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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Honoring All Who Saved Jews - “So far, however, Abdul Wahab has been denied the recognition he deserves”

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IN December 1942, when I was 13 years old, German troops occupied my hometown. Within days, our house was commandeered as an officers' mess hall. I soon had a yellow star on my dress, setting me apart from many of my childhood friends. The men of our family were ordered into forced labor. My happy life had vanished.

Luckily, an influential local man knew of our difficult straits and generously offered his protection. One night, he ferried the women, children and old men in our family to a farm he owned about 20 miles outside of town. There, he said, we would be safe. Though the stables he provided us for lodging were modest, with just a drape across the door to protect against the elements, we were relieved to be behind the thick, high walls of his property. We were deeply grateful.

As luck would have it, however, a German unit arrived in the area not long after we did. Our host told us to get rid of our yellow stars, stay inside the farm walls and keep far away from the main house. He had his own strategy for dealing with the Germans. A bon vivant and world traveler, he invited German officers for evenings filled with food and drink. While nearly two dozen of us were hiding in one part of the farm, he protected himself from the prying eyes of the Germans by entertaining them on the other side of the farm.

Our host's strategy worked well, until the night a couple of drunken German officers wandered away from the main house.

In the courtyard outside the stables, they started banging on the courtyard door and shouting, “We know you are Jews and we're coming to get you!”

My grandmother started screaming “Cachez les filles!” — “Hide the girls!” I remember being shoved under the bed, trembling and sobbing as I tried to hide under a blanket.

At that moment of unspeakable fear, as our hearts pounded and tears poured from our eyes, a guardian angel came to the rescue. Out of nowhere, our host appeared. A strong, powerful man who projected authority and commanded respect, he stopped the Germans and managed to lead them away.

The next day, our host came to the stables. We rushed to express our thanks to him, but he was more eager to apologize to us. He said he was sorry that we had to face the terrifying ordeal of the Germans' threats, expressed relief that he had intervened in time to prevent a horrible tragedy, and promised that it would never happen again. We never found out how he fulfilled his promise — perhaps he bribed the Germans — but he did. We passed the rest of the German occupation at our

host's farm, without incident.

During the horrors of the Holocaust, non-Jews saved many thousands of Jews from death and depravity at the hands of Germans and their allies. Yad Vashem, Israel's official Holocaust memorial museum, has recognized more than 23,000 of these brave men and women as "The Righteous Among the Nations." Our family's rescuer deserves to be among that number. And in his case, the impact of recognition would have powerful reverberations, striking a blow against Holocaust denial in a part of the world where such denial is widespread.

That is because my hometown is Mahdia, on the eastern shore of Tunisia, and our rescuer, Khaled Abdul Wahab, was an Arab Muslim. (He passed away in 1997.)

So far, however, Abdul Wahab has been denied the recognition he deserves. Nearly five years ago, in January 2007, the Department of the Righteous at Yad Vashem nominated him to be a "righteous," the first Arab ever to be formally considered for this honor. This nomination was based on witness testimony from my late sister, Anny Boukris. In March of that year, however, the official Commission for the Designation of the Righteous, a body presided over by a retired Israeli judge and created by Israeli law to decide who merits recognition as a "righteous," voted to reject the nomination. That decision was kept secret for two years.

In 2010, that same jurist, Justice Jacob Tuerkel, sent the Abdul Wahab file back to the commission for a second review. This time, the case was bolstered by two fresh testimonies — a video interview of my cousin Edmee Masliah, who was with me at the farm and now lives outside Paris, and a notarized letter I wrote recounting my own experience. Yad Vashem now had three firsthand accounts of the story. But to my complete dismay, the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous once again voted to reject the nomination. Abdul Wahab was a noble man, I was told by Yad Vashem, but his actions did not rise to the statutory level required to merit the "righteous" designation — that is, he didn't "risk his life" to save Jewish lives.

While that may be the wording of the law, I am told by experts that Abdul Wahab would not be the first rescuer of Jews not to have suffered physical harm, let alone life-threatening danger. Many in France who have won that designation were honored because they acted to save Jews without knowing for sure what fate would await them if they were caught. In addition, some of the famous diplomats honored as righteous were never arrested, injured or threatened with death for aiding Jews.

I refuse to believe that Yad Vashem has one standard for "righteous" in Europe and another for "righteous" who performed their sacred duty on the other side of the Mediterranean, in an Arab country.

Sixty-nine years after pinning a yellow star to my chest in my native land, I know that I was able to enjoy a long, full life because Abdul Wahab confronted evil and saved me, as he saved other fortunate members of my family. I hope that Yad Vashem reconsiders his case before no one is left to tell his story.

Eva Weisel

P.S.

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