

Trip To Greece



A photograph taken in the Acropolis on our trip to Greece.

I was born in Istanbul in 1926.

In 1936, right when I was about to begin elementary school, Mussolini passed a new law that affected me and my family members. According to this law, all males, who were Italian citizens, had to study at Italian schools worldwide. If not, they risked losing their citizenship when they became eighteen.

I first went to school in 1939. In 1943, when Italy signed a partnership agreement with Germany, the Jewish students were no longer allowed to be Fascist boy scouts. We could still attend the Locale even though we were Jewish, but we were not allowed to be boy scouts. Nor were we allowed to participate in the Locale's activities. We were only allowed to continue being students after that year.

After elementary school, in junior high there were the science and the accounting sections. I chose accounting.

Accounting was my favorite course. I graduated with six students, one of whom was a female. We all received accounting diplomas. I liked all of my teachers, most of whom were Italian. Students and teachers were very close to each other. I did not study English at school.

I played the violin for seven years, I could play a lot of musical pieces. I quit in my youth, today I

don't even remember the notes.

I was very close with two friends outside of school. One was Nesim Behar, and the other was Bensiyon Cukran, who unfortunately passed away recently. We always got together in a mixed, co-ed group. We had some Catholic students in our school as well. For example, the famous script writer Giovanni Scognamillo was my classmate in high school.

During my years in elementary school, and the first couple of years in middle school, I was very interested in playing with maquettes.

I was a member of both the volleyball and basketball teams at school. I did not participate in political activities much. As for cultural activities, I read a poem for the Etifani Holiday when I was in fifth grade. In order to prepare for my presentation, my father and I went to the Sumerbank store to buy some new clothes and shoes [Etifani Holiday is a Christian holiday, during which a cross is placed in the Holy Water].

I would spend the weekends with my mother and father.

My childhood was spent in Büyükada.

In my family, all traditions mandated by our religion were strictly followed. Holidays, Pesach and the Seder of course, Rosh Hashanah... My mother would make all kinds of puddings during Shavuot. During Purim, she would make a variety of pies made with honey or "Orejas de Aman" as well as "Borekitas del muez" [quiches]. In order to make orejas de aman, she would prepare some dough first. She would then roll it out, cut it in two pieces, and fry it with vegetable oil. We would eat it with margarine and melted honey or granulated sugar.

Unfortunately, I did not get to have bar-mitzvah ceremony because the date of the ceremony fell on September 16th-17th. World War II had broken out on the 1st of September, 1939. And, therefore, all our bar-mitzvah preparations went in vein. We were supposed to celebrate it in Buyukada. After a religious ceremony at the Buyukada Synagogue, we were planning on celebrating it on Sunday at home with my family and friends. Many people had gotten invited. I specifically remember that food was going to be served as an a-la-carte buffet. Unfortunately, everything fell through with the beginning of the War. I put on my tefilim on a Thursday, and was asked to go to the synagogue on Saturday for a prayer. That was it.

My wife, Ester Modiano, was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in 1927. She was born seven months old, and the doctors did not have much hope for her to live. Her maiden name is Yahni. As far as I remember, her mother was born in Haskoy, Istanbul.

Since Ester was born in Bulgaria, her native tongue in Bulgarian. At the same time, she speaks French very well because she studied at a French school. She also had the opportunity to learn Hebrew while she was in Bulgaria. She finished elementary school at Saint Joseph in 1937. She was a very successful student. Unfortunately, she had to drop out of school at seventh grade because of the War. She had to leave Bulgaria.

When my wife was attending third grade in elementary school, anti-Semitic waves had started becoming a reality in Bulgaria. The Jewish people were forced to wear the six-edged, yellow Star of David on their chests so as to identify who they were. The Turkish Consulate-General in Bulgaria was a very nice, whole-hearted man. Ester does not remember his name. Since Ester and her family were still Turkish citizens, he summoned them to the Consulate one day, and told them that they needed to urgently leave the country, and that it was not possible for them to survive the death camps once they were there.

Being a 13 or 14 year old kid, just starting to get to know life, and wanting to become a French teacher in the future, Ester, had to leave behind all her wishes and hopes in Bulgaria.

When Ester's family first came to Istanbul, they lived in Sirkeci for a couple of days, and then her mother's younger sister gave the family two rooms in her house to sleep in. They lived there for a couple of months. Afterwards, they moved to an old house on Mektep Street in the Sishane neighborhood. The money they had brought with them drained very quickly. They went through tough times financially. In all this while, Ester had started comprehending Turkish. She also started working because the family's financial condition was quite rough. She first got a job at a stationary store. When the owner of the store sexually harassed her, however, she immediately quit that job. Luckily, she was able to locate a job through a friend at the Odeon Company's Accounting Department. She worked there until we got married.

She became very good friends with a lady named Rachel Adato while she was working there. She also became the star of the department, and was quickly recognized by the owner of the Company. They began trusting her with secret Company information. My wife was taking care of most of the workload for the Department. She was working at the Company's headquarters location. Odeon had three branch offices; in Kadikoy, Sirkeci and Beyoglu. She was controlling all incoming and outgoing goods to and from these branches, and trying hard not to make a mistake.

At the time, I was governing Mishne Torah's [an association founded to help support poor school children] Youth Commission, and there was a wave of new candidates applying to become members of the Association. I, of course, had a secretary working with me - given my status as the President. Whenever a candidate wanted to apply, my secretary would have him/her fill out a form, and include a picture on his/her application.

I remember joking about it with my secretary when my wife-to-be's application form arrived on my desk. I said to her "What is this, are we going to open up a school here or what?" because the picture my wife submitted with her application form was one that was taken when she was a student. My secretary said to me "You accept her membership, and then we can deal with it later." My wife actually became a member 15 days after that. The first meeting she attended was during a Purim ball. She was sitting by herself on one corner of the ballroom. I asked my secretary "Who is this lady sitting over there at the corner?" She responded "That would be your student."

As a coincidence, we were supposed to have our Association's 50th-year meetings in a week's time. A bunch of us decided to take the day off, and go somewhere. Some of us were going to Yesilkoy, and others were going to go to Tarabya. I was actually going to meet a lady friend at 3:00 PM in Tunel. I remember waiting for her until 3:30 PM, but she never showed. Well, I decided to go over to Tarabya to meet my friends there. My wife-to-be was there as well. This was my opportunity to see her in a closer manner. After Tarabya, my friends decided to go over to the municipal casino in Taksim, where the Ceylan Hotel stands today. I invited my wife there as my friend. We started dating shortly after.

My wife and I were dating around the same time she was working at Odeon. We were not sure as to whether we both wanted to get married. Plus, my family did not have a final decision. In an effort to get to know Ester better, my father went over to her workplace with an excuse for wanting to buy a three-wheeled bicycle for his nephew. He was also very close with Ester's managers. There,

he had an opportunity to see her and talk to her even though it was not too comprehensive a talk. Her managers, meanwhile, had given for her excellent references. In the end, my father decided that Ester and I should get married.

We got engaged on the 28th of May, 1952. We stayed engaged for about a year, and then got married on the 31st of May in 1953 at the Italian Synagogue. My father was a member of the Governing Board for the Italian Jewish Community in Turkey. This is probably why our wedding was really crowded and colorful. At the same time, my father was a member of the 'Fakirleri Koruma Dernegi [Support Center for the Poor]. So, all members from there attended our wedding with their significant others. Our whole family was also a member of the Misne Tora, and so all members from the Association attended our wedding as well. Actually, members of the Misne Tora put together a ceremony team for the special day. It was composed of ten male and ten female schoolchildren dressed in clothing specifically prepared for our wedding.

The 24th of March, 1999 fell on a Wednesday, and we had a meeting that day at the house of the Italian Jewish Community's President. When the meeting was over, I came back home. That was when I learned that my wife had been in an accident.