

Remembering August 18, 1917---The Great Fire of Thessaloniki

By Marcia Haddad-Ikonomopoulos and Bob Bedford

August 18, 1917 marks the 95th anniversary of the Great Fire in Thessaloniki (Salonika). The central portion of the city actually destroyed by the fire was only about a mile and a quarter in length and a little over half a mile in width but the general loss was so immeasurable as to defy all imagination. The fire had started on a Saturday afternoon in a little wooden house in the upper part of the city, as a refugee was frying eggplant and the pan turned over. A simple start to what would become a devastating destruction, not only of physical structures but, also, of human lives. While few would be killed by the fire (only a group of drunken French soldiers were burned alive in a wine-shop), 49% of the total population of the city was left homeless, the greater majority of them, Jews.



Aerial View of Thessaloniki and Fire of August 18, 1917

In 1917, Thessaloniki was already overcrowded by an increase of refugees who had fled into the city during the Balkan Wars. Many of them were escaping atrocities committed by Bulgarian and Turkish armies. In addition, the city was overwhelmed with the housing of British, French, Serbian, Italian, Russian and Greek soldiers, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In the summer of 1917, the population of Salonika had nearly quadrupled. There was not enough water for firefighting because the Allied forces controlled reserves to serve their camps and hospitals in the suburbs of the city. More significantly, the city government did not have an organized fire brigade; a few firefighting teams were privately owned by insurance companies that protected only their subscribers. The private firefighters were found to be untrained and equipped with

antiquated equipment. To complicate matters, the fire started on a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath and the Jewish firefighters could not respond immediately. Salonika was constantly plagued by fire, as were most cities in the Ottoman Empire, overcrowded with wooden structures. Major fires in the 1890s and in 1910 had nearly devastated portions of the town, but the fire of 1917 was, by far, the most destructive fire in the history of the city.



Jewish Refugees living in tents after the Fire

The events leading up to the fire created the perfect storm: the city was overcrowded, there was a shortage of water, the heat of the summer fueled the flames and the strong Vardar winds rapidly spread the fire. Within an hour came the first indications that something was seriously wrong. From the cobblestoned streets came the sound of several carts, rattling and bumping along. The threatened residents up on the hill were gathering whatever transport available for the removal of their possessions from the danger area. As the fire spread quickly, the evacuation of each street came in a panic rush as its inhabitants realized that their homes were also doomed.

Soon the streets were filled with refugees bearing all sorts of useless household goods: wardrobes, mirrors, pots and pans and, of course, their precious sewing machines. Feather beds were carried on their shoulders, finally abandoned at the water's edge, where they became additional fuel for the fire. The fire would rapidly spread into the lower quarter of the city, where scenes of frantic escape were repeated. Merchants

threw their goods out onto the streets, calling desperately for hamales (porters) to help them. By midnight of the 18th, the harbor was filled with refugees, clutching the remnants of their shattered lives. The fire would continue to burn for several more days and it was immediately apparent that the destruction had reached gigantic proportions. The Jewish community of Salonika would never recover.

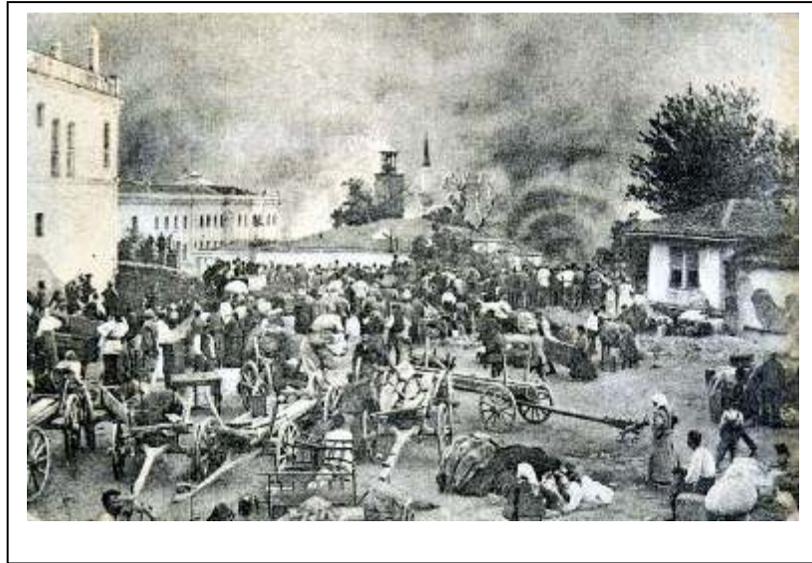


The port in the wake of the Fire

For the first time in the history of Salonika there was silence in the ancient city. The rattling carts, the cries of street vendors, and the constant chatter of the crowds were gone. Within a few short hours, the disastrous fire of August 18, 1917 had managed to destroy a flourishing community, the most important and prosperous in the Orient. Of the splendor and glory of the ancient Jewish community of Salonika, little was left but a smoldering mound of bricks and rubble.

Thessaloniki has the distinction of the oldest documented Jewish presence on the soil of what is now Greece, going back 2,300 years. Cassandros, brother-in-law of Alexander the Great, invited Jews from Alexandria to settle in the city. These Greek-speaking Jews were experts in maritime mercantile trade and would increase the economic prestige of the city. But, it was not until after the expulsion of Jews from Spain that the city became a major center of Jewish settlement. The Sephardic (Spanish-speaking) Jews brought with them learned scholars and great rabbis, establishing schools of learning (Yeshivot) that were respected throughout the Jewish world. They created a Ladino (Judeo-Espanyol) press that was active into the 20th century. Synagogues throughout the city bound their congregants to their ancestral past, whether from Castille, Aragon, Toledo or Granada.

In 1917, before the Fire, there were an estimated 40 synagogues in Salonika. Thirty-two were destroyed. The destruction of nearly every synagogue severed Salonika's historical ties with the past, for each synagogue was the stronghold of a community whose members dated their ancestry back to the Iberian Peninsula. Not only buildings, but the accumulated wealth within them perished; Torah scrolls, medieval manuscripts, entire libraries, synagogue ornaments and all the sacred treasures brought from the Spain of Isabella and Ferdinand.



Those fleeing the Fire gather their precious possessions and escape to the harbor

Much has been written as to the attempted recovery from the Fire. According to many Greek sources, the intervention of the state was timely and immediate. Unfortunately, this is far from the truth. If anything, many feel that the rebuilding of the city and the decision to follow the new "urban plan" of Ernest Hébrard would irrevocably change the situation of Jews in Salonika. Only a few days after the disaster, the Venizelos government announced that it would not allow uncontrolled rebuilding. This affected the Jews more than any other segment of the population. They were not allowed to reclaim their property and rebuild. The city took over the area affected by the Fire and minimal compensation was given to those who had lost property in the area. Eighteen months after the fire, there were almost 1,500 Jewish families still living in tents.

There is little doubt that the Fire of 1917 set the groundwork for the demise of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki. Many would decide to leave, going to Paris, Eretz Israel and the United States. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Jewish population of the city numbered 80,000, or more than half the total city population of 150,000. By World War II, this number had dwindled to 56,000. Other factors had come into play: becoming part of Modern Greece in 1912 and the uncertainty of how they would fare as Jews in a Christian world, the influx of Asia Minor Refugees into the

city in 1922/1923 and the anti-Semitic Campbell Riots of 1931. But, there is little doubt that the Great Fire of 1917 had set the stage for these subsequent changes.

In the years following the Fire of August 18, 1917, the Jewish Community of Salonika continually tried to restore the grandeur of their once glorious city. Nearly a decade before the Nazi invasions, the community leaders reached out to their co-religionists worldwide, hoping in vain to call attention to their plight. As the Jewish color faded slowly from the city, they wrote of grave concerns for the future of their community:

“Until now, great Jewish institutions of international scope have been interested only sporadically in the fate of this community. It is high time that the Jewish world should know that the Jewish community of Salonika is dying, and that it is necessary to come to its aid in order to prevent its complete fall into ruin and oblivion.”



The ruins

The final nail in the coffin would come in World war II, when 97% of the Jewish community of Salonika were lost in the Holocaust. The Salonika of today is very different from the Salonika of August 1917. It is now a modern, cosmopolitan city with few remnants of its multi-cultural past, but 1917 Jewish Salonika still lives on in the hearts of the grandchildren of those who survived the Fire of 1917. The authors of this article, Marcia Haddad-Ikonomopoulos and Bob Bedford, are both grandchildren of survivors of the Great Fire of 1917.

Bob Bedford is the Executive Vice Present of FASSAC (Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture), author, editor and publisher of many books on Sephardim.

Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos is Museum Director of Kehila Kedosha Janina, President of the Association of Friends of Greek Jewry, writer, editor and lecturer.



Jewish porter in Salonika