Foreword

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
—T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland"

In mid-April of 1945, young Tony Molho returned at last to his home in Salonica after two years in hiding—or more precisely, of being hidden—from Greece's Nazi occupiers. He was not yet six years old. The day was sunny, and he could feel around him the excitement of homecoming. As he stepped into the back garden, the sight of a glorious wisteria blooming against the garden wall further buoyed his spirits.

This scene comes close to the end of this memoir, and one might think it is an ending to Molho's tale. And while the image of spring rebirth might seem an unqualifiedly happy one, the reality (as it usually is) was more complex. Molho writes, "what happened after our return home is another story." On one level, of course, he means: This memoir is about the war; it would take another to tell the story of my life after it. Yet there is a poi-

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gnant, ultimate irony to the statement, for the deeply moving nature of this memoir derives from its emphatic demonstration that, for Tony (as perhaps indeed for all survivors of the Shoah), there was and has been no "other story." Far from the "before" and "after" being different tales, far from the "after" being "another story," this beautiful memoir shows us the powerful ways our childhood core is what we carry with us over the arc of a lifetime.

And how much more so for those who had a childhood such as his. As Molho writes: "nearly everything important that my parents, sister, and I did after the war was an attempt to reconcile ourselves to the memory of the Shoah and to try, mostly unsuccessfully it turns out, to normalize its influence on our lives. There was no return . . . just the slow unfolding of the war's consequences, which lasted for decades, until my parents' death and my own slow decline."

Tony Molho's memoir, which you are about to have the pleasure of reading, is about many different things. Fundamentally, of course, it is, as its subtitle has it, about "A Jewish Boyhood in German-Occupied Greece." And indeed, it tells us with remarkable forthrightness of just that: the adventures and misadventures of the author's young self, as he was passed quite literally from hand to hand, home to home, in the desperate and ultimately successful bid to save him from death at the hands of the German Nazis who occupied Greece during World War II. It recounts the fierce love and resilience of his parents, who contrived against all odds to keep their young son alive. This small volume, then, tells an immense and dramatic tale, a story of survival under the harshest and most unrelenting of circumstances.

As an account of the incredible events of two early years in Molho's remarkable life, this volume would, as a historical doc-

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ument alone, be an important work. But it is far more than that. Ultimately, it is a meditation on the most profound questions that trouble us all in our moments of reflectiveness: What is the nature of the passage of time? How can it be said that we have a single persisting, intact self that we carry with us from childhood to old age? How does memory draw on multiple threads to weave a coherent story of our lives? And, what is the point of it all? *Is* there a point? It is Molho's musing upon such questions and his tremendous capacity for deep self-reflection even as his dramatic narrative unfolds that makes this volume so much more than "just" a memoir.

No doubt the source of this depth lies, at least in part, in the fact that Molho himself is in turn much more than "just" a memoirist. He is a historian by profession, and a most distinguished one, a world-class scholar of late-medieval Florence. Molho has thought long and hard about the meaning of history, the nature of memory, and the ways remembered pasts echo in and even constitute our present. It may not be too much of a leap to venture that his chosen specialty—the Renaissance—has given him occasion to think long and hard about how we periodicize our histories, attempting to pin them down with artificially imposed "eras" to make them more coherent and compartmentalized. It will also have given him ample time to ponder the ironies of the idea of historical "rebirth." As Molho's wisteria shows us, no less forcefully than Eliot's lilacs, it is in fact at the moment of regeneration—the beginning of "the after"—that we find just how complex it is to attempt a renaissance, to emerge from the forgetful snow of winter and to aspire to a future that is wholly new. It shows us, indeed, how the dead and the living constantly mix together, how life is inevitably nourished by the "dry tubers" of the past.

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While Molho's core narrative ends in 1945, the brilliance of his memoir is that it is suffused with this strange accordioning of time, the never-endingness of what he lived through in those two terrifying years from spring of 1943 until the spring of 1945. Molho allows us to see him—the him of today—in conversation with his young self and indeed reveals that it is this ongoing conversation that has made up perhaps the most meaningful consistent narrative of his life. This volume is striking for its palimpsestic nature, the ease with which it moves back and forth through time, with that "after" serving as a lens onto what came before, just as the dramatic events of those two years have served as constant filter for Molho's whole life. In what way, it asks us, are our pasts ever behind us, and in what ways are they inevitably, always, part of us?

Courage and Compassion is about other things, as well. The nature of good—which, in insightfully reworking Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, Molho describes as being every bit as "banal" as evil—is a restrained yet steady theme. So, too, are important historical questions, Molho's treatment of which will be thought-provoking to historians of twentieth-century Greece: to what extent did—could—Jews think of themselves as Greek? To what extent did Greek Orthodox Christians aid and abet their Nazi occupiers as they went about the dastardly plan to rid Greece of its Jews? (The haunting image of yellow curtains, made of fabric stolen from Molho's family and hanging in the home of Greek Orthodox "friends" after the war, will stay with you long after you have finished reading.) How is it that a whole city managed, virtually overnight, to erase the memory of tens of thousands of its recent inhabitants, to turn them into specters? In a moniker coined by T. S. Eliot for another postwar European city, Salonica had become a "City of Ghosts"—the ep-

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ithet that Molho's mother, Lily, also gave it in an interview some fifty years after the core events described in her son's book. The Shoah did, indeed, render Salonica—one of Europe's most important Jewish metropoles and arguably its most cosmopolitan—a ghostly city, stalked by the phantasms of its recent past. They are ghosts that endure to this day. Books like this one help to bring them out of their shadows, and remind us that the past is not "another story" or a buried winter. Beneath Eliot's "forgetful snow" lie lives and lifetimes that are knitted to ours.

Molho writes, again borrowing a turn of phrase from Eliot, that he feels that he has had "a discontinuous life." In one sense, this memoir suggests that he has: wandering from place to place, from one language to another, from one country to another, from one historical era to the next. But at the end, through his deeply affecting account, I cannot help but feel that, perhaps, he has had a life of remarkable continuity and integration, a lifetime of bravely reckoning with the events recounted in this volume, and sustained by the remarkable love of the parents who worked so hard to save him. The blossoming of lilacs and wisteria is painful, but they are beautiful, after all.

Katherine E. Fleming

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