

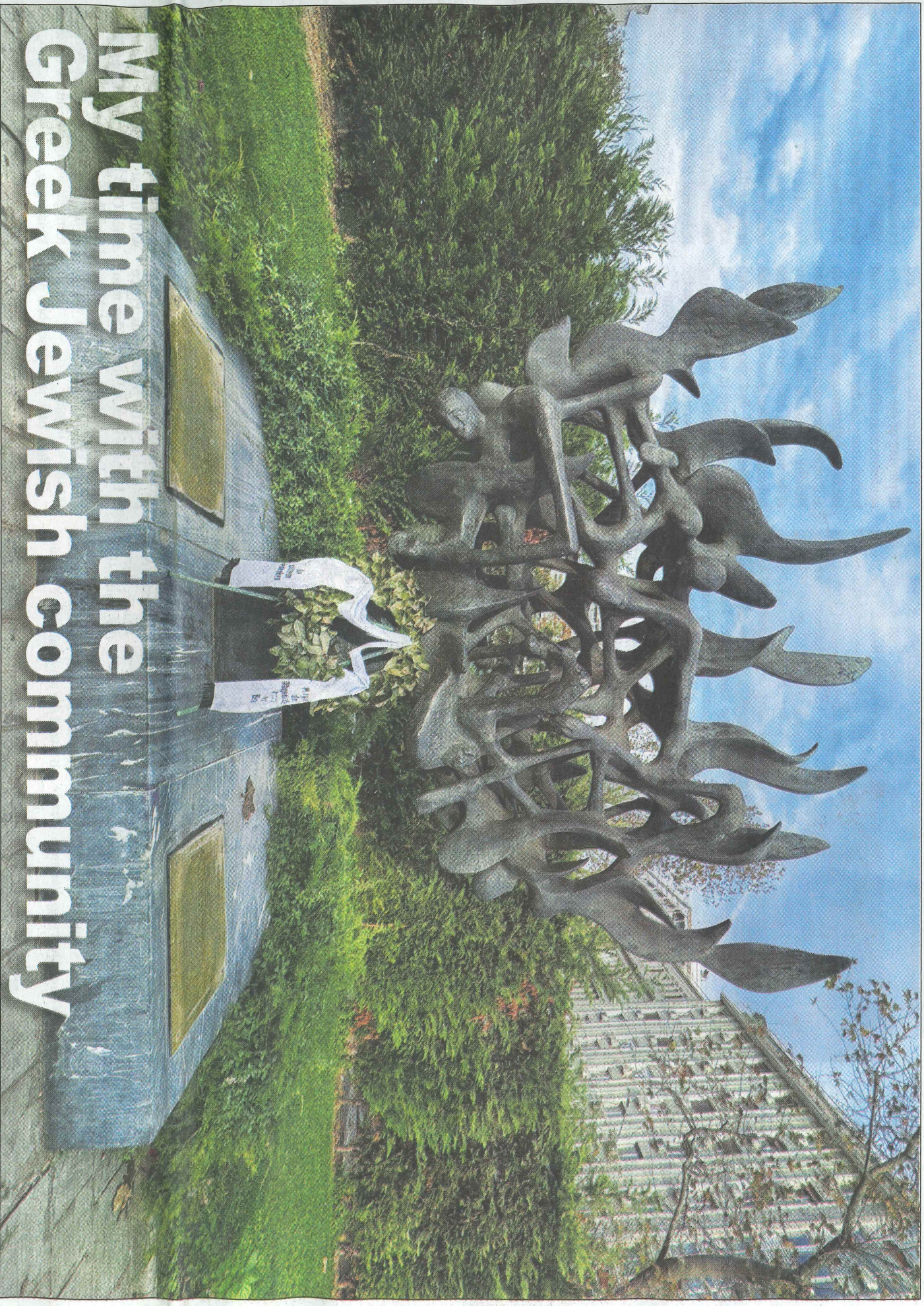
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My time with the Greek Jewish community

The Thessaloniki Holocaust memorial stands outside of Eleftherias Square, meant to be a memorial park, now just a parking lot. Depicted within the sculpture by Jewish sculptor and Holocaust survivor Nandor Gilid is a burning menorah, also bodies and the tree of life.

Photos by Elana Warren

By ELANA WARREN
Assistant Editor

learning about its Jewish history, both the beautiful and the tragic, as history was taking place just across the Mediterranean Sea in Israel.

Did you know there was Jewish history in Greece? Were you taught that 87 percent of Greece's Jewish population perished in the Holocaust? And 96 percent in just the city of Thessaloniki? Or that Thessaloniki was once considered the Jerusalem of the Balkans?

I traveled to Greece with a cohort of Twin Cities Jewish young adults on a trip organized by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Entwine, in partnership with YALDA Twin Cities. The purpose of Entwine trips is for participants to connect with the global Jewish community and learn about the JDC's global impact work.

The Jewish community first came to Greece in the fourth century and in Thessaloniki grew to be the largest ethnic group, with 70,000 Jews at the beginning of the 20th century, bigger than the Muslim and Greek

communities. The city suffered a fire in 1917 that destroyed 30 synagogues and led to people leaving the city, but in 1940 Thessaloniki still had the largest Jewish population in Greece, with 52,000 of Greece's 70,000 Jews, according to the 1940 census.

Then 48,000 of them were lost to the Holocaust, mostly at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

There are now 5,000 Jews in Greece, with almost 3,000 in Athens and about 1,000 in Thessaloniki. Our tour guide said all Greek Jews are descendants of Holocaust survivors. There are the Romaniote Jews, indigenous to Greece, and there's also a great Sephardi presence.

Two synagogues stand in Athens; both survived the Holocaust because the Nazi presence came to Greece late in the war and because the Nazis used the buildings for storage. You can still see markings from bullets in the white marble walls of Beth Shalom Synagogue, the principal synagogue of Athens.

At Beth Shalom, Rabbi Gabriel Negrin, chief rabbi of the Jewish Community of Athens, told the story of Rabbi Elias Barzilai, the chief rabbi during the war, who burned the synagogue archives to keep the list of Greek Jews from the Nazis. The Greek Orthodox archbishop, who had a list of non-Christians, also refused

to share his list and worked with the police chief to provide false identities for Jews.

From the bima, Negrin also spoke of Jewish life in Athens today. He stressed that all of Athens' Jews automatically have membership in the Jewish community, which is a legal entity under state law. He said you can have many chosen brotherhoods (like congregations), but there is only one Jewish community, and it comprises all Jews.

That idea carries into the work of the Jewish Community of Athens,

led by Director Taly Mair. The JCA offers social services, like our JFCS and JFS do; education, including a Jewish day school like Heilicher; security (supported mainly by the Jewish Agency for Israel), like the JCRC does; youth programs; Jewish cultural programs; and more.

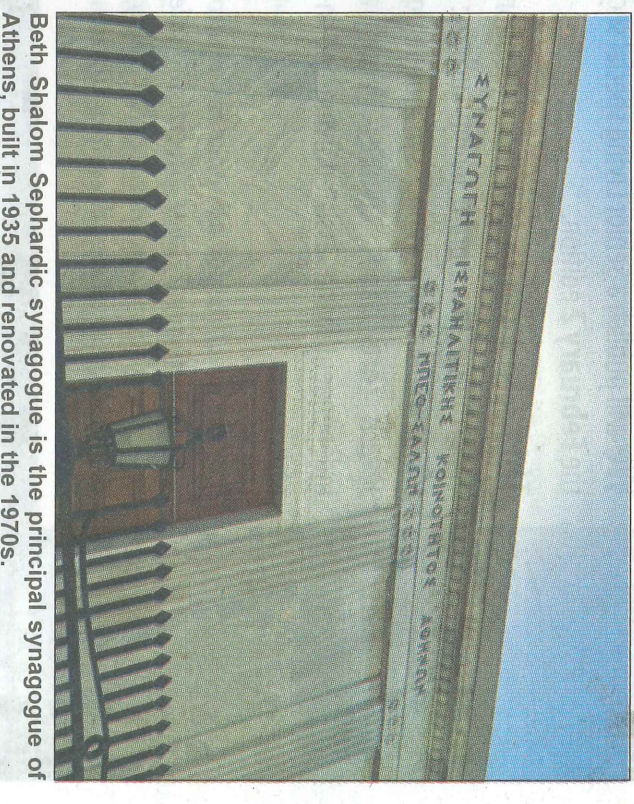
We visited seniors at JCA's Warm House, a program that provides the elderly, including the isolated, with activities, a warm meal and community three times a week. The Warm House

• GREECE / see page 4

Around the Jewish World

Our hotel was in the city center. As I arrived, a solidarity rally for Palestine was just five blocks away in front of the Parliament of Greece. It was an interesting time to be in Greece

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Beth Shalom Sephardic synagogue is the principal synagogue of Athens, built in 1935 and renovated in the 1970s.