

Ira Hirschmann Papers Box 3  
Report on Status of Jews in Greece by  
Burton Berry, 3/18/44

Copy

NO. 3680 (R - 2494)

AMERICAN CONSULATE GENERAL

Istanbul, Turkey, March 18, 1944.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

SUBJECT: The Present Status of Jews in Greece.

THE HONORABLE

THE SECRETARY OF STATE,

WASHINGTON.

SIR:

I have the honor to submit information concerning the present status of Jews in Greece and to report requests of Jewish refugees that an organized service be established to assist Jews in escaping. A number of small groups of Jews have recently arrived in Izmir and representatives have visited the American Consulate, but the information included in this despatch was furnished chiefly by members of a party of 26 Jews, including seven women and three children of nine years or less, who arrived in Chesme on March 2. Members of this group left Athens in mid December and the weeks following, going to Euboea by boat. After waiting there one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half months, they finally succeeded in obtaining transportation to Turkey and they left Euboea February 28. Because of stormy weather the boat was obliged to put in at Skyros for one night.

The report includes estimates of the numbers of Jews living in Athens and other parts of Greece, an appraisal of the present attitude of the Germans toward the Jews as shown in the orders and recommendations to registered Jews, statements regarding the praiseworthy attitude of the Greek people and the Sallis Government toward the Jews, a discussion of the present possibilities of escape and recommendations that an organized system of rescue be established. There is attached an enclosure entitled the "Fate of the Labor Battalions of Jews sent from Salonica in 1942 and 1943", which while not bearing directly upon the present situation of the Jews in Greece, gives details which have not been previously reported to this office and which are believed to be of historical interest.

The four members of the party who were interviewed were:

Jacques H. Benrubi, resident of Athens, civil engineer, graduate of the Conservatoire National des Arts et Metiers, Paris.

David J.

DECLASSIFIED  
State Dept. Letter

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By E. H. Parks Date AUG. 1 1979

David J. Faraggi, resident of Athens since 1940, formerly Administrative Director of the Austro-Hellenic Tobacco Company limited in Salonika, and Honorary Chancellor of the Austrian Consulate General at Salonika.

Moise Nahmias, resident of Salonika until the spring of 1943, when he went to Athens; until June, 1940, Fonde de Pouvoir de la Societe Anonyme d'Assurance Generales "La Victoria de Berlin", Direction pour la Grece et l'Albanie; 1940 - February 1943 Director of a company which refined cotton oil.

Oscar Salem, recently a resident of Athens; previous to April 1941 Director of the Salem Bank of Salonika; when the bank was closed, he started a shop for woolen goods.

Investigations in Izmir have established the reliability of these four men. Salem is a Spanish subject; the others are Greek citizens. All were in hiding in Athens, following the German order of October 3 that all Jews must register.

The above party did not leave Greece because the situation had changed for the worse since October when all Jews were required to register, but because it was the consensus of opinion that if the Germans remain in occupation, there will soon be persecution of the Jews of Athens, similar to that of Salonika in the spring of 1943. Even Jews of foreign nationality, such as Salem, feel that it is not safe to stay on in Greece, although their position is undoubtedly less dangerous than that of Greek Jews.

There are various estimates as to the number of Jews in Athens at present. In November, as was reported in Despatch No. 1746 (R-1618) the Istanbul representative of a Jewish organization stated that of a total of 3,500 Jews in Athens before the October order to register, all except 600 had escaped from the city. However, from later reports it is known that instead of escaping, the great majority were hidden, some in the houses of Greek friends or in quarters for which they paid a high price, some in the mountains. A resume of estimates reported in the last three months is given below; the starred numbers are the figures supplied by the four men interviewed.

Number of Jews in Athens before the flight from Salonika in the spring of 1943	... 3500* - 5000
Number of Jews who fled to Athens from Salonika	... 2500* - 6000
Number of Jews in Athens now	... 3600* - 8000
Number of Jews of foreign citizenship in Athens	... 500* - 600
Number of Jews in Athens who complied with the German order to register	... 600* - 1500
Number of Jews now hidden in Athens and vicinity	... All who have not registered
Number of Jews in Epirus before the occupation	... 2000 - 6000*

Number

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Number of Jews in Corfu before the occupation	... 1000**
Number of Jews who have escaped to Turkey through Izmir	... 300 - 1100**
Number of Jews who have escaped to Turkey through other ports	... 300

When the order for registration of all Jews was first issued (see Despatch No. 1601 (R-1483), October 22, 1943), only a few hundred of the poorest Jews obeyed the order. The German authorities assured these people that no unfortunate consequences would follow their registering and urged them to advise other Jews to follow the regulation. No penalty was imposed for late registration and as there was no unusual persecution of those who had obeyed the order, gradually more and more Jews registered. Such action was usually forced upon them by poverty, for although the Greeks have been humane in the extreme in their attitude toward Jews, it is often very expensive to remain in hiding and many poor Jews have not been able to continue to pay for their security. [See Despatch No. 1746 (R-1618) of November 11, 1943]. However, recent changes in the system of having registered Jews report, have aroused some suspicion. Instead of being obliged to report every two days, as was the case at first, there is now no regular period, but each time the Jews report they are told when to return and are allowed a very short interval in which to appear, often not more than fifteen minutes. This means that all the registered Jews of Athens are gathered periodically in one place and it is feared that on one of these occasions the Germans will take advantage of the situation to seize them. This fear is strengthened by the German insistence that the registered Jews persuade others to register. The four men recently interviewed expressed the conviction that all registered Jews are certainly condemned to death unless an organized effort is made to assist them to escape.

The attitude of the Greek people toward the Jews was praised in the highest terms. With the exception of the Greeks of Salonica, who are reported to have had an unsympathetic and sometimes hostile attitude toward the Jews during the persecutions of 1943, the Jewish refugees pay the sincerest possible tribute of respect and admiration for the Greeks who have consistently given aid, even at the cost of tremendous sacrifices. There are countless cases of Greeks taking Jews into their homes, hiding them, feeding them from their less than scanty supplies, and risking their lives to protect them. The Rallis Government has also been benevolent in its attitude and after the German order to register was issued, the police were authorized to supply 3,000 Jews with Greek identity cards. Our informants said that the police were always ready to assist Jews and would never betray their hiding places to the Germans. A number of instances were given where the police not only failed to give evidence against the Jews but made constructive suggestions to help them. When the order of October 3 was announced, it applied to all Greece, but many districts did not receive instructions for carryout it out and in that case the police took no steps whatsoever toward enforcing the measure.

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\*\*UT this number it was estimated that 500 were provided with papers showing that they were Greeks, with Greek names.

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In Jannina, for instance, the Jews have not been required to register and they circulate freely. It is true that their real property has been seized by the Germans and they cannot leave the city without paying from 1 to 2 million Drachmas for a permit, but their daily life goes on much as usual. In Corfu there are no reports of persecutions, although Jewish property has undoubtedly been confiscated.

At present there is no organization or underground movement for aiding the Jews of Greece. Those who leave the country do so upon their own initiative and through private channels. For the rich the undertaking is difficult and full of hardships but it offers a good chance of success. The only way for poor Jews to escape is through the charity of their fellow-countrymen. The four members of the party recently interviewed said that their group included a number of poor Jews, whose expenses were paid by the more wealthy members. This group also left money with poor Jews who could not embark with them and were obliged to wait in Euboea.

It is not easy even for rich Jews to obtain passage from Euboea to Turkish ports, for it is understood that the English and American services can take only a limited number and it is difficult to find other means of transportation. The places in Euboea where the parties are obliged to wait are primitive in the extreme and the food supply is almost non-existent. EAM maintains a consistently benevolent attitude toward Jews, often actually protecting them from open hostility on the part of the inhabitants of certain Albanian villages on Euboea, but it cannot give them food. A Jew who recently arrived in Izmir said that he lived for six weeks on a diet consisting solely of raw onions in the morning and boiled onions at noon. The only sleeping quarters were such that the party was devoured by lice.

The four Jews mentioned above, as well as others who have been interviewed from time to time, made the most urgent plea that the Allies, and especially the United States of America, should provide organized aid which will make it possible for even poor Jews to escape from Greece. They referred particularly to those who have registered, as they believe that all Jews remaining in Greece, whom the Germans can find, only await the fate that befell the Jews of Salonica in March 1943.

To give effective aid it would be necessary first to organize a service to evacuate the Jews to Euboea or to include Jews in one of the present Allied services which have worked out a very efficient system. Second, it would be necessary to provide facilities to bring them by boat from Euboea to a point on the Turkish coast near Izmir. Permits for Jews to travel from Izmir to Palestine are now arranged by the British and Greek services in Izmir but, for the destitute Jews, it would be necessary in addition to furnish funds for their living expenses both while waiting in Euboea and en route to Palestine and for their transportation expenses. It is understood that boats in both the British - Greek and American services have recently brought Jews from Euboea to Turkey but, according to the refugees, Jews are transported only if there happen to be vacant places. It would appear, therefore, that although a change of policy would facilitate the escape of Jews, the question can be solved only by an expansion of the existing services for the specific purpose of rescuing them.

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It is believed that the rescue of Jews from Greece falls within the scope of the work of the War Refugee Board appointed by the President and it is urged that the above be called to its attention. It is also suggested that Despatch No. 2628 (R-2445) of March 11 on the subject "Movement of Refugees from Greece through Izmir" would furnish the Board convincing evidence of the feasibility of the plan briefly outlined above. The inadequacy of the German control of the coast and the sea, as well as the benevolent attitude toward the Jews on the part of the Greek people and of EAM, the most powerful resistance group, make the task of rescuing Jews simply a question of organization and financial support.

Respectfully yours,

Burton Y. Berry  
American Consul General

File No. 820.02

MCD: HWD:vis

Enclosure: No. 1

To Department in Original and Hectograph.

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Enclosure No. 1 to Despatch  
No. 2680 (R - 2492) dated  
March 18, 1944, from the  
American Consulate General,  
Istanbul, Turkey.

Fate of the Labor Battalions of Jews Sent  
From Salonica in 1942 and 1943  
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References in previous despatches to labor battalions of Jews are as follows: Despatch No. 966 (R - 885), July 21, 1943, in which the statement is made that there was no news of 1,500 Jews who had been sent to Larissa to work on roads and mines; Despatch No. 1085 (R - 992), August 7, 1943, which states that beginning with July 1942 groups were sent away almost daily by the Occupation Authorities to forced labor in Macedonia; Despatch No. 1746 (R - 1618), November 11, 1943, which contains the following report of the Istanbul representative of a Jewish organization, "Jews of Salonica mobilized in groups for forced labor, beginning from July 1942 up to the time of the mass deportations in the spring of 1943, are still in Greece".

When questioned upon this subject, Mr. Nahmias who was in Salonica at the time the first labor battalions were called up and who served on the committee that later arranged for their return, gave the following information: Until July 1942, the Jews of Salonica were not molested by the Germans. German officers lived in Jewish homes and their relations with Jewish families were pleasant. In July a committee of Germans arrived in Salonica to register all men between 18 and 45. The announcement was made that anyone failing to register would suffer the death penalty and there was, therefore, a full attendance upon the day specified. The registration took place in a public square where conditions were made as painful for the Jews as German ingenuity could devise and where Germans resorted to torture upon the slightest pretext. Following the registration, 10,000 men were sent to labor camps. The food provided by the Germans was very inadequate in quantity and inexcusably bad in quality. At the end of the first week several Jews had died. When the families of the laborers tried to send food, the Germans refused permission. As more and more deaths were reported during succeeding weeks, a committee of Jews visited the German authorities in Salonica and obtained permission to send food.

In late September or early October 1942, the Germans advised the above-mentioned Jewish committee that the labor battalions would be permitted to return if a sum sufficient to pay the wages of men to replace them was furnished by the committee. The amount demanded was 3 billion Drachmas. The committee asked to be allowed to consider the proposal and it was found that the community could pay only 2 billion. When this reply was given the Germans, they agreed to accept the sum of 2 billion Drachmas if the Jews would cede their cemetery to the Occupation Authorities. The committee refused to do this and the Germans finally agreed to allow the laborers to return upon the receipt of 2 billion Drachmas. Almost immediately following this agreement, the Germans destroyed the Jewish cemetery in the night. The havoc which they wrought there was so great that the cemetery was hardly recognizable and none could find the bones of his dead.

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The members of the labor battalions who had survived up to that time came back on October 15. Of the 10,000 who had been sent out, only 6,500 returned. They were in a pitiable condition and 500 died in Salonica during the ensuing months, although given every care.

When the S.S. troops who arrived in Salonica in February 1943 deported the entire Jewish population of Greek citizenship, the men who had been in the labor battalions the previous autumn were again sent to work camps. Those who survived the second period of forced labor were later sent to Poland. No members of the labor battalions are now left in Greece.

The Germans whose special mission was to deport the Jews of Salonica were members of the Viennese Commission 104 of the Security Service. The most active members were Captains Brunner and Wincislek and Sergeants Slawik and Geibing.

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