

Sunday, January 25, 2010

Update on arsons at Etz Hayyim Synagogue in Hania Crete

During the month of January, Greek-Jewish news has been punctuated by two arson attacks on Etz Hayyim Synagogue in Hania Crete. Condemnations of these attacks have come in from all over the world and, on January 22nd, we learned that arrests had been made.

We feel that it is important to acknowledge those who spoke out in condemnation and to applaud the municipality of Hania for their speedy arrests. We, also, feel that it is important to put these attacks in their correct perspective.

The first arson attack occurred on January 5th in the middle of the night. The second attack, also under the secrecy of darkness, occurred on January 16th. Damage from the two arsons total over \$43,000. Funds have come in from all over the world and we are hopeful that Nikos Stavroulakis will be able to restore this precious synagogue, a synagogue that stands as the only reminder of the once flourishing Jewish community of the city and a living memorial to the Jews of Crete who perished in the Holocaust.

One of the first condemnations of arson occurred shortly after the January 5th attack and was by two major US Greek-American groups:

Condemnation of Hania incident

WASHINGTON (ANA-MPA) - Two major Greek-American groups this week expressed outrage over a recent arson attempt against the historic Hania synagogue, in Crete's eponymous port city, with the first condemnation issued in Chicago on Thursday by the World Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE) / USA Region coordinator. "The Greek American community is outraged at the recent act of anti-Semitism at the historic Hania Synagogue in Crete. We are deeply disturbed that such acts of terrorism happen in 21st century Greece..." the statement read.

In addition, a statement issued in Washington on Wednesday by the Pan-Cretan Association of America (PAA), underlined that Greek-Americans "castigate the arson attempt against the Hania Synagogue on Jan. 5, 2010." "After the attempt, January 5, 2010, to torch to the ground the historic Hania Synagogue, in Crete, we Cretans in the United States are outraged at all actions of anti-Semitism in Greece and all attempts to terrorize Greeks of Jewish faith," the statement read.

"As an expression of our outrage at all actions against the Jewish Community in Greece we sign this statement and we appeal to all people of good will to voice their support in efforts to eradicate hatred and racism in Greece," the statement also read.

The instances in Hania brought response from all segments of the Greek and Jewish world.

On January 20th, the following letter was sent to Moisis Constantinis (President of the Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece) by the Patriarchs of Constantinople and the Americas. The letter is translated from the original Greek.



ORDER OF SAINT ANDREW THE APOSTLE
ARCHONS OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE IN AMERICA

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Demetrios Condemn Arson of Synagogue in Crete

1/22/2010

New York, NY - The following is a translation of the letter (Jan. 20, 2010) of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Jewish community of Greece on the recent arson attacks on the historic synagogue, "Erz Hayyim" in Chania, Crete.

To the honorable Mr. Moses Konstantinis,
Chairman of the Central Israeli Council of Greece: grace and peace from God.

It is with profound sadness that we were informed at the Ecumenical Patriarchate about the new arson attempt against the building of the Hebrew Synagogue in the Old City of Chania.

Therefore, through this our Patriarchal Letter, we want you to know that we condemn this deed as any other deed of violence and terrorism and, particularly, against sites of the worship of God. Furthermore, we express to you the deep sympathy of our Most Holy Church of Constantinople and ours too, as well as our deeply felt compassion over this sad event. We pray to God to protect you and the Jewish community in Greece from every assault.

In closing, we invoke upon you the grace and infinite mercy of God.

His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios of America also made the following statement:

It is a deeply sad and disturbing that an attack on this historic 15th century synagogue or any house of worship should have ever happened. Clearly, such a sacrilege has been perpetrated by aberrant person or persons, who in no way represent the proud people of Crete or the Hellenic people as a whole, the names of whose heroes of the Holocaust are inscribed in the hearts of the Jewish people. We stand in solidarity with His All Holiness and all people of good will who condemn this cowardly act, and we pray for the swift restoration of this Synagogue, and for the well being of the historic Jewish community of Crete.

Israel relays concern to Greece over synagogue arson

Jan. 20, 2010

Herb Keinon , THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel registered its "concern" with the Greek government Tuesday over the arson attack against the Crete synagogue on Shabbat, the second attack on the synagogue in two weeks.

According to a Foreign Ministry statement, Naor Gilon, the Foreign Ministry's deputy director-general for western Europe, phoned Greek Ambassador Kyrakos Loukakis and requested that he pass on "in a friendly manner" Israel's request that Greece take all the steps necessary to find the attackers and ensure that similar actions don't take place in the future.

According to the statement, Loukakis condemned the attack and said that it prompted a wave of condemnations and protests inside Greece. He pledged that the Greek government would do everything it could to apprehend the arsonists.

Gilon, who thanked the Greek government for its efforts, said Israel was going to contribute toward the restoration of the synagogue, and hoped that the Greek government would do the same.

The Foreign Ministry statement said that the conversation between Loukakis and Gilon, who was present last week when Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon dressed down the Turkish ambassador, was held in a "good and friendly" atmosphere.

The attack on the 17th century Etz-Hayyim Synagogue in the city of Hania caused an estimated \$43,000 worth of damage to the synagogue's wooden ceiling, its archives and computers. Some 2,500 books were also destroyed in this fire, as well as the previous one on January 6.

The synagogue was restored in the late 1990s after years of neglect following World War II. The nearly 300 members of the Hania Jewish community were shipped out by the Nazis in 1944, and died when their ship was sunk in transit by an Allied torpedo.

Greece today has a Jewish community estimated at some 4,500.

The United States State Department condemned the attacks:

*Mark C. Toner
Acting Deputy Department Spokesman
Washington, DC
January 20, 2010*

We strongly condemn the January 5 and January 16 arson attacks on the Etz-Hayyim Synagogue in the city of Chania on the island of Crete. The Synagogue dates back to the Middle Ages and is one of the last Jewish monuments on the island. An attack on the Etz-Hayyim Synagogue is an attack on Greece's history and heritage. The second attack caused severe damage to the Synagogue, destroying nearly 2,000 books and severely damaging the building's wooden roof.

This attack was clearly intended to intimidate and terrorize Greece's Jewish community and is only the latest of several incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism throughout Greece over the past few years. We applaud the Greek government for condemning these attacks and taking a strong stand against anti-Semitism and racism.

Our Embassy in Athens is in contact with the Synagogue. Embassy officials will be meeting with their Greek counterparts to underscore U.S. concern over this incident.

In addition, two members of the US Congress, both of whom have strong ties to the Greek-American community here in the United States, spoke out:

Maloney, Bilirakis condemn Crete synagogue arson attacks

WASHINGTON (20 January) Today U.S. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) and U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.), co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Issues, condemned recent arson attempts against the historic Chania Synagogue on the Island of Crete. The synagogue, which holds a library of religious books and functions as a museum and memorial in the ancient harbor city of Chania, was attacked by arsonists on January 6 and 15.

"I strongly condemn the recent anti-Semitic attacks upon the Jewish community in Crete. We must not let this type of anti-Semitism percolate as the world has seen the evil that stems from this type of hatred and bigotry. We call on Greek authorities to swiftly apprehend the perpetrators and bring them to justice and implore the people of Chania, and all Greek citizens, to voice their outrage against this intolerance," said Maloney.

"The recent arson attempts at the Etz-Hayyim Synagogue in Crete are contemptible and wholly unacceptable. Now is a time to stand with Jewish community in Greece and against anti-Semitism and intolerance. I urge Greek authorities to conduct a swift and thorough investigation and bring to justice the perpetrators of these heinous attacks," said Bilirakis.

Condemnation by AHEPA

WASHINGTON - Nicholas A. Karacostas, supreme president of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA), a leading association for the nation's three million American citizens of Greek heritage, and countless Philhellenes, issued the following statement regarding the continued anti-Semitic attacks upon the historic Etz-Hayyim Synagogue located in Hania, Crete:

"We strongly condemn the anti-Semitic attacks that have been carried out on the Etz-Hayyim Synagogue in Hania. This is the second arson attack in two weeks that has left the synagogue's infrastructure devastated and approximately 2,500 rare books and other archival items destroyed by fire.

"These anti-Semitic attacks upon the Jewish community in Greece are simply unacceptable. We appeal to the people of Hania, and all Greek citizens, to come together to defy these acts of hatred, intolerance, and bigotry; and to help the healing process begin.

"We call for the swift apprehension of the perpetrators of these heinous attacks so that they may be brought to justice."

Arsonists attacked Etz-Hayyim Synagogue on Tuesday, January 5 and Saturday, January 16, 2010.

Etz-Hayyim Synagogue is the only surviving Jewish monument on the island of Crete. To learn more about the history of the synagogue, please visit <http://www.etz-hayyim-hania.org>.

AHEPA is the largest Greek-American association in the world with chapters in the United States, Canada, Greece, Cyprus, and sister chapters in Australia and New Zealand. It was established in 1922 by visionary Greek Americans to protect Hellenes from prejudice originating from the KKK, and in its history, AHEPA joined with the NAACP and B'nai B'rith International to fight discrimination.

The mission of the AHEPA family is to promote the ancient Greek ideals of education, philanthropy, civic responsibility and family and individual excellence through community service and volunteerism.

The American Jewish Committee (the only Jewish organization that spoke out after the attacks on the Jewish cemetery of Ioannina) made the following statement:

AJC Outraged by Arson Attack on Crete Synagogue

January 17, 2009 -- New York -- AJC is outraged by this morning's arson attack that severely damaged Etz Hayim, the only synagogue on the Greek island of Crete. It was the second arson attack on the historic building in ten days.

"Our hearts go out to the Greek Jewish community," said AJC Executive Director David Harris. "To target such a house of worship not once, but twice, within days of each other requires a swift public response from all in Greece who believe in the principles of religious freedom and mutual respect."

Today's blaze severely damaged or destroyed Jewish ritual objects and religious books, as well as the synagogue's roof. The earlier arson attack, on January 5, destroyed the synagogue's library.

Nearly 90 percent of Greek Jewry was murdered by the Nazis in World War II. Greece's Jewish population today is only 5,000. After the Nazis destroyed the Crete Jewish community in 1944, Etz Hayyim stood empty and neglected for decades. A restoration project commenced in 1996, and the synagogue was rededicated in 1999.

"We count on Greek Prime Minister Papandreou and his government to do everything possible to apprehend the arsonists and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law," said Harris. "The protection of all Jewish institutions in Greece must become a still higher priority in light of recent events. That attackers could strike the same target twice in ten days reveals the shortcomings of the security in place."

AJC and the Greek Jewish community have had an association agreement for many years.

We applaud the rapid response of the municipality of Hania and the arrest of three individuals responsible for the arsons.

Britons accused of setting fire to a synagogue in Crete

Two British men have been arrested in connection with arson attacks on a medieval synagogue on the Greek island of Crete.

The two men, who have not been named, are being held in the coastal town of Hania. A Greek man is also in custody and two Americans are being sought.

Hania's Etz Hayyim synagogue has been targeted by arsonists twice this month.

The UK embassy in Athens said two British men had been arrested on charges of arson.

The BBC's Malcolm Brabant in Athens said, according to the police, the men are aged 23 and 33 and are nightclub waiters in the seaside town.

Jewish monument

Police said they were arrested after a 24-year-old Greek man confessed, our correspondent added.

The British men have been offered assistance by consul staff on the island.

The first attack happened on 5 January but it was the second attack on Saturday 16 January which caused extensive damage to the synagogue's interior, its archive material and technical equipment.

The Etz Hayyim synagogue, which dates back to the Middle Ages, is the only surviving Jewish monument on the island of Crete.

It was restored in the late 1990s and has since become a memorial and a tourist attraction.

By 1941 most of the Jews in Crete had emigrated, leaving only the Hania community of about 270 people.

They were deported by Nazi invaders in 1944 and died when their ship was bombed and sunk by the Allies.

The nationalities of the alleged arsonists are disturbing but also reflective of the growing anti-Semitic climate in Europe and the United States. Greece has been too often labeled an anti-Semitic country. As someone who visits Greece annually, I take issue with that too easily applied assessment. Is there anti-Semitism in Greece? Of course but, then, there is anti-Semitism everywhere. One does not even need a Jewish population to have anti-Semitism.

Unfortunately, the goodness in people rarely makes the headlines. That is why the actions of the Christian citizens of Ioannina in December of 2009, coming out publically in support of the Jewish cemetery of the city (see e-newsletter of January 2010 on the Kehila Kedosha Janina website (www.kkjsm.org)) was so important. That is why we hope that the example set by Hania in arresting those responsible will be repeated in Ioannina.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal by Andrew Apostolou, a young man who, unfortunately, has punctuated his work by the supposition that the tremendous losses of Greek Jews during the Holocaust was due to Greek collaboration, a much too simplistic explanation for the complicated situation that existed in Occupied Greece, has described Modern Greece as "a country lacking in moral leadership."

Negativity breeds negativity. This does not mean that we should not honestly assess what is happening in Greece (and elsewhere in the world) but, as has recently been shown by the arrests in Hania, hate has no national boundaries. Let us applaud the police arrests in Hania. Let us applaud the Christian citizens of Ioannina who took a public stand and did not allow the actions of barbarians in their midst to define them as a people. Let us applaud all the good citizens and public officials who spoke out and expressed their opposition to anti-Semitism in Greece. Let these positive actions serve as an inspiration to others.

Lest we forget how beautiful this synagogue was, I have included photos of Etz Hayyim taken by Maurice Askinazi during a 2002 visit.



Most of all, let us work to restore Etz Hayyim. Personal and organizational donations can be made to Etz Hayyim through the following:

Directly to Nikos Stavroulakis:

Any donations will be deeply appreciated and, of course, welcome.

ALPHA BANK (Hania, Crete)

Account name: Friends of Etz Hayyim

Account # 776-002101-087154

IBAN: GR74 0140 6600 7760 0210 1087 154

Nicholas Hannan-Stavroulakis / Director Etz Hayyim Synagogue/ Hania

In the USA, tax-deductible charitable contribution will also be received by the International Survey of Jewish Monuments (ISJM). Checks can be sent to ISJM, P.O. Box 210, 118 Julian Place, Syracuse, NY 13210. Write "Hania" on the memo line. 100% of all funds will be transferred for use by Etz Hayyim.

In addition, The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry has been raising funds for Etz Hayyim and contributions have already been sent by the Association, Kehila Kedosha Janina & the Sisterhood of Janina.

The most positive response to these anti-Semitic acts will be the complete restoration of Etz Hayyim.

Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

Museum Director of Kehila Kedosha Janina

President of the Association of Friends of Greek Jewry