

Remarks by B'nai B'rith International CEO Daniel S. Mariaschin at the Israel-Hellenic Forum Nicosia

June 19, 2023

I'm pleased that the B'nai B'rith World Center, and my colleague Alan Schneider, together with our partners Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, the University of Nicosia, and the Institute of International Relations at Panteion University in Athens are once again cooperating in bringing together experts and advocates for strong relations amongst Cyprus, Greece and Israel.

There are many valid reasons for doing so. Regional rivalries, threats to stability in the region from several quarters, including well-armed terrorist organizations, commercial interests, high stakes energy exploration and exploitation, all demand constant, on-going, vigilance and analysis. The speakers at this program will address all of these challenges — and more — over the next couple of days.

B'nai B'rith's presence, and interest in the region goes back to the establishment of our first branch in Jerusalem, in 1888. In 1912, a branch was established in Thessaloniki, in the words of a colleague of ours in Washington, "to acclimate to the city's Hellenic culture" and to improve the quality of Jewish education in the city, then perhaps 40% Jewish.

Our branch encouraged teaching Jewish students Hebrew and Greek, and fostered studies in science, like biology. They offered scholarships to the brightest students to attend Greek universities.

The effects of the devastating fire that swept Thessaloniki. In 1917 dramatically affected the Jewish community and so many others in the city, Thousands of homes were destroyed in the conflagration. B'nai B'rith International, and local both contributed to aid the victims, Jewish and Greek. Indeed, our branch sponsored an academy for poor Jewish and Greek Orthodox pupils. They also supported a Jewish community newspaper, the Independent, which kept its readers abreast of local and global news in the Jewish world and beyond.

With the coming of the Great Depression and its aftermath, and despite the widespread economic hardship endured by all citizens of Greece, the 135 members of our group in Thessaloniki continued to support education programs as well as interfaith activities.

In 1937, with the growing threat posed to Greece and the rest of Europe by Nazi Germany, our branches in Thessaloniki and in Athens closed down their activities. Indeed, we now know that almost all of our 135 members in Saloniki were killed during the Holocaust.

The scene then switches to the United States, a nation of immigrants, became home to millions of Jewish and Greek immigrants. By the 1930s, there were many urban neighborhoods that hosted both communities. On the main streets in cities large and small, Jewish and Greek shop owners worked side-by-side on the same block.

When my family moved to New Hampshire in 1955, where they operated a small women's clothing store, our shoemaker was from the Greek community, and the small coffee shop on the next block, where my father bought his morning coffee and donuts, was Greek owned. The St. George's Greek

Orthodox Church, and our synagogue were a short 10-minute walk from each other downtown. Summer was when St. George's organized a Greek Festival, enjoyed by folks from every segment of our community.

There wasn't much conversation about strategic threats in the Eastern Mediterranean in those days; [] were too busy making their way economically and fulfilling the American dream.

The Greek-Israel relationship took much more time to warm up. Greece voted against the establishment of the State of Israel when the matter came before the UN General Assembly in 1947. It was only 43 years later, in 1990, that Greece gave full de jure recognition, effectuated by then Prime Minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis.

Fast forward to 2009 and 2010. The chance meeting in Moscow, between George Papandreou and Benjamin Netanyahu set in motion a total refashioning of bi-lateral relations — and now tri-lateral relations which brings us here today. The state of arrested development in relations has transformed into close ties on a broad front, from energy to military-to-military, to tourism, and hi-tech.

And that blossoming of ties — Greece, Cyprus, and Israel — is reflected in the close working relationships B'nai B'rith and other organizations have developed with the Hellenic -American community.

For example, we've now had five joint missions — every other year, with another set for January of 2024 — to the three countries together with the leadership of AHEPA and the American Hellenic Institute, to get to know each other better: to meet with government officials and policy makers, to learn about vital cooperation amongst the three defense establishments, including joint exercises in the air, on the sea and on land. We've each addressed the other's annual meetings, indeed going beyond the expected to include discussions about common challenges like assimilation, and Jewish and Hellenic continuity in the broader American scene.

There is no limit to this kind of friendship and cooperation. And we are proud to be partners in building these relationships which redound to the good of each of us, even as we look, as we will over the next couple of days, at profound issues affecting the geopolitical and strategic outlook for the Eastern Mediterranean.

In closing, let me once again say how pleased we are to be an organizer of these timely discussions. We look forward to working together with each of you in addressing the important threats and challenges before us.