

EUROPE

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# Greek City Breaks 'Unbearable Silence' About Jewish Past

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SALONIKA, Greece — It has been more than 50 years since Nazi occupiers wiped out all traces of this port city's rich Jewish past. All but one of its 36 synagogues were destroyed, and all but a few thousand of a prewar population of 56,000 Jews were killed in Nazi death camps.

The war ended, and the survivors returned — only to find that all traces of their suffering, too, had somehow vanished. As at Babi Yar, the notorious Nazi mass grave in Ukraine where Soviet authorities for decades refused to acknowledge that most of the victims were Jews, Salonika has been slow to recognize that its large and vibrant Jewish community was singled out for annihilation.

"There was such an unbearable silence about the Jews of Salonika," said Andreas Sefiha, 69, the president of the city's Jewish community. As a boy of 13, he managed to escape the occupied city in 1943 before

the trains started leaving for Auschwitz.

"It was sometimes as if we had never existed," he said. "For my generation, it was like a second death."

As Salonika celebrates its turn this year as the European Union's cultural capital, the city, the second-largest in Greece, is at last coming to terms with its history. Its first monument to the victims of the Holocaust is to be erected soon in a central square, and two new museums dedicated to Jewish life and culture over the last five centuries are to open this spring.

Doing right by Salonika's past was "one of the most difficult tasks" that Panos Theodoridis, a writer and architectural restorer, said he confronted when he became the fourth artistic director of the organization in charge of events for the cultural-capital role.

"People here tend to forget that this city was multinational right from the beginning," he said. "Now it is time to pay homage to all those who formed the city's character."

Mr. Sefiha, who took a leave from his family's machine-building business to devote his energies to a Jewish community that now numbers a mere 1,150, considers the establishment of the museums and the monument a belated act of justice.

"I think after we have the monument, more people will be interested to know the history of this town — why it is necessary to have a monument at all," he said.

To the discomfort of local Greek nationalists, it is a history that was largely Jewish during the 500 years of Ottoman Turkish occupation, with strong influences of Armenians and the Turks themselves.

The first great wave of Sephardic Jews came to Salonika in the late 15th century, expelled during the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. In time, the community grew with the arrivals of Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, until, by the late 19th century, Jews made up two-thirds of the city's population. Business was conducted either in French or Ladino, the Judeo-Hispanic language spoken by the Seph-

ardim, and shops and offices closed on Saturday for the Jewish Sabbath.

All evidence of this past is virtually gone now, and not only because of the Nazis. There were fires and earthquakes, but also a local strain of Greek nationalism, fueled by the arrival in 1923 of about 160,000 ethnic Greeks transferred from the Turkish mainland. Not only has Salonika never commemorated its Holocaust victims, but its children also find scant reference to the city's multicultural past in their school textbooks.

"Nothing appears in the books — no mention at all," Mr. Sefiha said. "But I am sure one day people will write again the story of this town in a more objective way."

The Jewish contribution to the city's past is not the only historical memory to have fallen victim to a collective amnesia. In local guidebooks and in literature printed for this year's international cultural events, the five centuries of Ottoman rule are referred to euphemistically as the

"post-Byzantine" period, a reflection of the strong anti-Turkish sentiment that is part of Greek consciousness.

This was not always so. In the 1930s, in a gesture of goodwill to the modern secular Turkish state founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the Salonika city council offered him as a gift the house where he had been born — a modest, pleasant building with a garden, which has survived as one of the few examples of Turkish middle-class life in a city that was once the second largest in the Ottoman Empire.

The house, now attached to the heavily guarded Turkish consulate, is now not only forgotten, but deliberately ignored by the local authorities, who never include it in any list of local historical attractions.

Few Greeks are aware that Ataturk was born in Salonika or that this was where the Young Turks began the revolution that eventually brought down the Ottoman Empire. The street along the side of the house, which was once called Ataturk Street, was renamed long ago.