

Isaac, when we-- the last part of the tape that we were on a few minutes ago, you were getting on top of the flatbedded truck that had all of this material on it. And I gather that these trucks were always going to the mountains. I mean, did they-- or not?

No. Not to the mountains. They were essentially traveling from Athens to various towns or cities. And some of them, of course, were also in other directions from-- between other cities. It was primarily commerce, because there were no-- at that time, there were no-- I don't even know, highways, as we know it-- but even routes that an ordinary truck even with powerful engines could possibly negotiate to go up mountains.

And so who's-- besides you--

And Thanassis.

--and Thanassis, who--

People, villagers-- People would travel, I imagine. Because especially with the advent of the black market-- or let's call it the underground market, right-- the villagers would bring things that obviously are important to Athens-- food primarily. And in turn, they would exchange it for goods of all kinds. I think principally textiles, occasionally some light machinery that existed at that time.

So it was primarily a commercial thing. Of course, you had also-- excuse me-- not tourists but passengers who visited relatives in Athens or vice versa. These are generally the [INAUDIBLE] But I think all the buses, if I can call them that way that I saw at that time, because they were so laden with goods and because it was so expensive, they wanted to make sure that cargo would be transported as well as passengers.

Did you have an ID card of some kind?

Ah, that's important, very interesting. It was necessary for me to get an ID. Before the German takeover of Athens, I had an ID with my real name. But now I had to get a Greek identity-- that's to say, a Christian Orthodox identity.

Thanassis had a friend who was a policeman. And I guess he was trustworthy enough to ask him to help me get an identity card. He was able to get the card detail if I gave him a photo.

And he did the appropriate thing of pasting the photograph in the appropriate place, plus filling out all the other things. But there was one thing that had to be done to which he had no access.

And the last thing was that the seal was embossed. But that seal was only at headquarters. So having no access there, he told me, I regret it, but I cannot get you anything more than that.

So before embarking on my trip, I took an old coin-- a pre-war 5 drachma piece. And I put it at the corner of the photograph and hammered it, so that it left an impression. Because the coin in its face had embossed letters. I'm sure it said [NON-ENGLISH] Greek Republic.

But it had to be some semblance. So I think it would not have withstood the scrutiny, even by an amateur. But fortunately, the only two checkpoints we went through-- after leaving Athens to my eventual destination in Karditsa in Thessaly.

It was during a driving rain. We were, of course, entirely soaked to the bone on top of those trucks. But by the same token, the guards-- which were Germans with Greek police-- didn't pay that much attention. So I didn't have to do what I had promised my father I would do.

Now, Nehama must have been clearly a Jewish--

Oh yes.

--name, right? So it would have been too noticeable.

Oh yes. My Greek name on that fake identity was Giannis Democritus, which is a rather famous name of a Greek philosopher. In fact, the first one to declare, on no evidence at all other than his mind, the existence of an atom.

Right. All right. So you're on this-- you go through two checkpoints, so you don't have to run away the way your father has suggested you do if there's a problem.

Because, you know, those trucks-- as I think mentioned possibly in the last tape-- they were not driven by a gasoline engine but by burning wood. So they didn't have that much of power. So it's rather a long trip.

And because of the rain, we then had to stop en route in a town called Lamia, which is a sizable town. So we stopped there for the night.

And where did you stay that night?

Well, we arrived. And because we were soaked, the first thing we thought was to dry ourselves. So next to the station where we stopped-- if we can call it a bus station-- was a restaurant. We were very hungry.

So we went there and really stood near the kitchen, so we could-- the heat would dry our clothes. And then we were ready to go out after the meal to find a place to stay, a hotel if such a thing existed.

But then they told us in the restaurant that in five minutes, the curfew began. And it was patrolled by German patrols. And you shouldn't be found out walking after curfew time.

So who do we call? We had no place to go. But next to the restaurant was I think the one and only bordello in town. So that's where we ended up.

So just because it's a little bit funny, what is the situation? You go and you say, we're two kids. We have no place to stay. Will you let to stay here. Is that what you end up--?

Well, they welcome you. Of course, you are obliged to take a girl.

Ah, yes. Really?

Well, sure. Otherwise, you-- they've got [? along ?] for the entire night. I mean, they knew that, of course, the curfew had started. And so the price was appropriate, ha, ha, for a whole night.

So this is a new experience?

Yes. Right.

[CHUCKLING]

And you spent one night there.

Yes.

Did they feed you breakfast in the morning?

Feed who? No, no, no. At the place? No, no, no. We just-- we knew-- we were told that the bus people would come around. Because they knew some people probably were there drifting. And because they wanted to start early.

So we left around 7:00. And first of all, I think that probably you know that in the Balkan countries, generally people don't have breakfast. If they have, they may have a cup of coffee. I don't know if we had anything. So we just got on the bus s on the truck. And by the end of that second day, we arrived at our destination-- Karditsa.

And then what happened? And then you--

Well, we alighted, and we got off. Now for us, it was the end. And nearby was-- there near Karditsa, although it was not part of, quote, "free Greece," unquote. But it was near enough the foothills of the mountains that there had been no Italian or German presence in Karditsa. At least voluntarily, they had left it.

But it doesn't mean-- but still it was on the plains of Thessaly. It was not occupied by the partisans either. So let's call it a no-man's land.

So we looked around, and we struck up a conversation with the teacher-- a teacher in one of the schools in Karditsa And Thanassis,] who had a specific destination in mind, I think very quickly asked the teacher-- we want to go and join Zervas. So where do we go to do that?

The teacher said, Zervas was around this area, but that's a few months ago. And there's been some fighting with ELAS, in other words, the other side. And I'm afraid that the nearest place that you can find Zervas was Epirus, which is near the Albanian border, which was very far away and totally beyond our means, even if we could find transport to go there.

We didn't discuss it very much more at that time. And the teacher was really kind enough-- we didn't even ask him, but he offered to let us stay in his house overnight. And we could decide what to do the following morning. So he offered us food and lodging without payment.

We got up the following day, Thanassis apparently having reflected on the situation. And he really didn't give me many reasons. But he said to me very clearly, I really cannot proceed any further.

I understand that in your case-- because the only other choice that was available is to join ELAS, who were only 30 or 40 kilometers away from Kalavryta. I understand your situation, but I cannot. And I will therefore return to Athens.

But he had no more money. I had no money left. We embraced. I thanked him. We took-- we leave of each other. And I mentally visually still remember seeing him walking.

Because either the directions, you really wouldn't take a highway. There was no such thing or a route. So he's following the railroad tracks, right? I see the railroad tracks and Thanassis walking. It's like the end of a movie as it fades in the background.

So I then ask the-- If I may--

I'm sorry, yes.

--before you move on, how do you understand his decision now? Do you think it was because he didn't want to join the communist group? He really was wanting to join the other--

The former. But let's be careful. ELAS was not a communist group. It included, but it was not a communist group.

Right. OK.

Only for a--

Right. No, no. That's important.

Uh. And--

So it wasn't anti-communist.

No.

So then it would include communists.

Right. It was a coalition of leftist parties. There's no question that it was dominated by the far left. Because they were the best organized group of resistance. But [INAUDIBLE] was the political side. And ELAS was the military side.

But they were a conglomeration. And I met lots of people who had nothing to do with the communists up there.

Perhaps later on-- but it's appropriate now for me to tell you-- because you asked me this question about Thanassis-- that at the end of the war, when I returned to Athens, within a couple of weeks there was the so-called troubles between the central government, now liberated. And I had not even had the chance to visit him and his parents and thank them and tell them that I have survived and everything like that. Because this problem arose, where the streets now, the shooting going on between factions.

And it was at the end of December after my return from concentration camp-- the British concentration camp, this time-- in Egypt that I learned that Thanassis was killed during this month of a couple of weeks of troubles. So here again, in a different vein as my mother, here's another case of somebody who went with me. I didn't have a chance to see him again after we parted.

But there's no question that he was really a member of an extremely rabid right wing group. And therefore, it would have been unthinkable for him to join.

But even being a member of such an extreme right wing group didn't mean he wouldn't help you as a Jew. The anti-Semitism was nothing in this situation.

No, no, no. These didn't-- they were two separate things.

All right.

So that's-- Thanassis is gone unfortunately.

Yeah. So he goes. And now you have--

I asked the teacher. I said, well-- and it was very easy. He says, do you see the top of this mountain? He pointed west, straight due west. That's where you go. And that's what it is.

I just-- following that kind of thing, I began on the road, which is in the beginning a visible road and it fades into a kind of a track. And it took close to five hours to negotiate that.

And I was reaching-- I could see the monastery becoming bigger and bigger. But the biggest shock was just, I think, half an hour before I got to the grounds of the monastery. All the surrounding area of trees, forest, grass, all that is filled up with Italian soldiers, but all of them armed.

And I'm walking through, and I see Partisans with beards talking to the Italians. Now, I know there was an armistice but, of course, no idea what had happened in between and especially armed Italians.

But what subsequently I learned, it was a regiment of Italian cavalry called Aosta, from the region in Italy, that voluntarily joined the Partisans. And of course, I had more dealings with them. And so I got to the monastery--

Did they stop you, these soldiers?

No, no, no.

You're walking--

No, they're just chatting and passing the day.

And you're just this kid walking.

I'm just this kid walking. And I reach the monastery. I saw a number of Partisans. And some of them-- it was still early afternoon. The sun is still shining, although it's close to November. It was a warm day. And I don't know why they were naked to the waist, but I learned subsequently why.

But I asked to go see the leader. And I was shown up to the leader, which was a tall man with a long beard. And I admittedly very briefly told him that I had come to join the Partisans. He didn't laugh outright.

He didn't laugh.

No, he didn't laugh, but at least he smiled. He said, look. This is extremely rough life. You are very young. And then, just as simply, I told him that I had no choice. I'm a Jew, and the Germans are persecuting us. And I cannot return to Athens. He says, what? Stay. Stay. And that was the end of it.

Did you also tell him that you had been a boy scout as if that might be--?

Yes, I have to convince him. Yes, I told him I was a boy scout. He laughed.

Did he laugh?

Yes, he laughed. Then I went to the yard again. And finally, I got enough courage to ask because then I began to observe the Partisans who were naked to the midriff because they were fiddling with their shirts. And I know what they were doing. They were killing lice. They were delousing themselves.

And for me, it was such a new thing to see fact that I asked one of them who was doing it, how many had he killed? He looks at me, such a crazy question. He didn't count. But to sort of humor me he said 47. Such a great number. Little did I know that very quickly I would be doing exactly the same thing.

So did the leader of this particular part of the resistance immediately say you can do x or y or--

No, no. I mean, he did all right. But we have to decide what we're going to have you do. But almost immediately, the following day, I was then assigned the-- if I can call it a graveyard shift of being a telephone operator. These telephones were military field telephones strung with wires.

And there was a little room. This was in a monastery, a former monastery. There were cells on all floors. And there was a little telephone room. Now, my shift started around 11 o'clock at night. Before going there, I had to go to the commissary or whatever to get a little tin container that was filled with rough kerosene oil because that was the only light.

There was no electricity. So we had this lamp with a wick. And I knew from the very first day, after the end of my shift, my throat, nose, and everything else were black. I would spit black stuff from inhaling the smoke that came out of that wick during the shift.

Of course, when the phone would ring, then I would respond, take notes. At times I was given messages too. But I remember the second night before starting my shift, again, I was going to the commissary. But I have to remind myself

and you that when you-- the first noticeable thing when you are in the mountains anyplace is how black and dark it is.

In cities, even in a darkened place, the glow of city lights still there, but in the mountains, two things are immediately noticeable. The silence is deafening. Literally, you hear nothing. That's why you can hear things from a distance. And it's also very dark. So there were no lights in the monastery corridors.

So I'm going to go to the commissary to fill my lamp with oil. And then the first thing I know is one leg is going through a hole. And then instinctively, the other leg is going through a hole, and I'm falling through space. And in the middle of the fall, I hit a beam on the side.

And after a couple of other seconds-- it was actually, it only took a few seconds-- I fell through two floors. And I must have screamed in the process of falling. They came running. I just got up, and they all marveled, and they thought that it was a miracle that had happened. They said to me that you are-- I was particularly lucky.

So that was your introduction.

My introduction. And I stayed on that particular job for about two weeks. And then for the following two weeks, I was then made a messenger. I had to take messages to division headquarters.

And the higher in rank was the military unit, the higher was also physically in the mountain. The division was higher and higher. And this is when I was given a rifle. I was given-- it was an Italian rifle-- and two rounds of--

Ammunition?

--ammunition. And I was then given the messages. And I was given the general direction, just march that way. And I didn't know whether my destination was, and you would need an occasional shepherd tending goats or sheep.

And you would say how long is, and you mentioned the name of the place. And he would say half an hour. They have no conception of time in terms of the units that we use. You walk for another three hours, it's still not there. And that's what I did for the next week or so.

Now, let me ask you something.

Yeah.

Did you become a messenger because you've done the telephone operator job so well or did they just happen to need--

No, they just decided that now they needed somebody to carry messages. And I became available or I could be spared from the telephone thing. After all, as I said, there were three shifts because it really had to be tended all the time.

And that's when I became a messenger. But when I returned from the last trek in delivering a message, then there was a general retreat because the Germans decided, which they did periodically, to do a sweep. And in fact, we could begin to see at a distance the trucks coming up and armored vehicles because they didn't have tanks or anything like that.

But this is what happened throughout the occupation. The Italians would sweep up from time to time, sometimes light sweep, sometimes very heavy. And this was a heavy sweep. So we are retreating.

So the monastery was evacuated. The Italian soldiers also accompanied us. And we're going higher and higher. There was no action other than occasionally firing a gun or two at the Germans. But you'll engage heavily armed enemy. That's what Partisan war is.

And after about two or three weeks of going higher than the Germans, decided that they had done as much damage as they could, which really didn't do anything other than burning some villages.

And they went back to the plains. And that's when then I was able to join a real unit rather than a band. The group that I saw in the monastery was a portion of a major unit. It was the First Regiment of Thessaly, the First Regiment of Thessaly, to which then I became-- I joined.

Let me ask you something. When you became a messenger, did you wear special clothes or are you wearing the clothes you came in?

I'm still having-- there are no clothes to go around.

Right. So you're still wearing--

I'm still in civilian clothes, which are beginning now to tatter and also get dirty and feel they were-- I was able to scare up another pair of underwear to change. There were no facilities of that kind. That's it.

I still remember that fortunately-- I don't know why I had traveled from Athens to Karditsa wearing also a blue overcoat, which was sort of a light overcoat, maybe a treated fabric that will withstand the rain. But it was a very, very handy thing because I went through a whole heavy winter with only these clothes.

And the rifle that you were given, were you trained on the rifle?

No.

They just gave it to you?

Give the rifle. They tell you, here is-- you know, the cartridges were in a clip, five to a clip. And they pull the-- I forget now all these terms which I should know from the army. And you push the clip down, push the bolt back again, and you are ready to fire.

I had never fired a rifle, and I still remember I'm marching about an hour away from the monastery. I'm in the middle of a natural plateau in the middle of the mountains. There's nobody around, total silence. And I fired the first bullet of my life, just to even get familiar with the sound. I didn't fire at anybody. It was towards the sky.

Right.

But that's the first time I fired.

All right. Let's stop the tape.