

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Isaak Sarfati on August 17, 2019 in Brooklyn, New York. Thank you, Mr. Sarfati for agreeing to speak with us today, to share your story, your family's experiences during World War II and what came to be known as the Holocaust. And we appreciate you raising up all of these memories to share with us today. We know that some of them are not easy at all.

The very first question that I'm going to ask is the simplest. And we'll develop everything from there. The first question I have is, can you tell me the date of your birth? When were you born?

I was born in July 28, 1934.

And what was your name at birth?

Isaak.

The same as today?

Yeah, same as today.

Nothing has changed?

No.

OK. Did you have any nicknames?

Yeah, Ino.

Ino?

Isaakino.

Isaakino. OK. And where were you born?

Born in Salonika. It's Northern Greece. It is a city that had a lot of Jews. It was called Mother to Israel.

Really?

Yerushalayim do los Balkanes.

The Jerusalem of the Balkans?

Right.

Wow. So how large was the Jewish community in Salonika?

Well, at the time when the Shoah started, it was about 55,000. But I have read somewhere that, at one time in its existence, the Jewish community was the biggest community anywhere. I don't know where, but--

Or we don't know really what era that would have been.

Yeah. I assume it was before the 20th century, definitely before the 20th--

Yeah, of course, before the 20th century. How large was Salonika in total? If about 55,000 were Jewish citizens, how many non-Jews were there?

The whole city was about 300,000.

So this is a sixth of the population, something, a large--

Right.

--large part.

At one point in its history that I know for sure, that the Jewish population was the largest group. There are three groups basically, Turkish, Greek, and Jewish. And Jewish was the largest group.

And then after Greece came to have control over Salonika in 1922, a large number of refugees from Asia Minor and other Turkish places, Greek speaking people, came into Greece. And they came in Salonika. So that increased it.

So before then, it was part of the Ottoman Empire?

Yes, it was part of the Ottoman Empire from about the 13th century, something like that.

Until the early 20th century.

Yes.

And then comes into--

Well, they re-- we don't call but the Ottoman Empire anymore.

What is it called?

Turkey.

Ah, OK. OK. Well, see this is part-- I have to admit-- and so some of my questions will reflect this. I don't know the history of Southern Europe that well.

OK.

And so please correct me. There are times I'm going to be asking questions to place in historical context. And this is one of those instances. It's, of course, before the events that we are going to focus on, but it gives us the background.

OK.

So then can I make an assumption that modern Greece only really comes into being in the early 20th century?

No.

OK.

Modern Greece comes into being in the early-- 19th century 1821 was the Greek Revolution. And it threw out the Ottoman rule for most of Southern Greece.

It stayed like this until the First World War-- or, no, a little before that, 1912, when the Christian states of the Balkans got together and started a war against Turkey. And they, I would say, liberated their countries from Ottoman rule-- or--

Turkish rule?

Yeah, I guess it wasn't-- if I call Ottoman rule anymore. It was called Turkey, I suppose. That's in 1912, 1913. Greek forces came into Salonika in 1912.

OK. Does this mean that the region was somewhat unstable? Or is it that we're highlighting just certain parts where instability was there? By unstable, do I mean were there competing tensions between various groups all along? And they kind of burst on the scene in the years that you mention. The first part--

Well, the thing is that the Ottoman Empire had conquered the area, people of different nationalities there, had their own language. The way the Ottoman Empire dealt with this is they called them the millet system, which means that each nationality its own semi-autonomous rule, you know, their own vital statistics, their own either ethnic and religious groups.

And they called them millet. And they stayed separate. And the Ottoman rulers wanted to remain separate--

To keep various groups separate?

--to keep them apart. So what happened was that, as the empire weakened, these groups began to assert themselves. So in the early 19th century-- 1820, yeah, early 19th--

Yeah, early 19th century.

--the Greeks revolted. Within a couple of years, they conquered Southern Greece. Bulgarians did their thing. Serbs did their thing, other thing. So maybe 1912, there were already states, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Greeks. And they got together, and they kicked Turkey out of most of the Balkans.

What kind of effect did this have on the Jewish community in Salonika? Did the Jewish community have a preference for one kind of rule over another? Were they treated one way under one?

OK. The Ottomans felt that the Jews were innocuous. They didn't pose a threat to their rule, the others did. So they treated the Jews with kindness.

In some ways, they welcomed the Jews. When the expulsion occurred, they welcomed the Jews of Spain.

You're talking about in the Middle Ages when there was the Inquisition?

Not the Middle Ages. The 16th century, when the expulsion occurred. And the Jews who had to leave Spain, a lot of them came all the way to the Ottoman Empire.

And in fact, I can't remember the date exactly. But the year of the expulsion is the same year that Constantinople fell to the Ottoman forces.

We can look it up.

I can't remember exactly.

Then did the change in the 20th century, when it comes totally under Greek control, did that have a difference for the Jewish community?

OK. Theoretically, they were all Greek citizens. They were Greek citizens.

Right.

The Jews did not feel comfortable. The Jews of Salonika did not feel comfortable with the Greek rule. And again, a little

bit later, 10 years later, there was another war with Turkey.

And it ended by an exchange of populations. A lot of Greeks that lived all over the Turkish area came to Greece. Most of the Turks that lived in the Greek areas went there.

There was only two groups that remained-- there was some Greeks in Constantinople. There was an agreement between the Greek and Turkish government, some Greeks remaining in Istanbul, Constantinople, and some Turks remained in an area of Greek Thrace, which is east of Salonika.

So a lot of people came with-- the nature of the city changed. The Greeks overwhelm the culture. The Jews didn't quite like it.

Why?

There was a little friction there.

Is there a cause of this friction? Is there a reason for the friction?

Well, there's a lot of the antisemitism with all the Christian people. The Jews seem to feel displaced by a large influx of Greek speaking people.

Because of the Christianity? Because of the religion more than the ethnicity, is that what you're saying?

I would say yes, yeah.

OK. So can I make an assumption that, historically, until we come to present day, but historically, there was a closer relationship or a more comfortable relationship with Islamic rule than Christian rule in Salonika, in Greece, in the Greek territories?

Yes. Yeah. That's right.

OK. OK. And your own family, how far back can you trace your own family's roots in Salonika?

My-- from us-- my father was born in a town west of Salonika, Veria. My mother was born in a place Monastir, which now it's in what they call the Northern Macedonia.

Oh, yeah.

They finally settled--

They finally settled the name.

--the name north of Macedonia.

Yeah. And Vitola, I think, what was called Monastir, now it's Vitola.

V like Victor?

Vitola, something like this.

Yeah, OK.

I can't remember now. So they were not Salonikans.

Oh, they weren't-- OK.

My generation was the first one born in Salonika.

OK. But I'll pose the question then in taking it from where your two parents were from. Had their families been in these places for generations?

Presumably, yes.

OK.

The presumption is that all of them came from Spain. They were Sephardic Jews. But as I was saying before, there were Jews that came from Germany before that.

Before the expulsion?

Before the expulsion, Jews came from Germany. There was a rabbi in Edirne. Edirne is now what they call the Eastern Thrace--

[BACKGROUND NOISE]

OK, let's cut.

--inside turkey.

OK.

OK. There was my namesake--

Also rabbi?

--Yitzhak Sarfati. Yitzhak Sarfati, 13th century, wrote a letter to the rabbis in Germany saying come down here where the Jews are treated well, where they don't have to wear yellow caps and so on. So the truth, this is one person.

But there were a number of Jews from middle of Europe, from Germany, that have come to the Ottoman area by the 13th century. OK. So they were there. There were some Jews, but not too many. They're called Romaniotes, who had been there since antiquity.

Really?

Right. In Salonika, the Spanish Jews came and obliterated--

The others.

--the cultures of the others. But there are places outside where the Jews called themselves Romaniotes. And that's Spanish, Romaniotes. Even in Athens and other small cities, they called themselves Romaniotes. They don't speak Ladino. They speak Greek.

In fact, there's a synagogue in Manhattan at Broome Street.

Really?

It's a Romaniote.

It's a Romaniote synagogue.

Right. So they don't speak Ladino. They speak Greek, a few of them from Alexandrian times.

Wow, that really is going back.

Then there were the German Jews that came in 13th century, I believe, around there. And then came the Spanish Jews in the 15th century. And that--

How far back do you know about your own family?

My own family?

Yeah.

Two generations, three generations?

Well, I know stories that my grandmother, who lived with us, told about her life in Veria, where she was born and where she lived. But her husband, my grandfather, whom I never knew, because he died very young-- but I don't know further than that anything.

OK. I had a question, and it went this way. What was the first language that you learned?

I would say Ladino was the first language. I could, at that point, understand French probably. I learned Greek afterwards. I can't understand French anymore. But I have so many hearing problems again in English.

Well, a lot of us say that, you know.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. I believe the language at home was Ladino. My parents spoke French. And my suspicion was they spoke French when they didn't want the kids to hear what they were saying.

That's such a universal thing.

[LAUGHTER]

But we learned.

You learned to understand.

[LAUGHTER]

We learned to understand, right.

And what was the language of outside the home when you would go to the streets, when you go to other places?

Greek.

Greek?

Greek, yeah.

Greek. So is there a time that you didn't know Greek?

I don't believe so. I don't have any memory of-- I went to school, what was it, six years old. I went to school. I got a I knew Greek. I spoke it.

OK. And so was it just so that there was the language at home, that's Ladino? The language in public is Greek?

Yes.

OK. Tell those of us, including myself who are very ignorant about these things, tell us about Ladino as a language. Yiddish, we know, has a root in German. If you speak German, you can understand some Yiddish.

Maybe not everything, but you can. If you speak Spanish, can you understand Ladino? If you speak French, can you understand Ladino?

Well, I wouldn't know that. I will know the--

The other way.

--reverse.

OK.

When I came to this country, I could understand any Spanish speaking person very well no matter where they came. Puerto Ricans, who speak very fast and people from the south, they speak Spanish, I could understand very well. I could understand French, because, you know, my parents spoke French. Because of that, I could understand just about every romance language. But, now, I can't anymore, because, you know--

But do you still know Ladino?

Yes, I know. But put it this way, if somebody speaks Spanish fast, I can't-- if somebody speaks very slowly, very clearly, I can understand. I remember, about a year ago, Pope Francis was on television speaking in his native Argentine Spanish.

Spanish.

And I could understand him, but he was speaking slowly and clearly. Most people I can't understand anymore.

OK, OK. Let's turn to your family. You go back two, three generations at most then, your generation, your parents, and your grandparents.

That's right.

Your father came, again, from which village?

Veria.

Veria.

Veria is about 50 kilometers west, northwest of Salonika.

And did it have a Jewish community, Veria?

Yes. It's a small town. It has a Jewish community.

And why did he leave Veria to come to Salonika?

For economic reasons, I suppose. Salonika was where you can do business.

What did his grandfather do? What does his father do? How did his father support the family?

He had a grocery store, I believe, there.

In Veria?

Yeah. They tell me the stories about during the Muslim holiday-- what do they call?

Ramadan?

During the Ramadan, he could take his fruit and put it outside. Because the Turkish friends who come and pick, they wouldn't pick, because they were fasting.

OK. So there was safety for the food, safety for the fruit.

[LAUGHTER]

That's right.

How many brothers and sisters did your father have?

Let me here, he had one brother, had four or five sisters, five sisters.

A large family.

A large family.

Did you know most of them?

I knew all but one. That one lived in Tel Aviv. By the time I am aware of it, they had moved to Tel Aviv. So they were out of harm's way.

Let's, if we can, go through the list. What was your father's name, first name?

Sam.

Sam. Samuel?

Samuel.

OK. And the other siblings, his brothers and sisters?

Asher was-- there was Sonhula, Miriam, Bella, and Matilda. Did I forget anyone?

If it comes back later, we can say it later. We can interject.

So Matilda was the one in Israel, in Palestine at the time. The others are--

Did the others--



Bella survived. The others were lost.

Matilda, did she leave before 1940?

Yeah, before. I'm not aware of ever meeting her. So she must have left at the time when either I was very young or maybe I wasn't even born.

I guess, you know, because I know I had a cousin that was a year older. I think she was born in Palestine. So [INAUDIBLE].

Were any of your father's siblings or himself-- did they get a higher education?

No. No, I never--

And your father, also no?

I don't think. He was self-taught.

So when he came to Salonika, what did he do for work and for being able to make a living?

OK. He eventually, as far back as I know he and his older brother had a store. They sold knits, things like that. And then--

Excuse me, they sold clothes that were knitted, or they sold fabric that was knitted?

Clothes that were knitted. And then I don't remember what Asher was doing, but my father eventually had a small factory that made knit things, like socks, and stockings, other underwear.

Like haberdashery, is that how we-- well, in our language, we call that [NON-ENGLISH]. But, you know, all of these smaller knitted items, they kind of come under one umbrella whether it's socks, whether it is underclothes, and things like that.

I don't know.

But is that the sort of thing that--

Yeah, that's the sort of thing he did until the end.

OK. And how did he meet your mother?

You know, as I told you, I've written a book. And I made it up. I don't know.

You don't know. You don't know. OK.

They didn't talk about this thing.

Do you think it was an arranged marriage?

Most marriages were arranged. But I would say very definitely it was probably arranged, but it was not enforced.

Forced, OK.

They don't enforce them.

OK. OK. And before we talk about your lives in Salonika, I want to know now more about your mother's family. She comes from Monastir?

Monastir, Vitola they call it now.

And what kind of a family did she come from?

OK. The name suggests aristocracy, Pardo.

Pardo was her maiden name?

Yes. There are names in Spanish that sound like that and is highfalutin aristocracy, Prado, for instance. So I don't what. So there was, at that time, very class consciousness. And I'm sure that my mother came from a higher--

Higher class than father?

--class than father, yeah.

What was her first name?

Her first name-- Estrea.

Estrea?

Estrea. The Jews of Salonika had rules about how they name their children. All the males had biblical names, all males have biblical names. Women had biblical names, but also names from Spain. My mother was Estrea.

There was another rule that said the first born son would take the paternal grandfather's name. The firstborn daughter will have paternal grandmother's name. The second one will take the maternal parent's name.

And so which grandfather are you named after?

My mother's.

OK, so you had an older brother.

I had an older.

OK. We'll come to your generation in a minute. We're still focusing on mama. So what did her father do in Monastir?

Her father was a merchant in Serbia. By that time, I guess it was Yugoslavia already formed. And he had stores in Monastir, but they had other store in other towns around there. And he was-- I don't know what he was selling.

Do you know his name? Of course, he was Isaac.

Isaak.

Isaak. Isaak, of course. Isaak Pardo.

Yeah.

And how many brothers and sisters did your mother have?

Mother had three sisters-- oh my, two sisters.

Did you know them?

Yes. One, Esther, lived in Salonika. The other, Rachel, I didn't remember from my childhood. But I met her later on. She survived. I met her in New York. I was able to--

Well, they might have come from different social classes. But from what you're telling me, they came from more or less the same world as far as making a living, fabrics, and stores, and clothes, and merchant, and so on. Do you think that had something to do with them coming together? Or you don't-- I'm speculating.

As I told you, when it comes to that, I made it up. And I made it up.

Yeah. Did you know your grandparents on your mother's side?

Yes.

Did you know your grandparents on your father's side?

Well, my grandmother, grandfather had died before I was born.

OK. And did they continue living in their respective towns or had they moved to Salonika?

My maternal grandmother lived with us.

She lived with you?

With us as far back as I can remember. My maternal grandmother lived this Salonika. When I was a boy, her husband moved up and down, because he had all this business in Yugoslavia.

OK. What was your mother's mother's name, first name? Do you remember?

Mazel To.

Hmm?

Mazel To.

Mazel To? I've never heard that name. Is it a--

It's the Hebrew "mazel tov."

Oh, mazel tov. Oh my goodness. And your grandmother on your father's side?

Esther.

Esther? So she was Esther Sarfati?

Mm-hmm.

Your other grandmother is Mazel Tov Pardo. And your grandfather on your father's side, what was his first name?

Azaria.

Azaria? And so was your older brother Azaria?

Yes, yes.

OK. Do you remember the factory that your father had?

Yeah. I remember, yeah.

Do remember going there?

I've been there. I had been there several times, yeah.

Was it close to your home?

Yes, originally. Although when the war started, we moved away from the-- the factory was close to the center of the city. We moved away from the center, because it seemed to be safer from, I don't know, air raids or whatever.

But until then, until then?

Yeah, I--

And in your own generation, we know that you have an older brother Azaria. You were born in 1934, is that correct?

Yes.

When was he born?

'29.

1929. And do you have any other siblings? I had.

Ah.

She was lost. She was born five years--

When was she--

'39. She was born in 1939.

'39. And so this was a sister?

Yeah.

And what was her name?

Esther.

Esther?

Of course.

Ah, of course, of course. Can we cut the camera for a second? So did she have a nickname?

It was Nina.

It was Nina. OK. So her formal name was Esther, but everyone knew her as Nina. So you were really in the middle, one sibling five years older, another one five years younger.

Right.

Where did you live in Salonika as far as neighborhood? Did you live in the Jewish neighborhood? Was there a Jewish neighborhood?

There was. We didn't live in a Jewish neighborhood. Jewish neighborhoods, there were a couple of them, basically slums. And most Jews that had means lived dispersed. I don't think there was a place as much Jewish as this is, for instance.

Where you are in Brooklyn? Yeah.

No, where we lived, probably we were the only Jews in the building, the only Jews in the street. I don't know.

OK. But it was integrated then.

It was integrated, yes.

OK. And do you remember your home and what it looked like? And I'm talking pre-war. I'm talking until everything changes.

I do not remember pre-war. I remember the years between the beginning of the war and the beginning of the Shoah. And it was in a nice neighborhood not in the center, but close to the outskirts.

Do you still remember the address? Yeah. I remember the name of the street. I don't remember number. Koromila. Koromila Street. I don't remember the number.

OK, Koromila Street.

Koromila.

Koromila?

Koromila.

Ah, Koromila. OK. I wonder if it still has that name, that street.

I don't know, because as government change in Greece and politics, they change the name of streets, too.

[LAUGHTER]

It's a European phenomenon everywhere. Things change, street names change. Governments change, countries change, street names change. People get confused. Often, if you go back to someplace, in order to find out whether it was the street that you knew you have to find an old person in that neighborhood who could remember not everywhere, but many places.

Right. I had this experience not in my hometown, but going back in Rhodes, where, if I asked the name of a local street, they couldn't tell me. If I told them the name of a person, they would tell how to get there.

[LAUGHTER]

Isn't that interesting? I mean, it speaks of people knowing each other, not being anonymous.

They don't care about the name of the street. It's a small--

Yeah, small places.

--place.

OK. So in Koromila, can you describe to me your-- it was an apartment that you lived in or a house?

We rented it, but it's a house. The bottom floor was occupied by the owner, who was a bishop in a province outside Salonika. And a caretaker lived there.

So when an Orthodox Christian Bishop?

Yes. Do you remember his name?

I can't remember the name. The book, I probably have it there. But I can't remember now.

Let's explain this. You refer to something that you've written. Is this a published book or a manuscript?

It's a manuscript. And I tried there. It didn't work out. So I thought maybe you can--

Whether I can--

--guide me somewhere where I can try to sell it again.

OK. Well, often in interviews, there are things that come up that can be used in writing a manuscript or amending it. People have used it that way. We can speak at the end of the interview to see if there would be--

OK.

--let's say, a place for it to have a life in print. I don't have a direct knowledge, but we can talk about it.

OK.

But it's interesting that you wrote something down that is book length form, because that means that usually people have to do research as well as rely on their memories.

Well, yeah. I relied on the memory, my memory, and the memory of my brother and cousin who survived. And we did our best. And as I said, sometimes things I didn't know I--

You assumed. You assumed.

I made it up.

Yeah.

And then I did some research for the introduction, which is one thing I have to work it over.

When did you write this manuscript?

20 years ago.

OK. And since we're doing this in 2019, that would have been 1999, sometime around then?

Yeah. When I retired from work, I started writing.

Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. A lot of people did. A lot of people then had the time. Earlier they hadn't had the time.

I just wanted to establish that. And then let's go back to where we were. So you lived in this house where there was a bishop, an Orthodox Christian Bishop who owned it.

He didn't live there. He came from time to time

To visit?

But he was bishop in another province, nearby province. From time to time, he came to stay there. A what do you--

Housekeeper?

Housekeeper, she lived there--

And what about--

--in the basement.

Did anybody else live in the house besides you and the housekeeper?

She lived in the basement. We lived in the main floor. And there was a second floor upstairs, my maternal grandmother.

Did it have a garden, this house?

A garden and fruit trees-- in fact, there was real contention between the housekeeper and us about who was eating the--

Who gets the fruit? Who does the fruit belong to? Yeah. And so it really was your family had most of the house.

Yes.

And the housekeeper, who represented the owner, lived in the basement?

Yes. It sounds like your family was, if not well-to-do, very comfortable.

Yes, it was.

And would you say even that financially you were well-to-do? You know, were you wealthy is what I'm asking.

What kind of a wealthy-- we're doing OK, let's put it this way.

OK. So I have a couple of questions that sound a little weird, but it helps me understand what does wealth mean at that time or what is being well-to-do mean. Did you have electricity?

Yes.

Did you have indoor plumbing?

Yes.

What kind of heating? How did you heat the place?

No central heating, individuals stoves in some of the rooms. And we fed wood, basically.

Not coal, wood.

Wood, yeah.

Wood. There was a separate bathroom?

There was a bathroom, yeah.

OK. Did your father have a car?

No.

OK. Did you have a radio?

We had a radio.

OK. Did you have any household help?

We had. I remember having, yes, someone coming once in a while.

OK, but not constant, not like nothing with you?

Not that.

So how did your mother-- did she take care of everything?

Yeah.

Or did she help your father in the business?

No, she stayed home.

She stayed home. And so she did the cooking and the taking care of the children and all of that?

Well, my grandmother also lived with us. This is my paternal grandma. So she also-- yeah.

OK. Was that easy for the two ladies to be in the same home?

I wasn't aware of any problems.

OK. Sometimes there is.

[LAUGHTER]

I wasn't aware of it.

OK.

There might have been, but I wasn't aware.

And was your home a happy home?



Yeah, I would say.

Yeah? Your parents, there wasn't a kind of an atmosphere of tension or anything like that?

No.

No. Tell me a little bit about their personalities, the grandma, your father, and your mother. Let's start with grandma, because she told you stories. So tell me a little bit about what kind of a person she was.

I can't remember her very well, but she didn't have any peculiarity that I can say. I know that my other grandmother complained a lot. She didn't. She told stories of [MUMBLING]. She was very good with the children. And I don't remember anything--

What kind of stories? What kind of stories?

Well, would tell about her husband who died very young. He got cancer. I don't remember [MUMBLING] That's what I remember about, stories about her husband.

OK. So it is stories about her life, because it's with her husband, things that she knew about.

And, you know, how he died, he was sick. But the doctors didn't know what it was. They didn't take good care of him, things like that.

Did she spend more time with you, or did your mother spend more time with you?

Yeah, both of them.

Both did, OK. And then tell me about what kind of personality your father had.

My father was the personality in the house.

OK.

He was outgoing, very-- he sort of held the house together. He was the man.

He was the true head of household, yeah? Was he a strict person?

No.

Did he engage with you as children? Or was he usually too busy to do that?

He engaged. Yeah. He took us out. This I remember, that weekends-- well, maybe not weekends, but Sundays we went out together. He would take us out.

He had friends. He had a lot of friends. And he would go out with friends. He would take us along.

OK. Was he someone who told you stories as well or not so much? Did he bring you to the office to show you what the factory was like?

Yes. I've been there a few times. So I must have gone.

And did he have particular interests?

I don't know.

OK.

Yes.

OK.

Remember, I was nine years old when I saw him.

I know. I know. I'm asking not easy things. I know. But I want, for the purposes of our interview, to get a sense of who he was, you know, what his presence was in your life.

Well, he was definitely a very strong presence. I remember those things. I remember that we would go out together. I remember sitting at the table. And he was smiling. He had a pleasant disposition. And I remember him worried also when the-- you know, at the end. I remember him--

You saw that?

--worried, yeah.

I'll come to these things. Let's talk about mama. What kind of personality did your mother have?

She was a complainer of sorts, not strict either. But she had-- well, I remember this thing. My brother and my cousin, who were about the same age, they were talking about a place that sells magazines and things.

And people will lift, will steal, the magazine and so on. And they were bragging that they did it. And I mentioned it to my mother. And I thought this was fun thing, [MUMBLING] my mother. And I was impressed the way she shut me down.

So you told your mother about this kind of bragging that your brother and cousin had done. And she got angry with you?

No, but she said this is not the thing to brag about, not thing to do.

And do you know if your brother got a--

--surprised I remember how definite she was about it. I thought it was so fun.

Do if your brother heard about it, too?

I'm sure he did.

Yeah, there are moments like that that stay in a child's mind because they're so surprising, you know? Did she have time for a social life as well? Did she have interests and friends and things that she did?

Well, I remember that she was visiting with her relatives, friends, whatever it was. And I was bored out of my skin because I was there alone.

And I was listening to them gossiping and things like this. And I was so envious of my brother, was at school already. He didn't have to be here.

So she took you along as well.

Well, yeah, sure.

But it wasn't as much fun.

Yes, it was fun.

Yeah. Remind me again, you were born in September, is that correct?

July.

July, excuse me. So you're born in July 1934.

Right.

The war starts September 1, 1939.

Well, that is--

That's when Hitler invades Poland.

--Europe, but not in Greece.

Greece is part of Europe.

Well--

OK.

--Greece, the war started October of 1940.

OK, I will come to that. But the reason I mentioned 1939 is I wonder-- now, as I ask you this, I'm asking somebody who was five years old at the time. So I know that it's a crazy question.

But on September 1, 1939, do you remember whether or not there was any broadcast over the radio that Hitler has invaded Poland? Do you remember your parents talking about things? You said your father got worried. I wonder whether the worry started then or started later.

I was aware that there was something going on. I wasn't aware of any war. I can't remember what the reaction was.

I remember I knew there was something happening in Europe, yeah. But I don't think it was-- yeah, I think there were concerns. I think so. I think I can remember that.

And I know that, if someone asked me a question from when I was five years old about politics, I would say, what would I know from politics? I'm five years old, you know, or historical events. But these were so major.

And yet they hadn't affected Greece yet. So let's come to when you say October 1940. That's when the war starts in Greece?

Yes.

How does it start? What happens? Who fights whom?

Italy, which had occupied Albania, the way I know it, gave an ultimatum to Greece to allow them to come to get certain bases and so on. And Greece rejected them. So they invaded from Albania into Epirus, which is the--

A mountain range?

It's the area south of Albania. But the Greeks fought back and pushed them back. And it was a humiliating defeat for Mussolini.

OK. So Mussolini hadn't expected this? When he--

I guess he expected he would run it through.

So the Greeks win. In other words, there is no Axis power on Greek territory at that time.

Not in 1940, no.

Do you remember--

Not the winter-- winter 1941, the Greeks were winning. And there were celebrations. They occupied this town.

They occupied that town. And all the towns had Greek names because that was an area with Greek speaking people. I remember the celebrations that were in Salonika, we were outside. People-- meetings.

There were meetings and things?

Yeah.

OK. Were there parades?

I don't remember parades. I remember people gathering in the street and shouting and screaming.

OK. Do you remember any particular radio broadcasts?

No. I don't remember.

Do you remember how your mother and father reacted to this news that Greece was beating back Italy?

No, I can't remember. I can't say.

It's OK. And did this continue? Did this kind of success continue?

Well, Germany intervened in the spring, in early spring. And they overwhelmed all the Allied forces that were in the area.

Was it only Greek forces that were fighting the Italians or were there--

Yeah, it was only Greek forces.

Only Greeks forces, no Brits? No--

No.

OK. And then what happened after they overwhelmed them?

They overwhelmed-- if you're asking now what the consequences of the Jews of Salonika when the Germans entered, I think one thing, they occupied the-- OK, let me put it-- remember I told you about the millet system?

Yes.

Now, some of the millet system remained after Greece took over. So the Jewish community of Salonika had its own semi-official--

Status?

--status. It kept records--

Of who the members are?

--who are Jews and the-- so they occupied the Jewish community. They replaced the people on top of it. And then they started anti-Jewish propaganda. They didn't interfere with us physically until a year later.

OK. There is a question I had forgotten to ask you earlier. And that was, was your family very religious and observant?

No.

Did you go to synagogue every week?

No.

Did you have Sabbath every week on Fridays?

No.

No. Did you see yourselves as more secular? Or your family, your parents, saw themselves--

Well, as far as I remember, the only one that was not secular was my grandmother on my mother's side.

The complainer?

Mazel To. Yeah. Yeah, but her husband was not. I think there was a little bit of a discourse about that. But I can't tell for sure.

OK. Did you keep--

But one thing, there was a leftover from kashrut is that it was never anything meat early in the day. Breakfast, there was never anything meat.

So you kept a kosher house?

No.

OK.

No.

Just that's the only thing?

That's the thing I remember. And it has to do with the habit of kashrut.

OK.

Yeah.

What is kashrut? Tell us what is kashrut because some people won't know.

Well, keeping dietary rules.

So that means the same thing as kosher?

That's what I mean, kashrut.

OK, OK. Pardon me, I didn't know that. I didn't know that it was the same, the kashrut is the same thing.

It is the rule of keeping kosher.

Of the diet, I understand. Can you cut the camera for a second? OK. Elaine just mentioned that you forgot one relative. And tell us about your Uncle David, who is he?

David was-- there's something wrong with him. I don't know what it was. He stayed in a room when I visited my grandmother.

Your mother's mother?

Yeah.

He would go. He smiled and go somewhere else and then come back, stay in the room. I don't know what's wrong with him, but something.

Was he younger or older than your mother?

I believe my mother was the oldest in the family, yeah.

OK, of the children. So would we say today that he had some developmental disabilities?

I don't know what it was

OK. All right. OK. Now, I'd like to ask another question just about Salonika. Was it on the ocean? Can you give us a geographical sense where in Greece it was?

Salonika is in northern Greece. It's a seaport. It's very far from the ocean. The closest water is the Aegean, which is not called an ocean and the--

I was wrong.

--the Mediterranean, which is not called an--

An ocean, OK. I was wrong. It was really water. Was it close to water? Yes.

It is a seaport.

It is a seaport. And how close to borders is it?

It is close to the northern border, what we call now, finally settled to be, Northern Macedonia. It's probably not more than 100 miles from the border. But I can't say for sure.

OK. This is a lead up as to when Germany invaded. Did they get to Salonika really quickly?

Yes, they get here quickly.

OK. Was this something that surprised Greece, the Greek forces, the people of Salonika?

Well, the way I know is that at the same time the Greek forces sort of dissolved. The British, they had some forces in Greece. They retreated very fast. And the only resistance worth mentioning is in Crete, which took a great deal of-- the Germans lost a lot of forces in Crete.

So when they first arrive, the elders of the Jewish community are changed?

They occupied the offices. They arrested some functionaries. But then they-- no, they didn't-- I cannot say for sure that-- I have to look it up-- that they put other people in yet. Later, they did that. They appointed their own people.

Ah, I see. Was your father affected? Was his business affected by--

Not at the moment, not for being Jewish, but there was of a famine in the winter that followed. '41 to '42 was famine, so long ago. My father had to provide food for his workers.

How did he do that?

Well, they bartered with farmers in the vicinity. For a period there, they gathered some food. I remember my uncle, who now lived with us.

Father's brother?

My uncle is my oldest aunt's husband on my father's side that I remember was the cook for the-- it was part of the pay was food.

OK. So the way he kept the factory going was to feed the workers, not just pay them, but feed them. Or was it that some of their salary was in this food?

I don't know.

You don't know the details.

I don't know the arrangement.

Yeah. Do you remember going hungry at home?

No. Did you or had you already started school?

OK. I started school just-- I must have started school-- the war started October 28. That's the official. I must have started school that September, but I don't remember being in school that long.

I remember being in school for a few days, and then schools closed. They were-- and I went to school for a while afterwards, second grade, a little while, the third grade. And then I didn't go to school for a long time until I was in fifth grade.

Your brother-- one thing I forgot to ask about also was what kind of an influence on you did your brother have. Was he a big part of your life when you were this age?

Yeah. Yes, he was.

Did he tell you about what's going on? Did he explain this wider world to you?

You know, by that time, my brother-- my cousin lived with us, you know. I told you about the uncle.

The one who went with the magazines with your brother?

Yeah. And the cousin, they lived in the same house. And I remember being with them, do arithmetic together, remember talking about books. They were banished in the house, because I had--

You mean books that boys shouldn't be reading, those kinds of books?

That--

OK. OK. So this isn't political banishment. This is parents who are censoring what the boys could read.

Yeah.

Got it. All right. So there were the three of you as boys in the house.

Right.

OK. Did your brother have an idea himself of what's going on?

I'm sure they did, both of them. My cousin was an Italian citizen, which bears on what happened next. But he had gone to school the Italian government, the fascist government, had in Salonika. He was pro-Italian.

What was his name?

Much of the-- and, yeah, we talked about the war and how the Italians did, how the Greeks did and so on.

What was this cousin's name?

Isaak.

Also Isaak?

Yeah.

And his last name?

Matalon.

Matalon. And he was the son of your aunt who was your father's sister?

Yeah, the older sister.

The older sister-- and his father was the cook? Is that correct?

His father was-- yes.

He was the cook. So your aunt's name was what, her first name?



Bella.

Ah, this was Bella, Bella Matalon. And Isaak Matalon, her son. And what was the father's name?

Solomon.

Solomon.

Solomon.

And are all three of them now Italian citizens? Or only--

Yes.

All three of them are. OK. But they live with you in your home in Salonika? And the father helps out your father when it comes to providing and preparing that food.

Yes.

OK. I got it. What's the next thing that happens, that stays in your memory, that kind of changes in your lives?

OK. One of the things that we were talking with the older kids is read the paper. Germans had shut all the papers, and they publish the thing. Nea Evropi. New Europe it's called. And they started anti-Jewish propaganda there.

And there was a thing that impressed them. And they found it funny. It wasn't funny. It's a Turkish word, "tsifut."

Tsifut.

--which means immigrant?

Foreigner? Stranger?

Foreigner, something like that, refugee. I'm not quite sure. So they called Salonika tsifut. Salonik-- that means, I guess, a reference to Jews coming from Spain, tsifut Saloni-- And then the word "tsifut" became a slur for Jews in Greek. And the Nea Evropi used this word, tsifut Salonik. And they found that it was very funny. Well, it wasn't funny. It was--

Well, yeah. It's sort of like they see it as ridiculous, but it has serious underpinnings. You had mentioned earlier that living under Christian rule was not as comfortable as living under Islamic, in those days the Turkish, rule. Had there been antisemitism in this new Greece from the early 1920s and 1930s?

Yeah. There was. Yeah. I would say yes.

Can you give me examples? But this is before the Germans come.

I can't tell you that serious things happened, but I can tell you that probably somebody will say a word, dirty Jew or something like that. And it went both ways. The Jews of Salonika were not fond of the Greeks. The Greeks--

OK. But it was not on a state institutional level. Or was it?

No.

OK. Well, I don't know. I would say there were, let's say, Jewish cops, I don't think there were any. I was thinking they were not in the army.

Although my cousin married a woman whose uncle was an officer in the Greek army. So that-- I know. An officer, he died. He was killed early in the war and honored.

Well, what you're mentioning are important markers. That is would Jews be accepted in the civil administration? Would they be accepted into the armed forces? Can they be government ministers, things like that?

I don't believe there-- I mean, that is the only person I know of. He was a captain in the army. He was killed early in the war. And he was honored as a hero.

OK.

But I wouldn't think that there were Jews in high places.

OK. So you see, another thing that is, was there, in Greek, a word that was derogatory for Jew before tsifut appears?

Yeah. That word tsifut was a derogatory word for Jews.

But had it appeared, had it been used, before?

Yes.

OK.

Yeah, it was--

OK, so that was not something that this new newspaper--

No.

--discovers or creates. It had been around.

Yeah. The word has been around, yeah.

OK. And the purpose is to let everyone know that this is a foreign element. This is a strange element. This is not part of Greek society. These are people who are outside of it.

The whole part of the Shoah of being implemented is that there are steps that are taken. And one of the first steps is isolation. And one of the ways of isolating is to distinguish the other from the society.

Yeah. But the distinction, as I said before, was the inheritance of the system that preceded it, this separation of--

That's right. That's this millet you mentioned.

--ethnicities.

Yeah.

You know, the Jews of Salonika were a lot more separate from the rest of the Greeks than the Jews of other places, who spoke Greek, who were smaller part of the thing. And they were more accepted than--

So when you say the Jews of other places, you mean within Greece itself?

Yeah.

So Salonika Jews were already distinct, already different?

Yes.

OK. So this is just emphasizing that more? All right. So after your brother and your cousin laugh at that, what's the next thing you remember?

Then the next thing was an order given to all Jewish men, oh, I don't know, 18 to 50 will have to present themselves in a square. It was called Platia Eleftherias, a square in downtown Salonika.

What is it called again? Eft-- could you say--

Platia Eleftherias.

Plate Eftherias?

Eleftherias.

Eleftherias.

--which means Liberty Square.

How ironic. How ironic. OK.

And everybody who was that age, nothing happened except they kept them whole day.

Your father went?

My father went. One cousin, Asher's son, also went. He was old enough. And my father was young enough.

So they went. They kept them all day. And then they were released.

But they didn't register them or anything like that?

I don't believe they did any of these thing. They were kept in an open space all day. And then there released.

That sounds kind of bizarre.

I don't think there was anything, you know.

Oh, did life at school change for you? Were you still going to school? And did things change?

Well, no, I went to school, but the school was not open. Well, I remember going back to school for a short time not-- because for some reason all the schools were closed. And then, of course, in 1943, the things started.

So is it around this time when your father goes to the square and then is released, is it around then that he starts looking worried? Or had that already been going on?

Yeah. I think he was worried before that.

Did he still have a cheerful manner or no more?

Yeah, he had. He did. He went to work. He kept going.

How old was he at this time? When was the date of his birth, your father?

OK. Officially, it was 1900. I think he was a little younger than that. Again, 1900 was still Turkish rule. I think somehow he made himself older to avoid the draft into the Turkish army. So in 1943, officially he was 43 years old. He could have been maybe 40 years old.

He's still a young man.

Yeah.

He's a young man.

And your mother, when was she born? Do you know?

OK.

1903. 1903.

1903.

OK.

Elaine said.

OK, 1903-- also a young woman.

Yeah.

All right, so this kind of requirement to come to that square, that was in 1942?

I believe so.

OK, OK.

I have to check it out.

And what's the next thing that happens that changes life?

I know that then some of the young men were drafted into forced labor and that the community sort of negotiated by giving money and part of the Jewish cemetery for the release. And they were released. It was not in my experiences. This is just what I read afterwards. And the next thing was when we were made to move into a ghetto.

And tell me about that transfer.

OK. As I said, there were certain areas, basically slums, Jewish. And the periphery of this, really there were more Jewish. This became the three different areas in Salonika. They became places where Jews can live.

We were outside. My uncle who lived with us was Italian citizen. He didn't have to move.

He didn't have to go.

No. So we moved in a place very near where he used to live before the war. He stayed in the house on Koromila.

But this is interesting. Because he is an Italian citizen, he has more freedom being a citizen of a fascist country than you

as occupied. But I would have thought that, in Germany, the first ones to go are the German Jews, you know. And in Italy, it's not the same.

No, neither in other fascist country. Spain also protected Jews. I know of another young man, who had Spanish citizenship. And he was free.

OK. So how is it that Uncle Matalon and Bella and their son had Italian citizenship? Was he from Italy?

Well, again, this is folklore. His father had a lot of sons. And the Turkish army-- Ottoman army would conscript them. You could ransom them, but he couldn't afford to ransom. Instead, he went to Istanbul into the Italian consulate and bought citizenship.

No kidding.

That's the story.

Oh my. So you can buy citizenship. Isn't that interesting?

Right.

You know-- of certain countries.

Things happened there.

Yeah.

That's the story.

OK, OK. But true or not, it's interesting that that's the version that was circulating. That's the explanation that you had. And at that point, it makes a difference in the lives of Mr. Matalon and his family.

Yes.

OK. So you are all moved into the ghetto. He stays in your old house or the place that you live, you know, that is the second floor of this house that you're renting.

Well, it was a house.

Yeah. What do your new quarters look like in the ghetto?

I can't remember them very well. It was OK.

And it was five of you who moved or more?

OK. Yes, the five of us. My grandmother must have moved, too.

So six-- the three children and three adults.

Yeah. We had enough room. There was no problem like that.

OK. And was this the first time that you're living in entirely a Jewish surrounding?

Well, it was not entirely Jewish surrounding. It was restricted for the Jews, but people lived there that were not Jewish.

Oh. So was it circled with barbed wire?

No. It was blocked. There were guards at the-- but you can go through.

I see.

There's no barbed wire. There was no barbed wire, but the street--

But people who were Gentile could still live in that ghetto area?

Still did, yeah.

OK. Could Jews leave that ghetto area?

No. You couldn't.

OK. So--

The beginning, they could live during the day. And then that was restricted of also.

So is it at this point that your father loses his business, Or had he lost it before?

At this point, yeah. He loses his business. The business went to a receiver which is a collaborator or something.

And how does your life change in that ghetto?

Well, not much, but was a short time.

OK. What does that mean, short time?

All right, soon after that, this is what we did. My sister, who was 4 years old and I, were adopted by the Matalons.

And the reason?

The vision was to-- we would be protected if they were adopted.

Oh, so you would get--

We'd be Italian citizens. We'd be protected. That's what we thought. That would work.

OK. And why not your older brother, too?

Well, they thought he was too old, better not to. And then we moved back to our house.

The two of you?

The two of us-- and we said goodbye to my parents and Asher, my brother. And I didn't see them until we went to Athens.

OK. How long did you live with the Matalons?

I can't tell for sure.

OK. Did it work, this adoption?

No.

Did it work?

It didn't work.

What happened?

The thing is they thought that I was at risk. Nina was too young. They wouldn't bother with her. So a friend of my father's came, took me to the railroad station.

You were how old?

She handed me--

10?

'43-- nine years old.

Nine years old, OK.

He introduced me to a couple. The woman was his cousin. And he took me to Athens.

And I had a false paper. They took me to Athens. We left Nina there, and they took her.

Did they leave the Matalons alone?

Yeah.

So who took her, Greek forces, or German forces, or who?

I think the culprits were Jewish.

Oh. Oh. They came prepared to take her. They forced my aunt, my uncle to take her to someone in the community.

Did you ever find out the details of how this happened? Apparently, somewhere I think they were scrutinizing the-- but maybe there were other adoptions like that. There were scrutinizing them. I don't know what happened.

Did they bring her back to the ghetto, or did they take her someplace else?

I don't know. They took her away. We never saw her again.

Oh. When did your parents find out about that?

OK. After a short time-- again, I can't tell the dates right now off-hand.

That's OK.

The Germans decided they don't want the Jews in Salonika at all. So the Italian consulate arranged for them to move to Athens. What's the thing about Athens? Athens was under Italian occupation. So they moved him to Athens.

So your father, your mother, your uncle, your brother?

My father had been taken for some reason that we have never understood. Somehow they picked him up off the street, and we didn't see him again. But when the Matalons came with the rest of the Italians, then we find out that my sister wasn't with them. They had taken the sister.

OK. So you are in Athens separately with the sister of a--

No, no. They took me to Athens. I met my mother and my brother. My father had been already--

Arrested.

--arrested. So we stayed there in Athens.

But when you left Salonika, your sister was still with the Matalons.

Yeah.

She's taken after you leave.

After I left, yes.

OK. So had you stayed there, you probably would have been taken with her?

Yeah.

OK. OK. And was it that the Matalons told you all when they came to Athens how your sister was taken?

Well, they forced them to take her somewhere, but remember where this is, the community offices. I don't know. I don't know. That's the thing. They didn't want to talk about it. There was a lot of blames back and forth.

Well, that's one of the reasons I'm emphasizing this. If I had been your mother and my child is not there and I had left her with relatives, I would be wanting to know what did they do.

Yeah, there was a lot of back and forth. But I'm not clear exactly what happened.

Oh, dear. Well, clearly, they wouldn't have wanted to do it. But--

They were forced to do.

Yeah.

So your father is taken from the streets. Nina is taken from the Matalons. And all of you were together in Athens eventually.

Yeah.

Where in Athens?

Do you know the--

No. But tell us. Somebody will know. If you tell it on the camera, somebody will know.

All right. We lived in a neighborhood called Pangrati.

Pagratz?



Pangrati.

Pangrati, OK.

Right. We lived there for as long as Italy was part of the Axis. When Italy, well, when they surrendered-- what do I call it? They--

They were overrun. Some would say they were liberated. Some would say they were occupied.

Right. They, let's say, withdrew from the war. The Germans moved into the Italian occupied area.

Here's a question, though, going back to the move. So instead of shipping all of Salonika Jews off to Auschwitz, they get rid of them by sending them to Athens where life is better for Jews?

Jews of Italian citizenship were protected. So when the Germans didn't want any Jews--

Anymore in--

--remaining in Salonika, so the Italian consulate--

Got them.

--arranged for them to move down to Athens.

Except that your mother wasn't. Your brother wasn't. Your grandmother wasn't. So the Jews of the ghetto of Salonika also go to Athens?

No, no. My mother and my brother and my

Grandmother.

--father, they sneaked into Athens. They didn't go--

OK. OK. So they escaped from the ghetto.

They escaped.

The ghetto-- was it in Athens that your father was picked up?

Yes.

Ah.

And we haven't understood why he was picked up.

OK.

It was supposed to be safe there. The Italians did not allow the [? intervene-- ?]

Maybe someone saw him and recognized him.

I have no idea.

Who knows? So did you ever find out what happened to him after he was picked up?

Stories say that he tried to escape from a-- he had stomach ulcers. So that's the story. I don't know if it's true or not. He was in custody.

And I really don't know who had him in custody. And he pretended to-- the stomach ulcers are going. They sent him to a hospital. He goes to the hospital. He tried to escape from the hospital.

He was picked up in the street. But this is apocryphal. So I don't know.

You don't know. In other words, you don't know.

I don't know, as I said, what happened to him.

One of the reasons I pause and I ask more questions about these moments is because I'm trying to imagine when you were a child. And you have family members, your father, you know, who's the head of the household, the protector, and he disappears. And you don't have answers.

You don't have any answers to how this happened, where this happened, who did this, what ended up happening. I can't imagine, but it sounds terrifying. It sounds absolutely terrifying.

Well, it was terrible.

It was. It was. And the same with Nina?

Yeah.

She's a baby.

That's right. She's a baby.

You know?

Yeah.

So after you have these blows to the family, what happens then? Where are you living in Athens? You say Pangrati, but was that a neighborhood? Is that another ghetto?

No, no. It wasn't a ghetto. Pangrati is a neighborhood. We lived there until Italy withdrew from the war and the Germans moved into the Italian occupation area. Again, a friend of my father's who lived in Athens came to warn us, because people around knew we were Jewish, that you should move. So we moved somewhere else.

All of you? Mother, father-- I mean, mother, grandma, brother, you--

Grandmother, no. There was no grandmother.

She had died?

She was left in Salonika, I suppose. I don't know.

Oh, I see.

My mother, my aunt, my cousin-- my uncle, stayed in Athens, where the Italian government had given refuge there for the Italians. He stayed there and was taken. I don't know exactly why he stayed. So my mother and my aunt and the

three of us, three boys, moved somewhere else in Athens, [NON-ENGLISH]. This was another street. I don't know the name of the neighborhood.

And we stayed there for a while. And then the same person came and said that the things don't look safe here. You have to move somewhere.

We left Athens. We moved to a place on the eastern part of the country, called Karditsa, a small town. The Germans, they had no interest in it. So there were no Germans there.

So we stayed there for a while. And then we were warned that the Germans would come in. We moved to the eastern part of the country, Volos, which is a seaport in the middle of the--

Who is the driving force within your group?

My mother.

Your mother. She's the one who made it all happen?

Yeah.

So she sounds like she had quite a strong personality.

Yes, she did.

What was her demeanor like during these times?

Very, very difficult, she was in panic all the time, in distress all the time.

Who put food on the table?

Well, we had some gold coins.

Ah.

When things got dark and things, what happened, we procured some gold coins. They were either Turkish lira, British--

Pound?

--pound sterling or French [NON-ENGLISH], all about the same, just about the same prices, the same value. I think the British pound was more expensive than French and then the Turkish. So my mother made belts of canvas with little pockets. And every pocket had a gold coin. We had it around our waist under our clothes all the time.

So there-- Of course. You may take everything else off, but not the belt.

Not the belt.

So did each one of you have such a gold belt?

Yeah.

So there were not a few gold coins. There were several gold coins.

Yeah, there were several.

And your mother wore one. You wore one. Your brother wore one. Your aunt wore one?

I suppose she did and my--

Your cousin?

I suppose did, yeah.

OK. So, well, let's say, we don't know for sure. But you know for sure that it was you, your brother, and your mother had one.

Yes, had one.

OK. And did those gold coins last?

Yes. It was more than enough.

Although my mother worked. We were trying to explain to her that the rate that we're going, the war will last another 20 years before. And she says, what happens after the war-- she was worried about.

OK, OK. So the gold coins, what would one gold coin purchase if they were more or less equal in value? A week? Accommodation?

I'm trying to remember. Yeah, probably a month.

OK, so a month's rent. And a month's food?

OK. This is what I remember. Eventually, we ended up in a-- I said Volos on a village up the mountain near Volos. Once every while-- but I can't remember how-- my mother and my aunt would go down to Volos to buy supplies.

They will sell a coin, buy supplies. And then they would load the supplies on a mule that people, villagers who brought things down-- mules were empty. They were--

Brought them up, yeah.

Yeah, bring the supplies up. I can't remember how often they went down. But it must have lasted for a while, because they didn't go too often.

OK. And did they pay accommodations in gold coins, too, as far as you know?

I don't know how this is. We were-- no, I think it's have to exchange it for some-- I know that in Volos in particular they didn't accept paper currency. It was the currency was cigarettes.

Of course.

There was a factory that produced cigarettes. And this was the currency that they accepted. There were packages of 100 and packages of 20 and then individual.

And how much, a package of 20 cigarettes?

I can't--

You don't know what that could buy you.

I can't tell-- I don't know.

But, you know, when you're talking like this, I'm thinking they have to maneuver this new economy that is an underground economy, that is black market, that is what everybody is doing.

Yeah, it's not underground. It was open.

Yeah. But nevertheless, it is how do I get food? How do I get shelter? I can't just go and pay money. I have to do this to do that to do the other thing and also to make sure I don't get caught.

I know that they did that to buy supplies. I don't know how we paid rent in Volos and how we paid rent up in the village. I don't know that.

Did the people that you would rent from know that you would Jews, or did you have false papers?

OK. We had false papers, but they knew.

They knew.

Well, we had a [? problem. ?] We finally-- we were living in Volos for a while, actually, well, six months.

That's a long time when you're on the run.

And the people in the neighborhood knew it. They knew. I heard things in the neighborhood. I was a kid. They knew.

And then one day the landlord's son was a hoodlum, had other hoodlum friends. They extorted money from us. And the father was distraught over this. His brother was from the-- he was from the Makrinita, which is the village up in the mountain.

And I don't know how. Within a day, his brother came down, came to the house, took all our clothes, brought them up, all our supplies, with everything that we had.

And you?

Well, we walked behind the mules.

OK. So the father--

And we went. The house was ready for us.

OK. So the father had this tragedy, that he sees what his son and his son's friends are like, and does what he can to protect you.

Yeah.

Did you have other such experiences of people helping, people betraying, people taking advantage of?

I don't think there was anybody taking advantage of us. I know that people helped. We went from Karditsa, where we found a relative there, a relative of my father's from Veria, probably a cousin, because they were all cousins there, who was in the resistance and who told us when the Germans are about to come.

He had some knowledge ahead of it. You have to leave. So we then we went to Volos. And my mother's looking for a place to live. We found a-- what do you call it-- real estate agent? Well, not quite that-- to find us a place.

Someone who deals in rented apartment, rented places?

Yeah.

OK. I'm not sure whether he was recommended from the guy or she just found him. And he got us false papers. He got us a place to rent.

So in other words, at a time of great disadvantage where your lives are in danger, did you feel like the non-targeted people are potential helpers or potential betrayers?

Well, it was a good policy not to let anybody know we were Jewish.

Of course. Of course.

But our experience was that people helped. When we went up in the mountains, we didn't hide our identity. Because it was free country, free again. So they knew we were Jewish, the resistance. Actually, we had this thing that the boys were now, 1943, they were--

They're teenagers. They're 14, 15 years old.

They were teenagers. And the communist resistance, they had a youth group. And they recruited them. And my mother and my aunt went, "oh, don't do that. You'll get into trouble. Blah, blah." But they did, worried everyone when we applied for a visa to enter the country. They were--

To enter the United States-- and then you have this question on there that says, are you now or have you ever been a member of the communist party? Oh, well.

Oh, well. OK.

So, well, they recruited us. But, yeah, we knew the thing. And anything seemed risky, the Germans may come, they will let us know that something was going on. So move out, move high up in the mountain. We moved up there. We did that, too.

About how many places do you think you moved to? Did you ever count them up? How many from Athens? From Athens?

Athens, Karditsa, Volos, Makrinita, and what called [GREEK], the broad flat, which is a place up in the mountain where we stayed until October of 1944 when the Germans left. And then we went back to Volos. And from there--

Did you go back to Salonika?

Yeah.

Eventually.

Right after the December events, you know the Dekemvriana?

No, tell me about those.

OK. This is when there was this thing between the communists and the British in Athens which is December 1944.

Was it an actual battle? Was it fights?

Yeah, it was. And after that, my mother had gone ahead, because she was-- and took my brother. She was trying to find

things. You know, Volos was another place to find things. So she went to go to Athens. We went to Salonika again.

What did she want to find? What things did she want to find, your mother?

To find out any news.

Any news about your father, any news about your sister?

Right.

OK.

So she had gone ahead. And then we removed to Salonika. I know this. The day I moved to, I reached, Salonika was the day that Roosevelt died.

Who died?

Roosevelt. President Roosevelt.

Roosevelt died. President Roosevelt died, OK.

That day, because I remember we went over there. There was a flag outside. And it was down the pole. I thought, well, the wind brought it down. And then my mother came and said, you know, Roosevelt died.

So was it a Greek flag that was at half-mast?

Yeah.

How interesting, a Greek flag at half mast, not a US flag. So was it outside a resident house, you know, a private person?

It's a hotel.

It was at a hotel. OK. OK. And did your brother have anything to do with the fights that were going on in Athens? Did his connection to the partisans continue?

They didn't in Athens.

It was in the mountains.

In Makrinita, in the mountains.

And then it stopped after that?

And then-- yeah. I don't really remember.

OK. So your mother was not worried that he would in some way be implicated in this?

Sure, she was. But then--

But it didn't happen, OK.

Nothing happened.

OK, OK. And was your brother a real convert, or was he someone-- these are the good guys at this time and it's exciting?

Yeah. These were the good guys, yeah.

OK. And did that ever change? Was he really a believer in the communist system is what I'm asking.

I don't know. In fact, he was at the right of me I think. Here, he worked--

In the United--

--for a firm that did just about the same thing as my father. There were also Jews from Greece. And he found employment there. And I remember he had gripes with the union.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, I ask it in a clumsy way. But there were people who joined the party because they believed in the ideals, the young kids who were just attracted because it's adventurers, others who say, OK, these are the guys who are saving us at this time. And they have no connection to ideology. And Greece also had a problem after the war.

I believe that was the only game in town. The only place where there was other kids and there was something going on. So they went to--

OK. You said it, the only game in town. OK. So when Roosevelt dies, that's 1945, I believe.

Right, right. Yeah. That was the time I returned Salonika with my aunt and cousin.

And you're 10 and 1/2 years old, yes?

'45, 11 years.

Yeah.

Well--

Close to 11 years, not yet.

I was going-- by the Greek reckoning, I was 11. By the way we do it here, I was not yet 11.

11. How would you describe the 11-year-old that you were at the time? How had that child changed? What kind of a person were you?

Well, one thing, I don't believe was traumatized. We had things. My mother was traumatized definitely. And we felt that, but I don't believe I was.

OK. Why? I mean, by saying this, I wasn't trying to feed you are you traumatized. But it's more out of a sense this child has lived from age 6 or so on through-- no, a little bit later, but not much later-- these two, three years of experiences that adults don't have. You've been close to death. How does that affect you? How does it change you? What does it make you-- yeah. How do you become as a child after going through that?

I don't know that it was-- I think I was a regular child. Eventually, in 1945, I went to school again. And I was one of the kids.

And your brother, was he more affected more because he was older?



He was one of the kids also. He has had the-- I remember him going on hikes with friends.

In fact, the thing that I remember is that my mother wouldn't stay alone. She had a fear of staying alone. And my brother would go on hikes. He would stay overnight. And I had to stay home.

You anticipated a question. Did the two of you come to be caretakers for your mother?

Well, no, not really. But just she had a fear of staying alone.

She needed to have someone there? OK.

And that lasted forever.

And that hadn't been there before? That hadn't been there before?

I don't know.

OK.

I don't remember.

And did she get the factory back?

Not really, no. They didn't.

Where did you live when you went back to Salonika?

Oh, we found a house. We rented an apartment in a house. We lived there for a while, then we moved to [INAUDIBLE] because our-- oh, yeah, we got the thing back.

But we didn't have anyone who could manage it well. So we came to America because our economics were not good.

OK. Before I ask about that, was there a point where you stopped looking for information about your father or your sister?

Yeah, after a year or so. There was a place in the old community offices. There was a wall where they had names of people who were returning or who were found to be alive.

And I remember going there a couple of times. And then we stopped going. And I don't remember then.

Did your brother start working? You went to school. But did your mother go to work? How did you support yourselves?

The thing was working. We wasn't working well. And we found our finances going down.

I remember going to private school. We started-- it's an American school-- for a couple years. And we thought we couldn't afford the thing anymore.

Fortunately, there was some money that-- the American government and Greek currency, they couldn't do anything with it. And they called it Fulbright scholarships-- was not the real Fulbrights. But that's what they called it, Fulbright scholarships. And I got one. And I finished the--

Here?

--high school.

OK. So what year did you come to the United States?

In '56.

So it's still 11 years after the war.

Yeah.

When did you make the decision as a family to come to the United States?

Well, it must have been not much before that because there was no way of coming. It was, I believe, an act of Congress passed about that time, a little earlier, that would allow us to be refugees of some kind, be allowed in. It wasn't easy going. It wasn't easy to get to the United States.

See, your situation is different from so many other of millions of survivors in that you weren't displaced persons. You weren't in DP camps in Germany. So many came to the United States from there. And there were quotas and so on. But you went back to your homes.

Yeah.

So were you allowed in under a Greek quota, for example? Were you considered citizens of Greece?

Yes.

Yeah. And was it under that condition, or was it as Jewish survivors from World War II?

I believe it was the latter. That we were included as displaced persons there, but we were not really displaced--

Well, not in the sense of not being in your home community. You know, you weren't in a camp somewhere else after the war. You went back to Salonika.

Yeah. We went back to Salonika.

Yeah. But 11 years is a long time, you know, after the war to--

Yeah. I went to high school. I went to college.

Here.

In Salonika.

Ah, in Salonika.

I didn't finish there. I finished here.

What did you finish? What did you study in college?

Chemistry.

Chemistry. And where did you go to school here in the United States?

City College.

City College, of course, and then a PhD at Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, which now is part of an NYU.

Do you have children?

Yes. I have three. I have a daughter from a previous marriage, who lives in Greece. I have a daughter in-- we have a daughter, who lives in Eugene, Oregon and a son that lives down the street.

And do they know of your story? Did they ask about what your experiences were?

Well, they know some.

OK. Some people talked about what had gone on and some people stayed really quiet after the war.

Yeah. Well, I didn't talk much.

OK.

Yes, yes. I didn't talk much for many years.

Did your mother come to the United States as well?

Yeah.

And your brother?

My aunt and--

Oh.

--my cousin, yeah.

All at the same time in 1956?

Well, about the same-- not together, about the same time, though.

OK. And did you have any relatives here already?

Yeah. We find out we had. My mother had some cousins.

So from the Pardo side of the family?

Yeah.

OK. How did she adjust to the United States?

Well, not very well.

OK. Did you go back to Greece after you arrived here?

Yeah. We've been going--

OK.

--recently.

And where does your daughter live in Greece?

In Athens.

In Athens, OK. Is there something that I should have asked that I haven't asked that you would like to add to this?

I don't know what. I don't know.

Is there something, a final thought, you would like to leave with people who will listen to your testimony and hear about your experiences?

Well, there's one thing. And I don't want to get into the politics of the day. But when I heard about this first thing that a child was forcibly removed from mothers down at the border, my mind went to my sister. Just--

And you have to referring to events that have happened in the past year in the United States with Mexicans and other South Americans who are trying to cross the southern US borders?

Just the first thing about one child being forced, removed from the mother, and immediately that's what came to my mind.

Yeah. I think it's very apropos. Thank you. Thank you very much.

Yeah.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Isaak Sarfati on August 17, 2019 in Brooklyn, New York. And after we cut here, we will film a few photographs. And you'll be able to tell us who is on those photographs. Thank you.

OK.

[INAUDIBLE]. So Mr. Sarfati, tell us who is in this picture in this photo.

My father, my mother, my older brother, and I.

And which one are you?

The smallest.

OK. And so this probably looks like it was taken in the late '30s at some point. You don't look very old there. Do you have any recollection of what the date would be?

I should have, but I have the impression that, if I take it out of the thing, there will date in the back of it. But I don't want to do it. Because my mother had the thing of putting the dates of pictures. We didn't take many pictures at that time. You know, we had to go find a photographer with a camera and take one picture. So my mother would put the date in.

OK. Tell us again then everybody's first name, just so that we have it together with the photograph. There's you, Isaak, your brother.

My brother, name is Azaria. We call him Azi. My father-- Sam. And my mother's Estrea.

Estrea Sarfati, the Sarfati family.

Sarfati.

OK, thank you. OK. Mr. Sarfati, so tell me this photograph. The two young men and the lady in between them, who is in this photo?

My mother is in the middle. And the taller one is Azaria, Azi, my brother. And the shorter one is me.

And about when was this taken?

That was, I believe, at the time when we came to this country in 1956 or thereabouts.

OK, thank you. And one thought that I had about the other photograph, your sister isn't in it. So maybe it was before she was born in 1939?

Yes.

OK. All right, thank you.