

The Jews of Preveza  
By George Moustaki

Chronika: January/February 2005: issue 195.  
Translated by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

It is difficult for anyone to speak regarding the Jewish community of Preveza. After more than 57 years, the memories are limited and detached. Nothing has been written by those who lived in the past.

The duration of the Jewish community of Preveza was brief, first formed during the 1880's by Jews who came from Arta. This immigration began after the liberation of Arta in 1881. Arta suffered economically after the liberation due to its isolation from the harbor of Salaoras, the mercantile trade of Ioannina, the plains, the areas of Filippiadas and Lakkas Thesprotikou, since the border separating Greece and Turkish lands was set at Araxthos. The Turkish administration of southern Epirus was now transferred to Preveza. In 1886, the Turks built The Central Administration [now the main judicial building] in Preveza.

The economic crisis also affected the leading mercantile trade in Ioannina because, with the exception of area of Arta, western Thessaly was also off limits. This was discussed in the writings of the contemporary historian from Zagoria, Ioannis Lambridis. Therefore, along with Jews from Arta, Jews from Ioannina also began to arrive in Preveza. In the registrars where the deaths of Avraam Ganis and those of Avesai and Moise Geni are listed, mention is made that they were born in Ioannina.

In the conventional history of Preveza, written in 1990 by Spyros Loukatos, it is stated that only two Jews were living in Preveza in 1870. The Metropolitan Bishop of Arta and Preveza, Seraphim Xenopoulos, wrote that until 1881 there were 150 Jewish families living in Arta, but he does not mention any Jews living in Preveza. In the February 1883, issue of *Review* published in Corfu, "Mosé Andalusia Israelite" noted that, "A committee composed of Elia David, Haim Isis, David Zadik, David Iakov and Elia Koulias went to Preveza to organize a Jewish Community and to arrange for the building of a synagogue."

Shortly after, on June 5, 1885, it was mentioned that there were Jews present at the funeral of the Metropolitan Bishop of Preveza, Amvrosiou.

According to the administrators of the border and local administrators, south Epirus began to import from Europe industrial products that supplanted the local industry and developed new avenues of commerce. Most of the Jews of Preveza were engaged in commerce involving the importation of textiles, haberdashery and other products on all levels. Before the War, almost all were heads of their own business but few were wealthy. Most struggled to survive, only doing so by strict control of their expenditures.

The Jewish shops were in the market place on adjacent streets. The shops extended from K. Kariotaki up to the Galanos Super Market, except for Bakola's shop, which was towards the cathedral on the side street of Spyros Veritsi. Bakola had come from Ioannina and his son, Leon, was born in 1917.

Located on the corner of K. Kariotaki and the market place was the fabric shop of Avraam Tzafou, believed to be the wealthiest Jew in Preveza. Perpendicularly across the street, on the plot owned by the Potamianou brothers, was the clearance house run by Daniel Zadik. He sold flour and dairy and was the only Jew in the city who engaged in a business that was monopolized by Christians. Where the present greengrocery of Niko Argirou is, was once the fabric shop of Zakar. The Matsil brothers had their fabric shop on the corner of inherited plot. Across the way, where Niko Belegirino has his shop, was the shop of Lagaris. He had come from Ioannina in the period between the two world wars. His grandson is the pathologist and Head of Internal Medicine at the University of Ioannina, Moses Eliasaf.

His mother, Lagaris' daughter, still lives in Ioannina. On the adjacent street, [21<sup>st</sup> of October] Albala had his "green" taverna in the basement of building owned by Karidi and Charbourou. There was a Jew who had a taverna near here [where Lambrou Gournari has his shop] and it is not clear whether this was Albala's and whether he rented it. Where Yianni Katsikobordou has his shop was the fabric shop of Levi. Next door was another fabric shop owned by another Jew named Zadik. Levi had storage facilities on Kastani. Next was a shop owned by Solomon Gani who, after the earthquake of 1938, moved his shop across the way where the shop of Taki Bondina now stands. Ganis' two daughters survived the German concentration camps. After the War, Rachel went to the United States and married. She then sent for her sister. They live on Long Island.

In the basement of property owned by Trufonidi, there were two shops; one selling fabric owned by Matsas and one selling used goods owned by Askenazi. On Kartsakla was Zak Matsas' fabric store, the other half of the street [to the corner] taken by Solomon Solomon. The tailor shop now owned by Kikeri was once that of Semos and Leon Matsas had the shop now owned by Angeliki Bondina. Tzakakis' haberdashery was on Alexiadi. Genis' shop was on the corner of the agora and Parthenagogiou. Genis' sons, Moise and Markos, survived. They were resistance fighters with Zerba and, after the liberation, went to Israel. Moise's son, Avraam, studied Greek and enjoys reading the local newspaper, as was related to the author by the present owner of the plot where their former home was.

The Albala brothers were on Traxana. The watchmaker, Bochor, was across the way. In the narrow alleyway adjacent to the Commercial Bank, Asser Koen and Koen Koen had their shop. Kapsalis' haberdashery was on Papasava. Zak was a butcher. There were also other Jewish-owned shops here such as those of Leon Saba, Amedeo Hanen and that of Gkortsas who sold organ music. In the Business and Occupation Guide of Thessaly and Epirus from 1939, there were 39 Jewish names listed.

In addition to those Jews who owned businesses, there were also those who worked as itinerant merchants. Well known was Aaron and his brother who had a small, two-wheel cart that was pulled by a small horse, making its way through the winding streets of the neighborhood, loudly announcing its arrival with blast of trumpets. On their backs were cheap fabrics, around their waists, a bag with threads, buttons, ribbons, safety pins, brooches, and hairpins, holding a metal yardstick in one hand. One of them, David, to entice customers, would call out, "American cloth, 3 cents a yard."

Aboula, one of the poorest, sold metal coffee pots to make Greek coffee [brikia] to the neighbors who sat in the periphery of Saint Lios Church. Another Aboula was an employee at the customs office. The Sabikou brothers ran a transport business, using handcarts and bike-like carriages. Giosla was an accountant at the lumber warehouse owned by Mosxou. A Jew was also the accountant at the electrical firm own by the Kalimeri brothers. Elias Zakar was the rabbi in the synagogue. His son, Pepo, bravely served on the Albanian Front in 1940-41 as a sergeant, head of his platoon. Other members of the community were the teachers in the school.

The Jewish neighborhood was composed of four square blocks created by Kariotaki, Politexniou, Ioanni Moustaki and the market, intermingled with Cjristian and Turkish residences. Very few lived beyond these limits. The location of their houses was close to their businesses and the homes were bought from Christians and Turks. Raphael Zadik bought his house on Kariotaki from the Turk, Base Haim on December 27, 1907. Some bought plots of land and built homes.

Most of their shops were property owned by Christians. I do not know of any Jews who rented their homes. Of the 140,000 olive trees owned by the inhabitants of Preveza, only a small number [about 250] were owned by Jews. The Jew, Kiolis, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, owned horses in a barn on Kalou Street, at the southern section of the Hotel Dioni.

### The Synagogue

The community's synagogue was on Kariotaki Street. It was a remarkable structure, strongly built with a beautiful architectural plan. The synagogue did not suffer any damage at all in the bombing that destroyed the Holy Church of Saint John [Agios Ioannis]. Only one stone fell on the southeastern corner of the wall where the plaque commemorating those of Spyro Botsari's family who fought against the Turks and lived [from 1736 on] in the area where the synagogue was built.

The synagogue, Kal Kadósh Tefilá Lemosé, was built in 1903 and was dedicated by the rabbi from Ioannina, Mosé Koen, who donated the necessary amount for the purchase of the plot.

After the Occupation, the orchestra [Philharmonic] took over the building, protecting it. The Philharmonic relinquished the building to the Telephone

Company [OTE] when OTE bought the synagogue and the adjacent school in the 1960's. OTE built its building and replaced the memorial plaque.

On the western side of the synagogue there was the Jewish Public School which began to function in 1908. The first floor held two rooms for classes and the office of the director was on the second floor. There were four teachers. The school received the attention of the Alliance in Salonika and the headquarters in Paris offered to pay for a teacher of French in Preveza. Solomon Danon arrived from Paris in 1911 to teach French and took an active role in the Jewish community. The other Jewish teachers were paid from the income of a bequest left by the late Haim Koen [income derived from rents collected on his property located on K. Kariotaki Street and L. Erinis, and from the proceeds from his 170 olive trees. The bequest also paid for dowries for five young, needy Jewish women. The school functioned all year long, in times of peace and in during the war. The cost was paid by the Community.

Hebrew was taught at the school and during their last three years, the students, also, learned French. After the liberation [from Turkey] in 1914, a teacher of Greek became part of the staff. As related to me by Mr. Odysseas Betsos, in the archives of the Superintendent of Public Schools there are at least three thick envelopes containing information on the Jewish School. The archives of the school, written in French, were taken to the basement of the Theophaneiou School, after the closing of the Jewish school. When Theophaneiou closed, the teachers took the archives and they were saved.

After Jewish public school [elementary], the students went to Greek high school, forming friendships such as that between the late Thomas Sfonduli and Moisi Geni. In addition, Rachel Gani formed a friendship with a fellow student [Greek Christian] that has lasted until today.

In the school year 1929-30, in the first three classes of the high school there were 14 Jewish students. In the first class, there were 6: Esther Matsa, Victor Matsas, Leon Bakolas, Sarika Tzafou, Moisis Levi and Amedeos Hanen. In the second class, there were 4: Judith Levi, Moisis Matsas, Iosef Zakar and Leon Sabas. In the third class, there were 4: Moisis Geni, Rachel Levi, Salvator Tzafos and Haim Esdraf from Avlona [*Αυλώνα: a town nearby?*] The fathers of all the students were merchants.

The absence of Jewish students in the last three classes of the high school appears to be due to the fact that Jews first started to send their children to the high school in 1927-28. Directly before the war, this number would more than double.

The Jewish cemetery was outside the city, right of the middle door of the moat. I visited it many times, both before and after the destruction of the community. After the war, a large portion of it was encroached upon by neighbors and others. Mr. Konstantini, who visited the cemetery on May 20, 1946, wrote: "The retaining walls that had been constructed to prevent vandalism have been destroyed on two sides. The one closest to the road is almost completely destroyed and, if not repaired, will be gone in a few years.

The writings are hardly legible on many of the tombstones and if not salvaged now, will disappear forever.” No attempt was made to save the cemetery and it was finally sold [by KIS] to the municipality for a token price [greatly reduced from its actual value: *why?*]. In turn, the municipality surrendered it to IKA, who constructed a building housing all the agencies of Preveza.

#### The Jews and Christians: a common life

The Jews of Preveza were a law-abiding and peaceful part of the pre-war community of our city. In spite of their special differences, they were very close to other Greeks. They took an active role in the general community of the city and served on the municipal council. Two of the first elected members were Iakov Levi and Solomon Gani [Levi was elected in the first election and Gani in both the second and the third].

Daniel Zadik was a member of the Administrative Council of the Mercantile Association. Among the first five members of the administrative council, “Orpheus” [The Musical Association which created the Philharmonic in 1920] was Asser David.

The bond between Jews and others in Preveza was stronger than in most other cities because the Jews engaged in new areas of commerce and did not compete with Christians engaged in other areas. However, the main reason might be the openness of Prevezians, coming from both inland and the coast, giving them an acceptance of both ideas and people.

Regarding the relationship of Jews and Christians in Preveza, my late friend, Takis Balkos, told me that, in September 1943, when he and his mother were freed [they had been held in Corfu by the Italians because his brother, an officer, Tasos, had gone to the mountains to fight with the resistance] they arrived in Preveza and found that, after more than a year abandonment of their home, the Jews of the city were the only ones who, without hesitation, gave them food. My friend never forgot their generosity.

Above all, we must take note that on March 25, 1944, the Germans, knocking wildly on the doors and windows, woke the Jews and ordered them to get dressed, take some necessities and all come out into the street. When they Jews came into the streets, it was daybreak. At that hour, the fisherman called Torpili was on his way to his boat. The German soldier, seeing him, thought him to be a Jew and ordered him to join the others. Before he understood what was happening, the Jews called out to him in surprise, “what are you doing with us?”

It was then that Torpili became frightened and began to scream. Fortunately, when they arrived at the waterside, an acquaintance who worked as a customs guard heard his screams and went to the Germans. He told them about Torpili and shortly before the transport left with the Jews loaded onto trucks, he was released. The German trucks had stopped at the beginning of P. Tsaldari Street, close to the Central Judicial building. Speaking about that tragic hour of the embarkation of the Jews, my now-deceased friend, Yiannis

Fondaras, told me: "I, along with a number of other Prevezians, had rented [for a tax of 10%] small boats from local fisherman, so that we could fish and feed our families. For that reason, we were on our way to Plateia Androutsou [which was then close to the sea] at that early hour. When we approached the Judicial Building, we heard desperate crying and saw them loading the Jews into open trucks. Immediately, I heard the Jew Askenazi call out to me: 'Yianni, light a candle in the Church of the Virgin for us.' I became very emotional and fled. Shortly afterwards, I went to the church and lit a candle." After a short while, Yianni added: "Even now, remembering, I shudder again!"

We are paying honor to our fellow citizens who the Germans led under inhuman circumstances to German death camps: 235 Jews from Preveza were lost in the Holocaust, a total of 15 survived. The last Jewish resident of Preveza was Sarina Matsa. Through her presence and judicial proceedings, the core of the Jewish cemetery was salvaged.

*This was a speech published in Prevezanika [newspaper] by the Municipality of Preveza.*