



AFTER MORE THAN 2,000 YEARS, THE ONCE-VIBRANT ANCIENT ROMANIOTE KEHILLAH— SWALLOWED UP BY SEPHARDIC IMMIGRANTS AND NEARLY WIPED OUT BY THE NAZIS— IS LIMPING ALONG WITH JUST A HANDFUL OF MEMBERS, BUT THEY AREN'T PACKING YET. WE WANTED TO CATCH THEM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE



For the longest time we'd wanted to visit the Jewish communities in Greece, and see if we could encounter the last remaining Romaniote Jews in their home setting before they entirely disappeared

from the stage of history. This ancient community, dating back to 300 BCE — the era of Antiochus and the Hellenists — became known as the Romaniotes, speaking their own language, Yevanic or Judeo-Greek, a version of Greek infused with Hebrew and written in Hebrew script. But the community numbers in just the tens today, having been swallowed up by the larger Sephardic communities that immigrated to these islands over the centuries, and then nearly finished off by the Nazis.

We finally had opportunity to make the journey, and as we drove into their native Ioannina (pronounced Yo-a-nina and also known as Janina) in northern Greece, we were struck by the sight of an ancient fortress whose maze-like lanes were originally designed to confuse pirates who breached the walls. Just outside the walls stand many buildings in disrepair, and while wandering these alleyways searching for a place to bed down for the night, we came across an old building with a Magen David on its plaster — and another building with the Jewish star on its metal grill work. We knew we weren't too late.

These days the large synagogue in Ioannina —

THE FLAME STILL FLICKERS IN GREECE

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Dr. Ari Greenspan*

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a town known for its feta cheese and baklava — opens its doors for prayer only one day a year, on Yom Kippur. The inscription over the door gives its date of completion as 1829, but it sits on the site of an older synagogue that dates back to the 16th century. There was also a “new shul” outside the fortress that was all but obliterated by the Nazis.

We headed to northern Greece, not far from the Albanian border, to investigate what’s left of this community. There are so few Jews left that even prearranging access to the shuls, an important prerequisite for such a mission, proved difficult, and we headed out counting on *siyata d’Shmaya*, which did not fail. We had a good feeling when we asked a random man for directions out of Athens; he looked at our yarmulkes and told us that he was an Iraqi Jew now living in Switzerland, and gave us his number to call should we have problems during the week. What are the chances?

We found ourselves driving through long tunnel after long tunnel — a phenomenal feat of modern engineering. In this area 76 tunnels totaling 99 kilometers in length lead right through the forested hills.

Although we couldn’t understand a word spoken on the streets (reminding us of the phrase “it’s all Greek to me”), we remembered many Greek letters from our coursework in trigonometry and calculus, so we had fun trying to read the road

signs. We were constantly attuned to the significance of Greek — of all the languages in the world, Greek is the only one that the Mishnah (*Megillah* 1:8) says might be acceptable for writing sacred books, although Rambam explains (*Hilchos Tefillin* 1:19) that modern Greek differs from the language Chazal were familiar with. Still, there are reports that in the 16th century there were communities here that read Maftir Yonah in Greek as a remembrance of the language’s unique halachic status.

Almost the End During our visit we were fortunate to meet with Dr. Moshe Elisaf, the longtime president of this tiny community, which today numbers fewer than 40 people. Some of them are well into their 80s, and most of the youth have moved to Athens and other large cities. The *kehillah* hasn’t celebrated a bris or wedding in more than 30 years. The last bar mitzvah was in 2000.

It was nevertheless amazing to learn that seven of the community members are university professors of medicine, physics, math, or archaeology. Dr. Elisaf, an educated and motivated Romaniote, shares how the community had been large and active, with both boys’ and girls’ schools, until the last century. Between 1902 and 1904, about half the 4,000-strong population emigrated to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where they established

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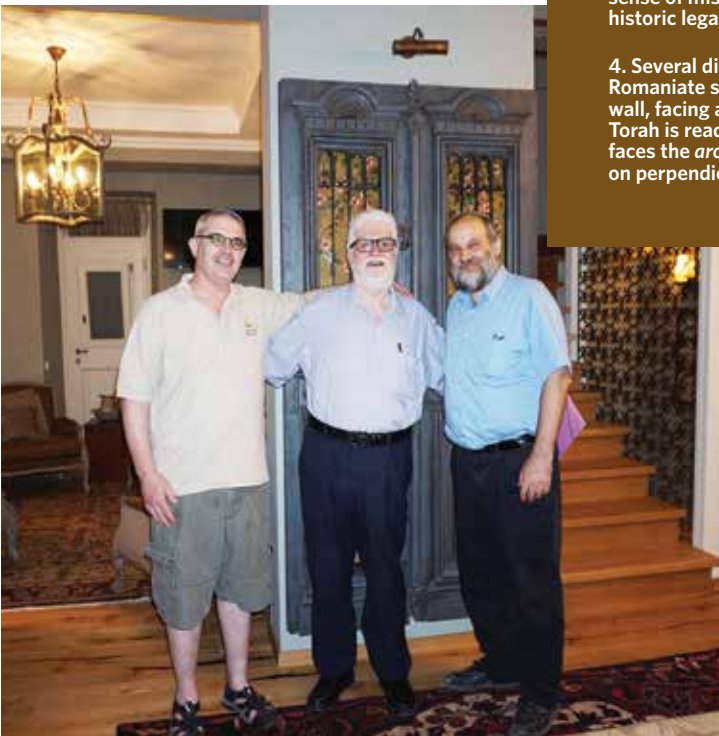
1. The magnificent sifrei Torah of Ioannina were hidden in a crypt during the Holocaust. When the Nazis discovered them, a sympathetic mayor convinced the conquerors to leave the spoils. Today they’ve been returned to the survivors

2.



2. Outside the Jewish cemetery of Trikala, whose Jewish community absorbed many Sephardim over the years but maintained its trademark Romaniote culture

3.



3. Dr. Moshe Elisaf, longtime president of Ioannina’s Jewish community, is a successful physician and popular statesman who feels a deep sense of mission to preserve his community’s historic legacy

4.



4. Several distinct markers differentiate the Romaniote shuls: The aron kodesh is on the eastern wall, facing a high raised platform from where the Torah is read and the prayers chanted. The *chazzan* faces the aron while davening, and the crowd sits on perpendicular benches

the Kehillah Kedosha Janina, the largest Romaniote *kehillah* existing today.

In July 1943, Ioannina and its 1,950 Jews were transferred from a relatively safe Italian occupation that had begun in 1941 to a brutal Nazi rule. The Jews of Ioannina were rounded up by the SS, which in Greece was run by the notorious General Jurgen Stroop, who had earlier put down the Warsaw ghetto uprising. (For his crimes in Warsaw and Greece he was later sentenced to death by a US military court and hanged in Poland.)

On March 25, 1944, the Jews were shipped out to spend a cold, snowy night in the Jewish cemetery in the nearby town of Trikala, from where, together with the Jews of Trikala and Larissa, they were transported to Auschwitz. The overwhelming majority was immediately gassed. Only 112 survived the death camp, and another 69 had escaped the roundup by hiding with Christian families or fleeing into the mountains, where some fought with the Greek resistance. (Sabethai Cabilli, a wealthy businessman, *chazzan*, teacher, and strong-willed opinionated community leader, was seemingly duped by the Nazis, and mistakenly called for people to tell their children who had joined the partisans to return to the city where they would be safe.)

After the war, about 100 made their way back to Ioannina to try to rebuild what had been ripped away. Many found their properties looted and homes occupied. So after more than 2,000 years, this once-vibrant Jewish community limped along with just a handful of its original members.

But they were not ready to give up. Before World War II, there were two main synagogues in the city. Until the 16th century everyone davened in the Old Kehal Kadosh synagogue, located within the old city walls. With the expansion of the community into a new neighborhood outside the fortress, the New Kehal Kadosh synagogue was constructed. The second shul was destroyed by the Germans, and many of the Jewish houses

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in that neighborhood were also damaged beyond repair and still sit dilapidated as quiet testimony to their occupants who never returned. The owner of the charming boutique hotel in which we stayed told us that she actually tried to buy one of those collapsing Jewish properties, but there are endless rules about preserving exterior façades.

The old shul had a different fate. At one point during the occupation, the trustees of both synagogues hid the Torahs, *parochos*, and other ritual objects in a crypt in the old shul. After the Jews were deported, the Nazis found the hidden objects, but the mayor, Demetrios Vlachides, persuaded the Nazis to spare the building; he said he wanted to use it as a municipal library, and he put the religious items in the local museum. All were returned to the survivors after the war. That shul was later renovated and is the community's focal point today.

Dr. Elisaf is a native of Ioannina, as is his wife. During the occupation his parents fled to Athens, and then with the help of the resistance, they made their way through Turkey and on to the Land of Israel. They returned to Ioannina after the war, where his father reopened his store. Dr. Elisaf did his medical training in Ioannina and then worked in a research lab in Tel Hashomer Hospital in Ramat Gan for several years, but subsequently returned to his birthplace. There, he eventually became president of the Jewish community, and for many years he was a respected and beloved member of the city council. It was only when the population realized that he might be the next mayor that latent anti-Semitism resulted in his getting fewer votes.

It was truly a pleasure to meet and schmooze with this walking *kiddush Hashem* — a successful physician and a local statesman whom everyone knows is a proud Jew and who is deeply concerned about the synagogue and the remnants of the local Jewish community.

Chametz and Matza In response to a request by Dr. Elisaf, a young man on a motorcycle arrived to let us into the shul, whose layout reflects the ancient Romaniote traditions. The *aron kodesh* sits on the eastern wall, and on the opposite wall is a high raised platform from where the Torah is read and the prayers chanted, the *chazzan* facing the *aron* and the crowd seated on perpendicular benches. We opened up the *aron* and were surprised to find a number of magnificent old Torahs, clearly the ones that had been hidden during the war.

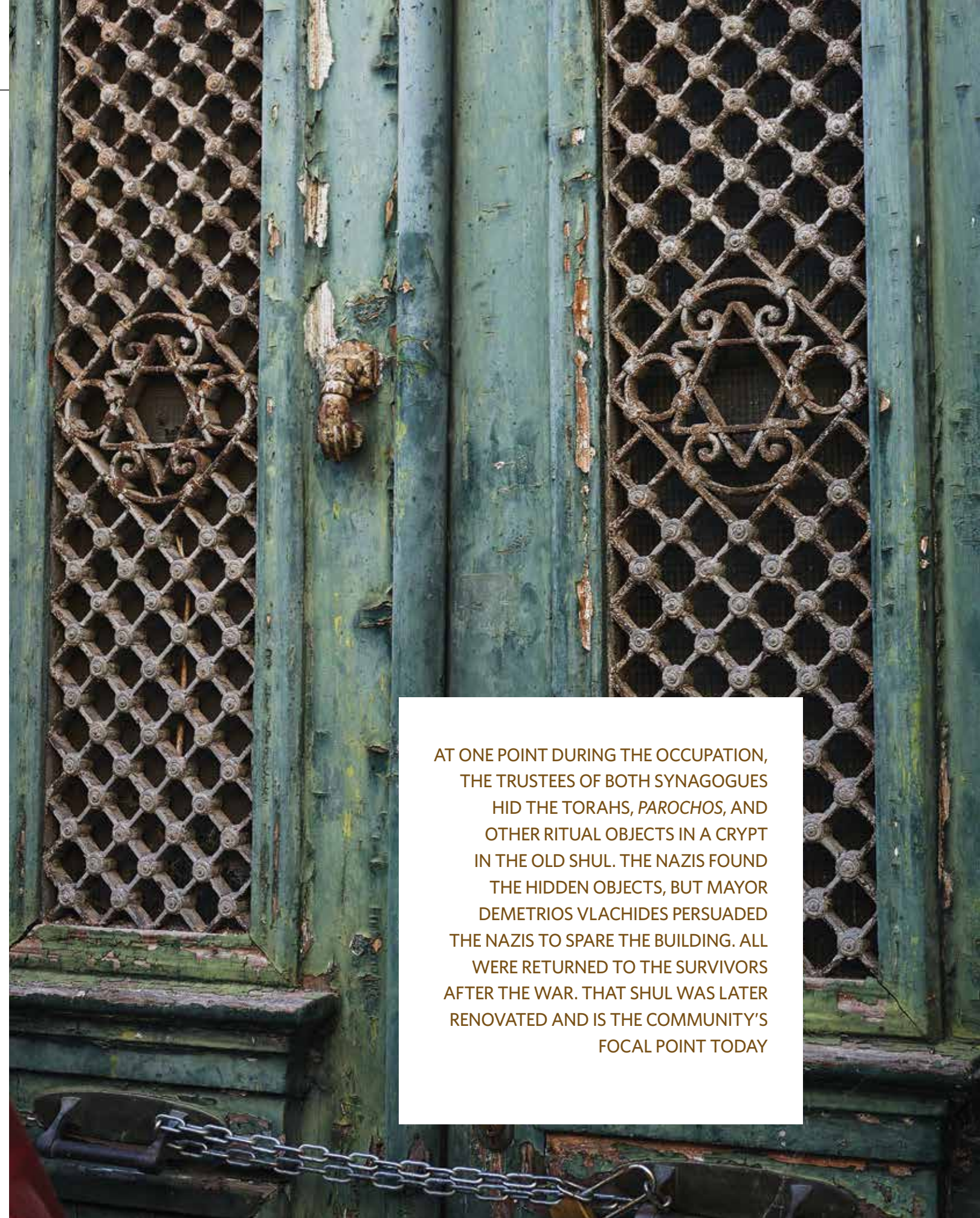
The inner walls of the main sanctuary are lined with marble plaques that list the name of every local person who was killed by the Nazis. Paying homage to these martyrs and trying to read the Greek at the same time, we discovered something amusing. Among the families in town were the well-known Matza family (connected to Yehoshua Matza, a former Israeli minister of health and five-term Likud MK) and another family named Chametz. Imagine the jokes that must have been told on Pesach in the community.

Although we were not able to find out the sources of those names, it seems that because of the naming practices of the Romaniote Jews, which included naming for living relatives and using the father's name as a surname, there were many duplicate names, such that nicknames became popular and they evolved into family names. Another one of these was Kalchamira or Colchamro, which derived from the "*kol chamira*" statement made on Erev Pesach. In the shul we were given a CD of the Romaniote rendition of the Pesach Haggadah, which we listened to as we headed out of town back through the kilometers of tunnels. Their Haggadah text is essentially identical to the version familiar to us, but the chanting and songs are more reminiscent of Greek tunes.

Some suggest that the customs of the ancient Greek Jews have their origins in the Jerusalem Talmud, as opposed to



Our uniformed police escort showed us the Trikala cemetery, which holds the remains of at least 500 years of Jewish residents. Thankfully, they ignored Ari Greenspan's effort to scale the wall



AT ONE POINT DURING THE OCCUPATION, THE TRUSTEES OF BOTH SYNAGOGUES HID THE TORAHS, *PAROCHOS*, AND OTHER RITUAL OBJECTS IN A CRYPT IN THE OLD SHUL. THE NAZIS FOUND THE HIDDEN OBJECTS, BUT MAYOR DEMETRIOS VLACHIDES PERSUADED THE NAZIS TO SPARE THE BUILDING. ALL WERE RETURNED TO THE SURVIVORS AFTER THE WAR. THAT SHUL WAS LATER RENOVATED AND IS THE COMMUNITY'S FOCAL POINT TODAY

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1. The Jewish cemetery in Veria — a town whose history has long been intertwined with a Jewish presence — now houses a soccer field. Tombstones can still be seen dotting the periphery

2. What treasures would we find in the Ioannina *genizah*?

3. Our new friend Minister Nikos Dimoliaras was more than happy to recite Shema and Kaddish for us, as he directed us toward Veria's Chevra Kaddisha headquarters

2.



3.



most other groups, whose source is the Babylonian Talmud. For example, we know that all Jews complete the reading of the Torah on a yearly cycle; yet as described in the Yerushalmi, the Romaniote community supposedly broke it up into a three-year cycle, along with different *haftaros*. In recent decades, however, they too have joined the yearly cycle, beginning and ending on Simchas Torah.

Although there are no longer any Yevanic native speakers alive today (the Nazis murdered the language into extinction), the Romaniote Jews like to highlight their *yichus* — they claim to have arrived in their current lands straight from the Land of Israel without having been in any other lands of exile. Yet in many ancient Romaniote communities, the influx of Spanish Jews following the 1492 expulsion

resulted in a merger of traditions or a dilution of the Romaniote practices. Ioannina and the few other places in which the Romaniote uncompromisingly persevered and their traditions prospered were rare and important communities.

Although the Nazis nearly finished them off, these “true Greek” Jews actually started disappearing long ago — the 16th century Spanish exiles swallowed many of them up, and others were killed in the 1821 Greek insurrection. The only two other extant Romaniote shuls are the one in Manhattan and another in Jerusalem.

Returned and Gone Not far from Ioannina, we passed through Trikala, another town that had an active Romaniote Jewish community before the war. Greece is a country with just under

11 million people, but enough land to give it a relatively low population density and a feeling of wide open space. The northwest region contains gently sloping hills, winding rivers, and lush valleys, and we wound our way through this terrain heading toward Trikala.

Built on an ancient city and straddling the Lithaios River, it is a small city of 80,000 people. It never had a massive Jewish community, but for hundreds of years, dating back to the Byzantine period, it had a respectable and active Romaniote presence. For example, in around 1530 the census revealed that there were 301 Muslim, 343 Christian, and 181 Jewish families. Over time Sephardim joined the community, but the character always remained Romaniote. The numbers rose and fell and by the eve of World War II

there were about 500 Jews in three shuls. Compared to the rest of Greek Jewry, they fared relatively well during the Holocaust, with many Jews hiding in the hills with the partisans and surviving — 139 were deported to the death camps. Two of the three shuls were destroyed, and the oldest, Kahal Kadosh Yavanim, the Romaniote shul, was severely damaged but rebuilt after the war. There are today only a few Jews left and the shul is not used often. But we were determined to see what remained of this once-vibrant community.

While the name Trikala is not well known, the community had been served by some important *talmidei chachamim* in the past. For example, Rav Shmuel Kalai, author of *Shu"t Mishpetei Shmuel*, learned under one of the rabbis there during its 16th-century heyday of Torah scholarship; in the 18th century, Rav Avraham Amarilo, author of *Sefer Brit Avraham*, was the community rabbi. But while the community continued to be active, things were not all rosy. There were blood libels in 1893, 1898, and 1911.

Trikala also played a role in an interesting historical footnote. In the early 20th century, there was a wealthy Jew there who hosted the Greek royal family on a visit to the area. As a result of the bond forged, Princess Alice would later shelter descendants of that family in her home in Athens during World War II. She was recognized as a “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem, and at her request, she was buried in a Christian cemetery on Har Hazeisim. She is better known as the mother of the English Prince Philip, husband of Queen Elizabeth II, and grandmother of Charles, Prince of Wales, who secretly visited her grave on the Mount of Olives this October.

Over 250 Jews returned to Trikala after the war, but although they received their property back and repaired the shul, most of them eventually left. Some of the youth helped found Moshav Neve Yamin near Petach Tikvah; others moved to Athens

and the US. There are today a mere handful of Jews in town, and when we set out to find the shul, we saw that it was only visible from across the street, as it was blocked from the sidewalk by a newly erected row of stores.

We began knocking on doors looking for a person who might have the key, and finally found the apartment of an elderly Jewish woman living across the street from the shul. She was not even sure she had a key, and was not thrilled about opening it, but after some cajoling, she searched, found the key, and let us in. We also succeeded in finding a young man who was able to translate for us. We saw a well-kept and clean but sterile synagogue. We davened Minchah in the shul, probably the first Minchah the shul has seen in many years.

The elderly woman described for us the sorrowful state of the Jewish community, telling us about the communal Seders (in a nonkosher restaurant), one of the last vestiges of Jewish activity. She spoke and read no Hebrew and knew very little about the synagogue or its service. We did find three lonely *sifrei Torah* in the *aron*, but it was obvious they'd been out of use for quite some time. (As a reward for our efforts, though, on the way back to our car we found a store that carried kosher Ben and Jerry's ice cream.)

The Trikala cemetery, well out of town and deep in a pine forest, was also reestablished after World War II, and although it has been vandalized several times since, it is well documented and researched, with tombstones going back almost 500 years. After getting hopelessly lost, we violated a major rule of self-exploration and asked for directions — from three motorcycled policemen, who actually gave us a police escort all the way up to the cemetery. (Perhaps they recognized us as *Mishpacha* VIPs?) Finding it locked, we asked the policemen if we could climb the wall; refusing with a smile, they at least were willing to turn a

Fungus Facts



There was another village we passed through, and although it had no Jewish history that we knew of, it had something else unique: a mushroom museum. Well, that was certainly a first for us, so we paid a brief visit to see if the tiny Mushroom Museum of Meteora could shed some light on the special halachos of mushrooms. Our first reaction in this museum, which opened in 2014, was wonderment at the Creation. They featured over 250 types of mushrooms that display amazing diversity in appearance, size, and edibility — some delicious,

some toxic, and others psychoactive.

The museum was chock full of mushroom information — we had not known, for example, that the tasty Caesar mushroom was so important to the ancient Romans that Julius Caesar had special collectors whose job was to gather those mushrooms for him. The most well-known halachah regarding this fungus is that although mushrooms seem to grow from the ground, Chazal (*Brachos* 40b) explained that they do not derive their primary nutrition from the soil and therefore the *brachah* before eating them is *shehakol*, although if one mistakenly did say the seemingly obvious *brachah* of *ha'adamah* they do not need to make a new *brachah* (*Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim* 204:5). Seeing the devotion of the three employees in this museum that gets only a handful of visitors a day reminded us of the comment of the *Avnei Nezer* (*Orach Chayim* 111) that mushrooms were immune to the curse of the land that applied following the sin of Adam in that they are harvested ready-to-eat and require no further human preparation.

blind eye as they sped off down the curvy mountain road.

Graveyards and Goals We were on the road early Friday morning making our way to Thessaloniki (Salonika) for Shabbos. When we realized we had some extra time, we pulled into the quaint town of Veria and drove to where all old shuls in Europe are — the center of the old town. There we managed to find an old stone structure that had recently been refurbished. The doors were padlocked and the owners of the two boutique hotels on either side of the shul told us they didn't have the key and that we should try the municipality. They informed us that the synagogue is 2,200 years old; what they meant, of course, was that the Jewish presence in the area is that old. The shul, while possibly the oldest in northern Greece, is merely several hundred years old.

Looking at the time and knowing we still

had a long drive ahead of us, we decided to forgo a peek into the shul, when suddenly a bubbly, smiling, swarthy Greek man bounded down the steps, greeted us with “Shalom” and then yammered away at us in pidgin Hebrew. We understood almost nothing, but it didn't deter him from continuing a complete monologue. We weren't sure if he was actually talking to us or just saying Hebrew phrases. He then pulled out his phone and dialed a woman who spoke English — she told us she was coming over with the key. While awaiting her arrival we strolled the Jewish quarter with him, understanding little but listening to a stream of *pesukim*, Jewish prayers, Hebrew songs and then the complete first paragraph of Shema with a *chatzi* Kaddish thrown in for good measure! His memory of Jewish prayers and verses was truly amazing.

The Jewish quarter, called Barbouta, is well preserved; the houses are built



In Trikala's well-kept but lonely shul, we davened the first Minchah the shul has seen in many years

around an open courtyard, with access only through two gates that used to be locked at night. Neighbors communicated among themselves through doors that opened from one to the other, without being exposed to the common courtyard. Our improvised guide pointed out to us the former rabbi's and president's houses that sit overlooking the steeply sloping banks of the bubbling Tripotamos River and have a Hebrew date and an “*im eshkeich Yerushalayim* (If I forget you, o Jerusalem)” inscription written on them. Clearly, the Jews of Veria pined for Eretz Yisrael. One of these houses had belonged to the Mordochai family who survived the Holocaust by hiding inside the attic of an old mosque, and occasionally returns to visit. These Jewish buildings have been restored and today house government offices.

The woman, Evi Meska, arrived with a key, and we got the story of our host. The

man, Nikos Dimoliaras, is a Pentecostal minister in a country that is overwhelmingly Greek Orthodox. He loves the Bible and the Jews and told us how the Greek Orthodox hate the Jews and don't know the Bible. His small church overlooks the entrance to the Jewish courtyard, and he makes it his business to help any Jew who comes looking for the shul.

Evi took us inside the shul and explained that although she's not Jewish, she's devoted to preserving the history of the Jews of Veria. She told us that she has two children — “a six-year-old girl at home and the synagogue,” which she treats with love. Now that the synagogue, built sometime before 1850, has been restored, she is attempting to restore several other buildings in the Jewish quarter.

Evi passionately related to us the history of the ancient town and its Jews. There are indications it was populated all the way back at the time of King David and is first mentioned in writings in 432 BCE. It has a unique Christian-Jewish connection. The Christian bible mentions that the Apostle Paul went to Veria to convert the pagans to Christianity. It actually says that he preached to the Jews *in the synagogue* and exhorted them to convert. There is a story about a *sefer Torah* written in the second century BCE that he supposedly used as his text while preaching around 55 CE. According to the unclear tale, the rabbi wrote notes in the margin of this Torah alluding to the fact that it was used for missionizing of the Jews and therefore may no longer be read in the synagogue. Nevertheless, this ancient Torah supposedly remained in the *aron kodesh* for centuries, was taken by the Nazis to the “Hebrew Museum” in Auschwitz, and after liberation was used by a group of Hungarian Jews. It then made its way to a Judaica dealer in Austria, and then disappeared in the 1950s.

Evi, having realized that she began this project with little education, peppers her presentation with the sources of her now much-enhanced Jewish and historical information, quoting native Jews, visiting rabbis, and local lore. Her sincerity is obvious, as she is constantly looking to further her knowledge.

Hopping on his motorcycle, Nikos escorted us the short distance to what remains of Veria's Jewish cemetery. We were shocked to discover that the cemetery has been converted into a soccer field and basketball court. Yet in the area surrounding these playing fields, some of the remaining tombstones can be seen lining the periphery. As we stood on the side street looking down at the kids playing ball and staring at the tombstones at our feet, we couldn't help thinking: After hundreds of years this is what is left — a sterile synagogue lovingly cared for by a devoted non-Jewish woman and a pastor, the cemetery-turned-sports-field, and no active remaining Jews.

Yet for the Romaniote community taking its last gasp for survival — whether it is the Jewish Dr. Moshe Elisaf or the non-Jewish Evi and Nikos — great efforts are being made to preserve a remnant of the past. Alas, it is, like so many other communities we have shared with you, in its twilight years. For us, though, experiencing the past means looking at a more hopeful Jewish future. ●