Rabbi Hayim Habib and the Holocaust in Salonica, Greece.

Rabbi Hayim Habib was born in the city of Salonica (or Thesaloniki), Greece, in 1882. His father was the famous Dayan (rabbinic judge), Rabbi Refael Habib.
Around the year 1550 and thanks to the efforts of Doña Gracia Mendes to absorb those expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, Salonica was the only city in the world with a Jewish majority. Its population consisted especially of Sepharadim refugees from Spain and Portugal. Among his illustrious Hakhamim were Ribbi Shemuel de Medina, Ribbi Moshe Almosnino, Ribbi Yaakob Ibn Habib, etc. At the end of the 19th century, the community of Salonica had the most important Sephardic community in the world. In 1900 there were approximately 80,000 Jews in Thessaloniki, out of a total population of 173,000. The Jews excelled in all professions: lawyers, doctors, teachers, and maritime trade specialists. The Jewish stevedores of the port of Salonica were famous all over the world. During Shabbat, the port of Salonica, one of the most prominent ports in Europe, was closed, since most of the port workers and entrepreneurs were Jews.
There were 49 synagogues in Salonica and a 500-year-old cemetery with half a million graves (sic.).
Rabbi Hayim Habib studied in the Talmud Torah led by Rabbi Moshe Ottolenghi (1840-1901) and later in the rabbinic school of Salonicai “Bet Yosef” where he was granted his rabbinical ordination. He also studied accounting and European languages.
At the age of 40, Rabbi Habib was offered to serve as the chief rabbi of Salonica. He was so humble that at first he refused to take that position, but at the insistence of many colleagues, he accepted that difficult position. The duties of Rabbi Habib were many and very complex. In addition to being responsible for the Kashrut of the city and overseeing all the technical aspects of the Jewish civil law (Bet Din) he was also in charge of overseeing the Jewish education of his city. Rabbi Habib taught the teachers, examined the students and

constantly proposed improvements in the curriculum of the schools, which also included the study of modern Hebrew.
He also supervised the rabbinical school and was in charge of the appointment of the Hazanim, Mohalim and Rabbanim for all the synagogues of the city.
Rabbi Habib was very dear to his community and many considered him a saint (□□□□ □□□) because he was always there to help the needy. The poor, the sick, the elderly, all of them could count on the unconditional support of Rav Jabib.
During the 1900s many Jews left Salonica and emigrated to the USA, France and Israel. Even so, the pre-Second World War the Jewish population of Salonica con sited of 56,000 souls.
In 1941 the Nazis □"□□ arrived in Salonica. In April of that year, Germany invaded Greece, the Greek king George II fled Athens. The country was divided into three different zones. Athens and other islands were under the control of Italy; East Macedonia was under the control of Bulgaria; and the Nazis controlled Salonica. The Nazis destroyed the synagogues, Jewish schools, Jewish libraries, and desecrated the Jewish cemetery. Soon, a ghetto was created for the Jews of Salonica, and the Jews were forced to move there and wear the yellow Star of David. This led to widespread looting of Jewish homes and businesses. Terrible public spectacles of Jewish humiliation became commonplace, and it was not long before the Jews were deported to the concentration camps, which began in March 1943.
95 percent of the Jews of Salonica, 54,000 Jews, were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau, or died during the terrible "March of Death" from January to May 1945. Rabbi Hayim Habib also died or was killed in that march, together with his wife and two of his daughters □"□□.
A daughter and son of Rabbi Habib migrated to Israel before the Nazis arrived in the city. The descendants of Rabbi Habib live today in Tel Aviv, Israel.
For a more detailed story of Salonica and the Shoah read this article from Yad VaShem