

# Michael Vlamis

## Part 1 & Part 2

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## Part 1

**Cohen:** Starting. Okay. So today, October 7, 2020. My name is Leah Cohen. On behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library. I am excited to interview Sergeant Michael Vlamis. Mr. Vlamis grew up in Crete under the German occupation during World War II. As a young teenager, he participated in the youth resistance movement, AETOPOLA [acronym in Greek, meaning Eagle Scouts] and EPON [acronym in Greek, meaning Patriot Youth]. Later, Mr. Vlamis immigrated to the United States and served in the U.S. Army from 1952 to 1954. In particular, he served with the 101st Airborne and Fort [i.e. Camp] Breckenridge, [Kentucky] and later with the 28th Infantry Division [110th Regiment, 2nd Battalion (H) Company] in Germany. So I thought we would begin at the beginning. When and where were you born?

**Vlamis:** I was born in the town of Kalyves in the prefecture of Chania, Crete on May 11, 1929.

**Cohen:** Okay, what was it like growing up there before the war?

**Vlamis:** It was a very beautiful, peaceful environment. We were in our house and the whole town was almost very close to the shore. The town was prosperous

because of the product, they produce a lot of vegetables in the valley. And the life was, I would say, very, very good, very good life.

**Cohen:** What were your sources of income?

**Vlamiš:** Well, my father served in the army in the US from 1911 to 1927<sup>1</sup>. He worked in My father was in the States from 1911 to 1927, he served in the US Army in 1918 the gold mines here in Colorado and also, he ventured into into the bakery business in [Price], Utah. He also became [an American citizen] serving in the army and and he was discharged in 1919, [i.e. 1918] but he did not serve overseas because the war by that time, the war was over. Yes. And he accumulated enough money assets, and he came back to Crete. He built a home and purchased properties. So we had sufficient properties to live well.

**Cohen:** I believe that you mentioned that your family also opened a restaurant?<sup>2</sup>

**Vlamiš:** Well, the restaurant was a café, a café that that became [a restaurant a month prior to the occupation] during the war because the... Well, I think we jump too much right now. The café was not really a money - it is not a good property, but it was just to spend his time with his friends. Yeah. The main source of income was the olive oil and wines and grains. We had sufficient productions to live well.

**Cohen:** Yeah. And brothers and sisters, did you have?

**Vlamiš:** I have three sisters and one brother...[only two of the three sisters are alive. One of my sisters, and my brother died]...one of my sisters is five years older than I am. My second sister is dead and I'm the only three right now.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Vlamiš later specified that his father was in the US s from 1911 to 1927, and he served in the US Army in 1918 .

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Vlamiš published, "A Detour in My Life: A Cretan Memoir", 2019. Some of the questions posed by Cohen were based on his memoir.

**Cohen:** Yeah. And you wrote in your book that a defining moment in Greek history was the dictatorship of General Metaxas in April 1936. Did that have an effect on you and your lives in Kalyves?

**Vlamis:** I'm sorry, I didn't get what you said.

**Cohen:** You mentioned the dictatorship.

**Vlamis:** Oh yes, dictatorship was in 1936. Well, actually in 1936, in March there was an election, and the prime minister was elected. It was Metaxas. However, because of the turmoil between the, between the parties, especially the communist, Metaxas dissolved the parliament, and he became a dictator on August 4, 1946, [sic, i.e., 1936] and he was a very strong dictator. He jailed his opponents. However, he never executed anybody but all his opponents who were were jailed, and nobody dared to oppose his policies. In my estimation, he forced the country to go back to work and he was a to help...The industry and also...the industry especially. He made an agreement with Germany to export the citrus fruit. And our town prospered from this because of the—people [i.e., the farmers] they produce a large amount of citrus it was exported to Germany had a lot of people were working, working to preserve this this fruit and put it in wooden barrels. And then the sailors, German] [ships used to come to Kalyves [to load the citrus fruit]. And however, that did not last because of the situation in Europe, you know, when the war broke out in Europe or this because they just stopped and consequently it was unemployment and unemployment, you know, and things like, yeah,

**Cohen:** You wrote about April [sic, i.e., August 15<sup>th</sup>], 1940, you called it the Greek Pearl Harbor when the Italian submarines torpedoed a Greek cruiser unprovoked. Would you like to talk about?

**Vlamis:** Of course, the Italians occupied the country adjacent to Greece, Albania. You know, they walk into Albania. However, Mussolini, was trying to show Hitler that he's also equivalent to conquest. And they provoked a war... [by attacking] the

cruiser. On August 15, 1938 [sic, i.e., August 15, 1940] the Italian submarine Delfino sank the anchored Greek cruiser Elli at the harbor of] ...the island of Tinos. Tinos is an island that people venerates on August 15 and that day. So there was a recall to the army of veterans, not full recall, just partial recall that they did not want to give Mussolini any excuse to attack Greece.

**Cohen:** You mentioned that your cousin had fought with that, the Cretan Infantry Division in Albania. Do you want to talk about what you knew then? forces from the Bulgarian Greek positions and [carried out] a counterattack [against] the Italian forces and push them back into Albania. And eventually they had a lot of success they occupied a town like Korçë [pronounced Coritze] Tepelene Cataleni, or you know, you know, they had good success. They pushed the Italian forces back into Albania. So there was a general recall of all the veterans and two of my cousins participated in this war, one of them is the infantry and the other one was in the navy... Because at that time, the Italians occupied the Rhodes the Greek island of Rhodes, we had had almost daily air raids that first the first week of the war and the war started in the early hours of Monday, the 28th of October. By Friday, we had bombings in the city of Chania. Chania was one of the two largest cities in Crete. And however, at that time, the British came with naval forces and to protect the Souda Bay because Souda Bay is a very natural port, and we can accommodate a very large naval power. So in addition to the British came and they took they brought a company. Oh no, more than the company. And close to my town, they built two high caliber cannons to protect the port. Yes. And I mentioned that it took about a month to build up the cannons and then they test them and one day they warned the people that this this cannon would [fire] the ... The cannons by the way, high caliber probably a twelve- or thirteen-inch caliber. And they test they test these cannons, however-  
- Hello?

**Cohen:** Yes.

**Vlamis:** I, wait a minute, something.

**Cohen:** Can can... you...were talking about testing the cannons?

**Vlamis:** Yeah. Yes. However, that was the only time this cannon was fired [laughs], this time during the the war lasted about from October until March, in March, no April. In March what happened was[that] the Greek army had advanced in Albania. But they didn't have the resources to proceed with the small country and they've been in the war for five months and it was very difficult for them because they didn't have the equipment and the ammunition to proceed. At the same time, Italy wants to attack the Greek forces they didn't have good luck. As a matter of fact, Mussolini came in and they erected the battle, but to no avail. Anyway, at that time, the Churchill realized that Greece needs some help. And he sent fifty-seven thousand troops almost were Australians and New Zealand... now to help Greece. Now when Hitler saw this, this move, he suspected that the Brits, the British, sub had base in Greece. And this is according to my estimation. That's why he came down to the Balkans. Hitler had no intention of coming to the Balkans, his goal was to attack the Soviet Union, but to save his flank, he came and occupied the Balkan states of Serbia, the time Yugoslavia and Greece.

**Cohen:** When the Italian, when the Italian- Greek War was going on in Albania when there were air attacks on Crete, were you concerned that Italy occupy Crete?

**Vlamis:** Well, in the beginning, they're not concerned but then when Hitler came down and occupied Greece, he was April 27, 1941, then we suspected that the next his next move will be Crete. When he occupied Greece, a large group of Australian and New Zealanders came to Crete because Crete was not occupied at that time, along with the King and his entourage came to Greece and the Australians were living close, all-over, all-over Crete. But the main concentration was in our town, you know, a very good, very good people, very good soldiers. However, they lack the heavy weapons and all that. However, when the Germans attacked Crete, that was in May 20,1941, the biggest battle was in the airfield, which is about few or ten kilometers or something from the big city of Chania. And then, the big battle was there. And they the people who resisted the invasion, the paratroop invasion was the British. I mean the Australian, New Zealanders, [and] also the

Greek civilians. And there was a very, very brutal battle there that the Germans lost or lost about 4000 dead at the top of their army. They were the the cream of the German Army--.

**Cohen:** Just going back a little bit, you mentioned that initially when the Australian and New Zealand troops came to Crete, that there was kind of friction between the troops and the local people. And then I think General Freyberg resolved it?

**Vlamis:** Yes. What what's happened? There have been they came to Crete and of course, they were about ten thousand miles away from their native land and the boys sitting there and then they were the soldiers became ruthless; there was drinking going on. And the fights, fights. And they blame, they blame actually the population, the Greek population or the Greek population for their luck, you know, because, "We came here ten thousand miles to fight for you!" ... And then Freyberg, Freyberg was a was a good friend of Churchill. And he was in charge of the entire army of the Australians and New Zealanders. He came to our town. Because we had a large contingent of Australians there. He put three speakers around the time he made a speech, he says, "This is your country, that's really, this is an area that is not really part of it's not the same as Greece. These people are fierce fighters and they're very good. You welcome this place that someday you may need their help." And then everything was quiet for a while.

However, as I mentioned, there was the black market there that is selling wines and from time to time. And one event which I described, there was a big fight outside our house where two Australians were sitting over there, they were drunk. And every time a passerby went by, they asked for wine and then two MPs to came and attempted to quiet them and take them back, but they were not cooperative. So I remember right now the one of the MPs search one of the drunken and pick up and took this... out and then he pack him down go, both of them and then a truck came by and pick them up. Anyway, these were events...they stay in my mind forever, you know, because I watch these things, there. So then then, well, the battle in Crete lasted for ten days and then the occupation started, which was really, really very difficult, not only for me, it was

[difficult] for everybody, because immediately the Germans imposed a curfew from 6:00 [am] to 8:00 [pm]; [starting] in the morning and many other things.

**Vlomis:** And the most important thing that happened -- there were four...Australians used the grammar school building for a hospital and about four hundred there and they and they the school building and the garden, there was really one of the best, especially the garden was just well-kept and manicured and all that however that became a cemetery because all of those Australians who live in the town, in the school, most of them were sick; they have doctors with them at the Germans did not bother to save a garden at all because they were in prison and they were sick so where are they going to go, you know what I mean?

**Cohen:** Yeah.

**Vlomis:** However, the bad thing that's happened there, they did not feed them. The Germans did not feed at all, these four hundred people and the people who took up the responsibility to feed them. Yeah. And everybody my father and other people did their best and the things I remember I put down in...my book, I was going to school one day and there's a bunch of them came in and begged me for bread, please bread.

**Cohen:** Yeah.

**Vlomis:** I said, "I have no bread." So anyway, I am going down on the corner and I went down I go from the main street to home, and I told my mother, oh, the Australians... She gave me --we didn't have have much bread, but she gave me a half a loaf of round bread, you know half a loaf and I, I wrapped this in a newspaper and slowly I went back. I was going back, all of a sudden, they realized I was bringing something. They attacked me like vultures I mean they attacked me, fought for the meal itself. And then my eye caught a Black man, most likely a Maori sitting on the [wall] crying, a big man. And I took a small piece of bread with me and I wanted to give it to them. He had both legs cut from knee down and from and like I mentioned in the book, it shook me you

know, to see such a big, big, powerful man sitting over there crying. At the same time and all that, an old lady was coming from the other side of the street and holding a basket. And I said, "Oh, you." Oh, he saw the scene. And she asked me, says, "This is all I have...". Oh, she looks at the scene and then she froze. I said, "You have any bread?" She says, "Yeah, but I'm taking it to my fath-- to my husband in the farm." I said, "Do you--" I said, "Do you have bread?" She say, "Yes." I say, "Give it to them." She said... "Mihali" - that's my name in Greek, Mihali. "Mihali, what am I going to do?" I said, "Give it to them." She took off the entire loaf of bread. At that time, I also took another piece, and I gave it to the rest of them was distributed among the prisoners there and I try to take it back to the Maori who was sitting near a wall. [Cohen sighs] Anyway, Greek people, I mean, the people in town were very good to them to the prisoners. As a matter of fact, some of them came back and married local women, like I mentioned, that, you know, in the book. And I heard a rumor that because my father spoke English, because he spent [time] there [in the US] he was very good friends with them. And I heard but I cannot verify that he was declared an honorary citizen of the Perth, the town in Australia. [Laughter] They were relocated however, in those days, a couple of days after that, in the long column of prisoners guarded by Germans were passing into the town and there was Australians and New Zealanders and Greek conscripts, and they were hungry, hungry and tired. At that time, a lot of people offered them water or cigarettes and my mother came up with her bucket of water to put it next to the stream and a cup for them to drink. And everybody was running there to drink.

**Vlamis:** The German guard saw the scene that and he with full speed he came and kicked the bucket. And you know, this is--to describe the meanness of the German is an understatement. They were really supposed to be supposed to be civilized people. They were not civilized at all, not civilized at all. You know, after the atrocities, executions, executions --

**Cohen:** Before that do you want to talk more about the immediate resistance of the guerillas [unintelligible] I think you [mentioned] that right away... [that there



were] Greek attempts to resist the German occupation. Would you like to elaborate, please?

**Vlamiis:** Well, they were... Unfortunately, there were there were two parties. You know, there were the right wing, and they were left wing. Now, in our town in our vicinity, the prefect of Chania. And most of them were from the left wing. In the area of Ērakleion, the largest town, they were helped by... the British commanders. And the Brits used to come by submarine to the south side of Crete and disembark and control - they controlled the Antartes, they controlled the guerrillas, the Antartes. But they... were actually getting information about the movements of Germans and things like that. You know, there were there were many, many constantly fights between the Antartes, between the guerrillas and the Germans. And the biggest one was 1944 in October 1944, where the Germans decide to--excuse me-- the guerrillas decide to... [The guerrillas] were up in the mountains, you know, and the Germans attempted to attack them. However they because of the terrain, they were not able to bring mechanized armor, tanks or trucks. The Antartes were outnumbered by four to one by the Germans. However the Germans, they had lot of vehicles because the attack the terrain.. Although they didn't have much ammunition, they [Antartes] were hidden behind the stones and things like that. And every time this is information I got from people, friends of mine who were there, every time they shot one German soldier when they came back after one week of battle, some Germans were really sad because they couldn't achieve what they want. And the information was that they had casualties, about six hundred dead and about four hundred wounded. You know, the guerrillas hit a total of ten well, six dead and four wounded, one of them wounded, was a friend of mine who was about four years my senior, and he was also my classmate. He was wounded. Therefore, whatever I said, he could not bend his arm. So you know this. But there were also a lot of battles in other places, there is a big event that happened with the British and I'm going to say when I say Brits, I mean Australians and New Zealanders... most of them were New Zealanders. One time the Germans, by the way, they brought all the provisions that they needed from the from the Bay of Souda, close to Chania and they distributed to other places like Ērakleion, which

is about a hundred and twenty kilometers. Now, every Thursday, there was a column of trucks loaded with provisions to go to Ērakleion. One of the guerillas, [devised a plan where a truck with British commandos and Greek guerillas enter the column and follow the Germans to the airport.] They come up with a truck and each truck was by one block from each other in line. When they had, they devised a plan. There was they had a big turn.

**Vlamis:** And when they make the turn, the driver in the front or in the back, they couldn't see each other. So what happened? The guerillas was a British. And this is with the British, also. Once one of the trucks passed, the last one, they came with their own truck, but instead-- I mean, they were British...and some, a couple of Americans and they follow the column. Well, the column, went to the airport. And when it gets dark, all these people in the truck in the last truck, it was a German truck, by the way, they stole a German truck. They came out with machine guns and destroyed twenty-two aircrafts in the field, they had only two losses and we were able to get away for that eight, the Germans, I think it was fifty, primarily from the town of Ērakleion—

**Cohen:** Yeah, yeah...

**Vlamis:** So this is one of -- the guerrillas help them, I mean, I fight them, but it was not... consistent. It was just a hit and run, hit and run because they didn't have the power. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So then the big atrocities that happened was... Oh, by the way, the governor, the German governor of Crete that it was it was Andrae. I believe Alexander Andrae. And after this incident, incident [of which I] talked on the airfield, he was demoted. He was replaced by somebody else, by another [commander] – Bengel, I believe the name is General [Julius] Ringel [who replaced General Alexander Andre in November 1942]. So now there are also many other things that have happened. If I put in the book, the book, the execution, which I really, really [unclear] [got] everyone to think about, you know, who's next? You know--

**Cohen:** Where these collective punishments in 1941 after the ten-day battle?

**Vlamis:** Yes, yes, yes. And yeah, that the first the first execution was in the town of Kondomari, Kondomari is...a short distance from Chania. And because this was close to the airfield, the airfield that in the prefect of Chania was monument because that's where the big battle was, you know. And so anyway the, the information that we were getting was that the 2nd, June 2nd, about two days after they occupy, the occupation week was over, they executed twenty-five from the village of Kondomari and then they continued. There was another big town, Kandanos, big town. And for some reason they executed forty people and they destroyed they burned the whole town. And I have a picture here that they put a sign in Greek and in German. He says for the because because the civilians fought the Kandanos was destroyed. And then a farther down, they killed too. Now, one thing that I didn't put down is by the the German heavyweight champion, Max Schmeling, who was knocked out by Joe Louis in 1938, he took part. He was the paratroops. He jumped in the town of Rethymno, Rethymno was about thirty miles from my hometown. And for that reason, the information was I didn't think I was about twenty-five because he was wounded and, you know, so...After that--.

**Cohen:** You know, sorry --

**Vlamis:** There is a lot of details which I failed to... The thing was that in school they occupied all the schools. Our grammar school which is a good building, a beautiful building there and they occupy that. The high school where I went was about seven kilometers from my hometown, also occupied so we had to hold classes in small areas around town. Yeah. So these...it was just horrible to, you know, but we managed to survive.

**Cohen:** And I think that you mentioned that you had to walk...

**Vlamis:** Pardon me?

**Cohen:** I think you mentioned that you have to walk fifteen kilometers to school, I believe?

**Vlamiis:** Yes. The high school was seven and a half kilometers from my hometown, from my hometown. And I went through the junior high. I was ten years old when I went to junior high, and I had to walk. I had to get up at six o'clock in the morning. And there were about sixty people going from my home, from my hometown. And I was the youngest one, the youngest one. And we walked to school. And then when the school was over, we walked back another seven and a half kilometers, you know. Yeah, the high school was another seven and a half kilometers. In wintertime was very bad. Oh, and by the way, I guess I want to mention, because of the war, the schools closed. Schools were closed from October 28, 1940, when the Italian-Greek War started, the schools were closed. So they open again, they allow us to open to open, I think in July, where we crammed the entire semester into two months [too] much there, you know.

So the other the other things that I mention there are the Germans constantly were fortifying the island and [on] a very big hill, but it's about probably about fifteen kilometers from my hometown, they had big four big cannons, extremely [big]. In retrospect, I estimate it [each cannon] was about fourteen inches, maybe more. And they need labor because they had to build this and constantly take care of it. They came with trucks, with trucks and gone to the surrounding villages and pick up, pick up workers. Now they had to pass through the lower town to go to work where school was. One time, we agree with them to take us there. And every morning they will come in two or three trucks. We were about sixty-five kids where the trucks and we give them a couple of eggs. However, one day, you know, we sat about almost half an hour because it was a truck to make it about ten, twenty minutes. But you know walking was an hour and a half. Now what happened one time, for some reason, by the way, we were walking, men, er and boys and girls together, we walk to school. One day the driver stopped, and he allowed only the girls to get on the truck, not the way that the boys. So we decided, especially the older the older students, that nobody rides if nobody rides. So we do let him go. We wouldn't ride. The following day when the trucks

were coming. We had about almost twenty eggs. In the flash of the light, we showed the eggs and he stopped so fast he burned his tires. [Laughter] We he stopped there; we didn't pay attention. We just [started] walking. This is an indication that we don't need them. From there on, they stopped every day. [Laughter] There are many, many events that I didn't cover because, you know I didn't want to go to more details.

**Cohen:** Well, something that may be hard for someone who was [unintelligible] Were some of the ordinary German soldiers friendly, like the guys driving the trucks? Where they friendly to the youngsters?

**Vlamis:** ...our town is far away from the mountains and all the guerrillas were living, I mean working up in the mountains. So we do have we didn't have any fights, brawls with the Germans although we're still under [the occupation].  
I mentioned that they took my father and my mother to the jail one time because my father just –  
By the way, another event, they prevent the Germans to come, bringing provisions to Crete by boat and always was an escort, most and most of the times a destroyer to escort the cargo ships. So across from our house, there was there was a big, a big submarine torpedoed two of the ships. And that's something unbelievable because the port is not more than a mile and a half from our house, you know, and that whole bay was turned upside down because the Germans start bombing [using] the deep-sea bombs [i.e., depth charges] - almost, they turn the bottom upside down but--

**Cohen:** Sorry, who torpedoed? Who did the torpedoing? A Greek submarine torpedoed a German convoy.

**Vlamis:** The German ships that will come into the port, the freight and the destroyer. And now the Germans, the Germans start bombing the entire area. [i.e., a Greek submarine torpedoed a Germany convoy.]

**Vlamis:** They also had the airplanes flying, constantly flying, but they never, never been able to find the submarine. Now, after the war, after the war, it came out, that submarine was a Greek submarine, was very famous for for its-- a very famous submarine. That it was the submarine that torpedoed the boats, the two boats, you know. And so...another thing, the British used to come during the night and drop deep sea bombs, torpedoes, mines. The Germans had a method which was unique and it with a simple, simple [magnetized ring and, when the plane passed over the mine, the mine exploded.] The plane from the wings to the to the fuselage who go over over the ship...exploded. This is something unbelievable. I mean, it's almost daily event. So the Italians just about used to bomb the...come and bomb the towns. However, they were very vague. They were not efficient. They had number of planes. But they were not efficient. Yeah, another event was that my mother, my mother was in jailed.

**Cohen:** Do you know what happened?

**Vlamis:** Pardon me, what happened? My father had bought some eye beans on those torpedo ships, and somebody went there, I think, and sold them to my father. He put them out in the garden next to the garden and I don't know why he bought them. Anyway, somebody told the Germans that that [the bean shipment] is to go to the German army. And one day my father and some neighbors and my mother were sitting over there on a nice Sunday afternoon and a sedan pulled up there and two tall Gestapo officers this trouble. And I guess it was really the fear, the fear of that whole thing. They came out and in fluent Greek, they said, "Who's Mr--?" My father [turned as white as] a ghost. "Who's Mr. Kosta Vlamakis<sup>3</sup>?" And my mother or my father...  
Oh no, [Mr. Vlamis corrected himself], before that somebody came and told my father that the Gestapo stopped at the center of the city looking for him. So my father left the group. So about five minutes after that, the sedan pulled up [at the family home] and a big, tall man came out – [addresses Cohen] Are you

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<sup>3</sup> The family name was originally Vlamakis, and Mr. Vlamis' father had changed the name to Vlamis when he was in the States 1911-1927

familiar with the Gestapo? They used to have an insignia here, just like a half moon.<sup>4</sup>

**Cohen:** Yeah.

**Vlamis:** And when you see that you know. He said, "Who is Konstantin Vlamakis?" My mother said that "I don't know, he's my father, my husband, but he's not here". "Where is he?" My mother said, "Well, he left the town. He's in a different town." When is he coming back? And she says, "He's coming back tomorrow." And the officers say, "Well then, when you come with us." My mother tried to find some excuses, she says, "But I can't. I can't. I have my feet are hurting and I'm walking with loafers" And he says, "The jail, does not need shoes." And then she says, "Well, I have a kid." My brother was about seven years old and he's sick and he turns away. He looks at the lady said, "This lady is going to take care of her kids." Anyway, they took my mother two people sitting in the middle of the center seat of a sedan and two Gestapo officers, one of each side to get to jail. So the following day, my father surrendered, and my mother was released. But I had to go every day to bring him food and clothes. They allow me to do that. Yeah, well, they investigate. I mean, investigated. They asked him, "What happened?" And he said, "Well, I purchased those because I thought those were ...commercial", and eventually after the interrogation, a week of interrogation, they let him go.

But the most significant event was on June 8, 1948 [i.e. 1944]. The Germans had -- it would have been a month...-- since they went up to the mountains and... [they] arrested a lot of people, there because they accused them of helping the guerrillas.

**Vlamis:** But back in November, I mean, on *June 8*, they put all the Italian prisoners, by the way, only the Italians had occupied Crete one prefecture, the prefecture of Lasithi in Crete. Then when Italy fell, all those people became prisoners to the

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<sup>4</sup> The crescent shaped Wolfsangel was used as a Nazi insignia on some uniform division and worn by the dreadful Gestapo police.

Germans, the Germans took them as prisoners. And I think with the exception of those Italians who are affiliated with the Germans... but most of them, they said, "No, we're not going to go with the Germans." And they became prisoners. Well, unfortunately, one day, June 8, 1944, they have all the Italian prisoners, the Greek prisoners, and also the entire Jewish community from town of Chania think it called [up] I think that it was two hundred sixty-five. They put them in a boat and that boat, they took it to the mainland. My little brother that night, he was poisoned or something and had doctor who gave intravenous... We, we, we saw a tremendous flash... at...the sea, tremendous flash followed by an ex[plosion] a big sound. We don't know what it was...The following day, a couple of days... Within a week, the most dreadful thing you can see, corpses were coming out and none of them was with a German uniform because these I mean, I, I really buried -- not by myself, me and my friends -- I was fifteen years old and we dug graves in the sand and buried them there. And, you know, and after the war, it was a message from the British naval headquarters. He says that that on June 8, a British submarine, torpedoed the ship, Tanais, you know? [Addresses Cohen] Now, excuse me, let me ask you a question. Are you related to Cohen? There is a gentleman by the name of Cohen, and he was born in Greece and he's here in Chicago. He knows a lot about the Jewish history. And I told them about this incident, and he said, "Yes, I know about Tanais." Tanais was the name of the ship... [that was hit by a] a British submarine. It was Dolphin. The Greek ship Tanais with I believe, or something like that. And this is I don't know what happened to the to the corpses after I left. Probably they were exhumed and going up to someplace else.

**Cohen:** I didn't know about it until I read your book. But then when I looked it up on Google, I saw that there was a child who was born in Chania and was hidden with Christians in the Greek mainland. And that there was a ceremony remembering the victims. I'll send you a link, I'll send you the link to it.

**Vlamis:** Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So then, of course, the engine was -- that the Germans destroyed the heavy cannons. They gathered up on a hill, and they packed it with dynamite, and they lit a fuse and then push it down the ravine and it exploded.



Instead of taking them back to -- with them. So said, [Cohen interrupts briefly but unintelligible]

**Vlamis:** Well, anyway, I was we rushed to claim to claim the canon because the tires were from rubber. It was good for shoes and so on. So I was the first one and I had my eyes in the last one close to the shore so I can put the ball in small balls and take it home. However, I slowed down by ten feet, and I broke my tailbone and I missed it, I didn't pick up any root [i.e. rubber] however, I went to probably the main streets up in the hill. The Germans were rushing to get into the trucks and go. At the same time, there was a fire on the [not clear] German positions on the hill and they started shooting there. Well as I was walking and watching them. I was not in danger because of the big shield from the rear of the street. A German looked at me and he started swearing in English. He takes the rifle. He pointed at me, and he shot me. Fortunately, it didn't hit me, and I went down to a different ravine, and I decided to stay in a church, stay there for a couple of hours. Then I got outside. Everything was quiet and I took the, you know, the shoreline back to my home. And when I got home, every German was gone. So we were free. [Cohen laughs with relief] And that was the center of the town. Happy, now, that everybody's going to be happy and celebrating. And they were fighting, arguing about politics! [Both laugh]

**Cohen:** So much for the party!

**Vlamis:** And I put in the book [ *A Detour in my Life*] the last shot. [both laugh], the last shot.

**Cohen:** You know, one thing that you think you wrote about? And especially as a child, as a teenager were the pangs of hunger. I think it was [especially severe] late '41 '42 I know that you did many things to procure food for you and your family. Did you want to talk about the different things that you did to get food?

**Vlamis:** The famine was severe in the big cities, especially in Athens and Piraeus. People were dying in the streets. In our town, we managed to get fish because we were

by the sea and and but many, many, many families were really hungry. And... they used to talk in the cafes. "What did you have today?" The main diet was dandelions because they were plenty dandelions. The oil even oil was short. So families who had suffered a lot. Fortunately, nobody died from hunger in our area because of the seafood that we had and also the valley, it was a very productive area, you know, for vegetables and things like that. But people there I mean, like I said, I at times [in] '42 to '43, at times, we were without food, at night, you know. It was it was it was tough. And some of it is also mentioned by a friend of mine or in the school that he was shaking because of the frostbite and hunger. And he said, "Why?" We didn't expect and nobody expected me to survive." He was younger than I work. But I mean in 1994... I went there, I was swimming and the gentleman said to me, "Michael, how are you?" I said, "I'm sorry but I got to go." He said, "I'm John!". That is just really unbelievable. And we were reminiscing about the bad times, you know. All kinds of things that he said, right?

**Cohen:** Yeah, [amazing] that he survived

**Vlamis:** Yeah, yeah. He survived, yeah. The other things is that one vicinity in ...Crete, the prefecture of Ērakleion, there is a place called Mesara which is a highly productive grain, and of course, part of the Germans did not venture into the area and they produce in 1943, in the beginning of '44, they produce a lot of grain and they would sell the grain, not with money. And money was worthless, you know, but the main part of the exchange with guns. Somehow, my father took the courage - I don't know where he got a revolver and... he hid it in his clothes and all. And he went-- [to] the German truck...the Germans didn't know, , of course, what he had -- with other people. And he came out became about 300 pounds of grain with one revolver.

**Cohen:** Wow.

**Vlamis:** I mean things happening there. The community is upside down. I mean, you have no money because the Germans, when he came to Greece -they loot the treasury of Greece, Greece had no assets.

**Vlamis:** So everything jumped. One cigarette is about 10 million drachmas, one cigarette, you know! I mean, how we did survive is a miracle because now these what the Germans did in, especially Crete because they [of] their revenge. They wanted to revenge because they lost their best troops, the Goering, they lost the Goering Division [Fallschirm-Panzer-Division 1. Hermann Göring was an elite German Luftwaffe armored division], and they never forget it. So the the some of them were Austrians. They were a little bit more -- how shall I say -- a little bit more polished than the Germans. The Germans were just brutal.

**Cohen:** Yeah. You also, I believe, had written that the Germans had taken over some of the agricultural land to grow potatoes for their own purposes?

**Vlamis:** Yes, that is a good area, about five kilometers from the town that the Germans confiscated, and they start raising root [vegetables], especially potatoes. You know, they used to pay minimum. I mean, peanuts.

**Vlamis:** But what happened, they whoever wants to volunteer to work on that, he had to work through the hole, make the hole and put the potatoes into the furrow. So there was the groups, one man, and one woman and the women the man would dig the hole and the woman would drop two potatoes, there. And the guy who with a hoe would pick up one and put it in his pocket. Now, the woman must stand between the man and the German guard...

**Cohen:** Wow.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, so eventually...the funny thing was that every fifteen, twenty minutes, everybody go to river, pretend that he's going to--[relieve himself; both laugh] where they used to hide the potatoes. At night, almost everybody got a sack of potatoes to take home.

**Cohen:** Wow!

**Vlamis:** You had to do everything, everything to survive. I learned, I learned how to -- one of the things that happened because of our lack of cleanness and all that, we developed boils and things like that. You had to treat yourself. I learned from the British, from the doctors in the hospital. I mean in the school hospital, how to, you know...

**Cohen:** Was there any medical care available?

**Vlamis:** No, no, there is not. We had two doctors, one of them was in one of our house, and the other one was about three kilometers away. Now, in 1940, '42, I developed a big I don't know what it was, something in my gums. It was almost the size of a pencil and about three quarters of an inch long. And it was painful. So what we do, we went to the doctor and the doctor was not a dentist. He was just a general practitioner. And when I went to the doctor, I was expecting something bad. So this is true - without any cleanness of his instruments --he didn't have many instruments - he plucked the knife in my gums and all the pus came out. And then to clean it, to give me give me moonshine that it's very easy -- we to use that for rubbing alcohol. It's very common. I mean there was no medical for my mother. My mother had a miscarriage, and she went to the hospital, and they didn't have any milk or anything. Just, just, I don't remember or any help, medical help.

**Cohen:** Yeah. Something else I noticed is that you were a very entrepreneurial youngster and you had various business ventures. I think initially with the New Zealand, Australian troops. Do you want to talk about that?

**Vlamis:** Yes, of course, the first - when the British came...when the Italian war was declared, there was a company that pitched tents about four kilometers from our town. Well, I could go out and sell things, but I didn't have any permits. They gave the permits to older people, and I used to go and sell to the British --

pastries. However, I could not do that because I was young and they didn't give me any pass, any permit. So one day but I was sneaking there with a friend of mine - they want to see it because they was MPs patrolling the area, you know, when the MPs were far away, we [would] sneak into the camp and sell the pastries.

**Vlamis:** But anyway, one time I... I mean, let's put it that way, because I used to sell them also wine. But I didn't have wine, so I used vinegar and mixed it with the sweet, sweet, it's called petimezi [a grape syrup]. It's... a juice, you know, and the Brits loved it. [Laughs] One time, one time, I was able was with a friend of mine who [also] traded pastries and there's an air raid we rush to under the foxhole there. So when I go like this, I had the wine in my back. And when I bend like this, over the tray, the wine opened and splashed over the tray. Half of them were destroyed. My friend and I finish the rest of it. I told my mother what happened. She didn't believe me because I had a sweet tooth for pastries. "No" you took .." Anyway, my line of credit stopped. [Laughter] But when the Australians came down, the Australians came when the Germans occupied Greece, it was April 28, I believe in '41. <sup>5</sup>A long column of was coming from... far away town and they were with their Australian hats and all that. All of them were armed with a rifle. They had some of them like cowboys; two guns. Anyway, one of them as I stood there watching, actually said to me, one of the soldiers said, "Cookies!" and I rushed to the pastry shop and I said, "I want sixty cookies and my mother will pay you, tomorrow." And it was two drachmas each. I came out, I sold them, in about two minutes for four drachmas, each I went in and bought another sixty and did the same thing and from there, all of a sudden, I see a big market developing and they live up in the hill, not tents. They had no tents, they just had to live under the trees. And every day I used to go there and bring oranges, eggs. And the... money was still good; the Greek money was still good. So I made a lot of money with it, but then I was about thirteen at the time, no twelve, and I would sit there talking with them. And they sell everything. Even the one -- he was a very tough guy - he offered to sell me a machine gun [Laughter].

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<sup>5</sup> On the Greek mainland, Athens fell to the Germans on April 27, 1941. The Germans invaded Crete on May 20, 1941, and Crete, fell on June 1, 1941.

**Vlamis:** Another one, had a handful of jewelry. I don't know where they got that jewelry. They were, nobody was offering you know, I mean they knew that the danger was imminent, so they didn't care about the [valuables]. So whatever I made went up in smoke because of the [German] occupation [of Crete which began June 1, 1941] changed everything, you know.

**Cohen:** Yeah. Something else that you talked about and maybe you would talk you about now is where your family went into hiding in caves during the Battle of Crete over the ten days period?

**Vlamis:** Yes. What happened, I said earlier that that the Germans occupied Crete, I mean, Greece, the mainland, the king and British and Australians who came to Crete. Also, there came to the Greek air force. And now they didn't have they didn't have any mess hall. They eat in the restaurants. However, the the bombing and the strafing were very intense. So we moved to a small cave. My father and my mother used to work during the day to prepare the food for ...the restaurant, [i.e.] The cafe became a restaurant. And then, however, we lived in a cave about a half a mile down the street and there were two caves, one facing each other. Each one, probably accommodated about fifty families, fifty families with no water, no sanitation, nothing like that. We, the young ones...oh by the way, I stopped my business -- this is this is the last ten days of the war of the invasion. So I stopped the selling my business. So I started I live in the cave and my father and my mother also came late at night. And then one event -- the caves were about about a couple hundred feet above the main street. And in the morning, the whole people came out because from both caves for fresh air and also from there we could see or hear about the fi[re]-- the battle that was taking place in there, in Chania. Especially at night, you see the, you saw the flames. Yeah. So anyway, the bombings and the strafing was very intense, very intense, because they used to go and bomb Chania and all that and all of the escorts, the heavy bombers. I mean, they the... planes that escort the bombers- they strafe everything there in the street. You couldn't be on the outside. You are taking a risk. Anyway, so we stay in this cave for a while, but then the the...hostilities

increased, increased and we moved from there to a small town about about seven kilometers away. It is a small village there was only four home houses among the trees. It was well camouflaged. One day my father left in the morning to go down to home to get some food. On the way back, he unload the food from the mayor, and there was a big tree. Oh, by the way, the place where we stayed was just a single room, it was a dirt floor and only one door. But in the small yard, there, there was a big tree. When my father brought the food inside he went back to take the mare to the to the pasture, their strafing was was so severe for four hours ... we didn't know if he was dead or alive. It's about ten feet from the door. He couldn't get in. If you see it, it's unbelievable. And would they know why. Not only that, not only the strafing, they [also] used to throw hand grenades. We were fortunate that we didn't get hurt. Anyway, after the strafings in the evening subsided, another man came over there crying. I said, "What's going on?" He says, "They used to chase me, they chased me around the trees!"

**Cohen:** [interrupts] Oh my God.

**Vlamiš:** I mean with planes, and they were flying, tree top, they were flying plane. And then from there we left again. We left again and this and we went to a big, big... Oh, we decided that we don't have enough protection because it would be [protective] for a bomb. It would blow it up. So we went to another cave very strong cave and that cave is facing the shoreline and [on] the shoreline, there were two freighters that they were bombed. Well, as we were getting that night, we were getting to this big, cave this new cave that was full a big explosion happened from the freighters. [It was] so strong that I felt I was getting -- I felt somebody push me, push me in the air. Anyway, that was very safe from bombing. You know, unless you have a bomb in the opening and the opening was protected with trees and all that that—

**Cohen:** What -- Sorry, go on.

**Vlamis:** All of a sudden, we see three armed men, coming toward the cave and everybody thought they were German. I, with the kids, we found a hole at the end of that cave and we crawled into that hole. No men, no adult men could crawl there. And so we got into the little area there and we hugged each other, and in my mind, I was thinking, "It's fine. But if they cut my... neck, am I going to feel the cold knife?" Somebody might think that's stupid. No, because in Crete, the history of Crete is that under the Turks that were a lot of things like that. Anyway it happened to be Australians that they. Yeah, that they...survived... And we told them where to, they go five kilometers down and we gave them some food and they were fully armed, and they had their rifles among them. However, the following day we decided to tell them it's not safe for them or for the people to stay there. And we did that, and they left. Some of them went to the south side of Crete, and from there they embarked in British submarines that took them to Cairo but that's a different story to tell. It's a long story, you know, but the one story which I heard was very interesting. Roosevelt in 1941 established the OSS, I believe, it's Oversea Security Service [i.e., Office of Strategic Services]. Today we know that organization as the CIA. I know, you had a lot of people who became members there, especially some Hollywood actors, one of whom was Hayden Sterling [i.e., Sterling Hayden]. I don't know if you know him. The other one that, oh, was a reporter for CBS who died a long time ago. He was also part of it. Anyway, what I want to say when Italy was, when the Allies occupied Italy not the whole Italy, just the half of Italy, they start training people as spies and put them in the occupied countries like Greece and said that they are [to] get information about the movement about the Germans.

**Vlamis:** Well, there are two...officers in Greece who took the training and after the training, they said, they told him, "You're going to Greece." They said, "No, we're not going to Greece we don't want to go to [Crete], we want to go to Crete!" Because their families, their families were from Crete. They were Greek-Americans--

**Cohen:** North Americans [of Greek descent.]



**Vlamis:** Yeah, so they insisted to come Crete. So, they took them to Crete, in a small boat and one captain only. The captain was Hayden Sterling that actor. All through the trip, they never talk to each other. And they knew, they said that his voice was familiar. By the time when they reached Crete, they disembarked but then they realized who he was. Anyway, in Crete, they split. One of them was close to my hometown up in the mountains; he purchased some half a dozen sheep and at night, lived in a cave. At night, he used to see the m-- By there, from that high area, he could see the movements of the Germans, their movements and everything else from far away. Then every night he would send his message to Cairo.

**Vlamis:** Now, one day he decided to go to a village and when he entered the village, it was in a white house and an old lady...There was a dog [who was about to] attack him, only he came close to him and the dog stopped. And the old lady says, "Who are you?" He says, "I'm Jim, the shepherd." He said, "Do you have anything for me to eat? I'll pay you." She was very suspicious, she didn't know who he was, so she gave him something to eat, and they got acquainted, but he didn't tell her who he was. So this happened repeatedly every couple of weeks. He used to come there. One time he said to her, to the old lady, he said, "Who are these two people?"...She said, "Well, that's my son."

**Vlamis:** That little boy is my grandson. But then they live in America that she didn't say America, [She said California] America and I'm not going to see him again. That day, that evening when he went back to his post in the cave to send a message to Cairo. He told them the main message and he appended with the following sentence, "Please inform my father in California, his mother is okay. [Laughter] The old lady was his grandmother, and... he never told her who he was. However, when the Germans surrendered, they had to sign the surrender in the Ērakleion, he got a message to go and represent the United States. So he got his uniform, he was a lieutenant, he got the uniform and all that. He goes back to the old lady and she says, "Who are you?" He say, "I'm Jim, the shepherd." "How are you? Why are you dressed like that?" He says, "Do you have anything for me to eat?" She said, "Yeah, I have something." He says, "I have this thing here. They

all...Jim used to like it." So he sat down, and he ate, and he asked her again, "Who are these people in the picture?" She said, "Well, I told you before..." He said, "You know who that little boy is? That's me. Ten years ago!" She almost fainted. And I read this in a reliable book - it is a true story. You know, the other guy also has a similar interesting story.

**Cohen:** Were you also aware at the time about the British and Greek kidnapping of the German commander and spirited him to a submarine and kept him prisoner in Egypt? I think I think there was an incident...

**Vlamis:** Yes, General Kreipe, okay. General Kreipe, replaced the -- I forgot his name [i.e., General Müller, known as the Butcher of Crete], I don't remember the name. Anyway, there were British agents that they used to come to Crete many things to, you know, to see the movements of the Germans and all that. Well, Leigh Fermor<sup>6</sup>, a very famous British agent and another one Stanley Moss<sup>7</sup> were sitting in Cairo drinking... Both of them had been to Crete with the guerillas for many, many times. So they agreed they were drinking there. So they say, one to another, "Well, why don't we go to kidnap the German general? And he said -- this was just a joke. So they proposed to [Thomas] Dunabin [the senior British liaison officer with the resistance in Crete], the Dunabin<sup>8</sup>] who was in the charge, and they agreed. So they made a plan how to do it. So anyway, they communicate with some of the Greeks that they knew well, so they were supposed to jump, to parachute in, I believe it was in March. They have bad luck and finally, they parachute in April. But now Kreipe, General Kreipe his headquarters were in Ērakleion. However, his living quarters was in a small town

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Leigh Fermor, 1915-2011, author, scholar, soldier and polyglot. Most famous for his role in the Cretan resistance. After the war, he became a popular and very influential travel writer.

<sup>7</sup> W Stanley Moss, 1921-1965, later wrote a bestselling book about the kidnapping. After the war, he became a successful writer of novels and memoirs, broadcaster and traveler, investigating Nazi-era gold bullion reserves as well as journeying to Antarctica and New Zealand.

<sup>8</sup> GEN Karl Heinrich Kreipe, 1896-1976, was abducted by British agents with Greek resistance fighters on April 26 1944. After the war, Kreipe was sent to a POW camp in Canada and released in 1947. Curiously, he appeared on a Greek television show with his kidnapers in 1972.

about ten kilometers away called Acharnis. Every night he used to go exactly the same time with his official limousine to his residence, although the thing was they plan to have one guy about a kilometer away to do how to somehow to inform them that the car is coming. I mean his drive car is coming. So they were dressed in German uniforms. So when the car approached them, one of the guys in civilian laid down the street and ended and the car stopped. The chauffeur came up and came out and jumped from the sides.

**Vlamis:** They hit him with a revolver, and they took the German in the back. They told the German, the general, "Now, you sit still or you gonna die." ... So now they pull the... As a matter of fact, they killed the driver accidentally. Anyway, they put him on the side there. They got into the car and two people in the back with German uniforms was holding the general down. And two in the front; two in the front was Leigh [i.e., Stanley] Moss and next to him was Leigh Fermor. I'm going to tell you a few stories after we finish this, and they went back to Ērakleion. Ērakleion was crowded because...the Germans were coming out from the cinema and they had to slow down. They passed twenty-two posts.

**Vlamis:** Nobody stopped them. And every time they see the car, the Germans salute, because they said, "This is the general's car." They recognize it. In the last one, in the last one, it is a post. The post came, the post came in, the soldier came in, they are looking for the car, they are looking inside the car. Before we reached there, this woman who's fluent in German, she said, "Don't you recognize...this is the general's car?" He said, "Look" and they let him go. They passed twenty-two posts. They took him to some area where they had disposed of the car and they put a note inside said: "This was done by the British commandos; the Greek public had no part in this this" in case the Germans found the car. Anyway, it took them nineteen days and the Germans went crazy with aero planes or squads looking for the general. They didn't find him. They were...They disembarked in a British speedboat and they left for for Egypt. Now he...Anyway, after the war, there was there was a meeting in 1974 in Athens. They had Leigh Fermor, General Kreipe, a civilian, and the people who had [i.e. kidnapped him]

[Cohen Laughs] and General Kreipe became the general I mean, the chairman of the British and of the German War... of those who served in the German army.

**Cohen:** Trial, the trial?

**Vlamis:** No, I mean, he was a chairman of the discharged Germans.

**Cohen:** Oh, okay.

**Vlamis:** Yeah. And now there is a cemetery in Maleme. There's about 4000 Germans soldiers buried there. And General Kreipe proposed to build a cemetery there. There are blocks there and you see the names and the age. When you walk through there, you're going to see nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old. Only the people with rank, they were they were older. They were young kids, all of them were young kids. Yeah...now Leigh Fermor this is a guy who -- we're running out time -- let me tell you this and then you do whatever we want... Leigh Fermor left England at the age of eighteen. He walked for a year. He walked all through Europe. He came to [Istanbul] Turkey.

**Cohen:** Oh my God!

**Vlamis:** Yeah, he was he was a very famous, he wrote a lot of books. And if you google Leigh Fermor, you're going to see who the guy is. He just died a few years ago, at age of ninety-four. He was very famous and interesting man.

**Cohen:** Hmm.

**Vlamis:** So what else...?

**Cohen:** Oh, yes. One thing you said that you were at first the National Liberation Front, the EAM, presented itself as a liberation front rather than a communist organization, and that you became involved in EPON, the patriotic youth, and the AETOPOLA the Eagle Scouts?

**Vlamis:** Yes, what happened...After the occupation, well, even during the occupation, we had the KKE [Kapa, Kapa, Ersilon acronyms for Communist party of] Greece. Now EAM was an umbrella. Yes, many people who want to fight against the Germans, you know [what] I mean? However, the communists, the communists were controlling this,[the EAM]. And in the beginning, people didn't realize it. And lives? [And many people] became a part of this EAM just to fight the Germans in different ways. So, you know I'm not the only one. A lot of people were fooled at the time.

**Cohen:** What activities did you do? What were you assigned to do?

**Vlamis:** Well, most of the time trying to indoctrinate the people to to come with this organization, you know. I did the only thing that we did was to steal the bikes from the Germans. That's all.

**Cohen:** You have something a little bit poignant. I mean, you said, obviously with the occupation, it brought about a lot of unease and before the war you had your direction in life. So now it wasn't clear what would happen because of the occupation. And you also wrote that your friend Milis was providing you with communist literature, but you found that it was not providing you with a good direction either. Do you want to describe your feelings around that?

**Vlamis:** Yes, there was a lot of literature going around. And Milis was one of the organizers. They were -- let me tell you -- they approached me more than anybody else because -- I don't mean to brag because -- I was a good student. Yes. I don't know why. Anyway, the. Everything they gave me, I never been able to understand it, I never been able to make any sense of out of it. For instance, they have some books from by Stalin, by Lenin and I've never, never been able to, you know, to read something that makes any sense to me. As a matter of fact, I thought the...after the war, I realize how foolish I was...realize, how foolish I was ...but but like I said, I never... As a matter of fact, when I came to the States, they approached me. They were there were there were people there

were communist organizations here. And I just kick them out. No. I have nothing to do with it.

**Cohen:** No. Your parents and you sound very brave and also very compassionate. I was wondering, do you want to tell the story of about hiding your neighbor's son Yiannis? Yeah, I think that's how we pronounce it.

**Vlamis:** Yeah. This is well... Yiannis. Now we had two homes. In our home we built in 1936 and...it was rented by a doctor and his wife. Now, Yiannis was an architect, and he was he was a communist because at that time, even though he graduated from the Polytechnical School, in Athens, a very prestigious school. All of them, in fact most of the students who graduated in the pre-war times, they were, you know, left wing affiliates. Anyway, John [i.e. Yiannis] was known to the Germans and one time the Germans, he was living in Ērackleion... One time the Germans attempted to arrest him. However, he was informed by somebody else, by a policeman or somebody that he left, that he was up in the mountains for a while.

And then after two [months hiding in the mountains], he came to live in with his sister, the doctor's wife. With his sister,[to avoid any suspicion], lived in our house. Now, he never, never mentioned or never attempted to talk to talk to me about politics. And I and he lived in the house all day long. At night, during the dark time, I used to go out and I walked a few paces ahead of him. He followed me just to get some fresh air for him to get some fresh air. If I saw anything suspicious, I we saw something for him to hide. Now I benefit from that because he tutored me in math, and I had tremendous basis for me. You know, I was Number One in class in math. Anyway, in 1944 or in the summer of 1944, he was sleeping upstairs, but because it was summer, he was sleeping, we had a terrace, which is completely enclosed. He lived in the terrace, there. And from there you can see our garden. I was walking in the gardens when I hear some thunder, some somebody hitting the top of the chicken coop and all that. I look around and I see John jumping down. He came to the outhouse...

**Vlamis:** I went up there. I went outside and I said, "John [i.e. English version of Yiannis], "What's going on?". He says, "The Gestapo is downstairs, Gestapo." So I went downstairs I went to see my mother what has happened. Somebody knocked on the door. My mother opened the door. I saw one with a Gestapo officer with the insignia here. She was suspicious that they're looking for John. So she starts with her hand to my sister [to motion to her to] go upstairs, to tell John. So she went upstairs, she said, "John, Gestapo's is looking for you." So he jumped down. Anyway, everybody got together and communicate [from] far -- from the doctor [who] was upstairs with his wife and we were downstairs. I was the conduit between John and the rest, whatever they told me from somebody, from the houses, I told John. Oh by the way, the Gestapo only spent a few minutes and he left. Anyway, we decide that John should leave the house. He dressed in summer clothes, heavy coat and a hat. And again, I was walking ahead, and I passed the house where two Germans were living... Of course, nobody knew who he was. And we walked outside the town. After we were free. Then he knew where to go. He go to a vineyard whose owner was a good friend at the time. And then he escaped. Escaped. So I know...he never came back, never came back. And the funny thing was that after the war, the Greek government prosecuted most of the communists, but not John He was a prominent citizen of the town, he had a good business, architectural business and... [both chuckle].

**Cohen:** [Unintelligible] I think you mentioned that at some point in 1944, you decided to go to the more prestigious high school<sup>9</sup>...?

**Vlamis:** Oh yes. This was a ... the middle education in Greece was six years of grammar school, six years of high school. However, after the fourth grade in high school, you had the option to go to what we call Lyceum, which was practical sciences, you know, to prepare you for engineering schools. So I went to -- the last two grades we went to - we call practicum. And then when I came here, after I came out from the army, I went to the University of Illinois to get my degree, from the IIC, electrical engineering...

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<sup>9</sup> Mr. Vlamis transferred from the provincial high school to the Lyceum which offered more advanced technical courses

**Cohen:** Um, do you want to-- we only have a few minutes left, maybe we can continue another time, but I'm wondering if you would like to describe the German surrender of Greek mainland and then the withdrawal from Crete. And then I think later, with the surrender from Crete, right?

**Vlamiis:** The surrender of the Germans, they did not surrender to the Greeks because they did not trust --they knew that they would not be safe with the Greeks. So they surrendered to the British. The British had an office in Chania. Yeah, the office in Chania. Now, when they surrendered, I don't I don't know anything beyond that, what happened—Oh, there's one of them [one German officer who] was very interesting. There was one German officer, Gestapo, who was from Greek descent, and he migrated from the Asia Minor back in the early 20s. Now, he anyway, he was in the town of Rethimnon.

There's a long story associated with this guy, but I'm going to just tell you a [short] story, only. He managed he managed to escape from the suspicion of it because he was really bad. He was brutal, he caused the execution of many people. However... he somehow survived, he went back to Germany. Nobody suspected nothing. However, in 1947 -- before he left, when he was... living in Crete, he had a romantic relationship with one of the girls -- and they were communicating more after the war. They decided to get married, so he came down in 1947 to meet the girl and get married. Well he came to Salonica while he was walking the streets, two boys that were prisoners of war from Rethimnon recognized him. So they told the authorities. This guy, his name was Schubert<sup>10</sup> ... Anyway, nobody says why, why he might to us [words unclear]. Yeah, that's what he gets the name Schubert. Anyway, these boys recognize him, and I assume they told the authorities, they told the authorities who he was. And they follow him for two weeks and they arrest him. He had a trial, and he was

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<sup>10</sup> Schubert, born in Asia Minor was of Greek descent. He immigrated to Austria in the 1920s. His Greek name was Petros Kostandinidis.



executed in Greece. Now, I told you that they were two SOS [i.e., SOE, Special Operations Executive] ... <sup>11</sup>agents--

**Cohen:** Yeah.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, the story, the other agent who were also Greek has a relation with this issue. You know, this guy, the German guy killed his father, the other guy's father. I mean, I thought there were two SOS [i.e. SOE] ...

**Cohen:** [Interrupts] Oh my goodness].

**Vlamis:** And they call him from the States during his trial. And he witnessed the execution and he stood there. He said, he looked at the sky and said, "Father...justice is served". It's a long story. He also had an interesting story. I told you only [about] Janni [described above as Jim, the Greek American, who posed as a shepherd] who it was his grandmother. But if we got time, I tell you about his guy here.

**Cohen:** Mr. Vlamis? I think that I set the timing for two hours. Would you like to continue tomorrow?

**Vlamis:** Other times?

**Cohen:** Like ...Would you like to continue talking tomorrow? Or later today or later this afternoon?

**Vlamis:** It's up to you. You want to take a break?

**Kronfeld<sup>12</sup>:** I can come back tomorrow so I could set you up, Dad.

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<sup>11</sup> SOE was a secret organization Britain during WWII which conducted espionage, sabotage, and related activities in Axis occupied countries. Similarly, SOE connected with and aided local resistance movements.

<sup>12</sup> Mr. Vlamis' daughter, Maria Kronfeld.

**Cohen:** Is a 11:15 a good time?

**Kronfeld:** I'm busy from 11 to 12 with a call. I could do before 11 or after 12.

**Cohen:** Whatever you prefer.

**Kronfeld:** How about 12: 30? It would get me time to..

**Cohen:** 12: 30 is great.

**Kronfeld:** Okay, you want to send an update?

**Cohen:** Yeah, I'll send, yeah. Okay. We'll continue on tomorrow at 12:30, and in the meantime, I really thank you very much for sharing that. Thank you.

**Vlamis:** Thank you. Bye bye...

## Part 2

**Cohen:** Okay today is October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and my name is Leah Cohen. On behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I am pleased to follow up on the interview of SGT Michael Vlamis on last Friday, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020 [static noise, interference]..during World War II.

**Vlamis:** You're breaking up.

**Kronfeld:** You're breaking up a little, Leah. Now you're okay now you're okay.

**Cohen:** Okay. I'm not sure why because your last week, I had the old laptop, and this is the good laptop, so I don't know why I'm breaking up...

**Kronfeld:** It could be the connection sometimes the bandwidth ... the Internet.

**Cohen:** Okay, so, after World War II, Mr. Vlamis immigrated to the US and served in the US Army, the 7th Army, 28th Infantry Division, 109<sup>th</sup> [110th Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Company H] from 1952 to 1954, in Germany during the Cold War and this will be a bit more of our focus today. And but so, Mr. Vlamis ... Sorry I'm just trying to adjust the picture a little bit, to focus something. There we go okay. So I guess before we move on, was there something that you would like to talk about in the last interview that we did not talk about regarding the [German] Occupation or your participation of the youth group and so on?

**Kronfeld:** Did you understand that?

**Vlamis:** Not too well.

**Kronfeld:** Okay, sorry, you're breaking up. Is there something else you want to add, if you think of something else regarding the Occupation or your youth participation in the parties that you want to also raise?

**Cohen:** Like before we go onto the United States and all that?

**Vlamis:** Well one thing that I don't believe we covered the last time was the invasion of Crete, where they, the paratroopers, jump on the airfield of Maleme, which is about ten kilometers from the city of Chania and at that time in charge, was General, General [Julius] Ringel the German general. And he wrote back to the headquarters that that they have a severe problem because the civilians are mutilating the German soldiers uh you know, and they ... which was not true and this uh, this caused the executions that followed after the occupation. You know, whatever he said, I mean the civilians fought but they did not mutilate any German corpses. What he said, as a matter of fact, General Ringel, the Cretan ... he said that the Cretan population in civilian or German uniforms, is making a part of the fighting. They are mutilating and robbing the corpses of German

soldiers. That was really ... it was not true. The civilians did fight against the Germans, but they did not mutilate any, any of those corpses.

The German, the general who took over the direction of German troops after the Occupation was General Andrae<sup>13</sup>, Alexander Andrae, and he continued with the executions. At that time, a group of eminent citizens of Crete went to him and asked him to cease the uh, the executions and let anybody who's left be judged according to his acts, and that's not indiscriminately executing the civilians. Well the people who went to talk to General [Alexander] Andrae<sup>14</sup>, was the bishop of town of Chania, the mayor and some other responsible people. Well he did not he did not accept any of the proposals that they offered to him. They offered him, "Let's live in peace and uh, if anything happens let's prosecute the individual not the entire population." Well, General Andrae did not accept the proposal so he, just summarily, just dismissed the group. However after they were facing the resistance from the guerrillas, he called, he called the group back—I'm talking about uh about a year after that—and asked them to turn off [i.e., turn in] any of the weapons that the civilians might have. And he collected about 1800 um, rifles which was from an outdated era you know, they were not some modern rifles, and the occupation eased a little bit.

However the British, in conjunction with the uh, with a Greek Underground or guerrillas, they come up with a plan. Every Thursday, a column of troops came from Chania to Ērakleion to bring to bring—I don't know if they had this done before or not—to bring food and supplies to the base of Ērakleion because the base was an air base, you know. However every, this column is followed by—I mean it was at nine, about nine trucks at a hundred meters apart, and the British commanders or the SOE<sup>15</sup> I mean uh, agents along with like, with the Greeks revised the plan and they...[obtained] a German truck—I don't know how they come to get a German truck—and inside there were a group of armed men, probably about twenty commandoes, and in one corner when they were

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<sup>13</sup> General Alexander Andrae, 1888-1979. After being captured the Allies postwar, he was sentenced to four terms of life imprisonment for war crimes on Crete. His sentence was later commuted to four years by King Paul of Greece. In 1950, he cofounded the German neo-Nazi DRP (Deutsche Reichspartei) which continued its own fascist activities until it merged with the similarly minded NPD in 1964, which exists to this day.

<sup>15</sup> Special Operations Executive; a top-secret group formed to conduct espionage, reconnaissance and sabotage in Nazi occupied Europe. Post war, many of the members became part of the foreign secret service, MI6.

entering the town of Ērackleion, in one uh, sharp corner they got behind the column. And when they got into Ērackleion, into the airport, they attacked the base with hand grenades and other explosives and destroyed about twenty-two aircraft there. Unfortunately—and they only got two casualties, I'm talking about uh you know, but the Germans suffer a big loss but then they managed to get away with only two losses there.

The other thing is that I don't know if we discussed the abduction of a GEN Kreipe<sup>16</sup>. The general in charge of the entire Cretan Occupation was Müller<sup>17</sup> and he had the nickname of the 'The Butcher of Crete' because he was a very severe, that general. He burned towns and executed people, so one time the two, two British agents who used to come to Crete and go back—Now the way they used to go to Crete, they go through by submarine and disembark in the south part of Crete, uh close to the mountains without giving [away] any ... because there was no German guards at the time, you know. So anyway, it was a famous famous agent, uh Leigh Fermor<sup>18</sup>, and Lee Farmer and Stanley Moss<sup>19</sup>, they were in Cairo during ... [at] the bar, because both of them were agents that used to, that have gone to Crete many times. While they're sitting in Cairo in a bar, they were talking and they said to themselves, "Why don't we go and kidnap Müller?" That Müller, I told you before with the most severe general. They said this as a joke, and they proposed this to the higher officials. I believe the guy was [Thomas] Dunabin [the official] above them, and he agreed to let him organize a group to go and kidnap GEN Müller. However, they organized the operation, how to do it and they jump, they planned to jump with a parachute in February, however because of bad weather and some other problems, they jump in April. By that time Müller was replaced by Kreipe. Kreipe was a general that had his headquarters in the big city of Ērackleion but his residence was about ten

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<sup>16</sup> GEN Karl Heinrich Kreipe, 1896-1976, was abducted by British agents with Greek resistance fighters on April 26, 1944. After the war, Kreipe was sent to a POW camp in Canada and released in 1947. Curiously, he appeared on a Greek television show with his kidnapers in 1972.

<sup>17</sup> GEN Freidrich Wilhelm Müller, 1897-1947, subsequently executed by firing squad for war crimes on May 20, 1947.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Leigh Fermor, 1915-2011, author, scholar, soldier and polyglot. Most famous for his role in the Cretan resistance. After the war, he became a popular and very influential travel writer.

<sup>19</sup> W Stanley Moss, 1921-1965, later wrote a bestselling book about the kidnapping. After the war, he became a successful writer of novels and memoirs, broadcaster, and traveler, investigating Nazi-era gold bullion reserves as well as journeying to Antarctica and New Zealand.

kilometers outside Ērakleion in a small town called Archanes. So now instead of going after the Müller they had to go after *Kreipe* and they organized a group of Cretans and in 1944—oh by the way, *Kreipe* used to go every night driving from his headquarters to his residence in Archanes by himself and no guard, just the chauffeur. So one night while he was going back to his residence, they jump in front of the limousine. The limousine stopped and that and the chauffeur came out to ask [what is] the problem. Well they knocked the chauffeur out with a revolver—they didn't kill him, they just knocked him down and they sat behind the *Kreipe* and they told him that they are agents and they put, put a revolver in his head. He sits in the salon, in the back seat. Now all who participated were in German uniforms, so Leigh Fermor, uh who was very famous, I mean he spoke very well German, he was sitting in a driver's seat and another one who was driving back, they drove through Ērakleion and the time that they drove back was the time that the Germans were coming out from the cinema and it was really a lot of people, a lot of soldiers on the streets. But every time, everyone who saw the limousine they recognized the GEN *Kreipe* and they salute, they let him go. They passed twenty-one posts and all the posts salute, and in, the last one, trying to see what's going inside the limousine and Leigh Fermor, in German he said, "Don't you see that this is the general's wagon?" And he salute and they salute, and they let him go.

Anyway they drove about uh, about fifty or sixty kilometers to another location. From there they went over the mountains, with a general all this time, the general was in the back and the two people were sitting on him, that if he makes any move he's going to die. Anyway it took them nineteen days to go over the mountains into the south part of Crete and at which time the submarine came one night, and as a matter of fact not too far from a German post. They managed in the dark to get to the submarine with the general and all the people who participate in the abduction and go back to Cairo. Now they said that I heard that *Kreipe* in Cairo made a radio announcement—I don't, I cannot verify it, but they said that he made an announcement. He told them that he was very well, he's treated well, and he proposed [to the Germans] to give up the uh, the effort to find him. You know that I don't know if this is correct, but it was a rumor right,

running around, yeah [laughter]. Although we have a lot of difficulties but sometimes, we have a something to cheer about it, of course, you know.

**Cohen:** Yeah! You know before, can you just uh, like two little technical things you know. Would you mind moving your face back because your chin is cut off. Yeah, that's good, that's good, that's good. And sometimes I hear, I think because the noise is so sensitive, I guess you hear the typing in the background.

**Kronfeld:** Okay, sorry he wants me to stay here because it's ... I'll be mindful of that, yeah. Sorry to be so loud. I think your sound is better so I'll, I'll stay as long as I need to and ...

**Cohen:** Okay and could you move the chair a tiny bit back. Oh, I think that's ....

**Vlamis:** Okay?

**Cohen:** Yeah, I think this way you see the whole face. Yeah okay, okay so World War II, did you ...

**Kronfeld:** Yeah, it's ... you know what, for some reason it's just all breaking up. Do you have a headset that you might be able to use? Is that better?

**Cohen:** Let's try it. Okay I think it's worse, but you never know.

**Vlamis:** I don't know if it's art, the only other thing I can suggest is the computer, and then we come back into this, because it's sometimes it's a bandwidth ...

**Cohen:** I missed ... that the only thing that you suggest is ...

**Kronfeld:** Yeah, I keep talking and I think it's better.

**Cohen:** Okay so do, you do you hear me better than before?

**Vlamis:** Yeah, yes.

**Cohen:** Okay, so I'll keep these the earphones in. Okay, so after the war, did you continue your education in Crete or in mainland Greece or in Athens?

**Vlamis:** No no, uh after the war ... Oh yes, I finished high school in 1947 and then I took the exams for the ones that we call commerce, college of commerce. However I didn't like it. My, uh desire was to go to the polytechnic, you know for electrical engineering. So anyway I attended for about six months and then I dropped out, for many reasons: I didn't like it. Secondly the situation was very bad in Crete, in Greece at that time because we had a civil war, and I was about to be drafted. However, the Greek government came back with an order of fiat that the people

of my classification have the right to go, to go out of Greece for studies or otherwise within a month. So I took the opportunity and I struggled in a month to get money from my tickets. I watched, by the way immediately I went to Athens and I took the oath in the American embassy, uh because my father as I said before, was an American citizen [audio garbled] ... World War I, and I took the oath when I became an American citizen and immediately I gathered the funds and I left Greece uh, in June of 1948 and I travel, travelled about nineteen days because the ship was one of those war—I forgot the name of the ships. Anyway we went through Egypt, Alexandria; from Alexandria we went to Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv, I think that was the time, when the Israel and the Arabs were in the middle of a big war and the Israelis came up and switched the boat to see if any contraband or something pertaining to war. And then we left Tel Aviv and we went to Jaffa and the ship was going only five miles an hour because they were suspecting that there might be mines, the area might be mined, so we got to Jaffa. By the way, we did not dock because neither Jaffa or Tel Aviv had any mooring facilities. Okay, after Jaffa we draw, we went to Beirut, Lebanon. In Beirut stopped there and forty people, young people came aboard. They were, they were Americans who came to fight in the side of the Jewish state of Israel. And uh they came aboard, and they sent them back to ... they were arrested and came back to, sent them back to the States and from there uh, it was we stayed probably about half a day in Beirut. And there we went to Palermo, Italy, and from Palermo, Italy we had a lot of people going to the States, a lot of people, families, small kids and all that. From there, we went to the Azores and then I remember in about three or four days, we came to the States.

And I came out okay—but by the way when I boarded the ship in Greece, I had no money with me because I didn't want to go back. Well after I got my tickets uh, then the ship was leaving, a certain day which I don't remember the exact date, at ten o'clock in the morning but that day I had to go to the Greek bank and exchange the money. For some reason, I don't remember what, uh details ... And there was a long line in the bank, and nobody allowed us to go forward. We told him the problem, but nobody helped us, nobody wanted to. Anyway unfortunately, we left the bank at twelve o'clock not knowing if the ship, is the boat is still there, and we took a taxi, we rushed back and we came to the Greek



police because we had to verify if we have any money with us. We're not allowed to take money out of the country. So I didn't have any money because I didn't want the police to stop me. Anyway, when we came to the port, Piraeus, fortunately we saw the ship was still in in port, you know. So anyway we clear the issue with the police. We came down and my cousin who was about ten years my senior, he says, "I don't have any money to give you but just take these two bottles of cognac." [laughter] So I get on the ship with two bottles of cognac. However my meals were paid you know so I, we lived in big rooms there and then we started the trip to the States.

During the trip, one of the workers was African American, a very nice individual, and I feel sorry for him, so I gave him one of the bottles, because he was a pretty nice guy. And then farther down, I sold the other one for two bucks. I came out in New York and I—by the way my mother had a tailor make a silk white suit for me, you know for coming to the States—so I came out to this New York with my white suit, a white shirt, a red tie and the weather was lousy. It was raining [laughter]. I borrowed two bucks from a friend of mine. He had money he was going to meet his father in um, Bahamas, so he lent me two dollars. Anyway so I was coming out, honestly in retrospect I didn't know what I was doing, I don't know, I really ... the plan I had was to call a friend of mine who had migrated three years earlier and you know, to give me help. I saw, I was walking over there at the port and to this, I mean I look back now, and I say, "You know what, was I crazy?" [laughter] You know there was a lady, we were traveling together ... he [the friend] says, "Michael, somebody, a lady, is looking for you." I said, "I don't expect anybody." He said, "You know, there's the lady here." So he says, "Okay there she is. "The lady says to me, the other lady says to me, "Are you Michael?" I said, "Yes." She says your aunt from Pittsburgh asked me to come. "And I said, "I appreciate that, but I don't need any help. And she was really, she says to me, "Are you crazy? Where the hell are you going to go by yourself? "[laughter]. Fortunately, I followed her. Coming out from the, from the ... When I was coming out from the port there, a petite lady was sitting at the corner and she says to me, "Excuse me", she says to me in Greek, she says, "Did you travel with somebody by the name Michael Vlamis?" I said I recognized her, who she was, she was, she had left my town ten years earlier. Because when she left, I

was ten years old you know—and I said to her, “Would you recognize him if you see him?” She says, “No ... un, no.” I said “Eleni,” that's her name, “Eleni, this is Michael.” [laughter] She took me, I went with the lady to her house. And that night, this Eleni, my ... who left the town ten years earlier, she came with her husband and her brother, that's the brother, the person whom I was trying to call for help from the family, they took me to Coney Island. Well they had a convertible and uh, Mitchell, that's his name, Mitchell and I sit in the back and Lenny her husband is driving, and we were talking with Mitchell because Mitchell was about six years my senior and he came to the States in 1946. And I was asking him for advice, I said, “Mitchell, what do you think is nice to do in the States? Can I go to school?” And Mitchell said to me, he says, “I'm giving advice,” he says. He says to me, “The best thing to do is to become a priest,” [laughter] he says in the car, “A priest or a farmer”. [laughter] What the heck are you talking about? [laughter]

Anyway the following day, I don't know how it happened, a relative of my father's sister was living in Detroit and they were visiting New York. How they find out that I came there, I don't know, but they came to see me in the other lady's house, and we drove from there to outside of Pittsburgh, a small town called Langeloth, and to my, to my mother's relatives. I stayed there for two weeks. Fred and my cousin were working in Chicago. They came to see their mother who was in the hospital, and I came with him in Chicago and I'm still here. [laughter]

**Cohen** [Laughs] I guess I was wondering when you went to school, like when after you arrived here and moved to Chicago, like did you apply to college, here?

**Vlamis:** No, I didn't. They called me, they called me in the [US] Army uh, one month after the Korean War and I pretended I didn't speak English [laughter]. They gave me two years deferment and in two years, they call me and the first thing they said to me when I went downtown to [unintelligible] induction office, a sergeant was there, he looked at my paper, he said, “Don't tell me that you cannot speak English now because I don't believe it.” Anyway, so I went into the Army, I took basic training with a 101st Airborne Division in Kentucky and after four months, I was, got my orders to go to Germany and that time, the war, the Korean War was really uh, big and there were only seven people from the entire company

that went to Germany. I was one of them you know, who left for Germany. In Germany, I was, I disembarked on June 9 ... no, June 17<sup>th</sup>. That day, it was a big revolution in East Berlin and the Russians came in with the tanks. They killed about fifty people in Germany, it was in the morning and the flags, all the German flags, were half-mast because I think it was you know, everybody's expecting that there's a war coming up between Russia and the States. They went to a small warehouse that they ... we rushed into a small warehouse and they gave us rifles immediately. They say, "You gotta be on alert because this is a problem." We stayed there about three days and after three days, I would transfer down to Ulm<sup>20</sup>, Germany and I stayed there for eighteen months. And we were under constant alert, we were in the maneuvers almost every other week. And I believe July the same year, they signed the armistice in Korea, but the pressure did not stop, I mean especially in Germany because I was ... we were in West Germany and East Germany was under the Russians. So I served eighteen months, I came out on November 30<sup>th</sup> '54, and immediately I rushed to the University of Illinois and I signed up! [laughter]

**Cohen:** When you're doing basic training, was that at Fort Breckenridge I think, [i.e., or Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky?

**Vlamis:** Yes.

**Cohen:** What was it like because I would imagine that doing basic training with the elite 101st Airborne Division would have been very rigorous?

**Vlamis:** Well, it was very rigorous but the Airborne, the division was not active, that means they were not, we were not in the parachutes, or ranks you know. We were just the infantry under the 101st ... It was very very tough, very very tough because ... well, I didn't mind because I was very, very good physically and I endured everything we went through. We had in our company, we had the Army football team, all of them, and as a matter of fact I used to live with him in the same barracks—not with all of them but some of them. It didn't bother me at all, but it was very tough, you know. But we learned a lot, to learn how to protect ourselves, how to fight uh you know, the usual training. I don't know what they're doing today but we're talking about sixty-five years ago.

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<sup>20</sup> City in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, situated on the River Danube on the border with Bavaria.

**Cohen:** Is that where you learned how to use a recoilless rifle<sup>21</sup>?

**Vlamis:** Okay, yes, a recoilless rifle, yes, it's a big action, it's a cannon and it was discovered early in the World War II, it's a rifle that you can fire from any place and very easy to fire with a big shell you know, big shell. But the recoilless rifle you can, you can put it on a string and fire it and it doesn't move because all the power comes out from the back. If anybody's in the back, he's gone. You know, so I was in charge of that part of the company when I was in Germany and, literally, we were about uh, I don't know, I don't remember how many we had uh, how many rifles were in the company, probably not more than three because it's a really like a heavy weapons company you know, a part of the heavy weapons. And we had a group of four in the group, well trained and nobody said ever sat behind the rifle because the explosion you know, the power goes from the back. So we had a very, very severe—I shouldn't say severe—very strong, I mean good training in Germany. I don't know if I mentioned to you the one adventure we went, we walked for sixty miles, sixty miles during the night and no rest. The rest was only from after a few miles, we allowed to rest for ten minutes and the sergeant used to go around to make sure that the people, I mean the soldiers, wake up because they were so tired, they fell asleep the moment they lay down on the ground, they fall asleep. And that, that one was biggest we had. As a matter of fact, it was the entire army in Germany, about [300 000 troops] , the 7<sup>th</sup> Army that participate and we had an exhibition one night about how much, how the firepower of a company looks like. We had to use the live ammunition and we were shooting at this small, deserted town, a German town. Present was also GEN Ridgeway<sup>22</sup>, who came to Germany to call because he was in charge of the Korean War and after the armistice, he came to Germany. He was in charge of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army; he was a four-star general and I had the opportunity to see him, and you know, at least salute him. So then we every like every week, not every week but every other week, we were almost out,

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<sup>21</sup> A recoilless rifle, recoilless launcher or recoilless gun, sometimes abbreviated "RR" or "RCL" (for ReCoilLess)[1] is a type of lightweight artillery system or man-portable launcher that is designed to eject some form of counter mass such as propellant gas from the rear of the weapon at the moment of firing, creating forward thrust that counteracts most of the weapon's recoil. (Wikipedia)

<sup>22</sup> GEN Matthew Bunker Ridgeway, 1895-1993, was a senior officer in the United States Army, who served as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (1952–1953) and the 19th Chief of Staff of the United States Army (1953–1955). In 1950, he succeeded GEN Walker in command of the US Army in Korea, as Mr Vlamis states.

probably just outside the town for just walking you know something like that, but many, many times we were out in the Bavaria, because Ulm is in Bavaria and roaming all over the countryside.

**Cohen:** What was the like say strategic objective of being based in Ulm, that's near Czechoslovakia? Was it to guard--

**Vlomis:** Well, like it was to guard close to Germany. As a matter of fact that there was a place, I forgot the name, Hoch... I believe it's Hochenschein [sic]<sup>23</sup> or something like that. On one side was the church, was the Czechoslovakian artillery and the other side, were Americans and both of them were firing twenty-four hours a day, you know. Some people went to that that area; I did not go to that area. We had a strong a strong force there you know, and there were sometimes rumors that some GIs lost their orientation, and they end up in the Czechoslovakian part of the ... Germany, I mean *Czechoslovakian* part of the country. I don't know if it's true or not but this this would say a common rumor, you know, that you have to be careful when you're there not to disorient yourself ...

**Cohen:** And land up on the other side.

**Vlomis:** Yeah.

**Cohen:** When did you become an NCO? Did you train in the United States as a Non-Commissioned Officer or in Germany?

**Vlomis:** Oh, I went to school, they sent me to school, in January of 1954, Non-Commissioned Officer, and it's a six-week school and you know, it's up to you whether you're going to pursue a military career or not you know, yeah.

**Cohen:** So what was your role when you got to Ulm, like with your own personal role. Like what was your assignment when you were in Ulm, Germany?

**Vlomis:** My family was, I was in charge of ... We lived in the barrack—not barracks, but buildings and that used to be the German army. They're very very beautiful buildings. We had all kinds of amenities there: we had a pool room, we had a reading room, we had showers, we had everything. You know, here in the States we have nothing like that. We have just wooden barracks, you know. So anyway, I was in charge of ... not the platoon, lower [i.e., squad]h but about twelve people. The platoon leader was uh a regular Army [careerist], he made the Army

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<sup>23</sup> When reviewing transcript, Mr. Vlomis thinks it may have been Hofheim.

his ... I mean, he stayed in the Army for you know, for twenty years. He was in charge of the platoon. I was in charge of the squad.

**Cohen:** Oh the squad, okay. This is really more question of opinion than anything else. It seems to me that you saw firsthand the rise of Communism in Greece during World War II that it eventually led to the Civil War. You know when, we know that the Truman government had sent aid to the Greek government as well. I think you mentioned previously that once you immigrated to the United States, the Communists attempted to recruit you. So all in all what was your whole opinion about the Cold War or the war in Korea, the role of the US military? Like what did you think about all of this?

**Vlamis:** Well I consider myself fortunate to migrate to the States. I mean I got everything I love. I went to school under the GI Bill, you know no other country will offer me anything. Like Greece, certainly not Greece, the time I lived in Greece I experience nothing but anomalies, wars and dictatorship, civil wars, occupation you know, so when I came here, I was free. You know in Greece during the Metaxas dictatorship<sup>24</sup>, you were not free to express your ideas you know or try to better yourself you know. So I cannot complain. I have a good family; I have ten grandchildren and so ...

**Cohen:** It all worked out. Do you think, I was just wondering if you'd like to elaborate with your arrival in Germany on the day of the uprisings? Like what you were being briefed on at the time and you know, and how you and the others were, what you're expected to do once you were issued ammunition?

**Vlamis:** Well you know I said after we disembarked, they rushed us to a warehouse and most of the guys, most of the guys who I remember, they said, "What a luck to come here and start the war!" You know, nobody liked it there, but we were ... they warned us you know, the officers came to the warehouse and said. "We don't know. It might be war", you know. So it was not a good welcome to Germany. [Laughter]

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<sup>24</sup> Totalitarian regime which ruled Greece from 1936-1941 under the leadership of General Ioannis Metaxas, who came to power via a coup with the blessing of the King. He established a nationalist, ultra-reactionary state but remained neutral during the war until the Axis Occupation of 1941. He remains a controversial figure, with popularity among extreme Rightist factions in Greece today.

**Cohen:** No. Were you concerned when you were still doing basic training that you might be shipped to Korea?

**Vlamis:** Yes, I was concerned, yes, because I was during the Korean War, yeah. Nobody wanted to go to Korea, you know yeah. So I, however let me tell you something else, the training in Germany was worse than in Korea. I had a lot of people that they were in Korea and a lot of soldiers, they were in Korea and they came to Germany. Some of them volunteered to go back to Korea, I mean they said it was dangerous, but they didn't have the discipline that we had, you know. They ... I mean we, had the discipline in the hectic training that we received you know, the indoctrination and all that. And a few of them I do remember, they volunteered to go back to Korea. [Laughter]

**Cohen:** Did you have an opportunity to travel? Like did you have any free time and if so, did you have an opportunity to travel within Germany?

**Vlamis:** Yes, we used to go to Munich and uh, I went to Munich I think in nineteen ... in 1954, I believe it was during the Greek Easter. Because there is a Greek church there in Munich, so a friend of mine and I went to Munich and they would get three-day passes. We found out where the Greek church was, and we spend the other two days around Munich.

**Cohen:** Right. Yes. Sorry, I jumped in.

**Vlamis:** I travelled a lot in Bavaria, but I was always with exercises. We used to go to small towns all over, all over small towns. Of course, we didn't go to the big cities like a Munich for exercise, but we were up in the country, you know, small towns all over, I don't remember all of them. I took a twenty-day furlough, and I went to Greece and I took the train, the Oriental Express from Munich to Greece. We left Munich at twelve o'clock uh through the day and then at eight o'clock, we were in the border between Czechoslovakia, [Austria] and Yugoslavia—it's probably Slovenia now. And uh, in Austria, and something which remains within my mind: the train stopped exactly in the even border, like half of the train was in Yugoslavia and half of it was in Austria. The train that was in Austria at the depot was lively, it was really different. The one in Yugoslavia, at that time it's completely dark, I mean you feel like something happened, change in your life, because you can .... As a matter of fact while I was waiting there, to change crew, or rather group, I mean crew, people from the front of the train came out to the

back where we were, were lighter. Anyway, we travel overnight, and we got to Belgrade, the uh....

**Cohen:** Capital?

**Vlomis:** [Affirms] The capital and I think it was about twelve o'clock, midday, and I had with me a camera which I brought from Germany, from Germany and in front of the train I took a picture, outside. All of a sudden, I see about four or five policemen come over there, asking me about my camera or who... and they were talking, I don't know what they they're talking about, and they ask for the film, so I give them the film. And then friend of mine, who were traveling together, he said, "Mike, destroy the film don't give it to them," because as a matter of fact I had the pictures from maneuvers, airplanes um, maneuvers, and other maneuvers, and I took the film out, I exposed it and they were satisfied. They let me go. Now traveling from there to the border of Greece, it was just -- I mean you saw, you can feel it, how poor the country is. Soldiers, Yugoslavian soldiers were training with no shoes on, and we were amazed to see these things, and then we came to the border of Greece and they welcome the people. They welcome a group to Greece and our heart opened up. How shall I say? You felt better, you felt you're free, you know.

**Cohen:** Yeah, so were your parents, how did your parents feel about you living in the United States or, and then serving for the US Army?

**Vlomis:** As I said before, my father was here, he came back in 1927. And we had a substantial property because he bought it, good money and homes and all that. However when I left two years after, my entire family came to the States.

**Cohen:** Oh, okay they followed suit, they followed ...

**Vlomis:** Yes, so they followed. My parents spent the rest of their life here in the States.

**Cohen:** But it seems like you still have a lot of family and family property in Crete, that you've gone back to visit over the years

**Vlomis:** I did have a lot of property, but I thought the smart thing you did, is get rid of it, because ... So I sold everything, you know. Everything's here, my family's here you know, my kids, so there's no need for me to go back. I mean what am I gonna strive, you know, for what, right?

**Cohen:** You're right, your lives are here.



**Vlamis:** But the people don't like to work as they used to. I mean I have to find people to take care of the property and all that, so I sold everything.

**Cohen:** Yeah, just jumping back to the military, could you describe what a typical maneuver looked like?

**Vlamis:** Well the maneuvers for instance, uh the basic training, one of the most dangerous was—I forgot how they call it—that you have to crawl under barbed wire, and over you were machine guns firing over you, and you have to be careful not to raise your head you know, this is to train you how to fight in the front line you know, not to jump, yes it was .... We were behind a, hiding behind a little place and then we jump, all of us jump, I mean go over and start crawling. At the same time as we start crawling, the machine guns were firing. I have a two or three machine guns from the other side and you've got to be careful not to raise, you know you cannot raise your head, because you're gone. I mean the bullets probably were not too far from one. That's one of the, the most dangerous. Then the other thing is that you learn how to use the rifle you know, the rifle and the machine guns; how to fight, for instance hand-to-hand combat uh, the different ways of attacking or with bayonets, everything that ... how to kill your enemy. [Laughs]

**Cohen:** When you were based in Germany, did you notice that things were more peaceful in Europe after the signing of the 1953 Korean War Armistice [Agreement]? Like did the signing of the Korean War Armistice have an effect on easing tensions in Europe from what you saw, from your point of view?

**Vlamis:** Uh well, no it didn't make any difference. We had to be on the alert twenty-four hours a day and sometimes, I mean the training was a daily ritual. Sometimes we would go off in the field for a week or two weeks and then come back, but we were always on the alert, that you had to be careful because the Russians you know, were on the other side so we could not relax. I mean we didn't feel, wouldn't feel—we're not panicking or anything like that, you know. We have lectures, just prepare to be and to be a good soldier. Yeah, it was a learning experience because besides the heavy training—which I didn't mind the training because I was a very good, athletic you know—you meet with other people, you see where they are from, the different parts of the States, you know, different customs and not different language but different pronunciations. [Laughter]

**Cohen:** Do you think that helped ease your integration to the United States by meeting people as you're saying, from different parts of the country with different accents and customs?

**Vlamis:** Yes, I think yeah, yes, I think. I met good friends from all over the States you know, they're all good Americans: there were African-Americans, who live together because I think Truman integrated the army in 1948. So we had nobody that, we lived together you know. I had, my squad, I had two or three guys, I remember you know, the people from Puerto Rico very well. Very good, very good guys. I think it's a good idea you know, and we are we're a country, we're a country from all parts of the world.

**Cohen:** So there was like a a good camaraderie?

**Vlamis:** Yes certainly, yeah certainly.

**Cohen:** Let me think- is there anything else? So after you mentioned before that, after you were discharged you went right away to study at the University of Illinois?

**Vlamis:** Yes.

**Cohen:** And so what did you study, where did you start your career and where did when did you meet your wife what happened?

**Vlamis:** You know I started in electrical engineering and I got three day, three years at the University of Illinois and I got my diploma from IIT<sup>25</sup> because I got married, you know. So after that I worked for Motorola for about a year and a half and after that, I worked in a small company which produced electronic wave filters. This is [a [part] that discriminates the frequencies. At that time it was, it was infan—this technology was in infancy, so I worked there for seven years and we built all the Apollo programs (parts for the communication systems) that the number, the Apollo 11, [in which] we went to the moon<sup>26</sup>.

**Cohen:** Very impressive.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, we built seven, I designed seven parts that go into the radio for the computation radio you know, seven different parts. And then after that, I went to another company in Kansas City and everything that we produced, everything we did was military—not directly, it was about ten percent directly from the military, from Ohio because that's the place where all the military contracts

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<sup>25</sup> IIT – The Illinois Institute of Technology.

<sup>26</sup> The NASA spaceflight that first landed on the moon, July 21, 1969.

come out, you know. But everything, everything that we produced in the military and then the business with General Dynamics, Magnavox, ITT, and Garfield and also from foreign countries. One of the biggest customers was Israel because Israel bought a lot of military parts, you know; Israel, France, England and believe it or not, India. [laughter] Not to knock India. But I had a very good experience, I did business with Israel for forty years and I did business with a company called Tadiran, Tadiran. Are you familiar with it?

**Cohen:** I'm familiar but more for domestic use. I think they used to produce fridges and some other like kitchen, kitchen equipment.

**Vlams:** Probably, they probably did, I don't know I'm not involved with their commercial [side]. Everything was military and they were, as a matter of fact, in partnership with Slovenia fifty-fifty, but I believe now Tadiran has purchased Slovenia<sup>27</sup> a long time ago, so I also, there's some other companies there like. Anyway, after I went to another company, we continued the military communications and then I opened my own company here in Chicago, we came back. And we continued with the same product and the product was changing, progressively every every, uh with times. We produced parts for what they call walkie-talkie that was used in the 1990s. It was produced by ITT in Fort Wayne, Indiana and they come out to be very very good. They were actually, they were worried that the dust and the sand dust might effect, the performance of this radio, but it did not. It was a very, very good radio. So then I couldn't find anybody take over my business. My son didn't care about it, so I sold them to a company in Phoenix, Arizona you know, that they're familiar with the same kind of business. So I sold it.

**Cohen:** Yes, out of curiosity, did the radios use satellite in any way?

**Vlams:** Oh yes, yes.

**Cohen:** Because I was just reading a little bit about the Gulf War recently and they mentioned some of the new technologies, including I think the use of satellite phones for the first time or what became the GPS [Global Positioning Systems] for desert tracking, so I wondered how it related to the radios?

**Vlams:** Yeah, yeah, the company ITT, I don't know if it's still in existence within Fort Wayne Indiana, ITT—International Telephone and Telegraph—they produced

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<sup>27</sup> I.e., the Slovenian the US Company, Sylvania interests. Tadiran is a conglomerate.

what they call the SINCGARS program<sup>28</sup>, the SINCGARS program is that is what I told you before, the radios. Now uh, the funny thing was that the first contract was given out in 1985 and the [US Army] Signal Corps came two years after and they wanted a similar one, a radio but a little more advanced. They wrote the specifications, and everybody was allowed, every good company here in the States was allowed to bid on the contract, including Tadiran. [laughter]. Okay you know who got the contract?

**Cohen:** I think I do, yes. [laughs]

**Vlamis:** All the guys say I am the best. I supply parts for them, and the Congress remembered a law that this contract cannot be produced outside the States, so what Tadiran did. They came over here, they went to Gainesville, Florida, a university town and they, the town built a huge factory, 200,000 square feet in it's beautiful. And I think they still own the place, and they pay an annual rental, one dollar a year. [Laughter] It's a beautiful building and I'm sure they're still there. I don't know what they produce right now, because I've been away from all that stuff for ten years.

**Cohen:** Had you gone to visit Israel when you were working with Tadiran or were having other exchanges?

**Vlamis:** No I did not, unfortunately I did not. I had a rep that ... No, but I visited the head office in New York, the Tadiran head office in New York and I went there one time for a contract, that we would negotiate a contract. I didn't remember, I don't remember the name the gentleman I talked to but no, I didn't get to, but I would negotiate with his people in New York. However the parts were directly to Israel.

**Cohen:** So how many children do you have?

**Vlamis:** Four. I have three ladies and one son. My son George is a general counsel for, what's the name of the company?

**Kronfeld:** USG, USG.

**Vlamis:** US Gypsum, it's a mobile company. He's the counsel here in Chicago.

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<sup>28</sup> Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System (SINCGARS) is a Combat Net Radio (CNR) currently used by U.S. and allied military forces. The CNR network is designed around three systems: SINCGARS, the high frequency (HF) radio, and the SC tactical satellite (TACSAT). Each system has different capabilities and transmission characteristics. [Wikipedia]

**Cohen:** Oh that's neat. So maybe just um, kind of just a few reflections. I was wondering motivated you to write your memoir.

**Vlamis:** As I said in my preface, like that it dawned on me because, back in the '60s, I was walking one day down Jackson Boulevard [Chicago] and when I started, I was approaching Wabash [Ave]. It was November and cold, I was there in the corner waiting for the light to change, it was early light, early evening but it was dark November and I looked around. All of a sudden I said, "Oh my god what am I doing here! Look at the place I left you know, the place I left was like a paradise!" And then from there, I decided to write something but as I say in the book, every time I make an attempt uh, I have a family, have a business so often I, especially ... But back in the 2005 or 2006, I was playing golf with a friend of mine in Florida, and he was also a veteran, and we were talking about the war and well after I told him the atrocities and the uh, difficult times we went through the world he said to me, "Mike, you got to put that down on the paper." So I started writing the book you know, and people have read the book, some people like it a lot, they say that uh ... my memory is vivid.

**Cohen:** That's what I was noticing too. Very, very vivid.

**Vlamis:** The old events I...don't forget, but the current ones are gone [Laughter].

**Cohen:** Well you know, usually we ask the interviewees how did serving in the US [Armed] Forces affect your life afterward, or your personality afterward. So here I would ask you that, but I would also ask you how growing up under the occupation affected your life? Like what are some of the lessons you learned that you applied later on in your life?

**Vlamis:** The occupied, I mean the occupation was really that severe I mean I tried ... I had a goal to pursue, to finish high school and then go to higher education. However when the Germans came and occupied the island—no, from the day that the Greco-Italian war started in 1940, we stopped school, the doors closed so for nine months we didn't do nothing. The Germans came like, occupied in uh degrees in Greece and Crete in 1941 or May 1941. A month after that, they allow us to go back to school, but we had no places because here the [German] army was occupying the buildings you know, the high school buildings, the grammar school buildings which were quite accommodating structures. So we had to hold classes in a small area, warehouses, and things like that. Not only that, we had

one month to cover the entire material that we missed for nine months: it's impossible. So actually, we were shorted an entire year on learning, you know. And then, and then the other thing is that we were walking. We didn't have any high school in my town, so I have to walk seven and a half kilometers in the morning and seven and a half kilometers in the afternoon, which is really bad. Especially you know. I couldn't live, I didn't like to live, to stay in the town where the high school was. I don't know, I had my best friend there but just something, I didn't like that town. So I had it really rough and I think this made me, give me the courage to face life, face life. I said, "If I can do it in, during the occupation I can make it anyplace else." This is the explanation I can give you, you know.

**Cohen:** Yeah, like you could, you knew you had these strengths to do it.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, yeah.

**Cohen:** So at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, our mission is to collect the stories, the history of the Citizen Soldier, as well as make it accessible. So what does the term 'Citizen Soldier' mean to you? What do think of?

**Vlamis:** Well 'Citizen Soldier' means someone that has served the Army, in the Army you know. And like I said, to me, and I speak with our friends and friends I shared [service] with, I think I was fortunate to serve you know, fortunate to serve, not only the benefits that I got but you know, you see the world around you. You see different people, you learn, you know. I've seen in the Army good people and I've seen bad people, you know. And you learn how to cope with these situations, you know. No, I and all the friends that served with me, I mean that served in the Army, they're very, very good people. That's all that I'm thinking, you know ... That's it.

**Cohen:** Is there any question that I did not ask? Is there something that you would like to talk about that we didn't mention?

**Vlamis:** I don't know. I have to go through the book to find out. I just talked to you about the [General Ringel] and the situation in Greece.

**Cohen:** Oh, I did have one question that I forgot to ask about. I've forgotten his name, but you describe the leaving of the Wehrmacht commander at the end, and how people threw cans of him and he was saying, "I saved you from the Gestapo!" Did you witness that and what did you think about it?

**Vlamiis:**

Yes, yes. Okay, our town ... our town is by the shore there. Okay, the Germans had a big installation there. They built four big cannons to guard the entire port of Souda Bay, because that's international port. Anyway one soldier they called Schwarz, George Schwartz, I believe it was, anyway he came in the beginning and served about a couple months there and then he disappeared. He went to the town of Chania and he was trained and became, he came back he was a lieutenant. He was very nice with the people. Now our town did not, we had no executions in our town, they don't execute [anyone]. And in this guy, I believe he was Austrian. The Austrians were different than Germans distinctly. I mean, I mean you couldn't have talked politics with any one of them, but they were [different]. Now George Schwarz, they call him Yorgo, I believe, he took over the installation there, he was in charge of the entire two companies, and he was good. He was good with civilians there was not ... no killings or anything against the civilians.

Now one time we had the one guerilla which I call Styfnos, that he was wild. And he, one time he stopped, he was like I mean as a matter of fact, he didn't follow any instructions from the headquarters of the guerrillas, because the guerillas, they were stationed up in the mountains, you know. Well, he was roaming the countryside. So one day, he saw a German with a few mules and the mules was loaded with water because the Germans used to come from uphill down to get some water. Anyway in one isolated place, he jumped from the side of a street, a deserted street, against the German you know, he pointed the machine gun at the German. The German was an old man because the Germans were not all good, that was the end [of the war]. There were a lot of Germans, that they were advanced in age you...but not the original—with the first occupiers, they were the crack troops you know. But after that, some of them, the ones that were advanced in age, they gave them some kind of different chores. And this guy was bringing the water to their base and this Styfnos attempted to talk him into surrender, but he did not, so he shot him. He shot him and he dumped him over the bridge, in a small bridge, where there was a lot of vegetation. Well, the Germans discovered the body after a couple of days and the Gestapo came to town to investigate, and there were a range of arrests, about ten people for execution. Now this guy George [Schwartz] who was in charge of my hometown,

he stepped in and he told the Gestapo that none, no people from this town were involved and he saved the town. Otherwise we would have had up to ten executions, see? So everybody liked the guy, you know. But when they were leaving in the town, after they surrendered to the British, they started they started throwing some cans at his side and he turned around, and he said, "I saved you from the Gestapo!" So yeah ...

**Cohen:** That's true, yeah. The other thing that you mentioned in the book that I don't think you spoke of was when you and your friend went to visit ... I believe, no, not your brother ... to visit somebody up in the mountains, quite high up and I think like when you go out there, they told you to leave because they were expecting an attack?

**Vlamis:** Yes, like I told you before, the headquarters of the guerillas, you know, were up in the weapon of mountains. So a friend of mine told me one day that he's going up in the mountains to bring some clothes to his friend, to his brother, because his brother was serving with the guerillas. And I said, "Okay." I was about thirteen or fourteen years old, to go to see the Antartes<sup>29</sup>, something big you know? So I said, "I'll come with you", and I told my father, I said, "I'm gonna go visit some relatives." We had some relatives up in the mountains, but my father didn't believe me, and he suspected what I was gonna do. Because they were relatives but not close relatives, you know? [Laughter] Anyway, so we plan to meet on Sunday morning, Sunday, in a small garden and an orchard, and all of a sudden, we met there and there's a guy here, he came to give us some ammunition to bring up to the Antartes, to the guerrillas. I didn't expect that, because we had to pass about three small towns, villages, to get clear of the Germans. But I have no choice. So okay we took the ammunition, and we went through small villages, through the woods and all, that until we were clear, and we went to these relative that I was talking of before... to get some water because it would probably about two hours. And after that, we told him where we want to go, and he explained to us how to get there and we left. And we left

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<sup>29</sup> *Antartes*, or Andartes literally 'guerillas' is a word dates back to the Ottoman period. *Andartiki* – 'guerrilla warfare.' The Antartes of World War II, irrespective of their political proclivities, risked their lives to fight the Germans.



this relative's house and we walked through the mountains with all kinds of brambles ... I mean, and we reached a small house.

In the small house, there were four armed men which were also guerrillas and they were sitting over there, cleaning their weapons and all that, and we asked him, I said, "We got to go to the base". So after we had some water and a little rest we started going to the base, the main base, and we could not follow, we could not really keep up with them because they were mountain people, they are experienced in how to negotiate this terrain. Anyway we got to this base and we see all the guerrillas sitting around the sun and all that, except the front line. He, my friend's brother, who is in the front line, so they told us who, where he was. We want to see him go and give him the package of clothing and they were on the alert because they're expecting Germans to come out to attack. And he told him, he says, "You'd better get back as soon as possible. Run!" Now going to that base, it took us six hours; back it took us three hours. We were running and flying because I believe the curfew occurred; we had to get back home before the curfew. Now I don't know, I do not remember if there was any general excursions at that time or not, but there was before that. Before that was a big battle, you know.

**Cohen:** Yeah.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, there were groups, I mean like I said before, there were guerrilla groups all over the island. However every vicinity had different groups. In our vicinity, all the guerillas were left wing; all the other ones were right wing, and they were supported by the British, and they used to bring money and ammunition from the British, you know?

**Cohen:** So when you see the other ones, do you mean elsewhere in Crete or do you mean elsewhere in the mainland? Like you said, "the guerillas near me were left wing, but the others were right-wing". So do you mean other groups on Crete itself?

**Vlamis:** Yeah, the right wing, who [were] called EOK; EOK means the National Organization of Crete, you know. The left wing was EAM<sup>30</sup> [Ethnikón Apeleftherotikón Métopon], with a Greek-Front Liberation front, you know. Now they never, they never get together, they never fought together. There was the problem that uh, EAM<sup>31</sup> was a front, but they were guided by the Communist country, I mean, party you know, and eventually... And nobody realizes until the civil war broke out. Some people didn't realize that they were really guided by the Communists you know, so even during the civil war<sup>32</sup> there were places left and right. As a matter of fact there's one, two left wing guerrillas that they were up in the mountains, after the end of the civil war for forty-five years.

**Cohen:** Forty-five years!

**Vlamis:** Forty-five years yeah, thirty-five years and the Greek government gave them amnesty. I believe uh, I don't remember when, but they were [there] thirty-five years, yeah ...

**Cohen:** Does does the name *Antartes*, I'm sorry if I'm not saying it correctly ... Does that simply mean *guerrilla* or did it refer to like specific organizations?

**Vlamis:** Well no, *Antartes* means —fighting you know, guerillas, you know. Yeah, now it's these groups belong to ... In the mainland Greece were all kinds of organizations you know, everybody who they had the Zahariadis the secretary of the Communist Party of Greece, and then they had the Zahariadis[?], you know. So always they never unify, they were fighting among themselves also, you know. Yeah, only in one event and one event where the left wing and the right wing fought together. There was a bridge, (bridge in mainland Greece a mainland bridge, and with the help of the British commandos who were in Greece, organized to blow up the bridge. And that is a big event because that bridge was a bridge that they knew that Germans had to use to bring to bring supplies down to Crete—I mean to (from) mainland, [and] to Crete—and that's the only time

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<sup>30</sup> EAM, *Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo*, was the largest Greek resistance organization. Founded in 1941, composed of a blanket of Left groups, with a central role allotted to the KKE, Communist Party of Greece. Signed a non-aggression pact with the much smaller Rightist EOK in 1943 and 1944.

<sup>31</sup> See above.

<sup>32</sup> According to Encyclopedia Britannica, in there was a second Communist rebellion in Greece from 1946-1949. This only ended with the US support of Greek forces, crushing rebels in the mountainous interior.

they blew out the bridge successfully and then they made their songs after that you know about this event. But never again.

**Cohen:** That was the end of it, huh? Do you have anything more to add that comes to mind right now? I think I am out of questions, or does Georgia [i.e., Maria] think that you should talk about something that was not covered yet?

**Vlomis:** Uh not really right now off the bat, but if you want, I'll see, I'm gonna dig my memory to see if I, or with the book or what, if we forgot something important, and I can send you an email..

**Cohen:** Then we could...Okay yeah so really I very much appreciate it and I enjoyed meeting you and I agree it's an important story to tell. I mean World War II is vast and not all of us know about what happened, where and I appreciate that and of course your service to the United States. I just would like to in this case express my appreciation on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library and as mentioned before, we will mail you a challenge coin, you know, as a as an expression of our support So I'll put this in the mail

**Vlomis:** Do you find the book interesting?

**Cohen:** Yes, I read the book and the book is here and I will give it to the woman who does processing and cataloging, and it will become part of our collection.

**Vlomis:** Well, I'm glad to help. Like I said, when you write this, you sit down and thinking you know, and your subconscious, it comes from the experience you know. Now I might have forgot something more important to discuss. So while I look at, I'll glance the book and then see if I can find something.

**Cohen:** I think, okay and we will also send you this, we can send you the files of the interviews right now, I can share them. Unfortunately, the sound of the other one is a bit funny when I'm talking but okay, and the second thing is that in time we will produce a transcript of the interviews and send them to you for your review, so that's another way of noticing if something important is missing.

**Vlomis:** Okay. One thing that I don't know if it's pertinent to what ... is covered. One thing is fishing, fishing with the Germans [laughter] You know, the Germans, well fishing was one of the best sources of food in my town by the sea. But the Germans disallowed any fishing during the night, because we used to go fishing, harpooning at night. So around 1943, we approached the Germans and said, "You want to [let us], can we go fishing?" Because fishing at that time used a

strong light. They say, "Okay, but what you have to share. It is fifty-fifty," So we have no choice, so anyway my father—he's not a fisherman but he's an expert in fishing—so we used to go, so we took a couple Germans and one German at one time, and we went fishing and split the catch. But my father didn't like the idea, to have somebody split up the fish so he decided to go by himself. I mean without a guy, without a guard. So what we did, I went along with him and his oar man and this guy was, or my father was, in the front with the light and fishing now. However, we had to pass a guard, a German guard that was guarding one of the—I have... a picture, one of the cannons—and he's ... and we were, this was about six o'clock, it was not dark yet but we were planning to pass the guard and go around the cove. In the back, there was no Germans at night to stop us fishing, but we passed the guard and he stopped he stopped us. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "We are going fishing." And goes, "Where is your escort?" Of course this was communication for Greek and German sign language and the guy who's with the oars, he says, "We're going to pick her up, pick her up, pick her up!" And *kamerad* in German, it means friend— "Yeah, we're gonna pick up a *kamerad*." Anyway, after a while the German realized that we're not gonna pick up anybody: "Okay, I'll let you go, but when you come back you bring me a good fish." Yes. We go around the cove and the dark came up. We appreciated it; it was a really really good night. We had almost a bucket full of big fish, prize fishes. Now going back, we didn't go through the same route. We headed out to the open sea and come down to house to avoid the guard. But anyway, so we came back in the boat ... the same. We took the—we're talking about three o'clock in the morning—we took the fish to our house. We had a café, a cafe also, [we enter] from the back door and we put the thing on the floor, the fish, and the doors were locked but the lights were on inside, then we were splitting the fish. All of a sudden, there's a strong—I don't know if you read that—the strong pound the door and we opened the door. It is uh, August. August was a gentleman, I mean he was so bad, a big guy at six foot five inches, always drunk and always mishandling his own people and also the civilians. He comes here; he couldn't stand on his feet; he reaches down, he picks up the biggest, the largest fish: "This is for me." He's walking away. [Laughter] And he's living in the house one block down from ours you know, because the Germans

used to live, occupy their civilian homes. Fortunately, they did not occupy our house, I don't know why because we have a very empty space, but they did not.

**Cohen:** Yeah, that's lucky.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, I know yeah. So I'll look and see if I can, if I forgot anything important. Any questions, any other questions?

**Cohen:** I think that's all my questions, but it was a pleasure and thank you, thank you.

**Vlamis:** Thank you okay, thank you very much. Do you want another interview or was you satisfied?

**Cohen:** You know, I think it's good, in a certain way, one cannot do justice to everybody, you know. Because we, there's a certain, let's say a degree of *push* that we should interview many different people etc. So I'm sorry if you know, so in a way it's a bit circumscribed and I'm sorry about that, but on the other hand, I think you did speak of a lot that would give a person a very good picture of what it was like, both during the occupation as well as in the [US] service. So the other thing maybe that I would maybe ask, is that if you wish to share scans of photos, like not the photos themselves, we would add them to the webpage.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, I have more pictures, pictures from a book published a long time ago. I think I still have the book, but I have to dig in ... a lot, a lot of information.

**Cohen:** I think, the photos are, unless it's your own personal photos, we wouldn't have permission to use them, and even from your own personal ones, we would need you to sign a deed of gift that you're donating the digital images of the photos, so if there are some that you feel would be, that there are reflections of what was told during the interview, that would be good, and I'll describe it more in an email.

**Vlamis:** Well of course the other ones are not published, you don't ... I'll get those.

**Cohen:** So unpublished is good because otherwise we have problems with copyright, but if they're your own photos then we would request your permission.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, I'll see what I can do, okay.

**Cohen:** That's okay yeah, oh okay, then so would you like me to share the videos, the recordings, the art, you know the video recordings, to share them to you even before we send the transcripts, so you can listen to them and so on?

**Vlamis:** Sure.

**Cohen:** Okay yeah thanks, thanks really, thanks again and we'll be in touch.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, thanks. It was a pleasure.

**Cohen:** It was a pleasure.

**Vlamis:** You know, I told you about the [SS] *Tanais* event? The *Tanais* disaster, that they torpedo the ship ...

**Cohen:** That was carrying the Jews that were, and the Italian prisoners that ...

**Vlamis:** They were Italian, Italian and Jewish, prisoners and Greeks. I discussed this with Mr. Cohen, [who] I believe is from Greece, but he now lives here in the States. Do you know him by any chance?

**Cohen:** I'm originally from Canada and about four years ago, I married my husband who's from Chicago, or Skokie in particular, yeah. Maybe, I'll meet him.

**Vlamis:** Yeah, he gives a lecture about the war from time to time and I went to one of his lectures, and after the lecture I said, "I have a story that probably" —oh, his lectures are about what the Germans did to the Jewish community in Greece.

**Cohen:** What is his first name his first name? His first name?

**Vlamis:** I think I can find the name; I don't remember. He lectured about the atrocities and then I told him about the event. He said, "I know that it's about the [SS] *Tanais*", the *Tanais* was the name of the ship, you know.

**Cohen:** I don't know enough but it's a sad history. I remember once seeing a documentary film on the Jews of Rodos [Rhodes] you know, as well how ...

**Vlamis:** No the other thing that, because of the Jewish ... But we had a very good relation, event went to school here with a friend of mine, at IIT, we were together here in Kansas City, I don't know if he's still alive... I have, like I said, good relations.

**Cohen:** And to tell the truth, I find it so interesting that you ended up being at the port of Tel Aviv and Jaffa for during the War of Independence in 1948. [Laughs]

**Vlamis:** Well, I never been there ...

**Cohen:** But the ship was close, yeah ....

**Vlamis:** Yeah. Like I told you, my business ... I was alone and so it had nothing to do with my business ...

**Cohen:** No, no I know, I realize that. Okay then to take care now, take care.

**Vlamis:** Thank you, nice seeing you again.

**Cohen:** Nice seeing you!

**Vlamis:** Okay, if I omit something, I'll send you an email.

**Cohen:** Yes, that would be good, that would be good thank you, thank you.

**Vlamiš:** Thank you, I enjoyed it.

**Cohen:** Yeah, I enjoyed it too.

**Vlamiš:** Thank you, bye-bye.

**Cohen:** Bye bye.

**End of interview**