

Book Review

Kateřina Králová. 2025. *Homecoming. Holocaust Survivors and Greece, 1941–1946.* Waltham/MA: Brandeis University Press. 373 pp., ISBN 9781684582570 (softcover), ISBN 9781684582525 (hardcover), ISBN 9781684582532 (eBook), \$ 40.00 / \$ 120.00 / \$ 39.95

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Homecoming, a word that both appears in the title and serves as a key concept of Kateřina Králová's book on Jewish survivors in postwar Greece, is as much misleading and disturbing as it is inspiring and enlightening. After reading in the blurb that the book was "a moving account of an important coda to the Holocaust in Greece", I anticipated a Greek version of Łukasz Krzyżanowski's *Ghost Citizens: Jewish Return to a Postwar City* (2020), or Michael Brenner's *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Life in Postwar Germany* (1999). I expected a narrative that would describe the actual process of homecoming in detail, including the return of survivors from their hiding places or deportation, their reception by non-Jewish neighbors, and the decisions they made regarding whether to stay and rebuild their communities or to leave and establish new lives elsewhere.

Yet, the first of the four main chapters, which address four distinct groups of survivors – those who returned home from hiding, from fighting in the resistance, from concentration camps, and from abroad – already indicates that this is not the book's primary focus. In this first chapter, titled "Coming Out of Hiding in Greece", the author meticulously details the process by which survivors emerged from concealment. The chapter delves into the various factors that influenced how feasible it was for different groups of Jews to hide, the role of non-Jews in this process, and the Jewish communities that were "doomed to eradication" (35) versus those with "high chances of survival" (41).

The actual emergence from hiding is merely the final step in a complex process, and this scheme (and the space dedicated to it) is repeated in the other chapters as well. At the core of Králová's book are the survival strategies, motives, and resilience of the survivors. These individuals fought with great determination not only to survive, but also to return home – understood as a place their surviving loved ones would also return to, but also as a physical space and community. The author demonstrates great sensitivity in the treatment of her subjects, focusing her analysis on families rather than individuals. While this reflects the strong bonds that exist in traditional Jewish families living in Greece before the Second World War and the

significance of these ties for the survival of individuals, it also allows readers to see the extent of the loss, as almost none of the Jewish families remained intact after the war, and very few have many members left to reunite today.

Králová meticulously reconstructs her subjects' biographies, providing a nuanced and comprehensive account. Her use of long quotations allows the voices of previously silenced individuals to resonate, offering a poignant perspective on their experiences. Indeed, this appears to be one of the most significant accomplishments of the book. By meticulously reconstructing biography after biography, the author provides the readers with a comprehensive understanding of the journeys taken by Jewish survivors from 1941 until the postwar decision to stay in or leave Greece. This includes examining the tensions and conflicts within the postwar Jewish community, such as for example the fascinating case of the former prisoners of what were dubbed the "star camp" and the "neutrals camp", both sub-camps of Bergen-Belsen, people who were ostracized and treated with hostility. Of particular value is the long time perspective the author adopts. Although formally, the narrative concludes in 1946, many stories are accompanied by subtle follow-up information, offering insight into subsequent events in the subjects' lives. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the biographies that takes both recent times and the present into consideration.

Occasionally, the intricate nature of the meticulously reconstructed trajectories led to an overreliance on excessive detail. While recognizing the value of the numerous narratives, I would have preferred a certain amount of generalization, a typology, or a clear summary to facilitate my understanding of the underlying pattern. This issue may have arisen due to the fact that the field in question is indeed geographically, socially, and politically diverse. In fact, Králová's research focuses on survivors from a community that was diverse prior to the Holocaust as well. This community included Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and Romaniotes. Events after 1941, such as the occupation by various Axis powers, the implementation of anti-Jewish measures to varying degrees, and different forms of repression, further complicated the situation. This results in a narrative that is fragmented into numerous subplots. Additionally, Králová's tendency to digress into discussions of specific or exceptional cases, such as the fate of the just 19 officially registered mixed marriages in pre-1941 Thessaloniki, does not exactly help the narrative's cohesion, regardless of the intrinsic interest these exceptional cases may hold.

Homecoming merits recognition for its meticulous attention to source material, paying as it does close attention to who says what, how, and when. While Králová largely bases her story on already recorded testimonies, I can easily imagine her being a careful and engaged listener (she also conducted her own interviews). Aware of the limitations of this type of source, she prioritizes various personal accounts and oral testimonies. This narrows the focus to survivors who were young during the

war, something Králová compensates for, however, by incorporating factual details from the Arolsen Archives and written memoirs. She consistently maintains her focus on the book's primary objective: to examine Jewish trajectories of resilience. However, she periodically pauses to assess the material from a methodological perspective, noting, for example, that the memoirs were typically authored by older men in the immediate aftermath of the war. In contrast, women, likely influenced by the conventional gender roles prevalent in Greek–Jewish communities, often began to share their experiences years later, primarily through interviews or other forms of testimony. Králová also examines testimonies that were submitted at different times, highlighting the variations in their content. The book's focus on gender and social aspects is particularly noteworthy. Králová dedicates specific subchapters to female combatants, as well as to minors and siblings who were deportees. Additionally, she examines how the voices of those affected by the war were influenced by their gender and social status in the postwar period.

I agree with the author's assessment of the uniqueness and inherent value of ego-documents, which undoubtedly make it easier for the researcher to distinguish layers of personal trajectories that they would not be able to access from administrative sources. However, I find the prevalence of personal accounts in the book striking. As I am not an expert in the history of the region in question, I am unable to pinpoint which specific, potentially useful, "traditional" sources, as Králová calls them, have been overlooked – assuming there even were any. However, I would be very interested to learn what the postwar files kept by the local administration reveal about the process of "making Greece home again", particularly during the period from the moment the survivors actually returned to Greek territory. This approach would have incorporated a non-Jewish perspective into the book. In the context of a book about Jewish agency, one might not expect significant insights from non-Jews. However, including local administration records would probably have offered additional perspectives that would have complemented the personal accounts, different even from the files kept by the Joint Distribution Committee, which are extensively referenced.

Králová frequently demonstrates her ability to understand both the individual memory work in the context of personal testimonies and the importance of the collective mnemonic landscape. Yet, many of the explanations she gives for certain phenomena lack sufficient contextualization and remain superficial or unclear. For example, in the case of the postwar hegemony of the camp survivors' narrative in Greece, Králová initially mentions that their stories were not trusted and that little was written about their experience due to the lack of sources. She goes on to state that eventually the camp survivors became the symbolic voice of the Holocaust in Greece. However, she fails to elaborate on how this change occurred. Though this might be obvious to the experts in the field, for readers unfamiliar with the Greek context, a

more comprehensive overview of the postwar Greek mnemonic landscape would have been beneficial.

Finally, I would like to address a significant omission in the book: the two intertwined issues of restitution of property and immediate postwar relations with non-Jewish neighbors. It can certainly be argued that the breadth of these issues justifies the creation of a dedicated publication. That said, research on the postwar recovery in other countries after the Holocaust indicates that the restitution of property was a critical factor in fostering a sense of belonging and stability. While the book does address the property issue in the context of the individual stories, the extent to which these attempts at recovering property were successful is often unclear. This situation is exemplified by the case of Marco Nahon, an Auschwitz survivor who returned to his native Didymoticho. In a letter to the Joint Distribution Committee, Nahon expressed his discontent regarding the condition of his property, which had been plundered, but it is not clear what happened next, except that he ultimately emigrated to the United States. On occasion, a broader perspective emerges, though it is often devoid of specifics and lacks a solid foundation of documented sources. A notable example of this is the property of the Belomorie or Thessaloniki Jews, which is merely referred to as having been looted and taken by the locals.

While the final chapter offers a concise overview of postwar restitution, it is limited to a mere two pages and leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Unfortunately, the local non-Jews are almost entirely excluded from this analysis. However, it is likely that their attitude contributed to the returnees reclaiming their property and their ultimate decision regarding whether to stay or leave. From the limited individual cases briefly mentioned in the book, it is evident that these relationships between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors, in conjunction with property issues, were crucial. I believe the striking example of the chandelier from the Monastir Synagogue in Thessaloniki that was taken for safekeeping by the Greek Orthodox priest, and later had to be bought back by the Jews from the same priest, was not an isolated incident.

In the preface, Králová states that she chose Greece as her case study so as to maintain a sufficient academic distance. However, her book remains very personal, intimate, and, in a sense, engaged. This is not only because she opens with a reminiscence of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, and closes by dedicating the book to her, but also because she constantly places her historical research in the context of the current violence, flight, and displacement, mentioning Syria, Ukraine, and other countries affected by war today. As a scholar of Ukraine, I deeply appreciate this perspective, as the historical parallels between past violence and current issues are too often overlooked. This intimate setting and lack of distance are most evident in the author's relationship with her subjects, whose lives she describes with great

sensitivity and empathy. I believe this is something we owe to our research subjects, especially if we are scholars of not only historical violence and suffering, but also current events. May the homecoming of the many people deprived of their homes today soon become a story told in the past tense.