

The Memory of War and the Historical Memory of Vichy Work Camps in Tunisia through Albert Memmi's *The Pillar of Salt*

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Abstract

The effects of Vichy anti-Jewish laws in North Africa were particularly devastating in Tunisia. Approximately 5,000 Tunisian Jewish men were detained and sent to forced labor camps run by the Germans and the Italians. The present paper analyzes Albert Memmi's descriptions in his 1953 novel, *The Pillar of Salt*, of arbitrary arrests, spoliations, raids, ransoming, and requisitions for forced labor in work camps. A Tunisian Jew, Memmi included his recollections of a labor camp in the final part of his novel. The book gives a precise idea of the climate established by the Nazis and its disastrous consequences for Tunisian Jews. Internees were given unnecessary chores, humiliated, and provoked to retributive behavior. Hygiene, food, and living conditions were deplorable.

Memmi attempted to present the historical memory of Tunisian Jews basing on his own experience of the camp system, his escape with a group of friends, and the day when fighting commenced. As an author, Memmi became aware of the intertwinement existing between the individual and the collective memory of Tunisian Jews under the German occupation.

Introduction

In 1881, Tunisia became a French Protectorate. During its colonial period, Tunisia was home to French colonizers, Italians, other Europeans, and a minority of Jews living among Tunisian Muslims. After Nazi Germany occupied France in 1940, the Pétain government started to implement anti-Semitic laws in its colonies. Detention camps were opened in Algeria, and, on a smaller scale, in Morocco. The effects of the Vichy anti-Jewish laws in North Africa were particularly devastating in Tunisia, which was occupied by both the German and Italian armies for six months. In Tunisia, labor and detention camps were overseen by the French, Germans, and Italians. Following the Allied landings in North Africa, the German campaign in North Africa led to the occupation of Tunisia from 9 November 1942 to 7 May 1943. The Nazis constructed over 20 labor camps during their six-month occupation. The German Army and the SS subjected Jews to raids, ransoming, and requisitions for forced labor. Of a community of about 100,000 people (Avrahami, 2016, p. 273), approximately 5,000 Tunisian Jewish men were detained or conscripted for forced labor.

The present paper analyzes the descriptions of arbitrary arrests, spoliation, and forced labor in camps given in Albert Memmi's 1953 novel, *The Pillar of Salt*. In the concluding chapters of the book, Memmi drew on his experience, as a young man, of one such German-controlled camp in Tunisia. The article looks at how the book was intimately involved with the historical events and social reality of the time, for in it Memmi, referencing his period of detention and subsequent escape, attempted a presentation of the historical memory of Tunisian Jews.

In order to consider the theoretical framework of historical, individual, and common memory, and how they intertwine, I will first outline my understanding of the concepts of "history" and "memory." As Brittney A. Bos states, "More than a simple chronological outline of events in the past, history is imbedded with the ideas and assumptions of those who record/ed them... At a basic level, 'memory' is what is remembered, both collectively and individually, about an event in the past." Bos adds, "[Not only has] [i]ncreasing attention to 'memory' [...] contributed to the transformation of the study of history, [but m]emory itself adds a significant layer of personal recollection to history and calls into question the often unquestioned 'truthfulness' of historical events" (Bos, 2011, paragraph 6).

1 Between History and Memory (Nora, 2009, p. 7).

The root of historical memory are individual memories and recollections. While oral history focuses on the narrator's story, agency, and representation, historical memory shifts the focus from the story and "questions how the recollection itself is formed and constructed. It considers issues surrounding not only individual memories, but collective memory and social memory formed within groups" (Bos, 2011, paragraph 7). Reflecting on the contrast between various forms of memory in history, Crane underlines that historical memory "begins when social traditions are broken and living contact with the past has been lost; all that remains are fragments as artifacts" (Crane, 1997, p. 1377).

Historical memory has the added dimension of providing a unique understanding of the construction of history, memories, and recollections: "The telling of one's own story or history is empowering for the narrator [in our case, Alexandre, the protagonist/Memmi, the writer] who has the chance to not only recount their own version of history, but have their life's experiences legitimized and recognized by a larger audience" (Bos, 2011, paragraph 10). Individual histories (like that of Alexandre) are significant additions to the historical record. Furthermore, as illustrated in the novel, "autobiographical writing, a seeming act of individual memory formation, is strongly socially mediated and could be considered as an act of collective memory formation" (Anastasio et al., 2012, p. 9). After all, "[l]ived experience and collective memory 'interpenetrate' each other through autobiography" (Crane, 1997, p. 1377) and, in the case of Memmi, through his self-conscious memory.

As for common memory, it "tends to restore or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance" (Friedlander, cited in Young, 1998, p. 666). Similarly to the memory of the Holocaust, the common memory of the labor camps is "haunted by that which it necessarily leaves unstated" (Young, 1998, p. 667). Friedlander's emphasis on common memory calls for a new historiography which integrates "the contingent truths of the historian's narrative and the fact of the victims' memory" (Friedlander, cited in Young, 1998, p. 668).

The three levels of memory bring into discussion the validity of retrospective memory as historical evidence. Memory is undoubtedly prone to distortion and forgetfulness, however "individual memories can provide crucial witness to the experience of a whole generation" (Thompson, 2009, p. iii).

How did the publication of the *The Pillar of Salt* help foster and thereafter strengthen the development of historical memory? And what was the significance of this specific period for the author?

Various anti-Jewish measures were introduced in Tunisia already before the German occupation. For example, on 18 December 1940 the Vichy regime excluded Tunisian Jews from administrative positions. In neighboring Algeria, the repeal of the Crémieux Decree on 7 October 1940 resulted in Jews losing their French citizenship and again becoming “natives.” Other steps taken in Algeria and Tunisia included the dismissal of Jewish civil servants, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and journalists. In June 1941, the restrictions were extended to professions in real estate, commerce and the gaming sector. In addition, a *numerus clausus* was applied to Jewish students. In several cities, communities organized themselves and, harnessing the skills of laid-off Jewish teachers, opened their own schools in order to provide education to children.

Some efforts were made both by local French colonial officials, particularly by the Resident General, Admiral Jean-Pierre Estéva, and the Tunisian ruler, Sidi Muhammad Munsif Bey, to somehow limit the application of anti-Semitic laws, especially as both native Tunisian and European Jews were affected. Until March 1942, both Estéva and the Bey were able to postpone the implementation of major anti-Jewish decrees, such as laws authorizing the seizure of Jewish properties. New legislation introduced in the spring of 1942 severely curtailed the professional and economic activities of all Jews in Tunisia, however these measures, too, were not immediately enforced.

The situation changed abruptly in November 1942. When General Rommel was defeated at the Battle of Al-Alamein, he demanded that Tunisia be occupied to protect the German retreat from the Allied troops that subsequently landed in North Africa. The latter began advancing upon Axis-occupied Tunisia, and fighting broke out during the winter of 1942/1943. Thus, Tunisia was occupied by German and Italian troops, and this development posed a great danger not only to Tunisian Jews but also to Jews of any nationality who were residing in the country.

The Germans set up headquarters in Tunis and in the region of Nabeul along the Mediterranean coast. In the capital, they immediately began to round up Tunisian Jews from the *hara* (the Jewish ghetto in Tunis) and the central synagogue not far from Albert Memmi's home. Schools of the Alliance Israélite were also targeted. The Jewish community in Tunis was forced to provide the German Army with young men for labor, and in exchange Jewish women, children, and the elderly were spared. The Gestapo seized private and communal property, imposed collective fines, and took Jewish hostages as “security” for the pledge to form a labor force. Members of the Jewish community in Tunisia, already discriminated and humiliated, were rounded up and, following a process of selection, sent to labor camps where living conditions were similar to those in concentration camps. In December 1942, 3,585 Jews were sent

to forced labor camps (Oliel, 2013), the most infamous of which were Gafsa, Le Kef, TbourSouk and Bizerte. It is in this context that Albert Memmi recalled his teenage years.

Memories of War through *The Pillar of Salt*

Born in 1920 in Tunis, the eldest of eight children of Marguerite Sarfati and François Memmi, Albert Memmi grew up in a poor family of illiterate artisans on the outskirts of the *hara*, the Jewish ghetto. In 1924, Memmi was sent to a religious school, while in 1927 he became a student at the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Between 1933 and 1938, he attended French secondary school and was active in local Jewish youth groups. This dual allegiance to mutually antagonistic organizations constituted a painful apprenticeship in the art of being Jewish and different. After graduating from high school, Memmi spent the 1941/42 academic year as a first-year philosophy student at the University of Algiers, where he published short articles and novellas in Jewish community newspapers. In 1943, in consequence of the anti-Semitic Vichy laws that were enforced in France and Algeria, he was expelled from university and suffered the traumatic experience of incarceration in a forced labor camp in eastern Tunisia. In 1945, he returned to Algiers and thereafter traveled widely in the Mediterranean. Finally, in 1946 he moved to France, where he studied philosophy and sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris. He lived in France until his death.

The Pillar of Salt was Memmi's first novel. He published it in French in 1953 at the age of thirty-three. Told in the first person, *The Pillar of Salt*² is divided into three main parts. These are arranged chronologically and reflect the author's life in Tunis from birth in 1920 through childhood and early manhood to the Nazi occupation in 1942 and 1943. Each part deals with a different identity assumed by Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, the protagonist. Alexandre struggles unsuccessfully to reconcile his African, Jewish, and Arab-Berber identities with a fourth, based on an overlay of French knowledge and culture (Dugas, 1997).

The most important elements for this paper are to be found in part three – “The World,” where the politics of fascism, Nazism, and anti-Semitism intrude ever more violently into Alexandre's world. In an act of solidarity, Alexandre chooses to join his co-religionists in a work camp, where he relearns the consolatory value of religion. Sadly, he discovers his own incapacity to help. He therefore decides to escape, and this is made

2 The novel's title is taken from the Biblical story of Lot's wife, who, having been exiled from her home in Sodom, ignored the prohibition to look back and is turned into salt. This epigraph introduces the motifs of prohibition and exile, which weave throughout the book.

possible when the Allied advance leads to the detainees being moved further behind the front line. Having reached Tunis, he hides until the Americans liberate the city. He tries to join the French army of Charles de Gaulle but is rejected because he is Jewish, and this second betrayal leads him to reject the West. Next, he studies philosophy, hoping to acquire a professorship, but after being turned down once more, this time by the French education ministry, he decides to continue his life in a new world: Argentina.

When the war begins, Pétain breaks the promise of the French Republic:

When the decrees were published, I was not so much struck by the material side of the catastrophe as disappointed and angry. It was the painful and astounding treason, vaguely expected but so brutally confirmed, of a civilization in which I had placed all my hopes and which I so ardently admired. With a crash, the reassuring idea that colonial Frenchmen and those from metropolitan France were not the same was now demolished (Memmi, 1955, p. 272).

In spite of this disappointment, Alexandre keeps hoping:

like a tracked animal, I thought first of saving my own skin. I relied on what connections I had among the French and on my admiration for France. It is not easy to believe in the betrayal of a myth (p. 275).

In the novel, the action is triggered by a pogrom that breaks out in the Tunis ghetto, bringing death to one of the narrator's childhood friends³:

As the Jewish community emerges from their hiding places behind locked doors and in barricaded homes, they search for explanations for this outbreak of hatred. Uncertainty as to the identity of the perpetrators or their motivations only adds to the pervasive sense of fear. The rumors reflect the deteriorating political situation of the period. Some say that Arab Muslim troops, called up to fight in Europe, descended upon the hara to pillage, kill, and rape before being shipped off to

3 It is uncertain if the novel refers to the actual anti-Jewish attacks of 1938. However, it accurately suggests that the rise of European anti-Semitism had an impact on French-controlled Tunisia. For more on this topic, see review of *Nazi Germany and the Arab World* by Francis R. Nicosia (Motadel, 2016).

an uncertain fate across the Mediterranean. Others argue that the French colonial government in Tunisia fomented the pogrom to deflect public attention from its own shortcomings (Clancy-Smith, 2000, p. 343).

In either case, Alexandre's position in the French school becomes more and more difficult: "It was in high school that I discovered how painful it is to be a Jew" (Memmi, 1955, p. 255). Growing anti-Semitism in Europe at the time is reflected in the behavior of the schoolboys from various European countries. Papachino, a classmate of Italian ethnicity whose family have only recently become naturalized French citizens, accuses the Jews of "ruining France" (p. 257). Nor are the professors immune – during his classes, one of the history instructors expounded on the scientific basis for racial prejudice and anti-Semitism; later, this particular teacher will actively collaborate with the Axis occupiers of the country. The mathematics teacher, originally from Alsace in eastern France, constantly denigrates not only the Tunisian Jews but also the Tunisian Muslims in his class.

However, military events elsewhere in North Africa and in Europe soon overwhelm Alexandre, the Jewish community, and all Tunisians. Unable to achieve a decisive victory over the Axis powers in Europe, the British and Americans decide to land troops in Morocco and Algeria and use North Africa as a base from which to attack the occupied Continent. In November 1942, Western Allied troops land in Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers in what is known as "Operation Torch." In response, Germany occupies Tunisia; Italian troops also pour into Tunisia from neighboring Libya.

"And then, all of a sudden, one day we found ourselves right in the middle of the tragedy" (p. 271). German war planes land in Tunis and the *Kommandatur* (German military high command) passes its first anti-Jewish measures. Hostages are taken; then come murders, rapes, deportations, and requisitions of supplies and animals. The Jews of Tunis, the weakest of the Jewish communities, are targeted first. Tunisian Jewish leaders are ordered to assemble all men between the ages of 18 and 40. For the most part, Italian or European Jews are left alone:

On the eighth day, after they had taken all their precautions, the Germans ordered all Jewish men between the ages of eighteen and forty to assemble to be sent off to forced labor camps. Our immediate reaction was to ask the French Residency for its protection. To our amazement, our delegates were thrown out (p. 275).

Life in the Camps

The novel gives a precise idea of the climate established by the Nazis and its dire consequences for Tunisian Jews:

The situation was becoming disastrous. The raiders carried off all men indiscriminately, the old and the young, the healthy and the sick. A few young girls disappeared. The families of the hostages begged and prayed and wept. Something had to be done about those who were already in the camps (Memmi, 1955, p. 279).

By far the largest and the worst camp was that in the city of Bizerte by the Mediterranean Sea. As many as 500 Jews, under the supervision of the German Army, were given arduous work assignments lasting up to 14 hours per day. As the Allies advanced across western Tunisia, disorder broke out in the sectors controlled by the Italian, German, and Vichy French forces. The mayhem allowed many Jewish labor conscripts and prisoners to flee the camps. These events help explain why, by early May 1943, when Axis control of Tunisia collapsed, only about 1,600 of all 5,000 Jewish forced laborers remained in the camps (Segré, 1992).

Approximately 20 more Tunisian Jews had by then been deported from Tunisia and sent to their deaths in extermination centers in Europe. (Segré)

Reports from the camps were very bad. As they had never had any experience of war, or the natural or historical disasters, my brethren – all city-dwellers, artisans, officeworkers, salesmen, and petty traders, with a skin that was too white and flabby stomach muscles – lost all appearance of being human after only a few days of camp life [...]. The best of them, those who in a moment of revolt tried to escape, had to cross hostile country and were quickly caught and shot or deported to Germany (Memmi, 1955, p. 280).

Although he could have avoided the camps because of his fragile health, Alexandre goes voluntarily and is transported to the countryside, amid horrific human suffering: “How was it possible to stay in the offices while all those young Jews were being beaten, humiliated, and killed in the camps?” (p. 282). As a young and committed idealist, Alexandre went to the forced labor camp of his own free will, in solidarity with his co-religionists: “I had come to the work-camp of my own accord” (p. 285).

While the Jewish Council strove to select Tunisian Jews from all socio-economic classes to serve in the camps, it became increasingly apparent that young men from the poorest strata, above all from the Tunis

ghetto, were being selected in the largest numbers: "It was because I was a student, not because of my lungs, that I had been saved... 'We wanted to save the elite of the community,' explained one of our leaders without even smiling" (p. 282). Already revolted by the injustice of an inhuman system, Alexandre has to resign himself to another inequity, this time social: "The distinction between the middle class and the ghetto population continued within the camp" (p. 286).

As regards the daily operation of the camps, there were no written rules; the definition and enforcement of the unwritten rules were left to the discretion of local officials – hence the disparities, oftentimes glaring, in the treatment of detainees:

We were still at work when the clear and bright-eyed night fell on us. Our guards were as bad-tempered as we were tired. In the last fortnight, the Germans handed us over to an elegant Italian lieutenant who kept perfection this strip of road to avoid being sent to the front... He had overworked us to make us appreciate an extraordinary gift: tomorrow there would be no work (p. 296).

The internees' day normally began at six o'clock in the morning and ended at nine o'clock in the evening. Of these fifteen hours, ten were to be devoted to work and the rest allocated to trips (3 or 4 hours) and meals (about 1 hour); obviously, there was no time left for leisure and cultural or religious activities.

The work that the internees were forced to perform often consisted of humiliating, unnecessary chores, the sole purpose of which was to tire them mentally and physically, and thereby break down their unity. Hygiene, food, and living conditions were deplorable. The deportees were given very little water, their sleeping mats were laced with bedbugs and scorpions, while horned vipers were a constant danger. Given the disastrous hygienic conditions and the risk of injury, infection, or epidemics, health remained their foremost concern. Needless to say, they had very limited access to medical care, for there were practically no doctors or nurses in the camps, whereas those who were present usually had no drugs at their disposal. As a result, injuries were not treated, and many prisoners suffered from ulcers, dysentery, malaria and typhus. Jewish community leaders set up committees to improve the lives of internees by classifying workers as sick and helping them escape. This strategy became progressively easier to implement, for discipline in the camps started to break down once the Axis hold on Tunisia weakened.

As the German Army started to lose ground to the advancing Allies, the labor camps were continually moved about. It soon became clear that the Jewish workers would either be deported to Germany or massacred by their captors. Having come to the conclusion that he could not

provide meaningful assistance to his fellow prisoners – “I fully realized it when I saw that my presence could be of no help to these men” – Alexandre proceeds to organize some of his comrades. Together, they make a daring escape and head back to Tunis, nearly being caught in a crossfire between the Anglo-Americans and some retreating Axis soldiers. Their endeavor ends in success, but the realization that he could not have been of use to others while in the camp is bitter:

Events helped to speed my decision. The Germans were yielding ground every day with their backs to the sea, and the camps accordingly retreated northwards. In two months, we moved five times and were obviously becoming useless. Rumor had it, and this was confirmed by discreet information in letters we received, that we were to be shipped to Germany (p. 294).

While providing some details about the escape, the novel also comments on the perceived differences between the Germans and the Italians:

Without moving, we let two German armored cars go past, only too relieved not to be questioned. We waved down a big truck driven by a civilian... an Italian civilian... We started vaguely explaining to him and ended up by being more explicit. Yes, he would take us, but he risked getting himself into a great deal of trouble... We wasted no breath. Among Mediterraneans, there was no need to beat about the bush – with a German we would never have dared – how much? He hesitated. We proposed five hundred francs. He accepted... (p. 308).

Building Historical Memory through the Novel

At least two factors help explain the void in the historiographical presentation of Tunisian Jews during the Second World War. First, the lack of oral and written sources on the camps limits the work of researchers. Obviously, strong censorship of the press was in effect. The *Tunis Journal* (published between 16 November 1941 and 6 May 1942) had the sole goal of propagating the political and military successes of the Third Reich. As a result, the number of written documents concerning the German occupation is relatively small, since the local population – not to mention the Jewish community – was unable to testify about the situation of the interned workers.

Secondly, the reconstitution of processes serving to elaborate and develop the historical memory is a difficult and complex task. The passage of time and its inherent vicissitudes do not leave the witness, the

writer, or the historian with sufficient material to properly understand the historical memory and analyze its components. Given the context, it is difficult to conclude whether Memmi's personal memories reflect the collective memory of the Jews of Tunisia. Nonetheless, he considers the experience of the labor camp to be of significance: "on the whole, this period remains a solid and alien block within my memory" (p. 294).

In his personal diary, Colonel Walter Rauff, the creator of "mobile gas chambers," describes the horrific events in Tunisia and the various plans designed to use the Jews as workers and as human shields against the Allied armies:

3,000 Jews will be recruited by the Task Force. The arrival of Jews to the workplaces and their supervision must be the responsibility of the Wehrmacht. For that, I have set up a Jewish committee that will be responsible for this process. The first workers will be ready for labor on 7 December 1942. [...] The financing, the material conditions of accommodation, and the organization of food will be assumed by the Jews themselves, without constraint on the German authorities. I have announced that if the orders were not respected it would be necessary to expect severe reprisals (Benillouche, 2015).

This diary entry is corroborated by Robert Satloff's research:

From the beginning, the Germans had more on their minds than just military strategy. Very soon after their arrival, they began to put together the building blocks of their master plan for Tunisia's Jews. This included arbitrary arrests, confiscations, forced labor, deportations, the yellow star (Satloff, 2013, p. 13).

We cannot conclude this dark chapter of Tunisian history without mentioning the shared responsibility of Italy:

With the retreat of the Axis forces from Libya to Tunisia in November 1942, Italian occupation policy in North Africa entered its final stage of radicalization. In Tunisia, the Italians and Germans installed short-lived but brutal occupation regimes (Bernhard, 2012, p. 436).

It was clear that in Rome, the persecution of the Jews was not a theoretical project but rather a policy in action. "Ultimately, in April 1943, the Italian authorities considered taking Jews hostage and deporting them to Italy in order to use them as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Allies" (Bernhard, 2012, p. 437).

Tunisia was liberated by the Allies on 9 May 1943, and the racial laws were finally abrogated on 10 June 1943. With the defeat of Vichy France, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the traumatized Tunisian Jewish community was finally freed from the oppression of a cruel and totalitarian order. The Jews of Tunisia were now faced with the burden of building a collective memory of their tragedy, and this required the employment of new narrative tools. The men proceeded to re-enact their outward journey, and amazingly their painful memories were tinged with joy.

'Look,' one of them said to me, 'see that big building there. That was where they held a thousand of us. They kept us there three days without letting us go out or even leave the straw on which we slept [...]'. [...] They were almost proud of their stories and were already reconstructing their memories (Memmi, 1955, p. 309).

The Pillar of Salt remains to this day a great example of living history and arguably the most powerful narrative devoted to a totalitarian system which drew sustenance from a complex colonial milieu.

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