

1939 in the Sephardic World



The Nazi menace decimated European Jewry, and its tentacles of hatred and violence reached even to North Africa and the Middle East. Jews of all backgrounds were victimized, and many stories about murdered family members remain as the heritage of Jews throughout the world. In our family-whose roots were in the Sephardic community of the Island of Rhodes-we also have a story.

My grandfather, Bohor Yehuda Angel, left the Island of Rhodes in 1908 to settle in Seattle, Washington. He and his older two sons, Moshe and Ralph, worked tirelessly to save enough money to bring the rest of the family to Seattle-my grandmother, Bulissa Esther Angel, and the children Victoria, Luna, Abner, Joseph and Rahamim.

During the early 20th century, the Jewish community of Rhodes numbered about 5000 souls. They formed a classic Judeo-Spanish Sephardic enclave, with an impressive cadre of rabbinic scholars, business people and intellectuals. The masses of Sephardim, though, were poor, and many began to consider leaving Rhodes to improve their lots. The favored destination was the United States, with others also leaving for Rhodesia and the Congo, Europe and the land of Israel.

It took three years for my grandfather and uncles to save enough money to bring the rest of the family to Seattle. In 1911, my grandmother bravely set sail with her five children, eager to be reunited with her husband and elder sons. When their ship arrived in New York harbor, they were confronted by United States immigration officials. It turned out that Joseph, aged about eight years old, had a scalp infection known as tinias. The immigration officials told my grandmother that they would not admit Joseph into the U.S. My grandmother pleaded with the officials-but to no avail. What was she to do? It had taken three years of hard work for my grandfather to earn enough to bring the family to Seattle. If she returned to Rhodes now, how many more years would be needed to arrange for new tickets? But how could she bear sending little Joseph back to Rhodes by himself? As it happened, another Jew from Rhodes was not admitted into the United States. He volunteered to bring Joseph back to Rhodes to live with relatives until such time as he could be brought to Seattle to join the rest of his family. My grandmother had no real choice: she agreed to send Joseph back to Rhodes. She looked forward to the day when Joseph would be brought to Seattle.

Joseph never did make it to Seattle. He grew up in Rhodes. He was married in the late 1920s to Sinyoru Angel (not related), and they had four children. A son and daughter were named Yehuda Leon and Bulissa, after Joseph's parents; the other son and daughter were named Jacob and Sara, after Sinyoru's parents. My father, Victor Angel, who was born in Seattle, never met his brother Joseph and family.

The Jews of Rhodes had lived under the rule of the Ottoman Empire from 1522 until 1912, when Italian forces occupied the island. Italy officially took control of Rhodes in 1923, with the Treaty of Lausanne. When Italy aligned with Germany in June 1936, the Jewish community of Rhodes began

to feel the bitter stings of government-sponsored anti-Semitism. The highly regarded Rabbinical College of Rhodes was forced to close. Jews were required to keep their stores open on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. In September 1938, anti-Jewish laws were announced: ritual slaughter of animals was prohibited; Jews could not buy property, employ non-Jewish servants, send their children to government schools. Non-Jews were not allowed to patronize Jewish doctors or pharmacists. Jews who had settled in Rhodes after 1919 were ordered to leave the island.

By September 1939, the Jewish community of Rhodes had shrunk to less than 2000 people. Those who remained faced ongoing discriminatory laws. Uncle Joseph and family must have suffered, and must have worried very much about their future. The anguish only grew with each passing year. In early 1944, Uncle Joseph died—we don't know the cause, although we can surmise that fear and anxiety played their roles in his early death. In August 1944, German troops took control of Rhodes. In short order, the historic Jewish community of Rhodes came to a tragic end. Almost all the Jews were deported to Auschwitz, and only about 150 survived. Among the victims were my Aunt Sinyoru and my cousins Yehudah Leon, Jacob, Bulissa and Sara—people I would never meet, but whose memory would never leave me.

Little Joseph had been turned away from the United States by an immigration official. That official did not realize that his action ultimately was a death sentence to the family of Joseph. Had Joseph been allowed to go to Seattle, he—like the rest of his siblings—would have lived. Life hangs by a thread. Perhaps a kinder official would have had pity on my grandmother and her children, and perhaps this story would have had a happier ending.

In 1939, the Jews of Rhodes were oppressed by anti-Semitic rulers: but few imagined that the Nazi deportations and concentration camps would actually include them. This situation prevailed in other Sephardic communities as well.

Mr. Isaac Gerson, now aged 96, was a merchant in Salonika in 1939. Salonika was one of the crown jewels of the Sephardic world, a bastion of Judeo-Spanish civilization. Mr. Gerson recalls that in 1939 the Jews were confused; they heard rumors about Nazi Germany, but could not actually believe that the "civilized" Germans could become vile murderers. Few Jews fled Salonika. Jewish leaders did not foresee the coming disaster, and did not encourage flight or active resistance on the part of the Jews. The approximately 50,000 Jews of Salonika began to recognize the gravity of their situation in April 1941, when the Germans occupied Greece. In March 1943, the Nazis deported the Jews to concentration camps—with very few coming out alive.

In 1939, Thea Gomes de Mesquita was a little girl growing up in the famed Sephardic community of Amsterdam. She had no premonition of danger. The family attended synagogue as usual; she attended the Talmud Torah as usual. Yet, the adults of the community must have sensed trouble. German Jews, fleeing the Nazis, sought safety in Amsterdam. They told their stories of woe to the local Dutch Jews. In 1939, though, the stories did not seem immediately threatening to the Jews of Amsterdam. With the German invasion in 1941, everything was suddenly to change for the worse. Anti-Jewish restrictions went into effect. In 1942, Jews were deported to concentration camps. Thea de Mesquita's family went into hiding, going from place to place, and ultimately survived the war. Yet, the vast majority of Amsterdam's Sephardim—along with the rest of Dutch Jewry—were ruthlessly murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices.

When Mussolini came to power in 1922, Silvano Arieti was a fourth grade pupil in a non-Jewish school in Pisa, Italy. The little Jewish boy—along with his teacher and classmates—were swept up with enthusiasm for their new leader who would bring Italy to new glory. Arieti even wrote a poem in honor of Mussolini. As he grew older, he came to learn that Mussolini was the personification of fascism, a tyrant and a war-monger. A fascist slogan was: The Duce is always right. In 1938

Mussolini, to strengthen Italy's alliance with Germany, declared that Italy would adopt anti-Jewish laws. Arieti, seeing the writing on the wall, fled Italy for the United States, and went on to become a world-renowned psychiatrist and author. Of the approximately 50,000 Jews in Italy, 8,000 Jews lost their lives to the Holocaust. That most Italian Jews survived the war is attributed to the generally good relations that existed between the Jews and Christians in Italy, even during the war years.

In 1939, Jewish communities in French North Africa-Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia-began to feel the claws of Nazism. The Jews in Italian Libya likewise came under anti-Jewish legislation. Thousands of North African Jews were among those innocent victims who were murdered during the Holocaust period.

The Jews of Turkey and Bulgaria, though living in a state of anxiety and fear, were essentially spared deportation and murder. To the extent possible, they maintained their historic communities according to the traditions of the Judeo-Spanish Sephardim.

In 1939, Sephardic communities in Europe were living in the shadow of death, although few realized it at the time. Sephardic communities in the Middle East and North Africa-though less endangered than their European co-religionists-did not escape the brutalities of Nazism.

In 1939, Rabbi Benzion Uziel became the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the land of Israel. He struggled mightily to save as many Jews as possible by arranging for them to come to Palestine. The Grand Mufti of Palestine was a vicious anti-Semite, and strove to stir up anti-Jewish sentiment among the Arabs. The British sharply limited the number of Jews who could enter the land of Israel legally.

In 1939 Jews throughout the world began to understand that their lives meant very little to the nations of the world, and that they could depend on few people to help them. The blind hatred aimed against them would lead to the deaths of millions of individuals, and the destruction of countless communities.

After the war, Rabbi Uziel was asked how Jews should memorialize those who died in the Holocaust. His answer was powerful: we must defy the Nazis and their collaborators who attempted to destroy Jews and Jewish civilization. We can best memorialize the Jewish victims by building synagogues and Torah academies named after the Jewish communities that were wiped out. We will create new, vital Jewish life. We will raise new generations of pious, learned and dedicated Jews. We will grow and flourish, and will never forget those Jews who lost their lives in the Holocaust. The Jewish people will live, and the souls of the departed will live on through the new Jewish generations.

Uncle Joseph and family would be pleased to know that they are remembered, that they have relatives who cherish their memory and who live according to the teachings and ideals of Judaism. Am yisrael hai. Od avinu hai: the people of Israel lives, our God lives.

Byline:

This article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel appeared in the Canadian Jewish News, September 17, 2009, and is reprinted with the permission of the editor, Mordechai Ben-Dat.