The Jews of Salonika

The Greek people lived under the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years along with several other distinct ethnic groups. This enabled the Jewish people living under Ottoman rule to blend in as one of many different minorities and escape the large-scale persecution that many of their co-religionists around the world had suffered. In the late 19th century, the Ottoman Empire started to fracture as the Greeks, along with many others, had grown tired of living under the rule of another race. They sought to revert back to what they believed were the nation-states of old. Many of these groups were able to win their independence and begin to work towards creating their own ethnically homogenous nation-states. This left the Jewish people, who were highly concentrated in Salonika, in an awkward position. They had suddenly become essentially the only minority in Greece and the only barrier to a purely Greek nation-state. This rise of nationalism and desire for a homogenous nation-state caused the Greeks to be anti-Semitic before the war and to accept Nazi cruelty during the occupation as it would help rid their country of Jews.

In the decades before the war, the Greeks were divided about how the Jews fit into this new nation-state. On one hand, the rising tide of nationalism called for an ethnically homogenous society, while on the other hand, the Jews had not caused any problems in the years that they had lived in Greece and would not otherwise garner such attention. One Greek citizen called on his compatriots to “Let the Jews living in Greece be aware that their fellow Greek citizens will salute with joy their wise cooperation in all areas” (Cohen and Stein, Document 80, 242). As would be seen later, this man’s goals were not widely shared. Greek nationalism was strong enough to
replace these sentiments of friendliness and welcoming towards the Jews with anti-Semitism. This was not because they were Jewish, but because they were not Greek. Ultimately, this led to the creation of a peculiar Greek brand of anti-Semitism which was born out of its own nationalism.

Although the Salonikan Jews would not suffer systematic persecution until the Nazis occupied Greece, they were still subject to milder anti-Semitism in the decades prior. The recollections of Holocaust survivors are what keep the stories of this era alive. Many Jewish adults living in Salonika before World War II were subject to anti-Semitism in the professional world. A Holocaust survivor named Albert Simantov had a typical workplace anti-Semitic experience. “I experienced very mild anti-Semitism” he says, “my colleagues in the university told me that I didn’t look like a Jew…I looked like a normal person. They expected Jews to look different.” (Simantov, 19:00). The Greek views of the Jewish are perfectly showcased in this interaction. They are still keenly aware that the Jews don’t fit into the Greek nation-state and expect them stand out from the crowd as clearly non-Greek. Although Jews lived amongst the Greeks they were still viewed as outsiders.

Additionally, many people had run-ins with anti-Semitism in school as children. “The school board – that’s where the anti-Semitism was” says Nina Levy, who was a young Jewish girl growing up in Salonika before World War II, “whenever we had important activities or school excursions, Jews were not permitted to go” (Levy, 5:50). This perfectly exemplifies the mild discrimination that Jews suffered in Greece before World War II had even started. Salonikan Jews were second-class citizens and were not welcomed in society. Eventually, however, the school administration caved. She explains that “My brother had a big argument with the board…and in the end he was allowed to go” (Levy, 6:30). Although they could be
reasonable, the Greek people still did not think that the Jews belonged. In the end, Greek nationalists were still striving for their own nation-state and that plan could not progress with Jews living in the country. On occasion, Greek frustrations with the Jews boiled over and events escalated during the 1931 Campbell riots. “I remember as a child,” Albert Simantov says, “a Jewish suburb in Salonika was burned” (Simantov, 17:56). The riots, which were started by a Greek nationalist party, comprise the worst attacks against Greek Jews before World War II. Although the treatment of Salonikan Jews was less than ideal, it was still preferable to the way the Germans would treat them a short time later.

When the Nazis arrived in northern Greece, the Salonikan Jews started to face worse persecution than before. Then a young Jewish boy living in Salonika, Salvator Saporta says “One morning we woke up…and the Jewish section of Salonika was circled by the German army…the then we were transported to the ghetto” (Saporta, 14:56). This was the first indication that the systematic oppression of the Jews was in full effect in northern Greece and that the Nazis would be far more cruel than the local Greeks. By allowing the Nazis to move the Jews into ghettos, the Greeks were indicating that Jews were not considered Greek and were not welcome there. Once inside the ghetto, Greeks still made no effort to help the Jews. Saporta says that “there was no food or water…it was suffering…you were like a prisoner” (Saporta, 16:37)

Eventually, the Nazi officials in Salonika needed a way to interact with the Jews as a whole, so they created the Judenrate, which consisted of Jews who “ran the ghettos” (Saporta, 19:30). Their main goal was the final extermination of European Jews and communicating with one representative Jewish body would allow them to do so more easily.

As the Nazi plan progressed, the Greek citizens were content to let the Nazis homogenize their society. They could achieve the nation-state they had hoped for without having to do much
of the hard work of getting rid of the Jews. In the center of Salonika there was a Jewish cemetery built on land that local officials had wanted to use for a long time. When the Germans occupied Salonika, this became a reality, where the Greek Governor General’s Office was assigned the project of “dismantling the old Jewish cemetery” (Cohen and Stein, Document 97, 284). The Greek population of Salonika was pleased with this development. As Simantov surveyed the construction, he explains that “All of the bones were there as they were building” and that a professor told him “it was a good thing that the Jews left so we could take that piece of land and build our university” (Simantov, 19:40). This professor indicates to us how the Greek people felt about the Nazi occupation. They were close to their dream of having a homogenous nation-state and they were willing to accept Nazi cruelty to realize it. Salvator Saporta explains that this sentiment was felt not only from the citizenry but also the government. He says that “If you were a Jew you had nowhere to complain, [the Greek government] won’t help you. No one will help you” (Saporta, 12:20) Not only did their government abandon them, but they were betrayed by their own as well. Saporta tells the story of a Jewish Judenrate officer who “was collaborating with the Germans, going outside the ghettos looking for more Jews because he knew where they were hiding…and he stole gold from them” (Saporta, 17:50). This officer might have hoped that by helping the Nazis track down Jews and send them to concentration camps he might escape the same fate, but nevertheless he was willing to sell out other Jews to benefit himself. This adds another layer to Jewish persecution and misfortune.

Perhaps it was because there were far fewer Jews to discriminate against, but the Greek nationalist movement was nonetheless no longer as anti-Semitic as it had been before World War II. There are recorded instances of the Greek government standing up for Jews in a way that it never had before. Saporta explains the fate of the former Judenrate officer who had betrayed
his fellow Jews, saying that “after the war…[the Greek government] caught him, put him on trial, and they killed him…for war crimes” (Saporta, 18:48). At the end of the day, the Greek government did look out for Jews that lived in their country and treated them as citizens that belonged. This would set the stage for a better life for the remaining Greek Jews and better relations amongst different ethnic groups within Greece.

Ultimately, the Greeks and the Jews both wanted the same thing: a nation-state of their own. The Jews of Salonika were unfortunate enough to have been one of the last burdens to a homogenous Greek society. They never took swift action to get rid of the Jews that lived there, but when the Nazis arrived in Greece, the locals felt no particular obligation to protect the Jews there. In fact, many of them were pleased to allow the Nazis to work on their behalf. Eventually, the Greeks started to show compassion towards the Jews and began to help create a better life for them, but this was not before many Jewish lives in Salonika were uprooted by Nazi occupation.
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