

Historical background: Greece

Text by Alexandra Patrikiou, Jewish Museum of Greece

The Jewish presence in Greece is attested from antiquity (first half of the second century BC). In Greece two Jewish traditions appear: the Romaniote, the Jews of the Byzantine Empire, and the Sephardic, the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. Before the war, around 80,000 Jews were living in Greece, dispersed in over 29 active communities throughout the country. More than 70% of Greece's Jewish population lived in Thessaloniki, the so-called "Jerusalem of the Balkans".

The fall of Crete at the end of May 1941 sealed the Greek army's defeat against the Axis forces. Immediately afterwards the country was divided in three occupation zones (German, Bulgarian, Italian). The city of Thessaloniki, which served as the headquarters of the German military forces in northern Greece, was the first target of Nazi antisemitic policies in the period between May 1941 and June 1942. In November 1941, the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, took advantage of the turmoil which had caused the arrival of 70,000 Greeks from the Bulgarian zone in the aftermath of the Doxato massacre and drew Hitler's attention to the additional danger posed by the large Jewish community of Thessaloniki. Hitler took note and demanded the removal of the 'Jewish element' from Thessaloniki.

On 11 July 1942, known as the so-called "Black Sabbath", 9,000 Jewish men, aged between 18 and 45, were ordered to appear in Eleftherias Square in Thessaloniki, where they were tortured and humiliated by the Nazis. After their registration, 3,500 men were sent to perform forced labour. After the payment of a huge ransom by the Jewish Community the slave laborers were released. In January 1943 the SS-Officers Rolf Günther, Alois Bruner and Dieter Wisliceny, Eichmann's closest associates, arrived in Thessaloniki in order to implement the program of the "Final Solution" in the German occupation zone. The attitude of the Greek collaborationist government did not pose an obstacle vis-à-vis the murderous plans of the Nazis.

The Jewish community of Thessaloniki soon experienced the deprivation of their political rights, their stigmatization, the looting of their properties and their ghettoisation. From 15 March to 10 August 1943, approximately 48,000 Jews were deported in 19 transports from Thessaloniki to Auschwitz. Most of them were murdered upon arrival. The trains that left Thessaloniki on 3 and 9 May 1943 deported approximately 2,000 Jews from Florina, Nea Orestiada, Soufli and Didymoteicho. In March 1943 approximately 4,200 Jews living in the Bulgarian-occupied communities of Serres, Kavala, Drama, Alexandroupoli, Komotini and Xanthi were deported to Treblinka - deportations which no one survived.

After the capitulation of Italy in September 1943, the Germans took control of the former Italian occupation zone of the country and began the persecution of the Jews living there. On 24 March 1944 the Germans trapped about 800 Jews of Athens in the Athens Synagogue, imprisoned them in the Haidari camp and deported them to Auschwitz on 2 April 1944. The same train also carried Jews from Patras, Chalkida, Volos, Larissa, Trikala, Arta, Preveza, Ioannina and Kastoria. This was the longest "death train" to leave Greece, carrying over 4,000 people. In the summer of 1944, the members of the Jewish communities of Corfu, Rhodes and Kos (the last two were not yet part of Greek territory) were deported to Auschwitz, which meant that the Jewish population there lost between 89% and 92% of their pre-war population. The Jews of Crete were infamously drowned on June 9, 1944 when the steamer "Tanais", which was transporting them to Piraeus, was hit by a British torpedo and sank.

Today, the Jewish population of Greece counts about 5,000 people, living in nine Jewish communities in the country.