


It's Greek To Me

**A fascinating interview
with Professor
Asher J. Matathias**

AS TOLD TO ESTY MENDELOWITZ

Asher on a visit to
Hamodias offices
in Brooklyn

Ayos Lavrendios, on Mt.
Pelion at the southeastern part
of Thessaly in central Greece



Jews have lived a problematic existence in Greece for over 2,000 years, sustaining their most devastating destruction during humanity's flight from sanity: The Holocaust.

Prof. Asher J. Matathias was born in Yavan/Greece in 1943 to a Romaniote father and Sephardic mother. His parents survived World War II by hiding in a cave, where he was born. He continues to advocate for Greek Jews, fighting the inherent anti-Semitism of Greek society, and lecturing around the country about Greek Jews, the Holocaust, Israel and current events.

In honor of Chanukah, Inyan presents some fascinating tidbits from his incredible life story, in his own words.

MY FAMILY

My father, Jacob Matathias, was a businessman in Volos, a beautiful port city located south of Salonika and north of Athens. He had a store on Ermou Street, the name for the commercial hubs in major Greek cities.

My mother's father was a successful restaurateur, even offering live music in his place located in the prewar mostly Jewish city of Salonika. Their family name was Atoun, and they were descended from the Sephardim expelled from Spain in 1492 after refusing the option to convert. My mother, Nina, spoke a Judeo-Spanish tongue, which my father (who spoke only Greek) agreed to learn in order to marry her.

My parents married on September 6, 1942, during the German occupation. They took a risk — they didn't want to separate and reunite after the war. They said, "Come what may, we will stay together."

IN HIDING

My parents were close friends with my father's business associates, Yorgos and Phroso Stamos, a childless couple who were devout Orthodox Christians. They approached my father and told him they had heard what happened to the Jews in Salonika and offered to help. They hid my parents in a primitive refuge on land they owned in a village called Ayos Lavrendios, on Mt. Pelion at the southeastern part of Thessaly in central Greece.

My parents lived without electricity or plumbing, and subsisted on a diet of feta cheese, olives, stone-baked bread, and goat's milk. My father assisted various underground groups in the area by bringing supplies. He didn't tell me very much about that time.

When my mother was ready to give birth to me in December of 1943, a midwife was summoned from a neighboring village. She traveled a long way in the snow, completing her task by delivering a healthy but undernourished baby boy.

As news of the roundup of Salonikan Jews by the Germans reached Volos, the Jews there sought refuge in similar mountain hideaways. German patrols combed the area to trap and recover Jews, and eventually they located my family's hiding place. The head of the patrol peered into the cave and upon seeing me he smiled, motioning that he had a baby of a similar age back home in Germany. He then shouted "Raus!" (Out!) to his fellow soldiers and they left, never

to bother us again. Because of the actions of that one soldier, I cannot hate *all* Germans or boycott their products.

We stayed in the cave until the spring of 1944, when we were liberated and my parents could finally celebrate their *bechor's bris milah*, eight months instead of eight days after birth! I was named Asher, after my uncle who was killed in an air raid at the beginning of the war.

For many years, my parents did not speak about their experiences during the Holocaust. As they got older, the stories slowly emerged. When my mother became a nonagenarian (she left us earlier this year at age 96), she would forget what she ate a few minutes before, but she was lucid about old times. She often told me, "Asher, you were my hero during the Holocaust."

I couldn't imagine what she was talking about. "But I was just a baby then," I protested.

She replied, "Other families were betrayed by the wails of their children, but you kept quiet."

A PROPOSAL REFUSED

While in hiding, the Stamoses approached my father, and said, "Jacob, in case you don't make it through this horrible period but your baby survives, can we adopt him?" They were extremely wealthy and could offer a child a great life, and they wanted a son and heir. Since we were in hiding, my parents could not give me a *bris*, so I didn't have a name yet. They wanted to name me Apostolos, baptize me, and never tell me about my origins. My parents were, of course, horrified at the thought and gently refused them. Eventually they relented, reasoning that if they didn't make it, at least their son could survive.

After we were liberated and, *baruch Hashem*, our family was still intact, the Stamoses told my parents, "You are a young couple and will still have more children. Leave your baby with us. Your family is alive due to us, after all."

My father told them, "We honor you and thank you for your help, but we cannot sacrifice our child."

When they insisted, my parents agreed to go to the Metropolitan (a high-ranking priest in the Greek Orthodox Church,



Ashers passport photo of 1955

similar to a Cardinal) to seek his advice. The Metropolitan must have been influenced by the wisdom of Shlomo Hamelech, because he said, "No, it would be cruel for Asher's parents to know their child is so close, yet have no contact with him." The Stamoses were understandably very upset, but they did reconcile with my parents eventually.

The Stamoses was posthumously recognized by the Volos Jewish community for saving our lives, and in the end, they did have an heir. They purchased a poor teenager with his consent, whose name was Thanasis. When I visited Greece after their death, he showed me around his land and livestock, and I thought to myself, "There, but for the grace of Hashem, go I!" If not for my parents' convictions, I could have been him. I joked to him that had my parents agreed, half of his possessions would now be mine!

After the war, my family went back to regular life in Volos. In 1955, an earthquake shook our hometown. Our home and business were gone, while we lived in tents. I recall our school held classes *al fresco*, outside on the grass. It was then that my parents decided to move to America.

COMING TO AMERICA

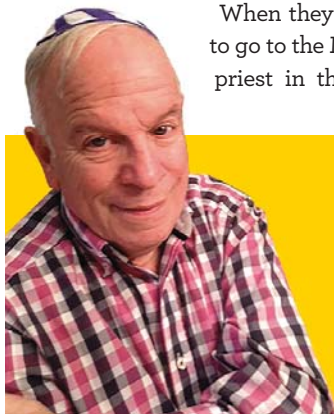
We immigrated to America in 1956 on the USS *Constitution*. When my father was asked his name, he said, "Matathias."

The official processing us asked, "Why don't you change your name to something more typically American?"

My father asked him what his name was. He said it was Mezevinsky. My father told him, "Is your name typical? Leave our name as it is. It has been in our family for generations."

The Joint Distribution Committee gave us a hearty welcome, as well as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), thought they weren't sure what to do with us. We didn't speak Yiddish, and they weren't aware of Ladino. We felt very isolated. We were placed in a HIAS apartment complex on Lafayette Street in Lower Manhattan for the first few weeks. On our first night in New York, I woke up bathed in sweat, thinking another earthquake was happening, but it turned out to be the tremor of the subway many floors below us.

While living in East New York, I thought I was picking up English by playing with the kids outside, but it turned out to be Yiddish! Our Rabbi, Rabbi Arnold B. Marans, the Ashkenazi Rabbi of a Sephardic congregation (and now rabbi emeritus of The Sephardic Temple in Cedarhurst, New York),



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upon discovering I had a good singing voice, took me as his teenage cantor on Shabbos morning. Later on, the board of the shul offered to pay for me to train professionally as a *chazzan*, but I refused. I couldn't see myself making money off something I did voluntarily.

I went to graduate school at The New School for Social Research, today known as New School University. In the mid-'60s, I had many émigré Jewish professors from Germany and Austria. I worked on my doctorate degree in political science, but I never finished it.

FINDING MY GREEK BRIDE

As *hashgachah* would have it, my father had sold his business before he left to America to a Mr. Maurice Frances, who later became my father-in-law. He sold buttons and sewing notions. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

In 1970, I was 26 years old and burning with a desire to retrace our steps in Greece as I remembered them and to meet the couple who had saved us during the Holocaust. My parents arranged the trip for me, and I stayed at our ancestral home, where my step-grandmother, Rebecca, still lived. She said to me, "Don't waste your time staying with an old lady like me. There's a young lady here from Israel visiting her family. Maybe go and meet her."

When I met her family, they knew everything about me, because they had known my parents before we immigrated to America. We got engaged within a few days. I suggested we hold the wedding the following summer, since my parents were on vacation and had left Greece just before I arrived. My bride's parents said, "This is not done, for what will people say? It can be arranged to have them married now!"

So I called my father, and he came for the wedding, which was held 13 days after we were introduced, on August 29, 1970. The Stamoses attended the wedding as well, and that was the last time I saw them.

At that time, Greece was under a military government, a dictatorship of colonels, which lasted from 1967-1974. Thus, when we applied for exit visas for my new wife, the ministry of interior said it would take six months. My wife, in tears, escorted me to the airport, for I needed to return to resume my academic career, but I promised her I'd do whatever I could to make sure we were together in time for the Yamim Tovim.

When I got home, I wrote a letter to our distinguished U.S. Senator Jacob K. Javits (I joke to my students that before he was a convention center, he was a senator!). He called the State Department on my behalf, who called our Ambassador to Greece. The Ambassador telegraphed my wife, and she



joined me in time for Yom Kippur! Later, when I was the Republican and Liberal candidate for Assemblyman, 36 A.D. Astoria, New York, Senator Javits endorsed me and even campaigned for me.

JEWRY IN GREECE TODAY

I have taught political science at St. Johns University for the last 20 years. I tell my students, many of whom are immigrants, that only in the United States can an immigrant empathize deeply and emotionally with other immigrants; but we all belong to a compassionate, welcoming, blessed nation!

Though I have lived in the United States since I was a young boy of 12, I visit Greece (after all, my in-laws live there, though now only my 93-year-old

mother-in-law Toula remains), and have a become a frequent speaker there on the air, in print, and in pulpits.

My current project is the Petition of Conscience: Appeal to Heal Hearts. It demands that Greece, the only Christian and European country to vote against the United Nations Resolution 181 that established the Jewish State, recant that ballot and apologize to Israel and the Jewish people. Eighty-seven percent of Greek Jewry vanished in the Holocaust; just 1,200 Jews returned. The response of the Greeks was, "Why are you back? Hitler should have finished you off!" They squatted on Jewish property and were not happy to see the Jews back.

According to the ADL, Greece is the most anti-Semitic country in Europe, with 67% of its population afflicted with the corrosive disease of anti-Semitism. Holocaust denial is rampant, and of the 300 members of the Hellenic parliament, 17 are neo-Nazis, members of the not-so-Golden Dawn party. That's why I have an obsession to right these wrongs.

They tell me to calm down and take it easy. I tell them, "It's been 70 years; I don't know if I have another 70." I also tell them, "Greeks must withdraw that notorious vote, not for the Jews or Israel, but for themselves — to raise their stature as a moral country and ethical people."

Jewry in Greece today is in a sorry state. There is no Jewish family that has not been ravaged by the scourge of intermarriage, and according to Greek law, the non-Christian spouse must be baptized.

Today, most of the remaining Jews in Greece are elderly. After 85 years of existence, the last Jewish day school in Larissa, Greece, has closed. Greece has a rich Jewish past — Salonika was once called the Jerusalem of the Balkans — but unfortunately her Jewish future remains questionable. ■