

FOREWORD

A Hug from Afar is not only one family's immigration story. Through the unusually rich collection of letters and documents assembled and/or translated here, *A Hug from Afar* gives voice to a now lost Jewish community on the verge of annihilation, to a Jewish family seeking asylum, and to one young woman who initiated a thread of correspondence with relatives in the United States that would ultimately solidify her family's escape from the Nazis.

The story itself is not only captivating and powerful on its own, but is also of great historical and cultural significance. Too seldom do we have access to the perspectives of women in history, even fewer with regard to young women, and very few when it comes to the Sephardic Jewish world. While we know of Anne Frank and her diary, we have almost no sources composed by Sephardic Jewish girls or young women describing their experiences regarding the rise of fascism and the onset of the Second World War. While not a diary and not focused as much on the period of the war itself, Claire Barkey's letters, which form the first part of the present book, nonetheless offer the reader a glimpse into a young woman's world on the cusp of unimaginable rupture and impending doom.

In the letters that she began writing to her relatives, especially her uncle Raphael Capeluto in Seattle, in 1930, remarkably at age nine, Claire Barkey reveals insights into her everyday experiences and impressions of life on the island of Rhodes and the changes afoot in her society as across the globe. Part of the Ottoman Empire since the 16th century and home to a small but important Jewish community, Rhodes became, in 1912, an Italian colony along with the other Dodecanese islands. These very changes, along with other factors, compelled some of the island's Jews to seek out new lives elsewhere during the early 20th century. A wide-spanning *Rhodesli* diaspora emerged with hubs reaching from Brussels to Cape Town, New York to Seattle.

Claire's initial letters nonetheless reveal the strong imprint of the local cultural milieu. Not only did Claire's father come from mainland Turkey and hold Turkish citizenship—signifying a continuing link to the old Ottoman world—but Claire's writing, ostensibly in the local Judeo-Spanish language of the Sephardic Jews, is peppered with vocabulary drawn from the Italian she encountered at school and on the street. She often renders her Judeo-Spanish with Italian spelling conventions. While many of these nuances are unable to be translated, despite the faithful English renderings undertaken by her brother, Morris, they still can be gleaned in the originals, some of which have been reproduced in this book, or explored in more depth in digital form via the Sephardic Studies Program at the University of Washington or in person via the Washington State Jewish Historical Society.

While clearly embedded in the Italian cultural environment that shaped the dynamics of Jewish life on Rhodes during the 1920s and 1930s, Claire and her family experienced a heart-wrenching rupture first with the imposition of fascist laws and ultimately the oncoming Nazi occupation that separated the family, sending members first as refugees to Tangier, Morocco, and then ultimately to be reunited in Seattle with relatives there. The documents offer a rare window into the entire experience, the bureaucratic and diplomatic processes involved in getting the family to Tangier, and then ultimately, after years in limbo, to Seattle in the wake of the war. Along the way, they discover the fate of friends and family they left behind on their native island.

It was thanks to the correspondence that young Claire initiated with her uncle in Seattle, well before the onset of the war, that her rescue and that of her family became possible—indeed a reality.

As much as the tale that unfolds in the pages that follow reveals a powerful “hug from afar”—the embrace between relatives stretching from the Aegean Sea to the Puget Sound—it also represents a set of missives from afar, letters from a bygone world, documents that reveal aspirations and anxieties shared by Jews all throughout Europe on the eve of World War II. For every story of a successful escape, like the one documented here, there were many more attempts that never came to fruition.

Finally, as much as *A Hug from Afar* is a tale of immigrants, it is also a tale of exiles and refugees. Today, in an era in which the plight of refugees preoccupies us anew, the story about Claire and her family revealed in this book gains new vitality and relevance. The members of the family that played a role in bringing their story to light for us in the 21st century should be applauded. They remind us how much we have learned—and how much we haven't.

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