

Echoes of Remembrance

Professor Asher Matathias Recounts His Family's Story of Survival in Greece During the Holocaust

BY MALKIE SCHULMAN



Prof. Matathias with a board filled with his life history

"It's not by accident that I am called by the sobriquet 'the singing professor.' My name, Asher, literally meaning 'happy' and 'blessed with fortune,'" states Prof. Asher J. Matathias, Professor Emeritus of American government studies at St. John's University in New York. For despite the hardships he has endured, from his family's harrowing beginnings during the Holocaust through his early youth growing up in the virulently antisemitic country of Greece, Prof. Matathias remains, now in his 80th year, as upbeat and optimistic as ever.

History of Antisemitism

Prof. Matathias's resilience and optimism stand in stark contrast to the backdrop of Greece's tumultuous history, particularly regarding its record of discrimination towards the Jewish population.

Greece's modern history, Prof. Matathias explains, dating from its 1821 revolution against the Ottoman Turks, is replete with civil strife, dictatorships, assassinations, and foreign power interventions. The longest period of peace and democracy Greeks have enjoyed is the past 50 years, beginning in 1974 with the overthrow of a military junta. Among the victims in the upheavals of the last 203

years were Greek Jews. Though their presence in the country precedes the arrival of Christianity, Jews were always considered "the other" and were never truly trusted. In the 1821 Greek uprising, the Jews were seen as not sufficiently enthusiastic and were subjected to violent attacks.

This perception likely stemmed from the fact that Turkey was one of the few countries that welcomed Jews after the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Many Sephardic, Ladino-speaking Jews were invited to settle in Salonica (belonging at that time to Turkey), which eventually became a major Jewish city. As the native Greeks never shared Turkey's positive sentiments towards the Jewish people, when Salonica reverted to Greek control in 1912, the government passed Hellenization laws forcing Jews to become fluent in Greek and to keep their businesses open on Shabbat – a law that's still upheld today!

Another group, Romaniote Jews, trace their origins farther back to the Hellenistic period, around the 4th century BCE, following Alexander the Great's conquests. From 146 BCE under Roman rule (from which they derive their name) and later during the Byzantine period starting around 330 CE, the Romaniote community flourished. Distinct from Sephardic Jews, who arrived much later, Romaniote Jews have a unique, longstanding history in Greece. Nevertheless, despite their established history, they

are still viewed as outsiders to Greek gentiles. Prof. Matathias, a proud Jewish Greek American citizen, is determined to change that perception. How successful he will ultimately be is anyone's guess, as, in his own words, "Greek antisemitism, the world's oldest disease, is deeply embedded."

According to Professor Matathias, the relationship between Greek Christians and Greek Jews has always been fraught with tension. This is due to both religious and commercial reasons. Jews of Greece have generally been more financially successful, which historically has led to jealousy among their Christian counterparts.

"Believe it or not," Prof. Matathias says, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,' a notorious and fraudulent document first published in Russia in 1903 that purports to record a secret Jewish conspiracy to achieve world domination, is still a bestseller in Greece today."

Additionally, the Greek Orthodox Church is one of the few branches of Christianity that has never formally retracted the belief that Jews were responsible for the death of their god.

Greece and the Holocaust

With all the above information, it will not come as a surprise that most of the Greek Christians were

more than happy to hand over Jews to the Nazis when they invaded in 1940. In Prof. Matathias's words, "In no time, and with the cooperation and collaboration of Greek Christians, Jewish properties were confiscated and huge ransoms collected. But nothing could forever forestall the inevitable roundup and transport to the Jews' doomed final destination, Auschwitz."

According to Prof. Matathias, Greece had the highest deportation rate of any country – 87%, though, of course, number-wise, countries like Poland lost more. The biggest deportation in Greece took place in Salonica since that was the main hub of the Jewish population. In total, almost 70,000 Greek Jews – out of 80,000 – were murdered in the Holocaust.

According to family lore, Prof. Matathias's father saved his mother (and her sister), and little Asher (Prof. Matathias) saved them all. Prof. Matathias explains that his father was born in the city of Trikala to Romaniote parents. Although the Romaniote Jews adopted many customs of the Sephardic Jews, they weren't considered scholars or cultured like the Sephardim. Consequently, the Romaniotes were often looked down upon by the Sephardic community. His mother, who spoke French, Greek, and Ladino and was a graduate of the French-inspired Alliance Israelite Universelle, was born in Salonica. Nevertheless, despite his less exotic background, at the age of 21, his father managed to woo his mother. They were married in 1942 and together with her younger sister, Mendi, they moved to the city of Volos. Their relocation from Salonica saved their lives since the first Jews to be deported were the Jews of Salonica, among them Professor Matathias's maternal grandparents and their two young sons who were ultimately murdered in Auschwitz.

In Volos, they heard what was happening in Salonica. Business associates of Asher's father, Phroso and Yiorgos Stamos, approached the newlyweds to warn of the impending disaster that would also befall Volos Jews. They urged them to follow them to a cave outside a nearby village where they would be hidden.

"This was in 1943, and by then, my mother was pregnant. Six months later, on December 3, 1943, in the primitive cave, I came into the world. Because it was dangerous to circumcise a baby while living in a cave under those conditions, I did not have a brit until I was eight months old after we were liberated. Being born during this time makes me among the youngest of the still 245,000 worldwide survivors."

A little bit of background about Phroso and Yiorgos Stamos. They were a childless couple who were eager to have a child, and they came up with a novel idea. During the roundup of Jews by the Germans, the gentile couple approached Prof. Matathias's parents with an astounding proposition: "If you don't survive the Shoah, but your baby does, we'd like to raise him as our own. We'll baptize him and give him a new name, Apostolos (Apostle, for they believed they would be offering a soul to their 'savior')."

To sweeten the offer, they said little Asher would eventually become the heir to their fabulous fortune as well.

"My parents agreed," shares Prof. Matathias, "for saving me was paramount to their calculation. But, alas for them and happily for us, our family was intact at war's end."

Still, the Stamos couple were not ready to give up. They came back with another proposition: believing that, as a young couple, Prof. Matathias's parents would have other children, would they, nevertheless, give their first-born over to them?

Of course, little Asher's parents had no desire to hand their beloved child over but the couples' relations remained strained until they agreed to have the matter resolved by the head bishop in Volos, Metropolitan Ioakim, who thankfully "ruled" that the Jewish parents keep their baby.

The Stamos couple eventually bought a teenager from an impoverished family, Thanasis, who in time became their heir.

"They were present at our wedding, on August 29, 1970, to my wife, Anna," shares Prof. Matathias. It was the last time I saw this amazing couple who saved our family. I am still trying to get them recognized by Jerusalem's Yad Vashem."

In Asher's mother's latter years, she'd say to him, "Asher, you are my hero. You saved our family. I'd say, 'Mom, how can that be? I was just a baby.' She'd answer, 'You saved us by being quiet!'"

This silence proved crucial when, upon learning of Germany's plan for Greek Jews, righteous gentile Consul Helmut Scheffel, the Reich's representative in Volos, urged Metropolitan Ioakim to encourage his parishioners to help Jews. Thus, when the Germans arrived, only the elderly and infirm were at the town square. Everybody had been forewarned and all those who were able had run away. The Nazis, together with Greek collaborators, combed the countryside. Many Jews were found, betrayed by the cries of their children. Baby Asher was quiet, so his family remained safe.



The Jews of Salonika being rounded up by Nazis in the town square, July 1942



Jews being rounded up in Ioannina, March 1944

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There was a time, however, when a German patrol passed and discovered them.

"My father was away helping the resistance when a German officer entered our cave," says Prof. Matathias. "He saw my makeshift crib and said, 'I left a baby like this in Hamburg, and then, turning to his men, he said 'Raus!' and they all left. Because of that action of one German, I cannot hate all Germans and I cannot boycott German products."

Nevertheless, that doesn't stop Prof. Matathias



Early post-war stroll with Asher and his father along the Volos boardwalk



The family bidding farewell before leaving Greece

from asking Germans of a certain age that he meets, "Where were you and what were you doing during World War II?"

There were other cases of non-Jews helping Greek Jews, although not enough, he laments. For example, Police Chief Evangelos Averoff issued false identity and baptismal certificates in Athens. On the island of Zakynthos, Mayo Karer and Metropolitan Chrysostomos presented only their names upon given the command to provide a list of the island's Jews. The resistance movements were also instrumental in saving lives of Jews.

As for the rest of the Greek population, the following story sums it up. After the war, about 1,200 Auschwitz inmates returned to Greece to attempt to pick up their shattered lives. Upon their return, they were told, "Why are you back? Why didn't Hitler finish the job?"

Growing Up in Volos - The Aftermath

After the war, Prof. Matathias's family, consisting of Asher followed by sister Mary (1945), and sister Rachelle (1952), were eager to leave Greece. Assimilation and intermarriage were rampant, and it had been clearly demonstrated over and over that the Greek gentile population was no friend to the Jews. In fact, in the 1947 United Nations General Assembly vote on Resolution 181, which proposed the partition of Palestine to establish a Jewish state and an Arab state, Greece voted against the Jewish state.

"I took that as a personal affront," shares Prof. Matathias. "To me, it was another slap in the face from the Greek government. To vote no, only two years after the Holocaust!"

Today, Prof. Matathias has put together what he calls "A Petition of Conscience: An Appeal to Correct History and Heal Hearts" that he has circulated in 10 countries, so far, demanding a repudiation of this vote on Resolution 181 and issuing an overdue apology to Israel and the entire Jewish People.

Meanwhile, shortly after the war, says Prof. Matathias, "Pop's younger brother Moshe had braved the British embargo on Jewish immigration to Mandate Palestine and settled in Holon. His intention was to give us the signal to join the new nation when things

Immediately after World War II, from 1945-1949, Greece, who it seems was never very good at getting its act together, was plunged into a civil war.

"Pop was called to serve," Prof. Matathias recalls. "However, he insisted upon the condition that his young family live with him on the base, to better assure a modicum of food during a time of famine, where people daily were picked up dead on the street. Because of his literacy, Pop became a major's aide. One day, the major called my father barking, 'Jew, come into my office!' Pretending not to hear, my father heard the same order given more emphatically. Walking into the major's office, my father declared, 'If I hear you call me again in this manner, I will report you!'"

The major apologetically explained that "there was no disrespect intended, it's just the expression of a social construct commonly in use."

Unfortunately for the Matathiases, after the war, most of the surviving Jews, especially the Judaically learned ones, left Greece for Israel, the United States, Canada and friendlier European countries. Consequently, Prof. Matathias grew up with very little Jewish knowledge. He knew he was a Jew, though, because his non-Jewish counterparts never let him forget it.

"My memories," he shares, "include being called Jew boy and other unprintable epithets."

Asher was the only Jewish child in his class.

"I would walk to synagogue and sit next to my father in synagogue every Saturday, but then after services at 8:00 am, we'd go to his place of business to open it up."

This was the law, Prof. Matathias notes.

"If my father was one minute late, he'd receive a citation from the policeman who was standing outside his store waiting for him."

Nevertheless, Mr. Matathias had a non-Jew do all the necessary writing for his business on Shabbat.

"I would say, in Greece, we practiced Orthodox style Judaism, not American style Judaism. It wasn't until moving to America that we learned about the different strands of Judaism, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. Our synagogue in Volos was Orthodox; the men were on the main floor and the women sat separately up in the balcony, and there was no microphone."

A particularly trying period of the year for young Asher was Greek Orthodox Holy Week. "Children who passed as my friends would distance themselves upon the indoctrination of parents who taught that we Jews looked for gentile children from whom to extract blood for the baking of our seder matzahs. On the day of what they say is the crucifixion of their deity, they'd stand in front of our home and chant in unison: 'Simera mavros ouranos, simera mavri mera, today is a dark sky, it's a dark day.' My Mom would open the shutters and shoo them away saying, 'There's nothing wrong with the perfectly blue, sunny sky, go away!'"

Although all the other rabbis in the country had been exterminated in World War II, Chochom Moshe Pesach, the chief rabbi of their city, had been spared. He was a learned scholar and a significant figure in young Asher's life. Intimidating yet welcoming, Rabbi Pesach wore a tunic that combined Greek Orthodox

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we'd like to raise him as our own. We'll baptize him
and give him a new name, Apostolos."

calmed down a bit. Unfortunately, that was never to be; the conditions then were as dangerous as they are today." So, the Matathias family remained for the time being in Volos.

and Magen David symbols, signifying his official recognition by the Greek state as the religious leader of their city.

"Chochom Pesach gave me lessons in aleph-bet and early on indoctrinated us with Zionism. I recall part of my daily routine was putting drachmas (Greek currency) into the Jewish National Fund tzedakah box."

Greece being a patriarchal society, Prof. Matathias as a first-born male was treated royally.

"In my formative years, I was treated like a *pasha*, which means prince in Turkish. I would attend all my father's business meetings, and he'd say to his associates, 'In London, the prince is Prince Philip. I have a prince named Asher.' My head expanded at that. However," he laughs ruefully, "I lost my edge once I moved to America, got married and had three daughters!"

Life in America

In the mid-1950s, Thessaly, Greece experienced catastrophic earthquakes. The United States felt guilty for not doing enough for Greek Jews during the Holocaust and offered to help ravaged Jews either to rebuild in place or by waiving the still in-place immigration quotas and allow them to emigrate to America.

"I was 12½ years old at the time," says Prof. Matathias, "and I remember my parents discussing whether we should travel by plane or ship. My father said, 'We'll be in America for the rest of our lives. Let's go slowly by boat so we can see the different countries.'"

Because the Greek port was not deep enough to accommodate the monster of an oceanliner (a 35,000-ton ship) they were to sail on, they first traveled via train, crossing mountains until they reached Naples, Italy, where they were to pick up the USS *Constitution*.

"Europe was one side and Africa was on another," recalls Prof. Matathias, "We sailed to Genoa, a port city in Northern Italy; we picked up immigrants in Algiers, the capital city of Algeria in North Africa. Then we sailed around the Strait of Gibraltar which separates Europe from Africa."

The Matathias family arrived in America in 1956. Their arrival was noted by the congregants of the Sephardic Temple of New Lots, Brooklyn, a Sephardic shul made up of Balkan, Greek and Turkish Jews. Consequently, they were invited to settle in New Lots. The spiritual leader and founding rabbi was Rabbi Arnold B. Marans who worked hard to maintain the cultural heritage of his constituents. In 1962, the shul relocated to Cedarhurst, NY, and the Matathias family eventually moved there as well. Later, when Prof. Matathias married, he and his wife settled in Astoria. In 1976, they bought a house in Woodmere, where they have resided ever since.

"As soon as we moved to the U.S., I became a fiend for Jewish knowledge," shares Prof. Matathias. "I went to Talmud Torah, soaking up everything I learned."

Asher had a beautiful voice, and when he turned bar mitzvah, he became assistant cantor. Unfortunately, his bar mitzvah celebration was marred by the

tragic death of his sister from childhood leukemia.

"I put on my teffilin that morning, had pound cake to celebrate and that night my father returned from the hospital with the news that my younger sister, Mary, had died."

There was no Shabbat bar mitzvah kiddush for Asher that year. Fifty years later, however, Prof. Matathias relates, "My mother called me and said, 'This year we're going to celebrate the bar mitzvah you never had.' So, at 63 years old, I leined the haftarah in the Sons of Israel in Woodmere followed by a catered kiddush. It was a very emotional day for all of us."

Greek Antisemitism Still Flourishing

"When I began to study further, I became an intense reader and opinion presenter on the Holocaust. In fact, I learned the awful truths of Greek antisemitism even in America, for nothing was ever written or said in public and parochial schools then, or now!"

Today, there are fewer than 5,000 Jews left in Greece. This number, according to Prof. Matathias, will be reduced even further through intermarriage and assimilation.

"In our extended family in Greece," he shares, "there is not one family that doesn't have a Christian member. Anybody who wants to have a religious wedding ceremony must be baptized, otherwise they can only have a civil marriage."

"I call Greece a 4th world country. My students argue with me and tell me, there's no such thing. But in my opinion," says Prof. Matathias, "Greece occupies a perch all by itself. It's a backward, patriarchal and intolerant country."

Of course, it's no surprise that Chabad has a presence in Athens today. But there is only one kosher restaurant under its auspices. Shechita is not allowed. All kosher meat is imported. Performing circumcision is not permitted either.

Message for Mankind

Prof. Matathias leaves us with timeless yet powerful truths: be empathetic, compassionate, and ever so humble. Never scapegoat immigrants or refugees – remember, the Jewish people were once strangers in a strange land. Give generously; nobody has ever become poor from giving. If you can't give materially, give kindness!

Get involved in service; Prof. Matathias continues to lead the Five Towns B'nai B'rith Lodge. Stand up to bullies. Remember, there is nothing new under the sun, and while progress is often slow, the Pirkei Avot instructs us that although the task is enormous, we cannot escape the responsibility of undertaking it.

"Vamos a empezar, let's begin!" ▲

Professor Emeritus Asher J. Matathias has instructed children and adults for over 55 years, with over 20 years as a popular American Government instructor at St. John's University's Queens Campus. He remains active on the lecture circuit, participates in Zoom sessions and contributes to the Names Not Numbers project, where middle school students interview and film Holocaust survivors for posterity.



A family passport, showing them arriving in New York on January 30, 1956



Prof. Matathias with his wife, Anna, at their wedding