



The Jewish Community of Arta

GREECE



FROM ITS BEGINNINGS UNTIL 1881

The presence of the Jewish element in Greece dates back to the 4th or 3rd century B.C., as attested by excavations and by a series of archaeological finds, such as the synagogues of Delos, Aegina, etc. Those Jews who inhabited Greece at that period were later named Romaniotes (see Romios), meaning the Greek Jews. They quickly adopted the Greek language, permeated with Jewish words, while their culture formed an interesting combination of Greek tradition and Hebrew religion. The Romaniote Jews have their own formal religious rituals, while the architecture of their synagogues is different to the traditions of other Jewish populations (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, etc.).

The Jews in Epirus were Romaniotes, but it seems that they came to Epirus a few centuries after their first arrival on the rest of Greece. According to Jeanette Battinou, the Romaniote Jews arrived on the Epirus shores (Actium, Nicopolis, Arta area) during the 3rd century A.D. and then they were directed towards the hinterland (for instance, Ioannina). It is therefore very likely that Arta had the oldest Jewish community among the Epirote cities until the middle of the 20th century.

*Cover image: Kanaris Konstantinis at the 'Poulieza' synagogue in 1946.
(© Jewish Museum of Greece Photographic Archives)*



*Arta, 1940: Fourtouni, the daughter of Bessos and Telenia Samba on her wedding day with Shalom Semo, son of Joseph and Pernoula
(from the archives of Mrs. Telenia Samba-Coen).*



A family of Jewish migrants from Arta: New York in the 1920's. Benjamin Mizan with his wife Malcula, his mother-in-law Haido Gani, and his daughters Esther, Anna and Lina (from the archives of Mr. Beni Mizan)

The first written reference made to a Jewish community in Arta dates to the 12th century and it was written by the Spanish-Jewish traveler Benjamin Ben Jonah, from Tudela, Spain. When passing through Arta, he met a community with around 100 families which had built up a significant intellectual and religious presence. During the late 15th century, Arta welcomed a new Jewish population expelled from Apulia, Italy; the Jewish population increased and by the early 16th century, it had reached 1,800 souls. The Jewish community of Arta appeared to be the center of Romaniote Jews for many centuries as well as the most important community in the region, at least until the 16th century, when four synagogues appear to have been active in the city, each with its own worship rituals and customs.





Book with songs of the feast of Purim, according with the Romaniote tradition of Arta and Ioannina (1875 edition, Jewish Museum of Greece Collection)

Due to the important work of its rabbis and the presence of the great religious library at the 'Greca' synagogue, Arta had been named Rabbané Arta, meaning Arta of the Rabbis. Rabbi Benjamin Zeev, born in Arta in the late 15th century, is a typical example of the intermingling relations taking place in the city, the cradle of the Jewish religion. His views on attributing religious justice, in matters of essence as well as Jewish jurisprudence, caused severe criticism by his peers throughout Europe, while some illustrious rabbis from Thessaloniki took his side and saluted his independent spirit. His reply to this criticism was expressed through his main work, entitled 'Benjamin Zeev' (Venice, 1539) – it includes 450 texts with decisions, questions and answers (responsa). The tumult brought by his writings did not cease when he returned to Arta, where he served as a regular rabbi, because many Jews from Europe demanded him to be removed from his position as rabbi.

Apart from its religious dimension, his work acquired unique historic meaning, as it constitutes a source of rare information on the life and tradition of the Jewish

communities on Helladic grounds and in the Ottoman Empire in general.

At its height, the Jewish community of Arta had also established 'satellite' associations, such as the charitable Chevra Tzedakah, Chevra Bikur Holim, the Chevra Acadath Achim brotherhood, etc.



The stamp of the seal of the Jewish Educational Association 'Chevra Talmud Torah' (1880). The stamp belongs to the 'SKOUFAS' Association's collection.



A correspondence envelope sent on the 31-08-1915 from Arta, the seat of the textile company 'Johannah, Chatzis, Ganis & Co.' to the great textile firm 'S.& J. Bloch Söhne' of Zurich.



THE COMMUNITY FROM THE LIBERATION (1881) UNTIL — THE HOLOCAUST

THE COMMUNITY AND ITS SURROUNDING INSTITUTIONS

When Arta was integrated into the Greek kingdom in 1881, the Community counted approximately 800 members. The Chevra Talmud Torah Educational Society as established in 1880, a little before Arta was liberated. The Society managed the four-class Jewish elementary school of the city and its seal is still kept at the 'Skoufas' Association. During the post – liberation period and while the Zionist movement was growing, the Zionist Association of Arta was established by the ideologist and Zionist Haim Daniil, a local resident. In 1920, the Community was recognized by the Greek

state as a public entity. A teacher for Greek was also appointed in the Jewish elementary school, alongside the teacher for Hebrew, and the Community participated officially in all events (national holidays, remembrance days), in which it had only participated customarily until that point. In fact, the Community was also represented during the celebration of the Patron saint, Saint Theodora, Protector of Arta, despite this being a purely Christian celebration.



THE MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY

The Jews of Arta were mostly merchants. They traded mostly textiles, leather, glass and dowry items. Some had stores in the Jewish district, at Monoplio and at Skoufa Street, while others were peddlers. There were few employees or professionals among them. As their Christian compatriots, many Jews also benefitted from cultivating oranges. Of course, there were also numerous Jews who ran errands, others who carried water, as well as seamstresses, women mending clothes, etc. In Arta, Jews stayed in the three Jewish districts of Roloï, Tsimenta and Ochtos, which today correspond to the areas of streets Amvracias, Haïkali, Tzavella, Kosti Palama, Manega, Solomou, Makrygianni, Filellinon. No Jewish ghetto existed in Arta, as the Jewish district was also home to Christians, with their two churches.

Some common Jewish surnames were Sambas, Johana, Mizan, Sousis, Eliezer, Politis, Koulias, Avdellas, Ganis, Mionis, Matsas,

Sabethai, Dentes, Daniil, Shalom, Gioulis, Zaquard, Rousos, Besos, Jeremiah, etc. It seems that the community's population started to go into steady decline from 1881 until the Holocaust, as Jews from Arta were often moving and creating new communities. So, after the liberation and under conditions of financial asphyxiation, the Jews of Arta established the Jewish Community of Preveza. In the early 20th century, apart from the migrating trend towards America, some merchants moved in the direction of Athens, Patras and later Agrinio, making their presence felt strongly in these communities. Naturally, the Jews who were far from Arta maintained their relations with their ancestral hearth. But those who had also remained in Arta were always in contact with the Jewish Romaniote communities nearby in Ioannina, Corfu and Preveza.



The philharmonic orchestra of the 'SKOUFAS' Association in the 1930's. In the front row, third from the right, is Avraminos Hatzis, member of the Association Administrative Council (from the "SKOUFAS" Association's archives)

Apart from the institution of the Community, Jews participated in the social life of Arta, as well as in public affairs. During the pre-war era, some Jews from Arta were elected municipal councilors and even deputy-mayors. Many Jews participated actively at the 'Skoufas' Music and Literature Association of Arta ever since its establishment in 1896, not only as members, but as elected councilors on its Administrative Board.

All this activity ceased with the German Occupation. As with the entire city, this Community also counted its losses from the bombing on the Holy Saturday of 1941, while a family of Jews from Arta lay among the 326 civilians slaughtered during the massacre of Kommeno. (16 August 1943): it was Zakinos Jeremiah, his wife Eutyxia Jeremiah and their daughter Kaiti Jeremiah.



THE HOLOCAUST

Before the Holocaust, the Community had almost 400 members. On the 24th of March 1944, a special Gestapo unit visited the Jewish houses of Arta one by one, violently ejecting the Jews from their homes and forcing them to assemble at the cinema 'ORPHEUS' at Kilkis Square. The following day, together with Jews of Preveza who had been rounded up, they were all loaded onto trucks, and after some stops at Agrinio and Patra (in order to 'collect' the Jews already arrested there), were sent by train to Athens and from there to Auschwitz – Birkenau. The Jewish houses and stores, having been stripped of anything of value, were locked, and thus a large part of

the city center was abandoned. The transportation conditions of the what were now hostages, were wretched: around 70 persons were stuffed into wagons intended for animals, leaving some standing. Women would give birth inside the wagons, the elderly, unable to stand the hardship, perished. The hostages arrived at Auschwitz on the 11th of April 1944. The men were separated from the women and after the initial 'triage', most were exterminated in the gas chambers and later cremated. The obliteration of personality and of any vestige of humanity, hunger and hardships, forced labor, the absence of conditions of hygiene, the experiments by

Dr. Mengele, the 'sorting out' of the healthiest or simply the luckiest and the extermination of the rest in the crematoria are just a few of the elements composing the Holocaust, the worst racist crime committed in human history. The Jewish Community of Arta lost 84% of its people in the Holocaust.



*Pepos (Joseph) Zakar from Arta in hostage uniform, shortly after his liberation
(picture from the internet)*



*The tragic arrival at Auschwitz ...
(picture from the internet)*



THE COMMUNITY POST WAR AND UP TO ITS DISSOLUTION (1959)

Only thirty Jews managed to return from death camps to Arta in 1945 and with another thirty hiding in the nearby villages, having avoided arrest, they created the new Jewish community of Arta following the war. The Jewish school never reopened; half of it was given over to the Scouts Ephorate and the other half housed families of poor Jews. The 'Greca' synagogue had been bombed and was no longer functional, while 'Poulieza', despite the damage it had suffered, was able to hold religious services.



Little neighbors at Filellinon Street (from the left): Amalia Eftaxia and Zoi Matsa arrived at the Amvracian Gulf (1950's). From the archives of Zoi Matsa.



ARTA AND THE — CONTEMPORARY JEWS FROM ARTA

Nowadays, Jews originating from Arta live in Athens, the USA, Israel, as well as in other European countries. Some still have property at Arta, while many visit it regularly and maintain their bonds with their Christian friends. The Holocaust Monument, as well as a bench donated by a Jew of the city for his mother, both lie at the former site of the Castle and the 'Greca' synagogue (square of Jewish Martyrs). The city's Jewish district still preserves some former Jewish houses in their pre-war state (such as the residences of M. Hatzis, I. Mizan, G. Mizan, Sousis), and part of the wall of the 'Poulieza' synagogue with half a well are preserved in a private area.

The Municipality of Arta commemorates its Jews every year, close to the date of their arrest (24-03-1944), with events attended by the Jews of Arta as well as numerous visitors from Greece and abroad, also by the representatives of foreign states, by religious, political, military authorities, etc. These events have brought Memory back to life and have strengthened the bonds of the Jews of Arta with their homeland, some becoming citizens of Arta once more and actively participate in the city's communal activities.



The Holocaust Monument constructed at Arta in 2004, in the memory of our Jewish compatriots who perished unjustly in the concentration camps. Here was the former site of the 'Greca' synagogue.





ARTA
connecting seasons

MUNICIPALITY OF ARTA
Periferiaki Odos & Afxentiou



+30 26813 62101
+30 26813 62115 (DEP. OF TOURISM)
FAX: +30 26813 62253



dimos@arta.gr
gr_tourismou@arta.gr

Texts: Theocharis Vadivoulis, Lawyer – Graphologist

www.discoverarta.gr

