

## **Engaged Responsibility:**

### **A Commentary**

Aomar Boum

University of California, Los Angeles, USA and Université Internationale de Rabat

What does one do with an artifact that defied prison walls and censorship? What meaning should one give to publishing a typewritten letter from prisoner #13559 (Abraham Serfaty), still in its original envelope, and composed in the dying months of a lengthy imprisonment in the Prison Centrale de Kenitra? For us, as editors of *Souffles Monde*, what significance does the publication of the letter hold, given the decades between June 24, 1991, when it was written, and April 2023?

My short answer is that the resurrection of *Souffles Monde* would be flawed without this letter, whose historical importance emanates from Serfaty's role as a key figure not only in the transformation of *Souffles* but also in the history of Morocco.

This letter is representative of its time. It is an embodiment of the exchange of ideas that motivated activists to communicate with each other beyond the borders of the nation. Serfaty's letter is a document that shed lights on conversations that Moroccan Jews, such as Edmond Amran El Maleh, had with artists, poets, and intellectuals around the world over the years. This epistle was written by Serfaty, a Sephardic Jew from Morocco, and sent to Ammiel Alcalay, a Boston-based poet and Sephardic Jew from Serbia. There is nothing strange in the desire for communication. However, we have to go deeper than the surface to see that the letter is an exemplar of a trans-Atlantic conversation about the ethical and moral role of Sephardic Jews in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is an affirmation of Abraham's advocacy for a direct engagement of Jewish Sephardic intellectuals in the Palestinian conflict. Although written in 1991, the letter still holds the spirit of Serfaty's role in shifting *Souffles*' focus in 1969 to a political publication with focus on international issues such as economic dependency, capitalism, decolonization, workers' rights, and Zionism, among other things.

In its broader resonance, for me, this letter is an invitation to North African scholars in the Atlantic world to seize the scholarly possibilities our place in North American academia affords us to dream about new and engaged social sciences and humanities with our native homes, communities and regions. It is an urgent call to engage with fellow North African scholars about "home, memory and history" at a global level in the same way Abraham Serfaty tried to build a community of scholars in collaboration with Abdellatif Laâbi and other intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

Despite their incarceration in Kenitra Central Prison, Morocco's highest security prison then, Serfaty and other detainees were able to build a space where they could access books, newspapers and journals especially in the 1980s. This unlimited access to books allowed Abraham to have a conversation with other intellectuals about his Moroccan identity, Palestinian-Israeli conflict,

Zionism, workers’ rights, capitalism and other topics. Writing at the international stage was a necessity not only to make his political case about Palestine public but also to voice his own local views of global issues. For Abraham, *Souffles* was, at least until its last issue, a political platform to highlight his social, political and economic struggles. In rereading Serfaty in this new context, my hope is that *Souffles Monde/Anfas al-‘alam* becomes a space for a new generation of scholars of African Studies to embrace decolonial methodologies and produce knowledge that further connects the two sides of the Atlantic.

In 2004, I met Edmond El Maleh for the first time. It was during a conference sponsored by the American Institute of Maghrib Studies and organized by my mentor Daniel Schroeter in Tangier. Later, “Hadj Edmond” as his fellow Moroccans called him invited me to his apartment in Rabat, where we had many conversations about my ethnographic work on Saharan Jewries and especially the Jews of Akka, to whom he was deeply connected. He encouraged me to pursue my work on plural memories and identities of Moroccan society. In 2007, he arranged a meeting for me with Abraham Serfaty whom I met for the first time in 2010 just a few months before his death. My plan was to write an article about their concepts of memory and identity. They both agreed, but, unfortunately, death took both of them the same week. Edmond Amran El Maleh died in Rabat on November 15, 2010 while Abraham Serfaty died in Marrakesh on November 18, 2010.

“For whom do you write?” Hadj Edmond asked me in 2004. A question that still resonates in my ears. Instead of waiting for my answer, he recommended that I should always write for Morocco first and the world second, adding that whatever I write should be published and accessible to Moroccans in their own languages. Again, decoloniality is at work in this advice. Hence, *Souffles Monde* will be a space where we write for the world and ourselves, in our languages and the languages of the world. Conversation starts with language.