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Author to give account of militant Islam

Frank Romano, seeking spiritual journey, finds 'Storm Over Morocco'

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By **Bill Varble**

Mail Tribune

March 03, 2008

Frank Romano was seeking spiritual truth when he left Paris on a train to Morocco with \$50 and a one-way ticket in his pocket. That was the summer of 1977. He wound up in a mosque, trapped with a sect devoted to militant Islam, and his life became a descent into fear.

Romano plans a reading and discussion of his new book about the adventure, "Storm Over Morocco," (World Audience, \$17.99) at 7:30 p.m. March 7 at Bloomsbury Books in Ashland. The book is available there and at Amazon.com.

Romano was a spiritual seeker who could no longer enjoy a secular life in Paris but was inspired by the faith of a group of young Muslims from Morocco that he met. He was a student of philosophy interested in finding a universal religion, which he believed was essential for world peace.

"My dad planted the seeds," he says in a telephone interview. "He inspired me."

Romano's father was an Italian-American who converted to the Baha'i faith.

Romano took a midnight train and wound up in Casablanca, where he studied the Quran and Arabic and practiced meditation. But his search for enlightenment soon turned into an ordeal of brainwashing and danger.

"The group invited me to study and meditate," he says. "The first week was great. We'd pray five times a day.

"Then one day the door was closed, and there was a guard. They wouldn't let me go. I realized I was being held a prisoner. I'd never expected a militant group."

The group's educational efforts turned to brainwashing. Romano was taught that Jews and Christians were evil. He found later that the group was associated with a strict fundamentalist Sunni sect known as Salafi, which is similar to the Wahhabism that produced Osama bin Laden.

Romano's spiritual superior, a man named Hanify, soon made clear that only unquestioning obedience was acceptable, and that like the Mafia, the sect was one in which nobody could leave, Romano recalled. The more exciting part of the book is Romano's escape from the group and his effort to remain free.

Romano had fallen ill and knew he had to regain his strength. During the month and a half of planning his escape he gained back some weight. He befriended a guard. He had left his passport with friends and made his way back to Paris, where he stayed another year.

He eventually became a lawyer, married and lived in the North Beach Italian neighborhood of San Francisco. Today he lives and teaches in Paris.

Romano says he doesn't regret his journey. He says that even in the midst of fanaticism he found answers to some of his spiritual questions, and he emerged from his quest a changed man.

A reviewer at Amazon.com praised the book for its "moving description of the mysteriously dark and shabby streets of Morocco, the hospitality of its people, the cohesion, and the air of silence teeming with conflict between fundamentalists and the more liberal Muslims of the country."

In the end, Romano's message is that the difficult task of seeking peace through understanding is always worth the effort.

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Check out enclosed article that was published in the Medfore Mail Tribune, S. Oregon's newspaper with the greatest circulation before a reading/power point event at Bloomsbury Books, Ashland. The event was highly successful (60 people showed, incredible turnout for a small city of 20,000).

--Frank Romano