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History of the Jews of Thessaloniki

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Main article: History of the Jews in Greece

The history of the [Jews of Thessaloniki](#), [Greece](#), reaches back two thousand years.

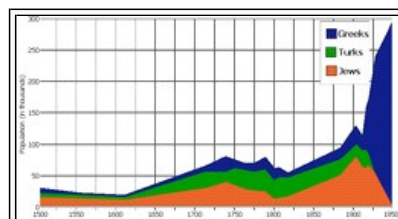
The city of [Thessaloniki](#) (also known as **Salonika**) housed a major [Jewish](#) community, mostly of [Sephardic](#) origin, until the middle of the [Second World War](#). It is the only known example of a city of this size in the [Jewish diaspora](#) that retained a Jewish majority for centuries.

Sephardic Jews immigrated to the city following their expulsion from Spain by Christian rulers under the [Alhambra Decree](#) in 1492. This community influenced the Sephardic world both culturally and economically, and the city was nicknamed *la madre de Israel* (mother of Israel). The community experienced a "golden age" in the 16th century, when they developed a strong culture in the city. Like other groups in the Ottoman Empire, they continued to practice traditional culture during the time when western Europe was undergoing industrialization. In the middle of 19th century, Jewish educators and entrepreneurs came to Thessaloniki from Western Europe to develop schools and industries; they brought contemporary ideas from Europe that changed the culture of the city. With the development of industry, both Jewish and other ethnic populations became industrial workers and developed a large working class, with labor movements contributing to the intellectual mix of the city. After Greece achieved independence from the Ottoman Empire, it made Jews full citizens of the country in the 1920s.

During [World War II](#), the [German Nazis](#) occupied Greece in 1941, and started to persecute the Jews as they had in other parts of Europe. In 1943 they forced the Jews in Thessaloniki into a [ghetto](#) near the rail lines, and started deporting them to [concentration](#) and labor camps, where most of the 60,000 deported died. This resulted in the near-extirmination of the community. Only 1200 Jews live in the city today.



Jewish family of Salonika in 1917.



Changes in the population of Salonika's three major communities: Jewish, Turkish and Greek (1500–1950).

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Early settlement [edit]

[Paul of Tarsus' First Epistle to the Thessalonians](#) mentions [Hellenized](#) Jews in the city about 52 CE. In 1170, [Benjamin of Tudela](#) reported that there were 500 Jews in Thessaloniki. In the following centuries, the native [Romaniote](#) community was joined by some [Italian](#) and [Ashkenazi Jews](#). A small Jewish population lived here during the Byzantine period, but it left virtually no trace in documents or archeological artifacts.^[1] Researchers have not determined where the first Jews lived in the city.^[2]

Under the Ottomans [edit]

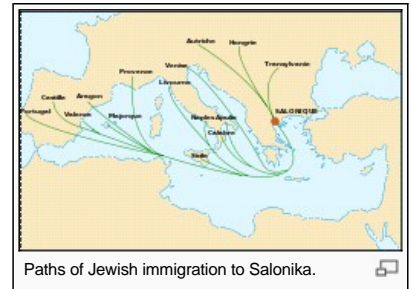
In 1430, the start of Ottoman domination, the Jewish population was still small. The Ottomans used population transfers within the empire following military conquests to achieve goals of border security or repopulation; they called it *Sürgün*. Following the **fall of Constantinople** in 1453, an example of *sürgün* was the Ottomans' forcing Jews from the Balkans and **Anatolia** to relocate there, which they made the new capital of the Empire.^[3] At the time, few Jews were left in Salonika; none were recorded in the Ottoman census of 1478.^[1]

Arrival of Sephardic Jews [edit]

See also: *History of the Jews in Turkey*

In 1492, the Spanish rulers **Ferdinand and Isabella** promulgated the **Alhambra Decree** to expel **Sephardic Jews** from their domains. Many immigrated to Salonika, sometimes after a stop in **Portugal** or **Italy**. The Ottoman Empire granted protection to Jews as *dhimmis* and encouraged the newcomers to settle in its territories. According to the historians Rosamond McKitterick and Christopher Allmand, the Empire's invitation to the expelled Jews was a demographic strategy to prevent ethnic Greeks from dominating the city.^[4]

The first Sephardim came in 1492 from **Majorca**. They were "repentant" returnees to Judaism after earlier forced conversion to Catholicism.^[citation needed] In 1493, **Castilians** and **Sicilians** joined them. In subsequent years, other Jews came from those lands and also from **Aragon**, **Valencia**, **Calabria**, **Venice**, **Apulia**, **Naples**, and **Provence**. Later, in 1540 and 1560, Jews from **Portugal** sought refuge in Salonika in response to the political persecution of the *marranos*. In addition to these Sephardim, a few **Ashkenazim** arrived from **Austria**, **Transylvania** and **Hungary**. They were sometimes forcibly relocated under the Ottoman policy of "sürgün," following the conquest of land by **Suleiman the Magnificent** beginning in 1526. Salonika's registers indicate the presence of "Buda Jews" after the conquest of that city by the Turks in 1541.^{[1][3]} Immigration was great enough that by 1519, the Jews represented 56% of the population and in 1613, 68%.^[1]



Religious organization [edit]

Each group of new arrivals founded its own community (*aljama* in Spanish), whose rites ("*minhagim*") differed from those of other communities. The synagogues cemented each group, and their names most often referred to the groups' origins. For example, **Katallan Yashan** (Old Catalan) was founded in 1492 and **Katallan Hadash** (New Catalonia) at the end of the 16th century.^[3]

Name of synagogue	Date of construction	Name of synagogue	Date of construction	Name of synagogue	Date of construction
Ets ha Chaim	1st century	Apulia	1502	Yahia	1560
Ashkenaz or Varnak	1376	Lisbon Yashan	1510	Sicilia Hadash	1562
Mayorka	1391	Talmud Torah Hagadol	1520	Beit Aron	1575
Provincia	1394	Portugal	1525	Italia Hadash	1582
Italia Yashan	1423	Evora	1535	Mayorka Sheni	16th century
Guerush Sfarad	1492	Estrug	1535	Katallan Chadash	16th century
Kastilla	1492–3	Lisbon Chadash	1536	Italia Sheni	1606
Aragon	1492–3	Otranto	1537	Shalom	1606
Katallan Yashan	1492	Ishmael	1537	Har Gavao	1663
Kalabria Yashan	1497	Tcina	1545	Mograbis	17th century ^[5]
Sicilia Yashan	1497	Nevei Tsedek	1550		

A government institution called *Talmud Torah Hagadol* was introduced in 1520 to head all the congregations and make decisions (*haskamot*) that applied to all. It was administered by seven members with annual terms. This institution provided an educational program for young boys, and was a preparatory school for entry to **yeshivot**. It hosted hundreds of students.^[6] In addition to Jewish studies, it taught **humanities**, Latin and Arabic, as well as medicine, the natural sciences and astronomy.^[7] The yeshivot of Salonika were frequented by Jews from throughout the Ottoman Empire and even farther abroad; there were students from Italy and Eastern Europe. After completing their studies, some students were appointed rabbis in the Jewish communities of the Empire and Europe, including cities such as **Amsterdam** and **Venice**.^[6] The success of its educational institutions was such that there was no illiteracy among the Jews of Salonika.^[7]

Economic activities [edit]

The Sephardic population settled mainly in the major urban centers of the Ottoman Empire, which included Salonika. Unlike other major cities of the Empire, the Jews controlled trading in Salonika. Their economic power became so great that the shipping and businesses stopped on Saturday (**Shabbat**)—the Jewish sabbath. They traded with the rest of the Ottoman Empire, and the countries of Latin **Venice** and **Genoa**, and with all the Jewish communities scattered throughout the **Mediterranean**. One sign of the influence of Salonikan Jews on trading is in the 1556 boycott of the port of **Ancona**, **Papal States**, in response to the *auto-da-fé* issued by Pope **Paul IV** against 25 **marranos**.^[8]

Salonikan Jews were unique in their participation in all economic niches, not confining their business to a few sectors, as was the case where Jews were a minority. They were active in all levels of society, from porters to merchants. Salonika had a large number of Jewish fishermen, unmatched elsewhere, even in what is now **Israel**.^[9]

The Jewish speciality was **spinning wool**. They imported technology from Spain where this craft was highly developed. Only the quality of the wool, better in Spain, differed in Salonika. The community made rapid decisions (*haskamot*) to require all congregations to regulate this industry. They forbade, under pain of excommunication (*cherem*), exporting wool and indigo less than three days' travel from the city.^[10] The



Salonican sheets, blankets and carpets acquired a high profile and were exported throughout the empire from Istanbul to [Alexandria](#) through [Smyrna](#). The industry spread to all localities close to the [Thermaic Gulf](#). This same activity became a matter of state when Sultan [Selim II](#) decided to dress his [Janissary](#) troops with warm and waterproof woollen garments. He made arrangements to protect his supply. His [Sublime Porte](#) issued a *firman* in 1576 forcing sheep raisers to provide their wool exclusively to the Jews to guarantee the adequacy of their supply. Other provisions strictly regulated the types of woollen production, production standards and deadlines.^[10] Tons of woollen goods were transported by boat, camel and horse to Istanbul to cloak the janissaries against the approaching winter. Towards 1578, both sides agreed that the supply of wool would serve as sufficient payment by the State for cloth and replace the cash payment. This turned out to be disadvantageous for the Jews.^[10]

Economic decline [edit]

The increase in the number of [Janissaries](#) contributed to an increase in clothing orders putting Jews in a very difficult situation.^[citation needed] Contributing to their problems were currency inflation concurrent with a state financial crisis.

Only 1,200 shipments were required initially. However, the orders surpassed 4,000 in 1620.^[11] Financially challenged, the factories began cheating on quality. This was discovered. Rabbi Judah Covo at the head of a Salonican delegation was summoned to explain this deterioration in Istanbul and was sentenced to hang. This left a profound impression in Salonica.^[11] Thereafter, applications of the Empire were partially reduced and reorganized production.^[11]

These setbacks were heralds of a dark period for Salonican Jews. The flow of migrants from the Iberian Peninsula had gradually dried up. Jews favored such Western European cities as [London](#), [Amsterdam](#) and [Bordeaux](#).^[11] This phenomenon led to a progressive estrangement of the Ottoman Sephardim from the West. Although the Jews had brought many new European technologies, including that of [printing](#), they became less and less competitive against other ethno-religious groups. The earlier well-known Jewish doctors and translators were gradually replaced by their Christian counterparts, mostly Armenians and Greeks. In the world of trading, the Jews were supplanted by Western Christians, who were protected by the western powers through their consular bodies.^[11] Salonika lost its pre-eminence following the phasing out of Venice, its commercial partner, and the rising power of the port of Smyrna.^[11]

Moreover, the Jews, like other [dhimmis](#), had to suffer the consequences of successive defeats of the Empire by the West. The city, strategically placed on a road travelled by armies, often saw retaliation by janissaries against "infidels."^[11] Throughout the 17th century, there was migration of Jews from Salonika to Istanbul, the [Israel](#), and especially [Smyrna](#). The Jewish community of Smyrna became composed of Salonican émigrés.^[11] Plague, along with other epidemics such as cholera, which arrived in Salonika in 1823, also contributed to the weakening of Salonika and its Jewish community.^[11]

Western products, which began to appear in the East in large quantities in the early-to-mid-19th century, was a severe blow to the Salonican economy, including the Jewish textile industry. The state eventually even began supplying janissaries with "[Provencal clothing](#)", which sold in low-priced lots, in preference to Salonican wools, whose quality had continued to deteriorate.^[11] Short of cash, the Jews were forced into paying the grand vizier more than half of their taxes in the form of promissory notes. Textile production declined rapidly and then stopped completely with the abolition of the body of janissaries in 1826.^[11]

Deterioration of Judaism and arrival of Sabbatai Zevi [edit]

Main article: [Sabbatai Zevi](#)

Jewish Salonikans had long benefited from the contribution of each of the ideas and knowledge of the various waves of Sephardic immigration, but this human contribution more or less dried up by the 17th century, and sank into a pattern of significant decline.^[12] The [yeshivot](#) were always busy teaching, but their output was very formalistic. They published books on religion, but these had little original thought. A witness reported that "outside it is always endless matters of worship and commercial law that absorb their attention and bear the brunt of their studies and their research. Their works are generally a restatement of their predecessors' writings."^[12]

From the 15th century, a messianic current had developed in the Sephardic world; the Redemption, marking the end of the world, which seemed imminent. This idea was fueled both by the economic decline of Salonica and the continued growth in [Kabbalistic](#) studies based on the [Zohar](#) booming in Salonican [yeshivot](#). The *end of time* was announced successively in 1540 and 1568 and again in 1648 and 1666.

It is in this context that there arrived a young and brilliant Rabbi who had been expelled from the nearby Smyrna: [Sabbatai Zevi](#). Banned from this city in 1651 after proclaiming himself the messiah,^[13] he came to Salonika, where his reputation as a scholar and Kabbalist grew very quickly.^[12] The greatest numbers to follow him were members of the Shalom Synagogue, often former [marranos](#).^[12] After several years of caution, he again caused a scandal when, during a solemn banquet in the courtyard of the Shalom Synagogue, he pronounced the [Tetragrammaton](#), ineffable in Jewish tradition, and introduced himself as the [Messiah son of King David](#).^[12] The federal rabbinical council then drove him from the city, but Sabbatai Zevi went to disseminate his doctrine in other cities around the Sephardic world. His passage divided, as it did everywhere, Thessaloniki's Jewish community, and this situation caused so much turmoil that Sabbatai Zevi was summoned and imprisoned by the sultan. There, rather than prove his supernatural powers, he relented under fire, and instead converted to [Islam](#). The dramatic turn of events was interpreted in various ways by his followers, the [Sabbateans](#). Some saw this as a sign and converted themselves, while others rejected his doctrine and fully returned to Judaism. Some, though, remained publicly faithful to Judaism while continuing to secretly follow the teachings of Sabbatai Zevi.^[12] In Salonica, there were 300 families among the richest who decided in 1686 to embrace Islam before the rabbinical authorities could react, their conversion already having been happily accepted by the Ottoman authorities.^[12] Therefore, those that the Turks gave the surname "[Dönme](#)," ("renegades") themselves divided into three groups: [Izmirlis](#), [Kuniosos](#) and [Yacoubi](#),^[14] forming a new component of the Salonican ethno-religious mosaic. Although they chose conversion, they did not assimilate with the Turks, practicing strict [endogamy](#), living in separate quarters, building their own mosques and maintaining a specific liturgy in their language.^[13] They participated greatly in the 19th century in the spread of modernist ideas in the empire.^[14] Then, as Turks, the [Donme](#) emigrated from the city following the assumption of power by the Greeks.^[14]



Sabbatai Zevi: Portrait by an eyewitness, Smyrna, 1666.

Modern times [edit]

From the second half of 19th century, the Jews of Salonika had a revival.^[citation needed] [Frankos](#), French Jews, and Italian Jews from [Livorno](#) were especially influential in introducing new methods of education, and developing new schools and intellectual environment for the Jewish population. Such Western modernists introduced new techniques and ideas to the Balkans from the industrialized world.

Industrialization [edit]

From the 1880s the city began to industrialize, within the Ottoman Empire whose larger economy was declining. The entrepreneurs in Thessaloniki were mostly Jewish, unlike in other major Ottoman cities, where industrialization was led by other ethno-religious groups. The Italian Allatini brothers led Jewish entrepreneurship, establishing [milling](#) and other food industries, [brickmaking](#), and processing plants for [tobacco](#). Several traders supported the introduction of a large textile-production industry, superseding the weaving of cloth in a system of artisanal production.

With industrialization, many Salonikans of all faiths became factory workers, part of a new proletariat. Given their population in the city, a large Jewish working class developed. Employers hired labor without regard for religion or ethnicity, unlike the common practice in other parts of the Ottoman Empire. In the city, workers movements developed crossing ethnic lines; in later years, the labor movements here became marked by issues of nationalism and identity.

Haskalah [edit]



Two rabbis of Salonika at the end of the 19th century. With the advent of the [Haskalah](#), part of the population grew less reliant on religion.

The [Haskalah](#), the movement of thought inspired by the Jewish [Enlightenment](#), touched the Ottoman world at the end of the 19th century, after its spread among Jewish populations of Western and Eastern Europe. These western groups helped stimulate the city's economic revival.

The [maskilim](#) and [Moses Allatini](#) from [Livorno](#), Italy, brought new educational style. In 1856, with the help of the [Rothschilds](#), he founded a school, having gained consent of rabbis whom he had won over with major donations to charities. The Lippman School was a model institution headed by Professor Lippman, a progressive rabbi from [Strasbourg](#).^[15] After five years, the school closed its doors and Lippman was pressured by the rabbinat, who disagreed with the school's innovative education methods. He trained numerous pupils who took over thereafter.^[15]

By 1862, Dr. Allatini led his brother Solomon Fernandez to found an Italian school, thanks to a donation by the Kingdom of Italy.^[15] French attempts to introduce the educational network of the [Alliance Israélite Universelle](#) (IAU) failed against resistance by the rabbis, who did not want a Jewish school under the patronage of the French embassy. But the need for schools was so urgent that supporters were finally successful in 1874. Allatini became a member of the central committee of the IAU in Paris and its patron in Thessaloniki.^[15] In 1912, nine new IAU schools IAU served the education of both boys and girls from kindergarten to high school; at the same time, the rabbinical seminaries were in decline. As a result, the [French language](#) became more widely used within the Jewish community of Salonika and throughout the Jewish world of the Mideast.^[15] These schools had instruction in both manual and intellectual training. They produced a generation familiar with the developments of the modern world, and able to enter the

workforce of a company in the process of industrialization.

Political and social activism [edit]

The eruption of modernity was also expressed by the growing influence of new political ideas from Western Europe. The Young Turk revolution of 1908 with its bases in Salonica proclaimed a [constitutional monarchy](#). The Jews did not remain indifferent to the enormous social and political change of the era, and were active most often in the social rather than national sphere. As the city began to take in the broader modern influences of the early 20th century, the movement of workers to organize and engage in social struggles for the improvement of working conditions began to spread. An attempt at union of different nationalities within a single labor movement took place with the formation of the [Socialist Workers' Federation](#) led by [Avraam Benaroya](#), a Jew from Bulgaria, who initially started publication of a quadrilingual *Journal of the worker* aired in Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian and other languages. However, the Balkan context was conducive to division, and affected the movement; after the departure of Bulgarian element, the Federation was heavily composed of Jews.

The Zionist movement thus faced competition for Jewish backing from the Socialist Workers' Federation, which was very antizionist. Unable to operate in the working class, Zionism in Salonica turned to the smaller group of the middle classes and intellectuals.^[16]

Greek administration [edit]

Salonika, Greek city [edit]

In 1912, following the [First Balkan War](#), the Greeks took control of Salonika and eventually integrated the city in their territory. This change of sovereignty was not at first well received by the Jews, who feared that the annexation would lead to difficulties, a concern reinforced by Bulgarian propaganda, and by the [Serbians](#), who wanted Austrian Jews to join to their cause.^[15] Some Jews fought for the internationalization of the city under the protection of the great European powers, but their proposal received little attention, Europe having accepted the [fait accompli](#).^[17] The Greek administration nevertheless took some measures to promote the integration of Jews^[15] such as permitting them to work on Sundays and allowing them to observe [Shabbat](#). The economy benefited from the annexation, which opened to Salonika the doors of markets in northern Greece and [Serbia](#) (with which Greece was in alliance), and by the influx of [Entente](#) troops following the outbreak of [World War I](#). The Greek government was positive towards the development of Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine, which converged with the Greek desire to dismember the Ottoman Empire. The city received the visit of Zionist leaders, [David Ben-Gurion](#), [Yitzhak Ben-Zvi](#) and [Ze'ev Jabotinsky](#) who saw in Salonika a Jewish model that should inspire their future state.^[15]

At the same time, some among the local population at the time did not share their government's view. A witness, Jean Leune, correspondent for



Salonika Jews occupied places throughout the social ladder, from the wealthy entrepreneur to the humble street seller of lemonade.



Families homeless following the pogrom by 1931. Photo taken somewhere near Aristotelous Str.

L'illustration during the Balkan wars and then an army officer from the East, says:

“ Faced with the countless shops and stores run by the Jews, until then the leaders in local commerce, Greek merchants set shop on the sidewalk, making access to the shop's doors impossible. The new police smiled ... and Jews, being boycotted, closed shop one after another.^[18] ”

Fire of 1917 and inter-communal tensions [edit]

Sparked by French soldiers in encampments in the city^[citation needed], the **Great Thessaloniki Fire of 1917** was a disaster for the community. The Jewish community was concentrated in the lower part of town and was thus the one most affected: the fire destroyed the seat of the Grand **Rabbinat** and its archives, as well as 16 of 33 synagogues in the city. 52,000 Jews were left homeless. Opting for a different course from the reconstruction that had taken place after the fire of 1890, the Greek administration decided on a modern urban redevelopment plan by the Frenchman **Ernest Hebrard**. Therefore it expropriated all land from residents, giving them nevertheless a **right of first refusal** on new housing reconstructed according to a new plan. It was, however, the Greeks who mostly populated the new neighborhoods, while Jews often chose to resettle the city's new suburbs.^[19]

Although the first anniversary of the **Balfour Declaration of 1917** was celebrated with a splendor unmatched in Europe, the decline had begun. The influx of tens of thousands of **Greek refugees** from **Asia Minor**, and the departure of **Dönme** Jews and Muslims from the region as a result of the **Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922)** and the **Treaty of Lausanne** (1923), significantly changed the ethnic composition of the city. The Jews ceased to constitute an absolute majority and, on the eve of the Second World War, they accounted for just 40% of the population.

During the period, a segment of the population began to demonstrate an increasingly less conciliatory policy towards the Jews. The Jewish population reacted by siding with the Greek monarchists during the Greek **National Schism** (opposing **Eleftherios Venizelos**, who had the overwhelming support of refugees and the lower income classes). This would set the stage for a 20-year period during which the relationship of the Jews with the Greek state and people would oscillate as Greek politics changed.

In 1922, work was banned on Sunday (forcing Jews to either work on **Shabbat** or lose income), posters in foreign languages were prohibited, and the authority of rabbinical courts to rule on commercial cases was taken away.^[7] As in countries such as **Hungary** and **Romania**, a significant current of antisemitism grew in **inner** Salonica, but "never reached the level of violence in these two countries".^[20] It was very much driven by Greek arrivals from **Asia Minor**, mostly poor and in direct competition with Jews for housing and work.^[20] This current of sentiment was, nevertheless, relayed by the **Makedonia** daily and the **National Union of Greece** (*Ethniki Enosis Ellados*, EEE) ultra-nationalist organization, which was close to Venizelos' Liberal Party (in power on and off during the 1930s),^[20] accusing the Jewish population of not wanting to blend in with the Greek nation, and viewing the development of **Communism** and **Zionism** in the community with suspicion. Venizelist Greek governments themselves largely adopted an ambivalent attitude, pursuing a policy of engagement while not distancing themselves unequivocally from the current of antisemitism.^[20]

In 1931, an antisemitic riot took place in Camp Campbell, where a Jewish neighborhood was completely burned, leaving 500 families homeless and one Jewish resident dead.^[21]

Under Metaxas [edit]

The seizure of power by dictator **Ioannis Metaxas** in 1936 too had a significant bearing on the pattern of Greek–Jewish relations in Thessaloniki. Metaxas' regime was not at all antisemitic; it perceived the **Venizelists** and the **Communists** as its political enemies, and **Turkey** as its major foreign enemy. This endeared Metaxas to influential Jewish groups: the upper/middle classes, which felt threatened by organized labor and the socialist movement. Antisemitic organizations and publications were banned^[20] and support for the regime was sufficiently strong for a Jewish charter of the regime-sponsored **National Organisation of Youth** (EON) to be formed. This reinforced the trend of national self-identification as Greeks among the Jews of Salonika, who had been Greek citizens since 1913. Even in the concentration camps, Greek Jews never ceased to affirm their sense of belonging to the Greek nation.^[22]

At the same time, the working-class poor of the Jewish community had joined forces with their Christian counterparts in the labor movement that developed in the 1930s, often the target of suppression during Metaxas' regime. **Avraam Benaroya** was a leading figure in the Greek Socialist Movement, not only among Jews, but on a national level. Thus the forces of the period had worked to bridge the gaps between Christians and Jews, while creating new tensions among the different socioeconomic groups within the city and the country as a whole.

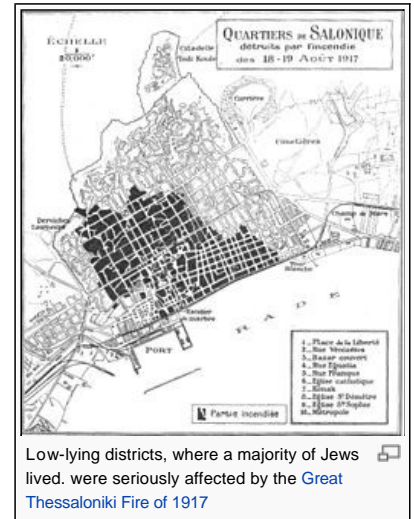
Emigration [edit]

Emigration of Jews from the city began when the **Young Turks** pushed through the universal **conscription** of all Ottoman subjects into the military irrespective of religion, a trend that continued to grow after the annexation of the city by Greece. Damage from the Thessaloniki fire, poor economic conditions, rise in antisemitism among a segment of the population, and the development of Zionism all motivated the departure of part of the city's Jewish population. This group left mainly for **Western Europe**, **South America** and **Palestine**. The Jewish population consequently decreased from 93,000 people to 53,000 on the eve of the war.^[23] There were some notable successes among the community's diaspora. **Isaac Carasso**, reaching **Barcelona**, founded the **Danone** company. **Maurice Abravanel** went to Switzerland with his family and then to the United States where he became a famous **conductor**. A future grandparent of the **French President Nicolas Sarkozy** emigrated to France. In the interwar years, some Jewish families were to be found in the **9th arrondissement** of **Paris, France**; The seat of their association was located on the Rue La Fayette.^[24] In Palestine, the Recanati family established one of the most important banks of Israel, the *Eretz Yisrael Discount Bank*, which later became the **Israel Discount Bank**.^[25]

Second World War [edit]

Battle of Greece [edit]

On 28 October 1940, Italian forces invaded Greece following the refusal of the Greek dictator **Ioannis Metaxas** to accept the ultimatum given by the Italians. In the resulting **Greco-Italian War** and the subsequent **German invasion**, many of Thessaloniki's Jews took part. 12,898 men enlisted in the Greek army;^[26] 4,000 participated in the campaigns in Albania and Macedonia; 513 fought with the Germans and, in total, 613 Jews were killed, including 174 from Salonika. The 50th Brigade of Macedonia was nicknamed "Cohen Battalion", reflecting the preponderance of Jews in



Low-lying districts, where a majority of Jews lived, were seriously affected by the **Great Thessaloniki Fire of 1917**

its composition.^[26] After the defeat of Greece, many Jewish soldiers had their feet frozen returning home on foot.

Occupation [edit]

For more details on this topic, see *Axis Occupation of Greece*.

Central Macedonia, including Thessaloniki, was occupied by the Germans, who entered the city on 9 April 1941. Antisemitic measures were only gradually introduced. **Max Merten**, the German civil administrator for the city, continued to repeat that the **Nuremberg laws** would not apply to Salonika.^[27] The Jewish press was quickly banned, while two pro-Nazi Greek dailies, *Nea Evropi* ("New Europe") and *Apogevmatini* ("Evening Press"), appeared. Some homes and community buildings were requisitioned by the occupying forces, including the Baron Hirsch Hospital. In late April, signs prohibiting Jews entry to cafés appeared. Jews were forced to turn in their radios.

The Grand Rabbi of Salonica, Zvi Koretz, was arrested by the **Gestapo** on 17 May 1941 and sent to a **concentration camp** near **Vienna**, from where he returned in late January 1942 to resume his position as rabbi.^[28] In June 1941, commissioner **Alfred Rosenberg** arrived. He plundered Jewish archives, sending tons of documents to his pet project, the *Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage* ("Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question") in Frankfurt.

Along with the other Greek urban communities, the Jews suffered a severe famine in the winter of 1941–42. The Nazi regime had not attached any importance to the Greek economy, food production or distribution. It is estimated that in 1941–1942 sixty Jews of the city died every day from hunger.^[26]

For a year, no further antisemitic action was taken. The momentary reprieve gave the Jews a temporary sense of security.

On a **Shabbat** in July 1942, all the men of the community aged 18 to 45 years were rounded up in the Plateia Eleftherias. Throughout the afternoon, they were forced to do humiliating physical exercises at gunpoint. Four thousand of them were ordered to construct a road for the Germans, linking Thessaloniki to **Katerini** and **Larissa**, a region rife with **malaria**.^[26]

In less than ten weeks, 12% of them died of exhaustion and disease. In the meantime, the Thessalonikan community, with the help of Athens, managed to gather two billion drachmas towards the sum of 3.5 billion drachmas demanded by the Germans to ransom the forced laborers. The Germans agreed to release them for the lesser sum but, in return, demanded that the Greek authorities abandon the Jewish cemetery in Salonika, containing 300,000^[29] to 500,000^[30] graves. Its size and location, they claimed, had long hampered urban growth.

The Jews transferred land in the periphery on which there were two graves. The municipal authorities, decrying the slow pace of the transfer, took matters into their own hands. Five hundred Greek workers, paid by the municipality, began with the destruction of tombs.^[30] The cemetery was soon transformed into a vast quarry where Greeks and Germans sought gravestones for use as construction materials.^[30] Today this site is occupied by the **Aristotle University**^[29] and other buildings.

It is estimated that from the beginning of the occupation to the end of deportations, 3,000–5,000 Jews managed to escape from Salonika, finding temporary refuge in the Italian zone. Of these, 800 had or obtained documents proving Italian citizenship and throughout the period of Italian occupation were actively protected by consular authority. 800 Jews fled to the Macedonian mountainsides, joining the Greek Communist Resistance, **ELAS**. Few Jews joined its royalist counterpart.^[26]

Destruction of the Jews of Salonika [edit]

Main article: *The Holocaust*

Salonica's 54,000 Sephardim were shipped to the Nazi **extermination camps**. Nearly 98% of the total Jewish population of the city died during the war. Only the Polish Jews experienced a greater level of destruction.^[26]

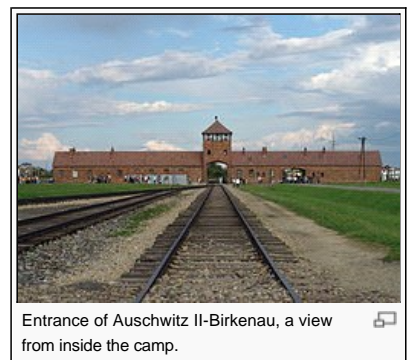
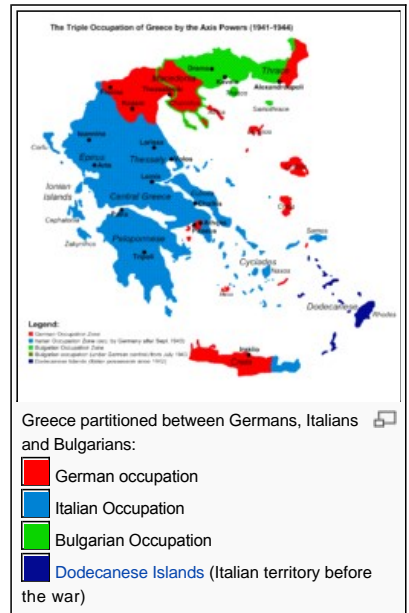
Deportation [edit]

To carry out this operation, the Nazi authorities dispatched two specialists in the field, **Alois Brunner** and **Dieter Wisliceny**, who arrived on February 6, 1943.^[27] They immediately applied the **Nuremberg laws** in all their rigor, imposing the display of the **yellow badge** and drastically restricting the Jews' freedom of movement.^[27] Toward the end of February 1943, they were rounded up in three **ghettos** (Kalamaria, Singrou and Vardar / Agia Paraskevi) and then transferred to a transit camp, called the **Baron Hirsch ghetto** or camp, which was adjacent to a train station. There, the death trains were waiting. To accomplish their mission, the SS relied on a Jewish police created for the occasion, led by Vital Hasson, which was the source of numerous abuses against the rest of the Jews.^[27]

The first convoy departed on March 15. Each train carried 1000–4000 Jews across the whole of **central Europe**, mainly to **Auschwitz**. A convoy also left for **Treblinka**, and it is possible that deportation to **Sobibor** took place, since Salonican Jews were liberated from that camp. The Jewish population of Salonika was so large that the deportation took several months until it was completed, which occurred on August 7^[26] with the deportation of Chief Rabbi Tzvi Koretz and other notables to the **Bergen-Belsen concentration camp**, under relatively good conditions. In the same convoy were 367 Jews protected by their Spanish nationality, who had a unique destiny: they were transferred from Bergen-Belsen to **Barcelona**, and then **Morocco**, with some finally reaching the **British Mandate of Palestine**.^{[26][31]}

Factors explaining the effectiveness of the deportations [edit]

Several reasons have been advanced to explain the carnage in contrast to the case of Athens, where a large proportion of Jews managed to escape death. First, the attitude of the **Judenrat**, and of its leader in the period prior to the deportations, the chief rabbi **Zvi Koretz**, has been heavily criticized. He was accused of having responded passively to the Nazis and downplayed the fears of Jews when their transfer to Poland was ordered. As an Austrian citizen and therefore a native German speaker, he was thought to be well-informed.^[32] There was a rumor



that accused him of having knowingly collaborated with the occupiers.^[32] A recent study, however tends to diminish his role in the deportations.^[32]

Another factor was the solidarity shown by the families who refused to be separated. This desire undermined individual initiatives. Some older Jews also had difficulty remaining in hiding because of their lack of knowledge of the Greek language, which had only become the city's dominant language after annexation by Greece in 1913. Additionally, the large size of the Jewish population rendered impossible the tactic of blending into the Greek Orthodox population, as in Athens.

Again in contrast to Athens, there was also a latent antisemitism among a segment of the Greek population, in particular among the refugees from Asia Minor. When these immigrants arrived en masse in Salonica, they were excluded from the economic system. Consequently, some of these outcasts watched the Jewish population with hostility. The Jewish people were more economically integrated and therefore better off, which the immigrants equated with the former Ottoman power.^[28] Nevertheless, the [Yad Vashem](#) has identified 265 Greek [righteous among the nations](#), the same proportion as among the French population.^[28]

In the camps [edit]

At [Birkenau](#), about 37,000 Salonicans were gassed immediately, especially women, children and the elderly.^[26] Nearly a quarter of all 400 experiments perpetrated on the Jews were on Greek Jews, especially those from Salonika. These experiments included emasculation and implantation of [cervical cancer](#) in women. Most of the twins died following atrocious crimes.^[26] Others from the community last worked in the camps. In the years 1943–1944, they accounted for a significant proportion of the workforce of Birkenau, making up to 11,000 of the labourers. Because of their unfamiliarity with [Yiddish](#), Jews from Greece were sent to clean up the rubble of the [Warsaw Ghetto](#) in August 1943 in order to build a camp. Among the 1,000 Salonican Jews employed on the task, a group of twenty managed to escape from the ghetto and join the Polish resistance, the [Armia Krajowa](#), which organized the [Warsaw Uprising](#).^{[26][33]}

Many Jews from Salonika were also integrated into the [Sonderkommandos](#). On 7 October 1944, they attacked German forces with other Greek Jews, in an uprising planned in advance, storming the crematoria and killing about twenty guards. A bomb was thrown into the furnace of the crematorium III, destroying the building. Before being massacred by the Germans, insurgents sang a song of the Greek partisan movement and the [Greek National Anthem](#).^[34]

In his book *If this is a man*, one of the most famous works of literature of the Holocaust, [Primo Levi](#) describes the group thus: "those Greeks, motionless and silent as the Sphinx, crouched on the ground behind their thick pot of soup".^[35] Those members of the community still alive during 1944 made a strong impression on the author. He noted: "Despite their low numbers their contribution to the overall appearance of the camp and the international jargon is spoken is of prime importance". He described a strong patriotic sense among them, writing that their ability to survive in the camps was partly explained by the fact that "they are among the cohesive of the national groups, and from this point of view the most advanced".

Post World War II [edit]

At the end of the Second World War, a violent [civil war](#) broke out in Greece. It lasted until 1949, with forces in Athens supported by the British opposition to the powerful Communist ELAS. Some of the Jews of Thessaloniki who had escaped deportation took part in it, either on the government or on the opposition side.^[36] Among those who fought in the ELAS many were victims, like other supporters, of the repression that fell on the country after the government had regained control of the situation.^[36]

Among the few survivors of the camps, some chose to return to Greece and others emigrated to Western Europe, America or the Palestine Mandate.^[36] They were all faced with great difficulties in surviving, as both Greece and all Europe were in a chaotic state in the immediate aftermath of war. They also suffered discrimination from some Ashkenazi survivors who cast doubt on their Jewishness.^[36]

The return to Thessaloniki was a shock. Returnees were often the sole survivors from their families. They returned to find their homes occupied by Christian families who had purchased them from the Germans.^[36] Initially, they were housed in synagogues. A Jewish Committee was formed to identify the number of survivors, and obtained a list from the [Bank of Greece](#) of 1,800 houses that had been sold to Christians.^[36] The new owners were reluctant to surrender their new dwellings, saying they had legally purchased the houses and that they too had suffered from war.^[36] When the war ended, the left wing ELAS, which at the time controlled the city, favored the immediate return of Jewish property to its rightful owners.^[37] Four months later, when the new British-supported right wing government in Athens came to power in Thessaloniki instead, restitution was cumulatively halted. Not only was the government faced with a major housing crisis due to the influx of refugees caused by war, but a number of individuals who had been enriched during the war were also influential in the new right wing administration, with the government's view favouring strengthening all anticommunist ties by adopting a more conciliatory approach to any former collaborators.^[37] The [Jewish Agency](#) denounced such policies of the postwar administration, and pleaded for the cause of the [Aliyah](#) Jews.^[36] The [World Jewish Congress](#) also aided the Jews of the city; some of the Jews saved from deportation by Greeks chose to convert to [Orthodoxy](#). Some isolated survivors of the camps made the same choice.^[36] There were also several marriages among the post-war survivors.^[36] One survivor testified:

I returned to a Salonika destroyed. I was hoping to find my adopted brother, but rumor told that he had died of malaria in [Lublin](#). I already knew that my parents had been burned on their first day at the extermination camp of Auschwitz. I was alone. Other prisoners who were with me had nobody either. These days, I am with a young man that I had known in [Brussels](#). We do not separate from each other. We were both survivors of the camps. Shortly after, we married, two refugees who had nothing, there was not even a rabbi to give us the blessing. The director of one of the Jewish schools served as a rabbi and we married, and so I started a new life.^[36]

1,783 survivors were listed in the 1951 census.

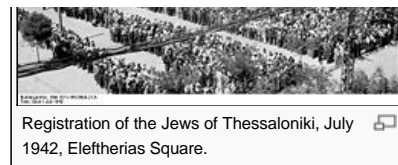
A monument in Thessaloniki to the tragedy of the deportation was erected in 1997.^[38]

In 1998, King [Juan Carlos I of Spain](#) went to the city, where he paid tribute to the Sephardic Jews.^[39] The visit followed one he had undertaken at the synagogue of [Madrid](#) in 1992 to commemorate the expulsion of 1492, at which he condemned the decree of expulsion from Spain.

Following the requests of Professors at the Aristotle University, a memorial to the Jewish cemetery lying beneath the foundations of the institution is awaited.^[38]

Today, around 1,300 Jews live in Thessaloniki,^[40] making it the second largest Jewish community in Greece after Athens.

[Israeli](#) singer [Yehuda Poliker](#) recorded a song about the deported Jews of Thessaloniki, called 'Wait for me Thessaloniki'.



Diaspora [edit]

Today, there are communities of Salonikan Jews found in the United States and Israel that preserve the customs of the Jews of Salonika.

- Israel

Hechal Yehuda Synagogue was founded by Jews from Salonika in **Tel Aviv**. It maintains the Salonikan musical and prayer customs.

- United States

Congregation Etz Ahaim^[41] (a **Sephardic** congregation was started by Jews from **Salonika** in **New Brunswick, N.J.**) in **Highland Park, New Jersey**. The reader chants the **Aramaic** prayer *B'rich Shemay* in Ladino before taking out the **Torah** on **Shabbat**; it is known as *Bendichu su Nombre*. Additionally, at the end of Shabbat services the entire congregation sings the well-known **Hebrew** song *Ein Kelohainu* as *Non Como Muestro Dio* in Ladino.

Culture [edit]

Language [edit]

Main article: Ladino language

Generally, Jews who emigrated adopted the language of their new country, but this was not true of the Sepharadim of the Ottoman Empire, who arrived en masse, and retained the use of their language. The Jews of Salonika thus are known to have used Spanish, the Judeo-Spanish (*djudezmo*), that is neither more nor less than a dialect of Spanish having evolved independently since the 15th century. They prayed and studied in **Hebrew** and **Aramaic** and used, as do all other Sephardic communities, what **Haïm Vidal Sephiha** called the language "layer", **Ladino**, which consisted of a Hebrew translation of texts into a Spanish respecting a Hebrew word order and syntax.^[42] These two languages, djudezmo and Ladino, were written in Hebrew characters as well as Latin characters. In addition to these languages that had evolved in exile, the Jews of Salonika sometimes spoke **Turkish**, the language of the Ottoman Empire, written in Arabic characters. The **haskala** taught by the French Jews has, in turn, encouraged teaching the French language in **Alliance Israélite Universelle** schools. Italian is also taught to a lesser extent. After the Greeks took Salonika in 1912, **Greek** was taught at school and has been spoken by several generations of Jewish Salonicans. Today it is the language that predominates among Thessalonian Jews.

Modern Salonican *djudezmo* now include phrases from various other immigrant groups including Italian. French phrases have also become popular to the point that Prof. Haïm-Vidal Séphiha speaks of "judéo-fragnol."^[42]

Cuisine [edit]

The sociologist **Edgar Morin** said that the core of every culture is its cuisine, and that this applies especially to the Jews of Salonika, the community from which he descends.^[43]

The cuisine of the Jews of the city was a variant of the Judeo-Spanish cuisine, which is itself influenced by the large ensemble of Mediterranean cuisine. It was influenced by the Jewish dietary rules of **kashrut**, which include prohibitions on the consumption of **pork** and mixtures of dairy and meat products, and religious holidays that require the preparation of special dishes. However, its key feature was its Iberian influence. **Fish**, abundant in this port city, was consumed in large quantities and in all forms: fried, baked ("*al orno*"), marinated or **braised** ("*abafado*"), and was often accompanied by complex sauces. Seen as a symbol of fertility, fish was used in a marriage rite called *dia del peche* ("day of fish") on the last day of wedding ceremonies, in which the bride stepped over a large dish of fish that was then consumed by the guests.^[43] Vegetables accompanied all the dishes, especially onions; garlic was on hand but was not used, since the Ashkenazic synagogues were major consumers of garlic and had been given the nickname "*El kal del ajo*", "the garlic synagogue." **Greek yogurt**, widely consumed in the Balkans and **Anatolia**, was also highly appreciated, as well as cream. In anticipation of Shabbat, *chamin* was prepared. A Judeo-Spanish variant of the Ashkenazi **cholent** and the North African *dafina*, *chamin* was a meat stew with vegetables (wheat, chickpeas, white beans) that were let simmer until the Saturday midday meal. In preparation for **Passover**, housewives filled locked chests with sweets, figs and dates stuffed with almonds, **marzipan** and the popular *chape blanche* (white jam), which consisted of sugar water and lemon. Wine was reserved for religious rituals, but Sepharadim, like their Greek and Muslim neighbors, were major consumers of **raki**. They also favored sugary drinks made of prune, cherry and apricot syrup, which they drank at the end of the large festive meal.^[43]

See also [edit]

- Sephardi Jews
- History of Thessaloniki
- History of the Jews in Greece
- History of the Jews in Turkey

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Major cities	Thessaloniki Veria Katerini Serres Kavala Kastoria Drama Naousa		
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