

**The Autobiographies of
Betty and Louis Cassorla**

as told to Albert Fried-Cassorla

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Betty's Autobiography: Ancestors Through Age 9



**The Autobiography of
Betty Cassorla (nee Betty Camhi)**

as told to Albert Fried-Cassorla

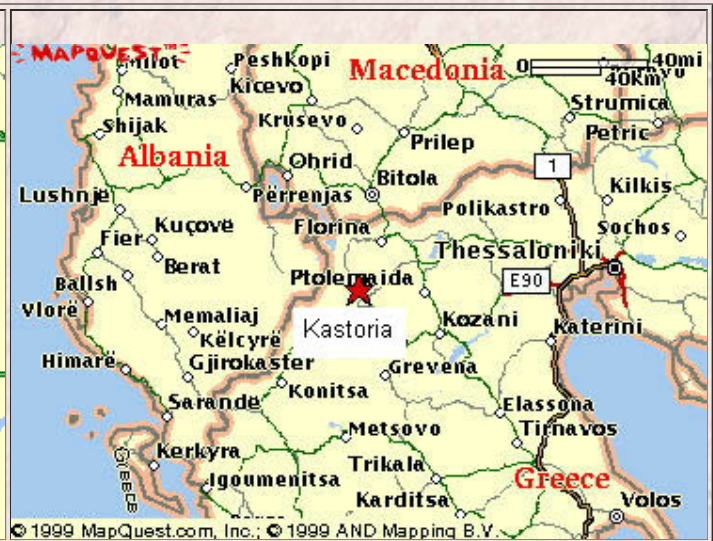
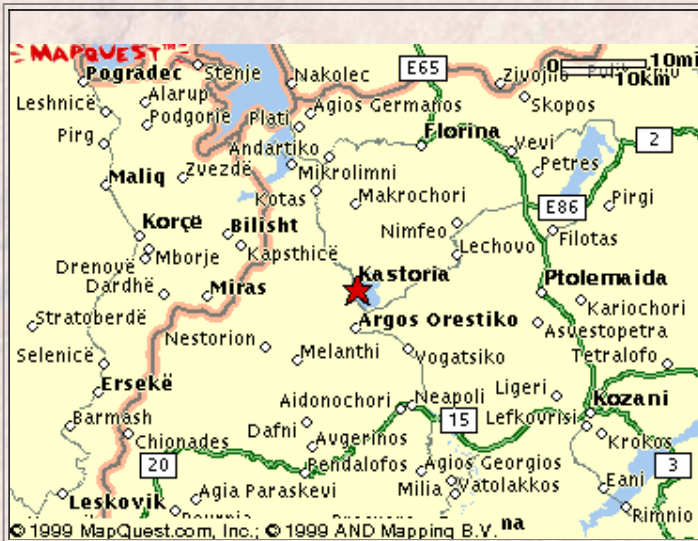
The Lower East Side Years

**My parents' histories and
my story from birth to age 5**

1922 - 1927

In the words of Betty Cassorla (nee Camhi):

My parents emigrated from Kastoria, Greece in the year 1910. My father was born in Monastir and my mother was born in Kastoria. My Dad heard about my mother and went across the mountains on a donkey, a distance of about 60 miles, to court her!



In the map above, we see where Kastoria is located, on a lake in Greece. Note that it is near the borders of modern-day Albania and the nation (not province) of Macedonia.

Here we see the star indicating Kastoria, and the city of Thessalonika. Bitola is the new name for Monastir. Chaim Camhi had to cross the mountains from Bitola to Kastoria to meet Mazalto Eli. Sophie (nee Passo, Betty's mother-in-law) Cassorla, traveled with her dad and sister from Monastir (north of the star) to Thessalonika (Salonica), to catch a ship. That ship took them to Pireus, the port of Athens (shown as Athina), and then to the New World.

My mother had beautiful red, wavy hair and wore barrettes, flowers and ribbons in it. To this day, I too do the same.

My father and mother settled on the Lower East Side, with all their cousins who had preceded them not too many years earlier.





This photograph or post card shows Betty's parents' home town of Kastoria, Greece, in 1909. At the time, it was part of Turkey. Note that it is also called Macedonia. This was a resort town, and you can see the beautiful lake.

An Article about the Jews of Kastoria, Greece

The following article has been provided to us by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos. It originally appeared in the *Sephardic Home News* in 2003. I (Albert Fried-Cassorla) enjoyed it so much that I contacted Jackie Green, the editor, who put me in contact with Ms. Ikonomopoulos. She graciously allowed me to add her article to this site, as well as providing some photos.

She serves as President of The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry . She asks that if you would like to reach her for additional information after reading this article, you can contact her at AFGI@msn.com . Thank you, Ms. Ikonomopoulos!

LOS MUESTROS by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

Our major concern at The Sephardic Home For the Aged is our residents. This column will be the first of a series of columns dealing with the people we care most about: their history, their culture, their roots and their traditions .The subject matter will vary. We welcome input and contributions from our readers



A view of Kastoria and its lake

KASTORIA.

Nestled on the shores of Lake Kastoria, surrounded by the mountains of Northern Greece, so very Greek Christian in appearance, it is hard to believe that this isolated hamlet was once on the crossroads of trade and the home to a close knit, traditional Jewish Community. Jews began to settle in Kastoria, attracted by the robust commercial life of the city, as early as the 10th century. They lived alongside the Byzantines, the Ottoman Turks and the Modern Greeks, only to be annihilated by the Holocaust. Their names (Elias, Russo, Camhi, Zacharia) are proudly carried by some of the most influential members of the American Sephardic community and residents, both past and present, of the Sephardic Home For the Aged.

There is only one Jewish family still living in Kastoria, the Eliaou (Elias) family, but in the early 20th century, before emigration and the Holocaust took its toll, Jews were 10% of the total population of the city, sharing with the Christians of Kastoria the daily struggle to survive in an environment with few economic or educational opportunities.

The Jewish community of Kastoria lived close to the marketplace, on the slopes of a ridge, between the Christian and Turkish quarters. Their small, overcrowded, wood and stone houses were built on narrow serpentine streets, following the rise and fall of the land. The most desirable properties, those owned by the few wealthy members of the community, were located on the peaks because, when it rained, the streets would turn to rivers and the low-lying homes would be flooded. The houses faced the street and had small utilitarian courtyards ("hayati") in the rear: it was here that the Jewish housewives performed their domestic tasks (cooking and laundry) and fuel (wood and coal) would be stored. Often, if the breadwinner were an itinerant salesman, a common profession among Jewish men in Kastoria, the family's prized possession, their mule, would also be housed in a sheltered area of the "hayati".

The homes were simple two or three story structures. The ground floor, due to the sloping terrain, tended to be relatively small, and was used for storage (grains, wines) and to hide the family's few valuables in case of fire or robbers. Very often, because of the slope of the land, the second floor was on street level. This is where the family lived during the winter, moving to the more ventilated top third floor in the summer. The homes were simply furnished. The main room was used as a living area by day and sleeping quarters by night: no beds; only straw mattresses that doubled as couches during the day, no cupboards; only shelves to hold foodstuffs and nails to hold utensils. A piece of wood, with "Mizraki" (east) elaborately carved in its center, would be placed on the eastern wall, to indicate the direction of prayer.

Jewish homes were indistinguishable from Christian homes, except for the mezuzah on the outer doorways, blue strips painted under the eaves (to remind them of the sky, a source of hope) and the lack of chimneys: Jews preferred portable braziers to heat their homes. As the families grew, young

grooms brings their wives to live with them, additions would be built and, eventually, the elderly parents would be housed in one of these additions, as the eldest son took over the responsibilities of the extended family. Property borders were usually ignored as makeshift additions extended over the neighbor's property line. Why bother? In this close-knit community with large families, one's neighbor was most likely a relative: a cousin, an in-law, etc.

Occupations were handed down from father to son: little carrier choice, few opportunities for rising up the economic ladder. Jews in Kastoria worked as porters, tinsmiths, cobblers, jewelers and weavers. Women also worked, at home, producing linen and silken fabrics. Many of the men would travel from village to village, bartering their wares, leaving with their overburdened mule on Sunday morning, and only returning for the Sabbath on Friday. It was not easy to feed their large families and, then, there were the dowries for their daughters, always a burden for the poor.



Closer view of the lake at Kastoria

The center of Jewish life was the synagogue, the "Aragon" synagogue, constructed in 5591 (1830). The exterior was plain, Jews keeping a low profile, not wanting to draw attention to themselves, but once inside, their love for the Jewish religion was displayed in the lavish interior: decorated with velvet parokhet and hand-carved wooden stalls. There were seventeen Torah Scrolls, some dating back to 15th century Spain and Italy, admired throughout Macedonia for their beauty. The women sat upstairs, in a gallery, blocked from view by a lattice so as not to disturb the prayer of the men below.

The Jews of Kastoria were observant, hard-working and, mostly, poor. In the early part of the twentieth century they began to emigrate, many to the New York area. A congregation of Kastorialis was established in Brooklyn, initially headed by Rabbi Zacharia, who had resettled there with his eleven children. The families they left behind were destroyed in the Holocaust: of the 900 Jews of Kastoria, only 35 survived. Their proud descendants in the United States would carry on the traditions of the Kastorialis. Many of our residents, and Board members, descend from these Kastorialis, and it is in their honor that I dedicate this column.

Continuing *The Autobiography of Betty Cassorla*:

"I was born on St. Valentine's Day!"

I was born on St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1922. We lived on the top floor of a six-floor cold water walk-up at 165 Eldridge Street, on the East Side of Manhattan. My parents were Chaim and Mazeltov Camhi. I had sisters who were much older: Esther, born in 1909 and thirteen years older than me; and Sally, born in 1913 and nine years my elder.



Ellis Island in New York harbor, where my parents passed through in 1910.

(Photo by Albert Fried-Cassorla, taken from the World Trade center observation deck, 1999.)

When I was a child, I remember a lot of horses, wagons, and pushcarts. My Mom used to do her shopping from the pushcarts -- not from stores. You could get everything you wanted from the vendors, from food to clothes. Our neighborhood on the East Side of Manhattan was all-Jewish and mostly Sephardic.



165 Eldridge Street, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the place of my birth. Notice how we're a few blocks from the Williamsburg Bridge.

My grandfather on my father's side was affectionately called Papoo. His real name was David Camhi.

He was a fruit and jelly-apple vendor. He used to make his own jelly from crushed fruits, which he refined and cooked in hot water, sugar and honey.

He would then dip apples into this mixture.

Papoo (David Camhi) sold these apples from his pushcart on the Lower East Side, on such streets at Broom, Essex, Orchard, Delancey and Allen. Orchard Street was the favorite for food vendors. I remember watching him get up from his seat and go to the barrel of apples one day. He was very tall and handsome,

which explains why all his sons were the same. Unfortunately, he was hit by a hit and run driver in 1924 on the Lower East Side.



Papoo (David Camhi) circa 1913, age 50, shown beside a barrel containing fresh fruits.

All of the children played on the rooftops. We jumped from one rooftop to another -- that was our playground. One boy, about ten years old, died after falling six flights. I was about four years old at the time. My mother always used to reprimand my sisters, "Don't jump from one building to another!"

We played a lot of jacks, we'd sew, do cross-stitching, making decorated towels, and sun ourselves. My father would bring different threads home from the dress factory where he worked so that we could decorate the towels and sew.





Dad, Chaim with Esther on left and Sally on right. Circa 1918.

My dad would also bring home dress belt fabric for my mother to sew on the foot-pedaled sewing machine. This work would help with the food money. Mom sewed all during her pregnancies. Sometimes, she would make an error by not matching the fabrics correctly. When the dresses were sewn incorrectly my father would say, "Mazelto! Qualu hizities?" ("Mazelto! What did you do!") She would be frightened, although of course he would never raise a hand to her. He was a very gentle man.



Here I am at age 3 in 1925, with my brother Jack, age 5.

