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Karen Gray Ruelle , Deborah Durland DeSaix

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When the Nazis occupied Paris, no Jew was safe from arrest and deportation.

Few Parisians were willing to risk their own lives to help. Yet during that perilous time, many Jews found refuge in an unlikely place--the sprawling complex of the Grand Mosque of Paris. Not just a place of worship but a community center, this hive of activity was an ideal temporary hiding place for escaped prisoners of war and Jews of all ages, especially children.

Beautifully illustrated and thoroughly researched (both authors speak French and conducted first-person interviews and research at archives and libraries), this hopeful, non-fiction book introduces children to a little-known part of history. Perfect for children studying World War II or those seeking a heart-warming, inspiring read that highlights extraordinary heroism across faiths.

Includes a bibliography, a recommended list of books and films, and afterword from the authors that gives more details behind the story.

The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Rescued Jews During the Holocaust Details

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From Reader Review The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Rescued Jews During the Holocaust for online ebook

Stephanie Anze says

When the Nazis took over Paris, no Jew was safe. Those fortunate enough to be able to escape did so. For those left behind, however, finding a refuge was imperative. Under an ever watchful eye of the Nazis, the Grand Mosque of Paris opened its doors and hid Jews and others under persecution, until they could be smuggled out of the city. This is the incredible untold story of how Muslims saved Jews.

Every so often I like to read a children's book and this one caught my eye immediately. I have read many books pertaining to the Holocaust and this is the first time that I have learned about this part of history. Si Kaddour Benghabrit was the founder and rector of the mosque. The mosque was a community center and was able to provide fake Muslims IDs to Jews as well as hide their children among their own. The underground tunnels and cellars under the mosque delivered those escaping to the banks of the Seine. There they were hidden in empty wine barrels and boarded onto barges operated by the Kabyles (a Berber group of Muslim Algerians) and smuggled out of occupied Paris. While the Nazis suspected that the Mosque was helping Jews escape, they could not risk Algerian riots in North Africa for they were fighting the Allies on that front already. For that, the Mosque had some leeway but still operated at great risk to themselves. Benghabrit was awarded the Grand Croix de la Legion d'Honneur (the highest merit awarded by France) for his role during the war.

Though its primary audience is children, this book had me captivated. The prose was written in a concise yet touching way. The illustrations perfectly pair with the narrative. This book is better suited for children ages 7 and above. The message is important for we must not forget that cooperation between rival groups can exist and be successful. Especially during these times, that message needs to be heard. The exact number of Jews saved by the mosque is unknown. It is estimated that a few dozen to one hundred were saved in total but even if it was just one, it's a valiant and admirable feat. Regardless of age, I highly recommend this book.

Elizabeth says

The Grand Mosque of Paris: A Story of How Muslims Rescued Jews During the Holocaust by Karen Gray Ruelle is the story of how the mosque and its rector, Si Kaddour Benghabrit helped Jews, Allied soldiers, POWs and others escape the Nazis into North Africa. The mosque was given to the Muslim people by the French government as a gift for Muslim help during WWI. Within its walls, was an entire city of religious offices, medical facilities, shops and restaurants, and schools. When France fell to the Nazis, they helped Jews escape by giving them papers stating they had converted to Islam. They had elaborate plans of moving the Jews and others through underground Catacombs, on péniches or barges sent to the wine markets. The story describes how the people of North Africa felt that being Jewish or Muslim didn't matter. They people shared similar cultures and referred to each other as brothers. Unfortunately, because no records could be kept, there is little remembered about what happened at the Grand Mosque.

I really enjoyed this story. Not only were the illustrations beautiful, but the entire story had a suspenseful feeling. Since it is a story not usually heard, it also made it very interesting from a historical perspective. Additionally, it is interesting to see these two cultures working for a common good, instead of the conflict that is usually associated with the area today.

I would pair this book up with the book *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story* by Ken Mochizuki . In it a Japanese diplomat writes forbidden visas for Jews, so they can escape Lithuania, and is disgraced by his government. They both address those that helped the Jews during WWII. It would also link to *Diary of Anne Frank*. This would also be appropriate for a study of WWII, Holocaust, genocide, or a study of real life heroes. It would also be appropriate for a study of religions.

Middle East Outreach Council-Middle East Award-Honorable Mention

Connor Bates says

The Grand Mosque of Paris is an amazing story about how Muslim people helped Jewish people during world war two. Karen Gray Ruelle, and Deborah Durland DeSaix do an amazing job connecting this historical story to the illustrations on the page.

During the first seven pages of the book, the author is giving background information about World War Two and the Holocaust, the illustrations match this tone with many dark blues, brows, and grays. When the Mosque is introduced on page 8, the tone of the writing changes as well. This is also seen in the illustrations with the use of greens, blues, and white on this page. The brighter colors are seen through most of the rest of the book.

Although this change in tone is significant, I believe that the use of a light in the illustrations are the best part of this book. As seen on the cover, the light can be seen as a symbol of hope for the future, as the Muslim people help guide the Jewish people to safety.

Overall, I was very pleased with this book and the historical accuracy, I appreciated the afterword, glossary, acknowledgements, references, bibliography, recommended books, and the index in the backmatter, as it made it very easy to research more information on this topic.

Inge says

An under-told story of kindness and selflessness during the Holocaust, beautifully and masterfully told.

Lisa Vegan says

Extraordinary. I was deeply touched.

This is an excellent history book, with many useful resources at the end, of a chapter of history about which I knew nothing, the Muslims/Mosque that saved Jews and others from the Nazis, during the Nazi occupation of Paris and all of France. Much good background history is given as well, and described also is what lack of detailed information survives.

I knew some details from other books about the huge round up of Jews in Paris, the tunnels under Paris, etc.

but nothing about the Grand Mosque of Paris and the part its people played to do the right and brave thing in order to help their fellow human beings.

It's stories such as these that continually reactivate my faith in the human race, so I found this story very uplifting.

The illustrations are fabulous and evocative of that period.

This is a non-fiction book for older children. The exact fate of the Jews under Nazism, including that of children and babies, is revealed only a couple pages into this book. Also, the vocabulary, as well as the subject matter, is more appropriate for older kids. I'd say I'd introduce this book to children ages 9-13.

And, I knew the saying "Save one life, and it is as if you've saved all of humanity" (and other ways of phrasing this) is an integral belief in Judaism, but this book taught me that this hadith/proverb is something Jews and Muslims have in common.

4 1/2 stars. 1/2 star off for missing/lack of information, which is not the fault of the book, so a full 5 star rating listed for bringing to light this little known story, and for all the extra resources to use for further research.

S10_Jessica Oster says

format: picture book

age: grades 5-8

protagonist: Muslims in Paris

This is the untold story of how Muslims in Paris helped to hide Jews during the Holocaust. I mark this as a definite must read simply because it is a side of history that Americans are not exposed to learning. While this is a picture book, the text is dense and rich in language which makes it more suitable for middle school age and up. And even though the illustrations and story are not graphic in detail, the context of the story also lends itself better to a slightly older crowd. This would be a great book to accompany a study on the Holocaust or to show how one religious culture can sincerely help another. The story is one that is woven together from bits and pieces of gathered information and interviews from Parisian Muslims and Jews that were there during the Holocaust. The illustrations are soft and cool in palate which aids in fostering a sense of calm and peace which is a reflection of the Islamic beliefs and the design of the Grand Mosque (in my opinion). This would be a great book to read now, especially in light of the Muslim stereotype of terrorist that is widespread today.

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

The Grand Mosque of Paris is a little known but important story, just like the The Cigarette Sellers of Three Crosses Square was; a book about people helping others in a time of great peril. The central theme of The Grand Mosque can be summed up in the Islamic hadith* and a Jewish proverb quoted by Ruelle and DeDaix:

"Save one life, and it is as if you've saved all of humanity."

The Grand Mosque of Paris was opened in 1926 on land donated by the French government in tribute to the

many Muslims of her North African colonies who fought and died for France in World War I. At the time, most of the mosque's members were Kabyle Muslims, Berbers from Kabylia in Algeria. It is a large place with both religious and social areas, including living accommodations, so that many people can be within its walls at any given time. When the Nazis invaded Paris in 1940 and began their roundups of Jews for deportation, it did not take long for the rector of the mosque, Si Kaddour Bengharrit, to realize that the Muslim community could do something to help the Jews – they had both the space and the means to do this. And so the Muslims of the Grand Mosque began to rescue Jews, and within three months of the Nazi occupation of Paris, the rector and his congregation were suspected of and warned against helping anyone escape to safety.

The story is well done and well researched but the authors also write that attempts to verify much of what they found for this book were not terribly successful:

Writing about clandestine events that took place at a time of turmoil involving people who had an oral rather than a written tradition, and with many of the participants having now passed away, presents many difficulties.” (pg34)

Yet, there is enough evidence to prove that it happened and Ruell and DeDaix present the story in part by using examples of people who had been helped. One such person was Salim Halali, a Berber Jew from Algeria, studying in Paris to become a singer. Salim found refuge in the mosque and received a “Certificate of Conversion” from the rector. The rector even had a stonemason called in to carve a false gravestone with Salim’s family name on it for authenticity. Although Salim remained at the mosque until the war was over, most of the people who received help did not stay as long. In fact, only those Jews who also looked North African were able to stay in the mosque for more than a few days, since it was easy for them to pass as Muslims. Those who did not look North African had to be guided out to safety as quickly as possible.

According to Ruell and DeDaix, the Muslims had a real advantage as far as the Nazis were concerned. Though the mosque was suspected of helping Jews, the Nazis didn’t target its members for it because they feared an uprising of Muslims in Northern Africa and the Germans were already fighting the Allies there. And on the occasions when the Nazis did show up to search the mosque, the members had various ways of delaying their entrance, giving the people inside time to hide. In addition, though the authors do not indicate whether or not they were actually sick or orphans, many of the Jewish children brought to the mosque were sent to Muslim clinics outside Paris to protect them from the Nazis. These clinics were run by a Tunisian Dr. named Ahmed Somia. There, they administered to the children as well as Allied pilots, parachutists and even spies who found themselves injured and trapped in France.

The Muslim helpers had many ways of doing what they needed to do in order to help the Jews. Ruell and DeDaix explain that as members of the French Resistance, the Kabyles could safely carry messages and instructions written in their native language which was difficult and understood only by other Kabyles. As businessmen, they were also able to sneak people into the mosque with the help of their deliverymen using a three-wheeled bicycle with a large bin in front. Once inside the mosque, the members could provide the escapees with whatever they needed until they could be secreted out through a complicated series of tunnels. These tunnels, sometimes compared to the American Underground Railroad, were the result of stones quarried underground for constructing the buildings in Paris centuries ago. The Jews would then be led through the tunnels to the River Seine and put on to barges. There, the Jews were hidden in the large barrels that were used for delivering wine to Paris.

The authors also did the illustrations for this book and they are simply lovely, providing a real sense of the story. The Grand Mosque is, in reality, a truly beautiful place and the illustrations capture much of the artistry of the North African craftsmen who built the mosque. The illustrations give the sense of an oasis of peace and calm and safety in a world gone mad.

This is a highly recommendable book, containing a lot in this interesting and touching information. I think it would be a wonderful addition to a class learning about the Holocaust.

*A hadith is a saying attributed in some way to the Prophet Muhammad.

June says

Wow! Ruelle really lays it out there. Death camps, mass murder, the deportation from France alone of "11,402 Jewish children, toddlers and even tiny babies" to the death camps with only about 300 surviving the camps.

Did not know that the French gave the land for the Mosque to thank the half million Muslim soldiers who fought for them in WWI. Also that with the loss of so many young men in WWI, that Berbers from Kabylia came to Paris to fill out the workforce in factories and construction and building the Paris subways. The Mosque connected to the souterrain or subterranean tangle of tunnels, rooms, passageways, catacombs, and eventually the Seine.

They hid people in the secluded women's section of the prayer room, where even the Nazis and Vichy police dared not enter. The rector would delay the soldiers and police by demanding they remove their boots before going into the prayer room.

Unfortunately, most of this history has been lost. Back matter says the number saved vary from 100 North African Jews to 1,732 resisters (# of extra stubs from ration cards).

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

This is the first I've read of this little-known fact of the history of France in World War II. Ruelle has done a tremendous amount of research, as shown by the 2 pages at the end of the book, on something about which it is difficult to find any information. Muslims in Nazi-occupied Paris risked their lives to aid Jews and Christians, including downed allied pilots. What an incredible story! I couldn't help but wonder why they could be so kind to each other then, and yet forget all that and fight today. That's why I think it's so important that this story be taught to children today, and why I highly recommend this book.

For anyone who would like to read more about how Arabs helped the Jews in WWII, try *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories From the Holocaust's Long Reach into Arab Lands* by Robert B. Satloff (another on my list to read!).

Tina says

This book is fascinating! It tells of a little-known story of Jews rescued by Muslims during WW2. The Mosque of Paris was apparently a haven for Jews during the war and responsible for many people surviving and making it to safety. The pictures are beautiful and the story is intriguing!

thelastword says

Informative, but definitely not for children. This is like a research article spaced between illustrations.

Hannah Fry says

"The Grand Mosque of Paris" tells the story of how the Islamic Mosque in France opened its doors to help Jewish people hide during the Holocaust. This book tells the story of multiple people who benefitted from the safe haven that the mosque provided them, different strategies used by the Muslims to hide the Jews, and how Kabyle Muslims built a resistance to help them. For example, the book discusses the experiences of Salim Halali, A Jew who came to Paris from Algeria to become a singer. The book explains how a stonemason carved Halali's family name onto a tombstone to make it appear that Salim was actually Muslim. Although this book is fairly short in comparison to other nonfiction books, its text and illustrations do an excellent job of covering the details and story of a part of the Holocaust that not many people know about. This book really allows readers to reflect on the walls of religion and how although the Muslims were of a completely different religion than the Jews, they still went out of their way to help this group of people find refuge during this dangerous time. I would use this book in the classroom to teach my students about the holocaust. This book explains a different aspect of the holocaust, and the picture-book format would help to engage young students.

Rebecca says

Another superbly-done nonfiction book about a little-known topic. To be honest, I saw it on Goodreads and wanted to look more closely at the blue cover with the yellow light, but after reading, I'm glad that my knowledge of history was widened. During the Nazi occupation of France, the Kabyles (a Berber group from Algeria) and the people of the Grand Mosque of Paris helped Jews escape persecution, by forging certificates of Muslim identity (the Nazis feared a Muslim uprising in North Africa and so did not target Muslims the same way they did Jews) and hiding people, especially children, in the mosque (which was a full community center, with gardens, apartments, and a library).

Includes an Afterword, Glossary, References, Bibliography, and Index.

Favorite quotes:

"The rector [of the mosque] delayed the search by demanding that the soldiers and police remove their boots. Before going into the prayer room of any mosque, it is customary to remove all footwear. Taking off heavy military boots took time, giving everyone the opportunity to get out of sight."

"Hundreds of miles of utterly dark, chilly passageways twisted and turned beneath the streets. If you knew the route, you could travel underground from the mosque to the bank of the river Seine. If you didn't know the way, you could become hopelessly lost in the souterrain."

Samantha says

An incredible untold story of the Holocaust. To everyone that doesn't think interfaith peace is possible, read this book.

Debbie says

This recounts the little-known story of how North African Muslims in Paris risked their lives to save Jewish people during the Nazi occupation of France. It is truly an amazing story, one that I had no knowledge of and great interest in, since more of my students are Muslim than Jewish. It reads like a non-fiction book, rather than a narrative, although the authors try to make some personal connections (some survivors' names, for example). I understand why this is a children's book: because official records were not kept and most people involved are now dead, it's difficult to collect enough evidence of how the staff and worshippers at the mosque helped. All the same, do not mistake this for a children's book. It's too dry, with information related to politics and religion that most children, even Muslim or Jewish kids, would not be interested in for leisurely reading.
