

“Greek Righteous Gentiles in the Holocaust, A Renewed Look and Their Current State of Being Recognized”

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Even though more than 10,000 Greek Jews were rescued in the Holocaust, only a little more than two hundred Greek Righteous Gentiles have been recognized until now. Once ghettos were established in Salonika and deportations began on March 15, 1943, several thousand Jews fled to Athens in the Italian zone. In Salonika there were very few Righteous Gentiles since most of the Greek-Orthodox population were refugees who arrived in the 1922 population exchange from Asia Minor and brought with them to Greece a rich tradition of enmity towards the Jews.

Most of the Judeo-Spanish speaking Salonikan Jews who fled to Athens were compelled to hide when the German army replaced the Italians in September 1943. After this point, until the Nazi mass arrests on March 24-25, 1944, most of the Jews in Athens hid or fled to Eretz-Israel by reaching the Evia Peninsula and proceeded to Turkey via fishing boats and later went overland to Eretz-Israel after interrogation in Aleppo. Most of the Jews of Thessaly fled to the mountains under the protection of the leftist-Communist leaning ELAS-EAM resistance movement after their religious leaders advocated such action.

The leftist Communist-leaning ELAS-EAM resistance movement, the Greek-Orthodox and Catholic Churches, foreign diplomats from neutral or Axis countries, the Greek police in Athens and other cities, the staffs of mental hospitals and orphanages, and many private citizens risked their lives to save Jews in Greece during the Second World War. Princess Alice, mother of Prince Philip, harbored two Jewish families in Athens and was recognized as a Righteous Gentile. Estimates of potential Righteous Gentiles from Greece number as high as 40,000. Many Jews in Greece fleeing Nazi persecution were saved by several different people and often had to switch hiding places.

When the Germans began the ghettoization of Salonikan Jewry into three large ghettos on 31 January 1943, Jewish youth began going to the mountains to join the ELAS Communist leaning resistance movement. While most did not go since they did not want to abandon their families and at this stage in the development of the partisan movement, conditions were extremely difficult in the mountains; a deterrent for families and the elderly from the conservative Jewish community of Salonika. While a fourth of Salonikan Jewry were tobacco workers and part of the original Socialist movement in the Ottoman Greek Peninsula and later in Greece, the general Jewish population steered away from anything connected to Communism and radical movements. Nonetheless, Alexandros Kalledopoulos, who recruited Salonikan Jews for ELAS,¹ was awarded the Righteous Gentile distinction for 800 Salonikan Jews joining the resistance and for his endangering his life in returning to Salonika from the mountains to recruit the Jews and accompanying them to the mountains.

The Jews of southern Greece learned from the deportations in Salonika, beginning on March 15, 1943, that in the future if they fell under German rule their fate would be very bleak. When the Italian military occupation was replaced by the German army in September 1943 in the south of Greece and other areas such as Epirus and the Ionian

Islands, Athenian Rabbi Eli Barzilai signaled to the Jewish community to flee their homes and hide. Starting at that point, the Greek people in the southern and central part of the country made a concerted effort to save the Jews.

The Greek-Orthodox and Catholic churches found hiding places for the Jews. Archbishop Damaskinos risked his life by creating false baptismal papers for many, and he arranged mixed marriages. Damaskinos had also organized a petition of labor union officials and national organizational heads to protest to the German authorities the deportations of Salonikan Jewry. He also issued false identification cards to Jews who could not find refuge.

“Furthermore, he instructed the Greek Orthodox churches throughout Greece and abroad to harbour Jews fleeing persecution. In Attica and the Euboean Peninsula, Greek Orthodox monasteries provided refuge for Jews waiting for boat connections to Turkey. Unlike the churches in Northern Europe, there are no instances where those in hiding in religious orders were converted to Christianity, and after the war, children were returned to their parents or the Jewish community.”²

The Catholic Church, under the inspiration of Sister Eleni provided food, medical assistance, and hiding places to many Jews in their five centers in Athens. Father Irene Typaldos, who was also a Spanish diplomat, also found hiding places for Jews in the Catholic religious orders and amongst contacts within Greek society.

The Athenian Police Chief Angelos Ebert and other police officers issued new identification cards with Greek sounding names to thousands of Jews hiding in Athens. The above mentioned leftist partisan movement ELAS-EAM accepted the Jewish youth in their ranks and harbored families in the villages under their protection. The latter was active in organizing the escape of Greek Jews from the Euboea Peninsula by fishing boats to Turkey and from there to Eretz-Israel by way of a temporary internment in British military camps in Aleppo, Syria for interrogation by British intelligence agents. Sotiris Papastratis, of ELAS and a native of Chalkis, who helped coordinate Jewish illegal immigration movement to Palestine from Greece to Turkey via fishing boats that left every two weeks from Zakaïos on the east coast of the Euboea Peninsula was recognized by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Gentile for saving more than 800 Jews.

In total, estimates range as high as 3,000 pertaining to Jews rescued via the boat movement to Turkey and sent onward to Eretz-Israel:

“ Posters appeared on walls in Athens urging the population to assist the Jews and avoid their arrest. On October 4 the Jews ordered to report to the synagogue where they would continue to report to the Germans on a weekly basis. While some 800 appeared, most Jews were influenced by Barzilai and either went into hiding in the large Athens area or started fleeing from Greece via the illegal immigration network to Eretz-Israel, which transported Greek Jews by small fishing boats from the eastern coast of the Evia Peninsula to Cesme, Turkey, and then on to Eretz-Israel after being put up in inns or refugee camps in Izmir, and sent by train to Aleppo for two weeks for interrogation by the British intelligence. Some three thousand Jews were saved through the boat movement, which was jointly coordinated by the Mossad LeAliyah Bet of Eretz-Israel and the ELAS-EAM movement.”

In contrast to ELAS-EAM, the rightest royalist resistance movement, mostly active in northwest Greece in the Epirus region, was very anti-Semitic in character and only four Jews were known to have belonged to its ranks.

Some six families from Agrinean, Epirus hid in the neighboring mountains in villages with Christian families. Such conditions were Spartan, and the danger of German arrival to the area in search for Jews was a constant reality, but whether protected by the ELAS partisans or villagers, not were loyal and did not betray the Jews.³

In general, the Jews in southern Greece were regarded highly by the local Greek-Orthodox population. They fought valiantly in the 1940-1941 Albanian campaign against the invading Italian army, they were native Greek speakers, and had been well integrated into Old Greece; those living under Greek sovereignty since the early 1880s or previously. The Jews in the north were part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912, were Judeo-Spanish speakers, and were castigated by their respective local populations; in particular in Salonika. Despite this typification, most of the Jews saved in Athens in 1943-44, were Judeo-Spanish speaking Jews from Salonika who had fled to Athens between 1941 and 1943, and they found themselves on the run when Germany replaced Italian rule in autumn 1943. These people in desperation searched hiding in the streets of Athens and later in the outskirts and even in the mountains. They numbered some 5,000-7,000 Jews; while Athenian Jewry only numbered some 800 Jews; half of which were deported since they reported to the Germans weekly on Friday and were finally rounded up on Pessach, March 24-25, 1944.

On the island of Zakynthos there was a miracle. The local Jewish population of 275 people was not deported.⁴ The mayor, Lukas Karrer, and the Metropolitan Chryostemos did not hand over the lists of the members of the Jewish community, and there were also other protests; by the translator Romi and the rightest EDES resistance leader Dr. Dimitri Katevatis. The German commander Alfred Lutt (or Lit) had a Christian girlfriend who put in a word in favor of saving the Jews. The Jews scattered to villages on the island, but they could have been rounded up. At the end of the German occupation, three boats destined to deport the Jews were used to transport the retreating German army from the island.

On the island of Rhodes, forty-seven Jews had the fortune of being saved by the 29 year-old Turkish consul, Salahattin Ulkumen, who protected them as Turkish subjects, and thus, they avoided deportation.⁵ Previously in February 1944 when there was great tension between Turkey and Germany, the latter bombed the Turkish Consulate building and injured Ulkumen's wife; she died seven months later after giving birth to a boy.

For forty years, survivors in Greece or elsewhere did not speak of their experiences. The public was not ready to hear of their experiences, when they spoke they often were ostracized, relating to the subject brought back nightmares, or they hesitated to speak about it to their children. Due to the Cold War, the status of ELAS-EAM was illegal in Greece and speaking of rescue by the movement could incriminate those involved. Jews, as well as Greek-Orthodox were exiled and even executed after the liberation of Greece in 1944 until the beginning of the 1950s for their past partisan affiliation. When the radical Andreas Papandreou came to power in 1982 and legalized

the movement, Jews in Greece began relating more to their past survival history. The movement not only admitted Jews as fighters or harbored them in their strongholds in Attica, Thessaly, Euboea, and elsewhere, but also assisted in illegal immigration to Eretz-Israel.

The film **It Was Nothing... It Was Everything** produced by Sy Rotter and the film department of B'nai Brith International in Washington D.C. shows several cases of Righteous Gentiles who saved Jews from Larissa and Volos in the mountains of the Thessaly region.

More Jews were rescued in Greece than in Denmark, and in Greece, many less Jews were betrayed in hiding by collaborators than in Holland, but the theme is unknown and needs to be integrated in Holocaust education.

¹ Steven Bowman, *Jewish Resistance in Wartime Greece* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006) 70n.

² Yitzchak Kerem, "The Role of Greek Righteous Gentiles in the Rescue of Greek Jews in the Holocaust", *Gesher, Bridge, The Official Journal of The Council of Christians & Jews, Vol. 1, No. 4* (October 1994) 62-63.

³ Michael Matsas, *The Illusion of Safety, The Story of the Greek Jews During the Second World War* (New York: Pella Publishing Company, 1997) 346-396.

⁴ Yitzchak Kerem, "The Survival of the Jews of Zakynthos in the Holocaust", *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B, Volume II: The History of the Jewish People* (Jerusalem: World union of Jewish Studies, 1990) 387-394.

⁵ Eric Silver, *The Book of the Just, The Silent Heroes who Saved Jews from Hitler* (Tel Aviv: Edanim Publishers, Yediot Aharonot, 1992) 119-122. [Hebrew]