

## **Crete during the Second World War.**

If, seven years ago, when we were trying to hang the Saltiel coat of arms on the wall of the sculpture gallery, someone had told us that members of the same family were to visit us one day, we would have called him over-imaginative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Up to the middle of the last century, on this elongated and primarily mountainous island in the middle of the Mediterranean, there coexisted for longer or shorter periods, sometimes peacefully, sometimes not, communities united or divided by religious belief, the role of conqueror or conquered, ally or opponent, or even by the memory of a distant common ancestry or traditional enmity.

With the passage of time, some of these communities flourished or declined, became rooted or emigrated, were exchanged or even extinguished.

Exactly sixty-five years ago, the Jewish community of Crete, a community present on the island for about 2.300 years, with all which that entailed (land, buildings, chattels, shops, schools, synagogues and cemeteries), was violently uprooted and obliterated in 45 minutes. The time it took for the ship that carried them shut in its hold to sink.

But let us look at the events leading up to that moment.

On 1 September 1939, when the German army invaded Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany, and the world was sucked into the maelstrom of the greatest military conflict in global history.

### **THE GREEK-ITALIAN WAR**

Two and a half months after an Italian submarine torpedoed the Greek light cruiser *Elli* in the harbour at Tinos (15 August 1940), Italy declared war on Greece (28<sup>th</sup> October 1940).

The Greek army not only repelled the Italian offensive, but even succeeded in driving the enemy forces further back within Albanian territory. The Greek victories caused a sensation worldwide, lending hope to those living under the threat of the Axis powers. The war went down in popular Greek memory as the Albanian War or the 1940 War. In the end, the Italians' allies were to provide a way out of the impasse.

Adolf Hitler, wishing to control the Balkans - which would be extremely useful to him in future military operations - on the one hand, and to salvage Benito Mussolini's dented prestige on the other, was forced to change his plans, and so, on the 6 April 1941, German forces attacked Greece via Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

### **THE GREEK GOVERNMENT ESCAPES. THE BATTLE OF CRETE.**

King George II and the Greek Government, rather than remain in Greece, surrender to the Germans and become their tools, decided to escape to the Middle East. They fled to Crete, which was then still free. For a few days, Chania was the seat of the Greek government.

The moment German paratroopers were dropped (20 May 1941), the King, the Prime Minister and their entourage crossed the White Mountains on foot, according to the plan drawn up. On the night of 22-23 May, they boarded the British destroyer HMS *Decoy* and left for Egypt.

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From 14 to 28 May 1941, Heraklion and - worse so - Chania, were bombarded by German Luftwaffe under General von Richthofen, commander of the *Condor* Legion, which had razed Guernica on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1937.

*Operation Merkur* ('Mercury') began in the early hours of 20 May 1941. The first wave of paratroopers attacked the north of Chania prefecture, while the northern reaches of Rethymnon and Heraklion came under attack from the second and third waves in the late afternoon.

Men of the fifth Cretan Division were trapped in Northern Greece. The island was defended by:

British Commonwealth troops, new recruits from various training depots, cadets from the Greek officer training academy, cadets from the Gendarmerie Academy, gendarmes serving on the island, reservists, hundreds of civilians, celebrated or anonymous, regardless of sex, age, political persuasions or social class. Significant numbers of clerics also joined battle.

The defenders held their positions at Rethymnon and Heraklion until 29 May, despite the fact that the Germans had taken Maleme airfield on the twenty-second. Allied forces began to evacuate from the island on the night of 28/29 May 1941.

### CIVILIAN EXECUTIONS

Immediately after taking Crete, the *Wehrmacht* proceeded to execute civilians at various locations on the island. The execution of innocent civilians in reprisal for acts of resistance contravenes the laws and conventions of warfare and constitutes a war crime.

Throughout the occupation of Crete, such acts were 'common practice' for the German forces. Civilians were killed, while cities, towns and villages were wantonly destroyed, left deserted by the forcible evacuation of civilians and turned into scorched earth.

Throughout the German-Italian Occupation, Crete suffered a great many local massacres. The Germans viciously hunted down and exterminated the members of targeted families one by one. Whole villages were razed to the ground and the entire male population executed. The method was always the same. The village was surrounded and the soldiers gathered the population together in the main square or the school. Interrogations and beatings followed. Then the Germans selected the people they meant to execute, which they did extremely efficiently. They looted the houses, taking food, animals and jewellery. Whatever they could not take away, they destroyed. Then they burned and blew up the houses, and, as if that were not enough, the Luftwaffe was often called to bomb the already burnt and devastated village. As a postscript, they put up a "Wehrmacht-issue" notice (as regard the design), sarcastically marking the former location of the village which had been destroyed for obvious reasons.

### EVERYDAY LIFE ON OCCUPIED CRETE

Everyday life on occupied Crete was fraught with tremendous hardship. Fear, hunger, poverty and the lack of freedom tormented the subjugated people.

Dozens of families were left homeless, as their homes were destroyed by bombing or commandeered by the invading military units. Foodstuffs were scarce, particularly in the urban centers. Money was devalued, and medicines were in very short supply. The price of olive oil, wheat, barley and leather (for shoemaking) reached

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dizzying heights. Coffee and sugar were all but impossible to come by. The conquerors would very often confiscate sheep, goats and other farm animals. Barter and black marketeering became part of everyday life.

The mountains, harbours and beaches were placed “off limits”, and a curfew was imposed. The occupying powers cut off electrical power and banned its use by civilians, while also confiscating boats, vehicles, horses, factory machinery, hunting guns, radios, etc. They looted shops and homes, clear-felled large areas of forest and requisitioned farmland. Mortality soared, while the birth rate plummeted.

### **FORCED LABOUR**

The conquerors were in need of a workforce in order to organize defence infrastructure. Every single day throughout the occupation, dozens of civilians of all ages carried out forced labour on starvation rations, in what were terrible conditions. The occupying forces conscripted the required workforce for road construction, building projects, digging, loading and unloading, etc. from the registers of names at their disposal, by indiscriminately arresting civilians or by using prisoners.

### **THE RESISTANCE**

The very moment the German offensive began, civilians set up armed groups in defence of the island. Such spontaneous participation was to be the hallmark of the spirit of resistance dominating the years to come. Finding and sheltering straggling British Commonwealth soldiers and assisting them to escape were among the first activities that the defiant people became involved in. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Crete and over the years of occupation that followed, resistance organisations and committees were set up.

### **ALLIED SECRET SERVICES**

Several months before war was declared, the British secret services saw to it that Captain John D.S. Pendlebury was posted to Heraklion under cover as a consular employee, so as to organize resistance groups. Well-known and popular on Crete from the time he had worked here as an archaeologist, Pendlebury had a wide circle of acquaintances, including prominent figures who were later to play a key role in the resistance. Pendlebury was killed by German paratroopers on the western outskirts of Heraklion on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1941. After the fall of Crete, and throughout the German-Italian occupation, dozens of agents in the Allied secret services were infiltrated into the island to set up wireless stations, gather intelligence and organize sabotage attacks and other similar activities.

### **GUERRILLA WARFARE**

Crete's geographical features (an elongated island divided by distinct mountain massifs) led to the establishment of local guerilla groups. This was also due to political circumstances, since no single leading figure was accepted throughout the island.

Prestigious figures, many of whom had been in contact with the archaeologist and British vice-consul in Heraklion J.D.S. Pendlebury before the war, emerged as leaders of the various guerilla groups active on Cretan mountains.

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### THE HERAKLION AIRFIELD SABOTAGE

In early June 1942 a six-man S.A.S. team, disembarked from the Greek submarine *Triton Y5* and landed on the north coast of Crete, east of Heraklion airfield. On the night of 13/14 June 1942, they entered the airfield and, using explosive bombs, destroyed thirteen Luftwaffe aeroplanes, installations and a large number of bombs piled on the ground ready for loading. Thanks to this act of sabotage, undertaken in conjunction with other attacks on airfields in the wider area of the Mediterranean, the Luftwaffe was unable to intercept vital Allied convoys to Malta. The day after the sabotage, on 14 June 1942, the Germans executed fifty Greek citizens.

In June 1942, in response to the killing of local collaborators by the resistance, the Germans applied the “dogma of collective responsibility” and proceeded to execute twelve Greek citizens. Among those executed on 3 June 1942 were the former Mayor of Heraklion and his two brothers.

Eleven days later, on the morning of 14 June, immediately after the Heraklion airfield sabotage, they executed a further fifty hostages. The executions took place west of Heraklion. Of the sixty-two Greek citizens executed, sixty were Christians and two were Jews. Their number included trade unionists, servicemen, sultana factory workers, lawyers, teachers, civil engineers, craftsmen, farmers, politicians, an industrialist, a bank manager, a journalist, a tinsmith, a land-owner, a headmaster, a priest, a telegraph operator, an agronomist and a barber.

### ONE MORE EXECUTION

What I am about to tell you is a recent discovery, presented here for the first time. At dawn on 6 July 1943 the Germans executed 19 patriots in reprisal for the sabotage of Kastelli airfield in Heraklion. Among them were six Jewish civilians from Heraklion. The order for their execution was signed by General Müller.

### THE ABDUCTION OF GENERAL KREIPE

In 1942, the British secret services devised a plan to arrest a German general on Crete. The target chosen was Major-General Heinrich Kreipe. On the night of 26 April 1944, an abduction team led by Major Patrick Leigh Fermor and Captain William Stanley Moss lay in ambush by the Archanes to Heraklion road, stopped the General's car and abducted him.

The abductors then drove the car through the streets of Heraklion and headed for the northern slopes of Mt. Ida. After a march over the mountains involving 18 eventful days wandering in the hinterland, they finally managed to reach the south coast. It was from there, on the night of 14/15 May 1944, that the General was evacuated to the Middle East. The abduction was carried out with the assistance of ten hand-picked Cretan guerillas together with two members of the intelligence network. Men in various guerilla groups protected the abduction team and guaranteed safe passage while they were in the Cretan mountains.

### THE *TANAIS* TRAGEDY

On the night of 8 June 1944, the Germans herded the members of the Cretan Jewish community (some 265 Jews) together with Christian resistance fighters and Italian prisoners, on board a requisitioned commercial steamer named the *Tanais*.

Before the war, since 1935, the *Tanais* belonged to a Greek ship-owner. From 1940 till April 1941 it plied between Alexandria and Piraeus, doubtless ferrying Allied equipment and troops. On May 1941 it was at Suda

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Bay and sank in shallow water. It resumed sailings in early 1943, initially between Piraeus and Salonika, and from August onward exclusively to Crete.

While sailing in convoy for Piraeus, 33 miles northeast of Heraklion, the *Tanais* was torpedoed and sunk by the British submarine *HMS Vivid* off Santorini, dragging its human cargo down to a watery grave. Of the hundreds of victims, more than one hundred were children. The names of the Jewish families which boarded on *Tanais* are:

Avigades, Alhanati. Amar, Angel, Akkos, Attia, Belleli, Yannis, Dentes, Depas, Evlagon; Elhai, Fermon, Fortis, Frankis, Franco, Haskel, Hanen, Ishaki, Koen, Konen, Kounio, Levis, Leon, Minervo, Minionis, Molho, Osmos, Papousado, Politi, Sarphati, Savaton, Sereno, Sezana, Trevezi.

The patrol report of submarine *Vivid* says that at 02:31 hr, on 9 June, a merchant vessel assumed to be *Tanais* was sighted close to the patrol position.

- At 03:12 hr, in the moonlight and from periscope depth, the submarine fired four torpedoes and then dived to 800 feet.
- At 03:14 hr, two explosions were heard, and four more in the next 45 minutes. There were also sounds suggesting that the escort vessels were picking up survivors. There was no counter-attack.
- From 15:00 to 17:30 hr wreckage was sighted-15 floating pieces of wood of various shapes and sizes and twelve 40-gallon oil drums, probably fuel.
- At 01:05 on 10 June, a brief report of the incident was passed to the Captain of the First Submarine Flotilla, who commented that the target, undoubtedly the *Tanais*, was considered sunk. It was known to have left Heraklion by 9 June and has not since been located.

For several years, debate surrounded what caused the *Tanais* to sink. Many people believed that the Germans had sunk the ship themselves, so as to exterminate the Jewish hostages; the truth of the matter is that the hostages were to be transported to concentration camps. For obvious reasons, the Germans always kept the cargo of their convoys a closely guarded secret. On the other hand, as part of military operations the Allied Command made indiscriminate attacks on all German and Italian convoys.

On the ultimate responsibility for the death of those on board there can be no doubt however. It was Germans who put them out to sea in circumstances so hazardous that they were virtually certain to perish before they reached their intended destinations.

The number of Cretan Jews that outlived the war was approximately twenty-five. There were several that evaded the round-up immediately preceding the deportation, and others, members of the Fifth Cretan Division, who did not return to the island at the end of the 1940-1 Albanian campaign.

### THE LIBERATION

In late September 1944 German and Italian forces started to withdraw. By 13 October of the same year the prefectures of Heraklion and Rethymnon were liberated. Occupation forces fell back to the north of Chania prefecture, where they remained until May 1945.

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### THE FINAL ACT OF THE WAR

On 9<sup>th</sup> May 1945, the German Commander of the Fortress of Crete, arrived in Heraklion by aircraft from Chania and was led to the Villa Ariadne at Knossos. There he signed the unconditional surrender of the German troops.. The document was to take effect as of “10 o'clock Greenwich Mean Time on the tenth day of May 1945”.

This was the final act of World War II in Europe, and the dawn of lasting peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A Christian woman, who lived in the Jewish Quarter of Chania, wrote an account describing what precisely took place on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1944 when the Jewish community was arrested with no warning.

She wrote:

*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. Suddenly they were being pressed along out of their neighbourhood by murderous soldiers and marched down to the harbour carrying a few pitiful possessions on their backs, departing like prisoners. One school friend of mine shouted me “Please, my books and my notes! Say good bye to the school, to my friends there!” The following day, German soldiers began to carry out, chairs, tables, beds, just as they were with their linen and even pillows from the night before. Photographs scattered were throughout the streets. I rushed into my friend’s house, and took few books and notes. We had all lived for so many many years together and now they were all leaving. I swear upon these books, which escaped destruction, that I will keep them as a memory of my dear friend and fellow student who had been so concerned about their safety.*

One of the notes which was collected and rescued contained a school composition written by a young pupil named Markos D. Ischaki, two years before the tragedy. Markos and his family boarded the *Tanais*.

*One day the alarm had sounded and Italian ships had come and the Italian ships fought a big naval battle against the British ones. You could hear really loud cannon fire and the air raid shelters were shaking, and everyone was saying when the alarm was over, everyone was saying that the Italian fleet was bombarding Suda. I like ships very much. They make an impression on me because I can travel and see all the islands of my country. But I’ve heard that big disasters have happened on ships when there is a war on, and that lots of ships have been sunk by submarines and have gone down. It’s good to travel by ship when there isn’t a war on and it’s summer. I like traveling by ship.*

This presentation is dedicated to all those who, through no choice of their own, were lost in the maelstrom of war, many of whom, like the schoolboy Markos Ishakis, did not even leave their picture behind for us to remember them by.

Speech at the Historical Museum of Crete 25 June 2009

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