Looking for Jewish relatives in pre-War Salonica?

Letters from Salonica, 1943
Greece to change law to allow for prosecution of German war criminals

At the April 2010 Yom Hashoah ceremony at the Monastirioton Synagogue in Thessaloniki, Justice Minister Mr H. Kastanidis announced the repeal of Law 3933 of 1959, according to which Greece waived its right to prosecute Nazis for war crimes committed on Greek territory or against Greek citizens and, instead, transferred it to the German judicial authorities.

“This is more of a moral victory, since most of the people in question have died”, said David Saltiel, President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, adding that once the amendment is adopted the Jewish Community would seek to extradite SS captain Alois Brunner from Syria, where he was known to be living in the 1990s.

Brunner was responsible for organizing the deportations in Thessaloniki, which sent almost 50,000 Jews to their deaths, 95 percent of the city’s Jewish population. He was a close collaborator of Adolf Eichmann and responsible for deporting more than 100,000 Jews from France, Greece, Slovakia and Austria to the death camps. After the war, he found shelter in Syria. His traces have been lost since the last few decades.

Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the “Final Solution,” was hanged in Jerusalem in 1962. Dieter Wisliceny, Brunner’s SS partner in the deportations of the Jews of Thessaloniki, was hanged in Bratislava in 1948.
Ceremony at the American College of Thessaloniki – Anatolia

“in memory of all Anatolians who were victims of human cruelty and brutality in the 20th century”

The American College “Anatolia”, one of the city’s most well-known educational institutions, was founded in Merzifon, Asia Minor in 1886 and relocated to Salonika in 1924. Through its history, it saw three relocations, two World Wars, the Asia Minor catastrophe and a series of cruel incidents. All these Anatolians who perished during the turbulent years of the last century were honored by Anatolia College in a number of ceremonies in May 2010.

On May 29, 2010, the President of the Thessaloniki Jewish Community Mr. David Saltiel, the President of the Thessaloniki Armenian Community Mr. Vartkes Kontaxian, the Secretary General of the Pan-Pontian Federation of Greece Mr. Konstantinos Gavridis, the President of the Board of Trustees Mr. John Clymer, the President of Anatolia Dr. Hans Giesecke, Former US Presidential candidate Mr. Michael Dukakis and Ms. Kitty Dukakis attended the ceremony for the dedication of the open-air amphitheater adjacent to the Eleftheriades Library in “memory of all Anatolians who were victims of human cruelty and brutality in the 20th century.”

Later that day, the President of the Board of Trustees Mr. John Clymer and the President of the Thessaloniki Jewish Community Mr. David Saltiel revealed the plaque in the memory of “more than 90 Anatolia students and alumni who perished in the Holocaust.” The ceremonies were attended by many faculty and representatives of various organizations.

This ceremony, a lesson for all future generations, confirms Anatolia’s commitment to its founding humanitarian principles and also its excellent and close relationship with the Salonikan Jewry developed over the past decades. The Library of Anatolia College possesses a large collection of archival material on the history of the Jewish Community of the city. ■
Brief Community News

Inauguration of the “Joseph Nehama” Hall

On June 23, 2010, the French Institute of Thessaloniki inaugurated its new auditorium, which took the name of “Joseph Nehama.” Present at the ceremony were the Ambassador of France in Greece, Mr. Christophe Farnaud, Consul-General Mr. Christian Thimonier and the President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki Mr. David Saltiel. The hall was renovated with the support of the Jewish Community and shall be used by the Institute for lectures, events and seminars.

French culture and language are closely linked with the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, making French the “lingua franca” of the 19th and 20th centuries. The first Alliance Israélite Universelle school opened in the city in 1873, to reform the field of education and to contribute to the Community’s progress and prosperity. One of the best examples is French-speaking Joseph Nehama, one of the most important figures of the literary scene in Thessaloniki.

JOSEPH NEHAMA

Josef Nehama (1881-1971) was born in Thessaloniki, studied at the Alliance Israélite Universelle school and went on to study pedagogy in France. He worked for decades as a teacher and director of the Alliance School in Salonika and eventually became the General Inspector for all the Alliance schools in the Near East. In 1926, he founded and became president of the "Union" bank, which became one of the largest in the city. During WW2, he was deported to the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, where he managed to survive and return to his hometown.

He authored many books on diverse subjects having, in most cases, the communal life as his epicenter (folk traditions, language, history etc). His first work was the 1902 study "Sabbataj Cevi et les Sabateens de Salonique", which was followed by many more studies of historical and folkloristic interest.

His most important work was "Histoire des Israélites de Salonique" (which he wrote in French and was only later translated into Greek). Through this monumental work, he presents the history of the "Jerusalem of the Balkans" (as the Jewish Community was known) in the most informative and vivid way.
Donation of tombstones to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

On July 21, 2010, US Consul General, Ms. Catherine Kay, accepted, on behalf of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, two desecrated tombstones which were donated by the Jewish Community to the Museum. In a heartfelt ceremony, the Consul General read a statement by the Holocaust Memorial Museum thanking the Community for the donation, which will be displayed in its Permanent Exhibit, and noting that the tombstones “...speak eloquently to the premeditated destruction of a vibrant Jewish community and culture that existed for hundreds of years in Salonika.”

The tombstones originated from the old Jewish cemetery of Thessaloniki which was destroyed during WW2. The first is dedicated to Liaos (Elihau) Mevorah, one of the 513 Greek Jews who were killed in combat during the 1940-41 war, fighting against the Italian and German invaders of Greece. The second is dedicated to a young woman and her newborn child, who both died upon giving birth. Both texts are written in Judeo-Spanish, the main language used by the Jews of Thessaloniki, in Rashi script.

With this donation, the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki contributed to the better presentation of its rich history to the biggest Holocaust Museum in the world. Since its inauguration 18 years ago, more than 30 million people have visited the USHMM, including 90 heads of State. All necessary permits for this donation were acquired from the Archeological Service and the Ministry of Culture.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was able to implement a solid archival cooperation with the archives of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with the archives of the Jewish Communities of Athens and Thessaloniki.

The Museum hopes to be able to achieve a similar archival project with the Greek National Archives.
We would like to congratulate Mr. Hasdai Kapon for his election to the Thessaloniki city council following the November 2010 polls. Mr. Kapon was also recently named one of the Deputy Mayors of the city, in charge of Resource Management and Economic Development. The son of a Holocaust survivor, Mr. Kapon was Treasurer of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki (2000-2004), member of the Community Assembly (2000-2009) and member of the Assembly of the Central Board of Greek Jewish Communities (2001-2009) among other activities.

With a family history linked to the industrial history of the city and studies at the London School of Economics and in Georgetown University in the USA, Mr. Kapon pursued a career in the economic sector which culminated with the founding of Omega Bank. Today he continues as a member of the board of Proton Bank, which absorbed Omega Bank, and is also involved in one of the city’s most famous bistros - Cafe Balkan.

At the same time, we would like to congratulate Mrs. Tilda Carasso-Kavasiadi, for her election as representative of one of Salonika’s departments. With degrees in Economics from the universities of Salonika and Zurich, for which she collaborated for years as a scientific advisor for the Institute of Social and Economic Sciences. Today she is active in the economic sector, and is a volunteer for the Jewish Community and other institutions.

A special note should be also made for 30-year-old Ilias Pessach who was also a candidate in the same elections but did not manage to get elected. Mr. Pessach has graduated as a medical doctor and served as general secretary of the Greek Jewish Youth Association.

It is a very welcome development that Salonika Jews are active in the local city life in so many diverse ways, and obtain the public recognition they deserve. It is something that we should all be proud of. We wish them all luck as they embark upon their important tasks.

The last member of our Community to be a member of the city council was Gabriel Safarana, who served until the end of 1942.

The Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki

The Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki (www.jmth.gr) was established in 1997 to preserve the memory and the tradition of the populous Sephardic community of the city. The Museum is a section of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, which is an official legal entity under Greek Law since 1920. The early 20th century two-storey commercial building that houses the Museum is located in the centre of the oldest Jewish neighbourhood in the city.

The Museum keeps the following collections: Grave-stones from the destroyed Jewish Cemetery of Thessaloniki; Religious artifacts; Old and rare Jewish books; Pre-WWII and rare local newspapers; Family documents; Ketubot; ID WWII documents; Private letters; Apparel (19th and 20th centuries); Carpets; Textiles; Table-cloths; Napkins; Photographs (pre- and post-WWII) of local families and institutions; Domestic vessels; Concentration camps’ vessels; Drawings and paintings; Pre-WWII depositor’s and account books.

The Museum seeks documents, apparel, textiles and artifacts that represent the history of the Jews in Greece in general and the Salonikans in particular. Please address to jctmuseo@otenet.gr to donate any family relics and documents.
Many of you are asking El Avenir or the staff of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki for information on family members that lived in the city before the Second World War. There is plenty of information out there, but unfortunately, not yet easily accessible.

The big fire of 1917 that burnt most of the city, completely destroyed the Community’s archive. The 1917-1941 archives were plundered by the Nazis and, whatever survived, is dispersed around the world. A large part of the original records and other documents are still kept in Moscow, while other parts are located in New York, Jerusalem and Thessaloniki itself.

The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki has original and microfilms of a number of official records or other documentation from before 1945. However, according to Devin Naar, a scholar who has researched and catalogued Thessaloniki Jewish archives all around the world, “the difficulty in dealing with the pre-war archives of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki is not so much that they are difficult to access — the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC now has microfilms of almost everything, including from Moscow — but that the languages and handwriting are often times difficult to decipher, namely the handwritten Judeo-Spanish (solitreo), in
which birth, marriage, and death records, as well as the Community’s internal correspondence and census records were kept.”

“The [Thessaloniki Community] census records from YIVO [in New York], which the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki has on microfilm, contain information on 13,000 Salonican Jews from before the war! That is a lot! Other records are in Greek, Hebrew, French, Italian, German, etc.”

Naar continues, “the problem is not how much of it, or where it is, but rather that those interested in these materials will have to spend some time to engage in the culture and history of their community, to become familiar with the Ladino language and the solitreo penmanship, in order to make use of them. It is not easy, but doable if one is serious and interested in the heritage of the Jewish Community of Salonica.”

The former President of the Assembly of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki and Auschwitz survivor, Mr. Heinz Kounio, has compiled a list of the names of almost 40,000 Jews who lived in Thessaloniki before the deportations. The list will soon be online for all those interested in consulting it.
In the meantime, here are some other helpful resources for a quick initial search.

**First, you should consult**

Yad Vashem’s, Israel’s Holocaust Museum, Shoah Names Database at [http://www.yadvashem.org/wps/portal/IY_HON_Welcome.](http://www.yadvashem.org/wps/portal/IY_HON_Welcome.)

There you can search by last name, location or other data, and check whether any information is available for the people you are looking for. The system has the different linguistic variants linked but you should keep in mind that there might be different spellings and transliterations, which may affect the results you get. Salonika alone can be written in more than 20 ways!

**Second, you should consult**

the Aure Recanati Database, as compiled online by Mathilde Tagger, at [http://www.sephardicgen.com/databases/recanatiSalonikaSrchFrm.html.](http://www.sephardicgen.com/databases/recanatiSalonikaSrchFrm.html)

The database contains some 13,500 names, a third of the Saloniki population on the eve of the deportations. Those names are contained in nearly 4,100 property forms that all Salonika Jews had to fill out on March 1, 1943, a few days before the trains left for Auschwitz. The database contains last names together with their various spellings as well as the number of forms under each last name. To consult the actual forms, you will need to spend time in a Museum which has copies of them.

**Another resource is that of the Registrar of the City of Thessaloniki.**

You can find birth, marriage or death certificates since 1914. For that, you will need a local contact or a lawyer.

Of course there are many more online databases, indexes, lists or books you can consult for more information.

We wish you a fruitful research!
The following letters (written in French, with a liberal sprinkling of Ladino phrases) were sent by a Salonika Jewish woman by the name of Neama (last name unknown) to her sons in Athens during the spring of 1943. The year before, in 1942, she had gone to Athens to rent a room for herself and one of her sons in the home of a Christian, Mrs Eleni Chatzimihail. The other son had remained in Salonika. Late in 1942, Neama then returned to Salonika to pack up her things and return to Athens with her other son. It appears she was caught in Salonika in the initial round-up of Jews into three ghettos established to facilitate their deportation. Her son managed to escape and make his way to Athens to join his brother.

When Neama wrote the first of these letters (dated 5-7 March, 1943), the Salonika Jewish Community...
had already been cut off from contact with the rest of the city. (How her letters made it to Athens is not clear.) On 1 March, through the Jewish Community Council, Jews had been required to declare all of their personal property and investments. By this date, three ghettos had been established (specifically, by the 25th of February) and Jews were required to wear the Magen David. On 5 March, not long after word was sent out that they would be deported and resettled in Cracow, the Community Council attempted to calm the growing atmosphere of anxiety and insecurity with a special announcement that nothing more than a resettlement was being planned. The first deportation took place on 15 March – 2,800 persons packed into 40 cattle cars. At the time of writing of the last of these letters, nine subsequent convoys had departed. From March until August of 1943, almost 50,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau – most were never to return.

It seems most likely that Neama was sent with the convoy that left Salonika on 13 April, 1943, as her last letter is dated the 10th. Nothing is known of the fate of Neama, nor that of her two sons, Maurice and Berto. The letters were discovered only two years ago (in 1990), when Mrs Chatzimihail emptied her house prior to its demolition to make way for an apartment building. Upon realizing what she had found, she gave them to some Jewish friends who in turn passed them on to the museum.

N. Stavroulakis
My very dear Maurice and Berto,

Today I received the letter from Berto and do not know when I will receive another. These days I have written you a letter to calm you a little in spite of the agony of the days and nights waiting, like the condemned, the sentence of death. For a moment there is an illusion of escaping this bad time. But things are happening so quickly that it makes you dizzy. The fatal moment can arrive in days or hours for me also. Dear children, in spite of my trying not to upset you I see that the last hour is near. I do not find comfort being separated from my dear children that I wish with all my heart to see, to feel near me, and in these last days to have the unique joy of my life. I have not enjoyed one day of my stay here because we are separated. I wanted to leave because I saw all this becoming a reality, but obstacles were always in front of me. I do not know if I can live with the nostalgia, the deprivation and the misery. God, who sees my tears, should pity you and keep you alive. Live happily if you can. May God preserve you from all evil. That is my prayer every night. Even God could not endure the tragedy that goes on here. How can I hope to resist so many things. I was waiting to see you from moment to moment. I leave with a sack on my back for the unknown without a protector. Don't forget me my beloved children. My only reason to live, if I can, is if God could give me the hope of seeing you again, to kiss you, to see your eyes, for which I have sacrificed my youth, hoping to have happy days with you. If one day there is news from you for me, who knows if God will preserve me, it will be at the office, where I will go, or to Tiano. When God will unite us, we do not know, but think of me at every moment. I suffered very much. I felt at these times that we should be together. Will God have pity on me not to fall ill if they do not exterminate me. What we are seeing is not very encouraging. The coat, the dress material, the small things and grandmother's gift are in a suitcase at the chemist's with my clothes, and Berto's arc with Vangelio, the neighbor on the other side of our house, Menea Kasamichal, at 60 Miaoulis Street. We sleep with our clothes on at night because it is at midnight that they wake us. Gina received your letter. I cannot continue this letter. I hope you are in good health. May God help you and may He keep me alive to see you both again. I kiss you with all my heart which breaks for you.

Your unfortunate mother,
Neama

Note. The following addenda were written along the margin:

Maurice, Berto, my children. I kiss you again.
I don't know if at the last minute.
I will be with Gina because we do not know how they will arrange the groups. For sure God will help me if He wants me to see you again.
My dear Maurice and Berto,

I received your letters and I see you are not very well informed about what we are going through. This week we are enduring scenes that we have seen only in the cinema and in history books.

For two nights we sat on the bed, dressed, waiting for the knock at the door to wake us and take us away. Everyone is selling their things in the streets to buy food. They are “spending money like water.” We are “throwing money out the window,” the belongings are being sold haphazardly. The cries, moans, and tragedy cannot be described. The day before yesterday the chemist’s daughter came to see me and I pleaded with her to tell her father that I want to visit him and to rest there for a while. He refused. Today she came again and gave me a very small jar of marmalade and a small tsoureki [bread], and asked me to forgive him for his refusal. The wife of Pazaitis comes three times a day to ask for things from Gina and myself. We have given her some things, not mine. I gave her the suitcase with my things and Berto’s. I took them from the other neighbor, Vangelio, thinking that they will be safer at Pazaitis’. The streets are crowded with people who are falling upon the others like hyenas on a dead horse to steal their things from them.

Yousse sold three-quarters of their belongings and Daisy does nothing but cry all day watching the buyers coming into her home. A real flea market. We are living a bad dream day and night in indescribable anguish. Everyone has a cart prepared in front of their door. Ida bought one for 120,000 drachmas to transport her belongings and her baby. We are wondering what we will do with Aunt Lea who will surely die halfway to the station. Gina has given all the hats and ornaments to Soula from the chemists. Last night we heard the bad news that we would go this morning. Now we don’t know what day of this week, if it is not tomorrow. We shall go by the 15th. At night I cannot sleep, my thoughts are of you, that this bad wind will not blow towards you. May God protect you, my dear children, so that my thoughts will not be more complicated by not knowing where you are. Make a long visit to Gouzios and give him my affection, he who has done much for you and is able to do more. Gina and I are trying to be together but we don’t know if we will be in the same group. We believe we will be together or with Ida in her group. I had my bag ready, but it was not strong and I could not lift it. Today Gina helped me to pack another. She is trying to help me not to see the horizon so dark, but I cannot console myself thinking about when I will see you again. God is becoming deaf to my prayers, but in spite of that I pray for it. The weather here helps the melancholy. If the weather changes for you it will be because it is spring. Beware of the cold as much as you can because the changes are unhealthy. Be well and always together, try to find me and Gina because this thought upsets me. The thought that upsets me is how will you find out where I am. Gina is sometimes in good humor and raises my morale a little.

May God preserve us and unite us again in good health. I kiss you with all my heart, with all my soul, my very dear children. May the good Lord finally have pity on the innocents who wish only one simple thing, that they and their families be well. Your mother has only one thought, to see her children in good health. Gina will write to you.

Your mother,

Neama

Note. The following addenda were written along the margin:

I am well in spite of all this turmoil.

Procop loaned me 50,000 drachmas for the travel expenses. Do not send money.

If I can, I shall use all the addresses.

Poli’s mother is gone. Lisa and Aunt Mary also. Poli’s friends were waiting to celebrate Pesah. Mario sold Beno’s things and wanted to get married, but not in time. His brother will also leave.

Mrs. Avayou is near us. I saw her last night. [Greek in Latin script:] “Don’t ask.”
**LETTER 3**
From Mrs Neama to one of her sons in Athens.
Salonika, Thursday, probably the 18th of March, 1943.

My dear Maurice,

Yesterday the permission arrived. I will do all possible through the influence of Albert’s father, who is living near me. He told me he will do all that is possible but doesn’t have much hope. Until today I am still waiting for an answer. I am in despair these days because from one moment to the other only God can save us. I cannot write to you about what is happening. God must perform a miracle. I received the money quickly but it has no value because, without you, what can I do? God help us to be in good health. I wish all that a mother’s heart can wish for you, her beloved children. God save us. Gina is well. We are making all preparations. Only God can save us. I am sending you all my strength with all my heart, my beloved children. May God have pity on us.

Your mother who is thinking only of her children,

Neama

Note. The following addenda were written along the margin:

May God perform a miracle for us to see each other again. They now said there is to be a postponement for a few days but nobody believes it. Two convoys have already left.

**LETTER 4**
From Mrs Neama to one of her sons in Athens.
Salonika, Friday, 19 March, 1943.

My dear Maurice,

The permission card arrived. The Italian Consul has issued permission for the sick woman, but the German authorities do not accept it. The Consul, as Albert’s father said, is trying in Athens to get the permit from there, but the sick woman is feeling poorly and must be operated on soon, as they are desperate to save her if the card can arrive in time. I have sent two telegrams to you and we shall phone you. Albert’s father told me that you must push things as quickly as possible. I wish you success and God’s help. I sent you one letter, but do not know if you received it because Tina sent it. Get started. I kiss you and Berto with all my heart.

Your mother thinks of you.

Neama

Note. The following addenda were written along the margin:

I received your letter. I have not answered because I do not know what to write to you about the sick woman who has a temperature of 40 degrees centigrade (104 degrees Fahrenheit), and I do not know if you can save her.
My very dears,

I received the postcard and the letter addressed to Miki, who has given it to Gina. This morning she brought it to me. She stayed half an hour because aside from our work at home we have nothing else to do. Your letter made me very emotional. My dear children, may God, who sees our anguish, save us in time because our worries and panic have bewildered us. We see each other, we look at each other; but we do not speak. We cannot exchange a word. We see only God. These past two days we have been calmer. We hope that providence will take care of us because we think of this night and day, but there is no improvement. This evening I tried to go to bed early and sleep. I sleep two hours a night and I wake with a start. What will happen to me without my children. When shall I see them again, or will I go to the unknown alone? I think so much that the nightmare haunts me and I believe that my head is becoming stone, and I cannot find any escape because it is a reality that all people are suffering, but I have been drained for a long time and the separation has consumed me very much. If God will that I see you again. He will give me the strength to resist it and to have you near me, to feel that I am surrounded with the affection that was my only joy in life. My neighbor is trying to raise my morale in spite of these worries, but I see myself so alone in this tempest that the other day I was ready to do a silly thing (in spite of this seeming strange to you it will make you laugh) I was ready to get married to an old paralytic man in order to change my nationality. Mr. Jeni’s son married. He found a maiden who could be a friend to him. By 4:30 in the afternoon we are all at home. Gina stayed one quarter hour. God preserve us from all the evil. I wait and read your letters over and over and think that God will not make us suffer much more, one moment of quiet makes me hope, as today, because the weather is beautiful. The Avanyu’s have come to stay near us at Edmond Rostand Street, but I have not gone to see them. Vital does not come home very often. Mario is in a desperate condition without work. He wants to marry. When we have one moment of quiet we think of the others. We hope to God that the quiet will be permanent and will give us repose of the soul and the mind.

I kiss you with all my heart.

Neama

Note. The following addenda were written along the margin:

see if you can send the package with a friend.

Mr. Levi is reading psalms with all his friends at home. Yousef, the neighbor, sends you his regards and prays God that you eat apricots now that the trees are blooming. May God take care of us.
LETTER 6 (the last)
From Mrs Neama to her sons in Athens.
Salonika, Saturday, 10 April, 1943.

Vital is arranging to send the refugees. He goes home only two days a week. He will leave last because he is the Jewish liaison officer. The four families are living in two rooms without beds or clothes. Renee is arranging the formalities to get married. The day before yesterday Mario got married at Beth Saul [synagogue] and they are sleeping on the wooden floor. Mary and Victoria are together. Mario’s brother cannot marry because the girl is ill. Margo Levi’s fiancé, who was ready to marry, was taken at the last minute. You can imagine in what a state she is in. Eugenie and her mother left yesterday. Last night we went to bed wearing our clothes and ready. This morning we are still here. We do not know if tomorrow we will live this agony again. Yesterday it rained very much and today it is very cold. The wind is blowing violently and it is snowing a little. Does Aleco have a job? He should take care of himself with the change of weather, especially these days with the rain. Dario Coenzo has gone with his sick wife. Everyone feels pity for my fate to be here, but they cannot do anything. May God help us and unite us again as soon as possible, healthy and safe. I kiss you with all my soul, my dear children, and may God preserve you.

Your mother,
Neama
Greek Holocaust survivors to have citizenship restored

By JONATHAN BECK, The Jerusalem Post
November 25, 2010

Expedited process will help Jewish Shoah victims; "This will correct a historic wrong," Greece's deputy foreign minister tells 'Post.'

ATHENS – Holocaust survivors of Greek extraction will soon have their Greek citizenship restored in an expedited process, the country’s Deputy Foreign Minister Dimitrios Dollis, who accompanied Prime Minister George Papandreou on his official visit to Israel in late July, told The Jerusalem Post on Wednesday.

That survivors have been denied their citizenship until now was a “result of the paranoia of consecutive governments,” Dollis said. Dollis, a veteran politician who was an exile in Australia and a member of the Labor Party there, said that as a longstanding supporter of Israel, he had been pushing for Holocaust survivors to be naturalized as Greeks again for a long time.

He added that the initiative had been in the pipeline since Papandreou came to power in October 2009, but had been delayed “for various reasons,” and would have been undertaken regardless of the recent improvement in bilateral ties.

“They’re our people... It’s their natural right,” he added, characterizing the current state of affairs as a “moral injustice that had to be corrected.”

There are approximately 100 survivors in Israel who will be granted citizenship. Dollis and Papandreou held a meeting with some of them during his visit in July.

Dollis told the Post that the papers would be processed within months, and the survivors would be holders of Greek ID cards by early 2011.

While all of the survivors are elderly and the move would be mostly symbolic for them, Dollis said their descendants would then be able to file requests with the Greek Embassy to receive citizenship as children of naturalized Greek citizens.

As a member state of the European Union, Greek citizenship automatically grants its holders all the privileges of being a citizen of the EU.

Speaking at a meeting with Israeli journalists on Monday – attended by members of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, as well as Israeli Ambassador Aryeh Mekel – David Saltiel, the board’s chairman, told the Post that the previous governments’ refusals to give citizenship to Greek Jews who fled the country during the Holocaust was a remnant of the country’s anti-Israel past. That past, he said, was expressed in some “anti-Semitic legislation” his organization was trying to overturn.

Saltiel, who only recently took over as chairman, is using the flowering ties to leverage an improvement in the condition of the Jewish communities in Greece.

He said that since Papandreou’s efforts to improve ties with Israel had gone into high gear, the community was finding it easier to book meetings with government ministers and that the government had been cooperative in repairing and restoring synagogues and cemeteries.

Saltiel attributed anti-Israel sentiments in Greece partly to a religious-based anti-Semitism, but expressed optimism that now that the government was changing course, the Greek population would follow suit.

“Anti-Semitism in Greece comes from ignorance and from books where you read about the crucifixion of Christ,” he said, adding that thanks to the Board of Jewish Communities’ efforts, today “elementary school books speak about what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust.”

A book published by the board in cooperation with the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs in 2008 (and in 2009 in English) was shown as an example. Titled Young People in the Maelstrom of Occupied Greece, the Persecution and Holocaust of the Jewish People 1943-1944, the book contains personal accounts and testimonies by survivors. Saltiel clarified that such a publication
GREEK HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS TO HAVE CITIZENSHIP RESTORED

would certainly not have been possible just a few years ago.

Victor Eliezer, a member of the board, added that Papandreou’s harsh condemnation of a recent incident in which a synagogue in Crete was vandalized was an unprecedented reaction to anti-Semitism.

“Still, there’s a problem of education of Greek society,” Eliezer said.

“There are anti-Semitic articles in the press, and we still always expect Greek society to react in a certain way,” Eliezer added. He cited incidents of vandalism of monuments and cemeteries in several towns following Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip two years ago.

The Jewish community in Greece numbers a mere 5,000 people today, down from 77,000 before World War II. The community in Thessaloniki flourished so much that the city came to be known as “Jerusalem of the Balkans,” Saltiel said. ■

Salonika Holocaust survivor tells of his ordeal

By BILL HESS, Sierra Vista Herald

April 22, 2010

FORT HUACHUCA — For nearly three years his name was a number — 110362. Treated as a criminal, Albert Rosa said the six-digit number was a way to take away his human identity. “It was my name,” Rosa said Wednesday, as he looked down on the faded blue tattoo on his left arm.

One would think the striped uniform he wore was because he was a criminal and like in any prison, numbers are used instead of names. But Rosa wasn’t a criminal, unless one considers it to be a crime to be Jewish — which Nazi Germany did in the 1930s and 1940s.

World War II came to Greece in late October 1940, when Italy invaded. But for the Italians it was a dismal failure with Greek forces outfighting them. About six months later, Germany came to the rescue of its Axis ally and the Greeks were eventually defeated, which is when the nearly 100,000 Greek Jews found themselves under increasingly stringent Nazi rules, Rosa said. Most of the Greek Jews were put in concentration camps and “only 5 percent survived,” he said.

Rosa was at the fort to speak at the annual Days of Remembrance, put aside to remember the Holocaust — when at least six million Jews died under Nazi direction. Another estimated five million gypsies, Jehovah Witnesses, homosexuals and others determined to be ant-Nazi civilians also were killed.

Before his talk, Rosa, who speaks 10 languages, was interviewed by the Herald/Review where he talked about the days as a teenager living under the Nazis. On one side of him was his daughter Regina and the other Mark Rothman, director of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust.

Nobody thought the Germans could ever do anything so horrible, he said. “They were a civilized, cultured people,” he said as he sat in the living room of the Hazen House, the fort’s guest house. But he was to learn differently — of the 70 members of his family, only he survived the concentration camps.

More than once he broke down, tears forming in his eyes, his lips quivering, words unable to flow from his mouth. It was particularly difficult when he talked about seeing his sister beaten to death, a brother hanged in a camp and finally realizing his parents, grandparents and the youngest members of the family — those considered useless for slave labor — had been gassed. Their bodies were burned in crematoriums, leaving no signs they
ever existed, with no monument placed over them so they could be mourned.

Each time, he would apologize for not being able to go on for a short time. "I'm sorry; it's hard," Rosa would say, as his 85-year-old mind went back to those days which happened more than six decades ago. At those times, his daughter would reach out and touch his arm, gently patting it.

It has been years since he was able to speak about his experiences. After arriving in the United States, Rosa suffered what he called "a mental breakdown" and was in a psychiatric hospital for three months. Today it probably would be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. It was there he went through shock treatments and was advised not to talk about what happened to him.

"For 55 years I said nothing," Rosa remarked. Regina said she told her father it probably would be good for him to tell his story. Besides, as she grew up, what happened to him and her late mother, also a Holocaust survivor from Austria, was never talked about at home.

A short man, Rosa said he was an athletic teen, a boxer, swimmer and soccer player. His older brother, Daniel, who was more than six feet tall, was a champion boxer and taught his younger sibling the art of the sport.

After the Germans took control of Greece, the Jews of the country were constrained into smaller areas, homes of the wealthy members of the community were confiscated, yellow stars of David with the German word for Jew — Jude — had to be worn, he said. Food was in short supply and more than once he and Daniel violated the rules, took off their yellow stars and went out seeking food.

At the beginning, Rosa and the family remained in Greece, with he and others building roads for the Germans. But then there was a gathering up of the Jewish community, with families split apart in different trucks as they were driven to a rail head for transportation to a concentration camp.

The trip took 10 days and 10 nights, Rosa said. It was winter and he left a warm Greek beach area for cold Poland. Traveling in box cars originally used to transport animals, there was no food, water or sanitary facilities. Along the trip many died, he said.

Upon arriving at Auschwitz, the separation of families continued, with the old and young taken away and the able-bodied, like he and his brothers and sister, becoming forced laborers. Sometimes mothers would not allow their babies to be taken away and without hesitation, the child was shot. If the woman was able-bodied, she was forced on to the women's area to work for the Nazis, he said. Whips and rifle butts were favorite items of discipline among the guards.

It would be some time before Rosa found out the old and other very young were immediately killed. One day he asked another inmate what was being burned because of the terrible smell coming out of a series of chimneys. He was told it was the bodies of the old and young being burned. "Then I knew mommy and daddy were dead," Rosa said.

Work was hard, starting before sunup and ending after sundown, Rosa said. Sleeping arrangements in the barracks consisted of a dozen or more men stretching out on wooden beds, without mattresses during the night some died.

One day he heard from a bunkmate his sister Luna was alive and he arranged with the man to switch uniforms so he could try to see her. The other man worked in an area near where the women were laboring, while Rosa worked in a coal mine.

Knowing the guards only looked at a prisoner's number on the uniform
and did not match it with the tattooed number, Rosa said he thought it would be an easy ploy to get away with and besides, he promised the other, hesitant, prisoner with two days of his food supply.

Making the change, Rosa went to the other man’s work area and through a fence eventually spotted Luna. Describing his older sister as a beautiful woman with blue eyes and long black hair, he saw her hair had been all cut off and she was emaciated.

Violating every rule, Rosa made his way to the fence and got his sister’s attention and they began to talk. The female guards, whom he described as big gorillas, carrying whips, wearing pistols and holding dogs on leashes saw what was happening. It was then Luna was beaten to the ground and when Rosa tried to interfere — “I tried to rip the fence apart” — a dog was unleashed against him and male guards arrived to start beating him.

Bitten and beaten, Rosa watched as Luna was pummeled to death and then saw her body put into a cart like it was a piece of trash to be hauled off to be burned. Returning to the barracks he told his brother Daniel, his boxing instructor, what happened — which angered him. Daniel promised to kill a German for the death of Luna as Rosa tried to talk some sense into his brother.

Some time later, while both were on a work detail, Rosa stole some raw potatoes and began to be beaten, Daniel came to his defense and knocked down some German guards, strangling one to death. For Daniel, it was a death sentence. Try as he might, Rosa could not come to his brother’s defense because his leg had been broken.

Later, his brother was hanged and it was then Rosa promised his dying brother he would survive and take revenge on the Germans. Initially, another brother, David, was in the same barracks but he had been moved and Rosa learned David had not passed physical muster and because he was so weak and couldn’t work he had been chosen for death.

Time continued and when the Warsaw Ghetto uprising took place and as put down by the Nazis, Rosa was one of the prisoners who was taken to the area where thousands of bodies, most of them decomposed, had to be removed and disposed of, causing disease and illness among the concentration camp laborers chosen for the detail.

As the Soviet Army pushed into Poland, the Germans fell back and Rosa found himself on a forced “death march” to Dachau, in upper Bavaria in Germany. Again he survived and when the American Army liberated the area he fell in with the GIs, serving with them “killing Nazis,” Rosa said. By the time he was liberated his weight had fallen from more than 150 pounds to just more than 80 pounds.

Maj. Gen. John Custer, commander of the Intelligence Center of Excellence and Fort Huachuca, said it is first-person accounts by people like Rosa that must be heard. It is important for today’s generations of soldiers to know the truth of the Holocaust to ensure what Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower warned should not happen after visiting a concentration camp in 1945. The horrors of such camps cannot be dismissed as propaganda because what happened “beggars description.”

Before he began his talk, Rosa saluted the soldiers in the audience and when he ended he said, “My life was saved by the U.S. Army.” Today, he no longer responds to 110362 — he is American Albert Rosa.

After World War II, Albert Rosa helped with the establishment of Israel, joining the Irgun, an underground, armed Jewish resistance against the British, who controlled the area. He smuggled weapons to support the fight and was captured by the British, taken to Cyprus, where he was tortured by his captors before he eventually escaped. He met his wife Betty, who died two years ago, after nearly 60 years of marriage. Rosa, Betty and daughter Regina, who was born in Austria, came to the United States, where he started work as a janitor and eventually became the foreman of an upholstery factory in Colorado. Visiting Disneyland, Rosa and his wife decided to move to California and started a deli and wine business. He speaks to students, law enforcement groups, military and other organizations about the dark days of the Holocaust.
The news article in the Israeli newspaper announced: “Jack Ya’acov Stroumsa, the Fiddler from Auschwitz, has died in Jerusalem the 14th November 2010 at the age of 98.” It was followed by some details about Auschwitz, his family having been sent to the gas chambers and Stroumsa surviving as member of the camp Orchestra. It was just one piece of news, for the common reader. But not for me.

I had the privilege to publish an article in the Newsletter of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki El Avenir (No. 6, June 2009). The readers of this excellent revue could read there how we met for the first time as well as my poem The Fiddler from Auschwitz dedicated to Jack-Ya’acov Stroumsa, survivor from Salonica.

My book of poetry in Hebrew From People’ s House to Nation’ s Hall (Jerusalem, 1987) which included for the first time the poem about the Fiddler, was launched at the Biannual Book Fair in Jerusalem together with the translation of a book by Primo Levi. Shimon Peres, now the President of The State of Israel, wrote the introduction and was present at the Fair and the launching of the book. Under the title “Moshé Liba-poet of agony and hope,” the President wrote: “Let us hope that these emotional poems –full of educational relevance will find ways to the hearts of many readers, especially among the younger generation.”

The poems and the questions motivated him to compile his memories and to publish them in a book. He started by writing to Elie Wiesel and asking for guidance and help. He also sent a letter, with the poem, to the editor of the Holocaust series at the Hartung –Gorre Verlag, Germany who invited him at the German-Israeli Society meeting. There, as he did for all his lectures, Dr Stroumsa asked the editor E. Roy-Wiehn to read aloud: “a poem by Moshé Liba, which I did,” wrote Dr Wiehn in his introduction to the book he published later. Indeed, he published two books, one in German in 1993 Geiger in Auschwitz, and then in English in 1996 Violinist in Auschwitz.

Dr Stroumsa wrote for me a dedication on his first book: “You are entitled to this first book. It is you who created “The Fiddler from Auschwitz,” thanks to your poem which is published at the begin-
The Violin from Auschwitz is Silent by Prof. Moshé Liba

ning of the book” (translation from the original French). Encouraged by these two books, he published the book in Hebrew, and then more, ending up with 8 translated versions of his memories into different languages. His books tell the story of his life, first in Thessaloniki, then the Auschwitz-Birkenau period, the Death March, the liberation, his new life in France and in Israel, and his activity for the preservation of the memory.

Born in Thessaloniki as the first of four children of the family of a teacher of Hebrew and of Ladino in the Alchech School of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, the young Ya’acov was a good student at school, but loved the private violin lessons, which would one day save his life.

The warm Jewish home, the French of his mother, the Hebrew and the Ladino of his father, the Greek at school, the synagogue, the violin, the Maccabi sport activities, were a happy youth for Ya’acov. This was followed by the first period in France, where he graduated as an electrical engineer, and became a good violin player.

Back to Thessaloniki, he served in the army, then married a young girl from the Community and then the German occupation, the transport to Poland in 1943, his family being sent to the gas chambers and Ya’acov saved as a violinist in the camp Orchestra.

Following in simple words the pattern of the questions asked by the youth at Yad VaShem, and in the trips to Auschwitz, Dr Stroumsa tells us of the years in the concentration camp and his struggle to survive; Tu choisisiras la vie is the title of his book in French.

At the liberation in 1945, Stroumsa finds himself alone and lonely. The French Consul, an officer whom he meets by pure chance, helps him to travel to France, where he builds a new life, a new family.

After 20 years, he arrives in Israel, following his son, becomes an electric engineer at the Jerusalem Municipality graduates with a Doctorate from the Technion and lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.

After his retirement, Dr Stroumsa becomes a volunteer, lecturing to groups of youngsters visiting Yad VaShem, the Museum of the Holocaust. It is there where I met him, facing every day the photo of the Orchestra from Auschwitz. I had the inspiration for the poem, which brought him to the light, to the meetings with President Navon, the visits to Auschwitz, the March of the Living, the youth groups.

Later came the visit by the invitation of the King of Spain, with whom he spoke in Judeo Spanish, and to the Queen, with whom he spoke in Greek, the invitation to a reception at the Presidency in Jerusalem received by President Shimon Peres... And lecturing, playing the violin, travelling to Poland, showing the number on his arm, answering questions.

The death found Dr Stroumsa in full activity in Jerusalem. Already diminished physically, but managing to see and to hear with the help of electronic instruments, he was working on various memory projects: writing a book about his electrical work at the Municipality...
The Violin from Auschwitz is Silent by Prof. Moshé Liba

of Jerusalem with his former co-worker; an Italian and French book in Bolzano, Italy; a new edition of his book in Hebrew in cooperation with a lecturer from the Hebrew University; the project of a monologue in Hebrew by one of his grand-daughters; a TV documentary in Dutch by a crew from the Netherlands (“they might arrive too late”, he said, a week before his death).

At his burial in the Sefardi Cemetery, Guivat Shaul, Jerusalem, on the 15th November 2010, his violin accompanied the mourners, the speeches, the prayers. But this time, it was not Dr Stroumsa, but one of his grand daughters who was playing it.

Post Scriptum
I loved this man, the violinist, the survivor, the friend.
I wrote about him a poem, translations, books, theatre plays, essays, articles, in various languages, over many years. I will continue writing…
I miss him so much! M.L.

A new radio program about Greek Jewry and Sephardic culture has not only conquered the Greek audience but is also an important development in the cultural landscape of the Greek Jewish communities.

Radio Sefarad, www.radiosefarad.com, is an internet radio station of the Federation of the Jewish Communities of Spain, whose main public is Spain, the Spanish speaking Jews of the USA, Latin America and the ladino speaking Jews around the world.

Thanks to the passion of Angela Maria Arbeláez and the support of the Jewish Community of Salonika, the most important Sephardic community in the word after 1492, a new radio show came on the air with the name “Desde Grecia, akí Salónika/From Greece, Here Salonika.”

Already 24 shows have aired and an archive of the shows, which one can download freely, can be found on the website 6 days after they are broadcast.

The last show deals with the memories of Shabetai M. Bezas, a Salonikli born in 1931, who survived together with his family the German Occupation thanks to friends. They fled to Athens and later to Albania from the Ghetto of Baron Hirsch.

In “Desde Grecia, Aki Salónika,” Kaminos de Vida, one can listen to conversations in Judeo Spanish from contemporary Greek Jews, many amazing, touching stories and testimonies before and during the Nazi occupation of Greece. Voices of the survivors of the Shoah, voices from the past, voices of the Greek Jewish heritage all around Greece in Ladino or Greek.

Among the themes of the shows, one finds songs from the famous Salonikan traditional singer Davico Saltiel, the ethno-graph and singer Judith Cohen from Canada or the Argentinian Liliana Benveniste and, of course, music and songs loved
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

Special thanks to the Association of Friends of Greek Jewry and its President, Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos, for their kind assistance in identifying Thessalonikians around the world and for distributing the newsletters.

El Avenir
Newsletter of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki

Owner:
Jewish Community of Thessaloniki,
Vas. Irakleiou 26, 54624 Thessaloniki, Greece
tel: +30-2310-275701
email: info@jct.gr
web: www.jct.gr

Publisher:
The President of JCT, Mr. David Saltiel.

Responsible according to the law:
The Director of JCT, Mr. Samuel Iosafat.

Editorial Committee:

Design:
Gatenio / hy brazil

“Desde Grecia, akí Salónika”

by Greek Jews before and after WWII: Rembetiko, Tango, Pasodoble.

Reportages from events like the one of the recent visit of the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel Amar to Greece and Albania, the new Shoah Memorial in Athens, presentations of Greek-Jewish artists, writers, historians, like Lydia Abastado, Joseph Ventura, Rena Molho and life stories from Jews in Salonika, Veria, Corfu and other areas, for those willing to learn about the past but also for those interested in hearing everyday ladino and not just songs.

Mrs. Arbelaez “wishes to be a link with the Jewish Diaspora of Spain, the countries of the Latin America and the USA and Greek Jews of Israel; to portray the history, the cultural heritage, the Judeo Spanish language (Judeo-español) and the values of the Greek Jewry, through events and testimonies” which includes also Christian Greeks, among others.

Everyone can download the shows from http://www.radiosefarad.com/
joomla/index.php?option=com_podcast&view=feed&format=raw
and hear them in their homes or their cars.

Even those who do not speak Spanish will certainly enjoy the music selection during the show.

The creator of the show, Angela Maria Arbeláez, is an art historian and reporter from Colombia (correspondent for Spanish speaking newspapers), who has lived many years in Greece and has excellent academic credentials.

Even though Mrs. Arbelaez is not Jewish, this show is exclusively her personal initiative and she is wholly responsible for its realization, setting an example for her Greek Orthodox colleagues. May we hope that similar shows will emerge in Greek, especially in Salonika?

You can contact the author in angelahellaspres@gmail.com and be included in the mailing list.