

Oro Benveniste

Wartime Experience: Hidden in Greece

I was born in Salonica Greece on December 2, 1925. My name was Oro Broudo but they called me Orico "little one". My father's name was Joseph, my mother's Allegra. I am an only child but had numerous very close relatives like cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents that I grew together. I had a happy childhood.

My ancestors of Spanish Jewish origin were evicted from Spain in 1492. During the reign of Queen Isabella, The Catholic, the infamous inquisition was established and the Jews who did not convert to Catholicism were evicted from Spain and found refuge in Salonica, which at that time was part of the Ottoman(Turkish) Empire. They welcomed us and saved our lives and under their leadership we prospered and established a new chapter in our life for 500 years. Salonica in the province of Macedonia was a beautiful, hospitable, cosmopolitan city, thriving economically and culturally with religious freedom and equal rights for advancement and prosperity. The population consisted of about 60,000 Jews and the spoken language was the Ladino "Judeo-Espagnol" of Castilian origin.

That prosperous life lasted until 1941 when the German army followed by the Gestapo and the SS conquered and occupied the northern part of Greece and Salonica. At the beginning my father, mother, and I were in the same hiding place in a warehouse, protected by a wonderful friend of my father in Salonica. Then we were able to relocate ourselves in Athens which because it was occupied by the Italians was a safe place, devoid of persecution.

Our trip from Salonica to Athens was a fearful and dangerous experience. A friend and business associate of my father help us find a way to escape. We bribed two Greek railroad engineers and were able to board a train bound for Athens. The train was supposed to be a civilian one. But at the last minute we realized it was a " German ammunition train". We boarded it reluctantly, because the Greek Partisan who were fighting the German troops, targeted such trains for destruction by blowing them up. We were lucky and we survived.

When Mussolini fell in September 1943 the Germans occupied Athens and they started implementing the Final solution there. I was hiding by myself in 4 different homes. My first safe house for hiding was in a suburb of Athens, just across from the local headquarters of the Gestapo. A loving older couple sheltered me and treated me as their own daughter. I called them uncle and aunt. Unfortunately, I had to leave this safe heaven because one German Officer got attracted to me and wanted to date me. I was then 17 years old. Fearing for the safety of my protectors in case the Germans found my true identity I left my hiding house in a state of fear and anguish. I don't remember where I went and how I found another safe place to hide with the help of some Gentile friends. A young lady the mother of two children, offered me shelter for about 3 to 4 months I was supposed to be a French Governess. I don't remember what particular incident led me to leave this safe house and seek refuge at another friend's

house in downtown Athens. This is where we got liberated by the English army in October of 1944 - a day of jubilation and happiness.

My parents were sheltered in a different home as were some of my relatives, all of us in Athens

In 1943 the "Final Solution" became an actuality and the deportation of the Jewish population to the Death Camps was implemented. We were liberated by the British army in October of 1944. By the time of the liberation my whole family from my maternal side survived. Unfortunately, none on my father's side family survived.

The day of the liberation was a day of sublime happiness, a moment of ecstasy. We celebrated in the streets by dancing, hugging, and kissing almost drunk with unbelievable joy and happiness. I survived by hiding for about two years like "Anne Frank " by the unselfish protection and hospitality of some of my Gentile friends who put their life on the line in order to save mine and other members of my family. I am grateful to them for the rest of my days, and I meet some of their children during a recent trip to Greece. It was quite an emotional reunion. The Jewish population lost about 95 % of its citizens.

In 1951 after graduating from the University of Athens Dental school as a DDS my late husband "a survivor of the Auschwitz death camp" and I immigrated to the USA through a special quota established by the American government for displaced persons. The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee assisted us in many ways and mostly financially.

After I became an American citizen, I brought my father and mother to the states. My father passed away in 1971 and my mother in 1983. By this time, I became the mother of my two children. My son Albert is a computer engineer and deals mostly in Software and has developed many programs in software applications. He is a UC Berkeley graduate. My daughter Tika is a professor of Cell Biology and does research in Multiple Sclerosis and Cancer She is a graduate of UCLA. She is married to a professor of Virology who does research in AIDS vaccine. They have a lovely, smart and loving child which is my pride and joy.

When we arrived in California, I discovered that my Dental Degree was not recognized by the State of California. After raising my family and being a mother and housewife for almost 10 years I decided to pursue a new career, I went back to college and I graduated in 1965 from UCSF Dental School as a Dental Hygienist. I practiced for 33 years and retired in 1998 after a successful and satisfying career.

This is the story of my life and my experiences during the war and the Holocaust. It has taught me to look at life from a different perspective and to count my blessings.