

The Last Train

A friendly relationship

Life in the city of Thessaloniki, despite the war raging in Europe, maintains its own human rhythm. People's relationships are friendly and independent of their religious and political beliefs.

The houses of the Manias family, Orthodox Christians, and the Karassos family, Jews, on Dioikitiriou Street are separated by a wall. Despite their different religious backgrounds, the two families experience a very friendly relationship. Their 9 children play together and the older ones look after the young ones with respect for each other that has developed through time.

Mothers Katina and Rachel, often drink their coffee on the terrace and discuss their children's future.

The fathers, Nikos and Samuel, will meet after work almost daily, discussing their daily chores, before getting together with their families. Their meetings demonstrate respect, appreciation and trust.

It is a few days before the German army will parade in the city of Thessaloniki.

The German Occupation of Thessaloniki

On April 9, 1941, the Germans occupy Thessaloniki by marching in front of the White Tower.

People watching the entry of the German troops show a deep concern. Most faces reflect fear. Some few seem to enjoy it in the expectation that they will be able to exploit the German occupation in various ways. They are the ones who will collaborate with the Germans, condemn their fellow human beings and exploit those who will be persecuted.

The Germans settle in Thessaloniki and their behavior is initially amicable to the people. They show nothing of their true intentions. They are engaged in organizing the city in order to control it. They show a special interest in a particular area, the one in which, later, they will entrench all Jews – the Ghetto.

The German Officer

The Germans, in order to get to know the habits of the inhabitants of the city they occupy, make sure to place high-ranking officers in selected houses, in every neighborhood of the city.

One of the houses they have chosen is that of the Manias family. On the day the German officers visit the family home, coincidentally the children and the mother of the Carasso family are in the living room. As soon as they see the Germans, fear spreads in their eyes. Germans recognize their fear and speak to them in German. The word "Jews" is heard and understood by one of the daughters of the Carasso family. The Germans inform Father Manias that from tomorrow the German officer Hans Muller will come to stay with them. They leave with courtesy and with a Hitler salute. The members of the Carasso family depart immediately.

The with the German officer in the Manias family home goes by without problems. His behavior from the beginning is humane and different from the behavior of the Nazis. He is educated and a merchant in his secular life, which is the common grounds with Father Manias. But the one who plays a catalytic role in creating a humane friendly relationship between the German officer and the Manias family is the mother, Katina, with her behavior and kindness. She appeals to the German officer.

The Persecution of Jews

In the following days, the persecution of the Jews of Thessaloniki begins. House by house, door by door, all the Jews of Thessaloniki are gradually taken to the Ghetto. All Jews are required to wear the yellow Star of David as an identity card. There is panic. The treatment of the Jews by the Germans is inhuman and degrading. Pain and misery prevail. Jews in groups are driven to the train station and piled into wagons. Trains depart daily to concentration camps in Poland. A one-way trip.

The Warning

The German officer staying with the Manias family is at a meeting in which the persecution of Jews is planned. There is a specific planning of persecution of Jews by region. The prosecution in the area where the Mania family lives is scheduled for the next few days.

The German officer returns to the house of the Manias family where he is hosted after the requisition of the house. He shuts himself in his room immersed in his thoughts. At some point he calls Father Manias and informs him that he is aware of his friendly relationship with the family living next door and that this family is Jewish. He tells him that they will soon come to get them. Finally, he announces that he will be leaving his home the next day.

Father Manias reluctantly leaves the room where their conversation took place and goes to the living room. His children have fallen asleep. It's just him and his wife. He confidentially informs her of what he has just learned. The woman raises her eyes, puts her book on the table and tells her husband. "You have to talk to Samuel tomorrow morning. We must help them! The Germans must not find them! "But what should I do?" He answers, "We have 4 children. If they understand that we helped a Jewish family, we will all be in danger!". "If we don't help them and they perish then we will have lost our humanity", was her blunt answer. With the help of Christ and the Virgin Mary you will find the way."

All night long, Nikos Manias sits awake in his chair. In the morning, before Father Carasso leaves for work, he invites him to talk. He calmly and decisively conveys to him what the German officer told him. Father Carasso is shaken. Nikos Manias hugs him and tells him. « Don't worry! I will stand by you. Go and talk to your wife. Collect everything valuable you have and a few clothes and you all come to our house. You'll hide in the attic until we see what we do." "But Nikos, your family will be in danger! I don't want this to happen. We'd better leave and we'll see what we do." "No," replies Nikos Manias in a firm voice. If you leave, you are sure to be caught. Here, you can hide because when the Germans came to inspect the house they did not discover the attic and they know that we had an officer who lived here."

Father Carasso consents! He goes home, informs his wife and soon returns with his family to the Manias family house. The children of the Mania family know nothing. For them, it is an ordinary visit.

The Germans, led by the officer who was staying with the Manias family go to the Carasso family house. They don't find anyone. The house is empty and locked. They break the door! They rush in and search! No one! Things are left intact! The chief officer says, "Someone must have warned them. They're gone! Let's go! They will be caught at the roadblocks!" On leaving, the German officer passes by the Mania family home to greet the family. Father Manias is absent. He respectfully greets Mother Katina and leaves, after taking a thorough look inside the house.

The decision

Sitting facing each other in the living room, Samuel Carasso listens carefully to Nikos Manias. He seems lost; his embarrassment and despair very evident. The danger threatening his family has taken root in his mind. Nikos Manias takes his hand and in a confident voice says: "Everything will be fine with God's help. Don't lose confidence. You have to be strong for your family!" Samuel Carasso wraps his arms around Nikos Manias and informs him about the plan he has devised.

The Carasso family will be divided into 2 groups. One group will be the parents and the younger children and the other the 2 eldest children, Alberto and Mary. This way they will be able to move more discreetly. The first group will go to a seaside village from where a boat will take them to Athens. The second team will be taken over by Nikos Manias who will arrange for them to be transferred to Athens. There the whole family will meet again.

Nikos Manias points out to Father Karassos that this plan should not be communicated to anyone. Only 2 people of his absolute confidence will know. Samuel Carasso, while realizing the risks if the plan leaks, tells Nikos Manias that he should inform, at least, his partner who owns 50% of his company. The reason is that he will have to transfer his own 50% stake to his partner virtually, in order to preserve it until his return, since the Germans did not allow Jews to have any participation in corporations. Nikos Manias questions the solvency and honesty of his partner and proposes to Samuel Karasso to "safeguard" the 50% stake and simply inform his partner that he will leave Thessaloniki with his family, without confiding in him about the plan. Father Carasso thinks about it and seems to agree. They break up having agreed on the next steps.

The fateful debate

In the small office of their company, where with hard work and devotion they built a successful commercial activity, the 2 partners sit in their opposite desks. Father Carasso seems skeptical. His partner is full of curiosity about the topic of their discussion. He has the arrogant style of a man who controls the situation. Father Carasso seems hesitant, but finally succumbs to informing his partner about his decision to leave Thessaloniki with the family. His partner asks him about the reasons for this hasty departure, which are none other than the persecution of the Jews.

"My friend, I have to go and save my family. We have been working together for so many years and you know, I trust you. I decided to transfer to you my percentage of 50%, since the Germans forbid us to have commercial activity and when all this is over, and I or any member of my family returns, you give it back it to us. This way you will be able to keep the company and continue our work. I trust you!"

The partner's face seems to light up, but hides his enthusiasm for the great opportunity presented to him. With feigned emotion, he assures Father Carasso that he will secure his quota and takes out a page to write the contract. While they are writing it, without raising his eyes towards his friend and business partner, he asks him "And how do you think leaving Thessaloniki? Do you have a plan? Are there

people that can help you? Can I do something myself?" Samuel Carasso is reluctant. He remembers the advice of his friend Nikos Manias. He is hesitating about talking to his partner. In his mind, there is also doubt about the agreement for the concession of his stake in the company, but emergency takes over. He feels that he has to say something, to show him his trust, if only to bind him morally. The partner is looking forward to it...Eventually, Samuel Carasso decides to tell him half the truth.

"We will all go together to the fishing village of Agios Nikolaos where the mayor is a very good friend of mine. We will stay there for 2-3 days and with a boat we will cross to Athens". The partner agrees with the idea, wishes him success, signs the papers, and they embrace, father Carasso with true love and the partner with a feeling of victory. They separate. At the exit, father Carasso stands for a moment. He raises his eyes to the corporate label. He weeps because he feels he may never see it again. He leaves with hesitation but also with urgency. He goes to save his family.

The Loving Family

Father Carasso, in returning to the Manias house where his family is secretly hosted, gathers all its members in the small attic. They sit mute and expressionless around a small table. The youngest child lies in her mother's arms while the 2 eldest, Albert and Mary surround their other siblings. Father Carasso in a firm voice describes the situation with the Germans. He hesitates to tell them the whole truth about the persecution of the Jews. He doesn't want to scare them. They exchange glances with Mother Rachel, who in a way tells him, "Keep going! You can hide your weakness and the burden of emotion!" It is time to tell them about their escape plan. He decides not to go into details, but only to explain how they will escape to Athens.

He informs them that in order to be able to move safer and faster they will be divided into 2 groups. One group will be him, their mother and the 3 youngest children. They will go to a village for a few days, while the 2 older children will stay in Thessaloniki in father Manias' family home and will come later to Athens. There, they will meet, all united again!

There is turmoil in the family. Everyone exchanges glances and hugs. They are overwhelmed by the upcoming separation. They feel that they will lose that family warmth in which they grew up. The 2 older brothers express their objections, because they understand what this might bring. They stare intently at their father, who with emotion but with a steady gaze conveys to them that his decision is non-negotiable. Silence ensues between them. Everyone shrivels to their corner. The little ones sleep. The older ones are on the watch. Father and mother wake up embracing. Tomorrow is the day of family separation.

The Time of Separation

It's Sunday morning. Everyone is in the house of the Manias family, now all united in one family. The children of the Manias family are still sleeping. Fathers exchange glances of confidence that everything will be fine. They have agreed that the first group will leave early in the morning. Father Carasso gets up and together with his 2 older children go to the attic and return with 2 suitcases packed with essentials. A discreet swipe at the front door means that the time has arrived.

Father Manias with a nod of silence gets up to open the door. On the doorstep stands his confidant, Joe. He's known him since he was a kid and has had him at his work ever since. She is his adopted child. Joe enters the house and without speaking raises the suitcases with his strong arms and loads them into a small truck, just outside the front door of the house. Everyone's emotion is peaking. Mothers Katina and Rachel hug, the older kids hug their younger siblings. Father Carasso clutches his eldest son and firstborn daughter in his arms. The daughter curls up into her mother's arms. She cries loudly. The son is also carried in her arms. The mother's expression hardens. She does not want to show weakness. She wants to look strong. Father Carasso watches and with a nod indicates that the time has come for their departure. Nikos Manias and Samuel Karasso embrace. They shake hands. A firm true handshake of undisputed trust. They exchange glances of a thousand words. They get into the truck driven by Joe. The door closes. From the window the 2 brothers look at their family fleeing into the unknown. Soon, Nikos Manias leaves the house clasping a small envelope given to him by father Carasso.

The New Identities.

Nikos Manias tries to think about how to protect the 2 remaining siblings from the German wrath. He has decided to get them fake IDs and have them stay at his house as guests, until he finds a way to send them to Athens. He thinks that with the new IDs they will be safe, but to whom should he turn to? Whom to trust?

He decides to address a member of the EAM guerillas. He had known him since he was a child and he and his father had grown up together as brothers. He knew that if he contacted him he could get his new identities out for him, and he was pretty sure he could trust him. Perhaps he could be found useful to him, later.

The effort to locate the guerilla was not easy because the guerillas were very careful and avoided descending on the city of Thessaloniki. They couldn't trust many of its people.

One day, Nikos Manias, as he was sitting late at night in the living room of his house, looking out the window at the street, saw a shadow and at the same time heard a knock on the glass. He approached carefully and saw the man he had been waiting for so long. He welcomed him with joy and heard what he expected: "Mr. Manias, I learned that you asked for me. What can I do for you?"

Without much bluntness, he explained to the young guerrilla exactly what he wanted. He replied without a second thought: "Whatever you want! I will help you!" Father Manias handed him the envelope that Father Carasso had given him before he left. The young man took the 2 pictures, took a glimpse of them and said "I will be back in 3 days. My greetings to Aunt Katina. He called her aunt because when he was young she took loving care of him.

3 days later, Nikos Manias had the 2 new identities of the children of his friend Samuel Carasso. He immediately called the children and in a fatherly manner explained to them what he had in mind. In the following days, under the new identities named Angelides, they would travel by bus to Athens, where, as he had agreed with their father, they would meet the rest of the family. Their joy at meeting their parents and siblings again was so great, that they did not think about the dangers of the trip. They wept with joy and embraced Father Manias.

A Damning but Humane Decision

Everything seemed to work according to plan. One group of the family was already in the fishing village and was eagerly waiting for the boat to Athens. Their life there was not easy, but they did not have the fear of persecution, while the 2 brothers with the new identities could move with relative comfort and with great care in the city of Thessaloniki.

One morning the Mayor of the fishing village of Agios Nikolaos received a phone call from Thessaloniki. He listened in horror to the harsh voice of the German representative. The mandate was clear. The Germans had learned that a Jewish family was hiding in the fishing village and if they did not return to Thessaloniki, the Germans had threatened to burn down the small fishing village. Such was their hatred for the Jews! They wanted to wipe them off the face of the earth!

The Mayor rushed to inform Father Carasso. Upon hearing the news, he hid his face in both hands and sobbed: "Three people knew where we were hiding. I know the two of them would give their lives! The Mayor tried to calm him down by saying, "Don't be afraid! We will wait for the boat and then I will tell them that you left at night and I did not have the time to summon you!"

But the days went by and the boat for Athens didn't come. The Mayor's phone rang again. The same voice, more urgent, gave him a 24-hour ultimatum. The Mayor informed Father Carasso. The situation was difficult. The fishing village was in danger and with it, his families as well. Father Carasso didn't think much of it. "My friend, I have no words to thank you, but I cannot be the cause of the destruction of a village with so many families. I won't be able to live out of guilt! I will return to Thessaloniki. In order not to suffer consequences, notify them that you caught us and sent us back."

The Mayor couldn't believe what he was hearing. A father put his family in enormous danger, perhaps even condemning them to certain death, after learning that the Germans were sending the Jews of Salonika, men, women, children and babies, by train to Poland to the death camps on the grounds that they would work there.

The next day, the family, after arriving in Thessaloniki, is arrested and identified by the Star of David, they were all taken to the railway station. They didn't notify anyone! No one saw them! No one knew! No one ever learned! Only the Mayor in the fishing village of St. Nicholas knew what had happened.

On August 14, 1943, the last train with Jewish families left Thessaloniki station. Father Carasso, Mother Rachel and their children Gemma 15, Isidor-Israel 10 years old and Renee 8 years old, inhumanely crammed into a wagon, had made their way to the death camps of Auschwitz. They would never return!

The Journey to Athens

While father Carasso, mother Rachel and their 3 children were heading to concentration camps in Poland, to the crematorium of Auschwitz, the 2 brothers Albert and Mary Carasso, with the new identities, were preparing for the trip to Athens. They would leave tomorrow by bus. They were scared because they didn't know what they would encounter alone on the bus, but at the same time happy, because they would see their family again. Their parents and little siblings.

Father Manias was skeptical. His wife could see his anguish in his expression. She knew him well. He knew that he would have done his best to bring the 2 brothers safely to Athens. She turned to him and said, "Christ and the Virgin Mary will protect them. Don't worry" "It's not just a matter of Christ and the Virgin Mary, Katina. It's also a matter of people's kindness!" he replied and opened the door leaving skeptical. He returned after a few hours. He looked light, calm and said to his wife, "Now it's up to Christ and the Virgin Mary!"

The next day, Albert and Mary Carasso had prepared early for the journey to Athens, the journey of freedom. They woke up with this anticipation. They went down to the kitchen. Mania's entire family was gathered to greet them. They hugged and said goodbye with heavy emotions. Mary lovingly embraced Mother Katina and with tears in her eyes said, "I will never forget you!" Father Manias lovingly embraced her brother and said to him, "Take care of your sister!" Make sure you sit 2 or 3 rows of seats behind her. No matter what, you and your sister will keep your cool. You won't panic. Under no circumstances will you forget your new names. No one else knows about them. Have a nice trip with God's blessing and a good meeting with your family." "Mr. Nikos, we owe you our lives." "You owe nothing! Your father would do the same for my family! Have a safe trip!" Joe waited patiently at the front door. The children walked towards the bus station. Discreetly, Joe watched over them. His responsibility was for them to get on the bus safe and sound.

The Route

At the bus station, passengers greeted relatives and friends and slowly took their seats on the bus. The 2 brothers were each standing alone at a short distance from each other. They looked like 2 strangers despite the relative similarity. Mary climbed first and sat in the 2nd row near the window, so that she could watch her beloved Thessaloniki disappearing into the horizon. Albert sat 3 rows further back, at the aisle. He believed that from there he could intervene if something went wrong. Most were young people embarking on a journey in search of better luck in Athens, the capital city.

The driver, a 50-year-old man, checked into the tickets. Approaching Mary, he stopped without saying anything. Reaching Albert, the same. He turned again and looked towards Mary's seat. It seemed that he didn't like something. Eventually he got behind the wheel and the journey began without incident.

After hours of absolute silence, the bus arrived to Larissa. The driver told passengers to get off for water and rest. The 2 brothers followed the others. The driver got off and went to an office. He picked up the phone and talked, looking at the passengers seated to rest.

Soon everyone was back in their seats. The driver got up and walked towards Mary's seat. He leaned into her ear and told her that she had to get off because if she stayed, all passengers would be in danger at the Lamia blockade. Mary lost it! She couldn't utter a word. She looked back. She didn't even have time to exchange a glance with Albert, when a tall and sturdy man suddenly jumped up from his seat and pushing the driver at lightning speed, he sat her in his seat. Then he leaned into

the driver's ear and whispered something to him. Mary and Albert watched in absolute horror. The man turned and looked them in the eyes. Something inside Mary told her to stay seated. She remained like a pillar of salt, her heart beating like a drum. Albert was frozen!

None of the other passengers understood anything. They thought that the man was asking the driver about the trip. But why was the driver turning red? Why was he shaking? Why did he nodding his head condescendingly? 5 minutes passed. The man patted the driver on the back and sat directly behind him. All the rest of the way, not a word was exchanged. From time to time the unknown man's hand patted the driver's shoulder, as if giving him courage, or rewarding him.

After hours with the man locked to the neck of the driver, they reached the last German blockade in Lamia. The bus and driver were known to the Germans. The man placed his hand on the driver's shoulder, squeezing him. The driver nodded his head, as if he was saying, "Yes, I know!" The driver showed the papers to the German officer who inspected the bus. His gaze crossed with Mary's. She found the strength to smile at him. The officer returned the papers to the driver. The blockade bar rose and the bus started to leave. The road was now clear. Next stop, Athens!

After an hour of travel, the unknown man got up. He leaned over the driver and said something to his ear. The bus stopped and the door opened. The unknown man turned to Albert. He looked at him kindly in the eyes. He raised his hand to the forehead. It was like a greeting. He turned to the door and went off. In a few hours the bus was entering the station of Omonia. They had arrived to Athens. The agony of the trip gave way to the anticipation of family reunification.

Everything had gone well thanks to the intervention of the unknown old man. Neither of the siblings understood who he was. But Nikos Manias had fully committed that he would look after the children and he had made sure that the presence of a confidant would ensure their salvation.

Strangers in Omonia

Having arrived safely in Athens, the 2 siblings had no reason not to be together. They didn't have to behave like strangers. Albert immediately took the initiative. In his pocket he had a note that father Manias had given him with the address of his brother Spilios Manias. He had told him that he had informed him and that he would be waiting for them. Together they decided to go to a hotel to sleep and that the next day they would look for Nikos Manias' brother, Spilios.

Indeed, the next day they went off to meet Spilios Manias, who lived in the area of Kypseli, near Omonoia. They knocked worriedly at his door. They didn't know whom they would meet, or how they would be treated. When the door on her doorstep opened, a nice gentleman appeared. He smiled at them and before they could introduce themselves, he calmed them: "Welcome! We were anxiously waiting for you! Are you okay?" they walked into the living room. They felt a relief, a certainty. They felt safe! From the kitchen emerged the wife of Spilios Manias, a sweet lady, who introduced herself to them as Chrysavgi Manias. She opened her arms and embraced them. They had so longed for their mother's hug and this hug reminded them of her.

They sat in the living room together and the 2 brothers set out to tell the story of their journey. Suddenly the living room was filled with children's voices. They were the 5 children of the family. A nod from Mother Chrysavgi was enough to keep them quiet and have them sit down. In the living room only the voice of the 2 brothers could be heard, telling their story, which everyone listened to attentively.

At some point mother Chrysavgi got up, took the 2 siblings by the hand and led them to a room with 2 beds, with freshly spread sheets, blankets and towels. «This is your room. You will sleep here as long as it takes. This is your room and this is your home until your family comes." The door of the room closed gently. The 2 brothers looked at each other for a moment and then fell into each other's arms. They wept from the emotional charge of all they had experienced. Now they would have to be patient until the rest of their family arrived...

The anticipation

The days passed excruciatingly for the two siblings. Every day they waited for the message from their father, in order to meet again. They knew that as soon as they arrived in Athens he would look for them at the house of Spilios Manias. The anticipation was difficult. They had to find an occupation to escape their minds and feel that they were free.

One evening, Albert asked Spilios Manias if there was a job he could do, mainly to keep busy and make some money. Spilios Manias hesitated to answer, because he wanted to take care of all the needs of the 2 children. On the other hand, he knew that if he found a job, managing anticipation would be easier. He replied, "If you want to work on something, I'll take you tomorrow to a shop where we will buy a large can of oil and some bottles and you will sell them on the street."

So the next morning they went to the market, bought a tin can of oil and a few bottles and returned home. Albert ran immediately to his room and with great care filled all

the bottles. Mother Chrysavgi gave him a basket which he filled with the bottles and then went out to sell them. Not many hours passed and he returned home with a huge smile. He didn't have a single bottle left! He gave the money to his sister and happily fell asleep. Tomorrow would be a pleasant day.

Meanwhile, Mary, staying at home all day, helped Mother Chrysavgi with household chores. She did it with joy just like she helped her mother, when the whole family was together at their home in Thessaloniki.

The Whispers in the Neighborhood.

The Spilios Manias family with their 5 children was well known in this neighborhood of Kypseli. The father, a food merchant, always had a little food to distribute to the neighbors. Everyone greeted gratefully as "Mr. Spilios" and he always had his hand outstretched to help.

Despite the family's good relationship with neighbors, he knew that some viewed him with an evil eye. He was afraid that someone would report him for the 2 children he hosted in his house.

His fears soon came true. A friend told him that some people in the neighborhood ask who the 2 hosted kids were. Where did they come from? Are they related? Are they Jewish? Just hearing this word, Spilios Manias froze.

The Germans had already occupied Athens and the Jews were in their daily crosshairs. There was no way to put the 2 siblings in danger. Of course, they now had regular identity cards registered as Orthodox Christians with Greek names, so that no one could understand that they were Jews, but Spilios Manias did not want to risk it. He had to find a solution.

The House in Sepolia

Over the next few days, Spilios Manias was thinking about where he could safely transport the children, since the insecurity in the neighborhood was rising. He found the solution from one of his employees. His sister had a small house in Sepolia, an area adjacent to Kypseli, in which she could rent them the room her son used before fleeing to the rebels.

Without thinking about it, Spilios Manias and his wife went to visit his employee's sister in Sepolia. They were kindly greeted by a lady of Chrysavgi's mother's age. She offered them a coffee and sweet treats that she had made herself. Spilios Manias asked her: "Mrs. Eleni, I have my cousin's children in my house, a boy and a girl, who

were sent them to me in order to find a job. The boy sells oil in the market and the girl helps my wife with household chores. I want to find them a room to rent. One room will be enough. Your brother told me you might be interested". "Yes, Mr. Manias, my brother has already informed me. I have a room but will the children be able to pay a small rent?" "That, I'm going to take care of. They are youngsters and I will take care of them. Whatever you need!" they shook hands and he gave her an envelope of money. It was much more than she expected.

The next day, just before dusk, Spilios Manias with the 2 youngsters and a suitcase arrived at the house in Sepolia. Mrs. Eleni opened the door with a warm smile. She welcomed the children and showed them to their small room with 2 beds with duvet covers and a washbasin. The children looked at each other. It was a new beginning.

The 2 brothers opened the suitcase that mother Chrysavgi had packed for them and their eyes sparkled. She had packed a whole household inside! Sheets, towels, socks, pajamas, food and a handwritten note "My good children, in the house where you will stay do not be afraid. Mrs. Eleni is a good woman with a child your age who has gone to fight with the rebels. She will take care of you with love and kindness as if you were her own. These things are for you, to feel at home and have food to eat. Give a little something to Mrs. Eleni, she will appreciate it. Whatever you need, we will be here. You, Mary, I will see you every day and you will tell me what you need. I kiss you and be careful!"

An act of reward

This is how the days of the 2 brothers went. In the morning, Albert would go near Omonoia with the bottles of oil and sell everything. Sometimes he would give a bottle of oil for free to a few people, like a policeman whom he would meet every morning on the main street of Omonia and was checking on passers-by.

Every day the policeman observed him and Albert would greet him: "Good morning, Mr. Policeman. And the man would answer, "Sam to you. Beware of bottles of oil, they can be stolen" Albert then would thank him and give him a bottle that would quickly disappear into the policeman's pocket.

His sister would go walking to the family home of Spilios Manias. She helped with household chores, ate, rested and before sunset she would return to the room in Sepolia.

Every night the two siblings sat and talked before falling asleep. Everything was in order. Nothing resembled their life in Thessaloniki, but they knew they were free

and safe. They believed the same about the rest of their family and looked forward to meeting them again. Of course, they had a great concern since they had not managed to come to Athens for so long, but they were sure that one day they would squeeze them in their arms. They were positive.

One evening, Mary, returning to the small room in Sepolia, was surprised that her brother was missing. It was his habit to wait for her with a warm milk in his hand and a Thessaloniki bagel, called 'koulouri'. This evening he hadn't returned.

A few hours passed when she finally heard the door open. She ran to meet him. As soon as she saw him, she froze. He looked agitated, he was pale with eyes lost in thought. «

What happened to you? What happened to you?" she asked anxiously. Mrs. Helen ran to him too. "Are you okay? Did you get beaten up?" "No, Mrs. Eleni. I'm fine," he answered and with a nod to his sister they went into their room.

"Don't worry, but today I had the hardest day since this whole adventure began. I will tell you why I want you to be careful. The dangers of being caught are not over!" "What happened?" asked Mary, terrified. And her brother, drinking some water, talked to her about his story.

There, in Omonoia, where he was selling the oil, some policemen checked him and asked him for his ID. Since he had forgotten to bring it along, he showed fear that the gendarmes would notice and then begin asking him questions. Where are you from? Where do you live? Where did you live in Drama? When did you come? What's your father's name? Your mother? How many siblings do you have? Albert lost it! He turned white, he was scared and confused. So the policemen led him to the station where the head officer continued the questioning. «Tell us the truth! Who are you? Are you Jewish?" On hearing this, Albert lost his speech. He thought he was going to faint! Then the officer told them to call a policeman called Christos to take him to the Gestapo. They were determined learn the truth. There was a knock on the door and the policeman who was to accompany him to the Gestapo appeared. Albert had already decided that his life had taken the road of no return. How would he get away? What would become of his sister? How to notify her? He closed his eyes to remember his family. Immersed in his thoughts, he felt a hand tighten his arm. A hand that did not pull him but held him so that he would not fall into pieces. He opened his eyes, lifted them and saw a familiar face. He thought he was living a dream. It was his friend, the policeman who greeted him every morning and to whom he gave a free bottle of oil.

"Yes, Mr. Sergeant. I will hand him over immediately!" said the policeman in a sturdy and convincing voice, and pulling Albert, supposedly brutally, they walked out of the office, into a corridor. "I don't know who you really are! I don't care! But I know you're a good person, and that's enough for me!" Get out of this treadmill and without running, without looking back, with rapid but steady steps go home." « And what are you going to say? Won't they chase you?" Albert asked. "Don't you mind. I'll tell them I slipped and missed you!"

Mary hugged him. She thanked God for protecting him and begged Him to protect her family, her parents and her little siblings. "Where could they be?", she wondered. And with this thought, she fell asleep.

The Decision to Return

It had already been a long time since the day the 2 siblings said goodbye to their parents and young siblings. The anticipation of their meeting in Athens that kept them alive has given way to anxiety. They hadn't heard from them. No one had told them anything. Maybe because no one knew? Maybe it's because they, all this time, were hiding? Maybe because they didn't know where they were? Or had something terrible happened to them?

The 2 siblings did not want to think that they would never meet their parents and siblings again. But this silence tormented them. Especially on the day when the streets of Athens were flooded with crowds of people cheering for its liberation. The Germans were leaving. Life would return to normal.

Albert and Mary also took to the streets. They wanted to feel the joy of liberation but couldn't. They were overwhelmed by the agony of the fate of their parents, their siblings. Albert paused. He shook Mary's hand and said, "Mary, I have to go back to Thessaloniki. I need to know what happened! Someone will know. Maybe Mr. Nikos Manias, maybe our father's partner. Someone! I'll be leaving tomorrow! You stay here, with the family of Spilios Manias and as soon as I hear from them I will notify you. We'll go find them together." "That's all I want you to promise me!" murmured Mary. "Go and don't think about me. I'll be fine."

The next morning, Albert packed his few things and prepared for the return trip. Mrs. Eleni, the landlady, had also woken up at the early hours of dawn waiting for her son to come back from the mountain. She made Albert eat 2 fresh eggs with some milk. Mary sat down at the table to drink some milk before going to the Spilios Manias home.

Albert held Mrs. Helen's hand and said, "I want to thank you for welcoming us into your home. I will never forget you. I have to leave to go to Thessaloniki to look for my parents" He felt a knot in his throat. Mary lost it! How did he miss that! Mrs. Eleni knew that their parents were in Drama! The 2 siblings looked at each other silently. Then Mrs. Eleni stretched out her arms and holding them tight, she said to them: "My good children, from the first day I saw you, the first time we spoke, I realized that you are not from Drama. I understood that you are Jews! I cannot say that I was not afraid, but I drowned my fear because I admired the strength of your soul and the love you have for each other. Go with God and I wish you soon to be in the arms of your parents and little brothers."

Albert and Mary's hearts were filled with relief, but also with immense gratitude for this woman who kept their secret. They stood up. They embraced her with love. She stroked their hair like a mother would. "Thank you very much. Welcome to your son. He is very lucky to have such a mother." Mary and Albert told her. They left overwhelmed by her humanity.

The Last Train

At the bus station, Albert waited impatiently for his turn. He was calm. He had no reason to be afraid. It would have been a different journey to return to Thessaloniki. All he could think about was how fast he would arrive, and he was overwhelmed only by the fear of not finding his family.

He was immersed in his thoughts, lost in his own world, when a hand gently rested on his shoulder. They had arrived at the bus station of Thessaloniki. The return journey was over. Now he would begin the journey of searching for his family. With determination he picked up the small suitcase, jumped off the bus and with rapid steps he set off for his home.

He arrived almost running. He stood by an abandoned house with hermetically closed windows. No sign of life, only a wooden sign with a piece of paper that read "Confiscated Jewish Home."

The suitcase fell from his hands on the street. He sat on the steps and grabbed his head with his hands as tears began flowing. When the tears dried up, he slowly stood up and knocked on the next door. A familiar figure answered. A moment of complete silence and then a voice so strong that could wake up the neighborhood: "Father, come! Albert has come!" Nikos Manias appeared on the doorstep and behind him his wife Katina. "Welcome!" they shouted in one voice. He fell into their arms and crying and asked them: "Mr. Nikos, do you know about my parents? Have you heard from them?" Nikos Manias raised his tearful eyes to the sky. Trying to hide

his emotions, he led him into the living room. With a nod from him, everyone walked away. They left them alone.

The man sat down next to him and putting his hand lovingly on his shoulder said, "Albert, what I have to tell you, I cannot hide from you or change it. You have to be strong and stand strong for yourself and your sister."

And with words drawing pain, he began recounting to Albert the adventure of his father Samuel, his mother Rachel and his siblings Gemma 15, Isidor – Israel 10 years old and René 8 years old, until their disappearance in the crematories of Auschwitz.

"Someone betrayed them. Someone told the Germans that they were hiding in the small fishing village of Agios Nikolaos and the occupiers threatened the mayor that they would burn the village if your father and his family did not return to Thessaloniki. Your father returned because he could not accept the sacrifice of an entire village. As soon as they arrived in Thessaloniki, they were arrested and put on the train to the concentration and extermination camps for Jews, in Poland. It was the last train that left Thessaloniki, the one that took away, forever, your parents."