

## **"The Jews of Thessaloniki, 1912-1941" by Dan Georgakas**

The story of the Jews of Thessaloniki is one of the most complex in the history of Jews in Europe. Some recent commentary on the topic has had the tendency to understate the unique nature of that story and to shape that history along lines found elsewhere in Europe. Essential to any discussion of this population is to note the dramatic shift in the nature of the community in the 1490s. Jews had settled in Thessaloniki almost immediately after its founding and by the time of the infancy of Christianity, a thriving community attracted the attention of the apostles, most notably Paul. That Jewish community was what we now term as Romaniote. Its history was tied to Graeco-Roman culture and would be part of the Byzantine continuum. These Jews spoke Greek and Hebrew. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, when the Sultanate offered sanctuary to Jews suffering from the Inquisitions in Spain, Portugal, and later Italy, tens of thousands of Jews who responded were relocated to Thessaloniki where they quickly set the Jewish cultural agenda.

For the next four hundred years, Thessaloniki Jews would be under Ottoman rule. Their main languages were Ladino, Hebrew, Turkish, and their native languages. Knowledge of Greek was circumstantial. Sephardic Jews were the largest single group in the city with Muslims second and Greeks usually a distant third. This remained so until the 1800s. In short, the Sephardic Jews of Thessaloniki were never under a Greek government until 1912 and Greek culture was of secondary importance until the twentieth century.

The three decade interval between the arrival of a Greek government in 1912 and the arrival of the Nazis is among the most volatile in modern Greek history, a period dominated by the monarchist/republican conflict that culminated with the dictatorship of General Metaxas. Early in that time frame, the Disaster of 1922 brought a million and a half Greek refugees from Anatolia and the Pontus to a Greece so poor that nearly a half million Greeks had emigrated to America between 1900-1924. Many of the refugees were settled in Thessaloniki and the province of Macedonia. Political and economic tensions were further complicated by the onset of a worldwide depression. One product of all these factors was the emergence in Thessaloniki of a substantial and activist anti-Semitic movement composed largely of a segment of the refugee population that was frustrated by poor housing, poor state services, and poor employment opportunities. They placed blame for their plight on Jews whom they perceived as controlling the port and other centers of local commerce. However, the movement never generalized in the way it did in other nations and even Metaxas would not tolerate it.

Embattled populations usually vote with their feet when they can. What is central to any discussion of anti-Semitism in Thessaloniki is that the Jewish population did not emigrate. From 1880-1920 the Jewish population of Thessaloniki had been between 45,000-65,000. The Jewish population held at 65,000 throughout the 1920s and was approximately 56,000 when the Nazis entered Thessaloniki on April 9, 1941. That Jewish community was as affluent as the one in 1912 and had retained its traditional internal social divisions. In short, the Thessaloniki Jews had not chosen to leave for Turkey, Palestine, or the United States in numbers much different than that of the general Greek population. The largest single group of emigrants was some 3,000 social Zionists who left for Palestine in 1935.

Anti-Semitism of any kind is inexcusable in a civilized society, but what is remarkable in Thessaloniki is not that it existed during the inter-war period but that it did not gain momentum. Anti-Semitic stereotypes used in other nations to foment anti-Semitism had some validity in Thessaloniki, namely the ambiguous nature of this particular community's relationship to the Greek state. By circumstances totally beyond their control, the Sephardic Jews of Thessaloniki had never been under Greek political rule or even under strong Greek cultural influence before the twentieth century. They, like everyone in the Ottoman Balkans, were governed under a millet system that identified citizens through membership in a religious/linguistic community. At the time of the Balkan wars, some Thessaloniki Jews had even argued that Thessaloniki should become an open city under Jewish administration. None of those factors were in sync with Greek irredentist policies which since 1844 had developed the ambition of establishing Constantinople as the new state's capital. The Iberian and Italian identity of Thessaloniki Jews was so strong that scores of

synagogues were organized on that principle. During the Occupation, some Thessaloniki Jews were able to escape the Holocaust by asserting their Spanish or Italian identity.

The purpose of my observations here is not to criticize Thessaloniki Jews for the vagaries of political and cultural history. Nor do I wish to excuse anti-Semitism among Greeks. I simply wish to note that even under circumstances where anti-Semitism might thrive and become the dominant political force in a locality and then a nation, it did not. That it was contained is not an accident of history and speaks well to the political savvy of all of those involved. Although we are beginning to have more candid accounts of the inter-war period, a coherent account of all factions within Thessaloniki is not in place. What would be most useful at this time is a study that moves past the factors that generated anti-Semitism to focus on those forces, personalities, institutions, and acts that held it in check.

[Population statistics and cultural data are available in N. K. Moutsopoulos, *Thessaloniki: 1900-1917*. Thessaloniki: M Molho Publications, 1980. A good starting point for insights into the complexities of the inter-war can be found in Photini Constantopoulou and Thanos Veremis (researchers and editors), *Documents of the History of the Greek Jews: Records from the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Athens: Kastaniotis Editions, 1999. ]

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