

Cohen, Solomon
RG-50.426*0008
Two video cassettes
In Ladino
Recorded June 19, 1996

Abstract

Solomon Cohen was born in Salonika in 1917. He was one of seven children. His father was a dentist. During the war, Solomon's father and brother, who was a doctor, went to Auschwitz to save Jews in the camp who needed medical attention. They both died in Auschwitz. The rest of Solomon's brothers survived the war by escaping to the mountains. Solomon and his brothers joined a group formed by the EAM partisans. They hid in the mountains and battled the Germans, occasionally taking German prisoners. Solomon and his brother were later decorated for their service in a commando unit that worked with the British.

After the war, Solomon and his brother returned to Salonika. The other brothers also returned, and they dispersed to various countries. Solomon believes that many Greek Jews could have been saved from death if they had joined the partisans.

1.01 Solomon Chinocos Cohen was born in Salonika, Greece in 1917. His family lived in Salonika where his father was a dentist and his mother, Rachel, stayed at home. There were seven children. Solomon's oldest brother, Izak, was a doctor of surgery who studied in Germany but was forced to leave there when Hitler came to power in 1933. He continued his studies in Salonika. Of the other six brothers, three, including Solomon, worked in sales. They lived in a Greek section of Salonika. They had many Greek friends, and that is why they were able to save most of their family (five brothers). Solomon's brother, Izak, was also a doctor who ended up in a high position in a hospital in Auschwitz, Poland, and thus was able to save many Jews there. He also saved their father, who eventually died in an Auschwitz hospital, a normal death, not in the ovens. They tried to find out what happened to Izak; they subsequently learned that he was either killed or died from typhus. Another brother, Ilias, who now lives in Rio de Janeiro, Argentina, and who is a bit younger than Solomon, had the misfortune of liking the sea. When the Germans were unloading the crude oil, he was swimming nearby and they thought he was a spy. They took him to the office of a Greek general, General Calidopolos, who at first hid him in his house, and later in another location, Hitler's tunba's house [?]. General Calidopolos is listed in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Six months later Solomon's brother escaped to Athens. His brother Alberto tried to join the partisans but was not able, and he went to Athens where his Greek friends helped him to hide. Another brother, Whilielmo, who now lives in Milano, also went to Athens in 1942. The youngest brother Morris, 17, went to the mountains in 1942. He went to the United States in 1950, and now lives in Chicago.

1.21 They all attended Lycee Francais, a private school. After graduation, in 1938,

Solomon went to Skadar for two years and later to the army. In the army, they got involved in the war with the Italians when the German army arrived, from October 1940 to April 1941. Before that they lived from the underground economy. In July 1942, Solomon was taken as a forced laborer to work on various projects. Later, they would register for work because of the threat of death, but then they would hide and the Germans didn't look for them. Although they had to wear the yellow band, they had the strength to oppose the Germans. Solomon's parents were actively doing things, like sleeping in the houses of Greek friends, so that the Germans would not find them. Eventually, they were taken to a ghetto Rumlaulji(?). They were piled up in this Jewish section, Solomon's large family and two other families. Both his father and brother had to abandon their medical facilities, and all of their equipment was stolen. They started planning how to escape, either to Athens or to the mountains. They had this guy, Greek partisan Calidopolus, son of the general, who helped them get to the mountains. They were not politically motivated to join the underground – they did this only to save themselves.

- 1.30** The interviewer asks why the Cohen family, father and sons had the vision to join the partisans while the Jewish community of Salonika for the most part was inactive, and perished. Solomon responds that it did not make sense to believe the Germans about building Jewish communities in Poland. His parents encouraged them to try to save their lives. Solomon says that his father and his brother went to Poland with the idea of saving Jews who would need medical attention.
- 1.32** They finally made contact with the EAM partisans. They were led to a mountain named Paiku(?). Solomon was one of the first Jews at Paiku. The partisans were not too well organized at the time. Solomon was assigned to a unit, a battalion under a Captain Mavros, as a supply sergeant, because he had been a sergeant in the Italian war earlier. They would walk the whole night to reach their destination.
- 1.38** The first day they climbed the Paiku mountain, and several Germans also climbed up. They didn't even have any arms. Solomon asked the captain to send him out with another guy. Most of them were dying from fear. Solomon gained a lot of respect for the Greeks because they were not afraid. The Greeks respected him, and pretty soon he was known by everyone.
- 1.39** They had many battles with the Germans. They would start out in the middle of the night, sometimes in the early morning before dawn, and go to the places where they knew there were Germans and they would attack them. The biggest battle they had was in Tokaria(?) in July 1943. They went to a place where they knew many Germans were assembled. One of their guys pretended to be a peasant; he went near the Germans and told them there were no partisans around there. The Germans undressed and went swimming. That's when Solomon's men attacked the Germans. They killed so many of them and took some prisoners. The partisan commander took one of the German prisoners, an officer, and told

Solomon to do whatever he wanted with him. The German prisoner probably guessed that Solomon was Jewish and started crying, telling him how he loved the Jews and how he was not like other Germans. Solomon couldn't do anything to him; he just put him back with the rest of the German prisoners.

- 1.42** This was in July 1943. They traveled, walking, all over the country. They went from one region to another. Solomon names many regions: Hasya(?), Kolica(?), Teveria(?), etc. It seemed like they were walking their entire life. Solomon's little brother was in another unit. The chief of all partisans liked Solomon a lot - he called him Yehudi. People would come to Solomon, asking him to intervene with the commander for special favors - some dealing with freedom of prisoners.
- 1.46** Life was difficult. It was cold in the mountains. Only when the British started to drop supplies did things get a bit better. Solomon's younger brother was in another commando unit that worked with the British. He was very courageous. He was later decorated, and so was Solomon.
- 1.49** Many Jews from Greece could have been saved if they had joined the partisans. The Jews just could not grasp what their fate would be under the Germans. Solomon describes the courage of the young Jews who had joined the partisans, and how many were killed in battles against the Germans. He talks about the continuing battles against the Germans which took place daily until the liberation.
- 1.58** Each unit had a 'commander' and a 'political commissar'. There was some mandatory political indoctrination, but it was not excessive.
- 2.01** Solomon lost track of his younger brother, who was eighteen years old. Solomon took advantage of his friendship with an EAM top commander, who promised to look into the situation. Within two days, Solomon received a letter from his brother informing him that he was in a hospital but was receiving good care and medicine.
- 2.03** Many Jews wrote books while with the partisans. Although some Jews were communists, most of the Jews were not interested in politics; they liked sports and education.
- 2.08** After the war, Solomon and his younger brother returned to Salonika. Then a third brother Ilia came to Athens. Two other brothers remained in Athens, but during the Greek Civil War the family was dispersed. Guilelmo went to Brazil, then to Milan. Another went to Rio, one to Milano, one to Chicago, etc.
- 2.14** Solomon talks about his life after the war.
- 2.16** People were good to him. One friend would give him small jobs where he could earn commissions. He got involved in fruit packing for the export industry. He married a non-Jew but she converted and became more Jewish than an average

Jewish-born person.

[There is some small talk between Solomon and the interviewer, and the interview ended.]