CHAPTER 2

AN UNLIKELY LEADER EMERGES

When the French invaded Algiers, they assumed that their main task was simply to get rid of the Turkish overlords, and then somehow everything would fall into place. For a few more years, the Ottomans held cities in other parts of the Regency, but for the most part the Turks gave up quickly. Their departure left a dangerous power vacuum. At last the French had to face the native population of Algeria—and for this challenge they were totally unprepared.

THE ALGERIANS

Who were the Algerians? The people of Algeria, who totaled about three million (a very rough estimate), were almost entirely Muslim but of two main ethnic backgrounds. The Arabs, the majority, were descended from Arab conquerors who brought Islam to North Africa in the eighth century C.E. The Berbers, also called Kabyles, were the original inhabitants of the land, from ancient times. They had adopted Islam and to some extent the Arabic language, but most lived in the rugged Kabyle mountains, apart from the rest of the population. A few thousand Jews, active in trade and finance, lived in the main cities.

There were very few, if any, native Christians.

Outside the cities—only five to ten percent of the total population—Algeria was a traditional tribal society. A vast land, a little larger than the entire United States east of the Mississippi River, it was home to many different tribes, large and small. Some tribes, settled in the fertile plains, made their living in agriculture. Others, in the arid and rugged mountainous areas, were nomadic, roaming over the land with their flocks of sheep and goats.

There were two main political groupings of tribes. One was called the *makhzen* tribes, with warrior skills, values, and traditions. They had served the Turkish overlords in collecting taxes and keeping the peace, and naturally they wanted to hold onto their power and privileges. The other, called the *rayah* tribes ("the flock"), were settled and peaceful; they were dominated by the *makhzen* tribes.

From the *rayah* tribes came the marabouts, men—and very rarely, women—of exceptional devoutness and wisdom. Often well educated and believed to have a divine blessing called *baraka*, the marabouts were the religious and intellectual aristocracy. Although the status of marabout was hereditary, an individual marabout still had to earn respect by demonstrating good character and high standards of conduct and piety. The warlike *makhzen* tribes looked down on the *rayah* tribes and especially disliked the marabouts. The Turkish overlords kept the tribes weak by playing them off against each other.

REACTION TO THE FRENCH INVASION

At first the tribes had no idea what to expect of the French invasion. Would the French be like the Spaniards, who had held parts of the coast in past centuries without causing too much trouble? No, as the Algerians soon learned, this European intrusion would be very different.

With the Ottoman rulers gone and no new system of law and order in place, the country fell into anarchy. The tribes, valuing their independence and competitive strength more than cooperation, seized the chance to fight, raid, and settle old scores—which naturally weakened them further. The Algerians were not, however, completely overwhelmed at the start. With Europeans already moving into Algiers and starting to change street names, some of the tribes in that area put aside their rivalries and worked together to harass the French. For two or three years they prevented the invaders from occupying several important towns.

In the western part of the country, where the story of Abd el-Kader starts, the tribes were less affected by the French invasion. Many, in fact, were indifferent to the threat, so long as they could continue in their independent ways. When the French seized the major port of Oran, however, and the system of control by *makhzen* tribes broke down, lawlessness took over.

In the midst of this disorder, there was one man, an esteemed marabout, who could command obedience. Muhyi ad-Din, the father of Abd el-Kader, claimed descent from the prophet Muhammad, a source of great prestige, and belonged to one of the most powerful tribes in the area. He was also the leader of a religious brotherhood called the Qadiriyya, which had started in Baghdad centuries earlier. These brotherhoods, widespread in the Muslim world, practiced a form of Islam called Sufism, which encouraged belief in direct communion with God through mysticism and prayer. In North Africa the center of the Qadiriyya brotherhood was in a village called Guetna, near the important town of Mascara in the region of Oran. Although Guetna was a small place, the Qadiriyya brotherhood became famous for its school and other religious activities.

The Turks had long regarded the marabouts as subversive and tried to suppress them. Now, with the Turks gone and the country gripped

by anarchy, the marabouts became natural leaders. Muhyi ad-Din not only had stature among the tribes but was respected by the Sultan of Morocco, just to the west of Algeria. The sultan appointed Muhyi ad-Din as his *khalifa*, meaning "lieutenant" or deputy. This gave Muhyi ad-Din, who had always resented the Ottoman overlords, a means of taking action against them. Leading other tribal chiefs and their men, he set out to drive the last of the Turks from western Algeria.

By this time, 1832, the French had teamed up with the remaining Turkish forces and powerful *makhzen* tribes—odd allies indeed—and had established garrisons in Oran and a few other towns on the coast. As a result the French, along with the Turks, became Muhyi ad-Din's target. Between April and November of 1832 he led many attacks on the French garrison in Oran, but with no success.

It was definitely not wasted effort, however. Muhyi ad-Din's son Abd el-Kader, about twenty-four years of age, came into his own during these skirmishes. Brave in battle and skillful as a leader, he even seemed to have a charmed life. In spite of the risks he took—sometimes mocking the French cannon balls as they whizzed past—he was never wounded. This added to popular beliefs that he had special powers and divine protection.

Both Muhyi ad-Din and Abd el-Kader, it must be remembered, were marabouts, men of religion and learning. They had no training in warfare, and no fondness for fighting. But when it appeared to be necessary, they did not hesitate to throw themselves into battle. And they were astonishingly good at it.

ABD EL-KADER'S EARLY YEARS

Abd el-Kader was born in 1807 (or 1808, according to some sources) in the village of Guetna. He was not the first-born of Muhyi ad-Din's

sons—he had at least two older brothers. But from his birth, his father had sensed that he was a highly gifted child and had given him special attention. The son and grandson of important marabouts, Abd el-Kader was conscious of living up to his heritage from an early age. His mother, Lalla Zohra, also had great influence on him. A person of good sense and ability, she was also literate and well educated about religion, which was most unusual for a woman at that time. She played a strong supporting role throughout Abd el-Kader's life.

Growing up in Guetna gave Abd el-Kader rare advantages from the start. He received an excellent education at the Qadiriyya brotherhood's *zawiya*, which his father directed. A *zawiya*, something like a European monastery, was a center for learning, religious instruction, and prayer. It also served as a hostel for the many students who came from far distances for higher studies there—and a refuge for people fleeing the painful grip of Ottoman justice.

The young Abd el-Kader seems to have excelled at just about everything he undertook. At the *zawiya* he studied Arabic grammar, Islamic law, and the holy book of Islam called the Koran. In addition he spent time with a scholar in another village learning mathematics, Greek philosophy, astronomy and geography, history, veterinary science, and even plant pharmacology. When he was fourteen, his father sent him to a school in Oran for further study. His year in town made Abd el-Kader aware of the lure of luxury and worldly pleasures—but they were not for him. Shocked by the arrogant and loose behavior of the Turks, Abd el-Kader focused all the more on what he regarded as the basic, true values of Islam. He was very glad to come home to the simple life at Guetna.

A strikingly handsome man, with dark blue eyes and a high forehead, Abd el-Kader stood a little on the short side but was extremely fit and strong. Even as a child he was known for his horsemanship. As an

adult he could manage a horse under all conditions, including desert survival, and could endure extraordinarily long hours in the saddle, covering great distances. This physical strength and stamina would serve him well in the years to come.

At the age of fifteen Abd el-Kader was married to his cousin, Kheira, as was customary for a youth in his social position. It proved a good marriage, although she probably saw very little of him for many years. Over time, Abd el-Kader had additional wives, since Islam permits a man to marry up to four women; but Kheira, mother of three of his children, was always his favorite and a trusted advisor.

In the fall of 1824, Muhyi ad-Din decided—over his wife's objections—to take Abd el-Kader on pilgrimage to the holy cities in Arabia, an important religious duty expected of every Muslim if at all possible. Many members of their tribe accompanied them. The religious purpose was undoubtedly of paramount importance, but there may also have been a political motive behind Muhyi ad-Din's decision to depart at this time. He knew he was suspected of stirring up the tribes against the Ottoman rulers, and the only way he could escape arrest—without appearance of guilt—was to go on pilgrimage. In any case, his plans soon went awry.

The Ottoman ruler of Oran, Bey Hasan, had imprisoned Muhyi ad-Din in the past. Now, learning about the large caravan of pilgrims headed eastward, he grew suspicious. He had Muhyi ad-Din and Abd el-Kader arrested, and they had good reason to fear for their lives. Fortunately the bey did not dare go that far; he kept them under house arrest in Oran for about a year before finally allowing them to continue on their travels.

Muhyi ad-Din and Abd el-Kader reached the holy city of Mecca for the pilgrimage and then traveled far and wide over the Middle East. They spent time in Alexandria, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and even

the Christian monastery of Saint Catherine in the heart of the Sinai Peninsula. Abd el-Kader took advantage of the famous mosques and Islamic universities on his itinerary, pursuing his deep interest in religion and philosophy. Baghdad was a particularly important stop because it was the burial place of the medieval Sufi mystic who had founded the Qadiriyya brotherhood to which Muhyi ad-Din and Abd el-Kader belonged. Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani had lived in the twelfth century C.E. when Baghdad was a great center of learning, and preached acceptance of the value of all religions. Muhyi ad-Din and Abd el-Kader regarded him as a greatly esteemed ancestor.

Toward the end of 1827 the father and son returned home, "their resources used up, their bodies aching, but their souls full."[1] On their arrival in Guetna they were showered with honor and affection, and the celebrations lasted for weeks. Afraid that all the excitement might make the suspicious Bey Hasan come after them again, Muhyi ad-Din decided to keep out of the public eye for a year or so. He and Abd el-Kader therefore devoted themselves to study and prayer, in this way avoiding the bey's prisons while gaining in prestige among the tribes for their reputation of piety.

ABD EL-KADER STEPS FORWARD

This brings the story up to the first years of the French conquest and Muhyi ad-Din's efforts to restore some kind of order in western Algeria. He had more in mind.

In November 1832, the Algerians finally took a rest after failing to dislodge the French from Oran. The tribal chiefs convened and argued for an organized, sustained campaign. Muhyi ad-Din, explaining that he was no longer physically able to continue the fight, proposed that his son take over for him. Earlier, when he had suggested this, the

other chiefs had refused; but now, after Abd el-Kader's good showing in battle, they willingly accepted him as their leader.

How did Abd el-Kader respond? His natural inclinations were for quiet, peaceful pursuits—but he was also a most obedient and loyal son. He, too, readily accepted this sudden and drastic change in his life.

In the most important mosque in the nearby town of Mascara, before a large assembly including tribal chiefs, marabouts, and leaders of the Jewish community, a formal ceremony gave Abd el-Kader the title "emir" (commander, prince) and designated him "Commander of the Faithful." He was twenty-five years old. In any military campaign it would have been remarkable for a man so young to take command . . . all the more so in a society where age and experience were as esteemed as in the traditional Muslim world.

Abd el-Kader clearly had the natural qualities for the job, and his family's status and background added to his prestige. Something else, besides the widespread common longing for a good leader, also worked in his favor: the hold of mystical religious beliefs among his people. For years, in fact, miraculous stories about his birth had been popular with the tribespeople. Now the story spread that while in Baghdad on the pilgrimage trip, Abd el-Kader and his father had met an old man who referred to a "sultan"—supreme ruler—in their group. Yes, people said, the old man must actually have been the famous medieval saint Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani himself, and he was referring to the young Abd el-Kader as a future ruler.

Muhyi ad-Din made a point of publicizing these stories, speaking often of mysterious dream-like encounters in which greatness was predicted for Abd el-Kader. Very possibly he had been hoping—long before the French appeared on the scene—that someday Abd el-Kader would lead popular resistance to the Turkish oppression. The "miracle"

stories circulated among the tribes like a finishing touch to Muhyi ad-Din's plans for his son.

The drama was ready for its hero, and Abd el-Kader was perfectly cast in the role.