the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE North Africa was conquered by Arab tribes. They had a profound influence on the character of the area. They brought with them the Arabic language and the religion of Islam.<sup>22</sup> The expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal in the 15<sup>th</sup> century brought thousands of Sephardim to northwest Africa.<sup>23</sup>

France conquered Tunisia in 1881 as part of its colonial expansion into North Africa. The French rule lasted 75 years and ended in the declaration of independence in 1956 by

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Ringel, "A Third Way: 'Iyyun Tunisi' as a Traditional Critical Method of Talmud Study." Ringel presented a viable alternative to Talmud study, using the Tunisian Analysis method championed by R. Meir Mazuz.

<sup>20</sup> חיים סעדון, *תוניסיה, קהילות ישראל במזרח במאות התשע-עשרה והעשרים* (משרד החינוך, המזכירות הפדגוגית, המרכז לשילוב מורשת יהדות המזרח, 2005) 7-12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. There is no historical evidence to the claim that Jews arrived in Djerba in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, or to the claim that many of them were Cohanim from Jerusalem. However, a genetic test of males showed a high frequency of a so-called priestly marker on the Y-Chromosome.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria*. (NYU Press, 1994), 5-19. Laskier provides excellent historical background on North Africa both non-Jewish milieu and Jewish society.

<sup>23</sup> חיים זאב הירשברג, *תולדות היהודים באפריקה הצפונית : התפוצה היהודית בארצות המגרב מימי קדם ועד זמננו*, 284, 327-329.



Tunisia's president, Habib Bourguiba. Tunisia as a French protectorate had benefited from growth in industry and agriculture. Colonial France built infrastructure that supported commerce and improved transportation by building roads, railroads, and ports.

In the 1940s, the Jewish population of Tunis, the capital, was around 45,000 out of approximately 250,000 city residents.<sup>24</sup> From the point of view of economics, culture, ethnicity, and politics, it was a very divided Jewish population. From an economic point of view, there was the bourgeoisie, which is equivalent to the upper class. They were bankers, import-export businessmen, and the "white collar" professions (lawyers, doctors, accountants, and engineers.) The middle class had merchants, clerks, craftsmen, and tradesmen. The lower class included day laborers, peddlers, unemployed, and the poor. Most of the people in the last group were reliant on welfare and accounted for almost half the Jewish population.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the economic division, there was a split along cultural affinity. On the one hand, there was the bourgeoisie, especially the young among them, that leaned towards a European lifestyle and a weakened affinity to religion. On the other hand, were the poor and the old whose culture was Arab-Jewish, and religion was central to their lives. These divisions are generalities, and there were nuanced and heterogeneous cultural expressions between these two extremes.

## **Toansa and Gerana**

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<sup>24</sup> Yaron Tsur, *Jews of Tunis in the Period of German Occupation*, 155. Tsur used as his data source the Service Tunisien des statistiques Annuaire statistique de la Tunisie, années 1940 à 1946.

<sup>25</sup> Yaron Tsur, *Jews of Tunis in the Period of German Occupation*, 155. Tsur provided the welfare assistance data from the French colonial administration of 1940 as 13,000 welfare recipients, while the Jewish newspaper *Le Reveil Juif* estimated a larger number of 15,000.

There were two separate kehillot (communities) in Tunisia, one known as “Toansa” and the other as “Gerana.” The Toansa, from the word *Tunis*, were the descendants of the native-born Tunisian Jews and were the majority. The Gerana are named after Leghorn, Italy, a port city on the Ligurian Sea. The Gerana have a Spanish-Italian origin and arrived in Tunis in several waves at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, the name Gerana was given to all Jews who came from Christian countries. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was great tension between the Toansa and Gerana communities. The Gerana isolated themselves from the Toansa and tried to form their own communal status. Since the community levied a tax on the sale of kosher wine and kosher meat, having a separate Gerana kehillah would hurt the income of the Toansa establishment.<sup>26</sup> The Gerana were around 4,000 to 5,000 in the 1940s and were deeply connected with their ancestral heritage in Italy. They maintained Italian citizenship and were devoted to its culture and language.<sup>27</sup>

The two kehillot, Toansa and Gerana, had different legal standings in Tunis. The Toansa were the subjects of the Bey (the Muslim monarch) and were protected by the dhimmi laws and the Pact of ‘Umar.<sup>28</sup> The Gerana enjoyed the patronage of the Italian consulate and were not subjected to the Dhimmi laws and the Pact of ‘Umar. The Gerana spoke Judeo-Arabic but also spoke Italian and sent their children to school in Livorno, Italy. The Toansa spoke Judeo-Arabic and French. The two kehillot remained separate and almost never

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<sup>26</sup> Yaron Tsur, *Jews of Tunis in the Period of German Occupation*, 158. The tax from sale of kosher wine and kosher meat was used for communal expenses.

<sup>27</sup> Yaron Tsur, “The Two Jewish Communities of Tunis (Touansa and Grana) on the Eve of the Colonial Period,” in *Proceedings of 9th World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. III (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1987), 67–73.

<sup>28</sup> *Dhimmi* is an Arabic term for “protected.” It is applied to Jews and Christians, who are protected by Islamic law but expected to pay the Jizya (head) tax. The Pact of ‘Umar spelled out the agreement between the Islamic state and the non-Muslim subjects. They had to distinguish themselves from the Muslims by their dress code.

intermarried. One example of the distinction between the two kehillot is the fact that the Gerana were allowed to wear regular clothes, while the Toansa had to wear specific Jewish clothing required by the Pact of 'Umar. The division between the two kehillot was also manifested in the success of the Gerana to establish their own separate cemetery in 1851.<sup>29</sup>

At the head of the Toansa Jewish community stood *Le Conseil de la Communauté Israélite*, the Council of the Jewish Community that was founded before the French colonization and the establishment of the protectorate. Its main concern was care for the numerous poor members of the kehillah. With the onset of the Second World War, 1939-1941, the French Civil Service appointed a temporary council, *La Commission Provisoire d'Administration de la Communauté Israélite*, with Muize Borgel as the committee head. The next change occurred in 1940 with the beginning of the Vichy period. Two young men, Paul Ghez and Dr. Léon Moatti, entered the council. Ghez came from a respected and wealthy family and married into a highly regarded Livornese family. He was one of the best lawyers in Tunis and possessed excellent contacts with the French rulers. (More on Paul Ghez' leadership will be described below.)

## French Colonial Protectorate (1881 – 1956)

### Social and Economic Progress

The French conquest brought about economic progress in Tunis. Modern boulevards were built in European style. In less than 20 years they built banks, new stores, cafés, a theater, a casino, and the Grand Hotel. In the years between the two World Wars, the Jews were

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<sup>29</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה 210-211.

successful merchants, traders, and industrialists. Some continued the traditional occupations of jewelry-making, sewing, embroidery, and shoemaking. A large number of Jews were physicians and lawyers, architects, law clerks, and teachers.<sup>30</sup> Jews were active participants in trade such as cereals, oil, leather, and wool, and in import of textile and luxury goods.

During the French protectorate period, the country of Tunisia was ruled by a French governor, Le résident général. The heads of administration and the French armed forces helped govern the country, while the Tunisian Muslim Bey continued to exist side by side with the French governor. Thus, there were two parallel government systems.<sup>31</sup>

The population of Tunisia was a tapestry of three major population groups, Muslims, Jews, and European Christians. The French governor, on the other hand, divided the population into two categories: native Tunisians Muslims and Jews, and Europeans who were citizens of France, Italy, or other countries. The Jews were divided into three groups. The largest (80%) were Tunisian (Toansa.) Around 15% were Jews with French citizenship and around 5% were Italian Jews (Gerana.) The main differences between the three groups were their legal status. But there were also cultural differences in their languages, dress, education, and political leanings.

In the French period, the position of the *Kaeed* (president of the Jewish community) was eliminated. In each city, the Jews established a committee of assistance and charity, ועד קופת

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<sup>30</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה 232.

<sup>31</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה 218.

העזרה והצדקה, *Caisse de Secours et de Bienfaisance*. The function of the committee was to manage the charity and ritual needs of the Kehilla.

## **Education and Acculturation**

The public schools in Tunis were influenced by France and Jewish youth attended these schools in growing numbers. At the same time, a great change in the education of children and in the life of the community occurred with the establishment of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Alliance or AIU hereafter) called in Hebrew כל ישראל חברים. AIU was created in Paris in 1860 with the purpose of safeguarding human rights for Jews. Over 100 AIU schools were established throughout North Africa, Iran, Palestine, and the Ottoman Empire. In Tunis, a school for boys was established in 1878 and a school for girls in 1883. AIU was a modern school, as compared to the traditional Talmud Torah schools, and the language of instruction was French.<sup>32</sup>

The influence of French culture was felt in every area of life. Adapting or assimilating to a new culture is called acculturation. Acculturation is defined as “cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture.”<sup>33</sup> France affected every aspect of life: the language, the living quarters, the connection to religion, habits of food and entertainment, educational endeavors, dress, and so forth. French and western European values were adopted widely in the capital city of Tunis.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria*. (NYU Press, 1994), 27.

<sup>33</sup> Merriam-Webster online dictionary. [Acculturation Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acculturation). Accessed on September 7, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century*, 30-31.

Albert Memmi (1920-2020), a Tunisian Jewish author, had written about the effects of language on acculturation in the French protectorate era. His book, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, is about the interdependent relationship between the Tunisian and the French cultures. He explored the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized and the colonizers alike. Memmi grew up in Tunis. His mother's tongue was Tunisian-Judeo-Arabic. He excelled in his studies at the Jewish school where the French language was dominant.<sup>35</sup>

### **Family Recollections: Childhood**

Albert Memmi was about nine years older than my mother. They both grew up in Tunis in the colonial period. Like other Jews, they spoke Judeo-Arabic at home and French in the French-language school, Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU.) Learning French was a demanding and arduous task which one had to work on with great diligence. Mother showed me her class notes with page after page of a beautiful hand-written text. She was very proud of her penmanship and mastery of the French language. Learning French opened the door for her and other Jews to the culture of the European authority. She lived in two worlds: Arab and French. Or maybe we can best express it as living in three worlds: Jewish, Arab, and French. Her home was in the mixed neighborhood of Arab Muslims, European Christians, and Jews, but her school emphasized assimilation to French culture. Another dimension of her unique milieu was the Italian neighbors with whom her family shared a very

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<sup>35</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London, England: Souvenir Press, 1974.) The book was originally published in French in 1957 with a preface by Jean Paul Sartre. A review of the author's autobiographical book *The Pillar of Salt* is available on Yad Vashem <https://yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/books/pillar-salt.html>.



warm friendship. In a later section, I will explore the good fortune of having Christian Italian neighbors during the German occupation.

My mother grew up in a traditional Jewish home. Religion was central to the family and to the kehillah. The rabbi was highly respected, and my mother often said, הרב קדוש the rabbi is a holy man. My Tunisian family had a long tradition of helping the upkeep of their synagogues. My maternal great grandparents Simcha and Shalom Zeitun lived in the coastal town of Nabeul in northeastern Tunisia. They took upon themselves the responsibility of maintaining the synagogue. My grandfather, Nissim, and his older son, Eli, went to the Great Synagogue of Tunis to pray. My grandparents lived in a mixed neighborhood of Arabs, Jews, Christians, French, and Italians. Their apartment building at 19 Rue Sidi Baïan no longer exists. My uncle Eli was in Tunis in the 1990's and could not find the street.

We who grew up in Israel had a negative attitude towards Arabs. They were the enemy, the fedayeen<sup>36</sup>, and the terrorists. But mother shared positive memories of relationships with her Arab neighbors. The Arabs showed deep respect for the Jewish holidays. For example, during Pesah the Muslim storekeepers covered the bread and baked goods, so the Jews will not see it. At the end of the Pesah holiday, the Arab neighbors brought platters of food with pita and baguettes to the Jews. On the fast day of Yom Kippur, Arab merchants covered the food in their stores so that Jews who walked to synagogue would not be tempted. On Shabbat afternoon,

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<sup>36</sup> Palestinian militants who operated as guerilla forces. Palestinians considered them “freedom fighters” while Israelis called them “terrorists.”

Muslims would come visit the family bringing fruit and enjoying a glass of Arak or Boukha. (We assume that the Muslims were not allowed to have liquor at home.)

“Generally speaking, anti-Jewish sentiments or violence in North Africa tended to emanate from the Christian, European settler and colonial population rather than the local Muslim one.”<sup>37</sup> The above quote from the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* foreshadows the growing French antisemitism during the Vichy period.

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<sup>37</sup> “The International League Against Anti-Semitism in North Africa.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. [The International League Against Anti-Semitism in North Africa | Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](https://www.ushmm.org/learn/encyclopedias/entry.php?id=1000)

# Vichy Period (June 1940 – November 1942)

In June 1940, France surrendered to Germany and adopted a policy of collaboration with Nazi Germany.<sup>38</sup> The northern part of France including Paris was occupied by Germany, while the southern part remained as an unoccupied state headed by Marshal Philippe Pétain. The French government was seated in the southern town of Vichy in the so-called *Free Zone*. The Vichy civil administration was responsible for the colonies of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

“North African Jews... were barred from most sectors of the economy, with quotas (*numeri clausi*) limiting the number of Jews who could operate as teachers, lawyers, doctors, journalists, students in public school and universities... Jewish property was subsequently *Aryanized* by Vichy decree (the process was stalled in Tunisia because of the intervention of the bey).”<sup>39</sup>

The anti-Jewish laws were called *Statut des Juifs*, Statutes of the Jews. According to Abitbol, there was no German pressure on Pétain, neither to impose racial laws in 1940 nor to extend them to North Africa. The Vichy government was completely independent in drafting anti-Jewish laws.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Why did France surrender to Germany? In brief, the fall of the Maginot Line, the unstable French government, and the destruction of Poland by the Germans were principal factors in the French surrender to Germany. Removal of France from the war paved the way to Hitler’s war against Britain. The Germans assured the French of their “benign intentions,” allowing them to keep the Navy and the North African colonies intact.

<sup>39</sup> Boum and Abrevaya Stein, *The Holocaust and North Africa*, 4. See also Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 71-72. It is the general view that the Vichy government was a puppet regime to Nazi Germany.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 56. The original name of the book was “*Les Juifs d’Afrique du Nord sous Vichy*.” Interesting to note the change in the book’s title in English. It is pointing to the difference between the French discourse which focused on the Vichy government versus the English which focused on World War II.

Michael Laskier,<sup>41</sup> an Israeli historian, orientalist, and writer provided the following description of the Vichy period.

“The Vichy law went into effect on October 3, 1940 and specified the status of the Jews of Tunisia... The Tunisian Bey, heir to the Husseini family... published orders with twelve sections that detailed the anti-Jews regulations. These regulations included limits on Jewish representation in public service, educational institutions, and journalism. It was decreed that a few public service positions would be open to Jews with the following conditions: If they could prove that they received a decoration from France while serving in the military during World War I, received a medal of excellence (L'ordre du jour) in the war of 1939-1940 up until the signing of the Armistice in June 1940 when France was conquered by Germany, or if they were descendants of soldiers who sacrificed their lives for France in World War I. On October 9, 1941, the Bey published regulations regarding Jewish lawyers and specified a date after which they no longer would be allowed to provide services. There were policies against Jewish doctors as well and, as of November 1941, they were allowed to provide medical care to the Jewish population alone. Some of the regulations remained on paper only, some were not enforced at all, and others were implemented very slowly and only in a partial manner.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> [Michael M. Laskier - EverybodyWiki Bios & Wiki](#).

<sup>42</sup> מיכאל מ' לסקר, “יהודים מקומיים ופליטים יהודים במרוקו הצרפתית ובתוניסיה במלחמת העולם השנייה,” *פעמים: רבעון לחקר קהילות ישראל במזרח* 71 (2008): 114–115.

Admiral Jean-Pierre Esteva served as Resident-General (Colonial Governor) of Tunisia for the Vichy French Government from July 25, 1940 to May 7, 1943.<sup>43</sup> His enlightened approach towards the Jews eased the restrictive decrees of Vichy law. “Esteva demanded from his French superiors to bend the policy to the local constraints and circumstances.”<sup>44</sup> The Germans who conquered Tunisia in November 1942 attributed the lax implementation of anti-Jewish regulations to Esteva’s liberal policy. Indeed, “the implementation of the anti-Jewish laws and regulations in Tunisia was problematic because Jews held important positions in medicine, commerce, law, banking and taxation, and metropolitan services.”<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note the prevalence of Jews in the legal and medical professions. In Tunis, the capitol there were 316 lawyers, 211 of whom were Jews.<sup>46</sup>

After decades of assimilation to French culture, the Jews were shocked at the antisemitism of the French as expressed in the Vichy laws. Mathilda Guez (1918-1990) lived in Sfax during the Second World War. She made Aliyah in 1957 and served as a member of the Israel Knesset (Parliament) from 1965 to 1977. She gave a lengthy interview at Yad Vashem. Here is a short quote.<sup>47</sup>

“The bitter taste came to us not through the Nazis at first, not through the Germans, but through the French of Marshal Pétain. The Germans went wild in Europe, but the French antisemites went wild in Tunisia and in all of North Africa. When they began

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<sup>43</sup> Terrence Peterson, “The ‘Jewish Question’ and the ‘Italian Peril’: Vichy, Italy, and the Jews of Tunisia, 1940-2,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 2 (2015): 234.

<sup>44</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה 251.

<sup>45</sup> חיים סעדון, “הקהילה היהודית בצפאקס במלחמת העולם השנייה,” *פעמים: רבעון לחקר קהילות ישראל במזרח*, 114–115, (2008): 16.

<sup>46</sup> דניאל קארפי, *בין שבט לחסד: השלטונות האיטלקיים ויהודי צרפת ותוניסיה בימי מלחמת העולם השנייה*. (ירושלים: מרכז זלמן שזר לתולדות ישראל, 1993), 264.

<sup>47</sup> Mathilda Guez’s Hebrew was ambiguous; in translation I try to clarify her testimony.

to restrict the children in schools and to prevent them from arriving at the universities. [She refers to restricting access to education.] They began to stick their noses in the business of the Jews, to argue about the profits of the Jews. They inserted a bone to all things. [they meddled in all Jewish affairs.] These are the French, whom we lived with in good friendship, and they were in our homes. Suddenly they changed their skins, and suddenly they became hostile, and we were afraid of them, no less afraid than from the local Arabs.”<sup>48</sup>

As if Vichy decrees were only an interlude, next came the German invasion.

## **German Occupation and the Course of the War (November 1942 – May 1943)**

The war in North Africa between the Axis forces (Germany and Italy) and the Allied forces (Britain and America) triggered the landing in Tunis of the German army. On November 8, 1942, the Allies invaded Morocco and Algeria in what is known as Operation Torch. The battle with German forces in North Africa was intended to relieve pressure on the battles in the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> Tying up Axis forces in the region and eventually defeating them enabled the subsequent 1943 Allied invasion of southern Europe. General Eisenhower was the commander of operations; his objective was to open a second front to the rear of the German and Italian forces, who were waging battles in Libya and Egypt. In a pincer

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<sup>48</sup> חיים סעדון, הקהילה היהודית בצפאקס במלחמת העולם השנייה, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 105. Stalin appealed to Roosevelt to open a second front against the Axis. Churchill agreed to give supreme command to General Eisenhower who led Operation Torch.



movement, Americans landed in Morocco and Algeria on the Atlantic and on the Mediterranean coasts.

In response to Operation Torch, the German and Italian armies invaded Tunisia on November 9, 1942.<sup>50</sup> Tunisia thus became sandwiched between the Allied forces to the west and the Axis forces to the east. The German army was pounded without respite by the Allied air forces. The bombing by British Royal Air Force (RAF) and the American Air Force had caused great suffering to the civilian population and especially to the Jews who worked in German camps.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 1: Map of Operation Torch. Allied army landed in western North Africa in strategic locations in Morocco and Algeria.

On the eve of the German invasion of Tunisia, there were around 90,000 Jews in the country. Roughly 70,000 were subjects of the Arab Bey, 15,000 were French citizens, and 5,000 were Italian citizens. Most of Tunisia's Jews, around 70,000, lived in the capital city of Tunis. The rest lived in other cities and about 5,000 lived on the island of Djerba.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Map of Operation Torch is in the Public Domain. [File:Operation Torch - map.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Operation_Torch_-_map.jpg).

<sup>51</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Yaron Tsur, *Jews of Tunis in the Period of German Occupation*, 153

## German Attitude Toward the Jews

The German army invaded Tunis on November 8, 1942. Walther Rauff was the Schutzstaffel paramilitary (SS) commander in charge of operations. In his previous assignments for the SS, Rauff was the head of the technical department and was responsible for the project of extermination using mobile gas chambers. Between 97,000 and 200,000 people, mostly Jews, were killed in these gas trucks. This method was too cumbersome for the Nazis, and they went on to develop gas chambers using Zyklon B as the killing agent.<sup>53</sup>

Two weeks after entering Tunis, Rauff arrested a few heads of the Jewish civil service, among them Muize Borgel, the head of the Jewish committee. Borgel's sons theorized that the arrest was meant to sow fear in the Jewish community. But Rauff's record showed that the Gestapo was trying to extract knowledge about Tunisia and its Jewish population, and that the treatment of the Jewish leaders was not too harsh. The French commissioner, Jean-Pierre Esteva, asserted his civil authority and was able to free most of the Jews who were arrested. The president of the Jewish community was required to appear every morning at German headquarters to report on the community's status and to receive orders. The Germans also confiscated some of the homes and belongings of the richest Jews and apparently meant to seize more properties on a large scale.<sup>54</sup>

On December 6, 1942, the Wehrmacht commander of Africa Korps, General Walther Nehring issued an order to recruit Jewish men for fortification works in northern and

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<sup>53</sup> Sharga Elam and Dennis Whitehead, "In the Service of the Jewish State," *Haaretz*, March 29, 2007. According to a lengthy article in *Haaretz* newspaper, Rauff was apparently recruited by the Israeli Mossad in 1948 for spy missions in Syria and Egypt. He died in Chile in 1984.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Borgel, *Six mois sous la botte*, 24-28.

southern Tunisia. Nehring ordered the Jewish community to organize a committee similar to the Judenrat (Jewish council) in Europe and set up working groups (Arbeitsgruppen) and leadership groups (Führungsgruppen). It was Walther Rauff who passed the order for 2,000 workers on to the president of the Jewish community Muize Borgel and Chief Rabbi Haim Blaish.<sup>55</sup> In that conversation, he also ordered that the workers affix a large yellow star on the front and back of their shirts so that they could be identified from afar and be shot if they tried to flee. Rauff also demanded that the Jewish community provide food and supplies for the workers. All this had to be done within a few hours. The chief rabbi broke into tears and the president, Borgel, tried to explain that he needed more than one day to find 2,000 workers.<sup>56</sup>

In this time of crisis and helplessness for the Jewish leadership, there were two reactions, one from the German side and one from the Jewish side. On December 9, Rauff came to the Great Synagogue on Paris Boulevard in Tunis and found only 200 recruits instead of 2,000. He began a punishing operation; he hit the Jews who came to pray and threw them out of the synagogue. He made them stand in a heavy rain and threatened to execute the heads of the kehillah. German soldiers, on Rauff's orders, began lurking in the streets and caught any Jew they saw while shooting in the air. The yard of the Alliance school became a collection area. At the same time, the Germans arrested the heads of the Jewish community. Borgel, the president, was ordered to give names of 100 distinguished members of the Kehillah, who served as hostages.

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<sup>55</sup> Some sources spell his name as Rabbi Cheim Baleish.

<sup>56</sup> Reeva Spector Simon, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: The Impact of World War II*, 191.

The reaction in the Jewish community was the meteoric rise of Paul Ghez as leader under German occupation. Paul Ghez, along with Dr. Léon Moatti and George Greif, became the recruitment committee. They called all men born between 1914 and 1925 (ages 17 to 28) to show up for work. The recruits were supplied with bread, canned food, tools (pickaxe or shovel), blankets, and so forth.

### **Fines and Taxes**

During the occupation, in parallel with forced labor, the Germans placed additional pressure on the kehillah. They confiscated Jewish property, homes, apartments, furniture, radios, sewing machines, blankets, and so forth. In addition, the community was responsible for the food and supplies of the workers. Overall, the Jews of Tunis were forced to pay 63 million francs during the six months of German occupation.<sup>57</sup> The first fine for 20 million Francs was levied on December 21, 1942. The excuse for demanding money from the Jews was written in a proclamation in three languages – French, Italian, and Arabic.

“International Jewry desired and prepared for the war. The French, Italian, and Islamic population of Tunisia is suffering greatly from the war because of the bombing of the last few days. Therefore, I decided to levy a fine on the wealth of Tunis’ Jews in the sum of 20 million francs, to provide immediate support to the victims of the bombings.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Yitzchak Avrahami, *Money Matters*, 119. The president of the Kehilla Felix Shammama published a summary of the expenses in three categories: The Germans’ needs, the cost of caring for the forced laborers, and fines. The exact total was 62,922,255.92 Francs.

<sup>58</sup> Yitzchak Avrahami, *Money Matters*, 115-116.

## Labor Camps

The laborers from Tunis were assigned to about thirty camps, mostly German military-controlled camps, but some were under Italian control. These camps were located right next to the front lines.<sup>59</sup> The first group of 2,700 men was recruited on December 9 and 10, 1942. Additional workers were recruited later in December and the beginning of January 1943. The total number of recruits was between 4,000 and 5,000 men.<sup>60</sup> But the numbers began to diminish after January. As the military situation of the Axis forces declined, the German and Italian soldiers' discipline weakened. They had less desire to invest in fortification and military facilities. The biggest problem with the work camps was their strategic locations. The labor camp in the El Aouina airport north of the city was bombed repeatedly by the Allied forces. Fourteen Jews were killed and 40 were wounded in these bombings. In a heavy bombing on January 22, 1943, sixty German airplanes were destroyed, and 1,200 German soldiers were killed. Thanks to their good fortune, only two Jewish workers were killed and around 10 were wounded that day.<sup>61</sup>

In the remote camps, prisoners suffered from poor living conditions and poor hygiene. The work lasted 12 to 18 hours a day. They dug deep trenches and were exposed to constant abuse by the German guards. In some camps, the Jews unloaded ammunition, cement, lime, and coal. They suffered from malnutrition and poor health and were sick with scabies and

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 131.

<sup>60</sup> Yaron Tsur, *The Jews of Tunis During the German Occupation*, 153. Tsur provided reference to Robert Borgel, *Etoile jaune et Croix gammée*, 60. From other cities in Tunisia there were a few hundred Jewish recruits.

<sup>61</sup> כיבוש טוניסיה על ידי צבאות הציר, קלמנט הורי, 86-87.

lice. Eventually, some of the Germans got infected as well, and allowed a Jewish doctor to provide treatment and to free some of the sick prisoners.<sup>62</sup>

## **The Final Solution of the Jewish Question**

On January 20, 1942, in the Wannsee suburb of Berlin, a group of Nazis and senior German government officials met secretly. Reinhard Heydrich, a high-ranking German SS and police official, arranged the meeting with the purpose of planning the Final Solution of the Jewish Question (*die Endlösung der Judenfrage*.) This raises a particularly important question: was North Africa Jewry included in the Wannsee protocol?

“Ultimately, close to seventy-six thousand Jews left France in cattle cars – to the East ... of these Jews only about 3 percent returned at the end of the war. Among them were scores of Tunisian Jews who happened to be in Paris environ during the war. But the vast majority of French Jews survived.”<sup>63</sup>

The Wannsee protocol presented a cold and bureaucratic genocidal plan. The Nazis calculated and planned to kill a total of 11 million Jews in Europe. Historians have looked at the protocol trying to evaluate whether the North African Jewry was part of the intended victims. France has two entries in the Wannsee document, presented below in German and then in English.

### German

Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet 165.000

Unbesetztes Gebiet 700.000

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<sup>62</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 132.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Robert Marrus and Robert O Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), xi. There were 335,000 Jews in continental France in 1940, of which 76,000 (22%) had perished in the Shoah.



## English

Imperial France / Occupied Territory 165,000

Unoccupied Territory 700,000

The German word *Reich* means Empire. *Frankreich* means Imperial France and it was the European continental part as well as the North African territories. The French called these territories *France d'Outre-mer*, France on the other side of the (Mediterranean) sea. The occupied territory was the northern half of France including Paris that was under direct German administration. The southern part of France, including the colonies of North Africa, were ruled by the Vichy government. These colonies were not occupied by Germany when the protocol was written in January 1942. Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia were ruled by French protectorate governors and their total Jewish population was less than half a million. A 1941 war census of the French Vichy government documented by Boum et al presented one set of numbers. But a different set of numbers must have been collected by Eichmann as was documented by Longerich and others.<sup>64</sup> I am pointing it out to show that the number of Jews in Eichmann's list was estimated and probably inaccurate. Eichmann's data went through a revision, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> iteration is presented below.

	1941 Vichy census <sup>65</sup>	Eichmann's data (2 <sup>nd</sup> iteration Dec. 11, 1941) <sup>66</sup>
Algerian Jews	110,000	150,000
Moroccan jews	240,000	160,000
Tunisian Jews	80,000	50,000
North African Assets, Total:	430,000	360,000

<sup>64</sup> Peter Longerich, *Wannsee: The Road to the Final Solution*, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *The Holocaust and North Africa*. (California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>66</sup> דן מכמן, "האם נכללו יהודי צפון אפריקה בפרוטוקול ועידת ואנזה", *האומה* גיליון 186 (2012): 63.

Continental occupied France		165,000
Continental unoccupied France		170,000

Adding Vichy North Africa (360,000) with Vichy France (170,000) yields 535,000. These numbers do not come close to 700,000. Raul Hilberg, one of the earliest Holocaust researchers who relied heavily on German sources, concluded that North African Jews were not part of the Final Solution. Hilberg, in his 1961 book *The Destruction of the European Jews*, said that Eichmann (in his trial in Jerusalem) could not explain the 700,000 number. But Hilberg could not produce an explanation for this possible error.<sup>67</sup>

There is disagreement among Israeli researchers in Yad Vashem on the significance of the 700,000 number. The more famous of the two is Professor Dan Michman, CEO of history study in the Education Ministry, the head of the International Institute of Research of the Shoah in Yad Vashem, and the head of the Shoah Institute at Bar Ilan University. Michman said that the Germans only thought of Europe's Jews when they prepared the Final Solution document. Michman said that though it is hard for us to imagine that the meticulous Germans have made an error, it is indeed possible that they erred in transcribing a number. He argued that the number of Jews in Unoccupied France was 170,000 and through a possible transcription error, the 170,000 became 700,000. Eichmann at his trial did not speak directly about the Jews of Unoccupied France, but he noticed several errors in the protocol that he could not explain. In the subtitle to his article, Michman added a statement

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<sup>67</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews: Deportations* (United Kingdom: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 411-413. Hilberg published a monumental work of 800 pages about the Holocaust. Only a few pages dealt with the German occupation of Tunisia. His approach is Euro-Centric, and he used only German sources. Hilberg was criticized for not using Jewish sources.

(possibly to appease the Sephardi sentiments on this sore subject.) “However, the German consul in Libya expressed in 1942 that in due time the Final Solution will be implemented in this territory as well.”<sup>68</sup> Another researcher at Yad Vashem, Dr. Irit Abramsky-Bligh, who was the editor of *Pinkas Ha’Kehillot Luv-Tunisia*, thought that the purpose of the Nazis was to murder all the Jews and that researchers disagree whether North Africa Jews were included in the plan for Unoccupied France.<sup>69</sup> Like other scholars employed by the State of Israel at Yad Vashem, Abramsky-Bligh had stayed within the consensus and only hinted at a disagreement among researchers. After her retirement she was considered “brave” in pronouncing that North Africa was definitely a part of the Final Solution.

Based on the views of these scholars, the general attitude at Yad Vashem towards North African Jewry, especially Tunisia and Libya, is jarring. An organization that fights *Holocaust Deniers* seems to turn a blind eye towards the Sephardi narrative of the Holocaust. To put a fine point on it, the official line at Yad Vashem appears to be a denial of the Holocaust experience in North Africa.

A novel idea was advanced by Peter Longerich, a German professor of history who had written several books on the Holocaust, on Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, and on the Wannsee Conference. Longerich asserts that it is altogether plausible that North African Jews were included in the Final Solution at the Wannsee protocol. He suspected an error in the addition of the following three numbers: 165,000 in occupied France, 170,000 in

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<sup>68</sup> דן מכמן, האומה – גיליון 186, קיץ תשע"ב-2012. "האם נכללו יהודי צפון אפריקה בפרוטוקול ועידת ונזה?" מתחת לכותרת נוספה הערה זו. "מחקר חדש מערער על הנחה זאת. ואף-על-פי-כן, הקונסול הגרמני בלוב התבטא ב-1942, כי בבוא הזמן ייושם הפיתרון הסופי גם באזור זה". עמודים 58-61.

<sup>69</sup> 254, פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה.

unoccupied France, and 360,000 in North African possessions. “It is conceivable that the figure of 700,000 given for the ‘unoccupied territory’ arose in error from the addition of the three numbers, the total (695,000) then being rounded up.”<sup>70</sup>

In his book *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer, a professor of Holocaust studies at Hebrew University, an academic advisor to Yad Vashem, and one of the world’s premier historians of the Holocaust, presented an insightful reconsideration of its history and meaning. Drawing on research he and other historians have done in recent years, he offered fresh opinions on such basic issues as how to define and explain the Holocaust.<sup>71</sup> Bauer offered a page from Himmler’s appointment book to shed a new light on the matter of the Jews in the Frankreich. On December 10, 1942 Himmler reported to Hitler on “Juden in Frankreich 600-700.000 abschaffen” (Jews in Imperial France 600,000 - 700,000 to be abolished or removed.) Immediately after Himmler’s report to Hitler he made this note: “Der Führer hat die Answeisung gegeben, daas die Juden und sonstigen Feinde des Reiches in Frankreich verhaftet und abtransportiert warden. Dies soll jedoch erst geschehen, wenn er mit Laval darueber gesprochen hat.” (The Führer gave the order that the Jews and other enemies of the French Reich should be arrested and taken away. However, this should not happen until he has spoken to Laval about it.)<sup>72</sup>

On February 15, 1943, the Germans arrested about twenty militant Socialists and Jewish and non-Jewish members of the Resistance. They were flown to concentration camps

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<sup>70</sup> Peter Longerich, *Wannsee: The Road to the Final Solution*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2001), abstract.

<sup>72</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 5-6. Edith Shaked, *The Holocaust: Reexamining The Wannsee Conference, Himmler’s Appointments Book, and the Jews of Vichy-Tunisia*. As per German documents faxed to Shaked by Yehuda Bauer.

Auschwitz, Sobibor and others. "Some of them, namely, Gilbert Chemla, Joseph Chemla, Victor Cohen-Hadria, Edouard Dana, and Edouard Nataf, did not return."<sup>73</sup> There were also 160 Tunisian Jews who were in the Paris environs during the German conquest and were sent to death camps. The Nazi attempt to foment antisemitism in the Muslim community in Tunisia was met with resistance. The Muslim Bey had favored the Jews and protected them. The Bey wanted the Jewish community to join Neo-Destour (the New Constitutional Liberal Party), his nationalist political party that revolted against French colonialism. The Germans needed more labor and recruited Arab citizens. As a result, there was a shared destiny among Jewish and Arab slave laborers. "It is reasonable to assume that Walther Rauff, the overseer of the Nazis' Jewish policy in Tunis, had wanted to incite Arabs against Jews, but the conditions and timing did not enable his plan."<sup>74</sup>

The Jews worked as slave laborers in fortification of the German camps. Even though they suffered from poor nutrition, poor hygiene, and harsh treatment by the Germans, the condition of their incarceration did not lead to massive deaths. The work camps were under the responsibility of the Wehrmacht; the SS was not involved. Jewish doctors were permitted to visit the detainees, and if a person's life was in danger, the Jewish community arranged for a substitute detainee. Many detainees managed to escape the camps, and the Germans freed most of them before the Allies arrived. There was no mass murder of Jewish prisoners, as happened in Europe in the concentration camps. The Jews of Tunis were required by law to wear a yellow star, but the Bey intervened, and it was not enforced.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 138.

<sup>74</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה, 260-261.

<sup>75</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 137-138. Thanks to the intervention of the Bey and the French authorities, the yellow star decree of March 12, 1942 was not enforced.

There were a few cases of looting and rape.<sup>76</sup> Over the six months of German occupation, there were about 100 Jewish deaths, mostly in the camps from Allied bombing. "There were only a handful of executions: three because of attempted escape; Victor Nataf, who was suspected of signaling to Allied planes; and a pharmacist named Mazuz."<sup>77</sup>

While the Jews of Tunis did not know about the destruction of European Jewry, they lived under constant Nazi terror. The Germans pressured the kehillah in multiple ways. The SS men threatened community leaders that if they did not comply precisely with all the decrees and demands levied upon them, they and many Jews would be executed.

Nevertheless, even though the instructions were not always fulfilled as directed, the threats of atrocities and killing never transpired. Community leaders were taken hostage in Tunis and in other cities, but none were murdered. The authors of diaries and eyewitness accounts that were published immediately after the war ascribed the German conduct to various causes. "On a micro level, some described the tendency of SS officers responsible for the Jewish community to be temperate. On a macro level, some explained the absence of executions of hostages as a strategic weakness of the Germans and their organizational problems."<sup>78</sup> Researchers and historians trying to explain the attitude of the German rulers towards the local Jews offered various explanations: the strategic situation, the short duration of the occupation (six months), the positive attitude of the Italian forces towards the Jews, and the distance of Tunisia from the railroad system of Europe.<sup>79</sup> Hilberg explained that while the finest German soldiers and officers were fighting on two fronts -

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<sup>76</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 130-140.

<sup>77</sup> Eli Bar-Chen, *Tunisian Jews' Fate under Nazi Occupation and the Possibility of Reviewing the Holocaust*, 34-47.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Borgel, *Etoile Jaune et Croix gammée*, 65.

<sup>79</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 411-413.

Russia and Libya - a weaker force was allocated to Tunisia. Another element was the confusing layers of administrative offices in Tunis, namely, the Arab Bey, who retained several civil responsibilities; the French Protectorate administration; and a third layer of officials and legal decrees imposed by the German military. Furthermore, the Germans who had a weak military presence in Tunis were trying to prevent friction with the French authorities.

### **A Change in the German Dealings with the Jews**

When the Germans entered Tunisia, they signed an agreement with the French protectorate chief, Admiral Esteva, that he would maintain his authority in regard to the police. This enabled Esteva to release the heads of the Jewish community arrested by Rauff. At the end of November, the Germans began to flex their muscles and removed the authority from the French. On December 6, 1942, the Jewish community's situation turned serious. Jews were commanded to recruit 3,000 to 4,000 young men for labor camps. The kehillah was ordered to choose the men and to provide them with food, blankets, and supplies. The Jewish community was ordered to separate the workers into groups (Arbeitsgruppen) and install a command structure (Führungsgruppen) that would coordinate with the German officers and implement the instructions.<sup>80</sup> Jews were commanded to wear a yellow star on their chest and back so that it would be easy to identify them from afar and shoot them if they tried to escape.

The Jews were rounded up in the Great Synagogue on Tunis's Paris Boulevard. Germans ambushed Jews as they were coming or leaving the synagogue and took them to Alliance

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<sup>80</sup> Yaron Tsur, *Jews of Tunis in the Period of German Occupation*, 165-167.

school. The school became a recruitment center. Apparently, the French assisted the Germans in the hunt for Jews. Borgel summarized that on December 9 and 10, around 2,700 men were taken to camp.

In the analysis of these events, we can conclude that the German objective had a limited scope: the Jewish community was to recruit a few thousand workers and take care of the workers' needs. There were no other pressures on the Jews nor any attempt to enact a Final Solution upon them. In hindsight, we know that the Germans were weak and that the Allies were soon to defeat them. Was it possible to resist the Germans and refuse to cooperate? Should Tunisian Jews have taken the risk that the community leaders would be executed? Ghez and Borgel, the leaders of the Tunis Jews community, chose to cooperate with the Germans. They developed a trust with the German commandant Rauff and waited for the end of the war in relative calm.

“In the anti-Nazi campaign that the Jewish community managed in the early 1940s, Ghez took an active role. In his public appearances he praised the pride, confidence, and bravery of the Jews and called his listeners to prove that it is possible for a Jew to rise against his enemies and punish them. To the tough and uncompromising stance that he displayed was added his military reputation, that earned him the appreciation not only of the assimilated class but also the admiration of the revisionist youth.<sup>81</sup>

## **The Livornese Jews During the German Occupation**

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<sup>81</sup> Yaron Tsur, *Jews of Tunis in the Period of German Occupation*, 162.



The Livornese Jewish community was protected by the Italian authority. It was the military coalition between Germany and Italy that gave the Livornese an exemption from persecution, forced labor, and wearing of the yellow star. Evidently, the split in the Jewish community of Tunis – between Toansa and Gerana – was deep and significant. While the Germans and Italians occupied Tunis, the Livornese spoke Italian and enjoyed the protection of their status as Italians. But a few months later, when the Axis forces were defeated and the Americans and British Allies marched in, the Livornese became, simply, Jews.

### **Witness Reports about Extermination Camps**

There were witness statements on attempts by the Germans to build extermination camps in Tunisia, attempts that at the end did not materialize. Some reported that they began converting the facilities of brick kiln near Tunis the capitol.<sup>82</sup> In 1982, Laskier received testimony about construction of an extermination facility near Kairouan in a cement and lime factory. The testimony was given by Naftali Ben-Giora, one of the envoys of the Zionist Organization in Palestine who arrived in Tunisia during the latter part of 1943.<sup>83</sup> A third witness reported construction of such a facility near Hammam-Lif, in Jebel Bou-Kornine. According to the witnesses, these facilities were not completed and were dismantled, but there were French and Arab men who spoke about their existence. My mother said that she heard such rumors. She said that they were building bakeries, מאפיות. My father said that the correct word is not bakeries מאפיות but crematorium. The rumor about building

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<sup>82</sup> Michael M. Laskier, "Between Vichy Antisemitism and German Harassment: The Jews of North Africa during the Early 1940s," *Modern Judaism* 11, no. 3 (1991): 359. Testimony of Yitzchak Avrahami in an interview by Laskier.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 359.

extermination facilities was never confirmed with any documentation. If anything was planned or began to be built, it was destroyed after the war. “It is safe to assume that Walter Rauff, the executioner of the Jewish policy in Tunis had intentions to physically hurt the Jewish community of Tunisia, but the desperate situation of the German Army did not allow it.”<sup>84</sup>



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-J20382  
Foto: Lükken | Dezember 1942

*Figure 2: Jews of Tunis were taken to forced labor camps, December 1942 (Yad Ben Zvi Archives)*<sup>85</sup>

### **Family Recollections: Forced Labor**

Mother remembered the day that her father, Nissim, was taken. Nissim came home from work every day around lunchtime. For two days he was able to evade the Germans and make it home safely. On the third day, as he made his way through the neighborhood, German soldiers captured him. Nissim was detained in the Alliance

<sup>84</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה, 260.

<sup>85</sup> Picture taken by a German photographer in December 1942. The photo was part of Germany's propaganda campaign, saying, "Africa: Jews must work – without exception all the male Jews in Tunisia must be used for productive labor." Attribution: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-J20382 / CC-BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0 DE < [Creative Commons – Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Germany – CC BY-SA 3.0 DE](#) >, via Wikimedia Commons.

school yard which became a collection area for laborers. My mother's older brother, Eli, was 16 at the time but the age of recruitment was 17 and he felt safe. Eli had seen the movie *Gone with the Wind* and admired Clark Gable. He grew a thin moustache like his idol Gable and looked older for his age. My grandmother was a professional cook, and she taught her son Eli to cook. Eli was sent by his mother to bring food and a change of clothes to his father. The German guards saw Eli, a tall and handsome boy with a Gable moustache and decided to send him to a work camp. Eli was shipped to Bizerte army camp which was documented by the historians Abitbol and Laskier as the worst camp. But he returned home looking fine, probably because he was a good cook and had worked in the camp's kitchen. Nissim worked in the desert in Jebel Jelloud. This is where Tunisia had its largest cement plant and a phosphate-processing plant. My grandmother, Ninet, had to take care of the family on her own. She had three young children and a handicapped sister at home. Ninet also took on the added responsibility of bringing food and supplies to her husband, Nissim. Ninet hitched a ride with the German soldiers and delivered meals to Nissim.<sup>86</sup> My mother, at age 13, was the oldest of the children. It fell on her to run errands, stand hours in bread lines, and take care of the home while her mother was working. The children stopped going to school when the Alliance school became a recruitment site for forced laborers.

She remembers: "The Germans took all the food for themselves. They stored the provisions and left very little for us to eat. We were hungry, fearful, and distressed.

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<sup>86</sup> A ride from the center of Tunis to Jebel Jelloud on today's road would take about 10 minutes; see Google Maps. [https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Tunis to Jebel Jelloud](https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Tunis%20to%20Jebel%20Jelloud).

At night, drunk soldiers roamed the streets. They knocked on the doors and demanded girls. The Italian neighbors said to the Germans: 'There are no girls here! No girls!' This is how the Italians saved us."

The Jewish community was helpful to our family. They distributed coupons to buy sugar and oil. And the black market had flourished. The Arabs had more access to food, and they charged a high price in the black market.

The Allied bombing was relentless. Because the Germans were in the city, the Allied Air Force bombed indiscriminately and caused many civilian casualties. My mother remembers that many people, Arabs and Jews, escaped from Tunis and found refuge in the countryside. But her family was stuck. They had a handicapped aunt, and a food delivery to Nissim, and had nowhere to go. When the bombs fell, all three children jumped into bed with the aunt and prayed *Shema Yisrael*. The trauma left deep emotional scars. Decades later, mother was recognized as suffering from PTSD, received medical diagnosis of a handicap, and began receiving a monthly reparation from Germany.

### **Family Recollections: Family Tragedy, by Emily Gazit<sup>87</sup>**

איך אתם קשורים לשואה

..אתם הרי לא מאירופה

..רגע, היי

השואה לא פסחה גם על צפון אפריקה, אי שם בתוניס הצוררים אספו את הגברים החסונים היהודים

כדי לעבוד בשבילם

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<sup>87</sup> Emily Gazit is the great granddaughter of Emile Meir Ja'oui z"l who died in the Holocaust. She and I are descendants of Simcha and Shalom Zeitun – my Tunisians great grandparents.

הם תפסו את סבא רבא שלי, גבר חסון וגבוה.. ג'ינג'י עם עיניים ירוקות.. העלו אותו לג'יפ שלהם ואז הוא הרגיש משהו לא תקין, הנהג היה שיכור מדי כדי לנהוג

הוא החליט לקפוץ ולברוח וכך היה. הוא קפץ בזמן הנסיעה ישר אל תוך הבוץ כשהגשם עדיין יורד בחוזקה.

אבל הנהג לא ויתר ונסע מיד אחורה על מנת לדרוס ולמנוע ממנו לברוח הצורך לא הסתפק בפעם אחת, הוא דרס הלוך ושוב עד שפרחה נשמתו הטהורה בתוך שלולית ענקית של בוץ, דם ודמעות.

ומאחורי הג'יפ רצה בתו הקטנה בת ה 7 יסמין שמה, היא רצה וצעקה לעבר אבא שלה ולא הבינה מי אלה שלקחו אותו בכוח. וכשהוא קפץ היא הספיקה לראות את כל המחזה הנורא בזמן השבעה על סבא רבא יסמין הקטנה מסרה את נשמתה לבורא מרוב צער וכאב על מות אביה! סבתא רבא שלי קברה 2 יקרים בשבוע אחד

היא התאלמנה בגיל 28! גידלה 4 בנות בעוני כבד.. ועם השנים הן גדלו ונישאו והולידו ילדים. סבתא רבא שלי זכתה לראות נכדים/ות, נינים/ות ואפילו בני נינים/ות

היא האריכה ימים עד גיל 98 ונפטרה במיתת נשיקה לפני 10 שנים

יהי זיכרם ברוך

לעילוי נשמת

אמיל מאיר בן רוחמה

יסמין בת מרסל

מרסל בת שמחה

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

This is the incredible story of my mother's cousin, Marcelle Jaoui (née Zeitoun), her husband Meïr Jaoui, and their daughter Jasmine.

May God rest their souls.

How are you related to the Holocaust?

You are not from Europe...

Wait a minute, hey...

The Holocaust did not skip North Africa. Somewhere in Tunis, the oppressors gathered rugged Jewish men to work for them.

They caught my great-grandfather, a tall and rugged man, a redhead with green eyes. They put him in their jeep and then he felt uncomfortable because the driver was too drunk to drive.

He decided to jump and run, and this is how it was. He jumped while the jeep was moving, straight into the mud while the rain was still falling hard. But the driver did not give up and immediately reversed to run over him and stop him from getting away. The oppressor was not satisfied with one pass; he ran over him twice until his pure soul extinguished in a huge puddle of mud, blood, and tears.

And behind the jeep ran his 7-year-old little girl named Jasmine; she ran and screamed to her father and did not understand who had taken him by force. and when he jumped, she got to see the whole horrible show!

During her father's weeklong Azkara [memorial period], little Jasmine gave up her soul to the Creator out of grief and pain at her father's death. My great grandma buried two loved ones in one week!

She became a widow at age 28! She raised four daughters in extreme poverty, and over the years, they grew up and got married and had children. My great-grandmother got to see her grandchildren, great-



grandchildren, and even great-great-grandchildren. She lived to be 98 and died 10 years ago.

May their memory be a blessing. To give Aliya to their souls.

Emile Meir son of Ruchama

Jasmine daughter of Marcelle

Marcelle daughter of Simha and Shalom Zeitun

## Liberation

“On May 7, 1943, the British 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division captured Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, and the U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> Army Corps captured Bizerte, the last remaining port in Axis hands. Six days later, on May 13, 1943, the Axis forces in North Africa, having sustained 40,000 casualties in Tunisia alone, surrendered; 267,000 German and Italian soldiers became prisoners of war.

During the entire North African campaign, the Germans and Italians suffered 620,000 casualties, while the British Commonwealth lost 220,000 men. American casualties in Tunisia alone totaled more than 18,500. The Allied victory in North Africa destroyed or neutralized nearly 900,000 German and Italian troops, opened a second front against the Axis, permitted the invasion of Sicily and the Italian mainland in the summer of 1943, and removed the Axis threat to the oilfields of the Middle East and to British supply lines to Asia and Africa. It was critically important to the course of World War II.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Tunisia Campaign Collections Highlights. [Tunisia Campaign | Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](https://ushmm.org/Tunisia-Campaign). Accessed on September 7, 2022.

The day of liberation for the Jews of Tunis was like waking up from a nightmare. For over two years, they had been oppressed and discriminated against under the Vichy laws. For six months, they were victims of German violence and abuse. Just like their brethren in Europe, they lived on the edge of the abyss and could not have predicted their luck at having survived it at the last moment.

Life began to be restored, men returned from labor camps, but from a political point of view, the Vichy laws were still in force. It took three months to cancel the anti-Jewish decrees. The Jews tried to reconcile the France that they had adored before the war with the France that collaborated with Germany and betrayed them. French colonial control was still in place in Tunis, and France was still occupied by Germany until 1945. The disappointment from France – the superpower that advanced the universal messages of the French revolution, messages that were the cornerstone of Jewish assimilation – led Jews to find other political solutions. That, and the rise of Arab nationalism, brought about the spread of Zionism.

### **Family Recollections: No One Kept Shabbat**

Mother remembers that Friday afternoon. She was going to take out the trash when she saw the British troops marching in. The liberation euphoria took her breath away. She saw people opening the storage facilities where the Germans stored all the food. That day, she said, no one kept Shabbat. People were hoarding food, wine, dry goods; celebrating, singing, eating, drinking, and hugging each other. Jews jumped into the cars with the American and British soldiers and took joy rides throughout Tunis. Mom brought a Jewish American soldier home to meet the family.



The Italian neighbors disappeared. The Arabs went into hiding. And the Jews rejoiced! ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה

A few weeks before liberation, her brother Eli escaped from Bizerte labor camp. He was a tall and handsome boy at 16 who spoke Arabic, French, Italian, and a *bissele* (little) German. Although Bizerte was bombed frequently, he survived possibly because of his good rapport with the German guards. Eli worked in the kitchen with an Italian cook. The Italian cook arranged the smuggling of two Italian army uniforms to the kitchen. They got dressed as soldiers and managed to escape in the truck that delivered food and supplies to the camp. Eli went first to Nabeul where he had family. When the war was over, he returned to Tunis healthy and self-assured. Sabba Nissim on the other hand returned from Jebel Jelloud emaciated, sick, and full of lice. It took many months for him to regain his strength.

Over time, life returned to normal. My mother went to work – first at a second-hand clothing store, and then as a housekeeper for a rich family. Sabba Nissim returned to his job as a taster of Boukha in the Bokobsa brandy factory.<sup>89</sup> Savta continued to cook fabulous meals for receptions and celebrations. And summer holidays resumed in the coastal city of Bizerte.

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<sup>89</sup> Boukha is a clear brandy made from Mediterranean figs. The Bokobsa family had been distilling the brandy since 1880. Boukha to Tunisians is as Vodka is to Russians, a national alcoholic drink. Note the similar spelling of Boukha and водка (Vodka, in Cyrillic alphabet.)

# Zionism

Zionism in Tunisia began to rise with several forces pushing it to the fore. The Jews' disappointment in France and the antisemitism of the Vichy period, as well as the rise of Arab nationalism in Tunisia and in the rest of colonial North Africa created a void. The crisis caused by the war greatly elevated the status of Zionism, not only in society's lower strata, but also in the higher echelons.<sup>90</sup> On Bastille Day, July 14, 1943 when France celebrated its independence, the Jewish youth movement צעירי ציון (Zion Youth) was established. The arrival in Tunis of Jewish soldiers from Israel, who had served in the British army, encouraged the Zionist movement. Zionism was viewed as an answer to a rise in Arab hate. Beginning in 1948, the Zionist youth movement sent their members to *Hachshara* הכשרה preparatory camp at Mombardon, a farm in southwestern France.<sup>91</sup> "Jewish youth flocked to courses in modern Hebrew taught by Israeli Shlichim (emissaries) who had gotten trapped in Tunisia because of the war."<sup>92</sup>

## Arab - Jewish Tension

A riot broke out in the Hafsia neighborhood of Tunis on June 14, 1952. This neighborhood was situated between the Jewish and Muslim quarters of the city. "The riot occurred within the broader context of the struggle for Tunisian independence from France and the violence that that struggle unleashed."<sup>93</sup> Although the tension between Arabs and Jews was

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<sup>90</sup> Yaron Tzur, *Yad Vashem Quarterly Magazine*, vol. 27, Summer 2002, 12-13. [Yad Vashem Magazine #27 - Page 12-13.](#)

<sup>91</sup> פנקס הקהילות לוב – תוניסיה, 266.

<sup>92</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 85.

<sup>93</sup> Ethan Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, *Colonialism and the Jews* (Indiana University Press, 2017), 256.

not pervasive, the riot escalated, and a Jewish youth named Journo was murdered. The young Jews were not passive and had fought in self-defense. There were calls to keep peace and the Bey met the head of the Jewish community and apologized for the death of Journo. Some of the conclusion to the riots were that “the majority of the Jewish population feels that should the French be forced to leave Tunisia; the Jews would have to leave too.”<sup>94</sup>

“If we follow the prevailing historiography on the Jews of Muslim lands after 1945, and particularly after 1947-1948, we would be inclined to regard these events as indicative of the increasingly vulnerable position of the North Africa Jewish community in light of the war in the Middle East and mounting Muslim antisemitism.”<sup>95</sup>

### **Family Recollections: Youth Movement and Aliyah**

Mother joined the religious youth movement תורה ועבודה, Torah and Service. She studied Hebrew in the basement of the Great Synagogue in Tunis. At age 19, she decided to make Aliya (immigrate to Israel) but had to get permission from her parents. She made a very bold decision for a girl who lived in a traditional family where girls were not given much freedom of movement. She pressured her parents and, with the help of her brother, Eli, the parents relented and permitted her to make Aliya. Family lore tells it that Eli boarded the boat with my mother forgetting for a moment that he had a wife and two young sons. He was an enthusiastic Zionist and was ready to depart with the other pioneers. But his wife Rachel, short in stature but very determined, came aboard, and pulled him off the boat. Three years

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 264

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 252

later, Eli immigrated to Israel with his wife, two children plus one infant. Mother joined a group of girls from Tunisia and Morocco and went to הכשרה preparatory camp in Pujaudran, near Toulouse in southwestern France.<sup>96</sup> After several weeks in the camp, she boarded the boat, *Modeka*, and arrived in Israel in March 1949.



*Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency Photo ID. This hand-written card contains the following details. Guetta*

*Helena, born 11/29 to Nissim and Ninet. Arrived in Israel on the boat Modeka on the date of 20 March 1949.*

## War: Iron and Irony

The Shoah is a weighty subject. War is a somber affair. Bombing and killing is a horrendous consequence of humanity's failure to live together and in peace. But along the somber research, one could not escape examples of irony and absurdity.

### The Duplicitous Italians

The fascist regime in Italy enacted anti-Jewish laws on October 6, 1938. It was enacted not as part of their pact with Nazi Germany but as an independent fascist ideology.<sup>97</sup> In Italy the racist laws included discrimination and economic dispossession of Jews. But in Tunisia the Italian consul insisted that the Italian Jews should be free from the anti-Jewish statutes

<sup>96</sup> Pujaudran on Google Maps. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Pujaudran>

<sup>97</sup> דניאל קארפי, בין שבט לחסד: השלטונות האיטלקים ויהודי צרפת ותוניסיה בימי מלחמת העולם השנייה (ירושלים: מרכז זלמן שזר לתולדות ישראל, 1993), 300.

and from forced labor. It was explained by Carpi that a colonial competition erupted between France and Italy. The French *Statut des Juifs* was applied in Tunisia not too stringently because the Italian authorities protected “their” Jews and therefore France did not want to look “bad” in comparison.<sup>98</sup> Early in 1942 the Italian diplomats and military already knew about the atrocities committed by the Nazis and expressed aversion and disagreement to be partners in this heinous crime. Italians were flippant, inconsistent, but not as cruel as the Germans.

Hilberg provided this analysis:

“The application of dismissals and Aryanizations in Tunisia led to difficulties with the Italians, who insisted upon the protection of 5,000 Italian Jews in the territory. These Jews, a seventeenth-century offshoot of the Italian mercantile community of Livorno, were important to the Italians... what sort of impression was created when France was persecuting and Italy protecting the Jews.”<sup>99</sup>

The Italian diplomats set their eyes on the French colonies of North Africa. They took advantage of their alliance with Germany and aimed to meddle in the French colonial affairs. “The Italian intervention [on behalf of Italian Jews] was certainly the most spectacular and effective.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> דניאל קארפי, בין שבת לחסד, 203-302.

<sup>99</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 664

<sup>100</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 168.

## **The Allied Aerial Bombardment**

While the Italian actions helped save Jews from harm and abuse, there was a heartbreaking Allied action that contributed to the Jews' pain. The Americans joined the war against Hitler to free the world from Nazism and to save the oppressed populations from slave labor. And American air force relentlessly bombed the German positions inside the city of Tunis, as well as in the camps, the seaports, and the airports. But while dropping bombs indiscriminately they caused enormous suffering to the civilian population. The Jews who worked in German camps were subjected to almost daily bombing. "Estimates are that 2,587 civilians were killed in Tunisia during the German occupation... almost all of them died, not from Nazi persecution, but from the Allied bombing attacks."<sup>101</sup> It is vital to stress the fact that the very presence of the Germans caused the deaths.<sup>102</sup>

## **The Germans and the B.B.C. Radio**

About a month after they conquered Tunis, the Germans confiscated the radios of the Jewish community.<sup>103</sup> They ordered the Jews to bring the radios on Shabbat and Sunday to the Grand synagogue. The Rabbi permitted Jews to ride the streetcar with their radios on the basis of פיקוח נפש (saving a life). Clement Hori had written in his diary the following pained reaction. "I brought my radio to the synagogue, and it was clear to me that the German officers took to themselves the best and lightest Radio equipment... it was a real

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<sup>101</sup> Spector Simon, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa*, 196-197.

<sup>102</sup> Michael Laskier, *Between Vichy Antisemitism and German Harassment*, 358.

<sup>103</sup> The exact date for delivery of Radio (on pain of death) was Shabbat and Sunday, December 12-13, 1942.

חילול הקדש desecration... Is this the Grand Synagogue on Paris Boulevard, or is it a huge shopping mall?"<sup>104</sup>

Months later, the radios were put to good use. A Jew of Polish origin named Norytch served as an interpreter between the Germans and the Jews. In the spring of 1943, through his daily contact with the German troops, Norytch noticed the extent of their distress. He told the soldiers about the B.B.C. broadcasts in German and handed to them the radios from the stock taken from the Jews. "In this manner, Jewish radios brought their anti-Hitlerian 'poison' into the most inaccessible Nazi ranks and have considerably contributed to the Allied victory in the Tunisian region... they were the first to abandon their positions on the front line thus creating an incredible chaos."<sup>105</sup>

### **How Tunisia became Judenrein<sup>106</sup>**

The consequence of the war and the Holocaust in Europe was a large Jewish emigration away from eastern Europe. But at the end of the war in North Africa, the majority of the Jews stayed in place. Some twenty years after World War II, by the late 1960's, the Arab lands become largely Judenrein. Unlike the European experience, the pressure to leave Tunisia was not related to World War II and to the Holocaust. Their fate was exacerbated by the establishment of the State of Israel and by the Israel-Arab conflict. Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, Israel's victory over several Arab armies in the war of independence, the 1956 Sinai campaign, and 1967 Six-Day War all contributed to Arab

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<sup>104</sup> קלמנט הורי, כיבוש טוניסיה על ידי צבאות הציר, 66.

<sup>105</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 125, 135-136.

<sup>106</sup> Judenrein (cleaned of Jews) or Judenfrei (free of Jews) are Nazi terms designating an area that is free or cleansed of Jews during the Holocaust.

antisemitism. Ironically, the Nazis antisemitic propaganda failed to incite Arab hatred of Jews, but the series of Israeli war victories succeeded in fomenting antisemitism. After the 1967 Six-Day War, Tunisia had become almost entirely Judenrein.

### **Jewish (Dis)Unity**

Before the German occupation, the two Kehillot of Tunis, Toansa and Gerana, lived in separate orbits. The Toansa was the majority of the population, but the smaller and prosperous Gerana community achieved independence in 1710. The Kehillot had separate cemeteries, each had their own Rabbi and kosher slaughtering, and they rarely married each other. This split and disunity began to fade when Jews experienced the pain of discrimination and war. While the Gerana autonomy had begun the process of decline during the Vichy era, it was the German occupation that caused the communities to unite, to share resources and to cooperate. The Germans' exploitation strengthened the bonds within the separate kehillot. "On February 17, 1944, the Gerana Kehilla was no longer a separate entity."<sup>107</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Soon after the allied victory in North Africa, the first scraps of information on genocide of the European Jewry became known. In comparison to the horrors in Europe, whose true extent was yet to be grasped, the persecution they had suffered seemed only a brief nightmare. The anti-Jewish Vichy decrees and the German oppression had included neither mass destruction nor barbaric killings. "Consequently, any analogical connection with the

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<sup>107</sup> Yitzchak Avrahami, *Money Matters*, 124. Tsur, *The Jews of Tunis During the Nazi Occupation*, 174.



odious carnage perpetrated in Europe could, on the surface, only appear false and even ridiculous.”<sup>108</sup>

But what we call the Holocaust cannot be reduced to the counting of dead bodies. The German ideology that led to the Final Solution in Europe held true in North Africa as well. The definition of the Final Solution needs unpacking as it points to wide-ranging theories about the cause of the Holocaust. It may sound strange, but to this day Holocaust historians disagree about the reasons for the Holocaust and the steps that led to the Final Solution. Some historians view the Holocaust from an intentionalist viewpoint, while others hold a functionalist viewpoint. Most contemporary historians combine the two perspectives as will be explained below. The intentionalist historians, such as Lucy Dawidowicz, say that “the Final Solution had its origins in Hitler’s mind.” Hitler transformed political antisemitism into racial doctrine whose purpose was the destruction of the Jews.<sup>109</sup> She and others argued that “Hitler’s intentions, and therefore his role in the process leading to the Holocaust are central because of the Godlike position he occupied in the regime; the other Nazis were an indispensable supporting cast.”<sup>110</sup> The functionalist historians explained the factors that caused the Holocaust by concentrating on the development of social and economic structures that led to impasses that “forced” the Germans to take the most radical solutions. They describe an unplanned process of step-by-step worsening of the German attitude towards the Jews, a process that ended in annihilation. They do not

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<sup>108</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 166.

<sup>109</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945*, 150.

<sup>110</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945*, 150-166. See also Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 4.

believe that ideology or central decision makers were at all crucial, but they agree that Hitler's approval was necessary.

Most historians nowadays posit a combination of Hitler's ideology (intentionalist) with a process that began with enacting racial laws, isolation in ghettos, deportations, and annihilation (functionalist.) They pointed to a drastic moral decline and barbaric behavior by the SS and the Wehrmacht as well. They noted the power struggle within the Reich's upper echelon and thus answering the "Jewish Question" by Heidrich, Himmler, and Eichmann became a sure way to get the approval of the Fuhrer.<sup>111</sup>

Refocusing on the Jews of Tunisia, let us return to the question that we asked at the outset. Was Tunisia included in the plan for the Final Solution? For historians in the intentionalist camp, the answer is yes. Nazi ideology did not distinguish between a Jew in Warsaw and a Jew in Tunis. The ideology was the same but the opportunity to deport and annihilate the Jews of Tunisia was not practical during the short Nazi occupation. The functionalist historian could show that the steps taken by the Nazis in Tunisia were aligned with the steps taken in the European territories. But every step of the way the Nazis faced stumbling blocks. The first step was to define Jews by race and adopt the Vichy antisemitic laws, which were similar to Nuremberg laws. Jewish property was to be Aryanized (though the Bey of Tunisia stalled its implementation.)<sup>112</sup> Jews worked as slave labors in German camps and were subjected to abuse but there was no mass killing. Rauff made efforts to incite the Arab population against the Jews, but the Arabs did not turn against the Jews. Some Jews

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<sup>111</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 5-7.

<sup>112</sup> Aomar Boum, *The Holocaust and North Africa*, 4.

were deported to concentration camps in Europe, but the logistics and cost of transportation made it impossible to do transport on a large scale.

History is not a static endeavor. Each historian evaluates documents and social-political forces and may draw different conclusions. This section is an assessment of the work of historians dealing with the Jews of North Africa. The evaluation will be organized by the year of publication, beginning with Raul Hilberg (1961) and ending with Reeva Spector Simon (2020.)

Hilberg was one of the earliest historians researching the Holocaust. He drew much of his research from German sources. Unlike the work done by Yad Vashem, Hilberg did not use Jewish eyewitness testimony. His conclusion is:

“In Tunisia the German sphere of activity was most restricted. For one thing, the geographic position of the area was forbidding. The Germans knew that, in the event of an Allied breakthrough, they would not be able to evacuate the fighting army from there. How, then, could they ship out 80,000 Tunisian Jews? Besides, Tunisia was Africa, and the “final solution” by its very definition was applicable only to the European continent. These considerations, however, were not going to stop the German bureaucrats from inflicting upon the Tunisian Jews a certain amount of suffering. The bureaucrats were determined to start as quickly as possible, and they proceeded as far as they could.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 688.

Hilberg's statements contains an internal contradiction. Hilberg claims that the Final Solution is Eurocentric but at the same breath he says that if not for losing the war, plus the logistic problem of shipping 80,000 Tunisians to Europe, they would have annihilated the Tunisian Jews. Hilberg is in the functionalist camp, but his refusal to see the Jews of Tunisia as part of the Final Solution had created the convoluted and illogical statement quoted above.

Michel Abitbol (1983), a Moroccan Israeli historian published twenty years after Hilberg. He saw no difference between the Jews of Europe and the Jews of Tunisia:

“Tunisia was separated by the sea from the Hitlerian empire and thus could not be connected with the usual means to the deadly infrastructure [of]... eastern Europe. Transportation to Auschwitz by air or by sea would be expensive and unsafe. Building extermination camps in Tunisia required more space, time, and secrecy than was available. There were barely enough Wehrmacht troops to hold off the Allied attacks. The German attempts to instigate anti-Jewish pogroms was not feasible.”<sup>114</sup>

The Nazis had taken a series of steps before enacting the Final Solution in Europe. Those steps were taken in North Africa as well (fortunately, not the final step.) Jews were defined “scientifically,” objectified juridically, the Jews had been systematically expelled from society, and branded, penned, starved, and diabolized before the massacre. “State Antisemitism of the Vichy regime can be compared to Nuremberg Laws.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 119-120.

<sup>115</sup> Michel Abitbol, *The Jews of North Africa*, 166-168.

Satlof (2006) suggests the widest *geographical envelope* for the Holocaust. For Satlof, all Jews whether in Christian Europe or in Muslim lands were targets for annihilation by the Nazi regime. In his words:

“From the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, the lives of Jews in Arab lands were touched by the Holocaust. It is a complex story. The persecution of the region’s Jews cannot be disentangled from the politics of colonial rule and the ambitions of the Jews’ European tormentors. But proximity was paramount. The closer to Europe, the more intense and pervasive was the persecution.”<sup>116</sup>

Irit Abramsky-Bligh (2013) “a Shoah researcher working at Yad Vashem decided in a brave step to document in writing the Shoah that took place in North Africa, with which we are less familiar.”<sup>117</sup> The video producer considered her work “a brave step” because including Tunisian Jews in the Shoah went against the official line of Yad Vashem. One of Abramsky’s concluding statements on the video is most telling. “The policy of the Final Solution does not discriminate between the Jews of Ashkenaz and the Jews of Sepharad.”<sup>118</sup> Jews in Israel may (and do) discriminate against the Sephardim, but in the eyes of the Nazi beasts, Jews are all the same.

More recently, Boum and Abrevaya Stein (2019) stated: “Thus, the Holocaust was experienced by Jews in North Africa through the implementation of French and Italian racial laws, the expropriation of property and economic disenfranchisement, and

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<sup>116</sup> Satlof, *Among the Righteous*, 24.

<sup>117</sup> “עירית אברמסקי” , אדומדיה מרכז תקשורת , April 7, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hFvR9QfYeg>.

<sup>118</sup> “מדיניות הפיתרון הסופי אינה יודעת הפליות בין יהודי אשכנז ויהודי ספרד.”

internment and forced labor. Some... were deported to death camps.”<sup>119</sup> In the introduction to their book, Boum and Abrevaya Stein stated that their aim was to shed light on North Africa and “push the boundaries of Holocaust history.” As historians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they blend the *intentionalist* and the *functionalist* view of the Holocaust. The Nazis did not spare any Jew from annihilation; it was just a matter of time and opportunity before the Tunisian Jews were to be destroyed.

Reeva Spector Simon (2020) issues a vague opinion about the Nazi’s intentions, but her summary statement is comprehensive. “If the Germans had a plan to implement the Final Solution in Tunisia, they were unsuccessful: logistics and transportation facilities were inadequate, and there was little support from either the Italians or the Arab population. The Allies liberated Tunisia on May 7, 1943. Three months later, the anti-Jewish regulations were cancelled.”<sup>120</sup>

What is common to Abitbol and Satlof is their Sephardi heritage. Unlike Hilberg, Dawidowicz, and Michman (the Ashkenazi Historians) Abitbol and Satlof take as a given that Tunisia was included in the Final Solution. The more recent historians and researchers, Abramsky, Boum, Stein, and Simon are leaning towards including Tunisia in the Final Solution.

### **Shoah: Society for the History of Tunisian Jews**

Tunisian Jews living in France hold an annual commemoration of the Shoah in Paris. The Tunisian-French Jewish community sees Imperial France (of the 1940’s) as a single entity

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<sup>119</sup> Aomar Boum, *The Holocaust and North Africa*, 7-8.

<sup>120</sup> Reeva Spector Simon, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa*, 197.

encompassing a European territory as well as the overseas (d'outre-mer) colonies. The *Société d'Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie* (Society for the History of the Jews of Tunisia) held the commemoration of the 78<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the round-up of the Jews of Tunis by the SS and the establishment of forced labor camps in Tunisia. The event took place online (because of the pandemic) on December 6, 2020.<sup>121</sup> “The annual commemoration ceremony was held at the Paris Shoah Memorial in the presence of government officials, diplomatic representatives from Tunisia, Germany and Israel, and various religious and civil society representatives. The names of Tunisian Jews who died in the field of battle, of deportees who did not return from concentration and death camps in Europe, and those murdered in Tunisian forced labor camps were read.”<sup>122</sup>

### **Sephardim and the Shoah**

Immediately after making Aliya to Israel, Sephardi Jews did not consider themselves Holocaust survivors. They recalled being expelled from their homes by enraged Arab mob. They remembered war, Vichy antisemitism, German occupation and terror, dispossession of property, hunger, and fear from the Arab neighbors. But none categorized this experience as Shoah. War was war and civilians, including the Arabs, suffered. The expulsion of Jews from Arab lands was an enormous trauma for Tunisian Jews. It took decades for them to articulate the period of Vichy rule and German occupation as a part of the Shoah experience.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> On December 6, 1942 the Nazis began the persecution of Tunisian Jews.

<sup>122</sup> The Society for the History of the Jews of Tunisia. <https://shjt.fr/>.

<sup>123</sup> יבלונקה, חנה, הרחק מהמסילה - המזרחים והשוואה: ידיעות אחרונות ספרי חמד, 2008. 27-38.

Growing up in Israel in the 1960's, we commemorated the Holocaust in a day called Yom Hashoah V'Hagvura יום השואה והגבורה. A day to honor the memory of the victims but also to remember the bravery of the resistance. The spotlight was on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Partisans, and the fighters. We mourned the six million European Jews who perished, but the focus was on the resistance. My mother participated in these events, and she identified with the survivors. We knew who they were because they had a number tattooed on their arm. But my mother never claimed that she was a Holocaust survivor herself. She and her family were survivors of the Nazis terror during the war. Her transition from war survivor to Holocaust survivor occurred much later, in the 2000's as the state of Israel and the republic of Germany began to incorporate handicapped Jews from North Africa into the reparation program. By the time these reparations were approved, my grandfather and uncle who were enslaved in labor camps had died. Since receiving reparations, my mother had joined the elite class of Holocaust survivors which put her on par with her Ashkenazi neighbors.

A famous Israeli actor went through a similar transformation. The actor Sharon Raginiano discovered at the age of 27 that his father, a Libyan Jew, was taken to Bergen Belsen at age 3 and survived there for four years. "I am a Holocaust survivor," declared Raginiano in an interview with Tzofia Herschfeld. This made him realize that the Shoah did not belong exclusively to the Ashkenazim. This knowledge changed his life. He retired from acting and returned to the religious tradition of the Libyan Jewish community. He changed his whole



outlook on life by internalizing the fact that the Holocaust was also a Sephardi experience.<sup>124</sup>

I asked my mother: האם את ניצולת שואה? Are you a Holocaust survivor?

She answered emphatically: כן! Yes!

Question: למה את מקבלת תשלומים מגרמניה? Why do you get reparations from Germany?

Answer: I missed years of school. My father and my brother were prisoners in Nazi camps. I had to go to work to support the family. I lost the joy of life. There were bombings and we were terrorized. I had gone to buy boxes of dry milk for my family and had to duck and hide from the bombs. I developed a handicap, a trauma, and for that I receive reparations from Germany.

### **Personal Reflection**

My father, an eastern European Ashkenazi Jew, escaped from Europe before the Holocaust. My mother, a North African Sephardi Jew, suffered under the Nazi regime and is a Holocaust survivor. How am I to understand the meaning of the Shoah for both sides of my family? I have spent months reading books about the Holocaust and about Tunisian history. I had an internal debate about how to characterize the fate of Tunisian Jewry during the Second World War. The position of Yad Vashem weighed on me for a long time. I was brought up in an Ashkenazi world and I trusted that Yad Vashem was the authority on the

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<sup>124</sup> צופיה הירשפלד, "אני שרון רגיניאנו, ניצול שואה," ידיעות אחרונות, אפריל 20, 2009, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3703286,00.html>.

Shoah. If they did not include Tunisia in the Shoah narrative, how could I? But, over time, I learned about the politics of the Holocaust and its Eurocentric bias. For example, the issue of reparations, which involved a lot of money and political power had influence on the narrative of the Shoah. The people who are included in the consensus as survivors, may be eligible for reparation, other people will be kept out. There are conferences, and notoriety, and international fame associated with the Holocaust. Eli Wiesel, a humble and serious thinker became a celebrity as a “professional Holocaust survivor.” Holocaust Historians debate, argue, and fight among themselves which is typical to many other academic circles. A lot of ego gets mixed in with scholarship. For my part, I concluded that the Wannsee Protocol’s “Final Solution” had planned the murder of the Jews of French North Africa. Eichmann counted my Sephardi ancestors as candidates for annihilation. I was a young girl during Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. I heard on the radio testimonies which shook me and scared me. I mourned the six million of my people who were murdered in the Holocaust, among them one and a half million children. And I am relieved that the Nazi’s’ diabolical plan for the Jews of Tunisia did not succeed.

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# Maps and Photographs

The arrow is pointing at the city of Tunis<sup>125</sup>



Figure 3: Map of the Mediterranean Sea

Imperial France during the Vichy Rule<sup>126</sup>



Figure 4: Vichy France and the North African Protectorate plus Syria and Lebanon.

<sup>125</sup> Map of the Mediterranean Sea by Janwillem Van Aalst - Own work, CC BY 4.0, [File:Area of the Mediterranean.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#). Compiled from Natural Earth open data, this map from 2020 shows land cover, hillshade, populated places, infrastructure, and administrative divisions.

<sup>126</sup> Peamim 28, Machon Yad Ben Zvi. (1986), 78. Email permission to the Author on August 2, 2022.

## Map of Europe and Oversea Possessions

France, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Corsica, Lebanon, Syria (blue)

Italy, Libya, Sardinia (yellow)

England, Palestine, Cyprus, Transjordan, Iraq (red)



Figure 5: Europe and the Colonies in 1939<sup>127</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Edith Shaked, email from the author, August 8, 2022.

## Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) כל ישראל חברים

My mother attended AIU in the years 1935-1942. When this picture was taken, she was six years old, but she is not recognized in this photo.



Figure 6: Alliance Israelite Universelle 1935<sup>128</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Photo n° 2977 - TUNISIA, Tunis, 1935 - School Class photo. Photo by: Jacques Adda, Tunis Public domain:  
[https://www.aiu.org/sites/default/files/styles/album\\_slider\\_full/public/albums/AIUPHOT\\_2977.jpg?itok=SkG6BNl4](https://www.aiu.org/sites/default/files/styles/album_slider_full/public/albums/AIUPHOT_2977.jpg?itok=SkG6BNl4)



**Souk el Grana:** The market of the Jews who came from Livorno, Italy to Tunis beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Jews transformed the souk into an economic center in Tunis. Agricultural products, crafts, clothing and footwear, and many other products were sold in the market.<sup>129</sup>



*Figure 7: Old view of Souk El Grana*

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<sup>129</sup> By Unknown author - Private collection, Public Domain, created on January 1, 1900  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7354434>.

## Wannsee Conference: Eichmann's list

Land	Zahl
<b>A. Altreich</b>	131.800
Ostmark	43.700
Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Bialystok	400.000
Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Estland - judenfrei -	
Lettland	3.500
Litauen	34.000
Belgien	43.000
Dänemark	5.600
Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet	165.000
Unbesetztes Gebiet	700.000
Griechenland	69.600
Niederlande	160.800
Norwegen	1.300
<b>B. Bulgarien</b>	48.000
England	330.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	58.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	342.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	6.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	55.500
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrußland aus- schl. Bialystok	446.484
<b>Zusammen: über</b>	<b>11.000.000</b>

Figure 8: Public Domain photo. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4107295>.

A (Areas under direct Reich control or occupation)	
Location	Number
<a href="#">Altreich</a>	131,800
<a href="#">Ostmark</a>	43,700
<a href="#">Ostgebiete</a>	420,000
<a href="#">General Government</a>	2,284,000
<a href="#">Białystok</a>	400,000
<a href="#">Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia</a>	74,200
<a href="#">Estonia</a>	Judenrein <a href="#">free of Jews</a>
<a href="#">Latvia</a>	3,500
<a href="#">Lithuania</a>	34,000
<a href="#">Belgium</a>	43,000
<a href="#">Denmark</a>	5,600

<a href="#">Occupied France</a>	165,000
<a href="#">Unoccupied France</a>	700,000 <sup>130</sup>
<a href="#">Hellenic State</a>	69,600
<a href="#">Netherlands</a>	160,800
<a href="#">Norway</a>	1,300
<b>B (Allied or client states, neutral, or at war with Germany)</b>	
Location	Number
<a href="#">Bulgaria</a>	48,000
<a href="#">England</a>	330,000
<a href="#">Finland</a>	2,300
<a href="#">Irish Free State</a>	4,000
<a href="#">Kingdom of Italy</a> (including <a href="#">Sardinia</a> )	58,000
<a href="#">Albania</a>	200
<a href="#">Croatia</a>	40,000
<a href="#">Portugal</a>	3,000
<a href="#">Romania</a> (including <a href="#">Bessarabia</a> )	342,000
<a href="#">Sweden</a>	8,000
<a href="#">Switzerland</a>	18,000
<a href="#">Serbia</a>	10,000
<a href="#">Slovakia</a>	88,000
<a href="#">Spain</a>	6,000
<a href="#">Turkey (European part)</a>	55,500
<a href="#">Hungary</a>	742,800
<a href="#">Soviet Union</a>	5,000,000 (total)
- <a href="#">Ukraine</a>	2,994,684
- <a href="#">Byelorussia</a> (excluding Białystok)	446,484
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,000,000</b>

Historians estimated about 9 million Jews in Europe before the Holocaust.

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<sup>130</sup> The number of Jews in Unoccupied France is a source of speculations and debates.



*Figure 9: A Jewish Forced Laborer sweeping the streets of Tunis<sup>131</sup>*

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<sup>131</sup> Copied with permission from Documentation Center of North African Jews During World War 2, Yad Ben Zvi (YBZ). <https://northafricanjews-ww2.org.il/en/image-gallery>.

## Victory in Tunisia



*Figure 10: British troops enter Tunis after defeating the Axis forces in the African campaign*

Tunis, Tunisia May 20, 1943.<sup>132</sup>



*Figure 11: Winston Churchill salutes Allied troops in the Roman amphitheater at Carthage, during a visit to troops*

Cartage, near Tunis, June 1943.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Library of Congress photo.

<sup>133</sup> This work created by the United Kingdom Government is in the public domain.