

Genealogy of Yanniotte Jews (Jews from Ioannina, Greece)

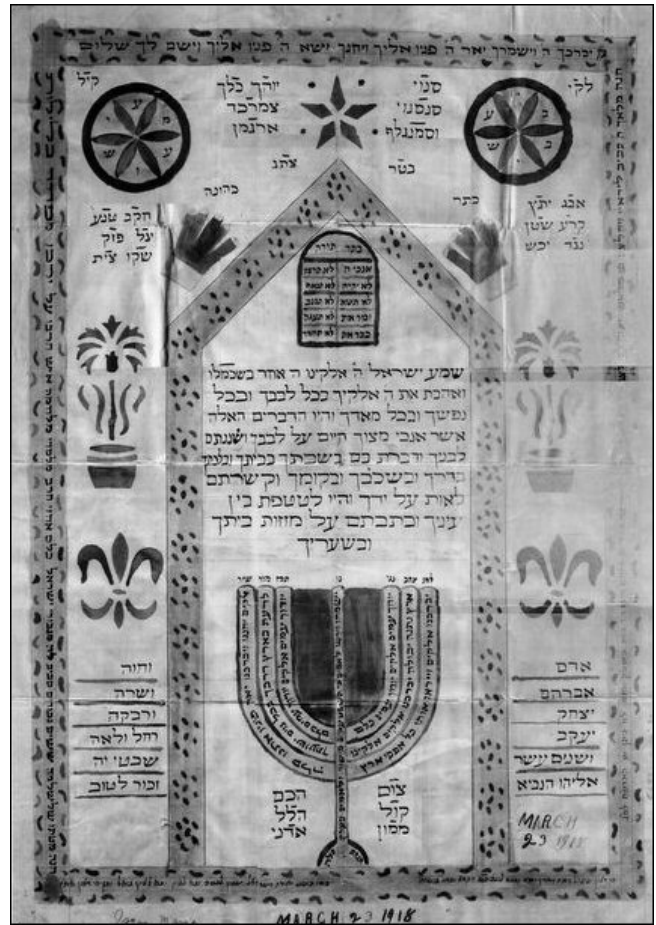
by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

Ioannina, a small city in northwestern Greece near the Albanian border, was home to Jews for more than 1,300 years from the eighth century until the present.¹ Due to its location west of the Pindos Mountain Range, the community was isolated geographically from the mainstream of Judaism, even that within Greece. Consequently, it developed its own traditions, customs, and *minhag*, (prayer rites), and remained Greek-speaking even after most other Jewish communities on Greek soil were absorbed into the traditional Sephardic world following the post-1492 influx of Spanish-speaking Jews. Yanniotte Jews, as they called themselves (only the scholars used the term Romaniote) remained a small community throughout its existence, probably never numbering more than four or five thousand at its peak.²

About half the community (an estimated 2,000) immigrated to the United States between 1902 and 1924. Most settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan not far from the present site of Kehila Kedosha Janina, a synagogue founded by Jews from Greece. Their reasons for leaving were political upheavals in the Balkans, economic instability, antiquated inheritance laws, and the dowry system plus, of course, the desire for a better life for themselves and their children. Lured by the possibility of educational and economic opportunities, they made the long and arduous journey to the New World. The small size, closeness of its members—most married within the community—and the fact that after immigration to the U.S., the community in Greece never lost touch with the community established in New York, has made quite easy the genealogical aspect of my job as museum director at Kehila Kedosha Janina.

For genealogists, certain source material, such as cemetery, immigration and census records, and, when available, community archival material, has considerable value. For communities devastated by the Holocaust, lists of victims typically add pertinent genealogical information. Some of our source materials have been invaluable; other materials were confusing initially and only after further investigation yielded interesting insights into the community. The Jewish cemetery in Ioannina, although overgrown, still exists, and with the unearthing of tombstones and documentation, substantiating genealogical data has become accessible. Recently revealed tombstones may date back to the 15th century.

Birth and census records housed in Ioannina's municipal archives have become part of our database at Kehila Kedosha Janina. These records have been translated and computerized so that, in many instances, we can document the birth and residence of those researching their family roots. The database has been supplemented by additional data received over the years and our recently established genealogical database. In some cases, these records have proven



Traditional "Alef" brit milah amulet made for males to protect them from "the evil eye" for 40 days after the brit. The baby's name, along with that of the father and grandfather would be listed.

to be reliable sources of genealogical information, especially the census records in which whole families were listed. In other cases, the records can be misinterpreted, leading to false connections.

Naming Practices

The reasons behind these possible "errors" actually provide insights into the Jewish community of Ioannina. Although much has changed after the terrible destruction of the Holocaust, for the most part, before World War II Yanniotte Jews were traditional, observant, conservative Jews who named their children according to their time-honored customs.³ First sons and daughters were named after the father's parents, and second sons and daughters named after the mother's parents. Subsequent children would often be named after aunts and uncles or others whom the parents wished to honor. Parents hoped that the honoree, including

Traditional Yanniuote Family at turn of the 20th century.



the grandparents, would be alive to appreciate the tribute. The typical surname of a Yanniuote Jew derived from masculine Hebrew first names, such as Solomon, Matathia, Moses, Israel, Samuel, Barouch, and Naphtali. Naming as traditional Yanniuote Jews do, if, for example, Samuel had a son and he named him Solomon, the son would be called Solomon ben Samuel. With the naming practices of this community, when Solomon had his first son, that son was named Samuel ben Solomon.

This changed in the 17th century, when the ruling Ottoman Turks demanded consistency in surnames for tax purposes. The Ottomans, confused by what they thought was a change in surname from generation to generation—which actually was simply the traditional naming practices of observant Jews—demanded that all in the family have the same “surname.” Outwardly, the Jews of Ioannina acquiesced by seeming to follow the Ottoman requirements—but then they proceeded to name their children as they always had. In archival records, therefore, names apparently continued to change from generation to generation.

To confuse matters, there were some Yanniuote Jews who inscribed their sons’ names in the municipal archives in the same way as they did when giving their sons their names at the *brit milah* (circumcision) (the father’s name, followed by the father’s father’s name, and then the name of the baby boy). Therefore, what should have been Matathias Kalchamiras (a nickname that became a surname), the son of Asser, was inscribed as Matathias Jessoula, the son of Asser (Jessoula was the grandfather of Matathia and the father of Asser).⁴ The child’s name was Matathia Kalchamiras but was transcribed as Matathias Jessoula.

Emigration and census records have aided in genealogical research, but they also reflect the naming idiosyncrasies

of Yanniuote Jews. The name of the father was of paramount importance, more so than the surnames the Yanniuote Jews had reluctantly assumed. When completing ship manifests, the information that would form the basis for entry at Ellis Island, the father’s name often would be entered in the space reserved for surname. To complicate matters, most Yanniuote Jews, up until 1913 when Ioannina became part of modern Greece and all residents of the city attended Greek public schools, wrote their Greek language with Hebrew letters and could not read written Greek. Verbal communication was necessary, therefore, and errors often appeared in documents requesting written Greek, including birth registrations and ship manifests.

These errors continued in the United States in census records. An example of this practice is noted in the records of Leon Joseph, who was listed on his emigration passenger manifest as Leon Joseph. He also was listed as Leon Joseph in the 1910 and 1930 U.S. censuses, but appeared as Leon Ezra in the 1920 U.S. census. (Ezra was Leon’s father’s name.) Burial society lists also offer a glimpse into the world of Greek-speaking Jews.⁵ The lists include many typographical errors; obviously, the scribe recorded the names by listening to them orally, but was not familiar with the names of Ioannina Jews. Curiously, the Brotherhood list from the United Brotherhood of Janina, the burial society, is alphabetized by first name!

Holocaust-era Data

The list of the Jews deported from Ioannina during the Holocaust also is a source of genealogical data. This list was used as a basis to list each victim’s name individually on the walls of the synagogue in Ioannina. Leon Cabillis, one of the compilers of the list, gave the information to us

for use in our memorial book. As painful as the list is to read, the information has proven to be the most accurate of all available documentary sources. Kehila Kedosha Janina shared the work from our memorial book, *In Memory of the Jewish Community of Ioannina*, published by Bloch Publishing for Kehila Kedosha Janina, New York 2004, with Yad Vashem. The book was used to, correct misinformation in its records caused by non-Hebrew speaking Greek Jews filling out the forms in Hebrew, not understanding what was requested of them, and thereby additionally complicating the emotional process of listing the names of murdered family members.⁶ The Holocaust records may be accessed through the museum's website <www.kkjism.com/> under the link, "Holocaust in Ioannina."

Many seeming discrepancies in source materials were discovered as museum staff and volunteers cross-referenced names for the genealogical database. Rabbi Bechoraki Matsil, who circumcised more than 600 Yanniot boys both in Greece and in New York after he emigrated in 1919, recorded all the names in a prayer book. Acquisition of the records helped resolve some of the discrepancies.

New resources, such as Ancestry.com and Geni (a family tree database), have helped to add data and to fine tune the genealogical database, but the main source of success has remained the same since the beginning of the 20th century—the fact that this community has always remained close, never losing its ties to the small Greek city from which it emigrated.

The community in New York was, and continues to be, spiritually centered around a little synagogue established in 1927 on Broome Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In addition to preserving the close connections, this was a community that was impassioned about who they were. A small minority within a minority, both in Greece and transplanted to the United States, they did not blend, they did not assimilate. They remained "different." The Yanniot Jews in New York passed down their love of who they are from generation to generation. In the final analysis, the role of genealogist was made relatively easy by the ability to connect with and interview community members. Family trees grew out of the interviews. Oral histories emerged. Additional connections were made and the oral tradition that all Yanniot Jews are somehow related to one another proved to be true.

Future Plans

Additional research now in progress will enable the Ioannina Jewish community in New York to have a clear picture of the Jewish community in Ioannina in 1900, before half the community of 4,000 left and then was decimated by the Holocaust. The archival records reveal the houses they lived in and the occupations they engaged in and, shortly, a block-by-block picture will be completed of the Jewish community of Ioannina at the turn of the century. In addition, work is under way on the early immigrants who came to the Lower East Side, where they lived and with whom

they stayed—in all likelihood, because of the makeup of the community family members. Individuals who work in historical preservation have a saying, "We all walk in someone else's footsteps. Make your footprints deep so someone else can walk in yours." Continued work and research will help to make our genealogical footprints deep, enabling future generations to have access to the precious information genealogists now gather.

Notes

1. Some sources date the Jewish presence back to the destruction of the Second Temple, but no substantiating documentation is any earlier than the eighth century of the Common Era.

2. The term Romaniote has come to describe Jews who date their ancestry back to the East Roman, i.e., the Byzantine Empire.

3. Ioannina was under Ottoman Turkish rule from 1430 to 1913.

4. Because of many duplicate names, nicknames became popular and many of these nicknames (*paratsoukli* in Greek) evolved into surnames. Kalchamira (Colchamiro in the United States) derives from the opening lines of the Kalchamira prayer said before the onset of Pesach when cleaning the house of *hametz* (food not eaten on Passover).

5. The United Brotherhood of Janina was formed in 1925/26 through an amalgamation of two brotherhoods that had been established earlier.

6. Eighty-seven percent of Greek Jewry died in the Holocaust; in the small city of Ioannina, the death rate was 91 percent.

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