

COURAGE AND COMPASSION

Courage and Compassion

*A Jewish Boyhood in
German-Occupied Greece*

Tony Molho



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*That's the core. The early part of you.*¹

*These things cannot be written. Human beings
cannot write these things.*²

*Il n'est plus question de distinctions superficielles de race, de
religion, ni de rang social—je n'y ai jamais cru—il y a l'union
contre le mal, et la communion contre la souffrance.*³

¹ Kirk Douglas, *The New York Times*, 6 February 2020, "Obituary of Kirk Douglas."

² Lily Alkalay Molho in 1993, conversation recorded in video by Mr. Izo Avram.

³ Hélène Berr, *Journal*, Paris, Tallandier, 2008, pp. 107–108. Entry dated 18 July 1942.

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Foreword

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
—T. S. Eliot, “The Wasteland”

In mid-April of 1945, young Tony Molho returned at last to his home in Salonica after two years in hiding—or more precisely, of being hidden—from Greece’s Nazi occupiers. He was not yet six years old. The day was sunny, and he could feel around him the excitement of homecoming. As he stepped into the back garden, the sight of a glorious wisteria blooming against the garden wall further buoyed his spirits.

This scene comes close to the end of this memoir, and one might think it is an ending to Molho’s tale. And while the image of spring rebirth might seem an unqualifiedly happy one, the reality (as it usually is) was more complex. Molho writes, “what happened after our return home is another story.” On one level, of course, he means: This memoir is about the war; it would take another to tell the story of my life after it. Yet there is a poi-

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gnant, ultimate irony to the statement, for the deeply moving nature of this memoir derives from its emphatic demonstration that, for Tony (as perhaps indeed for all survivors of the Shoah), there was and has been no “other story.” Far from the “before” and “after” being different tales, far from the “after” being “another story,” this beautiful memoir shows us the powerful ways our childhood core is what we carry with us over the arc of a lifetime.

And how much more so for those who had a childhood such as his. As Molho writes: “nearly everything important that my parents, sister, and I did after the war was an attempt to reconcile ourselves to the memory of the Shoah and to try, mostly unsuccessfully it turns out, to normalize its influence on our lives. There was no return . . . just the slow unfolding of the war’s consequences, which lasted for decades, until my parents’ death and my own slow decline.”

Tony Molho’s memoir, which you are about to have the pleasure of reading, is about many different things. Fundamentally, of course, it is, as its subtitle has it, about “A Jewish Boyhood in German-Occupied Greece.” And indeed, it tells us with remarkable forthrightness of just that: the adventures and misadventures of the author’s young self, as he was passed quite literally from hand to hand, home to home, in the desperate and ultimately successful bid to save him from death at the hands of the German Nazis who occupied Greece during World War II. It recounts the fierce love and resilience of his parents, who contrived against all odds to keep their young son alive. This small volume, then, tells an immense and dramatic tale, a story of survival under the harshest and most unrelenting of circumstances.

As an account of the incredible events of two early years in Molho’s remarkable life, this volume would, as a historical doc-

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ument alone, be an important work. But it is far more than that. Ultimately, it is a meditation on the most profound questions that trouble us all in our moments of reflectiveness: What is the nature of the passage of time? How can it be said that we have a single persisting, intact self that we carry with us from childhood to old age? How does memory draw on multiple threads to weave a coherent story of our lives? And, what is the point of it all? *Is* there a point? It is Molho's musing upon such questions and his tremendous capacity for deep self-reflection even as his dramatic narrative unfolds that makes this volume so much more than "just" a memoir.

No doubt the source of this depth lies, at least in part, in the fact that Molho himself is in turn much more than "just" a memoirist. He is a historian by profession, and a most distinguished one, a world-class scholar of late-medieval Florence. Molho has thought long and hard about the meaning of history, the nature of memory, and the ways remembered pasts echo in and even constitute our present. It may not be too much of a leap to venture that his chosen specialty—the Renaissance—has given him occasion to think long and hard about how we periodicize our histories, attempting to pin them down with artificially imposed "eras" to make them more coherent and compartmentalized. It will also have given him ample time to ponder the ironies of the idea of historical "rebirth." As Molho's wisteria shows us, no less forcefully than Eliot's lilacs, it is in fact at the moment of regeneration—the beginning of "the after"—that we find just how complex it is to attempt a renaissance, to emerge from the forgetful snow of winter and to aspire to a future that is wholly new. It shows us, indeed, how the dead and the living constantly mix together, how life is inevitably nourished by the "dry tubers" of the past.

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While Molho's core narrative ends in 1945, the brilliance of his memoir is that it is suffused with this strange accordioneing of time, the never-endingness of what he lived through in those two terrifying years from spring of 1943 until the spring of 1945. Molho allows us to see him—the him of today—in conversation with his young self and indeed reveals that it is this ongoing conversation that has made up perhaps the most meaningful consistent narrative of his life. This volume is striking for its palimpsestic nature, the ease with which it moves back and forth through time, with that “after” serving as a lens onto what came before, just as the dramatic events of those two years have served as constant filter for Molho's whole life. In what way, it asks us, are our pasts ever behind us, and in what ways are they inevitably, always, part of us?

Courage and Compassion is about other things, as well. The nature of good—which, in insightfully reworking Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, Molho describes as being every bit as “banal” as evil—is a restrained yet steady theme. So, too, are important historical questions, Molho's treatment of which will be thought-provoking to historians of twentieth-century Greece: to what extent did—could—Jews think of themselves as Greek? To what extent did Greek Orthodox Christians aid and abet their Nazi occupiers as they went about the dastardly plan to rid Greece of its Jews? (The haunting image of yellow curtains, made of fabric stolen from Molho's family and hanging in the home of Greek Orthodox “friends” after the war, will stay with you long after you have finished reading.) How is it that a whole city managed, virtually overnight, to erase the memory of tens of thousands of its recent inhabitants, to turn them into specters? In a moniker coined by T. S. Eliot for another postwar European city, Salonica had become a “City of Ghosts”—the ep-

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ithet that Molho's mother, Lily, also gave it in an interview some fifty years after the core events described in her son's book. The Shoah did, indeed, render Salonica—one of Europe's most important Jewish metropolises and arguably its most cosmopolitan—a ghostly city, stalked by the phantasms of its recent past. They are ghosts that endure to this day. Books like this one help to bring them out of their shadows, and remind us that the past is not "another story" or a buried winter. Beneath Eliot's "forgetful snow" lie lives and lifetimes that are knitted to ours.

Molho writes, again borrowing a turn of phrase from Eliot, that he feels that he has had "a discontinuous life." In one sense, this memoir suggests that he has: wandering from place to place, from one language to another, from one country to another, from one historical era to the next. But at the end, through his deeply affecting account, I cannot help but feel that, perhaps, he has had a life of remarkable continuity and integration, a lifetime of bravely reckoning with the events recounted in this volume, and sustained by the remarkable love of the parents who worked so hard to save him. The blossoming of lilacs and wisteria is painful, but they are beautiful, after all.

Katherine E. Fleming

1.

Memory's Reach

Sephardi Salonica. That's the universe in which I was born and spent the first few years of my life. My immediate ancestors had lived in this city for several generations. There, they were engaged in commerce—some of them modest and middling merchants and middlemen, such as shipping agents, insurance brokers, money changers and the like, while others were rabbis, and a very few, notably my maternal grandfather, were successful businessmen, cosmopolitan in outlook and familiar with life in Europe's more "advanced" regions. A constant if often muted presence in the stories of their lives—a ghost that casts its shadow on much of what I recount here—is the fact that, starting in 1430 and for almost five centuries, Salonica (Selanik in Turkish, Solun in Bulgarian, Thessaloniki in Greek, Salonique or Thessalonique in French, Salonicco in Italian) was an important commercial and administrative center of the Ottoman Empire and home of the largest Sephardic community in the Balkans and one of the largest in Europe. For long stretches of time since the beginning of the sixteenth century when they had fled the Inquisitions of the Spanish and Portuguese Kingdoms and, on the Sultan's invitation, settled in Salonica, the city's Jews had comprised the majority of its population. There,



Figure 1.1. (a) My maternal grandfather Nissim Alkalay, and (b) My maternal grandmother Henrietta Alkalay. Both were murdered in Auschwitz. The pictures were taken at the end of the 1920s or beginning of the 1930s.¹

they flourished and contributed to Salonica's fame as the New Jerusalem.

Then, in 1912, during the Balkan wars between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian nations of Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece, Greek armies conquered the city and annexed it to the Greek state. Not all of Salonica's Jews were happy with this change of their city's status, from being an important provincial center of the Ottoman Empire to becoming a marginal provincial center of the new and rather small Greek nation-state, cut off from the Balkan hinterland. Substantial numbers left the city shortly after 1912, many of them, especially young men followed by their families, to avoid the military draft. Some moved

to western Europe, to Paris, Vienna, Milan, Marseilles, Manchester, some as far away as New York, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires. Others more simply moved to Constantinople (Istanbul), where they continued to live under the impression that their mostly tranquil lives in Salonica could be reconstructed in the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Over time, this proved to be an illusion, but for Sephardic Jews in the 1910s, opting for the Ottoman Empire did not seem like a bad bet. After all, had not Kemal Ataturk himself been born and grown up in Salonica? Would not his leadership of the new Turkish state offer some continuity between the old world of Salonica and the Turkish Republic born out of the Empire's ashes?

Among those Salonican Jews who moved to Constantinople, there were two members of my more extended family: my grandmother Flora's sister, Bella, who, following her marriage, came to be known to us as *Madamme* Bella Botton, and my mother's uncle, Albert Alkalay. I remember them well from our visits to their homes in Turkey after the war. Over time, I grew close to *Oncle* Albert and *Tante* Lydia, his wonderful and very beautiful Russian Orthodox wife, a refugee from Kiev who escaped the aftermath of the Russian Revolution by mostly walking (!) to Istanbul where she met and married my great-uncle. My father's Turkish cousin, also named Albert, always pleasant and gregarious, and his vivacious red-haired Jewish wife Nellie, who hailed from Bursa in Asia Minor, also became close friends and in various moments of my later life gave me the benefit of their advice and support.

Memories of Salonica's Ottoman/Turkish past lingered for generations. Perhaps they still do. For my grandmother, born in 1876, and my father in 1899, this memory colored many aspects of their daily lives, most especially language, food, and

music. My grandmother's daily consumption of coffee each morning (was it Greek or Turkish, her sons teased her) and of *kaiimaki* ice cream that the young waiter from the neighboring milk store would bring most every afternoon to *Mme. Flore* as he charmingly called her, kept these linguistic and alimentary residues very much a part of the social world of all Salonicans, Jews or not. I am always touched to discover, every time I visit my adult American-born daughter, whose itinerant life has taken her from New England in North America, to Tuscany, England, and most recently Wales, with short but frequent stays in Greece to spend time with her grandmother (my mother), that the most vivid evidence of her distant Selanikli Sephardic and Greek roots are the dishes she was taught by her grandmother, to whom she was very attached: *avgolemono* soup, *bourekakia*, *pasteliko*, and, still struggling to master it, *bouñouelos* (egg and lemon soup, cheese triangles, spinach pie, honey-dipped dough fritters). As for the remnants of Turkish music, its languid, characteristic sound penetrated and often transformed traditional Greek music, its tunes ever present in the city's streets and squares, in working-class joints and in restaurants frequented by wealthier patrons. As much as the tango was a sign of the city's "Europeanization," it remained a cultural import, competing with more indigenous and resilient forms of music and singing, and, of course, dancing.

Initially, after the city's incorporation into the Greek state, its multiethnic complexity persisted, Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisting in tension among themselves but more or less peacefully. But in 1922, following yet another Greco-Turkish war that resulted in a catastrophic Greek defeat, the population's ethnic complexity was drastically changed. The city's Muslim inhabitants, including Jews who in the eighteenth century had been

converted to Islam and were known as the *Dönme*, were mostly expelled from Greece and forcibly moved to Turkey, while Greek Orthodox inhabitants of Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace were themselves coerced to leave their homes, where they had often prospered for centuries. Mostly penniless, perhaps as many as one and a half million uprooted Greek Orthodox Christians, some of whom did not even speak Greek, were transferred to Greece and forced to find new homes in a country they had not known until then.

Of these, about a quarter of a million were settled in Salonica where it was hoped they would take over properties abandoned by the Muslims. Homeless, resentful about their horribly unjust fate, these refugees represented a new element in the city's population. Their presence reinforced the central government's determination to Hellenize Salonica. A central policy of all Greek governments from the 1920s until the present has been to give a purely Greek hue to the city's culture and to reinforce the notion that Salonica never, even during the centuries of Ottoman Turkish domination and of Jewish demographic predominance, had lost its Greek character. Tensions between the Greek Orthodox population and the city's Jews, who had lived there uninterruptedly for about five centuries, often marked the city's history in the twenty or so years before its occupation by the Germans in 1941. For generations, Jews had often felt themselves to be an integral, organic part of the city's history and culture; following 1912, but especially after 1922, they were made to feel that they were a minority, marginalized and at best tolerated by the city's Greek Orthodox population. The Zionist movement, which had attracted the sympathies of substantial numbers of Salonica's Jews, reinforced the sentiment of many Jews' alienation from their traditional *patria*.

Local Greeks greeted the refugees from Asia Minor with more than a smidgen of suspicion and condescension; they were different—indeed, many thought of them as inferior—from old Greece’s Greeks, the common saying being that they were Turkish-seeded (τουρκόσποροι), there was something alien—Turkish—in their customs, their language, their ways of being. Yet, for all their real or perceived differences, the fact was that the attendance of both groups en masse at Greek Orthodox religious rituals created an inchoate sense of community that was reinforced every Sunday and greatly solidified at the time of solemn holidays, such as Christmas and Easter or the Assumption of the Virgin on 15 August. So, by and large, the resilient anti-Jewish sentiment that had persisted in Greek Orthodox lands for generations, was not diluted following the refugees’ arrival in 1922. Only now in Salonica and in the surrounding areas, it was expressed by a much larger number of people, many of whom tended to ogle the properties of the Jews as possible compensation for the wealth they had lost at the time of their expulsion from Turkey.

The Shoah in its Salonican-Greek variant was consummated in a local context where intense rivalries between Christians and Jews were a constant presence in the city’s life. With the silencing of a strong Jewish voice as a consequence of the Shoah, after the war, much of the Jewish legacy to Salonica’s history was willfully forgotten. It was as if a huge sigh of relief was exhaled by the city’s population—perhaps one should better say that a collective fit of amnesia overtook the city’s leaders—intellectuals, secondary-school and university professors, public servants, newspaper editors and journalists, lawyers and notaries, doctors and pharmacists, not to speak of priests and bishops and other religious functionaries. Jews had now become a

very, very small minority, from fifty, perhaps sixty, thousand to about two to three thousand people. Their properties, in circumstances that to this day have never been fully investigated, passed to the hands of Christians. Even the grounds of their cemetery—perhaps the largest Jewish one in Europe, larger it seems even than the one in Prague—had been assigned to the local university, where, for decades, rectors, deans, and faculty assemblies had stubbornly refused even to place a plaque commemorating the Jewish cemetery's presence in that spot. One of my troubling memories of those immediate postwar years was the sight of slabs of marble, marked by strange signs—Hebrew letters!—found in the most unlikely spots in the city. These mutilated tomb stones, scattered about when the Jewish cemetery was vandalized—it should be added not by the Germans but by local municipal authorities—were put to all sorts of uses: as paving stones to decorate church yards, as building materials to construct street pavements and sidewalks, and, in at least one case, to firm up the walls of a swimming pool.

So, in the years immediately after 1945, when following the wartime adventures that take up the better part of this book, together with my parents I returned to Salonica, Jews who had survived were often accepted as if they were unwelcome intruders. The true story, recounted innumerable times by my father, is indicative of conditions and of the mood that prevailed at the time. A young survivor filed a petition that the family business, which had been registered in his father's name, be transferred to his, as his father had never returned from Auschwitz. The response of the competent authorities was that the son's request could not be honored until he provided his father's death certificate. Antisemitism has all sorts of ways of expressing itself!

Jews were now surrounded by silence, with little curiosity expressed by neighbors, classmates, or others about the circumstances of their survival. In the two schools I attended from 1946 to 1956, where the city's *bien-pensant* middle-class families sent their children, not once did a classmate, a teacher, or anyone else ever ask me the obvious question: Tony, how did you survive the war; how is it that you were able to make it back to Salonica, when so many other Jews never came back? As a good friend from my school days recently ruminated: Never were topics of this sort discussed at home. We did not ask, and parents never offered any information.

I confess that among my various aims in writing this book was to give a small answer to these questions. How were my family and I able to return to our home, when two of my grandparents, an uncle, an aunt, not to mention numerous other relatives were not given a chance to survive even for a couple of days when they were transported to Auschwitz, and when more than 45,000 Salonican Jews perished in concentration camps? And what happened to us in the war's aftermath?

An Old Man and His Younger Self

Many years—indeed, many decades—have passed since the events I describe in this book. At the beginning of this story, I was not quite four years old. Now, I am well past my eighty-third birthday. A whole lifetime lies between my two selves, and I can't help but wonder if the old man I am now is the same person I was in my early boyhood, when I lived in Salonica. Repeatedly, as I was writing these memories, I puzzled over this conundrum. One of the recurring themes in the pages that follow is the challenges an old man faces when he tries to remember his

youth. In my case, everything around me has changed—the people whom I could interrogate about my memories are all dead. The buildings, and public squares where I spent my daily life are now unrecognizable, so profoundly have they been transformed. My *patria*, to the extent to which I may have one, is different from what it was when I was a boy. Everything has changed, not necessarily for the worse, as our newly acquired attachment to Europe shows. Yet, I still go by the same name I bore almost eighty years ago and in some ungraspable way my present self is a continuation of my old one. My own recollections are fragmented, and often what in retrospect seemed to be important—indeed crucial—details remain unrecognizable, enveloped in the mist of a distant past. What did my grandparents look like? I do not recall. The uncle who was responsible for my survival should occupy a privileged place in my memory. I can hardly remember him, and when I do it is mostly from pictures I saw when I was older. Indeed, as the reader will discover, photographs have helped me reconstruct key moments of my family life.

When I think of my past, these are the stories that first come to mind, they are the events that have shaped me more than perhaps I was willing to acknowledge for many years following my adolescence. Still, there is a question that persists in the background. The reader might quite correctly want to ask here: Whose stories are these, anyway? Better yet, whose memories am I recording? If the bulk of the stories I recounted date mostly from a short period of slightly more than two years—from March 1943 to April/May 1945—how I can I claim that they are my memories when at the beginning of this period I was not quite four years old and at its end not quite six? So, for my own and the reader's clarification, now that I have recorded these stories, I should make some things clear.