

# MAMMA

By Tuvia (toby) Erez (reiss)



Left: My mother, Olga. Yad Vashem Archive, 1948



Right: The writing on the house on Edmond Rostand St. in Thessaloniki

This short article is my loving tribute to my mother, Olga, who was a holocaust survivor, and who passed a few years ago. This story was published in my town's newspaper shortly after her death. I would like to share it with all of you now in honor of Holocaust Remembrance Day, which takes place today in Israel.



43177. That's the number the Germans branded on my mother's left arm when she arrived in Auschwitz. In 1943, dark clouds covered the bright blue skies of Thessaloniki, Greece. 17-year-old Olga and her family were taken to a concentration camp. When the war ended, my mother found rfdher way to Belgium, where she taken in by a family of Righteous Gentiles, and then to Israel. The war was over, but the clouds that covered the bright blue skies remained and colored my mother's life in a permanent grey hue; the color of the smoky chimneys from which her loved ones perished. From time to time, a ray of light beckoned in the form of the birth of children, grandchildren, and her

great-granddaughter Tamar. But over the years, as I looked into my mother's eyes, I would always see the 17-year-old girl whose life stood still in Auschwitz, in 1943.

Two years ago, when that damn disease that got her had only begun, she called me one morning. "Have I ever told you," she asked, "how I survived the concentration camp?" "No, Mother," I said, "you've never told me."

"Would you like me to tell you?" she asked.

"Of course," I said. And she began to talk.

"The German officers guarding the concentration camp loved Neapolitan songs.

One day they came to us, the prisoners, and asked, 'Is there anyone here who can sing the song MAMMA by the famous Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli?'"

"I knew the song," she continued, "because my father, who loved Neapolitan songs, used to sing it to us often. So I sang it in front of the German officers. I must have sung it well because from that day, every time they wanted to hear the song they called for me and said, 'Greeka (the Greek woman), sing MAMMA for us.' And I sang because my life depended on it. That's how I was saved."

"Would you like me to sing you the song?" she continued to ask me on the other end of the line. "Of course, Mother," I replied. She began singing into the receiver MAMMA in Italian, and I on the other end wiped a tear.



My mother never returned to Thessaloniki. The memories were too painful. A few years back, I told her I was going on a trip to Northern Greece and Thessaloniki and asked her to write down the address where she had lived. She remembered the street name: Edmond Rostand (the name of a French author). She did not remember the house number, but said that across the street was a synagogue with the Hebrew words "Gifts for the Poor" inscribed on its front.

On a spring day we arrived in Thessaloniki. We found the street immediately - a long straight road in the middle of town. The houses were typical to Greece: each house five stories, painted white, with a meter-wide balcony surrounding each floor. On the balconies, the inhabitants sat on chairs facing the street, and watched the passersby.

We began walking along the street and approached passersby, asking them where we could find the synagogue. No one knew. And then we saw him - an old Greek man at an age likely to have been touched by war in youth. We approached him, but he did not speak any English - only Greek and German. We began to converse with simultaneous translations, telling him who we were and what we were after. The Greek told us that during the war he was a boy, maybe 10. He didn't know where there a synagogue was in the area, but said he had a friend who was one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki, and suggested she might be able to help.

Following him, we walked to one of the side streets and reached an extravagant house with multiple floors. The Greek pushed the intercom button, said a few words and the door opened. Receiving us at the door was a woman dressed in black. Her apartment was extremely well maintained and pristinely clean; pictures of her son (so she said) at various Maccabiah sport competitions were scattered along the walls. Soon, however, we found ourselves yet again in a dead-end conversation. The woman spoke only Ladino and Greek, the man spoke only Greek and German, and we knew only German and Hebrew. Words and questions were lost along the way. Eventually, I took out my cell phone and called my mother in Tel Aviv. "Mom," I spoke in Hebrew of course, "there's a woman here who speaks Ladino - explain to her what we're looking for." I passed the phone to the woman in black and she spoke to my mother in Ladino. I did not understand a word, because growing up we spoke only Hebrew and German in our house, but the sound of the words enveloped me

like the warmth of my mother's home. After they finished speaking, she gestured with her hand, and we followed her as she walked down the street.

After a 20-minute walk, we arrived at a small, preserved house, surrounded by a fine fence. There was a guard-booth at the entrance. We went around the house to the back. On the white wall, large metal letters spelled "Gifts for the Poor." I had come full circle.

To my mother, who passed this year, I dedicate the song that saved her life at the camp, "MAMMA". (Below)

### **MAMMA / Beniamino Gigli**

Mamma, I'm so happy because I return to you.  
My song tells you. It's the most beautiful dream for me!  
Mamma I'm so happy. Why should one live so far away?  
Mamma, just only for you my song is flying.  
Mamma, you will be with me, you will not be alone anymore!  
How much I love you!  
These words of love, sighed for you by my heart,  
maybe are not used anymore.  
Mamma! But my most beautiful song is you!  
It is you for a lifetime (you are my life).  
And in my life I will not leave you again!  
I feel your tired hand. It's searching for my golden curls.  
I feel it, and your voice is feeble, the lullaby - that old lullaby - you used to sing back then  
(back to the past).  
Today your head is whitening. I want to hold it close to my heart.  
Mamma  
You are my most beautiful song  
You are my life  
And I will not leave you anymore in my life!

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