

Let me ask you the same question that I just asked you.

All right.

Was it in some ways helpful to you that you didn't know? Would it have actually made a difference?

That I did not know--

Know about the [INAUDIBLE]--

--and did not learn about the extermination--

Yeah.

--it's very hard to put myself in the kind of frame of mind that I had at that time and try to speculate what it would have caused if I had known. I think, as I mentioned earlier-- perhaps we were off camera; I don't recall anymore-- that it's a lot both easier for me and much more present in my mind to tell you what my mind was occupied with during, especially the late summer months, as we begin to really more than hope now. We can see this being a tangible, reachable goal, to be liberated.

Right.

That more increasingly my thoughts constantly are with the family, and, of course, the big unknown. And I can still remember going on long walks in the middle of the mountains and sitting on a rock and looking at the horizon, beyond which you cannot see because the next ridge intervenes, and try to go mentally beyond that ridge. And then I would see the family.

See, I mean, pictures in my mind. But almost all the thoughts were, no matter how they started, were all how things are going to be, not how things they were, but how they are going to be. And I was-- it was this feeling that with liberation there would be really a greater, brighter thing for everybody. And now the experience in the mountains and so forth had begun to-- I grew up almost overnight. I had-- I don't think I had another childish thought after I-- after the one I stated was [? Messenikolas ?].

So this is what I was preoccupied with, that I would have to go to the university, and how it would be with my mother, my father, my brothers, how I would be able to guide them with all my experience. So that was what was preoccupying-- you know, it would have been terrible to have had these kinds of things be disturbed by if we had learned what was actually happening.

What was happening. So in many ways, you were constructing a future--

Right.

--at this point.

I don't know, perhaps, temperamentally, I've always been much more forward-looking than retrospective-looking. And it's essential for me to have an objective. So I would always formulate objectives that would be reached that I can then act on. And that's what was the primary-- and the closer this thing is coming, the more eager I am to want to do it.

So tell me about what liberation was like, how-- what led up--

Very quickly. The thing that, like many things like that, happened very quickly. That was towards the tail end of September, maybe beginning of October. We're issued orders that, indeed, we have to start descending down.

And we physically begin to descend. And, out of nowhere, I thought nowhere because I had-- in the mountain, I'd never seen that-- a tiny little Fiat automobile, which was a captured Italian army vehicle, which I think the Italians called Topolino, which means "little mouse." It was smaller than a VW.

And that's where-- there was a driver. Imagine that little thing, four people. And I don't know why. Here's the colonel, sitting in the passenger seat in front. And in the rear seat is the adjutant, who has the rank of a captain, and me.

[LAUGHS]

But it's almost-- as we are unloading, or taking the few files that we took with us, maybe because I was helping, I just got in and that's it. So for hours, we are driving down very rough roads. And it's like we were stopping every so often.

And I think, finally, towards 10 or 11 o'clock at night, we stopped someplace for relief and even to have a bite that we had carried with us. And we slept on the ground. And we're already now in the plains of Thessaly.

And the following morning, as we are ready again to proceed, the colonel turns to the adjutant and says, what's Nehama doing here? I mean, I've been with him for a whole day talking and driving. He just then realized that I was there, apparently. Out!

So without any other thing, I'm ordered out of the vehicle in the middle of nowhere. And they left me. I mean, I had my rifle and a few personal belongings. But soon, very soon, I could hear even a truck coming. And it was a truck that the partisans had commandeered, and it was-- so they stopped. And I got on.

And it took us two to three hours. So as I said, these things occurred very, very fast. In fact, when I was left, and then I boarded the truck, that was the first time when I saw visual evidence of the German retreat because on the side of the road, there were burned vehicles because they had been attacked. And I saw a considerable number of dead German soldiers. Dead-- in fact, I still remember one of them on his back with belly distended because the corpse inflates after a while and stinks. And these were visual, again, evidence that they finally had left.

And so we reached Trikala, and I don't know where we encamped-- someplace. But then, a couple of days later, we were ordered to get to Larissa. Larissa is a much larger city. And it happens to be also most central city and strategic city because the railroad line runs through Larissa. So I got to Larissa, and essentially, I rejoined the regimental unit.

And what constituted liberation? I mean, how did it happen that somebody said, it's over, the war's over?

Oh, nobody said that.

Nobody said that.

I mean-- again, this is not a single event. So last night, you're a slave, and next, you're free. This happens-- but the reason I would say it happens without rapidity is we didn't-- we were not in constant touch.

So we did not know if, indeed, we finally have seen the last of the rear guard of the retreating Germans. You know, units are moving up, but there may be others coming behind them. So all these things you're doing partly by your feel of the terrain and what's happening in front of you, now at the same time, also you're receiving orders, which themselves are delayed because, again, the communications are not what we have today. So it would take hours until you begin to get confirmation that you're eventually seeing the end of the German columns, let alone that some of our outlying units, on purpose, were harassing the retreating Germans, so to speed them on their way.

[LAUGHS] So is there a moment, let's say, the war is not over--

Right.

--for a number of months. But in terms of Greece, is there a moment that you remember saying, it's not just this free

little area--

Right.

--it's the country?

Yes, the moment I got to Trikala, you see, since I thought maybe it's a local situation, but there, I talked to people in the city and-- as well as other partisans from other units and-- because by that time, they knew, because they knew that Athens was free, and Peloponnesus was free, and Lamia was free, and therefore, they were free. And so that's when I knew, that's it.

Right. Did you feel physical relief? Do you remember?

First of all, I still remember that as we are coming down the mountains, almost as we are reaching the plains, not on purpose, I think accidentally, I turned west. And I saw the retreating heights where I spent the previous 13 months or so. It's almost like visibly doing two things, thanking them for saving me, and two, saying goodbye. That's why I've had since then a tremendous love and affinity for mountains.

So that when I finally got to Trikala and I was told that the rest of the country was free, there wasn't elation. I don't believe that either mentally or say, like-- it was definitely not a letdown, but it was a kind of calm. That now, I said, all right, now you have to cease worrying about survival from the standpoint of an enemy action, all right, and whatever the Germans represented. And so you got to be able to gather forces to do what I had been planning to do in the mountains.

So there was-- it was a feeling of a great deal of something-- some weight lifted from your mind that that part, you don't have to worry. But that did linger, and it was supplanted by, now, in the coming days, you're going to rejoin the family. And you will then be able to pursue what you've been hoping to do.

It was more serenity than elation. I mean, elation was there. I mean, we shouted a little bit. But it was-- it didn't last very long. It was much more--

Calm.

I don't know whether I had a presentiment-- I-- obviously, I didn't. But it was-- I think others had the same thing because, when we went to Larissa, I met another Jewish boy, actually the son of the owner of the company that my father worked for, who was almost the last person I could imagine would have been there. But he was there, and we talked for hours. And I think we almost shared similar-- had similar reactions to the events.

And his name?

Sabi [? Camhi ?]. He's been dead a number of years now.

Now, some woman came by, Popi.

That was in Larissa. in fact, the day after I saw Sabi [? Camhi ?], whom I encountered in-- there was a little park across the building where we were housed. And I had gone for a stroll. And the following day, I was maybe typing something or writing something.

Somebody coming told me that there is a lady at the office of the adjutant, which was next to the colonel's office, asking for me. First of all, who could possibly be asking for me in Larissa? So I went there. And she told me her name, Popi Stasinopoulos, and she told me that she's passing on her way to Trikala.

And somehow, my parents had learned that I was with this partisan unit, maybe Sabi Shabbathai or his parents, because Sabi's still part of that. And so she had been asked by my father to get in touch with me, bring me news of the family, and to urge me to go and see them as soon as possible. I had no thought of that yet, because I didn't know by what

means I would leave to do that. It didn't occur to me too that, first of all, it was really almost a week or two after-- no, less than that-- that we had been liberated.

She asked me if I had money to travel to Greece. I had no money. We didn't get paid in the partisans. And she opened her purse and gave me what I thought was a rather large denomination bill, or several of them, and told me that that would adequately cover a bus ticket.

And then she was on her way to the station to go. And I offered to walk with her. She says, no, thanks a lot.

But she-- I asked her for some news about my mother. But for everybody, well, there were anxious moments during all the hiding and so forth. But they're all very well and extremely anxious to see you, so don't tarry.

I have to-- just a month before in the middle of the summer, I had caught a cold. And I was offered a medical leave of absence. But at the time I was offered, where was I going to go? I didn't have relatives in the middle of the mountains. But I had asked the doctor if he could keep it for me.

And so, after I saw Mrs. Stasinopoulos, Popi, then I remembered his promise. So I went to him, and I said, is this still valid? Sure. So immediately, he signed the three-week medical leave, which I then presented to the adjutant.

He said it was fine with him. He says, when do you want to leave? Said, as soon as I can.

So I went to the bus station, and I booked a seat on the bus. When I signed it, it was November, I think November 19. That was the end of my stay with the partisans.

Had you dreamt-- do you remember dreams during this time?

I'm sure I dreamt, but I don't remember.

Not [INAUDIBLE].

No.

So you get on the bus, November 19, to travel, yes?

It's a Sunday.

It's a Sunday.

See, that's important. I'll tell you why.

OK.

But, unlike when I came up from Athens, this time, it was a regular bus. So it could make good time. And we arrived in Athens around 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Now, Athens, pre-war, as well as post-war-- I mean, I think all cities, on Sunday, they are so quiet. It sounds almost they're deserted, especially in the commercial.

So we end up in the bus station, and I got out of the bus. And I call on the telephone. Now, actually, in my house, we didn't have a telephone. We shared it with the people upstairs, the Shabbathais.

So I think Mrs. Shabbathai answered, and I said, I just arrived. She says, well, come on, come on. Well, I said, I'm going to take a taxi. So I got on a taxi.

And, eventually, it wasn't really-- it was Omonia, that square I mentioned to you earlier where people would sit on the grates during the war. It's a 10-minute ride at most. And we got in front of the house. But there's no one there.

I thought that by then, by the time I made the telephone call, I would find my younger brothers there, eager to see me arrive. There's no one. And so I opened the main entrance door. And I go up the stairs to the third floor, where our apartment was, and I knocked on the floor.

And the door opens, and who do I see? Popi, Mrs. Stasinopoulos. She's the woman that had come to Larissa to talk to me. And she went like this. Go upstairs.

I mean, I'm too dumbfounded to even ask her why. So I trudge another floor. And I knock on the door. And Mrs. Shabbathai opened the door and she embraced me.

And she takes me by the hand into their living room. And there's my father. And I still remember him because it was a kind of a thing that he wore in winter, a flannel robe. And he's sitting in a kind of deck chair because he liked that kind of thing with armrests.

Well, I went in and embraced him. He kissed me, and I see he's crying. And I say, where is Mother? And where is-- where is Sam and Meko?

Well, he-- I don't think he was in a state to talk. But Mrs. Shabbathai came again and put her arm around me. And Mr. Shabbathai took hold of my arm and told me that things had been terrible, you know, and the only thing is that they were caught somehow, but nobody knew now where they were.

This is what I found when I got there. I really cannot even remember the remaining of the day. I'm sure I must have something to eat because I hadn't eaten all day long. I don't know whether I ate it when-- apparently, I then-- and we went downstairs to our apartment.

But very quickly [INAUDIBLE] make a final tie with Mr. and Mrs. Stasinopoulos who I met. When we left our apartment, then people who were looking for places, they-- and the Stasinopoulos found or got a hold of our apartment. And they moved there. And at liberation, they could not be expelled. They didn't even have a place to go.

So they stayed in the same place. We shared the apartment for a number of months. And relations were not really the best after a while. It was difficult to do that.

But essentially, my father and I shared a room. And they shared the other bedroom. You know, and even I know that the following night-- I don't know how I slept that night, how I was able to sleep. I didn't know what to think.

And I'm sure I must have asked my father, but he had no details as to exactly what had happened, how they had been caught. Or now, she knows because other people had said that they were taken to Haidari. And that from there nobody else they knew.

Actually, we know now, I know now, that my mother and my two brothers were put on the last transport that left Greece. And the reason that was being delayed was because they were waiting for the 2,400 Jews of Rhodes, which, again, the Italian army seized. They had the Germans occupied and they had rounded up, and they are bringing them by boat. And they made the last transport in August.

It's very hard sometimes when I think that the first time I began to learn and see that indeed the Germans may be on the way out from Greece, it must have been July, maybe, or maybe early August of '44. And to think that within a month they would be being transported literally along the railway line in front of me in Thessaly-- well, figuratively speaking-- or even harder that after another month or two, it would have been over. But it happened.

Was your father able to talk with you about what he experienced? Were you [INAUDIBLE]--

Slowly. Slowly. Yeah, I can now-- and then, but of course more now-- having children myself, I began to feel that as soon as he emerged from hiding, he finds that he has no wife or children, he doesn't know where I am or where the rest

of the family are. And he has no answers. Nobody can tell him.

I mean, in the case of my mother and my brothers, he has surmised that something horrible happened. So at least I had told him I was going to go up the mountain, but whether I'm alive or not, he had no idea until the Shabbathais returned, which was not until two or three weeks later.

And only slowly, he began to tell me how it was. And, in fact, I remember he told me that around September, he finally - in the last place where he was hiding in one of the suburbs of Athens, he got up, and he knew it was Yom Kippur. And he began to pray. And out of the window, he saw another man in the yard in the adjacent house, who was also praying. And that's when he realized it must be another Jew.

And it wasn't yet liberation or freedom yet. And when they got liberated, they-- and indeed, he was another Jew. So, I mean, for my father, being immobilized first of all, because of his leg, but even because of hiding, when even people who were fully functional couldn't roam around the streets from fear of being seen by somebody, denounced-- there were many of this kind of people.

In fact, my family, as I know from my brother, were found by Recanati, who was a Jew in Salonika, a Jew who worked for the Germans when he was shot. And so we are trying to pick up life again out of the-- but no sooner are we doing that that the trouble start. And at one point, because I didn't know what to do, I thought that I ought to rejoin my unit.

And my father went into hysterics, literal hysterics, which I thought a little bit ludicrous for a man of his age. But now I can understand. I mean, it is the only son that's left to him, and he's now talking about going and rejoining the unit.

Well, it wasn't so much his shouting that kept me there, but the doctor who gave me the leave turned out to be staying at the apartment across the street from us. So I went and I said to him, what shall I do? He goes, don't go any place. Stay there-- here. And that's what I did.

How old was your father at this time, do you think?

My father, at that time, must have been in his late 40s.

OK, let's change the tape.