

CHAPTER ONE

SET APART

Throughout my childhood in Greece, I felt like an outsider. Even among friends, there were invisible barriers. I knew it was because I was from a minority group in the majority Orthodox country.

My father never talked about his childhood or his family, so I don't know if he ever felt set apart like I did growing up. His brother, Oskar, never mentioned the past either. And, like many Holocaust survivors, neither of them ever wanted to speak about Auschwitz.

I never met his parents, Jacob and Mathildi. They both died in the camps. What little I know is that they were born here in Thessaloniki and that their ancestors, like my mother's, were Sephardic Jews who originally came to Greece in the 16th century, during Ottoman rule.

Although my parents were born and grew up in Thessaloniki, they spoke several languages, like many in the Jewish community. It seems that during the Ottoman Empire, in order to keep from being persecuted by the sultans, as the Greek Orthodox often were, some Greek Jews maintained citizenship in other countries. Up until my parents' generation, many weren't very fluent in Greek, preferring to speak French, Italian or Ladino, the language of the Sephardic Jews. As a result, even in the 20th century, during my grandparent's time, the Orthodox and Jewish communities in Thessaloniki tended to be separate. That began to change in my father's generation, and after World War II, things changed even more. What was left of the Jewish community tended to integrate almost completely into regular Greek life, even while maintaining, to one extent or another, elements of Jewish and other cultures they were connected to.

I know that, before the Second World War, my father's parents had a small factory that produced leather belts, and for a while they kept a shop. When they were deported to Auschwitz, my father's two sisters and other members

of the family were sent with them. His oldest sister was named Alik; the youngest, his favorite, was Sarah. I named my company, Sarah Lawrence, after her.

My mother's parents were also from Thessaloniki. They managed to escape from the city in 1942, on an Italian troop train headed to Athens. Once there, they and their three children—my mother and her two older siblings, Alberto and Nina—were able to get Greek papers with names that weren't Jewish, and so were allowed to rent a small apartment. Later, when the Germans started rounding up more and more Jews in Athens, my mother's parents moved to Dionysos, a village thirty kilometers north of Athens. Many Athenians considered Dionysos undesirable, even dangerous, because people with tuberculosis were sent there for treatment. Alberto went with his parents, but his two sisters stayed in Athens. With the help of Greek friends—and because both spoke French fluently—my mother and Nina found jobs as governesses in two Greek households, where they stayed for the rest of the war.

In 1944, someone pointed my mother's father out to the Gestapo and they arrested him. He was put on what turned out to be the final train from Greece to Auschwitz. Because by then he was over sixty, the Germans no doubt sent him directly to the crematorium.

After the war, my uncle stayed in Athens and later moved to Israel. My grandmother, mother and aunt came back to Thessaloniki. By then, the authorities had rented their house out to a Greek military officer, who was kind enough to let them stay in one of its rooms.

My grandmother died in 1963. Alberto died a year ago and Nina two years ago.



We called my father Peppo, from Giuseppe, Joseph. And my mother Mati, from Matilda. I was born in 1948, when Peppo was 36 and Mati 23.

When I think of my early childhood, I remember how affectionate they were most of the time, how softly they'd speak with each other, and the different languages we used with each other. Mati would speak French with us and with our father. We'd all answer her in Greek. Peppo spoke Greek with us. And, when they didn't want us kids to understand what they were saying, they both spoke Ladino.

Physically, Peppo was medium height, a little taller than I am now, and fairly thin. People who knew him say he was an engaging man in many ways.

My mother was shorter than Peppo, calm, and elegant. She could be coquettish at times, but never flashy. She was younger than my father, and, because she was so beautiful, I think she was a bit self-absorbed. She always took good care of her appearance, making sure that, in every situation, she looked her best. I still remember her wearing a fuchsia summer dress, with sandals and no hat. Some rings on her fingers, but nothing ostentatious. As a teenager, while we were spending our summers in the beach town of Mihaniona, I remember men passing by on the street, making comments about her looks—and it made me furious.

When we were small, my brother and I spent all day with our mother, because at that time our father would work incredibly long hours in the family factory and at the shop, six days a week, morning and night. He would always come home for lunch, but only for a little while. When he returned at night, he was completely exhausted, so we never had much time with him.

Mati would show affection by hugging and holding us, and also through food. She'd fix *bourekakia*, a special kind of eggplant pie, or *melitzana salata*, eggplant salad, because she knew they were my favorites. Peppo, too, showed us love. We could feel his protection, as well as the certainty that food would always be on the table. Sometimes he'd bring home different kinds of delicacies—they were expensive, but he knew they'd make us happy. He'd bring Russian caviar, and *avgotarakho*, a pâté also made of fish roe. And Hungarian salami, which I loved.

There were times when he would pick me up and hug me, or sit me beside him on the couch. But he did that much more often with my younger brother. Because of that, I always felt that he favored Micki. It wasn't until after Peppo died, when I was twenty-five and running the family shop with Micki, that I learned from the employees that I was his favorite son. At work—but never at home—he would always say that he admired Jackie the most. He never said that to me, not even once, as a child or an adult.

At home, when we were young, my parents were always soft-spoken. They never fought, at least not in front of us. Both were well educated. In their day, if you went to the French Lyceum, like my father did, or to the Italian school, like my mother, it was as if you had the equivalent of an M.A.

As I got older, I continued to feel emotional support from both my parents, though my brother Micki must've felt it more. He was lucky to be

younger than me. As the oldest by three years, I took all the heat. My brother usually went unscathed when he did the same things wrong that I had done before him—making a mess with his food, breaking something, or getting his clothes dirty. I got punished for such things because our parents were much stricter when I was growing up, especially our father. That is probably why I was more insecure than Micki was. I hated being made to feel different. Even more than that, I was frightened of my father's anger.

At eight years old, I was deathly afraid of going down the stairs from the roof of our house, where we had a veranda. The house belonged to my father's family. It was a small, two-storey structure, with a little yard, located on a small road off of Miaouli Street. We lived on the top floor and rented out the bottom floor, because we needed the money. To get to the veranda, we had to climb an external iron staircase, one you could see through. Micki and I would go up to the veranda a lot to kick a soccer ball around, or play with the pigeons we kept in a dovecote there.

Going up the stairs was no problem; but when it came time to go back down into the house, I was terrified. Those six or seven steps felt like an eternity. Even though there were railings, I was sure I was going to fall—and if I fell, I knew I would die. So I'd sit down on the top step, and slowly slide myself down, step by step. My insecurity and trauma were overwhelming. For as long as I can remember, I've been afraid of heights.

However, that fear was nothing compared to the panic I felt when my father got angry at me for something I'd done wrong. Both our parents, but especially Peppo, imposed strict rules on us. Like most parents back then, they felt that they had to establish firm limits. Mother tried to be strict sometimes, but she never really scolded us, or if she did, we wouldn't pay attention. But we knew that if we did something really bad, she would tell our father—and then we'd be severely punished. It always seemed, though, that I was the one who got punished, instead of Micki.

When Peppo got angry, he would spank and slap me. On one occasion he even kicked me. Even worse, he once closed me up in the wood cellar. In the small backyard of our house there was a cellar where we would store wood for our kitchen stove. One day, when I was four years old, my father got extremely angry at me, for what I don't recall. I was always doing something wrong, so I'm sure he had lots of reasons to discipline me. He took me out into the yard, opened the door to the cellar, ordered me to step down into it, then slammed the door behind me, latching it shut. I was terrified and started screaming,

“Let me out! Get me out of here!” I had no idea where my father was, or how long he would leave me in there. It was pitch dark. The air was stale and smelled of wood pulp. I was sure snakes and mice and cockroaches, and God knows what else, were crawling about in there, and would soon be swarming all over me. I just kept screaming.

Finally he opened the door, and I darted out past him, fleeing into the house, still terrified. I don’t remember where my mother was; I just ran into my room and shoved the door closed behind me. That experience haunts me, even though I was only shut up in there for only a few minutes. Maybe the claustrophobia I felt later in life came from that day. I just know that when I think about being in that dark cellar, I still get goose bumps.

The time he kicked me, I was around 13. We were in Mihaniona, where we rented a house every summer. I would bum around the whole day, playing soccer in the afternoon or going swimming at one of the nearby beaches. I had lots of friends there.

My parents were friends with two families in Mihaniona. Both were extremely rich compared to us. We would rent a simple apartment some place in the town, nothing luxurious. But these two families owned villas. Every Sunday, we would go to a taverna with one or both of the families. During the day, Micki and I would play ball with their children. My mother would go swimming and shopping with their mothers. One of the families had a big house overlooking the sea, and in the backyard they had fruit trees. All of us kids would pick the apples and pears and eat them, as did the owner’s children.

One day, we were eating dinner with one of the wealthy families at a fish taverna. During their conversation, after Micki and I had gone off to play, Peppo asked the mother of one of my friends, “How was your fruit this year?”

She responded, “Well, if Jackie would leave any for the rest of us, we’d be able to try them and let you know.”

After the meal, Peppo came to find me where I was playing with some other boys in the main square. He called me over to him, and said, “Let’s go home.” I knew from the tone of his voice that he was mad. As we walked home, he didn’t say a word, which made me even more certain I was in trouble. Finally, as we went into the living room, he turned to me and said sharply, “Who gave you the right to pick fruit from those trees and eat it? And who said you could let other people insult us about you stealing their fruit?” At first, I didn’t understand what he meant. Then he said, “She told me that you were picking fruit from their trees, and eating it—all of it!”