My life in Rhodes during World War II

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Dr. Elliot Turiel writes of his experiences as a child in Rhodes during World War II. When the Jews of Rhodes were deported to Auschwitz in July 1944, the Turiel family was saved through the efforts of the Turkish Consul in Rhodes, since Elliot's mother held a Turkish passport.

Rhodes is a Greek Island in the Aegean Sea that was occupied by Italy from 1912 until 1943. Those years of occupation included many of the years of World War II and the reign of Benito Mussolini. I was born in Rhodes on September 23, 1938. My family on my father's (Daniel Turiel) side had lived in Rhodes for many years as part of the Jewish Sephardic community there. My mother (Mathilde Nahum Turiel) was from the Sephardic community in Izmir, Turkey, where she grew up. She moved to Rhodes when she married, but she maintained her Turkish citizenship. We lived in the Jewish section located in the old city of Rhodes, which is surrounded by medieval walls.

During my early childhood years Rhodes was occupied by Italy, with a substantial number of soldiers stationed there. As a young child, I was not very aware of the military presence or the existence of a broader war in much of the rest of the world. I recall that I had a regular childhood with my parents and older brother, as well as with friends. I have memories of a bicycle kept in our home that I often rode in the streets.

However, I was also aware and made afraid by the regular bombings of the island by the British, usually from ships off the shore of Rhodes. Typically, the air raid sirens would sound, and we would then go to the ground floor of our house that provided some protection and wait for the bombings to end. I do vividly remember an incident that actually saved me from having surgery. Because of an intense stomachache our family doctor came to examine me. He concluded that I had appendicitis and

told us to go to the hospital to have my appendix removed. Just then, the air raid sirens sounded, and we had to go directly to the shelter. By the time the air raid was finished, my stomach pain was gone. The doctor concluded that I did not have appendicitis, and to this day I still have my appendix.

Events in Rhodes began to change dramatically in January of 1943 when German soldiers and the Gestapo came to Rhodes. By September of 1943, they had displaced the Italians from the island after a brief battle. The number and ferocity of the bombings increased at that time. I recall an attack, coming with no warning, when a bomb hit the house across our house while we were having lunch on the first day of Passover. The bombing caused a great deal of damage to property and life. I recall walking through the streets in the ruble looking for a cousin who had disappeared. His body was never found. Eventually, it was presumed that he had died and been buried deep in the streets.

Because of the intensity of the bombings, my parents decided we would move to a farmhouse a few kilometers from the city. We were away from bombings in the few months we lived there. It all ended abruptly one day in July of 1944. On that day, my mother had taken my brother and me shopping at a store near the farm. We returned to learn that German authorities had taken my father away. We did not know why or where he was taken. We went back to town right away to learn that all the Jewish men had been placed into a government building for reasons or fates unknown. The German authorities rapidly announced that all the women and children were required to report to the same building on July 19th. It was also announced that if families did not report, their husbands would be killed.

My mother prepared for the three of us to report on that day. As we were on the way, Mr. Selahattin Ulkumen, the young Turkish Counsel on Rhodes, made his presence. He told my mother, as well as other women also holding Turkish citizenship, to return to their homes while he would confront the German authorities.

Apparently, he argued with the Germans that all Turkish citizens, as well as their spouses, were under his protection. He insisted that all the Turkish citizens must be allowed to be free and that their husbands too had to be released from detention. The Germans reluctantly agreed to his demands – probably because they wanted Turkey to remain neutral in the war. Mr. Ulkumen presented the Germans a list of persons under his protection that included a number of names of people who were not actually Turkish; the Germans disallowed those names. My father was then released.

A total of 42 people, including my family, were saved by the heroic actions of Mr. Ulkumen. The rest of the Jewish people (over 1700) were moved on July 23rd to the port in Rhodes, placed on ships for mainland Greece, and then taken by train to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Many suffered greatly on the way in the boats or trains, and some died. Only a small number survived Auschwitz.

After the deportation of the other Jewish people, we remained in Rhodes with the intention to leave for Marmaris as soon as possible since we did not feel safe there. In the Fall of 1944, we attempted to go to Marmaris on a large rowboat. Soon after leaving Rhodes, there was a leak in the boat and we had to return to Rhodes. We were not able to finally leave until January of 1945 when, with some of the other survivors, we took a large motorized boat to Marmaris in winter weather with rough seas and we experienced a good deal of sea sickness.

We did arrive safely in Marmaris, where we all slept on cots in a large room. Although it was not very comfortable, we were very glad to finally be in the welcoming confines of Turkish land. Soon after my mother, brother and I, as Turkish citizens, went to Izmir to join my mother's family. It took two months for my father to obtain the necessary documents to be able to join us in Izmir. We lived in Izmir in happy circumstances until July of 1946 when we took a ship to New York City where we were admitted as immigrants because my father's brothers had established residency earlier during World War II. My brother and I had our names "Americanized" – his from Boaz to Bernard and mine from Eliachim to Elliot.

My father went into business with his brothers. My brother and I went through the public schools in New York, and then went to University. My brother went to Law School and had a long and successful career as a lawyer. I obtained a Ph.D. in psychology and have taught at universities since 1966. I have been a professor at the University of California, Berkeley since 1980.

B'nai B'rith in New York and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem have deservedly recognized Mr. Ulkumen's actions that directly saved those 42 lives. My mother was able to attend both ceremonies and became reconnected with Mr. Ulkumen. I did not have an opportunity to meet him, but I did on more than one occasion meet his son, Mehmet, who for many years was the Chief of Protocol for the United Nations. Turkey is a country I feel I know well, having visited many times since 1962.