

Exhibition “Thessaloniki Mother of Israel”
Curated by the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki

The Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki was founded by the local Jewish Community of which it is an expression to honour the rich and creative Sephardic heritage of the town where the Nazis exterminated 98% of the Jews in 1943 (more information is available in the section “Not to forget”).

<http://www.jmth.gr/web/about.htm>

The standing exhibition displayed in the Museum is made of a series of 14 panels documenting the history of Jewish presence in Thessaloniki from its foundation in 315 b.C. until World War II. Particular attention is devoted to the cultural role acquired over centuries by the Jewish Thessaloniki, which in the Sixteenth Century earned the title of “Mother of Israel”, and to the Nazi extermination of the Twentieth Century. Aside, in another wing of the Museum, we are explained the tragic events of the deportation and extermination in Auschwitz of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki in 1943

(See the photogallery in the Website/Gardens of Thessaloniki).

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315 B.C.E.

The First Jews in Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki was founded around 315 B.C.E. by Kassandros, king of Macedonia, who named it after his wife, Alexander the Grate's sister.

Jewish presence in Greece is mentioned in Isaiah (66.19) and in Joel (3.6).

Nevertheless, there is no specific reference to the arrival of the first Jews in Thessaloniki. Some Jews might have been among its first inhabitants.

Alternatively, the first Jews may have arrived in Thessaloniki around 140 B.C.E., coming from Alexandria, Egypt.

Exhibit: Copper coin minted during the reign of King Kassandros, founder of Thessaloniki.



168 B.C.E.

The Roman Conquest

Following its conquest by the Romans in 168 B.C.E., Thessaloniki became the capital of the province of Macedonia, and evolved, mainly after the completion of the “Egnatia” road (146-120 B.C.E.), into the largest urban centre of the Hellenic region. During that period, Jews came to settle in increasing numbers. The Jewish communities in Greece spread and served as bases for further settling of Jews throughout the Haemus (Balkan) peninsula.

Therefore, we could safely infer that during the second century B.C.E., a small group of Jews settled permanently in Thessaloniki.

The ancient Jewish community of Thessaloniki was a typical example of a Judaic community of Hellenistic and Roman times. Its members, named later Romaniotes (to distinguish them from the immigrants from Western Europe of the 15th and 16th centuries), eventually adopted the Greek language while maintaining the Hebrew/Aramaic script for writing. It is this community that Apostle Paul visited around 50 C.E. to preach in its synagogue “for three Saturdays”.

According to tradition, the oldest synagogue of Thessaloniki, where Paul probably preached, was “Ets Ahayim” (Tree of Life). Throughout the Ottoman occupation and up to the Great Fire of 1917, it was located between today’s Demosthenous and Kalapothaki streets, very near the port.

Exhibit: The Arc of Galerious (Kamara). Dated 302 C.E.. Main theme of its engraved decoration is the depiction of the victorious campaigns of Galerious, Caesar of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, against the Persians.



395 C.E.

Byzantine Thessaloniki

After the division of the Roman Empire into east and west (395 C.E.), Thessaloniki, due to its privileged location, attained great economic, military and political significance and evolved into the largest city of the Byzantine Empire besides Constantinople.

Some emperors dealt specifically with the Jews, imposing special taxation or limitations to their religious rights. There were also some unsuccessful attempts to convert them to Christianity. Such attempts were disavowed by the ecumenical synods where it was often proclaimed that the Jews had the right to live freely and in accordance with their religious laws.

In 1096, the Grand Rabbi of Thessaloniki was Tobias ben Eliezer from Kastoria, known for his thesis, “Lekah Tov”.

Exhibit: Remnants of the wall of the town were reconstructed during the 4th century C.E. by Theodosios I. The prosperity of Thessaloniki continued into the Paleochristianic Era.



12th Century

Through the mid-Byzantine era, Thessaloniki flourished in spite of all the wars taking place in its vicinity and the successive invasions and sieges. Its population at this time exceeded 100.000.

Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, visiting Thessaloniki in 1160, noted: “We arrived in Thessaloniki, big, coastal town... There are 500 Jews living here under the leadership of Rabbi Samuel and his sons... Here also live the Rabbis Shabethai, Eli, and Michael...”

The account of the voyages of Benjamin of Tudela was published several times. One such publication is shown here, a 16th century edition from Italy.

There are also valuable references to the Jews of Thessaloniki of that period in the chronicles of its siege by the Normans (1185), written by Archbishop Eustathios. In the preceding century, the Crusades carved the way to the Holy Land. A new, strong, messianic movement was rising among the Jews of Eastern Europe. Many of them crossed Thessaloniki on their pilgrimage to the land of their forefathers. Some opted to stay here, thus increasing Thessaloniki’s Jewish population.

Exhibit: Jewish grave of the Byzantine era.



1423

Venetian Rule

In 1423, facing the Ottoman threat, Andronikos Paleologos, son of Emperor Manuel II, sold the city to the Venetians, who in return promised to respect the privileges and rights of all inhabitants.

Already, the Ashkenazic Jews from Hungary and Germany (1376) had arrived in Thessaloniki, as well as the first Sephardic Jews from Majorca (1391) and a small group from Provence (1394).

During the Venetian rule (1423-1430), immigration of Jews from Italy and Sicily increased. The new settlers, like the ones before them, built their own synagogues. The Venetian overlords soon broke their promises, and started oppressing the people with heavy taxation.

Exhibit: 904 C.E. Conquest of Thessaloniki by the Saracens under Leon of Tripoli. The White Tower, contemporary symbol of Thessaloniki, built either during the Venetian rule or the first years of the Ottoman occupation.



1492

The Turkish Occupation: Arrival of the Spanish Jews

Thessaloniki was conquered by the Turks on March 29, 1430. Half a century later, its population did not exceed 11.000.

1492 marks an event of decisive importance for the future not only for its Jewish community, but for the city as a whole. 15-20.000 Spanish Jews, called Sephardim, were expelled from Spain by edict of the Catholic King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella and found refuge in the Macedonian capital.

More Jews followed from Portugal, Sicily, Italy and North Africa. The Sephardim gave a new boost to commerce and industry. They developed the mines of Gallico and Siderokapsa. They also founded the first printing house around 1510-1520.



16th Century

The century that followed the expulsion from Spain was to be a cultural golden era. Thessaloniki evolved into a major centre for theological studies, attracting students from around the world and producing excellent rabbis, poets and doctors, renowned throughout Europe.

It was then, in 1537, that Thessaloniki earned the honorific title “Mother of Israel,” by the Jewish poet from Ferrara, Samuel Usque.

Exhibit: Clothing distribution ceremony for the students of the Talmud Torah school. 16th century.

(Glass – Beth Hatefutsot Museum, Israel.)



1655

The Messianic Movement of Shabbethai Zvi

In the beginning of the 17th century, the discoveries of new sea routes to the east, as well as fires and pestilence, caused the interruption of the magnificent development of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki. Economic collapse was followed by a cultural decline: interest in biblical studies diminished considerably, while mysticism and study of the apocrypha gained adherents. In such a milieu, in 1655, a certain Shabbethai Zvi from Izmir arrived in Thessaloniki, proclaiming himself the messiah. His sermons were well received by the population, but the magnitude of his following worried the Ottoman authorities, who subsequently arrested him in 1666. Facing the choice of conversion or death, Shabbethai Zvi then converted to Islam. It is estimated that 300 Jewish families of Thessaloniki followed him in conversion, thus creating the community of the Jewish-Muslim sectarians, who came to be known as “Doenmeh” (“converts” in Turkish).

In 1902, the Doenmehs built the “Yeni Djami” (Contemporary Former Archaeological Museum) and continued to live in Thessaloniki until their immigration to Turkey as part of the exchange of populations that followed the Asia Minor war (1922).

Exhibit: Shabbethai Zvi

Yeni Djami: Doenmeh grave in Thessaloniki



19th – 20th century

The New Renaissance

The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki suffered considerably from the cultural shock of the mass conversion of Doenmehs, from which it did not recover until the mid-19th century, when it witnessed a renaissance following the model of the European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution.

Certain reforms instituted by the Ottoman administration, as well as the new industrial products and production methods imported from the west, transformed Thessaloniki into an agent-city and furthered its expansion and development.

The city expanded by tearing down part of the Byzantine fortifications in 1869.

Electricity, trams and a modern port were installed. Railway connections to Europe were established. The multinational structure of the city was preserved.

However, the demographic and economic superiority of its Jewish community became one of its most interesting characteristics.

In 1864, the first local newspaper was published in Thessaloniki: the Jewish “El Lunar”.

In 1873, the Alliance Israelite Universelle established a new school in Thessaloniki and Jews were thereafter recipients of an advanced European-style education.

During this period the Jewish population exceeded 70.000, that is, half of the total population of the city. Jews dominated commerce and industry, were to be found in every profession, and constituted the majority of the workers’ population.

Thessaloniki was like a deserted city on Saturdays and during Jewish holidays. New Jewish neighbourhoods sprang up. The community administered many welfare institutions, more than 30 synagogues, dozens of houses of worship and parochial schools, and the great theological seminary of “Talmud Torah”.

Exhibit: Rabbi of Thessaloniki, 1873.



1912

Liberation

On the 26th of October 1912, Thessaloniki became Greek once again. The Grand Rabbi Yaakov Meir and the leaders of the community were received immediately by King George, crown prince Konstantinos, and Prime Minister Eleftheris Venizelos, who all promised to uphold the rights of Jews and to guarantee full equality.

During the first world war, Thessaloniki, due to its strategic location, served as a centre for provisions of the allied armies.

On September 26, 1916, the National Defence Government was formed by Eleftherios Venizelos.

Exhibit: Grand Rabbi Yaakov Meir with the Archbishop of Thessaloniki Gennadios.



1917

The Great Fire

On the 18th and 19th of August, 1917, a terrible fire devastated the centre of Thessaloniki: from Aghiou Dimitrou Street to the shorefront, and from the Vardari Square to the Aghia Sophia church.

Most of the Jewish neighbourhood was destroyed and 53.737 Jews were rendered homeless. 31 synagogues, dozens of houses of worship, the community center, the offices of the chief rabbinate, welfare institutions, the buildings of the Alliance Israelite Universelle and of the Talmud Torah, and 10 more schools, all burned down. The terrible disaster was compounded by the loss of many priceless old worship relics, as well as manuscripts and libraries containing the writings of the great rabbis of the past.

It was a devastating blow, which crippled the Jewish community for years to come.

Exhibit: Map of the 1917 fire.

Postcard of Thessaloniki after the Great Fire of 1917.



1940

The 1940-41 War

In 1940, 50.000 Jews lived in Thessaloniki. The Jewish citizens lived in harmony with their Christian neighbours, and fulfilled their duty to the Greek homeland: 12.898 Jews served in the army during the 1940-41 war, with 343 officers among them. Many received decorations for their valour. 513 lost their lives, and 3.713 were wounded.

The Axis forces occupied Thessaloniki on April 9, 1941, and this marked the beginning of the end. The Nazis enforced anti-Jewish laws from the very first days of the occupation. Jews were barred from cafés, pastry shops, etc. The Hirsch hospital and many Jewish homes were confiscated, members of the community council were imprisoned, the offices of the community centre were pillaged, and archives and the library were destroyed.

On July 11, 1942, all Jewish men aged 18-45 were ordered to present themselves at Liberty Square. There they were submitted to a series of humiliating exercises. They were then counted, and led to forced labour. The community paid about 2.5 billion drachmas in ransom money to set them free. Around the end of 1942, Jewish businesses were confiscated and the Jewish cemetery was destroyed.

Exhibit: Newspaper announcement about Thessaloniki Jews wounded during the 1940-41 war.



1943

Starting in February 1943, Jews were forced to wear the yellow star and reside only in certain neighbourhoods (ghettos).

On March 15, 1943, the first trains departed for the death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau. By August 1943, 18 more “shipments” had carried most of the Jews, loaded on cattle cars, to their deaths.

Very few were able to flee to the Greek mountains, or hide, assisted by Christian friends. These people returned to Thessaloniki after the liberation and, joining forciers with the very few survivors of the concentration camps, established a new community on the ruins of the Holocaust.

Exhibit: The railway station of Thessaloniki.

Post scriptum:

The Jews of Thessaloniki contributed to the economy of Thessaloniki:

According to 16th century sources, the majority of the Jewish population of Thessaloniki, were craftsmen. The Jewish immigrants imported skills previously unknown to the region. Textile was the most developed light industry. Rabbinical texts of this period abound with details concerning the daily life of the Jewish families around their looms.

From 1515 onwards, the Ottoman state procured all its woven fabrics, used to fulfil the needs of the Ottoman army in uniforms, from the Jews of Thessaloniki. It even accepted the collection of the poll tax (Jizya) in kind (in fabrics).

In 1540, the synagogues themselves took over the fabric production, employing their poor members and distributing the profits among their welfare and educational institutions. In 1568, a community delegation, headed by Moshe Almosnino, succeeded in obtaining a sultan's decree officially reconfirming the written privileged bestowed to the Jews by Suleiman the Magnificent, which had been burnt in the fire of 1545.

The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki was thus declared a "Musselemluk," that is, an autonomous administrative body that answered directly to the "Sublime Porte". It also secured the right to buy its new materials at prices below actual market prices. Thus the Jews of Thessaloniki enjoyed a period of great prosperity that did not come to an end until the beginning of the 17th century.

Dozens of Jewish Periodicals were published in Thessaloniki:

The first newspaper in Thessaloniki was "El Lunar," published by Yehouda Nehama in 1864. Saadi Halevi Askenazi's "La Epoca" followed in 1875. Later, dozens of Jewish magazines and newspapers (dailies, weeklies, monthlies, satirical, Zionist, Socialist, independent) circulated in Thessaloniki.

Most of them were written in the Judeo-Spanish dialect in "Rashi" script. There were also some in French. Prominent figures among the Jewish journalists, publishers and editors of Thessaloniki were: Moshe Mallah, David Florentin, Yossef Uziel, Eliahu Arditti, Albert Matarasso, Solomon Reuben, Menten Bensantsi, Eliahu Veisi, Yitzhak Benroubi, Yossef Angel, Samuel Modiano, Jacques Ventura, Albert Molho, Albert Arditti, Abraham Benaroua, Eliahu Attas, Abraham Cohen, and Baruch Shibi.

The Jewish press was a significant aspect of the life of the Jews of Thessaloniki. In 1931, the daily circulation of the Jewish newspapers was nearly 25.000 copies. In 1941, there were three daily newspapers: "El Messagero," in Judeo-Espanol, and the "Independent" and the "Le Progres" in French.

Jewish Newspapers in Thessaloniki:

1. El Lunar 1864-1866
2. La Epoca 1875-1912
3. El Avenir 1897
4. Revista Populara 1909-1912
5. La Libertad 1909
6. La Tribuna Libera 1910
7. La Solidaridad Umbradera 1911
8. Avanti 1936
9. El Liberal 1913
10. La Esperanza 1915
11. Journal de Laborador 1909
12. La Boz del Pueblo 1915
13. Pueblo 1917-1931
14. Pro-Israel 1917-1926

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| 15. La Renaissance Judia 1917 | 25. La Nacion 1932 |
| 16. La Verdad 1921 | 26. La Voz Zionista 1933 |
| 17. La Accion Zionista 1921 | 27. La Prensa 1934 |
| 18. El Tiempo 1925 | 28. Messagero 1935-1941 |
| 19. La Nueva Palestina 1926 | 29. Accion Prensa 1935 |
| 20. El Gidío 1926 | 30. Tikvatenu 1935 |
| 21. El Dror 1928 | 31. Amenora 1937 |
| 22. Mizrahi 1929 | 32. Le Progres 1935-1941 |
| 23. Accion 1930 | 33. L'Independent 1923-1941 |
| 24. Israel 1932 | |

Thessaloniki: a prominent printing centre

Thessaloniki was one of the major centres of the Jewish publishing activity. From the 16th to the beginning of the 20th century, more than 3.500 titles were published by its printers.

Until the 19th century, the printers published mostly holy texts, midrashim, responses, comments on kabala, philosophical and scientific treatises.

After the 19th century, in addition to Jewish newspapers, books, magazines and brochures, the publishing houses of Thessaloniki published the famous Haskamoth – legal resolutions of its rabbis and community leaders that were a valuable source of information about the life and history of the Jewish community. Most of those documents were destroyed during successive fires and finally during the German occupation.

The first printing plant was founded 1510-1520 by Don Yeoudah Ghedalia. Later the printing dynasties of Yonah ben Yaakov and Betzalel Halevi Ashkenazi from Amsterdam lived in Thessaloniki, the latter establishing his printing press in 1741, thus contributing to turning Thessaloniki into a literary and publishing metropolis. Among the dozens of printing houses that operated in the city we note: Sonsino, Solomon and Yossef Yabetz, Avraham Azouvi, Batsheva, Bezes, Yossef Molho, Talmoud Torah Hagadol, Hevra Gemilout Hasidim, and Ets Ahayim.

Zionist Organizations in Thessaloniki:

1. Kadima, 1899
2. Benei Zion, 1908
3. Maccabi (sports club), 1908
4. Hatekia (women), 1908
5. Maccabi Boy Scouts, 1926
6. Theodor Herzl
7. Mizrahi (religious), 1918
8. Beitar (revisionists)
9. Max Nordau (sports club), 1920
10. Artensou
11. Wizo (women)
12. Benot Zion (women)
13. Benei Israel (cultural)

An Active Zionist Movement Founded in Thessaloniki:

Ideological Currents

Zionist Movement – La Federation

Zionism had fervent followers in Thessaloniki since its conception. It was expressed through societies, such as “Kadima,” founded in 1899, whose declared purpose was the resurrection of the Hebrew language.

After the Young Turk revolution and the proclamation of the Ottoman constitution, the Zionist movement came out into the open, founding the “Benei Zion” society and the “Maccabi” sports club. After the Greek liberation, more Zionist societies were formed, representing the various political sub currents within the movement. There were representatives of the so-called general Zionists, the religious Zionists (the Mizrahi), the revisionists of “Artsenou” and “Beitar” and the Zionist-Socialists of “Poalei Zion”.

In 1919, the first Panhellenic Zionist Congress took place in Thessaloniki, resulting in the establishment of the Zionist Federation of Greece, with its headquarters in Thessaloniki. Its official publication was “La Esperanza” magazine, published by Joseph Uziel. The Federation leaders were: Asher Mallah, David Matalon, Asher Moisis, David Florentin, Mentesh Bensantsi, and Isaac Angel.

The Assimilationists were represented in Thessaloniki by the Union of the Alliance Israelite Universelle alumni.

In 1909, almost simultaneously with the appearance of the Zionist organizations, the Socialist Workers’ Federation was formed. Its nucleus was the Jewish working class of Thessaloniki. As a matter of fact, it came to be known by its Judeo-Spanish name, “Federation”. Its founder and leader was Avraham Benaroya, who was succeeded by others, such as Albert Arditti, Shabbetai Yonah, Vidal Dassa, etc.

The “Federation” was autonomous until 1918, at which time it co-founded, along with other Greek leftist organizations, the Greek Worker’s Socialist Party (S.E.K.E.), later renamed the Communist Party of Greece (K.K.E.).

Thessaloniki was a centre of learning and education:

From the 16th century onwards, Thessaloniki evolved into an important center for Judaic theological studies, attracting students from all around Europe who came to study in its famous yeshivas. Every synagogue had its own school of elementary education, “Hevra”, and seminary of higher education, “Yeshiva”. There was also the “Talmud Torah Hagadol”, a veritable university for the community members, established in 1520 and financed by community funds.

The education system in the community was reformed in the middle of the 19th century.

Furthermore, the school of the “Alliance Israelite Universelle” was established in 1873.

Private secular schools of general and professional studies were also founded, while the Jewish youth constituted the majority of the students enrolled in the numerous foreign schools of Thessaloniki.

Schools

1. Talmud Torah Hagadol (main school)
2. Talmud Torah (Kalamaria branch)
3. Talmud Torah (Baron Hirsch district branch)
4. Alliance Israélite Universelle (est. 1873)
5. Hirsch School
6. Agia Paraskevi School
7. Sewing School (est. 1887)
8. Gattegno School (est. 1890)
9. Pinto Elementary School (1897-1942)
10. Alchech School (1898-1935)
11. Moshe Modiano (est. 1898)
12. Girls' Communal School (est. 1906)
13. Ezra Kindergarten and Elementary School (est. 1908)
14. Kazes School
15. Isaac Cohen Benadot Girls' School
16. Paladino Elementary School
17. Versano School
18. "Le Progres" School

Medical and Welfare Institutions:

The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki maintained many magnificent welfare institutions and mutual aid societies, unmatched by any other Diaspora community.

The health fund "Bikour Holim", established immediately following the expulsion from Spain, offered medical, pharmaceutical, and hospital care to the poor. Many famous Jewish doctors, such as Amato Lusitano, who was expelled from Spain and Portugal, settled in Thessaloniki and offered their services to Bikour Holim.

In 1908, the Hirsch hospital was established (today's "Ippocratio"). It was financed by a donation from the Baroness Clara de Hirsch, and completed through the tireless efforts of Dr. Moshe Misrahi. Many renowned doctors served there: Dreyfus, Sciaki, Jean Allaluf, Albert Israel, Meir Yoel, Leon Koenka, Moshe Modiano and others.

The community also operated the "Saul Modiano" home for the elderly, the "Allatini" and "Aboav" orphanages, the "Lieto Noah" psychiatric asylum, and welfare organizations such as "Matanot Laevionim", which offered meals to schools children, the "Torah Oumelaha", which supported poor students, etc.

Welfare Institutions

1. Charles Allatini Boys' Orphanage
2. Meir Aboav Girls' Orphanage
3. "Ets Ahayim" Welfare Organization (est. 1923)
4. Yeshua Verahanim (widows' and orphans' care)
5. Mtanot Laevionim (est. 1901)
6. Noten Besether Welfare Organization (est. 1923)
7. Malbis Aroymim (est. 1923)
8. Small Loan Fund (est. 1929)
9. Ozer Dalim
10. Unleavened Bread Plant
11. Saul Modiano Home for the Elderly
12. Hevra Kedusha Burial Society
13. Meir Tsenio

Health Care Institutions

1. Bikour Holim
2. Hirsch Hospital (est. 1908)
3. Isaac Hassid Clinic
4. Pinhas Dispensary (est. 1923)