



A Semite: A Memoir of Algeria

Denis Guenoun

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Denis Guénoun's father was an Algerian Jew who inherited French citizenship and revered the principles of the French Revolution. He taught science in a French lycée in Oran and belonged to the French Communist Party. He rarely fought on a winning side, but his belief in the common interests of Arabs and Jews, Europe and a liberated North Africa, call out to us from the ruins.

In World War II, he was drafted to defend Vichy France's colonies in the Middle East. At the same time, Vichy barred him and his wife from teaching school because they were Jewish. When the British conquered Syria he was sent home to Oran. In 1943, after the Allies captured Algeria, he joined the Free French Army and fought in Europe. After the war, both parents went back to teaching, doing their best to reconcile militant unionism and clandestine party activity with the demands of teaching and family. The Guénouns had little interest in Israel. They considered themselves at home in Algeria. From 1958 onward, Guénoun supported Algerian independence, outraging his French neighbors. Expelled from Algeria by the French paramilitary Organisation Armée Secrète, he spent his last years in Marseille.

This book movingly recreates the efforts of a grown-up son, Denis Guénoun, to understand what happened in his childhood. Gracefully weaving together youthful memories with research into his father's life and times, this memoir confounds the distinctions -- ethnic, national, and political -- that might otherwise explain or justify conflict. Who belongs where? Who is one's natural enemy? Radically hostile to any sort of racism, Guénoun's father believed Jews and Arabs were bound by an authentic fraternity and could only realize a free future together. He called himself a Semite, a word that united Jewish and Arab worlds and best reflected a shared origin.

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