

The Colchamiro Family

It all began with the marriage of Jesoula Colchamiro and Rachel Galanos in 1865 in a small city in northwestern Greece called Ioannina [Yanina, Janina]. Jesoula, like many other Jews in the city, was engaged in the textile business. He would buy and sell fabrics and, as legend has it, was so picky in selecting his merchandise that his family and friends said that it was as if he was meticulously clearing the house of hametz before Pessah and reciting the *kalchamira* prayer. This, “*kalchamira*”, would become his nickname and, as so often happened in Ioannina, this nickname would become the surname of his descendants. Jesoula and Rachel would sire eleven children [4 sons and 7 daughters], over 80 grandchildren and great-grandchildren too numerous to count. His descendants would have made him proud. The present generation of Colchamiro [as the name was transcribed in America] is composed of teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, writers, philanthropists, filmmakers, writers, engineers and architects. But, Jesoula and Rachel would have been most proud that over a century and a half later, their descendants have not forgotten their roots.

On March 18th, in the only remaining Romaniote synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, a synagogue founded in 1927 by Jews from Ioannina, among them Leon Colchamiro, one of the sons of Jesoula and Rachel, their descendants gathered to celebrate a special family, a family that in many ways displays the struggles and accomplishments of our community. Coming from a small city in Greece, not knowing the language, strangers in a strange land, not highly educated, they would work hard, help each other, educate their children and, most importantly, pass on the love of their distinct culture.

The Colchamiro Family, in many ways, is an example of the struggles our congregation incurred both in Greece before they left, and here in the United States, after they arrived. The Ioannina where Jesoula ben Matathias was born in 1840 would change drastically over the next 100 years. By the time he started his family in 1866, the Jewish Community of the city numbered close to 4000, warranting the building of a second synagogue outside the Kastro. But, by the end of the 19th century, the politic climate had changed and the area was in turmoil. The Balkans were in a flux and overnight changes of borders caused economic instability. These would be the factors [political and economic] that would cause the small Jewish Community of Ioannina to send half of its members into the Diaspora, most coming to the New York City area of the United States. The remaining Jews of Ioannina would number 1960 in 1940 but 91% would perish in the Holocaust. Among those lost would be grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Jesoula and Rachel.

The sons of Jesoula were engaged in all aspects of the textile trade but, as the community diminished in size, they realized that they would have to seek their fortunes elsewhere. The first to leave [1897] would be Leon [Judah]. He would return to Ioannina to marry and start his family before returning to New York. Leon would be instrumental in starting the Kehila of Yannote Jews [Kehila Kedosha Janina] and would serve as one of its early spiritual leaders. Leon would, also, be the one to welcome other members of the Colchamiro family as they arrived in the New World, greeting them at Ellis Island and helping them to get established.

The story of the Colchamiro is our story: the story of Greek-Jewish immigrants and their struggle to survive in a world where they were a tiny minority and often appeared ‘strange’ to their fellow Jews of both Ashkenazi and Sephardi background. It is a story of adaptation to the New World while remembering the values of the Old.

The Descendants of Jesoula and Rachel Galanos Colchamiro

Matathias [born in Ioannina in 1866] was the oldest child of Jesoula and Rachel and, as the oldest son, would have responsibilities in the family that would increase after the death of his father in 1905. These family responsibilities would delay his coming to the New World and he would not arrive until 1913. In fact, his two oldest children [Rachel, 15 at the time and Jess, 13] would arrive before him, traveling alone to the New World.



March 30, 1957:

Ben & Ray Barouch	Esther & Dave Politis	Leon & Beatrice Colchamiro Mazalto Colchamiro Kaplan Dave & Bertha Furawitz	Fanny (wife of Jess)	Florence & Gabriel Colchamiro	Jess Colchamiro
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Matathias had 7 children. He worked in selling yarns in Ioannina but joined his brother Leon in business ventures here in New York. Initially, the family would live on the Lower East Side [275 Broome] before moving to the Bronx.



Simcha [born in Ioannina in 1867] married Menachem Negrin in Ioannina and had 6 children, all born in Ioannina, before she was widowed in 1903. **Simcha** would come to New York with her sisters [Malka and Mazalto] in 1904 when a marriage had been arranged for Mazalto [Mollie]. She would settle with her family in the Bronx.

Mollie and Simcha Colchamiro Negrin 1912

Asser [born 1872 in Ioannina] would never make it to the New World. He would die of an infection caused by an appendicitis attack in 1919. Before leaving his wife Steroula as a widow with 7 young children, **Asser** had been working in Albania, struggling to provide dowries for his 7 sisters. Steroula would come to New York with her children and aging mother in 1920. Leon Colchamiro would be there to help her and the children find housing and substance. Steroula would live to be 90 and was an inspiration to her children and grandchildren.



Esther and Asser Colchamiro

Leon [Judah] was born in Ioannina in 1873. Leon married Julia Mazza in Ioannina. They would have 8 children. **Leon** would be the ‘pioneer’ the first of the Colchamiro family to arrive in the New World. He would come in 1897 and then return to Ioannina to marry, finally settling in New York in 1903. **Leon** was instrumental, not only in founding the synagogue on Broome Street but, also, in founding the Brotherhood [burial society] and Sisterhood. He was a dedicated son and brother, helping other members of the family to establish themselves in the New World. He would earn his income in the garment trade. Three of his grandsons [Leonard, Elliot and Jesse] sit on the Board of Kehila Kedosha Janina and Leonard Colchamiro was the architect for the restoration of the synagogue.



Leon Colchamiro and Family circa 1920s

Malka was born in Ioannina in 1874. She married Judah Ezra, a very religious man, in Ioannina and had 6 children, 5 born in Ioannina and the youngest, Menachem [Milton] born in the USA. According to Ellis Island records, the family came to New York in 1913. They would settle on Pike Street (#1) in Manhattan. Judah would work for the Ganis Brother's Manufacturing Co., a firm that is still in business (a cutting machine donated by the Ganis family is on display in our museum). Malka's



Malka Colchamiro

family was poor and the children would be forced to quit school to help with the finances. The family would later move to the Bronx and Malka would die of heart-related problems in 1933.



Dinoula, Ezra and Family

Dinoula [Dinah] was born in 1874 in Ioannina. She was the only child of Jesoula and Rachel not to immigrate to the New World. She married Ezra Bakola and died in 1931 after giving birth to her 9th child. Unfortunately, **Dinoula**'s branch of the family would be almost completely destroyed in the Holocaust. Only Max, **Dinoula**'s oldest son, who immigrated to the United States in 1914, his younger brother Sion [born in 1920] and his sister, Bimbo [born in 1909] survived the Holocaust. Sion was in the Resistance and Bimbo survived in hiding in Athens.



Esther Colchamiro Dalven and Israel Dalven

Esther was born in Ioannina in 1880 and married Israel Dalven of Preveza. Israel was 31 years older than Esther but did not require a dowry, a major deciding factor in the family arranging the marriage. One of Esther's daughters, Rae Dalven, would write the definitive history of the Jews of Ioannina. Israel Dalven would come to the United States in 1905 and Esther and the 2 children would join him in 1909. Seven other children would be born in New York.



Hanoula Colchamiro and her husband Isaac Cohen

Hanoula was born in Ioannina in 1881. According to family, Isaac Cohen, born in Kastoria, traveled over the mountains on a donkey, seeking a wife in Ioannina. He had heard about the beauty of Yanniot women. **Hanoula**, truly a beauty, would catch his eye. Isaac pursued her and forfeited his right to a dowry in order to marry her. This union would be the basis for another Kastoria/Ioannina match, as **Hanoula**'s younger sister [Refku] would marry Isaac's brother [Haim]. Another family legend describes how **Hanoula** was marked with chalk to return to Greece when she arrived at Ellis Island. It appeared that the examiner found an infection in her eyes and this was grounds for return. According to the story, when Isaac saw the chalk mark and realized what it meant, he put his arm around **Hanoula** and led her forward, rubbing off the chalk mark as they walked until it was no longer noticeable. **Hanoula** and Isaac would have 9 children.



*Mollie Colchamiro and
her husband David (Cartona)
Kaplan*

Mollie [Mazalto] was born in Ioannina in 1882. **Mollie** would come to the United States to marry David Kaplan [Cartona] in 1904. According to family legend, David had fallen love with **Mollie** when he saw her in a family photo. The marriage was arranged while **Mollie** was still living in Greece and David in New York. They would correspond but did not actually meet until **Mollie** came over for the wedding. They would have 9 children.

Elias was born in Ioannina in 1886 and would be only 17 years old when he arrived in New York. He would marry Nancy [Esperanza] Matza and have 9 children. **Elias** was an accomplished musician and loved to entertain on the bouzouki.



Elias and Family



*Refku Colchamiro Cohen and
Haim Cohen*

Refku was the youngest of Jesoula and Rachel's children, born in Ioannina in 1892. She would come to New York and, eventually, marry her sister Hanoula's brother, Haim Cohen, who was born in Kastoria. The family would return to Kastoria when Haim's illness required a change of climate. Of their 8 children, 3 were born in the United States and 5 were born in Greece. The family, except for their oldest son Jules, returned to the United States in 1935. Jules, fortunately, had a US passport and was able to leave in 1941.