

Introductory Note

After our arrival in the military camp and the disappearance of my wife and parents, it was music that kept me from sinking into despair. Because a person in despair is already dead.

Jacob Stroumsa from *Dialexa tin Zoi*.

In December 2016, the Jewish Community of Volos held its annual festive Hannukah meal. The room was filled with people, including members of the Volos community and guests from around Greece. This was the setting for my very first performance of songs of the Jewish tradition, the result of a warm invitation by Jewish Community president Mr. Marcel Solomon. This performance was also one of my first in Greece after a thirteen-year hiatus abroad. I remember struggling to choose repertoire befitting the occasion and working diligently to learn the correct pronunciation of the Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew-language song lyrics. I also remember how I longed to make a good impression on the audience and in particular on the Jewish Community of Volos that had placed its faith in me.

At that time, I could hardly have imagined that this concert would come to play a catalytic role in my professional artis-

tic career. But this performance ultimately led to a stream of concerts all over Greece including in Larissa, Kastoria, Kavala, Thessaloniki, Rhodes, Athens, and Trikala. And then it led to concerts abroad including in Geneva, Berlin, Milan, and Paris. As demand increased, I felt ever more compelled to enrich my repertoire in an effort to never perform the same program twice. I began my research for additional repertoire with great enthusiasm and soon developed an intense desire to program concerts of lesser-known songs. I also began to note which songs from the available repertoire had been composed or performed in Greece and by Greeks abroad. It seemed somehow irresponsible to program songs at random, simply because they were Sephardic. Since I was performing for Greek audiences, I felt that I owed it to them to present repertoire that bore some connection to Greece. In this early stage of my investigation of the music of the Jews of Greece, my research goals were not yet fully formed. But I followed my instincts and soon found my path.

My research began with the book *Oi Synagoges/Ta Tragoudia Mas* by Alberto Nar, that catalogues songs of the Sephardic tradition of Thessaloniki. While an immensely valuable contribution, the book does not include information about the song melodies and therefore could not serve as the basis for creating a sound recording. Next, I listened intently to the recordings of David Saltiel, Savvina Yannatou, Yehoram Gaon, and the chorus of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki under the direction of Kostis Papazoglou. My research revealed minimal scholarly documentation of this repertoire. I also began to question whether these recordings truly included the entire repertoire of the songs of the Greek Jews. I was certain

that additional songs must exist and I was determined to find them. I noted a particular dearth of information about Romaniote songs and an exceptionally limited commercial and amateur discography: the internet and relevant sources revealed little information useful to my research. The only academic source on Romaniote songs is the heartfelt text *Yanniotika Evraïka Tragoudia* by Joseph Matsas that includes song lyrics, relevant historical data, and limited information about song melodies. Unfortunately, the documented musical information is so limited that we are unable to use this book as the basis for a meaningful musical interpretation of the songs. Finally, the established bibliography reveals no information about any other Holocaust songs of the Greeks, and the conventional repertoire that is performed on days of Holocaust remembrance only consists of a handful of songs.

At first, my efforts to discover new songs were entirely in vain: all sources seemed to indicate that there existed no additional repertoire. But my desire to continue researching remained, and with curiosity and a bit of luck as my guide, I slowly began to find additional repertoire. Not only were the songs that I discovered new to me, but they were also absent from the existing discography. I also began to find in books variations of texts of well-known Holocaust songs that did not yet exist in the discography. Alongside the common lifecycle songs (about love, marriage, children, etc.), I discovered quite a few songs about the Holocaust. At first, I was unsure how to judge the quality of the material that I had discovered, so I began by merely making a small list of nine or ten songs that had yet to be recorded. It was only then that I began to dream up the idea of making my own recording. And so, about four years

ago, at the urging of the President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, David Saltiel, I visited Evangelos Hekimoglou, the then curator of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki. I shared with him my wish to research, document, and record the songs of the Jewish tradition of Greece. Together, we began the journey that resulted in the recording, *Unknown Musical Treasures of the Jewish Tradition of Greece*. Despite my very broad criteria for including on the recording all relevant songs without discretion, at the start of our research, the material that we had discovered was hardly enough to fill one disc. However, little by little, I uncovered more and more material, and at some point, I even began to feel overwhelmed. In 2020, sometime during the first COVID quarantine, I called Evangelos in despair: “Evangele what will we do? The material does not fit on one disc.” In his characteristically calm manner he replied, “we will find money and we will record another one.” This is how we arrived at the current publication featuring Holocaust songs of the Greek Jews.

My research methodology was simple. I began by reading numerous books about the Holocaust and about Greek Jews with particular attention to survivor testimony. The first book that I read was the moving study by Giorgos Pilichos *Auschwitz – Ellines – Arithmos Mellothanatou*, a text rich with valuable information about the concentration camps including everything from the design and planning of individual camps, to living conditions and medical experiments conducted on camp grounds, to the phenomenon of camp orchestras. The book also includes significant survivor testimony. I was fortunate to experience two guided tours of the Auschwitz camps by the author himself. I am certain that reading this book and visit-

ing the camps afforded me the “experiential” knowledge that has allowed me to approach the subject of the Holocaust with greater humility and understanding. I still remember my first visit to Auschwitz that took place sometime in the beginning of May 2019, I was wearing a coat, warm shoes, gloves, and a hat. My stomach was full and I was safe. During the hours-long tour, I felt frozen by the bitter cold, and I could not help but reflect on the desperation the camp prisoners must have felt in the freezing winter, living with the constant fear of death and in inhumane and unhygienic conditions, with no food, clothing, or shoes, their feet touching directly the clay soil, mud, and snow. What immense spiritual strength must those few survivors have had? And what can be said for the strength of the many prisoners who survived as long as they could before they were selected for the gas chamber or before their hearts simply stopped? Did the songs that they wrote and sang give them strength? How, despite their pain and despair, did they continue to write words full of hope, full of nostalgia for Thessaloniki, and full of love for the homeland? These thoughts and observations played an important role in the decisions that were made about the orchestration and recording of these songs.

The next book that I read was *Proforikes martyries Evraion tis Thessalonikis yia to Olokautoma* by Alberto Nar and Erika Kounio-Amarilio. This is perhaps the most important book for anyone who wishes to gain an in-depth understanding of the Holocaust through survivor testimony. The testimony of Leon Hagouel included in this book serves as the source of two songs on our recording (see “Un dia de Saba amanesyo” and “Thessaloniki mou glikia”). *Keimeni... epi aktis thalassis* (out-of-

print) by Alberto Nar, and Nar's digital archive housed within the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive of the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, yielded a rich array of songs from the Holocaust period. Survivor memoirs also proved to be critical sources for this project including *Kravgi yia to Avrio 76859* by Berry Nahmia and *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* by Shlomo Venezia. I discovered several songs in the archives of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, in the Fortunoff Holocaust Testimony Archive at Yale University, and in the collection of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki. Making personal connections with survivors and their descendants also provided information that was vital to this project. Finally, growing acquainted with relevant literature helped me develop a more general understanding of the Holocaust.

I was fortunate to never have to look far to discover new relevant material: all that I needed already existed in local bookstores and in the library of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki. Even the song lyrics that I found had already been documented. However, what I did not find is precisely what this edition offers: the collection, documentation, and recording of Holocaust songs of the Greek Jews in one place. This facilitates their rightful inclusion within the broader repertoire and brings these songs to the ears of the public at last. I am certain that in the future, additional relevant repertoire will be discovered. I am saddened by the thought that many other songs might have survived had there been yet another researcher like Alberto Nar, who placed such special significance on preserving the history and music of the Greek Jews. Alberto Nar is the reason why we have access to a majority of

the songs of the Holocaust period and to songs of the broader Sephardic tradition in Greece. In fact, it was highly unusual for survivor interviews to focus on the subject of music. This makes sense, for which interviewer would guide a conversation about the Holocaust to music? Who could possibly imagine that inside the camps, inmates might write or sing songs? As a result, during the first years after the return to Greece of the few remaining survivors, knowledge about music in the Holocaust remained scarce.

My study of the Holocaust songs of the Greek Jews has led to a number of broad conclusions. Above all, I believe that the very existence of this repertoire is significant in and of itself. We already knew that the Ashkenazi Jews of northern and eastern Europe had composed and sung many songs in the ghettos and camps, and that concentration camp orchestras had played music. However, references to the songs of the Greek Jews were sporadic at best. This present edition aims to demonstrate that this repertoire is in fact vast and richly informative. For example, a careful reading of song lyrics reveals that they were usually written in Greek rather than in Judeo-Spanish. This is indicative of the degree of integration into Greek society of the Jews of Thessaloniki, an observation that is hardly self-evident given that the liberation of Thessaloniki only took place in 1912, three decades before the Holocaust. In addition, the use of the Greek language by those imprisoned in the camps certainly reflects sentiments of national affiliation with Greece. Holocaust survivor Leon Hagouel supports this perspective: "...songs from the camp are in Greek, which we spoke most often while in the camp because we felt alienated. The Greek language was the link with our homeland that we

missed.” The songs also reveal information about the music listening habits of Greek Jews since so many of the songs are based on pre-existing melodies, primarily those of European popular songs, Greek folk songs, and rebetika. Holocaust songs of the Greek Jews also serve as an important source of information about various aspects of everyday life during the Holocaust, offering insight into the living conditions in the ghettos, the experience of riding the train to Auschwitz, and life in the camps. Many songs have a confessional air, expressing the authors’ thoughts, hopes, fears, and sentiments about the homeland.

As noted above, the musical repertoire of the Greek Jews during the Holocaust consisted largely of arrangements of popular European songs and of traditional and popular Greek repertoire including folk songs and rebetika. In most cases, new lyrics were adapted to existing melodies, which is a common practice called *contrafactum*. We did face some interpretive challenges when recording certain songs whose light-hearted melodies contrasted starkly the despondent nature of the newly-composed lyrics. Telling examples include “Un dia de Saba amanesyó” and “Ap’tou Baronou Hirsch mas vgalane” whose lyrics about the grim reality of the Jews of Thessaloniki during the final solution contrast their upbeat foxtrot-style melody. In these instances, we have chosen to respect the authors’ decision and record the songs as written, even if the end result might be jarring to the listener.

I do not want to dwell on my own thoughts and conclusions that emerged from the study and recording of this material. I prefer to leave you to draw your own conclusions at your own pace. I am well aware that listening to these songs

will evoke feelings of sadness and despair. But I believe that we should put these feelings aside for now, and devote a bit of time and thought to the writings of these extraordinarily resilient individuals who spoke from their hearts in the darkest moments of their existence.

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