

You're fine.

OK, any time.

Good afternoon. I am Alice Hamburg. I'm here at Temple Beth Jacob to interview Mary Rouben, who comes from Salonika. I'm very privileged, I think, to be able to talk to Mary, to you, and to get your story, which I'm sure is a very interesting one. This is Tuesday, December 5th. And as I said before, this is Temple Beth Jacob. And we are starting our interview. Beth Jacob is in-- are we in Oakland or Hayward? Which are we? I think we're Oakland.

Oakland.

In Oakland.

Oakland, yeah.

Mary, would you tell me where you were born?

Well I was born in Salonika in 1917. And I grew up there. I went to school. As a matter of fact, I went to an Italian school, because my parents were very friendly. And they were--

Your parents were what?

I mean were friends with the Italian.

Friendly, yes, I see.

And in this time, it wasn't any restriction from the government. They asked the kids to go in a Greek school, you know.

Yes.

Because it was--

Yes, I see.

But after, they make a law. In the meantime, I graduate high school. And we were a family of five boys and myself six.

So you were the one girl--

The only girl.

--in the family? I would like to go back and ask you to tell us a little about Salonika because I understand that it used to belong to Turkey.

Yeah.

Now, would you tell us a little bit about when it became--

Well, this was the time of my parents. When I was born, already it was Greek.

That was about what year, do you recall?

On the Greeks, they came in 1912.

And up until that time, it was part of the Turkish Empire, is that right?

On the Turkish Empire, yeah, Turkish Empire. And the Greek, they have a very nice life with the Greek, you know, like they were their own city. But after, when the Greek came, they started to put different--

Law, restrictions?

--laws, right. Yeah, like the kids, they have to go to Greek school till elementary. And there, they use the Greek. They were so strong. You know, Saturday, many of them, they didn't work.

Really?

No. And this, my father was telling me, because I didn't see this.

Yes.

But after, when the Greek came, they started to oblige to open on Saturday. And most of the Jewish left for Israel.

Is that so?

Yeah.

Tell us something about the Jewish community there.

The Jewish community was very good. I mean, just a nice organization, and strong, and everything. I mean, they were free and every. And they we have schools, Hebrew schools. And it was also an orphanage for the children, you know. It was a very good organization-- all the Jewish organization, like Matanot La'evyonim. I don't know if you have-- it's-- it was--

Is it [CROSS TALK]?

Matanot La'evyonim. It was a Hebrew-- a Jewish organization they were taking care of. And there were hospital. It was the hospital Hirsch, the rich-- I mean, the family Hirsch.

Oh, it was named after them?

Yeah, the Hospital Hirsch, it was white for the Jews, everything. And they still-- the buildings are there. And I think the Greek took it after the German, after everything.

I see. Well, then were the Turks, then, from your recollection, or from what your family told you, offered freer conditions-- there was more freedom for the Jews under the Turks--

Absolutely.

--than under Greek?

Oh, absolutely, yeah.

Yes, I see.

May I ask a question?

Sure.

What was it like for you when you were growing up there? What was life like before the war?

Life before the war?

Yeah.

It was OK. I mean, just we were going with the laws the Greek put. But it was antisemitism. You can--

There was antisemitism?

--feel that. Antisemitism, yeah. It was, yeah, it was.

I'd like to go back to your family again. You started telling us that you had five brothers?

Yes.

And were you the youngest? Or where were you?

No. I was in the middle-- in the middle-- in the middle.

In the middle. I see. Well, what would you like to tell us about your early life before the Germans came or even before the threat?

Well, when I recall, like this is in 1917, it was a war with the English. And they have a big fire in Salonika. And I don't know if you know about that. It's in the history, because that's-- I'll tell you something to laugh.

Is that part of World War I you're telling us about?

Yeah, maybe the end.

I think so.

The end.

Toward the end.

Yeah, because at this time, like I says, if you asked me for my birthdays, I don't know when I was born. But I'll tell you something to laugh.

Yes.

When I was going to get married, and they asked me on the certificate, the birth certificate, at the city hall, I didn't know. And my father figured out.

What that the city of?

The city hall in Greece.

Oh, yes, yes.

Yeah. We were to have our license.

Yes.

And I asked my father where I was born-- when. And he start to figure it out and says, in 1917, you were six month old. That's what he said. And it was the Purim holidays. You know the Purim holidays?

Yes. It always is in March.

March, yes.

And it was the Saturday before Purim, because--

Yes. And that's when you were born?

Was born. And he figured out that the same year we were there-- in 1941, I got married-- it was March the 14th. But it won't be the date, but because this year, it was this, the date of March-- Saturday, it was March the 14th. Says, OK, well, let's put March the 14th, 1917.

In other words, they didn't have to register births as we do here--

No, no, no, no.

--when someone is born?

No. After, with the Greek government, everything was more straight up. And even, I mean, when I was there, the Greek, they were there, 1917. But it was the big fire. And the whole city of Salonika was burned. And everybody start to move through the different--

You moved away from Salonika, did you--

I mean, in other words of it-- most of it, everything-- mostly, they were concentrated in the downtown of Salonika, you know. But after the fire, people start to move in the farms. Like here, for instance, you go where there used to be the farm. And they build. And they started.

Yes, the suburbs.

The suburb, right, the suburb.

Like they built up the suburbs, yes.

They start to build. And we were, I mean, the first. I mean, we move over there.

Was your father in business?

Yes it was in business.

What kind of a business?

Oh, it was a family business from his father. It was like a factory of-- a sweet candy factory. It's like I remember now, like we see here candies, and these candies with the pictures of the lady.

Oh, yeah.

It was my grandfather picture on the boxes.

Oh, really?

And I had a box always keep it with me till the German came. And they took the whole thing. Always, we were keeping a box for souvenir, because he was a strong man-- I mean, big business there with the Turk. You know, it was everything was his hand.

Yes.

And after, my father continued, but with the Greek, it wasn't so much of-- too many restrictions.

It wasn't so easy for Jews? And did your father go into a different line of business then?

No, no.

No? So he remained. When did you get the first inkling that something of a threat to you and the Jews generally?

No, we didn't have any threat. It was the World War II. I mean, everybody was involved. And my three brothers went to the Greek Army--

Oh, I see.

--to serve. They went. At the time it was the war with the Italian in 1940, 1941.

Yes, yes.

And after, when the German came, they defeat the Greek and the Italian. And they come in Greece. And they start to-- but in 1941, still, we didn't have any threat. But we were feeling something. It was because the Germans were organizing things, you know.

Yes, yes.

That's it.

Was there any resistance on the part of the Greeks to try to defend their lands?

Well, no.

Nothing like that?

No. Just no. The only thing the Greek, they were doing was to rebelling against the German, they were going to the guerrilla war, you know?

Yes, yes.

And one of my brother went with them.

He was in the underground, was it called?

Yes, one of my brother. He says, I don't go with the German. I'm going to fight them. And he left the house, just he was 19 years old. And he never came back.

He did not return?

No.

So could you tell us what happened to your family, then, after the Germans came? Or is there anything that you want

that I haven't asked you about that you would like to tell us so that we get an idea of what your life was like before you had to leave?

Well, from 1941, and we were afraid. I mean, whatever it is, we didn't know what was going to be our future. The men went to the war with the Greek. And after, they got the defeat, they came back. And we didn't know what was going to be. After, when the German started to register and make ghettos-- and because in Salonika, it was a big community. There were different suburbs, you know, with--

Yes.

--and they were different neighbors, like the poor one, the medium one, the rich one. And every time, the German, they were making a ghetto, and take, for instance, this neighbor today. And the next week, it will be another neighbor. In this way, one by one. They knew. Some, they tried to escape through France. And the German, sometimes, they caught them. They killed them. And it was a lot of surprises, you know.

Yes. Yeah. Were there many different congregations of Jews? Were there different-- like Orthodox and Reform, and all those?

To tell the true, this was surprise to me when we came here and we find this separation. There, there were too many synagogue. But the synagogue were from every neighbor. I go to my neighbor, you go to yours. And there were different names just. But no, I never felt whatever I feel here, because the Orthodox, the Conservative, and now, the Reform, you know.

Yes.

No.

How did the Germans handle the matter of segregating-- getting the Jews all together in ghettos? Did they have more than one? Did they have many ghettos?

No, no. It was one. It was the poor section of Salonika who was near the railroad station. There was a big Jewish people, and labor worker. And first, when they came, they took up the community.

They went to the Jewish community. And they ask for names and everything. And first, some Jewish people, they thought that they were going to help the German just to be comfortable. They were taking survey. They were taking some jobs to do. But after, they find out.

About how many Jews were there in Salonika when the Germans came?

Well, like the SS, they were like--

About how many?

--70,000, 75,000.

About 70,000.

Yeah.

And the population of the city was what?

Oh, I don't remember.

200,000, something like that, perhaps.

Yeah, more or less.

I see. Well, then if there isn't anything more that you think we should know about your family?

Well, about what? I mean, just like--

Well, then let's come to the time that you found out that the Jews were being rounded up.

Well, they were rounded up. And we thought, we're going to work. They're taking us to work. And everybody was buying warm things, getting ready, you know. They were buying boots and wool things because they would go to Poland. That's what they were telling us. And after, they were telling us to change money. We were giving the money to them. And they were giving us paper. Didn't have any value.

Were people able to take valuable items? Were they able to take their jewelry or gold, anything?

Well, they were able. But--

Not very much.

They were able to take it. For what? I mean, they did. They were taking, yeah. But after, when you know they were at the concentration camp, they were making them and take everything to them.

Take everything away.

Yeah. And it was also a fact that the German, they didn't touch the Spanish people, the one that were citizen.

Yes.

And all these citizen people, those Spanish, they get organize, you know. They bought nice luggage, fancy, like they were going to go to--

Well, were they being taken also?

But separately--

Separately, oh, I see.

--not with us, because the Spanish was protecting them. And as a matter of fact, those people, they didn't go to Auschwitz. It was a different camp. And they were living there in the camp without doing the hard work that--

They were treated differently?

They were treating different. But when the German concentrated all the Spanish and everybody came to the station with the luggage, they took all the luggage with them. And they brought the luggage because they thought the Jewish were hiding between the luggage. And they took all the luggage, thousands of luggage they took it. And the poor people, they were making bundles to take the things. And this happened. I was there.

They took their luggage away?

Yes, with the idea they would have between the--

Clothing that they wear, yeah.

Not clothing, just the money or thought they were ordering luggage, but for themselves, that they knew what they were going to put in between the lining of the luggage. You know. Yeah, this was also with the Spanish people. Yeah.

So how did your family react, then, when you said-- did you say that there was a convoy that was coming?

Every time, every neighbor was a convoy. We knew, today, it's one at Greek, and they take all the Jewish. The next week, they were telling us, the next week will be this-- they-- they took all the one neighbor to this--

They take them to the station, to the railroad station?

Not to the station. First, they were put into the--

On trucks or buses?

No, no, no, no, the ghetto.

The ghetto?

The ghetto, I'm sorry. And they were staying there for two or three days in the ghetto till the train will come. And those trains, you know, I was there on the last ghetto. They come and took me at 3 o'clock in the morning to go and clean the trains. And the trains were full of animals, because they were putting animals dirty, anything.

We were four or five girls that they took us. They call us. They come at the door and says, come on, come on, dress and clean the-- we were doing this. The people who would stay in the ghetto, it was not our turn to go, you know.

Yes. So they used you as laborers.

Yeah.

So then did your family, all of your family, go?

Yeah, well, in the meantime, I got married, like I told you yesterday.

Yeah, well, you tell us.

Yeah. When the German came and they broke the land with the Italian, you know, with the Italian--

Yes.

--because in Salonika was the German. And in Athens was the Italian. And who was-- all the Jews were in Athens, they were free. The Italian didn't touch anybody. But when they broke the alliance--

Yes. They broke their alliance with the Italians.

Yeah, yeah. They start to go after the Jews, then, in Athens. But in the meantime, we were in Salonika, you know. And I told you that my father says to my fiance, you will not stay like that, because the World War might be long time. You just get married. And we got married in 1941.

And in Salonika, it was beautiful temples. They called Beth Shaul. It was a rich family. In these, they were doing the most beautiful weddings there. And this time, the Germans didn't let us go for-- I mean, generally-- to make the ceremony. They closed the door.

They let you? They permitted you to have the ceremony?



No.

They did not?

No, no. I want to tell you. And most of the girl, because they were going to get married, they were going to the temple from the back door and take the--

Their wedding gown?

--the wedding gown there just for the ceremony. And after-- and I was one of those too. The funny thing was my husband had, with his brother, a company, taxicab company. And when the Germans came, one night, they ask the key of the garage, because it was a garage. And he had, for instance, 20 drivers-- 10 for the days and 10 for the night shift.

They threw everybody out. And they took all our car. But they didn't let us not go there anymore. And we were without a pay. And the day we were married, so he was telling, imagine, we don't have a car to bring you at the wedding. You know, it was--

Had to work on it.

--something now, you think what's happened.

Must have been very, very difficult for your entire family. Yeah. And, oh, for the whole Jewish population. I mean, I don't see my family. All the Jewish population was. And like I told you, it was when they took us to the ghetto, after, it was in August-- no, no, in April. They took my family, my in-laws, and we went to the ghetto, you know. And they said, you are going to stay for five days. And after, the train will come. And you will go.

And yet, all of you thought that you were going to go to work?

Yeah, to work. Not a single idea. I mean, just--

Not anything else, what other would happen.

--what was done. No, no. And I'll tell you still the liberation, what's happen in Athens when we start to-- they told somebody's coming back from Poland. And we knew the person we went to the temple because it was a meeting. And he says, well, I would like to talk to you what's happened there. But because it's Passover week, we are going to leave for the next week, because he didn't want us to--

He didn't want to tell you.

--to tell us.

Excuse me. But you're talking about Athens now.

Yeah.

And we have to finish how you left Salonika--

Oh, Salonika.

--and what happened to your family before you get to Athens.

Well, we were in the ghetto, right. And it was a paper that says this family, this family, this family, tomorrow, they have to leave. And it was my parents and my in-laws include. But my name and my husband's name wasn't included there, because my husband, they needed him to fix the cars. If they had something was wrong, it was like a--

Automobiles, yes, like a mechanic.

--mechanic. And we saw our name wasn't there. This was at 3 o'clock in the morning. My husband says, get up. Get dressed. And we'll go with them. And we were behind them. And we start in line, you know, because the train. A SS with the gun come to me and says, go.

Came to you?

Yeah. And to my husband.

Yeah.

They didn't.

They didn't want you to go?

No, to go-- they didn't want my husband still to go, because-- and they took me and my husband. And in this ghetto, it was like a Jewish hospital there. And they make like prison there. Everything was bad, ooh, what they were doing there. But the thanks, they put us there without touching. They didn't hit us. They didn't. But there were very bad memory from then.

Anyhow, the train left. And after, at night, they took out. They told us, you go to your cabin, because we have some cabin. And we stay there till the next week, it was the last convoy. We have to go too.

And now, it was in April that they started?

No, no. In April is reconciliation. April-- I mention April, because it was my family.

Oh, yes, I see.

Yeah, no, there isn't. No. And this time, it was the last convoy. In the meantime--

This was late in summer? When was this?

Late in summer, yeah, after, in August.

August.

It was in August. In the meantime, my husband, because he was going in and out with the-- he met this Italian officer, I told. And his Italian officer was a friend of my husband, because they were living in Salonika.

And he told him, if you can give me 10 family, 12 family, the names, I will give you false identification like there are Italian. And we are going to take them from the ghetto and send it to Athens. Because in Athens, it wasn't.

And there, we were nine, 10 couple, new married. All we were young. And I was telling to you, and I says, OK, I says. And they gave us some names. And the next day, the Italian guy came, gave to my husband a different names identification. Says, you are going to tell to your wife she was born in Livorno, so-and-so and thus.

We are going to take to this lady. She was born in Italy. Everybody, we have new identification, these 10 couples. And says, and I'm going to go to Gestapo and ask for this, to take them out, because there are my people. They are Italians. And we are friends, he said. One of the kapos for-- she was talking with a friend of her. I told you that.

But you have to tell us all of this.

Yeah. One of the young girls was telling to a friend and says, Thursday, we're going out, because the Italian officer did that for me. This girl was married to a German Jewish who was too much collaborating with the Germans.

He told her husband, those papers are false. And the husband told to the Gestapo. And the Gestapo put an order, says, nobody is going to leave the ghetto today. And all our dream, you know, says, OK. We'll go back. It was the next day. At 3 o'clock, the convoy was too.

And in this ghetto, there were three gates. And all these ghetto were with two Gestapo in that gate. They didn't let go in and out nobody. But this day, the SS, they have to come with us. And they changed. And they put the Greek police in the doors, on the gates there.

And my husband knew one of the Greek. He says, listen, we are going to leave in a half an hour. We need to buy something for the train to eat. Let us go. I says, well, I don't know. Says, if you want to go, go and come back. He says, well, there are six, seven couples who want to buy something for the train. OK, so the Greek says.

He let them go. Let them go.

But in the meantime, the week before, those 10 couples find a place where they are going to go in leaving the ghetto. They have friends, Greeks, or something.

But where?

In Salonika. This is from the ghetto to Salonika, because we were still in Salonika.

Yes, yes.

And everybody says OK. Once we couldn't get out through the officially with the Italian, we'll do this way. We are going to. And we have some place to go. These days, some day, they come to us, the lady who was going to hide my husband and me, says, I'm scared. I cannot.

Well, this was a Greek woman who was going to--

A Greek woman, yeah.

--hide you.

All they were Greek now there. They were not. But there were some friends who compassion, but they were afraid. They were afraid, because the German is not to laugh. Anyhow, all those 10 couples, one by one, they went to buy things. They didn't come back. And we were the last one. And we were in the street. And we didn't know where to go.

My husband was very known in Salonika. All the people were there. And he was afraid that somebody will know him out. It was August. It was a heat. And we were walking and walking. He says, what we are going to do?

And my husband says, OK, let's walk and go to the embassy, to the Italian embassy, because we saw this guy. And let's take a train, like a cable, we have some those. They said, no, no, no, no, no. My husband said, somebody might recognize me. Let's walk.

And we were walking and walking. It was a mile and a half, because there, it was with kilometers, it was. And the minute we arrive at the door of the embassy, a taxicab stop.

And the guy was there, I mean, in the taxicab. He saw us. He get up, says, oh, you come on time. Come on. Because he didn't want the taxi driver to understand anything. He says, oh, you come on time. Come in, come in. And he put us in the embassy, says, don't worry now, you are in Italy. He was telling us.

Where did your husband make the contact with this friend?

It was a friend we knew in Salonika.

So how did he know? He knew that you were about to be deported?

Well, sure, everybody knew. Everybody knew the Jewish were deported, you know. And the Italian, they did a lot for the Jewish. Even if they were friends with the German, they were trying to help any way they could. And this guy took us this night, says, tonight, you are going to stay here. But tomorrow, I have to find you a place to go because I cannot keep you.

But he was very nice. And I was myself, my husband, and my brother. We were the three of them. And the next day, he took us in his car. And he rent the place. Says, you will stay here till I will get a train going to Athens. And I'll come to pick up you and send it to Athens.

We didn't have much, any money in this time, you know, we were just-- he didn't make this for money. But some people did that with money. And after two, three days, he came to pick us up. And he put us in an Italian train to go in Athens.

And he told us to take some precaution, because when the train was going from one village to another, there were the German who were making, you know. But we arrive in Athens, thanks goodness.

And there in Athens, we called a friend of ours, like I told. Because my husband says, if I arrive in Athens, I know this-- it was a driver who used to work with him. I'll call him. And he's going to find me a job right away. Says, and we are going to start again, says, don't worry. You know, we were young. I mean, it's not like-- we call this guy.

And somebody answered the phone, says, he's out of town. What can I do for you? He says, well, I am so-and-so. And I would like. Oh, you are Sam Rouben? Oh, says, I want to know you, because my brother-in-law talked so much about you. I want to know you. OK.

He came to pick us up. He says, how did you do? How you left? Because he knew we were Jewish. He says, you stay over my house. And he went to the City Hall again. And he took us some Greek identification because he was a big shot, him there, you know.

And this guy, he didn't know us. He did a lot for us-- and not for money. We didn't have money. That's why we survive. But there were too many episodes in between. But you cannot tell something.

Yes. Well, I hate to stop you, but I'd like to know what happened to your family at this time.

My family went to the--

They all went.

--all went.

But you had a younger brother with you?

No, no, my brother-- yeah, is with me, the one he's here with me.

Oh, he was your youngest brother?

No. No, he wasn't the youngest. The youngest brother came back from Auschwitz. I have five brothers. This was my-- two brothers older than me, me, and another one, and the youngest one came back from Auschwitz. He survive.

So two of your brothers survived?

Yeah, the one from Auschwitz--

Yes.

--and this here. Yeah. He's Auschwitz. He lives in Israel now.

Oh, yes. And the rest of your family perished?

My parents, my husband's family, no one. No.

So let's go to Athens now. And tell us about your experience. I know you had to do it.

In Athens, like I said, we stay there first in a friend. And after, they start to capture the Jewish again. But we have the paper. And we were living in the house of this guy. He wasn't friend. We didn't know him.

And he says, don't worry, I'll tell you are a French teacher from my kids. And your husband is working because he had a factory of soaps, and perfume, and everything. And my husband was there, making transportation for him, you know. And I was in the house.

And one time, this is funny, this guy got some job to do for the Germans, to carry some. And my husband says, I'm not going anymore with you to work. He says, period.

No, no, don't worry. I am here. Don't worry. And the guy who I know is a very good young man, the German. Don't worry. Says, no, my husband says, I don't go. I'll take my wife. And we'll go and hide. And he was going every day with the truck.

Making deliveries?

Making deliveries, loading and unloading. I mean, just wasn't deliveries. And one day, he says, I'm going to bring Hans for dinner tonight. And you are going to be. No, he says, no me, no Mary won't be at the table. Please, please. No, he says, you don't worry. I have confidence in Hans. OK.

We couldn't do anything because we were staying in his house. And Hans sat down with me. He started to speak me French. Says, you know, I was living in Salonika, and I knew those guys, and I knew this. As this, we were talking and talking in French, and so, and so. And I was-- hmm, I don't want to say.

You were careful.

You dread. I mean, you know, it was a--

Of course, your life depended on it.

When we went in bed with my husband, I told him, you know, you were listen to him? And says, I bet this Hans is Jewish. Oh, you are crazy, says, Jewish? Jewish is going to work with the German and so and so? I says, I bet this guy is Jewish the way he was telling me things from Salonika.

In the meantime, he was working with him. My husband was a little bit more comfortable, because-- and one day, they went again work. He was there. And he says, today, don't work. Sit down there, he says, because you have Passover. My husband says-- and he was looking at him. And he started to sing in Hebrew.

Now, this is Hans?

Now is Hans. They were working at the-- it was like a mine. They were carrying charcoals, you know. And my husband was doing this job. And these days, they said, don't work. Said, sit down there. And let's go. And they were walking through the hill there. And they sit down.

And he says, you have Passover today. My husband, he didn't know what's this, whatever my wife said. And he started to sing some Hebrew songs. He says, Hans, what is this, my husband says? What is this? Says, I am Jewish, he says.

Oh, my goodness.

My husband thought. He was married with a German lady. And this lady, I mean, protect him. He was going to the Gestapo, and take papers, and so. But we didn't know that. I mean, we thought it was-- and that is the story of this guy. I mean, it was amazing.

I'll say. You were very lucky in many ways, weren't you?

Well, in any way, we were-- yeah, we were lucky in any way, I can tell. But still, we were hiding. I mean, just we couldn't go places, I mean, just--

Well, when did the Germans occupy Athens, then?

In '43.

In '43.

Was '43. I mean, it was in a short time they occupied. They come in '41 in Greece. But '41 to '42, they didn't anything wrong, just they put us the star, just organizing, knowing what is going on.

Getting ready, I suppose.

Yeah, who are the rich people who are not the-- you know, they were-- and after, from Salonika to Athens was very fast. And in Athens, also, the government was very good with the Jewish, because they knew they were going to close-- and most of the policemen, they went house to houses. Can you leave? Can you leave? Because the Germans are come.

They were warning people?

Yeah. They were warning most of them. But in Salonika, no.

No.

No, no. The people of Athens, they were. And these are the people who loved and who hide us too.

Yeah. These were Greek? These were Greek nationals? People-- Greeks?

Well, Athens was normal.

Who were the police--

No, no, Athens was.

--that were warning you? What nationality were they?

The police? Greek, the Greek. I mean, Athens and Salonika, everything is Greece. But it's the north and the south, you know.

So things went smoothly for you in Athens.

Oh, smoothly, I mean, I tell now smoothly comparing with the house sweet and everything since.

We understand. Of course. Of course. You were always apprehensive. You didn't know when something might go wrong.

But Yeah. And now, I want to tell you, when the first Jewish camp in Greece after the war were, and he didn't want to talk to us.

Yeah, tell us about that.

And the next week after, we went everybody to the temple. And he started to tell us how was this, the convoys, I mean, and how in Auschwitz, they were burning people. You know the impression of all the people who were in Greece when we hear?

They didn't believe him?

He lost his mind. What he's talking about?

They didn't believe him. They didn't believe him.

What he's talking about? Has he lost his mind? The poor guy, the poor guy. And after, when after, people would start to come, and this was the impression we had from.

What happened to the Jewish community in Athens, then?

Then? Nothing, it closed. Now, they opened. I mean, there are--

No, but I mean, during this period--

This period.

--they were warned by the Greek police that the Germans came and took the--

Yeah. --took them from the houses also.

They took a lot, yeah, sure. Sure.

Was there a large Jewish community in Athens--

Oh, yes.

--also?

Well, bigger was in Salonika. And most of the time, the Jewish from Athens, you couldn't tell. You couldn't tell they were Jewish, they were speaking so fluently Greek. And they were-- you know, you couldn't tell.

They integrated in the society.

Right. Integrated in society, but only when the German went and took all the [NON-ENGLISH] from the community, they were find out this, yes.

They were found out.

Because the Jewish from Greece, they-- they didn't speak Spanish. In Salonika, most of the people were speaking Spanish from the-- the people who left Spain. And they continued.

Yeah. They speak back in Salonika, did they speak Ladino?

Oh, yes. Well, I speak Ladino, because my parents were speaking Ladino to me, and my grandmother, and everything still. The Queen Elizabeth date, remember still, they were speaking Ladino. And they were not speaking Greek. But not in Athens, because it was the south part. It was different, the Greek of Athens.

So do you want to tell us more about your life in Athens, then, and that your husband continued working in this firm?

No, no. After, we were hiding. Oh, in Athens it wasn't more. We were hiding. We hiding in a village.

Well yeah, but tell us how you-- because here, you were living with this family. And your husband was working. And you were teaching the children French?

French, yeah. But in the meantime, I'm telling you, in Athens, it was a big raid of airplanes, big.

An air raid.

And his wife got so scared and was telling to her husband, I want to leave Athens. I know I cannot stay here. He has three little. And her husband went to find a house in the outskirts of--

The city.

--the city. And he says, OK, if you want to go, I'll stay here. No, no, no, no, no. Says, I'm not going if you don't come. I'm not going if you don't come. Really, she took us there. But her husband and my husband were commuting, commuted every day.

And we stayed in this village for one year, sure, I mean, hiding. And there, it was a big influence of German, because this village, according they say as it was, a descendant from the German-- and all the Greek, they have it German names there. Most of the Greek. And when the German came, they were all patriot. And we were scared even to talk with them, because we didn't know what. And we were just hiding, just behind them.

Did you try to stay indoors as much as possible?

Oh, yes. You know.

Were you in the garden?

Oh, oh, yeah. Yes. I mean, just this family was having always an eyes on us, just always watching what we were doing, what we were going to do. She was coming. We were there hiding. And it was a family who we knew there. They knew we were Jewish. They were Greek.

And all the time, you know, it was that in case you are lonely, afraid, you come to my house. So why she tells me this, I mean, I don't know. And one day, to tell you the truth, we didn't have anything to eat-- no bread, nothing. We didn't have anything.

That's even before you went to the ghetto?

No, this is after. The ghetto was in Salonika. We went in Athens.

Oh, I have a version.



Just yeah.

Yeah. OK.

And the friends who hide us, you know, they took us. They rent for us a little room near there, because they didn't have room.

Separate?

Separate. And this was like a little farm. And they have a room where they were putting all the tools and everything. And when this friend of ours was there, says, do you have to rent a car? My cousin from Bulgaria come here, I don't have where to put it. He says, if you want, I can clean this room.

And she gave us a little room in the middle of the farm. Every morning, the old man, because he has some goats, some chicken, some-- at 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock in the morning, he was getting up. And he'd look if the guard was going.

He was telling all the women, god damn the Jews. God damn these Jews. Whatever happened to them, saying, that was. I says, well, if they know we are Jews, what we are going to do, you know? It was something like that.

And this day-- and my husband and my brother, every morning, they were going to get up and leave the house to make them believe they are going to work, because they don't want to stay there. They were going in the field just like that to stay and coming back. And that's the way we were going.

But I says, one day, we didn't have anything to eat and no money, nothing. This lady, I'm telling you, come, knock at the door-- the little girl, that is, and says, oh, my mommy make some bread. And she wants to give it to you. I says, my goodness. This is a God. Sometimes, he says, you believe in God.

My goodness.

But after, we knew she knew we were Jewish. And she was trying to help us. But we were afraid.

Oh, you mean the woman from the farm brought you?

No, no.

Your friend? Well, she knew all the time, though.

No, it was another lady who was living in this village. You know. And she knew us through the other.

Oh.

Yeah.

Yeah. I see.

And he was. And besides this, in the place we were staying, the guy who rented us this little room, the two sons, they were working at the Gestapo.

Oh.

I mean, it was-- I mean, if you think now how the things were. They were working at the Gestapo. And they were all friend of the Germans. He says, If they knew. I mean, it was a miracle we survived. I mean, just that sometimes, I say that.

Yeah, it is. What about when you were out living in the suburbs there, the outskirts of Athens, and you say there were many German families--

Yeah, there was there, yes.

--settled a long time ago.

Yeah.

So were you able to go out at all?

No, no, no, no.

How about did you ever attend church?

Well, I told you when it was.

You have to tell us for the camera.

Yeah. It was Easter. And my friend, the one who was mine, told me, listen, Mary, here, the village every day, I mean especially Easter, they go to church. And you have to come with me. They will see you there. It was a church for the Orthodox Greek. And this church for the German. We went to the Orthodox one. He says, you come with me. And do whatever I will do. You light a--

Candle?

--candle, and you-- and the priest come and make the thing there. You will bow. And I did, I mean, it's this. And her husband was very nice. He says, Mary, don't worry, he says, God is everywhere. You pray for your God. He said, don't pray for my God.

Oh, wonderful.

No, this guy who hide us, it was an angel. I mean, just--

Did you have any close calls other than that this old farmer was cursing the Jews? But did you have any other?

No, no. This old man, that was his every morning would come running after the goats, and running after the-- he was there. And my husband says, listen, OK, it's his time. And that's it. And our friend of father, like I told you, we didn't have any more money. And there, the time, even sometimes if you had money, you couldn't buy anything, because it was the war.

Everyone was rationing, I suppose.

It was very hard, very hard to find anything. And when he rent this room for us--

Shortages, yes.

--says, how much you want, he asked to the-- says, I don't want money. I want three pounds-- something, I mean, they make pounds-- oil and three pounds of soap. And every month, the oil and the soap, the price inflation, you know.

Yeah.

You know, this is what is this.

Oh, that's fascinating. So that's how he paid the rent.

He paid the rent for us in this way.

And your husband was not able to work at this time?

No, there were never to. And it wasn't thought.

They didn't go into the city?

No, no, no, no, no, it wasn't.

It wasn't safe.

Yeah.

So you lived there how long in Athens?

In Athens to '43-- till '45, we liberate. We were free after 1945.

So is there anything that we've left out about so far? Because I do want to ask you about how you came, where you went, what country you emigrated to, and all that. But--

No.

--is there something more that we should know about?

Well, there are so many little legs and incident there, where we were.

Well, those are fascinating.

Yeah, I mean it's--

If there's any that you recall, we'd like to hear it.

This-- there were so many incidents there.

Did your friend ever-- the husband or the wife-- ever discuss with you antisemitism--

No.

--and how terrible it was?

Oh, those people, no. These two, no.

No.

No, these two people-- he had a family of four kids. And he was telling, I found 10 pounds of beans, six pounds for me, two pounds for you, and two pounds for her sister, I mean. He was always around looking for food, because it was very, very hard to-- very hard to find food or to go to buy.

Oh, there was the shortages during the war.

Ah, shortage.

Shortage.

Oh, you cannot believe what shortage it is. I mean, just you cannot imagine it is. But it is. Because sometimes we survived, this was it.

And you remained healthy? All of you remained healthy?

Thanks god.

You were very, very fortunate, weren't you?

You know, healthy.

In spite of all the hardships, you were better off than--

Oh, yeah.

--millions of others.

No, I mean, thanks god, because we were living outdoor. I mean, I was working with them, helping the lady, everything. But no.

But your husband must have had a very good way of getting along with people.

He is.

That's why he had these friends. And that's why you were safe.

He is. And everybody talks about my husband. I don't talk about my husband. But I miss him a lot. It's like my friend always, they says, numero uno. Numero uno. Sam is numero uno. But he's gone.

So are there any incidents you can think about? Because we have time to--

I don't know what else.

--hear. This is very--

Until one day, still, when we were in Athens, one morning, this was at 5 o'clock, the sister of the lady knock at the door, says, you know, the Germans are going house to house to look for guns. Because in this place where they were living, it was like a communist.

Oh, yes.

Yeah, it was. And the name was Kokiniar, red thing.

Yeah.

When this guy hide-- I mean, was living there, it was most of the people were communist. And the German, this morning, we went to the window. And we saw with the cannon--

Machine gun?

--machines guns in the corners and going from door to door, from door to door. The husband says, what we are going to do? He says, I have three guns in the-- because he had a factory in the first floor. And he was making soap, you know.

Oh, yes.

And he had a huge--

Case, cabinet?

--no cabinet, when he boiled the soaps.

Oh, like a vat?

Yeah. And he dropped the three.

Into the soap?

That's there. He says, I have three guns. I have three Jews. And I have gasoline. Gasoline, it was very hard--

Oh, yes.

--to have.

Yes, of course. You weren't supposed to have that.

You weren't supposed. What now we are going to do? We were upstairs. And I says, well, don't worry for us, I says, in case. They says, well, I will tell, what, you are my French teacher for the children, and so, and so, and so. And we were through the windows looking from one door, there they went with the other one. And they come to our door an officer with two SS, two soldiers.

Yeah.

But in the door, he had there like it was a factory, you know.

Yes, a sign.

A sign, number, and they come for work from 6:00 in the morning to--

Yeah, yeah. They look, they look like that. It's closed, says. And they went to the other door. I mean, this was miracle that they did that. That was. They went to the next door. And they went there. And we were hiding in the house upstairs. They didn't come there.

And the poor lady was all this, the Jesus Christ and this, not for me. Jesus Christ. I mean, this is-- I mean, there were incident like that. But this day, they took 100 people there and they killed them.

They shot them?

Yeah, because they thought that they were communists, because this there were-- this place, there are all communists. And they shot them too.

They were in the underground, probably. Or at least they thought they were.

This day was this. I mean, it was with this.

Did they take them away?

They take. They went in the house and so sometimes see. And one man or two men, the one day, they come out. You're out. And there was another house. I mean, it's unbelievable what the Germans, they were doing. It's nothing to. It's nothing to. But still, I don't know how we survived. I don't know. Just it was it.

So then how did you hear that the war was over?

When the war was over, we were in this village, I told you, where the German went. And the whole barrack of soldiers came in this, in the hill. And they put the cannon. They were just defending from there. And we were in the backyard, you know. Yeah, this was the last day. They were--

Was this the Greek resistance?

No, this was the German, German soldier. They have some barracks in this.

Oh, right around you.

Right around there. Yeah, that's why I says, this was-- I mean, when we were hiding in the worst part, but we were better hiding, because they couldn't imagine we were there.

Yeah, that you would be there.

Yeah. They couldn't imagine we were there. And this day, after they were fighting, the soldiers, they to stop. They took them. And they went. And we went to Athens. We went. The next day, we went to Athens in his house, where you live in.

I didn't understand what you just said.

We were still in the village there.

Yes.

In this village where there were German. And the last day, too many soldiers, they came there, up there, I mean, to defend themselves. They have some kind of-- from the hill, they were put in. And we were there, hiding, said we'll see what is going, will be.

But some other people said, they are leaving. They are leaving. But we couldn't believe that are leaving, because they were there fighting. But at 5 o'clock that afternoon, you know, an officer came and says stop. And they took them with them. And they left.

So I don't quite understand. The Germans were there. And they had their whatever, their camp or whatever there. And toward the end of the war, which army was approaching? Who was coming to clean up?

Is not the army-- ah, the American.

Was it the Greek underground?

No, the American.

The Americans.

The Americans. Oh, yes, the Americans were there.

The Americans were coming.

Yeah. Oh, this day, it was something.

So they really-- there was some fighting there.

Oh, yes, there were still some fighting the last minute. But they were the Americans, because they saw after.

And then the German officer came and retreated. With that, took his men?

They took. They pick up in the buses and they left.

So that was pretty much the end of the war for you?

Oh, yes, for me, oh, yes, that's it. And the lady, the wife of the old man, you know, when we told we were Jewish-- you were Jewish? Huh? How you make your cross? He says. Which way you do that?

She found out afterwards? You told them?

You are? Like that, like she was-- you are Jewish? How you make your cross?

Yeah, how could you guys-- yeah.

She said, how do you make the cross, what way? I says, with no way, I said, we are Jewish.

Because Protestants and Catholics make them differently.

Yeah, I mean, it's something.

Do you know whether there were any other Jews that were being hidden?

Over there, no. I mean, we were not out, going out, but just over. Were not going on there.

I was wondering if you ever heard afterwards that there were other Jews in the area.

It was a friend of mine who was from Salonika, went to Athens, because Athens was free, and she says, what I'm going to do here? She become like a teacher again from a little girl in the house. He was living with.

And the family was Jewish when she was there. And when they start in Athens to-- and the police went to house and to house, telling the Germans are picking up the Jewish. You go wherever you can hide, this girl was at the house.

And the lady and the little girl, they were not. They knew. They didn't come back. And this girl started to cry and says, what I'm going to do here? And the policeman says, come with me. She took-- he took her. And he brought her to his mother, again, in a village in Athens, and says to his mother, you keep this girl here. She's going to help you in the house. And she was there for one year and a half, working as a--

Maid.

--yeah. And this is another story. And after, when everything was-- we liberated again, he told her, you want to marry me? They--

They married?

They married, yeah. They got married. This girl has a sister in Israel. When he knew her sister was free and he married a

Greek policeman, he sent somebody from Israel to my house, because she knew I knew. He says, you do whatever you can to take Mary from there and send her to Israel.

I says, I'm not going to take Mary. This guy is an angel who saved Mary. I said, and if you want, you take Mary. Says, no, no, no, no, no. I'm not going, says, any place, because he was-- I mean, he save her, you know. And when they get married, he says, now, listen, Friday night, you are going to--

Light candles.

--with the candles. And Sunday, now, I'm going to. And you will. And every Easter and Rosh Hashanah, they were coming for dinner over my house after the deliberation, every time. He says, we want to go Passover because Mary wants to make Passover. This is one story. Still, they living there.

That is a story. But you know, I didn't quite understand about Israel. And so could you explain this story?

I said, this girl has a sister living in Israel.

Yes, OK.

And I think she was a radio--

Announcer or something, yes.

--announcer, her sister.

Yes.

And she was so upset when he learned her sister, Mary, was a Greek policeman. And he sent two people in Athens to look for her and take her back.

To bring her to Greece?

To bring to Israel.

Oh, to Israel.

To Israel, yeah. Because we were in Athens, to bring in Israel, because she got married when everything was-- you know. And the girl says, no, I'm not going to Israel. This is my husband. This, I'm staying here. But they were-- the sister was fighting to take her. But after, when she understand.

Then they reconciled.

They reconciled.

What a fascinating story.

Story-- stories.

As they say, truth is stranger than fiction.

Unbelievable, unbelievable, unbelievable.

So when did you get news-- word about your family? When did you know that they were not coming back? Just heard nothing?



Right away. I mean, yeah, right away. Just when my younger brother came from Auschwitz, he told, me don't expect anybody, just him.

How did he get away?

Well he says, because he was the youngest one, he was 13 years old when they took him. But he was tall. And he says, one of the kitchen--

Helpers?

--helpers took her to the kitchen to clean. He says, and I was eating all the things they left off. The other people, they didn't have what to eat. I mean, he survived.

But he escaped before the war ended, didn't he?

No, no.

No, he didn't?

No, no, no. He was taken too because he was young. He was taken with my mother. My parents.

So he survived on bitters in Auschwitz.

He survives, yeah. He survived in Auschwitz.

And then he found out where you were.

I found out where he was.

Oh, you found out.

Yeah, when they start to come. And I find out. And I took him in Athens. And he came in Athens. After, he says, I'm not staying here. I'm going to Israel. Because in Athens, there was a camp. There was a--

Displaced people.

--place people. And he went to the camp one day to visit some friend. And they told him, we'll go to Israel. And he says, I'm going to Israel. And he went to Israel. And he lived there. No, now, he's a grandpa already.

Now, that's your youngest brother.

My youngest brother, yeah.

So then when did you decide-- where did you go from Athens, then, after the war ended? Is there anything else that we haven't heard about the war?

No, we stay in Athens to organize ourselves. And after, they says, if you would like to come in America. I says, let's go, because nobody we have anymore here. My husband didn't have anybody. We didn't have anybody, except my brother in Israel. We decide to come here.

Did you have family here?

Family, I have two children.

Yes, but I mean, how did you get papers to come to the United States?

Oh, papers through the organization.

Joint, through the Joint?

Joint, yeah. The Joint.

So tell us about coming to this country, when you came.

Oh, I came in 1956. Yeah, after the war.

Well, tell us about the years between the time the war ended and you were waiting.

Well, we were in Athens. We were in Athens trying to put our feet together.

Make a living?

And right away, we would like to have a baby. We have my baby. My daughter was born there.

Oh, she was born in Athens.

Yeah, 1947. Yeah. And after, we didn't like anymore to stay in Greece. And we came here, because it's a free country. A free country, but we didn't find it a free country.

It isn't very free.

I was surprised when I was going to in school for my English, night school here. And it was a colored girl-- this was surprising. I didn't know it was different. And I was friends with, friendly with. We went, they took us to Sacramento, the school.

Oh, yes.

And I was sitting to it. And some lady says, don't sit with the Black lady.

Why, I said, why? I didn't know there were so much, you know--

So much prejudice?

--prejudice, you know, I didn't. I never imagine.

You didn't realize there was the prejudice against the Negro, Black people.

Yeah, yeah. I didn't know. I didn't know at all. I says, here is a free country. How-- I was telling my husband. And we were so much in. I mean, then with this little girl.

In Poland and Germany, the Germans and the Poles took over the property of the Jews who were deported. What happened in Greece?

They took it.

The same thing?

The German, they took. And maybe, the Greek they took it, because I have a nice house. When I went there, it was on the ground. They took everything, because we left. We left. We leave the house like it was.

Left everything.

Everything, everything.

And when you came back, there was nothing?

No, there were no house, just the gate. Just the gate. And I mean, this is-- we lost the people. We didn't care for the things. But it's unbelievable.

Did you get any reparations?

No.

No.

No, no.

Because Greece is supposed to be with the Allies, I guess, for one thing.

Yeah, well, it was sometimes the Germans sent some money, I think. And the Greek government took everything. They didn't give anybody too.

Yeah. Well, what were conditions like after the war ended in Greece? Well, there are a few Jews. There are, because they have their job, the property. But some, they are not happy, some. Because in Greece, the government is up and down, you know.

Oh, yes, we know. We know, yes. That's true.

After Papandreou did a lot of bad, now, they are going to elect him. I don't know why.

Yeah, I don't-- I'm not sure whether he's going to be in the government.

Because we have a nice job. I mean, in Athens, we have. Why did you come here? Well, he says, I come here for the children, to give a good education. For the children, he says, you came here? You lost your children. You know the way.

I'll tell you something. I says, I have two children too. I came here. And when I came at night from work, I says, I saw my son lay down watching TV and my daughter in the other room. And I says hi. Shh.

I go to my daughter, says, I want to finish this show. The minute I go in the backyard, the dog jump. And he tell me, the dog jumped to human, says, these are the children.

I said, oh, my husband was so much. Says, we are going to lose our children here. Well, then go back. Let's go back. I said, no, I'm not going back for home, I said. It was very hard, very, very, very hard. We struggled. We didn't know the language well.

Where did you come when you came to the United States? Where did you first come?

Well, we stop in New York.

Did you have family here--

I have-- yeah.

--some relatives? Yeah. And after, we came to California. We were just to come from California. We stayed 20 days in New York.

And then came directly over.

We came directly here. They waited to welcome, because we have my husband, is his cousin here. And this was in Auschwitz. He was in the oven, this guy.

He worked. He had a job?

Yeah, he-- I think they took interview from him two or three times. He had a very bad job. And he survived. Yeah.

Has the library gotten his story?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

They have interviewed him?

They have interviewed him two or three times.

Oh, I see.

Somebody who came from Israel. Somebody who came here. I don't know the name, but they interview him.

So tell us about your life here. What do you do? How do you occupy yourself?

Well, my life here, I mean, we were struggling to find jobs when we came. And we couldn't find, because we didn't know the language.

Yeah.

And my husband had hard time. Wherever he was going to find a job, they would ask, are you in the union? No, we don't have too. They didn't hire him because he wasn't in the union. And says, what we are going to do now? We cannot find a job.

And a friend, he says, the only thing you can do is just open a little shop and sell by yourself. And we open a little shop with a few things. And we didn't know the language. You were coming to the shop, were telling me, do you have glasses, I says, no. Yeah, yes, you have in the window, he said. It's funny now.

But you were-- you are a linguist, though. You did learn well.

Well, yeah, when I speak French, what good here?

Yeah, not good here.

I speak Spanish. The only Spanish a little bit, yes, because we were in San Francisco, Mission Street, and there were too many Spanish people, at least, yeah. And I speak Greek. What do you think? But hardly, I learned the English. And still, my English is not too good.

I think you do very well. Are you retired now?

How about your husband?

My husband passed away.

How long ago?

It's eight years.

Oh, eight years.

Over just like that.

Very sudden?

Very sudden. My husband, I'm telling you, and me, we were never sick since we know each other. Not a cold, not nothing. Just I will tell you. And he was a workaholic like they call now.

Yes, I know it.

He was active in everything.

I know what a workaholic is.

He was. And one night, we were-- I had people at home playing cards, very nice, joking. And they left. He told me, let's go to bed. And tomorrow, we'll clean the mess. I says, oh, no. I cannot go to bed without clean. I clean the mess. And I go.

And he says, OK. I'll help you. And he helped me in the living room. I was in the kitchen. He finished. He says, OK? I says, OK. He went upstairs. And I went. Says, bring me the newspaper. OK. I brought the newspaper. I went upstairs.

Says, you know, I have a pain here. Says, maybe indigestion. You want a soda? I said, you want something? Says, yes, yes, bring me a soda. I went downstairs to bring a soda. He was so terrible pain, says, OK. He says, I don't know what to do. I dial 911. 911 came right away. They took him. They brought to the hospital. He was gone.

That quickly. My goodness.

That's it. I mean, it was something unbelievable.

That must've been very, very difficult for you.

Like I says, he never smoked. He never drank. He never did. Some people said, you don't smoke. You don't have to drink. He was strong. And that's it.

Do your children still live nearby?

I beg your pardon?

Do your children still live nearby?

My daughter got married. She lives in New York. My son live in Los Angeles. But he's not married. Yeah.

So you have no grandchildren yet?

Yes, I have in New York.

Yes, oh, in New York you have. I see.

One, only one.

Do you visit there often?

Oh, every year. Now, I'm leaving the 15th. I'm leaving for New Year and Christmas. That's all.

Do you have any questions you would like to ask?

Well, it has been extremely interesting. And maybe you have something still to tell us? You've done--

Like I said--

--a wonderful job.

--there is so many things went by there. And I'm just-- I've forgotten how to take pictures. And I'm on. I don't want them to keep doing that.

What, what's that kind of--

I don't know what's happening here?

Well, I want to thank you very much for telling us your story. I think that this is, really, very important for this.

I don't know. Since the Auschwitz was so bad, I says, my story doesn't have any-- you know.

No, but everyone's story is important, because you certainly went through a great deal of anxiety and concern. And probably, possible that if your husband hadn't undergone so much strain during those years, he might have lived longer. One never knows.

You never know.

You certainly don't. You don't.

He was a wonderful person.

I'm sure you miss him very much. Want to take a picture, but I don't know what-- you, are you familiar with cameras at all? Let me see whether it--

Which one is it?

Shall we turn this camera off now? Are you done?

I think so, probably. Unless there's something that you're not-- you know.

If you feel we haven't finished.

No, I think that was nice. Are you familiar with this camera?

I can take a look.

Yeah it's--

<https://collections.ushmm.org>  
Contact [reference@ushmm.org](mailto:reference@ushmm.org) for further information about this collection