

## Moshe Surmani



**Moshe on a *kibbutz* in Israel.**

Moshe Surmani was born on the island of Rhodes on August 14, 1931. He was the son of Sara “Giovanna” (née Hasson) and Jacob Surmani. His siblings were Rachele, Stella, Eliezer, Mari and Fortunata.

Moshe chronicled his 1943 journey from Rhodes to Israel. His diary was kept at the Yakeer school in Kfar Haroe. At the beginning of the War of Independence, Moshe enlisted in the Palmach. He died defending the Etzion Bloc at the young age of seventeen.

In 2003, Eliezer and his son, Andrew, visited Moshe’s gravesite and the school where he studied. Coincidentally, Moshe’s diary was found in the study room of the late Rabbi Moshe Neria by his widow. In 2005, the diary written in Hebrew was translated into English by Moshe’s nephew, Andrew Surmani. A film, “Moshe Surmani, a child from Rhodes,” was made in Israel as a tribute to his life and heroism during the War of Independence.



Left photo. Moshe's parents: Sara "Giovanna" (née Hasson) and Jacob Surmani.  
Right photo. The Surmani siblings: Eliezer\*, Stella\*, Mari and Moshe. (\*Survivors of the Holocaust).

ELENCO NOMINATIVO DELLE PERSONE EMIGRATE CLANDESTINAMENTE DAL MESE DI SETTEMBRE 1943 AD. OGGI.-

- 1 - Geraianni Giovanni di Demetrio e di Papandrea Calliope, nato a Rodi il 22-1-1927-celibe, scolaro, abitante in Via Ludovico di Scalamoche 32;
- 2 - Siragachi Minà di Anastasio e fu Nistaso Irene, nato a Calino il 1917, celibe, manovale, abitante in Via G.M. Orsini 33;
- 3 - Ziessimo Michele di Demostene e di Stuppi Anastasia, nato a Rodi il 1917, celibe, muratore, abitante in Via del Riposo 28;
- 4 - Macramà Filippo di Cristo e di Bachiri Caterina, nato ad Afando il 3-1-1922, celibe, studente, abitante in Via Filippo Corridoni 28;
- 5 - Hasson Nissim di Isacco e di Tarica Sarina, nato a Rodi il 1922, vetraio, celibe, abitante in Via G.M. Deodato Gozzone 1409;
- 6 - Demergi Oglu Hani di Hassan e di Nieldi Haccià, nato a Rodi il 1920, celibe, falegname, abitante in Via Giovanni dello Cayo-8;
- 7 - Fetgi Hagi Apti di Haidar e di Culachi Dilber, nato a Rodi il 1926, celibe, aiutante cuoco, abitante in Via Matteo Gioenco 1513;
- 8 - Arnitenà Diamanti di Nicola e di Tripoliti Stergulla, nato a Calchi il 13-8-1922-celibe, operaio, abitante in Via Enrico Toselli 20;
- 9 - Cugno Natan di Abramo e di Gelante Vittoria, nato a Rodi il 1920, celibe, meccanico, abitante in Via Venezia s.n.;
- 10 - Sormani Mose di Giacomo e fu Hasson Sara, nato a Rodi il 14-8-1931-celibe, scolaro, abitante in Via Giovanni da Rivara 24;
- 11 - Zattagliò Leonida fu Michele e di Condachi Maria, nato a Simi il 15-4-1923, celibe, calzolaio, abitante in Via G.M. di Naillac 1380;

Italian document: List of Persons who escaped Rhodes in September 1943.  
#10 Surmani, Mose of Jacob and the former Hasson Sara, born in Rhodes on 14-8-1931, unmarried, student, living at Via Giovanni da Rivara 24

**(With God's Help) "Coming to the Promised Land"**  
**by Moshe Surmani**

With the German presence in Italian-occupied Rhodes, food was scarce on the island. So, my friend and I began working at the Italian Military Camp. **As we were walking from work, an incident happened where the Italians shut the gates and barred us from going home. The Italian soldier with a machine gun didn't want to kill us but rather detain us. I suggested to my friend to run away with the Greeks. Otherwise, the Germans would be coming soon to kill us.**

**We heard explosions from German ammunition at nearby villages. One bomb fell right next to us. We ran towards the harbor, where we saw the Italians trying to escape. The Jews, however, could not escape.** We didn't know what to do. An Italian came from one of the villages the Germans had been to. He told us that the Italian soldiers were burning their planes (preventing the Germans from using them) and giving away their weapons, armed motorcycles, and armored vehicles to anybody who wanted them. I didn't want a thing. I just wanted to go home to see my father and siblings.

**We decided to escape Rhodes. We got onboard on a big boat Saturday. When we sailed, I didn't even have shoes on. I left them on the dock. The Italians were throwing rifles & munitions into the sea. Four hours later, we arrived on Turkish territory.** The Turks inspected us. An armed guard watched us until we reached *Marmaris*. The Turks told us to go to *Bodrum*, where food is available. The Italians onboard shared their food with the Greeks and us. They gave us white bread. In the middle of the night, we arrived in *Bodrum*. We asked for food but didn't have any. We were told to sleep in the fields. We sat together and lit a fire.

In the morning, everyone except us was placed on a ship where they sailed to another place (unspecified). The Greeks, my Italian friends, and I stayed in *Bodrum*. Some Turks with boats brought us to the harbor and then to a mosque. More Turks came and took us to a restaurant. After we ate, they lined us up and took our belongings and documents, even things hidden in handkerchiefs. Later, we were fed olives and grapes. In the evening, we're told to sleep on the floor. Sunday morning, my 2 uncles arrived with 2 more Jews.

I had to sell my pants to a Turkish tailor for 15 pounds (in Turkish currency). With that money, we bought some food. After we ate, we walked from house to house to ask for food and money. As we got back, the Turks asked our whereabouts, and they warned us of punishment if we went out again without permission. The next day, we went house to house to get food and clothing. On the third day, the Turks lined us up to be counted and got bread and grapes.

That evening, the 3 of us went to ask the Turks for clothes. I was given a good sweater. The following day, my sweater was stolen by one of the Greeks. I asked for my sweater back, but he refused.

**They let us go for a little walk at noon, so I went hiking by the sea. Eventually, the Turks offered us to go to Israel, Cyprus, Alexandria, or Izmir. On Thursday, 3 Jews & 2 Italians traveled to *Izmir*. On Friday, they counted us again and gave us our travel documents for Cyprus. Altogether we were in Turkey for 3 weeks.**

On the day we left, they called our names and gave us olives with 4 loaves of bread each. We sailed to a harbor, where we boarded a big ship. The Turks counted us here for the last time.



**We sailed to Cyprus. 3 Jews: myself, my friend, my uncle, and 72 Greek passengers for approximately 8 days.** After 2 days, we didn't have any food left. We were starving for hours. Then we saw a plane. We didn't know what kind of plane it was but noticed it was German. Everyone started screaming, and we were told to go under the deck. There was nowhere to hide. We were scared with no weapons. We would not have been left alive if the plane had seen us. At night, we could not light a fire. It was freezing, with no shoes, clothing, food, or water. We looked in every corner for food and found flour. We took the burlap bags and made clothing out of them.

**We were concerned that our parents would be looking for us and that they would not know where we were.**

Thursday, there was a great storm at sea. Our boat was out of control and was unable to sail forward. On Friday, another storm came from the west. The storm dragged the boat slowly toward the east. We started to get close to Cyprus.

On Saturday, we raised a white flag. That afternoon, we saw 6 British airplanes. The captain told us to wave our shirts at the planes to notice us. The British planes did see us and left us alone. Everyone onboard said we would be urged to join the Greek Army upon arrival in Cyprus. My uncle was very upset as he didn't want to be a soldier after everything he'd been through. On Sunday evening, we saw Cyprus from a distance. We lit the light on the mast to show that we were not the enemy.

**Monday morning, we're in Cyprus harbor. All of us were on the verge of starvation. We asked for food, and they gave us bread and grapes.**

The British came and loaded us on trucks. Halfway through the trip, we saw carob trees. We stopped to eat carob trees every half an hour. I filled up my shirt with carobs. The trip lasted the whole day. They had us all cleaned when we got there, and our clothes fumigated. Then they loaded us back into the truck to another place. We arrived at the camp and saw all kinds of nationalities, including Indians, Greeks, and Italians.

**The British were guarding us. They gave us food and a place to sleep. After we ate, we went walking for half an hour. We ate with plates and forks for the first time. In the evening, they gave us 2 blankets.**

We saw some Italians that we knew from Rhodes. They asked about the situation there. We told them that we had just arrived from Turkey. Some English doctors came and started checking everybody. My uncle was very sick and was taken to a local hospital. He stayed there for more than a week. After he returned, the British lined us up for questioning. They asked us about the families we left and our ages. Then they gave us soldier's uniforms.

In front of our camps were the Cyprus-Greek villages. Whenever we could, we picked figs from the tree. Food at the camps was never enough. So, we go to the villages to ask for food.

An incident happened in the camp. It was some Italian holiday where the Italian flag was raised in the middle of the camp. The Greeks were upset, so they went into the village to get a Greek flag and raised it on a post. Then a big fight broke out between the Greeks and Italians. Fistfights only; no weapons were used.

The British told us to work at a local quarry, which was hard and dangerous. After work, we asked the Indian soldiers for food. The British learned about this and forbade us from asking the Indian soldiers. So, we went to the Greek village to get figs from the trees. Then the British wanted to send us to another place. We didn't want to go but had no choice.

**Before we left, the British asked us to fix a road. We did what they asked us to do. New Italian refugees arrive at the camp two days before we depart. We were told to return everything handed to us. They let us keep: 1 pair of pants, 1 shirt, 1 undershirt, 1 pair of underwear, 2 pairs of socks, and 1 pair of shoes. We stayed at this camp for about 2 months.**

A big truck came and took us farther. There was no room, so we had to stand. When we arrived, the Greek soldiers took us to a big house and fed us that evening. They wanted to shave my head, but I refused.

In the morning, some people came to the camp to get workers for odd jobs. The local post office director took me to his home on Sunday. He saw that I was hungry and offered me as much food as I liked. I was embarrassed to overeat on the first day, but after a while, I started eating as much as I wanted except the pork meat. We were taken to a big house. I was tasked to get firewood for his daughter. **She was a nice person and gave me food in return. Even today, I still remember her kindness and good heart because she always gave me enough food to eat. It felt very good. The post office director was also good to me. It was a miracle that I was still alive. God was with me each time.**

**After a while, I was sent to a different family. They were good too, but one girl asked me to convert and be Greek, but I didn't want to. I said, "I was born a Jew, and I will die a Jew." They tried to convert me, but I refused to deny my race and faith. Before we came to this place, the adults were drafted by force to be soldiers; the young ones stayed behind. My uncle refused, so the British placed him in jail. My friend didn't have a choice, so he joined the Greek Army. I was left all alone.**

At this time, I was forced to eat ham. I didn't want to, but I wanted to survive. **I was happy to receive a letter from my uncle (the one who was in jail). He sent a picture of him. I had not seen him for 2 months. He begged me to visit him in Nicosia.** After a while, my friend went off to join the Greek Army. I was left with Greek boys my age. Some local teachers came one day and registered us. I didn't want to learn Greek. I was cutting school every day. One day the principal caught me. Whenever I saw him coming, I would turn the other way. The Greek officials were trying to force me to go to school. I would doodle on the desk because I didn't understand what was happening. I became a laughingstock of the class, so I took off to a nearby Turkish village. I stayed there until dawn. The people in that village taught me a little Turkish. They gave me oranges and food. When I came home, my adoptive family would ask, *"Where have you been since this morning?"* I had to lie and told them I went to the doctor.

In the morning, at breakfast, they asked, *"why don't you come to church?"* I told them I'm Jewish and was not allowed to pray with them. I asked them for some money to go to *Nicosia* to visit my uncle, but they refused. I went to the principal, begged, and cried for money for a bus ticket. He gave me the money.

It took 3 hours by bus to get to *Nicosia* and half an hour to find the jail. I saw my uncle, and he took me inside. We talked about all kinds of things. He became the prison cook and brought me food. He gave me 3 boiled eggs for the ride home. I told him I didn't feel good at the place I was staying. He advised me to ask the principal to

send me to *Nicosia*. Then he gave me money for food; I thanked him and kissed him goodbye.

Some kids and I decided to run away to another place. In the middle of our getaway, we got caught by a policeman. He asked why we were running away from the village. We told him that we wanted to be soldiers. The policeman kicked each one of us, and we were sent home. The principal beat us up. After the beating, I didn't try to escape anymore. **A week later, we received legal papers to leave the place. In the morning, they gave us food; then, we got on the bus to *Nicosia*. I was very happy.**

When we arrived in *Nicosia*, a soldier took us to an orphanage. We rested, ate good food, and got new beds. The other kids explored *Nicosia*, but I went to visit my uncle. He had no idea how long he'll be in jail. We went on walks and talked about things like *Eretz Israel*. **He instructed me to look for the person whose name was written on the paper. "That person is a wise man from Rhodes." I placed the note in my pocket as we walked back. I told him I would soon be traveling to *Eretz Israel*. Then my uncle received a letter from his brother, who traveled from Turkey to Alexandria. I was pleased that he was a Jewish soldier.**

The food was good at the orphanage. One morning after breakfast, they took us to a photographer for a passport photo. When we returned, we got new clothes. I also learned that my Jewish friends have already gone to *Eretz Israel*. I was all by myself with the Greek kids. These kids and I would walk all over the town of *Nicosia*. We played games that we made up.

One time when I visited my uncle, a meeting was arranged between a British Intelligence officer (who spoke Italian) and me. He asked how old I was, how I got to Cyprus, and the details of the battle in Rhodes. He wanted to know how Rhodes was taken. I told him everything I knew. He was a very nice person. When I returned to the orphanage, they gave us our certificates (legal permission to enter *Palestine*).

A "good" girl (non-Jew) asked me to write to her when in *Palestine*. I told her I still had time as I didn't have my "traveling date" yet. People suggested staying in Cyprus was better because living in *Palestine* was hard. But I refused to stay. **I remembered the mission my uncle entrusted me, to look for the wise man (*great Rabbi*) from Rhodes in *Eretz Israel*. That was one of the reasons I didn't want to stay.**

The Greek soldiers told us we would sail soon to *Palestine*. I was thrilled to go to my real homeland. On the last day before the trip, they gave us papers to be shown to the British officer. We got envelopes and addresses from the orphanage to write a letter to everybody. The girl asked me to write her a letter, so I took her address.

We got up early. We ate our meals and brought the food they gave us for the trip. The girl accompanied me to the train station and reminded me to send her a letter once I arrived in *Israel*. **I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to my uncle, so I asked the orphanage director to give him my regards and will soon write to him. We shook hands and bid farewell to everyone. We boarded the train and traveled to a harbor in a town called *Limassol*.**

When we got to the harbor, some Greeks gave us food. We waited for the rest of the passengers to come. We got off the train at noon and rested by the boat. That evening, many new immigrants started arriving at the dock. I didn't have anything besides the trousers, underwear, and shirt I was wearing. That was everything I owned at the time. When I got into the harbor, I discovered I had lost the address of the girl I wanted to write to. I was very sad.

Two boats full of Italians who escaped from Rhodes arrived at the harbor. I was curious, so I started talking to them and asked how they escaped. An Italian ship came to take us out of Cyprus. The sailors gave us food to eat and some to keep: bread, 1-3 eggs, 4 oranges, and assortments. I didn't have any room for all the food, but I found a dirty sack to put the food in. A big storm began at sea as we sailed through the middle of the night. The boat started rocking from side to side. We were scared. To keep warm, we stayed in the kitchen. I felt unwell, and I started throwing up.

**Before we arrived at the shore, they gave us food. I ate but didn't feel that good. Then we saw the shoreline of the Holy Land at Haifa beach.** As we entered the harbor, I saw many Italian boats from Rhodes. We waited for transportation. The British came with 4 trucks. We started moving towards *Atlit*. They brought us to a huge barracks and assigned us a place to sleep with 2 blankets. After an hour, they called us out to play soccer. When we were done, we walked on the beach. A Greek soldier called us for dinner. Some Greek nationals came into the courtyard to play games with us. Since then, we have played with them every evening.

The British officers told us to work by picking up paper and trash from the roadside every day. They also notified us to bring all our clothes for washing. I didn't have anything to wash except the 2 blankets given to us. When we returned to get our belongings, nobody could find what belonged to him anymore. Everybody started fighting over the blankets, the clothes, and who owned what. They gave us 1 pair of pants, 1 shirt, and 1 towel. I had to improvise for myself a suitcase to place my belongings. Nobody got a coat. We took a blanket and cut it in the right places to improvise a coat. I started making a suitcase from wood pieces that I found. It took 2 weeks to collect enough wood to make a suitcase. I was going out every day looking for nails. It took me more than a month to gather enough nails. I didn't have a hammer, so I used a rock.

One day I heard that the British had retaken Rhodes. I was really happy because I thought of writing a letter to my father. I asked around if it was possible to send a letter to Rhodes. An elderly man advised me not to send it now because we would be leaving from *Atlit* to *Gaza* very soon. There I can write my letter. Two days later, the British notified us of our transfer to *Gaza*. On the last day, I completed my makeshift suitcase. The trucks came and took us to the train station. We boarded the train headed to *Gaza*. When we arrived in *Gaza*, the British and Greek soldiers took us to the big barracks to rest. They gave blankets and white bread.

**On the first day in Gaza, they gave us coupons for food. It was a miracle that I arrived in Eretz safely. "Return us to the land as a dry riverbed in the desert" (like a flash flood), and "The one who seeds with tears will reap with joy" (Psalms).**

After 3 days in the *Gaza* camp with the Greek soldiers, I found out they had 3 different camps: Greeks, English, and Jews. I was not aware of any Jews out there. I told them that I am Jewish from Rhodes. There was a Jew from Greece. They asked me if I wanted to be together with them (other Jews), and I said yes.

I took all my clothes in the morning and headed to the Jewish camp. They gave me an orange to eat. After a while, I heard that my cousin was in *Haleb* (a town in Northern Syria). After 3 days, he arrived. I was delighted to see him. Then he told me that my father was looking for me in Rhodes. I started crying.

One day, a soldier came to all the camps and gave us money. We got the equivalent of 12 pounds a month. (I only got it once). A Jewish man brought me to a place to get clothes, shoes, an undershirt, etc.

**Two days later, it was *Passover*. We needed *kosher* food. The British brought wine, *matzos*, and all sorts. We're delighted. After the holiday, the Greek soldiers gave us 2 knives, one small for cutting the bread and a larger one for protection against attacks.**

My cousin, who didn't want to be an auxiliary soldier, decided to run away to Jerusalem. I brought my belongings to his place and joined him with his wife and child. He had one packed suitcase. At the gate, the guard asked where we were heading. My cousin mentioned going to *Jaffa* to buy potatoes and sold the new pair of pants to the guard so he could leave us.

As we walked by the road, an Arab car came. The driver wanted to take us but asked for a lot of money. We waited for a long while until a British car came and took us straight to *Jaffa*. When we got there, we needed bus tickets to *Jerusalem*. My cousin spoke Turkish to the Arab and got us our tickets. Altogether, I was in the *Gaza* camps for 20 days.

**On the trip to *Jerusalem*, I noticed the tall mountains. When we arrived, we didn't know what to do. We stopped and asked a person if he knew any Jews from Rhodes. He then brought us to a family. We went to their house and realized the woman was a cousin of my cousin.**

**It was Friday evening. We're very happy to be in *Jerusalem*. The lady gave me something to wear. I washed up, sat by the table, and ate dinner. It was the first time in 2 years that I ate at a decent table with decent food.**

It is now Saturday. The lady asked if I understood Turkish. I told her I could converse in Turkish, Greek, Italian, and *Ladino*. We said the blessings, drank the wine and went to sleep.

In the morning, she gave me a coat, a handkerchief, and a pair of socks. I washed up, drank coffee, and ate breakfast. Then we went to the local synagogue. They prayed. As I looked around, I saw people with "sidelocks." It was my first-time seeing people with sidelocks which made me laugh. I didn't know how to pray then, so I just sat and waited until the end of the prayer. Then we headed home.

I started remembering my aunt, who traveled to Israel. Before the war, my aunt told me a story about the ship she was on. She overheard a Greek and an Italian conspiring to set the boat on fire. Then passengers started jumping into the water. Nobody died; things just got burned. Another ship was passing by and took all the people back to Rhodes. My aunt tried to go to *Israel* again and made it safely through North Africa.

**The lady of the house knew other Jews from Rhodes, so we went to look for my aunt. There were more than 30 kids on the street where my aunt lived. My aunt led me to her home, and we started talking. She didn't recognize me, but I recognized her. I said that her sister had passed away. We both cried. Nevertheless, she was happy to see me.**

On Sunday, my aunt took me to the store and bought me pants, shoes, a shirt & a *kippah*. I laughed that she bought me a *kippah*. After that, they talked about sending me to a *kibbutz*, but somehow that didn't work out. Then they spoke about enrolling me in a school. My cousin inquired daily to the Youth Immigration Bureau so I could continue a proper education.



I cried and was upset that I didn't speak *Hebrew*. My cousin and I followed up with the Jewish Agency in *Jerusalem* for more than 2 months. Finally, they found a place for me. I'm being sent to the *B'nai Akiva Yeshiva* (a National Religious Zionist Institute) school dormitory. My cousin bought lots of things; I took a suitcase and rode a taxi to take us there. I cried along the way. We arrived at the gate, and the lady came out and ushered me in. **This is how I started my new life at the *B'nai Akiva Yeshiva*.**

### Epilogue:

The diary stopped at this point. Moshe found a warm home at the *B'nai Akiva* dormitory. He was loved and revered by his friends and teachers. He learned *Hebrew*. Through his faith, he found comfort and strength. He was a good student that loved Israel very much. He saved any money he had to buy religious books. He was very handy, and everything he fixed was to perfection.

Moshe joined the *Palmach* and was sent with his platoon as reinforcement to the Etzion Bloc (composed of 4 isolated settlements south of Jerusalem). These settlements were constantly and savagely attacked by local Arabs and the Jordanian Arab Legion that invaded the country. The block repelled many of these attacks, but due to a lack of ammunition and manpower, they were overcome. With the defenders having fallen and many wounded, the rest had to surrender. After surrendering, they were lined up to the wall and shot down by a machine gun. A few that survived were taken as prisoners in Jordan.

Moshe gave his last measure of devotion as a soldier that protected his homeland, *Israel*. He died at the young age of seventeen. May his memory be blessed and remembered forever.



L-R. Moshe Surmani, Aharon Schechter and Yehetzkel Wagner at the Yakeer school, Kfar Haroe

### Sources:

- Moshe Surmani's Diary (English translation) by Andrew Surmani
- Photographs of Moshe Surmani, Sara "Giovanna" (née Hasson), Jacob Surmani and the Surmani siblings. Courtesy of Jack Surmani and Andrew Surmani
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