

Isaac, think when you went to this special gymnasium or high school, were you as happy to be going there as your father was to send you? Were these the subjects that you liked the most?

I think yes. I think after, perhaps, the age of six or seven, either by deed of repetition from my father. And also, because I, perhaps, began to like or had no difficulty with mathematics. Then I didn't question it. I was going to private schools, although I mentioned to you earlier, I was changing because of this age phenomenon.

And in order to transfer from a private school to a public school in Greece, at least at that time, I had to take a special exam that I could make the grade. My last year in private school was in a Catholic school. That's a different story because my father had gone to that school in Monastir when he was young because it was the only school where you could learn foreign languages. So there was an equivalent school in Athens, and I went to that.

Then I had to take a special exam. Not that I didn't question-- it was almost a natural thing to me. It was an unexpected thing. And I think that there was no reason to even think about it. I thought it was just a natural progression.

Did you have hobbies when you were growing up?

- Oh yes.

Like?

I think, in retrospect-- and I say that now because I can see how this thing is traced. I like to build things. I build all kinds of kites. You have to remember that you couldn't go, in those days, to a store and buy a kite. We only buy materials from the skeleton, which were pieces of wood to paper. And then you had to construct it, then assemble it, and eventually fly it.

Then I would build lots of shadow puppets. Do you know what shadow puppets are? These are flat. If you take a figure of an individual that's articulated at the legs and at the arms, and if you hold this cardboard piece behind a screen that is backlit, you hold it against the screen. Then the audience on the other side see the puppet, which is essentially its outline. And although it can be colorful, because the colors come through the screen. We usually use a sheet, white. So I used to make that.

Now, you progress. In the beginning, of course, you go to the store and buy the a book of the outlines of the figures which you have to cut very, very carefully. And in the beginning as a child, I would do them out of cardboard. But to do it with cardboard, which was rather thick, you had to have a chisel.

Well, chisels were not that readily available. So what we would do is to eventually get a very large nail, and take it and put it on the track of the streetcar. And when the streetcar went over the nail, it would flatten the edge and make it a chisel. So we would use that to cut the--

But after, if you become very proficient and you continue, then you begin to make them out of thin plywood, which, of course, required different tools. The drill and of course, a coping saw with a very thin blade. And you had to be very careful because they break very, very frequently. And it's a very elaborate thing because it's full of filigrees, especially out on the hair. These are the kinds of things I would do.

Then I built a radio out of crystal. I had to go and find appropriate crystal and get the things, wind the coil. Then we used to try to build telephones. And they became the usual telephone of two cans with a string. But then we got a little bit more elaborate and starting building things that would go a longer distance with actual wires. So I think I trace my interest in building things.

When you were doing these puppets, did you actually do little shows for--

Oh yes, of course. After all this. There were also books because first of all, the main character is called Karagoz. And

it's a remnant from the 400 years of Turkish occupation of Greece because literally, Karagoz means "black eyes." He was, I don't know, perhaps Punchinello in Italian Renaissance plays or Till Eulenspiegel.

It's a combination of a character who was, perhaps, completely illiterate but street smart, and who would always outwit more serious officials in particular because the opponents were always Turks, you see? And/or the police, or some clerk. So always, the street smart boy. Well, actually manly though, because he had children himself who outwit them all.

Of course, we would learn the parts. And then at that time, we would try to invite anyone. We'd sometimes ask for a fee for those who had come, and we would put on a show.

That must have been great fun.

Yes, yes.

And I gather because you were doing this with other people, that these were friends of yours of like interest.

Right. They were either people in the immediate neighborhood or later on, for more serious things that were much more complex, they were, I'm sure, school friends, schoolmates.

So your memories of your childhood are very pleasant?

Yes. Right. Because family life was good, pleasant. The school was pleasant, too, at times, difficult, which is something that every child needs. But nothing dark until '40, late '40 or '41.

Are you hearing things-- I mean, I know in 1933, you're a little bit too young to have begun to hear things about what's happening in Germany. Although, I don't know. I mean, did you have some sense as you began to be six, seven, eight years old that something was going on in Europe--

Yes.

--that was not so good? I have to speak for myself. I think my earliest recollection, which I date my becoming politically aware, is 1936 with the onset of the Spanish Civil War. I think the reason being primarily that it was written up in the newspapers. My mother and father, in particular my mother-- and I really don't know why. I try sometimes to understand why because obviously, I didn't have conversations with her about things like that.

But she was very interested in politics. And I know she read and she discussed things with my father. So I would then read the articles also. So I began to become very sensitive about the situation in Europe. Then in '37 '38, the interest broadened primarily because in the synagogue during, for instance, the break in the entire day of Yom Kippur after the morning prayers, we wouldn't even go home, although it was around the corner. We would stay in the yard.

And we began to see for the first time people who we had never seen before. And these were Ashkenazi, Jewish people from Czechoslovakia or Germany who had found refuge in Greece in escaping the Nazis. So one couldn't help be sensitive to this, primarily because my parents talk about it even when friends came to visit, and we could overhear their conversation. It went around, things like this, so I can date my awareness.

And also, I had become to be very interested in history. I always loved history. I read history books for children from an early age, including myths and mythology. So I was aware from the middle '30s.

Did you talk about this with your friends? Or did you just mainly keep it to yourself?

I think we would talk a little bit primarily about following the headlines. Remember, there were stories which, when in the Spanish Civil War, I remember stories of bombardments by German planes. And I would ask, what would are the Germans doing in Spain? But of course, now one knows that there was a contingent of-- it became almost a proving ground for many of the weapons. Or the Italians, also the same thing.

By contrast, although the French and the British were neutral, and in fact, at times, made terrible obstacles to try to help the royalists. You have to remember that because of speaking French, I have to say that we were a very Francophile family. So I had read French history.

My father, after the war, had bought a book about the Second World War that was illustrated with photographs. And I remember spending endless hours leafing through the book, looking at photographs of the French generals, French soldiers, battle scenes. Plus, also, the text.

So before 1939 or 1940, were you worried about what might happen to Greece? Do you remember as a child?

No, no, no. And that's why in 1914, when Italy declared war when we at least went to war with Italy, I think it's fair to say that it was a surprise to everyone. There may have been understanding by much more politically savvy individuals than a 13-year-old that perhaps Greece inevitably-- or no part was going to be spared and will always get to be involved. But I don't think anyone expected this sort of overt move on the part of Mussolini to demand access to Salonika, which of course, had to be refused. And the rest, as we say, is history, right?

Were you forced to join a fascist group? Because I know that Samuel--

Yes, yes. Not I because what happened was the dissolution of the Boy Scouts-- and I still remember-- you see, 25 March is the national holiday in Greece because it's when the War of Independence in 1821 started against the Turks. So usually, there were parades. And we as Boy Scouts participated in the parades. But in that year, in 1940, which was the order to dissolve the Boy Scouts, it was our last day. We were all dressed in our uniforms and so forth.

But the fascist youth began, I think, first year of high school. And they would gradually proceed to the later grades. But by 1940 or '41, I was in now, the fifth grade, which was the next to last grade, so I didn't have to. That was one reason. The other reason is that if we insisted as aliens, not being Greek citizens, we didn't have to be part of it. But I think in some cases, instead of making a fuss, we put this blue thing.

So you were not citizens?

No, we were not because I came to the United States, as I mentioned to you earlier in private, on a Yugoslav passport.

Right, right. Hm. So when the occupation happens, the invasion is 1940 and then the Italians--

No. Excuse me. In October of 1940, Italy essentially sent an ultimatum to Greece to essentially let it come through, which was effectively saying we want to occupy you. But Axis even said no. And the war started between Greece and Italy primarily taking place in Albania because the Italians had already occupied Albania. So they tried to invade that northwestern part of Greece known as Epirus from the Albanian border.

Well, they were not only repulsed, but also, the Greeks began to advance. So for the four of 40 in the spring of '41, the war in Greece was only between the Italians and the Greeks. It was not until April of '41 that Germany declared war and invaded. And the reason, principally, is that in Yugoslavia, the then regent had not necessarily allied himself with Germany, but had signed a non-aggression pact with Germany.

But then there was a revolution or a coup by young officers in the Yugoslavian army. And they expelled the regent and elevated the young then King Peter, who was a minor, to become king and overturned the arrangement with Germany, which infuriated Hitler. And in a lightning campaign that lasted, I think, about 3 and 1/2 to four weeks, all of Yugoslavia and Greece were overrun.

Right. And that was in April of '41?

Yes. The Germans entered Athens April 30 of '41, the day after my birthday.

And how was that in relationship to your bar mitzvah? But was your bar mitzvah later?

No, no, no. Bar mitzvah was earlier because I had my bar mitzvah in 1939. And he was a very elaborate affair, at least as I--

As you remember?

As I remember it where, first of all, the preparation itself. Actually, when I first went to school, first grade of primary school, I went to a Jewish school. I would have continued, but the school was bursting. They didn't have enough facilities, so they had to close it because they were going to build a different, much larger facility. So I began to go to Greek schools.

So I had begun to read the Hebrew and understand at least a little bit of Hebrew. But that essentially did not continue because then I started going to Greek schools. But I think about six to seven months before my bar mitzvah, I began to take lessons with the then rabbi of Athens. So I got well prepared, and so I--

Was in a big party?

Yes. I remember it lasted almost all day long because the people came in waves. We received in our apartment. In those days, I think nobody would go in and engage a wholesome someplace for guests. So I think people knew that they had to stagger. So they came after the ceremony in the synagogue. They came in continuous waves that lasted practically all day long.

And these were children and adults or only adults?

Both.

Or both?

Both. Yeah, there were children of comparable age.

Right, not little.

Right.

So when the occupation happened, do you remember seeing German troops?

Absolutely.

Yes.

Yes.

So that must have been really frightening?

Well, it was frightening because for one thing, by that time, we knew what had happened to Europe, what would happen to Jews in particular. So we knew it was not a good thing for us. But again, there is another aspect which becomes important for our story, that Athens was occupied by Italians.

I think Hitler, as a sop to Mussolini, gave him Athens and a few other largest cities and regions of Greece to occupy. Unfortunately-- well, I don't know if it would have made a-- it might have made a difference. Salonika was under German occupation.

And that means that the greatest of Jews living in Greece were under German occupation?

Right. So visibly, of course, we could see Germans, the German soldiers. But Italians were a lot more visible. And orders which were issued, as any occupying authority does promulgating laws and things like this, always. Although, they were coming from the Quisling government, the collaborating government. But generally, it was according to the orders of-- and they would cite the particular Italian thing.

So in '41 and '42, does your life change very much? Or once the occupation starts, does it settle down?

Well, it changed in many respects. But I continued with school. I finished high school in '42. The winter of '41 to '42, which was the first winter under occupation, turned out to be the most terrible winter of the occupation from a standpoint of famine. For the first time, we began to see weak people who had fallen in the middle of the street. And gradually, even some of them who were left there, and some of them dead, so it was a very, very--

And coincidentally also, Athens generally had mild winters. I remember only once in my entire childhood remembering snow. Snow, it was only something that you read in books. And we woke up one day, and the roofs were a little white. And some of us went immediately to try to make a snowman, but the moment we reached the street, the snow had melted. There wasn't very much left.

But that was a very rough winter. It was very, very cold. There was no heating. Lack of food. I think that probably what happened is that the black market and other clandestine ways of getting food-- also, people didn't know what the occupying powers were going to do in grabbing hold of the agricultural produce that naturally came out of Greece.

But in short, it was a terrible winter. But then things began to be better. We did not suffer very much in our family because although we didn't get the kinds of foods that we were used to, then I remember being sent by my mother to stand in queues, in lines to buy a piece of feta, a piece of cheese. And sometimes you would stand in line for hours only to reach the door practically, and then be told that there was no more left, so we spent a great deal of time like that.

But I was not directly affected with it in school. We had to be very careful. We were advised and admonished by our teachers not to make any politically overt statements in class, for obvious reasons. But you knew that you were not entirely free to say what you wanted to, and you had to be very, very careful. There was no curfew in Athens because at least at that time, it would be almost impossible to enforce.

As soon as I finished high school in '42, normally I would have been taking the exams to get into the political school, but it was closed. The university was closed. So I then, until the beginning of the Jewish persecution in Athens, I worked for slightly over a year for a man who was-- and the occupation, there was a clandestine stock exchange. We're not talking about stocks or bonds. The only means of transaction, the only thing that was transacted was gold, gold coins, English sovereigns, French gold francs, Swiss francs, and occasionally bars and small bars of gold.

And this market was obviously entirely underground because it was under penalty of death if you were caught with gold. The way the market was done was strictly over the telephone. Somebody would call in the morning and say, I have 10 liras, they used to be called collectively, to sell. What is the asking price?

And this market would fluctuate entirely or what would happen in the international news. If the Germans were winning, then the Greek drachma would lose even more of its value. We're talking about, by that time, a million drachmas was just to buy some candy. If the Allies were winning in the country, then the drachma would rise because naturally, people thought that with the Allies' side winning, then the days of liberation for Greece would come. And therefore, the drachma would gain value.

So that's what I did. I mean, I would then-- the man I work for would be the middle man. He would then sell, get a buyer, get a seller. And then I would then have to, from time to time, deliver the goods, which were the rows, maybe, of 10 silver coins. And I would deliver them, go pick him up, and deliver them. And it was a dangerous thing because if I were found out, then it would have been terrible, but I was not found out.

Let me go back to the school for a moment. Was there propaganda in the school? Or were the classes really pretty

straightforward?

There was no propaganda, especially in that high school. I think it was too early. There was not enough time for the occupying forces to begin something overt that would trickle down into the lessons themselves. I mean, what we were, as I said, admonished by our teachers not to do is not to make overt statements against the occupying powers, even in jest for obvious reasons. But there was no visible effect.

So You didn't have to do a heil--

Oh, no.

--to anybody?

None of that.

Nothing?

No, no.

So it was very straightforward? Right.

OK. We're going to need to change the tape.