

# The Corfu Connection

*Rediscovering a lost mesorah*

*Decades after the last appearance of the famous Corfu esrog, an intrepid chassid launches a search for it — a quest involving exotic locales, halachic debates, and the fervent desire to restore a piece of our heritage.*

*Every Sukkos, thousands of chassidim flock to the Skverer Rebbe's sukkah for the opportunity to hold the Rebbe's lulav and esrog, a tradition started generations ago in the Skverer court of Reb Itzik'l, the Rebbe's great-grandfather.*

*The Rebbe sits majestically at the head of a long table, resplendent in his white tallis, silver atarah gleaming; his lulav and all three of his esrogim laid out before him. One esrog is from Eretz Yisrael, one is a Yanove esrog from Italy, and one is the exceptional Corfu esrog.*

### The History of the Corfu Esrog

The picturesque Mediterranean island of Corfu is located just off the west coast of Greece, at the entrance of the Adriatic Sea. One of the largest of the Ionian Islands, it is surrounded by dazzling blue water. Its mountainous terrain (the name Corfu is an Italian derivation of the Byzantine word meaning "city of peaks") is replete with impressive landscapes and dense vegetation. Amidst the two million olive trees for which Corfu is famous lie the ancient cultivations of the illustrious citron known as the Corfu esrog.

Although there is no precise documentation for when Jews first arrived on the island of Corfu, it is believed that their presence dates as far back as the second Beis Hamikdash. The Greek Jews, Romaniotes (so named because the people of the Byzantine Empire were

then referred to as Romaioi) were known to have used the Corfu esrog for hundreds of years. By all accounts, the beauty, size, color, and overall perfection of the Corfu esrog made it the ultimate fulfillment of the mitzvah "ulekachtem lachem... pri etz hadar."

The esrog began making its way across Europe in 1785 and came to the attention of notable Rebbes such as the Noda BiYehudah; Harav Yechezkel Landau; the Berditchever Rebbe, the Kedushas Levi, and the Koznitzer Maggid, Harav Yisroel Hopstein, as well as the ancestors of the current Skverer Rebbe, Harav Dovid Twersky, shlita.

No stone was left unturned in the pursuit of this beautiful esrog, and shlichim were often sent across Europe to bring the esrog back to their Rebbe. Word of this remarkable esrog continued to spread; in fact, merchants advertised their esrogim in Polish newspapers and raised their

prices as the esrog's value increased according to demand.

For many Ashkenazim across Europe, however, the Corfu esrog's unusual perfection created grounds for suspicion. They assumed that the only way to achieve such beautiful fruit was by grafting, which would render the esrog murkav, and therefore pasul for use. At the same time (the beginning of the 19th century), the battles of Napoleon I of France have been said to have caused the other, more prevalently used esrog from Italy, the Yanove, to become unavailable and the Corfu esrog began to dominate the market.

### Debate Arises — Murkav or Kosher?

Harav Ephraim Zalman Margolis, in his sefer Beis Ephraim (volume 1:56), states that no grafted citron trees were found on the grounds of the Corfu



## Greek Politics and the Corfu Esrog

In March 2010, the BBC reported that two senior politicians in Europe's biggest economy suggested that Greece consider selling some of its uninhabited islands to cut its debt. As Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, met the Greek prime minister for crisis talks, two German MPs demanded that as a condition of the economic bail-out, Greece hand over some of its islands. "We give you cash, you give us Corfu," one tabloid newspaper proclaimed. Later, the Greek government had to deny reports that it was indeed selling off some state-owned islands to help balance its budget.

Recently, the financial and political woes of Greece have been broadcast on almost a daily basis. Talk of crushing debt, heated debate regarding a massive bailout, failed elections, and civilian unrest have reached epic proportions and once again, rumors regarding the sell-off of Greek Islands have arisen. I came across one recent report which stated, "Greece is trying to sell off a huge slab of land on the holiday island of Corfu to raise cash to tackle its debts. Government officials revealed that a tender has been launched for the exploitation of a large seaside plot on the western resort island."

An extensive article published in the *New York Times* on Monday, June 25, 2012, stated: "Over the last decade, Greece has been embroiled in spiraling debt, which in turn has provoked an economic crisis, which has decimated the country's economy, brought down a government, unleashed increasing social unrest, and threatened both Europe's recovery and the future of the euro."

The article expounded further, saying that since a change in government revealed the true size of the country's massive deficits, Greece has been kept afloat by its fellow euro-zone countries, but at a steep price: The austerity measures demanded by France and Germany in return for two massive bailout packages have plunged the country into a recession of near-Great Depression dimensions.

In March 2012, European officials helped Greece negotiate a landmark debt restructuring deal with the vast majority of its private sector lenders, who agreed to swap \$77 billion in Greek debt for new bonds worth as much as 75 percent less. It was the largest default in history. Despite the bailout, Greece remains saddled with unsustainable debts and little prospects for growth.

Notwithstanding the swirling rumors and Greece's ongoing financial crisis, Rabbi Knobloch is hopeful that he will be able to locate a Corfu *esrog* for years to come. He remains committed to obtaining it for the Skverer Rebbe, stating that "regardless of who owns the islands, the *esrogim* will still grow and I will continue to do whatever I can to ensure the Rebbe receives a Corfu *esrog* every year, on time for Sukkos."

interested in anything old," reminisces Rabbi Knobloch. "I would spend hours poring through old *sefarim* and manuscripts." As a staunch Skverer chassid, he soon found himself caught up in the history of the Corfu *esrog*. However, it was not until he got married in the early 1990s that he decided to try to find this special specimen about which he had heard

and read so much.

"I began by making phone calls," he states. Tens of phone calls, in fact, until he connected with the Rav of Athens, Rabbi Arrar, who joined in the search. With his help, Rabbi Knobloch located and contacted a farmer on the island of Corfu, Mr. Dalas. An elderly gentleman, he had a Corfu *esrog* tree and was willing to help.

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address. "I was so excited, I still remember the number he gave me!"

A few days before Sukkos, Rabbi Knobloch called the number in Great Neck. He called and called, yet there was no answer. With one day to go before Sukkos and still no answer, Rabbi Knobloch and a friend got into the car, drove down to Great Neck in person and knocked on the door, to no avail. "We went to a Jewish neighbor and knocked on their door, desperate to find out when their neighbor might be coming home."

Turns out the vacationers had continued traveling after they left Greece and were not coming directly



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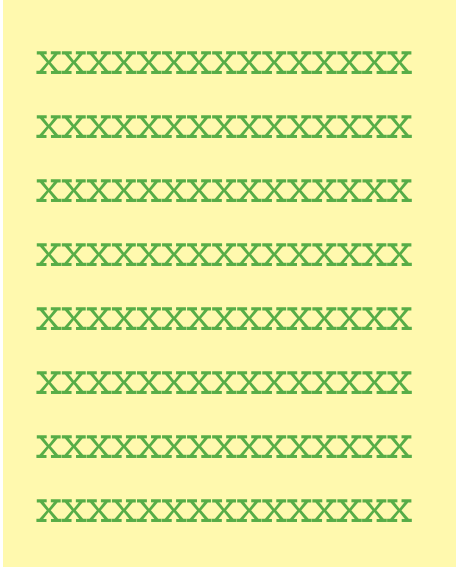
The next step was to find someone within the Jewish community who would facilitate the complicated process of delivery. Rabbi Knobloch was surprised to learn that there still exists a Jewish community on Corfu, not to mention a shul, one of the only ones left that still *davens* in Ladino.

"The community members I spoke with were surprised and amused to realize that I was willing to go to such great lengths to acquire the Corfu *esrog*," Rabbi Knobloch laughs. "Turns out, they import their *esrogim* from Eretz Yisrael!" Rabbi Knobloch relayed his address to the farmer and then waited and waited for the *esrog*. It finally arrived in the mail — on the eighth day of Chanukah! In true Chassidic fashion, Rabbi Knobloch rejoiced in its arrival and made *esrog* compote in honor of Tu BiShvat.

It became apparent that attempting to send the *esrog* by mail was not the answer. Laws regarding the transport of agricultural items had become stricter and if the package were to be

opened, in all likelihood, the *esrog* would either be denied entry or if allowed through, rendered *pasul* in handling. "So the following year, I told Rabbi Arrar that we would need to look for someone to bring it back personally, thereby increasing the chances of it actually arriving, not to mention in time for Sukkos!"

Sure enough, shortly before Sukkos, Rabbi Knobloch received an overseas call from Rabbi Arrar. A couple from Great Neck, Long Island, had been vacationing in Athens and were willing to act as couriers for the *esrog*. Rabbi Arrar provided Rabbi Knobloch with the couple's phone number and



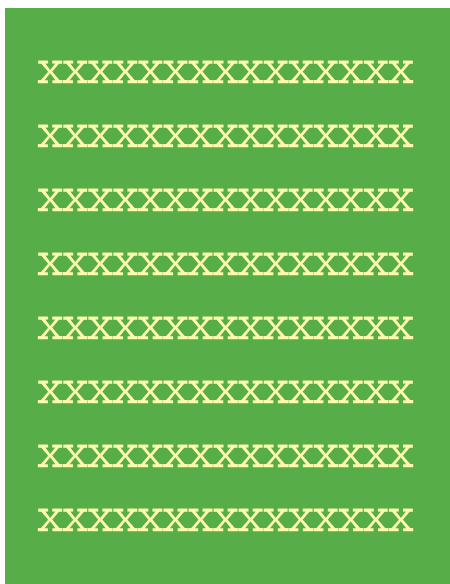
home, as the Rabbi in Athens had thought!

Once again, the best was made of a tardy situation. The *esrog* arrived on the second day of Chol Hamoed and with great anticipation, Rabbi Knobloch presented it to the Skverer Rebbe. "He was extremely happy to finally hold the same type of *esrog* his father and grandfather had used. The Rebbe relayed to me the importance of the *minhag* and expressed that by using the *esrog* alongside his usual *esrog*, he was not endorsing the kashrus of the Corfu *esrog* but rather exalting over the opportunity to continue the *mesorah*."

As tradition dictates, Skverer chassidim flocked to the Rebbe throughout Sukkos to use the Rebbe's *esrog*. The *esrog's* arrival, though late, was still in time to be used by hundreds if not thousands of chassidim.

In the years since, it has remained a constant challenge to obtain the *esrog*, one that Rabbi Knobloch meets with determination. "Every year, we have seen *nissim* in how the *esrog* made its way to us." One year, for example, a connection was somehow made with a Jewish pilot of the now defunct Tower Airlines, who brought the *esrog* home with him in the cockpit on his flight from Athens to New York.

Rabbi Mendel Hendel, head of Chabad in Athens for the past 11 years, has been instrumental in assisting Rabbi Knobloch in his yearly endeavors



to obtain a Corfu *esrog*. Athens, he informs me, has a community of about 3,000 Jews and welcomes travelers from all over the world. "Corfu," he adds, "is a particularly beautiful island with a lot of greenery." It is a considerable journey to Corfu, however, six hours of driving, followed by a one-hour ferry ride.

"Every year is another adventure when it comes to finding a Corfu *esrog*," he explains good-naturedly. "The crop is not always a good one and we are constantly on the lookout for alternatives." This includes searching for the *esrog* on the many Greek islands, through various contacts, including academics who research various fruits and have the knowledge of where to find a Corfu *esrog* that

meets the criteria.

"Once we find an *esrog* tree, we then need to explain how the *esrog* must be cultivated and cut in order for it to be permissible for our use." Rabbi Hendel has found that whoever he deals with tends to be very interested in the religious import of the *esrog* and respectful of his desire to obtain it.

This past summer, Mr. Dalas, the 90 year old farmer, passed away, calling into question once again Rabbi Knobloch's ability to acquire the *esrog*. "I stayed in contact with the farmer's son," he recounts, "and begged him not to forget the *esrog* tree. I reminded him that it needs constant tending and care." Unfortunately, the farmer's son responded that "this year there is no *esrog*." Rabbi Knobloch asked him to go to his friends and neighbors and see if they have an *esrog* tree, but no one did.

Rabbi Knobloch was not deterred. He reached out to the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Papanicolai, who was familiar with the tradition he refers to as "*kitro*," another name for the Corfu *esrog*. Since there are some companies that cultivate the fruit for usage in jams and the like, he was able to find a source.

Another year, another adventure, and the *mesorah* of the Corfu *esrog* continues. **B**

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