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Books

BOOK REVIEW

'Traveling Heavy' by Ruth Behar

By **Judy Bolton-Fasman** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 07, 2013

So much of Ruth Behar's life story resonates with me. My mother is Cuban, and to paraphrase Winston Churchill, I may be half Cuban and half American, but there are so many times I feel completely Cuban. When I finally went to Cuba last fall, it was like returning to a place to which I had never been. I am the Cubana that Ruth Behar describes in her fascinating new memoir, "Traveling Heavy: A Memoir in Between Journeys," one that is part of an "intensely diasporic people."

Behar was born in Cuba in 1957 and left the island as a small child. By any measure she is an American success story. With a PhD from Princeton University, Behar is a self-described anthropologist who "specializes in homesickness." She's also a MacArthur grantee and a chaired professor at the University of Michigan who has been recognized for her groundbreaking work in Spain and Mexico. Like me, she's the offspring of the union of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish families.

Behar introduces the reader to her dual ancestry with talismans of Jewish and Cuban heritages and old family photographs. She writes, "In Cuba, the union of my mother, the daughter of polacos, and my father, the son of turcos, was viewed as practically an intermarriage." That displacement within her own people forges a unique empathy for the communities that she studies and their stories that she records.

As a young graduate student Behar was assigned to a village in Central Spain, a country that is one of the "many abandoned places" in her history. Like my mother, Behar's father traces his lineage back to medieval Spain. Yet on that early trip she hid her Judaism.

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"An instinct of fear and self-preservation had led me to decide not to reveal to the village people that I was Jewish. . . . I figured they'd be more deeply shocked to discover I was a descendant of the expelled Jews of Spain."

**TRAVELING HEAVY: A
Memoir in Between
Journeys**

Three decades later, Behar returns to Spain as a proud Jew for the worldwide reunion of the Behar clan in Béjar, home to a notable Jewish community before 1492. In what she describes as the first world summit of Behars, she meets people with her surname who came from North America to Australia and she finally lays claim to her Sephardic roots. In Spain she and her fellow Behars “travel light, letting ourselves be blown back to our scattered destinations.”

Ruth Behar

Author: Duke University

Publisher: 225 pp

Number of pages: \$23.95

Book price:

But in Poland, another homeland, she travels heavy. Her beloved grandmother, Baba, entrusts her with a thick memorial book from Goworowo, a town near Krakow. The book details a community annihilated by the Nazis, and includes her great-grandfather’s unpublished memoir. Knowing that her granddaughter the anthropologist is also a chronicler of family lore, Baba entrusts the book to Behar, and she takes it with her on her misty, gray tour of Poland as both a guide and talisman.

But Cuba is where Behar travels light with happy memories. Compared to the heaviness of Poland, Cuba is a place that she says, “resonates with joyous images of cigars, mojitos, salsa dancing and pristine beaches. . . . Cuba is seen as a multicultural Caribbean island where Jews were never persecuted.”

Although the majority of Jews left Cuba in the years after Castro took power, there remained a remnant community, which over the past decades has been revived due to the largesse of the American Jewish community. Behar looks at the revitalization of Cuban Jewish life as an anthropologist, but her personal journey back to the island she left as a little girl is the heart of this “memoir I snuck in, between journeys.”

Judy Bolton-Fasman is a columnist for the Jewish Advocate and can be reached at www.thejudychronicles.com.

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