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EDUCATION IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF THESSALONIKI  
IN THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY\*

The second renaissance enjoyed by the Thessaloniki Jewish community in the beginning of our century, owed much to the renewal of its educational system introduced by the establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools in 1873. This study deals with the external and internal factors that contributed to this change and the development of the new educational system and its institutions in Thessaloniki. It also discusses the ideological and socio-economic impact that the new educational establishment exercised upon the society and culture of this exceptional Jewish community which was to all Jews "The Metropolis of Israel".

Jewish influence, decisively noticed in all aspects that characterised the multiethnic Macedonian capital between 1850-1912, was especially challenged in the field of education. Up until the middle of the 19th c. the absence of technical and vocational training of the Jewish working classes in Thessaloniki, had not merely led the community into economic and social decay but contributed to the general decline of the city. The cultural and economic rise noticed in the Greek and the Turkish local communities proved inadequate to change the general sight of misery. Ch. R. Guis, the French consul, described the city as a shadow of its past prosperity. And Mercado Covo, a contemporary local historian, wrote:

"...Salonika's commerce was collapsing and the precarious state of affairs had seriously reduced the numbers of wealthy families in Salonika. People living miserably were counted by the thousands,

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and hundreds of children were wandering in the streets either begging or roaming. Poverty begot vices unknown in the past. Something ought to be done to remedy this pitiful state of affairs, to avoid compromising irreversibly this community's future".

The urgency of the matter became pressing especially after 1850. During this time the economic penetration of the Great Powers in Macedonia and the changes imposed in transit trade at the end of the Crimean War and the Civil War in America had turned Thessaloniki into a warehouse in Europe. In view of the new opportunities that emerged and in connection to the urban and political Reforms applied by the Ottoman rulers, certain men of the Jewish elite undertook the educational renewal of their coreligionists, to enable them to contribute their share in the general development.

This created a controversy among them and the religious party, exercising then complete control over all religious or secular matters concerning the community. At the time elementary education was limited in the T. Torah and other religious schools, yet the level of the teaching rabbis remained extremely low. Not only were they seriously underpaid, but they were totally inadequate as a result of an old rabbinical law granting hereditary rights to Talmud Torah teachers, not otherwise required to possess any diploma before they could exercise such important functions.

As in the past, the Greek immigrants from Europe had brought to their country the principles of the Enlightenment, in Thessaloniki it was the westernized Jews who introduced the principles of modern education. Moise Allatini, was the first among the benefactors who set himself to the reorganisation of the educational system. He had acquired an occidental culture while studying medicine in Italy. Allatini gained the support of a small group of progressive Jews imbued with western ideas, because of their occupation. By 1856, having gained rabbinical approval, Allatini managed to establish a school fund, "*Hessed Olam*" [People's Wisdom], to finance the first Jewish western type school, organized by Dr. Lippmann, a progressive rabbi from France who had become the headmaster in the T. Torah. In three years, Lippmann was forced to leave, having met with strong reaction by his colleagues. The school closed down in 1861 but, in the 5 years of its existence, it managed to educate a whole group of people who were now capable of corresponding with the European firms and helped them improve their relations with their fellow citizens.

More people were now becoming aware that there was no salvation other

than education. Foreign propaganda, vying to expand its influence in Thessaloniki, established western type schools attended mostly by Jews. Simultaneously, private Jewish schools appeared, reflecting the rise in demand of education.

In the meantime, in 1862, the Alliance Israelite Universelle\* began to establish the first secular Jewish schools in the Empire. Alliance education consisted of a combination of secular and religious instruction, the study of a European and the local language, as well as the teaching of a craft to poor students. Alliance schools, such as the one in the neighboring Volos, met with such a spectacular success that even the Greeks asked to merge their school with it. This, however, made no impression on Ascher Covo, the Great rabbi of Thessaloniki. On the contrary, though he had originally agreed to the establishment of the first Alliance school, as early as 1864, he soon cancelled the appointment, for fear that the school would be controlled by the French government.

The Alliance had no way of imposing itself in Thessaloniki, though it had already established a local as well as a regional board in 1862-63. The fact that the majority of the city's multiethnic population was Jewish, prevented the occurrence of antisemitic incidents that had urged the Organisation's intervention in other communities. Nothing could be done while the rabbinical autocracy was in control of the political power of the community. But by 1873, havoc was created by the constant inflexibility of the rabbis who criticised the people for sending their children to foreign schools, while they themselves offered no alternative solution. The rebellious youth proceeded in shaving their beard, in breaking the Shabbat or other Jewish laws, ignoring the threats of excommunication. The controversy reached its peak with the intervention of the Great rabbi who had called the Turkish police to arrest a French Jew publicly eating pork, "*taref*". Obligated to give satisfaction to the anger of the French consul, the vali proceeded in revoking the rabbi's right of arrests. From that day the rabbi was no longer considered a temporal leader.

The progressive group wasted no time, and the first French Jewish school for Boys, better known as "Moise Allatini school", was opened in Thessaloniki by October 1873. The school fund which had been promptly reorganised as "*Sedaka ve Hessed*" [Justice & Wisdom], provided for the first supplies. Evidently, besides contributions, the new school, like all the others created

\* Hereafter just Alliance.

by the Alliance, was also supported by the organisation itself, the Anglo-Jewish Association and the local Jewish Community that had imposed a special tax on commerce. An additional source of income was tuition paid by about 60% of the student body who could afford it. The ideological understatement reflecting equal opportunity for all and the responsibility of rich notables for the development of their society, would constitute the guiding lines in the communal reorganisation and leadership, controlled now by laymen.

One of the largest and most beautiful buildings of the Jewish quarter was rented, and once equipped, it received its first 200 students, reaching close to 1,000 in 1912. To avoid the violent reaction produced in the communities of Istanbul, Edirne and Larissa, the Local board employed the old teachers for Hebrew and chose its students from private schools or from the poorer layers of society. The policy of also accepting non-Jewish students, was considered the best way of effacing ethnic antagonism, commonly observed in games played by religious school children. Alliance's initiative in establishing dialogue between the different ethnicities, introduced new moral values that benefitted Thessaloniki more than any other Ottoman city.

The beginning of the educational venture, marked a return to the Golden age. Schools were founded, one after the other, in Thessaloniki. In the interval of 37 years, from 1873 to 1910, the Alliance alone created nine new schools of all levels. Among them three were clearly vocational schools, while six out of nine were girls' schools (Table I).

The girls could not be excluded from the educational project since they were destined to be mothers and therefore long time educators. The first school for Girls, occupying the building next to the Boy's School, was founded in September 1874.

The popularity enjoyed by the schools, allowed its founders to raise the necessary capital that in 1876 bought them an imposing conak. It had a huge garden and spacious classrooms for the various subjects taught. It also housed a kindergarten, "*Asile*", established in 1881 with the support of the Hirsch family. Kindergarten children were taught while playing, according to the Pestalozzi principles, taken up also in France. In the four years of elementary schooling, students were at first taught Accounting, History and Foreign Languages, even more efficiently than in France. The language of instruction was of course French, since it had become the "lingua franca" in the East. Italian was also popular, especially in the Girl's school, replaced by French only in 1889.

TABLE I

## Jewish Schools in Thessaloniki in 1912

Name & Year of Foundation	Level <sup>1</sup>	Number of Grades	Number of Students	Number of Personnel <sup>2</sup>
<i>Alliance Schools</i>				
1. M. Allatini School	1873	E, G & S	10	912 boys 25+4 = 29
2. " " Girls' School	1874	E & G	7	630 girls 18+3 = 21
3. " " Kindergarten <sup>3</sup>	1881	K	2	277 mixed 8+2 = 10
4. Vocational School	1877	V	6	58 boys ?
5. Vocational School	1887	V	6	369 girls ?
6. Popular School	1897	E & V	6	130 girls 9+1 = 10
7. 2nd " "4	1897	E	6	130 girls
8. Popular School	1897	E	6	300 boys 9+2 = 11
9. Nouvelle	1910	V	6	240 girls ?
<i>Communal, Alliance controlled</i>				
10. Communal School	1904	E	6	228 girls ?
11. Talmud Tora (1520)	1880	E, G & S	12	2,460 mixed ?
12. Fused Schools	1911	K & E ?	8?	2,250 mixed 67
13. Regie <sup>5</sup>	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
14. Calamaria	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
15. Aghia Paraskevi	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
16. Hirsch	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
17. No. 151	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
18. Caragatch	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
19. No. 6	(1917)	K & E	6	? " ?
<i>Private, controlled by the Alliance</i>				
20. H. Salem school	1866 - ?	E	?	? boys ?
21. Abr. Varrios "	1867?-1873	E	?	50 boys ?
22. Gattegno <sup>6</sup> "	1890	E	7?	? boys ?
23. Pinto "	1897-1941	E	6	? mixed ?
24. Altcheh "	1898	E & G, C	7?	? boys ?
25. Ovadia "	1900?	E	7?	? ? ?
26. El Progreso "	1900?	E	6?	? ? ?
27. Hahinouh "	1900?	E	6?	? ? ?
28. Ezra	1910	K & E?	2	60 " ?

1. K:kindergarten, E:elementary, G:gymnasium, S:secondary, V:vocational, C:commercial and class.: classical section preparing students for the university.

2. The second column represents the number of school assistants.

3. There was a teacher for Sewing and another of Home Economics [G. Hadjikyriakou, *Odigos tis Makedonias*, Athens, 1910, p. 30].

4. Schools no. 6. & 7. had the same teachers for Sewing.

5. Here the date refers to the earliest reference we have on them [*Revue Franco-macedonienne*, Thessaloniki, 1 May 1916].

6. Otherwise known as Franco-Allemande.

This limited variety, however, defined only by commercial career requirements intensely pursued in Thessaloniki, did not meet the organisation's aim to westernize the mores of oriental Jewish society. In 1884 and again in 1903, the Central board from Paris gave specific instructions that enriched the curriculum. The community of Thessaloniki adapted to the new requirements as early as 1886, starting by substituting Ancient History with Ottoman History<sup>1</sup>.

The teaching of the local history, did not simply consolidate the patriotic feelings of the students but became a popular subject of conversation between them and their parents. Once the dialogue among the two generations was established, the parents were more receptive of the western values of discipline and order, acquired by their children at school. Other subjects such Arithmetic, Physics, Geography, Natural Sciences, World and Jewish History and Religion, were taught yearly in the concentric manner. Optional subjects such as Painting, Music or Gymnastics, were taken only if the day's schedule did not exceed 6-7 hours. In the Girl's school, where Sewing, Linear Painting and Home Economics subjects were mandatory, the teaching of Hebrew was reduced.

By the end of the 19th c., Thessaloniki had reached an unprecedented commercial development which urged foreign schools to establish separate commercial high school sections that attracted many Jewish students. Jewish schools were then forced to follow the trend. In 1904 J. Nehama organised and taught the commercial courses in the 3 higher grades of the Boy's School<sup>2</sup>.

When the schools were rebuilt in 1910, their gymnasium sections were recognised officially as establishments of secondary education, both by local and foreign university authorities. Thessaloniki's schools were also considered to be model institutions among the 140 schools created until then by the Alliance, because the majority of the students reached their graduation at 18. A small number of graduates continued their studies on an academic level in French or Swiss universities. This educated elite, sharing the same motivation and ideals with the other Alliance graduates, now mostly in commerce, joined with the latter to become the future leadership.

The Alliance, however, dictated that the westernisation of the oriental Jewish society could only be obtained by transforming its social structure

1. I. Danon, "Ecole des garçons de Salonique", *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, 2em sem. 1886, p. 66-69.

2. Archives de l'Alliance Israelite Universelle, hereafter A.A.I.U., Grèce, XVII/E.202, 2.7.1907.

through professional diversification. The poor in Thessaloniki were still facing enormous problems by not being adequately represented in the crafts and by being limited to the most unhealthy and the least lucrative trades. Also, Greek and other craftsmen were invading the city offering better quality or reduced prices in all crafts. Therefore vocational training of the lower classes, amounting to 80% of the Jewish community, became imperative<sup>3</sup>.

Thessaloniki was the second city after Istanbul, to acquire a vocational school already established by the Alliance in 1877. Twenty four different crafts were taught. But the long apprenticeship period prevented the poor from allowing their children to complete the course. Attendance of poor students rose thanks to the Local board and the Community, who resolved to provide a small monthly allowance and a hot daily meal at noon, thereby alleviating the burden of maintenance carried by the parents. A set of tools to be received at the end of the course encouraged the apprentices to complete their training and become good artisans. Those who performed best were sent to Vienna or Paris to acquire further skills. In less than 10 years, Jewish artisans reached a level that allowed them to earn money even while studying<sup>4</sup>.

Thessaloniki Jews had a prejudice against manual crafts since they were underpaid compared to the commercial professions that offered better salaries after a shorter period of training. This prejudice was eliminated only after a long newspaper campaign, and the creation of special societies such as the "Alliance at work" or the "Association d'Anciens Eleves" (A.A.E.) and the "Club des Intimes" which concentrated in promoting the craftsmen. Also, the A.A.E., having created its own apprenticeship division, organised special night school courses where in addition to elementary subjects, the workers learned to calculate the cost of different artifacts, and were taught to read the newspapers. The prestige acquired by the artisans at the beginning of the century was confirmed by their high class customers as well as by the success of their Arts and Crafts Exhibition, the first to be organised in Thessaloniki in 1909.

In 1887 the Alliance also established the first clearly vocational Girls' school that was immediately filled to capacity with 368 students. Even though, or maybe just because, until then most women did not receive any schooling and were mainly occupied by sewing, knitting and carpet weaving at home, they were eager to get out and change their social status. In 1910, the popularity of vocational training led to the foundation of another school called

3. A.A.I.U., Grèce, XVII/E.202, 14.7.1899.

4. I. Danon, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

"*Nouvelle*". At those institutions, known as "*Ateliers*", girls learned to make hats, girdles and bras, as well as dresses. The most capable among them became atelier head mistresses<sup>5</sup>.

The success of the vocational schooling of the lower classes, had its counterpart in the creation of popular schools. In 1897 the Local board established 3 new schools in the suburbs of Hirsch and Calamaria. In 1904, it also took under its control one more school for Girls, directed till then by the Grosby missionary couple.

Evidently the advantages of the Alliance education had impressed the people and soon everybody aspired to attend the new schools. Unable to withstand the pressures of the Local board and the Communal council, Juda Covo, head of the Rabbinate in 1887, gave his consent for the reformation of the Talmud Torah. Extra taxes were voted, one on kosher meat and another on the communal contribution, while everyone, rich and poor, the non-Jews, the synagogues as well as the Alliance, raised money to assist the project<sup>6</sup>.

The Talmud Tora teachers were now considered communal employees and were regularly paid. The headmaster of the "M. Allatini School", organised the progressivity of studies, the time schedule and divided the students into 5 grades, to be raised to 8 in 1892, when the School was rebuilt. Ottolenghi, a progressive Italian rabbi, became the headmaster, Yet, though he had deployed great efforts to replace the teaching of Hebrew with books and tables, instead of by chant, and introduced Hebrew Grammar, Italian, French, Arithmetic and even Turkish, the resistance of the old "*melamedim*" teachers did not allow the school to progress. Graduates had still to attend a special course in the Alliance. Ottolenghi was only met by Bernardout, an excellent hebraïst who introduced modern Hebrew. He produced the best Hebrew teachers in Thessaloniki who established the first zionist organisation "*Kadima*"<sup>7</sup>.

It was only in 1910 that the T. Torah underwent radical changes. Rabbi Dr. Itzhak Epstein, the new headmaster from France, believed that culture should precede knowledge. He therefore adopted the exact same courses as were taught at the Alliance schools, while giving equal weight to the teaching of Hebrew studies. This was, however, a short lived success, due to his untimely departure in 1913, and the upheaval caused by the balkan wars. Meanwhile, the new educational attitude had also influenced the religious kindergartens' system.

5. *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, 75, 1913, p. 164.

6. A.A.I.U., Grèce, VII/B.27-33, 21.4.1914.

7. A.A.I.U., Grèce, XVI/E.202, 11.5.1899, III/C, 9.1.1903 and VII/B.27-33, 21.4.1914.

At the same time, the Alliance influence was noticed in all the other schools of the city that were interested in holding on to their Jewish students. Non-Jewish schools, such as the Italian, but also private ones such as the Altcheh, the Gattegno, the Ovadia, and the Pinto, opted for the French Jewish educational method. By 1917, the Alliance had also taken under its control all the communal schools of Regie, Calamaria, Aghia Paraskevi, Hirsch, 151, Caragatch and No. 6 quarters. The upkeep of their financial support depended on the trimestrial report of school inspectors who saw that the Alliance intructions were duly followed<sup>8</sup>.

Last but not least, the Alliance extended its influence also to the private religious educational sector composed then of 28 one room schools, "*hederim*" and "*hevroth*", comprising 3.000 students, taught under deplorable conditions. In 1911, at the intervention of an Alliance teacher and with the Great rabbi's and the Ottoman authorities' of Public Education support, 24 of the old schools fused into 7 new establishments following the T. Torah model. Their financing was raised by the Alliance, the Ottoman government and the Community, for fear that the new schools should fall under zionist influence. The Fused schools comprised 2.250 students out of which 780 were girls. They were divided into 49 classes of 40 students each, taught by 67 men and women teachers, responsible for kindergarten, elementary and highschool education to be accomplished in 8 years of studying according to a specific schedule provided by the Alliance. Unable, however, to follow the requirements, the owners, who treated the whole operation as a commercial enterprise, forced the schools to close down already by 1914, when the Alliance withdrew its financial supports<sup>9</sup>.

At the end of the 19th century Jewish educational establishments in Thessaloniki had imposed French culture to such a degree that the French considered them to be the most perfect centers of their propaganda. However, desiring to extend French influence to the non-Jewish population of the city, in 1906 the French government established the Lycée Français, consisting of a complex of educational institutions of all levels, attended also by Jews. Nevertheless, the Y. Turks insisted on employing only Jewish French teachers in their schools<sup>10</sup>. French was even taught in the German zionist school created by the Hilfsverein in 1910, since zionist leaders visiting Thessaloniki had

8. Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, File 229/6.10.1920.

9. A.A.I.U., Grèce VII/B.27-33, 28.5.1914.

10. A.A.I.U., Grèce, XVII/E.202, 19.6.1911 and VI/B.25-26, 28.7.1911.

realised that locals had an irreversible and mystified respect for French civilisation.

Given that the educational and social activities of a people in an area constitutes the best proof of their cultural consciousness, the frenchification of the Jews of Thessaloniki confirmed the latter's conviction in western ways and values. They were now educated enough to see that it was the French enlightenment doctrine of fraternity, equality and freedom that had allowed the French Jews to create the Alliance, and they were deeply attached to the Organisation. Not only were they indebted to it for its financial support, but they were also aware that if not for the Alliance they could have never risen from their backward isolation, neither would they be equipped to participate in the modernisation of their hometown, as their fellow citizens who were backed by their motherland. The Central board visitors from Paris were delighted to observe that the Alliance had accomplished its purpose in Thessaloniki<sup>11</sup>.

Indeed the Macedonian capital, had undergone a tremendous change by the turn of the 20th c. and was considered to be a modern commercial center, second only to Istanbul. This has been mainly attributed to the Jews who had become the main animators of the city's economic and social activities<sup>12</sup>. In the interval of 35 years that the Alliance had operated in Thessaloniki, it had managed to educate 8.500 children. The Alliance students all found work upon graduation, holding the best positions in the banks, the shops, the administration, the services. Education became the primary concern of the community, now able to promote it, since even the poor paid tuition, receiving communal assistance only partially.

In contrast to other oriental Jewish communities, the occupational network of the Thessaloniki Jews was of a unique complexity. More specifically, from a report drawn for the "*Hoover Mission*", in 1918, we learn that the 33,000 working Jews representing 42% of the Jewish population were divided as follows: 7,750 were artisans and workers, 9,000 were dockets, porters, boatmen and coachmen, 7,450 were office employees, 6,100 were small merchants, 1,900 were businessmen and 750 exercised liberal professions. The socio-professional transformation attained, was comparable only to a revolution. The Jews found now in every profession, and thereby representing all

11. S. Benedict, "Das Schulwerk der Alliance in Saloniki", *Ost und West*, vol. 7, 1907, col. 63-66.

12. P. Dumont, "La structure sociale de la communauté juive de Salonique à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle", *Revue Historique*, CCLXIII (1980), 2, 351-393.

social strata, were not simply responsible for the smooth functioning of the city, but also determined its social and political dynamics.

Liberalism, as a result of westernisation, became of paramount importance to the Jews. The success of the Young Turk revolution, first manifested in Thessaloniki in 1908, had been mainly attributed to their support. They had developed their first Zionist and assimilationist associations asserting the pluralism of their society. Most importantly, however, they were the main founders of the Socialist Federation of Thessaloniki, the most prominent at the time in the Empire. The fact that it drew its members from all the ethnicities in the city, reflects the climate of good understanding that prevailed now in Thessaloniki which later facilitated the absorption of the Jewish population into the Hellenic state.

The pluridimensional effect produced by Alliance education in the transformation of the Thessaloniki Jewish community, cannot be covered by one study. As Sam Levy, pointed out it should constitute the subject of many Ph. D. dissertations. Indeed the Archives of the A.I.U., in Paris, have an extraordinary collection of documentation thanks to which we were able to reconstruct the institutional and ideological framework that enabled the Thessaloniki Jews to play the leading part in the city's development.