

The Jewish Presence in Thessaly and Larissa
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Even before the arrival of Spanish Jews, significant numbers of Jews lived in both Macedonia and Thessaly, dating back to the 5th century B.C.E. [*actual documentation of Jews on Greek soil dates to the 4th century B.C.E.-translator's note*].

O.L. Barkan, a Turkish historian notes that at the beginning of the 16th century the total population of Thessaly was 3,870 families. In an article titled "The Economy and Territory of Thessaly during the Turkish Occupation" by R. Rawles published in "Trikala", a periodical [volume 1, Trikala 1981] we learn that, from the beginning, Muslim and non-Muslim communities stayed geographically and socially separate. Orthodox Christians [who were the majority of the population in Thessaly], Jews and Muslims were separated according to religion into autonomous communities called "millets." The members of each "millet" were free to follow their own faith, preserve their institutions, laws and traditions under the instruction of their religious leaders who, also, had political authority. In addition, the adherents of the different religions separated themselves from each other. The "millet" system enabled the Ottomans to exploit the wealth of the inhabitants without protest or friction.

The different regulations enacted towards the Christians and Jews, as to where they could live, the clothing they could wear and their social behavior originated with the Ottoman authorities and was separate from that enacted towards the Muslim communities. The purpose of these regulations was to clearly assign each person's position in the community, easily distinguish each millet from the other and to eliminate, as much as possible, any possible frictions. In this way, the different communities never merged into any organized society, but remained separate and distinct.

The most important Jewish community in Thessaly was that of Larissa.

The Larissa Jewish community was the oldest. It seems that the Jewish presence in the city of Larissa dates back to the Roman era and that for at least 1,900 years Jews have continuously lived in the city. A letter [dated 150 C.E.] by a Christian Apostle to the Jews of the city is testimony of this long presence. However, there is the opinion that the Jewish presence in Thessaly, including Larissa, dates to the 5th century B.C.E. The Jews of the area were involved in commerce and industry. Evidence of this long presence was a recent [1973] archeological find close to the central square of the city of a colonnade with the inscription "Alexandros the Educator and Protector." Under the inscription [in the style of the Second temple Period] was the Jewish symbol of the menorah. According to the archeologist who studied the colonnade, it dates to the 1st century C.E. It can now be found under the archeological care of the city of Larissa.

It is not known who “Alexandros the Educator and Protector” was and why his name was engraved on the colonnade. However, everyone acknowledges the symbol of the menorah as a Jewish symbol.

Regarding the Jewish presence in Larissa, the Larissan historian Epameinondas Pharmakidis wrote the following in his book “Larissa” [pages 20-21]: “From the 1st century A.D., and particularly from the 7th century A.D., in Greece in general and particularly in Larissa, there were Jews involved in industry and commerce, most originating in Thessaloniki. There were Jewish communities in Larissa and Nafpaktos and with the three [Thessaloniki, Larissa and Nafpaktos] and, in each, synagogues.” In “The History of Greece from the Words From Antiquity” by Gustav Hertzberg [translation by Karolidi, page 497], “three synagogues of the Jewish community also existed in Larissa”, and mentions that, in 1173, the city was visited by the famous Jewish writer, Benjamin of Tudela. However, Paparrigopoulos, in his history, does not include Larissa as one of the cities with a Jewish community visited by Benjamin. He appears, apparently, to have overlooked this visit. Another source, one that speaks not only of Larissa but, also, of the other cities in Thessaly, Trikala and Volos and, also Athens, Thebes and Chalkida, etc. in the report of the director of antiquities of Thessaly, N.G. Giannopoulou, who published the report on the anniversary of The Society of Byzantine Studies in Chronika [published by KIS-Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece, volume 105/8, pp. 1006/18]. Giannopoulou wrote: “A contemporary of Benjamin of Tudela, a Arab geographer and columnist, Endersi [1173] mentions an exceptionally important Jewish community in Larissa, Trikala, Volos and Almiro.”

From other written sources, it is apparent that there was a meaningful Jewish presence in Thessaly from the time of the Roman Empire and early Christianity through the Middle Ages.

Naturally, the Jewish population of Larissa would grow with the influx of Jews from Spain in 1492. The settling of these Sephardic Jews in Larissa was an important event that breathed new life into the Jewish community. They arrived from Spain without any property, but they did not arrive empty-handed. The greater majority had an occupation; many experience and knowledge that helped them get established. They passed this knowledge and experience on to their fellow Jews and to local Christians. Their presence in the city, even though they were recent refugees, enriched both the communal and economic life of the city, as shown by archival records. The Spanish-Jews mingled with the other Jews of the city, spreading their culture and their language, which has been preserved over the years and is still spoken by the majority of the elderly Jews. In all likelihood, this language will disappear in a few generations, since the younger generation no longer speaks it.

In 1821, when the Jews of the Peloponnese fled persecutions in the Morea and settled throughout all parts of Greece, most came to Thessaly. In his diary, Head Rabbi Moise Pessah lists the names of 50 families who formed the Brotherhood of Morea, a separate burial society [Hevra Kedosha Morea] under the jurisdiction of the Jewish Community of Larissa. Vasou Kalogianni mentions this in his book, *Larissa-Madre de Israel*:

Mizrachi, Maisi, Zakar, Yiekountiel, Russo, Alhanati, Tovil, Hazan, Manoach, Hakim. Soustiel, Gagiegou, Koumeri, Bantaf, Saki, Sason, Sedaka, Sali, Albelansi, Saragousi, Gischaki, Koen, Mizan, Benforado, Iosafat, Peres, Amiel, Ourtzel, Biton, Krispi, Tsevi, Kakamou, Proniki, Hasan, Simcha, Fellous, Rozanes, Touron, Pilas, Siami, Bistri, Franses, Kabeli, Mortzok, Pelosof, Amar. Atoun and Gabai.

From the same book and from the same source, a registry of the names of notables and aristocrats was preserved. This is the list of “celebis”, a title of honor given by the Turks to elderly, distinguished Greek-Jews of the city who were exceptional philanthropists and played an important role in the history and development of the city. A list of those “celebis” included”

Menachem Sidis, Menachem Faratzi, Sabetai Yiouda, Iosef Bourla, Eliaou Handali, David Saki, Bochorakis Kabeli, Haim Sifki, Eliaou Saki, Haskia Saki, Avraam Siaki, Mousion Siaki, Shalom Hakim, Jessoua Koen, Avraam Mizan, Avraam Filosof, Aaron Koen, Bochor Yiachel Koen, Tselebon Koen, Raphalakis Koen, Haim Alhanati and Elazar Alhanati.

Another important registry preserved in the archives of the distinguished, learned intellectual and pharmacist, Haim Alhanati [died 3/21/63] was a list of the names of families who were members of the community going back 100-150 years. This catalog will be useful to those Jews researching their family trees and who have their roots in Larissa, Thessaly and Greece, since Larissa, during those years, was a major headquarter for Mediterranean Jews. Some of these family names still appear in Larissa. Many others are names of Jews who, especially after WWII, were scattered to Israel, America, Europe, and throughout Greece:

Andzel, Alkava, Amarilio, Benforanto, Boton, Taraboulous, Estroumsa, Magrizou, Sason, Azouvi, Eskiniazi, Alhanati, Benveniste, Albelansi, Nachmouli, Yischaki, Koen, Levi, Tameri, Tevouli, Mizan, Kapeta, Sevilia, Tsevi, Kakamo, Kabano [or Kapuano], Touron, Franses, Negrin, Fellous, Rousso, Pilas, Siami, Bistri, Faratzi, Koufino, Faras, Santikario, Proniko, Yomtov, De Boton, Malalel, Esformes, Saptsi, Amiel, Gedalia, Tevouli, Touvil, Molho, Eliakim, Maras, Ourtzel, Souhami, Rekanati, Jesoula, Amar, Masarano, Hanoka, Bourla, Boeno, Salia, Yiamali, Moisi, Netanel, Handali, Atoun, Sultan, Tesouva, Kalabrezo, Saki, Hamoui, Arar, Karmona, Simcha, Arouesti, Nachman, Hanoach, Rozanes, DeMayo, Maisi, Yiakbes, Mizraki, Sipoura, Soumlal, Bega, Beza, Meir, Nisim, Kabeli, Matatia, Nachmia, Hason, Krispi, Errera, Alkranti, Menashe, Revach, Salem, Yiachbes, Fais, Feretzi, Babouki, Peres, Dafa, Hakim, Soustiel, Alkaz, Gayiego, Saltiel, Zafarana, Gabai, Saragosi, Pelosof, Bantaf, Mavromati, Sides, Jesoua, Salama, Matalon, Yiekountiel, Iosafat, Zakar, Israel, Kalamaro, Ouriel, Abravanel, Benroubi, Konforti, Konen, Hazan, Benozilio and Benouziou.

Professor Nikos Beis, in his book of 1921, mentions the following regarding the Jewish quarter in Larissa: “At least 1000 years ago there was a Jewish population in Larissa in Thessaly.” The indigenous Jewish community of Larissa ceased to develop with the

arrival of the Jews from Spain, but before their arrival there was a Jewish presence in the cities of Thessaly. After the arrival of Spanish Jews in 1492, the Jewish quarter grew during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and, according to impressions recorded from these periods, there were outstanding Jewish professionals in Larissa, mostly based in economic growth of the city. There were also learned Jewish doctors. From the book, *The History of the Jews of Turkey*, by M. Franco [page 29] we learn about the provenance of the Jews of Larissa before the arrival of their co-religionists from Spain. In addition, from the book of the Jewish scholar Solomon Rozanes, on page 160 of Volume I on the history of the Jews of Turkey, we are informed that the Spanish Jews who came to Larissa created a separate community alongside that of the indigenous Jews who lived there. In that period, the heads of the Jewish community were Rabbis Yiakov Bochor Solomon and Moshe ben Sabetai.

Therefore, for many years there were two communities. The indigenous Jews [the Romaniote, from the word “Romios”] and the Spanish Jews [the Sephardi-from Sepharad, meaning Latin country]. As fate would have it, at a certain point in history, under the guidance of their respective rabbis, the two communities became one and remain so today. A learned study on the Jews of the East according to geography, was published by Levi and Solomon Rainos in 1889/1890 in the French Review of Jewish Research. Some worthwhile information on the Jews of Larissa in the 17th century [1600-1630] was found in this study. The information came from a book [Voyage du Sieur Paul Lukas] published in Paris in 1712. In Larissa, in 1912, N. Giannopoulos copied the inscriptions from more than 70 old tombstones in the old Jewish cemetery and recorded them for posterity.

From many different historical sources recorded from different time periods, interesting evidence of the Jewish presence in Larissa and the activities of the Jewish Community have been uncovered.

In March of 1990 [March 9-10] there was a symposium on Larissa Studies with the theme “Larissa Immediately After the Liberation in 1881.” According to a contemporary of that time, a military doctor, Dr. Ornstein, there were 13,000 inhabitants of Larissa in 1881. This included Christians, Jews and Ottomans. There were 450 Jewish families with a total of 2,200 members of the Jewish Community. They spoke Greek and Turkish and, among themselves, Spanish. The community had synagogues and three schools [only for boys]. The commerce of the city was in the hands of the Jews and the Christians.

In an article in the Larissa newspaper, Freedom, by Vasou Kalogianni, on August 28, 1957, we are informed that the Jews of Larissa reach an acme of commercial involvement with the establishment of Larissa as the capital of Thessaly in the beginning of the 18th century and the involvement of “celebi” Isaak DeMayo, a Jew from Kastoria who was a prominent merchant. DeMayo’s activities involving the Jewish Community of Larissa were so influential and creative that Osman Pasha, then Despot of Larissa and the surrounding areas, used DeMayo as his banker, making good use of his wealth and power. Mutual aid societies and philanthropic organizations were established and, due to DeMayo, important writings of prominent Jews of the period were published and

preserved. DeMayo died in 1855 in unfortunate circumstances. In 1854 there was the Revolution of 1854 and the Turkish terrorism did not spare him. The Turks set on fire both Jewish and Christian sites. The Jews, who had reached the acme of their development in the city passed into the hands of a harsh ruler: commercial establishments were closed and the Jewish cemetery was [then close to Filippoupoli] filled with tombstones, was destroyed. These events caused many Jews to leave the city, many going to Thessaloniki, Kastoria, Drama and elsewhere. From then, the Jewish presence in the city began to decline. But, despite having received deep wounds, the Jewish community never lost its vitality. It revived quickly, accomplished what it could, awaiting the day when the bonds would be cut and they would, once again, be living as free men.

Larissa was liberated from the Turks on August 31, 1881. The Jews of Larissa fought in the liberation. They had suffered deep wounds during the last years of the Turkish occupation and looked forward to a new life.

Head Rabbi Simeon Aaron Pessah [Head rabbi of Larissa and Thessaly] wrote in his diary that, on August 31, 1881, when the keys of the city passed from the hands of the Turkish administrator, Chalil Pasha and his mayor, Etem Efendi to the liberating Greek Army, the Jews of Larissa were found in the front rows emotionally viewing this symbol of their liberation. Rabbi Pessah wrote in his diary that the Jews of the city took part in the reception of the army and in the reception of King George I when he arrived in Larissa:

“ The fathers of the community, holding a holy book in one hand and a large candle in the other, met the procession of the King [at the spot where the agricultural school now stands] and there chanted a greeting in Hebrew. After a visit to the Metropolitan Church of Agios Achillios, King George made an official visit to the Great Synagogue, walking across a carpet draped across the street leading to the synagogue [starting at the point where the Hotel Doma now stands-then it was the office of the newspaper, The Herald]. Laurel draped the archway of the synagogue. Then, the religious leaders and the elders of the Jewish community joined the King at the Basilica [where today stands the municipal school of music].”

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