

Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project

P.O. Box 25506, San Mateo, CA 94402

Name of interviewee: Aelion, Elias

Date of interview: 9/19/1989

Summary: Elias Aelion was born in 1918 in Salonika, Greece (Thessaloniki on some maps). He comes from a deeply religious Jewish family who sent him to a private Jewish school. He had one brother and one sister. His father owned a liquor shop and made his own wine. Much of his early childhood memories are happy without specific details. In Salonika, his family had very firm and established roots with many branches and generations. Elias remembers that, as a child, he would celebrate holidays at his grandparents' house with all of his cousins, uncles, and aunts. Because so many Jews lived in Salonika, the whole town would shut down on major Jewish holidays. Elias believes this caused a lot of jealousy on the part of the Greek gentiles.

In 1939, Elias was drafted into the army and stationed at the Yugoslavia border when war broke out. He was in the Italian military but stayed in the background because his job was inventory bookkeeping. He said that often Jews were given jobs like that because they were more educated and thought to be less useful fighting. Anti-Semitic discrimination always existed in Salonika.

In 1940, he walked from his station to Athens and then to Salonika where he found the Germans had already set up camp. Elias remembers walking into his house and seeing his mother crying because the Germans took their furniture. His family then started going around to their gentile friends asking them to hide valuables for them, but these friends kept the valuables for themselves. He worked in his uncle's textile business and was sent to Athens on the pretext of this business. In 1942, he remembers the Germans using the synagogues as stables for their horses.

In 1943, the Germans occupied Athens. Elias went into hiding, sleeping in different places every night. He hid with four other people, his future wife, her brother, and two other brothers who were friends of theirs. One hiding place was a brothel that Germans frequented, another the house of an Italian spy who was arrested while Elias was staying there. Despite his best efforts, he lost all contact with his family who all died in concentration camps. One of his uncles who followed him to Athens gave his Greek mistress a rug that she had always liked. The Germans found her walking in the street later that night, took the rug, and beat his uncle to death after finding out where he lived from the mistress. He also remembers the Germans taking aside a rabbi, shaving his head, and making him sweep the streets of Athens.

Elias and his friends tried to escape to the mountains but couldn't get past the border. They stayed in a small house by a village. The Germans found this

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village and several others that were housing Jews and burned them. Elias remembers running up the sides of the mountains escaping back to Athens where an Armenian family took them in. Near the end of the war, Elias helped his wife's family escape to a villa on the outskirts of Athens. Right before his liberation, he remembers falling asleep and waking up in the middle of the night and going to his friends' house. He found the Germans there taking them away, but those who were taken after August 3rd, 1944 weren't taken to camps because the roads were closed. Elias ran back and warned his friends who then dispersed and hid in different places.

In September of 1944, they were liberated. Elias and his friends and his wife's family lived together in one large house with no furniture and no food. They couldn't go outside to get food for fear of being shot by machine guns on the roofs of houses. After a while things settled down, and Elias married. Before leaving Greece, Elias went back to Salonika to find his family. No one was left except a few distant aunts. One of his aunts had five children all of whom had died in camps except for the aunt. His brother died of typhus in one of the camps. On the street one day, a man approached Elias and gave him a suitcase Elias' father had given to him. The suitcase was for Elias, but he couldn't take it because it had too many painful memories even though the suitcase was filled with money and jewelry. In September of 1951, Elias and his wife moved to America with seven dollars in their pockets. They traveled to San Francisco. Elias spoke no English and couldn't go to school because he had to work. He was a bookkeeper while learning English, then a shipping clerk, and again a bookkeeper.

Elias still dreams about those days. He fears losing anyone else in his family. He believes that these events have made him a more protective and prone-to-worry parent. The whole experience made him lose faith, but he remains devoted to his Jewish identity and raised his son and daughter in that tradition.