

# Mario Modiano

Mario Modiano

Interviewer: Milena Molho

Date of interview: November 2005

Mario Modiano, 80, lives in a very chic big apartment in Kolonaki, Athens, which his wife Inzi decorated with great taste when she was alive. All around the apartment you can even feel Inzi being there, her aura is very strong, and Mr. Modiano keeps it so strong because of his enormous love towards her. The house is full of souvenirs from many different places that the couple has visited during their vacations. Mr. Modiano has a very lively personality, and a huge appetite for life. Really, listening to him and his stories gives you hope for life. One would never believe that this gentleman, now in his 80s, went through the ordeal of being hidden in Greece to avoid German persecution.

My full name is Mario Modiano and I was born in Salonica in the year 1926. The Modianos come from a long line of rabbis whose ancestor, R. Samuel Modillano, moved from Italy to Salonica some time in the mid-16th century. We know this from an inscription on the grave of Isaac, his son, also a rabbi, who was buried in Salonica in the year 1635. My father used to say that we are the 'true Modianos' because we come from the line of Bonomo, a direct descendant of Rabbi Samuel.

However, in preparing our family's genealogical tree I was unable to link Bonomo to our earliest known ancestor, my great-great grandfather, Moise Modiano, who lived in the early 19th century, because of a gap of some eight generations between them.

My book on the genealogical story of the Modiano family [HAMEHUNE MODILLANO -- The Genealogical Story of the Modiano Family from ~1570 to Our Days], which was published in the year 2000, indicated that we have been in Salonica since 1570. However, during a family reunion in Florence in June 2005, we visited Modigliana, the village that gave us our family name, and I discovered evidence that perhaps the Modianos existed in Italy even before the year 1500.

My family has Italian origins in the sense that they moved to Salonica from Italy. What we don't know for sure is whether they originally came from Spain and stopped over in Italy, or if we are descendants of the Jewish captives that Titus took to Rome after the destruction of the Second Temple. One way or another, personally I feel Jewish. I feel totally Jewish. And I think that encompasses everything.

My great-grandfather, Samuel Modiano, was born in Salonica in 1828. He married Rika Modiano - intermarriage was frequent in the family. They had six children: Esther who died at birth, Moise who settled in Egypt, Estrea, who married David Simha, Yeshua who was the father of Vidal Modiano, a prominent surgeon who was leader of the Sephardic Jews of France. The youngest, Eliaou Modiano, was my grandfather.

Grandfather Eliaou, who was born in 1865, married Allegra Cohen. They had three children, my father Sam, Lily [Leal] and Joseph. As my grandfather wasn't doing too well in Salonica, he moved

to Alexandria to be near his eldest brother Moise. However, he seems to have lost all his money in the cotton exchange. So he brought the family back to Salonica again.

I remember that my grandparents lived in the center of Salonica in a complex of several two- and three-floor houses that surrounded a courtyard. There, in the middle of the courtyard, was a small synagogue that was known as the 'synagogue of the rabbis.' That is where my father would take me on major holidays and we would join Grandfather who lived practically next door. I would mainly play in the courtyard rather than sit in at the service.

My grandmother Allegra died when I was ten years old. I didn't really know her much. After her death, Grandfather Eliaou moved to the Modiano Old People's Home as a paying guest. He would come and visit us on Saturdays or Sundays when the whole family would gather round the table for a meal. I don't know what language my grandparents spoke to each other. However, they spoke judesmo to my parents. [Ladino was the liturgical language; the spoken one was Judeo-Spanish or judesmo.] My parents spoke French to each other and to me; they spoke judesmo to my brother, while my brother and I spoke Greek.

I remember that my father would give me a banknote or two to take to my grandfather once a week, so he would have pocket money. During the German occupation and the persecution of the Jews in Salonica, the home was closed. Grandfather had Italian citizenship and in 1943 the Italians moved him to Athens, which was still under their control. But then, Italy collapsed. At that moment Grandfather was in a private clinic in the care of a trustworthy doctor for a prostate operation. A nurse betrayed him to the Germans who were looking for hidden Jews, and he was caught. Mercifully he died in the train taking him to Auschwitz.

My aunt Lily, who was born in 1897, had married twice but had no children. She and her husband were taken by the Germans in Salonica and were killed in the Shoah in 1943.

My father's brother, Uncle Joe [Joseph], was born in 1901. Before the war he lived in Kavalla [in northern Greece, on the way from Salonica to the Turkish border] and was in the tobacco business. When he married Aunt Aline [nee Nahmia] in a Salonica hotel, I was a page. Throughout my childhood people kept reminding me how I had dropped the bride's train and ran to collect the 'koufeta,' the sugar-coated almonds that are traditionally showered over the bride and groom.

Uncle Joe, Aunt Aline and their son, my cousin Maurice, would visit us frequently in Salonica. Our home was quite small, so they would stay in a hotel. I remember how Maurice loved wearing my father's medals as well as my school cap, which had a showy badge.

When Italy collapsed, Uncle Joe and his family went into hiding in the house of a Greek communist on the slopes of Mount Hymettus in Athens. There they had a fantastic experience. One night the Gestapo raided the house and arrested everybody in it. Joe and Aline spent the night facing a wall at the Gestapo headquarters on Merlin Street. My uncle showed them the false IDs they carried, the Germans said OK, and let them go. The Germans were only interested in their communist landlord.

Joe and family then moved to the suburb of Nea Smirni [area in Athens that the refugees from Asia Minor were placed to live], posing as refugees from the allied bombardment of Piraeus. Nea Smirni is where we were also hiding. So we would see each other infrequently and quite stealthily. They

survived this ordeal and later migrated to California where Maurice graduated from Stanford University. Later they returned to Athens. Aline died first, and Joe followed at the age of 99 in the year 2000. Maurice, who has two brilliant sons, is chairman of the board of directors of the Grande Bretagne Hotel, the most important hotel in Athens. [Editor's note: The Grand Bretagne Hotel is one of the oldest and most luxurious hotels in Athens.]

My mother's name was Nella. She was the daughter of Mair Tchenio, of a prominent family from Aragon, in Spain. The family was famous because after the massacres of 1390, part of the Tchenios, or Chenillos as they were called in Aragon, converted adopting the Christian surname of Santangel. One Louis de Santangel, who was purser to the King of Aragon, provided the loans that financed Christopher Columbus' expedition to the New World. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me, 'we are Tchenio but our other name was Santangel.' I didn't understand at the time, but I remembered this when I discovered the story of Louis.

My mother was very sweet and very pretty. She was a gentle person and had a lot of understanding. She wasn't a mother that was smothering her children; she would see to it that we grew up to be human beings. She would put pepper in our mouths if we said a dirty word. She wasn't a pushy Jewish mother, not at all. Mother was running our household as well as the whole family, since Father was so busy. She would read French books. We had quite a library at home, one that the Germans took away.

My maternal grandfather, Mair Tchenio, after whom I was named, had nine children, of whom four were from his first marriage. They were Felix, Estrea, Regina and Riquetta. When his first wife died, Meir married a young girl, Sara Benadon, my grandmother. They had five children - the eldest, Albert Tchenio, became a member of the Greek Parliament; then there was Pepo, Nella, my mother, Moise, and Valerie.

Mair Tchenio had a haberdashery store, a fairly large business, on Ermou Street in Salonica in which his sons were his partners. They inherited the business after his death. I was two or three years old when he died. I remember that once a week, the maid would take me to my uncles' shop visiting. They would give me a 20-drachma coin, which made me the happiest little boy in Salonica.

My grandmother Sara lived with one of my late grandfather's daughters from his first marriage - Riquetta - who took good care of her. Mother and I would visit her often, but I had difficulty communicating with her because she only spoke judesmo. But I enjoyed the tajicos [1](#) they served us. I didn't get the feeling that they kept a kosher cuisine in their house.

Grandma lived at the corner of Koromila and Vassilissis Olgas Street. The house had a long narrow garden lined with fruit trees. I do remember how in our young age my brother and I would steal unripe fruit, eat it, and promptly develop tummy trouble.

Mother's brother Uncle Pepo was tall and wore glasses, and loved a good joke. They were great friends with my father - in fact that is how Father met Mother - and they would enjoy their outings. Often they would agree in advance on some prank to play on the unsuspecting waiter of the restaurant they would go to. All of my mother's family, except for her sister Valerie and her children, were lost in the Shoah.

My father's name was Sam Modiano. He was born in Salonica in 1895. He died in Athens at the age of 84. He belonged to the vast Modiano family about whom I have written in my book. Father went to school at the Mission Laïque Française [2](#), one of the French schools established in Salonica at the beginning of the last century. Like all the Modianos, Father was an Italian citizen. Just before World War I, in 1911, war broke out between Italy and Turkey over Tripolitania - present-day Libya. As a result all the Italian males who lived in Salonica - then still under Ottoman rule - were expelled to Italy, some to Sicily, others to Livorno, and those of military age were recruited in the Italian army to fight in Libya. Father was only 16 at the time, so he didn't have to serve. The Greeks occupied Salonica in 1912.

My father went into journalism at the close of World War I when Salonica was a base for the French troops of General [Maurice] Sarrail [commander of the French Army stationed in Salonica, 'Front d'Orient,' during the WWI.]. He was a reporter of the French-language newspaper 'L'Opinion.' His first story was about the downing by the allies of a German zeppelin, which was flying over Salonica. That was great news at the time.

Later Father, who was a prolific writer, joined forces with Avram Houli and they launched the French-language newspaper 'Le Progres' [3](#) around 1926. Houli was the proprietor and Father was the editor. At the outset the paper had great financial difficulties because of competition with the long-established - also French-language - afternoon daily 'L'Independant,' which commanded great prestige. Houli died in 1931 and Father took over.

Most of the Jews at that time were royalists because [Eleftherios] Venizelos, the Greek Prime Minister, was credited with the mass repatriation of the Greeks of Asia Minor, following a population exchange treaty with Turkey. The refugees were settled mainly in Salonica and this put them into direct competition with the Jews who had for centuries controlled the city's commerce, its business and labor market.

Contrary to the royalist trend among the Jews, my father supported Venizelos because of his democratic principles. A law in 1933, which prohibited foreign nationals from owning newspapers in Greece, forced Father to obtain Greek nationality to be able to continue with his paper. We, the children, were given an option to choose between Greek or Italian citizenship at the age of 18. By that time there was a war between Greece and Italy, which made any choice rather difficult.

In 1936 when General Metaxas [4](#) proclaimed a dictatorship, Father had a hard time because a censorship was imposed and every word that went into his paper had to be checked and sanctioned by the censors. During the Greek- Italian war in 1940, Father also became Reuters correspondent to report on the war on the Albanian front. This stood him in good stead after the war when Reuters searched and found him in Athens and promptly gave him a job at a time when we were really starving.

Father was a hard worker. Before the war, he would return home after 'putting the paper to bed,' so to speak. So he was never back before 1 or 2am. We saw very little of him. However, on Sundays - as no newspapers appeared on Mondays - he would preside over lunch where often there would be a bunch of cousins invited. I remember that we, the children, would keep laughing for no reason at all, making Father very angry. So he would tell us off. Otherwise, my father had an exuberant personality. He was very outgoing and he enjoyed a good joke. He had an incredibly vast repertoire of jokes, and, would you believe it, even to this day my brother and I enjoy telling

some of Father's old jokes.

As far as religion went, he wasn't very observant. He would go to the synagogue on the high holidays, but not every Sabbath, mainly because his work was such that it always demanded his attention. We didn't keep a kosher house. We were quite secular.

One thing I really enjoyed during the holiday of Purim where the 'novyicas,' the little brides made of sugar. [Las novias de Pourim: it means the bride and groom of Purim; those were colored candy dolls especially made for Purim to give to Sephardic children as presents during the holiday. There are some left in the exhibit of the Jewish Museum of Greece. They were used instead of Oznei Aman used in the Ashkenazi tradition.]

After the war Father worked for Reuters, the news agency, and eventually became the chief correspondent for Greece and Turkey. He was highly respected as an honest and reliable journalist - he was regarded as number one among all the foreign correspondents in Athens.

Already before the war he had been made a 'Cavaliere,' a sort of knight of the Italian Crown, and had won the 'Palmes Academiques' from the French Government. He also had decorations from the Spanish and Polish Governments. As a postwar correspondent he was made an OBE [Officer of the Order of the British Empire] and received the Gold Cross of the Order of the Phoenix from King Paul of the Hellenes.

My parents got married in Salonica on 30th June 1920. My maternal grandfather had at first objections because at that time journalism, like theater acting, wasn't regarded as a dignified profession. The marriage took place in the house of Riquetta Bourla in Salonica. Riquetta was Father's first cousin. My parents lived on the ground floor of the same building on Miaouli Street. Later we moved to the so-called Depot district.

I grew up in Alexandrias Street number 103. It was a one-story house with a staircase on the side. You entered the house five steps up. Beneath there was a sort of rough stone cellar that we didn't use because it was too damp. The house had a large hall with a big heating stove. On the left there were two bedrooms. One I shared with my brother. The other was my parents'. To the right there was a dining room and straight ahead an ancient kitchen and bathroom. We had electricity and running water, we even had a water-well in the garden, which we used for our vegetable garden. We had electricity, but next to us there was a small shack where a very old woman and her son lived, and they had no light.

In fact there was no garden; it was a large courtyard half of it covered with flagstones. We had fruit trees - apricots and pears - and we used to steal the figs from the neighbor's tree, which was overhanging our wall. Our courtyard proved to be very useful during the 1932 earthquakes in Salonica. There were very strong shocks in the peninsula of Chalkidiki and they affected Salonica a good deal. We were all very scared. It was in the summertime so we set up some sort of straw shed and the whole neighborhood would come and sleep there at night, because they were too afraid to sleep in their houses.

At that time I was aged six and I remember that during one of the shocks, my mother fetched me, threw a mattress out of the window and then threw me on it. I was too young, and I wasn't very conscious of what was happening. But I somehow got used to earthquakes and didn't panic. Later,

as a journalist, I went to the Ionian Islands to report on the earthquakes of 1953 and I felt quite relaxed in the middle of all that devastation and the shaking ground.

It was in the neighborhood of Alexandrias Street that I played with other children. We would horseplay, throw stones at each other, and we would form a gang to fight with the gang in the next street up because they had teased one of our girls. The neighborhood was mixed, there were Jewish and Christian families, and we would play together because most of us went to the same school. It was fun.

We speak of Salonica, but although I was 17 when we left, I didn't really get to know the city. My parents were very protective and wouldn't encourage me to go into town. This was naturally because of the German occupation. But the point is that I still don't really know the town outside the main sights - the White Tower, the Depot district, the villa Allatini and of course my school. My whole life revolved around home and the school.

In the summer we used to go to the seaside. There was a taxi driver called Grigoris and we would share the taxi with neighbors to go to Karabournaki for a swim. One day I convinced Grigoris to let me hold the taxi's driving wheel. I must have been seven. I promptly drove the car into a ditch. So that ended my first attempt to drive. The facilities at the beach were at the time quite primitive. However, we didn't know any better and would be very happy to be in the sea. It is later that we became spoilt. In the summer our family would also spend a few weeks in a hotel in Edessa, the city of waterfalls, west of Salonica. That was what my French-speaking parents called our 'villegiature' [French for vacation].

Father and Mother had Jewish friends and they would gather on Sundays in the home of one of them in turn to play cards and share a meal. We, the children, would gather in a room or the courtyard and play. My elder brother Lelo would go out with his friends.

My brother Lelo, which is a variation of Eliaou, Modiano was born in Salonica in 1922 in a house near Panaghia Halkeon [5](#). When he was a youngster he was quite restless. Father used to call him 'giovano', Italian for dandy. He would return home from his outings rather late, so there would be big quarrels with Father. During the Greek-Italian war in 1940, Lelo would help Father with the newspaper. In fact, Father was very proud that they managed to print the newspaper although his offices were bombed during an Italian air raid.

Lelo was in a sense guarding our newspaper offices after the Germans occupied Salonica. One night a German officer and some soldiers came in. The officer told him, 'Take my advice: get your hat and get out of here. We are taking over.' This was the end of Father's newspaper. The Germans used the facilities to print their army newspaper.

When Italy collapsed and we went to hide in Nea Smirni, my brother Lelo escaped by boat to the Turkish coast and then joined the Greek Air Force in the Middle East. He received training in Rhodesia [today Zimbabwe] and South Africa, but then he had an accident and was hospitalized until the end of the war. After the war he married Nina Hassid, his Salonica sweetheart, in 1950. They had one son, Miki, born in 1952, who has become a very successful television producer. Nina later died of cancer. Miki and his wife Christina have a daughter, Marianina, whose name is a combination of the names of both her grandmothers.

Every year my brother and I have a picture of us taken to remind us of what we looked like several years earlier. It shows us what the ageing process can do.

As a child I was very thin. I am looking at this photograph and cannot believe I was so thin. I remember that at the age of ten my father said to me that when I would become thirty kilos he would give me 1,000 drachmas. I started wearing glasses when I was in the sixth grade of elementary school. I was then trying to learn to play the violin that my uncle Joseph had given me. But then I soon discovered that I couldn't read the music score that was just one meter away. That's how we discovered that I was shortsighted. So I gave up the violin, and I got myself a pair of glasses.

I used to go to a private school called Zahariadis in Salonica. It was near the house at 25th Martiou tram terminal. It was a good school where they taught Greek in the morning and English in the afternoon. I have used English throughout my professional life, and what I know I owe to this teacher of English who gave us the basics of the language. I'm eternally grateful to him. It was largely thanks to him that I was able to perfect my English to the point of being able to write for a newspaper such as The Times of London.

There was no obvious anti-Semitism in the air when I was growing up. You will laugh if I tell you my first anti-Semitic experience. There was this child bootblack who, whenever we crossed paths on my way to school he would shout, 'dirty Jew, dirty Jew!' The joke, as I found out later, was that he was Jewish too! That was anti-Semitism prompted by class rivalry. There have been instances of anti-Semitism in my life, but they were not serious, more a social phenomenon in which no violence was threatened or implied.

What I remember vividly from my bar mitzvah is the hard time I had trying to learn enough Hebrew to be able to read the text. I had a teacher who came home and taught me how to parrot the text from the Torah that I was supposed to read at the service in the synagogue. I very much regret that I never really learned Hebrew. After the service at the synagogue there was a reception at home, and the whole family as well as many of my father's colleagues and employees came to celebrate with us. I also remember that on that occasion my maternal uncles gave me a bicycle as a gift, and that I fell in love with it. I just would never part with the bicycle so much so that the neighbors claimed I even went to the toilet with the bicycle.

The only political event that I remember in Salonica before the war, took place on 9th May 1936, which was my 10th birthday. My mother was taking me by bus to visit an uncle. And then there was rioting by the communists so the police rushed in on horseback swinging swords. Some demonstrators were killed that day. A few months later General Metaxas proclaimed a dictatorship. Another event that impressed me very much was getting on a bus with Mother. The bus caught fire and we managed to get off just in time. The flames singed our hair.

The first time that we really felt anti-Semitism was after the Germans occupied Salonica. Greek anti-Semites took courage and came out openly to manifest their racism. After the war, however, everybody was trying to show how friendly they were; every other person said they had an uncle 'who had hidden several Jews in his house' or 'a grandfather who rescued so many others...' The truth is that many Greeks helped scores of Jews during the occupation, but only two Jewish families found a hiding place in Salonica.

The night before the Germans entered the city in March 1941, we had tried to escape southwards. The four of us - Father, Mother, Lelo and myself - went off to Aretsou [area that at the time was outside the city, in front of the sea] where Father had made arrangements for a caique, a sailboat, to pick us up and take us across to Lithoro [seaside village resort below Olympus mountain, 100 km from Salonica] at the foot of Mount Olympus so we could go on to Athens.

At that time we lived under the misconception that the Greek Army and the British allies would have halted the German advance at the river Aliakmon line. This was a fallacy. In any event, the caique never turned up, so we went back sheepishly to our home. It was a traumatic experience. We felt trapped.

The next trauma came when the German military came to the house to question Father. There were three of them. The officer took my father into the dining room and questioned him. The other two went through Father's library. They took all the books we had and placed them in two large wooden crates. They came the next day and took them away. Many years later I was given the copy of an SS order based on information they had received before the war from agents in Salonica listing important Jews in Salonica. Father's name was second after that of the chief rabbi, Zvi Koretz.

As I said, Father had had to take the Greek nationality because of the 1933 law. So, when the racial laws came into force in Salonica, unlike the other Modianos who as Italian nationals were exempt, we were forced to abandon our home and go and live in one of the two 'ghettos' where the Germans confined the Greek Jews [see Salonica Ghettos] [6](#). So we went and lived in the apartment of one of Father's fellow-journalists in Analipsi [name derived from the church's name, which means Ascension, in an area outside the old city of Salonica.]. We weren't allowed to go outside the boundaries of the ghetto, or to use any means of transportation, or telephones. We stayed there for about three months. I have here a picture of myself aged 16 reading Nea Evropi [7](#), the pro-Nazi paper, on the back balcony of the house in the ghetto.

One night my father's colleagues, the Greek journalists of Salonica, came to see him. They told him, '...don't be stupid, go to the Italian consulate and ask them to restore your Italian nationality...' Indeed he went and got his Italian nationality back. The Consul then recruited him to help the Italians with a plan to get all the families in which the wife had been Italian before marrying a Greek Jew, out of the Baron Hirsch camp [8](#) before they were deported. So they managed to get 138 families out. Then they sent Father to Athens, which was under Italian control, to secure housing for all the Italian Jews that would come from Salonica.

Later, from that backside balcony, I saw my best friend, Hugo Mordoh, leaving with that small convoy of people carrying things to go to the Baron Hirsch camp where he and his would be put on a train and - end of story. I was crying. He was my best friend; we were at school together and we were very close. In Salonica there was the Mordoh house [9](#), the first building after the Zachariades School. It was a huge, very beautiful mansion that belonged to his grandfather. At that time I didn't know where he was being taken. The Germans had convinced us that we were being sent to Cracow in Poland where the local Jewish community had prepared for us housing and work and everything. We were even asked to hand in our Greek drachmas, which would be exchanged for Polish Zloty. They assured us we would be very happy.

Father, Mother and I left Salonica in June 1943 in an Italian military train bound for Athens. The journey turned out to be a grueling experience. The resistance had blown up some important bridges, so we had to walk down the ravines and up again, but eventually we reached Athens. Uncle Joe, who lived in Athens, gave us hospitality until we found somewhere to stay. Father got in touch with the Italian Embassy and joined a committee that found houses and schools and put up the Italian Jews that were coming from Salonica. My brother came later with the main group of Italian Jews.

In August the Italian embassy asked us if we wanted to go to Italy on false papers with Christian names in order to be safe in case something happened to Italy. We refused because Father had already other plans. Italy collapsed on 8th September 1943 and the Germans seized control of Athens and started looking for Jews.

This is where my parents' friendship with our Christian neighbors in Salonica, Niko and Elli Sanikou, saved us. These neighbors had moved to Athens and lived in the suburb of Nea Smirni. They took us into hiding at great risk to themselves and their two little girls. We stayed there in hiding for nearly 15 months.

From time to time the Germans and their collaborators would organize searches in different areas of Athens looking for hiding Jews or communists. They would collect all the males in the central square and there masked traitors would point a finger at those involved with the resistance or who were giving shelter to Jews.

It was at that time that my father started losing his eyesight, so he had an excuse for not going to the gathering on the ground that he was blind. My mother was supposed to be his nurse. I would go and hide in a small hole under a stairway. Once I spent eight hours doubled up like this, while I could hear the Germans and their collaborators shouting through loudspeakers: 'Any male found hiding will be shot on the spot ...' Great fun! I must have felt pretty awful, but while it happens your adrenaline goes up and helps keep your courage.

On other occasions, when we knew in advance that the Germans were coming the following day for a round up, Father and I would take off and walk past the cemetery of Nea Smirni in the direction of Palio Faliro. We would stay all day near the mountain, until the Germans would leave the suburb. We would then just walk back together in the evening.

My mother's German came useful one night while hiding in Nea Smirni. It was towards the end of the German occupation. The Germans were so short of manpower that they had recruited young boys for the air force - I mean boys aged 15-16. Some were stationed at the air force base at Faliro. Some of them deserted one night and there was a search by the German military police. They came into the house in Nea Smirni where we were hiding. I was sleeping on the floor, and they woke me up and started barking at me in German, thinking that because of my blond hair and blue eyes, I was one of the deserters. Fortunately my mother's German came all back. She explained that I was her son, not a deserter. That saved the day.

While we were in hiding I continued learning English because there was an American lady married to a Greek, who gave me lessons in Nea Smirni. Then I would go home and study further from an English translation of Eugene Sue's 'Mysteries of Paris' with the help of a dictionary. [Sue, Eugene (real name Marie Joseph Sue, 1804-1857): French novelist, best known for his popular and

sensational romances, 'The Mysteries of Paris' and 'The Wandering Jew' ranking among his most famous works.]

I never finished school because when the Germans occupied Salonica in 1941 they barred all Jews from schools. I was in the last class of the gymnasium, my finishing year. So I never got a school-leaving certificate. After we left Salonica and settled in Athens, I tried to pass the finishing exams but then Italy collapsed and we had to go into hiding. It's a good thing that I chose a profession in which they didn't require you to have a school-leaving certificate or a university degree.

I had no complex about not having gone to college, but I must admit that a higher education would have helped me greatly in my work. But then, if I had gone to university and studied to become an architect, as I had planned, I wouldn't have gone into a profession that I found so much more exciting.

Athens was liberated on 12th October 1944. We left the home of our saviors and moved to the Veto hotel which was near Omonoia Square [the most central point of reference in Athens]. We were still there when the communist uprising [see Greek Civil War] [10](#) broke out in December. The hotel was in no man's land. Everyday we would see dead bodies outside the hotel. At one end of the street, the British troops were firing from the rooftop of a hotel and at the other there were communists who were holed up in a brothel and were firing back. In these circumstances it became rather difficult to get food as well as charcoal for heating and cooking. At that time we were absolutely penniless.

In the early days of January, after the end of the uprising, there was a call for interpreters in the Greek Army. By that time Father had made contact with Reuters and had a steady job. He and Mother moved to the Grand Bretagne Hotel, which was the headquarters of the British military, since living anywhere else in Athens was dangerous.

I falsified my birth date on my German identity card and pretended I was old enough for the army as an interpreter. But I was still only seventeen. I was accepted and given the rank of second lieutenant. I served first in Kalamata and then in Tripoli in the Peloponnesus.

At that time there were still clusters of communist guerrillas on the mountains. I worked as an interpreter with the British military mission, which was instructing the newly recruited Greek army in all military drills. I was translating some of the manuals of the British army for the use by the Greek army, and I was demobilized about two years later, in 1947.

After I left the army I worked for the Joint [11](#) - the American Joint Distribution Committee, in their offices on Mitropoleos Street in Athens. I made many friends there. One of the very dear ones is Dario Gabbai who had returned from Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was in the Sonderkommando [Jews that the Germans used in the extermination camps to throw the corpses into the ovens] and had some very frightening experiences to tell. He had put into the oven of the crematoria his own family. Only one of his brothers survived. Today he lives in Los Angeles. His testimony figured prominently in Spielberg's documentary about the Hungarian Jews [The Last Days, 1998]. Dario, who was captured in Athens in 1943, served in the crematoria towards the end of the war and this saved him. The Germans used young Jews to shove the bodies of the gassed Jews into the ovens, but they would shoot them every three months so there would be no witnesses. Dario managed to flee by mixing with the other survivors from Auschwitz when the Germans evacuated the camp and

led the survivors to a death march [12](#) westwards.

While I was on leave from the army, I would help my father at Reuters. It was in this way that I learned the profession of a foreign correspondent. During this time I met several colleagues of my father. One of them was Frank McCaskey, a British war hero turned foreign correspondent. He worked for The Times of London. One day he asked me to help him.

That was my next job. It was 1950 and I was appointed assistant correspondent for The Times. In 1952 Frank was transferred to Suez to cover the Anglo-French landing there. Frank was a very heavy drinker and eventually he died of it. The Times asked me to carry on in Greece. I accepted and I continued to work for them for the next 38 years. I always felt passionate about my new profession. It really takes you over and controls your life. You are no longer a free man. At every moment you must be on the alert just in case something important is happening in your area. It is a very exciting job but a very demanding one. You are on call 24/7.

The period between 1967 and 1974 was particularly interesting because a bunch of army colonels imposed a dictatorship in Greece. Actually mine was a risky profession to be in. From one moment to the next you couldn't tell whether they would slap you in jail because of something disagreeable you wrote in The Times. So much so that the British Ambassador gave my wife his bedside telephone number just in case something happened in the middle of the night. But they didn't touch me, although I was sharply critical of the regime in my reports. There were many other important issues that I covered during the 38 years I was in the profession. One of the big issues was Cyprus. Towards the end of my career I was awarded the OBE by the Queen of England for a job well done. It was the same award that had been presented to my father a few years earlier. During all those years as a foreign correspondent only once or twice there were references in Greek newspapers pointing out that I was Jewish, simply because they hadn't liked something I had written.

I got married to Inci, pronounced Indji, a young Turkish woman, in 1963. I was then aged 37, and my wife was six years younger. We had met during an Aegean cruise. She had just divorced and her Greek hairdresser in Istanbul advised her to go to the Greek islands, which were just then becoming a fashionable tourist destination. I had joined the ship with a friend who was British consul in Athens. Inci and I fell in love and I proposed to her while dancing in a nightclub on the Island of Rhodes.

She was a Muslim Turk and very liberal-minded. So was her family who accepted me instantly. The question of religion never came up. We had a civil wedding in Istanbul. Then we came to Athens and, since the civil marriage was not yet recognized in Greece, we looked for a hakham to marry us without too much fuss. We looked all over - Turkey, London, Paris, Rome - but they were very strict and wanted to go by the rules. Then thankfully we found a kind hakham in Athens who said to Inci, 'If you respect his faith as he respects yours, it is fine with me.' So he did. We were married in my bachelor apartment on Alopekis Street. We had 35 years of bliss, even during the most dangerous times.

Inci went through a fictitious conversion and she got the name of Lea. In this way we managed to register our religious wedding in the Athens registry. She would come to the synagogue whenever I went, which was rarely. I find that the non-Jewish wives of all my relatives and cousins also go to the synagogue and attend services. Quite naturally they expect their husbands to go to the church

with them whenever they go.

Actually, the only thing I do according to the book is fast on Yom Kippur. We finish the fast - El cortar del Tanit [from Judeo-Spanish: the ceasing/cutting/or stopping the fast with the ceremonial meal that follows] - usually at my cousin Alberto's house. We just have dinner there, and it's like any other family dinner. My cousin Christian's wife prepares all the traditional things haroseth and lettuce and all. But you know, we do it casually because we don't really know how to do it properly - there is nobody at the table that would say the appropriate prayers for Yom Kippur or on Seder night for Pesach. We just enjoy the matzot and the 'uevos enhaminados' - the eggs baked in the oven with onions and coffee. I really love them.

Inci owned a school in Istanbul. She had studied abnormal psychology in Cambridge and Paris and was specializing in children with Down's syndrome. But then she decided she couldn't do it because the children would get too emotionally attached to her and she couldn't take it. So she opened a school in Istanbul for normal children - first in her paternal house - and she added one class a year. Then she moved to a bigger estate and at one point she had one of the best private schools in Istanbul with over 1,000 pupils. When we met she was at the top of her career and her decision to marry me and come and live in Athens had been a very difficult one. But she did it. It was a great sacrifice. She would go to Istanbul every two months and make her presence felt because she felt that the parents had entrusted their children to her personally.

Being my wife wasn't easy. The Greeks dislike the Turks and they don't hide it. The Turks knew that I was Greek and they were always extremely polite and would avoid any controversial subject. Here it was exactly the opposite. They often behaved in an insulting way to her. However, I called Inci 'lion-tamer.' When she saw that someone was openly hostile to her, she would go out of her way to tame them and make them eat out of her hand. She had so much charm, and she was deeply interested in people. So she would win them over.

For our 25th wedding anniversary I married her again. By this time Greece had recognized the civil wedding. We went in front of the Mayor of Athens, Miltos Evert, a close friend. His father, Colonel Evert, was the chief of the Athens police during the German occupation and it was he who had given us and many other Jews identity cards with false Christian names.

So, Inci and I were married three times. As a couple we really enjoyed traveling and we visited many places together. We went on a Safari in central Africa and, later sailed up the Nile around the late 1960s. We also visited China and Indonesia in 1985, which we really enjoyed. Shortly after we married we were invited by the U.S. Government to go on a two-month tour of the United States. We have an apartment in a complex in Eretria [a beautiful resort] on the island of Euboea, where we relaxed whenever my work would allow me to leave the city. We had no children.

In 1990 my wife and I agreed that 'enough is enough.' We made our accounts, saw the state of our financial situation and decided that I would retire. For eight years, until 1998, we had a great time, the best of our lives. Inci was very popular and on the whole I think that she enjoyed her life. Unfortunately she got cancer twice, once she had an operation and survived it for about nine years. In 1998 it moved to her liver. For a whole month she knew that she was dying. She was very, very brave until the end. I still miss her.

My father died in 1979 during his siesta, in a Kifissia hotel [an outstanding resort on the outskirts of the city of Athens]. He and Mother used to spend a month or two in this hotel every summer. He died there. The news came over the phone from my brother as we were spending the weekend at the seaside in Eretria. So we dashed back and found Mother and learned that he hadn't suffered. Still it was a great shock because his death was so sudden, although he was already 84 years old.

Father is buried in Athens in the 3rd cemetery that has a Jewish section. The community gave him an honorary place near the entrance of the cemetery. I was very impressed by the number of people who attended his funeral. There were lots of wreaths including one from King Constantine who was then living in London. When father died, I was 53 years old, and I had been married to Inci for 14 years. My mother became ill soon after Father died. She had to be taken care of until her death six years later. She is also buried in the 3rd cemetery but in a different area.

After my retirement I started looking into the genealogy of our family. I'd heard a lot of things from my father, but unfortunately he died in 1979. Had he lived, he would have spared me half the research work. I started investigating the family tree thinking that this would have been a simple affair of finding about 100 to 150 names and putting them on a tree. I thought it would be over in six months. I am still at it!

It took me ten years to research the family's origins and its different branches. So I wrote a book, 'HAMEHUNE MODILLANO -- The Genealogical Story of the Modiano Family from ~1570 to our Days.' It was first published in 2000. I made several revisions as more information kept pouring in. Now we are at the 5th edition, which is posted on the Internet at [www.themodianos.gr](http://www.themodianos.gr). The tree had 1,700 names on it when the book was printed. We are now at just over 3,000 names.

Inci loved this project and the book is dedicated to her. She was thrilled every time we visited a city like Washington or London or Paris and we would gather all the Modianos of the city for dinner even if they didn't know one another. Inci loved it so much that she behaved, as I say in the book, as if she was a Modiano, not I.

Genealogy has been my main occupation for the past few years. People are constantly coming through by letter or e-mail after stumbling on the Modiano site and finding that we are related. So I keep adding and adding and I don't know when it will finish.

In January 2004 several Modianos met on a cruise in the Caribbean. There must have been about 15 of us. It was great fun. We had such a wonderful time meeting unknown relatives who became instant 'cousins.' So we decided to have a worldwide family reunion. Our Mexican Modianos organized another get-together in October of the same year and it was quite exciting. But the official worldwide reunion was held in Florence in June 2005. There were 125 Modianos or descendents of Modianos there. We spent five terrific days visiting Modigliana, the village northeast of Florence that gave us our family name. Later we visited Livorno whose citizens the Modianos had been for several centuries. We decided to hold the next reunion in Salonica in 2007. It was wonderful to get a feeling that even though you had never seen them in your whole life you knew that you were from the same family and so it was family love at first sight. I call it the Modiano magic, but I'm sure it works for other families as well.

## **1 Tajicos**

the name for homemade marzipan sweets. Jews used to eat them because they were neutral ingredients sweets that could be served as desert for any dairy or meat meal.

## **2 Mission Laique Francaise**

French Mission School, founded in 1905 in Salonica. Many Jews studied there in the interwar period.

## **3 Le Progres**

One of the 7 French-Jewish newspapers published in Salonica up until 1941.

## **4 Metaxas, Ioannis (1871-1941)**

Greek General and Prime Minister of Greece from 1936 until his death. A staunch monarchist, he supported Constantine I and opposed Greek entry into WWI. Metaxas left Greece with the king, neither returning until 1920. When the monarchy was displaced in 1922, Metaxas moved into politics and founded the Party of Free Opinion in 1923. After a disputed plebiscite George II, son of Constantine I, returned to take the throne in 1935. The elections of 1936 produced a deadlock between Panagis Tsaldaris and Themistoklis Sophoulis. The political situation was further polarized by the gains made by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). Disliking the Communists and fearing a coup, George II appointed Metaxas, then minister of war, to be interim prime minister. Widespread industrial unrest in May allowed Metaxas to declare a state of emergency. He suspended the parliament indefinitely and annulled various articles of the constitution. By 4th August 1936, Metaxas was effectively dictator. Patterning his regime on other authoritarian European governments (most notably Mussolini's fascist regime), Metaxas banned political parties, arrested his opponents, criminalized strikes and introduced widespread censorship of the media. But he did not have great popular support or a strong ideology. The Metaxas government sought to pacify the working classes by raising wages, regulating hours and trying to improve working conditions. For rural areas agricultural prices were raised and farm debts were taken on by the government. Despite these efforts the Greek people generally moved towards the political left, but without actively opposing Metaxas.

## **5 Panaghia Halkeon**

an old church in the old part of town off Egnatia Street, in the center. It means 'Virgin of the brass craftsmen' because this is the area of those trade shops.

## **6 Salonica Ghettos**

The two ghettos in Salonica were established by the Germans on Fleming and Syngrou Streets, in the east and the west of the city respectively. These were formerly neighborhoods with a dense, yet not exclusively Jewish population. There was no ghetto in the city before it was occupied by the Germans. (Source: Mark Mazower, Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941-44, New Haven and London)

## **7 Nea Evropi**

New Europe, founded by the Germans and Greek collaborators in April 1941.

## **8 Baron Hirsch camp**

one of the poorest Jewish working class neighborhoods near the old train station in Salonica. During the German occupation it was turned into a ghetto where the Nazis assembled the Jews before they deported them.

## **9 Mordoh house**

one of the Jewish villas on Queen Olga Street, used today as the city's museum of ethnography.

## **10 Greek Civil War**

1946-49, between the left and the right that was supported by the British.

## **11 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during WWI. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

## **12 Death march**

the Germans, in fear of the approaching Allied armies, tried to erase evidence of the concentration camps. They often destroyed all the facilities and forced all Jews regardless of their age or sex to go on a death march. This march often led nowhere, there was no concrete destination. The marchers got no food and no rest at night. It was solely up to the guards how they treated the prisoners, how they acted towards them, what they gave them to eat and they even had the power of their life or death in their hands. The conditions during the march were so cruel that this journey became a journey that ended in death for many.