



Vibrant testimony to a vanishing world

Elizabeth Graver's *Kantika* travels from Istanbul across the world to tell the story of a feisty matriarch. **Michael Frank**, whose recent book shone a light on Jewish life in Rhodes, speaks to Graver about the challenges of recording Sephardi history before it disappears

A curious thing happens when, as a writer, you immerse yourself in a subject over a sustained period of time. In the six-plus years I spent researching my book, *One Hundred Saturdays*, as I listened to Stella Levi tell me about the Sephardi Jewish community of Rhodes into which she was born in 1923 and where she continued to live until the entire community was deported to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944, I found that my reading antenna became attuned to other books that were set against related

backgrounds, and I opened them with a particular curiosity: what will this new story have to say about the subject?

I confess to reading Elizabeth Graver's novel *Kantika* with excitement and some anxiety about what I might have missed or misunderstood. Here was a novel based on the life of her grandmother Rebecca Cohen, a Sephardi woman of Turkish ancestry, a powerful personality whose life unfolded against significant 20th-century events. Graver took the facts of Rebecca's life, and the key figures who populated

it, and imagined herself into them with facility and panache.

Where I sought to convey the facts of Stella's life with the same Scheherazade-like enchantment with which I first heard them, Graver freed herself to conjure her grandmother's life not quite as she first learned about it – through research and interviews conducted years ago with Rebecca herself and more recently with relatives, friends and even strangers in a Sephardi home for the aged in Istanbul – but with all the range and freedom of the fiction-maker that she is.

Kantika – 'song' in Ladino – opens in 1907 in Istanbul when Rebecca is a young girl, the daughter of a textile merchant, Alberto, and his wife Sultana. The family leads a comfortable life but, with the establishment of the Turkish republic,

Clockwise from above: Rebecca (seated) holding baby Albert, with son David and first husband Luis (holding puppy) on the left. Her parents stand behind her. Barcelona, circa 1928; Elizabeth Graver; Michael Frank; Rebecca in Florida, 1979

Alberto begins to feel insecure about the future for Jews in the country. He is offered a job as a caretaker in a synagogue in Barcelona and the family uproots for Spain. There, Rebecca marries another Turkish Jew and the ensuing story takes her around the world, back to Turkey in pursuit of her erratic husband, and then, after his death, to Havana, where she remarries and follows her new husband to New York.

Where Graver, paradoxically, used family photographs to illustrate her fictional *Kantika*, I used paintings (by the gifted Maira Kalman) to illustrate my non-fictional book. And where Graver wrote out of the particular intimacy of having known her subject for decades, I wrote out of knowledge accumulated over these ample but nevertheless finite years of listening closely to Stella.

Yet even though we came at these stories differently, we had a shared goal: to capture, as vividly and authentically as possible, these two vibrant women and

the layered, and now vanished, Sephardi worlds that formed them.

When Jewish Renaissance invited me to have a conversation with Graver about our two books, I couldn't wait to dive into what turned out to be a lively exchange that might easily have gone on for days.

MICHAEL FRANK: Let's start with the 'why now' question. Stella was 92 when I met her. The clock was loudly clicking. But your grandmother Rebecca died in 1992. You didn't start this novel until decades later.

ELIZABETH GRAVER: I began writing in 2014, prompted in part by the state of the world: the refugee crisis and rising antisemitism – age-old issues, of course, but they felt pressing in ways that were at once new and all too reminiscent of the past. More personally, I had my own strong sense of time speeding up. My mother was approaching 80 when I started this book; two of my uncles were close to 90; every day the worlds they'd seen and heard about were in danger of disappearing. I felt an

“I wanted my relatives to have the experience of being listened to”

urgency. At the same time, I wanted my older relatives to have the experience of being listened to – for them to know that their stories mattered. I felt a powerful echo with your project in this way. We were both listeners, weren't we?

MF: I wish I'd been able to do something similar with my own grandmother, who was born in Safed in Israel, at the end of the 19th century into an Ashkenazi family that had returned to 'repopulate' the Holy Land. I was fascinated by her exotic origins and did ask her a lot of questions – I even took notes – but I was 14 when she died, and there was only so much I could understand then. You, on the other hand, had access to so much family history. And you didn't hesitate to invent what you didn't know. Did that ever feel risky?

EG: I gave myself permission to invent, but my invention was grounded, as much as possible, in the facts as I'd had heard them or encountered them in my research. I love to do research. But also I didn't want to be bound by what I knew. There were too many gaps and I wanted the freedom to imagine inner lives, to go inside.

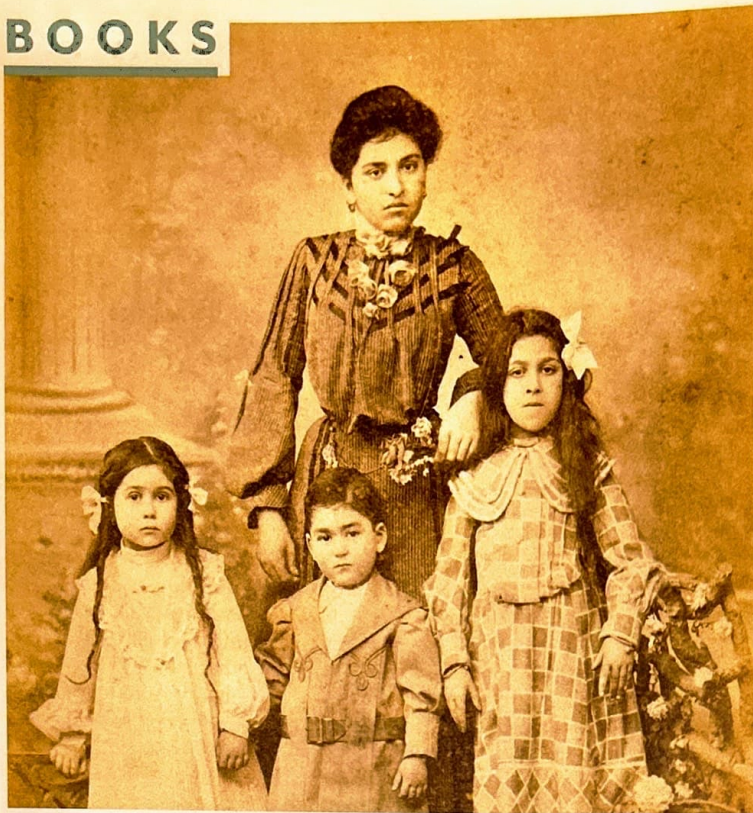
MF: Both of our books tell Sephardi stories, which seem to have received less attention than they should. Of course, more Jews are Ashkenazi, especially in the United States – but I wonder if other factors are at work?

EG: Well, Rebecca regarded Ladino or Judeo-Spanish, her first language – as it also was Stella's – as a kind of 'kitchen speak' that marked her as an immigrant and outsider. Even in Turkey, where she lived as a child, spoken Ladino was seen as lesser-than, which is why her education was in French. In America, I saw in my own family how there could be a certain discomfort with the Sephardim: my paternal grandmother, who was Ashkenazi, ended up loving my mother, but when my dad brought her home, she didn't code as Jewish at first. Her first language, the food she ate, the songs she sang, her pronunciation of Hebrew prayers, it was all different from having grown up with Sephardi parents who were recent arrivals to America when my mother was born.

MF: Yet there are Sephardim, Stella among them, who see their culture as equal or even superior, whatever that means when we're talking about two rich – and richly different – cultures framed around a shared religion.

EG: It's hard to generalise about these divisions, especially since we're both writing about women who were proud of their backgrounds and felt that their stories →





From left: Rebecca (in white) with her siblings and (behind) older cousin, Victoria, Istanbul, circa 1907; Rebecca in Istanbul, circa 1924

should be told. And they both powerfully inhabited their own lives. This is part of what made them such charismatic subjects, but is it typical? I'd hesitate to claim that; their power lies in their particularity. Rebecca was confident, regal in her bearing. She loved her body. She came from a well-to-do family that had lost its status, though the marks of that status clung to her all her life. Like Stella, she was proud of where she came from, even if as a child I had trouble pinning down where, exactly, that was. Or what, exactly, she was: Spanish, Turkish, Jewish, American?

MF: Or all of the above?
EG: Very likely.

MF: More than once, I asked Stella how she defined herself. She was born into a Sephardi culture that was still old-world in much of its inflections, habits and traditions. She spoke Judeo-Spanish at home, yet she was equally formed by the Italian school system imposed on Rhodes when the Italians made the island a colony in 1923. For most of her postwar adult life she's lived in New York. All the conventional markers of identity – language and place central among them – kept changing in her life. In the end, and after some reflection, she answered that she first identified herself as Jewish: the history, traditions, practices and holidays shaped her life more than a fixed place or language.

EG: I think Rebecca felt the same way. Jewishness was her constant amid flux, even as it was the cause of much of the flux.

“Was she Spanish, Turkish, Jewish or American?”

She spoke about Turkey with nostalgia, but it was just one of her key places. Her parents were buried in Spain, two of her brothers moved to Israel. She belonged nowhere and everywhere. Wherever she landed, she was gifted at joining synagogues, building communities and making a home for herself – a true home, full of life, yet also tinged with loss. She always had gardens: in Turkey, Spain, New York and Florida. She had a strong urge to literally put down roots. For someone who grew up with privilege, she was scrappy. Some of her silverware was swiped from

airplanes. She knew how to improvise and could make something out of anything. I have a doll sitting in my study that we crafted together. One thing I loved about her was that although she carried around plenty of sadness and longing – she conveyed a sense of having come from a lost place – she was also quick to show joy.

MF: Of course, the invisible presence of that lost place is unmistakable with Stella, but for a different reason: she didn't just leave her place behind. With the deportation, her place lost its identity, its very definition. She and I spoke about this a good deal: What is the Juderia – as the neighbourhood where she grew up was known – without any Jews? A pile of old stones, in essence.

EG: There's an unspeakableness at the centre of Stella's story. The conversation between the two of you is so raw in what cannot and can be said. The book manages

to convey this essential piece of human nature: certain things are so powerful and painful that you can't go near them.

MF: Were there places you felt you couldn't go with Rebecca?

EG: Not so much with Rebecca, but at times with her stepdaughter, the character called Luna in the novel. Luna was inspired by – and named after – my real Aunt Luna, who had cerebral palsy and a childhood full of struggle. She was an extraordinary person with writerly ambitions. I was hesitant at first to inhabit her perspective. I didn't want to get it wrong and wish she could have told her story in all its fullness for herself.

MF: And yet you tried to tell it, I think bravely.

EG: If we fall short, maybe that says something too.

MF: The main thing is to try to tell these stories – at least as long as they're there and waiting to be told.

EG: Waiting – and sometimes asking too. ■

Kantika by Elizabeth Graver, Metropolitan Books, 2024, £14.84. *One Hundred Saturdays: Stella Levi and the Vanished World of Jewish Rhodes* by Michael Frank, Souvenir Press, 2023, £18.99. Michael Frank is the author of *What is Missing*, plus a memoir, *The Mighty Franks*, which won the 2018 Wingate Prize and was named one of the 10 best books of 2022 by the Wall Street Journal. To read more about *One Hundred Saturdays* see Michael Frank's piece in the Winter 2023 issue of JR.