

## Jewish community of Ioannina

Ioannina, the capital city of Epirus region in Greece, is historically multicultural. The city is mainly influenced by the Ottomans but are also marked by the byzantine period and the Greek Antiquity.



The Jewish presence in Ioannina goes back to the IX<sup>th</sup> century. They are Romaniotes, an ethnic Jewish community native to the Eastern Mediterranean. One of the oldest Jewish communities in Europe, they adhere to Hellenistic Judaism.

The Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula arrived to the Ottoman Empire over time, and many of them settled in Ioannina.

Today, there is only one trace left from the Jewish community in Ioannina, located within the ramparts of the castle of Ioannina:

The Ancient Synagogue, **Kahal Kadosh Yashan**.



## Kahal Kadosh Yashan



This synagogue was built in 1829. The original structure is much older, and dates back to the Byzantine period. It is the former synagogue belonging to the Levy, Negrin and Coffina families. It is built in the Romaniote style, unique to this synagogue in Ioannina. The synagogue owns an annex, named Minyan Yashan, which was originally a living house, built by Abraham and Sarah.

Before the German occupation, there were two Synagogues in Ioannina, **Kahal Kadosh Yashan** (the only one who survived) and **Kahal Kadosh Hadash**.

The second one was built around 1840 when the Jewish community was at its peak, with a population of almost 5 000 people. It used to be the main Synagogue in Ioannina, but it did not survive the Holocaust.

The annex was used during the Occupation and has been damaged in many ways. When the community was deported to Auschwitz, the German used wood from the building to make fires.

After the war, the Greek government razed the remains of the Synagogue structure.

## The Romaniote style

The Romaniote tradition remains dominant in Northern Greece. The biggest community was in Ioannina.

The Romaniotes have their own traditions, customs, and ceremonies, different than the other Jewish people, and the architecture of the Synagogue is an example of that.

The main differences are in the language, the clothing, the eating habits and in the cultic ritual.



EHAL, a marble recess of Kahal Kados Yassan, where the sacred books of the Torah are kept.

The 2 basics elements of the synagogue are the Ehal (The Holy place) and the Step (a place, elevated, from where they read the Torah on Saturdays on ceremonies).

The Ehal must be face to face with the Teva (a pulpit at floor level), so they stand opposite to each other.

In Romaniote style, the priest stands on the Step, behind the people during the ceremony instead of like in other ceremonies that are more traditional.



TEVA, the pulpit

The interior of the synagogue is designed according to the Romaniote tradition, which means that the seats are oriented towards each other. This style is unique to Ioannina, as it is the only Romaniote style synagogue left in Europe.



## The women

The women, during the ceremony, have a different entrance. They are not allowed to come by the main entrance, and they must use a side door. This tradition exists to avoid temptation.



The women must go upstairs in a special place on the balcony, named **Mechitza**, where they can attend the ceremony from above, while the men sit downstairs.



## The History

The Jewish people settled in Ptolemy Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor and also in Greece where they adopted the Greek language and the culture.

The Greek language became the universal, intellectual, and urban language of the Jews in Greece.

At the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, anti-Jewish riots took place in Ioannina. This led to the first wave of Jewish emigration to New York and Jerusalem. In these places, they built synagogues of the “holy community of Ioannina”.

At the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century about 4000 Romaniote Jews lived in Ioannina. But the economic crisis, the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of Nazism and the Shoah led to a second wave of emigration to New York and Palestine.

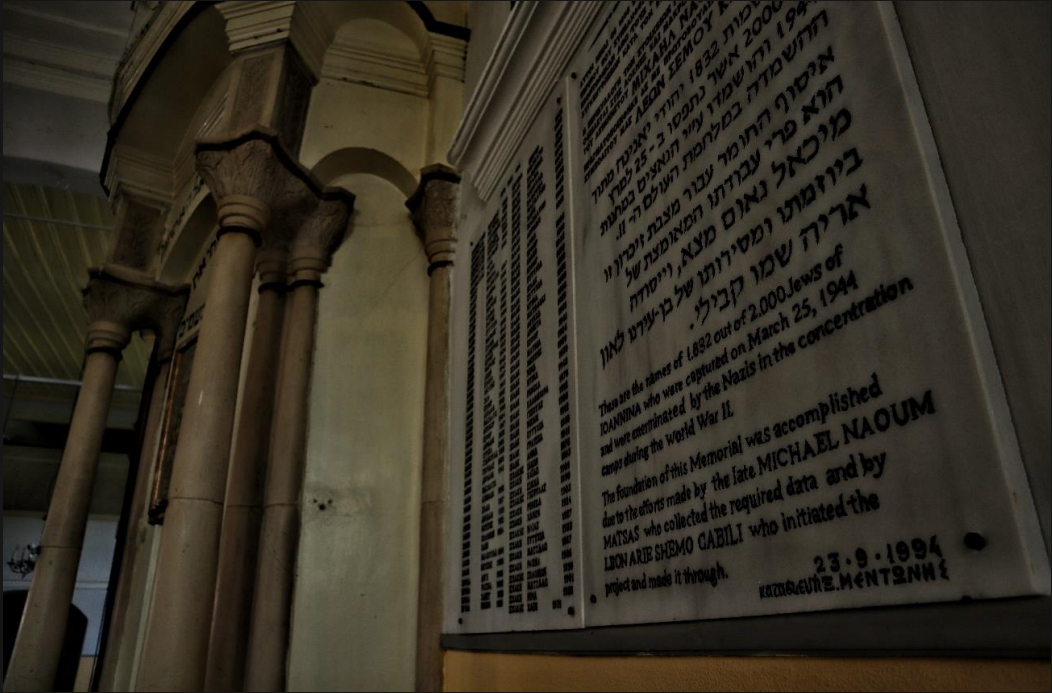
Today there are only about ten thousand Jews in the whole of Greece.



“Blessed are the people who have calmed down Kay”  
“Blessed is the Lord of hosts”

The synagogue was burned during the German occupation, but it survived thanks to Demetrios Vlachides, the mayor of Ioannina between 1929 – 1936, and 1946 – 1949.

Inside the synagogue, on the walls, on marble tablets, there is written the names of the 1850 Jews who were deported on March 25, 1944 to concentration camps (mainly Auschwitz) during the Holocaust.



Only 163 survived.



After the war, the survivors of the Holocaust came back to Ioannina to send the Torah scrolls to museums in New York City and Jerusalem. Today, these scrolls are still exposed in these museums.



The Hebrew text on the stone slab above refers to the donations of Rabbi Shlomo Matzliah to the New Synagogue and to the Holy Society of the Talmud Torah. The Jews of this synagogue must every year read a section of the Zohar and the Haftarah in his memory.





Today, most of the Jewish survivors who remained in Ioannina, live in neighborhood where the synagogue is located. Located here is also the Center of the Jewish Community, called “Ta Evraika”.

The current mayor of Ioannina, **Moses Elisaf**, is a Jew and he is the president of the Jewish association.

A sculpture was also erected in honor of the Jews deported to Auschwitz on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944 during the Holocaust.

*“In memory of our 1.850 Jewish cohabitants who were arrested on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944 and executed in the concentration camps Ioannina municipality”.*

