Interview with Sam Ackos

By Rhoda Lewin

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With Mary Ackos Calof and Evelyn Ackos Ettinger also present

Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League of Minnesota and the Dakotas.

Holocaust Oral History taping project

Q. This is Rhoda Lewin interviewing Sam Ackos on January 31, 1987, for the

Holocaust oral history project. Mr. Ackos, could you please tell me your

complete name, including your Jewish name if it’s different?

A. My completely Jewish name is Semanto Menachem Ackos.

Q. When were you born?

A. I was born on November 10, 1931.

Q. In what town and country were you born?

A. I was born in Breveza, Greece.

Q. Was that a suburb of Athens?

A. No, it was in northern Greece near the Albanian border.

Q. What were your parents’ names?

A. My father’s name was Menachem Semanto Ackos and my mother’s maiden name

was Rosa Chaim Vitalis.

Q. Were they born in that same city?

A. My father was born in the next town, where we called it Yanena, and my mother was born in the same town that I was born in, Breveza.

Q. What were your parents’ occupations?

A. My father was a general merchant, and wheeler and dealer guy, whatever he could do in order to make the best for his family. Also, my mother was very, very

wonderful alteration lady for woman’s garments.

Q. You say your father did everything. He bought, he sold?

A. Wheeling and dealing. Buying, selling, the merchant type of wheeling and dealing in Greece is way, way different than in the United States. You don’t need no license.

Q. Can you tell me about it? I mean, clothing, metals, grain?

A. I can tell you about it. I can tell you that you will go into a warehouse, that they were selling flannels, blankets, things like that, that you will buy a quantity of them, and leave some at home, and the rest of them, you put it on your shoulder or a push cart, and go over to the neighborhoods and sell it to the ladies. Like we didn’t have so many department stores over there, so they were waiting for the merchant to come in to their door. Also he was part goldsmith, buying, selling gold and copper and silver, and things like that. Anything that he can do to improve the better life for his family.

Q. What languages did you speak at home?

A. We speak completely Greek. We were not aware of any other language at that time.

Q. Then you didn’t speak Yiddish, as so many central Europeans did.

A. No. We did not have any of that. We had only one small school that the youngsters, before they hit high school, they were learning the basics of the Jewish language. But it wasn’t very much to talk about.

Q. This was Hebrew, though, rather than Yiddish.

A. Well, I don’t know, to tell you the truth. I’m ashamed to say it, but I don’t know the difference between Yiddish and Hebrew.

Q. Hebrew is what the prayer books are written in in the synagogue.

A. Well, then, it was Hebrew.

Q. Was your family, then, very religious? Did you have a religious home?

A. Just like any common other family in Greece. Whenever we could, we respected and loved God. I attended all the High Holidays, but I will not say that ever Shabbos we were over in the shul. I will not say that. But I can say that all the High Holidays were attended religiously and with a great respect for our religion, to keep our customs alive, and to keep the best that we know for loving our own religion.

Q. And when you say High Holidays you mean Rosh Hashanah?

A. I mean Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, I mean Succoth and Pesach, and so on and so forth.

Q. Was anybody in your family a Zionist?

A. Zionists we did not have at that time, because technically, to tell you the truth, we didn’t even know what the word Zionist means.

Q. Now we’ll move away from the family. What events, local, national, international, were you aware of from the mid ‘30’s, late ‘30’s to 1941? I think this question aims at news of what was happening, say, in Germany.

A. Absolutely none.

Q. Where were you getting your information at this time? Newspapers? Radio?

A. We did not have any information about the outside world from Greece except on October 28, 1940, the Italians were allies of the Axis, declared war against the Greeks.

Q. We’ll get to that in a minute. Here were have a couple more questions on background. The question here is in what setting or settings did you have contact with Gentiles? Obviously your father did business with them…

A. Gentiles were our friends, colleagues and classmates, merchant mates, our families, neighbors. The religion had not much to do with the combination of our friendship and acquaintance in the neighborhood and in the world of business, except at the time of Passover, when it was the crucifixion of the Christ. At that time it was a small percentage of animosity from the Gentiles towards the Jews, and **only** that time, showing obviously. The rest of the time, the anti-Semitism was a little bit under the ground.

Q. How did it show up, this little that was not under the ground? What happened at Easter time?

A. Well, at Easter time, they would avoid contact, especially at the time of the great grand Friday, the Good Friday, when it was the day that Christ was crucified. They would look at us and try to avoid any contact with us at that time. As a matter of fact, it was a myth that the mothers will frighten the little boys and girls that in case they’re not very good, they’re going to give them to the Jews, and the Jews are gonna put them over barrels with pins and needles, to take the blood away from them, make their bread out of it, which was the matzo.

Q. You mean the mothers were using Jews to frighten little children? You were the boogeyman?

A. Yes, that was the truth. And it was very unfortunate—and I can say it right now, with no regret—that 85% of the Grecian people were almost illiterate. So they didn’t know any better, and it was something like they inherit it from mother to son, and they could not accept very gracefully that anybody that was Greek can worship another religion besides the Greek Orthodox.

Q. So then, where in Poland at that time, the little Jewish kids were having rocks thrown at them, and getting beaten up, in Greece the Gentile kids were afraid of the Jews.

A. Well, I tell you, they were looking at the Jews as part of the curse remaining from the Christ itself, that they were not blessed by the Lord Jesus, and they had the mystic voodoo powers to do some harm. So it was all these kinds of myths during the Passover time and during the Easter of the Greeks. All the rest of the time they were fading away. At least they weren’t showing, anyway.

Q. But nobody called you names because you were Jewish?

A. No, but it was exactly in Greece the same thing that is almost over the whole world. When a Jew does not do exactly the favor or cooperation of the Gentile wish, you hear a certain percentage of the Gentiles call you, “that damn Jew”. That is a fact all over the world, not only in Greece or in America.

Q. I’m going to interpolate a minute now, another question. Tell me, who was in your family? How many sisters and brothers were you?

A. We are four sisters and I was the only brother, and the father and the mother.

Q. What ages were the girls? Were they younger than you?

A. The girls were approximately two years apart from me and the last one was ten years younger than I am.

Q. And were there other relatives living outside your community?

A. Yes. Not outside of our community. In the same quarters that we were living. Our mother’s father and mother had very unfortunately died, and my father took in his own protection my mother’s two brothers and one sister, which is the sister of my mother who has become widowed through the Albanian and Greek war. My father took them all in custody, and besides raising his own family, he was guarding and protecting my mother’s two brothers and sister. Also, another brother that my mother had, he was serving in the Grecian army, and he stepped on a needle. He had tetanus through that and he died when he was 22 years old. His name was Gersom Vitalis.

Q. Now, you say he was their guardian.

(Female voice: I think he wants to say “protector.”)

A. He helped them as a protector, providing food and providing quarters to sleep, and guarding them if anything was wrong. One of the men was trying to be a craftsman for shoes, the other one a merchant, and mother’s sister was helping as much as she could by altering dresses in houses when there was a need for it.

Q. To your knowledge, what happened to them?

A. They all got caught by the Nazis, and shipped by trains to the concentration camp of Auschwitz, and we never hear of them except a small detail that we heard about my father. According to the story of the survivors that had come back from the concentration camp, he was part of the plot to blow up part of the crematoriums over there. We don’t know what is truth and what is not truth, because many stories, good, bad and indifferent, had arrived with the first Holocaust survivors from Germany. Also, in Greece, after the end of the war, were many survivors from many other countries, like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, because Israel was reborn in that time and Greece was one of the main lands that you could travel to Israel through sea and it was called *Achsherah*. And it was welcoming everybody and anybody that wanted to emigrate to Israel.

Q. Was this the Greek government that built this?

A. We do not know exactly where *Achsherah* was founding from but it was a word that it was funding through United Jewish Appeal or American Distribution Committee. It was based in New York that time, and they had a representative from Yanana Relief. But they would have made one of these bases like a little camp outside of Athens, that every Jew was welcome, either had a family or didn’t have a family, or he wanted to remain Jew and go to live his life beyond the survivor, or whatever he wanted to do. It was a shelter for anybody who was passing by into Greece from any place as long as he was Jew, and he will be as comfortable as he possibly could make ‘em through the circumstances.

Q. Now we get into questions about the actual war. What age were you when the Italians attacked Greece?

A. When the Italians took Greece I was from 9 to 10.

Q. And how did you hear about what was happening?

A. How did I hear? It was like a great celebration! When on October 28 Mussolini sent the telegraph over to Greece that you either surrender or we attack you, everybody and his brother that he can hold an arm, he went over against the Italians. There was nobody who could miss it. It was like a celebration. (Laughing)

Q. So there was mobilization.

A. Yeah. It was a grand…what they call it when they grab everybody that goes in the army? Drafting. They draft everybody and everybody was volunteering and even the ones, they weren’t qualified to be drafted, they wanted to go over and fight for the freedom of the country.

Q. Did the Jewish community react in any special way? Like was there a meeting at the synagogue.

A. Oh, no, no, no, no. The Jewish people reacted just exactly like the Americans reacted at Pearl Harbor. Everybody went over, got his uniform, to work against the guy that wanted to invade our freedom.

Q. Okay, so here we are now. The war has begun. How did your life change, economically and socially?

A. Well, it’s a long story to that. The Italians were advancing for the first month, but after that the Greeks drove them all the way through the Adriatic Sea, and then Mussolini had to ask Hitler for help, and Hitler marched through Yugoslavia into Macedonia and six months later in April the Nazis marched right into Greece. As soon as they marched right in, everything turned upside down. They divide Greece in two different categories. Athens was under the control of the Italians, and all of the rest of the other Greek land was under control of the Germans. And they come over and they announce over the radio, “We come in as friends and if you don’t bother us, we don’t bother you. But if you do bother us, you will be punished by death.” So just before the Greek national radio stations shut out, the announcers said this: “Everybody has to fight against the Nazis, even if it costs his life. Long life to Greece!” And after that the Nazis took over the radio and everything else. With a very small time, no more than two months, everything had disappeared from Greece. You could not find any food. People will sacrifice houses, without exaggeration, for five pounds of beans. People dying in the streets like flies. We lost more people from starvation than we lost from bullets. There were many undergrounds, and kids that were making all kinds of things, anything that they can damage the conquerors. And the conquerors in return were very, very much angry, and rough, on anybody. Winston Churchill come out every day on the radio and one time he said, “Greek people, even if you take and damage one screw out of the great German machine, you lead us one step towards victory. Do whatever you can.”

Q. How did you hear Winston Churchill?

A. We hear Winston Churchill because the Nazis had always confiscate those radios. The ones that were not confiscate, they were digging inside of wells, right in homes, inside of courtyards, and any place that can possibly hide them, and we were getting them out in the afternoon hours when London BBC will come out and speak. That time we used to send a few guys, small boys, three, four blocks away, from anybody was listening to the radio, so when the German electronic cars were coming in, they can catch wherever the radio’s coming from and then he will come over, whistle, and we shut off the radio, and put it right back in the well, because almost every house in Greece had, in the middle of the courtyard, a well that it was drawing water out of it. That’s how we heard from the BBC. The penalty for listening to the BBC at that time was immediately death. As same as the penalty if you’re hiding a Jew. If you know of a Jew, and you don’t report them, it was also death.

Q. Was the BBC broadcasting in Greek, or did you know some English?

A. On, no. The BBC was broadcasting in Greek language.

Q. Now, what were you personally doing? Did you do any sabotage?

A. EVERYBODY, not only myself, everybody was involved. Anybody who can think. The sabotage cannot be by bodily harming some soldier, or by blowing a tire of a car. That you hated them, it was sabotage right there, itself. They knew very well that they were not welcome. The young people between ten and fifteen, when the cars and trucks were traveling fifty, sixty miles an hour, or thirty miles an hour, they will jump behind the cab, steal the fuel, anything they can steal, and jump out. They were coming to the point that every truck had a guard behind with a gun, and soon as a kid will jump on, they will kill right on the spot. We had many, many formal ways of sabotaging. As far as myself is concerned, I’d rather not talk about it. It’s not time of bragging or heroism or any things like that. It’s been a long time now, but everybody did something to damage the great German machine.

Q. Now, your father had gone off to fight? Did he enlist?

A. It was a word at that time that they will take all the young men and send them over to work in factories in Germany. To build, the Germans needed working hands. One period of time, he left and he went over with the partisans. He came back sometime later. I’m not so sure what was the reason that he come back—he got wounded, or the partisans went way out deep. But towards the middle of 1944, when the great Nazi snake was dying, nobody was believing that it would harm anybody else, and that time the new boss of Athens was German, because Italy had gone underground, and he promised to the Jewish people through the Great Archbishop of Athens that he will not harm the Jewish people if every Saturday they will go and present themselves, the men, in a synagogue. Every Saturday for an hour. It was not going to harm anybody. It was a part of a trap. Because the Germans were losing, nobody thought that they had time now to take revenge out of the Jewish people. So for several weeks the Jews were going over to the synagogue. They said, “Right here we are,” and nothing happened. The time was going by. They had more trust that nothing will happen to them, until that day of March 25, 1944.

Q. To backtrack a little bit, then, your father was gone for a while, and there was your mother alone with these five little children, and you were the oldest. What did you live on? Who made a living?

A. What’s the difference? We did try anything and everything. It’s very, very difficult to American people, or to a reader, to understand. How can homes live without plumbing, how can homes live without telephones, how can homes live without doctors, even how can ladies give birth to children with midwives? At that time we didn’t have no telephones, we didn’t have no plumbing—we had outside in our courtyard—we can have one pound of beans and three pounds of bread, and it lasts us three days. We did anything and everything, whatever we could, to survive. Everybody was doing his best. We were going to the woods, we were going to anyplace you could, to get any food. We all were a lack of nutrition. It was one was helping the other. Greeks were helping the Jews; the Jews were helping the Greeks, wherever you could, so you stay alive.

Q. And you were heating your home with wood stoves.

A. There is no such thing as was heating homes. People cannot understand that the winters were not as severe as in Minnesota, but we had a great big, like a wood stove. We’d grab some wood here, and we’d get newspapers, anything. It’s completely indescribable. I do not have the imagination and I cannot coming close to the truth of describing how we survived. Sometimes it’s very miraculous like to believe that people can survive under circumstances. Most of the time it’s unbelievable.

Q. I did not ask you before, when did you move to Athens?

A. When did we move to Athens? We moved from Breveza to Athens when I was five years old. We survived also because, during the good days when father was working his wheeling and dealing, he had saved enough gold, and he made it into the small coins, liras, and then we were selling part of the gold on the black market to survive and buy food and things like that. Towards the end we didn’t have anything much more. But also there he had a taxicab, that was very unique at that time. But we cannot use it because lack of gasoline and lack of the people riding in the cabs, and also the Nazis were confiscating anything that had wheels on it. So my father had taken the wheels out of the cab, and give it to a friend to put it in a basement, and he hide the whole entire torso of the cab. The friend was a manufacturer of bamboo and straw things, and he covered the cab with bamboo and straw things so nobody would see it. And right after the war, when father was gone, and we come back in our own home, my mother and I, we took the cab out, and we put it back. With the help of the Greek government restoring our license, we had a Greek employee to drive the cab, one in the day and one in the night—they stole us blind, but that’s a different story—but through the cab we were trying to survive. So many other actions were involved after the war, like the United Jewish Appeal has brought in so many services like doctors and orphanages…

Q. We’ll get to that. Let’s back up a minute now. Somebody said that when your father went to the partisans, or before your father went to the partisans, you were in hiding.

A. My mother’s sister, she was widowed from the second war. She met a friend, very, very well to do lady that had a whole house over in some kind of suburb of Athens. Her own son was killed in the Albanian War, and the two women had become friends. Knowing the fact—the other lady—that my mother’s sister was Jewish, she offered to go hiding in case something happened. She didn’t care for her life, because she was alone. So my mother’s sister, through that lady, took us into hiding before my father went to the partisans. And then, after he come back from the partisans, we still were there. Then we come back in the house again, and then come back to the hiding. It was a couple of times like that. Now this is also forty-five years ago, and even though that I am fifty-five years old, I do not recall everything in the smallest detail. I’m very sure my sisters will be able to add something that I might miss. Even though they were a little bit younger than me, I imagine that their memories will not fool ‘em.

Q. Well, you remember different things. You remember what was important to you and what was happening specifically to you. Now you must have been hearing what was happening to the Jews in other parts of Europe, because you said a few minutes ago that, “We didn’t think anything would happen to us.”

A. Yes. We never had any contact to know what happened to the Jews in any other places in Europe. The BBC, which was the direct contact with the Greeks, it was busy talking about only the military victories or defeats of the Nazis, in England and America. They never had to bother with any kind of the small details about the Jewish people. We did have, though, in 1943, an occasion that the biggest city of Greece, which was Salonika, had the greatest population of Jewish people and three or four synagogues and many, many thousands of Jews, they were taken from there into Germany or something, but it was something like hiding and misinformation about other people. I’m very unfortunate to say, there were two brothers, the brothers of Reykanati, that they were hiding and they turned them in to the Germans for their own safety, which is the two brothers also got into court after the war, and they were executed by the Greek government. But during the exile of the Jews from Salonika, we didn’t know anything about it. There was not any information whatsoever. And like I said before, because the war was at the tail end, nobody thought anything will happen to the Jews in Greece, because the Nazis were busy defending themselves and the walls of Berlin. They didn’t have any other appetites for killing anybody else. But we were very wrong in that matter.

Q. Now at no time, then, in Athens was there a ghetto or were you required to wear a yellow star?

A. Oh, no, nothing like that. As a matter of fact, the Greek government, to a certain, degree, had instructed certain officials and the police department to give us identifications with Christian names and pictures and things like that, and there were a lot of Jewish people that they were floating around in Athens with false I.D.’s.

Q. Where did you get your false I.D.’s?

A. Through the neighborhood precincts of the police department. Anybody, I think, over fifteen years old, he had to have an I.D. with his name, his residence, and his occupation. And also that I.D. required you to name your religion, Catholic, Jewish or Orthodox. And most of the false I.D.’s were claiming that the Jew that was bearing the identification was an Orthodox, and with a different name.

Q. Did you buy these somewhere, or did you just go in the precinct and get them?

A. We had a lot of traitors in Greece that they turned in a lot of Jews, but also I have to admit that the survival of the Greek (Jewish) people that they are here today alive, or they were alive after the war, we owe it to the Greek government and to the Greek people. They were stand by with us. Some of them they even lost their lives to cover the Jewish people.

Q. So then the government offices were issuing you false identity papers and they knew they were doing it.

A. There were no government offices at that time. The government offices were running by the German people through the Greeks that were collaborating with the Nazis. The real patriots, that they happened to be one or two or three in each precinct, they were risking their own lives to provide a false I.D. for some Jewish family. We had great patriots and great humanitarians, that they like to see us survive, instead of going like lambs in the slaughterhouse.

Q. Can we go back to the hiding a minute? Do you remember how you hid? Were you just staying with these people or were you hiding in a barn or somewhere else?

A. We were hiding in a small basement room in that lady’s house, which was a very beautiful house. The room that we were hiding in, it was like some storage room. And she has given to the neighbors the false information that we were distant relatives, and we were over there because our small village way up in the north part of Greece was all burning up from the Nazis, and we had no place to go, and through the better times when our village would be rebuilt again, we’ll go home.

In the meantime, we were surviving, like I say, by taking a small piece of gold and sell it in the black market and try to do whatever we could out of that.

Q. What made you decide to go and hide?

A. Well, we had no choice because the Nazis were starting to show great animosity, and at that time there was some kind of rumors, after 1943, that the Salonika Jews, they have suffered a great deal, they were expelled from their own city into the Nazi Germany—and they would do the same thing in Athens. There were some houses that the Nazis took over, the extremely rich Jewish, and they put them in custody when they failed to very much bother the middle class or the poor Jews.

Q. And you can’t attach any dates. You don’t remember exactly when you were there, and when you came back?

A. Well, I can give you 1943 to about the end of ’43, and we come back from the hiding there in ’43 to ’44, and then go back in the hiding in ’44 until the end of the war, because I remember they took me there in March 25, 1944. So that’s as close as I can get as far as dates are concerned.

Q. That’s pretty good. Tell me about the deportation. The day that the men went to the synagogues on Saturday as usual to check in, to report, to be counted. Tell me about what happened there.

A. Well, that’s a story that is a little bit tragic. That time I was helping my father by selling cigarettes from the black market to the Greeks, and one of the places that I could make a little bit of business as about a 14- or 15-year-old, was at the gathering of the Greek Jews over in the synagogue. I was going over there, selling some cigarettes. And that Saturday, they took all of them in, and when I finished selling the cigarettes I left, and I was coming home because they didn’t want the young people, they only wanted the big ones. We didn’t think nothing of it. Now the rest of what I heard is after I left—I heard that, I did not witness it—that a truck come in with some guards, and they placed two guards in the door of the synagogue, and they closed the doors and they tell them not to get alarmed because they were taking them over for some kind of an examination. But the young people and the other Greeks that were walking around there and they saw that thing happen, spread the word that the Jews were getting captured and even the word come over towards our house. They brought in some trucks and they put the Jews in, and they took ‘em outside Athens in a place called Chaidari. That place was a small concentration camp for the resistant partisans and anybody that was against the Nazis. The Nazis would capture them and put them over there, and even then, when they were taking them there, they think nothing will happen to them; they were just taking them for questioning. Many of the relatives of the men, they want to go with their husbands and their brothers. One of them was my mother’s brother’s wife, with her two kids. She wanted to go where her husband went, and the Nazis would have no objection to taking anybody in the trucks that they will admit that he was a Jew. The mother didn’t want her to go in there. Somewhere, somehow, her instinct told her, no matter how painful it was, that **we** had to survive. And we left the house, we give whatever we could to the neighbors, and we marching towards that lady’s house, and begun the second hiding. The mentality of the Greek woman is, “I’ll go wherever my husband go”. The woman in Greece, even now 45 years later, are, in a way, depending on the man for their livehood and their whole entire lives. So if they lose their male protector, some of them, they don’t even want to live. They did want to go wherever their husbands went, or their brothers. They wanted to share they own fortune with their beloved ones. That’s why they followed wherever the Nazis were taking the men.

Q. So then your father was taken away, and then what happened? How did the six of you continue on?

A. Well, it’s very, very simple. After they took ‘em from the synagogue, the Nazis made a mission to go over in every Jewish house. They confiscated the records of the synagogue and they knew now where every Jewish house was located, and they went over there and confiscated whatever they could, and they wanted to take everybody into the concentration camps. The word had spread that they were doing that, so the Greeks and anybody else who could informed us, and we all went into hiding, up ‘til the liberation day. The great breadwinner was the mother, because she was the one who could divide up and manage the things, in order for us to survive. We conserved things that father had left us, and we had friends that they donated a little bit here and there. And I was shining shoes and I was doing wheeling and dealing, whatever I could, but I was not the main breadwinner. The main breadwinner was my mother.

Q. Could you describe to me what a black market contact was like? Where did you go? Who did you meet? How much did things cost?

A. The black market was like this. The main thing that the black market was selling, it was food, and only food. That was the main source of survival. And in order to buy food, you had to have gold, or Great British sovereigns, which is worth 24-carat gold, the size of a quarter. So only with English sovereigns and melted gold—I mentioned before in the interview that my father was having the gold, and melted it, and we had some pots of gold—with gold we could buy some food and survive. And, like I said before, I was trying to wheel and deal at that time with the gold. I was the one that was selling the gold and getting the food, but I was not the only breadwinner. No, the mother was the one who made us what we are today.

Q. But did you go out to the country to meet people and buy things, or were you in alleys or doorways?

A. You could not find food in Athens. You had to go way out in the small villages, which they were all the way from ten miles to fifty miles to a hundred miles out. The farther that you are going, the more that the Nazis will not go there, because they were a small farmer here, a small farmer there, that they had in their storage room corn or barley or beans, that they were willing to sell for some gold. They were afraid to come down in Athens, so wherever I was going, and he knew that I was sincere, then he would see two pounds of corn or two pounds of butter, or two pounds of beans. Through the gold you will survive somehow.

Q. How did you travel?

A. Walk. There was no meanings of transportation. Walk.

Q. Were any of your sisters old enough to do that?

A. The kids were very young and I’m very thankful that they were very young. They still have the memories of this ordeal, the painful memories, but it’s fading away.

Q. So then you and your sisters and your mother were never taken away by the Germans. Did you find out what happened to your father?

A. Well, we find out the father and part of our other relations and others in Athens, they were trying to blow up the crematorium. That’s one story. Another story, for a long time, it was that he was liberated and was in Russia. Also we made some inquiries of the Red Cross, that will inform me officially, later, after the war, that he was dead. Also, some other sources would say that the time that they were selecting them right and left—the ones that they were on the right, they would work, and the ones on the left, they were going to the gas chambers—that somebody says he might have seen him selected onto the right, and he might have seen him selected over to the left. There were all kinds of rumors. Nothing is officially to be believed. Whatever has happened, it’s nobody can give an account absolutely 100% true.

Q. Can you tell me what happened the day the war ended?

A. The day the war ended? Have you ever seen Times Square on the first of the year, at midnight? The day the war ended, every Greek in town he got in the streets of Athens, hollering, “Long live to the Allies!” “Long live to Greece!” The Nazi German flag came down from the rock of the Acropolis, and the Greek flag went up. Allies from New Zealand, England, America, France and all over, and also the Divine Platoon from the Greek army that was fighting in Egypt, and in El Alamein, and at Rimini, Italy, they all arrive in Greece, and also King Paul arrived with all his aides, and the whole entire Greece was full of flags from every nation that we never can dream that they were existing. The radios were playing the national anthem and patriotic songs. The kids were hugging and kissing, and everybody was in such a joy that it almost seemed like the hunger, the thirst, the lost of the beloveds, all of it faded away for a while, because the bright light of freedom had brightly shined in the streets of Athens.

Q. That’s quite a description. What happened next?

A. Next, slowly but sure, organizations from all over, the United States mostly, and England and any of the prosperous countries, they wanted to help the people to come back on their own feet. The construction companies and UNRRA, and the American-run organizations through General Marshall, come over in Greece, and they start rebuilding the things that were town down because of the bombing and the catastrophic effects of the war. Food starts coming in. Clothes start coming in, and businesses start, slowly but sure, building up. We got our taxi out. We got our license. We come back in our own home. Our home was confiscated by a collaborator of the Nazis and we could not prove that he was a collaborator, and from four rooms we ended up having one, but still it was a home, though we were forced to be neighbors with the collaborator, and also another Jewish family. We all lived together in that big house.

Q. Was Athens ever bombed?

A. No, Athens was never bombed. The city of Piraeus was bombed very severely, which is approximately fifteen miles away from Athens, and is the main port of Greece, and I think it’s the third or forth largest port in the world.

Q. Now, you decided at some point to leave Greece, and come to the United States. Why?

A. Why did we not come to Israel?

Q. Why did you even think about leaving now that the war was over and things were gradually getting back to normal?

A. That’s another long story, why we didn’t go to Israel and we come to America, and why we left Greece. Right after the war, a gentleman by the name of Joseph I. Josephs, he was a Jewish Greek, from Germina, he was claiming that he knew part of the father’s family. He came over to visit Greece right after the war, and he praised America so much. He said that in America, the girls don’t have to have dowry to get married. And also he praised America as the greatest country in the world for a family to be built and live happily. The *achsherah*, that I mentioned before, it was in Greece, and it was a great propaganda for people to immigrate to Israel. When they make us go and visit the *achsherah*, we found many young men and many young women waiting to go to Israel to fight, because they had the spirit to build up the state of Israel. But very unfortunately, when we got in there, nine out of ten girls that were in *achsherah*, they were all pregnant. And when mother asked when they had time to get married and get pregnant, one of the officials said, “Over there, they don’t have to be married. We need lives.” So mother said “I don’t want my daughters to be that way. I’m not going to Israel.” So time goes by, and it was through United Jewish Appeal, a possibility to come over in America. One of mother’s main concerns was the happiness of her children. Being the only boy, I couldn’t under any circumstances—no matter how smart, and how clever, or how good a merchant I can be—I couldn’t provide, even with the taxi that we had, a dowry to get qualified husbands for the sisters. So through the things that we hear about the United States, mother knew that the only place in the world that her kids can be happy was America. And that’s why we’re here.

Q. When did you come and did you all come together?

A. No, I came in first, because that time I was almost twenty years old, and according to the Greek Army law, anybody who hits 21st birthday, he cannot emigrate because he has to serve in the army.

Q. For how long?

A. He has to serve in the army for four or five years. So I had to come first, before November 10, which was my birthday to make me 21 years old. So I arrived in New York on January 10, 1951, and the kids arrived on March 1951, and mother.

Q. And all the transportation costs were paid by Jewish…

A. Part of the transportation costs, because we had a taxicab and mother into United Jewish Appeal, because United Jewish Appeal never wanted to furnish the complete transportation. They would furnish transportation into the people that they didn’t have any equity, but at that time, having a taxicab in Greece, it was very obvious equity. In return, the United Jewish Appeal has guarantee that when we come here, for five years until we become an American citizen, we will be under their protection.

Q. Now, you didn’t have any relatives who were in the United States?

A. No. We didn’t have any relatives. I waited in New York for three months. When they come in, then we had a choice. We could stay on our own in New York, but New York is a big city. We could never become American citizens there. We could become citizens, but we could never have whatever we want to live like Americans. Coming to New York, we live like Greeks, like living in the old neighborhood in a different part of the world. Mother didn’t want that. Mother is the cause that we have what we got, and whatever we are now.

Q. How did you happen to come to St. Paul, Minnesota?

A. Well, because it’s random. United Jewish Appeal had many branches. One of the branches of United Jewish Appeal was Jewish Family Service of Minnesota, that was taking under her protection certain people from Europe after the Holocaust, after the war. There were people from Poland, people from Germany, people from Greece, and it was by random that we had to be coming here.

Q. What did they do for you after you got here?

A. When we got here, they provided us house on Broadway, which was a good Jewish ghetto at that time, because there were a lot of Jews from all over the world in that neighborhood.

Q. That’s in St. Paul.

A. We had the upstairs, about two rooms and a patio, whatever you call it, and a kitchen. At that time it looked like a palace to us. And it **was** a palace, you know. They provided us with plenty to eat, they provided us with plenty to sleep, and they help us send the kids into school, providing that I would contribute some from my work. So we made some kind of arrangement on that, and we went five years like that, until we become American citizens.

Q. How much education had you had in Greece? Did you go to school when you came here?

A. As far as I am concerned, right here I never went to school. I went only one day to the International Institute. I went one day, but I didn’t like it very much because, without being selfish, after being in high school in Greece, I thought I knew more than the teacher. I never went to school in America, but I’m very proud that the kids went to school, and that they did so well. I learned whatever I know on the sidewalks of America, which is great.

Q. Tell me, you’re married, do you have children of your own?

A. No, I don’t.

Q. So then your sisters have been your family, as it were.

A. The sisters have been more than a family to me. They’ve been the whole world. (crying) “The sidewalks of America.”

Q. How did you learn to speak English?

A. Well, for a great part of my life I have been a taxi cab driver, and I learned it through the American public, and also I learned it through the family that I got here. I visit my sisters, and most of the time my nieces and nephews and my sisters speak English. So I learned through them.

Q. I see. I should ask you if you’ve had any involvement with the Jewish community while you’ve been here.

A. Well, I been keeping the faith but I never have a great deal of socializing with the Jewish people. I know very many of them, but…

Q. But you’re not active in the synagogue, organizations.

A. Technically I’m not very active with the Jewish community or anything else.

Q. Do you maintain contact, or did you, with other survivors or any survivor organization?

A. Not organizations, but private people. I do know several survivors of the Holocaust, including some people that I socialize with that they come directly from concentration camps.

Q. Are there any other Greek survivors in the Twin Cities?

A. Yes, they are. There is a family that I know called Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Asher. They live in Highland Park. They have a couple of kids. They’re quite old right now, but I do not associate the last few years with them. Also there is a Greek survivor here from the concentration camp that’s a Greek lady that married a German survivor, by name Ida Rosenbaum. She lives in Highland Park, also.

Q. These are philosophical questions now. Can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor? Have you thought about it?

A. Love of life, to be alive, and I just thank God that I am survivor, and I have enjoyed the beautiful life that Americans provide for me though his culture and my work. And it means a great deal that my mother’s dream come true. Because the only thing my mother ever wanted, is to see her kids married, especially the girls, and see grandchildren, and from her soul upstairs, I think she’s very pleased.

Q. So all four of your sisters did get married without dowries in America.

A. Well, the “dowries” they give, it was as good wives, working and help their husbands be whatever they are now, and give good families and good homes and good kids for them. And I’m very proud of each one of them.

Q. You were apparently fortunate because the Greek non-Jews were very “helping” people for the Jews during this time. So I don’t know whether I should even ask you this question. Can you describe for me your general feelings about human nature? About non-Jews, and Jews and Germans?

A. My general feelings about human nature? I am very proud that I’m Jewish; I’m very proud that I’m alive and here in America. But until the day I die, I will have one very big question in my mind: Why, all over the world, is a certain percentage of people anti-Semitic? I’ll pray to God that He give the good knowledge to people to be non-anti-Semitic, and to help Jewish people at the time of need, the same way that other people will help others.

Q. Do you read books about the Holocaust or watch TV shows about it or go to the movies?

A. I’ve seen several movies, I have read the book about the Diary of Anne Frank, and saw other small stories here and there, but due to the fact that Holocaust stories, movies and memories like that will bring some kind of a painful memories into myself, lately, the last few years, I try to avoid them. I do not avoid them completely but I’m not crazy about it to go and see them either.

Q. Did you feel that they were accurate, though? That they were giving a true picture?

A. The truth is that there’s no imagination, and the greatest author of the world can never describe the truth of this Holocaust. There is no pen sharp enough to write exactly what happened. And there is no mind big enough to believe the things that have took place between the rise and fall of the Third Reich.

Q. Usually I ask one more question. Is there something that you want to say for this interview that I forgot to ask you?

A. Yes, I’d like to say one very good thing. Love live to America!

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