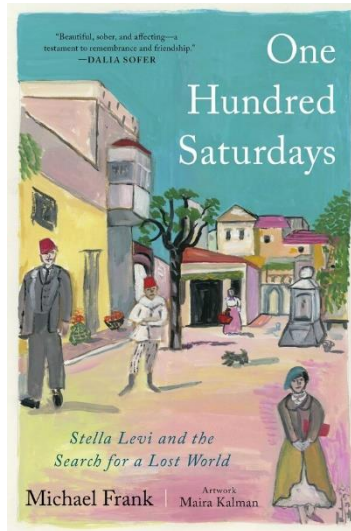


One Hundred Saturdays. Stella Levi and the Search for a Lost World. Michael Frank. Artwork by Maira Kalman. New York: First Avid Reader Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-9821-6722-6. 297 pgs.

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“Only a minority of persons have the presence of mind and verbal gifts to observe and digest all that takes place as one life form begins to give way to another” (Nathan Shachar)

One Hundred Saturdays is a story of diaspora, dislocation, and relocation amidst fragmented and broken identities while struggling to find some meaning out of destruction. The book chronicles the conversation that unfolded during one hundred Saturdays between Michael Frank and ninety-two-year-old Stella Levi in her Greenwich Village apartment as she recounted to him the story of her life. Stella Levi, originally born in the *judería* of the island of Rhodes, whom the author met fortuitously during a lecture at NYU, agreed to go back in her memory as an exercise to exorcise demons of her past, or to come to terms with who she was. Her life’s odyssey, as it turns out, takes her from Rhodes (her own little piece of the earth) to Athens, several death camps in Poland, Bolzano, Modena, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Los Angeles, and finally to New York. Stella is a woman in “permanent exile” with no real home of her own, lost in many languages and many identities who has recourse to her memory in order to find a sense of self.

Stella, who cannot identify herself in any given language (despite being fluent in several) although Italian comes close to it, describes for us her growing up in Sephardic Rhodes in *judeo-Spanish* and *French* and her coming of age in *Italian* among an Italianized circle of friends and acquaintances from inside and outside the *judería*. The most influential event in her life, other than the camps, was the passing of the racial laws by the Italian government in 1938 which meant for her the impossibility to continue with her formal education. Ms. Levi is the youngest of the 7 children (Morris, Selma, Victor, Sara, Felicie, and Renée, several of whom had already left the family house before she even got to know them) by Yehuda and Miriam. In the endogamic context of cobblestoned streets, *kortijos* or neighborhood patios, open windows and doors, ballads sang in unison among neighbors, and a close-knit community ten per cent of which was blood related to her, the life of Stella developed as it had for other young daughters in the same place for the last

five hundred years. Her family lived *a la turka* (not *a la franca*), having adopted numerous Turkish customs over the centuries, among Turkish and Greek neighbors with whom occasionally they had close friendships. There, among their neighbors (*los buenos de nosotros*), they had practiced a *convivencia* for half a millennium that was not different from what their ancestors once enjoyed in the medieval Iberian Peninsula and that eventually ended depriving them of their land and leaving them only a language of identity, Spanish. The synagogue was the anchor of this community life and Judaism (“kon el nombre del Dyo”, “kon el nombre de Avraam, Yishak, i Yakov”) organized their time during the day, the weeks and the months, their sense of the world and of who they were, all around the narrow streets of the *judería* and the slightly broader ones of several *piazze* like the Kay Ancha. Stella’s father made his living selling coal and had a business with a Turkish partner. This was the context that surrounded the life of 1,650 Jews in Rhodes, apart from a few who had been able to leave the neighborhood, such as the Notricas, the Menasces and the Alhadeffs, and lived outside the city walls, in what was seen as modern Rhodes.

By remaining in the Juderia, Stella tells me, you lived among the old women who sat outside and told stories in the afternoon within emergency oil-lamp-lighting or prayer-saying, distance of the synagogue. You took your dishes to be baked in the communal oven and while you waited for them to finish baking you spent the hour gossiping with your friends. You didn’t bathe at home because there were no baths at home, or showers either, but at the Turkish baths, once a week, before Shabbat. You sang and learned the Spanish *romansas*; you absorbed, and came to live by, the proverbs (twelve thousand counted by one scholar alone) as though they were molecules in the air or blood in your veins; you learned to prepare your grandmothers’ sweet and savory dishes; you walked with care across the uneven cobblestones; and you fell asleep inhaling the perfume of the courtyards with their intense, unforgettable brew of jasmine and rosemary, lavender and roses and rue. (27)

We learn about Stella’s grandmothers, Mazaltov Levi, who probably never stepped outside of the *judería* once in her entire life, and Sara, a medicine woman who traveled yearly to Jerusalem and came back telling many *konsejas*. We learn about the latter’s role as *komadre* and her remedies such as *mumya*, *enserradura*, *ventozas*, *oja de kura*, for many ailments like *dolores de kavesa*, *bukeras*, *gota*. We also learn about famed Sephardic sweets such as *pastels*, *pastelikus*, *hojaldres*, *travados*, *kurabiyes*, and *boyus*, and about customs like the *tefilla* (the summoning to prayer by banging an iron stick on the windows), the using of Colombo’s *carrozza* to go outside the *judería*, the *trousseau* that included many *manillas de chatón*, the death rituals like the funeral procession (*pasa la misva*) and the *lloros*, the *teneme aki* (whenever a mother sent a child to someone else’s house to be baby-sited for a time while the mother attended to some business), the use of *solitreo* (the Sephardic spelling using Hebrew script), the weekly visit to the baths (*hammam*) with the *agua de flor*, the *banyo de novya* and the *kantigas de novya*, etc. A special place is reserved for the Jewish festivities, the preparation of the weekly Sabbath dinner, Purim (*Pesah en la mano*), the Passover with the most rigorous housekeeping of the year, the Yom Kippur and the drinking of Rodino water brought to the neighborhood on a donkey by a Turkish man

Stella’s family lived amid the economic downturns of the 1930s that saw many of the young members of the *judería*, including her siblings, to leave for places like the Belgian Congo, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Rhodesia, Los Angeles, New York. We also learn about Stella’s admiration for her older sister Felicie, the wise daughter, rebellious and intellectual, the first in the

family to attend the *scuola femminile*. We learn about Renée, two years older than Stella, frail and delicate, asthmatic and the constant object of her mother's attention. Stella reminisces about how she was a *kayijera* who liked to spend time out and about in the streets, as well as her awakening to the world of sensuality and physical attraction with the connivance of her open-minded mother who only advised her to be discreet. She moved from the French influence of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (in which her older siblings had been educated) to that of the Italian *scuola femminile* (*scuola ebraica italiana*) after the Italians took possession of the island (that is after acquiring sovereignty over the Dodecanese that followed the Second Treaty of Lausanne of 1923), living in a world in which Judeo-Spanish, Hebrew, Turkish, Greek, French, and Italian alternated as forms of communication for different contents and contexts. Stella Levi remembers with fondness her stepping into the learning world of the nuns who run the *scuola*, eager to learn and excelling at it, with high hopes of passing the *maturità* and entering university, something that never happened and which marked her deeply. At the *scuola* she also mingled with classmates from other neighborhoods that helped open her horizon and cross over into another world. The neighborhood had started to change because the Italians brought to it electricity and running water, road paving, fashion, cinema, sports and improvement of old building structures, as well overhauled the educational system. The Jewish youth of Rhodes started at this time to let go of the old style of their parents (*basta a la turka*), in a way similar to what was also happening to many Sephardic communities all over the Mediterranean, and thus "the old world began to recede" and adopt new rhythms and patterns.

In addition to modernity, Italians also brought with them infamous governor Cesare De Vecchi, a Fascist hardliner who oversaw the final demise of Rhodesli Jews. Stella's father, Yehuda, lost the warehouse where he conducted his business, thus being unable to properly make a living and initiating his downfall and the beginning of hard times for his family. De Vecchi also ordered the relocation of the Jewish cemetery, something that affected the whole community. At age fifteen, when she was about to start the *prima liceo*, Stella's world crumbled. The racial laws were passed, and Jewish children were banned from school. She went from being a *piccola Italiana* to becoming a nonentity. As luck would have it, and as the antisemitic attitudes increased little by little on the island, a group of teachers volunteered to continue educating the Jewish youngsters in the afternoon, chief among them Luigi Noferini. He (the eminent teacher), together with Gennaro Tescione (lawyerly, athletic, and old-fashioned), and Renzo Rossi (a successful businessman, university-educated, and himself Jewish) played an important part in Stella's life, friends and *boyfriends* at once. Stella goes on to narrate the increasingly antisemitic menacing atmosphere, the arrival at the island of several boatloads of Jewish emigrés who lived in makeshift camps before they could be sent somewhere else, sometimes to internment camps, and the fact that, unbeknownst to them, "their most casual encounters, movements, and conversations were being monitored, bugged, preserved, and shared" by police surveillance. Then in 1943, the island was overtaken by the Germans, after three days of fighting with the Italians, although they left in Italian hands the bureaucratic administration of the island. For Stella this meant that Rossi left the island without as much as saying farewell, and Tescione killed himself for not being able to avenge the insult perpetrated against Italy by the Germans, giving birth to a world of dislocation, relocation, and confusion where it could not be said anymore that "*todo bueno se va a ser*". She also joined her sister working in an administrative position to help her family make ends meet, her dreams of an intellectual life of further studies completely abandoned.

In July of 1944, the 1,650 Jewish inhabitants of the island (*gli ultimi ebrei di Rodi*), with the exception of some with Turkish nationality, were sent to the *aeronautica* and eventually put in

three dilapidated cargo boats that took them on an *exodus* journey to Kos, Leros, Athens, Italy...and finally Auschwitz aboard some of the infamous cargo trains, where ninety percent of them perished. Stella is clear to point out with a tinge of disappointment that “the deportation and consequential destruction of the Jews of Rhodes took place only because the Italian authorities fully collaborated in its implementation” (162). She had now become prisoner A24409, beginning, always in the company of her sister Renée, a series of further dislocations that took them to Lager B at Birkenau, Kaufering at Landsberg, Türkheim, and Allach. Lucky as all survivors are, and trying to find her way to survival by becoming a thief and trickster, she learnt to *organisieren* and turn into, like many others, an animal “reduced to thinking about food all the time”. In the camps she survived in the company of many girls from Rhodes and elsewhere, with whom she established a solidarity that allowed her to avoid death. Stella noticed this fact was also true of other prisoners, like those at Allach, where she was finally liberated by the American troops:

The camp at Allach was populated by political prisoners, soldiers from Spain and Italy and even Germany; several had fought in the Spanish Civil War. Jews were among them, but they were by no means the majority. Stella immediately noted that these men took care of themselves. They were eating; they were relatively tidy; their rooms were clean. (205)

Liberation was met with a mixture of exhilaration and doubt. The choice for the two sisters was to join their siblings Morris, Selma, Sara, and Elicie in Los Angeles, something that was delayed one year due to problems securing a visa. In the meantime, Stella had the opportunity to live in the Italy she had come to love, living in Bolzano, Modena, Bologna, Firenze and Roma. She even reconnected with Noferini, and was even expected to marry him in the near future. Nevertheless, this never happened. Stella went to Los Angeles (*un popoloso deserto*) and from there to New York, setting in Greenwich Village and eventually starting and managing with success her own import-export business. She married Paul Grundberg and divorced him after three years, having given birth to her son John. Stella was not marriage material. Like Odysseus, Stella would finally return to her beloved *judería* of Rhodes many times, including one with author Michael Frank, although she felt a *vuoto* inside, a feeling that the world of Jewish Rhodes did not exist anymore safe in her own memory.

For one hundred Saturdays Stella plunges into her past world of family, food and music, a rhythm of life permeated by *kortijos* and the *judería* at large. Remembrance in dislocation seems to serve as a narrative thread that runs through a life that began its journey at a moment when the new world entered the old Sephardic *sancta sactorum* and changed it forever. That thread helps Stella sew more than a narrative, for it is in fact the discursive manner with which she constructs her own persona. We witness the bygone world of an *orfanella*, a girl not only orphaned at Auschwitz but also orphaned by the disappearance of a world that faded away. Stella, the many Stellas that compose the narrative of her life, allows the reader a glimpse of one of those personas, the one that still remembers as if it were yesterday a song from her childhood:

Una pastora yo ami
 Una ija ermoza
 De mi chikez yo la adori
 Mas ke eya no ami
 De mi chikez yo la adori
 Mas ke eya no ami

But Stella does not want to be defined by a single instance of her life (her imprisonment in Auschwitz), although in her diving into the recesses of who she is she finds in Judaism (a cultural more than a religious Judaism) a way of placing herself in a broader world that gives sense to her while still feeling the impermanence or fluidity of identity.

For us, interested in the Hispanic world at large, the world of the *judería* and of Judeo-Spanish allows us to peer into one more instance of the endurance of the expelled Jewish community of Spain, creating in this case a small world of its own in the island of Rhodes that assured its continuation and survival based on the pillars of religion and language. The lamentation for a lost land (Spain) and remembrance of a destiny as *judeos errantes* reverberates in Stella's lamentation for a lost land, Rhodes. And if survival is the keystone that sustains the building of this Sephardic community, survival and endurance are also the main elements that hold together Stella's life. Narration becomes ultimately the urgency of life itself, for as she insists to the author at the end of the series of interviews through one hundred Saturdays, *we need to finish before I'm finished*. For eternal process of telling and re-telling is then the essence of the identity of this new-Scheherazade.