

## Zakynthos leaders' courage in face of Nazi evil saved Jews

VIC ALHADEFF THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM February 6, 2016

Zakynthos is a magnificent speck in the ocean off the west coast of Greece. One of 1400 Greek islands, it is said that the Greek goddess of hunting, Artemis, hunted in the woods of Zakynthos.

The island was the scene of an extraordinary act of courage which saved an entire community from annihilation. That story was not widely known until recently, however, and it will be honoured in Sydney tomorrow evening.

For five centuries Zakynthos was home to a tiny Jewish community. Mainly tradesmen, artisans and glaziers, the community numbered 275 and blended seamlessly with the rest of the island population.

In October 1943 German forces arrived on Zakynthos with orders to round up the Jews and deport them to Nazi camps in mainland Europe — to their deaths. They made three stark announcements: an overnight curfew was imposed on Jews from 5pm to 7am; Jews were ordered to place a sign on their apartment doors indicating how many people lived there; and anyone helping Jews to hide or escape would be shot.

The commander of the German garrison, Paul Berenz, summoned the mayor, Loukas Karrer, and Bishop Chrysostomos Demetriou, and informed him the Jews would eventually be deported. Bishop Chrysostomos, who spoke fluent German, declared he would follow the example of Archbishop Demaskinos of Athens, who had publicly stated: "I spoke to the Lord and made up my mind to save as many Jewish souls as possible."

He argued that the Jews were indigent and a small community and there was no reason to target them.

Mayor Karrer warned the island's Jews that danger was imminent and all 275 were given refuge in Christian homes in the various villages. The people of Zakynthos considered the Jews part of their society and had seen Jews elsewhere in Greece transported to the death camps. They refused to hand them over.

In October 1944, Commander Berenz again summons Mayor Karrer, but this time demands a list of Jews, including addresses and professions. If Karrer fails to return the next day with the requested list, Karrer will pay with his life.

Karrer rushes to Bishop Chrysostomos, who declares they will give them a list. The next day, he and the bishop meet German officer Alfred Lit and hand him two sheets of paper. One is a letter from Bishop Chrysostomos to the German High Command, insisting that the Jews of Zakynthos fall under his protection and will not be handed over. Furthermore, he and the mayor are prepared to follow them to the gas chambers, if necessary.

And then, in a monumental act of courage, they tell the officer that the second sheet of paper contains the names of the island's 275 Jews. "Here are your Jews," says the bishop. "If you choose to deport the Jews of Zakynthos, you must also take me and I will share their fate."

Yet that sheet of paper contains just two names — Chrysostomos Demetriou, bishop of Zakynthos, and Loukas Karrer, mayor of Zakynthos. Perplexed, the German commander sends both documents to the German High Command in Berlin, requesting instructions. The order to round up the Jews of Zakynthos is revoked and the German forces depart. Not one of the 275 Jews perished.

In 1948, in recognition of the heroism of the people of Zakynthos, its Jewish community donated stained glass for the windows of the Church of Saint Dionysios on the island.

In 1953 an earthquake rocked the island and the first ship to arrive with aid, food and medical supplies was from Israel with a message that read: "The Jews of Zakynthos have never forgotten their mayor or their beloved bishop and what they did for us". Israel's Holocaust Museum duly honoured Bishop Chrysostomos and Mayor Karrer with the title "Righteous Among The Nations" and Greece's Jewish community erected marble monuments of the courageous pair on the site where the island's synagogue had stood before the earthquake.

Tomorrow night I have the honour of addressing Australian descendants of Zakynthos, including Zakynthos Association president Jim Gouskos, and saluting them for the inspirational courage and humanity of their people. In a world with so much prejudice and bigotry, it is people such as Loukas Karrer and Chrysostomos Demetriou who enable us to keep our faith in humanity alive.

*Vic Alhadeff is chief executive of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies. This is an extract from his address to the NSW Zakynthian Association and the NSW National Council of Jewish Women of Australia. Twitter: [@VicAlhadeff](#)*

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