

# LADINAR

Estudios sobre la literatura, la música  
y la historia de los sefardíes



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Estudios sobre la literatura, la música  
y la historia de los sefardíes

Establecido por  
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Vol. IX

©

2017

Centro Naime y Yehoshua Salti  
para los estudios del Ladino  
Universidad Bar-Ilán, Israel

**El presente volumen ha sido financiado por:**

**Centro Naime y Yehoshua Salti para los estudios del Ladino**

Fundación Salamó Rubén  
Universidad Bar-Ilán, Israel

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**Ladinar es una publicación del:**

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[www.ladinobiu.co.il](http://www.ladinobiu.co.il)

ISSN 2520-7601

**Diseño y producción:**

Nitsa Bruck, A.N.B. Project Management

**Edición a cargo de**

Dov Cohen

**Este volumen** de Ladinar contiene nueve artículos y una reseña.

Los artículos de Agnieszka August-Zarębska, Susy Gruss, Rivka Havassy y José Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, han sido presentados como ponencias durante el XVII Congreso de Estudios Sefardíes que se celebró en la Universidad Bar-Ilán en el verano del 2012 y han sido editados por Hilary Pomeroy, Shmuel Refael y Elena Romero.

Los artículos de Michael Alpert, Nivi Gomel, Michal Held Delarozza, Nina Pinto-Abecasis y Sarah Zur, han sido aceptados posteriormente para su publicacion en Ladinar y su edición ha corrido a cargo de Dov Cohen.



המרכז לחקר הלאדינו ע"ש נעימה ויהושע סלטי  
Naime & Yehoshua Salti Center for Ladino Studies



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# "ב'ירסו אונה נואיב'ה ב'ידה" (Towards a New Life): The Ultimate Voices of the Sephardic Community of Salonica\*

Michal Held Delaroza  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

## Introduction

פור ארקילאר ג'יקו אפארטאמינטו די דוס אולאס ז'ארנאלאדו אי קוזינה, קאליי  
ז'אקיליאוס פיטרו נו' 14 (צייז'ן לוקאל דינה איסקולה הסגור) קאטאפיגיווס אינפירינטי,  
ראנסנייאמינטוס קוב'רי איל לוגאר סירקה ס'י מואיז זינצ'ינסקי.<sup>1</sup>

(**For rent** a small two-room apartment with hallway and kitchen, 14 Vissilious  
Pitro St. [old location of HaChinuch School] opposite shelters, Notice about the  
place by Mr. Moiz Benveniste.)

Posted in the last issue of the daily newspaper *Mesajero*, printed in Salonica two days before the Germans invaded the city in April 1941, this advertisement may retrospectively be read as a microcosm of the city's Jewish community's life at the time. We learn from it that normality was carried on as much as possible, with apartments

\* I thank Nivi Gomel for her participation in the initial research leading to this study. My thanks also go to Amos Goldberg, who read an early version of the essay and illuminated my understanding of relevant issues in Holocaust Studies, and to Noah Hacham for kindly providing me with access to the archive of the Attas family from pre-World War II Salonica and Tel Aviv.

<sup>1</sup> *Mesajero* was printed in Hebrew characters known "letras de Rashi" (Rashi script). In some cases, Square Hebrew characters were used for emphasis. All quotes appearing in this essay follow the original orthography, including the font variations, and font size used in the newspaper.

being put up for rent, having rooms referred to by the Turkish word “odas” embedded in the community’s native Judeo-Spanish, echoing the experience of Sephardic Jews during the previous four and a half decades of their mostly tranquil existence in the Ottoman Empire. And yet, the striking presence of the Greek word “καταφύγιο” (shelter) and the mentioning of the fact that the Hebrew-named Jewish school החינוך (the Education) had been moved or no longer existed, evokes a sense that the seemingly naïve advertisement also reflects an existence on the edge of an unknown, worsening future.

For nearly five centuries, Salonica – the second-largest city in Greece and the capital of the northern region of Greek Macedonia – was an important center of Sephardic life referred to in the language of the Sephardim as “*Yerushalayim del Balkan*” (Jerusalem of the Balkans) and “*La Madre de Israel*” (The Mother of Israel). On the eve of World War II, the Jewish community formed the majority of this city’s population. Jews were active in all walks of life in Salonica: dock workers, shipping company owners, bankers, rabbis and religious leaders. Numerous Jewish books and newspapers were published in the city.

On March 15, 1943, the Germans began deporting the Jews of Salonica. Twice a week, freight cars crammed with an average of 2,000 Salonican Jews headed toward Poland. Nineteen transports left Salonica for Auschwitz-Birkenau, until by the summer of 1943, nearly 50,000 Jews had been deported – the overwhelming majority of whom, forming 97% of the community, never survived the death camps.

The written materials left by the members of the Salonican community who survived the Holocaust provide an important channel for deciphering their individual and social life, as well as their tragic fate.<sup>2</sup> The following discussion aims to restore some pre-war voices of this community and of its members who did not survive the

<sup>2</sup> For the corpus of poetic works relating to the Sephardic Holocaust and its analysis see Levy (1989) and Refael (2008). For an example of a close reading of the novel concentrating on the Holocaust of the Salonican community see Held (2016).

catastrophe, by deciphering their ultimate expressions – uttered at the last moment of the community’s sane existence – and, even if only partially, making them heard.

As already hinted by the advertisement quoted above, this discussion is underpinned by questions concerning the structure of the subjectivity characteristic of the individuals and the community when their fate is about to take a brutal turn; the concept of time and the designation of the unique point in it when writing and reading become an urgency; the tension between the bursting force; and the relieving force that runs through the newspaper. This essay seeks to trace the voices of the members of the community and listen to their own version of the last chapter in the story of their free existence in their Greek homeland.

### **Conceptual Framework: Life as Dramatic Irony**

The present study seeks to demonstrate and analyze the very final moments of normal Jewish life in Salonica<sup>3</sup> as presented by the community members shortly before life could no longer be fully captured by the human mind and expressed by human language. The importance of this process is emphasized by Jean-François Lyotard’s observation, which is appropriate for the case of the total destruction of the Sephardic communities:

Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects, but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes [...] With Auschwitz, something new has happened in history [...] The facts, the testimonies which bore the traces of heres and nows, the documents which indicated the sense or senses of the facts, the names and finally the possibility of various kinds of phrases whose conjunction makes reality, all this has been destroyed as much as possible. (Lyotard 1988: 55–7)

Lyotard goes on to suggest that with regard to the Holocaust not only reality but also the meta-reality, which is the destruction of reality,

<sup>3</sup> For such a study of the Salonican community see for example Hadar (2008).

must be taken into account. In an attempt to achieve some degree of the meta-reality of Jewish Salonica, the following reading focuses on the very last issue of the daily newspaper *Mesajero*, of April 6 1941 – two days prior to the German occupation of the city and four days before the forced shutdown of its Jewish press. Printed an instant prior to the destruction of the instruments used for measuring life and its “normal” earthquakes, the newspaper freezes in time the ultimate free voices of the community, as well as the cultural, social and linguistic reality reflected through them.

The reading aims for an understanding of the individual and the collective at a point when a realized or unrealized approaching catastrophe is about to brutally end their lives. Being a phenomenon that the human mind is incapable of fully grasping, the Holocaust can also not be fully expressed by human language. According to Primo Levi, the survivors themselves cannot figure it out. “Today, at this very moment as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened,” he says in a reflective phrase embedded in the reproduction of the memories of his days in the death camp (Levi 1979: 109). How can we, then, approach it?

Drama and its study are often employed in relation to the Holocaust, as if it could become somewhat more accessible when reconstructed on stage; as if its seemingly coming alive might make it easier to grasp. Robert Skloot notes five objectives that underscore serious dramas dealing with the Holocaust: honoring the victims, teaching history to audiences, evoking emotional responses, discussing ethical issues, and suggesting solutions to universal, contemporary problems (Skloot 1988: 10). Shifting this dynamics and looking at **the Holocaust itself** as if it were a dramatic play may support our limited understanding of it.

A retrospective consideration of the last issue of *Mesajero* is a paradoxical, anti-linear hermeneutic process in which we as retrospective readers are aware of the unpredictable total destruction destined to be the fate of Salonica’s Jewish community, an insight that could not have been conceived at the time when it was written and read. A concept that may be borrowed from drama studies and applied

to the understanding of the newspaper describing the events that preceded the Holocaust in Salonica is **dramatic irony**, achieved when the audience understands the implication and meaning of a situation on stage, but which escapes the minds of the characters participating in it. According to Sedgewick, dramatic irony consists of a conflict of forces in the play, the characters' ignorance of their situation and the spectators' awareness of both the appearance and the reality, leading them to the assumption that they would have made better decisions than those of the ignorant characters had they been in their place (Sedgewick 1948: 48–9).

This model cannot serve as an only key for understanding the narrative of the soon-to-be victims of the Holocaust. The model may, however, contribute to an understanding of the narrative's complex meanings. In our specific case, the Salonican "characters" who wrote and read the newspaper appearing on April 6, 1941 can be retrospectively regarded as the victims of dramatic irony. The following close reading of their narrative and of the lives that it exposes will therefore be inspired with this concept.

### *Mesajero*: A Close Reading

The daily Judeo-Spanish newspaper *Mesajero* was published in Salonica from 1935 until 1941. It was established and edited by Elia Veisi,<sup>4</sup> who made continuous efforts to keep it going despite of the difficulties he faced. At the end of 1936, Veisi complained in a letter to Haim Toledano, *Mesajero*'s correspondent in Tel-Aviv, about the Greek censorship laws that prevented the existence of free, Jewish journalism, and about the authorities' attempt to dictate his newspaper's contents. Also described in his letter were the difficulties that the Jewish press was facing following the implementation of the law banning the publication of newspapers on Sundays (Toledano 1986: 168–75).

<sup>4</sup> For information about the newspaper see Gaon (1965: 82). For a detailed analysis of excerpts from it see Bunis (1999).

Shmuel Refael (2015) offers a socio-literary investigation of the history of the Jewish community of Salonica as reflected in the Sephardic press, including *Mesajero*, and its reportage on Hitler's ascension to power. The present analysis centers on *Mesajero's* very last issue. Two thirds of the content of that issue was devoted to the war in Europe, including reports on the battles, with special emphasis on the situation of the Greek army and the attempts made by social organizations in Salonica to help the wounded and the war effort in general. In addition, the issue addresses the economic situation in Greece, matters of special Jewish concern (such as the community's religious leaders and the approaching Passover holiday) and general Greek social issues (such as the rights of the employed).

On the whole, the newspaper forms an important part of the corpus of written materials left by the members of the thriving community of Jewish Salonica, which was and is no more. The German invasion of Salonica started on April 8, 1941. Two days later, the closure of *Mesajero*, the city's sole surviving Jewish newspaper, marked the tragic end of not only the eight years of its daily appearance, but of nearly one hundred years of local Judeo-Spanish journalism as well (Bunis 1999: 37).

The retrospective observation and interpretation of the issue's content as a whole evokes a sense of tension and disjunction. The writers acknowledge the fact that the war in Europe may develop into a danger for Greece, yet they seem to take it less harmfully than it actually was in the beginning of April 1941. On the one hand, this dual tendency may be read as an irony, and on the other hand it may be taken as a human survival mechanism and an expression of the inability of the Salonican Jews to grasp the Germans' intentions at this early stage of their presence in Salonica.

The historical context of the main editorial article of *Mesajero's* last issue begins with the fact that having initially wished to remain neutral, Greece was pulled into the war by the invading Italian forces on October 28, 1940. The Greek army counterattacked and forced the Italians to retreat. By mid-December, the Greeks occupied one quarter of Albania, and in March 1941 a major Italian counterattack

failed, humiliating Italian military pretensions. Under the title of “מואיציוס סוקסיוסו דימואיסטראס טרופאס אין אלבאניאה” (New Successes of our Troops in Albania), the article reports that during the night of April 3, 1941, Greek forces had captured important positions from the enemy. Quoting and interpreting radio reports from Athens, this article conveys a sense of security and safety, trusting the strength of the Greek army and by no means anticipating the German invasion of Salonica that was about to take place a few days later.

The language used by the writer (whose name is not stated but who quite possibly was the editor Elia Veisi) expresses the Salonican Jews' full trust in Greece and their identification with the Greek army. As opposed to the Italians troops, referred to in the article as the “אינמיגו” (the enemy), he mentions “מואיסטרס טרופאס” (**our** troops), “מואיסטרוס סולדאדוס” (**our** soldiers) and the Albanian area that “קאליאאה” “אין מואיסטראס מאנוס” (fell into **our** hands).

A sense of dramatic irony is not irrelevant to the retrospective consideration of these descriptions, which reflect an ignorance of the calamity that was approaching the Salonican Jewish community at the time when they were written and read, and the fact that within a few days their ability to conceive of themselves as a free, protected part of Greece would be denied. Let us now turn to a close reading of three subject matters conveying the attitudes that are expressed in the issue.

## 1. Towards a New Life: The Issue's Main Article

London's *Free Europe* of April 4, 1941 included an article by Greek Minister of Press Theologos Nicoloudis, titled “צירקו אונה נואיצי” “צילדה” (Towards a New Life) and stating the following: “We invited M. Nicoloudis to write an article on the present spirit of Greece. In reply, he telegraphed from Athens the following message to our readers on March 20th.” Two days later, *Mesajero* offered the Jews of Salonica a Judeo-Spanish version of the same article. It is rather difficult to determine whether it was a translation of a parallel article that may have appeared in the local Greek press, or of the English one,

which is mentioned at the beginning of the *Mesajero* article. However, there is no doubt that the adaptation of the Minister of Press's words to the Jewish language of the majority of the citizens of Salonica was crucial for the editor of *Mesajero* in the beginning of April 1941. The minister's message included statements such as:

אזס אונזיצירקאלמינטרי אדמיטירד, אוי, קי נון קולו לה גריגה זינסקיוו אה לה איטאלייה, אזס אזלייה אומיליוו, קומו דוד אומיליוו אה גלית, מה טאמזיין קי קון איל אימינקו פריסקטיגייז מוראל די סו לוגה אסקיגורו אה לה אינגליטיייררה לה פארטיידה מוראלה די לה גיוררה. אגורה, דיסקפואס די קואטרז מיזס די לוגה איפיקה קובירי לאס מונטאניאס די אלזאניאה [...] איל מונדו אינטירו ריקונסקי קי לה גריגה די לוס אונז מיליונים די אזיטאנטים זינסקיוו אה לה איטאלייה די 45 מיליונים.

(It is universally recognized today, that Greece has not only defeated Italy, which was humiliated like David humiliated Goliath, but also that by the immense moral prestige of its struggle it has assured England's moral position in the war. Now, after four months of epic struggle on the mountains of Albania [...] the entire world recognizes that Greece of eight million inhabitants has beaten Italy of 45 million.)<sup>5</sup>

A few days prior to the German invasion of his country, the Greek Minister of Press concludes his analysis by claiming that it is certain that Greece has not reached the end yet, and that the world must acknowledge that the forces of evil must be defeated, and a new dawn shall shine over people.

Does this attitude towards the war derive from a naïve conception of reality? Does it reflect the writer's wish to deceive the Greek citizenry, the world and maybe himself as well? Whatever the answer may be, the adaptation of the article by the main communication channel of the Salonican Jewish community, whose destiny to be demolished was connected to the defeat of Greece in the war, represents the fact that the Jews of the city never realized the severity of their situation when it was published in *Mesajero*.

<sup>5</sup> To remain as close as possible to the article presented and read in Jewish Salonica, the translation deliberately follows the Judeo-Spanish version published in *Mesajero*, regardless of the English original of London's Free Europe.



## 2. Zeher Tzadik LiVraha (May the Memory of the Righteous be a Blessing)

Published three days before the German invasion of Salonica, this report conveys a sense of routine that in retrospect may seem ironic:

אין מידיו די און ריקוזימיינטו מווי אימפריסייונאנטו פיואי ריקיטאלדה אליי, שצת הגדול, אין טודוק גואיקטרוס לוגאריס די אוראקייין, אונה השכבה אה לה מימורייה די אילוקטריס רבינוס קי מאנטוויירון לה פ'אמה די גואיקטרה קומוניטה. איקטה אלצ'אצ'לי איניסיאטיבה טומאדה פור לוס גזברים די קהילות פיואי ריאלזאלדה פור לוס מווי אקטיב'וס אי דיצ'אלוס קולאבוראדוריס דיל קרן קימת קי סי פרוטונן די פירפיטורס קוס צינדיג'ים מימורייה אין אינרזיקטראנדולוס אל ליצ'רו די אורו דיל ג'ודאלאזמו.

(During an impressive gathering held yesterday, *Shabbat HaGadol*,<sup>6</sup> in all our places of prayer, an *ashkava*<sup>7</sup> was recited, dedicated to the memory of the illustrious *rabbanim*<sup>8</sup> who maintained the fame of our community. This elevated initiative, taken by the *gizbarim*<sup>9</sup> of the *kehilot*<sup>10</sup> was fulfilled by the most active and committed collaborators of *Keren Kayemeth*,<sup>11</sup> whose aim is to commemorate their blessed memory by registering them in the Golden Book of Judaism.)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The Shabbat before Passover, named in Hebrew *The Great Shabbat*.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrew: Literally, "laying to rest." The Jewish prayer recited in memory of the dead.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrew: rabbis.

<sup>9</sup> Hebrew: treasurers.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew: synagogues. Literally: communities.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrew: The Jewish National Fund.

<sup>12</sup> According to the KKL website: "As suggested by Yona Kremenetzky, the first Chairman of KKL-JNF, Jews around the world began to contribute to the Fund by inscribing gifts for dear ones, acquaintances or distinguished people in what became known as the Books of Honor. The Golden Book is the most unique of the KKL-JNF Books of Honor and is, in effect, a genealogical tree of the Jewish people. Among its pages are inscriptions recording special events in people's lives over the past one hundred years of Jewish history. Each volume of the Golden Book describes a different period in the life of the Jewish People and the contribution of KKL-JNF, acting through and on behalf of the people, for the preservation, care and development of the land. An entry in the Golden Book is a mark of esteem and gratitude to the donors who with their contribution enable a variety of projects to be carried out." (<http://www.kkl.org.il/eng/people-and-environment/donate/kkl-jnf-books-for-honor/>)

This Judeo-Spanish report of a memorial service for the community's distinguished rabbis appears in *Mesajero* under a Hebrew title. The use of a traditional Hebrew expression in the title, as well as and the enhanced use of Hebrew words within the text, projects the life and the identity of the Salonican Jewish community before the German invasion.

Had it not appeared in the last daily Jewish newspaper printed in Salonica in 1941, this article could have been read as a report concerning the calm life of a Jewish community, whose members create a bridge between traditional religious Jewish values and the Zionist ones represented by *Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael*. An inquiry with the Jewish National Fund's Books of Honor department reveals that none of the names of the Salonican rabbis mentioned in the article was actually registered in the Golden Book.

A strong sense of dramatic irony is thus evoked when we read the article in retrospect, realizing that the abrupt disruption of the community's ordered routine life actually took place shortly after the memorial service described in it, and prevented the commemoration the rabbis in the Golden Book. This could not possibly have been anticipated when the report was originally written and read. The writers and readers of *Mesajero* were naturally ignorant of the contradiction between appearance and reality in Salonica of the beginning of April 1941. Only as spectators of the metaphorical play in which they are seemingly acting can we retrospectively grasp the tragic characteristics of it.

### 3. Advertisements and Notices

Forming part of a popular daily newspaper, the abovementioned articles are accompanied with commercial advertisements, community notices and personal announcements relating to and expressing many aspects of the ultimate moments of free Jewish existence in Salonica. They form an important source of information that deepens our understanding of the community before its destruction, even though in retrospect

they seem somewhat inexplicable, considering that all these echoes of normal life are about to be brutally silenced a few days after their naïve, or ironic, publication. Readers wishing to inquire about many of the advertisements are directed to the community, whose office, we learn, regularly handled such matters as if the winds of war were not buffeting the city in the beginning of April 1941. For example:

קונטאבלי איסקפירימינטעדו סי אינגאזיה פור אונאס קואנטאס אוראס איז דיאה או איז דיאה אינטירו. אין מיזמו טיימט מיטי אה גיורנו לאס איסקריטוראס. אדריסארסי אל גיורנאל.

(Experienced **Accountant** available for part-time or full-day employment. At the same time takes care of bookkeeping. Contact the newspaper.)

\* \* \*

סי דימאנדה פירטירוס קון בואינה פאגה. אדריסארסין אלוק ברוק די פרוטוקול דילה קומניטה.  
(**Wanted:** Bakers for good pay. Contact the registration offices in the community.)

Three days before it was closed by the Germans, *Mesajero* announced that food stores in the city would remain open an hour longer than the usual, to accommodate shoppers for the approaching Passover holiday. The writer and readers of this item could never have realized the tragic irony in the fact that Passover was never to be celebrated normally again in Salonica. A later, shocking juxtaposition to this advertisement was a circular issued on March 12, 1942, in which Chief Rabbi Koretz instructed the Jews of the city how to keep a kosher Passover and prepare Matzah when food was getting very scarce in Salonica.<sup>13</sup>

On the whole, the advertisements indicate that even though the members of the Jewish community of soon-to-be-German-occupied Salonica were aware of the advancement of the war, they did so without disrupting their routine life, unable to foresee the monstrous scope of the catastrophe they were soon destined to face. Thus, as we learn from the newspaper, they made sure that their houses and public buildings had a nearby shelter, referred to in the ads by the Greek word καταφύγιο, whose penetration into their language proves that traditional Judeo-Spanish lacked the terminology related to the reality

<sup>13</sup> Ben-Zvi Institute Library, broadsheet no. 52-w.

of war in the mid-twentieth century:

קומוניקאדו סי טראלוי אה לה קונסו|נסוייה דיל אונוריבלי פובליקו קי לוס זאנניוס  
"אולימפייה" פונקסיונאון קאדה דיאה אה פארטיר די לאס 6 דילה מאנייאנה אקטה לאס  
8 דילה טארדי קון קאטאפיגניו סיגורו אדיינטרו איל זאנניו אי אפרובאדו די פארטי לוס  
אונזיניירוס די לה דיפינסה אארייאנה פאסיבה. דילה דיריקסיון.

(Notice. It is brought to the knowledge of the honorable public that the Olympia public bath functions every day from 6 in the morning until 8 in the evening with a safe shelter inside the bath approved by Passive Air Defense engineers. From the management.)

Still, the awareness of the advancement of the war did not prevent Salonican Jewry from living as normally as possible inside the sheltered buildings. As the advertisements published in the last issue of *MesaJero* tell us, they offered apartments for rent, hired employees; visited the cinemas and public baths, kept the communal, educational and commercial systems going and made use of banking and accounting services. An interesting example is the following relatively long text promoting the upcoming screening of the movie *The Indian's Dream*<sup>14</sup> in one of the city's main cinemas:

לה דיריקסיון דיל סינימה איליסייה נון מיראנדו לה סיטואסיון אגומאלה אי אין קו  
דיזואו די קאטיספואזיר אל פובליקו נו איזטה אה אופירי אה פארטיר די מאנייאנה אונו  
דילוס מאס קארסו אי גראנדיאוזוס קאפו לאזירוס דילה פרודוקסיון די אוגאניו... איל  
קולוס דילוס קולוסיס איל איספואניו דיל אינדו און פטינטי דראס סוקיאל. מיטידה  
אין שינה אינמאזינאבלי. מילאריס די פיגוראנטים. שינאס גראנדיאוזאס די אינולאסיוניס  
אי טיריטימבולוס. 3 סימאנאס קונטינואלאס די טריאומפז אין אטינה אנדי פיזאי פריזנטאדו  
אין מיזמו טיימפו אין לוס סינימאס ריקס אטיקון אי פאנטיאון. פרוטאגוניסטאס טאיירון  
פאאואיר, מירנה לואו, ג'ורג' ברינט. פרימיירה איקסיפסיונאלה מאנייאנה סולו  
אל איליסייה. איקטאנדו דאדו לה זאלור אי לה לונגורה דיל פילמו, קוס רוגאדוס די  
אסיגוראציון לוס לוגאריס אה טיימפו.

(The Management of the Elisia Cinema, ignoring the abnormal situation and wishing to satisfy the public does not hesitate to offer as of **tomorrow** one

<sup>14</sup> A Judeo-Spanish (possibly following a Greek) improvisation of original title of the *The Rains Came*, a 1939 20th Century Fox film based on an American novel by Louis Bromfield and directed by Clarence Brown.

of the grandiose main productions of the year... **Colossus of the Colossuses**  
**The Indian's Dream.** A powerful social drama. Fantastically directed. Thousands of extras. Striking scenes of floods and earthquakes. 3 weeks of success in Athens where it was played at the same time in the Rex, Attikon and Panteon cinemas. **Starring Tyrone Power, Myrna Loy, George Brent.** **Exceptional premiere tomorrow only at Elisia.** Considering the length and the value of the film, you are requested to ensure your places ahead of time.)

Reading this film promotion in retrospect, one shivers at the thought that the its premiere, taking place on April 7, 1941, may had been the first and the last screening of it, as the German troops entered Salonica the following day. The concept of dramatic irony, which I suggested concerning the understanding of the last issue of *Mesajero* as a whole, becomes even more apt with respect to this advertisement, in which the protagonists are no longer the Hollywood actors but the writers and readers of the newspaper. They could never have realized the deep irony of the fact that only two days after the ad was published the “striking scenes of floods and earthquakes” would begin to unfold in their own lives, as we – the retrospective viewers of the metaphorical play in which they participate can clearly see.

Michel de Certeau's concept of the re-legitimatization of everyday practices and of the activity of “the non-producers of culture” (De Certeau 1984: xvii) is relevant to the understanding the motivations of the people who published the *Mesajero* advertisements. Unlike the producers of canonic culture, whose figures are portrayed in the newspapers' articles focusing on the war and on the memorial service for the rabbis, the advertisements represent the ordinary people whom de Certeau defined as “poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of the jungle of functionalist rationality” (De Certeau 1984: xviii). After the total destruction of their once thriving community, they left us with a vivid picture of it; the advertisements, written and published during the ultimate moments of free Jewish life in Salonica, contribute to our understanding of the community from the point of view of individuals representing themselves and relating to the social frames of their lives.

Claiming that every human experience deserves historical discussion, Dalia Ofer suggested new ways of reading Holocaust history by acknowledging individual thinking patterns and activities as valuable sources. Following Alf Lüdtke's model of the historiography of everyday life, Ofer explains that reaching the widest range of materials decades after War World II is of course crucial, and that traditional sources must also be read with attendance to individual voices and everyday life descriptions in order to begin to understand the indecipherable phenomenon of the Holocaust (Ofer, 1989: 342). Following this insight, the close reading of the very last issue of a daily newspaper printed and originally read just a few days before the Nazi occupation of Salonica captures a unique point in historical, communal and individual time.

## Conclusion

In *Mesaĵero* of April 6, 1941, we hear the echoes of the quotidian fused with a sense of urgency. The newspaper forms a narrative that reflects a conception of time as the routine movement of life, while also implying a subconscious sense of an approaching catastrophe. It is this interaction between the two contradictory forces – the bursting and the relieving – that define the voice of those who wrote and read the final issue of *Mesaĵero* and the structure of the subjectivity that governed the end of their existence as a free Jewish community. It is this tendency that led to the above discussion of the newspaper's contents in the context of the theory of dramatic irony.

More relevant sources may be examined in order to enlarge the prism through which the last breaths of the Jewish community of Salonica may be perceived. The limited boundaries of this essay cannot hold a detailed analysis of them all. We can, however, offer at least a couple of examples of written sources that reconstruct the fragmented picture of the lost Jerusalem of the Balkans.

On March 24, 1941, two weeks before the appearance of *Mesaĵero*'s final issue, a postcard was sent by Salonica's railroad clerk Isaac Attas

to his relatives in Tel-Aviv, Palestine. Writing in Judeo-Spanish, Attas refers to the recent passing away of his mother and the whereabouts of his other family members as if there had been no war raging around them; as if the mother's death, caused by an inevitable complication of her illness while her sons and daughters were taking care of her, had not been almost idyllic compared to the approaching destruction of her family by cruel means that no human mind can possibly anticipate. Again, a sense of dramatic irony is evoked when we read these short lines in retrospect:<sup>15</sup>

Monsieur Yeoehouah Attas  
16, rue Mercas Misrahi [=Mishari]  
Tel-Aviv, Palestine

Thessaloniki, le 24/III/41  
Cara Louna, Perla i souvrinos –  
Aressivimos v/[ouestra] éstimada letra del 30/I/41 tomimos  
plazer que vos tupach saludozos. Mozotros mos tupamos  
bouenos. La razon de la mouerte de Mama foué de ouna  
desfriassion que empresso por disenterie i se compliquo despouès  
en bronchite. Á notar que Mama se espanto de las vijitas  
mouevas. Malgrado todos los couydos que le dimos Sara i yo de  
ouna parte, i el Docteur de la otra, non avanssaron[?] à nada, i  
despouès de 2 dias de agonía mourio en etchando la bindission à  
todos los miembros de todas m/[ouestras] famillias non estech à  
pensar por mozotros  
Saludos de Bertha.  
Isaac

<sup>15</sup> From the Attas family archive, in which the postcard is kept as part of an extensive family correspondence. Issac Attas was probably murdered by the Germans in Salonica, and the rest of the people mentioned in his postcards were sent to the death camps. Information about them may be found in the Yad VaShem central database of Shoah victims' names (<http://db.yadvashem.org/names/search.html?language=en>)

Envoie Isaac Attas  
c/o Joseph Cuencas  
11 rue Roi Constantin  
Thessaloniki – Grèce

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(Mr. Yeochouah Attas  
16 Mercaz Misrahi St.  
Tel-Aviv, Palestine

Salonica, March 24 1941

Dear Luna, Perla and [the] nephews –

We have received your esteemed letter of January 30, 1941. We found satisfaction in the fact that you are in good health. We are well. The cause of mother's death had been a cold that started with an intestinal inflammation that then complicated into bronchitis. Note that mother feared the new visits. Despite of all the care she had from Sara and me on the one hand, and from the doctor on the other hand, we made no progress, and after two days of torments she died while blessing all our family members. Do not be thinking about us. Regards from Berta.

Issac.

Sent by Isaac Attas  
c/o Yoseph Cuencas  
11 Roi Constantin St.  
Thessaloniki – Greece)

The analysis offered in this essay shows that the reading of *Mesajero's* final issue sheds light on the life that took place in Jewish Salonica before the Holocaust, and on its transformation during the war. However, like most Holocaust histories and stories, those of the Salonican Jewish community will forever remain incomplete, as the gaps in our ability to fully reconstruct them cannot be filled when nearly all those who experienced them have perished. I would like to conclude with a



document that remains an enigma and may be taken as a reminder of the fact that the complete story shall forever escape us.

Searching the Yad Vashem archive for this research, I came across an identity card issued by the local association of Jewish culture in Salonica on February 21, 1943, for a man named Albert Arditti. It is written in German and Greek and stamped with the Hebrew seal of the Salonican Jewish Association, with Chief Rabbi Koretz's signature in Hebrew and Latin characters. The German letters stand out much bolder than the other languages used on this certificate, and in retrospect the linguistic hierarchy becomes a metonymy of the fragile Jewish existence of the card owner and his community.

Who was the person whose metaphorical tombstone is this ID card? Yad VaShem's names database lists 8 men by the name of Albert Arditti from Salonica. The information on all of them is rather limited, acknowledging nothing but their birth place, father's name and the fact that they were murdered in Auschwitz. One of them is listed as the son of Vital, matching the information given on the card whose photocopy I am holding, trying to reconstruct the life of the person to whom it belonged. It is known that one of the Jewish community leaders who were arrested by the Germans on April 15, 1943 was Albert Arditti (Rivlin 1998: 33), yet there is no way to prove a connection between that man and the holder of the ID card under discussion.

Whoever he may have been, we can visualize him entering the offices of the community to obtain this card on a Sunday, 23 days before the first train left Salonica for Poland; a month or so before the Jewish holiday of Purim. A human being with a profession, probably well dressed as much as was still possible at that time. Having been born in 1906, he was probably married and had a family. It is quite likely that Albert Arditti was one of the readers of the daily *Mesajero*. Did he get a chance to hold a copy of the last issue that is the focus of this essay?

Endless scenarios about the life and destiny of Albert Arditti and his family go through the mind. They will forever remain unresolved. The only thing we know for certain is that the Germans carefully kept the facade of normal life going on until the very last moments of Jewish

existence in Salonica, in this case by issuing innocuous (or ironic?) identity cards whose holders never knew would soon to be worthless. Rabbi Koretz's participation in the process (whether willingly or forcefully is not for us to decide here) only made it seem more credible for innocent Jews like Albert Arditti.

The ID card issued shortly before the Jewish community of Salonica turned into ashes and dust, ironically reinforces the complexity of the voices described in this essay as a whole. Like the last issue of *MesaJero*, it reflects the attempt made by Salonica's Jews to carry on with life while refusing to acknowledge its impending end, an attempt that implies a widening gap between the signifiers and signified, between the reality to which they refer and the way in which it is conceived and described.

As indicated above, it is possible that this ironic juxtaposition reflects blindness. However, in light of the circumstances under which it was created, it may better be interpreted as a survival tool in conditions that become increasingly impossible with the passage of time. One way or another, a retrospective study proves that all communication means in Salonica prior to its destruction form a memorial to the members of the thriving Jewish community established in this city by the survivors of the 1492 Spanish expulsion, and whose descendants were expelled to Auschwitz by the Nazis shortly after 1942.

Five days after the last transport of Jews left Salonica, these words, originally in Hebrew, were secretly passed from the heads of the Athens Jewish community in response to a letter and financial aid sent to them from Eretz Israel:

אחים יקרים,  
 [...] עכשו לא נשאר שום יהודי בסלוניקי. איכה ישבה בדד העיר ואם בישראל. אבדו  
 בתי תפלה, נשמדו בתי! [!] החיים שלנו, נשמדו ספריותינו, ספרי תורתנו, נשרפו כל  
 פנקסי העדה, ולקחו את כל רכושנו. אנו באים אליכם בבקשה [...] זעקו, שקולכם  
 ישמע בכל העולם ודרשו אוד מוצל [...] ]  
 אתונא, י"ד אב תש"ג<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ouziel (1961: 82–83). The original letter belongs to Yad Vashem Archives (Item 3539754, division 75.0, file 24).

(Dear Brothers,  
[...] There is not a single Jew left in Salonica. How doth the city sit solitary,<sup>17</sup> a city and a mother in Israel.<sup>18</sup> Our houses of prayer are lost, our cemeteries, our Torah scrolls and our libraries are destroyed, the community logbooks have all been burned [and] our property has been taken away in its entirety. We come to you with a plea [...] Cry out, so that your voice is heard around the world, and seek for a brand plucked out of the fire [...]<sup>19</sup>  
Athens, August 15th, 1943)

Knowing that all Salonican Jews had been sent to Poland and having no idea of the fate that awaited them there, the authors of this letter could not possibly have realized that it was already too late for their plea, expressed earlier in the letter, that they be provided with food, clothing and medicines, since they were all already dead or imprisoned in the death camps when the letter reached its destination.

The key questions that this essay has presented and elaborated concern the nature of the individual and collective degree of possible subjectivity and awareness of Jewish Salonica on the eve of its total destruction. The fact that it was naïvely and/or ironically expressed in what was later realized to be the community's last daily newspaper reinforces the understanding that no definite answers can settle the tension between a bursting force and a relieving force that governs *Mesajero* of April 6, 1941.

As in all readings of original materials connected to the Holocaust, many questions shall forever remain unresolved. However limited as it may be, the close reading of the last sane words of the Jewish community of Salonica modifies the totality and the absoluteness of the Holocaust precisely because it stands out in its complete lack of reason when compared to the conditions that led to the war in Central and Eastern Europe.

<sup>17</sup> Lamentations, 1:1.

<sup>18</sup> II Samuel 20:19.

<sup>19</sup> Zechariah 3:2.

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