

*To Gariwo by e-mail for publication into the WE FOR site*

My name is Mary Alvo Benveniste and I was born in Thessaloniki Greece in 1932. My family belonged to the Jewish middle class and my father Moise was a well known drapery merchant. My mother Berthe Salmona, was a pretty and elegant housewife who spoke French and Spanish Ladino, I was their only child. At that time almost the whole Jewish population spoke Ladino, few spoke fluent Greek and most of the elders spoke also Turkish as Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Empire for more than three centuries.

I grew up living a pleasant and comfortable life and went to the primary school of our neighborhood, which was a Greek school. In October 1940, Italy declared war to Greece advancing slowly into Albanian land. The Italians were loosing the war and during spring 1941 the German army occupied the northern half of the country, which included Thessaloniki, the second bigger city of Greece and capital of Macedonia.

That is when German atrocities against the Jews started. Slowly but steadily they limited the Jewish population into ghettos, forcing them to wear the Yellow Star, confiscating their homes, stores, fortunes and bank accounts. Young and old Jews were forced to hard labor, punishment and discrimination. At that time my parents and me managed to move to Athens still occupied by the Italian forces, At the end of 1942 we were informed that the Jews in Thessaloniki, where most of our family had remained, were persecuted imprisoned, tortured and systematically evacuated to some unknown foreign country. People young and old babies and children were stuffed by thousands into cattle trains, with no food and very few belongings, whilst homes, fortunes, land and gold were confiscated. Their lives suddenly came to a stop. They were driven sick, famished and in total despair towards an unknown country, knowing deep in their hearts that this was the way to no return. The Jews of Thessaloniki were cunningly convinced by their Rabbi Mr. Koretz, that a new country was ready to receive them, promising hospitality work and freedom. The Jews were the VICTIMS OF THEIR HOPE trapped into the cobweb of Nazi corruption leading them to extermination.

At that time my parents and me were living in Athens in total freedom.

The tragic messages concerning the deportation of our beloved people, were reaching us. We were desperate because deep in our hearts we knew that we were not see again our people, we also knew that we would be the next to be trapped and expelled. The German Reich had already bargained the southern part of Greece and had occupied Athens, immediately becoming the masters of the game.

My father decided to go into hiding. That is when our savior and righteous Diamandis Diamandopoulos appears. Diamandis was a very old and close friend of my father, totally disinterested, honest and generous person. He loved and respected our family. He was a smiling clever and hard working man. He offered to help us immediately. He drove us to our first hiding place. Mr. Tzevas and his wife gave us hospitality under very strict conditions. No loud speaking, no use of the toilet during daytime, closed shutters, garden out of bounds Neighbors were right next door and they might discern voices and unusual noise. Diamandis decided to take me to his house and family. He introduced me to his friends as his little Christian niece coming from the island of Paris.

That was at the end of 1942 beginning of 1943, followed by a period of freedom for us three. My father managed to get for the family Argentinean passports by paying an important sum of money to the Argentinean Ambassador. At that specific period, Argentina sustained friendly diplomatic relations with the Reich.

Free again for a little while. Back to school, regular everyday life, a breath of fresh air. Freedom unfortunately did not last more than a few months, this unexpected holiday proved to be a short one. In the laps of one night in December 1943 the Nazis collected all the Argentinean Jews but they missed collecting us. A very early and urgent call woke us up at dawn urging us to leave immediately the

house. We collected a few things in three bags, we wore our money belts where my mother had meticulously sewn our fortune which consisted of gold Sterling coins. Each one of us had his own belt, in case we lost each other so we could survive. We fled the house always with Diamandis precious help. Our third hiding place was kept by a very old couple belonging to Athenian aristocracy. They were penniless and childless. I will never forget their kindness their wonderful manners their culture. We loved them. Our fourth hiding place, again some friends of Diamandis, lived in a country house in one of the suburbs. By that time we were celebrating Xmas 1943 and it had become an emergency for us to leave Greece in order to survive. It was again Diamandis who solved this vital problem He told us and I remember his words. " You have to escape to Turkey and then to Palestine. It is becoming dangerous to you to stay in Athens. Anytime THEY will find you and they will deport you."

We listened to him, we parted and parting from Diamandis was painful it was a hard separation. We could not thank him enough. We packed a bag with a few belongings. our fake identification cards with Christian names in our pockets and late at night in February 1944, we took a bus to Atavismas a fisherman village not far from Athens. A contact was waiting for us at the bus terminal.. In the darkness he showed us the way to the beach where a fishing boat not bigger than eight meters long, was waiting in total silence.. We jumped in and someone we did not know took the oars and started rowing.. Dawn found us on a white beach of an island called Macronisos. Ten other young men were sitting some of them still sleeping in a protected spot on the beach. These young people were to be our companions on this extraordinary crossing of the Aegean Sea, to These Turkey.

Rowing and sailing by night winds and weather permitting, taking regular turns, those young guys my father included, rowed and rowed endlessly....With compass the Northern star, we started our Odyssey traveling by night ,hiding by day into rocky caves, as German speed boats were checking, around the clock.. We stopped at some uninhabited islands in order to get fresh water . We stopped twice in bigger islands. We were wet to the bones dirty, thirsty weak and famished. Some brave fishermen and their families helped us repair the boat that was taking sea water. They fed us, baked bread cuddled the little one who was no other than me a twelve year old girl, encouraged us but also urged us to leave the island as soon as possible. They told us that weather and winds were changing dangerously. We were on the thirteenth day of our trip and the shores of Turkey were not far. They said.....A night's trip.....Leave the soonest possible.....they insisted.

This last night's crossing was a real INFERNO. Which cannot be described with words. We survived!!!!

Dawn found us alive on the shores of Tchesme. We were safe. GOD stood beside us.

We ended up after a couple of weeks meandering between Emir and Halloo Syria, We were outlaws, we had to get papers in order to reach Palestine. ERETS ISRAEL.

When Greece was liberated my parents came back home. They met Diamandis and his family. I stayed in Israel until 1947. When I came back to Athens on my way to Switzerland where I finished my studies, I saw Diamandis. Always happy, generous optimist, friendly, a wonderful man. He was present at the Synagogue on our marriage with Mico, he was so happy to see that .....we managed.....as he used to say. Brave Diamandis. I have lost his whereabouts after my father's death. I simply cannot find him. On the name of my whole family I have to honor him.

He was a real Righteous of the Nations!!!!

Please help me find his family, if you can!

He lived in Athens around Patisia, his wife's name was Anthoula and his eldest son's name was Stefanos. He worked during long years as sales manager with the well known firm call TRIA DELTA.

*Mary Alvo*

*Thessaloniki, 24 maggio 2010*