

Odette Varon-Vassard, *Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs. Histoire mémoire et identité. Nouvelle édition augmentée* (Paris: Editions Le Manuscrit, 2021), pp. 292.

by *Dimitrios Varvaritis*

The history and culture of the Jews of Greece has, in recent years, been the object of continuous and innovative research by a number of scholars based in Greece, Israel and North America. As a direct result of this research a rich and nuanced literature has emerged and Odette Varon-Vassard's collection of nine essays is a very welcome addition to this evolving corpus. The nine essays derive mainly from scholarly presentations, public interventions and book notes made, by the author, over the course of number of decades and revised for the purposes of this book. These essays do not constitute "a complete history" (p. 17) but rather a record of the author's long-term and profound commitment to the field of Greek-Jewish history. It should be also noted that Varon-Vassard was one of the founding members of a pioneering circle of Greek scholars that established the Society for the Study of Greek Jewry in 1990.¹ And so this set of essays reflect the processes of scholarly research on the Jewish history of Greece as well as the author's critical reflections on a variety of themes that emerge from this research. Moreover, they stand in a long tradition of francophone scholarship in Jewish Studies and the related sub-field of Sephardic Studies initiated by scholars such as Moïse Franco, continued in contemporary times by Joseph Nehama and Haim Vidal Sephiha.

The book is structured around the themes of memory and identity and includes, in particular, histories of various Jewish communities of Greece, the history and memory of the Shoah in Greece, genocide testimony as well as literary representations of Jewish identity. It also includes a useful bibliography of works in a number of different languages. That said, the themes of this book are very broad and thus it could have benefited from a preface that was more detailed and wove together these diverse thematic strands.

¹ Odette Varon-Vassard, "La présence juive en Grèce: Histoire et Historiographie," *Bulletin of Judaeo-Greek Studies* 26 (2000): 34-43; 35.

The book's first essay focuses on the "construction and transformations" (p. 21) of Sephardic identity. It isolates two principle ruptures in the history of the Sephardim, namely the expulsion from Spain and the destruction of Salonican Jewry, centuries later, in the Nazi death camps. Furthermore, it focuses on the case of those Jews that settled in the Ottoman lands that in time became Greece, tracing their initial expulsion from Spain, as well as their arrival and subsequent socio-cultural evolution in the Ottoman Empire. The essay concludes by proposing a periodization of this long historical trajectory based on the two above-mentioned ruptures. This essay overlaps thematically with the book's second essay, a study of the specific cultural identity of Salonican Jewry. The second essay builds upon the foundation provided by the first through an exploration of the specific socio-cultural identity of Salonican Jewry. This essay examines the religion and largely ladino culture of the city's Jewry as well as the emergence of a specifically Jewish working class politics through the creation of the Socialist Federation.

From Salonica Varon-Vassard leads the reader to Corfu and to the literary world of Albert Cohen. The francophone novelist and jurist was born in Corfu but lived most of his life in France and Switzerland, returning to Corfu only for his barmitzvah. Through an exploration of the novels *Solal* and *Les Valeureux*, Varon-Vassard invokes the world of pre-holocaust Corfu and the perennial dilemma of Jewish Identity through the character of *Solal*. It should be noted that Varon-Vassard has translated two of Cohen's novels into Greek and this essay demonstrates her profound knowledge of Cohen's oeuvre.²

The next two essays in the collection concern written testimonies of the Shoah and specifically those of the Salonican survivors, Lisa Pinhas and Andreas Sephiha. Pinhas was a survivor of both Auschwitz and of two related death marches. Her testimony provides us not only with invaluable details about life in this specific death camp but it also explicitly seeks,³ from the outset, to document the lives of

² Varon-Vassard's translation of *Solal* was published in 1992 (Athens: Chatzinikolis Publications) and two years later the author's translation of *Mangeclous* (Athens: Heridas Publications) was also published. A second edition of *Solal* was issued by the Athenian publishing house Exantas in 2019 and includes an extensive afterword by Varon-Vassard.

³ The original French text of Pinhas' testimony is included in *Récit de l'enfer. Manuscrit d'une Juive de Salonique deportée* (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2016) while an English translation was published

women of various nationalities in this camp. Varon-Vassard highlights this latter aspect and emphasizes this memoir's significance in the context of testimonies by other women such as Charlotte Delbo, Berry Nahmias and Erika Kounio-Amariglio.

In the case of Sephiha, Varon-Vassard revisits the theme of Jewish identity, and in particular its connection to survival during the Shoah. As a young man Sephiha was able to survive through the intervention of his grandfather and a network of Christian families that sheltered him. However, Sephiha also belonged to the first generation of Salonican Jews that were to a great extent highly assimilated and hellenized, allowing him to pass as a Christian and as a consequence endure and survive the War. Varon-Vassard reflects on this condition, describing it as a kind of "neo-marranism" (p. 118) and furthermore arguing that during the Shoah Sephiha shared, in a similar way, the fate of his coreligionists in medieval Spain who privately practiced Judaism but were publicly Christian.

The next three essays concentrate on the Shoah in Greece, its history, historiography and memory as well as on the participation of Greek Jews in the Resistance. Their common thread is that of the silence, or rather, the silences, surrounding the genocide of Greek Jewry. In particular these essays examine the ways in which (and reasons why) the genocide of Greek Jewry was, according to Varon-Vassard, silenced for a relatively long period (from the 1950s to the 1980s), while also discussing at length how Jewish pasts, narratives, testimonies as well as the actual history of the genocide emerged in the form of a "difficult memory". Varon-Vassard also places emphasis on the particularities and specificities of the Greek case and how they informed and shaped the reception and memory of the Shoah. In this vein, Antisemitism, the impact of the Greek Civil War and the related political turmoil as well as the profound trauma of the post-war Jewish communities are touched on. More importantly, these three essays document the activities and efforts made, in recent years, for the official institutionalization of this memory, as well as the parallel development of scholarly and public history of

in 2014, *A narrative of evil: Lisa Pinhas confronts the Holocaust* (Athens: Jewish Museum of Greece, 2014).

the Shoah. Recent scholarship concerning the memory of the Holocaust in the United States⁴ and other countries⁵ has begun to forcefully question the notion of postwar silence. It would be worthwhile, if a further edition of this work appears, for the author to address and incorporate an assessment of this historiography in relation to Greece.

The final essay concerns the postwar life of the Greek Holocaust survivor Berry Nahmias. Originally published in Greek as an epilogue to a new edition of Nahmias' 1989 memoir, this long piece describes in great detail Nahmias' experiences following her return to Greece after the end of Shoah. Utilizing Nahmias' personal archive, Varon-Vassard poignantly chronicles Nahmias' early postwar marriage, the birth of her children and then the passing of her husband and her work in the area of Holocaust education and remembrance. Nahmias' work in the latter two areas was wide-ranging and consequential. It made her, in short, an emblematic figure not only within the community of Greek survivors of the Shoah but also within Greece more broadly.

This book is an important work on Greek-Jewish and Holocaust history and memory. It provides a crucial opening both for the general reader and for the specialist. It extends and deepens the body of scholarship initiated by Varon-Vassard, and her colleagues, many decades ago and underscores once again the author's commitment to the field of Greek-Jewish studies. This commitment continues with the publication of a recent issue of the Greek scholarly journal *Synchrona Themata* dedicated to the memory of the Shoah.⁶

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⁴ Hasia R. Diner, *We remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust 1945-1962* (New York: New York University Press, 2009)

⁵ David Cesarani, *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London: Routledge, 2012)

⁶ Odette Varon-Vassard, "The Memory of the Shoah – 75 years later", *Synchrona Themata* 150-151-152 (2020-2021): 30-102 [in Greek].

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