

# Muslims Rescue and Resistance during the Holocaust

## by Lisa Adeli

### Notes for the Lecture (“Script”)

#### 1. Introduction (Slide 1)

A. It is important to note that the Holocaust was a European phenomenon: European planned, European-led, and implemented mostly in Europe. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of those who persecuted the Jews and others during the Holocaust – and those who opposed it – were Europeans of Christian decent. Nonetheless, some Muslims in North Africa and southeastern Europe encountered the Holocaust along with their Christian counterparts, and some areas of the Middle East (Turkey, Palestine, even Iran) were on the periphery. (Slide 2)

B. Looking at the Muslim responses to the Holocaust sheds light on relations between Muslims and Jews in a period just before the violence surrounding the creation of the state of Israel. Of course, as with others who encountered the Holocaust, the responses were varied, a matter of individual choice. Nevertheless, some patterns emerge that shed light not on Muslim relations with minority religious groups.

2. Historical background: Anti-Semitism was a lot less common in Muslim lands than Christian lands in medieval times and afterwards.

A. Muslims believed that Christians, Muslims, and Jews are all “people of the book,” ones who worship the same one God and who have scriptures containing important truths. Therefore, Christians and Jews were not exactly treated as equals, yet they were allowed to practice their religion freely and were not persecuted.

B. During/after the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal (1490s), many “Sephardic” Jews resettled in the Ottoman Empire (North Africa, Turkey/Arab lands, the Balkans).

C. Later, Muslim Holocaust rescuers would frequently refer to their tradition of religious tolerance, extending back to Ottoman times or even further to the time of the prophet Muhammad. (Note: That did not mean that there was never any persecution in the Ottoman Empire. Following the rise of nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottomans persecuted the Armenians, resulting in the Armenian genocide of 1915. However, this was nationally-based, not exactly *religiously*-based, persecution.)

#### 3. Muslim Holocaust rescuers from the Middle East/North Africa.

##### A. Background

1. The Middle East was NOT occupied by Nazi troops, so the Holocaust was not implemented there. (Slide 3) On this map, notice that the Balkans (upper left-hand corner) were taken over by the Nazis, but Turkey and Iran were not. Nor were the Arab countries shown on this map.
2. Arabs were NOT involved in the persecution of the Jews. Some of them, such as the Hajj Amin Al-Husseini, (Slide 4) a leader of Jerusalem, favored the Nazis (just as some people in every country of Europe), but

the Arabs did not persecute the Jews, nor did they witness the Holocaust (since it did not occur on their territory.)

B. Some Middle Eastern Muslims rescued Jews in Europe. IF neutral countries (Turkey and Iran, for example) insisted that Jewish citizens from their countries should not be sent to concentration camps, the Nazis usually allowed those Jews to live. Germany did not want neutral countries entering the war against them....

1. Abdol Hussein Sardari, an Iranian diplomat in Paris, helped to save 150 Jews or people of Jewish descent. They had originally come from Iran and Central Asia but were living in Paris. **(Slide 5)**

2. Turkish diplomats, Namik Kemal Yolga and Ismail Necdet Kent, also in France, spent much of their time in 1942 and 1943 trying to get Turkish citizenship papers to protect Jews in France. **(Slide 6)** In 1943, Necdet Kent hurried to a train station where 80 “Turkish” Jews were in a cattle car about to be deported to Auschwitz. When the Germans refused to release the Jews, Necdet Kent climbed into the cattle car with them. Officials sealed the train, and it set off. At the next station, higher German officials, who had been informed of the occurrence, stopped the train and tried to get the Turkish diplomat to get out. He agreed only when the Germans reluctantly released the 80 Jews!

3. Other Turkish diplomatic rescuers were not as lucky. **(Slide 7)** Selahattin Ülkümen, a Turkish diplomat on the island of Rhodes, intervened to save 42 “Turkish” Jewish families (by giving them Turkish documentation). In retaliation, Germans bombed his home, killing his pregnant wife. **(Slide 8)**

4. Another rescue effort by Muslim officials stationed in Europe occurred at the Grand Mosque of Paris, staffed by North African Arab officials. **(Slide 9)** Mosque officials, such as Si Kaddour Benghrabit and Si Mohamed Benzouaou, got papers for some North African Jews, stating that they were Muslims. (This was particularly important for Jewish men, who thus had a reason to explain their circumcision that was acceptable to the Nazis.) The mosque probably also have provided temporary refuge to children and others fleeing the Holocaust.

C. Middle Eastern countries helped Jewish refugees.

1. Approximately 1,000 Jewish children, mostly orphans, and 800 Jewish adults found temporary refuge in Tehran, Iran, between April and August 1942. **(Slide 10)** The “Tehran children” were then smuggled into Palestine. Although this effort was organized by Jewish groups, not Iranian, the Iranians undoubtedly knew about it and allowed it.

2. Meanwhile, several thousand more Jews fleeing from the Holocaust in the Balkans, found refuge in Turkey en route to Palestine. (The Turkish government knew about and allowed that.)

D. Muslim responses in areas of less direct Nazi implementation of the Holocaust: North Africa. **(Slide 11)** Notice that before the war, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia were under France; Libya under Italy.

1. The North African front included more than ½ million Jews (from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt). There is evidence that Germans

planned to target these Jews due to some lists drawn up at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. In early 1940s, Morocco and Algeria came under Vichy French control; Tunisia under direct German control; Libya under Italian.

2. From the fall of France in June 1940 until the expulsion of German troops from Tunisia in May 1943, the French colonies of North Africa and Italian-controlled Libya experienced a lot of what happened in Europe: laws discriminating against Jews, forced labor (more than 100 camps set up in the area), confiscations, deportations, and executions. **(Slide 12)** The eventual goal of the Germans was extermination. Fortunately, only about 4-5,000 died because Germans kicked out of North Africa before they could accomplish their goals. There were not “death camps” established in North Africa. The situation was worst in Tunisia, which was under direct German control.

3. Some Arabs cooperated with the Germans because they resented the Jews as Jews had been offered – and taken – French citizenship, while the Arab minority had been badly treated; the majority did not see what was happening or was not involved either way. Some helped the Jews.

a. Author Robert Satloff (*Among the Righteous*, 2006) documented a number of cases, but one, Khaled Abdelwahhab, has been nominated for the title of “Righteous among the Nations.”

Abdelwahhab, a Tunisian Arab, hid a family of Jews on his farm, saving them from a Nazi officer who had planned to rape one of the women. **(Slide 13)**

b. Another rescuer was Si Ali Sakkat, a Tunisian who helped 60 Jews who escaped from a labor camp **(Slides 14 and 15)** and randomly knocked on his gate asking for help.

c. Others probably rescued Jews as well, but for political reasons, many preferred not to talk about it. (Si Ali Sakkat, for example, never told his family what he had done.)

--The most exciting, deeply moving stories come from two European predominantly Muslim countries that were conquered by the Axis powers and thus subject to the ‘final solution.’ These were Albania and Bosnia.

#### 4. Albania

##### A. Background

1. Albania **(Slide 16)**, a mostly Muslim country in the Balkans, seemed like an unlikely place to rescue Jews since: only about 200 Jews lived there before the war; it was the poorest country in Europe; and it was conquered by Italy even before World War II began.

2. **(Slide 17)** Yet Albania was the only European country to end the war with more Jews than at the beginning. 800-1,000 Jews found refuge there.

3. Why?

a. Little anti-Semitism (as in the rest of the former-Ottoman lands).

b. Albanians had a code of honor called 'besa' that every person who knocked on one's door was a guest sent from God. Albanians were honor-bound to take care of the guests for as long as they needed assistance (without accepting any payment) and were duty-bound to protect them even if it meant risking their lives. (Slide 18)

c. When asked later why they did it, Holocaust rescuers gave religious or cultural reasons – or a combination of the two.

1. Beqir Qojja said: "I have always been a devout Muslim....All Jews are our brothers."
2. Kasem Jakup Kocerri elaborated on this idea: "We have been a family of Muslims for 500 years. 'To save a life is to go to paradise.' *Besa* came from the Koran."
3. Hamid and Xhemal Veseli, who together with their brother and parents rescued two families of Jewish refugees, cited a similar mixture of religious and cultural reasons: "Our parents were devout Muslims and believed, as we do, that 'every knock on the door is a blessing from God' ....*Besa* exists in every Albanian soul."

#### B. Hiding Jews:

1. Until mid-1943, the Italians were in charge, so there was no push to deport Jews to concentration camps. But after Italy withdrew, the Germans took over, and it became much more dangerous to shelter Jews.
2. Sometimes people took Jewish friends into their homes and told other people that they were "relatives from another area." This became more difficult as Jews from other areas arrived who spoke different languages.
3. Often in Albania, entire neighborhoods or villages knew that someone was sheltering Jews or worked together to do it. A few examples:
  - a. For example, Dr. Anna Kohen, who fled from Nazi persecution in northern Greece, later described how her family had disguised themselves as Muslims in the Albanian town of Vlora and had been accepted by the local population "like their own brothers and sisters."
  - b. Peasants in the small village of Shengjergji worked together to disguise seventeen Jews as local farmers though "even the local police knew that the villagers were sheltering Jews."
  - c. Often Jews lived openly under assumed Muslim identities, a situation requiring the complicity of others to conceal that many of these so-called Albanians could not speak the national language. For example, Ali Koca, an Albanian Muslim heard about the arrest of Solomon Konforti, a Yugoslav Jew whose family was living with some of Koca's friends. Koca had provided Konforti with false papers stating that Konforti was his brother. He then had to swear before German authorities that Solomon was his brother. This must have been dangerous if anyone had pointed out that the "brothers" spoke different languages!

C. After the war: Albanians and the Jews they'd rescued tried to remain in touch despite political restrictions. **(Slide 19)** For example, Refik Veseli, shown here with a child his family had rescued, later visited the family in Yugoslavia, studied photography under the father's tutelage, and after returning to Albania, worked as a photographer himself the rest of his life.

## 5. Bosnia:

### A. Background

1. Bosnia is not labeled separately on the map **(Slide 20)** because it was part of the so-called "Independent State of Croatia," a fascist puppet state in which the Serbs were especially persecuted but the Jews were too. Bosnia, the area in "Croatia" around the city of Sarajevo, had no majority, but Muslims and Serbs were the two largest groups.
2. In Bosnia, there were three major "national" groups (determined by religion as they all spoke the same language and lived in the same place): Serbs (Orthodox), Croats (Catholics), and Muslims. The Jews were a smaller group (40,000 in Bosnia and Croatia together; about 11,000 in Bosnia alone), but they were also considered a nationality.
3. After the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, Bosnia and Croatia were joined together in the "Independent State of Croatia." **(Slide 21)** The Croatian fascists (Ustasha) ruled, but the Bosnian Muslims were also declared "Aryans." The Croats' main enemy was the Serbs (and if the Germans pressured them enough, the Jews were second), so there was a brutal reign of terror with horrible concentration camps for Serbs, Jews, Roma (gypsies), and political prisoners who protested.

### B. Variety of Muslim responses in Bosnia.

1. A small minority committed atrocities. While most of the concentration camp leaders were Croats, there were some Muslim guards. But most Muslims who perpetrated atrocities were poor peasants involved in the sporadic outbreaks of violence in the countryside – mostly against Serbian peasants, not Jews.
2. **(Slide 22)** Another small segment (some young men) joined the Handjars, a unit of the Bosnian SS. Although people talk a lot about this, it is important to note that this particular SS unit was purely a combat unit, fighting Allied troops in the West. The Handjars did NOT participate in atrocities.
3. A larger group of people went along with the status quo, figuring that the persecution was only the result of "wild elements" that would later be controlled. Their goal was to ensure Muslim rights and get a share of the power. So being dominated by Croatian fascists didn't seem much different than being dominated by a Serbian dictatorship (between the wars) or by Austrian conquerors or Ottoman conquerors.
4. Others protested, either in a group, individually, or through the Partisan resistance movement. We'll focus on those who opposed the Holocaust (since during/after the war, this ideology won out).

### C. Muslim rescue and resistance in Bosnia.

1. Public protests: **(Slide 23)** Bosnian Muslims were one of the FEW RELIGIOUS GROUP IN EUROPE to speak out formerly against genocide DURING the Holocaust.)
  - a. Between Aug. and Dec. 1941, protest letters were sent from Muslim notables in the cities of Prijedor, Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Mostar, Bijeljina, and Tuzla. The letters, signed by leading members of the Muslim community, stated that religious tolerance was a **Bosnian tradition dating back to Ottoman times** and asked that Croatian authorities stop the violence. **Prominent Muslims signed their names to the documents** – and many ended up in concentration camps because of it.
  - b. A larger, general protest of the mostly Muslim residents of Travnik, Bosnia, occurred when local authorities ordered a large-scale deportation of the city's Jews in January 1942 (supposedly to "work camps"). Because of the extremely cold weather at that time, many residents of the city feared for the health of the people scheduled for deportation. The authorities were forced to "compromise," assigning a Jewish doctor to accompany the transport in order to reassure the concerned citizens that efforts were being made to safeguard the health of Travnik's Jews during their journey.
2. Resistance: **(Slide 24)** Bosnia became the center of the Partisan movement, a multi-ethnic force whose main ideology was "brotherhood and unity," a struggle against ethnic persecution. Even people who didn't fight in the movement often supported it or helped people hiding from the Germans and their collaborators to get to Partisan lines. In fact, when Jews and Serbs escaped from – or in April 1945 fought their way out of – Croatian concentration camps, the escaped prisoners often headed into Bosnia. There they specifically looked for Muslim villages so that they could find someone to take them to the Partisans.
3. Holocaust rescuers. There are many of them, not just the ones officially listed, but others who provided "smaller" services (such as the Muslim truck driver who smuggled Jews out of danger in his truck). Here are two remarkable stories – both with a remarkable twist at the end!
  - a. Mustafa and Zejneba Hardaga, a Muslim couple living in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, rescued a Jewish family. **(Slide 25)**
    1. Mustafa, the husband, was acquainted with Josef Kavilio, a Jewish man who operated a small company in a building owned by Hardaga. When Kavilio's home was destroyed during the German bombing of Sarajevo in April 1941, Hardaga offered to take in the entire family of four. Sheltering a Jewish family at that time was not yet illegal, but it was certainly inconvenient and crowded as Mustafa's brother and sister-in-law were also living in the same apartment. In addition, the Hardagas were observant Muslims, and the women of the family always wore veils in

the presence of non-related men. Thus, Josef Kavilio's presence in their home must have been difficult for Zejneba and her sister-in-law, who then had to wear a veil even within the confines of their own home.

2. The destiny of the two families remained intertwined, and the Hardaga family took serious risks for their Jewish friends. Kavilio soon succeeded in smuggling his wife and children to Mostar, which was under Italian control and thus a relatively safe place for Jews, but he himself remained in Sarajevo to sell his business. He was then arrested in the Ustaša's general roundup of Sarajevo's Jews in the winter of 1941-1942. Upon learning of his arrest and conscription into a forced labor brigade, Zejneba Hardaga risked harassment by Croatian authorities by making repeated trips to his worksite, bringing enough food for Kavilio and his fellow prisoners. When Kavilio finally escaped from the Ustaša, the Hardagas again took him in. This time his Muslim hosts knew that they risked arrest and deportation to Jasenovac if their action were discovered. In fact, Zejneba's father, Ahmed Sadik, was arrested for hiding another Jewish family and eventually died in Jasenovac. When Kavilio had recovered from his internment, he managed to escape from the NDH and rejoin his family in Mostar, where all of them survived the war.

3. Fast forward 50 years later. The Kavilio had emigrated to Israel. When the Bosnian civil war broke out and Bosnian Muslims were the targets of genocide, the daughter in the family tracked down Zejnaba Hardaga, now a very old lady, and asked if she needed help. Soon they brought her and her granddaughter to Israel. It's truly a case of what goes around comes around or being rewarded for your good deeds!

b. Dervis and Servet Korkut, Albanian-speakers from Kosovo who lived most of their adult lives in Bosnia. **(Slide 26)**

1. In 1942 a Serbian friend of Dervis Korkut brought a young Jewish woman to him and asked him to hide her. Korkut and his wife dressed her as a Muslim and had her pretend to be a nanny for their baby. A few months later, she was able to escape from Sarajevo to the Italian-controlled coast (and later to the Partisans).

2. That same year, Dervis, an important official in the Bosnian National Library, also rescued a rare Jewish manuscript, the Sarajevo Haggadah. When German soldiers came for it, he smuggled it out of the library and hid it with Muslim friends.

3. Just over 50 years later, Servet Korkut (the wife) and her daughter and family were rescued by Jews from TWO separate genocides. During the Bosnian conflict, Servet escaped from Sarajevo on a Jewish bus. Several years later, in 1999, her daughter and her family fled from a genocide in Kosovo. The family was among a group of Muslim refugees taken to Israel; she was met at the airport by the son of the woman that her parents had rescued so many years before! Again (and again) good deeds were rewarded in the long run.

6. Conclusion:

A. Although I have spent a lot more time speaking about those who protested the Holocaust, I'm not implying that all Muslims did this. Most people were not rescuers but bystanders, either people who chose not to get involved or (more common in the Middle East) were too far from the action to see any persecution.

B. So why focus so much on the rescuers and those who publicly protested?

1. because what I love best about the historical record is the way in which it defies stereotypes. Holocaust history shows that (despite Western propaganda) there isn't a deep-rooted enmity between Muslims and Jews going back thousands of years, a hatred which makes conflict inevitable. People who supported the Nazis (like the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem) or those involved in the anti-Jewish rampages in Iraq did not do so because of long-standing religious hatreds but because of modern POLITICAL rivalries.

2. because it illustrates many aspects of the Muslim tradition that favor tolerance and coexistence, a tradition just as strong – if not stronger – than the history of rivalries. This is another stereotype-buster!

3. because it's important for students to see that genocide is not inevitable or unstoppable. Rather, it is the product of individual decisions that people can control. Looking at individuals who made a difference show exactly that: Individuals *can* make a difference.

C. Questions? Contact information (**Slide 27**)