



(Photo Courtesy of Bracha Cohen)

Bracha Cohen, shown as child with her parents and brother on their annual visit to Greece.

From Greece, with love

By HILLEL KUTTLER

THE CONCERTS of Greek music that Bracha Cohen is producing this month in Israel will do more than entertain audiences. The events continue to honor a friendship formed 75 years ago, a bond that spurred her love of Greece.

In 1942, Cohen's father, Chaim, an Egyptian immigrant to pre-State Israel, was sent to Greece to fight with the British army against the Germans. He was captured and tortured, but didn't reveal his identity or military unit. After a year in a prisoner-of-war camp, he and a Greek soldier, Yorgos Tsaris, escaped through the woods.

They reached Yorgos's hometown of Korinthos, in the Peloponnese peninsula. There, Chaim received false identity papers with a non-Jewish name. He learned Greek and lived with the Tsarises. When World War II ended, Chaim returned to Tel

Aviv and worked as a sea captain. There, at a bohemian café in 1965, he met Gail Verbit, a Philadelphian volunteering that summer at Kibbutz Kfar Giladi who was visiting the big city on a day off.

Gail returned to America, but in 1972 settled in Israel and married Chaim. She gave birth to Bracha and Avi, and the family spent every summer in Korinthos, staying with Yorgos and his wife, Theodora. The Tsarises were childless, so Bracha and Avi played in the street with the neighborhood's kids, even bicycling well past midnight. They learned Greek and taught the locals English and Hebrew. The Cohens and Tsarises went to the beach and visited the islands together. In Korinthos, Chaim was called "Victor."

"It was a lot of fun, another world. Those were formative experiences. It's not like I was just there for a week," Cohen said from her apartment in Tel Aviv in August, shortly before flying off

to her other apartment in Athens. "Everything I do results from that. I always had two homes, two homelands: Israel and Greece. And that's my work—I bring Greece to Israel through music."

Cohen, 44, arranges, on average, one Greek concert in Israel each month. The October concert will feature three. Spiros Papadopoulos will film his popular television program, *Stin Ygeia Mas*, before audiences on Oct. 16 at Tel Aviv's Opera House and the next evening at the Jerusalem Theater. Four singers are to be accompanied by the show's seven-member band that includes two playing a Greek stringed instrument known as a bouzouki. The program—which Cohen says is widely watched as far away as Greek-expatriate communities in Chicago and New York—runs four hours on Saturday nights, is set in a tavern and revolves around Papadopoulos discussing music, with frequent performance interludes. In Israel, the shows will lean toward the music of Salonika, whose large Jewish community was decimated under the Nazis.

And on Oct. 31 in Tel Aviv, composer-conductor Stavros Xarchakos will lead his orchestra, accompanied by two soloists.

Thanks to the concerts, Cohen is an unofficial cultural ambassador for both countries.

"I'm bringing Greece to Israel through music," she explained, while, in interviews on Greek television, "I say that I'm a proud Israeli."

Cohen fell for Greek music at age 14, going out with her friends to Loutraki, a resort near Korinthos.

"It's fun, happy music. You have to admire it. It's like if I hear Israeli music – it's the language," she said. "Greek music is so much a part of the culture. When you say 'Greece,' you say 'Greek music.'"

She maintains friendships with those she knew as children, only one of whom remains in Korinthos.

Sotiris Michalopoulos, a nephew of Tsagris (who, like Chaim Cohen, is deceased), said he considers Bracha and Avi as his own siblings. He gets together with Bracha whenever she's in

Greece, and saw Avi while visiting Israel five years ago. The Cohens, he said, were the first Jews and the first foreigners he ever met.

"The love is always there and will be there," said Michalopoulos, a resident of Loutraki who works as a card dealer for an Israeli-owned casino.

Because Korinthos is not a tourist destination, "if you go there, there has to be a reason," he said of the Cohen's annual visits. "It's very emotional, to know that [Chaim Cohen] never forgot that someone helped him."

"My father would be very proud," Bracha said, "of the respect and the good exposure I give to his second homeland [Greece] in Israel." ■

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