

The Jews of Monastir Macedonia

The Life and Times of the
Departed Jewish Community of Bitola



by Shlomo Alboher

Jerusalem, Israel

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INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 1943 all the Jews of Macedonia, all 7,215 of them, were taken from their homes by Bulgarian soldiers, policemen, and clerks to the the Monopol tobacco factory in the city of Skopje, capital of the Republic of Macedonia. They spent the following days on the wooden benches of the factory, ten on a bench, starving, thirsty, and fearful as to their fate. For the five days until their deportation, they were without food, locked in the halls of the factory and guarded by the Bulgarian soldiers. There were three shipments from the the Monopol, 80 Jews in each cattle car of the train, each car sealed and locked on March 22, 25, and 29, all of them with one destination – Treblinka

...

The only Macedonian Jews to survive were several dozen young Jews, who, a short time before the deportation comprehended the likely fate in store for the Jews of Europe and Macedonia. They fled to the mountains and joined the partisan underground fighting against the Bulgarian army. Many of them fell in battle, among them the young Monastir Jewess Estrea Ovadia (Mara, her underground nickname), at the age of 22. Afterwards she was proclaimed a national heroine of Yugoslavia, and in her memory, the Macedonians erected a statue in the field where, until the war, the central synagogue of Monastir, the Aragon Synagogue had stood.

In June 1998, I accompanied several family members in a visit to Macedonia, the land of our heritage. The sights were difficult, even horrifying. The two big synagogues of Monastir, Portugal and Aragon had disappeared.

The Jewish cemetery in Monastir, "Beit Haim" (the Home of the Living), founded in 1497, five years after the expulsion from Spain, was abandoned and in miserable condition. The Bulgarian soldiers had used the gravestones to pave their military camp, the parade grounds, the floors of the barracks, the swimming pool, the walls of the washrooms, sidewalks, etc.

The Macedonian peasant farmers also took part in the destruction. They used the gravestones to pave their yards or to build dining-room tables.

All that was left were smashed pieces of gravestones strewn all over the cemetery. Swastikas and Nazi slogans were drawn on the tent that the Jews of Monastir had put up over the grave of the great Abraham Aroesti, one of the head rabbis of the city. The iron fence around the cemetery and the "Magen David" (Jewish Star) adornments that were built in the 1920's were broken apart, and Macedonian shepherds were herding their sheep among the graves.

A particularly depressing moment occurred in the Skopje cigarette factory, the last stop of the Jews from Macedonia on the death trains to Treblinka. Many of my mother's family, the Calderon family, sat among those that waited on the benches of the tobacco factory, later to be transported to the death camps. There I said Kaddish (the prayer for the dead) and read the names of those that were murdered in the death camps: Alboher, Alkotser, Argaz, Ashkenazi, Baruch, Mevorach, Hasson, Hassid, Meschulam, and Masson, Navon and Nahmias, Florentin and Pardo, Calderon and Konfino, Russo and Rosilio, and many others – the cream of Judaism from Spain and Portugal. Right then and there, as my feelings of shock resonated, I made the important decision to memorialize these Jews from my city.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would like to thank:

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Last, but not least, best wishes to my beloved wife who stood by me and worked hard with me throughout this project.

Shlomo Alboher

PREFACE

About 60 years after the destruction of the Jewish community of Monastir (Bitola) in Treblinka, after the Bulgarians handed the Jews over to the Germans, two researchers, children of those Jews, established this memorial to them.

At the same time, Marc Cohen in the United States and Shlomo Alboher in Israel were involved in this sacred work. Both have degrees in an exploratory academic discipline. The former graduated from the University of Columbia in New York and lives in California, and the latter is a graduate of the Hebrew University and lives in Jerusalem. Cohen's work, written in English, appeared in New York in the year 2003, and now we have Alboher's book, originally written in Hebrew.

Since the destruction of the Monastir community in 1943, various works have been published about Jewish Macedonia by different authors, such as: Alexandar Matkovski, Jamilla Kolonomos, Vera Veskovik-Vangeli, Zvi Loker, Uri Oren, Jennie Lebel, and others.

These authors dedicated most of their writing to the period of the Holocaust and the events preceding it. However, the works of Jennie Lebel and, Professor Max Luria, (who wrote before the Holocaust), on the Spanish language of Jewish Monastir were studies about the history and culture of Jewish Macedonia.

Still, the more recent contributions to the study of this community by Mark Cohen and Shlomo Alboher have played an extremely important role.

Mark Cohen, Last Century of a Sephardic Community - The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943, published New York 2003

Jennie Lebel – Pride & Hope (1947).

Max A. Luria, a Study of the Monastir Dialect of Judeo-Spanish etc., New York 1930

On the one hand, these research studies are detailed and analytical, and rely on archives and varied sources. On the other hand, their conclusions are convincing, concentrating on the Jewish Spanish community in the Balkans somewhat like a microcosm of the Jewish Spanish world, which was destroyed in the Holocaust. It is important to note, that Marc Cohen concentrated on the writing about the last years of the existence of the community, helped mainly by the archives of the Presbyterian Mission in Canada and Scotland that was active among the Balkan Jewish communities in the nineteenth century. Also helpful were the archives of the Alliance that made a special effort towards the modernization of the educational system, and archives of the JOINT in the USA and other places.

Shlomo Alboher covers the Ottoman era, especially the 450 years since the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal and Spain. He also relies, rightly, on the rabbinical literature that is an important reflection of the spiritual and social life of the community for hundreds of years, and for which there is no other literature.

The two researchers showed not only vast knowledge and scientific abilities, but also strong empathy for the communities of their parents. This is especially prominent in two central areas of the life of the community: Zionism and the Holocaust.

For the last 40 years of its existence, the community of Monastir was very Zionist. All the leaders, including the religious and intellectual ones, identified themselves with Zionism. Zionist and cultural events connected to the Land of Israel, Aliyah, and others were marked with a large celebration in the Aragon central synagogue, and in the Zionist cultural hall, the "Rebirth" (of the Jewish People). The youth movements, especially the "Hashomer Hatzair" (the young guard), were prominent.

Moreover, there was absolutely no friction between the religious leaders and the non-religious in their relationship to Zionism. All organizations - the secular Zionist youth movements, the religious establishment, and the volunteer family assistance organizations acted side by side in harmony and cooperation with each other.

The Aliyah of the twenties and thirties flourished and every travel visa that was not used by Yugoslavia to the north was taken advantage of by the Macedonians.

A few years ago, Yosef (Tommy) Lapid told me that many wealthy Jews in the North willingly gave up their certificates for the poorer Jews from the South. Taking advantage of these documents, many of the Jews of Monastir, including Shlomo Alboher and his family, moved to Israel. These families were saved from the Holocaust, unlike their relatives who were not able to escape, and perished in Treblinka.

There is no doubt in my mind that their love for the Land of Israel was founded on the traditional love of the Land that led several individuals to move to Jerusalem in the late 1800's. Many of them settled in the Old City, the Yemin Moshe area, Ohel Moshe, or Mazkeret Moshe.

It was this attachment to the Land that led the Jews of the Balkans to follow the Messianic movements in the 1600's and 1700's, during the period of the false prophet Sabbatai Zevi. The strongest following came from the descendents of the Jews that were expelled from Spain and Portugal and from those who were forced to convert.

Researchers of the Sabbatai Zevi period, Professors Gershom Scholem, Meir Benayahu, Yakov Bernai and others concluded that the Balkan communities were drawn to the Sabbatian movement by Natan Haezrati, who lived in Kastoria, (today in northern Greece,) together with his students Rabbi Israel Hazan and Shmoel DeMaio.

This messianic activity coexisted there in the framework of Jewish culture or religious law. Natan Haezrati paid frequent visits to the communities of Monastir, Skopje and Sofia. In 1680 on his way from Sofia to Kastoria, he became ill, died and was buried in Skopje.

In my opinion, the devotion to Zionism by the Jews of Monastir in the 20th century was a clear continuation of the messianic fervor along with the love of the Land in the generations preceding modern Zionism.

Additional studies on the connection between these phenomena can help, since the metaphysical redemption, as explained by the Kabbalah, and the redemption in the historical frame were bound together according to many researchers.

The Holocaust of Jewish Monastir in March and April 1943 was part of the destruction of Jewish communities in Thrace, Greece, Macedonia, and partially Serbia.

In April 1941, the Germans gave these areas into the full control of Bulgaria.

...

The Bulgarians executed the deportation to Treblinka with the greatest of atrocities, including physical abuse, rape, starvation, thirst, and a confiscation of every material asset of the expelled.

Not one of the 11,343 expelled Jews survived.

At the same time, the Bulgarians began denying the Holocaust, for which they themselves were responsible. They would make assertions as if the Jews belonged to the Germans and they could not prevent the deportation. But it is known that the German army and these areas were under full Bulgarian control and not annexed by the conquering Germans. These areas were part of the "United Bulgaria" of 1943 at the time of the Holocaust.

By creating and spreading the false myth that Bulgaria saved its Jewish populace, when in reality 20 percent were sent to the death camps, Bulgaria has been helped by Jews, including those from Bulgaria, who know the truth and thus are aiding the Bulgarian Holocaust deniers.

To understand this malignant process, which does an injustice to the holy souls of Thrace, Macedonia and others, it is important to see the monuments in the Bulgarian forest, including the statue of war criminal King Boris, who surrendered his Jewish subjects to death.

These monuments were set up with the help of Jewish supporters of Bulgaria in the United States and in Israel. They were taken down according to a decision of the committee of Judge Beisky on July 13, 2000. This committee was founded by the Jewish National Fund after continuous public activity by Jews who were expelled from the communities that were destroyed and by former Bulgarians who were opposed to the outrageous statue of Boris in the Bulgarian forest.

In my opinion, it would be worthwhile investigating the possible connection between the actions of the Bulgarian army against the Jews of Macedonia in the First World War, including the use of poisonous gas bombs that took many Jewish lives in Monastir, and the deportation of Jews to the death camps in the Second World War.

Is it possible that the Bulgarians had a special hatred of the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia because they expressed loyalty to Greece and Serbia, and later Yugoslavia, and did not support the aspirations of the Bulgarians to annex these areas to their country? Is it correct that this was the reason the Bulgarians acted against them when they had the chance during both world wars? Additional research into the archives of the government of Bulgaria can support or disprove this presumption, which is not to be disregarded automatically.

We must remember another aspect of the Holocaust. Several dozen Jews that were under the Bulgarian authority were saved from deportation and from annihilation due to the intervention of the consuls of Italy, Turkey and Spain that acted for the sake of their citizens. Yet, the Spanish government of Franco did not want to protect all the Ladino speakers in the Balkans (including Greece, Thessaloniki, Thrace, the islands Crete, Corfu, Rhodes, northern Greece and Athens, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Romania) or the Spanish communities in Holland and in Western Europe. All these preserved in one way or other their Iberian culture, but the Spanish and Portuguese governments ignored them. Their behavior in the Holocaust and their disregard for the fate of Spanish communities in Europe and in the other places does not grant them any respect.

If they had acted like neutral Sweden, which protected many Jews from Hungary and gave them Swedish identity cards through the efforts of Raoul Wallenberg, Spain and Portugal could have rescued thousands of Spanish Jews.

The exclusive contribution of Shlomo Alboher is included in the chapters that deal with the names of Jews in Monastir. These enlightening chapters shed light on the historical attachment of Monastirli Jews through connections to families, connections to other places and to literary sources. But allow me to relate personally to the surname Ischak, which was very prevalent in Monastir. The surviving family in Israel has changed their names to Yoshah, Yishai, and Ben-Yishai.

Shlomo Alboher found that the source of the name is the Bible name "Yitzhak" (Isaac) as pronounced by the Jews of Monastir. Without disregarding this explanation altogether, allow me to offer an additional explanation. It is very possible that the name "Ischak" is a corruption of the name "Ischer" as the Jews were wont to pronounce the city Hajar in Aragon. A while ago, Professor Haim Binart told me that in his opinion the surname "Alishur" comes from the word combination "Al Ishur", which means "coming from the city of Ashur in Aragon". This leads us to the possibility that the name "Ischak" is also connected to that city. As added proof to this theory, we can add the fact that the name "Ischak" was used only by Jews from the city of Monastir, a city prominent in people from Aragon. Whether this theory or the theory of Shlomo Alboher is correct, it is fitting to bring both possibilities to the reader.

This book by Shlomo Alboher shows not only his scientific dexterity, analytical ability, and empathy with the subject, but also the increased desire to study the heritage of the Jews of Spain. Monastir is worthy of such a great study and is finally receiving it. Alas, this antique community has disappeared in the smoke of the cursed fields of Treblinka. Our solace is in the work of the descendents of the Jews of Monastir, prospering and building in Israel, the United States and Chile, whose preeminent sons also contribute to the research of their past and culture.

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