The Ghost of Hagar

I searched for hagar in the desert and in the land, and all I could find were traces of where she had passed. My journey took me further and further from home, and as I passed through the towns where she had gone, I saw written in graffiti on the walls, you are not one of us. The message was repeated, on shores, in the poor parts of towns, even sometimes on the walls of caves or on the oasis trees. Eventually they became my landmarks when I felt uncertain about the wisdom of continuing for so long. I dreamed of hagar, and her little boy Ishmael. I knew I would recognize her; I saw the signs that pointed where she was headed. Many had seen her the first time when she had been expelled, but sent back by the angel to rejoin Abraham and Sarah. This was the definitive journey, with no turning back. From the desert of Beersheba to Paran, from oasis to desert oasis, until finally, south where the boy had grown old enough to be a man, to need a wife. Egypt, Misra, where god freed Israel from the pharaoh.

The coast of Egypt runs west through Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, to the sea. Along the coast the fishermen set out into the Mediterranean every day. Some sail far out, and can sight Lampedusa, and many other islands that lie between Africa and Europe. It is a short hop for some to the mainland. People fleeing north would imagine a short boat trip could save them. Many do not make it. Now Italy is turning them back.

During World War II many European jews, and communists, and intellectuals, some children like our walter kron, some desperate, fled from the Nazis. They tried to reach north Africa, or Spain and hopefully a boat leaving the continent. I knew a few of those people, and knew of many others who were able to reach Marseilles, and then headed for Port Bou across the French border. If they could cross the Pyrenees it would be possible to move on to Gibraltar, to be saved by the Spanish or British or Moroccans. Or to the lands where the the jews had been welcomed and lived since the Inquisition and before. To Tunis. To Alger. To Fez. To Alexandria.

I knew Hagar had to pass through one of the ports if she was to save her son from those who pursued them in the desert. At some point she wouldn’t be alone and others would be there to help her. It wasn’t easy. And the traces grew faint. I didn’t quit looking. After all, it was my job to be telling her not to be afraid, to tell her that god had heard her son’s cries, to show her the way to the water, and the way that led past Abimelech and Phicol, his general.

The first sign was the etching on the stones of Abraham’s oath to Abimelech that he would not seek to harm his son or grandson, that the well was now Abraham’s after he had paid for it with his flocks and cattle, in testimony of which they both swore and named the place Beersheba. There, shortly before, Abraham’s son Ishmael had passed with his mother as they were dying of thirst in the desert. There Abraham planted his eishel, his orchard, and lived in the land of the Philistines, until he too learned he was not welcome and would have to move on.

Hagar’s ghost showed him the signs and markers where they could flee. They came, eventually, to Port Bou where her shadow crossed the French refugees, and rested one night as they were told the following stories.

Was it one night or another? The great intellectuals of the thirties were formed under Heidegger, in the twenties and thirties. His school produced Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin. Jews. Arendt briefly became his mistress. Then the Nazis came to power; the jews were gradually driven out. Arendt, like Simon Weil, the French intellectual, wound up arrested by the Gestapo. Released she fled and wound up in France. When Germany invaded France in 1940 she was detained by the French as an alien, despite having being stripped of her German citizenship in 1937. She escaped and made her way to the United States in 1941 via Portugal. In New York she was safe, and stayed, wrote The Origins of Totalitarianism, and Eichmann in Jerusalem.

She had married Gunther Stern, a Jew, in 1929. As a Jew in Nazi Germany, Arendt was prevented from making a living and discriminated against. By 1933, life for the Jewish population in Germany was becoming precarious. Hitler became [Chancellor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chancellor_of_Germany) in January, and the Reichstag was burned down. Her husband, Stern, with his communist associations fled to Paris, but Arendt stayed on to become an activist. She knew her time was limited, using their Berlin apartment as a waystation for fugitives. Eventually she was arrested by the Gestapo, was released, and fled to Czechoslovakia, before rejoining her husband in Paris. Two steps away were her mother, and the ghost of Hagar. She rejoined her husband in Paris in 1933, where she befriended Benjamin, now considered one of the major thinkers of the 20th century. Another Jew.

On May 5, 1940, in anticipation of the Germany invasion of France, the Gouverneur général of Paris issued a proclamation ordering all "enemy aliens" between 17 and 55, who had come from Germany (predominantly Jews) to report separately for internment. The women were gathered together in the *Vélodrome d'Hiver* on May 15. Hannah's mother, being over 55 was allowed to stay in Paris. She described the process of making refugees as "the new type of human being created by contemporary history...put into concentration camps by their foes and into internment camps by their friends".Arendt was sent to Camp Gurs, in south-west France, close to the Spanish border. The camp had originally been set up to accommodate refugees from Spain. Gurs was in the southern Vichy controlled section. In the ensuing chaos she managed to obtain papers enabling her to leave the camp, with about 200 of the 7,000 women held there. There was no *Résistance* then, but she managed to walk and hitchhike north to Montauban, where she knew she would find help. Montauban had become an unofficial capital for former detainees, and she managed to secure visas and cross the border into Spain. Visas were being illegally issued by the American diplomat Hiram Bingham, who aided roughly 2,500 Jewish refugees in this way. Varian Fry, another American humanitarian, paid for their travel and helped obtain the visas. From Spain Arendt traveled to Lisbon, Portugal and eventually secured a passage to New York with her mother in 1941.

She escaped, just barely, leaving Hagar’s ghost behind at the frontier. When Walter Benjamin arrived at Port Bou in September of 1940, shortly after Arendt, after a difficult climb over the mountain passes, he was re-arrested by the Spanish police, who intended to return him to France the next day. He committed suicide in despair; but his writings had been handed earlier to Arendt in Marseilles, thanks to Hagar’s ghost, and today we study and teach the great Benjamin.

There were many others whom the ghost saved.

Simone Weil was another. A survivor of Auschwitz where she lost part of her family during the Holocaust she served as the first president of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, from 2000 to 2007and president of the European Parliament. She was elected to the Académie française in 2008. She was best known for pushing forward the law legalizing abortion in France on 17 January 1975. She and her husband were buried in the Panthéon on July 1, 2018, only the fifth woman accorded this honor. When she was buried, there was Hagar’s ghost.

There are many others I could cite; but many many of those women are anonymous; a Syrian Kurdish woman whose child was washed up on the beaches of Turkey. The image of his body broke the hearts of those who still had the compassion of a mother who could weep at the desperate thirst of her son in the desert. The desperate Afghan woman whose daughter had been threatened with acid when she refused to marry, and had fled to Bulgaria, only to find barbed wire fences. Hagar’s ghost showed her the opening she herself had cut when fleeing with Ishmael earlier. The Eritrean woman, the Nigerian woman, the Libyan woman, the Iraki woman, the women of Raqqah who fled with their children when Assad’s forces retook the town from Isis; the woman of Kobane, the northern Syrian town held by the Kurds in resistance to Isis. Those who escaped joined 400,000 Kurds who fled to Turkey.

Only a ghost could tell you about all those women who fled, who survived with their children, and who made their way over the passes, through the barbed wire of the camps, across the borders, into a zone of safety. Someone heard their cries. Here are the words that paved the path for Hagar’s ghost:

15And the water was depleted from the leather pouch, and she cast the child under one of the bushes.

16And she went and sat down from afar, at about the distance of two bowshots, for she said, "Let me not see the child's death." And she sat from afar, and she raised her voice and wept.

17And God heard the lad's voice, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is troubling you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the lad's voice in the place where he is.

The angel who heard the lad’s voice reminded god that the one who raised her voice and wept was called Hagar. We remember our ancestors today. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sara, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. But if we listen to the voices of these women, we can also hear the silent weeping of Hagar, like that of Hannah, and then, if we do, the least we can do is remember what Abraham had done: “And Abraham arose early in the morning, and he took bread and a leather pouch of water, and he gave [them] to Hagar, he placed [them] on her shoulder, and the child.”

He then sent her away. Now it is our turn, and we can do better.

“And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she went and filled the pouch with water and gave the lad to drink.”

Hag sameach