

The Commemoration of the Jews from the Holocaust in the Museum of Bitola And The Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki.

The holocaust is a well-known period that occurred some 72 years ago and has lived on in the hearts of many affecting any that hear of the tragedy that occurred. Nowhere was spared the terror of the Nazis. The countries that were invaded, along with the citizens that lived there, suffered terribly, particularly the Jews¹. However, after the war the lives lost in the camps have been commemorated even to this day. Although it is a period that is not talked about by some, it weighs heavily on the minds of many. Looking at this I will see how much the Jews were commemorated in the museums, what information was available to view and what was the overall impact it had on me by the end of the trip.

Although it was known that the museum of Bitola had artefacts from different periods of time, when hearing from the tour guide that they had an exhibit for the Holocaust, I expected to find some information that I had not known before for that region or at least find a few objects to look at. However, though the museum certainly had a lot of information about the Jews and the events leading up to the war, facts about the Holocaust were slim. The main object that stood out was in a glass case holding all the names of the Jews that had died [see figure one]. It was not really a shock that there had been deaths and that the Jews in the area had been affected by the Nazi regime. But, the fact that only the names were available caused me to pause in thought. It made me wonder, if so many had perished, why was there not more information? At the time I thought it may be the museum was still collecting lost objects². However, I also wondered if it was that for the people of Macedonia, having their names written down and the amount who died on display was enough. In which case, did it still have the needed impact on those who read it who may not know the events of that time, and would it still get the severity and the point across? That the point of not forgetting did not just circle those that had been lost in the battles but in the camps as well. It was a turning point in what I thought on the matter and gave me new ideas to investigate. I had expected to find the information there waiting, instead I found only more questions.



Figure One: The names of the Jews from Macedonia. © Deanna Radcliffe. 17 April 2018. Macedonia, The Museum of Bitola.

When first hearing about The Jewish Museum, I at first expected to find information inside about the Holocaust and the Jews from that region who suffered, as not only had we studied the Jews of Thessaloniki during world war 2 in class, but usually in museums labelled in such a way something exists commemorating the lives lost at the Holocaust. However, after visiting the Museum of Bitola my expectation lessened slightly as despite being told there was an exhibit, there was not much there. The Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki had a lot more to offer on the Holocaust. Once upstairs

¹ Chodakiewicz; 2004. 7. Shneer; 2011. 169

² Zhivot., 1993. 178

there was a timeline of events relating to the Jews of Thessaloniki³. At the end of the timeline [see figure two] there was information about World War 2 and the Holocaust. Due to the previous museum I believed that would be all the information that was available, only to find another room specifically dedicated to the Holocaust⁴. Perhaps that is due to this museum having a clear focus on the Jews of Thessaloniki, instead of an overall historic review of a place such as the Bitola museum was based upon. What I had already suspected to be there, such as information and posters from that period had been present along with other objects. Including letters that exempted some Jews from the new laws, mainly the Jews that had married non-Jews. Unfortunately, due to it being a Jewish museum information was lost on other Holocaust victims such as; homosexuals, gypsies etc⁵. This showed that even now there is still a lot to learn about the period, no matter how much one thinks they know. What was thought-provoking was to read about the conversion from being friends and allies, only to end up being ignored and hated for being something, by someone they had known a long time. It showed a bitter truth, something I partly expected, that in fear and with enough hate those that once were friends can become enemies, can ignore you and treat you wrongly.



Figure two: Chara. 2017. Timeline of Jewish events.

The two exhibitions commemorating the Holocaust, however slight, show what it always has been, that this is an event that should not and, in some ways, cannot be forgotten. Although it casts a shadow and produces nightmares for me even to this day, it is something I am grateful I was taught as there are many lessons to learn from it; the experience of the museums only solidified this thought. Cruel to them in life would it not be crueler to now forget them in death as well, to wipe the truth of their lives from history. It was all that can be thought when looking at the thousands of names in the two museums. It is easy to turn a man into a bloodthirsty creature given the right circumstances, which became clear by looking at the history inside The Jewish Museum with its information and images. By remembering not just the names but the events and sufferings the Jews went through, perhaps the humility and disgust of knowing our ancestors let it get so far will waken our resolve to not let it happen again. Although a bitter heritage for either side, a heritage many would soon forget, it is part of our history a history that should never be forgotten. Through the two museums, even Bitola which mentioned little but the names of those lost, there is knowledge and self-awareness of history to be had. The expectation of being haunted by what I saw was there, however the reality was a lot worse than I thought, showing that no matter how much is learnt in a classroom, without witnessing or reading something for ourselves some of that truth and experience is lost to us.

³ MIRTSIOTI. 2016.

⁴ Stylianou. 2016. 42

⁵ Calcagno. 2007. 50

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