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K. E. Fleming: Greece--a Jewish History

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

ON OCTOBER 26, 1914, Thomas Donnelly, justice of the Supreme Court of the State of New York, signed off on docket #4979–1914 C, legally certifying the incorporation of the “Jewish Community of Janina, Inc.” A parenthetical note explained the name to the court: “(Janina [is] the name of a town in Greece).” What was being incorporated was a “Greek Jewish group.” These notes were deceptively simple. For Janina (Jannina) had only been part of Greece for one year, and the idea of a “Greek Jew” was all but nonexistent—at least in Greece.

In 1914, Jannina was home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in Europe: the so-called Romaniotes, the indigenous, Greek-speaking Jews who had first settled in the south Balkans in the first centuries C.E. At the same time, it was one of Greece’s newest towns: just one year before, in 1913, the town, along with most of what today is northern Greece, had been taken from the Ottoman Empire by Greek forces in the second Balkan War. This “town in Greece,” like many others, had spent the previous five hundred years as part of the Ottoman Empire.

Hundreds of thousands of the region’s inhabitants, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim alike, were profoundly affected by the transition. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw massive migration from the Ottoman borderlands to the United States. Between 1873 and 1924, almost 550,000 Greeks from the Ottoman Empire and Greece arrived in America.¹ With them were many Jews, both Greek-speaking Romaniotes from around the south Balkan mainland and Sephardim from the city of Salonika—the descendants of the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula starting in the late fifteenth century. Between 1895 and 1906, up to 30 percent of the total population of the northwestern Greek district of Epirus, of which Jannina was the seat, emigrated.² The Jewish Community of Janina, Inc. was made up of recent émigrés who were part of this mass movement.

The corporation’s nine original directors had come together to create a social and religious home for the burgeoning new Romaniote community of New York’s Lower East Side.³ All recent immigrants, six members of the board were naturalized U.S. citizens while the remaining third were Greek nationals. The new corporation had as its goal “to unite the Jews of Janina for the promotion of their welfare, physically, morally, and intel-

lectually,” and to “aid and assist them financially and morally; to cultivate and foster social intercourse among the members and in general to ameliorate their condition.”⁴

The founding of the Jewish Community of Janina, Inc. signaled a significant Greek Jewish presence on lower Manhattan—one that grew in the wake of the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and during the interwar period, when there was another, smaller wave of emigration. Of the roughly six thousand Jews living in Jannina at the turn of the century, more than half had departed by 1930, most to the United States.⁵

By the mid-1920s, when America’s new “closed door” immigration policy took effect, slowing the growth of the New York Jannina community, affiliate organizations—a burial society and a benevolent foundation—had been established; money was being raised to build a permanent home for the Janniote congregation. By 1926, the burial society (the United Brotherhood of Janina, which resulted that year from the merger of various other organizations) had 250 members, and total holdings valued at just over \$12,000. Annual dues averaged \$6.60.⁶ A constitution was drawn up, officers elected, and fees set according to age. The next year a permanent synagogue, the Kehila Kedosha Janina (holy community of Jannina), was founded. Services were packed. The New York community was so large that the Janina Brotherhood had a Harlem Division and a Downtown Division, each presided over by its own rabbi.⁷

The Kehila Kedosha Janina, at 280 Broome Street on lower Manhattan, was the social and spiritual hub for the thriving group of new Greek Jewish immigrants. While Janniotes made up the congregation’s core, the synagogue drew congregants from all over Greece. Over time, in a nice ironic reversal of the conditions that had prevailed for centuries in the south Balkans, Ladino-speaking Sephardim—who in Greece had dominated Romaniotes in number—were incorporated into the group, which to this day follows the Greek/Judeo *minhag* (customary practice). As in Greece, in New York the Romaniote rabbinic establishment interacted with various Sephardic congregations. Close ties were maintained with the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue at 133 Eldridge Street, for instance; while the Eldridge Street synagogue had a Hebrew school, the Kehila Kedosha Janina did not, so young New York Romaniotes training for Bar Mitzvah would study with the Sephardim.

In early June 1935, a young man from the Jannina community was Bar Mitzvahed at the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue. “It was a very memorable day for me, my family and friends.” The celebration lasted for two days; the following weekend when the young man was called up to the Torah back at the Jannina synagogue another party followed.⁸ The young man was Hyman Genee, who until his death in early spring 2006 was the president of the Kehila Kedosha Janina. Well into his eighties, Genee ran



Fig. 1.1. Left, Hyman Genee, 2001, New York City; right, Hyman Genee at his Bar Mitzvah, 1935, New York City. Permission Kehila Kedosha Janina, New York.

the synagogue, served as the reader, and generally kept the congregation in line—it no longer has a rabbi (the community’s last rabbi passed away in 2000), and conducts its own services. “You have to make the effort to be here on time,” he would reprimand the congregants. Punctuality is not simply a matter of etiquette but also necessity. Nowadays, it can be difficult to gather the ten-man minyan, or quorum, required for services to begin.⁹ Those who’ve arrived on time can sit around for hours waiting for the latecomers before they’re able to start. Sometimes extreme measures are taken; if nine men have arrived, and a tenth doesn’t seem forthcoming, the congregation may open the curtain covering the Torah scrolls (*heikhal*) and let the scrolls serve as the tenth man. One morning as the minutes ticked by, Hy joked that he was going to go grab someone off the street, “circumcise him on the spot,” and have him complete the minyan.

In keeping with patterns on the Lower East Side as a whole, as its Greek Jewish immigrants became established in the United States and accumulated wealth, they moved from Manhattan to the outlying boroughs, New Jersey, and Long Island.¹⁰ After the boom of the 1920s and 1930s, and slight growth as Holocaust survivors came in the late 1940s and early

1950s, the number of congregants began a steady decline, while affiliated organizations that drew together the increasingly far-flung Greek Jewish population in the United States grew. Now known as the United Brotherhood/Good Hope Society of Janina, it has over eleven hundred members.¹¹ It is the key organization in the States via which the descendants of Greek Jews can express and propagate their identity. The Sisterhood of Janina, Inc., the women's branch founded in 1932, is active in charitable work and has over three hundred members from across the country. The Kehila's actual congregation, however, has all but disappeared.

Today, 280 Broome Street is an unassuming building sandwiched between Chinese food warehouses; the formerly Jewish neighborhood is now overwhelmingly Cantonese. Recently renovated, the synagogue's clean rusty pink facade stands out on a block of dingy tenements and storefronts. The space inside is long and narrow, running north-south, configured with the central reader's platform (bimah) facing north toward the heikhal. (Romaniote synagogues are usually laid east-west, with the heikhal on the eastern wall and the bimah on the western one.)¹² But the Janina congregation's tiny lot size and its orientation led to the Kehila's unusual layout, which is more in keeping with traditional Sephardic synagogues. Upstairs is the women's section (ezrat nashim); the women who sit there today regularly shout down at the reader to speak up, or to add pieces of news they'd like included in the week's announcements. The news reports are not, for the most part, upbeat: word of elderly former congregants who have died or suffered illness, and news of perennial vandalism of Jewish sites in Jannina, back in Greece, feature prominently. Downstairs in the basement is a modest kitchen and a common area where a blessing of bread and wine (kiddush) is held after services. Until the recent renovations, the room's walls were plastered with tourist posters of Greece and Israel; kiddush regularly includes grape juice, shots of ouzo, spanakopita (traditional Greek spinach pie), kalamata olives, hard-boiled eggs, and feta cheese. Bagels or bialys with cream cheese and salmon are a frequent supplement.

In decor and gustatory tastes, as in their self-identification, the Kehila's congregants are at once fully Greek and fully Jewish, and their immigrant culture is interwoven with both Greek and Jewish organizations. The synagogue has sponsored Greek language classes, trips to Greece, and *kafeneion* evenings designed to replicate the social ambiance of the traditional Greek coffeehouse. Tributes included in the Kehila's seventy-fifth-anniversary commemorative volume are full of Greek turns of phrase: "Yásson [Hello] to all" and "*s'agapó*" (I love you); a beloved deceased relative is remembered with the Greek term for grandfather as "a great *Papoo*."¹³ As is the case for other diaspora émigré groups, the Greeks of the Janina

synagogue are particularly pointed about the expression of their national origins. Some, like Genee, were born in the United States, to parents who came to the States before Jannina became part of Greece in 1913. Others were born in Greece, survived the Holocaust in hiding, and came to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s.

Ilias Hadjis, for example, was born in Athens in 1937, and spent the occupation hiding in the Pilion Mountains and Athens. Koula Cohen Kofinas, born in Larissa in 1938, spent the war posing as a Christian. “I used to go to church and light a candle. First because we didn’t have a place to thank God. And second, we didn’t want to give [those around us] any reason to think of us as different.”¹⁴ Almost twenty years later, she came to the United States. Her husband, Sol Kofinas, who now directs the museum run out of the Broome Street synagogue, spent the occupation hiding in a woodshed with his brother. His father was among those infamously locked in the Athens Melidoni Street synagogue by the Nazis just before Passover in 1944; his mother had fled with the two boys, but was caught by German guards when she sneaked back to the family’s house to get some diapers and clothing.¹⁵ Kofinas left Greece in the 1950s. The congregation also includes many Sephardim of Salonikan origin (there was a merger with a Sephardic synagogue in the 1970s), but resolutely sticks to the Romaniote liturgy and insists at all times that it is Greek. When a would-be congregant phoned the synagogue and asked, “You’re not Ashkenazic, right? You’re Sephardic?” he received the somewhat brusque reply, “No, we’re Romaniote.”¹⁶

The congregation’s sense of Greekness is fostered by its diasporic, immigrant identity and U.S. context. While in Greece, Jews like Kofinas had a complicated national identity—there was in many settings a vague sense of “us” (Greeks) and “them” (Jews).¹⁷ “Greek Jew” was not an established category. In the United States, and particularly New York City, the Greek immigrant as a category is well-known. The religiously pluralistic surrounding environment doesn’t necessarily expect Greeks to be of one religion or another, and Greek Jews in this country more easily inhabit both “halves” of their identity than they did in Greece. Here, their Greekness is not challenged but rather taken as a matter of fact. Meanwhile, Greek Jews back in Greece still struggle today to assert their legitimacy as Greeks. They are often suspected of having divided loyalties between Greece and Israel, or are told that Greekness and Orthodox Christianity are coterminous. The New York context, however, which is far more used to Jews (and far less critical of Israel), more easily embraces the idea of multiple, overlapping identities, such that the members of the Kehila Kedosha Janina are woven into the fabric of an immigrant narrative that has fostered Greek Jewish identity for more than a century.

GREEK JEWS

Hy and his fellow congregants, Romaniote and Sephardic, while now unified by the smallness of their congregation, their shared status as first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants, and their adoption of a unifying national term—Greek Jews—by which to identify themselves, are actually of astonishingly diverse origin. The congregants' distant roots are in a swath of territory reaching from Portugal and Spain, to the northern Balkans, to Alexandria, Egypt. Until the twentieth century, there was no such thing as a Greek Jew. Nor was there a definitive Greece; the country's boundaries were not fixed until after the Second World War. After the Greek War of Independence (1821–33), Greece consisted of small portions of the mainland (see figure 3.1, chapter 3). Over the course of the nineteenth century it grew until, by the end of World War I, it had doubled in size. Finally, after World War II the Dodecanese Islands, of which Rhodes is the largest, were ceded to Greece. Only retroactively have the Jews from these places come to be regarded as a nationalized collective, as Greek Jews. Indeed, Rhodes is a case in point; while at the time of the Nazi deportations from the island Rhodes was actually Italian, its destroyed Jewish community is now classified by Yad Vashem (Israel's official Holocaust “Remembrance Authority”) as part of Greek Jewry—an *ex post facto* classification based on the fact that Rhodes today is part of Greece, and one that says little, if anything, about its Jewish community's own identity.¹⁸

This awkward category and the communities to which it refers—some of which considered themselves Greek, and some of which did not—reflects the complicated path minority groups negotiated in the transition from a world of empires to one of nation-states. The Jews who today are collectively called Greek—in Israel, the United States, and other places in the diaspora as well as in Greece—are described by a term that would have been meaningless to their ancestors. With the exception of some (largely Romaniote) communities (notably, in Athens and Jannina) in the last decades of the nineteenth century through World War II, the designator would have been met with puzzlement. Salonika, home to sixty thousand Jews before the Holocaust, became part of Greece only in 1912. The Judeo-Greek culture that began to emerge there in the 1920s and 1930s was arguably as much a reflection of assimilation as it was of a new, distinctly Jewish, Greek identity, and was in any case tragically short-lived. Jews from Rhodes were *Rodeslis*, a Turkish word that simply means “from Rhodes.” While Rhodes is now included in Yad Vashem's list of destroyed Greek communities, it was not part of Greece until 1947, by which time almost all of its Jews had either left or been murdered by



Fig. 1.2. Hacham Ezra, rabbi of the Kehila Kadosha Janina, 1880s–1925, New York. Permission Kehila Kadosha Janina, New York.

the Nazis. Many Jews from the Island of Corfu—which joined Greece in 1864—historically called themselves Italian or Apulian; those who called themselves Greek (*Griega*) did so in reference only to the language they spoke (and in a typical early modern Mediterranean cultural *mélange*, used an Italian term to designate their Greekness).

Greek Jews, a unified, nationalized category, emerged out of multiple and fragmented communities, and fully gained purchase, paradoxically, only once more than 90 percent of all Jews actually living in Greece had ceased to exist. The first *topoi* in which a distinct Greek Jewish identity fully emerged were, like Broome Street’s Kehila Kedosha Janina, outside of Greece. It was in Auschwitz and afterward in Palestine/Israel—settings characterized, like New York’s Lower East Side, by mass heterogenous Jewish populations—that Jews from Greece came to be defined as a nationalized group, as Greek Jews. One of this book’s primary interests is in this phenomenon of what might best be termed “extranational nationalization”—the striking dynamic by which a formerly imperial group of peoples were converted, largely in settings beyond Greece’s borders, into a single nationalized people. It is a process that was driven initially by the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Greek nation-state, but was completed with the Holocaust and the foundation of the state of Israel.

ROMANIOTES AND SEPHARDIM

Roughly speaking, Greek Jews fall into two broad categories: Romaniotes and Sephardim. The older but by far smaller are the Romaniotes, or *Niótes*, as some colloquially refer to themselves.¹⁹ Many Romaniotes believe that their origins are in the Jewish migrations from Palestine that came in the wake of the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple by the Romans in A.D. 70. Some Romaniote communities, most notably in Jannina, in the northwest province Epirus, claim that their ancestors arrived sometime between the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (586 B.C.E.) and the early Roman period. Didimoticho, Serres, Salonika, Verroia, Jannina, the Peloponnese, Halkis, and many of the Greek islands were (and in some cases still are) home to Romaniote communities, all of which—despite their communal origin myths—are properly regarded as indigenous to the region.

Romaniote Jews are literally “Roman Jews.” Just as most Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians referred to themselves as late as the early nineteenth century as *Romiós* (“Roman”), in reference to their Roman (i.e., early Byzantine) origins, so did Jews of the region. The map of southeastern Europe is dotted with places named “Rumeli” and variants for the same reason; Romania is the most obvious example. In their very name,

the Romaniote Jews show their cultural commonality and shared historical origins with a variety of peoples, across a large swath of territory, who trace their origins in Greek lands to the first centuries of the Common Era. The term Romaniote, then, is fairly generic. In the Greek Jewish context, it has evolved in meaning since the sixteenth century to designate non-Sephardic, “native” Jews.

Romaniote Jews were indigenous, in contrast to the Sephardim, whose name—like the Romaniotes’—denotes their place and culture of origin: *Sefarad*, the Iberian Peninsula. Following the Catholic expulsions of Jews from Spain, Portugal, France, and Italy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, waves of Sephardim fled east to Ottoman territories. Sultan Bayezit II (1481–1512), eager to restore economic and social balance to the empire in the wake of the successful but draining conquests of his predecessor, Mehmet II, who had consolidated Ottoman rule over the Balkan Peninsula, issued a decree welcoming the Sephardim to Ottoman lands. There they overcame the Romaniotes, emerging as culturally and economically dominant by the end of the seventeenth century. As early as 1509 a Salonikan Sephardic rabbi boasted, “It is well-known that Sephardic Jews . . . in this kingdom . . . [now] comprise the majority here, may the Lord be praised.”²⁰ A few Romaniote communities retained their distinctive “Roman” character, but none was unaffected by the arrival of the Sephardim.

Salonika became the world capital of Ladino rabbinic literary culture.²¹ Ladino was its first language until the city underwent rapid Hellenization in the 1920s. For centuries the city was the region’s economic center. Sephardic Jews settled in other Greek regions as well. Rhodes, the largest of the Dodecanese islands off Greece’s southeastern coast, was a Sephardic center, and small pockets of Sephardim, most engaged in trade, settled throughout the region that today comprises Greece. Many formerly Romaniote communities were replaced with or absorbed by Sephardim.

Smaller numbers of Ashkenazim—central and east European Jews—had also lived on the Balkan Peninsula since the 1400s, when they were ejected from the Kingdom of Bavaria.²² Cretan rabbinic documents of the early sixteenth century indicate that there were Ashkenazim on the island at that time.²³ Hungarian-speaking Jews settled in Kavála around the same period. Smaller groups included Sicilian and Italian Jews—also referred to in Cretan documents of the early modern era—as well as Jews from Provence and other southern French regions.²⁴ At first they followed their own liturgy and customs, but like the Romaniotes, were generally gradually assimilated into Sephardic practice as Iberian Jews established their cultural and economy hegemony over the region.

Greek Jews are not a monolithic group, but rather represent a set of cultures that has been a long-standing presence within Greek lands—in

some cases, since before their Christianization.²⁵ In all places but Salonika, Jewish communities were a minority, and usually a tiny one. Some lived in a largely Catholic environment, as on Corfu. Others, as on Venetian Crete, negotiated a Christian environment divided between Catholic and Orthodox Christians, and Muslims. In the Peloponnese, Jews lived in a uniformly Orthodox environment. Some Jews spoke Greek; others used Italian or Ladino. In urban areas, Jewish communities were an integral and central part of economic and mercantile life. In other places, such as early nineteenth-century Athens, only a handful of Jews could be found—largely itinerant traders who temporarily set up business far from home.

In all cases, the size, quality, and vibrancy of Jewish communal life were shaped by political events to both the west and the east, and particularly by the waves of immigration they provoked. One of the characteristic features of Balkan culture generally, arguably experienced most acutely by its Jewish populations, is the profound influence of its location between east and west.²⁶ From 1500 on, large numbers of Jews from Portugal, Spain, Italy, and southern France made their way eastward to Ottoman territory. Ashkenazic Jews, too, in smaller number, found their way east and south in the wake of pogroms. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire underwent rapid westward expansion. Jewish communities exchanged Catholic and Orthodox rulers for Muslim ones. For the most part, Jewish communities benefited from this change. Centuries later, they were caught between the crosscurrents of western European nationalism and Ottoman “decline.” Over centuries Jewish communities, along with other local cultures, were shaped by converging developments to the east and the west.

WHY STUDY GREEK JEWS?

Until recent decades, little scholarly attention was paid to Greek Jews. Jewish studies has long focused largely on Ashkenazim, while Greek histories typically don't include a treatment of Jews—although in recent years this has begun to change, with a number of superb Greek books coming out on specific dimensions of Greek Jewish life as well as important collections of Greek Jewish testimonies. Survey literature has been sparse, with the exception of an excellent French survey of Jewish-Orthodox relations in the modern period, Bernard Pierron's *Juifs et chrétiens de la Grèce moderne*, published in 1996, and shorter essay-style surveys such as Nicholas Stavroulakis's *The Jews of Greece*, first published in 1990.²⁷ Very little indeed has been written on contemporary Greek Jewry; both Pierron and Stavroulakis stop with the arrival of the

Germans in the 1940s, as do most other works—for a tragically obvious reason. Within Greece itself, this book goes only a bit further in time—to the late 1940s and 1950s, which saw a new host of problems confront Greek Jews, and when a large percentage of survivors emigrated to Palestine/Israel. I make only passing reference to today's Greek Jews, who, between five and six thousand in number, have labored hard to re-create a meaningful communal life in nine of Greece's traditional Jewish communities.²⁸ Present-day Greek Jewish life is worthy of a scholarly treatment of its own. In both spatial and conceptual scope, however, this book attempts to be more comprehensive than previous works, following Greek Jews as they were deported to Auschwitz and other camps, and as they emigrated to the United States and Palestine/Israel, tracing the development of the Greek Jew as a category in these diasporic settings.

Since the 1980s, Sephardic history generally has received growing attention, mainly because of developments in Jewish studies and Ottoman social and economic history. For the most part, though, these studies look at Balkan Jewish communities largely in isolation, without acknowledging the multicultural and multireligious environment in which they lived—much less its influence on them. This increased interest in the region's Jews also hasn't spilled over to the Romaniotes, whose tiny numbers, cultural obscurity, and eclipse by the Sephardim during the early modern period have often kept them beneath the radar of scholarly investigation.

Interest in Ottoman "multiculturalism," and specifically in the city of Salonika, has recently become intense. It stems in part from a pervasive academic nostalgia for a time when people ostensibly thought differently about religious difference. The collapse of Yugoslavia, the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, and more recently, the simplistic depiction of the world as divided between a "civilized" Judeo-Christian West and "dangerous" Muslim East have fostered interest in a historical moment when Jews, Christians, and Muslims cohabited (it is imagined) with relatively little conflict.

This vision, of course, is romanticized, and downplays the extent to which religious hierarchy and prejudice colored social conditions. But the efflorescence of interest in the late imperial multicultural moment is an important development in the context of a scholarly tradition that inadequately addresses "minority" populations, and in a Western cultural environment that smugly imagines itself to be the first historical instance ever of diversity and tolerance, and too easily glosses over its own prejudices. It is a self-congratulatory tendency to think of multiculturalism as a distinctly modern invention. Yet many of the conflicts routinely termed "age-old" are, in fact, quite young. That groups of people should be categorized and defined along religious lines is an ancient concept; that specific chunks

of land and entire nations should be is largely a much newer one. The emergence of the Greek Jew as a category provides one example of the anomalous results of this rapid and dramatic transformation.

In deciding on a title for this book, it was difficult to encapsulate the complexity of this category, or avoid eliding that complexity altogether. It was impossible to avoid teleology. Greece, after all, has only existed for a few short centuries, and Greek Jews, even on a strictly cultural level, haven't existed as such for much longer than a hundred years. This book's primary emphasis is on the modern period, although I attempt to provide a partial history of several of the south Balkan Jewish communities that ultimately made up modernity's Greek Jews, setting these histories in the broader context of Mediterranean history, Ottoman rise and decline, the rise of nationalism, the growth of Zionism, and the internationalization and secularization of Judaism. Its primary backdrop is the hundred-year period during which the Ottoman Empire and Greece existed side by side, during which the region's Jews and Christians alike felt themselves to belong to polities that spanned the two.

The uneven, drawn-out transition from empire to nation, and Greece's century-long period of territorial expansion, resulted in a belated nationalization of Greece's Jews—a nationalization that became complete only with their departure from Greece. It is not by accident that fully half of the history recounted in this book is set outside of Greece: in the concentration camps of the Nazis, and the Greek Jewish diasporas of Israel and New York's Lower East Side. In these settings, communities that for centuries developed identities that varied in their embrace or rejection of Greekness were cast as clearly and uncomplicatedly Greek. This book seeks to show how this is so, tracing the many strands that lead to modernity's paradoxical and largely diasporic Greek Jew, and such groups as the Kehila Kedosha Janina today.

The result has turned out to be a history of Greece, or Greekness, from a different angle. This book presents a history of a group of peoples, but even more, it strives to present a "Jewish history" of both a place and an ideal: Greece. The idea of a Jewish history of Greece will doubtless be an annoying one in some quarters—both those that define Jewish history in academically territorial terms and those that define Greece as something decidedly other than Jewish. But the history of the Ottoman borderlands—like those of various Jewish groups themselves—is nothing if not the history of overlapping categories, national threads, and peoples. It is a history that will be better understood if we are willing to broaden our definitions.