

The Romaniote Jewish Community of New York
Marcia Haddad Ikonopoulos

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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 Jews¹, the indigenous Jews of Greece, have lived on Greek soil for over 2,300 years². The first documented evidence of their presence dates to the establishment of the city of Thessaloniki, when Jews from Alexandria were invited by Kassandros, the brother-in-law of Alexander the Great, to settle. ¹Wanting to establish Thessaloniki, with its natural outlet to the Northern Aegean, as a center of maritime trade, Jews were invited because of their growing expertise and connections throughout the Mediterranean. These Jews, Hellenized Jews, Greek-speaking Jews, would become what we refer to as 'Romaniotes'. The term would not be coined until much later: estimates vary from the 4th century to the 11th century C.E. The primary criterion distinguishing them from Jews of other cultures was their language, Greek, and they had been Greek-speaking Jews as early as the 4th century B.C.E. Romaniote Jews would establish communities throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, settling along the shores of the Sea and along inland trade routes. By the 1st century C.E., communities were present in Thessaloniki, Verroia, Corinthos, Patras, Athens, and Rhodes, as attested to by the writings 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 Greece. Flourishing communities are mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela [12th century Jewish traveler]. He not only notes their numbers, locations, but also, occupations, most of which centered on textile production, dyeing and trade³.

Of the 2,300 year presence of Jews on Greek soil, for 1,800 of those years 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 the Ottoman Empire, that the composition of Greek Jewry would change. By the early part of the 16th century most of the indigenous Romaniote population had been absorbed into the more populous Sephardi culture, adopting the Sephardic language [Spanish] and liturgy. Of the few remaining Romaniote communities, most would be west of the Pindos Mountain Range. In 1940, of the 78,000 Jews residing on Greek soil, about 10% were Romaniotes⁴. The Holocaust did not distinguish between Spanish-speaking⁵ Sephardic Jews or Greek-speaking Romaniotes: 87% of Greek Jewry would perish in the Holocaust. Cultural distinction no longer exist in Greece's Jewish population which is estimated at 4,500. All are Greek-speaking. Attempts to resurrect lost cultures, both among those descending from traditional Sephardi and Romaniote backgrounds are no more than exercises in nostalgia. Very few of those in Greece who come from Romaniote backgrounds know anything of their culture, language⁶ and distinctive liturgy. Most were either born after World War II or were too young to have absorbed the culture. In the aftermath of the almost complete destruction of Greek Jewry, post-war efforts were concentrated on rehabilitation of the survivors and restoration of personal and communal property. Preservation of traditions, both secular and religious, was, understandably, on the bottom of the list of priorities.

Culture and Romaniote traditions would be preserved in the Diaspora, mainly in communities established by Romaniote immigrants who had left Greece before the Holocaust. The emigration of Greek Jewry mirrored the emigration of all Greeks in many ways but, in other ways, it was quite distinct. In both Europe and the United States, Greek Jews would be included in immigration statistics by their country of origin,⁷ making it necessary to rely on Jewish community records of the respective countries to determine the numbers. These figures are not always accurate⁸. Immigration to Palestine [pre-1948 Israel] was minimal due to efforts on the part of the British to limit such immigration. With the exception of the explicit request for stevedores to build the port of Haifa, bringing Salonikan Jews to the port⁹, most of the immigration was illegal and clandestine. Immigration figures are almost non-existent.

The total population of Greece in the early twentieth century did not exceed 2,500,000¹⁰. Greece was a poor country with an agrarian economy, offering little opportunities for its youth¹¹. Both Jewish and Christian Greeks immigrated to the United States seeking better opportunities for themselves and their children. Those Greek Jews who arrived between 1906 and 1924 mainly came from the former Ottoman Turkish lands of Macedonia and Epirus, particularly from cities such as Thessaloniki, Kastoria, and Ioannina that had substantial Jewish populations. The devastating fire in 1917 would leave half of the

Jewish community of Thessaloniki homeless, leading many to immigrate to the United States. These were traditional Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews and they would establish communities in New York City and along both the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. Most adapted to their new country, only retaining traces of their Sephardic heritage during occasional holiday celebrations. Their ancestral language, Judeo-Espanyol, was rapidly lost.

The preservation of language, or lack of it, offers us insights into many aspects of ethnic identity and cultural preservation. An estimated 40,000 Greek Jews left Greece between 1906 and 1940, settling primarily in France and the United States¹². An additional 5,000 immigrated to Israel after 1948¹³. The majority of these Jews were Sephardim. Within two generations they would no longer identify themselves as 'Greek Jews', many having never identified themselves in such terms as they had left when their cities of origin were still part of the Ottoman Empire. They would now be 'French Jews', 'American Jews', 'Israelis' or, among those who still retained a pride in their Sephardic origins, 'Sephardim'. Among the Romaniotes, especially those from the city of Ioannina [Yanniotes], ethnic identities would be defined in terms of both their city and country of origin, Ioannina and Greece respectively. The interesting phenomenon is that, unlike other Greek Jewish emigrants, the Romaniotes continued to preserve their distinctive culture, traditions and, most importantly, their language [Greek]. The 'how' and 'why' of this phenomenon has not yet been fully researched. What is beyond speculation is that Romaniote Jewry still thrives in the New York area and so much of this has to do with a little synagogue on Broome Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan¹⁴.

Tourists who visit Kehila Kedosha Janina are often pleasantly surprised by the story told inside. Most had not realized that Jews lived, and continue to live, in Greece. Many find the terms 'Greek' and 'Jew' incongruous, feeling that one must be one or the other and cannot possibly be both at the same time. Some enter with misconceptions about the relationship between Jews and Greeks, certainly with a void in knowledge about the long history of Jews on Greek soil, few having ever heard the term 'Romaniote'. The museum within the synagogue attempts to tell the story of Greek Jewry, the history, the culture and, most specifically, who 'Romaniote' Jews are. In many ways, Kehila Kedosha Janina has become the worldwide repository of Romaniote culture. The neighborhood surrounding the synagogue and museum has changed. Most of the families of the original congregants have long since left, but Kehila Kedosha Janina still stands, one of only five original Jewish houses of worship left of the hundreds that once existed. But, why not? The story of Romaniote Greek Jewry is one of endurance and perseverance. It is a Greek story. It is a Jewish story.

The story of Judaism and Hellenism is one of interaction between the two cultures that most influenced western civilization.¹⁵ Greeks and Jews have lived alongside each other for over two millennia, exchanging ideas, absorbing each other's culture and surviving, while most of the other cultures of antiquity slipped into oblivion. Their relationship was not always harmonious. In many ways, they were too much alike and would become even more so over the centuries. Both were people of long histories and long memories, never forgetting their friends and, certainly, not willing to forget their enemies. They would also become people of the Diaspora, both Jews and Greeks numbering more representatives of their respective ethnicities outside their territorial borders than within. How to survive in the Diaspora and how to preserve their respective cultures would be subjects debated by both. For Jews in the Diaspora, how to participate in surrounding non-Jewish culture and take advantage of the opportunities afforded them, while still preserving their religion has been a constant challenge. For Greeks in the Diaspora, the challenge was to preserve their culture and, most importantly, the language that was so inherently tied to that culture. Romaniote Jews in New York somehow achieved both: the preservation of their religion with its specific cultural difference, and the preservation of the Greek culture and language that distinguished them from other Jews. Within the walls of Kehila Kedosha Janina, the Holy Congregation of Ioannina, both would be passed down from generation to generation.

Romaniote Jews came to the United States during the massive wave of immigration, from 1881-1924, when over 17 million European immigrants would arrive, among them 3,500,000 Jews. Most of the Jewish immigrants were from Eastern European countries, fleeing pogroms and persecutions. A great majority would initially settle in 'ghettos' in Eastern cities close to their port of entry, New York City, Baltimore, and Boston. Those who entered through the port of New Orleans traveled up the Mississippi to Chicago. They would settle where there was cheap housing and relatives who could help them adjust, find housing and get employment. For Jews, the existence of Jewish institutions such as synagogues, *shohets* [ritual slaughterers] and *mikvehs* [ritual baths], was also important. The Lower East

Side of Manhattan was a primary site of settlement for Jewish immigrants in New York City from 1881-1924.¹⁶

Intermingled with this massive wave of Eastern European, Ashkenazi¹⁷ Jews was a smaller group of Jews arriving from the Balkans. Political upheavals, border changes and economics were the primary reason for their leaving countries that were part of the disintegrating Ottoman Turkish Empire. Most of these Jews were traditional Sephardim coming from lands that were, or would shortly become Turkey, southern Yugoslavia and Greece, from cities such as Smyrna, Monastir, Thessaloniki, and Kastoria. Intermingled with the Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews was a small contingent of Jews from Ioannina: Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews. Hundred of synagogues would be established on the Lower East Side, most Ashkenazi, but, also a small number of traditional Sephardic congregations, including those serving Jews from Greece [Thessaloniki and Kastoria]¹⁸. It is understandable that the Romaniote Jews would have difficulty worshipping in Ashkenazi synagogues, the liturgy being remarkably different. While the liturgy of the Sephardim was closer to that of the Romaniotes, language would be a deciding factor in the establishment of a separate Romaniote *kehila* [community]. The Greek-speaking Romaniotes did not feel comfortable worshipping in a Spanish-speaking congregation. Their language [Greek] would separate them, not only from Yiddish¹⁹-speaking Jews, but also, from Spanish-speaking Jews. Thus Kehila Kedosha Janina was born.

Between 1906-1924, half of the Jewish community of Ioannina emigrated, approximately 2000 of the 4000 members. The Jewish community had reached its height in the early part of the twentieth century, as reflected by the need to build an additional synagogue outside the *kastro* walls. In many ways, the dynamics behind the emigration mirrored that of non-Jewish Greeks in Epirus but, in other aspects, it reflected uncertainties not shared by the Christian community. Like their Christian counterparts, the Jews were affected by the economy, political upheavals, the need to amass dowries and the laws of inheritance and, like the Christians, the Jews would leave to seek a better life for themselves and their children, but an added dimension in Greek Jewish emigration was an underlying uncertainty as to how they would fare in a Christian world after Ioannina became part of Modern Greece in 1913. Under the Ottoman Turks, they had been able to continue to practice their Judaism with little interference. Would this continue? A possibly troubling omen was talk of mandatory closing of commercial establishments on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, something that would create a disadvantage for Jewish shop owners who wished to continue to observe their Sabbath on Saturdays. Now they would lose two days of work and, if they employed Christians, they would have to pay them for work lost on Saturday. Uncertainties might have triggered the emigration, but once in the New World the majority would continue to proudly identify themselves as Greeks and, within the walls of Kehila Kedosha Janina, and sister synagogues that were established as offshoots of the Kehila, they would continue to practice their age-old traditions and incorporate Judeo-Greco into their liturgy.

Greek Jews, both Sephardic and Romaniote, often lived side by side in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods in New York City and the outlying boroughs. Very often, they shared similar occupations. Occasionally, they would even intermarry. While outsiders, especially Ashkenazi Jews, would group them together, among themselves there were marked differences, not the least of which was language. The Sephardim continued, at least among the new arrivals and the first generation of children born in the New World, to speak *judesmo*, a mixture of medieval Spanish and Hebrew, and the Romaniotes [the Yanniotes] were Greek-speakers. While in the work place, they might often work side by side, but they would worship separately, their liturgies reflecting century-old distinctions. They rarely socialized, again language playing a major role. On arrival in the New World, Greek Jews would settle into occupations that often, but not always, mirrored their occupations in Greece. Many would work in the textile industry. Jews from Ioannina, Kastoria and Monastir²⁰ would open small factories producing women's garments and underwear. While a number of the Sephardic merchants accumulated sizable fortunes, most of the Yanniotes remained small-time operators. Hard working, family oriented and strongly attached to their culture and traditions, their wealth was not measured in material possessions. They worked in, and opened small factories producing nightgowns, bathrobes, women's underwear and aprons. In Ioannina, few of these Jewish families had been involved in the production of finished garments. Most had been involved in the import and export of textiles. Factory production on the scale seen in New York City in the 1920s had not yet reached Greece. While some of the small shops would be downtown, close to home, larger factories would be uptown and, even before the completion of Kehila Kedosha Janina, congregants would start to move to Harlem to be closer to work. One of the first sister synagogues of Kehila Kedosha Janina would be Sheerith Israel²¹ of Janina, located first in Harlem and, then, at two additional locations in the Bronx. An additional textile factory was built in New Bedford, Massachusetts, bringing Yanniote Jews to

work there. Distance did not weaken the strength of the Romaniote community. Marriages would continue to be arranged and the center would continue to be in Lower Manhattan, within the walls of Kehila Kedosha Janina.

In their very 'Greek' identity, the Romaniote Jews of Ioannina were, in many ways, torn between two worlds. Their religion was Jewish but their ethnicity was Greek. In the New York City area, where they had access to traditional Greek institutions, there would be instances in their daily lives where being Greek was almost as important as being Jewish. Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, founded in a former synagogue at 27 Forsyth, like most Greek parishes, would offer Greek language classes, and many of the students in the 1940s and 1950s were the children of Greek Jews living close by.²² The preservation of their Greek language was an important part of their identity and something that had to be passed on to their children. Unfortunately, the language would cause problems for these Greek-speaking Jews. An industrial accident in Harlem in 1906 demonstrated the hardships they encountered in the New World, and how their fellow Jews often ostracized them because they spoke Greek and not Yiddish. A young man from the small community of Yanniote Jews was working as an assistant to the driver of a horse-drawn truck delivering merchandise for a cigarette factory when he fell under the cart and was run over by the horse. The sudden death of this young man raised many problems for the small Jewish community. They were recent arrivals in the New World and were not organized for such disasters. They had no religious or civic associations---no provision for such emergency. There was no workmen's compensation law, nor any provision for burial²³. The need to bury this young man, and the fact that other Jewish organizations questioned his 'Jewishness' because he spoke Greek and did not have a typically Jewish surname, resulted in the organization of a burial society to serve the community. The United Brotherhood Good Hope Society of Janina is still active today, one of the most active Jewish burial societies in the northeast.

In most immigrant communities, within two generations the language of the mother country is lost. While initially preserved by the immigrants and passed on to some extent to their children, very few of the third generation will have a spoken knowledge of the 'mother tongue'. For many, language is closely interwoven with culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than among Greek speakers.²⁴ For Romaniote Jews, language, the Greek language, has always been an important part of their identity. It would separate and distinguish them from Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews while living in Greece, and would continue to be a distinguishing factor once they arrived in the New World. An inherent part of Romaniote liturgy is based on Judeo-Greco, a mixture of Greek and Hebrew, a reinforcement of their Greek identity and knowledge of Greek throughout the Jewish liturgical year. While most of the service is now done in traditional Hebrew, *piyyuttim*,²⁵ distinctive poetry inserted into the service that differs from one Jewish community in the Diaspora to another, are in Judeo-Greco in a Romaniote service. Greek expressions were part of their daily communication, often spoken in the distinctive Yanniote dialect, a dialect spoken by both Jews and Christians in Ioannina.²⁶ Romaniotes would identify themselves as Greek Jews; a distinction not often made by Jews from Sephardic backgrounds whose families immigrated to the United States. Descendants of Greek Sephardic immigrants refer to themselves as *Saloniklis*, *Rhodeslis*, etc., emphasizing their separation.²⁷ Jews from Ioannina would refer to themselves as *Yanniotes*, but this was the same term that Christians from Ioannina might also use.

On the Lower East Side, surrounded by the predominantly Yiddish-speaking world of the Ashkenazim, Greek-speaking Jews would often find themselves ostracized. Their Judaism would be doubted. Among themselves, as so often happens to ethnic groups left out of mainstream society, they would create mocking epithets for those who were mocking them. The Romaniotes created a nickname for the Ashkenazim: they called them *zeegazooks*. The word actually had no meaning but, rather, was an imitation of the language, Yiddish, that they could not understand. Socially, the Greek language would play an important role in the life of the early immigrants. They would set up their own coffee houses along Allen Street, places where they could feel comfortable conversing with each other as they sipped their strong coffee and discussed local and, of course, Greek politics. There is no doubt that, as Greek-speakers, their native language would act as a means to unify them and, there is no doubt that as a tiny minority, surrounded by a predominantly non Greek-speaking world, this unity would be necessary. In the midst of the bustling life of early 20th century Lower East Side, with immigrants from all parts of Europe, this small enclave of Greek-speaking Jews preserved their separate customs, traditions and distinctive style of worship. The neighborhood around the Kehila [especially Broome and Allen Streets] would house the extended families, most related to each other in some way. For entertainment, they would frequent the café Amans, listening to the lilting strains of popular singers of the day, one of whom, Amalia,²⁸ lived across the street from the Kehila at 275 Broome Street. The youth would socialize among their own, kept under tight scrutiny of their conservative, old-fashioned parents and grandparents.

Not only was Greek spoken at home, in many instances, it was the only language spoken. If children wanted to be able to communicate with their grandparents, they had to speak Greek. Greek music was often the only music sung at home and many of these 'old' songs are still cherished by subsequent generations. Even among future generations, Greek-language classes, usually given in local churches, would play an important role in a child's upbringing. An interesting phenomenon was the concerted effort to preserve traditional Greek culture among the Jewish immigrants from Ioannina. So beloved was their culture, that a group of children of immigrants formed an organization called the *Pashas*, a strictly social organization founded in 1957 to preserve the secular culture of the Romaniote Greek Jews. Regular monthly meetings were organized and annual dinner dances, picnics and weekend excursions still take place. Greek music is played. The participants gather to dance the traditional dances of Greece [Epirote dances predominant] and to enjoy traditional [kosher] Greek meals. An outsider looking in would probably be quite surprised to learn that the participants at these very Greek events are all Jewish.

The incorporation of traditional Greek food into holiday feasts and, for many, their daily diet, is still a very important part of Romaniote existence. While many practice *kashrut* [observance of kosher laws] and incorporate this into their cooking, Greek food plays an important role in the life of Romaniote Jews. Kehila Kedosha Janina Board meetings often include traditional Greek foods such as feta cheese, kalamata olives, pita bread, taramasalata, bourekas and, of course, a Greek salad. Ouzo is traditionally served during the *kiddush* [traditional meal following Shabbat services] even though there is often speculation [mostly on the part of Ashkenazim who might wander into the service] as to whether ouzo is kosher. In a truly Greek tradition, the congregation usually ignores such references. After all, there is no doubt that God created ouzo.

After almost 100 years of existence, the Romaniote Jewish community of Yanniotos in the United States has spread out throughout the country, living in almost every state. With the exception of a substantial community of retirees in Florida, where an offshoot of the *Pashas* has been formed, there are few means to help them preserve their Greek identity and culture, but the interest is still there as expressed by daily communications [via our website], requests for books and information on their family, the Kehila and the city of origin, Ioannina. In many ways, Romaniote Jews are not very different from their Christian Greek counterparts. Both communities continue to make a concerted effort to perpetuate the culture and language, despair on its possible disappearance, lament the fact that the future generations do not share their appreciation or concerns and, somehow, continue on.

Much of the ability to perpetuate the culture, traditions and religious practices of Romaniote Jews has depended on Kehila Kedosha Janina. The synagogue was constructed in 1927 and is the only remaining Romaniote synagogue in the Western Hemisphere. In the early part of the 20th century, the streets of the Lower East Side were filled with Jews from throughout Europe, most living in enclaves alongside Jews from their former homeland. Each community would build synagogues reminiscent of those they left behind. The Jews who erected Kehila Kedosha Janina in 1927 were no different. They named their synagogue [the Holy Congregation of Janina] after the small city in Greece that they had come from: Ioannina, pronounced in their dialect as Yanina and, when transliterated from Greek to English, mistakenly spelled with a "j." The community [*kehila*] was incorporated in 1906 and, initially, people would meet in private homes, using a torah scroll brought over from Ioannina for that purpose. The scroll still sits in the Aron inside of Kehila Kedosha Janina, now joined by five others, each with a special story to tell. As the numbers of Yanniotos on the Lower East Side grew, funds were gathered for the building of a synagogue. The names of the major donors [each contributing \$100, a hefty sum in 1927] still grace the marble plaques in the vestibule. Some of the names are obviously Jewish such as Levi and Koen, even though the spelling might be a little different: Levi with an "i" on the end, and Koen with a "K". Other names, Koffinas, Battino, Negrin, Colchamiro and DeCastros are distinctly Yanniotos. Never a wealthy congregation, the hardworking founders of the Kehila would build the synagogue with their own hands. The original wooden *bema*²⁹ and Aron³⁰ still stand and the congregants still sit on wooden benches and chairs dating to 1927. Like most synagogues on the Lower East Side, Kehila Kedosha Janina is small, cramped into a tiny space, all the poor congregants could afford. All the furnishings are hand-made and exude simplicity and honesty. The immigrant women had contributed their needlework talents. Their decorative embroidered parochets [the curtains symbolizing the veil that was hung in front of the Holy of Holies in the Temple] adorn the simple wood Aron. The congregation was, and still is, Orthodox and the women sit in the balcony upstairs. Although separate from the men, they have always made their wishes known by banging on the inside of the balcony, a tradition that is still practiced.

The community, like its sister community in Greece, was traditional, observant and male-dominated. Most of the men were engaged in some aspect of the textile industry. A number would open small factories producing aprons, ladies underwear, nightgowns and bathrobes. Very rarely would the women work outside of the family business. As in the old country, higher education was not stressed. Men would be encouraged to enter the professions of their fathers, most small tradesmen or shop owners, and the only acceptable future for a woman would be marriage and family³¹. In the New World, marriages were no longer 'officially' arranged, as they were back in Greece, but the youth were encouraged to marry 'among their own'. It was rare for a Yanniotte, a Jew from Ioannina, to marry a Sephardi Jew, and still rarer to marry an Ashkenazi.

The Museum located in the women's balcony has a collection of *Alephs*, birth amulets that in many ways reflect the conservative, male-dominated nature of the community, both in Greece and the United States. An *Aleph* would be made for every newborn male child, noting his birth and genealogy and, most importantly, filled with kabalistic symbols to protect him from the 'evil eye' for the first forty days of his life.³² There was no such equivalent for a female child. It was not that daughters were not loved and cherished, but their position in the community was quite different from their male counterparts. A young boy would become part of the *minyán*³³ on his 13th birthday. He would grow up to enter the family business, aiding the family economically. He would take care of his parents in their old age and say *kaddish* [the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead] when they died. A girl could do none of these things and, in addition, she was costly: a dowry had to be provided to assure her marriage. In a poor community with large families, additional daughters were often a burden. Sometimes their actual names reflected that. The name *Stemma* is derived from the Greek word *stamata* and was given to what they hoped was the last of many daughters, expressing the desperate wish that God would 'stop' sending them daughters that they could not afford to marry off.³⁴

In 1906, when the Kehila was founded, there were between two hundred to three hundred Yanniotte Jews in the New York area. Most lived on the Lower East Side but some had already started to move uptown. With the completion of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903, Brooklyn became an area of settlement for Jews on the Lower East Side who were looking to move their families into the 'suburbs'. Even before the completion of the synagogue on Broome Street, some early Romaniote immigrants had made their residential move into Brooklyn. The first 'sister' congregation in Brooklyn would be in Williamsburg. A synagogue was never built there, as it was close enough to the Lower East Side for those wishing to attend services to walk across the bridge. A sign of the growth of the community, both on Broome Street and in Williamsburg, was the fact that a social hall on South 9th Street in Brooklyn was rented to house the overflow of congregants wishing to celebrate the Jewish High Holidays. It was also at this point that discussion on the sale of seats for the High Holidays took place. While most traditional synagogues sell seats for the Jewish holidays of *Rosh HaShanah* [the Jewish New Year] and *Yom Kippur* [the Day of Atonement], using the opportunity of maximum synagogue attendance to raise funds for the upcoming year, Kehila Kedosha Janina had never done this. In the 1940s when the synagogue would be filled to capacity, the elders made the decision, not so much as a fund-raiser, but as a means of crowd control, to sell the seats. Men, who wished to have a reserved seat, would pay \$1 and women would pay \$2. Now, not only would the women be forced to climb the steps to the balcony, but they would also have to pay double for this privilege. The rationale was that there were fewer seats in the women's balcony. In 1936, an offshoot of Kehila Kedosha Janina was created in Brooklyn, on 66th Street between 21st and 22nd Avenues in Bensonhurst. It was called the Mapleton Synagogue or Kehila Kedosha Janina of Mapleton. Originally located on the top floor of a large Ashkenazi synagogue, it was eventually moved in 1965 to its own quarters around the corner at 65th Street. The first rabbi of Kehila Kedosha Janina of Mapleton was Rabbi Bechoraki³⁵ Matsil, who was born in Ioannina in 1877 and arrived in New York in 1919. He would support his family of nine children on his \$400 annual salary and would serve the congregation until his death in 1962. The Mapleton Synagogue is no longer in existence. The rabbi's youngest son, Sol Matsil, sits on the Board of Kehila Kedosha Janina.

Additional sister congregations were opened in Harlem, and the Bronx. The Harlem synagogue [Congregation Sheerith Israel of Janina] moved first to Hunts Point in the Bronx, where many Yanniotte Jews were engaged in the Hunts Point Market and, like the first Yanniotte synagogue in Brooklyn, was housed within an Ashkenazi synagogue in the Hunts Point Jewish Center at 928 Simpson Street. During the week it was the Hebrew school for the Hunts Point Jewish Center and on Shabbat and all holidays it was Sheerith Israel of Janina. As in the downtown synagogue, the liturgy would be predominantly in Hebrew with the addition of Judeo-Greco *piyyuttim*, but the sermons were always in Greek. The synagogue closed in the early 1950s and the congregation moved to new quarters on Kingbridge Road in the Bronx, in the Kingbridge Heights Jewish Center on Eames Place.

The immigration quotas of 1924³⁶ would limit the number of Yanniotte Jews to arrive after that year, and with the destruction of the Ioannina community in Greece during the Holocaust, where 91% would perish in the concentration camps, the Kehila Kedosha Janina would become the center of Romaniote Jewish life worldwide, keeping the flame of this distinct Jewish group alive. With these thoughts in mind, in 1997, a museum was created in the women's section. Kehila Kedosha Janina is now an historical landmark, designated so by the City of New York and is on the state and national registry. The synagogue's exterior was restored in 2004 and was awarded the Lucy B. Moses Award for Architectural Preservation. The congregation is now in the process of completing the first stage of an extensive interior restoration aimed at restoring the original 1927 interior with updated electricity and air-conditioning.

In addition to displaying artifacts of Romaniote Jews, costumes and religious items, and telling their unique story, the museum at Kehila Kedosha Janina has an extensive collection of archival records and photographs of the community, both before it left Greece and after its arrival in the United States.³⁷ The museum actively works with other museums throughout the world, especially the Jewish Museum in Athens, sharing information and exchanging knowledge. Larger, more famous museums have sought its help in telling this rarely told story of Greek-speaking Jewry and the museum in New York has supplied information and artifacts to such prestigious institutions as The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, Yad VaShem in Jerusalem and the recently opened Museum in Memory of the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin.³⁸ The synagogue's library houses an extensive collection of books on Greek Jewry, written in English, Hebrew, Greek, French and Italian, and it has the largest collection of English-language books on Greek Jewry in the world, all for sale through its website and gift shop. In addition, with the sole purpose of assuring that the Romaniote story is told, the community publishes its own books, through a publishing division named "The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry". Recent publications include *In Memory of the Jewish Community of Ioannina*, a memorial book listing the names of all those who were deported from Ioannina and perished in the Holocaust, *Yannina-Journey To the Past*, the English translation of a best selling book on the Jews of Ioannina by Eftihia Nachmias Nachman, and *Ten Gold Medals: Glory or Freedom*, a children's book on the Holocaust in Greece by Isaac Dostis, the founder of the Museum at Kehila Kedosha Janina. Dostis' book has been endorsed by the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Studies for inclusion in their curriculum for Middle Schools as part of one of the best mandated Holocaust Studies programs in the United States. Future publications will include a comprehensive book on the Jews of Corfu, memorial books on other Romaniote communities in Greece [Corfu,³⁹ Arta, Preveza, Hania, Chalkis, and Athens], *The Names of the Jews of Ioannina*, and *The Romaniotes of the Lower East Side*.

The Kehila Kedosha Janina's story is one of perseverance, endurance and rebirth. In 2000, a Board of Directors was created for the Synagogue and Museum. The composition of the Board is reflective of the continuity that is so much a part of the story of this special community. Most of the members of the Board come from families who once worshiped in the Kehila, many even descended from the founding fathers. All, as reflected in the mission of the Kehila, are committed to preserving the traditions, customs and liturgy of the Romaniote Jews of Ioannina, Greece. Cultural events, very traditional Greek cultural events, are part of the regular programming of Kehila Kedosha Janina: Greek-Jewish cooking classes, Greek-Jewish music and dancing and an annual Greek Jewish film festival⁴⁰. Annual trips to Greece, organized by both the Kehila and its sister organization, The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry, always include the city of Ioannina. Most of the participants have their roots in the Jewish Community of Ioannina and long to visit the city of their ancestors' birth. While other participants may be Ashkenazi Jews interested in this unique culture, or Sephardic Jews who have their roots in other cities in Greece often included in the tour, the reactions of the Romaniotes on arriving in the city, landing at the airport in Ioannina, can only be compared to pilgrims making a spiritual visit. Tears fill their eyes, some even kneel to touch the ground and all want private time to relive the stories their *papous*⁴¹ and *nonas*⁴² told them, stories of the Lake,⁴³ the *kastro*⁴⁴ and the close-knit Jewish community that once upon a time lived in Ioannina. They wander the cobble-stoned streets within the *kastro* walls, trying to find signs of the former Jewish presence, many bringing names and possible addresses of relatives with them. They take a boat ride to the island in the Lake, reliving the stories told by their ancestors. Many return repeatedly, bringing their children and grandchildren with them, passing on the love for this city to the next generation. Some even make the concerted effort to celebrate *simchas* [joyous occasions] in the only remaining synagogue in the city.

In 2000, a Bar Mitzvah took place in Ioannina, one of the few that would take place after the destruction of the community during the Holocaust. All the participants came from the United States, the grandmother and mother of the Bar Mitzvah boy members of the Romaniote Community of New York.

The synagogue was filled. There was not a dry eye in the house. The commitment on the part of the family, of the community, and of the young boy was reflective of the commitment to continuity that is a very special aspect of the present Jewish community of Ioannina, a community that knows that while others in Greece might be ready to sing dirges in their memory, they are continuously supported by their sister community of Romaniotes in New York.

From the very creation of the Kehila Kedosha Janina, strong ties were kept with the sister community back in Ioannina, something that was rarely duplicated in Jews who came from other parts of Europe or, even, from other cities in Greece. The Sisterhood of Janina, founded in 1932 has, over the course of the years, contributed funds to help the Jewish Community of Ioannina, as has the Brotherhood, the Kehila and, since its foundation in 1998, The Association of Friends of Greek Jewry. In the beginning, money was sent over to help create dowries for poor or orphaned girls, enabling them to get married. The Sisterhood has continually contributed towards the restoration of the synagogue and Jewish cemetery and, after the opening of the borders in 1991, helped rescue 37 Albanian Jews with Yanniot roots, bringing them to the United States. Ongoing fundraising to preserve the Ioannina Jewish Cemetery is shared by all organizations associated with the Kehila. The ties between the community in Ioannina and the New York Romaniote community have never been severed. As expressed by Moses Eliasaf, President of the Jewish Community of Ioannina, in a recent letter to Kehila Kedosha Janina, dated January 27, 2006, written on receipt of a generous donation towards the restoration of the only remaining synagogue in Ioannina, "We wish to convey to you that, on our part, we feel that you are always with us in spite of the great geographical distance that separates us. Your valuable aid, your immediate response to our appeals and the feelings with which you cherish our Community have raised our consciousness as to our real benefactors. Our brethren at Kehila Kedosha Janina have never let us down."

One of the most fascinating aspects of this community, the Romaniote community of New York, is their definition of who they are. Ethnicity is a matter of choice. These Jews could have defined themselves in many ways: American Jews who descend from Greece, Jews living in America with Greek roots, etc. Their choice of defining themselves as 'Greek' Jews, and putting this aspect of their ethnicity first, reveals much about their choice of identity. The number now attempting to get Greek nationality based on their parent[s] or grandparent[s] having been born in Greece is not found in any other group of Jews who have their roots on Greek soil. Romaniote Jews, Hellenized Jews, still remain Hellenes.

There is much to be learned from this community: in a society, here in the United States, that stressed assimilation, that proudly called itself a 'melting pot', this small community of Greek-speaking Jews stood proudly separate, never quite 'melting', always proud of their distinctions. Was it their differences that forced them to cling to each other and their traditions? Was it pride in who they were and where they came from? These are questions still not completely answered, questions still demanding additional research. What we do know is, today, a century later, Romaniote Jews are still attracting attention, still, somehow, achieving the impossible and, most importantly, continuing, with pride, to preserve their distinctiveness. The rabbis say that with each language we learn we acquire an additional soul. There is no doubt that the souls of Romaniote Jews are distinctly Greek and remain so wherever they transplant their bodies.

¹ Romaniote has come to mean Hellenized, Greek-speaking Jews. According to Professor Bowman, the term was in common usage by the 11th century. For an extensive overview of Romaniote Jewry in the Byzantine Empire see, Sharf, Andrew, *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade*, New York, 1971 and Bowman, Steven, *Jews of Byzantium*, Bloch Publishing, New York, 1985.

² Stavroulakis, Nikolas, *The Jews of Greece*, Talos Press, Athens 1990, pp. 9-10

³ See Stavroulakis, Nikos, *Jewish Sites and Synagogues of Greece*, Talos Press, Athens, 1992 for an extensive history of the Jewish communities in Greece.

⁴ Included in these statistics are the Jewish Communities of Rhodes and Kos, which were physically part of Italy from 1919-1943 and did not become part of Modern Greece until 1946. Since these communities, jointly numbering close to 2000, are usually included in Greek Holocaust statistics, they will be included here.

⁵ The language spoken by the Sephardim of Greece was a mixture of Medieval Spanish, dating to the 15th century, Hebrew and inclusions of occasional Greek and Turkish expressions, depending on the location of the speaker. It is often erroneously called ‘Ladino’ which is more correctly used when referring to the liturgical language used only during religious ceremonies and not to the vernacular. The scholars refer to the spoken language as Judeo-Espanyol, or Judeo-Spanish, but the Jews referred to it simply as ‘*judeumos*’ [Jewish].

⁶ Judeo-Greco, the liturgical language of Romaniotes differed from their spoken language. The spoken language was predominantly Greek with inclusions of Hebrew expressions having to do with religious practices. In Ioannina, where the dialect of Romaniote Jews developed to the highest level, it also was often used as the vernacular of non-Jewish Greeks, especially those involved in trade with the Jewish community. The Yanniot dialect incorporated many Turkish expressions, not surprising due to over 480 years of Turkish occupation. For a glossary of Yanniot dialectic expressions, see Νάχιαν, Ευτυχία, ΓΙΑΝΝΕΝΑ, Ταξίδι στο Παρελθόν, Talos Press, Athens, 1996, or the English translation: Nachman, Eftihia, Yannina-Journey To the Past, edited by Marcia Haddad Ikononopoulos and Isaac Dostis, Bloch Publishing, New York 2004.

⁷ According to Moskos, Charles, *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1980, p.156, the figures for total Greek immigration to the United States between 1873 and 1989 numbered 850,000. Included in the 1890-1917 and 1918-1924 figures [a total of 520,000] would have been the 2000 Jews of Ioannina who came to the United States during that period. As noted by Moskos, it was difficult to determine exact numbers of Greek immigrants because many of them were expatriated Greeks who came to the United States from Turkey or lands still part of the Ottoman Turkish Empire.

Era	Approx. Total	Approx. Annual Average
Early migration 1873-1899	15,000	500
Great Wave 1890-1917	450,000	25,000
Last Exodus 1918-1924	70,000	10,000
Closed Door 1925-1946	30,000	1,300
Postwar Migration 1947-1965	75,000	4,000
New Wave 1966-1979	160,000	11,000
Declining Migration 1980-1989	25,000	2,500

⁸ The established Jewish communities of both western Europe and the United States were predominantly Ashkenazi and, often, had difficulty recognizing their Sephardic and Romaniote brethren as Jews, very often excluding them from official statistics.

⁹ Many Jews from Salonika worked as *hamales* [porters] in the port of Salonika and were specifically recruited by the British to help build the port of Haifa. According to the legend, when asked by the British to provide stevedores to work the port of Haifa, the Ashkenazim replied that no self-respecting Jew worked in such a capacity. Of course, this was not true. There were many working in near by Salonika.

¹⁰ With the influx of 1,100,000 Asia Minor Greeks in 1922/23, as part of the exchange of populations, these figures would change.

¹¹ Although most Jews did not work in agriculture but, rather, as merchants, their ability to make a living was affected by the general economy and they were also affected by antiquated inheritance laws.

¹² See Nehama, J., ‘The Jews of Salonika and the Rest of Greece Under Hellenic Rule: The Death of a Great Community’ in Barnett, R.D. (ed.) *The Western Sephardim*. London, Gibraltar Books, pp. 243-82.

¹³ There are approximately 30,000 Jews in Israel who date their ancestry back to Greece, most of traditional Sephardic background. There is a Moshav [co-operative community] founded by Greek Jews [Moshav Tsur located between Haifa and Tel Aviv] and one still functioning Romaniote Synagogue [Beit Kneset, known as the Zakynthos Synagogue] in Tel Aviv.

¹⁴ Kehila Kedosha Janina [The Holy Congregation of Ioannina] is located at 280 Broome Street, between Allen and Eldridge. An excellent website [<http://www.kkjsm.org>] tells the story of the congregation and the history of the community, in addition to items of interest, books for sale and upcoming events involving the synagogue and museum.

¹⁵ Gordon, Cyrus H., *The Common Background of the Greek and Hebrew Civilizations*, W.W. Norton and Company, NY 1965

¹⁶ While population density would decrease after the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge and a movement of Jews into nearby Brooklyn, at the height of immigration, the Lower East Side had one of the highest population densities in the world. In 1910, there were an estimated 2,300,000 residents in the borough of Manhattan, of which almost half were foreign born. The Lower East Side had the distinction of the highest population density, averaging over 300 persons per acre, most living in crowded tenements with an average of four residents per room. For an extensive picture of immigrant life on the Lower East Side, see:

Joyce Mendelson, *Lower East Side Remembered and Revisited*, Lower East Side Press, New York, 2001, Diner, Hasia R., *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America*, Princeton University Press, NJ 2000 and Hilton Hindus, ed. *The Jewish East Side, 1881-1924*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London, 1996. With the exception of Joyce Mendelson's book, no mention is made of the Romaniote Jewish community or of Kehila Kedosha Janina.

¹⁷ Ashkenazi, Hebrew for German, originally designated Jews from German lands, but with migrations east to escape persecutions starting in the 11th century, it has come to mean Jews from Eastern Europe, predominantly Polish and Russian lands.

¹⁸ Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, located uptown on West 70th and Central Park West, established a Talmud Torah [a school to teach Jewish youth] on Eldridge Street and there were a Kastorlis [Kastoria] and Monastirlis [Monastir] synagogue in the neighborhood, until the congregations moved to Brooklyn. Most of the Saloniklis [Jews from Salonika] would move uptown to the Bronx, establishing a synagogue there. The Kastorlis Synagogue still stands in Brooklyn but is no longer active, the Monastirlis Synagogue moved its congregation to Long Island [The Sephardic Temple of Cedarhurst] and the Sephardic Jewish Center of Forest Hills now houses the Saloniklis congregation of the Bronx.

¹⁹ Yiddish, a mixture of Medieval German and Hebrew is the language of the Ashkenazim.

²⁰ Monastir [now called Bitol] while not part of Greece [located in southern Yugoslavia] had a very strong connection to both Sephardic and Romaniote Greek Jewry. The one remaining synagogue in Thessaloniki is the Monastirion Synagogue, founded by Jews from Monastir in the early twentieth century. Many marriages were arranged between Jews from Monastir and those of Salonika, Kastoria and, even Ioannina. What is of particular interest is that, when the Monastirlis Synagogue, located at 133 Eldridge Street, closed in the 1940's, they gave many of their 'treasures', including a Torah crown to Kehila Kedosha Janina, and many of the Monastirlis congregants began to attend services at Kehila Kedosha Janina.

²¹ Sheerith [also spelled 'Shearith'] means remnant. Many congregations in the Diaspora would call themselves Sheerot {Remnants} of Israel.

²² Source: Father John Angel, resident priest of St. Barbara.

²³ Source: The United Brotherhood Good Hope Society of Janina. Often, in the Diaspora, the establishment of a burial society preceded the establishment of the community and the synagogue. The commandment [mitzva] to provide a decent burial for every Jew is one of the most important commandments [mitzvot] in Judaism. A synagogue is not necessary for Jewish worship: only the Laws [the Torah] and a quorum [a minyan] are required.

²⁴ See Constantakos, C. and Spiradakis, J., Greek in New York, in O. Garcia and J. Fishman (Eds.) *The Multilingual Apple: Languages in New York City* (pp.143-166) Mouton de Gruyter, New York, 1997 for a comprehensive look on attempts to preserve Greek among Greek-Americans in New York.

²⁵ Originally, Romaniote piyyuttim from Ioannina were written, as were all Judeo-Greco piyyuttim, in Hebrew characters. Due to the work of the late Joseph Matsas of Ioannina, much was transcribed into Greek characters and is now stored in the archives of Kehila Kedosha Janina. It is hoped that in the future, these *piyyuttim* can be translated into English and transliterated into Latin characters and published in all four linguistic variations.

²⁶ It is not uncommon during our annual visits to Ioannina to see expressions of delight among older residents of the city [both Jewish and Christian] when hearing one of our tour participants try to communicate in the ‘Greek’ they learned at home. The typical comment on the part of the listener is, “That reminds me of how my grandfather [or grandmother] spoke.”

²⁷ The ‘lis’ ending is the Judeo-Espanyol form of designation of location of birth. Therefore, a *Rhodeslis* was a Jew from Rhodes, a *Saloniklis*, from Salonika, a *Kastorlis*, from Kastoria, etc. It would never refer to a non-Jew from that area, but only to ‘*los maestros*’, [one of ours].

²⁸ Amalia Bakar was born in Ioannina and sang a repertoire of songs typical of the Greco-Turkish world of her youth. The participation of Greek-speaking Jews in the Greek musical world of the early 20th century was not unusual. One of the most famous was Roza Eskenazi, born Sarah Skinazi to Jewish parents [Flora and Avraam] in Constantinople. She would become the most famous of female Rebetika singers. Her Jewish roots were never hidden. She would sing in Judeo-Espanyol, Turkish, Armenian and Greek, clearly displaying the many dimensions of her Jewish Balkan background. Amalia, her contemporary, never achieved the international status of Roza, but her music is still beloved by the Yanniotas and a CD with many of the songs she made famous is still a best seller at Kehila Kedosha Janina, the synagogue she and her family attended.

²⁹ The word ‘bema’ comes from the Greek word ‘vima’ [βήμα] a raised platform or podium used to conduct services. Many Greek words have become part of traditional Jewish usage [συναγωγή-synagogue-a gathering place, *knesset* in Hebrew; *tik*, *tikkim* in the plural [from the Greek word θήκη- a case, in the synagogue, one to hold the Torah scrolls and, during the holiday of Pessah, the afikomen, the piece of matsa that is hidden].

³⁰ The Ark where the Torah scrolls are kept.

³¹ This would change in subsequent generations, as the children of the congregants became more ‘Americanized’ but it would be a slower process of acceptance for the women to have a higher education, many of the old-timers still feeling that, not only that there was no need for it, but that it would actually make her less desirable as a mate.

³² See Stavroulakis, Nikos, *The Jews of Greece*, Talos Press, Athens, 1990, p. 68 and Dalven, Rae, *The Jews of Ioannina*, Cadmus Press, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 79.

³³ Quorum of ten men needed in traditional Orthodox Jewish religious services. Women are not counted in the *minyan* in Orthodox Jewish communities.

³⁴ In an irony of fate, one of the congregants of Kehila Kedosha Janina, named Stemma, became the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust when her parents, having already provided dowries for her older sisters, and fearing that they could not do so for her, sent her to America to live with relatives, hearing that dowries were not required in America and hoping that she would meet a mate there. The rest of the family would perish in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

³⁵ Bechoraki [or Bechorak] was an example of the Hellenization of Hebrew names that took place in Ioannina. Bechor means ‘first born’ and Bechoraki, with the addition of the Greek diminutive ‘aki’ was a name given many firstborn males in Ioannina. Other examples of this were the surnames of Hadjopoulos and Bechoropoulos [the son of someone who made a pilgrimage, Haj in Turkish, to Jerusalem, and the son of a ‘Bechor’ respectively. For a complete discussion of the names of the Jews of Ioannina, see Matsas, Joseph, *Ta Onomata Tων Εβραίων Των Ιωαννίνων*, an unpublished paper that will form the basis for a soon to be published book in English on the same subject. The English edition is slated for publication in 2008.

³⁶ The Immigration Act of May 26, 1924 would set quotas on immigration according to the country of origin. It was heavily discriminatory towards immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe [Italians, Greeks and Jews]. The fear that the United States would experience a renewed flood of immigration in response to the postwar economic turmoil in Europe fed a xenophobic demand for increased restrictions. When an economic recession hit in 1920, the House of Representatives voted to end all immigration. The Senate refused to go that far, but clearly Congress was ready to pass significantly more restrictionist immigration laws than before World War I. The quotas were based on the census of 1910 and set the limit of 3% for new arrivals from countries that had caused an ‘undesirable’ influx into the United States. For a comprehensive discussion of United States Immigration Laws see, *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History*, Edited by Michael Lemay and Elliot Robert Barkan, Greenwood Press, London, 1999.

³⁷ Two of the more interesting photos are of a Bar Mitzvah gathering from 1937 where in attendance at the table of honor, next to the rabbi, is a Greek Orthodox priest, and a dinner at the Broadway Central Hotel on November 13, 1934 in honor of His Eminence, Archbishop Athenagoras, Archbishop of the United States and Canada, where, in the crowd of attendees, there are a number of Yanniote Jews.

³⁸ In 2004, before the opening of the Berlin Museum, a representative visited Kehila Kedosha Janina, specifically requesting help to tell the oft-neglected story of Greek-Jewry in the Holocaust. They had a number of sources to help them with the Sephardic story but they wanted the Romaniote story. That is how, of the fifteen detailed family stories that would be told, limited by the architectural structure, of the millions that could have been told, one of those is the story of Eftihia Nachmias Nachman from Ioannina. Having just completed the English edition of her book, Kehila Kedosha Janina was able to put the Berlin Museum in touch with Eftihia, help in providing necessary photos and, often, act as an intermediary, overcoming language difficulties. For once, the story of Romaniote Holocaust losses would be accurately presented in a major non-Greek Holocaust Museum.

³⁹ Corfu had a Greek-speaking Romaniote community and a community of Jews who descended from parts of Italy, primarily Apulia.

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ Greek for ‘grandfathers’.

⁴² While ‘*yiayia*’ is traditional Greek for ‘grandmother’, among Greek-Jews, both Romaniote and Sephardic, the word ‘*nona*’ was used.

⁴³ Lake Pamvotis.

⁴⁴ 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.