

LOS MUESTROS

Our major concern at The Sephardic Home For the Aged is our residents. This column will be the first of a series of columns dealing with the people we care most about: their history, their culture, their roots and their traditions. The subject matter will vary. We welcome input and contributions from our readers.

KASTORIA

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NESTLED ON THE SHORES OF LAKE KASTORIA, surrounded by the mountains of Northern Greece, so very Greek Christian in appearance, it is hard to believe that this isolated hamlet was once on the crossroads of trade and the home to a close knit, traditional Jewish Community. Jews began to settle in Kastoria, attracted by the robust commercial life of the city, as early as the 10th century. They lived alongside the Byzantines, the Ottoman Turks and the Modern Greeks, only to be annihilated by the Holocaust. Their names (Elias, Russo, Camhi, Zacharia) are proudly carried by some of the most influential members of the American Sephardic community and residents, both past and present, of the Sephardic Home For the Aged.



The homes were simple two or three story structures. The ground floor, due to the sloping terrain, tended to be relatively small, and was used for storage (grains, wines) and to hide the family's few valuables in case of fire or robbers. Very often, because of the slope of the land, the second floor was on street level. This is where the family lived during the winter, moving to the more ventilated top third floor in the summer. The homes were simply furnished. The main room was used as a living area by day and sleeping quarters by night: no beds; only straw mattresses that doubled as couches during the day, no cupboards; only shelves to hold food-stuffs and nails to hold utensils. A piece of wood, with "Mizraki" (east) elaborately carved in its center, would be placed on the eastern wall, to indicate the direction of prayer.

Jewish homes were indistinguishable from Christian homes, except for the mezuzah on the outer doorways, blue strips painted under the eaves (to remind them of the sky, a source of hope) and the lack of chimneys: Jews preferred portable braziers to heat their homes. As the families grew, young grooms bring their wives to live with them, additions would be built and, eventually, the elderly parents would be housed in one of these additions, as the eldest son took over the responsibilities of the extended family. Property borders were usually ignored as



Rabbi Isaac Menachen Zacharia, Chief Rabbi of Kastoria, Greece, with his wife and five of their children

There is only one Jewish family still living in Kastoria, the Eliaou (Elias) family, but in the early 20th century, before emigration and the Holocaust took its toll, Jews were 10% of the total population of the city, sharing with the Christians of Kastoria the daily struggle to survive in an environment with few economic or educational opportunities.

The Jewish community of Kastoria lived close to the marketplace, on the slopes of a ridge, between the Christian and Turkish quarters. Their small, overcrowded, wood and stone houses were built on narrow serpentine streets, following the rise and fall of the land. The most desirable properties, those owned by the few wealthy members of the community, were located on the peaks because, when it rained, the streets would turn to rivers and the low-lying homes would be flooded. The houses faced the street and had small utilitarian courtyards ("hayati") in the rear: it was here that the Jewish housewives performed their domestic tasks (cooking and laundry) and fuel (wood and coal) would be stored. Often, if the breadwinner were an itinerant salesman, a common profession among Jewish men in Kastoria, the family's prized possession, their mule, would also be housed in a sheltered area of the "hayati".

makeshift additions extended over the neighbor's property line. Why bother? In this close-knit community with large families, one's neighbor was most likely a relative: a cousin, an in-law, etc.

Occupations were handed down from father to son: little carrier choice, few opportunities for rising up the economic ladder. Jews in Kastoria worked as porters, tinsmiths, cobblers, jewelers and weavers. Women also worked, at home, producing linen and silken fabrics. Many of the men would travel from village to village, bartering their wares, leaving with their overburdened mule on Sunday morning, and only returning for the Sabbath on Friday. It was not easy to feed their large families and, then, there were the dowries for their daughters, always a burden for the poor.

The center of Jewish life was the synagogue, the "Aragon" synagogue, constructed in 5591 (1830). The exterior was plain, Jews keeping a low profile, not wanting to draw attention to themselves, but once inside, their love for the Jewish religion was displayed in the lavish interior: decorated with velvet parokhet and hand-carved wooden stalls. There were seventeen Torah Scrolls, some dating back to 15th century Spain and Italy, admired throughout Macedonia for their beauty. The women sat upstairs, in a gallery, blocked from view by a lattice so as not to disturb the prayer of the men below.

The Jews of Kastoria were observant, hard-working and, mostly, poor. In the early part of the twentieth century they began to emigrate, many to the New York area. A congregation of Kastorialis was established in Brooklyn, initially headed by Rabbi Zacharia, who had resettled there with his eleven children. The families they left behind were destroyed in the Holocaust: the 900 Jews of Kastoria, only 35 survived. Their proud descendants in the United States would carry on the traditions of the Kastorialis. Many of our residents, and Board members, descend from these Kastorialis, and it is in their honor that I dedicate this column. ▲