

Miller, Susan Gilson. *Years of Glory: Nelly Benatar and the Pursuit of Justice in Wartime North Africa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021

Rachel Simon

Volume 19, numéro 2, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110277ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v19i2.42675>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Women in Judaism, Inc.

ISSN

1209-9392 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Simon, R. (2022). Compte rendu de [Miller, Susan Gilson. *Years of Glory: Nelly Benatar and the Pursuit of Justice in Wartime North Africa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021]. *Women in Judaism*, 19(2), 1–3.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v19i2.42675>

Miller, Susan Gilson. *Years of Glory: Nelly Benatar and the Pursuit of Justice in Wartime North Africa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021.

Reviewed by Rachel Simon, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

In recent years, there is a growing interest and understanding of the impact of World War II on North Africa's politics, military operations, and issues related to refugees and stateless and displaced persons. In this study Susan Gilson Miller, professor emerita of history of Morocco and the Mediterranean at the University of California, Davis, examines the role of Hélène “Nelly” Cazes Benatar (1898-1979) in assisting refugees who escaped Europe during the war and reached Morocco, a French Protectorate since 1912, in their attempts to find a new home, and her achievements in helping during the mid-1940s to release slave workers from French labor camps in the Sahara. While her activities were mentioned in several studies, this is the first monograph focusing on her activities, examined on the background of political and military developments in North Africa and France during the war and its aftermath, providing a thorough review of the refugee problem. The study, divided into chapters each discussing one year, is based on national, organizational and private archives, including that of Cazes Benatar, as well as memoirs written by her son-in-law, numerous interviews and published resources. Extensive notes and references are included.

Born into a prosperous Sephardic family in Tangier, Morocco, Cazes Benatar studied at the Alliance Israélite Universelle school, spent time in Italy and Spain during her youth, and knew Spanish (including the local Jewish dialect, *Haketia*), French, Italian, and English. In 1917 her family moved to Casablanca, which became a major Moroccan port city and administrative center on the Atlantic Ocean, where she passed the baccalaureate at the Lycée Mers Sultan college and lived there for most of her life until she settled in Paris in 1962, where she died. In 1920 she married Moyses Benatar (d. 1939), had two children but toward the end of the decade was not content with the life of a wife, homemaker, and socialite. She decided to study law by correspondence at the University of Bordeaux, passed the French bar in 1933, and opened her own office, thus becoming the first woman lawyer in Morocco. For several years she focused on her legal work but once realizing in 1939 the plight of European Jewish refugees, who were stuck in Casablanca trying to reach safety in the West, she spent increasingly more time on helping refugees and stateless and displaced persons, and eventually completely focused on these endeavors, due to her dedication and as a result of the anti-Semitic laws, which debarred Jewish lawyers in Vichy France,

including Morocco.

To get things done, Cazes Benatar utilized her connections with senior French administrators and Jewish community members and institutions, her legal expertise, administrative skills, ability to connect with people seeking help, and sheer stubbornness not to let political and administrative hurdles stand in the way of helping desperate people, who were stuck in Morocco fleeing the Nazi regime and laboring in camps in the Sahara building the trans-Saharan railroad. While during the war years she helped mainly refugees, following the Allied landing in North Africa she was involved with the continuous refugee flow from Europe and these workers interned in the Saharan labor camps, fighting for their legal status, finding accommodation, food, medical services and work, and arranging their travel documents and safe departure. To create documentation of the refugees and camp internees, she spent several months in Algeria and visited several major Saharan labor camps. She became closely involved with major Jewish organizations, mainly the Jewish American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the HICEM (three merged Jewish migration organizations) to solve the problems of European Jews stuck in North Africa. Despite the legal hurdles put on Moroccan Jews under Vichy, she managed to find ways to overcome these obstacles. She was assisted with a growing staff, several of whom have found her overbearing, though these were mostly European and American men who resisted having a Moroccan woman in charge.

Following the war, she spent two years in Paris with the JDC working on Displaced Persons issues. She returned to Casablanca serving as the JDC representative in North Africa until 1951, and resumed her private law practice there until 1962, when lawyers were obliged to present their cases in court in Arabic. Upon her settling in Paris, she passed the French law bar for the second time and continued working as a lawyer.

This is an important study on the work of an exemplary gifted woman who selflessly dedicated her talents and time to successfully assist refugees and stateless and displaced persons during WWII and its aftermath. The book is very engaging, combining an examination of Cazes Benatar work with and analysis of political and military developments during the war, using, among other sources, the rich private archive of Cazes Benatar as well as numerous other national and organizational archives. I wish the study included more on her personality, connection with her family, and her socioeconomic condition which enabled her to commit herself to assisting others during several years. The book is a major contribution to the study of WWII, especially on its impact on North Africa, as well as to Jewish and

women studies.