The Greek Jewish Tradition: A Fulbright Scholar's Report

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Ethan Marcus is currently serving as a Fulbright Research Scholar in Athens, Greece and is a recent graduate of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Prior to his arrival in Greece, he served as the Community Development Director for the Seattle Sephardic Community and the Communications Director for the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America.

At Friday Night Kabbalat Shabbat Services in the Synagogue of the city of Ioannina, an old man stood up to the podium, chanting in the melodies of his community. As I sat there and listened to him, my eyes begin to well with tears and I smiled; this inspiring community leader for nearly seven decades still had it within him at 90 years old to sing, and sing with pride. As he clutched the podium for support, he sang with tremendous emotion and power, as if he was still a young man. Suddenly, at the height of the prayer, he nearly collapsed, thankfully caught by some of the congregants right next to him. That man, Samuel Cohen, was a Holocaust survivor from northern Greece, and recently passed away at the age of 93. That was a defining moment for me, a point which I realized that I had a duty as a Greek Jew to tell his story, and the stories of the Jews of Greece, before it disappeared for good.

My Greek Jewish heritage is one major source of pride in my life. I've constantly asked my father about his parents' roots in Greece and the former Ottoman Empire, their experiences immigrating to New York and the struggles they made to get me where I am today. My congregation, Kehila Kedosha Janina (Holy Congregation of Janina), the only Romaniote synagogue in the Western

Hemisphere, still reads in many of the traditional melodies of my ancestors. I have given tours at my synagogue's Museum about Greek Jewry and told visitors exactly where my grandfather and great grandfather lived in Greece. Most of all, I love inspiring other young Greek Jews within my community, helping them to realize how special they are and ignite their passions for learning their traditions and becoming more active in the community.

Yet a lot of people ask me why I am so passionate about my Greek Jewish community. Many of my friends pester me, asking why I'm so active in promoting Greek Jewry and making sure everyone knows how proud I am of it. But for me, in all honesty, this isn't a choice. It can be a burden, a responsibility I have to the more than 67,000 Greek Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Yet this rich culture still lives on, and needs to be shared.

Jews have had a continuous presence in Greece for over 2,300 years, dating back to the time of Alexander the Great. This ancient community, known as Romaniote Jews, has the distinction of the longest, continuous Jewish presence in the European Diaspora. Romaniotes possess a unique set of practices, poetry, songs, and traditions unlike any other Jewish community in the world. They developed their own Judeo-Greek language, a combination of ancient Hebrew and Greek still spoken by some today. While much of the Jewish world follows the Babylonian Talmud, they follow the Jerusalem Talmud. Yet this historic and incredibly rich tradition is under threat. The Romaniote minhag is struggling; only around 5,500 Jews remain in Greece today, and those who still remember their communal customs prior to the Holocaust are in their 80s and 90s. Time is of the essence – many have already passed away and if something is not done to document this heritage, it may slowly fade away.

That is why I am currently serving as a Fulbright Research Scholar in Greece, working with the Jewish Community of Athens under its Rabbinate and the Jewish Museum of Greece. My research is focused on creating an online database of documented recordings of the liturgical traditions, developing corresponding booklets of these written traditions paralleling the online resource, and collaborating with the Jewish Museum of Greece to curate a public exhibit on these traditions.

I have been privileged enough in my work thus far to be able to closely collaborate with the leadership of the Jewish Museum of Greece and the Jewish Community of Athens, including the current Rabbi, Gabriel Negrin, who as a young, native Athenian is doing amazing work to reconnect the next generation of Greek Jews to their heritage. I have not only begun conducting interviews with Rabbi Negrin and working with him one-on-one to document his extensive knowledge of Romaniote customs, but have also connected with an important network of contacts throughout Greece, both among the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. The Jewish Museum, which houses a robust historical archive and is doing amazing work producing new scholarship on Greek Jewry, has also been gracious enough to grant me access to explore many of its records, including beautifully digitized Romaniote manuscripts that are hundreds of years old. I've also begun to shadow Rabbi Negrin at religious services and community programs during my time in Greece, giving me the chance to record unique elements of the community prayer as well as learn some of them myself.

Engaging with the local populace throughout Greece will be an integral part of my research as well. I've begun to connect with some of the elderly, most knowledgeable members of the Jewish communities, with plans on traveling to the historic centers of Romaniote Jewish life in Greece, such as the cities of Ioannina and Arta. This will consist of personal interviews through audio and video recordings to document their expertise of specific traditional practices. These interviews will also include conversations of what life was like growing up in pre-WWII Greece, descriptions of their communities, and most importantly, discussions of the traditional songs and customs of Greek Jewry.

As I collect materials to develop an online database, I am also working to compile the available texts that parallel these recordings, drafting Booklets organized by life cycle events, holiday practices, unique Greek Jewish piyutim (liturgical poetry), and cultural traditions that have been gathered through my individual research and interviews. I hope that by Spring 2020, we'll be able to develop a public exhibit on my work through the Jewish Museum of Greece, using it as an opportunity to not only promote my work in Athens, but to publicly highlight the importance of mutual engagement between the United States and Greece through the Fulbright Program. My hope is that this can eventually turn into a

traveling exhibit, allowing it to move to Museums in the United States.

My greatest hope, however, is that this project will not only serve as a resource for academic inquiry around the world, but will directly help both the Jewish Communities of Greece and my own Greek Jewish Community in New York. These beautiful traditions, whether it’s the unique hazzanut, piyutim, holiday customs, halakhic interpretations, or even special Jewish worldview, cannot end up being just something one reads about in a museum. They must remain a part of a living, active tradition, one practiced by my Greek Jewish Community in America as well as the one in Greece itself. I want the next generation of young Greek Jews that come after me to be proud of their heritage and work towards giving it a voice within the wider Jewish world. Indeed, it needs to be an integral part of the collective Jewish experience.

With time, I have realized how important it is that I not only continue to promote and serve my small Greek Jewish community, but I learn its traditions and love of life that so many Greek Jews did not have the chance to express themselves. I have a direct responsibility to ensure this rich identity not only continues to survive, but thrive. These traditions and memories cannot die. For Samuel’s sake, I cannot let them die.