

Introduction
of the
The House of Levi
by
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We unearthed the treasure from an old cardboard suitcase. In Jaffa at the Fleemarket, a rag dealer spread out his wares on the pavement. Between shaky, bent candelabra, worn shabby shoes, an old cardboard suitcase awaited a customer. The partition of the suitcase swollen from the dampness was filled with papers. If someone had taken the trouble to examine the piles of faded letters, written in gothic letters, and classify the official documents, adorned and sealed with the svastika, and study old, yellowish, more than 100 years old photographs, he would have been stunned to discover that the dig, a mine of informations, was the lead to the story of the House of Levi.

The first to come across the swollen bundle of letters was Dan ben Amoz: a collector of objects from the pre-plastic period, as he defines himself. He handed the material over to the survivors of the family, from there it went to the author of this book.

In the fall of 1812 a horseman from the Napoleonic wars sold his booty: a set of candlesticks he had stolen somewhere in far away czarist Russia. A miserable roaming peddler, a Jew called Jekkel bought the finding. 126 years later, in the fall of 1938, a sportscar, model Stoever, was stopped by the Gestapo near the border Germano-Swiss. The driver was the great grand'daughter of Jekkel the peddler who bought the candlesticks. She was an attractive, well dressed lady, who according to the identity card was called Ida Levi.

Where do you want to go asked the Nazi police officer. On vacation to the mountains, she answered. The identity card was correct, but the candlesticks and the suitcase full of family memorandums were bizarre, who needed all this on a recreation trip? Ida was submitted to an examination. We will never know how she got through, but we know that she crossed the border, for sure and though carefree, she knew of the murder of her brother, still wondering about the tragedy and the circumstance and tension surrounding it.

Shortly before the second world war, the suitcase was forwarded to its owner: the couple Siegfried and Lisbeth Levi. They escaped from Hitler's Berlin and found a temporary refuge at the Swiss holiday spot: Lugano. Before they got away, they had managed to take out a considerable sum from Germany to be deposited in Swiss banks in Zuerich and in the Tessin. A clever lawyer, Senior Valedo Rivovo, settled the official matters for the couple. Great was his surprise when in the winter of 1977 I came, unexpectedly, to his beautiful office, a 300 years old house at the via Pretoria 7, and asked to see the dusty files !

As stunned was the owner of the hotel Windsor in Nizza when he saw me. Siegfried and Lisbeth Levi lived there in the days of the Vichy government. Then I was knocking at the door of the Pension Bandini in Florence. My hand shook as I rang the bell. In 1943 German secret agents knocked at the same door to arrest another son of the family, the painter Rudolf Levi. That's how ended the life of this successful artist. He had started his career as a manager of the Studio of Henri Matisse. Married to a gentile woman, he was deprived of the family's inheritance. He got mixed up in homosexual activities and at the end fell into the hands of the Nazis.

Generation after generation unfold their experiences. In the darkness of the preceeding century the sons of Levi are struggling for a position in society. Being persistent minded, they climbed the ladder from bottom to almost the top. Then collapsed their world. 6 generations were born until then, living full lives until their death. In 1975 Lisbeth Levi passed away, a lonely 92 years old. The heirs sent the cardboard suitcase apparently by error. What luck for the author !

Among the papers I found a passport in which I found the cue: In case of death or accident please inform Thea Levinton, Ramat-Gan. I found Mrs. Levinton. She was the first link of the chain to be searched : 7 countries on 3 continents, to that extent the search was carried out. Little by little I uncovered survivors of the family, in Los Angeles, New York, London and Israel. Archives were combed in Jerusalem, Berlin and England. I found among them letters written by Asher Levi -the first of the family to grow rich- on his travels to Eretz Israel in the year 1872. I pondered over files from the Nazi police in Kesslin, following the events and activities of the sons of Levi. An account book, in case the ramified businesses would be returned to their owner.

There were countless other documents. I advanced step by step from one person to the next, from one place to the next one. In the house of the lawyer Fritz Wolfsohn, I found by chance a diary of the family from the year 1834. In the house of Mrs. Hannah Sleiper, a great grand'daughter of Asher Levi, I found snapshots, letters and newspaper cuttings with a time span of over 100 years. In the house of Dr. Klaus Henrickson, in London, I found stenograms of meetings between the sons of Levi and the delegates of the Nazi government in Pomerania.

I removed layers and layers of the weathering in order to bare the chronicles of the family. I could see the drama unfolding, woven into the events of those days. Actually, the story of the house of Levi is the one of 10000 other families who looked for a good seat in the middle - between a strong adherence to Judaism and loyalty to the German homeland - and fell between the seats.

Whatever I wrote is based on official and private documents, interviews with the witness of the evidence. My conclusions are based on the reading of certified matter. Almost nothing in this book is the fruit of invention.

The reality was gripping and cruel beyond imagination !