

RG-50.030.1040

Summary

Isaak Sarfati was born on July 28, 1934 in Salonika, Greece. Although Salonika was known as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans" its Jewish population had decreased to 55,000 out of a total population of 300,000 after WWI. Sarfati believed that antisemitism was worse under the Greeks than under the Ottoman Turks, but the antisemitism was more a matter of calling names than institutional. His father, Samuel, had come to Salonika from about 50 kilometers north west of Salonika for economic reasons. His father had one brother and four or five sisters, one of whom was killed during the Nazi occupation. Isaak Sarfati's father owned a small knitting factory. His mother, Estrea Pardo, was from a higher social class, and had also come from outside Salonika. Although like his father's family his mother's family had been in Greece since the Spanish Inquisition. She had two sisters, one of whom lived in Salonika and one in the United States. The family was financially comfortable and lived outside the Jewish neighborhoods which were poor. Isaak had one older brother and a younger sister. The family spoke Ladino at home and Greek in the street. The family was not religious.

The war in Greece began in October 1940, but Greek forces defeated the invading Italians. Germany intervened in the spring of 1941 and obtained the records of the Jewish community which included names and addresses. At first, Germans just emitted anti-Jewish propaganda and arrested some Jewish functionaries. In 1942, however, the German occupiers drafted Jews into forced labor but released them when the Jewish community paid a ransom. Then Jews, including Isaak, his brother, sister, mother, father, and grandmother, were forced into a ghetto in the old Jewish neighborhoods. His father's brother and family, however, had Italian citizenship and did not have to go into the ghetto. Fearing the worst, Isaak's uncle adopted Isaac and his sister, and they left the ghetto. But the adoption didn't work. Isaak was taken away by his father's friend, and German authorities came soon after and took away his little sister. She was never heard from again. His mother, father, and brother escaped the ghetto, but his grandmother was killed. Isaak met up again with his family and they escaped to Athens. Sadly, his father was arrested off the streets. That left him, his mother, brother and cousin, who was now living with them. They were helped by friendly Greeks and the communist resistance, which his older brother joined, and moved several times with false papers. They survived the rest of the war in hiding.

In October 1944 the Germans left. After bitter fighting between the British and the communist resistance. Isaac and his remaining family returned to Salonika. His mother searched for his father and sister but gave up hope after a year. Isaak returned to school and finished high school and most of college. For financial reasons, he came to the United States with his mother, brother and cousin. Isaac finished college in chemistry and adjusted well to his new country. His mother had more difficulty. In his final thoughts for the interview Isaak expressed his dismay at the current U.S. immigrant policy that separated children from their parents.