

PODCAST - Tribute to Sarah Yeshua-Forti

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-Dear listeners, welcome to the radio show of the 7th High School of Thessaloniki, "Beyond the Syllabus". Today, Urmani Antigoni, Papadaki Asimina and Papadimitriou Theodora will introduce us to a rather unknown aspect of the Holocaust. The topic of today's broadcast is the participation of Hellenic Jews in National Resistance during the 2nd World War.

-Did you know that Jewish Resistance during World War II was notable? 12.898 Greek Jews served in the armed forces during the Greco-Italian War. Their losses amounted to 513 dead and 3.743 wounded. Additionally, 91 Jews were killed or executed as members of the National Resistance.

-I am reading an abstract from the research of Doctor Jason Chandrinis regarding the participation of Jews in the national Resistance: "The history of Jewish Resistance, being an eternal lesson of collective dignity and virtue in the face of destruction, emits a universally human and timeless message: In those difficult years, within a rhetoric of hatred and exclusion preached by the Nazis and their collaborators, the Resistance responded with the magical slogan of inclusion, calling out to all the persecuted brothers offering them not only protection but also the choice of battle. It was a rare phenomenon of militant solidarity encoded in Greek with a word as heavy as history:" Synagonistis."

The word does not exist in English. It means co-fighter but includes all virtues associated with a brother in arms.

-At this point, let us inform our listeners that the exhibition "Synagonistis" exists and can be found with free access on the Jewish Museum of Greece website.

-Having elaborated on the significant role of the Greek Jews in the Resistance, let us now turn our attention to our central theme. Our show today is dedicated to the unknown and fascinating story of a woman, a Jewish warrior, Sara Gesua, or otherwise known as ... Captain Sarika.

-Before we continue, Theodora, we should inform our listeners that if they want to delve deeper, our sources are the Jewish Museum of Greece and the documentaries of "Time Machine."

-On top of that, we have invited distinguished historians to offer a more comprehensive perspective for our show today. But let us start the story from the beginning. Sara was born in Chalkida in 1927. Halkida is the capital of the large island called Evia. She never got to meet her father, as he died the same year. She lived with her mother, Zafira, and her sister, Yaffa, on Kotsou Street, a central street in the Jewish neighbourhood of the city. To survive, they made men's hats. Meanwhile, Sara started studying at the Public Commercial School of Chalkida. Her mother was the sister of Colonel Mardochai Fritzis.

-Who was Mardochai Fritzis?

-Apart from Sara's uncle, One of the best officers of the Greek army. He was an example of courage and ethics. He was one of the main contributors to the Greeks' victory against the Italians on the Albanian front in 1940. To understand what kind of person we are talking about, let me tell you about the day he died.

-Very apt, Antigone; a person's stance in the face of death clearly shows their character.

-On December 5, 1940, he and his soldiers were attacked by Italian planes. He ordered his soldiers to take cover in the trenches. He stayed on his horse. He galloped back and forth, speaking to them to encourage them not to panic. Of course, he was an easy target. Death found him up there. Thus, as the newspapers of the time wrote, Mardochai Fritzi, a Jew by religion and a Greek by sentiment, became the first senior officer to fall in battle.

-So, it's very likely that Sara's uncle served as a father figure for her.

-I'm sure, considering that before she turned 14, she nursed wounded as a volunteer nurse.

-When the Germans occupied Chalkida, she obtained fake identities for herself and her mother, and she fled to the mountainous villages with an identity claiming she was a teacher named Marika, a Christian orthodox name.

-wow! Perhaps this was the reason the partisans called her Sarika. She was both a Sarah and a Marika.

-Here, we should add that the National Resistance would scatter the Jews who wanted to flee and sought refuge in the mountains within those remote villages. Specifically, Sara created escape networks to Turkey. They used fishing boats.

-Therefore that means that she was a full-fledged member of the National Resistance! Amazing!

-How do you think the partisans welcomed her? What challenges did she face as a woman and a Jew in a predominantly male resistance network?

-We have her own words... listen: "I understood from the very beginning that they wanted me to make them tea. I told them I would never do that. If I am to join you, whatever you do, I will do too.

They told me: Sarika, you can't, you're a little girl, you can't do that. I said give me a donkey. I don't want anything, just a donkey, and then I know what I'll do."

-But what did she do with the donkey?

-She went to the villages, passionately talked about the armed struggle against the Germans, and recruited women. She quickly formed an independent women's group that fought, gathered information, and organized village theatrical performances. Listen to what an American journalist, who was in Evia then, wrote about her. "She is a short, tough girl with black hair and blue eyes. She runs like a man and can hit a walnut 200 yards away. Whether she shouts orders, signals with her hands to the squad, or sings on the mountain trails, she does it with passion and pride."

- Consider that Sarah created a platoon of 12 female fighters, thus overturning the strong stereotype of the time that women were only for the home.

- At this point, we would like to welcome our distinguished guests to our conversation. Mrs. Velissari Theodora history teacher and Dr Hambidis Theodoros, literature teacher, PhD in gender studies, and post-doctorate in issues of gender and ethnicity.

- Tell us, Mrs Velissari, How is Sarah's story significant for understanding and deepening knowledge of the history of the Jewish community of Greece and its role in the national resistance?

- Firstly, congratulations on choosing a topic that highlights an unknown aspect of Greek history the participation of Greek Jews in the WW II war and the National Resistance. Sarah's story is significant and deserves to be highlighted for many reasons. Sarah herself is an example of courage, strength of soul, and devotion to high humanitarian values. These elements become even more important when taking into account that, as a woman, she entered a purely male-dominated space during a difficult time and that she is Jewish. Being a Jew during the German occupation was not easy at all, and each of her actions and decisions involved a greater degree of risk, required greater mental strength, and therefore had particular weight and value.

Additionally, Sara's story highlights that the participation of Greek Jews in the National Resistance was extensive and stemmed from a source of patriotism similar to that of the rest of the Greeks, regardless of religion. It also confirms that many Greek Jews were saved from the Nazi extermination plan by joining the Greek resistance organizations. In this struggle, they actively participated, distinguished themselves, and gave their souls (many even gave their lives) experiencing a condition of equality and absolute inclusion without discrimination related to religious or cultural differences. All of this is an essential chapter of Greek and Greek-Jewish history, which deserves to be highlighted. Through Sarah's story, these elements can be distinguished very clearly.

-Mr. Hambidi, Sarah was a unique case of a woman who stood out for many and various reasons. What is the legacy she left behind regarding the position of women in society? What does Sarah's presence in historical becoming document?

-The fact that gender and religion are important elements of identity. Through these elements, a man can be considered a hero because he overcomes the stereotypes of the time. Sarah was a hero, she fought and won her independence without inhibitions. In a particularly turbulent time like that of war, Sarah shows that she is not afraid to play a leading role in the care of the wounded. Here is another identifying element of Sara, which makes her noteworthy, her age. Only fourteen years old, she is a volunteer nurse at the city's military hospital.

-Can heroism be attributed to a young woman, therefore, in a troubled yet clearly patriarchal context?

-Sara becomes a heroine, because she is not afraid, because she dares, because she reacts, because she finally becomes a wall against the gender stereotypes of her time. She helps other Jews escape to Turkey. Sarah becomes a speaker for the armed struggle. Let's think about what this might mean, when her audience is mostly women. The young girl fights against what is defined as expected for her gender. Its characteristics are the ones that will play a decisive role, so that it can be considered a justified presumption of women's capabilities. Who would have imagined that one woman would inspire other women to take part in the struggle? Who would have thought that a young woman, persecuted for her religion would at first shake off the fear? And yet, Sarah inspires. Sarah writes her own history in an era that does not allow any form of resistance not only to the national enemy but also to gender stereotypes.

-Would you say Sarah is a role model?

-Gender model. She is "Captain Sarika". It overturns every precedent. It resists the restrictive frameworks of society that imposed the passivity, inactivity and abstinence of women from the commons. Her political action is still a message for the women and people of our time. It is, after all, so important to know that neither religion, nor gender identity, nor circumstances can prevent a person from resisting when the political perception pushes to break stereotypes. Sarah is and will be a model of asserting female self-determination.

-Sarah, a young, orphaned woman, forced to leave her home, found the courage to stand equal to male warriors and contribute to the fight for freedom. She never became famous, but that's an injustice we believe we will correct.

-Dear listeners, we will be waiting for you next week at the same time to grab a coffee and chat "Beyond the syllabus". Have a good night.