

### **The Jews in Greece\***

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There are approximately 5500 Jews in Greece today.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of WWII they numbered some 75,000, most of whom were killed by Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> This decimation and its ramifications constitute the single most important factor defining the identity of contemporary Greek Jewry. In order for us to understand their situation, we have to survey the historical experience of Greek Jews prior to WWII. Another section of the paper will delineate the tragic story of the war years, while the post-war emigration of Greek Jews will form the historical transition to the modern period. We shall begin, however, with an outline of the contemporary society to which the following sections will provide the requisite background for its understanding.

In 1941 over 55,000 Jews lived in Thessaloniki, then locally known as Salonika or Saloniki; Corfu, Ioannina (Yanina), Larissa, Volos, Trikala (almost) and Rhodes had flourishing communities numbering several thousands each. Athens, on the other hand, had fewer than 1000 Jews. Today over 3500 Jews live in Athens, a thoroughly Graecized community that tries not to acknowledge the high number of secularized youth and intermarriages with local non-Jewish women. Perhaps 1000 Jews live in Thessaloniki amid the homeless ghosts of their parents and siblings. In central Greece, only Larissa supports a viable little community of some 400 Jews. Jews are only a memory in Thrace and the Peloponnesus. Some Macedonian towns may still have a family or two. Ioannina is in decline while the humble remnants of Corfu and Rhodes are aging with sad dreams, if not nightmares. When I last visited Euboea some 20 years ago, I was introduced to the baby that brought the community's census to 101; today, the population numbers 90. Crete has nearly disappeared from Jewish memory.

To understand contemporary Greek Jewry one has to comprehend another legacy of the war. In 1946, the Greek government passed a law restoring to the Jewish community the heirless properties of those Jews who had been deported to the death camps of Poland.<sup>3</sup> That act of a liberated state was the first of any European country to resolve justly the problem of Nazi confiscated Jewish property, a problem about which Jewish organizations in Britain, the United States and Palestine were quite concerned during the war. Many homes, however, remained in the hands of wartime squatters and refugees. The surviving remnant of Greek Jewry, some 10,000 out of the prewar 75,000 set up the major institution that has dominated local Jewish politics to this day: The Central Agency for Relief and Rehabilitation of Greek Jews, known as OPAIE. Its responsibility is to administer the

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thousands of homes and businesses, public buildings, schools, synagogues, hospitals, graveyards, bank accounts, etc. of the 60,000 who had been despoiled, deported and destroyed.

The problems involved in this matter are legion, and the documentation for it has so far not been critically examined, although much material is available in the archives of the World Jewish Congress now housed at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, in the American Joint Distribution Committee archives in New York City and Jerusalem, and the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem. The survivors of WWII still hold a tight rein on this organization; the property has become a symbol and source of power and wealth for this small clique. While undoubtedly some good has been done for Greek Jews at large, the smaller and by now satellite communities are daily declining in number and tensions have arisen and grievances expressed on three fronts:

1) The perceived disenfranchisement of the younger generation has, to a great extent, been ignored by the leadership in Athens and Salonika;

2) The descendants of Greek Jews who immigrated to Palestine in the 1930s or to Israel after 1948 rightly claim a share in this property of their relatives. Yet only recently has the Greek government allowed a percentage of the realizable Greek assets to be denationalized to Israel; and

3) Descendants of Greek Jews in the United States see the burden and the power of this administration as a corrupting influence on the future of Greek Jewry.

The Jewish community has a wide range of social services that maintain its religious autonomy. These include religious schools in Athens, Saloniki and Larissa with significant components of secular Greek subjects in the curriculum, synagogues (partially supported by the state), several museums each with newsletters and websites: Salonika and the internationally known Jewish Museum of Greece located in Athens – the latter also the beneficiary of government subsidy, a summer camp for children, benevolent societies for orphans (*torah umelakha*), for poor young women (*bakhnasat kallal*), for burial in the community graveyards (*hevra kadisha*), etc., and an old age home in Saloniki. On the local level the University of Thessaloniki is working with the Jewish community and with a recently established Society for Greek Jewry consisting of local scholars to explore the community's history and culture. Several conferences have already been held and their proceedings published. In addition to Greek government aid, the American Joint Distribution Committee has been assisting Greek Jews since 1917. Other American support groups include the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the World Jewish Congress and the American Friends of the Jewish Museum of Greece. Israel sends emissaries (*shlibim*) to organize its programs, teach Hebrew, and promote tours and immigration.

The Central Organization of Jewish communities in Athens (KIS) is the voice through which contemporary Greek Jewry speaks to the government of Greece and to concerned Jews in Israel and the western diasporas of Sephardi and Greek Jews. This facet of the leadership is yet another means of control by which the older generation excludes the

younger from receiving the mentoring necessary to succeed to leadership in the future. The legacy of the war which we shall explore later and the age of the leadership together produce extremely conservative and occasionally jingoistic statements and actions by this leadership.<sup>4</sup> One more point needs to be made. Greece is officially a Christian Orthodox state, which make Jewish and Muslim citizens of a different sort, and that in turn forces the community to maintain a low public profile. At the same time, the legacy of wartime German anti-Jewish propaganda coupled with arch conservative ecclesiastics or radical leftists raises the specter of anti-Semitism through an occasional incident.<sup>5</sup> The obverse of this tension, of course, is a kind of philosemitism that stems from interest in the Bible, business partnerships, social relationships and the presumption that Jews have influence with the media in other countries.

On the eve of WWII there were still three distinct worlds of Greek Jewry, each with its own layer of polyglot culture and historical experience. These three areas corresponded to 1) the South: Peloponnesos, Attike, and Boeotia of ancient times and called Morea since late Byzantine and Ottoman times; 2) the West: Epiros and Akarnania; and 3) the North: Thrake and Makedonia, stretching southward into Central Greece or Stereohellada. The islands of Ionian and Aegean Seas were until post WWII heavily influenced by Italian domination which in effect colonized numerous islands, and Italian is still spoken by the older generation. And lastly, there was Crete. Subject to Venice and then the Ottomans, it became part of the new kingdom of Greece at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The wealthy Hellenistic cities surrounding the Aegean attracted a large Jewish diaspora in the Roman period, but Jews may have been living in the area as early as the last days of the First Temple (6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE). The continuity of the Jewish settlement in the Peloponnesos and Attike through the period of Roman domination is documented; however, though data from the middle and late Byzantine period is scarce, it is still suggestive of this continuity. On the eve of the Ottoman conquest of Morea, Jews were still to be found from Thebes to Mistra, while during the Turkokratia they were located in all the major centers from Patras to Kalamata and from Tripolis to Corinth, with smaller settlements in Thebes and Euboea.<sup>6</sup>

The sketchy and still untold story of the Jews in the South came to an end with the Greek Revolution of the 1820s. Marked as allies of the Turks, they fell victim to persecution and massacre by Greek revolutionaries. Such a tragedy seems to be more a side-effect of the butchering of the Turks of Tripolis, the last Ottoman stronghold in the South where the Jews had taken refuge from the fighting, than a specific action against Jews per se. In general, Jews within Greece and throughout Europe were supporters of the Greek revolt, using their wealth (such as the Rothschilds) as well as their political and public influence. In turn, the success of the Greek Revolution was to stimulate the incipient stirrings of Jewish nationalism, later called Zionism.<sup>7</sup>

The newly established kingdom of Greece attracted Jews to its capital Athens from both Ottoman areas and Central Europe, a trend that would continue through the middle of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These were Sephardi merchants from Smyrna (Izmir) on the east coast of the Aegean Sea and Volos on the northwest coast as well as Romaniotes from Ioannina in the western Epiros.<sup>8</sup> An Izmirli Sephardi is even credited with inventing the flea market in the Monastiraki section below the Acropolis, at the confluence of the Plaka, the older Byzantine and Ottoman section, and the modern 19<sup>th</sup> century town that grew up around it. The Greek government gave official recognition to the community in 1889. By this time a second generation of Greek Jews was graduating from the University of Athens and entering professional life, especially law and journalism.

A few Central European Jews came as merchants and professionals to serve the new Germanic king of Greece alongside their Christian compatriots, such as a Jewish dentist (Levi) and a Christian brewer (Fuchs = Fix beer). The best known was Max de Rothschild, a financier who accompanied King Otto I. Charles de Rothschild became president of the newly recognized community in 1890, and the leadership henceforth alternated between local Greek Jews and Central European Jews throughout the twentieth century. German Jewish and Christian scholars immigrated to Greece to teach at the local university and in the schools and to dig into the antiquities of the new kingdom. Perhaps the most famous was Professor Georg Karo whose distinguished career as the head of the Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut spanned some twenty years (until the mid 1930s). For a variety of political and economic reasons the interwar years would see an influx of Central European Jewish scholars, businessmen and technocrats immigrate to Greece.<sup>9</sup>

By the First Balkan War (1912), a small but wealthy and influential community of Athenian Jews led by Ashkenazim (Central European Jews)<sup>10</sup> was well integrated into the Kingdom of Greece and active in Greek society. Some of them, moreover, were active supporters of the Cretan revolutionary politician Eleutherios Venezelos, whose post WWI and interwar political career was to have such a great impact on the Jews of Saloniki. He himself maintained close relations with his patriotic Jewish colleagues and was described by Moise Caime in 1912 as his friend, a man who liked Jews and respected the Jews of Saloniki for their potential value to Greece, “a superior man who had no race or religious prejudice.”<sup>11</sup> Though small in number, the voices of Athenian Jewry were heard as lobbyists for Saloniki Jewry in the Greek parliament during the interwar period.<sup>12</sup>

The Jews of the West, the Epiros (“peninsula”), have a shorter recorded history than either the South or the North. Primarily merchants, they settled on the two major routes that crisscrossed Epiros: the Via Egnatia, built by the Romans to connect the Ionian Sea with Byzantium on the Bosphoros, and the north-south route from Naupaktos (Lepanto), Preveza and Arta in the south through the metropolis of Ioannina into the villages of southern Albania and ultimately to Dyrrachium (Durrazzo), the western emporium of the Via Egnatia. Like the Jews of the South, the Jews of Epiros and Akarnania were Romaniote, that is, Greek-speaking citizens of the Byzantine Empire. They followed their own synagogue rite and have continued to speak a local patois of Judeo-Greek to the present

day.<sup>13</sup> With the recent opening of Albania several hundred of these north Epirote Jews were brought to Israel.

The recorded history of Ioannina Jewry begins in the early 1300s (although local legends place Jews there in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries or even in the first!) with two chrysobulla of Andronikos II, one of 1319 promising protection to the Jewish immigrants to the city, and one of 1321 confirming the rights of the Church over some local Jews.<sup>14</sup> To these two groups must be added an unmentioned by implied veteran autonomous community of indeterminate ancestry. In later years immigrants from Corfu and Italy added their contributions to the complexity of Ioannina's Jewish community. Among the latter we find the extensive Matsas clan which claims to have introduced kaskaval cheese as a family monopoly.<sup>15</sup> Inter-marriage with Sephardim from Saloniki and Central Greece and the arrival of a few North African Jews added more traditions, but soon all spoke and prayed in a seemingly homogeneous community. The Jewish community lived alongside the Ottoman governors inside the walled kastro, a practice repeated throughout the smaller communities of Greece during the Turkokratia.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were some 1500 Jews in the town of Ioannina with an equal number in the other towns of the vilayet of Ioannina.<sup>16</sup> The main marketplace was burned in 1869, allegedly by the Turkish governor, who wanted to modernize the city.<sup>17</sup> This was a tragedy for the Jews comparable to the effect of the great fire of Saloniki in 1917 on their coreligionists in that metropolis. Almost half of the Jewish community (840) was left homeless; most of the stores were burned. Three years later a series of riots against Jews contributed to the decline of the community. With the opening of a highway between Ioannina and Preveza, Jews from the hinterland of Epiros began to emigrate, including those of Ioannina. They left to join their coreligionists in Alexandria, Egypt, and were also drawn to the great mecca of the fin de siècle – New York City. Despite the emigration, there were still some 4000 Jews in Ioannina according to the Alliance bulletins of 1904. In the following year 500 Jews emigrated to Bucharest, Alexandria, Istanbul, Jerusalem, and New York. Another 1000 left for New York in 1906. The community thus lost its most energetic reservoir and was left with the more conservative and religious element which was to predominate through the next generation.

The Jews of western Greece shared with the Jews of southern Greece a Greek-speaking environment. However, the former region remained pre-modern under Ottoman control into the twentieth century. The latter became a newly established part of a thriving neo-classical civilization which, despite its German king, prided itself on being a parliamentary democracy. The Jews of Athens, at least those raised and educated in the new environment, considered themselves Greeks of the Israelite persuasion and adopted a secularized veneer in public. Despite the predominance of Orthodox Christianity in Greek society, they did not consider themselves to be outsiders. Even the affair of David Pacifico, a British subject, that became the center of a cause célèbre when his house was sacked by an angry mob in 1847 was not seen as a threat. Britain pressured Greece to compensate him

and ultimately sent warships to seize Greek merchant ships in Piraeus as indemnity. The Jews of western Greece however suffered the vicissitudes of ethnic tensions between them and the subject Greek Orthodox, tensions that occasionally exploded in blood libel against local Jewish communities. The hysteria brought about by these canards, which slowly spread west through the Ottoman Empire beginning with the Damascus Blood Libel of 1840, reached Corfu in 1891, twenty-seven years after the island was annexed by the Athens monarchy. The Greek government, like the Ottoman regime that preceded it, extended its formal protection to the Jewish citizens, an attitude and policy that continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The situation in northern Greece was quite different. The traditions of the Greek-speaking Jews of Macedonia, Thrace, and Central Greece, prominent in Hellenistic times and continuing through the Byzantine period, virtually disappeared with the Ottoman conquests of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1455, Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople (now called Istanbul) ordered the deportation of the Greek-speaking Jewish communities of Thrace, Macedonia, and Central Greece to repopulate his new capital. All of the tiny Jewish communities along the Via Egnatia from Kastoria to Thessaloniki and east to Constantinople as well as south along the Aegean coasts were forcibly removed and subsequently identified for the next few centuries as *sürgün*, that is, forcibly deported, and hence not free to relocate. In the 1470 census of the capital, the Romaniote Jews numbered some 1500 families or nearly ten percent of the city's population.<sup>18</sup>

In the decade following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, and during the generation following the forced baptism of the Jews in Portugal in 1498 (many of them Spanish refugees), Sephardim migrated eastward to the Ottoman Empire and were encouraged to settle in those areas devoid of Jews. As a consequence there flourished in the northern tier of Greece, in that string of towns along the Via Egnatia with Saloniki as its center, a transplanted medieval Spanish civilization that dominated the Jews of the Balkans both commercially and intellectually until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century on Ashkenazi refugees from Central Europe and through the 19<sup>th</sup> century floods of Jews from southern Russia, the two major branches of European Jews – Ashkenazim and Sephardim – intermingled in the homeland of the Greek-speaking Romaniotes and produced a vibrant renaissance of Jewish creativity that was intimately linked with the fate and fortune of the Ottoman realm that welcomed them.<sup>19</sup> From Saloniki Sephardi Jews emigrated north to Bulgaria and Rumania and south to the land of Israel, both frontier provinces of the Ottomans, but the main Jewish settlements ringed the Aegean Sea from Larissa in Central Greece to Izmir in western Turkey. The islands of the Dodekanesoi, which extend like a string of pearls from the western coast of Turkey, soon supported colonies of Sephardi Jews; the most important of these islands was Rhodes.

Saloniki, nestled at the northwest corner of the Aegean Sea, enjoyed her prosperity as the entrepot of the Balkans. Jews appeared, according to tradition, shortly after the city was founded in 315 BCE by Cassander, who named it after his wife, the sister of Alexander the

Great. The first Jews to settle in Saloniki most likely came from Ptolemaic Alexandria; their community was well established by New Testament times and mention of it in the Theodosian Code informs us of its continued vitality into Roman Christian times. Only occasional references are extant from the Middle Byzantine period. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, numerous sources suggest a continuity of settlement until the Ottoman conquest in 1430 when its Jews were deported to Edirne. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century however, the community was again growing and flourishing. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Saloniki was the intellectual capital of the Jewish world while her businessmen and manufactories sustained a textile industry that spanned the trade routes of the empire. The Spanish-speaking Jews formed the majority in the city, outnumbering both the Greek Christians and the Turkish Muslims. They were able to impose the rhythm of their religious calendar on the pulse of the city. Its scholars and academies supplied leadership to all the Balkan communities, so much so that Saloniki was known as the “Jewish metropolis.”

A second period of expansion came at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when northern Greece began to westernize. The harbor walls of the city were razed providing a lovely promenade for the citizens of the old and new Jewish quarters that bordered the port. The Jewish population subsequently spread east along the gulf, with the older Roman/Byzantine center becoming separated from the modern new suburbs by the huge graveyard that had developed over the centuries east of the Byzantine walls. In the new suburbs, a rich secular literature in Judeo-Spanish blossomed to compete with the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Ladino<sup>20</sup> classics of the older center that stretched within the remaining walls from the port up towards the Via Egnatia. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish Saloniki seemed poised for a brilliant future as the capital city of a newly renaissance Balkans. History would decree otherwise.

Three islands define the borders of the Greek world: Corfu, Crete, and Rhodes.<sup>21</sup> They were subject to a variety of foreign rulers during late Byzantine and Ottoman times; the predominant influence however was Venetian. Indeed, the Jews of Corfu spoke more Italian than Greek, just as after 1912, the Jews of Rhodes spoke more Italian than Judeo-Spanish; and, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Jews of Crete were part of the urbane influence of a colonizing Venice. The same held true for the Jews of Euboea (Negroponte) which was heavily Italianized during the late Byzantine period. This intimacy of the island Jews with the occupying Italians in the port cities of Corfu, Crete, and Rhodes would ill prepare them for the harshness of the German occupation that replaced that of the Italians in September 1943.

During WWI Venezelos succeeded in making Saloniki the capital of his provisional pro-Allied government whereas the king in Athens sympathized with the Central Powers.<sup>22</sup> Two events contributed to the crippling of the large and powerful Jewish community of the city. The first was the great fire of 1917 that raged all the way to the port, destroying homes, businesses, centers of prayer and learning, libraries, and commercial institutions. In the wake of this destruction, the Athens government appropriated much of the area and declared it an

archaeological site. From this blow the community never recovered. At the time of their deportation in 1943 over half the Jews were indigent and still living in the temporary housing supplied by Joint (AJDC) funds after WWI. The exodus of prosperous Sephardi merchants, which had begun at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – many to France – continued and accelerated. The poor remained, surviving on Greek government and Joint subsidies.<sup>23</sup>

The second blow followed upon the Greek catastrophe in Asia Minor in 1922, an over ambitious invasion that effectively brought to an end the policy of the *Megali idea* which was aimed at reestablishing Hellenic control of the Aegean region. Venizelos directed a large migration of Asiatic Greek refugees to Thessaloniki, which put tremendous burdens on the infrastructure of the city. In addition, the Jewish community was pressured to Hellenize its school curricula and to release land to the civil government. In particular, the city demanded more and more of the huge graveyard located just east of the Byzantine walls. Part of this graveyard had been given over to the Ottoman administration for a school. Now the Greeks wished to expand this school into a university. The question was resolved during the war when the city gained total control of the area. Today, the university – centrally located in its prime real estate – occupies nearly all of the area of the former graveyard. Visitors can still see fragments of grave stones inscribed in Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish built into the walkways and embellishing the gardens of that prestigious institution.<sup>24</sup>

The agony experienced by the Jews of Greece brought to a close 450 years of a glorious Sephardi diaspora and nearly ended 2500 years of Jewish presence in Greece. A summary of the tragedy will be followed by an outline of the Jewish contributions to Greece during the war and its aftermath.<sup>25</sup>

The general story of Greece's agony under the Axis is not unknown. An excellent introduction to this period is now available to Mark Mazower's *Inside Hitler's Greece* (New Haven, 1993) which contains, inter alia, the best one chapter summary to date of the Jewish fate under the Axis. More detailed information can be found in my articles in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* and *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*. A brief review however is apropos.

The dearth and death (to paraphrase Thucydides) brought to Greece from the north affected Jews and non-Jews alike. The Jews however received an extra measure of suffering due to the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis and the enslavement of the young men of Saloniki who were sent out to repair the railroads that British sappers destroyed during their retreat in 1941.<sup>26</sup>

The Bulgarian plot to depopulate Thrace, (its share of partitioned Greece), led to the eviction of some 30,000 Christians, the deaths of thousands of others, and the deportation of some 4000 Jews from Serres, Kavalla, Komotini, Xanthi and the island of Thrace. The deportation was the result of lengthy negotiations between the Bulgarians and Adolph Eichmann's emissary. Eichmann had received the directive to remove the Jews from the Balkans now threatened by the expected Soviet advance. Following Rommel's defeat at El Alamein (November 1942) and the encirclement of the German army at Stalingrad (winter 1942-3), Hitler reorganized his defense of the Balkans. It was now time for the remaining

Jews to go. Most of the Jews of Yugoslavia were already gone; butchered in Croatia, killed by the Wehrmacht in reprisal executions, or deported to Auschwitz where almost all were gassed. A few remained under Italian protection. Eichmann sent Theodor Danneker to Sophia to organize the elimination of the Bulgarian Jews. The Bulgarians agreed to the removal of 20,000 for forced labor in Germany. These would be deported from Greek Thrace (4000), Yugoslav Macedonia (8000) and the rest from the pre-war kingdom. The latter were never surrendered. The former, however, were arrested on Passover 1943 and sent by train or barge to Vienna whence they were sent to Treblinka, the killing center built for the Warsaw Ghetto. There were no survivors, although the crates of food they brought for their sustenance alleviated the famine that was decimating the few slave workers in that camp. The latter soon staged a mass escape which forced the Germans to close down that particular killing center in favor of the megakilling factory in Auschwitz/Birkenau.<sup>27</sup>

Since late fall of 1941 the order for the deportation of the Salonikan Jewish community was in the Wehrmacht pipeline.<sup>28</sup> The actual process was organized by Eichmann's emissary Dieter Wisliceny. The Chief Rabbi of Saloniki, Dr. Zvi Koretz, whose hiring in the mid 1930s followed a rebellion among the younger generation of Jewish leaders who wished to modernize the rabbinate, had been made President of the Judenrat in December of 1942. He was brought back from a prison in Vienna where he had been interned from May 1941 to January 1942, ostensibly for his public support of the Greek government during the Italian bombing attacks on Thessaloniki.<sup>29</sup> Eichmann's decrees were handed over by Wisliceny to Dr. Max Merten, the German civilian liaison with the Greek communities, who, in turn, delivered them to Rabbi Koretz for promulgation and enforcement.

Thus in February 1943 the Nurnberg Laws were introduced into Saloniki. By mid March the deportations began, despite the protests of the representative of the International Committee for the Red Cross and Greek authorities. [It was not until June that the Germans could finally evict the former from his post.]<sup>30</sup> Within three months the Jews of Greek citizenship, numbering some 50,000, were deported to Auschwitz/Birkenau. In May another train carried the Jews of Alexandroupolis, Didymotihon and Nea Soufli to their deaths. They were later joined by 1500 Jewish males who had done slave labor near Thebes and other rail stations. Of these deportees over 80% were gassed on arrival and cremated. The Judenrat and many Jews who held Spanish citizenship were deported to Bergen-Belsen in June where they were held for exchange, either for German detainees from the old German Templar colonies in Palestine or for POWs.<sup>31</sup>

With the surrender of Italy in September 1943, the ax began to fall on the Jews of that occupied Zone. Until then, the Italians had refused to cooperate with Gestapo and later Eichmann demands to persecute and deport the Jews of their occupied zone. (This complicated story has been told elsewhere; most recently by Jonathon Steinberg in his fascinating study of Italian-German relation entitled *All or Nothing* (London, 1990). Thus it was not until Passover of 1944 that the Jews of the former Italian zone were deported to

Auschwitz/Birkenau. In June of that year the Jews of Crete mysteriously disappeared. Recent scholarship leads us to believe that their ship, on which were also Italian POWs, and Greek prisoners, was sunk by the British; the traditional view is that the Germans were responsible.<sup>32</sup> The Jews of Corfu and Rhodes were deported in July and August respectively.

In all, some 60,000 (perhaps 65,000) Greek Jews were deported. Over 12,000 were selected for slave labor or for usually lethal medical experiments, and ended up either in Auschwitz or in other camps such as Majdanek and Dachau and a number of less well-known camps, e.g., Melk and Ebensee, subcamps of Mauthausen. Of those deported about 2000 survived the war to return home to a strife-filled Greece. We will examine the latter's fate after we look at the role of Jews in the Greek struggles against the Axis.

The story of the Jews who remained in Greece during the war years has two aspects: one is the contribution of Greek Jews to the overall effort consisting both of military and civilian support; the other is the role of non-Greek Jews in Greece during the war years.

Greek Jews are extremely proud of their service to Greece during WWII, both on the battlefield and in military and civilian support services. The nation honored them during the Italian campaign in Albania (1940-41), and Metaxas raised Colonel Frizis of Chalkis to the rank of national hero following his death in battle (November 1940). The government later tried to protect the war invalids, a group otherwise covered by the Geneva Convention, from deportation, but to no avail. Their prosthetic limbs are prominently displayed in the museum at Auschwitz. After their demobilization (Spring 1941), most of the Greek Jews went home to their families and their pre-war occupations. Some however went to the mountains to continue the fight, along with Cretans and Serbs and others who could not make it home.

During the rise and organization of the resistance movement under the aegis of EAM/ELAS, more and more Jews found their way into the mountains.<sup>33</sup> Few escaped from the forced labor battalions because of the heavy reprisals visited on those who remained. Many of the youths who were led to safety returned later to their homes out of their sense of familial obligation, a strong Sephardi trait, or were called back by their mothers who went into the hills surrounding Ioannina to reclaim their children. Throughout 1943 and 1944 between 600 and 1000 Greek Jews out of an estimated 30,000 andartes fought with the resistance.<sup>34</sup> Many thousands were active in support units, such as logistics, or acted as translators, nurses, doctors, or spies. Others were recruiters for the mountain fighters, while university students helped organize agricultural cooperatives in the villages. Others remained in the cities where they were able to contribute to the EAM resistance with their special skills. Many others served and died anonymously, as Joseph Matsas recalled in his stirring memorial. In all, the full story of the Jews in the Greek resistance has still to be told.<sup>35</sup>

To the Greek Jews in the resistance we should add the following: refugees from Central Europe, who were trapped in Greece, and Jewish members of the British Expeditionary Force who had escaped from POW camps. Many of the latter fought in

Yugoslavia as well as in Greece. Their contribution and identities are still relatively unknown.<sup>36</sup>

The non-Greek contribution to the war is generally unknown. To begin with, some 2000 Palestinian Jews and about 400 Palestinian Arabs were volunteers in the British Expeditionary Force sent to Greece in 1941. These constituted engineer and sapper units since for political reasons the British did not allow Palestinians in fighting units. However, a special squad of highly trained Jews was sent on secret missions to Greece during the war. The British Government felt that, as in WWI, only fighting units were entitled to claim the political spoils of victory and the protection of the British. Yet during the chaos of the semi-controlled retreat, many of these volunteers did fight, albeit with discarded weapons. Nonetheless, most of these Palestinians were abandoned on the beaches of Kalamata and became POWs: some were sent to stalags in Germany, others escaped to fight with the Greek *andartes* and Yugoslav partisans for the rest of the war.<sup>37</sup>

An interesting fact that has yet to enter the literature is the role played by two Jewish commanders who fought under the Union Jack. The one was Colonel E.C.W. Myers, who was drafted from the Haifa War College to be in charge of the special mission to blow up the Gorgoptamos Bridge.<sup>38</sup> After the successful completion of this mission, his brief was extended to organize the resistance to the British war effort. From November 1942 to the summer of 1943 he succeeded in forging a union of the National Bands of the Resistance, whereupon he was relieved of command and replaced by C.W. Woodhouse, a young Oxford classicist who followed a more political line. The other was Myers's cousin, Bernard Freyberg, the General who was in charge of the British defense of Crete during the terrible ten days of May 1941.

The post-war history of the Greek Jewish community follows two distinct paths: one leads to emigration, the other to restoration. The pattern of emigration was established during the war. Very few Jews escaped the death warrant issued by Hitler and Himmler and implemented by the Gestapo and the Wehrmacht. Those who did escape were mainly upper-class and well-to-do Jews, many of whom held foreign passports, whether Italian, Spanish or various South American ones.<sup>39</sup> The story began in Saloniki with the blanket issue of Spanish passports to Sephardi Jews and continued with the generous aid of the Italian consulate, the last sympathetic Axis authority in the city.<sup>40</sup>

Those who made it to the Italian zone were rescued in late 1943 and 1944 through a unique Palestinian Jewish – ELAS agreement under which one gold sovereign was paid for each Jew transported from Euboea to Çesme in Turkey. From there the Jews were transported via Syria to refugee camps in Gaza or in the Sinai desert. From these camps, some were drafted into British or Greek military service, some deserted or defected to the Palestinian Jewish community. Thus they returned to their ancestral homeland, for which they later fought or contributed bravely to its independence in other ways. Not that the journey home was easy; too many were betrayed, robbed by unscrupulous Greeks, or sunk in their caiques by German patrol boats. Incidentally, a number of Greek politicians, including

George Papandreiou, and high ranking military officers also escaped via this network. According to sources, ELAS was paid one gold sovereign for these as well.<sup>41</sup>

When the Germans evacuated Greece, a negotiated withdrawal in which both the Greeks and the British fully participated, the civil war which had been festering under German occupation broke out in all the fury which was to tear apart Greece for the next five years and poison its hospitality for the next half century. After the Varkiza Agreement (1944), the Jews who were attached to ELAS units demobilized and returned home, as did those who had hid in the mountains. There they found their homes occupied by Greek squatters while their wartime experiences were used against them by Rightist authorities. Many Jews were imprisoned; some others shot. The government however recognized the necessity of Jewish participation in ELAS for the express purpose of survival and so exempted them from the incipient civil war based on their wartime experiences. Yet local authorities continued their purge, and many young Jews were drafted into government forces to fight against the Communists.

On a number of accounts, then, Jews welcomed the option to leave Greece. Many, who recognized the politics of the anti-Communist campaigns of 1946-49 yet loyally served in them, left for Israel. Added to them were the handful who returned from the camps. The first survivors from Auschwitz were deemed crazy because of the incomprehensible and unbelievable stories they told. The average Greek exercises hyperbole as normative discourse. Hence the description of the gas chambers and ovens must have seemed to be hyperbole to those who stayed in Greece and who themselves had suffered tremendously in the resistance or in hiding. Indeed, the latter even accused the survivors of betraying their families by abandoning them to go to Germany!

Was it the pressures of the civil war, the psychological loss of family and home, the hostility of the local population, and the call of the Zionist effort to establish a haven for survivors that set in motion a mass exodus of Greek Jews to Palestine after 1945? True, there were in Greece some 10,000 Jews, most of whom had come out of hiding or out of the mountains after the German evacuation of Greece. Also, survivors came back, handful by handful, from the German camps, each with a different set of tragic experiences. But why did half of Greek Jewry decide to leave Greece to migrate - illegally or legally - in the decade following the end of WWII?

It was an aspect of the modern experience of Jews in Israel before the reestablishment of an independent state after nearly 1900 years of minority status among the nations of the world. The question facing Jewish leaders was what to do with the concentration camp survivors and the Jews who came out of hiding or returned from the Soviet cities of Central Asia? It was clear from postwar massacres that they were no longer welcome in Eastern Europe.

The first stage of the solution was to bring as many Jews as possible to Palestine both for humanitarian and for practical political reasons. The British White Paper which had restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine was still in effect until May 15, 1948. To

circumvent this restriction the Palestinian Jews sent in agents to organize the potential illegal immigrants for flight (*brichah* as it is called in Hebrew or *Aliyah Beth*) to Palestine. Groups were organized and brought to the Mediterranean shores of Italy and Greece over snow covered mountain passes. From there unseaworthy ships overcrowded with destitute refugees who had suffered both the camps and post liberation persecution challenged the Royal Navy.

As these illegal groups approached national borders in eastern and central Europe as well as in the Balkans, the participants were told to speak only Hebrew which the guides told the border guards was Greek! This ruse was necessary since the Greeks, as repatriating forced laborers from the Third Reich, were entitled to free transportation and unfettered border crossings. Contrary then to the actual figures of forced labor from Greece, the number of those who came to Greece and Italy and who were formally identified as Greeks was clearly beyond any statistical reality. There was no diplomatic protest from Greece to speak of. By comparison, we recall the pressures of the British Government on the Metaxas Dictatorship to halt a similar flight of refugees to Palestine via Greece in the years immediately prior to the war.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the above noted reasons for Greek Jews to leave Greece after the war, we need to consider the great number of Yiddish-speaking Jews whose exodus via Greece was efficiently organized by the Palestinian Jewish intelligence services and financed by the American Joint Distribution Committee.<sup>43</sup> The former simply became part of the larger movement to Palestine.<sup>44</sup>

This brings us to the close of our historical survey of Greek Jewry, the destruction of the age-old communities, and the exodus of most of the survivors. We can begin, I hope, to understand the politics and concerns of those who are in Greece today struggling with the twin burdens of dealing with the legacy of the war years and of sustaining an organized community in the face of declining numbers. It is no wonder that pundits for the past generation have prophesied the end of Greek Jewry. As an historian, it has been my task to outline the tremendous changes that have crippled the Greek Jewish community in the twentieth century. What will be tomorrow, I leave to their successors to effect and to mine to chronicle. Their brief will have to include the story of Modern Greek-Israeli diplomatic experiences and joint economic adventures as well as the ramifications and pressures of the Arab-Israeli dispute on the Greek Jewish community of Athens.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> A list forwarded to me in 1995 by Dr. Michael Matsas, whom I wish to thank here for his courtesy and assistance, contains the following current figures:

Athena	3524
Thessaloniki	1012
Larissa	405
Volos	128
Trikala	80
Chalkida	90
Karditsa	11
Kerkyra	45
Yiannina	92
Rhodos	35
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Total	5419

I cannot account for the discrepancy of three (5422 is the correct sum).

<sup>2</sup> A list of most of the demographic information then available from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1980 is in my essay “Jews in War-Time Greece,” *Jewish Social Studies* (Winter, 1986), 46-62. The problem of war-time demography is discussed in my forthcoming *The Agony of Greek Jewry during WWII*.

<sup>3</sup> This is a fascinating story that involves local post-war Greek politics and negotiations with the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem based on common war-time activities between the Cairo based Greek government in exile and the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and their respective counterparts in London.

<sup>4</sup> The leadership emerged out of a strong group of Zionists who spent the war years with the Resistance and who were almost the only ones to maintain contacts after the war between Greece and Israel.

<sup>5</sup> The Arab-Israeli conflict has been the cause of a number of violent terrorist incidents in Athens in the past. On the other hand, I recall discussions with Greeks displaced from Egypt who supported Israel as God’s rod against Arab xenophobia. In-depth studies of Israel-Greece relations have been noticeably lacking from the scholarly literature dealing with areas formerly under British influence.

<sup>6</sup> There is a dearth of material in Western languages on Greek Jewry in the Turkokratia. The Hebrew reader is better served. For the earlier Byzantine period, the works of Joshua Starr, *The Jews in the Byzantine Empire, 641-1204* (Athens, 1939), and the author’s *The Jews of Byzantium, 1204-1453* (University of Alabama Press, 1985), contain the basic documentation.

<sup>7</sup> See my “Greek and Jewish Nationalism in the Balkans in the Early Nineteenth Century” in *The Disintegration of the Ottoman World and the Fate of the Jews in Turkey and the Balkans (1808-1945)*, vol. 2, ed. Minna Rozen (Tel Aviv University, Diaspora Research Institute, 2002), 15-31.

<sup>8</sup> Sephardim were descendants of the Iberian exiles of 1492 and later Spanish-speaking migrants to the Ottoman realm. Romaniotes were descendants of the Greek-speaking citizens of Byzantium.

<sup>9</sup> See my "Germans and Jews in Interwar Greece," *The Jewish Communities of South Eastern Europe*, ed. I.K. Hasiotis (Thessaloniki, 1997), 75-86.

<sup>10</sup> Ashkenazim refers to German and Yiddish-speaking Jews of Northern Europe, the bulk of whom come from Poland. The migration to Greece of Central European Jews followed in the wake of the general migration mentioned previously.

<sup>11</sup> AIU, Grèce, IB1 Athens 1887/1932: letter Caime to Bigart.

<sup>12</sup> The otherwise excellent study of George Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic* (Berkeley, 1983) is occasionally misleading about the Jewish story. Joseph Nehama wrote extensive reports on the local situation which are housed in the archive of the Alliance Israélite Universelle [AIU] in Paris. His own censored summary of these appears in Nehama's multi-volume *Histoire des Juifs de Salonique*. Several of his reports have been published by Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition. The Teachers of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, 1860-1939* (Seattle, 1993), pp. 236, 248ff.

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Dalven, *The Jews of Ioannina* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 105-112.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. my *Jews of Byzantium*, pp. 25ff.

<sup>15</sup> Family tradition related to me by Dr. Michael Matsas.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted for the following outline to the late Rachel Dalven's *The Jews of Ioannina* (Philadelphia, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31f.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Jews of Byzantium*, pp. 174ff, 184, 193.

<sup>19</sup> See my "La llegada de los Sefardies a las tierras del Mediterraneo oriental" in *Judios. Sefarditas. Conversos. La expulsion de 1492 y sus consecuencias*, ed. Angel Alcalá (1995), pp. 269-281 and "Welcoming immigrants and refugees: aspects of the balkan jewish experience from byzantine to post-ottoman times," *Studies on turkish-jewish history: political and social relations, literature and linguistics: the quincentennial papers*, eds David F. Altabé, Erhan Atay, Israel J. Katz (Brooklyn, NY: Sepher-Hermon press, 1996), 1-11.

<sup>20</sup> Ladino was originally the vernacular language into which the Bible was translated (from latinar); it has come to represent Judaeo-Spanish, also called Judezmo, and in Hebrew Sepharadith.

<sup>21</sup> We exclude Cyprus from this discussion since its connection with Greek and Palestinian Jewish history is post WWII.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Rena Molho, "The Jewish Community of Salonika and Its Incorporation into the Greek State 1912-19," *Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (1988), 391-403.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. author's "The Great Powers and the Jews: British and French Consuls on Interwar Greek Jewry," *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division B, Volume II (Jerusalem, 1990), 379-86.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J. Nehama and Mr. Molho, *In Memoriam* (Thessaloniki, 1948) and subsequent editions in Hebrew and Greek. The curricular dispute is outlined in excruciating detail in the Nehama files located in the AIU archives in Paris.

<sup>25</sup> A preliminary outline of this tragedy is in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York, 1990), s.v.: Greece, Salonika, Athens, Thrace, etc., and *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* (New Haven, 2001), s.v. Greece.

<sup>26</sup> Among the latter were a number of Palestinian Jews who had been trained by the classicist now irregular (SOE) officer Lt. Col. Nicholas Hammond.

<sup>27</sup> The Bulgarian story is an oft told one, although never told in connection with the total Balkan picture or within the context of the whole Eastern Front. The most detailed study in English of the Bulgarian archival material is in Frederick B. Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution* (Pittsburg, 1972). The last contribution of Thracian Jewry at Treblinka was recorded by Claude Lanzmann in his film *Shoab*. The most recent discussion of this tragedy is Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fragility of Goodness. Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust* (Princeton and Oxford, 1999); see Omar Bartov's review in *The New Republic* (August 13, 2001) and my review in *Hadoar* (February 15, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. G. Engel, *Heeresadjutant bei Hitler 1938-1943* (ed., H. von Kotze) [Stuttgart, 1974], p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> His son Arie Koretz told me that it was because the Germans thought him part of the Masonic conspiracy in Greece.

<sup>30</sup> The story, based on documents at the ICRC in Geneva, is in my forthcoming study *The Agony of Greek Jews During WWII*. Cf. Jean-Claude Favez, *Une mission impossible? Le CIRC, les deportations et les camps de concentration Nazis* (1998), pp. 253-256. See also my "Another Righteous Gentile: The ICRC Representative in Salonika," *Thetis*, Band 111 (Mannheim, 1996), 217-220.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, s.v., Greece, Salonika, Thrace.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Humphrey, "The Jews of Crete under German Occupation 1941-44: I," *Bulletin of Judaeo-Greek Studies*, 5 (Winter 1989), 18-26; "The Sinking of the *Danae* off Crete in June 1944," *ibid.*, 9 (1991), 19-34.

<sup>33</sup> This story is more fully examined in Michael Matsas' *The Illusion of Safety*, (New York, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> The lower figure is the cautious estimate of Joseph Matsas, cf. "The Participation of the Greek Jews in the National Resistance," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 17 (1991), 55-68. He died before publishing more detailed figures. Michael Matsas has collected considerable oral data in his *The Illusion of Safety*.

<sup>35</sup> The issues of *Chronika*, the organ of KIS in Athens, often has articles on the Jews in the Resistance. Miriam Novitch collected a number of Resistance memoirs in 1959 (*Le passage des barbares*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Paris, 1967; English: Hull, 1989). See previous note. The resistance story will be examined in my forthcoming *Eleftheria I Thanatos* [Freedom or Death]. *Jewish Andartes in Wartime Greece* (in press).

<sup>36</sup> Some of their story from the 1930s is in my “Germans and Jews in Interwar Greece”; additional material and a preliminary roster will appear in my book cited in previous note.

<sup>37</sup> Most of the material on these units is in Hebrew in the form of memoirs. See Yoav Gelber, *Toldoth Habitnadvuth*, Vol III (Jerusalem, 1973), 1388 (in Hebrew) and my *Agony of Greek Jewry*, (forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> See his *Greek Entanglement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1985.

<sup>39</sup> The Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem contain the lists of Jews escaping from Greece to Turkey, with their passport affiliation.

<sup>40</sup> See Daniel Carpi, ed., *Italian Diplomatic Documents on the History of the Holocaust in Greece (1941-1943)* (Tel Aviv, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Zeev Venia Hadari, *Against All Odds. Istanbul 1942-1945* (Israel, Ministry of Defense, 1992), pp. 63f [in Hebrew]. Ehud Avriel, *Open the Gates* (New York, 1975) was the first to relate the Papandreou story. See author’s “Could the Dodekanisi Jews have been saved?” *Newsletter of the Jewish Museum of Greece* 26 (Winter, 1989), 1-2. See now my “Evia portage: the Jews, ELAS and the Allies in Evvia, 1943-1944,” *KAMPIOΣ: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek*, No. 11 (2003), pp. 1-24.

<sup>42</sup> See my “Germans and Jews in Interwar Greece” and in general Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (London and Oxford, 1979)

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Tad Szulc, *The Secret Alliance. The Extraordinary Story of the Rescue of the Jews Since World War II* (New York, 1991). The author provides a sweeping overview of material that can be substantiated from archival sources; cf. Yehudah Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945* (Detroit, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> These organizers entered Greece under cover of the United Nations Relief and Works Association (UNRWA) medical team, which consisted of 34 Palestinian Jewish doctors, nurses, and aides. (The documentation for this story is in the Haganah Archives in Tel Aviv.) They split into three groups, each under the banner of the Red Star of David medical symbol (to this day still not formally recognized by the Red Cross): one circulated through the Peloponnesus dispensing medicines and giving treatment to the local population; a second remained in Athens to help reorganize the Jewish community and recover orphan children as well as treat medically the local population; and a third established itself at Siderokastro to treat and direct any refugees returning via Bulgaria.