

## Untold Stories from the lost communities of Greece

When the Nazis occupied Europe their policies of hatred and discrimination took root and spread. All over Europe whole communities were changed forever when the Nazis invaded and hunted for people from the groups they targeted like Jewish people and Gypsies. In many parts of Europe whole communities were wiped out. There are places in many countries where there are very few traces of the vibrant pre-war community. Sometimes we travel to these places for business or holidays but are unaware of the void, that empty space where the original community lived and thrived. Today we don't always notice this void because it is hidden; other people live in the area; the space isn't physically vacant but it has been emptied of its original inhabitants.

We do not spot it straight away but sometimes in the landscape there is a hint that another community lived there once perhaps the ruins of a synagogue, the name of a street, or an unmarked grave. But if we search hard enough we may find traces of **Untold Stories**. Once found, we can then remember the disappeared community and pass their stories on to other people so the individuals who were murdered will not be forgotten.

Many **Untold Stories** can be found in Greece. The fate of the Jewish communities there can only be described as tragic. The number of lives lost is immense. Historians estimate that out of a Jewish population of 70-80,000 only about 10,000 people survived the occupation. The commander of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss claimed that 60,000 to 65,000 arrived at the death camp.<sup>1</sup>



A Jewish couple wearing the yellow star pose on a street in Thessaloniki. ©USHMM

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<sup>1</sup> Mazower M, Inside Hitler's Greece, 1995, p256-257

Occupied Greece was divided into three zones. The Nazis held western Macedonia, Thessaloniki (sometimes called Salonika) a strip of land in eastern Thrace, the major Aegean Islands and Crete. The Bulgarian zone included eastern Macedonia and Thrace whilst the Italians took charge of the Dodecanese Islands, the Ionian Islands, and a large portion of the mainland including the



city of Athens. 55,000 Jewish people lived in Thessaloniki and found themselves directly under Nazi rule. The rest lived in the Bulgarian and Italian zones.

As soon as they entered their zone the Nazis began to discriminate against Jewish people. They imposed harsh rules to weaken Jewish communities and terrorise individuals. Jews in Thessaloniki bore the brunt of Nazi hatred. From the moment they arrived on 8 April 1941 the Nazis encouraged people to turn against their Jewish neighbours. Members of the Jewish community's Council were arrested. From June 1941, the Nazis raided Jewish library collections, stealing anything they thought was valuable and exporting what they took to Germany.

Food was in short supply in Thessaloniki during the winter of 1941-2 as there were many refugees in the region. Conditions were harsh and weaker members of the Jewish community died of starvation or typhus. Meanwhile others disappeared as the Nazis arrested and executed people.

The Nazis introduced a programme of forced labour. In the summer of 1942, 9,000 Jews were captured. In the autumn those who were still technically free were told that if a ransom was paid the slave labourers would be released. Everyone tried to contribute to the ransom payment though most were facing extreme hardship. The ransom demand was part of a cynical plan to further impoverish the remaining Jewish community and dishearten

individuals. To make certain there was no absolutely wealth left in the community the Jewish cemeteries in Thessaloniki were confiscated and desecrated.

By 1943 the Nazis imposed most of their 1935 Nuremberg laws.<sup>2</sup> Jews in the Nazi zone had to wear the infamous star badges on their clothing and Jewish property was identified and marked. The Nazis created three ghettos and crammed the whole Jewish community into them. Jewish people were ordered to register all their possessions. Jewish organisations and membership of them was now against the law. The Thessaloniki Jewish community was now virtually powerless to resist and the Nazis were free to do whatever they wished. On 15 March, deportations began and within three months over 45,500 Jews were sent from Thessaloniki to the death camps in Poland leaving behind a void. All aspects of Jewish life had been obliterated. Books, sacred manuscripts, photographs, paintings, small silver candlesticks from homes and large ones from synagogues had been stolen, and monuments and cemeteries were destroyed.

There were very few survivors to tell the **Untold Stories** of these lost communities. Jacob Stroumsa, who was deported to Auschwitz, is one of these. He survived because he could play the violin and was chosen to play in the camp orchestra. He describes the lost community in his book *Violinist in Auschwitz*. He remembers the humiliation heaped upon Jews when the Nazis rounded up several young men and made them perform degrading and pointless tasks, such as hopping about like frogs, whilst their neighbours watched and laughed. He writes of the building of the ghetto and the moving of bones from the Jewish cemeteries. His young wife was eight months pregnant when they were deported. He never saw her again. Jacob discovered the void every time he revisited Thessaloniki. He writes

I always stay at the Hotel Amalia, across from the Stoa Modiano because there is no one left with whom I could stay. I always wake up very early and sit on the balcony in order to gaze at the sea. I smoke cigarette after cigarette in fear that I may start to weep. A Greek Orthodox friend once met me alone towards midnight and said 'I understand you, Jacques, you no longer know where you should go in Salonika, the city in which you once knew every stone'.<sup>3</sup>

A similar fate awaited the Jews trapped in the area occupied by Bulgaria. At first many Christian members of the community did their best to support and help their Jewish neighbours but this was difficult because the authorities supported Nazi policies of hatred

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/dates-to-remember/introduction-of-the-nuremberg-laws>

<sup>3</sup> Stroumsa J. *Violinist In Auschwitz*, 1996, p74

and discrimination. In November 1942, the Bulgarian government confirmed that it accepted Nazi proposals to evacuate the Jews.

Before long Jews in the Bulgarian zone were ordered to wear the Star of David and register their possessions. Although there was no official creation of ghettos, Jews were only allowed to live in certain areas and they had to adhere to a curfew. Their valuables were confiscated. Worse was to come with the arrest of all Jews in the area. Some 200 managed to escape but 4,100 were deported to the death camp at Treblinka. The extermination of Jews in the German and Bulgarian zones was completed by the summer of 1943 creating more **Untold Stories** and leaving another void.

Those who lived in the Italian zone were initially safer than Jewish communities in the rest of Greece. The Italians defied the Nazis and did not cooperate with them or implement their policies. Instead they issued false papers to hide Jewish identities and assisted Jews to escape to Athens. Christian leaders managed to hide Jewish children. In Athens it was quite difficult to decide who was Jewish and who was Christian because the two communities were well integrated and worked together.

However there was to be no happy ending. On 8 September 1943 after the Italian surrender to Allied forces, the Nazis moved in and arrested the Italians in Greece. This cleared the way for the last phase of their campaign against the Jewish communities. On 20 September, the Nazis demanded that the citizens of Athens hand them a complete list to include the names and addresses of all Jews the names of anyone who had hidden Jewish children or assisted Jews to survive. The Jewish community was defiant and destroyed all their records so they could not fall into Nazi hands.

8 October 1943 was Yom Kippur, a special day for the Jewish community. The Nazis chose this day to announce that the Jewish community was to be reorganised. Again Jews were told to register their names so that the Nazis knew where they were. They were given five days to comply. Only 200 people had obeyed by the end of October. Some people managed to escape by sea and others vanished into the hills and mountains to join the partisans. A good number found somewhere to hide. As winter took hold it was more difficult to survive and by the spring there were about 1,500 Jews on registration lists. Christians hiding Jews were threatened and their lives were at risk. On 24-25 March, 800 Jews from Athens were deported to Auschwitz. As spring turned to summer another 3,500 Jews from various communities in the Italian zones met a similar fate creating more voids.

The Jewish citizens of the Greek Islands were the last to be deported. The Nazis began to round them up between March and July 1944, only months before they were forced to

withdraw from Greece themselves. Very few survived the deportations. A man forced to work for the infamous Dr Mengele in Auschwitz, Dr Nyiszli, recorded the fate of some of them in June 1944.

Last night they burned the Greek Jews from the Mediterranean island of Corfu, one of the oldest communities in Europe. The victims were kept for twenty seven days without food or water, first in small boats then in sealed cars. When they arrived at Auschwitz's platform the doors were unlocked but no one got out to line up for selection. Half of them were already dead and half in a coma. The entire convoy without exception was sent to number two crematorium.<sup>4</sup>

There is an **Untold Story** about the people who lived on the island of Zakynthos. Here a void was not created. Every member of this island's Jewish community survived the Holocaust because their neighbours protected them. As was their practice the Nazis demanded a list of all Jewish residents to be handed over but the Mayor of the island and its Christian Bishop provided the Nazis with a list of only two names - their own. The Islanders defied the Nazis and hid all their Jewish neighbours. In 1953 when an earthquake struck Zakynthos Jewish people were amongst the first to provide aid to the Island's community.

In January 2011 many people from all over the world will be making plans to travel to Greece and her islands to take a holiday. They hope that Greece will provide them with many happy memories and stories to tell their friends. Holocaust Memorial Day is a good time to remember the lost communities of Greece and the **Untold Stories** of the individuals whose lives were stolen because of hatred and discrimination.

On HMD 2011 we can remember the communities that have been wiped out by genocide whether it is those in Greece or those villages being destroyed in Darfur at the present time. We can reflect on what and who makes up our community today and question what role we play in them. HMD 2011 is an opportunity for us to join together to explore the **Untold Stories** around us today.

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<sup>4</sup> Holst-Warhaft, G, The Tragedy Of The Greek Jews In The Holocaust in Holocaust and Genocide Studies vol 13, spring 1999, p106