And with these words on your lips you reach your home, as purple-horn Byzantium thunders above Salonica.

And it came to pass ...

I shall spare no effort to keep my testimony regarding the expulsion and the destruction of the Jews of Salonica during the German occupation as dry and emotionless as possible; unencumbered by historical and philological embellishments or unverifiable hypotheses. Out of respect for a dreadful fate which can justify nothing but mourning and the deepest sobriety.

The story I have to tell is neither all-inclusive nor particularly heartrending, for I was a child then, a poor, introspective adolescent with problems and torments of my own which kept me far removed from those of others. Still, so numerous were the Jews of Salonica, so much a part of our lives, that no matter how introspective you may have been, it was impossible not to have been aware of the disaster that befell them.

The Jews, as a people, had always held themselves aloof, particularly from us, a posture they regrettably continued to maintain even when the Germans began to bring ever greater pressure to bear on them. I do not know the precise reasons for the distance — though I can imagine what those reasons might have been — but I consider it to have been a grave error on their part. More lives could have been saved, many more. There was no
way the expulsion and destruction of the Jews could have been avoided, of course, but more of them would have survived, the young in particular. I surmise that the satanic nature and the unyielding brutality of their tormentors caused the Jews to choose in silence, the path of martyrdom, they must have imagined that, despite its horror, that path had some logical end-point. How lamentably mistaken they were to be.

It is also true that the Greeks had always looked on the Jews with indifferent acceptance, neither loving, nor hating them. They made them the butt of their humor, of course, as testified by an extensive repertoire of jokes and stories. But in no manner did the Greeks hate them — with the exception of certain isolated instances of personal discord, intense commercial rivalry or acts of open incapacity. The same kind of thing occurs with far greater frequency among like individuals. Several antisemitic organizations existed, but such was their insignificance that they were unable to play a destructive role even during the occupation.

The Jews responded to indifference with indifference, or with smiles and hypocritical courtesies, not to mention their legendary double-edged diplomatic language. And possibly even with jokes which they have not yet mustered the courage to tell us.

Though Jews had always lived in Salonica, it was the lower town, and particularly its westernmost portion, that had attracted the greatest concentration, either as employees, store owners or families. It was here that I came to know them, and that I remember them.

From 1941 on, we lived on the top floor of a house on Justinian Street. At first, its number was 8, before being changed to 14. Justinian Street began just opposite the Church of the Acheiropoietos and, interrupted by Courthouse Square, stretched as far west as the Caravansary. We resided in that portion of Justiniati Street which fell between Brass Founders and Venizelos Streets. That area, so the history books say, used to be called “Old Jewtown,” which may have meant it was inhabited by elderly Jews, or that it had once been the oldest of the city’s Jewish districts.

In 1941, many Jews still resided in “Old Jewtown,” forming perhaps a third of the total population of the neighborhood. They did not seem poor, nor did they look rich. Perhaps most of them were storekeepers, owners of small or medium-sized shops. They stayed close to their homes, intensely devoted to their families, and avoided relations with us.

As we learned later, most of these families had been concentrated — along with us, as it turned out — in Old Jewtown. They moved from their isolated dwellings and took up quarters in the city center, where very few people wished to live because it was a frequent target of bombing raids. They must have believed that in the city center, in its display window so to speak, they would be better protected from the arbitrary measures of an occupying power which did not conceal its hatred for them.

On the second floor of our building, 8 Justinian Street, lived two Jewish families, who shared the dwelling. They had moved in shortly before we did. Two couples, with three children. A red-haired girl with a freckled face, between fourteen and fifteen years old, a youth of seventeen or eighteen, and a little three or four-year-old boy named Inc. The two elder children attended school, probably a foreign school, possibly French. All I can remember is a family name. One of the
men was called Sedo. "Madame Sedo" we called one of the ladies, who often spoke French on the staircase with our French-speaking landlady, Asimo Korpanoglou, from eastern Rumelia. Given our own problems, and the fearful difficulties faced by the Jews, we had hardly made each other's acquaintance. Then too, I was just a boy, and it was impossible for me to develop relations on my own. Once I went with Mr. Sedo to his shop for some reason; it was on Commensus Street, behind the Modiano market. I cannot even remember what kind of shop it was, because like all the shops of the day, it had no merchandise.

At street level, below our house on Justinian Street, were two shops: a bakery and a coffee roaster's. The coffee roaster's belong to a Jew named Azuz. His shop, it goes without saying, had no real coffee to sell, but a mixture made of ground chick-peas, barley or wheat. It was run by the father, along with his two grown sons, fine looking young men with muscular builds and large, expressive eyes, like Armenians. The two were either boxers or wrestlers, which was immediately apparent in their physiques. I have no idea where Azuz lived, but he spent most of his time in his shop, or on the sidewalk outside the shop. In fact, most of the shop owners spent most of their time on the sidewalk, since that section of Justinian Street boasted -- and still boasts today -- a heavy concentration of furniture shops that would set their merchandise out on the sidewalk every morning. In spite of the hunger, furniture sold even then, purchased for the most part by black marketers, Germans and peasants from the villages. Many of these shops belonged to Jews.

Many more Jews lived in other houses in the neighborhood, particularly on Siatista Street. But this only became apparent after they had been rounded up, when their homes were abandoned, left without the owners who had been issued a one-way ticket to the death camps.

This section of Justinian Street, from Brass Founders to Venizelos, and including Siatista Street, which ran perpendicular to it, formed a T. If you closed off its three exits -- Brass Founders, Venizelos and Philip -- you could control the entire neighborhood. Which was precisely what the Germans did. In the frightful fullness of time, the spring of 1943, when they took the decision to activate the expulsion they had been so meticulously planning all along, one of the first ghettos they created was this very T, made up of Justinian and Siatista Streets.

The method employed to achieve, with a minimum of turmoil, the enclosure of so many thousands of people has become well-known. But even the crimes committed with impunity by heavily armed men against the unarmed, even such crimes present difficulties. If you happen to be a stickler for order, then confusion can make you ill. Small wonder that the terrorizers encountered problems: problems in breaking morale, problems in humiliating their charges, problems in drawing up lists, in singling out the victims, problems in stealing family fortunes, in enclosing the ghetto, in herding their victims to the station, in transporting them by train, in robbing them of their remaining goods en route, in the selection, the short-term utilization, the immediate elimination of the weak, and the final elimination of all. All these problems had to be solved; they required efforts, planning. And indeed they were all solved, in the optimum manner.
From early in the occupation, printed notices had appeared in several stores, on Tsimiski Street in particular. They read: "Jews Unwelcome." The notices were placed in the display windows, and on the glass doors. At first they made an impression on us, a disagreeable one, but we quickly grew accustomed; every day we had fresh troubles of our own. And when you got right down to it, we weren't Jews...

Soon after, we heard that in Liberty Square — what an ironic coincidence! — the Jews had suffered public humiliation at the hands of the Germans. These were things we learned by word of mouth. The Jews in our building breathed not a word. But Mr. Sedo had been reduced to little more than skin and bone.

One winter morning we were startled to see some people walking the streets with large stars cut from yellow cloth sewn over their hearts. They were the Jews, who had been ordered to wear the star whenever they appeared in public; failure to do so meant danger. And danger could mean only one thing: death. The Jews living in our building breathed not a word. Perhaps they believed that through patience and self-humiliation they would be able to sidestep their frenzied tormentors.

For several days, though it lasted for less than a month, Salonica was flooded with ambulant yellow stars. The emblem had been scrupulously designed. It was visible from a great distance. Berahia, a classmate of ours at the Third High School for Boys, came to school wearing his star. The boys, who had no idea what it meant, took it humorously and began to tease him. Most of the pupils were from the uptown neighborhoods of Salonica where there lived few, if any, Jews, and were unaccustomed to the star. They were working-class kids, kids from poor families, badly educated, hungry, acquisitive, tough kids seething with jealousy of those better off than they were. They would even torment me, as I was quieter than them. One of them, I remember, made a cross out of paper and pasted it to the back of Berahia's coat using pitch from the pine-tree in the school yard. Poor Berahia, who still looked like a little boy, moved slowly, with the star in front and the cross on his back. But I could not say that the incident caused much of a stir. It was a tasteless joke; I doubt he even understood it himself. A few days later he stopped coming to school. He was a tall, thin kid; taciturn, deliberate, and extremely quiet.

I may have been the only one of my classmates who actually lived in the midst of so many Jews. I attended that particular school because we had once lived in its district; when we moved we shifted districts, but I continued to attend the same school. And as there were no Jews in our school, my fellow-students were unconcerned by their suffering; it was for this reason that I said nothing about the things I heard and saw in our neighborhood. Unconsciously, I was employing the same tactic of silence that the Jews employed with regard to outsiders. I did the same thing when I went for lunch at the Catechism Academy where I ate lunch every day. No one said a word, and I kept my mouth shut. I do not believe it was out of fear. We had no sense of danger.

I likewise said nothing when, one morning, I spotted a sheet of paper pasted to the door of the Jews' apartment, listing the names of the people living there. There were far more names than we had suspected; that was how we learned that other Jewish families from other, non-Jewish neighborhoods which were more difficult to
control, had been moved into the apartment – against their will, of course.

Our neighborhood, that tiny T-shaped district I described earlier, became a Jewish ghetto. At the same time, at the points of the T – on Brass Founders, Venizelos and Philip Streets – gendarmes, Greek gendarmes, made their appearance, standing guard day and night. This meant that the Jews, even with their yellow stars, were no longer free to circulate in the city; only in the ghetto. And only at certain times of day. I imagine that many such ghettos were created. Wherever the Jews happened to be when that happened was where they stayed. They could not go to their shops, nor visit their families if they lived in another ghetto; they could not go shopping. They all but vanished from sight.

Restricted to their houses, they waited patiently. On the streets of the ghetto, aside from one another, we encountered quick-stepping young Jews wearing yellow arm-bands. They must have been a kind of militia set up by the Jewish Community, or perhaps even by the Germans. Whoever they were, we hated them, without knowing exactly why. Their empty activism and their bravado made them suspect in our eyes. We were probably right; a few of them reappeared in the neighborhood after the Jews had been rounded up, carrying themselves exactly the same way. After that, they too vanished.

Everyone else – we Greeks, that is – was free to enter and leave the ghetto. I continued attending school, and the members of my family went about their business. No one bothered us, no one asked us for our papers. As though we even had papers! That is why I am convinced that, even at the last moment, it would have been relatively simple for many Jews to escape. Of course, there were the lists on the doors. Woe unto them if the names did not match during a head count.

People in our building had begun to whisper that the Germans would be taking the Jews away any day now. We felt that we never suspected the evil that was soon to befell them. Neither did the Jews – those who lived in our building, at least – ever imagine that such a disaster could strike them. Mme Sedo complained to my mother that in Cracow, where they were to be taken, the weather was cold, and that Jews spoke another language. That meant they would not be able to communicate. Mme Sedo was after me to help take a big ceramic heater that they kept in storage somewhere outside the ghetto. She wanted me to accompany the porter, whom she would pay. I finally wiggled my way out of it, with various excuses, not knowing why. It pained us to take things from the condemned.

Deep down we had the suspicion that something grave was afoot, something unspeakable. And the Jews were far more concerned than they let on. At night we heard muffled chanting from their darkened apartment. They gathered in their living room, in the darkness, and sang in low voices. On some evenings, from the neighboring houses, particularly those on Kleisoura Street, that lay to the south of us and that harbored many Jews, we heard laughter, singing and hand-clapping late into the night. We hardly knew what to think. Who was having a party? The next day we found out. The Jews were carrying as fast as they could, tying up loose ends, in the hope that somehow they would be treated differently if they were married. They could not imagine the cruelty of their tormentor, nor what he held in store for them...
Just across from our house, at the corner of Justinian and Siatista Streets, lived a couple; the wife had just given birth. They were friendly people, moderately prosperous. They had hung from their balcony a string which reached down to the furniture shop at street level. There, amid the awnings and theropes, the string was all but invisible: clearly, it was attached to a bell or buzzer of some sort. It must have been used to signal the new mother’s household to take some kind of measures. It was the only sign of self-protection I was able to detect. But, when it came to power, what avail was a little bell against the terrible German doomsday machine?

I recall a street game the Jewish kids had played. It would have been one or two days before the roundup, perhaps even a Sunday afternoon, for the shops on the street were closed. Six or seven adolescents had ventured out into the street, aching for activity. I was standing in the doorway, not far away. The gendarmes posted at the ends of the street would have seen them, not to mention hundreds of eyes from the surrounding houses. They had inflated a prophylactic like a balloon, and were batting it back and forth like a volleyball. I remember them shouting “Beba! Beba!”, short for “Bebecca,” the most popular brand of the day. But with their Spanish accent, they seemed to be bleating.

It was the spring of 1943. The situation on the war front had changed, to the detriment of the Axis powers. Information was filtering through, and we had begun to pluck up our courage. Even the internal situation had shifted slightly. Greece was no longer as it had been in 1941, a country paralyzed by defeat. The resistance was burgeoning in the mountains and in the cities. There are no “difficult” mountains near Salonica – difficult for pursuers, I mean. That too was the Jews’ misfortune. Many more could have fled. But all exits were blocked. The Jews of Salonica were the most unfortunate of all of us. Not only had they endured the hunger, and suffered the arrogance of a fanatical occupant; they were lost exactly when, for the rest, the situation had at last begun to improve.

Finally, one morning in April, a particularly mild morning as I remember, came the worst. A loudspeaker at the head of the street blared: “All Jews to the door. Ready for departure!” It was the propaganda wagon, a black Opel, spewing guttural shouts, barking bestial commands in German. The neighborhood had been sealed off. Peeking through the blinds we watched as SS-men and the men we called “blacksmiths” thundered up and down the stairs, shouting savagely and hammering on doors. “They’re taking the Jews away!”

We dressed and hurried down from the fifth to the second floor, where lamentation and confusion reigned. The latest arrivals had already made their way down to the street; we never even saw them go. Our neighbors were still there, running to and fro in a frenzy. Not so much a frenzy of despair as of preparation. Not to leave behind them any of the essentials, the things they could not do without. The basic items had been ready for a long time before, of course, packed away in trunks. But now they were chasing wildly back and forth over odds and ends. Madame Sedo was boiling an egg for Ino, his last. She stuffed it into his mouth, as from the outside came bestial commands. All the doors were wide open, as ordered. The people looking on saw the same scenes, as the Germans dragged the Jews from their homes on Siatista Street and shoved them into line.
They saw elderly men and women being dragged along in their night-clothes. The residents of the building, women mostly, had come down to the second floor to kiss Madame Sedo good-bye. One Greek lady, crossing herself, said in a loud voice: "As God is my witness, I shall return it all." It seems they had entrusted her with some of their belongings, and I can confirm they had chosen well.

One by one the Jews made their way down the winding stairs where I had scratched the letters EPON (National Panhellenic Youth Organization) into the plaster with a nail. My father had all but whipped me: "You're writing that in my house?" he shouted. The last one down was Madame Sedo, holding Ino by the hand. I snuck halfway down the stairs, and peeked through the front door. All of them were standing at the doorway, as though having their pictures taken. First the head count to make sure everyone is present and accounted for, then they would join the cortege. Our neighbors were there, to a man, to a woman. "The salt of the earth." The column was forming up on Venizelos Street.

The doors to the Jews' apartments gaped open. The neighbor women took whatever they could, and as it turned out, they did the right thing. They took mostly clothing, and smaller items, the kind of things you can move quickly. Because there was fear in the air. For days the Germans had been declaring that the penalty for theft of Jewish property would be – what else? – death.

I went back upstairs to get ready for school. I was a well-disciplined lad, but that morning I also wanted out of that hell-hole. As I was preparing my books, I looked out the window onto the Via Egnatia, where I saw long columns of Jews marching toward the railway station. They had come from other districts; they must have set out even earlier than our neighbors. Surrounding them, as if they were criminals ready to make a break at any second, were heavily armed Germans with weapons at the ready. Ranks of stretchers, born by young Jews, carrying the crippled and the infirm brought up the rear of each contingent.

I never saw our own Jews depart. The house wasn't properly located, and it was dangerous to get too close. When I came out onto the street with my school-bag they were gone, but the gendarmes were still standing guard at the exits of the ghetto. I left at the Brass Founders' exit. "Where to?" the gendarme asked me softly, with a troubled look on his face. "School," I said and reached into my pocket for the passbook I carried as the child of a railway worker. "On with you," he muttered even before I could show it. And so it was that I made my way across the lower section of Courthouse Square. The square's upper quadrant, as far as Justinian Street, had been turned into a military zone crowded with armored vehicles, tanks and anti-aircraft weapons. I still wonder that the Allied air-raids didn't destroy all of us.

There, among the pines that ringed Our Lady of the Brass Founders, I spotted groups of Gypsies staring greedily in the direction of our neighborhood. For the time being they could not make a move; the guards were still on duty. But they had been well informed, and were clearly familiar with the roundups of Jews which had taken place earlier, in other districts, of which we knew nothing. They knew that the German orders regarding Jewish property were not being enforced; they were
ready to pounce. At the time I never suspected a thing. I thought they were simply looking out of curiosity.

At school, which was quite far away, near Kemal's birthplace, nobody seemed particularly upset. Most of my classmates did not even know that the Germans had been rounding up the Jews; certainly none of them had seen what I saw that morning. It wasn't long before I had forgotten most of it; and by the time classes started, I had forgotten the whole thing. I was just a kid...

But when I returned home at midday, no sooner had I crossed the square than I began to slide back into the atmosphere. The closer I got the more clearly I realized that looting had taken place. A few pathetic wretches were still dragging trunks, couches and empty drawers through the dusty streets; and heavy, leather-bound books.

The door to our building hung open, the staircase strewn with mattress stuffing and refuse. The Jews' apartment lay wide open, obviously plundered. Inside, almost nothing remained. The floors were thick with garbage, heaps of pumpkin seed shells that the Jews must have nibbled on as they waited, shredded books in the bathroom. That was the only thing that moved me. In the kitchen, the stove tiles had been ripped off in the search for hidden "treasure," and in one corner of the bedroom stood a single bed with a few broken springs. It was on that bed, which we carried upstairs, that I would sleep until I grew to manhood.

But worst of all, the Gypsy regiments and battalions did not limit themselves to the homes of the Jews; they grabbed whatever came to hand. They ripped the windows from our staircase, even pried the metal cups from the doorbells. It took us years to repair the damage. We froze, got wet, and slipped countless times on the snow and ice in that unprotected staircase. Our family had its hands full protecting our own apartment from the looters. They had taken up positions at the head of the stairs, armed with whatever they could lay hands on. We were fortunate that those Gypsies were really not all Gypsy. If they had been the modern-day variety, they would have burned the place to the ground.

From high up, at the back of the house, we watched the following scene unfold: looters had broken into the Jewish shops from the rear, and emptied them. People living on Kleisoura Street ransacked the shops that fronted on Justinian Street. You could see beds, buffets, closets, couches, dressers being hauled up by rope to the second or third floor, invisible from the street. And all of it was being done with terrible haste, with anguished movements. A few days later the Germans portioned out the shops to various individuals, whom it would be reasonable to assume that they had carefully chosen. But when time had come to take possession of the shops, they were empty, and that alone was excellent punishment - the only punishment.

At first we thought they had loaded the Jews directly into the trains. Later we found out that they had parked them at the station, in the sordid, decrepit Hirsch district that they had surrounded with heavy barbed wire, some of which has survived to this day. From there they shipped smaller groups north in sealed goods carriages. In fact, it was not long before we learned exactly how, at first hand.

My father was a railway engine-driver. Passenger trains were a rarity then. Most trains had been requisitioned by the occupation forces. Borders in the Balkans
had broken down: the entire region was under German military control. Greece and Serbia were directly linked by rail. Greek trains did not stop at the frontier, as they do today, but traveled as far north as Belgrade if need be. When my father left, no one knew when he would be back. Then, suddenly, he would reappear. Exhausted, filthy, his socks rotting on his feet. A heartrending sight.

Late one night he had returned home in a particular turmoil. He had driven a train full of Jews as far as Nish. “It’s awful what they’re doing to the Jews,” he said. “They’re shipping them in freight cars, without food and water. Without air. The Germans force us to stop the train out in the countryside, so they can make the cull. Inside the cars you can hear the people screaming, and hammering on the walls. It’s not only for water and air, it’s to throw off the dead bodies. I saw them take a kid the age of our Laki,” he said, stroking my younger brother’s head. That was when he broke down in tears. Shoulders heaving, the tears streamed down his face. “The Germans, they can hardly walk from the watches and the bracelets and the necklaces they grab at gunpoint. They even threw some stuff my way.” He showed us a handful of broken watches; I may have kept some of them down to this day.

Later, he drove other trains north, overcome each time with emotion. With horror in his voice he told us about the hell of the concentration camp at the station. The Germans were molesting the women. The Jews had lost their will power. Hunger, filth, disease, brutality. Today we read that the Jews of Greece arrived at their destination in a state of collapse, and that most were led straight to the ovens ...

A few days later a tall, thin German who was getting along in years came to the building, accompanied by an interpreter. He asked that the Jews’ apartment be opened, went in and began to count the rooms in a loud voice: ein, zwei, drei ... “Germans! Germans are requisitioning the Jews’ place! We were going to have a German living next door to us. Who knows what kind of devil he’ll be ...” we said.

Sure enough, he took the place. The man wasn’t a German, but a Vlach from western Macedonia who had studied in Germany and maintained excellent relations with the Germans, doing technical jobs. He settled in and stayed for years. And the truth is that, except for his old man’s odd ways, he never bothered a soul. He was not a collaborator. But when the Germans left and EAM took over, he got the fright of his life. He started being nice to us, getting acquainted. We were proletarians; he wanted to be on good terms with people like us. But he survived, and in the years that followed, bitter years for us, there was not an important position that he did not occupy. He was a man you could trust. A friend of the Germans ...

Not a single one of the Jews who once lived in our building ever returned. Gone was plump Mme Sedo, gone was little Ino, gone was the red-headed girl. Only a tiny handful returned eventually to the neighborhood, and those that did were broken people. One by one, silent, humiliated, they returned, took up their homes if they could, and returned to their occupations.

Perhaps a year after the war had ended, and everything had begun to seem far away, almost forgotten, we noticed one day that the coffee roaster’s shop at street level in our building had opened. Mr. Azuz’s two sons, the wrestlers or prizefighters, had returned. But not old
Azuz himself. He too had vanished in the faraway camps of madness.

_Here I have written down, in the month of February 1943, the things that I saw, my testimony regarding the expulsion of the Jews of Thessaloniki by the Germans._

_I have written it for those innocents alone, and for no one else._

_Thessaloniki, awake and asleep..._

If there is one subject that never fails to arise in the course of a political discussion, it is the absence of Salonicians from public life, and from the broader political arena. When I say _absence_, let me make it quite clear that I am speaking not of total, or even formal non-participation, for no such thing exists. That of which I speak is the utter lack of political influence, of political personalities, of people whose opinions and actions carry enough weight to shape the political life of the country. Certainly no one will find fault with this last statement.

In all the years since liberation our city has produced not one outstanding political figure, nor has it generated forceful, lively and original political groups or circles that might have been able to found a tradition, a political school worthy of comparison with those of Patras, of Crete, of the Ionian islands, or even of the eastern Aegean.

I can imagine what some people are thinking as they read these lines. Not only has Thessaloniki been unsuccessful in reaching such a point on its own, so has northern Greece as a region. While there is much to be said about the northern region, I prefer to focus on Thessaloniki, which has always been a socially sophisticated