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Of Holocaust Monuments and parking lots. Legitimizing Jewish presence in contemporary Thessaloniki

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On February 16, 2006, the president of Israel Moshe Katsav and the president of Greece Karolos Papoulias visited Thessaloniki. This was according to “El Avenir”, the newsletter of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, a ‘historic day’. The two presidents started their visit from the Holocaust Monument which had just been moved to its current location at the centre of the city at Eleftherias (Liberty) Square. An army unit was already in place to pay tribute to the two dignitaries and a “crowd of people”, most probably from the city’s Jewish community, as well as several local high-ranking officials representing the city and the state authorities welcomed them. The pupils of the community’s Jewish primary school were also present. The ceremony started with a memorial service conducted by Rabbi Frizis, a descendant of colonel Mordechai Frizis, long held to be the first high-ranking Greek officer to have been killed in action on the Albanian front during the first months of the Greek-Italian War of 1940-1941. The two presidents then laid wreaths (**slides 1 & 2**) and the national anthems of the two countries were played by the military band of the Thessaloniki-based Third Army Corps. A memorial plaque commemorating their common visit was consequently unveiled and at the end of the ceremony the two men conversed with elderly survivors of the Nazi death camps and were photographed together with young pupils from the community’s primary school.

Their next stop was the Jewish Museum of Salonica, situated in the city’s historic old market district five minutes’ walk from the Holocaust Monument (**slide 3**). The two presidents toured the museum’s halls and were, according to the newsletter, “familiarized with the illustrious and multifaceted contribution of the Jews in the life and development of Thessaloniki”. President Katsav spoke about the special place Thessaloniki holds in the history of the Jewish diaspora as an age-old refuge and an important centre of Jewish theological learning. Whereas in his response, the mayor of the city, Vassilis Papageorgopoulos, praised “the glorious history of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki”, and, as the newsletter documented, “donated to the president of Israel a gold-plated replica of the urn of the ancient Greek Macedonian king Philip the Second which had been discovered in Vergina, 60 km west of Thessaloniki in central Greek Macedonia”.

The visit of the two presidents may have been “a historic event”, but it was not in any case unique. Over the past few years a growing number of state officials visiting Thessaloniki and its Jewish community have followed, or were scheduled to follow, the same itinerary. From former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Perez and the Oecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the then acting German foreign minister Joshka Fischer and the Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, all have walked down the same memory lane starting with wreath laying at the Holocaust Monument and continuing with a visit to the Jewish Museum before meeting with the community’s

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board and members. The two sites, inaugurated in 1997 and 2001 respectively, have played a major role in heightening the visibility of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki. Not necessarily in the city itself -where signs of Jewish presence are nowadays still few and hidden and public interest in its multiethnic past is at best limited into small intellectual circles; but in the broader scene of high politics and their highly ritualistic performance. By providing for the necessary venues of ceremonial reception, these two sites have radically transformed the outlook of the community and have for the first time allowed it to fashion an acceptable and instantly recognizable public image.

Yet, as this paper argues what these sites and the commemorative rituals they host demonstrate, is not merely a case of successful public relations. Rather, they primarily constitute positive, public affirmations of the uncontested reality of contemporary Jewish presence in Thessaloniki. Through their sheer material existence, the symbolic meanings they convey, and the performative practices they demand, they function as means for legitimizing the community's existence. In the eyes of its distinguished visitors and the wider public alike, the community *is* nowadays the Holocaust Monument and the museum. Both sites inscribe it into the city's mnemonic landscape and through it into the memory of the nation at large. As such, although being testimonies to cultural difference (be that in life or in death), what they essentially offer is not so much new, plural, or revised readings of the city's and the nation's past. As it will become apparent in the pages to follow, their intention is not at all to facilitate a counter-memory work that would eventually legitimize a different appreciation of Greek history from a Jewish perspective. These sites do not "reclaim" a particular and exclusive Jewish past nor do they fashion themselves as a vindication and a corrective to the long silences of the conventional grecocentric historical narrative. Rather, through the display of the Salonica Jews' "illustrious" past and the monumentalization of their extermination, a dwindling community of less than a thousand people aspires to gain symbolic acceptance into the broader contours of the Greek society/nation of *today*. Although they refer to the past, the sites are there to secure a present.

The small size of the community, its complete and successful assimilation, and the nature of contemporary Greek nationalism (with its nineteenth-century emphasis on organic, singular identifications still largely operative), are often cited as the crucial factors determining the symbolic content with which the community has endowed its sites. Such a macroscopic approach lays strong emphasis on the compulsive, exclusionary nature of Greek nationalism and conceives the relation between the Jewish community and the Greek state as one of subordination, enfeeblement and self-negation. Yet, the stories behind the establishment of the Holocaust Monument, as well as those about its subsequent presence in the cityscape, allow us to see the relation of the community with its past and its position in the present through a different light. It is therefore on these stories that I will focus today. On the one hand, establishing a legitimate and acceptable public representation of the community's past, constructing it as a "national heritage", proved to be an arduous business that involved surprisingly many actors in unexpectedly many places. The monumentalization of the community's death was to a large extent forged outside Thessaloniki, in fact outside Greece altogether. Following its trajectory allows us to see how the local and the national are in fact deeply ingrained into the global, or else, how in the case of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, insertion into the conventional national memory has to be seen as an essentially transnational process. On the other hand, the stories about the before and the after of the monument's

establishment show that this insertion has far from stabilized the meanings of the Holocaust of the Salonica Jews, the appropriate ways of honouring it, and consequently the community's public acceptability. Since its inception the Holocaust monument was first and foremost a discursive space inhabited by multiple meanings and continued to be even more so after its materialization. As with the actors, the meanings the Holocaust Monument took in Salonica eventually transgressed (although they never challenged) the symbolic framework of Greek nationalism within which the community constantly attempts to fix it. Unwelcomed by the monument's custodians, and yet unavoidable, these meanings transformed it into an arena where dramas concerning other places and other people than the exterminated Salonica Jews and their few descendants, were reenacted.

The erection of a public monument to honor the deportation and death of the 50,000 Jews of Thessaloniki seems to have been a long-held demand of the city's Jewish community. The Holocaust itself was commemorated in the community's main synagogue already from the early 1950s following the introduction of a National Day for the Heroes and Victims of the Holocaust in Israel (**slide 4**). Later, a monument was erected inside the small, new cemetery of the community in Stavroupoli a working- and lower-middle class district at the western end of the city. This monument functioned in tandem with the synagogue as the two principal sites of Holocaust remembrance. Yet, despite the systematic presence of outside high-ranking state and municipal officials, Holocaust remembrance was an essentially introspect affair that strengthened internal solidarity and group identity by transforming the community into a collectivity of common mourning.

The city itself remained literally oblivious to the memory of the tragic loss of one fifth of its then population. Already from the late 1970s, successive requests by the community to the responsible municipal authorities, (conservative and progressive alike), for the erection of a centrally placed public monument were meeting with initial condescension and oral approval, but no further steps were ever taken. In 1986 the municipal council finally decided that a future Holocaust Monument would be erected at the small and remote "Square of the Jewish Martyrs" in the eastern part of the city. To this decision, the community outrightly objected. Its firm position was that the monument should be placed at Liberty Square, one of Thessaloniki's main squares and a place of heightened memory value: it was there that in July 1942 9,000 male Jews were summoned up by the Nazi authorities, beaten up and turned into a spectacle of humiliation offered to Nazi and Greek Christian spectators alike watching from the balconies looking at the square. To this request the Municipal authorities repeatedly responded that the Square was an inappropriate place as it was used as a parking lot. Whether the municipality's stance was due to a particular, latent antisemitism, or, to a more general cold-warrior fear towards any manifestation of non-ethnically Greek presence in Macedonia, or, most probably, both, is still an open question requiring further research. Suffice it to say that state authorities were nevertheless wholeheartedly favorable to other community requests such as the complete funding of the restoration of the battered synagogue after the earthquake of 1979. The public inscription of Jewish presence and loss into a highly hellenized and equally amnesiac urban fabric was however a completely different issue.

The end of the Cold War, the cataclysmic events of the late 1980s, and the ensuing attempt to reframe Thessaloniki as a Balkan metropolis are often credited for producing a new sensibility about the city's "multicultural" past –as it was

erroneously, but so indicatively, designated. Yet, this awareness did not in any way materialize into the emergence of a plural, more diversified, urban mnemonic culture. The proliferation of statues, busts and other middle-sized monuments that devoured the urban landscape and its limited open spaces during the 1990s was certainly indicative of a frenetic mnemonic movement from below spearheaded by various local voluntary associations. However, this popularization of memory remained fairly and squarely within the contours of accepted national discourses and thus effectively hardened instead of loosening the nation's grip over civic memory. As a result, the symbolic space available for commemorating the Holocaust became virtually nonexistent.

Things nevertheless were radically reversed in 1996. The exact chain of events has yet to be documented in its entirety but it nevertheless seems clear that the catalyst for the new developments was the intervention of American government officials and American-Jewish organizations. Pressure seems to have been exerted to both the then Greek foreign minister Theodore Pangalos as well as to the Minister of Culture Evangelos Venizelos. In his visit to the United States in 1996 the latter did meet with the potent American Jewish Committee and mainly discussed the question of the Holocaust Monument in Thessaloniki. His words are an oblique but indicative testimony to the extent of American Jewish pressure, and also of the way the duty of memory was domesticated and effectively neutralized by being discursively linked to Greek Orthodox heritage celebration and the technocratic necessities of "public relations" in contemporary culture business. I quote Venizelos:

"I have met with the American Jewish Committee with which I had an extensive discussion over the whole spectrum of issues that are of interest to them. The main practical point of reference was the Monument to the Jewish Holocaust in Thessaloniki which will be inaugurated (sic, «εγκαινιάσται») during the period of the Cultural Capital of Europe. [Its inauguration] will coincide with the exhibition "Treasures from Mount Athos" and will be an opportunity for the arrival of many delegations that are highly interested («ενδιαφέρονται εντόνωζ») for this monument which we owe to the memory of the populous Jewish Community of Thessaloniki that paid a heavy toll during the Second World War."

This sudden American interest cannot be solely explained by reference to possible representations of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki to the American authorities and the American Jewish organizations. Even if there were any, these representations acquired significance primarily because they touched upon the sensibilities of the American Jewish decision makers. Over the years internal as well as external considerations had converged into moving the Holocaust at the forefront of American public life. Peter Novick has traced down this forwarding of the Holocaust within American Judaism although we still lack a comprehensive analysis of how it was then projected worldwide as a component of American foreign policy. Already from the early nineteen-seventies there was a growing concern among American Jewish communal leaders that fast declining antisemitism, increasing intermarriage rates and cultural assimilation would thwart ethnic identification among the younger generations of American Jews. Holocaust ignorance was diagnosed as the main source of an enfeebled Jewishness; consequently, a heightened Holocaust awareness was proposed as a remedy.

Thus, Holocaust gradually became the core part of a reconfigured American Jewish identity. As with all things American, this did not remain an internal affair.

Holocaust memory was also linked to Middle Eastern politics as a primal vehicle for curbing anti-Israel public sentiment which had been in steep rise in the western world since the early 1980s. Inciting Christian guilt would generate sympathy towards Israel and therefore consolidate an international commitment to safeguard its existence. And finally, in the post-Cold War climate of the 1990s, Holocaust memory also constituted one of the chief building materials for reconstructing the western world as a moral community. This community was increasingly spoken through the discourses and rituals of tolerance and humanity and Holocaust commemoration seemed to exemplify them best.

Promoting Holocaust memory had therefore become a priority in American and, consequently, international politics and it was this new development that made the issue of a monument in Thessaloniki an urgent matter in Greek-American (Jewish) relations. Greek Jewish matters were read through an American Jewish lens and were evaluated accordingly. Thus, the question of Holocaust remembrance in Thessaloniki was transformed from a local affair between a reluctant municipality and a small community into a issue of international relations. Reconfigured as such it was subsequently inscribed into national politics and became a ministerial concern. By early 1996 the Greek Ministry of Culture took over the whole issue. Upon its recommendation, on March 28, 1996 the municipal council of Thessaloniki convened to discuss the “urgent issue” of the replacing of the monument and decided to erect it opposite the former Hirsch (and nowadays Ippokrateion) Hospital where the former Jewish working-class settlement “151” stood. The Jewish Community acceded although the decision did not eventually concur with its desire to place the monument in Liberty Square. The Ministry provided the necessary funds which amounted to thirty million drachmas (ca. 90,000 euros) and in August 1996 proceeded with the announcement of an open artistic competition to decide the design of the monument. The jury was to be composed of the members of the Ministry’s Committee for the Creation of Monuments, Memorials and Statues, to which a representative of the municipality and one of the Community would be added. Nevertheless, in December 1996 the competition was cancelled. Two months afterwards, on February 19, 1997 the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki authorized the chief representative of Greek Jewry, the Athens-based Central Board of the Jews of Greece (Κεντρικό Ισραηλιτικό Συμβούλιο), to deal with the question of the establishment of the monument. At the same time, the Ministry of Culture was finding itself under acute pressure since the Ministry of Foreign affairs demanded that the Monument be ready on time for the upcoming visit of a delegation of American Jewish congressmen, congresswomen and senators in Thessaloniki on June 29, 1997. Fear of “international embarrassment” had once more reshifted the issue into a question of national priority. Thus, after deliberations (again, not directly with the community but with the president and the secretary of the Central Board), the Ministry of Culture conferred to the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki the exclusive right to select the most appropriate design and proceed with its construction. A typical municipal approval was instantly given. Suddenly and ironically, all obstacles were therefore overcome and the Community found itself with unrestricted freedom of movement. A design was commissioned to the renowned Jewish Yugoslav sculptor Nandor Glid and although not ready for the visit of the American Jewish congressmen, the monument was finally unveiled on Sunday, November 23, 1997 by the president of Greece Kostas Stefanopoulos in the presence of various dignitaries from Greece, but also the United States, Israel and Europe (**slide 5**). The monument remained there until early 2006 when construction works for the building of an underground parking lot necessitated its removal and

once again opened up the question of its placement. Since the removal coincided with the imminent visit in the city of the Israeli president Moshe Katsav and the loss of public face loomed large in the horizon, the Community's president suggested, and the city's mayor instantly agreed, that the monument be placed in Liberty Square. This was eventually done and the Monument now stands at the lower end of the square keeping company to the busy parking lot still there (**slide 6**). What had therefore begun with the Community had ended up with the Community. Having toured around the globe, Holocaust memory had finally come back home.

Its specific, local meaning now seemed to be as fixed as it has never been. Indeed, the monument aimed primarily at honouring the dead by securing a prominent and legitimate place for the Holocaust of the Salonica Jews in national history. In providing a brief historical outline for the needs of the design competition, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki resorted to the figurative trope of catastrophe and heroism (a trope long applied in the narrative reconstruction of Greek history as a martyrology), in order to fit the extermination of the Salonica Jews into it:

"In the concentration camps", the outline read, "crematoria were used. There 50,000 Salonica Jews were exterminated. A crowning and unknown to many event, that constituted the modern "Arkadi" of Greek history [was that] on August 15, 1944 [note that the day corresponds with the major Greek Orthodox Feast of Holy Virgin], the Salonica Jews rebelled, raised the Greek flag that had made out of their uniforms' rags, stormed the crematoria, resisted to the Germans and when they could not resist any more, blew up the crematorium and themselves. A major act of heroism from the Greek Salonica Jews that is entered into the resplendent pages of glory of Greek History".

Thus, what is most often portrayed as the single most inherently unintelligible and incommensurable event in history, the one whose uniqueness does not allow even its use as a yardstick for assessing and understanding the extent of other human catastrophes, is here domesticated by being relegated to yet another manifestation of a central symbol of Greek Orthodox sacrifice. In an ironic act of reversal, the resistance of Greek Orthodox fighters to Ottoman rule in the Cretan monastery of Arkadi in 1867 and their voluntary blowing up when any further resistance was impossible and Ottoman troops were about to storm the monastery, the "Holocaust of Arkadi", as is officially referred to, lends meaning and, most importantly, visibility to the Holocaust of the Salonica Jews. Even the monument's aesthetic choices seem to condone this message. The Holocaust is figuratively represented as a fusion of slender human bodies consumed by a fire whose tongues form a menorah (**slide 7**). Whereas Glid's earlier and acclaimed work at Dachau (**slide 8**) provided a more directly recognizable allusion to the realities of the concentration camps by blending the agonizing human form with the barbed wire, in Thessaloniki, the monument constructs instead other imaginary identifications. For its gentile viewers (to which it is primarily addressed), the figurative motive of bodies on fire recalls the stock portrayal of sacrifice in the Greek national iconography (**slide 9**).

To approach the meaning invested in the monument's construction and ritually conveyed ever since through the annual official ceremonies taking place around it as a demonstration of self-censorship and a patent proof of the community's subordinate status, would, I think, miss the point entirely. For it would idealize and methodologically confer upon a particular rendering of Holocaust memory, of Jewishness, and of a given set of Jewish-gentile relations a normative, canonical status against which all other manifestations of Jewish identity would be drawn out of

context, measured, and usually found weak. Examining questions of power and disempowerment in the public politics of the Jewish communities has therefore to be done with reference to the social and symbolic contexts within which their memorial projects operate. In the case of Salonica, the insertion of the Holocaust in the conventional national narrative has actually empowered the community. The unconditional adoption of this narrative has provided it with a usable past and has conferred upon it a long sought-after legitimacy and a heightened public recognisability.

Success in stabilizing the meaning of the Holocaust monument was therefore the necessary precondition for the public acceptance of the Jewish community. It is for that reason that any outright Holocaust denial, although abhorrent, could not essentially shaken the community's position. For denying the existence of the Holocaust *altogether* left in any case the symbolic meanings attributed to it untouched. Thus, the spraying of Nazi graffiti on the Holocaust monument in July 2000 and again in April 2003 (**slide 10**) actually solidified the particular "Greek" meaning given to it and bolstered the community's acceptance. The attacks of 2000 were widely condemned by the Greek state authorities, whereas those of 2003 were immediately linked by the community to the necessity of establishing a state-sponsored "National Day of Remembrance for the Greek Jews Heroes and Martyrs of the Holocaust", another high-profile event that would insert the Holocaust into the Greek national time this time and which was eventually legislated in 2004.

Yet, securing the monument's meaning proved to be much more difficult in August 2006 amidst the war on Lebanon. On August 1, 2006, an anti-imperialist rally was organized in Thessaloniki by several organizations affiliated with or close to the Communist Party of Greece, chief among them PAME, or, All-workers' Struggle Front. With a huge Palestinian flag on its head, the ensuing demonstration followed the expected course and passed by the American consulate where an American flag was ceremoniously burnt (**slide 11**). But then, it continued further on, towards the nearby Holocaust monument in order, as the Communist Party's newspaper *Rizospastis* reported, "to demonstrate against the genocide of the people of Palestine and Lebanon which is this time realized by Israel". There, further symbolic gestures unfolded. "Despite the attempt of the police to prevent the demonstrators from accessing the Monument", *Rizospastis* continued, "the demonstrators broke the police ring [protecting the monument], and managed to place near it pictures of the dead children of Palestine and Lebanon".

As expected, the event provoked the instant reaction of the Jewish Community which issued a written statement. It protested and denounced the act as "an attempt to desecrate the monument", and sought to restabilize its meaning. As the statement read, "This monument, which was inaugurated in 1997 from the President of the Republic Konstantinos Stefanopoulos, has been dedicated by the Greek state to the memory of the 50.000 Greek Jews of Thessaloniki who were exterminated by the Nazis. Any attempt to link it to other events is inconsiderate and offends the memory of these innocent victims".

This triggered in turn the concerted response of *Rizospastis*, PAME, and the Palestinian Community of Thessaloniki. The Jewish community's statement was unanimously condemned as a "shameless provocation" (ταμὴ πρόκληση) "to the democratic sentiments of the people". *Rizospastis* and PAME certified their deep respect for the monument and the events it commemorated by reminding the community of the shared fate of Jews and communists alike in the hands of their

“fascist” perpetrators as well as of the unconditional assistance the leftist resistance organizations and the “Greek people” in general had offered to the Jews during the hard times of the Second World War. It was this dignified past that actually vindicated their current actions. Seen in this light, placing “images of horror” near the monument was not at all an act of desecration. Rather, as PAME put it, “to hang on the monument pictures of the children of Lebanon and Palestine that had been slaughtered by the Israelis is the true payment of tribute to the victims of fascism past and present. This act of the anti-imperialists of Thessaloniki honours the monument”. By consequence, it continued, “those that degrade the monument are those that remain silent, or support the atrocities of Israel and the imperialists against the people of the Middle East”. Whereas the “Greek people” are “nowadays in their entirety against the imperialist-Israeli barbarism”, “during the past days the Jewish Community has not uttered a single word about the slaughter of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians from the criminal state of Israel that is supported by its American and European allies”.

The Holocaust was therefore inserted into another historical narrative, that of the continuous, incessant resistance of the “Greek people” against superior enemies and of its assistance to their victims. Rather than an outright negation of the conventional national-official historical narrative, this one serves as its leftist-populist supplement. This strategic discursive positioning invests it with a tremendous popularity that transcends the boundaries of the leftist parties and resonates throughout the whole political spectrum. As is apparent, it can accommodate Jewishness only as helpless victimhood. More importantly, it also fuels an agonistic form of citizenship that almost compulsively calls for a reenactment of global struggles into the local scene. In this capacity, it dethroned the Jewish community from its hard-won place and excluded it from a Greek polity symbolically conceived as a community of righteous and indignant strugglers.

Such discursive displacements were possible in the first place due to the inherently multiple and contradictory political meanings Holocaust memory carries nowadays. The stories behind the birth and life of the Holocaust monument of Thessaloniki do not only demonstrate the near total lack of control the Jewish community of Thessaloniki had over the whole procedure. This control, I remind you, passed in turn from the Municipality to the American Jewish organizations, and from there, to the Greek Ministry of Culture, the Central Board of the Jewish Communities of Greece, and finally, to the Greek Foreign Ministry before ending up for a moment and due to a fortuitous conjuncture to the Jewish community itself. What this lack of control actually makes clear is the entrapment of the community within a web of meanings regarding the Holocaust others have spanned and continue to span. These others range from the American Jews, to PAME and its ultra-leftist autonomist opponents (who in their web site have charged it of anti-semitism), and, more recently, to the Israeli ambassador who in front of the monument has named Iran and its president as part of “an international alliance of extremists that deny the Holocaust of the Jews, and cultivate antisemitism and racism”. The notion of “Holocaust” may refer to a past event, but it is preeminently a symbol whose meanings cannot be disentangled from whatever has happened *after* the event in the United States, Greece, or, more importantly, the Middle East. Every attempt of the community to stabilize its meaning is therefore by definition bound to fail. Instead, it is this constant shifting of meanings that empowers or disempowers the community itself.

To conclude. In the last decade, like many other communities, the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki has been increasingly defining itself through the Holocaust. From a communal memory nurtured by traumatic individual experiences and remembered behind closed doors by the words, or, most often, by the silences of the survivors, “Holocaust” has become a prominent cultural memory, construed as heritage and commemorated in a public monument. This monument has offered to the community an acceptable, recognizable public face in the Greek public sphere, but it has also provoked its contestation. The burden of the present weighs therefore heavily upon the community’s past, a past monumentalized and refashioned as heritage. For as I have tried to show, Holocaust monuments ultimately and inescapably reflect the very current lives and predicaments of the Jewish communities of today. As for the past lives and deaths of the 50,000 murdered Jews of Salonica themselves, the slightly paraphrased words of André Schwarz-Bart might eventually constitute the best of all tributes: **(slide 12)**

«Cette histoire alors, ne va pas finir en visitant quelque tombeau en mémoire pieuse. Parce que comme chaque autre fumée, la fumée qui se lève par les crématoires, obéit aux lois de la physique: les particules se réunissent et se dispersent selon le vent qui les pousse. Le seule pèlerinage, mes amis, serait-il donc de regarder de temps en temps, de regarder avec tristesse au ciel tempétueux de Salonique».



Photo: Eleni Hondolidou