

## **Rena Abravanel Greenup**

I was born in Thessaloniki, Greece on May 12, 1936. My mother was one of two Ashkenazim families (descendants of Jews from France, Germany and Eastern Europe) in Thessaloniki, Greece. Because my grandfather died suddenly when my mother was twelve, she had to work by playing the piano in the movie houses. This was absolutely unheard of for a Jewish girl of good family to be working. My father was just the opposite. He was a Zionist from a very wealthy, aristocratic, snobbish family. He was a Sephardic Jew (descendants of Jews from Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East). It was very unusual for my father to find someone so different from him like my mother.

After my parents married, they waited for about five or six years before they had me because my father had to build the best house in Salonika before having children. Sure enough, we had a beautiful villa, one of the most beautiful houses in Salonika. It was very modern and built with reinforced concrete. My mother continued showing her independence by giving piano lessons. At home we had a cook and maids because mama didn't know how to cook.

In 1940 when I was 4, things changed. The Germans came into Greece. I don't know how my father was so astute, but he decided to take the immediate family, my mother, my uncle, my father's oldest brother who was unmarried, and me to Athens, which was a much larger city, and get lost there. A bad thing happened in Salonika. The Germans asked the rabbi for the list of all the Jewish families and the rabbi complied. Whereas in Athens, even though the Germans had made the same request, the rabbi did not comply. Salonika was the most densely populated area by Jews per square mile in the world. In the meantime, when we left, the rest of the family came and stayed at our house because it was the strongest and the one that would probably withstand bombardment because we had a very good basement and people could hide there.

It was probably towards the end of 1940 when we came to Athens and immediately went into hiding. We were hidden by a Greek general married to a German lady who was my mother's friend. My mother, being Ashkenazi of Austrian parents had a circle of friends who were either Austrian or German. They had a common language and got together for many parties. We were hidden in the general's basement, the four of us. Now all or most of you have read 'The Diary of Anne Frank'. Instead of being in an attic, we were in the basement. The family had two boys just a little older than me and I could hear them playing upstairs. We had to be extremely quiet.

My father was a live wire. He just could not keep still. During the First World War he had volunteered for the British Army which had been encamped in Greece and he spoke perfectly good English having gone to Oxford for awhile and had kept all of his contacts. He used a wireless. That's all I can remember. I understood that there were messages going back and forth. Apparently, the dragnet of the Gestapo to find all of the outlawed radios was getting closer and closer. Our friend, being a general, had a lot of contacts and was told that they were going to raid the house, so we had to flee.

My parents, using Greek Orthodox names, rented a small apt in Athens. Instead of Abrovanel, which was our Jewish name, it became Tsolakis from somebody who had died. They had fake ID cards because in Greece you had ID cards the way we have drivers' licenses here. When you become fourteen you had an ID card. I didn't have one because I was too young.

My mother's first name was Mizza and because of the M she became Maria, Mrs. Maria Tsolakis. My father's name was Joseph; they used to call him Pepo and he became Mr. Joseph. Uncle David was Mr. David. Among the 4 of us, we had 2 ration cards. You had to go and get food with ration cards but there was no food to be had. You could barter some in the black market and bartering was done with other kinds of things. Oil and wheat were of the highest value, then furs and gold. Everything else had almost no value at all.

My mother had to learn how to cook pretty fast but there was almost nothing to cook. There was a small mountain a few miles from our house called Lykavitos. We used walk up there with our knives and my mother would show me which were the dandelion greens and the other greens that one could pull out to make a salad and eat. We were not the only ones because there were always a lot of other people going up the mountain for

greens. Sometimes in my nightmares I hear the horrendous word Pinao.... Pinao means I'm hungry. The Greeks were starved during the occupation especially in 1941. You could hear them shouting on the streets pinao, pinao. Early in the morning at dawn a carriage would come and pick up the corpses of the people who had died from starvation. This was the situation in 1941. I had already turned 6 and went to school for the first time with the other children, my name now Rena Tsolakis. I was in first grade. We had 2 chickens on the small balcony of the apt and that was what gave us some eggs for food.

Things were becoming harder and harder for the Jews. We had very difficult time keeping track of the rest of the relatives. We knew nothing of what happened to the ones in Salonika and had absolutely no knowledge of what was happening there. We were a very large extended family; my father had 6 brothers and sisters with lots of children. They were all older than I. I was one of the youngest. The cousins went to the mountains to be with the resistance and to save their own lives. One of the things that we had heard was that the Jews that were able to go to Turkey found their way to what was then Palestine or today Israel. Some of my cousins had taken that route so my father thought that must be the way to get out. Food was getting scarcer and fewer and fewer Jews were left in Greece. It became more and more difficult to hide.

It was at the end of 1944 when my father took us to a farm in a little village just outside of the port city of Lavrion where we could take a boat to go to Turkey. It was nice on the farm and there were 2 other children. I remember running through the fields. It was just great. My mother wore a kerchief and her apron and everybody called her Mrs. Maria. She helped the mother there. Now that I have grown older, I have often wondered how she managed. Here was a woman who had always had maids and a cook when she was married. Before that her mother did all the housework or whatever had to be done. She never had to do anything except earn a living by being a musician and now she did the farming with the farmer's wife and everything else that had to be done. During the night, there were raids on the farm, but it was an extended farm and anytime that there was a raid we children flee to the fields to hide. I don't know what my parents did. The way that the farm was situated we could see the motorcycles of the Germans coming. The Germans were always checking or wanting something.

Finally, it must have been December, 1944 when my father chartered a small boat to take us to Turkey, my mother, my father, my Uncle David, and me. There were also a Greek engineer and a Greek lawyer plus the captain and a couple of crew people. Apparently the Greek engineer and the Greek lawyer had somehow fallen afoul of the Germans and had to flee in order to save themselves.

The weather was very bad. The small boat was constantly being buffeted by the waves. I don't know if the captain was a real captain, but the engine seemed to be constantly breaking down. They kept asking for my mother's hairpins in order to fix it. So when the engine was not working of course we would be buffeted even more. We had been on the boat 10 days. There was almost no food and water left and from afar we saw a very huge, dark and inhospitable rock. On the other side there was another piece of land that was beach. My mother kept saying let's go to the rock, let's go to the rock but everybody else was so tired of the hardships that they decided to head towards the beach. As they were going towards the beach, a German gunboat came. My uncle got so upset that he fell into the water to drown himself. They pulled him out.

The Germans came and took us to the beach which was on the island of Lemnos. That inhospitable rock was Imbros which was in Turkey. We had our Greek names and Greek passports but of course it was suspicious that we were on that boat. They took us for interrogation to the village of Moudro that was near the beach. All that I remember was that my father was taken away from us to the capitol of the Island of Lemnos which at that time was called Castro. It has a different name or maybe the villagers just called it Castro which means castle. My uncle, my mother, the engineer, the lawyer and I were taken to a Greek prison in the village of Moudro. I don't want you to think that it was anything like the concentration camps. Moudro was a Greek village probably 200 or 300 years old and the kind of prison that they had was very primitive.

There were cells on one side of the wall which opened up to a large hallway. There were no bathrooms or anything like that. We had to use an outhouse. They put each one of us, my mother, my uncle and me, in separate cells. I must have been six to seven years old. The cell had a round hole on the door so you could look out to the hallway or the guards could look in and very high near the ceiling were bars for some type of outside

window. It was very frightening being all alone. My mother started screaming, "How can they allow children to be alone? Haven't they ever heard of the Red Cross and the Switzerland Convention? Who is so inhuman as to put a child alone without its mother?" Poor woman, she had no idea what was going on in the concentration camps and the cattle cars where the rest of our family had gone to die. She was so convincing and made such a ruckus that after 2 or 3 days they put me in the same cell with her. It's one of my fondest memories. She could do so many things. She took her handkerchief and made a little doll out of it so that I could have something to play with and devised all sorts of games to pass the time away.

Someone had given me an unusual kind of toy. You have it in the United States too. You look at slides of different countries and places. It was a very modern kind of toy. When they searched and found it, they believed that we were spies because of this film. I don't know if they beat my father or my uncle to confess that we were spies; they never told me

It took about two or three months for an interpreter come. My mother of course, being Austrian, did not need an interpreter. They took my father and they had the interpreter. My father could speak German but not fluently. The guy looked at him and in Greek he said "Aren't you Abravanel who worked at the tobacco factory in Austrohellenique?" My father worked for an Austrian tobacco firm. My father's answer was "Yes, but why do you want to harm a fellow Greek?" He knew that we were Jews.

The Gestapo commander was an Austrian who prided himself on his culture. He was very vain and considered himself above anybody else there. I can understand about the poor villagers there, but there might have been a doctor or a teacher. There was really no cultural stimulation for this Gestapo commander. He found in my mother a very cultured lady who could talk about books, who could play the piano, who had studied, who spoke French and all sorts of languages. He told her that he would keep us in Lemnos for the duration of his tour of duty on the island which was a year, but we had to make it worth his while. Any jewelry or money we might have hidden from the searches had to be given to him and we could not tell anyone.

In the meanwhile, my mother started screaming again saying "Look at this child. She's going to be in prison. What is the matter with you?" So they took me out and placed me with a Greek family, the Karpouvis. They were considered wealthy by the rest of the villagers; however, they were extremely poor and had almost nothing. All of the girls used to sleep together and the one who was closest to my age was always trying to pump me for information. It was so obvious that I could see how she was trying to pass information on to the Germans about us. I used to visit my mother every day. I could not visit my uncle because his cell hole and back window were covered. My uncle was in complete blackness except when he had to go to the bathroom. Food was once a day and it was very poor and very little. They would have boiled black eyed peas which were wormy and a piece of black bread. The prisons were manned by Greek police. The Germans would come for interrogations, beatings and torture. When they were present, you would hear the hollering and screaming.

There was communication between the villagers and the prisoners. The women of the village found out that my mother could tell fortunes. My mother told me that young ladies or young matrons would go through the back, climb up on something and through the window drop my mother a coffee cup. In Greece they drink the very thick Turkish coffee, but we always called it Greek coffee. After you drink it you swish it around, turn it upside down and to see all sorts of patterns inside. They would lower one of these cups down and my mother would whisper the signs she saw. The women would steal food from their mothers-in-law and throw it through the window and my mother would have something extra to eat.

There was forced labor. I went with the girls from the Karpouvi family. We peeled potatoes with the poor villagers who were completely starved. They had nothing. Those in forced labor could steal some food by hiding it in their clothes. I looked to see what the others were doing and I did the same. I brought home some potatoes and gave a little bit to the Karpouvi family. I tried to bring some to my uncle. I left them at the outhouse. My uncle asked my mother, "Did she bring some to everybody in the prison?" My mother said yes, otherwise he wouldn't eat it. That was the type of person he was. Everybody had to have something.

My mother and my father somehow were able to communicate a little and my father was still able to be in touch with the outside world. He had so many contacts and everybody in prison communicated. My mother heard from him. He had been very sick with asthma.

When the Gestapo commander had to leave, a new commander came. The first thing that he said was that he had to clean up all the political prisoners in the prison. In the meanwhile, the interpreter was beside himself because we were still in Lemnos. No one had given orders for the final solution to return us to the Salonika and from there be deported or whatever they did to the Jews, "the dirty Jews".

My father was extremely sick. It's ironic; the Germans would not kill you if you were sick. You had to get well first and then they would kill you. That is at least what was happening there. So he had to get better. There was a big meeting of all the Gestapo commanders on the island of Mytilini which was very close to Lemnos. I don't know how he did it, but my father had been able to contact the outside and informed them that the cream of the crop was in Mytilini. A British submarine came that night and wiped them all out. Again, luck was with us. We had to wait for a new Gestapo commander.

It is now 1945. The Germans realized that they are losing the war. The Greeks also saw that the Germans were losing the war. Many were rethinking their position because things were changing. We heard that there were going to be large British destroyers coming to take all of the Germans back to the mainland. We were supposed to be on those boats. The Gestapo told the villagers of Moudro that they were going to blow up the village before they left. The villagers should go away. I went to visit my mother. She told me to go away with the villagers because the Germans were going to blow up the village. If we get through this we were to meet at the beach.

I went with the other villagers into the fields. Then the Greek policemen who were guarding the prisons left the cell doors unlocked and everybody fled. During the night we could see the flares and the noise of the village being blown up. We slept that night in the fields. In the morning we saw the big ships going away with the Germans and any Greeks that were high up in the German echelon like the interpreters. As soon as the villagers saw the ships leaving, they ran to see what was saved from their homes. They went into the Gestapo headquarters to see if the Germans had left anything of value. The Germans had left a few things of value; food, a ham maybe, chicken and a few toys. Unfortunately they were booby trapped so that the people who would take them would lose a hand or an eye or something. I could hear the screams because I went to the Gestapo headquarters just like a lot of others. I was so used to hearing screams and, shouting and crying that it really didn't make much of an impression on me. I walked around in a daze looking and seeing that there was no roof here, no walls there. There was just a door jam standing, just a frame. I looked down and saw a narrow, long rectangular brown box, about four or five inches wide and two and a half feet long. I pick it up and with my box in hand suddenly remembered that my mother said we should meet on the beach. I went to the beach and there were my mother and my uncle. Pretty soon there was my father. We kissed, we embraced. Thank God we were all alive as were the lawyer and the engineer.

My mother used to call me Renoula, meaning little Rena. Renoula she said "What do you have in this box?" I don't know. "Well let's see!" She had not gone by the Gestapo area so she had not realized that there might be booby traps. We opened up the little box. It was a tiny paper Christmas tree and was not booby trapped.

What I just talked about was of course one of the most traumatic things that happened to me. Every one of us has a book inside. There is no doubt about it. We have some times that are very traumatic and other times that were easier to take. Our story continues like everyone else's story.

We got back to Salonika and immediately went to our villa. We were surprised to see a stranger living there, a Greek officer. There had been a civil war in Greece between the partisans or royalist and the communists. The communist lost. We found out that this man was a Greek officer who had turned communist when it was convenient to be a communist and then returned to being a Greek officer. He had a very nice house in the outskirts of the city but of course preferred the villa. When we returned he gave us one room in the house for the four of us. We went down to the basement where he kept his pigs and his chickens. We saw all the German

writings on the wall and a huge swastika with Deutschland Über Alles. We learned that our house had been used as the German officers' headquarters. Our basement had been good enough to be the officers club and now it was a pigsty.

We started with law suits that kept dragging on. I remember my dad getting up one morning and grabbing the Greek officer by the neck and telling him. "Listen, I have gone through hell with the Germans. I'm going to kill you if you are not out of here. I don't care." Apparently the man realized that it was going to happen so the next day he cleared out. The neighbors had saved some of our furniture. The cook and the maids brought them back. Among the things that were saved was the Greek flag made out of wool. My mother had no money so she split the flag. She gave it to the maid's sister who was a seamstress. They dyed the flag navy blue and the seamstress made pleated skirts for me and her daughter. I had a very nice woolen pleated skirt.

My father was able to find a job at the YMCA because he spoke English. We were extremely thin. We did have a picture of us taken a year after we had come back. I don't know what happened to it, but I remember that we looked like skeletons. My father brought day old pastries back from the Y. We then got quite round. Today all my veins are very, very deep. When they are trying to find veins for blood tests, they tell me one of the reasons for this is that during my growing years I was very, very thin.

That first year back the little tree had little walnuts in foil and that was its' decorations. In the second year it even had candles and it caught on fire a couple times. Ever since that year we had the biggest Jewish/Christmas you ever want to see. My mother started making things right after Christmas for every single person in the family. It would have been little things, maybe a needle case or a collar that she had knitted. But every single person that Hitler not killed would gather on Christmas day at our house and we would have a Christmas tree. We would decorate the house with paper, red bows and anything that we had. There was a big dinner and at night we might play cards. Even today we have a very big Christmas tree. We always have a lot of people on Christmas Day and Christmas is very special because it was the day our family was reunited.

The first year that we were back my father went to the British Army and, because he was a vet, he was able to borrow tents. He took them to the seashore and started the first camp for children of survivors. It became a permanent place with buildings. Those Jewish camps started in 1945 and in 1946, still continue.

Dad was able to go back to his job at the Austrohellenique; my mother kept giving lessons. She was a very resourceful person. Some of the furniture was very old and worn. She'd take flour sacks, dye them different colors and cover all the furniture up so it was just fine. It looked good.

The people that had hidden in our house, my father's younger brother Leon and his wife and two little girls and the mother-in-law were all killed in Auschwitz. My father's older sister, Aunt Rachael, and her children were able to go to Israel. The three younger ones ages twenty, eighteen and seventeen, one boy and two girls were killed when their boat was torpedoed. I can still see my Aunt Rachael mourning. "It's so difficult when the children go first. It's against nature." she would say, "Why, God, did you leave me and take my kids?" This was very hard. A lot of other cousins, we were a big clan, were killed and others made it through. Each one could write a book.

The Holocaust or any tremendous traumatic experience changes us somehow. My father, who was a very open man, very well educated, became closed and bitter. He did a lot of things for the orphaned children and started the Jewish young people's movement. In fact, there in Salonika at the Jewish Center, the library is named after him. He became very strict with me, maybe because I was the only child and he was so afraid something might happen to me. I went through high school and learned English. I was going to a Greek/American school called Anatolia. My mother was a piano teacher there so that way she would help with the tuition. We were never as well off as we were before the war. I would say we were middle class, but our name was still considered aristocratic. When I was finishing high school, any time there was an activity going on everybody would say, "Is Mr. Abravanel allowing his daughter to do it?" If my father would let me do it maybe the other parents would. I could never do anything; I could never go anyplace. I was the president of my high school class and we were going to Austria. I organized the whole thing and my father said, "No you're not going to go." Thank

goodness the girls at school voted my mother as one of the supervisors and I was able to go after having done all that work.

My future was to go the university and get married. Even though he had a lot of education and had married my mother, a very liberated woman, my father turned back to his old Sephardic, Turkish kind of ideas. Girls don't need so much education. You'll get married and that's good enough. I was a rebel. I was just being stifled and there was a lot of friction at home. I needed to leave. Finally my mother said, "Well if she finds the money let her go." I had not a dime. My father agreed not expecting me to find money.

At school exams for the Fulbright scholarship were given. Because we were learning English they took my whole graduating class to take the exams as practice to see how Americans take exams. Half of us were eliminated the first time, then the other half took the exams and a quarter was eliminated. Finally 2 of us were left. The other girl was the valedictorian. She was a better student than I was by far. I was a good student, but she was tops. Because I was sure that she had the scholarship when we went to the interview, I was really brazen and not intimidated. I got the scholarship! It appeared in the Greek newspapers, Rena Joseph Abrovanel, received the scholarship from the United States Information Service. It will be used to study and live in the United States. On the bus my father was being congratulated. He came home, "What's this?" "I got a scholarship to go to the United States." It absolutely killed him but he had opened his mouth and had agreed. Dad lived with that kind of a code, if you open your mouth, it is law. And that was that.

I came to the United States and went to Michigan State University. I received my bachelor's degree in art education. I remember the first year I was there, the first Christmas. Christmas, it was so important. I couldn't go back and I called home from a friend's family home. I was able to call Greece and all I did was cry on the phone. It cost \$65 for me to cry on the phone. I had to baby sit for a year in order to pay that \$65 back.

I am sometimes envious of the students that come now from Greece and can go back every year. I couldn't go back. We didn't have the money. The travel grant was good for 3 years. I finished college in 3 years. I got my degree and met my future husband, Ray. He was a fellow student and a Korean vet. I wrote to my dad and said "I do have the money to come back. If I don't come back this year, I will lose the travel grant. Do you promise to send me back for graduate school?" I really had somebody here that I wanted to be with very badly. My Dad wrote, "Yes I will send you back." I went home and the letters started coming from Ray. Father was not pleased at all. A letter came to my dad asking for my hand in marriage. My dad looked at the letter and looked at me and he said, "Who is that upstart that wants to marry you? The answer is no." I said, "You promised to let me go back and I am going back." He didn't speak to me for the whole summer. I was the only child he had and I broke his heart, but he sent me back because he had agreed to it. Ray and I were married in college at the rabbi's home. We had a few friends and the rabbi was kind enough to open his home to us. He was a fellow student. We had some rough times. My parents came to visit quite a few times. Dad was delighted with his grandchildren.

My father spoke fluent English. My mother spoke Italian, Spanish, German and French and could be understood in English, but not very well. At the age of sixty+ she decided to learn how to speak English. In Greece you only went to school if you were young. Once you were older, school was not for you. This is an American concept. You can learn as long as you want to whenever you want to. In Greece it is just for the young. My mother went to night school to learn English so she could converse with her grandchildren. Her classmates were twelve and fourteen year old kids and there was a grandmother sitting side by side with the young kids. I went to Greece to visit my mother with my oldest boy when he was two and a half. We were on a bus and a little fellow came up to us, "Mrs. Abrovanel, where were you yesterday? How come you weren't in the class?" My mother said to me "This is my classmate," and she said to the boy "This is my daughter. She came from America. This is my grandson. I couldn't come to class."

As I think back on both of them, they were very remarkable people. The reason I really felt that I had to tell my story, was that both my parents are dead and I'm the only child. My Uncle David died of Parkinson's disease right after the Germans left. After me there is no one. No one knows what happened. It took a very long time

to be able to talk about this. My husband said that for awhile when we were first married I had nightmares. I have spoken very little about this time in my life.

My husband Ray and I are the proud parents of Ryan and his wife Kristin, Reva and her husband Ken, and Ray Joseph. We have two wonderful grandchildren, Alan Ray and Katrina.

I would like to thank the Pateraki family for helping us on the island of Lemnos.

I am really grateful to The Holocaust Center. Four years ago when they first contacted me in Brookline and I talked for the first time, it was a catharsis. It was really good. My children know little bits here and little bits there. I have never really sat down to talk. You, The Holocaust Center, really broke the ice for me and I really am very grateful for the gift you have given me to be able to tell my story. Thank you!

(Edited transcription from video recorded.)