

AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK 1944

II. WESTERN EUROPE

By MARTHA JELENKO*

Tunisia

Most horrible was the fate of the sixty-three thousand Jews living in Tunisia, where they were exposed to the wrath of retreating Axis troops whose behavior was nothing short of barbarous. As the British forces advanced from Libya, the Jews were rescued, but in most instances deliverance came too late. Many of the cities were in ruins and the majority of the Jews massacred.

The reign of terror was especially severe in the city of Tunis. The entire able-bodied Jewish population was ordered by the Nazi military authorities in January to forced labor constructing fortifications and clearing the docks of the debris left by Allied bombings. The London *Daily Mail* reported that the city had been completely evacuated except for these workers. Charges of aiding the Allied troops led to the execution of a number of Jewish leaders, a collective fine of twenty million francs imposed upon the Jewish population, and the jailing of hundreds of others.

The victorious Eighth Army in its relentless drive to the West appeared as messengers of mercy to the thirty thousand liberated Jews in Tunis. When the British reached Fom Tatahouine, just below the Mareth Line in southern Tunisia, they found that six hundred Jews had fled to caves in the mountains where they lived for three weeks until the Germans were forced to withdraw. In April, the British entered the city of Gafsa where 82 Jews, mostly women and children, had been killed. The Arab population there had been threatened with the death penalty if they sheltered any Jews. Just before their withdrawal from Gabes, the Nazis had organized a pogrom during which none of the thirty-five hundred Jews escaped injury. Homes and businesses were robbed and destroyed; the women were raped. Over a million francs belonging to Jews were taken from the banks. Italian officers, the London *Jewish Chronicle* of April 9 reported, intervened and attempted to protect the Jews.

When the Nazis left, Jews repaired the bridge to aid the British in their pursuit of the enemy. In their evacuation of Sfax, the Nazis took with them fifty Jewish hostages, including five members of the Jewish community council. Of course, there, too, the Jews as well as the native population were stripped of all belongings. The total amount of cash alone was eighty million francs. The Jews of Kairouan danced for joy when the British First Army entered the town on April 10. They tore off the yellow badges which the

Nazis had compelled all Tunisian Jews to wear and donned improvised V signs in their place. An elder of the Jewish community greeted the troops with a poetically written message. Thanks to the rapid Allied advance, about three thousand Jewish slave workers employed in constructing fortifications for the Axis were rescued. The bodies of 85 slave workers left near Wadi Akarit were buried in a common grave at the Sfax Jewish cemetery.