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A Cretan Exodus

May-June 1944

By Katina Singelakis
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The general indifference of responsible persons to the memory of the Jews of Hania that has been evident makes it somehow appropriate to bring to mind what precisely took place on the morning of the 29th May 1944 when the community was arrested with no warning. The following short account was written by a Haniote Christian woman, Mrs Katina Singelakis, who lived in the Jewish Quarter – most likely on Skoufon St. just behind the synagogue of Etz Hayyim. By the beginning of the War many former Jewish homes were lived in by Christians as the community had dwindled considerably and consistently since 1912. The article was published in the ‘Evraiki Estia, Athens 1st July 1947 and was titled ‘In Twenty Four Hours’. The translation (with some editing) was made by Avi Sharon. Notes in italics are by Nicholas Stavroulakis).

We finished class and walked together back to our beloved neighborhood, talking along the way about school, upcoming tests and our lessons. Later that evening my two girlfriends, both orphans, came to our house and the sisterly love that we had for each other will always remain with me. *(Most likely these two Jewish girls were Sarah (22), and Judita (20) Kounio. There was another sister Voulitsa (15) all daughters of Leon Kounio who had died prior to the War. Their still derelict house on 18 Skouphon*

St., can still be seen. It was most likely Voulitsa who was the school friend of Mrs Syngelakis. Cf. ‘Faces’ in Jottings, Issue I, Fall 2000.)

They were both in a particularly good mood that night and we laughed a lot. Around 9:00 that evening they left and all of us went to bed peacefully. At dawn we were woken from our beds by shrill voices and loud knocking. At first we all thought it was some sort of a landing that had taken place but then we were sadly faced with the frightful truth. Battalion of the occupying forces had surrounded our little neighborhood and in a terrible and violent uproar they were rousing all of the Jews from their houses. They were allowed to take only bare essentials of clothing and food that could last them for eight days. *(The SS which normally carried out such actions with the assistance of the army was not stationed in Crete. The order for the arrest of the Jews and its execution were both initiated and put into effect by the Wehrmacht).*

What moments of horror and agony! They *(the Jews)* were forced to flee, to leave their homes, their workplaces, stores and dear friends; they lost in ten minutes whatever they had achieved through many years of hard work and the sweat of their brows. They had all been very hardworking people and now suddenly they were being marched down to the harbor carrying a few pitiful possessions on their backs, departing like prisoners. The brave soldiers herding them were shouting in excitement over their victory over an un-armed civilian population of some 300 people. *(The Jews on Skouphon and Doukas Sts. were badgered down to the harbor whereas those on Kondylaki and Portou were pushed through a narrow funnel-*

like passage that leads out of the Zuddecca at its southern end and into a small open area where trucks were waiting to load them. Other trucks had been stationed in the harbor. While this was going on in the Jewish Quarter officers and soldier were simultaneously arresting Jews in Halepa and near the Court House).

In only a few moments they were all assembled in the streets. Instead of celebrating the Sabbath in their little synagogue (*Etz Hayyim*) they were being pressed along out of their neighborhood by murderous soldiers. I cannot describe to you the tragic sight of our farewell. We had all lived for so many years together. Perhaps this was going to be the last time that we would see them and the grief was sharper because their lives were going to be so bitter now. They were all leaving and we, their fellow-citizens were not given any permission to help them in any way and my friend, the one who had been such a good student at school now overwhelmed me with a plea from the crowd, 'Katina, please, my books! Say good bye to the school, to my friends there – say good-bye for me'.

One by one they left. In the end only the old men, several invalids and scattered children remained. It was a moving sight, shocking really, when an old blind lady, a revered old woman, was forced to walk quickly without knowing where she was going – pushed along by the barbarian occupiers. Behind her another elderly lady, alone and without a family, nearly one hundred years old, was seized and dragged along the street by force (*This was possible the widow Alegra Frangko who lived at 47 Kondylaki St. She was 93 years old*).

The little children seemed to walk indifferently, some clutching pieces of bread in their hands. The hateful voices and the waving hands of the German beast hurried them along mercilessly, as if they were crumbs. Amid these frightening and tragic scenes, the tiny population of our neighborhood passed before our eyes.

When the sun had risen we could see that our neighborhood had been almost emptied of all human presence. In the doorways already there were piled the possessions of European style homes. Soon another expulsion would come, this

time purging each house of its inanimate objects. The soldiers proudly began to carry out the various possessions of Jewish peddlers and loaded them on their trucks: chairs, tables, beds, just as they were, with their linen and even the pillows from the night before. The first house that they emptied was that of my two orphan girlfriends, but soon the other houses suffered the same outrage. I went to their house and after repeated requests to the soldiers I was permitted to take a few books. Another of our friends did the same and she too saved three of the girls notebooks.

I was in such a state that I couldn't prepare my lesson for the day. It was the same nervous agony that we had all suffered when before, almost three years to the day, the first bombs fell and the (*German*) hands had seized our sweet island.

It was time to go to school – I would not be able to meet my friend with whom I had walked to school every day for seven years. I couldn't stand it and as soon as I was in the classroom I burst out crying. Our fellow students and friends felt the same pain as she was such a good girl, she had loved us all so much and they pleaded with me to tell them what had happened. It was then that I gave them her farewell. When our teacher saw me in such a state he asked me what had happened. When he heard the news he became terribly upset and said: 'She was truly such a good girl, a sweet and diligent girl.' The hours went by as if in monotone, filled with grief. Finally class was dismissed. Today I returned home alone but yesterday we had come back together. When I reached our neighborhood I couldn't pass by the street as it was piled high with furniture, clothes, beds, chairs and toys.

After they (*the Germans*) had loaded their cars with all of these things, another scene of horror and disgust came to pass. Greeks, so-called Christians, the neighboring women who only minutes before had seemed to be grieving, were now laughing with the soldiers, asking for permission to steal for themselves the belongings of their unfortunate neighbors. Luckily I didn't see any respectable people amongst them. Hordes of the poorest people rushed into the homes with incredible swiftness and seeming expertise to steal; the few things that had been left behind by the Germans. At six

that evening some terrible occurred. Germans, Greeks, children, wives, husbands – all neighbors – all invaded once again and emerged carrying out their plunder. I grew sick at the wretchedness of the sight, this in our Christian Commonwealth. But what could I do? I only watched it all with contempt.

Then darkness fell and the Germans ordered the police to guard the street overnight and not to let anyone pass.

So the great crowd of people, along with the Germans, all left singing. While we went to bed early in our soft warm beds the others were counting their newfound wealth in glee and others, further off, who knows where, were curled up without a roof over their heads; sitting in horror in the face of so much misfortune. How much could the human spirit take?

And now, I swear upon these books which escaped destruction, with tears in my eyes, that I will keep them as a memory of my dear friend and fellow student who had been so concerned about their safety.

The following day pretzels and photographs scattered were throughout the streets. After eight days several cars came to empty the synagogue. Our so-called cultured people, they ransacked that tiny assembly, the House of God. They took all of the valuable objects and then rented the building as a dwelling. This was the culminating scene in this horrible drama. It was terrible

(Etz Hayyim was completely stripped of everything save the Bema and Ehal which were dismantled later for firewood. The interior was divided up by partitioning. The pediment over the gate, along with the inscription was pulled down and used as 'fill' to block up one of the windows. The Ganiti inscription over the entrance to the synagogue was carved into to provide a light bulb. In the south courtyard the three graves of the rabbis were broken open and their bones scattered. These were gathered together in 1999 and re-buried. At the time of the reconstruction of Etz Hayyim (1996-9) signs were everywhere evident of not only the general desecration that had taken place but the

deliberate search for what might have been hidden by the Jews in walls and under paving.

The families living inside Etz Hayyim moved out between 1956-1960 after which the site was used as a site for neighborhood trash, chickens, and dogs).

The Jews waited fifteen days in Ayas prison of Hania without food or clothing and afterwards they were taken to Herakleion – and the next day they were taken away and no one knows where they are. Are they alive? Or...

(At the time of writing this –1947 – there were still several rumors circulating as to the fate of the community. It was only after 1950 that the facts became clear and it was verified that the Jews of Crete had been drowned when the ship transporting them to Athens was torpedoed off of Milos island.)

They were Greeks, they were our own brothers, and their sons fought with us for freedom during the terrible but victorious battles in Albania.

The expulsion took place in May 1944.