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## Faces

*Date: August 5, 2002*  
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As many of you know from visits, we have a set of bronze tablets and a commemorative plaque in memory of the Hania victims of the Holocaust in the south courtyard – the Lauder Garden. On the tablets are recorded all of the patronyms as well as first names of the 276 Jews who were arrested in May 1944 and then lost their lives in the sinking of the *Tanais* in early June of that year. All of the Jews save for one young woman, Victoria Fermon, the daughter of the Hebrew teacher Moisis Fermon, had perished.

I knew Victoria well. Somewhat like the synagogue and the ravaged Jewish quarter she bore only the scars of her experience. As sole survivor – by a strange accident – she was the living witness for me of what a horrible mark, a livid scar, in fact, the death of a community can make on a surviving member. To make things worse, Victoria was almost an embarrassment to the Haniote Jews who had survived in Athens by hiding in the War years – not to mention the official Jewish Community in Athens. She in a sense shared the fate of the synagogue though in Victoria's case what rebirth there may be is known only on some other plane of existence.

I often thought that it was strange that I would look in her face to make some contact with the community -- to get some sense of what cast of features Rika Depas or Hayyim Cohen may have had. They remained a hidden mystery for me. A blank wall of irresolute death.

Recently I found a quite aged woman sitting in the north courtyard. She was only half seated, slightly ill at ease, and held in her hand an envelope. She asked if I could help her and so I sat down next to her and she began to tell why she had come. She had lived in the 'lesser' Jewish Quarter during the year of 1943. We once had two sections of the Jewish Quarter – the 'greater' and the 'lesser'. The former was Kondylakis Street parallel to which is the 'cul de sac' in which Etz Hayyim stands and the latter was Skouphon Street that runs along the back of the synagogue to the west. She told me that during that summer she had become almost inseparable from two young Jewish girls – Sara and Ioudita but that early in 1944 her family had fled Hania and made their way to the



*Sara and Ioudita Kounio*

mountains and eventually had been able to flee Crete for the Peloponnese where she reached her maturity and then moved to Athens and married. She had never returned to Crete, This summer she had been given a trip 'home' by her children and in preparation for coming she had gone through some of her papers and found an old photograph of her two friends. When she heard about the synagogue she came, hoping that I might be able to tell her if they survived and where. The photograph accompanies this text and from the inscription on the back it says simply as one might expect on a snapshot 'From your dear friends Sara and Ioudita'. They are in black as their father had died shortly before. Sara had injured her hand that day and wears a makeshift bandage around it but their faces, young, fresh, expectant – looking off into the distance.

This was the first contacts that I had with the victims. Their friends told me that she couldn't remember their last name but she thought that they had another younger sister, named Voulissa. There is a complete list of the victims and their addresses in the office, so I took her inside and we sat together, this aged woman holding the photograph and I.

I knew she was hoping that we were not going to find their names – but we did. Sara, Judith, Voulissa and the widow Rachel, the daughters of Leon Kounio. They had vanished with the others. I sat a long time in silence with the woman and when she got up to go I asked her if I could make a copy of the photograph. Late that afternoon I walked over to Skouphon St. and there was the house – no. 18 – a narrow three-story house with one room on each level – the sort of dwelling quite common in the poorer neighborhoods of Hania.

Nothing more can be said really.