

ESSAY

Ancestry

by Angela Patera



"Exuberant Creation" by Carter Boucher

On a crisp December day, my 16-year-old twins, Eric and Rachel, burst into the room, practically radiating excitement. Eric shared the news that their public school, grappling with unfortunate incidents of racism, had been selected for a European Union program extolling the virtues of multiculturalism. An obligatory DNA test taken by all the participants would unravel the diverse origins that make our little East-Southern Balkan slice of the world a flavourful ancestral kaleidoscope.

Of course, I am well-versed in our ancestral history. From the moment I could form a coherent thought, I have been haunted by tales of our lineage. We are steeped in Jewish heritage. In fact, both my family and my husband's clan have been entangled in matrimonial unions with Jewish folks dating back to the 17th century. It's as if our

families made a pact to keep the tradition going, and boy, have we kept our side of the bargain. As my dad used to remark, "We've been Jews married to Jews for centuries."

In the tapestry of my family saga, Sephardi Jewish heritage weaves a resilient narrative. My maternal grandma, Nonna Jane, and her little sister Tía Eva emerged as the sole survivors of their family since Auschwitz claimed the lives of the rest. Right after the war, Jane immediately married my grandpa, Nonno Roberto, laying the foundation for my maternal lineage. On my paternal side, my grandparents escaped mass extermination thanks to the Greek Liberation Army rebels who ensured their survival by hiding them in mountain hideaways, abandoned villages, and remote hamlets. Tragically, the rest of their kin reportedly died on the way to Treblinka concentration camp. After the war, they fled Greece and started a new life in the U.S. My dad crossed paths with my mum at UCLA. I was born in the late 1970s in sunny California but we soon returned to Greece as my dad assumed a teaching position at the National University of Athens.

I was raised in a household that could be described as an explosive cocktail of intellectualism and strict Jewish rituals. My parents spoke to me in a linguistic medley of Greek, Ladino, and English, all while diligently observing every custom and tradition of our Jewish faith. There were no other Jewish children at my local public high school so my folks, in a heroic parental plot, figured that if they couldn't bring the Jewish kids to me, they'd take me to the Jewish hubs. Worried I would develop cultural amnesia, they made sure I logged some serious hours every week at the Athens Synagogue.

But the fun didn't stop there. Our family vacations weren't exactly the typical sun-soaked escapades of my classmates. We embarked on extensive tours of the historic hotspots of our heritage, from the ancient streets of Jerusalem to the enchanting Jewish quarters of Prague and Budapest. I was repeatedly brought to visit Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and Dachau; "Lest we forget," my parents would solemnly say. As if I could ever forget. This collective

trauma has been etched into the very fabric of my existence. It's not just in my genes; I feel it in my bones, in every fiber of my being. Just a few pages of Primo Levi's masterpiece "If This Is a Man" are enough to reduce me to tears.

Imagine the sheer terror that seized my parents when I dove headfirst into the tumultuous sea of "dating." To them, each and every boyfriend, from the tattooed punks of my late teens to the introspective intellectuals of my mid-twenties was a potential suitor, poised to lead me astray from the righteous path of our cherished faith. Meanwhile, in my quest for rebellion, I had become the poster child for the most fervent strain of atheism, renouncing my past along with my faith, shaving my golden locks, piercing my face and marring my pale, freckled arms with tattoos. My name, Allegra Rodrigues, might have sounded a tad exotic for a pale, blonde, Greek girl, but being such a zealous atheist, I swiftly silenced any inquisitive soul with a concocted tale about my parents' vanity and their desire for me to stand out in a sea of Helens and Marias.

Fate, though, had a chuckle at my expense. You see, I eventually got married to a lovely, heavily tattooed chap I met at a Nick Cave concert who, as it turns out, happened to be Jewish. When we started dating, it didn't take long to realize that something extraordinary was going on. I could tell by his name, Elijah, that he was Jewish but I couldn't bring myself to admit that after all these years and all those men, I had come full circle and I had landed in a serious relationship with a good Jewish boy from a respectable Jewish family. Life's little ironies, indeed.

My husband's lineage traces back to Romaniote roots. His grandparents, having survived Auschwitz and Dachau respectively, returned after the war to their hometown, Ioannina, to find their houses looted and charred. In an intriguing twist, my husband's quest for his family genealogical tree led him to the Heraldry & Genealogy Society of Athens. There, he unearthed a shocking connection: his parents were, in fact, third cousins. Such entwined family ties are not uncommon in close-knit communities and it's highly likely that the remaining Romaniotes of Ioannina must have been a tiny community plagued by the weight of unimaginable trauma.

All our ancestors, apart from my own madre, Alba, and Tía Eva are now dead. I sometimes wonder what they would make of today's world.

Our household has been strictly secular and unapologetically atheist. No synagogue, no bar mitzvah, no conversations about the Jewish faith and the Jewish ways, no Torah, no Yom Kippur or Hanukkah celebrations. We have consciously created a vacuum, where the only sermon is delivered by the sound of reason. Our children are free to let their hearts and minds inform their decisions, and there is no way we would impose a set lifestyle on them

the way our folks did.

I have given my kids a crash course in history — systematic racism throughout the centuries, persecutions, concentration camps; the whole saga of terror. Talking to them about world history feels like teaching them the ABC but with more world-shaking revelations; colonialism, WW1, WW2, the Vietnam War, the Nigerian Civil War, the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the Syrian war. Those were certainly no bedtime stories but they were lessons in empathy. Nurtured in the fertile grounds of this religiously charged yet liberal and intellectual home, I was taught how to absorb the symphony of art and literature from different cultures. My parents, despite their stringent adherence to the tenets of the Jewish faith, were culturally open-minded — a paradox that became the cornerstone of my upbringing and informed my own approach to parenting. I have always wanted my children to embrace the richness of their complex culture without ever succumbing to the sirens of national pride. In our house, love, solidarity and art are our religion.

A month later, the results of the swab test arrived, plunging my puzzled kids into a bewildering world of genetic revelations. The two identical envelopes contained three densely packed sheets of paper with intricate statistics sprawled across the pages and a color-coded geographic map of the world. According to the information sheet, the statistics showed the mixture of ethnic groups that were traced in their DNA samples, and the map indicated where people who shared similar traits could be found. Greece

was ablaze in bold red while Israel, Spain, Portugal, and Romania were also marked in fiery hues. My eyes lingered on the vibrant red dots, connecting the familial threads to Sephardi and Romaniote Jewish heritage. But then, I came across an unexpected orange behemoth sprawled over Germany. What was that? I checked the reference box. The orange dot indicated the third highest percentage in their DNA samples. It read “Germany/Saxony.” Germany? My mind raced through family tales, but no German kin surfaced. I wondered if we had some Jewish relatives in central Europe that I had never heard of. How could it be though? Our families had been located in Salonica, Athens, and Ioannina for hundreds of years. Those who had actually made it to Germany had died in Bergen Belsen and Dachau. As I was puzzling over the “Germany/Saxony” tag, a quirky mental image formed — a clandestine German Jewish great-grandma blending into our familial tapestry of olive skin, dark eyes, and wiry dark hair. I made a mental note to ask Tía Eva, my grandmother’s sister. Eva, well into her eighties, had always been the living embodiment of everything my Nonna Jane wasn’t. Post-war, Eva skipped the conventional expectations of finding a good Jewish boy to get married to and dove headfirst into studying cultural anthropology at university. She traveled around the world studying different civilizations and writing books. I remember

myself looking forward to her arrival from yet another trip as she always had amazing stories to tell and of course she brought me magical souvenirs: little ivory necklaces from Africa, satin dresses from China, stone pendants from Borneo. Eva's tales were like confetti, scattering magic and wonder across mundane afternoons. In a home haunted by survivor's guilt, Eva was my North Star.

Jane barely spoke. She got married and had my mother when she was very young, probably in her mid-teens, right after the war. An aura of mystery seemed to envelop her all the time. Locked inside her study, lost in Ladino-laden journals, Jane mastered the art of looking perpetually perplexed. I always thought that the combination of having spent months as a fugitive when she was a teenager combined with the loss of her family in Auschwitz had inflicted a superhuman trauma on her teenage psyche, a shock that she never managed to overcome.

I paid a visit to Tía Eva a few weeks later. She lived in a beautiful apartment near the Acropolis. Her house was a testament to her vibrant spirit, adorned with memorabilia from her globetrotting escapades: posters of art exhibitions, colorful quilts, jade vases, ivory statues, stacks of books, and albums overflowing with photos. As the door swung open, I was welcomed into a cocoon of nostalgia, wrapped in a bouquet of scents echoing the long weekends of my childhood: flower cologne, coffee, and menthol cigarettes. She was serving me a cup of strong Pakistani tea when I showed her the DNA ancestry test results. The ambiance immediately shifted; her hands started shaking, prompting her to settle into a chair in an attempt to compose herself. A shadow fell over her face and with a gulp, she cast a contemplative gaze upon me.

I broke the silence "It's odd, isn't it? I mean, neither our family nor Elijah's family ever lived in Germany. Seriously, our lineage in Germany usually ended in gas chambers, not genealogy charts. Do you think we're secretly harboring an Ashkenazi great-great grandma who spoke Yiddish and instead of strudel, whipped up Knieküchlein for Hannukah?"

Eva remained silent, lost in contemplation.

"Or, you know, it could be a blip. It says that it's 99% accurate but hey, come on, how sure can we be?"

Eva stared at her hands, tiny like a child's, skinny like twigs, adorned with dozens of silver, jade, and aquamarine bracelets. I wondered if she was having a mal seizure, like the ones Eric used to have as a little boy. I panicked.

"Eva? What's wrong?"

Eva's eyes, welled with tears, met mine. Rising, she navigated through the maze of bookcases and returned with a big wooden box. She passed it to me silently. It was full of notebooks: Jane's diaries, a forbidden territory during my childhood.

As I delicately flipped through the pages, I realized deciphering the intricate cursive in mid-century Ladino would be a Herculean task. At the box's depths lay a trove of faded photographs. I remembered a couple of them from my childhood: snapshots of my great-grandparents and their two little girls, staring at the camera, blissfully unaware of the impending storm. One photo stood out; it showed a fragile-looking teenage Jane, a mirror image of my daughter Rachel, standing beside a fair-haired man with striking features. He was tall and handsome, with crew-cut blonde hair and big, sad eyes. He couldn't have been older than 19. His statuesque body, his blond hair, and his almond-shaped eyes reminded me of Eric. Frozen in my tracks, a question reverberated through my head: who was that man?

Well, lo and behold, it turned out that the ancestry test wasn't schmoozing around. Eric and Rachel do have a half-German grandma after all: my dear mother.

Eva was cautious at first but when she started talking, the words escaped her lips in cascades, like a veritable deluge of family secrets. Oy vey, the things you discover when you start digging.

In the throes of war, Eva and Jane's family, once residents of Salonica, faced the relentless grip of hardship. During the first year of occupation by the Germans, the family's property in Salonika got confiscated, and, living in squalid conditions, both girls got afflicted with tuberculosis and teetered on the brink of survival. In a desperate bid for a better chance, the family sought refuge in a suburb of Athens where the climate was warmer and less humid. A former colleague of their father facilitated their escape in the back of a truck and secured shelter in his aunt's home.

In Athens, life had taken a sinister turn. Food was scarce and the pervasive specter of violence cast a shadow over everyday life. Amidst this chaos, Jane and Eva's family found themselves in the care of an old lady. Frail and blind, she ate like a bird to make sure the girls had enough food to survive.

Each morning brought with it a macabre panorama outside their window — a chilling display of the hanging bodies of Greek freedom fighters and Jews. The ominous march of tragedy extended beyond the confines of their hiding place. In March 1943, over 4,000 Jews were deported from the Bulgarian occupation zone to Treblinka extermination camp. From mid-March through August, almost all of Salonika's Jews, along with those of neighboring communities in the German occupation zone, were deported to Auschwitz concentration camp. Jane and Eva's parents knew that the inevitable loomed ahead for them. In March 1944, Athens, Ioannina, and other places in the former Italian occupation zone witnessed the roundup and deportation of their Jewish communities. One cold March evening, German soldiers brought down the door of the house and seized up Jane and Eva's parents. In a final act of brutality, the occupiers drew a bayonet through the blind old lady who had looked after them and hung her body from a fig tree across the house.

Jane and Eva found refuge beneath the kitchen floorboard. As German boots departed their home oblivious to the hidden lives beneath the floors, the sisters, aged 15 and 9, clung to the shadows for three harrowing days. On the third night, Jane ventured into the fields surrounding the house to forage for roots, fruit and wild weeds. Soon, she realized that half the houses of their neighborhood had been looted and repurposed by German soldiers to hoard firearms and canned goods. Jane became a nocturnal scavenger, rummaging the cellars every night to bring back to Eva whatever she could find and carry.

One night, as she was pulling a bag full of canned tomato soup back to Eva, Jane's mission took an unexpected turn when she got caught by a German soldier. He was Paul, a shell-shocked 18-year-old boy drafted from Leipzig to fight in Greece. Towards the end of the war, the Germans established an entire SS Panzer Tank Division with the majority of its recruits being 17-year-old boys from the Hitler Youth brigades. When he got recruited, Paul didn't even know exactly where Greece was. He was shocked to be transferred to a city where the skeletal people's hatred towards him was palpable.

When he caught Jane, wild-eyed and skinny like an apparition, all he felt was an overwhelming sense of sadness, compassion, and a desire to embrace and protect her. He followed her back home, clandestinely carrying eggs and two bars of chocolate in his pockets. Witnessing the girls' skeletal plight, he became their nocturnal lifeline until the German withdrawal from the mainland in October 1944, risking everything to bring them whatever he could — moldy bread, beans, eggs, sometimes even a can of veal. It was feast or famine. He knew really well that getting noticed meant a torturous death for both himself and the girls.

Eva was unsure when Jane and Paul got closer. She was too young and way too traumatized to pay any attention to their budding proximity. However, as she kept on narrating the story to me, eyes fixated on the photo, she sighed and declared that a single morning remains etched in her memory. It was a chilly autumn dawn when Paul came to their house carrying a bag full of cans of beef, a loaf of bread, potatoes, carrots, and a whole bottle of olive oil. He left the bag at Eva's feet, handed her a camera, and showed her how to take a picture. He and Jane stood beneath the fig tree down the road, the same fig tree from which the Germans had hanged the bodies of their neighbors, the freedom rebels and the old lady. Eva pressed the button and that was it. She never saw Paul ever again.

Weeks later, the city of Athens was finally liberated from German occupation. Eva wanted to march down the streets of the city center along with fellow Athenians to celebrate liberation, yet Jane was so violently sick that she could barely move, let alone join the festivities. Although Jane could actually go to a hospital to seek help as she was safe from German persecution, she resisted getting treatment. One day, she was so weak that Eva knocked on the doors of all surviving neighbors to ask for help. A gentle-looking woman, once Jewish but baptized Christian to survive, came to help and tended to Jane for a whole month. By the end of that month, Jane, dressed in a makeshift wedding gown fashioned from old linen curtains, got married to Roberto. She was 16 years old and three months pregnant.

To Eva's knowledge, Jane never saw Paul again. Years later when my own mother was already pushing ten, Jane received a mysterious envelope from an unknown sender bearing a poignant relic of the past—a lone photograph: Paul and her, frozen in time, their hands barely touching, their expressions guarded, standing awkwardly under that dreaded fig tree.

Curiosity brought forth a barrage of questions. Had they been in love? Had Roberto known the truth or did he voyage through life under the blissful illusion that my Valkyrie-esque mother was his own offspring? Despite Jane's distant and cold demeanor, Roberto had been a loving father who showered my mother with affection and tenderness. Did Jane ever reveal the truth to a single soul?

Eva grappled with unanswered questions herself. Jane withdrew into silence soon after the end of World War II, locking away her secret forever. The paternity of her niece remained a topic skillfully avoided by both Eva and Jane. Years later, Eva stumbled upon a chilling newspaper article about "Wehrmacht babies," a taboo echoing across Europe. In Greece, the offspring of Wehrmacht soldiers were known to have been subjected to public scorn, spitefully labeled "Germanobastardos." Eva realized that Jane's silence was a shield against a world where a Jewish unmarried teenager admitting such a thing would make her subject to public humiliation and most probably lynching. Digging into the shadows, Eva sought

statistics on such clandestine births in Greece, finding no official records. Researchers estimated that at least 200 such children existed in Greece, a number dampened by mothers aborting or abandoning their babies, fearing societal discrimination.

In the twisted saga of Jane's past, a cascade of mysteries unfolded. Had this been a fleeting teenage dalliance or a single, bitter note? Did the specter of terminating this pregnancy, along with thousands of women navigating the treacherous terrain of illegal abortions in 1940s Greece, haunt her thoughts? Did she ever consider giving her baby up for adoption? Her marriage to Roberto had obviously been arranged; Roberto was the nephew of their Jewish-turned-Christian neighbor. He had just moved to Athens to prepare his legal papers to flee to the U.S. Did Jane carry the unbearable weight of her secret like an albatross tied around her neck for the following six decades of her life? Did she wear her icy demeanor towards my mother as an armor, shielding herself from the relentless memories of her concealed past?

Ah, the elusive dance with family secrets! The sad truth is that the mystery of Jane's past is a locked treasure chest, buried with her beyond the pearly gates. I briefly considered hiding the truth from the rest of the family but, truth be told, it didn't change anything for me and I doubted it would alter the family dynamics. To me, one's identity is a symphony composed of their life experiences and what they have sculpted from these experiences. So, whether my dear mum has German blood flowing through her veins is interesting but not exactly life-altering. The saga continues, the mysteries persist, and life rolls on.

When I unveiled this ancestral revelation to my mother, I expected gasps and torrents of tears but received a serene sigh instead. With the nonchalant air of one who had suspected genealogical mischief, she declared that Roberto was the only father figure she had ever recognized, a father who never questioned her parenthood and had

always revered her. Paul was nothing but a biological blip, a simple footnote in a narrative steeped in Jewish customs, intellectual pursuits, and an unwavering disdain for fascism.

Despite my aversion to my folks' antiquated traditions and old-fashioned ways, our familial hearth was built upon the sturdy foundation of love, acceptance, and tolerance.

As I braced myself to spill the ancestral beans to Eric and Rachel, I feared that they, amidst the vigor of their youth, might combust with fervor upon learning that their great-grandfather was, in fact, a Nazi. It was definitely going to be an unsettling revelation for a bunch of fervent, teenage anti-fascists. Yet, in the grand theater of familial secrets, I couldn't help but ponder: was he truly a Nazi or another young victim of propaganda in the drama of history?

Armed only with the meager clues of a name, Paul Lang, and a birthplace, Leipzig, I decided to conduct thorough research on him before disclosing the news to my children. I first contacted the German embassy and they referred me to the German Federal Archive. The people I talked to were not exactly enthusiastic at my inquiry – they were somewhat wary of helping a lady with a Jewish name try to locate a WWII era German soldier who impregnated her own grandmother 70 years ago — but at some point, after some diplomatic wrangling with the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, morsels of Paul’s narrative emerged. Born in 1926, Paul had been just three years older than Jane when he crossed paths with her. He was the only son of a florist and a housewife who lived in Leisnig, a quaint hamlet just 50 kilometers away from Leipzig. He had been forced to join the Hitler Youth a few weeks before being drafted and sent to Greece.

As I delved into the extensive bibliography regarding the Hitler Youth, I realized that boys as young as 12 had joined the Hitler Youth and towards the end of the war, they were the ones that were directed to the front lines to fight, in what essentially was a suicide mission. Paul’s life was short and sorrowful. On his way back to Leipzig, he was detained in a Soviet POW camp in Kozelshchyna. He died in 1945 of “disease.” Despite my lifelong repudiation of Nazis, an unexpected pang of pity welled within me for a young man who squandered his existence in a psychopath’s war.

When I summoned the courage to unfold the disturbing ancestral saga to Eric and Rachel, I couldn’t help but be saddened by how mortified they looked. Rachel initially locked herself in her bedroom, punk music blasting through the walls for hours, until she emerged teary-eyed and pale the next day. Eric, frantic with angst, kept on pacing with fervor, raking his hands through the golden locks of his hair while muttering “And now you’re telling us that we, Rachel and I, and you and Nonna Alba have Nazi blood coursing through our veins?” The unsettling news took a couple of weeks to sink in. We all agreed that the mere thought of Nazi blood flowing through our veins horrified us. Amidst this verbal tempest, I reminded them –as well as myself- of a crucial truth: blood, a mere molecular concoction, meant nothing to us. Our blood did not define us. Love and solidarity were the marrow of our identity and were the sole things that defined us and would continue to define us as people.