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JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THESSALONIKI IN THE 20TH CENTURY: THE THREAT OF ASSIMILATION AND IDENTITY PRESERVATION

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The paper analyses the fate of the Thessaloniki Jews, who during the Ottoman times constituted the majority, but after joining the city to Greece in 1912 faced the threat of assimilation. Looking for the solution, the Jewish community found itself between Zionist and socialist ideas with sentiments towards the Ottoman as much more tolerant model of the city and the state. Many of Jews chose the third way as emigration, mostly to the European countries and the United States, and only a quarter of them repatriated to Palestine.

Keywords: Jews, Thessaloniki, Ottoman empire, Greece, identity, assimilation, Zionism.

ЕВРЕЙСКАЯ ОБЩИНА В САЛОНИКАХ В XX ВЕКЕ: УГРОЗА АССИМИЛЯЦИИ И СОХРАНЕНИЕ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ

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В статье анализируется судьба еврейской общины в Салониках, которая во времена Османской империи составляла большинство, а после присоединения города к Греции в 1912 году столкнулась с угрозой ассимиляции. В поисках решения проблемы еврейская община оказалась между сионистскими и социалистическими идеями с ностальгией по отношению к османской, гораздо более терпимой, модели устройства города и государства. Многие евреи выбрали третий путь – эмиграцию преимущественно в страны Европы и США, а не в Палестину, куда репатриировалась только четверть из них.

Ключевые слова: евреи, Салоники, Османская империя, Греция, идентичность, ассимиляция, сионизм.

Introduction

Despite of after-Holocaust attention towards Jewish history in Europe, the religious and ethnical identity of Jews in Greece is still underexposed in academic discourse. The latest confirmation of this suggestion comes from mainstream media. Historian Sam Jones published a warning article in "The Guardian" entitled "Thessaloniki's Jews: 'We can't let this be forgotten; if it's forgotten, it will die'", covering the opening of a new centre in Thessaloniki for small Jewish community, mostly descendants of Iberian exiles. "Many Spanish Jews came to Thessaloniki, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, following their expulsion by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492. The community endured and thrived over the centuries but came close to total destruction when the Nazis deported and murdered more than 90% of the city's Jewish inhabitants", Jones wrote [2]. By 2020 Thessaloniki's Jewish community counted about 1,200 people.

According to the statement of the Cervantes Institute in Athens director Cristina Conde de Beroldingen, the initiative aims to help preserve Sephardic culture and language, and also to stop Thessaloniki losing a piece of its past: "We want to recover this legacy for Thessaloniki: there were a lot of newspapers in Judeo-Spanish, so it's a good time to go digging in the archives" [2].

The main aim of this paper is to trace the fate of the Salonica Jews, who during the Ottoman times constituted the majority in the city and after joining Greece in 1912 found themselves in a completely new situation.

Thessaloniki became a part of the Greek state, which was reborn in 1830, only after the First Balkan War in 1912. Until the Greek uprising, Thessaloniki was a bridge between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire, and at the same a port with intensive trade traffic. Before the minarets appeared in Thessaloniki, the city belonged to the Byzantine Empire. In 1430 it was conquered by the Ottoman army and for many centuries it functioned in accordance with the system of *milets*, dividing the population of the empire according to religion: Christians (Greeks, Armenians, and Slavs), Muslims (Turks, Bosnians) and Jews.

British historian Mark Mazower in his excellent monograph "*Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950*" called the city quoting one of British travellers, "historically Greek, politically Turkish, geographically Bulgarian, and ethnographically Jewish" [3, s. 297]. This quote reflects the complexity of this city, but British traveller was wrong to call Thessaloniki a geographically Bulgarian city. Thessaloniki is located in the Macedonian area, not the Bulgarian one. Perhaps this traveller did not know it yet, because Macedonian self-awareness was only just taking shape.

The Ottomans conquered parts of Southern Europe in order to expand their own Empire and transferred the principle used in the Byzantine Empire according to which it was religion and social position [1, s. 105-135], not nationality, that determines identity. In Byzantium, the term *Romios,* or *Roman,* could be used to describe any inhabitant of the empire, professing Orthodoxy and considering the Emperor to be God's anointed. Therefore, the Ottomans divided the population by religion and although the non-Muslim population in the empire was limited in their positions of power and military until the reforms of *Tanzimat* in 1839-1876, this was a scheme that allowed for a common existence. Thessaloniki during the Ottoman rule was a port city that allowed various communities to survive. "In the 1840s, British, French and Austrian shipping companies provided connections to Thessaloniki with major Mediterranean ports" [3, s. 215].

The functioning of the city and its appearance had to change when it became a part of the Ottoman Empire. As Mazower put it, "even time passed in the city in a way that was incomprehensible to Europeans, and the muezzins' calls to prayer made their orientation only slightly easier: public clocks in the towers were rare, because at least three calendars were used (four if you add Jewish)" [3, s. 224]. This quotation confirms that in the Ottoman times the city functioned with respect for religious diversity.

In the 19th century the *militia* system lost out to the idea of a nation-state. After independence in 1830 the Greek national consciousness was just taking shape, it was unable to accept the Ottomans on its territory, therefore the population, professing

Islam, fled to Asia Minor, where the Greek Orthodox population felt unsafe. Greece's national ambitions were enormous, and an armed conflict broke out shortly after independence. The Balkan wars (1912-1913) confirmed it strongly. Agreements between the Balkan states (Serbia with Bulgaria, Bulgaria with Greece, Montenegro with Serbia) caused the attacks on Turkey from many sides. The war was a derivative of the awakened territorial ambitions of each of the Balkan states, which sought to expand their own territory, in accordance with an imaginary map (the idea of *Stanstefan Bulgaria*, the *Great Idea* with Greek Constantinople).

After the signing of the *Treaty of Sèvres* on the 10th of August 1920, Greece officially received Thessaloniki and Thrace but not Constantinople. Greece took advantage of the military defeat on Turkey and expanded its territory, although Greece was not satisfied its aspirations for a state with a capital in Constantinople. This political construct, dubbed the *Great Idea*, was ubiquitous and so popular that the Greek army began military action against Constantinople, and the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) began. Despite the initial successes of the Greeks, this attempted failed. The *Treaty of Lausanne* (24 July 1923) left only Western Thrace for Greece and marked the end of the Greek-Turkish war. Turkey regained power and Anatolia and the eastern part of Thrace.

Additionally, a population exchange agreement was concluded: Orthodox Christians from Turkish territories (about 1.5 million people) were to be resettled to Greece, and Muslims from Greek territories (about 450,000 people) moved to Turkish territory. The criterion for the exchange was not ethnical belonging, but religion.

Consequently, Thessaloniki as a predominantly Jewish city entered the stage of very rapid change affecting Jewish identity in the search for *modus vivendi*. In contrary to the Greeks and Turks who already had their own state, the Jews of the Ottoman Empire did not have territory designated by the Western Powers for themselves. Therefore, they were in a very difficult situation: if they were to stay in Greece, how to define themselves? How to communicate with the local authorities?

The Jewish community in Thessaloniki

By 1912 Thessaloniki had become a predominantly Greek city. Greeks began to appreciate their Hellenistic past thanks to European travellers, and consequently they unnecessarily tried to eliminate the Ottoman period from social memory in various ways treating it as shameful [q.v.: 3; 4; 5].

Another phenomenon that changes the fate of Thessaloniki is the mass formation of bourgeois associations, such as: *Der Deutscher Klub*, *Le Théâtre Français* and most importantly: *Le Cercle de Salonique* founded in 1873, which was established on noble families settled in Thessaloniki.

The clubs were founded by representatives of various ethnic minorities: Greeks, Jews, Germans, Italians and represented various industries, the combination in one company was to serve new contacts, discussions on business or private matters. These activities were aimed at gaining not so much political power as power over the minds, social capital in the city. “The most important battle they have won since the 1870s was the battle against their own archbishops and rabbis. The Jewish families of Allatinich and Fernandez, the Greek Chadzilazaros, Rongotti and Prasakakis not only formed the venerable face of the city, its "society" in contacts with important visitors from the West, but, more importantly, were the architects of the process of taking power in the city from the hands of the old elites by the new the class of entrepreneurs and the opinion leaders” [3, s. 274].

Thus, associations became a means of strengthening contacts with the West. This illustrates at least two directions of the city’s development in the 19th century: one was strictly Ottoman (until 1913), but after the reforms of Tanzimat, it was an attractive direction for older residents, accustomed to the changed system: religious equality and secular education.

Another direction was the rapprochement with the West and the attractiveness of new markets, which was attractive for those residents who dreamed of gaining new positions in trading, as well as for those who wanted to create conditions in the city for travellers and develop tourism. There were similar changes in education. In the

19th century, the Enlightenment trends reached Thessaloniki, it was noticed that there was a need for education reform, which was not always accepted.

"With the strengthening of economic ties with the West, local entrepreneurs needed employees who knew modern foreign languages and were fluent in mathematics and geography. As early as the 1840s, wealthy Jewish families put pressure on the school of the Talmud-Torah fraternity to introduce Italian and French books into teaching. When these pressures were unsuccessful, the bourgeois community established an experimental school, and the German rabbi who led it was considered an ungodly foreigner among the local rabbis resistance, the same group of families opened a school under the aspirations of the *Paris Alliance Israélite Universelle*, an institution that expresses the idea of French Enlightenment liberalism in its purest form. The school was extremely successful, in 1912 Alliance educated more than 4,000 students, more than half of the student population of Salonica Jewish schools" [3, s. 275-276].

After the Young Turkish Revolution, Thessaloniki remained within the reformed Ottoman Empire. Representatives of the secret organization "Committee of Unity and Progress" wanted to maintain Europeanism and lead the Ottoman Empire towards reforms and gradual development, but these plans were not implemented, because already in 1912, as a result of the Balkan wars, the city was under Greek rule.

What was important to the Greek authorities? Two factors should be exposed: the first was language. If the school was public, it had to teach Greek. The demand to teach in Greek faced various reactions in in Jewish community. Here's how Mazower describes it: "The local communists defended *Ladino* (the language of Salonica Jews with strong Spanish influence – *A.K.*), because they spoke it in everyday life. But the less numerous middle class stressed the need for fluency in Greek, so that Greece would have good Greek citizens who would also remain Jews" [3, s. 463].

The argument in favour of Greek language was considered dangerous because besides the difficulties with Greek language it meant the perspective of assimilation. While a language can be learned by leaving your identity with you entering Greek

culture, assimilation meant the lost Jewish identity. Again, there was not one clear opinion among the Jews of Salonica. If the young generation could easily enter into the depth of Greek culture, accept some elements from it, this process raised doubts among some: would their children culturally become Greeks or they still stay Jews in a few generations? Would the identity be kept or lost?

The prefect of the city Periclis Argyropoulos addressed a group of Jewish representatives and declared: "I am trying with all my heart to prevent all anti-Semitic incidents that unfortunately blackened our glorious entry to Salonica. The Jews can rest assured that in me they will find a firm protector" [4, p. 393]. The government applied practical measures in order to regain the confidence of the local Jewish population and at the same time secure the support of international Jewish community.

The Jews in Thessaloniki were granted the special privileges:

1. Exemption from military service in return for payment, for a period of three years after the arrival of the Greek army, without loss of voting rights.

2. The keeping of the Sabbath tradition in the city of Salonica.

3. The right to participate in public administration.

4. The right to continue keeping accounts in their own language.

5. The freedom of their press.

6. The possibility of collaboration between civil veterinary officers and the specially appointed shohet ensuring the observance of Jewish dietary laws.

7. Government allocations of 1,200 drachmas to Jewish communities in Greece numbering more than 50 families, as well as government allowances to various exclusively Jewish associations, such as the athletic and Zionist Maccabee club.

8. Exemption from all taxes on imported unleavened bread used on Passover, etc. [4, p. 394].

Therefore, after obtaining privileges, Jewish communities seemed to be satisfied and their concerns were now heard so loudly in the media and public sphere.

Keeping identity: social Jewish organizations

Thessaloniki of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was inhabited by a large number of workers of various nationalities. Their working conditions were much worse compared to the standards in force today. Here is how Mazower describes it: “Workers were upset about living conditions. Fishermen and boatmen in the bay, porters, and dockers earned so poorly that they often could not afford to send their children to school. In cotton spinning mills, the working day lasted fifteen hours in the summer, with a thirty-five-minute break for lunch” [3, s. 330].

Under such conditions, the people of Thessaloniki had to work for many years, and of course, many of them were looking for ways to force employers to change the situation in favour of the workers. And if for one part of the workers the way out of the embrace was to emigrate beyond the borders of Thessaloniki and seek a better life, then for others the solution to the problem was to form groups and try to mediate with employers.

“The revolution of the summer of 1908, almost as if by magic, caused the mass political mobilization of workers, which paralyzed the entire city. Although the beginnings of the political movement arose earlier, the wave of strikes and occupations of the plants came only in the summer: first the port died, then the telegraph, tobacco factories, breweries, brickyards, shopkeepers, tailors, carpenters, ironworkers, railwaymen went on strike” [3, s. 331].

What role did the Jewish population play in the socialist movement in Thessaloniki? Even if the number of Jewish inhabitants was large, they could stay in the shadows and not fight for their rights. However, this did not happen, and the Jewish population actively worked to the benefit of all workers. Here is a quote from the scientific article “*Jewish Socialism in Ottoman Empire*” by Turkish historian H. Şükrü Ilıcak: “One possible explanation for Salonica’s fertility for socialism lies in the *Jewishness* of Salonica. With a sizable majority and an established Jewish tradition in the city, the Jews likely identified themselves as "owners" in Salonica more than any other community, while in Istanbul or Izmir, Jews constituted only a

small minority. Furthermore, the Jews of Salonica had never been subject to pogroms and unlike the more familiar contemporary socialist groups formed by East European Jewry, the Federationists hand no need to carry on a struggle for the political emancipation of the Jewish population. Socialism was favoured not because it offered solutions to the Jewish question, but because it offered solutions to the nationality problem in the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. Thus, the Jews of Salonica, probably acting with a "majority mentality" that did not focus on "minority obsessions", supported an ideology which was supposed to change the entire society" [6, p. 136].

Before the Balkan wars, many workers' associations were established. The very idea of creating associations to protect workers' rights came from leftist circles. One popular view among workers was to unite on an ethical basis (Greeks, Armenians), others wanted to eliminate ethnic divisions like the Bulgarian socialists, and one of the inhabitants, Abraham Benaroya, founded the "Sephardic circle of socialist studies" which later transformed into the Socialist Workers' Federation. Why the Federation? Well, that is what Benaroya himself wrote about it: "Due to the ethnic and linguistic diversity here, we advocated the creation of a federation of all national groups within which they would not be forced to give up their own language or culture" [3, s. 332].

Keeping identity: Zionism

Against the backdrop of increasingly popular nationalist concepts in Europe in the first decade of the 20th century, the Jewish population of Thessaloniki, which for hundreds years had kept its own identity without a state, did not fit the "*every nation should have its own state*" pattern. The Jewish people had no territory of their own since the fall of the Roman Empire, but were dispersed in various places where Jews legally pursued their own activities and cultivated their own religion. The Ottoman Empire allowed them to do so, because the sultan allowed the "*people of the Book*" the peaceful worship of their religion, as long as they paid the Port taxes on time.

The community tried to establish contact not only with the Central Zionist Organization but also with other Jewish ones. It exposes the need of the community

members to define their national identity and reflects their preoccupation with the loss of their autonomy.

The new states in the Balkans, emerging thanks to the ideas of nationalism, such as Bulgaria and Serbia, did not guarantee this position for Jews, and therefore even before the Balkan wars many of them felt that with the Ottoman Empire they were better able to meet their needs.

The Jewish population of Thessaloniki was loyal to the Ottoman Empire and therefore the Zionist movement did not gain much support in the beginning of the 20th century. The Jews even considered the possibility of immigrating to Macedonia together with the Muslims, because demographically the Christian population would not have an advantage there. Thus, it would be another proof of the multinationality of the Ottoman Empire. One additional interesting observation was the mention of the future Prime Minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion visit to Thessaloniki. He observed that local Zionist movement was stagnant. As one of Ben-Gurion's biographers writes, although he appreciated the charm of the city, "as a Zionist he felt alienated there and left after a few months" [3, s. 327].

Conclusion

Initially, Jews in Greece did not suggest the need for any kind of political independence, which could cause a conflict. Jewish claims were focused on the preservation of their cultural autonomy and political equality. Consequently, these claims expressed their appreciation of Greek policy towards ethnic and religious minorities. As Rena Molho emphasizes, "unlike most Jews in other European countries, as well as those in the Balkan states who had tried to integrate culturally within the sovereign states and become accepted as regular citizens of their adopted countries, the Jews of Salonica eventually rejected the precedents of Western nationalism and kept their cultural differentiation" [4, p. 398]. The Greek state introduced a new political reality towards the Jews as equal members in hope that a similar attitude towards all Greek minorities, especially those in the Ottoman Empire, would be established.

But it did not happen, and the rise of nationalisms around Greece enforced internal Greek nationalism. Problems between the Jewish minority and the Greek authorities became more and more visible. After the fire in Salonica Jewish quarter most of the poor families were relocated to the outskirts of the city. Emigration began in all possible directions, to Italy, France and even the United States. Trips to Palestine were not so frequent: "Of the twenty, twenty-five thousand Jewish immigrants of Thessaloniki who are estimated to have left the city before World War II, no more than a quarter have settled in the Palestinian mandate" [3, s. 466].

This exodus of Jews from Thessaloniki, the city where they had a majority, proves its general evolution during the transition period from 1912 to the outbreak of World War II. From a multinational city without ghettos under Ottoman Empire, Thessaloniki has been gradually transformed into its opposite, implementing ghettoization and assimilative state policy. Looking for the solution, the Jewish community found itself between Zionist and socialist ideas with sentiments towards the Ottoman as much more tolerant model of the city and the state. Many of Jews chose the third way to emigration.

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