

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Tunisia



## Country Snapshot

Present in Tunisia for centuries, the first Jews likely arrived in the area prior to the Roman victory over Carthage in 146 BCE. Over the years, Jews lived under many different political regimes and adapted to life under the Phoenicians, the Roman Empire, the Vandals, Arab invaders from the Levant, the Ottoman Empire, and the French. World events affected the original Jewish population of Tunisia, as both Sephardic Jews fleeing persecution in Spain and Levantine Jews from the Middle East made their way to settle in the area, known in the Middle Ages as the province of Ifriqiya. By the tenth century, the city of Qayrawan (Kairouan) had become a significant religious and academic center for both Jews and Muslims, and from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, Tunis was an important hub for Jewish life, religion, and culture. Tunisian Jews made their living in both the artisanal trades and in agriculture, and worked closely alongside their Muslim counterparts, despite keeping to their own residential areas, known colloquially as the “hara.” In addition to mainland Tunisia, Jewish communities also established themselves on the island of Djerba, living mainly in the Hara Kebira (large Jewish Quarter) and the Hara Seghira (small Jewish Quarter).

Toward the end of the seventeenth century, many Livornese Jews moved to Tunis in the hopes of capitalizing on the city’s prime location for trade. The massive influx of European Jews resulted in the creation of two separate Jewish communities in the city of Tunis: the Twansa, or indigenous local Jews, and the Grana, or those Jews of Livornese descent. Despite sharing a common religion, the two communities differed in significant ways from one another: the Grana benefitted first from Italian protégé status, and then, later, from Italian citizenship, whereas the Twansa lived as *dhimmis*, subject to Ottoman rule. The Twansa and the Grana constituted two distinct legal entities, prayed at separate synagogues, observed different religious rituals, and were buried in separate cemetery locations. There was little to no intermarriage, and the two communities generally occupied separate



MAP 5. Tunisia. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

economic spheres, with the Twansa working as merchants, peddlers, smiths, and artisans, and the Grana working in international trade and commerce.

Jewish life in Tunisia changed significantly over the course of the nineteenth century. The Tanzimat, or Ottoman reforms, which occurred between 1839–1876, vastly improved living conditions of *dhimmis* throughout the empire, including Tunisian Jews. Despite the improvement to their living conditions, however, the Twansa remained subjected to the *dhimma* statute until 1857, when the execution for blasphemy of Jewish coachman Batto Sfez led to an international outcry, the pressure of which resulted in the abolition of Tunisia's *dhimma* statute on September 10 of that year. The establishment of the French protectorate in 1881 further

improved the situation for indigenous Tunisian Jews, who increasingly began to work in the liberal professions as doctors, lawyers, and journalists. While rapprochement of Tunisian Jews to France and French culture did not necessarily sow discord between the Jewish and Muslim populations, it did result in a relative cooling of Jewish-Muslim relations. In the 1930s, the polemics around Palestine, Zionism, and the possibility of Israel started to drive the wedge between the two even further. Tunisia was the only Arab nation to be occupied by the Nazis during World War II. Although the protectorate had been subject to Vichy's anti-Jewish legislation since shortly after the armistice (1940), the situation took a dire turn in November 1942, when the Nazis invaded the North African nation. During the six-month Nazi occupation, approximately 5,000 Jews were pressed into service for the Germans, and many were forced to toil in labor and internment camps under horrific conditions. Despite Nazi efforts to divide the Jewish and Muslim populations, relations between the two communities remained rather stable during the occupation, and there were significantly fewer instances of Muslim violence toward Jews than reported in other parts of the Arab world, where Nazi propaganda was more readily accepted. The first Arab ever nominated for Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations distinction was a Tunisian, Khaled Abdel-Wahab, who was dubbed the "Arab Schindler" for his heroic actions saving Jews from Nazi persecution.

The relationship of Tunisian Jews to France was irremediably damaged by the events of World War II, and following Tunisia's liberation on July 7, 1943, many Tunisian Jews began to reassess their options. They began to turn away from the colonial power in significant number, and to look increasingly toward Zionism, communism, and Tunisian nationalist movements. Although many Tunisian Jews were able to imagine a future in Tunisia after World War II, the same could no longer be said of the situation following independence from France in 1956. The incremental dissolution of Tunisian Jewish institutions, coupled with the 1961 withdrawal of French troops from the port of Bizerte, a military presence that had eased the minds of many Tunisian Jews living in the newly independent, Muslim-majority state, prompted many to emigrate; between 1960–1965, over thirty thousand Tunisian Jews left the country, most never to return. More Tunisian Jews followed suit in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967, and the majority of those who remained emigrated in the early 1980s, following the transfer of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters and the Bureau of the Arab League to Tunis. Currently, there are approximately fifteen hundred Jews living in Tunisia, residing mostly in Tunis and on the island of Djerba, whose El Ghriba synagogue welcomes hundreds of pilgrims and tourists every year.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*



Moulinville, Sfax

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## Nothing about Childhood

Chochana Boukhobza

It lives on endlessly in me and yet, in truth, the traces of it are long gone.

Since they have disappeared, been swallowed up by memory, I'll spare you a tale about the sun, whitewashed houses, the sea, and the scent of jasmine.

I don't know how to tell that story. I can't.

It's been erased.

Just as my adult memories, very recent ones, are erased as quickly as I write them down. I can't tell whether I'm writing to remember or whether I'm writing to create memories for myself.

And yet Sfax is in my memory.

I was born there, in that seaside town, as were seven generations of my kin, poor folks, true believers, or as the locals say in Arabic, *hayfen rabi*, God-fearing people . . .

I was four when my parents left Sfax to go live in Paris. They didn't want to leave. They liked their *zenka*, their neighborhood, the people around them; they delighted in the land's bounty. The flavor of olives never left their lips, nor did the taste of fresh fish still wriggling in the fishermen's nets.

When they talk about Tunisia, my parents recall a time when time meant something and weighed nothing. Then they never fail to add that, ever since they got to France, they haven't stopped "running." Early on, they would always repeat: here in Paris, unless you keep running, you're a loser, *mchyam*, done, dead.

Gradually, they began to sense that time itself had gone awry since their exile; that time flew by faster than before, as if swept by the wind; that days and nights ran together; that months melted into years, and years vanished. In short, they realized that time had left them, along with their dreams, in the dust.

In fact, since they've been in Paris, everything seems more difficult, harder to manage. They made a long list of reasons to explain this mystery. Reason number



FIGURE 12. Chochana with her little sister in 1963, in Sfax.

one, the most serious: there is no sun in Paris, no real light, the white kind that stings your eyes and sucks the sweat from your pores, the kind that separates day from night and marks the horizon. Reason number two: the city is huge, and to get from one place to another, you have to take the metro, the bus, sometimes both. Reason number three: the more you work, the more you spend, and the



more you spend, the more you work. In other words, there's no more time to take your time. Before, at least, even though we were poor, we savored life.

I listened to them talk.

Their words fell into me like stones into a well. Their words filled the well of my childhood. Each utterance had its own weight, and each produced emotional impact. The words resonated with each other. And they still resonate because, bizarrely, the well of my childhood can never be filled. The more words pour in, the more it demands. The more details it records, the thirstier it is to hear more.

I was four years old.

I should remember quite a lot.

And yet I can recall nothing.

The land of my birth is disembodied.

I know—because I've been told—that I must have been a very precocious little girl, since at the age of three I ran away from home, fleeing my father's house during the siesta to go to my grandfather's. Alone. On my chubby little legs. I crossed one sidewalk, then another. I went past the Simca garage. No sooner had I arrived, proudly, at my grandfather's doorstep than he scooped me up by the waist, sat me on the handlebars of his bicycle, and pedaled me right back home to my parents, who had been searching for me high and low. They had alerted the neighbors, scoured the narrow streets nearby, gone up to the rooftops, all in the hopes of finding me.

As a child, I loved hearing them tell the story of my escape.

This escape became a symbol.

Of an entire past that had been severed.

Though only a child, I understood that we'd been uprooted. Understood that on one side, there was the tree, the family tree that sought to regain its verticality, its balance, and that on the other, there was a hole, the place where our roots had once thrived, a gaping hole, over there, far away.

Why?

Because they didn't want Jews in Muslim lands anymore?

Because there was Israel?

Because we had become Westernized?

Because the arrow of history was pointing in a different direction?

I'm fifty years old today.

I'm constantly creating questions and answers for myself. I'm constantly constructing images for myself.

This way, sometimes I feel like I'm "seeing" my grandfather's synagogue. I feel like I'm "seeing" myself playing in the street, I feel like I know the Sfax seaside where, according to my grandmother, sailors from the four corners of the world would make stopovers. I am steeped in old, yellowed photographs, mostly in black and white.

Another thing.

The Bourguiba government had prohibited Jews from taking their assets with them when they left. So as not to leave their entire fortune behind, the Jews bought

objects. My parents had blankets woven for themselves in Gafsa, blankets that were heavier than carpets, so heavy that we felt crushed beneath their weight. Even better, our cousins had hundreds of drums of olive oil shipped to Paris, a stock that took years to consume, whose empties then served as tables and chairs.

We had left Tunisia, but Tunisia didn't want to leave us. As my father used to say, as he headed out to Belleville every Sunday to meet up with Tunisians, to buy a sandwich overflowing with harissa, to bring back a box of *zlabias* and a pack of pistachios: the lion left the forest, but the forest is still in the eye of the lion.<sup>1</sup>

From circle to circle, we tried to reach the center, to recover the core of existence, to rest our heads on the breast of the lost land and hear its beating heart.

The truth is, mine is a strange people, torn between a lost country—a country for living, marrying, working—and a promised land. A strange people caught between the past, the present, and prophecy.

At what point did I realize that something irreversible had taken place?

I have to admit that we were swimming upstream, unwilling transplants in a society where we had no choice but to adapt.

We were here and there at the same time.

We tried to change, to blend in, to naturalize, but the old ways die hard.

My grandfather roamed around the house in his saroual and *kabouch*.<sup>2</sup> We ate couscous, *halelem*, *pkila*, *nikitouche*, *merguez*, *hasbana*, *koukla*, and *akoud*.<sup>3</sup> No pot-au-feu at our place, no cassoulet or foie gras, no tarts or crepes.

And everything we did during our first years in Paris was almost, dare I say, suspicious.

Some examples?

Here's one I took years to shake off.

Back in Sfax, my grandfather performed animal sacrifice. He slaughtered chickens, hens, sheep, and cows for the butcher, in accordance with the laws of Moses. Naturally, he brought his sharp knives and whetstones with him when we moved to France.

Our very first week in Paris, my mother walked the length and breadth of the city to find a live chicken to purchase for Shabbat.

1. A typical Tunisian sweet, *zlabia* (sometimes *zalabia*, or *zylabia*) is a fritter: dough is sweetened with some combination of sugar, honey, and rose or orange-blossom water, and then deep fried in oil. The dish is found, with slight variations, throughout South and West Asia, and in North and West Africa.

2. *Saroual* (*sarwal*) are baggy, dropped-crotch trousers that gather at the ankles; a *kabouch* (*kabbous* or *kabous*) is a hat similar to a fez.

3. *Halelem* (*hlalem*): a handmade pasta used in a spicy soup; *pkila* (*pkaila*): an aromatic stew of beef, white beans, and spinach, often served on Rosh Hashanah; *nikitouche* (*nikitoosh*): homemade pasta, commercially called Israeli couscous, traditionally served in broth; *merguez*: spicy lamb sausages; *hasbana* (*osbana*): a traditional sausage using sheep intestines as casing and stuffed with lamb, chickpeas, parsley, and spices; *koukla* (*kookla*): semolina-based egg dumplings spiced with harissa and dried mint; *akoud* (*akood*): a spicy, tripe-based stew.

She finally bought one down on the quays.

Outrageously overpriced.

We kept the bird for a few days under the sink in the kitchen of our tiny apartment on rue de la Roquette. It crowed at dawn. Our curious neighbors searched the entire building for the rooster. They questioned my mother: had she heard a rooster crowing? No, she answered, suddenly gripped by fear, and, as soon as the door was shut, she turned to my grandfather: "Kill the bird, and make it quick, so I can cook the thing and be done with it. In this town, they send the police after people who keep live chickens in their apartments."

At the age of fifty-eight, my grandfather ended his career in animal sacrifice with this rooster.

But we still made our own harissa at home.

I remember those summers when the peppers would be drying in the sun, when my eyes and throat would burn as my grandmother pounded the dried peppers in her bronze mortar and pestle.

And while other people's balconies were brightened with pots of geraniums, ours was piled high with basins, buckets, cardboard boxes full of Passover dishes—because we had three sets of dishes, one for meat, one for milk, and the one that never came in contact with bread, and which was used only one week per year. And for years, we dried meat in the sun on a line. We call it *kadid*: first it marinates in oil, cumin, and cayenne pepper; then, once it's dry, we steam it for serving.

In our building, they called us the Tunisians.

One day, it occurred to me suddenly that we were foreigners.

I realized then that we had been ejected from a country, like someone ejected from a plane, without a parachute.

What my eyes saw, I'm unable to recover. What my skin felt, I can't bring back to life.

But Sfax draws a little closer every time I speak in Arabic, every time I say *filamen*, *tmenik*, *malaraha*; every time I leave one of my children with a "*rabi maak*"; every time they sneeze and I murmur a "*tahich*," or when they hurt themselves and, I say "*smalla*" . . .<sup>4</sup>

I'm from there. From Sfax.

It's written on my ID.

Born in.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

4. *Filamen*: see you later; *tmenik*: you're kidding!; *Malaraha*: good riddance!; *rabi maak*: Godspeed; *tahich* (from the Arabic *ta'ish*): may you live long; *smalla* (an abbreviation of *bismillah*): may God protect you.

Mateur, Tunisia

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## A Triple Coexistence

Annie Goldmann

It's market day in Mateur, the little city in the north of Tunisia where I spent my childhood. Starting at dawn, I can hear the scraping of the carts on the pebbly ground of the main street; the barking of stray dogs, excited by the herds of sheep and goats; the shouting, in Arabic, of the peasants, farmers, sharecroppers, and market gardeners who hurry to take their place in the corral reserved for the impassive and disdainful camels (dromedaries in fact). Mateur is an important market town located in the center of the principal grain-growing region in Tunisia. If the rainy season, September and October, had been bad, all the growers—small-time peasants, Arab farmers, Italians, small-time French settlers—awaited the moment of the harvest with foreboding. From my window, I can see the store of one of the two grain merchants who purchase harvested wheat and put up money for future sowing. They evaluate the quality of the grains, compare them, debate. I'd go there often, drawn by the enormous old-fashioned scales on which the jute bags are weighed. Uncle Raoul and his brother Émile would kindly explain to me the difference between the qualities of wheat. They are not my uncles, but I have always called them that, out of familiarity. Every year I went to their house for the Passover celebration.

My father, a devoted secularist, did not practice any religion. At home, Jewish holidays were only marked by the appearance of special dishes prepared by my mother: *msouki* with matzah bread for Passover, cakes for Purim and Rosh Hashanah, stuffed chicken for Yom Kippur.<sup>1</sup> It is only during the seder that my singularity is explained to me—and with a good deal of solemnity—by Uncle Raoul who would translate the texts for me and repeat over and over: “We were all at Mount Sinai when Moses received the Torah from God's hand. All of us, you

1. *Msouki*, sometimes also rendered *msoki*, is a spring lamb stew with vegetables made by Jews from Tunisia and Algeria.



FIGURE 13. Annie Taïeb-Goldmann, five or six years old, in Mateur.

understand?" "Me too?" "Yes, you too." How strange, something unique happened on an unknown mountain, and I don't remember it. Yet this something is part of me, without my knowing it or being able to explain it. For the word "Jew" was never spoken in front of me, no more so than "Muslim" or "Christian"—these words were all undertones. By implicit deduction, I knew that I was Jewish, but my education "à la française," my parents' culture, which did not include Arabic, my father's years of pharmacy studies in France, my mother's baccalaureate at the French lycée in 1920, and, most of all, her sister Juliette's prestigious status as the first female lawyer in North Africa, situated me on the side of the French language.

In Mateur, where one found Arabs, Italians, French, Maltese, Jews, and even two Russian families who escaped the Revolution of 1917 all living together, everyone knew everyone, and everyone, at some point, would end up stopping by my father's pharmacy to ask for guidance, advice, or help. Nothing stayed a secret here: family

relations, money problems, the precarious situation of some, the relative wealth of others, French bureaucrats but also shopkeepers and craftsmen, plumbers, tailors, Jewish jewelers, Italian mechanics . . . And then there were the engineers and specialized technicians from France who inspected and directed the mines in the area: my father would invite them to lunch in an impromptu way and they'd bring my mother the prizes from their hunts, without worrying about kosher laws.

My only Arab friend, Beya, was the daughter of the grocer whose store occupied the ground floor of our apartment building. She was two or three years older than me; we played hopscotch on the sidewalk; she spoke French haltingly. One day, she disappeared. When I asked her father if she was sick, he answered me in a very serious tone: "Beya will no longer come play here; she's a young woman now; she has to stay at home." Intrigued, I turned to my parents for an answer. My father had no comment. Tacitly, I understood that Beya would never go to school, and that was the way of life for Arab families, period, end of story. It was understood that everyone has the right to live as they please.

I had no contact with Arab women outside of the market, the only place where veiled women could go out, even those who veiled discreetly. While French and Jewish homes welcomed me with open arms, it was completely impossible for me to enter the houses of Arab families. There was only exception, which came about thanks to Tahar, my father's employee and a young man who had apprenticed with him since he was fifteen years old. Tahar found it amusing to teach me how to write my name and that of my parents in Arabic letters and—surprisingly—from right to left (in the same direction as Hebrew, a language I'd never heard of). So Tahar invited us to a party held in honor of his sister's marriage. First element of surprise: women and men are separated, and the bride is absent. Slipping into the next room, I discover in half-darkness, sitting on a chair, away from the hubbub and the guests, the bride, waiting passively. The door finally opens and a man, wearing a jacket and dress pants with a *chéchia*<sup>2</sup> like the Arabs in the city, slowly approaches, lifts the veil, contemplates for a few seconds the face of the woman whose eyes are cast downward, and then leaves. It was the husband. This scene, obviously unlike the marriages I had attended with my family in Tunis, awakened in me a certain anxiety. How would this woman be able to live with a man that she was seeing for the first time? A taboo question that I refrained from asking Tahar . . .

Another experience would also bring me into contact with very different customs. When my parents would leave Mateur to spend the night in Tunis—to attend a party or a wedding—they would sometimes leave me in the care of one of the young women who worked at the pharmacy, either Jewish or Italian, since young Arab women did not work outside the home. It was a chance for me to live

2. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.

for a couple of days with a different family, and so to learn to know and respect others, in accordance with my parents' educational principles. This was how I went one evening to stay with Myriam. In her modest building, where Jews and Arabs lived together, there were two young women who shared the same apartment in the midst of a swarm of children. They asked us, laughing, if it was true that "outside," men and women danced together. So Myriam and I improvised an unconvincing tango. In high spirits, the two young women, who couldn't believe their eyes, kept repeating one after the other: "Really, so close to each other?" They lived together, almost cloistered, with the same husband. When I told my parents about my evening away, my father, once more, remained silent.

We lived in a peaceful state of coexistence governed by implicit rules: avoid conflicts, abstain from any references to religion (even if loud curses sometimes escaped from certain mouths), respect the lines of demarcation (geographic if not linguistic, since the same language, Arabic, was spoken in both the Arab and Jewish quarters), live together harmoniously, and get along with the neighbors. Thus, for me—as a Jew who attended Passover—it was natural that I wait for my Catholic friend on a bench while she went to confession at church. But even a good kid like me had to be careful not to stray, even absentmindedly—something I would learn the hard way.

Here is the story. Mahmoud, the fairly elderly caretaker of our building, a handyman happy to do the renters' bidding, had the habit of teasing me by blocking the way in the stairwell. But one morning, when I was late for school and he did it again, laughing, I callously pushed him back. Upon my return four hours later, my mother greeted me coolly: "Come here, you" she said with a stern look. "Is it true that you called Mahmoud an idiot?" "Well . . . uh . . . I don't know." "Yes or no?" "I don't remember." "Very well, he hasn't forgotten, and you're going to apologize to him; he's waiting at the door." Indeed, Mahmoud was standing there, looking intimidated. "Apologize to him! Apologize to him!" ordered my mother in an implacable tone. Unaffected by my tears, she insisted: "On your knees!" I cried even harder. Then Mahmoud, even more upset, and sorry about the scale the scene had taken on, spoke: "It's alright, Madame Taïeb, it's alright . . ." After he left, my mother told me: "I won't tell your father about this, but remember that you are privileged, that you aren't superior to anyone, and that you have to respect everyone equally." A magnificent lesson, never forgotten . . .

Some time later, I became truly aware of this fact: for others, I was Jewish. War was on the horizon. I saw my father called up for service for the first time, in uniform. Then demobilization and his return home made life even more stressful.<sup>3</sup> When a Frenchman made openly antisemitic declarations, my father became incensed and, in a stormy telephone conversation with the Civil Controller in

3. Here, demobilization likely refers to the fact that, following the armistice signed between Germany and France in June 1940, Marshal Pétain agreed to demobilize the French Air Force.

Bizerte (the prefect, in short) who oversaw Mateur, demanded a public retraction. The person in question came to the pharmacy to apologize in front of the staff. The visit of the Resident General to Mateur provoked another incident.<sup>4</sup> As school-children, we were called upon to stand along the road with little signs featuring Pétain's picture.<sup>5</sup> When I told my mother, she refused outright, and thus I was deprived of what we students considered a fun outing: "But what will I say to the teacher?" "She will understand," my mother said. Indeed, the next day, when the principal, surveying the ranks of girls, stopped in front of me and I told her that I wouldn't be coming, she calmly responded: "I know." What did she know? But that was nothing compared to what followed: how was I to understand, in effect, that I was forbidden access to the French high school because I was Jewish, and that I had been accepted, instead, into a Catholic girls' school?<sup>6</sup>

In November 1942, German tanks entered our dumbfounded little town. Then came the requisition of our apartment, the closing of the school, and, above all, my father's enlistment in the Jewish labor camps set up in the area around Mateur and Bizerte to establish decent sanitary conditions and ensure regular food supplies—as American bombs fell around them. All of this highlighted certain divisions and reinforced the feeling of belonging to a separate community, between the French families who invited us over to listen to the BBC and an Arab population that remained neutral, of belonging to it and sharing its fate.

—*Translated by Robert Watson*

4. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Tunisia. The resident general effectively ran the country, despite the legal fiction of indigenous administration under the Beys of the Husainid dynasty—the hereditary monarchs who reigned during the Ottoman Empire.

5. Marshal Philippe Pétain was a WWI hero who collaborated with Nazi Germany and became the leader of Vichy (or non-occupied) France from 1940–1942. He was convicted of treason after the war and died in prison in 1951.

6. The application of Vichy's Jewish status laws in Tunisia in May 1941 would result in quotas (*numerus clausus*) limiting the number of Jewish students in French secondary schools to 20 percent of the total student population.



La Hara, Tunis

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## Of Wings and Footprints

Hubert Haddad

The wind loses the key to the wind.<sup>1</sup> There is no such thing as rooted identity; one is born Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, just as water from the sky runs into rivers or seas. My sole lasting image is the outline of Djebel Boukornine peeking through the blue mists of the Gulf of Carthage, like Vesuvius in the Bay of Naples. Childhood is a volcano that buries you inch by inch in the trembling ash of oblivion. I recall four elements only: the ochre earth, the hundred azure layers of sea, the stunningly fragrant air, the fierce sun drenching all creation. Air, wind, and fire are beyond our grasp: elusive, the realm of djinns and spirits has no earthly grounding. Humans, poor creatures, are bound to the land, where we live and perish, like flowers and cities.

A child of La Goulette<sup>2</sup> on my mother's side (her maiden name was Guedj), and of the Hara, the Jewish quarter of the Tunis medina, on my father's side, I don't recall any notable differences between my family and our Muslim neighbors in our lively continuum of language, shared tastes, and pace of life; amid the heady fragrance of spices, ripe olives, jasmine and orange flowers; in the blue-hued shade of the giant eucalyptus trees of the municipal garden where we used to stroll; or down on the shores of the gulf, or on the hill in Sidi Bou Said. Back in the Hara, the grandfather would wear a *chéchia*, and the grandmother, a long,

1. The title of this story is a reference to a line from a poem by the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias titled "Mis huellas son esmeraldas de agua," published in the collection *Clarivigilia primaveral* (1965). The line reads: "The earth feeds on footprints, the sky feeds on wings."

2. La Goulette is the port of Tunis, in the northern suburbs of the capital, and a popular seaside spot for Tunisia's Jewish community.



FIGURE 14. Hubert Haddad, approximately three years old, at La Goulette (Tunisia).

multicolored housedress and a headscarf that she would chew at one end.<sup>3</sup> What child could possibly comprehend the peculiar phenomenon that aggregates people into families and tribes, and, in doing so, distances them from others? The Abrahamic religion of Islam conquered, subjected, and converted the Berbers, whether

3. A *chéchia* (often transliterated as *sheshia*) is a soft skullcap worn by many Muslim men, particularly in North Africa. In certain regions, it was also worn by Jewish men and boys.

animist, Christian, or Jewish, Arabizing them in the process. Down through the centuries, dhimmified indigenous Sephardic Jews,<sup>4</sup> freshly arrived from Spain after the Reconquista, and native Muslims that dynastic wars caused to scatter and intermingle all across Ifriqiya and Morocco into the far-off lands of the Levant and even Mauritania<sup>5</sup> (before the eventual fall of the Ottoman Empire and the colonial invasions), never ceased to merge, by will or by force, to blend their arts and customs, to piece together that mosaic of common manners and beliefs, to share the same essential tastes, harmonies, superstitions, and enchantments.

In this civilizing patchwork, of which the Mediterranean is so rightly proud, the Jews of North Africa themselves are made up of more than one ethnic group (if the term “ethnic group”—less loaded than “race”—makes any sense). For instance, nothing could be further from the deeply Arabized paternal branch of the family than the Guedjs, who were originally from Constantine, the city of suspension bridges, where Judeo-Arab Andalusia, expelled from its gardens of contemplation and its ethereal architecture, was able to take root and thrive.<sup>6</sup> My maternal grandmother Baya, née Harrar—a forceful woman who was one of the first in Algeria to demand the right to divorce, at the risk of her life—could neither read nor write, but was a happily bilingual storyteller. Though born into Arabic, she spoke in a delightful French to us children, who were destined for expatriation. Remarried to a railroad employee who was gassed at Verdun and died in the 1930s in Sfax, where his company had assigned him after stints in Tunis and Gabès, Baya made a first attempt at immigration to the metropole, all her children in tow, my adolescent mother being the eldest. This was in 1939. When the Nazis invaded Paris, some good souls showed them the way out. After a lifesaving stay with a family of Catholic peasants in the Yonne region, Baya managed to get everyone back to Tunis via Marseille, where she opened a little business to keep her *smala* alive.<sup>7</sup>

It was in the early 1940s that a somewhat turbulent young man from the medina, working odd jobs as a stonemason, a porter, or a small-time cook, first crossed paths with the too delicate Miss Alice, nicknamed *la Parisienne* because of her permed light-brown hair. He fell head over heels in love, as the story goes, and swept her into wedlock. Her bearings already compromised following the recent death of her father, *la Parisienne* was quickly disillusioned with the

4. The original invents a French version of the Arabic term *dhimmi*; the translation attempts to render a similar neologism in English. *Dhimmi* means “protected person.” *Dhimma* status is an historical feature of Muslim law that offered certain forms of protection to “people of the book” (namely, Jews and Christians) living in Islamic lands. While *dhimmis* had fewer rights and protections than Muslims, the existence of this category nonetheless provided guarantees of some state protections. (See Introduction for more detail.)

5. *Ifriqiya*, derived from the Latin for Africa, has historically referred to the coastal region of North Africa that encompasses today’s eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.

6. Constantine is a city in northeastern Algeria.

7. *Smala* is an Arabic term that refers to the tents sheltering the extended family of a clan leader. It may also mean a large following, usually family members, who accompany the leader whenever he changes location. Colloquially used, even in French, to refer to a large family or a metaphorical tribe.

marriage. Right around that time, the Germans had just invaded Tunisia and were going about constructing a concentration camp for suspicious people and Jews.<sup>8</sup> Khamous, Alice's husband, would be incarcerated there for several months before being liberated by the Americans. They nicknamed their firstborn "Jimmy" in a gesture of gratitude.

Confronted with a situation of crushing poverty long before the events that would force the ancestral Jewish community to abandon its beloved, sun-drenched Tunisia, my parents, my elder brother, and myself (not counting the child who had died) found ourselves like exiles in our own country, in transit from our very existence, in the utter confusion caused by those moments of deep-seated parental disagreement that suddenly emerge, leaving artfully patterned cracks in their offspring. In the East, whether Middle, Near or further afield, Abrahamic tradition yokes father to son: the ancients assumed and assuaged the obviated sacrifice of Isaac or Ismaël, holding back the sacrificing hand by the long tradition of temperance and internalization of this violent initiation, of which circumcision is but one manifestation. We had no symbol-bearing ancestors, Jewish or Muslim, in our household, only a lapsed father who brandished the bladeless knife of disunion and a mother driven mad with disappointment, her dreams dashed. Perhaps it was inevitable: when an entire population is threatened by upheaval linked to decolonization and feverish nationalist identity politics, exile might end up preventing the breakup of a structurally unsound family adrift in the world. The fact is that the legacy of Baya's world was simply too distant from the paternal world of the *chéchia*-wearing patriarch; her side of the family's emphatic use of Arabic was interpreted in a variety of ways within a context dramatized by independence wars and invasion.

We dream today of returning to a golden age, an era that was never anything but a product of our fervent imagination, no doubt: Jews and Muslims will all be Tunisians together on our shared ground, from the moment that we democratically defend the common homeland, its memory, its children, and the prodigious unity of its riches, both material and spiritual. Everyone knows Tunisia's timeline of successive invasions and dependencies: Phoenician, Roman, Arab, Ottoman, Franco-Ottoman, before sovereignty was at last recovered with Bourguiba, who proclaimed in resounding Republican tones: "Out of a smattering of people, a jumble of tribes and clans, all bent beneath the yoke of resignation and fatalism, I have forged a citizenry." Poor among the poor back then, their line of descent now more or less assimilated everywhere in the world, the ancestral Jews of the medina might well have rightfully belonged to that citizenry, that people. In an Islamized land, under the French Protectorate, we were children like any other, just barely aware of the torturous conflicts haunting the world of adults.

8. See Country Snapshot: "Tunisia."

Born in the nineteenth century, Baya had forgotten nothing of the anti-Jewish riots that broke out long before the 1934 pogrom in Constantine—incited by the anti-Semitic forces of Second- and Third-Republic France, by way of the Second Empire—and that Adolphe Crémieux, a descendant of the Pope's Jews, attempted to curb with his eponymous decree of 1870.<sup>9</sup> Against a backdrop of economic crisis and clashing identities, the decree's unfortunate consequence would be to definitively isolate Jewish Algerians from their Muslim compatriots. On the paternal side, family lore tells of a rebellious act on the part of the grandfather who, sabered by one of the Dey's soldiers, in turn knocked the soldier off his horse—which might explain why his children and grandchildren had such a hard time obtaining their naturalization after the war.<sup>10</sup> And, on May 20, 1941, the maternal family was probably living in Gabès, where seven Jews were massacred on the square right outside the synagogue.

We children had no notion of our parents' anxious memories. How did the idea of exile suddenly take hold, once and forever? I remember the Arabic of speech and song from my earliest years. We must have understood it, bathed as we were in its intonations. Then, from one day to the next, at the dawn of the 1950s, the adults stopped speaking to us in Arabic. Our banishment was sealed with this self-imposed embargo. Poor folks cut their most essential ties with their own offspring by ceasing to speak to them in the native tongue, though they would continue, backs turned, to talk among themselves in Arabic, in what looked like a plot to sever us from our origins, leaving us with only the French language in common. And that is how I was born to French in the programmed oblivion of the ancestral language.

Still, since then, music has remained a bridge to our deepest history. Music is always first, in a way, since we are all born blind; while in the womb, sound takes precedence over vision. In the phonic universe of my early years, it is Arab music that stands out: it was Farid el Atrache, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, and Abdel Halim Hafez that we heard in cafés, in the street, whether in Tunis or Belleville, and similarly, the dirge-like strains of sacred music sung and murmured in mosques and synagogues. My grandmother Baya's hand-cranked phonograph never left her side. Small local orchestras in the working-class neighborhoods of Tunis would play popular songs by Oum Kalthoum and Asmahane, classical Egyptian music, and you could even detect inflections of highbrow Arab-Andalusian harmonies in Algerian *chaâbi* tunes, or in the rumbas of Lili Boniche.<sup>11</sup>

9. "The Pope's Jews" refers to Jews living under the restrictive rule of the Avignon popes in fourteenth-century France. See Country Snapshot: "Algeria" for more on the Crémieux Decree.

10. Dey is an Ottoman honorific term meaning "uncle." During the Ottoman rule of North Africa, it was also the title given to the rulers of the various regencies.

11. *Chaâbi* (also *chaabi* or *sha-bii*) is Arabic for "folk," and refers to the popular roots of this North African musical genre. Songs are sung in local dialects, rooted in the Andalusian tradition, but with new rhythms. Born in the Casbah of Algiers to a Sephardic family, Lili Boniche (1922–2008) was

Jews and Muslims had the same passion for the Arab-Turkish *maqâm*, the system of special intervals between notes in the melody that makes the music sound so organically improvised. The eastern melodic line is the stuff of time itself vibrating in our memory, an overwhelming nostalgia, a longing that is renewed with every listen.

Today, how am I supposed to cull two or three memories of my Tunisian childhood when everything is tangled together between the sinuous black and white passages of the Tunis medina and the alleyways of Ménilmontant in Paris, where we landed quite naturally in a neighborhood that was practically a carbon-copy of our old one, with its cheap restaurants and hovels? What I have kept close to my heart are the faces of women, Muslim and Jewish, grandmothers and aunts, neighbors, companions in the tiny gestures of exchange that our proximity asked of us, a closeness that revealed more complicity than dissimilarity. From those women, without ever being taught, I learned how to make real Berber couscous with its twenty side dishes and salads, the exquisite *mouloukhia* made from malva leaves, and all sorts of holiday sweets, like *makrouds* with almonds or dates, and *zlabiyas* soaked in honey.<sup>12</sup> Most especially, I learned how to see the ancestral mercy of the Orient in something as simple as a smile. Childhood is borne by the search for those faces of women, young or old, tilted ever so slightly. What secrets are hidden behind their stately languidness? The precious intertwining of birth and death would be my guess, back there as here, from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other, in the endless loop of disremembered origins.

Not too long ago, on a return visit to the beaches of La Goulette, looking a little lost perhaps, I walked around the old, dilapidated casino that was slated for demolition. A very old man, in *chèche* and *djellaba*,<sup>13</sup> looking like the local

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one of mid-century Algeria's most famous singers. He performed across Europe and North Africa, in both French and Arabic.

12. A soup made with chicken and vegetables, *mouloukhia* (or *mulukhiya*) takes its name from the Arabic for its main ingredient, malva leaves, which are sometimes called Jew's mallow or Nalta jute, and have the consistency of okra when cooked; *makrouds* are diamond-shaped North African cookies made with semolina flour and filled with dates, figs, or nuts; *zlabiyas* are fritters: dough is sweetened with some combination of sugar, honey, and rose or orange-blossom water, and then deep fried in oil. The dish is found, with slight variations, throughout South and West Asia, and in North and West Africa.

13. A *chèche* (known as a *lithâm* in Arabic and as a tagelmust in English) functions as both a veil and a turban. Worn primarily by the Tuareg Berbers, the *chèche* is a single, long piece of cotton, usually dyed blue and wound around the head and the lower part of the face, to protect the mouth and nose from sand and dust. Resembling the Egyptian *jalabiya* (or *galabeya*), the *djellaba* (or *jillaba*) is a loose-fitting, long-sleeved outer robe worn in North Africa by both men and women. It is interesting to note that, unlike with the food words in note 12, the author does not italicize *chèche* or *djellaba* in the original French. While this could be a simple omission, it is more likely a reflection of the ways certain Arabic words have become naturalized in the French language.

muezzin, called out softly, a trace of irony on his lips. “*Ya hasra!*”<sup>14</sup> he said as he passed—the good old days!—as if I somehow stood out for him in this timeless place, in a kind of implicit recognition. Like Vesuvius looming over Pompeii, smoke always seemed to be rising out of Djebel Boukornine as it stood above the Gulf of Tunis—but it was only the sea’s haze rising into the shimmering sunlight.

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

14. The word *hasra* in Arabic means “heartbreak,” and the expression *ya hasra* can be translated as “what a shame” or even “poor thing.” Given that it is typically uttered at the sight or memory of something ancient or old and no longer seen, and that it is generally nostalgic, we’ve opted to imagine the elderly man regretting “the good old days,” rather than pitying the author.



Belvedere, Tunis

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## The Broken Bargain

Ida Kummer

Growing up in Tunisia, I always knew I was Jewish, even though my minimally observant family mingled with the well-to-do members of other religions and cultures. Segregation made no sense at my maternal grandparents' house, where the whole cultural mosaic of what is now a bygone Tunisia would gather on Friday evenings to play music, warmed up by a few bottles of boukha.<sup>1</sup> "Muslim" was not a word in my childhood vocabulary, at least not in French; the term in use back then was "Arab." Was this a vestige of colonial times, or a sign of the era's relative lack of emphasis on all things religious?

Still, where did those early inklings of difference come from? I had no country but Tunisia in those days; yet, as far back as I can recall, I always had the uncanny feeling of claiming the country as my own without really belonging to it. I was somehow mismatched, my identity slightly out of joint. Wasn't I always hearing the grown-ups lowering their voices to a whisper whenever they uttered the word "Israélite"? ("Jew" would have been in bad taste!) Were the Jews right to speak in hushed tones, or was this just a habit passed down over centuries of exodus, now woefully etched into our cultural DNA? Why, for that matter, even bother speaking about oneself in a low voice, since after all, everyone in Tunis grew up knowing exactly which families were Jewish, Muslim, or Christian?

In Tunisia in the sixties, even in secular families you were either a secular Jew or a secular Muslim!

Caught between family lore and the forward march of local history, I came to the painful understanding that despite the picture-perfect life often ascribed to our supposedly easygoing Mediterranean world, my Tunisian Jewish identity would

1. Author's note: A distilled beverage made from figs, originating in Tunisia where most of it is still produced.





FIGURE 15. Ida in her bedroom at the Villa Zirah, Tunis, 1956.

involve both joys and sorrows. My mother, who had a way with words, dubbed our situation at the time “*bey’aa mkata’a*”—a broken bargain.<sup>2</sup>

The first crack appeared with an early childhood incident that I can no longer recall precisely. Various family members have told their versions of events which, when blended into my own reconstruction of the story, make it difficult to extract the actual facts. In 1957, I was briefly kidnapped from the Villa Zirah garden, on avenue de la Liberté. Legend has it that I followed an individual on a bicycle who took me all the way to the gates of Belvedere Park. I was then “saved,” it seems, by a young American who lived nearby, also riding a bike, and who must have realized that something was amiss. Who was the kidnapper? There was much conjecture as to his identity: an Algerian freedom fighter seeking a ransom for his cause? A Seraglio janissary? A highway robber? I have no memory of the man, but what I do recall with great clarity is that neither my grandfather nor my father sought to press charges, an exercise in futility, they said . . . I would relive this richly opaque episode in my own private theater, as if I were seeing a banner headline in the local news, or reenacting it as a photo-novella: sometimes I would fall madly in love with my kidnapper, other times I would become a warrior, like Kahena, defending one of the world’s many lost causes.<sup>3</sup> Could this young American who reportedly brought me home safe and sound have unwittingly played a role in my life choices, decades later?

The news reels of the time were full of Tunisia’s struggle for independence from France, but for non-Muslim Tunisians, the overwhelming majority of whom were Jews, it was a confusing period of self-scrutiny. The nascent Tunisian republic, despite a few early steps in the right direction, would make very little room for its largest minority, in the end.

My father, a Tunisian national but of Italian extraction, a senior surgeon who had trained many young physicians, was compelled to step down from his position at the Libération Hospital in favor of one of his former students—his favorite, in fact. The latter, deeply disturbed by the injustice of this lofty promotion, did take over direction of the unit, though he would continually apologize to his mentor. From that day forward, my father began to plan how we would leave the country. Rumor had it that there was no longer a “future” for us. For the child that I was, the word had little meaning: if we had a past and a present in Tunisia, how was it that we had no future? I didn’t realize that tomorrow had already been written yesterday.

As the specter of departure hung in the air, the nuts and bolts of it were spoken of in discreet whispers, and I sensed an atmosphere of urgency; and yet, my daily routine changed very little. The government authorized bank withdrawals,

2. Author’s note: literally, a “torn up sale,” an unkept promise to sell something—an expression used to designate bad deals in general.

3. La Kahena (also spelled Kahina; known as Dihya in Berber) was a Berber queen of the Aurès region, who lived from 688–703 and is credited with bringing unity to the Maghreb. Some historians have suggested that she may have been Jewish.

but would not allow these funds to leave the country, hence the not-so-subtle sobriquet for the trendy Abu Nawas Beach in Gammarth, renamed “frozen assets beach.” The word “container” was often murmured in conversation between my parents. What they were referring to, I figured out, was the only way we could ship our furniture, which was by putting it into the container of a Frenchman, a Corsican, or an Italian. The port authorities would look the other way as they opened their pockets when it came to the country’s worst kept secret: the Tunisian Jews were leaving!

As if to forestall the looming storm, I became even closer friends with Latifa, an Arab neighbor five years my senior, whom I’d known for forever. Our family’s secret weighed on me, but I kept it to myself, obeying their rule to never mention our departure to anyone.

The meals at Latifa’s were exquisite, so like our own, but much tastier, spicier, more potent. Our couscous *boulettes*, a couscous made with meat-stuffed vegetables,<sup>4</sup> a particular specialty of my grandmother’s, seemed doughy and greasy compared to theirs, which was more fragrant and less saucy. My taste for the hot-and-spicy has stayed with me ever since, and it all started at Latifa’s, with their fried peppers smothered in harissa, which we’d sneak into the kitchen to gobble up.

I felt I was her confidant, instead of the other way around. We always spoke to each other in Arabic, which I was proud to say I spoke very well, even though Latifa’s French was excellent. We grew close through the play of language. One day, to tell her I didn’t feel like doing something, I said, “*ma andich el gana*,” an expression I often heard used by my grandmother (who perhaps didn’t often feel like doing things!). My friend understood the first part of my sentence, but for her, *el gana* wasn’t Arabic.<sup>5</sup> Many years later, as I came to learn Spanish, I figured out how to unpack those hybrid expressions whose bits and pieces came from a variety of languages and gave ours its special flavor. This was long before Judeo-Arabic had become a topic for university lecture halls. Which might soon be the only place you’ll hear it, since the authentic language communities are disappearing.

Latifa loved to tell stories. I would sit and listen, dumbfounded, to various tall tales told at the hammam, such as the one about young virgins getting pregnant from just sitting on the stone slabs of the Turkish baths (you never knew what those boys were up to when it was their day at the baths, she said), or the saying that, at birth, girls look like their future mother-in-law. I cherished these moments all the more since I knew they were numbered. In this friendship clouded by secrecy, I sometimes felt I was betraying Latifa, and Tunisia as well, for that matter, even though the country pretended it wanted us to stay. Without knowing it,

4. Author’s note: in Tunisia, Jewish couscous differs from Arab couscous in that the Jews add stuffed vegetables, which they also call “boulettes.”

5. Author’s note: Probably borrowed by Ladino from Spanish, *no tengo ganas* means “I don’t want to.”

Latifa is the one who reset the balance between us when she announced that her parents had married her to a young man she'd never met . . . She seemed glad about it. Thus, we were each chased out of childhood at the same time: her by an early marriage, and me by our departure.

Speaking Arabic was indisputably one of my great pleasures. In that respect, I was somewhat at odds with the young Tunisian Jews of my generation who came from bourgeois families whose scant use of Arabic was for strictly utilitarian purposes. Linguistic markers were such that, in the low-income bracket that included my maternal grandparents, speaking Arabic was too Jewish, while on my father's side, speaking Arabic was too Arab.

I used Arabic as both a weapon and a shield. During the winter months, my maternal grandparents lived on rue Zarkoun, on the edge of the old medina, where my mother and I often went to buy fabric. I loved walking through those vaulted alleys, the beating heart of the city of Tunis, in my view. An excitingly rich world, but one that proves uncomfortable for "light" women like my mother and me.<sup>6</sup> Mistaking us for tourists, or at least, non-Muslims, boys would whistle and make comments, sometimes even grope us. I figured out early on that a well-placed "*ahcham a la ruhek*,"<sup>7</sup> pronounced with a perfect Arab accent, not a Jewish one (yes, you could learn how to do that!), would not only have them running in the opposite direction, but would gratify us with an apology: "*semhini ya okhti*."<sup>8</sup> Even as I felt empowered by this little deception, something about it disturbed me: language helped me turn a situation to my advantage, but it also implied I was denying some part of myself. To get out of a sticky situation, I had to become someone other than who I was. At a different level, these episodes were also my way of setting myself apart from my mother, who would pretend she hadn't seen or heard anything, as was customary for women of her generation. Which meant that, in another reversal, I was the one intimidating my mother, who was uncomfortable with my boldness.

Over at "frozen assets beach," where bank accounts weren't the only thing that was paralyzed, another drama played out: the implicit social constraints that separated the young people of the two communities. How were we supposed to not notice the good-looking guys on the beach? Especially the dark-complexioned ones—I could never get so tan, even when I slathered myself with that mixture of olive oil and mercurochrome said to produce a copper glow. Like a pod of dolphins, the boys leapt and splashed and chased each other in the warm Mediterranean water, while the "frozen assets" girls, without taking their eyes off the boys for a minute, pretended to be looking languorously out at the horizon, absorbed by

6. Author's note: This was, in fact, the term used. (Editors' note: The original French expression, "*des femmes 'claires*," refers to women with fair skin.)

7. Author's note: in Arabic, literally, "be ashamed in your soul," meaning: "You should be ashamed of yourself to talk that way to a girl."

8. Author's note: in Arabic, "So sorry, my sister!"

the open water. Each of us imagined our personal love story or adventure tale. In our imaginations, everything was possible, since in reality, nothing actually was.

Despite the wrenching experience of departure, and unlike present generations, I was able to experience the great richness of a multicultural Tunisia, the country that made me who I am today, the one I still carry in my heart, wherever I roam.

Tunisian I am; Tunisian I remain.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*

Place Jeanne d'Arc, Tunis

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## Open Letter to my Grandchildren Adrien, Élie, Raphaël, and Anna

Nine Moati

The other day, you asked me what my happiest childhood memory was. I answered without missing a beat: the war years! The confused looks I got from my older grandchildren made me realize that I'd said something wrong. They already knew all about the war! I owe you an explanation. Here it is:

I was born in Paris, just before the war. Why Paris, you might ask, when I've become the symbol of your beloved Tunisia? It was simply because my father, Serge Moati, journalist and French politician of Tunisia—the land where his Italian forbearers had settled—was demanding more freedom and independence for Tunisians. The country was a French protectorate back then, almost a *département*.<sup>1</sup> For the resident general, my father's stance in this matter was an outrage, and he was deported to France, soon to be joined by his wife and eldest son, Yves.<sup>2</sup> His socialist friends greeted him with open arms, and he went to work as a journalist for *Le Populaire*.

1. *Départements* are administrative areas in France, akin to communes or counties. In certain cases, departmental status has been given to French overseas holdings: currently, for example, the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe hold *département* status, which means they are considered a part of the French state despite their distance from the mainland. During the colonial period in Algeria, from 1870 to 1962, the northern portion of the country was divided into three *départements* that were administered not as colonies, but rather as non-contiguous French territories. Moati, here, is suggesting that while Tunisia was technically a protectorate, certain aspects of colonial administration were similar to those practiced in *départements*.

2. The resident general was the official appointed to oversee the French administration in Tunisia during the protectorate (1881–1956). The resident general effectively ran the country, despite the legal fiction of indigenous administration under the Beys of the Husainid dynasty—the hereditary monarchs who reigned during the Ottoman Empire.



FIGURE 16. Nine Moati, surrounded by her mother and her brother Yves, on the patio outside her grandparents' apartment building, Verdun Square, Tunis, 1943.

I was born on the eve of the war, as the Nazi threat was gaining momentum. Paris was occupied. The exiles flooding in from Germany, Austria, and Poland urged us to return to Tunisia. We took refuge for a short time in Normandy, then made our way to Marseille, and caught the last boat to Tunis, where we were given a hero's welcome. Imagine! An entire family had escaped the clutches of the Nazis!

As soon as we stepped off the boat in La Goulette, my life was utterly transformed. Carriages, cars, and family friends were waiting at the dock, shouting our names in greeting. They drove us back to the city, honking their horns the whole way. What a welcome! I'd never seen so many people. I was passed around, receiving kisses from total strangers. I was a little heroine, the princess of Paris.

I was finally able to meet my grandparents, to hear their laughter, to experience their warmth and *joie de vivre*. They immediately spoiled me with tenderness and honey-soaked pastries. My parents managed to find a refugee apartment in Passage Grammont, an alley connecting avenue de Londres and avenue de Madrid. We all squeezed in, including my other grandmother, but we were so happy together! My mother would have her friends over, who all still smelled of fancy Parisian perfumes, my father worked, and I played out in the street with the neighborhood kids.

It wasn't long before the Germans brought that carefree life to a halt. War cast a dark pall over my sunny country.



Starting in November 1942, my father began to disappear every evening. My grandmother and mother waited up all night for his return. They didn't ask questions, but I could tell they were proud of what he was doing during those absences, which must have signified something glorious.

One day, Mohamed B., my Muslim godfather—who would become the Tunisian ambassador to Egypt after independence—came over to discuss something with my parents. We immediately started packing our bags. From that point on, we were to sleep in a different place every night. My father was wanted for his resistance activities. One night at Aunt Livia's, another at Olga's, two or three in the casbah at my godfather's, and so on. I have to admit that this wanderer's life was much to my liking. One night when we were at a cousin's, the sirens went off. Whenever that happened, we would rush down into the basement, but that night, my brother and I refused to go. We didn't want to huddle in darkness and fear anymore. My parents gave in, and we sought shelter in a nearby trench. This childish intuition saved our lives: a bomb fell on our building, killing several people.

My parents finally decided that *mektoub* was *mektoub*, and that there was no use changing location every night.<sup>3</sup> Still, they gladly accepted a friend's offer to take up lodgings in an out-of-service hammam on avenue de Londres. The place had one extraordinary advantage: its service entrance backed onto an old, long forgotten Jewish cemetery, where protective trenches worthy of Verdun had been dug and covered over with corrugated sheet metal. At the slightest alert, everyone would make a dash for cover.

This little utopian community, living between a bathhouse and a graveyard, provided me a haven of happiness in the midst of the war. Several Jewish families whose villas had been requisitioned by the Germans found refuge there. Each family took up residence in one of the little compartments, probably the places where bathers used to rest and cool off after their session in the steam room. All four of us slept in the same tiny compartment, and I got to sleep in my parents' bed. What a treat! The atmosphere was calm during the day. Women went about their normal chores, cooking over camp stoves, making their regular couscous, tagines, and makrouds . . .<sup>4</sup> My friends and I played in the trenches, where we found the bones of rabbis buried centuries ago, rats, mice, pigeons without feathers, and fragments from bombs that could have been dropped the day before. We would return "home" with our trophies, and our mothers would either sigh in despair, beat their breasts, or yell at us for taking such risks.

At night, Marius, the household dog, was our personal alarm system: he would sense danger and bark, and his flair saved many a life. When that happened, everybody—old folks, children, women, and men—would grab the first thing they

3. The expression *mektoub* signifies "it is written," meaning that whatever happens is fate, or destiny.

4. *Makrouds* are diamond-shaped North African cookies made with semolina flour and filled with dates, figs, or nuts.



could find to cover their heads, whether a skillet, a saucepan, or a stock pot, and run for the trenches. Thanks to Marius, we always had the best spots.

Every Friday night was a party. Women set up trestle tables to serve their famous couscous, with melt-in-your-mouth meatballs and broth, and not a single salad or condiment was ever missing, I swear. We feasted while the bombs fell all around us. What else could we do—it was mektoub! We'd then clear the dishes and fold up the tablecloth, so that the table could be used for card games. The men would play skouba and poker until the break of dawn.<sup>5</sup> In bad weather, everyone would stay inside and a fiddler would play us well-known tunes by Habiba Messika, Raoul Journo, or Ali Riahi. Women would dance, swinging their hips and undulating their bellies. I tried to do likewise.

One night, a knock came at the front door. My father simply said, "That's for me." The French police, on Pétain's orders, had come to arrest him for his role in the resistance. My brother burst into tears. A Tunisian collaborator reassured us: "We're not Nazis. Your father will be back, don't worry." My father gave me a big hug and told me to take good care of my mother, who would soon be spending all her waking hours in various offices and departments trying to discover my father's whereabouts, but to no avail. Then one day, she found out that a plane was transporting prisoners to Germany. My uncle André wanted to take her to the airfield, but the road was bombarded and they had to get out of their car and take shelter in a ravine. My mother watched as the airplane carrying her husband to a German concentration camp flew over her head.

Life from that day forward was less gay. Everyone had a missing person to mourn, a brother sent to a work camp, or an uncle swept up in a raid. For my mother, it was her husband. I would venture out alone now, into the trenches and beyond, figuring I had nothing left to lose. One time I really did get lost. Adults speaking Arabic came to help me, but I was unable to explain to them where I lived. I started crying. Suddenly, arms wrapped around me, tears flowed, hugs and kisses, words of comfort, *Heure bleue* perfume: it was her; my mother had found me.

In May 1943, Tunisia was at last liberated from the Germans. All of Tunis was gathered on avenue de Londres, us hammam-dwellers in the front row, to greet the Americans. People threw confetti and flowers as they passed, singing "It's a Long Way."<sup>6</sup> My mother could not hold back her tears and I reassured her: "Don't worry, he'll be back." I toured the town in the Jeep of an African-American serviceman who gave me chewing gum, the first in my life. In his company, we liberated Tunis in a haze of euphoria.

5. *Skouba*, often transliterated as *la chkobba*, is derived from the Italian card game known as *la scopa*. It was introduced into Tunisia by Italian immigrants, but the game is played, with variations, throughout the Mediterranean.

6. Moati refers here to "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary," a British music-hall song written in 1912 that became popular with British troops as a World War I marching song.

The hammam was instantly deserted. Those whose villas had been impounded by the Germans were able to go home, and we too got our old apartment back, though it wasn't the same without my father. As always, my mother didn't let it get her down, and started working so as not to depend on anyone. She got the idea to start manufacturing mules. I went with her to the souks to purchase raffia for the soles; fabrics in satin, velvet, and moiré; yards of swan feathers; and, of course, sequins in every conceivable color.<sup>7</sup> Our living-room was transformed into a workshop. Many American servicemen bought her irresistible oriental mules for their wives or girlfriends. This is how my mother kept the home fires burning until the return of my father from the camp where he'd been deported, Sachsenhausen, near Berlin.

He came back in September 1944 after the Liberation of Paris, in which he took part. An enormous crowd awaited his arrival. He didn't recognize me among all the other children who were jostling to get close to him. His friends, the ones with more obviously Jewish names—Levy, Cohen, or Hadria—were never to return. They died at Auschwitz. The Nazis had taken my father for an Italian, and that saved him. He went back to his job as journalist and politician. And we moved into a lovely villa near place Jeanne-d'Arc, in the Belvédère neighborhood.

My dears, you know how the rest of my life story has unfolded . . .

Thanks to the love of my parents and my country, Tunisia, whenever I return, it's like coming home. To see the women's smiles, how caring and gentle and affectionate they are, to rediscover the beauty of Boukornine, the sea, the cypress trees, the scent of jasmine, the magenta bougainvillea that pours over the whitewashed walls, yes, those are the reasons why Tunisia will always be the country of my heart.<sup>8</sup>

And that's why you three big boys call yourselves Tunisians. And what should we think of Anna, only three and a half, who told me the other day, "Mamie, I had a wonderful dream: the two of us were there in your golden bed and we were doing *la halai* (cuddling), drinking *masar* (orange blossom water), and watching a movie for grown-ups." In a word, the perfect "kif."<sup>9</sup>

—Translated by Jane Kuntz

7. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar.

8. Boukornine (sometimes called Mount Bou Kornine or Jebel Boukornine) is a 576-meter (1,890-foot) mountain situated just south of Tunis, along the coast, overlooking the Gulf of Tunis.

9. *Un kif* refers to something fun and pleasurable. Now very common in French (including in its verbal form *kiffer*—meaning "to enjoy"), the word is a deformation of the Arabic *kif*, which is associated with the pleasurable state brought on by smoking cannabis or hashish. Its use in French is generally unrelated to drugs, however.

Monastir, Tunisia

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## The Jewish Boy from Monastir

Guy Sitbon

Not all families took part in the commemorative celebration of Rabbi Shémeoun. My mother Juliette solemnly swore to do so once during a typhoid fever epidemic that was decimating the town, and from which my sister Daisy made an almost miraculous recovery. The celebration involved a rite in which children and adolescents had to walk in procession through Monastir, carrying lit candles and chanting in Hebrew all the way to the synagogue. The ceremony took place at dusk, when the souk shops were still open and the cafés were teeming with customers.<sup>1</sup> People out in the street, all Muslims, watched unsurprised as our cortege passed. They knew our traditions by heart, and would even offer a match to relight our candles when the breeze blew them out.

On Moulèd and Aïd el-Kebir, the town transformed, as if by magic, into a kind of fairground, with a merry-go-round, swing-sets, fakirs, snake charmers and fortune-tellers setting up their stalls in streets and squares.<sup>2</sup> The air vibrated with the drumming of darboukas, bendirs (tambourines), and the strident notes of the *zukra*, a kind of goatskin bagpipe, as hearts danced with joy.<sup>3</sup> The Muslims would

1. A *souk*, or *souq*, is a market or a bazaar. In the original, the author used the word without italics, suggesting its incorporation into everyday French vocabulary.

2. Moulèd (also Mawlid or Mawlid al-Nabi al-Sharif), is the celebration of the birthday of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Aïd el-Kebir, or Aïd al-Adha (sometimes simply Aïd or Eid), is the Festival of the Sacrifice—one of two Islamic holidays celebrated the world over, it commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and marks the end of the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is traditionally celebrated by the ritual slaughter of an animal whose meat is then shared, at least in part, with the needy.

3. A *darbouka* (also spelled *darbuka*, or *darabukka*), sometimes called a goblet drum, is an ancient Middle Eastern percussion instrument. Shaped like an hourglass and with an animal skin stretched over its widest end, the *darbouka* is played by hand. Similarly, the *bendir* is also a traditional



FIGURE 17. Guy Sitbon in Monastir, age fourteen.

wear their Sunday best, but we would not; still, the festival atmosphere sent vibrations through the whole crowd. It was many years later that I learned the real meaning of Moulèd (the feast of the birth of Prophet Mohamed), which I had always thought was just a big Monastirian street party.

During the colonial era, the French attitude toward Monastir was largely dismissive. They set up three elementary schools with a half-dozen teachers (we should give them our blessing, by the way), a post office, a town hall, a tax bureau, and nothing else. I remember only three or four French families in town. The church was attended mostly by Sicilians and Maltese who, like us, spoke fluent Arabic. They had immigrated to the country long before the protectorate was imposed. There were barracks outside town that housed a dozen or so French soldiers whom we never laid eyes on. The police station was run by three civil servants, usually Tunisians. The town was administered by a *caïd*, a handful of *cadis* (judges), a few *ouzirs* (notaries), a sharia court, and an *amine*, who kept order in the local marketplace.<sup>4</sup> In the town prison, a big barn of a place, some one hundred square meters large, with impressive barred windows, you might find two or three drunks picked up off the street the previous evening. Apart from the “Christian foreigners,” the native population had been divided into two parts since the dawn of time: on the one hand, some twelve thousand Muslims, and on the other, my people, a hundred and fifty Jews. Even though we were a tiny minority, we had a very high profile in the town.

Businessmen, manufacturers like my father, who opened the first soap factory—still today called *mèkinet saboun* (the soap factory)—shoemakers and hairdressers: we had an obvious presence in the souk, and our celebrations, like the feast day of Rabi Chameoun, never went unnoticed.<sup>5</sup> This is the way it had always been, and no one suspected it would ever be otherwise.

Not a single house had a bathtub or shower. Everyone went to the hamman once a week to wash. After my eleventh birthday, I started going in the morning with my father, but prior to that, I would go in the afternoon, with the women. The sight of all those mostly naked women didn’t trouble me in the least. Only Faïza made my heart skip a beat. I decided I must be in love with Faïza. In the only novel I had ever read, *Les Mystères de Marseille*, by Émile Zola (God knows how I got my hands on it), I learned that boys were supposed to fall in love with girls. And mine was Faïza Mzali, with whom I shared a bench in our last year of elementary school. She always wore the same calf-length green dress and black lace-up

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North African hand drum, but it features a much larger head (striking surface), and thus a deeper tone. The membrane is stretched over a wooden frame.

4. Sitbon is inconsistent in his choices about which words to define for the reader. Definitions in parentheses are his; we provide the following: a *caïd* is a leader (in this case, similar to mayor); Sharia courts, which were abolished in Tunisia in 1956, administered Islamic law; an *amine* is an administrator or custodian.

5. *Mèkinet* (or *makinet*) *saboun* literally means “soap machine.”

patent leather shoes, and always wore her black hair in braids. Her compositions (in French, naturally) were better than mine, but mine weren't so bad either. We never put it into so many words, but we were both proud of each other. During recess, she didn't play with the others, but just stood in a corner by herself, still as a statue. I didn't dare invite her over to play with the rest of us, for I understood that as the only Muslim girl in the whole school of thirty pupils, she probably felt uncomfortable. Nor did the two or three French boys mix with the Jewish and Maltese ruffians that we were. Faïza's parents could have easily enrolled their daughter in what was called the *École des filles mulsumanes*, just as the Muslim boys attended the *École franco-arabe* run by Mr. Pétèche, where my father had studied for four years.<sup>6</sup> But the Mzali family, the wealthiest in town, thought it more appropriate that their daughter be schooled just like the French were in France.

In rue Gabriel-Médina, we were the only Jewish family. I wasn't aware of this "isolation" until much later—until just recently, in fact, now that everyone seems to be into ethnic anthropology. Back then, it would never have occurred to me that there was anything unusual about where we lived. We lived in a house; that's all I knew. And walking from the market back home, you'd pass by Dar Trimeche (the Trimeche family home), Dar Kalala, Dar Bchir, Dar Rokbani, and Dar Aghir. Apart from the Trimeche olive oil factory, our soap works, the Fondouk (a kind of inn, or caravansary), and my father's three houses, there were no other buildings. After Dar Aghir, you were at the edge of town, and our unpaved street continued into the countryside as a path for camels and burros, lined on either side by bushes of prickly pear cactus, bearing the most divine fruit. It goes without saying that we knew all our neighbors, and no family event ever escaped our notice. Births, weddings, illnesses, and deaths were shared by the whole neighborhood.

My mother would sometimes visit the women next door. As a child, I was allowed access to the women's quarters, so I would tag along. Juliette, my mother, was sought out by all the ladies of the town for her inimitable singing voice. She had a large repertoire of popular tunes, and could sing ballads and laments by all the greats, from Abdel Awab to Saliha, even better than the original.<sup>7</sup> After tea and cakes had been served, and all the gossip circulated, the lady of the house would invariably beg Juliette: "Sing us something. Whatever you want, Juliette, your choice." My mother would coyly demur, but after much coaxing, would sit up on her ottoman and launch into "*Les bateliers du Nil*," in a voice that still gives me goosebumps.<sup>8</sup> Her audience would swoon with pleasure. Sitting at the feet of the performer, I felt like the king of the world.

6. The School for Muslim Girls, and the Franco-Arab School, respectively.

7. Abdel Awab is most likely a phonetic spelling of Mohamed Abdel Wahab (1901–1991), the revered Egyptian composer, singer, musician, and actor. Saliha, or Salouha Ben Ibrahim Ben Abdelhafid (1914–1958), was a famous Tunisian singer.

8. "*Les bateliers du Nil*" (ferryman of the Nile River) does not refer to a single song but, rather, to ancient chants (traditional work songs) sung by boatmen on the Nile to set the rhythm for their labor.

One day in late 1942, I was almost nine at the time, the German army occupied Monastir. The Jews knew they had the most to fear, while the Arabs thought they stood to gain. The fleet of the only three automobiles in the whole town consisted of share taxis (*louages*) that shuttled between Monastir and Sousse, the closest large town. Seemingly overnight, all three had portraits of Hitler on their windshields. One of the vehicles, belonging to Douik, went so far as to brandish a Nazi swastika on its splash guards. Everyone seemed to think that this was in the normal course of events. I, for one, was frightened. We didn't talk about it at home, but I'm sure my parents were terribly worried. My father, along with all other Jewish adult males, was sent to a work camp in Sousse, where his job consisted of clearing the rubble from the port that had been bombed by the Americans. In his absence, the most senior worker at our soap factory, Salah, took over operations and made sure that production continued smoothly. Salah was one of the family.

We didn't have any friends in Monastir. We had cousins (Jews, all related) or neighbors (Muslims). Still, I was friendly with one neighbor: Hachmi Bchir. He was the youngest child in the house next door, just my age. I could already read the newspaper, so I would tell him all about the war between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. When the Jews were winning, I was happy, but he was not. We were eleven or twelve, we had no idea what the fighting was about, but we didn't agree. Though no one ever mentioned it in my family, I got the impression that in his home, his father, a man given to serious pronouncements, made his opinion known. None of this stopped us from playing together in the street, where no automobile had ever ventured. Camel caravans, yes; horse-drawn carts, naturally; but never a car.

Jews and Arabs, like Aragon and Elsa, lived "apart together."<sup>9</sup> The word "Jew" was (and remains) an insult. Even today, I am not comfortable telling people in Tunisia that I'm a Jew. I feel guilty. The Gaza Strip, Palestinian refugees, finances, and so on and so forth. The word Muslim, in Arabic, has a completely different meaning from the same word in French, or any other language, for that matter. In French, Islam is a religion. In Arabic, *mislim* denotes first and foremost membership in a universal community, an ethnicity, a nation, a family, a block. *Mislim* is good, *Youdi* is bad.<sup>10</sup> We coexisted for thirteen centuries without ever feeling that we were part of the same group. Until the French arrived, we spoke the same language, shared the same Arab-Muslim civilization; we traded, helped each other out when we could; but let's not delude ourselves—we were foreigners to one another.

On a recent visit back to Monastir, some children accompanied me in the street, the way they often escort tourists. I spoke to them in the local Monastir dialect, the inimitable Arab accent of Tunisia's eastern coast that any kid can spot immediately.

9. French surrealist poet Louis Aragon and French-Russian writer Elsa Triolet were one of the most famous literary couples of the twentieth century. The expression "apart together" is a line from one of Aragon's poems, in which he describes their tumultuous relationship.

10. The words *Mislim* and *Youdi*—in italics in the original—refer to Muslim and Yehudi (or Jew), respectively. The particular spelling renders the local dialect and pronunciation.



They were stunned. How could you be both a tourist and Monastirian? I told them I was born in Monastir, just like them, that I had lived there for almost thirty years, and that I was a Jew. The peals of laughter that I set off must still be resonating on the city ramparts. They weren't buying it, not for a minute! To think I could make them believe that the enemy had lived in Monastir, that I was Bluebeard, or a child-eating ogre! I'll bet they're still laughing today.

—*Translated by Jane Kuntz*