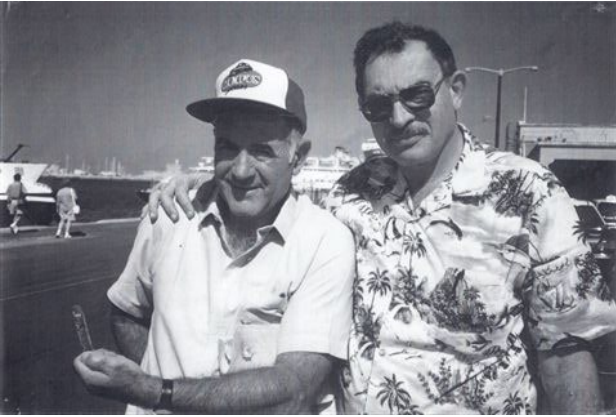


## Sami Modiano and his Mezuzah in 1997

by Jo Mallel



Sami Modiano and Jo Mallel

One may ask: "Why did I choose to speak about Sami Modiano, now, in 2013?"

For the past few years, I have seen a number of newspapers and tv's interviewing him and now he has written a book in Italian about his experience of the Holocaust.

He and Jakitou Hasson, who passed away a few years ago here in Cape Town, were the youngest survivors from Rhodes. Sami is an eyewitness of the past and a hero of the history of the Jews of Rhodes.

Sami is an interesting character. I have known him for many years, as I met him when I used to go to Rhodes before even the first museum was created by Aron Hasson.

Why do I say he is a character? As we say in Ladino, he is a '*cavesa dura*'. (hard head - obstinate). When I used to ask him about the Holocaust, he would never answer. All that he was prepared to do, was to tell us the names of the people who used to live in the houses or shops that we passed when we walked in the Old City... *esty morava aki* (so-and-so used to live here) ... *in frenty avia esti ki vindia laz frutas* (the other one used to sell fruit) ... and that is all .... never a word about the deportation ....

During my trip in July 1997 with my late wife Nicole, I spoke to Sami again and I begged him to talk ... "*Sami, azi mi plaziar dimi koualou ci passo* (Sami, do me a favour, you must tell me what happened). *mostra me.... douspouz di ti no ay digounos ki va a kontar* (who is going to tell the stories after you?) *Violetta Finz mi dichou dimanda li dili ki yo ti dichi di dimadarli*" (Violetta Finz told me to ask you to show me around and tell your story).

He replied: "*ti lo vou azer par ti solo et no mi dimada ouna otra vez...*" (ok, i will do it for you and don't ask me again.) I thanked him and we made an appointment for the following day at 9am.

I went to his house with Rose Denti's husband, Dennis Bason. Sami's wife, Selma, told me that I was very lucky, this is unique as he had never agreed to that with anyone before. I was thrilled and honoured. I was ready with my 8m video camera, he did not object at all and I had the privilege of filming him from the beginning to the end. He explained the whole story. I think he has forgotten about that film. No other tv or newsman has that report, done on that day of July 1997. It was exactly 52 years after his deportation.

Sami lives a few minutes from "*la calle ancha*", where the Holocaust Memorial was dedicated on June 23, 2002. From the "*Square of the Martyred Jews*", he explained the bombardment they suffered in the Old City by the Allies. We walked past the Mandraki towards the "Gate of Amboise", where the former Italian Airforce command center was situated. The Jews were held there for 3 days prior to their deportation. From there, we walked to his parent's house which had been in a wealthy area at the time. He explained that when he came back for the first time in 1950, there were people living there and they returned the house to him. He gave all the furniture to the late Mrs. Soulam, a cousin of his.

After the war, Sami left for the Belgian Congo where he had family. He went into business with Jakitou in Kamina, in Katanga Province. In 1955, a Greek guy that Sami knew, made him an offer to buy his house in Rhodes. He accepted and the deal was done. Since 1960, Sami spends 5 months a year in Rhodes. The last time he visited the house was in 1972, and he swore never to go again. He was 13 years old when he was deported. Sami told us that from the time he sold the house, there were 3 different owners.

Arriving next to his house, in 1997, he had tears in his eyes. I could see his face changing, he was very sad. One can imagine the film going on in his mind. I asked him: "*Sami, staz bien?*" (are you ok?) ...no reply. He was as white as a sheet. Then, something strange happened ... we are eyewitnesses.....from 1950 until this day in 1997, the house had always been empty. Before being able to access the entrance, we had to fight our way through the overgrowth. Once inside, we had to be careful as most of the house was a very large, wooden structure. We went into the main lounge. He could not stop crying, to the point that I, myself, was "*tchouradou*" (crying).

He explained that he was born in that house and showed us around. I left him for a few minutes and went to film other parts of the house. Suddenly I saw something on the door and went to have a closer look. I found a mezuzah!! I shouted: "*Sami, vienii aki presto ...mera koualoutoupi*" (Sami, come here quickly, look what I found).

He could not believe his eyes!!!! *Lagrimas* (crying) He told us that this mezuzah was placed there on the day of his birth, 66 years ago. On the day that they were evacuated from their homes, his father gave him the blessing, at that mezuzah!!

For me, it was an amazing experience to be part of something like this. Here was this man whose entire family had been murdered and all these years later, he finds this important link to his parents. I managed with difficulty to take the mezuzah off the doorpost and gave it to him. One cannot explain this sensation. It reminded me of my father in Elisabethville, giving me the blessing before travelling, or for other special occasions.

That was the first surprise. When we left through the back door, the yard was covered with debris. I started to clear some of the debris and....second surprise!!! After 66 years, I found a small Italian book that used to belong to Sami's sister who was deported and perished in the camp. Sami could not talk any more. He was looking and looking at these two items in disbelief.

On the way back, we stopped again at the former Airforce command and walked to the port exactly the same way that 1, 604 Jewish Rhodesis did on the 23rd of July 1944. As we got to the port, he showed us exactly where the 3 boats were and then told us the story up to the day of their arrival in Auschwitz. Well, since that day, he has opened his history to the world and, I repeat, he is a hero of the history of *La Juderia di Rhodis*.

Sami told me: "without you, I would never have had such a memorable, unforgettable day."

I found myself honored to be part of Sami Modiano's story in my way.

Jo Mallel  
Cape Town  
15 June 2013