November 18, 1999

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD—SENATE

NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH HONORS WEST VIRGINIA ADOPTION ANGELS

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President, I rise today to honor three West Virginia individuals who have recently been awarded “Adoption Angel” awards by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption. Larry and Jane Leech and Judge Gary Johnson are truly “angels” in adoption.

President Clinton recently proclaimed November “National Adoption Month”. It is a good time to re-commit ourselves to doing all we can to ensure that all children have the opportunity to grow up in safe, stable and permanent homes.

During Adoption Month in 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act, a bill I sponsored, was signed into law. This act, for the first time ever, made children’s safety, health and opportunity for loving, stable families the paramount factors to consider when planning for children in foster care. The act provided incentive bonuses for states successful in increasing adoptions.

My state of West Virginia has made a lot of progress in moving kids out of foster care and into permanent homes. When the adoption bonuses for 1999 were announced, I was proud that West Virginia, because three of our state’s children, Brian, Shawn and Sarah Keane, had the honor of introducing President Clinton the day the bonuses were announced. The 3 Keane children along with 208 more West Virginia foster children moved in with their adoptive families in 1999.

Our state is working hard to increase public awareness of adoption and children needing homes. A quarterly newsletter, “Open Your Heart, Open Your Home” features stories of waiting children and successful adoptive families. In May, Dave Thomas came to West Virginia for the third annual Foster and Adoptive Parent Recognition Day, to recognize adoptive parents who provide homes for children with special needs.

We have been able to make this progress largely as a result of the efforts of the individuals who were honored by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption, and other dedicated and hard-working West Virginians like them. Let me tell you a little about these “angels”.

Larry and Jane Leech have been foster parents for many years, opening their home and their hearts to children in need of both. Working with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, the Leeches adopted a sibling group of three young boys, twins age 4 and an older brother, age 6, in 1998. Now, a year later, the Leeches are again in the final stages of adopting another sibling group—this time, three older girls. Mr. and Mrs. Leech also have two biological children. They have a tremendous amount of love and a strong commitment to all nine of their children. Recently, the Leeches and their children visited the West Virginia mansion where they were honored by First Lady Hovah Underwood, for their commitment to children in need.

Judge Gary Johnson believes that all children in the foster care system deserve permanent homes. As the 28th Judicial circuit judge, elected in 1992. Judge Johnson has worked closely with the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. He meets with them quarterly to review policies that help prevent children in West Virginia from achieving permanence in their lives.

Judge Johnson continually increases his own knowledge of the issues by attending conferences on child welfare. The progress made since the passage of the 1997 Adoption Act is significant. Certainly the 211 West Virginia children who found families last year, including the six children who now call Larry and Jan Leech “Mom” and “Dad” know that. But of 400 West Virginia children are still waiting and hoping to be adopted—over 100,000 children in our nation are still waiting and hoping to be adopted. Too many of these children are growing up in the insecurity of foster care. Too many of them are becoming teenagers without a permanent family.

And that is why we need “National Adoption Month”. We need opportunities to honor the angels in adoption, like the Leeches and Judge Johnson. And we need the opportunity to publicly re-new our commitment to ensuring that all children have the opportunity for permanent adoptive families.

I am pleased that the members of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption in honoring more than 50 “Angels of Adoption” from around the country. I am doubly pleased that 3 of these angels are from West Virginia. And I pledge to continue to work on legislation that will help all of West Virginia’s, and America’s foster children have the opportunity that the Leech children now have, the chance to grow up in a permanent, loving family.

JEWISH HISTORY IN GREECE

Mr. SARBANES. Mr. President, in recent years there has been renewed interest in the early history of the Jewish community in Greece. The Hellenic and Jewish peoples have had a long and constructive relationship, and that interaction has been beneficial to the foundations of Western civilization.

An important part of this historical movement is the renewed research on historic Jewish sites in Greece. There is now an active and impressive Jewish museum in Athens which has served as a focal point for this activity. These efforts have spawned a number of individuals to do their own family and group research; and I am pleased to report that one of my constituents, Dr. Judith Mazza, has written an excellent account of her visit to Greece. "First-time traveler’s impressions of Jewish sites in Greece," which was published in the spring 1999 issue of Kol haKEHILA. Dr. Mazza is descended from a Romaniote Jewish family from Greece, and her article describes succinctly the rich and enduring Jewish cultural and religious legacy in Greece. I recommend it to all those interested in the history of the Jewish people and ask that the article be inserted at this point in the RECORD.

This article follows:

[From Kol haKEHILA, Spring 1999]

A FIRST-TIME TRAVELER’S IMPRESSIONS OF JEWISH SITES IN GREECE

(By Dr. Judith Mazza)

I first saw mention of the Jewish Museum of Greece, located in Athens, about twenty years ago. Curious about my family history, I joined the Museum as an “American Friend.” Upon joining, I received a letter from the founder (now Director Emeritus) of the museum, Nicholas Stavrakakis, concerning my family name (Mazza, Matsas, Mata, etc.). I learned from that letter that my family most probably was a Romaniote family rather than a Sephardi family. I then understood why my father’s family never spoke Ladino (judao-espanol). My father, born in the United States, spoke Greek at home, as did his parents (who emigrated to the United States in the early 1900s from Ionnina and Corfu).

My husband and I were curious to visit Jewish sites in Greece. My interest had been stimulated by the book Jewish Sites and Synagogues of Greece (Athens, 1992) by Stavrakakis and Tsoutsos. Prior to reading this book, I knew little about the communities that had existed in Greece prior to World War II. I did not have the opportunity to travel to Greece until November 1998. As soon as I knew I would be in Athens, I attempted to contact the Jewish Museum of Greece. Kol haKEHILA, the first internet source to give me a way to contact the museum by e-mail.

By e-mail, I asked the museum’s curator, Zanet Battinou, to help find us a knowledgeable guide for our day in Athens. She recommended Dolly Asser. In addition to visiting ancient sites in Athens that day, Ms. Asser also took us to the Jewish Museum of Greece, and to the two modern synagogues in Athens.

ATHENS

We began our day at the Museum. It had recently relocated and now occupies an entire building in the Plaka neighborhood. The museum has a number of floors, each with a different focus. As a first-time visitor, I found it interesting to see historic artifacts, decorative objects, clothing and religious and domestic objects. There is a research library on the top floor. School children arrived as we were leaving, so apparent a visit to the Jewish Museum of Greece has become a part of the public school curriculum.
After we left the museum, we visited the other Jewish sites throughout Greece as possible. When we were in the Jewish Museum of Greece shop in Athens, I was stunned to find an English language book about the Jews of Rhodes (Daims, R., The Jews of Ioannina, Philadelphia, 1992). I purchased the book immediately! Likewise, it was through word of mouth from both Vivien Kerem (publisher of the electronic newsletter Sefarad) and Elias Messinas (editor of Kol haKEHILA) that I learned of The Illusion of Safety; The Story of the Greek Jews During the Second World War (New York, 1997). In reading these books and in speaking with both Messinas and Kerem whom I recently met in Jerusalem, I understand that the Greek Jews, unlike Jews in some other parts of Europe, had ample opportunity to flee or hide from the Nazis. In instance after instance the warnings of the catastrophic consequences of not fleeing or hiding were not disseminated, or the seriousness of the situation was minimized. That information among the communities was poor.

When we visited Rhodes, we stood on its acropolis and looked at the 19th century (in part) city only 11 miles away. It was difficult to come to terms with the complacency of the Jewish population of Rhodes in 1944 that resulted in their slaughter. They were among the last Greek Jews to be sent to Auschwitz. By 1944, other communities in Greece had already been eliminated. Safety lay only eleven miles away. The city of Rhodes did not even flee to the island’s countryside. Perhaps a reader can explain this puzzling apparent fact.

The lesson today seems clear. To preserve the remnants of the Greek Jewish heritage, various interested organizations should cooperate with the other. They should use electronic means to link to one another whenever possible. The Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens should have information about Jewish sites throughout Greece, as well as the one in Rhodes. Likewise, the Jewish Museum of Rhodes should link to as many Jewish sites throughout Greece as possible. Hopefully, the information about Jewish sites throughout Greece should be made available at each of the sites and at Tourist Offices. Never again should the Jewish community be weakened by poor communication among various components. Certainly, not in this age of electronic communications and the Internet. There are many more educational opportunities to preserve and memorialize Greek Jewish sites and culture. Now they need to recognize the gestalt effect that would result from closer cooperation.

Rhodes

We had the opportunity to see one other Jewish site in Greece when we stopped in Rhodes a few days later. We had seen a website for the Jewish Museum of Rhodes before our travels began at www.RhodesJewishMuseum.org. We sought out the island’s synagogue and adjacent museum. Finding the street in the old walled city of Rhodes was not too difficult, as it was clearly labeled and the synagogue is noted on tourist maps. As we walked toward the synagogue and museum, we knew that we were in what once been the Jewish quarter of the city. We could see Hebrew inscriptions above some of the doorways, signifying houses built by prominent Jewish families. However, many of these buildings appeared to be in poor repair. Unfortunately, we had no information about the buildings and knew virtually nothing about the Jewish community that once existed here.

As we walked through iron gates, that some buildings had interior courtyards with interesting floor patterns formed by smooth black and white stones. In some courtyards, the stone patterns were intact, while in others the patterns were quite deteriorated.

We could not find the synagogue itself, but luckily, we asked directions from an elderly woman. Lucia Modiano Sulam turned out to be the keeper of the synagogue and was kind enough to guide us to it. She was a Holocaust survivor, with tattooed numbers on her forearm.

We were quite unprepared for what we found when we entered Kahal Shalom synagogue. The synagogue, in very good condition, was more elaborate than the synagogues we had seen in Athens. Crystal chandeliers, ceiling mosaics, and pets lay on the floor. The mosaic floor inside was made of the same black and white smooth stones that we had seen elsewhere. Here, however, the floors were arranged in more elaborate patterns. Chairs were placed on the two long sides of the interior and the wooden bimah was in the middle of the room.

Just outside the synagogue entrance is a courtyard which has a stone mosaic floor. It is well preserved.

We also visited the Jewish Museum of Rhodes. This is a new museum in its first stage of development. Aron Hassan, a Los Angeles attorney whose family came from Rhodes, founded it. The museum currently consists of one room with temporary ceiling paintings. When we were there, the museum exhibition consisted of photographs and other printed materials.

Tourism to Jewish Sites in Greece

We knew that the Jewish population in Greece had been decimated by the Holocaust, and that only remnants of that once-thriving community remain here. As a traveler and tourist, I have been struck by the difficulty in obtaining information about Jewish sites and Jewish history of Greece. I not understand why one organization or resource does not reference other. Organizations that have websites or access to the Internet should have hyperlinks to other Jewish organizations, including e-mail links to facilities that may not yet have a website.

There should be a list of bibliographic references about Jewish tourist sites in Greece. When we were in the Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens, I was stunned to find an English language book about the Jews of Ioannina (Daims, R., The Jews of Ioannina, Philadelphia, 1992). I purchased the book immediately! Likewise, it was through word of mouth from both Vivien Kerem (publisher of the electronic newsletter Sefarad) and Elias Messinas (editor of Kol haKEHILA) that I learned of The Illusion of Safety; The Story of the Greek Jews During the Second World War (New York, 1997). In reading these books and in speaking with both Messinas and Kerem whom I recently met in Jerusalem, I understand that the Greek Jews, unlike Jews in some other parts of Europe, had ample opportunity to flee or hide from the Nazis. In instance after instance the warnings of the catastrophic consequences of not fleeing or hiding were not disseminated, or the seriousness of the situation was minimized. That information among the communities was poor.

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