

HOME PAGE | TODAY'S PAPER | VIDEO | MOST POPULAR | TIMES TOPICS | Subscribe: Home Delivery / Digital | Log In | Register Now | Help

**The New York Times** **Movies** Search All NYTimes.com

WORLD | U.S. | N.Y. / REGION | BUSINESS | TECHNOLOGY | SCIENCE | HEALTH | SPORTS | OPINION | ARTS | STYLE | TRAVEL | JOBS | REAL ESTATE | AUTOS

**Search** Movies, People and Showtimes by ZIP Code

**More in Movies »**  
[In Theaters](#) | [Coming Soon](#) | [Critics' Picks](#) | [On DVD](#) | [Tickets & Showtimes](#) | [Trailers](#) | [ArtsBeat](#)

## Heroic Tale of Holocaust, With a Twist



Pyramide Productions. In “Les Hommes Libres” (“Free Men”), a new wartime French film based on true stories, Tahar Rahim, seated, is a black-market operator and Michael Lonsdale portrays the rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris.

**By ELAINE SCIOLINO**  
**Published: October 3, 2011**

PARIS — The stories of the Holocaust have been documented, distorted, clarified and filtered through memory. Yet new stories keep coming, occasionally altering the grand, incomplete mosaic of Holocaust history.

One of them, dramatized in a French film released here last week, focuses on an unlikely savior of Jews during the Nazi occupation of France: the rector of a Paris mosque.

Muslims, it seems, rescued Jews from the Nazis.

“Les Hommes Libres” (“Free Men”) is a tale of courage not found in French textbooks. According to the story, Si Kaddour Benghabrit, the founder and rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, provided refuge and certificates of Muslim identity to a small number of Jews to allow them to evade arrest and deportation.



Martin Bureau/Agence France-Presse  
— Getty Images. The film's director,  
Ismaël Ferroukhi.

It was simpler than it sounds. In the early 1940s France was home to a large population of North Africans, including thousands of Sephardic Jews. The Jews spoke Arabic and shared many of the same traditions and everyday habits as the Arabs. Neither Muslims nor Jews ate pork. Both Muslim and Jewish men were circumcised. Muslim and Jewish names were often similar.

The mosque, a tiled, walled fortress the size of a city block on the Left Bank, served as a place to pray, certainly, but also as an oasis

of calm where visitors were fed and clothed and could bathe, and where they could talk freely and rest in the garden.

It was possible for a Jew to pass.

“This film is an event,” said Benjamin Stora, France’s pre-eminent historian on North Africa and a consultant on the film. “Much has been written about Muslim collaboration with the Nazis. But it has not been widely known that Muslims helped Jews. There are still stories to be told, to be written.”

The film, directed by Ismaël Ferroukhi, is described as fiction inspired by real events and built around the stories of two real-life figures (along with a made-up black marketeer). The veteran French actor Michael Lonsdale plays Benghabrit, an Algerian-born religious leader and a clever political maneuverer who gave tours of the mosque to German officers and their wives even as he apparently used it to help Jews.

Mahmoud Shalaby, a Palestinian actor living in Israel, plays Salim — originally Simon — Hilali, who was Paris’s most popular Arabic-language singer, a Jew who survived the Holocaust by posing as a Muslim. (To make the assumed identity credible, Benghabrit had the name of Hilali’s grandfather engraved on a tombstone in the Muslim cemetery in the Paris suburb of Bobigny, according to French obituaries about the singer. In one tense scene in the film a German soldier intent on proving that Hilali is a Jew, takes him to the cemetery to identify it.)

The historical record remains incomplete, because documentation is sketchy. Help was provided to Jews on an ad hoc basis and was not part of any organized movement by the mosque. The number of Jews who benefited is not known. The most graphic account, never corroborated, was given by Albert Assouline, a North African Jew who escaped from a German prison camp. He claimed that more than 1,700 resistance fighters — including Jews but also a lesser number of Muslims and Christians — found refuge in the mosque’s underground caverns, and that the rector provided many Jews with certificates of Muslim identity.

In his 2006 book, “Among the Righteous,” Robert Satloff, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, uncovered stories of Arabs who saved Jews during the Holocaust, and included a chapter on the Grand Mosque. Dalil Boubakeur, the current rector, confirmed to him that some Jews — up to 100 perhaps — were given Muslim identity papers by the mosque, without specifying a number. Mr. Boubakeur said individual Muslims brought Jews they knew to the mosque for help, and the chief imam, not Benghabrit, was the man responsible.

Mr. Boubakeur showed Mr. Satloff a copy of a typewritten 1940 Foreign Ministry document from the French Archives. It stated that the occupation authorities suspected mosque personnel of delivering false Muslim identity papers to Jews. “The imam was summoned, in a threatening manner, to put an end to all such practices,” the document said.

Mr. Satloff said in a telephone interview: “One has to separate the myth from the fact. The number of Jews protected by the mosque was probably in the dozens, not the hundreds. But it is a story that carries a powerful political message and deserves to be told.”

A 1991 television documentary “Une Résistance Oubliée: La Mosquée de Paris” (“A Forgotten Resistance: The Mosque of Paris”) by Derri Berkani, and a children’s book “The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Saved Jews During the Holocaust,” published in 2007, also explore the events.

The latest film was made in an empty palace in Morocco, with the support of the Moroccan government. The Paris mosque refused to grant permission for any filming. “We’re a place of worship,” Mr. Boubakeur said in an interview. “There are prayers five times a day. Shooting a film would have been disruptive.”

Benghabrit fell out of favor with fellow Muslims because he opposed Algerian independence and stayed loyal to France’s occupation of his native country. He died in 1954.

In doing research for the film, Mr. Ferroukhi and even Mr. Stora learned new stories. At one screening a woman asked him why the film did not mention the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern European origin who had been saved by the mosque. Mr. Stora said he explained that the mosque didn’t intervene on behalf of Ashkenazi Jews, who did not speak Arabic or know Arab culture.

“She told me: ‘That’s not true. My mother was protected and saved by a certificate from the mosque,’ ” Mr. Stora said.

On Wednesday, the day of the film’s release here, hundreds of students from three racially and ethnically mixed Paris-area high schools were invited to a special screening and question-and-answer session with Mr. Ferroukhi and some of his actors.

Some asked banal questions. Where did you find the old cars? (From an antique car rental agency.) Others reacted with curiosity and disbelief, wanting to know how much of the film was based on fact, and how it could have been possible that Jews mingled easily with Muslims. Some were stunned to hear that the Nazis persecuted only the Jews, and left the Muslims alone.

Reviews here were mixed on the film, which is to be released in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium. (American rights have been sold as well.) The daily Le Figaro said it “reconstitutes an atmosphere and a period marvelously.” The weekly L’Express called it “ideal for a school outing, less for an evening at the movies.”

Mr. Ferroukhi does not care. He said he was lobbying the Culture and Education Ministries to get the film shown in schools. “It pays homage to the people of our history who have been invisible,” he said. “It shows another reality, that Muslims and Jews existed in peace. We have to remember that — with pride.”

**A version of this article appeared in print on October 4, 2011, on page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Heroic Tale Of Holocaust, With a Twist.**