

The Story Behind the Statistics Variables Affecting the Tremendous Losses of Greek Jewry During the Holocaust

Greece has the ignominious distinction of having lost the largest percentage of Jews in any occupied country during the Holocaust: 87% of Greek Jewry was lost¹. Many attempts have been made to explain these losses: the complicity of a quisling government², Greek anti-Semitism³, inadequate Jewish leadership (especially in the case of Head Rabbi Koretz of Salonika)⁴, the conservative mentality of Jewish communities in Greece and, especially, that as late as 1943/44 (when deportations took place in Greece) little was known of the concentration camps and that the railroad cars were taking the Jews of Greece to their deaths⁵. All of these variables are important but they still do not explain other pertinent facts: why, on arrival at the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, were a greater percentage of Greek Jews chosen to die in the gas chambers, and why was their ability to survive in the camps more difficult than that of Jews from other countries? These last two factors also added to the losses of Greek Jewry, but have never been adequately discussed before. It is the purpose of this paper to review previous attempts to explain the losses of Greek Jewry (primarily based on Jewish Greece during the Occupation and deportations that ensued), and to discuss these two additional variables (the journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau and life in the camp), variables that have nothing to do with the internal situation within Greece, but everything to do with what added to the tremendous losses of Greek Jewry.

There were 77,600 Jews living in Greece at the beginning of the Occupation (April 1941)⁶: the 1,700 Jews of Rhodes and the 100 Jews of Kos, which are counted as part of Greek Holocaust statistics (and will be included in discussion of Greek Jewry in this paper) were under Italian control, making for a total of 78,400. With the exception of Salonika, where Jews made up one third of the city's total population, Jews represented a small minority in communities where they resided. Greek Jewry was composed of two distinct groups: Romaniotes (the indigenous, Greek-speaking Jews of Greece who date their ancestry back to the Roman Empire) and Sephardim (Spanish-speaking descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in 1492). There were also small numbers of Ashkenazi Jews (who had entered from German lands to the north and Russian lands to the east) and Jews of Italian descent on the island of Corfu. By the time of the Holocaust, these Jews had been absorbed by either the Romaniotes or Sephardim, and can only be distinguished by surnames that show their former roots. Salonika (Thessaloniki), alone, had 56,000 Jews in 1940 and was the most populous city of Sephardic Jews in the world for over 400 years.

Hagen Fleischer examined the extent of assimilation of various Greek Jewish communities and speculated on how this affected their ability to survive the Holocaust⁷. He discussed the assimilated Jewish communities of Athens and Thessaly, the connections they had made with non-Jews in the area and how this assimilation had aided them. The statistics substantiate what he says (on this point): the losses in Athens and Thessaly are substantially less than those throughout the rest of Greece. His explanation does not take into account the over 90% losses in Ioannina, one of the most highly acculturated Greek-Jewish communities in Greece. He compared the survival ability of Greek-speaking Jews (for the most part Romaniote Jews) with those of Spanish speaking Sephardim, who spoke a medieval form of Spanish, often referred to as Ladino. His conclusion was that because the Sephardim, especially those living in insulated communities like Salonika, had preserved their Spanish language and had not fully assimilated into the surrounding Greek-speaking culture, their ability to survive the Holocaust was severely hampered. The explanation is too simplistic. True, the heavily Spanish-accented Greek spoken by native Ladino speakers in Greece made it more difficult for them to

hide their Jewish identity, but numbers of native Ladino speakers in Thessaly (in communities like Larissa, Karditsa and Trikkala) were able to escape deportation in hiding and, as previously mentioned, native Greek-speaking Jews also suffered horrendous losses. True, connections with local non-Jews, both those in political positions, and those in religious authority, were of aid in some locales (specifically in Athens, Thessaly, Zakynthos and Chalkis) but in other areas (such as Ioannina) they proved meaningless.

A simplistic approach at explaining the statistics of Greek-Jewish losses is that of Greek anti-Semitism and Greek government complicity. As with all officially occupied countries during the Holocaust, the Germans put a quisling government in place in Greece to carry out their plans. The official Greek government was in exile in Egypt throughout the occupation. While no top government official protested the German's actions regarding Jews in the country, and in some instances, such as that of the Governor of Macedonia, openly supported the German policy, minor officials, such as the Chiefs of Police in both Athens and Piraeus, issued false ID cards to Jews, enabling them to elude the deportations. The head of the Greek Orthodox Church, Archbishop Damaskinos, issued a formal protest, the only one of its kind by the head of any major Christian religion in Europe, denouncing the German's intention to deport the Jews of Greece. This protest was signed by heads of major unions and educational institutions in Athens. In addition, Greece had one of the strongest resistance movements in all of Europe: EDES, which was government and Church affiliated, and EAM/ELAS, which was Communist controlled at the top. The latter formulated, as early as 1943, as part of its official policy, the saving of Jews in Greece. In a series of interviews of Holocaust survivors from Salonika conducted by Erika Kounio Amariglio and Alberto Nar⁸, many interviewed were asked if they could have escaped and if they had Greek Christian friends who had offered to help them. Most answered yes. Many related connections to the resistance movement. When asked why they did not choose to escape and avoid deportations, most gave personal explanations: "I was the oldest son-I could not leave my aging parents to care for my many brothers and sisters," "My wife was pregnant-we could not go to the mountains," "I had an infant child-we could not leave," "My mother cried-my father pleaded with me not to go," "Families were not separated-we would bear out fate together," etc. These responses are reflective of the conservative nature of the Jewish communities (especially that of Salonika), which will be discussed later.

Much has been written about the adequacy, or inadequacy, of Jewish leadership during the Holocaust. One of the most controversial figures of the Holocaust in Greece was Head Rabbi Koretz of Salonika, whom many of the survivors consider a collaborator directly responsible for the demise of the Jewish community.⁹ There is no doubt that, as both the religious and political leader of the community (the Germans put him in the position of President of the community in addition to his position of Head Rabbi), and the fact that he called for the compliance of the community in following German orders and acted as a spokesman for their demands, disseminating their propaganda that the Jew were only "being sent to work in Poland," contributed to the acquiescence of the community and the reluctance of many to escape. There were other rabbis, such as Rabbi Pessach in Volos¹⁰, and Rabbi Barzilai in Athens, who, with knowledge of what had happened in Salonika the previous year, helped many in their respective communities to flee safely. On the other hand, other leaders, such as the President of the Jewish Community of Ioannina, Sabbetai Kabellis, even knowing what had happened in Salonika, chose to believe that they could best serve their communities by complying with the German demands.¹¹ The question of Jewish leadership during the Holocaust is always a difficult one. Rabbis and community presidents were not chosen, nor equipped to deal with the horrors of Nazi persecutions. They, especially the rabbis, were

chosen as spiritual leaders. They were ill equipped to deal with the German methods of persuasion by fear and threats of reprisals.

The conservative nature of the Jewish communities in Greece was definitely a variable that led to their severe losses during the Holocaust. In many ways, most of the Greek Jews were decades behind their contemporaries in Western and Eastern Europe. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century that modern education (in the form of the Alliance Israelite Universelle¹²) came to Greece. Before that, women had no formal education, and most young boys only received religious education. Even though there were wealthy Jewish industrialists in Salonika, most of the Jewish population of the city, and of other Jewish communities in Greece, belonged to the lower-middle or lower classes. They were small shop owners, craftsmen, hamales who worked at the ports, and street venders. Families were large, often numbering eight or more children. Society was patriarchal: marriages were arranged. Children lived at home until they were married. Even when given the opportunity to escape to the mountains and the resistance movement, many young people chose to stay with their families. Many who did leave returned later to be deported with them.¹³

As early as the spring of 1942, knowledge on the mass extermination of European Jewry had reached those who could have helped: Churchill, Roosevelt and the Pope. Deportations did not begin in Greece until 1943. When the Germans arrived, they confiscated all radios and took over the newspapers, replacing them with their own propaganda press. Broadcasts from the BBC were heard in Greece by those who possessed illegal radios, but never once was there any mention of the death camps. Correspondences sent by Consul Burton Berry (stationed in Turkey) to the United States¹⁴, repeatedly mentioned the deportations from Greece in 1943 and 1944. Both England and the United States knew that Jews were being killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They knew the Jews of Greece were being deported there¹⁵. They knew the railroad lines that were taking the Jews of Greece to the Nazi extermination camps. The Allies bombed Greece from top to bottom. The one thing they never touched were the railroad lines leading Greek Jews to their deaths. There is no doubt that if information was available to Greek Jewry, and that if they did not honestly believe, as late as July of 1944, that they were being sent to work in Poland (or Germany depending on the misinformation given them at the time), they would not have so willingly entered the cattlecars. There is no doubt that the destruction of the means of taking Greek Jewry to the camps would have prevented their tremendous losses. All of this has been excellently dealt with in Dr. Michael Matsas' book, "The Illusion of Safety." This is not the purpose of my paper.

While many variables within Greece, as discussed above, influenced the 87% losses of Greek Jewry, one variable has never been fully explored before: how their journey to, arrival at, and their life within the camps contributed to their losses. It is my intention to explore this multi-faceted variable and to shed new light on the losses of Greek Jewry. All statistics mentioned are taken from the Official Archives of Auschwitz as compiled by Danuta Czech for the Auschwitz Chronicle¹⁶. Community statistics are those of Yad Vashem and the official statistics issued by the Central Board of Jewish Communities.

A limited number of "privileged" Jews (those holding foreign nationalities) were sent to Bergen-Belsen) and the Jews of Thrace were sent to their deaths in Treblinka¹⁷, deported by the Bulgarians, but the final destination for most Greek Jews would be Auschwitz-Birkenau. The decision to establish a concentration camp in Auschwitz (Oświęcim), near the Vistula River on the outskirts of the industrial region of Upper Silesia, was made shortly after the German invasion and occupation of western Poland in 1939. Auschwitz was ideally situated at the

junction of a major travel network and the camp could be protected and unnoticed by the Polish population in the area (something that would change with the mass exterminations and the smoke emanating from the crematoria). Himmler officially established the camp on April 27, 1940. Birkenau was established in the winter of 1941-42. In January of 1942, a conference was held at Wannsee (a suburb outside of Berlin) to discuss the implementation of the "Final Solution." The means used, up until that point, of exterminating Jews (the Einsatzgruppen) was not adequate: the number of Jews killed by firing squads were limited in number and, more importantly, there were demoralizing psychological repercussions for the German soldiers who had to actually view the women and children they were killing. The decision to use lethal gas was made at Wannsee. Statistics were presented on the numbers of European Jewry slated for extermination (11 million), among them the 77,000 Jews of Greece (the actual number estimated by the Germans was 69,000¹⁸).

The first gas chamber at Auschwitz (Crematorium I) began functioning on August 15, 1940¹⁹. Attached to the gas chamber was a crematorium to incinerate the corpses. This would be the procedure used in all additional facilities erected at the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Additional gas chambers and attached crematoria (a total of 4) would be erected in the camp of Birkenau. Two of the four crematoria were functional as of March 13, 1943²⁰, just in time for the arrival of the first transport of Greek Jews from Salonika: the third would be completed in April, 1943 and the fourth in June, 1943, during the arrival of additional transports from Salonika. Previous to the erection of the gas chambers and crematoria, the Nazis were limited in their capacity to kill arriving Jews. This is not to say that Jews did not die within the camp previous to this (and, of course, afterwards) due to starvation diets and harsh working conditions, but the ability to select Jews for immediate extermination upon arrival (those considered "unfit" for work—the children, the elderly, the infirm, pregnant women and young mothers carrying children) was hampered by the inability to murder in large numbers and dispose of the corpses. This was not true when Greek Jews began to arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau: the means for their mass extermination were in place.

The first transport of Greek Jews left Salonika on March 15, 1943²¹: the transport contained 2,800 Jews. They arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau on March 20. According to the Official Records of Auschwitz: "2,800 Jewish men, women and children from the ghetto in Salonika have arrived with an RSHA transport from Greece. Following the selection, 417 men, given Nos. 109371-109787, and 192 women, given Nos. 38721-38912, are admitted to the camp as prisoners. The other approximately 2,191 people are killed in the gas chambers."²² From this transport, immediately on arrival in the camp, 78% would be sent to their deaths. The percentage would rise to over 80% with subsequent transport arrivals. There were, of course, Jews arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau from other European countries at the same time that the Jews of Greece were arriving. Jews from Berlin, and other cities in Germany, began arriving in early March of 1943, before the completion of the crematoria. On March 6, two transports arrived: on the first transport 58% were sent directly to the gas chambers, and on the second, 59% perished immediately²³. The difference in survival rates due to the unavailability of functional crematoria in the case of the German Jews, as opposed to that of the Greek Jews (when the crematoria were all functional) is apparent. The first transport to arrive after three of the four crematoria were in place (March 13th) was from Krakau (Krakow), Poland: of the 2000 Jewish men, women and children on the transport, 1,492 are killed in the gas chambers (72%)²⁴. Other transports arriving from other countries at the same time as Greek Jews were arriving from Salonika (March-July 1943) show this same trend: the percentage of Jews sent directly to the gas chambers was substantially less. Why?

The answer to this “why” is simple: Greek Jews had to travel substantially longer distances to reach Auschwitz-Birkenau. Their greater length of time spent in the cattlecars, deprived of water and adequate food, cramped into suffocating quarters unable to lie down, forced to relieve themselves in a bucket in the middle of the car, all contributed to their debilitated state on arrival. The German criterion for entrance into the camp was “usefulness,” whether one was capable of working for the Third Reich. Those who were considered useless (the elderly, the lame, the infirm, children, pregnant women, etc.) were sent immediately to the gas chambers. Where the average travel time for arrival at Auschwitz from other points in Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Czechoslovakia and Poland) was one to three days, the shortage journey from Greece (from Salonika in the northeast) was 5 days²⁵, with most transports taking from 7-8 days. The transports in 1944 would take even longer. The Jews of Rhodes were taken off the island on July 23: they did not arrive at Auschwitz until August 16, a journey of 24 days²⁶. Simply put, by the time the Jews of Greece arrived at the train station at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the young looked old beyond their years and many were too feeble to even walk, let alone appear fit for work. As reported by eyewitness, when the Jews of Corfu arrived in July of 1944 and the doors to the cattlecars opened, there was dead silence.

The testimonies of Greek Jews who endured the horrific conditions of the Journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau speak volumes:

*Moisis Amir from Salonika (a young healthy man, recently married, from Salonika)*²⁷.

The cattlecars were intended for animals. People could not live in them. There were about 60-80 people inside each car. It was very difficult to lie down. We had two women who died on the trip. We screamed out to the Germans to remove the corpses because they had started to smell. I went and grabbed them and threw them outside. I was in charge of getting rid of all the dirt in the car. We emptied our bodily wastes out of the window while the train was moving. There was a wire covering and I would open it and throw out the receptacle. . . . As for food, we had practically nothing. We had brought bread with us. We had filled two sacks with carob bread and that's how we got by. After about 6 days, (it was the end of April) we arrived at Auschwitz, at the ramp between Auschwitz and Birkenau. We arrived at four in the afternoon. I was exhausted. I could not even move. My father-in-law told me to watch his tools because that would be what would save us. We got down off the train to the sounds of shouting. There was so much commotion. They spoke to us in German. There was a Jew from Salonika who spoke to us in Greek. He told us to leave our things and that they would give them to us later. They tried to calm us down. The selections took place very fast. My wife and I went arm in arm. I was right behind my brother-in-law. The selection took place there. They separated the men from the women. My mother-in-law wanted one of my sister-in-laws to stay with her. She called out to her and she went from our line to be with her mother.

*Iakov Attias, from Salonika, age 33, married with a young daughter.*²⁸

The freight cars were like those used for hauling animals. There were about 80-90 people in the car. Excuse me, but inside the cattlecar, we peed, we shit, we did everything. There were no toilets, only barrels.

The only food we had was what we had taken with us. They made many stops but did not open the doors. We were inside for eight days straight.

Leon Benmayor from Salonika, age 28, single.²⁹

We were loaded into the cattlecars early in the morning of April 26. The conditions were traumatic. They were railroad cars used for animals and rubbish: they were completely sealed. We could not breathe. There were two barrels inside each car, one for our bodily needs and one holding drinking water. The only food we had was what we had brought with us. The cars were filled to the point of suffocation. We tried to arrange ourselves so that we could sit. It was impossible to lie down. There was no room. We took turns lying down. The trip took about six or seven days. It was very difficult. The train made one stop somewhere in the mountains. We got down, emptied the barrels and then started to move again. We made one other stop on the border of Austria and Yugoslavia. However, that time we were not permitted to get water. You can imagine how people were suffering. It was horrible. The children were crying and the elderly could not calm themselves down: the young people patiently tried to endure. Some seriously ill people died in some of the cars during the journey. We learned about that later on. Fortunately, we did not have such occurrences in our own car.³⁰

Moses Eskenazi, from Salonika, age 30, married with one young child.³¹

They told us that they would take us to live in Poland. First of all, we knew nothing. Secondly, we had families. We had no idea that we would suffer so much. If we knew, we would have stayed here. We would have fought like men. So, we went to Birkenau. We traveled in freight cars that were crowded and dirty. There was not even room to breathe. Donkeys traveled in better conditions than we did. We were about 50-60 people in each car. They told us to take a large pot for water and another for our bodily needs. The trip took about 6-8 days. They made stops to get water but they did not allow us to go out of the cars. It was midnight when we arrived at the camp.

Mose Halegua (a young rabbi from Salonika).³²

The trip alone took 8 or 9 days. The freight cars were the kind they used to transport horses. We were about 80 people in each car. We were spread out one on top of the others, with no place to lie down. People were crying out in the cars, wanting to lie down. Where could one lie down? On top of some rags? We had barrels inside for our bodily needs. We would empty them on the road when the train stopped. There was no food, only what they had given us in Thessaloniki. They had given us some loaves of bread, one kilo for each person. That's how we got by. We economized. They told us that was it and there was no more. In the streets, the Greeks gave us some small round loaves. Otherwise, we would have collapsed. I don't remember all the details. After all these years, I cannot remember. This is the first time that I am speaking about it. The train would stop after a number of hours. It could not pass through. The railroad lines were being used by other trains.

One evening, it was night, midnight. There were flashlights. We had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Benjamin Kapon, from Salonika, age 16 (his family had escaped to Athens but were informed on and deported in 1944).³³

Half of us were standing, and the other half were sitting so that there could be some room to breath. I don't remember us having any food other than the packages from the Red Cross. They opened the cars for water in Yugoslavia. If we left Athens in the morning, I think they let us down for water when they opened the cars. We went and filled up whatever containers we had with water. There was a barrel for our bodily needs. We would empty it when the cars were opened. I don't remember how many times the train stopped. I think there were people who died in the train, but I don't remember where they took them off. I think it was afternoon when we arrived at Birkenau. We got off the trains and they separated us, the men from the women.

Iakov Pardo, from Salonika, age 20.³⁴

We were packed into cattlecars made to transport animals. There were no seats. They had put a bucket in the corner with a curtain in front, so that we could go and urinate. Nothing else. We were crammed together inside. There was not even an open window, nothing. We were 60 people in the car. We could neither sit nor lay down. The only food we had was what we had brought with us. They had told us that the trip would last 8 days. They gave us water on the road. We did not get down from the cars. They had us locked in. They gave us cans of water. We arrived at Auschwitz. It was night. They said: "Those that can march on foot, go over there. Those that cannot walk will go by truck". Many young people were so exhausted, they could not walk and they went to the trucks. They did not know that they were going to their death.

Matty Azaria, from Salonika, age 15.³⁵

They were freight cars without windows. We had some food inside: grapes, olives, and lemons. We did not have water. Certainly, the freight cars made stops, now and then. We called out for water. They would bring the water about three or four meters from the windows and pour it out in front of us, and we remained without any water. Italians and Bulgarians would come to give us water when they heard us calling "water, water," but as soon as they saw the Germans approaching, they would leave. The train made many stops. As far as our bodily needs, everything took place inside the freight cars. When the train departed, we would throw our wastes outside through the window. There was a small window; one that the animals would use to get air. The wind would blow our wastes back in on top of us. My mother took out a good blanket that she had brought with her, and placed it in a corner, since she was afraid that the others would look at us, young girls that we were. We had no space to lie down. We sat day and night. We would stand up for a little while, take a few steps and then sit down again. There were little babies, and old people. We prayed to arrive as quickly as possible, even if we didn't know what would happen when we got to

our destination. Those who couldn't stand on their feet were laid down. If they didn't leave the train rapidly enough, they were beaten. The Germans were accompanied by dogs, but they did not need to use them. How could we escape? Where would someone go in a strange land? There was one old woman who died in the cattlecar. As soon as we arrived there, they separated the small children with the old people. When we got out of the cattlecar, we saw trucks coming. They took the dead woman by her head and her feet and threw her inside one of the trucks. Our parents were in the truck along with her. I think the trip took seven days. When we arrived, it was dawn. As soon as we arrived, when the Germans said that we had arrived, my mother was next to the window. As soon as she stood up and saw the barbed-wire fence, she fainted. It was as if she sensed what awaited us. The Germans unloaded us and told us to place our things alongside the train and to make note of the number of the car, so that when we returned we would find our things.

*Oro Alfandari (age 26, married, a survivor of Block 10).*³⁶

The train was the kind that was used to transport animals. It had a roof and a small window 50 points wide, with wire, so that no one could escape. When everyone went in, the cattle cars were sealed. We sat on the floor; there was no room to stretch out. (There were 75 people in each car). As we entered, an SS guard counted us. The trip took eight days, if I am not mistaken. We entered the cattlecars on the 9th of the month and arrived at Auschwitz on the 17th. The train made stops, but no one could leave. . . they called out. There were small children who wanted water, but no one could have water. No one could have water. Only those who had carried a bottle of water along with them. That was it. Because of that, many died before we arrived. There were as many as four or five people who died in our cattlecar. They could not withstand the trip.

*Stella Abraham from Ioannina*³⁷

After nine-ten days (in a warehouse in Larissa), they gathered us all and loaded us onto trains. I can't tell you how many of us there were: one on top of the other. They kept pushing us. Then they threw a barrel in for us to use as a toilet. The Red Cross took care of us again, bringing us many things. But, in that train... one on top of the other. We were crying; we were trying to look out of the window but we couldn't see a thing. The only thing we knew was that the train was traveling on. After a while, we would stop; they would order the men to empty the barrels because they stank. Little children needed to go to the toilet, but we grown-ups were so ashamed, we could not... This terrible situation lasted for nine whole days. Some old men died; they would stop the trains and remove the bodies. For so many days we weren't allowed to get off at all, not even to get some fresh air. We just stopped for a short time, they opened the doors, emptied the barrels, brought them in again and we went on, and on, and on....

*Joya Dostis (Ioannina).*³⁸

In the most brutal way, they separated us by hundreds and loaded us onto the cattlecars, under appalling conditions. Each person tried desperately to stay with his family. I became separated from my older sister, Efthymia, who boarded another train; I never saw her again after that day. I was with my parents and my brothers, Moses and Aaron. When they separated the young from the elderly, I found myself in the same group as my sister Chrysi. At one point, I saw my parents in the back of a truck, taking their grandchild with them. We could not bear to be separated from them. My sister, desperate, fell at the feet of the Germans, begging them to let her go with her child. That was the last time I saw any of them; I was left all alone.

*Chrysoula Politis from Ioannina.*³⁹

On the trains, we were like animals in cars meant for horses, with no seats at all. Had there been seats, we wouldn't all have fit in. The windows were very small and covered with wooden planks so that we couldn't see outside. We began to sing and cry; we were together with the family of Matathias Raffael, Isaak Raffael's father; the whole family: mother, children, everybody, a big family. My father, from force of habit, still had the keys of the shop in his pocket. At one point, Matathias took them from him and threw them out of the window. "Here! That's how much they're worth now!" he said. Was it day or night? The sun rose and set, and we didn't know where we were going, what we were doing, where we were. We didn't know why we had been taken away. Nothing. We had nothing to eat; we had nothing. They didn't give us anything to eat. Oh, if the Red Cross happened to pass by... but nothing was ever sent by the Red Cross to our car. We were starving. At one stop, I went out just for a moment and tried to talk to a German in French. "Please, some bread!" He showed me a truck full of Germans in front of me. "Go there!" he said. "They will give you some." I went there, thinking they would really give me some bread. The only thing I got were two kicks, one in my stomach and one in my back; then they sent me quickly back to our wagon, so that I wouldn't stay outside. I was about 17 years old and my sister, Fortouni, two years younger.

*Daniel Ischakis from Ioannina.*⁴⁰

In Larissa, we were taken on foot to the railway station. We were loaded on wagons that had space enough for seven or eight horses. The car had just one window, fenced with barbed wire, so that we wouldn't try to bring in water, food etc. When we were boarding that train, we were given a loaf of bread and a box of threpsyni, a substitute for honey, which caused an incredible thirst. As soon as they closed the doors and locked the wagons, the trains slowly started off towards Auschwitz, without our knowing where we were heading; not knowing that we were on our way to Auschwitz in Poland. Moreover, to convince us that we were really going to settle in Poland, Eichmann had issued an order that we should exchange Greek money for Polish zloty. A huge crowd gathered in front of the exchange counters at the station, so that we could exchange all our drachmas for zloty. The train traveled day and night. We crossed Serbia; we crossed Austria, we crossed... On the

trains, we suffered from lack of water and food, and from lack of toilets; the latter were literally non-existent. One evening, we arrived in Auschwitz. There, for the first time, we saw the inscription "Arbeit macht Frei," which means "Work Makes You Free."

Survival with in the camp was extremely difficult under the best of circumstances, but for Greek Jews their ability to survive was further hampered by conditions in the camp and specifics inherent to Greek Jewry⁴¹. Greek Jews could not speak the languages of the camp: Yiddish, Polish and German, a fact that further hampered their ability to survive. Orders must be executed immediately; the inability to comprehend could mean instant death. Attempts at escape did take place at Auschwitz-Birkenau even though the odds of succeeding were slim. This option was not available to Greek Jews. Where could they go in a strange land where they did not speak the language? Only one Greek Jew, Alberto Errera, attempted escape. He was captured shortly afterwards⁴².

Other Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, found the Jews of Greece (both the Sephardim and Romaniote) "strange", often doubting that they were actually "Jews": after all, these Greek Jews did not even speak Yiddish. They doubted the "Jewishness" of Greek Jews, a situation that often made their lives even more unbearable, especially since many of the "kapos" (inmates put in charge of the "blocks") were Ashkenazim. Greek Jews, like all Greeks were used to drinking vast amounts of water: the water in the camp was contaminated and even when told not to drink it, many Greek Jews could not resist⁴³. The results were dysentery and typhus, often leading to death. Greek Jews had difficulty adapting to the harsh weather of Poland. They were used to a more temperate climate. Unlike the Jews of Poland, the Netherlands, Germany and other lands where winters were harsh, the Jews of Greece had an additional handicap to overcome: the weather. Many relate that they do not remember the sun ever shining at Auschwitz and that even the Polish spring and summers were harsh for them⁴⁴.

Dr. Clauberg began his experiments on sterilization on December 28, 1942, with a limited number of female inmates, all of whom were Jewish. On April 1, 1943, by order of the WVHA, Commandant Hoess places Block 10 of the main camp (Auschwitz I) under the command of SS Brigadier General Professor Dr. Carl Clauberg⁴⁵. Clauberg has received permission to continue the sterilization experiments he had begun in 1942. Young Jewish women would be used. Therefore, coinciding with the arrival of Saloniklis Jews, Clauberg was ready to expand his experiments: many Greek-Jewish women would be chosen as his human guinea pigs, most of whom would die before liberation of the camp in January of 1945, adding to the statistics of Greek Jewish losses⁴⁶. On April 28, 1943 (as specifically noted in the Archives of Auschwitz) 128 Greek Jewish women are transferred to Block 10, the experimental block⁴⁷. This entry is especially important because it is one of the only ones that actually denotes the nationality of those chosen for the sterilization experiments.

Another variable that increased the losses of Greek Jews (in contrast to those from other Jewish populations in Europe) involved Greek Jewish men who served in the Sonderkommando. The special section was chosen to remove the corpses from the gas chambers, remove gold teeth and hidden valuables, and then shovel the corpses into the crematoria. Sonderkommando were usually chosen from arriving transports. Strong, able-bodied men were needed. Greek-Jewish men were chosen disproportionately to their percentage in the camp population. Many had worked as hamales at the ports (especially in Salonika and Corfu) and were able to withstand the heavy physical labor involved. Sonderkommando were routinely exterminated every 3-4 months, and replaced by new

arrivals, to assure that there would be no witnesses to the “Final Solution.” Therefore, young, able-bodied Greek-Jewish men, who otherwise could have possibly withstood the hardships of the camp, were systematically exterminated. Among the last group of Sonderkommando (involved in the uprising at Auschwitz in October of 1944 known as the Revolt of the Sonderkommando) some survived to tell the gruesome story of their ordeal⁴⁸.

Reviewing general statistics of survival within the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the numbers are revealing. From among all the people deported to Auschwitz, approximately 400,000 people were registered and placed in the camp and its sub-camps (200,000 Jews, more than 140,000 Poles, approximately 20,000 Gypsies from various countries, more than 10,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and more than 10,000 prisoners of other nationalities)⁴⁹. Over 50% of the registered prisoners died as a result of starvation, labor that exceeded their physical capacity, the terror that raged in the camp, executions, the inhuman living conditions, disease and epidemics, punishment, torture, and criminal medical experiments. Among Jews (Poles, Dutch, German, Belgian, French, Italian and prisoners from other countries), the figures were higher: approximately 70%⁵⁰. A total of over 55,000 Greek Jews were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau⁵¹: 42,509 (close to 80%) would be sent to their deaths immediately; 12,948 would be registered in the camp for forced labor. Of those, less than 2,000 would survive. Over 85% of Greek Jewry would succumb to the hardships of the camp as compared to 70% of Jews from other countries.

The statistics are as follows:

Transport Number	Date of Arrival at Auschwitz	Total number in Transport	Number Admitted to Camp	Number Sent Directly to Gas Chambers
1	March 20, 1943	2800	609	2191
2	March 24, 1943	2800	814	1986
3	March 25, 1943	1901	695	1206
4	March 30, 1943	2501	453	2048
5	April 3, 1943	2800	592	2208
6	April 9, 1943	2500	479	2021
7	April 10, 1943	2750	783	1967
8	April 13, 1943	2800	864	1936
9	April 17, 1943	3000	729	2271
10	April 18, 1943	2501	605	1896
11	April 22, 1943	2800	668	2132
12	April 26, 1943	2700	638	2062
13	April 27, 1943	3070	501	2509
14	May 4, 1943	2930	538	2392
15	May 7, 1943	1000	68	932
16	May 8, 1943	2500	815	1685
17	May 16, 1943	4500 ⁵²	700	3800
18	June 8, 1943	880	228	572
19	August 18, 1943	1800	300	1500
20	April 11, 1944	2500 ⁵³	648	1852
21	June 30, 1944	2044	621	1423
22	August 16, 1944	2500	600	1900
TOTALS		55,577	12,948	42,629

Conclusion

The story of Greek Jewry in the Holocaust is often called the “orphan child” of Holocaust research. For the most part, the story of the Holocaust has been told by the Ashkenazim, and the fate of Sephardic Jews has often been overlooked. It is only recently that their story and, particularly, the story of Greek Jewry is being told. Many factors led to the tremendous Holocaust losses of Greek Jews. There is no denying that factors within Greece and variables specific to Greek Jewry added to these losses. There is no denying that if information was available to Greek Jews on the concentration camps, information that was known at the time of their deportation, many of these losses could have been prevented. There is no denying that the timing of their arrival, unfortunately timed to coincide with the completion of the gas chambers and the crematoria, also added to their losses. There is also no denial that the longer journey of Greek Jews to the camps, and the fact that life was harsher for them once they arrived, added to their losses and that these losses were statistically disproportionate to those of Jews from other European countries. By analyzing these other variables, we are able to get a clearer, more complete, picture of why 87% of Greek Jewry were lost during the Holocaust. These explanations will never ease the pain but, hopefully, they will enable us to better understand the “why.”

¹ Statistics of Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece.

² M. Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece* (USA, 1995), 97-102

³ M. Matsas, *The Illusion Of Safety, The Story of Greek Jews During the Second World War* (New York, 1997), 336; F. Abatzopoulou, “Η ΕΙΚΟΝΑ ΤΟΥ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΠΕΖΟΓΡΑΦΙΑ” (The Image of Jews in Greek Prose) in *ΟΙ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΙ ΣΤΟΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΧΩΡΟ: ΖΗΤΗΜΑΤΑ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΜΑΚΡΑ ΔΙΑΡΚΕΙΑ* (Athens 1995) 267-287.

⁴ J. Ben, *Jewish Leadership in Greece During the Holocaust*, Proceedings of the Third Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, 1979, pp 335-352; N. Eck. *New Light on the Charges Against the Last Chief Rabbi Of Salonika*, Yad Vashem Bulletin, Vol. 19, December 1965; *Holocaust in Salonika: Eye Witness Accounts*, translated by Isaac Benmayor, edited by Steven Bowman, NY, 2002, E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΕΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΟΛΟΚΑΥΤΩΜΑ (Personal Accounts of Salonikan Jews on the Holocaust), Thessaloniki 1998.

⁵ M. Matsas, *Ibid.* 420

⁶ H. Fleischer, “Greek Jewry and Nazi Germany: The Holocaust and its antecedents” in *ΟΙ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΙ ΣΤΟΝ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΧΩΡΟ: ΖΗΤΗΜΑΤΑ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΜΑΚΡΑ ΔΙΑΡΚΕΙΑ* (Athens 1995) 194-195

⁷ *Ibid.*, 197-198

⁸ E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΕΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΟΛΟΚΑΥΤΩΜΑ (Personal Accounts of Salonikan Jews on the Holocaust), Thessaloniki 1998.

⁹ E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ R. Frezis, *Η Ισραηλιτική Κοινότητα βόλου* (The Jewish Community of Volos), Greece 2000.

¹¹ R. Dalvin, *The Jews of Ioannina*, Greece 1990.

¹² R. Frezis, Alliance Israelite Universelle, Greece 2000

¹³ M. Bourlas, *ΕΛΛΗΝΑΣ, ΕΒΡΑΙΟΣ, ΑΡΙΣΤΕΡΟΣ* (Greek, Jewish and Leftist), Greece 2000.

¹⁴ M. Matsas, *Ibid.* pp. 21-24,34,38,50,66,68,95,98,104,107.

¹⁵ M. Matsas, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ D. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945*, NY 1989

¹⁷ T. Exarhou, *Οι εβραίοι στην Ξάνθη* (The Jews in Xanthi), Greece 2001

¹⁸ H. Kounio, *ΕΖΗΣΑ ΤΟ ΘΑΝΑΤΟ* (I Lived Death), Greece 1982, pp. 183.

¹⁹ D. Czech, *Ibid.*

²⁰ D. Czech, *Ibid.*

-
- ²¹ H. Kounio, *A Liter of Soup and Sixty Grams of Bread*, p. 195, NY 2003; E. Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz and Back 1926-1996*, London 2000.
- ²² D. Czech, *Ibid.* p. 356
- ²³ D. Czech, *Ibid.* p. 347
- ²⁴ D. Czech, *Ibid.* p. 354
- ²⁵ H. Kounio, *A Liter of Soup and Sixty Grams of Bread*, p. 185, NY 2003
- ²⁶ H. Franco, *The Jewish Martyrs of Rhodes and Kos*, NY, 1994.
- ²⁷ Translated from Greek from E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΕΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΟΛΟΚΑΥΤΩΜΑ (Personal Accounts of Salonikan Jews on the Holocaust), Thessaloniki 1998, pp. 231-240.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 241-244.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 299-314.
- ³⁰ Leon Benmayor would later serve the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki as one of its most dynamic Presidents.
- ³¹ Translated from Greek from E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΕΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΟΛΟΚΑΥΤΩΜΑ (Personal Accounts of Salonikan Jews on the Holocaust), Thessaloniki 1998, pp 270-272.
- ³² *Ibid.* pp. 411-417.
- ³³ *Ibid.* pp. 273-283.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 326-331.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 11-22.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 44-53.
- ³⁷ E. Nachman, *Yannina-Journey To the Past*, New York 2004.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, *Ibid.*; R. Molho *They Say Diamonds Don't Burn: The Holocaust Experiences of Rene Molho of Salonika, Greece*, The Judah L. Magnes Museum, Berkley, 1994; E. Sevillias, *Athens-Auschwitz*, Lycabettus Press, Athens, 1983.
- ⁴² H. Kounio, *Ibid.* p. 65-66.
- ⁴³ E. K. Amarilio, A. Nar, *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ D. Czech, *Ibid.* p. 366
- ⁴⁶ I. Benmayor, S. Bowman, *Ibid.* p. 205-210.
- ⁴⁷ D. Czech, *Ibid.* p. 385.
- ⁴⁸ R. C. Fromer, *The Holocaust Odyssey of Daniel Bennahmias, Sonderkommando*, Alabama, 1993; H. Kounio, *A Liter of Soup and Sixty Grams of Bread*, p. 67-70.
- ⁴⁹ Source: official statistics from Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Official statistics of Central Board of Jewish Communities and Yad Vashem.
- ⁵² These figures include the Jews from Didimotiko and Veroia; Nahon, Dr. Marco. *Birkenau, The Camp of Death*, University of Alabama Press, Alabama 1989.
- ⁵³ Records for the deportations of Jews from Greece for 1944 are not complete. The Auschwitz records do not record all the deportations that left Greece in March of 1944. The figure of over 5,000 deported in March of 1944 is based on community records of Jewish communities involved.