

A CRY FOR TOMORROW
76859 ...

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BERRY NAHMIA

**Translated from the Modern Greek
by David R. Weinberg**

**Sephardi and Greek Holocaust Library
Volume IV**

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DEDICATION

I wrote this book in memory of all my people whom I loved and lost in the crematoria of Auschwitz.

I dedicate it, however, to my beloved children, Viko and Rita, and her husband Seefi, who through their love, encouraged me to write it one day because they wanted to learn all the details of my horror during the Second World War.

Also, I dedicate this book to my beloved grandchildren, Bianca and Berry, and my beloved great-grandchildren, Eitan, Daniel, Benyo, and Tamar, who I am sure, with deep feeling and great devotion will relate it to their children who, in turn, will relate it to the generations to come.

I wish for it to remain as a memorial to my beloved husband, Mendes, who gave me such a beautiful family that is for me the meaning of my survival.

Special thanks to my dear niece, philologist-historian Odet Varon, who with much love and devotion edited my entire text.

I thank as well, all my friends, men and women, especially those companions of my prison days who survived and assisted me with dates and details of the various events we lived through together during that same period.



I especially thank David Weinberg for this English translation. He succeeded in giving life to my every thought and even translated the most subtle of my feelings. His translation is indeed worthy and close to perfection.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

I was introduced to Berry Nahmia in the Athens synagogue at a holiday reception. She showed me the numbers on her arm. I slowly caressed them with my hand and then embraced her. We became friends. Sometime later, she gave me a signed copy of her book published in Greek. It was then that I told her I would translate it into English as a gesture of friendship and as a contribution to Holocaust studies. I hope I have caught most every nuance of her thought and emotion.

Since then, as I have come to know Berry not only as a survivor, but also as an individual. My admiration for her has soared. Her achievement is not only her incredible survival and then the writing of this book. Her achievement is her acquired wisdom and her tempered soul, which has purged itself of hate. How miraculous!

I am very grateful to my Assistant, Nancy Hauri, for editing and shepherding this translation toward publication.

David R. Weinberg



This translation for Nadia

Song of Songs

How lovely is my love
in her everyday dress
with a little comb in her hair.
Girls of Auschwitz
girls of Dachau
have you seen the one I love?

We saw her on the long journey.
She wasn't wearing her everyday dress
or the little comb in her hair.

How lovely is my love
caressed by her mother
kissed by her brother.
No one knew how lovely she was.
Girls of Belsen
girls of Mauthausen
have you seen the one I love?

We saw her in the frozen square
with a number on her white arm
and a yellow star over her heart.

The quotations appearing here from my *Song* are not given as a "permission," but as an ever so slight offering to the tragic experience which the writer of this book herself represents.

Iacovos Kambanellis

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This is the fourth volume to be published in The Sephardi and Greek Holocaust Library series, whose purpose it is to fill a serious lacuna in the sad tale of the Holocaust. There is a dearth of publications on the Sephardi and Greek experiences both in terms of memoirs and scholarly studies of the period. True, there is an increasing number of publications in Greek, Hebrew, Spanish, and French; however, this material has not been submitted to the searching analysis that characterizes similar materials dealing with the variety of Ashkenazi experiences during the tragic decades of the 1930s and 1940s. The studies to be offered in this series will present to both scholars and the general public a range of materials heretofore not available in English so that the story of other communities devastated by the Nazis, marginalized for a variety of reasons by scholarly research, may find their place in the broader narrative as well as provide for their descendants an answer to the question: What happened to our relatives and ancestors in the war years?

This series comprises two categories of materials:

I. Documents, reports, memoirs which are contemporary to the events of the period. The first volume of the series includes seminal materials in this category. Later volumes contain more recently written memoirs that add new dimensions to the experience of the Sephardi and Greek Jews.

II. Scholarly studies on the Sephardi and Greek Holocaust.

On behalf of the editorial committee, we wish to express our gratitude to Sephardic House under whose auspices this series is being published. Support for this series has been graciously given by The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Lucius M. Littauer Foundation, The Recanati Foundation in memory of Raphael Recanati, and private donors Dianne Cadesky in memory of Esther Tivoli and Molly Edell, and Victor Besso.

Steven Bowman
Series editor
Cincinnati, 2010

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Preface

Today at last, I begin my important book.... As I go along writing it, I don't know what course it will take. I do know one thing, that the goal I have set, which has occupied my mind these many years, remains unswerving: to write something for posterity that relates the full experience of my life acquired unwillingly and under the violence of other fellowmen.

It is not at all easy to dredge up situations and experiences that the mind chases away, which memory refuses to relive. Moreover, even at this moment as I prepare to begin, I feel internal strife, a conflict, a division, where one side threatens the other.

One voice tells me: Don't return to the past, to the war, to the barbarism, to the hell, to the darkness. Don't scratch a wound that is ready to hemorrhage. It will be painful! It is best to forget, because you won't be able to withstand living through it all over again.

The other voice: No, for God's sake, don't bury, don't suppress these ghosts, these demons deep inside you, because they will always remain dormant, and only die with you. You will drag them along forever like an affliction. They will eat away at your entrails until little by little you are entirely devoured. Bring them to the surface. Do it first for your own benefit, for your own sake ... perhaps you will feel relieved and renewed. And what's more, you have a duty to future generations. They must know and remember that what happened must never be forgotten, so that it never happens again!

Thirty-eight years have passed since the Holocaust of six million Jews, and I still have not been able to speak or write about it, except once, when I told my husband everything. Then I closed myself up again, concealed it, covered it over, hoping that the passage of time would bring me forgetfulness and peace.

But I was unable to find peace, for the nightmare I feared confronting, feared looking at straight in the eye — tortured me. I constantly fought with myself, sometimes playing the role of victim, sometimes that of defense counsel, and sometimes that of judge. Dreadful! For many of us who came back, survival was and is more difficult than the Holocaust itself.

And while I go on, agonizing thus the whole life long with the same familiar demons, I suddenly discover that I have grown up, matured. I am full of experience, wisdom, knowledge — all abstracted

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from the great book of my life, which I lived so intensely.

And I ask myself whether today, now, the hour, the right moment has come to dredge up everything inside me for all to see, hoping it will perhaps carry a message of Peace, Love, and Fraternity to the present world and the generations to come.

November 7, 1985

* * * * *

Among responses to Berry Nahmia's "great book of my life" was the following:

December 5, 1996

Dear, dear Betty [sic],

Of course I remember our meetings...

I read your book and was deeply moved by its pain as much as by its message. Yours is an important testimony.

With all my good wishes -

Elie Wiesel

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1

First Years in Kastoria

My Kastoria

My heart and soul journey to a Byzantine town of Macedonia shaped like a small peninsula and bathed by the tranquil waters of a beautiful lake. My Kastoria. There I find myself a small, carefree little girl in the narrow lanes of my neighborhood where housewives sitting on stone steps whisper to each other ... I see myself in my paternal home at my window, gazing at the mountain in the distance, at the mill opposite, at the typical two-oared boats, at the fishermen with their nets!

In my mind's eye, I watch the day dawn as the sun rises and shines brightly on the freshly whitewashed houses and their courtyards. I see the Byzantine churches, the bell tower, and the entire castle! I even see the enchanting approach of evening! Over there is the moon. I see it, majestic and golden, glowing from the top of the mountain with its reflection in the lake like a red sphere thrown from high above!

My God, how I yearn to clasp all this beloved beauty tightly in my arms, to become one with it — myself with the place I was born, grew up, and loved.

I want to bring my childhood world back to life — grandfather and grandmother, my father and my mother, brothers and sisters, cousins and friends, with their boundless love, kindness, discipline, and old values. Yes, even their "you must nots" and all the things that at the time were so meaningful and beautiful!

My religious heritage

Race and religion are inherited by chance. I could have been born Muslim somewhere else, or Christian Orthodox, or anything else — as if by lottery. Lo and behold, from the day you are born you feel a label placed on you by your parents, because their parents attached the same to them. My label read: "You are a Jew." It weighed rather heavily on me. I remember many "musts" on my shoulders as I grew older.

I was brought up according to the moral principles of Moses' "Ten Commandments" and had to adhere to them faithfully. "Love," they say, and "Honor your father and mother." "Do not steal." I had to learn the history of my ancestors from generation to generation — of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I studied the teachings and philosophy of monotheism.

We ate only kosher meat, thought to be healthier by our religion. We celebrated the feast days with different meanings than those of our Christian friends. Passover, for example, which occurs at about the same time as Christian Easter, was for us a remembrance of the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt.

I later learned about religious antagonism, the persecutions of my race, the pogroms, the wars, the heroism and struggles of the Diaspora. And finally, I learned of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, when, hunted and homeless, they arrived on the coasts of Italy and the Adriatic, on the mountains and the plains of the interior. They settled in Kastoria, Thessaloniki, and Monasteri-Bitolia with their own manners and customs, their ways of thinking, and most of all their language. It then became clear to me why grandfather and grandmother spoke to me in Spanish and quite naturally conveyed this language and its idioms to us.

From all this, I later became aware of the richness of the family tradition I had inherited, of the depth of my roots and my origins, of the shape of my life. My very being was prepared to take its place in this established society and to develop and function within it.

Early memories

In Martin Gray's *Book of Life** I read:

Childhood is a spring of water that irrigates the man to come. It can drown him.

With this water of origin, man can make his way through life. He can quench his thirst or poison himself with it.

One must be careful with childhood.

It is true that one cannot deny or erase childhood memories. They are forever etched inside as a personal history. That which is

*Martin Gray, *A Book of Life to Find Happiness, Courage, and Hope*, New York, 1975, p. 39.

FIRST YEARS IN KASTORIA

remembered remains throughout the journey of one's life.

At this moment, I'm not sure at what point my childhood memories begin. I wonder when one begins to remember oneself. Which is the first memory? Is it perhaps the one that lies buried inside and holds on forever, or the one most vivid, that comes easily and is expressed as if being lived again?

At this moment I feel the need to return far into the past and stop somewhere ... to the time I was a four or five year old child. I see myself very tiny. One day all the grown-ups in my house were crying! Strangely, everyone was caressing and hugging me. Why? In order to finally tell me, very haltingly, in words I didn't fully understand — that my mother had died. I can't describe how I felt at the time. One thing my little mind did grasp at that moment was that something terrible had happened.

I asked over and over, "Why won't I see my mother again?" It was beyond my comprehension. And the more they explained to me, the more I told myself that it isn't possible for God, that sweet, merciful God, to take her to heaven with Him. No, I said, He's not at all good to me.

I wanted my mama, I needed her every moment, and she loved me very much. Why did she leave? It was unfair, that's how I felt ... I was in pain, a lot of pain. I remember it as the first terrible pain of my most tender age. It was the first blow that scarred my sensitive little soul and changed my life.

Other memories

Every day it seems I heard a certain song, an internal voice, arising warm and strong within me — shaping me, raising me, nourishing and strengthening my body and soul. I was becoming a tall, dark, slim, pretty girl, they told me. An uncle of mine, who liked me very much, called me "*Mignonne*" and I loved hearing it.

My house, though large, sometimes seemed small to me. I felt confined. That's why, I recall, I would run and glue myself to my open window and stare at the horizon, waiting like a bird to grow up, to sprout wings, and fly swiftly outside on my own.

Grandfather and grandmother loved me dearly, and they also loved my brother who was three years younger. Later, four other children arrived, one after another, by my stepmother. I loved them very much and still feel that way today.

It was a blessing growing up in a house full of children in

accordance with our traditions. The habits and rules in the house were those of grandfather and grandmother with their patriarchal views about the family, the household, and honor.

My father was very youthful, and for his time had a modern outlook. He was a hardworking honest merchant who possessed a very mature social awareness. I had a special love for him and I admired his wisdom, his intelligence, and his energy. I always liked to be near him, to accompany him everywhere as I was growing up. Besides, I was his pride and joy. I felt it, and he showed it without speaking about it!

Remembering myself as a child at that time, I see a sensitive little girl, pampered, but polite, who nevertheless had a hidden flame inside her and watched for the appropriate opportunity.

My adolescence

What strong emotion I feel when I bring back memories of the first awakenings of my adolescence! It is at that time you discover your strength, like birds wanting to fly on their own, or like flower buds readying to blossom. Human spring! You gaze at the world for the first time and run toward it with optimism. You set goals, you dream, and hope your dreams come true beyond measure.

Everything seemed wonderful to me then and I slowly acquired self-confidence, belief in people, my first friendships, and those first throbs of love. I enjoyed everything in my environment, especially the way I grew up and lived among a mix of Jewish-Christian manners, customs, and local traditions in my Kastoria! It was then, I recall, that I learned to dance, laugh, and sing.

I can't say what my greater joy was when I see myself back in Kastoria at that age. Was it the walks with my girl friends to St. Thanasis church in summer? Or was it when we went to the pier with the boys close by, teasing us? Or again, was it in the middle of winter when we were wrapped in our warm, heavy coats, woolen gloves, doubled-tied scarves around our head and neck, and rubber boots on our feet? Or truly, was it when we would go sliding on the frozen lake with pointed wooden sticks?

Sometimes the temperature would fall to eleven degrees below zero and it was bitter cold. That's when Kastoria was covered with snow and the lake frozen for months. We would go outside for snowball fights. But the slopes were our greatest fun. They were our "slides." We children, I recall, didn't walk on the icy snow, we just

FIRST YEARS IN KASTORIA

kept sliding — falling down and getting up, and again, falling down and standing up. What an unforgettable time!

We lived peacefully and harmoniously with our Christian neighbors, both in our social relations and in our jobs, because there was mutual respect, friendship, and love.

I remember that each year on January 6th, the Day of Epiphany, the custom was to visit our friend, Theano Kovatsi, to wish her a happy name day which she always celebrated. Her parents and sisters Ritsa, Meni, and Louda, always received us with great joy. And then there would follow such a wonderful party — girlfriends merrymaking until late at night! On January 7th and 8th, just before St. John's Day, I remember, there was a carnival, the *Pateritsa*, and we would rush to Dultso Square to see it — a traditional Christian festival called *Ragoutsaria*. All Kastoria stood there to celebrate. Children and grown-ups in masquerade danced in the streets to the accompaniment of popular musical instruments.

These Christmas holidays seemed endless because the preparations started a month earlier. We children, being on vacation, were carefree and enjoying ourselves right up to the night before school, when we would fall exhausted into bed only to wake up the following morning to go back to our daily routine.

School days

Jewish education was obligatory for me, but only through primary school. During that time we studied both Greek and Hebrew. In those first six years, I studied many things including *The Old Testament*. I even learned to speak Hebrew fluently, the language of my religious ancestors. But when I entered high school, I completely abandoned my Hebrew. I changed, or rather I acquired more ancestors. Why not? This time our ancient ancestors were Socrates, Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, and Homer.

There were only a few Jewish girls in the high school. We were called "the bouquet of flowers" by our new teachers and by all the people of Kastoria without exception, because they liked us.

We excelled in school events. I remember the parades, especially the one in celebration of St. Minas, November 11th, the day when Kastoria was liberated from the Turks. We marched in the first row, and were even the flag-bearers. They were proud of us and we were proud of ourselves!

In this state of happiness, of youthful enthusiasm, precisely when