

SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL
OF
BYZANTINE
AND
MODERN GREEK STUDIES

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Rae Dalven, Greek-Jewish-American, feminist and leftist

Review essay of Adam J. Goldwyn, *Rae Dalven: The Life of a Greek Jewish American/ Ράε Ντάλβεν: Η ζωή μιας Ελληνοεβραϊσοαμερικάνας*. Forward by A. Liraz. Tr. A. Fotakis. Ioannina: Isnafi 2022. 168 pp. – ISBN: 9789609446457, and

Rae Dalven, *Marriages Are Arranged in Heaven/ Οι γάμοι κανονίζονται στον παράδεισο*. Ed. – intr. A. J. Goldwyn, vol. 1. Tr. A. Fotakis. Ioannina: Isnafi 2022

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Rae Dalven is perhaps not known to the general reading public in Greece. She is however undoubtedly known to an, albeit limited, audience interested in the history of the Jews of Greece. And this is due to her book – by now a work of reference – *The Jews of Ioannina* (Cadmus Press 1990). The latter was her last published work before her death (1992). It reflects, as noted by Adam Goldwyn, her biographer and Assistant Professor of Medieval Literature and English at the University of North Dakota, the shift of her interest from Modern Greek literature, and specifically Modern Greek poetry, to Jewish history and memory.

Let us take matters from the start and begin with Goldwyn’s wonderful biography of Dalven. This biography inaugurates the “Romanioti” series published by the Ioannina-based publisher Isnafi. The editor of the series is the Israeli interdisciplinary and performance artist Adi Liraz, who originally hails from Ioannina. The series will focus on books that capture the life and work of Romaniote Jews, that is the Greek-speaking Jews of the Ottoman Empire and later Greece. Rae Dalven was born Rachel Dalian in 1904 in the then Ottoman Preveza to Jewish parents

from Ioannina. As was the custom at the time, the marriage of her parents, Esther Colchamira and Israel Dalian, was arranged. The dowry, or rather the absence of a dowry (Israel, as we learn, made no such claims), was the determining factor in this marriage. The institution of dowry, and the consequences it had for the lives of women – and also men – of her family will form the core of her play *Marriages are arranged in Heaven* (1983). The play is the first of her four plays to be released, in English, by Isnafi. Unfortunately, due to a number of budgetary restrictions this series of publications do not include Greek translations of the plays.

Motivated by his desire to see the world, but mainly because of his desperate financial situation, Rachel's father will set sail for America in 1906. Three years later his wife will follow with two of their three children, the eldest Iosif and the youngest Rachel. The family's middle child, Sophie, will not be allowed to travel with them because of her trachoma, a disease of the eyes. Sophie will be reunited with her family three whole years later. The event will be a source of inspiration for the first scene of the play *Marriages are arranged in Heaven*. In this work, however, the heroine, Esther, will forever lose the opportunity to migrate to America. She will remain in Ioannina, where the play takes place, and will “drown”, as Primo Levi¹ might have said, along with almost the entire Jewish community of the city. As Goldwyn, editor of the edition, writes in his preface, in this case “failure to emigrate is effectively a death sentence, though none of the characters in the play could know it”.²

As a consequence of a misspelling of Iosif's surname at school, the family will change their surname from Dalian to Dalven – and Iosif will adopt the more American sounding name Joseph. The family will eventually settle in the Lower East side of Manhattan, in the heart of the small Romaniote community. Close to their new home Kehila Kedosha Janina, the only Romaniote synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, will be built in 1925. The apartment in which they will live looks like a railroad car: a thin narrow halfway with rooms off the side. Poverty as well as the successive social exclusions of poor Greek migrants from

¹ See Levi 1986.

² Dalven 2022a, 18.

American society and in addition Greek-speaking Jews from the larger Yiddish-speaking Jewish community, will define their lives. The father will always complain that he is not accepted, as a Jew, by the “Yiddish” – as he calls the Ashkenazi Jews, who make up the majority of Jews in New York. He will spend his life close to “his own people”, that is the few Romaniote Jews who had also migrated to America. And exactly this characterization, “our own people” will be the title of another play by Dalven (*Our kind of people*, 1989, also to be published by Isnafi).

Rae will struggle to overcome the limitations of her environment through education. In her work *Our kind of People* Dalven’s alter ego Anna finds herself in trouble when her father realises that she is responsible for the lamp continually going out. “Anna must have stayed up to do her homework”, the mother would say. According to Goldwyn, this is where the main conflict of the play can be traced, reflecting one of the main conflicts that also defined Dalven’s life. The father, both in life and in her work, pressured the young Rae/Anna to leave school to work – in order to support her brother financially. And as if that wasn’t enough, the father wanted to choose a husband for his daughter, while she wanted to decide for herself. Finally, Rae will end up marrying a Romaniote immigrant from Ioannina, Jack Negrin, while managing to stay in school by working in the evenings as a seamstress. “I started to earn my own way really quite well at the age of fourteen, because I worked on all the [sewing] machines – single machine, double-needle machine, narrow machine – and I was making a good salary”,³ she will say in one of her interviews which Goldwyn studied. Thus a sewing machine, as for many women until relatively recent times, will become the vehicle for relative independence from a rather suffocating family environment.⁴ The main issues that will preoccupy Dalven in her life will be reflected in her academic and theatrical work, namely her ethnic and religious origins – as a Greek-American-Jewish woman, her class – that of a poor immigrant woman and her gender – that of a woman living in a patriarchal society.

³ Dalven 2022b, 27.

⁴ More details on the contribution of the sewing machine to lives of Greek women may be found in Papastefanaki 2021, 74-95.

Difficult financial circumstances as well as gender will determine her choice of Hunter College as the university at which she studied. “How did I choose it? [...] It was free and it was in Manhattan. [It was a] girl’s college at that time”, she will say in the same interview.⁵ During her studies she will need to continue working, besides she had to contribute to the expenses of her brother who was studying medicine. But her student years will also be the time of her acquaintance with the theater. Her favorite author is Henrik Ibsen, whose themes and atmosphere will directly influence her works. Echoing some of Ibsen’s works, such as *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll’s House*, Dalven’s plays are set in houses and feature women trapped, for economic reasons, in unhappy marriages.

Dalven’s marriage will, for various reasons (childlessness, her husband’s adherence to traditional values, her own aspirations), not succeed. But it will be thanks to her husband’s family that she will come into contact with “the poet of the family”, the Zionist, socialist and Hellenist Joseph Eliyia. The two would begin a correspondence that would last three years, until Eliyia’s untimely death at the age of 29 in 1931. Acquaintance with his work will open one of the most important chapters in Dalven’s life, that of mediating Greek poets to the American public. The translation of his poems would be published in 1944 and would establish “Dalven bona fides as a translator”.⁶ Her frequent trips to Greece in the 1930s and her reception by Greek literary circles will help in this direction. The war will interrupt her visits to Greece. She will return in 1947, only to find the community of Ioannina in ruins. In the meantime, her marriage will break up and she will be forced to make a living on her own. Another conflict will plague her life, this one between the financial need to work and the creative need to write.

In her writing, Dalven’s choices are not random. They are guided by her political ideology – she never hid her sympathy for the left – and her feminist outlook. Thus, in 1945 she completed the translation of an “EAMist”, as she described it, work. This work was Manthos Ketsis’ *Rebels* (Αντάρτες), a play written and performed during the Occupation (1943). Dalven probably met Ketsis, who during the Civil War was

⁵ Dalven 2022b, 27.

⁶ Dalven 2022b, 39.

exiled to Makronissos (1947-1950), through his colleague and fellow prisoner Yannis Ritsos, with whom she was well acquainted. Her efforts

to stage the play in New York will, however, fail. After all, at this time fear of communists and their sympathizers is widespread in America.

Dalven's engagement with Ritsos' work betrays the same ideological viewpoint. Her translation of *The Fourth Dimension* (1977) will be the first since the lifting of the ban on his work. Using some of the profits from the publication of Eliyia's poems, she will travel again to Greece, where she will meet with the future Nobel laureates George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, as well as the perennial Nobel nominees Nikos Kazantzakis and Yannis Ritsos. The resulting publication (1951), an anthology of translations of Greek poets, would establish Dalven in the English-speaking world as a translator of contemporary Greek poetry. Another significant publication would follow, that of Constantine Cavafy's poems (1961) – a publication that would cement her reputation and which, among other things, would be, according to Goldwyn, an expression of her abiding interest in queer sexuality.⁷ The rejection she received from Seferis, who finally approved Philip Sherrard as his translator, was a low point in her career. How Dalven's work was perceived by Seferis' circle is perhaps revealed by a letter from the critic and poet George Katsimbali to Seferis on the occasion of the publication of Dalven's anthology and on which Goldwyn comments. "This is what happens to modern Greek poetry when it is soiled by Hellenohebraioamerican commie women",⁸ Katsimbali wrote to Seferis. He apparently preferred male translators of greater erudition and prestige, Goldwyn observes. And obviously not commies or Greek-American Jews we would add. But there were also admirers of Dalven's translation work, such as Kazantzakis. In a 1947 letter to the Homeric scholar Giannis Kakridis he wrote: "I found a woman who

⁷ Dalven dramatised, for example, in her 1938 work *A Season in Hell*, Verlaine's love for Rimbaud, while in her posthumously published collection of women's poetry she refers to Sappho.

⁸ Dalven 2022b, 42. Katsimbali uses κοκκούνες, the feminine derivative of the term κοκκουέδες.

knows Greek [...] and was raised and studied [...] in America, and she is a poet. She is [...] a *force vitale*, with a real feeling for the English

language, who considers each word as though it were an organism of blood, warmth, and rhythm”.⁹ Dalven will translate 300 verses from Kazantzakis’ *Odyssey*, which will be included in her anthology of Greek poetry.

Her academic career was far from easy and the financial difficulties she faced were numerous. In 1951 she wrote to one of her old professors at the Yale Drama, where she had enrolled in 1939, when there was still a quota limiting the number of Jews, and women were not admitted as undergraduates: “[...] I never had a position which could properly support me and my writing thus far, while it has brought me a measure of prestige, has been a disastrous loss”.¹⁰ Fortunately for her, in 1952 an unexpected position presented itself at Fisk University, one of the oldest African-American institutions of higher learning in the country. In this environment, awakened by the Civil Rights Movement, Dalven will flourish. Her multiple and competing identities will converge giving expression to her progressive convictions. Thus, in the same year she writes a radio play entitled *Jim Crow Schools Must End!* on racial segregation in schools. In the same period, she will also write the play *Tula*, a work on the subject of Greek Jews during the Occupation – based in part on real people and events – and which signals her commitment to the duty of preserving Greek-Jewish memory in the post-war period. In the late 1970s she will rework this play, renaming it *A Matter of Survival*. This play will also join Isnafi’s Romanioti series.

Her interest in civil rights will not leave her. In the play *Esther*, which she will write in 1983 – and which will also be published by Isnafi – an African-American maid describes the experience of slavery. In the meantime, Dalven will acquire relative financial security thanks to a number of teaching positions she took. By the late 1960s she had a permanent post at Ladycliffe College, fulfilling her lifelong dream of teaching Drama and English. The stability in her life allowed her

⁹ Op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 47.

to devote herself to the subjects that nurtured her intellectually and artistically throughout her career, namely Greek Jews and women's experience and creativity. She will therefore write a biography of Anna Comnena, the only woman who wrote, as Dalven noted, a work of history (*Alexiad*) during byzantine times. As Dalven's biographer observes, the emphasis on gender stems from a similarity: both women tried to distinguish themselves in a male-dominated environment. And, as an indirect acknowledgment of the feminist character of her study, she dedicates the biography of the highly educated daughter of the imperial couple to a penniless and illiterate seamstress, her mother.

In the period that followed, Dalven would devote herself to the role of historian – indeed she is the only female scholar of Romaniote Jewry. As with her plays, Dalven captures elements of the history of the Jews of Ioannina with an emphasis on reconstructing their daily lives. Her main concern, apart from historical recording, is the preservation of the memory of a community that, as she realises, will soon – due to the Shoah and immigration – cease to exist.

Dalven's last and posthumously published book, *The Daughters of Sappho* (1994) is an anthology of women's poetry. According to Goldwyn, the decision to work on this anthology was her most radical. And this is understandable if we consider that she was sidelined and underestimated by the male establishment, such as, for example, Katsimbali and Seferis or her university professors who hesitated to acknowledge her talent. As Goldwyn notes, "the decision to create a canon of women is the apotheosis of a lifetime of marginalization".¹¹ Closing his well documented and particularly well-written book, Dalven's biographer concludes that Katsimbali's characterization ("Greek-Jewish-American commie") is ultimately accurate, and contrary to what he himself believed, not at all derogatory. "Commie", as she dedicated her life to calling attention to marginalised groups, such as Greek women poets, African-Americans in the South, and Greek Jews during and after the Shoah. Finally, she seeks to be inextricably Greek, Jewish and American. These are indeed gendered qualities, as her female identity was an essential factor in her

¹¹ Op.cit., p. 73.

life and *oeuvre* – an *oeuvre* deeply political and feminist.

A few words about her play *Marriages are arranged in Heaven*. The action is set in pre-war Ioannina, inside the house of a poor Jewish family. In focus, as the work evolves over time (1929-1938) is the issue of dowry. The lives of people, women as well as men, seem to be determined by a “successful” or “failed” marriage, the criterion for which is exclusively the financial situation of the couple and also of the wider family. Of course, the absence of marriage is even more decisive, a condition that is disastrous for a woman’s life. The sparse dialogues – dominated by the figure of the matchmaker – revolve steadily around the amount the prospective grooms’ family is asking for – and the family of the three heroines is struggling to provide – this negotiation constitutes, as Dalven writes, a commercial transaction devoid of any “sanctity”.¹² So it is no coincidence that the author chooses to close her play with a personal intervention. A voice is heard over a loudspeaker after the end of the last act. Thanks to the voice we learn the subsequent fate of the family. Moreover, at the center of this intervention is the anxiety of the new parents, whom we have followed since adolescence, to collect the monies necessary for the dowry of the daughters who have, in the meantime, been born. Dalven makes a final comment to current affairs. Fortunately, she writes, the Greek government passed a law abolishing dowry (1983). The play closes with the realisation that women will no longer be, at least officially, objects of commercial negotiation. Dalven’s play, realistic and largely autobiographical, is clearly a socio-ideological commentary.

Finally, it is worth noting that the covers of the two books are decorated with works by Liraz, works that furthermore bring us into contact, by way of a different path, with the Jewish memory of Ioannina.

¹² Dalven 2022a, 155.

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