

## Why Two Women — One Jewish, the Other Muslim — Are Taking Moms to Visit Auschwitz



**Members of Langage de Femmes on a tour of the Auschwitz death camp run by the Nazis in Poland.** Essabaa Samia

PARIS — In September 2001, English teacher Samia Essabaa overheard some of the students at her school talking about the 9/11 attack. The students, from a hardscrabble Parisian suburb, said they were not shocked by the tragedy because Jews worked in the World Trade Center, from where they made decisions about the world economy.

Essabaa was stunned. “There were prejudices and ignorance — they transmitted what they heard without knowing or doing research. I decided to educate them so we can fight against that,” recalls the 53-year-old Frenchwoman, who is Muslim.

From that day on, Essabaa was on a mission: She spent the next three years immersing herself in [Holocaust](#) education, interning at the Holocaust Museum of Paris; meeting with [Holocaust survivors](#); and working with Simone Veil (at the time the first president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah). Veil, herself a survivor of the [Auschwitz death camp](#) in Nazi-occupied Poland, helped fund Essabaa’s first school trip, in 2004, to the infamous camp where over 1 million people died in the Holocaust. (She still takes her schoolchildren on tours to Auschwitz, and next year she’ll be breaking new ground when she takes a class to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.)

Suzanne Nakache, meanwhile, owned and ran a pharmacy in the capital's 20th arrondissement — a multicultural neighborhood where she worked with many Muslim women in the community.



**Langage de Femmes co-founders Suzanne Nakache, left, and Samia Essabaa.** Shachar Peled

“When I sold it in 2012, I wanted to stay in touch with them,” says Nakache, who is Jewish. She found an opportunity with the Aladdin Project, which seeks to build “bridges of knowledge between Jews and Muslims,” according to its website. The group translated books such as “The Diary of a Young Girl” (aka “[Anne Frank’s Diary](#)”) and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi’s works into Arabic and Farsi, she explains, because “when someone wanted to know about the Holocaust on Arabic-speaking websites, there were only anti-Semitic suggestions.”

Through the Aladdin Project, it was not long before Essabaa and Nakache’s paths crossed. Nakache was born in Algeria and had never visited Auschwitz before. The idea of the Holocaust was traumatic for her, she says. “I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to stand it. And then Samia said, ‘Come with me.’”



**Samia Essabaa, right, with Holocaust survivor and legendary French politician Simone Veil. Essabaa established Langages des Femmes on the day of Veil's death in 2017.** Essabaa Samia

That was how Nakache went to Auschwitz for the first time in 2014, “hand in hand with a Muslim woman.” She recalls the experience as a nightmarish but significant one. “To go there with a Muslim woman was very powerful for me,” she says.

They both recognized that women of all cultures face similar challenges in life and, on the day of [Veil's death on June 30, 2017](#), decided to form a new organization, Langage de Femmes (Women's Voices), dedicated to the education of mothers — matriarchs who could pass knowledge on to their families and communities.

Their shared experience at Auschwitz also led them to realize that bringing women to this death camp built on hatred could be especially impactful in their mission of fighting anti-Semitism and racism in France.

Two and a half years on, Langage de Femmes is now a 600-strong interfaith organization that every year takes groups of ethnically diverse French women to the Nazi death camp. **‘Symbol of hatred and destruction’**

Essabaa and Nakache's goal is to build bridges between women of all religions — *réconciliation*, as they say in French — and saying no to hatred. “We want to enable dialogue, to exchange and [for them] to share testimonies about their living experiences,” Essabaa says. This is done via social gatherings, film screenings and roundtables, where the women brainstorm.

“We take the ideas and create activities based on their suggestions,” Essabaa continues. “For example, some women suggested visits to mosques, synagogues and cathedrals — and we did that. Last Sunday, 40 women visited the Grand Synagogue of Paris — or Synagogue de la Victoire. Most of them were Muslim.”





**Members of Langages des Femmes on a visit to the Nazi death camp Auschwitz, in Poland.** Essabaa Samia

But visiting Auschwitz was always the most crucial element of their agenda. “It’s a place where we can see how words lead to persecution and the extermination of human beings,” Essabaa says. “It’s a symbol of hatred and destruction, of Shoah — and every human being should know and should see this place.”

The two friends organized their first Auschwitz group trip last year, taking 70 women on a day-long, intensive tour of the death camp. “The women were upset because they realized that what they had learned at school was insufficient,” Essabaa says.

Both women stress the importance of having a female-only group, where the women are free to cry and express emotions, or even pose questions they wouldn’t otherwise have asked.

This February, the number of women on the tour doubled to 140, and Langage de Femmes plans to take 150 participants on its Auschwitz tour next March, including some Israeli-Arab women. The group is currently fundraising, especially for those who do not have the means to pay for the trip. The Paris municipality and Holocaust Museum of Paris are some of the organizations helping fund it.



### **A Langage de Femmes social gathering. Essabaa Samia**

The two women say the results they have seen so far are promising: Some mothers returned from Auschwitz and sat with their children to watch Holocaust films; another took lots of pictures and created a photo album with her son, engaging him in conversation. Two women on the verge of being Holocaust deniers — one Christian, one Muslim — returned from Auschwitz with their eyes wide open.

“We had a Muslim woman who asked, ‘But how do you know it’s true? That they were exterminated there?’ When she went with us to Auschwitz and saw the piles of hair and shoes, suitcases with names and addresses, the question changed to: ‘How is it possible that intelligent men decided to kill like that?’ Auschwitz is the proof and a physical confrontation to deniers,” Essabaa says.

Looking further ahead, they would like to extend the places where women are invited from to include the United States, North Africa, Russia and elsewhere in Europe. “Auschwitz is the greatest tragedy of humanity, I think,” Essabaa says. “Many people who are not Jews were committed to fight against this — such as my grandfather, who was a former Moroccan soldier and answered the French Army’s call. We are all concerned by this.”

### **Atmosphere of fear**

Some 5 to 6 million Muslims live in France today alongside around 500,000 Jews. Nakache describes a growing atmosphere of fear in the country, further motivating their initiative. “In France, we are afraid to say we are Jewish, afraid to speak about Israel — it can be dangerous in schools,” she says. “When I take a taxi to the airport to visit Israel, if it’s an Arabic-speaking driver I don’t tell him I’m going to Tel Aviv. I’m afraid,” she adds, looking at Essabaa apologetically.

On the other hand, Essabaa explains, French Muslims are experiencing a backlash against Islamic extremists and the terror attacks that shook France in 2015. The debate over banning full-face veils in public and the frenzy surrounding immigration puts “all Muslims in the same boat,” she says. And although she personally does not wear a head covering, she says “that when someone speaks to me,” she feels “this heavy weight the way they’re looking at me.”

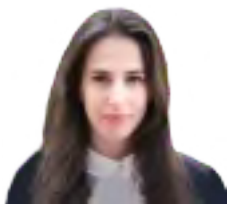


**Members of Langages des Femmes on a visit to the Nazi death camp Auschwitz, in Poland.** Essabaa Samia

While respecting the republic's secular values (what the French call "Laïcité"), the two activists are aiming for a legacy that will create and maintain a space for religious and ethnic freedoms — one where women can expand their knowledge and reach an understanding they can then share.

Essabaa offers one final example that relates back to her school classroom. Some of her young Muslim students are told at home that it's forbidden to have Jewish friends, as many bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into the discourse, "so school has a strong role to educate on these issues. We want to also do it with the mothers," she says.

"Mothers are the origin of education," Nakache adds. "The French have a very bad opinion of Israeli people and, if they begin to meet Jews, maybe they'll see Israelis in a different light too."



*Shachar Peled*

Haaretz Contributor