

## **The Art of Holocaust Memory and the Emergence of Anti-Semitism in Greece**

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In early 2006, an issue of the newspaper published by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, an international Jewish human rights organization, proclaimed the headline “Greece finally remembers”. This was referring to the belated erection of a centrally placed monument for the victims of the Shoah (Holocaust) in Salonika/Thessaloniki, which is considered to be the second capital of Greece. Before the Second World War, Salonika far surpassed what today would be called a “multicultural city”, as the Jewish community of the city numbered around 56,000 people. The liquidation of the Jewish community by the Nazis was so unique that after the end of the war less than 2,000 Jews returned to the so-called “Jerusalem of the Balkans”.

According to James Young, memorials are a means by which societies unceasingly shape their pasts.<sup>1</sup> They provide a focus for the public commemoration of individual memories. Memorials for the Shoah are inspired by a series of questions: How does a state incorporate the “untold”, the shame, the historical event of Holocaust into its national memorial landscape? How does a state commemorate the painful past? How do “commemorative communities”, such as Jews living in Greece today, but also representatives from political parties such as the radical (neo-Nazi) right and the left, participate in the remembrance or the denigration of the victims? I believe, like Michel Foucault, that the study of history (en)compasses the study of *commemorative forms* such as monuments, museums and days of remembrance. Taking this argument as a starting point, I intend in this paper to study the ways in which Greek cities, such as Salonika or Rhodes, currently “house” the memory of a people which is no longer present. We suggest that the art of Holocaust memory includes the activity that brought the monuments into being and also the constant renegotiation of the meaning of the memorials by the members of the “commemorative communities”. The notion of “public history” lies at the core of my

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<sup>1</sup> James Young, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 3.

analysis, as public history is history that is seen, heard, read and interpreted by a popular audience, especially through the medium of newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

## Salonika

According to the historian Hagen Fleischer, Greece lost more of its Jewish population in the “Final Solution” proportionately than almost any other country in Europe during the Second World War. From the approximately 72,000 Jews in Greece in 1941 only about 17% would survive until liberation, which means that we have a reduction of 60,000 people.<sup>3</sup>

On December 6, 1942, the Germans began to dismantle the Jewish cemetery of Salonika, sending five hundred Greek workers to the site, where they uprooted about a hundred thousand tombstones (Fig. 1). The desecration of the graves was unspeakably traumatic, marking the final diminution of the Jewish physical presence in the city.<sup>4</sup> The site of the cemetery is now the campus of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Fig. 2). During the long excavations for the construction of the city’s underground, it is not uncommon for workers to unearth tombstones or even bones. Current excavations unearthed, just 30cm under the ground, signs of the cemetery. This find was downplayed heavily by the local media, which avoided specifying that the cemetery found was the Jewish one. So, today, only two sites of memory in Salonika recall the lost Jewish community: the Shoah Monument on Eleftherias (or Liberty) Square and the Jewish Museum. Both of them were inaugurated in 1997, when Salonika was the cultural capital of Europe.

For years the Jewish community contested the creation of a monument for the Shoah on Eleftherias Square, a central square in Salonika. There, in mid-July 1942, the Germans forced 9,000 Jewish males of Greek citizenship, aged between 18 and 45 years, to assemble for registration for forced-labor assignments. Throughout the day,

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<sup>2</sup> Hagen Fleischer, *The Wars of Memory. Second World War in Public History (Oi polemoi tis mnimis. O B’ Pagkosmios Polemos sti Dimosia Istoría)*, Nefeli, Athens, 2008, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Hagen Fleischer, “Greek Jewry and Nazi Germany. The Holocaust and its antecedents”, announcement at the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Group for the Study of the History of Jews in Greece, Gavrielides, Athens, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> K. E. Fleming, *Greece: A Jewish History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2008, p. 119.

the Germans humiliated and beat the men (Fig. 3). Later, in 1943, the first deportations to Auschwitz started. So, this square has a symbolic meaning.

The demand for the creation of a Shoah monument was ignored by the government, with the excuse that the square was unsuitable because it was a car park. In 1996, after the Jewish community in America made strong representations, sculptors were invited to submit designs for the monument. The Glids, brothers and sons of Jews murdered in Auschwitz and famous for their memorial sculpture at Dachau (Fig. 4), were named winners of the competition. Their design was devoted primarily to the suffering of the victims: a black-bronze grid of human forms encircled by large flames (Fig. 5). Unfortunately, the community's demand that the monument be placed on Eleftherias Square was not satisfied, and on the November 23, 1997, the unveiling ceremony took place in the "151" district, a former industrial quarter, where Jews lived before the war. Newspapers at the time commented on the event with headlines such as "Belated unveiling", "Memory injection for Nazi bestiality" (*Avgi*), while the international press was also preoccupied with the unveiling, with the *Jerusalem Post* headlining with "Greek Jews finally get memorial" or *Le Monde* with "La Grece se reconcilie avec sa communaute juive".<sup>5</sup> The speech of the minister of foreign affairs, Theodoros Pangalos, at the ceremony was interesting as he condemned all contemporary genocides: he provided the example of Turkey and the Kurds, in a speech full of comparisons and non-historic examples, unsuitable for the event in question.<sup>6</sup>

Extreme right-wing elements, including members of Xrisi Aygi (Golden Dawn), a neo-Nazi organization, immediately desecrated the monument with anti-Semitic graffiti. In 2000, the violent escalation in the acts of vandalism directed at the monument was condemned by a foreign ministry spokesman: "We condemn in the most definite way the desecration of the monument to the victims of the holocaust and of the Holy Synagogue of Thessaloniki, apparently committed by 'neo-Nazi' elements, on April 20, coinciding with the Jewish Passover celebration. This act of desecration, against the holy sites and symbols of the Jewish community of Greece, blatantly insults the historical memory of Thessaloniki, for the preservation of which the Greek government three years ago, in honor of Greek Jewish victims of Nazism,

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<sup>5</sup> Archives of the Jewish Community of Salonika (JCAT), file number 01282.

<sup>6</sup> JCAT, file number 01282.

built a monument to the Holocaust”.<sup>7</sup> For reasons of political correctness, he did not refer to the belated erection of the monument, which took over half a century to fulfill ...

Six years later, in 2006, Salonika city council suddenly, and out of the blue, accepted the long-lasting demand of the Jewish community for the transfer of the monument to the symbolic Eleftherias Square. The monument was moved there, in a procedure that took less than a month to complete. On February 16, 2006, the president of Israel Moshe Katsav, together with his Greek counterpart, Karolos Papoulias, visited the monument and the Jewish Museum.

The monument, as well as the new Jewish cemetery, continues to be the target of the fanatical (Fig. 6). Surprisingly, however, it has also been vandalized by members of the Greek Communist Party-backed PAME trade union, which placed photos of young Palestinians killed by the Israel Defense Forces on the monument in order to protest against the 2006 Lebanon War. The anti-Semitism of the Left in Greece could be the subject for a separate paper. The city’s recently elected mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, the first Socialist-backed mayor in 24 years, has said that he intends to build a new memorial to the city’s Jewish martyrs on Eleftherias Square. The entire process of the memorialisation of the Shoah in Salonika may lend itself as an exemplary, ever-expanding *memorial text*.<sup>8</sup> The monument here is not comprised by material space and ruins but by memory-work itself. It contests memory because it continues to challenge, exasperate and invite visitors into a dialogue between themselves and their past.

## **Rhodes and Ioannina**

In 1943 the island of Rhodes in the eastern Aegean Sea was occupied by the Germans and on July 23, 1944, 1,673 Jews were arrested and then deported to Auschwitz concentration camp. There were only 151 survivors. A monument was erected in 2002 and it has proved to be the most sorely tried monument of the Shoah

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<sup>7</sup> See Anna Maria Droumpouki, *Sites of Memory of Second World War in Greece: A comparative aspect through the lens of Public History*, dissertation in progress, University of Athens, Greece.

<sup>8</sup> According to the term used by James Young. See James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge. After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000, p. 1-11.

in Greece (Fig. 7). After its unveiling on June 30, 2002, it was the target of vandalism three days later, when it was defaced by vandals who erased the engraved lettering, cut the barbed wire that was part of the monument and knocked it off its base. This vandalism was repeated in the years that followed. The most shocking attack took place during the summer of 2008, when a group of students from a secondary school on the island urinated on the monument, posting a video of their activity on YouTube, accompanied by a message rife with slang and vulgarities: “After all the propaganda we’ve been fed in school books, even in religion class, about the ‘chosen people’ and other bullshit, we have decided to take the situation into our own hands and show to everyone through action how much do we really ‘agree’ with this view.”<sup>9</sup>

Multiple distortions of Holocaust memory occur in other Greek cities as well. In Ioannina, the largest city in northwestern Greece, there was a Romaniote Jewish community living there before the Second World War. The Nazis deported the majority of its members (1,860) to concentration camps during the final months of German occupation in 1944. Almost all of the people deported were murdered on or shortly after April 11, 1944, when the train carrying them reached Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>10</sup> Today only around 50 Jews live in the city. In 2009, the Jewish cemetery in Ioannina was desecrated several times (Fig. 8). It had already been targeted by anti-Semites many times during the past decade, with police not even identifying possible suspects. The anti-Semitic vandals went to the extreme in their work. Not only were 7 or 8 headstones and the Holocaust memorial smashed, but a tortoise was killed and its blood used to complete the desecration. One of the graves belonged Iosif Ganni, a benefactor of the city of Ioannina, while another belonged to the recently deceased mother of the city’s Jewish Community president. There is also the question as to why the neighboring residents heard or saw nothing of the noisy marble smashing inside the cemetery, which is within urban area. On a positive note, the local press unequivocally condemned the attacks and has refused to brush aside the issue, unlike the police or Greek media in general. Another positive element is the action of the Citizens’ Initiative for the Defense of the Jewish Cemetery of Ioannina, an organization that was created at the beginning of 2009 “to combat racism and elevate

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<sup>9</sup> <http://abravanel.wordpress.com/2008/08/22/neo-nazi-group-urinates-on-the-shoah-memorial-in-rhodes-a-video/> (13/6/2011).

<sup>10</sup> K. E. Fleming, *Greece: A Jewish History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2008, p. 140-141.

the Jewish cemetery as an inseparable part of Ioannina's history". A public protest by this organization against anti-Semitism was held outside the Jewish cemetery in March 2010.<sup>11</sup> The monument to the Shoah, which was erected in 1991 in the city centre, also had a similar fate as the other Greek monuments to the Shoah: in 2003 it was vandalized three times (Fig. 9).

## Athens

It has taken 70 years for Athens, "the last European capital without a Jewish monument" (according to newspaper headlines) to commemorate those who perished at the hands of Nazis.<sup>12</sup> An estimated 1,000 Athenian Jews were packed off to the concentration camps in April 1944 after thousands had already fled or gone underground.<sup>13</sup> The Athenian memorial, which takes the form of a broken Star of David acting like a compass, in that it points in the direction of the cities and villages across Greece from where tens of thousands of Jews were gathered and deported, was unveiled in May 2010 after long discussions between the Jewish community, the municipality and the 3rd Ephorate (authority) of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, which had hesitated to authorize the construction of the monument in the area of Keramikos, near the ancient cemetery of the same name and other antiquities (Fig. 10). The municipality of Athens also questioned the functionality of locating a monument to the Shoah so near antiquities dating from the 5th-century BC on the grounds that there would be a "contest with the ancient marbles".<sup>14</sup> Finally, these hesitations were overcome.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.giannena-e.gr/%CE%A0%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%B9%CF%84%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%BC%CF%8C%CF%82/ekdiloseis/Koinoniki\\_Aspida\\_Ebraiko\\_Nekrotafeio.aspx](http://www.giannena-e.gr/%CE%A0%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%B9%CF%84%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%BC%CF%8C%CF%82/ekdiloseis/Koinoniki_Aspida_Ebraiko_Nekrotafeio.aspx) (13/6/2011)

<sup>12</sup> Nikos Mpakounakis, "Athens finally has a Holocaust Monument, Newspaper *To Vima*, 11/5/2010.

<sup>13</sup> Hagen Fleischer, *Stemma kai Swastika - I Ellada tis Katochis kai tis Antistasis 1941-1944 ("Crown and Swastika - Greece of the Occupation and the Resistance 1941-1944")*, Vol. 2, Papazisis, Athens, 1995, p. 334.

<sup>14</sup> Sakis Leon private archiv, Municipality of Athens, dossier 064540.

## Conclusion

According to historian K. E. Fleming, anti-Semitism in Greece is stronger than ever.<sup>15</sup> The reasons for this is that Greek public sentiment is strongly pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli, so that Greek anti-Semitism often masquerades as a principled political stance in which Zionism and Judaism are equated. Hagen Fleischer also says that there is less sympathy for the suffering of the Jews in countries such as Russia, Poland, and Greece, where the majority population also suffered heavily under German occupation, or in the Baltic countries, where dark memories of Communist rule endure.<sup>16</sup> Articles in serious newspapers that refer to the Israelis as “Nazis” or the “descendants of Hitler” are indicative of the public resentment against Israel. Bishops, artists, writers and politicians have sparked tensions with statements that derive from their anti-Zionist resentment. In televised remarks, a Greek Orthodox bishop recently blamed the country’s financial problems on a conspiracy of Jewish bankers and claimed that the Holocaust was orchestrated by Zionists, and that even Hitler himself was a Zionist! These incidents have intensified over the past year, in a trend connected to the severe economic crisis faced by the country. In such circumstances, the age-old habit of scapegoating the Jews is combined with the stereotype of the "Jewish Bankers" to a willing reception. Monuments are often the targets of this resentment and the trivialization of the Shoah takes place even at the top level of world politics, where the offenders usually insist on their manipulative analogies.<sup>17</sup> The most prominent Greek denier of the Holocaust, lawyer Kostas Plevris, because of his 1.400 page tome of anti-Jewish rage was judged and in March 2009 the court acquitted him on the grounds of free speech. According to the court, his book was scientific! This decision damaged Greece’s image worldwide. I quote from his book: “Hitler was blamed for something that did not actually take place. Later the history of mankind will blame him for not ridding Europe off the Jews, though he could have... We should preserve Auschwitz as it may be useful for the future”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> K. E. Fleming, *Greece: A Jewish History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2008, p. 205.

<sup>16</sup> Hagen Fleischer, *The Wars of Memory. Second World War in Public History*, Nefeli, Athens, 2008, p. 323.

<sup>17</sup> Hagen Fleischer, “Les Fleurs du Mal, The Need to Confront Holocaust Distortion”, paper delivered at the Conference “60 Years Genocide Convention”, Den Haag , 2009, in press.

<sup>18</sup> Hagen Fleischer, *Ibid.*

Pierre Nora has said “the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de memoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial ... all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs”.<sup>19</sup> In this paper, I have tried to indicate the delays and the suppressions concerning the memorialisation of the Holocaust in Greece. Concluding, I would like to mention the ideal type of Shoah monument, a “counter-monument” that incarnates the ideal conduct towards oblivion and historical distortions and one that even invited anti-Semites to “participate” in the commemorative practice: Esther and Jochen Gerz’s Monument against Fascism, War, and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights project in Hamburg. After erecting a twelve-meter lead column, the artists called on residents and visitors to Hamburg alike to sign their names on it, in a call to ‘remain vigilant’. Once each accessible part of the column was covered with signatures, it was lowered into the ground; in 1993, the column disappeared underground completely (Fig. . As artists explained in seven languages on signs located around the sinking monument: ‘In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, *Representations*, No. 26, Spring 1989, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge. After Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2000, p. 127-139.

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