



An intriguing epitaph

How did a Jewish woman and a Roman man fall in love?

By Judith Sudilovsky

TEN YEARS ago over a sushi dinner one night in Tel Aviv with friends, Lori Banov Kaufmann found her mojo.

Kaufmann had spent most of her professional career in business, working as a strategic consultant for a hi-tech company commercializing military technology for civilian use, but secretly harbored a desire to write fiction, though had not yet found a story compelling enough for her.

That evening, things were about to change.

One of her friends, Tel Aviv University history professor Jonathan Price, was involved in a project cataloging inscriptions of the ancient world concentrating on first century ossuaries buried in caves in Israel and was describing the work to his dining companions.

Then he mentioned an inscription on a gravestone of a Jewish woman found in southern Italy: “Claudia Aster, prisoner from Jerusalem. Tiberius Claudius Proculus, imperial freedman, took care (of the epitaph). I ask you, make sure through the law that you take care that no-one casts down my inscription. She lived 25 years.”

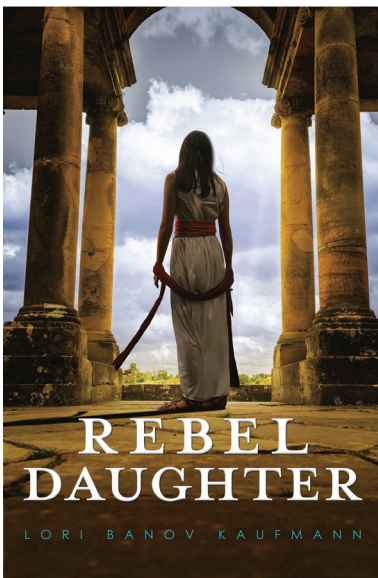
Price mentioned that this epitaph, which has been known since 1761 and centuries later in 1996 rediscovered in the basement of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, was of particular importance not only because it is the first archaeological corroboration that Jewish slaves had been taken to Rome after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, but it also revealed a very unlikely love story between a Roman freeman and his former slave. Aster is believed to be a Romanized version of the Jewish name Esther.

The actual headstone is now displayed as part of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Italian Judaism and the Holocaust in the northern Italian city of Ferrara.

“As soon as I heard about this inscription, I wanted to know more,” says Kaufmann, 61, who eventually quit consulting in favor of full-time writing. “It was the gravestone of a Jewish woman who had been taken captive after the fall of the Second Temple and sold as a slave in Rome, and she was set free by her owner who had fallen in love with her. He put up this gravestone. I wanted to know more about who this woman was, and how did a Jewish woman and a Roman man whose peoples were fierce enemies fall in love?”

That question set Kaufmann off on a decade-long odyssey of

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The cover of Kaufmann’s book

research and writing, concluding in the recently published novel, *Rebel Daughter* as a cross-over young adult/adult fictionalized account of the love story between Esther, a young Jewish woman, and Tiberius Claudius, a Roman freeman, beginning just at the tumultuous cusp of the Jewish revolt which culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple.

From the short inscription that included her name, it is known that Claudia Aster was a freed slave because it was the practice to give a freed slave the middle name of their former owner, Kaufmann noted.

“There was no reason for (Tiberius Claudius) to free her unless he loved her,” she said.

In this imagined coming of age story young Esther, daughter of Temple priest Hanan, must grapple not only with her own internal dilemmas as she faces an unwanted arranged marriage while pining for the fictionalized character of the real-life Josephus Flavius – the controversial Jewish general turned historian – but also with complex family dynamics and the violent unrest in Jerusalem just prior to the doomed revolt.

A fan of historical fiction, Kaufmann said growing up in Charleston, South Carolina, usually meant reading World War II fiction and sometimes Civil War fiction. She had a lot of catching up to do to get up to speed on first century Jerusalem. She set about reading every book she could get her hands on, reaching out to scholars, archaeologists and professors of the era, and pounding the streets of Jerusalem’s Old City and its archaeological remains to imbue her book with the feel of the ancient city.

“It gives you chills to be walking on the same exact stones that your characters from 2000 years ago would have walked on,” said Kaufmann. “Even today you can see the excavated tunnel where the Jews fled when the Romans were coming after them during the battle for the fall of the Temple.”

In the drainage tunnels where Jews escaped, archaeologists found ancient coins, cooking pots and other artifacts from that period, Kaufmann noted, and she used those images in her book.

“The research process was obsessive, to put it mildly,” Kaufmann added, reflecting on her trajectory. “But I felt a commitment to tell this story. I felt a commitment to these real life characters to portray them as accurately as possible and to portray the first century as authentically as I could. I worked and consulted with many world

class archaeologists and scholars on everything: from first century magic, to the food they ate and how the houses looked like as well as on the details of the historical events.”

Though as a writer that may have not been the best choice, she felt an obligation to the real-life characters – as well as to the readers – she said. Still, she acknowledges now, she may have been writing more with an eye to the scholars than to fans of historical fiction.

“I know when I read historical fiction the first thing I want to know afterwards is how much of the book is true. I always feel disappointed when I find out the writer changed history to tell their story,” Kaufmann says. “I think the truth is interesting enough that it can stand on its own while obviously there is so much we don’t know and have to make up. But what I did know and what I could know, I didn’t want to change.”

After doing her homework on the historical time period, she began the process of writing her story, using voices which are largely not recorded in historical accounts.

“There are a lot of forgotten voices in history: women, children, and we have to have a historical imagination to bring these people back to life. So I did spend time wondering what it would be like for a young woman living through these events. There is a lot of imagination that an author has to use to recreate these experiences. They are important voices and it is important to try to look at historical events through the eyes of the participants not only as scholars looking down... from a geopolitical perspective but from a personal perspective. That was challenging but fun for me.”

In writing and researching the book, Kaufmann says she realized three things: First, that the first century was perhaps one of the most fascinating and momentous eras not only in Jewish history but in all of human history because it was the period when Judaism changed from a temple-based religion to a community, prayer-based religion and also is the time when Christianity developed.

Because of this, *Rebel Daughter* has altogether unexpectedly found enthusiastic readers among Christian audiences, she said. Now together with Price – the professor who got her hooked on the story – she has been participating in webinar parlor meetings to talk about the book and the historical period with Christian groups as well as Jewish groups.

The book has been nominated for a 2021 “Christy Award” given by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, and is also listed on the Jewish Book Council website.

“Christians are really liking the book. It turns out that the fall of the Second Temple in the first century is a very important period for Christians as well. They are intensely interested in the first century because that is the time when Jesus lived,” she says.



Lori Banov Kaufmann

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The second thing she came to realize by delving more into the history of the time period, she says, is that much of what she had learned about the first century rebellion was wrong.

“For Judea to rebel against Rome in the first century was not an act of patriotism; it was an act of religious fanaticism and delusional,” she said. “Judea was a small province on the eastern edge of the great and mighty Roman Empire and to declare war on Rome when you have no army at all is not a good idea. They truly believed that God was on their side and they would prevail. This led to the destruction of Jerusalem.”

The third thing that really struck her in the writing of the book, she said, was while looking back on the historical events from her own modern vantage point, she couldn’t help but see parallels with the civil discord within Jewish society today.

“The ‘*sinat hinam*,’ baseless hatred (mentioned in the Talmud) is why the Temple fell.

The Jews themselves were fighting amongst themselves. In the story I tell in *Rebel Daughter* different factions are murdering each other... burning other groups’ food stores. That is the reason why people starved during the siege of Jerusalem... A lot of what we know about this is from the eyewitness account of Josephus...he wrote about this so we know it happened,” Kaufmann says.

Sadly, she says while much has changed in these past thousands of years, people have very much remained the same.

“The fact that religious fanaticism and civil war are still relevant today is very telling about human nature,” she says.

As long as it took her to write the manuscript, it took Kaufmann only a few short weeks to find an agent as well as a publisher for the book.

“Most of the readers of the book have been adults who love serious historical fiction. But I think younger readers can relate because there is young protagonist who is determined to take charge of her own life,” says Kaufmann, who is now milling around an idea for a second novel based on the life of her grandmother growing up in South Carolina at the turn of the century.

Though it was exciting to get the book into print, the most emotional moment for Kaufmann was when she was finally able to travel back to the USA in January two weeks after getting her second COVID-19 vaccine to present her 90-year-old father, who has advanced Parkinson’s disease, with a copy of the book.

“My father has been a real champion of this writing journey. He was just very overwhelmed and very excited and thrilled,” says Kaufmann, who dedicated the book to her father. “The biggest thrill was reading him the dedication. That was definitely the highlight of this whole publishing experience.” ■