

A SHORT VISIT TO GREECE

by Yosef ben Avraham



The writer, who was with the South African Army, is seen here with a group of refugees in Greece

A LITTLE while ago I spent four days in Athens. My first call was to the Town Major's office, which is housed in the Jewish Soldiers' Services Club. Here I asked to be put in touch with relief workers. Soon I was in conversation with soldiers in the British forces, workers of the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Relief unit and members of the Magen David Adom of Palestine. From the leader of the latter, Mr. E. Shachnai, I was able to learn many interesting facts. I also met members of the World Student Relief Organisation, and members of a South African Red Cross team which had just arrived from Egypt. From the last mentioned I learned of activities among students and of the projected relief work in Northern Greece.

My companion and guide during the time in Athens was Mischa Landsberg of Jerusalem, and with him I went to one of two Hachsharath which have been started on the outskirts of the city. This was the smaller of the two undertakings and had been in existence for three months. The progress made compared very well with that which I had seen on Hachsharath in Italy.

The young people on this Hachsharath are mainly Greeks, and a large number of them are survivors from Dachau—they have the now all too familiar tattooed number on the forearm. They are training for life in Palestine. Already they are well advanced in Hebrew. Among them were an odd Rumanian youth and one girl from Vilna. Heaven knows how she came down into Greece.

Later in the morning some of the members of the South African Red Cross team came out, and those who were farmers expressed much satisfaction with methods and progress. The leader and inspiration of this Hachsharath is Mr. H. Bubek of Kibbutz Ein-Geb. He emphasised that the Hachsharath were really only temporary and would only be kept up until the youth could go to Palestine. Thus although much equipment is needed for their work it would not be justified in spending very large sums. It was not possible to visit the other larger and older Hachsharath. Altogether there are 150 persons in the two, but provision has been made for another 100.

Children's Orphanage

A trip was arranged for a visit to the orphanage for children. These children are the survivors of families

taken away, and they are alive to-day because they had been cared for by Greek Christian friends. The house is a fairly large and substantial one, though rather crowded. We were all impressed by the organisation and cleanliness of the place.

The children, numbering 45 at present, range from about 3 to 12 years. They seemed a happy little group, dancing and singing for us, forgetting, it seemed, all the horrors which their young minds must in many cases yet retain of the inhuman beasts who took their parents away. It was hard to remain unmoved, and one hoped that they would soon be able to go to a place where they could live free from fear. There was one young boy of 2½ years who had been found barely alive when eighteen months old on the street—no one knew where he came from. To-day, though a little undersized, he is regaining normality rapidly. He has been named Avraham ben Avraham.

In Athens a hostel for adolescent girl refugees is being opened where they will have shelter and are to learn occupations. There will be about 40 to begin with.

Communities in Greece

There were approximately 80,000 Greek Jews in 1939; to-day there are perhaps 9,000 to 9,500. The very large community at Salonika, numbering 55,000, was carried away almost completely, and to-day there are approximately 2,000, among whom are 72 children of school-going age, and also 80 to 90 youths. The position of the remnants of the Salonika community is particularly tragic. Those who have returned are now in the position of displaced persons, and although legislation exists, their property has not been returned. Up to the 1st October of last year out of approximately 2,000 Jewish houses and shops only 100 had been returned.

The Greek Government has manifested much goodwill towards the return of property but there is no strong action. Anti-Semitism unknown in Greece before the occupation is extremely intense in Salonika. This sabotage against public opinion is carried on by those Christians who have possession of the property and are unwilling to return it.

The Jewish quarters of Baron Hirsch, which housed 6,000 to 7,000, and the quarter called "151," built by the Joint in 1923, have been completely ruined. The housing position is extremely acute and many are liv-

ing in some of the synagogues which have now been made available. The cemetery, one of the oldest in the world, dating from 700 A.D., was ruined completely by the Germans and by some Greeks. Cows were turned loose, and now an evening cafe, built by private enterprise, is on the site. In Larissa, which had one of the oldest schools of learning, the synagogue was used as a stable, and later bombed.

In small communities, property has been returned, part by the population and part by officials. The main problem, however, is still Salonika.

Of the 9,000 people saved in Greece about 7,500 are in great distress. There is not enough food, many have no clothing or shelter. UNRRA asked the Joint to take full care of the Jewish population from November of last year. This was agreed to and one team of the Magen David Adom is attached to Joint for a winter programme. The team is naturally very happy to be working for Jews.

The Jews may be divided into two problem groups. (a) Those returning from Poland, and (b) those who escaped to the Greek mountains. In the case of the former, they have returned to Greece from the concentration camps completely destitute, and although they received the same treatment at the frontier as other Greeks, they come back without a home or a family to return to, whereas the Greeks, many of whom went as labourers, return not only with goods, but have families and homes awaiting them. Those who took refuge in the mountains and have now returned are viewed with suspicion by officials as collaborators with partisans—this has been regarded as sufficient to withhold clothing and ration cards, and property.

During the persecution the Greek Christians helped to save many from deportation to Poland. They were defended by the Regent and other Greek officials. Children were cared for and many are still in Greek homes, and already ten children saved by Christians have gone to Palestine. No complaints can be raised against the Greeks during the occupation, and much credit is due to them. The general critical economic situation in the country makes it even more difficult for the survivors, economically.

The Greek Government is loyal to the Zionist movement, which has an official Zionist Federation; in fact, the Government has decided to release 300 boys from the forces, who might be able to go to Palestine. At present there is a waiting list for permits, and if a thousand are granted, youth, children and working people will be sent to Palestine. On the 2nd August last, 175 children and 25 adults (parents) left for Palestine.

Now a little about the relief units. In January, 1945, it was decided to send relief teams from Palestine to Europe. The first area selected was the Balkans for the considerations

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Farewell to Mr. and Mrs. J. Perlstein

On Wednesday of last week members of the Palestine Society gathered to bid farewell to Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Perlstein on the eve of their departure for Palestine, where they will settle as Chalutzim.

Tributes to the valuable services rendered by Mr. and Mrs. Perlstein to the Zionist cause in Johannesburg were paid by the chairman, Rev. B. Schechter, Rabbi A. D. Perlstein and the secretary, Mr. M. Fine. Rev. Schechter also took the opportunity of referring to the 50th anniversary of Dr. Herzl's "Der Judenstaat."

Mr. J. Perlstein suitably replied.

Leaving for Palestine

Miss Jenny Maltz, of Johannesburg, is leaving this week-end by plane for Palestine, where she will spend about three months.

SOPLY ARONOWSKY RESIGNS FROM S.A.B.C.

MR. SOPLY ARONOWSKY, the well-known violinist and conductor, has resigned from the S.A. Broadcasting Corporation with which he has been associated for the past ten years as a first violinist in the symphony orchestra.

During his association with the S.A.B.C. he produced numerous programmes under the "A" and "B" transmissions, some of which were broadcast from Durban and Cape Town.

Mr. Aronowsky is taking up the position of Managing Director of a company of impressarios, the "Solly Aronowsky Concert Bureau (Pty.) Ltd.," which is financed by a group of prominent Johannesburg business men.

Mr. Aronowsky will, however, continue to make personal appearances as violinist and conductor and, also, carry on with violin tuition.

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