TLC SHOWCASE

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TLC The Literary Consultancy

Introduction to *Journeys of Hope*

Journeys of Hope: The Letters of Meyer and Sonia is the first-hand story of two people's emigration journey, told through their original letters. Meyer Fortes and Sonia Donen grew up in a Jewish immigrant community in South Africa, where they met and fell in love. In 1927, Meyer set off, alone, to study in London. Sonia stayed behind in South Africa and they kept up a lively correspondence to keep in touch. Their letters chart their hopes, fears, disappointments and successes, as Meyer struggles to make a life for himself in London and prepare for Sonia's arrival.

Meyer and Sonia were my grandparents. I, the granddaughter of immigrants, was prompted to explore their story, as I watched the rise of anti-immigrant populism. Reading their letters inspired me to find out more about what it means to emigrate: a huge personal upheaval, but one that involves solving all sorts of small problems.

Meyer and Sonia were also the children and grandchildren of immigrants. Members of both their families had undergone their own journeys, fleeing from danger in the Jewish Pale of Settlement of the Russian Empire. Meyer's father, Nathan, had first emigrated to Memphis, Tennessee and spent a period of time in Leeds, UK, before settling in South Africa. Sonia, herself, had been a refugee from the Russian Civil War that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution.

It seemed to me that letters offer unique insights into universal challenges, resonating uncannily with current affairs. I was prompted to undertake my own journey of discovery through eastern Europe. Few traces now remain of this important period of history, overlaid by more immediate, recent conflicts. Instead, I was drawn into the conflicts facing contemporary citizens, descendants of those who stayed in the countries from which my family emigrated. These people are now facing similar choices to the families who feature in the letters and I was struck by how relevant my grandparents' correspondence was to modern refugees.

Although I have written all my life, this is my first attempt at a commercial narrative non-fiction book. Frustrated by the difficulty in weaving together the different timelines, I signed up to TLC's Chapter and Verse programme. I started by getting feedback on my early draft and then worked with my mentor to create the final manuscript. She encouraged me to experiment, to write in different styles and gave me feedback on each tranche of writing. I also joined some of the monthly Sunday

morning Online Write Clubs, which gave me support and stimulation from other writers, all at different stages of their projects.

Journeys of Hope is essentially the love story of two young migrants, set in the context of my own explorations through the past and present of eastern Europe. The themes of conflict, migration and hope are a constant.

Extract from *Journeys of Hope*

Sonia, despite her reservations, was becoming more inclined to join Meyer in London. Her life in South Africa felt empty. Around her, many of her friends were settling down, getting engaged and planning married life. Being alone was hard, after having been used to spending all her free time with Meyer, as part of a couple. Her friends – and Meyer's friends – all encouraged her to join him. The problem was her parents. She was worried they would find it difficult to accept such a drastic move by their daughter.

'*I wish my parents were capable of understanding my point of view. I think I can understand theirs – but I cannot accept it… At the bottom of it is, of course, the selfish desire of all parents to have their children near them & see them married with all the accepted pomp & ceremony*.' It was only four years since Sonia's older sister, Bertha, had died from tuberculosis, only five years since the family had been reunited in South Africa when Sonia, her mother and younger brothers finally arrived from Russia. It must have been hard for her parents. Meyer was less understanding. He wrote, '*Dear, be good to your parents, but not soft. Even silken chains must be cut because they are chains. A man or a woman must be free to raise or ruin himself or herself.*' In December 1927, Sonia had finished her course at the University of Cape Town and had returned to live in her parents' home in Worcester. Meyer, knowing how bored and unhappy she was there, urged her constantly to throw caution to the winds, to just go out and buy a steamship ticket and join him in London. '*Believe only that I love you & want you & am tortured to think of you like a caged bird in Worcester when the whole world could be before us. Believe too that I am striving my hardest to find some means of outwitting Mammon. If I could sell my soul to Mephistopheles in return for your freedom (– to be with me) I would.*' Sonia was unimpressed by this melodramatic turn. She wrote back, '*Yes, I believe you love me & want me, but you exaggerate the danger threatening my freedom. I am not caged at Wo. [Worcester] I am as free as I ever was & if I were to decide now of going away to Russia & coining my own future there, no-one would prevent me from doing so. To you my freedom is tantamount to my being with you. Why not vice versa? In such a case you are no more free than I am. I don't want you to think of yourself as my liberator. I love you and therefore the highest happiness is to be with you. I don't flee to you because you are the only refuge I have, I flee to you because I want you.*' I smiled, reading these words of this thoroughly modern young woman addressing my grandfather, who in his later life had rather old-fashioned views on feminism. It is slightly poignant, though, to read Sonia's occasional suggestions of returning to Russia. She had had little choice in the decision to leave

her homeland and had had so much enthusiasm for the Revolution, it must have always been at the back of her mind.

Sonia turned out to be quite a skilful negotiator. She had no wish to fall out with her parents and soon brought them round to her plan. First she worked on her mother, Esther, who was very fond of Meyer and understood her daughter well. '*Sweetheart, my parents are wonderful & I am a selfish beast. God alone knows how hard it is for them: they'd give anything to have us here & yet my mother just said "Alright, my child, you'll go" & added to father "Let her go. I know what she feels like". It is my mother who has courage, these words were a sacrifice of her own feelings & wishes*', she wrote. Esther had been separated from Nochom for long enough to have some understanding of what Sonia was feeling Sonia showed her negotiating skill by agreeing to a minor compromise, but winning the main argument. She would leave, not in February as she had proposed, but after Passover, in mid-April. Her mother, Esther, had suggested this plan and pointed out that it had a number of advantages, the main one being that Nochom, her father, would have more money coming through his business at that time of year and would be able to help out financially. It would also mean Sonia would arrive in London at the end of the winter, meaning she would not need to take so many clothes. She could also be there when the family marked the death of her sister Bertha. '*You know my sister died on Passover & my parents feel it always.*' By the end of the year, it was all agreed and the family were joining in with her plans. '*Mother, for some reason or other, told the story of the bottle of alcohol, which is now 14 years old & was destined to be opened on my wedding, but will now be given to me when I go to London*.' Her father continued to demur, mainly on financial grounds, but the battle was largely won.

Nochom had a point: the financial situation continued to be intractable. Sonia got a little annoyed with Meyer. '*My dear boy, do you quite realise that whatever I am going to do I will have to do it blindly. It is I who have to make the sacrifice & take the risk & it is you who know to what I am coming*.' Meyer would keep on writing detailed lists of costs and budgets, but she complained his figures were inconsistent and doubted his logic. She was sceptical, too, about him finding a job for her '*Do you really think it is possible for you to get work for me in London when I am in Africa? After all if there is a vacancy it has to be filled at once. Who will wait till I come? It seems to me all this is a mere desire to tickle one's palate. Dammit. I wish I could believe in impossible things. I want so much to be with you, it is miserable & lonely away from you – but how is one to live*?'

About the Writer

Alison Marshall grew up in Manchester and now lives in the Yorkshire Dales, after periods of living and working in various other places. Her career was spent working at the intersection between industry and academia, in product and software development. She is now semi-retired, but still does some part time community development consulting, when not travelling and writing. She is also involved with local refugee support activities and has worked as a volunteer.

This is her first book, which, as well as giving the personal, family, aspects of this story, also describes her travels to the places featured in the story. The book was inspired by the discovery of her grandparents' letters, which motivated her to research the family history. She began to travel in eastern Europe, visiting the some of the places featured in the family story. Although little remains of her forbears' experiences, she encountered instead the stories of her contemporaries, also living through conflict and migration.