

# MATILDA HASSON

*Rhodes, Haidari*

I was born in Seattle, America. This was to save my life. My parents did not like the American weather and returned to Rhodes Island where I grew up and married. In 1938 I tried to get into America but I could not find my birth certificate and by the time my cousin in Washington managed to get me immigration papers, war had broken out. However] did receive papers which showed that] was an American citizen. When the SS arrived to arrest us, there were some Turks with them to whom] showed these papers. Later the Turkish consul came and freed the Turkish citizens. The SS said that we could not stay here but must be sent as political prisoners to Greece. My husband Albert, my daughter Stella and] were packed into the boats from Rhodes along with my parents and the other Jews.

They were sent to Auschwitz but we were separated and sent with other prisoners to the Haidari Camp in Athens. When I arrived there I said,

"I am not an Italian, I am an American citizen."

We were placed with the other foreigners who included Turks, Russians, Argentineans, Spaniards and people who had mixed marriages. The men were separated from the women. When Albert tried to tell them that he was an American citizen, he was beaten. "You are not an American. You are a Jew!"

!!POW!!

So he had to keep quiet.

Stella and I were sent to a big building with about two hundred people in a room. She was to celebrate her second birthday in this room. She became very sick with pneumonia, coughed all the time and could not sleep. She had constant diarrhoea and I had no medicine to give her. I did not sleep for a month. We stayed in Haidari for about three months.

Every time one German was killed, the Nazis would line us all up, take fifty at random and kill them in revenge. First they made us dig a ditch, line up, take off our clothes and then would shoot us. One day in 1944 the SS called out my name and that of a lady from Cos, Juliette Menashe, with her two children. We thought that it was our turn to be selected to be killed. We cried and cried. A nice young lady tried to comfort me, telling me not to worry, I would be freed. (Some time later we saw each other in the street. She was very glad and embraced me - she had wondered what had happened to us.)

I discovered that my husband and Mr Menashe had also been selected. To our surprise they took us and put us outside the camp. We said,

"Where are we going to go? We have no money or anything." Everything had been taken from us - our money, our gold, our rings. Only one street led from Haidari and as we walked up it a lady saw us and called,

"Have you come from Haidari? Women with children? Come and spend the night with us."

We learnt that the tide of war had turned, the Germans were retreating and the Russians were about to land in Greece from Yugoslavia. The Germans had decided to set the foreign citizens free - the others remained in Haidari. I do not want to talk about what they did to the others. That night all the Germans flew out of Athens.

We spent the night in that woman's house.

A man arranged for a truck to fetch us to take us to the Red Cross who would house and feed us in the morning and at lunch. They put us up in a school where we settled down on the floor.

We had nothing. No mattress, no covers, nothing. We were displaced persons. We stayed there for a few months. The children had lice, there were bugs. It was awful.

In Haidari we had met Mr Profetta, a rich Jew married to a German. He was one of the first to be released - his wife had paid a lot of money to get him out.' He came to the school and when he saw the conditions under which we were living, he found us a cheap hotel and paid for us. Later when we returned to Rhodes we repaid everything he lent us.

We did not like the food that we got from the Red Cross. We were not used to that sort of food. My husband sold the food and in this way we got a little money. We kept the bread but used the money to buy butter or oil which we would eat on a slice of bread - it was better than their meat.

Then the Civil War started. Unfortunately our hotel lay in the middle between the Communists and the Royalists. They would fire at each other and hit the hotel. A man looked out of the hotel, was shot in the stomach and had to be taken to hospital. Another woman was cleaning the window and while she bent down to pick up the cloth, a bullet passed over her head. She was lucky. The Communists came and searched under our mattresses for arms - but we had nothing. Our room did not even have a closet. This went on for over a month and we suffered a great deal.

At last Hitler was defeated and the World War came to an end but we were still displaced people, and a long way from home and its comforts. There was no oil, and no water, no electricity and no power. It was winter by now and I was sick in bed. The Red Cross had stopped giving us food because they thought we were Communists. A teacher we knew spoke to them and told them that we were not Communists but were from Rhodes, and had been in Haidari and begged them to continue giving us food parcels. In the meantime the next door building was bombed. Albert went there to pick up scraps for firewood. I used to make a fire in a small room on the roof of the building to cook the little we had.

One night while I was trying to cook, I fainted and fell on the floor as though dead. My sister-in-law's brother, Albert: Franco, who was also with us pulled my ear to revive me. [ I woke up to find many people surrounding me looking at me. They put me to bed. ] I could not move. I did not have the strength to comb my hair or put something on. Albert sold something and used the money to buy me an egg. One egg. We boiled the egg. Stella sat there looking and looking at the egg, so I said'

"Okay, we shall split the egg - half for you and half for me." There were so many things available; chicken, oranges, apples, lots of fruit but we did not have the money to buy anything. We could only look. I was so weak, I was dizzy and could not go out by myself.

After a year we met Reuben Hasson from Rhodes who had fled to Turkey and joined the Greek navy. He told Jacques Israel who worked for the Alhadeff Company about the existence of our little group of Rhodes Island Jews - Albert Hasson, Albert Franco and Moshe Menashe. Reuben Hasson would visit us in the hotel and wrote to my brother in the Congo who sent us Egyptian money. Now we could buy something to eat. We also wrote from the Red Cross to my brother in America telling him what had happened to my parents and to ourselves. They sent us money and a parcel of clothes. The latter never arrived. We now moved into a house outside Athens with a man we had met in Haidari. There was no furniture but we bought a mattress and moved in.

In September 1945 Menashe met a Greek man who had a little boat who agreed to take them home to the island of Cos, from where we could go on to Rhodes. However when we tried to get a permit to leave, this was refused. The English authorities said that we were Communists. Apparently there was an Albert Hasson from Salonika who was a Communist spy, and they mistook my husband for him. Although my husband said that he was from Haidari, they refused to believe him and claimed that he had borrowed some money to get a permit for Cos.

The English knew, I do not know how, that we had decided to leave Athens without a permit to go back to Rhodes. We stopped at a few islands on the way but when we got to Cos, the Greek police were waiting to arrest 'Albert Hasson'. They threatened to put us in gaol unless we left and went to Rhodes. We sailed for Rhodes together with Albert Franco but when at last we arrived home, the English put my husband in gaol along with the other men. They wanted to put Stella and me in gaol also but people recognized us and said,

"Leave the woman; they are good people; they are businessmen; they are not Communists".

The men stayed in gaol for two nights in a cell with another man who was put there in the hope that they would reveal information so they were careful what they said to each other. When they were released, we were told that we were to be deported from the island!

The Germans had deported us from our homes in Rhodes to Athens and now that we had at last managed to return to Rhodes after suffering terribly, the English were doing the same thing.

In order to return to Rhodes, we had to get a permit to go to Athens. Then we had to return to Athens.

Then we had to get a permit to go to Rhodes, Only then could we go home.

By this time we had some money. We had given some gold jewellery to good Greeks in Rhodes before we left and we had managed to get some of it back. The rest of it the Greeks claimed had been given to the Germans to save themselves from being killed; they made up some stories. We now had to pay the man' who had the boat to take us back to Athens.

It took us FIFTY days to get to Athens.

We needed a permit to go there. We went from island to island trying to get one. As we had been deported, each island refused to give us a permit. In addition it was dangerous to sail around the islands because mines still surrounded the entrances.

"Re careful, don't go this way. Be careful, don't go that way!" we would be warned. We had constant anxiety. The motor of the boat was broken so we could only use the sails. Finally we met a nice man on one of the islands who took pity on us and gave us a permit to go to Greece, Moshe Menashe had also been deported from Cos and had also had to return to Athens to get a permit to return to Cos. It only took him one day to go - it took us fifty!

After a few weeks in Athens we got the permit and boarded a boat again. The boat was halfway out to sea when the police stopped us and called,

"ALRERT HASSON! MATILDA HASSON! COME BACK!!

Take your suitcases and everything out of the boat with you!"

I sat on the pier and cried!

"What is going to happen to us now!"

We went with the policeman - he was a nice person.

"Why are they doing this to us?" we asked him.

"We are not Communists. The Germans took us all away from Rhodes and imprisoned us in Haidari."

He said. "Go! Go to your place!

Go to Rhodes!" and he took the permit.

We arrived in Rhodes on Rosh Hashanah.

We went to my aunt who was at shul. Can you imagine the excitement when she returned home to find us there!! As our house had been destroyed, she invited us to stay with her.

We never heard from my parents. They were probably killed in Auschwitz.

Our shop had been taken over by someone else. All our goods had been confiscated by the Germans. What had remained had been put in a warehouse but these goods could only be claimed if the owner's name was on it. We managed to find a few things with our name and we were given a damaged shop which my husband fixed. We sold all the unclaimed goods from the warehouse on behalf of the Jewish Community and the money was given to the community. With the devaluation of the drachma we had very little. I became very ill and was taken to hospital in Rhodes. I thought I was going to die. While I was in hospital the American immigration papers arrived.

In 1948 we went to America but we were not happy there and moved to Zaire. Recently we settled in Cape Town.

When we returned to Rhodes and found that everything of ours had been destroyed and that we had nothing, my aunt said, "What does it matter if you have lost everything!

You are alive. That is enough. Thank G-d."

Today I have two lovely children and grandchildren. We are alive. Thank G-d.

*MATHILDA HASSON was born in Seattle, America in 1912 and educated at Rhodes Island where she trained as a dress maker. She was taken to the Haidari Camp outside Athens until liberated on 11.9.1944. She then lived in Athens until allowed to return to Rhodes, and moved to New York and Kinshasa, Zaire. She came to South Africa in 1974 with her husband Albert. She has a son Ikey and a daughter Stella.*

Source: "IN SACRED MEMORY" Recollections of the Holocaust by survivors living in Cape Town, edited by Gwyne Schrire.