

AN ACCIDENTAL ODYSSEY: JEWS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

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[eJewish Philanthropy](#), June 25, 2013

I had been to Italy and Greece fifteen years before, but in those days I was not interested in finding remnants of Jewish communities and exploring the Jewish past of the area. This summer I had the opportunity to take a whirlwind tour of a few locations in Italy and Greece. Having lived in Israel for the past 11 years, I was now much more curious about Jewish communities.

The Jewish Cathedral of Florence

My journey began in Florence. My first order of business was to climb to the top of the Duomo and to the top of the campanile. I decided that if I had time, I would also visit the synagogue, which I missed 15 years ago. From both of these high perches, I saw a small, beautiful, green-ish dome in the distance that I knew to be the synagogue. After the 463 steps of the Duomo and the 414 steps of the campanile, I was ready to walk on flat ground to the synagogue and back in order to catch my bus that afternoon.



Florence synagogue from the campanile

Arriving to the synagogue, the first sight is the high gates and the protective detail guarding the site, but the green-ish dome beckoned from its hiding place. The security is high – no bags, no photos, metal detectors. And the price seems high as well – €6.50 to enter.

I entered a pleasant, well-kept, clean courtyard and made my way to the synagogue. I noticed that there were groups of Italian (non-Jewish) schoolchildren visiting, which I thought was a good thing for the Jewish community of Florence. Instead of entering the sanctuary first, I went directly to the museum and viewed the beautiful religious and ritual objects of the synagogue. And then I went into the women's section, the balcony, of the synagogue. I was overwhelmed by emotion. For a moment, I couldn't breathe. As much as I had admired cathedrals in the many cities in Europe I had visited, they did not speak to me on a deep level. I have also been to several very beautiful mosques, but again they did not speak to me. Here I was in a cathedral, but it was a Jewish cathedral. David Levi, the man who donated the funds to build it in the late 1870s, said that he wanted to build a synagogue worthy of Florence.

Here I felt that special something that I hadn't felt in any other cathedral. This was a building for my people to speak to our God in our way. It was big. It was beautiful. It honored all the traditions and elevated the community. In this building a person could be inspired and uplifted. And I was.

Hidden Treasure in Siena

My next stop was a visit to my college professor in Siena. As we entered the Campo, the main square of Siena, I thought to ask my professor if he happened to know where the synagogue of Siena was. He did and we went, but it was already closed.

The next day, after a climb up another tower (503 steps), I went directly to the synagogue. The synagogue is a hidden synagogue in that there is little outward evidence of the existence of a synagogue. There are opening hours, but the door is not open. I knocked on the door several times and finally someone opened the door.



The entrance of the synagogue in Siena

“Hello! Where are you from?”

“I live in Israel.”

“Oh! *Baruch habah!*”

And the conversation continued from there in Hebrew. As I was speaking to the enthusiastic woman in Hebrew in the doorway of the synagogue, two more Israelis entered the synagogue. We all went together to tour the museum (€4 or €3 upon showing the ticket from the Florence synagogue) and sat in the sanctuary with our guide who happily chatted in perfectly fluent Hebrew. She has family in Israel and Rome. Sadly, the community in Siena today is approximately 50 people. Yet, the sanctuary has a beautiful marble *ahron kodesh* in the traditional Italian style and a large *bima*. The feeling is that there is a rich and deep history, but today it is only an echo of the past.

The entrance to the museum contains many pictures of the Jewish community in Siena and our guide would have happily talked through the day about its history. One of the interesting pictures was of a wedding that took place during WWII between a Jewish woman of Siena and a Jew from Britain, who was serving in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army.

A WUJS Kabbalat Shabbat on the High Seas

I joined my mother in Venice for an 8-day cruise that stopped in Bari, Olympia, Athens, Santorini, Corfu and Dubrovnik. On Friday night, we noted that the cruise ship had provided a special location for *Kabbalat Shabbat*, so Mom and I went to find out who were the other Jews on the ship. From the 3,400 guests on the ship, one other family of four came.

We were provided with a *challah* (more like braided French bread), white sparkling wine from the kosher Rashi winery in Italy as well as a prayer book. As we spoke to the family, it turned out we had a lot in common. We were all from the West Coast of the United States. They had spent a year living in Israel recently. It turned out that the mother, Iliana, had emigrated at the age of 11 from Minsk in 1978 (my

mother and I emigrated from Moscow in 1973). And as the story developed further, it turned out that she had participated in WUJS in Arad in 1994 (I had participated in 2002).

An Unexpected Encounter in Corfu



Sign to the synagogue

The next day in Corfu a sign saying “Jewish synagogue” caught my eye. From the main street we followed the signs like clues in a scavenger hunt. In each square, we looked for another sign, until the next square and another sign. At one sign, my mother looked into a store and spoke to the owner, but we went on to the synagogue.

The synagogue is a large building and at the entrance, we saw a woman sitting and welcoming guests. My mother and I went in (entrance is free).

“Hello! Welcome! Welcome! Where you from?”

“I live in Israel.”

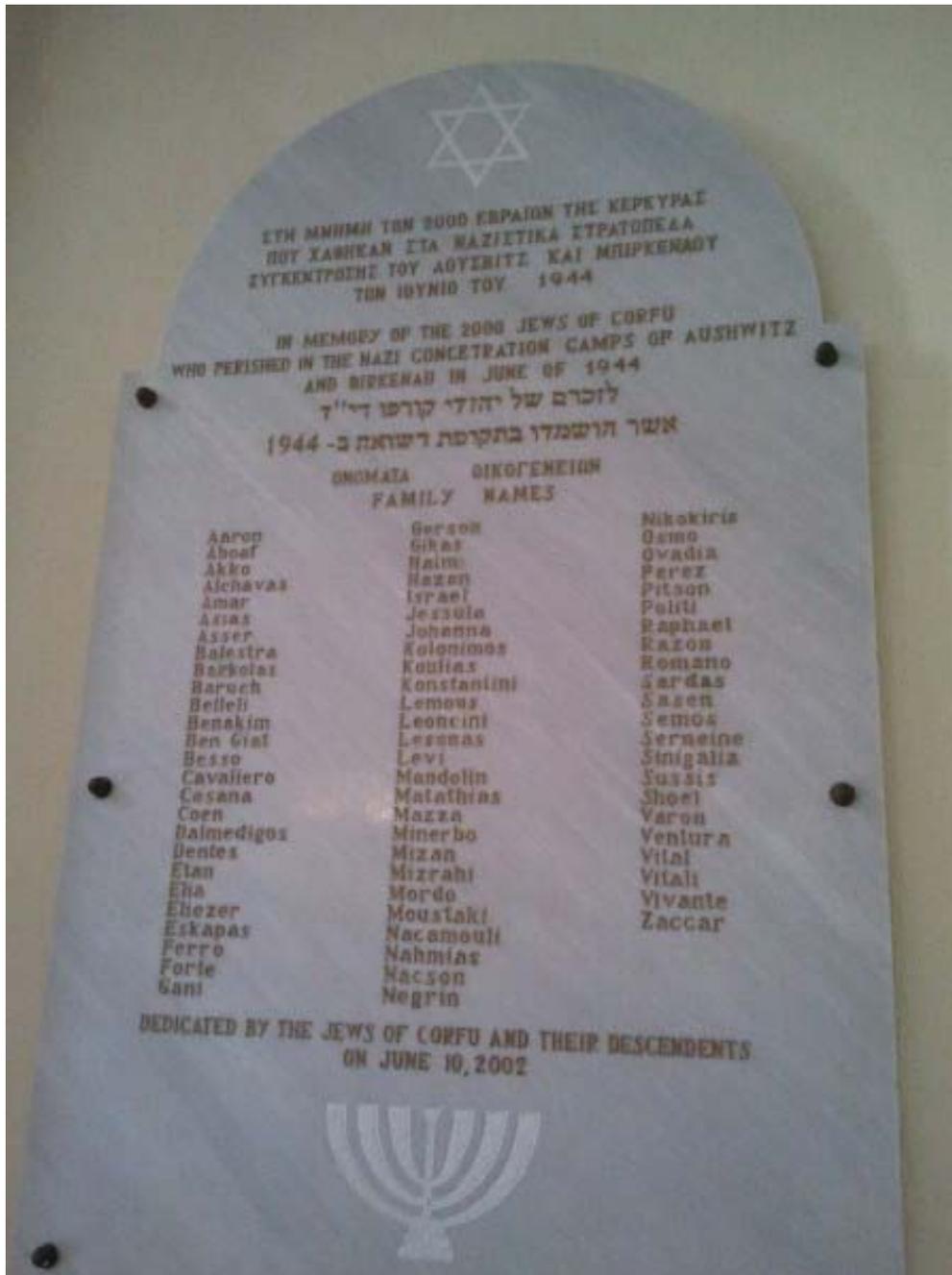
“*Yaffe! Baruch habah!*”



Corfu synagogue

We could have had the conversation in Hebrew, but we switched to English and my mother and I sat and spoke with this large, friendly woman, who sat with her sunglasses on and unapologetically smoked (on Saturday!) in the community room of the synagogue. Ruti, as we learned her name was, lived in Israel for six years and returned to Corfu to care for her sick father. Eventually, she married and stayed in Corfu. She told us that the Jews of Corfu were taken away in WWII, ten families were hidden. Two thousand Jews left

and only about 150 returned. Once there had been three synagogues and now this one was the only one left and was used only during holidays when they brought in a rabbi from Italy, Greece, or Israel. Today there are approximately 50 Jews, eight are children.



Dedicated to the Lost

On our way back to the main street, we passed the store that my mother had stopped into. The owner called out, “Did you find the synagogue?”

“Yes.” How did he know? Did my mother mention it?

“Where are you from?”

“Israel.”

“Bohenna!”

At this Hebrew suggestion, I went right in. “I want to show you something.” He pulled out a package from behind his sales counter. “This is the shirt that my father was wearing when he left Auschwitz and came back to Corfu. From his family of 13, only he and his sister returned. From my mother’s family of 12, only my mother and her sister returned. They met here and made our family.”

In shock, I asked his name and if I could take a picture of him with the shirt. Moshe (Zinos in Greek) agreed. During WWII, the island had first been under the control of the Italians and then in late 1943, under

the Germans. The story of the Jews of Corfu is that only as late as June 10, 1944 (coincidentally I was there on June 15) the Jews were taken to Auschwitz.



Zinos (Moshe) Velelis and his father's shirt

Looking around the store, I saw that the back wall had an Israeli flag and Beitar Yerushalayim memorabilia. A quick search on the internet later revealed that Moshe is the President of the Jewish community of Corfu. As we left, we wished each other a Shabbat Shalom.



The back wall of Moshe's store

Final Thoughts

I went to Italy and Greece for a vacation and to revisit places I had been before to see the sights I had missed. When I entered the synagogue in Florence, I understood that I needed to not only revisit the places I had been before, but revisit them with curiosity about the Jewish community that was there – or in many cases, that was once there. That is what I missed 15 years ago.

Living in Israel has blinded me somewhat to the situation outside of Israel for Jewish communities. The Jewish communities are small, but proud. The best surprises were those that in the smallest communities, there was Hebrew, there was pride, there was still a connection. I was saddened a bit by the communities in Rome and Venice. It is expensive to enter the synagogue and the “Ghetto” is a tourist attraction, no more. Hebrew is not spoken and the community is Roman, Venetian or Italian first, with Jewishness as a close second.

That is why this was an accidental odyssey. Until I arrived in Italy, I did not know what my quest would be. Now, upon my return, what I went to find was a connection to the Jewish community and to be inspired anew to live in Israel.

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