

Anytime. OK. I said, did your father retain his job as the accountant with the textile firm in '41 and '42?

Oh, yes. Because the firm continued. Again, there was no-- they didn't shut down any businesses. Again, it requires emphasis to contrast it with not only what happened afterwards, but also with the situation in Salonika, in that there were no effect on Jewish businesses. The Italians didn't shut anything down. So the textile firm continued, and my father continued.

Was this surprising to you, given that the Italians were allies of the Germans?

Well, it was not surprising. I mean, I don't--

Or you didn't know what to expect?

Right. And you see, we began to hear not only stories, but things which I remember I knew my parents were discussing. Very early after the occupation in the Fall of '41, the Germans in Salonika conscripted all males, I think between the age of 18 to 45 or 50, and they were taken into forced labor along the Greek/Bulgarian border to do road work. I think it was primarily harassment.

And I remember there was lots of conversations that my parents and their friends are discussing. A delegation from a number of prominent Jews of Athens and Salonika, including, I think, the rabbi in Koretz in Salonika, went to Vienna. And after a few weeks, they came back and there was a deal struck, apparently, where a head toll had to be paid to sort of get those Jews, Salonika Jews, release them from the forced labor.

But you see, again, these things are happening in Salonika. Things trickle down or come down relatively quickly. But the Italians refused to do-- take any anti-Jewish measures. I have looked into that. Very often I say to my children, other people, that I think I survived because the Italians did not enforce.

I have spoken to a number of people, and some of them, even students of that period and knowledgeable, they ascribe this thing to the fact that the Italian army refused to take any political measures. So they say it was not an attempt to save Jews, but because simply they refused to get involved politically.

However, now I have read and I have seen tremendous instances where Italians, and the only ones were army contingents, really did go out of the way to save Jews. So Athens was fortunate in that regard.

Now, you said when the Germans came in, when the occupation happened, when the Germans and the Italians came in, that you and your family knew something of what had been going on in Germany and Czechoslovakia and in Austria. What was it that you knew at that point about what the Germans were doing?

We knew that they had lost livelihoods. They were not allowed to be in many professions. Many of them had to leave. We saw visibly, with our own eyes, refugees.

In the winter of '40, '41, I was sent by my father to take classes-- not classes-- to be taught by a private tutor who was a Jewish top engineer in the Skoda Works in Czechoslovakia. I was sent there not because I needed any tutoring, but because it was an indirect way to really contribute something for this individual and his wife. And I still remember this man, relatively young, extremely bright. And so all of those things were known.

The Kristallnacht--

You knew about.

Of course.

And this is from the newspaper, as well as from stories people wrote, and the radio, perhaps?

I don't know if-- they may have been-- but we were not avid listeners of the radio news at that time. This became the case after the occupation, listening clandestinely to BBC and other broadcasts.

There is a difference once Germany attacks the Soviet Union. Because now it isn't simply oppression and people losing citizenship-- and not that that's simple, but it becomes much worse, because murder starts happening.

Now, did you hear about the murder of Jews after the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941-- in June of 1941?

You say murders of Jews in Greece?

No.

Oh.

No, no, no. I'm wondering what you're hearing about what the Germans are doing--

Oh. In occupied-- in occupied--

Yes, in occupied Europe. And whether you eventually, you begin to hear that the Salonikan Jews have been deported or--

We'll come to that.

OK. Then let's first--

It will take--

A while. Yes.

Let's say-- let's go-- because the second half of '41, after the beginning of the occupation, well, the principle thing at that time was really the scarcity of food. That was most prominent thing. So we're getting to '42 now. And the only thing that we are able to learn firsthand, because from the radio, which is under control of the Italians and Germans, of course, you aren't going to learn anything. And the newspapers also, where all of them simply writing handouts, and nobody would write anything that was inimical to the--

But, of course, we knew from other sources, including listening to foreign broadcasts, about how the war is going. And you know that until late '42, things were not very good for the Allies. But there was nothing until the beginning of '43, when in very quick succession, we began to hear about things which really were not only palpably true, but were very close to home. Perhaps we'll come to that point, if you ask me again, in the beginning of '43.

But I can remember palpably around the beginning or end of March of '43, and the beginning of April of '43, suddenly in a-- that my parents' look was dark and didn't change. And it was not something that was temporary, that something was bothering them or something like this. Just something descended upon.

Now, we were not told about it. But I, now in retrospect, and I think I know, that the fate of the relatives in Monastir, which occurred-- the fateful day was 11 March '43, which I know subsequently, and the Salonika-- the expulsion of the Jews from Salonika took place early April of '43, that was just the beginning for me, at any rate, of an extremely visible effect that I saw and I began to feel.

But it was vague, because no one knew at that time about concentration camps. The story was relocation, because that's what the Germans were giving out. But definitely, that's something that I know was a tremendous change, which lasted, of course, and persistent.

Do you think your parents knew more than you did?

Oh, absolutely. Yes. And, again, I have to stress, I don't think that my parents did not tell us for the usual reasons. Sometimes there was a phrase to protect our sensibilities then. It was not that. But the thing was so immense. And yet, they themselves having suffered so much in the bombardment in the Second World War, because Monastir was a battleground between the Germans and their allies in the--

You mean the First World War.

The first-- I'm sorry-- the First World War. Right. Having lived through that, and also, the psyche of the Sephardim going back five centuries. I remember just a few weeks before the Germans arrived in Athens, that, I don't know, perhaps a childish-- but I remember asking my father, why don't we leave and get on a ship and go away? Because during the war and listening to what was happening to France and in Poland and things like this, there was definitely a fear in there. We're going to get bombarded by the Germans.

And, of course, my father, he didn't ridicule the thing. But I mean, it wasn't that easy to just get on-- and we go where at that time? Where were we going to go? But I still remember that I had reactions, because I had heard what was happening. But it was something that was so vague that I couldn't put something-- a face, or something concrete in the way of measures. But definitely, it was something that was a dark cloud that grew, and became darker, and then enveloped us all.

And you became depressed as you saw your parents become-- I mean, it's as if there's a shroud on them, on their face.

No. I think at that time I was in a kind of schizophrenic situation. I used to go to work. Then in the evening, I would go with my friends, my schoolmates, most of them. And in fact, it was a kind of thing that very often one considers that there was more going on in Athens at that time, especially its nightlife-- more cabarets and more-- it's almost as if people think that since there is no tomorrow, they might as well do whatever they can for the time that they have left.

I was too young. I didn't go to cabarets. But we used to go out and go occasionally to drink a beer or something like that. So I was then able to-- and most of them, there were about four or five, were Greek Orthodox. There was only another Jew beside myself in that small circle.

The depression would be felt at home. Because, again, it was so apparently overwhelming, and it was impossible to-- except only to see the visually in my parents' faces. They didn't talk about it. And I think they probably became even very careful, and even when they were talking to each other, lest they be overheard and frighten us unnecessarily. Not unnecessarily, but at least in ways that children will not be expected to be able to cope with.

When you were out, were these mainly with boys? Or is it a mixed group of girls and boys?

Oh, no, no. There were no mixed groups.

No mixed groups? No.

Not in those days, no. No. It was primarily boys. Occasionally, you would try to chase a girl or two, but there were no mixed groups.

So you didn't go out with any girls at your-- you were 15?

Yeah. No. No. Not at that time. I'd look at them, but I'd think, oh--

So the girls would go out together, if they would go out. And probably they wouldn't go out in the evening alone.

Probably not. Most of them were very restricted. I mean, they would go-- they would go out in a big company, either with their parents, or with their brothers or cousins.

I see. So it's a little different than probably some of what happened in Europe at that time.

Oh sure.

They may have been--

Oh, yes.

--different kind of social existence.

Yes.

And how is your brother, your two brothers, doing at this time?

Well, they had their own friends. I guess schooling continued. So in some aspects, it's almost an unreal situation to talk, that there is a continuing normal life going on in the face of impending danger, but which one has-- even, I think, very clever people had the foresight to really imagine its dimensions.

And I don't think that necessarily this thing I mentioned earlier about so many nightclubs in Athens-- I mean, this feeling that where there's only another day to live for, so let's make merry. I don't think there was very much of that. But the uncertainty of what happens, especially seeing in the winter of '41, dead people in the street. So it made everybody aware that there was a lot of fragility, not in life in general, even in normal times, but especially in those times.

Did you see dead bodies?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

And what did that do to you? Do you remember the first time?

Well, of course, in the beginning you don't even believe it, you know? Then people would surround some person. In the beginning, of course, there was attempts to help and carry. But when it became more prevalent, and it would become such a common occurrence-- I don't want to give impression that this is our leader, but they were there.

And I think the thing that struck me after a little while, something that I also had to do, is you don't even stop. You just go on, because you know practically there's nothing you can do.

In one of the main squares of Athens-- it's called Omonia, which means Concorde-- Place de la Concorde in Paris-- it was a station, a subway, the metro. But it was underground. And on the square itself, above the metro, the metro station, there was a grate where most of the warm gases that emanated from-- but it was filled up with derelicts that were homeless and filthy, because that was the only warmth that they could get. They would hover over the grates. And so that became a part of daily life. And I'm sorry to say, in retrospect, that one becomes inured to things like that.

Yeah. It's interesting that you talk about sort of living-- you live on two levels. One, you try to keep normalcy. And yet at the same time, you have this very--

This pull. This different-- this different thing, this thing which was visible in my parents' faces first. And even in their own compartment, I mean, I don't remember for those six or seven months prior to the disbursal, seeing them even smile. And I can only imagine the kind of burden that they felt.

Did you have relatives living in Salonika?

No.

You didn't?

No. We had lots of relatives in Monastir. My father, brother and his family, a sister and her family-- in fact, two sisters and their families. But on the maternal side, there were two aunts, my mother's sisters, living in Athens with their families. The eldest sister had migrated with her family to Palestine. They lived in Salonika, but in '32, '33, they left and went to Palestine.

So we had-- then there were cousins, all of them in Athens. We had no relatives in Salonika, except that some who were fortunate enough, and there were very, very few, one or two who escape Macedonia, Monastir, or Bitola, as it was called, and make it to Athens. And in fact-- first to Salonika, but very quickly, my father's niece, my first cousin and her husband and young daughter came to Athens. But we had no--

But I think that there's no question that my parents knew or had heard, although I'm sure it must have been a very murky story, because the details do not even become known until after the war, and years after the war, that all the Monastir Jews, all the Bitola Jews, were expelled, as well as those in Skopje, expelled. But they were-- they disappeared.

And was that area under Bulgarian occupation?

Yes.

Yeah. So they were actually-- they were deported before the Salonikan Jews.

Just only three weeks-- three weeks. It was a concerted effort. It was not only the Macedonian Jews, because the Bulgarians were given that part of former Yugoslavia, and as well as part of northern Greece. And the Jews in Thrace and other parts of northern Greece under Bulgarian occupation also were deported by the Bulgarians.

Their fate was slightly different from those of Monastir, because they were taken by barges up in the Danube. One of them was sunk, and people drowned. And eventually, they got them to railheads and took them by transport to Auschwitz. But all of the other Macedonian Jews, all of them ended up in Treblinka, and nobody returned.

Right. Did you have to wear a Jewish star?

No. Again, I remind you, and myself, because the Italians did not enforce any laws-- any racial laws.

But when [CLEARS THROAT]-- excuse me-- in 1943, after the armistice in Italy, and the Italians are no longer occupying the area that you're living in, the Germans occupied. So something changes radically in that time, right?

Immediately, yes.

Did you, by the way, know what was going on in Italy, that the allies--

Sure. Of course.

You did?

We know what's going on in North Africa. The Allies are winning, then the invasion in Sicily, and then finally, the Italian armistice. But things happened so fast there was no time for reflection, because I think within a day or two, I think it's around September 8 or 9 or 10 of '43, the Germans take over Athens. And we didn't have time to see visually what the effect of the change was.

But practically the second or third day, we already are told by the rabbi of Athens that the Germans are now asking for Jews to go and register. And because, I think, of the knowledge of what had happened in Salonika, this was essentially a call to disperse. So within a day or two after we received this news about a forced registration, we then abandoned everything and went into hiding. So there was no time. And therefore, as that happened, there were no Jews around

Athens to be told to go and wear a star.

So do you know how the decision was made to disperse? Had your father been preparing this, as if this might happen? Do you know?

Let me tell you what I remember. As I say, it was, I think, evening-- the first thing that I know is that my boss told me that he's obliged to close shop. He has to go into hiding. So I say goodbye to him. And it must have been, as I say, perhaps two or three days after the armistice and the occupation of Athens by the Germans.

When I returned home, it must have been around 6 o'clock or 7 o'clock in the evening, my father convened a family council, which was a first. But very calmly, with a few measured words, simply said, we have to go into hiding, because the Germans are taking over, and they're going to come after us personally. So we're going to have to go into hiding, and we have to disperse. We cannot take anything other than the clothes on our backs.

I had begun to think about that, because I had heard a little bit about the Salonika thing. So I had spoken to one of my friends, ones that I went out with who was a former schoolmate of mine from high school. His name was Thanasis Nikolopoulos.

So as soon as my father told us what the decision was, then-- well, he turned to me, and he says, well, you're going to go and see-- apparently, he had spoken to a friend, a neighbor. And I told him, all right, but let me-- also, I have spoken to Thanasis. He knew him. And he was going to talk to his parents, and I'm to see him tomorrow. Why don't you wait until tomorrow? He says, fine.

So eventually, the following day, I spoke to [PERSONAL NAME], and she said, you're welcome. And I had not even met his parents. I went to their home. And immediately, they-- with no fuss, no nothing, said, you can stay with us for as long as you want.

Then I went home. It was the last day that we were together. And my mother and Sam and Meko were going to go together to one of the suburbs as, again, arranged by my father, and my father with another Greek friend.

So-- well, we said goodbye, embraced. But, of course, I was told by my father his address, because I would need money from time to time, and I would have to go and see him. But then I went with the few clothes I had with me, and stayed in Thanasis's house.

I think we should stop the tape--

All right.

--now, because the story is going to get very complicated.

Right.