MEMORIES FROM WORLD WAR II, CRETE

Antonis Fiotakis interviewed by Eugenia Moraitis

Transcript from SBS Radio's Greek Language Program, May 2005

This is a transcript of an interview broadcast on the Greek program of SBS Radio on the 19th of May 2005.

The interview was conducted in Greek by Eugenia Moraitis, Executive Producer SBS Radio Melbourne

Eugenia Moraitis:
Greeks and Australians all over the world are celebrating the anniversary of the famous Battle of Crete, which played a critical role in changing history in the Balkans, Europe and the world. The Australians, the New Zealanders and the British fought alongside the Greeks against the Nazi occupation with heroism and sacrifice. Cretan organisations everywhere, including Australia, are paying tribute again to all those who sacrificed their lives for freedom.

A humble war veteran from Crete, who now lives with his family in picturesque Tasmania, is sharing with us today some of his memories of the war. His name is Antonis Fiotakis.

Antonis Fiotakis:
I have so many memories...unfortunately. I was born in Paliohora in the province of Selinou. In those days the unforgettable army officer, Arhontakis Antonis, invited the people of my village to go to the city of Hania and help the Resistance. But as soon as we left Kandanos and reached a village called Floria, we heard motorbikes approaching. We all fell down to hide on both sides of the road. The Germans had arrived on their motorbikes and went into the cafeteria. We all knew the cafeteria only had one door. One of us suggested we could seal the door and throw bee hives inside from the ceiling. The others did not agree and we ended up removing the tiles of the roof and throwing hand grenades instead. However, the hand grenades were old and they did not explode. So, we finally threw the bee hives inside and the Germans came out. As soon as they stepped out we killed them all. There were 30 Germans.

Eugenia Moraitis:
How many were on your side?

Antonis Fiotakis:
I suppose we were about 300 hundred. Some of us had guns, others did not. Later we celebrated our success and we got their guns… We continued walking towards Hania. The next day we saw about 250 Germans on motorbikes. We hid behind the bushes on the side of the road. The Germans were heavily armed and we were not, so we decided to return back to our homes. We could not communicate with Hania. All communications were cut by the Germans.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Did you lose anybody from your side?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes, we lost one policeman and two civilians. I think maybe four in total, all of them Cretans from the province of Selinou. When the Germans went through Kandanos, the officer who was leading them was the one who lead the Germans in the occupation of Crete.

Later, Germany had decided to stop the advance into Crete. However, he had requested Hitler send more troops and give him one more day. So, as he was passing through the shopping centre of Kandanos, an old man called up on him to stop. The German did not stop and the old man fired on him. The German officer fell on the ground injured but not dead. I think his name was Schmelling… he was a high ranking officer in the German army. After that the Germans were entering homes in Paliohora …looking for people (to kill).

During the following week, some Australians arrived from Hania. They were walking in the villages asking for help. My family collected about 10 Australians and New Zealanders to look after them.

Eugenia Moraitis:
What do you remember about the Australian soldiers and the other Allies?

Antonis Fiotakis:
They were very good people. There was one from Melbourne. I met him in Melbourne later when I arrived in Australia.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Do you remember his name? What was his name?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Tom String. He belonged to the RSL Club of Melbourne.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Is he alive now?

Antonis Fiotakis:
I do not know. He was elderly. I do not know if he is alive. I never saw him again.

Eugenia Moraitis:
How old were you during the war?

Antonis Fiotakis:
I was 18 years old.

Eugenia Moraitis:
A young boy!

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes!

Eugenia Moraitis:
How old were you when you arrived in Australia?

Antonis Fiotakis:
I think I came to Australia when I was 32 years old.

Eugenia Moraitis:
What did the Australians and New Zealanders say?

Antonis Fiotakis:
When they saw me in Melbourne, they thanked me very much for what I had done for them in Crete and invited me to the RSL Club in Collins Street Melbourne. We had a great time there. They also gave me a certificate to be special guest in any RSL Club.

Eugenia Moraitis:
What else do you remember from the war days and the German occupation?

Antonis Fiotakis:
One day my father told me to go to Paliohora and do some shopping. He could see difficult days coming ahead and so he gave me money and asked me to buy some clothes and shoes and other necessities. As I was entering Paliohora, I saw a Gestapo officer. He was speaking Greek. He had received word that I was hiding Australians.

He arrested me and threw me into gaol. There he beat me every day for a week asking me where I was hiding the Australians. I was unable to stand on my two feet (because of the repeated beatings). Then they transferred me to the office of the Greek subdivision which the Germans were using temporarily. There, I met a Greek officer. He was very good. His name was Malindretos. He was from Sfakia. I told him that I was hiding Australians and I asked him if hiding Australians in my home was bad. He replied no my child. Do not be afraid. ...I cannot ... I cannot speak... ... (Losing his voice)

Eugenia Moraitis:
Mr. Antonis, I understand that with all these memories you have become emotional...

Antonis Fiotakis:
I am unable to speak....You see... I still remember vividly the beatings I suffered... they had ruined me....

Eugenia Moraitis:
What they were beating you with?

Antonis Fiotakis:
They had a long plastic club and they were beating me continuously with that. They were holding the gun to my head and they were demanding I reveal where I was hiding the Australians. I did not tell them.

Malindretos told me not to be afraid. He told me that if he found that the Germans were planning to shoot me dead, he would take me away to a safe place. The same night, I do not know what time it was, Malindretos came late. He jumped on the German guard from behind, disarmed him and tied him on the door of my cell. He grabbed me and we disappeared into the sea.

Eugenia Moraitis:
He saved you?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes! He saved me. Then we left Paliohora but the Germans did not find us. We went to Koustogeraho. There we found an outpost. The British had this outpost with a wireless. From there, the Greek army officer left for the Middle East.

When the war ended, I was conscripted and sent to Souda. There I found again the same officer, Malindretos, who had saved me. He was very

happy and I was very happy. Malindretos!... I cannot recall his first name....

Eugenia Moraitis:
Did you say he was from Sfakia?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes! He was from Sfakia!

Eugenia Moraitis:
You said you were hiding Australians in your home...

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes. We always had at least 3 Australians in my home, hiding them from the Germans. One time, however, we collected about 40 Australians and we took them to a promontory called Krios. There was waiting a Greek Captain. He would go to Hania to organise a ship to take all of us to Africa. We brought to him about 30 to 35 Australians. With us was someone called Sergentanis Antonis. I also remember that my father was going from door to door collecting food to feed the Australians.

Another day, I remember a German war plane crashed on to the sea (near my village). The Germans on board survived and they informed their people in Paliohora. Pariohora is 7 to 8 kilometres away by foot. A young lady in Paliohora immediately sent word to us that the plane had crashed and there would be other Germans coming to pick up the survivors. It was 6pm and together, with my unforgettable brother Dimitris, another boy and Antonis Sergenis, the so called kavros, we left to move the Australians and New Zealanders out.

We walked all night with the Australians and the New Zealanders. One New Zealander was walking bare foot. He could not continue and stopped in Koustogeraho. Later, some other people took the Australians and the New Zealanders to Preveli, the monastery of Preveli. You must have heard about Preveli, it is widely known. There was a British monk there and so we sent them on their way to the Middle East. During the German occupation I secretly accompanied many Australians and New Zealanders to Preveli to be sent to Middle East and be safe there.

Eugenia Moraitis:
When you were hiding Australians and New Zealanders in your home, what did they say to you?

Antonis Fiotakis:
We could not understand their language very well, but communicated with me sufficiently. They were very good people. One of the New Zealanders was called Mark MacLaren. Mark was going around to the shopkeepers asking them to give us food (to feed the Australians) and he would pay them once he returned to his country, New Zealand. He told us that his father had large herds of sheep and cattle in New Zealand. He invited us to go to New Zealand to be his guests after the war.

One day we were in Koundoura, a village near Paliohora. I was sleeping outside at night with my shotgun at my side because I was afraid of the Germans. My older brother Dimitris had cooked a meal and we had Mark the New Zealander with us. In the morning, I walked to the house to eat with my brother and Mark. I was carrying my gun and the army coat. I put my gun on the clothes hanger and on top I placed my coat so that it could not be seen.

While we were eating we heard steps. There were two German soldiers. Mark, who had learnt Greek well said: "Do not be afraid, I am a commando. If there are only 2 Germans, I will clean them up". On the wall, some brown onions were hanging. The Germans saw them and were asking us for the onions in Greek "kremmydes", "kremmydes". My brother Dimitris got up and gave them the onions and they left. Luckily.

Eugenia Moraitis:
So you were saved…

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes we were saved.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Did you have enough food during the war?

Antonis Fiotakis:
My family yes, because my father was well-off. We had land in Koundoura and we used to cultivate it. We had ample bread and oil.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Did you give some to the Australians?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes. We were giving food to the Australians, the New Zealanders and our relatives, who were leaving the cities (Hania) and moving into the villages. We never sat down to have dinner by ourselves.

Eugenia Moraitis:
You were sharing your food.

Antonis Fiotakis:
Yes

Eugenia Moraitis:
You said you were only 18 years old. Did you know anything about Australia and New Zealand?

Antonis Fiotakis:
I had heard about Australia from my mother. She had a brother living in Australia. I think he arrived in Australia in 1918.

Eugenia Moraitis:
I noticed that during our conversation, a little earlier, you lost your breath and could not speak…

Antonis Fiotakis:
When Malindretos moved out of gaol, my voice was lost…. Unfortunately!…. (crying) The beatings I suffered…. I will never forget it… I cannot speak… I will never forget…never!…

Eugenia Moraitis:
Are you still hearting? Were you left with psychological scars?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Sure, no doubt… But remember that it was Greece who humiliated Hitler for the first time. In Greece he lost the very best of his army… the parachutists.

Eugenia Moraitis:
What else do you remember from the Australians and New Zealanders?

Antonis Fiotakis:
I will never forget them. They were brave! They had guts! They had no fear of dying!

Eugenia Moraitis:
If the Australians and New Zealanders were not there with you, would the Greeks be able to cope?

Antonis Fiotakis:
We could not, because the Cretan Division had been sent to Albania at that time. We had some newly conscripted soldiers from the mainland of Greece who had only ten days of army training. They did not even have shot-guns to give them except for some very few old ones, nothing else.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Do you believe that if the Australians were not there, the Cretan casualties would be far greater?

Antonis Fiotakis:
Far greater. The Germans would have taken Crete with no difficulty at all.

Eugenia Moraitis:
Mr Antonis, thank you very much for sharing your war memories with us.

Antonis Fiotakis:
I thank you very much, Eugenia, and I hope we can speak again...

Eugenia Moraitis:
You have been listening to parts of an extensive interview conducted by Eugenia Moraitis, Executive Producer SBS Radio Melbourne, with War Veteran, Mr. Antonis Fiotakis, who now lives in Tasmania, about the role of Australians and New Zealanders during the Second World War on the island of Crete.

END