

Behold an Arab in the Garden of the Righteous

A Tunisian Arab, Kahled Abdul-Wahab intervened to save Jewish lives following the introduction of anti-Semitic laws during the Nazi occupation. • Now he's the only Arab in line for Israel's "Righteous among the Nations" status. • In an interview, his daughter Faïza recalls a man who just did what he thought was right. •

by Marina Gersony

« It's the memory of my father that found me. I wasn't even looking for it. One day, by chance, I read a magazine article about Robert Satloff, who had written a book about the effects of the Holocaust on North Africa. While studying Nazi persecution of Jews, he dug up stories of atrocities committed by the local population. Many worked on behalf of the Nazis, betraying and denouncing their fellows – something that also occurred in others parts of the world. But he also discovered stories of those who worked to protect and save the Jews. In researching some of these tales, Satloff found my father's story and included it in his book.» (*Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands.*)

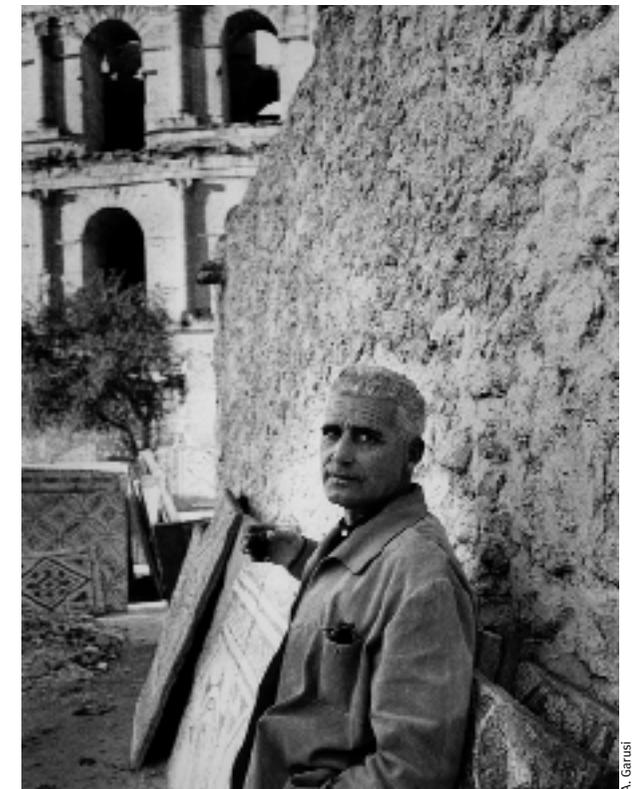
Faïza Abdul-Wahab lives in Paris. An attractive French-born woman of Tunisian origin, her face turns luminous when she speaks of her father. Visibly moved, she nonetheless remains composed. Her response is understandable. It's unsettling to learn by chance, as an adult, that your father was a wartime hero.

The credit goes to Satloff, an American historian and the director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. No author had previously worked so devotedly to track down the fate of the more than 500,000 Jews who lived in North Africa in the 1930s and 1940s.

Over the years, Israel had conferred "Righteous among

the Nations" status to thousands of people. The honor went to non-Jews singled out for rescuing wartime Jews from deportation. Though the honor roles contained dozens of Muslims, not a single Arab was listed — until the story of Kahled Abdul-Wahab came out, making him the first Arab nominee.

In 1942, the Vichy regime imposed anti-Semitic laws in the French colonies of Morocco and Algeria. A more immediate danger to Jews arose from Nazi and Italian Fas-



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cist-occupied Tunisia. Tunisian Jews were forced to wear the notorious yellow star and had their home and belongings confiscated. For a nation where Arabs and Jews of certain social classes worked and studied together, shared food, music, and long stretches of peaceful coexistence, the events were traumatic.

Kahled was the son of Tunisia's most eminent historian. Young, charming and worldly, he ingratiated himself to the occupying Germans. When it became apparent that Nazi persecution would place many of his Jewish friends in harm's way, he immediately worked to hide them. His efforts lasted until the British Army pushed the Germans out in 1943. In all, he's credited with saving the lives of 23 people.

Not all the Jews in Tunisia were so fortunate. Before the British liberation of Tunisia, writes Satloff, the Nazis dispatched some 5,000 Jews to forced labor camps, where according to the Holocaust organization Yad Vashem 46 people died. Another 160 Tunisian Jews were deported to European extermination camps.

Kahled Abdul-Wahab died in 1997 at age 86. Soon after, he became the first Arab nominee for "Righteous among the Nations" status. In 2009, two trees were dedicated in his honor, one in the Adas Israel Garden of the

The word "just" derives from the biblical passage that states "whoever saves a life saves the whole world" and was applied for the first time by Israel in relation to those who helped rescue Jews during Holocaust-era persecution in Europe. Italy's **Committee for the Gardens of the Righteous** (Gariwo) began operating in Milan in 1999 and was officially formed in 2001. "There is a tree for every person that opted for good over evil," reads its motto, reflecting the organization's dedication to creating gardens to honor those that chose a righteous path.

Gabriele Nissim, historian and author, chairs the organization. Today Gariwo has become a major force in spreading genocide awareness internationally. Its site (www.gariwo.net) helps the committee heighten awareness of the concept of righteousness and to seek out and honor figures that helped those at risk from genocide. ●

Righteous in Washington, D.C., the other in Milan's Garden of the Righteous during a ceremony attended by his daughter Faïza.

What do you remember of your father?

My father was born in Tunisia in 1911. He owned a property near the coastal town of Mahdia. During the war, when the Nazis occupied a part of the country, Jews immediately felt threatened. Between November 1942 and April and May 1943, anti-Semitic laws went into effect. My father had a number of Jewish employees, neighbors and friends. It became clear to him that they faced a tangible danger. Since he was often present at German headquarters, he learned one day that some Jewish women he knew had been threatened with rape. That's when he acted. In the middle of the night he drove a truck-full of people to his farm and hid them for the duration of the occupation, four months, until the Germans were gone.

Was he aware of the risk he was running?

He certainly agreed to take such risks. There were Germans everywhere, troops, and then the general headquarters, which was located near his farm... Maybe some of the soldiers actually turned blind eye. I was told that some of them knew what was happening. But my father was lucky to be able to do what he did, because in general the Germans didn't notice anything amiss.

When you think of your father, do other figures come to mind, such as the German Oskar Schindler or the Italian Giorgio Perlasca?

I don't know. I don't even know if you can compare them. I consider Schindler a hero while I see my father as an ordinary person. I see him as a normal father who under very specific circumstances said: «I won't let my neighbors be attacked or assaulted. They're my friends so it's normal that I'm hiding them.»

It seems to me it wasn't such an obvious choice. But what was coexistence like at the time between Jews and Muslims?

My father was a Muslim. At the time, Muslims and Jews lived together in Tunisia. Of course, during the war the situation changed dramatically because in addition to Muslims and Jews you had the German occupiers. My father felt Tunisian first and foremost. And the Jews were Tunisian nationals. He was a nationalist and therefore his



Faïza Abdul-Wahab silhouetted over an image of her father Kahled, who worked to save Tunisia Jews in World War II. Kahled died in 1997.

A. Garusi / Fotomontaggio di R.S. Gobesso

attitude was to protect the people of his country against foreign invasion.

There was no hatred between Arabs and Jews?

You can't compare those years to the ones now. They were different times. Obviously religious tensions have always existed, along with friction between the majority and the minority. But in general, I repeat, at the time people of different origins lived together in harmony.

Your father said nothing to you about what happened to the war when you were young?

Once I asked him if the Germans were really in Tunisia. At school we were studying World War II in French textbooks and nobody talked about it. He told me «Yes,» the Germans had been here. I asked him if the Jews faced threats and he also told me «Yes.» He mentioned that he'd hidden the people on his farm. To which I replied, «all right,» because what he'd done seemed like a normal thing. It ended there.

What kind of person was your father?

He tended toward being reserved, secretive, a man of a few words. He never spoke of his life. You had to push him to get him to tell stories. I remember that he refused injustice. He couldn't abide it. He had a very strong bond with the Jews of his country. I have the sense that he became resentful later in life. He regretted the loss of the period when Muslims, Jews and Italians understood each other and lived together in Tunisia.

What does heroism mean to you?

The heroic can come out in some people and under certain circumstances. It depends at what point they feel genuinely moved. Obviously such sensitivity varies person-to-person. If certain values are touched deep down, in those cases you can emerge with something that's similar to heroism.

Have you remained in touch with any of the Jews saved by your father?

A couple of years ago there was a ceremony at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. I met Nadia, the daughter of Anny Boukris. Anny was 11 years old when



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A group of Tunisian Jews who volunteered to fight for the North African nation in World War II.

my father hid her on his farm. Nadia obviously didn't live any of this out, but she did get stories from her mother. We're always in touch and have established a wonderful relationship. I also met another woman saved by my father. She came with me when we were filming a documentary in Tunisia. She even recognized the farm and just where she'd been hidden. I see her regularly in Paris. I've stayed in touch. It's amazing.

What was it like meeting with these people?

We were both moved and relaxed. Tunisians don't take themselves too seriously. We started laughing and joking, probably a reflection of our cultural similarities. We went to a restaurant, we picked out food we liked, and we visited the places we knew well.

We established a kind of happy complicity that was expressed in the joy of just being together rather than other, graver emotions.

Are you proud of your father?

I am proud of him. His gesture shows who he really was in life, and what he hid from everyone. He was a good man with deep sense of dignity. No one knew him; no one knew he had done. For me what he did was not a heroic gesture. It was simply a gesture of powerful and meaningful friendship. ●