

*Dear Malka,*

*"Be careful!" Papa yelled as I pulled myself up on top of the wall and dangled my feet over the side.*

*It was scary to be up so high, staring down at the wide blue sea. But I took a deep breath and felt a little braver.*

*I thought of you, Malka, and Mama and Bubbe and my brothers, how far you all still are from us. I wanted to stretch out my arms and give you a hug. But my sorrows were mixed with my joys. The sea was calm and peaceful and seemed to be whispering to me, I will bring your family to you. Soon, soon, soon.*

*Sending you all my love,*

*Esther*

## PRAISE FOR LETTERS FROM CUBA

**"A delightful, heartfelt book about holding on to who you are and where you're from when far from home, and the joys and benefits of welcoming other cultures and communities into your own."**

**—Alan Gratz, author of *Refugee***

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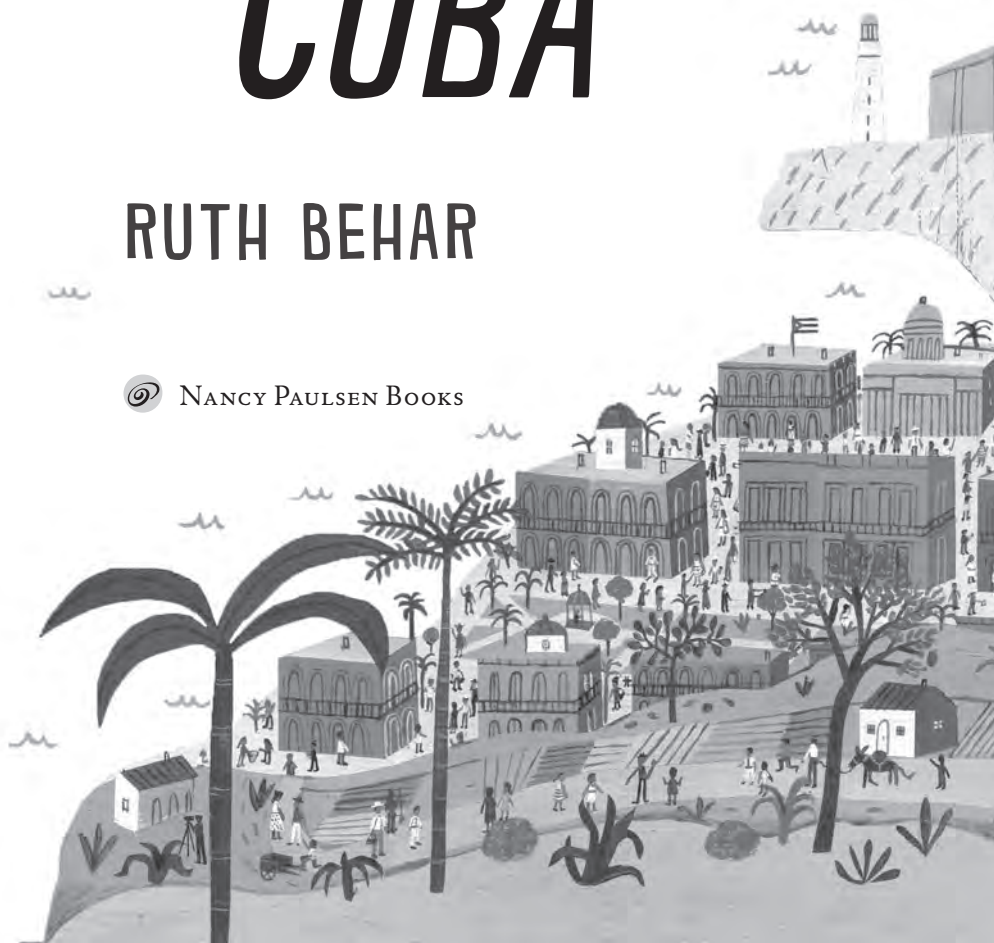
*ESTHER*

# *LETTERS FROM CUBA*

RUTH BEHAR



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“For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people?  
How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?”

Esther 8:6

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Yo vengo de todas partes,  
Y hacia todas partes voy:  
Arte soy entre las artes,  
En los montes, monte soy.

I come from many places,  
And to every place I go:  
I am art among the arts,  
And mountain among mountains.

José Martí, *Versos sencillos*  
(*Simple Verses*), 1891

## GOVOROV

December 2, 1937

*Dearest Papa,*

*I am writing to you out of desperation. I pray that my letter arrives safely in your hands so you will listen to my plea.*

*How is it possible we're still separated from you and that three years have passed since you left for Cuba? Would you recognize us today—your own family?*

*I could fill a river with my tears when I think of you being so far away. Mama worries we will never see you again. "Your papa is gone forever," she says. She scares my brothers and sister with those terrible words, but I promise them we'll be reunited.*

*You will be surprised to learn how much I've grown in the last year. I'm taller than Mama now (which I know isn't saying much). I try to do everything I can to help here. I go to the woods every day and cut balls of juniper for cooking. After school, I work two afternoons a week for Yoelke the baker, sweeping ashes and crumbs. He pays me with two loaves of rye bread so that for breakfast we have something to dip into the bit of milk our tired cow, Zisseleh, still gives us.*

*The other children help as much as they can, especially Malka. She reminds me of you because she's smart and studious and never complains. Every morning she warms the water for Bubbe so it won't be too cold when she washes up. Even the twins are old enough to help—you wouldn't recognize Eliezer and Chaim, since they were such babies when you left for Cuba. Today they collected three full buckets of berries with Moshe, who they look up to and call "Little Papa." This made Mama smile. She is beautiful when she smiles and her blue eyes sparkle.*

*I'm sad to say not a lot makes Mama smile anymore. It's getting harder and harder for us here in Poland, especially for me and Moshe and the twins, since we all share your dark hair and eyes. There is no chance we can pass for Polish as Mama and Malka often can. The Poles always know we are Jews. Some are kind, but some give us nasty looks and spit on the ground as we walk past. Yet I've seen them nod hello to Mama and Malka, as if they are more worthy, just because of how they look.*

*Mama is still angry about the loss of our store in Govorovo, and what happened was so unfair. Now that I'm older, I understand that the government overtaxed you and put you out of business just because we are Jewish. You had no choice but to leave Poland to find work and take care of all of us. I don't know what we'd do without the money you send us from Cuba.*

*I've been thinking a lot about all this. According to Jewish tradition, I will be an adult when I turn twelve in a few months.*



*The truth shouldn't be kept from me, which is why I'm upset that Mama tried to hide your letter. She knows how much I miss you, and I am always asking if you've written. I thought we hadn't heard from you in so long because the mail's unreliable these days, but then I found your letter squirreled away inside her shoe. I had gotten suspicious because suddenly we had a little bit of meat to eat with our potatoes and the money had to come from somewhere.*

*When I read your letter, I understood why Mama hid it. She didn't want me to know that you now have enough savings to bring only one of us to Cuba. Papa, you write that the child who should travel first is Moshe because he's the oldest of the boys and you think he'll be the most capable of helping you work. But I'm the eldest and stronger than you think. By birthright, it is I who should come. Please, Papa, choose me. Don't think less of me because I am a girl. I will help you show Mama that it wasn't a mistake for you to go to Cuba. I promise if you let me be the one to come first, I will work hard and make you proud.*

*I'm eager to see you, dear Papa, and hear your voice. Put your trust in me. I will not disappoint you.*

*Your loving daughter,*

*ESTHER*



## ON BOARD THE SHIP TO CUBA

*January 22, 1938*

Dear Malka,

Oh dear sister, I have been on the ship for three days and three nights and I still keep pinching myself, unable to believe I'm really on my way to Cuba! Even after I begged, I doubted Papa would choose me. I'm so grateful, but saying goodbye at the train station was the hardest thing I've ever done.

The tears in Bubbe's eyes left a hole in my heart. When she wiped my tears with her embroidered handkerchief, then gave it to me as a gift, I could barely hold myself together. I was surprised to see some tears from Moshe, Eliezer, and Chaim too. I guess they will miss me a little. Mama will too, I hope. I was touched when she gave me her silver thimble to remember her by, even though I know she's still angry with me for encouraging Papa to go to Cuba—but where else was he to go when the door to the United States had closed to Jewish refugees? I hugged her and told her I loved her, and all she said was “Tell your father we need him at home.”

But you, Malka, my treasured only sister, I know you will miss me as much as I'll miss you. I feel terrible that I won't be around to protect you at school. I hope you'll feel like I'm

there in spirit, urging you to stay smart and studious, even when jealous girls tease you. And if one of them hides your eyeglasses again, please tell Moshe!

I don't know what I will do without you and I'll be thinking of you every day. I promise to write down every interesting thing that happens while we're apart so that the hours, weeks, and months we're separated won't seem so painful. I'm beginning now, writing in this old accounting notebook of Papa's, and I will fill it up with letters from Cuba that I will save for you. Writing them will make the days bearable until you arrive. Then when you're finally here, we will read them together and it will be as if you were with me the whole time.

The train ride from Warsaw to Rotterdam was scary. I worried if I got up to go to the bathroom, another traveler would take my seat. I sat stiff as a doll and ate the hard-boiled egg you packed for me and barely had a sip of water. Mama had warned me to be careful around strangers, so I looked at no one and kept my eyes glued to the window. I felt happy and sad at the same time, seeing my own country as I was leaving it behind. Glimpses of cities, towns, and forests that I would never know flew past. If only things were different for us in Poland and we hadn't lost our store! If only so many people didn't hate us. If only, if only . . . My head grew heavy from holding back the tears. But if I started crying, I wouldn't stop!

When we crossed the border from Germany into the Netherlands, they ordered everyone who had steamship tickets to step down from the train. We had to walk a long way to

get to the inspection station, where we were checked for illnesses and had our baggage disinfected. The doctor hardly examined me at all, quickly looking down my throat and running his fingers over my scalp. But there were grown-ups who weren't so lucky, and they wouldn't be allowed to continue their journey.

"But here's my steamship ticket! My brother's waiting for me!" a man yelled in a mix of Polish and Yiddish. He lifted his suitcase onto his shoulders and shoved his way toward the door. A policeman rushed after him and dragged him back in. The man's suit got torn and his nose spouted blood as he crumpled to the ground. I felt so sad. With his dark beard, the man reminded me of Papa. I went to his side and offered him the handkerchief that Bubbe gave me. He brightened and smiled at me. "Shayna maideleh, shayna maideleh," he said in a gentle voice. "You are a beautiful dear maiden, just like my daughter at home."

He told me his name was Jacob. At first, Jacob wouldn't take the handkerchief. He said he didn't want to dirty it, but I told him I wanted him to have it, that it was my grandmother's gift and she'd be proud of me for helping him. By then it was night. All the people there, whether they'd passed the inspection or not, had nowhere to go, and they slept on the floor or leaning against the walls. I stayed with Jacob and felt safe enough to sleep. In the morning, we said our goodbyes and he held my head with both hands and gave me his blessing: "May you go in peace to your destination and be delivered from accidents and enemies along the way."

I returned to the station and took the train to Rotterdam, feeling less afraid because of Jacob's blessing. And do you know what? I think it protected me. When I arrived in Rotterdam, I noticed an old couple speaking Yiddish. The man had a white beard and wore the black suit of a rabbi, and the woman's hair was hidden under a kerchief. I asked if they knew the directions to the port, and it turned out they had tickets for the same ship as me!

"What are you doing alone, little girl?" the woman asked.

"I am not little. I am fifteen," I told them. All the papers say I am fifteen, so I thought I'd better keep my story straight, though I felt bad about lying to them. But then I told them the truth. "There was only enough money for one child to travel, so I'm going to help my father bring all our family to Cuba."

"It's a shame we are being forced out of our home," the old woman said.

"We didn't want to leave Poland," the old man added. "We've lived all our lives there and our ancestors are buried in that soil. But it's changed. Our children are in Mexico and it's time for us to join them."

I became worried. "But how can we be on the same ship? My ticket says it's for Cuba."

They assured me the ship would make several stops, and we set off together toward the port. Since I only had a small bag for my few necessities, I carried the woman's heavy suitcase. Before the ocean came into view, I could feel the change in the air, and flocks of white birds appeared. They circled

the sky and sang a wistful tune. I learned they were seagulls! A moment later, I saw the ocean and could not believe how huge it was! Extending to the edge of the world.

We found our ship at the dock but had to pass yet another medical exam before we could board. The old couple gave me some of their herring and potatoes or I would not have eaten. Then when they came to check our passports, my heart was thumping so loudly I was afraid a policeman would rush aboard the ship and pull me off. I wanted to set sail right away, not wait another moment. But I'm learning that everything in life happens in its own good time.

Now we are out on the high seas and there's nothing but water surrounding us. In the morning, the ocean is blue, in the afternoon, it is green, and in the evening, it is purple. I'm grateful I've seen the miracle of the ocean. If I died tomorrow, I would be happy I've seen it. But I don't plan on dying. I have to get to Cuba!

What takes more getting used to is the sound of the waves. Sometimes it is like the whisper of a lullaby, soft and soothing. But when the wind blows hard, the crashing waves sound like the roar of a lion. That's when my fears about this journey become difficult to shoo away. I am crossing the ocean. But it feels as if the ocean is crossing me.

*Your sister, who misses you,*

*ESTHER*