

Going Down The Steps Of The Synagogue On Our Wedding Day



A picture from our wedding with my wife Fani.

I was born on November 6th, 1927. We would hear about antisemitic events, even if it wasn't often, during the time I grew up. Since the government declared the "Citizen, speak Turkish" law that mandated the public to speak only Turkish, our family always spoke to us in Turkish and sent us to Turkish schools. As I said before, these events were only on the annoying level. For example,

when we spoke Ladino (Judeo Espagnol) in the street, they people who were against it would say "Pis Yahudi" (dirty Jew) or "Chifit" (Jewish Gypsy). The Jewish school in our neighborhood was closed, reason unknown to me. I started my education in a public school "23rd Elementary School" (without tuition). My father enrolled me at the Art School in Sultanahmet after elementary school since I was artistically talented. I would go to school with the tram from my home. I learned ironworking there, that is to say, to manufacture tools and machine parts from iron.

While I was in that school, I became an apprentice to "Zangochian Stove" factory where our neighbor Izak Gaon worked, during the summers. I learned how to make stoves, stove pipes and the piggybanks that Labor Bank produced for the first time. I earned three liras a week from this job.

I started my first job as an apprentice in a shirt manufacturing place where Davit Ner was the manager, and Nesim Franci the manufacturer, in Marputcular [An area on the European side where wholesale commerce is done] at the age of 14 or 15. I worked for a weekly salary in this workplace. Meanwhile World War 2 was shaking up the whole world and affecting our country too. Poplin fabrics became hard to find at our work, only a heavy type of cotton was available. Because of this, the manufacturing of our shirts was disrupted. One day a fabric merchant who was a Jew from Istanbul but who lived in London came to our store and Franci who saw the British merchandise in his hands, accepted his offer and we restarted the manufacturing. This gentleman started coming to Istanbul very often, he started giving me 5 liras every time he came to the store, I mean, I almost got as much in tips as my weekly paycheck. I started saving these 5 liras.

One day, unfortunately, this man said to Franci: "I will bring you this amount of merchandise, give me this amount of money". Franci's trust in this person was already in place and he gave him the money he asked for before receiving the merchandise, of course this gentleman never showed up, he swindled Franci in a bad way. I worked in this place for exactly 15 years and I learned all the ins and outs of the business.

I went to the military in 1937 for 36 months. I was put to work in the art workshop in the military, but unfortunately I had some bad memories there due to some misunderstandings.

After my discharge I returned to work with my old boss Franci. At the time, my older brother Kemal was a janitor in a handbag store named "Yildiz" (Star). After 2-3 months, he said to me: "I received a very good offer from the lady I work with. Would you like to be partners in this store?". "O.k. Kemal, how will we do this work?", I asked. "You have a credit history in the market, you can bring various merchandise here, we will fill the store, we will build a new showcase. I am sure that this store will work like clockwork because of you". I thought for a while, because I am a little fearless, I accepted the offer. I went and explained the situation to my boss. "I regret to inform you that I will quit. Because I became partners in a store and I was promised to Fani Levi". I cannot describe to you how sad my boss was. "My goodness, I loved you so much and I wanted to marry you to my daughter Leyla" he says. "Whatever, hope everything is for the best. I will give you the shirts, pijamas and men's underwear that you need for your store. And you will do good business", he said.

After this, I became investment partners with the lady Ester Civre who was the owner of Yildiz store and who sold handbags at the age of 23 or 24 only and we agreed to share the profits 50/50. The

store was on Istiklal Street (on the European side, between Taksim and Tunel, the street that is closed to traffic today where in addition to shopping, you can find bars, movie theatres and entertainment centers), close to Tunel, next to the Swedish embassy, at the entrance of the apartment no. 397. The lady Ester was also married and had children, but unfortunately when I met them, her husband had declared bankruptcy.

With the help of my old boss, I added shirts, underwear, pijamas, along with ties and belts to the store, I rearranged the showcase and we held the opening of the store. However, for a certain while, this business did not go as I wished it would. So I changed the things I sold, I removed these and instead I bought women's pantyhose, scarves, my older brother Davit was one of the best glove merchants of the market, I got different assertive colored gloves from him, I got many various colored handbags, I even placed practical hats and fantasy jewelry. I placed purple colored gloves and a voile purple scarf next to it in the showcase, and next to that, a pink pair of gloves and same colored voile scarf, and I tagged them with a price of 5 liras. Whoever saw the showcase, came in, looked at it and came in. In this way we increased the sales of Yildiz store.

My wife Fani who was born in 1927 fell in the street when she was about 10 or 11 years old, and caught an infection from her wounds. There was no penicillin at the time, the infection spread to her ankles. She had various surgeries in Or Ahayim and had to stay in the hospital for a long time. She stayed for such a long time there that she became very friendly with the nurses and learned a lot. She made a vow to herself: "the day when I am able to stand up, I will volunteer in this hospital and help the patients as much as I can".

With time Fani became a very good nurse who was in demand. When she had clients outside the hospital too, she started earning money. She provided the livelihood of her house after that day.

My cousin Rafael who went on to become a very famous cantor in Israel later on, was a salesperson in "Nelson", a store where they sold needles, threads and fabrics, next door to the store where I worked as a shirt-seller. Rafael was my neighbor during the day, and Fani's neighbor during the evenings, so he matched the two of us. He first disclosed his idea to my father. My father loved Fani very much. When my mother approached me with the offer: "My goodness, mom, what are you saying, we are cousins", I said. My father said: "What difference does it make, she is a very capable and respectful girl who we know very well and appreciate. I say think about it, you cannot find a girl like this all the time". "Fani is a very hardworking, open-minded girl who earns very well. There are no drawbacks according to the Torah either", he said.

We started looking at each other differently after that day. We started going out together and getting to know each other and were promised to each other with a small ceremony among the family. Fani started coming to our house on Sabbath evenings. As I said before my father was quite big and burly. He would just about fit in the armchair he sat in. He loved Fani so much that he would try squeezing in the armchair where he barely fit and say "Come next to me Fanika". My mother and father had Fani sleep next to them because it was hard for us to go back at night. When we were engaged, Kemal was still a bachelor and a ladies' man, when he returned home late from parties, because my father was very conservative, he would immediately stomp on the floor with his cane "Çafteyava el patin" (hit the floor) so that he would go up to his room without delay, because both Fani and my older brother Davit's fiancée Luiza were at home.

After staying engaged with Fani for a few months, we married in August of 1951, in the Zulfaris Synagogue while we both were 23 years old. My cousin Rafael Abuaf who was their cantor, met us and my wife Fani outside the synagogue and brought us all the way till Ehal Hakodesh (in front of the closet where the Torah's are kept). Thanks to him, the memory of our wedding is special still. After the synagogue, we went to Bomonti Beer Gardens with all our friends and family; we had a few appetizers, drank beer from barrels, we sang and danced with my older brother and his friends' band. After we left there, we listened to music and danced at the Park Hotel with our closest friends. We spent that night in that hotel in a room overlooking the sea. The next morning, after breakfast, we went to Yalova Thermal Hotel (on the south border of Marmara Sea, close to the city of Bursa) to spend our week of honeymoon.

Our oldest daughter Verjel who was born in June of 1953 brought us a lot of luck. After her birth, everything worked out for the better. Until that day, because we did not have much money, we shared a house with Fani's older sister Sara, her husband Anri and my mother-in-law. A short while before her birth, business in the store started to work like clockwork, a specific clientele was formed, and I took the plunge and bought a tiny flat at Shishane (on the European side, where Jews lived together) to live with Fani alone and moved in.