

# **A Brief History of the Jewish Community of Greece**

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## Introduction

In her August 12, 2010 book review of the latest addition to the historiography of the Jewish Holocaust in the Israeli daily Haaretz, Leah Aini made the following statement: “A new volume on the destruction of Greece's Jews in the Shoah is a fitting reminder of how little attention the 'official version' of history pays not only to that subject, but also to the miraculous culture that characterized the Jews of Salonika”. The book she is referring to is by Photini Tomai, *Greeks in Auschwitz-Birkenau* published by the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She goes on to say “It would also be worthwhile to check how it is that, out of 115,000 volumes about the Holocaust housed in the Yad Vashem library, only 34 are indexed under the heading "Greece".<sup>1</sup>

And yet, the story of the Jews of Greece is most remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it spans well over 2,300 years of continuous habitation, interaction and contribution to the economic and cultural life of the Greek nation. Second, it was a large and dynamic presence that on the eve of the First World War numbered over 100,000 people, spread out in more than 25 communities across Greece where it enjoyed the same rights as the Greek people and was prominently represented in the Greek parliament, universities, professions and industry. Third, the Northern Macedonian city of Thessaloniki, or Salonika as it was known at the time had become Europe's largest Sephardic Jewish center until the Holocaust, and between the 16th and 18th centuries was, without exaggeration, the largest, and one of the most vibrant Jewish centers in Europe altogether. “A Jewish city unlike any other in the world, not even in Eretz Israel,” wrote David Ben-Gurion in one of his letters, about the year he spent studying in Salonika”.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, when the criminal and horrific events of the Holocaust arrived in Greece in March 1943, the response of the Greek people, the Greek government, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Greek national resistance organizations EDES and EAM/ELAS was unparalleled in the civilized world in its defiance of the occupying forces and in its wholehearted support for its Jewish compatriots.

Today's conference on Hellenic Israeli relations has been long overdue and there is no better place to start than by reviewing this history and describing the background upon which the future of this relationship can evolve. In the twenty minutes I have available to recount this story I can not do full justice on all the aspects of this remarkable story. Fortunately, there is a large body of writings much of it accessible on the internet and I have listed some of these in the bibliography of this paper. Instead I will provide a brief outline of this history and will borrow heavily from Jewish scholars and sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Aini, Leah, ) “No other Jews like them” in Haaretz.com, March 20, 2011

<sup>2</sup> ibid

In his preface to the book *Documents on the History of the Greek Jews: Records from the Historical Archives* of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs that came out in 1998, Professor Steven Bowman, eminent authority on Judaic studies and the Greek Jewry sums up the relationship as follows:

“Greek-Jewish relations, now over three millennia in duration, present the oldest continuous inter-ethnic relationship in history and constitute, as it were, the double helix of western civilization. As with every relationship it is double-edged, with elements of competition and fusion. Towards the end of the first millennium B.C.E., invading Aegean warriors and their families, now settled in the land of the Philistines, clashed with the Israelites returning to their ancestral homeland after centuries of slavery. The Israelite champion David eventually became ruler over a vast empire stretching from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates. Philistine and Cretan mercenaries constituted the core of David’s fighting force, and after his conquest of the Philistine cities the two peoples merged under the banner of the God of Abraham and Moses and David.

Some seven centuries later the conquests of Alexander and his successors gave new incentive to the Philistines to resurrect their Hellenic connections and a new age entered the land of Israel during which the heirs of Moses and David adopted Hellenised speech, thought, and institutions. Hellenism penetrated slowly under the Ptolemies of Egypt, but clashes with the Seleucids of Syria led to a renewal of Jewish independence under the Hasmoneans. Throughout the Greek-speaking world a rich Judeo-Greek culture and literature flourished, and through the extensive works of Philo, Paul and Josephus a new fusion of Greeks and Jews set the pattern for the next two millennia, while expanding commentaries on their respective oeuvres continue to guide new immigrant peoples to the West into the logical and moral heritage of these two traditions.

From Alexander’s time, if not before, Hellenophone Jews have been living and creating in Hellas and among the Hellenes in all the lands surrounding the Aegean. Throughout the medieval period in the territories subject to Constantinople these Jews were engaged in a series of competitions with the Greek Orthodox tradition, although the Jews were at a distinct political disadvantage as an increasingly second-class minority. Nonetheless their very existence, as well as their literary heritage, provided opportunities for heretics and converts to challenge the control of state and church. The 19<sup>th</sup> century resurrection of the Greeks to national independence reverberated first among Balkan, and later East European Jews in their Zionist awakening and still influences contemporary Jewish nationalism.

From its inception Jews have been an integral part of the new and expanding Greek State, including its fighting forces, despite the animosity of a minority of aggressive nationalists who were unable to separate Greek from Orthodox.

The tragic and criminal deportation of Greek Jews from their homeland by Nazi Germany during World War II left less than one fifth of pre-war Jewry to cope with the ensuing civil war. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the vicissitudes of post-war Greece stimulated the emigration of two-thirds of the survivors such that there are scarcely more than 5,000 Jews in today's Greece".<sup>3</sup>

## The Early Years

Jewish presence in Greece dates from the 3rd century BCE, in tombstones and other ancient artifacts discovered throughout Greece. The first known reference comes from a 3rd century BC plaque found in Oropos, a seaside area northeast of Athens, which refers to Moschos Moschionos (i.e. Moschos son of Moschos), a Jew from Voiotia, just north of Athens. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Hyrcanus, a leader in the Jewish community of Athens, was honoured by the raising of a statue in the agora. After the wars of the Maccabaeas (170 to 161 BCE), many Israelites left Judea and settled in commercial hubs of the eastern Mediterranean, like Alexandria and Antioch. From these communities, many further settled in secondary ports and hubs in the Aegean, such as Efessus, Smyrna, and Thessaloniki, where Jews arrived from Ptolemaic Alexandria shortly after the founding of the city by Cassander in 315 BCE who named it after his wife, the sister of Alexander the Great. Apostle Paul had visited Thessaloniki around 50 CE and preached at the Etz Chaim Synagogue three Saturdays in a row. In addition, excavations in the sacred island of Delos have unearthed an ancient synagogue and many signs in Hebrew, all dating from the 1st century BCE including the Synagogue in the Agora of Athens. Other written evidence suggests that Roman General Vespasian, in 66-70 CE, sent Nero six thousand Jews to work at the construction site of the Corinth canal. The Book of Maccabaeas includes a list of Jewish communities in Greece and confirms their existence in Delos, Kos, Samos, Argos, Corinth, Crete, Thessaly and Macedonia. Historian Philon refers to Jewish presence in Thessaly, Voiotia, Attica, Crete, Evoia and Cyprus.

These communities were the basis for the extensive Jewish presence in what is today Greece throughout the thousand years of the Byzantine Empire. Despite repeated attempts by many Byzantine Emperors to force them to convert to Christianity, Greek Jews resisted and maintained their identity. In 1173, Rabbi Benjamin from the Spanish city of Tudela, who travelled to Greece to study the Jewish presence there wrote in his diary that he found Jews in 13 Greek cities, including Thessaloniki, Corfu, Corinth and Halkida. The Jews of Greece were called Romaniotes, which means Roman citizens. They were Hellenized Jews who spoke Greek and Yevanic, a dialect of the Greek language but who kept tightly to their religion, customs and traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998) Documents on the History of the Greek Jews: Records from the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MFA & University of Athens, p.11

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 ordered the deportation of these Greek-speaking Jewish communities 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.<sup>4</sup>

In the decade following the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Spain in 1492, Jews in Portugal, Italy, Sicily and France, migrated eastward to the Ottoman Empire and were encouraged to settle in those areas devoid of Jews by the Sultan Bayazid. About 20 thousand Jews settled in Thessaloniki and gave new life to the city that was almost deserted after the Turkish conquest. The Spanish Sephardim brought their language known as Ladino, their customs and skills. Their main occupations were textile manufacture and dying as well as silk processing, but they also distinguished themselves in the arts, the sciences and in commercial activities. As a consequence there flourished in the northern tier of Greece, in that string of towns along the Via Egnatia with Thessaloniki 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. Sultan Bayazid made the now famous remark that the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella were considered wise, but wrongly so, since they impoverished Spain and enriched Turkey. The Greek historian Apostolos Vacalopoulos writes “the commercial activity of those Jews was a special incentive for the economic growth of the Greek inhabitants of the city, which, combined with other factors, led to their national awakening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Ashkenazi refugees from Central Europe and later on floods of Jews from southern Russia, started streaming into the city and surrounding regions, 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. In the 200 years between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries Thessaloniki became the largest Jewish city in the world, and came to be known as “Jerusalem of the Balkans and “Saloniki city and mother in Israel” or “Ir va-em be-yisrael”.

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<sup>4</sup> Bowman, Steven (2002) “The Jews in Greece” *Minorities in Greece: Aspects of a Plural Society*, Edited by Richard Clogg, Oxford, p. 424

<sup>5</sup> Vacalopoulos, Apostolos (1972) *A History of Thessaloniki*, translated by T.F.Carney, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki

When the Greeks decided to rise against the Turks during the Greek Revolution of 1821, circumstances led to the unfortunate slaughter of many Jews in the Peloponnesus. Steven Bowman explains that ‘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>6</sup> During the Greek Revolution of 1821, a reporter by the name of Georges Laffitte, a French Jew, roused French public opinion in support of struggling Greece with his moving articles in “France Libre”, The Chief Rabbi of Westphalia in Germany collected donations in the Synagogues for the Greek liberation fighters. Moses Gaster, a Jew, diplomatic agent of Holland in Bucharest, helped Alexandros Ypsylantis escape from the Turks after the lost battle of Dragatsani.<sup>7</sup>

### **From the Creation of the Modern State of Greece to the Liberation of Thessaloniki**

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 on the east coast of the Aegean Sea and Volos on the northwest coast as well as Romaniotes from Ioannina in Epiros. 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, the most famous being Georg Karo as the head of the Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut. 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>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bowman, Steven (2002), op. cit., p. 421

<sup>7</sup> Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, [www.sephardicstudies.org](http://www.sephardicstudies.org)

<sup>8</sup> Bowman, Steven (2002), op. cit., p.422

At the turn of the 20th century, the Greek state occupied less than half the land it does today; the island of Crete and northern Greece, including Thessaloniki, were still part of the dying Ottoman Empire. The future of Macedonia, Epirus and Thrace, regions with predominantly Greek populations were still under the control of the Ottomans while the newly resurgent states of Bulgaria and Serbia were laying plans to possess them from the Turks. During the Greek struggle for Macedonia Jews of international renown, such as Max Nordau, co-founder of the World Zionist Organization and Archaeologist Salomon Reinach, vice-president of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, one of the leading figures in the Franco-Jewish establishment, supported in every possible way Greek national aspirations in Crete and Macedonia. In the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, two hundred Jews fought in the Greek army.

By the First Balkan War (1912), a small but wealthy and influential community of Athenian Jews led by Ashkenazim 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 Eleftherios Venezelos. Venizelos 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 Thessaloniki for their potential value to Greece, “a superior man who had no race or religious prejudice.”<sup>9</sup>

### **From the Balkan Wars to the Second World War**

When the Greek army entered Thessaloniki in October, 1912 during the last days of the First Balkan War, King George of Greece declared that Jews and all other minorities were to have the same rights as the Greek population. In May, 1917, under the leadership of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and Foreign Minister Nicolaos Politis, Greece, became one of the first countries in the world that accepted the Balfour Declaration five months before its proclamation in November of that year on the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. <sup>10</sup>The following year, the Thessaloniki community celebrated the first anniversary of the Balfour Declaration with “a grandeur unprecedented for most Jewish communities in Europe” <sup>11</sup>

It is important to highlight the special nature and legacy of the Jews of Thessaloniki. Unlike the Romaniote Jews, who asserted their Greekness and merged into the Athenian environment seamlessly, the predominantly Sephardic community of Jews of Thessaloniki formed a separate constellation. Having evolved over the previous four centuries in a highly decentralized Ottoman

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 422

<sup>10</sup> Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, [www.kis.gr](http://www.kis.gr)

<sup>11</sup> Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.31

environment with special rights and privileges having been accorded to them by the Sultans in lieu of their special economic contribution to the life of the empire, the city's Jewish community had evolved by the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into an assertive, confident and cosmopolitan metropolis, where half the total population of the city was Jewish. Salonika, was Europe's largest Sephardic Jewish center until the Holocaust and between the 16th and 18th centuries was, without exaggeration, the largest Jewish center in Europe altogether and came to be known as the "Jerusalem of the Balkans," Thessaloniki, which knew occupation, epidemics, fires and famines, had been a veritable empire of rare cosmopolitan experience, with a lively culture of tolerance, and it had served as a Ladino-speaking Jewish center for 450 years.

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Thessaloniki's Jewish population numbered around 62,000, about half the city's population, the other half being composed of Christian and Muslim Greeks. There were around 60 synagogues, and the Jewish cemetery of the city, dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century numbered over 450,000 graves, a testimony of the generations of Jews who lived and died in the city.<sup>12</sup> There was a flourishing Jewish intelligentsia; newspapers published in Ladino, French and Greek; Jewish theater, poets and writers; movements both socialist and Zionist; publishers and impressive libraries; a wide network of Jewish schools and community-run social-service organizations; a magnificent rabbinate; physicians and bankers.<sup>13</sup> The city's Jews were the living realization of the vision of David Ben-Gurion and the Zionist movement: They were the "New Jew." "The sea off the coast of Salonika was home to Jewish fishermen, its ports employed Jewish stevedores - and when they rested on the Sabbath, the port was closed. The workshops of Salonika, many of which were Jewish-owned, employed Jewish craftsmen, and the city's streets were traversed by muscular Jewish porters, Jewish horse-drawn carriages, all organized in cooperative agreements that were fully honored in hard times. And with fraternal relations with their Christian brethren too, they had a mentality that was Mediterranean. They celebrated life with good food, with song, dance and music, with entertainment, love and sports".<sup>14</sup> "No, there were no other Jews like this in the Diaspora: Salonika's Jews were not weak, not assimilated, they were not forced to choose between religion and education. They were nursed on the harmony that was in the blood of the city, and blended body and soul. 'A Jewish city unlike any other in the world, not even in Eretz Israel,' wrote David Ben-Gurion in one of his letters, about the year he spent studying in Salonika".<sup>15</sup>

Following the liberation of the city by the Greek army from Ottoman rule, in 1912, the Jews retained their privileges and were granted the same civil rights as

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<sup>12</sup> For a fascinating description of the history and economic, social and administrative structure of the community see Benmayor, Yakov, *The Jews of Thessaloniki* and Molho, Rena *The Jerusalem of the Balkans: Salonica 1856-1919*, [www.jmth.gr](http://www.jmth.gr)

<sup>13</sup> Aini, Leah (2011), op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

all the other Greeks. The Jews continued to be active in the country's social, political and military circles, with people like Senator Avraham Ben-Aroya, co-founder of the Socialist Workers' Party of Greece, Senator Asser Mallah, member of Venizelos' Liberal Party, head of the Zionist movement in Greece and co-founder of the Haifa Polytechnic School, and military officers such as Col. Mordechai Frizis who fought and distinguished himself in the Asia Minor campaigns of 1921-22 and a hero of the Albanian war. There were many families that had distinguished themselves such as the Allatini, Mallah and Matsas families, to name only a few. Incidentally, Senator Mallah's cousin was the doctor Beniko Mallah, the grand father of French President Nicola Sarkozy.<sup>16</sup> Although Greek authorities had made good on their promises to the Jewish community which continued to thrive, two events contributed adversely to the development of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki.

The first of these events was the Great Fire of 1917 which devastated almost all of the city, including its historical nucleus, its business centre, the offices and buildings of local administration and public services and splendid monuments such as the 5<sup>th</sup> century church of St-Demetrios, probably the most cherished shrine of Christendom in South-Eastern Europe. The 120 hectares of scorched land included 9,500 houses. As a consequence, 70,000 people out of a population of close to 170,000 were left homeless. The Thessaloniki Jews suffered the hardest blow from the disaster.<sup>17</sup> The fire of 1917 was a particularly severe blow, from which the Community was never able to fully recover: 53,737 Jews were rendered homeless, and many buildings were destroyed, including the Community administrative offices, those of the Chief Rabbinate and of various welfare institutions, as well as thirty synagogues, the school of the Alliance Israelite, and ten more schools.<sup>18</sup>

The second event was the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922 in which the Greek army was defeated by Kemal Ataturk's forces which led to a massive exodus of 1,500,000 Greeks from their ancestral homes in Anatolia including many thousands of Armenians. With the influx of huge numbers of destitute Greek and Armenian refugees few years after the Great Fire the situation in the city became even more unbearable which forced many Jews to emigrate to France, Palestine and the United States. Not only did the city's population start to decrease, but the Jewish community was reduced to a minority after centuries of constituting the majority. In 1924, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki delivered a report on their condition to Henry Morgenthau, Chairman of the Refugee Settlement Commission, describing their plight and needs. Morgenthau, a reform Jew from New York and a personal friend of Woodrow Wilson, committed two years of his life to the Herculean task of coping with the settlement of Greece's refugee population.

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<sup>16</sup> Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, "Chronika", Vol. M, Issue 214, March-April, 2008

<sup>17</sup> Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.31

<sup>18</sup> Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, [www.kis.gr](http://www.kis.gr)

By 1924, 2,500 Jewish families had been provided with shelter, another 7,000 remained homeless. In the meantime, the camps of the destitute refugees became hotbeds of resentment and anti-Semitism during the 1920s which culminated in the burning of a large part of the Jewish suburb of Campbell in June 1931 by ultra-right extremists. It was the worst anti-Semitic incident in the history of the Greek state and forced authorities to take measures to preclude a repetition.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, despite the vicissitudes of the inter-war period the Jewish Community numbered more than 50,000 souls on the eve of World War II.

### **The Second World War and the Holocaust in Greece**

In 28 October, 1940, Greece's Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas rejected Mussolini's ultimatum to surrender the country to the Fascist forces and despite his attempts to stay out of the war, Greece was forced to enter the war. In the general mobilization that followed, 12,898 Jews from all parts of Greece were conscripted, of which 343 were officers. In the battles that ensued on the mountains of Epirus and Albania, Colonel Mordechai Frizis, from Halkida was instrumental in repulsing the Italian advance into Greece which led to Greece's counter attack that drove the Italians out of Greece and deep into Albanian territory.<sup>20</sup> The success of the Greek army in defeating the Italians, quipped "Surprise No. 6 of WWII" by Time Magazine in its December 16 1940 issue however, forced Germany's hand. After an unsuccessful attempt to enter Greece through Bulgaria, they were forced to invade Yugoslavia and come down the Axios valley straight to Thessaloniki in April, 1941, which forced the surrender of the Greek army. The toll of the war for the Greek Jews was 513 dead and 3,743 wounded, of whom 1,412 were disabled. Among the 343 Jewish officers that served were Colonel Mordechai Frizis, from Halkida, who died gallantly in the Battle of Kalamas and was elevated to a national hero by Prime Minister Metaxas, officer Jean Allalouf, from Thessaloniki, Major Salvador Sarfatli, from Athens, officers Joseph Baruch from Corfu and Leon Dostis from Ioannina. Most of the wounded and disabled Jews were subsequently rounded up from hospitals and shipped to the notorious Birkenau camp. Very few survived.

An other lesser known fact in the history of the contribution of the Jewish community was the Greek national resistance movement under the aegis of EAM/ELAS. Many Jews from all parts of Greece made their way into the mountains.<sup>21</sup> 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 to reclaim their children. Throughout 1943 and 1944 between 600 and 1000 Greek Jews out of an estimated 30,000 resistance fighters fought with the resistance. Many thousands were active in support units, such as logistics, or acted as translators, nurses,

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<sup>19</sup> Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.31

<sup>20</sup> Matsas, Michael (1997) *The Illusion of Safety – the Story of the Greek Jews during the Second World War*, Pella Publishing Company

<sup>21</sup> Bowman, Steven (2002), op.cit. p.428

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.<sup>22</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. 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 while a special squad of highly trained Jews was sent on secret missions to Greece during the war. Another aspect was the close collaboration between the Greek resistance organizations and Haganah, which worked ceaselessly to smuggle Greek and European Jews to Palestine through Turkey.<sup>23</sup> One of those who was assisted by the Greek resistance movement and was able to escape to Palestine was a Polish volunteer in the British army, Yitzhak Persky, the father of the President of Israel, Shimon Peres.<sup>24</sup>

The Nazi occupation of Greece was brutal. Greece was carved up in three zones: Thrace and Eastern Macedonia were given to the Bulgarians, central Macedonia with Thessaloniki, the Athens metropolitan region, Crete and many islands adjacent to the Turkish coast were under German occupation while the rest of Greece was under Italian control. The fate of Jews followed different paths in each one of the regions. In the Bulgarian section, although the government of King Boris refused to surrender the Jews of Bulgaria, in the occupied section of Greece they demanded that the Jews in the Greek occupied areas relinquish their Greek citizenship which the Jews refused to do. Under German pressure the Bulgarians deported some 4000 Greek Jews from Serres, Kavalla, Komotini, Xanthi and the island of Thassos to death camps in Poland, mostly in Treblinka. Over 97% of the Jews of Greece under the control of the Bulgarians perished.

In the German controlled central Macedonia with Thessaloniki as its capital, where 70% of Greece's pre-war Jewish community was concentrated, the fate that awaited the Greek Jews was dismal. Steven Bowman writes:

“Since late fall of 1941 the order for the deportation of the Salonikan Jewish community was in the Wehrmacht pipeline. 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

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.429

<sup>23</sup> Matsas, Michael (2004) *The Greek Jews and the Holocaust – Why 87% Were Killed During the Second World War*

<sup>24</sup> Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), *op.cit.* p.34

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. 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".<sup>25</sup>

"Thus in February 1943 the Nuremberg 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. 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>26</sup> In February 1943 the Greek resistance organization of EAM proposed that "they should disperse, separately, or by families in areas where they would be safe and they should entrust their children to trustworthy families outside of Salonica."<sup>27</sup> This humanitarian proposal was rejected by the uninformed or naive Jewish leaders of Salonica.<sup>28</sup> The task of rounding up the Jewish population of Thessaloniki was tragically greatly facilitated by Chief Rabbi Zvi Koretz who surrendered to the Germans the archives of the community. "The community hoped that since he spoke German, he would be effective in his dealings with the German authorities. He became convinced that by unquestioning compliance, the Nazis might be mollified. He therefore urged the community to comply with the German instructions"<sup>29</sup>The role of Koretz has remained a contentious issue but the prevailing view is that he was guilty of naiveté rather than collaboration.<sup>30</sup>

The situation of Greece's Jewish community south of Mount Olympus, on the other hand was vastly different, were more than 80% of its Jewish population survived. After the Italian armistice in September 1943, the Germans tried to locate the Jews of Athens, Patras, Chalkida and other cities, but to no avail. A number of reasons helped these communities survive. First, was the fact that the Jewish community of Athens and the rest of the predominantly Romaniote Jews of Southern Greece were more integrated than those of the North in Greek society and their homes were dispersed throughout the communities in which they lived. The concept of ghetto had never taken root in Greece. Second, the

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<sup>25</sup> Bowman, Steven (2002), op. cit., p.427

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 427

<sup>27</sup> Matsas, Michael (2004), op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> ibid

<sup>29</sup> Benmayor, Yakov, op.cit.

<sup>30</sup> Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.35

role of Greek society and polity. The idea of surrendering fellow human beings to genocide, let alone their Jewish compatriots was completely abhorrent and alien to the Greek psyche. Aware of what had happened to the Jews of Thessaloniki, Greek society, the Greek resistance movement, the Greek Orthodox Church and even the Greek quisling government officials opposed the demands of the Nazis to submit their fellow Jews to the Nuremberg laws and mobilized their forces to save their fellow brothers. The Greek Chief Rabbi of Athens Elias Barzilai was told not to comply to German demands to surrender the list of Athenian Jews to the authorities; the Chief of the Greek police Angelos Evert, and those of other cities like Michael Glykas, Dimitris Vranopoulos, and Stavridis issued 18,500 false identity papers while the Greek Orthodox Church issued thousands of false baptismal certificates to Greek Jews who were hidden across the cities in Christian homes or taken to the surrounding mountains by the Greek resistance fighters.

The third and defining factor that protected the Jewish community, not only in Greece but across much of the Orthodox Christian world was the role of the Greek Orthodox Church. To quote Nora Levin, "In contrast with the Pope's decision to give the Bishops liberty of action, the Orthodox Church adopted a different policy. The Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople wrote to all of his Bishops in the Balkans and in central Europe, urging them to help Jews and to announce in their Churches that concealing Jews was a sacred duty. This might explain the fact that in Slovakia, an essentially Catholic Country, more Jews were temporarily able to escape deportation by "conversion" to the Orthodox Church than to Roman Catholicism". Dr. Michael Matsas, a Greek Jew writes: "during the Second World War the churches of Europe remained silent and silent also remained all the churches of the United States of America. Pope Pius XII not only remained silent, but in a new book, "The Battle for Rome," he is presented as a "moral coward with deep Fascist tendencies. In spite of his white robes he had a black soul. In the book "Hitler's Pope," by John Cornwell, Pope Pius XII gave his message of indifference not only by his silence, but also especially by his "Reich Concordat," a treaty with Hitler, which insured that the Nazis would rise unopposed to power. This treaty, by Hitler's own admission, sealed the fate of the Jews in Europe". In the great list of important personalities of the Western World for whom I don't have any respect, writes Dr. Matsas, there are two worthy exceptions: Archbishop Damaskinos of Greece and the Archbishop of Bulgaria".

<sup>31</sup>

On March 23, 1943, barely a month following the first deportation of Thessaloniki Jews to Poland, Archbishop of Athens and Greece Damaskinos submitted a strongly worded letter of protest to the Greek quisling Prime Minister Logothetopoulos a letter of protest unique in the annals of occupied Europe. The following day a similar letter of protest dated March 24, 1943 and addressed to Adolph Hitler's Ambassador to Greece Gunther von Altenburg was also delivered. It was drafted by Greek lyric poet and humanist Angelos Sikelianos and signed by Archbishop Damaskinos, and the presidents of 42 Greek

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<sup>31</sup> Matsas, Michael (2004), op. cit

organizations who protested the deportation of the Greek Jews. The poet Angelos Sikelianos, who wrote the protest, the editor George Karantzias, and the actor Theodoros Moridis, all three risked everything when they undertook the dangerous mission of delivering the protest.<sup>32</sup> The Jewish Virtual Library states that “this historical document, unique in the annals of occupied Europe, was signed by representatives of the major cultural institutions and organizations on behalf of the Greek people. It required “virtue and courage” to sign such a document on those dark times.”<sup>33</sup> Salomon Asser of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation adds: “Archbishop Damaskinos went ahead and published the letter, even though the Nazi Commander of Athens threatened to execute him by firing squad. Damaskinos’ famous response to him was: *”According to the traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church, Greek Priests are hung and not shot. Please respect our traditions!”*

The full text of this letter dated March 23, 1943 and addressed to the German appointed Prime Minister of Greece K. Logothetopoulos is worth reproducing in its entirety and has been appended to this paper, because its profound wording and spirit remain universal, timeless and still relevant in today’s world. Here I will read only few excerpts from the letter of protest

*”In our national consciousness, all the children of Mother Greece are an inseparable unity; they are equal members of the national body irrespective of religion (as it is stated): ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek’ and thus condemns any attempt to discriminate or create racial or religious differences. Our common fate in both days of glory and in periods of national misfortune forged inseparable bonds between all Greek citizens, without exemption, irrespective of religion...”*

*Today we are...deeply concerned with the fate of 60,000 of our fellow citizens who are Jewish...we have lived together in both slavery and freedom, and we have come to appreciate their feelings, their brotherly attitude, their economic activity, and most important, their indefectible patriotism...”*

*“We hope that the Occupation Authorities will realize in due time the futility of the persecution of Greek Jews, who are among the most peaceful and productive elements of the country.*

*If, however, they insist on this policy of deportation, we believe that the Government, as the bearer of whatever political authority is left in the country, should take a clear stance against these events and let the foreigners bear the full responsibility of committing this obvious injustice. Let no one forget that all actions done during these difficult times, even those actions that lie beyond our will and power, will be assessed some day by the nation and will be subjected to historical investigation. In that time of judgement, the*

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<sup>32</sup> ibid

<sup>33</sup> Jewish Virtual Library

*responsibility of the leaders will weigh heavily upon the conscience of the nation if today the leaders fail to protest boldly in the name of the nation against such unjust measures as the deportation of the Greek Jews, which are an insult to our national unity and honour*<sup>34</sup>

Equally unequivocal in its stance in support of Greek Jews is the proclamation issued on January 22, 1943 by the Greek National Liberation Front (EAM) calling on Greeks to rescue their Jewish compatriots. The full text of this proclamation is also appended to this paper.<sup>35</sup>

Greek Jews were assisted by the Bishops of Thessaloniki, Gennadios, of Dimitrias, Christodoulos, of Chalkis, Gregorios, and of Zakynthos, Chrysostomos. The last one is worth noting. When the German authorities asked the Mayor and the Chief Rabbi to submit the list of Jews on the island, the Bishop of Zakynthos Chrysostomos accompanied by the Mayor of the island Loukas Carrer, submitted a list. It contained only two names, that of the Bishop and that of the Mayor, thus all of the island's 275 Greek Jews were miraculously saved!

The tragedy of the Greek Jewish community during the Holocaust was as great as any other European country's. About 86% of the community was exterminated in the concentration camps of central Europe mostly in the notorious Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Of 77,377 Greek Jews in 1940, only 10,266 lived to see 1945. The proud and illustrious 450-year old Saphardic community of Thessaloniki was decimated to the point that today, with a population of just over 1,000 Greek Jews is a mere shadow of its former self. The community that was called the "Mother of Israel" and inspired and paved the way for the creation of the modern state of Israel disappeared not only in reality but unfortunately in the memory of contemporary world Jewry as well. The Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture in New York states in its website "and yet, too often in modern Holocaust texts, historians have overlooked the destruction of Greek Jewry. Greece suffered one of the highest percentage of losses in Jewish population during the Second World War and is often recounted as a footnote in Holocaust history" echoing the statement of Leah Aini.

What is also overlooked in the contemporary history of the Second World War is the contribution made by Greece to the allied victory as well as the disproportional and horrendous cost born by the Greek nation. The German attack on Greece cost the Germans their elite paratroopers who were slaughtered by the Greeks in the fields of Crete and most important delayed the implementation of the Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union by five weeks which proved faithful, because it gave the Russians time to prepare and forced the Germans to face their greatest enemy, the Russian winter in front of

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<sup>34</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, Yad Vashem Resource Centre & Constantantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.250 & 254

<sup>35</sup> Yad Vashem, Shoah Resource Center

Moscow for which they were not prepared. By the end of the war, Greece's entire economy had been destroyed and the human toll in military and civilian casualties was immense, although the exact figure will never be known the best estimates suggest that, if the ensuing civil war casualties are included, it exceeded 700,000 about 10% of the Greek population at the time.

The response of the Greek government following the end of the war was exemplary. Immediately after the liberation of Greece, the Greek government passed legislation for the restitution of Jewish properties to their legal owners. Greek authorities set a laudable precedent by appointing the Jewish communities as administrators of all property whose legal owners had perished or were lost without trace. Besides the automatic return of property to its rightful owners, the Cabinet of George Papandreou, during its meeting of August 24, 1944, resolved that all Jewish property which remained in abeyance due to the absence of heirs up to and including the fourth degree was not to revert to the state, as laid down by law, but was to be ceded to a common fund for the rehabilitation of indigent Jews.<sup>36</sup> Steven Bowman adds: this "act of a liberated state was the first of any European country to resolve justly the problem of Nazi confiscated Jewish property"<sup>37</sup> On May 8, 1947, the Cabinet resolved to grant the sum of 8,000,000 drachmas as a first instalment to meet urgent educational and religious needs of the Jewish communities. The US Ambassador to Greece had expressed his surprise that the Greek government was proceeding with the enforcement of these laws at a time when the country itself was in such dire circumstances. Prime Minister Nikolaos Plastiras declared that Greece was a poor but honest country and that it would be unthinkable for it to take advantage of the fact that a number of its citizens had been exterminated, in order to fill its till.<sup>38</sup>

The years following the end of the war were not easy for the Jews of Greece and the Greeks in general. A civil war broke out between 1946 and 1949 between leftist and rightist forces. In the meantime, the State of Israel was reborn on May 14, 1948 and many of the Greek Jews chose to move to Israel or the United States, thus further weakening the Jewish community of Greece. Although there is still a prominent and dynamic Jewish community in Greece today numbering just under 6,000 persons, unfortunately for Greece, it lost one of the most urbane and productive elements of its population.

Constantopoulou and Veremis write that "Greek Jews shared common historical experiences and struggled on the same fronts as the majority of their Christian fellow citizens. However, they devoutly kept up their traditions, and if in Greece they were never confined in ghettos, they did follow a certain way of life which extended beyond their religion to their language and particular mores. In the post-War period, Greek literature, more than any other in Europe, dealt with

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<sup>36</sup> Constantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.36

<sup>37</sup> Bowman, Steven (2002), op. cit., p. 419

<sup>38</sup> Constantopoulou, Photini & Thanos Veremis (1998), op.cit. p.36

the life and fate of the Greek Jews, mainly the victims of the Holocaust, thus providing the general public with a unique description of their lives.<sup>39</sup>

And they conclude: "In pursuing the history of the two peoples, it is easy to observe their common characteristics: their inclination to trade, their love for art and literature, their long subjection to conquerors and their Diaspora, have been dealt with in many treatises. Their love of freedom, respect for the individual and their cosmopolitanism, which however, never broke the bonds with their country of origin are a few other characteristics which linked the two nations"<sup>40</sup>.

Sir Winston Churchill remarked in his memoirs: "The Greeks rival the Jews in being the most politically minded race in the world ... No other two races have set such a mark upon the world. Both have shown a capacity for survival in spite of unending perils and suffering from external oppressors, matched only by their own ceaseless feuds, quarrels and convulsions. The passage of several thousand years sees no change in their characteristics and no diminution of their trials or their vitality. They have survived in spite of all that the world could do against them ... No two cities have counted more with mankind than Athens and Jerusalem".<sup>41</sup> In finishing, let us be reminded by what Albert Einstein once said: "The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it"

To date, 307 Greeks have been honoured as Righteous Among The Nations by The Holocaust Martyrs` and Heroes` Remembrance Authority of Yad Vashem

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.37

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 38

<sup>41</sup> Churchill, Winston (1951) Triumph and Tragedy, Volume V, Book II, Houghton, Mifflin Co. Boston, pp. 532-533

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## ADDENDUM 1

### Archbishop Damaskinos and Greek Intellectuals Protest Persecution of Greek Jewry

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#### VIRTUE AND COURAGE

The Greek Orthodox Church and the Academic World of the Greek People Protest against the Persecution.

The letter that was sent by Archbishop Damaskinos to Prime Minister K. Logothetopoulos is a monument of courage, national dignity and respect for human ideals.

This historical document, unique in the annals of occupied Europe, was signed by representatives of the major cultural institutions and organizations on behalf of the Greek people. It required "virtue and courage" to sign such a document in those dark times.<sup>42</sup>

To  
The Prime Minister  
Mr. K. Logothetopoulos  
ATHENS

*Mr. Prime Minister*

*The Greek people were rightfully surprised and deeply grieved to learn that the German Occupation Authorities have already started to put into effect a program of gradual deportation of the Greek Jewish community of Salonika to places beyond our national borders, and that the first groups of deportees are already on their way to Poland. The grief of the Greek people is particularly deep because of the following:*

*According to the terms of the armistice, all Greek citizens, without distinction of race or religion, were to be treated equally by the Occupation Authorities.*

*The Greek Jews have proven themselves not only valuable contributors to the economic growth of the country but also law-abiding citizens who fully understand their duties as Greeks. They made sacrifices for the Greek country and were always on the front line in the struggles of the Greek nation to defend its inalienable historical rights.*

*The law-abiding nature of the Jewish community in Greece refutes a priori any charge that it may be involved in actions or acts that might even slightly endanger the safety of the Military Occupation Authorities.*

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<sup>42</sup> [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/greekbishop.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/greekbishop.html)

*In our national consciousness, all the children of Mother Greece are an inseparable unity: they are equal members of the national body irrespective of religion or dogmatic differences.*

*Our Holy Religion does not recognize superior or inferior qualities based on race or religion, as it is stated: "There is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28) and thus condemns any attempt to discriminate or create racial or religious differences.*

*Our common fate, both in days of glory and in periods of national misfortune, forged inseparable bonds between all Greek citizens, without exemption, irrespective of race.*

*Certainly, we are not unaware of the deep conflict between the new Germany and the Jewish community, nor do we intend to become defenders or judges of world Jewry in the great sphere of world politics and economic affairs. Today we are interested in and deeply concerned with the fate of 60,000 of our fellow citizens, who are Jews. For a long time, we have lived together in both slavery and freedom, and we have come to appreciate their feelings, their brotherly attitude, their economic activity and, most important, their indefectible patriotism. Evidence of this patriotism is the great number of victims sacrificed by the Greek Jewish community without regret and without hesitation on the altar of duty when our country was in peril.*

*Mr. Prime Minister,*

*We are certain that the thoughts and feelings of the Government on this matter are in agreement with those of the rest of the Greek nation. We also trust that you have already taken the necessary steps and applied to the Occupation Authorities to rescind the grievous and futile measure to deport the members of the Jewish community of Greece.*

*We hope, indeed, that you have clarified to those in power that such harsh treatment of Jews of other nationalities in Greece makes the instituted measure even more unjustifiable and therefore morally unacceptable. If security reasons underlie it, we think it possible to suggest alternatives. Other measures can be taken, such as detaining the active male population (not including children and old people) in a specific place on Greek territory under the surveillance of the Occupation Authorities, thereby guaranteeing safety in face of any alleged danger and saving the Greek Jewish community from the impending deportation. Moreover, we would like to point out that, if asked, the rest of the Greek people will be willing to vouch for their brothers in need without hesitation.*

*We hope that the Occupation Authorities will realize in due time the futility of the persecution of Greek Jews, who are among the most peaceful and productive elements of the country.*

*If, however, they insist on this policy of deportation, we believe that the Government, as the bearer of whatever political authority is left in the country, should take a clear stance against these events and let the foreigners bear the full responsibility of committing this obvious injustice. Let no one forget that all actions done during these difficult times, even those actions that lie beyond our will and power, will be assessed some day by the nation and will be subjected to historical investigation. In that time of judgement, the responsibility of the leaders will weigh heavily upon the conscience of the nation if today*

*the leaders fail to protest boldly in the name of the nation against such unjust measures as the deportation of the Greek Jews, which are an insult to our national unity and honor.*

*Respectfully,*

*Damaskinos  
Archbishop of Athens and Greece*

Following are the signatures of the heads of the major cultural institutions and organizations:

President of the Academy of Athens, Rector of the University of Athens, Rector of the Polytechnical School of Athens, Rector of the High School of Economic Studies, President of the Medical Association of Attica, President of the Roll of Barristers of Attica, President of the Union of Notaries of Athens and Aegean, President of the Journalists Union, President of the Association of Greek Authors, President of the Culture Association, President of the Piraeus Chamber of Commerce, President of the Athens Professional Chamber, President of the Greek Association of Chemists, President of the Athens Association of Pharmacists, President of the Dentists Association, President of the Athens Craftsman Chamber, President of the Piraeus Association of Pharmacists, President of the Greeks Actors, President of the Greek Association of Pharmacists, President of the Medical Association of Piraeus, President of the Athens Association of Commercants, President of the Athens Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Vice-President of the Greek Union of Theatrical and Musical Critics, President of the Medical Association of Callithea, Secretary General of the Panhellenic Association of Dentists, President of the Greek Industrialists Union, General Director of the Refugees Organization, General Director of Social Health Organization.

Source: "Chronika," the newspaper of Greek Jewry, 1984.

Source: [Yad Vashem](#)

## **ADDENDUM 2**

### **Proclamation by the Greek National Liberation Front (EAM) to Rescue Jews, January 22, 1943**

National Liberation Front

National Organizations District

Proclamation

To the entire Greek people, to the inhabitants of Athens.

Brothers,

The occupier is preparing to commit a new crime against our people. We are facing a new manifestation of the bestial brutality of Fascism, directed this time against the Jewish part of the Greek people. The bloodthirsty occupier is preparing to launch a most horrendous and terrible pogrom against Greek Jews, like the pogroms he had

perpetrated in Germany and Poland. In Salonika, many thousands of innocent women and children are facing the threat of execution in huge massacres in concentration camps by the vicious Gestapo. The oppressors and murderers of the "New Order" in Europe are thirsty for the blood of many new victims.

This new crime is not directed only against the Jews but also against the Greek people, since the Jews constitute an integral part of the Greek people, and their fate is combined with that of the Greek people as a whole [...] The Jews have displayed the same level of patriotism and self-abnegation as the rest of us, sacrificing their own blood for the fight against Fascism and the salvation of the homeland. The number killed, injured and maimed as a result of the fighting on the Albanian front is not low, and neither is the number of the Jews who fought together with the Greek people in our heroic struggle for the liberation of the homeland.

The pogrom against the Jews wishes to undermine our struggle for liberation. In hurting the Jews, the occupier also harms our peoples vigorous struggle as a whole. Our struggle is a terrible nightmare for the occupier, who is crushed under the blows inflicted on him by our allies on the eastern front and in Italy.

The National Liberation Front (EAM), therefore, calls upon the inhabitants of Athens and upon all Greeks and all Christians to extend their help in order to save the Jews. This can be done by massive protest demonstrations, big rallies and general mobilization aimed at frustrating the terrible Pogrom. Let us give asylum to all persecuted Jews; let us crush any traitor that harms the Jews.

DOWN with any pogrom against the Jews.

DEATH to the occupier and to any traitor and collaborator.

LONG LIVE the National Liberation Front.

Athens, 22.1.1943

The National Liberation Front (EAM) of the nationwide organizations of Rumeli, Thessalia, Epirous, Thrace, Macedonia, the Seven Islands [of the Ionian Sea], the Dodecanese Islands, Crete, the Peloponnese, the Aegean Islands, and the Jews.

**Source: *Chronika*, the newspaper of Greek Jewry, Nov.- Dec. 1989**

**Source: Yad Vashem, [www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center)**

### **ADDENDUM 3**

#### **The Agony of Salonika Jewry – 'Hed Hamizrach' Newspaper, October 24, 1943**

##### **Salonika – a Jewish metropolis that has been destroyed**

The great tragedy that had befallen Greek Jewry was revealed today by Yosef and Baruch Uziel, representatives of the Greek immigrants in Palestine, who met with journalists in Tel-Aviv. Mr. Yosef Uziel spoke of the Jewish community in Salonika, the

largest of Sephardic Jewry. This community of 70,000, which was a Jewish stronghold of Zionism, strong in its patriotic feelings and high values, afforded the entire city a special character. Out of a population of seventy thousand, approximately 12,000 immigrated to Palestine. Of these, 9,000 reside in Tel-Aviv, 2,000 in Haifa, and the rest settled in other places including a settlement that they had established, "Zur Moshe". This Jewish community has been completely destroyed. A small part remains in the environs of Salonika. The majority, however, were transported to Poland or escaped to the mountains to join the partisan units.

What happened to Greek Jewry?

Attorney Baruch Uziel based his account on a letter written in Hebrew, which was received half a year ago, and on a memorandum from a Greek student, P.K., who had left Salonika on July 18 and then sent in September a special memo to the Greek government about what was happening in Greece. In the early stages of the occupation, there was no persecution of Jews. Soon, however, the economic situation deteriorated, the rich lost their property, the middle classes were impoverished, and the poor reached the point of starvation. At least ten people died from starvation every day. In March, the deportation by the S.S. began. At first, 8,500 men were sent to labor camps. Later, a census of the Jews was taken. The Jews were made to wear the Star of David and were confined to three ghettos, where all the Jews of Macedonia were also concentrated. During the deportation, Jews were put in cattle cars, each one containing 70 people, among them women, children and old people. 53,000 Jews were deported in this manner, and not a single Jew was left in Salonika. Torah scrolls, the Jewish libraries, and all Jewish property were looted and burnt. Out of the entire community, only 180 Jews remain, thanks to their Turkish or Spanish citizenships. They are awaiting immigration certificates to Palestine. No one knows what happened to Salonika's Jews or to where they were sent. The Jewish community of Palestine must not remain indifferent: there are still Jews in Athens and in other places in Greece. Mr. Moshe Caraso spoke of the aid and information that have been provided by the Union of Greek Immigrants in Palestine. On Saturday, a public meeting dedicated to Greek Jewry will be held in the "Ophir" cinema in Tel-Aviv in the presence of Mr. D. Ben-Gurion. An aid committee for Greek Jews has been established recently in Palestine by Mr. L. Recanati, M. Caraso, A. Rikanati, B. Uziel, Yosef Uziel, Yaakov Beego, Shmuel Amario, Haim Angel, Shelomo Vanzia and Albert Alsheich, Mr. Ovadia Shalem and Leon Castro of Egypt have promised their full support in the rescue of Greek Jewry. Thanks to the efforts of the aid committee, the Greek and British radio services have addressed the Greek people, asking them to help the persecuted Jews and rescue them from the Nazis. In the next few days, Mr. I. Molcho, author and public figure from Jerusalem, will travel to Istanbul on a mission from the Committee to help the refugees there. The Committee hereby announces a Week of Greek Jewry, which will include public gatherings where the story of the atrocities and persecution of Greek Jews will be told. In the aforementioned meeting in "Ophir," Mr. D. Ben-Gurion and Mr. Baruch Uziel will address the audience.

**Source: 'Hed Hamizrach' Newspaper, October 24, 1943**

[www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center)

## **ADDENDUM 4**

### **The Suffering of Greek Jewry**

Hed Hamizrach Newspaper, November 12, 1943

More than half of Greece is now in the hands of the partisans. The Greeks help the Jews to hide and escape, and the partisans take them in. London's radio call to the Greeks to come to the assistance of the Jews, also had a positive influence. On the other hand, the German authorities have announced that any Greek caught hiding a Jew will be sent to a labor camp. Jews are prohibited from going out after 5 p.m. When it became clear that mixed couples would be exempt from decrees, about 3,000 intermarriages took place in Athens. There are additional labor camps for Jews in Janina and in other parts of the country. Hundreds of Jews work in road construction and in the construction of the Athens-Salonika railway-track. Their living conditions are unbearable. They live in ragged tents, do not receive clothing and are fed only beans in hot water. They are forbidden to drink water while working. A Jew suffering from a fever of over 37.5 degrees is immediately shot, since the Germans fear the spread of contagious diseases. Heading the Gestapo is S.S General Stroobe, who is assisted by Rosenberg, founder and head of the police battalions known to us from Poland.

[www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center)

#### **NOTE TO READERS**

**If you have additional information that is material to this subject or would like to comment or share your thoughts, please forward them to:  
ken.matziorinis@mcgill.ca**