

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Leon Saltiel



Between 15 March and 10 August 1943, some forty-three thousand Jews of Thessaloniki were transported to the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz. Of those, less than one thousand returned back alive. This was a devastating blow to the Jewish population of Thessaloniki, a major Jewish center in Europe since the arrival of the Sephardic Jews after the Spanish Inquisition in 1492. The Jews had constituted the majority of the population—and at times even the absolute majority—thus marking the city’s character for centuries.

One of the most comprehensive first attempts to document the Holocaust in Thessaloniki, and in Greece in general, was the book by Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama, *In Memoriam*.¹ Based on their own experiences, survivor testimonies, and the scant documentation that was available at the time, the two authors tried to reconstruct the Nazi period, the antisemitic measures, and the last days of the Jewish communities. This work, whose first volume was written in 1948, was coupled with some of the early survivors’ testimonies that were printed mostly privately.² Molho also tapped into the diary of Yomtov Yacoel, the Thessaloniki Jewish Community’s legal counsel, who played a central role in the events of the period.³ As his diary is based most probably on detailed notes he kept each day, it remains an authentic and invaluable record of the Nazi persecution in Thessaloniki. Scholarly works that have appeared since have tried to combine these first testimonies together with

diplomatic and government archives, newspaper articles, and trial records in an effort to provide a more complete picture.⁴

However, little is known about the everyday lives of individual Jews during the years of the Nazi occupation, let alone the period of ghettoization and deportation. Most of the existing information comes from testimonies of Jewish survivors or Christian neighbors after the war. Very little material is available from eyewitness accounts of the Nazi antisemitic measures during the events, free from hindsight and the influence of what had followed. This gap in historiography can be bridged by a unique find: a series of fifty-three letters written by three Jewish mothers living in Thessaloniki and sent to their sons, all residing in Athens—all three women victims of the Holocaust. This considerable number of letters from three different eyewitnesses, as well as the period covered (which goes until their transfer to the Baron Hirsch ghetto, which served as a transit camp for the deportation by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau), can shed light on the lives of ordinary Jewish citizens of Thessaloniki, never before known in such detail. The collections seem to be almost complete, as no significant gaps in the narration could be found, thus covering the period in question quite consistently.

Letters are an uncommon find as they often remain in the possession of the family, outside the reach of the researcher. In addition, when found, letters can be fragmented, or lacking the information sought by the historian. In this respect, this collection is rather extraordinary, not only because of the great volume, rich content, and near completeness of the series but also because of the fact that they come from three different authors—three mothers who write to their sons—thus adding a rare multiperspectivity within a common pattern.

The three mothers who are the primary authors are Sara Saltiel, Mathilde Barouh and Neama Cazes. Between 17 May 1942 and 21 March 1943, Sara (Sarina) Serrero Saltiel (1902–43) sent twenty-eight letters to her son Maurice, who was located in Athens. Eleven letters from Mathilde Kamhi Barouh (1883–1943) to her son Fredy have survived, sent from 28 February 1943 to 17 April 1943. Neama Djivre Cazes (1889–1943) sent fourteen letters initially to her son Maurice and then to both of her sons, Maurice and Alberto, between 29 January 1943 and 10 April 1943. The largest collection of letters comprises those sent from Sara Saltiel to her son Maurice Saltiel in Athens, which cover approximately ten months. The letters from the mothers make up the largest part of the collection. Within them, additional letters were found, sent by other family members or close friends, which the recipients also kept in their possession and, in this way, have been preserved to this day. These letters have also been included in this volume.

The three women, aged between forty and sixty years old, had sons in their twenties or thirties. They were from middle-class families, although it is hard to ascertain their exact social status, as the war situation seriously affected everyone's lives and well-being. The Saltiel family seems to be the wealthiest of the three, judging from lifestyle and business aspects described in the letters. The other two families had more limited means and could be described as belonging to the lower middle class. They do not seem to have contacts with the leadership or the elders of the Jewish Community, who had assumed important roles during this period. Whatever they write is what they saw, heard, or lived themselves. Moreover, it is almost certain that the three mothers were not in direct contact with one another.

Another interesting element offered by these letters is the female perspective, and that of the mother in particular. Women are often absent from the historical narration, and their role is presented as secondary. Consequently, a significant part of the population is not represented in historiography, and their experiences are marginalized. In this collection, the women have the principle voice, as they are the narrators of the dramatic events of the German occupation. We not only read their voice but also view the events as presented through their own lens. Their role in the Jewish family becomes apparent, and the areas of their prime responsibility are highlighted, such as care for the family and friends, contact with their children, daily housekeeping, and the preparation of the meals. Thus, this special and unique perspective is added to the other valuable information contained in these letters.

Greece during 1942 and 1943 was divided into three occupation zones by Germany and its Italian and Bulgarian allies. More relevant in our case is the border line between the German and Italian zones, as Thessaloniki was under German control and Athens under Italian control (see map 0.1). As the Italians did not wish to implement antisemitic measures in their territories, these became safe havens for Jews, with several hundred fleeing Thessaloniki to go to the southern parts of the country, most of them to Athens.⁵ These included the four sons, who were already located there or moved soon after the Nazis started to implement racial laws in Thessaloniki.

The letters were sent from Thessaloniki either by regular post or through different Greek Christian acquaintances who made the journey to Athens and could circulate rather freely between these two zones. The confinement of the Jews to the ghettos did not prohibit the postman from accessing the recipients and delivering correspondence addressed to them. The letters took around four to five days to arrive, though not all letters made it.

It is important to note that there appear to be no marks on the letters indicating any state censorship, even though the letters were sent and received by Jews, including during the period of the deportations. The three mothers mentioned that some of the letters, either theirs or those of their sons, did not reach their destination. This could be due to the bad postal system and the difficulties during the war. Since the publication of the Greek volume, some additional letters have come to our attention, including letters written by Neama Cazes's sons in April 1943 and returned back to them in Athens. The envelope bears stamps as well as a sticker by Italian censorship. Additionally, a handwritten note in Greek states, "Departed from Thessaloniki."⁶ Similar stamps can be seen in the letter of Mathilde Barouh sent to her daughter in Paris in June 1943.

Occasionally, the mothers could speak with their sons over the phone, but with difficulties in the connection. For example, on 24 January 1943, Sara Saltiel had started speaking with her son on the phone when the line was cut. Fredy Barouh was able to call friends in Thessaloniki until at least the beginning of April. The mothers had to go to a friend or relative who had a phone connection, usually in their office, and wait for hours for the call.⁷



Figure 0.1. An envelope sent to Neama Cazes on 13 April 1943, which was returned to sender as the recipient had “departed from Thessaloniki.” Italian censorship tape and stamps are visible. Archive of Marie Cazes.

These pages of testimony by the three mothers bear a lot of similarities. The letters are very charged emotionally. The authors described their feelings, fears, prayers, and anguish, which escalated as they realized that their final days were approaching. The correspondence between mother and son is, at times, deeply touching and moving, and radiates an extraordinary humanity. The mothers could not hide the great love they felt for their sons and provided them with last words of advice.

Moreover, the letters detail aspects of daily life, which was quite challenging because of the war situation and eventually the antisemitic restrictions. Spending their time each day was a challenge, as the Jews were confined in the ghettos, without work or any particular activities. They had to depend on family, friends, and neighbors. It is important to stress that these letters offer the fullest and most comprehensive description of the daily life in the ghetto and the emotions right before and during the deportations in Thessaloniki that have been discovered so far.

Each of the three mothers had their own social circles, family and friends, business partners, and neighbors. Consequentially, through their letters, the reader is able to find information about several dozens of other people who interact with the main narrators.

Even if the mothers may have censored themselves—not to describe fully the situation and disturb their sons—they did pass on private discussions, gossip, and rumors. The information presented in these letters is invaluable. Other than describing some of the major events of this period, the letters also offer details ranging from the weather and the types of diseases to prices of different goods and the daily meal. This wealth of news helps us to put things in context and provides us with a background that is often missing from sources, such as government documents or newspaper articles.⁸

In the following pages, we will discuss the main points contained in these letters, divided into different categories. This categorization is based on the content of the letters and also inspired by similar works in the past.⁹ In addition, we will provide the historical context of the German occupation in Thessaloniki, so as to better frame this content. Last but not least, we will try to explain how these letters enrich our knowledge of that period and how they add to what we already know.

Nazi Measures against the Jews of Thessaloniki

In order to have the necessary context to place the letters from the three mothers, it is important to provide a brief historical overview of the

Nazi antisemitic measures against the Jews of Thessaloniki, which led to their deportation and extermination in Auschwitz. The Germans entered Thessaloniki in April 1941. At the beginning, there were no antisemitic actions that were systematic or exclusively touched the Jewish population. Surely, some Jewish leaders were imprisoned, the Jewish archives and libraries were confiscated, Jewish newspapers were shut down, and some Jewish merchants were forced to hand over the ownership of their companies. Yet, the majority of the Jews of Thessaloniki did not perceive them as an organized antisemitic campaign against them. These measures did not have a mass character, and most of the people went on with their lives, suffering as much as their Christian compatriots did.

The delay in the implementation of antisemitic policies in Thessaloniki could be explained by the German wish to apply uniformly the measures to all Jews in the country. That required the consent of the Italians, who were not willing to cooperate on that matter. The Jews were seen as agents of Italian culture, especially in the newly acquired territories for which they had preponderance. When the Germans realized that the Italians were not willing to collaborate, they decided to proceed unilaterally with the deportation of the Jews in the territories they controlled.¹⁰

The first mass measures against the Jews of Thessaloniki started to be implemented more than one year after the German invasion. On 11 July 1942, all male Jews aged between eighteen and forty-five were ordered to gather in the central Liberty Square to register for forced labor.¹¹ On that day, shocking scenes of public humiliation took place, with beatings and cries under a burning sun. It is pertinent to clarify that this measure was a local initiative rather than the result of an order that originated in Berlin.¹² During the weeks that followed, thousands of Jews were sent for hard construction works in different parts of Greece. Due to the heavy work, poor nutrition, and bad conditions, there was a high mortality rate, as these men were far from qualified.¹³ In order to release the Jewish laborers, the Jewish Community had to agree to two painful demands: the collection of a ransom of two billion drachmas and, in addition, the destruction of the city's ancient Jewish cemetery, a process that started on 6 December 1942.

Two Jews, former members of the Greek Parliament, are among the victims of the German reprisals in Thessaloniki. Printer Michel Cazes, member of parliament of the United Front of 1932, was executed on 14 February 1942. David Soulam, MP of the same party in 1926, was executed on 30 December 1942.¹⁴ They are the only members of the Greek Parliament who were targeted and killed by the foreign occupier. In the



Figure 0.2. Jewish men of Thessaloniki gathered in Liberty Square and forced to undergo humiliating gymnastics to register for forced labor. German soldiers stand in the back and watch. Source: Bundesarchiv.

middle of February 1943, the first phase of renaming the streets that bore Jewish names began. This was another measure aimed to remove signs of the city's Jewish character. This process was completed after several months.¹⁵

The arrival the same month of SS officers Dieter Wisliceny and Alois Brunner, sent by Adolf Eichmann, marked the beginning of the implementation of the "Final Solution" in Thessaloniki, which included harsh antisemitic measures. After 25 February 1943, Jews had to move to ghettos, which were set up for this reason.¹⁶ All those who lived in other areas had to move to these designated areas, and several Jewish families often found themselves crammed together in one apartment. The Christian families who lived in the area could remain at their homes. In addition, the Jews were forced to wear a yellow star and declare all their possessions.

During the same period, the city's chamber of commerce and professional associations were ordered to remove all Jews from the membership, which meant that, from then on, Jews could not exercise any profession. Regrettably, most associations implemented this order immediately, without delaying the action or trying to stand by the persecuted Jews.¹⁷



Figure 0.3. A group of friends wearing the yellow star in the ghetto of Thessaloniki, March–April 1943. The second woman from the left is Alice Bivas, who perished at Auschwitz together with her parents. She sent this photograph to her family. Source: Archive of Liliane Arditti-Beizermann.

From the ghettos, the Jews would be transferred to the Baron Hirsch transit camp, a poor Jewish neighborhood in front of what was then the train station, which had been fenced and prepared for the occasion. After waiting there for two days, they were loaded in cattle cars under horrific conditions, eighty to one hundred people in each wagon, with little food and water and no sanitation, to be transported to the death camp of Auschwitz, in Nazi-occupied Poland, after a trip lasting several days. When the Hirsch camp was vacated, it would be filled by Jews from other districts.

The first transport of some twenty-five hundred Jews left Thessaloniki on 15 March 1943. In a telegram to Berlin, the German consul in Thessaloniki, Fritz Schönberg, reported:

The evacuation of approximately 56,000 counted persons, local Jews with Greek citizenship, began today with the transportation of 2,600 persons from Salonika to the General Government [Occupied Poland]. The plan is to carry out four transports every week; thus, the entire operation will be completed in 6 weeks. The movable and immovable property of the evacuated Jews will



Figure 0.4. Transport of Jews from the ghetto in the eastern part of Thessaloniki to the Baron Hirsch transit camp, via Egnatia Street, 9 April 1943. The Jews can be seen in between two columns of onlookers who are watching the scene. The photo was taken from a balcony, where one can also see the father and sister of the photographer. Source: Archive of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki.

be confiscated and transferred to a fund from which transport expenses and debts will be paid. The businesses of the evacuees will continue to be run by Greek trustees until further notice.¹⁸

After August 1943, virtually no Jew remained in the city, and after the end of the war, very few came back alive.

On 7 March 1943, the Agency for the Custody of Jewish Property (YDIP) was founded, with the goal to administer the vacated Jewish properties and thus offer a layer of legitimacy to their plunder, which was about to follow. The YDIP was in charge of registering Jewish properties (shops and apartments) and their contents and appointing Christian custodians. The Germans took for themselves a large part of the movable property, as did several of their local collaborators. A big part of the society, merchants, employers, refugees, state agencies, and associations, as well as German collaborators, took over the direction of the shops and businesses.¹⁹

The Use of Languages and Terms

All letters were written in cursive French. Most letters are two pages long (one double-paged sheet), and more rarely three or four pages (two sheets). Sometimes, other people—brother, aunt—added some words at the end of the letters. The level of their French was high, with a few grammatical typos or spelling errors, although they may not have reread and corrected the text due to stress or shortage of time. The women's knowledge of French indicates that they came from middle-class families who were able to afford high school education for their daughters.

To understand the significance of the French language to the Jewish community of Thessaloniki at the time, it is important to recall the network of Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, which tried to introduce Western educational norms among the Jews in Southeast Europe and the wider region.²⁰ The first girls' school in Thessaloniki was founded in September 1874.²¹ French was the main language of instruction in the schools, both for boys and also for girls.²² According to Eyal Ginio, French “represented . . . the enlightened and redeeming culture of the West.” It was therefore the language of choice for all correspondence, be it business or personal.²³

Another aspect with regard to the language of the correspondence is the use of Judeo-Spanish, transcribed in Latin letters. Ginio explained that Judeo-Spanish was used for more familiar or informal discussion, and while “no longer regarded as a respectful and modern means of

communication, it continued, nevertheless, to serve as a language of intimate conversation.”²⁴ The role of Judeo-Spanish as a mother tongue among the Jewish families of Thessaloniki had changed over time.²⁵ After the integration of Thessaloniki into the Greek state in 1912, a young generation of Thessaloniki Jews was taught Greek as their first language in both the community and the state-run schools. This new reality made the use of Judeo-Spanish gradually more infrequent.²⁶ The mothers used the Spanish Jewish idiom to varying degrees. For example, Mathilde Barouh, when describing the harsh realities in the ghetto and her personal suffering, often reverted to Judeo-Spanish—her mother tongue—not formal French.

In addition, all three mothers used few Greek words, mostly in Latin script and rarely in Greek alphabet, for terms that related to the special vocabulary of the period, such as *politofilakas* (Jewish civilian guard at the ghetto), *sissition* (daily food allowance), etc. Although they had not gone to Greek schools, they sometimes utilized in their letters Greek expressions translated into French. This shows an increased exposure to Greek culture and language, despite the fact that they wrote in French or may not have used the Greek alphabet regularly.

In general, the three mothers wrote to their sons openly, without an apparent use of code words to refer to certain people. As the situation deteriorated, however, they sometimes used initials or indirect ways to refer to people, probably in an effort to protect their identities in case the letters were intercepted. Such are mentions like “your friend,” “your two acquaintances,” or “the gentleman you wrote to me about.” Some of these cryptic references to people may also be due to the familiarity they had with them. Interestingly, Neama Cazes stopped writing the names of her children as the antisemitic measures were intensifying. On 19 March 1943, four days after the first train had left Thessaloniki, Ms. Cazes began her letter with “My dear Maurice” for the last time. From 24 March, they started with “My dear children.” She also used the Greek name “Aleco” when referring to her son “Alberto.” Similarly, in her last letters, Sara Saltiel did not mention by name her son’s two Christian schoolmates and close friends.

The language used in the letters gives us a great insight into the linguistic reality of that period for Thessaloniki’s Jews. French remained the language of formal correspondence. It was infused with Judeo-Spanish and Greek, when the former gradually ceded its place to the latter as the main spoken language of the Jewish community. The choice of words, and whether to mention specific names or not, demonstrates the awareness of the three mothers to the rapidly deteriorating situation, which required careful attention and more secrecy.

Narration of Everyday Life

The rising prices and the constant depreciation of the drachma made the life of the people of Thessaloniki very difficult, and it affected their daily nutrition. The three mothers, like the rest of the residents, had to face the many difficulties of this period, including limited food supplies, lack of heating, and great uncertainty. In the letters, we find information on the daily meals, the availability of foodstuffs, and the different recipes. They also referred to the different goods in the market and their prices. In these conditions, it is only natural that local transportation was also affected, with the price of a tram ticket on the rise. Many then opted to go to their jobs on foot, or to not go to the city center at all, although the trams appeared full, maybe because they had reduced circulation.

The hunger affected a large percentage of the population and caused a lot of deaths. In Thessaloniki, the famine is estimated to have lasted from December 1941 to March 1943, and an outbreak of malaria exacerbated it.²⁷ According to Maria Kavala, the deaths in Thessaloniki due to famine were about 1 percent of the total population, i.e. 1,785 people, of whom 773 (43.3 percent) were Jews, two times higher in relation to the Christian population.²⁸ Using different sources, the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki speaks of Jewish deaths three times higher than those of Greek Christians in 1942.²⁹ The International Red Cross estimated that between 1943 and 1944, 98 percent of the population of Thessaloniki and its outskirts, some 285,000 people on average, were in need of food aid.³⁰

In the letters, we read about a poor domestic aid and an older lady, both of them described as “skeletons.” This also matches the description that most of the victims of famine were from the lower classes or elderly.³¹ Under these circumstances, the Jewish Community took on even more responsibilities, realizing the vulnerability of its constituency. A coordinating committee for social welfare, composed of prominent members of the community, had been created in April 1942, and the challenges they had to tackle were constantly increasing.³² Soup kitchens for children were also in operation, which grew from two thousand recipients in April 1942 to fifty-five hundred in the middle of October, a number that swelled even more rapidly during the first months of 1943.³³

During the same period, robberies increased significantly, and the mothers describe such events. This phenomenon must be linked to the difficult economic situation, which drove many to these illegal acts. Such descriptions remind us of the widespread poverty during this period and the value of items, such as a blanket or a woolen shirt.

From the letters, mainly of Sara Saltiel, the reader can glean information regarding the cultural life of the city and how the citizens spent their leisure time prior to the ghettoization. Due to the cold and the increased food prices during the winter of 1942–43, it was often the case that people visited each other's homes, mostly the warmest among family members and friends. There, they chatted, played cards, or even sang and danced. Ms. Saltiel went regularly to concerts and to the cinema. In the letters, she described many of these events and her impressions. In the summer of 1942, they swam in the sea or took an occasional boat ride. In the winter, when the weather was good, they preferred walks by the seafront or parks with friends, as well as small excursions.

The war situation did limit social events, such as weddings or bar mitzvah ceremonies. As the food was scarce and expensive, invitations and big spending were avoided. Most people preferred to postpone the celebrations until after the war and to accept invitations at home or do absolutely nothing. Nevertheless, some festive events did take place, especially among the more affluent members, such as the marriage of Leon J. Cohen to Germaine Perahia, daughter of banker Jessua Perahia, in January 1943, which is described in the letters.

Formal and Informal Relations between Jews and Non-Jews: Family Members, Friends, and Neighbors

The letters from the three mothers offer a glimpse of their daily interactions with family, friends, and neighbors, both Jewish and Christian. Interpersonal relations are a very important element, especially in times of crisis, like during World War II, when support networks were crucial. These relationships between Jews and Christians, although challenged due to the circumstances, were not contained strictly along religious lines but had a lot of cordial elements, at least in the central areas where the three mothers resided.

Family members were very close in order to deal with the hardships of the period and to provide support, but they also kept each other company. Ms. Saltiel did her best to keep her family well during these difficult times. Her in-laws sometimes stayed with her and her husband in the apartment. She often invited relatives for dinner. She tried to cheer people up, even though she sometimes felt the urge to cry. The difficulties of the period put strains on her relationship her husband. Ms. Saltiel complained that he would return home from work troubled and not in the mood for any conversation. She spoke of her "solitude" and

wrote to her son that his letters were the one thing that would console her. The other two mothers, Mathilde Barouh and Neama Cazes, were widows whose children lived in Athens. As a result, they had to rely on extended families or acquaintances. Ms. Barouh stayed with her sister, while Ms. Cazes did not have any close family members in her home.

Another important element is the interaction with their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. In the letters, we see a quite close relation between Jews and non-Jews, which went beyond the traditional dividing lines. Sara Saltiel was very close to her son's Christian friends, some of whom were studying with him in Athens. In fact, her son Maurice moved into the house of the grandmother of Sotiris Faltsis, one of his best friends. Ms. Saltiel saw her son's friends regularly, and through them she and her son sent clothes, food, and other supplies back and forth to Athens. She also gave them gifts, visited them when they were sick, invited them for dinner, went to the cinema with them, and met up socially with their parents.

The Saltiel family had a wide circle of business partners and acquaintances who were Christians. Mr. Saltiel's Christian business partners would sometimes spend the night at their home. There were also several people, such as acquaintances and friends of friends, through which Sara Saltiel used to send things to her son. At the time, their relations appeared to be cordial and sincere, seemingly unaffected by the antisemitic propaganda, German measures, and anti-Jewish restrictions of the period. Ms. Barouh also mentioned names of Greek Christians, but she did not indicate that they had a very close relationship. Two Christian acquaintances visited her in the ghetto during the time of the deportations in order to pass on information to her from her family in Athens. Ms. Cazes, too, described her relations with Christians, commercial contacts, or acquaintances, of whom some appeared somewhat cautious, however.

These cordial relations between Jews and non-Jews reveal an unknown aspect of the everyday life in Thessaloniki during the period of the German occupation. Due to the general lack of other contemporary sources, the letters shed a light into the state of intercommunal relations and open the way for more research on the issue.

Narration of Anti-Jewish Measures

The mothers offer a unique eyewitness insight into the anti-Jewish measures that took place in Thessaloniki during the German occupation. In the beginning, the three women were careful not to paint a dark picture

to their children. This could be due to the fact that they did not want their sons to worry too much, but it could also be because they hoped the situation would remain stable—or even improve—and that these were isolated incidents. Nevertheless, as they witnessed the antisemitic measures gradually intensifying and the situation deteriorating at an increasing pace, their accounts became more emotional and blunt, with little hope or optimism.

Sara Saltiel's flat was requisitioned by the Germans, and subsequently in 1942 she had to change apartments several times while looking for more permanent housing. The furniture, after being confiscated, was returned to the family in a very bad condition. She became worried as the winter months approached that she would not be able to find a new place to live. Her troubles with housing seemed endless, and she was actively searching for a new home for some time. She was so desperate that she went to a medium to seek some clarity. In October 1942, she moved to a flat that was far from desirable and with very bad sanitary conditions, having been left with no choice.

The gathering in Liberty Square on 11 July 1942—in order to register Jewish males for forced labor—was not mentioned in the letters, but its repercussions were. Ms. Saltiel described these developments to her son, specifying family friends or relatives who were drafted for these works. In some households no man was left behind, while in others, those who were sick would be sent to the works once their situation improved. When some of the workers returned from the forced labor camps in mid-October 1942, Sara Saltiel described their poor condition and the diseases many of them carried. At this point, only the sick were allowed to return to Thessaloniki, and the Community began to collect the ransom of two billion drachmas in order to release the rest of the workers. A committee of the Jewish Community came up with lists of how much each member should contribute based on their financial background.³⁴ There is no mention in the letters of the destruction of the old Jewish cemetery of the city, which commenced on 6 December 1942 and was part of the deal.

In February 1943, the Saltiels were forced to undergo the German restrictions. They had to reside in particular areas, with many families in one apartment. From this point on, Ms. Saltiel broke down emotionally and could not restrain her tears and agony due to the great adversities and uncertainty they were experiencing. The other two mothers wrote the letters to their sons with crying eyes and trembling hand. All three described the life in the ghetto with the darkest of colors. Even though they do not mention the obligation to wear the yellow star, they do refer to personal experiences and incidents.

Life in the Ghetto and Personal Emotional State

The letters from the three mothers are the only primary contemporary source that offers a perspective into the life in the ghettos of Thessaloniki. Through them, one can learn the severe impact of these anti-Jewish measures on the Jewish population of Thessaloniki, such as the restrictions in circulation,³⁵ the closure of businesses, and the registration of properties. The ghettos had been closed, and exit was allowed only with a special permit. They were guarded by the Greek police and a special Jewish unit that was formed for that purpose.³⁶ At the same time, the Greek Christian families who resided in the area remained in their homes, living side-by-side with the Jewish families without having to undergo the same restrictions.

The three mothers were located in different parts of Thessaloniki. The Saltiel family was residing in the ghetto of the city center, over Egnatias Avenue, on Ptolemeon 43. Ms. Barouh and Ms. Cazes lived in the big ghetto in the eastern part of the city, and their homes where they wrote their last letters before their deportation were Amalias 30 and Deligiorgi 33 respectively.

The situation took a very heavy toll on the Jewish population. The people inside the ghetto had to live with the daily fear of deportation. They struggled with adapting to the new reality, accepting it as the new standard, while preparing for the trip to an unknown future. They did not know when they would depart and lived a constant torment of uncertainty and anxiety. These circumstances caused grave emotional consequences, and many endured extreme psychological pressure without an end in sight. The fact that they had no jobs, income, or any other occupation exacerbated their already critical living situation. Hunger, poverty, anxiety, and uncertainty crushed them. In the letters, we see the three mothers in a very poor emotional and psychological state. They had feelings of hopelessness and self-pity, they were demoralized, and they spoke of a state of panic and agony. There was also a sense of acceptance, of leaving things to destiny, that things simply “were written” this way.

With the deportations on the horizon, the letters describe the efforts of the people to sell their personal belongings, with ruthless merchants walking the streets of the ghetto waiting to buy everything for a small fee or a little food. The mothers seem to despair, as nothing belonged to them anymore, and their household that they had built for so long had no value.

In the ghetto, there was a surge in marriage rates, reinforced by rumors that married couples would get their own house at the new des-

ination.³⁷ Wedding ceremonies increased exponentially with couples getting married in large groups, with some of the partners only getting to know each other a few hours before the nuptials. Dowry and a big ceremony were the least of their worries. Some unfortunate ones could not get married in the wake of their partner being deported before the wedding could take place. Others could not because their future partner had a foreign passport, and marriages with people of other nationalities were forbidden.³⁸ Interestingly, there was a rise of divorces in the ghettos, possibly due to couples not wishing to remain together during the difficult times.³⁹

The letters describe the preparations for the long journey to Poland. To be able to carry their personal effects, along with babies, the elderly, and the sick, several people would buy small carts that they loaded and parked in front of their door. Concerning luggage, they could only take with them a small bag of twenty kilos per person, with the most basic belongings. No suitcases were allowed.⁴⁰ For this reason they would prepare a backpack, which they would have ready by their bed.

In the letters there is a clear sense of doom, that their final days were approaching. The mothers felt deep emotions of hopelessness, although some rays of hope occasionally crept in, when they prayed for a miracle or the chance to reunite with their children. Their profound love for and affection toward their children is omnipresent in the writings of all three. Their sons tried to help their mothers as much as they could. They asked Christian friends or acquaintances to visit their mothers in their homes. This was often the only contact they had with the outside world, and through the visitors they sent messages to their children. Their sons, living in relative freedom and safety in Athens, were possibly the only positive thought they had left to cling to. Their sons were always on their minds, offering them emotional and mental support and giving them courage to endure the challenges they faced.

Finally, it is important to add that in the letters from the three women there were no emotions of hate or revenge against the Germans, not even a reference to them.⁴¹ Similarly, references to any responsibilities of the community leadership or the Greek authorities are also absent.

Deportation and Options for Escape

The three mothers, with their families and friends, were deported and murdered in Auschwitz. They remained in the ghetto while the first trains started leaving Thessaloniki to German-occupied Poland, transporting the Jews from the poorer neighborhoods close to the train sta-

tion. They must have been deported to the unknown destination shortly after they sent their last letters to their sons.

The three authors described the procedure of the deportations in heartbreaking detail. The reactions of the people the day of the departure are shocking. The inhuman conditions on the deportation trains were known to them, and the mere thought of the journey would freeze their blood. They worried about the elderly and sick, but also about themselves, that they would not come out of the journey alive. The wait inside the ghetto until the date of the departure was nerve-racking. People could not sleep at night and laid in bed with their clothes on to be ready. For some of them, the departure would signal the end of their suffering in the ghetto, since the transfer to Poland was unavoidable.

While the nature of the final destination—a factory of death set up to exterminate them—was unknown to them, the three mothers had a sense of the very precarious situation they were in. The context of the war, the daily life in the ghetto with all its hardships, and in particular the way the deportations were being carried out all signaled the gravity and seriousness of their condition. The severe parameters of their displacement were becoming apparent to them, not by concrete words or exact information but by actions, observation, and emotions. Facing these adversities—and possibly foreseeing their immediate future—they had few doubts about what would happen to them. They used expressions such as “death,” “extermination,” “last hour,” “fatal moment,” and “condemned to death sentence.” The situation around them did not give them any hope for encouragement or optimism.

Before this escalation of the situation—and possibly predicting their immediate future—the three mothers each tried to find a way to escape. Leaving Thessaloniki and joining their children in Athens would be a logical decision. One of their sons tried to issue a permit so that his mother could travel to Athens. They were not successful, and the German authorities would not accept such documents. Some appealed to the Italian consulate, which had a positive attitude toward the persecuted Jews,⁴² but were not successful there either. The option of a wedding with a foreign citizen could also have been a solution. Unfortunately for them, their efforts were fruitless, and they could not escape the deportation and murder in Auschwitz.

The descriptions the three mothers gave of the situation in the ghetto, the options of escape, and the stance of the Jewish population touch the broader debate related to the presumed passivity of the victims. Could more Jews of Thessaloniki have been saved during this period of persecution? The letters offer us some important elements, which could serve as an impetus for more comprehensive research. At the same time,

detailed sources on the thinking of the Jewish leadership are lacking,⁴³ or even on the stance of the youth, who could have escaped easier or organized some resistance.

The situation deteriorated at a rapid pace, a fact that did not help the reflexes of the persecuted Jews. The three mothers were not young, and it was not easy for them to escape. Their age, language, accent, and the lack of connections with the resistance or people in the countryside were factors that worked against them. They had large families in a traditional society, where reckless attempts or taking risks were not generally accepted. Their circle of loved ones included sick individuals, the elderly, pregnant women, and small children. To escape and leave them behind without support was not an easy thing.

Most of the Jews of Thessaloniki belonged to an urban population, with limited networks outside the city. Many were active in trade, managing businesses or shops with a lot of merchandise and capital invested in them. In the letters, there are many references to interpersonal relations with Christians, but nothing on escape networks or offers to hide in Christian homes. It is possible that these existed but were not recorded.

When the three mothers finally realized the true nature of the persecution, it was already too late—they were imprisoned in the ghetto. Their only chances of escape were via peaceful, legal means, such as moving to Athens or marrying a foreign subject. In general, there are almost no references to organized mass reactions of the authorities of Thessaloniki or the ordinary people, no protests, complaints, or acts of solidarity. Only three cases are known of Jewish families who hid in Christian homes in the city of Thessaloniki during the whole period of the German occupation.⁴⁴

Approaches to Faith, Relation with God

Thessaloniki was traditionally a very important Jewish religious center. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, religious observance was decreasing. Thessaloniki scholar Joseph Nehama described a society that was more secular and tolerant, attributing it to reasons such as education and analytical thinking, the big fire of 1917 that destroyed much of the religious infrastructure, the decline of the religious authorities, and the participation in the social life of the lower classes.⁴⁵ Following this general pattern, the three mothers do not seem to be very religious. They were probably traditional, observing the different religious customs and the Jewish High Holidays.

Despite their lack of observance of official religious practice, the three mothers displayed a spiritual faith in God. In the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, God became a way out for them, and they prayed and hoped for a better future. God was the only support that they had left, that gave them hope and strength to continue. They asked God for a miracle that would bring them back to the prior calm and peaceful situation and allow them to see their children again. Prayer and faith in God became their only consolation in the face of the difficult voyage toward the unknown that awaited them. This also showed the irreversible situation they were in, as they could not find help or assistance from anywhere else. In addition, the three mothers opened themselves to their sons. They spoke about their lives, recording in their letters a kind of reckoning of their actions until then. They tried to be kind and helpful to others and hoped that God would reward them for that.

Final Words to Their Children

As the time of the deportation approached for the three mothers, the tone of their letters increased in emotion. Their writings were a means to communicate their last words to their children, to offer advice, and to share their last requests. They tried to pass on to their sons their wisdom and blessings, words that they would usually save for important life events, such as their wedding day.

Some of the mothers mentioned the people who stood by their side during these difficult hours, so that their sons knew and could repay them one day. They advised them which people to trust and who they should keep by their side for the rest of their lives. They reassured them that they would also be loved and welcomed by their adopted families. They indicated where they had left some things for them and where they would meet after the war was over.

Starting in the beginning of March 1943, the mothers began offering prayers and blessings for their sons. They wished them health and a bright future and prayed to God to protect them. They asked them to be kind and generous with everyone and to be careful of the ones that tried to take advantage of them. The mothers worried about what would happen to their sons if the anti-Jewish measures would expand also in Athens, which would put their children in danger. In that case, they advised them to get rid of their possessions and acquire cash so that they could deal with the difficult circumstances.

The letters from the three mothers contain a unique characteristic, expressing a universal message of love, hope, and peace. The very loaded

phrases contained in the final letters served as their final testament to the sons, as the three mothers realized their end was approaching. They offered their blessings, pieces of advice, as well as their last kiss and goodbye. They reiterated their love to their children and their hope of seeing them again. Finally, they expressed their wish that their children would not forget them.

Notes

1. Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*. The book was first published in French.
2. For an overview of the historiography of the Holocaust in Greece, see, for example, Avloniti, "Holocaust"; Benveniste, "Istoriografia"; Benveniste, "Coming Out"; A. Molho, "Introduction"; R. Molho, *Olokautoma*, 25–48; and Varon-Vassard, "Genoktonia."
3. Yacoel, *Apomnimoneumata*. Yacoel's diary is also available in English in Bowman, *Holocaust in Salonika*, 25–122. Yacoel was writing his diary while hidden in Athens between 1943 and 1944, before he was arrested and deported.
4. See for example Apostolou, "Exception"; Fleischer, *Stemma kai Svastiga*, 296–348; Margaritis, *Anepithimitoi Sympatriotes*; Mazower, *Salonica*, 392–411; Ritzaleos, "Elliniki Orthodoxi Ekklisia."
5. Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 116.
6. The stamp reads "Uficio Censura Postale Atene" and the banner "Verificato Per Censura." Envelopes from January and February 1943 do not bear any marks. No other envelopes have been found.
7. On 10 January 1943, an announcement of the German commander of Thessaloniki published in the local press called for people to use the phone only in urgent cases and to avoid any unnecessary conversations. In case the monthly quota was exceeded, the owner was threatened with losing the telephone connection and further punishment. *Nea Evropi* [New Europe], 10 January 1943. This order may have discouraged many people from using the telephone.
8. There were two newspapers in circulation in Thessaloniki during this period, *Nea Evropi* [New Europe] and *Apogematini* [Evening], both run by Greek collaborators of the Nazis. For more background on the collaboration press of Thessaloniki, see Patrikiou, "Mia 'Nea' Istoriki Periodos" and Dordanas "Ehthros me tin Pena."
9. See for example Bacharach, *Last Letters*.
10. Dublon-Knebel, *German Foreign Office*, 24. See also other relevant documents in the volume.
11. These measures did not apply to Jews of Italian citizenship or those of neutral states.
12. For more on these events, see Saltiel, *Holocaust*, 47–56.
13. For the mortality rate, Yacoel gives a figure of 3 percent in two and a half months. This would be approximately 100 people. Yacoel, *Apomnimoneumata*, 71. Molho misquotes Yacoel and gives a rate of 12 percent. Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 69. In fact, Molho must have confused it with a 12 that appeared close by in Yacoel's text but was unrelated. In his 1961 deposition to the Eichmann trial, German officer Max Merten said that there "was a high mortality rate, and I consider that the figure of twelve percent in two and a half months, given by Michael Molho in his book *In Memoriam*, is still too low" ("Testimony"). Merten may have claimed that the rate was

- even higher than 12 percent to bolster his humanitarian actions for his defense. We believe Yacoel's is a more plausible figure.
14. Dodos, *Ebraioi tis Thessalonikis*, 264.
 15. Tsironis, "Onomatohesies kai Metonomasies," 190–93 and Saltiel, *Holocaust*, 107–10.
 16. For more on the ghettos established in Thessaloniki see Hadar, "Space and Time"; Hekimoglou, "Exact Location"; R. Molho, *Olokautoma* 69–71, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Encyclopedia*, 1941–48.
 17. Saltiel, *Holocaust*, 151–64.
 18. Dublon-Knebel, *German Foreign Office*, telegram T50, Schönberg to Berlin, 15 March 1943, 120.
 19. See for example Dordanas, "Exontosi kai Leilasia."
 20. R. Molho, *Ebraioi tis Thessalonikis*, 142–46.
 21. R. Molho, "Education," 262.
 22. R. Molho, *Ebraioi tis Thessalonikis*, 175–79.
 23. Ginio, "Learning," 236.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. Bunis, "Salonika."
 26. Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 20–21, and Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 156–88.
 27. For more on the hunger see Hionidou, *Famine and Death*; Clogg, *Bearing Gifts*; and Kavala, "Epiviosi."
 28. Kavala, "Thessaloniki," 182–91.
 29. "Divided Memories 1940–1950: Between History and Experience," exhibition, Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, December 2016–February 2017, quoting a study of "medical doctor Athanasios Mantekos (1903–2006) an international personality in the field of public health."
 30. Helger, *Ravitaillement*, 323.
 31. Kavala, "Epiviosi," 17.
 32. Yacoel was the de facto leader of this group. On its creation, see Yacoel, *Apomnimoneumata*, 51–52.
 33. Archive of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, Box 9, Subseries 2: Correspondence of Matanoth Laevionim, File 165: Correspondence regarding Mess Halls of Thessaloniki and related items, 1940–1943.
 34. See Yacoel, *Apomnimoneumata*, 78–83.
 35. Prohibition of circulation after sunset. This measure was announced to Chief Rabbi Koretz by the SS on 8 February 1943, with the date of implementation of 25 February. See Yacoel, *Apomnimoneumata*, 101.
 36. The Germans ordered the Community to prepare a corps of 250 Jews, preferably young, who would be auxiliaries to the Community, under orders by the SS. See Yacoel, *Apomnimoneumata*, 116, and Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 92.
 37. For more on the marriages in the ghetto, see Hadar, "Marriage," and Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 115–16.
 38. This was due to the fact that Jews of certain foreign citizenships were exempt from the measures. See order 1237 of 6 February 1943, provided in Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 84–85, with the German original on page 163.
 39. Historical Archive of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, Letter of Sarina Sides, 31 March 1943.
 40. Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 108.
 41. For a discussion on the absence of reference to the German perpetrators in Holocaust victims' diaries, see Tahvonon, "Perpetrators and Possibilities," 110–19.
 42. For a review of the role of the Italian consulate in Thessaloniki in helping the Jews, see Carpi, *Italian Diplomatic Documents*.

43. Such references are lacking, and the narration in Yacoel's diary ends before the beginning of the deportations.
44. These families were Algava, Assael, and Pardo. The son of the first family published his memoirs: Algava, *600 Days in Hiding*. A daughter of the second family published her memoirs after the war: Ingram, *Unaccounted For*. Finally, a daughter of the third family published the diary she was keeping as a young teenager: Asser Pardo, *548 Days*.
45. Nehama, *Istoria*, 1592. Molho made similar observations as to the small number of religious leaders and the decreasing quality of religious education. Molho and Nehama, *In Memoriam*, 23–24.