Jewish Greece: a journey in the past and present[1]
By Elias V. Messinas*[2]*, PhD, MSc, MArch, BDes

Within Judaism, the synagogue is second only to the Temple in Jerusalem in its importance as an institution, and the religious, cultural, and social center of the Jewish communities. It is traditionally believed that it originated during the period of the Babylonian Exile (586-530 BCE), and is believed to have been created in an effort to preserve the Jewish religion during exile from its spiritual heart, Jerusalem. During the Second Temple Period (164 BCE -70 CE), with the return of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem, synagogues not only retained their function but even multiplied in Eretz Israel[3] and beyond.

According to the ancient historian Strabo[4], there were organized Jewish communities with, most probably, at least one synagogue, in most major Greek cities as early as the first century BCE[5]. Between 49 and 52 CE, St. Paul the Apostle visited Jewish communities during the course of his second journey to Greece, preaching Christianity in the synagogues of Philippi[6], Thessaloniki[7], Veroia[8], Athens[9], and Corinth[10]. The oldest-known Greek synagogue, dating from the first century BCE, was unearthed in Delos, although its Jewish origins have been disputed, while synagogue mosaic floors dating from the c.4 CE have been discovered in Aegina and lately in Chios. The mosaic floor of Aegina indicates in a Greek inscription that it was built by Theodoros (Nathaniel) Archisynagogos. According to excavation evidence published by E.L. Sukenik[11] and B.

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1. With notes and quotes from the author's journeys, writings, manuscripts and notebooks.

2. ELIAS V. MESSINAS is an architect, graduate of the Yale School of Architecture, Bezalel Academy, and holds a Ph.D. from the National Technical University of Athens, and a post-doc from the Technion. He initiated the survey and study of the synagogue of Greece in 1993, preserving in detail architectural records of synagogues since demolished. Since 2016 he has been the chief architect and coordinator of restoration projects of synagogues throughout Greece - including Thessaloniki, Trikala, and Kos.. He has lectured, and exhibited his work in the United States, Israel and Europe and is the author of several books and numerous articles. Founder and editor of *Kol haKEHILA* the newsletter and website for the Jewish Monuments of Greece and founder and coordinator of ECOWEEK with activity in 17 countries. He is the urban planner of the Ginot Hair Jerusalem community council, and a Senior Lecturer at the Design Faculty of Holon Institute of Technology.

3. Ezekiel (11, 16).

4. Strabo (1928), *Geography*.

5. Mazur, B. (1935). *Studies on Jewry in Greece,* 8.

6. Acts (16, 12).

7. Acts (17, 1-2).

8. Acts (17, 10).

9. Acts (17, 15).

10. Acts (18, 1).

11. Sukenik, E. L. (1934). *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, London.

Mazur,[12] the synagogue was a rectangle with an apse, built over an earlier building, most probably also a synagogue. The synagogue in Chios, the magnificent mosaic floor of which was discovered accidentally in 2008, indicates in Greek inscriptions that the synagogue was tended (or built?) by Eilasios and Damalios. The excavation is still in progress and more findings are expected to be published by the Archaeological Service of Greece.[13]

It has also been suggested by the American School of Classical Studies, but not formulated into a full theory, that the Metroon, which is located at the foot of the Hephaesteion (Theseion) in the Agora of Athens, was reconstructed as a synagogue after its destruction by Alaric ‘s Visigoths at the beginning of the fifth century CE. The remains of all these synagogues are still visible and accessible to visitors.

Upon the outbreak of World War II there were 27 Jewish communities and a small concentration of Jewish congregations in several more cities, numbering over 70,000 Jews in Greece, including Romaniotes, Sephardim, and Ashkenazim. These diverse communities prayed in more than 100 synagogues, originating from antiquity, Medieval Spain, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and North Africa. In WWII the Nazis and the Bulgarians in Thrace and parts of Eastern Macedonia, arrested, deported, and annihilated 87% of the Jews of Greece and destroyed most of their houses of prayer. Synagogues were destroyed or converted to other uses. Jewish cemeteries and institutions were also destroyed, erasing traces of a continuous presence since antiquity. In Thessaloniki the Nazis, authorized the destruction and pillaging of marble and brick materials from the ancient cemetery for construction throughout th e city, leaving the cemetery in ruins. On the cemetery grounds, the extension of the Aristotle University was later built.[14]

Upon Liberation we know of 38 synagogues surviving in 25 cities in Greece. Most of these buildings were either ruined or abandoned, or had been converted into homes, warehouses, and stables. As Jewish communities dissolved or seized to exist, many of these synagogues were sold and then torn down during the modern reconstruction of these cities. Very few were saved, thanks to the intervention of local authorities.[15]

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12. Mazur, B. (1935). op.cit., 8.

13. Missailidis, A. (2017). “A Jewish synagogue of the Diaspora in Chios and the inscriptions”. In *International Symposium in Honour of Emeritus Professor George Velenis* Proceedings, Thessaloniki (4-7- October 2017), 1385.

14. Saltiel, L. (2016). “Dehumanizing the Dead: The Destruction of Thessaloniki’s Jewish Cemetery. In *Microhistories of the Holocaust,* 68-84.

15. A rare example is the Kahal Shalom Synagogue in Kos island, where in the 1980s the Municipality purchased the synagogue to use it as a municipal cultural center.

Today, just 15 synagogues remain in 12 cities throughout Greece. Two synagogues in Athens (Beit Shalom and Yanniotiki), and three in Thessaloniki (Monastirioton, Yad LeZikaron, and Yoshua Salem at the Shaul Modiano Retirement Home). One synagogue also stands in each of these cities: Corfu (Scuola Greca), Chalkis (Chalkida), Chania (Etz HaHaim), Ioannina (Kahal Kadosh Shalom), Trikala (Yavanim), Volos, and Veroia. A prayer hall in Kavala, located inside the former Jewish community center was recently demolished.

The research on the synagogues of Greece by the author was initiated in 1993. Developed, expanded and disseminated in publications and exhibitions for about ten years, the project was all but halted for a long time. Due to rising interest on the subject, a new book by the author on the synagogues of Greece was published in April 2022.

Titled "The Synagogue" (Η Συναγωγή, in Greek), a new book by this author was published by Infognomon Editions in Athens,[16] and is currently being translated for an English edition. Prepared by this author over the course of several years, this book, diverted from an exclusive architectural or historic narrative. It rather suggested a different narrative. One, that is at the same time, a geographic progression from place to place, and through dialogue with people and through notes, it is like a journey from the present to the past. Traditional narrative focuses on chronological order of history and centers upon individuals, action and intention. The modern narrative typically focuses on structures and general trends. In comparison, the book "The Synagogue" combines the historic narrative focused on structures (the synagogues), embellishing each structure with dialogues and human stories related to the synagogues, their architecture and history. What the book engages the reader with, is the human stories behind the research, turning the reader into a partner in the process. As a matter of fact, as many cities have lost their Jewish communities and the people to tell the story, the stories in the book, bring the synagogues – or traces of these synagogues and the surrounding built context of the former Jewish quarter - back to life. It is as if, in order to experience the Greek Jewish geographic presence – or absence – we have to move in time and space, and to connect to people. Time enables a direct connection with the pre-Holocaust communities and Jewish life: from their distinct liturgy in the synagogue, to their traditional food and Jewish quarter architecture. Space enables a connection between the synagogue and the Jewish quarter. Also, connections between Jewish communities in different cities. Thus, helping us understand their similarities and learn from their differences. And people. They give life to this experience, bringing us

16. Messinas, E. (2022). The Synagogue. Athens.

closer to the buildings as living organisms. For example, the Jewish quarters in Veroia (Barbouta) and Komotini, both in a defensive layout[17] are very similar to the 'cortijos' of the dense Jewish quarters of the city center of Thessaloniki. There, prior to the fire of 1917 communal Jewish life was mostly concentrated. Yet, very different from the post-1917 layout of the modern city of Thessaloniki. Designed by French architect Ernest Hebrard (1875-1933), it was a cosmopolitan modern Greek city with wide avenues and landscaped public squares adorned with religious, public or ancient monuments.[18] In the book "The Synagogue, it is thanks to the local people who guide the author to find his way to the 'Ovreika'[19] – the Jewish quarter - in Didimoticho and the remains of the mosaic-tile floor of the demolished synagogue. He found it in 1993, used as an open parking lot. Otherwise, it would be hard to locate within the modern city.

"'Where was the Jewish quarter?' he wondered. As if expecting someone, perhaps a passer-by, to give him a response. But they, especially the younger ones, didn't know. Someone, older, stopped and corrected him: 'The Jewish quarter? You mean the 'Ovreika'? 'Yes!' he responded. 'The Ovreika'. He directed him towards OTE [Hellenic Telecommunications Organization building], near the officers' club. He followed the narrow streets looking for clues, for some sign, to help him find the exact place. What was he looking for? He wasn't sure."[20]

It is also thanks to people like the late Minas Kostis, born and raised in the Jewish quarter of Chalkis, who unravel before the author the names, the family ties, and the stories of the Jewish community. The narrative unravels on top of a pre-war city plan of the Jewish quarter of Chalkis, where notes and numbering was densely marked on each of the houses on the map.

Chalkis Sunday September 19, 1993

"I spoke with Minas Kostis and Marios Maisis for hours. Maisis told me that the synagogue was repaired by his father, Solomon Meir Maisis, who built the marble heikhal, the marble bimah, the marble bases of the four columns, and the overhang over the entrance to ezrat nashim [...] Minas Kostis remembered all the Jews who lived near the synagogue. All of them!"[21]

If we go back in time, we will find Kanaris Konstantinis in 1946, as an employee of the Hellenic Post and as an official representative of the

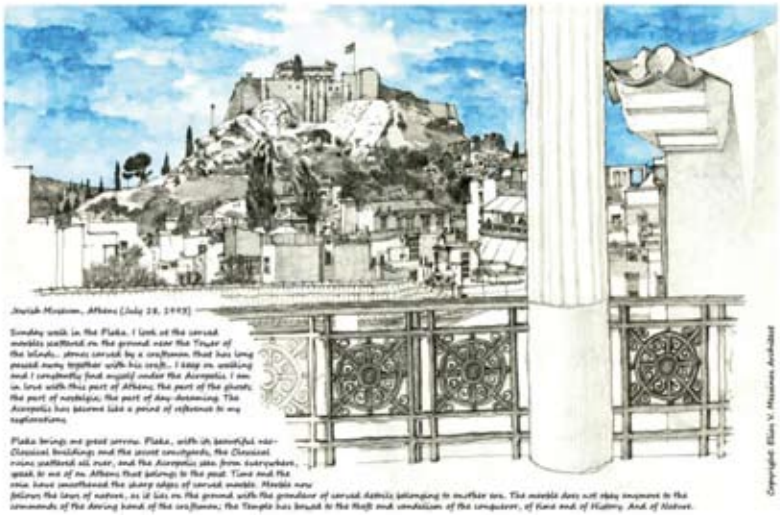
17. Messinas, E. (2011). The Synagogues of Greece. New York, 33-34.
18. Messinas, E. (1997). The Synagogues of Salonika and Veroia. Athens, 21.
19. The Jewish quarter in the local Greek dialect.
20. Messinas, E. (2022). The Synagogue,47-48.
21. op. cit., 75-76.

Central Board of Jewish Communities, travelling throughout Greece and documenting in detail the state of the Jewish communities, in the early years of reconstruction after the Holocaust. In his reports, published by his son Moisis Konstantinis in 2015, enable us a closer look at the state of Greek Jewry right after the Holocaust, the poor state of most communities, struggling to re-establish Jewish life in big cities and remote towns throughout Greece. Some survivors are getting ready to emigrate or to move to larger cities, and others rooted to their hometowns eager to start a new life. Despite the recent horrors of deportation and the annihilation of relatives and friends, the empty seats in the synagogues and the pillaged businesses once full of inventory.

"In Chalkis, Larissa, Volos, and Trikala the Jewish population is re-organizing. Athens has now more Jews than before the War. Never before the synagogue was so full of people. However, this is not the case in Thessaloniki, Yiannena, and Corfu. These communities, once populous and thriving, they are now skeletal and rickety."[22]

In 1977 the Jewish Museum of Greece was founded 'to collect, preserve, research and exhibit the material evidence of 2,300 years of Jewish life in Greece'. First in a small space in the ground floor of the Yianniotiki synagogue, then, in 1984 moved, to an aristocratic bourgeois apartment on the third floor of 36 Amalias Avenue, overlooking the Acropolis. Finally, in March 1998 moved to its permanent premises on 39 Nikis street in the historic center of Athens. One of the first projects initiated by the Museum director Nicholas Stavroulakis in 1979, with the assistance of photographer Timothy DeVinney, was the photographic documentation of the remaining Jewish sites and synagogues in Greece, funded by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. The documentation featured synagogues and Jewish sites in nearly 30 cities, with short descriptions on the history of the Jewish community. In such an early survey, we find many under-represented cities, such as Didimoticho, Komotini and Xanthi, yet, the photographs of their synagogues, would later enable the author to complete his own surveys and detailed reconstructions. The photographic survey was published in the book *Jewish Sites and Synagogues of Greece* in 1992. It is also available in the archive of the Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens.[23]

22. Konstantinis, M. (2015). The Jewish Communities of Greece after the Holocaust. Athens, 135.
23. Stavroulakis, N., DeVinney, T. (1992). Jewish Sites and Synagogues of Greece. Athens.



View of the Acropolis from the Jewish Museum of Greece on July 18, 1993[24]
(Elias V. Messinas Architect)

Notebook Saturday May 4, 2019

"In 1992 after completing my Masters at Yale School of Architecture, I moved to New York to work at the office of my Yale-design-studio-tutor Gavin Macrae-Gibson (a student of Robert Stern, and a writer.[25] *One of the projects undertaken by the office was the survey of the office inventory of one of the biggest property owners in New York, Winthrop Management L.P. The project involved numerous surveys of entire floors of office towers, some historic and some modern, and the detailed drafting of their floor plans, to be both marketed to future tenants, and allow their remodeling using CAD software. The work required developing skills in measuring and documenting simple or complex spaces, and the ability to translate these measurements into accurate architectural scale drawings. During the same time in New York, I was active in promoting Greek culture, including inviting prominent*

24. Messinas, E. (2002). *Sketches from Greece. Exhibition at the Jerusalem Theater, Jerusalem. The text of the sketch: '**Jewish Museum, Athens (18/7/1993)** Sunday walk in the Plaka. I look at the carved marbles scattered on the ground near the Tower of the Winds... stones carved by a craftsman that has long passed away together with his craft... I keep on walking and I constantly find myself under the Acropolis. I am in love with this part of Athens; the part of the ghosts; the part of nostalgia; the part of day-dreaming. The Acropolis has become like a point of reference to my explorations. Plaka brings me great sorrow. Plaka, with its beautiful neo-Classical buildings and the secret courtyards, the Classical ruins scattered all over, and the Acropolis seen from everywhere, speak to me of an Athens that belongs to the past. Time and the rain have smoothened the sharp edges of carved marble. Marble now follows the laws of nature, as it lies on the ground with the grandeur of carved details belonging to another era. The marble does not obey anymore to the commands of the daring hand of the craftsman; the Temple has bowed to the theft and vandalism of the conqueror, of time and of History. And of Nature.'*

25. Macrae-Gibson, G. (1988). *The Secret Life of Buildings*. Boston.

speakers from Greece, such as architect Prof. Manolis Korres, the head of the Acropolis Restoration Service, at Columbia University. The success of that initiative and a visit to a Sephardic Cultural event in New York, gave me the idea to organize an exhibition of Greek synagogues in New York City. From a preliminary inquiry with the Jewish Museum, I was told that although there were high quality photographs, there were no architectural drawings of synagogues. The decision to initiate the creation of this missing historic and architectural documentation, came only after reading an article by Art and Architecture historian Samuel Gruber, President of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, on the documentation and restoration of synagogues in Europe. A telephone conversation with Gruber – based in Syracuse, NY - and his commitment to secure reimbursement of the photographs of the surveys, was the missing piece to trigger the survey of Greek synagogues. The obligation to serve my army duty in Greece, and the idea to undertake the survey of Greek synagogues, were the two reasons that in the summer of 1993, I took a one-way flight from New York to Athens. Apparently, there was a third reason, of which I was unaware, but was revealed to me a few weeks after landing to Athens: upon returning to Greece, I met Yvette." [26]

In August 1993, thanks to a seed grant from the late Minos Mordochai of the Jewish Museum of Greece board, the survey and study of the synagogues of Greece was launched. The first pilot survey took place in Chalkis[27], the city where Eftihia Negrin (nee Forni) – the grandmother of the author - was born. A relative to the Kostis, Frizis, and Politis families, her family was also related to the wife of Greek army general Mordohai Frizis, a national hero of the Greek Italian war in 1940. A Romaniote community of 325 Jews, established in antiquity inside the medieval fortress of Chalkis – the walls were demolished in the early 20th century. The community hid in the mountains and only 22 people were deported in 1944. Seven returned and the community managed to re-organize after Liberation with more than 170 members. The survey of the synagogue in Chalkis, was a test-drive to fine-tune the methodology and skills developed in New York. The next stop, after Chalkis, was Thrace. Stationed in Didimoticho during his army service, the author visited a cluster of former Jewish communities no longer existing in Alexandropolis, Didimoticho, Komotini and Xanthi. They were all destroyed during the German and Bulgarian occupation and their synagogues abandoned after serving the Greek church for Sunday school for several years, or being used as a storehouse or stables. In 1993 they faced demolition, or were already demolished. For example, the synagogue in Didimoticho was already demolished, but thanks to locals, the author was

26. Messinas, E. (2019). Unpublished manuscript.

27. Χαλκίς / Χαλκίδα.

able to find the location and survey the remaining floor. As a matter of fact, as the synagogue was built on a slope, its demolition didn't affect the base of the synagogue, which was preserved, including the perimeter retaining wall, the projecting niche of the heikhal and the decorated mosaic-tile floor. It was 'preserved' under a thick layer of earth and gravel, while the site was used for parking. The photographic survey of Stavroulakis and DeVinney of a decade earlier, and a surveyor's plan of the footprint of the synagogue, assisted the author to complete the missing parts of the building and to reconstruct accurate drawings of the synagogue. The synagogue in Komotini (called Beth El) and Xanthi, both in an abandoned state, were in danger of demolition. They were both surveyed in great detail in October 1993 and detailed accurate architectural drawings were prepared. Less than two years later, they were demolished in 1994 (Komotini) and in 1995 (Xanthi).

Komotini Wednesday April 13, 2022

"Visit to the synagogue site. My guide historian Jenny Katsari Vafeiadou made every possible effort to connect the historic layers of narratives of today and of the past, by taking me not only to the site of the synagogue and the Jewish quarter, but to the historic part of the city of Komotini, naming the owners of the preserved historic houses. The Byzantine walls have been greatly restored. We saw the walls from Michail Karaoli street, once called Maccabees street it was the main street of the Jewish quarter. Here in the corner with Frouriou street, there are two 1980s apartment buildings. Before WWII, they were the Jewish community center to the right and the Jewish School to the left. We followed the Byzantine walls to the north side and from there we entered the intra-muros area, once the Jewish quarter, from the opposite side of the synagogue. Based on city plans of the 1930s, the houses were built in a rectangle surrounding an open courtyard. Very similar to the 'defensive' plan of the Jewish quarter in Veroia. At the far end of the open space to the right was the synagogue. Today the Jewish houses and the synagogue are all gone. Only the foundations of the synagogue are visible." [28]

The survey project unraveled from there to all corners of Greece. In September 1995, the survey of the synagogue in Alexandroupolis, used by a Christian organization, which also considerably modified the building, took place. Fortunately, a surveyor's plan of the synagogue prior to the modifications, and a surviving original opening and other architectural elements, took place. The synagogue was considerably modified. However, its perimeter walls still intact. The same year, a grant by the Getty Grant Program[29] enabled

28. Messinas, E. (2022). Unpublished notebook.

29. Messinas, E. et al. (1995). *Conservation of the Synagogue of Veroia - Identification Phase Report.* For the Getty Grant Program, Athens.

the author with the team of architects Petros Koufopoulos and Marina Mariantheos, engineer Takis Panagiotopoulos and photographer Socrates Mavromatis, to survey the synagogue in Veroia in great detail, and document it in architectural drawings and in a photographic survey. The two-stage program was completed in 1997. Without an implementation, though, as partial restoration of the exterior of the synagogue was undertaken by the local Municipality towards the 1997 celebrations of near-by Thessaloniki as the Cultural Capital of Europe.[30] In addition, through contacts and fundraising efforts the author secured a commitment by the Hellenic Society Paideia to support the establishment of an exhibition in the basement of the synagogue. However, it was never realized as the interior renovation of the synagogue in 2002 was not coordinated with the author and there was no planning for exhibition. Further, the adjacent neighbor moved his front gate and blocked access to the basement, thus blocking, at least for now, accessibility to the basement and a future exhibition space there. The plans for an accessible exhibition space at the basement of the synagogue. The synagogue of Veroia identification project was also the trigger for the creation of *Kol haKEHILA - The newsletter for the Jewish monuments of Greece*[31] by the author in 1998, first in hard copy and online since 2001. It includes a wealth of materials and updates on the synagogues and the Jewish communities of Greece, and genealogical information on Greek Jews.

"The [Jewish] quarter [of Veroia] kept its secrets. Like the defensive urban layout where the houses are built adjacent to each other, thus creating a protective wall around the open courtyard of the quarter. There at one corner of the courtyard is the synagogue. Around the courtyard were the secrete passages –or 'apanaxi' – which allowed discreet and protected communication from house to house at the basement level in case of emergency. The quarter had two gates. One towards the city, facing 10th Division Street, and one towards the bridge and the river. The gates would close at sunset and open at sunrise. 'Here a question rises,' he often said to his friend Reuven, when their discussions reached the assimilation of the Jews in the societies where they lived. 'Did the gate close from the inside or the outside? Did the Jews close the gates to prevent assimilation with others, the gentiles, and thus protect their traditions? Or were the gates closed from the outside by the authorities? Did the authorities lock the Jews inside to isolate them and thus to control them better?'"[32]

30. Messinas, E. (1997). *The Synagogues of Salonika and Veroia*. Athens, 21.

31. Accessible at https://kolhakehila.org.

32. Messinas, E. (2022). *The Synagogue*, 85-86.

View of the synagogue in Veroia in 1995 [33]
(Elias V. Messinas Architect, Elias V. Messinas Archive)

The surveys of synagogues project unfolded to more cities in northern Greece. As the surveys proceeded, meetings and interviews with locals – Jews or not – took place, where they shared their memories and descriptions of the synagogues and pre-WWII Jewish life in general. The project included more cities, such as Thessaloniki, Kavala, Ioannina, Trikala, Larissa, and Volos, with a visit to Karditsa and meetings with the local Jewish community, yet without a synagogue to survey. Thessaloniki was a unique visit, as Thessaloniki is one of the cities where Jewish history is in every turn. One has only to read and learn about it, and then search for its traces in the city fabric, in the remaining monuments and the synagogues. In one of the visits to Thessaloniki, a friend of the author led him to the Upper City. There, above a high wall, he was exposed to a shocking view: a private courtyard paved in marble tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions, pillaged from the Jewish cemetery, which the Nazis permitted its destruction on December 6, 1942. According to published reports and official documents, the Jewish cemetery had a section with ancient tombs. It was completely destroyed and the marble tombstones and bricks were scattered throughout the city. They became readily available construction material. In such a quantity, that they dropped the price of construction materials at the time. Jewish tombstones made their way to this private courtyard too, and are preserved until today in their original form.

33. op. cit., 81.

View of Jewish tombstones in a private courtyard in the Upper City of Thessaloniki in 2013.
They were pillaged from the Jewish cemetery of Thessaloniki after December 6, 1942 (Elias V. Messinas Archive)

Saturday May 4, 2019

"August 1996 The last round of survey and visits. Following our wedding, Yvette and I went on a honeymoon. My suggestion was to follow a track of Greek islands with a Jewish community and synagogue. Yvette agreed. The choice was very careful, to combine vacation with surveys. We visited Corfu, Rhodes, and Kos. She would spend time with relatives and friends there and I would find time to survey the synagogues. Often she would join me and hold the end of the meter. Her help was great! This round of surveys was completed in Athens, with the Shalom Synagogue and the Yianniotiki Synagogue across the street on Melidoni street near Keramikos in the historic part of Athens. The city where I was born and raised, was the city to close the series of surveys. Beth Shalom synagogue where my grandfather Elias Negrin was arrested on March 25, 1944, before transferred to the Haidari concentration camp and then to Auschwitz on April 2, 1944, was the one to close the survey series. I begun the surveys with the synagogue in Chalkis, the city where my grandmother was born. I closed with Beth Shalom synagogue in Athens, the city where my grandfather was arrested and deported. Even though, he had left his hometown Yiannina with his family to hide in Athens. But, there, in Athens, he was arrested, deported and murdered. One thing may have made him happy, though, on those horrific

moments: the fact that at least my grandmother, my mother and my aunt, escaped arrest and deportation.[34]

In the coming months, more trips were undertaken, to cities without a Jewish community or a synagogue, such as Preveza and Arta. Before WWII the Jewish community in Preveza numbered 250 and Arta 384. With only 15 and 60 survivors respectively, these Jewish communities were dissolved after the war. One would expect that the Jewish memory would be forgotten. Quite the contrary, thanks to the efforts of locals. Among them, two non-Jewish – professionals, who have been instrumental in telling the story of the local Jewish communities. In Preveza, Nikos Karabelas, has been instrumental in raising awareness about the local Jewish community that was annihilated in the Holocaust. Through books and publications, he shares his research with the public. In the early 1990s, he also guided the author to the IKA (Hellenic Social Security Foundation) building, where two Jewish tombstones still stood in 1993. The public building was apparently built on the land of the former Jewish cemetery destroyed shortly after the deportation of the community. Recently, in a communication with Karabelas, several questions were raised regarding two inscriptions dating from 1901, which belonged to the synagogue "Tefila LeMoshe" in Preveza, built in 1932 and demolished in 1962. These two inscriptions are located in the Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens. They commemorate a community donation and contract between the Jewish community and Moshe HaCohen son of Avraham, to pray in the memory of his deceased father and wife in 1901. The inscriptions raised interesting questions regarding the establishment of a synagogue in Preveza in 1901, and its relationship with the later synagogue of 1931 and demolished in 1962. These two inscriptions, located in the Jewish Community of Greece in Athens, commemorate a community contract with a donor, Moshe Avraham HaCohen, to pray in the memory of his deceased father and wife in 1901. The inscription opened an interesting dialogue with regard to the establishment of the synagogue (the older synagogue of Preveza) and the name of the synagogue. In Arta, a young lawyer, Theocharis Vadivoulis, is a dedicated researcher of the history of the Jewish community of Arta, on behalf of descendants of Jews from Arta. His familiarity with legal documents on issues relating to property, inheritance, genealogy and registry, has become an invaluable resource on the Jewish history of Arta, a Romaniote community, with close relations to Preveza and Ioannina. Vadivoulis is also knowledgeable of the hidden secrets of Jewish history still remaining in his city as revealed to him by relatives of deported Jews, or through his research in the city registry and archives. In 2019

34. Messinas, E. (2019). Unpublished manuscript.

the author met Vadivoulis in Arta, and there, in a walk through the former Jewish quarter of Arta, he had one of the most outstanding experiences in his journey through the Jewish heritage of Greece:

Sunday September 29, 2019

"Walking the streets of Arta with Theocharis Vadivoulis was like reading a genealogy tree of the Jewish Community. As we walked he explained: 'this was the house of the Mizan family. There were two brothers, Samuel and Jacko. Their sister Elvira married, while their other sister Mathildi died after liberation on the train to Greece. This one belonged to Jacko, also a Holocaust survivor. He lived in Athens and had two children, Zozef and Anna. This one was of the Iochanas family'. Each house has its identity, and each family a story. Stories of people long lost in the Holocaust or long emigrated to Athens or abroad. At a big square Theocharis stopped. 'In this corner, there was a movie theater, Orpheus', he told me. 'This is where Jews were locked in the basement on March 24, 1944. First, they were joined by the Jews deported from Preveza, to the southwest, and then were loaded on trucks, and transported through Agrinion and Patras to Athens. From Athens they were transported by trains to Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp, were they arrived on April 11, 1944. There, most of them lost their lives upon arrival.' At the former Jewish quarter nothing reminded of how the quarter looked like before WWII. Theocharis said: 'Very few houses have survived. This is the house of Nissim Mionis. The house next to it belonged to Fortuni, daughter of Bessos and Telenia Sabas, who got married to Salom Semos from Preveza in 1940. This belonged to Moisis Hatzis family. It hides several secrets. One is a gate in the fence. It leads to a narrow path. On the other side of the path is the house of Solomon Hatzis, Moisis' brother.' Theocharis opened the door between the two Hatzis' houses and walked into a narrow passage. To the left, the opening from the Moisis Hatzis house. To the right, a stone wall with a projecting fountain. 'This', he said, 'is the remaining wall of the Pulieza synagogue!'" [35]

The synagogue surveys completed about 30 years ago, were put aside for more than a decade. Then, 2016, a new journey started. The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki decided to restore the historic Monastirioton synagogue and the more modern synagogue Yad Lezikaron. Also, to create a new entrance and new wing to the Jewish Museum, with accessibility and new exhibition spaces. The community turned to the author and his architectural partners KARD Architects – Dimitris Raidis and Alexandros

35. Messinas, E. (2019). "The Jewish Community of Arta: Fables, Memories and the Holocaust". Jerusalem Post International Edition (November 2019).

Kouloukouris based in Thessaloniki, to complete the task. The project was completed in May 2016 with an opening ceremony that included honorary guests such as the German Ambassador and the Mayor of Thessaloniki. The restoration of Monastirioton synagogue included upgrading infrastructure, interior refurbishment and preservation of the historic interiors, and the reinstallation of the Ten Commandments on the top of the front façade. Yad LeZikaron included the restoration of the historic heikhal, which originally belonged to the Ohel Yossef (Kehila Sarfati) synagogue of 1921 and brought to this synagogue after WWII when the Ohel Yossef (Kehila Sarfati) synagogue was demolished.[36]

In 2019 the Jewish Community of Trikala supported by the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, invited the author to restore the Yavanim synagogue in Trikala. Together with architects Petros Koufopoulos, Marina Mariantheos and Kostas Skaris, engineer Kostas Evangellou, Panagiotis Spiropoulos and architect Yiorgos Antoniou, the team focused primarily on the protection of the historic monument from rising underground water and dampness – caused by climate change, and on the restoration of the interiors of the synagogue. The author, based on his research, also proposed the demolition of the three stores built in the 1950s on the front façade of the synagogue, blocking it from the street. By demolishing the stores, the synagogue was visible again from the street as it was when originally built, becoming (again) a historic point of reference in the historic city center.[37]

In 2019 the author was invited to collaborate with the Eforate of Antiquities of Piraeus and Islands of the Ministry of Culture of Greece, to curate an exhibition on the mosaic floor of the ancient fourth century CE synagogue on the island of Aegina. With Yvette Nahmia-Messinas he also undertook a campaign to fundraise for the preservation and protection of the mosaic for the future. Thanks to this campaign, the Ministry committed to preserve the mosaic and Samuel-Makis Matsas came forward to donate the protective roof over the mosaic. The process of curating the exhibition, led to a fascinating journey through time and space in Aegina, leading to the discovery of a human story behind the mosaic: the story of the German archaeologist Gabriel Welter, responsible for the site, and the American Jewish archaeologist Belle Mazur, who came to Greece in 1932. Their professional and romantic story, mostly unknown, was presented in the chapter on Aegina in the recent book by the author "The Synagogue" (Athens, 2022). The story, like a mosaic,

36. Messinas, E. (2011). The *Synagogues of Greece: A Study of Synagogues in Macedonia and Thrace.* New York, 68.

37. Messinas, E. (2022). *The Synagogues of Greece: A Study of Synagogues in Macedonia and Thrace*: *with Architectural Drawings of all Synagogues*. Second Edition, xi.

is made up piece by piece, by researched archival facts, and completed carefully with fiction, where the facts are missing. Most characteristic is the imaginary notebook that Mazur may have kept as an archaeologist, during her years in Greece. Very much like the notebooks that other archaeologists keep. Inspired by the personal notebooks and sketchbooks that the author keeps since the 1980s, and as there is no evidence of such notebook existing, their existence is fabricated at the end of the story. Through these notebooks, Mazur is imagined to record her experience, and in the end she is imagined leaving Aegina by boat, and letting the notebook slip from her hands into the sea. This happens as the boat leaves the port of Aegina towards Piraeus. As she stands on the edge of the ship, she is imaged letting the notebook drop into the blue waters of the Saronic sea and being lost forever.[38]

The mosaic of the ancient synagogue of Aegina is an important evidence of the ancient origins of Greek Jewry. Dating from the c.4th CE, the mosaic was discovered in 1829, very close to the archeological site of Kolona, by the German archaeologist Ludwig Ross, who was later appointed professor of Archeology at the University of Athens, founded by King Otto. At that time, the mosaic was still preserved almost intact next to the "Hidden Port". It was covered to be protected and exposed again, to be studied by Hermann Thiersch in 1901, Adolf Furtwängler in 1904 and Eleazar Lipa Sukenik in 1928. Sukenik, one of the founders of the Department of Archeology at the Jewish University in Jerusalem, studied the mosaic with Franz Gabriel Welter and published it in England in 1934. Shortly after Sukenik, in 1932, the mosaic was uncovered again, to be studied this time by the American Archaeologist Belle Mazur, who published it in 1935 with Hestia Publishing house in Athens. The German archaeologist Franz Gabriel Welter also supervised this expedition, as the supervisor of the archaeological site of Kolona and the mosaic of the synagogue. Welter, who had begun in the early 1920s as a volunteer-assistant at the German Archaeological Institute in Athens, took over the responsibility of researching the site of Kolona and Aphaia. Mazur studied the mosaic, under the supervision of Welter, and then published her study of the ancient synagogues in Delos and Aegina as well as a study on the Jews in Greece since antiquity. In the 1960s, the mosaic was still in its original position. It was fenced to be protected from visitors stepping on it. It was then removed in the 1960s to be placed in the courtyard of the Archaeological Museum of Aegina, while at its original site, the Avra Hotel was built. In the coming months, the mosaic is scheduled to be preserved and protected by a new roof.[39]

38. Messinas, E. (2022). *The Synagogue*, 91-113.

39. Messinas, E., Messina-Nahmia, Y. (2020). "The Preservation of the mosaic of the ancient synagogue of Aegina: the next phase". *Saronic Magazine* 89 (2/11/2020), 30.

“Dr. Welter; » she asked hesitantly.
“Good morning,“he replied in a heavy German accent. In his forties, red-haired with blue eyes, dressed in a light shirt and beige shorts. She met him at the archeological site of Kolona, as he was giving instructions to the young archaeologists who had come, to gain experience. Most were Germans, but there were also Americans, French and some Greeks.
“My name is Mazur, Belle Mazur. Nice to meet you." She reached out her hand to introduce herself. He held it and kissed it with obvious charm. Belle smiled shyly with the gesture but pulled it discreetly.
“Mazur; Of Polish origin?“
“Yes, my parents are Polish Jews. They settled in New York at the beginning of the century. I was born in New York.“

Aegina 1932

“Welter. The surprise of the trip! Handsome, blue-eyed and red-haired with a light beard that makes him so masculine! He speaks Greek like a local. The other day, he was arguing with a Greek worker during the excavation and on the dispute between them, he was correcting his Greek! I do not see the time to reveal the mosaic. From the moment he told me, I have lost my sleep. They have covered it since Sukenik came to study it. Now, it's my turn. I have to go to Delos and see the synagogue there. At the American School I was told to also look at the Metroon in the ancient Agora of Athens. There is also a mosaic there. Should I look at that too? His wife and children often come to the excavations, but he flirts with the young archaeologists without a second thought. Lately, I have the impression that he is flirting with me more intensely. Maybe because his wife left."

Aegina 1935

“I live the most beautiful moment of my life. I'm in love! My book has just been published by Hestia. My Greek is improving. The ancient Greek I learned at the university helps. But the language has changed a lot. Gabriel has found a way to teach me Greek from proverbs. Especially those who say here in Aegina. I feel like I want to stay here forever. It is a paradise. Gabriel suggested I build my house next to his.”

Aegina 1937

“Gabriel has changed. On the one hand, he avoids seeing us together in public. He has cut off all contact with Kahane and Schwabacher. On the other hand, whenever I tell him I want to leave, he tells me not to worry and to stay close to him. The sunset from the house is magnificent!“ [40]

Our journey is not complete, without a stop at another island on the Aegean sea, very close to the coast of Turkey. The synagogue Kahal Shalom on the island of Kos, near Rhodes, had its interior restored by the author in 2023, to function once again as a synagogue. In 2022 the Central Board

40. Messinas, E. (2022). *The Synagogue*. Unedited English translation of the Greek chapter ‘Aegina’, 106-108.

of Jewish Communities of Greece in collaboration with the Municipality of Kos, commissioned the author to upgrade the interior of the preserved historic synagogue of 1935, into a mixed-use synagogue and cultural center. The Kahal Shalom synagogue in Kos, which was preserved after WWII, was purchased by the Municipality in the 1980s and was used as a cultural center for the island. With the increase of tourism from Israel, the need to provide a place for prayer and ceremonies was evident. Until now, the closest synagogue was Kahal Shalom in Rhodes, dating from 1575. The interior upgrade required from the author to extensively research the Italian origins of the synagogue, and the Italian style architecture of the island, under Italian rule until 1943.

The older synagogue of Kos, dating from 1747, was destroyed in the earthquake of April 22, 1933. The new synagogue was reconstructed by Italian architects Armando Bernabiti and Rodolfo Petracco. The author reviewed their original plans at the Municipal Special Historic and Folklore Archive of the Kos Municipality. Due to cost restrains and in order to adhere to the principles of circular economy, the restoration of the interior included the reuse and adaptation of existing furniture. Thus, the *heikhal* was created from an office closet, and the *bimah* from an office wooden desk. Both furniture were salvaged from use and the basement of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki offices. In addition, new wooden seating was added in the interior of the synagogue, in the Italian style, and a light wooden trellis screen to separate the staircase to the *ezrat nashim* from the main prayer hall. This addition was based on the original architects' drawings. The project was locally coordinated by Dimitris Geroukalis of the 'Ippokratis' organization, responsible for the upkeep of the synagogue. The project was completed in July 2023, and a re-dedication ceremony was held, hosted by the Municipality.[41]

In April 2022 a new journey was undertaken by the author throughout Greece. This time the journey focused primarily on presentations of his new book titled "The Synagogue" (Infognomon Editions, 2022), including stops in Thessaloniki, Xanthi, Komotini, Kastoria, Didimoticho, Kos and Athens. The mixed Jewish and non-Jewish audiences indicated to the rising interest on the subject, and the eagerness of local audiences to learn more about the history of the Jewish heritage of their city. Thus, the book provided the occasion for discussions on the Jewish heritage in these cities, enabling the audiences, not only to listen, but also to share their own memories and experiences, in a very accessible manner.[42]

41. Messinas, E. (2022). *The Synagogues of Greece: A Study of Synagogues in Macedonia and Thrace: with Architectural Drawings of all Synagogues*. Second Edition, 171-174.

42. Messinas, E. (2022). "A Jewish renaissance in Greece: Abandoned synagogues get new life". *Jerusalem Post* (14/5/2022).

The former Director of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, Dr. Evangelos Hekimoglou*, who moderated the presentation of the book "The Synagogue" by the author in Thessaloniki, said among others: "'The Synagogue' [by Elias Messinas] lifts the curtain between the book governed by the rules of historiography and research, which usually remains invisible. [...] The historical research and the architectural impressions in the book 'do not wear the academic dress', but meet the events of everyday life."* [43]

This new journey is still in progress. As the author published his new book "To Synagoi" (Infognomon Editions, 2023), new book presentations, lectures and expeditions are taking place in more locations: locations: Athens, Alexandroupolis, Preveza, Ioannina, Kavala, Kastoria, Thessaloniki, and Xanthi. In this journey the author was accompanied by his daughter Maya Messinas and photographer and cinematographer Gil Lupo. Lupo's short videos with the author, on Jewish sites in Greek cities, provide a most updated view of the state of Jewish heritage throughout Greece. Other experts undertake journeys throughout Greece, as for example Samuel Gruber, Director of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments. Gruber's recent expedition in Greece, in collaboration with the Center for Jewish Art, took place in May 2022 [44] and included a complete survey of Holocaust memorials throughout Greece. Details are expected to be made available soon. Finally, a new collaboration between the author and the Ministry of Culture of Greece, aims to enrich the Archaeological Registry of Greece with approximately 400 new entries, to mark the exact location of Jewish sites, monuments, cemeteries and synagogues, throughout Greece. The Greek Archaeological Jewish Registry project is scheduled to be completed in 2024, and will create for the first time, maps that will render Jewish sites easily accessible to visitors.

With the growing interest in Jewish heritage and Jewish sites in Greece, new books make the stories more visible, and maps make the Jewish sites more accessible. They provide a unique opportunity for visitors to experience Jewish Greece in time and place. Through the stories unfolding in these books, Jewish sites are experienced through people and their stories. We hope that the current interest in Greek Jewish heritage will lead to new research and discoveries, and new efforts will be undertaken to preserve these sites for future generations.

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43. Book presentation on the book *The Synagogue* by Elias Messinas (Infognomon, Athens, 2022) at Monastirioton Synagogue in Thessaloniki, Greece (12/4/2022).

44. Messinas, E. (2022). *The Synagogues of Greece: A Study of Synagogues in Macedonia and Thrace: with Architectural Drawings of all Synagogues*. Second Edition, xviii-xxi.

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Exterior view of the synagogue in Chalkis in 1993.
(Elias V. Messinas Archive)

Interior view of the Scuola Greca Synagogue in Corfu in 1996.
(Elias V. Messinas Archive)

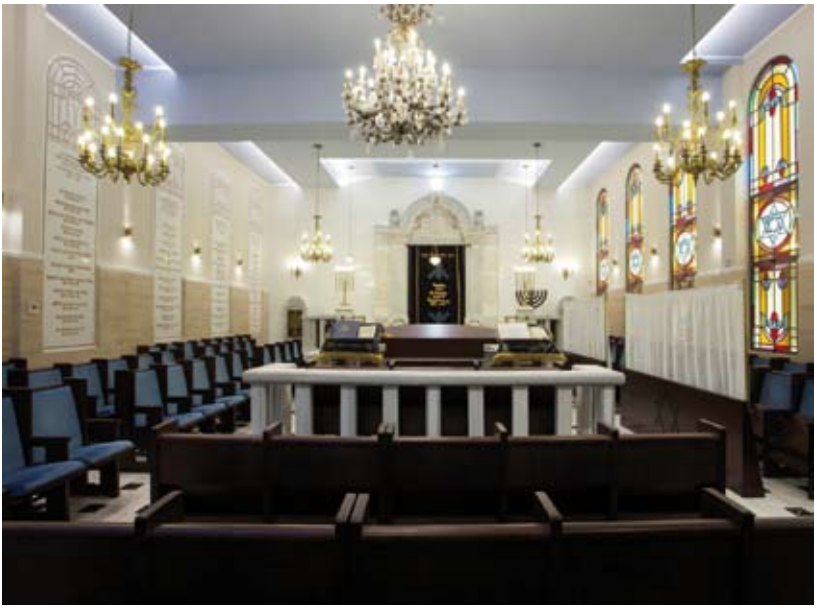
Interior view of the Kahal Kadosh Yashan Synagogue in Ioannina in 2017. (Elias V. Messinas Archive)

Interior view of the Kahal Shalom Synagogue in Rhodes in 1996. (Elias V. Messinas Archive)

Exterior view of Yavanim Synagogue in Trikala in 2020 after the completion of the restoration by Elias Messinas and Petros Koufopoulos – Marina Mariantheos Architects. (Courtesy of Iakovos Venouziou and the Jewish Community of Trikala. Photographer: Fotocenter: Sakis Goulas and Vaios Giourkis)

Interior view of the synagogue in Veroia in 2017. (Elias V. Messinas Archive)

Interior view of the synagogue in Volos in the 1990s. (Elias V. Messinas Archive)



Interior view of Yad LeZikaron Synagogue in Thessaloniki in 2018 after the completion of the restoration by Elias Messinas and KARD Architects – Dimitris Raidis and Alexandros Kouloukouris. (Courtesy of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki. Photographer: Petros Papakyriakou)

Interior view of the restored Kahal Shalom Synagogue in Kos in 2023. (Elias V. Messinas Archive)

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