

MEMORIES AND TESTIMONIES

FROM THE TIME OF THE NAZI OCCUPATION OF GREECE (Athens, 2001)

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CHAPTER 5

THE CHURCH'S CARE ABOUT AND COMMON UNDERSTANDING WITH THE GREEK JEWS

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[...] In those tragic days and times of German Occupation, in times of deprivation and hardship for the Greek people, the Church deeply empathized with the grief and affliction of Greek Jews who were brutally persecuted and tortured standing by them with compassion at the time when our Jewish compatriots were suffering while they were relentlessly persecuted.

Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, Damaskinos

The Greek Church, true to the teaching of the Gospel "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another"¹ and consistent with its traditions constantly protested to the German Military Occupation Authorities demanding that the inhumane persecution of Jews by Germans which had exceeded the limits of extermination, be brought to an end. The Greek Church continued to fight for this aim with Archbishop Damaskinos leading the way despite the attitude of the German Military Occupation Authorities and the Plenipotentiary of the Third Reich for Greece, Günther Altenburg, to whom the Archbishop constantly protested in favor of the rescue of Jews.

Despite the threats and the intimidation, the voice of Archbishop Damaskinos was raised and heard on countless occasions in support of the unjustly persecuted Jews.

"The Hierarchs of Greece are not shot, General Strop, they are hung. I request that you respect this tradition." This was the proud answer of Archbishop Damaskinos to the Nazi General Strop who threatened to shoot him because of the Archbishop's written protest on the persecutions of Greek Jews.

On countless occasions the Archbishop addressed a strong urge to the Christians of the Archdiocese of Athens and All Greece to demonstrate a spirit of sacrifice and solidarity in favor of the persecuted Greek Jews. [...]

¹ Romans 13:8, KJV

While Jews continued to get arrested, on March 31st, 1943 Archbishop Damaskinos in a desperate attempt requested the German authorities to at least exempt individuals of young age, elderly and civilian invalids of war. However the situation got more difficult. Archbishop Damaskinos invited at the Archbishopric Mr. D. Haldezos, municipal clerk, and said to him: "I crossed myself, spoke to God and decided to save as many Jewish souls as I can. Even if I put my own life in danger. I will "baptize" the Jews and you will give them municipal certificates so they can receive Christian identity cards. In the meantime a four-member committee consisting of the leading Jewish Athenians Sam Sarfati, Rafael Yakouel, John Vitali and S. Cohen requested the help of the Greek Democratic National League [EDES] and addressed themselves to Panos Mahairas, medical doctor, who held his medical practice in the area of Thissio-Petralona where the majority of Jewish Athenians resided. Thus with the approval of General Zervas, Panos Mahairas, partisan of EDES, was assigned to cooperate, on behalf of EDES, for the rescue operation of Jews. Additionally, the National Liberation Front [EAM] and the National Popular Liberation Army [ELAS] had a significant role in rescuing Jews to the "liberated zones".

Rev. Father Ilias Apostolides, Vicar of Saint Thomas church in Goudi, later Metropolitan of Canada named Anatolius, was a valuable partner in protecting Greek Jews and was awarded the Cross of the Order of the Phoenix and the City of Athens Gold Medal of Honor.

One of the measures for rescuing Greek Jews was to issue fake identity cards with Greek names and Christian religion to whoever asked for one. This was a decision made by Archbishop Damaskinos and a leading part in its implementation was played by the Chairman of the Athens Pharmacists Association, Lambros Karamertzanis, and the Chairman of the Medical Association, Manos Karzis, along with the Athens branch of the City Police and its Head, Angelos Evert, and Dimitris Vranopoulos. The cooperation and mobilization of Archbishop Damaskinos was immediate.

Greek Jewish writer Joseph Nehama attested that "the clergy had not been deceived. It was due to their feelings of humaneness that they didn't hesitate to receive these converts and to treat them with kindness and sympathy. They supported them in any way they could through their grief. Moreover, priests, for the love of God and without any profit whatsoever, issued Baptism certificates to people who had never set foot in a church...."

The Church did not only issue the necessary certificates but in 1943 when the persecution of Jews had been intensified, it also officiated matrimonies between "former" Jews and Orthodox Christians.

In the records of the Holy Archbishopric of Athens there are 377 applications of Jews, 206 men and 171 women, who nominally converted to Orthodox Christianity. [...]

The National Organization of Christian Solidarity (EOCHA) of the Archbishopric of Athens played a significant role in rescuing Jews despite adversities. Not only did EOCHA tend to them without any religious or ethnic discrimination but it also hid and rescued many from certain death despite the obvious danger. [...]

The contribution of the Archbishopric of Arta

About 500 Jews lived in the town of Arta since the 17th century. They were involved in commerce and maintained two Synagogues and ran a school. When the war was declared, Metropolitan Spyridon (Ginakas) who was known for his friendly relations with the Jewish community, for his feelings of patriotism and his strong resistance against the Forces of Occupation, had taken Jews under his protection and made an extraordinary effort to prevent their being attacked. However most of them got arrested and were sent to concentration camps. Only those hidden by their fellow citizens of Arta and the Church and helped to flee to areas controlled by partisans were rescued.

The Christians of Veroia

Miriam Mordechai, one of the few survivors of Veroia, narrated how she and her family survived thanks to the assistance of their Christian neighbors. A neighbor breastfed her youngest baby because she was extremely weak. Another neighbor who was a carpenter built a wooden warehouse next to the Mosque in Veroia where Miriam and her children survived for months.

Metropolitan of Demetrias, Joachim

The town of Volos was under Italian occupation until September 8, 1943. On September 12, 1943 the Germans took over. In September 1943 the Jewish community of Volos numbered 882 members. The Administration of the community along with the doctor Joseph Cohen had set up a committee of vigilance and collection of information aiming to rescue its members from the nazi onslaught. David Levis, head of this committee, working together with the Metropolitan of Demetrias Joachim provided fake identity cards with Christian names to Jews. On September 30, 1943 the German military governor Kurt Rikert required Rabbi Moshe Shimon Pessach to give him a list with the names of all the Jews in town. After asking and receiving a 24-hour extension to submit it, he went to Metropolitan Joachim with whom he had a friendly relationship to ask for his help and to gather information about the intentions of Germans. Metropolitan Joachim contacted Helmut Sheffel, the German consul in Volos, who was a crypto-philhellene and who informed him that the Jews had to leave Volos immediately. Chief Rabbi Moshe Shimon Pessach and Jewish historian, Joseph Nehama, as well as the survivors recall:

“... As the Jews of Volos had been rushed out of town and generously helped by the Christian Orthodox Bishop [...], they were dispersed in the area around the town. Only a few isolated, weak or disabled people stayed in town. On the night of March 24th to March 25th, 1944 those who had remained in town were arrested by the SS [...]. 120 people lost their lives [...].”

Some of those who escaped entrusted all their valuables to the Bishopric before they were gone. People from the entourage of Metropolitan Joachim narrate that behind the books in

his bookcases there were small parcels hidden which sometimes they found when looking for a book; it was then that Metropolitan Joachim told them to leave the parcels where they were and explained whom they belonged to and what they contained. [...]

For those who were hidden in the villages of Mount Pelion, Metropolitan Joachim ordered the priests to cater for all their needs making no discrimination whatsoever. He also handed Chief Rabbi Moshe Shimon Pessach a recommendation document addressed to the priests of the villages and to the National Resistance asking for protection of the persecuted Greek Jews. [...]

After the Liberation, Metropolitan Joachim returned to Jewish survivors all their valuables that had been saved for them during the Occupation.

According to the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, the percentage of property losses in Volos was only 2%, that is the lowest in all Greece with the exception of Zakynthos (Zante). [...]

Metropolitan of Didymoteihon and Orestias Joachim

In the Diocese of Didymoteihon Metropolitan Joachim (Sigalas) cared for the Jewish community [...]. When Germans arrested the Jews in the Synagogue on May 5, 1943, he intervened and strongly claimed their liberation. Of course his request was not accepted by the Occupation authorities. Metropolitan Joachim [...] walked to the railway station to bid the Jews farewell, his eyes wet with tears.

Metropolitan of Zakynthos Chrysostomos

“If the order of deportation is executed, I will leave with the Jews and I will share their destiny”

The governor of the German occupation asked the Mayor of Zakynthos, Loukas Karrer, for a list of all Jews on the island. In a diplomatic manner, the mayor offered him an old golden ring and told him that Jewish citizens are registered in the population register just like all citizens and that he is unable to provide him with such a list. Metropolitan of Zakynthos Chrysostomos who stood by the Mayor’s side accompanied him to the German governor and they both handed him a document. When the governor opened it thinking that it was the list with the Jewish names, he read only two names:

Metropolitan of Zakynthos Chrysostomos
Mayor of Zakynthos Loukas Karrer

They both refused Gestapo’s order to round up 257 Jews of the island and to board them to the ship that would take them to Corfu.

“If the order of deportation is executed, I will leave with the Jews and I will share their destiny”. Without any delay Greek Jews were helped to flee to remote villages of the island. All of them were rescued.

Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Gennadios

Following a request by Chief Rabbi Dr Zvi Koretz, Metropolitan Gennadios arranged a meeting with Prime Minister Ioannis Rallis and Dr Koretz, President of the Jewish community, planning to ask him to try to achieve the suspension of the order for deportation of Jews in Thessaloniki. The meeting took place on April 9, 1943 at the offices of the Diocese when ½ of the Jews had already been deported. In the presence of Metropolitan Gennadios, Chief Rabbi was begging with tears in his eyes Prime Minister Ioannis Rallis to intervene in order to stop the deportation. Rallis was devastated. His demarche was futile. The same day of his arrival in Thessaloniki the sixth mission of deportation with 2,800 Jews from Thessaloniki took place and by the end of April there had been eight successive missions every two to three days.

According to Jewish historian, Joseph Nehama, [...] Dimitris Spiliakos, Petros Levis, Dimitris Digas and Professor Vizoukidis [...] submitted a report to Metropolitan Gennadios stressing the danger to which Jewish people were exposed. Without any delay, Metropolitan Gennadios met with Max Merten, Head of the Military administration and pleaded, in the name of God, that imprisonment in the camps and the rest of the projects be suspended. [...] Merten [...] answered that no intervention could change the orders.

Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Gennadios ensured that “over 500 Jews were registered as Christian Orthodox. They were hidden. They were provided with fake identity cards, baptized with different names. At least 3,000 Jews fled to every neighborhood and suburb where they settled spending their time reading while hiding. The examples of sincere brotherhood are innumerable. Most of these actions of utmost kindness will never be known...”

The contribution of the Diocese of Thebes and Livadia

Two Jewish families resided in the town of Livadia [...]. Every effort was made to help them escape from danger and survive during the Occupation. According to testimonies, Christians in Livadia hid Jewish families in their houses for a long period of time, at the risk of their own lives.

The contribution of the Diocese of Kastoria

About 120 Jewish families resided in Kastoria before the war. During the German Occupation when the intentions of Germans against Jews were revealed, Christians in that area demonstrated in every possible way their solidarity towards Jews whom they characterized

as Patriots. At the risk of their own lives and with the assistance of the Diocese and the priests, they fled to mountain villages around town in order not to be arrested by the occupiers. In that way some were rescued.

Metropolitan of Corfu and Paxoi Methodios

The struggle of Metropolitan of Corfu Methodios to rescue Greek Jews is reported in his memoirs: "May 1st, 1944: At 11:00 I went to 'Mon Repos' to meet with German commander Jaeger. [...] 'I wish to ask you to mitigate the pressure against Jews [...]. Jews residing here are Greek citizens [...], they have done no harm to anyone. [...] The pressure against them is inhumane and it is rumored that they will be deported. I am kindly asking you [...] to stop crushing them and to prevent their alleged deportation.' He promised me that he would do everything in his power.

On June 2, 1944 [...] Metropolitan Methodios sent a letter of vociferous protest to the Prefect of Corfu, Ioannis Komianos, in response to the laying off of Jewish workers. "[...] We believe that this is a huge offense committed by a Greek citizen against Greek citizens who also lead a life of misery and suffering, perhaps more than all others and who should not be deprived of the very right to work which is conferred to them by our country and by humanism. [...] Metropolitan Methodios also protested personally to the German Military commandant Jaeger. [...]

The contribution of the Diocese of Corinth

After the declaration of war several Jewish families were driven out of Italy and deported to Greece probably due to their Greek nationality. About 15 families arrived in Corinth in two missions within a two-month period. The Diocese took over the task to accommodate them temporarily and to feed them. [...] The Jewish Community of Athens regularly sent food distributed through the Diocese. [...] The Jewish Community of Athens thanked the Church of Corinth for standing by the Jews of the town during the Occupation. Most of the Jews fled to other areas and villages assisted by the Diocese. [...]

The contribution of the Diocese of Florina

Greek Jews lived in tranquility in Florina during the first two years of the German Occupation [...] until the day when they were arrested unexpectedly to be deported to concentration camps and crematoria in Germany. [...]

Metropolitan of Chalkis Gregorios

When during the Occupation Jews had to flee from the town of Chalkis to find refuge in the villages around the town, Metropolitan Gregorios, on his own initiative and despite the danger, hid and kept in the Bishopric the six Sefer Torah (i.e. the scrolls of the holiest book of Judaism) of the Synagogue. In cooperation with the lieutenant of the gendarmerie, Mr. Economides, they provided Jews with the necessary certificates to get fake identity cards with Christian names. After the Occupation the Metropolitan returned the Torah to the Synagogue [...].

During the German Occupation but also beyond that time, Metropolitan Gregorios assisted in many ways the Jewish community of Chalkis and demonstrated his feelings of brotherhood [...].

The contribution of the Diocese of Rhodes

Because of the complete destruction of the Archives of the Palace of the Bishopric due to the bombing, there is no detailed information available. However we do know that during the German Occupation 3,000 Jews resided in Rhodes. The Church and the citizens demonstrated their solidarity to them and offered them protection and assistance during the time of their persecution.

Translated by Callis MITRAKA