

Diary Recollections from my past- Dora Saltiel

Diary recollections from my past. Today, Sunday 11/22/98, is my brothers Isidor's memorial day. He was killed in action in the Italian/Greek war in 1940. The day that the news was told to my parents was the worst day of our life. He was only 19 years old and the first son. The irony of it all was that he was going to be discharged by the end of November. He had just turned 20 years old. Our family was a large family of 7 children and we were a very close knit family. My grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins gathered that day and it really was a sad day. In our family we were always happy singing at our Friday dinner table, being disciplined by our mother. My father was always telling stories. This news was the worst that could have happened. At the time I was 12 years old. Our life changed drastically. We could not talk too much, saying only the necessary things. Our parents were so sad that nothing mattered to them anymore.

At the same time, the war was going on we had air raids so we had to live away from home in a shelter during the day. At night we went home to wash and get some food and then returned to the shelter. There were a lot more people like us and we all slept on the floor. For 5-6 months the Greek army was advancing and we were all very happy. The young kids my age and older were knitting socks and scarves for our soldiers and we thought that we were helping our soldiers in the combat zone to keep them warm. In April 1941 Hitler realized that Italy was losing the war and he declared war against Greece. Italy fought us throughout Albania and the Germans from Bulgaria. In a matter of days they were in Salonika. What happened then is something that I will never forget.

A few days before the invasion the Greek Army opened all of its warehouses of food and ammunitions and left the city to burn. The whole city was in chaos with people going to the warehouses to get barrels of oil, cheese, and dry bread that resembles big heavy crackers and anything else that you can imagine. Food, tires, clothing and anything else that the army uses. All the guns and ammunition were burning.

A lot of people left the city for the country. They were afraid of what the Germans would do. My parents were also debating whether to stay or to go but we did not know anyone in the country. On the 4th day the whole city was like a dead city. No one was on the streets. You could hear the Germans singing as they marched into the city triumphant with their big cannons and tanks. Nobody went outside for fear of what might happen. On the second day some ventured outside and things were calm. The Germans took positions in different buildings and they proceeded to occupy the rest of the country. I will stop tonight as I am getting tired and upset.

11-30 98

Today is the last day of Hanukah and it is snowing outside. We had a nice Hanukah party with the kids. It was a beautiful evening. This year is a little hard without Dad but thankfully you kids are giving me your support. Back to my story. That was on April of 1940. Every day was fearful and we were waiting to see what the next day would bring. For a while the Germans were busy with the war. They had to occupy the rest of Greece and they met heavy resistance, especially when they got to the island of Crete. By the end of 1941 {I am not too good with dates} things started to develop and there was a new order coming from the German command. First they took the beautiful villa that belonged to Uncle Nico's (Solomon Saltiel's cousin) aunt and it became the

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center of the German command. They ordered the family out in 12 hours which meant that they could not take too many things with them. They had to live with other families.

We had different foreign schools and also private Jewish schools. It was commanded that all foreign schools be closed and only the German and Italian schools stay open. They [the Germans] issued a new order almost every other day pertaining to the whole city or only the Jews. They had a meeting with the Jewish Council to discuss the affairs pertaining to the Jews. One of the orders that I will never forget was when sometime in July or August of 1942 the order came that all Jewish males from the age of 18 to 50 should report to the main square of Salonika at 8 o'clock in the morning. Nobody knew what it was for and the wealthiest people went dressed up in suits and hats and others with every day clothes. It was a very hot day and there was not even one tree to protect them from the sun. The square was all paved, and near the sea. Amongst the people there were young and old. Religious old men, Rabaim dressed in their long robes and long beards and long hair. There were thousands of people standing on their feet all day long. The Germans did not allow them to sit down or to talk to each other. The German soldiers were all around them with their guns facing the people. The older people and us women were on the outside looking in and wondering what would happen.

I don't recall the sequence of the day but what I do know is that they picked out the people that were the most nicely dressed, and to their reasoning the most rich, and made them to do certain acrobatics. Because they could not do it the Germans threw water on them, laughed at them and after a while let them go. Next were the Rabaim with the beards and the long gowns. They were pulled by their beards and they spit on their faces. They put their guns to their heads and made them jump like monkeys. This went on all day long. Every group that was let go was so ashamed of themselves that they could not talk at all or were crying without saying anything.

Among the people in the square were my brother Albert and my brother-in-law Leon Cohen [Rachel's father]. Albert was young and it did not bother him so much, but Leon was the unlucky one. He was one of the last ones and he suffered all the heat of the day. At the end the Germans made him and the rest of the group lie down at the one end of the asphalt square and roll themselves to the other end. When the ordeal was over and he came home his whole back was a bleeding mess. He could not sit or lay down and he was crying worse than a baby. The humiliation they went through was barbaric and cruel. It took him days to be well physically and mentally.

Their next move was to take all the Jewish High School children out of school and so they could help to take a census of the Jewish population of Salonika and issue the yellow star to each Jew. I was one of many to do this job. Whole families were coming with all their children [that was the law] to register and get their stars which the Germans told them to wear. I will stop for today as it is getting very emotional.

1-2-99

Today is a very cold day with a lot of snow and strong winds. That means I am home all day. I talked with uncle Joseph in Israel and they have a severe drought. We decided to exchange weather. Continuing my story. It was a pity to see poor and rich alike to coming from work and

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bringing the entire family including little babies and old people waiting in line. The numbers had to be in sequence so the Germans could have control and keep the whole family together. The trouble was that our chief rabbi was a German Jew and he knew the language. The Germans had him in a meeting and told him that he was not supposed to tell us anything, otherwise they would kill his entire family in front of him. In general the Jewish population did not know what was happening. Every time he came out of a meeting, he would say there is nothing to worry about. We are just going to Poland to work. Just make sure that you have warm clothes because the weather there is very cold. This way they kept us busy with no time to think about what was really going on. After all, the chief rabbi said so.

The next order was that we had to move into ghettos. They drew the lines where they were going to be and they raised walls to enclose the area. They left 2-3 entrances that people could go in and out. The time span to move to the ghetto was very minimum. Can you imagine thousands upon thousands of people and we had to find our own place to live. There were two such ghettos. One was at the Baron Hirsh area where there was inexpensive housing for the poor Jews and it was conveniently near the railroad station. The other side was also a section for the poor people that belonged to the Jewish community and also had a section of middle class housing. We used to call it Las Campanias because it was out of the city.

My father found a friend of his who was from the same city of Larrisa [Jacob Pelossof]. They did not have children and they had a house that had 2 bedrooms with a dinning room and kitchen. Meantime there were other people that were looking for some place to live too and we ended up including another family from Larissa [the man was Greek Senator and a member of the Jewish council and he new what it was going on]. Our sleeping arrangements were such that the senator and his family took the one bedroom and the other that was a little larger was for my parents together with the host. Us children slept in the dinning room and kitchen. Every day my father would go to his store to work. Meantime all of our furniture was given away. All we got was what was necessary in the new place. Life was miserable! We were on each other's nerves. We youngsters behaved like any youngsters do. We had to do what our parents told us to. On the other hand their nerves were so bad, because of the overall situation, and we kids were supposed to be seen but not heard.

Every family lost their independence and there was no place to discuss anything privately. You can image sixty thousand people that were scattered all over Salonika put into 2 square miles. The worse thing of all was that, after we moved into the ghetto, the Germans instituted a curfew. We could not go out in the morning before 8 AM and at night we had to be in at sundown. That was a big frustration for every one. I was young and did not have an accent (Salonika was once under Turkish rule and the older Jews spoke Greek with an accent). I used to take off my yellow star and would go out to do errands for my parents and neighbors even after the curfew.

The next order was that we could not go out of the ghetto at all. That was the last straw. Meantime we did not know what was going on in the other ghetto. There was famine all around us because no one could go out to work and there was no money to buy in the black market. People started to sell some of their belongings. In all this misery we had the Jewish police that had to keep the peace. They were very nice young men but it was very hard to do anything with so many desperate people and also they were inexperienced. Among them were four or more

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policeman that found themselves with so much power that they became collaborators for the Germans. They stole jewelry and they attacked young girls in front of their parents. If they had a grudge against someone then it was the time to take revenge. Of all the names, the only one I remember is Rekanati. He was the worst of all.

When the Germans closed the ghettos, nobody could leave. This meant that the people with businesses outside of the ghetto could not go to their stores. This was the case for my father and my Uncle Haim Levy. They debated what to do and a week later they were notified to report to the store, accompanied by a policeman, to take inventory of the merchandise. They had to sign a letter saying that they voluntarily were giving their business to the Germans. One thing that the Germans did was to make sure that everything looked legal. During the time of the inventory which lasted more than a week, my father and uncle, as well as my brothers Albert, Sam, Leon Cohen[Rachel's father] and my cousins had a chance to be outside of the ghetto. They were able to bring some money and food from the city.

The building where my father had his business was owned by a Christian by the name of Ligdas. He had a candy store next to our store with a large corridor in between the back door of our store was about 30 feet away from Mr. Ligdas back door. As they were taking inventory they moved a lot of merchandise next door. One night when it was dark, three or four people who were hired with the help of Mr. Ligda, moved the safety box from our store to Mr. Ligda's. In the safety box was all the cash (English Gold coins) as well as my Mother's and Aunt's jewelry as well as other valuables. When the Germans took possession of the store, they gave a receipt to them showing that the business was given over voluntarily.

Back in the ghetto, life was very difficult for everyone. People were angry and upset and did not know what to do. Rumors were all over about every thing that you can imagine. Young people were getting married because the rumor was that if you got married you would be able to have a house of your own while working for the Germans in Poland. Others would sell whatever they had to buy food to take with them and more. We all waited for our Rabbi to tell us what to do and he would say that the Germans had the best intentions for our welfare and we should follow their bidding. We were told that in Poland it was very cold and that we should get warm clothes so people were doing so. Also, some that had money or gold tried to find ways to hide it. Some put it in the soles of their shoes, others in the lining of their coats and more. Dad's mom (Rivka Saltiel) had a lot of jewelry and she hid it in a flower pot thinking that when her son would come back from POW camp in Italy he would find it. My sister Aime (Rachel's mother) gave her jewelry to her neighbor for safe keeping, Three days later when it was certain that Aime and her family would be able to escape to Athens, she went back to ask them to return the jewelry. The neighbor denied having received any jewelry. Scenarios like this were going on all the time.

The Greeks of Salonika were very greedy and instead of helping us they were trying to loot as much as they could. Thia (Aunt) Bella (Bella Ouziel) told me her story of why she hates the Greeks. When they were in the Ghetto, her father could not go to work [He was a dental technician]. He could not provide for his family. They started to sell whatever they could in order to buy food. As you know, the girls always had to have their dowry in order to get married and the parents had to start preparing years ahead. When the Germans ordered them to report to the railroad station, the Greeks were lined up outside to see them go. Her family was not yet

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outside when they stormed in and started to loot the place. They also had to sell their home for very little money so they could buy food. After the war, she was able to get the house back because it was sold for food during the war.

When the first transport took place every one was shocked with the reality of what was going to happen. The rumors never stooped circulating.

3-4-99

It is Saturday and very cold. It has been snowing since last night with high winds and a lot of snow accumulation. I am very comfortable down here with my computer and I am very happy that I got it. Monday 3-8-99 will be 1 year since your dad passed away and it seems that it never happened. I am lonely and miss him, but every night I talk to him and every morning I tell him good morning. I will continue with my story.

Every day was something different. We never knew exactly how the transportation took place. The only thing was that when the Germans started to move people from our Ghetto to the Baron of Hirsh ghetto, rumors were that the old were killed on the march to the train station because they could not walk fast enough. They would pull the long beards that our Rabbis had and ridicule the long black robes they wore. At that time my mother insisted that we do something about the problem. My father was afraid that if the Germans would check our numbers in the yellow stars and found that they did not match then something would happen to all of us. Meantime the Senator that lived in the other room [he was one of the Jewish assembly members who was at the meetings with the Germans and Coretz and he knew What was going on] was telling my parents to hide or go to the mountains. He said he could not say any more. When my father would ask more questions he would say that he had to keep secrecy otherwise the other members could be killed. That was the time that my mother insisted to find a way to get out before our time would come to be moved to the Baron of Hirsh Ghetto.

As I told you before, my father and uncle had removed the safety box from the store containing money and Jewelry belonging to both my mother and Aunt. They decided to spend it to find someone to help us. Because my father was in business, and very well liked, he started to look around and asking Greek friends if they knew someone that would help. There was a black market going on in Athens [The north of Greece produces a lot of wheat and vegetables while the south had nothing.] So the black Market was flourishing. People would take food and beef to Athens and sell it at a very high price. We found these kind of people and paid them a sum of money [20 gold English coins the Greek money was of no value] for each of us so that we could be taken to Athens. There too were the bad ones that would take your money and never show up. This happened to my sister Aime, her husband Leon and little Rachel. They were lucky that a Greek family hid them until they found someone else. Others were not as lucky as my sister. They took their money and took them to the train station and then told the Germans that they were Jewish. When my parents were already on the train they saw this happen. You can imagine how scared they were because the couple with the daughter that was caught were our old neighbors. Their name was the Moos family and he was a prominent lawyer.

When we arrived in Athens it was another ordeal. We did not have a place to stay and we found a basement room to stay that was a few houses up from the Gestapo headquarters. We could see

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the boots marching and hear them singing when they were changing guard. Another problem was that the landlady would not allow men to live in the room because the Germans could identify Jewish men by checking to see if they were circumcised. So our family had to live separate from each other. My mother and I lived in that basement room while my father lived in a different house with his brother. Albert lived in a laboratory and worked there. This is where he learned to do medical tests. He was supposed to go to Medical school but we had to leave Salonika. Sam stayed in another home and Joseph was sent to an overnight camp that was run by the city's welfare department. He was the lucky one because he had good food to eat. We were all hungry and we were lucky when we had that German bread to eat. This bread was always sour and black and it was moldy by the time we received it. But it filled our stomachs.

Our stay at Athens was very traumatic. We never knew when our next meal would come from and we were always hungry. We had no clothes or shoes and my mother and I used to make them. We would find rags, cut them into strips and braid them. We would then take a carton, cut it in the size of my feet and sew the braid on it. That was the sole of the shoe and then we would put a piece of rug over to tie it up on my feet. As you can imagine they did not last too long. In this situation my mother felt that I should not sit idle and found a dressmaker for me to go and learn the trade. So I used to go there every day and she was also a poor girl, but whenever she had a little food she used to share it with me. Her name was Fedra. I don't remember her last name. She knew that I was Jewish and tried to help me as much as she could.

It was amazing the kind of ladies that used to come to have their clothes made. Some were the wives of the black marketeers and they used to have a lot of money. There were two young girls who were very beautiful and they became prostitutes in order to help their families and themselves survive the war. Others were Germans collaborators. We were always afraid to talk and we only listened. Nobody knew that I was Jewish, except Fedra. It was far from where we lived and I used to walk back and forth to work. You can imagine how often we had to make shoes for me.

Meantime at the house we lived, the landlady (Anna Boutou, her husband Periklis Boutou and the little girl Lilika) had to take more boarders. One was an Army officer that was out of the army (because of the war) and a young lady that used to work for the city welfare department. She was very nice and she knew that we were Jews. She decided to help us as much as she could. She sent Joseph (he was only 12 years old) to a camp at the monastery in Kessariani that was run by the city (her name was Anoula). The camp lasted for 2 weeks at a time. At the end of the session, he would come for the night and the next day would go back. He stayed there until the war was over and did not come back until the civil war was over in December of 1944.

My father, Sam, and my uncle lived in the same place. The people there were very intellectual and were not afraid of the Germans. We could not see each other in either home and the only way to communicate was to meet in the park. My brother Albert lived in a medical laboratory where he worked for his room and board. In emergencies we pretended to be patients and relay any message we had and he would see our father to tell him. One Sunday mother and I were walking in the park and we saw Albert was sitting on a bench talking to another man. Our understanding was that when one of us saw the other not alone we were not supposed to acknowledge each other. He saw us and we did not stop. The next time we met, he said that the

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man he was talking to was a German collaborator that used to terrorize the Jews in Thessaloniki. There were rumors going around in Athens that this Reccanati was going to the Jews of Athens getting money from them. Albert new that he was a Jew from back home and without realizing who he was he told him the rumors. Reccanati got mad and said that he was the one and that he never did this. At that particular time we were passing by and Albert was afraid that we would stop to talk to him. There are more stories like this and maybe another day I will write about them.

December 6 1999 Hanukah

Now I would like to write about how life was in Thessaloniki for us. Thessaloniki was a Jewish city and we were in the majority. We kept the customs that our ancestors brought from Spain. Our form of cooking and the Spanish language. I remember when I was growing up. At that time Thessaloniki was Greek, and we the children used to talk Greek. My grandmother used to tell us to please speak Jewish. The families used to be very close knit. We had a big family with lots of aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and neighbors. Life was different then what it is today. We kids used to go and see Grandmother or our aunts who were always happy to see us. Especially our grandmother who used to live near school and she always had candy for us. The respect that was taught to us towards the older people was wonderful.

It was fun when we had a holiday. Today I will tell you about Hanukah which was not a big holiday. My father will tell us the story about the Maccabis and why we celebrated those days. We did not have candles like now, and my mother took a soup plate, poured some olive oil in it. She made little bundles of cotton and put them in the dish and lit them. My father would say the prayer and then we all sang the rest of the prayers. We did not have any presents. Only on the last night my father would give us Hanukah Gelt. We were 7 children and according to our ages we received the Gelt. The oldest would get 2 drachmas. As the youngest, which was Joseph and I, we received only like 25cents. We were all were happy. The oldest ones used to get together with their friends and put their money together and have a dancing party. We the youngest ones used to go to the candy store and buy nice delicious candy. It was fun, being all together as a family and listening to my father telling us stories is something that I still cherish.