

Introductory Comments from the Guest Editors

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The history of the Jews of Greece is not widely known in the United States and Greece. Nor is it familiar to world Jewry. No single text currently exists recounting this incredible saga. This is most unfortunate. As Steven Bowman has eloquently noted, "Greek-Jewish relations, now three millennia in duration, present the oldest continuous inter-ethnic relations in history and constitute, as it were, the double helix of Western civilization."¹ Given this enormous time period, the cluster of languages, and the highly decentralized political structures that characterize the region, such a mammoth undertaking would have to be a collaborative multi-volume account. Even the last five hundred years of the story of the Jews of Greece remains spotty, with some cities or regions receiving considerable attention and others very little or none at all.

The paucity of primary sources always has been a problem in understanding the Jews of Greece. That paucity began to be addressed in earnest by the establishment of Jewish museums in Greece in the 1980s. The museum initiatives have served as a catalyst to scholars. A substantial number of books and specialized studies have appeared in the past twenty years. The Greek government has also stepped forward by making available records from 1918-1957 from the historical archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In co-

operation with the University of Athens, these records were published as *Documents on the History of the Greek Jews*.² In addition, successive Greek governments have begun the task of broadening public perception in Greece about the history of the Jews of Greece through the creation of public monuments and most notably in the establishment of January 27 as a date to nationally commemorate the Holocaust. Much remains to be done, particularly in the realm of the history texts used in the public school system. Nevertheless, a significant momentum has begun to build for the thoughtful inclusion of the story of the Jews of Greece in the diachronic national narrative.

Increasingly, the experiences of the Jews of Greece are being approached as a natural component of Modern Greek Studies, Byzantine Studies, and Classical Studies. The essays in this special issue of the *Journal of Modern Hellenism* are offered as a contribution to the discourses now taking place regarding the experiences of the Jews of Greece over the past five hundred years. We trust such discussions will continue at various symposia, lecture programs, and academic publications. We also look forward to seeing more studies of Greek Jews in the United States, a subject area still in its infancy.

Among our priorities in putting together this issue was that the study of the Jews of Greece must not be confined to Holocaust Studies and that the history of the Jews of Greece must be placed in the broader Hellenic context. Greek Jews have expressed frustration in that they sometimes have been neglected in Holocaust accounts that focus almost exclusively on the experience of Ashkenazi Jews.³ This neglect, however, has begun to be addressed by various Jewish organizations and museums. While the full inclusion of Greek Jews in Holocaust Studies remains an intellectual priority, we feel that equal vigor must be given to the study of the entire range of cultural, economic, and political activities of the

Jews of Greece for more than two millennia. We also think these events should not be viewed through cultural prisms derived from Eastern or even Western Europe. Appropriate contexts for the Byzantine millennium, the Ottoman Era, and the formation of the modern Greek state have unique aspects that are often quite distinct from those of the rest of Europe. The essays in this issue reflect those concerns.

NOTES

¹ From the prefatory note to Photini Constantopoulou and Thanos Veremis, (researchers and editors), *Documents of the History of the Greek Jews: Records from the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. Athens: Kastaniotis Editions, 1999. Includes an introduction by Theodoros Pangalos, then Minister of Foreign Affairs.

² *Ibid.*

³ In "The Story Behind the Statistics," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, V. 32.1 (2006), p. 106, Marica Haddad Ikonopoulou comments, "The story of Greek Jewry in the Holocaust is often called the 'orphan child' of Holocaust research. For the most part, the story of the Holocaust has been told by the Ashkenazim, and the fate of Sephardic Jews has often been overlooked."