WHAT THE CITY REMEMBERS

I would like to thank the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki and its President, David Saltiel, for the opportunity to speak with you this evening. On this day of Remembrance for the Greek Jews who died in the war, we think of those who were killed, some 45,000 from Thessaloniki alone, and more than 60,000 from Greece. But as well as those who were killed we should take a moment to think too perhaps of those who were never born – the two or three generations of children that were lost to the world by the death of those who would have been their parents. They would have been the descendants of those who perished and they would, in other circumstances, have been here to mourn the dead. But because children died in the camps as well as adults, and those children never grew up to have children of their own, the task of remembering falls to us.

'MEMORIE,' Pliny says, '[is]the greatest gift of Nature, and most necessarie of all others for this life.' But time itself renews and transforms the work of commemoration: what is to be remembered is both constant and constantly changing and so we, who are enjoined to remember, need to be ready to think afresh. I want this evening to ask about the relationship between what it is we are asked to remember, and who and where we are who do the remembering – between those who were killed and us, today, here in Thessaloniki.

The end of January, since that is where we are, is where I will begin, the end of January of the year 1943 - a turning-point in the Second World War. It was at this time that in Stalingrad, Soviet troops managed to cut through the German 6th Army, shutting what remained of it into

two small sectors of the city and thereby forcing its surrender. The RAF was carrying out its first daylight raids on Berlin. Anglo-American forces had landed in North Africa. The war was turning against the Axis.

In Thessaloniki that second winter under German occupation had been a hard one and the city was crowded with refugees from the Bulgarian zone of occupation in the east. Many of its inhabitants were hungry and some were starving. In late January, a group of students barged into the offices of the rector of the university demanding that he widen access to the soup kitchen from which some of them had been barred. The resistance was just beginning to organise in Thessaloniki itself and acts of sabotage and other forms of defiance to the occupiers were multiplying in the countryside. That winter, the number of those executed in reprisals shootings soared; Jews and Christians, teachers and students, townspeople and peasants, most of them prisoners detained in the Eptapyrgio or the Pavlos Melas camp. In January 1943, the new prime minister, Konstantinos Logothetopoulos, issued a proclamation denouncing the Communist insurrectionaries. The struggle against what he called the 'Slavo-Communist Monster'[σλαυοκομμουνιστικον τερας], put Thessaloniki on the frontline.

For the Jews of Thessaloniki January 1943 was a turning-point too, the time when the city's community, which had been largely ignored in Berlin for many months, became a target. The so-called Final Solution of the Jewish Question was well underway and the genocide had swept rapidly across Poland and the occupied Soviet territories, through death camps and mobile killing squads. But from the summer of 1942 there was unexpected diplomatic resistance

elsewhere in Europe – and from Germany's own partners no less. The governments of Slovakia, France, Denmark and Romania showed themselves less and less disposed to heed Berlin's demands to hand over their Jewish subjects. That autumn, the deportations *stopped* from Slovakia, the Belgians made difficulties and the Romanians changed their mind. The Hungarians, aware of the changing tide of the war in Stalingrad, refused the Germans. The Italians deliberately delayed. One reason was that word was beginning to leak out internationally: in mid-December 1942 the ongoing 'cold-blooded extermination' of Jewish communities across Europe was denounced in a simultaneous Joint Declaration by Members of the United Nations – a declaration which was, so far as I can tell, the first expression of the wartime UN alliance since its establishment and one of the earliest UN documents of any kind.

Experience showed the Reich's 'Jewish experts' that Jews were most vulnerable where they exerted the greatest control. And Greece was a conquered, occupied and partitioned state. Although it had a government of its own, it was an exceptionally weak one which had lost control of some of its territories, manifestly lacked the power to feed its own people, and was failing too to keep them quiet: protest was growing and the armed resistance was becoming a real problem for the Axis in the mountains. Revealingly, the Greek government, unlike some others, had raised no objections to its own citizens being included in anti-Jewish round-ups in western Europe. Nor had it protested the first persecutory measures initiated in Thessaloniki in the summer and autumn of 1942. For those officials of the wartime Greek state here in the city who were, as they saw it, holding the line against the Bulgarians, loyalty and indifference were closely conjoined. Loyalty to Athens meant preserving what was left of Greece's territorial gains

in the Balkan Wars and doing nothing –including protesting the Germans' anti-Jewish measures – that could jeopardise those. In short, their idea of Greece did not encompass the lives of their Jewish co-citizens. In the destruction and plundering of the vast Jewish cemetery at the end of the year, many actors played a role: the governor general on behalf of the state, but also the municipality, the Church, local associations and businessmen.

It was precisely 80 years ago this month that Adolf Eichmann's deputy visited in Greece to prepare the ground for the deportations from Thessaloniki and then reported back to Berlin. To oversee the deportations themselves, Eichmann chose his trusted colleague Dieter Wisliceny and had him recalled to Berlin from his posting in Slovakia. As we know from the postwar testimony of both men, Eichmann explained his new mission to him in terms that left no room for doubt. It was the start of February when Wisliceny and his team arrived here. They established a close working relationship with the chief military administrator, Max Merten: the two men issued a barrage of instructions targetting the Jewish community which continued over the rest of the month.

The terrible story is well known by now –the dutiful and catastrophic compliance of the chief rabbi in the entire process, the shootings, extortion, beating and torture by Germans, gendarmes and collaborators alike, the upheaval of children suddenly having to leave their schools, shopkeepers bidding farewell to partners and friends they had known for years, the few sporadic and ineffectual protests as families were uprooted and forced from their homes into specially assigned zones before their turn came to be marched through the city to the

makeshift Baron Hirsch detention camp next to the train station to await, as they were told, though fewer and fewer could really believe it, resettlement somewhere in Poland. The first transport left Thessaloniki railway station on 15 March and arrived at Auschwitz on March 20: some 2,800 people of all ages had been packed into the wagons; of these, according to the camp records, 2,191 were immediately gassed. It was on my reckoning the largest transport by some measure the camp had received until then – a sign, I think, of the Germans' haste - and it was followed by no fewer than eighteen more. By the mid-summer of 1943, more than 45,000 people, had been deported, and the majority had been killed upon arrival. A few had escaped; a tiny handful were in hiding in the city itself. Almost overnight, with bewildering speed and little protest, the historic community which had stamped its presence upon the city, helped it thrive over so many centuries, and made it something quite unique in the world, had been utterly destroyed.

These events happened eighty years ago and I would like to dwell for a little on the significance of this span of time. I first began to immerse myself in the city's history in the early 1980s, more or less exactly halfway between then and now. If I look back on my own memories, a few things stand out. I think the first was the sense when I arrived here of being in a real city, in a way that was unlike anywhere else in Greece. If I ask myself what accounted for that feeling, I think I'd say it was its unique blend of the Byzantine, the Ottoman atmosphere of the Ano Polis, and the glimpses one caught on the way in from the airport of the great late nineteenth century villas with their unmistakably Sefardic Jewish names. Yet the more I read about the city, the more it struck me how much of this blend had vanished or remained unspoken. This was especially true

when trying to find out about what had happened during the war. In the Jewish community offices, there were the volumes of Nehamas, long out of print and not easy to find elsewhere, but not much more. Molho's bookshop was still on Tsimiski, a portal into the past, and I remember my conversations with its owners Solomon and Renée. But despite the efforts of one or two pioneering researchers, the subject of Jewish Thessaloniki – which flourishes today – was ignored. As for the Holocaust, officialdom avoided it.

And yet its signs were everywhere. In fact, it was not difficult to find vivid memories of those years. You only had to be the age I am now to have your own stories to recount. One sometimes had the sense that almost anyone one met aged sixty or more, Jewish or Christian, possessed a kind of secret - almost complicit - knowledge of these events which were then still only beginning very hesitantly to be discussed openly. And often the subject came up almost instantly. Sitting next to me on a plane, a woman who had grown up in Saranta Ekklisies told me about playing with her friends as a girl amid the scattered bones in what was left of the old cemetery before the university campus covered it entirely: it had seemed just a game at the time; now the memory horrified her. One day I walked over to where the old Συνοικισμος 151 had been with a survivor who had grown up there, and we were standing on the street chatting, when a couple of men came up, about his age. They were curious and after I explained my interest in the history, they told us how well they remembered that day in 1943 that the Jews of the neighborhood had been forced to leave because they were schoolboys then, and some of their classmates were among those affected: they had watched them depart and then

one of them dared the other to go into one of the empty houses and look around. Neither of these stories was or is in the least unusual; as I say, they were everywhere, just rarely voiced. One morning I was shown some large old dusty sacks that had been unopened since the end of the war. They were stuffed with official papers from the Occupation, and when I opened them, the contents poured out – one typed form after another, requests for this shop or that apartment. Written on the fragile, poor-quality often almost translucent paper of those years, they all dated from 1943 and I thought back to those schoolboys and those empty houses. The sacks turned out to contain the archives of Thessaloniki's Service for the Disposal of Jewish Property and its files testified to the enormous impact the sudden deportation of the Jews had had upon the city. Quite suddenly I realised that the academic histories I had been reading and teaching my students had missed something important. The story of the Final Solution did not end in Auschwitz: it reverberated in the cities its victims had left behind and it continued to reverberate for many decades after the war had ended. And that this was true in all likelihood for many cities besides, and for other wars for that matter.

Today, eighty years on, there are fewer and fewer people with first-hand memories of that time. When the United Nations General Assembly voted in 2005 to establish an International Day in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, it was in recognition of the fact that the passing of the years is doing its work and the memories of those who lived through the war are slowly fading and vanishing entirely. The UN's decision was thus a call to create another kind of more enduring memory through learning and culture and continued discussion. In this process the very nature of memory itself is thrown into question because the *we* who are being asked to

remember refers more and more to generations too young to have lived through those events. What *we* are being asked to remember in fact is history. And history and memory are two different things.

There is an extraordinary short story you may know by the Argentinian writer Jorge Louis Borges: *Funes the Memorious*. In it Borges tells of a man called Ireneo Funes, the son of an ironing woman, who through an accident has acquired the gift, or curse, of never being able to forget anything at all. Funes the Memorious is a man who can reconstruct the course of an entire day; every star in the sky; every feature of a landscape once glimpsed. The result, Borges tells us, was 'that he [was] not very capable of thought' 'In the teeming mental world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence'. For memories to be useful to us, Borges suggests, there must also be forgetting; and for them to be useful, they must have meaning, they must form part of some kind of explanation.

Which is where history comes in. The late Yosef Yerushalmi, a distinguished former colleague of mine, once wrote a classic work entitled *Zakhor*, on Jewish memory and Jewish history, to explain what had been gained, and lost, as Jews in modern times came increasingly to turn to history in place of memory. For Yerushalmi, memory was rooted in faith and the Holy Books and tradition and helped to preserve the immediacy of the believer's connection with God; whereas history was the application of reason and evidence to the past and the establishment of cause and effect. Put in more psychological terms, memories are often deeply personal, momentary flashes into the past that connect us in mysterious ways to our older individual

selves; whereas history is there, out in the open, to be discussed and argued over and debated, unaffected in its essence by who we are or how we happen to feel that day.

Memories too may be shared of course. The French historian Maurice Halbwachs, who died in Buchenwald in 1945, devoted much of his life to understanding the importance of these. In fact, collective memory, for Halbwachs, was one of the key ways modern life brought people together. Halbwachs wanted to show that even something as seemingly personal and bound up with the psyche as memory is not in fact an isolated and subjective experience but something that can serve a powerful collective function as the cement of a social group. But we can see today what Halbwachs could not, that what brings people together can also keep them apart. Because collective memories can proliferate and even begin to compete, and in doing so, they can foster, in their own way, a form of indifference. So that for us the challenge is to find forms of collective memory that overcome this and bring us together again.

Perhaps it is because we are gathered here, in this remarkable city, which has undergone so many slow metamorphoses and sudden transformations, that it occurs to me to suggest we might think about collective memory afresh - not as a quality of persons and groups but as a quality of place. What the *city* remembers is a question that has come to interest me more and more. It is the one that has, in a way, underpinned my own approach to its history. This city, which does not take sides, which has watched peoples come and go and embraced them all. Which does not act politically and has little knowledge of who ordered what and bore the responsibility but remembers the daily lives of those who lived in it and their routines, the

moments of conflict and unimaginable change – a deportation, a fire, a new road driven through an old quarter. Where better than in Thessaloniki to explore a model of remembering that includes rather than excludes, that does not merely enshrine the lonely fate of each group in its suffering, but draws out the connections with others?

The files of the Service for the Disposal of Jewish Property, for one, are rich in such memories of 1943. Take as a modest example among hundreds a haberdashery at Valaoritou 39: until the spring of that year the shop had been owned by a certain Avraam S.; after his deportation, it was handed over to a certain Vasilis K., who - the file tells us - presented himself because he had lost his own home in Drama, presumably fleeing the Bulgarian massacres. How can we disentangle the memory of one from the memory of the other? Can we not go where memory leads us and follow their interconnections?

In Thessaloniki, layers upon layers of memory thus await their archaeologists. In fact they are already at work because the public memory of the city is far more active and far richer now than it was forty years ago: the silence of those years has been banished and a good two generations of remarkable historians and archivists have been patiently excavating this kind of material and making it available. Brilliant teachers at schools in the city encourage their pupils to explore the identities and fates of the children who occupied their classrooms and lived in their neighborhoods before them. These stories the children explore without guilt or shame, seeming intuitively to understand the significance of this past they share with others who came before them.

A child who witnessed the events of 1943, if they are still alive, is around ninety today. If Jewish, his or her parents were likely born in the decade of wars that reshaped the city and turned it Greek; his or her grandparents had probably grown up in the days of Abdul Hamid, and likely spoke little or Greek at all. It is thus still biologically possible to meet someone in this room whose grandparents remembered the times when the sea wall still stood and the train station to Europe was not even the figment of someone's imagination. And if Christian, that 90 year old's parents and grandparents were as likely as not to have been born outside the city, perhaps speaking an unfamiliar dialect in a village in the hinterland, or on one of the shores of Asia Minor or the Black Sea, bringing here their own traumatic memories of flight and dispossession and homelands lost. The layers of memory take us through time with astonishing rapidity.

And across place as well. For Thessaloniki in 1943 was made up too of the memories it contained within it of those other cities – Trabzon, Smyrna , Livorno, Cordoba - brought by its inhabitants on their arrival. And it lived on in the hearts of those who left and took it with them in the way some of them, we know, remembered Tsitsanis's Στις Σαλονικης τα στενα, or some version of it, even within Auschwitz itself. That same year, the old city was brought back to life by a forty-nine year old math teacher in poor health who was seated in his farmhouse kitchen in the hills of the Hudson Valley when the smell of baking bread took him back into 'memories of a long ago so distant that it makes one wonder whether one is really *that* old', memories of a time before the war, of the sounds of the muezzin and the market, of the day in 1915 when he

had stood on the deck of an Italian steamer, and seen Salonica, his native city, disappearing on the horizon for the last time, a whole host of memories that came pouring out and that the writer, Leon Sciaky, evoked in his classic memoir of life: *Farewell to Salonica*.

Let me conclude: Our primary obligation today is to cast our minds back to remember those who were murdered. But precisely because the Jews of Thessaloniki were always an integral part of the city, the meaning of their loss is not to be isolated from the larger history of the city itself. It is in the nature of history that it changes with time as *we* change and the questions we ask of the past change too. There are things that can no longer be remembered today because those who remembered them are no longer with us; but there are other things that it falls to us to remember because it is only now that that we have come to learn about them. In short, when we mourn the needless and dreadful suffering inflicted upon the Jews of Thessaloniki eighty years ago, we are also remembering afresh the city and the world of which they formed a part. Only thus, I believe, can we begin to apprehend the enormous dimensions of what was lost and reflect on what is really required of us today.

Mark Mazower