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Sarah Abrevaya Stein discusses 'Family Papers'

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[00:00:24] Good evening. Hello.

[00:00:27] My name is Misha Stone with the Reader Services Department here at the Seattle Public Library. Thank you so much for coming out tonight. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. So together let us honor their elders past and present. This event is sponsored with the in partnership with the Sephardic Studies program and the Stroum Center for the Jewish Studies at the University of Washington. This event is also supported by the Seattle Public Library Foundation that makes so many of our free library programs possible. Author series sponsors Gary and Connie Kunis and the Seattle City of Literature. We also want to thank our media sponsor, The Seattle Times. This event is also presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Thank you so much for Elliott Bay and Karen for coming tonight. Support your independent booksellers. We are excited to have tonight with us Sarah h Abrevaya Stein on her new book, *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey Through the 20th Century* with Devin Naar, Sephardic Studies Chair at the University of Washington. We are thrilled to be co-hosting this event with the Sephardic Studies program and the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington. And I want to tell you a little bit about our speakers. Incidentally, for those of you who didn't know, we were thrilled that this event came to us from our volunteer extraordinaire, Joan Abrevaya. And when she let my colleague Linda and I know that her niece wrote a book and it was a fabulous book, we looked into it and we said, oh, yes, she's right. Let's make this happen.

[00:02:16] Ok.

[00:02:16] But to be formal, Sarah h Abrevaya Stein is a historian, writer and educator whose work has reshaped our understanding of Jewish history. Her commitment to research is matched by her

love of teaching. At UCLA she is professor of History, the director of the Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies, as well as the Maurice Amado Chair in Sephardic Studies. She's an author or editor of nine books, including *Family Papers* and *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and the Lost World of Global Commerce*. Sarah h has received many awards, including the Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, two National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowships, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Jewish Book Awards, and the UCLA Distinguished Teaching Award.

[00:03:04] You can find out more by buying the book and going to Sarah h Stein dot com.

[00:03:10] Next up is Dr. Devin E. Naar, who is the Isaac Alhadeff Professor and Sephardic Studies, Associate Professor of History, and faculty at the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies in the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. Born and raised in New Jersey, Dr. Naar graduated summa cum laude from Washington University in St. Louis and received his Ph.D. in History at Stanford University. He has also served as a Fulbright fellow to Greece. His first book, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece*, was published by Stanford University Press in 2016. The book won the 2016 National Jewish Book Award in the category of Research Based on Archival Material and was named a finalist in Sephardic Culture. It also won the 2017 Edmund Keeley Prize for best book in Modern Greek Studies awarded by the Modern Greek Studies Association. Please welcome Professor Devin Naar, who will be in conversation with our featured author this evening, Sarah Stein.

[00:04:17] I'm very thrilled to be here. And before we get started, I wanted to offer some thanks as well to the staff of the Seattle Public Library and especially Linda Johns and Misha Stone. Thank you very much for making this event possible. And to Joan Abrevaya also for making the connection very, very grateful. And I wanted to also express my gratitude to the Stroum Center of Jewish Studies and Sephardic Studies staff, including Sarah h Zaides Rosen, Emily Thompson, Ty Alhadeff and our students, Tony and Joey, and especially Mackenna Mezistrano, who is our new Sephardic Studies Assistant Director, who really took the lead in coordinating this event and also wrote a really wonderful post for the Stroum Center website, exploring Sarah h's book *Family Papers* and linking it to her own family roots in Salonica as well. I'd also like to express my gratitude and our gratitude to the Sephardic Studies Founder Circle, some of whose members are with us this evening, who have really enabled the Sephardic Studies program to not only become established, but to really thrive and become a an important center in the field of Sephardic studies in the United States and also to the Al-Haddad Foundation, some of whose board members are with us as well for also their instrumental support in developing Sephardic Studies. So it's it's really my privilege to be here with you this evening and with my friend and colleague and mentor, Sarah h Abrevaya Stein.

[00:05:54] And you heard a little bit about her. I won't repeat that, but I would only mention that, you know, I guess we've probably known each other for more than a decade, maybe close to 15 years now. We both completed our PhD at Stanford University under the mentorship of some of the same faculty and in particular Aron Rodrigue who is really the doyen of the field of Sephardic Studies. And his students and now some of his students' students even are holding important positions in the field of Sephardic Studies. And it's been really lovely, to, to have the opportunity to meet with you and to

interact and to speak and to correspond and to collaborate on on many occasions over the years. I would just comment on the breadth of Sarah's scholarship over the years. She's brought us books on Yiddish and Ladino newspaper culture. She brought us a really wonderful book about the rise and fall of the ostrich feather trade and the role that Jews played in that trade that came out. I think very you timed it very well with actually the the economic crisis of 2008. So it is very with the boom, the bust of that whole enterprise, a book on Saharan Jews in Algeria and a number of other studies, almost all of it, all of which I've read cover to cover. And they're really very much influenced my own scholarship and in my teaching.

[00:07:26] And I think one of the major impacts that Sarah has made is she has compelled us to think differently about the contours of Jewish history, to expand the horizons of Jewish history, and really to bring the Mediterranean world into the conversation and to make it a central aspect of the experience of Jews in the last number of centuries, and also to bring the experience of the Ottoman Empire to scholarly and more broader public attention. And I think this new book, *Family Papers*, brings that enterprise even further in terms of transforming the experiences of Sephardic Jews through this one family and bringing it to a broader audience. I mean, an unprecedented, I mean, you have no idea the thrill that I got to see the wonderful reviews in *The New York Times* and then *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and the little write up in *The Economist*, which named that one of the best books of twenty nineteen. The fact that these very prestigious mainstream publications are published on their pages, the word Salonica and Sephardic Jews and Ladino. I mean, this is a really, really remarkable kind of contribution. And I think it speaks to the way in which Sarah's work is bringing the narratives and the experiences often overlooked of Sephardic Jews to a much broader, broader and wider audience.

[00:08:55] And that's been it's been a thrill to see. And I'm very grateful for all of your contributions. In terms of *Family Papers*. It's also a very exciting book for me because I began my career studying my own family's family papers in some ways. I haven't written a book about it or not yet, at least. But. It was these family correspondence from my own relatives who were in Salonica in Greece, writing to relatives in the United States about everyday life, about trying to get a visa and not being able to get a visa, and about the fate of those relatives who perished in the Holocaust. That when I was able to get a hold of those letters, that I began to decipher them and to understand them. I realized that I had to go deeper. And I wanted to understand that entire universe that seemed I got a little taste from those letters and I wanted to go a lot further. And that led me on a path of deep academic inquiry and my entire career sort of stemming from a different set of family papers. And so I thought we could begin with I would hope that you could maybe tell us a little bit about how you arrived at this particular project.

[00:10:06] I should also mention that Sarah is no stranger to Seattle, that she held my position a number of years ago. Or shall I say, I filled her position when she vacated it and went to UCLA. So she is no stranger to Seattle.

[00:10:20] But I thought at the beginning, you know, maybe you could tell us a little bit about how you arrived at this project, meant you could read a little bit of those, bring the opening pages of your of your book for us.

[00:10:30] Thank you. Well, it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you so much, everyone, for taking part and so many friends in the room. And Devin, I'd love to be in conversation with you always. So I'm so grateful to everyone at the library and in Magnolia and at the University of Washington who helped bring this together. Thank you so much. I thought that I might begin with answering this first question by just reading about a page that opens *Family Papers* and then I won't read more will enter into conversation. But I think that it will introduce you to the voice of the book and also answer Devin's question about the genesis of the project.

[00:11:13] This is the story of a single Sephardic family whose roots connect them to a place and community that no longer exist. The place was the port city of Ottoman Salonica, present day Thessaloniki, Greece, one of the few cities in modern Europe ever to claim a Jewish majority. The community was made up mostly of Ladino – (or-Judeo-Spanish) speaking Jews, Sephardic families who trace their ancestry back to Sepharad, medieval Iberia, from which they were expelled in the 1490s, but who for the next five centuries called the Ottoman Empire, southeastern Europe and Salonica home. Today, the papers of the Levy family are spread across nine countries and three continents. The single largest collection, the papers of Leon Levy, is kept by his four grandchildren in a private vault in Rio de Janeiro. It consists of nearly 5,000 handwritten and typed letters, telegrams, photographs, legal and medical documents and miscellanea address books, expired passports and more. By far, the largest private archive I have ever encountered as a professional historian and near obsessive document hunter. In a suitcase in a spare garage in a retirement village outside Johannesburg. There is another repository of Levy family papers smaller than the Rio collection. The South African one is nonetheless of immeasurable historical value. It includes such cherished souvenirs as a silhouette cut in Salonica in 1919, capturing the likeness of a young woman about to emigrate from her native city, never to return. Other family papers have turned up in private hands in England.

[00:12:47] One collection boxed up in a home in London has survived multiple migrations from Greece to Great Britain to Germany to India, back to Great Britain and on to the United States. Another housed in a scenic village outside Manchester, contains fragile glass slides taken in 1917 in Salonica's Jewish Cemetery, then the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe. Yet more documents, photographs and objects have materialized in Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Portugal and the United States. Not only family owned papers, but documents and photographs held by 30 archives, travel documents, naturalization papers, birth, death and medical records, letters exchanged by relatives, lovers and friends, business papers, even a baptismal certificate. All told, these scattered sources have allowed me to trace an intimate arc of the 20th century. The Levy family papers catalogue the lives and losses of multiple generations, contain papers written in eight languages, and reflect correspondence among members of a single family spanning the globe. This is a Jewish story, an Ottoman story, a European story, a Mediterranean story and a diasporic story. A story of how women, men and children experienced

wars, genocide and migration. The collapse of old regimes and the rise of new nations. The Levy papers also reveal how this family loved and quarreled, struggled and succeeded, clung to one another, and watched the ties that once bound them slip from their grasp.

[00:14:22] Thank you. It's remarkable opening your book. We can go home now.

[00:14:31] Can you tell us, how did you find those materials? Because, I mean, it's such a vast wealth of information.

[00:14:40] Well, you were able to bring to bear on the story.

[00:14:44] I mean, you you're a documentary hunter, too, and you know how this goes. I mean, it's a bit like pulling the string of yarn on a sweater. You know, the more you pull, the more it unravels further and further and further. And then your hands are overwhelmed by all of this unraveled yarn that you suddenly have to spin into into a tale, into a yarn. But I began the project began when another project ended. And as I describe in the introduction, I was finishing a book with my friend and colleague and former teacher that Devin mentioned earlier, Aron Rodrigue, which was a translation of the first Judeo Spanish memoir that we understand to have been written by a patriarch of this family and written over a series of decades in late 19th century Salonica. And he was a very interesting, cantankerous, moody person, driven to write a memoir to exonerate himself from perceived slights, actual slights that he'd experienced over his lifetime. And he wrote a memoir in a very fragile notebook. And the notebook journeyed through family hands from Salonica to Paris to Rio to Jerusalem. And we finished this translation with Isaa Jerusalmi -doing a beautiful translation. And I thought, how on earth did this notebook make this journey, survive a century of turmoil, mass migration of the family, a fire in the native city, the collapse of the empire in which it was written. And I started looking backwards and in a sense, following the notebook in reverse.

[00:16:23] And the first and most overwhelming discovering was this repository. I just read about in Rio de Janeiro that this the grandson of the memoirist preserved and passed on to his son and then to his grandchildren. And they still hold the grandfather's papers. And he was a rather like the memoirist himself. He was a rather strong willed individual, a devoted letter writer, and someone who saved letters that he wrote and drafted and letters that he received over some six decades. And this collection of papers was such a rich repository. And you visited it with me the first time that I discovered it. And that got me thinking about the paper's families keep and about what letters mean to a family in a global diaspora from one another. And it sort of hooked me. And so I began following different branches of the tree, using the historian's ever present guide, which is Google, as well as a lot of books and archives. And slowly, slowly made my way from one family to the next to all across the world. And what is remarkable is that these people don't know each other. In fact, now, since the book is coming out, they've begun to meet, which is another story, but they weren't aware of each other or in contact with each other. So this, in a sense, was a historian reconstructing a family where in some sense the family no longer existed.

[00:17:59] In some ways, the book that you describe, it's a Sephardic journey. And it's the journey of the people. It's journey of the letters. It's a journey of that notebook. But it's as you describe it. You know, it's it's much bigger than a Sephardic story. I mean, you could tell the story of the 20th century through this particular family experience, through this particular communal configuration.

[00:18:22] And that could be a story of the 20th century as any other. And one of the one of the themes that runs throughout a lot of your scholarship, including in this book, is the concept of of what it means to be modern. And, you know, you mentioned modern Europe in the beginning, but it comes up several times in in the book. The Levy's were shapers of modernity. Saudi posed a threat of modernity to a traditional world. His children, like Tavia in *Fiddler on the Roof*, followed all the paths that modernity offered to Jews. They went in many different directions. And you have a really nice passage that starts off one of the chapters. Those Levys were dangerous. All they needed was an idea to come to them like a little birdie and they'd start chasing after it. And this idea never rested until it became a reality. So I was wondering if you could comment a little bit. This is kind of a bigger question, but like, what does it mean to be modern in the world? And how do you see this as a modern stories about ideas or technology or politics? How do you understand that?

[00:19:23] That's an interesting question. And the quote that you read about the the family being dangerous was written in a memoir from the turn of the century from 100 years ago. So it was already notorious. They were already notorious before the historian came along. How do we understand what the experience of the modern world? Well, historians of spilled a lot of ink trying to answer that question. And I think what interested me is trying to answer that question from the family upward, rather than thinking about the modern world being defined by laws or states or the shifting of boundaries or numbers, you know, numbers of bodies across about a borders, citizenship. You know, new cultural forms, new forms of personal expression rather than the thinking in abstraction. Through much of my writing, I've been trying to think about what the modern world looked and felt and smelled like to the people that made it up and who shaped the modern world as all people do. So for this family. They in some ways what they experienced is a modern Jewish story. The broad outlines of their story are very much the broad outlines of modern Jewish history.

[00:20:44] It's the rise and fall of empires, the rise of new states. It's mass migration. It's shifting norms of religious practice. It's emigration and diaspora. Alas, the experience of wars and genocide. Re-orientation in new homes. You could say all of this. Of any Ashkenazi family in the 20th century. But at the same time, theirs wasn't only a modern Jewish story, it was also a modern Sephardic one. And so much of of how they wrote, of what they wrote about the precise contours of what they experienced were specific to the place they came from. The language they spoke. You know, the spiritual non normative religious customs they practiced. So there are these layers of what modernity meant. A Sephardic layer, a Jewish layer, a European layer, a global layer. And I think what I was trying to do in the book is re-ask this question of what modern meant through the lens of individuals. Individual characters in the book is organized chapter by chapter by around people whose stories we follow through its pages, mostly visiting them more than once. A few appear only once for particular idiosyncratic reasons.

[00:22:08] And really, I'm trying to understand what these big changes felt like on a very intimate scale. And so rethinking the modern not as an abstraction, but as a lived reality, what how does it translate into the letter that you write to your son who suffered a bankruptcy and fled abroad in disgrace? You know, what does it mean to the woman who has to take up the needle trade to support her family when her when her husband falls ill? How do people at the very material level navigate their way through a changing world?

[00:22:48] How do you, how do you think about the characters that you created? I mean, you sort of brought them back to life through their writing and through the other kinds of documents that you discovered.

[00:22:59] Do you think about them as characters. Also, I mean, because there is the writing is such that you really brought in and there's this this really engaging kind of writing style. There's some novel novel – novelesque - kind of elements to the the story that you tell. Do you have a favorite character or favorite figure? Is there a character they find really fascinating that you really grappled with that you found that you identified with? I don't know. Could you tell us something about an individual person?

[00:23:29] Well, it was it was really hard to. There were there were many people in that I. There are many Levys across this extended tree that I encountered through their writing or letters sent to them. In fact, when I finally printed the genealogical tree that I created using online software, it extended over 11 sheets of paper and I had to sort of spread it down my hallway and it was too big to fit in the book. So I had to be creative about who was actually pictured in the tree. So there were a lot of people who ended up on the cutting room floor and my choice was to both look for people who led rich and interesting lives, but also look for people whose stories helped me move the family history forward in time. And so inevitably, there are some people who I am more drawn to than others. There are a couple of people without naming names who I feel feel in a pivotal moment but don't necessarily didn't grab my soul for me. Some of the most exciting figures in the book are the women whose histories.

[00:24:41] I was forced to reconstruct through the sparsest documentary trail because this was a family of writers and teachers, men and women, but the men were in the publishing industry and they were printers and editors and they wrote a lot and they were government officials and kind of political pundits. And the women wrote less. And there is one chapter that maybe one of my one that I feel quite close to by about a woman who I suspect was illiterate because her son Leon is the one who goes to Rio and he has a huge collection of letters and there's a out of 5000 documents or so. There's just one that comes from his mother and it's transcribed. So his mother dictated the letter to her daughter, Eleanor, and the daughter signs it in her name. And I shared it with a colleague, our friend Julia Phillips Cohen, another scholar of Ottoman Jewry, because I understood it, but that there was something I was sort of missing. And she read the letter and she looked and she said, well, you're missing the most important thing, which is that the letter is stained with tears.

[00:25:50] And I really began thinking not only about the way the letter was stained with tears. What I said, sorry for that.

[00:25:57] I began thinking not only about the content of the letter, but all of the ways that this woman who couldn't write surfaced through the family history, the objects that she sent. We have spoken about the fact that she has commissioned a talisman as a sort of a magical amulet that she can give to her son when her first grandchild is born. And so I thought that there was something really evocative about that. The challenge that posed to the historian to find a personality through these very ephemeral traces that it would be easy to ignore as a as a historian drawn to text. But there are other figures. There are, you know, some heroes here and some antiheroes, as you know. And there are also some pests. You know, people I felt the personality of these people very strongly, and maybe that's why I call them characters rather than historical actors. I mean, it is entirely a work of non-fiction. And I'm very careful never to put words in anyone's mouth unless I can quote from a letter. Yet I use a lot of artistic license to try to describe it in an informed but nonetheless imaginative way the world around them.

[00:27:24] Fantastic. The world that you describe, this world of Sephardic Jews is, you know, it's it's a world that I've spent a lot of time thinking about as well. And I was wondering if, you know, because for many people, this maybe they see this book in *The Economist* and say, well, this looks interesting. I've never seen the words Sephardic before. What is what is what is the Sephardic Jewish experience about? How do you think about this book in terms of. Do you see it as I mean, it's A Sephardic journey. So but I mean, do you see it as representative of kind of a Solonican experience or a Sephardic experience? And then how do we think about that also, when we think about the the ways in which, you know, the name was originally Ashkenazi a-Levi and they were a family that, as you said, I think they braided Sephardic and Ashkenazi heritage. So I was curious if you could tell us a little bit about how you how you think about sort of the contours of Sephardic identity and the representativeness of this family's story.

[00:28:25] Well, I think what the what the family teaches us is that there isn't an essential Sephardic experience. And that within a family, different branches of the family have profoundly different experiences of the 20th century based on a huge number of factors. Who immigrates where, who leaves with what legal documents, personality, which historians tend to ignore. But I think it actually matters, not necessarily at all junctures, but it matters in many respects through these people's lifetime, lifetimes. So within the family, the fact of being Sephardic didn't dictate people's choices or fate.

[00:29:11] Except, of course, when you come to the Second World War, in which at which point it's not exactly the fact of being Sephardic, but the fact of being from Salonica, from Greece, being Jewish. At a certain point in time dictates the fate of many, but not all.

[00:29:28] So I would say the choice to call it a Sephardic journey through the 20th century is very intentional that I don't think they are representative. I don't think that if you pulled the yarn of the sweater of any family, you would find as much. That's a really profound point. You just simply

wouldn't. If you followed other families, you would experience a lot. You would be confronted with a lot more poverty. For example, there is poverty in this family, though they are for a time part of the cultural elite of their community. There's still poverty in the family and ebbs and flows with time. And some people who seem to have a stable fate end up very poor unexpectedly. So I would say it's not generalizable, but so little of history is generalizable. And even when we get to chapters, for example, around the Holocaust, where we know statistically. We know that there is a generalisable story. And for those of you for whom this is new, Salonica and Greece in general suffers from among the very highest rates of genocide of any community in Europe in the Second World War, 97 to 98 percent. So we know in the abstract we know what the majority of these families go through. And yet when you begin to tell the story of the family level, you find it shocking variance even of the people who stay in Salonica. But then there's also people who leave and those who go to Manchester will obviously have a different fate than those who stay.

[00:31:00] But those who go to Paris, their own paths are very modeled depending on all of these factors. So I really wasn't seeking to capture the essence or a ubiquitous story. I was more interested. I was really more driven by the idiosyncrasies and that I see in the idiosyncrasies. I see what makes a family unique and what makes people people. And it's not broad contours. It's it's very, you know, sort of textured difference.

[00:31:37] Could you take us through some of these ruptures that you've alluded to? One of the major ruptures that you describe in the book is this catastrophic, catastrophic fire in Salonica in in nineteen seventeen. That leaves thousands of people homeless, including the majority of the city's Jews who are majority of the population of the city at the time. And it also has transformative, transformative impact on the city and sort of is one of those moments that pushes Jews out of the city and including some of the members of the Levy clan who enter into diaspora. Perhaps you could share a little bit about your rendition of that of that experience and maybe tell us a little bit about the impact of that fire on the story that you and I actually marked.

[00:32:23] I'll read with your indulgence, a short another short section on this. This comes from a chapter labeled Esther.

[00:32:34] One month after Greece entered the First World War on the side of the allies on a hot, windy August afternoon in 1917, the Salem family. That's the name of Esther's family. The Salem family was enjoying a restful Sabbath in the delightful suburb of Salonica, where Esther's parents Fortunée and Ascher had settled some decades earlier. Las Kampanyas was known for its grand vista, and the Salem home offered a generous view of Salonica's red tile roofs, the bay, and Mount Olympus and beyond. On this particular August day, Esther's father's enjoyment of the view was marred by the sight of flames in the distance. He called the family to come quickly. "I went to look," wrote Esther in a long letter to her brother, Jacques, "and indeed a large part of the city appeared to have fallen prey to the flames. After this, we couldn't stop watching the fire. We wanted to pull ourselves away, but as if magnetized, we were drawn to the small corner of the terrace on the water where we saw the whole city." Esther's brother Karsa arrived from town, frantic, newly renamed Venizelos Street, where the family business was located, had burned to the ground. "Oh, the images I

have seen,” Karsa sobbed. “Children, women, all fleeing. And despite the horror, the city is calm. The exodus is happening in a mournful, heavy silence. A woman gave birth on the pavement. People surrounded her as she shrieked. Oh, I am broken! Papa, go and see what must be done.” In a panic, the father Ascher rushed out, taking the keys to his store and leaving his wife Fortunée and the children at home. As the hours passed, Esther and her family watched Red Cross in British trucks race by among the fleeing masses, “the parade of ghosts,” quote unquote. That Esther saw stumble by the home was a number of family members.

[00:34:18] The garden, courtyard and house were quickly transformed into a makeshift refuge as closets were emptied to provide clean clothes and sheets for the victims. At last, Esther's father returned his eyes swollen in his sockets and very red. I'm quoting her, “his face pale as candle wax.” Unable to save the family's store, Ascher managed to rescue only a handful of account books before fleeing to the smoky streets. Despite the chaos he had located his father and mother-in-law and his and their son. And as the night wore on, the flames spread. Even the sea was burning, dotted with blazing sailboats emanating from a neighborhood adjacent to the crowded port known to Salonica's Jews as Agua Nueva (New Water). The fire wrought catastrophic damage in the city's historic Jewish quarter, in the commercial district and in the port where most of the city's Jews lived and worked. When the fire began, the movie theaters were packed and an Italian marching band was performing in Liberty Square as the flames spread. The French military strategically bombed a number of buildings, including us, including Salonica's new Talmud Torah, hoping to arrest the fires course. Their efforts were futile. The fire only grew in intensity, intensity, ultimately raging for 30 hours and covering a square kilometer thick with urban life. Thirty two synagogues burned, along with nine rabbinical libraries, 600 Torah scrolls and eight Jewish schools. Though no deaths were recorded, fifty thousand Jews were left homeless, along with 10000 Muslim residents of the city and somewhere between 10000 15000 Christians. The damage was estimated at a billion French francs, 75 percent of which was Jewish owned. The city already transformed into a wartime refugee First World War, became a smoldering landscape of displacement overnight.

[00:36:09] So it really is, as you have written about it, is an incredibly profound moment for the community and profound in complicated ways, as you know, because there is massive urban redesign after the fire and a densely Jewish neighborhood becomes relandscaped by a young regime because the city had only been Greek for a few handful of short years. A young regime eager to remake the face of a city. So for the family, there is there is financial loss, there is material loss. And there is also a feeling of instability. And it is one of the prompts, among others, that that begins to lead the family to devise exit strategies. And the most obvious exit strategy is actually leaving. And people do begin to leave after the fire. Going to Paris and Manchester especially, but other places, too. But some of them also have other exit strategies, new investments, the pursuit of new kinds of legal documentation that might protect them. It clearly shifts their mentality and leads them to think of their home as more fragile than they had before.

[00:37:32] The fragility. I mean, I guess many of them are able to rebuild or that are have to get back up on some footing, then we have the depression setting in.

[00:37:40] We have. And then of course, the Second World War becomes this other major catastrophic rupture and devastation. And, you know, we sort of know how this story ends. In many ways, many of the figures that you include, I mean, I'm familiar with this family because they were a prominent family. And I've written about some of them in my book and even when I know what. What will happen to them, I'm still kind of. It was still jarring to encounter your description of those experiences. I was hoping you could share with us a little bit of that of your depiction of that kind of final chapter. If you would, read with us. Read for us a little bit from the chapter on Eleanor, who is the daughter of Daout Effendi who has a very Ottoman Turkish name, Effendi being an honorific and Daout being David. And he was an Ottoman official and also an important leader in the Jewish community. And this is from the accounting of the daughter. If you say more, are you to say something else?

[00:38:59] Shall I read one more page or shall I talk?

[00:39:01] Ok, I'll read one. I looked at one person and they nodded. So he gets to speak for all of you. I'd like to know how you feel. I'll read a short bit, but I will say this is from a chapter called Eleanor. There are family members who are deported from Paris.

[00:39:21] That represents one dramatic chapter.

[00:39:24] There are family members who are in Paris who flee to the south, the Vichy. Vichy controlled south, which sometimes is mistakenly referred to as independent France. But it's not really independent at all. And there are many who are in Greece and this is what happens to one person and her intimates. Eleanor.

[00:39:50] The Nazis deported the extended Levy family from Salonica to Auschwitz in stages. The journey took roughly six days in freight cars jammed with more than 70 people each. Provisions like light and air were all negligible. Prisoners wailed from sickness, pain, hunger, thirst and fear. Some died on route, forcing the living to remain pressed against the dead for hours at a time. Eleanor's father Daout Effendi made this terrifying journey in his eightyfirst year. Quote, "I followed your father until the last minute. That is to say, through the ghetto of Salonica," wrote Julie Hasson Sarfatti, the sister of Vital and Dino, in a letter sent to Rio from postwar Greece. Quote, "The news that I heard from several survivors who left in the same convoy and were trapped in the same train to Poland is that your father and his brother-in law-died in the first week in the gas chamber since because of their age, they could not be used for forced labor. Julie pressed other survivors for the precise date of Daout Effendi's death, but none could remember with certainty. "Life in camp was a veritable hell," she wrote, and deduced that after leaving Salonica in mid-April 1943, Leon's father must have died within the first two weeks of May. Eleanor's son Solomon quote, succumbed several months later after being used for experimental work that he died a natural death, reported Julie. This could mean that Solomon was subjected to medical experiments, as were other Salonican deportees, or that he was inducted into the Sonderkommando, as were other Greek Jewish veterans of the Greek Italian War. Quote, "of the women in the family. No one has told me anything,"

[00:41:26] Julie continued. It seemed their convoy had no survivors, with his sister, Doudoun Molho, Daout Effendi belonged to the oldest generation of the Levy family to perish in Auschwitz. His daughter Eleanor was murdered there, too, as were her husband Abram. Their three children, Allegra, Salomon, and Ety. The extended families of Abram and of Ety's husband, Joseph Menasse, were also among the annihilated, as were Abram and Joseph themselves. The youngest in the family to be killed was Ety and Joseph's four-year-old daughter, Lenora Menasse, known to the family by her two pet names, Nora and Nimica. Eleanor's father, Daout Effendi was born in 1863 when Salonica was Ottoman, when his father Sa'adi, could provoke the rabbinical establishment with these incendiary tools of a printing press and a violin. His great-granddaughter Lenora was born in 1939, the year the Second World War began. The two bookended four generations, yet they breathed their last breaths in the same claustrophobic space in rural Poland. Inhaling a poison invented to eradicate vermin in a chamber designed by German engineers. In Paris after the war. Sam Levy estimated that his niece, Eleanor was among 37 members of the immediate Levy family killed by the Nazis after their deportation from France and Greece. Were one to stretch Sam's tally to the extended family, including the many branches of the family tree, that reached outward from the proverbial trunk that was Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi - to the families of Alaluf, Arditi, Matalon, Menasse, Modiano, Molho, Salen, and on - the number would rise exponentially. Only one among the dizzying number of relatives deported to the east survived the war: Jacques Levy.

[00:43:13] And I feel that I have to hint. I don't know if you were going to ask, but there's a, within the darkness of this story, there is another darkness which I discovered in the course of my research with your assistance, which is that a cousin of the family serves the Nazis as head of the Jewish police and is a terrible sadist who commits innumerable crimes of horrific proportion that one can reconstruct by listening to many, many testimonies from Salonica in many languages Hebrew, French, Ladino, Greek, English. And he is after a very meandering tale of escape. He is, in fact, captured and brought back by the British to Greece after the war, and will be tried for war crimes and proves to be the only Jew in all of Europe to be executed by a state, Greece, for his complicity with the Nazis. So he, too, is a figure in this book, as is his sister and his daughter, both of whom must live the rest of their lives in the shadow of this man's horrific acts.

[00:44:41] I'm still trying to get over your reading of that passage, so yeah, but I mean, I think it goes to illustrate your earlier point about the many different trajectories that even members of one.

[00:44:54] One family, one clan traversed in this in this 20th century, and now as we were discussing as part of your research, the the fate of this individual, I happened to have a student of mine at the time who came to me and told me that her grandfather was from Salonica and that she had heard some stories about him. And we did I did a little bit of research. And it turns out that he was **her son's her son's** right hand man, actually. Right. Well, OK.

[00:45:25] Well, we'll talk about that later. That's right. So she. I mean, so in terms of the research, having an impact on your question. Help me understand.

[00:45:36] Provide me some tools so I can help the student unravel this story about her grandfather.

[00:45:42] And I think it really impacted her in a very kind of visceral way. She'd heard stories.

[00:45:47] But then to see his name among the list of, you know, collaborators was really, really impactful for her.

[00:45:57] And I guess I want to save time for questions, but I thought maybe I'd wrap up questions for the general audience here, but I thought maybe I'd wrap up with one. One final question, which is if you could maybe comment a little bit on what you would hope the impact of this book would be and how you think about the multiple kinds of audiences for this book on the one hand. And I think it's important in a place like Seattle, which has a Sephardic community. There are people from Salonica who live in Seattle. There are people from Salonica or whose families are from Salonica are here today with us. What do you think they might take away from this book? And then on the other hand, what might people who have had no prior exposure to the stories that you tell here, to the context, to the history? What do you hope they take away from your book and also the people who might be in between those two kinds of readers?

[00:46:54] Well, one of the things that's been really quite profound for me is to receive commentary from the family as they read the book for the first time. The extended family. And this is seven generations, eight generations, nine generations out from from the starting point. And they are incredibly moved and find it to be very personal. But what's striking is that I've begun to field a lot of e-mails from Sephardic Jews around the world, but also non-Sephardic Jews, Ashkenazi Jews around the world and also some Persians even, you know, Maghrebi Jews who feel there is something in this story that evokes their own family history. And I think that perhaps the reason that that is true is where we began, which is to say it conforms to some of the broad strokes of modern history, but it is also meant to be a really intimate, daily personal view of the world. And so it lends a kind of humanity to the macro picture of history that we might already expect. And I would say that in some ways that is my hope with this book is to build upon work like yours, which paints such a valuable picture of Jewish Salonica, build on it by by deepening our understanding of the individuals involved.

[00:48:35] And almost as we go back to this idea of their character, their personality, their their daily lives, and how as as their lives were fractured and split apart into millions of pieces, how they weathered these astonishing transitions as individuals, certainly as a family, but also as individuals. And so, like much of my other writing, I'm trying to engage in this ambition of writing a global history on an intimate scale, a phrase that I use here. And that I would say, is ultimately my hope that also for people who have no access point for Sephardic history, we've never heard of Salonica, still find in it a very human story of the 20th century and of the world. And I think it's striking to me how evocative it is even of non Jewish histories of the same period where broad contours are so similar and the human experience is just as varied and and nuanced and accessible to us as as humans.

[00:49:43] You say somewhere in the book that, you know, what kept this family together was not blood or belief, but rather these these papers, these papers that tied them together.

[00:49:54] It seems to me that the book is a new instantiation of that kind of dynamic. relinking this splintered family together.

[00:50:02] And not only that, linking many families, as you describe, seeing families from all different kinds of backgrounds, at least seeing something of their own family thread woven into the story that you tell. That's what I'm very grateful for, you sharing that with us. So we have some time for questions.

[00:50:24] I think there are microphones, so maybe you just raise your hand.

[00:50:30] Thanks, Sarah. So it's easy to throw away documents and it's really hard to save documents, especially through the generations. Why did this family in all these different countries happen to save all these documents? That's a great question.

[00:50:49] Well, I don't assume they saved everything. First of all, five thousand is a lot. Five thousand is a lot, and it kills me to think of what was lost. And it's interesting because even in the course of my research, from one year to the next, someone will say, will you send me the picture you took of my grandfather's photo album because I can't find it. So even in the course of my research, the things that people took out to show me actually became lost, which is a remarkable thing. Things that had been preserved for decades, if not generations. I think I'm going to offer two different kinds of answers to your question. One answer is to say that this was a family of writers, so they had an attachment to the written word. And I. And they were teachers, as I said before. And so I think that letters continued to matter even when they couldn't read them anymore. And today, many of them can't read the languages these letters are written and that's one answer. But the other answer actually brings to bear on your work. Devin, with the program here, which is to say that there really has not been until now people who are systematically seeking out documents and artifacts of a Sephardic past. So we have no idea. We're only beginning to have an idea of what actually has been preserved. And I think, like Devin, I'm astonished at what one does find if one seeks it out. And this gets at a bigger picture of how this history has been ignored by some of the collecting agencies and the museums that have devoted themselves to picturing and documenting and preserving Jewish life, that really until very recently, they haven't made it an ambition to focus on the Sephardic world.

[00:52:45] So this act of digging is not only about reclaiming one family's story, but working against a tide of neglect. Neglect and preservation because families do treasure the things they have.

[00:53:02] Did any of the family members not want you to publish this or were hesitant in allowing you to?

[00:53:09] Ss

[00:53:12] Some people were more forthcoming than others. Some people felt more of a tie to their past than others. Some people just weren't that interested. So I didn't talk to everybody. And within a family, there might be one sibling who was really passionate. And one sibling who I never met, which

is curious, but I guess that's life. But then there were some people I couldn't find. And that actually really broke my heart. I spent years looking for the two sons of I mentioned it in the reading I did about the Second World War. I mentioned that only one person who's deported survives. Jacques Levy and I desperately wanted to find his sons, and I looked across many countries through many means and I never found his sons. And then when the book was published, I got an e-mail from Cuba and somebody said, Don't you know that Jacques Levy's son owned this like two Michelin star restaurant in Berlin?

[00:54:13] And I thought, where have you been? But he had died. He'd actually die since. So I wouldn't have met him anyway. But the point is that it's it's it's complex.

[00:54:24] People have a complex relationship to to their past. And I was very lucky that no door was really close to me, except some were more inaccessible. But nobody. Even the people, honestly, who had the most to lose, and by that I mean the people whose story is the darkest that I touch on here, who have the most pain.

[00:54:50] To experience because of this book. Even they would open their homes, which was remarkable.

[00:54:59] Hi. I was wondering how you organized your thinking and everything you came across. I'm sure it was out of order. Can you describe what it looked like or.

[00:55:10] Yeah, it's.

[00:55:13] I went through a lot of drafts. I had different narrative things. I experimented with my editor, rejected some. You know, there's always so much writing and rewriting. It doesn't matter if it's your ninth book or your first book. Writing is always a process of unwriting and rewriting and moving things around and cutting cutting people and being willing to sacrifice material, so I came to it through the blood, sweat and tears that all writers bring to their work, that it really was just a process with with experimentation. And up until the end, I was trying to think about what what was accessible, what was engaging, who was superfluous, what was I attached to for the wrong reasons. So it was just a constant sort of cycle of rethinking.

[00:56:13] Hey. Hi. Thanks. You used the term layered and I kind of like that. I think we kind of tend to think of history as being this kind of linear thing and, you know, do you find that history, whether it be Jewish or otherwise, can be? Multi-dimensional and intersectional like, you know, even, you know, spanning across continents and countries, you know, like, you know, like Rio my favorite city in the world.

[00:56:55] I don't even see an alternative. I mean, the short answer is yes. But the longer answer is to say I don't see an alternative to a layered, intersectional, all the words that you used, multi-dimensional history. I don't even know where that leaves us. I think where it might. You know, I I shocked an audience at a different book talk recently because somebody said something to the effect

of. You write about all of these people, but do you worry about straying from the facts? And I said, well, I don't think it's my job as a historian to write facts. I think it's my job to tell stories that are inspired by evidence that I managed to find and string together. But one is always making choices as a historian. What you leave out, what you tell, how you tell it, who where you shine that light. So this isn't about fact versus not fact. It's not about completeness versus incompleteness.

[00:57:57] You know.

[00:58:01] You know, I don't I.

[00:58:03] Well, it's so hard to know when a book is done. The question was, was it about closure? And whenever you stopped, you know that there's more you didn't tell. And just like this story that emerged. Well, now it turns out Jacques Levy had a son who owned a Michelin starred restaurant in Berlin. I didn't know it would have been I would have loved to find out more. So you never quite reach closure. And I don't think history has closure because maybe you as you were saying that last question, it continues to mean different things as as time moves forward.

[00:58:38] Thank you.

[00:58:42] I'm curious about your methodology of research, because I'm assuming the letters did not reveal, for example, the names of people who perished in the Holocaust. So how did you find them? How do you. Did you say you've seen the letters do not reveal them? I'm assuming because if I'm assuming they were all spread out. So how did you find this kind of information and the relationship between people who are in Paris and people were in Salonica, for example?

[00:59:10] Well.

[00:59:13] I've always done research for my books across many kinds of collections of materials. And so for me, it's always a process of reading one body of information against another and filling in holes.

[00:59:27] So, for example, the war criminal who I mentioned, he he's never named, not one family letter, not one family tree. Never named.

[00:59:42] So the first time I read through all of the family letters I didn't know he existed.

[00:59:48] And you helped me, I think, make these connections and.

[00:59:53] I found the trial records for his trial in two places in the Holocaust Museum in D.C. and in the Jewish Museum in Thessaloniki in Greece. And I re-read all the letters and lo and behold, he was there. I just. It was coded. It wasn't I don't mean he had a code. I mean to say you had to know he existed to understand the conversations and the emotions that were swirling around him in the letters, but he wasn't listed. So it's about making. It's about making connections. And it takes a long time. And one has to consult a lot of kinds of voices. Published unpublished colleagues who are knowledgeable.

A collection here, a collection there. And a really cumbersome genealogical software which I kept finding errors in and correcting and re-correcting. But that really is the was part of the labor was mapping this family tree. Some of the survivors went through reparation claims. And sometimes it's difficult to get access to documents around reparations for a family that is not your own.

[01:01:07] But in their own papers, in their private papers, all of the notes that they amassed for the reparation claims against Germany were there. And sometimes those notes, which could just be like back of an envelope kind of thing, would map out. I mean, I'm thinking of one person who mapped out all the losses of the Holocaust. I mean, just mapped it all out, all of the names and all the connections. But it's a draft. It's not a polished documented. It literally was the back of an envelope. So that is the historical work that that used the methodological challenge in a way and the strategy that I employed, which isn't random. You know, it's something I've thought about and tested over a lot of years. Is this strategy of working across different voices and weaving them together.

[01:01:56] I'm confused by a couple of things you said. First, you mentioned that there were families who kept letters even if they couldn't read them. So it was in another language. You also said that you read and re-read.

[01:02:12] Letters.

[01:02:13] Does that mean that you could read it? I mean, what language were they all in and and did you have to work with translators at all?

[01:02:24] Yeah. These this these letters were in about eight languages. They were in eight languages. Can you tell us which ones? OK. Gosh, let me see if I can tell you which ones. OK, so we have Ladino and French and Spanish and Portuguese and Hebrew and German and Greek.

[01:02:41] At 7.

[01:02:44] And I'm wondering about the whole – translating. I'm forgetting one. You didn't know it.

[01:02:49] I know. I can read many of those languages. I can't read Greek. So I had help with Greek. I can muddle my way through languages that I'm not fluent in Spanish in Portuguese. I had a little help of Portuguese. I can kind of begin to muddle through. So I asked for help when I needed it. And.

[01:03:11] The one of the things about this kind, working on this part of the world and working on a diasporic community is that you have to work in a lot of languages, especially if it is it is already a multilingual community. I mean, the answer gets even more complicated because letters aren't ever in one language for these people.

[01:03:35] They are never in one language.

[01:03:39] They favored French. But if it came to matters of the heart, they might use Ladino. And if it came to a religious question, they might use some Hebrew. And if it came to business, they might start to mix in more Ottoman. I mean their language. But it was a French letter and the French is perfectly fluent. So these are choices they make. And I have a note at the back of the book about the way I handle language. And it's really, really hard because we as historians who know this community intimately can see a lot of that complexity of language, but it's very hard to translate. For an audience that doesn't know all those languages or that isn't as multilingual by nature.

[01:04:23] That whole idea of of hyper-multilinguality is not that common to us. Bilinguality maybe so.

[01:04:34] Yeah.

[01:04:37] Thanks so much. My question is, you mentioned in your work that as you read each of these texts that it was not only the context that you were sort of translating, piecing together, but also sort of the subtext. You know, what was written on the pages. I think it could be argued. Your book is now a new chapter, pun intended in sort of in the Levy papers. So I guess I'd ask, you know, what's the subtext that we should be reading into the context you're providing with your book?

[01:05:12] Interesting question. I mean, I. The book is framed by a meditation about what letters mean for families and what it means today in an era that we don't mostly write letters. And certainly young people I think of when my kids were teenagers. I mean, they write thank you letters when I make them, but they're not writing or receiving letters. I think that. So I do think there's a. The main content is about family and thinking about what keeps a family, a family over time and why a family phrase and how letters at a certain time in this family's history were so important as glue to hold them together.

[01:05:58] And it's also in the subtext, I would say, is also a meditation on what we have lost along with letters in an era that we don't write and that so much of our expression is fleeting, possibly frivolous. We produce a lot of words, a lot of words for the future historian, but none of them have that feeling of a letter which you sit down and write over time and you edit and you know, it may not.

[01:06:28] It may take eight weeks or sometimes months to reach its mark or it may not reach it at all in time of war or or some some such. So I think that it's also a meditation about communication and the lost art of writing and what it means for us to enter a world where that is the norm and that is taken for granted.

[01:06:56] Thank you. Let's give a round of applause for Sarah.

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