

# Hélène Cazes Benatar

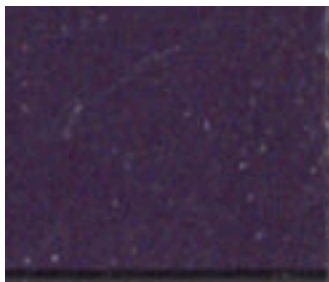
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Based in Casablanca, Hélène Cazes Benatar not only assisted a great number of refugees fleeing from Europe to North Africa, but also helped with the liberation of internees in Saharan forced labor and internment camps run by the Vichy regime.

Her son-in-law titled a report about her appropriately: ‘Nelly Cazes-Benathar, une femme de tête, de coeur et de courage’—a strong-minded and witty woman of compassion and courage.<sup>1)</sup> Rather than presenting Hélène Cazes Benatar’s biography in strict chronological order, this brief profile aims to examine facets of her life as a Moroccan Jewish woman, lawyer, and activist, focusing on her ‘years of glory’<sup>2)</sup>.



## A Well-Educated and Dedicated Moroccan Jewish Woman, Spouse, and Mother

Hélène Cazes Benatar was born into and raised by a Jewish family with [Sephardic ancestry](#) in [Tangier](#) (Morocco) on 27 October 1898. Hélène Cazes spoke Spanish as well as [Haketia](#), a variety of Spanish, Arabic, and Hebrew, and even added French and Italian to her linguistic repertoire later on.<sup>3)</sup> She attended the Tangier primary school of the [Alliance Israélite Universelle](#) (AIU), an international Jewish organization headquartered in Paris, where she was educated in French literature, language, and history, as well as Jewish subjects including the Hebrew Bible, language, and history.<sup>4)</sup> After the [French conquest of Morocco in 1912](#),<sup>5)</sup> the Cazes family obtained French citizenship.<sup>6)</sup> Susan Gilson Miller encapsulates Hélène Cazes' [education](#) and overall upbringing as follows:

'Born in a Muslim country, impregnated with Judeo-Spanish customs and mores, Moroccan in sensibility, Western in intellect and outlook, French by citizenship and taste, Nelly Benatar had an upbringing that was a diverse mix of beliefs, loyalties, cultures, and histories.'<sup>7)</sup>

After living in Turin (Italy) and Seville (Spain) in the 1910s, the Cazes family moved to [Casablanca](#) in 1916. There, Hélène Cazes enrolled in the all-girls Lycée Mers Sultan and obtained her [baccalauréat](#) (French high-school diploma) in 1917. This was an extraordinary achievement for a Moroccan woman during that time,<sup>8)</sup> only accomplished by few Jewish women in Morocco<sup>9)</sup>. Four years later, Hélène Cazes [married Moyses Benatar](#). Based in Casablanca, the couple started a family soon after. Both committed themselves to social and political activities in Casablanca's Jewish community alongside their professional work.<sup>10)</sup> Within the community, Hélène Cazes Benatar made contact with women such as the French jurist and president of the [WIZO](#) (Women's International Zionist Organization) Sasia Erlich, who inspired her to co-found and preside over the WIZO's local branch in Casablanca.<sup>11)</sup>

Unexpectedly, Moyses Benatar passed away in the beginning of 1939, leaving his family behind. Hence, Hélène Cazes Benatar was now solely responsible for the support of her children. Her daughter Myriam accompanied and supported her mother in her wartime activities.<sup>12)</sup> Post-war and [Morocco's independence in 1956](#), many—including her daughter—left Morocco for [France](#), and in 1962, Hélène Cazes Benatar joined her family in Paris, where she passed in 1979.<sup>13)</sup>

## First Licensed and Native-Born Moroccan Jewish Woman Lawyer

Already a spouse and mother in her early thirties, H el ene Cazes Benatar pursued a degree in French law from the [University of Bordeaux](#). A special agreement between its faculty of law and the French dominion allowed holders of the baccalaur at to pursue a law degree.<sup>14)</sup> Earning her degree and passing the French bar in 1933,<sup>15)</sup> H el ene Cazes Benatar became the first certified native [Moroccan Jewish female lawyer](#) and ‘paved the way for Jewish people and women’.<sup>16)</sup> She launched her legal career by starting a law office and joining the cour de cassation (French court of cassation) in Casablanca as a member.<sup>17)</sup> In the French judicial system, the [cour de cassation](#) forms the supreme court in civil and commercial matters.<sup>18)</sup> Under colonial rule, a dualistic Moroccan legal system was established according to which either European-derived (i.e., Spanish or French) law or indigenous law was administered in Moroccan courts.<sup>19)</sup> To H el ene Cazes Benatar, a French citizen and bred to the French law, this was ‘a prestigious post for a beginner, signaling her competence in the details of French jurisprudence.’<sup>20)</sup>

Subsequent to the [Franco-German armistice in June 1940](#), the [Vichy regime](#) gained control over parts of France as well as its colonies until the [allied forces arrived in North Africa in November 1942](#). As a result of the antisemitic legislation of the Vichy regime, Moroccan Jewish people were officially prohibited from carrying out certain independent professions, including lawyers, doctors and others, due to dahirs ([royal decrees](#)) implementing numeri clausi (strict quotas) established by the second Statut de juifs ([anti-Jewish law](#)).<sup>21)</sup> It is likely that H el ene Cazes Benatar was no longer allowed to practice her legal profession.<sup>22)</sup> In the first reinstatement order in 1943, her name, unlike the names of her male lawyer colleagues, was omitted, which was why she reprimanded her name’s inscription swiftly.<sup>23)</sup>

After the war, she returned to her legal career, first in Casablanca, and then—following the [end of colonial rule in Morocco in 1956](#) and changes in the Moroccan legal system as well as the requirements for the legal profession<sup>24)</sup>—in Paris. When she was already in her sixties, she took the French bar exam again and passed it for the second time.<sup>25)</sup>

## A Relentless Advocate for the Rights of Refugees and Displaced Persons during and after WWII

Following the [outset of WWII](#) in the year of her spouse’s untimely death, H el ene Cazes Benatar underwent local Red Cross nursing training at a military hospital in Casablanca.<sup>26)</sup> The ascending number of refugees arriving in Casablanca soon caught her attention, and she instituted the Comit e d’Assistance aux R efugies

Etrangers (Committee of Assistance to [Foreign] Refugees) to aid refugees by providing food, shelter, medical assistance and help in emigrating abroad.<sup>27)</sup> In order to finance the work of her committee, H  l  ne Cazes Benatar raised financial aid within the Jewish community and received donations from Jewish and non-Jewish private individuals.<sup>28)</sup>

She collaborated with various aid organizations, among them the [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee](#) (JDC), [HIAS-HICEM](#), and [AFSC](#).<sup>29)</sup> H  l  ne Cazes Benatar was also involved with the ‘Mengin’ resistance group.<sup>30)</sup> During the time of the Vichy regime, resistance groups formed part of an anti-Vichy clandestine movement in support of the Allied cause.<sup>31)</sup> The aforementioned Vichy regime not only affected H  l  ne Cazes Benatar regarding her legal profession, but also in her activist work. When she was targeted by regime executives, this culminated in a ban of her Refugee Committee.<sup>32)</sup>

Throughout her work, H  l  ne Cazes Benatar showed great empathy and affection. She cared deeply for women and children in need of protection, once even offering her home to a young mother of twins whose spouse had passed.<sup>33)</sup>

## **Meeting New Challenges: Liberation of Forced Labor and Internment Camps in North Africa and Joining UNRRA Staff**

When the existence of [forced labor and internment camps](#) in North Africa, operated by the Vichy regime, came to light, H  l  ne Cazes Benatar was given another important task: the fight for liberation of internees. Internees were refugees from Europe, ex-soldiers, and political prisoners. They were held in an unknown number of camps, and many were subjected to forced labor.<sup>34)</sup> She was hesitant about taking on the task at first,<sup>35)</sup> even though she had the necessary skill set: ‘The work ahead consisted of fact-checking, tabulating, profiling, evaluating, planning. No one on the scene was better equipped than Benatar to take this assignment. A new phase on her struggle for refugee rights was about to begin.’<sup>36)</sup>

Building on her established working relationships, she visited camps in the Sahara to liberate internees and help them rebuild their lives.<sup>37)</sup> In November 1943, the newly established [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration \(UNRRA\)](#) entered the field and took on the task of [providing large-scale assistance to refugees and displaced persons](#). The aims and functions of this government-sponsored organization included planning, coordinating, administering, or arranging for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations.<sup>38)</sup> In 1944, H  l  ne Cazes Benatar joined the UNRRA as a staff member for one year. She first worked in the refugee camp at F  dala (now [Mohammedia](#)), then at Philippeville (Algeria; now [Skikda](#)) where she



interviewed camp residents to corroborate their eligibility for the UNRRA program.<sup>39)</sup> Hélène Cazes Benatar, already experienced in this field and equipped with legal knowledge, compiled her expertise in the form of a paper entitled *Étude sur les réfugiés* (A Guide on Refugees).<sup>40)</sup> Therein, she made suggestions on how to address the issue of [statelessness](#) that many refugees faced as part of the challenge to rebuild their lives. Notably, at that time, individual rights, particularly those of refugees and displaced persons, were not enshrined in international law as they are nowadays.<sup>41)</sup> It was only after the atrocities of the Second World War that [international and regional human rights regimes](#) were established, along with [international and regional instruments for the protection of refugees](#).<sup>42)</sup>

## Post-WWII Work: Resettlement of Displaced Persons and Activities in Jewish Community Affairs

After the war, Hélène Cazes Benatar joined the Paris office of the aforementioned JDC in the supervision and support of postwar resettlement of Jewish [displaced persons](#).<sup>43)</sup> As Susan Gilson Miller highlights: 'In her work for the UNRRA, her [Nelly's] success had hinged on her ability to treat each refugee individually, but the sheer number of clients post-war made this method impossible. Benatar was plainly out of her element.'<sup>44)</sup> Although she struggled to live up to her standards and faced difficulties and opposition from within the department, she appears to have stood by her principles and emphasized the importance of this when she wrote to her superiors, among other things, that

'[a]t no moment did I consider the persons protected by us as material for calculations and statistics, but always took care of their needs, regarding them as human beings and persecuted persons with the right to all care and attention from our department. [...]'<sup>45)</sup>

Hélène Cazes Benatar proved herself to be a tireless advocate for the rights of refugees and displaced persons. She embraced the idea that every refugee should have basic rights based on a shared belief in dignity and respect, but also combined this maxim with her legal expertise, which had already been demonstrated in her work for UNRRA.<sup>46)</sup> In 1948, she was appointed JDC 'Representative in North Africa'.<sup>47)</sup> After completing her work with the JDC by 1952<sup>48)</sup> she toured the United States.<sup>49)</sup> In 1956, she joined the [Fonds social juif unifié](#) (Unified Jewish Social Fund, FSJU) [as a member](#). She wrote [several reports on French and Spanish Morocco as well as Tangier](#) for the renowned [American Jewish Year Book](#) between 1953 and 1956.

After leaving Casablanca, Hélène Cazes Benatar co-founded and was nominated president of an Association of Moroccan Jews in Paris, but apparently, there were [voices opposed to a woman presiding](#) over the organization.<sup>50)</sup> In 1969, several years after some of her allies had already received recognition for their services

in various ways, a British-French Friendship Association awarded her a medal recognizing her wartime activities.<sup>51)</sup>

Hélène Cazes Benatar was exceptional not only with regard to her academic education as one of few Jewish women in Morocco to obtain the baccalauréat and as the first certified native-born Moroccan Jewish woman lawyer. Also, her social, political and even clandestine activities were significant and extend far beyond the Jewish community until well after the Second World War. They certainly constitute remarkable accomplishments by a woman at that time and 'took her far beyond the spheres of traditional women's work'.<sup>52)</sup> Thus, Hélène Cazes Benatar was an 'outstanding woman' not only in one but in a number of ways.

## Further Readings:

- Susan Gilson Miller, [Years of Glory: Nelly Benatar and the Pursuit of Justice in Wartime North Africa](#)(SUP 2021).
- Susan Gilson Miller, '[Hélène Cazes Benatar](#)' in the Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women (23 June 2021, Jewish Women's Archive) (accessed 7 February 2024).
- Reeva Spector Simon, [The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: The Impact of World War II](#)(Routledge 2020) 200-218.
- Michal Ben Ya'akov, '[Hélène Cazes-Benatar et ses activités en faveur des réfugiés juifs au Maroc 1940-1943](#)' in Dan Michman and Haïm Saadoun (eds.), *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord face à l'Allemagne nazie*(Perrin 2018) 177-198.
- Michal Ben Ya'akov, '[Cazès-Benathar, Hélène](#)' in the Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World (first published online 2010, Brill) (accessed 30 October 2023).
- Meredith Hindley, [Destination Casablanca: Exile, Espionage, and the Battle for North Africa](#)(PublicAffairs 2017).

## Further Sources:

- 'Pioneering Women – Hélène Cazès-Benatar: An International Conference marking International Holocaust Remembrance Day' January 2023 (Youtube, last updated 27 February 2023) <[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPPtFVY0jHkVnsOWzdOdXvMHgG\\_HXjfOU](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPPtFVY0jHkVnsOWzdOdXvMHgG_HXjfOU)> accessed 9 February 2024, consisting of several episodes.
- National WWII Museum, 'Service on Celluloid: Minisode to Casablanca' (Spotify, March 2019) <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6gO16eHd7bEZCLRZAULp4x?si=8f076a1bac9a40ec>> accessed 9 February 2024, picks up on the story of Hélène Cazes Benatar while exploring the [Warner Bros. film 'Casablanca' \(1942\)](#) and the actual background in WWII history.

## References

- Rachel Hélène ('Nelly') Cazes Benatar's personal papers were deposited in the Central Archives of the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP) (Reference

Code P129) and digitized by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) (RG-68.115M). Material can also be found in collections of the archives of the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC Archives). USHMM references the unpublished report by Serge Lapidus, Nelly Cazes-Benatar, une femme de tête, de cœur et de courage (from the author, n.d.). Drawing inter alia from the private collection, material, and Serge Lapidus' report, historian Susan Gilson Miller wrote the book *Years of Glory: Nelly Benatar and the Pursuit of Justice in Wartime North Africa* (SUP 2021) on Héléne Cazes Benatar. Her wartime activities are also addressed in Michal Ben Ya'akov, 'Héléne Cazes-Benatar et ses activités en faveur des réfugiés juifs au Maroc 1940-1943' in Dan Michman and Haïm Saadoun (eds.), *Les Juifs d'Afrique du Nord face à l'Allemagne nazie* (Perrin 2018) 177-198 and Meredith Hindley, *Destination Casablanca: Exile, Espionage, and the Battle for North Africa* (PublicAffairs 2017) particularly Chapter 9 as well various other publications. Please note that any reference to individuals, organizations, and institutions mentioned throughout this blog article—whether it may be explicitly or implicitly—shall refer to them only in full respect for their integrity and recognition for their work and achievement.

- See the title of Miller's book on Héléne Cazes Benatar who herself referred to the wartime period as 'les années glorieuses' according to Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 4.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 12-13.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 12. On the AIU in Morocco see, e.g., Michael M. Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish communities of Morocco: 1862–1962* (State Univ. of New York Press 1983).
- From 1912 to 1956, Morocco was under colonial rule: The Treaty between France and Morocco (March 1912) arranged for French occupation, followed by the Treaty between France and Spain regarding Morocco (November 1912) dividing Morocco into two sectors and putting the Northern zone in Spanish and the rest in French hands except for Tangier, see, e.g., Susan Gilson Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (CUP 2013) 88.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 10.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 12.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 13.
- Ben Ya'akov, 'Héléne Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 181.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 22-23.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 21; Ben Ya'akov, 'Héléne Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 182.
- See, e.g., Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 105, 108; Ben Ya'akov, 'Héléne Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 184.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 157-158.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 17.
- Ben Ya'akov, 'Héléne Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 182 (translated from French by the author). See also Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 17; Ben Ya'akov, 'Cazès-Benathar, Héléne' (n 1); N.N., 'Benatar, Nelly' (n.d., CAHJP) accessed 30 January 2024.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 17-18.



- Further chambers were established for commercial and social matters alongside the three original counting civil and criminal matters as well as petitions; the latter was abolished in 1947.
- Léon Buskens, 'Sharia and national law in Morocco' in Jan Michiel Otto (ed.), *Sharia Incorporated: A Comparative Overview of the Legal Systems of Twelve Muslim Countries in Past and Present* (AUP 2012) 95 et seqq.
- Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (English tr, 2nd edn., SUP 2019) 61, 69. See further Daniel J. Schroeter, 'Between Metropole and French North Africa: Vichy's Anti-Semitic Legislation and Colonialism's Racial Hierarchies' in Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (eds.), *The Holocaust and North Africa* (SUP 2019) 19 et seqq.
- Ben Ya'akov, 'Hélène Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 186, adding that there were 30 Jewish lawyers in Casablanca and only four allowed to work (id. with further reference). With reference to a denial of exemption filed by Hélène Cazes Benatar, Meredith Hindley assumes that 'she did [...] lose the ability to practice law', Hindley (n 1) 129 (with further reference).
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 117.
- See, e.g., Buskens (n 19) 103.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 157.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 38-39.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 42-43 (with further references) presents two versions of events on Hélène's initial involvement with refugees.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 43.
- Reeva Spector Simon, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: The Impact of World War II* (Routledge 2020) 210 (with further reference), 212.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 47-49, 55-58.
- See further, e.g., Hindley (n 1) particularly Chapters 22 et seqq.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 65-66 (with further references); Ben Ya'akov, 'Hélène Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 197-198.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 104 (with further reference).
- See further, e.g., Simon (n 29) 128-129 (with further references).
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 90 (with further reference).
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 107.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 108 et seqq.
- Article I(2)(a) of the Agreement for United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, November 9, 1943, printed in United States Army Information School, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., *Pillars of Peace* (Pamphlet No. 4, 2nd printing, Book Department May 1946) 19. The UNRAA was succeeded by the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in 1948.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 125 et seqq., 138 et seq.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 129-130.
- On the previous work of the League of Nations regarding the protection of refugees in international law see, e.g., Gilbert Jaeger, 'On the History of the International Protection of Refugees' [2001] 83 *IRRC* 727.
- Still, one should bear in mind that origin and drafting of these instruments is thus largely based on Western thought as well as European historical experiences wherefore they should be explored also by taking critical approaches to international law particularly about colonial continuities and imperial domination;

for the human rights regime see, e.g., here, and for the refugee regime see, e.g., here.

- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 149 et seqq.
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 150 (with further reference).
- American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, G45-54, F007R/0841, as cited in Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 153.
- On this point cf. Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 129-130 (with further references).
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 153.
- Ben Ya'akov, 'Hélène Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 185. Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 153 states 1951.
- There, a newspaper heading referred to her as a 'French Heroine'. See also Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 155-157 (with further references).
- Ben Ya'akov, 'Hélène Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 185 (with further reference).
- Miller, *Years of Glory* (n 1) 158.
- Ben Ya'akov, 'Hélène Cazes-Benatar et ses activités' (n 1) 197 (translated from French by the author).

