

Intent

To study the workings of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki and the relations between Greek Jews and Greek Christians before the Second World War and in the present day.

Background Readings

I arrived in Thessaloniki on June 1, 2003. Upon my arrival I spent two weeks reading books such as "The Illusion of Safety: The Story of Greek Jews During the Second World War," by Michael Matsas, "Greek Jewry in the Twentieth Century, 1913-1983," by Joshua Eli Plant, and "From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz and Back," by Erika Kounio Amariglio, whom I later interviewed. I also used this time to familiarize myself with my surroundings, as I lived in the very center of Thessaloniki.

Active Research

After two weeks, I went to the Jewish Museum and asked for volunteer work. Erika Peraxia, the curator, charged me with transcribing the plaques on the walls which told the history of the Jews of Thessaloniki, and then entering the text into the computer. The text was in both Greek and English. I worked at this, off and on, for my two month stay, finishing the last week that I was there.

I also tried to get a job working at the Jewish retirement home, Saul Modiano, but it was not possible. Regardless of this, I spent a significant amount of time there interviewing those residents who felt up to speaking, sometimes in English, sometimes in French, and mostly in Greek.

I took a last minute trip to Crete in late July to speak with Nikos Stavroulakis, who designed both the Jewish Museum in Athens and the Jewish Museum in Thessaloniki, and who renovated the synagogue of Chania, where he presently lives. Every source to whom I had spoken had referred to him as both an intelligent and a wise man, and his perspective proved to be extremely valuable. All in all, I ended up with about 495 minutes of interviews on six cassette tapes, some of which will need to be translated by a native Greek speaker.

Findings

When I talked to David Saltiel, the President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, he told me that the greatest danger to the current Jewish Community is assimilation, and it seems to be

true; when I visited the synagogue, I found that they have to pay men to come to ensure that there will be a ten-man minyan.

What I became focused on, however, is the shocking lack of any education in Thessaloniki about the Jews of the city, and the anti-Semitism that this is breeding. When I asked Greek Christians what they knew about the Jews of Thessaloniki, the typical answer was, "They lived here, they had some problems around the second world war, now there aren't very many of them." Very few know of the richness of the past Jewish community and of its contributions; I was told that even the Holocaust was merely a footnote in the history textbooks.

The anti-Semitism present in Thessaloniki at this time is confusing. On several occasions, I (or friends of mine) heard that "The Jews are responsible for everything that's wrong with the world," etc. The Jewish reaction to this anti-Semitism is varied. Some refuse to admit that it exists. Another said, "They shout [anti-Semitic] slogans during protests and marches, but after the marches, everything's fine." Erika Peraxia, who lived in France for thirty years, said that the Greek anti-Semitism was harmless compared to the French, which she claimed is more deep-seated. Greek anti-Semitism, she claimed, is likely a passing phase. The best explanation I heard was that Greeks tend to side with the underdog; during the Six Days War, Jews in Greece were approached on the street and congratulated on Israel's victory. Now that the Palestinians are the underdog and the Israelis are supported by the United States, public opinion has swung the other way.

The current Jewish reaction to anti-Semitism parallels that of the Jewish reaction to anti-Semitism in the years before the Second World War. Officially, there was very little anti-Semitism before the war, and some of the retirees that I interviewed denied that there was any anti-Semitism. Others claimed that there was quite a lot.

Conclusion

It is difficult to accept anything as truth in this area. Books are subjective, as are interviews. It would be interesting to see what older Greek Christians have to say about the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, as that is a valuable perspective which has not yet been explored, to my knowledge. In any case, the many different truths which I have been given make it difficult to come to a single conclusion after my research. Even if only a few Greek Jews felt that there was anti-Semitism before the war, it must have been present in some fashion, and the general atmosphere of the Jewish Community led me to believe that there was more going on than I was privy to, due to barriers of youth or language. There is no real proof of this anti-Semitism, however. It is clear that the Jewish

and Christian populations impacted each other significantly; how they felt about each other remains unclear to me.