

Jewish Greece:

by Yvette Nahmia-Messinas

Textiles belonging to Greek Jews

Tevet kai Shevat katse kamme rehat. Only a remnant of Greek Jews have survived who can fully understand this proverb. It contains three different languages spoken in the Mediterranean, and reflects the interwoven influences on the Greek Romaniote Jewish culture. Judaeo-Greek and Turkish idioms, expressions and proverbs colored the spoken language of the Jewish population in Romaniote communities such as Ioannina, where 1,870 Romaniotes lived on the eve of the Second World War. The life of these communities, which dates back to antiquity, as well as that of the numerous Sephardic and few Ashkenazic communities in Greece, is portrayed in the *Pinkas Hakehillot - Yavan, The Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities: Greece*, that has just been published by Yad Vashem.

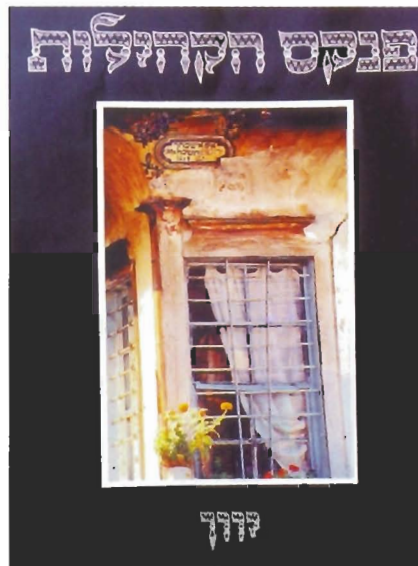
Tevet kai Shevat katse kamme rehat: In the months of *Tevet* and *Shevat* you should sit (*katse*) and rest (*kamme rehat*). *Tevet* and *Shevat*, two months in the Jewish lunar calendar, correspond to the months of January and February, months during which the northern city of Ioannina was covered with snow, its lake frozen. During the winter season, business was slow, and the city's residents could rest in the warmth and comfort

of their homes. In the winter of 1944 however, the Jews of Ioannina were under German occupation, and aware of the mass deportations of the Jews of Salonika a year earlier, could find no rest. On March 25, early on a Sabbath

A Voyage Through Time

morning, in the heavy snow, the Jews of Ioannina were taken to a concentration camp in Larissa, from where they were later transported in railroad cattle cars to their death in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

"Less than 50 Jews remain in the once thriving Jewish community of Ioannina. Their distinctive Judaeo-Greek language, songs, *piyyutin* (religious poetry), *minbag* (ritual) and customs have, with a few remaining traces, been destroyed with them," says Dr. Bracha Rivlin, Yad Vashem historian, editor and author of the *Pinkas Hakehillot - Yavan*. "Today Ioannina Jews live outside the *Kastro* (fortress) on the site of the former synagogue on Max Nordau street. After the Holocaust, this street was renamed Yossef Eliya, after the Ioannina-born Jewish poet and Talmudist. Eliya studied and taught at the Alliance school of the city," recalls Joya Aroyo, Ioannina-born Holocaust survivor now living in Tel Aviv. Only the synagogue *Kal Kadosh Yashan* inside the *Kastro* survived the war. The wooden seats, mostly empty even on the high holidays, and the 1,838 names carved on marble plaques hanging on the walls, give witness to the people's loss.



En este mundo sufrimos porque somos Jidios. En otro mundo sufriríamos porque no fuéramos buenos Jidios.

"In this world we suffer because we are

Jews. In the world to come we will suffer because we were not good Jews." Indeed, Salonika's Sephardic community suffered greatly because of its Jewishness. Only 1,950 Jews, out of a population of 56,000, survived the Holocaust.

David Howell, a Salonika-born Jew who left Greece before the war, and lives in Tel Aviv, recalls life in Salonika. "At home, we spoke French and Judaeo-Spanish (Ladino), my mother spoke no Greek. I went to the Alliance school and was a member of *HaKoah*, the Jewish boy scouts. I prayed at the Siniora Fakima Synagogue, formally known as Beit Shaul." The older generation of the 1,000-member Jewish community of the city-port of Salonika still speak Judaeo-Spanish. A few of the melodious *canticas* and *romances* (songs and ballads) have been adopted by Greek singers, but the majority can only be found in museum recordings.

The Jewish population of Salonika grew extensively under the rule of Sultan Beyazit II, who invited the Jews to the Ottoman empire, at the time of their expulsion from Spain and later Portugal. With the influx of 20,000 Sephardic Jews in 1492, culture and business blossomed, and a wealth of religious, social and educational services was established. In 1512, Don Yehuda Gedalia opened the first printing press in the city.

"Each Jewish community in Spain and Portugal transferred its microcosm to Salonika. Synagogues, carrying names such as Castile, Aragon, Catalonia, Lisbon, Gerush Sefarad and Portugal, served as centers of communal life along with the school, Talmud Torah, Beit Din, hospital, charity center and burial society," says Dr. Bracha Rivlin who, together with the Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate Avner Shalev, attended the unveiling of the Holocaust monument in Salonika in November 1997.

Today there are no more than 5,000 Jews living in Greece and a few remaining Jewish sites to tell the story of the community. The *Pinkas Hakehillot - Yavan* takes the reader on a voyage through time, recounting the history of the Greek Jewish communities from antiquity until the present. With more than 70 entries of Jewish communities in Greece, an appendix on Albania, and maps and period photographs, the *Pinkas* illustrates the rich life that once was and is no more. The *Pinkasei Hakehillot* project, supported by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture and its Executive Vice-President, Dr. Jerry Hochbaum, is one of Yad Vashem's most important projects commemorating the Holocaust.