

**Transcript:**

Jack Cohen

A39

20min

Interviewer: You know you're our only Mediterranean Jew in the state. Did you know that?

Jack Cohen: I think so...

Interviewer: Yeah. So this is a fascinating experience for all of us not having experienced that before.

Jack Cohen: I know I'm the only Greek Jew in the city of Memphis.

Interviewer: I believe you're the only one in the state. But I'm not sure. But I find it...I'm very anxious to hear it. Help me... What year were you born?

Jack Cohen: Was what?

Interviewer: What year were you born?

Jack Cohen: Where was I born?

Interviewer: What year?

Jack Cohen: Year '32. 1932.

Interviewer: 1932, okay.

Jack Cohen: And July the 4th too.

Interviewer: Oh. Okay. You lived in Greece?

Jack Cohen: In Greece.

Interviewer: In Greece, okay.

Interviewer: Where in Greece?

Jack Cohen: Where in Greece? The name of the town is Chalkif, C-H-A-L-K-I-F. And is the capital of the second largest island. I'll say about the 100 kilometers northeast of Athens.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Okay.

Jack Cohen: Crete is the largest island. Evia, E-V-I-A, is the second largest island.

Interviewer: Okay. Tell me a little bit about childhood in Greece before the war.

Jack Cohen: Before the war. Before the war, things were quiet. Life was, looking back now, was kind of easy, at least for us kids. Go to school, go to Hebrew school, go out play. Summertime, go swimming. In our family, there were two things mandatory: do whatever you want, on Friday nights you're home for dinner. And synagogue, especially on Saturday, was not a question, "Do I go or don't I go?" I mean, you get up and you go. We had heard rumors of what was happening in the war, but of course, back then I was about eight, nine-year-old kid. We were not concerned with those things like that.

Interviewer: Do you remember any antisemitism when you were a child?

Jack Cohen: Remember what?

Interviewer: Any antisemitism? You remember anybody...

Jack Cohen: Not before the war.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Jack Cohen: Not before the war. After the war, there were some...as a matter of fact, one of my teachers made the remark and...

Interviewer: What remark? Do you remember?

Jack Cohen: "How come the Germans did not exterminate you?" So I told the...

Interviewer: And that was when?

Jack Cohen: Pardon?

Interviewer: That was when?

Jack Cohen: After the war.

Interviewer: Oh that was after the war.

Jack Cohen: Right, in high school. That was after the war. But I told him that the German did not exterminate me, but I promise you one thing that you won't stay here long enough. Before the week was over she was moved. I'm sorry, I have not brought that magazine and an article that I wrote in... The local Greek Church, they asked me to write an article.

Interviewer: If you have it, you can always send it to me. You can always send me a copy.

Jack Cohen: I'll send you the whole magazine of the...

Interviewer: I'll give you my address, so you can always send me things.

Jack Cohen: Our family and another family from our hometown were one of the, let's say, power families in Greece. They help a lot during the 1821 revolution against the Turks, both financially and with their contact in French where they created the society to help the Greeks with arms and that sort of thing. So going down generation after generation, they did have some influence in town.

Interviewer: When did you know that the war broke out? I know you were a child. When did you realize what was happening?

Jack Cohen: Oh, gosh. There was no mistake about it. The Germans were very brutal. I've seen things at Greece. Our hometown was close to the barrack. And every morning, early morning, you could hear the machine guns killing people. And then after a few minutes, you could hear the trucks coming by to go to the cemetery. They had to come by my home, by our suite to go to cemetery, and then after awhile, of course, a fire engine coming to clean up the blood. It was quite obvious what was going on. Now the Italians, I don't know whether you know or not, Greece officially was under the Italian occupation and not German occupation. And the Italian were very lenient people. They help and they made friends, but not the Germans. In fact, I witnessed myself, and my father used to go by the seaside to come home and there were guards over there guarding the ports. And one of the guards over there was about right afternoon, gets lunchtime and the guards had finished eating and he dump his food, whatever was left, on the ground. And a child went over there to pick it up and that German pick up the child and broke his hand, broke his arm on his knee. And I mean, how can you miss that? So we were quite well aware of what was happening. Another thing of that, the war... My father was an English, he spoke seven different languages. And there was a clandestine radio that my father would go over there and sometimes I'd be at the store. He'll take me with me. And he listen and translate what was going on with the war. So we knew exactly what was going on. Even as a child.

Interviewer: Tell me about the situation in Greece after the war.

Jack Cohen: After the war?

Interviewer: I mean, after the war broke out.

Jack Cohen: What...

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with the Nazis. Were you sent anywhere?

Jack Cohen: The only thing we could do is just keep a low profile--

Interviewer: Right.

Jack Cohen: -- at the time there until the fall of Italy. That's when the Germans start picking up the Jews.

Interviewer: And that was what year you were --

Jack Cohen: We were not just going to school --

Interviewer: -- do you remember what year that was?

Jack Cohen: Late '43, '44.

Interviewer: '43 or '44, okay.

Jack Cohen: And my father, at that time there, was in Athens on a shopping trip. And when they heard that they were... They start picking up the Jews from Salonica. And of course it was transmitted right away. And my father found out about it, and came home, and

got in contact with the underground right away. And within a day or so we were taken in the middle of the night, passed through the German lines and whisked out to the mountains. We stay all the time in a monastery.

Interviewer: You hid in a monastery --

Jack Cohen: Correct.

Interviewer: -- in the mountains?

Jack Cohen: We had one room, I say about a fourth of this, with a fireplace. Dirt ground and wooden stools to sit on. And that was our quarters for almost two years.

Interviewer: Two years?

Jack Cohen: Now food... We learn survival the hard way. I learned to pick up berries, dandelion and cook. I know this --

Interviewer: With your parents?

Jack Cohen: My parents.

Interviewer: You have any brothers or sisters?

Jack Cohen: One brother who died about three years ago.

Interviewer: So you were in the forest --

Jack Cohen: Right.

Interviewer: -- with your brother?

Jack Cohen: With my brother...

Interviewer: Was he older or younger?

Jack Cohen: Younger.

Interviewer: Younger. And your parents?

Jack Cohen: And my parents.

Interviewer: Okay. What were your parents telling you what was happening? Did they tell you, "We had to leave"?

Jack Cohen: All they needed is my help to go around picking up berries, or mushrooms, or whatever. They had to be careful with the mushrooms. But nevertheless, the underground would stop by the monastery every now and then and they would bring some food.

Interviewer: Was this the Zionist underground?

Jack Cohen: Yeah. There was only one family that was taking care of the monastery. There was nobody else around. It was a three hours walk downhill from where we were. The Germans didn't come up there. But we were notified by the underground to get ready to be moved. And when the Germans start coming, they pick us up at night again and they moved us through the forest down to a small village behind the German lines. So when they would comb the mountains there was nobody there to be picked up.

Unidentified Spkr: At the monastery? They went to the monastery?

Jack Cohen: Yeah, that's where I lost my grandmother. She was in another small village up the mountain.

Interviewer: And how did you lose her?

Jack Cohen: Somebody told the Germans that she was Jewish and they pick her up. And, from there on, we lost track. We don't know whatever happened to her. Whether she died before, she got killed, she was taken to the concentration camps; nobody knows.

Interviewer: And you lived in the monastery for two years?

Jack Cohen: Almost, yeah.

Interviewer: Almost two years.

Jack Cohen: Yeah, because then toward the end of the war, the Germans came to comb the mountain.

Interviewer: Were you religious Jews?

Jack Cohen: Right.

Interviewer: You were religious?

Jack Cohen: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: What did you think was happening?

Jack Cohen: Well...

Interviewer: I mean, were you praying? Did you do prayers?

Jack Cohen: Don't forget, over there we were not Jewish. As far as the people there were concerned, we were not Jewish.

Interviewer: You were Greek.

Jack Cohen: When there was a festival, a Christian festival, and the church was open, then we go to the church. There's no way about it.

Unidentified Spkr: You have to go.

Jack Cohen: That's right. I mean, like my father said, that God belongs just as much there as anywhere else; in the synagogue or anywhere else. So he'd say, "You don't have to go and pray to whatever they pray, but you can go there."

Interviewer: You can talk to God anywhere, basically.

Jack Cohen: That's right.

Interviewer: They knew you were Jewish, obviously, the monastery?

Jack Cohen: They did.

Interviewer: Did they require you to be Catholic?

Jack Cohen: No.

Interviewer: They just --

Jack Cohen: No, no.

Interviewer: -- they didn't do anything like that?

Jack Cohen: No.

Interviewer: They just...

Jack Cohen: They didn't.

Interviewer: -- they hid you.

Jack Cohen: They did.

Interviewer: And did they help feed you?

Jack Cohen: They did. Now after, like I said, after we left the monastery, we went down to a small village closer to town.

Interviewer: Were there any people in the monastery you remember?

Jack Cohen: Names? No.

Interviewer: No. Excuse me. Any people in the monastery that you remember that might have stood out to you a little bit?

Jack Cohen: Mmm, I don't think so.

Interviewer: No, because I know you were a small boy.

Jack Cohen: Right. But there were nobody. It was one family, that's the only people in the monastery. The people were coming up there to worship during the festival once or twice a year were very few. And as far as they're concerned, we were just worshipers just like everybody else. That's all it is.

Interviewer: So even the people coming didn't know you were Jewish?

Jack Cohen: No. No. Only that family and the family that took us in the village after the Germans moved them down. That was...

Interviewer: They knew?

Jack Cohen: They knew that.

Interviewer: What did you do after the war?

Jack Cohen: After the war?

Interviewer: How did you know that the Jews were liberated? How did somebody get a message to you?

Jack Cohen: Germans disappeared, the underground moved in. We were free.

Interviewer: So there wasn't any one conversation you can remember?

Jack Cohen: Right. No, not really.

Interviewer: The Germans disappeared, the underground moved in and you knew you were free? How was everything in liberation? How was that?

Jack Cohen: Oh, of course --

Interviewer: Being in hiding for two years, not having a lot of food.

Jack Cohen: Well it was just as hard after the liberation because we -my family, my parents -we were one of the few people that didn't have anybody to leave things with. Some of my mother's trousseau was left with a friend. They in turn gave this trousseau to their daughters. So we came back down, they said the Germans pick it up. You know better because if you were keeping something that belonged to a Jew, you have not turned it in to the Germans, and the Germans found out about it, you were in just as much trouble as anybody else. But my mother happened to see her trousseau in one of the people's daughter's home that she happened to visit one day. So we know that. Also my father's store was ravaged completely. He was in the cosmetic business. So he had to go start from scratch to rebuild. But for us kids, especially for myself, there was no time to worry about it, to fool about it, because I had almost three years of school to catch up with. Now Greece had made easy for people like me. And they were not just the Jews; there were other people that have lost classes. They allow you to go to the class that you supposed to have been. In the meantime, take exams quarterly of the previous classes. And if you passed them, you take, then you...so I had a tutor that helped me and I pass all three years that I had missed and I continued. My brother could not do that. My brother left one year. So he fell behind a little bit. But we were busy doing that. Then after this, when things changed back, my...in fact our home was also occupied by another family. And we had to share the kitchen, the bathroom...

Interviewer: You had to share your own home?

Jack Cohen: We had one room of ourselves and of course the dining room and the living room were shared by everybody for several months until they found a place and they moved out. Then we had our home...

Interviewer: So they just moved into your house while you were in hiding?

Jack Cohen: Yeah, they were living, right. Well, the Greek government did that. Especially up in the north, the Jews, especially the ones that were taken by the Germans to the concentration camps -they put families in their homes. And there was a problem when these families came back because the families that were living there then, they had understood that that would be their home. And they came back, they claim their home and that was...but things had got straightened out eventually and people took back...

Interviewer: When you think about this, I know you had a lot of feelings about being Mediterranean Jew versus the Germans and the Polish Jews. When you think about your experience, what do you think most about?

Jack Cohen: You know, on one side, you can't hold a grudge the rest of you life. On the other side, you cannot forget. There is a saying, of course, that says forgive and forget. But humans are not animals. We don't forget. No matter how much you want to forget. I certainly was, in the beginning, quite bitter, especially losing my grandmother. Because she more or less raised me. In time that my mother had to go somewhere, my grandmother was right around the corner to take care of me. And she was dear to us. So we lost her. And that was the last survivor of both my parents' families. Then the rest of them were uncles and aunts, and that sort of thing. But eventually I guess I got used to it, and just buckled down, and go on with my life. And whatever happened, it happened. Main thing is that try not to let it happen again. Anywhere I can contribute to that fact to make people aware of what has happened. And I'm always glad to do it and try to help them.

Interviewer: Did you ever wonder during those two years in the monastery how...

Jack Cohen: Yes, we visited it.

Interviewer: You've been back to visit it?

Jack Cohen: I've been...oh, yeah, I've been back.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Jack Cohen: Totally different.

Interviewer: Really?

Jack Cohen: They had running water. They had benches, they had concrete [unintelligible 18:31], it was...

Interviewer: It was different.

Jack Cohen: It was a hotel back when we went to see it. Yeah, I took my family by. My wife. My daughter was too young; she does not remember going there. But...

Interviewer: Where did you meet your wife?

Jack Cohen: My wife?

Interviewer: Where did you meet her; in Greece?

Jack Cohen: She's an American.

Interviewer: American. You met her here?

Jack Cohen: I met her here. Here in the United States.

Interviewer: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Jack Cohen: No, not really other than I do appreciate you people... program and the effort that you putting into that program. And I think that this program and others like that would contribute greatly to equalize -to make people aware of what can happen in the past and perhaps avoid it happening again. That's all I got.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir. I want you to know that we find it an honor that you shared this with us. And that we are...I'm so thrilled that you called me back and that we were able to talk to you today.

Jack Cohen:

Well...