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THE ROLE OF THE ITALIAN CIVIL ADMINISTRATION IN THE DEPORTATION OF THE RHODES JEWISH COMMUNITY (JULY 1944)*⁵

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Abstract. In the present paper we analyse the role of the Italian administration played during the deportation of the whole Jewish Community of Rhodes. New sources gave us the possibility to study more deeply the relationships between Italian authorities and the population of the Dodecanese during the Italian's rule (1924 – 1947) and the activity in cooperation with the German secret police in 1944, when the Germans brought to end the deportation of the Jewish living in the Aegean area.

Keywords: Italian administration, deportation, Jewish Community, cooperation.

РОЛЬ ГРАЖДАНСКОЙ АДМИНИСТРАЦИИ ИТАЛИИ В ДЕПОРТАЦИИ ЕВРЕЙСКОЙ ОБЩИНЫ РОДОСА (ИЮЛЬ 1944 ГОДА)

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Аннотация. Анализируется роль итальянской администрации в депортации всей еврейской общины Родоса. Новые источники дали возможность более глубоко изучить отношения между итальянскими властями и населением Додеканеса во время итальянского правления (1924 – 1947 гг.) и деятельность в сотрудничестве с немецкой тайной полицией в 1944 году, когда немцы положили конец депортации евреев, проживающих в Эгейском регионе.

Ключевые слова: итальянская администрация, депортация, еврейская община, сотрудничество.

*При подготовке настоящей работы были использованы материалы: Архива Итальянского Генерального Штаба [SME]. Рим. L8, b. 213. Отчет о различных государственных услугах, принятых итальянской администрацией в Додеканесе. 24 мая 1914, подписан генералом Франческо Марки; Исторического Архив МИД Италии, Рим [ASMAE] AG 1915-1918. В. 56, f. 4. К министру ИД. Родос 26 февраля 1918, подписан Elia; Государственного Архива Додеканеса, фонд Центрального Бюро [GAK DOD UCS]. 1932, 20PS, ед. хр. 2. Еврейская община Родоса. Vol. 3, Центральное Бюро Полиции; Данных, рассчитанных автором путем скрещивания чисел, полученных из личных дел еврейских граждан, присутствующих в различных итальянских и греческих архивах; GAK DOD UCS. 1943. ед. хр. 4715. Сервисный офис n. 311/3 протокола. Родос 20 октября 1943. Контроль удостоверений личности; GAK DOD UCS. 1944. ед. хр. 939. Евреи, проживающие на Родосе. Центральное Бюро Полиции. 4715/6. 1943. Родос 17 апреля 1944. Подписан Cerati; GAK DOD UCS. Родос 11 мая 1944. протокол n. 2237. ЗАГС. Передача списка имен евреев, проживающих на Родосе. Подписан руководителем офиса; Государственный Архив Додеканеса. Фонд Итальянской Администрации. 1944. ед. хр. 293 p.; GAK DOD UCS. 1944. ед. хр. 1939. l. 3.; Von Westernhagen D. Von der Herrschaft zur Gefolgschaft... P. 105; "Il Messaggero di Rodi". 23 июля 1944; SME. N. 1-11. Исторический Дневник. В. 2129. Маленькая история оккупации Коса. Отец Микеланджело Бакека. 1945/1946; ASMAE. Социальная Республика Италии В. 36. Письмо России к гос. Кирхнер, 3 августа 1944. Отчеты в пользу евреев. 7 августа 1944; Franco H. The Jewish Martyrs of Rhodes and Cos. P. 64 – 66.

The Sephardic Jewish Community of Rhodes and Cos have had a very long tradition in the Mediterranean area. After the Ottomans had conquered Rhodes in 1522, the new lords harbored the Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492 [1]. They occupied a neighborhood in the mediaeval walls of the Knights Citadel of Rhodes, known in Judaeo-Spanish as the *Juderia*. Throughout its long history Rhodes has been a hub for travellers and tradesmen, a port with extensive connections to the Middle East. Rhodes was also a multiethnic centre, where Sephardic Jews lived in relative peace and prosperity side by side with Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox communities. In this respect, Rhodes appears to be an example of urban Ottoman heritage, similar to towns such as Salonica or Izmir; in fact, under the Millet system the communities received a degree of autonomy and the right to maintain religious and traditional practices, and had well-developed notions of their identities based on religious affiliation. Over time the situation worsened and Rhodes lost many trade connections, becoming a place of exile for people, who had fallen into political disgrace. The changes that happened in the Levant at the beginning of the XX century affected Rhodes as well. In 1911 Italy declared war on the Ottoman Empire for the North African regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. During the conflict, Italy occupied Dodecanese to exert pressure over Istanbul. After the end of WWI the final destiny of the Islands was not decided and only with the second Treaty of Lausanne, signed by Turkey, France, Italy, Japan, Greece, Romania and the British Empire in 1923, it became an Italian territory. Dodecanese – the only colony in a European territory – was called *Possedimento*, something original, halfway between a colony and a metropolitan area, and the local citizens obtained full-right Italian citizenship, called “small” or Aegean citizenship, that could become full after military service (voluntary), or by royal concession.

The Italian Rule

Shortly after having occupied the islands in 1912, Italians organized an unofficial census in Rhodes, obtaining interesting information about the religious composition of the inhabitants: out of 13,744 people estimated, 4,890 declared themselves Muslims, 4,290 Jews, 4,246 Greek Orthodox and 318 Catholics*. There were 596 Jewish families; 598 people lived abroad, having emigrated for seasonal work. After the end of WWI, the governor Vittorio Elia completed a new verification: 13,123 people lived in Rhodes town; 5,477 Muslim, 3,298 Jews, 4,093 Orthodox and 255 Catholics*. According to Moise Rahmani, in this period there were 4,500 Jews, including families from Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece, which had moved to Rhodes after

the end of the war [2]. This number is not low; in 1921, for instance, 4,844 members formed the Jewish community of Belgrade; in 1910 there were 4,985 Jews in Sarajevo [3].

In 1931 the official Italian census showed a Jewish population of 4,310 (2,198 males and 2,112 females; the island of Cos had a population of 169 – 100 males and 69 females). According to the records of the Italian race census of 1938, on the eve of the Italian racial laws, there were 525 households on the island [4]. In March 1938 the president of the Jewish community, John Menascè, stated that the last census showed 3,134 people living in Rhodes, about a thousand less than in the previous years*. By 1944, the year of deportation around 1737 people remained in Rhodes and roughly 120 in Cos*.

During the Italian period, however, one of the most remarkable phenomena was emigration; it involved all the inhabitants of the islands, including Jews. At the end of WWI, Rhodes was in a situation of serious economic crisis and Jewish young people migrated to the United States, Rhodesia and Belgian Congo. During the 1920s, other Jews reached relatives and acquaintances in Africa, in Tangier and Argentina [5]; only a minority tried to reach Palestine, because of the difficulties in getting a visa during the British Mandate (1922 – 1948) and in particular after the British Government issued the White Paper in 1939.

The Jewish emigration from Rhodes became more important after the arrival of the new Italian governor, Cesare Maria de Vecchi, at the end of 1936. De Vecchi, breaking a tradition that was strengthened with the previous governor, Mario Lago (1923 – 1936), began a policy of Italianisation and fascistisation in a much more violent way [6]. During his mandate, the general conditions of the Jewish community worsened, mostly, of course, because of the racial laws of 1938. Many Jews left Rhodes in the following years as their employment opportunities became restricted; and those, who had considerable assets, for instance the Alhadeff and the Menascè families, exported their capital abroad.

At that time there were many problems, mostly between generations, concerning the future of the community, the relationship with Rome and Fascism, emigration to Palestine and the Revisionist Zionism, founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky and supported in Italy by Leone Carpi, who was in contact with some young students from Rhodes. Moreover, even within the narrow boundaries of the *Juderia*, the Jewish *kehilà* was a divided society in terms of wealth; according to Father Corrado Prodomi, who served in the Italian garrison in Rhodes during the first years of Italian rule, only a small number of families were rich, like the Turiels, the Francos, the Sorianos, the Alhadeffs and the Menascès (both



Archive photos

bankers). They were the «notables», they held relations with Italians, took care of the poor, organized the cultural, social and economic life of the community, provided the ruling class and the president of the kehilà and with time tended to live outside the old town, in the new Italian districts. The others, the majority, were of humble origins: they were drivers and porters, tradesmen and merchants with small family businesses. This part of the community also tried to attract the Italians' sympathy and when the Italian State put land on sale the debt consolidated at 5 %, the Jews were the ones who bought the most, and «the poor put all their savings at the disposal of the Italian government» [7].

The Deportation

When the Allies took control of the sky over the Aegean, they regularly bombed Rhodes. Many Jews left their neighborhood and found new accommodation in the villages around Rhodes in April 1944, after heavy bombardment, as the Juderia was close

to the harbor. At that time, the Dodecanese was occupied by German troops and four thousands of Italian soldiers and carabinieri joined the German forces, together with the civil administration that remained in charge and swore loyalty to Mussolini's Social Republic. The rest of the troops were detained in concentration camps on the island and then deported to Germany.

In Italy November 30th, 1943 Mussolini stated that all Jews, independent of their nationality, had to be considered enemies and deported. At the same time Germans began deporting local Jews from the zones, once occupied by the Italian Army, they put Rhodes in the final wave together with the islands of Crete and Corfu. All Jews of Rhodes with Italian citizenship fell under the jurisdiction of the SS Athens office, which led to the first action against the Greek Jews in the spring and summer of 1943 (Macedonia) and again in the spring and summer of 1944 (the rest of Greece).

In March of 1944 the Germans arrested 800 Jews in Athens. The Jews of the various Greek mainland towns, such as Ioannina, Volos, Larissa and Trikala, were seized during March and April. Those captured by the Germans were initially sequestered in the notorious Haidari Camp near Athens, where the Jews from Rhodes would also be kept for three days in August 1944 [8]. After having finished in the mainland, SS-officers moved to the islands of Corfu, Crete, and finally Rhodes-Cos. The manager of deportation was the Hauptsturmführer Anton Burger, an Austrian Nazi, who had served as commandant at Theresienstadt (1943 – January 1944) [9].

Burger and his men arrived in Rhodes the night of July 12th, 1944 potentially without having informed Klee Mann before. However, the preparatory work had already been completed some weeks earlier by the Secret Military Police Inspector (Geheime Feldpolizei) Adolf Manshausen. As we said, the Italian civil government in Rhodes remained in charge, led by deputy Governor Iginio Ugo Faralli. At the behest of the division Rhodos, the Commander of the Italian carabinieri, Fernando Mittino, arranged a special check of Identity Cards in the old town, where the Jewish quarter was located*. The Italian Administration planned a new ID Check on German request (17th May 1944) from July 1st to September 30th, 1944. In this context, in April 1944 Manshausen probably visited the Central Bureau of carabinieri and asked Mittino to make a list of the Jewish families of Rhodes. On April 17th, the headquarters of carabinieri (at that time renamed Republican National Guard) sent the Municipality of Rhodes the following request: «Having to carry out checks on identity documents, we kindly request to draw up a list of names, in two copies, of all Jews currently domiciled and resident in Rhodes. If possible, I would appreciate that the names would be divided by households or co-habitation and their address (street and number) as of April 1st, 1944»*. The answer came almost a month later by the Registry Office of the Municipality: «In fulfillment of the note of April 17th, 1944 No. 4715/6, 1943, the Office transmits the list of names, in two copies, of Jewish enrolment in the register of this population and residents currently in Rhodes, as required with the note quoted above»*. These documents indicate that the process for the deportation started long before Burger's arrival in July. In April 2014 a list of 1,660 Jewish names, divided by families and typed on the back of 6 pre-printed sheets of the Italian Registry Office of Rhodes were found in the State Archive of Rhodes*. With the list made up by the Italian Authorities, the Germans began the registration of all inhabitants, dispersed in the villages after the bombing of April, while the Jews would not be

allowed to leave the villages of Trianda, Cremasto, Villanova and Belpasso, as well as Rhodes [10].

On July 18th supposedly a German officer visited the leader of the Jewish community, Giacobbe Franco, instructing him that all adult males should meet the following day at the former Italian air force headquarters in Rhodes, the Kommandantur, now headquarter of the Feld gendarmerie; the same request was made in the villages by the respective Mayors [11]. On July 19th, women and children were ordered to join the men in the Kommandantur, bringing money, valuables, small suitcase and provisions for the journey.

The operation, that was supposed to take two or three days, was delayed for the following reasons: firstly, in July, a group of German military conspirators attempted to assassinate Hitler inside his Wolf's Lair field headquarters near Rustenburg. The situation was not clear and the headquarters in Athens were awaiting orders. Moreover, on July 21st and 22nd the RAF bombed Rhodes, forcing many people to leave their homes and making any trips by sea difficult. It was not easy to find appropriate ships, so the Jews remained in the Kommandantur for three more days. Once the transportation was secured, on July 23rd the hostages, about 1740 people, were escorted to the harbor, loaded onto three ships, locked up and sent to Piraeus.

On July 21st a copy of the list drawn up by the Italian Registry Office was given to the Italian judge and director of judicial services of the Aegean, Rino Rossi, as we read in the last paper of the file n. 293, 1944:

«A copy of the list has now been delivered by Lieutenant Cerati to the President Rino Rossi, director of judicial services of the Aegean, which has pledged to return it soon. The other copy was given some time ago to the German Secret Police [Geheime Feldpolizei]*. This document shows the close cooperation between the Italian civilian administration and the Gestapo/SS, circumstance confirmed by the Kleemann's adjutant, K. Gödecke-Meyer: «The names of the Jews had been found under the direction of two SS men [...] with the cooperation of the [German] military police and the civil authorities of the Italian administration; so they [the Jews] could have been arrested in different parts of the Island»*.

On July 21st deputy governor Faralli issued the decree n. 94, concerning the confiscation of Jewish properties. With his order, he prohibited any transfer of movable and immovable properties; the penalty for violation was imprisonment of up to five years*. Judge Rossi was put in charge of the inventory of Jewish properties and the list helped him to plan the work with various sub-commissions, nomi-

nated in order to search Jewish real estate and record every item of value.

All the about 120 Jews of Cos were arrested and closed in the Regency building; on July 24th they were loaded onto a boat and deported to Leros, where they joined their coreligionists from Rhodes [12]. Father Michelangelo Bacheca remembered in his diary: «July 23rd. This evening all the Jews has been arrested and closed in the Regency building, being treated like beasts. July 24th. All the Jews remained closed all day long. The men have been divided from the women. We brought some food and told them some words. But what could we say? [...]. Today at three p.m. they were embarked like beasts in the ship's hold and taken away»*.

Judge Rossi went to Athens at the beginning of August, following the deportation; on August 3rd he contacted Ivan Kirchner, a subject well known by the Italian authorities in Athens native of Sudetenland and at that time director of the local german newspaper «Deutsche Nachrichten in Griechenland», asking him to intercede for Mosè Soriano and his family, who in the past had been very close to the fascist regime*. The document is important, because shows that Rossi was involved in the deportation not only in Rhodes, but as well in Athens, when the prisoners were closed at Haidari KZ. That very day, when Rossi wrote his letter, however, the Jews were load on the train to Auschwitz and the Soriano's family (Mosè, his wife Bohora Tarica, his son Giacomo and the daughters Bellina and Fortunata, numbers 898 – 902 of the list) were deported to Poland with the others. Since the documentation about Rossi's attempt reached Italy on August 12th, 1944, one can assume that starting from this date the RSI, i. e. Mussolini, was well informed about the destiny of the Jewish Community of Rhodes.

According to the former president of the kehilà, H. Franco, who was not deported, having left Rhodes in 1942, 40 people died during this long trip: 5 of them passed away during the journey by sea; a dozen perished in Haidari and 22 died on the way to Auschwitz*. Only a third (mostly young men and women) entered the camp. According to the data of the Auschwitz Museum Archive, on August 16th about 2500 Jews reached the extermination camp. After the selection, 345 men [B-7159 to B-7504], and 253 women [A-24215 to A-24468] overcame the selection. The rest were killed that very same day in the gas chambers [13]. Rhodes and Cos were the furthest places from which people were deported to Auschwitz; only six weeks later, in October, the German troops withdrew from Greece, (but not from the Dodecanese, which remained isolated), losing the important logistic bases of Athens

and Salonica. At that time, any further transportation would have been impossible.

Conclusion

It was only after the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 and the destruction of the Italian Army, that a systematic implementation of deportation to the death camps took place in the zones of former Italian occupation. Spearheaded by the so-called Eichmann Office, deportations of Jews from northern Italy began in October, soon followed by the area around Nice in southern France, then the islands of Corfu and Zakynthos in the early spring, and finally Rhodes. These late and comparatively smaller deportations are deserving of greater attention than hitherto paid to them, not only because the victims have a right to be remembered, but also because the timing of this episode raises issues of interpretation with regard to intention and contingency. However, in the context of the “Jewish question” in Italy the case of Rhodes is paradigmatic.

When the island was occupied by the Regio Esercito in 1912, an important Sephardic Jewish community lived there, who didn't survive WWII. To understand why this happened, it is necessary to set the deadly fate of the Jews of Rhodes in the broader context of Fascist Italy's policy towards the Jews between 1938 and 1945. In fact, the Fascist treatment of the Jews of Rhodes followed a similar pattern to that of Jews in Italy: control, persecution and, finally, deportation and destruction. For Mussolini, the opportunity to put into practice the Nazis' requests for collaboration in their extermination policy and thus solve the “Jewish question” in the Nazi way, arrived only after September 1943; however, during 1942 he had already accepted this solution. In 1938 Mussolini launched his anti-Jewish campaign only a week after Kristallnacht, in a very hard time for the Jews in Europe. Subsequently, in 1942 il duce granted the Nazis' request that foreign Jewish refugees in the Italian-occupied zones of Yugoslavia had to be handed over to them for deportation. Yet, the resistance of the Italian Army “on the ground” hindered this plan. Thus, it was only after the armistice between Italy and the Allies on September 8th, 1943 and the dissolution of the Italian Army that the Fascists and the Italian police were able to collaborate with the Nazis in deporting Jews from central and northern Italy, as well as from the former areas of occupation. Through the case of Rhodes, we have tried to shed light on Fascist Italy's «twisted» path from anti-Jewish persecution to collaboration in the deportation of foreign and Italian Jews to the Nazi death camps. A collaboration, which became perpetration.

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