

JEWISH YANNIOTES FROM AMERICA VISIT IOANNINA
WITH THE AIM OF BECOMING ACQUAINTED WITH THE SPECIAL MOTHERLAND OF THEIR GRANDPARENTS
BY GEORGE SIOBOTIS

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“On the 20th and 21st of July, a group of Yanniot Jews from New York visited our city. The purpose of their visit was to acquaint themselves with the special motherland of their grandparents. The leader of the delegation was Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos, the Director of the museum in the Yanniot Synagogue of New York (Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum).

On the occasion of this visit, the family of Chaim and Suzanne Kofinas (descendants of the large Kofinas family who used to live in Ioannina) celebrated the Bar Mitzvah (religious coming-of-age custom) of their son, Seth Kofinas, on Saturday, July 21st, in the synagogue in Ioannina. There were many Christians invited to the event.

As the Vice-President of the Jewish Community of Ioannina, John Kalef-Ezra, a professor at our university, explained, the religious coming-of-age ceremony for boys (Bar Mitzvah) takes place at the age of 13, and is one the most important landmarks in the life of a Jewish male. According to the Talmud (the Bible), at this age a young boy enters the phase of responsibility and can take part in all religious services. It is thought that the Bar Mitzvah first came into being in the beginning of the 15th century. The young boy is called up to the bema and, for the first time, reads from the religious law (sic. Torah), and a portion of the Bible of the Prophets (sic). He wears the “filaktiria” (as the tefilin” is called in the Romaniote dialect) on his left hand and forehead. The tefilin is nothing more than two small leather boxes holding writings in indelible black ink. The writings are four paragraphs from the Bible, most often the Ten Commandments.

After the service inside the synagogue, all of the invitees went outside into the courtyard, where there followed a “kiddush” (a sanctified offering) consisting of light drinks and traditional Yanniot sweets.

The Yanniot Synagogue of New York was built in 1927 by those Jews who chose to emigrate mainly after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 due to the poor economy. As explained to me by Ms. M. Ikonomopoulos, the first settlers (sic) wanted to continue to follow their religious traditions and created synagogues (in addition to the one in Manhattan) in Brooklyn, Harlem and the Bronx. With the passing of the years, the descendants continued the traditions up to today at 280 Broome Street.

In the afternoon, the celebration continued with a meal in a restaurant on the island, where, according to tradition, the young boy, Seth, was presented with gifts from his co-religionists.

It is worthy to mention the presence of two senior members of the group (one 85 years old and the other 87), Elias Eliasof (Hy Eliasof) and Matsil Matsilia (Max Marshall), both born in America, who, as they were leaving, spoke to me in Greek (in Yanniot dialect) some words and phrases they remembered from their grandmothers and their parents. Let me mention some words as examples: doumatis yioumstes, duo pats k’ena gyrou, pivvataou, na t’krino, masiala, skiaziti, I yunaikis krevoun, eimasti romaioi imeis (Romioi=Ellenes). The confessed to me that they enjoyed speaking with me because Greek words came to their lips, words they heard from their grandparents and which they had now forgotten since they did not have the opportunity “na krinou” (to speak).

They informed me that their ancestors used to go to a park in New York where there was very cold water so that they could dip their watermelon, tomatoes and cucumbers in the ice water to chill them the way they used to do when they lived in Ioannina.

At the end, music was played, and slowly, slowly, one by one, they got up to joyfully dance Greek dances, which most of the younger guests did not know, but they quickly learned the steps to the beautiful rhythms of the pogoniou.”

Translated from the Greek by Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos and reprinted here with her permission.