

# The Role of Righteous Muslims

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*"Whoever saves one life saves all of mankind"* The Holy Qur'an.  
*"If you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world"* The Talmud

*"If people of goodwill can connect together, by using these examples of those honoured as righteous when the world was in its darkest moment, we may yet find ways of cherishing life and fighting for the rights of others"*



FAITH MATTERS  
A Faith Matters Educational Booklet



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## Foreword

This booklet is aimed at broadening knowledge and awareness of the roles that some Muslims took during the Holocaust and whose stories show the moral and physical courage of these individuals who believed in doing what was right.



Today, unfortunately, xenophobia and fear 'of the other' still continue to plague societies and the United Kingdom is not immune to these issues. The caricaturing of communities continues in some quarters and the lessons of history are not learnt. Yet, history should teach us and guide us so that we preserve the stories of our common humanity and social links which should not be forgotten. Furthermore, these stories should not be physically or mentally shelved as though they have no significance in the modern world. If anything, they have a greater significance today than they would have had 10, 20 or 30 years ago.

The Righteous Muslims booklet shows us that there are many stories of positive Muslim and Jewish interaction, even at the darkest moments in history. It shows a common bond and a link between people of two faiths who believe in the compassion of God and in the sanctity of life. Whilst the politics of the Middle East may block such stories out of the public narrative, there is a duty on us all to ensure that they get their rightful place in our social and educational narratives.

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## Introduction

Following extensive and rigorous research, Robert Satloff, Executive Director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has revealed a large number of stories of Arabs and Muslims who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust, many of whom have now been honoured by Yad Vashem or other prestigious international institutions dedicated to the memory of those who perished at the hands of the Nazis. Social justice within Islam, in the form of honour codes, religious and cultural practices, shaped the actions of many Muslims during the Holocaust and should serve as a sense of pride for Islamic communities throughout the world. This booklet is needed more than ever, especially when there is very little in the public domain about the role that Muslim communities played in the Holocaust and numerous articles, blogs and websites repeat the untrue mantra that Muslim communities are overwhelmingly negative in their thoughts and views about the Holocaust. This booklet shows that they were involved in the protection of Jews during the Holocaust and that those stories need to be heard.

If anything, it is the duty of Muslims and non-Muslims to further research and promote such stories that help to form bridges between various communities in the UK and across the globe.

This booklet therefore celebrates those Muslims who guided by their faith and their personal desire to do what was right, saved Jewish lives. Long may their deeds live on!

### **The Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks**

“Great darkness can create great heroes, whose lives become signals of hope for future generations. That is the case in the lives whose stories are told in this book. It is a chapter of history that is not well known but deserves to be. It tells of acts of Muslim bravery during the Holocaust years. Faithful to the call of Islam to save life – indeed to see a single life as an entire universe, one of the Quran’s great teachings – these individuals risked personal danger to save Jews during the great destruction. Their courage, together with the tears of Muslims and Jews alike who have suffered persecution, should find a place in the heart of each of us, summoning us to a sense of shared fate and responsibility that transcends religious and political differences. From the courage of the past can come the inspiration that will lead us, Muslims and Jews together, to honour life, and faith, and God, drawing strength from one another as we seek to build a world both holy and humane.”

## 1. Righteous Muslim Persons

*“If you deny the Shoah, you also deny that there were noble Arabs and other Muslims, those who put their lives on the line to rescue Jews.”<sup>1</sup>*

This booklet acknowledges the noble deeds and acts of Muslim courage towards their Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust (Shoah). These actions are often ignored as they do not prescribe to the stereotypical characterisation in which both sides of a tragic dispute are often portrayed or wish to be portrayed. It chronicles individual stories of heroism and bravery that run counter to the prevailing myths in some parts of Europe which subtly imply that no Muslims played a role in the defence of Jewish communities during the Holocaust. Conversely, it also runs counter to those within some Arab communities which ranges from crude Holocaust celebration (in which Hitler is often portrayed as a hero) to outright Holocaust denial. This booklet therefore makes clear that Muslims are also a part of the narrative of the wide range of individuals who stood up within communities against the injustice and sheer brutality of the Nazi war machine and its allies.

Yad Vashem, located in the peaceful grounds of the Jerusalem Forest, honours those Jewish martyrs who were cynically murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. This site is a permanent reminder to the world of man’s inhumanity to man and what occurs when hatred, bigotry and prejudice are allowed to prosper amongst previously civilised societies.



The Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem,  
Jerusalem

Yad Vashem also possesses an avenue of trees which proudly embraces those righteous individuals who courageously stood apart from the masses, to save Jewish lives. These virtuous people have been awarded the title of “Righteous among the Nations” for “Whosoever saves a single life, saves an entire universe”.<sup>2</sup>

Today there are over 20,000 people who have been awarded this title by the Israeli Supreme Court of Justice acting as guardians to this honour, 70 of whom are from the Muslim faith.

This little known fact is one of the reasons why this booklet has been published. It describes how men and women of goodwill and of different faiths and beliefs can follow their own consciences despite threats to their own lives to safeguard others. It pays tribute to those 70 Muslims, 63 of them from Albania, who grounded in Besa, a code of national honour, provided a safe sanctuary to their Jewish citizens following the Nazi occupation in 1943.

In addition there were other Muslims in Europe and North Africa who have been recognised as “Righteous” and others, who according to the exacting strictures of Yad Vashem, have not been accepted, though whose endeavours we should recall with respect.

Another little known fact is that there exists in Nazareth a Holocaust museum owned by Khaleed Mahameed, a 43-year old lawyer, husband, and father of two, who has opened what is believed to be the first-ever Arab Holocaust museum to raise awareness of past Jewish suffering in the eyes of Palestinians.

Furthermore, Khaleed believes that by understanding what happened in the Holocaust, steps may be taken to try and get some empathy built within relationships between the Israeli Jewish community in Israel and Palestinians Arabs who have suffered dislocation, dispossession and discrimination.

The intention of this booklet is to produce historical evidence of those traumatic events in the Shoah that should enable people with open minds to enter a dialogue and understanding with others and create environments of trust. It is only when these dialogues of trust are established that deep-seated and often bitter differences can be discussed leading to the possible resolution of previous intractable grievances.

## 2. Yad Vashem



*“And to them will I give in my house and within my walls, a memorial and a name (a “yad vashem”)... that shall not be cut off.”<sup>3</sup>*

Yad Vashem was established in 1953 to commemorate the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust by safeguarding the memory of the past and imparting meaning for future generations. One of the principal duties of Yad Vashem is to convey the gratitude of the Jewish people to those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews, and to award the title, “Righteous Among The Nations”.

*“Let us not forget after all there is always a moment when moral choice is made...And so we must know these good people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We must learn from them, and in gratitude and hope, we must remember them.”<sup>4</sup>*

### 2.1 Who is a Righteous Person?

An independent public commission chaired by a Justice of Israel’s Supreme Court, was established in order to define the criteria of a righteous person and grant the title of חסידיו אומות העולם “Chassidei umot ha’olam”, literally, ‘righteous men of the world’s nations’ translated from the literature of the Rabbis. This Righteous Commission then meticulously studies all documentation, including evidence by survivors and other eyewitnesses, evaluates the historical circumstances, the element of risk to the rescuer, and then decides if the case accords with its exacting criteria, one of which states that, “Assistance has to be given without any financial gain expected in return”.<sup>5</sup>

This prestigious award is based upon the principle that each individual is responsible for their deeds and is also a unique attempt by the victims to pay tribute to those who defied their heinous masters. The creation of a garden to honour people of courage is therefore a remarkable phenomenon to symbolise to a future world that people are capable of defending and maintaining civilised values. It is a testament to the resilience of the victims who, despite coming face to face with the most horrific manifestations of evil, retained their faith and belief in human values.

A person recognised as “Righteous among the Nations” is awarded a specially minted medal bearing their name, a certificate of honour, honorary Israeli citizenship and the privilege of having their name added to those on the Wall of Honour in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. It has been granted to over 20,000 people and amongst the most famous are Oskar Shindler, Feng-Shan Ho and Raoul Wallenberg.

### 3. Muslim Righteous Persons

*“Be kind, for wherever kindness becomes a part of something, it beautifies it; wherever it is taken from something, it leaves it tarnished.”<sup>6</sup>*

In every country and among members of every religion, there were heroes of humanity who saved Jews and others from the clutches of the Nazis. In this context the people of Arab lands and Muslims were no exception. Robert Satloff, in his unique book *Among The Righteous*, discovered “numerous Arabs and Muslims” who by “noble and selfless deeds helped save Jews from the Nazis, risking their lives to do so”.<sup>7</sup> There were remarkable individual stories of rescue which include that of Si Ali Sakkat, a Tunisian landowner who came from a noble Muslim family that traced lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him, PBUH).

“He opened up his outbuildings and barns to sixty Jewish escapees from a labour camp and sheltered them for weeks until allied troops, on their way to Tunis, could liberate them... The Sultan of Morocco and the Bey of Tunis provided moral support and, at times, gave practical help to Jewish subjects. Si Kaddour Benghabrit, the rector of the Great Mosque of Paris, who saved numerous Jews by having the mosque’s administrative personnel give them certificates of Muslim identity with which they could evade arrest and deportation.

...When Vichy controlled Algerian officials offered the indigenous population windfall profits if they took over Jewish property, (Muslim) preachers gave sermons forbidding believers from serving as conservators of confiscated Jewish property. Not a single Arab participated in this theft. Arabs welcomed Jews into their homes; guarded valuables so Germans could not confiscate them, warned Jewish leaders of coming SS raids and even shared with Jews their meagre rations.”<sup>8</sup>

Satloff uncovered the story of a group of Arab shepherds from Western Tunisia who hid fleeing Jews. “When the Germans came looking for Jews, the Arabs would say they are our cousins”<sup>9</sup> In his evidence to The Commission, Yaacov Zrivy, who came from a small town near Sfax in Tunisia, stated “The Arabs watched over the Jews”.<sup>10</sup> These, and others acts recorded here, shed some light on the fate of Jews in the Arab countries of North Africa during World War II, about which until recently little has been

documented.

The names and individuals outlined above, (whilst not classed as ‘Righteous’ by Yad Vashem), put their lives at stake to ensure that the weak and the vulnerable were protected. For this, their names and their histories should live on.

We would, however, be negating our historical responsibility if we did not record the fact that there were also some Arabs who participated in the persecution.

Whilst the situation in Europe fashioned different scenarios in respect of the Holocaust, almost no nation in Europe, and certainly no occupied nation, was free of the shameful stain of collaboration in the genocide. “Individual Arabs made individual choices, some for good, some for evil, some made a choice not to choose but there was no national responsibility or national guilt”;<sup>11</sup> whereas allied governments virtually all looked the other way despite knowledge of what was happening in the death camps, and refused to grant visas to Jews.

In order to understand the explicit bravery of these Arab heroes, it is necessary to put their behaviour in context. As an attributed observation by the philosopher Edmund Burke warns us, “It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph.”<sup>12</sup> And there were plenty of men and women who did nothing. Of the 22,765 righteous persons honoured by Yad Vashem,<sup>13</sup> 70 have been Muslims; 63, Muslim Albanians. These are their courageous stories:

## 4. Albania

*“This is a story that has rarely been publicized... It is a story of a nation saving all of its Jews because of a code of behaviour”<sup>14</sup>*

Albania is a small mountainous country is bordered by Montenegro to the north, Serbia to the northeast, Macedonia to the east, Greece to the south and The Adriatic Sea to the west. She was one of the first countries invaded by the Axis Powers (Germany and Italy) in World War II with Mussolini entering Albania in 1939, using it as a base from which to attack Greece in 1940.



Following the 1942 Wannsee Conference, convened to coordinate the “Final Solution”, a protocol was produced with a table of the numbers of Jews that were to be murdered in each country. The number given for Albania was 200. However, in reality, the number was higher – around

one thousand Jews had fled to Albania, hoping to be able to emigrate from there.

In September 1943, when the Italian regime changed, Albania came under direct German control and the Jewish population were ordered to register with the authorities. During this period, the indigenous population both welcomed and sheltered those fleeing other European countries. With the knowledge of government officials they

refused to release their names, provided false papers and helped them flee from the capital Tirana to find refuge with Albanian families and partisans. They were so effective in their efforts that Albania became a safe haven for Jews and there were only two reported cases of capture and deportation”.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4.1 BESA, a Code of National Honour

*“If someone seeks refuge in Allah, give him refuge. If someone asks in the name of Allah, give him something. If someone asks you a favour, repay him. If you cannot find anything to repay him, then pray for him so that he knows that you appreciate what he has done for you.”<sup>16</sup>*



The Albanians’ refusal to comply with the Nazis’ genocidal policies was grounded in **Besa**, a code of national honour, germinating from their strong Muslim and ethical beliefs. **Besa** literally means “to keep the promise”. Its significance was that once a family was hosted by Albanians, those individuals could trust their hosts with their lives and the lives of their family. These acts originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even those of another faith or origin.

#### 4.2 The Veseli and Mandil Families



Veseli and Fatima Veseli and their children: Refik, Hamid & Xhemal



Moshe Mandil in Albanian Clothes, Kruja 1944

Moshe and Ela Mandil and their children Gavra and Irena came from Yugoslavia, where Moshe owned a flourishing photography shop. When the Germans invaded in April 1941, the family fled to the Kosovo province under Italian control, where the Jews were relatively protected. Towards the end of the summer of 1942 they were forced to move deeper into Albania where the majority of the population was Muslim and settled in Tirana. Moshe came upon a photography store owned by Neshad Prizerini, one of his former apprentices, who not only offered him work, but also invited his extended family to stay at his home. It was here where Moshe met Refik Veseli, Prizerini's 17-year-old apprentice, who had been sent by his parents from their village, Kruja, to learn the photographic trade.

Their situation deteriorated when the Germans occupied Albania and Veseli suggested that the Mandils should move to his parents' home in the mountains. They set out together on a hazardous journey riding mules over rocky terrain, taking side roads, moving only during the night and hiding in caves during the days to avoid detection by the German military.

In the Veseli's village of Kruja, Moshe and Ela were hidden in a small room above the barn while their children played together. Some time after their arrival, Refik's brother, Xhemal, brought another Jewish family - Ruzhica and Yosef Ben Yosef, and his sister Finica from Tirana. Both families stayed in their mountain retreat until liberation in November 1944.

After the war, the Mandils returned to Yugoslavia and the family went to live in Novi Sad where Moshe reopened a photography shop. They invited Refik to live with them and to continue his training as a photographer. He stayed with the Mandil family until their emigration to Israel where, despite the distance, contact was maintained.

Gavra Mandil felt an obligation on behalf of all those saved in Albania to pay tribute to the Albanian people and to his rescuers in particular and in 1987 wrote to Yad Vashem and told his story.

"In those difficult times the Albanian people revealed themselves in their full glory and greatness. There was not one Jewish family that failed to find shelter within the Albanian local population, whether with poor villagers or with owners of estates and manor houses. No Jew remained without the protection of an Albanian. In many cases, like our own, the hiding of Jews involved the danger of death and required colossal self-sacrifice! Our family of four and another Jewish family of three was saved thanks to the shelter we found at the home of the Veseli family in a small village called Kruja in Albania. Like us all the Jewish refugee families from Yugoslavia, who were in Albania in those years, were saved. They attached the greatest importance to human life, in a most natural and understandable way".<sup>17</sup>



In 1987 Veseli and Fatima Veseli and their children Refik, Hamid and Xhemal became the first Albanians to be recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

### 4.3 Ali Sheqer Pashkaj Saved Yeoshua Baruchowic

*“Why did my father save a stranger at the risk of his life and the entire village?” asked Enver Alia Sheqer, Ali’s son, “My father was a devout Muslim. He believed that to save one life is to enter paradise.”<sup>18</sup>*

“My father owned a general store with food provisions in Puke and was the only store of its kind for many miles around. One day a German transport rolled by with nineteen Albanian prisoners on their way to hard labour, and one Jew who was to be shot. My father spoke excellent German and invited the Nazis into his store and plied them with food and wine until they became drunk.



Enver Alia Sheqer

Meanwhile he hid a note in a piece of melon and gave it to the young Jew which instructed him to jump out and flee into the woods to a designated place. The Nazis were furious over the escape, but my father claimed innocence. They brought him into the village and lined him up against a wall to extract information about where the Jew was hiding. Four times they put a gun to his head and threatened to burn down the village if he didn’t confess. My father held out, and finally the Germans left. My father retrieved the man, Yeoshua Baruchowic, from the forest and hid him for two years in his home until the war was over. There were thirty families in this village, but no one knew that my father was sheltering a Jew”.<sup>19</sup>

Yeoshua today lives in Mexico as a dentist.

On March 18, 2002, Yad Vashem recognized Ali Sheqer Pashkaj as Righteous Among the Nations.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.4 Destan Balla and his Wife, Lime Balla, Saved the Lazar Brothers: Their Story as Told by Lime Balla

“All of us villagers were Muslims. We were sheltering God’s children under our Besa. I was born in 1910. In 1943, at the time of Ramadan, seventeen people from Tirana came to our village of Shengjergji. They were all escaping from the Germans. At first I didn’t know they were Jews. We divided them amongst the villagers. We took in three brothers by the name of Lazar.

We were poor - we didn’t even have a dining table - but we never allowed them to pay for the food or shelter. I went into the forest to chop wood and haul water. We grew vegetables in our garden so we all had plenty to eat. The Jews were sheltered in our village for fifteen months. We dressed them all as farmers, like us. Even the local police knew that the villagers were sheltering Jews. I remember they spoke many different languages. In December of 1944 the Jews left for Priština, where a nephew of ours, who was a partisan, helped them. After that we lost all contact with the Lazar brothers. It was not until 1990 forty-five years later, that Sollomon and Mordehaj Lazar made contact with us from Israel.”

On October 4, 1992, Yad Vashem recognized Destan Balla and his wife, Lime Balla, as Righteous Among the Nations.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Algeria, Tunisia And Morocco

After Hitler conquered France, Algeria and Morocco remained under the control of the collaborationist Vichy regime. While the Jews of these countries suffered under the anti-Semitic Vichy-imposed laws, their lives were not at risk. Tunisia, however, was the exception. In November 1942, German troops and their Italian ally occupied the small country. They confiscated a number of Jewish properties and forced many of its 100,000 Jews to wear yellow stars (except for those in Tunis). Before the Allied troops liberated Tunisia six months later, the Nazis had already sent 5,000 Jews to forced labour camps, where at least 46 died; about 160 Tunisian Jews living in France were deported to death camps.



## 5.1 Khaled Abdelwahhab: The First Arab Muslim to be Nominated for Recognition as Righteous by Yad Vashem



*Khaled Abdelwahhab was an “elegant, refined, dashing, debonair, strikingly handsome and cultured man both an aesthete and a gourmet. His zest for good food and conversation was infectious; to have dinner with him...was more than a meal, it was an experience”.*<sup>22</sup>

In 1942, the Germans arrived in Mahdia and expelled Jewish families from their homes in order to transform them into barracks and the men were forced to perform day labour. Anny Boukris’ extended family took shelter along with the Uzzan family at an olive oil factory near the centre of town. Of the 23 Jews living at the factory, about half were children.

One of the town’s leading citizens, Khaled Abdelwahhab, was a wealthy Tunisian landowner, who held several posts in the government and was an advisor in the Ministry of Tourism. Khaled often interacted with the soldiers, and learned that the Germans had set up a brothel where they could regularly take advantage of the girls and young women. Khaled visited the house many times in an attempt to protect these women and brought delicacies and fine wine to distract the soldiers, hoping the Germans would get so drunk they would bypass the women and go straight to bed. On one such night, a German soldier confided in Khaled that he planned to bring a certain beautiful Jewish woman to the brothel the next day. From the soldier’s description, he realized that the soldier was talking about Anny’s mother, Odette, and he was determined that he would save the entire Boukris family.

That night Khaled was especially generous with the wine and once the German soldier had fallen asleep he left for the factory, where he informed Jacob and Odette what he had heard from the German soldier. Khaled managed to evacuate the entire group of two dozen to his farm in Tlelsa, 20 miles from Mahdia. The living quarters were restricted, but the group was both comfortable and safe. The Boukris family

left the farm once a week to visit a Jewish-owned farm four miles away, where each Thursday, much of the Mahdia Jewish community gathered to see the local rabbi preside over the kosher slaughter of chickens for the Shabbat meal. For four months Khaled visited the families almost every day while they remained secure on the farm before the British eventually took Mahdia from the Germans in April 1943.



Jacob & Odete Boukris' Wedding

“Khaled and Jacob Boukris maintained their friendship for some years after the war but the story would surely have been forgotten after their deaths except for the persistence of Robert Satloff. This was acknowledged when in April 2007 Khaled Abdelwahab became the first Arab Muslim to be nominated (but not confirmed) by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations, however he has since been honoured by The Simon Wiesenthal Centre and The Museum of Tolerance in California as well as other prestigious institutions around the world for saving Jews during the Shoah. “Khaled’s story adds a new dimension to the 6 million stories of horror, and occasionally nobility, rising from the ashes of the Holocaust.”<sup>23</sup>

Khaled Abdelwahab died in 1997 at the age of 86.

## 6. Turkey

Since the founding of the Ottoman Empire, many accounts have been documented of Turkish Muslims providing sanctuary and assistance to the Jewish people. They were welcomed, initially as refugees, when they fled Spain during the Inquisition and later the government also took a stand supporting them when slanderous blood libel accusations, originating in Damascus, reached Rhodes in 1840. This occurred after an intervention by the Jewish humanitarian Moses Montefiore in Constantinople, when Sultan Abd Al-Majid made it clear that Jews did not use blood in their ceremonies, and anyone who said the Jews did was lying. (The blood libel is a medieval myth originating in Christian Europe which claims Jews use the blood of non-Jews to make *Matzah* (unleavened bread) for *Pesach* (Passover).



Prior to being seized by the Italians, Rhodes (which today is part of Greece) was a Turkish Island on which the Jewish community had thrived. This situation continued under a benign Italian dictatorship until the arrival of the Germans in 1940 when Mussolini allowed them to use the island as a southern base for military operations. Their lives totally changed when on July 18, 1944 all the Jews were told to appear at Gestapo headquarters and the Germans commenced the deportation on both the islands of Rhodes and Kos.

## 6.1 Selahattin Ülkümen

At the age of 30 Selahattin Ülkümen, who had become the Turkish Consul on Rhodes, attempted to intercede on their behalf and went to the German commanding officer, General Kleeman, reminding him of Turkey's neutrality and requesting him to release the Jews. Previously Ülkümen had secured the release of thirty-nine Turkish and Greek boatmen who had been condemned to death for taking Italian soldiers to refuge in Turkey. However, on this occasion the commander refused, stating that under Nazi law all Jews had to go to the concentration camps. Ülkümen responded by stating that "under Turkish law all citizens were equal. We don't differentiate between citizens who are Jewish, Christian or Muslim"<sup>24</sup> stating that this refusal would cause an international incident. Kleeman was forced to accept and all the Jews protected by Ülkümen were released, though not until they had been subjected to considerable additional harassment by the Nazi authorities. Ülkümen continued to provide protection and moral support to those he had rescued, all of whom were in mortal fear since they still were required to report daily to the Gestapo.



A survivor, Matilda Toriel, relates that she was a Turkish citizen living in Rhodes and married to an Italian citizen. Matilda was commanded to report to Gestapo headquarters but as she prepared to enter the building, Ülkümen approached her and told her not to go in but to wait until he had managed to release her husband. It was the first time she had ever met him. Ülkümen requested that the Germans release the Turkish citizens and their families, who numbered only 15 at the time. However, he added another 25-30 people to the list whom he knew had allowed

their citizenship to lapse. The Gestapo, suspecting him, demanded to see their papers, which they did not have. Ulkumen however returned to the Gestapo building, insisting that according to Turkish law, spouses of Turkish citizens were considered to be citizens themselves, and demanded their release. Matilda later discovered that no such law existed, and that he had simply fabricated it in order to save the Jews.<sup>25</sup> In another case, survivor Albert Franko was on a transport to Auschwitz from Piraeus, and was taken off the train thanks to the intervention of Ulkumen, who claimed Franko's wife was a Turkish citizen.<sup>26</sup>



Ülkümen, his wife Mihrinissa Hanım and their children

In one of his last media interviews, Ulkumen reflected: "I went to the commander, General von Kleeman, and asked him to release 42 Turkish citizens, who were Jewish by religion. Where a Turk was married for example, to an Italian, I said for humanitarian reasons that the whole family was Turkish. I succeeded in saving 42 persons.

Not all of them were Turkish. I don't know how many were not Turks. If I could, I would have saved more Jews, but it was beyond my competence. The 42 were released, but the other Jews were conducted to Auschwitz".<sup>27</sup>

Selahattin Ulkumen managed to save approximately 50 Jews, 13 of them Turkish citizens and by intervening with the authorities to claim that the prisoners were of Turkish origin, he clearly acted on his own initiative. In the end, all those on Ulkumen's list were released. The rest, some 1,700, were deported to Auschwitz.<sup>28</sup>

In retaliation for this assistance German planes bombed the Turkish consulate, mortally wounding Mihrinissa Hanım, Selahattin's pregnant wife (she died later in childbirth) and both were deported to Piraeus, on the Greek mainland where he spent the remainder of the war in confinement.



An Israeli postage stamp issued in his honour in 1990

Thanks to the help of the Quincentennial Foundation Vice President, historian Naim Guleryuz, who amassed the necessary testimony from those survivors still living on Rhodes, Ülkümen was declared on 13 December 1989 a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. His name is inscribed on a tree planted at the *Path of the Righteous* and an Israeli postage stamp also issued in his honour in 1990.

Selahattin died in his sleep on July 7, 2003 in Istanbul Turkey at the age of 89.<sup>29</sup>

## 7. Croatia, Bosnia And Herzegovina

After the German invasion of the former Yugoslavia in April 1941, the country was divided between Germany and its allies. The regions of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina were united into a puppet state – the so-called Independent State of Croatia – ruled by the fascist Ustaša movement. The Ustaša immediately embarked on a terror campaign “to purge Croatia of foreign elements” systematically killing Serbs, Jews, and Romanians (Gypsies). The Jews’ plight became more severe as new edicts constantly undermined their legal and economic status. They were made to wear a yellow patch, endure forced labour, and accept other humiliations. The roundup of the Jews of Sarajevo started in August 1941 and continued until the beginning of 1942. The men were sent to Jasenovac, from where only a few returned alive, and the women and children were moved initially to Lobograd, then to Auschwitz, and finally to Djakovo where many died of epidemics. 12,000 of Bosnia’s 14,000 Jews (existing before the war) perished.<sup>30</sup>



### 7.1 The Sarajevo Haggadah

One of the best-known stories of Bosnian involvement in preserving Jewish tradition during World War II involves efforts to safeguard a 600-year-old Jewish manuscript known as the Sarajevo Haggadah (the Haggadah narrates the account of the Exodus from Egypt every Passover).

In 1492, when Spain expelled the country’s Jews, a refugee carried the book to Italy. It was then taken to Bosnia by a rabbi who passed it down through his family until a descendant, Joseph Cohen, sold it to the National Museum in 1894 for 150 Crowns (\$10,000). The museum kept the treasure in a safe until World War II, when the Catholic museum director Mr. Jozo Petrovic and his Muslim colleague Mr. Dervis Korbuc saved the book from a Nazi officer who came to seize it. The two men spirited the book through Nazi checkpoints and carried it to a village in the mountains above Sarajevo, where a Muslim cleric kept it hidden beneath the floor of a mosque until the war ended and returned to the museum.



During Bosnia’s 1992-95 war, Dr. Enver Imanovic, the Muslim museum director and several Serb policemen risked sniper fire to reach the museum, and concealed it in the National Bank safe, where it remained until the end of the war. Bosnia regards the Haggadah as its most important national treasure.<sup>31</sup>

## 7.2 The Incredible Journeys of the Hardaga and the Kavilio Families

When the Germans invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, Sarajevo was bombed by air raids and the synagogue and home of the Kavilio family was destroyed and looted. They were forced to find shelter in the surrounding hillside and whilst attempting to return they were met by a Muslim friend, Mustafa Hardaga, who immediately offered them hospitality to stay at his house.

The Hardagas were observant Muslims who included Mustafa's wife Zejneba, brother Izet and his wife Bachriya and they welcomed the Kavilios as their family. The families stayed together for a short while until Josef was able to move his family to Mostar, an area under Italian control, where Jews were relatively safe. Josef stayed behind to settle his business affairs but unfortunately was arrested and imprisoned by the Ustaša. Because of the heavy snow, the prisoners could not be transferred from Sarajevo to the infamous killing camp of Jasenovac near Zagreb. Instead the prisoners were taken, with their legs chained, to clear the blocked roads and this is where Zejneba saw Joseph and with tears in her eyes brought food to all the prisoners, undisturbed by the danger.

Josef eventually managed to escape and returned to the Hardaga home, where they nursed him back to health, even though the Gestapo headquarters were nearby, and the risk immense. In his testimony Josef described the notices on the walls threatening those who would hide Serbs and Jews with the death penalty. Not wanting to endanger the Hardagas' life further, he decided to flee again to Mostar and join his family.

After September 1943, when the Italian areas came under German occupation, the Kavilio family fled once more to the mountains and joined the partisans. After the war they returned to Sarajevo and again stayed with the Hardagas until they could find a place of their own. The Hardagas returned the jewellery that the Kavilio family had left with them for safekeeping. It was only then that they learned that Zejneba's father, Ahmed Sadik, had rescued the family of Isidur Papo, but was later "denounced, arrested and transported to Jasenovac and executed for having saved Jews".<sup>32</sup> His burial site remains unknown.

The Kavilio family eventually emigrated to Israel and in 1984 they asked Yad Vashem to recognize the Hardaga family and Ahmed Sadik as Righteous Among the Nations. A year later, Zejneba Hardaga came to Israel and a tree was planted by her mother in honour of her family's courage and humanity.



“The tree planted on behalf of the Hardaga family in Yad Vashem”

“The story did not end there. Fifty years after the Holocaust, Sarajevo came under attack from Serbian forces. With the assistance of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Yad Vashem appealed to the President of Bosnia to permit the Zejneba family to come to Israel. Permission was granted in February 1994. The Hardagas who had sheltered a Jewish family during the darkest period in Jewish history, were now themselves rescued by the State of Israel in their time of distress and Sarah (now Pecanac) began working for Yad Vashem, where the family story is exhibited”.<sup>33</sup>

### 7.3 Zekira Besrevic and Roza Sober Dragoje Save the Albahari Family in Sarajevo



Zejneba at the Hall of Remembrance, Yad Vashem 1985

On the eve of the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, two young women, Roza Sober, a Christian of 19, and Zekira Besrević, a Muslim of about 20 were working in a beauty parlour owned by a Sarajevo Jew, Mordo Albahari. His niece, Gracija Kamihi (later Džamonja), was also an apprentice in the establishment.

One night during the round up (*Aktion*) and deportations some members of the Kamihi family were taken but Gracija and Mordo succeeded in evading the troops by hiding in their apartment. Hearing about the *Aktion*, Roza and Zekira rushed to the Albahari home to see if they could help. They saw Gracija’s family being taken away, but Gracija’s mother managed to inform them that they were upstairs. The two young women

waited until the Ustaša unit had left and then ran upstairs to rescue Gracija and her uncle and take them to their home.

In the wake of a proclamation by the authorities allowing citizens to take over Jewish businesses, Zekira asked for and obtained Albahiri's beauty parlour and she and Roza became the establishment's new managers. They immediately brought Gracija and her uncle to the shop where they hid them by day, and at night they remained free to move about the premises and eat the food brought to them by the two young women. This arrangement lasted several months, until Mordo obtained "Aryan" papers enabling him and Gracija to move to Mostar, which was under Italian occupation. From Mostar they sent false papers for Gracija's mother and her ten-year-old brother and they all reached the island of Rab, which was under Italian control but following the German occupation in September 1943, they joined Tito's partisans.

Gracija wrote in the late 1990s that "Roza Sober-Dragoje did everything possible to rescue all of us, including her boyfriend, with whom she fought alongside and later married; he too had fled Sarajevo with Roza's assistance".

On May 28, 2000, Yad Vashem recognized Roza Sober-Dragoje and Zekira Besrević as Righteous Among the Nations.<sup>34</sup>



Zekira Besrevic



Roza Sober Dragoje

## 8. Conclusion

*“The most surprising story of all is why, more than sixty years after the end of the war, so few people - Arab and Jew - want this story told”<sup>35</sup>*

Whilst we have been indebted to the documented testimonies found at Yad Vashem, it has been the fortitude and determined research undertaken by Robert Satloff, that has provided the inspirational source material for this booklet.

Satloff’s quintessential and unique work, *Among The Righteous*, has provided a starting point in documenting the virtuous acts of those individuals who were driven by their faith in Islam and who stood for truth and justice in the protection of the persecuted and the weak against the tyranny of evil. It provides points of potential dialogue and mutual respect and this book builds on that work. It is essential that others take up this mantle and continue to further investigate and shine a light on the personal stories of other people who stood for the protection of their fellow Jewish citizens.

It is only perhaps since the publication of this book and the honour bestowed on these righteous Muslims that we have begun to take seriously the specific challenges that this historical evidence has now made available. “The book is therefore an essential addition to our understanding of this darkest period of the 20th Century and it is hoped the historical evidence Satloff has uncovered will help launch a new kind of dialogue between Arabs and Jews.”

36

“The stories of rescuers of all faiths and ethnicities must therefore be told. Not only is their courage part of the history of the Holocaust but it also gives the lie to bystanders’ claims that nothing could have been done. These stories should be uncovered for the sake of history and not (just) for the purposes of changing irrational attitudes.”

37

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean of the Wiesenthal Centre, has urged that the conduct of these Muslim heroes and other Muslims who believed in social justice and who protected the lives of non-Muslims, become “part of both the Jewish and Arab (Muslim) collective memories.” However, whilst they may act as an impediment to those who denigrate and deny the Holocaust, the valour and actions of, Selahattin Ülkümen, Ali Sheqer Pashkaj, Mustafa and Zejneba Hardaga, Destan and Lime Balla, Zekira Besrevic and Roza Dragoje and all the other “righteous” should send a different message. Any denial repudiates the heroism of the righteous and every other human being, regardless of religion or creed, who decided that they could not stand by passively whilst their neighbours were being systematically exterminated. As a substitute to propagating hate, intolerance and injustice wherever it is found in the world, we should all learn from those righteous individuals who in humility, diplomacy and maturity followed their true faith and conviction and saved other souls.

These righteous Muslim men and women should be given a legacy of respect and honour by all communities who need to hear these inspiring histories. It is also a fact that they were driven by their belief in Islam that is grounded within the protection of human life and whose teachings through the Quran and the Hadith supported their courage to protect their fellow human beings.

It is the aim and the hope that this booklet and the stories it contains can become a catalyst to initiate dialogue and understanding in order to implement the adage, "Peace at Home, Peace in the World".<sup>38</sup>

## 9. And Finally - A Holocaust Museum in Palestine



Khaled Kassab Mahameed

A unique museum exists in Nazareth, in a house not far from Mary's Well, called The Arab Institute for Holocaust Research and Education.

Founded by its curator, Muslim Lawyer Khaled Mahameed, this unique museum is believed to be the first-ever Arab Holocaust museum, and was opened with the intention of raising awareness of past Jewish suffering in the eyes of Palestinians through historical photographs and Arabic-language educational materials. Mahameed originally purchased about 80 photographs at a cost of 20,000 shekels (about £3,500) with his own money with the aim of creating a greater understanding between the faiths, eventually leading (he hopes) to establishing peace and equality in the region.

He initially wrote an explanatory booklet in Arabic printing some 2,000 copies, containing explicit photographs of the horrors of the Holocaust.



“Israel was established in Palestine on the ashes of the Holocaust”, he said. “Understanding this is extremely important... and if I as an Arab do not understand that, I have an error in my calculations and a point of view that will lead to wrong conclusions. Jews in Israel and elsewhere still feel persecuted as a result of their history, and this concern for their personal security still dictates the policies of Israeli governments in all matters. Anyone who wants to influence policy in Israel has to learn about it, because it is the basis of international policies regarding Israel and the region”, he continued. Mahameed maintains that “The Holocaust is at the heart of the Arab and Palestinian tragedy....[and a] greater understanding by Arabs generally of the Holocaust and its lessons would also have an effect on world leaders who until now have refrained from putting pressure on Israel to conform to democratic norms regarding the Arab Palestinian community.” According to Mahameed, “If we, as Palestinian Arabs, can dissipate these concerns and show understanding over what happened it will help create the climate for real dialogue in which Israeli Jews and especially decision-makers will be able to have a greater understanding of the suffering of Palestinians. This, in turn, would hopefully lead towards a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and an end to discriminatory policies towards Palestinians and the acceptance that they deserve equal rights”.<sup>39</sup>

**This booklet, designed to promote peace and understanding, is dedicated to those Righteous Muslims and to those individuals like Khaleed Mahameed who are driven by social justice and in ensuring equality and the protection of all people.**

Fiyaz Mughal OBE and Esmond Rosen

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## **Muslim Righteous Among the Nations Honoured by Yad Vashem as of January 1, 2009**

### **Albania**

1987: Veseli, Vesel & Fatima; son Refik

1991: Hoxha, Shaban & Siavet; son Hilmi: Orgocka, Paskal & Lefkothea

1992: Balla, Destan & Lima :Kadiu, Besim & Aishe: Budo, Shyqyri & Xhemile: Ciftia Agosti & Gysepin; Margerita, Cesarina, Gjovona: Lekatari, Mihal : Mece, Suleiman & Zenepe: Muasil, Dulaj: Myrto, Abdulla & Tje: Nosi, Vasil & Kelkira; brother. Nos; sister Adelina: Hoxha, Nuro: Qoqja, Beqir: Ruli, Metin Aziz & Shpresa: Shkurti, Pietro & Magdalena: Toptani, Atif & Ganimet: Xhyheri, Qamil & Hanume:

1993: Borici, Shaqir & Qamile; daughter Bahrije: Kona, Vasil & Kristina: Myrto, Shyqyri: Sheko, Stavro & Nora: Shpuza, Esheref:

1994: Hoti, Hasan, his sister Fife Gjylbegu; Cele & Vehbi:

1995: Kasapi, Zyrha; son Hamdi:

1996: Bicaku, Mufail; son Niazi:

1997: Pilku, Njazi & Liza:

1999: Kilica, Mikel: Zyma, Bessim & Higmat:

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Mustafa & Zejneba (Susic) Izet & Bachriya Hardaga; Ahmed Sadik,

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Selahattin Ülkümen, 1989

## **Comments and Statements By Patrons of Faith Matters**

“This is a remarkable book, which tells stories too little known and far too little understood. What these stories show is that amongst Muslims, who, like others, often turned a blind eye to what was happening in the Holocaust, there were remarkable and brave and honourable people. They saved Jews, and did so in the name of their Muslim faith and their code of honour (Besa). This book deserves to be studied in mosques and synagogues, and celebrated in interfaith activities worldwide.”

***Baroness Julia Neuberger DBE***

“This is a very important, and very timely, publication. It tells of acts of great courage and selflessness on the part of many Muslims, made in the name of their Jewish neighbours during the horrors of the Holocaust. These stories are an important part of the history of World War II, and will serve to strengthen the relationship that exists between Muslims and Jews. At a time when there is much religious tension in the world, these stories will also encourage further social cohesion between different communities throughout Britain and across the globe; they are a shining example of how two different groups can come together during one of the darkest periods of modern history for the good of mankind. Much has been written about the Muslim community in recent times. Too much emphasis has been placed on differences rather than how the communities have worked together. It is worth spelling this out and this Faith Matters booklet has done precisely that.”

***Lord Dholakia of Waltham Brooks OBE DL***



## A Final Word

'Heroism impresses us because it is out of the ordinary and unpredictable. But it is worth learning about because it is also performed by ordinary people and entirely self-evident. This booklet throws light on a little considered corner of the vast and still incomprehensible crime that was the Shoah. As we all know, most of the Shoah was carried out against a backdrop of centuries of contempt for Jews taught by Christian authorities. Many argue that this is why it was so easy for the particularly pernicious new racist anti-Semitism to take root in Europe.

But what of the experience of Jews living in Muslim lands, amongst Muslims? There too there had been some teaching of contempt, but also of greater tolerance and co-existence, and it is generally agreed that most of the time in most places Jews fared better under Muslims than Christians, at least until the twentieth century.

But most of the personal wickedness of the Shoah was not driven by deep ideology and theological convictions, but on small acts of viciousness, lack of empathy, fear, sadism, ignorance, self-seeking and cowardice. In the middle of all of this shine out (too few) heroes, who did the right thing, almost, from their own words, because they couldn't see any alternative if they wanted to live with themselves. Some of these were Muslims in Muslim lands.

Sadly, at the beginning of the 21st century, too many have learnt to assume that there must be enmity between Jews and Muslims, and some too have lost sight of the rich teachings of Islam concerning responsibility and care for others, high moral courage and the demand of a pure and rigorous religion for high nobility of action.

So the contents of this booklet might, regrettably, come as a surprise to some. I hope too though the fact of the surprise will also come as a cause for reflection. How did we get to this state, where some might have thought that adherents to a great force for moral good in the world would not act at least as nobly as their Christian counterparts when put to the test?

That they did is attested to here in these accounts and all should know it. That it was all too few is as true in Muslim lands as it was elsewhere, but that is because most people are ordinary and ordinary is not impressive. But these described here were ordinary too and they chose to act extraordinarily for which they earn our gratitude, not just for the people they saved but for saving our faith in human nature and challenging any easy assumptions we might want to make about this or that group, either negative or positive.

Each person - you and me too - finds themselves from moment to moment faced with moral challenges (thank God, for most of us they are small and seem fairly

inconsequential in the great scheme of things). These noble Muslims are brought back to us from across the decades and across the continent to remind us of what we should and must be capable of. They challenge our prejudices and they challenge our possibilities.

**Clive A Lawton** JP, BA, MA, MEd, MSc, Cert Ed, ADB(Ed)

Jewish Educationalist and specialist on Muslim and Jewish interfaith relations



This booklet has been developed by Faith Matters and the core aims of the Organisation are to provide:

- Social programmes based on the themes of interfaith, conflict resolution and community cohesion. Faith Matters works within the UK and within the Middle East on such programmes.
- Platforms where historical similarities are used as the glue to try to get faith communities to try to understand each others perspectives.
- Social programmes utilising new technologies which engage with faith communities within the UK and within the Middle East.

### **Muslim / Jewish Programmes**

Faith Matters ran the Bridging Beliefs programme in 2007 which took a Muslim survivor of the killing and murder camps run by Serbs in Bosnia during 1992-1995 on a tour of the UK with a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. This programme was targeted at university campuses. Faith Matters has also been involved in Imam and Rabbi dialogue discussions and works towards building platforms for Muslim and Jewish engagement in the UK and within the Middle East.

These are just a few of the numerous faith related social dialogue programmes that the Organisation has put together and co-ordinated.

### **Patrons of Faith Matters**

These include:

- Lord Navnit Dholakia OBE,
- Baroness Julia Neuberger DBE,
- The Rt Hon. Lord Raymond Hylton

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*The Holocaust was a unique catastrophe that virtually wiped out European Jewry and there are many similarities between the Holocaust and genocides today, like those heinous crimes committed against Muslims in Bosnia from 1992-1995. Yet, for all of its horrors, it also had its heroes and this booklet celebrates those noble Muslims who saved Jewish lives during the Second World War.*



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