The Holocaust In Sephardic Communities

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OUR ENEMIES?

I would like to briefly refer to the Holocaust in Sephardic communities, a topic that is not often discussed. In Holland, France, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Italy, the Sephardic Jews suffered the same fate as the Ashkenazi Jews of Europe. Probably the most shocking case was that of the community of Thessaloniki in Greece, where nearly 54,000 Jews, 95% of its population, were exterminated in Auschwitz (see here). My first reflection is that we must learn a great lesson from our enemies: that we are ONE people and we must stay united. That there are no, and should not be, differences between Sephardim, Ashkenazim, more religious or less religious, etc. We must do the impossible to feel that we are members of the same family.

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THE JEWS OF MOROCCO AND ALGERIA

Let's briefly look at the impact of the Shoah on the Jewish communities in North Africa: Morocco, which had a population of 200,000 Jews in 1940. Algeria, 120,000 Jews. Tunisia had 80,000 Jews, and Libya, had 30,000 Jews. The first three states were under the French protectorate, while Libya was under the Italian protectorate. France was occupied by the Nazis in 1940, which is known as "Vichy France." The Germans ruled France, its colonies, and its protectorates. And this included: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. In Morocco and Algeria, the infamous "Statut de Juifs" was established, which allowed the German authorities to confiscate the property of Jews, severely restrict their activities, and prohibit their access to education, etc. They also established about 30 labor

camps to build the trans-Sahara road, and for that, the Germans recruited about 4,000 Jews from Morocco and about 1,000 Jews from Algeria. It should be noted that there was a big difference between these labor camps and, for example, Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen. In the North African "labor camps," only adult and able-bodied men arrived at first. Dozens of them died due to unsanitary working conditions, scorching heat, disease. But the vast majority survived. The camps in Europe, on the other hand, were "extermination camps." Children, the elderly, women, and men who could not work were immediately exterminated in gas chambers. And for the men and women fit for work, they were made to work but ultimately to be killed. This horrible strategy, not so well known, has a "name" in the German language. The expression is: *Vernichtung durch Arbeit*, "killing Jews through forced labor." Returning to North Africa on November 8, 1942, and B"H before the Nazis could carry out the process of deportation and extermination of the Jews, Allied forces led by General Montgomery arrived on the coasts of Morocco and Algeria and were able to defeat the Nazis-led by General Rommel in a military operation called "Operation Torch." (see map above).

THE OLDEST JEWISH COMMUNITY OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL

Tunisia is a separate story. Tunisia was the only country in North Africa directly occupied by the Nazis. To begin, the Jewish population of this country, the smallest in the region, constituted 15% of the total population. Jews lived in the capital (of the same name) and on the famous island of Djerba. According to tradition, a group of Cohanim (priests) who served in the Temple of King Solomon escaped to Djerba when the Great Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BCE. They brought some stones from the Bet HaMiqdash which they used to build their synagogue there. To this day, the majority of Jews in Djerba – more than 60% – are Cohanim, something that has recently been confirmed in DNA tests that detect the Cohanim gene. Djerba is one of the few surviving Jewish communities in

the Arab world. One day after the "Torch" operation began on November 9, 1942, the Germans occupied Tunisia. Rommel's idea was to regroup in that country and repel the Allied forces from Morocco and Algeria and the British forces from Egypt. Within days of arriving, and despite being occupied with fighting the Allied forces, the Germans ordered the leaders of the Jewish community to provide them with all the data about the community. Thousands of Jews were taken to labor camps to build military roads (the vast majority survived). More than 200 Jews from that country were transported directly to Europe, where they were exterminated in concentration camps. B"H in May 1943, the Allies defeated and expelled the Germans from Tunisia, and the loss of Jewish lives was not higher.

I refer to the history of the Libyan Jews during the Holocaust in a separate article (see here)

WHO WAS NOT INCLUDED IN THE FINAL SOLUTION?

A final reflection on something horrifying. On January 20, 1942, the infamous Wannsee Conference took place, which is a small town near Berlin. At that conference (see here), the Nazi leaders gathered with the purpose of evaluating and strategizing "the final solution" to the Jewish problem. Among other things, they mentioned the number of Jews that had to be eliminated in France. This list indicated 700,000 Jews. But in France, there were only 350,000 Jews! Historians say that the only way to understand this difference in numbers is that the Nazis planned to exterminate all Jews from the countries under French protection: that is, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia…

I have always defined myself as "a Holocaust survivor." The simple reason is that, as with North Africa, the intention of the Nazis' final solution did not end in Europe. God forbid, if the Nazis had triumphed in Europe, then the Jews of North Africa, the Middle East, and perhaps even the Americas would also have faced the executors of the final solution.

We all are Shoah Survivors

IZKOR