Morocco

Country in North Africa governed by France from 1912--1956; a small part of the country was ruled by SPAIN. On the eve of world war ii, about 200,000 Jews lived in Morocco, most in the French-held part. During the 1930s, both French right-wing and Arab Muslim groups in Morocco began anti-Jewish propaganda campaigns that led to violent clashes between them and the Jews. In spite of that, however, many Jewish refugees fled to Morocco after the war broke out in September 1939.

After Germany occupied northern France and a pro-German regime was established in southern France, at Vichy, most of the French administration in Morocco declared allegiance to the Vichy government. By October 1940, they instituted the same anti-Jewish laws (Statut des Juifs) that were being enacted in France, but adapted them for the special circumstances in Morocco. Unlike in Europe, Jews in Morocco were defined as such by religion, so as not to offend the Muslim majority by targeting Jews who had converted to Islam. Also, the Vichy anti-Jewish decrees mainly affected Jews in urban areas.

In 1941 many Jewish refugees fled occupied France for Morocco. At the same time, the French administration in Morocco established over 30 forced labor and detention camps, where Jews were sent to work in an insufferable climate for more than 10 hours per day. The largest Moroccan forced labor camp was Djelfa, which contained 700--1,000 prisoners, many of whom were those same refugees who had come to Morocco seeking a safe haven.

The United States army liberated Morocco on November 11, 1942. Technically, the Jews in Morocco were free, but it was several months until all anti-Jewish decrees were cancelled and prisoners interned in camps were actually let out. Furthermore, French right-wing groups and some Muslims once again organized violence against the Jews. Even the police persecuted the newly-"liberated" Jews; tens of Jews were randomly arrested in the streets and given heavy punishments. This type of cruel treatment lasted for many months. (For more on Vichy, see also France.)