

# UNCERTAIN TRAVELERS



*Conversations with Jewish Women  
Immigrants to America*

Marjorie Agosín

RUTH BEHAR



November 12, 1956	Born in Havana, Cuba
May 4, 1961	Leaves Cuba and settles in Kibbutz Gash, Tel Aviv, Israel
June 6, 1962	Arrives in New York City; lives in Brooklyn with maternal grandparents during the summer and then in apartments in Queens
1974	Attends Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut; meets future husband, David Frye
1977	Graduate school in anthropology at Princeton University
1980–1981	Lives and studies in Santa María del Monte in León, Spain
1982–1985	Lives and studies in Mexquitic, San Luis Potosí, Mexico
1983	Receives doctorate in anthropology
1986	Moves to Ann Arbor, Michigan; son, Gabriel, born; publishes <i>The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village</i> (Princeton University Press)
1991	Begins travel to Cuba on a regular basis
1993	Publishes <i>Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story</i> (Beacon Press)
1994	Promoted to professor in the department of anthropology at the University of Michigan
1995	Edits <i>Bridges to Cuba</i> , an anthology of Cubans of her generation on the island and in the diaspora (University of Michigan Press); Co-edits <i>Women Writing Culture</i> (University of California Press)
1996	Publishes <i>The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart</i> (Beacon Press)

At the turn of the century, Cuba served as a way station for European Jews intent on emigrating to the United States. Once they obtained entry papers, they left Cuba. Because of this, a visible Jewish community in Cuba did not form until the 1920s, when U.S. immigration tightened its policies and closed its doors to a variety of people, including Jews. European anti-Semitism and the outbreak of war brought a new wave of Jews to Cuba in the late 1930s. By 1950, around 16,500 Jews had settled in the urban area of Havana, with a few thousand living in rural settlements.

At the end of World War II, immigration restrictions relaxed, allowing Cuban Jews greater access to the United States. As a result, the island's Jewish community decreased to ten thousand by 1951. At the time of Castro's Communist revolution, in 1959, the Cuban Jewish community was comprised of Jewish immigrants of Eastern European and Sephardic descent who had made the island their permanent home. Most of these Jews, engaged in the economic sectors Castro sought to nationalize,

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did not support his regime. In the early 1960s, 70 percent of Cuba's Jews left the country for the United States, Israel, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Venezuela, and other Latin American nations. It was during this diaspora that five-year-old Ruth Behar emigrated with her family to Israel and then to New York.

Ruth Behar, born in Havana, Cuba, in 1956, is a friend and immigrant of my generation. When I converse with her, I feel as though her stories and mine fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Together, we might create a recognizable whole. Ruth is as obsessed with Cuba as I am with Chile, and both of us are fascinated by the European homelands of our parents.

During two years of correspondence, Ruth and I shared family and professional stories. We also shared our passion for poetry and exchanged poems in our letters. I took the liberty of correcting her Spanish and she did the same with my English. This conversation, a continuation of that correspondence, took place in Saratoga Springs, New York, Chicago, and at my home in Wellesley.

**Marjorie:** Do you think there is something specific about the Jewish immigration experience to this country that makes it different from all the others?

**Ruth:** For me it's not just being Jewish, but being Jewish-Cuban . . . I am a certain kind of Jew. I speak Spanish. I am a Jew from the Caribbean, so that's what always made the experience unique for me. So when my family moved to New York, we did not fit into the Jewish community because we spoke Spanish and Ladino.<sup>1</sup> That made a big difference.

**Marjorie:** When we both arrived in the United States, we were very young. We did not speak English and did not have a community or a support group. How did you integrate into society those first years?

**Ruth:** Well, it was interesting. I always gravitated toward other immigrant children, so that when I was a child, a little girl, my very first close friend was from Belgium. She was Jewish too, Dina, my closest friend from about age nine until I was eleven or twelve. We were very, very close friends. We had the Jewish identity in common; we were both immigrants. We had both come to the United States when we were around five years old. I felt a bond with her. At the same time, my parents had a group of friends, a group of Cuban-Jewish friends that always saw each other, every weekend.

**Marjorie:** They were all Cuban-Jewish?

**Ruth:** Yes, in New York. They would see each other every weekend. I kept a diary when I was ten years old and I would write down almost every weekend

that we would get together and have Cuban sandwiches. [Laughs.] And so, the language . . . I think the important thing was that we had the Spanish; really, Spanish was the language of our family and our little community.

**Marjorie:** So your identification with other Jewish immigrants as a child was almost nonexistent? Did you feel empathy with, let's say, somebody who was from Holland or Poland who was Jewish?

**Ruth:** I came to feel that more as I grew older. I mean I always had Jewish friends. I had a friend named Ruthie (people called her Ruthie and me Ruth to distinguish us). She was a next-door neighbor. She was Jewish and a close friend, too, but Dina was a special friend because she was a Jewish immigrant and she felt a connection to the country she had left behind. In fact, she would go back to Belgium regularly. Her grandparents still lived in Belgium and she would say to me how lucky I was to have all my family nearby. Then, later on, when I was eleven, we moved to another neighborhood in Queens and there I became close friends with a Vietnamese French girl and I admired her tremendously. There what I felt was the connection to the fact that she, like myself, was a mixture. She had two identities and she spoke French. Her mother was French and her father was Vietnamese. And I had the Jewish and the Cuban in me. I admired her tremendously. In fact, I adored her.

**Marjorie:** You have told me you still feel like an immigrant. Why is that? You had a great education and therefore most people would say that you are a privileged, mainstream person.

**Ruth:** Even after all of these years, I always feel . . . but then it's also maybe the anthropologist in me because anthropologists are always people who don't feel at home where they are, and that's why they have to go to other places. So that's one of the things that drew me to anthropology—I did not feel quite at home anywhere and wanted to go elsewhere. I always felt that everything felt borrowed. I don't feel that places belong to me. But maybe that's good. I did not have this sense of ownership about places. I just feel that this is wonderful, this wonderful place is a loan to me . . . it's given to me as a gift, it's borrowed. I may have to give it back some time and that is one of the things I talk about in my writings. I have a story about losing my suitcase when I went to New Hampshire and how I thought about what a suitcase means, having to pack a suitcase and take *everything* you have in that suitcase. If you are lucky. Maybe you won't be able to take a suitcase, maybe it will just be the clothes on your back. But the idea that you may have to leave or decide what it is you have to put in the suitcase . . . that everything might have to be reduced to a suitcase . . .

**Marjorie:** Do you feel like you are an exiled person or an immigrant? The metaphor of the suitcase is so much a part of your writings and your spirit.

**Ruth:** It is a mixture of both. I feel maybe that it would be pretentious for me to be an exile because, as you said, I have had lots of privileges here. An exile for me seems like a position of principle. You're an exile because you don't believe in something that has happened in your country. With me, it was really my parents who were the exiles and then I am the daughter of exiles. So what am I? Can I claim to be an exile too? Would that be pretentious? Am I really an immigrant child then? Lately I have been wanting to identify myself as an immigrant, because an exile is somebody who never arrives. And so I want to try to arrive. I am here and that is what I must now try to claim.

**Marjorie:** Do you claim some kind of ownership of this country? Or could you leave the United States and feel as if you had never lived here?

**Ruth:** Sometimes I feel that . . . I have feelings like that . . . When I am in Cuba, at times I think, "You know, I really could live here," and then I think about that. But at the same time, when I am here, in the United States, I think this is really where I want to be. Sometimes it happens to me in the most prosaic of situations, like when I am on a bus . . . in the U.S. And then you talk to the person next to you and they are from another country, and you start recognizing the immigrant past that we all have. For example, in Michigan, sometimes I think "Oh, this is the most homogeneous place. It's so American," but then you really talk to people and you find out, for example, Gabriel is on the soccer team and one of the team managers, I thought he was "just an American," but I talked to him and it turns out his grandparents are Lebanese. You know, and I had just put him into the American category, and he has this Lebanese background. Or I go to a camp trip with my son's class and I am talking to a woman who I think is American and it turns out that her background is Greek and you think, you have to open yourself to not assuming that, "They are all the Americans and I am the immigrant." We all have these home cultures, these other cultures within us, and I think sometimes I am so ready to assume that other people lack that. You make personal contact, you find that they have other places within them too.

**Marjorie:** I remember one of the few stories my father told us of when he was a young medical student at the University of Chile, in Santiago. One of his many foes told people not to speak to him, a landless Jew. The emblematic condition of the Jew as an errant, lost, and wandering soul has been part of the Western collective imaginary. But we have to examine this concept in greater depth. That is why I ask my friends what place they consider their homeland.

Ruth Behar

**Ruth:** I think about that a lot because, you know I don't want to be a nationalist and I don't like the idea of "homeland or death," which is the Cuban motto. Homeland or death, I think that is terrible. I don't want to be a nationalist in any way, any kind of nationalist for any nation.

**Marjorie:** But, don't we need something we can call home? What is home to you?

**Ruth:** Different things. Home is my desk. It is my books. That's definitely home to me. When I am at my desk with my books I am home. It is not so much a country. I have to have books. The books I have read and loved and the new books that I am reading. Books are very important. Also, interior spaces are very important to me. My house is really home because it has everything I have brought back from the places where I have been. And now I collect art work from my friends in Cuba and all of that surrounds me. So, you sort of make home, these interior spaces, which are important to me. When I was in Miami, I felt very much at home because I had the ocean, I had my grandmother, and I had the Spanish language. I love that. I love being able to hear Spanish, to speak Spanish, and I felt very at home among the Cuban community there. Everybody had a story, a tragic story, about loss and separation, about mourning. And the Cuban sense of humor. I feel very at home with that Cuban sensibility of making fun of everything.

**Marjorie:** Ruth, when you speak about your interior landscape where you collect memories, you are very Cuban. How do you reclaim the past? What makes you so different that you write about Cuba?

**Ruth:** I don't know. The one thing I say a lot is that I feel that I owe my life to Cuba. That if my family hadn't gone to Cuba in the 1920s they would have definitely perished under the Nazis. My mother's family was originally from Poland and Russia; my father's family from Turkey. My father's family might have been OK, but not my mother's . . . Those members of the family who did not migrate to Cuba died during the Nazi invasion. So I know that would have been my fate too. Or actually, I would not have been born. And so, Cuba gave me my life, saved my life. Nobody else in my family looks at it that way. I look at it this way . . . Cuba was our refuge.

**Marjorie:** Then it is inevitable that we talk about nations as refuges, but I want to speak to you about the migration and history of your family. Your family really ventured into the unknown.

**Ruth:** My grandparents were Jews who settled in Cuba because anti-Semitic

immigration laws in the 1920s kept them out of this country. So I am Cuban because I am Jewish. But I am also Jewish because I am Cuban. The two diasporas are intertwined for me. I was able to calmly make my way through the Holocaust Museum in Washington, but when I came upon those piles and piles of suitcases, I fell apart weeping. And yet I am always traveling, packing or unpacking a suitcase.

**Marjorie:** Is travel for you a familiar encounter with the land and the ancestors? Is it also a way to renew ties? Here I am thinking about your return trips to Cuba and your involvement with young writers and painters.

**Ruth:** Well, maybe that is why I love going to Cuba so much, because I can connect there. There is no problem, you know? In the U.S. it is always a problem like, "Am I really Cuban? Am I really Latina? Am I really a woman of color?" I mean, I want to be with women of color. I think it is a privilege that I could be with a group of women that are black. I am "of color" here, but I'm not black. Women who are black could include me in their group, but then I also have to acknowledge, "Wait a minute, I haven't had to deal with the kinds of racist issues that black women deal with, so can you accept my being part of this group?" Those are my worries, but if they accept me, then I want to be there, and so I am glad that being Cuban gives me the possibility of being a woman of color in this country. But I know that in Cuba I am not a woman of color. I am a white woman, but I can be Jewish *and* Cuban in Cuba. As an anthropologist I worked in Spain and in Mexico and I was always afraid to tell people I was Jewish.

**Marjorie:** In Spain and Mexico, places that you have visited and written so much about?

**Ruth:** Yes. In Spain because I worked in a little village in northern Spain that was very traditional and very Catholic and I went there as a very young woman in my early twenties and I thought that as an anthropologist what I had to do was to be like them. So I would go to church. I would attend mass. I learned to recite the rosary, you know, and I did not tell people that I was Jewish and I went back several times and I kept thinking, "Now I will tell them. Now I will tell them." But I did not. I suffered mainly because I thought I was being dishonest with these people who had given me so much of their time and their lives and I had never been straight with them.

**Marjorie:** Do you think they would have rejected you?

**Ruth:** I don't know. I really don't know. What I feel bad about is that I hadn't



done it from the beginning, and then it was something that ended up weighing on me. Should I or shouldn't I? I felt like a *conversa*, you know, in Spain, hiding ...<sup>2</sup>

**Marjorie:** Ruth, your Cuban family does not really exist anymore. It has forged a new identity. How do you feel about going back to your *nana*, the woman who cared for you as a child?

**Ruth:** Wonderful. I want to write about her. She is one of the most important people to me in my whole life, because we left when I was so young. She knows me.

**Marjorie:** Tell me about that relationship.

**Ruth:** She never stopped thinking about me, which is the other amazing thing. And she told me stories about when I was a little girl that my mother never told me, so she has a knowledge of me because she was the one who was with me when I was a little child, day after day, not my mother. There are things that she knows about me that are very strong and very important.

**Marjorie:** So going back is a way of recapturing that past for you?

**Ruth:** Well, that and being all the things I am without contradiction. Like I am Jewish, that is fine. I am Cuban, that is fine too. They know my father was of Turkish background and my mother was Polish and Russian and it is OK. Cuba is also very special. I bet the revolution had a lot do with that. The level of political awareness and social awareness is very strong there. People understand that there was a Jewish immigration and people understand the past and it's not something strange to them. Maybe if I was in a very tiny town in the mountains of Cuba it wouldn't be like that, but in Havana ... Havana is very cosmopolitan.

**Marjorie:** What about this country? It is supposed to be a country of immigrants, but it seems to not understand them.

**Ruth:** It's because things here are reduced to black and white racial politics. And then, also it's the desire to order and rationalize the world. So there are these boxes and the boxes don't allow for multiple identities; they only allow for a single identity at a time.

**Marjorie:** So, do you have conflicting identities all the time? Immigrant, Jewish, Cuban, professor ... Does the immigrant experience enrich you and also maybe drive you crazy?

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**Ruth:** I don't think it drives me crazy . . . I think it is a source of energy, actually. Because I was young, the trauma is more, "Can I recover it?" instead of, "Did I lose it?" I was so young, I think that the trauma is having been a child, an immigrant child, who did not know English and I was just put in a public school where I had to figure out how to make it. My parents could not help me.

**Marjorie:** Did they put you in the "dumb class"?

**Ruth:** They put me in the "dumb class" in second grade and I was with the slightly retarded children, the slow learners, and also with a Japanese immigrant boy. But I think that was good for me, because I decided that those kids were kids just like me too. They weren't better or worse, they were just kids. So I think that's what I am grateful for. Compassion is very important to me, that's what I strive for, to be compassionate.

**Marjorie:** Then maybe being an immigrant has allowed you to have a certain awareness . . . to place yourself in someone else's skin. That happens to me constantly and I feel a strong kinship with the boat people and the displaced women in refugee camps. This empathy is also part of what you call compassion.

**Ruth:** Yes, yes. I also think that there is a lot of compassion in this country if you can connect with certain people and certain groups. For example, a friend of mine had an incredible conference last year at Michigan. It was about disability—art and disability. There was a woman who had no arms and she was a spectacular performance artist. She came out naked and said: "Here I am, you can examine me just the way the doctors did. See my disability?" And it was so strong, because I went to this conference and a few days later I had to go to Cuba and I thought, this is amazing, this country has given me something—*this* country. This could not have happened anywhere, I mean, anywhere else, this desire to have compassion. I was so moved, I gave a talk there, because I broke my femur at the age of nine in New York and I was in a body cast for a year, I was in bed the whole year and could not walk.

**Marjorie:** A whole year?

**Ruth:** And so it gave me a sense of what it might be like to be disabled. The nurses did not want to help me because they said, "Forget it, if she doesn't walk, she doesn't walk." Then, finally I had a tough nurse who forced me to learn to walk when I was terribly afraid, and because of that experience, I have always had a lot of compassion for people with disabilities, especially those involving walking. You know, I had the body cast so that my legs would grow at the same rate and I was only nine, so they thought if they only put the cast on

one leg it might end up shorter than the other. Whenever I see people who have that problem, with one leg shorter than the other one, and they are wearing this big heel, I think, "That might have been me." I see someone with an amputated leg and I think, "That might have been me too." The experience gave me a sense of compassion. So I gave my paper at this disability conference and I thought, "What are these people going to think? I'm not disabled anymore." I saw people who had problems with their legs . . . all the things I had been terrified of and there they were. They were great artists, great writers, and great people and I thought they would think I was just some stupid person complaining about a broken leg. And they came and spoke to me. I thought that was compassionate of them. They could have said, "You're not the one with the real disability," but they did not do that. They came up to me and said, "That was good. That spoke to me." So that was compassion. I thought to myself, "This is really where I want to be." I see things like that. And it was really very strong for me because I was going to Cuba afterwards and thinking, "Cuba is really my country," but I had been at this event and that was wonderful too. I really couldn't have experienced this anywhere else.

**Marjorie:** Do you think being an immigrant allows you also at one point to really love the country you have to live in?

**Ruth:** That's interesting. You know, I rebelled against that attitude because that was definitely my parents' attitude.

**Marjorie:** To be thankful and grateful?

**Ruth:** To be very thankful, to always say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." And I guess I rebelled against that and said, "Yeah, but why are we here?" We're here because we symbolized the triumph of capitalism, so we were handy for this country; we were handy immigrants to have, so I don't have to be thankful. They used us since we were symbols for them of the cold war struggle between capitalism and socialism. So why do we owe anything? I felt that for a very long time, the rejection was very strong. I rejected my parents' attitude and therefore America. I did not want to accept this country because I did not want to be a patriot. I think of myself as very disloyal to institutions and countries. I don't want to have to salute any country. And with my parents it was so strong, especially with my father . . . I mean he loves to wear U.S.A. T-shirts and things like that.

**Marjorie:** Kind of like Matilde Salganicoff . . . her mother sent her tapes of Argentine national anthems. So, your father feels he is a patriot, but an American patriot?

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**Ruth:** Totally. My father does not realize he is being discriminated against. He speaks with a very strong accent. He is viewed as a Latino. He looks like García Márquez. He has this big mustache and he has just a lot of Cuban/Latin American style about him. All that comes from the Sephardic part of his identity, which has become very important to him in the last few years. But he does not realize that he is being discriminated against when he is treated as less than a full citizen. He does not see that. It is denial, he wants to accept this country so it will accept him.

**Marjorie:** And you? Have you totally accepted this country?

**Ruth:** I think I am getting close to accepting it more.

**Marjorie:** Because of your age?

**Ruth:** Age might have something to do with it, but I tell you, I was very, very enchanted by Miami and I thought well, this could be the place for me because it's here but it's not really here. It's a place that has Spanish as its language, there's a whole way of being Latino or Latin American. There is a way of not following the rules there that I like . . . Plus, there is the ocean . . .

**Marjorie:** Now I can get closer to ask you what I have always wanted to know. This is a question I constantly ask. Tell me Ruth, what city would you like to sleep in?

**Ruth:** I don't know which city I would choose, maybe Havana, but also New York, where I grew up, and maybe Ocean Drive, in Miami Beach. I have good memories of vacations at the beach, and Istanbul, which I visited a few years ago, I was fascinated by it. Madrid is full of memories for me, especially the Museo del Prado, the basement where I used to go see Goya's black paintings. I would like to, if possible, mix and match my favorite streets in various cities and create my own geography.

**Marjorie:** Maybe you would choose Havana then?

**Ruth:** Havana would be nice. I had a very strange response when I went to the Jewish cemetery in Guanabacoa, which is right outside of Havana, and I thought, this is where I would want to sleep eternally. That is where I want to be buried. I had that feeling when I saw the cemetery . . .

**Marjorie:** Of all the places that you have loved, the cities and the people, what makes you feel most nostalgic?

**Ruth:** We are not supposed to want to be nostalgic. It's sort of a bad thing, but I don't know. I sometimes feel nostalgia for those early immigrant years because the family was very close. We all lived in the same apartment building. My family was all there, my parents, me and my brother, Mori, my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins. We were all in one building. Sometimes I am nostalgic for those years when that unity was so strong. My parents, my brother, and I have really broken down as a family. This country broke us down. It's a lot of different things. It's very complicated. For example, with my brother I felt that everything, for a long time, depended on me. I had to make the phone calls, I had to visit him, and I reached a point where I got tired and I said, "If you want the relationship *you* keep it up now." And it all kind of fell apart.

**Marjorie:** Who are you, Ruth? Do you define yourself as an immigrant? In what landscape do you feel free? I have made a certain peace with myself by accepting the fact that I do not belong and in that I have some freedom.

**Ruth:** All those things—being Jewish, Cuban, U.S. immigrant, and an anthropologist too—everything is there in me in a very poetic way. I don't always identify with the discipline of anthropology, but I identify with the poetry of anthropology as an identity of never being quite sure if this is where you want to be. What I am trying to learn now is how to be in the present . . . because I am so swept up by memory. I get lost . . . I think that being an immigrant is always about thinking about the past, being in the past, and to finally stop being an immigrant, you have to be willing to be in the present.

**Marjorie:** What does it mean to be in the present?

**Ruth:** To be in the present is to be where you are. To be in whatever place you are and accept it as it is. This is it . . . It means to be part of a community. I think, for me, it's a search for ways to identify with people that I am convinced at the beginning I have nothing to do with . . . that's what I have been striving for.

**Marjorie:** Do you think being in the present means being able to say, "enough of being the outsider"?

**Ruth:** I think so . . . I think it's a little bit of that, also getting over a certain kind of snobbiness that I think I had—maybe this is too strong—but aloof. I was aloof, I would go off and think . . .

**Marjorie:** Is this shyness too?

**Ruth:** Shyness too, yes. Maybe it was a fear that you won't have something to

give. There is always that insecurity that you feel and at the same time (you will understand this since you are a writer too) I have a need for solitude, but sometimes other people take that away from you. Sometimes you really *want* that distance. What I find is that if you connect with people, they give you so much. They give you their stories and that's what you want as a writer . . . you want their stories. If you keep putting a distance, you don't get the stories and you want them . . . they are all interesting. I think I used to be very small-minded, I used to think only *some* stories were interesting and now I think *all* stories are interesting, and that I underestimated people I met and I did not think they had anything to give me and they do. I think that's what has been important to me now. I think that is making me a better writer, that I am *willing* to see everybody's story as interesting.

**Marjorie:** Also, you are willing to give everyone a chance. I also want to ask how being Jewish has influenced you. What does it mean for you to be Jewish?

**Ruth:** Many things, so many different things . . . It's hard to know where to start with that. Definitely the Sephardic part of my identity is strong because it means being able to link being Jewish with speaking Spanish. So that is very important to me: the identity. Sephardic music and poetry gives me a lot of energy, and when I went to Turkey a few years ago, I picked up on a lot of Sephardic poetry written in Ladino and that was extremely important to me, to have that, and to know it goes back so many centuries. It's not just from Cuba, in fact, it is older and it goes back to Spain. And also that connection to Spain and being a Jew from a Spanish-speaking country is very strong. So even when I am speaking Spanish, it reminds me that I am Spanish, too, because I have that from being Jewish more than anything else. I do also have, and this I have learned in this country, the tradition of Jewishness and social justice being things that are linked together. It has nothing to do with religion, but again, with the desire for compassion and community and so I have learned from reading and meeting Jewish people in the U.S. who are on the left and who have taught me a lot. At home we maintain certain rituals. David loves to make bread, so he makes challah. Every Friday he makes challah and I light the candles. I want to at least have that, those small but significant traditions.

**Marjorie:** What do you think about when you light the candles?

**Ruth:** Just gratitude for life. Life, light . . .

**Marjorie:** So you are grateful for Gabriel and the things of the earth?

**Ruth:** Gabriel and David. It's the three of us when we do that. I am connecting with them. I am grateful to them and what they give me. My two "boys" and

definitely connecting with that longer tradition. I am also fascinated by the Old Testament, the stories fascinate me, and that's important. Hebrew still has a kind of power over me.

**Marjorie:** The language? The prayers?

**Ruth:** The language, the look of the language, the letters. When I see something in Hebrew . . . and Ladino is very wonderful because it's Hebrew letters, but it's Spanish, and these Hebrew letters are saying something to you in Spanish. It's an amazing thing . . . It's powerful. It's gorgeous. It's wonderful and the chanting for me always is emotional and moving, particularly what moves me in the whole Jewish calendar, in the liturgy, is the Abraham and Isaac story of Rosh Hashannah.

**Marjorie:** Of the sacrifice?

**Ruth:** That sacrifice of Isaac always, always, always moves me tremendously, emotionally; it's very strong for me. My problem with Jewishness is that the way my parents taught it to us was always very . . . it was an obligation . . . *un compromiso*. Cuban Spanish has that sense of "duty" and obligation. We have to do this because other people want to know if we are doing it. So, for example, my brother does not want to have anything to do with Jewish practice.

**Marjorie:** Is he married? What is his family life like?

**Ruth:** Yes, he is married to a Jewish woman from Philadelphia who is very connected to her Jewish identity, but he . . . because it was always something that was very much for other people . . . You were not doing it because you loved it, but because if you did not do it, what would the others say . . . It was such a bad way of doing things. We did so many things like that. My parents were very much into obligation, and so the beauty of Jewishness seemed so forced. They did not show their love for it, or so it seemed.

**Marjorie:** So are you again rebuilding that in your own house with David and Gabriel?

**Ruth:** I am trying with Gabriel. He goes to Hebrew school, which he does not love, but I notice when he does not think I am listening he hums songs that he has learned in Hebrew school. So, it's hard because I don't want to force it on him, but I don't want him to grow up ignorant either. The most beautiful thing happened when we were in Miami for a semester's visit. I had decided not to put him in Hebrew school there because there were so many new things to cope with, a new public school . . . My grandmother said that she had a friend

who had been a Hebrew school teacher. She was eighty-eight years old and she started teaching Gabriel. Once a week we would go to Frida Salesky's house in Miami and it was a beautiful experience for her, for Gabriel, and for me. She taught him prayers; hers is the old school, where you repeat it and repeat it and at first Gabriel hated it, but by the time he was done, he loved it, and she kept saying to him, "You are my last student. You are my last student." She didn't want me to pay her. She did not want any money. She said, "I will not teach for money." I asked her if I could make a donation in her name to the Cuban-Hebrew synagogue and she said yes. And I made a donation that was much bigger than she thought it would be and she was very, very honored. That was beautiful. I thought it was a great way to bring Gabriel to Hebrew, to Jewishness, to this gift from this old, old woman who could barely see. It was a strain for her to do this, her health was not great, and she gave him a great gift. I kept telling him that this was a gift: "Gabriel, you have to recognize this because you got this from such an older person." And he did. He was very loving with her and that made me feel good, knowing that there was such a special bond between that older generation (someone who had migrated from Cuba) and Gabriel, born here in Michigan.

**Marjorie:** How do you dream and where do you return to when you think about your childhood?

**Ruth:** I dream in two languages—English and Spanish. But for the most part it's images that I remember and some hard-to-define things like desire and fear. A Sephardic Jew can always return to Spain and feel some nostalgia. It happened to me, although returning is always somewhat bitter (you'll see in my essay "The Story of Ruth"). I return to the Sephardic songs and they always bring up strong emotions. I think that we return to that language—Ladino—to the ancient Spanish, tender, sad, and which was maintained in Turkey and other countries to which the Spanish Jews moved when they were exiled.

**Marjorie:** In your book you are a "translated woman." How do you feel about yourself, about living in multiple identities?

**Ruth:** Well, it's hard because, is there an original? I mean, that is a question that people are asking. There is a book by a Cuban poet called *Translations without Originals* and now I think, well, which is the original? I mean, if we all exist in translation, what am I worried about? I think just communication is an act of translation. You cannot be inside of me, I cannot be inside of you . . . We have to translate feelings, experiences, longings . . . all of that. So any effort at language, communication, or art is translation. It's all translation.