



Jewish Communities in Macedonia



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During the late middle ages the Jewish population of Thessalonica, the primary city of Macedonia during the period, was minimal. However, this all changed after the Royal decrees in Spain demanding conversion to Christianity or forced migration. This led to the vast Jewish populations of Spain and its territories fleeing their homes as refugees, many of which fled to the open arms of the more tolerant Ottoman Empire which viewed these Sephardic Jews as 'people of the book' and thus welcomed them. By 1520 there were around 15000 Jews in Thessalonica which accounted for roughly half the city's population. According to one contemporary Jewish chronicler "A part of the exiled Spaniards went overseas to Turkey. Some were thrown into the sea and drowned, but those who arrived there the king of Turkey received kindly, as they were artisans". Furthermore in the words of one modern scholar "they revitalised urban life after many decades of war. And of all the towns in the empire, it was Salonica which benefited most." The Jewish population of the region became so influential that the Sephardic language 'Ladino' quickly became the language of trade and secular learning, while older texts were translated from Hebrew, Arabic and Latin into this new local lingua franca.

The Jewish communities of Macedonia, primarily that of Thessalonica, lived relatively stably in this prosperous European port city. This began to change as the Ottoman Empire began to crumble and collapse leading up to the Balkan wars of the early 20th century in the aftermath of which the relatively new state of Greece had acquired the southern portion of the former Ottoman province of Macedonia including the city of Thessalonica with its sizeable Jewish population, leaving the total population Jews in Greece at 80000 as opposed to the former 10000, nearly all due to the acquisition of Thessalonica. Unlike the Jews of the south the traditionally Sephardic Jews did not speak Greek which in the eyes of the Greek state was the main obstacle in the way of their integration. The state therefore enforced the teaching of the Greek language at all schools leading the younger generation of the Jewish communities of Macedonia to pick up the language with ease while the original language also underwent change, adopting several Greek origin words into its vocabulary leading a Jewish journalist Albert Molho to write in 1939 "our assimilation to Hellenism is to be noted not only in the thousand and one manifestations of our public and private life. One sees it in our language as well: even when we speak *Judesmo*, one still sees we are Hellenes." However, things did not always go smoothly which in 1928 led to a group of Thessalonican Jews founding the Association of Jewish Assimilationists which sought to promote integration with their fellow citizens.

The next major event in Jewish history in the region occurred during the second world war, when after the failed Italian invasion, Nazi Germany occupied the country in April 1941. Under occupation the majority of the population—56000 were deported to Nazi concentration camps where next to none returned. The remaining population in the city was thus heavily reduced and roughly a mere 1200 remain in the city today, a significant drop from the heyday under the Ottomans. Despite Thessalonica still maintains several signs of Jewish influence such as a number of Synagogues such as the Mosatirioton Synagogue pictured below to the right and there has been constructed the Thessaloniki Holocaust Memorial in Eleftherias square in 1997 in memory of the significant loss the city felt during the horrors of the second world war.



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