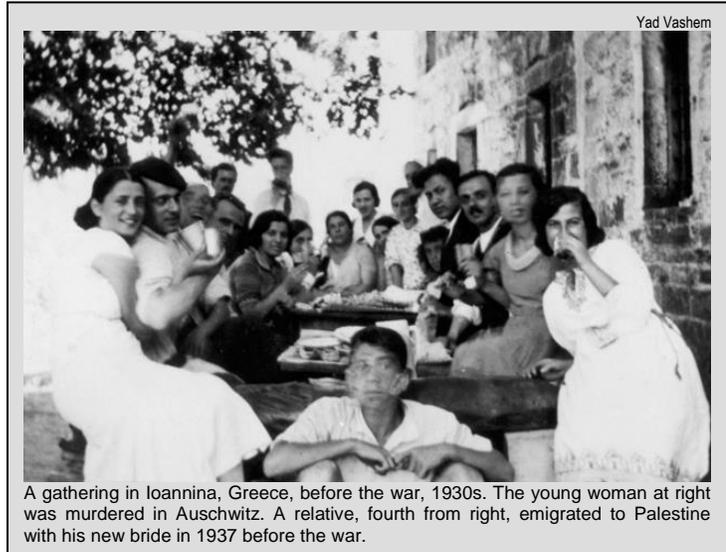


■ THE CAMPS ■

ESTHER & ELIAS ARE SENT TO AUSCHWITZ

Esther Politis and Elias Mordechai were born in Ioannina, Greece. Esther, age 22, had been married less than a year to her first husband. Elias, in his early thirties, was married with a four-year-old daughter. On March 25, 1944, the Germans came to arrest all the Jews of the city. Nearly 1900 people were deported to Auschwitz that day; only about 160 survived.

ESTHER: Early on a Saturday morning in March 1944, around seven o'clock, somebody knocked on the door so hard. We didn't know what was happening. The Germans were outside. They gave us exactly two hours to get ready. Two of my brothers were begging my mother to let them go hide in the attic. My mother was screaming like anything. She said she was not going to leave anybody behind. Everybody, the whole family, was going. We were very close. The whole family was going to go together. So my two brothers didn't have any choice.



A gathering in Ioannina, Greece, before the war, 1930s. The young woman at right was murdered in Auschwitz. A relative, fourth from right, emigrated to Palestine with his new bride in 1937 before the war.

We all got ready. We took a couple of loaves of bread and a quilt or blanket. My grandmother had passed away a month before, and my mother had made a cake for the Sabbath prayer for her. When the Germans came in, my mother had it in her hands, and when they pushed us out of the door, the cake fell in front on the stoop of the house.

They took us to a big place and gathered everybody together. The Germans had a schedule. Everybody's name was written down. They knew how many people were there. And that afternoon they sent trucks, like they carry horses in, and everybody got in. It was March 25 and it was snowing. They called our names out and checked a list before they put us in the truck. I was completely lost. You know, I was 22 years old. I said, "What are they going to do to us? Where are they going to take us?"

ELIAS: There was no food, nothing, in the trucks. They took us to a little town. There we were put in one big building that used to be a warehouse. Two thousand—two thousand people—in one building. No food, not a thing, no water, no food. After eight days, a transport [train] came. Seventy-five people were put in each train car. The train traveled through Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and stopped at Auschwitz, Poland. Eight days and nights. A lot of people died in the train cars by the time the train reached Auschwitz.

ESTHER: Everybody was screaming, "What are they going to do? What are they going to do?" So two German men came in and took us out of the train. You know, if you sit eight days in a train and you don't stretch your feet—a lot of people couldn't walk. So they finally separated us when we came out of the train. They put the young people on the right, the old people on the left. Of all my family, only one of my brothers and I came out of Auschwitz. Everybody else went

that same night to the gas chambers. I told the German officer, "I want to go with my mother," and he said, "You cannot go with your mother because she cannot walk. You're going to walk. And you're going to meet them tonight." And we walked. And we never saw them again.

After the war Esther and Elias returned to Ioannina hoping to find their families, but most of their relatives had died in Auschwitz. They became friends and married in 1946. In 1951 they emigrated to the United States with their two daughters and settled in Greensboro, North Carolina, where other Jews from their town had emigrated before the war.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- The Holocaust in Ioannina (Yad Vashem)
www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/ioannina/german_occupation.asp
- The Holocaust in Ioannina (Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum, New York, NY)
www.kkjsm.org/the-holocaust-in-ioannina
- A Greek Girl in Auschwitz: Rebecca Hauser's Story (North Carolina survivor), video, 28 min. (Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education in North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC)
youtu.be/UbPudYTSWgs
- The Auschwitz Album: photographs taken by SS photographers as Hungarian Jews arrived and were selected for death or slave labor, May-June 1944 (Yad Vashem)
www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/selection.asp
 - ♦ Arrival www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/arrival.asp
 - ♦ Selection www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/selection.asp



Jews arrive in Auschwitz before being lined up for selection, May 1944. One crematorium is visible in the upper right.



An SS physician examines an elderly Jewish man during selection, May 1944. The woman has probably been selected for slave labor.