

Introduction

The need for a history of the Holocaust in Greece in the English language necessitates no apology. It is a fairly neglected topic that has seen documentary research only in recent years. In addition to the abiding neglect of Greek studies by Jewish and general scholarship, the complex problems of Greek Jewry and its sources almost seem to encourage scholars to avoid the topic for better-plowed fields. Yet Greek Jewry is a fascinating subject and its broad neglect by scholars of the modern period and in particular those of the Holocaust is difficult to rationalize. Greek Jewry has many unique qualities about it, the Holocaust experience notwithstanding. It is the oldest Jewish community in Europe; it gave to the West Christianity via Saint Paul of Tarsus and a working model integrating philosophy and Bible study via Philo of Alexandria; it gave to Greece one source (*koiné*) for its modern Greek dialect via the Septuagint and the New Testament; it was the medium through which Palestinian Jewish traditions passed to the lands of Ashkenaz (Germanic-speaking Europe); it had two great diasporic periods, the Greek-speaking and the Judeo-Spanish-speaking; and its percentage of loss during the Holocaust was exceeded only by that of Poland.

The history of Greece during the modern period is complex; how much more so for Jewish history in Greece. This complexity is the subject of the first chapter, whose purpose is to orient the reader to a variegated background and to the influence that it had on the Holocaust in Greece. As part of this orientation, it is necessary to identify the rhythms of Greek Jewish society over the past several millennia and their effects on the differing Jewries found within the borders of modern Greece as they expanded through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Each of these Jewries had its own traditions and local history. This approach to Greek Jewry can be understood only against the background of the emergence of modern Greece, its chronological and territorial complexities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and some requisite background in the major political themes of Greek history.

By the nineteenth century, two Jewries—one Greek-speaking Romaniots and the other Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim—were long established on the mainland and islands of the geographic area we call Greece. An obvious question: can a Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jewry who lived under Ottoman domination since the 16th century be considered a Greek Jewry in the same way as those Greek-speaking Jews who lived for one to two millennia under a host of masters? Is the term *Greek* then a function of language or of territory?

For the majority in the Hellenistic period, the term Greek, or Helene, referred to anyone who spoke the language; in the Byzantine period, Hellene designated an “apostate Christian” if not outright pagan (*pace* Gennadios Scholarios). In the nineteenth century the term became geographic, and Greek nationalism used language as an ethnic identifying factor. These definitions continued alongside each other during the modern period. The borders of the modern Greek state were continually expanding from the period of the Revolution (1820s) until the end of World War II, when the Allies awarded to Greece the areas that had been annexed by Bulgaria and those annexed at various times during the twentieth century by the Italians. We have chosen to define Greece, for the purposes of this book, by the borders she had at the end of World War II. Chapter 1 briefly surveys the story of the Jews in Greece from antiquity and points out the regional differences that, subject to myriad local factors, contributed, each in its own way, to the story of the Holocaust in Greece.

The vicissitudes of chronology form an important theme; the most crucial question in Chapter 2 is the limited time available to the Jews of the newly acquired northern territories to adjust to the post-World War I realities in the Balkans. We shall find it necessary not to pursue a strictly chronological sequence from chapter to chapter. Events parallel each other from region to region just as they differ. There is in Greece a local rhythm, a regional, and a national, each of which has its own historical development. In traditional studies of Greece, moreover, there

has been a distinction between history, politics, and *laographia* (folklore). Because Jewish society usually follows the *Weltanschauung* of the host society, Jewish scholars writing about Greek Jewry inevitably follow the pattern. Our story is structured somewhat differently and also includes some new interpretations of the Jewish experience in Greece.

Both Greeks and Jews have their own millennial traditions of diaspora, namely the phenomenon of individuals possessing a common language and culture and living in communities outside the borders of the mother country. Until the rise of modern Zionism and establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, all Jews lived in diaspora or *galut* (exile). The rise of nationalism in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Balkans demanded that the Jews choose whether to join the new state and society as citizens or remain an autonomous, religiously structured ethnic community, which had characterized their settlements outside of the land of Israel for the past two and a half millennia. This question is specifically addressed in Chapter 2 with regard to the internal and external problems surrounding Salonika (or Thessaloniki in Greek) and in Chapter 3 with respect to the Jewish response to World War II in Greece. The territorial theme raises its head again with the occupation of separate areas of Greece by Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria; to paraphrase Caesar's observation about another conquest, *omnia Graecia in tres partes divisa est*. Different administrative units, armies, policies, and rhythms justly challenge an integrated picture of the occupation period. The Holocaust was effected in differing ways in each area, but it was effected nonetheless by the order of the Germans and the cooperation of the Bulgarians. It was deliberately delayed by a year in the Italian zone until that area came under German administrative and military control after Italy left the war.

How the Jews structured their communities in diaspora will also be of importance for an understanding of the Holocaust in Greece, if not elsewhere in Europe. The traditions of self-government and communal institutions geared for social relief, within the framework of a religious community centered about the study of Torah and its commentaries, created a system that was essentially loyal to the government in power. The inability of the traditional Jewish community to recognize the dangers inherent in a malevolent government that would use those communal institutions and traditions of loyalty to destroy that

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very community is one of the tragedies of the Holocaust period. This theme is examined in Chapters 3 and 4. Perforce, the contemporary and postwar judgments on the role of the chief rabbi of Salonika and the Community Council during the war will have to be reexamined in light of our understanding of the Nazi manipulation of the Judenrats of occupied Europe.

The horrors of the deportations and subsequent destruction of the arriving groups is chronicled in Chapter 5. This information is based on analysis of the materials made available by scholars working in the Auschwitz Archives. A serious concern among scholars of the period and of modern Jewish times in general is the question of numbers. How many Jews were in Greece before the war? How many were killed by the Nazis both in the camps and elsewhere? How many survived the war? How many emigrated to Palestine and elsewhere? These questions, though it is necessary to answer them, tend to overlook the fact that people, not numbers, were involved. Hence it is important to chronicle the deaths of the various trainloads of Jews who went to Treblinka and Auschwitz; yet the stories of individual survivors and the memory of their experiences must be integrated into the story. The question of history and memory is discussed later.

But the Holocaust is not only about death and destruction, although these themes understandably take a front seat in the reader's attention. The mechanism of the process and the methods used are of interest, the participants important to note, and the goals or reasons of each of them necessary to understand. One of the subthemes of the period is the despoliation of the Jews' wealth, which the Nazis exploited for their own benefit and to reward their supporters. Interestingly, Bulgaria took Thrace as its reward but put some of the personal effects of the Thracian Jews whom it deported in escrow. Some of that liquid wealth was recently turned over to the Greek government, which in turn entrusted it to the Jewish Museum of Greece. Much of the real property was returned to the Greek Jewish survivors by the postliberation government; however, the tobacco warehouses somehow remained in the hands of Austrian merchants. These questions of wealth and property are discussed in Chapters 5 and 10.

One of the unique accomplishments of the Nazis was to reduce the enslaved masses deported to concentration camps to a series of num-

bers. The numbers were temporarily reusable, given the three-month average life expectancy for slaves, and thus were recycled by a never-ending supply of fresh slaves. For example, in spring 1943 Greek Jewish women were tattooed with the same numbers that Greek Jews deported from France had been assigned in November 1942. This was the ultimate victory of the amoral technological thinking that finds mathematics and science more important than unique individuals whose vagaries of thought and action cannot be absolutely tabulated or predicted. We look at these numbers and the people who bore them in Chapters 6 and 7 to ascertain what happened to those who entered the camps. Chapter 6 tries to find out where and how they died; Chapter 7 records the experiences of the survivors. Because the Greeks (both Christians and Jews) endured nearly all aspects of the Nazi concentration camps, it is useful for the reader to follow the vicissitudes of their experiences to gain a broader view of the Holocaust through one ethnic group. There is unfortunately relatively little literature on the Greek Christians who were sent to German POW and concentration camps; this lack is also discussed in this book.

The role of the Jews in Greece during World War II has been restricted in the general literature to the destruction of their communities. Their role in the military story has been quite ignored save for memoirs in various collections; this story includes both native Greek Jews and Palestinian Jewish volunteers in the Italian and German campaigns. Moreover, the complicated story of the Jewish contribution to the Resistance, and the Resistance attitudes toward the Jews, has not been seriously explored in the general literature.¹ These and other themes are examined in Chapters 3 and 8, although the paucity of memoirs and absence of official sources means that the complete story cannot be known.

Could anyone help the Jews? Did anyone help the Jews? Did anyone warn them? Chapter 9 explores the potential and the actual assistance that was proffered to the Jews of Greece during the Occupation and its aftermath. There we discuss the local and international agencies that attempted to render aid or organize rescue, the problems they faced, and the results of their actions. One problem in doing history is evaluation of source material; sometimes those who were the least important have left the most records about their efforts. It is our responsibility to

note and possibly adjust this imbalance in terms of both the surviving material and the self-congratulatory use to which it has been put. Those readers anxious to follow the fates of the survivors may go directly to Chapter 10 and then return to read of the attempts made before and during the war to render assistance to Greek Jewry.

The Germans left Greece in October 1944; the war ended in May 1945; the survivors did not return before the following summer. What did they find? How were they received by their co-religionists and by their fellow citizens? What was the fate of the Jews who took refuge in the mountains and fought with the Resistance? What happened to the Jewish property confiscated by the Nazis and distributed to quisling (or “collaborationist,” to follow Greek terminology) Greeks? Greece is the only occupied country in which there were war crimes trials (albeit for individuals) involving Jews; it is significant that these trials were carried out with the support of (and even instituted by) the surviving Jews. Another theme is the redemption of the survivors in Israel, or rather the emigration of survivors from Greece to Palestine and the United States. What was the attitude of Palestinian Jews, of Greek origin or in political power, to the remnants of this proud Jewry that they had to some extent ignored during the war? Chapter 10 discusses this role and other local problems that affected Greek Jewry during the last year of the war and the beginning of the Civil War that was to be even more disastrous for Greece than the Axis Occupation.

The question of sources is the most serious problem for the historian. In the modern period, there is a plethora of source material, official government documents of varying degrees of value, and memoirs of officials and private individuals. One of the great discoveries of modern scholarship is that governments do not always tell the truth, despite their claims to the contrary. Governments pursue their own interests, and oftentimes the latter are contrary to what their citizens, allies, or enemies think to be those interests. We are fortunate to have a great deal of captured Italian and German documents telling us much about what they did and why they did it. We do not have as much Bulgarian material (although more has recently become available), but enough has been collected to understand their actions against the background of policy. We do not have much access to Greek wartime documentation. This has allowed a chaotic situation to develop among those

who restrict themselves to discussion of Greece without recourse to the national archives of the British and Americans, especially because the discussion has been obfuscated by ideological arguments and selective interpretation for the purpose of scoring political points. In the post-war years Greek political points have been made more by the sword than by the pen—so much so that in Greece many scholars tend to ignore secondary Greek material in their historical studies unless they are summarizing some ideological argument.

The task of the historian is critical reading of many kinds of sources and judicious selection from them to produce a coherent narrative. I shall try to make the story as comprehensive as possible, both as a guide to future researchers and as a counterbalance to the available literature. As I have noted, the Greek Jews have not been integrated into the general story of wartime Greece. Among Jewish scholarship, there has been until recently only one comprehensive treatment of the Holocaust in Greece (Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama's *In Memoriam*, published in Salonika in 1948, reedited in Hebrew and Greek translations) alongside an increasing number of memoirs that are appearing annually in Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and English. Molho and Nehama's treatment was, interestingly, the first historical study of the Holocaust in any one country. Comprehensive for its time, it is nevertheless more than fifty years out of date in terms of scholarship, sources investigated, and material included. Moreover, the survivors' passion for revenge has clouded an historical understanding of the forces and individuals involved in the story. Yet it is still valuable and a tribute to the efforts of its authors. Unfortunately, much general scholarship on Greece relies on *In Memoriam* for its brief (and inadequate) surveys of the fate of Greek Jews during the war years.

My earlier essays in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* were a first attempt to summarize and integrate new material. Michael Matsas's *The Illusion of Safety*² uses *In Memoriam* for the background story but contributes many new memoirs on the camps and Resistance to the literature. Bernard Pierron's *Juifs et Chrétiens de la Grèce*³ is a comprehensive survey of the period 1821–1945 that summarizes his more expanded and detailed dissertation.

Hence much of our information for various aspects of the story is necessarily dependent on memoirs of individuals. This category of

sources is so problematic that certain historians have refused to use them at all. Raul Hilberg, for instance, based his monumental work almost exclusively on German archival documents. This approach leads to other problems for the historian, the most important of which is knowing what happened outside the archival records. Much material and novel facets of the story can be recovered only from memoirs. (For the general story of Greek resistance, see now André Gerolymatos's *Guerrilla Warfare and Espionage in Greece 1940–1944*,⁴ which judiciously expands the received story on the basis of a critical reading of official sources and memoirs.)

But how to read these sources? How to critique material that is based on memory, occasionally fictionalized even where the author does not intend fictionalization (let alone where the author does intend it)? What is the relationship between memoir and literature (as in the works of Elie Wiesel) for historians attempting to reconstitute past events? Also, how do we critique the time factor? A memoir immediately after the event has a different value from one written decades later; yet there is a phenomenon of forty-year memory that occasionally recalls events and conversations more accurately than a memory closer in time to the event. Some individuals have better memory than others; some have photogenic or auralgenic memory. In other words, some individuals are better witnesses than others. No doubt the same critique can be made of contemporary interpretations in the archives, including those of policy makers. Occasionally the latter deliberately obfuscated their reports, as in the general Nazi trend to use euphemisms to obscure the Holocaust. It is no wonder that archival historians, like prosecuting attorneys, prefer the abstract and unchanging written word to the variable oral testimony.

In the vast literature of Holocaust memoirs, it is surprising to find numerous stories of Greek Jews. They seemed to be everywhere in the Nazi zone, in all the camps, in the Warsaw Ghetto, and definitely in the experience of numerous survivors. These stories, though occasionally embellished, seem to ring true and are all the more trustworthy because there does not seem to be any ulterior motive in their recording other than their exotic nature. At least they attest to the ubiquity of the Greeks. More valuable are the testimonies given by individuals under cross-examination in a formal interview or in court. These

statements were elicited for judicial evidence and hence can be treated with more confidence. Not all, however; after the war some survivors returning to Salonika gave court depositions regarding the fate of deported property owners that do not always stand the light of investigation. On the other hand, the same individual's witness as to the fate of beloved relatives can be treated less circumspectly. Memoirs by trained professionals such as doctors, lawyers, nurses, or others who survived are usually matter-of-fact memoirs by individuals trained to observe and report; those by the less educated are not so useful, yet occasionally they provide interesting data—as in the case of one Greek Sonderkommando slave. It is a matter of historical interest that the first published postwar Holocaust memoir was that of a Greek Jewish doctor, Marco Nahon, from Dhidhimotikhon, a small town in Thrace on the Greek-Turkish border. We may rely on one axiom: a memoir recording personal experience is more valuable than hearsay, although the former is to be treated cautiously unless independently confirmed. Even so, we shall have to use all memoirs judiciously. But first, we have to meet the people and their background.