Jewish Life in Greece Before the Holocaust

Of all the countries in Europe, Greece has the earliest Jewish presence. There has been a Jewish population since at least the fourth century B.C.E; in fact, archaeologists have discovered the ruins of Greek Jewish synagogues from the second century B.C.E. Despite their long history in the country, however, Greek Jews have struggled for inclusion.

While many Jews under Greek rule were integrated into Greek culture, Jewish culture and practices came to be seen as a threat, especially since Greece struggled to maintain its territory. While Jews in present-day Israel, under Greek rule, were initially allowed to keep their traditions, in the second century B.C.E, Emperor Antiochus and his son, Antiochus IV, sought to absorb Jews into Greek culture. Violence broke out in Greek-controlled Jerusalem when Antiochus IV outlawed several key Jewish practices and built an altar for sacrifice to the Greek god Zeus in the Jewish temple. The ruler presumed, as did most polytheists, that adding another god to the pantheon would not alienate the native population, but an important pillar of monotheistic religions like Judaism is that there is one God and no others. The successful revolt to retake the temple, led by the Maccabees, is still celebrated as part of the Jewish tradition of Hanukkah.

Not all Jews under Greek rule lived on the outskirts of the empire; by the time the Saul of Tarsus (Christian Saint Paul) visited Greece in the first century, there were thriving Jewish communities in several Greek cities, including Thessaloniki, Veroia, Athens, and Corinth. Those early Jewish communities formed a unique culture called Romaniotes. Throughout the Byzantine period in Greece, Romaniote Jews sought to balance their Greek identities with Jewish practices. In the struggle for integration and acceptance, Jews often faced discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

When the Byzantine capital of Constantinople was conquered by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II in 1453, Ottoman law created a special status for Jews as "People of the Book" with some legal and religious autonomy. In 1492, however, Spanish Jews were expelled on the orders of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, forcing a mass exodus. Tens of thousands of Sephardic Jews (or Spanish Jews) found a safe haven in Greece, particularly in the city of Thessaloniki. Over time, the

Sephardic Jewish tradition and practices of the newcomers came to overshadow the Romaniote tradition.

When Greeks fought for their independence from Ottoman rule in the nineteenth century, Jews, who were routinely perceived as loyal to the Ottoman Empire, often fell victim in the fighting alongside people of Turkish origin. Some Greek Jews fled to territory still controlled by the Ottomans, such as Thessaloniki, which remained under Ottoman rule until 1912; Jews made up about half of the city's population by the turn of the twentieth century. Their presence was so significant that the thriving port was closed on the Jewish sabbath until World War I. Migration of Greeks from Asia Minor as part of the post–World War I population transfers with Turkey, along with political tensions within Greece, made many Greek Jews feel increasingly vulnerable in the decades before World War II.