



NEVER
FORGET

YOUR
NAME

The Children of Auschwitz

ALWIN MEYER

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NEVER FORGET YOUR NAME

The Children of Auschwitz

Alwin Meyer

Translated by Nick Somers

polity

Copyright Page

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Janek (Jack) Mandelbaum, without whose generosity the English translation would not have been possible. Having survived five Nazi concentration camps and the murder of his parents, sister and brother during the Holocaust, he has spent the last seventy-five years educating people about this dark period of history. His contribution to the publication of this book is part of that noble effort.

Preface

Children in Auschwitz: the darkest spot on an ocean of suffering, criminality and death with a thousand faces – humiliation; contempt; harassment; persecution; fanatical racism; transports; lice; rats; diseases; epidemics; beatings; Mengele; experiments; smoking crematorium chimneys; abominable stench; starvation; selections; brutal separation from mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles and friends; gas ...

In 1940, a first camp by the name of Auschwitz, later to be known as the Main Camp or Auschwitz I, was erected by the Nazis on the outskirts of the Polish town of Oświęcim (65 kilometres west of Kraków). The first transport of Polish inmates arrived from German-occupied Poland in mid-1940. In 1941, the Nazis planned and built the killing centre (extermination camp) Auschwitz-Birkenau, also known as Auschwitz II, on the site of the destroyed village of Brzezinka.

From March 1942, Jewish children and their families were transported to Auschwitz from almost all German-occupied countries, for the sole reason that they were Jews. There were already a large number of Jewish boys and girls in the first transports to Auschwitz from Slovakia. Well over 200,000 children were to follow, and almost all of them were murdered.

The Auschwitz complex consisted of forty-eight concentration and extermination camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau has become the unmatched symbol of contempt for humanity, and a unique synonym for the mass murder of European Jewry. It was the site of the largest killing centre conceived, built and operated by the Germans, and played

a central role in the Nazi 'Final Solution',¹ the systematic extermination of Europe's Jewish inhabitants.

By far the largest group of children deported to Auschwitz were thus Jewish girls and boys (see also [pages xi](#) and [xii](#)). Most of them were transported with their families in packed, closed and sealed freight cars, mercilessly exposed to the summer heat and freezing winters. They had to relieve themselves in buckets that were soon full. Because the wagons were so packed, many couldn't even reach the buckets in time and the floors were swimming in urine and excrement. The stench was overwhelming. In many cases, the deportees had little or nothing to eat or drink. Although especially the small children begged constantly for water, their entreaties went unheard. Many - particularly infants, young children and elderly persons - died during the journeys, which often lasted for days.

The Jews were deliberately kept in the dark about the real intentions of the Nazis. Before the deportations, they were told that they were being resettled in labour camps in the East, where they could start a new life.

The opposite was true. The Jewish children, women and men were destined to be murdered. They were 'welcomed at the ramp in Auschwitz with the bellowed order: "Everyone out! Leave your luggage where it is!"' The few people who were initially kept alive never again saw the possessions they had been allowed to bring with them.

Selections began sporadically from April 1942, and then regularly from July of that year. They were carried out on the railway ramp, usually by SS doctors but also by pharmacists, medical orderlies and dentists. Young, healthy and strong women and men whom they considered 'fit for work' were temporarily allowed to live and were separated from the old and invalid, pregnant women and children. Germans randomly classed around 80 per cent of the Jews -

often also entire transports - as 'unfit for work', particularly during the deportations to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing centre of 438,000 Hungarian Jewish children, women and men from May 1944. These people were marched under guard or transported in trucks by the SS to one of the crematoria, where they were ordered to undress. Under the pretext that they were to be showered, the SS herded them into the gas chambers disguised to look like showers. The poisonous gas Zyklon B was then introduced, and those inside suffered an agonizing death by suffocation. It took 10 to 20 minutes for them all to die.

Small children in Auschwitz were almost all killed on arrival. If a mother was carrying her child during the initial selection, they were both gassed, however healthy and 'fit for work' the young mother might be. This was irrelevant. Pregnant woman also suffered a terrible fate in Auschwitz. They were 'automatically' killed by phenol injection, gassed or beaten to death. This applied initially to Jewish and non-Jewish women alike. Pregnant women from other concentration camps were also transferred to Auschwitz exclusively to be gassed.

A stay of execution was granted only to those condemned to heavy physical slave labour inside and outside the camp. These men and women were physically and psychologically exploited in road building, agriculture or industrial and armaments factories, in which inmates from the satellite camps in particular were forced into slave labour.

Sometimes children aged between 13 and 15 were also 'selected for work' and allowed to live, usually only for a short time. For example, a large group of children and juveniles were assigned to the 'Rollwagen-Kommando', where they pulled heavy carts in place of horses, transporting blankets, wood or the ashes of incinerated children, women and men from the crematoria. They were

highly mobile and had plenty of opportunity to see the atrocities taking place in the camp.

Some sets of twins up to the age of 16 were also kept alive for a time. SS doctor Mengele exploited and misused both Jewish and Sinti and Roma twins for pseudo-medical experiments. They were selected, measured, X-rayed, infected with viruses or had their eyes cauterized, and then killed, dissected and burned.

Throughout the five years of its existence - from the first to the last - however, the main purpose and primary aim of the killing centre was extermination. All other aims by the Nazis - such as exploitation of the children, women and men as slave labourers, or the criminal, so-called 'medical', experiments by SS doctors - were of secondary importance.

The children and juveniles transferred temporarily to the camp soon became acquainted with the reality of Auschwitz. They didn't know whether they would still be alive from one day to the next. No one could foresee how the same situation would be dealt with by the SS the next day, the next hour or the next minute. Any act could mean immediate death. Apart from extermination, nothing in Auschwitz was predictable. The children were permanently confronted with death and knew that they had to be on their guard at all times.

*

- More than 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945. Among them were at least 1.1 million Jews. They came from Hungary, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Romania, the Soviet Union (especially Byelorussia, Ukraine and Russia), Yugoslavia, Italy, Norway, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Latvia, Austria, Germany and elsewhere.²

- The Auschwitz complex consisted of three main units. The Main Camp, Auschwitz I, held up to 20,000 people. The killing centre Birkenau, or Auschwitz II, was the largest unit of the camp complex, containing as many as 90,000 children, women and men. Birkenau was divided into ten sections separated by electrified barbed-wire fences. For example, there was the Women's Camp, the Theresienstadt Family Camp, the Men's Camp and the Gypsy Family Camp, where Sinti and Roma were interned. In Auschwitz III (Monowitz), IG Farbenindustrie AG (headquarters Frankfurt am Main) employed Auschwitz concentration camp inmates as slave labour to make synthetic rubber ('Buna') and fuel. There were also forty-five satellite camps of various sizes, such as Blechhammer, Kattowitz or Rajsko.³
- At least 1 million Jewish babies, children, juveniles, women and men, mostly in Auschwitz-Birkenau, were starved to death, killed by injections into the heart, murdered in criminal pseudo-medical experiments, shot, beaten to death or gassed.⁴
- Between 70,000 and 75,000 non-Jewish Poles, 21,000 Roma and Sinti, 14,000 Soviet prisoners of war and 10-15,000 non-Jewish inmates speaking many languages were murdered in Auschwitz.⁵
- At least 232,000 infants, children and adolescents between the ages of 1 day and 17 years inclusive were deported to Auschwitz, including 216,300 Jews and 11,000 Roma and Sinti; 3,120 were non-Jewish Poles, 1,140 were Byelorussians, Russians and Ukrainians, from other nations.⁶
- On 27 January 1945, only about 750 children and youths aged under 18 years were liberated; only 521

boys and girls aged 14 and under,⁷ including around 60 new-born babies, were still alive, and several of them died shortly afterwards.⁸

*

Very few of the children deported to Auschwitz remained alive. To some extent, the survival of every child was an anomaly unforeseen by the Nazis, a type of resistance to the only fate that Germans had planned for the children – namely, extermination. Very many of the children and juveniles in this book are fully aware that their survival was a matter of pure luck.

In some cases, comradeship and solidarity among the camp inmates helped them to stay alive. For example, some women relate how their pregnancy remained undetected because of the starvation rations in the camp, enabling them to give birth in secret. Once the child was born, it had practically no chance of survival. SS doctors, medical orderlies and their assistants took the mother and child and killed them. Sometimes, however, the mother managed, with the aid of other women inmates, to hide and feed her baby for a while. This was particularly true of the infants born in the last weeks and days before Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated.⁹

Others are convinced that they survived through their belief in God. Otto Klein, who, at the age of 11, was claimed with his twin brother Ferenc by Mengele for pseudo-medical experiments, for example, never dared to doubt in God. ‘That would have been the end. Deep down in my heart, I always remained a Jew. No one and nothing could beat that out of me. Not even Auschwitz.’

For the few children who were liberated, the pain is always there: before breakfast, during the day, in the evening, at night. The memory of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers,

the grandparents, girlfriends, boyfriends, aunts and uncles, killed in the camps. For a lifetime and beyond, the pain is ever present, not only in their lives but also in those of their own children and grandchildren.

Even if the number tattooed on the forearm, thigh or buttocks is often the only outward sign that they were in Auschwitz, they bear the traces of suffering on their bodies and in their souls.

The older liberated children of Auschwitz talk about their happy childhoods at home, about school, life in a Jewish community, the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish children, the arrival of the Germans, the growing apprehension, the refugees, the chaos prior to deportation, the end of playing, the transport in cattle wagons, the arrival in Auschwitz, the mortal fear.

The children remember the gnawing hunger; the experiments carried out on them; the cold that pierced to the bone; the constant selections by the SS; the fear that their number would be called out; the longing for their parents, a good meal, an eiderdown, warmth. They were torn between despair and hope. They wanted to see their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters again. They wanted to go home. They wanted their old and happy lives back. They wanted to be able to be children again.

Only a few survived Auschwitz and the other camps where they were interned. The children rescued from the camps were just skin and bone. The people caring for them feared that they would not live. They looked like skeletons, with bite wounds from the dogs, bodies covered in sores, eyes stuck together with pus; for a long time, anything they ate went in one end and straight out the other; they had tuberculosis, pneumonia and encephalitis.

Some had no idea where they were from. Practically all of them were orphans. The smaller children in particular were marked by their life in the camp. They spoke a mixture of languages. For a long time, the girls and boys lived in fear that something – particularly food and clothing – would be snatched away from them. Hiding food was part of their survival strategy. They defended it with their lives, because in the camp even the smallest possession had had inestimable value. Every small piece of bread meant survival for one or two days or more. Even spoiled food was not thrown away. When adults who had not been in the camp suggested this, they would look at them incredulously and think to themselves: ‘You have no idea what life is really like!’

The small children were incapable of playing. When they were presented with playthings, they gave them a cursory glance or threw them away. They didn’t know what they were or what to do with them. These children had first to learn how to play. They were irritable and mistrustful. Dogs, rats and uniforms caused indescribable anxiety. When someone left them, some of the smaller children assumed they were dead. Others couldn’t believe at first that people could die of natural causes.

The children of Auschwitz were free, but how could they live after what they had been through? It took them years of painstaking work to learn to see life from a perspective other than that of the camp. They had to learn to survive the camp emotionally. They had to learn to be young again so as to be able to grow old like others.

As they grew older, those children of Auschwitz were increasingly motivated to find out where they came from. In searching for their parents, the number tattooed on their arm often helped, because their numbers were tattooed at the same time – first the mother, then the daughter with

serial numbers from the Women's Camp; or the father, then the son, from the Men's Camp.

Only a few were reunited, years later, with their parents. They were soon conflicted as to who their real mothers and fathers were. In the experience of the author of this book, the answer was always the adoptive parents. They went back to the place where they had experienced most warmth in their lives. For the biological parents, this was a bitter disappointment, losing a son or a daughter for a second time. The others never stopped asking whether their families had been killed in the gas chambers, or had perhaps survived somewhere. They continued to look for their parents, siblings, grandparents and friends - at least in their dreams.

Those who survived Auschwitz as children or juveniles continued to wonder whether their families had really died in the gas chambers. They would come across newspaper articles reporting on the return of people thought dead. Hope made it possible for them to continue living. It was just a dream that they would wake from. Then everything would be fine again. But no one came back.

The survivors' children and grandchildren can sense how their parents and grandparents suffer. They often know much more than their parents and grandparents think - despite their having done everything possible to protect them from the consequences of Auschwitz.

The children of Auschwitz had to show supreme resolve to make their way in the world. They sought and found new lives, went to school, studied, married, had children, pursued careers and created new homes. But as they got older and no longer had to concern themselves as much with their own families, the memories of Auschwitz returned with a vengeance. Every day, every hour, the pain is there: the memory of their mothers, fathers, brothers

and sisters, all murdered. Many can still remember them quite clearly. How they would love to hear their voices again. How they would love once again to speak to their parents and siblings, or to hug them.

The ancestors and descendants of the children of Auschwitz who tell their stories in this book lived and live among us in Będzin, Békéscsaba, Berlin, Bilky, Budapest, Csepel, Czaniec, Davos, Delvin, Dimona, El Paso, Esslingen, Frankfurt am Main, Gdynia, Geneva, Givat Haviva, Haifa, Hajdúböszörmény, Hartford, Herzliya, Hronov, Jerusalem, Kansas City, Kaunas, Konstanz, Kraków, Kutná Hora, London, Los Angeles, Lubin, Miskolc, Montreal, Mukachevo, Naples, New York, Odolice, Orsha, Oslo, Ostrava, Paris, Prague, Providence, Sárospatak, Thessaloniki, Topol'čany, Toronto, Turany nad Ondavou, Vel'ký Meder, Vienna, Vilnius, Vitebsk, Warsaw, Yad Hanna, Yalta, Yenakieve, Zabrze, Zurich.

When the persecutions by Nazi Germany began throughout Europe, the children of Auschwitz featured in this book were babies, toddlers and children up to 14 years old. When they were forced to work as slaves or were interned for the first time in ghettos or camps, they were all children. When they were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, four were juveniles, none of the others older than 15. Four of the children were born in Auschwitz.

The children of Auschwitz interviewed for this book are among the very last survivors. Herbert Adler, Yehuda Bacon, Halina Birenbaum, Robert Büchler, Gábor Hirsch, Lydia Holznerová, Krzysztof J., Otto Klein, Kola Klimczyk, Josif Konvoj, Eduard Kornfeld, Heinz Salvator Kounio, Géza Kozma, Ewa Krcz-Siezka, Vera Kriegel, Dagmar Lieblová, Dasha Lewin, Channa Loewenstein, Israel Loewenstein, Mirjam M., Jack Mandelbaum, Angela Orosz-Richt, Lidia Rydzikowska, Olga Solomon, Jiří Steiner, William Wermuth,

Barbara Wesółowska and other children of Auschwitz were willing to tell the story of their survival, and life afterwards.

The life stories of the children of Auschwitz are based above all on numerous lengthy interviews with them, their families and friends. This book could never have been written without the willingness of the children of Auschwitz to provide information, without their hospitality, their openness and their trust. It is their book first and foremost. It contains the life stories of people who know more than others what life means.

Notes

Apart from the interviews above, there were numerous other unrecorded interviews with the children of Auschwitz and their families. All interviewees also made records, letters, documents and photos available. The interviews and personal documents and correspondence (letters, emails and telephone calls) are not generally mentioned specifically in the notes. The following sources were also used.

(All translations are by Nick Somers, unless otherwise marked.)

1 See, in particular, Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago 1961), and Götz Aly, *'Endlösung' - Völkerverschiebung und Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main 2017).

2 Franciszek Piper, 'Mass Murder', in Waclaw Długoborski and Franciszek Piper, eds., *Auschwitz 1940-1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, vols. I-V, trans. from Polish by William Brand (Oświęcim 2000), vol. III, pp. 11-52, 205-31; Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum (Teresa Świebocka, Jadwiga Pinderska-Lech

and Jarko Mensfelt), *Auschwitz-Birkenau: The Past and the Present* (Oświęcim 2016), pp. 6–12.

- 3 Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, *Auschwitz-Birkenau*.
- 4 Piper, 'Mass Murder'; moreover, from the first day of occupation onwards, Jews were ruthlessly murdered in the countries invaded by Nazi Germany, by German 'Einsatzgruppen' and 'Einsatzkommandos' (mobile killing units), but also by Wehrmacht units. According to the United States Holocaust Museum, 1.3 million Jews were shot by Wehrmacht and SS units or killed in gas trucks on the territory of the former Soviet Union alone: United States Holocaust Museum, Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution | The Holocaust Encyclopedia (ushmm.org).
- 5 Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, p. 12 (prepared by Piper).
- 6 Helena Kubica, *Geraubte Kindheit - In Auschwitz befreite Kinder* [Stolen Childhood: Children Liberated in Auschwitz] (Oświęcim, October 2021), pp. 7, 59. Altogether, 400,000 babies, children and women were registered in Auschwitz, including over 23,500 children and juveniles, almost all of whom were murdered.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 33, 64.
- 8 Helena Kubica, *Pregnant Women and Children in Auschwitz* (Oświęcim 2010), p. 13; see also George M. Weisz and Konrad Kwiet, 'Managing Pregnancy in Nazi Concentration Camps: The Role of Two Jewish Doctors', in *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* (Israel), 9.3 (July 2018).

9 Alwin Meyer, *Mama, ich höre dich - Mütter, Kinder und Geburten in Auschwitz* (Göttingen 2021), pp. 104-62.

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Life Before

Heinz Salvator Kounio enjoyed his life as a young boy. He loved his parents, his sister Erika, who was a year older than him, and his grandparents. Of course, there were things he didn't like so much: the disputes with boys in the neighbourhood or with classmates in the school yard. But in retrospect they were trivial.

Thessaloniki - also known as Saloniki, Salonika (Judeo-Spanish), Selanik (Turkish) or Solun (Bulgarian/Macedonian/Serbian) - the second-largest city in Greece, where he lived, fascinated him and promised a good life for a Jewish boy. Until he was 11.¹

At the age of just 24, his father Salvator Kounio had opened a small photo supply shop. That was in 1924. He sold photographic paper and cameras to the many street photographers in Thessaloniki. He obtained his goods from Germany. At the same time, he and his brother exported sheepskins in the opposite direction. He bought them untreated from the farmers in and around Thessaloniki. The skins were then dried and transported by road or sea to Germany. Heinz's father and brother were very hardworking and were soon well respected far and wide, not only in Thessaloniki but also in Germany. Their customer base grew rapidly.

Every year Heinz's father visited the photography fair in Leipzig, which was part of the Leipzig industrial fair. There he found out about new products and placed orders for photographic paper, cameras and accessories for the whole year. On one of his business trips, he met the 'self-assured, obstinate and intelligent' Helene Löwy (known as Hella). The 18-year-old was a fifth-semester medical student in

Leipzig. The two fell in love at first sight. They wanted to get married. Hella was determined to abandon her studies to go with Salvator Kounio to Greece.

The young woman's parents lived in Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary) in multi-ethnic Czechoslovakia. Her father, Ernst Löwy, was a well-known architect and engineer; her mother Theresa, 'a beautiful and educated Viennese woman'.

The Jewish inhabitants of Karlsbad have a turbulent history. For around 350 years, they were not allowed to reside permanently there. Only during the spa season from 1 May to 30 September were Jews permitted to stay and do business there. Afterwards, they had to leave again.²

Many Jews had moved since the mid sixteenth century to the surrounding villages, from where they could reach Karlsbad on foot to sell their goods. They were thus able to quickly improve their impoverished situation.

A large number of Jews living and working in Karlsbad during the spa season came from Lichtenstadt (Hroznětín). *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Böhmens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* [The Jews and Jewish Communities of Bohemia in the Past and Present] by Hugo Gold, editor-in-chief of the Brno magazine *Jüdische Volksstimme*, and published in Brno and Prague in 1934, says of this period:

We do not know whether individual Jews lived in those cities before 1568. But after that time a larger Jewish community was gradually established ... in the town of Lichtenstadt, just two hours' walk from Karlsbad. It has an ancient Jewish cemetery and an old synagogue. According to legend it is 1,000 years old, which is naturally a great exaggeration. But it is nevertheless a few centuries old, as the oldest gravestones reveal.³

Over the centuries, the Jews living in the villages near Karlsbad attempted in vain to be allowed to reside

permanently in the spa town. Their efforts were not to come to fruition until the mid nineteenth century: a Jewish cemetery was laid out in 1868, and the Great Synagogue was officially dedicated on 4 September 1877.

The Jewish community of Karlsbad grew rapidly: in 1910, there were around 1,600 Jews living there, and by 1931 their number had grown to 2,650, representing 11 per cent of the total population.⁴

Back to the year 1924 and Salvator Kounio and Hella Löwy's desire to get married: 'Neither family', says Heinz Kounio, 'was keen on the marriage plans.' The Löwys asked: 'Where do you intend to go? Saloniki? To the south? You will be a long way from the vibrant cultural life!' And the Kounios said of the north: 'Where does she come from? Karlsbad? The people there have no culture!'

The young couple finally had their way and got married in Karlsbad in 1925. Beforehand, with the help of his parents, Salvator Kounio had had a nice two-storey house built for himself and his young wife right by the sea in Thessaloniki. 'She should be made to feel at home' in this part of Europe, which was completely foreign to her.

In fact, Hella Kounio's new home could look back on an old and vibrant Jewish culture dating back more than twenty centuries. It is thought that the first Jewish families settled in Thessaloniki around 140 bce. The community received a decisive boost from 1492 onwards with the arrival of 15,000 to 20,000 Jews who had been expelled first from Spain, where Jews had lived for more than 2,100 years,⁵ then a year later from Sicily and Italy, which was ruled by the Spaniards, and then in 1497 from Portugal. At the time, Thessaloniki was part of the Ottoman Empire, which welcomed the Jews with open arms and also guaranteed them freedom of religion.⁶

The situation remained unchanged for centuries afterwards. The *Baseler Nachrichten* reported in 1903: 'The Jews, who manage their affairs independently and in complete freedom, are staunch supporters of the Turkish government. They know that no other power offers the same freedom as they now enjoy under the sign of the crescent.'⁷

Among the Jewish refugees from 1492 were important and knowledgeable academics, writers, artisans, merchants and Talmudists - students and experts in the Talmud, the primary source of Jewish religious law.

This massive new impetus brought about a radical change in Thessaloniki. The Jewish refugees introduced novel methods of working. Many artisanal businesses were established - silk mills, goldsmiths' studios, tanneries and, above all, weaving mills, where a large number of new immigrants found work. The conveniently located port became a hub for trade with the Balkans and a centre of European Jewish scholarship.⁸

Thessaloniki held a great fascination for students from all over the world. The Talmud Torah school founded in 1520 was both a cultural centre supported by the Jewish community and a school of higher education for trainee rabbis.⁹ It was to produce celebrated doctors, writers and rabbis.¹⁰

Over the centuries, other schools and institutes, such as a trade school, boys' school, girls' school and apprentice training school were established. The Jewish cultural magazine *Ost und West* wrote in January 1907: 'Saloniki has a well-established apprenticeship system. There is none of the frequently insurmountable difficulty found elsewhere in finding a decent master for the young trainees. Most of the master craftsmen in Saloniki are Jews.'¹¹

This development, the spread of modern teaching and training establishments in Thessaloniki, was mainly due to the Alliance israélite universelle, founded by French Jews in Paris in 1860. In Thessaloniki by 1914, around 10,000 students had graduated from the Alliance's educational institutions.¹²

Many synagogues existed for centuries in the city. Their names give an indication of the places where the inhabitants had arrived from: Aragon, Kalabrya, Katalan, Kastilia, Lisbon, Majorca, Puglia, Sicilia,¹³ to cite just a few. During the heyday of Judaism, there were around forty synagogues and prayer houses in Thessaloniki.¹⁴

'Of all the synagogues that of "Aragon" seemed the most picturesque. It is large, and the Alememar [bimah or raised area in the centre of the synagogue where the Torah is read] is a lofty dais at the extreme west end, gallery high. The Ark is also highly placed, and many elders sit on either side on a somewhat lower platform.'¹⁵

These lines were written in the late nineteenth century by Elkan Nathan Adler, son of the chief rabbi of England, who called himself a 'travelling scholar' and visited Jews in many countries between 1888 and 1914.¹⁶

"'Italia" was more striking', wrote Adler, who visited Thessaloniki in autumn 1898, 'for the synagogue is but half-built, the floor not yet bricked in, and the galleries of rough lathes, and yet the women climbed up the giddy steps of the scaffolding, and the hall was full of worshippers.' In practically all of the synagogues in the city there was a two-hour break between *musaf* (midday prayer) and *mincha* (afternoon prayer), when some worshippers took a siesta. Many went to the coffeehouses, full of people, who neither smoked nor drank. During the services, the streets were deserted.¹⁷

The journalist Esriel Carlebach, born in Leipzig and later living in Israel, who visited Jewish communities in Europe and beyond, wrote in the early 1930s, about Thessaloniki, that booksellers there offered collections of prayers everywhere for the holidays. But each one recommended a different version. 'Saloniki had thirty-three synagogues with thirty-three different rites, and a member of a Castilian family would never dare to call to God with Andalusian poems and songs.'¹⁸

The Jewish inhabitants formed separate synagogue communities based on their places of origin. They were extensively autonomous and even had their own (limited) jurisdiction. They also administered the districts they lived in, with delegates elected to represent the communities, who met regularly, consulted and adopted decisions on affairs concerning them.¹⁹ And the first Jewish printing works was established as early as 1506. Hundreds of publications appeared, and Thessaloniki became 'the centre of printing in the Near East'.²⁰ The first Jewish newspaper - also the first newspaper in the city - *El Lunar*, was launched in 1865. It was followed by *La Época*²¹ in 1875, and *El Avenir*²² in 1897. Between 1865 and 1925, seventy-three newspapers were published in Thessaloniki, thirty-five in Judeo-Spanish, twenty-five in Turkish, eight in Greek and five in French.²³

Thessaloniki became the 'Jerusalem of the Balkans', the 'Mother of Israel' or the 'Mother of Jerusalem', as the poet Samuel Usque - who was born in Portugal, fled to Italy and later lived in Safed, Palestine - described the city during a visit in the mid sixteenth century:²⁴

Saloniki is a devout city. The Jews from Europe and other areas where they are persecuted and expelled find shelter in the shade of this city and are as warmly welcomed by it as if it were our venerable mother Jerusalem itself. The surrounding countryside is irrigated by many rivers. Its vegetation is lush and nowhere are there more beautiful trees. Their fruit is excellent.²⁵

According to official Turkish sources, in 1519 over 50 per cent of the population of Thessaloniki were Jews: 15,715 children, women and men, compared with 6,870 Muslims and 6,635 Christians. The situation had barely changed by the end of the nineteenth century, when there were over 70,000 Jews in the city – again, half of the population.²⁶

Thessaloniki's privileged position in international trade gradually declined as a result of the transformation of the world economy. The burgeoning transatlantic economy, particularly the rise of the Netherlands and England, shifted the traditional balance.²⁷ It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the revival of trade relations with the Mediterranean ports of western Europe helped the city to flourish again.²⁸

At this time, Jews were present in all professions. There were 40 Jewish chemists, 30 lawyers, 45 doctors and dentists, 150 fishermen, 500 waggoneers and carters, 220 self-employed artisans, 100 domestics, 3 engineers, 10 journalists, 2,000 waiters, 8,000 retailers and wholesalers, 60 colliers, 2,000 porters, 300 teachers, 250 butchers, 600 boatmen and 50 carpenters. There were also several Jewish businesses: a brewery, nine flour mills, twelve soap factories, thirty weaving mills and a brickworks.²⁹

At the end of October 1912, during the First Balkan War waged by Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia against