

# Greece's oldest Auschwitz survivor has died

Katerina Selin  
30 December 2020

On December 1, Greece's oldest Auschwitz survivor, Esther Cohen, died at the age of 96. In 1944, as a young woman, she was deported from her hometown of Ioannina to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp along with her parents and six siblings. Apart from one sister, her entire family died at the camp.

The northern Greek city of Ioannina in the Epirus region had a strong Jewish community, at one time numbering up to 6,000, with a history reaching back to the Byzantine period in the 9th century. For centuries, Jews, Christians and Muslims lived together in Ioannina.

The Nazis invaded Greece in the spring of 1941 and wiped out almost the entire Jewish community overnight. On March 25, 1944, at dawn, over 1,700 Jewish residents were rounded up by the Gestapo and Greek police and taken to the town's central Mavili Square. From there they were deported to German-occupied Poland. Among the group were 651 children under the age of 13. Only a few Jews managed to escape deportation by hiding in the mountains and joining the resistance—including Esther's late husband Samuel Cohen.

None of the perpetrators from the SS, police and Wehrmacht were ever held accountable for the murder of Ioannina's Jews. In 2015, an article dealing with the crimes of the Nazis in Greece and the subsequent silence about what had taken place appeared on the WSWS.

In a 2014 interview with the Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*, Esther Cohen described the brutal circumstances of her deportation: "They stormed through the alleys yelling and shooting, banging on doors and breaking windows."

"Take a bundle with you and within an hour everyone must be in the square. What should one do first in just one hour? We were seven siblings and my parents. My sister-in-law was eight months pregnant, it was

madness. My mother couldn't understand why she couldn't go to the synagogue on Saturday for services. ... We pulled her along and took her to Mavi Square. One behind the other, one in slippers, another barefoot, one in pajamas, the babies screaming."

A few months earlier, the Wehrmacht had carried out a brutal massacre in the nearby village of Lingiades. Wehrmacht soldiers crammed 82 villagers into cellars, shot them and set fire to their houses.

The Jews of Ioannina were transported on trucks over the mountains to the central Greek town of Larissa where they were locked up for days in a pitiable shack with no windows or roof. Several died there, including babies, Cohen related. The Nazis searched all of the prisoners and confiscated gold and valuables, which they collected in large baskets used for watermelons.

They then loaded the prisoners into cattle cars. "They forced 75 people into a space for two horses. The wagons had no light and no water, old and young. Eleven days travel without food or water in freezing wagons."

In a 2019 interview with the state television station ERT, Cohen described how the wagons arrived late at Auschwitz after they had been bombed. Upon arrival at the camp, "the parents were loaded onto other cars. Men, children, the cars were full and left. We never saw anyone again. Since then I have had no one—no mother, no siblings, no one."

At the camp she was tattooed with the number 77102. She told *Kathimerini*, "I was no longer a person, I was a number." Cohen asked a prisoner from Thessaloniki who shaved her head where her parents had been taken. He pointed to a flame in the sky. "That's where they're burning your mother and your family." Cohen fainted and woke up later in the block. In the concentration camp, she was forced to hew stones and do hard labor with the other prisoners.

Of Ioannina's Jewish community, only 180 people

survived the hell of Auschwitz. Today, the community has barely 50 members. Of Greece's 80,000 Jews, 80 to 90 percent died in the Holocaust. Esther Cohen was one of the more fortunate: a German-Jewish doctor who treated her in a hospital ward hid her at the last moment when all of the patients were herded into the gas chambers.

In her interview, Cohen expressed concern and anger about the growing influence of fascist forces in Greece today. When she talked about a concentration camp guard in SS uniform, she also recalled today's fascists—the “bastards”—of Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn): “You have no idea what those on TV remind me of. How can we tolerate this in our poor Greece, a country that has been praised and sung about by so many poets and great people?”

In 2014, Cohen became known in Germany when the German president at the time, Joachim Gauck, went to Ioannina and Lingiades during a visit to Greece. Gauck's hypocritical visit was primarily aimed at making propaganda for the German government, which dictated the EU's austerity policy in Greece, ultimately pursuing goals similar to those of the Nazis: the ruthless imposition of German economic interests and the re-organization of Europe under German leadership.

“Seven, seven, one hundred and two”—Cohen greeted Gauck with her concentration camp number. When asked later in an interview if she felt any relief following an apology from the German president, she replied, “The misery they inflicted on us cannot be repaired. I asked his interpreters to tell him he should at least spend money so books can be written that children can read and learn from to prevent such crimes being repeated. Unfortunately, history seems to repeat itself.”

The year 2014 was marked by a revival of German militarism and fascism. Just a few weeks before his visit to Greece, Gauck, together with his future successor and then-foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), proposed to the Munich Security conference a new German foreign policy based on great power politics and militarism. At the same time, Jörg Baberowski, a historian specialising in Eastern European studies who maintains close relations to military and government circles, declared in *Der Spiegel*: “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn't vicious. He didn't want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

Six years later, the embrace of fascism by the ruling class is far advanced throughout Europe. In numerous Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, extreme right-wing parties are in power; in France, President Macron has praised the Nazi collaborator Philippe Pétain and is establishing a police state to suppress growing social resistance. His counterpart, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, is doing the same in Greece. In Germany, the ruling Grand Coalition has approved the far-right Alternative for Germany as the main opposition party and is putting the AfD's agenda into action: rearmament at home and abroad, the mass deportations of refugees, and a murderous “profits before lives” policy in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Against this background, the horrific crimes committed against Cohen and the Jewish community of Ioannina are an urgent warning: if the working class does not intervene in this crisis and fight for a socialist alternative, capitalism will once again revert to the most vile forms of barbarism.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**