

Στις 9.11.2019 δημοσιεύτηκε στην Jerusalem Post το παρακάτω άρθρο του Ηλία Μεσσίνα για την εβραϊκή κοινότητα της Άρτας με τίτλο «The Jewish Community of Arta, Greece: Fables, memories and the Holocaust".

«The Jewish history of Greece dates back to antiquity. Cities like Salonika (Thessaloniki), Veroia and Corinth, were among the cities visited by St. Paul the Apostle, during the first century BCE. St. Paul prayed and preached in their synagogues. Today, most people associate the history of Romaniote Jewry – the Jews that lived in Greece since antiquity, long before the arrival of the Sephardim after the 15th century – with Ioannina, a fortress city in western Greece. But in fact, the Romaniote story most probably started earlier, further to the south, in the city of Arta.

Ancient Arta, called Ambracia, was established in 625 BCE. It is famous for the medieval bridge over the Arachthos River, which was reconstructed by King Pyros I, circa the third century BCE, and completed in its present form in the early 1600s. Arta, a city of fables, has a story for every important site. For example, the legend for the bridge wants the architect who built it having to sacrifice his wife in order to stabilize this magnificent and ambitious stone-built structure with arches, giving it mythical proportions. But it is not the only one.

The church of Panagia Parigoritisa (Panagia of Consolation) is another legendary monument. Built in the 13th century by the Despot of Epirus, Nikephoros I Komnenos Doukas, its interior is a surprise for an architect who may not have seen anything like it in the books of Byzantine Architecture. The legend has it that during construction, the architect had to travel to Constantinople, leaving his head craftsman (kalfas in the traditional builders" vocabulary) to continue construction. Upon return, finding the design modified, and greatly improved, he became jealous. So he decided to get rid of his rival. Leading him up to the top of the scaffolding, he pushed him to his death. But the craftsman grabbed him, and so both men fell to their death.

Two red stones in the back yard of the church represent the incident: a larger one for the architect and a smaller one for the craftsman. The legend concludes with Panagia (All-Holy in Greek, Mother of Jesus) visiting the mother of the craftsman to console her for the unjust death of her son, thus giving the name to the church Parigoritisa (consoling).

It is at this church that I met Theocharis Vadivoulis, an Artinos – a local of Arta, lawyer and dedicated researcher of the history of the Jewish community of the city. Some readers may have been unknowingly served by him, from his research in the

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archives of Arta, Preveza, Ioannina and other cities. Speaking to Theocharis is like reading a book, or better, hearing a fable on the roots and family trees of Arta Jews.

While touring the Jewish quarter and Skoufa Street, the main commercial street of Arta, the houses start to become alive. “This was the house of the Mizan family. There were two brothers, Samuel and Jacko. Their sister Elvira married, while their other sister Mathildi died after liberation on the train to Greece. This one belongs to Jacko, also a Holocaust survivor. He lives in Athens and has two children, Zozef and Anna. This one was of the Iochanas family.” Each house has its identity, and each family a story. Stories of people long lost in the Holocaust or long emigrated to Athens or abroad.

AT A BIG square he stopped. “In this corner, there was a movie theater, Orpheus,” Theocharis told me. “This is where Jews were locked in the basement on March 24, 1944. First, they were joined by the Jews deported from Preveza, to the southwest, and then were loaded on trucks, and transported through Agrinion and Patras to Athens. From Athens they were transported by trains to Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp, were they arrived on April 11, 1944. There, most of them lost their lives upon arrival”.

The Arta Jewish community was officially established in 1920, but its roots go back to antiquity. The first mention of a Jewish community in Arta of about 100 families was in 1173 by Rabbi Benjamin ben Yonah. It is believed that Jewish settlement near the coast of Epirus and the city of Nicopolis, dates back to the third century CE. It is therefore believed to be the oldest Jewish community in western Greece.

It is from here that apparently Jews moved north to Ioannina and other locations to establish new Romatiote communities. The Greca synagogue was established around the 13th century. In the 16th century, Jewish settlement reached its peak, with about 2000 people, after Jews expelled from Apulia and Calabria in Italy in the 15th century, moved to the area. They established Pulieza synagogue. This and Greca, were two out of several synagogues in the city at the time.

By 1940, the community numbered about 400 people, praying in these two synagogues. The bombing of April 21, 1941, damaged Greca, and with it destroyed the important 16th century library of Benjamin Zeev Ben Matathias, former judge of the Beth Din of Arta. In the Holocaust, 324 Jews were deported from the city. Some 84% were annihilated. The community restructured after WWII with about 60 members, who soon emigrated to Israel, USA and Athens. It was finally dissolved in 1959.

The highlight of the visit was when Theocharis took me to the Jewish quarter. We walked the streets reconstructed with new concrete buildings. Nothing reminded of how the quarter looked like before WWII. “Very few houses have survived. You can see the house of Nissim Mionis. Its original stone wall still visible in the ground floor. The house next to it belonged to Fortuni, daughter of Bessos and Telenia Sabas, who got married to Salom Semos from Preveza in 1940,” my guide informs me.

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Then we stopped at a restored two-story neoclassical house with a private garden. "This belonged to Moisis Hatzis family. It hides several secrets. One is a gate in the fence. It leads to a narrow path. On the other side of the path is the house of Solomon Hatzis, Moisis's brother," Theocharis said and stopped at a neighbor to get a key.

"What for?" I asked.

"Wait and you will see he answered. He opened the door between the two Hatzis's houses and walked into a narrow passage. To the left, the opening from the Moisis Hatzis house. To the right, a stone wall with a projecting fountain.

"This," he said, "is the remaining wall of the Pulieza synagogue!"

I FROZE in my place looking at the stone wall. The projecting round stone fountain incorporated into the wall, served both the synagogue courtyard and the narrow passage. This synagogue, after WWII, was the oldest standing synagogue in Greece. Yet, once the community was dissolved, the land of the synagogue was divided into three plots, each sold separately and the synagogue was demolished.

The ruins of the Greca synagogue stood until the late 1950s. Theocharis remembers the date palm tree – now removed – which stood until recently, belonging to the courtyard of the synagogue. The palm tree provided the lulav, one of the four species of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles. Greca synagogue was demolished and the site turned into a park. Opposite the site, on the foot of the medieval castle, a Holocaust memorial was erected in 2004.

Theocharis is representative of the new generation of non-Jewish Greeks who have a real interest in their city's Jewish history. Through their personal and professional ties, they have been exposed to the last remaining Jews living in the city, and from their own research they have learned more – perhaps much more – than the descendants of these communities may know.

"I often get a request to find a birth certificate for someone who claims to be born in Patras. I do my research and I discover that, as a matter of fact, they were born here, in Arta. Often they are astounded by the realization." People like Theocharis feel the need to preserve and present this history to their fellow citizens and to the world at large. For Arta, he is trying to get the city officials to establish a Jewish museum or a point of reference, for those visiting the city looking for their Jewish roots.

"It could exhibit, among others, the collection of Alef, Ketubbot and historic photographs in the archive of the Skoufas Association. Established in 1896, it is one of the oldest in Greece, with several Arta Jews among its members," he says. "But, the cost to purchase and restore a historic building is high and the city is unable to undertake it," he adds. "We really need support from the outside."

I was curious by his dedication to preserve Jewish history in Arta with such passion. I

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asked him why. “My grand-mother was a very difficult person. She never told stories. She never liked fables. It felt to me that she was disassociated from people keeping her feelings to herself. However, there was one thing that she kept telling me about, almost like a fable, bursting in tears. The painful memory of losing her Jewish friends, and their deserted homes after their deportation: the deserted streets in the Jewish quarter, the silence, the open windows swaying in the wind, the closed shutters, the emptiness,” he recalled. “Their loss was unbearable.”

Theocharis Vadivoulis is scheduled to lecture on the Jews of Arta at the Salonika and Greece Jewry Heritage Center at the Leon Recanati Old Age Home in Petah Tikva on Friday, November 8, at 10 a.m. Participation requires registration and entrance fee.

The writer, an architect and an immigrant to Israel from Greece, has published two books on the synagogues of Greece, and oversaw the recent restoration of the synagogues in Salonika and Trikala, and with Yvette Nahmia Messinas, initiated the preservation of the ancient mosaic of the synagogue of Aegina, Greece.

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