MICHAEL FRANK: THE LOST WORLD OF JEWISH RHODES

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast and our acclaimed author series, A partnership between HUC Connect, the online learning platform of the Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Book Council, featuring conversations with authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards. My name is Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with author Michael Frank. Michael Frank's essays, articles and short stories have appeared in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Atlantic, Slate, the Yale Review and Tablet among other publications. His fiction has been presented at Symphony Spaces, selected shorts, a celebration of the short story, and he served as a contributing writer to the Los Angeles Times book review for nearly eight years. He also authored What is Missing, A Novel and The Mighty Franks, a memoir, which was named one of the Best Books of the Year by the Telegraph and The New Statesman. His new book, One Hundred Saturdays: Stella Levy, and The Search for A Lost World, won two National Jewish Book Awards in 2022 for Sephardic culture and Holocaust memoir. Michael Frank, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast, and congratulations on your recognition.

Michael Frank: Thank you, Josh, and thanks for having me.

JH: Set the stage for us, if you would, and introduce us to One Hundred Saturdays.

MF: 100 Saturdays is a book, a long time in the making that seeks to capture my more than six years spent talking to Stella Levy, who is one of the last survivors of the Sephardic Jewish community of the island of Rhodes. Stella is a remarkable woman with a long reaching memory and vision and understanding of the place she came from, a world that completely vanished overnight when Nazis deported the entire community, approximately 1700 people on what was considered the longest of all the deportations measured either in time more than three weeks or geography, all the way from nearly Turkey to Auschwitz.

JH: We have the pleasure through your book of getting to know Stella, the protagonist as she inducts us into what you call a lost world, the world of Rhodes Jewelry. She says, most of us

had never been off the island in our entire lives. Did you find something naive or as it were, forgive upon insular about the pre Holocaust roads, Juderia in particular, and here I'm contrasting your depiction to what I received orally from my father, who is a Torkino from Turkey, though born in the United States. He conveyed to me this sense of Turkish Jews only a few miles away from Rhodes Jews who saw themselves as very ottoman and very worldly and very broad in their geographic and cultural expanse. Do you have a resonance there with this experience of Rhodes as Stella shared with you?

MF: Absolutely. Stella was born into a world that was very much in transition. It was both open and closed, insular, as you say, and worldly, inward looking and increasingly outward gazing. She was born in 1923. I like to say that she had, her world had one or even two feet, if you have three in [laughter] the 19th century and one heading toward inexorably the 20th. She herself grew up in this neighborhood, which had been really, essentially, and in its fundamentals, unchanged for the 500 years that the community had lived there in flight from Spain at the end of the 1400s. But it was shifting and changing, I can't say quite before her eyes, because her eyes weren't old enough to quite take in what was going on. But with retrospect, it becomes increasingly clear that while she was raised with this sensibility that was very Turkish, really in its essences, a very old world in its flavors, its music, its proverbs, its domestic practices, its attitude toward women, toward families. There were also these forces working on the community that were tugging it toward modernity. And Stella very interestingly, I think comes of age really being formed tugged in a sense in both directions. But inevitably modernity prevailed.

JH: That's quite a pregnant way to describe modernity leading onto the Holocaust.

MF: I don't mean only the Holocaust by any means. I mean, first of all, that Stella was born into a family, very much dominated by the matriarch being her maternal grandmother, Sara Notrica, was a fascinating woman in a certain way modern in the sense that she had power or the kind of power a woman could have in that context, she was a healer. She performed these famous insera duras where she would put young women to bed for an entire week. Young women who'd suffered an attack of nerves or a psychological crisis, empty out the houses on either side of the house of this young woman, sit by her bed, hold Mumia, the ashes of dead saints, reportedly in her hands, say prayers and bring this girl back. Then they would, at the end of seven days, go to the Turkish baths and synagogue and she'd be reset.

MF: This grandmother Sara Notrica applied leeches. She'd perform cupping. She would see couples who were struggling in their marriages. She would advise people who were trying to figure out their paths forward in life. Stella never saw her grandmother with her hair down. She never saw her undressed. She never saw her at the beach. She never saw her at the Turkish spas, but she saw her as a woman of great importance in the community. She saw her mother largely lead a domestic life, cook and sing, as they often did, organize their rituals around the Jewish calendar, which dominated day-to-day life. The family lived right across the street from the second largest synagogue in the community, The Kahal Shalom. She saw the dead bodies, for example, being taken past the synagogue on their way to the cemetery because that was part of the ritual. She took her food and the family food when she was old enough to the communal oven in order to be cooked.

MF: She, her sisters and her parents, her mother bathed in the Turkish baths because there was no shower or bathtub at home. So she grew up very much in this old world atmosphere. But when the Italians came, particularly from 1923, year Stella was born forward. They modernized the community in the sense that the infrastructure was improved. Running water came in, buildings were restored, excavations were conducted on the Roman ruins. As the Italians tried to sort of reposition roads as a tourist attraction, as indeed it became, and ideas came, ideas are the thing I think that most awakened Stella and that most led her toward what I mean by modernity. At 14, there's this seminal story she tells that I just love, she rather theatrically, I'm sure, but quite interestingly, packed a suitcase and put it at the foot of her bed. And her mother, Miriam found her there and said, well, what are you doing, Stella? Are you running away from home?

MF: And Stella's answer was, I'm packing to go to university in Italy. And this is such a remarkable thing because maybe one or two young women had attended the sorban from the community up till then and had returned as school teachers. But the idea of going abroad to university to study for a young woman whose destiny at 15 or 16 was to park herself at the work table and begin embroidering her trousseau in preparation for marriage to a man, she would not be able to choose for herself. For Stella, to have the kind of vision she did with a different idea about what a woman's life might be is really quite outstanding. Now, I attribute it in part to the presence of the Italians, in part to ideas that came with books and movies, with music, with conversations that changed in the community and in the surrounding greater island.

MF: But there was also, for example, her older sister, Fatie C, the intellectual in the family like Stella, utterly uninterested in trousseau making, also cooking, but in books and in conversation and ideas. So there were different forces at work that were opening this young woman's eyes and readying her, in theory for a life, led on a much larger canvas than she might've had otherwise. So it's not just the Holocaust, it's the forces of time really, and change that were exerting themselves on this formerly "remote island." It's only remote if you're not living on it, but [laughter] in a way. Also, Stella talked about sensing, the limitations of the community as she got older of the geography, her longing to see these worlds that she'd been reading about, for example. Again, books and ideas can open up your expectations of wider horizons.

JH: Since we're talking about this sense of the old world and its encounter with the new, meaning the new realities of the 20th century, as you put it, I'd like to plumb the complexity of Jewish nostalgia as a phenomenon. If you ask an Ashkenazi Jew, where are you from? They're most likely to respond with their family's last stop in the old world, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, etcetera. By contrast, if you ask a Sephardi where they're from, they're likely to say, Spain, they'll skip over a half millennium of history in Greece, Turkey, north Africa, etcetera, depending, not always, of course, but it does happen quite a bit. You write that in this vein, Stella's grandmother believed they were all Jews simply because they spoke Spanish. Have you experienced this particular form of Sephardic nostalgia, and how do you interpret it in relation to your understanding of what you call the old world as particular to the Sephardi and by contrast to the Ashkenazi?

MF: Yes, I have experienced it in a way similar to the way you formulated it, but let's take a moment just to explain about that grandmother. This is not her maternal grandmother, Sara Notrica, the worldly one, let's call her. But her paternal grandmother, who possibly, we're not sure, never left the neighborhood, the Juderia which I calculate 12 square blocks, maybe it was 20, who knows. And was so unworldly unlike her co-equal on the other side of the family, that when, in fact, those first tourists started to visit the island, and this is the story you referred to. She was sitting outside on this bench that was built into the side of the house, and I really love this detail because it's sort of architecture as destiny in a way. There was a bench, and so she sat there. If there were a bench, maybe two blocks away, maybe she'd have sat there. But here she was parked in front of the house across from the synagogue, watching the world go by.

MF: And the world all of a sudden started to include these tourists who had disembarked at the port nearby, had come up to tour this charming quento Juderia. And she heard them speaking Spanish, well, Spanish being early 20th century Spanish. Whereas at home, they spoke a version of Castellano that have, of course, had evolved over time into what is generally called Judeo Spanish, the language of the community in Rhodes or Ladino more generally. And in her naivete, she said, oh, they must all be Jews. This woman had no understanding that there was a country called Spain where people were both Gentile and Jewish, which is fascinating. So she's a really extreme example of one end of the spectrum. But I think this thing that you put your finger on, calling it Jewish nostalgia, I might call it identity, is something quite rigorous and interesting in Stella.

MF: She defines herself by yes, where she came from, I don't wanna say arrogantly, but she holds it in very high esteem. Maybe because I was not raised in a religious ambiance. You know, it's easy for her to dismiss my Ashkenazi ancestry in some of our conversations as not having the weight of hers. But I do think they have a common expulsion story. So it's the entire community and larger or even than the one on Rhodes. So they have that shared identity, whereas those of us who come through Eastern Europe have a much more complicated, checkered, broken, and in some ways, untraceable history. Theirs has that clear demarking point. It has a language that stayed however it evolved or modified with them. These grandmothers, these aunts, these mothers were singing songs that are the equivalent of the Romances that were being sung in Spain in the 1430s, for example.

MF: This gives you a real sense of clarity about your origins. I think, of course, all these things, if you really look at them, evolved and were cross fertilized with local cultures and with places that they possibly stopped along their way. It's not like they took an airplane from Spain to Turkey or to Rhodes. Those were long complex, in some ways, rather fogged-over journeys. But here we do have this language intact spoken as it was in its essence for hundreds of hundreds of years on this far away unrelated piece of territory. And I think there's a lot of self-defining that derives from that. Absolutely.

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JH: You captured really with wonderful empathy, something remarkable about Stella, which is her fierce Joie de vivre. Aside from witnessing that in the book, it came out again when you broached the topic of the camps, and she resisted the topic as I read her saying that she didn't want to be that person. Do you find her vitality to be forced, perhaps a repression of the horror that is, does she protest too much with her joy or alternatively, is it precisely as she would have it? That is simply the awe inspiring ferocity of her life force?

MF: Oh, Josh, I'll tell you, I don't make any fixed assessments or judgements of Stella in this regard or in a funny way in many regards. When I met Stella, I had no idea I was going to write a book about her. I met her quite by accident. I was simply intrigued by her. I was intrigued by the stories she began to tell me about her childhood and youth. I was intrigued by this capacity she had to see back in time. I like to use this wonderful phrase from Henry James in a late novella. He talked about the visitable past. You too, can see back in time. It intrigued me in particular because my own grandmother was born in the Middle East, though Ashkenazi and I didn't have the opportunity to take this kind of journey with her. And so here I was presented with Stella, making friends with Stella, listening to Stella.

MF: And naturally, part of my interest in her was of course, because there is this tragic bracket put around the story of the Jews of Rhodes. And early on when I first met Stella, I had, as I say, no intention of writing a book. But when it became clear that there was something here worth preserving, and when she agreed to do it, the first thing she said to me was pretty unequivocally, I will not speak about the camps. I will not be defined by that year in my life. And I respected that, although I knew that if it were going to be a book, it would need to embrace also that interlude in her life. But she made a point that really resonated with me, which was the thing to focus on certainly at first, is this world I was born into. And it was so other, so remote, so flavored, as I say, with its 19th and 18th century inflections, that I had absolutely no hesitancy to want to dive in as deeply as I could and ask her to give it to me through stories, through scents, through colors, through songs which she sang for me through photographs when she had them to offer, through research that I did independently, or we did together as we made our way roughly chronologically through her life over these cumulative hundred Saturdays, which included, to be honest, a few Tuesdays and Thursdays along the way she agreed and saw, I thought the importance of taking me through also 1944 and the events that proceeded and followed.

JH: In terms precisely of this visitable past that you so aptly described. Describe for our audience if you would the really vivid saturated images that we find throughout the book, and how artists Myra Kelman communicated both that visitability and the vitality to which we referred of Stella's personality to you.

MF: When I started to work on this project and eventually sat down to write the book, I struggled really to figure out what kind of book it was or would be. It's clearly not a memoir because I'm not the protagonist. It's not a biography because I'm not that kind of writer. It's not a work of

history because first of all, I'm not a historian, but second of all, there are all kinds of histories of the community that have been written, and it's not an as told to book because I'm also not that writer and wouldn't have been interested in it. And I thought a lot about what happened between me and Stella. What happened was I went to her house, I sat in her living room, and I listened to her, and I began to think that, well, as I'm listening to her, a storyteller, I am myself a storyteller.

MF: And what we really have here is an encounter between two different storytellers, a very ancient, almost age old experience that later on, I realized when I read this fascinating essay by Walter Benjamin called The Storyteller, of course, reaches way back to Homer and to the Renaissance, to the Middle Ages, to sites, and to contexts in which people who've seen the world, who've traveled, who've fought in armies and in wars who have been on Voyages and Odyssey come back from where they've been, and they tell their story orally to an audience, and that someone in that audience will end up retelling that story. And that's how stories are passed down through time.

MF: Now, once I put all this together, I began to think, well, what I have here is an encounter. This book is an encounter between two human beings. And then came the question as the book was moving farther along its creative journey, what would one do if one wanted to even illustrate it, and of course, the obvious fall back position or approach would be photographs, but I looked at the photographic record of Stella's life, and it's very spotty, five of her seven siblings left before the war and took with them a handful of photographs or they were sent photographs that were made in Rhodes, obviously, nobody is packing a box of photographs or a photo album and taking it to Auschwitz so the record was very inconsistent. You saw Stella as a newborn, you saw her at 2, you saw her at 8, you saw her at 14, you saw her in her 20s, and it wasn't very satisfying to me.

MF: And also evocative as some of those pictures were I felt that they were kind of literal-minded, and I was talking about the book to Maira Kalman and immediately she said, Well, I'll illustrate it for you, if you like, she'd been hearing about the story, she had met Stella, and I thought, This is a really amazing thing that could happen because here Maira could have her own visual encounter the same way I have my linguistic one with Stella's Story, and of course, Maira, when she dips her brush in red paint and paints a red dress can give you red in a way that my describing someone wearing a red dress, I don't think will ever be as successful.

MF: Maira was able, I believe, to capture the color, the texture, the fabulous-ness in various senses of the word of this community. She was able to depict the beach where Stella grew up with her sisters and her friends, La Juderia on Shabbat when a Greek band came to play in their costumes, she was able to capture that fantastic grandmother, Sara Notrica basing this one on a photograph surrounded by her grandchildren and Maira sees the bows in these young girls' hair and of course, triples them in size, and in a way you sort of understand, we're in a world that has a kind of magical quality to it, which I believe Rhodes did. So I'm very, very pleased that Maira was able to contribute to the book. It's a sort of parallel narrative, if you like or a parallel impression or gain, encounter with Stella's Story.

JH: As you mentioned earlier, you capture much of the culture that defined Jewish life on Rhodes, its social hierarchies, its relations with non-Jewish populations among many other facets, what unit of culture most captured your imagination about that lost world that you and Stella brought to life for us?

MF: I wouldn't say just one thing, I loved the music, it seems so timeless, and to hear her sing it for me in Judaeo-Spanish. Fantastic. I love the Proverbs. There's a professor who came along in the post-war years and interviewed people who had grown up in Rhodes, both who survived the camps or who had immigrated before the war, and he collected 14,000 Proverbs, which just blows my mind, and some of them I find just so attractive and amusing, like if you don't put down a tablecloth on the table in the evening, the devil will come along and put you down as a tablecloth, which of course has changed my life and increased my laundry bills, because now I put a tablecloth down every time we sit down to eat, or you don't speak of teeth at night, if you speak of death at night, you need to pull your ear.

MF: There's so many of them, and I think that's a fascinating window into that world, there are just so many ways to look back in time, stories are one, proverbs, the music, the food, the clothes, the architecture, these buildings built around shared courtyards or terraces or doors or windows left open so that you would hear music and you would smell what your neighbors were cooking, but of course, if you were a young woman like Stella and her older sisters, when you were venturing outside of the Juderia in the evening, if you were dating, God forbid, an Italian soldier, this information would be known instantly and would pass to the community at work speed, the flowers the plants, the rue that everyone always grew in a pot, no matter how poor or what space a family had, because it was one of these superstitions that you would go out mostly the young women, again, with a sprig of Rue pinned to your underclothes as a kind of protection against evil forces, I ate it all up, and it takes me back to that desire to see back in time and to try my best to experience what it was like, and I hope in my modest way, I've been able to convey that in language for the reader.

JH: The notion of the past as a visitable unit of understanding or as an anchor in identity comes up not only in our ruminations about the book, but from Stella herself, at the beginning of the horrifying deportation and train journey North, Stella, speaking with you asks rhetorically, You know how we often speak about my memory? And in this she appears to be speaking of her personal recall of events, but it's almost impossible not to interpret her as speaking about Memory with the capital M, and certainly not only in relation to the Holocaust where it holds almost Talismanic force today, but also with respect to the human condition, you have written about this personal encounter, you've written your own personal memoir. What did you learn from Stella about the idea of Memory with the capital M?

MF: That's a great question. At some point, I listened to her and began to think about writing this book, I thought I had to make a decision that I would trust Stella's memory, because I do believe that stories or moments stay with us for a reason, sometimes largely because they're truthful and accurate, but sometimes because they have maybe a deeper psychological or emotional truth, and so I say in a note at the end of the book that Stella's memory is something that I trust, but I also know that there are likely to be conflations and errors and mistakes, but I felt it was

important to give her testimony, if you will, her account as she offered it to me, but at the same time, I, being a responsible writer, did my best to confirm the stories, many of them that she told me, and a large number of her stories coincide with the historical facts now is this because she has a remarkable memory, is it because in her later life, she's committed to herself to studying the story of her community and what happened to it? I can't tell you that.

MF: All I know is that I felt quite confident that what I was offering was generally accurate, and when there were discrepancies, and I write about one in particular, they're very fascinating and interesting, and they don't really call into question Stella's memory as I think illustrate the nature of memory itself, and specifically I'm talking about a recollection of a, to me, really remarkable evening when she attended a birthday party for her friend Stella Cedes and described at one point how a group of German officers came out onto the balcony which happened to overlook this garden, which was outside of the Juderia, I should say, and having heard these young women sing because like their mothers, when they went to parties, they sang, asked them if they would sing a song that the soldiers knew in German and in Italian and in French, and they did, and then the German sang the same song in German, and now these were the Germans who had seized control of the island, the fall of '43, and ended up, of course, being consequential in the deportation of the entire community in July of 1944.

MF: When Stella first told me this story, I was able to figure out with some help that she had conflated two evenings, one was the birthday party of her friend and another was simply a party in the same garden. And how do we know this? Most remarkably, a letter emerged from an archive that was discovered less than 10 years ago on the island, that was the police archive maintained by the Italian Fascist Government, which had been surveying not only the Jewish population of the island, but the Turks and the Greeks, more than 90,000 documents, and then one of them was a report from a spy, we have no idea of knowing who, who was present at the party, describe the records being played, describe what the young women were eating down to the Sesame crackers and drinking the vermouth, listing those present at the party, which included both Jewish women from the Juderia and Italian officers with whom they consorted.

MF: And so this to me was just the most illuminating document and discovery, it shows the quite minor fallibility of Stella's memory, but the almost bigger truth she remembered this evening, she had no way of knowing that she had been observed reported on to the government, what a fascinating thing.

JH: Leave us if you would, with the story or the element of the encounter that most surprised you about Stella.

MF: Honestly, I would say the profundity with which she has sought to think about her life, she lived her life, she lived through major events of the 20th century, she lost her parents, her uncle, her cousin, and a young baby, as soon as she arrived at Auschwitz, she went through many metamorphoses there and afterward, but she has continued always to revisit herself, as a young woman, as a slightly older woman, as a mother, as a professional, as a retiree, as someone who has been friends with a wide circle of people, as someone who has traveled and seen the world, and as someone who has continued to take in information about her points of origin and

her own experiences, this is what I think made her such a intriguing person to speak to about her life, her inward gaze that looks both within but also looks outward at the world around her, the world that history catapulted her into and the world as she experiences it still today.

JH: Well, Michael Frank, thank you for sharing Stella and her profundity with us in One Hundred Saturdays: Stella Levi And The Search For A Lost World. It was a pleasure to speak with you and to crack open a little bit of this amazing chapter of Jewish history. Thank you so much.

MF: Thank you for having me on.

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