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The Holocaust in  
**GREECE**



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# The Holocaust in GREECE

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# I INTRODUCTION

The indigenous Jewish communities of Greece represent the longest continuous Jewish presence in Europe. These communities, along with the Jews who settled in Greece after their expulsion from Spain, were almost completely destroyed in the Holocaust.



Mordechai Frezis, a Jew from Chalkis, was one of the first Greek officers to die in World War Two.

Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum, NY

The Germans defeated the Greek army in the **spring of 1941** and occupied Greece until **October 1944**. The country was divided into three zones of occupation: Bulgaria annexed Thrace and Yugoslav Macedonia; Germany occupied Greek Macedonia, including Thessaloniki, Piraeus, and western Crete; and Italy occupied the remainder of the mainland and the islands. Where Jews resided determined not only their subsequent fate but also their ultimate possibility of escape.



Members of ELAS, the Popular Greek Liberation Army  
Dr. Michael Matsas

Greek resistance groups, both communist and noncommunist, battled the Axis occupiers in an effort to save not only Greece but also the Jews living there. Between 8,000 and 10,000 Greek Jews survived the Holocaust, due in large part to the unwillingness of the Greek people, including leaders in the Greek Orthodox Church, to cooperate with German plans for the deportation of Jews. In addition, Italian

occupying authorities refused to facilitate or permit deportations from the Italian zone of occupation until Italy surrendered in **September 1943**.

Even though deportations did not start until **March 1943**, Greece lost at least 81 percent of its Jewish population during the Holocaust. Between 60,000 and 70,000 Greek Jews perished, most of them at Auschwitz-Birkenau.



The deportation of Jews in Thrace, March 1943  
Jewish Museum of Greece



# A THENS

Jews have lived in Athens since the **third century BCE**, and the remains of an ancient synagogue can be found in the Agora, at the foot of the Acropolis. The Jewish community in Athens is Romaniote; its members speak Greek and have assimilated into the city's culture over time.

In **1940** the Jewish community numbered 3,500 and was dispersed throughout the city. With the occupation of Greece in 1941, control of the city was given to the Italians, and the Jewish community enjoyed three years of relative security. As in other regions under Italian control, Jews fleeing persecution in Thessaloniki sought safe haven in Athens.

The head rabbi, Elias Barzelai, had strong connections with the municipal government and the EAM (National Liberation Front). These connections and the support of the archbishop of Athens, Damaskinos, contributed to the rescue of 66 percent of Athens's Jews. Athens Police Chief Angelos Evert issued false identification cards and **Archbishop Damaskinos**



Athens Police Chief  
Angelos Evert  
Jewish Museum of Greece



Rabbi Elias Barzelai  
Jewish Museum of Greece

ordered the church to issue false baptismal certificates to those threatened with deportation. In Athens and the port city of Piraeus, Christians hid Jews in their homes. Both Archbishop Damaskinos and Chief Evert are honored at Yad Vashem, along with the mayor of Piraeus.

On **March 25, 1944**, German officials rounded up 1,690 Jews in Athens—many of whom were refugees from Thessaloniki—for deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau. After the war, Athens became the main center of resettlement for Jews returning to Greece, and the Jewish population increased to 4,940. Today Athens remains the center of Jewish life in Greece.



An order issued by  
SS General Jürgen Stroop  
Jewish Museum of Greece

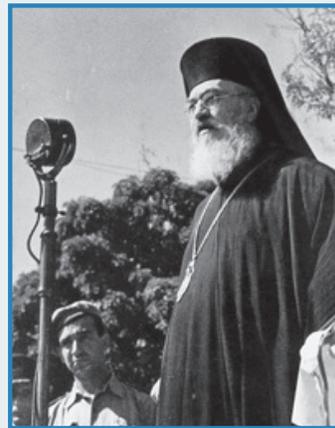
## ARCHBISHOP DAMASKINOS

In contrast to many Catholic and Protestant religious leaders in Europe, who either supported the Nazi policy of extermination of the Jews or did nothing to stop it, Archbishop Damaskinos of Greece formally protested the deportation of Jews.

After learning of the deportation of the Thessaloniki Jews in March 1943, Damaskinos sent a letter of protest to the Germans. This letter was composed by the famous Greek poet Angelos Sikilianos and was signed by many members of the Athens intelligentsia. Damaskinos included the biblical quote “There is neither Jew nor Greek” in his letter, emphasizing that all people are the same in the Greek Orthodox religion.

He described the long history of the Jews in Greece and how, as exemplary citizens, they presented no threat to Germany. He warned that one day the world would hold accountable those who deported the Jews.

When General Jürgen Stroop, high SS and police leader for Greece, found out who was behind the letter, he threatened to shoot Damaskinos. The archbishop



bravely reminded the German that “According to the traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church, our prelates are hung and not shot. Please respect our traditions!”

Yet the Germans proceeded with the deportations. Damaskinos called the police chief of Athens, Angelos Evert, to his office and said, “I have spoken to God and my conscience tells me what we must do. The church will issue false baptismal certificates to any Jew who asks for them and you will issue false identification cards.” Due to Damaskinos’s courageous stance, thousands of Greek Jews were spared.



## CORFU

The island of Corfu in the Ionian Sea had been home to Jews for over 800 years. When the Venetians annexed the island in the **fourteenth century**, they enclosed the Jewish community in a ghetto. The island's Jewish population was a mix of Greek-speaking Romaniotes, Ladino-speaking Sephardim, and Italian-speaking Jews from Apulia and Sicily. The relationship between Jews and Christians on the island had been soured by a notorious "Blood Libel" investigation conducted in **1891**.

The story of the Holocaust in Corfu is especially unfortunate, in part because it occurred late in the war. The Germans took control of the island in **1943** after the fall of Italy and promulgated antisemitic laws. Corfu's Mayor Kollas was a known collaborator.

In early **June 1944**, as the Allies bombed the island to divert attention from the landing at Normandy, German SS and local Greek police forced the Jews of Corfu out of their homes and imprisoned them in



Proclamation signed by Mayor Kollas, the prefect, and the chief of police on June 9, 1944, proclaiming that the Jews of the island had been rounded up and that the economy of the island will rightfully revert to the Christian citizens.

Jewish Museum of Greece



Rabbi Iakov Nechama, the last chief rabbi of Corfu  
Jewish Museum of Greece

the Old Fort. On June 10, 1944, the SS and police, with assistance from Wehrmacht units, deported them. Of the 2,000 Corfu Jews, 200 found sanctuary with Christian families; 1,800 were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In **July 1944**, 435 of the men who had arrived at Aushwitz-Birkenau on the transport chose immediate death rather than joining the *Sonderkommando*, the special detachment forced to help the Germans destroy the bodies of Jewish prisoners.



Corfu's Mayor Kollas  
Jewish Museum of Greece



# IOANNINA

Evidence dates the presence of Jews in Ioannina to **70 CE**. The Ioannina Jews formed a Romaniote community, composed of Greek Jews already settled in the city before the influx of Sephardim in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Unlike other Jewish communities of the period, the Jews in Ioannina preserved their Romaniote culture and continue to maintain that culture and special liturgy today.

Initially, Ioannina was occupied by the Italians, and Jews did not experience any discrimination until Italy surrendered in **September 1943**.

After the Germans took over, Jewish leaders adopted a wait-and-see policy, hoping that the Germans would leave them alone as well. The Germans told members of the communities that what had happened in Thessaloniki would not happen in Ioannina because the Ioannina Jews, as Greek speakers, were not akin to the Ladino-speaking Jews of Thessaloniki.

In **March 1944**, however, the president of the Jewish community in Ioannina, Dr. Moses Koffinas, was arrested. While detained, he learned of Germany's plans to deport Jews, and he smuggled a note out to Sabetai Kabelis, a prominent member of the Jewish Community Board, advising the Jews to flee. Unfortunately, Kabelis chose not to relay the warning to Ioannina's Jews, and on **March 25, 1944**, the entire Jewish community of 1,860 people, including Kabelis himself, was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.



The deportation of Jews, March 25, 1944  
Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum



A Holocaust memorial in  
Ioannina

Marcia Haddad Ikononopoulos



Torahs

Marcia Haddad Ikononopoulos



# KASTORIA

Kastoria is located on an ancient trade route in the mountains between Thessaloniki and Ioannina. Many of Kastoria’s Jews were employed in the manufacturing of fur and leather items, for which the city became famous. Kastoria was a Sephardic community, although there is evidence that a Jewish community existed there before the **fifteenth century**.

Like Thessaloniki, the city was part of the Ottoman Empire until the Balkan Wars in the early **twentieth century**, when it was liberated by Greece.



A Jewish family before the deportations  
Jewish Museum of Greece



The dedication of a Holocaust memorial in Kastoria in 1996

Jewish Museum of Greece

There were 900 Jews in Kastoria in **1940**. On **March 25, 1944**, 763 of them were rounded up for deportation, first to Thessaloniki and then to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Prior to their deportation, they were enclosed in an abandoned school for days, with no food or water, and the young girls were raped by German soldiers. Thirty-five Jews survived the Holocaust in Kastoria. In 1996, a Holocaust memorial was dedicated in honor of the victims.



# T THESSALONIKI

**For centuries**, Thessaloniki, honored with the title “La Madre de Israel,” was the most populous city of Sephardic Jewry in the world.

In the **summer of 1942**, the persecution of the Jews of Thessaloniki started. All men between the ages of 18 and 45 were conscripted into forced labor, where they stood for hours in the hot summer sun and were beaten and humiliated. The Jewish community was depleted of its wealth and pride. Jews were ordered to wear the yellow Star of David and forced into an enclosed ghetto, called Baron Hirsch, adjacent to the rail lines.



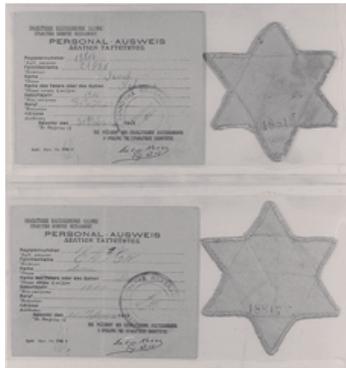
The persecution of Jews, summer 1942  
Jewish Museum of Greece

On **March 15, 1943**, the Germans began deporting Jews from Thessaloniki. Every three days, freight cars crammed with an average of 2,000 Thessaloniki Jews headed toward Auschwitz-Birkenau.

By the **summer of 1943**, German authorities had deported 46,091 Jews.

Several factors contributed to the loss of such a large number of Jews from Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki was under direct German occupation. The Jewish community was highly concentrated in the city. Jews had no idea that they were going to killing centers; they believed the German subterfuge that they were going to work in Poland. Moreover, the controversial head rabbi, Zvi Koretz, reportedly assisted the Germans in organizing efficient roundups. Because Ladino was the first language of Thessaloniki Jews, their spoken Greek was easy to distinguish. While the possibility of escape existed, most Jews, fearing separation from their families, did not take advantage of the available options.

Thessaloniki lost 94 percent of its Jewish population in the Holocaust.



Identification cards and yellow Stars of David issued by Germans and signed by Rabbi Koretz  
Jewish Museum of Greece



# V VOLOS

Volos, an important port city on the Aegean Sea, south of Thessaloniki, has had a Jewish presence since the **fourteenth century**. There is evidence that Jews have existed in the surrounding areas since ancient times.

In **1940** there were 882 Jews living in Volos. With the occupation of Greece, Volos was placed in the Italian zone and Jews lived in relative safety until the Germans took over in September **1943**.

While the Italians were in power, Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in Thessaloniki sought sanctuary in Volos.

The resistance movement was very active in Volos. The chief rabbi, Moshe Pessah, worked with Archbishop Joachim Alexopoulos and the EAM (National Liberation Front) to find sanctuary for the city's Jews in the mountainous villages of Pelion.



**Chief Rabbi Moshe Pessah**  
Raphael Frezis, President of the Jewish  
Community of Volos



**Archbishop Joachim Alexopoulos**  
Raphael Frezis, President of the Jewish  
Community of Volos

The Germans chose **March 25, 1944**, Greek Independence Day, to deport the Jews of Volos and any Jews remaining on the Greek mainland. Due to the valiant efforts of Rabbi Pessah, Archbishop Joachim (who is honored at Yad Vashem as “Righteous Among the Nations”), and the EAM, 74 percent of Volos’s Jews were saved. Of more than 1,000 Jews living in the city in **March 1944**, only 130 were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Devastating earthquakes in **1955–57** forced many of the remaining Jews to leave Volos, and most immigrated to the United States and Israel.



# RHODES

For 2,300 years, Jews have lived on the island of Rhodes at the southern tip of the Aegean Sea. The community became Sephardic in the **sixteenth century**, and was among the most renowned Sephardic communities in the world. The synagogue in Rhodes, Kahal Shalom, was built in 1575 and is the oldest functioning synagogue in Greece.

Rhodes was part of Italy during World War II, having been ceded to the Italians after World War I. As with other areas under Italian occupation, the Jews of Rhodes remained relatively safe until the Germans occupied the island in **September 1943**.



The Kahal Shalom Synagogue, built in 1575  
Jewish Community of Rhodes

**In 1944** there were close to 2,000 Jews living on the island, 50 of whom, as Turkish citizens, fell under the protection of the Turkish consulate. The rest were deported on **July 20, 1944**.

The timing of the deportation is especially painful since, less than three months later, the Germans were forced to leave Greece. Deportations from Rhodes were the last conducted by the Germans in Greece.

On **July 20, 1944**, the Jews of Rhodes and the neighboring island of Kos were sent by boat to the Greek mainland. Crammed together in the hot summer sun, without food or water, 23 Jews died on the voyage to the mainland. Those who survived were incarcerated in the SS-operated transit

camp Haidary and then deported by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Only 151 Jews from Rhodes survived the Holocaust.



Yodef Levy and Dona Habif, April 1944. Both died at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Aron Hasson, Rhodes  
Historical Society



Yehuda Levy and his family in 1928. Yehuda and his wife, Miriam Notrica, died at Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1944.

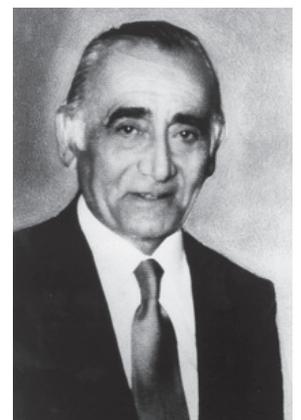
Stella Levy and Aron Hasson, Rhodes



# ZAKYNTHOS

Although the Jews of Zakynthos share a similar history with the Jews of the Ionian islands, all 275 Zakynthos Jews survived the Holocaust. The courageous actions of Bishop Chrysostomos and Mayor Loukas Karrer in helping save Zakynthos Jews led Yad Vashem to recognize them as "Righteous Among the Nations."

In **1944** Mayor Loukas Karrer was ordered at gunpoint to hand over a list of Jews residing on the island. The list, presented to the Germans by Bishop Chrysostomos, contained only two names: Mayor Karrer and Bishop Chrysostomos. The bishop bravely told the Germans, "Here are your Jews. If you choose to deport the Jews of Zakynthos, you must also take me, and I will share their fate."



Mayor Loukas Karrer  
Jewish Museum of Greece



The Mordos family before World War II  
Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum

correspondence impossible. Historians do know that a boat was never sent to deport the Jews of Zakynthos and that all 275 of the island's Jews survived the Holocaust.

The first boat to arrive with aid to the victims of the **1953** earthquake was from Israel, with a message that read, "The Jews of Zakynthos have never forgotten their mayor or their beloved bishop and what they did for us."

In the interim, all the Jews of the island were safely hidden in the mountainous villages. Though the whole island knew what was happening, not one person revealed their whereabouts.

There is evidence that Chrysostomos actually communicated with Hitler himself to beg for the lives of the Jews on the island. Unfortunately, a devastating earthquake in **1953** destroyed all archives on the island, making proof of the



Bishop Chrysostomos  
Jewish Museum of Greece

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A Holocaust memorial in Volos, dedicated in 1998

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