

## Primary Source:

# Excerpts from Zohra Drif's Memoir, 2017



Excerpts from Zohra Drif's memoir, *Inside the Battle of Algiers: Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter*, trans. Andrew Farrand (Just World Books, 2017), 99–122. Drif's memoir was originally published in French in 2013. The following excerpt was cut from the English translation of 2017.

**Setting:** Algiers, capital of the French colony of Algeria, in the fall of 1956

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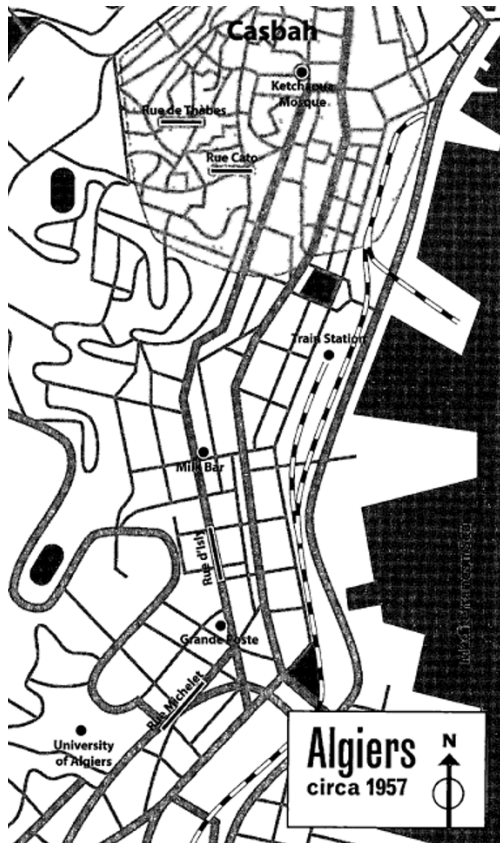
### How We Prepared for the Bombing

In August 1956, after the *ultras*<sup>1</sup> bombing against the inhabitants of Rue de Thèbes in the Casbah, Yacef Saâdi decided to induct Samia and me into the armed groups as volunteers for death ... We had argued that if [women] were recruited into the armed groups, we could blend into the European civilian population and conduct missions with far less risk of being arrested or killed ... We threw ourselves into the concrete preparations for our missions by walking in the European neighborhoods throughout the last days of August and first weeks of September. After meticulous observation, I chose the Milk Bar on Rue d'Isly and Samia opted for the Cafétéria on Rue Michelet ... The Milk Bar symbolized colonial modernity in the service of the Europeans, their offensive carefree attitudes, their shameful indifference to our woes, and the arrogance of the colonial regime ...

1. The *ultras* were a group of right-wing French colonial extremists in Algeria who were independent of the French government and carried out vigilante and paramilitary actions during the war.

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*Map of Algiers showing the relationship of the Casbah to two bomb sites, the Rue Michelet and Milk Bar Café.*

The next step was to study our targets, their surroundings, and their detail. Then came the selecting [of] our outfits, bags, shoes, hair, and makeup. Supervised by Mama Zhor,<sup>2</sup> who was infallible in these subjects, we bought summer dresses and the smartest matching shoe-and-bag combinations and went to Rocques, the best hairdresser, whose haircuts transformed me into a true Bretonne woman and Samia into a real Corsican.<sup>3</sup>

Having never done makeup before, we let the salon's specialist (guided, of course, by Mama Zhor) layer on all the necessary products, explaining the secrets of discrete yet effective application as she put her precious advice into practice on our faces. When we finished up and paid cash – generously – she invited us to return for a free combing and touch-up if needed.

On September 28, Samia and Djamila brought out the first three bombs from the Casbah ... to stash them in an apartment at 5 Rue Borely la Sapie, in Bab El Oued<sup>4</sup>

... [T]he operation to transport the first three bombs was a high-risk mission that demanded courage, composure, and self-control ... Samia told me that when they reached the final checkpoint, one of the soldiers on guard had asked them what they were carrying in their beach bags. With a smile, Djamila replied, "Why, bombs, of course!" The soldier, Djamila, and Samia laughed at her joke and the two young girls, elegant and all smiles on the outside, passed through the checkpoint smoothly, in a hurry to get to the beach. They cried out to a group of French soldiers perched on a Jeep, who responded, "You two are lucky!" to which Djamila replied, "Just come with us!" But they excused themselves, explaining that their service came first.

### **Carrying Out the Bombing**

On the morning of September 30, 1956, Samia, her mother, and I arrived at the very chic Salon Rocques on Rue d'Isly, close to the Milk Bar, for a combing and touch-ups to our makeup, just as the employees had offered two days before.



*A street in the Casbah of Algiers in the 1950s.*

2. Samia Lakhdari's mother.

3. Drif is using words for people from respective regions of France: Brittany in the northwest and Corsica in the Mediterranean. The assumption is that Drif had a lighter complexion than Samia.

4. One of the main neighborhoods of Algiers that was home to French settlers.



From left to right: Samia Lakhdari, Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired, and Hassiba Bent-Bouali, c. 1956.

By eleven o'clock we were back in Saint-Eugène,<sup>5</sup> where we consecrated ourselves to preparing our chic "volunteers for death" outfits. I must say that mine was frankly quite pretty, an elegant summer dress with shoulder straps molding the bust, running my length, and coming to a stop a few inches above the ankles, where it flared out into a frill. It was lavender blue, with small white stripes that perfectly matched my cork-wedge summer shoes of the same color. When trying it all on we had confirmed that, with

our new haircuts and makeup, we would blend in perfectly among the European *jeunesse dorée*<sup>6</sup> – even the most well-to-do among them ...

At one-thirty, we donned our outfits. Aware that we could not go out in the neighborhood dressed this way, we slipped long, loose, ordinary blouses over our fashionable dresses ... Two hours later, when Djamila opened the door on the second floor of 5 Rue Borely la Sapie in Bab El Oued, each of us was more elegant and classy than the last. It would be impossible for the Europeans, blinded by their racism, to detect in us the "Fatimas" of their fantasies ... Then Si Rachid told us that the bombs were activated and stowed in the beach bags. The timers were set ... I took my bomb, opened the door, and ran down the stairs, the beach bag slung behind my right shoulder like all the young girls did at that time.

Suddenly the Milk Bar was before me ... I entered through the door facing the Rue d'Isly, which was closer to the counter and less crowded. Luckily the center stool at the bar was free. I walked calmly and perched myself atop it. I set my heavy beach bag on the ground in front of me, between my legs, my shoes braced on the metal circle that surrounded the stool's high legs. I set my handbag in front of me on the counter. I arranged my long bohemian dress to completely surround and conceal the stool ... I ordered my peach melba<sup>7</sup> and put my left forearm on my little bag, so that my watch would be constantly under my nose and I could watch it without being noticed ... I was served promptly and set about attacking my ice cream. I positioned my beach bag perfectly against the counter with my feet discreetly, all the while showing a barely perceptible smile to hint at the pleasure of tasting my dessert.



Photograph of the Milk Bar Café before Drif's bombing on Sunday, September 30, 1956.

At seven minutes before the explosion, I let myself slide gently off the stool, quietly picked up my handbag and made the few steps that separated me from the exit onto the Rue d'Isly. An invisible hand was crushing my neck, and I fought my

5. A seaside neighborhood in Algiers where Samia and Mama Zhor lived.

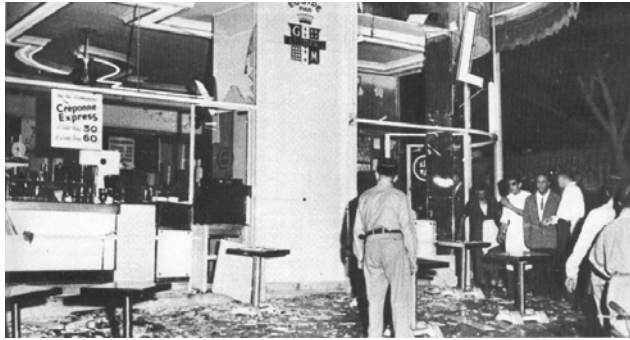
6. Literally translating to "Golden youth," *jeunesse dorée* refers to young, rich, and fashionable people.

7. Peach Melba is a French desert made of vanilla ice cream covered in peaches and raspberry sauce.



legs and feet to force them to stay at the speed befitting a calm young girl on her way home. I turned right, skirted the lively outdoor terrace of the Milk Bar, and took the side alley that led me straight to the Rampe Bugeaud ... I was walking, my head in a vise, when a huge explosion shook me, followed by the sound of shattering glass. My whole body was trembling and I realized that I was paralyzed ...

### Immediately After the Bombing



*Photograph of the Milk Bar Café after Drif's bombing on Sunday, September 30, 1956.*

The sight of people screaming and running everywhere reanimated me ... I remembered that a friend of the family, Madame Caux<sup>8</sup>, lived just a few meters away ... Madame Caux ran a hotel where my parents stayed when they came to Algiers ... Even after I joined the FLN, I occasionally shared Sunday dinner at Madame Caux's, especially when she mentioned that her friend Marguerite

and her husband the colonel would be present. The colonel was part of the military's central staff and I would take advantage of the meal to guide the discussion toward "the events in Algeria." I asked questions that a young girl unacquainted with military life might ask. Then I would give the brothers a detailed report of the colonel's answers ...

I ... threw myself into Madame Caux's building ... She welcomed me by pulling me inside, then locked the door and worried aloud why I had been "wandering" around outside at such an hour in these troubled times. She led me to the kitchen, where she served me a glass of water and asked if I knew where the explosion had been.

"The explosion site can't have been very far," she said. "It made our window panes rattle. You are so pale, my child. Take this, drink. But where on earth were you?"

"Thank you. I was in the study hall and just as I left I heard an explosion. Then I got scared and ..."

"You did well to come here. You should spend the night here," she said ... Madame Caux excused herself, left me leaning against the kitchen table, and ran to open the living-room window to hear the news ... "The bastards! The bastards! It was the Milk Bar! It's carnage!" "Do you hear the sirens? Oh! The Milk Bar! It's right in front of the army headquarters! Oh, the bastards! Murderers!" Madame Caux returned, leaving the window open. She kept talking, railing against "the bastards," the "gang of murderers" who dared to attack the "beautiful," "lovely" Milk Bar. Then she ran back to the window, having heard something new ...

8. Elsewhere, Drif writes that "Madame Caux hailed from mainland France and had only recently returned from her dear Île-de-France," (119).

## Returning to the Casbah

Upon hearing the phrase “another bomb exploded on Rue Michelet,” I awoke from my numbness ... I got up, went to Madame Caux, thanked her infinitely for her kindness, and explained that I had to get going to reach the bus by nightfall and return to the dormitory at Ben Aknoun,<sup>9</sup> where I had to finish some urgent work. I ... bounded down the stairs and found myself in the Rue de Tanger, where a hysterical crowd of men and women of all ages rushed about.

Voices were yelling, “The bastards, the bastards, they sure wasted no time!”

“Dirty rats! They’ll pay! They have to pay!”

“A-rabs, we’ll smash them! We’ll smash those dirty rats!”

“Arrests aren’t good enough anymore, they’ve got to be exterminated! A good *fellaga*<sup>10</sup> is a dead *fellaga*, I tell you. We should round ‘em up and throw ‘em into the sea, I say!”

The street was full of these venomous individuals; racism and hatred spilled out of them, sullyng the walls and asphalt ... A man shot past me like an arrow. Shocked and frightened, I turned. Three Europeans ran in pursuit, trying to catch the fugitive. Terrified, I flattened myself into a doorway. The three Europeans

paused a little further on ... One of them noticed me standing petrified against the door and said, “Don’t stand out here, Mademoiselle.<sup>11</sup> Don’t you know? Now they’re targeting us with bombs, the bastards! Dogs! But we’ll make them pay!”

Saying nothing, I quickly took up my route once more ... I arrived at the bus and threw myself aboard ... It was maybe a quarter to eight ... By the time we arrived at Saint-Eugène, few people remained in the trolley. I got off and hurried up the stairs leading to Rue Salvandy, where Samia lived at number nine



*From top left to right, behind: Djamila Bouhired, Yacef Saâdi, and Hassiba Bent-Bouali. In the front: Samia Lakdhari, Yacef Saâdi's nephew Omar, Ali la Pointe, and Zohra Drif, c. 1956.*

... We fell into each other’s arms, kissing and hugging ... Mama Zhor dragged me upright and pushed me down the hallway and into the sitting room ... She made me drink a glass of water, all the while repeating, “Serves them right! Allah be praised! You did it. We succeeded ... Today, you are a true *moudjahida*,<sup>12</sup> and your place is reserved in heaven.”



*French soldiers search a civilian in Algiers.*

9. A suburb of Algiers where Drif lived in a dormitory on the University of Algiers' residential campus.

10. An Arabic word meaning “bandit,” *fellagas* refers to armed nationalists who fought the French in North Africa, primarily Algeria and Tunisia, after World War II. It is used here as a racialized insult.

11. A title of respect used to address a young, unmarried French woman.

12. *Moudjahidin* are people who struggle on behalf of Muslims; *moudjahida* is the feminine singular form of the word.

# Image Citations

**Page 1:**

Zohra Drif, Just World Books, Fair Use, <https://justworld-books.com/authors/zohra-drif/>

**Page 2:**

Map of Algiers (c. 1957), in Zohra Drif, *Inside the Battle of Algiers: Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter*. Translated by Andrew Farrand. Just World Books, 2017.

Photograph of a street scene from the Casbah, the Muslim district of Algiers, in the 1950s, Fair Use, <https://i.ebay-img.com/images/g/eykAAOSwdGFYwzLn/s-1960.jpg>

**Page 3:**

From left to right: Samia Lakhdari, Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired, Hassiba Bent-Bouali,” in Jacques Massu, *La vraie bataille d’Alger*, Plon, 1971, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les\\_poseuses\\_de\\_bombes.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les_poseuses_de_bombes.jpg)

Milk Bar Café before 20 September 1956, Fair Use, [https://alger-roi.fr/Alger/rue\\_isly/pages\\_liees/44\\_milk\\_bar\\_04\\_lemaire.htm](https://alger-roi.fr/Alger/rue_isly/pages_liees/44_milk_bar_04_lemaire.htm)

**Page 4:**

A scene from the aftermath of the Milk Bar explosion, 1956. Originally published in *Echo d’Alger*, 1956, Fair Use, <https://averyreview.com/issues/67/adjusting-the-dial>

**Page 5:**

French soldiers search a civilian in an Algiers street, during the Algerian War of Independence, Memo: Middle East Monitor, Fair Use, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201006-this-book-tackles-the-silence-of-french-conscripts-and-asks-what-did-you-do-in-algeria-daddy/> “From top left to right, behind: Djamila Bouhired, Yacef Saâdi, and Hassiba Bent-Bouali. In the front: Samia Lakdhari, Yacef Saâdi’s nephew Omar, Ali la Pointe, and Zohra Drif,” in Jacques Massu, *La vraie bataille d’Alger*, Plon, 1971, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les\\_poseuses\\_de\\_bombes\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Les_poseuses_de_bombes_2.jpg)