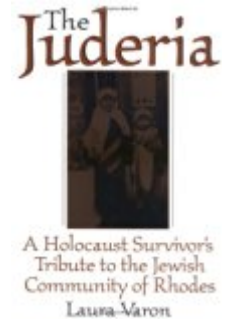


Laura Varon. *The Juderia: A Holocaust Survivor's Tribute to the Jewish Community of Rhodes.* Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999. 166 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-96346-0.



Reviewed by Rachel Amado Bortnick

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Rhodes -- a favorite island stop for cruise ships on the Aegean. For Jewish visitors, it is also a place to remember, and for some to discover, that the long arm of the Nazi Holocaust had decimated a historic Jewish community here. In what was once "La Juderia", the Jewish quarter where Sephardic life bustled, there are now memorials. A plaque lists the names of families killed in the German camps in 1944-45. Only a handful of Jews now live on the island.

"It is said that of the two thousand members of the Juderia 104 survived the camps; however, [it is doubtful] that even that many made it through alive." So writes Laura Varon, one of the few survivors, in her recently published book, *The Juderia: A Holocaust Survivor's Tribute to the Jewish Community of Rhodes*. This is the first book in English that is a personal memoir of the Holocaust in Rhodes. It is beautifully written, with vivid descriptions of life on the island and the Juderia, and the events that changed, and ended, that life.

The story in the book starts in 1938, with the chapter titled "Joy". Laura, a twelve-year-old Jew-

ish girl, is living a normal, joyful life among her family, friends and neighbors. Ages-old Sephardic traditions give shape and meaning to their lives: "Mother and Father made sure we carefully observed the rituals of our faith and the customs of our community. Our lives revolved around our Jewish heritage, and our special days...were always met with extensive preparation and sincere observance. I can still remember the Succah we built in our little courtyard for the celebration of Succot. Father constructed it meticulously, and we adorned it with palm branches and myrtle. How the sweet smell of the leaves mingled with aromas of blossoming orange trees, or the grape vines that found toeholds in the cracks of the house walls. We would pray and study the tikkun beneath that simple splendor, ensconced in our observance and surrounded by Mother's biscochos (cookies) and fruit we had hung on the Succah branches"(3).

Social interactions with Greeks and Turks on the island were generally peaceful, though not intimate. "Prejudice among the many peoples on Rhodes ebbed and flowed like the tide," Varon

writes. But despite her "occasional spats with Greek children (which) were carried on by adults ...on a much larger scale," Laura's view of the world remained optimistic. During a Purim carnival in "La Kaye Ancha" (The Wide Street), a Gypsy fortune teller warns her of upcoming danger from "uniforms," a cryptic message that Laura understood only much later. In 1939, the war in Europe brought changes to Rhodes, too. The Italian Fascist administration changed life "from simple, rustic splendor to an oppressive quiet"(14). Anti-Jewish measures, a rise in omni-present Greek anti-Semitism, and occasional bombardments shattered the peace. (Italians had naval and air bases in Rhodes and Leros, a nearby island.) Even then, the community still managed to continue its life and customs. "...our Judaism could not be thought of as a religion... in the sense of the Christian view of observance. In the Juderia, keeping kosher and keeping tradition was ... simply, a part of each and every one of us, an ancient core of what we were as individuals and as a community.... "(19) Real terror arrives with the Germans and grows, as innocent eyes witness death and brutality. Before the deportation, a friendly Turkish family, tries to keep Laura with them and secure a journey to Turkey for her, but Laura refuses, unable and unwilling to separate herself from her family.

The unrelenting determination of the Nazis to destroy the Jewish people everywhere and at whatever cost is illustrated by their deportation of far flung Sephardic communities such as that in Rhodes. Like most of the Dodecanese islands, Rhodes was under Italian control until late in the war. After the Italians signed the armistice with the Allies in September of 1943, the Germans occupied Rhodes. By spring of 1944 they were being defeated by the Red Army in the East and by the American, British, and Canadian forces in the West. Yet the Jews of Rhodes were rounded up on July 20, 1944, their property confiscated, and three days later loaded onto three small cargo ships for a last journey from their ancient home.

(Forty two Jews escaped deportation through the intervention of the Turkish Consul Selahattin Ulkumen, now a "Righteous Gentile" at Yad Vashem). Varon describes the ship on which she and her family were crowded: "Nearly seven hundred people were crowded into a ship designed to carry cargo and a crew of six and, with a stop at the island of Kos to pick up another hundred, we became even more crowded ... the smell of hundreds of people ... would have been overwhelming had we all not been immersed in it (42). And again: "... It was only 250 miles from Rhodes to our destination in Piraeus, but with constant fear of submarines and a stop on the island of Kos to pick up Jews there, the trip took eight days. For me it was a time of feeling as if my very soul had been stripped from me. Like the rest of what remained of the Juderia, I had become nothing more than a speck on the vast Aegean Sea. ... Just another small bit of culture torn apart and awash in the seas of war"(43). Persons who died on board, "of heat or several of the maladies related to their plight" were "unceremoniously dumped overboard each evening, as soon as the ships were underway...There was little room for the living, let alone the dead"(43). The Jews of the island of Crete, who had similarly been put into a small boat, never made it to Piraeus. The Aegean became their grave when their boat was sunk by Allied bombardment.

The miserable sea journey to Piraeus, Greece, "the transition, for each of us, from one life to the other," was followed by detention at the Haidari concentration camp, "our introduction to the Nazis' bestiality, and it had a death-rattle message all its own." Then, the group was taken to the trains, and shoved into boxcars. "Most of us had never seen a train before, and no one knew exactly where we were being taken. ... [There was] the eerie sound of a thousand shuffling souls and the grating noise of the rail car doors being shut against the future of most of them"(55).

Three weeks of misery later, the train arrived at its last stop –Auschwitz – and the innocent arrivals had their first sight of "two odd-looking men in dirty striped uniforms". A German soldier's shouts of "Schnell! Schnell!" were translated into Spanish by one of the men in stripes, presumably a prisoner from Salonica. The chapter in the book dealing with Auschwitz is appropriately titled "Into the Abyss." As everyone who had arrived before them, as anyone would be, they were totally unprepared for the horrors that awaited them. But Sephardim also faced added difficulties: having come from a mild and gentle climate, they suffered from the harsh winter in Poland. Furthermore, they did not understand or speak Yiddish, the language of most of the other Jewish prisoners, nor German, the language of their oppressors. (This point is not elaborated or stressed in the book.) The horror in Auschwitz "buried Rhodes and the beauty of my life there; it was smothered like the faceless shadows of my family." (116). "Despair" is the chapter describing the deathly march to Ebensee in February, 1945, and then to Bergen-Belsen.

Rescue, and the end of the horrors, eventually comes. Laura, now weighing 50 pounds, is sent to Sweden to recuperate. Later she is reunited in Italy with some members of her family whom "the God of Chance" allowed to survive. In 1947, Rhodes became part of Greece, and Laura, as other survivors, could not bear the thought of going back to Rhodes, where life could never be the same again. She joined her uncle in the Belgian Congo, where she reconstructed her life and lived for eleven years. Today Ms. Varon lives in Seattle, and lectures widely on the Holocaust. She has never been back to Rhodes. "I fear too much I would hear the whispers of my people in the streets...see my mother at the door admiring the heavy purses of her Purim-costumed children. But most of all, I've not returned because there is nothing left to return to...only the shell of what

was. There is only now a foreign place, like so many other foreign places I've been." (166)

The topic of the Rhodian Jewish population in the Holocaust has not received much attention. In his book, *The Jews of Rhodes* (Sepher Hermon Press, 1978), the first in English to give a detailed account of the Holocaust in Rhodes, Marc D. Angel writes: "The Sephardic community in Rhodes was born as a result of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. It died in the ashes of the German concentration camps." (152) In 1987 *Sephardim and the Holocaust*, edited by Solomon Gaon and Mitchell Serels, published by Yeshiva University, included the relevant chapter from Angel's book, because no one else had written much about it until then. Isaac Jack Levy, a Rhodes native, included a history of the Holocaust on the island in his Jewish Rhodes, a *Lost Culture* (Judah Magnes Museum, 1989). Personal recollections of the Sephardic culture of Rhodes before the war is also the subject of Rebecca Amato Levy's *I Remember Rhodes* (Sepher Hermon Press, 1987). In recent years there have been articles published in various, mostly Sephardic, publications by Holocaust survivors from Rhodes. *The Juderia: A Holocaust Survivor's Tribute to the Jewish Community of Rhodes* is the first book written by a survivor, but that is not the only reason for its importance.

In the Afterword of *The Juderia* Varon writes: "In 1993, Laura Varon visited the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. She spent more than a week absorbing everything in the various exhibits. She was dismayed, however, to discover that the islands of Rhodes, Kos, Corfu, and Crete were missing from a map that displayed the areas of Europe that had been scarred forever by the Nazis. Laura drew the attention of the museum curators to this oversight and received a letter promising to correct the omission"(166).

Other Holocaust museums also have committed such "oversights", as has much of the Holocaust literature. _The Juderia: A Holocaust Sur-

vivor's Tribute to the Jewish Community of Rhodes helps to fill the void left by these omissions, and gives a moving tribute to the people who were murdered by the Nazis. The pictures in the book help us know what many of the people looked like, and visualize the joy of their togetherness before the Holocaust engulfed them. But it is the masterful style of writing that brings each person to life and allows us to feel the pain of their oppression and death.

One wonders, however, if the obvious concern with style and creating a beautiful piece of literature, did not lead to some romanticizing, even creating some fictional details in the story. Was there really a Gypsy that foretold the "danger from uniforms"? Did that Russian girl who helped Laura in Auschwitz really speak Italian? Did they really kill the rabbis at the Haidari (Haydar) holding camp? ("Beginning with the rabbis, anyone the Germans knew or thought held a position of leadership was systematically brought to the wall, tied, and shot." p. 49.) No other account mentions this, and though Rabbi Angel indicates that "ten more died" at Haydar ("Jewish Rhodes p. 152) he says nothing about rabbis.

The book's Acknowledgments Varon credits Sharon Gricol, "without whom my memoirs would never have been written" and Roger Hoffman, without whom "my story would have never been written so beautifully." Though we wonder why Mr. Hoffman has not received more, perhaps all, credit for writing the book, the result of the cooperation of these three people has produced an important and eloquent book that belongs on the bookshelves of Jewish homes, and all libraries.

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