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Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution



Review of Odette Varon-Vassard, *Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs: Histoire, mémoire et identité*

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Odette Varon-Vassard

Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs: Histoire, mémoire et identité

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Odette Varon-Vassard's *Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs: Histoire, mémoire et identité* comprises a series of articles that beautifully (re)chart and clearly highlight the rather unexplored topic of Sephardic Jews in Greece: their trajectories and cultural characteristics, as well as the formation of their particular identity through the collective history of exile and persecution. It is important to note that, as the historian explains right at the onset, the term Sephardic in this research defines exclusively the descendants of those exiled from Spain in 1492, seeking refuge in the lands of the Ottoman Empire, specifically Greece (22). It is this geographical and cultural milieu, the writer suggests, that offers fertile ground for a very particular cultural identity to be formed; more importantly, it is by exploring and considering this history in its totality that one may integrate the memory of Sephardic Jews into the memory of the Shoah and bring it to the fore (23). To this end, Varon-Vassard presents us with a fascinating kaleidoscope of subjects, carefully oscillating between history and historiography and effectively considering related narratives, testimony and fiction, as well as mnemonic practices. In fact, the book's greatest strength lies precisely in this diversity: while offering a composite of the Sephardic presence in Greece, *Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs* is also a valuable reference for readers of differing backgrounds as it allows for the consultation of specific chapters irrespective of their placement in the volume.

The first part of the book, consisting in two chapters – “De l'Espagne à Salonique: construction et transformations de l'identité Sépharade” and “Une identité culturelle de la diaspora: le cas de Salonique” – originates in Varon-Vassard's primary field of expertise, history, and offers a comprehensive account of the construction of Sephardic identity, explicitly framed within the “two major ruptures” (21) that define it: the Jew's expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the deportation and extermination of Greek Sephardic communities by the Nazis in spring 1943. In the first chapter, the writer designates the cultural characteristics of this “new diaspora”, succinctly outlines the circumstances surrounding the

expulsion and insightfully offers connections to the discourse adopted in the following centuries and the consequent rhetoric that germinated in Nazi ideology. She then proceeds to trace the Sephardic Jews' arrival and establishment in Thessaloniki, also known as "Jerusalem of the Balkans", significantly proposing a periodisation that takes the lead from Braudel's order of historical time: the *longue durée*, or long-term time scale, spanning from the arrival of the first Jews from Spain to Thessaloniki's annexation to the Greek state in 1913; the medium-term conjunctural period leading up to the Nazi occupation; and the short-term period that comprises the years of the occupation. The postwar years, Varon-Vassard notes, actually constitute a different era, marked by the difficult process of the Jewish communities' reconstruction and the slow and difficult emergence of the memory of the Shoah in Greece (38).

Focusing on the Sephardic community in Thessaloniki, the city named "*madre d'Israel*", the historian then discusses the characteristic traits of this particular cultural identity in depth and reveals its multifarious nature, heretofore neglected by the official Greek historiography (59), and commonly reduced merely to its religious dimension (57). Supported by a wealth of historical facts that testify to a continuity – already present in the definition of collective identity and self-image through the term Sephardim – Sephardic identity is here presented as encompassing constituent elements of religion as well as geographical and historical ancestry. The term *sépharade*, the writer argues, incorporates multiple pieces of information at the same time: it teaches us that the individual defined by this word is a Jew and that their ancestors lived in Spain for many centuries until they were expelled due to the 1492 royal decree; what is more, [this individual] is a carrier of collective memory, as s/he speaks Judaeo-Spanish (61–62). It is precisely the latter that allows us to speak of a singular diasporic culture whose formation does not simply rely on an attachment to religion, but is also informed by elements of its Spanish heritage: the language, the customs and traditions. By also accommodating to the effects of acculturation, the Sephardic cultural identity rises as a singular, complex yet malleable nexus of affiliations; one that acknowledges and adheres to the past while at the same time enriching itself by aptly adapting to the present.

The historical facts and theses presented in the inaugural chapters are most eloquently complemented by the following three – namely, "'Solal' et 'Les Valeureux': l'identité juive dans l'œuvre d'Albert Cohen"; "Le témoignage de Lisa Pinhas, soixante-dix ans après"; and "Andréas Séphiha: voyage dans la Salonique sépharade" – which shift the line of enquiry to the ways Sephardic identity is made manifest in seminal works of writing. A renowned scholar of testimony and concentration camp literature, Varon-Vassard presents her readers with written works – fiction, a survivor's testimony from Auschwitz, and a memoir, respectively – that are very different and yet, when seen as a whole, unravel precisely the complexity and multifariousness of the issue at hand. More importantly, while

consistently maintaining the connecting thread of Sephardic identity and experience, the writer highlights two core elements of Holocaust scholarship: her discussion of Lisa Pinhas' memoir introduces the particular role of gendered testimonies in concentration camp bibliography; and her presentation of Andréas Séphiha's trajectory underlines the importance of microhistory in the mapping and treatment of historical periods and events.

The sixth chapter of the book, titled "Les Juifs Grecs et la résistance: première approche d'une réalité complexe", returns to the historical aspects of the Jewish presence in Greece while discussing the rather underexplored subject of Jewish participation in the resistance during the Second World War. Albeit of special interest with reference to its geographical and historical coordinates, this chapter readily finds its place in the collection, as Varon-Vassard offers a concise account of her extensive research on the matter that, in fact, touches on the ever-persisting motifs of acculturation, integration and silence. As the writer notes, the Jewish people's engagement in the resistance – in any part of Europe – is triggered not only by the need for survival but also by the common ideology and shared identity that allow them to combat the enemy on equal terms with their compatriots (135); it is, perhaps, the very first moment in their long presence in Greece when they are no longer considered to be "the Other". It is interesting to see, however, how this reinforced integration lies on a par with a renewed type of silence, whereby, on the one hand, their participation in the resistance naturally calls for young Jews to temporarily eschew their religious identity; and, on the other, the acknowledgement of their contribution is withheld up until the 1990s, as part of the overall postwar silence. The compelling analysis of the intricate dynamics surrounding this issue not only familiarises the reader with an aspect of Greek-Jewish history that is not widely known or available; it also constitutes a most eloquent example of the Jews' multihued presence in the Greek space.

Having thus combined her research interests and scholarly expertise to provide a series of essays on the special attributes and characteristics of Sephardic identity, Varon-Vassard shifts her focus from history to memory. Chapters 7 and 8 – titled "Le Génocide des juifs grecs: histoire, mémoire et historiographie" and "La mémoire de la Shoah en Grèce", respectively – take the reader to the heart of the rupture, the second decisive moment in Jewish history, the Holocaust; and provide them with a concise yet comprehensive overview of the Shoah in Greece. The meticulous mapping of the different communities and separate seminal incidents discussed in chapter 7 constitute important points of reference for students of the Holocaust; as does the impressive cataloguing of bibliographical sources offered in the "mémoire–historiographie" section of this chapter. Other than the scholarly interest this may present with reference to the Holocaust, however, it is important to see the ways in which the collection's main theme unfolds: in the writer's own words, the devastating effect of the Holocaust in Greece resulted in the postwar generations never actually being able to feel the true presence of Jews in the cities; or experience the multicultural nuances of prewar communities (172).

It is precisely in the passage to the postwar years that the book's value and

importance arguably surface to the greatest extent: Varon-Vassard's discussion of the years following the war – traditionally tantamount to a preoccupation with the mnemonic practices implemented for the commemoration of the singular event – commences with a reference to the years of silence and mutism reigning in the aftermath of the genocide and proceeds with a consistently thorough exploration of the passage from history to memory: the dissemination of testimonies, the instatement of memorials, the role of education and the media in the publicisation of Nazi atrocities and the persecution of Jews in Europe; the establishment, after all, of a collective type of memory that finds its place in the public sphere. In the concluding remarks to chapter 8, the writer carefully underlines the ways in which the memory of Sephardic and Romaniote communities is an integral part of the memory of the Shoah (210); and the reader of this collection is immediately – if implicitly – aware of the multifaceted nature of these communities, specifically the Sephardic ones.

Consonant with the book's entire structure, the final chapter included in the book's revised edition (2021), titled *Berry Nahmias (1924–2013): Survivre, témoigner et transmettre*, constitutes a most eloquent recapitulation of the issues raised throughout while shedding light on yet another pixel of this particularly complex mosaic that is the presence of Sephardic Jews in Greece. Originating from an extensive introduction written to complement the publication of Nahmias' testimony in Greece, this final chapter clearly and precisely reminds the reader of the key points permeating the book: the presence of the thriving Jewish communities in Greece; the rupture effectuated by the deracination and deportation of these communities by the Nazi regime; the cardinal role of testimony – particularly gendered testimony – in any attempt to reconstruct or represent the Holocaust; the interlacing of a personal story, be it rendered as a memoir or a testimony, with the public history. Still, there's more, for, by way of Nahmias's book, Varon-Vassard is given the opportunity to speak of the prewar harmonious relations between Christians and Jews within the community, which is rarely – if ever – explicitly stated; to highlight the specificities of the female experience in the concentration camp and the importance of women's bonding in survival; and to bring yet another cardinal issue to the fore – currently in the limelight of Holocaust scholarship – that is the return. The discussion of Nahmias's important work in maintaining and disseminating the memory of the Holocaust allows Varon-Vassard to bring her work to the present having brought the survivors' work to the fore and, thus, to conclude her book having shed light on all aspects of Sephardic identity and existence in Greece.

All in all, *Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs: Histoire, mémoire et identité* constitutes an impressive collection of essays that touch on manifold aspects of the Sephardic presence in Greece and successfully effectuate the emergence of this fascinating, very particular type of (cultural) identity. The overall effect achieved through the layout – that of the separate chapters working in continuity as well as independently – make this book an

invaluable reference for readers of all backgrounds and interests. And the chapter added in the revised edition (chapter 9 on Nahmias) constitutes a significant difference from the early edition as it closes the book by foregrounding the importance of people before and after the catastrophe: the survivors who fought to disseminate knowledge, despite the traumatic experience, and their children who work to preserve memory. One must also mention the photographs complementing the volume which, albeit scarce, are a valuable addition as well, especially seeing that these are not pictures one can readily find in online databases or other bibliographical sources. Odette Varon-Vassard's expertise and experience combine with her narrative skills and passion to produce a book that, even though specialised, comprises a compelling read that, in addition to being a detailed treatise, may also function as an introduction and an invitation for further study.