



The Coming Out of Jewish History in Greece

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By “coming out” of Jewish history, I refer to a process, liberating for its actors and usually viewed by others with a kind of astonishment. This process took place in the 1990’s and brought to the public sphere various agents who attempted to narrate “Jewish histories” or “Greek-Jewish histories”, expressing contested ideologies and policies. I will focus on public and academic “events” (voir Appendice, note A), which I find to be important, and which reveal the sometimes hesitant or daring, apologetic or polemic, conciliatory or demanding, introspected or extraverted, implicit or explicit, discourses on Jewish history or on Greek-Jewish history. These discourses belong to larger meta-narratives that underlie either arguments about the past or comprehensive explanations of historical experience and knowledge. More precisely, I would like to connect the relevant recent events to their historical meta-narratives, and to relate them to historiographic trends. The question that underlies my inquiry is the following: What is at stake in every attempt to relate a Jewish past with the Greek national narrative?

Since the 1990’s, a discourse on the “duty of memory” of the victims of the Shoah forges the framework of three strong meta-narratives which sometimes overlap: The first views Greece’s Jewish past under the spectre either of an ever returning antisemitism or of an idyllic peaceful coexistence between Jews and Christians. The second meta-narrative either emphasizes Jewish contribution to Greek welfare or considers Jews and Judaism as a force disrupting the nation. A third meta-narrative conflates today’s multiculturalism with yesterday’s cosmopolitanism and is in danger of anachronism.

Memory

The destruction of European Jewry and the establishment of the state of Israel shaped the writing of Jewish history and Jews’ self-understanding. We had to wait till the 80’s to see a “memory boom” in the world and the consequent meta-narrative on the duty “not to forget”. The memory issue was at stake in the international scene, and in events such as the Bitburg controversy (1985), the Historikerstreit (1986-7), the Waldheim affair (1986), the Barbi trial (1987) etc. In the “era of the witness”(Wiewiorka, 2002), massive publication of testimonies had a profound effect on historiography and on intellectual life in general. By means of books, films and TV, the awareness of Holocaust became even broader in the 1990’s. The new millennium and the ending of Europe’s divisions marked the multiplication of commemorations, monuments and museums.

The breaking of silence on the Shoah in Greece coincided with an emergence of Greek- Jewish history. It should be reminded that beyond the moral and material demolition, the sense of loss, the haunting feelings of sorrow and guilt, the demands and compromises of rebuilding a “new life”, which were common to survivors all over the world, Greek survivors faced not simply the Cold War, but a civil war and the terrorism exercised by its victors. Very few accounts were written in the years 1945-55, while some Greek-Jewish testimonies were collected by Yad Vashem in the 60’s (Novitch, 1967).

In 1990, N. Stavroulakis published a short survey entitled “The Jews of Greece”, an account that

stops with the arrival of the Germans (Stavroulakis, 1990). Stavroulakis was the first creative director of the Jewish Museum of Greece (in Athens) and, above all perhaps, the soul of the renovation and the re-opening of the synagogue in Chania in 1999, a cultural institution that deserves attention of its own (voir appendice, B). Stavroulakis' essay was probably the first attempt to deal with Greece's Jewish history (voir appendice, C). In the same year, i.e., 1990, a small group of young women, both Jewish and non Jewish, founded the "Society for the Study of Greek Jewry" in Salonica. Their aim was to demonstrate the interest of studying different aspects of the long Jewish past of Greece. Although their disciplinary approaches varied –from psychoanalysis to literature–, modern history occupied a privileged place in their interests. Their ambition was to keep high academic standards while addressing a large public, by no means exclusively Jewish. The "founding meeting" took place at E. Amariglio's house, who was to become the author of an important memoir of her own experience in Auschwitz (Amariglio, 2000).

At that time she had already accomplished a project of collecting oral testimonies of survivors from Salonica that had been supported by the Jewish community; these testimonies would be published in 1998, in an important volume (Amariglio – Nar , (eds), 1998) under the painstaking editing by F. Abatzopoulou, also one of the Society's founding members. In 1991 an ambitious international conference on "Jews in Greece. Questions of History in the *longue durée*", organized by the above Society, was held in Salonica (Avdela- Varon (eds), 1995). It aimed at showing the complexity, the continuities and the ruptures in a long Jewish presence in Greece.

I wouldn't like to insist on the issues that were raised, I would rather insist on the event itself. Hundreds of invitations were mailed and the conference was announced in the local newspapers. I remember an amphitheater full of people and many Salonican Jews among them. The tension was high when political issues, such as Venizelos' policy in the 20's, were raised, while in the session on the Holocaust, emotion was powerful. I believe I was not just imagining it when I heard people telling each other that "time had come to break the silence".

A special issue of the journal "Sygchrona Themata" in 1994, prepared by E. Avdela, another member of the Society, followed up the conference. Its title "Approaches to a history of Greek minorities" was perhaps misleading: "Minority", a "technical", i.e. legal term, may indeed contribute towards integrating a Jewish history under one vision -that of a national state- and in interaction with other minorities but it may also conceal its uniqueness. The term did not represent the path followed by the authors. However, the many faces of Jewish history unfolded by the contributors and hosted in a respected journal could function as an opening of windows for historians.

The Society (SSGJ) continued its activities for the following eight years: talks, three more conferences, even a concert with music composed in the camp of Terezin. A conference that took place in 1997 on "The Jews of Greece during the German Occupation" (Beneviste, 1998) represents the most important paths of research on the subject –such as the possibilities of escape, the issue of collaboration and Jewish properties, the value of testimonies etc. - which unfortunately have not been fully explored since then.

But the life of the SSGJ was a "symptom" of that decade. It coincided with a new phase for the Jewish Community of Salonica, and more specifically with its "opening" to the surrounding society. As it was mentioned above, the time had come for cultural diversity to be appreciated. The mourning was over or survivors felt less insecure. A new council and a new president at the head of Salonica's community appeared willing to give the Jewish community "the place it deserved" among other Jewish communities in the world, a role "meritorious of its past", respectful to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The still unpublished memoir of the president of the community from 1993 to 2001, the late A. Sefiha, is very instructive in understanding a major shift: this was the time when the community decided to become visible, to affirm its presence, to be vocal about both its glorious past and its tragic end. Three anniversaries were of great importance: 1992, i.e., the 500 years since the expulsion from Spain and the establishment of the Sephardic

community; 1995, i.e., the 50 years since the end of the war; and 1997, i.e., Salonica being “cultural capital” of Europe. Each of these anniversaries generated cultural and social events that would be too long to list here. I shall only mention a conference co-organized in 1992 by the community and the Aristotle University on “Jewish communities in South-Eastern Europe from the 15th century to the end of WWII” (Hassiotis (ed), 1997). The founding of the Jewish museum of Salonica, inaugurated in 2001 (voir appendice, D), and the monument to the victims of the Holocaust, finally inaugurated in 1997. An attempt to study the conception of a monument, its realization and its life should take into account the government’s longstanding refusal to undertake such an initiative and the different agents who were determinant in the decision making (such as the American Jewish community, according to E. Venizelos the minister of culture at that time, or the Greek American lobby according to the president of the community at that time). The magisterial ceremony for its inauguration with the presence of international personalities, the changes in its visibility (its move from the initial place to its current site in a highly symbolic central place), its use as a site in which to project different discursive policies (memory of Jewish victims, anti-Israeli protests) and its meaning for the citizens are also of great importance in understanding the monument’s place in public history.

Survivors explicitly expressed their desire to leave a record of events to their children and grandchildren. About twenty personal testimonies of Greek survivors of the Holocaust were published in the 1990s (Abatzopoulou , 1993; Handali, 1995; Natzari, 1991; Perahia, 1990; Strumzah, 1997; Yakoel, 1993). Some of them are of great historical importance: the diary of Y. Yakoel, the community’s lawyer during the Occupation, or the notes by a prisoner M. Natzari in the camp. The publication of the collected oral testimonies mentioned above focuses on the camp imprisonment and reveals the multiple faces of the Jewish Greek experience. Biographical details speak of the complexity of the historical experience. An anthropological research conducted by a German scholar in those years but published in 2006 also focuses on the memory of a community of survivors and their children (Lewkowicz, 2006). The voices of survivors were heard in a new environment dominated by the rise of identity politics. In a new space of public history, the collective memory of new or old ethnic groups met with the official history. Publication of testimonies carried on after 2000 (Bourlas, 2000; Asser-Pardo, 1999; Benroubi-Abastado, 1999; Kamhi - Sephiha, 2007).

However, it took a slightly different direction. The published narratives do not focus exclusively on the Shoah but also on rescues hid from the Germans and on Jewish life before the war. Nostalgia claims its own place behind the heavy curtain of the Shoah. Facing new multiculturalism with fear, some turn to “a world we have lost”, defending old, familiar values, habits and tastes (Benroubi, 2002; Proceedings of the international conference, 1999). This “cultural shift” appears in the rediscovery of the Sephardic heritage, and takes the form of a new interest in the Judeo-Spanish language or in old cooking habits. Folklorization and exoticization seem to be the price to pay for the lost cosmopolitanism.

In the 1990’s the commemoration of the Holocaust Day (Yom ha-Shoah) changed. TV entered into the usual ceremony that since the end of the war used to take place in the Synagogue and the Jewish cemetery / that had taken place in synagogues and Jewish ceremonies since the end of the war.. The ceremony was conducted mostly among Jews and the kaddish was interrupted only by mute weeping. But since the event was announced in the evening news some deputies attended the ceremony. The year of 97, when Salonica was the European cultural capital, was again a turning point. Since then, and particularly in the election years, local candidates for the Parliament or the municipality pay a visit to the Synagogue. In 2005, following the other European countries the 27ⁿ of January, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz was instituted as a day of national remembrance. In the official ceremonies organized by the community representatives of the government and the political parties as well as local authorities are present as well as many Jewish citizens and a few non Jewish.

Too much of Holocaust? In Greece as elsewhere there is a discourse attributing a causal relation

between remembering Jewish suffering and “forgetting” the pain of others in the present and in the past; it constructs the memory of Jewish victimization as implicitly or explicitly hyperbolic (voir Appendice, E). In a pervasive way this discourse forges Jewish memory as a weapon against the human community implicitly claiming that “belonging” to the community of human sufferers requires that Jews not insist too much on their own. This is not of course the case of historical studies that reveal concrete relationships between memory, political conjuncture and collective sentiments. But condemnations of the commemorations or even of scholar work often imply the moral superiority of the critic who “knows” the dimension and the role that Holocaust should have and prescribes the right doses of mourning, memory and conscience (Lang, 2005).

Memory discourse forges the framework of three strong sometimes overlapping meta-narratives of Jewish history in Greece and I shall briefly comment on them, focusing on the shift that occurred since the 1990’s.

Antisemitism versus peaceful coexistence

There are two contradictory discourses when it comes to dealing with Jewish past and present in Greece: “Antisemitism does not exist in Greece because it has never existed”, claims the one. “Antisemitism is here, present everywhere, always ready to reemerge, because it has never ceased to exist” claims the other. Modern historiography has opposed the traditional “lachrymose conception of history” that regarded antisemitism as the predominant and inevitable force of Jewish history. Effectively, in the 1980’s Jewish history moved away from the history of persecutions (cf. Salo, 1928; AA.VV., *Jewish Social Studies*, 1976; Cohen, Rosman (eds), 2009).

However, Greek historiography’s real problem was less the emphasis on persecutions, than the “invisibility” of the Jews, effaced as they were from a homogeneous national entity. In 1994 S. Marketos drew attention to the writing of the nation’s history without a mention of the existence of Jews (Marketos, 1994). The silencing of the Jewish past of Salonica was, for P. Vidal-Naquet, a “déjudaization de la mémoire” (Vidal-Naquet, 1991). This “omission” went hand in hand with self-confident and complacent declarations on the absence of antisemitism from Greek history. In a pervasive perspective antisemitism is sometimes considered to be the work of the Jews themselves: accordingly, their particularity provoked hatred, if they had been assimilated they would have saved themselves, their own leaders betrayed them..., etc. The blame is placed on the victim, hence the national narrative remains irreproachable!

A selection of documents on the History of the Jews of Greece by the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 1998 (Constandopoulou, Veremis (eds.), 1998), exemplifies the tendency to depict the past as one of a peaceful coexistence nourished by a kind of Greek exceptionalism. Most of the published documents are statements stressing the assistance given by Greek people to the Jews of Greece. This version of official history has as its ally in the sense of insecurity felt by the Jewish communities, which are finding themselves in a double bind situation: condemning antisemitic statements and acts and, at the same time, negating antisemitism’s existence.

Since the 90’s, however, there have been some daring approaches to break the self-confidence and self-complacency of official history. In 1998 appeared F. Abatzopoulou’s major study of the stereotypes dominating literary representations of the Jews and especially those persecuted by the Nazis (Abatzopoulou, 1998). The author, who had already distinguished herself in the editing and the literary study of the Holocaust Greek testimonies, analyzed literary works both in their historical uniqueness and in the tropes they share with the rest of European literature.

In G. Margaritis’ collection of articles (Margaritis, 2005), antisemitism becomes an analytical tool that allows the historian to understand the workings of Greek nationalism. To achieve this goal Margaritis conflates Jewish historical existence in Greece with the existence of other “unwanted compatriots”. His contribution, however, has at least two merits: on the one hand, by challenging Greek exceptionalism, he shows that anti-Jewish explosions in Greece were very parallel to events

taking place in Europe; on the other hand, he explains these episodes as indicative of the pathology of Greek nationalism.

B. Pierron invented the concept of «exclusivisme culturel» to speak of the encounter between different antisemitic variants (economic, political religious) that was forged primarily in the Ottoman period to constitute later the basis of Greek nationalism (Pierron, 1996). The reception of his book, translated into Greek in 2004, was indicative of the resistance to accept a history of Greek antisemitism.

Jewish contribution versus Jewish disrupting of the nation

A discourse that emphasizes the minority's importance in society reflects both its insecurity and its desire to justify its position. In Jewish historiography it was meant to provide Jews themselves with confidence and to persuade non-Jewish readers that Jewish status should be ameliorated: as the argument goes, by discounting Jews, an integral component of European entity, the majority impoverishes itself and works counter to its own interests (Rosman, 2007). Although Jewish scholarship has moved beyond apologetics, the contribution discourse is often a rejoinder to the view of Jews as a force disrupting the Greek nation.

In the petition in favor of the Jews signed by the archbishop and by a list of Greek intellectuals, academics and leaders of professional associations during the Nazi Occupation, an emphasis was put on: "the Hebrew (sic) community's contribution to Greece and to their loyalty to the state". Several stories emphasize Jewish contribution to the nation's welfare, such as the story of Colonel Frezis, held to be the first high-ranking officer to have been killed in action on the front during the War in 1940-41. The contribution meta-narrative is also to be found in solid historical studies, showing, for instance, how Salonica benefited from Jewish activity: accordingly, Jewish merchants, entrepreneurs and industrialists initiated methods and culture; education, architectural style, western manners were introduced by Jews; Jewish workers founded the socialist movement, etc.

The contribution meta-narrative is counterbalanced by powerful discourses that point to an eternal opposition between Judaism and Greekness, or Orthodoxy, and view Jews as unpatriotic traitors and enemies of Hellenism. These discourses are by no means limited to extreme right or religious milieux nor to ultra-nationalist bloggers. The origins of the ideology of Jewish disloyalty to Greece goes back to the Jews' pro-Ottoman role –both real and imagined. In the inter-war period Greece's antisemitic press singled out the Jews as traitors who plotted against the territories ceded during the Balkan war. The vocabulary of Jewish disloyalty would become a virtual trope suggesting that Greek Jews aren't really Greek.

In 1999, the SSGJ invited Professor Minna Rozen from Tel Aviv University to give a lecture in Athens on the recently "discovered" lost archive of the Jewish Community of Salonica, to be found in Moscow. An article on a Sunday newspaper on the interest of her talk for Greek history was succeeded by an unprecedented exchange on the ever suspicious role of the Jews in Greek history; they were mostly accused of having acted against the national liberation project (voir Appendice, F). Academic conflicts and pure antisemitism had their part in a game initiated by nationalist graduate students. Five years later, Pierron's publication in Greece was followed by similar reactions.

Two recent approaches challenge, in their own way, the dichotomy contribution versus disruption: According to R. Molho (2001), Salonica represents both a Jewish particularity and a Greek exception: Jews were deeply rooted in the city. While possessing their own culture and not being ethnically Greek, they saw themselves as not just in Greece but of it, and so they felt the prerogative to make demands upon government and society. More recently, in her own book K. E. Fleming (2008) discuss the "Judeo-Greek culture" that began to emerge in the 1920's and 1930's and was as much a reflection of assimilation as it was of a new distinctly Jewish, Greek identity, encompassing not only a religious but also a civic status. This identity was tragically short lived and Jews from

Greece came to be finally perceived as Greek Jews, when they emigrated to the U.S. or to Palestine and Israel.

Today's multiculturalism, yesterday's cosmopolitanism

In our multicultural society the contribution discourse is still very much with us albeit in a new incarnation. It tends either to insist on the right to be different or to regard Jews as a trope, as a metaphor or even as a model. Jewish historiography reflects the new trends. Jewish cultural history (voir Appendice, note G) is an effort to see the connections between daily life and intellectual reflection, challenging dichotomies such as textual continuity versus cultural ruptures or isolation versus assimilation. In the 80's and 90's the cultural shift played its role in the formation of a new understanding of Jewish identity and culture in its local context. Jewish self-definition was considered to be "bound up in a tangled web with the non Jewish environment in which the Jews lived, at once conditioned by how non-Jews saw the Jews and by how the Jews adopted and resisted the majority culture's definition of them (Biale, 1994). K.E. Fleming's aforementioned book reflects contemporary historiographical trends: Greek Jewish history is viewed as constituted by multiple local histories of multiple people, Romaniotes and Sephardim who emerged as a unified entity in the 20th century.

M. Mazower's best-seller on the history of Salonica (Mazower, 2004) adopted the perspective of the multi-ethnic past. This is an extremely well written book by a talented historian who is also well known by the public, and its launching attracted hundreds of people in both Salonica and Athens. It was warmly welcomed by those whose somehow romanticized vision, though ignoring the miserable living conditions of the vast majority of both Christians and Jews, forges a legitimate critique of nationalism and xenophobia. On the other hand, nationalist milieux regarded it as one more gesture suspicious of downplaying the "greekness" of the city. The issue was even raised at the municipal council where nationalistic critique was opposed to multiculturalist admiration. The multiethnic reality of the past is sometimes conceived as a threat in the present. In the summer of 2008 the municipal majority refused the proposal to include Salonica in the web of "martyr towns", under the pretext that Jews did not perish in the city, since they were deported ...

What about a new history of the Jews in Greece?

Any endeavour to write a Greek-Jewish history has been a reflection upon and reaction to the surrounding dominant culture. Greek-Jewish history emerged in the context of memory growth and has been governed by meta-narratives that to a large extent conditioned the issues it raised and the forms it took. The power of the above meta-narratives has been strong enough to fill the large "lacunae" of historical research. From an external perspective, the historiographical lacunae could be attributed to the marginal status of Greek Jewish History. A "normalization" (Appendice, note H) would mean the entrance of Jewish History to the academe, and this can only happen if Greek historiography opens itself to subjects other than national history, as well as to its deconstruction. Needless to say, this "normalization" could only follow a decline of antisemitism and a retreat of nationalism.

Now, from an internal point of view: It has been said that modern Jewish historiography is the historiography of Jewish politics even when its explicit concerns appear to lie elsewhere. In the 1970s Jewish history was indeed still dominated by research on Jewish politics in Diaspora, responses to antisemitism, and emancipation through the study of men and ideas. In the 1980s, however, Jewish history moved away from previously dominant intellectual and religious history to social history. The central concern of social history has been to incorporate ordinary people into the historical narrative, to reveal structural forces, local specificity and the multiplicity of Jewish responses. The process of assimilation and the role of communal institutions acquired a different meaning (Appendice, note I) and shed new light in the historiography of Jewish politics. To

introduce the notion of social history meant to deflate historiographical interest from its preoccupation with politics but political aspects cannot be ignored since the political dimension is also present as a factor within the internal life of the Jewish community itself.

In the Greek case, one can admit that Greek-Jewish social history has never been conducted. Of course there are exceptions, such as a path breaking article by E. Avdela which deals with questions of class, gender and ethnicity in the mid-war period (Avdela, 1998), the work of V. Ritzaleos whose understanding of political history is informed by social and economic issues (Rozen, 2005), or the work by M. Rozen contextualizing migration to Palestine (Ritzaleos, forthcoming). But generally speaking we have passed from a more or less traditional political history to investigations of the cultural meaning of Jewish past realities; we still miss a deeper knowledge of the formation of social classes and groups. Religious commitment and secularization, vocational transformation, social conflict within the community, mass migration to Palestine, family and gender (Hyman, 2009; Magnus, 1990), philanthropy, popular and high culture are among the common themes of study that still need to be researched.

Despite impressions, it is worth noticing that not even the history of the Holocaust has progressed since the mid 90's: A conference organized in 2005 at the Panteion University focused on the political and moral significances of the Shoah rather than on the fate of the Jews of Greece (Georgiadou, Rigos (eds.), 2007). On the other hand, a big conference on "The Holocaust and the Local", held in June 2008 in Salonica, coorganized by the University of Macedonia, Yale University, and the Network for the Study of Civil Wars, was much advertised as "the first international conference on the Shoah in Greece" (Appendice, note J). However, despite claims for innovation, it could not conceal the poverty of the Greek historiographic case, the lack of both archival research and conceptual and methodological framework.

Last but not least, regarding "events", I would like to mention the activities of the "Group for the Study of the Jews of Greece" (Appendice, note K) that meets once a month for a seminar, on the premises of the University of Macedonia since 2005, thus offering a stage for researchers to present their work and much discussion for those interested in Greek-Jewish history. It aims at incorporating Jewish history in Greek historiography, attempting a comparative approach between Greek-Jewish history and other Jewish histories, and reflecting on the categories of historical analysis.

It would not be unreasonable to argue that we are currently going through a second phase in Jewish history in Greece. The first phase coincided broadly with the 90's, when we witnessed a new interest in the study of Greek Jewry, an interest due to many factors, as I tried to show. People coming from a variety of backgrounds, contributed with their work and their questions to the charting of Jewish presence in the past. In the end I would say that a field of study has gained at least some legitimacy, it has nourished a more self-consciously critical stance for history making and it has also positively complexified modern Greek historical consciousness. If the 90's were the years of "coming out", I would say that the current second phase is "post-celebratory" and more demanding of reflection.

Appendice

*This paper was delivered at the international conference "History Between reflexivity and Critique", organized by HISTOREIN/ΙΣΤΟΠΕΙΝ (a review of the past and other stories), the International Commission of Historiography and Theory of History and the Historical Archive of the University of Athens, (October 30-November 1, 2008) Athens.

Note A. An event is understood as “a fragment of reality that carries perceptions and sensibilities constructed before it occurs, though it also submits itself to contingencies. It translates relations and policies, fabricates conflicts and conciliations and lives long after it occurred through social and political relations and memories” (Farge, 2002).

Note B. See <http://www.etz-hayyim-hania.org>

Note C. Before that we have only Joseph Nehama’s monumental work on the history of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, re-published in the 70’s (*Histoire des Israélites de Salonique*, 7 volumes, Thessalonique 1978) a study on the Jews of Yannena by Rea Dalven (1990) and a volume edited in Israel and devoted to Salonica (Centre de recherche sur le judaïsme de Salonique, 1967).

Note D. See <http://www.jmth.gr>

Note E. See for example the article by T. Judt (2008) versus C. J. Dean (2006)

Note F. “To Vima” (20.12.1998, 7.3.1999)

Note G. Cf. the essays by M. Rosman, “The Jewish Contribution to (Multicultural) Civilization” and “Prolegomenon to the Study of Jewish Cultural History” (Rosman, 2007, pp. 111-130 and 131-153).

Note H. In the U.S. the “normalization” of Jewish historiography was the result of the decline of antisemitism, the destigmatization of Jewishness that began on the 60’s and the entrance to the academy of new historians more ethnically diverse than earlier cohorts (Endelman, 2001).

Note I. Cf. Hyman, 1994; Katz, 1993. On a “renewed” interest in social history in general cf. the special issue on “The Future of Social History”, in *Journal of Social History*, 37:1, 2003.

Note J. “Holocaust as Local History. Past and Present of a Complex Relationship”, Thessaloniki June 5-8, 2008.

Note K. See www.histjews.blogspot.com

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