

In a tiny Greek village on the idyllic island called Rhodos, lived a family who loved music. If you walked past their house, on the outskirts of the Jewish quarters, on any evening, and peered through the window you might have seen them in their living room; the beautiful Renata, dressed in her finely-tailored clothes, playing Chopin's waltz on her grand Steinway piano, her husband Alberto, listening rapt with attention and love for his wife, and their little girl Lina, in her frilly dress, dancing and twirling to the music, a large pink bow in her hair.

For the Amato family, life revolved around music, and their two beautiful Steinway pianos were the heart of their happy home. Alberto had gifted his wife with the grand piano as a measure of his love for her. The brown upright piano was a gift from Renata's father Nissim, who lived in Italy and had shipped the finest piano across the seas, for his daughter's wedding. On a Sunday afternoon, if you were to visit the Amato's, you would have been welcomed into a wonderful gathering of friends and family, all sharing singing, dancing, delicious Sephardic food, good conversation, and merriment around the pianos. Later, you might have joined them on the Mandraki, the promenade that skirted the crystal blue seas, discussing the latest books, or politics, or village news as they walked together. The island of Rhodos was known by some as the "Bride of the Sun"; it was bathed in sunlight and beauty, and for the community that lived in the Jewish quarters, this was paradise.

One day in 1939, their peaceful life began to change. As they were on the way to the Mandraki for ice-cream with Lina skipping happily towards the restaurant, they bumped into their friends Bianca and Girolamo Sotgiu. The laughter and chatter on the Mandraki soon turned to worried conversation as the Sotgius shared the news that war had reached their shores. Little Lina could not understand why the adults were suddenly so rushed and serious.

"We need to get home right away and listen to the news on the radio," they told her.

"But what about my ice-cream?" she said, anticipating her usual Sunday treat.

"There's no time for ice-cream now," they snapped.

What could be more important than her ice-cream? "I want my ice-cream!" she insisted, stamping her foot for extra impact. Lina did get her ice cream, but the chocolate delight melted over her hands as her father carried her all the way back to their home.

The very next day Lina was removed from her regular school because the new racial laws did not allow Jewish students to attend the school anymore. Her new school was now at her best friend Isi's house with three of her other Jewish friends. She was under the guidance of the beautiful Seniorina Capeluto, a gifted young Jewish teacher who was no longer allowed to teach non-Jews.

Lina felt safe in the classroom with Seniorita and her friends. She wore a shiny black pinafore, with a white collar, and she was the only girl in the class. Together they celebrated and learnt about the Jewish festivals, and at the end of the year they even had a school play and prizegiving, just the four of them.

A shadow had moved over the island. No longer were there the usual Sunday musical gatherings, the bustling food markets, or the walks with friends on the Mandraki. At night they were often woken up with sounds of sirens, aerial raids, or even bombings. Some nights the sky looked like fireworks display and they rushed to the shelters where it was safe. After those nights she and her friends would look for unusual pieces of shrapnel to gather and play with. There were no toys available during the war, so these were their playthings.

One night, when the skies were quiet, Isi asked his parents, "But when will they drop the bombs?" thinking this was some kind of game. His mother's cheeks grew red as she shouted, "These are dangerous times my boy, no more comments like

that. And no more shrapnel collections for you either!” She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him so much that he almost lifted off the ground, much to the mirth of Lina and her friends.

One day while Renata was at home, practicing her scales, deep in concentration, there was a loud knock at the door. Cautiously she opened and peered outside. She saw a lorry filled with German soldiers and their captain was on her doorstep, ready to push his way inside her home. His eyes scanned the living room and as he glimpsed the pianos a visible smile appeared on his face.

“We are here to take your pianos,” he said. “Under the orders of the Reich, you are no longer permitted to possess these items.”

Renata was a pint-sized lady, and the soldiers were so frightening with their guns and loud voices, but she could not let them take her pianos without putting up a fight.

Gathering all her strength she stood up tall. “Sir. I am a teacher and a musician. I need my pianos; they are my life.”

“You don’t have any say in this,” said the captain. “These are orders.”

“I refuse the orders,” she said boldly. “Please leave. I cannot let you take them.”

The captain softened. Being a cultured man, he knew something about the love of music.

“Then,” he said. “Which of these two pianos will you give up first?”

“Neither,” she said.

“You don’t have a choice,” he said menacingly and instructed his officers to remove the upright piano. Renata’s cheeks flamed with anger.

As her piano was almost out the door she shouted, “You need to give me a receipt for that piano before it leaves these premises.”

“A what?” said the captain incredulously.

“Yes. A receipt” she repeated, fumbling for a piece of paper and a pen on her desk. “You can write the numbers down here.”

Keen to get rid of the woman, he peered at the brass plaque inside the instrument, which did indeed display some numbers, and wrote them down, smirking all the while.

“Wait, let me check that,” she said, reading the numbers out aloud, aware of the importance of such details.

When the soldiers left, Renata ran all the way to Alberto’s office. “We need to protect our grand piano,” she said.

Together they took the legs off the remaining piano and placed the large mahogany body in a big wooden box. On top of that they placed a huge mattress, and then a multi-coloured embroidered bedspread, with numerous goose-down pillows at the top. Can you imagine how huge that bed was? It made a wonderful place to rest, and no one had any idea what they were sleeping on.

The years went by and in 1944 the island of Rhodos was one of the final places from which the Nazis began to deport the Jews. But on July 18th, 1944, the entire Jewish community was told to report to the German barracks; first the men, followed the next day by the women who arrived clutching their key possessions and valuables. They had to be ready to leave on boats for the long trip to Germany the following day. Some of them had heard stories of the camps and were terrified. Granny Renata and Alberto waited at the barracks, the piano receipt in the suitcase she gripped tightly on her lap.

Listening to music had been replaced by listening to the radio over the years. Alberto and Renata had discussed the coming of this day with their close friends, the Sotgius, and together they made sure that adoption papers for Lina were signed. Lina Amato became Lina Sotgiu; she learnt the sign of the cross and the Catholic mass in Latin as taught to her by the local priest. The priest told her that this was a game they were playing. They had hoped that this was just a precaution,

but now the day had come where they knew the only option was to leave Lina with the Sotgius. Before leaving Renata hugged Lina one more time “It's just a little holiday for you” she whispered, “be strong mi alma, (my soul), always be strong.” Lina felt so lost without her parents but was soothed on that first night by playing with the Sotgius baby girl Federica.

Great Granny Rachel also stayed behind at home, determined not to leave the beautiful island. When Italy had invaded the island a few years previously, the citizens of Rhodos had to give up their identities for Italian. Rachel had refused to give up her Turkish passport, her only connection now to the land of her birth. “I was born Turkish,” she said, “and Turkish I will die.” Turkey had remained neutral during the war, and none of them could have known that Granny Rachel's patriotism and that Turkish passport was to save their lives.

Signora Bianca Sotgiu could not bear the thought that in just 24 hours her close friends, the Amatos would be shipped off to Germany, and who knew if they would ever be seen again? She thought back to the precious times spent together and knew that desperate times called for desperate measures. Although she was heavily pregnant, she grabbed her bicycle and headed off for the Turkish Ambassador's house, a Mr Selahettin Ulkumen. She arrived out of breath, her hair all over the place, and found the distinguished looking man in his garden. She explained the situation to him, exclaiming finally, “These people are Turkish citizens, and you sir, are now G-d. You can save them from a terrible fate. You know as well as I do what will happen to them if you do not!”

Mr Ulkumen was a brave and upright young man. He made a list of all the Turkish citizens who were now in the barracks, and the next morning, he walked personally to the barracks in the centre of the island, to read their names out.

By a miracle of miracles, even though they had renounced their Turkish citizenship, the names of Alberto and Renata Amato were announced, and they exited the building to their freedom, but they would never forget the sound of the pleas of those that remained. “Alberto, Renata salva me,” (save me).

Fifty-five people were saved that day due to the bravery of Signora Sotgiu, a Christian woman and Mr Ulkumen, a Muslim man.

Over the next few months, Alberto had to report to the Germans daily. One day he came home sobbing. The Germans had told him that they would be summonsed to a boat that would transport them to Germany at any moment. Every day Lina went up to the terrace of their house, and looked onto the harbour, wondering which boat would take them away to that far off place.

One morning Alberto walked to the barracks for his daily check-in to find that the room was empty. The Germans were gone and the boat that was supposed to carry the Amato family, had left with all the top-ranking German officers. The war was almost over.

But life as they knew it was very different. There was little food left on the island and Alberto went to the local priest every day to beg for a glass of milk for Lina. There was no more Jewish community, and they knew they could not stay. Eventually they found a boat that, for a high price, could take them to Turkey, where they would meet up with friends and family.

The boat was filled with people heading to Marmaris hoping for a new life. Renata was clutching her smartest handbag and still, tucked safely inside, was that piano receipt.

It was mid-winter, and the seas were rough. Suddenly the boat sprung a leak and began to sink. The men started to bail out the water with whatever they could: a shoe, a pot, a bucket. Alberto used his best hat to scoop out the water but to no avail. The boat was filling with water and Lina, clutching her doll started to cry, “But I can’t swim, I can’t swim.”

Night was falling and they felt desperate, but suddenly someone spotted a light in the distance, just on the horizon. As it came closer, they saw it was a boat. They started to scream and wave their hands frantically “Please, please, help us please!” On that stormy night the boat came towards them, saving them all, and Renata’s precious receipt.

After a few months in Turkey, it was the end of the war, and they decided to return to their beloved island of Rhodos. Renata missed her music, the medicine of her soul. She had not forgotten her upright piano and longed to play the instrument again.

She asked around the island and found out that the piano might be at the British Governor’s house. She put on her best dress, her smart hat, and took her special handbag and headed out the door without telling Alberto. In the small pocket of her bag was the receipt, the paper withered but the numbers still legible.

Renata rang the doorbell many times. Finally, the Governor, Mr. Parker, an imposing man wearing a tie and jacket, opened the door. Right there in front of her, in his living room was her beloved upright piano as if it had been waiting for her there all the time.

“My name is Renata Amato and that Sir, is my piano.” she announced.

“What audacity madam, you can’t just walk into here saying that. What proof do you have?”

Unphased, Renata opened her handbag, and whipped out the receipt.

Mr. Parker took out his glasses from his jacket pocket to check it, amazed at the tenacity of this woman but it was quite clear to see – that written on the receipt was the same number as on the piano’s brass plaque. The Governor had the piano returned to her the next day and even asked Renata to teach his teenage daughter Carol how to play.

Once again, the house was filled with the gift of music, the language that unites us all.

Today, in a town at the tip of Africa called Cape Town, the pianos are still in the family. If you walk past their home and peer through the window, perhaps you will see Grandmother Lina playing the grand piano, and her granddaughters dancing free. Or perhaps you will see Lina’s sons there; Gareth playing a duet with her on the upright piano, with Michael playing the saxophone, sending the balm of music to all who listen.

Life is filled with miracles, moments where life presents us with gifts of beauty, love, and surprise. How many miracles could you count in this story? In our lives we can make miracles happen every day, with small acts of kindness, and of courage. Perhaps miracles are not just the big things that happen in life, like Albert and Renata walking free. They are in the tiny moments of grace, love, connection, and determination that are present to us at any time; the moments where we can create a chain of hands that support each other, even in the hardest days of our lives.

Renata’s Piano written by Linda Kantor

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