

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF TRIKALA

HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The presence of Jews in Trikala is mentioned in sources of the Byzantine period. Their population was increased significantly after the settlement of Spanish Jews - "Sepharadim" - in 1492, who were later joined by immigrants from Valona, Portugal and from Sicily. The Turks who had returned from their campaign in Hungary - in 1545 - brought back a number of Jews to Trikala and other Greek cities, where they settled. The local Jews preserved the "Romaniote" character of the community and historians refer to the Jewish quarter and its Synagogues.

During the fire that broke out in the city - on July 11, 1749 - the Jewish quarter and the Synagogues suffered great damages.

In 1873 the Community had 400 members. The city was liberated from the Turkish rule on August 23, 1881. According to the 1907 census, the city had 110 Jewish families, 265 men and 294 women.

The Jewish population fluctuated during various periods. The newspapers often mentioned the contribution of Jews in the economic, social and political development of the city, stressing their peaceful co-existence with their fellow-citizens.

SYNAGOGUES

The Romaniote, Sephardic and Ashkenazi synagogues were in the old Jewish quarter. Each one was autonomous and preserved the particular religious traditions of the origin of the faithful. The great Synagogue "Ka'hal Kadosh Yavani'im" on Athanasiou Diakou Street, was very old and therefore torn down in 1930. A new synagogue was constructed in its place, but the Germans turned it into a stable and looted it. After the War it was repaired, but it suffered serious damages in the 1954 earthquakes. Once again it was repaired and has been functioning ever since. It was re-consecrated on June 16, 1957.

Trikala Synagogue





Trikala Synagogue

The smaller, stone Synagogue on Kondyli Street suffered serious damages by the Germans as well as in the 1954 earthquakes. Part of its land plot was expropriated by the Municipality in order to open up the street. The remaining section was built into an apartment building in order to house Jewish victims of the earthquakes.

The rabbis who held an office in the Synagogues were Rabbi Iosif Yakoel, El Iatson-Elias Rousso and Raphael Felous.

The graves of the Jewish cemetery in Trikala have a particular manner: The occupation of the deceased is depicted on many gravestones. (In the photo, the hand holding the razor shows that the deceased was a barber).

CEMETERY



It is located on a hill northwest of the city, near the national highway between Trikala and Kalambaka. It covers an area of 15,000 m², and has over 800 graves, including a few gravestones dating at least 450 years back.



Since 1995 several graves were vandalized and desecrated. Today, gravestones undergo reparation and maintenance works and the surrounding area is remodeled.

JEWISH SCHOOL

According to older publications, a private Community school with 70 pupils had existed since 1913. It functioned until a few years after the War. Leon Pessach, Mr. and Mrs. Bior and Nissim Venouziou were among the most recent instructors.

A scene from the play "Esther" by Racine, organized by the Jewish Communities of Trikala and Larissa on the occasion of the holiday of Purim in 1918 in Trikala

ASSOCIATIONS

Various Associations and Committees were active within the bosom of the Community. A local newspaper, dating 17 March, 1884, refers to the Jewish Charity Association, whose target was the assistance of the needy, deeds of charity, and the education of poor pupils. Iosif Sidis was chairman and Isaac Levi, Raphael Moissis and Yehuda Atoun were members of the Board.

In 1902 the very active charity organization "Ezdra Betarot" was founded. Other examples of Associations - Committees are "Bikur Cholim", "Chevrah Kedoshah" and the influential Zionist Association "Eretz Tsion" (Land of Zion), which co-operated with the sister Associations in Volos and Larissa in order to publish the "Israel" magazine. The young and active Asher Moissis and Yomtov Yakoel played a leading role in the foundation and function of this Association.

PROFESSIONS

As of the 16th century, the Jews of Trikala were in the business of production of woolen, cotton silk and linen textiles. For a long time they "exclusively" ran the wine trade. Later on, until recently, they became involved in commerce, small industry and various other trades. Some of them became well-known merchants, bankers, and money-changers. They were pious and kept the Sabbath. Their deeds of charity were not restricted within the Jewish Community, but went beyond that, to the city in general. Their donations helped support the foundation of a hospital, a fitness center and providing needy girls with a dowry.



It is also worth mentioning the participation of Jews in the national struggles, in both World Wars, and in the National Resistance, all of which took a heavy toll.



NAZI OCCUPATION - PERSECUTION

After Italy's defeat in 1943 there was a period of calm during the German Occupation. Then, on the night of March 23, 1944, the Nazis arrested 112 Jews (out of the 520 who lived in Trikala at that time), who did not succeed to escape and deported them to the Nazi death camps where most of them were exterminated. The Community lost 31% of its population. Only 10 prisoners returned after the War.

The Community was re-organized thanks to the co-ordination of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece and to the significant contribution of the "American Joint" charity Organization.

After the War the Community had 270 members, some of whom gradually settled in other cities. The Community today has 40 members. In spite of its small size the Community of Trikala continues its long historic course.

The text for this was taken from the website www.kis.gr. The visuals are thanks to various friends from Trikala who have visited the community over the years and shared their photos with us.