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ARTICLE FOR THE SUMMER CAMP OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF THESSALONIKI

By DAVID BREAKSTONE*

August 28 might have been the end. It might not have been noted on your calendar last week, but this summer I discovered that the date is etched deep into the consciousness of [Greek Jewry](#). That was the day in 1943 on which the final remnants of the more than 53,000 Jews living in Thessaloniki (Salonika) on the eve of World War II were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The vast majority died even before reaching the camp. Most of the rest were gassed upon arrival. The fate of the additional 27,000 Greek Jews, dispersed among 30 locales, was hardly any better. Some 87% of the total of 80,000 were slaughtered during in the Holocaust.

Against all odds, however, this wasn't to be the final chapter of this proud and resilient community, one of the oldest in the annals of [Jewish history](#). I know because I experienced what the survivors willed to be otherwise, in a camp of a very different nature than that in which so many were eradicated.

It was high in the mountains of central Greece, far from the crystal-clear waters lapping the shores most often frequented by visitors from Israel. Invigorating highland air, views surpassing those of the Swiss Alps, charming villages – and an Israeli flag waving in the breeze. I'd arrived.

So had some 200 young Greek Jews, two weeks before me. They'd taken over the sprawling facility that had been rented for them, transforming it into an enclave of pulsating Jewish life with Israel as its heart. Their number included more than 40 staff, most between the ages of 16 and 24, as well as a few dozen Israeli kids whose parents had made aliyah from Greece and continue to maintain strong ties with what I would learn is a very tight-knit community.

This month-long Jewish summer camp was established nearly 40 years ago and has operated every summer since. Bringing together youngsters from all corners of the country, it is operated by the Jewish umbrella organization of Thessaloniki and serves as an inspiring testament to the magnificent history and determined present of this indomitable community, of which, it turns out, I knew very little before arriving.

I got my first glimpse of Jewish Thessaloniki quite accidentally. Strolling about on my first morning there, I came across a Holocaust memorial prominently placed on the waterfront promenade. But I didn't begin to grasp just how Jewish the town once was until I visited its iconic White Tower, now a municipal museum. Jews were mentioned repeatedly throughout the museum's various exhibits, something I took to be rather odd given that today, numbering less than 2,000 souls, Jews account for less than two-tenths of 1% of the nearly 1.3 million people living in the metropolitan area.

I thought it odd, that is, until being informed of the astonishing fact that for much of the last five centuries, Jews actually comprised a majority of the city's population, earning it the moniker "Jerusalem of the Balkans." This demographic preeminence lasted into the beginning of the 20th century, some saying all the way until 1922. At the beginning of the German occupation, there were still a full 59 functioning synagogues and Jewish study halls.

ONLY ONE house of prayer survived the Nazi annihilation of the community, and only a handful of its congregants survived the death camps. But the resolve of those who did, along with the few who were hidden by non-Jewish families or had managed to stay alive as partisans in the Greek resistance, was enough to lay the foundation for the camp I was now visiting.

Being there over parents' weekend gave me the opportunity to hear again and again from those who had once been campers themselves, how vital the institution has been to the community's future, and how deeply it impacted the identity and esprit de corps of those who spent their summers there. After a few days on-site, it was easy to understand why. Campers range in age from six to 16, and while many of the activities are organized by age group, others are camp-wide and conducted in an atmosphere infused with a palpable feeling of family. Shabbat certainly feels that way, as does every morning, beginning with an outdoor assembly that includes recitation of the Shema Yisrael prayer, the raising of the Israeli flag, and the singing of "Hatikvah," the words of which I was pleasantly surprised to learn they know by heart.

It was also at the community's request that several senior members of the staff were brought over from Israel, including a number of Jewish Agency emissaries charged with ensuring that Zionism is a constant in the educational program. That responsibility led them to dress me up as David Ben-Gurion and have me declare Israel's independence, at a reenactment of the event enthusiastically cheered by all.

This is not to say that the community doesn't face enormous challenges. Sometimes size does matter, and the stark reality is that the community is finding it difficult to sustain itself. Estimates of the total number of Jews in Greece today range from 5,000 to 7,000, with nearly three-quarters believed to be in Athens. The two day schools, one in the capital and one in Thessaloniki, find it difficult to fill their beginning classes, sometimes launching a new grade with less than a handful of Jewish children. Inter-marriage is on the rise. But perhaps most problematic is that the vast majority of Jewish Millennials and Gen Z are migrating, not a surprising statistic as a recent Pew study suggests that as few as 6% of the general Greek population of that age are satisfied with the way things are going in their country.

Nevertheless, the community's leadership is fully committed to turning things around, and refusing to entertain any scenario projecting its demise. One of the solutions they are exploring – and that I was there to begin processing – is the establishment of an international, Jewish Agency-backed summer camp that would bring together young Jews from around the world. The hope is that this will foster

lifelong friendships – and perhaps more than that, leading ultimately to the replenishment of the community.

If you build it, will they come? Difficult to say, but there's no doubting that this venerable and time-honored Jewish community is determined to give it a try. With a sterling record of having helped others in their hour of need, Israel in particular, it is now determined to help itself - with or without the help of others. They seem to feel they owe that not only to themselves, but to their parents and grandparents so that their memory might indeed be for a blessing.

*The writer serves as deputy chair of the Jewish Agency executive and is actively engaged with small Jewish communities worldwide. The Jewish Agency is the ongoing story of Israel and the Jewish people. 'Family Matters' tells that as it is, one chapter at a time.

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