

Isaac, what is-- are you getting news about the front? I mean, clearly there's a turn in the war and there's been a turning war since '43 or late '42.

Right. Well, most of the spring, we knew, first of all, to ask through the British connection, primarily, as well as independently the Greek connections, because the division talked to the agents Athens or the top command of Allies. But it would come to us two or three weeks late. So it primarily still involves the campaign in Italy.

The great event occurs June 6, when Normandy occurs. We would get also news of the Eastern Front.

Well, that was the first major event that really didn't have an immediate effect, other than psychological, but now these two great parts of the Allies are converging. But I think through the stream of messages coming from division and from Allies' headquarters definitely show an increase in the pace of operations for two reasons.

First of all, visibly, from reports, Germans are abandoning smaller towns and concentrating in major arteries. Now, why would they do that, since nobody thought that Greece itself was about to be invaded by Allied troops? So that was one reason.

Then also, the news began to trickle down again. We had more contact, even, from Tito partisans who have much better communications. And already, we began to see that the Russians are approaching the southern part of Europe, namely the Balkans. And it doesn't take a strategic Napoleonic mind. A short look at the map indicates that because Greece is almost like a peninsula at the bottom of the Balkans, if the Russians were advancing that much, I think eventually what happened is that the Germans would have an untenable position in Greece.

So this explains why the Germans were consolidating their lines. And because in the meantime, attempts are being made by the British mission to try to unite the warring factions of the Greek resistance. And eventually, in June or July of '44, there was a signed agreement that was signed by representatives in the Middle East in Lebanon, I believe, Beirut, which then held until the end of the war. So we had this pace going on.

But again, the day to day life for us, food was very scarce, as usual. Although it was regimental headquarters, we didn't crops or other food. Also, clothing and sanitary conditions were not-- I mean, if you went to sleep at night, especially in the winter, well, in the middle of the night, people are getting-- they sleep on the floor. People are getting up and stepping more sometimes on the bodies, make their way to go out, maybe to relieve themselves.

But very often, it was not for that reason. You would go up and open the tunic to let the cold air come in to quiet the lice, because in sleeping bodies next to each other, the lice begin to get warm. They began to move. And it's not particularly pleasant. And to quiet them again, you go out and open the tunic, let the cold in, and they're quiet, letting you sleep for another hour or two.

This persisted until when you became real warm in the mountains, late June and on, because then you could go bathe in the streams. And that's what-- we used to do that every day. And at times, in effect, it eventually happened to me later on a month or two later. When I went swimming, I had been perspiring, running to get to the place to swim, and I must have caught a cold, which was then misdiagnosed as malaria and other problems.

But this was-- the pace noticeably started. There were more action from our units in the periphery, plus the clear indication, whether they had come from headquarters in the Middle East or from Allies headquarters, to harass Germans, even notably those who were retreating and going North, but not to attempt any major action, even if we were able to, the reason being that they didn't want to infuriate the Germans because they have to infuriate them, they were doing that anyhow in many places, namely a scorched earth policy. They attempted to blow up the port facilities in Piraeus, and it was only a last minute action by the partisans in the city that averted the blowing up of port facilities in Piraeus.

So noticeably, we saw the pace accelerate.

Did you want to join them?

I?

Yes.

I hadn't seen any action. The only action I saw was a month later. It came inadvertently. I don't think I had-- I knew that-- it wasn't because of the roughness or the danger, but that really I had no experience. And I had seen enough of what had been going on to know that I should not be entrusted with lack of appropriate training or anything major.

Let me go back for a moment. There wasn't that much food, but you all were smoking cigarettes, which--

Well, food was always, I think, once a day. And most of the time, because that was what was available, were I still remember the black eye-- they look like black eyed peas, or black eyed beans. But these were from old, even sometimes abandoned governmental warehouses.

The villagers would make flour available, whatever they were able to do. And those things were usually spoiled, rotten, you find little crawling worms inside, but not after boiling. We used to joke that we would eat meat also while eating the beans.

But again, relief would come from hunger in the summertime, then, because of vegetables and the availability of vegetables.

I forgot what you asked me.

I was asking about cigarettes.

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, the only way to relieve hunger-- and that's where I learn to smoke. But we didn't have tobacco. So you would take leaves from trees and dry them and crunch them, and usually find a piece of newspaper.

In the area where we were, a government warehouse had been raided and tons, literally tons of contraband cigarette paper, which was used to be sold legally to roll cigarettes, had been found. But because it had been contraband, it was so massive, you cannot burn paper so easily. As you know, even in a fireplace, if you put a book, it takes-- it's hard to burn it.

So the government had fumigated these warehouses with sulfur which had permeated the cigarette paper. So if you use that, which was in some respects easy, but it stunk and smelled and tasted of sulfur so much we use newspaper.

The problem with the newspaper is you take a puff and it's a flame at the end of the thing. You think of burning a cigarette, with this you have a flame burning. And this is the reason why. It was primarily to assuage hunger.

So it was very difficult to actually do that.

Right, yeah, yeah. Later on, occasionally, somebody would find-- because that region of Greece also is a tobacco growing region. We were able to find tobacco and hide it.

Now, were you finding that in the villages, in spite of your bridge failure, that people were supporting the partisans?

Oh, yes. There is no question. Because first of all, there is no question that without the support of the people who had suffered a great deal, who also knew that harboring villagers really almost invited punitive raids by the Italians, by the Germans. And in spite of that, they persisted. And without them, I think, not only our movement, I think no partisan movement can possibly exist, survive, let alone thrive and operate.

The Italians taught you songs.

And also poems and--

So you have a certain kind of education.

Sure, sure.

Were their partisan songs that were sung?

No, the only Italian or foreign partisan songs that I learned was from a captured German soldier who turned out to have been formerly in Nazi prisons. But as the war is progressing and manpower is lost, the Germans began to free-- free-- I mean, let the prisoners out, sometimes eventually including criminals. But first, we started with political prisoners, former Communists and leftists, Social Democrats, you name it.

But when they set them free, so to speak, they put them in special German units. In fact, they had a number. I forget if it was 888 or 999, something like that. And they were never let in big numbers. They were dispersed and sent throughout Europe. And generally, they would be given menial or clerical or support jobs, so they were not in any armed way or possibly representing a risk to the other German military.

And so he was captured-- actually, he came also willingly. And he was acting in some cases as an interpreter when we captured others and interrogate them. And he told me all kinds of songs that were sung throughout Europe in French. I learned the "Internationale" in French, a couple of partisan songs in German, some, lots of them in Italian, "Bandiera Rossa", which was "Red Flag".

Do you ever sing any of them?

No. Occasionally, I-- I wanted to-- I remember many of them, not sometimes the complete words. And I tried to find disks. And eventually, some friend located, but very few were songs that I remembered that we sang. I think that what happened, some group got together and maybe officially these songs were recorded, the songs of the resistance, but they were not the things that we sang every day.

I have a song that I taped--

Oh, the Greek resistance?

Not, no it wasn't the Greek resistance. Although actually, I interviewed someone who was in the Greek resistance, and publicly. And he and someone in the audience sang one of the songs. I'll have to find it for you so you can hear it and see whether you recognize it.

Of course.

There was an Italian woman that I interviewed who was in the Italian Resistance. And she played from a tape one of the songs. It's a wonderful song. And I'll have to play it for you also. Is there anything you could sing now that you remember?

Oh, yes. I'll sing [INAUDIBLE] a whole stanza, but it would start. [NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

And it goes on. And it literally means we are not afraid. We aren't scared of German guns or of the fascist swords because we are all fighting for democracy and freedom. Many tunes, as you know, they came from Russian partisan songs. But with Greek words, yes.

Now, it's clear that the war is closing, but there isn't an action that happens that's sort of by accident.

Right. That's right. The only one that I have participated in, very quickly, one morning, if I remember, it was close to

10:00 in the morning. And I was sort of manning the telephone. And it rang. And they asked, at the other end, to speak to the colonel. But I couldn't get the colonel. And I got the adjutant.

But very quickly, what had transpired regimental headquarters was in a part that was really a short distance from the plains of [? Thessaly ?], but it was at considerable elevation. And there was a kind of like an entry, a pass, a mountain pass. And essentially, what the telephone call said is four or five or six German trucks had entered this pass, which had been manned by a very small unit of partisans, about five or six.

And we, of course, knew that coming into the pass and going South ended in a cul-de-sac because there was nothing after you go on for another kilometer, just there was a mountain wall. So when they saw that happening, that's why they called to alert us. They were not able-- those who were guarding the pass-- to engage how many Germans there would be. And the nearest unit of sufficient strength was at least three or four hours away.

So very quickly, the commanding officer decided that the way to do is to fool the Germans into thinking that they are surrounded, that there are many more than actually we were. So he dispatched anybody who could walk, including us clerical personnel in the regimental unit, to go. So we grabbed our weapons. And after running for about 45 minutes and out of breath, you could see down in that cul-de-sac the Germans had literally circled the wagons. And some of them had gone hiding.

And as they were being fired by the unit that was guarding the pass, they would return, of course, rifle fire. They didn't have anything heavy. And so we started firing at them. And they were firing at us.

And since they saw things coming from both directions, they really concluded that they were in dire straits. And we were afraid that they would communicate via radio to their original unit. And they would come to relieve them with a much bigger force. But apparently, they either didn't have radio, or if they had, they didn't know where they were since they got lost.

And by that time, in about three hours, the main fighting unit came and started-- partisan units-- firing at the Germans. And then after about a few minutes, we begin to see a white flag. But just before that happened, suddenly there was a little noise or sound near where I was behind a rock. And at the same time that I heard the sound, I also felt a kind of a bit of a pain, temporary pain in the right knee. And when I bent down, I saw it was a tear and something oozing a little bit of blood.

And it must have been some part of a bullet that had hit a rock and splintered. And part of the thing ricocheted, but it didn't go inside. I didn't find anything. It wasn't a major wound. And it didn't hurt.

But nevertheless, when I was taken, when I was bandaged by a woman who turned out to be a Jewish woman who had gone to school for midwives with a young girl who was next door neighbors to use. So that was the only action that I saw. I mean, we the number of Germans killed was eight or nine and two were wounded. They were carried out with their leader and three prisoner.

And did you shoot when you were--

Oh, yeah.

Yeah, you did?

Yes.

Did you hit anything?

Oh, we didn't see-- we didn't shoot at the soldiers. Because the only thing was the trucks. So we aimed not the trucks so much. But again, it was psychological to impress them that fire is coming from both directions. So they feel that they are trapped, and which they were.

What happened to these two guys that were captured, the Germans--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

The three who were captured.

Ah, three.

I'll tell you. One was a very young fellow I can still remember. Must have been really almost my age. At least he looked like that.

And I remember all throughout the time that he's marched and taken up to-- he's yelling German curses, which I do not understand and Heil Hitlers interspersed with German curses. And when we got here, he was then interviewed or interrogated by this German soldier who came out and he told me in French, because that's how I communicated with him in French, that it was a hopeless case of a fanatic member of the Hitlerjugend.

And I think he was shot-- actually, not shot, he was killed. But again, because of a bullet was a scarcity-- I didn't see it. I didn't witness it. But the following day, I was told that they had cut his throat.

Also, it would have been a little hard to carry-- I mean, we had to be mobile. And we didn't have the facilities to carry extra.

Did they kill the other two?

No.

They didn't?

No, no. They were given to the British.

So there were a lot of British?

Well, it was not a--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

--mixed thing. But I mean, at least the British, they didn't incarcerate themselves, but they made arrangements with the locals gendarmerie in Karditsa to guard them. That's after we began to descend--

From the mountains.

--from the mountains. We kept them until then.

And the British were not terribly fond of your particular group?

They were not. The British meddled a lot since. In fact, after the War of Independence in 1821, they always thought of Greece as a part of their own backyard. But look, they were primarily interested, as they should have been, in making sure that the Germans felt the brunt, whether it was harassment or actual, you know, telling action like blowing up bridges, and so forth. Because if nothing else, it kept units pinned down. We could not account for pitting crack divisions, but anything, you know, helped.

But there's no question that they were much more inclined to help the service forces then. But eventually, they saw the light. And it was almost like a kind of contract. You take this action, blew up this convoy, and then the next two weeks

liberators would drop in. We used to go. And that's when I got my first shoes after an air drop.

Really?

Finally. Yes.

So you were for weeks, months without--

Months without shoes.

--months without shoes?

With pig shoes.

Well, except one--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I replaced them, yes, right.

Were you wearing socks?

No, no such thing.

So did they cover your toes these things?

Yes, yes, it's like a ballet--

It's like a ballet.

--slipper, yes.

I see. It's a good thing it was warm weather. Now, it's clear that liberation is going to come.

Right.

Maybe a few months.

No, it began to be visible beginning of August, even towards maybe the end of August, in two ways. First of all, because our units are more active. But I have to tell you that I can remember it now in my mind's ear because I had never heard all of these months the sound of artillery. You know, there's no artillery in partisan. But now, you begin to hear in great distance these dull thud-- boom, boom, boom.

And at night, you know, it's not a heavy sound. It's not continuous, but it's there. And at night, you hear the same sound, but at the same time, you see also the illumination in the horizon. So you know somebody is firing, right?

So essentially, what was happening is, by then, the Germans are in very well-organized retreat. They're abandoning Greece. And of course, that's understood and known. And so the partisans units physically are themselves beginning to move, first, to harass the rear of the departing Germans, but also to get lower. Because the lower parts now are themselves free.

So it became a combination of news, a combination of an action, a combination of hearing things, seeing things. And then beginning to ourselves be on the move. Because as soon as these things started, headquarters wasn't going to stay in the rear where we were. We ourselves began to descend to lower elevations.

Are you also hearing about killing centers in the East?

No.

You don't hear anything?

That, at least-- I mean, I did not hear at all.

Yes.

Whether it was known, whether it was known at the higher levels at headquarters, I don't think so. Because, for example, I read the memoirs of Yugoslav partisans, some of them Bitola Jews. One of them Zamila Kolonomos, who was my mother's maiden name, although no relation. And they only find out at the end of the war. Because coincidentally, Ilya Ehrenburg, the Russian author, had been through a tour of concentration camps, and who had been apparently to Treblinka. And who told the survivors 67 out of 3,500 Bitola Jews that all were exterminated in Treblinka with no survivors.

So I don't think that this kind of thing was known until really I think the Russians, because they were the first that liberated parts of Poland. You know? My brother, when they had to abandon Auschwitz, was because of the approaching Russians. So I think through that way, but it did not reach the partisans, certainly.

And I think even after we were liberated, we didn't understand the kind, as well as the magnitude, both in kind and in size of the horror that had to occurred.