



A Hug From Afar: One family's dramatic journey through three continents to escape the Holocaust

Claire Barkey Flash

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From the young age of 9 on the Aegean island of Rhodes, Clara Barki started writing to her uncle Ralph and aunty Rachel Capeluto in the far-away place known as Seattle, Wash. This smart and determined young woman, who was always at or near the top of her class, used the dying language of Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, to report news of the relatives Ralph left behind on Rhodes and the happenings of her Sephardic Jewish community. But what started as friendly letters quickly turned to desperate pleas for help as life for the Jews of Rhodes deteriorated under the control of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who allied with Adolph Hitler. Forgotten and never thought of again, Clara's letters turned up more than 60 years after they were written and after she, Ralph and Rachel had passed away. Preserved and translated from Ladino into English, they paint a vivid and detailed 16-year story of how one family triumphed and survived after they became refugees and rode the roller coaster of successes and failures to legally win permission to immigrate to the United States. This compelling story of perseverance, determination, love and grit is brought to life in *A Hug From Afar*, a historical narrative nonfiction memoir that journalist Cynthia Flash Hemphill has edited and compiled based on the letters written by her mother Clara Barki (aka Barkey) from 1930 to 1946. "A Hug from Afar reads like a suspense novel—only it's a true story, and it feels as though it's your family caught up in a tale of hope and fear, frustration and happiness, family ties that reach across continents and over decades, and an American immigration bureaucracy working to make family reunification as difficult as possible," Paul Burstein, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Political Science, and Stroum Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies, University of Washington, wrote in a pre-publication commentary on the book. The book goes far beyond one family's story. It captures the history of the Sephardic Jews on the Island of Rhodes, descendants of Spanish Jews exiled during the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. The book "gives voice to a now-lost Jewish community on the verge of annihilation, to a Jewish family seeking asylum, and to one young woman who initiated a thread of correspondence with relatives in the United States that would ultimately solidify her family's escape from the Nazis," writes Devin E. Naar, Isaac Alhadeff Professor in Sephardic Studies, University of Washington, in a detailed and compelling foreword to the book. "The story itself is not only captivating and powerful on its own, but is also of great historical and cultural significance," Naar writes. "Too seldom do we have access to the perspectives of women in history, even fewer with regard to young women, and very few when it comes to the Sephardic Jewish world. While we know of Anne Frank and her diary, we have almost no sources composed by Sephardic Jewish girls or young women describing their experiences regarding the rise of fascism and the onset of the Second World War." The book uses 16 years worth of letters and official documents to take the reader through a detailed journey of exile, community annihilation, dashed hopes, and real-life drama seen through the eyes of a young woman forced to grow up too quickly as she desperately worked to save her family from Hitler's efforts to destroy the Jews. As she put this book together, Flash Hemphill reflected on the many themes it offers. "It touches on the Holocaust and includes two surviving and aging family members who are still alive and well today," she said. "It centers on the topic of immigration, a hot subject today as our country debates this important issue. And it raises the question about how family histories will be preserved in the future, now that we have moved away from formal, hand-written letters to the instant and quickly discarded forms of today's communication - e-mail, texts and tweets."

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