

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *THE FRUIT OF HER HANDS*

I don't remember the first time my mother told me I was descended from a famous rabbi who lived in Europe in the 1200s. Although I never even asked her my ancestor's name, I stumbled across a reference to Meir of Rothenberg while researching my family tree. Living in the 21st century, I did what any curious historical novelist would do. I googled him.

What I discovered was fascinating. In 1242, a converted Jew named Nicholas Donin convinced the Pope and French royals to burn every copy of the Talmud in a Paris market square. My ancestor, then a Talmudic student, witnessed the burning. Devastated by the tragedy, he composed an elegy to the Talmud, "*Sha'ali Srufa*" or "O You, who burn in fire," which today is included as one of the liturgical laments in the annual Tisha B'av service that mourns the tragedies of Jewish history.

Meir settled in Rothenberg, founded a Jewish seminary, and became known throughout Europe for the wisdom of his letters responding to Talmudic questions. His writing was peppered with personality. For instance, when Jews were required to wear a clumsy "Jew hat," he wrote that they should be fastened with a strap on the Shabbat, so the wind wouldn't blow them off. For a 13th Century rabbi, Meir certainly had a lot of common sense!

Toward the end of Meir's life, Rudolph I of Hapsburg sought to bind his Jews to him through travel restrictions and harsh taxes. Meir and his followers fled Germany. But Meir was recognized, captured and held for ransom. Rudolph refused to free him unless German Jews accepted the royal decree. Meir refused and remained in prison for the rest of his life.

I felt this was a compelling story that more people should know about. Yet I struggled to bring Meir to life. It was not until I created Shira — a wholly invented character — that I felt I could encompass the man's fascinating life. Meir, a product of his age, sought to curtail women's religious rights. By pairing him with a curious and intelligent wife, I felt I could infuse the domestic side of Meir's character with vitality. I also used the character of Shira to incorporate a fictional love triangle — Shira's relationship with Nicholas Donin — into the plot line.

Shira's existence allowed me to explore yet another of the dark chapters of Jewish history. As I researched the time period, the horrific tale of a boy who drowned in a well in Lincoln, England and the resulting wave of anti-Semitic feeling that swept through the country took possession of me. Knowing that the Jews — unlike their Gentile neighbors — traveled widely during the Middle Ages both for study and trade, I sent one of the family's daughters to Lincoln so that her mother could visit her there.

In *The Fruit of Her Hands*, I explore not only mounting anti-Semitism in medieval Europe, but the traditions and love that allowed my ancestors and others to survive it.