

# ASYLEES AND REFUGEES # INTERNATIONAL

## Remembering Algeria's Jewish Refugees – 50 Years Later

*April 16, 2017*

This June marks the 50th anniversary of the Evian Accord, the agreement recognizing Algeria's independence from France. Since Roman times, Algeria was home to a large **Jewish community**. During the French colonial period, Jews were granted French citizenship. After independence, however, Algeria denied citizenship to its Jewish population and most of the country's 140,000 Jews left for France. By 2004, there were less than 100 Jews remaining in Algeria, and most of those fled during the **civil war** (1991-2002) when the Armed Islamic Group threatened to exterminate them.

I had an opportunity to visit Algeria in 2001. I traveled with an **Ibadite Muslim** friend who is from the **M'Zab Valley**, an oasis in the Sahara, about 500 km south of Algiers. The principal city of the M'Zab Valley is Ghardaia, which a French philosopher described as a "Cubist painting beautifully constructed" (maybe I am a bit more pedantic, but to



Ghardaia

me it looks like the video game Q\*bert). There, I visited an old abandoned synagogue and the Jewish graveyard. As we are approaching the 50th anniversary of the Evian Accord, I thought I would share some photos and facts about the Jewish community of Ghardaia.

As best as we know, Jews arrived in Ghardaia in two waves. The city's original Jews arrived in the 13th or 14th century, a few hundred years after the town was founded. The Jews were invited to the M'Zab to work as jewelers and smiths, professions traditionally avoided by the local Muslims. Legend tells of four families who came to the desert town from Djerba, an island off the coast of Tunisia. The Jews of Djerba trace their lineage back to Biblical times.

The second group arrived in the late 15th century. At the time, an extremist Muslim movement (possibly fueled by the failure of Islam in Spain) attacked and expelled Jewish communities in Morocco. Some Jews fled to Ghardaia. They joined the existing community, and over time, the two groups merged together.



Abandoned Synagogue in Ghardaia

The Jews of Ghardaia lived in relative harmony with their neighbors until the mid-20th century. By then, Algeria was controlled by France, and the population of Ghardaia was divided between Ibadite Muslims (who originally settled the M'Zab Valley), Jews, and Sunni

Muslims. When the war of independence began in 1954, the situation for the Jews of Algeria deteriorated, and by June 1962, all the Jews of Ghardaia had been forced to seek refuge abroad.

Just as this 800-year chapter of Jewish history was drawing to a close, two anthropologists arrived on the scene, hoping to study genetic traits of the Jewish people there. Instead, they documented the final years and days of Ghardaia's Jews. The anthropologists, Lloyd Cabot Briggs and Norina Lami Guede, wrote up their observations in an amazing (and obscure) paper called "No More Forever: A Saharan Jewish Town." The

paper begins: "This book is the record of a people who are gone." Recalling their own departure, through newly established rebel checkpoints in the now independent Algeria, Briggs and Guede write:

The notebooks and pictures that we carried with us were the only coherent record that remained of a curiously distinctive way of life which had gone on for centuries and came suddenly to an end, leaving behind it only empty houses and an abandoned cemetery in the desert.

It so happened that I was visiting Algeria during Passover, and so I was particularly keen to find other Jews, or at least visit Jewish sites. With the help of several friends, I was able to visit the old synagogue of Ghardaia and the Jewish graveyard.



The same synagogue, circa 1958

The synagogue had been empty for almost 40 years when I visited, and it was in bad shape. A man lived there, and he allowed us to visit for a few minutes. I took some pictures, which you can see here, and I said a prayer. It was quite moving to pray in that abandoned temple, where (I assume) no Jew had prayed for almost 40 years.

The synagogue was a typical Sephardic design, with blue and white walls, and numerous thick columns. A wooden bimah (stage) would have formed the center piece of the room, but it was gone. Parts of the domed roof had collapsed, covering the floor with piles of stone and mortar. The ceiling above the women's section had fallen in, filling the balcony with rubble. A few chains hung from the ceiling. At one time they held lamps with an eternal flame, long since extinguished. Two Stars of David were all that remained to confirm that we were in a synagogue.

After visiting the synagogue, we walked to the Jewish cemetery, which is a mile or two outside the town. It's difficult to get a sense for the size of the graveyard, as it blends perfectly with the rocky surroundings. It was here,



in 1962, that the last Jews of Ghardaia buried their old prayer books, before departing their oasis homes forever (in Jewish tradition, books containing the name of G-d are buried, not thrown away). The oldest dated grave is from 1749 (5509 in the Jewish calendar), but some graves are probably centuries older. Members of the community used to come to a small grotto here to light candles and pray for assistance from their ancestors. Women who reached menopause came here to pray for one more male child. I also said a prayer at the graveyard and I placed stones on some of the graves (it is a Jewish tradition to place stones on the graves).

Another view of the  
synagogue.



The Jewish cemetery near Ghardaia

The last Jews of Ghardaia left Algeria in 1962. They fled to France and most of them are still there. All in all, over **800,000 Middle Eastern Jews** were forced to flee their homes between 1948 (the founding of the state of Israel) and the 1970's. Like the Jews of

Ghardaia, they came from communities that had existed for centuries (and in some cases millennium). Also like the Jews of Ghardaia, they lost most of their property and were lucky to escape with their lives. Having seen a bit of this history makes me lament the loss of these ancient and diverse communities, but it also reminds me of the importance of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution.

For more information about the Jews of Ghardaia, take a look at [Jews of the Sahara](#) by Ronald L. Nagel.

Algeria

Jews

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**MARINA**

REPLY

*March 9, 2015*

Algerian Jews were not benefactors of French colonialism, they were the victims.

I don't see emancipation in forced assimilation to French culture. France and in particular French Jews colonised Algerian Jews and it was welcomed with rioting, Algerian Jews faced cultural genocide!

How about the Jews of the Mزاب? They were treated worse than Muslims were by the French.

France had the chance to give them nationality and rights. Why wait until 1961? And most ended up in Israel, not France. You need to open a history and stop being an apologist for French colonialism.



**SEPHARDIC PRINCESS**

**REPLY**

*May 23, 2014*

To Omar Safi: No, my family didn't leave willingly. It broke their heart to leave their beloved country.

May the people of the Earth live in peace with each other.



**OMAR SAFI**

**REPLY**

*February 7, 2014*

I would like to bring to your attention that the Jews left Algeria willingly, first they opposed the Algerian revolution standing with the brutal french against the people who offered them refuge. so when independence came, the jews considering themselves french left Algeria with the French. you can ask the famous Derida the deconstructionist or any jews who lived in Algeria and now he is in france.



**JASON DZUBOW**

**REPLY**

*February 7, 2014*

You are correct that the Algerian Jews generally sides with the French, but the reason for that is their second-class status prior to French rule (although generally in Algeria, Jews and Muslims seemed to get along pretty well compared to many places). After the Evian accord, the new Algerian government stripped Jews of citizenship. Also, the FLN had a history of targeting Jews during the Revolution. So to say that the Jews left

“voluntarily” is false. This is particularly true for the Jews I am writing about – in the Mzab – who were not really players on either side during the Revolution, but who had to flee because they feared being attacked.



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August 22, 2012

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