

U.S.

# Distinctive Mission for Muslims' Conference: Remembering the Holocaust

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On Religion

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One afternoon this week, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran addressed the United Nations General Assembly, once again casting doubt that the Holocaust had occurred. Almost exactly 24 hours earlier, an otherwise obscure college student in Morocco named Elmehdi Boudra was convening a conference devoted not to denying the Holocaust but to remembering it.

Mr. Ahmadinejad's speech, not surprisingly, made major news around the world, as had his similar pronouncements in earlier years and his Tehran convention of Holocaust deniers. Mr. Boudra's conference, meanwhile, attracted virtually no media attention of any kind.

Yet it should have been trumpeted, all the more for its coincidental timing. While Holocaust denial or denigration in the Muslim world is a sadly familiar phenomenon, hardly news at all, the conference put together by Mr. Boudra and several dozen classmates, all of them Muslim, may well have been the first of its kind in an Arab or Muslim nation, and a sign of historical truth triumphing over conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic dogma.

The conference — held at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, a town in the Atlas Mountains about two hours south of Rabat — brought together Holocaust scholars and survivors, leaders of Morocco's Jewish community and American

Jewish and Moroccan Muslim students. Its twin mandates were to teach about the extermination of European Jewry and to pay homage to the courage of Morocco's wartime king, Mohammed V, in resisting the orders of the Vichy French occupation government to round up and turn over Jews for internment and probable death.

Uncommonly among Arab and Muslim nations, Morocco has accepted the reality of the Holocaust, rather than either dismissing it outright or portraying it as a European crime for which those countries paid the price in the form of Israel's creation. Partly, no doubt, because of Mohammed V's stand against the Vichy regime, the current king, Mohammed VI, called in a 2009 proclamation for "an exhaustive and faithful reading of the history of this period" as part of "the duty of remembrance dictated by the Shoah."

Still, the recent conference would never have occurred without Mr. Boudra. Now 24 and majoring in political science, Mr. Boudra grew up after much of Morocco's Jewish population had moved to France or Israel. But he heard from his grandmother about her childhood in the Jewish quarter of Casablanca, and a grandfather still had Jewish neighbors in his apartment house.

Those few personal connections kindled a broader curiosity. That curiosity ultimately led Mr. Boudra to study with Simon Levy, a scholar who directs the Museum of Moroccan Judaism of Casablanca, and to read such classic Holocaust memoirs as "If This Is a Man" by Primo Levi and the diary of Anne Frank.

"What upsets me about this subject," Mr. Boudra wrote in an e-mail message last week, "is some people's claims that the Holocaust never took place. It is simply absurd to hear such claims in the light of the historical evidence the world has today."

As a student at Al Akhawayn, an elite university with an international orientation, Mr. Boudra and several dozen friends formed a club around their shared interest in Morocco's Jewish culture and heritage. They named it Mimouna, after the holiday that Moroccan Jews celebrate on the final day of Passover.

Through Mimouna and Al Akhawayn, Mr. Boudra met another barrier-breaker named Peter Geffen. The descendant of a distinguished rabbinic family, Mr. Geffen

had founded a Jewish day school in New York and an organization, Kivunim, that provided students and teachers with study and travel in Jewish communities around the world.

Last December, Mr. Geffen took 60 Kivunim participants to Ifrane to meet with the Mimouna Club. As the session ended, Mr. Boudra pulled him aside to say that the club wanted to hold a Holocaust conference and to ask if Mr. Geffen could help.

“The whole power of it is that it was their idea,” Mr. Geffen said in a recent interview, recalling the conversation. “This is before the Arab Spring, and here’s a group of Muslim students, 20, 21 years old, on an Arab campus in the Arab world. And to have an intuitive recognition that opening the discussion in the face of widespread Holocaust denial is a major human step forward.”

In the intervening months, Mr. Geffen and Mr. Boudra worked both separately and together to assemble financial support, formal sponsorship and a schedule, which included scholarly presentations, panel discussions, first-person testimony, museum visits, a concert of Moroccan Jewish music and scrupulously kosher meals.

So it was that on Sept. 21, the eminent Holocaust historian Michael Berenbaum spoke of the Jewish genocide in Europe, the tide that Mohammed V succeeded in holding back in his nation. An 80-year-old survivor, Elisabeth Citron, recounted her childhood in Romania and Hungary — wearing the yellow star, being deloused with gasoline in front of a laughing first-grade class, being deported to Birkenau, watching the daily selection of inmates for the gas chambers and ovens.

“I don’t expect any of you to understand how today I’m here standing in front of you,” Ms. Citron said. “I have no clue why I am here.” By which, of course, she meant alive.

For their part, the Moroccan students asked questions and got answers. Were there any German Jews powerful enough to intercede with the Nazis? Was propaganda the way the Nazis justified the Holocaust to non-Jews? Why hasn’t Mohammed V been listed among the righteous gentiles in the Holocaust museum

of Yad Vashem?

At one point, a Jewish adviser to the current king, Andre Azoulay, addressed Mr. Boudra and the Mimouna Club directly. Mr. Azoulay was born in 1941, during the Vichy occupation, which made him a half-century older than the students. To make sure all the visitors, too, would understand him, he switched from French into English.

“You have decided by yourself,” he said. “No one asked you to do it. It was your decision, your vision, your commitment.” He mentioned the significance of naming the club for Mimouna with its connection to the Exodus. “You Muslim students decided to be identified with our liberation,” he said. “It’s not something usual.”

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