

1947-1948

## 19. NORTH AFRICA

*By Maurice Eisenbeth*

To DISCUSS THE Jewish community in French North Africa, (close to 500,000 people) and its work from May 1946 to April 1947, is quite difficult.

*Welfare Activities*

Welfare activities have been resumed. But while the communal agencies in Tunisia, and Morocco deal especially — in fact solely — with the problems of charity, dispensing relief from a budget built up by special taxes, in Algeria they are concerned only with religion in compliance with the law separating Church and State. Needy Jews in Algeria are at present aided by the Jewish sub-commission of the Bureau de Bienfaisance Européen, a public organization, and by the Sociétés de Bienfaisance Israélites, private agencies. There are still numerous private charity organizations and their needs are growing in direct proportion to the inflation. There is an acute need for the creation of a new welfare organization. In Algiers there has been founded a Committee for the creation of a Jewish orphanage — only the difficulty of finding ground and material delay the construction.

*Educational Activities*

On the educational scene there have been some real achievements:

ORT has opened a school in Algiers where mechanics, electricity, chemistry, carpentry are being taught; a school canteen has also been opened. ORT plans to organize a large handicraft school for North Africa which most probably will be located in Tlemcen.

Camps have been in two places in Algiers where young people (boys and girls) may learn agricultural work (Hahshara); there are about 100 young people in these camps.

Finally, the Association des Etudiants Juifs de France has recently organized a branch in Algiers.

As for primary grades in Tunisia and in Morocco, not many children can attend Jewish schools of which there are far too few. At present great efforts are being made to enlarge the existing schools and to build new ones. Thus in Marrakech, Morocco, during 1946, more than a thousand children were unable to attend school for lack of space. In Casablanca there are more than twenty-five hundred children in the same situation and in Rabat there are four hundred children.

In Algeria the situation is different: the State schools are open to all children regardless of their religious affiliation. Until 1941, there was no private Jewish school in Algeria (with the exception of the Talmud Torahs and the Etz-Haim, exclusively religious schools). Under the Vichy regime and a Governor General named General Weygand a numerus clausus was introduced not only in the universities but especially in the elementary and secondary schools. Overnight Jewish children were excluded, even from kindergarten, and the communities found themselves obliged to start anew the building of Jewish private schools. Opened October 1, 1941, these schools were closed March 31, 1943, the children returning to the public schools the following day.

### *The Algerian Community*

In Algiers, however, the Maimonides School, a Jewish college, was kept going. At this school, which is closed on Saturdays and Jewish holidays, the official high school program and Jewish knowledge are both taught. Since 1943, it has been struggling under adverse financial conditions, for considerable funds are needed particularly in training those youngsters who wish to qualify for the Ecole Rabbinique d'Algérie. The establishment of this seminary as well as of

the Conseil Supérieur Rabbinique has just been decided on by the Fédération des Communautés Israélites d'Algérie.

La Fédération des Communautés Israélites d'Algérie was organized in April 1947. The Congress of Algerian Judaism which met from April 22 to April 24, 1947, was attended by delegates from the eighty Jewish communities within Algeria.

Reports were made on the following:

a) Establishment of the statute pertaining to religious and lay officials of the communities in Algeria; b) Talmud Torahs and religious instruction in Algeria; c) higher religious education; d) plans for the by-laws of the Federation; e) budget of the Federation.

The by-laws adopted provide for

- 1) The representation of Jewish interests in Algeria in general and of the member groups in particular;
- 2) The study and coordination of their general activities;
- 3) The defense of their common interests;
- 4) And the development and protection of religious and social institutions, especially by the creation of an Ecole Rabbinique d'Algérie and of a general management of Hebrew teaching (instruction) in the lower grades (Talmud Torahs);
- 5) Creation and development of youth group work and professional orientation;
- 6) Establishment of civil service status for the Rabbinical personnel;

### *The Moroccan Community*

A similar set-up exists in Morocco. The development of the Jews there has been judged sufficiently advanced to permit them, since the end of 1945, to elect their own representatives for the committees. Before that time they were designated by the office of the *Shereef* (a high Mohammedan dignitary).

The elections thus held have produced results that do honor to Moroccan Jewry. They have been grateful to His Majesty the Sultan for the *Dahir* of May 7, 1945, which reorganized

the communal committees. The communities have been happy to be called upon to elect their representatives, and the elections which for the first time were held in the last month of 1945 proved that the Jewish voters have an intellectual maturity which justified the aforementioned *Dahir*. Since then one meets with committees whose members are young and active and who have a realistic knowledge of needs. They try to reconcile the ideas of a venerable past with the living conditions of a present created by the inevitable evolution of social values.

During a meeting of the presidents of the *Comités des Communautés Israélites* which took place at the beginning of March 1947, a *Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc* was set up. This council drew up by-laws which at present are being examined. The customary benevolence of the Residence Services, and the concern which His Majesty the Sultan shows in respect to his Jewish subjects, give hope that the Council will be officially recognized. This recognition would represent an act of high policy, because such a council would be eminently fit to work for the good of the Jews in Morocco, for their development and progress in the religious and cultural domains.

It is hoped that the Jews of Tunisia will follow the example of their co-religionists in Algeria and Morocco, and that they in turn will build up a union of communities in the Regency.

### *Libyan Refugees*

Problems arising from conditions in foreign countries have had their influence on North African Jewry. In the first place, there was the case of the "Libyan refugees." In July 1942, the Italians expelled five hundred Jewish families of Algerian ancestry from Tripoli and Libya. The Vichy Government agreed to let them come to Algeria. Overnight the Jewish communities in Algeria were faced with the necessity of taking them into their communities. They were not even given time to make the preparations required in such circumstances. The decision was imposed and the victims of the Italian au-

thorities were sent off in trains without even knowing what their destination was to be. Worse still, in certain areas the administrators of the Southern territories refused these unfortunates the right to settle in the regions under their jurisdiction. The district heads, having no authority over these functionaries, the Gouvernement Général was compelled to enjoin them to receive the Jewish refugees and to adopt a somewhat more humane attitude towards them. The few belongings which these unfortunates had been able to bring along had been taken away from them by the Italian customs officers. Thus they arrived in Algiers deprived of everything, without any roof to shelter them, without any means of self-support. Subjected to the common law which governs the Jewish population, reduced to abject beggary, and excluded from the distribution of raw materials the acquisition of which would have permitted a few of them to work as shoemakers or tailors, their condition can be easily imagined.

Since the beginning of 1943, the attention of the Algerian authorities has repeatedly been drawn to the situation of the Libyan refugees, and their repatriation to Tripoli and Libya requested. The gouvernement général, touched by their fate, has repeatedly interceded with the British Government; but so far there has been no reply. Curious and even disturbing is the fact that Tripoli and Libya seem to be isolated from the outside world, for the undeniable fact is that no news emanates from these countries, and we know nothing of the Jews who are living there. We lack any information on the conditions of their life and their moral and political situation.