Biography as Historical Practice: A Moroccan Jewish Lawyer on European Refugees of World War II

Susan Gilson Miller’s *Nelly Benatar and the Pursuit of Justice in Wartime North Africa* is an engaging and eye-opening addition to recent scholarship about the role of Morocco in World War II. Just eight miles from Europe, Morocco’s port cities became an important stop for Jewish refugees from eastern and central Europe as they sought to escape persecution and certain death. Morocco, however, had been a French protectorate since 1912, and it was controlled by the Vichy regime until Operation Torch in November 1942. As Miller points out, the Allied occupation of North Africa did not eliminate Vichy influence overnight, and people like Nelly Benatar—Sephardic Jew, Moroccan woman, skillful lawyer, and advocate for European refugees of wartime Europe—worked to change an oppressive system, often within that very system.

Benatar was born in 1898, and chapter 1 highlights the geographic and social mobility of Sephardic Jews in the early twentieth century. Benatar’s father was a well-traveled diplomat, and her husband had come to Morocco from Brazil to make a fortune in rubber. Marriage and motherhood did not prevent Benatar from earning a law degree at the age of thirty-five.

This is a biography, and subsequent chapters are intended to bring to light a forgotten historical actor while also providing a new entry point for studying the refugee crisis in wartime Morocco. In doing so, Miller sheds light on the upper echelons of elite society of Casablanca, where Benatar lived and worked, and those in transition from eastern and central Europe, hoping to make it to the United States. Miller traces Benatar’s work with refugees through her private papers, housed in Israel, as well as a wide variety of documents found in approximately fifteen research facilities located in four countries. She also uses discussions with family and friends as well as field trips to the Saharan prisons to add both color and depth to Benatar and her work.

Miller destabilizes one potential criticism of this biography in the first pages of her book. To connect evidence beyond what written documents explicitly supply, she uses what she deems “conditional signifiers usually banished from the historian’s quiver of words” (p. 7). Miller has earned sufficient trust among historians of Morocco to rely on phrases like “it may be” or “it seems.” She was
already a well-respected historian of Morocco before I began graduate school in the mid-1990s. Her knowledge of Morocco is vast, and her scholarly networks unparalleled. Miller’s awareness of the potential pitfalls of biography adds value to this book, and her last five pages offer a lovely musing on “to what extent ... a single life [can] illuminate an entire era” (p. 158).

Focusing on Benatar’s war work, this book can and cannot do specific types of history. Readers will come away with knowledge of Morocco’s role in World War II, both as a Vichy stronghold and a stop for Jewish refugees from Europe. This book is also a valuable contribution to works centering the role of local actors in shaping the international arena of the postwar era. Further, this study is part of recent scholarship that expands Holocaust geography beyond eastern and central Europe, providing new perspectives from the United States, North Africa, Greece, and Australia.[1]

However, Benatar was born into wealth and privilege, so this book is not able to provide an overarching political or social history of Morocco. Benatar had more in common with French colonizers than ordinary Moroccans of rural areas. Reading a set of texts against the grain—in combination with her vast knowledge of Moroccan history—Miller skillfully acknowledges that her focus on Benatar limits the historical conditions or events she can address via Benatar’s life story. A French lawyer asked Benatar to take on the case of Jews in Tineghir, believing a Vichy administrator was “inspired by Nazi-style forms of persecution.” This is a small town in the Atlas Mountains, not the bustling and cosmopolitan streets of Casablanca. Benatar withdrew from the case, which Miller offers as a “frank admission of their distance from her world” (p. 124).

Miller organizes her study in a straightforward chronological manner. Seven of nine chapters address event history in Morocco through the work of Nelly Benatar, with each covering a single year. The first and last chapter cover Benatar’s life before and after the war.

The narrative choices of the author are a further strength of this book. At times, as in chapter 3 (1940), Miller relies on documentary fragments to piece together Benatar’s world. In this task, Miller breaks the fourth wall to show the difficulty of finding evidence to investigate both wartime resistance and Benatar, who kept her “secret life hidden from the view of everyone who knew her” (p. 47). Miller opens this chapter with a description of three photos that present “at first no hint of a narrative” (p. 38). Emphasizing the difficulty of tracing Benatar’s “secret life,” Miller describes scraps of handwritten notes in Benatar’s archives. To piece together a coherent narrative, Miller uses these unidentified photos and scraps of paper together with information about other resistance figures of that time and place (pp. 49, 52). Miller sometimes writes incomplete sentences, a reflection of the fragments of evidence on which the author relies.

At other times, however, Miller chooses to provide former refugees with ample space to tell their own story. Lilli Joseph describes being sent from a ship docked in Casablanca to a prison in central Morocco. Miller not only uses an interview with Ms. Joseph from 1996 found at the USC Shoah Foundation, but also visited her in Palm Beach while writing this book (pp. 73-74). Erwin Blumentfeld was detained in Camp Sidi El Ayachi, and he and his son provide very different views of their time as refugees (pp. 70-71). Erwin, the father, expected much worse, while his son remembers only that “most people in the camp were suffering some disease or other” (p. 72). Rounding out these voices, Miller gives voice to refugees already established in Casablanca to describe Benatar’s world. The daughter of a Russian Jew who came to Casablanca in 1930, for example, provides insight into the social lives of Benatar’s set. Miller writes that Vichy laws forced this doctor to close his practice, but Benatar helped him to see patients in...
secret, refugees in need of help (pp. 86-87). I was impressed at how Miller allows refugees to tell their own story.

This book reads quickly, which I mean in the very best way. Scholars will be intrigued by the story of Morocco as part of an international trail followed by refugees during World War II, and the life of Nelly Benatar offers a unique way of conveying this history. Miller’s use of archives dispersed throughout the world also makes this an important work when considering the methods of doing history, whether of Morocco, the Holocaust, or another twentieth-century topic. For this reason, this book should be assigned to graduate students thinking about how to piece together the story of a person or a time. But undergraduates too will find this an engaging book, one that allows them to consider the entangled histories of twentieth-century Morocco and Europe, and I foresee stimulating classroom discussions about what this author has to say, and how.

Note


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