BOAT OF STONE

MAUREEN EARL

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by

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Dedicated to my mother: Janty Proctor, née Boshi,
in gratitude and with love.
And in loving memory of my father,
Wing Commander John (Hector) Proctor.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:
GULLIVER QUICK

It would have been as though he were in a boat of stone with masts of steel, sails of lead, ropes of iron, the devil at the helm, the wrath of God for a breeze, and hell for his destination.

—Emory A Storrs. 1866

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Author's Note

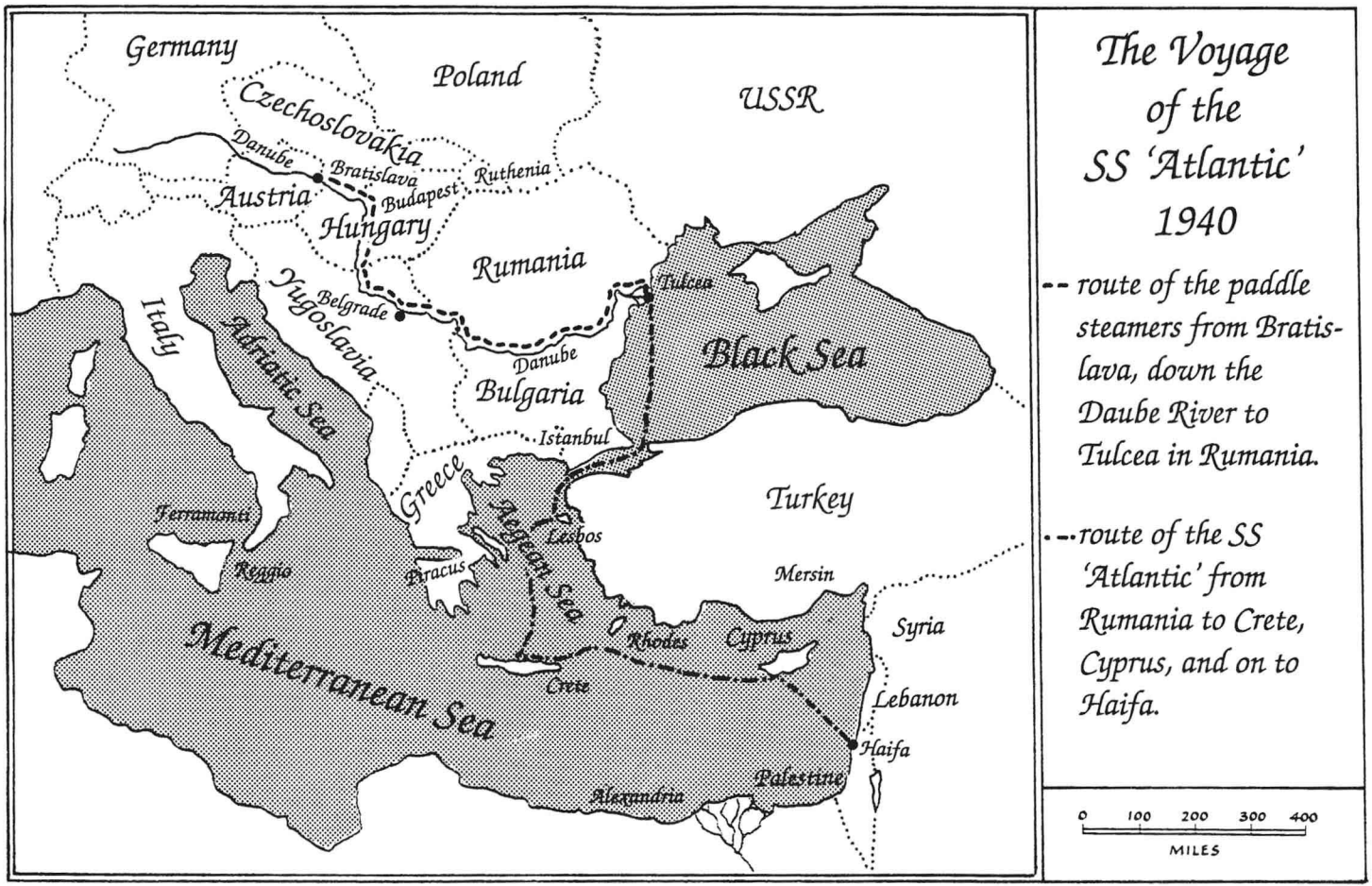
For dramatic purposes, the main characters of this book have been fictionalized, but the story of the *SS Atlantic* is true, as is that of the almost five years her passengers were held captive on the island of Mauritius, off the east coast of equatorial Africa. The prison of Beau Bassin—and the cemetery of St. Martin—still stand today, although the island now has independence from Britain.

Aaron Zwergbaum writes in *Exile In Mauritius*: "The detention of Jewish refugees in Mauritius during World War II is a singular, peculiar and rather exotic chapter of modern Jewish history." And so it is. It is almost fantastic.

Sadly, in not so many years from now, the remaining survivors of this astonishing journey will no longer be living. Their story will lie stilled at last.

It is in homage to all the passengers of the *SS Atlantic*, who with such hope and such conviction, in the autumn of 1940, started upon an odyssey that was to take them more than five years to complete, that this book is written.

Maureen Earl
Mexico. November 1992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Haifa
Palestine
Alexandria
The Voyage of the SS 'Atlantic' 1940
-- route of the paddle steamers from Bratislava, down the Daube River to Tulcea in Rumania.
---route of the SS 'Atlantic' from Rumania to Crete, Cyprus, and on to Haifa.
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MILES

BOAT OF STONE

LAST NIGHT AGAIN I couldn't sleep. I tossed my body, this venerable lump, about in the bed as if it belonged to someone else. My brain is an ocean of remembering. When I do sleep I dream: dreams which fuse with the days, barely surrendering to what others call reality. The past migrates into the periphery of the present, intrudes into the tide of now. Sometimes I become confused and exasperate Dita, my daughter-in-law, who, because she is always busy, is perhaps fearful of a day when I might become a feeble old woman. She shouldn't worry, I have at least ten good years left yet. That I can feel in my bones.

But I could be wrong. Maybe I'll go ga-ga and live the last years of my life as a dribbling old fool and drive them all mad. Who knows? Anyway, I'm not so terribly old; I have friends in their nineties who call me a girl. It's more or less up to God now, but He can be a moody soul, with Him you don't know what might happen next.

I got up last night and went to the bathroom where I stared at the mirror. One would think that a person would eventually get used to seeing old age scowling from the glass. But no, it's always a shock. If I were plump I might appear more robust, but no matter what I eat, I stay thin. An altogether different thinness to the slimness of youth: my flesh is loose, my bones have shriveled and shrunk. Once my neck was long and lissome; Daniel used to run his fingers up and down it, as if it were a harp. But in spite of those over-priced calcium pills, my neck has all but disappeared. It's there somewhere, it's just not very noticeable—and sometimes it aches on the left side. A thing of beauty is not necessarily a joy forever.

The skin of my face looks as if desert winds have blown a pattern across it, but my chin does not have turkey flesh hanging from it like waterlogged laundry, and my mouth is without fraying edges that might make it look like a crumpled evening bag.

"Hanna, you're so vain," Daniel used to say.

"And don't I have reason?" I replied. Amazing, now that I think about it, for I must have looked a sight: tattered clothes, worn shoes, unwashed hair—but such lovely hair it was: curling and thick, a reddish brown. And even when there was no water, no soap, still I tied it back with a ribbon or a piece of cloth, or lace if I could find it. When I was a girl I used to wind my braids into fat twists over my ears, pushing hair right into the ear so that I couldn't hear what people were saying.

If there is an afterlife, and if from this place Daniel now looks down and spots me brushing at my feathery white hair or patting my face into shape as if it were putty, he must surely smile. But there again, maybe he glowers and says, "Look at her. She's still vain."

What he must wonder at, if he's watching, is my foot: the clumping false foot that I have to clamp on before I walk. It doesn't bother me much, this bogus foot. Unless I'm tired I can walk almost as fast as anyone else, but now and then the bone in the leg hurts, cramps with indignation. I lost the foot—the left—just before Daniel died; he always knew me as a woman with two feet.

More and more Daniel drifts back into my dreams, forever frozen in youth. His sweat smells like the sea. Daniel, melancholy, brooding, biting at the skin of his thumb until it is raw, his eyes extinguished lamps in round hollows as he fingers his yellow star. I never knew Daniel without that star. When we were newly married, he wore it at night, on the sleeve of his pajama top.

"Are you crazy?" I asked. "You want to wear it to bed?"

"I certainly do." He attached it with a safety pin. "They can rot in hell if they think I'm ashamed to wear it."

Daniel was not always that proud, that certain. Not at all; soon after that, they broke him. But he always wore that star. "See," he would say, smoothing the coarse cotton as if it were satin, "I wear it in place of my heart, on my sleeve."

"Daniel?" I look up at the bathroom ceiling as if he were perched on the roof, able to see through plaster and roof-tiles, "I'm old! I triumphed!" And to that surely he must smile. "It's not so bad being old," I tell him. "There are compensations. People don't expect me to be so polite now. That's quite a relief for me, as you can imagine."

Who was he, this man Daniel to whom I was once married? Maybe he looks down at me and says, "Fools do not become less foolish as they grow old."

Increasingly, in my dreams, I am haunted by the notion that it was my fault Daniel lost his assurance. I wake up, my skin chilled, and bury my face in my hands. It wasn't my fault, of course it wasn't, but maybe I could have been more patient, could have had more grace.

"If you want a prince, Hanna, you must cultivate one," my mother said to me. It was one of the few pieces of advice she ever gave me, and certainly the last that I recall.

Instantly I dismissed such advice. "I don't want to construct a man, Mutti, like I was making a cake or building a mansion. A *mensch* is born, not made."

Now, however, I'm not so sure.

A life in hindsight is a series of vignettes. Memories plummet out of sequence as I drift in timelessness among columns of recollections, as if walking through an ancient historical site. Last night, as I often do when I can't sleep, I went down to the kitchen and brewed some of Dita's tasteless herb tea, then climbed back up to bed, where, almost immediately—even before I was asleep—I could see a small paddle-steamer, shabby, its decks burdened with too many passengers, listing as it scuds down the Danube followed by three other antiquated steamers—all flying the swastika. I look at the viscous black smoke as it twists from the chimneys in a defiant dance of freedom. "May it blow back and choke the tissues of their hearts and lungs," I say in my half-sleep.

I don't want to dream such things. I don't want to sustain this unsightly albatross that will not, cannot, flee. When we were living through those years I knew that what I saw, what I knew, might cling to me like slime clinging to an abyss that could never again be dredged clean. Time and time again I barricaded my eyes, my ears, my heart. By witnessing such atrocities I felt that I might be guilty of compliance. I could do nothing; my will had been proven feeble, even nonexistent.

I lie in bed and see the dancing black smoke, and think of the dance we were forced to perform, a dance of desolation in which each of us moved separately yet united as one; not knowing whether to defy or obey those who choreographed.

In my half-sleep I move forward toward the decks, closer to the passengers; I see anxiety written in the lines of faces, necks strained to face the new stretch of river, shoulders taut, as if their very tension would propel the boat faster.

And now I see something else: in their numbed eyes I see hope. Mothers hold up children and point to the mountains that frame the valley. Old people dig their skeletal fingers into each other's arms and stare, wide-eyed, at the river ahead. And I see a young woman, her hands held to her cheeks to prevent the wind biting her skin; she watches the passing mountains and modest thatched-roof houses. She leans lightly against her husband who looks apprehensive, as if he knows all this will somehow go wrong.

And I, now an old woman, want to reach forward and put my arms about that young woman, to comfort her, to stroke her hair and cheeks, as if I have become my own mother.

It was September of 1940. Daniel and I had been married almost three years. I was twenty-two, and he almost twenty-seven when we boarded the *Schoenbrunn* in Bratislava. That decrepit old paddle-steamer built for two hundred light-hearted tourists now carried well over seven hundred scruffy, dazed refugees. Most of us had already spent many months in holding camps, living on mud in torn tents, frozen and starved by winter. We never referred to ourselves as refugees; we were immigrants fleeing what Goebbels called the War of Flowers. That is what he called the Second World War, the *Blumenkrieg*. Very poetic, this monster Goebbels. "Not bullets but flowers greet our soldiers," he said as his army marched into Austria, where indeed, baskets of blossoms and bouquets were strewn in their path as they strode into new cities and towns, baptizing more and more with hatred. And my son wondered why I laughed when the long-haired, sweet-faced children of the sixties thought they were the first to become Flower Children.

What is it about human beings that they have this compulsion to hate? Even our Bible teaches us to love our neighbor and mistrust the enemy. "But we're not the enemy!" I would yell.

Time and time again I shouted this; Daniel would turn away, his pale eyes fogged with misery. "It doesn't matter

what a man hates, Hanna, as long as he hates something." Maybe he was right: love and fellowship don't seem to unite people as much as a common hatred.

It is our first evening aboard, we are all strangers to each other. Our common languages are German and Yiddish. I stand in the dining hall that once must have been very grand; the chandeliers still hang, dusty now and cracked, and the wooden paneling peeling where once it was burnished and rich. About the room are mounds of thin straw mattresses pushed back so that several hundred famished people can collect their bowlful of sausage and onion, their half mug of water. They gaze, outraged, this raggle-taggle mob, into the contents of their bowls. "On this we are expected to live?" As if they dined each night in fancy restaurants. All afternoon, since we boarded the boat, I have been hearing complaints, born of fear, but compounding fear upon fear. If I hear one more I'll lose all control of my patience. Not that I am famed for my patience.

We have a leader, David Engleman. He is a member of the Hagana, from Palestine, with an accent quite unlike any of ours. He's immensely brave about all this, as if four thousand sick and frightened people crammed into a flotilla of four rundown boats were an everyday event. He stands on a table, his arms folded, and explains that when we arrive at the Black Sea in Rumania, we'll be transferred to oceangoing ships. "From there we'll sail through the Aegean to the Mediterranean, and directly to Palestine. The entire journey will probably take two, possibly three weeks. Not more."

He is well-fed. On his sleeve is a blue-and-white armband on which is embroidered a gold Star of David. His jacket is battledress, buttoned right up to the high collar. He looks like a movie star from America. His hair is dark blond and curly, his eyes forceful.

"While we're on the Danube there will be a Gestapo motorboat arriving daily to investigate us," David continues, "and all of us—including the crew—will have to obey their orders until we disembark in Tulcea and re-embark under a different flag."

Furious murmuring starts all about the room. "But we paid for this journey! Why are we still beholden to them?"

"With our last pennies we paid!" a man near me shouts. His legs are thin and bowed, like an antique French chair. "We're travelling legally."

David nods. "Yes. But the rules are theirs."

How had this happened? How had I come to be part of a vanquished mob fleeing to a country none of us had ever seen? What did any of us really know about Palestine? We called it the land of Israel and spoke of it with reverence, but it was a legend, a stony foreign land from biblical stories. When I first told my parents Daniel and I had decided to go to Palestine, my father said, "You think Palestine is a hotel that will put you up in comfort and not present you with a bill?"

Suddenly everyone is clapping at something David has said. Such is the strength of the ovation that the chandeliers ripple as if in a summer wind. I also applaud, but I feel disoriented and my head is light. The clamor crackles in waves. In the back of my throat spice from the sausage rises up and mixes with bile. The roots of my hair are soaked in sweat. I look about the room, at these who are my brethren, and I am filled with disparagement. They are broken-winged sparrows.

Many months before we boarded the paddle-steamers there had been a night in our city, a November night of such terror that before the sun rose six hundred and eighty men and women had committed suicide. Mahatma Gandhi, whom I considered to be a sage, had recommended that we offer passive resistance. "You will win," he assured us, "if you remain calm and do not allow bloodshed." I sometimes ponder his advice. But not for long. In this particular case Gandhi didn't have a clue what he was talking about. Passive resistance was the only recourse available to us—and it most certainly didn't work. Maybe the great Mahatma, like the rest of the world, didn't grasp that we were not dealing with a normal human being.

It took me many years to understand that many of us *did* resist. How? We stayed alive, that's how. We survived.

But that was then. Let me first tell you a little about the today that has arisen from the ashes of yesterday. Twenty years ago I moved from Tel Aviv into this house in the French Quarter of Haifa with my son Martin and his family.