

Isaac, the evening that your father brought you together, this, you said, was extremely unusual. This was the first time you'd ever had a family--

Council.

Council. Was he very explicit with you beyond saying, we have to-- first we have to go into hiding because the Germans are going to come after us? Did you say, well, what are we going to do?

No, no. Yeah. He was-- I mean, because it was, first of all, a first experience, but, in other words, even in retrospect, I remember even at that time, or a day or two later, in thinking what he said, I'm sure he didn't rehearse it. He didn't-- I mean, he obviously knew what he wanted to say. But he did it with quite directly. It was quite clear. In other words, he set the scene, and said, we are coming under German occupation.

We now know what happened to the Jews of Salonika. And their fate is unknown. But it can only be a terrible thing. That is why we are now being given the signal. And I remember he used that word. We're being given the signal to disperse. All those who can. Because we should not fall in German hands.

So he set the stage rather clearly. It wasn't-- it did not [INAUDIBLE] or anything like that. But having then set the stage, then just as clearly, he then said what my mother and he had decided to do. That we would have to split because we couldn't all remain together. Unfortunately, it was impractical going into a friend's house. People are not ready to take on five people.

So all those things were very clear, very measured. And I don't recall-- I mean, there was-- I mean, we looked at each other-- my brothers and I, and we looked at them. But, it was done in such a realistic, businesslike way, there was no-- there was no emotional-- I mean, I saw my mother crying. But not in a loud or emotional outward way. Was just silent tears coming down her face.

But, I think, probably my father wanted to make sure that he could convey this news without causing, you know, undue anxiety or panic more than simply what the situation dictated.

Isaac, you said to me-- this was a few months ago, off camera-- about how you wish, but there's no answer to the question, of the look that your parents had, a sort of gray grayness. And no--

Dark black black. Yes.

That you wish that they had been able to communicate what it was that they were feeling or thinking. Is it possible also that they had very little information? That they knew something was ominous. But they also had no words.

Oh.

Was it--

Yes. I mean, I'm sure they had no conception of the dimensions of the horror. But, on the other hand, I mentioned earlier, as early as '41, the Germans did the conscription of the Jews in Salonika. Ransom had to be paid. Then, the deportation occurred. And actually, this was written up in the papers. Because the then archbishop of Greece wrote a letter to the Greek prime minister, the collaboration government, protesting the mistreatment of the Jews of Salonika.

And very well known. He was threatened to be shot by the German general occupying Greece at that time. And there's a equally famous reply that he made. And he said, General Strop, Greek clergy are hanged, are not shot. Please observe this tradition.

So, information was available. Finally, I have to tell you, which I now have pieced together subsequently, is my father's niece, the daughter of his sister, and her husband had escaped the last minute from Monastir. Went to Salonika because

they had family there. But they were told they were crazy to come to Salonika. Because it was under German occupation. Go to Athens.

So they came to Athens, I imagine around May of '43. Italian-- I mean, that's still under Italian occupation. And I'm sure that from Allegra-- that was my cousin's name-- Allegra Russo-- and her husband. They were told whatever they know, because they had seen these things first hand. And I mean, the treatment of the Macedonian Jews of Bitola was unspeakable from the first minute of the occupation. So they knew.

But obviously, you picked up enough to talk with your friend even prior to this family council.

Yes. I had-- I sensed, and as well as heard. Because after all, also my-- the man I worked for himself was from Salonika and had left Salonika a year or two earlier to come to Athens. So, you piece pieces together and you know.

But I have to tell you that I didn't discuss the possibility of going into hiding to my friend Thenassis in the hearing of the others. I don't know why. Maybe the subject was so delicate, I think, that I spoke to him alone.

None of your other friends were there.

Right. So, it isn't something that I had been preparing. And possibly, I must have flew to to Thenassis maybe a week or so before the actual happening, when we put into effect.

And you also said that very quickly, the Jews of Athens dispersed, many of them--

Disappeared. Yes.

So this means that the population of non-Jewish Greeks are very open to helping the Jews. Or am I-- is that not--

No, of course. We are-- those who survived, we survived because of the Greeks. And, I mean, I think most of them-- the great majority of them-- knew the risks that they were running. Because to be found out doing that, you yourself are to be shot or in prison and so forth. And the only thing-- I remember some Greek family that hid Jewish people-- were asked, why do they do that? And they said, we are human beings. And I think that I have no other word or better word than humanity. It was nothing ideological. They didn't-- it was an exalted thing or philosophical. It was just sheer humanity. Goodness.

Had there been a census of Greece within, I don't know, 1933, 1936?

Of all of Greece? But, I'm sure they might have been. But it was not as regular as it's done in the United States or even other parts of Europe. But, if you talking about this particular about the Jewish population, now recall that in every community, births and deaths were registered in the Jewish community. But also with the Greek authorities.

So it was known, for example, yes. Because these were remnants in Greece and in the Balkans of the 500 years of Ottoman rule where, not only the Jewish community, the Greek communities under Ottoman rule, they were effectively self regulating and self governing. Except, of course, for matters of war or crimes or things like that.

But, Jews, or even Christians under Ottoman rule, if they had a dispute with-- I would say business dispute with a partner, they didn't go to Turkish court. That was a Jewish court in the Jewish community that adjudicated things like that. Which is a long tradition, as we all know in Europe.

Now the reason why I'm asking this is because does this mean that the Germans, when they come in, can easily get a list of who the Jews are and where they're living?

Yes. The answer is I think yes. Now the list may not have an up to date. Because effectively, some people who are coming from Salonika and other parts of Greece to Athens because of the favorable atmosphere of the Italian occupation, they didn't necessarily go to the community and register. I believe, but I am not entirely sure about what I'm

going to say, that when the rabbi received the instruction to issue then a proclamation for the Jews to come and register, I think the paperwork also went with him.

So he, or other people in the community that went into hiding hid the main files.

So does that mean that most of the Jews did not register? Some must have.

Well, unfortunately, months later-- by that time, I'm in the mountains. But I learned after the war-- some people, foolishly, in March or April '44-- I'm talking about a year later-- the Jews issued another proclamation-- I mean, the Germans-- saying Jews can come and register to get matzo distributed. And some of them, believe it or not, did go. And they were grabbed.

Now, before you go to the mountains, you are hiding for about how long?

Two or three weeks.

Just a few weeks.

Yeah. Two or three weeks in Thenassis' house. I go out in the evenings at times. I went and saw my father two or three times. I went and saw my mother and brothers twice.

And you were the only one who could do that? The other members of the family didn't come to see you. You went to see them.

Yes. First of all, my two younger brothers lived in an Eastern suburb of Athens. My friend's house was a 10 minute walk really from the apartment where we lived. So it was much more-- not only convenient, but I think more prudent for me to go. My father, of course, could not navigate, as we know. And I went-- took the bus and went to the suburbs and saw my mother and brothers twice.

I saw my father at least three times, including when I went to tell him of my decision to go to the mountains. Well, he tried to dissuade me. Because he said that I'm young and this is not a life that somebody of my age can cope with. But I think when he saw that I was determined, he insisted that, since, in my travels, I may have to go through checkpoints, if somehow I were discovered, he begged me-- in fact, he insisted that I then run away on purpose so I could be shot and killed so I would not fall alive in the hands of the Germans.

He gave me some money to pay for my passage to the mountains. And parenthetically, my friend had also asked me that-- that he had decided also to go to the mountains. But his parents did not know. But he didn't have enough money for the fare. So I asked my father for that also. I did not go to see my mother. Because I believed that it wasn't an attempt at dissuasion. That it would be something more emotional that I possibly could not then handle. And then I was concerned that she might succeed. And since I was determined to go to the mountains, I didn't go to see her. And this is something that I have regretted, and I will possibly regret forever that I didn't say goodbye to her.

Or to your two brothers.

Right.

Hm. Mm. How did you make the decision to go? What made you, since you weren't very political? [CLEARING THROAT].

Well, we knew-- people know because they talk and you hear things. First of all, people are shot at times. Because a German soldier was killed, assassinated by the resistance. Then they grabbed people at random and shoot them.

And it was known, and we knew, that there was a part of Greece, generally in the Northwestern part from the direction of Athens in those mountains around Thessaly. And that was a portion of which, if I remember hearing maybe as early

as the summer of '43, it was called free Greece. And that's all that, I think, I knew personally.

So when I made the decision-- because I-- what led me to make this decision, first it was the negative factor that I couldn't possibly remain in hiding for goodness knows how long. No one knew how long the situation may last. A few weeks, maybe a few months, or something. But, what if it's a year?

So I decided I have to get out somewhere. So I go in the direction in which I here is free Greece. When I talked with my friend Thenassis, he was much more politically involved, something that I did not know until that moment. That yes, he also had decided to do that and he wanted to join a specific group of the Greek resistance known as the Zervas forces.

And he knew that they were in a specific part of Thessaly. So that's why we decided to take the bus, which was not a bus. It was a truck, and head to Thessaly. But from my standpoint, that's all the information I had.

Now let me go back to this choice that you made not to see your mother and your brothers. Do you--

Choice.

Choice.

Right.

Do you really regret having gone to the mountains? You don't.

No. I'm alive because I went to the mountains. No, I-- well two things. First of all-- well many things. At times in the mountains, I thought about them. I thought about them continuously, but I had no news. But I thought instead about what was going to be after the war. See, being the eldest child and my mother was a rather dominant and strong willed individual. We had clashes at times.

And I remember them saying that now I was growing up. Now all these things were behind me and how things were going to be a lot better and I was really going to be now a magnificent child that my mother would be proud of me and so forth.

So there was a lot of that kind of a thing built up. Which came crashing down when I found out that they were not around anymore. And then subsequently, from my brother, I learned that my mother was terribly worried about me. Because she did not know where I was. They had no news. We could not communicate. There was no way for me-- I couldn't write them a letter for obvious reasons. And there were no visitors-- especially in the mountains where I was-- there was no one that I knew who could bring them news.

So all these things had a cumulative effect. And so since-- the regret-- I had to regret when I made the decision-- and maybe a few days and a few weeks and a few months. And every time I think about it, it becomes bigger. Because of other things that I learn. So it piles up.

So she knew that you were going to the mountains because your father--

Of course, my father. Even my poor father, what did he know other than I was leaving? I was going to go in the direction somewhere. And--

And of course he doesn't--

He doesn't know where I-- No. Of course not.

So in some ways, you create a level of anxiety that you didn't want to create with people. But you were trying to make a decision that was best for you.

Right. And I ended up in a place and at the time where-- I'm not trying to rationalize or excuse it-- would have been almost impossible for me to even send word. For example, perhaps we will come to that point later on when I got to the mountains. Because Thenassis decided not to stay. And then he returned.

I did not dare tell Thenassis where my father was. Because we were told and enjoined when we had this family council, we were going to go into hiding. And other than because of me, like, going and getting money or seeing a loved one, we are not to divulge where they are. And I know from my brother when they were caught by the Germans, they were beaten. Because among other things, they wanted [INAUDIBLE] to reveal where my whereabouts were and where my father's whereabouts were.

So they knew you existed?

Oh yes. Oh yes.

So he was with this family.

Right. Oh sure.

Was there a network of people who were rescuing people? Or were these really individuals that had been chosen by--

There was no network. We don't have anything as in Denmark, which was one of the networks so much, but an almost simultaneous reaction of putting all of the-- or 99% of the Danish Jews into boats and ferrying them across to Sweden. All these things were done, I think, on individual measures.

But, there is no question that, for example, in the northern parts of Greece, I know that there were, at times, attempts by the partisan forces to encourage Jews to leave their homes and go to the mountains, which is not an easy thing to do. But nevertheless, they--

Were you frightened by your own decision? Or were you excited that you were finally making a decision to do something? As opposed to waiting?

I was not excited in the sense of that I looked at it as an adventure. It was primarily a relief that, at least I wouldn't have to live in hiding and be a burden on these friends and so forth. But, there was a great deal of uncertainty, which lasted for about a few days until my journey to the mountains. I went into an unknown. I would have gone to a different region where I wouldn't have found anything.

Fortunately, I found the specific thing. And therefore, the thing got transformed. So I didn't go into this thing either as a youthful adventure, there was none of that. It was a serious undertaking.

But you did not have, in a certain way, a political point of view except to get away from the Germans. Whereas your friend really wanted to join what was an anti-communist group.

Yes.

Is it pronounced--

Zervas.

Zervas.

Yeah. He was a former officer in the Greek army who had formed his own bands in the mountains, and who, for a time, they were all collaborating. Until they became politically at loggerheads. And started fighting each other, which was a horrible thing.

So you didn't care which group you got to at first?

First of all--

It was just getting out.

Right. For me, it was getting out and escaping the Germans. I had no background or predilection politically speaking about which group I was going to join.

And your friend, Thenassis, who left because he couldn't get into that group? That was--

Well when we got to--

Well actually--

Yes, yes.

Let's go back.

Right OK.

The day that you're going to leave--

Right.

Right?

Yes.

What do you have to--

We just have the clothes on our back.

You have a little money?

We have just enough for the fare, which I had gotten the day before. And a few spare drachmas, you know, for something to eat.

And he did not say anything to his parents?

No.

Worse than you.

Worse. Right.

Because--

And he was-- and he was the only child as well. So I can only imagine their horror, dismay and so forth. So, we got to the-- I want to call it bus station. There were no bus stations. It was a place in Athens where all the trucks, because they were only trucks available to do that. And there was no gasoline. They were powered-- it was in the rear of the car or truck, something like a furnace where you burned wood. And the gases would be diverted to drive the pistons for the engine.

So we got there and the usual thing was that first, the goods were piled up on the truck. And then the passengers-- in that particular case for us, it was about a dozen or so-- simply sat on top of an open truck. And that was the only way to travel.

OK. I think we'll stop the tape and then we begin next time, we'll begin the journey into the mountains.

Sure. All right.