

# **My Family's Holocaust Experience**

**by Samuel Varsano**

My mother was born Martha Pinto in Salonica, Greece, in March of 1924 to parents of Sephardic origin (descendants of Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 15th Century). It was one year after her mother (my grandmother), Rachel, married a widower, David Pinto. She was in her early twenties and he was her elder by almost twenty-five years. David had lost his wife in childbirth in 1912. Martha was ten when her father died of a stroke and she was apprenticed to a dressmaking shop to learn a trade and earn a living.

At the outset of the Nazi occupation of Greece in 1941, her brother, Moise (my uncle), found a refuge for Martha and Rachel with a righteous Greek Orthodox family in a village in Northern Greece. Because her mother had a strong Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) accent she was always risking discovery by Nazis or those that might inform the Nazis. My uncle was asked by the rescuing family if he could convince Rachel to return to Salonica to register her property. This action saved my mother from discovery but also resulted in my grandmother being captured and transported to Auschwitz along with my uncle. She was killed upon arrival but he managed to survive the camps until liberation.

My father was born Joseph (Peppo) Varsano on February, 1911, in Salonica, Greece to Samuel and Estrella Varsano. He was a sales broker who left school early to start a business career. His father (my grandfather) was a Hebrew Day School owner/principal and his mother (my grandmother) was a homemaker in their observant Jewish home. He had a married older brother and several younger sisters when Salonica was evacuated of its Jewish population by the Nazis. Coincidentally, this evacuation operation to Auschwitz was led by SS Officer Kurt Waldheim, later notable as the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Peppo was also married and had a three year old son, Samuel, when he arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau in April of 1943. By January of 1945 his entire family who had survived the transport to Poland had been murdered and he was ordered to join a Death March to Mauthausen Death Camp in Austria. He was liberated by U.S. Third Army troops in May of 1945. By August of 1945 he had sufficiently recovered from malnutrition and disease to return to Salonica.

My parents met at a Jewish Community Center notice board in Salonica for survivors to reconnect with lost family members. After a very short conversation they each realized that they were alone in the world and agreed to marry. They did so in March of 1947 and I was born in late December of that year, the second Samuel. The first one was the product of my father's marriage and he was killed upon arrival at Auschwitz. Since it is Sephardic tradition among Greek Jews to name the first son after the father's father, I was also named Samuel though a product of the

second marriage after the war. My father quickly resurrected his business and my first sister, Rachel (Shelly) was born in 1950.

Beginning in the middle of World War II and extending through the early years of the Fifties, Greece was suffering through an intense civil war between Communists and Royalists who favored the West. My parents received support from HIAS to emigrate with the choice being between Israel and the United States. They chose the United States and in July of 1951 our family arrived to our new home in Syracuse, NY. They raised us there (another sister, Jeanette, was born in 1959) until they retired to Florida in 1978.



**Me with my father and mother in Salonica, 1949**



Me, Sam Varsano