

## **The Fate of the Material Evidence of the Jews of Greece**

NICHOLAS STAVROULAKIS

The material culture of the Jews of Greece consists primarily of mute evidence of their history in the form of objects, either of secular or liturgical use, synagogues and cemeteries. By the mid-seventies, some thirty years after the disaster of the Axis occupation of Greece, much of this evidence was made the more silent and in many cases opaque and ambiguous as elderly survivors died and took with them the last memories of the daily and religious life of Jews in Greece. How this evidence survived, was collected, conserved, and, as far as was possible, documented is the subject of this paper.

In the course of the Axis occupation of Greece between 1941 and 1945, almost all documentary evidence of Jewish life in the form of community records and libraries had been systematically confiscated by the Nazis or simply thrown to the winds. Apparently, except in the case of Thessaloniki, there was no overall "policy" which may reflect the divided attention given to the application of the "Final Solution" by the Italian and Bulgarian co-belligerents of the Germans.

In Thessaloniki the use of shock, delusion and subsequent harnessing of the mechanism of implosion was not repeated as efficiently elsewhere in Greece. The almost immediate appropriation of Jewish communal wealth secured by the arrest and subsequent ransom of some 5,000 Jewish men in the city was only the first step in the process of assisting the

community to destroy itself. The weak and divided leadership of the community organized by the Nazis only weeks after their arrival under the authority not of a president but of the chief rabbi of the city was, as might be expected, ineffective. More significantly, it also assisted in the furtherance of a hope for some form of *modus vivendi*. It was through this leadership that the delusion of re-settlement of the city's Jews to a Jewish "reserve" near Cracow lulled many into false hopes of what would be a difficult period of transition but only that. They thought their fate would be not unlike what the Asia Minor Christian Greeks had endured between 1924-27. Many of those refugees, in fact, had settled in Thessaloniki. This initial "action" was followed by the designation of specific ghettos into which all Jews were required to take residence thus cutting them off from normal urban life. The confiscation of personal wealth through subterfuge and deception was put into effect at the same time.

As if to emphasize the permanent nature of this process the great Jewish necropolis that lay just to the east of the city beyond its ancient walls was confiscated and then given over to complete destruction. Covering an expanse of some 324,000 square meters, it contained the graves of over 300,000 Jews, most marked with stones, many of which could be dated back to Byzantine and late Roman times. For centuries this venue had provided a vibrant link between the living and the dead and was itself a sign of some form of permanency and continuity.<sup>1</sup> By March 1943, when the deportations began, the Jews had become a confused, impoverished and deluded mass of people that had no leadership to speak of. What remained of their daily lives had been for the most part abandoned and subsequently vandalized.<sup>2</sup>

At the termination of the war Jewish survivors who returned from the camps or who had gone into hiding during the Occupation immediately set about trying to salvage what could be saved of Jewish property, communal or private, that

had either been parceled out by the Nazis or had been seized by squatters or even by legalized theft.

What had been lost forever can only be guessed at by what eventually was saved. Communal records, religious artifacts from synagogues, entire libraries and archives recording the history of communities and individuals never emerged even after the settlement of property and the establishment of legal tenure by the Central Board of Jewish Communities or KIS (the first such organization in the modern Greek state). Abandoned synagogues, schools, and other communal buildings and cemeteries were apparently all that remained of a two-thousand-years patrimony.

Despite the enormity of the catastrophe that struck Jewish fortunes and life in Greece between 1941 and 1945, one must avoid the temptation to magnify its impact. Scholars and individuals have been tempted to assume that what was lost between 1941 and 1945 in Thessaloniki and elsewhere was an intact patrimony reflecting essentially Sephardic religious life in the city through some 33 synagogues and their rich contents of communal records and libraries. Also thought to be intact was a cemetery with inscriptions that went back well over a millennium. What is often forgotten is that on several occasions in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, fires destroyed sizeable portions of the city where Jews lived in close proximity to synagogues that were destroyed along with domestic dwellings. These fires alone likely destroyed whatever may have been brought from Iberia in the previous century but also archives, libraries, and liturgical art that may have been passed on from Byzantine times. Such fires were somewhat commonplace and a subject of great concern to Ottoman authorities. Perhaps the greatest of these was that of August 1917, five years after the city's annexation by Greece, when the entire Jewish quarter along with almost all of its synagogues and oratories was destroyed. The years following this catastrophe were quite difficult for the city's Jews as the



community was still in the midst of coming to terms with Greek national identity and not always surrounded by a sympathetic non-Jewish urban population.

By the mid-twenties the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey saw the departure of the Muslims from Greece and the arrival of over a million or so Greek Christians from Asia Minor, many of whom were settled in Thessaloniki and its environs. Up-rooted on the basis of modern nationalist norms of identity, these Asia Minor Greeks, many of whom did not speak Greek and had never felt any deep identity with the Greek state (being Ottoman subjects), found themselves in a city that was still predominantly Jewish, Spanish speaking and facing ambiguous responses from the government and Orthodox Church. Despite these disadvantages and faced with perhaps even a certain animosity, all of the synagogues destroyed in the great fire of 1917 were restored by 1929 even though their contents and those of private dwellings were for the most part lost forever.

With the exception of Rhodes, Hania, Corfu, Komotini, and Kastoria, cities in Greece that had Jewish communities and synagogues of some antiquity, restoration of burnt buildings was not always the case. At least twice after 1821, the Kal Yashan (the Old Synagogue of Ioannina) was destroyed by fire. The synagogue of Halkida also went up in flames in 1841, leaving behind tantalizing stories of communal documents and archives that were destroyed at the time. Such "events" also affected synagogues in Larissa and Trikala.

Even during the Occupation the fate of synagogues and even cemeteries was not consistent. Nonetheless, one must note the uniform absence of Jewish communal archives after the war. Most of the synagogues in Thessaloniki were destroyed. The most recently founded Monasteriote synagogue (1929), however, was given to the Red Cross; and a good number survived the war and were later passed into

secular hands or razed.<sup>3</sup> The synagogues of Patras, Rhodes and Verroia were simply locked up with most of their contents. That of Kos was sacked as was the synagogue of Etz Hayyim in Hania, Crete, which was given over to squatters. The great synagogue of Komotini was savaged as was that of Didimoteicho. What was left of the recently built synagogue of Xanthi, for all purposes a shell, was given to the civic authorities. The Kal Yashan (Old Synagogue of Ioannina) was given to the civic authorities as a possible library. The silence of these destroyed communities at the end of the war was almost total. All written records had vanished or been carried out of Greece. If one was to attempt to construct some semblance of a history of Greek Jewry, it was only through what might have materially survived the catastrophe.

The material evidence of the Jewish presence in what constitutes the modern Greek state is made a quite complex matter when one considers that the Jewish communities under the Ottomans were inter-connected in a wide web of greater Jewish dispersion that in relatively contemporary times (i.e. from the 15<sup>th</sup> century) was highly complex but also evolved with understandable indifference to what today we consider national boundaries. Within the Balkans and Western Anatolia, Jewish communities were united by common economic interests but also language (either Greek or Ladino) and a sense of common tradition (either Romaniote or Sephardic). Thessaloniki maintained very close contacts with Monastir, Sophia, Kavalla, Serres and Larissa. Ioannina was closely bound by common Romaniote roots to Corfu, Preveza, Arta and Kastoria and Istanbul's Greek-speaking Jews. Rhodes was a world unto itself and maintained close ties with Kos and Smyrna as well as Bodrum. This wide dispersion of Jewish contacts was to create a significant problem at the time of defining the scope of interest and concern of a Jewish museum of Greece. Any study of its material evidence was going to cut across national borders.



The first attempt made to collect some of the material evidence of Jewish life as it had been lived prior to the War came only in the mid-1970s. Asher Moshe, a Ioannina Jew who was highly active in the Athens Jewish Community and also the President of B'nei Brith, put together a quite idiosyncratic collection of Jewish artifacts that constituted the B'nei Brith "Museum." Nothing in the collection was documented or identified other than by a short label; and the collection was closed to the public constituting for all practical purposes a private museum. Like the Jewish summer camp, or the idea of a Jewish home for the aged, it was a feeble but well-intentioned attempt to come to terms with loss. It also reflects the understandable lack of leadership that characterized most, if not all reconstructed post-War Jewish communities in Greece.

In 1975-76, I was approached by Mr. Noulis Vital who was at that time the president of the Athens Jewish Community. He and two friends, Elias Almosninos and Moise Consantini were interested in the idea of making a proper Jewish museum that was to represent some aspect of the renewed life of the Jewish Community of Athens. I was asked what I thought of the idea and its feasibility. I was approached on the basis that for some years I was known to be concerned about the fate of Jewish material evidence. I had become aware very early of the fate of the libraries and communal records. I understood that all that one could count on were objects that might reflect a formerly rich but possibly in contemporary terms, not representative collection of artifacts. I had already actually collected some of these e.g., the iron Magen David that once was attached to the shattered gates of the cemetery of Hania, a copper mug with the name Hayyim that I found on Rhodes, a small tinned tray with not only a Magen David but also a Hebrew inscription and several other items. There was as well the B'nei Brith collection, but I was also told about a large collection of objects seized by

the Bulgarians in Kavala from Jews who had been arrested and were destined to be sent to the camps. These had been recorded in detail and then stored in sealed containers in the Bank of Bulgaria. At the termination of the war, they had presented a "problem" until it was felt that they should be returned to Greece. The proposal I culled from our initial conversation was that I might wish to assume an operative and active role in making a proper museum. I was especially intrigued by this Bulgarian material. The Jews of Thrace had a fate that was made additionally more sinister by the fact that they had been de facto nationalized as Bulgarians just after the annexation of Thrace and parts of Macedonia by the Bulgarians in 1941. The some 5,000 Jews who were assembled in Kavala for deportation in 1943 were substituted for a quota of proper Bulgarian Jewish nationals that had been demanded by the Nazis. The Bulgarian Jewish nationals, as a consequence, were never arrested. Exactly what transpired between the King of Bulgaria, his prime minister and the Bulgarian Jewish leadership over this substitution has never been adequately addressed.<sup>4</sup>

In early July 1970 I was given the use of a small room adjacent to the synagogue of Athens as a place to work and determine what in fact might constitute the material heritage of Greek Jewry. Fifteen Hessian sacks were delivered containing the Bulgarian loot and the contents of these, plus what was delivered from the B'nei Brith "Museum" constituted the initial collection of what was to evolve into the Jewish Museum of Greece. Some thirty-two years had elapsed since the end of the war and the contents of the sacks were by no means representative of what they may have contained initially as was patently obvious from an initial examination. There were a good number of fragments of the Bulgarian documents recording some of the material that had been confiscated from the Jews of Thrace. But there was also a considerable amount of interference that had occurred after



they had been handed over to Greek authorities and subsequently into the hands of the official centralized Jewish organization set up after the war. Watches, rings, earrings, a few religious amulets and quite a vast amount of cheap paste jewelry all datable to the 1930s represented the sad reminders of the Holocaust as it had struck ordinary people. There was little to distinguish this material from that which Greeks, Bulgarians, Jews and Turks might have worn. The additional material sent from B'Nei Brith was of greater Jewish interest and central to it were a large number silver cases some of which contained scrolls of the Book of Esther (*megilloth*). All of these appeared to have come from Ioannina and bore evidence of the close collaboration between local non-Jewish silversmiths (of which Ioannina was famous) and the Jewish community. There were as well a number of components of women's costumes that were also from Ioannina: jackets and a full-skirted dress that was said to have come from Preveza.

This static amassment of quite disparate material was hardly going to constitute more than a topical study, but it presented a challenge. Not long after beginning to document this material we set out on a trip to all of the Jewish communities of Greece in order to assess what may have survived the war in the form of liturgical art. As Judaeo-Greek religious art had not been studied, we had little recourse but to begin in a vacuum. Prior to this we had "discovered" in forgotten closets adjacent to the Athens synagogue and in spaces under the Ehal of the Romanist synagogue (also in Athens) that had been used as a *gnizeh* (repository for unusable articles and books of religious significance) a quite considerable number of books. In one of these we also found a few remnants of discarded liturgical textiles, some ritual art in the form of wooden finials for Scrolls of the Law, and a number of broken and badly damaged *tikkim*, (the upright cases that had once contained the Scrolls of Moses commonly used by

Romaniote Jews in Greece).

I was fortunate by this time to have the assistance of two people who were to become invaluable in the early growth of what was to become the Jewish Museum of Greece and who shared with me the arduous task of tracking down the increasingly enticing evidence of Jewish life prior to World War II. Ida Mordoh and T.J. DeVinney, a photographer, both committed themselves to what, at that time, could well have been a complete waste of time as we had no idea as to what possibly remained. This first excursion into the remaining Jewish communities of Greece took us in a circuitous route from Athens via Halkis to Larissa, Trikala, Volos, and Thessaloniki, from whence we crossed over the Pindus and continued on to Ioannina and then to Corfu. At this time we did not visit Jewish sites that no longer had any communities (Komotini, Xanthi and Didimoteicho, Arta, Preveza and Serres). Most of the remaining communities had been savaged severely by the Nazis after the arrests, but we did discover a surprising number of artifacts as well as books. Perhaps even more important was that we were put in direct contact with people who showed interest in what we were doing, which was photographing, recording and taking down data as well as assigning somewhat incriminating ad hoc numbers to artifacts so as to keep track of them in the future should the need arise. We also began a data book of persons who we were told had either photographs or objects that might be of interest as Judaica.

In Ioannina we discovered that it was possible that a great deal of Jewish material evidence did in fact remain. A quite extraordinary local Jewish historian, Joseph Matzas not only took us about the then quite dismal synagogue but also into what had once been the women's section on an upper floor. Here we found a vast number of mildewed books most of which were bound in leather or half leather bindings and consequently had attracted rodents and insects over the years.



We also found several wooden *tikkim* that we were told were from Preveza, the community of which no longer existed. Its synagogue apparently had been disposed of by deed to local civic authorities. At the end of a day spent in examining the books and rummaging through a large pile of discarded religious textiles (equally damaged after years of having lain in humid and vermin infested stacks) we were taken by Joseph Matzas to the *bema*, the large reader's platform that was built against the west wall of the synagogue where he unlocked two small doors that were set in its paneled front. The contents of two cardboard boxes were opened up and we found over 200 silver *ex votos*. Many of them had inscriptions in Hebrew indicating the festival or event that they commemorated including names and dates, some of which went back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. We were also told that an equal number, if not more similar artifacts, had been sent to Israel not long before. This bore out our increasing suspicion that in fact much had survived the war and that much had possibly been lost to dealers, collectors and unscrupulous individuals who had systematically purloined what remained of the heritage of Greece's Jews. We later found two 17<sup>th</sup> century, illuminated *ketubboth* (wedding contracts) from Corfu hanging in a miserable state in a corner of the mosque-museum located in the old Muslim quarter of the town. On our return to Athens we were able to assess what we had found and to then set out in an organized manner to track down and even to obtain custody of what was obviously going to be a more complicated and difficult task than we had envisaged initially.

Not long after this a committee was established that acted as an interim "Board" of the collection. This was made up of by Noulis Vital, (the former president of the Jewish Community of Athens), Elias Almosninos and Moise Constantini. All three had shown a motivating interest in what we were doing from the very beginning. Based on our initial trip through

Greece, we set our sights on an in-depth visit to communities. Our first trip was to Rhodes where Maurice Sorianos was president of a community that had for all practical purposes ceased to exist. We returned to Athens after three days with two 18<sup>th</sup> century silver crowns, two silver breastplates, and a pair of silver finials as well as what remained of two Scrolls of the Law, both badly burnt and in a state of near disintegration but obviously of some age. Both had been rescued from a synagogue that had been bombed in 1941 in Rhodes.

Our second trip was to Volos where we made contact with Serena Mizrahi, a dedicated spinster originally from Larissa who had been instrumental in rejuvenating the Women's Zionist Organization of Greece. Originally from Larissa, Mizrahi was the great-grand-daughter of Rabbi Jacob Angel who was the last chief rabbi of Larissa under the Ottomans. A man of great learning he also steered the community and that of Trikala through a difficult period of transition. Preserved in the family were a few mementos that by sheer accident had survived the war. Most dramatic was a large photograph of Angel (taken circa 1875) showing him dressed in a light-colored woolen street garment (*binis*) and sporting a fez and turban. In one hand he was holding a *tesbi* or what are now usually called "worry beads." In the course of an afternoon Mizrahi proceeded to open up several cloth wrappers that contained not only the *tesbi* that Angel had held in his hand in the photograph but also some of the wedding undergarments that had been prepared for him on his marriage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These consisted of hand-woven silk knickers, two long "shirts" still neatly folded and strangely still held together by the basting threads. There was also a heavily embroidered cloth sash and several embroidered hand-towels. Through Mizrahi we were put on the track of several women originally from either Trikala or Larissa who were ultimately to give to us what they had never considered to be important:



remnants of a world that had long passed into oblivion in the form of embroidered hand-towels, photographs and household artifacts.

Not long after our return to Athens I was contacted by an antique dealer in Athens who wanted me to look at the contents of a large chest that he had acquired from Thessaloniki. I had heard of the costume of the Jewesses of Thessaloniki and of its somewhat exotic and distinctive character. There were even a good number of postcards sporting women wearing the complicated headdress known as a *kofya* with heavily seed-pearl embroidered finials. They wore decidedly Turkish-looking long kaftans gathered up characteristically from behind. Many wore fur-lined jackets and heavy bracelets. We could also see many small star-shaped brilliant set pins in the *kofyas* or holding in place long golden chains at the ends of which were small time pieces. The contents of this chest consisted of several Jewish women's kaftans as well as the under skirts, the former made of striped obviously Turkish silks and the latter more often than not of rich silk brocades from Lyons. By comparing photographs with objects that we had from the Bulgarian horde, we were able to identify some of the bracelets, rings and even watches still with their gold chains as being part of the famous costume of the Jewish women of Thessaloniki. By 1979 we had managed to assemble all of the components of this costume save for the *kofya*, or headdress. But we were able to identify two of the pearl-embroidered finials that had also been part of the Bulgarian horde, some of the watches and many of the brilliant ornamented pins.

By this date, only two years after beginning our search, we had opened up not just a collection that represented a sad memory of what Jewish life might have been prior to the war but more importantly we had established the categories of costumes, photographs, and household textiles that were to become collections. We also began to acquire from

communities discarded liturgical textiles and books. Many of these had survived only by reason of the fact that they had been discarded even prior to the war and thus had been left to molder and rot in storerooms that had been either ignored or treated indifferently by the Nazis and later looters. In the course of these trips to communities we also began to photograph the synagogues and graveyards in a systematic fashion.

During hours that were not spent in looking through material of possible interest to us I also began to collect stories and accounts of life as it was lived in these communities. The work on the costumes, accounts and the collecting of recipes resulted in a cookery book that interwove culinary culture of the Jews in Greece with accounts of local differences in secular and religious life. Many of the illustrations were based on actual costumes or household artifacts that we had found.<sup>5</sup>

During the winter of 1979-80, we made a second trip to Ioannina where Matzas had made arrangements whereby we could photograph, number and transcribe the *ex votos*. We also discovered that possibly an equal number had been sent to Israel as a gift. Although some of them have turned up at the Israel Museum, the majority seem to have disappeared. They had not been photographed prior to their dispersal. As the synagogue was in the process of being cleaned and prepared for some repairs we were again given access to the space in the women's section where an enormous number of books, fragments or complete liturgical textiles had been thrown. All were in a quite miserable state of decomposition but many bore Hebrew inscriptions. The dedications from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century had incorporated panels of 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century embroideries, or Ottoman brocades some of which we found dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Our work was very quickly becoming quite complex.

Some of the large hangings were actually made up from



women's dresses that still bore evidence of their original cut. Many seemed to have been discarded in great confusion and were in a state of disrepair. We acquired several *tikkim*, a number of which still had attached to them decorated cloth coverings that were in fair condition. Most had been heavily over-painted but still bore slight traces of under-painting that revealed earlier decorations. This excursion to Ioannina gave us one of the richest collections of objects that we had thus far found and it was on the basis of this trip that we made yet another to Verroia, the synagogue of which along with the entire Jewish Quarter and cemetery had been abandoned since 1945.

The sole remaining Jew in Verroia at that time was Isaac Cohen who spent an entire day with us as we photographed the interior and exterior and made a preliminary overview of the cemetery that lay somewhat distant from it. The latter was at that time being used as a playing field as well as a pasture ground. In between a game that was in progress and several cows in pasturage we were able to make out the ravaged graves that had been stripped of their stones and in most cases deeply penetrated by pick axes and shovels and subsequently left in that condition. The only bright spot in that day was that we were given permission to take several *ex votos* of a type altogether different from what we had found in Ioannina and were allowed to rummage through some textiles that had been obviously used to cover the Scrolls of the Law. Verroia was a Sephardic community. Hence these covers were cut quite distinctively and had been cut down from women's kaftans (*entari*). A few had dedications in Hebrew embroidered on them and as we went through them I was given a bundled cloth to clean off the reader's desk on which we had them spread to take photographs. It was only later when I spread open this cloth that I saw that it was not only large (about 1.50 x 1.50 cms square) but of linen and completely covered with embroidered buildings, trees, inscrip-

tions in Hebrew and in one corner a lion with the words in Hebrew *ha-Ari* (the Lion) which was the name given to R. Isaac Luria, the greatest of the 16<sup>th</sup> century mystics of Sephat in Israel. It was only later when we were back in Athens that I was able to work on this textile which required cleaning and painstaking reattaching of the stitching. Something of this genre I had seen in the Israel Museum as well as the Jewish museum in New York and an almost identical one had been published by Burnett in a monumental catalogue that he had done for the Jewish museum in London. This tablecloth was one of six surviving examples of the work of a very strange man, Janver Simcha, active in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in Jerusalem. He had carved stone *Kiddush* cups as well as the lions at the entrance to the Jerusalem police station. He also made embroidery "kits" with depictions of the sacred Jewish sites of *Eretz* Israel drawn on the raw linen that were sold with bundles of colored floss silk to be later used to fill in details by Jewish housewives at their leisure. The religious itinerary featured on these linens paralleled the Greek Orthodox custom of *Proskynitaria*, pilgrim maps on which the major sites of Christian religious significance to be found in the Holy Land were depicted, though not to my knowledge on a household artifact such as those produced by Janver Simcha.

By 1980-81, we had begun to acquire significantly more than the sad remnants of victims of the war. We were amassing rich evidence of not only the folk art of the Jews of Greece but also their interconnection with other Jewish communities elsewhere. Some very important liturgical artifacts were acquired such as a set of silver *rimonim* (finials) and a *yad* (a pointer used in reading the Law of Moses) dedicated in the name of Abraham Galante to the synagogue of Bodrum and dated clearly to 1797. It can only be that these dedications had been made to the grandfather of the Jewish Turkish historian of the same name. By this date we



had also assembled a good number of books some dating back to the presses of Thessaloniki in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These included volumes of the Talmud as well as commentaries on the Zohar and several texts by Italian *Shabbateans* printed in Mantua. Many of the prayer books, especially those for use on the holidays (*mahzorim*), were not only from the famous presses of Thessaloniki but also from presses in Istanbul, Izmir, Mantua, Livorgno, Amsterdam and Vienna. One of our most important finds was a very small kabbalist commentary on the *Sepher ha-Yetsira* by the HIDA which is the Hebrew name given to R. Hayyim Joseph David Azulai, a quite famous rabbi of Jerusalem (d. 1803). His sanctity was such that even scraps of paper bearing his name were considered to be effective in making amulets against the evil eye. As if to make our find more important, this copy of his commentary was the first book printed in Jerusalem at a Hebrew press by Israel Bak in 1840. Bak was a Hassid who after having had his press burnt elsewhere re-established himself in Jerusalem where he opened the first Jewish printing house in 1840.

By 1981 the premises that we had been given adjacent to the sanctuary of Beth Shalom Synagogue in Athens had become quite choked with artifacts that were either in the process of being documented and photographed or where possible, exhibited, but in no especially coherent manner. To a degree this was intentional as individual artifacts, even isolated and in no special context, such as embroidered sashes or hand-towels, under-garments and fragments of costumes, indicated the range of our interests. Our collection was obviously not a collection of "art" but of how people lived. Inevitably artifacts that had survived the war either in the hands of Christian neighbors or hidden and ignored suddenly were given significance and hence the collections began to grow more complicated. We had also passed the initial danger point that the collection was going to be dominated by

the Shoah and restricted to the Bulgarian and Nazi atrocities in Greece. Much of the concentration of the collection that we had been given initially from B'nei Brith through the efforts of Asher Moshe had been centered on a few items that inevitably attracted considerable interest. These included a uniform from Auschwitz, several bars of soap that had been used in the camp and that allegedly were derived from humans, and documents that had been given to people on their return from the camps. It would have been quite easy to have determined that the collections reflected mainly the disaster that had struck Greek Jewry. But this was no longer the main thrust of our endeavors as we were discovering very quickly that there was material evidence that reflected the rich social and religious life of Jews prior to the war.

We had begun to bring out a quarterly newsletter, cut (as was the custom back then) on stencils and then mimeographed. This made our work public. We announced field trips that we were taking as well as work being carried out on the collections. Every issue also contained an article on some artifact. The purpose of this quarterly was to inform the public, lay and scholarly, of on-going work that was being done, of new artifacts, and more especially to make them public in some systematic manner. A special column was always reserved for recipes or accounts of customs and traditions that we were discovering were part of the Judaeo-Greek heritage. This quarterly was maintained as one of the most important of our efforts and was responsible for making what we were doing much wider known. It attracted artifacts from Greece as well as from those that had emigrated to the New World (Mexico included) and Europe. Until 1992 the newsletter was responsible for tracking the growth of what was evolving as the Jewish Museum of Greece.

Inevitably, our frequent visits to communities and their highly acquisitive nature aroused concern as well as excited ambitions. We had passed the initial stages of trying to find



out what there was that had remained and out of this had grown collections that were quite autonomous and represented not only the religious life of Jews in Greece but also their daily life. By the turning of our museum kaleidoscope, the initial flat and somewhat two dimensional impression given by the sad remnants of what had managed to survive the war was transformed into multi-colored and intriguingly complicated reflection of Jewish life rather than the destruction of Greece's Jews.

One of the persons who most drove this home to me was the late Liza Pinhas. In 1943, she and her entire family (some twenty persons) were moved from the ghetto to Hirsch Camp in Thessaloniki which was the last processing stage before being sent to Auschwitz. In order to maintain some semblance of order in what had become a nightmare world of disorder, the Nazis maintained up until the very last moment the impression that the Jews of Thessaloniki were to be re-settled in a special reserve near Cracow. Counterfeit money could be bargained for and amongst those who were perhaps most capable to facing the challenges in life, lay creative plans for an unknown future. Along with several of her friends she organized a Salonika Club that they intended to immediately make the focus of their re-settlement for the purpose of maintaining their identity and friendships. Liza, like many of the youth of her age, married just before leaving in April of that year, but on arrival at Auschwitz, almost all of her relatives (including her husband) were killed. By January of 1945 when Auschwitz was in the process of being closed, she was moved with most of the women to a camp in northern Germany. She became one of the fifteen hundred women, abandoned by their Nazi guards and later found by the Russians wandering in a forest.

I was told this story by Liza with a small cardboard box sitting between us. She related how she had taken a local bus from the initial processing centre that the Russians had set

up and gone down to Belgrade and then, by various means, had proceeded to Bucharest where she tried through the Red Cross to contact a brother who had been living in Istanbul only to be told that he had committed suicide in response to news of what had transpired in the camps. It was after this that she made her way back to Thessaloniki.

In the box between us Liza removed the detritus of her life as it had been lived between 1943-1945. The number tags on which her IDs were sewn, the bus stub with date that she had taken initially, all of the papers from the Russians and the Red Cross, and the final access papers to re-enter Greece. It also contained a black chiffon blouse that she had made for herself shortly after her return on which were embroidered short texts from Sartre, Gide and even Colette, affirmations of the will to live. Liza's box of memorabilia from the horror of those three years was to become the link between the living and the dead, between what had been and what had survived. It would be the final statement of return in what eventually became our exhibit of the Holocaust.

The cramped and quite confusing space in which this work was being carried out became inoperable after a telephone call one morning informing us that the synagogue of Patras was to be demolished the next day. Although small, the synagogue of Patras was quite elegant. It had been put together by Greek Christian craftsmen from Corfu in 1912 when the community had been officially re-founded. We had made an initial overview of this structure only a year before and thus had a full photographic record of it though we had not yet managed to make measurements. Nor had we extracted more than a few of its contents that had lain sealed within it for several years. Already what remained of the community had been legally dissolved two years before, and we had removed two large *tikkim* as well as most of the silver ornaments in the form of *rimmonim*, all with Venetian control stamps from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. One of the *tikkim* (both at



that time had been heavily coated with bronze paint) proved eventually to have originated from Candia (Herakleion) in Crete. From other contents in the form of paper amulets (*alephot*) and wedding contracts found in the *gnizeh* (the place where such documents might be thrown were they to be of no further use) it was apparent that the "new" Patras Jewish community, only re-founded circa 1912, had been the recipient of artifacts from several Jewish communities many of which were now in our collection. The interior was typically Romaniote with a *bema* on the west wall and the *ehal* where the Scrolls of the Law were retained, on its east wall. Both *bema* and *ehal* were quite elegantly carved in a neo-classic design as were the matching benches and the lattice grill that separated the women's section.

On the day after the call saying that the synagogue was to be demolished, we arrived with a truck and two workmen. As the process was just beginning and as the demolition was proceeding at the back of the building, we managed to save the entire contents of its interior by throwing them out of the upper story window onto the truck. By the evening they resembled nothing more than a pile of lumber and the synagogue had been reduced to a mound of rubble.

As an artifact of considerable importance the interior furnishings of the synagogue of Patras finally focused our efforts in an immediate demand that proper space be found for this and what we had been collecting. By this date the quarterly had made our work internationally known and it was obvious as well that other communities in Greece were seriously thinking of creating Jewish museums, the most significant of them being that of Thessaloniki under the leadership of a highly active and committed president, Dik Benveniste. Our own feeling in Athens was that provincially isolated and weakly defined museums were not what were needed. Our experience had been that only after collecting all of what remained in one place and then systematically documenting

it and extracting relevance would it be possible to think of local museums.

It was in 1983 that serious decisions had to be made by persons who had supported us to a degree, often not really understanding what it was that we were up to. But they realized that what we had collected needed more than ad hoc attention. It also had become obvious that what we were doing had to be independent of the Jewish Community of Athens as we had on several occasions been drawn into community politics. Moreover, what we were doing was seen by many (including Thessaloniki) as representing the Jewish Community of Athens, which it was not. Thus we needed independence with a legal charter and space to expand and begin to interpret what were now collections for the public. Later that year decisions were taken by what now constituted a Board and the process of legal incorporation began just prior to the acquisition of a quite ideal and elegant space on Amalia Avenue in Athens that guaranteed exhibition, work and storage areas as well as putting the endeavor very much in the public eye.

From that time until 1993 when it moved to new premises, the Jewish Museum of Greece had three main functions:

- 1) to continue to collect, conserve and document the material evidence of the history of the Jews of Greece
- 2) to make this collection relevant to the public in an intelligent and meaningful manner through exhibits that articulated every aspect of Jewish life
- 3) to continue publication of our quarterly.

The museum was designed to be highly didactic in the sense that it was directed to teaching the public about the antiquity, complexity, richness and fate of the Jews of Greece and their inter-action with the non-Jews about them. Within a year the "new" museum was set up. The opening was presided over by Rabbi Seurat, the Chief Sephardi Rabbi of France. This took place in a room of the new museum that held all of



the interior of the synagogue of Patras, the acquisition of which had precipitated, to a degree, the final decision to create a proper museum worthy of the history of the Jews of Greece.

By 1993 there was a growing awareness that as the Museum now had its own charter and was completely independent from the Community in Athens that it also had to have its own space. It was out of this awareness that a property was acquired not far from it. The re-located Museum inevitably took a direction that is decidedly different from that which it had previously.

Mention must also be made of the newly re-designed Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki. By 1998 the Thessaloniki Jewish Community had two quite large exhibits that occupied separate spaces over the main synagogue. One exhibit was of photographs of the rise of the Nazis out of the shambles of the Weimar Republic down through the Final Solution and ultimate collapse of Germany brought about by British, US and Russian forces. Its main thrust was on the growth and ultimate domination of the Nazis in Europe and it focused little on the tragedy that struck Greece, much less the Jews of Thessaloniki. The other exhibit was funded in memory of Sir Simon Marks and essentially was a copy of the Salonika exhibit of Lohemei ha-Getaoth Kibbuits in Israel behind which was the spirit of the late Miriam Novitch. In 2001 both of these exhibits were dismantled and re-designed to provide a running commentary on the history of the city's Jews from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE through to the Holocaust. An appropriate space dedicated to the Holocaust concentrates solely on Thessaloniki. This Holocaust section relies on contemporary photographs, documents and artifacts from the camps, especially that of Birkenau-Auschwitz. As initially there were few artifacts, the first main exhibit was of memorabilia collected from Jews of Thessaloniki who had immigrated to Israel in 1935 and that had been exhibited initially at Bar

Ilan University in the Negev. The main corridor of the entrance to the impressive building that houses the museum is dominated by tombstones, revetments, fragments and other stone elements that constitute what remain of the cemetery and now lost synagogues.

Two other important sources of information regarding the material evidence of the Jews of Greece exist: the synagogues and the cemeteries. The core concern of initial work was the process of saving what was most vulnerable to either theft or mal-appropriation and inevitable decomposition as in the case of textiles, costumes, liturgical and household artifacts and books. In the course of visiting communities it also was inevitable that local Jewish sites of feasible importance be encompassed as well. There were, prior to the war, a great number of synagogues on the Greek mainland and the islands. With the exception of Thessaloniki, none of these were of exceptional size. All are or were of great interest as they reflected the quite varied threads of Jewish identity that constituted the Jewish presence. In Thessaloniki names such as Aragon, Mogrebi, Andaluse, Castille, Italia, Provence were evidence of tenacity to Jewish roots in Iberia and elsewhere. None of these 33 synagogues and oratories was of any exceptional antiquity save that of Beth Shalom, a considerable portion of which had survived the great fire of 1917. All of these synagogues had been savaged by the Nazis or looted by locals with the exception of one, the Monasteriote, which was given to the Red Cross by the Nazis. The recording and researching of these defunct and in almost every case, now destroyed buildings (since 1945) was an aspect of the single-minded dedication of the late Alberto Nar who devoted most of his life to recording the Jewish monuments of the city. Unfortunately no photographic or architectural study was ever done on these buildings.

Elsewhere in Greece, all of the synagogues were photographed between 1979-1990 during visits to communities.



Those of Komotini, Kavalla, Didimoteicho, Serres, Patras, Xanthi, Kastoria, Kos and Arta have been destroyed or sold since 1985. The medieval synagogues of Hania and Rhodes and those of Verroia (probably 18<sup>th</sup> century) and Ioannina (19<sup>th</sup> century) have been renovated in the course of the past six years.

While many of these buildings were somewhat mean and hardly pretentious, their sites, their relationship with the surrounding Jewish community and non-Christian neighborhoods is highly important for any study of the demographic peculiarities of Greek towns. Equally important are their architectural peculiarities. Komotini's synagogue had a lantern dome and was of quite large proportions. That of Hania appears to have been adapted from a ruined and abandoned Venetian church of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. That of Rhodes was certainly influenced by the nearby entrance hall of the palace of the Knights of St. John (later to become the Knights of Malta).<sup>6</sup> Without a doubt the synagogue of Komotini could have been restored as a building of historical interest if nothing else as fifteen years ago, despite having been used as a stable for horses and sheep since 1944, it was still intact, its interior columned and remarkably lit by low windows. Sadly its collapse was apparently welcomed locally though it did reveal a highly textured portion of the old medieval Comnenid walls of the city. Fortunately the synagogues of Verroia, Rhodes, and Hania have been renovated, the last in a particularly mindful and significant manner. Despite the fact that only Rhodes has a Jewish community, their future (especially that of Hania as a resource center on Cretan Jewry) as evidence of the multi-ethnic and religious life over many centuries in Greece is of great importance.<sup>7</sup>

The Jewish cemeteries continue to occupy a somewhat troublesome and secondary importance due to *halachic* (Jewish legal restrictions) considerations and, to a degree, understandable local non-Jewish perplexity over their con-

tinued presence, especially in the context of towns where they occupy prominent positions and where there is no longer a Jewish community. Mention must also be made of the fact that proper study of Jewish cemeteries is highly expensive, time consuming, and demands on the part of the person researching a wide range of expertise in Hebrew, Aramaic epigraphy, local artistic traditions, culture(s) and customs, both Jewish as well as non-Jewish. Especially in the case of Greece, Jewish funereal remains in the form of covered graves indicate even at a cursory glance influences and obvious migrations of Jews who were absorbed into previously existing Jewish communities but who, as in the case of the Sicilian Jews in Ioannina, maintained their own synagogue and had their own area for traditional burials within the Jewish cemetery.<sup>8</sup> Immediately after the war, from 1945 until well into the 1980s, most of the cemeteries in places where Jews had disappeared were in the process of being pillaged for cut stones. This was especially so where cemeteries had been bulldozed into oblivion along with their contents. Examples include Hania, Herakleion, Serres, and of course, the great necropolis of Thessaloniki. Many others, such as those of Kavalla and Corfu, Kos and to a degree even Ioannina, are in a deplorable though somewhat stable condition and have walls that insure their relative inviolability.

One notable cemetery is that of Didimoteicho which is essentially inaccessible as it is spread over the west bank of the Evros river which is a militarized zone separating Turkey from Greece. Some, however, such as that of Zakynthos and imminently Kavala and perhaps even Ioannina are presenting serious problems as towns grow and encroach upon what for Jews is inviolate funerary territory (a concept that is not of prime importance to Greek Christians for whom a burial place is in most cases rented and vacated after three years!). In certain cities of Greece already urban expansion has resulted in embedding Jewish cemeteries within areas that have



been designated as not only suitable but in many cases vital for any coherent zoning. Although on a very small scale, the cemeteries of Zakynthos, and Ioannina for that matter, once outside the city limits, now finds themselves well within them and inevitably local Greek Christian incomprehension does little to further their preservation or conservation, much less their future.<sup>9</sup>

No over-all policy has been established to date as to what should and can be done with these cemeteries many of which contain important clues regarding Jewish demography, names, as well as the interaction of Jews with local customs and culture. A systematic study of the cemeteries of Greece is of the prime importance as these will add important genealogical information, peculiar local traditions and influences from far a-field that will provide vital information regarding the complex inner character of communities and even trade involvements, if not occupations.<sup>10</sup> At present this entails a more sympathetic and concerned approach to this common Greek patrimony on the part of government ministries, especially that of culture. There has been a somewhat consistent indifference to Jewish cultural remains in Greece on the part of the government which may well change due to a quite different approach to this matter taken by the EU. In collaboration with local Jewish communities or the Central Board of Jewish Communities of Greece, these sites should be adequately photographed, individual graves recorded in great detail and further documentation carried out afterwards.

From this cursory examination of the state of the mute testimony of the surviving material heritage of the Jews of Greece (and its conservation), it is obvious that the study remains seminal. It is hoped that what has been saved to date demonstrates that this somewhat inert and silent field of research warrants a place in the study of Jewish life in the Diaspora. It is indeed saddening that the collections of the Jewish Museum of Greece have still not been adequately

documented and that publication of some aspects of these collections is still awaited. The greatest thrust of interest in Greek Jewry has been dominated by the Holocaust and even this interest was late as it was overshadowed by concentration on the destruction of East European Jewry. Greece sadly, and as is too often the case, fell between two chairs and has not received and continues to not receive the concentrated energy of either locals, archaeologists, historians, ethnographers and even official government agencies that it warrants.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stavroulakis, N. *Salonika, Jews and Dervishes*, Talos Press, Athens, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Ioannou, Y., *Refugee Capital*, Kedros Press, Athens, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Nar, Alberto, *The Synagogues of Thessaloniki* (in Greek), Thessaloniki, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> The late Miriam Novitch, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and member of Lohemei ha-Getaoth Kibbutz in Israel was one of the very first persons to arouse concern over this and other incidents that occurred during the war affecting Jewish life in Greece. She was indefatigable in her dedication to promoting the study of the Jews of the Balkans and Greece in particular and of the Gypsies during the War. Novitch, M., *The Passage of the Barbarians*, The Glenville Group, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> *A Cookbook of the Jews of Greece*, Athens, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> What was to have been only a preliminary study was published as *Jewish Sites and Synagogues of Greece* through the collaborative work of Stavroulakis and T. J. DeVinney (Talos Press Athens 1992). This was the first major publication that includes photographs of the synagogues and historical overviews as well as antique photographs of sites. It also contains maps of the contemporary towns in which Jewish sites can be found as well as an appendix of material dealing with synagogues and cemeteries that have been destroyed or given over to secular use.

<sup>7</sup> Verroia synagogue has been the centre of a good amount of local interest as it and its former Jewish quarter are more or less intact and thus has an important tourist potential. The renovation of the synagogue of Hania was funded by the World Monuments Fund in New York, Lord Jacob Rothschild and Mr Ronald Lauder and several other private donors in



Europe and the US.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike the somewhat uniform type of burial stones of the Sephardic Jews of Greece, those of the Romaniotes are quite distinct and highly variable in style and even the exact positioning of the dedication plaques.

<sup>9</sup> With little doubt the destruction of the Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki in 1942 by the Nazis and its confiscation by the local civic authorities was a "final solution" to a problem that had dominated all plans for urban expansion of the city since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the time of Sabri Pasha it had been determined that the only direction that expansion could feasibly take place (and it must be remembered that Thessaloniki was the greatest city in the Balkans) was to the east and even the eventual creation of the Hamidye Quarter beyond the cemetery limits further to the east created problems of communication through what was a quite desolate and arid looking area. After the annexation of Thessaloniki, Greek Christian urban authorities inherited the same difficult zoning problem. Actually just before the war, certain sections of the cemetery were finally granted to the authorities under considerable local pressure (and antagonism) – though this involved the disinterment of the contents of the graves within this zone.

<sup>10</sup> Work should have been in progress long ago perhaps along parallel though modified lines to the seminal study of the Jewish Cemetery of Haskoy in Istanbul by Minna Rozen. (M. Rozen, *Haskoy Cemetery*, Eisenbrauns, 1994).

## The Romaniote Jewish Community of New York

MARCIA HADDAD IKONOMOPOULOS

This article is written in memory of Hy Genee who passed away on February 13, 2006. For over 40 years he was the glue that kept the community together, preserving its secular traditions and religious liturgy. He is now the inspiration for its continuance. Always proud to be a "Greek," he exemplified the best of Romaniote culture.

Romaniote Jews,<sup>1</sup> the indigenous Jews of Greece, have lived on Greek soil for over 2,300 years.<sup>2</sup> The first documented evidence of their presence dates to the establishment of the city of Thessaloniki in 315 BCE. Romaniote Jews would establish communities throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. The primary criterion distinguishing them from Jews of other cultures was their language. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, communities were present in Thessaloniki, Verroia, Corinth, Patras, Athens, and Rhodes, as attested to by the writings in the New Testament of St. Paul, a Hellenized Jew who preached the new religion of Christianity from the *bemas* of existing synagogues throughout the Mediterranean, many of which were in what is now part of the modern Greek state. Romaniote communities continued to flourish through the Byzantine period. They were heavily involved in the textile industry, dying and trading.<sup>3</sup>

For 1,800 years of the 2,300 year presence of Jews on Greek soil, the presence was strictly Romaniote. It would only be after the Expulsion Order of 1492, forcing the Jews of Spain to leave, and their invitation to settle in parts of