



PELEUS
STUDIEN ZUR ARCHÄOLOGIE UND
GESCHICHTE GRIECHENLANDS UND ZYPERNS
BAND 30

Moshe Ha-Elion

The Straits of Hell

**The chronicle of a Salonikan Jew
in the Nazi extermination camps
Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Melk, Ebensee**

Revised for American edition
by Ralph H. Herolzer



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Cover vignettes:

Front cover: The author as a child with his parents and sister and with his grandfather's Brudo family

Opposite title page: Cup by the Peithinospainter, Berlin, Pergamonmuseum (CVA Berlin 2, Taf. 61).

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**Commendation of Mr. Dov Shilanski
Deputy Speaker of the Knesset**

The Knesset

13/6/1996

Dov Shilanski
Deputy Speaker of the Knesset

My brother and comrade Moshe,

I have twice read your book „The Straits of Hell” with much reflection over the vision in which I see my comrades and myself in the ghetto, in the death camps and on the death march.

You direct our attention on the back cover to the current lack of awareness among us of the number *six million*, a number one and a half times the number of Jews living today in Israel. To our regret, this figure of six million does not shock the youth of Israel today. Whoever reads your book, however, will learn and understand more and more deeply the Holocaust and everything connected with it.

You accurately guide us from the life of a deep-rooted and quiet Jewish community and throw us suddenly into the ghetto. But, only a person who has been there can truly understand your journey to Poland.

I feel as if I am standing at your side in Auschwitz when you meet your friend Yona Yaacov and you hear about the extermination of your family. You don't believe him. How indeed can a rational human being believe the stories of the gas chamber and the crematorium?

You describe simply the walk to your 25 lashes. Your daughter who has absorbed the Holocaust since childhood does not understand that. I suppose that my children do not as well. Who can really understand?

During the death march your friend Binio weakened until he was about to stop walking, an inevitable death, but you were steadfast in spirit and you encouraged him and both of you survived to liberation.

And, after all of this, you again undertook another difficult journey amid risks. You crossed borders, past Villach, Udine and Mestre, places of activity known to me, in your determination to go to the homeland, to the land of our ancestors.

May you be blessed for the chapters you have put in writing. Your document will be important for the coming generations, so that they will know and understand that the Land of Israel is the guarantee that all that we endured „then and there“ will never happen to our people again.

With appreciation,
Dov Shilanski

**A Letter from Dr. Josef Burg
President of the International Committee of “Yad Va-Shem”
to Mr. Raoul Saporta
President of the Association of Survivors of Concentration Camps
of Greek Origin Living in Israel**

26th of September 1996

Honored Sir,

At the time it first appeared I read with interest the book of Mr. Moshe Ha-Elion, “The Straits of Hell”. It is an important book that describes the story of Salonikans in the extermination camps. I heard recently that the first edition has been sold out and that preparations are made for the printing of a second edition that will contain some important supplements.

I can only congratulate this effort. Our knowledge of the past is always important in learning to understand the future, in particular when the subject is that tragic period of holocaust and heroism. I especially praise everything concerning the holy community of Saloniki and of the towns in that part of Europe.

With kind regards,
Dr. Josef Burg

Author's Introduction

Eight years ago, in 1983, an impulse stirred me to deal with a matter I neglected during all the years since my liberation from the death camps, namely to seek out and recover the manuscript which my father, of blessed memory, had written several years before the outbreak of the Second World War. In this book he prophesied about the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. I had entrusted the manuscript to one of our neighbours (a Christian) a short time before I was transferred with the other members of the family from Saloniki to the Auschwitz extermination camp.

Due to the distance in time and place, matters proceeded very slowly. Unexpectedly, the opportunity arose to travel to Saloniki in March 1987 in the framework of „The Journey to Saloniki and Auschwitz“ wherein I could devote myself to this matter directly and energetically. After my return to Israel I decided to write an essay (which in the end was not published) on my efforts at tracing the manuscript. I titled the essay „The End of the Wonders“.

The journey had an additional facet. It stirred me to put in writing what had happened to me during the period I had been incarcerated in the concentration camps. In truth, I had planned to do so a number of years before, when I experienced that change diagnosed in many Holocaust survivors, a transformation in which the repression of experiences dissipates and is replaced by a readiness to lecture about them and to present them before various audiences. However, other factors postponed the project.

When at last I addressed the implementation of my plan, I was confronted by obstacles, which delayed its realization for some time. The main obstacles, included painful psychological pressures during attempts to resurrect memories of the difficult events and fears that I personally experienced or witnessed and which oblivion had obscured over the years; the mental distresses which accompanied them; the limitations of my talent to describe matters as they were; and other obstacles.

During the task of writing, I realized more than once how difficult it was for me to remember what happened to me during the years I had been in the Nazi extermination camps. I reflected sadly that I had not begun it at a much earlier time while my memory was still fresh. What aided me to some extent was a laconic recording of some events, plus their dates, which I had put in a diary begun some four and a half months after liberation.

The results of my effort related to the Holocaust period was summed up in three chapters, which I call: „Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die“, „From Freedom to

* This journey took place from 20 March to 3 April 1987. Participants included, in addition to us, nine Salonikan survivors from the Holocaust escorted by a family member (son, daughter or wife), also a team from „Galei-Zahar“, the army radio station, a team from the Educational Television and for part of the time Dr. Avi Becker, Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress in Israel and his wife. „Galei-Zahar“ devoted a broadcast of five hours to the journey on the eve of *Yom Hashoah* [The Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust] of the Jewish year 5747 (1987) and a repeat broadcast the week after (one hour a day), and the Educational Television a one hour broadcast on *Yom Hashoah* 5748 (1988).

„Serfdom“ and „For Thou Hast Delivered My Soul from Death“. Let me note that they were written at various times and not in chronological sequence, but rather following the sequence in which the events surfaced in my memory, most likely influenced by the strength of the impressions they left in my consciousness.

Knowing that what I had written could not elicit many new facts, if any, about the horrors and atrocities of the Holocaust and the Nazi concentration camps - because many of those who had experienced them had already written about these events and they had been also discussed in not a few studies from different perspectives - I did not plan at the outset for the material to be circulated publicly. Rather they were restricted to the limited circle of my family: my wife, my daughter and my son. This was for two reasons. The one, in order that they should become acquainted from a first hand source - albeit from a limited perspective - with the process which had brought about the annihilation of one third of our nation and almost all the Jews of Saloniki. The other, in order that they should know, even a little, those members of our family, who had perished in the Holocaust, and something about them - especially about their death - and so to preserve the memory of the dead in their hearts. (I hope the same for my grandchildren, when they will be able to understand and with their descendants in the more remote future.) However, due to the influence of some friends, who had read what I had written and were of the opinion that it was suitable for it to gain a wider circulation, I took it upon myself to concentrate the chapters into a book.

In the book, which now sees light, the three above-mentioned chapters have been arranged in chronological sequence and so they create a full report, which describes the way and the conditions in which I lived in the death camps, if it is possible to call this a life, during the 25 months I was imprisoned there.

As a supplement to the report of the events described in those three chapters, I have added the chapter „After the Liberation“ briefly describing what happened to me from the day I was liberated by the Americans in the Ebensee Camp, in Austria, until I walked free in the Land of Israel at the end of a period of detention in Atlith Camp, subsequent to my 'illegal' arrival in Palestine as part of Aliyah Bet. Also, I have included the aforementioned essay „The End of the Wonders.“

While the book was in the last stages of editing, I completed writing two more chapters „Roots“ and „My Childhood and Youth in Saloniki“. Although these chapters are not connected with the main theme of the book - the life of an inmate in the Nazi concentration camps - I found it suitable to add them. The second chapter opened one more perspective, albeit limited, on the life of the Jews of Saloniki in the last years before their extermination, while the first one serves as a memorial to the members of my family who perished in the period of the Holocaust.

I was especially moved to receive, when the book was already in the final stages of printing, the comments my daughter Rachel and my son Eliahu had written about their feelings as children of a Holocaust survivor. I have added their comments at the end of this book.

Editor's Note

Herein you will find three memoirs, a tragic life experience, a quest, and a family history. They were experienced in Ladino, Greek, French, German, Polish, and the patois of the camps, recalled in Hebrew and finally translated into English. My pleasurable task has been simply to clarify some passages of the final translation without destroying the color and texture of the fabric.

In the manuscript I received, Sterne-like asides take us from a straightforward narrative of the observations of a teen-aged mind abraded, mellowed, and filtered through some fifty years of subsequent experience. To leave them in destroys the flow of the narrative; to leave them out would bleach the color of the experience. I have chosen the expedient of a separate typeface when the story wanders off the narrative track.

My thanks go to the author. Having done this has made my life richer.

Ralph H. Herolzer
02 January 2002

From Freedom to Serfdom

On Wednesday morning, the 9th of April 1941, the German army entered Saloniki, Greece, a city well known in the Jewish world where my family had resided for many generations. It was three days before *Pessah*. At the time, my father had lain for a month in his sickbed, having fallen ill with pneumonia, which had led to development of jaundice. Our celebration of the *Seder* found us in very low spirits. As my father was unable to come to the table, we set the table close to his bed. We read the *Haggadah* somewhat hurriedly. With a feeble voice my father read some passages and with great effort performed the ritual of spilling drops of wine when recounting the Ten Plagues.

The following Monday, one of the intermediate days of *Pessah*, his agony began. It was clear that the time had come for him to depart this world. My sister and I were taken to relatives to stay overnight. In the morning, on my way home, I somehow knew that my father had died. I found my mother crying and lamenting and her parents and her sister crying with her. „We fell down from the tree-top,“ she repeated again and again. My father was then about forty.

The washing of the dead was done at home. No decent funeral could be given to my father. In the light of the situation, those being the first days after the occupation of the town with fear pervading everywhere, it was not possible to follow his hearse from the house to the cemetery, as was the custom. And so, the hearse carrying his coffin wended its way alone.

I went to the cemetery by tramway with a few family members, my grandfather, my paternal uncle, and a handful of father's friends and acquaintances, hardly a *minyán*, men only, because women did not partake in funerals in accordance with the custom of our town.

My Uncle Isaac, my mother's brother, was not present because he had not yet returned from the front. He had been mobilized at the start of war with Italy, which attacked Greece on the 28th of October 1940 through Albania. After the initial success of the Greek army and its conquest of territories in Albania, the German army came to the aid of the Italians and overpowered the Greeks. Out of respect for their bravery, the German army simply disarmed the Greek soldiers and they were left free to return home on their own.

Inside the area of the cemetery the coffin was carried upon the shoulders of four men to fulfil what is written in Psalms 91:12, „On palms they will carry you, lest you strike your foot against a stone“. The coffin was placed upon one of the tombstones, near the open grave. The usual prayers in such circumstances were said in haste. The body was lowered into the grave and covered with dust. We performed *Keriah* and I recited *Kaddish* together with my uncle Haim. We returned home. After the holiday the family sat *Shiv'ah*.

My father, of blessed memory, was a tall, spare man with delicate manners. As son of a Rabbi he was given a traditional Jewish education, though I don't know in what framework he had studied. Afterwards he acquired the title of cantor and he actually served as such for several years, though not professionally. He was thus freed from serving in the Greek army. He had a quite good command of Hebrew - speaking, reading and writing. He received his formal education in a secondary German commercial school, and in that way absorbed German culture. Through self-study, he widened his knowledge in other domains, especially chemistry and medicine. He also mastered French, which was customary for the Jewish people of the city as it was the common foreign language in Greece. He liked music and played the mandolin; from him I learned to play. He liked reading very much and purchased books on every occasion, so that his book collection numbered in the hundreds if

not more. By any criterion he could have been considered intellectual and learned. He worked as a bookkeeper in a large housewares and kitchenware store. As far as I can recollect, he earned adequately and maintained the family in relative comfort.

As I have thought about my father's death over the years, at first during my detention in the Nazi extermination camps with their pain and horror, and many other times following my liberation, it has passed through my mind that perhaps dying at home was a kindness done him. He was spared the rigors of being pulled from his sickbed and transported to Poland where he would have faced extermination on arrival or the great suffering of living in the camps. Moreover, he had the privilege of being put into a grave according to Jewish tradition, unlike those murdered in the death camps whose ashes were dispersed to all the winds. Be that as it may, my father's remains stayed in his grave for only a short period of time.

The fate of his tomb was the fate of the tombs of hundreds of thousands buried in the town's Jewish cemetery. I. Emmanuel, in his book "Tombstones of Saloniki" [Ben-Zvi Institute Jerusalem 1963, vol. 1, p. 11], points out „... It can be estimated that the number of Jews buried in it was 400,000 men and women over the age of twelve and as it seems not a lesser number of boys and girls under twelve years“. On p. 12 he notes that „.... The number of tombstones in 1943 did not surpass 100,000“.

The Jewish Cemetery of Saloniki

For a period of more than 450 years the Jewish Cemetery of Salonika was the oldest and largest of all Jewish cemeteries in the Near East. (See M. Molho, "Tombstones of the Jewish Cemetery of Salonica" [Salonika Jewry Research Center, Tel Aviv, 1974, p.12.]) It was situated in an area south of the town walls, and begun by the people expelled from Spain and Portugal after they settled here. The boundaries of the cemetery expanded over the course of time. By the last decade of the 19th century, before the southern wall of the town was demolished, it extended over the entire length of the outward side of this wall, from the hills in the east, to near the sea-board in the west. After the demolition of the wall, the town began to expand quickly southwards, leapfrogging the cemetery. As a result of this the cemetery separated the town into two parts, a fact that greatly annoyed first the Turkish and, after 1912, the Greek authorities. Both governments confiscated parcels of land from the cemetery, reducing its area, despite the resistance of the Jewish community and its leaders. Immediately following demolition of the wall, the Turks confiscated areas of the cemetery in order to build a road and a secondary school in which was at first housed the University of Saloniki after its occupation by the Greeks. The Greeks, following the plan of a French architect hired after the 1917 fire which destroyed much of the town, acted with consistency to transfer the cemetery elsewhere for the sake of turning the place into a park.

The matter of the transfer was not uncontested. However, after the settling of the many Greek refugees who had been expelled from Asia Minor in 1922 into quarters near the cemetery, the community could no longer bear the pressure from the authorities. In order to save what could be saved, they were compelled to make concessions. In the late 1930's they had to give up, without compensation, an area of 30 dunams [7.5 acres approximately] in favour of broadening the installations of the university. At the same time a special law closed the cemetery to further burials in most of its areas in pursuance of the park policy.

After the occupation of the town by the Germans, different Greek elements, and not only the open enemies of Jews, urged the German authorities to confiscate the whole area

of the cemetery and to extract it from the hands of the Jews. The Germans, wanting to gain the goodwill of the Christian inhabitants, found the opportunity to do just that.

At the end of 1942 the Jewish community was asked to pay a ransom of 3.5 billion drachmas (the amount was later reduced to 2.5 billion drachmas) to the German authorities for the liberation of Jewish workers who had been taken into forced labour. Since the leaders of the community couldn't raise the entire amount, they were compelled to agree to a German proposal to hand over the graveyard in exchange for one billion drachmas of the ransom. [From the Greek translation of J. Nehama's book "In Memoriam", Saloniki 1974, pp. 70-73.]

Immediately after taking possession of the area, the German authorities decided to eliminate the cemetery entirely. This task was imposed upon the municipality of Saloniki. In December of that year they mobilised hundreds of workers and sent them to carry out the work of destruction. The workers rooted out the hundred thousand tombs that were in the cemetery with outstanding agility and zeal. As for the Jews, the few who could afford it exhumed the bones of their beloved relatives and, after paying a special tax to the Germans, transferred them to another site that had been allocated by the municipality. At this new locality the remaining, unclaimed bones were buried together.

I hold scant memory of events related to the last days of the cemetery. This was because the restrictive laws the Germans had decreed were foremost in our thoughts. Even had we been informed about the possibility of transferring my father's bones, and those of other family members, to inter them in another place, I am not sure whether we even considered doing so. And if we had, we certainly couldn't have afforded it considering our economic situation in those days.

I collected this summary of the history of the cemetery from the aforementioned books and also from the book "Zikhron Saloniki" published by the Committee for the Publication of the Book on the Community of Saloniki, Tel-Aviv, 5732 (1972), vol. 1, pp. 239-240, and vol. 2, pp. 118-119.

I was a Hawker

After my father's death our financial position deteriorated although we were not without the proverbial „crust of bread.“ If I remember correctly, the owners of the shop where my father worked awarded my mother a sum of money as compensation for the years he had been working for them, which allowed us to subsist for a while. Mother's family, her parents and her brother, also assisted us. In this way it was made possible for my sister and me to continue our studies when the schools reopened. I was then a student in the fifth grade of the „Fourth Gymnasium for Boys.“ (In Greece the secondary {gymnasium} and the primary schools each had six grades.) Since the Germans had seized the school near my home where I had studied, I was sent to another school along with all the other pupils, one much more distant in one of the neighbourhoods populated only by Christians, a matter that worried my mother. I succeeded in finishing that school year and in beginning my studies in the sixth before Jews were prohibited from attending schools.

Meanwhile, the general worsening of the economic situation with the development accompanied by a galloping inflation that daily devalued the money made it necessary for me to undertake the support of the family. It was decided that I should set up a stall selling haberdashery and other wares - socks and underwear for men and women, handkerchiefs, belts and the like. These were snapped up by the German soldiers who paid with special marks used in countries occupied by Germany. To the best of my knowledge my grand-