

THE GREEK JEWS

INTRODUCTION

In 1821 on the southernmost portion of the Balkan Peninsula, a Christian people known as the Greeks revolted against 400 years of Ottoman rule and successfully established a fully independent state recognized by the European powers. The Greeks would be the first national group to win its independence and would inspire other nationalist groups among the subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire to do the same in Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania and Albania.

The young Greek state announced to the world that it was not satisfied with its original boundaries. Over the next century, this vibrant and energetic state sought to expand its territory by incorporating all those territories which were ethnically and historically Greek since ancient times. The ideology upon which this phenomenon is based has come to be known as the Megali Idea (Fleming 29, 44). The Greek state had as its immediate goal the acquisition of the Greek Orthodox populations of Macedonia, Epirus and Thessaly. Over the next 100 years, they achieved this reality. As the Greek state expanded, it acquired the various Jewish communities that lived in these areas.

It is often said that Greece became a country for the first time in its long history in the 1820s during the Greek revolution. Historians of ancient Greek history describe the Greeks not in terms of a country, but as a civilization which extended throughout much of the Mediterranean world forming a brilliant cultural zone which influenced many of the civilizations around it.

However, it is important to make note of that which many historians seem to neglect. The Greek speaking people have lived in an organized state longer than any other Christian ethnic group in the Mediterranean world. For 1600 years they lived in the Roman Empire. This was the most advanced civilization on European soil and the closest thing resembling a pre-modern state that the world would have seen up to that time. It had the only standing army financed by a sophisticated governmental apparatus that succeeded in protecting its people for two millennia. That empire began in the tiny village of Rome on the Tiber River in 500 BCE and ended 2000 years later in Constantinople in 1453 ACE when the last emperor donned his armor and died in battle defending his people. A new age had emerged and that was the Age of the Ottoman Empire.

THE ROMANIOTES

But another observation is equally as important. We must not forget that alongside its Greek speaking neighbors for those 1600 years was a Jewish community which experienced the good times and the bad times of Orthodox Christian history. These Jews refer to themselves in Greek as the Romaniotes, the Roman Jews. They would derive their ethnonym from the name of the Roman Empire as it was known in the old times, Romania. They have been speaking the Greek language for over 2000 years. They have adopted Greek names. They have distinct customs which have incorporated many of their Orthodox Christian neighbors' traditions. The liturgical language of their synagogues is conducted in a Judeo-Greek dialect known as Yevanic. The rabbis were advanced intellectuals genuinely interested in world affairs (Papo 00:45:08). This genuine interest may be related to the fact that they lived in a Roman state with a continuous history over a 2000 year period.

If you were to YouTube "Greek Jew", you would find a short recording of a Greek Festival on the Lower East Side of Manhattan much like the festivals that Greek Orthodox Christians have all over the United States (Kehila Kedosha Janina). The streets are blocked off. The music you are hearing is Greek. The instruments that are being played are Greek. People are celebrating Greek dances in traditional Greek costumes. The language that is spoken is Greek. The food that is served resembles the very items that are sponsored at Greek Orthodox festivals all over the U.S. These joyous people think Greek; they act Greek; they look Greek. There is only one difference. When you walk into the temple of worship, it is obvious that you have just entered a synagogue, but one which echoes the sounds of the Greek language. This is the Greek Jewish community that the expanding Greek state found in her newly acquired territories; a community that has been assimilated with the Greek culture for over 2000 years.

THE SEPHARDIC JEWS

During the First Balkan War of 1912, the Greek Armed Forces won the great prize of the Balkans, the city of Thessaloniki (StroumJewishStudies, "DevinNaar:Between" 01:43). What had been a Greek city for 1700 years was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century. What the Greeks found in 1912 in Thessaloniki was not a Greek city. It was not a Turkish city. It was an Ottoman city and a most unique one at that (StroumJewishStudies, "Devin Naar: Between" 04:52-5:33). Slightly over 50% of that city's population was Jewish. This was the largest Jewish population of any city on the European continent at the time. No such city on the European continent or for that matter in the Ottoman Empire had a Jewish majority.

When do they arrive? Where did they come from? How did they get there? Answers to these questions lie in their name, Sephardic Jews, Sephardim as they are known in Hebrew. Sepharad in Hebrew has come to be synonymous with Spain. The Sephardic

Jews were the ancient Jews of the Roman Empire who found themselves under the rule of the Visigoths, one of the Germanic groups which had divided among themselves parts of the western territories lost to the Roman Empire in the fifth century. They would lose their Roman identity along with the rest of the Christian population of the Iberian Peninsula. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the eastern part of the Roman Empire survived in Constantinople for the next 1000 years and preserved the heritage and inheritance of its people both Orthodox Christians and Jews within its lands.

The greatest era of the Sephardic Jewish presence in what are now the countries of Spain and Portugal began in the year 711 ACE when Arab and Berber armies established Muslim rule in Spain. The Sephardic Jews would reach significant heights of cultural and societal advancement never before seen by Jews living in any of the lands of the Gentiles. They were steeped in Arabic philosophy and science which were built on ancient Greek philosophy and science. This would have a significant influence on the development of Sephardic Jewish thought. They had their own distinct identity among the Jews of the world. They had their own ritualistic customs, architectural styles for their synagogues, foods and arts. They had a strong ethnic identity. The language they spoke, Ladino, was based on the 15th century Spanish dialect of the Kingdom of Castile.

All of this would come to an end during the Spanish Reconquista. The Spanish had driven the last of the Muslim kingdoms from their lands in 1492. Forced conversions of Jews to Christianity had diminished the ranks of practicing Jews in the Iberian peninsula. A minority of the once thriving Sephardic Jewish population remained when the Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile were united to form what is now the modern country of Spain. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella issued the Alhambra Decree. Their concern was that the last freestanding remnant of Judaism in Spain represented an undue influence on those recent Jewish converts to Christianity some of whom were less than enthusiastic about their new faith given the forced conversions of the previous 100 years ("Christian-Jewish Relations"). The Decree offered the remaining Jewish community conversion to Christianity or expulsion.

Salvation came to the Sephardic Jews from an unsuspecting quarter. Bayezid II, whose father had recently made Constantinople the capital of the Ottoman Empire, learned of the plight of this beleaguered population in the country of Spain. He sent a letter to King Ferdinand and mocked him for impoverishing his country through the expulsion of a group of people that had contributed so much to his civilization. He welcomed all Sephardic Jews who wished to live in his realm. He literally deployed the Ottoman Navy and secured the evacuation and passage of tens of thousands of Sephardic Jewish refugees to Ottoman lands where they would find protection from persecution (Alhambra Decree of 1492). Tens of thousands would settle in the city of Thessaloniki.

When those Greek boys in 1912 entered Thessaloniki, they would have heard the Spanish language as the dominant sound in the streets of the city. This was a city where Jews were not confined to ghettos or prohibited from practicing certain professions. Therefore, vocations extended across a very wide spectrum including physicians, religious leaders, journalists and merchants. They were the vendors in the streets, the cobblers and the bakers (StroumJewishStudies, "Jewish Salonika" 09:30-09:48). They provided the manual labor as the port workers who unloaded and loaded ships on the docks of this most important city which was the commercial gateway to the entire Balkan Peninsula. This city would come to a standstill on the Jewish Sabbath. If a ship were in the harbor to be unloaded, it would have to wait until the Sabbath had ended (StroumJewishStudies, "Devin Naar: Between" 06:35-06:45).

It was during the interwar period in Salonika between World War I and World War II that a genuine Greek Jewish culture was beginning to take form (Fleming 92-94). Greek entered the Jewish schools as a language which was taught to the Sephardic children. An interwar generation of Jews in Thessaloniki gradually was beginning to coalesce around a growing national identity of the Greek Jew (Fleming, 108-109). The Jews of Thessaloniki were participating in the process of transforming Thessaloniki city into the Greek city it was destined to be following the Ottoman interlude .

World War II would disrupt this process and bring it to an end with the Nazi occupation of Thessaloniki. What the Nazis found in Thessaloniki was a city that had not yet formed a completed organic community (Papo 01:58:20). The following factors must be considered in this regard:

1. Five years after the Greek liberation of Thessaloniki, a devastating fire occurred in 1917 which placed a disproportionate burden upon the Jewish community. 70,000 people were made refugees. 50,000 of them were Sephardic Jews displaced in their own city. However, the energy of that community was such that a substantial recovery was being made by the eve of World War II (StroumJewishStudies, "Devin Naar: between" 27:37).
2. In addition, the exchange of populations between Turkey and Greece following the disastrous Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) resulted in the loss of the Turkish members of that historic community in Thessaloniki and the influx of tens of thousands of Greek refugees from Asia Minor.
3. Communal ties between the Sephardic Jews and the newcomers were limited by circumstantial barriers. The Greeks spoke Greek and some could only speak Turkish as they had lost the Greek language. The Sephardic Jews spoke Spanish.
4. Both communities were suffering from economic hardships; one from a disastrous fire, the other from the traumatic uprooting from its traditional home in Asia Minor

where historic ties reached back over a period of 2500 years.

The 30 short years that the Jews and Greeks had been together in Thessaloniki before World War II were not enough time to establish strong relations across communal boundaries. This would not bode well for the chances for survival of the Sephardic Jews of Thessaloniki when the deportations to the Nazi concentration camps began in 1943 (Papo 01:58:40- 01:59:30).

OCCUPATION

The outbreak of World War II in September 1939 resulted in the occupation of Greece by the armed forces of Italy, Germany and Bulgaria. The Germans deployed limited forces and held strategic points in the country such as Athens, which was coadministered with the Italians, Crete and Macedonia/Salonika. An oppressive occupation characterized the Nazi administration resulting in food shortages, runaway inflation, and widespread deprivations. Roughly 2/3 of Greek territory was occupied by the Italians where their military rule was relatively less oppressive. The Bulgarians held Western Thrace and the eastern part of Macedonia. Early on they began a policy of Bulgarian colonization of these territories whereby they were settling Bulgarian citizens in this area with the hope of annexing these territories to Bulgaria proper. They faced stiff resistance from the Greek population.

The occupation authorities established a puppet Greek government that was unpopular with the Greek people. This government was not allowed to maintain any military force of significance. It was forced to rely on local police forces and lightly armed civilians to maintain order. In response to the situation, an armed resistance movement began based in the interior mountains of Greece where partisans controlled sizable stretches of territory including some towns. The Italians were largely unsuccessful in suppressing the growing military potential of this movement by mid-1942.

SALONIKA DEPORTATIONS

In February 1943 the Jewish population of Salonika was moved to the ghettos within the city. The Germans began deporting Salonika's Jews in the spring of 1943 and by August, 45,000 Jews were sent by railway to Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center where most were gassed upon arrival.

Those Jews in the city who held identity papers or visas from neutral governments were afforded some protection from deportation. The Italian diplomat, Guelfo Zamboni, who was consul general for Italy in Thessaloniki, went to extraordinary measures to rescue Italian Jews in the city (Fleming 115,124-125). He issued provisional Italian citizenship papers to 350 Greek Jews in the city and was successful in preventing their deportation. His successor, Giuseppe Castruccio, was able to extract Jews with Italian passports out

of the city by train to Athens in the Italian zone.

Several hundred Jews escaped the city to the surrounding mountains where they joined the partisan resistance. Many would fight in that resistance against the German occupation. Those who successfully escaped to the mountains were more likely younger and better able to tolerate the physical hardship needed to survive (Stroum Jewish Studies, "Devin Naar: Between" 37:33-38:07).

Some were hidden by Greek families and friends inside the city of Thessaloniki. 1200, primarily the well-to-do, were able to escape to Athens and/or the Italian zone where there was no concerted effort to deport the Greek Jews. Survival in the cosmopolitan environment of Athens was more successful as Jews were much less readily identifiable in this larger Orthodox Christian urban center (Stroum Jewish Studies, "Devin Naar: Between" 38:07-38:50).

Ultimately, a little over 1000 Sephardic Jews would survive the death camps and live to return to Greece.

Survival in Salonika was significantly hampered by several factors. Although the percent of the city's Jewish inhabitants was reduced during the interwar period as a result of emigration and the relative influx of Greek refugees, there was still a substantial Jewish presence in the city. Its first language was Ladino, not Greek. The Spanish accents of those who did speak Greek made the Jewish population more readily identifiable. The relative lack of resemblance of the Sephardic Jewish population to the Greek population of that city was a disadvantage. The Jewish and Greek populations in the city had not had sufficient time to develop the intercommunal intimacy that existed in the older population centers of Greece where Jews resided (Papo 01:58:40). During the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Chief Rabbi Koretz of Salonika was highly chastised for not resisting the various German demands that were made on his community. He was seen as an outsider by the community as he was not Sephardic. It was felt that he could have been more effective in his negotiations with the occupying forces in the city (Fleming 118). The combination of these factors significantly hampered efforts to undermine the Nazi deportation program which resulted in the destruction of 96% of the city's Jewish community (Stroum Jewish Studies, "Devin Naar: Between" 32:19-32:45).

VOLOS

Volos was one of the oldest Romaniote communities in Greece. A combination of factors worked in favor of that community. This community was well assimilated with the Greek population and, in turn, had good relations with its Greek neighbors. Its Rabbi for several decades, Moshe Pesach, was born in Larissa in 1869. As a Rabbi, he was authoritarian but very charismatic and was well respected by both the Jewish and Orthodox Christian communities. He was a moral authority in Volos. Stories abound that he would counsel

both Christians and Jews in regard to their personal problems. It is said that Christians passing him on the streets would kiss his hand as they would that of an Orthodox priest (Papo 00:53:50 - 00:54:40). He was influential in helping Greek and British troops who were attempting to leave Greece for the Middle East after they were defeated by the German invasion in April 1941.

During the first years of the war, Volos was included in the Italian zone and was occupied by the Italian Army. In 1943 Volos began to receive refugees from Thessaloniki and Macedonia when the Germans began their deportation of Jews in their occupation zone. Many of the Jews of Volos fled to the mountains for the safety of the partisan resistance while others went to Athens (Prabook. "Moshe Pesach.") This was a harbinger of the danger that the Jewish population of this town would ultimately face.

When the Germans occupied his city in September 1943 following the Italian surrender to the Allies, the Rabbi was summoned by the German commander who demanded a list of all the Jews in his area within the next 24 hours. He was told that this list was necessary in order for the authorities to properly disperse food rations. The Rabbi told him that this would be a problem because of the celebration of the Rosh Hashanah holidays. He was granted an extension of this deadline when he agreed to submit that list within three days. He immediately contacted the city mayor, chief of police and the partisans in the woods (Papo 00:53:00 - 00:53:40). He also contacted Joachim Alexopoulos, Bishop of Demetrias. The bishop had befriended the local German consul, Helmut Scheffel, who conveyed to the bishop the urgent need for the Jews to leave the city as soon as possible (Prabook). The bishop provided false Christian identity papers and a letter to local clergy to provide whatever assistance possible in the evacuation of the Jewish population to the countryside. The Rabbi sent emissaries to each Jewish home and directed their Jewish occupants to leave immediately for the woods. Three quarters of the city's population of 700 Jews were able to evacuate the city. Those who remained were unable to do so because of physical challenges. Rabbi Pesach's courageous and assertive actions were successful in saving close to three quarters of the town's Jewish population.

The Rabbi then sought safety with his wife among the partisans in the mountains until the war was over. His wife died during this period. His two sons who were in other cities were executed by the Germans. In 1946, Moshe Pesach would become the chief Rabbi of Greece until his death in 1955. In 1952, he was decorated by King Paul of Greece with the Order of the Phoenix which is an award of excellence bestowed to a Greek citizen by the government.

The majority of the Greek Jews of Larissa, Patras and Trikala were successful in evading the German occupation forces. Karditsa was a partisan stronghold and proved to be a safe haven for many Jews fleeing their towns. The coordination between the Greek

partisans and the Greek Orthodox Christian authorities and the decision of the local rabbis to avoid cooperation with the German occupation authorities were vital in securing safety for the Jewish population.

ARCHBISHOP OF ATHENS AND ALL OF GREECE

During this period of violent upheaval in European civilization, occupied Greece would find a spiritual father from among the ranks of its Orthodox Church who embodied courage and compassion with an unwavering conviction to lead and protect his flock during its greatest hour of need.

As news of the deportation of Greek Jews from northern cities under German occupation, especially Thessaloniki, began reaching Athens, the capital city was becoming a safe haven for those who were attempting to escape. The Jewish population of Athens was growing. Archbishop Damaskinos and the Chief Rabbi Elias Barzilai in Athens worked together to ensure the safety of the newly arrived Jews. A delegation of Sephardic Jews from Thessaloniki traveled to Athens to meet with the Archbishop. It is said that he burst into tears as the Salonikan Jews explained the dire straits of the Sephardic community during its darkest hour (Yad Vashem). He vowed to intercede on their behalf.

Archbishop Damaskinos assumed a leadership role and galvanized 28 prominent community leaders of associations and organizations in Athens and Greece as he informed them of the tragedy which was unfolding in the north. These individuals represented a cross-section of Greek society including commercial and industrial organizations and the educational community. A letter signed by the Archbishop and these leaders was sent to Prime Minister Konstantinos Logothetopoulos on March 23, 1943. The Archbishop also sent a similar letter to Gunther von Altenburg, the Reich's diplomat imploring the Nazi occupation forces to cancel the deportation (Yad Vashem).

On March 23, 1943, the Archbishop personally delivered the letter he had submitted to the Prime Minister to SS General Jürgen Stroup, who was the commander of the paramilitary organization that was occupying Athens (Iakovidis). The general was enraged by this letter when the Archbishop told him that he intended to publish it. Stroup threatened to execute Damaskinos by a firing squad if he did so. The Archbishop's response was as follows: ***"According to the traditions of the Greek Orthodox church, our prelates are hanged, not shot. Please respect our traditions."*** (qtd in Iakovidis) This is a quote from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This was a bold reference to the hanging of Patriarch Gregory V of Constantinople in 1821 at the start of the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire. If he had any fear for his life, the Archbishop confronted it and overcame it as he demonstrated the heart of a true hero.

Not deterred by the failure of this attempt to halt the deportations, Archbishop Damaskinos sent word to the Greek Orthodox church hierarchy at all levels commanding all priests to implore their congregations to hide Jews in their homes (Yad Vashem). It is estimated that the Orthodox clergy provided safe haven for over 250 Jewish children (Burns). Orthodox Christian convents and monasteries were ordered to open their doors to any Jews seeking refuge.

The Greek Orthodox church issued thousands of false Orthodox Christian baptismal certificates with Christian names and with the help of Angelos Evert, the chief of the Athens police, thousands of false identity papers were issued to desperate Jews who were seeking to either hide or escape from the Nazis. The archbishop told the chief of police: ***"I have spoken to God, and my conscience tells me what we must do. The church will issue false baptismal certificates to any Jew who asks for them and you will issue false identification cards"*** (qtd in Iakovidis). The Archbishop said the following to Panos Haldezos, director general of the Athens municipality: ***"I have made my cross, have spoken with God, and decided to save as many Jewish souls as I can. Even if I were to endanger myself, I will baptize the Jews, and you will issue municipal documents, so that they obtain identity cards, as Christian Greeks"*** (qtd in Yad Vashem).

In response to the leadership role played by Archbishop Damaskinos, 600 Greek Orthodox priest would be deported by the Nazi authorities for their actions (Burns). It is believed that Damaskinos and Evert would have faced certain death had the Nazis been aware of the extent of their efforts to undermine Nazi plans to deport the Jewish population of Greece to the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau (Burns).

A German official who was the deputy of Adolf Eichmann, Dieter Wisliceny, arrived in Athens on September 20, 1943. He commanded the Chief Rabbi to hand over the names and addresses of the Athenian Jewish community, foreign Jews, Italian Jews and anyone who was assisting Jews escaping to the British mandate in Palestine. The Rabbi conferred with the Archbishop who strongly advised that the Jews of the city flee the capital. The Rabbi requested more time from the Germans and ultimately destroyed the Jewish community's records. The Rabbi, who had good communal relations with the municipal government and connections with the partisans together with the support of Archbishop Damaskinos, was able to help two thirds of the Athenian Jewish community escape to safety. The Rabbi and his family were smuggled out of Athens by the partisans and brought to safety in the mountains.

Archbishop Damaskinos has the singular experience of being the only spiritual leader of a European nation during World War II who formally protested the Holocaust and defied the Nazi occupation forces. He is the personification of the many heroes among the Greek people who in their own lives made the bold decision to defy a truly tyrannical

order in one of the darkest hours that the Greek nation has ever endured. Greek Orthodox Christians and Greek Jews fought against incredible odds dictated by circumstances imposed upon them and through their efforts were able to save over 10,000 of their fellow citizens.

Greece would lose a higher percentage of its Jewish citizenry than almost any other country in Europe under Nazi occupation. However, this loss was not for a lack of heroism on the part of the Greek community. In the face of the disastrous loss of life at Thessaloniki, many Greeks rallied their resources under duress and with determination managed to save many of the lives of the last remnant of their historic Jewish community.

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