

Remembering and Naming the Greek-Jewish War Heroes of World War II
Exclusive for the National Herald for Oxi day, 2009 by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

On October 28, 1940, when Mussolini issued an ultimatum to the Greek people, announcing that he was planning to invade Greece across the border of Albania, and Metaxas answered back with a resounding 'Oxi', there were 76, 000 Jews living on the soil of Greece, 1% of the total Greek population of 7 ½ million. By October of 1944, four years later—only 10, 000 Greek Jews would remain; 87% would perish in Nazi concentration camps. In October of 1940 there was anger and indignation mingled with patriotism and pride, feelings Jews shared with their Greek Orthodox Christian neighbors. In the autumn and early winter of 1940, there was also hope bolstered by successes in battle. The country was proud. Justifiably so. The fervent patriotism of Greek Jews was augmented by news of what Hitler planned for all the Jews of Europe, and reports from Rhodes, then under the Italians, of the implementation of "Racist Laws" restricting Jewish rights. When war was declared on October 28, 1940, 13,000 Greek-Jewish men would sign up to defend their country on the Albanian Front; 3,500 would return severely injured, many amputees due to injuries and frostbite, and 513 would give their lives for their country, Greece.

Through the winter of 1940-1941, Greece put forth the staunchest resistance to date against the Fascists. Greatly outnumbered by the Italians, without the modern weaponry of the aggressors, Greece stood strong, holding the Italians at bay. Many young men fought heroically, some paying the ultimate price, giving their lives for their country. Among them, were Greek Jews. Some would achieve fame. Most would serve in anonymity. While it is important to remember those who became heroes, sometimes it is more important to acknowledge those whose names are remembered by few.



Mordechai Frizis



Moses Nachmias

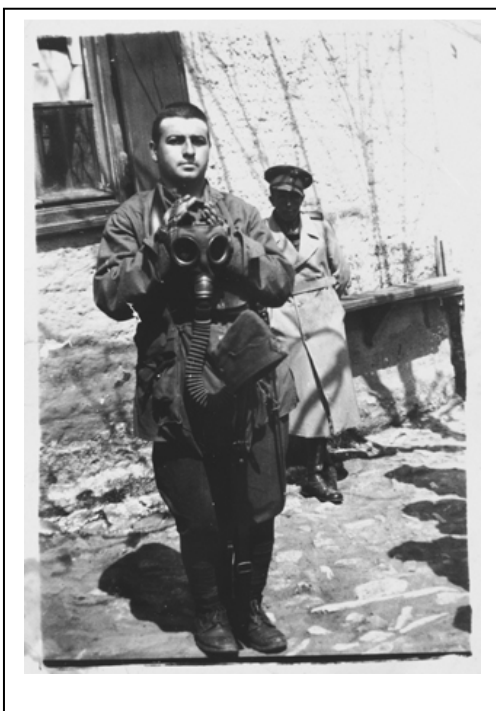
Many are familiar with the valiant heroism of Colonel Mordechai Frizis, one of the first high-ranking officers to die in battle. On December 7, 1940, then forty-seven years old and the father of three, Frizis would die in the snows of Albanian, leading his men on to battle, mounted on his horse, an easy target for the Italian fighter planes above. His name is engraved in the annals of Greek heroes, statues and plaques erected afterwards throughout the country, including an equestrian statue recently planned for unveiling in Chalkis, the city of his birth. His heroism inspired many and he would become a national hero, honored after death, by the country he loved. In 2002, Mordechai Frizis' remains were returned from Albania to Greek soil and reinterred in the Jewish cemetery of Thessaloniki with full military honors. The Colonel is remembered as a Greek National War Hero but, others, less famous, would die in relative obscurity, only mourned by their immediate families and the communities in Greece to which they belonged.

In this short article, I want to take the opportunity on this National Day of Remembrance in Greece, to remember a few whom will, in all likelihood, never be mentioned anywhere else. They died as Greeks. Their religion was Jewish. As Museum Director of a museum located in a synagogue founded by Greek Jews (Kehila Kedosha Janina), I want to, as we say "bring it home." I want to put flesh on the bones of those who gave their lives for their country over sixty-eight years ago. I want the names of these unheralded war dead to be known.

From the small city of Ioannina, close to the Albanian border where so much of the fighting took place in the winter of 1940-1941, six young Jewish men would die in battle in the snows of the Pindos Mountain Range, not far from their beloved city. All came from simple, hard-working families, sons joining their fathers in small shops, or selling their fabrics, buttons and sundries to nearby villages in Epirus. Many would be working to provide the dowries needed to marry off their sisters, some hoping to acquire capital to take a bride of their own. When war was declared, all, without hesitancy would volunteer to fight for their country. Joseph Raphael would be the first casualty from Ioannina, twenty-six years old. He sold vegetables with his father Andzelos. Joseph would die on November 5, 1940, only a week into the war. Tragedy came early to the small Jewish community of Ioannina. Twenty-one days later, Ioannina would lose another son. Moses Shemos was twenty-four when he died on November 26, 1940. His mother was a widow. Her other sons had gone to Athens to make a living. Moses was her sole support. The toll would continue and, on January 11, 1941, the small Jewish community of Ioannina, then numbering 2000, would be one less. Shemos Attas was thirty-one when he died of his injuries on the Albanian front. He was the middle son of Ilias and, along with his brothers, Nissim and David, helped his father in his small textile shop. In February, another Yanniote would be lost. David Negrin was twenty-eight when he died on February 14, 1941. He and his family were dairymen. The son of the butcher Pitsirilo, Jeuda, was twenty-five when he fell in battle and the remains of Ouriel Negrin, son of Solomon the merchant, have never been found. He has been listed as missing in action since November of 1940.

One of the saddest stories of all is that of Nissim Attas, severely injured at the age of twenty-four. He would return to Ioannina as an amputee. Along with his widowed mother Anneta, his older brother Joseph, Joseph's wife Esther, and his younger brother Moises, he would be deported to Auschwitz Birkenau and perish in the gas chambers. The injuries he incurred fighting for his country would make him fodder for the crematoria. The Germans considered him incapable of working, the primary criterion for surviving the selection at the train depot on arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. His fate would be shared by other Jewish veterans of the Albanian Front, the mounds of prostheses at the museum at Auschwitz testimony to their unfortunate demise.

On October 28, 1940, Thessaloniki was home to the largest Jewish community in Greece and the most populous city of Sephardic Jews in the world. When Metaxas responded to Mussolini's ultimatum with a resounding "oxi" so many Jewish men from Thessaloniki would register to defend their country that one battalion was called "The Cohen Battalion." Salonikan Jews would serve in all ranks and capacities, some as interpreters (many had studied Italian in Salonika). Some, like Moise Bourlas, worked building bridges to enable to movement of troops. In his nineties, Moses still regales visitors at the Saul Modiano Senior Home in Thessaloniki with stories of his experiences. Isadore Levi, born in Thessaloniki to a prosperous merchant family, manufacturers of hats and shirts, volunteered to fight on the Albanian Front. In November of 1940, he sent his family a photo of himself holding his gas mask. Shortly after receiving the photo, the Levi family would learn that their son had died in battle. Isadore was nineteen. A friend of the Levi family, Salomon Salltiel, was taken prison by the Italians and, ironically, survived the Occupation of Greece and the deportation of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, including his own family, in an Italian POW camp. His family would be among the 50,000 Salonikan Jews who became victims of the Holocaust. On return, he would marry Dora Levi, Isadore's sister.



Isadore Levi



Cohen Battalion

Serving in the Greek Army on the Albanian front often gave young Jewish men skills they had not imagined before, skills that would often provide resources under the German Occupation. Many former soldiers would use these skills to fight for the Resistance after the invasion of Greece. Such would be the case for Moise Bourlas of Thessaloniki, and Samuel Cohen of Ioannina. Sometimes, unfortunately, these same skills would prove the demise of young Jewish men. Moise Errera had fought bravely on the Albanian Front. He was not going to live as a prisoner in his own city. He was caught by the Germans attempting to escape Thessaloniki and was publically executed, his body left hanging as an example to others who might try the same. Alberto Errera would use his skills as a Greek Army officer to help organize the Revolt of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Alberto, also, had the distinction of being the only Greek to attempt escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was found and brutally executed.

Greek-Jewish women would, also, contribute to the war effort. They worked as nurses for the Greek Red Cross, treating the injured as they returned from battle. Along with other women throughout Greece, they aided the war effort by knitting the warm woolen socks so necessary in the harsh snow-covered mountains on the border of Albania. Anna Cohen Angel worked as a nurse in the Military Hospital in Volos, along with many other Greek Jewish nurses.

**Anna Angel
Cohen-Volos**



Back in the United States, news of the war with Italy would make the front page of the New York Times on Oct. 29, 1940, but little mention would appear in the Jewish presses, most unknowledgeable about the ancient Jewish presence in Greece and the impending threat to Jews residing in the country. An interesting letter was found in the archives of the Jewish Community of Athens, sent by Rabbi Barzalai on October 29th to 'the Jewish Community of Baltimore.' The letter requested aid from fellow Jews in the United States. Because of the ambiguity of the address, we have no way of knowing if it arrived. An answer was never found. Most Jews in the United States were of Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi background, and few knew that there was a Jewish community in Greece. While American Jews registered in large numbers to fight in the US Armed Forces in World War II and, certainly, had knowledge of Hitler's threat to exterminate European Jewry, their fight was against the aggressors (German, Italian and Japanese) who were considered threats to the security of the United States. They fought as Americans, not Jews.

There were a group of Jews in the United States who did have a vested interest in Greece, a very personal vested interest. Their families were still there. They were Sephardic and Romaniote (Greek-speaking) Jews whose families had immigrated to the United States from Salonika (Thessaloniki), Ioannina and other parts of Modern Greece. Many of their family members remained behind. Most would perish in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As they volunteered, or were drafted, to serve in the United States Armed Forces, they hoped that, somehow, they would find themselves in Greece and discover what had happened to their families whom they had not heard from since the invasion of Greece in 1941. Only one, to our knowledge, succeeded. Louie Levy had enlisted in the US Navy in 1941 and, in June of 1945, when his ship landed in Patras, Louie Levy made his way to Ioannina, fulfilling a promise he had made to his mother. It would be Louie who would learn of what had happened to the small Jewish Community of Ioannina and of the 1850 who perished in the camps. He was hosted by Samuel Cohen and other *palikaria* who had returned from the mountains. Ioannina of June 1945 was quite different from Ioannina of October 1940. On October 28, 1940, hope was in the air, patriotism abounded, young Jewish men along with their Christian neighbors were going to push the 'macaroni-eaters' back into the sea. In June of 1945, the reality of what had been lost was apparent. As Louie took photos to bring back to New York, his heart would be heavy with the news he would be forced to tell his mother, but he was also proud of the valiant fight his spiritual patria, Greece, had waged. As we stop to commemorate Oxi Day, we should never forget that Greeks of the Jewish faith were very much a part of the war on the Albanian front. They served proudly. Those who perished did so with honor. They died as Greeks.

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