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# Poles apart

The unusual Holocaust stories of the ‘Tehran children’

By **Abigail Green**



January 15, 2021

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Villagers in Ein Harod Kibbutz, Israel, c.1948 | © World History Archive/Alamy

## TEHRAN CHILDREN

A Holocaust refugee odyssey

384pp. Norton. £19.99.

Mikhal Dekel

**A**s a child in Israel, Mikhal Dekel belonged to a society shaped by the Holocaust and desperate to move beyond it. Most homes in their Mount Carmel neighbourhood contained at least one life lived elsewhere before the war, “a complex story of survival, and an entire other family ... who had existed before the war. Nobody talked. Everything was negated”. Her own family was no exception.

Dekel knew that her father had been born in Poland, but she thought of Hanan simply as one of the “Tehran children” - an iconic group of child refugees brought to Mandate Palestine from Iran in February 1943. Both then and since, their story had been celebrated as one not of suffering but of deliverance: “CHILDREN OF ISRAEL SAVED FROM ORPHANHOOD AND BROUGHT TO ERETZ ISRAEL”, as one contemporary headline put it. Only in later life, as a literary scholar in New York, did she start to wonder what lay behind the story.

*Tehran Children* is the story of Dekel’s quest to understand where her father came from, both literally and metaphorically. Encouraged by her friend Salar, a Persian refugee with linguistic and personal connections that she lacked, she follows the trajectory of her late father and his sister Regina from their comfortable life as the children of wealthy brewers in the Polish town of Ostrów, through the turmoil of the Soviet occupation of Białystok, from September 1939, to the well-documented hardships of the Gulag archipelago, where they were sent without any prior knowledge. And onwards, ever

onwards, from one terrible situation to the next. Always hungry, always desperate, never in control of their trajectory, from Archangelsk through rural Uzbekistan, Bukhara and Samarkand - where the children were separated from their parents - until they eventually reached Tehran. The children then passed through a series of orphanages, homes and transit camps - via India, Aden and on through the Sinai - until they eventually settled in Kibbutz Ein Harod.

Theirs was not the usual Holocaust story of survival within the confines of the rigid logic of the death camp. Rather, as Dekel rightly notes, it was “the story of being vomited out from the tentative safety of home into a vast, impoverished, ferociously dangerous world”. It is a story that speaks to the terrors of the twenty-first century in a way that perhaps the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Treblinka no longer can.

Dekel’s academic training helps her to see her father’s experience as simultaneously particular and generic. Hanan’s “Holocaust refugee odyssey” is always his story, and based on his own written account, but by interweaving his memory with the written testimonies of other Tehran children, Dekel shows us how similar their responses were to death, insecurity, disease and hunger. Only 857 Tehran children arrived in Palestine in 1943, but hundreds of thousands of Poles had set out with them a few years earlier on the same terrible path. Catholics and Jews alike, they fled the Nazis and found themselves sucked into the horrors of a succession of alien worlds. As she tells her father’s story, Dekel helps us to see what held these disparate groups together, both in Poland and out of it - and how what appeared to be a common plight served, in the end, to prise Jewish and Catholic Poles apart. In recovering his lost geography of suffering, she opens up new possibilities for understanding that shared past.

Perhaps, however, this was not Dekel's original intention. For this is a book that sets out to challenge the Zionist narrative of deliverance by questioning the inevitability of Hanan's rebirth as an Israeli citizen. She is at pains to emphasize the contingency of her father's trajectory, the alternative fates that might have awaited him, and the extent to which the brutal experience of forced exile was shared by almost everyone she met.

Yet she also comes to understand the Jewishness of Hanan's experience as distinctive. She had wanted to "trace my father's identity through his prewar life and his refugee journey rather than presuppose it, to 'follow the actor himself'" (here she is quoting the sociologist Rogers Brubaker). She then discovered that theoretical constructs like these could not help her to understand her father, because choice was a luxury he never had. Zionism, in short, was the only option available to Hanan and Regina by the time they reached Tehran. It transformed their sense of self in a way that was, perhaps, artificial, but there was dignity and security in this identity as well.

In 1949 Hanan's mother too reached Palestine (her husband survived the war, only to perish in a displaced persons camp). Regina later recalled this moment as one of "great happiness" that was nonetheless unsettling, for suddenly she didn't know who she was any more. "I had grown accustomed to thinking of myself as an Israeli. My mother was a refugee." In choosing to end her story with this reflection, Dekel reminds us how much Hanan and his sister had lost - and gained - in the making of their new selves.

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