

So now you're at a very high point in the mountains. And you joined the real regiment I gather.

Right. I sort of got interviewed by an officer. He was not the commanding officer of the regiment. And I think they're probably debating about what to have me do. Certainly I was not either trained or old enough to join a fighting unit. And then the same afternoon, I am called to go and talk to the second in command.

Let me parenthetically note that in ELAS, there was always dual leadership. There was the military commander. I don't want to-- the second in command, it was not a rank. But he was the equivalent of a political officer, if you want to call it a kommissar. But they were called kapetanios, which is a generic name for captain or an officer of some rank.

So I go to his office. And he told me that he has an important mission for me. They know me. But they had not known that I was from Athens, that I spoke French and some Spanish. It was very important mission because every year, the little rivulets, or even creeks, which are dry most of the year, but in spring after the snows fall, then these creeks flood and even the little rivers flood. And always there are people who drown.

Now, our mission, the mission I want to entrust you with is this, because we don't know when the next sweep is going to come. And we want to be sure that our line of retreat is available to us. We don't want to have to ford something that's not passable. So what I want you to do is I'm going to put you in charge, 16 and a half years old, put you in charge of a group. And there'll be two Italian officers. They are both engineers.

And your mission is to go to a number of villages, which he had written down, near some of those rivers. And you will tell them that you have orders for the village people to help you do two things, first, cut down trees to provide material for building the bridge. The Italian officers would measure and find the appropriate place. And then the villagers would help with labor to cut the logs and also, with materials such as nails and things like this, as well as labor to assemble the bridge.

So he gave me official orders, signed, whatever it was. I don't even know if it was a seal. And then I was introduced-- they were in the outside-- these two men, officer uniforms. They were also armed. Now I do not know Italian. But between French and the Ladino, I could make out a few things. And we could begin to understand each other. I think they had been briefed, that's now the word, about what the mission was.

And so the following morning, you have the Nehama group walking to our destination. And it took us--

Isn't this rather unusual to have a 16 and a half year old who hasn't been in this group for more than four to five weeks?

Look, I can only speculate that probably it was either a stupid, half baked idea. Or it was a serious idea, but a half baked notion of how to implement it. Or it is not they wanted to get rid of me from there, but the plausible explanation is that this was a real need, right? That was not the only way to skin that particular cat, or fording a bridge. But they thought, why don't we take advantage of-- because the military engineers are trained to do things like this using what locally available materials are.

So it was not a crazy notion of trying to build. And we aren't talking about large rivers. I'm talking maybe the biggest one that we had to do was 4 to 5 meters, which is 15, 20 feet. We're not talking about huge things. So the notion was certainly plausible and necessary in order to maintain open line of communication. You don't want to be repeating and suddenly have your backs to the river. But I mean, if they wanted to do it very seriously, they wouldn't have sent a 16 and a half year old boy. They would have something else, maybe another contingent of two or three who would then also participate in the actual building.

Up to this point, these few weeks that you're the group, do some of the older men befriend you? I mean, do you feel--

Oh, yes.

They do.

Oh, yes.

They welcome you in.

Right, right.

And do they in some sense try to-- you're the youngest person there, right?

Yes, yes.

And there are no women. It's all boys. Or are there women?

There are women. But I didn't see them yet, when the partisans-- until after the end of that mission that failed. Right.

OK, so you feel very comfortable with these people.

Yes. I share their life. I eat with them. We talk.

Now, all this time, of course, you are still preoccupied in some way with what's happening to the family.

Yes, I'm preoccupied. But it's the kind of a thing that I don't-- I have no contact left anymore. I thinking of them. But it's a kind of thought that goes nowhere because there is nothing I can do in trying some method of trying to get news from them, either deliver my news or their news. So I-- so that I'm getting adjusted even to the notion of being out of contact.

Do they ask you about your family, these guys?

Look, I don't think we spoke very much. I mean, occasionally the conversation would come back, because later on, when I was part of a real ongoing military unit after this mission that I returned from, there was a large contingent of regimental headquarters, where we were really living, and staying together, and talking. And we started exchanging. But in the first month or two, most of the time we are talking about is first of all, the next preoccupation-- or the only preoccupation is what are you going to eat? Because there is no food to be had.

This is not a unit where you're going to go for chow when something rings. You have to scrounge for things. So most of the time, and necessarily, is you're thinking about only one thing, survival.

All right, let's describe this-- it ends up being a somewhat failed mission.

Right, failed mission. Very briefly, we went to the first village. I approached the teacher. I showed him the orders. And they said, sure, sure. The following morning, we will gather, sure, sure. Of course, they put us up for the evening. They were a little skittish I could see in their eyes of having to also host two Italian officers, armed, because you got to remember, for the previous two years, that region from time to time would have incursions of Italians who would burn their villages. I mean, I saw the rims of that, the hulks of just nothing but the walls with the open sky.

But at least they did not attack us. They would put us up. But they wouldn't show up. And although I tried to get in then, they would say again the following morning, the long and the short is we went through two or three other villages with almost identical results. But the third or fourth village it was just, I think, after Christmas of '43, maybe December 28 or 29. We got to this village.

And although the story was the same tomorrow. But they didn't put us up in a house in that village. Instead they guided us something like close to a half an hour walk from the village. And in the middle of nowhere there was a little barn. And it was two stories. And in the lower part it was a tethered donkey. And the upper was just a room. But it had a fireplace. So he says, this is where you're going to stay during your stay. All right. So that's where we slept the first night.

When we got up the following morning, it had begun to snow incessantly which continued for a week. Very quickly we were totally snowbound. Fortunately, I mean, the way we survived is once a day around midday or so, a poor, elderly woman from the village would trudge all that distance with a sack of roughly ground corn flour. And that's our subsistence. We would take the corn flour and melt some snow, knead it into some kind of a dough and pat it to a semblance of a bread. And we would burn it on the fireplace. That's what we ate.

Now, I think the second week, she brought us an egg. And we were, of course, you know, we hadn't seen anything like this. And we were overjoyed. But very quickly we decided that it would be divided into three. I mean, we would not even feel it in our mouths. So we decided to keep it as a symbol of our eventual deliverance, both from the snow outside of that mission, as well as the war.

And then I can tell you very quickly, I mean, we used the egg to play games with the mice. The mice would come out at night, because it was the gallery, I mean, all these things. And we had not thought-- we had left the egg someplace. And then in the glow of the fire-- we used to go out to gather branches and burn them-- we saw how mice steal the egg. One mouse takes it in its paws and the others drag it by the tail. So we discovered a game.

So we used to take the egg and have bets made and races. We would leave it like this. And then we see the mouse come. And the bet was how fast it will get to the hole. By the time he reached the hole, we grabbed the egg again. And so that's the way-- and that's how I began to learn Italian because spending all day long, we used to sing Italian songs.

And I clearly remember the first day when the snow ended, it was the kind of thing that you know when the snow clears and the sky is completely cloud free and bright, blinding brightness because of the white. And we heard a drone of aircraft, which was an incredible sound. And we look up. And we see huge formations of bombers, which we concluded couldn't be anything but the Allied because the Germans didn't have very much of an air force. And I think in retrospect, because I can tell you the direction which they were flying, namely northeastern, they probably were coming from Italy to bomb the oil fields in Ploiesti in Romania.

So you know, we could almost-- kind of a thing that we all three of us looked up and sort of begged that they would come for us very quickly. So after the second week there, we concluded that we were not going to get anywhere, especially now since the ground was covered with snow, even if things had changed, the attitude had changed. So I had lost, also, a sense of orientation of where we were. Where is the nearest partisan unit? We had been on the road for practically a month.

So I was told, and we were pointed to some direction. And we got there. And the first person I saw was Saby, Shabetai my friend and neighbor from our apartment in Athens. I approached him. I addressed him. He turn and says, who are you? And when I told him, he was, you know, horrified, dismayed. I must have been filthy in rags, you know, uncombed, literally dirty because we had no means of bathing, washing, or anything like that, as well as, of course, hungry.

But so that was regimental headquarters. And that's the unit I then became part of for the remaining of my--

And he was part of that unit--

No, no, he was--

Saby told me very quickly. Saby he was a very clever fellow. But he didn't have any training like I did. He was two years older. He became a spy. And it was-- he would go to Trikala, wearing decent civilian clothes. And I guess there must have been contacts. And he would stay with them. But he would-- the spy part was to try to find out movements. Are there convoys of trucks or is there a train that's coming, passing that's laden?

So that if there would be any action to be taken against either a convoy of trucks, or it blow up a train, although the British had much greater network of intelligence in Greece. And all the major actions that took place was always because the British knew. And then they would agree with the guerrillas to blow up a train or to destroy a bridge, the

[INAUDIBLE], but the most major action was done at the request of the British. And a big viaduct was blown up. It was quite a few months before my arrival.

During my time, there were two actions of blowing up bridges in the area where my regiment operated. I was not involved in that.

So when you-- do you end up being able to take a shower or something?

Eventually, yes, I took a bath. There were no showers, a bath. And given-- actually, the pants I had-- and then, I had lost my shoes because in fording up one of the rivers, I was told by a partisan, which is true in all armies, that when you are going to cross a river, tie the shoelaces and tie them around the rifle and hold them like that. So I don't know. Maybe I didn't tie them well enough. And we're in the middle of this little rivulet, this little stream. But it's quite swift. And one of the shoes falls. And I see them disappearing down. And it's going too fast for me to do anything.

So I was left with one shoe. So I thought, I'll wear only one shoe. But it's bad because then you begin to hurt all over. So I threw the other one out. And I was barefoot all of this time in the snow and so forth. I was totally barefoot. But the pants survived after my return, after they were washed by a villager. And I was given a tunic, the top, a tunic, an Italian soldier's tunic, but no shoes.

But a villager gave me a pigskin shoes. It's just a piece of pigskin which is then pierced and tied with string, which is all right. It's like a ballet slipper that you use, which is fine. But two weeks later, when I was asleep, a dog ate one of the shoes because it was food for them.

So did you get frostbite on your feet?

Fortunately not. The feet would get very, very cold. And the Italians, maybe they had been taught or they knew, they were much, of course, older than I am, to rub them with snow. And if you do that-- I don't think it's rubbing with snow, but rubbing them fast, it just restores the blood circulation. This is what you have to make sure. Fortunately I didn't get frostbite.

But three weeks after my arrival at headquarters, I got pleurisy, a very bad cold. I mean, a little bit of fluid collects in the pleura, not the lungs, but in the pleura. But there was a little infirmary and had an Italian doctor. I can still remember him. He was a short, very intelligent looking Sicilian. He was almost entirely black, so brown skin, but very, very capable, very clever, with practically he had no facilities, but took care of his patients.

Did he misdiagnose what was wrong with you?

No, no, no, no, no, no.

No.

No, no, everything was fine.

And what did they give you for this?

Nothing, just simply to be covered with additional blankets. There were no medicines to be had. Sulfa was beginning to be known at that time. And of course, they were equipped in their own army, but we didn't have such supplies.

So you were sick, what, for a week, 10 days, something like that?

Yes. Unfortunately, behind, it was in an abandoned church, an old church, so looking out of the window was the cemetery. And I remember another fellow patient and I were talking. And we were thinking, well, OK, they won't have very far to travel if we have to end up there.

So you get another job--

Yes.

--after you get sick?

After I got sick and recovered, I was-- because by that time, there was also another transformation that had taken place a few months before my arrival in the partisans. Namely, the partisans became organized as a modern army with echelons, distinct divisions, regiments, battalions, companies, at least on paper, all right? And whereas before these were independent units marauding, doing whatever they could.

But this was put on a much more professional footing because by that time, the man in command of the entire ELAS was General Sarafis, who was a professional military officer before the war. So when I then was assigned to the regiment, now, the regimental commander was a man whose permanent rank was a major in the former Greek Army by the name of Karfis. And he happened to have as an adjutant a recent graduate of the Greek Military Academy.

So he was the usual, not spit and polish because we didn't have the things for that, but saluting, although there wasn't so much saluting the partisans, you know. The method of addressing each other was [NON-ENGLISH] which means fellow fighter. It wasn't comrade. It wasn't mister. It was even with an officer of superior rank, you would address him as fellow fighter and then his name.

So because I think of the fact that my background, finishing high school, command of the language, and so forth, I was given a clerical job, primarily encipherment, codes, because by that time, there were even radios, and nearby, because very near the regimental place there was the airfield, if I can call it that. It was just a bare piece of ground. But it was situated in a natural plateau, the one that I fired, remember?

Yes.

My first rifle. And in the summer months when the land was dry then it was able to support the weight of an aircraft. And they would fly them over there from Egypt for missions back and forth. And because of the proximity, then there was a permanent detachment of British officers, liaison officers, that had been parachuted or brought by aircraft next to our regimental headquarters. So at times I would then be asked to go. I do not know English. But some of them, some of the English officers, knew French. And I was able to converse.

Plus they were the only ones that had long range shortwave radios. I mean, the partisans only division had a radio. And in our headquarters, we didn't have a radio in the beginning. So everything had to be through, again, field telephony. But by then, it was necessary because of certain engagements to encode messages. And so I was pressed in that job.

Did you like that job? Was it interesting?

Well, you know, no clerical job is interesting. Everything becomes routine a little bit. But it was-- the thing that amazed me is that after a while, I didn't have to look at the decoding book to decode text. I had begun to learn and visualize the decipherment, the decipherment, if you will. But I didn't want people to see that because I was told that if you eventually memorize it, then if you are ever caught, then under torture you may reveal the codes. Although, I'm sure that the things that they had to communicate were not of momentous, strategic importance.

But they would also change the codes.

Yeah, but you do that-- we didn't have-- in all that-- I'm talking about practically from February through November, practically the nine months that my remaining stay with the partisans service. We change codes routinely only twice. So there wasn't that kind of a [INAUDIBLE] because I don't think they were high level codes. But they were important to us. Well, that was not the only thing I had to do.

Then the adjutant orders had to be typed. We found a ramshackle typewriter and some paper. I was the only one who

was able to use that and type some orders.

So you had learned typing? Sort of?

Sort of-- [LAUGHS] more the two or three fingers, which I still have to this day.

So how are things now? Is this unit now going out and doing sabotage? Or is it quiet and that's not what you're doing--

No, no. Again, because it was regimental headquarters-- now, it's fighting units. Sabotage are in the region. I mean, if I drew a circle, it would probably cover a radius of 50, 60 kilometers, or 40 miles because then we are adjacent to it. By that time, in the beginning of the partisan war, the major things that the partisans had to do, ordered to do, was a kill known collaborators primarily to elevate the morale of the people, to begin to give them a sense that there are people who are protecting them, that those who collaborate with the enemy are going to get their just desserts.

And because you cannot fight heavy engagements, there were occasional skirmishes and attacks with isolated Italian or German units. But in our sector, then we began to do a systematic thing of attacking convoys because our unit was the nearest to the main road that goes from Trikala to eventually Karditsa, and then Lamia and so forth to south part of Greece.

So that was essentially the mission, if I can call it, of the regiment. We never got engaged. You don't do that with the light weapons. The heaviest weapon I remember we had in the whole regiment was two heavy machine guns. You can't engage an enemy that has armored units with two heavy machine guns.

OK, we've come to the end of the tape.

All right.