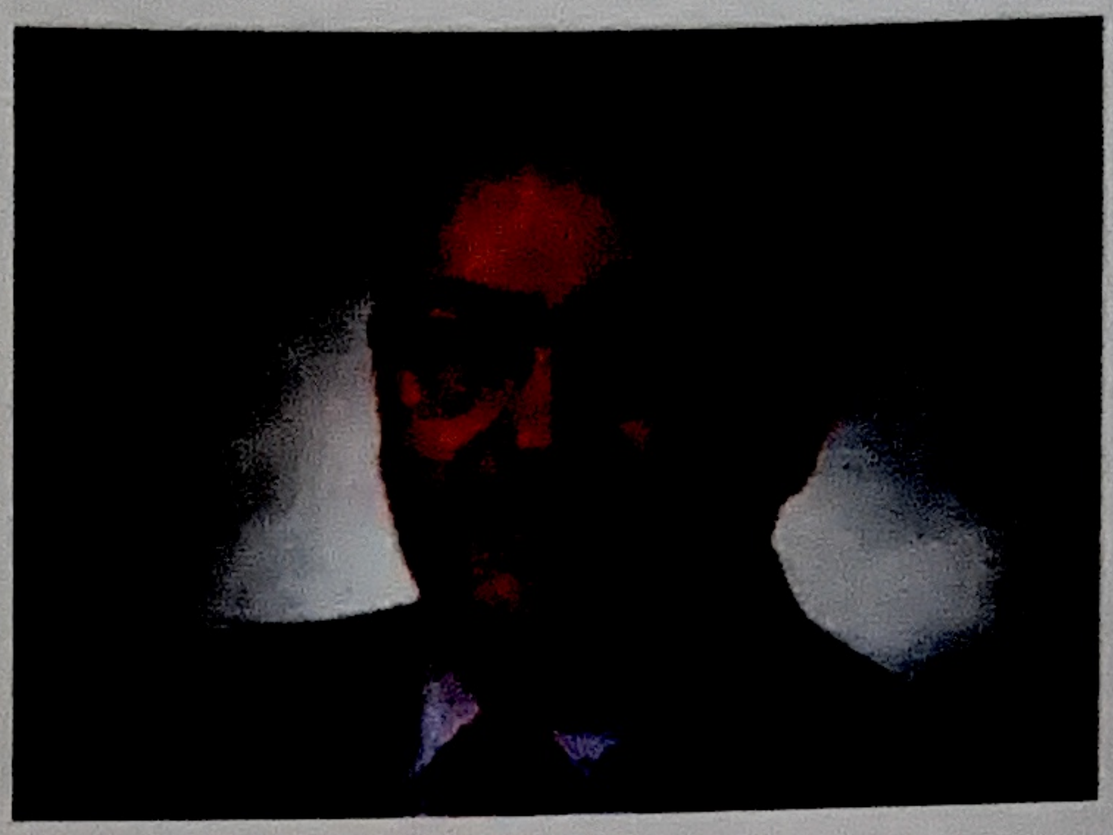
From Tunisia to Tulsa: A Student, a Teacher, and Two Worlds We Have Lost

Malick W. Ghachem

My father Said H. Ghachem (1941-2021) was an immigrant from Tunisia to the United States who came by way of the kindness of a teacher named David Errera. Since my father's passing in 2021, I have been working on a memoir of his passage to the United States that weaves together the intersecting lives of these two remarkable men, the one a young Arab Muslim man who dreamed of a life beyond the shores of his native land, the other a Sephardic Jew who would also leave Tunisia not long after my father, albeit for quite different reasons, and following a different trajectory to France. There is a sadness to Errera's story that I carry inside me and in my memories of my father, and that sits alongside a gratitude for, and a sense of wonder at, the story of these two men. It is a story of a world of Arab-Jewish coexistence and of an America that, I fear, we have lost.



Said H. Ghachem

Let me begin with the American part. On my father's online obituary in the *Houston Chronicle*, a family friend named Michelle Beale posted this comment:

I met Said in 1962 at the University of Tulsa as a freshman. He and the other foreign students at TU made me want to explore the world, which I did. Said led an interesting life, and he with his lovely wife Katia came back into mine many years later when they moved to Houston. He will be missed by family and friends around the world.

What happened to this America? The America that created the Peace Corps and the United States Agency for International Development in 1961, the very year that my father first arrived in the United States? The America of college graduates curious about, and eager to find their place in, a broader world beyond our shores? The America of immigrants changing the lives of citizens and going on to become citizens themselves? The America that, particularly after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished discriminatory national origins quotas, opened its doors to those seeking opportunity in a land of abundance?

My father indeed led an interesting life, and it was owed in part to a world of Arab-Jewish coexistence that brought him into contact with David Errera at a pivotal moment in both men's stories. My father came of age in the town of Sousse, on the Mediterranean coast about two hours south of Tunis by car, during the post-World War II decade that coincided with the decolonization of Tunisia. Errera, who taught my father English at the Lycée de Garçons in Sousse, encouraged him to apply for a Cold War-era American government scholarship designed to orient post-colonial students of the "Third World" towards the United States. That scholarship led to my father's education (at TU) as a chemical-petroleum engineer and his subsequent role in the oil refining revolution that continues to shape our world.

Errera was descended from the Livornese Sephardic diaspora that began settling in Tunisia in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Like Albert Memmi, he was imprisoned as a young man in a German labor camp in Tunis during the Nazi occupation of North Africa. After the war he became a teacher of English at the Lycée de Garçons in Sousse, and a correspondent for the major Tunisian newspapers *La Presse*, *La dépêche tunisienne*, and *Le Petit Matin*, covering Sousse. The Second World War changed everything for both my father and his teacher, albeit in radically different ways that

reflected their Muslim and Jewish backgrounds. Decolonization and the rise of Cold War ideological proxy warfare created a path for my father to migrate to the United States and pursue his dream of becoming a chemical engineer. That path was not just a product of structural and political factors: it was made directly possible by Errera, who, through contacts overseas, had his finger on the pulse of opportunities for higher education scholarships in the United States.

For his part, Errera (and other Tunisian Jews) encountered an increasingly tenuous place in the new postwar, and eventually postcolonial, Tunisian society. Opportunities for social mobility, such as entering the teaching profession, were available. But they were tied to the perpetuation of French cultural and institutional influence in Tunisia. Perhaps sensing the decline of that influence, Errera himself increasingly turned toward the United States as a vehicle and framework for channeling and mediating his vision of Tunisia's postcolonial future. Tensions over Israel, the Algerian war of independence, and – above all – the July 1962 Bizerte crisis with France ultimately made that pluralist and cosmopolitan vision too vulnerable to survive. Errera made his own exit from Tunisia (for France) in 1963, thereby converging in a paradoxical way with my father's story – though his reasons for leaving may have extended beyond concerns about antisemitism.

In a full-length memoir-in-progress that draws on my uncle's family archive, the archives of the Lycée de Garçons de Sousse, Tunisian newspapers, and French public records, I reconstruct the intersecting fates of these two sons of Tunisia as they navigated the headwinds of life after the Second World War and independence. Their divergent paths symbolize the eclipse of Arab-Jewish coexistence in North Africa and in the Arab Muslim world more generally. Since 2023, the recrudescence of conflict between Israel and an increasingly large portion of the Middle East region seems to have stacked the deck against any effort to reconstruct a vision of peaceful coexistence out of the kind of memories and histories associated with the story of my father and David Errera. We who live in this time of increasing faith in war, violence, and xenophobia as the natural and necessary conditions of humankind must continue to find ways to stir the seeds of peace, coexistence, and solidarity with our immigrant neighbors into life. In that struggle, the discipline of social history will continue to have an important, indeed indispensable, role.

Lycée de Garçons in Sousse

I have spent my career ar
difference between an o
changing lives and one t
Cambridge Assessment
running a school in a
interested, but I wasn't
That conversation wa
moments of my life.

Alsama Project ope
camps of Shatila an
four people who h
a school and ever
publisher; Richa
Kadria, a Syrian
Palestinian refu
camp asked f
answer.

What they h
unbelievable.
school – 90
eradicate th
those same
years. Half
spent dec
means.

AG