'It's time they knew our names'

Stella and Renee in California two years after being freed.

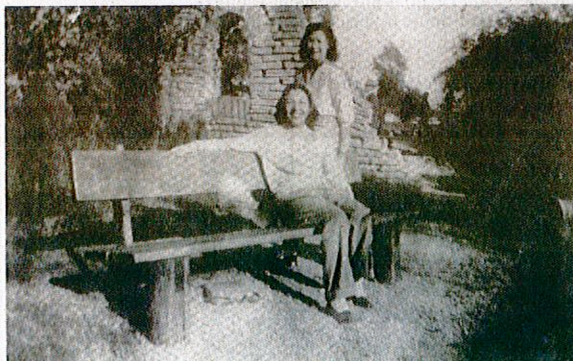
Rhodes native Stella Levi was imprisoned in Auschwitz, but still feels that her story - like that of most Sephardi Holocaust victims and survivors - 'doesn't count'

• By STACEY MENCHEL

Standing side by side the women looked identical: malnourished, skeletons – a mere shadow of the vibrant mothers, daughters, and sisters they had been not so long ago. As they lined up for another inspection, Stella Levi stood close to her sister Renee, her constant confidante, hoping to help her decipher the piercing German commands. The guards handled them like livestock, inspecting for sickness and abnormalities. What distinguished Levi the most, her language and culture, was of very little interest to the Nazis. In the camps, concepts of Greek, Italian, German and Russian were erased. All Jews were prisoners destined for the same violent end. In the roar of foreign sounds, Levi's Sephardi voice, her musical Judeo-Spanish, was silenced.

Hearing a rustling, Levi woke up in the middle of the night. She did not comprehend the whispering, but the shifting under her bed was all too familiar. They were stealing her bread again. To Polish Jews, Levi, since she did not speak Yiddish, was an easy target. She sat up quickly, trying to stop them, but they had already scurried back to their beds. From some corner of the darkness, a trickle of laughter shot out. "Greek," they laughed, "stupid Greek."

Stella Levi experienced Auschwitz differently from other Jews. She was lost in translation. Born on the island of Rhodes in 1926, Levi grew up speaking Ladino. Contrary to the belief of many at the camp, she was not Greek, she was Rhodian; and even more importantly, she was Sephardi. Her family descended from the glorious courts of medieval Spain. Yet in Auschwitz, dominated by German- and Yiddish-speaking Jews, Levi was part of a minority. Her Mediterranean heritage became a source of pain. The kapos harassed her, and other Ashkenazi Jews took advantage of her limited German. "They were such peasants," she recalls, the old dividing lines still vivid for her. "I knew so much about the Ashkenazi culture, the Jewish scholars in Lithuania and Germany, and they knew absolutely nothing about me."



Stella and Renee in Florence, Italy, soon after their release from Landsburg.

TO THIS DAY, the Sephardic voice of the Holocaust remains silent. Due to the larger numbers of Eastern European victims, the Shoah has been retold as a European story – an Ashkenazi story. The tragedy of the Holocaust, however, almost completely destroyed the Sephardi communities of the Mediterranean. Levi's family was among the estimated 400,000 Sephardi Jews deported to the Nazi death camps. The largest groups came from Greece, the Balkans, Bulgaria, Holland, Italy and its territories in Rhodes and Corfu. There were 57,000 Jews from the Greek city of Salonika alone. Of the close to 2,000 Jews sent from Rhodes, only 151 survived.

> 'Many of the Ashkenazim did not accept us. To them, if you didn't speak Yiddish, then you weren't Jewish. They didn't think the Jewish world existed outside of their shtetl' - Stella Levi on the Ashkenazi prisoners

As the survivors quickly disappear, Levi's story takes on an added significance, because the Sephardi experience of the Holocaust still lacks the memorial infrastructure – museums, monuments, works of literature – that keep the Ashkenazi story alive. According to Prof. Seth Ward of the Institute for Islamic-Judaic Studies at Denver University, while the Ashkenazi communities suffered a larger loss of people, certain Sephardi communities, such as Rhodes, experienced an even more complete version of the Final Solution. Due to their smaller size, the Sephardi communities occupied by the Nazis were completely destroyed, while proportionately more of the Ashkenazi community remained.

The small number of Sephardi survivors helps to explain the lacuna of information on the Sephardic experience of the Shoah. Ward feels, however, that the event has been memorialized through Ashkenazi eyes. He states, "The lower visibility of the Holocaust outside of Europe goes beyond issues of documentation and disparities in the size of the communities affected. It reflects the centrality of the Central and Eastern European narrative." Ward emphasizes the need to expand the knowledge of the Sephardi experience of Shoah. He states, "If the Holocaust is important, it is important to record and analyze as much of the Holocaust as possible. Yet, in most places, the history of the Sephardim is nearly invisible."

In 1944, the Nazis killed Levi's family, destroyed her community and shattered her sense of belonging. Levi's treatment in the Holocaust, especially the condemnation by her Ashkenazi coreligionists, created layers of resentment, and to this day she seems lost in the Jewish world. She feels most at home somewhere that no longer exists, the Jewish quarter of Rhodes.

According to 17th-century Karaite traveler Samuel Ben David, Rhodes, with its warm climate, lush greenery, and delicious fruits " in a word... is paradise." Close to the Anatolian coast of Turkey, with easy proximity to Alexandria, Egypt, the island holds a strategic location in the Mediterranean Sea, and thus has been conquered and reconquered throughout the centuries.

In 1523, the Ottoman Turkish sultan encouraged the settlement of a group of Sephardi Jews that had been exiled from Spain with the passage of the Inquisition and Edict of Expulsion in 1492. Speaking Ladino, a hybrid of medieval Castilian Spanish and Hebrew, this group came to call themselves the Rhodeslies. These merchants and traders held onto their Iberian culture, merged with the Turkish and Greek influences around them and created the vibrant Jewish community of Levi's past.

Levi grew up in La Juderia of Rhodes, the designated Jewish quarter on the island close to the northern port. Under Ottoman rule, the Jews were *dhimmi*, a protected a people, paying taxes to the government in order to rule themselves on the island. While occasional persecution existed, Rhodeslies lived peacefully in the Turkish Empire. They had freedom to conduct business, worship in public, and speak and educate in the Ladino language.

Rhodian Jews connected strongly to Sephardi tradition. Music dominated religious services, and Ladino melodies, *romanceros*, could be heard often in the streets. The proximity of Jerusalem also deepened Jewish identity. Levi's relatives traveled often to the holy city, and two generations of her forefathers were buried there.

As a cosmopolitan port city, Rhodes had contact with Europe and the Levant for centuries. The Italian occupation in 1912, however, augmented European influence. Levi attended an Italian school, and studied Latin, ancient Greek, philosophy and Italian literature. Even under Italian rule, Levi felt safe as a Rhodian Jew. In her young mind, the Rhodeslies community seemed permanent; she was stunned when her freedom was taken away.

SUCCUMBING TO pressure from Hitler in 1936, Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini passed a series of anti-Semitic racial laws. Under this oppressive legislation, Rhodian Jews could no longer hold governmental positions and were eliminated from the state's educational system. It became forbidden for Jewish doctors to treat patients of the "pure" Italian race.

With the surrender of the Italians to the Germans on September 8, 1943, the situation in Rhodes deteriorated. Rhodes was attacked from both sides as the Allies, in an attempt to destroy German ships in the port, dropped many bombs in La Juderia. On Pessah in 1944, 26 Jews were killed as an Allied plane dropped a bomb on the Calle Ancha, meters from the synagogue.

Soon after, the deportation occurred on August 3, 1944. Stella, her sister Renee, her mother and father arrived in Auschwitz after 10 days of brutal boat and cattle car travel. "We were in such awful condition after the trip, and we understood so little because very few people spoke Ladino." She was separated from her parents immediately. She remembers in the first few days, ironically singing Italian songs like *Mama sono tanto felice* ("Mother, I'm so happy") in hopes that another family member might hear and sing back.

Her parents were killed upon arrival, yet Stella and Renee remained together throughout their time in the concentration camps. The companionship proved essential for both women's survival. Levi also befriended a group of French Jewish women, and because of the linguistic proximity of Italian, Ladino and French, the girls could easily communicate.

The Eastern European Jews, however, treated Levi as a foreigner. "Many of the Ashkenazim did not accept us. To them, if you didn't speak Yiddish, then you weren't Jewish. They didn't think the Jewish world existed outside of their shtetl. " Levi lamented the rejection and loneliness she felt. Her beloved Ladino only marginalized her further among her own people.

After only three months, Stella and Renee were transferred. The women were sent to a series of other camps in Germany, as the Nazis fled the impending victory of the Allies. On April 16, 1945, the Americans liberated Levi and her sister at Landsburg, a satellite camp of Dachau.

While clearly joyous about her freedom, Levi would soon discover, even family could not fill the void created by the deportation from Rhodes. The sisters spent the first year in Italy, staying with relatives in Rome and Florence, before deciding to move near family in Los Angeles. Levi suffered from extreme culture shock in America. "I was just lonely in this time," she recalls. "I didn't think I ever wanted to go back to Europe, because Europe killed my family. But, ultimately, Europe was all I knew." After three years of feeling unsettled, Stella and Renee decided to move to New York after reconnecting with Italian Jewish friends. Cosmopolitan and international, it was the right fit for Levi, and 59 years later, she remains.

DESPITE MARRIAGE to an Ashkenazi, Levi's resentment toward the Ashkenazim deepened over time. She felt invisible in the Ashkenazi-dominated city of New York. Levi recalls the lack of sympathy she received from Holocaust aid groups. "They only helped each other," she says of the Ashkenazim. "They considered me Greek and didn't give a single penny." There were no official Sephardic organizations for survivors, thus Levi had to organize her own compensation. She received restitution from the German Claims Conference in the 1980s, almost 20 years after most Eastern European survivors.

In 1977 Levi returned to Rhodes for the first time and, soon after, she became one of the main proprietors of the Jewish Museum of Rhodes. Due to the lack of public history about the Sephardic experience, Levi feels especially passionate about her work with the museum. "It is tragic the exhibits are so incomplete in Washington and Israel. Now finally there is some more information on Greece, but there is still so little on Rhodes," she notes.

While the Rhodes museum sees up to 75 people a day in its high season, it does not have the impact of the bigger museums in the US, Europe and Israel. "It seems to many that our stories don't count," she laments. "But people need to know about the Sephardim. It is time that people know our names." ■

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Levi with friends in the 1980s (she is the woman in the foreground).

Stella Levi and friends at the Jewish Museum of Rhodes.