Jewish Salonica: A Great Sephardic Community

by Michael Curtis

Much of the writing on Jewish history has focused on the complex experience of Ashkenazi Jews, their achievements as well as the discrimination and persecution mounted against them. For generations, Ashkenazi Jews constituted about three quarters of Jews worldwide. Concentrated in Europe, mostly in Eastern and Central Europe, Ashkenazi Jews made a remarkable and highly disproportionate contribution to European and world culture and civilization. The group, some speaking Yiddish as their main language, was the dominant element of European Jewish life until the Holocaust.

Less known is the history of those Jews known as Sephardim and it is valuable to be made more aware of their story and fate. Sephardim are those Jews who from an ethnic point of view descended from Jews who had lived in the Iberian Peninsula, until they were expelled from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1496. Many of the descendants, speaking a language usually known as Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, based on Castilian elements merged with some Hebrew and Aramaic, settled in various parts of the Ottoman Empire.

A particularly significant section of those descendants were those Jews who have been present for 450 years in the Aegean port city of Salonica, sometimes spelled as Salonika, or called Thessaloniki by Greeks. Already Jews had been present for 2,000 years in the area where Apostle Paul is said to have preached. When the Ottoman Empire was collapsing in 1912, Greece declared war on it and as a result Greece became independent. Some Sephardim, as well as outsiders, dreamed of the creation of an autonomous Jewish city-state but this did not happen. Instead, the area of Salonica was officially

annexed to Greece by the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest.

From being subjects of the multi-ethic, and multi-religious Ottoman Empire, Jews in Salonica became citizens in the homogenized Greek Orthodox nation state of Greece, a minority group in that nation state. At that time in the 1910s Jews, active in all aspects of economic and social life, numbered 80,000 of the total population of 157,000 in Salonica.

In his new book, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece,* Devin E. Naar, a historian himself descended from Salonica families, recounts in a highly personal and scholarly fashion, the history of those Jews, including some of his relatives, who constituted about half of the total population in the port city of Salonica . The city was once the home of the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world. It was sometimes proudly proclaimed “the Jerusalem of the Balkans.”

The story of those Jews is compelling, not least because of their sad fate during the Holocaust when the once vibrant community was almost entirely exterminated by Nazi Germany. The city, in which the number of Jews has now fallen to less than 1,000, has largely disappeared from present day consciousness.

The city was occupied by Nazi Germany in April 1941. Almost immediately, Jews were persecuted and its leadership was arrested. Jews were evicted from their homes. Jewish artifacts were plundered; the Jewish Cemetery, with over 500,000 tombs we destroyed; all but one of the 32 synagogues was destroyed; Jews were assigned to forced labor projects; they were forced to wear a yellow star; and two ghettos were created. Between March and April 1943 more than 45,000 Jews or more than 95 per cent of the population at that time, were deported, 2000-2500 at a time in closed freight cars in 19 convoys from Salonica to Auschwitz and Birkenau where they were immediately gassed.

The Holocaust in Salonica was carried out by a special Nazi unit headed by Dieter Wisliceny, SS Hauptsturmfuhrer, and Alois Brunner, who had been ordered by Adolf Eichmann to "solve the Jewish problem" there by ending the vibrant Jewish community. To their discredit, collaborators in the Greek administration, civil service, and police helped in the process. A highly controversial issue has been the allegation that the Chief Rabbi Sevi Koretz was a Nazi collaborator.

The Salonica story is not wholly lachrymose. Naar is primarily concerned with the variety of responses of Jews in shaping their destiny after the end of the Ottoman Empire and as citizens of Greece. Under the Empire, Salonica had been a major Jewish religious and cultural center. Naar's analyses detail the problem, one that is a perpetual issue of any Jewish minority in a secular state, of how Salonica Jews tried to reconcile their obligations and relationships as Jews with the city, the Greek state, and their communal Jewish activities. They tried to forge an identity as "Hellenic Jews," one that challenged the identity as Sephardic Jews.

On this central issue Salonica Jews differed, depending on their ideological view. Some were assimilationist or integrationist, some socialist, some Zionist. But in general they viewed Salonica as central to Hellenic history in which Jews had played a key role. They did not resist Hellenization, as many have suggested, but articulated a different version of what Hellenization could become.

Jews did not see themselves as victims of ethnic nationalism, but as part of a Jewish city as well as a Greek one. The city remained Jewish into the 20th century. The port of Salonica was closed on Saturday because of the Jewish Sabbath, and Ladino was widely spoken by Jews. The Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky referred to the city as the "most Jewish city in the world." His rival David Ben Gurion, visiting Salonica in 1911, thought the city could be a model for a future Jewish

state. Indeed, during the Ottoman years Salonica was a Jewish city, a city created by Jews.

Though the Salonica Jews experienced anti-Semitic outbursts they established a thriving cultural world, a Judeo-Spanish theater, newspapers and magazines, an active press, literature and music. With a Jewish population of 55,000, it was the largest Jewish community in Greece, with multiple identities and playing an important role in the religious, political, and institutional life of the city. Jews were present in all strata of society, bankers and business people, civil servants, and port workers.

At the same time they encountered problems and suffered discrimination and persecution. The great fire of 1917 destroyed much of the town, leaving many Jews homeless and therefore some emigrated. Though they had civil rights, they could not participate in national elections for prime minister. In 1931 during the Campbell riots, a form of pogrom, entire Jewish neighborhoods were burned. Further emigration of Jews occurred, reducing the population of about 80,000 to little more than half the size. Among the emigrants during these years were the grandparent of the French politician Nicolas Sarkozy, the father of the 2014 Nobel Prize winner novelist Patrick Modiano, the Dassault family, aircraft manufacturers, and the Danone family with their yogurt business.

Jewish Salonica, as Naar points out, illustrates the necessity to reflect on hybrid identities. The place of minorities, especially Jews, in contemporary societies is still an unresolved dilemma of modernity. It is therefore troubling that according to recent public opinion polls, Greece is the most anti-Semitic country in Europe. The acceptance by Greeks of allegations of supposed nefarious Jewish influence and behavior in business, financial markets and global affairs remains high.

A monument honoring “Jewish martyrs and heroes” was unveiled at Aristotle University in November 2014. The ultimate irony is that this University was literally built on the ruins of the Jewish cemetery. In memory of Jewish Salonica, that University as a minimal starting point should do more to make known the history and achievements of a remarkable community of Sephardic Jews.