The Fiddler from Auschwitz

Mary Rouben as a Young Woman in Salonika

4th International Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies
Dear friends,

With the present issue of El Avenir you have in your hands we continue our efforts to provide our friends from around the world with recent news from our Community and articles of interest.

More importantly, we try to highlight several aspects of the Community’s rich history and culture, as well as highlight the lives of individuals with roots in our Community.

As always, we welcome your comments, and your ideas on how we can further improve our newsletter.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we did preparing it!

The El Avenir editorial committee

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From October 26th to October 28th, the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki organized the 4th International Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies. The conference, sponsored by the Cervantes Institute and the Casa Sefarad-Israel, was entitled “Satirical Texts in Judeo-Spanish by and about the Jews of Thessaloniki.” During its proceedings, the participating prominent academics and researchers from Israel, Europe and Northern America, presented insightful lectures on published and unpublished texts, poetry and folk songs, and indicated how the language, traditions and humor of the Jews of Thessaloniki influenced the social and cultural character of the city before the Holocaust.

The keynote speech at the opening of the conference was delivered by associate professor of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Mr. Petros Martinidis. Welcoming addresses were delivered by the President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, Mr. David Saltiel, the director of the Cervantes Institute in Athens, Mr. Eusebi Ayensa Prat, the Secretary General of the Casa Sefarad-Israel, Mr. Angel Vazquez and the President of the Ladino Society, Mrs. Betty Perahia.

The conference, preceded by previous conferences in 1997, 2000 and 2004, was attended by a large audience, including city officials, academics, representatives of the diplomatic corps, students and visitors who came for the event. It underlined the importance of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, the Metropolis of the Sepharadism up until the Holocaust and the continuous efforts and commitment of the post-war Jewish Community for the preservation of its rich heritage.
Mary Rouben is now 94 years old, or maybe 93….It makes no difference to Mary. Her age is measured not in years, but in accomplishments. Born Miriam Beraha, the daughter of Eliahu Beraha and Estrea Benozilo in the city of Salonika at a time when female births went unrecorded, Mary’s record would have been lost, anyway, in the Fire of 1917. All Mary knows is that she was born during “al mez de las novias,” during the month of Purim when the marzipan sweets cherished by the children of Salonika were made. Mary would lose her mother at an early age, dying in childbirth when Mary was just 13 months old. Her brother Jacko would survive and Mary’s father would marry his deceased wife’s sister, providing a mother for his three young children, Mary, Jacko and his firstborn, Leon. The Beraha family would grow with three additional sons, and for much of Mary’s life, she had no knowledge that the woman who raised her was not her biological mother. The family was a well do to merchant family, owning a large factory producing sweets and candies. The children (five sons and one daughter, Mary) would grow up in a comfortable home surrounded by many aunts and uncles. A live-in-servant would aid in the care of the children and the home. Mary remembers the Ladino-speaking woman as being named Stella.

Mary’s early life was so reflective of pre-WW II Salonika. She attended a private Italian school, not uncommon in this cosmopolitan city where the younger generation, including the women, was being exposed to Western learning. Mary excelled in languages, studying Italian in school, Hebrew at home with a private tutor hired to teach the family, and learning, of course, Greek along with her ancestral Judeo-Espanyol. By the time she neared graduation, she was offered a scholarship continue her studies in Italy. Whether due to a change in the family’s finances and the loss of the candy factory, or the fact that Mary was a woman and women of her generation did not leave home to study abroad, Mary stayed Home to help care for her younger brothers and went to work to supplement the family’s income. One of Mary’s first jobs was as a tutor of French and her love of (and ability in) languages have stayed with her throughout her life. At the age of 94 (or 93) Mary still speaks, reads and writes Greek, Italian, French, Ladino and English.

Mary’s then went to work full-time as a cashier at The Cinema Palace. Mary takes pride in her ability to rapidly calculate the price of the tickets without the aid of a calculator. After all, there were no calculators then and all the additions had to be done in her head. The job required her to work seven days a week, often until midnight, and because the trams and buses would not run at that late hour, one of her brothers (either Leon or Jack) would arrive at closing to walk her home. The cinema would show a variety of films, most in either French or Greek but, when a Spanish film would play, the theater would attract the Sephardim of the city. Mary remembers when the film Romona with Josi Mohija played The Palace [note: Josi Mohija (1896-1974) was Mexico’s greatest opera star before Placido Domingo and appeared in both Spanish and English language films, most made during the 1930s]. Movies were treated with great respect by the public in Salonika, and Mary remembers how the customers arrived in their finery and were always well-behaved during the showing.

It would be as her job as a cashier at another Salonika movie house (The Cinema Palace) that one of the attendees would make a lasting impression. Arriving with a group of friends, carrying a bouquet of flowers and not knowing what to do with them, a young man named Sam Rouben handed the flowers to Mary. This was Mary’s initial meeting with the man who would become her husband.

The money that Mary earned would be turned over to the family. Such was the custom then. The children would receive an allowance for their expenses. Mary loved sports and joined the Maccabees, saving her allowance to pay for classes. As a young girl, Mary loved to run, exercise and swim. Today, years later, Mary still keeps in excellent shape by swimming daily.

Mary’s ability with languages landed her a job at Mourzopoulos, a high-end, exclusive shop patronized by the wealthy women of Salonika. When the Mr. Mourzopoulos tested her accent (along with her handwriting), he was so impressed that he hired her immediately, often using her as an example for other employees.
It was during this time that she finally formally met Sam Rouben and their relationship would develop. Always chaperoned, usually by one or more of her brothers, they would go on excursions or out to dinner. Such were the times. Such was the life for young girls from good families. Sam was a romantic and one of his charming gestures that Mary vividly remembers was his custom of leaving a chocolate on her window sill as he would return home from a night on the town, usually from Café Luxembourg, a club frequented by many young people. Sam remained a romantic throughout their marriage. Mary and Sam would be married on October 28, 1941, exactly a year after Greece formally entered WWII. Salonika was occupied by the Germans and Mary Beraha and Sam Rouben would be among the few to survive.

On February 24, 1943 a ghetto was established in Salonika, and on March 15, the first of nineteen deportation transports was dispatched to Auschwitz. The Beraha family was rounded up and sent to Baron Hirsch, the infamous detention site alongside the railroad tracks that would take so many to their deaths at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Mary, Sam and Mary’s brother Jacko would miss their appointment with death. They would escape from Baron Hirsch before their scheduled deportation. Fleeing the camp, they found Sam’s car and drove to the Italian Consulate. There, they were given Italian papers and train tickets to Athens. On reaching Athens, they made contact with the Greek Resistance Movement and were given false identification papers. It would be a Greek Orthodox Christian who would save their lives. Dimoleon Lemone had himself been a refugee, forced to leave Asia Minor (Turkey) during the exchange of populations in 1922/1923 and, when hearing of the plight of the young Jews through a friend of Sam’s, he came to their aid. Mary, Sam and Jacko were hidden in his home in Pireaus for almost two years. They would survive. Mary’s half brother Yeshua would be the only family member to return from the camps. The rest would be murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Yeshua chose to go to Israel and fight for his new adopted country during the Israel War of Independence. Mary and Sam chose to come to the United States in 1956 with their two young children.

It is only through the memories of the few remaining survivors that pre-WW II Salonika continues to live. Mary Beraha Rouben remembers a Salonika filled with elegance, culture and diversity, a cosmopolitan city with colorful memories. Those memories now reside in California and, thanks to Mary, here on the pages of El Avenir.

Mary Beraha Rouben survived the occupation of Greece in hiding with her husband Sam. She presently lives in California.
“A Tale ...A Debt”

Sailing through the seventh decade of my life and having been involved with the youth issues and the cultural life of the Jewish Community of Salonica for more than 50 years, I try to look ahead. Alas, more often than not, I look back to the fairy tale I lived. Like all fairy tales it starts with an unusual story, woeful at times, which paves the way through insurmountable difficulties to a triumphant Happy Ending.

The more I grow old the more I feel like a storyteller; ask Leon, my grandson, who by now has grown up to be old enough—he is already nine—to lose interest in witches, elves, princesses and heroes. It is for him and for all the children of the community who will carry on living this tale that I will try to explain what went on during the last 65 years.

Once upon a time—a gloomy, grim, unhappy time—a young girl, just over 18—a morenika of Salonica—responded to the persistent call of her beloved who had fled the German-occupied city of Salonica to find shelter in the Italian-occupied city of Athens. Breathless and fearful did she arrive in Athens not carrying anything with her but the very set of clothes she was wearing at the time. There she married her beloved in a very beautiful wedding in the Athens synagogue while 1942 was coming to its end. Life was all but easy back then. Still, Rofel and Alegra made it through the difficulties and a cute blond boy was born on the 10th of September 1943. This boy was me.

Following the cessation of hostilities between the Italians and the Greeks, the Germans seized power over all of Greece. Fifty five thousand Jews in Salonica perished. The fate of the Jews of Athens was thus sealed. The only escape was to get to the mountains. Somewhere in the Agrafa mountain, Rofel, Alegra and baby Leon spent the last year of the German occupation.

And then came freedom. They woke up from a long, almost endless sleep tormented by nightmares to find themselves—those who had fallen asleep in the arms of big, caring families—waking up as orphans. Alone. Inexorably and irrevocably alone. They returned to Athens knowing deep inside them that not a single person, not even a single thing, would be left waiting for them in Salonica.

The year before I finished elementary school we went back to Salonica. It was the autumn of ’55, a time of poverty again. Things hadn’t worked out right for my father’s business. “Where shall we stay?” mother mused on our way back, “How will we afford to live, to bring up two children, to send them to a good school...” And then the word “community” first appeared in my life, as comforting as a grandmother, as menacing as a teacher pointing to the sacred debt, hanging over my head.

As if by instinct, we were drawn away from this language, like we wished to remain ignorant, secretly wishing our names were Lakis, Costas, Christos. We didn’t want to differ, we didn’t even want to know; it was as if by instinct that we felt that awareness would bring responsibility about the debt toward the dead.

March 1950. A new baby was born. Another blond baby boy, Alberto, stepped into our dream. Some of our beloved ones who had died, now lived again through our names. From time to time at home, a strangely melodic foreign language interposed between our parents and us; “Adio santo, mira los fisikos”—my mother chanted to my father and it sounded almost like a prayer.

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It was a leap year. New faces at school, a new city that made me feel uneasy. A variety of Papadopoulos and Panagopoulos names in class, I, an Arouh, strangely dissonant and foreign yet same in all other respects. Two names traversed the year of my sixth grade: Altseh and Benveniste. Though their names were Sephardic, as was mine, in the eyes of the children that bore these names laid a knowledge that went far beyond me and even scared me. I preferred to befriend the other names. Those I knew and trusted.

In a neighbourhood somewhere around Acharnon street in Athens, little children with the names of Panagopoulos, Charissis, Papadopoulos, Ioannou and Arouh used to play together. What a name, Arouh! There was nothing like it. As if this wasn’t enough, all children had dark, Mediterranean, well groomed short hair except this one child whose hair was blond, wild and messy. At home no one ever mentioned the horror we had all lived through—especially in front of the child; we should rejoice for escaping the Angel of Death as if our right to live was less than self-evident. My awareness of being a Jew came as natural as my awareness of being a short and slender boy.

My father worked from dawn till late night to reassemble a life that had fallen into pieces. My mother, fear still lurking in her eyes, stayed at home nurturing the child; the child that would make sure the tale continued, the child that would perhaps turn this nightmare into a dream.

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At home, that strange language continued to interpose
between our parents and us even more frequently as if
the city invoked it. “Adio Rofel, ke vamos afazer” which
was soon followed by his response: “No te espandes
Alegrita, yo sto aki”. I didn’t know back then—or perhaps I
didn’t want to know. I was too young and my brother was
even younger than me but I was soon to find out.

Anxiously I awaited the forthcoming summer knowing
it would be the first summer without vacation. “Never
mind,” I said to myself, “my brother has grown old and
me even older, there is no need for vacation”.

It was at that time that the words Jewish Community
entered my life for good—not just any community but
one with “Jewish” attached to it. I found myself near the
shore, in a summer camp bursting with tents, children,
games and dreams.

Here all the names sounded different: Benmayor, Barzilai,
Nahmia, Soulha, Monina, Alhanati. The world around me
had suddenly changed. Where were the Papadopoulos,
Panagopoulos, Charissis, Ioannou? Why didn’t they make
the sign of the cross at the morning prayer, why did they
place their hands on their heads while saying weird
sounding things like “Semah Israel”? Why did all of a
sudden boys and girls older than me and bearing foreign
names like Rosy, Flora, Leon -like me-, Alberto -like my
brother- care if I ate well, if I played and if I were well
adjusted there? Their concern, their sweetness and even
their strictness at times gradually built, brick by brick, a
wall of love around me; behind the wall lurked the debt,
but back then I wasn’t able to see it.

The winter that followed, during which I entered high
school, was the toughest one of my–brief up to that day–
life. On the one hand there was poverty and on the other
there was the first realisation of being deprived of my
family, of being an orphan. The absence of grandfathers,
uncles and cousins suddenly turned into an unbearable
burden. Something inside me, however, was telling me
that I had built a wider family which I had left behind
in the summer camp. I looked for them. Most of them
carried the same burden as I did.

We knew that right after the war a few young kids, the
same young kids who had fostered us during the summer,
had created a children’s centre which however no longer
existed. We followed their steps and we reopened the
centre under the impressive name “youth club.”

Our laughter and voices were like paintings on the walls
of an austere hall whose only decoration was a few worn
out chairs. Our joy and the warmth that each one of us felt
from each other’s presence filled the place with music.
Our mischief, our first flirts, our concerns about art, our
thirst for creative work chased away the nightmare of a
death-ridden community forever. A roughly written paper
on the door read: “JEWISH COMMUNITY OF SALONICA
YOUTH CENTRE”; a community with a last name and a
father’s name.

We had slayed the dragon of extinction and we were ready
to fight with the gigantic debt that we felt was hurling
towards us. Yet now we weren’t alone anymore. We had
each other and we all had a community to belong to.
Victoria, Andreas, Paula, Betty, Joseph, Michel, Raphael,
me and many others, we all knew that from this moment
on we would live a life committed to a battle with the
debt.

The years went by. Today the community has fulfilled
even our wildest dreams. Children, youngsters, middle-
aged and seniors have all they want in respect to venues
and resources. As for us, we grew up. Most of us have
families, the best of us like Gaby and Makis left this
world early, as it always happens with the best. Many of
us were lucky to see our children and our grandchildren
committed to the same debt. If one comes to the second
floor of Vassileos Irakliou 26, one will find an office where
a neatly written sign bears the impressive title “ladino
society.”

Victoria, Andreas, Betty, me and many others are still
there trying to pay back as much of the debt as possible
so as to make everyone live happily now and those that
will come even more happily ever after.

Lelos, May 2007

This article was written by Leon (Lelos) Arouch.
As the present issue of El Avenir was being prepared, Lelos
unexpectedly passed away. Lelos was a good friend, a member
of El Avenir’s Editorial Board, who worked tirelessly to
preserve the history, traditions, and the Judeospanish language
of the Community. He loved its people and dedicated his
life to safeguarding the Jewish past, present and future of
Thessaloniki. Lelos was an inspiration to all of us. He will be
greatly missed at a time he was needed the most.
The Fiddler from Auschwitz

As every Israeli coming back from a long mission abroad, I went at the end of 1983 to Yad Va’Shem – Museum of the Holocaust in Jerusalem. I noticed an old man standing in front of the wall-photo showing the orchestra from Auschwitz, the most notorious concentration camp of the Nazis.

In the years afterwards, I brought often for a visit to Yad Va’Shem the participants to congresses and conferences I was organizing as Director General of the Central Institute of Cultural Relations in Jerusalem. Time and again, I noticed the man standing in front of the photo of Auschwitz. Intrigued, I enquired about him. “Don’t you know?” was the answer, “this man is Dr. Stroumsa, he was there, in the orchestra.”

Then I asked Dr. Jacques, Jacov Stroumsa, to come and see me. He came and told me his story: a young electrical engineer from Thessaloniki, sent to Auschwitz with his family and surviving only because the Nazis needed a violinist for the orchestra. There and then, I told Dr. Stroumsa: your story makes a solid basis for a poem! He did not seem to understand me.

Years later, the trial of Demjaniuk took place in Jerusalem, the Ukrainian Nazi from the concentration camp of Treblinka. The whole country was following the debates taking place at the National Hall-Convention Center in Jerusalem.

My editor, the publisher of “La Semana Publicaciones Ltd” in Jerusalem, asked me if I would put on a book all my poems on the Holocaust, to be launched at the Biannual Book Fair in Jerusalem in 1987, together with the translation of a book by Primo Levy, who by then was not yet known and recognized in Israel. It was an interesting offer and I gladly obliged, and started working on the project.

Looking through my poems and notes, I came across the story of Dr. Stroumsa. Using the notes as basis for a description of the Holocaust and its Museum, Yad Va’Shem, I wrote a poem: “The Fiddler from Auschwitz.” I then phoned Dr. Stroumsa and told him, that his poem was ready. He gave me an inaudible answer and closed the phone. Half an hour later the telephone rang, it was Dr. Stroumsa: “Did you call me earlier?” he asked, and on my positive answer he continued: “and did you tell me, that you wrote a poem about me?” My answer seemed to satisfy him, he said “thank you” and closed again the phone.

Half an hour later, there was a noise at my office door, as my secretary was trying to prevent someone from entering unannounced. It was Dr. Stroumsa, looking very excited. “Can I see the poem?” he asked. “Yes Dr. Stroumsa, but it is still a draft.” “Never mind, show me,” which I did and he grabbed the paper: “I want it!” “O.K., but it is in handwriting and I need it for a book to be published soon.”

“Right,” said Dr. Stroumsa, “right, a book, very good. I am going to the photo-shop to make a photocopy (we did not yet have then a photocopier) and bring you back your draft.”

Again half an hour later, he was back with the photocopy and asked: “I will be in a poem in a book?” “Yes Dr. Stroumsa, and from now on you are The Fiddler from Auschwitz!”, I ended the meeting.

The book “From People’s House to Nation’s Hall” was published and presented at the Book Fair. Shimon Peres, now President of the State of Israel, wrote the introduction and was present at the Fair and the launching of the book. “The Fiddler from Auschwitz” was one of the 24 poems. This was only a beginning. Dr. Stroumsa came again and said: “You know French, please translate the poem into French, so my only surviving sister living now in France can read it.” After he asked for translations into Spanish, Ladino, German...

And so, again and again, one language after the other, I ended up publishing a book in eight languages: The Fiddler from Auschwitz. Yitzhak Navon, fifth President of the State of Israel, now President of the Authority for Ladino-Judeo Español, wrote the introduction. Soon after these two books were published,
a friend of mine asked to turn them into a theater play, using The Fiddler from Auschwitz as the center-piece. Indeed, Dr. Paul Leibovici, Director of the Art Department, the Cultural Center and the Gallery of Ashkelon, an artist and writer in his own right, had the capacity and the means to do it. Before the end of 1987 we sat on the first row of the Cultural Center, the Mayor, Dr. Stroumsa, Dr. Leibovici and myself, seeing the performance of the local artists and the choir of Ashkelon playing the “The Fiddler of Auschwitz.”

Being appointed for new diplomatic missions abroad, I did not follow the story and the play.

In the years to come, Dr. Stroumsa published his memoirs, translated into several languages, all of them including the poem.

Years later, I became a member of the active painters department of the Haagse Kunstkring, the artists association of The Hague, and Tatiana Radier, Chairperson of the Department of Letters, Theater and Film, asked me to join her Department.

There I met her husband, the writer, musician and dramatist Rob Scholten. This led to a strong friendship and so I came to the idea to propose to Rob to write together a theater play on the Holocaust, based on my poetry. He agreed, and we took advantage of the visit of Dr. Paul Leibovici to the Netherlands to organize a session of brainstorming on the subject, the original script not being available any more.

Dr. Stroumsa, with his usual energy, provided many documents, photocopies and books.

The new Chairman of the Department of the Literature embraced enthusiastically the idea of members writing together and presenting the Premiere at the Haagse Kunstkring, the Association. Being himself a publisher he graciously accepted “to bring the book to light,” as we say in Hebrew.

The rest was only hard work, writing, separately and together, Rob Scholten translating my poems into Dutch and introducing autobiographic notes from the book of Dr. Stroumsa, putting on a team and having a show in The Hague.


There was a full audience, each one receiving the book published for the occasion, instead of a program. Three artists enacted the play while two musicians (violin and piano) played Jewish and Holocaust songs. The impressions of the audience were profoundly emotional. After the success of the performance and the book, I proposed to Dr. Leibovici to re-enact the original play in Hebrew. He accepted gracefully and we had already several work sessions in Israel, including a brainstorming together with Dr. Stroumsa. The idea was to reproduce the play, using old and new material, to publish a book and to put the play on stage.

Dr. Jacques - Jacov Stroumsa, now 96 years old, lives with his family in Jerusalem.

He gives conferences in several languages to groups of visitors to the Yad Va’Shem memorial of the Holocaust in Jerusalem. To old and young he tells his story, plays the violin and reads the poem: “The Fiddler from Auschwitz.” It is him.

Moshé Liba, November 2008
To Jacov Stroumsa, survivor from Salonika
by Moshé Liba

Every morning
even when perchance
there was no nightmare
when I was not awakened
in a cold sweat,
when I did not arise in fright
in terror of the SS.
Every single morning.

I ask myself
where shall I go today?
I dress, drink tea,
start the car
and drive off -
where to?

The engine purrs
the sites rush by
the avenue, the traffic lights
the road leads up,
up the hill,
the open gate.
Every morning
Yad Va’Shem -
the Holocaust Memorial.

The same hum
the same voices
the same notes
the same music
the march
the little town in flames.
The music leads my car,
draws me like a magnet
like a cable
like the chain of a winch
to Yad Va’Shem.

Dr. Stroumsa
and Prof. Liba in Jerusalem

The Remembrance Tent
the Eternal Light
candles for the children
the Hall of Names
the photos, eyes,
teeth, golden dentures, human hair.
Here are the gas chambers,
the furnaces
the crematoria
and Jews in striped, shapeless clothes
pushing bodies.
Naked women trying in vain
to hide their shame
on the brink of the common grave.
Only the stench, the smoke and the music are
missing.

What means that noise,
the cadence of steps
“Links, left, left, ...!”
The whip, the shots,
«Labour makes free»
on the arch above the gate.
And all around
walls, dogs, and barbed wire;
lists of names and numbers
and there is a hand - Yad, hands.
In the parade, who comes, who goes
where from, where to?

I played the fiddle there,
I was selected
for the orchestra
leading each day, in music,
the Jews driven
to the gas chambers
to the edge of the abyss.
to the place from where
no one returns, no one comes back
is only removed, a corpse
to the incinerators.

No longer any need to run
no reason for fear
but this tune still turns round in my
head.
And so, I will arrive
here, today, yesterday,
tomorrow
in front of the musicians’ photo:
an orchestra leading
the endless file of those who walk
in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Yes, I’m a grandfather now
my hair is white,
very little remains of me
but my features still resemble
a little bit, the fiddler, me,
there on the photo
from Auschwitz.

And yet it happens
that a visitor to Yad Va’Shem will look at
me,
stare at the wall, and be stunned.
As if he saw one
from beyond the divide -
an apparition that, for him,
belongs to the other world,
that, for me, is
the world that was.
The pages of the Salonika Judezmo folk press enabled its readers to “eavesdrop” on “neighbors” albeit fictitious and often comic neighbors – representing diverse sectors of their community. Many of the pieces published in the folk periodicals took the form of dialogues, linguistically well seasoned and frequently provocative. But in most instances, the characters populating this fictional world were one-dimensional and ephemeral: the lack of any continuity or direct connection between the events and characters presented in the dialogue columns from issue to issue must have prevented readers from becoming sentimentally attached to these characters; nor could they perceive the columns as serial episodes in which an extended plot was unwinding.

A charming expression to that rule was a column which was developed over a period of some dozen years, and in several variant forms, in four Salonika Judeszmo periodicals. For most of the years of its publication, and in three of the four periodicals, the column bore the title “Tio Ezra I su mujer Benuta” (Uncle Ezra and his wife Benuta). It was devoted to the life and times of an elderly but sassy Salonika Sephardic couple. Through the narrow confines of the paper’s columns, printed in small Rashi type as was customary in the Judezmo press, readers were able to peek into the couple’s home, listen in on their daily conversations, and observe their interactions with relatives, neighbors, friends and the outside world at large. The goings-on in the couple’s home were regularly “leaked” to the newspapers by a younger, semi-westernized journalist who wrote under the pseudonym Chufla Yuda (Whistle, Yuda!), whose name appeared at the foot of most installments as the “author”, and who in fact interacted with the main characters in some of the dialogues. Chufla Yuda was also credited as the “manager, editor, typesetter and printer” (“director, redactor, kompozitor i emprimor”) of the folk periodical El rayo de_fwego (Beam of Fire). Thanks to the sharp eyes and ears of Yuda, readers were fed a regular diet of dialogues encouraging them to reflect on some of the cultural, ideological, generational, and male-female tensions which characterized the Ottoman Sephardic communities between the world wars, as mirrored -as it were- in the life of one aging couple. Unlike the other dialogue columns in the Salonika Judezmo papers, the installments of this series were often related, at times loosely, at other times quite closely, the action always revolving around the same pair of characters, as well as additional individuals with whom they were in regular contact. Thus, the readers of this column could form a cumulative image of the characters’ consistent if exaggerated personalities, grow attached to them, and relate to the column as a kind of serialized folk novel documenting elements of the Traditional Salonika Sephardic life-style, already on the verge of extinction at the time the column was appearing.

La Boda or La Hupa, ‘the Wedding’

The following is an excerpt from the book “Voices from Jewish Salonika: Selections from the Judezmo Satirical Series Tio Ezra I Su Mujer Benuta and Tio Bohor I Su Mujer Djamila” by Moshe Cazes, selected and with an introduction by David M. Bunis.

The traditional customs observed by the Salonika Sephardim before, during and after a wedding received the most detailed coverage of all the life-cycle events noted in the series, especially in the episodes focusing on the betrothal and marriage of Semayi and Sunhula.

Before modernization, Salonika Sephardic parents arranged marriages for their children with the assistance of professional or amateur kazamenteros (marriage brokers). For Ezra/Bohor and Benuta/Djamila, with their traditional orientation, any other approach to marriage-making was unthinkable; just as the optimal solution to the myriad problems any unmarried person might have was a proper match - and the brokerage fee accruing to an amateur matchmaker was always a welcome supplement to Ezra’s and Bohor’s income.

In several segments, Ezra revealed some of the betrothal customs which were still being observed among the Salonika Sephardim while he was a youth. In those days, the pair who had been selected by their parents for marriage did not see one another until their wedding day. From Ezra’s account of the strange sequence of events leading to his own marriage to Benuta - who had refused to marry a friend of Ezra’s, selected by her parents to be her mate, and instead insisted on marrying him - it was clear that, even as a maiden, she had possessed an indomitable spirit.

With the modernization of the Salonika Jews came the ‘emancipation’ of young people of marriageable age, and a growing emphasis on romantic love and the free choice of marriage partners. Under these conditions, the institution of the arranged marriage was doomed. Thus, in reaction to

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Bohor’s proposal to fix up young Mishel with his brother-in-law’s flighty daughter - if only to earn the brokerage fee - Djamila dismissed the idea out of hand, certain that their modern upstairs neighbor would have no interest in that type of ninya baylacho ‘frivolous girl.’

For their part, Ezra and Benuta did their best to secure a proper match for Sunhula; but in the end she rejected their crude, antiquated candidate in favor of a less tradition-bound partner of her own choosing. Once Sunhula and Semayi did decide to wed, however, they complied with all the marriage customs dictated by Salonika Sephardic tradition, beginning with the kinyan or ‘religious engagement ceremony’ performed in the presence of a haham. In Sunhula’s courtyard, the ceremony known as the lavadura de la lana (‘washing of the wool’) to be used in the future couple’s bedding) was duly performed by her female relatives, friends, and neighbors. In Aksyon the satirist ‘Mozes’ explained the custom as follows:

Uno de estos uzos [djidyos] es el “lavamyento dela lana,” despwes dela prima arapadura . . . [ke] se eskapa a1 33 del omer. Esta data konkorda kon la fyesta de Ribi Shimon ke mete una fin a1 luyo dekretado por la yeshiva ala segwita dela mwerte delos 33 talmidim por los kwalos los djidyos no se arapavan ni se kortavan unyas. I komo esta data konkorda kon la prima arapadura dela lana, las lavaduras de lana en tyempo de los grandes kortijos ala turka, kon 12 o 15 vezinas, era la alegria delas famias de la novya ke lavavan esta lana en envitando alas sovrinas i amigas, i no se kyere dicho a la parentera del novyo i su famiya.

- Reuven Ben Avraam of Stip, Tikune Anefesh part two, Salonika 1774/75

Kwando kazaras, mal yevaras. [When you marry you’ll have trouble.] Antes ke kazes mira loke fazes. [Before you marry watch what you’re doing.] Mi madre me kazava i yo no lo savia. [My mother married me off and I didn’t know it.] Novya chika, novya grande, talamo se kyere. [Little bride, big bride, they both need a canopy.] Kyen kazo i komo temprano no se arrepintyo. (He who married early and ate early never regretted it.) Bendicho El ke faze kazaymentos. (Blessed be He who arranges marriages.) Loke no se faze en la boda, no se faze en ninguna ora. (What isn’t done at a wedding, isn’t done ever.) - Folk sayings
and friends, and of course the groom’s closest relatives and family.

All of the participants derived pleasure from this otherwise mundane task by singing traditional songs of love and marriage, including “I las almadrakes de la lana fina” (And the mattresses of fine wool) in which were recalled a knight and his ‘white lass’ - motifs preserved among the Salonika Sephardim from their medieval Spanish past. Before the wedding, on the día de la alvorada (literally, ‘day of dawning’), the family gathered to celebrate the displaying of the bride’s trousseau. Females also gathered on a Saturday night preceding the wedding to rejoice with the bride at the almusama feast.

Before the wedding, an entourage of relatives, friends, and traditional musicians accompanied Sunhula to the banyo (ritual bath) for her prenuptial immersion (selection 118). On the night of the wedding, the bride and groom were led under the hupa or talamo (wedding canopy) and the kidushim (marriage ceremony) was performed by the haham. ‘Mozes,’ one of the pseudonyms used by the probable author of the series, described the plight of the wedding caterers cum entertainers who used to accompany the bride, lighting the way with menoras, silver candelabras - which, on windy nights, often bespattered their bearers with wax:

Kwando vos avlo de esta epoka i delos uzos de akeas bodas, es menesterozo ke vos diga ke se uzavan las ‘menoras’. . . . Komo no avia elektrisita, los mosos de boda devian akompanyar o ir delantre la novya, ke la yevan a pye kon el chalgi tanyendo, kon una menora de plata kon 5 parchmes. Ya entendesh: si akea noche avia un poko de ayre, ke travala el povereto kon el chalgi tanyendo, kon una menora de plata kon 5 parchmes. Ya devesh figurarvos ke karnavalesenke ke eran estas seremonias ande la amas y de bratas kon bambulas, armadas de criaturas, i todos los butikaryos, i de todas las venantas i chadrakes salian las gwayas i los djimidos mas negro dela gwalusia.

If I’m speaking to you of this period and these wedding customs, I must tell you that in those days they used to use menoras (candelabras). Since there was no electricity, the wedding caterers/ waiters had to accompany or precede the bride – who was brought along on foot with the traditional musicians playing – holding a candelabra with five candles. You can well understand, if there was a bit of wind that night, what the poor fellow with the candles went through: if the candles weren’t blown out by the wind, the drops of the wax fell on his suit and stained it completely. You can imagine the carnival-like quality of these ceremonies in the Jewish quarter, the women in their silk scarves, loaded down with children, all of the shopkeepers, and from all the windows and balconies screams and groans worse than from a Gypsy band.

The couple was then led to a private chamber for the ensayar al novyo kon la novya (secluding of the bride and groom); their first intimate moments together as husband and wife began that night, la noche del ensayro ‘the night of seclusion’. Thereafter began the festivities marking the ocho dias dela hupa or los ocho dias dela seva (eight days of the wedding celebration).

Ezra recalled former times, when tradition had demanded separate, segregated festivities for the men and women and the wedding feasts had lasted twenty-one days. Ezra had paid for his own wedding, at a time when the dowries received by young men from their intended’s families were small. Benuta recalled that, as a token of his affection, Ezra had presented her with a variety of ornaments (“Me echates kordon i orika, flecha i rozeta”). But by the time of Sunhula’s wedding, many of the older customs were no longer followed. Her festivities did include the traditional bayle ala turka (Oriental dancing), with candies tossed at the dancing newlyweds; plates of coins presented by each side of the family to the bride; and jokes and spontaneously-composed komplas (rhymed couplets) offered in honor of Semaya and Sunhula by talented mosos de boda (of which the creator of the Uncle and Aunt series might well have been one) and by shakadjis (comedians), while the guests saluted the couple by raising a glass of wine. But despite the jubilation of Sunhula’s wedding feasts, Ezra and Benuta could not help comparing them with the more uproarious - and thus, to their view, superior - celebrations of the past; in those days, ‘everthing was accompanied by songs and jokes; nowadays it all seems muted’ (“Era todo kon kantigas i shakas. . . agora parese todo ala mudera”). And, though the dowries paid to the modern young husbands were considerably higher than in Ezra’s day, almost nothing was left after the outlays on necessities - which now included a car, and a honeymoon in Athens or some other distant place.
Salamo Arouch

Salamo Arouch, who died on April 26 aged 86, survived the Auschwitz concentration camp by fighting exhibition boxing matches for Nazi officers; his harrowing story later inspired a Hollywood film.

1 May 2009
Telegraph

Born in Greece of Jewish descent, Arouch became middle-weight champion of the Balkans, but his professional career was cut short by the Second World War and the German invasion of his homeland. Like thousands of other Greek Jews, he and his family and friends were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Ordered to fight other prisoners for the entertainment of the Nazi guards, Arouch escaped the gas chambers. At the end of the war he emigrated to Palestine and witnessed the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. His story was the basis for Triumph of the Spirit (1989) starring Willem Dafoe, much of which was shot on location at Auschwitz, with Arouch making an emotional return to the site as an adviser.

Salamon Arouch – he dropped the final “n” and was always known as Shlomo – was born in Salonika in 1923 into a family of Sephardic Jews. His father taught him to box, and in 1937, when he was 14, he made his debut in his home town, knocking down his opponent twice to win by a technical knockout.

Adopting a traditional style of jabbing and crossing, by 1939 he had an unbeaten record with 24 knockouts. His fancy footwork earned him the nickname “The Ballet Dancer”, and before the outbreak of war he was reportedly a member of the Greek Olympic boxing team.

Drafted into the Greek military, Arouch became a member of the army boxing squad. But when the Germans overran Greece, he was arrested and, because he was Jewish, deported with his family to Auschwitz on March 15 1943.

All the female members of his family were gassed on the first day, as were all the children and infants. With his father and younger brother, Arouch was forced into slave labour. When a Nazi officer found out that inmate 136954 had been a boxer, Arouch was forced to fight in matches held at the camp on Wednesday and Sunday evenings.

These bloody encounters – often preceded by juggling gipsies and dancing dogs – involved Jewish and gipsy boxers at Auschwitz; they were forced to fight each other, with Nazi officers placing heavy bets on the outcome.

The bouts ended only when one fighter was unable to continue. For the winner there would be bread and soup; the loser would be executed and incinerated.

On his second day at Auschwitz Arouch’s first fight was against a Polish Jew, with a senior officer at the camp, one “Hans”, acting as “referee”. Arouch knocked the Pole out. Twenty minutes later, he knocked out a six-foot Czech with a single punch to the stomach. “He fold like a camel,” Arouch remembered. “Hans says: ‘You good, you good.’”

For the next two years, Arouch would fight two or three times a week in a smoke-filled warehouse for the amusement of his Nazi captors, knowing that a single defeat would almost certainly result in death. Thanks to his speed and nimble footwork, he could beat opponents who outweighed him by more than 100 pounds. On one occasion Arouch (135lbs) claimed to have knocked out a 6ft 6in, 250lb gipsy fighter in 18 seconds.

His toughest opponent was a German-Jewish boxer called Klaus Silber, who had an undefeated pre-war amateur boxing record (44-0) and who had never lost any of his 100-plus fights at the camp. His fight with Arouch was so fierce that at one point, both men fell out of the ring. Silber went on to stun Arouch and then to knock him down. But Arouch recovered to knock Silber out. After the fight, Silber was never seen alive again.

By the time Arouch was removed from the slave labour force and put to work in an office, his entire family had been murdered. His father was executed after becoming too ill to work; when his brother, Avram, refused to pull gold teeth from those gassed in the ovens, he was shot dead on the spot.

Arouch managed to survive at Auschwitz for nearly two years, racking up a record of 208 knockouts. When the camp was finally liberated, he asked the British forces if they had any boxers who would fight him in an exhibition. When two were found, Arouch knocked them both out.

Asked how he approached his life-or-death battles at Auschwitz, Arouch admitted he felt terrible. “I trembled,” he said. “But a boxer had to be without compassion. If I didn’t win, I didn’t survive.”

While searching for members of his family at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945, Arouch met 17-year-old Marta Yechiel, from his own home town. After their marriage later that year, in 1948 he emigrated to the fledgling state of Israel and served in the Israeli Army, where he continued to box. In civilian life he ran a successful shipping and moving business in Tel Aviv.

Salamo Arouch’s wife and four children survive him.
Daniel Carasso, who helped turn yogurt from an obscure ethnic food into an international staple through the Danone brand in Europe and Dannon in the United States, died Sunday at his home in Paris. He was 103.

The death was announced by Groupe Danone, of which Mr. Carasso was honorary chairman.

The Danone brand owes nearly everything to Mr. Carasso, including its name. When his father, Isaac, created the yogurt in Barcelona in 1919, he named it after his son, whose nickname in Catalan was Danon, or Danny.

From this small start-up operation Daniel Carasso developed a global business, beginning in France in 1929, expanding to the United States during World War II and eventually reaching markets as far-flung as Mexico, Brazil and Morocco. “My dream was to make Danone a worldwide brand,” he said at a news conference in April to celebrate Danone’s 90th anniversary.

Mr. Carasso was born in Thessalonika, Greece, where his Sephardic family had settled four centuries earlier after the Jews were driven out of Spain. In 1916 his father took the family back to Spain, where he became disturbed by the high incidence of intestinal disorders, especially among children.

Isaac Carasso began studying the work of Élie Metchnikoff, the Russian microbiologist who believed that human life could be extended by introducing lactic-acid bacilli, found in yogurt and sour milk, into the digestive system. Using cultures developed at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, Isaac began producing Danone.

At the time, yogurt was exotic. Although a traditional food in Greece, the Middle East, southeastern Europe and large parts of Asia, it was known elsewhere only to a small population of health faddists. Early on, Danone was marketed as a health food and sold by prescription through pharmacies. Gradually it found favor as a milk product that did not spoil in the heat.

In 1923 Daniel Carasso enrolled in business school in Marseille and, the better to understand yogurt, took a training course in bacteriology at the Pasteur Institute.

In 1929 he planted the Danone flag in France, just in time for the worldwide business slump. “I barely realized that there was a financial crisis raging around me,” he said at a news conference in April. “I was too caught up in trying to find dairy stores to sell my product.”

His efforts paid off, as the French took to this newfangled food, but in 1941 the arrival of the Nazis forced him to flee to the United States. There he formed a partnership with two family friends, Joe Metzger, a Swiss-born Spanish businessman, and his son Juan, whose flair for marketing would make Dannon a household name in the United States.

Mr. Carasso and the Metzgers bought Oxy-Gala, a small Greek yogurt company in the Bronx, and in October 1942 began producing unflavored yogurt in half-pint glass bottles under the Americanized name Dannon.

Customers paid 11 cents and a 3-cent deposit. Juan washed out the returns. “We only sold $20 worth a day, but even then we were the bigger of the two companies in the business,” Juan Metzger, who died in 1998, told People magazine in 1980. (Joe Metzger had died in 1965.)

The little company operated at a loss until 1947, when, in a concession to the American sweet tooth, strawberry jam was added to the yogurt. Sales took off, new flavors were added to the product line, and Dannon yogurt made the leap from specialty product to snack food and dessert. In 1959 the company was bought by Beatrice Foods.

Mr. Carasso returned to Europe after the war to restart Danone in Spain and France. He then embarked on an aggressive campaign to expand the business by establishing Danone plants in other countries and merging with other food companies. It acquired the fresh-cheese company Gervais in 1967 and in 1973 merged with the bottle maker BSN, which was eager to expand the food side of its business.

The new company, BSN-Gervais Danone, bought Dannon from Beatrice Foods in 1981 and changed its name to Groupe Danone two years later. One of France’s largest food conglomerates, with revenue of nearly $19 billion in 2008, it ranks first in the world in sales of fresh dairy products and second in sales of bottled water and baby foods.

Mr. Carasso is survived by a daughter, Marina Nahmias, four grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.
Return of JCT Archives from the Netherlands

On Tuesday September 2, 2008, the President and the Board of the JCT Community Council met with Mr. Elwin J. Hendrikse, Director of Strategy and Policy of the Dutch National Archives (Nationaal Archief) and received documents from the JCT pre-WWII archive.

According to international conventions and agreements, the Dutch authorities returned the files to their rightful owners. These files comprise only a small part of the pre-WWII archive that was stolen by the Nazi Occupational forces in 1943 and, after the war, ended up in the hands of the Soviets. The documents in question arrived in the Netherlands in 2003, after the Russian Federation returned Dutch archives that were confiscated by the Nazis.

The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki is consistently advocating for the full repatriation of its pre-WWII archives, which are currently located in Russia.

The JCT Choir in Cairo

In October 2007, the Choir of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki arrived in Cairo, Egypt for one of its most memorable performances ever. The event took place in the newly renovated Shaar Hashamayim (Gate of Sky) synagogue, which celebrated its 100th year anniversary.

The building was renovated, with the approval and assistance of the Egyptian authorities, and is used by the Jewish Community of the city which unfortunately numbers less than 100 members. The JCT Choir began the event by signing from the loft and concluded the ceremony by performing in front of the Echal.

The audience, comprised of local Jews, senior officials, diplomats and large delegations from abroad, was deeply touched by the ceremony and warmly applauded the members of the Choir.

The JCT Choir in Israel

The choir of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki traveled to Israel in June 2008, on the occasion of the celebration of the 60-year anniversary of the State of Israel.

Happy and very moved, we started our tour from Jerusalem. We walked on the Holy Land with safety, provided by the Israeli army and police to the people who come from all over the world to pray. We owe special thanks to Rabbi Mordechai Frizis that escorted us and helped us with the tour.

One of the most important sites that we visited was Yad Vashem (the Institute for the Memory of the Holocaust). Mr. Handali, a holocaust survivor from Thessaloniki, escorted us to our visit there and with the narration of his story reinforced the emotions that derived from the Institute itself.

On Thursday, June 12, 2008, we gave our first performance at Kfar Saba. We were invited by the Galron Choir, with which our choir is twinned. The audience was very warm and gave us a very generous applause. We met there with old friends from Greece that live in Israel. Their hospitality and love will be memorable.

On Saturday, June 14, 2008, we toured Caesarea and Haifa. Dr. Benny Natan, an eminent scientist from Thessaloniki, gave us an unforgettable gift: a tour of Technion University! We were very proud as we realized that high quality education is one of the most important factors that make this small state a real miracle!

In the afternoon of Sunday, June 15, 2008, we gave our second performance at Bat Yam. The Greeks of the city had organized a wonderful event. Many dignitaries honored us with their presence. The Mayor, the Deputy Mayor, the representative of the Recanati Foundation and the Secretary General of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki were all there. For us it was a very moving event that ended with applause, flowers and exchange of gifts.

Our trip to Israel was a wonderful experience that we will always keep close to our hearts.

Adapted from the original article by Riketta Tarfon - Zakar
“Salonicco ’43”

On Saturday, September 27, 2008, the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki together with the Municipality of the city and the Italian consulate presented the play “Salonicco ‘43” at the Thessaloniki Music Hall. The event was under the patronage of the President of the Italian Republic.

The program was divided in two parts. The first was a theatrical play, based on an idea of Gian Paolo Cavarai and Antonio Ferrari, and directed by Ferdinando Ceriani. The play signals the end of an era: Greeks and Italians, Christians and Jews bid farewell with the sounds of a song, without realizing the distance that will be created between them. This is the beginning of the narration of the suffering of the Jews of Thessaloniki during World War II, their confinement in ghettos, the efforts of the Italian consul in Thessaloniki, Guelfo Zamboni, to save Jews as the trains were leaving to Auschwitz. Stories of ordinary people are joined with songs and legends many of which contain prophetic elements for the tragedy that is about to come.

In the second part, the Symphonic Orchestra of the City of Thessaloniki, under the director of Mr. Haris Iliadis, presented the rhapsodic poem “The Gold of the Ashes,” by Dov Seltzer, one of the most well-known Israeli composers, written to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Spain. The composition transposed Spanish songs and ballads of the 16th-century Sephardic Jewry into the symphonic genre. It is nostalgic not necessarily of Spain, but of Jewish Spain, the culture, poetry, the aroma, the traditions and the melodies. The composer is presenting the rich Sephardic heritage, their golden age, the years of persecution and expulsion until their rescue.

Wreath at the Holocaust Monument

In the framework of the commemorative events for the 90th anniversary of the end of First World War, Jean – Marie Bockel, Deputy Defense Minister of France, laid a wreath at the Holocaust Monument of Thessaloniki, honoring the memory of the Jews of the city, on 27 September 2008.

Present in the ceremony were the Prefect Mr. Psomiadis, the Mayor Mr. Papageorgopoulos and many members of the Community.
Below we publish some of the messages we have received from the readers of our newsletter. We welcome any comments at jctnewsletter@freemail.gr.

Comments from our readers

Karos senyores:


Saludes y abrazos.

Michel Vedrenne

I’m writing to you from Tribuna Israelita of the Jewish Community in Mexico City. We received during a certain International Congress, a copy of your Newsletter “El Avenir” of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki which we find very interesting. We consider your newsletter to be a very important reading about the Sephardim, history, traditions and present information of the Greek Jewish Community. Therefore, we would like to see the possibility of receiving your newsletter and maybe have you in our mailing list.

Please let me know if it is possible.

Best regards

Vera Robbins
Publishing Coordinator
Tribuna Israelita

Request for information

We received the following request and are passing it on to those who descend from Salonika. The request came from Allgenerations, a website that seeks to connect relatives of those lost in the Holocaust. If anybody has any information, please contact us at jctnewsletter@freemail.gr

From Dorothy Tiano Melvin, in Los Angeles, California:

I am looking for anyone that may have known my grandparents, aunts, uncles in Salonika (Thessaloniki).

My mother a”h was Solika Varsano, daughter of Doudoun and Ovadia; my father was Mordoh Tiano a”h, son of Itzhak and Ricoula (passed away young) and stepmother, Buena Tiano.
The articles in this issue reflect the personal views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki.

For any comments or ideas, and if you want to receive this newsletter in the future, please contact us at: jctnewsletter@freemail.gr

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