

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. George Ftikas on September 15, 2017, in Falls Church, Virginia near Lake Barcroft. Thank you, Mr. Ftikas, for agreeing to speak with us today to share your story, to share your experiences and your witness of what you saw as a young boy.

I'm going to start our interview at the very beginning. And as I mentioned before we were recording, that we'll spend a lot of time talking about prewar life. And from there, we'll build the story and what you saw and what you experienced. And we'll go from there. So my very first question is, can you tell me the date of your birth.

February 10, 1929.

February 10, 1929. And what was your name at birth?

George.

And in Greek?

Georgios.

Georgios. And your last name was Ftikas?

Ftikas, yeah.

Ftikas. And where were you born?

In Thessaloniki.

OK. And that is in--

That is in Greece. That is the northern part of Greece. Thessaloniki is a very significant port, has been for all its existence. It was founded by Alexander the Great in his days.

So it's not a new place.

It is not a new place. Tell me a little bit about your own family. What was your father's name?

My father's name was Dimitri. And he was born in Mavrovouni. I don't really know where it is, because I never went there. At the time he was born, all that part of the Balkans was controlled, occupied by the Ottoman Turks.

And eventually he went to Thessaloniki, which was the diamond of the area and met my mother, got married.

So your father was from a place that would have been further east from Thessaloniki?

Further north.

Further north, OK. And would it have been a hundred kilometers, 200 kilometers? Even though you never went there, do you have an approximate idea?

I would say it would be 100 miles.

OK. And as far as what he told you about it and what you know of it, was it a village or was it a town? Was it the countryside?

It must have been a town. Because I remember my father was not an arts and music lover, even though he played the

violin.

Oh.

So it was a place where you could learn how to play the violin. And he also was singing the overture to the Aida.

Oh, wow. Well, in a village, you probably wouldn't hear the Aida.

Yeah. Well, that's right. But back then, those parts of the world were influenced a lot by Austria and that explains a lot about the music part of it. But I really know very little about my father's beginnings.

Did he have brothers and sisters?

I had a brother.

No, did he have--

I'm sorry. Yes. He had a sister who lived in Thessaloniki as well.

OK. And did you ever know your grandparents on your father's side?

No. Neither side.

On neither side, neither mother nor father.

Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I knew my mother's mother-- was very old when I was very young. And I have very sketchy memories of her.

OK. Was your father a storyteller--

No.

--about his own childhood?

No.

No.

What kind of a personality did he have? Was he quiet, reserved?

Very quiet, very reserved, and very much the victim of my mother.

[LAUGHTER]

Those sort of things happen, you know? So I guess she was not very reserved.

No. Nothing wrong with my mother, but she was the dominant part of the marriage.

What was her name?

Anastasia.

Anastasia. And do you know about approximately when she was born?

1900. And your father?

Maybe a couple of years earlier. I don't know exactly. But I know my mother's.

Anastasia, and what was her maiden name?

Sofialidis.

Sofialidis. OK. And did she have brothers and sisters?

Yes. She had-- I can count maybe eight or nine siblings, including three women, three of my aunts, four. None of whom were as good a cook as my mother.

Really?

My mother was a famous cook.

What were her specialties?

Well, any Greek food you can mention. Even if she didn't know it, she would make it. She got the talent. You know, they all learned the same thing from my grandmother.

And the others were competent cooks. But nobody had the talent of my mother. It's the way she put the salt and, you know, I don't know. But she was famous in Thessaloniki.

Well, let me tell you. Some people say that it's not so much a skill as an art. And that's what makes for a superior kind of cook.

And she didn't know anything about recipes, if you ask her for a recipe. When I came to the States, I said, hey, Mom, give me some recipes.

She said, you know how to. Says, you take tomatoes and you wash them well. You know? And that's all the instruction she could give. Because everything else she was doing by, I don't know.

By feel.

Feel. Yes.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

Yes, one brother. And what was his name?

Nikos.

And is he older or younger?

Eight years older.

So he was born in 1921?

Oh, yes.

OK. Is he still alive today?

No. He passed away a few years ago.

OK. OK. So there was the two of you, and you were the younger son.

And spoiled.

As is your birthright. Tell me, how did your father support your family?

He was working for the Greek post office.

OK.

Which had a banking kind of activity or function, which I believe was in the United States as well. The postal savings something or other. Well, yes, there were, sometimes, and especially in Europe, there would be savings sections connected to banks. The Germans have them, the sparkasse, that you could go and deposit something when you went to the post office.

It was really a savings account kind of thing. But nothing big, nothing that you do with banks. It was just for the poor people, you know?

So was it a civil service position?

Yes.

OK. And so he was part of the Greek civil service.

Yes.

OK. Had he gone to secondary school?

You know, I'm embarrassed to say I know very little about my father. I don't know. He may not have. Certainly, he did not go to college.

But in the job he did, he was actually the director, or the supervisor, or whatever, the head guy in Thessaloniki of this postal savings service. But you know, he could do his job. But that's about it.

OK. But if you say it's the saving service for poor people, he must have had a very good overview of the community and the people who were less well off.

Not personally.

Not really?

His job was, like, in the bank. You go there. You may eventually learn who is there. But you don't really know that much about them.

Let's turn to your mother's side of the family. Can you recite all of the names of the aunts and uncles?

[LAUGHS]

Well, there was Apostolos, who may have been the oldest. And he was a black sheep. And the youngest was Yannis, John, an electrician. Prokopis, who is a very interesting guy.

And then there were Irini, who was actually living close to where we lived and was my favorite aunt. And in fact, was

my second mother. I spent as much time in her house as I did in our house.

And then there were-- come on. It's embarrassing. I don't even remember.

It's OK. It's common. A lot of people don't.

It's Lisa. And Lisa lived in Egypt, where a large part of my mother's family lived and Prokopis was also in Egypt.

He's the black sheep, did you say?

No, no, Apostolos was the black sheep.

OK.

He embezzled some money. He was working for the electric company in Thessaloniki, embezzled some money. And he managed to get to jail. He got out of jail. And guess what? He embezzled--

[LAUGHTER]

So not only he was a black sheep, he was a dumb sheep.

He hadn't learned how to do it well enough.

And it occurred to me, actually, just after we visit the museum--

Our Holocaust Museum?

--his wife was a Jew. But when they married, I guess, she changed to being a Greek Orthodox, as is the law. And I didn't know she was a Jew until a long time afterwards, because she really observed all the Greek and Christian, religious, you know, protocols. And I didn't know she was a Jew, not that it makes any difference. But she was.

Did she come into any danger? Or the fact that she was married and converted somehow save her during the war?

The fact that she was married and converted did not mean anything. But the fact that she was not a known Jew did. Because all the other Jews were open Jews in the ghettos. And she was just-- nobody knew that. Unless you made an FBI investigation, yeah.

How is it that some of your mother's family was in Egypt? What brought them there?

A lot of Greeks, particularly from the North, did go to Africa. And Egypt was a favorite place. Because it was the business minds. And they went to Egypt. It was a good place to start a business. And that's what they did.

One of my uncles, whom I never met, had a big office store of naval stuff. And he made a lot of money. He was supporting almost seven other families. So anyway, a lot of people went to Egypt.

Because there was more opportunity for such development, such entrepreneurship.

That's right. Because Greece did not have that. Certainly, Thessaloniki did not. Thessaloniki was, like the rest of the Balkans, part of the Ottoman Empire. Greece was taken over what, at the time, was known as the Byzantine Empire in 1453 by the Ottomans. And that was Constantinople, which is now Istanbul.

That's right.

And then they moved eastward, and-- no, it was westward, and occupied everything else there. So that part of the world

was Ottoman Empire, including Thessaloniki until 1912. When it was-- we call it liberated from the Ottomans.

It was before it was called Turkey. There's a difference. And my father was part of the group that was fighting the Ottoman's.

So he would have been a partisan, could one say?

Yes. In fact, my brother had pictures of my father in the sort of uniform of the partisans at the time. So as I said, I'm really embarrassed that I don't really know more about my father.

It's OK.

It's not that I forgot it, either. But somehow, my mother was more important in the family than my father.

Nevertheless, it's very interesting. You know, the mix between one's personal background and the immediate family members, and then the greater historical picture, this is what gives oral histories like this, interviews that we're having with people such as yourself, it's immediacy and what makes it interesting. Because it is history through individuals. And from this, I gather, then Greece was a brand new country. Greece was a brand new country, an ancient place, but a brand new country in 1912.

In 1912, with Thessaloniki, the Greek independence war started in 1821.

That's a long time.

That's a long time. And pretty soon, it expanded up to Athens a little bit North of Athens. And that's how it was until 1912, when what's known as the first Balkan War erupted, where everybody was trying to get rid of the Turks. And then there was a fight as to who would get what part of the land and pretty much the map of Greece as we know it now was established in 1912.

OK.

And it would have been a little bit different if there was not a politics between the King and the prime minister at that time, but that's a different story.

That's internal Greek politics?

Absolutely.

OK. Did World War I touch Greece and Thessaloniki in particular ways?

Yes. And it is a very interesting story that is well-known to people who know World War II. But for some reason it is not more widely known. But it's very interesting. Because in a way, it explains why we won the war and not the Germans.

Are you talking about World War II now?

World War II.

Not World War I, because I was asking about World War I?

I'm sorry. World War I, that was a little after Thessaloniki was liberated. And it was just what, a few years. And the French and the British had troops in Macedonia and Thessaloniki. And in fact, they had built barracks in Thessaloniki, at the outskirts of Thessaloniki.

And when they left, so talking about 1918, somebody got those barracks and developed them into low cost housing. And it was in one of those apartments, so to speak, that my family lived.

Oh, into those barracks, those former barracks?

Those former barracks. And most of the people in those barracks were Jews. And in fact, that was a Jewish ghetto.

An informal, sort of, like, a neighborhood? Or an actual ghetto that became a ghetto during World War II?

No, I call it ghetto because it was a--

A neighborhood.

--a neighborhood by predominantly Jewish.

OK.

And one of the 17 synagogues in Thessaloniki was just around the corner from our house.

Do you remember its name?

No.

Do you remember the street you lived on?

I do. But I'll tell you what, I saw somewhere in the material that I looked at, that they had the names and addresses of every synagogue except that one. And I think the only thing they said was Charilaou, which is a reference, like we would say in Falls Church. Nothing like 3500 Bond Street.

OK. So it doesn't have a specificity to it. It just has an overall neighborhood kind of--

Right. And it's interesting that they managed, whoever did that listing, managed to get the specific addresses of all the others, but not that one. But I know where it was.

What kind of a structure was it, the synagogue? Was it a wooden one or a stone one?

I think it was a stone one. There was no wood. Wood was not used in most of Greece.

So for barracks-- you see, when you say barracks, I think of wooden barracks. Clearly, then the barracks that the French had constructed were of different materials.

Yeah. It was--

Stone.

Stone.

Stone. OK. And then Charilaos who developed the neighborhood, as I said, subdivided the barracks into there. They were kind of barracks 1, 2, 3, 4. And then he subdivided into three units in each one. And we had one of them.

Was it like analogous to a townhouse in the sense that there's a long building that's connected, but there are separate family homes?

Yeah. But it was a low cost thing. When my mother and father got married in 1921, they wanted to buy a house. And

my mother was very finicky. And she wanted to have a house just right.

And they waited to have that house. And they never found it.

Ah.

Let's go there where it's cheap and wait until we find the house. They never found the house.

OK.

So everybody in the neighborhood was really a lower class kind of person.

Lower working class.

Lower working class, yeah. You know, the neighbors, not all of them, but most of them were Jews, were working in, you know, very menial kind of occupations.

Well, a number of questions come to mind. You say that Thessaloniki was a diamond. And yet, at the same time, to have business opportunities, it didn't offer many. Because of the historical circumstances, people would go to Egypt and other places if they wanted to develop a business. How did Thessaloniki live? That is, what was its main-- what made it this diamond?

Thessaloniki is a very important port. If you look at the map, it is the best port of the area. And let's see, Germany and Austria and all of the other little countries in between, their commerce had to go through ships back then. That was the most common means of transporting things.

And Thessaloniki was the best location. So it was its location that was important, made it a jewel, but not opportunities for work.

OK. Would you say that, as a port city, it was a well-off port city generally, or a rather poor one? How would you describe?

Well, I really don't know, other than to say that if you look at the map, there is no other port. And it had a lot of traffic. But I cannot compare it to other areas.

I'm trying to get a sense of were there rich people there, were there other classes besides lower working--

Yes.

--lower middle class.

Yes. In fact, one of the important buildings in my youth was the Villa Bianca in Thessaloniki was owned by an Italian Jew. And it was about two miles from my house and on an important street at the time.

And it was one of the great places in Thessaloniki. Go see Villa Bianca. It's not big deal now. But back then it was a very important building.

But it was held by a private family, in private hands?

Yeah. It was a Jewish family.

A Jewish family. And did you ever get inside?

No.



OK.

And there were other obviously wealthy people. But how many of them Jews? But it's like anything else. There is always a hierarchical structure. And there are some people at the top and most people are down.

Are at the bottom, yeah, very pyramid.

Exactly.

So you say that the synagogue for which there is no address known now was around the corner. What about the Greek Orthodox Church? Was there one in your neighborhood?

Yes. Excuse me. The synagogue was relative-- I mean, walking distance. I mean, just feet. The church was, maybe, 3/4 of a mile.

Did you walk to it? First of all, was your family religious?

No. But we went to church. You know, not on every Sunday, but certainly Easter, holidays, and stuff like that. But my family was certainly Christian, I would say so. But we were not all that, you know, how shall I say fanatic about religion.

The thing about the synagogue is that I remember one time, one of my friends, Jewish friends, said do me a favor. I says what? He says, let's go to the synagogue.

I said why. He says, yeah, come on. So I went to the synagogue. And he says, turn the lights on. And I said, why the hell? Can't you do it?

Well, then I learned that the Sabbath and Sabbath you don't do it if you're a Jew. And I said, oh, come on.

[LAUGHTER]

Did you turn the lights on?

I turned the lights on. And I think I did it a number of other times. But I guess they were always asking somebody, non-Jew to turn on the lights on Sabbath.

OK. Tell me a little bit more about your mother's family. So they were from Thessaloniki? They had been there for generations, is what I'm understanding.

Yes.

And do you know how your grandfather supported his eight children? I'm being very patriarchal here by assuming that it was the grandfather. But usually--

Yes, back then, women were not even allowed to work.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. He was, I guess you would say, from what I understand, some sort of a manager in a mill, a flour mill in Thessaloniki. A big one, as a matter of fact, it was, I guess, producing flour for a large part of the country. And anyway, that's where he was.

But he had passed away by the time you were born?

Yes.

Your grandmother was still alive, however?

Yes. And did they have a family home that all of the eight children had come from?

Yes.

And was it close to you?

Yeah. Back then, everything was close. We were working.

OK. So I have some other questions that are going to sound very strange. But I'm going to ask them. And it gives us a sense of-- were there trolley cars? What was the transportation like in Thessaloniki?

There were trolley cars.

OK. Did many people have private automobiles?

No.

Were the streets paved?

No. Maybe two or three downtown streets, but I would say 90% of the streets were dirt streets.

OK. Did people have horses in town?

No.

OK.

But there were horse driven carts. For example, there were three vegetable vendors that were passing by our little house. And they were driven by a horse. And you know, the vegetables were in barrels in the back of the cart. And my mother would go out and yell at them that the tomatoes are not good enough, but buy anyway.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. Well, that's to knock the price down.

So yeah. But that was the transportation. There were taxis. And once in a while--

The taxi was horse driven?

No. It was in a car?

But it was the kind of a car that you had to put the-- what you call it?

You had to turn the motor with a crank?

Yeah. So the driver would go out when he was waiting for customers who'd go there. If you wanted to go to Charilaou, that was the name of the neighborhood, he would come out and bring the crankshaft-- anyway, whatever they call it. It would go va vroom!

OK.

And in fact, about 15 years ago, we went to Thessaloniki, because we used to go once a year to visit. And my brother and I decided to go and see if we can find where our house used to be.

Because since I moved and he moved, that whole area disappeared. You go and try to find that synagogue, doesn't exist. The street doesn't exist. And maybe that's why the guy couldn't find the name. You had to be alive at that time to know the name of that street.

What was there 15 years ago when you went? What would you see?

Apartment buildings, you know, just modern town, nothing like we remembered. So we went there, and there was one place that we could remember, and that was a stop of the trolley. And it was there. And there was something identifiable.

And I said, OK, this is where the trolley stopped. And from then on, we began remembering the instructions we gave to the taxi driver. You turn right. And then, ah, that was-- forget now-- Victoria's house. And we turn left here. And this way, we sort of went through the new streets. But they were not quite the way they used to be.

And we eventually found a townhouse-- I mean, an apartment building where it must be where our house was. So after working for about 3/4 of an hour on a small area, we decided this is where our house was. And woo!

It grew!

10 floors, you know? And then we went around that corner, guess what? We found a tree that we used to climb on when we were kids.

Oh, wow.

I forget now what tree it was, a pear tree or something. I don't know, something like that.

How interesting.

You see, the image I have, a person describes a place. And all of us in our minds create a certain image of what they've described. So I have in my mind these low lying barracks made of stone with no vegetation, no trees around because they were soldiers' barracks at one time, by the French. And it's all rather uniform and it's kind of level.

But is it pretty? Are their gardens? Are their streets? Are there trees? Are their garages?

No. Forget about garages. There was no need for garage. But there was no space. These are very small [INAUDIBLE].

But there were trees. And who put the trees? I don't know. Maybe the developer who bought the thing and converted from barracks to living quarters. But that's it. I tried to make a little garden and grow tomatoes and peppers.

What did your mother think of your tomatoes?

[LAUGHTER]

I don't know if she would buy them.

So OK. Another question that's sort of immaterial, but not. Because it gives us a sense of what was development like. Did you have indoor plumbing?

Yes.

OK.

But cold water.

Cold water.

I was, I believe, 18-years-old when I found that somebody was developing housing in Athens that even had hot water. And I said they had what? I didn't know that there is such thing as hot water--

In a house.

--in the house.

OK. And did you have electricity?

Yes.

OK. How did you heat the place?

Stove with wood. There was a wood stove.

So by a stove, do you mean a stove that you cook on? Or the kind of stove that one finds often in Eastern Europe that will be in the corner of a room with tile on it and you stick coal in it or wood and it heats the whole room?

And there is the pipes that go and yeah, that kind. And my mother would get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and start the fire. So that when everybody else in the family, you know, my brother and my father got up, the house was reasonable-- not the house, the living room only.

How many rooms did you have?

A living room, a salon.

Living room, yeah.

No. The living room was one thing. Like, living room and dining room. And then there was the formal room. You know, everybody, no matter how poor you were, you had to have a salon, and two bedrooms.

That's not small.

It's not small. It's not that big, either.

No, but for that time, for example, when I speak with someone who would be from Eastern Europe, sometimes they'd have two rooms, you know?

Yeah. It was OK to wait until you find the right house.

[LAUGHTER]

Of course. Of course.

And they lived there, you know, I forget now. But until-- not recently, but certainly a long time after I left.

OK. Was most of the neighborhood like your own home?

Yes. So your Jewish neighbors also would have had the same circumstances?

I was trying to remember how many barracks were. And I came up with maybe 7 to 10. And all of those were mostly Jewish.

Because a lot of the people, the Jewish people in Thessaloniki, of whom there were a lot, you know, there were more than Greeks, more than Orthodox, I mean, you know, Christian Greeks, they were poor. Yes, as I said earlier, there was the Villa Bianca and some other things.

Now I mentioned later, there was the [INAUDIBLE], a very interesting neighborhood downtown in Thessaloniki where there were some rich Jews. But most of them were really poor and most of them lived where I grew up and two other places I call ghettos, not because they were called ghettos at the time. But because ghetto became a label for anything where poor Jews lived.

OK.

Yours was named Charilaou?

Charilaou was the name-- Charilaou, Charilaos was the genitive case of Charilaos. This Charilaos was the guy who developed the barrack area into livable quarters. And the whole area got his name. Charilaou means the place of Charilaos.

Got it. And the other two neighborhoods where there were mostly Jews, what were they called?

One which was very close to where Charilaou was was called 151. And why? I have no idea what the 151 stood for.

I mean, 151, I would bring it up a couple of times a day, you know? I will go through 151, or went by 151. It was a larger area where Jews lived in Charilaou.

And then there was another one up northwest of the city, which was close to the railroad station. And I never really went there. But that was probably the biggest. And I think that was called Vardaris.

Vara--

Vardaris.

Vardaris?

Vardaris is the name of a river. Even though it's in Thessaloniki, I never went there.

Mhm.

It was not in my part of moving around the city. And I never went to that place.

OK.

But I knew it existed. And another big bunch of Jews lived in Ladadika, which is an area that I mentioned before. And it has become, actually now, what do they call these places with historical--

Like UNESCO sites?

But it's not UNESCO. It's the Greek, the government has declared it as an--

An historical place.

--an historical place. And that is where a lot of Jews lived. And they were wealthy. And it was famous for a number of reasons.

First of all, because those people, Ladadika is the name of the place. And Ladadika means the oil stores. And those people were merchants that were dealing with olive oil. And in fact, I remember the few times I went there back then, it was so dirty. Because the dirt street and a lot of oil that was being pored. Back then, things were not all that well-contained.

Dirt and oil and you'd get sludge of a certain kind.

Yeah. It's oily sludge.

Yeah.

Well, anyway, it was known for that. And the people who were running it were Jews. And that was a big part of where the relatively wealthier Jews lived. It was also one of three areas in Thessaloniki where bordellos. And I don't know how they ended up being at this more or less the same neighborhood. But that's how it was.

When you were a little boy, did you know about that?

[LAUGHTER]

When I was a little boy, I knew everything.

[LAUGHTER]

Tell me, because it's a port city, were there beaches around Thessaloniki and did kids go to the beach?

No. Thessaloniki-- OK. I mentioned earlier my Aunt Irini, who was my second mother.

That's right.

And I spent half of my life there? Her house was on the water. And in front, there was sand. You would call it a beach. That's how I spent my early days. That's where I learned to swim and everything.

But it was just a little beach in front of a house. There were no other houses around to speak of that had the same thing, maybe. I don't know, very few. But there were beaches further out of when you left the main Thessaloniki. There were little villages that had beaches. But to go there, you had to take a bus and we would spend almost an hour to get to it. But other than that, there were no beaches.

So kids didn't go to the ocean or to the sea to play. That wasn't one of the things that you would-- They would be doing it either by taking the bus to go there, but if you weren't there, there were expensive restaurants. And that's not really for the kids.

You could go from the center of the city to beach villages that were too far to walk, that you could go by bus or by little boats. And we used to go there, the whole family, a couple of times during the summer. But for every day thing, there was no beach, really.

So what did the neighborhood-- I take it that you had friends in your neighborhood?

Yes.

What did you do? What were your play activities?

I don't know. Just kicking the can, you know?

So it was in the streets. It was in the neighborhood.

Yes.

OK.

And once in a while my parents, or my uncle and aunt would take me to the beaches. But you know, infrequently. So the rest of the kids, I don't know. We just fooled around.

OK. You started school in the '30s?

Yes.

Tell me a little bit about your early school days. What was your schooling like? Who were the other kids in the classroom?

Well, you know, there was a school very close to our house. And I remember very little about it except the name of one of my first teachers. Her name was Aglaea. Why I remember Aglaea and I don't remember all the other teachers, because, you know, that was six years.

You were six years old.

No, no, six years.

Oh, you were sixth grade?

Sixth grade, yeah.

OK.

I don't know.

Was it a neighborhood school?

Yes.

You walked to it?

Absolutely. That was really very close.

OK.

And well, I learned how to write. And I learned how to count. And were schools divided that way? That is, from neighborhoods, everybody would go to their own neighborhood school within Thessaloniki?

Yes.

And so that meant that other kids, mostly Jewish kids, were also your classmates?

Yes.

OK. So your neighborhood friends and your classmates would be the same group of people?

Yeah. There was actually-- how do I say? There was no discrimination. Or not-- but yes, of course, here's a Jew and that.

But there was no, how shall I say, confrontation, or well, you know, I don't like him because he's a Jew or something like that. No, that didn't exist.

The important thing as I remember is that those people, even though their great-great-grandparents came from Spain, therefore, they were in Thessaloniki for two centuries, their Greek was marginal. They were still speaking a funny combination of Yiddish and Spanish.

Would have that been Ladino or Sephardic? Yeah?

For example, my across the barrack friend Richard, when he was telling his younger brother, whose name I've forgot, let's go, he said vamos. That's when I learned about vamos. But that goes for the parents.

The kids who began going to school, and remember, you know, there is chronology here. When the kids began going to school, you know, they learn Greek. So they would all speaking the same language.

But the parents were the ones where the language barrier-- well, not barrier, but the differentiation existed.

Could the fact that Greece had been part of the Ottoman Empire have something to do with this?

Well, it has to do with the fact that no education was given during the Ottoman times to anybody.

OK.

In fact, one of the resistance kind of activities that was known and has been documented in history books is the priests would hold schools, so to speak, for kids. But it was forbidden. So they have to do it under the Ottoman observation.

But you know, after 1912, the Greek government came in. They established the schools. And when I went there, there was a well-functioning schooling system. And everybody went there, including the Jews, who I believe became Greek citizens in 1920.

I see. OK. So would you say that it was a process of some kind of assimilation that was starting, if the parents still had a language barrier but the children already were fluent in Greek? I mean, that's a lot to ask for someone who's in the sixth grade to analyze. But I'm wondering.

Well, the parents were not all that-- their Greek was broken Greek, you know. They could speak Greek, obviously. They did go to the store, you know.

They spoke with the neighbors and all that. But you could tell that they were not really Greek because they didn't have the education.

OK.

It was kind of interesting. My mother had good friendships with a lot of neighbors, including one, I think I mentioned to Nancy at one time. It was one of the things that I can't forget.

When the Jews were rounded up and obviously, everybody knew that they would be taken away, there was a neighbor by the name of Rachel who had a baby. And the baby's name was Rosa. And the baby was up to a year old. But it was a darling of the neighborhood. You know, it was one of those babies that's kind of cute.



And my mother, I forget-- I don't forget my mother being on this window and Rachel being on the next barrack of that window. And my mother said, give me the baby. And Rachel says no, the baby stays with me.

You know, here, it's going to be a difficult trip. And so you never know what's going to happen. We knew what's going to happen.

And Rachel said, no, no. I won't. They'll take us there. They'll make us work. They'll bring us back. They still thought that this might be a tourist kind of-- anyway. I can't forget my mother and Rachel having this conversation about Rosa. Yeah.

Yeah. In the neighborhood, how did the Jews live? What did they make their living from in your neighborhood? They all did things, like, one of them, I remember, was working at the port carrying things in his back.

I don't know how I would call that guy's job. In Greek, they call it [GREEK]. [GREEK] is the guy who, your job is to take sacks. You know? That was his job.

And other people, I don't remember exactly what they did. But they did similar things, like, dig or nothing particularly exciting.

Were there Jewish bakeries, for example, in the neighborhood? Were there Jewish shops?

Not in the neighborhood. They may have been downtown. I do not know. I do not remember. But not in our-- as far as I remember, they were going to the same stores that we did.

And the stores were on your streets or someplace else?

No. The stores were within walking distance, but not close. What was close were the carts that I described earlier that were passing by. There were three of them.

And there were fish vendors, which was kind of interesting because the sea was a long way, walking, because I walked to school. But that sea was several miles. And those guys had a flat tray on their head with fish that they caught during the night. And they were coming by.

And my mother would like to buy fish now and then. And when the guy was coming by saying, fish, fish [GREEK]. She would go and say what do you have today? And he would lower the tray.

And my mother who was always very picky, said is that what you're giving me? I caught it this morning! I don't like that, the eyes, you know. I'll tell you, it was difficult to sell tomatoes and fish.

[LAUGHTER]

But anyway, she would buy it. But that was a different way to buy fish than the way we do it today.

Of course. Of course. Can you imagine someone from Lake Barcroft, carrying fish, going on to Route 7?

[LAUGHTER]

Were there Orthodox Jews in the neighborhood?

I learned that term when I came to this country. Back then I didn't know.

OK.

There might have been. But I don't know.

Well, in Eastern Europe, often people looked different. They dressed differently. Would that have also been the case?

[ELECTRONIC NOTIFICATION RINGING]

Let's hold.

That's fine.

OK. Hang on a minute. So did Jews and Christians look alike, or did they dress alike?

Not to my memory. That does not mean that they didn't.

OK. But they didn't enough to make enough of an impression. I presume there must have been. But I don't know. Either I was not in the circles--

OK. To you, in a boy's eyes, you didn't see a difference?

No. When I went to school-- [CLEARS THROAT] excuse me-- the same classes except in the Greek schooling system, you have to take religion. And the early parts of religion is the Old Testament. And then the next year is the New Testament. And then there is catechism.

The Jews were excused from the last two, the New Testament and catechism, because those were clearly Christian thing. But the first year, which was the Old Testament, they were required to attend those classes because that was the same thing.

Yeah. Yeah.

So other than that, there was no difference.

OK. Your parents, did they have a social circle? And who made up that social circle?

Well, we had very few neighbors that were part of the circle. And this remains a question mark in my mind. And I often tell Duffy, I don't know how that happened.

Because most of the people were living in other parts of Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki is a big city. Of course, this is a modern part. But this is the center of the city.

You're showing me a map of Thessaloniki.

Yeah. Our house was at the outskirts, out here. In fact, if you went this way from my house, you were out in the country.

So you're sort of northeast. You're pointing to a northeastern part of Thessaloniki. And this is the landmark of Thessaloniki, the White Tower, the part of a or middle age fortification. And it's a very nice building.

Anyway, that's, like, the Parthenon is in Athens. The White Tower is in Thessaloniki. And it's exactly at the middle of the town. And this was the downtown area. This is where the middle class of Thessaloniki is--

So you're showing me, on the map, someplace that is more on the western side, that would be the middle, but to the west of the center of town?

Yeah.

OK.

Now we lived here.

Yeah. You lived on the eastern part.

And two of the neighbors, Apostolos, the black sheep, and Yannis, the youngest, were living reasonably close to--

So your mother's brothers, your uncles.

My mother's, yeah. And let's see, Yannis, the youngest. Actually, you asked me that question. I never answered it. Where he lived was where my mother and her siblings grew up. And that house eventually was left to the youngest.

And the distance between there and our house was several miles, quite a few miles. But you know, that's the way--

But it's also still on the eastern part of Thessaloniki.

Yeah. But we also had, of course, a lot of distant relatives and other social friends in the center of Thessaloniki. And we used to go to their house. And they used to come to our house.

And the thing that I cannot remember for the life of me is how were those engagements made. These days, of course, forget about the email. Telephone. Well, there was no telephone.

I forgot to ask you. Did you have a telephone? And you just answered no.

We did not have a telephone. And making a telephone call sometimes when an emergency, it was a big deal, finding a telephone.

Did the post office have one?

The post office did. But we'd go to a store that had a telephone. But that was a long way, a long way.

But anyway, the others did not have telephones, either. Nobody-- well, not nobody, but very few people had. So it's a question mark in my mind.

I know that there was, oh, Thursday, the Lavadas are coming. How did my mother get to know that the Lavadas were coming on Thursday? Where was that engagement made?

And that was not just one, you know? It was like today. Every day we have something or other. I don't know how they communicated. I'm embarrassed, but I would be lying if I made up a story.

Oh, no, no no. But I mean, it's a legitimate question, given that there weren't-- there were very limited means of communication.

I'll tell you how limited it was. Now Thessaloniki is a town of some, I forget now. At that time, maybe a quarter of a million people, that's a lot.

Yeah.

My uncle, in whose house I spent half of my life--

Irina's--

Irina's husband.

Irina's husband, yeah.

He had an office downtown here. OK. And he had a telephone. Now I'll give you the number of the telephone, 5490, four digits. That tells you how few telephones were there.

But it's interesting. It's interesting. So we started this from who made up your parents' social circle. And it sounds like it was both relatives and other friends--

And other friends.

--but not necessarily in your immediate neighborhood. So you didn't socialize much with the Jewish neighbors.

We were socially higher end than the immediate neighborhood.

Did people know one another, though, by first name?

Yeah.

Yeah? OK.

A lot of people would give their left hand to come to our house because my mother was a famous cook. I mean, when I said that before, I mean, I meant she was famous. And they want Anastasia's cooking. But you know, we went to their houses, too.

Let's pause just for a second. OK? Yeah?

OK. You were talking about your mother and her talent.

Speaking about my mother's talent, and it's still a mystery to me. There is a very simple Greek biscuit or whatever you would call it, [INAUDIBLE]. In Greek, they call it [GREEK].

[GREEK]?

And you make the dough in a sort of long way. And then you kind of do it like a hair--

You make a crescent from it?

Braid.

A braid. OK.

Yeah. And you make it. Everybody makes it, including my mother. Nobody makes it the way my mother does. I mean, I can't believe that.

I mean, [GREEK], we find it in every house. We have a very good Greek friend here, a very good cook, who makes [GREEK], very good. But--

Not the same.

It's a B minus compared to my mother. And I hate to say that, because you know, I'm not in advertising, whatever, for my mother. But I don't know how she did it.

Did you ever stand and watch her?

Oh, sure. But you know, back then, I didn't have that much interest. The one thing that perhaps would be of interest to you, since you're asking questions of that nature, is that my mother was cooking under the most primitive conditions. She either was in the kitchen, the place where you put coal, you ignited the coal. And you made a fire.

And you used that fire to cook anything. And whether it's high heat, low heat, she did it. I don't know how.

Wow.

But she managed to--

She couldn't regulate it normally. She had to go by what the fire gives her.

And there were no hot water. She would have to have boil water. Excuse me. And when you cook or for any other reason you need-- so she did all of that stuff in that little thing.

Except, there was, of course, there was no oven in the house. So anything that needed to be baked, I had to take it to--

The baker?

--the baker. That probably is not unique to Greece back then.

Mhm.

Because we're talking about conditions that were Ottoman Empire. You know, that's a few years after. Right now, they have everything that we have here. But I'm talking about back then.

And the bakers of the time, in addition to making delicious bread, which they were selling, they also were using people's baking--

That is, they offered their ovens? Or did they rent those ovens? Or did they just--

Oh, no, no. You had to have a child. Like, first of all, it was my brother, then my brother retired from this chore. And I had to.

When my mother made [GREEK], I would have to take the--

The dough?

--the pan, after she was finished it. And take it to the baker. And the baker was under strict conditions, I mean, instructions from my mother for how long and how to bake it. But that was part of his income. He was doing it not only for us, but for everybody else.

For example, at--

Easter?

--Easter, the Resurrection mass is said at 12 o'clock at night, when the priest comes out of the church and says Christ is risen, blah, blah, blah. And we always went for that.

And after that we went home and we had the traditional Greek dish for the occasion. So we didn't eat until after 12. But my mother would make the thing, which was baked lamb, would have prepared it in the afternoon. Would have taken it to the baker and brought it home before going to church.

But that was not only I. It was everybody-- well, not everybody, a lot of other people. So when I went to pick up mine, there were there a lot of others. But our baker was particularly attentive to me, because he knew whose son I was.

[LAUGHTER]

But anyway, anything that needed baking.

What about refrigeration?

We had an ice box.

OK.

Which was, you know what an ice box is.

Yeah.

But during the bad times of the war, it was or wasn't. So for a few years, the ice box was there but not functioning because there was no ice.

OK.

Did your parents have-- what kind of conversations would take place in your own home? Did they talk much? I asked you before if your father was a storyteller. What about your mother?

No. But my mother was fairly social. And she spoke some French. She had a neighbor, a Jewish neighbor who spoke French. And she would open the window and have a good chat in French with a neighbor. But you know.

Did they ever talk politics at home?

Yes. There are homes where you don't talk politics. But during the times that I remember most, the politics were-- have to do with the war.

World War II?

World War II. And not so much as to what was happening outside in Greece, because what was happening in Greece was important enough. And you know that really was the center of any--

Discussion?

--discussion.

What about the 1930s, though, before World War II begins? Before all of this happens, do you remember any kinds of conversations? If your father had been part of, let's say, the partisans that helped liberate Greece from the Ottoman Empire, was there talk about that? Was the sort of like a narrative of what Greek history was?

I don't remember that.

OK. And we had a family friend who was coming very frequently to taste my mother's cooking who was a major member of that group that were fighting the Turks. But I don't remember any important discussions having to do with that part. Maybe my memory is not good. But I don't.

It could also be you're a child and they're adults. And they talk adult things and kids--

Well, I was not that much of a child. I kind of matured earlier. But before the war, the government was taken over in 1936 by a dictator by the name of Metaxa.

Mhm.

And he is a very controversial guy. Because like a dictator, he is hated because he was a dictator. On the other hand, he was a good dictator and without him, Greece would have gone to pieces. So you have different ideas about him. But he was a hero for the war, because he stood up to the Italians.

And this is really what I wanted to say earlier. This is an important piece of World War II history that many people do not know. And it actually, in my opinion, decided who won the war.

So let's hear it.

In October 28 of 1940, Mussolini gave an ultimatum to Metaxa. His ambassador knocked the door at 12 o'clock night and said, you either allow us to go down, take a military walk to Athens, or we'll take it anyway on our own.

And Metaxa said, [GREEK], which in Greek, means no. And it has become a famous word in Greek. [GREEK] And the Italians attacked Greece on the 28th of October. And to the consternation of everybody, including the Greeks, they didn't make it.

The Greeks were winning the war. And they pushed back-- the Italians attacked Greece from Albania. And the Greeks counterattacked and they began taking Albania.

And that was a big humiliation for Mussolini. But a big worry to Hitler. Because Hitler, first of all, had made a big name for himself up to that time because he had taken over the whole of Europe.

And he had told Mussolini, don't touch Greece. Greece is neutral. Let me do that.

And Mussolini wanted to get part of the action. And he began losing the war. And it was an embarrassment to Hitler, plus Hitler had already decided to attack Russia. But he knew from the Napoleon catastrophe that if you don't go there early enough, the winter is going to beat you.

So he wanted to attack Russia, but he was delayed because of Mussolini being there. So he sent his ambassador to Metaxa now, talking about March.

So this is Hitler sends his ambassador to Metaxa?

Yes. And he said, look, we'll take Mussolini off your back. In fact, you can even hold on to the ground that you've won from Albania. Keep that.

All you have to do is tell the British to take back a regiment of New Zealanders who the British had sent when Metaxa had asked for help. Because the British sent one regiment of New Zealanders in Crete and one Spitfire. And the ambassador said all you have to do is tell the British to take--

To go away.

And Metaxa said, OK. And Metaxa died within 24 hours.

Oh.

Then the King appoints another prime minister. The same ambassador goes to the new prime minister, gives him the same message. And the new prime minister says, OK, [? no big deal. ?] And he dies within 48 hours.

It's the foreign office at work here. The third prime minister said no. And then the Germans said, OK, then we'll have to do it ourselves. But to go there, they had to go from Austria, they had to go through Hungary, they had to go through Romania, they had to go through Serbia and Bulgaria. That was four countries to go and--

Get to Greece.

--get to Greece. And its March. He did it. But it took him two months.

And it's the same time that, in two months, March, April, May, and the next month, he attacks the Soviet Union.

He attacks the Soviet Union. But he knew that he was two months late. But he did it anyway. He was dumb. But had he done it two months-- you know?

But he did it two months later. Had he done it in March, when he wanted to get rid of Mussolini's gaffe, for all I know, we know, he might have gone to Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the world would have changed. The Russians would have not been part of the winning team.

Interesting.

So that's how they came to correct, so to speak, Mussolini's mistake.

Let's go back just a second. September 1, 1939, do you remember? Did you have a radio at home?

No. That's another story.

OK. Tell me. So did anybody have a radio?

Yes. Some people did. And there was a radio that a cousin of mine who lived in Egypt had left at my aunt's house.

Irina?

Irina, yes. And when the Germans came, it was illegal to own a radio.