The Jews of Greece in the Holocaust
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The national population census taken in Greece in 1928 found that 72,791 Jews lived in Greece at that time, representing 1.2 percent of the country’s total population. The vast majority of this (over 98 percent) were Jewish communities residing in cities. Salonika was by far the largest Jewish community in Greece, with 55,250 Jews living there in 1928. Only 1,578 Jews lived in Athens, the nation’s capital, at that time. Consequently, it should not come as a surprise that the Holocaust of the Jews of Greece is associated in Jewish consciousness and memory with the tragedy of the Jews of Salonika, one of the oldest Jewish communities in Europe, which according to certain sources has been in existence since the second century BCE.

The war reached Greece about one year after it first broke out in Europe. On June 10, 1940, Mussolini’s Italy signed a pact with Hitler and on October 28, 1940, the Italian army attacked Greece. Mussolini demanded that Greece open its borders to the passage of the Italian army and after this demand was met with refusal, the Italians attacked the Greek army along its border with Albania. The Greeks managed to stave off the Italian invasion up to the middle of Albania. However, on April 6, 1941, the Germans invaded Greece via Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. The British army was unable to prevent the occupation of the country along with the fall of the island of Crete.

Greece was divided into three occupation zones: German, Italian and Bulgarian. The Germans controlled a strip of land in eastern Thrace, central and eastern Macedonia, including Salonika, and Crete due to the strategic importance involved in maintaining control over the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. Consequently, Salonika, where most of Greece’s Jews lived, fell under German control. The Italians received central Greece, including Athens, the Peloponnesus, and additional sections of the west; and the Bulgarians received western Thrace and eastern Macedonia. Officially, Greece continued to maintain its independence and a Greek puppet regime was installed in Athens.

The population figures presented at the Wannsee conference in 1942 related to the Jews of Greece as a single unit, and accordingly, stated that 75,000 Jews lived in Greece. However, the fate of the Jews of Greece, of whom 90 percent ultimately perished, varied in the different areas of the country. At the first stage of the “Final Solution,” the plan targeted the Jews living in the German occupation zone (where most of Greece’s Jews lived) and the Jews
living in the Bulgarian zone. At the second stage, after Italy surrendered and the Germans occupied the northern and central areas of the country in 1943, the extermination policy targeted Jews in the Italian occupation zone as well. But the actual implementation was delayed until the summer of 1944.

Even before the German invasion of Greece, a unit called the Sonderkommando Rosenberg was established in Germany, in February 1941, headed by Von Ingram. The unit consisted of 80 men and was divided into two groups, one designated for Athens and the other for Salonika. On November 15, 1941, the unit arrived in Greece where it conducted a meticulous survey of the Jews in the country. According to the survey, there were 78,750 Jews living in Greece, of whom 55,000 lived in Salonika and the rest in other cities and regions of the country. The other large Jewish communities were in Corfu, (3,000 Jews), Kavala (3,000), Janina (3,000) and Athens (2,500).

On April 19, 1941, the Germans entered Salonika. Two days later, they ordered all Jewish newspapers and other publications shut down and replaced them with publications of an overtly antisemitic nature.

On April 15, 1941, all the members of the Jewish community were imprisoned along with all the distinguished members of the general community and public figures. This wave of arrests continued in the days that followed too. The Germans appointed Shabtai (Sabi) Shaltiel, a former community official, to be in charge of the Jewish community of Salonika and nearby communities. Shaltiel lacked the necessary skills to carry out the complex task given to him and he appointed Jacques Albala to help him as an interpreter and to report to the Germans. The Gestapo, which maintained close supervision of the community, closed down the Jewish organizations and schools and imposed heavy taxes on it to finance the Gestapo’s needs. On April 29, the Jews were required to hand over all radio sets in their possession. A few days later, apartments owned by Jews were seized to make room for German accommodations. It is notable however that the Christian residents of the city were also subject to similar decrees.

One of the first acts undertaken by the Rosenberg Commando unit after it arrived in Salonika in June 1941 was to confiscate all the Jewish cultural assets in the city, including Jewish libraries and ancient manuscripts, Torah scrolls and prayer books and silver religious artifacts. Not only public Jewish property was taken. The Rosenberg Commando laid its hands on various private collections, including the library of the community’s chief rabbi, Rabbi Koretz, which included some 3,000 books, and the libraries of other rabbis, which contained hundreds of philosophy and sacred texts. In addition, the archives of the various Jewish organizations in the city were seized. The material was packed up and sent to Germany under the supervision of Johann Pohl, the director of the Hebrew department in the Jewish Research...
Library in Frankfurt. Most of these cultural assets, collected over hundreds of years in the Salonika community, which were a unique source for the study of the history and spiritual life of the Sephardic Jews, were never found after the war.

Immediately after the entry of the German occupation forces, the people of Salonika suffered a very serious economic crisis. The Germans took everything they could lay their hands on, including the chrome mines, granaries and the cotton and agricultural produce around the city. Unemployment spread throughout the town and food became scarce. The drought of 1941 exacerbated the economic crisis and its repercussions. The Jews suffered more than the non-Jewish Greek population because the latter were helped to overcome the crisis in food supply by relatives and friends in the countryside. The situation of the Jews in the winter of 1941-1942 grew increasingly worse and quite a number of cases of death due to starvation were recorded. The starvation led to the spread of disease and the Jewish quarter was quarantined due to the fear of epidemics. In order to contend with the hardship, the community opened soup kitchens that supplied food to tens of thousands of needy Jews. The Jewish community and the Red Cross made great effort and in 1941, they extended aid to 2,000 needy people, distributing 5,000 meals and 1,700 milk portions for babies daily. According to the estimates of international organizations in Salonika, the Jews received but a tiny part of the economic assistance they were entitled to based on their proportion of the city’s population.

In April 1942, all citizens were ordered to enlist in the German war effort. Those obliged to enlist were required to report for duty within 24 hours. At that time, the city’s German military commander, ordered all Jewish males aged 18-45 to report on Saturday, July 11, 1942 at eight o'clock in the morning to Salonika’s Liberty Square to aid in the preparation of a list of people fit for work. The president of the community managed to remove the officials of the community, rabbis, teachers and aid society operators from the list of those required to enlist for forced labor. On July 11, some 6,500 Jews dressed in their Sabbath best reported to the square. Armed German soldiers were posted on the nearby rooftops. That day, which came to be known as the “Black Sabbath,” became a turning point in the history of the Jews of Salonika. The Germans abused the Jews, forcing them to stand for many long hours in the blazing sun, without water. They set their dogs on them and forbade the provision of any medical assistance to those that passed out. At two o'clock in the afternoon, the Germans ordered the Jews to go home. Those that did not register that day were forced to return to the square two days later.

Following registration, the Jews were sent to a number of work camps. They were forced to work in order to free 5,000 local villagers so that they could return to their agricultural work in the villages. The living and work conditions in the camp were harsh, especially because the Jews were not accustomed to this type of work. They worked for 12 hours a day and slept on
the ground or in the stables. They were not given sufficient food and their supervisors treated them harshly. According to various estimates, some 700 Jews died in the four months from the time they were enlisted to work in the camps.

The events of the summer of 1942 sowed panic among the members of the community. In mid-July, about 1,200 wealthy Jews escaped Salonika using false papers to move over to the Italian occupation zone. On December 11, 1942, the Germans replaced the community’s leadership and appointed Dr. Zvi Koretz, the chief rabbi of Salonika, as the leader. He worked with a committee made up of six members who all bore collective responsibility towards the occupation authorities. These steps fell in line with the general preparations made during that period for the implementation of the “Final Solution” in Greece.

In late January 1943, Rolf Günther, Eichmann’s deputy, arrived in Salonika in order to arrange for the deportation of the city’s Jews. He began his preparations in coordination with the city’s military authorities and officials of the foreign ministry. In February 1943, Dieter Wisliceny, one of Eichmann’s most senior staff members, also arrived. He had previously prepared the deportation of the Jews of Slovakia. He was joined by Alois Brunner, who until then had been stationed in Vienna, where he had been responsible deporting that city’s Jews to the extermination camps. In Salonika, they worked in cooperation with the city’s military governor, and under their supervision, a special SS unit was established in the city, which set up headquarters on Velisario Street, where the infrastructure for the deportation of the 50,000 Jews of Salonika was prepared.

On February 6, an order was issued requiring all Jews aged five and above to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing. The Jews were also required to move into special areas set aside for them. Jews of foreign citizenship (Italy, Spain, Turkey) who could present a valid foreign passport were exempted from these two requirements. The costs of the move to the ghettos and the expenses of the reorganization of the Jews within the ghettos were imposed on the Jewish community. On February 13, an additional order was issued forbidding the Jews to change their place of residence without permission on pain of death. The order also stated that Jews were forbidden to use public transportation, enter certain parts of the city or leave their homes after dark. A third order, issued on February 17, required the Jews to clearly mark their shops in German and Greek with the words “Jewish shop.” From February 25 on, they were also required to similarly mark their homes.

Three ghettos were established in Salonika – two were open, and a third, which was really a transit camp, the last station on the way to deportation to the east, was closed. This ghetto, known as the “Baron Hirsch Quarter,” was located next to the railroad tracks. The move to the ghettos was difficult and fraught with human tragedy. The Jewish police force established
by the Germans supervised the move to the ghetto. The Jewish police force had 250 members, most of whom had served in low-ranking positions in the Greek army; the rest were refugees from central Europe. The police chief was Jacques Albala, who spoke German and had close ties with the occupational authorities. The move to the ghettos ended on March 6, when an order was issued forbidding the Jews to leave them. Conditions in the ghettos were terrible. Three to five families lived in each apartment, and in some cases, 30 people occupied an area of just 16 square meters. The extreme overcrowding in the ghettos immediately created health and sanitation problems and epidemics began to spread. Some 2,500 people had lived in the Baron Hirsch Quarter before the ghettoization; another 1,700 additional Jews were added to them. A wooden wall topped with barbed wire surrounded the entire neighborhood.

On March 10, the public learned that 300 train cars had arrived in Salonika’s train station. Rabbi Koretz and the members of his committee handed Max Marten, the advisor on civil affairs to the military government in Salonika, who was responsible for handling the Jewish community, a document waiving all rights to half of the community assets, including land and buildings, in return for the cancellation of the deportations. Just 24 hours later, Marten informed them that he had received a negative response to their request from Berlin. He maintained that various Greek organizations had demanded that the Jews be deported from Salonika. On March 13, 1943, Marten sent Dr. Koretz an order confiscating all Jewish assets, which were to be handed over by March 15 to the Germans. This included all real estate, cash and other valuables. Dieter Wisliceny was placed in charge of the implementation of this order.

On March 14, one day before the first transport left Salonika, Rabbi Koretz spoke before the Jews in the Baron Hirsch camp. He told them that the younger members of the community would be able to continue to work in the camps in Greece and that their parents would be allowed to continue to live in Salonika. Just one day later, the first transport left for Auschwitz. It arrived at its destination on March 20. Transports left from Salonika’s Baron Hirsch neighborhood for Auschwitz over a period of five months. Five transports left in March; nine in April; two in May; one in June, two in August. Jews that were citizens of Axis or neutral countries, such as Turkey or Spain, were exempted from the transports. There were 850 such Jews in Salonika – 500 of Spanish citizenship, 280 of Italian citizenship, as well as Jews that were citizens of Turkey, Portugal, Argentina, Switzerland, Egypt, Hungary and Bulgaria. Immediately after each transport left, the Baron Hirsch neighborhood would once again be filled up with Jews who moved there in preparation for the next transport. The number of Jews in each transport was 1,000-4,500.

Jews from other communities, Thrace and Macedonia, were also included in the transports. In late April, 316 Jews from Varia and 372 from Florina were transported from Salonika. In
May, another 900 Jews from these areas were transported. In all, according to German records, 19 transports left from Salonika to Auschwitz carrying 48,533 Jews. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine the precise number of Jews sent, because it is known that one transport, which included 46 train cars carrying an unknown number of Jews, arrived in the Treblinka camp. One assumption is that this was a transport that left Salonika between March 23-27, 1943, possibly carrying Jews from Thrace and Macedonia. From the transports that left Salonika and arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, 11,147 young men and women were selected for the work camps (about 7,000 men and just over 4,000 women). The rest of the Jews were sent to the gas chambers.

The unique fate of the Jews of Salonika in Auschwitz-Birkenau has been documented in both in the testimonies and memoirs of the Salonikan survivors and in the testimonies of Jewish prisoners from other European countries that came in contact with them. Unlike the Jewish prisoners from Poland or Central Europe, the Jews of Greece that arrived in Auschwitz were unaccustomed to the harsh eastern European climate. The cold, the hard labor, difficult conditions and the crisis caused by the loss of their families in the gas chambers took a terrible toll on them. In the first months they suffered from serious communication difficulties because they spoke neither German, nor Yiddish nor Polish, which were the principal languages spoken in the camp. They made a negative impression, at least at first, and were given various unpleasant epithets. They were also the target of blows and insults from other prisoners because they did not understand when they were spoken to. Despite this, the Salonikan Jews were considered an important work force in the camp. They became known for their industriousness and physical prowess, and their special circumstances turned them into an especially close-knit group among the prisoners.

The younger people that came from Salonika to Auschwitz in the spring and summer of 1943 were employed mainly in the construction of barracks and crematoria in Birkenau and in the factory of Buna-Monowitz. Others were sent to the work squads outside the main camp to work in the mines or in various farming tasks. In the autumn of 1943, a few hundred prisoners were sent from Auschwitz to a work camp established on the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto. Their job was to clean up the wreckage in what had been the ghetto. At least two groups of Jews were sent to the camp, which was set up on Gęśia Street, and most were from Salonika. In August, the first group of 500 workers arrived, and in October, another group of 500 arrived. They were selected because they did not speak Polish and consequently, would be unable to make any contact with the local Polish population. In January 1944, a typhus epidemic broke out among the prisoners of the Gęsiówka and dozens of prisoners died every day. In the months of May and June, additional groups of prisoners arrived. This time, they were mainly Hungarian Jews. After the camp was liquidated, about 300 ill prisoners that
could not be moved were murdered. Most of the Greek prisoners were evacuated from the camp in July 1944, before the outbreak of the Polish Uprising in Warsaw.

**The Jews of Athens**

Compared to the fate of the Jews of Salonika and in the other parts of the German occupation zone, in the first two years of the war, the Jews in Greece’s Italian zone fared much better. In all, about 12,500 Jews lived in these areas. During the war, refugees from other areas reached Athens, which had previously had a Jewish population of about 3,000, and the number of Jews there rose to 7000-8,000.

From the start of the period of Italian occupation until September 8, 1943, the date of the German invasion, the Jews benefited from the protection of the Italian authorities, which refused to cave in to pressure from the Germans and impose anti-Jewish regulations. They even called upon the Greek population to help the Jews and support them. But on September 20 1943, after the Italian surrender and the entry of the Germans, steps began to be taken to implement the “Final Solution” in these areas too. Wisliceny was sent to Athens, to be joined shortly afterwards by SS General Jurgen Stroop, who had just completed the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto and the deportation of the few Jews left in it a short time earlier. In January 1944, Tony Burger replaced Dieter Wisliceny.

In early October 1943, Stroop had posters hung in the street and ads placed in the newspapers informing the Jews of Athens, including those of foreign citizenship, that they must report for registration in the city’s synagogues. The Germans ordered the Jews to appoint a “committee of elders” to represent their affairs. At the same time, the Germans appointed Moise Sciaki as president and Isaac Kabili as vice-president of a new Jewish committee. After Sciaki died in January, Kabili was appointed to replace him.

The Jews of Athens were in no rush to register in accordance with the Germans’ orders. Jews of means quickly fled and a few hundred succeeded in reaching the mountains where they hid in remote villages. In all, about 3,000 Athenian Jews managed to obtain false papers and scatter themselves throughout Athens and outside it. Groups of Greek youths and other residents of the city offered the Jews their help to hide them and find ways of escaping and places to hide. After a month, only 2,000 Jews had registered, of whom 300 were of Italian citizenship and 200 of Spanish, Portuguese and Turkish citizenships. Most of the Jews that registered were poor people who were unable to find places to hide in return for property or food ration slips. They received special identification papers from the Germans and all those aged 14 and above were required to report daily for inspection. They were forbidden to enter public places from five o'clock in the evening until seven o'clock in the morning.
In March 1944, the Gestapo spread rumors that in honor of the upcoming Passover holiday, the Jews would receive special flour and sugar rations, which would be distributed in the synagogue on Athen’s Melidoni Street. On March 23, Tony Burger, Eichmann’s new representative in the city, arrived and told the Jews gathered in the synagogue, that they would be sent to work camps in Germany until the end of the war. The doors of the synagogue were sealed and the Jews trapped inside (estimates range from 300, according to one version, to 700-1,000 according to another) were taken to the temporary Haidari transit camp. There the men were separated from the women and incarcerated in barracks. The next day, the prisoners were joined by their families causing the number of Jews in the camp to rise to 1,500. After a few days, Jews that had been caught in the outlying areas were brought to the camp too, bringing the total number of Jews in the camp to 3,000.

On April 2, 1944, 1,300 Jews were deported from Haidari to Auschwitz. Swiss and Turkish citizens among the Jews were released. Among those deported were Jews of French, Bulgarian, Hungarian and German citizenship as well as Jews of Italian citizenship, because after Italy surrendered, it no longer enjoyed German protection. Among the Jews were some from other cities besides Athens. This transport arrived in Auschwitz on April 11.

There are varying estimates regarding the number of Greek Jews that perished during the Holocaust. The difference between them is based mainly on the fact that we do not have precise figures regarding the Jewish population of Greece on the eve of the war. Figures from one source (those of historian Hagen Fleischer) state that the number of Jews in Greece before World War II was 71,611, of whom 58,885 were murdered by the Nazis. According to figures presented by Michael Molcho and Yosef Nehama, 79,950 Jews lived in Greece and Rhodes before the war, of whom 10,371 survived. According to the official records of the Jewish communities of Greece as of January 1945, 67,203 Jews lived in Greece before the war, and in January 1945, only 9,825 remained.

After the German retreat, the surviving Greek Jews began to come out of hiding and return home. In October 1944, the Greek government canceled the racial laws legislated by the Germans and declared full equality for Jews. As stated, the overall number of survivors found in Greece immediately after the war is estimated at 10,000, of which about 1,500 were children, many of them orphans that had been hidden in different places. About 65 percent of the survivors were men and only 35 percent were women. Most of the survivors were concentrated in Athens, Salonika and Larissa. In January 1945, there were 4,985 Jews in Athens and only 2,000 in Salonika.

The return home was not easy. The search for family members who could not be found, the struggle to restore family property and the endless legal battles this involved, the economic
crisis and the civil war that broke out in Greece all made it especially difficult for the Greek Jews that survived to rebuild their lives. Like in many other communities of survivors in Europe, many of the Greek survivors decided to leave Greece and find a new country in which to start afresh. The Land of Israel and from 1948, the State of Israel, was the principal immigration target of Greek Jews until the mid-1950s. Other countries to which Greek Jews moved included the United States, Canada, Australia and some countries in Latin America. In the wake of this emigration, the number of Jews left in Greece diminished even further, and in 1951, there were only 6,000 Jews in Greece.