

reviewed by Dr. Albert de Vidas

Greek Jewry in the Twentieth Century, 1913 - 1983

**Patterns of Jewish Survival in the Greek Provinces before and after the
Holocaust**

by Joshua E. Plaut, Associated University Press, 440 Forsgate Drive, Cranbury, NJ 08512, USA 1996.

As the subtitle indicates, the two major concentrations of Jewish life in Greece, Salonica and Athens, are not part of this book. That leaves out some 80% of the 80,000 Jews that lived in Greece before World War II and the same proportion of the 10,000 Jews that survived the Holocaust.

As we move to the 1970's the numbers are lower still, some 1,000 Jews in the provinces out of a total Jewish population of 5,000, the majority living in Athens and Salonica.

In spite of the small numbers of people involved, Joshua Plaut has given us a superb analysis of the difficult life faced by the Jews in Greece, yesterday and today.

What started as a research paper during, a stay in Greece in 1977 and subsequent trips in the 1980's and 1990's, was developed by the author into a short book, complete with pictures, maps and statistical tables. The reader is presented with the story of three distinct Jewish communities: the Spanish-speaking Sephardim living in the territories occupied by Greece after the Balkan Wars and the First World War; the Italian-speaking Corfiotes living in the Ionian Islands; and the Greek-speaking Romaniotes living mostly in Central and Southern Greece.

The author gives us a rapid view of the catastrophes that befell Jewry before and after 1913 when Salonica was occupied by Greece: the massacres of the Jews in during the Greek rebellion against the Sultan in the 1820's; the pogroms in Corfou in 1891 that forced many Jews into exile and those in Volos, Larissa and Trikala that had the same effect; the great fire of Salonica which destroyed

this Sefardic city and foreshadowed the Holocaust at the hands of the Germans and their Greek collaborators.

Plaut, correctly points out that the Jews were never persecuted when Turkey was in control of those areas, and contrasts Turkish liberalism with the traditional religious anti-Semitism of the Greek clergy and population, the ritual murder accusations, mob violence and massacres, synagogue and cemetery desecrations, government discrimination and outright confiscations of property.

In modern times, Plaut explains the difference between the monarchist parties and the followers of Venizelos who instituted a Republic from 1924 to 1934. It was under the republican regime that extreme anti-semitic measures were taken by the government and the many racist and nazi parties that emerged at that time. The E.E.E. (Ethniki Enosis Ellados), the National Association of Greece in particular, spearheaded the pogroms in Kavalla in 1930, in the Campbell neighborhood of Salonica in 1931 and in Kastoria in 1934, all with the complicity of the local police forces and the government. Only the return of the monarchy, according to Plaut, stopped those outrages against the Jewish population which was vastly diminished in numbers by emigration.

The forced hellenization of all minorities in Greece, the enforcement of the Sunday sabbath, the closing of the schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, forbidding the presence of Jews in the harbor of Salonica, the suppression of the French-Jewish press, all those governmental actions led to waves of Jewish emigration towards France, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine and the American continent.

Plaut gives us a vivid picture of the recollections of the survivors of the Holocaust who saw the annihilation of 90% of the Jews in Greece. Statistical tables are also of great interest in understanding the catastrophe that befell the Sephardim, Romaniotes and Corfiotes communities in Greece.

The end of the Second World War, according to Plaut did not end the suffering of the Jews in Greece. No official government body welcomed the survivors home or helped them reclaim their properties. Their Greek Christian neighbors who had collaborated with the Germans and had looted and occupied their residences and businesses, refused to give them back. Communal properties of the Jews were quickly confiscated by the municipalities, Jewish tombstones were used to repair the streets and sidewalks, especially in Salonica. The efforts

of the Jews to reclaim their personal property often encountered a wall of reluctance on the part of the government. A law issued in 1948 prohibited the eviction of squatters, making the repossession of Jewish properties impossible.

Quoting the eminent British historian, Cecil Roth, Plaut points out that the Director of Antiquities oversaw the removal of Jewish tombstones in 1946 for the repair of local churches, in particular St. Demetrios, the Salonican Metropolitan Church. Army barracks were erected on the Jewish graveyard in Kastoria, while the one in Nea Orestias was plowed under, and a reservoir was constructed on the one in Serres.

Denied assistance by the Greek government, the surviving Jews turned to international Jewish organizations, in particular the American Joint Distribution Committee for help. The Greek civil war of 1944-1949, further hampered the rehabilitation of the Jewish communities. Many of the survivors who escaped to the mountains, had found refuge in the camps of the EAM-ELAS guerrillas fighting the Germans. Automatically, according to Plaut, when the civil war started, the government labeled every Jew a suspect and blamed the war on a "world Jewish intrigue."

Plaut gives an interesting description of the difficulties of maintaining Jewish life in the provinces in the face of a dwindling population, virulent anti-Semitism, government indifference and sometimes outright persecution.

In his conclusion, Plaut brings us to the realities of modern times, where the unwritten law is that no Jews are ever allowed to work for the government or become officers, where files of Jewish soldiers are highlighted in a special color ink and identification cards and passports list the religion of the bearer, where the Greek Orthodox attacks on Judaism are still frequent and the socialist party, Pasok, in power under Prime Minister Papandreou has launched virulent attacks

against the Jews and Israel. Anti-semitic periodicals such as Kinema, Stohos, Mesogiaki Alilegi and others are still widely published and read, while swastikas deface the Holocaust memorial and the nearby synagogue in Larissa, Janina and other towns.

All in all Plaut has given us an interesting book on a Jewish community on its way to extinction in the country side and diminishing in numbers in Athens and Salonica. The author concludes that Hitler's goal of a Europe free of Jews may very well succeed in Greece due to "national complacency ... historical revisionism... (and) complete silence and neglect in government, civil and academic circles."

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