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Greek Jews on the American Stage: Gender, Nationalism, and Assimilation in Rae Dalven's Unpublished Autobiographical Plays*

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Rae Dalven (1904-1992) is best known for her several volumes of translation, which introduced Anglophone readers to canonical Greek poets such as Constantine Cavafy (1961)[1] and Yannis Ritsos (1977)[2] and to the lesser-known poets who featured in her anthologies *Modern Greek Poetry* (1949)[3] and *Daughters of Sappho* (1994),[4] the latter a collection of Greek women writers. But Dalven was also a Jew, and her emigration from her hometown of Preveza (then in the Ottoman Empire; it was annexed by Greece in 1912) to New York in

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[1] Cavafy 1961.

[2] Ritsos 1977.

[3] Dalven 1949.

[4] Dalven 1994.

1909, when she was five years old, left an indelible mark on her. Much of her scholarly life, particularly after the Second World War, was devoted to preserving the memory of the decimated Jewish communities who stayed in Greece and documenting the immigrant experience of those who came to the United States – and New York in particular.[5] Her book *The Jews of Ioannina* (1989) was the culmination of a lifetime of research and scholarship on this subject.[6] Yitzchak Kerem's "Rachel (Rae) Dalven: An Accomplished Female Romaniote Historian, Translator, and Playwright"[7] covers much of her biographical information, with particular regard to what she called her "unsought for calling" as a translator,[8] though he devotes only a single paragraph to her work as a playwright,[9] which is understandable, given that three of the plays survived only in fragmentary form in private collections and the fourth was widely considered lost until its rediscovery in the US Copyright Office in 2017. And yet, despite their marginal position in accounts of her life and work, Dalven thought of herself as a translator second and a historian third; she was, in her own eyes, first and foremost a playwright. In a letter of 1948 to Basil Vlavianos, an Athenian-born lawyer who had settled in New York, Dalven writes:

> *As I wrote you at present I am teaching English in high school. This I hope will be temporary. I am determined to appear as a playwright,*

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[5] Formerly a relatively neglected subfield in studies of the Holocaust, which focused principally on the Ashkenazi communities of Eastern Europe, Greek Jewish life now constitutes a growing body of scholarship; see, for instance, Naar 2016, Bowman 2009, Mazower 2005, Pierron 1996, Plaut 1996, Fleming 2008, Naar 2016, and Antoniou and Moses 2018. Dalven's own *Jews of Ioannina* (1994) also deals in part with her own Jewish community.

[6] Her translation of the poetry of Joseph Eliyia (1901-1930), the pre-eminent Jewish-Greek poet since antiquity and her nephew by marriage, published at the height of World War II, exemplifies the synthesis of her interest in Greek literature, translation, and Greek Jews (Eliyia 1944). For Dalven's first-person account of discovering and translating Eliyia's work, see Dalven Interview, and Dalven 1990. Two of Eliyia's letters to Dalven survive, though unpublished.

[7] Kerem 2018.

[8] Dalven 1990.

[9] Kerem 2018, 150.

which is my rightful heritage. I am revising my play "A Season in Hell" and some of my Greek-Jewish friends have offered to invest money in my play. Anyone who knows me and values my creative writing knows that I will perish if I do not arrive as a playwright, an original writer in my own right. Up to now I have been a servant to Greek literature, and I hope I have served Greek writers well. This was my aim. As a Jew I take great pride in the service I am offering Greek poets, for I am the first one in the world who has presented in English the beautiful poetry of 44 poets of the last 125 years of Modern Greece. But now I must appear as a playwright as well.[10]

For Dalven, playwriting was the central and organizing passion of her life. Indeed, she had graduated from Yale Drama School in 1941,[11] but had had no success as a playwright during the 1940s. *A Season in Hell*, the play she references in the letter to Vlavianos, was about the lives of Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine; she wrote it, she tells another of her correspondents, William Rose Benét, in 1941, based on her studies at the Sorbonne in 1938. Staged in 1950 at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City, *A Season in Hell* was panned brutally and unequivocal-

[10] Vlavianos Papers.

[11] Her time at Yale did have a long-term impact on her personal life, however, leading directly to her divorce from her husband; Diane Matza's notes from a 1984 interview with Dalven record that her ex-husband, Jack, sought to win her back:

He persists in desiring remarriage, thinks he can persuade her if he supports her through a Yale M.A. in drama. When a play of hers is produced on campus he tells her: "If you're famous after this I don't want to know you." This finishes her relationship with him. She "wanted him to appreciate her culture." he wanted "her to dedicate herself to him." She says she feels he ruined her life. (Matza 2015).

The episode reveals Dalven's lifelong dramatic concern with patriarchy and capitalism and the intersecting means by which men, through marriage and money, could simultaneously liberate and oppress the women close to them, thus both furthering and impeding their aspirations.

Relatively extensive letters with her professors at Yale survive, including their tepid recommendations to her for teaching and other positions. As a Jewish woman at Yale long before women were admitted as undergraduates and while strict Jewish quotas were still in place, Dalven was faced, as in so many of her other undertakings, with patriarchal and anti-Semitic attitudes which haunted her whole life.

ly; *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*'s headline "Dull, verbose 'Season in Hell'" sums up the reviewer Louis Sheaffer's view. The review itself is hardly any nicer; he calls the play "a heavy-handed effort with a frequently embarrassing attachment for literarified dialogue, a play floundering in waters that are much too deep for it. Under the circumstances, there's nothing the all-Equity cast can do to overcome the script's disastrous shortcomings."[12]

Dalven did not give up, however; she continued to write plays until the end of her life.[13] Indeed, records from the United States Copyright Office show that Dalven received copyrights for an additional four original plays: *A Matter of Survival* (1979), *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven* (1980), Esther (1983) and *Our Kind People* (1990). Each of these four plays reflects a different aspect of the Jewish experience: *A Matter of Survival* is about the Greek-Jewish community in Athens during the Holocaust, *Our Kind of People* is about the Greek-Jewish immigrant experience in America, *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven* is about a Greek-Jewish family struggling to find the money for dowries for their daughters, and *Esther* is about Dalven's and her mother's later life in New York City. Though they are distinct plays, they nevertheless constitute a kind of intergenerational dramatic cycle stretching across the twentieth century, and thus represent the most sustained depiction of Greek Jews in American drama. More importantly, by foregrounding women's experiences and voices and centering women's relationships, Dalven's work must also be seen as part of the broader feminist project of recuperating female voices ignored by traditional Holocaust and imigrant narratives.[14]

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[12] Sheaffer 1950.

[13] Among those extant which will not be discussed in the present study are a 1952 radio drama entitled "Jim-Crow Schools Must go!" based on the life of Frederick Douglass, and "Hercules," which was also staged in 1952 at Fisk College, a historically black university where Dalven taught during those years. Letters of this period find her discussing writing scripts on George Washington Carver, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and musing that "some scripts ought to be written on current issues especially such issues as will better racial relations" (Vlavianos Papers). If she ever wrote these scripts, however, neither she nor any of her correspondents mention them, and extensive archival research and communication with her collaborators and family has yielded no leads.

[14] There has been an increasing interest in the primary source writing of Greek Jews,

1. "An Authentic Story Told to the Author in Athens": Greek, Jewish, and Greek-Jewish Identity During the Holocaust in *A Matter of Survival*

While working on *A Season in Hell*, Dalven was also working on another, much more personal, play. A newspaper article in *The Banner* dated February 13, 1953 has the headline "Rae Delven's [sic] play to have Sunday debut."[15] This is the earliest published reference to a work which the playbill says is "based on an authentic story told to the author in Athens."[16]

In letters to a variety of correspondents, she discusses the genesis and evolution of the play at length – as late as June 24, 1981, she wrote to Nicholas Capellaris, the Greek consul general in New York, that "I have taken Dr. Vlavianos's suggestion to make a minor revision of my play which I will now call *Toula*. This was the original title of my play."[17]

In a letter of May 23, 1948 to the poet and publisher William Rose Benét, Dalven locates the genesis of the play in May of 1947:

> *I wonder if I might ask you at this time, if you think SR [the magazine The Saturday Review of Literature, which Benét founded and edited] would be interested in a short story about Jewish heroism during the German occupation. When I was in Greece last May Greek Jews told*

particularly of prose by men, as, for instance, Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi 2012.

[15] Benét Family Papers. The magazine *Crisis*, a prominent African-American magazine founded by WEB DuBois, noted in its March 1953 issue that "other recent activities on the Fisk Campus include presentation of the original play 'Toula' by Rae Dalven, assistant professor of dramatics" (*The Crisis* 1953, 184). Records from the Lillian Voorhees Theater Programs Collection at Fisk University put the date at February 15 of that year [pg. 17]).

[16] Onassis Center Archives, New York University. In a letter of January 29, 1953 to her Yale professor Edward Cole, she claims that Toula was a real person: "Toula was a Christian girl who was killed by the Nazis. It is an authentic story and I have written it in tribute to her" (Benét Family Papers).

[17] Vlavianos Papers. In both the printed text of her play and the audio recording, the play is referred to as *A Matter of Survival*, though various letters and playbills at the Tsakopoulos Collection and the Onassis Center also refer to it by the alternate titles *A Testimonial to Life* and *Above All – Greek*; that the main character is named Toula in all the versions suggest that these are all revisions of the same play.

me several stories of their sufferings. I have a number of these – some from people who returned from concentration camps – others who hid in Greek homes or in the mountains with the National Liberation Front – still others who made their way to Palestine. I have only notes on these – but I do not believe it would take me long to whip it up in story form. I was intensely excited about them when I heard them and I feel they will come out right.[18]

Benét wrote back that "an article such as you mention about the Greek Jews during the German occupation would not quite be *Saturday Review* material."[19] It may have been at this point that she decided to turn the material into a play; thus, though the first record of *Toula* being performed is in the *Crisis* issue of 1953, the play's roots go back some years earlier. Reconstructing the timeline for the play, then, it seems that Dalven traveled to Greece in 1947, completed her work on *A Season in Hell* around 1950, then turned her attention to *Toula/A Matter of Survival*. She staged the play early in 1953, then put it aside for the next thirty years, only picking it up again in the 80s.

An audio recording of the play of uncertain date opens with a voice-over announcing that it is September 8, 1943, the day the Germans took over from the Italians in occupying Greece. This is also the day of the wedding of a Greek-Jewish couple whose family is at the center of the drama:

As A Matter of Survival opens, Roberto Lorenzo, the young Italian commandant in Athens has been so helpful in hiding the Jews that Fanny Cohen, the lady of the house in this play as well as her husband Leon, have invited Roberto to the wedding of their first-born son Jonathan and his bride Sarah. Nina, their only daughter and Rabbi Barzilai, Chief Rabbi of Athens, were also pleased to see Roberto there. This is where Robert met Nina's Greek Christian friend, Toula Miliate, and was immediately drawn to her. Toula, Nina, Jonathan and Sarah were all members of the resistance movement. Leon and Fanny approved of their children's liberal ideas and their militant spirit.

[18] Benét Family Papers.

[19] Benét Family Papers.

The parents were observant Jews but they looked upon their Christian neighbors as fellow citizens, rather than as Christians. The only member of the family who did not see eye to eye with Fanny and Leon on this point was Isaac, Leon's older brother. He was a businessman and often travelled to Germany. It was there that he met his wife Miriam, a young Jewish woman who was strongly pro-German. Isaac got along well with his brother Leon but was much more traditional. He believed what the Bible says in Exodus: "The Lord will fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." He felt that the Germans could not harm him, for he observed the law of God.[20]

In addition to establishing the *dramatis personae* and the relationships among them,[21] the voiceover also establishes two key concepts in Dalven's view of the Holocaust in Greece. That the "observant Jews […] looked upon their Christian neighbors as fellow citizens" and that the Christians, embodied by Toula and Roberto, reciprocated this humanistic spirit is the uplifting moral at the center of a play otherwise concerned with darker themes. Dalven balances the dual identities of Greek Jews – herself included – by arguing that the religious differences between the Christian and Jewish communities was less important than their shared Greek national identity.

The tension between a Greek identity which is inclusive of Jews and one which is exclusive of Jews is the play's central point of conflict, as set out between the two brothers, Leon and Isaac. Isaac believes that Orthodox Greeks do not consider the Jews to be Greek, and that the Jews thus have a better chance of survival if they trust the Germans instead of the Greeks. Leon and his wife Fanny, by contrast, trust that

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[20] Tsakopoulos Collection. The quoted biblical line is Ex. 14:14.

[21] It is tempting to try to identify the characters with people whom Dalven knew and perhaps from whom she heard the story. Dalven's family tree had in it in a previous generation a Fanny, a Leon, and an Isaac; though her ancestors' names may have inspired her, these are not the characters in the play. Dalven did, however, have two cousins who might be the source of the story: Sion who fought with the Greek resistance, and his sister Bimbo, who survived by going into hiding. For Dalven's family tree, see the website of Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum, the Romaniote synagogue of New York: https://www.kkjsm.org/previous-exhibits (accessed October 16, 2019).

the Orthodox Greeks have a vision of Greekness that includes them and that they should thus trust the Greeks instead of the Germans.[22] These competing visions of Jewishness in Greece are reflected in the opening scene of the play, a family meeting on September 8, 1943, the day before the Germans have called for the Jews to register with the authorities. Leon suggests the family allow themselves to go into hiding among their Greek friends, while Isaac and his German-born Jewish wife suggest registering, noting that the Germans are more likely to show them mercy than the Greeks.

In trying to convince Isaac and Miriam to hide rather than register, the other characters repeatedly stress the bonds that join Greek Jews and Greek Christians. The most forceful voice of an inclusive Greek identity is Toula, the Orthodox Greek resistance fighter who is the central moral voice of the play. When Isaac and Miriam decide to register with the Nazis, she says: "Will you surrender to them because you and I are not of the same religion?" to which Fanny adds "For God's sake, Isaac, recognize the relationships that exist between the Christians and us as soul citizens and not the difference in our religion."[23]

The utopian theme of Greek identity trumping the religious divide is stronger in the second read-through of the play on the Tsakopoulos audio cassette, where Regina (an alternate name for Miriam in this version of the play), Toula, and Sara (Fanny) have a similar exchange:

> Regina: *How many Christian families will risk their own safety to hide us?*
> Toula: *Will you surrender to the Nazis because you and I are not of the same faith?*
> Sara: *For God's sake, recognize the relationship that exists between Christians and Jews, as citizens and not the difference in our religion.*[24]

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[22] Dalven frequently changed the names of her characters in different drafts, even as the lines they delivered remained virtually unchanged. The names I am using are from the complete audio-recording at the Tsakopoulos, which accords with the Benmayor fragments.

[23] *A Matter of Survival* audio cassette (Tsakopoulos).

[24] *A Matter of Survival* audio cassette (Tsakopoulos).

Miriam/Regina refuses to accept that the Greek Christians consider the Jews to be Greek, while Fanny/Sara argue the opposite. In the printed version of the play, this same sentiment remains: When Miriam tells the family that "[i]n Germany we always felt more German than Jewish. We thought we were German. In Germany, a Jew is a German. In Greece, a Jew is a Jew," Toula responds: "[b]eing Jewish is your religion, not your nationality. Your nationality is Greek, just as mine is, even though I'm not Jewish."[25]

Ultimately, the two couples thus make opposite choices: Leon and Fanny go into hiding, while Isaac and Miriam register with the Nazis, and Isaac is condemned in the play as much for his inability to see the Nazis' true intentions as by his lack of faith in the good intentions of the Greek Christians.

The disastrous consequences of Isaac's decision unfold later, when a Nazi soldier comes to their shop and asks Isaac to lead the German registration effort. Isaac attempts to decline, but is told that the other choice is execution. "What are we going to do?" Miriam asks, to which Isaac replies, "What can we do? We're registered. Leon and the family have left their house and even if they're still there, they'll never want to get mixed up in this development. I never foresaw this."[26] Though it is hard now to imagine a Jewish writer blaming the victims of the Holocaust for their own genocide, Dalven does construct this scene such that Isaac and Miriam bear the blame for their own deaths. She does this because the play is as much concerned with making an ideological argument for an inclusive Greek national identity as it is with history and memory: if antisemitic Nazi ideology is the proximate cause of their deaths, Isaac and Miriam's ideological refusal to trust in the good intentions of the Greek Christians is the ultimate cause. Isaac's "I never foresaw this" is meant to ring hollow, since no foresight was required: his brother and all the other characters warned him well in advance that this would happen, he just refused to believe them.[27]

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[25] Dalven 1979, 7.

[26] *A Matter of Survival*.

[27] Dalven, of course, had the benefit of hindsight when writing these passages, and her treatment of Isaac and Miriam reflects his. The case for resistance as opposed to ac-

Act II takes place six months later, during which time Isaac and Miriam register several hundred Jews; it doesn't save them, however, as the voiceover says: "And so, Isaac and Miriam are taken to Haidari, the German concentration camp in Athens, and then deported to Poland with the other 800 Jews who had been locked up in the synagogue."[28]

The next act of the play occurs at the end of the war; as the liberation bells ring throughout Athens, Toula, the brave Greek resistance fighter who had been helping the family in hiding, is shot and dies. The play concludes with two voiceovers:

> Female Narrator: *We hear church bells ringing and general jubilation on the street. We know that the war is over and that Greece has been liberated, but inside the house they are mourning the death of Toula.*
> Male Narrator: *The war is over, but where there should be jubilation, they are mourning the death of Toula. As Leon recites from memory the El Malei Rachamim, the prayer for the dead, we realize that no one is an island unto himself. In order for any people to survive cruelty, terror and destruction, we must measure men not by his birth or his creed, but by his humanity.*[29]

For Dalven, Toula the character represents the best of Greece; that is, those Greeks who fought for liberty against the Nazis, those Greeks who put their lives at risk to help save Jews. This idea is then expanded to encompass universal ideals of peace and fraternity among all peoples, a universal humanity which transcends the divisions of Greek and Jew which formed Dalven's own core identity. Indeed, there is a version of the play in which Toula herself is Jewish, and she goes into hiding with her family and husband Fofo. For Dalven, however, who wanted to show the heroism of the Greek Christians in saving their fellow Greek Jews, changing the principal character to a Greek Christian furthers her idealized vision of a unifying Greek national identity.

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quiescence seems much more obvious to those who lived after the war than it did to the people who had to make these life or death decisions in the moment.

[28] *A Matter of Survival*.

[29] A Matter of Survival audio cassette (Tsakopoulos).

Making Toula the tragic heroine and moral voice of the play is consistent with the dramatic choices Dalven made throughout her plays about Jewish life, which organize social and family morality around the (often deleterious) effects patriarchal values and the men who enforce them have on women. What Dalven presents on stage, therefore, is the Holocaust from a female perspective; this is not a version of the Holocaust concerned with the violence perpetrated on Jews by Greeks – no deaths occur on-stage – but a version of the Holocaust concerned with the help Greeks gave to Jews, exemplified by the faultless female protagonist who, murdered by a Nazi soldier on the day of the liberation, sacrifices herself to save her fellow Greeks, albeit Jews, from the Nazis.

In later versions, however, Dalven seems to have significantly revised her thinking on the issue of Greek attitudes and actions towards Jews during the Holocaust. Though it can never be known why Dalven abandoned the play for thirty years, a letter to Vlavianos of Sept 9, 1983 may offer an explanation:

> *Now I want to say a word about the play I wrote on the Holocaust in Athens. I abandoned that play only after one of the critics remarked that "the Jews did not suffer at all" – as I wrote it. In my desire to show my appreciation for any help given to the Jews by the Greek resistance, I highlighted that fact. But the resistance movement during the occupation was of great help to the Jews only in three cities: Athens, Volos and Larissa. It was quite a different story in Janina, and Salonika. In Janina as well as in Salonika, there were many Greek collaborators. I think my play should concern itself with Janina, which is what I know best. It's all well and good for Mr. Capellaris to ask me "what happened to your play." But I have a responsibility to my own Jewish people. Please do not forget that out of 80,000 Jews who lived in Greece in 1940, there are now fewer than 5,000. Anti-semitism has raised its ugly head again because of the situation in Israel.*[30]

[30] Tsakopoulos Collection. I have found no evidence she ever revised the play along the lines suggested in the letter, nor are there any references to a play about the Holocaust set in Janina.

Dalven here gives insight into why she wrote the play: to show her appreciation to those Greeks who helped Jews during the Resistance. The letter suggests, however, that Dalven's attitude towards Greece had changed somewhat drastically: instead of focusing on the Greeks who helped Jews, she now sees most of the Greeks as having been collaborators. Dalven, who was writing her own book (*The Jews of Ioannina*) at the same time as revising the play may have become aware of the gathering scholarly consensus of the full scope of the destruction of Greek Jewry. Though there are as of today just over three hundred Greek Orthodox among the Righteous of the Nations, represented by characters like Toula, scholarship has increasingly pointed towards Greek disenfranchisement of Jews even before the Holocaust and of the Greek collaboration with the Nazis.[31] In light of her friendship with scholars like Steve Bowman and others prominent advocates of the new revisionism, Dalven's unambiguously pro-Greek attitude must have become increasingly untenable.

Nevertheless, this letter remains a rather stunning reversal for a person who had felt it her mission to be an ambassador for Greece and Greek letters to the rest of the world out of a sense of gratitude for the help it gave the Jews in their darkest hour. The date of the letter, however, and Dalven's more frequent trips to Israel and increasing Zionism during the 1970s may be significant. In June of 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, a move which gained widespread international condemnation; the death of thousands of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by an Israeli-allied Lebanese militia further inflamed anti-Israeli passions. That Dalven's letter a year later suggests her change of heart on the position of Greeks protecting Jews during World War II might reflect her changed perception of Greek and European attitudes towards Israel after the invasion of Lebanon.

[31] See, for instance, the works cited in n. 14 above, much of which by scholars whom Dalven knew personally (such as Steve Bowman).

2. "That Women Can't Be Looked Upon, Officially at Least, as the Subject of Commercial Bargaining": Politicizing the Personal in *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven*

Dalven makes no mention of *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven* in any of her other published or unpublished works. A date for the setting of the play can be inferred from its subject matter; the play ends with a voice-over summarizing the fates of the various characters:

> *Now, happily, the Greek government has finally passed a law to abolish the dowry completely. The new legislation enacted states that parents may give gifts to their children at the time of their marriage, but they must provide for such gifts to be made to children of either sex. "What is very important," said Anne Mangrioti, a member of the Union of Greek Women "is that women can't be looked on, officially at least, as the subject of commercial bargaining."*[32]

The Greek government passed this law on January 25, 1983, the same year the play was registered with the US Copyright Office, so a safe assumption can be made for this as the year of the play's composition. The only potentially complicating factor is that the characters' names are all both distinctly Jewish and distinctly non-Greek Orthodox (i.e. Baruch, Esther, Rachel, Avram), and by 1983 there were only approximately fifty Jews in Ioannina, where the play is set. The best solution, born out by the lifestyle and the customs depicted in it, is to accept that Dalven is writing about the world of oppressive dowries in which she grew up transposed against the contemporary political abolition of dowries.

For Dalven, the dowry was a personal as well as political issue. In accord with the general feminism of her oeuvre, this play too features a female protagonist who suffers under patriarchy and, through her suffering, reveals the essential inhumanity and injustice in the patriarchal world order. The title of the play itself reflects Dalven's indictment of arranged marriages: marriage should be "arranged in heaven," not by men.[33] In her interviews and other writings, Dalven frequently returns

[32] Dalven 1980, 89.

[33] A similar idea is contained in the Yiddish word *beshert*, which describes soulmates or

to the pressures the dowry system imposed on families, driving fathers to penury, girls to difficult working conditions, young women into arranged marriages against their will, and children born to unhappy families.[34] In an interview with Sybil Maimin in 1991 for the New York Public Library Oral History Project for Sephardic Jews, which represents one of her most sustained (auto)biographical discourses, Dalven describes the difficulties the dowry system imposed on her grandfather and his eight daughters:

> *So my grandfather, who had a store, who was a middle-class man, he had a beautiful business, had a gorgeous home, but he had to think of the dowry every year. […]My grandfather always worried about… as soon as he got enough dowry for one, he had to begin saving for the next one. And of course the girls had no say in the matter.*[35]

Later in the interview, Dalven explains how the dowry system affected her mother's marriage: "He [her father] had expressed a desire for my mother. But the big thing was, would he want a dowry. When he said, No, I'm not interested in a dowry, I want to marry her without a dowry, so they arranged this marriage. My mother had nothing to do with it whatever."[36] Maimin then asks about the results of the marriage:

> Q. *This was an arranged marriage.*
> A. *Of course*.
> Q. *Do you think it was a good marriage?*
> A. *No. Not for me it wasn't, not for the children it wasn't.*[37]

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divinely foreordained couples.

[34] Elsewhere, Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos writes in her history of the Romaniote [the non-Sephardic Jewish population of Greece, of which Dalven was a part] immigrant community of New York that "the name Stemma is derived from the Greek world *stamata* and was given to what [parents with many children] hoped was the last of many daughters, expressing the desperate wish that God would 'stop' sending them daughters that they could not afford to marry off" Ikonomopoulos 2006-2007, 155).

[35] Dalven Interview, 18-19.

[36] Dalven Interview, 28.

[37] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 19.

In Dalven's own self-narrative, therefore, the dowry looms large in being the cause of her parents' unhappy marriage and, in her own telling, her own unhappy childhood.

The dowry, however, was not an issue for her parents alone; indeed, it was the biggest point of contention with her family in her own adolescence. In particular, the need for her to earn a dowry threatened her one true passion, education:

> Q. *What was the reason your father didn't want you to get educated?*
> A. *Money and marriage, for the girls.*
> Q. *What do you mean by marriage?*
> A. *To save money for the dowry to give to a man. Not only that, but who's going to make the wedding. They had no money to make a wedding for me.*
> Q. *In other words, a girl would work and save for her own dowry?*
> A. *That's right. For her own dowry, for her own wedding expenses, for her own trousseau.*[38]

Given the prominent place the dowry had as the exemplary Old World evil that scarred generations of women (including her mother) and followed her into the New World to scar her as well, it is not surprising that the news of the abolition of the dowry in 1983 was an important political development that also had deep personal resonance, even a half century later. Indeed, the affiliation between author and character is such that she gives the protagonist her own name, Rachel.[39]

Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven centers on three sisters: Rachel, Esther, and Amelia. Early in the play, Esther enters in tears, having just returned from the port city of Patras, where she had been denied in her attempt to emigrate; returning home she tells her family: "First they told us we would both have to have drops in our eyes for two weeks before we could be cured. When that was over we got ready to leave again. Then they told us America was closed."[40] This seemingly inconsequen-

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[38] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 29.

[39] Rachel's name also evokes her biblical namesake, who also endured sorrows as a result of patriarchal marriage law.

[40] Dalven 1980, 10.

tial detail has important significance for locating the origins of the story in Dalven's own biography; in her interview with Maimon, Dalven describes a sister who was initially denied passage to America:

> A. *My sister had trichoma of the eyes and they didn't let her come to America with us. So my mother went –*
> Q. *You mean the immigration authorities did not allow her to come?*
> A. *That's right, because she had trichoma and it was infectious. So they sent her back from Patras, which was the port of embarkation."*[41]

The play, therefore, is at least loosely autobiographical; likely it blends some of her and her mother's generations' experience of women's life and marriage politics in Greece.

Since she cannot emigrate, Esther must find a husband, which occurs a few pages later. Dalven plays the scene dramatically: by a stroke of luck, a rich suitor – described by the men as "a fine fellow" who "has piles of money" and "a very generous hearted man" – expresses interest in the otherwise unmarriageable girl; if she marries him "none of us will have to worry about money any more [sic]."[42]

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[41] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 23. This Esther also shares a name with her mother and, in the play as in real life, marries a man named Israel who is much older than she. In the play, however, Israel is a butcher; Dalven's father was an itinerant peddler. This is another example of how the play operates at the intersection of autobiography and fiction resulting in some anachronisms. In the play, for instance, Rachel and Esther's brother is named Joseph, the name of Rae's brother in real life as well. But the overbearing and cruel Joseph in the play shares no resemblance to the brother to whom she was very close in real life. Also, both Rae and Joseph left Greece when they were still children, much younger than the characters in this play. The voiceover cited above at the end of the play indicates that Rachel, married as a teen or early twenty-something in the play, no longer had to worry about a dowry because of the legal abolition (which occurred in 1983), but this would is hard to reconcile temporally with the events in the beginning of the play, when her older sister is turned away from an attempt to immigrate to America by boat, an event much more suited to the early twentieth century.

[42] Dalven 1980, 14.

Dalven structures the scene such that the marriage is effusively praised by the men without revealing anything about the suitor himself: the audience's first picture of him sounds overwhelmingly positive. This, however, is only the male perspective, a perspective immediately questioned by the prospective bride-to-be. Esther wonders aloud if she is too young to marry, to which her father replies "(with bravado): Young! Your mother was ten when she was engaged to me and seventeen when she was married."[43] This admission, shocking to his daughters and certainly more so to the play's original late twentieth-century American audience, is followed by the reveal of the suitor himself: a local butcher named Israel. On hearing the news, Esther says "(as if stunned): Israel the butcher! (they pay her no attention)."[44] The stage directions sum up Dalven's attitude towards arranged marriage: the women have no choice and the men do not care what they want anyway.

Over the course of the scene, Esther becomes more despondent ("He's so old!" and "But I don't love him. I don't love him."),[45] even as her father and brother become more aggressive in pushing the marriage on her (her brother Moses says: "Shut up the lot of you! Listen to them. Babies telling us what to do. Chicks giving advice to the roosters" and later "(gets up menacingly)" to say "if I hear another word out of you, I'll strangle you. I'll break you in two").[46] For the women, marriage is servitude and misery, while for the men it is a path to economic security and freedom. Scene I ends with Esther in tears, futilely protesting her marriage: "I'll never go out with Israel. I'll never let him touch me. I'll pray every day for the engagement to be broken. Oh why, why didn't they let me go to America? (sobbing) Why? Why?"[47] The only other time she is mentioned is in the play's epilogue, when the narrator mentions that she and her son David move to Athens for work, suggesting that even despite her protestations, she ends up marrying Israel anyway.

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[43] Dalven 1980, 15.
[44] Dalven 1980, 15.
[45] Dalven 1980, 16, 17.
[46] Dalven 1980,16, 17.
[47] Dalven 1980, 20.

Things go scarcely better for Amelia, Rachel's other sister. Scene II opens several years later, and now Amelia, aged 22, must get married. The two sisters discuss their disappointment with the engagement party, but Amelia shrugs it off:

Amelia: *Anyway, what was the use; an engagement without the man betrothed.*
Rachel: *It wasn't his fault. They wouldn't give your fiancé leave from the army.*
Amelia: *But I have never seen him.*
Rachel: *They sent you a photograph.*
Amelia: *Those who know him say he doesn't look at all like that.*[48]

Esther and Amelia, therefore, represent two different dilemmas women faced: where Esther finds her husband unsuitable because she knows everything about him already, Amelia has never even seen her betrothed, does not know what he looks like or anything about his background. Indeed, when they finally meet in the play, the husband-to-be, Nissim, fails to introduce himself, leading a terrified Amelia to flee into the house. Tears and terror were, Dalven seems to suggest, typical responses to marriage.

As in *A Matter of Survival*, Dalven depicts Jewish-Greek life through the eyes of female protagonists; the men in her plays represent the patriarchal forces which suck the joy and, as importantly, agency out of the women's lives. This is demonstrated in the final lines of dialogue in the play: Rachel has just been wed, but it is the women in her life – her mother Hannah and her sister-in-law Annette – to whom she turns for solace:

Hannah: *Thank God we managed it. (Hannah kisses Rachel). May I see you and rejoice.*
Rachel: *May I have you forever.*
Hannah: *At last you are saved.*
Annette: *(happily) Let's dance.*

[48] Dalven 1980, 22.

Rachel: *Yes, and you sing Annette, the way you used to. (they clap hands and start to dance the kalamatiano. Annette sings gaily, more as she used to sing before she married Joseph).*[49]

The women, all in unhappy arranged marriages, nevertheless make a community among themselves without their husbands. This final scene presents three women made family by no choice of their own, who find happiness in the company of one another. The final stage direction in the parentheses emphasizes the negative effects of patriarchy on the women subject to it: Annette is only happy, and her singing only as gay as it was before her marriage, when she is surrounded by the other women in her family and not her husband or male relatives.

3. "I'm Not Gonna Leave School, Papa": American Education and Female Liberation in *Our Kind of People*

The problems of arranged marriage, traditional customs, and their place in modern life were also the main subjects of Dalven's most explicitly autobiographical play, *Our Kind of People*. The first extant reference to the play is a letter of May 27, 1944 to her former Yale professor Walter Prichard Eaton. In it, she writes that she has abandoned her proposed play about Walt Whitman and, in deciding what next to do, writes: "Shirly has been after me to return to my play Culture. Do you remember that? I wrote it as a one-acter and you and Mr. Nicoll both thought it contained three-act material. What do you think? I would appreciate a word on this. It's a folk-drama about a Greek family in New York trying to learn the American way without being outcasts of their Greek heritage."[50] As with *Toula/A Matter of Survival*, Dalven labored on this play in various forms for decades, and it was only in 1992, nearly fifty years later, that the play, the only one of hers to appear by name in her *New York Times* eulogy, was staged.[51] At least three different versions of

[49] Dalven 1980, 88.

[50] Benét Family Papers. Mr. Nicoll is Allardyce Nicoll, a professor of Dalven's at Yale with whom she exchanged letters for some years.

[51] *New York Times*, August 3, 1992. http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/03/nyregion/

Jayne Vitale as Sara Daniels and Peter Johl as Avram Daniels in Our Kind of People (date unknown). Courtesy of Jayne Vitale.

the play exist in various states of completion. Only fragments survive of two. The fragments of the play preserved by Isaac Benmayor and the manuscript of the play provided by Jane Vitale, who acted in one

rae-dalven-87-former-professor-and-a-historian-of-jews-in-greece.html. A surviving advertisement for the play in the Aaron Kramer Papers at the University of Michigan lists the "World Premier Performance" at the Sephardic House at Shearit Israel on Saturday, February 29th (with no year noted) followed by matinee and evening performances on Sunday, March 1. (Collection Code: AMSNB Call Number: Labadie Kramer; Volume/Box: Box 3 Folder Heading/Issue: Rachel Dalven
Title: Aaron Kramer Papers). Dalven sent a playbill for these shows to Antonis Dekavalles, which is now held; a letter attached to the playbill is dated 1992.

staged version, share a fundamental plot but are clear revisions of the version held at the US Copyright Office; thus, at least three different versions are represented. That in one the principal heroine is most frequently called "Anna," but that in another her name is "Rachel" speaks to the obvious autobiographical parallels. These parallels can be further deduced from external sources, such as the interview she gave to Maimin and to Diane Matza, a professor at Utica College, in 1984. The play is about the Daniels family, Greek Jewish immigrants who have moved to the Lower East Side. Avram (also called Abraham) and Sara are virtually identical to Dalven's own parents: Avram is much older than Sara and the marriage is an unhappy one; Abraham is unable to adapt to American society, learns no English and wants to preserve the old ways. Sara is 20 years his junior, forced to work long hours because of their poverty, and, though somewhat unsure of her family's place in America, more willing to let her children find their way. In one of Dalven's most affective scenes, for instance, the daughter teaches her mother how to write her name in English. The two children are David, a stand-in for Dalven's older brother Joe, and Anna, Dalven's alterego.[52]

The play, which takes place in "a cold water rail road flat on 5 Eldridge Street," is divided into four acts with two scenes in each, and each scene takes place on a day ranging from October 1918 to a Saturday in June 1926.[53] The plot centers on the parallel educations of the two

[52] The playbill summarizes the play as follows: "OUR KIND OF PEOPLE" is an original play depicting the struggles of a Jewish immigrant family from Greece who settled in lower Manhattan in the early 20's. The conflicts stem from the clanish [sic] father, a man of the old school who believes only in 'a shoe from our own home town, even if it is patched'; and the mother who sides with her 2 children in their struggle for a higher education and more sensible acceptance of all Jewish people." (Kramer archives). Dalven uses the phrase again when describing her parents' suspicion of the Ashkenazi Jews they met in New York (Dalven 1991 [Interview], 41). Later, Dalven is asked about her time undergraduate years: "Q. What are your memories of Hunter College.? A. The unhappiest years of my life. Q. Why? A. Because I worked all the time." (Dalven 1991 [Interview] 39). In 1982, Dalven told Diane Matza that "she stole her education" because of her parents' disapproval (private correspondence, August 25, 2015).

[53] Dalven 1990, 2. These details nearly match Dalven's own life: Dalven was born in 1904, and an early scene in the play (see below) takes place when Anna turns fourteen

children: David, as the eldest son, doesn't want to go to medical school, but is forced into it by his parents, who view it as his role. As eldest son, he must support the family and raise their status by becoming a doctor. By contrast, Anna, passionate for education, is discouraged merely because she is a girl. Just as Rae Dalven's parents belittled her goals, in one version of the play, Anna's parents also demand she go to work or get married:

Avram: (sternly): *You go for working papers?*
Anna: *No.*
Avram: *No? What you mean no? Don't we say when you are fourteen, you will leave shool and take a full time job?*
Anna: *I'm not gonna leave school, papa.*
Avram: (angered): *She bring the blood to my head! How will you save money to marry? I can't afford to pay for you wedding.*
Anna: *Don't worry, papa, you won't ever have to pay for my wedding.*[54]
Sara: *Is it important for you to finish high school, Anna.*
Anna: *Very important. First of all I like school, and then I'll get a better job if I graduate from high school.*
Avram: *Nobody wanna marry you if you have so much ejucation.*[55]

As in *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven*, the parents' concern is again with dowries and marriage. Unlike Esther and Amelia (and, in real life, Dalven's own mother) in Greece, however, Anna has the beginnings of an American consciousness. Independent, persistent, and aware of the possibilities for individual self-fulfillment outside the traditional fam-

(she would have been sixteen in 1918), while the play concludes with Anna graduating from college in 1926, while the real Dalven graduated from Hunter in 1925.

[54] In the draft, this line is crossed out and a handwritten note in the margin says: "Should this go back in?" That Dalven was fiercely independent and did not want to get married at all might offer one interpretation for this line, though it equally might suggest that she will pay for it herself through her own earnings.

[55] Dalven 1990, 12. Dalven references this scene in particular in describing the play to Maimin: "Now I was fourteen – that's the story of my play – I was fourteen and my father wanted me to get working papers once I reached fourteen and work, and get married at sixteen" (Dalven Interview, 26).

ily, she pushes back against patriarchal expectations: she refuses her father's demand. Her mother, much younger than her husband and therefore generationally closer to her children, also senses the possibility of escaping the constraints of Old World patriarchy. As an already married mother, however, she recognizes the limits placed on herself, and thus becomes a tentative but firm advocate for her daughter. She brokers a compromise that if Anna can still earn the $6.00 she would have earned had she dropped out and gone to work in the factory, she can stay in school. Anna fulfills this obligation by working nights as a seamstress. This too parallels Dalven's own real-life experience as she describes it to Maimin: "I began to earn my own way really quite well at the age of fourteen, because I worked on all the machines – single machine, double-needle machine, narrow machine – and I was making a good salary. But I didn't enjoy my high school because I wanted to be with my classmates. I wanted to stay in school, after school."[56]

Her father's opposition to education and eagerness for her to get married comes to the fore again later in the play when Anna asks her parents to come to her high school graduation:

Anna: *You're coming to my graduation, papa, aren't you?*
Avram: *I come to your engagement, your wedding, your graduation, no!*
Anna: *Oh papa, why? All the fathers come.*
Sara: *Why don't you wanna go, Avram?*
Avram: *Is not important I go.*
Anna: *It is important to me.*
Avram*: I won't come.*
Anna (turns to her mother): *You'll come, mama, won't you?*
Sara: *Sure I will come.* (pause) *Maybe papa change his mind and come too.*
Avram: *I won't change my mind.*[57]

During the course of the play, Anna comes to see the full possibilities of American life, including full agency in matters of love, finances, educa-

[56] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 26.
[57] Dalven 1990, 45.

tion, and marriage: she runs for student government, the Girls Scouts, and the drama club, quintessential American experiences her parents oppose because they will hinder her ability to earn money and find a husband.

In emphasizing Anna's commitment to her American identity, Dalven dramatizes the conflict between the expansive worldview of the children of immigrants and the narrowly constrained one of their parents. Indeed, the seemingly endless possibilities for Anna and her medical student brother are consistently contrasted with the shrinking world of her father, who resents American life in general and his lack of economic opportunity in particular ("life in America is slavery" he says, to which his wife replies, "Is true America is slavery").[58] This economic marginalization is coupled with his decreasing influence at home, a man's traditional sphere of greatest influence. This conflict comes to a head when the parents secretly attempt to betroth Anna to a rich man from their village in Greece. It is not Anna who objects, however, but her brother David. In one of the only passages in Dalven's plays in which a man makes a case for female independence, David opposes his parents when he accidentally overhears them discussing the marriage:

> David: *She's seventeen! Listen, papa, you too, mama. You leave Anna alone! Don't go matchmaking for her.*
> Sara: *He is a rich man. He comes from a good family. Maybe he will pay expenses for wedding.*
> Avram: *Is good luck. It come unexpected. Don't come everyday.*
> David: *She's too young to marry!*
> Sara: *She don't marry tomorrow! First she will be engaged. We will make plans. She will go out…*
> *David: With you and papa tagging behind. That's not the way it's done here! In America a girl finds her own husband, and she meets a man many times before she decides even to introduce him to her family; only after she makes sure that he's the right man for her, does she invite him to meet her parents; the same goes for the boy.*
> Avram: *Anathema! The devil take your father!*[59]

[58] Dalven 1990, 25.
[59] Dalven 1990, 41.

The contrast between David's speech and the depiction of women's agency in marriage reflects the cultural changes between marriage politics in Greece and in America. *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven* features teenage and even pre-teen brides (the girls' parents were engaged when their mother was ten) who had no choice but to accept their husbands – often husbands whom they have either never seen or who are unsuitable in terms of age or temperament. The descendants of these women, however, transplanted to America, can wait to get married and can even refuse their suitors; the dowry and other economic considerations are no longer the exclusive concerns. David makes a point of mentioning that the women get to choose the husband and, as importantly, that the family only gets to meet the prospective husband when the daughter decides to make the introduction, a complete reversal of the power dynamic in Greece.

David's defense of Anna's independence in marriage extends beyond marriage as an economic decision and towards a more American notion of marriage as a romantic partnership based on shared values and interests. When Avram asserts that money is all that matters, David gives the most forceful speech in the play:

> David: *That's the whole damn trouble. You don't know a damn thing about this man, except that he has money, and he comes from a family you knew twenty years ago. This man will treat Anna like a doll, not as a person; he'll want to think for her. He won't let her think for herself. Anna will sick with such a husband. A lot you know about your own daughter.*[60]

The force of David's conviction surprises the parents; in the next line, Sara says: "My God, how sharp you are. We're not gonna kill her," to which David responds: "It's worse than killing her."[61] The passage

[60] Dalven 1990, 42.

[61] Dalven 1990, 42. In her interview with Maimin, Dalven indicates that this scene is taken directly from her real life: "They [her relatives] told him [her father] that so-and-so wants a wife and he wants a wife of our own people and I'd like you to arrange for him to meet your daughter. The first time that happened I was sixteen years old. So my brother… one of the scenes in the play is my brother raising hell because they

reads like an indictment of Dalven's own marriage; though she had some choice in whom to marry, she too yielded to economic necessity and parental pressure and married almost exactly the man described in the play: a wealthy furrier whom the family had known in Ioannina and who, as in the play, received no education in America but went straight into business.[62] David's speech, therefore, represents the most forceful moment in her corpus when a male member of the family intervenes on a woman's behalf. Even though the speaker is a man, this speech represents the ultimate rejection of the imposition of Old World patriarchy on Greek Jewish immigrant women in the US.[63]

Anna/Rae and David/Joe were able to complete their educations. Nonetheless, it is a point of both personal pride but communal shame that in doing so their success was exceptional among the immigrant children of their generation, most of whom were still bound by traditional way. Dalven tells Maimin that

> *We were a rebellious family, my brother and I. On the one hand, we were the talk of the town among the Romaniotes as remarkable children. On the other hand, we were bad because we were doing things that the parents were against. Not a single Romaniote girl in my generation went to college.*
> Q. *What about the boys?*
> A. *The same. My brother was the first doctor and I was the first teacher among my people.*[64]

Dalven depicts a rather more optimistic world in *Our Kind of People*, offering Anna and, to a lesser extent, Joe as avatars of a new kind of Greek

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wanted to marry me off when I was seventeen. Oh, he had a fight with them! They dropped it. He threatened them." (Dalven 1991 [Interview], 49).

[62] For the biographical parallel, see Dalven 1991 (Interview), 50-51, where Dalven describes her future husband and the circumstances of their engagement and marriage.

[63] Dalven seems unsure about whether a speech like this from her would have made any difference; it was only because her brother was the first-born son that he had this kind of influence, as Dalven notes: "It couldn't work since Joe was against it. That's how they (?) the firstborn son" (Dalven 1991 [Interview], 49).

[64] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 39-40.

Jew, freed from the traditions and cultural mores which had prevented their abilities to fulfill their personal and intellectual ambitions.

4. "All people are her brothers and sisters": Becoming American in *Esther*

The plot of *Esther* offers a political and personal counter-model to the previous plays, demonstrating the full possibilities of American life. At the political level, unlike *A Matter of Survival*, which takes place simultaneously but is set in Athens, the family that gathers in Manhattan as the play opens in late 1944 have no inkling of the genocide of their Greek kin in the Holocaust. More personally, the play begins with a group of siblings – closely modeled on Dalven's family again – congratulating their youngest brother on his upcoming wedding which, significantly, is a love match and, just as importantly to Dalven, "Miriam's [the bride's] father can afford it. He's not exactly a poor man."[65] The dual problems of arranged marriage and dowries are thus solved in the play's opening scene. *Esther*, then, picks up twenty years after *Our Kind of People*, with the same family in different guise, enjoying the fruits of life in America in a way that was neither possible for those Greek-Jews who did not emigrate nor to those immigrants of the previous generation. David, for instance, has become a doctor, fulfilling the aim of the different character with the same name from *Our Kind of People*. Rebecca, too, the stand-in for Dalven, has become a teacher, just as Anna had hoped in the previous play. Where the family in *Our Kind of People*, moreover, lived in a "cold water rail road flat on 5 Eldridge Street," an evocation of a familiar kind of tenement for Jewish immigrants, *Esther* is set in "the living room of a middle-class home in the upper-story of a private two family house in Brooklyn," thus signaling the family's rising economic fortune,[66] and partway through the play, one of the sons, Jesse, announces that he is moving to New Jersey, saying, "It's like country there –

[65] Dalven 1983, 10. Dalven's stand-in is named Rebecca Cohen, "a college teacher in her mid thirties," about a decade younger than Dalven herself would have been, but sharing the same profession.

[66] Dalven 1983, 3.

lots of trees and grass, right in front of our house."[67] The impoverished immigrant family marks its coming into wealth through its move from tenement to urban duplex, from duplex to suburban house.

The second strand of the plot of the play follows the children's aging mother, the eponymous Esther (who has the same name as Dalven's real mother), who stands as a foil between the generations, between the old ways and the new, between Greece and America. In one scene, Esther tells her gathered children about the reasons for her immigration: "Papa and me we come to America to make better life for you, so you can have good education. […] In old country, in them days, not so easy for poor people give children good education. You know why doctor in my village say to me? 'Go to America, Esther; there you and your husband will slave, but your children will become real people.'"[68] In this, Esther lays out the different opportunities available to her and her children, both in Greece and in the United States. Indeed, articulating her own ambiguous position, she continues: "But all the time you live in new world, papa and me we live in old world; most times is like we never leave our village."[69] Esther identifies her personal sacrifices, identifying them as the price she paid for her children's inclusion in America: "We help all we can so you can belong to this country, where we bring you. Is how we try to be part of your world, like you say. Papa and me, we have no chance to belong to this country for ourselves."[70] This assertion epitomizes Dalven's optimistic view of the possibilities of American life for her children: education, love marriages, wealth.

Thus, the wedding announcement that opens the play attains significance as a symbol of the family's Americanness. Jesse (the only one of the children born in America), has rejected his mother's attempts to find a match. In saying so, moreover, Esther uses nearly the same phrase as the title of the previous play: "I try to find girl for him from our people."[71] Rebecca (Dalven's autobiographical stand-in), however, ap-

[67] Dalven 1983, 35.
[68] Dalven 1983, 21-22.
[69] Dalven 1983, 22.
[70] Dalven 1983, 22.
[71] Dalven 1983, 22.

proves of Jesse's choice, saying "It's always better to let children find their own mates, mama," to which Esther says: "In old country, we never believe like that. Father find man for his daughter, girl for his son."[72]

Their discussion then reveals that Rebecca has gotten a divorce (as did the real Rae Dalven): "I help you find somebody you like, so you marry again, Rebecca," Esther says.[73] Rebecca, however, rejects this, noting that her own personal fulfillment cannot be achieved within the confines of marriage as she understood it: "No one will ever have me, mama. […] The men who are interested to marry me, expect me to give up my profession and give all my time to their profession. I can't do that mama."[74] When he mother asks here if she "want[s] something more from life" besides "teaching," she responds "I'm writing a book."[75] In this, *Esther* brings the story of Rae Dalven – through her various fictional alter-egos – to its autobiographical culmination: the female protagonist becomes self-sufficient economically and self-fulfilled through her vocation as artist and educator.

The same fulfillment is true of Esther. Where Rebecca achieved freedom through divorce, Esther's husband has died, allowing her a freedom she had never previously known. Indeed, one of the most notable elements of the play is the near complete absence of men. The first thing she does with that freedom, moreover, is to pursue two other forms of freedom: first, she becomes economically self-sufficient as a seamstress, and second, she attempts to naturalize as an American citizen; her pursuit of this goal and the reactions of the other characters to it is the central action of the play. Act I Scene 2, for instance, is largely given over to a discussion between Esther and her neighbor Lena Feldman, a Jewish woman of about the same age. Though both Jews, Lena and Esther come from different ethnic streams within the religion – Esther is a Romaniote Jew from Greece and Lena is an Ashkenazi Jew from Poland. The two women have much in common as aging immigrants from a lost world, but their worlds are relatively unknown to each other. As

[72] Dalven 1983, 24.
[73] Dalven 1983, 24.
[74] Dalven 1983, 24.
[75] Dalven 1983, 24.

the scene progresses, Esther and Lena discuss their relative backgrounds in relation to the Holocaust:

> Lena: *Many Jews in Greece now, Esther?*
> Esther: *My daughter Rebecca say 80,000 Jews live in Greece before Hitler kill most of them. He kill almost all my relatives there; nephews, nieces; only one niece and her family living there now, and one nephew. Only 5000 Jews left in Greece today.*
> Lena: *"I lost all my relatives in Poland. Not a single soul is left alive.*[76]

This discussion thus represents the decisive break between old world and new: despite their struggles to Americanize, there is no old world left for the elderly women to return to. In this light, the course of the conversation is significant, for in the very next line, Esther asks "You American citizen, Lena?" to which Lena replies "Oh, sure. I became a citizen myself after I went to night school and learned how to read and write English."[77]

This, then, spurs Esther, free of the economic obligations of the sweatshop and the domestic obligations of children and husband, to pursue her own life, and her vision of that is through becoming fully American. This journey is part of Dalven's broader argument over personal and national identity during the course of the plays. Indeed, while Jesse proves his Americanness by buying a house in the suburbs, and David by dramatically returning from four years in the European theater as a medic, the man with the largest speaking part is no man at all, but an eleven-year-old neighbor, Jonathan, who, in Act II, Scene 1, is quizzing Esther, who is preparing for her Naturalization exam, the ultimate expression of Americanization and assimilation; when Jonathan tells her about the Oath of Allegiance, she asks: "What mean allegiance?" to which he replies: "It means that you belong with your heart to this

[76] Dalven 1983, 33-34.
[77] Dalven 1983, 34.

country," and she, in turn, replies: "We belong to this country with our hearts more than thirty years."[78]

The play also represents Dalven's universal vision of American identity in the character of Patience, Esther's African-American housekeeper. During the study session, Patience describes her life growing up in Georgia, the African-American experience under slavery. In particular, she tells Jonathan that African-Americans weren't allowed to march in Lincoln's funeral until the Assistant Secretary of War overturned the ban:

> Jonathan: *I'm sure that isn't in my history book.*
> Patience: *I don't expect that it is. I could tell your teacher a few more facts in American history which are not in your history book.*[79]

Dalven, perhaps influenced by her time at Fisk University, a historically black university, allows the voices of marginalized figures into the history of the nation – not just immigrants like the Greeks and Jews who populate the plays, but African-Americans as well. Indeed, when another of Esther's daughters, Sara expresses her displeasure at her mother's undertaking: "You are killing yourself for nothing," she says and, later, "What good will it do at your age, mama?"[80] She then gets into a debate with Patience that reveals the universal humanism of Dalven's vision of America:

> Sara: *But what benefit will you get out of it, mama?*
> Patience: *Excuse me, Mrs. Cohen, I would like to answer your daughter's question.*
> Sara (curtly): *I was speaking to my mother, not to you.*
> Patience: *I know you were, but your mother happens to be my sister.*
> Sara: *What is she talking about?*
> Esther: *Patience feel all people are her brothers and sisters.*[81]

[78] Dalven 1983, 61.
[79] Dalven 1983, 61.
[80] Dalven 1983, 68.
[81] Dalven 1983, 69.

In this way, Dalven allows for a capacious definition of Americanness beyond what is found in official textbooks, a vision that includes women, immigrants, and minorities and reaffirms the universalist message which had informed her early drafts of *A Matter of Survival*, in which Orthodox and Jewish Greeks fought alongside each other. Though her subsequent research into the extensive collaboration of Orthodox Greeks with the Nazis forced a revision of this thesis as regards the place of Jews in the citizen and national life of pre- and post-War Greece, Dalven finds it again in the story of immigrant and minority solidarity in the United States.

Indeed, this sense of the family's growing Americanness is not simply a matter of dialogue, but plays a fundamental role in the action of the plot. Rebecca and David (the analog characters to Anna and David from *Our Kind of People*) approve of her mother's attempt to naturalize, and Rebecca says: "You know what I'm going to do for mama, when she gets her citizenship? I'm going to drive her to Washington, to visit the White House."[82] The family's Americanness is, as immigrants and refugees, as much a matter of geography as ideology. When David announces that his mother has passed the test, he announces: "I now declare you an American lady," but it is Patience, the African-American housekeeper, who delivers the thesis of the play: "Your mother has always been an American lady."[83]

5. "You Don't Have to Forget Your Heritage to Become American": Memories of Greece and the American Dream

An undated fragment written in Dalven's handwriting sums up her early life as depicted in *Our Kind of People* in a few sentences:

> *Papa left Greece so he could earn a living for his family, so that his daughters could find husbands without a dowry. When he got here he could not give up his ways of the old school. The children learn English – Irene – all don't want to know Greek – America—assim-*

[82] Dalven 1983, 47.
[83] Dalven 1983, 84.

ilation program – I don't want to hear Greek – I get to high school English – too much education for a girl is bad – after the marriage going to Greece + translating Eliyia.[84]

Joseph Eliyia, the most famous Jewish poet of Greece, was nephew to her husband, and this relationship became central to Dalven's scholarly identity. Though he died in 1931 and Dalven did not travel to Greece until 1937, they corresponded frequently and, after his death, Dalven went to Greece to visit Eliyia's mother. Her translation of his poetry in 1944, during the height of the Holocaust, was her first major attempt to grapple with the questions of identity, nationality and memory that would sustain her for another fifty years.

Dalven never comments on her husband's interest in Eliyia's poetry; given his indifference to education or aesthetics, having a cousin as a poet and scholar was probably something more of a curiosity. For Dalven, however, Eliyia's work offered her a way to legitimize her interests and to tie together all the pieces of her otherwise fragmented identity. This is represented in one scene in *Our Kind of People*, in which Anna and her brother David are arguing about Anna's professor's assignment that she give a talk in class on Greek culture. The assignment leads to a rare argument between the otherwise close siblings about the place of their Greek, Jewish, and Greek-Jewish identities in America:

David: *Why the hell do you have to tell people you're from Greece in the first place?*
Anna: *It's where we were born, isn't it?*
David: *You amaze me. You were five years old when we came to America. Those five years are the only difference between you and an American born child. You started school like any other American.*
Anna: *We started out with a different heritage.*
David: *I thought we came here to become American…*
Anna: *You don't have to forget your heritage to become American.*[85]

[84] Onassis Archives.
[85] Dalven 1990, 89.

The passage dramatizes contrasting ideas about assimilation. David, as the first-born son destined to go to medical school, is deeply invested in being fully American, with all the economic benefits and cultural liberation that the adoption of such an identity implied. Indeed, Dalven's brother Joe would cause something of a family scandal by marrying a Christian woman.[86] Dalven, however, by personal orientation and gendered expectations for women in the early twentieth century, wanted to be a teacher, a position that would also bequeath to her the responsibility for preserving her family's and her people's memory and traditions.

As all her plays' sentimental and melodramatic yet unsparing and often unflattering view of Greek-Jewish life suggests, Dalven was committed to preserving the past, even if she found it at odds with her own worldview. This is represented in the rest of Anna's reply to David: "The main reason I chose Greek is that it's the language that mama and papa speak."[87] In handwritten notes on this page, Dalven crossed out part of the last sentence and rewrote it: "Anyway, the main reason I chose Greek is because I want to write about our people." In the revision, she deleted the reference to her parents because she was conflicted about her allegiance to them. On the one hand, her parents brought the family to the US, creating the conditions that allowed their son to become a doctor and their daughter a teacher. On the other hand, her parents' inability or unwillingness to embrace their new culture brought Dalven a lifetime of pain. Through this revision, Dalven's ambivalence is made visible.

In *Our Kind of People*, Dalven gives voice to her own life's mission, putting in the mouth of Anna, her teenage self, the feelings which motivated her over the course of her several decades long involvement in writing about Greek Jewish life in both academic and creative venues:

> *There's a void inside of me, because all the values of my home, appear worthless in America. No matter how much I learn about American and British literature and history at college, even though I love what I am learning, that void is always there. When I graduate and become*

[86] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 43.

[87] Dalven 1990, 86. The fragment breaks off at the word "our," but I presume the missing next word would be "people."

a teacher, I'm going back to Greece. I wanna find the house where David and I were born, where my parents were born, and I want to write about our life there (looks at the objects on the table).[88] *I know this isn't much to talk about. If my parents had been rich in Greece, I would have had my mother's sterling silver to show, which was part of her trousseau, but sold almost all of it to raise money for my father to come to America.*[89]

The play concludes with Anna forcing her parents to accept that she will not marry the man they want, thus fully rejecting the Old World patriarchy under which all of the women Dalven wrote about suffered. Anna, a college graduate, will now get her own job and have her own independence; indeed, at just this climactic moment in the play, the phone rings with an offer from a school offering Anna a permanent position teaching creative writing. Anna accepts the offer but says she can't start until September; first she wants to study in Greece.

This, too, is similar to what happened to the real life Dalven, with one significant difference. Whereas Anna is free to go travelling, the real Dalven was unable to shake off the claims of patriarchy and family so easily. She grudgingly accepted a marriage proposal from an upper-class Greek-Jewish immigrant her family had known in Ioannina. The marriage was ultimately unhappy; her husband was hardly more accommodating of her intellectual and career goals than her father. Dalven says in her interview with Maimin that "I cooked, I baked, I did all sorts of things to make him comfortable. The first thing he did was ask me to give up my job."[90] She was forced to go to school only during the day, while her husband worked. This, and the infertility which plagued them (which she claims medical tests proved was his), led to an unhappy marriage and eventual divorce. It was only at this point, in 1936, that

[88] The objects referenced are earlier identified as water jugs called *kukmula*, one of the few things the family brought to the US from Greece.

[89] Dalven 1990, 90. Dalven also edited this line by hand: "but she sold almost all of it to raise money to support us while my father was away." Though distinction seems small, it suggests the competing autobiographical narratives which Dalven was working out in the play.

[90] Dalven 1991 (Interview), 53.

Dalven, in a bid to save her marriage, went on a fourteen-month trip around the world, and to Greece for the first of her seventeen trips there. Though the two divorced upon their return, the trip fulfilled her (and Anna's) lifelong goal of seeing the house in which she was born and forging lifelong connections with those relatives who remained. After the Holocaust, she did keep in touch with the few survivors and their descendants and with several non-Jewish Greek writers. It was also during this trip that Joseph Eliyia's mother passed along the late poet's dying wish that she translate his poetry into English, thus launching her career in both Greek and Jewish literature.

Our Kind of People, then, can be seen as an attempt by Dalven, then in her late 80s, to recreate on stage the crucial moment in her life some sixty years earlier when she first rejected the demands of traditional Greek Jewish patriarchy and embraced her own financial and intellectual independence. The freedom she felt in claiming her agency and using it to pursue her passion for playwriting is exemplified in a letter she wrote to William Rose Benet on November 22, 1948:

> *I must eventually become a part of the theater world. Imagine a human being tingling and radiant with life, with the strength of the soil, eyes forever brimming with the wonder of childhood, sensitive to the suffering of others, tuned to the voices of nature – I have seen myself like this when studying for the theatre.*[91]

Dalven never arrived in the world of the theater as she had hoped, but she nevertheless managed to leave behind a remarkable series of autobiographical plays which offer glimpses into the lost world of pre-War Greek Jewry both in Greece and in the US. The plays tell two interlocking sets of stories: *Marriages are Arranged in Heaven* and *A Matter of Survival* tell the story of Greek-Jewish women in Greece, while *Our Kind of People* and *Esther* follow Greek Jews in America. The plays represent Dalven's own vision of the world as proven by her own life: that even as Greek-Jewish culture in Greece suffocated its women and was eventually exterminated completely in the Holocaust, Greek-Jewish

[91] Benét Family Papers.

women in American were asserting their right to live a new and freer life in a new country that accepted them wholly for who they were. It is to her credit that Dalven used the freedom that America offered her to chronicle the lives and experiences of her coreligionists who were not as fortunate as she.

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