

History of the Jewish Cemetery of Trikala

Sources from the Byzantine period mention that there were Jews in Trikala and, along with that, documentation of a Jewish cemetery, but it is not known where it was located.

However, it is true that at the time Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 settled in Trikala, there was already a Jewish cemetery at the present location with epitaphs engraved in stone (at that time there were not marble plaques). The earliest epitaphs found to date are from 1550.

There were three synagogues functioning in Trikala: the Greek synagogue (Kal Kadosh Yavanim), the synagogue of the Sephardim and the synagogue of the Ashkenazim.

Today's cemetery is located on the periphery of the city on a plot of land 16,500 square meters with a perimeter of 543 meters which, from the beginning of the 19th century, was continuously in use. With a gift from Solomon Megir (Meir) of Blessed Memory, a protective wall was erected around the periphery of the cemetery. The cemetery now contains the graves of Jews from Trikala, Karditsa and Farsala.

Karditsa, along with Farsalon had their own administration but most of their Jews originated from Trikala and were inscribed in the Trikala registers.

In 1972, under the chairmanship of Michail (Mimi) Kabeli, then President of the convention of Jewish Communities of Greece, the destroyed southern side of the fence was reconstructed to the length of 173 meters, as had been planned for the entire cemetery, creating two areas and one road useable by vehicles. They constructed permanent paths of concrete and elevated all the surfaces from the tall trees with the result that they greatly improved the appearance of the cemetery.

That same chairman opened roads connecting the public artery from Trikala-Kalambakas to the cemetery. Up until then the dead were transported by foot (carried) by relatives and friends some 700-1000 meters, and the hardships of the loved ones were indescribable.

From 1995-1999 the cemetery was vandalized again and again, and 70% of the graves were affected with grave markers repeatedly destroyed by the continuous nighttime incursions of the neo-Nazi vandals.

The Jewish Community of Trikala and the Central Board of Jewish Communities complained to the police but the perpetrators were never found.

Up until 1999, there were attempts to repair the destroyed graves, among them those of my own ancestors and my father. I made the decision to concern myself with the

cemetery of Trikala. Trikala was my second home, having come from nearby Karditsa. I set forth the following plans:

1. Phase 1

a. In 1997 I assigned Mr. Kostas Leonida, a topographic engineer from Trikala, to make a plan of all the burials.

b. I allocated to the same topographic engineer the job of writing down all the names on the broken gravestones which were next to related graves. When combined with the list from the shamas of the synagogue, Mr. Ilias Atoun, an extremely valuable list of burials was created. Mr. Atoun's list contained names for 91 graves while the work of Mr. Leonides revealed a total of 371 grave stones with complete information.

Some of the grave stones were in especially good condition with legible inscriptions expressing love and respect towards the deceased, with Hebrew writing and different depictions indicative of the occupation of the deceased. From what I viewed in other Jewish cemeteries in Europe, this was a custom based on Jewish tradition.

2. Phase 2

a. In conjunction with the project to create a topography of the graves, I undertook the initiative and created a movement to raise funds to repair the damaged graves. Money was raised from within the Jewish community of Trikala and Karditsa, along with Jews in the rest of Greece and the diaspora. The response to this appeal among our fellow Jews was moving. With the cooperation of the Jewish community of Trikala and the spontaneous willingness of all those from whom I sought aid, we collected the necessary amount and proceeded to repair almost all the graves, along with taking steps to assure that it would be very difficult to repeat such a destruction.

b. Upon a rather enthusiastic request by the Jewish community of Trikala, I personally took the responsibility for the repair of the graves and was immediately joined by my fellow worker, the exceptional President of the Community, Mr. Ovadia Saba, to whom I extend my warm thanks. To complete the work it was necessary for me to come to Trikala from Thessaloniki, where I reside, two to three times a week for a period of one year.

c. The restoration work began in 1999 and was finished in 2001. During that period, the Community of Trikala removed fallen tree trunks and revealed another 545 stone plaques which, up until now, had been covered under thick bushes and soil. Thus, the total number of graves rose to 915. All of the above graves were inscribed in a topographical diagram, separated into five locations labeled A, B, Γ, Δ and E. On each of the graves a marble plaque was placed bearing numbers from 1-915.

3. Phase 3

a. After the final topographical mapping of the graves, the project was begun to inscribe the names, along with all the personal information as was written in the epitaphs on the gravestones, along with the assigned number of the grave, in what area of the cemetery it was located and the date of death and the date for memorial (note: the Hebrew date for kaddish). The information was written on a chart with the

names of the deceased written alphabetically. This would act as guide for visitors to the cemetery.

b. We photographed all the 371 gravestone plaques using color. We photographed them in the condition we found them and placed the photos in protective plastic so that they would be preserved over the years. The photos were placed in an album to be of use to future generations.

c. Finally, we enhanced the album with a topographical diagram which would guide visitors to the area in the cemetery where they would find the grave which was of interest to them.

d. 1. The photographing of the plaques was undertaken by Mr. Kostas Goula, a photographer from Trikala.

2. The classification and codification of the photographs was undertaken by Harry and Eirini Kourti in their photocopy workshop in Thessaloniki.

3. The typing and classification of the gravestones were undertaken by Sotirio Terzi, a philologist and historian from Thessaloniki.

I sincerely thank all of the above.

e. The main purpose of the photographing of the gravestones was for the relatives of the deceased who were seeking information, and I would send them a photograph and we would urge them to be diligent in restoring the inscriptions or to replace the damaged plaques of their ancestors. We are very hopeful that after the publication of the photographs, the relatives of the deceased would fulfill their spiritual duty towards their parents and grandparents.

4. Phase 4

After the successful completion of the previously mentioned phases, my goal was not yet reached and the struggle would continue to repair the wall fencing in the cemetery, especially the southern side which was found on the periphery and had caved in. If not taken care of immediately, for certain there would be vandalism since the Trikala/Kalambakas road passed alongside the periphery of the cemetery. I should now make note that this side of the cemetery is found alongside the peripheral road at a height of 50-70 meters above the station that passes through. The erosion of the ground due to rain was continuous. To repair the collapsed wall around the periphery of the cemetery would need an estimated 60,000 euros. I am hoping that this money can be raised from Jewish organizations in Greece and outside of Greece.

Finally, I plan to have a list of the 139 members of the Jewish Communities of Trikala and Karditsa who were arrested by the Germans on March 24, 1944 and were taken to their deaths to the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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October 31, 2004