Sephardim and the Holocaust

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From 1961 to his retirement in 2003, Sociology Professor Art Shostak aided the AFT, NEA, and school superintendents nationwide improve K-12 reforms. In retirement he has helped develop a Holocaust Survivors Speaker project for Santa Rosa schools, seen the publication in 2017 of his 34th book, posted a related website –www.stealthaltruism.com, and given related talks in Australia, Israel, New Zealand, South Africa, and throughout the USA.

Bringing the Sephardi into a Reset Shoah Narrative

By Arthur Shostak

Holocaust scholarship is finally making up for nearly eight decades of inadequate attention to the impact of the Shoah (1933 - ’45) on approximately 430,000 Sephardi Jews from Europe, Morocco, Algiers, Tunisia, and Libya, etc., over 160,000 of whom perished in the catastrophe.

While a few path-setting academic histories came out since 1945 the publication in 2020 of a heartfelt analysis, *The Sephardim in the Holocaust: A Forgotten People*, by Isaac and Rosemary Levy, raises the bar. It will for decades be regarded as seminal.

The 262-page book draws on more than 170 interviews conducted with Auschwitz survivors in Belgium, Canada, France, Greece, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands, the former Yugoslavia, and the United States. We hear from Sephardim in Athens, Corfu, Cos, Macedonia, Rhodes, Salonika, and the former Yugoslavia.

Especially valuable are three features: First, clarification of unique challenges Sephardim faced when in the grips of the Third Reich, as differences in language (24 occupied

countries), physical appearance, and Hebrew pronunciation set them apart from the Ashkenazim (the dominant bloc). Second, documentation of brave high-risk secret efforts at revolt in the camps, complicated by the need for Sephardi cooperation with Ashkenazi fellow prisoners. Third, attention to survivors who owe their lives to altruistic sanctuary provided in Albania by Christian and Muslim Upstanders.

Hopefully, the Levy book will soon be followed by new Sephardic-focused scholarship that recognizes there are two stories, not one, that learners ought to take from study of the Shoah: The Horror Story, or what perpetrators did To their victims, AND the Help Story, or what victims did FOR one another.

The well-known first story is unforgivable, while the neglected second story is inspiring, It tells of high-risk secret non-militant efforts made by victims to relieve suffering and increase the survival chances of less fortunate others … even at risk of life. The first story has gotten far more museum wall space than the second, far more library shelf space than the second, far more movie screen coverage than the second, and far more classroom podium and blackboard attention, along with Covid-19 based zoom attention, than the second. This makes the least of memorialization possibilities.

It is past time to think critically about this costly imbalance, and act to remedy it, as it is historically incorrect, grievously misleads, negatively stigmatizes the subject, and explains much of so-called Holocaust Fatigue. The mainstream Narrative needs a constructive reset that would arrest Horror Centrism and advance a new ratio, say, 55/45, Horror/Help, and thereby improve the Legacy and better honor the Six Million (over 160,000 of whom are Sephardic).

To this end I offer the example of my 2017 book*, Stealth Altruism: Forbidden Care as Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust*, my website of related short published articles (www.stealthaltruism.com), and my podcast (https://www.practicalreasonpodcast.com/help-story). As well, I offer to assist any reader willing to take this perspective and apply it to the Sephardic Shoah experience.

What was the Sephardic counterpart of the Ashkenazi forest partisan units that in addition to harassing German troops also sheltered young and old Jewish refugees? Who was a Sephardic counterpart for Dr. Janusz Korczak, a world-renowned Polish Jew possibly the greatest child specialist and educational reformer in all of Europe. How did Sephardic communities treat alleged Nazi collaborationists after 1945? How have Sephardic survivors sought to improve Shoah memorialization efforts and the educational transfer of the Legacy, much as do scores of Ashkenazi organizations?

With the rapid coming of an advent in which there are no direct survivors to tell youngsters (and scholars) their story, all of Shoah memorialization is at risk. The sooner Ashkenazi and Sephardic join hands, hearts, and minds in a creative effort to reset and thereby rehabilitate the Narrative, the better off will be Jewry, Judaism, and thereby, humanity. The stakes are high,