January 2013 e-newsletter

Dear Friends of Kehila Kedosha Janina,

From our little corner of the world to yours, best wishes for a Happy and Healthy 2013 to all our growing community of friends.

This newsletter, our 60th will, as always, cover news regarding Kehila Kedosha Janina and news concerning Greek Jewry. We hope you find our newsletter interesting. Your feedback is of utmost importance to us. If you missed previous issues, they can be accessed on our website (www.kkjism.org).
We now reach over 5000 households worldwide, with our community of ‘friends’ continually growing with each newsletter. If you know others who wish to be part of this ever-growing network, please have them contact us at kehila_kedosha_janina@netzero.net.

As always, you are all invited to attend our Saturday morning Shabbat services. Just give our Shamas, Sol Kofinas, a heads up (papusoup@mindspring.com) so we are sure that our Kiddush (traditional Greek Jewish Kosher foods) is sufficient. If you wish to sponsor a Kiddush for a special occasion or an Adara, contact Sol.

Passings

We mourn the passing of 4 special people from our Greek-Jewish community.

Elliott Nacmias died peacefully in his home on Sunday, December 2, 2012 at the age of 93. Elliott descended from Corfiote Jews. The family had left Corfu after the 1891 Blood Libel and settled in Alexandria Egypt where Elliott was born. After the problems in Egypt, the family settled in the USA in the 1960s. Elliot was one of the few people left in the world who spoke the Corfiote dialect. Our condolences to his family.

Evelyn Negrin, widow of Nat Negrin and mother of Joe and Rebecca Negrin, and Elaine and Gene Lerner, left us on December 6, 2012 at the age of 88. In the words of her daughter-in-law, Rebecca, “Evelyn was one of the purest souls on earth. It was a privilege to know her and be in her company. She was a loving, kind, caring, unassuming, genuine person. She always cared for everyone else’s needs and wants above her own. Her family was her pride and joy. She loved her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. We were the jewels in her life and nothing else made her happier than a visit with any one of us. To quote our son, Jonathan, ‘an amazing woman may have left our world but her loving spirit and positive outlook on life will always be with us.’ Our daughter Elisa, said that Mom taught her the meaning of family and traditions through the years and will bring this forward into her family. As for the rest of us it is all of the above and we will miss her beautiful smile, her gentle ways and loving touch. Her loving family Elaine, Joe, Gene, Rebecca, Lisa and Jay, Jay and Kim, Elisa, Jonathan and great grandchildren, Gabriel, Andrew, Mackenzie and Evan.” Our sincere condolences to her family.

Marriage of Evelyn and Nat Negrin 1947
Mary Rouben, born in Salonika 98 years ago, passed away quietly in her sleep. She had been living for many years in California. Mary was a remarkable woman, alert and active until the very end. The widow of Sam Rouben, Mary was born Miriam Beraha. She lived through the great changes in Salonika: the Fire of 1917, the influx of Asia Minor refugees, World War II and the Holocaust of Salonikan Jews. Married in 1941, Mary and her husband survived the Holocaust in hiding with the help of the Italian Consulate in Salonika and the Greek Resistance Movement after they escaped the city. Most of Mary and Sam’s family perished in the camps. For Mary’s complete story see the English language edition of El Avenir published in June of 2009. If you would like a copy of the issue, contact us at kehila_kedosha_janina@netzero.net. Our sincere sympathies to her family.

As reported from Greece
November 27, 2012
ATHENS, Greece (JTA) -- Mario Modiano, a Jewish-Greek journalist who chronicled some of the most turbulent times of modern Greek history, died at the age of 86. Modiano, whose family survived the Holocaust that decimated the historic Jewish community of Thessaloniki by fleeing to Athens, died Monday, November 27th. He was 86. He covered Greece and Turkey for The Times of London newspaper for 38 years and also worked for the BBC. His work covered the rise and fall of the military dictatorship in Greece between 1967 and 1974, and tensions with Turkey over the invasion and partition of Cyprus. Modiano was awarded an Order of the British Empire from Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II. Born to a prominent Jewish family in Thessaloniki in 1926, Modiano and his immediate family hid from the Germans in Athens during World War II. After retiring from journalism in 1990, Modiano spent his days researching his family’s history of more than 400 years in Thessaloniki, eventually publishing the book “Hamehune Modillano -- the Genealogical Story of the Modiano Family from 1570 to Our Days.” This book can be found on the web. If you have difficulty, send us an e-mail at kehila_kedosha_janina@netzero.net and we will e-mail you a copy.
Simchas

It is with great joy that we spread the news of the birth of a grandchild to Lois and Ed Ledner (parents, Damon and Denise Ledner). Jason is the great-grandson of Hy Genee of Blessed Memory and his widow Lil Genee, the great-great grandson of Bechoraki (Morris) and Fani (Firo) Genee (both born in Ioannina), the great great-great grandson of Avram Genee and Estrea Negrin Genee, and Morris Jenny and Stamoula Battino Jenny and the great great great great grandson of Haim and Firo Geni. With this distinguished Yanniote lineage, how can he not achieve great things!

Past Museum Events

On December 30th, our Museum was filled to capacity for a presentation by Anthony Georgeiff, author of “Guide To Jewish Bulgaria.” We were honored by the presence of the Consul General of Bulgaria in New York, Radoslav Totchev and the Bulgarian Ambassador to the United Nations, Stephan Tafrov. The audience was a marvelous mix of Greeks and Bulgarians (Jewish and non-Jewish) and other interested spectators.

After the program the crowd gathered in our Communal room for Bulgarian and Greek delicacies including homemade banitsa.
If you wish to purchase a copy of the book, please e-mail us at kehila_kedosha_janina@netzero.net. We only have a limited number of copies for sale and since we are presently the only place in the USA selling them, it should sell out fast. The cost is $25 including postage and handling within the continental USA. You can also purchase the book through the net for $32 (including postage and handling) at www.vagabond.bg/jewishbulgaria.

Newly released in Greek

The Rescue
The silence of the world, the resistance in the ghettos and camps, Greek Jews during the Occupation

KARINA LAMPSA

Iakov Shibly

Pages: 432
Pictures: 172
Binding: Paperback
Language: Greek

Between 1939 and 1943, hundreds of thousands of Jews were trapped in more than 400 ghettos in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe. By the summer of 1944, all ghettos were emptied and most prisoners killed.

When did people learn about the genocide that was underway in the heart of Europe? What did the Allies do to stop the slaughter? Why did Jewish leadership in Palestine take so long to respond? Where was the Jewish resistance? What was the role of the Jews in the revolt of the Sonderkommando;

Could Rabbi Korets have prevented the annihilation of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki? How were Jews who had gathered in Athens saved? Who organized the rescue operation in the Aegean? Did agreements between the British intelligence services, the Jewish Agency and others pave the way for escape from Euboea.
“The Rescue” is a new narrative about the persecution and rescue of Jews in the Third Reich, which overturns stereotypes and myths and gives very timely food for thought.

We are happy to announce that Asher Moissis’ book “Greek-Jewish Patrimony” has just come out in print in English. It can be purchased at amazon.com. We are hoping to arrange a future book presentation at Kehila Kedosha Janina and to offer the book for sale in our Museum.

The book is a marvelous collection of the speeches and writings of Asher Moissis delivered or written during or after the Occupation of Greece and the Holocaust. They were collected by his son Raphael Moissis and the English translation was done by his grandson, Alex Moissis.

Dikoi Mas, Los Muestros (Our Own) Come Home

It is always emotional when one of our own visit the synagogue.

Michael Pearlstein, son of Rita Mione Pearlstein, grandson of Murray Mione and Sylvia Cohen, great grandson of Avraam Mione and Rachel Mazza
Visitors continue to flock to Kehila Kedosha Janina

Upcoming Museum Events

Join us on Sunday, January 13th at 2:00 pm for a special concert by the Renaissance Street Singers directed by John Hetland

Free admission
Refreshments served after concert

Kehila Kedosha Janina
280 Broome Street (between Allen & Eldridge)
New York, NY 10002

For reservations, contact us at 516-456-9336 or kehila_kedosha_janina@netzero.net

Since 1973, The Renaissance Street Singers of New York, directed by John Hetland, have sung 15th- and 16th-century music a cappella on the sidewalks and in the public spaces of New York City. The motivation is love for the music and the wish to share it with others. Their concerts are always free.
This concert will include both Christian and Jewish sacred music and highlight the music of Salamone di Rossi, Italian-Jewish Renaissance composer who brought Choral music into the synagogues.

As a young man Rossi acquired a reputation as a talented violinist and was hired (in 1587) as a court musician in Mantua, where records of his activities as a violinist survive. Along with Monteverdi, he entertained the guests at the Ducal Palace of the Gonzagas in Mantua and was commissioned by Rabbi Leon di Modena of Venice to write a collection of Jewish liturgical music, הַשִּׁירִים אֶשֶר לְשֵׁלָמָה (Ha-shirim asher li-Shlomo, The Songs of Solomon) in 1623.

This was an unprecedented development in synagogue music, as polyphonic music in the synagogue had been forbidden following the destruction of the Temple. Rossi set many Biblical Hebrew texts to music in their original Hebrew language, which makes him unique among Baroque composers. His vocal music resembles that of Claudio Monteverdi and Luigi Rossi, but its lyrics are in Hebrew.

Come enjoy this rare performance of Renaissance chamber music as our Synagogue/Museum hosts the Renaissance Street Singers of New York.

Sacred music in a sacred place presented by Kehila Kedosha Janina, a Museum that dares to be different.
NOTICE TO ALL PASHAS

Due to Hurricane Sandy and the fact that present Pasha President, Sol Matsil, will not be able to receive payments for the upcoming Pasha reunion in Florida on February 13th, Ray Modiano will be receiving the checks ($60 a couple) at the following address.

Ray Modiano
10354 Mateo Ct.
Boca Raton, FL 33498

Remember, you must be a Pasha to attend.

Upcoming Events on Lower East Side

103 Orchard Street
Access website at www.tenement.org

Tenement Talks

BREAD GIVERS BY ANZIA YEZIERSKA
JANUARY 15TH, 2013 - 6:30 PM
Vivian Gornick returns to host the second installment of her New York Novels Series. Alice-Kessler-Harris and Miriam Cohen join for a panel on this intense, compelling and unforgettable masterwork of American immigrant literature set in the 1920s Lower East Side.

RISE TO GREATNESS: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND AMERICA’S MOST PERILOUS YEAR
JANUARY 29TH, 2013 - 6:30 PM
David von Drehle sets his sights on 1862, the crucial year that transformed our sixteenth president into a singular leader. The author discusses our nation’s darkest hour and what we can learn from the man who led us through it.

Kehila Kedosha Janina is proud to be part of L.E.S.P.I (Lower East Side Preservation Initiative). Access the website at www.lespi-nyc.org. Become a member. See what L.E.S.P.I. has done in the five years it has been in existence. Help us create an historic district on the Lower East Side south of Houston.
January 5th - February 22nd
Group Exhibition of Works of Art Dealing with a Printed Technique
Opening Reception: Saturday January 5th, 2013; 6-8 pm
Past Events of interest in the New York Metropolitan Area

The sixth annual New York City Greek Film Festival, which ran from October 6 through 17, broke all previous attendance records with 3,804 admissions.

“Most of the films this year played to near capacity,” said festival manager Stermites Ghillas. “We also noticed an increase in young and non-Greek viewers, all of which is tremendously gratifying.”

“We are very pleased by the turnout this year,” added James DeMetro, festival director. “The films were high quality, and people wanted to see them. So many told me how much they enjoyed the films and how grateful they were for the opportunity to see Greek movies. For the most part, people were happy with what they had seen.”

This year’s festival presented twelve films from Greece, some of them shown for the first time in the U.S. Included among the selections were: ALPS, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos; Burning Heads To Get; Giorgos Sougras; Christos Tsohanis (To Tango, To Tango, To Tango); Nikos Koutelides; City of Children (Po To Ton Silence); Yorgos Thimos (To Os Nera); Costas Lavizos (D Theres Apani: To Haven); Annie Maugard; Magic Hour; Kostas Papakak; Smyrna: The Destruction of A Cosmopolitan City, 1900-1922; Meia Hou; Two Virginial Babies (We Love Us); Maria Economos; Kosmas, Filippis Stavros; Wanted Youth; Angelopoulos (Aphrodite and the Little Black Prince and Last Veil); Giorgos Riga; and The End of Athens (O Diamat, the 1958 classic directed by Nikos Koundaras). Angelopoulos was the American Film Feed’s Work, Move Out, by Greek American director Richard Lebed.

The festival also paid tribute to the late Theo Angelopoulos with a lecture with film excerpts by Prof. Andrew Horton of the University of Oklahoma. Prof. Horton, who was a personal friend of Angelopoulos, has written extensively about his work.

News From Jewish Greece

Thessaloniki

The discovery of Jewish tombstones from the Jewish cemetery destroyed during the WWII Occupation of Salonika has to led to speculation about other buried tombstones.

http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/lost-jewish-tombstones-found-greece-18024593

Lost Jewish Tombstones Found in Greece

Thessaloniki, Greece December 20, 2012 (AP)
In a find that local Jewish groups have described as highly significant, Greek police said Thursday that hundreds of marble headstones and other fragments from Jewish graves destroyed during the Nazi occupation in World War II have been recovered.

The 668 fragments were found buried in a plot of land in Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city, following a 70-year search for the remains of graves smashed when the city's main Jewish cemetery was destroyed.

The head of the city's Jewish community, David Saltiel, said most of the gravestones found dated from the mid-1800s up until World War II.

"This is our history," Saltiel, head of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, told The Associated Press.

"Apart from the names, the (gravestones) also include the person's occupation. So this is a historic record."

An estimated 60,000 Greek Jews, most of the country's prewar Jewish population, were killed in the Holocaust.

Ioannina

At a recent presentation in Ioannina, Moses Eliasaf, President of the Jewish Community of Ioannina, gave a moving speech regarding the Occupation of Greece and, specifically, that of Ioannina. For the full speech, access our website (www.kkJsm.org under archives/The Serpent's Egg).

The Jewish Community in Ioannina has reached out to us to help with urgent repairs. While the $20,000 we raised last year helped to restore 4 of the 5 tikkim damaged by moisture, one is still left to repair. The synagogue is now protected by the Byzantine Archeological Department but, because of financial problems in Greece, repairs on the roof of synagogue remain unfinished and, while the Municipality was funding cleanup in Jewish cemetery, financial problems have put a hold on this. Therefore, the Jewish Community of Ioannina is asking our help in raising 25,000 euros to fund these projects. You can send the funds to us at Kehila Kedosha Janina and we will transfer the funds to the community in Greece. (Kehila Kedosha Janina, 280 Broome Street, New York, NY 10002). Please note on the check that these funds are for Ioannina.

We recently added to our website the list of victims from Salonika, the monumental work of Heinz Kounio. For those of you who are interested, you can find the list at www.kkJsm.org under the link “The Holocaust in Greece.”
As you can see from the comment below, the publication of this list was so important for those of us who lost family in Ioannina. Our editor, Rose Eskononts, could not go on when she realized that the woman whose name, (Oro Grottas, her Nona’s sister) she bore had been a victim of the Holocaust.

"Marcia,
This was the most moving, beautiful newsletter. Please keep the photos coming in all your future newsletters. Please keep letting us know of the work being done by Heinz Kounio. I read Kyrios Kounio’s list, looking for the Saoul family and as I scrolled down to the 30,100 row, I started to cry that so many had died. But reading their names, remembering them, certainly makes their memories eternal. God bless you all for the find and honorable work you are doing.

With warmest regards,
Eugenia Meimaridis Maish"

We are happy to report that the quest for connections to the Battino family listed in our last newsletter has led to reconnections between the family of Regina Battino-Pardo in California and members of Ed Cohen’s family in New York.

Shalom to one and all!

Gershon Harris
Hatzor Haglilit, Israel

Can, or should, Jews celebrate New Year's Day – January 1st? Due to its unequivocal pagan and Christian origins, the question of its recognition and celebration has been debated in Jewish law since at least medieval times. And in fact, despite its unequivocal pagan and Christian origins, since by and large New Year's Day celebrations have become almost completely "secularized" in character, even the late and great Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who was considered one of the greatest "poskim" (deciders of Jewish law) of our generation, ruled that: "The first day of the year[January 1] for 'them'[non-Jews] is not prohibited according to [Jewish] law, but 'pious' people should be strict."

In other words, while it is definitely preferable not to lend the day any special recognition, a Jew is not violating any Jewish legal prohibition if he or she does celebrate New Year's day, though obviously this should not be encouraged.

In fact, Judaism has always faced a very often difficult task of trying to cope with the "infiltration" of very non-Jewish ideas and practices since Biblical times. And though many were certainly avoided and rejected, two major non-Jewish innovations actually became so ingrained in Judaism that many are not even aware of their "problematic" origins.

After all, how many Jews realize that the names of the "Jewish" months (Tishrei, Heshvan, Kislev, etc.) are actually Babylonian names, some even of pagan gods? In the Jewish Bible the months have no names, only numbers: The first month, second month, and so on, with only four having an additional name tagged on, like "Hodesh Ha-aviv" (the month of Spring), referring to the month when Pesah falls. So how did the Sages allow the assimilation of such a non-Jewish practice? The Jerusalem Talmud tells us that the modern names of the months "came up [to Israel] with [the returnees] from Babylon," at the onset of the Second Jewish Commonwealth, approximately 350 BCE. And though certain commentators put a prophetic spin on the use of
these names, it is obvious that they were too imbedded and internalized by Jews to be changed. Apparently, since their use had no pagan symbolism for the returnees from Babylonian exile, they were accepted and institutionalized as the official names of the Jewish months.

Secondly, the very division into books, chapters and verses of our Hebrew Bible is a very Christian idea! Originally, the Torah and subsequent books of the Jewish canon had only unnumbered verses, and no chapters per se. In 1205, a certain Parisian theologian named Stephen Langton made the first chapter and verse divisions to facilitate his own work with Bible commentaries. In 1240, Cardinal Hugo of St. Cher published the first Latin Bible with the chapter divisions that exist today. Jews started using these chapter divisions in 1330 for our Hebrew Bible, simply because of how much easier it made Biblical study and commentary. Certain objections were raised at this shocking intrusion of non-Jewish influence, but ultimately, since no Jewish tradition was sacrificed or removed, and in fact the system itself came to help organize and ease Biblical study with no anti-Jewish connotations whatsoever, this system became officially institutionalized and universally accepted — and used — by all Jewish commentators, ancient and modern.

There are numerous other examples, but these are two of the most significant — and interesting. So, after all is said and done, I think I safely wish everyone a "Happy New Year"— though secular it may be!

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News of Interest To All

“The Third Half” among those foreign films submitted as entries for Oscar nominations.


In this case, a scruffy low-class workingman and part-time soccer player pursues the aristocratic daughter of a rich Jewish banker, and his laughable provincial team beats the league’s top team.

What sets “The Third Half” apart is the time, 1941, and the locale of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M), occupied by Nazi ally Bulgaria. The occupiers introduce all of Hitler’s racial agenda, including the graphically depicted humiliation and deportation of the Jews.

Bulgaria, which saved its own Jews but turned the Jews of occupied Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M) over to the Germans, has bitterly protested the film as a perversion of history. According to Mitrevski, Bulgarian authorities have retaliated by blocking talks for Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M) to join the European Union.

http://www.jewishjournal.com/hollywood/article/holocaust_jewish_themes_remain_prominent_among_foreign_oscar_offerings

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Excellent Article in Jewish Week on Kehila Kedosha Janina

It is so gratifying when a reporter finally gets it right. With the exception of some minor errors (present population of Jewish Community of Ioannina), the journalist did an excellent job.

Against all odds (and urban demographics), a Greek-Jewish presence still clings to the Lower East Side.

Wednesday, December 26, 2012
Diane Cole
Special To The Jewish Week
I recently took a wrong turn on the Lower East Side — and walked right into the Jewish past. Because my sense of direction has never been dependable, it was no surprise that as I walked from the subway to the modish Lower East Side bar where a friend was hosting a party, I lost my way. The surprise was where I found myself instead: in front of a two-story honey-colored brick tenement-width building whose distinctive stained-glass windows featured azure blue and white six-pointed stars. Above the front door, a stone frieze displayed two proud lions of Judah standing protective guard on either side of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, encircled by an inscription in Hebrew. Finally, crowning the building’s decorative upper façade hovered one more set of carved tablets, again with Hebrew lettering.

The overall effect was a proud proclamation: this is a Jewish house of worship. Clearly not the chic bar I had sought — and which, I later found, turned out to be just a block away. But the party could wait. For the moment, I stood where I was, transfixed. Though the building’s architectural style spoke of the early-20th century, its appearance was brand new. Huh? No, I laughed inwardly, I had not stumbled into a time warp (nor a waking dream-like Woody Allen film fantasy) — though the neighborhood’s surrounding melange of hipster bars and upscale restaurants made the discovery of an almost hidden Jewish house of worship from another era in their midst feel that way. On the contrary, I decided, this was the opposite of fantasy: so vital a Jewish presence here, amid and despite the never-ending upheavals of urban demographics, signaled a toughness and determination to not just survive, but thrive. I needed to find out more.

The synagogue I stood before, a brightly polished bronze plaque on its exterior informed me, was Kehila Kedosha Janina: the synagogue of the Romaniote Jews, built on this site in 1927, more recently restored and renovated with care, and now a designated New York City landmark.
Romaniote Jews? For sure I’m familiar with the broad categories of Ashkenazic (from Eastern Europe) and Sephardic (from the Iberian peninsula and the Middle East) Jews. But this was a phrase I had never heard.

Nor have most people, I was assured by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos, the synagogue’s museum director, who greeted me when I returned to the synagogue — and this time, with Kehila Kedosha Janina as my actual destination, I did not get lost.

Romaniote, she explained, refers to Greek Jews whose ancestors arrived in the lands of Greece as early as the era of Alexander the Greek, around 300 BCE, and who continued arriving even as Greece, and Jerusalem, became parts of the Roman Empire. The good news: This gives them “the distinction of being the longest continuous Jewish presence in the diaspora, going back 2,300 years,” says Ikonomopoulos.

But the history of Janina (the English transliteration of Ioannina), the town in northwest Greece that the founders of this Lower East Side synagogue called home before coming to America, also has its dark chapters. According to legend, Jews first arrived in the Ionian coastal area in a Roman slave ship sometime after 70 CE, after having been taken captive in Jerusalem after the destruction of the Second Temple. After large numbers of Sephardic Jews began arriving in Greece after the expulsion from Spain in 1492, most, but not all Romaniote communities became assimilated within the Sephardic culture. Janina was one that retained its original identity — speaking Greek, not the Judeo-Spanish dialect of Ladino, and adhering to its own Hellenistic prayer chants. But by 1900, its Jewish population had shrunk to about 4,000; by the beginning of World War II, that number had diminished to 1,950. In March-April 1944, the Nazis deported 1,860 to concentration camps; the great majority were murdered. Today, the Jewish population of the town is between 50 and 100.

And Kehila Kedosha Janina is now the Western Hemisphere’s only surviving synagogue of this Jewish culture.

The congregation itself was founded on the Lower East Side in 1906 by Jewish immigrants from Janina, and by 1927 enough money was raised to open the building that continues to be a fully functioning synagogue, with services every Shabbat and on all holidays. Its numbers are small — rather than a formal membership list, it has a group of devoted regulars and committed board members. But unlike so many other area shuls that, in the second half of the 20th century, moved with their congregants to other boroughs or suburbs, or merged or disbanded altogether, Kehila Kedosha stayed put, and stayed open.

One reason was the determination of Isaac Dostis, who established the synagogue’s museum in 1997. “That brought people through our doors,” brought attention to the Romaniote Jews, and subsequently led to grants for restoration and landmark status, says Ikonomopoulos. Equally important was the dedication of Hy Genee, who died in 2006. “He was the backbone, he kept it going,” says KKJ’s current president Marvin Marcus, who recorded Genee changing chanting piyutim in the haunting, traditional Romaniote style, and urges me to listen.

And what they saved is more than a time capsule. Step inside the sanctuary, and it looks much like it did in 1927, thanks to a historically informed renovation completed in 2006. Sunlight beams down from the original skylight, illuminating a narrow room with wooden benches, centrally placed bima and wooden Torah ark beyond. The tin ceiling, hand stenciling in lieu of wallpaper, and hanging chandeliers all reflect the original décor. Dangling from above are at least a dozen metal and glass memorial lamps, donated by family members of the deceased, both to keep memory alive and to add beauty to the sacred space.
As I walk the length of the room, my guide is Marvin Marcus’ 16-year-old son Ethan Marcus, whose bar mitzvah took place here three years ago (as did his older brother’s a few years prior). He eagerly drew aside the curtain to the ark to show me the array of six Torahs within (another one is currently being repaired). None of them is robed in the traditional mantle seen in Ashkenazic synagogues. Instead, each is contained within a velvet-covered wood and metal case — a protective holder called a “tik.” The custom is “exclusive to the Romaniote community,”

Marcus tells me. Then he undoes the clasp to open a crimson and gold case and reveals the yellowed parchment scroll within. “This is the oldest Torah, from Greece, about 1750,” he says. “We never remove the Torah from the tik. Scholars feel that this tradition is Torah dress dates back to Second Temple destruction when Jews were forced to carry the Torah scrolls — literally carry them — from Jerusalem to the Eastern Mediterranean, by hand. They needed something to protect them, and so created the heavy metal and wood cases.”

Another distinctive aspect of the Romaniote Jews is the sound of the service itself, with chants and melodies that “sound like they come from the mountains — and the community originally was from the mountains!” says Ikonomopoulos with a laugh. “I had a Greek Orthodox priest who was in here and said, this sounds like our chant! And the question is, who got it from whom?”

Upstairs, the women’s gallery (the men sit downstairs, and women are not counted as part of a minyan, even though sparse attendance can make it difficult sometimes to gather a Shabbat quorum of 10) doubles as a museum. Exhibits display everything to do with the history of Janina’s Jewish community — and with the history of the Kehila Kedosha Janina synagogue, including photos and history and ceremonial objects such as antique brit milah instruments, seder plates, spice boxes, and candlesticks. Best of all, organize a group of ten or more to tour the museum and sanctuary, and you’ll get a traditional Janina lunch, too. “We make great food, much better than Ashkenazi!” gloats Ikonomopoulos.

Jeffrey Mordos, an advertising executive and KKJ board member, agrees. Having grown up on the Lower East Side, attending the synagogue with his Greek immigrant parents, Mordos positively kvells as he remembers his mother’s traditional holiday dishes: for Purim, for instance, Haman’s ears, consisting of deep-fried dough shaped in circles (like ears) and dipped in honey; and for Passover, soup served with crushed matzah and, in what seems like a traditional, finished with egg-lemon sauce. “My wife will still make those dishes and our kids still enjoy and the tradition carries forward,” he says.

But it’s much more than food traditions that keep him at KKJ. “What draws me is keeping the traditions of Greek Jewry alive as long as possible,” he says. “When you recognize that Greece lost something like 90 percent of its Jews in the Holocaust, that raises the likelihood of Greek Jewry vanishing. So beyond the personal interest, there’s a historic component which is very important.” Kehila Kedosha Janina forms an important part of that mosaic. And it’s an easy destination to get lost in. ◆

*Diane Cole is the author of the memoir “After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges,” and a frequent contributor to many national publications, including The Wall Street Journal.*
Recently Acquired Photos and Enquiries

With the visit of Michael Pearlstein, a mystery was solved. We identified the alef above as that of his great uncle Meyer (Menachem) Mione who died an unfortunate death at the age of 24, accidently electrocuted in 1948 while working with another young man from the Greek Jewish community. We are hoping to make a copy of the alef for our collection.

Websites of interest:

Holocaust studies in Australia welcomed by Greek community.


So many of you have applauded our efforts. We thank those who have sent in contributions.

If you would like to make a contribution to Kehila kedosha Janina, please send your check (in US dollars) to us at 280 Broome Street, New York, NY 10002 (attention Marcia). Your donation will enable us to continue to hold services and preserve our special traditions and customs, and to tell our unique story through our Museum.
When you are in New York, visit us on Broome Street. We are open for services every Saturday and all major Jewish holidays and our Museum is open every Sunday from 11-4 and, by appointment during the week.