

HISTORY AND LIFE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF VERIA



Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece

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An ancient scroll found in the Veria Synagogue

The text that follows was published in *Kathimerini* newspaper on 13 May 1951, under the column *Notes of an Athenian*. In a letter published three days later, on 16 May 1951, a reader, signing under the name *Ihnilatis*, (probably the late Asher Moissis) wrote that the scroll is the Torah of the Synagogue in question. [Information from Mr Moses K. Constantinis archives.]

What Mr Isaac Kambelis wrote me on the occasion of the forthcoming festivities of Apostle Paul, concerning the passing of Apostle Paul from Veria, was very interesting. In early September 1940, Mr Kambelis, in his capacity as the general director of the Grand Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, visited Veria and its very old Synagogue. The Synagogue has very old scrolls of the Holy Scriptures and the aged Rabbi of the city showed Mr Kambelis one of them. However, as the Rabbi told Mr Kambelis, the specific scroll was not used during religious ceremonies and was considered *passul* (in Hebrew) not suitable for reading. Phrases were written in the margins of the scroll, something clearly forbidden, informing readers about the visit of a Shaliah (i.e. Apostle) called Saul (Paul in Hebrew) who was preaching in Greek the advent of the Messiah. Another part of the scroll mentioned the date of the Shaliah's preaching in the Synagogue of Veria. Apparently, this writing dates back to the first Christian times, when Jews were using many Aramaic letters.

Mr Kambelis, when he returned to Thessaloniki, reported everything to the Chief Rabbi Dr Korets and the Rabbinic Council of the Community, which decided to send a specialised researcher of Jewish scrolls to Veria. The researcher was the wise Jew Barouh Ben Jacob, a prominent writer of many his-

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A Hebrew inscription on a house of "Barboute", built in 1859 (5619)



The Jewish quarter pictured in an old postal card

toric works on the history of Eastern Hebraism, who submitted a well-documented report to the Community. The report contained information on both the time in which the scroll was written (the second century BC, date which can be determined in precise from the quality of the scroll, the way and the kind of writing, the formatting of the Chapters, the dots and accents) and on the historic value of the writings in the margins. Following discussions between the Chief Rabbi Dr Korets and the late Metropolitan Bishop of Thessaloniki, Genadios, it was decided to bring the scroll to Thessaloniki and have it examined by foreign experts. Unfortunately, the unfair attack against Greece by the fascist countries and the consequences of this attack did not allow this plan to materialise.

During the war, writes my correspondent, the Germans plundered all Greek Synagogues, as was the case all over Europe. And they collected all valuable items, books and scrolls of the Synagogues of all occupied countries in a four-storied building in Auschwitz - which they named Hebrew Museum. Mr Kambelis writes I saw with my own eyes the unimaginable artistic and archaeological treasure that was collected there and was present, after the liberation, at the looting of this treasure by Russian soldiers and Polish irregulars, who were the first to enter Auschwitz. Among the scrolls of the Museum there was the invaluable scroll of Veria, which immediately after the liberation and without its heavy wooden case was taken into possession by a group of Hungarian Jews. The latter, even though they regarded it as a *passul*, they used it for the purpose of religious ceremonies, because they did not have any other. As Mr Kambelis has written to

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me, the Greek Jews made every effort to take possession of said scroll. However, the Russian commander of Auschwitz showed more sympathy towards the Hungarians to whom the scroll was finally delivered. Despite the protestations made by the Greek Jews, the invaluable scroll did not come to their possession. It was later made known that this scroll came to the possession of Ernest Klein, a merchant from Budapest with whom we were prisoners in Auschwitz. Currently, he resides in Graz, Austria. There is no doubt that, on the occasion of the forthcoming celebrations, every effort must be made for this invaluable historical piece to be returned to Greece. I gather that the city of Graz is under the Western control and not under the control of the Russians and, consequently, the actions for the retrieval of the invaluable scroll could be facilitated.