

Memoirs of a Spy
Dory Sontheimer
Translated by Rachel Toogood

Introduction

A novel, based on a true story.

After my mother died in 2002, I found seven boxes at the back of the loft in our family home. In them I found a huge number of photographs, passports, telegrams, letters.....documents that told the story of my central European family, victims of the Holocaust.

Reading those previously undiscovered, harrowing papers became nothing short of a mission for me. I had to go through a period of assimilating a reality that up until then I had known nothing about, before accepting it and eventually greatly admiring the survivors. I had to learn to process all the emotions they created inside me, many of them contradictory: disbelief at what had happened, acceptance, rancour towards the perpetrators, indignation and confusion in the face of society's behaviour.....and an endless number of other feelings as well.

Among the documents I found some information that both intrigued and surprised me, containing a hint of glamour, something quite difficult to accept amidst the grey pall of crime and loss. It was the story of Sonia Rosetti Roznovano, the princess of Moldova, who collaborated with the Allies fighting against Nazism.

In September 1940 my paternal grandparents, Max and Rosa Sontheimer, both German and Jewish, had acquired visas to go and live in Cuba and a passport to leave Germany and travel to Barcelona where my parents were. My parents had managed to leave Germany beforehand, they had met in Barcelona and married in 1936. They obtained Spanish residency and after Franco came to power saw it was necessary to convert to Catholicism.

My parents managed to get a boat passage for my grandparents to escape to Cuba on 31 December 1940, but the Spanish government gave them a transit visa for only three days (from 23rd – 26th October 1940)

It was then that an exchange of letters began between my father Kurt and his uncle Henry Sontheimer, who was already in the US, asking him for help. He told my father to get in contact with princess Sonia, "who has a very good relationship with the Germans and will arrive in Bilbao at the end of September 1940. She will be able to solve the problem"

The letters documented the journey that Sonia made after September 1940 when she arrived in Bilbao from America. This is how I knew about the cities she travelled to and the hotels she stayed in.

This novel describes the life of Princess Sonia, her involvement with the Allies, the association of the Franco government with Nazism, and the help Sonia gave so that my grandparents could obtain a visa until their departure date for Cuba.

I hope this novel will serve as a tribute to my family and to all the people who risked their lives to confront this powerful machinery of evil in order to save human beings. At that time it was much easier to be swept along with the current and be one of the millions of indifferent people who looked the other way and thought only of themselves.

For six years between 1939 and 1945 I worked as an undercover agent for the allies.

It wasn't something I had planned to do, but rather more circumstantial. I was living through a time of intolerable injustice and it was this that compelled me to do it. There were many things in my favour: the people I was accustomed to mixing with, my sociability, the discretion with which I knew how to hide my past, my somewhat fearless personality, and even, why not say it, my physical attractiveness. All this made it easy, almost natural for me to permeate the highest spheres of power and gain from them what was needed to save lives.

I worked as a spy against the Nazis because I was able to and because I knew how to do it well. Witnessing the pain of so many friends and family and having the possibility of saving lives became not so much a task as a reason for living. I was brought up in my family with basic but solid values and it was these that drove and impelled me to fight against those criminals. I wasn't scared as I didn't have much to lose. And I couldn't just sit back and watch.

As a secret agent I lived through many experiences, but the ones that I am about to recount, I will never forget.

Bilbao, September 1940

In September 1940, after an absence of five years, I returned to Bilbao. The exquisite building of the Concordia station was to be the setting of a long-awaited reunion.

I descended the steps of the carriage and saw him there, waiting for me with a bunch of flowers in his hands. Josetxu, the love of my life. I had yearned for him so much over the past five years....! I had never loved anyone this way before. I never would have wanted to be separated from him, but fate had dealt me an unavoidable mission during a very complicated period in history.

I ran towards him and he caught me in his arms. It's difficult to express what I felt: a mixture of emotion and bewilderment, a combination of anxiety and euphoria, of strength and weakness. Moments impossible to forget and difficult to describe. When you love someone, being reunited with them is a special moment, it's two hearts beating as one, it's the song of life.

'Josetxu' I said his name, searching to meet his gaze.
'I'm not Josetxu any more', he said as his face became sombre, 'I'm José now. A lot has changed since we last saw each other.'

We looked into each other's eyes. He had become serious, but his expression soon softened to be full of love. He kissed me and the world around me disappeared. An indescribable feeling overwhelmed me. I had always been a strong, independent woman, but at that moment I didn't ever want to be separated again from the man that I loved, the love of my life.

We kissed, once, twice, perhaps more, but we remained in each other's arms until we were able to calm our emotions. I don't know what I did with the bunch of flowers, but later, when we were sat in the car, I found it in my lap. I couldn't stop looking at the man I had just got back. I pored over and reacquainted myself with all the individual features that were so much part of him, that I had recreated in my memory so many times at night: his smile, the face he made when he laughed, the mole that lay exactly halfway between his earlobe and his eyelid that I had kissed so many times, the sound of his laugh. I liked everything about him. But a lot had happened since the last time we were in each other's arms.

In reality, the Bilbao of 1935 was nothing like the Bilbao of 1940. It was a different city to the one I had known under the Republic, a difficult period economically because of the disturbances and strikes, but where there was still an air of freedom. Now the city wore a different patina. The city, and above all the spirit of its people, were different. There was no war, but nor did they breathe peace. Wall after wall was painted with the slogans "Viva Franco", "Long live Spain" and the symbol of the Falange.

A lot had happened in the years that Josetxu and I had been apart. In Spain, nothing more and nothing less than a fratricidal civil war. In Western Europe Fascism, championed by German National Socialism was spreading like an oil slick. We were a year into the Second

World War and Hitler had already incorporated Austria, the Low Countries, Norway and Czechoslovakia into the Third Reich. In June the German army reached Paris, fulfilling one of the Führer's long-held ambitions. France became divided – the France occupied by the Germans and Vichy France, governed by Marshal Pétain, an ally of the Nazis.

I wasn't thinking about any of this at that moment. I had Josetxu next to me and that was all that mattered now. We went into the hotel with our arms wrapped around each other's waists, eager to be alone. But the atmosphere didn't match; there was a greyness both in the air and in the looks from the people around us, warning us to restrain ourselves so that we didn't attract attention. In the hotel's reception, the same one that I had stayed in years before, I was surprised by the change in décor. The brightly coloured cushions that had once adorned the sofas had changed to drab tones. At the counter, a portrait of Franco greeted the guests. In essence, there was nothing that created a sense of happiness, love or vitality.

'We're delighted to have you staying with us once again señorita Sonia' said the concierge, although neither his tone of voice, nor the look on his face showed even a hint of pleasure to see me, nor for anything else at all. In fact, quite the opposite, he looked at us suspiciously, particularly at Josetxu.

I was so excited and eager to feel my lover's skin against mine that I refused to get dragged down by the ashen-coloured atmosphere around me. But whilst the concierge took down my details, I couldn't avoid glancing at the newspapers that were on the counter. All the headlines were of the Foreign Minister Serrano Suñer's visit to Berlin where he had met with his German counterpart, Ribentropp. The articles focused on the excellent relations between the Spanish and Nazi governments.

When the concierge returned my documents to me, Josetxu, (disregarding his look of disapproval), purposefully took hold of my suitcase and we went up to the room, without giving the concierge time to object.

Alone at last! I remembered the pretty pictures that used to decorate the rooms of the hotel, now nowhere to be seen. In their place, presiding over the bed, hung a crucifix. The world had changed without a doubt, but we were together at last, searching each other's eyes for some sense of stability, of security. We kissed. I loved Josetxu so much! Next to him, the world disappeared from view. We lay down on the bed. Years had passed and I had waited so long for this moment to arrive. Our desire took over. At the pace of an adagio Josetxu undressed me slowly and ran his lips and hands all over my body. He slowed me down every time I writhed with pleasure, on fire, wanting more. I understood his message and did the same. Slowly and tenderly I caressed and kissed his body. But soon desire took over. It overcame us. We allowed it to. It was inevitable. We had restrained ourselves for so many years and now we wanted to make up for lost time.

When our palpitations finally subsided, I lay on top of him as we caressed each other, whispering words of love.

We would have stayed in bed for hours, indifferent to the brutal crucifix judging us from on high, but once our desires were sated, we were conscious we couldn't stay any longer.

Jose txu went down to the reception to wait for me, tolerating the reprimanding looks from the concierge.

Time went by too quickly but even now, after all those years, that moment has been immortalised in my mind as being wonderful. It was the melding of our bodies, of our spirits, of two people in love. The smell of his body, the taste of his lips, the tenderness of his caresses and the passion of his hands are imprinted on me.

I returned to reality, to the new atmosphere that was so different to the one I had known five years earlier. Spain in black and white. Fascist Spain, complicit in Nazi bloodshed, National - Catholic Spain with crucifixes over beds boycotting the love of lovers. Spain under Franco where repression meant victory.

Two important matters had taken me to Bilbao and also granted me the reunion with Jose txu. The first, a mission entrusted to me by the Allies, and the second, a personal favour on behalf of a great friend of mine, Henry Sontheimer.

Chişinău -Iasi, 1897 – 1924

I was born in 1897 in Chişinău, in the centre of the Bessarabia region. It's a beautiful city, majestically green, built on seven hills, replete with parks and lakes and flanked by the river Bic, a tributary of the Dniester. According to history, the city was built entirely of white stone on a little natural spring, although it's known as the green city because of the amount of vegetation covering it. It's the capital of Moldavia, a region situated on a strategic route between Asia and Europe that had an allegiance to either Rumania or the Russian Empire, depending on the vagaries of history. When I was born, strictly speaking, Moldavia belonged to the kingdom of Rumania, which formed part of the Russian Empire.

This changed in 1918 after the Russian Revolution and the end of the First World War had ended. We were an independent republic for a mere two months before we became part of the kingdom of Rumania again, until 1939 when the Germans signed the pact with the Russians to divide up Europe.

I can just imagine the meeting between Ribbentrop and Molotov, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from both countries, dividing up states as if they were swapping picture cards. We became part of the Soviet Union until 1941 when the Germans invaded Russia and the pact was broken.

Under German occupation, the Jewish community in Chişinău suffered relentless persecution; ten thousand people were transported in trucks to the outskirts of the city where they were shot and then hastily buried in mass graves.

Once Germany was losing the war in 1944, Bessarabia once more became part of the Soviet Union and annexed to Ukraine and Transnitria, forming the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Chişinău remained the capital.

We were just one piece in a giant game of chess.

I'm the youngest of four children and my arrival was a surprise. I think that for my parents my birth was more of a worry than a joy. We used to live in what was considered a middle class neighbourhood. My father was a salesman for a textile factory and had to travel frequently, so my mother, despite having been trained as a teacher, decided to stay at home and take on managing the household. She organised the daily routine and looked after the children, their education, the cleaning and everything to do with our day to day lives.

Despite always seeming exhausted, she always tried to instil important values in us and provide us with a basic education.

The flat was small for the number of people living there and even as a youngster I was aware of the serious economic problems we had at home and of the enormous job my mother had with four children and a husband who continually came and went from the family home. There were three rooms, a single bathroom and a kitchen that opened out onto a little living room that was also used as a dining room. I've no idea how she managed

to get me a boarding place at Saint Mary Institute in Chişinău, an Armenian Roman Catholic institution, but it meant that I was able to receive a decent education at the same time as she freed herself a little from the enormous task she had at hand.

I started boarding at the school when I was just six years old and one of my companions was Jenica, a Jewish girl, the only child of an affluent family. At that time, Chişinău was the European city with the largest proportion of Jews – 45%. Many of them had escaped the pogroms of Tsarist Russia.

Jenica and I became close friends. She was blonde with big blue eyes and long legs. She laughed a lot at my red hair and freckles. She was a day pupil, that's to say she came to school for classes, but returned home to spend the evening and night there. It was over the course of the many weekends I spent in her house that I realised the difference between their way of life and ours. Jenica's family lived in a large house with a garden, they had domestic help and she was lucky enough to have a bedroom of her own as well as another room to play, paint and study in. Jenica's father was an accomplished pianist and her mother was an impressive soprano. Sometimes on Saturday evenings they organised concerts with their friends and Jenica and I enjoyed this enormously. The meals when her parents talked to us about art and literature are engraved on my memory. I enjoyed every minute.

I was envious, in a healthy sort of way, of an environment that was so different to my own: of the welcoming, cultural and intellectual atmosphere that symbolised the rebirth of hope for the future.

The weekends I spent at my friend's house were much happier as I could avoid life at home with my parents and siblings. Not only did we suffer from economic uncertainty, but also from my father's absences. My mother was very lonely and often couldn't avoid revealing the sorrow and bitterness that she carried inside. The older I grew, the more I thought that perhaps there was a third person standing in the way of our family's happiness, but I didn't ever dare to ask my siblings, or mention it to my mother. Years later I found out that my father was leading a double life. He had another family and I assume my mother knew the situation.

I can imagine the humiliation and frustration that my mother must have felt, on top of the worsening dire economic situation we found ourselves in due to my father's parallel relationship and comings and goings. Resentment towards my father has stayed with me ever since for having deceived her. My mother dedicated herself exclusively to her home and children. It wasn't fair. He enjoyed her beauty whilst she was young and disregarded her with the passing of the years, once he no longer found her attractive. This determined my attitude in relation to men. I rebelled, I never accepted the submission of a woman to a man. My feminist beliefs developed and I resolved that I would always have to value myself for who I was. I didn't want to be somebody's object, nor to live at the expense of a husband who could make my life a misery. I wanted to be me, to have my own personality, my own space of freedom, my independence in every sense.

My family situation contrasted greatly with Jenica's, but not everything was perfect in their household either. The family soon began to suffer from relentless harassment, which got steadily worse due to the anti-Semitism that began to spread and grow, above all through the influence of the local press.

One of my most vivid memories is of the first Shabbat dinner that I shared in their home. It was a special experience, perhaps because in our house, where we were atheist, we had never done anything religious together as a family. Jenica's mother put out their best tableware and laid an exquisite embroidered tablecloth. There were candles on the table and two loaves of plaited bread, the *challah*, carefully covered with a napkin. Whilst her mother lit the candles, her father began to recite the *kiddush*, the blessing for the wine, which was followed by a ceremonial washing of our hands. Then she took one of the *challah*, said a blessing and handed a piece to each of us. As I looked at her out of the corner of my eye in the semi-darkness, I saw the expression of respect and happiness on Jenica's face.

Never had I had such a feeling of fulfilment and communion as I felt at that table taking part in those religious traditions. It was an intimate family dinner, but there was also magic, or at least so it seemed to me; it was as if the atmosphere were impregnated with an essence of peace, calm and retreat that penetrated your body. I had the feeling that we were united by an invisible tie.

We were celebrating the start of the day of rest dedicated to the family, a day to share things and time to remember the Creator. I thought that being Jewish was more than following a religion; it was an identity, the convergence of tradition and respect. After that first Shabbat, I always waited with anticipation for the invitation to go to Jenica's house on a Friday to enjoy this special dinner with her family.

During the first year that I boarded at school an explosion of antisemitism took place in the city, which would go down in history as the Kishinev Pogrom. Jenica and I were very young and didn't understand what was happening, but I realised from that moment on that some of our friends didn't want to play with her anymore. For me it was completely incomprehensible. I didn't understand, just as I don't understand now, why the Jewish community was attacked.

Jenica and I grew up together and became more mature and educated as time went on. We dreamt about our future, about what we wanted to study. We bet on who our husbands would be, how many children we would have, what they would be called and a ton of other adolescent questions. We giggled as we speculated if our husbands would be blonde or dark haired, if they would be serious or have a sense of humour, what job they would have, if they would be rich or poor, lovers of sport or culture. We imagined how they would kiss, how they would hold us, how they would look after us. Our adolescent imaginations ran wild, but there was one thing that was very clear to both Jenica and I, our life partner had to be a lover of culture, art, literature, the theatre.....In short, someone to share all our passions with.

When I got my first period, Jenica was the first to know, even before my mother. She looked at me amazed and with a hint of jealousy. It took almost another year for hers to start and I warned her about how uncomfortable and annoying it was. Her big blue eyes looked at me with astonishment when I told her about the stomach cramps I suffered from and how unjust it seemed to me that we women had to put up with this every month, whilst men got away with nothing.

“You’re so pretty that you’ll marry a prince. You’ll be the beautiful red headed princess with the green eyes!” Jenica often said, laughing.

“And you’ll marry someone important and have loads of children” I answered.

The conversation went on outlining the thousands of desires that we wanted to fulfil in our life as wives.

“I want him to be Jewish because it’s part of my identity and I want to carry on my traditions and culture” Jenica assured me.

I thought a lot about this statement. I was of the opinion that love should be above everything else, including religion and we discussed this a lot. Later on I understood that to share your life fully with someone, you had to have as much in common as possible. I accepted that it was normal for Jenica to want to share her traditions with her husband, the father of her children, because, more than just being customs, her religion formed part of her identity. This question remained open between us, even many years later.

We were growing up, as was our friendship. We were inseparable. The antisemitic feeling that was already present in Chişinău was growing elsewhere too and Jenica’s father started to think about moving his family to Paris; he had good contacts there and an aunt, his mother’s sister lived there too. This happened in 1912. We were both fifteen, in full adolescence and our conversations were becoming quite deep.