Murder

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America.

That was the dream of so many poor Jews in the old Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. America was hope, a chance for a better life, a way out of poverty and squalor, a bastion of freedom.

America.

Enthusiasm for the new “promised land” spread from heart to heart. Thousands of hopeful souls uprooted themselves from the old world and set sail

for the new.

Among them, in 1908, were Bohor Yehuda Angel and his eldest son Moshe. They left the Island of Rhodes and made the long, arduous trip to Seattle, Washington, where a small community of Rhodes Jews had already settled.

Bohor Yehuda was a sturdy, pious man. He left his six young children in Rhodes with his wife Bulissa Esther. He and Moshe planned to work hard, earn money, and bring the entire family to Seattle as soon as possible.

Bohor Yehuda opened a shoe-shine stand in downtown Seattle. Moshe worked at various odd jobs. They lived simply and with great self-sacrifice. They regularly sent money to their family in Rhodes to sustain them until they could save enough to bring them all to Seattle. It took them three years of toil and scrimping before they finally raised the necessary funds.

Bulissa Esther received the news with ineffable joy.

The past three years had been difficult. Separation from a husband so many thousands of miles away in a strange land was not easy. Caring for six children in the absence of their father was a huge challenge. Although she was blessed with great wisdom and patience, Bulissa Esther was taxed to the limit of her abilities. At last, she could now arrange to travel with her children to America and the family could once again be united.

Bulissa Esther and her six children set sail in the summer of 1911. They traveled steerage, but no one complained. They were on their way to the freedom, happiness, and the promise of America. They were on their way to family reunion.

When they arrived in New York harbor, they looked forward to stepping onto American soil. They would soon take a train cross-country to Seattle. All would be well.

As they exited the ship, all passengers were brought to the immigration office. American officials checked their names, their places of origin, their ultimate

destinations in the United States. They asked many questions, although most of the immigrants did not know English and could not understand what was being asked of them. Somehow, though, most of the passengers answered well enough and received papers admitting them into the United States. When the turn of Bulissa Esther and her six children came, she stood before the examining officers with trembling anticipation. She told the officials that they were on their way to Seattle to reunite with her husband and eldest son.

One of the officials, following standard immigration procedures, checked the family members to determine if they had any obvious diseases or health issues that would prohibit their entry into the United States. Bulissa Esther and five of her children were deemed to be healthy. Her nine-year-old son, Joseph, was found to have a scalp disease, tinias. This was not a serious health problem in itself; but the immigration official ruled that Joseph could not be admitted into the country due to his disease. Bulissa Esther’s heart jumped a beat when she was made to understand that Joseph could not enter the

United States. She broke down crying. She pleaded with the officials. He is just a little boy, we will get medicine for his tinias, please let him in, what am I to do if you do not admit him? We've waited three years for my husband and son to raise the funds to bring us here! We can't go back to Rhodes again!

No, said the official, you don't have to go back to Rhodes. You and five of your children can continue your trip to Seattle. But Joseph can't be admitted into the United States.

Please, have mercy on a mother and her children. Have mercy on a nine year old boy. How can we separate him from the rest of us? How will he go back to Rhodes alone? Who will care for him there?

That is not our problem, said the official. Joseph cannot be admitted. You need to decide what to do now.

America.

The promised land. A land with laws, but without

mercy. A land that would turn a young boy away, that would break the hearts of a good, honest family. Bulissa Esther was beside herself with grief. She could not bring her family back to Rhodes. But neither could she abandon little Joseph.

As it happened, a Jewish man from Rhodes, who had been on the same ship as Bulissa Esther, was also denied entry into the United States due to a health problem. He had no choice but to return to Rhodes. When he heard Bulissa Esther crying, he came over to her and learned of the problem with Joseph. He volunteered to bring Joseph back to Rhodes with him, to settle him in with a family of relatives until such time as Bohor Yehuda could raise enough money to pay passage for Joseph to join the family in Seattle.

Bulissa Esther had no other realistic option. She thanked the man profusely for agreeing to look after Joseph. So she kissed her beloved son and said goodbye. All the brothers and sisters hugged Joseph and promised that they would see him again soon. Bulissa Esther and five of her children traveled on to Seattle, reunited with Bohor Yehuda and Moshe,

and gradually adapted to their new lives in America. Joseph was brought to the home of relatives in Rhodes. Bulissa Esther prayed for the day when Joseph could be brought together with the rest of the family in Seattle.

That day never came.

Bohor Yehuda could scarcely earn enough to support his large family in Seattle, let alone to save money to buy passage for Joseph. Meanwhile, world events were impacting on life in Rhodes, making Joseph’s travel to the United States increasingly unlikely.

War broke out between Italy and Turkey, with Italian forces occupying the Island of Rhodes in May 1912. After nearly four centuries of Turkish dominion, Rhodes was now under Italian control. Italy was officially granted Rhodes in July 1923 under the Treaty of Lausanne. The Jews of Rhodes, along with the other residents of the island, soon began to speak Italian, to think Italian, to be Italian subjects. Economic life in Rhodes blossomed. Little Joseph

grew up at a time of growing optimism among the Jews of Rhodes.

He couldn’t easily travel to America during the Turco-Italian War years. Then World War I broke out in July 1914, making travel across the Atlantic Ocean dangerous if not impossible. By the time the war ended in November 1918, Joseph was a young man, already comfortable in his life in Italian-ruled Rhodes. In due course, he was married to a lovely wife, Sinyorou; and they went on to have four children—two boys and two girls. Life was moving along well. They could see no reason to move to America; and in any case, American quota laws of 1921 and 1924 dramatically limited the number of immigrants eligible to enter the United States. Joseph had been turned away from America once; he had no desire to face American immigration officials a second time. But conditions in Rhodes were to change radically. In June 1936, Italy aligned itself with Nazi Germany. Jews living in Italian territories—like Jews living in Germany—became victims of a horrific policy of anti-Semitism.

The Jews of Rhodes were thunderstruck by the dramatic undermining of their lives and their livelihoods. The Rabbinical College of Rhodes was forced to close. Jews in Rhodes were required to keep their stores open on the Jewish Sabbath and festivals. In September 1938, anti-Jewish laws went into effect in Rhodes that prohibited kosher slaughter of animals. Jews were no longer allowed to buy property, employ non-Jewish servants, send their children to government schools. Non-Jews were forbidden from patronizing Jewish doctors or pharmacists. Jews who had settled in Rhodes after January 1919 were expelled from the Island. (They were the fortunate ones!)

For a short period in the early 1940s, there was a slight easing of the anti-Jewish measures. Yet, conditions were dire. Aside from dealing with their loss of civil status and human dignity, they had to deal with the ongoing hardships of living in a war zone. British planes dropped bombs on Rhodes in their effort to defeat the Axis powers, and dozens of Jews were among those killed in these attacks.

When Mussolini was removed from power in July 1943, the Jews of Rhodes thought their troubles were over. But contrary to their expectations, the Germans occupied Rhodes. The situation of the Jews worsened precipitously. In July 1944, the Jews of Rhodes had all their valuables confiscated by the Germans. They were then crowded into three small freight ships. Of the nearly 1,700 Rhodes Jews deported by the Nazis, only 151 survived. Almost all the Jews of Rhodes were viciously murdered in Auschwitz.

Among those who suffered this cruel and inhuman death were the entire family of Joseph Angel.

Little did the American immigration official realize in 1911, that by turning away a little boy with a scalp infection, he was condemning that boy and family to a calamitous destruction. That official no doubt slept peacefully the night he sent Joseph back to Rhodes, separating the young son from his mother and siblings. The official was following the rules.

If that official was still alive in July 1944, he probably

slept the sleep of the innocent, not realizing that his actions led to the death of an entire family. His dreams were not haunted by nightmares of the ghosts of Joseph’s family.