

Proof of Merten's ransom is found

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Seven checks prove that the ransom of 1.5 billion drachmes that the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki paid from 1942-1943 was seized by the treasury of the German State.

The mystery is solved. The door is open to claim compensation.

"Merten had demanded a massive sum in exchange for the promise that we would not be sent to the concentration camps. We amassed the ransom to save ourselves believing that we would be saved...but, as soon as he got it, only a few days afterwards, he arranged for our deportation, putting us on trains, taking us to our death."

Heinz Kounio is one of the few Jews from Thessaloniki who survived the hell of Auschwitz. More than 45,000 of his fellow Jews from Thessaloniki would take their last breath in German concentration camps, in spite of the fact that 1.5 billion drachmes [the equivalent of 30 million euro] was given as a ransom to Max Merten, the Director of the Military Administration of Thessaloniki. A few days ago, one of the greatest mysteries of Greece's involvement in the Second World War, whether this ransom was actually given and, if so, how much it was, has finally been solved by the historian, Evangelos Xekimoulou.

"Seven checks that were given as ransom in 1942 and 1943 by the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki to the German Occupation Forces [to release the Jews of the city from forced labor] were found," Xekimoulou revealed. The checks were found after a two-year search through the archives of the Banks of Thessaloniki and were discovered in the historical archives of the National Bank of Greece. The checks were made out by the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki in the amount of 1,036 billion drachmes and were dated from October 29, 1942 to January 15, 1943. They were made out in the name of the Director of the Military Administration of Thessaloniki-Aegean. They were endorsed by Merten and forwarded to the Bank of Greece to be withdrawn by the Economic Agency of the German Republic.

"The discovery of these checks [which had been thought to be lost] reinforces what we knew and, naturally, opens the door for payment of compensation by the German State. For the first time there is proof that the ransom he demanded did not wind up in his hands [a claim that was repeatedly stated by the German

Republic] but rather in the German Treasury,” said the President of the Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece, Moises Konstantini.

“We paid with our lives. They sent us to our deaths.”

“On July 11, 1942, the Germans gathered all Jewish Males between the ages of 18-35 in Plateia Elefterias. The following day, 2000 were sent to quarries in different parts of Macedonia. The registration for forced labor ended on July 13, 1942: 3500 additional Jewish men were registered for forced labor [road construction and construction of the airport of ΣΕΔΕΣ [note: I am not sure what the initials mean]. Those who were chosen for forced labor were not used to this type of work, resulting in many dying of exhaustion. When the bodies of the first dead began to arrive in Thessaloniki, an entire ‘industry’ was created with the sole purpose of gaining the release of those forced to endure the conscripted labor: bribing doctors, mediators and contractors. The Jews of the city began to collect money for payment, believing that by paying they would save the lives of those taken for forced labor,” explained Xekimoulou.

In November of 1942, the obligatory conscription spread to the total population and all Jewish men born between 1912-1921 were called up. It was then, with the mediation of the German contractor, Miller, that an agreement was made for the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki [JCT] to pay a ransom to Merten. According to the terms of the agreement [Yomtov Yiakoel acting as representative of the JCT], the Jews would be released from forced labor upon the payment of the sum of 2 billion drachmes, payment to be made by December 15, 1942.

The JCT was only able to amass 1.5 billion drachmes [collecting over 1.5 million drachmes a day] by the end of December. Of the amount collected, 1, 036 billion was paid by the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki in seven checks made out to the Director of the Military Administration of Thessaloniki-Aegean and cashed by the Bank of Thessaloniki, endorsed by Max Merten. According to Xekimoulou, six of the checks were paid in the usual manner to the German military Administration, while one was collected in installments by Merten’s interpreter who gave a disposition at Merten’s trial in Greece. According to the testimony, this 500 million was taken in installments by Merten. During his trial in Greece in 1959, Merten acknowledged that a ransom was levied against the JCT, but he claimed that all the money was sent to the Central Bank of Germany. The German State denied this claim and stated that not one drachma from the JCT wound up in the German Treasury. Only now, history has changed, as Konstantini noted.

The Greek parliament set Merten free!

Merten was a personal friend of Hitler and a favorite of his, although he insisted after the war that he was not a political friend of Hitler's. He was born in Berlin in 1911 and is mentioned in the archives of Thessaloniki [1942] as a military counselor of the German Military Administration before becoming Director of the German Administration of Macedonia. He organized the plan to exterminate the Jews. In March of 1944, he hurriedly left Greece along with his 'treasure' [supposedly sunk at the bottom of the Gulf of Messiniakos [off the coast of Kalamata: my note], a rumor that has never been proven even after extensive searches. In 1957, he was in Greece to testify before the War Crime Tribunal in Athens at the trial of Arthur Meissner. He was subsequently arrested by the prosecutor, Toussis, and imprisoned at Averof Prison. He was tried and sentenced to 25 years [he was kept imprisoned during the pre-trial period to assure that he would not flee the country]. In the summer of 1959, something unique in the chronicles of world history happened. The Greek parliament passed a law that decreed the removal [note: a term is used here by the writer of the article which gives the connotation that this law was 'illegal'] of all prison penalties and, in all essence, granted amnesty to all of those Germans convicted of war crimes. The main person who benefited from this law was Merten, who was released and fled Greece.