

The Crying Woman

It is often said that "a picture is worth a thousand words," that thoughts, feelings, ideas can be captured in a single image, a process that otherwise may take countless words. A picture that we labeled "The Crying Woman" captured, in a solitary icon, the anguish, heartbreak and pain of the destruction of the Jewish Community of Ioannina and, by extension, that of the Jews of Greece during the Holocaust. From the moment that I first saw the photo, I knew that I must find out who she was. It would take years. Our journey is over. The "crying woman" has been identified and her story, in many ways, sheds light on the plight of the Jews of Greece.



Before I reveal her identity, for those who may not know, 87% of Greek Jews perished in the Holocaust and in the small city of Ioannina, home to one of the oldest Jewish Communities in Greece, 91% would meet their fate at Auschwitz-Birkenau, rounded up on a cold March morning in 1944 and arriving at the concentration camp in Poland on April 11th where most would go directly to the gas chambers. As they were being loaded into open trucks to take them across the snow covered mountains to Larissa, where they would be kept in a warehouse, stripped of their valuables to await the cattlecars to take them on their final journey, a German photographer in Ioannina took a series of photos, eighteen in number, forever documenting the event. The photos became part of the photo archive in Koblenz, where the image of the "crying woman" would languish for years until we acquired it at Kehila Kedosha Janina Museum in 2004. While all the photos were heartbreaking, recording the innocent men, women and children standing in the cold and being loaded onto trucks, the image of the "crying woman" haunted me and, while we were able to identify so many in the photos, her identity would remain a mystery.

Under 200 of the close to 2000 Jews who lived in Ioannina in 1944 survived, some enduring the deprivations and brutality of the concentration camps, the numbers on their forearms forever bearing witness to the tortures they had suffered, an external reminder of their internal scars. Others returned from the mountains where they had fought with the resistance or had been hidden by Christian neighbors and friends. Was the "crying woman" among the 1850 who perished in the camps? Did she somehow survive?

Too often the story of the Holocaust ends with the return of the survivors, not taking into account the scars left by the loss of family. For many, on returning from the camps, even their own communities did not want to hear of the horrors of the camps, telling them to "forget" and to go on with their lives, to marry and create a new family as if that would somehow miraculously replace the parents, spouses and children they had lost. There would be a fight for return of property and then, of course, Greece would be thrown into a civil war, where the story of recent Jewish suffering would have to take a back seat. Was the story and the identity of the "crying woman" forever lost?

Due to the wonders of the internet, in March of 2009, close to the 65th anniversary of the roundup of the Jews of Ioannina, the identity of the "crying woman" was revealed. In accessing our website (www.kkjsm.org) and viewing the story of the Holocaust in Ioannina someone saw the picture of the "crying woman" and our plea to help identify her, someone who knew the woman well, her granddaughter. Fani Haim (Svolis), the daughter of Firo Haim and Avraam ben Isaak Haim had survived the camps. Fani was born in 1925 and the image captured on March 25, 1944 of her standing on the Molo in Ioannina was of a 19 year old girl who had been emotionally wretched from her home. Fani was the only survivor in her immediate family. Her 76 year old widowed grandmother Fani, after whom she had been named, her 39 year old father Avraam, who was a teacher, her 36 year old mother, the daughter of Avraam Matsil, her younger sister Reveka, age 18, and her two younger brothers, Isaac, age 15 and Haim, age 12, would all be murdered by the Nazis. We do not know Fani's whole story. She passed away recently, in 2008 at the age of 83. She married a Greek Orthodox Christian, had children and lived to experience the joy of being a grandmother. Her granddaughter Lia, who lives in Athens, grew up knowing that her grandmother had survived the camps, the numbers on her arm bearing witness to the horrors she had endured. Lia said her grandmother never hid the fact that she had been born Jewish but had said little about her life in Ioannina. The memories of what she had lost were probably too painful.

As a footnote to this story, through the identification of the "crying woman," family has been found here in the United States. A branch of Fani's mother's family, the Matsils, came to the United States, to New York, before WWII and are looking forward to contacting Lia, Fani's granddaughter, in Athens, to introduce her to the many American cousins she now has.

The photo of the "crying woman" speaks volumes, certainly more than a thousand words. It tells of the anguish of loss, of the pain of separation, of the fear of the unknown and, unbeknownst to young Fani at the time, the horrors she would endure and the scars, both

physical and emotional, she would carry for the rest of her life. "The Crying Woman" has come to symbolize for so many the indescribable losses of the Holocaust of Greek Jewry. Fani might not have been able to speak of them, but her photo has spoken for her. Hopefully, we have now dried some of her tears.

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Note: This story is exactly 1000 words.