

# Many stories, one heart

Jews return en masse to the once Jewish-Greek city of 'Salonika'  
– but only as tourists **Text and photos by Orit Arfa, Thessaloniki**



The memorial for the Jewish cemetery, now the grounds of Aristotle University

**THE SLOGAN** of the port city of Thessaloniki, Greece, written on municipal letterhead and garbage trucks is: "Many stories, one heart."

It was adopted when businessman-turned-mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, assumed office in 2011. He envisioned turning Thessaloniki into an attractive Greek tourism destination at a time when tourists romanticized Athens and the Greek islands. And if there's any population for whom Thessaloniki holds many stories, it's the Jewish people, who are returning to "Salonika"—as eager tourists.

According to the Thessaloniki Tourism Organization, Israeli tourism increased over the last year by a whopping 87 percent. Israelis are rated the fourth largest group of overnight visitors. The president of the organization, Paraskevi Patoulidou, waxed poetic about the Jews' return.

"Thessaloniki welcomes the visitors from Israel," Patoulidou wrote in a statement. "A breeze sweeps over its commercial roads and its neoclassical mansions, which

reveals voices, sounds and memories from the Ashkenazim and Sephardim people, from [illustrious Jewish-Greek residents] Modiano and Dasot, Karasot, Sasson and many others who were born, walked, lived and loved Thessaloniki."

Most of the Jewish stories, however, are ones of heartbreak and tragedy. Once a Jewish-Greek city with a majority Jewish population that caused even the ports and shops to close on Shabbat, Thessaloniki lost over 95 percent of its 50,000 Jews to Hitler's genocidal madness. Next year, the new, state-of-the-art Holocaust Memorial and Human Rights Educational Center will sanctify the city's Jewish past.

**IT BEGINS** in 1492 when the Ottoman sultan welcomed Jews expelled from Spain during the Inquisition. He saw their value as skilled, well-connected merchants who could revive the Ottoman economy and fill imperial coffers. Jews were given considerable leeway to live according to their traditions, so much so that Thessaloniki eventually

fancied itself as the "Mother of Israel."

The modern story of Jewish life in Thessaloniki began, at least for me, in Berlin, where days before my trip I met Thessaloniki native Luna Kapeta, a student at J Academy, a year-long Jewish learning program for young professionals based in Germany.

"You won't find too many Thessaloniki Jews my age," she warned me. They left not necessarily out of sparse Jewish activity. Many college graduates left after Greece's 2009 financial crisis. The country never truly recovered despite Germany's bailout of its debts.

Kapeta's grandfather was one of the 1,500 Jews who survived the Nazi occupation by literally "running for the hills."

"The area has a lot of mountains. It was a time when the left party was protesting. They were trying to hide people," Kapeta said during a walk in a Berlin park. Like most Thessaloniki Jews, she traces her heritage to Spain. Her parents spoke Ladino, the first language of many Thessaloniki Jews. As an authentic "Sephardi" (Jew of Spanish



The writer places a stone on the memorial for the Jewish cemetery

descent), she is eligible for Spanish citizenship. She recalls fun Purim parties and Jewish activities as a child attending the Jewish elementary school, but in Thessaloniki, her future as a Jew is questionable. “All my friends are abroad.”

**THE 30-MINUTE** drive from the Makedonia Airport to the city center immediately reveals those mountains. Thessaloniki is nestled in a northern Greece bay, surrounded by hills. Across the bay, visible on a very clear day, is Mount Olympus of Greek mythological fame. They add topographic beauty to a city center that aesthetically has something in common with Tel Aviv.

Municipal efforts to attract Jewish and Israeli visitors have been working. In the last decade, Thessaloniki has become an increasingly in-demand destination for Israelis. Veteran tour guide and travel agency owner, Maria Kyriakidou, identified the turning point as 2009, when the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident sank Turkey and Israeli diplomatic relations, and Israelis turned to Greece as a substitute for Turkey. Two years later, the mayor, a successful

winery entrepreneur, sought the rebranding of the city for internationals.

Kyriakidou, a Christian native of Thessaloniki, hardly knew anything about the Jewish history of the city when she completed her tour guiding course in 1990; it simply wasn’t taught. When she received a request from an Israeli travel agency to show Israeli cruise participants the city’s Jewish sites, she embarked on an autodidactic crash course. She had no idea, for example, that 12,700 Greek Jews fought in Albania against Italians during World War II or that Jews founded the city’s first hospital.

“I started knocking on the doors, went to the community, saw people,” she said over coffee at the northern fortress elevated over the city. “I told them I’m really interested in learning about the Jewish life, not just for a tour that makes money. It’s a big part of the history.”

Eventually, as more Israeli and Jewish groups put Thessaloniki on their itineraries, the Jewish community professionalized operations. Today, repeat visitors expand their trips to the scenic countryside.

“There is a Greek saying: ‘If I have



someone asking me for a specific product, I’ll start cultivating that product.’ Here the ‘product’ is a tour. When they saw that more Israelis were also coming, they realized that. We kept asking for them to open a synagogue.” These days, tourists can access the two operating synagogues and the Jewish Museum for a five-euro all-Jewish-purpose ticket. The city’s Jewish history is now required learning for tour guides.

Only imprints of Jewish life are left to see – and not because of the Holocaust. The “Great Fire” of 1917 razed much of the city, including dozens of synagogues, each named after the migrant community that built it. These synagogues are honored in a series of plaques at Yad LeZikaron, the daily operating synagogue located in the building housing the Jewish community headquarters. Paul preached to the Romanites (Greco-Roman Jews) at the oldest known synagogue (now destroyed) dating from the 1st century.

The first major public Holocaust memorial was inaugurated in 1997 at Freedom Plaza where, in March 1942, Nazis herded men, aged 18-45, for registration and pub-



The Thessaloniki marketplace

lic humiliation. Four years ago, a memorial consisting of a lopsided menorah and tombstone was consecrated at Aristotle University, which was built on what was once the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe. The Nazis had disturbed the rest of some 350,000 Jews buried there, having demolished it in consort with local Greek authorities who eyed the vast real estate. Villas once belonging to wealthy Jewish businessmen outside the city center now serve as municipal and cultural institutions. Only in the last few years were memorial plaques placed at the site of the former ghetto and deportation station.

Israelis today don't come only for the Jewish content. The beachside vibe of Thessaloniki, with its packed, smoky cafés and *tavernas*, would make the average Israeli feel at home, except eateries are a third cheaper in Greece. The *shuk* is filled with eager merchants selling fresh fish, olives, and other delicacies one could find at the Carmel Market. Densely packed, gray-white buildings are reminiscent of Tel Aviv's Bauhaus. Cars honk liberally on one-way streets. They're even building a subway, like in Tel Aviv,



The interior of the Monastir synagogue, aka 'The Great Synagogue,' one of the few in operation today

that annoys locals because of its cost and inconvenience. The Tel Aviv and Haifa ports have Thessaloniki hands in their creation. Skilled Thessaloniki Jews were recruited to build the ports of Haifa and Tel Aviv during Mandate Palestine.

Random archaeological sites nestled among the restaurants and boutiques give the city a Jerusalem-touch, justifying the title "Jerusalem of the Balkans." On the macro-level, Thessaloniki's history mimics that of Israel's: stories of dispossession, population exchanges, changing rulers from Roman to Byzantine to Ottoman and back to Greek. Even the Greek flag is blue and white.

**NO ISRAELIS** on record have made Thessaloniki their home except for the rabbi of Moroccan-Polish descent, Rabbi Aharon Israel. After serving in Australia, he was called on to preside over the Thessaloniki Jewish community ten years ago.

As we walked along the port promenade from the synagogue to his house for the Friday night Shabbat meal, he visibly stood out as Jewish with his black hat. He said he

has never encountered dirty looks or antisemitic remarks. His five lively children (all born in Greece) evinced a fearlessness and trust at the table, as they entertained and cozied up to the guests.

The rabbi doesn't see any serious threat to Jews in Thessaloniki today, neither from the far right nor the Muslim population, even though he has a special obligation to be on alert.

Unlike the intellectuals of Ashkenaz, Thessaloniki's Sephardim were mostly Jews of simple faith who put rabbis on a pedestal, much to their detriment. It is speculated that the Galician-born Rabbi Zvi Koretz, who came to serve right before Hitler's rise, betrayed the community.

At the onset of the Nazi occupation, Koretz was whisked to Vienna for several months. Eventually, he gathered the Jews at the Monastiriotes Synagogue (the only one to survive the Great Fire).

"Not only did he tell them to comply with the Nazis, he encouraged them to comply," Rabbi Israel said during our walk in the humid air. "Jews in the balcony started



The writer on an ancient road leading from a former pagan temple, the 'Rotunda,' to the port



Paraskevi Patoulidou, vice governor of the Metropolitan Area of Thessaloniki and president of Thessaloniki Tourism Organization

shouting that he's a traitor, and they were thrown out."

Jews were tricked into believing they'd be resettled in Poland; at Nazi command, they traded in their valuables for Polish currency they had no idea was fake.

When asked about security, the president of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, David Saltiel, immediately brought up Golden Dawn, Greece's right populist party that has been accused of trafficking in Nazi ideology. He likens them to other right-wing parties that have gained popularity on the heels of Muslim immigration. He believes these parties resent all minorities, including Jews.

"Antisemitism is, was, and will be," Saltiel said at a conference of the Jewish community. "It's something inside that's always there. You cut it and something else comes. Before it was another party, now it's Golden Dawn. Tomorrow it will not be Golden Dawn."

He does not view Islamic antisemitism as a major threat to Greek Jews. Greece's Muslim population stands at one million. Rabbi Israel has close contacts with local *imams*, who often require his services as a certified kosher slaughterer since kosher

meat is also considered *halal*.

Smoking a cigar from underneath his proud white mustache, Saltiel showed off the portraits of the many dignitaries who visited Thessaloniki: Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron, and his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy (himself of partial Greek-Jewish descent). The most recognizable Israeli of Thessaloniki descent is rock star Yehuda Poliker, who created a cultural bridge by forging a Greek-Hebrew musical style. (On the rabbi tribute wall, Koretz was missing.)

Today's Jewish population in Greece stands at about 5,000, of which 1,500 are Thessalonians. Saltiel's parents survived because they escaped Thessaloniki and hid in villages around Athens.

"We're very small in numbers but from our experience, it's our obligation," Saltiel said. "For me, as president of the Central Board and Vice President of the World Jewish Congress, I think we have to teach the children what happened. We have to change laws. We have to rewrite books. We have to do a lot of things."

A model of the new Holocaust Museum takes center stage in the conference room. Its design by Berlin and Jerusalem

architects mimics the landmark Ottoman white tower fortress to demonstrate the Jews' organic tie to the city.

"The biggest problem now doesn't depend on Jews," Saltiel said. "It's the economic situation of Greece. In the last eight, nine years, 450,000 youngsters left to the US and other countries. This percentage of youth includes Jews. It's the best of the young generation."

Back in Berlin, Kapeta is not sure she'll return to Thessaloniki, even though she misses its warmth, beauty and food. As both a Greek and a Jew, she didn't foresee German life as "a walk in the park." She encountered anti-Israel bias among native German peers, and she even averted a stabbing by an Arab in the streets of Berlin by loudly shouting for help. She's also concerned about a rise in neo-Nazis. But, for now, her Greek-Jewish tale continues, ironically, in the country that destroyed Greek-Jewish life.

"I don't regret being here," she said. "The whole experience made me stronger and the person I am today." ■

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