A Sephardic Family Odyssey From Constantinople to Queens

Inspired by the 20th-century migrations of her grandmother, Elizabeth Graver's new novel, “Kantika,” depicts lives filled with music, ritual and hardship across continents and cultures.

By Ayten Tartiçi
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KANTIKA, by Elizabeth Graver

Of his refugee parents, the novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen once observed that they had “experienced the usual dilemma of anyone classified as an other. The other exists in contradiction, or perhaps in paradox, being either invisible or hyper-visible, but rarely just visible.” The refugee, the immigrant, the outsider cannot merely be. She is either passed over or stands out like a sore thumb.

Elizabeth Graver’s fifth novel, “Kantika,” brings to life this duality through the story of an Ottoman Jewish family’s emigration from early-20th-century Constantinople to Barcelona, Havana and eventually New York. The novel raises the literary profile of the Sephardim, which remains less conspicuous in America than that of the Ashkenazi, in that formidable line from Henry Roth to Philip Roth. Largely inspired by her maternal grandmother, Rebecca, Graver has reworked family interviews, photographs and stories recorded on microcassettes into stylized historical fiction spanning nearly half a century.

While “Kantika” inevitably relies on tropes of Jewish immigrant literature, from questions of what and where home is to idolization of America as a land relatively unhaunted by the ghosts of European antisemitism, Graver is equally interested in the resilience of women as filtered through the lens of music, motherhood and disability.

We are first introduced to the Cohens as cosmopolitan, affluent Turkish Jews whose lives in turn-of-the-century Constantinople seem buoyant, even picturesque. Alberto and Sultana live at the top of a hill in the ethnically mixed Fener neighborhood, tending to a garden bursting with roses, crocuses, tulips and hyacinths. Their daughter Rebecca fraternizes with the daughters of Greek diplomats and attends a French Catholic school; an Armenian maid lovingly serves their meals. Early on, Graver’s narrator teasingly refers to the intra-Jewish cultural divide that marks the Sephardim as a more colorful branch of Judaism: “Later in life, Rebecca will encounter Jews for whom the Sabbath is a solemn, davening affair — no apricots in syrup or pomegranates with their bloody pearls, just gefilte fish trembling in slime.”

Their multiethnic, multisectionary Ottoman world (arguably somewhat romanticized by Graver) soon collapses, replaced by a bureaucratic Turkish nationalism, even as Turkey remains home to the Cohens: their birthplace, the site of Alberto’s garden, where his father is buried. Although the Ottoman Empire welcomed large numbers of Iberian Jewish exiles after 1492, some Ottoman Jews began to leave in the 20th century to avoid conscription into the army as well as to seek out better opportunities. After the Turkish government requisitions Alberto’s textile factory, he too relocates the bankrupt family to Barcelona with the help of the Jewish Refugee Relief Committee.

Ambivalent about returning to the country that had expelled their ancestors 400 years earlier, the family must rely on invisibility as a form of protection in Spain. Alberto, the raki-drinking businessman with a penchant for the poet Judah Halevi, becomes a humble shammas, or groundskeeper, of a tiny, unmarked synagogue. Rebecca marries another Sephardic Jew and has two sons but is forced to conceal her Jewishness, posing as Marie Blanco Camayar, a literal blank slate with a Parisian pedigree, to get work as a seamstress. A filmmaker, who will later become a fascist, pesters the family to appear as specimens with “authentic Sephardic features” in his “little film to educate Spaniards about the national treasure of the half a million Spanish Jews abroad.”
In Graver’s vision, migration i and zag, doubting, retracing a and bulbs from his Turkish ge absentee father who is sufferi hoping to get into America, an citizenship, before finally land Graver freely enters the consc novel focuses heavily on Rebe one but myself,” her younger s from her second marriage, she chatter, more cuddling, more l

The amount of research that v Sephardic Jews have tradition title, which means “song” in L repertoire of Spanish, Hebrew transmit her cultural heritage narration can sometimes be overwhelming, as when the novel later veers into a side quest about David, Rebecca’s son, who is assigned to the U.S. Franklin during World War II.

Yet Graver’s ability to tenderly and humorously inhabit the mind of Rebecca's disabled stepdaughter, Luna Levy, sets “Kantika” apart. Luna has cerebral palsy and Graver replaces the economic betterment motif of immigrant narratives with an account of Rebecca's persistent and successful resolve to teach Luna not to lower expectations for herself: “Newmother tortures her. For the past month, she has been taking her through a set of exercises for an hour a day, but with Nona” — her grandmother — “gone, the hour becomes two, then three.” Rebecca's tough love, however, is genuine and Luna soon embraces her hyper-visibility, merrily greeting others in her father’s shop in Queens: “Ahmlunaley pleezedtameeeeyoo!”

That careful attention to individual speech underlines “Kantika”’s kaleidoscope of languages, accents and dialects. Graver weaves together snippets of Ladino, Turkish, French, Castilian, Catalan, Hebrew and English like one of Rebecca’s hand-stitched dresses. Helpfully translated so as not to lose the reader, these fragments enrich Graver’s fiction while also stressing one of its central questions: whether a language can stand in for home.

“Kantika” answers in the affirmative. Puzzled by the word aman in a Ladino song Rebecca sings, her husband, Sam, and daughter Suzanne hit the books: “ At the public library the two of them discovered that it meant woe is me in Turkish and Greek, ‘safety’ in Arabic and something akin to ‘believe’ in Hebrew, but when they came home and told Rebecca, she rolled her eyes and said just let it be, it means aman, so they left it untranslated.” Yet by the novel’s end, a lightly tragic note surfaces. As their lives in the United States take off, Rebecca’s American-born children can only muster “kitchen variety” Ladino. “Kantika” is thus also a gesture at preserving a language that, like Yiddish, is now endangered.

Queens is not exactly Fener, English is not Ladino, and Rebecca’s thriving garden of snap peas and sunflowers cannot replace her lost parents. Far from being a Pollyannish tale of New World success, “Kantika” is a meticulous endeavor to preserve the memories of a family, an elegy and a celebration both.

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