The Stereotyped “Greek Jew”
From Auschwitz-Birkenau to
Israeli Popular Culture
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Abstract
Over the course of the twentieth century, Greek Jews underwent a gradual, if anomalous, process of nationalization. While other groups (Asia Minor refugees, for example) “became Greek” through assimilation within the physical territory of Greece, Jews “became Greek” in large part as a result of their exile from that territory. They were definitively portrayed as being first and foremost “Greek” largely within contexts that were characterized by mass heterogeneous Jewish populations. In Auschwitz-Birkenau and later in the context of post-war Palestine/Israel, Jews of Greek origin were a tiny minority within Jewish contexts dominated by other Jewish groups. While in the Orthodox Christian-dominant context of Greece Jews had, variously, struggled to establish their status as Greeks; rejected the categorization altogether; or developed complex hybrid identities, in the contexts of Auschwitz-Birkenau and, later, Israel/Palestine, they were understood by others, and, later, by themselves, as uncomplicatedly “Greek.” This “Greekness,” however, particularly in Israel/Palestine, largely took the form of a stereotype, one that elided the subtleties of Greek Jewish identity as it had begun to take shape in Greece before the Second World War.
I didn’t know prison, now I do
Trapped in the cell, I stare at the walls
All comes back to my mind, the laughter and the loves
All became ashes, on the train of life.

That’s the way life goes, girls, that’s the way life always goes
For us to be closed up in Auschwitz.
Youth that passes, joys that leave and don’t come back.
Girls, be patient, we’ll get out

During the interwar period, a nascent but still inchoate “Greek Jewish” culture began to emerge, particularly in Salonica and Athens, one that would not have the chance to develop to the point of fully understanding the relationship between Jewishness and Greece. In Salonica, in particular, there was a concerted effort to, in Mark Mazower’s term, “make the city Greek”—a vital component of which was to shift the identity of the city’s large Jewish population in the direction of “Greekness” via a series of Hellenizing measures (Mazower 2004:275ff.). Only after the annexation of Salonica in 1912 did the Greek state have to come to grips, in legal terms, with the status of the nation’s minority citizens. The various constitutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of which there were six—1822, 1823, 1827, 1844, 1864, and 1911—had made scant mention of minorities, and as the century progressed were increasingly inclined towards the hegemony of the state religion, Greek Orthodoxy. Until 1844, the constitution had affirmed the Eastern Orthodox Church as the “dominant” religion, but emphasized the state’s tolerance of all other religions thereafter. However, all constitutions reserved certain rights—proselytizing, for example—to Orthodoxy alone and were fuzzy as to the prospects non-Christians in the Kingdom had for attaining full citizenship rights equal to those of Greek Orthodox Christians.

With the annexation of Salonica in 1912, this legal imprecision was clearly no longer viable. Until then Jews had lived in scattered, largely provincial, pockets around the country, but now the nation’s second largest city was home to tens of thousands. The Salonican community was aggressive in lobbying the Greek Parliament for clarification of the legal status of Jews in Greece, with the result that from 1920 on, to be Jewish in Greece was not simply, as Bernard Pierron has put it, “to belong to a minority ‘ethno-confessional’ group, tolerated so long as it remained quiet,” but rather to have the right to expect one’s difference to be respected and protected by law (Pierron 1996:124). This change in Greek legal perspective proved to have a prescriptive, rather than
merely descriptive, dimension: with the recognition of Jews as rights-bearing citizens, Jewish identity gradually expanded to encompass more than solely the “religious” (Pierron’s “ethno-confessional”) sphere. That is, to be a “Greek Jew” was as much a matter of Greek citizenship as of Jewish confession. The emergence of “Greek Jews,” as a category recognizable to both the Jews whom it described and the Orthodox Christians beside whom they lived, was not, then, a matter simply of assimilation. To “become Greek” did not necessarily mean an abandonment of Judaism. Rather, it entailed an expansion of Jewish identity to encompass not only a religious but also a civic status.

Law 2456/1920, adopted 27 July 1920, recognized Jews as a protected minority citizenry and for the first time allowed, from both a Greek Orthodox Christian and from a Jewish perspective, for the conceptualization of a category, Ελληνοεβραίος (Greek Jew). Indeed, from 1920 the Salonica community began referring to itself in its formal communications not simply as the “Israelite Community of Salonica,” but also as the “Greek Jewish Community.” One obvious result, among many, was that Jews in Greece were increasingly drawn together as the creation of a juridical category to which all Greek Jews belonged, eroding the particularity of the Salonican community vis-à-vis other Greek Jewish groups. This legal development, more than the simple fact of annexation to Greece, provided a catalyst for the emergence of a distinctly Greek Jewish identity. Thus, for example, in the 1930s an important amendment was made to the law of 1920 making Greek citizenship a requirement for official participation in the life of the community. The Grand Rabbi and other rabbinic appointments had to hold Greek nationality to be eligible, as did all participants in the Jewish Community Assembly. Over the course of the 1930s a series of similar refinements were made, along with the formalization of the status of various Greek Jewish communities (ultimately, 31 of them) around the country.

With the legal assimilation of thousands of Jews, a true Greek Jewish culture began tentatively to take root. Its best-known symbol is perhaps the famous rembetika singer Rosa Eskanazi, but an array of other Greek Jews, also, gradually made inroads into the mainstream of Greek culture. Indeed, the rembetika genre as a whole, first championed by the Asia Minor refugees, which blended oriental and western styles and was devoted to telling the story of society’s underdogs, was closely linked to Greek Jewish life. In 1924, the German recording company Odeon appointed the Salonican Jewish firm Abravanel and Benveniste as “their exclusive agents for the purposes of artist and repertoire selection” (Pappas 1999:355). Sephardic musical traditions—particularly the music of women singers known as tañaderas—were to a degree integrated
into this now most distinctively “Greek” genre, rembetika (Petropoulos 2000:75).

After the Greek conquest of Salonica, Greek language instruction was mandated in all schools that enjoyed public funding. In many instances, the Greek government provided funding to Jewish schools specifically for the teaching of the Greek language (Vasilikou 1999:129ff.). Just as in immigrant contexts there is a rapid shift in language from the first generation to the next, in new Greek Salonica change came rapidly after the transition from Ottoman rule—which rendered the city’s citizens de facto, if unwilling, “immigrants” to Greece. By the late 1920s the younger generation of Salonicans was largely bilingual and within a decade many had Greek as their first language. A number of Greek Jews began writing in Greek, with a small body of Greek Jewish literary works emerging in the period. Choice of language, of course, was political, and Greek was not universally embraced—with elites favoring French over Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) and Greek, and Zionists emphasizing the need for Hebrew instruction. Among the younger Sephardic middle classes, however, Greek had established itself as primary language by the 1930s. Some of the most poignant documents of the Greek Jewish experience of the Holocaust were written in Greek—hastily-penned farewell notes, songs about life under the Nazis set to the tune of Greek hits of the 1930s, and memoirs of the few survivors. Given time, Greek Jewish culture might well have asserted itself as a readily recognizable feature of the Greek cultural landscape as a whole.

The horrific interruption of the Nazi occupation of Greece, and the Nazi slaughter of more than 80% of Greece’s Jews, all but eliminated “Greek Jewish culture” when it was barely two decades old. Beyond Greece, first in Auschwitz-Birkenau and later in Palestine/Israel, the “Greek Jew” would soon emerge as a familiar stock figure, and the complex strands that had made up true Greek Jewish identity would largely be reduced to a flattened, one-dimensional stereotype.

I. Greek at Last: Greek Jews in Auschwitz

The Strong “Exotic” Greek of the Camps

First among [the merchants in the Lager black market] come the Greeks, as immobile and silent as sphinxes, squatting on the ground behind their bowls of thick soup, the fruits of their labour, of their cooperation and of their national solidarity. The Greeks . . . have made a contribution of the first importance to the physiognomy of the camp and to the international slang in circulation. Everyone knows that “caravana” is the bowl, and that “la comedera es buena” means that the soup is good; the word that expresses
The Stereotyped “Greek Jew”

The generic idea of theft is “klepsiklepsi,” of obvious Greek origin. These few survivors from the Jewish colony of Salonica, with their two languages, Spanish and Greek, and their numerous activities, are the repositories of a concrete, mundane, conscious wisdom, in which the traditions of all the Mediterranean civilizations blend together. That this wisdom was transformed in the camp into the systematic and scientific practice of theft and seizure of possessions and the monopoly of the bargaining Market, should not let one forget that their aversion to gratuitous brutality, their amazing consciousness of the survival of at least a potential human dignity made of the Greeks the most coherent national nucleus in Lager [camp], and in this respect, the most civilized. (Levi 1996b:85)

In Auschwitz, Greek Jews were regarded as exotic and peculiar outsiders by the Ashkenazim who met them there. They were seen as quintessentially Mediterranean, and were teased about their tastes and habits. One prisoner recalls being rounded up with hundreds of other Greeks and sent to Birkenau. “In one of the blocks [there] we found a Blokaltester who spoke Spanish. When he heard that we were from Saloniki he said to us, ‘Ijos de putas! Donde esta la halva y el raki de Saloniki?’ [sons of whores! Where are your Salonican halva and raki?] We answered, ‘[Look], we didn’t [just] come from Salonica, only from Buna [in Auschwitz]’” (Refael 1998:317).

The “otherness” of the Greeks in the eyes of the Ashkenazim who made up the majority population in the camps cut two ways. To some, the Greeks inspired awe with their good looks, ingenuity, and beautifully-accented Hebrew. Some non-Greek prisoners “were impressed with the strength we’d shown in the [Greco-Italian] war of 40–41, and they considered all us Greeks heroes” (Amatzopoulou 1993:145). But to others, they were inferior, second-class citizens. The divide between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, in which Sephardim were cast as inferior outsiders, was to become one of the most striking features of post-war Jewish Palestine/Israel. During the war, it was developing already in the camps—the first sites of heterogenous mass Jewish co-habitation.

We, the Jews of Greece, were in a special situation, the reason for which I never understood. Even though we always filled in for sick members of the Sonderkommando, and we always took upon ourselves assignments that had been given to others—despite all that, we were treated with disrespect, particularly [by] prisoners from the northern countries, such as Poles, Russians, and Czechs. We were always the black sheep, and we always were called insulting names such as ‘cholera,’ or ‘kurva’ [whore]. One day I spoke with [a Polish prisoner named] Kochak, and asked him to try to put an end to the situation. ‘I can’t help,’ he said. ‘They are bastards who view you as people of an inferior level. They are the Ashkenazim, and you are the Sephardim.’ What a shame! They only spoke to the Greek Jews...
nicely when they wanted them to give them a bit of gold to trade . . . I, the Greek, the Sephardic, the ‘cholera,’ never refused them that small service. (Refael 1988:91–92)

The Greeks’ appearance, their habits, and, above all, their inability to speak Yiddish struck the Ashkenazim who dominated Auschwitz as the least Jewish thing they had ever seen. Ka-Tzetnik (born Yechiel Dinur Finer), a Polish-born survivor of the Holocaust and one of its most famous eyewitnesses, writes of the shock and wonder Central European Jews felt upon encountering the Greeks. In one of his novels, a central European Jew named Hayyim-Idl muses over his barrack-mate, a Greek who never spoke.

Professor Rafael . . . doesn’t tire of just lying there day and night, all locked up within himself, not saying a word even to his friends. . . . So they are as silent as he. And even if Professor Rafael did speak, he, Hayyim-Idl, wouldn’t be able to exchange a word with him. They say the Professor knows ten languages fluently. But he doesn’t understand a word of Yiddish. Strange Jew. He was brought here from Greece, where he was born. . . . Not even forty yet, and he speaks all of ten languages. But plain Yiddish, the Mother Tongue—not a word! (Ka-Tzetnik 1963:132)

The camp’s Greek Jews speak in Greek, box for recreation, and look like nothing the Askenazic Hayyim-Idl has ever seen:

Jewish lads from Salonica. Jews. Now who would ever guess that the likes of these are Jews? They had to send him to Auschwitz so he should find out that tawny skins and muscles like that could belong to brothers of his. His own flesh and blood. They can’t speak a word of Yiddish, but that “Shalom!” comes out of their mouths like a living verse of Scripture . . . Jewish kids. And what is it they want? Just to live. Greece. Jews everywhere. He had never realized that in Greece the Jews look so Gentile. Jewish kids. (Ka-Tzetnik 1963:146)

The Greeks, who knew no German or Yiddish, suffered from the language barrier that stood between them and the German and Polish guards. “There were two reasons why the Greek Jews suffered more than the other Jews [in the camps]. First, they were Mediterranean. . . . Second, they came to Poland without knowing the language. The Ashkenazic Jews who know Yiddish, understood German. We arrived with absolutely no knowledge of the German language, and it was very difficult for us to get used to the central European climate” (Hantali 1996:94). When Greeks were slow to react to German orders, they were punished. Many were beaten to death simply because they could not make out what it was they were being told to do (Refael 1998:292).
The Stereotyped “Greek Jew”

Not surprisingly, Greeks sought another way that they might have some verbal human contact. Errikos Sevillias, “a simple man born in Athens in the good old days of 1901,” had served in the Greek campaign in Asia Minor for three years, then returned to Athens in 1923 to open a leather goods workshop. He was deported to Auschwitz in April of 1943 where he was assigned inmate number 182699. In his bunk were “a Russian, a Pole, a Hungarian, and the fourth was Dutch. Try to communicate in a situation like that.” When a guard asked him his number and he didn’t understand the question, “he slapped me on the face and pointed to my arm.” Finally he sought out a new bunk “with two Greeks and two Italians and joined them as the fifth. At least I could talk to them” (Sevillias 1983:frontispiece, 33, 35).

The language barrier also ensured that very few Greeks tried to escape the camp. “Usually it was the Poles who tried to escape. How could a French, Dutch, or Greek prisoner think of escape without knowing a word of Polish?” (Amariglio 1998:92). At the end, too, when the Germans abandoned the camp in the bitter cold first weeks of 1945, Polish prisoners walked away to find food and shelter, while most of the Greeks did not. “Us Greeks, where could we go?” (Hantali 1996:111).

In the camps, Ladino was a Greek language, a language spoken by Greeks. In Greece, it had marked Sephardic Jews as outsiders in Greek society, but in Auschwitz it identified them definitively as Greek. “One time I saw a group of Greek women screaming; the Kapo was beating them. How did I know they were Greek? They all were wearing the same clothes, and they were all bald. And it was very difficult to identify individual faces. But I heard that they were screaming ‘Dio!’ which in Ladino means ‘God.’ And then I understood that they were Greek” (Refael 1998:265).

But while the Germans could not understand Greek or Ladino, they were interested in the strangeness of these languages, particularly the former. Shaul Chazan recounts, “We slept in a block in Birkenau, number 11 or 13. From there we went every morning on foot to work. When we returned to the block, we were forced to sing. We used to sing songs in Greek, folk songs. The Germans really liked the sound of the Greek language” (Greif 1999:298). Leon Cohen recalls a young German leading a newly-selected Sonderkommando squad, made up entirely of Greeks, off to work. “All the Greeks, after me…” When we got out of the block, the German asked, ‘You know how to sing, right? Why don’t you sing a song?’ And then we started singing. There were always songs that we liked to sing together—Greek folk songs, or patriotic songs…” (Greif 1999:329). Shabtai Hannuka, a Salonican who was subjected to Mengele’s experiments while in Auschwitz, later recalled, “We used to
sing Greek army songs, military Greek marches. The Germans enjoyed listening to us” (Refael 1998:201).

Testimony after testimony indicates that the one thing about the Greeks for which the German guards had any appreciation was their music. Mano Avraham Ben-Yaakov, from Salonica, was moved from Auschwitz to Dachau in 1944.

By the end of December 1944, very close to liberation, we were experienced with all forms of extermination. I don’t know why, but we decided to lift our spirits and celebrate the New Year, hoping it would bring the desired liberation. My friend Yehuda Marcus organized some prisoner friends to go out with pots in their hands . . . and they started singing Greek Christmas songs together. The Lagerkommandant himself came towards us, and finally treated us with respect. He opened the food warehouse for us and spoiled us with some food and tobacco. (Refael 1998:319)

Songs did not simply entertain the Germans; they also provided inmates with a way to blow off steam. Here the language barrier proved helpful. “What helped me in the camp was singing. The Germans always told us, ‘singen,’ and we used to sing. We sang all sorts of songs; we made up the words. For example . . . ‘With laughter on our lips, we haul a cart of shit, and the German behind us beats us with a belt. La, la, la, la, la’” (Refael 1998:388).

The inability to communicate with others furthered the sense of solidarity between the camp’s Greek Jews. Eli Wiesel writes, “I remember in the camp, in our block, there were Jews from Thessaloniki. They didn’t understand my Yiddish and I didn’t understand Greek or their ‘Ladino.’ But I liked to be around them all the same. They had good hearts . . . The solidarity between them struck all of us as amazing” (Hantali 1996:12).

This solidarity characterized relations between Greek Jews from varied locales in Greece, and reached across the long-standing Romaniote-Sephardic divide,6 which had in any case decreased over the prior thirty years, as Thrace and Macedonia were further integrated into Greece. After Greece was drawn into the war, from 1941–43, the emergence of a collective, distinctly “Greek”—as opposed to regional—Jewish consciousness was further hastened by the occupation, and particularly by the tripartite administration of the country, which forced Jews living in the German- and Bulgarian-occupied zones to depend on contacts they had in the Italian zone. While for the first months almost all Greek Jews in the camp were from Salonica, when transports from other regions began to come in the Salonicans greeted the new-comers as fellow Greeks. The experience of the camp, where all Jews from Greece—Romaniote, Salonican, and
The Stereotyped “Greek Jew”

Ashkenazic alike—were referred to by the guards and by non-Greek Jews simply as “the Greeks,” furthered this collective nationalization.

The Greeks in the camps did not stand out only for their language and music. They were also regarded as particularly strong, resourceful, and handsome and emerged as leaders in the camp. Dario Akounis, a stevedore from Salonica, arrived in Buna with a broken leg. He was afraid that if he went to the doctor, he would be sent to the selection. Finally, though, he went to the doctor, without anesthesia, on the broken bone. The assistant at the operation was a Spanish political prisoner, and as he held Akounis’s legs during the surgery, the two conversed in Spanish. The Spaniard asked Akounis how he knew the language. “I’m from Saloniki,” Akounis replied. “Oh, yes,” the Spaniard responded, “All Salonicans are strong” (Refael 1998:40). It was good to have Greek friends in the camp. When Primo Levi left Auschwitz in early 1945, he traveled in the company of a man he referred to simply as, “my Greek.” Levi chose his companion largely on the basis of the fact that he was Salonican, “which, as everyone in Auschwitz knew, was equivalent to a guarantee of highly skilled mercantile ability, and of knowing how to get oneself out of any situation” (Levi 1996b:213, 207–229).

The Greeks in the camps had a well-deserved reputation for resourcefulness, a quality that could literally mean the difference between life and death. For example, prisoners carried their thin soup in a bucket-like pot called, in the argot of Auschwitz, a “Menaschka.” These pots could only be obtained through complicated negotiations with the tinsmith, who would make them for prisoners in exchange for bread. The Greeks had the largest pots of all, which, in addition to securing them more food, also was a symbol of their primacy: “Besides the material advantages [of the menaschka], it carries with it a perceptible improvement in our social standing. A [large] menaschka . . . is a diploma of nobility, a heraldic emblem” (Levi 1996a:151).

The guards regarded the Greeks as gifted athletes, and often deployed them for entertainment. Yitzhak Koen, who worked on the construction of Lager D in Auschwitz, recalls that one day as the workers were cleaning some pools of water, used to breed fish, outside the camp “an SS man came and told me, ‘You are Greek, Greece is a beautiful country. You probably know how to swim, climb up a tree, and dive head-first into a pool. So let’s see how you swim.’” Koen was wearing heavy boots, and knew that if he dived headfirst into the water he could kill himself, so he jumped in foot-first. As punishment for the disappointing athletic performance, the SS officer sent his dog into the pool to bite Koen (Recanati 1972:591). Greeks were meant to be more athletic than that, reasoned the guard.
The Greeks became particularly well-known for their boxing abilities. Yaakov Razon, a Salonican, who had been coached by Dino Uziel, the Greek national boxing champion, found the skill to be useful in the camps, and respected by the guards—so much so that he was able to use it heroically to garner extra rations for his fellow inmates.

When we arrived in Auschwitz, we immediately came to grasp the situation. I exclaimed, “I’m screwed.” One of the Kapos hit me, and I immediately hit him back. He was stunned and asked me if I was a boxer. I said yes. The next day they had already organized a match for me with a Polish guy. I knocked him out by the third round . . . When the Jews saw that I was winning, they threw bread, margarine, and a little bit of cheese towards me, and I understood that this was my chance to survive. (Refael 1998:456)

When Razon was moved to Buna, he announced to everyone that he was a boxer. The guards matched him up with different fights and even provided him with an arena. “They loved this game, because it is a cruel game. All the SS men used to come watch us, every Sunday we would box” (Refael 1998:455–456).

Everyone in the camp was fascinated by the Greeks—German officers and scientists, and Ashkenazic Jewish inmates alike. While the Germans measured their heads, searching for signs of their genetic superiority, and recruited them for the most gruesome work details, their fellow inmates marveled at their mysterious silence, their handsome physiques, and their overwhelming sense of solidarity, even as they looked down at them as inferior Sephardim. The argot of the camps was heavily inflected by Greeks, and the sounds of the camp—the singing, the speech patterns, the cheers of the crowds who gathered to watch the Greek boxers—were strongly shaped by their presence. Under the gaze of these outsiders, Jews from Ioannina, Salonica, Thrace, Athens, Corfu—from all the far-flung corners of the country—became one national conglomerate. They became “Greeks.” The process would be furthered in the decades after the war, in a quite different site of heterogeneous mass Jewish cohabitation: Palestine/Israel. Over its course, the “Greek Jew” would emerge as a stereotype.
II. Hellenized at Last: Greek Jews in Israeli Culture

“I feel like an idiot—I came here from Salonica thirty years ago, and I have nothing! You [Askenazim] show up, and you get everything right away.”
—Salamonico to Berezovsky, in the Israeli film, Salamonico (1972)

The Israeli “Greek Jew”

In the 1972 Israeli film hit, Salamonico, a kindhearted but boorish Greek Jew tries to make his way in mainstream Israeli society. At the insistence of his social-climber wife, Salamonico moves his family out of the port slums to a fashionable north Tel Aviv neighborhood where his new Ashkenazic neighbors scorn and revile him. His housewarming party, which draws scores of Sephardic friends and relatives and features live bouzouki music, keeps the whole building up all night. The neighbors complain that they cannot figure out who is and who is not a member of his family—“there are so many of you.” While Salamonico insists on keeping tradition, his children rush off to parties on Friday nights, interrupt him at the dinner table, and ignore his wishes. When his teenaged daughter is taken advantage of at a party by an Ashkenazic boy and becomes pregnant, Salamonico insists that they marry. The boy’s parents are shocked by the suggestion, telling him by way of counterproposal, “We’ll be happy to pay for an abortion.” Salamonico prevails, and in a (far better) forerunner to “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” the event brings together Salamonico’s huge, fun-loving family and the boy’s uptight European relatives, who gawk as the Greeks dance the tsifteteli, down gallons of ouzo, and generally show that they know how to have a good time.

Salamonico is the parodic 1970s Israeli version of the quintessential Greek. He works in the port and has a huge mustache, large family, simple mind, and big heart. He is loutish and oriental—when a Polish friend takes him to a French restaurant, Salamonico causes a scene. Disgusted with the food and wine, he calls for arak and mezedes in their place and is reprimanded by the waiter, “We are civilized here.” He has lived in Israel for decades, but remains cocooned in his Greek world, hanging out in tavernas, fraternizing with fellow Greeks, and never learning to read. His speech is peppered with Greek, Ladino, and Turkish expressions, and he and his wife are preoccupied with the Greek royal family, whom they regard as the pinnacle of class and elegance.

The picture is a peculiar composite of pre-war Jewish Greece and 1970s Israeli visions of the country. Salamonico is also a pastiche of Sephardic and Romaniote elements; the tensions between the “foreign”
aspects of Sephardim vis-à-vis the “more Greek” aspects of Romaniotes, which had earlier played a strong role in Greek Jewish culture, are fully elided in the person of Salamonico. Features of Salamonico’s character as cast by the Ashkenazic filmmakers who created him are quintessential traditional Salonica: his language, profession, and attachment to custom. But others are pure 1970s working-class Greece. The Greek folk/pop music and Zorba-style dancing at his parties, Salamonico’s physical appearance (complete with Greek fisherman’s hat permanently affixed to his head), and the food and drink—on frequent display throughout the film—are all straight from a tourist brochure. Key features of traditional Salonica are ignored: the cosmopolitan and educated nature of many of its residents, its intense involvement with its surrounding environment, and, above all, its community’s sense of superiority to other forms of Judaism. In Salamonico the Greek Jew has been simultaneously orientalized and Hellenized.

Despite their small numbers, Greek Jews have come to occupy a large space within the Israeli cultural imagination. The image of the Greek stevedore—the good-hearted, strong, and simple Salonican man of the sea—was early on coined as a cultural archetype (Molho 1951). The Greeks were recognized as superior fishermen, the first Palestinian Jewish fishermen learning the trade mainly from them, as well as from Italians, Romanians, and Arabs (New Judaea 1944:XXI, 1, 2:23–24). Movies, books, and comedy routines have long referenced the “Greek” of the docks. The actor who plays the role of Salamonico—Reuven Bar-Yotam—is Moroccan, and built his career largely on a comedy routine in which he played a good-hearted Greek. The Greek Jew, at once Sephardic and European (though not acknowledged as the latter), to an extent serves as a symbolic bridge between the often-alienated worlds of central and east European Jewry on the one hand and, on the other, the heavily Arab culture of the more than one million mizrahim, or “oriental Jews,” who were brought to Israel from Yemen, the Maghreb, Egypt, Iraq, and other Arab regions in the early 1950s. Much as Greece itself has done in a global historical context, in Israel the Greek Jew mediates between East and West.

Israel’s relationship to its Middle Eastern setting is an ambivalent one, and a form of “internal orientalism”—about which a copious literature has emerged—is at play in the dominant Ashkenazi culture’s categorization of different Jewish groups within Israel, and particularly of Jews from Muslim lands but also to an extent of European Sephardim. Even as Israeli culture glorifies and appropriates the more benign trappings of Arab culture (falafel, an Arab dish, has been declared the national food;
The Stereotyped “Greek Jew”

The Palestinian cactus is depicted as a metaphor for the rugged Israeli character; the Egyptian singer Um Kulthum was recently the pinnacle of cool, etc.), its more problematic implications are reviled or ignored. Just as in France in the wake of its colonization of North Africa the material trappings of Maghrebi culture rose to the highest in vogue, mainstream Israeli culture has adopted and idealized various Arabicisms while distancing the Arabs themselves. Many of these Arab cultural adaptations have been mediated by the *mizrahim*, whose own culture is made up in part of Arab strands. Yet *mizrahim* have long been perceived as inferior outsiders in Israel’s decidedly Ashkenazic, western culture; behind the high-profile conflict of Israelis and Palestinians lurks a societal fracture between European and “oriental” Jews. The Israeli cultural embrace of idealized Greekness can be read as an unspoken attempt to bridge the gap. Greeks, put simply, have often functioned in the Israeli cultural imagination as “safe” *mizrahim*.

“Greek” music in Israel

This has spawned the peculiar Israeli phenomenon of the fake Greek singer, best typified by Zohar Argov, the hugely popular Yemenite performer of the 1970s and 1980s. Zohar Orkabi was born in Rishon LeZion, Israel, in 1955. Like many other *mizrahim*, Orkabi changed his obviously “oriental” family name to a benignly Israelified and Ashkenazified one. In the 1970s he rose to fame with the song “Eリンor.” A Hebrew version of Stelios Kazantzidis’ Greek single “Yparho,” “Eリンor” is probably the biggest Mizrahi hit ever. He also recorded countless other Greek songs, some in Hebrew and others in a garbled and scarcely intelligible Greek; in 1984 he starred in the musical film “Kasach.” By many ardent fans, Argov is regarded as a martyr to the ill effects of Ashkenazic anti-*mizrahi* sentiment. Although he attained success, he was imprisoned for drug possession and committed suicide in prison in 1987. One of many websites dedicated to his memory features as its background music Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind.” Written in homage to Marilyn Monroe, the song’s lyrics invoke the image of the appropriated, exploited, and misunderstood superstar whose success depends on clever concealment of humble origins: “They put you on a pedestal, and they made you change your name.”

Like Monroe, Argov’s greatest fame came after—and in part because of—his early, self-inflicted death, a death that reflected the inner torment brought by the effort to escape his roots. A 1993 documentary on Argov, *Zohar: Mediterranean Blues*, teases out these same themes. The songs Zohar sang were traditionally Greek—not Greek Jewish, or Sephardic, but
the popular hits of contemporary Greek culture. Scores of other Israeli “Greek singers”—some of Greek origin, but most, like Argov, mizrahim from Arab countries—have championed this music as well.

In the late 1950s Aris San, a Greek Orthodox Christian singer from Salonica, began performing in Haifa; he later became a mainstay of a Salonican Jewish-owned nightclub in Jaffa, the Arianna, known for featuring Greek music. His arrival on the scene coincided with the influx to Israel of hundreds of thousands of mizrahim. At the time, “Greek laika [pop/folk] music provided a legitimate way to publicly enjoy the type of sounds beloved by Jews from Arab countries” (Regev and Seroussi 2004:200). San (who appears in Salamonic as the entertainment at Salamonic’s house-warming party) and other Greek performers soon

Cover of Levitros’ Greatest Hits, Volume II. Permission of Azulai Brothers Productions, Israel.
inspired *mizrahi* musicians to perform their own “Greek” music. Argov; Stalos; Nikoles; and Levitros (whose most famous album has the Acropolis on its jacket and identifies his music as “Oriental”); all built their careers in part by singing Greek hits.

Greek music seems to have provided Argov and other *mizrahi* singers with an outlet for expression of their oriental origins. Levitros, for example, is Israeli-born, of Iraqi origin. He Hellenized his original name, Levi Mu’alem, by adding the Greek-sounding suffix “tros,” and explains that he “was not born Greek,” but became Greek through Greek music, which “penetrates to every place and every person,” and makes him feel “free.” Greek music, he observes, reminds him of the “old country”—that is, Iraq. The Greek language, which few of them knew, substituted for Arabic—which for many was a second, if not first tongue. By “becoming Greek,” they toned down their Arabness and moved themselves further towards the west on the Oriental-European spectrum. Overwhelmingly, their audience was *mizrahi*. Just as the classification of all non-European Jews in Israel as “Sephardim” (despite the fact that most *mizrahim* have no ties to Spain or to Ladino culture) has sanitized and minimized the markedly Arab features of their culture, the embrace of Greek music has been a means through which *mizrahim* found a non-threatening, semi-Europeanized cultural mode of expression.

At the same time, and for very different reasons, Ashkenazim, too, have come to embrace Greek music. In the 1980s the rock singer Yehuda Poliker, a mainstay of Ashkenazic top-ten lists, “recovered” his Greek origins. Poliker’s family, originally from Salonica, was part of Israel’s gritty and largely *mizrahi* working class, but his grunge-style music reflects the tastes of the Ashkenazic mainstream. In his 30s Poliker became intensely interested in his Salonian roots, publicly tracing the multi-generational impact the Holocaust had had on his family. Increasingly, the central themes in his music were the Holocaust and the Greek Left—Poliker translated and performed several partisan songs. In exploring his past and his Greekness, he argued that Israel needed to embrace its identity as a Mediterranean country, while his resurrection of the Greek Left served as commentary on contemporary Israeli policies, particularly towards Palestinians. As part of his personal transformation, Poliker developed an interest in contemporary Greece, bringing famous singers like Haris Alexiou from Greece to Israel to perform with him. In Poliker’s case, Greek music and Greekness—in this case, an authentic Greekness, as Poliker pointedly emphasized—became a vehicle for positive self-orientalization and a means of interrogating the dominant categories of Israeli culture.

These two embraces of Greek music have more recently moved
closer together, spawning a new wave of “Greek” singers, among them Shlomi Saranga (“Greek Celebration”), Yehuda Saleas (“Best Hits from Greece”), and Boaz Tabib (“Crazy Greek”). Greek standards like “Fige Fige,” “Ohi Ohi,” “Min Perimeneis Pia,” and “Paploma” are well-known in Israel. The genre into which they fit is now known as “Mediterranean Music” (musika yam tihonit), a compromise between East and West, described by a geographic term (“Mediterranean”) that doesn’t carry the more loaded connotations of “Ashkenazic” or “oriental.” A few “real” Greek singers (that is, non-Jewish Greek singers from Greece)—notably Yiorgos Dalaras and Haris Alexiou—are popular, particularly among Ashkenazim, but for the most part the Israeli Greek music market is dominated by the Israeli version. And one of Greece’s most famous musicians, Mikis Theodorakis, is persona non grata in Israel, where the press frequently rails against his ardent support of the Palestinian cause and his obnoxious and provocative statements about “world Jewry”; while another, Glykeria, used to enjoy fantastic popularity in Israel but now is regarded as virtually kitsch.

Israeli-Greek music (of Argov’s sort, and only to a degree Poliker’s, which also draws from Greek laika but is classified as “ethnic” rock [Regev and Seroussi 2004:193]) is a genre within musica mizrahit (oriental music), a musical culture that “combines certain stereotypical musical elements from both Western and Eastern traditions” and “tries to appeal to a Western audience by developing a stereotypical Oriental sound that is pleasing to the Western ear.” Just as musica mizrahit as a whole tries to bridge the worlds of East and West, Greek music in particular has occupied an important place for Ashkenazim and mizrahim alike as a mediating, European-yet-not-European, cultural form.

Back to Auschwitz: the Holocaust in Greek-Israeli memory

The mediating functions played by Greek music in Israel are an apt metaphor for Greek-Jewish history as a whole, for the status of Greek Jews in Israel, and for the geographic location of Greece itself. The only major non-Ashkenazic group to perish in the Holocaust and one of the only major Jewish groups from Europe to be classified as Sephardic, Greek Jews in Israel exist in an ill-defined space between East and West that was frequently omitted from the Holocaust narrative. In the 1980s and 1990s, as the last survivors of the Holocaust moved into old age and began to die, the project of capturing as many testimonies as possible took on new urgency.

In the mid 1980s Lo Nishkah! (“We Shall Not Forget!”) began publication. Issued annually in Tel Aviv on the eve of Holocaust commemoration
The Stereotyped “Greek Jew”

day, *Lo Nishkah!* is the work of the “Organization of Greek Survivors of Extermination Camps in Israel, Division of ‘Continuing Generations.’” Dedicated to preserving the memory of the Holocaust and Greek Jewish culture, *Lo Nishkah!* gives us a view of how Greekness, Greece, and the arrival of Greek Jews in Israel are remembered by second-generation Greek Israelis. A few themes emerge. For one, Greek Jews in Israel recall the Greek *aliya* as having been far smoother than documents from the 1940s and 1950s indicate. In the 1991 issue Shmuel Refael, the son of a survivor, wrote, “The Holocaust survivors born in Greece were absorbed quickly in Israel, while comfortably acclimating without burdening the establishment” (*Lo Nishkah!* 1991[6]:18). Another recurrent theme is the ignorance of most other Israelis regarding the Holocaust in Greece. In the 1990 issue David Koen, son of Leon Koen, commented,

> I was always asked, “What? The Jews of Greece were also in the Holocaust?” There weren’t many articles or stories about the Jews of Greece. The media always talk about the Warsaw ghetto rebellion, the culture of the Jews of Germany and Poland. Weren’t the Jews of Greece kosher Jews? According to my father’s stories, the Jews of Greece were righteous, honest, [and] helped others . . . (*Lo Nishkah!* 1990[5]:25)

The exclusion of Greek Jews from the Holocaust narrative was linked to their liminal status between the dominant categories—Mizrahi/Ashkenazic—of Israeli society. Many of the testimonies gathered from Greek Jews in the 1980s came from survivors who had lived in Israel for decades by the time they were interviewed. Several filtered their recollections through the sense of cultural liminality they had experienced in Israel. Mano Avraham Ben-Yaakov of Salonica was one of many survivors interviewed in the mid 1980s. He closed his testimony—a grueling account of life in Auschwitz—with a remarkable statement:

> Now, having revealed the goings-on and my history in the camps, I’d like to make some concluding remarks, that in my opinion deserve to be longer than [those about] the events themselves. We were led like all of Europe’s Jewry to the crematoria, and our fate was no different than the fate of all Jewry. However, in my opinion, Greece’s Jewry was hurt more than any other community in Europe. At the time of liberation, no one imagined that there was any difference between the different [Jewish] communities. But despite all that we’d been through, after liberation we were met with a humiliating attitude. I refer here to the attitude of the Ashkenazic survivors, who withheld help from us when organizing services for the High Holidays of 1945. The Ashkenazic survivors claimed that we were Reform Jews, and this was a terrible humiliation. And in my humble opinion, it was already then that the breech between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry was forged. But the Greeks do not give up. (Refael 1998:321)
Ben-Yaakov identifies a dilemma that many Greek Jews had first encountered in Nazi camps and later in the DP camps, a dilemma that in Israel was to become one of the defining features of their identity. The divide between Sephardim and Ashkenazim remains to this day perhaps the most striking, if unacknowledged, feature of Israeli culture. But while other categories of Jews—“oriental” Jews from Arab countries on the one hand; central and east European Ashkenazim on the other—could be readily identified and described, Greek Jews did not fit easily into the demographic and cultural schema. In Israel, Greek Jews had difficulty negotiating an identity that captured both their “true” Sephardi culture and their status as survivors of the Holocaust.

The absolute centrality of the Holocaust to this divide emerges clearly from the transcripts of the Adolf Eichmann trial, held in Israel in spring of 1961 (The Trial of Adolf Eichmann 1992). The trial proceeded according to geography; testimonies and evidence were brought in a sequence that followed the spread of the Holocaust, moving in a roughly eastward direction. Testimony from Greece came toward the end, or easternmost, point of the trial, following testimonies from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, and preceding Romania and Slovakia. This geographic approach underscored the position of Greece’s Jews between East and West. It also furthered their nationalization: the Central Jewish Council of Greece, putting forth the initial Greek testimony for session 47, dealing with Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Greece, was “actually an official council which act[ed] in the name of the Kingdom of Greece,” and its findings were treated “as an official report issued on behalf of the government” (The Trial of Adolf Eichmann 1992:II:847). Thus, for the first time since the end of Ottoman rule, the Jewish council was recognized as an official branch of the Greek government, albeit acting on behalf of a Greek Jewish population that, for the most part, had ceased some decades earlier to reside in Greece.

The Council’s document, No. 832, gives a numerical summary of the Jewish populations of Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, Central Greece, the Peloponnese, Epirus, and the Greek Islands just before German occupation. It contains an estimate that 77,000 Jews were in Greece before the deportations, of which number 10,000 survived. The basis for the report was the diary of Yomtov Yekuel, legal adviser to the Salonican Jewish community during the occupation. Yekuel was arrested by the Germans literally in mid-sentence, deported, and killed in Auschwitz. The diary itself, which contains lengthy commentary on Max Merten, Dieter Wisliceny, Brunner, and other leaders of the Greek occupation apparatus, was also admitted as evidence. Composed in Greek, Hebrew and German translations of the diary were made for the court (The Trial
The Stereotyped “Greek Jew” of Adolf Eichmann II:847–848). Testimony on the Holocaust in Greece was provided by a single witness, Itzhak Nechama, who spoke only of his hometown, Salonica. One result was that in the course of the trial, the identification of “Salonican” with “Greek” became more complete.

Hanna Yablonka has recently written of the careful selection of witnesses at the Eichmann trial, designed to “shape the way in which the Holocaust was remembered through this highly publicized [event].” Witnesses “who came from especially interesting locales,” as well as those who were particularly well-educated and articulate, were top picks (Yablonka 2004:88–89). Nechama met both of these key criteria. Salonians tended to be well-educated polyglots and their status as Sephardim gave them an exotic edge. In addition to Nechama’s oral testimony in the court, the Ghetto Fighters’ Museum provided nine testimonies of Greek Jews living outside of Israel. In Israel, the Association of Greek Jews provided other names and possible witnesses.

The Eichmann trial came at the end of a decade fraught with conflict between mizrahim and Ashkenazim. In addition to the greater global importance of the trial, the Israeli government viewed it as a way to educate mizrahim about the Holocaust, “exposing them to a part of Jewish history with which they had had little or no contact” (Yablonka 2004:186). In the words of the director of the Prime Minister’s Office, Teddy Kollek, “. . . [T]he trial had another important function that we are not capable of appreciating. After all, a generation has grown up in Israel that did not know Hitler, and in our midst there are hundreds of thousands of immigrants from lands distant from Europe, who had no experience of the suffering about which we are hearing” (Yablonka 2004:186).

While the Holocaust was an absolutely foundational feature of the modern Ashkenazic experience—and of Israel’s Ashkenazic leadership—the more than one million mizrahi Jews who had come to Israel in the 1950s had little knowledge of or interest in it. The division between Ashkenazic and mizrahi responses to the trial echoed the divide between the two groups in Israeli society at large. While some mizrahi did, as Kollek and others hoped, feel closer to the Ashkenazim as a result of what the Eichmann trial taught them, others wound up feeling once again marginalized and excluded from the Ashkenazic mainstream (HaAretz 11 April 1961).

For Greeks, who occupied a peculiar in-between status in this schema, the dynamic was particularly confusing. Nechama was the sole Sephardi witness at the trial, which included no witnesses from Bulgaria nor any representatives of North African Jewry. As such, he was to “embod[y] the oneness of Jewish destiny,” his personal experience as a
Sephardi Holocaust survivor binding together the destinies of Sephardim and Ashkenazim alike (*Davar* 7 July 1961; cited in Yablonka 2004:188). This lofty goal overshadowed the particularity of the Holocaust as experienced by Greek Jews, and subsumed the category of Greek Jewry under the broader rubric of “Sephardim.” The heads of the Israel-Greece league, Jean Allalouf, Maurice Ayyash, and Yitzhak Ben-Rubi, wrote an open letter to the editor of *HaTzofe* complaining that only one court session in the Eichmann trial had been given over to Greek Jews (*HaTzofe* 30 May 1961; cited in Yablonka 2004:189). At the same time, non-Sephardic Greeks resented the fact that “Greek Jew” had become synonymous with “Salonican.” Just as the Greeks as a whole felt written out of the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli Holocaust narrative, Romaniotes (indigenous, Greek-speaking Jews, who were not Sephardic) felt excluded from the narrative of Greek Jewry.

In multiple ways, versions of the liminality that Greek Jews had experienced in Greek Christian contexts were replicated and reworked both in the Nazi camps and, later, in post-war Israel. In Greece, Romaniotes had struggled to differentiate themselves from Sephardim; both Romaniotes and Sephardim had fought to convince Greek Christians that they, too, were “authentically” Greek. In the camps Greek Jews for the first time came to think of themselves as a national collective and for the first time felt themselves “othered” by a dominant Ashkenazic Jewish culture. In Israel these processes deepened, as Romaniotes and Sephardim—now “Greek Jews,” a nationalized category—struggled to differentiate themselves collectively from other, non-European Sephardim and to lay claim to their status as survivors of the attempted destruction of European Jewry.

In Greece, Jews had felt “more Greek” or “less Greek” according to their cultural practices, the language they spoke, and whether they lived in “Old” or “New” Greece. In Israel, all were grouped as “Greek Jews,” even as the Greece they had left became, in the 1950s and 1960s, one of the most ethnically homogenous and uniformly Christian nations in Europe. At the same time, in Israel the image of the “Greek Jew” became more Greek, and less Jewish. The Salonican traded his fez for a Greek sailor hat, danced traditional Greek dances, played the bouzouki, and drank ouzo. In Auschwitz, and then in Israel, he was more “Greek” than he had ever been in Greece.
NOTE

Acknowledgements. Sincere thanks to the two anonymous readers who refereed this article; I am grateful to the Journal of Modern Greek Studies for identifying readers who were clearly expert in the field.

1 In deference to the historical context, and to Mark Mazower’s recent Salonica: City of Ghosts (2004), I use the form “Salonica” throughout this essay, except in the case of direct citations or quotes that make use of an alternate form.

2 Law 4837/1930, adopted 17 July 1930.

3 I use the term “Ladino” throughout this article as this is the term most speakers of it use in reference to their own language. Technically, “Ladino” refers to late Medieval Castillian Spanish, which was in use in the Sephardic diaspora through the early modern period, while its contemporary form is referred to as Judeo-Spanish or Spaniolit.


5 K.Z. (pronounced in German “ka” “tzet”) are the initials of the German term for concentration camp. Inmates were referred to by their “katzentnik number.” After the Holocaust, Dinur, katzentnik number 135633, took as his name “Ka-Tzetnik,” saying that after his experience in the camps, he no longer had any other identity. As Primo Levi writes, “Who could tell one of our faces from the other? For [the civilians] we are ‘Kazett,’ a singular neuter word” (Levi 1996a:127).

6 Sephardim made up the majority of Greek Jews from 1912 on, when the city of Salonica, home to 50,000 Sephardic Jews, was captured by the Greek army and passed from Ottoman to Greek control. The second largest group of Jews in Greece is the Romanioites, indigenous, Greek-speaking Jews who have been in the region since at least the second century. After the Sephardim came to the south Balkans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, following the expulsions from the Iberian peninsula, they rapidly established cultural dominance over the Romanioite communities already living there.

7 The similarity between this and Victor Klemperer’s observations on the German love of boxing is noteworthy: “[Linguistically] Nazism . . . was influenced by boxing more than all [other kinds of sport] put together . . . [its] incarnation of heroism [is] the glassy stare which expresses a hard and thrusting determination coupled with the will to succeed” (Klemperer 2000:4).

8 On the broader relationship between Israeli cinema and ideology, see Shohat (1989).

9 There is a copious literature on orientalism, the mizraki/Ashkenazic divide in Israel, and the orientalization of the mizrakiim. See, among others, Shohat (1988; 1989 and 1999), Shenhav (2002), Shokeid (2001), Ben-Amos (1994), and Piterberg (1996).

10 See, for example, http://www.geocities.com/Nashville/Opry/3795/main.htm

11 Eran Riklis, director; written by Amir Ben-David and Moshe Zonder.


13 Poliker’s own status as “oriental” is brought into sharp focus beside his partner and musical collaborator Yaakov Gilad; the contrast between the quintessentially Ashkenazic Gilad and the oriental Poliker, and the role of the Holocaust in the Ashkenazic/Sephardic cultural divide in Israel, is the theme of Orna Ben-Dor Niv’s 1997 well-known documentary, Because of that War, which recounts the ongoing devastating effects of the Holocaust on the families of both men.

14 On “Mediterranean Music” as an Israeli genre, see Horowitz (1994).

15 Theodorakis frequently characterizes Israeli policy towards Palestinians as “Nazi.” See for example “The Jewish Problem, According to Theodorakis” (Haaretz 28 August 2004); also “Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis is compared to Hitler after saying Jews
are ‘the root of all evil,’” at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/entertainment/music/3266891.stm

At Yassir Arafat’s request, Theodorakis composed the Palestinian national anthem, basing it on a song sung by Greek partisans during the resistance to Nazi occupation.

16 Jason M. Kemper, “Defining a Musical Culture—The Case of Musica Mizrahit,” in the University of Chicago on-line journals, humanities.uchicago.edu/jsjournal/kemper.html. See also Halper, Seroussi, and Squires-Kidron (1989); Finegold (1996).

17 Volume II includes the testimony on Greece.

18 Spelling per English translation of trial transcripts.


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