

Family Picture With His Mother



At home in Sisli.

The people in the photograph: My wife, my older son Saul at one year of age, my mother and myself.

My mother, Ester Modiano, was born in Salonika in 1894. My mother went to a Greek school, but the educational language of the school was French. She later attended a French school. When my mother was attending high school, she was able to secure a scholarship to study at the Alliance Israelite Universelle. She was going to go to France in an effort to further her French skills. But, my father, being her groom-to-be, talked her out of it. He actually did not let her go there. As a result, my mother took a job as a French teacher in a Greek school. French was a very popular language back then; students would begin learning French starting from elementary school. My mother continued teaching French until she got married. She did not work after she came to Istanbul. My mother died in 1979. She is interned in the Italian Jewish cemetery.

I was born in Istanbul in 1926.

In 1936, right when I was about to begin elementary school, Mussolini passed a new law that affected me and my family members. According to this law, all males, who were Italian citizens, had to study at Italian schools worldwide. If not, they risked losing their citizenship when they became eighteen.

I first went to school in 1939. In 1943, when Italy signed a partnership agreement with Germany, the Jewish students were no longer allowed to be Fascist boy scouts. We could still attend the Locale even though we were Jewish, but we were not allowed to be boy scouts. Nor were we allowed to participate in the Locale's activities. We were only allowed to continue being students after that year.

After elementary school, in junior high there were the science and the accounting sections. I chose accounting.

My childhood was spent in Büyükada.

In my family, all traditions mandated by our religion were strictly followed. Holidays, Pesach and the Seder of course, Rosh Hashanah... My mother would make all kinds of puddings during Shavuot. During Purim, she would make a variety of pies made with honey or "Orejas de Aman" as well as "Borekitas del muez" [quiches]. In order to make orejas de aman, she would prepare some dough first. She would then roll it out, cut it in two pieces, and fry it with vegetable oil. We would eat it with margarine and melted honey or granulated sugar.

My wife, Ester Modiano, was born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in 1927. She was born seven months old, and the doctors did not have much hope for her to live. Her maiden name is Yahni. As far as I remember, her mother was born in Haskoy, Istanbul.

Since Ester was born in Bulgaria, her native tongue in Bulgarian. At the same time, she speaks French very well because she studied at a French school. She also had the opportunity to learn Hebrew while she was in Bulgaria. She finished elementary school at Saint Joseph in 1937. She was a very successful student. Unfortunately, she had to drop out of school at seventh grade because of the War. She had to leave Bulgaria.

When my wife was attending third grade in elementary school, anti-Semitic waves had started becoming a reality in Bulgaria. The Jewish people were forced to wear the six-edged, yellow Star of David on their chests so as to identify who they were. The Turkish Consulate-General in Bulgaria was a very nice, whole-hearted man. Ester does not remember his name. Since Ester and her family were still Turkish citizens, he summoned them to the Consulate one day, and told them that they needed to urgently leave the country, and that it was not possible for them to survive the death camps once they were there.

Being a 13 or 14 year old kid, just starting to get to know life, and wanting to become a French teacher in the future, Ester, had to leave behind all her wishes and hopes in Bulgaria.

When Ester's family first came to Istanbul, they lived in Sirkeci for a couple of days, and then her mother's younger sister gave the family two rooms in her house to sleep in. They lived there for a couple of months. Afterwards, they moved to an old house on Mektep Street in the Sishane neighborhood. The money they had brought with them drained very quickly. They went through tough times financially. In all this while, Ester had started comprehending Turkish. She also started working because the family's financial condition was quite rough. She first got a job at a stationary store. When the owner of the store sexually harassed her, however, she immediately quit that job. Luckily, she was able to locate a job through a friend at the Odeon Company's Accounting Department. She worked there until we got married.

She became very good friends with a lady named Rachel Adato while she was working there. She also became the star of the department, and was quickly recognized by the owner of the Company. They began trusting her with secret Company information. My wife was taking care of most of the workload for the Department. She was working at the Company's headquarters location. Odeon had three branch offices; in Kadikoy, Sirkeci and Beyoglu. She was controlling all incoming and outgoing goods to and from these branches, and trying hard not to make a mistake.

At the time, I was governing Mishne Torah's [an association founded to help support poor school children] Youth Commission, and there was a wave of new candidates applying to become

members of the Association. I, of course, had a secretary working with me - given my status as the President. Whenever a candidate wanted to apply, my secretary would have him/her fill out a form, and include a picture on his/her application.

I remember joking about it with my secretary when my wife-to-be's application form arrived on my desk. I said to her "What is this, are we going to open up a school here or what?" because the picture my wife submitted with her application form was one that was taken when she was a student. My secretary said to me "You accept her membership, and then we can deal with it later." My wife actually became a member 15 days after that. The first meeting she attended was during a Purim ball. She was sitting by herself on one corner of the ballroom. I asked my secretary "Who is this lady sitting over there at the corner?" She responded "That would be your student."

As a coincidence, we were supposed to have our Association's 50th-year meetings in a week's time. A bunch of us decided to take the day off, and go somewhere. Some of us were going to Yesilkoy, and others were going to go to Tarabya. I was actually going to meet a lady friend at 3:00 PM in Tunel. I remember waiting for her until 3:30 PM, but she never showed. Well, I decided to go over to Tarabya to meet my friends there. My wife-to-be was there as well. This was my opportunity to see her in a closer manner. After Tarabya, my friends decided to go over to the municipal casino in Taksim, where the Ceylan Hotel stands today. I invited my wife there as my friend. We started dating shortly after.

My wife and I were dating around the same time she was working at Odeon. We were not sure as to whether we both wanted to get married. Plus, my family did not have a final decision. In an effort to get to know Ester better, my father went over to her workplace with an excuse for wanting to buy a three-wheeled bicycle for his nephew. He was also very close with Ester's managers. There, he had an opportunity to see her and talk to her even though it was not too comprehensive a talk. Her managers, meanwhile, had given for her excellent references. In the end, my father decided that Ester and I should get married.

We got engaged on the 28th of May, 1952. We stayed engaged for about a year, and then got married on the 31st of May in 1953 at the Italian Synagogue. My father was a member of the Governing Board for the Italian Jewish Community in Turkey. This is probably why our wedding was really crowded and colorful. At the same time, my father was a member of the 'Fakirleri Koruma Dernegi [Support Center for the Poor]. So, all members from there attended our wedding with their significant others. Our whole family was also a member of the Misne Tora, and so all members from the Association attended our wedding as well. Actually, members of the Misne Tora put together a ceremony team for the special day. It was composed of ten male and ten female schoolchildren dressed in clothing specifically prepared for our wedding.

The 24th of March, 1999 fell on a Wednesday, and we had a meeting that day at the house of the Italian Jewish Community's President. When the meeting was over, I came back home. That was when I learned that my wife had been in an accident. .

My older son Saul was born on the 15th of December, 1954. He studied at the Sisli Ondokuzmayis Elementary School, at the Saint Benoit Lysee for middle school and at the Beyoglu Commerce Lysee for high school. He graduated from there at 18. He served in the military between 1979-80. He worked in a variety of businesses including insurance, tourism and textile businesses. Last year,

he retired (officially) from his work as the Import-Export Manager of a firm that sells baby products, but he is still considered the Import-Export Manager of the firm today.