

The Jews of Rhodes: From the Hellenistic Age to the Holocaust

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The Jewish presence on Rhodes dates to the end of the Hellenistic period. The island was also the site of a famous meeting between Herod the Great and Emperor Augustus Caesar where the two heads of state negotiated an alliance between Eretz Israel and Rome. Hundreds of Romaniote Jews settled there over successive generations; Benjamin of Tudelar, a famous traveler, estimated that 400 Jews were living on Rhodes in the 12th century.

The Jewish population of the island increased dramatically during the Spanish Inquisition. Thousands of Sephardic Jews fled Iberia and were given asylum on Rhodes, which was still under the rule of the Saracens. From the 15th century on, the Jewish presence on Rhodes has been well documented, thanks to scholarly investigations into the Crusader and Ottoman empires. Isaac Jack Levy states in *Jewish Rhodes: A Lost Culture* that numerous records establish that Jews constituted an important part of Rhodian life and economy.² Jews fought side by side with the Greek Christians and the Knights in trying to repulse Turkish attacks on the island. Relations between the Crusaders and the Jews were harmonious for twenty years until Grand Master Pierre Aubusson, elevated by the Pope to the rank of Cardinal, threatened to expel all Jews who would not convert to Catholicism. Those who refused to convert were subjected to torture, prison or death.

Pierre d'Aubusson died before he could carry out his agenda, but by then relations between Rhodian Jews and Christians had soured. Life on the island became unbearable for all Jews except those who had fought alongside the Knights during the invasion by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.

Due to cruel treatment, a large number of Jews from the island lent support to the Ottomans. Between 2,000 and 3,000 Jews from the city helped the invaders by filling the moat on the Italian side of the fortress wall with sand bags. The Turks probably would not have been able to occupy Rhodes without this assistance. Many of the Jews who had left the island under duress returned with the Turkish army.

Those who had been forced to convert returned to their original faith. The Jews had their own quarter in the fortress-city. It ran along the wall closest to Rhodes' main port and was centered around a square with a tiny fountain decorated with sea horses. A dozen-odd cobbled street spoked out from the square, all packed with one- and two-story houses and a profusion of shops, schools, libraries, banks, synagogues, restaurants and hospitals. They made their living at jobs ranging from carpenters, cobblers and tinsmiths to shopkeepers, bankers, jewelers and traders. The Juderia was a remarkable and colorful place, home to an insular but vital and loving tribe, some wealthy, some poor, but none neglected or exploited.

Among themselves, the *Rhodeslis* spoke Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish hybrid with words borrowed from Hebrew, Greek and Turkish. Their love of song was famous, especially when it came to the epic ballads and *romancers* of ancient Spain. The women were known for their beauty and high spirits, as well as their skill at cooking, embroidery and crocheting. The men were a stylish, industrious and intelligent lot, adept at storytelling. Their fondness for raki was such that it gave rise to the popular song, "La vida do por el raki" (My Life I Give for Raki).

In *I Remember Rhodes*, Rebecca Amato Levy writes of Jewish life on the island between World War 1 and World War 2.³ She recounts how Jewish tavern owners would make their wine, raki and vinegar to sell or serve at their tavernas. Jews would use wine and raki for the Sabbath, as well as on other occasions. The Greek Christians, although they had their own tavernas, would also patronize the taverns in the Juderia. Some Turks, forbidden to drink by their Muslim faith, would sneak into the Juderia and drink until they got drunk, which accounts for the Ladino expression: *Paseses an un Turko boracho* (You walk like a drunken Turk)."

Female *preguneros* (town criers) were primarily responsible for inviting the community to happy occasions. As an example, one such woman might walk through the streets of the community, inviting people to a wedding. The male town criers (ordinarily two of them) would go through the streets to inform the community that it was time to light the Friday night candles or to rise for the morning Tefilla. During the month of Selihot prior to Rosh Hashana, the town criers would call out at two o'clock in the morning that everyone should arise and go to the homes that were holding services that lasted from two o'clock until dawn.

If a pregnant woman entered a home where they were cooking or making sweets, the woman of the house would have to give her a taste of all the foods. If she did not get a taste of everything, superstition had it that the child would always be hungry.

To treat diarrhea, a preparation was made of rice soup, thoroughly cooked, with lots of lemon and pepper. If this did not help, the patient was given a spoonful of powdered Turkish coffee with a squeeze of lemon, or a grated apple.

The Rhodes Jews managed to maintain their customs and traditions after the Italians took control of Rhodes from the Turks following World War I. It wasn't until fascism came to Italy and one of Mussolini's henchmen, Mario de Vecchi, was sent to the island as the new governor that the Jews began to suffer. His enforcement of racial laws and incitement of anti-Semitism drove a spike into the heart of the Juderia. At least half of the four thousand Jews living on the island had fled by 1939, emigrating to the USA, Canada, Africa, and Europe.

Among those who left were Matilda Cohen (nee Franco) who settled in Los Angeles.⁴ She recalls that her family had to leave the island when she was six. At that time Mussolini had joined forces with Hitler. Schools were closed to Jews. Her parents didn't want to leave. Her father had a department store and her mother was extremely happy on Rhodes, but with Hitler marching through country after country in Europe, they thought it would be best if the family left. They went to Naples where the American Embassy gave them a strict physical examination. Three of Jaffee's brothers had scar tissue under their eyelids. They were forbidden entry to the United States until the scar tissue healed. Nonetheless, the family decided to emigrate, reasoning the boys would follow when their eyes healed. After six months one of them was able to join them, but two older brothers were told their treatment would take another six months. They had their boat tickets in their hands when the war broke out and all ports were closed. For the next five years the two teenaged boys had to stay in Italy, on their own.

Those who remained suffered an even worse fate when the Germans captured the Dodecanese islands during World War 2. The Nazis rounded up the *Rhodeslis* as part of the Third Reich's final solution and sent them to Auschwitz and other concentration camps.

The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation records show that on July 18, 1944, the German began to order all the Jews of Rhodes to appear with their identity cards and work permits at the Air Force Command Center. Unanticipated help for the Jews came on July 20 when Selahattin Ulkumen, the Consul General in Rhodes for Turkey, demanded the German commanders release Jews with Turkish nationality. He cited various treaties and neutrality agreements between Turkey and Germany, and the Germans reluctantly released forty-two Jews. Ulkumen even managed to free women of Turkish origin who had married Jews who were not Turkish citizens.

Ulkumen paid dearly for his bravery when the Germany military discovered that the laws he had cited did not exist. The Consul General had totally fabricated their existence to

save Jews from deportation. The Nazis bombed his home in retaliation, seriously injuring his pregnant wife who died a week after giving birth to the couple's son, Ufuk. The remaining Jews on the island, some 1,700, were deported to Auschwitz.⁵

A first-hand account of the life of Jews at Auschwitz has been written by Errikos Sevillias.⁶ "Two months had passed since I had arrived at Auschwitz and the heat had started to become unbearable. It was the beginning of June and the sun beat down hard upon us as we worked...One day while we were working outside the crematorium, at about quitting time, a big sedan drew up and out of it got the commandant of Birkenau Camp, whose name was Kramer. He had a big scar on his face as have many criminals and was the fear and terror of us all. This wasn't the first time we had seen him. He was so repulsive and cruel that when he approached us we trembled; his stare was horrible. When he approached us, he began to examine us and we began to get uneasy.... He said something to the soldiers who were with us and they ordered us to stop working and to get into line. We were terrified as we didn't know what was going to happen. Our fear became panic when, instead of going back to the camp, they took us to the crematorium. We waited on line in the yard.... When we had all our clothes off, the Capo and our guards came and began to search them, carefully. Only then did we understand that they were looking for rings, gold teeth, or any other gold we might have. They knew that the inside workers gave us many things so we could buy cigarettes and food. If they ever found anything on anyone, even a tooth, they would execute him immediately as an example to the others."

These atrocities ended with the liberation of the camps as the war drew to an end. Hizkia M. Franco has written of the joy the end of the war created. "We move on to 1946; a happy year! All the criminal regimes had now fallen. Their leaders had disappeared like a bad dream, like shadows of a hideous specter. Almost as if it had suffered from a mental aberration, the world had for a sad moment moved backwards on the road of its evolution; but now at least it took up its forward march. With feverish labor, it was sweeping away the debris which evil genius had piled up and was beginning to redress the wrongs of the past.

"In Rhodes, the Municipal Council, now presided over by that liberal and enlightened lawyer Haritos, removed the fascist name that de Vecchi had put up in the avenue and replaced it with once more the name of its legitimate owner, Salomon Alhadeff! They also decided to call the main street of the Jewish quarter Street of the Hebrew Martyrs! Justice was done. May God be praised!"

No more than half a dozen chose to remain on the island after Rhodes became Greek again, the others emigrating to the United States or Israel. Nevertheless, they managed to rebuild one synagogue and restore the 3000-year-old Jewish graveyard with the help of the worldwide Sephardic community. A Jewish museum was also created.⁷ Nicholas

Stavroulakis and Timothy J. DeVinney have written that some of the liturgical silver from the Rhodes Kal Shalom Synagogue as well as a number of eighteenth century ivory components for decorating the spindles on which the Sepher Torah is rolled were acquired by the Jews Museum of Greece as a gift. These were part of a large number of liturgical artifacts hidden by the Turkish Muslim community from the Nazis after the arrest of the Jews. They were returned to the Jewish community at the end of the war and are now on display in the Jewish Museum in Athens.⁸

The Jews of Rhodes remember the life on the island fondly. They have produced a number of films,⁹ memoirs, and historical accounts¹⁰ They have also established The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation headquarter in in Los Angles. The thoughts of many Greek Jews were summed up a poem by Aviva Franco, the 13-year-old great-granddaughter of Hizkia M. Franco.¹¹

The Martyrs of Rhodes, family names to me,
Are the acknowledged heroes of our history.
These wonderful people, so happy and content,
Had no fear of exile or of being sent
From their home they loved so dear,
When the war in Europe grew near.

It happened almost overnight,
When the Germans came in sight.
There was no reason they could see
Why their lives would change disastrously.

The Nazi Germans had cruel plans
For those with homes and precious lands.
It was to death they had to go,
Leaving family and world they did know.
Why should one race or creed
Destroy another with willful greed?
Our new generation must take heed
Never to repeat these vile misdeeds.
Working together as friend, not foe,
Freedom to come, and freedom to go.

On July 6, 2003, the first Jewish wedding in fifty-nine years took place on Rhodes. Nathalie Rica Jonas and Aaron Dessner, both New Yorkers, were married in the Kahal Shalom synagogue. Guests and family came from Israel, South Africa, France, Belgium,

Italy, Norway, Costa Rica, Athens and various cities in the United States. Rachel Amado Bortnick wrote of the wedding in the 2005 annual bulletin of The Rhodes Jewish Historical Foundation, "The scene was reminiscent of pre-war Rhodes wedding photographs. The crowd of family and guests gathered in front of the synagogue after the wedding ceremony and, with the beautiful bride and elegant groom in front, walked down the narrow-pebbled streets within the Juderia.

"People in the streets stopped and applauded, others looked on from balconies and doorways, probably much as they used to years ago, until we reached the building with a large garden terrace on the top floor, where the wedding dinner and celebration took place, in a restaurant converted from a house that had belonged to a Turkish pasha.

". . . Jews the world over and their descendants continue to have a special pride in their origins and a strong attachment to this city and its ancient history. That is why the bride and groom and their families decided to hold the wedding here. Nathalie's grandparents were born in Rhodes and migrated to the Belgian Congo before World War II, but the family members who remained in Rhodes were murdered in Auschwitz. The wedding and the special service on the preceding Sabbath honored their memory and that of grandparents and other family members now deceased.

For everyone involved and everyone present, the wedding in Rhodes was a beautiful, unforgettable, emotional event, giving honor to the past, celebrating the future, and symbolizing the undying spirit of Judaism."

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¹ I would like to thank Dan Georgakas who worked with me to create a single essay from a shorter version augmented by detailed list of further readings with long selections.

² Isaac Jack Levy. *Jewish Rhodes: A Lost Culture*. (Berkeley, CA: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1989).

³ This description of Jewish daily life in Rhodes paraphrases and condenses accounts in Rebecca Amato Levy. *I Remember Rhodes*. (NY: Stephen-Hermon Press in co-operation with Sephardic House, Cong. Shearith Israel, 1987.) Translated from the original Ladino by Frances Franco Strumza and edited by Frances Franco.

⁴ The account which follows is based on Matilda Cohen. *Our Beloved Rhodes*, a personal essay supplied to the author in 1999 by Frances Franco in Los Angeles.

⁵ Noted in an obituary in *Kathimerini* (English-language edition), June 11, 2003. Also noted by various sources was that the man nicknamed the Turkish Schindler had been honored by Yad Vashem, the holocaust museum in Jerusalem by being named as one of the 'Righteous Among the Nations' in 1990 with a tree planting ceremony." Selahattin Ulkumen has also been honored by American organizations such as B'Nai B'rith and the Anti-Defamation League.

⁶ Errikos Sevilias. *Athens-Auschwitz*. (Athens: Lycabettus Press, 1983). Translation and introduction by Nikos Stavroulakis.

⁷ The Rhodes Jewish Community Headquarters is at 5 Pilidorou St. in Rhodes' Old Town. The Kahal Shalom synagogue is located nearby on Dosiadou and Simiou Streets with the Jewish Museum of Rhodes adjoining it.

⁸ The Jewish Museum of Greece is located at 36 Amalias St. in Athens.

⁹ Two examples are *Island of Rhodes: The Jews of Rhodes in Los Angeles*, a VHS by Gregori Vien and *Rhodes Forever* (1995), a video by Diane and Willy Perelsztejn available from The National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University.

¹⁰ *This Way to Paradise: Dancing on the Tables* by Willard Manus is a memoir of the American author's 35 years on Rhodes that was written in 1997. Available at mavmanus@aol.com. Another example is the already cited *The Jews of Rhode* by Jack Levy.

¹¹ Published in Hizkia M. Frango. *The Martyrs of Rhodes and Kos* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Harper Collins, 1994). English translation from the original Ladino by Joseph Franco.