

The Jewish Community of Agrinion
By Michael Matsas

Translated by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos
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On the New Year, the families of Eliezer, Yiossoula, Reví, Elia Mizan Savva Mizan, Leon Matsas and Isaak Matsas families would gather in Nisim Mionis' home to read the book of prayers since Nisim Mioni knew Hebrew. The only one who did not take part in the religious service was Nisim's brother, Yonas, the teacher and member of the Communist Party who was one of the five leaders of EAM [left-wing resistance movement] in the area of Agrinion. The Eliezer family, who were also members of EAM, had a dog who was much beloved by the *andartes* [resistance fighters]. His name was Hitler.

We were in touch with my father's family but, unfortunately, I was the only one in my family who did not get to see my relatives again.

In 1942, my mother decided to visit her sisters in Ioannina, along with her parents and her brother who were in Albania. Since we no longer had a servant, my mother gave me some instructions on cooking and housekeeping before she left. She took my sister Ninetta with her.

During this period, most people traveled by bus, which used to have frequent breakdowns, or with the Italian convoys, which my parents preferred. The Italians would permit people to travel with them on their trucks and lorries, feeling that the *andartes* would not attack them with civilians on board.

My mother stayed about two days in Ioannina and in Albania. My father, also, went to visit his relatives for a few days in Ioannina.

Many people were traveling during this period, searching for food or work. The Italians had requisitioned all the hotels, and people who were traveling would rent beds in private homes. Many Jews, who knew my parents, would prefer to stay at our house, not so much because they did not have to pay anything, but because they feared that someone would steal their money, their good or their possessions if they rented elsewhere.

Every evening, we would have visitors. One evening there were 12 people sleeping on the floor. My parents wanted to host all those who could keep them in touch with what was happening in Ioannina and Athens.

In 1942, the heads of the Jewish families were ordered to present themselves to the Italian police and be registered. The Italian sergeant, who was responsible

for this, always believed that as long as the Italians were in Agrinion, nothing would happen to the Jews. This indicative hint should have made all of us nervous, but none of us were. Everyone obeyed and, shortly, this episode was forgotten with no one suspecting the hidden meaning behind his words.

In the beginning of 1943, Agrinion had the distinction of providing the greatest number of *andartes* [in proportion to the population] of any other city. The spirit of resistance was very much alive in our area. There were many instances where my mother would prepare baskets filled with sweets, which our friends, especially Maria Dimadi, would bring to the hospital where the *andartes* were being treated.

One day, we were taken by horseback after purchasing a sack of wheat from a villager. The individual who took us gave us this message: "Inside the sack of wheat there is a gun and bullets which you are to give to Chrysto Bokoro." I quickly transferred this valuable cargo to a lorry filled with many different items. On the way to Bokoros' house, we passed by many enemy soldiers and I was curious as to my 'mission.' I did not realize how what I was doing was very dangerous, up to the moment where I transferred the gun to Chrystos' sister, Kiki, and saw the expression of fear on her face.

The Bokoros family was our best friends in Agrinion. They were related to one of my father's bank colleagues in Preveza. They had given me a small plot of land on their farm outside of Agrinion and I planted potatoes there. The problem was that potatoes require a great deal of watering and all I had to water them was a bucket from the well. In addition, the field was located a number of kilometers outside of Agrinion in the village of Zapanti. My potatoes were the smallest in the world. I did not appreciate it then; it was only afterwards that I realized that every time I would go to water my potatoes, I was leaving Occupied Agrinion and going to a free area controlled by the *andartes*. I did not have to show my identification papers. I did not even have one. Neither the Italians nor the Germans had a road-block in the area where the *andartes* were.

In April of 1943, we learned about the deportation of the Jews of Thessaloniki and understood that the same would happen to us. My father went to the director of the bank to get his annual leave which was necessary for him to leave the city. The director informed my father that the Jews of Thessaloniki were 'different.' [Rumors had it that the Papagianni family to which the director belonged was one of the Jewish families that converted to Christianity in 1821.]

In May of 1943, the Polizos family, neighbors of ours and members of the Resistance, had visitors. I remember them. They were a well-dressed couple with a beautiful young daughter. Rumors had it that they were wealthy Jews from Thessaloniki who had arrived in Agrinion, escaping the anti-Jewish measures

inflicted on their fellow Jews by the Germans in the German Zone of Occupation. They had fled to Agrinion and avoided any contact with the community. After a few days, they left the city. Not even then did we think that, perhaps, we too should flee the city. Wasn't it said that we were 'different' as far as the Germans were concerned.

The Italians capitulated in 1943. German soldiers entered Agrinion and took over the Italian fortifications. The *andartes* tried to confiscate arms from the Italians and the Germans did everything possible to prevent this.

One day, while standing on the balcony in the rear of the house, I saw a German with a gun in hand chasing after a youth who was carrying a sack and shooting at him. The young boy ran into our courtyard, crossing over to the apartment on the first floor and jumping from the window that was directly under our balcony. The German also entered the courtyard, climbed the outside concrete stairs and entered our house. Our door was always kept open. He ran through to the balcony, and right in front of me, aimed his pistol at the fleeing youth below and pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. The gun did not fire. The *andarte* escaped unharmed and the German stared right at me, looking straight into my eyes. I thought that he was trying to see if I was happy that his gun had not fired and I was terrified. The German left without saying a word, looking at his weapon in disgust.

In September of 1943, the Germans arrived in Agrinion and we were unhappy. We did not know that if the Italians had not capitulated, all of the Jews in Greece would have been arrested by the Italian Army and would have been interred in a concentration camp.

It was thirty years later that I learned that what had looked like an innocent registration of the Jews by the Italian police had really been the first step in our destruction.

With the arrival of the Germans and the knowledge that the Jews of Thessaloniki had already been deported, we should have fled the city and gone to the free countryside. Yet, we remained in the comfort of our home! One day, the Germans requisitioned a room in the house right across the street owned by our friend, Kalidopoulos. His mother asked me to stay with her until her son, who was Director of the Agricultural Bank, came home. It was there that I met a young German soldier who appeared to be a good person and we became "friends." Since he did not speak Greek, and I did not speak German, I thought to find a common ground of communication and began to play around with the word "good" in a number of languages. We both knew how to say "good" in Greek, Latin, German, French, Spanish and Italian. [I also knew how to say "good" in Hebrew but I was smart enough to keep that quiet!] Our expertise in

linguistics made us both smile. Only, while I equated the word "good" with a general quality, he was actually thinking of "good" as meaning "good people." It was only when I said, "English-good," referring to the fact that this was the word for "good" in English, and he became enraged and slapped my face, thinking that I was saying that the "English were good," did I realize this. This was September 1943, and I still did not realize that even the kindest looking Germans were really beasts. After this experience, I should have asked my parents to leave the city. Yet, in spite of all my words, I did not ask them. I did not insist on us leaving our home.

When the Italians were in power they were so afraid of the Greek Resistance that they created fortresses out of every house they occupied. The Germans did not approve of these fortifications. They decided to handle the *andartes* differently. They wanted to teach them a lesson. The Germans sent 100 elite troops towards Thermos, about 30 miles from Agrinion, where the resistance forces in the area were located. Through informants in the underground, the *andartes* learned of the plan and ambushed the advancing German troops. The Germans were caught on a winding road, at the mercy of the *andartes*. Only one German motorcyclist survived and returned to Agrinion.

It was only after the war that we learned that it was our friend and neighbor, Maria Dimaldi, a member of one of the most prominent families in the city, who was responsible for this successful resistance operation, and many others. She first started her resistance activities by baking for patients in the resistance hospital, later providing other necessary items. When the Germans entered Agrinion, she was asked to act as an interpreter for the German commander, since she had studied in Germany. It was rumored that she became his mistress and was under his protection. On the night that the Germans left Agrinion, she was executed by the Greek Security Battalion, fearful of what she knew about their collaboration with the Germans. The Resistance had warned her to flee the city but she returned to her home to change into a comfortable pair of shoes and was arrested.

By September 1943, we suspected that things could get worse very soon. My father's request for his annual leave from the bank was approved. We hid our religious articles and books in the bank's archives. The Germans later requisitioned the building and everything, including our Hebrew prayer books and other religious articles [such as the megillat Esther] were sent to the nearby Agricultural Bank. After the war, we found everything intact.

Influenced by the spirit of resistance that permeated the city of Agrinion, we decided not to obey any orders that discriminated against the Jews, but we still remained in the city!

At the end of September, 1943, Yonas Mionis told my father that Elias Mizan had gone to Athens on business and had returned immediately when he learned that all the Jews of Athens had gone into hiding. It was in 1997 that Lazarus Mionis told me that it was his father, Nisim Mionis, who had gone to Athens to buy merchandise. When he heard the news, he bought some gold *liras* and hurriedly returned to Agrinion. "Everyone is getting ready to leave," Yonas continued. "My brother did not want me to tell you too soon, since you do not have a shop and could leave immediately. I do not agree with him. That is why I am telling you now. Tomorrow morning I am leaving the city."

As soon as my father heard the news, he got in touch with the landlord who wanted to take over our apartment. We distributed our furniture to our friends and neighbors. There was a storage area in my father's bank that was used to store food to be distributed monthly to the employees. Dimitris Pipiringos, who was in charge of the distribution, took some oil, wheat and corn from my father. He was instructed to give the food periodically to individuals who would come requesting it, only if they were in possession of written permission from my father. The same agreement was made with Yannis Exarchos, Andreas Papadopoulos, Michail Bellos and Kostas Maniakis. How could we know that only a few months later all of them, with the exemption of Kostas Maniakis, would become collaborators of the Germans as members of the Greek Security Battalion. One of our friends, Yannis Exarchos, became captain of the reserves and my high school principal, Pantazis, gave a speech in the town square exhorting Greek youth to 'imitate the Germans.'

After we distributed everything we would not be taking with us, we started to pack things [clothing, food, utensils, medicine] for our new residence. We packed them in waterproof sacks made from the tents used by the soldiers. I was even sent to the dentist to have a bad tooth extracted. There would be no medical or dental facilities where we were going. In a few days we were ready to leave but we still did not know where we were going. We were not politically sophisticated and did not realize the political divisions among our fellow Greeks. We had no idea that people were supposed to be either 'rightwing' or 'leftwing.' We just wanted to remain neutral and be anti-German, but this was not possible. Yannis Exarchos wanted us to go to Arta and, from there, to the mountains where EDES [a nationalistic, rightwing resistance organization] was in control. Our friend Christos Bokoros invited us to stay in his house for a few days and, then, to leave the city with the horses he would provide. We decided to follow his plan and this put us in touch with EAM/ELAS [the leftwing, Communist controlled resistance organization]. My father went to our neighbor, Maniakis, and told him that we were going to the *andartes*. He told Maniakis to make sure that no one informed to the Germans. My father was particularly suspicious of the woman who lived next door who was fanatically religious. Maniakis assured my father that no one would tell.

October 2, 1943, a porter transferred all our belongings to Mr. Bokoros' house. A few minutes later, Mother, Ninetta and I went to Mr. Bokoros' house. My father went to the bank to transfer his money and papers to the bank director. On the way to Bokoros' house, we encountered Mr. Zaharopoulos, a bus driver. He whispered to us that all the Jews of Athens had gone into hiding and that he was about to come to our house to tell us this. My mother thanked him and told him that we were leaving right away.

There was a great commotion at Bokoros' house. People were coming and going. There was a battle going on between the Germans and the *andartes* and there were no spare horses for civilian use. To make matters worse, a German soldier entered the house, looked around and left without saying anything. There were many times where Greek collaborators would disguise German soldiers and this unexpected, suspicious visit alarmed my mother and the Bokoros family.

Thomas Bokoros went to the bank to find my father. Bokoros saw how busy my father was with all the formalities and went directly to the Director of the Bank. He told him to forget about the formalities and to get my father out of there immediately. The Director knew that Bokoros was with the Resistance and when Bokoros told him that he would be held responsible if anything happened to my father, he let him go without checking the amount of money being given to my father. My father left the bank on a supposed twenty-day leave of absence.

Since there were no horses available, Thomas and his brothers thought of another plan. They coordinated the plan with Psilopoulos, who had a car that he used to carry passengers to Houni, a village located 30 miles from Agrinion. The next day, Sunday, the 3rd of October, 1943, Psilopoulos' "gazozene" parked in front of Bokoros' house. We loaded our things on top of the car and, after some more passengers boarded, we headed out for Houni 'in style.' The car stopped for a few minutes and my mother noticed one of the Eliezer brothers. She called him over and told him that we were leaving and that they should immediately do the same. Shortly afterwards, we were stopped at a German roadblock. The guards accepted the raisins and cigarettes that Psilopoulos offered them and we left occupied territory forever.

If my father had been delayed by the paperwork necessary for his leave for even two days, I am sure that this story would not have been written.

On the 5th of October, two days after our departure from Agrinion, two Germans visited the bank, looking for my father. I am sure that this was not a courtesy call. They were told that my father was on leave. Judging by what had happened in other cities, this action on the part of the Germans was probably intended to take my father hostage and to hold him so that they could gather up the rest of

the community. If this assumption is correct, we left just in time. I am sure that if my father were arrested, my mother would have never left without him.

On October 8, 1943, the Greek newspapers published the following orders:

- 1) All Jews residing in German-occupied territory are to go to the permanent homes they resided in before June 1, 1943.
- 2) Jews are forbidden to abandon their homes or to change residence.
- 3) Jews residing in Athens or its suburbs are to report within five days to the Jewish Community of Athens and register. Outside of Athens, the registration will take place at municipal and community offices.
- 4) Jews who do not comply with this order will be executed. Non-Jews who hide Jews, offer them shelter or aid in their escape will be sent to a concentration camp or worse.
- 5) Jews of foreign nationality are to present themselves on October 18 at 8:00 am to the Jewish Community of Athens and submit their passports. Outside of Athens, this declaration is to be made to Greek authorities.
- 6) The Jewish religious community of Athens is recognized as the only legal representative of the Jews of Greece. Without delay, it is to appoint representatives and commence functioning.
- 7) After registration, all male Jews over the age of 14 must present themselves every other day to the Jewish Community Office.
- 8) Jews are forbidden to be out in public from 5:00 pm to 7:00 am.
- 9) Greek police have been given instructions to arrest anyone who does not comply with these orders, or anyone who helps them to disobey.
- 10) The above order considers anyone who is the descendant of three generations of Jews as a Jew regardless of the religion he now practices.

When this order was issued in Agrinion, the Germans did not find any Jews prepared to obey their orders. Thus, the Jewish Community of Agrinion has a unique distinction of resistance among the Jewish communities of occupied Europe. It is the only community where not one of its members registered with the Germans, nor was deported and sent to the crematoria. On the 23rd of October, the German consul sent the following note to the German embassy in Athens, mentioning the Jews of Agrinion: "I have the honor to report to you that after the announcement in the newspapers regarding the order for the obligatory registration of the Jews, they disappeared. It is believed that they went to the mountains."

In retrospect, we should have left the city when the Italians requested our registration. It would have been very easy then and no law would have been broken. Those who helped us would not have been in any danger, since they would not have broken any law.

Now, looking back on that exhilarating trip to freedom on the 3rd of October, how we sighed with relief when we finally arrived safely. Before long, we were stopped by an armed soldier wearing a shabby uniform. We exchanged warm greetings. We knew him very well. He had worked as a cabinet maker and had polished our furniture. The word ELAS was embroidered on his cap. I thought that I had discovered a mistake in spelling [ELLAS, meaning Greece, is spelled with two 'Ls'] but fortunately I did not say anything. I found out later that ELAS stood for National People's Liberation Army.

We passed the village of Agios Vlassis, where we saw Leon Revi, and arrived in Houni. The road ended near a half-built bridge near a beautiful fountain. It had been built by the Italians when the enemy soldier were not afraid to be stationed so far from Agrinion.

My father explained to the driver that he wanted to go to a village far from the road. The driver understood and mentioned the village of Psilovrachos, three hours by foot from Houni. We arranged with some local villagers to provide transportation for us. Before long, we were on the road with two horses and a donkey. My mother and my sister were squeezed in between the bags loaded on top of the horses. My father and I went on foot.

We felt marvelous. The weather was exceptional and the scenery exceedingly beautiful. We were in free territory and we felt like carefree tourists, rather than fleeing, oppressed Jews.