

Greek Ministry of Education
OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism
Berlin, 28 – 29 April 2004

ENGLISH only

The Jews in Greek History Text Books

The Greek educational system places the utmost emphasis on the development of responsible citizens with a democratic conscience (Constitutional Article 16). Essential conditions for the development of a democratic citizen's identity among others are: acceptance of differences, respect for human rights and the recognition of the contribution of all peoples, irrespective of their nationality, language spoken, religion, ideology and general political identity in the process of developing culture.

All these principles characterize the entire curriculum of various topics which are taught in the Greek schools in Primary and Secondary education, and are mentioned specifically in the aims of the lessons. The achievement of these aims, is derived both from the content of the specific curriculum and the teaching methodology.

It is obvious that anti-Semitism, as an extreme expression of racism and intolerance is in direct contrast with the spirit and content of the Greek educational policy. The democratic Greek society regards all religious groups as equal, not only the Jews. In particular, the contribution of the Jews to worldwide culture and specifically to the progress of modern Greece, as mentioned above and the prosecutions which they experienced during their history from the Middle ages to the Holocaust during the

Second World War, is included in the content of humanistic and social lessons and particularly in the subject History.

Characteristically we can mention that a specific teaching unit about the Jews can be found in a lesson on ancient History which is taught in Junior High Schools (“History of the Ancient times to 30 B.C.”, p.33). Students are informed about the conditions under which the Jewish nation settled in Palestine after the exodus from Egypt, the history of the flourishing of the Jewish nation under the reign of King David and Solomon, the period of Babylonian captivity and the return to Palestine under the rule of the Persian King Cyrus. Particular emphasis is given to the establishment of monotheism and the Bible.

In senior high schools broader themes (“History of the Ancient World, from Pre-Historic civilizations of the East to the Justinian Period:”, p.37-41) are covered such as the economic, social and political organization of the Jews. Specific reference is made to the period of the Patriarchs, of Krites, of the Kings and Prophets, and all the experiences of the Jewish people are described up to the time of Alexander the Great. The Jewish religion is portrayed as an important point in the development of humanity and there is an emphasis on the high spiritual and literary value of the Old Testament (which we must note is taught analytically to Greek students in the subject “Religious Studies”). The lesson is complimented with visual material and selected excerpts from “Asma Asmaton”, the Exodus and texts of modern historians.

Students in the first class of Senior High School can select the optional subject “European Culture and its Roots”. In the text book mention is made of the Jews persecution in Spain at the end of the fifteenth century

(p.68 – 69). Most of them took refuge then in Thessaloniki, where they lived peacefully until the Nazi occupation in 1943 when they became the victims of the Holocaust.

The prosperous and active Jewish community of Thessaloniki did not only contribute to the financial and cultural development of the city but also laid the foundations for the working class movement in modern Greece. In the text book “Topics from Modern Greek History” which is taught to students of the third class of Senior High Schools there is a description (p.48) about how the integration of Thessaloniki in the Greek state was a decisive factor for the working class movement, because the great multinational working class union “Federation” which existed there consisted mostly of socialist members of the Jewish community.

The Jewish community of Thessaloniki, like all the other Jewish communities in Greece, was exterminated by the Nazis during the Occupation of Greece. In Greek History text books, in both Primary and Secondary education, this tragedy has a special position. In the text book “The Modern Years” of the sixth class of Primary School there is a full page excerpt of the Diary of Anna Frank (p.238). Simultaneously, in the text book “Modern and Contemporary History” of the third class of Senior High Schools the historical information about the Holocaust is accompanied by a photograph of a gas corridor in the Nazi Concentration Camp of Buchenwald and an excerpt from the book of L.Polliakof and Z. Woulf “The Third Reich and the Jews” which mentions the horror of Nazism. In the narrative content of the book there is a dramatic description of the Jewish Genocide in Auschwitz, Dachau and Mauthausen (p.260 – 261). In the text book “Modern and Contemporary History” for the third class of Junior High Schools, in the chapter about

the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis, there is the following definition of Racism: “Racism is the perception according to which one racial group is considered higher than all the others, who are excluded from the public life and are isolated from the social activities. The anti-Jewish racism which developed in Germany during the time of Hitler resulted in the extermination of millions of Jews”. On the same page (p.334) there is photograph of Adolf Hitler and a comment about the crimes committed against humanity and civilization because of him. The content and the philosophy of the text book “History of Modern and Contemporary World” taught at Vocational Schools is similar to the text books mentioned previously.

But as historical knowledge is permanent only when students discover the facts for themselves while involved in a process which contributes to the development of their critical thought, the history of the Jewish community in Greece and of its extermination by the Nazis is studied through several projects within the framework of local History. A good example is a project about Thessaloniki which is presented in a text book entitled “The Local History as a Field of Study in the Framework of School Education” (p.156-179). In that project the students are encouraged to investigate the history of their own city from antiquity to modern times. The prosperous Jewish community of the city has a central position in the history of the city. This project includes the use of bibliography, maps, literature, photographs as well as in situ visits to historical places and museums, among which the Museum of History of the Jews of Thessaloniki. The students follow all the history of the Jewish community and realize how big a gap the tragic loss of the Jewish community has left in the contemporary city.

The Greek people has suffered many tragedies during its long history. That is why we are very sensitive about the crimes against humanity. When we commemorate the remembrance of several local holocausts and slaughters committed by Nazis in Greece we also refer to the Jewish Holocaust in the presentations made in our schools. Especially on the 28th of October, a National Holiday commemorating the resistance of the Greek people against the invasion of the powers of Axis in Greece, we commemorate the heroism and the sacrifices of the Greek people during the Second World War as well as the Holocaust as the most horrifying Nazi crime. We do not forget that among the victims of the Holocaust the Greek Jews were also included. Furthermore we also remember the contribution of the Greek Jews to our national resistance. Another aspect of Greek History which proves the close relationship between Christians and Jews of Greece is the salvation of many Greek Jews by their Christian compatriots during the Second World War.

In Greece, contrary to many other European countries the relationship between Christians and Jews was never severed. Their coexistence is deeply-rooted since they lived together since antiquity. This peaceful and friendly coexistence is strongly stressed through the teaching of History.

Anastasia Kyrkini-Koutoula

Counsellor of P. I.