

<sup>40</sup> Recently, two important documentary film projects involving the Kehila have drawn the attention of talented filmmakers. *The Last Greeks on Broome Street*, by Ed Askinazi has played successfully at numerous film festivals, and *Before the Flame Goes Out*, by Vincent Giordano, is part of an extensive project to document the Romaniote community, both here in the United States and in Greece.

<sup>41</sup> Greek for grandfathers.

<sup>42</sup> While *yiayia* is traditional Greek for grandmother, among Greek-Jews, both Romaniote and Sephardic, the word *nona* was used.

<sup>43</sup> Lake Pamvotis.

<sup>44</sup> Fortified area within which most of the Jewish community lived. It was never a ghetto but, rather, the oldest part of the city and the area where the first synagogue was located. The only remaining synagogue in Ioannina still lies within the *kastro* walls.

## Romaniote Jews in the United States

NICHOLAS ALEXIOU

*A Greek!*

*A Greek has come.*

*In a few moments of conversation,  
he had accomplished a miracle,  
he had created an atmosphere.  
--Primo Levi, The Reawakening*

Greek American Studies has traditionally focused on the immigration of Greek Orthodox peoples to the US, especially on the nature of their local communities and on issues regarding their ethnic identity.<sup>1</sup> Largely omitted have been members of other Christian denominations and other religions. Falling into this category are groups such as Greeks of the Jewish faith. In this respect the sociological analysis of the Hellenic immigration to the United States remains incomplete. The present sociological investigation of the Romaniote Jews in the United States is among the few of its kind. The immigrant experience of the Romaniotes,<sup>2</sup> Greek-speaking Jews who trace their Greek roots to Alexandrian and Roman times, is very similar to that of Greek Orthodox immigrants. Moreover, Romaniote Americans continue to identify themselves as Greek Jews. They maintain ties to the Greek homeland and with New York's Kehila Kedosha Janina, the only Romaniote synagogue in North America. Although Romaniotes comprise a small community, a study of their experiences provides information on a Greek



American community that has so far been mostly ignored, and it identifies aspects of ethnic identity that are common to both Christian and Jewish Greeks.

Massive Greek immigration to the United States did not occur until the twentieth century. The first massive wave took place between 1900-1924 and a second smaller wave took place in 1965-1980. The first wave was part of the Great Migration from Europe that began in the 1880s and the second followed passage of the Hart-Celler Act that removed ethnic quotas. Greeks were among the last of the Europeans to immigrate to America during the Great Migration, and their numbers are relatively small when compared to neighboring nations like Italy. Immigration and Naturalization Service data provides documentation that about 421,000 Greeks immigrated to the United States between 1890 and 1924.<sup>3</sup> Although they formed enclaves on the West Coast, the vast majority settled on the East Coast (primarily Florida and New York) and the industrial Midwest (Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh).<sup>4</sup> The anti-immigration laws of 1924 produced four decades of declining immigration. As a result only about 66,000 Greeks came to America between 1930 and 1960. These numbers reflect Greeks who came with Greek passports or otherwise identified themselves as Hellenic. Numerous other Greeks carried Ottoman, Italian, or British passports, so it is likely the total number of immigrants in the first forty years of the century is between 600,000 and a million.

The second wave of Greek mass migration occurred in the years between 1965 and 1980 and abated thereafter due to improving economic conditions in Greece that culminated with Greece's admission to the European Union. Although the numbers of the Second Wave did not reach the peak of the first immigration period, about 200,000 Greeks entered the United States between 1960 and 1980, showing a settlement pattern favoring the large urban centers of the United States. Since the 1980s there has been no other waves of immigration from

Greece. The number of immigrants has hovered at one to two thousand annually with almost an equal number returning to Greece.

In the census taken in 2000, a little over one million Americans claimed Greek heritage, a rather small fraction of a total population hovering near three hundred million. The current population of Greece is approximately eleven million, a figure that includes approximately one million Albanian immigrants. Thus, while Greek Americans are a small fraction of the American population, they comprise one of the largest Greek communities outside of Greece itself. The largest numbers of Greek Americans reside in New York (200,000) and Chicago (100,000). As a result of the Second Wave immigration, in the 1970s in New York City "the Astoria section of Queens with sixty to seventy thousand Greeks became the largest Hellenic settlement outside Greece or Cyprus."<sup>5</sup>

The above population estimates pertain to immigrants of Greek origin in general, without specific distinction of religious background. There is no breakdown in regard to Greek Jews in America, for Sephardics or Romaniotes and other Jewish subdivisions. What is known is that the only Romaniote synagogue in the United States, which is located in New York City, maintains a mailing list of approximately 3,000 families. This count, however, is not exhaustive since many Romaniotes are members of other social organizations and others are not members of any formal Romaniote groups. A preliminary investigation of the community associated with the Romaniote synagogue indicates that most Romaniotes immigrated during the first wave of Greek mass immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. Their reasons for immigrating were economic, like that of Christian Greeks, or political, in the sense that the Epirus region was a combat zone in the struggle between Greece and the fading Ottoman Empire. The Romaniote were not fleeing pogroms



or other anti-Semitic initiatives. Another smaller group of Romaniotes arrived after the mid-1950s, when a series of catastrophic earthquakes devastated many areas of Greece. Today, Romaniotes are primarily concentrated in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, but they have also dispersed throughout the United States, mainly in California, Texas and Florida.

The Greek Jews tend to be underrepresented in American Jewish bibliographies and official records. For example, the various Jewish historical resources, with few exceptions, do not mention the Romaniote Greek Jews, although they refer to different Jewish ethnic divisions such as Ashkenazi, Sephardic, or Mizrahic. To the same extent, among the numerous Jewish languages, Judeo-Greek, which is the language of the Romaniote Jews, is also omitted. This underrepresentation of the Romaniote Jews in American Jewish surveys and reports is a general pattern for all the Jews of Greece.

Although almost ninety percent of the Jews of Greece perished due to German and Bulgarian<sup>6</sup> extermination campaigns during the Holocaust, the history of Greek Jewry is not adequately presented in major Holocaust museums around the world. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington D.C. only recently attempted to collect material that properly document the fate of Greek Jews during WWII. The horrific loss of life in the Holocaust also explains to a large degree why Greek Jews did not produce a post-1965 immigration wave to America.

### Religion and Ethnicity in the United States

From the 1600s through to the mid-nineteenth century successive Protestant immigrant groups, mostly from north-western European countries, settled in the United States and

despite their wide range of denominations are considered the Protestant mainstream. During the European mass immigration period between 1880 and 1924, large numbers of Catholics and Jews from throughout Europe settled in the United States. This influx of nearly twenty million non-Protestant immigrants contributed greatly to the ethnic and religious diversity in the United States. Immigrant Jews of this period constituted eight percent of the newcomers.<sup>7</sup> By 1920, Catholics accounted for about twenty-one percent of the "white" population in the United States and Jews two percent.<sup>8</sup> Estimates based on the 2000 Census indicate the United States is composed of eight-six percent Christians, seven percent all other faiths, and seven percent nonreligious.<sup>9</sup>

The number of Greek immigrants, both Greek Orthodox and Jewish, who moved to the United States before the anti-immigration laws of the mid-1920s was relatively small compared to the numbers of other non-Protestant groups such as Catholics and Ashkenazi Jews. In that regard, Greek immigration of the first period, both Christian and Jewish, contributed to religious diversity in the United States. Eastern Orthodoxy is a relatively new faith in North America. In the case of Greek Orthodoxy, the first church was established in 1864 in New Orleans, but there were few Orthodox parishes before the twentieth century. By 1923, there were 140 churches in the United States. By the onset of the twenty-first century, the number had grown to approximately 450 with approximately two million members. Orthodoxy is often not differentiated from the other two major Christian groupings and is even utterly omitted from some major studies of religion in America.<sup>10</sup>

The arrival of the first Jews in North America cannot be accurately determined, but in the territory that became the United States, Jewish immigration dates to at least the 1650s.<sup>11</sup> Greek Jews, however, did not begin to immigrate to



the United States until the early 1900s, basically following the pattern of their Greek Orthodox compatriots. In his celebrated study about the Greeks in America, Charles Moskos states that, "There are also a few Greek Jews in America, coming out of the post-Holocaust remnant of the large Sephardic communities in Thessalonica and Yannina."<sup>12</sup> This is an overgeneralization in two regards. Yannina Jews were Romaniote not Sephardic. Moreover, the vast majority of Romaniote immigrants arrived in the early 1900s, not after the Holocaust. Consequently, their immigration experience needs to be considered as part of the overall Greek mass immigration of the first period. Furthermore, in a pattern similar to the Greek Orthodox who diversified Christianity in America, the Romaniote Jews contributed to the religious diversity of Jews in the United States. They established their first synagogue, Kehila Kedosha Janina, in 1927. They retained their linguistic differences not only from the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe but even from the Sephardic Jews who had been given refuge in Greece by the Ottomans in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. As previously noted, Romaniotes are Jews whose history in Greece dates from the time of Greek antiquity and the Roman Empire. They speak Greek and the language used in their religious services is Judeo-Greek.

The public figure who best embodies the distinctive Romaniote cultural tradition is the late Rae Dalven. She was born in Preveza, Greece, to parents born and raised in Yannina. Dalven held degrees from Hunter College, New York University, and the Yale School of Drama. She achieved national fame with the publication of her translation of *The Complete Poems of Cavafy* in 1961. Earlier, she had also translated a number of contemporary Greek poets in *Modern Greek Poetry* and the work of a Romaniote relative in *Poems of Joseph Eliyia*.<sup>13</sup> *Athene*, the most important Greek American literary journal of its era, published part

of her translation of *Judas* by Spiro Melas. Her *A Season in Hell*, a play based on the life of Rimbaud had an off-Broadway production. Among her other literary works were radio dramas such as *Hercules*. Dalven was active in numerous Hellenic initiatives, including an attempt to establish a Hellenic Museum in Manhattan. Dalven was equally active in the cultural organizations of the Romaniote in New York and frequently visited Yannina. This passion culminated in the publication of *The Jews of Ioannina*, a work that drew heavily on Hebrew, Greek, and English sources to offer a complete history of the Jews of Yannina with groundbreaking sections titled Religious Life and Social life.

### A Romaniote Case Study

I have been able to do extensive interviews with twenty Romaniote Jews living in New York.<sup>14</sup> The respondents were almost equally divided between men and women who at the time of the interviews varied in age between 30 and 78. All but five were born in the United States. Two of the Greek-born were from Yannina, two from Athens and one from Volos. All the American-born respondents were children of parents born in Greece. What is distinctive about this sampling is that the Romaniotes all came from mainland Greece while other Greek Jews have more diverse migration patterns, some coming from Asia Minor, Syria Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt. This is similar to the multi-national pattern of the Ashkenazi Jews from Europe, who migrated primarily from Russia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Austria. The Sephardic Jews of Greece often retained an affinity for the nations from which they had been expelled or with Turkey. These connections were sufficient for a modest number of Sephardim to obtain documents identifying them as Spanish, Italian, or Turkish nationals during World War II, a circumstance that protected them from deportation.



Some 95% of the respondents interviewed considered religion to be very or fairly important in their lives. Almost as many felt a strong attachment to their synagogue. Overall, the respondents not only believed that religion was important in their lives, but they also showed a moderately strong attachment to the religious aspects of being Jewish. More than the two-thirds of the respondents attended services at least monthly while only 20% said they attended services only on special occasions such as a wedding or on the high holidays.

The overwhelming majority (85%) felt a special attachment to Kehila Kedosha Janina. The name, of course, refers to the city of Yannina (also rendered as Janina and Ioannina) and the synagogue's design is Romaniote with benches facing each other. One of the respondents happily referred to the early days of the synagogue by noting, "We used to have three rabbis, and they were a wonderful, harmonious group. And when they used to chant, they chanted in unison and it was wonderful." The chants referred to are poems inserted throughout the religious services and are called *piyyutim*. The use of the *piyyutim* "is one of the few things in the religious service that is strictly Romaniote."<sup>15</sup> Such distinct elements of Romaniote liturgy generated feelings of uniqueness and pride among the respondents regarding their religious and cultural heritage. A respondent proudly declared, "We are not just Jews, we are Romaniote Jews, and nowhere else but in our own synagogue, do we have a liturgy according to our own tradition and language."

All expressed a strong attachment to their identity as Jews. American sociologists largely agree that the matter of Jewish identity in America is primarily a matter of cultural choice than a simple matter of faith.<sup>16</sup> These sentiments are mirrored in the responses of the Romaniote sample. While practicing Judaism was important to the majority, nearly one-thirds felt being Jewish was either not very important or were unsure

of its importance to them. A similar division broke down among respondents about how essential or desirable it was for a Jew to marry another Jew.

An equally powerful Greek identity also was evident. A full 70% reported a strong or extremely strong attachment to Greece. All had visited Greece at least once and 75% visited Greece annually. Greek food was part of everyone's diet, and 75% reported that they had Greek food for dinner as often as non-Greek food. In the area of language, 90% of the sample asserted that they could understand Greek quite well, 40% were able to speak the language confidently, and over a third reported they could read satisfactorily. Given that 75% of the respondents were American born, these percentages are quite high when compared to other Americans of Greek heritage. Writing was the only area of questionable competence. A full 60% said they either could not write well or at all. The 40% who could write are comparable and perhaps even a bit better than the percentages found in comparable Orthodox Greek communities, second generation descendants of immigrants of the Great Migration.

The dual cultural identity found in this group and its relatively strong language retention is quite remarkable, all the more so as the Romaniote Jews did not have the Second Wave immigration that was so important in revitalizing the cultural identity of the dominant Greek Orthodox community. If a wider sampling of the several thousand Romaniotes in the United States parallels the Kehila Kedosha Janina findings, we could conclude that although Romaniote Jews have achieved middle class status, unlike other "white" American religious groups, they do not show a significant decline in their ethnic attachment.<sup>17</sup> Most sociological studies of Jews living in America argue that Jewish identity is often a matter of cultural choice that involves more than faith. Ethnic identity is a major indicator of the degree to which members and immediate descendants of an immigrant group remain



culturally, socially, and/or psychologically integrated into their ethnic community. The Kehila Kedosha Janina study indicates that the Romaniote Jews, like their forbearers, have chosen to be both Jewish and Greek.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Saloutos, *The Greeks in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964) was the first professional history to examine the key decades of Greek immigration to America. Charles Moskos, *Greek Americans: Struggles and Success* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, Second Edition, 2002) carries forward the Saloutos legacy. A third edition is now being prepared.

<sup>2</sup> *Romaniotes* and *Romaniots* are interchangeable terms. Some scholars use *Romaniot* for the singular and *Romaniote* for the plural as such usage more closely reflects how the term is rendered in Greek.

<sup>3</sup> Immigration and Naturalization Services, Annual Report, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Georgakas, *Greek America At Work* (NY: Greek American Labor Council, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Moskos, *Greek Americans*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> The loss in the Bulgarian sector of occupation was 98%. For a full discussion of the loss rates in the various zones see Michael Matsas, *The Illusion of Safety* (NY: Pella, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Pyong Gap Min and Jung Ha Kim, *Religions in Asian America* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altmira Press, NY: 2002), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Schaefer, *Race and Ethnicity in the United States* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2009), 172.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion* (NY: the Free Press, 2003) is an example.

<sup>11</sup> Hertzberg, *The Jews*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Moskos, *Greek Americans*, 67.

<sup>13</sup> Eliyia (1901-1931) achieved considerable fame in his short life, not only for his own poetry, but also for his translations of Old Testament Hebrew into demotic Greek. He contributed 209 articles on Hebrew subjects for the Large Greek Encyclopedia. Eliyia was a Romaniote Jew who had been born in Yannina. Dalven's translations of ninety of his poems are found in *Poems* (NY: Anatolia Press, 1944). This publication also contains a biography.

<sup>14</sup> Each interview took at least an hour. Among my guidelines for doing the interviews were questions drawn from a 1998 study sponsored by the Florence G. Heller Jewish Community Research Center in New York City.

<sup>15</sup> For an extended discussion see Mark Kligman in an interview by Vanina Maestracci for Columbia University Radio on The Romaniote Jews of the Lower East Side, 1988, [www.jrn.columbia.edu](http://www.jrn.columbia.edu).

Also see Dalven, *The Jews*.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), xii.

<sup>17</sup> The history of Romaniote social organizations in the US is not well documented. Nor are there many professional studies of social and religious views of Romaniotes. An intriguing look at the community is found in *The Last Greeks on Broome Street* a video by Ed Askinazi released in 2004. Filmmaker Askinazi accompanies his father back to the neighborhood on the Lower East Side where he was born and raised but hadn't seen in forty years.