

Michael Matsas, “The Illusion of Safety”

1997, Pella Publishing Company, NY; second edition 2021 revised and expanded, Vrahori Publishing Company, MD. *2nd Edition available through the Kehila Kedosha Janina or Amazon.*

Michael Matsas covers the Greek Holocaust historically and integrates his own personal memoir and memoirs from interviews with Greek survivors of Auschwitz and those who hid during the occupation of Greece. It is also a book about the Greek Resistance – its successes, failures, and aftermath following the re-institution of the Greek government. This book is a ‘must-read’, not only for Greek Jews (Romaniote & Sephardic) and Greek Orthodox, but for all WWII historians and followers. Additionally, it is a classic Holocaust text that goes a step further: presenting a thesis as to why the Nazis were so successful and demonstrates that the Jews did not “go like sheep to the gas chambers” but were duped by the Nazi mis-information machine.

Michael Matsas’ primary research, footnoted throughout the book, is impressive and scholarly. He spent months researching at the National Archives, the British Archives, and the FDR Institute in Hyde Park, NY uncovering primary communications and documents (many marked ‘classified’) between U.S. Officials, sent during WWII. The book is very well-written and reads “like a novel”.

Our grandparents came to this country in 1903 (Elias Matathia Colchamiro) and 1906 (Speranza Matsas Colchamiro) and were spared the Holocaust in Ioannina. Yet, Nona’s sister Chyssie and family were taken by the Germans in Ioannina (see paper by Jonathan Hirsch). The Holocaust in Greece is ingrained in us – not only as Jews and Greek Jews, but especially in Nona’s eyes when I would say, “Nona, let’s all go to Ioannina one day.” She never answered my persistent question but a far-away look came over her. After many times questioning my father, the answer was “because Nona lost family in the Holocaust”. (See “The Charm”, by Rhoda Elison). Cousins Ilias and Rafael’s father Sam Matsas was interned in Auschwitz (where his first wife and two daughters perished) and his heroism to defy the Germans is described by Michael Matsas on p.264 and p, 469 2nd Edition and on pages 242 and 418 1st Edition. Sam Matsas’ father was Nona’s brother and he remained in Ioannina where Sam was born as was Ilias and Rafael (twins). Their mother Titina Yohanna hid in Athens; and Sam and she married after the war.

Michael Matsas is related to us through marriage into the Colchamiro – Dinah Colchamiro (Elias’ sister) married Ezra Bacola. Their daughter was Bimbo who married Semo Cohen who is related to her grandmother’s side of the family. It is possible we are related through the Matsas too – Sam Matsas related to Sulamet Matsas related to Minos Matsas (father of Makis Matsas).