

## Greek and Jewish: The *Yanniotes* in New York

Leaving the soil of our homeland often forces us to redefine our identity. Too often assimilation into the surrounding majority culture causes the loss of original ethnicity, especially when the emphasis is placed on leaving the "Old World" behind. Hellenes, throughout their history have continually, and often successfully, stressed the importance of preservation of culture, tradition and, especially, language, aspects so important in preserving one's identity. Most studies on diasporic "Greeks," transplanted Hellenes, have concentrated on Greek Orthodox Christians and, yet, one of the most understudied group of Greeks, Greek-Jews, offer us valuable insights into the processes of assimilation and acculturation. What is preserved? What is lost? What is important?

In the early part of the twentieth century, continuing through the 1960s Greeks would emigrate in large numbers, creating a Hellenistic Diaspora that reached from the Mediterranean to the far corners of the world. Often, it would appear that more Greeks lived outside of Greece than on Greek soil. Various factors have led to emigration, political instability and economic deprivations foremost. Whether it was a hoped-for short term stay to work in Europe, the United States or Australia, or an actual transplanting of one's family onto the soil of these respective locales, Greeks have always, for the most part, taken their culture, language and love for homeland with them. In doing so, they transformed their host countries, and on returning, greatly altered their motherland.

Most of the information on the Hellenistic Diaspora does not take into account the 'other' Hellenes, those who practice Judaism. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, as main areas of Jewish settlement in Macedonia, Thrace and Epirus became part of the Modern State of Greece, there were over 100,000 Jews living on what was now Greek soil<sup>1</sup>. From 1912/13-1931, approximately one quarter of the Jewish population would leave, most going to either France or the United States<sup>2</sup>. In some ways, their reasons for leaving would be the same as those of their Greek Orthodox Christian neighbors, searching for economic opportunities for themselves and their children. But, in other ways, their leaving would reflect changes in the Jewish world on Greek soil: uncertainties about living under a Christian government, economic hardships incurred because of their faith and, in the case of Thessaloniki, a devastating fire and rise in economic anti-Semitism with the influx of Asia Minor refugees.

Also, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the United States was experiencing a massive wave of immigration<sup>3</sup>. From 1881-1924, over fifteen million immigrants would enter the shores of the United States, including three and a half million Jews, most from eastern and southern Europe. Among the Jewish immigrants was a comparatively smaller group of Balkan Jews. Ship manifests and Ellis Island

records do not distinguish by religion, only by country of origin. Only through examination of surnames can we separate Jews from non-Jews, and our assumptions are not always correct. Jews from mainland Greece were listed by their cities and countries of origin. Depending on the date, their country of origin might be listed as either Greece or Turkey<sup>4</sup>.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, most Balkan Jewry was of traditional Sephardic background, dating their ancestry back to pre-Expulsion Spain and, on immigrating to the United States, would establish their communal organizations and synagogues along those lines. Back in Greece, especially in the city of Salonika, where there were over forty synagogues in the early part of the twentieth century, the synagogues would be named after the ancestral city in the Iberian Peninsula from where their ancestors hailed. In the United States, especially in the New York area, they would name their synagogues and communal organizations after the Balkan cities from where they had recently left (Kastoria, Monastir, etc.) While there were a number of congregations founded by Saloniklis Jews, no synagogue would be named after their city of origin, an interesting phenomenon that has yet to be fully explored.

Included in this wave of early twentieth century immigration, intermingled with Jews from the Balkans were a group of Jews from the city of Ioannina, Greek-speaking Jews whom the scholars like to call *Romaniotes*. They called themselves *Yanniotes* (Jews from Ioannina), a name that still persists today. They would not feel comfortable worshipping in either Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi, or Spanish-speaking Sephardic synagogues. They would establish their own institutions and organizations, enabling them to perpetuate their specific culture, traditions and religious observance. As with all first-generation immigrants, one foot would be in the new world and one foot would remain in the old. For the Yanniotes, and other Greek-speaking Jews who would join their congregations, that other foot would remain firmly planted on Greek soil.

The Jews from Ioannina Greece, and the sister communities of Arta and Preveza, started to come to the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, most arriving between 1903 and 1924. Why leave this idyllic city of Ioannina located at the foot of the Pindos Mountain Range? Why leave a city where their people had lived in relative peace for over a millennium? In many ways their reasons for leaving were just the same as that of non-Jewish Greeks. A poor economy, antiquated inheritance laws and the dowry system made it difficult to survive economically. Political uncertainty permeated the Balkans. The United States would offer economic and educational opportunities unavailable in Greece.

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the Jewish community in Ioannina numbered over 4000. Two synagogues served the community, one inside the walls of the ancient *Kastro*<sup>5</sup> where many of the Jews still lived, and

one outside the walls in the newer Jewish quarter. The community had its own burial society and welfare organizations. It would only be with the emigration of many of the young people that the need to construct a senior home would arise. The home would open in 1931<sup>6</sup>. The Alliance Israelite Universelle<sup>7</sup> had come to Ioannina in 1904 and now, even Jewish girls were beginning to receive an education. It is quite probable that this offering of secular education<sup>8</sup> opened the doors to possible opportunities outside the small city of Ioannina and, when a shipping company advertised cheap fares to the United States, many of the youth would make their way to the New World. By 1924, when the immigration quotas would be established in the United States, limiting immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, half of the Jewish community of Ioannina had already left.

Most of the *Yanniote* Jews arrived in the United States at Ellis Island in the harbor of New York City, and many would settle, for at least some time, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan<sup>9</sup>. It was there that they would plant their specific Jewish culture and their Greek traditions. Their first communal organization was the burial society, now called the United Brotherhood/Good Hope Society of Janina<sup>10</sup>. In 1906, a young Yanniote man working at the Schinasi Cigarette Company, died in an industrial accident. Initially, both the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi and the Spanish-speaking Sephardic burial societies refused to bury him. The Sephardic Brotherhood acquiesced and the young man was given a Jewish burial but this incident made it clear that, here, in the United States, Greek speaking Jews were thought of as "different" and would have to establish their own communal organizations.

On the Lower East Side, their Greek language separated them from other Jews in the area and although there were hundreds of synagogues where they could have worshipped as Jews, they needed their own synagogue, a place where they could be both Jews and Greeks. In 1921 they acquired the property at 280 Broome Street and, six years later, in 1927, the doors of Kehila Kedosha Janina (The Holy Congregation of Ioannina) opened for services. The names of the founding fathers still adorn the marble plaques in the entrance vestibule<sup>11</sup>. Their stories are reflective of the struggles and successes of this small unique community. Most were born in Ioannina, and had come to the New World to ply their trades and raise their families. Heading the founder's plaque is the name of Leon Colchamiro. In 1927, when the synagogue opened its doors, Leon was 54 years old and had been New York for 23 years. He was the second oldest son in a family of eleven, all of whom with two exceptions<sup>12</sup> would join the New York Community that Leon helped establish. His wife, Julia Mazza, was also born in Ioannina. Most immigrant Yanniotes married others of the same background, in most instances their families' close ties carried across the ocean from Greece to New York. By 1927, Leon's family had grown to eight children, all but the first two born in the United States. He would make his living manufacturing bathrobes

and nightgowns<sup>12</sup>, enabling him to finance the voyage of family members still in Greece, and to buy a house in Brooklyn where he would raise his family. In so many ways, Leon Colchamiro is an excellent example of the Greek-speaking Romaniote community from Ioannina in New York: hard-working, family oriented, dedicated to the observance of his faith and proud of his Greek roots. This love of family, country and religion would be passed down to his children and grandchildren. Three of Leon's grandsons sit on the Board of Directors of Kehila Kedosha Janina, the synagogue he helped establish.



Leon Colchamiro and Family

In June of 2009, the Colchamiro family will gather in Ioannina, in the synagogue inside the *kastro* walls, to celebrate the 144<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of their matriarch, Rachel Galanos, and their patriarch, Jessoula, an itinerant merchant who bought and sold fabrics<sup>13</sup>. Over 100 years have passed since their ancestors, the children of Jessoula and Rachel, left Ioannina, carrying with them, in their meager satchels, a love for the country they were leaving behind. Now, a century later, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, will return to celebrate their heritage, a very Greek, and a very Jewish heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> In Thessaloniki, alone, the Jewish population in 1912, when the city became part of Modern Greece, was close to 80,000. Other major centers of Jewish presence were Ioannina, Kastoria, Veroia, Kavalla and Drama.

<sup>2</sup> Naar, Devin, *From the Jerusalem of the Balkans to the Goldene Medina: Jewish Immigration From Salonika*, *American Jewish History* Journal, to be published in the fall of 2008. Also, see Skourtes, Ioannes, *METANAΣΤΕΥΣΗ ΤΩΝ ΕΒΡΑΙΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΓΑΛΛΙΑ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΟΝ ΜΕΣΟΠΟΛΕΜΟ* (Immigration of the Jews of Thessaloniki To France Between the Wars) published in 1992 by the Center For Historical Research of the Municipality of Thessaloniki.

<sup>3</sup> According to the US census of 2000, there were 1,153, 295 individuals of Greek heritage living in the United States, with the heaviest concentration in New York City, Detroit and Chicago.

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<sup>4</sup> It was not unusual for individuals within the same family coming from the same city to list different countries of origin. Those examining papers at ports of entry were unconcerned with these discrepancies. Their main concerns were the health of the arrivals and an assurance that they would not become a financial burden once released.

<sup>5</sup> Fortified area originally built by the Venetians and, then, refortified by the Byzantines and the Turks. It is the oldest part of the city.

<sup>6</sup> The Beit Yeshoua VeRahel Hebrew Home For the Aged was opened in 1931. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the Home was emptied of its residents for deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau, never to re-open.

<sup>7</sup> The Alliance was established in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to educate “educationally deprived” Jewish youth in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>8</sup> Before the arrival of the Alliance, young girls received no education and their brothers only received a religious education at the Talmud Torah. The patriarchs of the Jewish community in Ioannina made their living in trade (mostly textiles) and as shopkeepers. Higher education was not stressed. Even in the 1940s, very few women worked outside the home and very few men completed more than a rudimentary education enabling them to read, write and keep their books. For an excellent overview of pre-WWII Jewish life in Ioannina, see Fromm, Annette, *We Are Few: Folklore and Ethnic Identity of the Jewish Community of Ioannina*, Lexington Books, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Additional synagogues would eventually be established to serve the growing Yanniote community as they moved from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to the outer boroughs. Shearith Israel of Janina would serve the community in the Bronx, and Kehila Kedosha Janina of Mapleton would serve the community in Brooklyn. Both no longer exist. Only Kehila Kedosha Janina (280 Broome Street, NYC) still remains open.

<sup>10</sup> The Society of Love and Brotherhood of Janina was established in 1906, The Good Hope Society, Sons of Israel in 1907 and the Israelite Community of Janina in 1913.

<sup>11</sup> The original Board of Directors were Leon Colchamiro (listed as Rabbi, but never ordained as such), Joseph Josephs (President), Eliasof Solomon (Vice President), Eliezer Apstein (Treasurer), Elia Matza (Secretary), Jessoula Menachem, Samuel Nahoum, Solomon Asser, Morris Besso, Elias Asser, Jessoula Levy (Rabbi), Jessua Meezan (Honorary President), Elias De Castros (Honorary Secretary) and Aaron Saddock, (Honorary Treasurer).

<sup>12</sup> Asser Colchamiro, the third child of Jessoula and Rachel Colchamiro and the second oldest son, died of appendicitis in August 1919. Leon Colchamiro returned to Greece to bring Asser’s widow and children to the United States. Dinoula Colchamiro Bakola would stay in Greece with her husband, Ezra were they had nine children. Dinoula died in Ioannina in 1931. Her oldest son, Max, came to join Leon Colchamiro’s family in the United States, making him one of the few in his family to survive the Holocaust. For additional details on the Holocaust in Ioannina, see *In Memory of the Jewish Community of Ioannina*, published by Kehila Kedosha Janina in 2004.

<sup>12</sup> The *Yanniotes* found their place in textiles in New York, many establishing (or working in) small family owned businesses producing ladies nightgowns, housedresses, bathrobes, panties and aprons. Many of the small ‘factories’ were established in the basements of the tenements and, later, moved to lower Broadway in Manhattan.

<sup>13</sup> Jessoula probably never received a formal education, only learning to read and write enough Greek to keep his books. Certainly, his wife, Rachel, received no education. Yet, when 156 of their descendants gathered for a family reunion in Kehila Kedosha Janina in 2007, among his grandchildren, great grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren were doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors, educators and architects. When Jessoula’s children made the decision to leave Ioannina for the New World, that decision not only saved most of the family from the devastation of the Holocaust but, also, afforded their descendant opportunities they never would have had if they had remained behind in Greece.