



Immigration of Jews from Ioannina to the United States¹

Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

The diversity in Greek culture is often ignored when scholars talk about immigration patterns and the nature of the Greek Diaspora. Looking at a specific region illustrates some of the nuances involved in mass immigration.

During the massive wave of immigration to the United States between 1881 and 1924, an estimated 15 million immigrants entered the country. By all estimates, both Greek-Christian and Greek-Jewish immigrants were a small minority. What is of interest is the fact, that according to the major source of official data (ship manifests) of those emigrants from Epirus, the greater majority appear to be Jews. While the impetus to leave might have been the same, the dynamics of the emigration and the intentions varied. While all emigrants shared the desire to find resources to improve their lives back in the old country, most Greek- Orthodox Christians thought of the move as temporary, the majority hoping to shortly return to live out their improved existence in Greece. For most Greek-Jews the move was permanent.

For Jews, the dynamics of their lives during the period of immigration to the United States had to do with the parameters within which they lived. They were a minority, both within the Ottoman Turkish world of pre-1913 Ioannina and within the Christian world of post-1913 Ioannina, when the city became part of modern Greece. Their place in society was set, leaving very little room for upward mobility. This is not to say that there were not fairly affluent Yanniotte Jews; certainly the family of Davijohn Levi was an example. But, for the most part, the Jews of Ioannina were middle class merchants or small shop owners, trying to eke out a living and support their ever-growing large families. Antiquated inheritance laws and the need to provide dowries for their marriageable daughters complicated their ability to survive. For a young Jewish man in Ioannina, or the nearby Jewish communities in Arta and Preveza, emigration appeared to be the only means with which they could improve their lives.

The question arises as to whether their experiences and reasons for emigrating differed from those of their Greek-Orthodox Christian counterparts. The fact that Jews in Ioannina emigrated at a proportionally higher rate than their Christian neighbors appears to point to the fact that there were other dynamics involved. It is my hope to shed light on this question and paint a picture of Jewish emigration from Ioannina. The main topics touched upon will be: What was different in the experiences of Greek-Jews from Ioannina compared to that of Greek-Orthodox Christians that led to their emigration? Was there a difference in the years of emigration and, if so, why? From what ports did they leave? Did they share the same destinations in the United States? What influenced their areas of settlement in the United States? In what occupations did they engage? Since my main area of study has been the immigrant experience of Greek-speaking Jews from Ioannina, I will be able to speak extensively on their experiences but, unfortunately, only be able to superficially touch upon the experiences of Greek-Orthodox Christians from Ioannina. This area must be left to those who are, hopefully, studying the non-Jewish experiences.

What was different in the experiences of Greek-Jews from Ioannina, compared to that of Greek-Orthodox Christians that led to their emigration? While both Christians and Jews experienced the same political changes in Ioannina as it changed from an Ottoman Turkish territory to its incorporation into modern Greece, for Jews these changes had different consequences. Now being part of a Christian, rather than a Moslem state, shops were to be closed on Sundays. Jews who observed the Jewish Shabbat and wished to continue to do so were now losing two days of business, rather than just one (on Saturdays). Differences in treatment by the Ottoman Turks affected Jewish emigration even earlier than 1913, the year in which Ioannina became part of modern Greece. Jews became prime targets for forced conscription² into the Ottoman Turkish Empire and, as early as 1899, Jewish males from Ioannina started to leave to avoid serving in a foreign army that they did not support. Greek-Orthodox Christians were not affected by this forced conscription since they were considered potential enemies of Turkey and, obviously, would not be considered desirable to serve in the Ottoman Turkish army. A perfect example of leaving to escape forced conscription can be seen in the experiences of the earliest Yanniot Jewish immigrant, Zacharia Yomtov, who arrived in New York City in 1899 at the age of 25. For a subject of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, twenty-five was an important age. The desirable age for forced conscription in the Turkish military was 20-25.³ While someone could pay another to fulfill this obligation, it became more expensive with each subsequent year. Many of the early Yanniot Jewish male immigrants give the avoidance of military service as the reason for leaving Ioannina⁴.

Was there a difference in the years of emigration of Greek-Orthodox Christian and Greek-Jewish immigrants and, if so, why? In general, the immigration of Greek-Orthodox

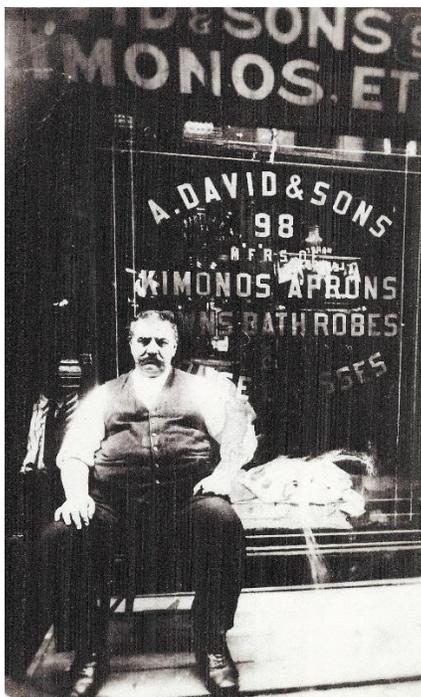
Christians started earlier, some coming as early as 1890, but it appears that most of these were young, single men from the Peloponnese. During this early period of immigration (from 1890-1910) for both Greek-Jews and Greek-Christians, it was an attempt to survive the economic chaos in Greece at the turn of the century.⁵ Many Greek families, both Jewish and non-Jewish, sent their sons to the United States. Initially, the young men, both Christian and Jewish, were expected to work hard in America and then return to Greece, purchase Greek land for their families, and provide dowries for their sisters.⁶ We see a difference in the fact that, while most of the Greek-Christian men did not bring their families over during this period, not intending to establish roots in the New World, most of the Jewish families followed the young men to the United States within a year or two of their arrival.

The ports of debarkation for all Greeks from Epirus were the same. Initially, before Patras became accessible for larger steamships used for immigration in 1906, the main ports chosen were those of Le Havre, Cherbourg, Boulogne and Naples. Major steamship companies advertised America as a place of opportunity and employment. Many offered all-inclusive ticket packages that included transport of immigrants by rail and steamship from their homes in Europe to their new homes in America. As Patras became a major port of debarkation, there was a major increase in the number of Jews leaving Epirus. In the year 1906, of the approximate 4000 Jews living in Ioannina, 1000 left for the United States. According to Rae Dalven⁷, this was primarily due to a discount offered by one of the major shipping lines, cutting the price in half, from \$25 for an adult ticket to \$12.

Comparing Jewish and Christian immigrants from Ioannina, did they share the same destinations in the United States and what influenced their areas of settlement? With few exceptions, Greek Jews from Ioannina settled almost exclusively in New York City, initially on the Lower East Side of Manhattan but, as early as 1904, uptown in Harlem. Greek Christians, also, settled in New York City, but tended to settle in neighborhoods where there was an established Greek Orthodox Church and, often just used New York as a stepping stone to move to other established Greek communities elsewhere in the United States, such as Chicago in Illinois and the mill towns of New England.

Settlement of immigrants is largely determined by two factors, employment and proximity of others from communities in the home country. While Greek Orthodox Christians had pre-existing communities outside of New York City, this was not the case for Greek-speaking Jews.⁸ While there were Greek-Jewish communities elsewhere in the United States, these were established by Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews.⁹ Early settlement of Greek-Jews in Manhattan was largely determined by availability of employment and this explains the initial settlement on the Lower East Side and the

simultaneous move uptown to Harlem. Much of this story revolves around two enterprising brothers, Morris and Solomon Schinasi, originally from Kavala, Greece. The brothers learned how to make superior high quality cigarettes made from expensive imported Turkish tobacco while in Alexandria, Egypt. They brought their secret with them and opened a small factory at 48 Broad Street in Lower Manhattan. Many early Greek- and Spanish-speaking Jews worked for the Schinasi Brothers and, when the firm was moved uptown to Harlem, followed the company uptown. As early as 1904, Ioannina Jews coming off the ships in Ellis Island gave the uptown address (310 West 120th Street) as their destination address.



In discussing the occupations of Yanniotte Jews in the United States, we see a continuance of occupational differences in Ioannina before emigration. Most Greek-Orthodox Christians were engaged in agricultural pursuits and most Greek-Jews were engaged in some aspect of the textile industry, primarily the buying and selling of fabrics and small family owned haberdashery shops. Coming to the United States, Greek-Jews continued their involvement with textiles and opened small family owned garment businesses manufacturing aprons, housedresses, lady's underwear, pajamas and bathrobes. Where their address of destination might have been the Schinasi factories, they quickly moved from the business of rolling cigarettes to that of owning their own small

businesses or working as “operators” in garment factories. When the Harlem community moved further north into the Bronx, many worked in the produce business at the Hunts Point Market. Many of the early Jewish immigrants were also peddlers and engaged in low-end occupations such as shining shoes.

While some of the children of the first immigrants worked in the family owned garment businesses, many chose to take advantage of educational opportunities in the New World and became professionals: teachers, doctors, lawyers, accountants, architects, etc. After all, educational opportunity was one of the primary reasons that Yanniotte Jews left Greece. In Ioannina, in the early twentieth century, young Jewish males rarely went past the sixth grade, just learning enough of the basics of reading and writing and math to help in the family business and, only with the arrival of the Alliance Israélite Universelle¹⁰ were young women given any education. In researching the memorial book for those who perished in the Holocaust from Ioannina¹¹ there were only four professionals in the community of 2000 Jews.¹² The daughters of the early Jewish immigrants from Ioannina still had to overcome the Old-World attitude of their parents, many having to fight to get an education that was thought unnecessary for women.

In many ways, the story of the Colchamiro family exemplifies the story of Greek-Jewish emigration from Ioannina. The family consisted of the eleven children of Jessoula and Rachel Colchamiro. Jessoula bought and sold fabrics for a living and would have had a rudimentary knowledge of math, enough to keep his books. He, of course, was fluent in Greek but probably could not read the language, Jews of his age writing their Greek in Hebrew characters. Rachel had no education at all. Among his children there were four sons and seven daughters, certainly a burden for a poor family, leaving little opportunity for his sons to start out in life and support families of their own and a burden to provide dowries for all the daughters. The first of their children to come to the United States was the youngest son, Elias, who travelled with a married sister and her husband. The second oldest son, Leon, followed with his wife, Julia, leaving their young sons behind until he could establish himself in the New World. The rest of the Colchamiro siblings followed with the exception of one branch of the family, that of Dinoula Colchamiro Bakola, who remained in Greece and were decimated by the Holocaust. In 2006 Kehila Kedosha Janina (Holy Congregation of Janina) ¹³ reunited 156 members of the Colchamiro family in ~~our~~ its synagogue/museum. Among the descendants of Jessoula and Rachel there were doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers, accountants and architects, not only among the men but also among the women. The sacrifices of the early immigrants had enabled their children and grandchildren to fulfill the American dream but, the most emotional part of the reunion is they had never forgot where they came from. Like other Greeks, they carried with them a love for Ioannina, the city their ancestors had left behind.

¹ This essay originally speared in Greek in a journal that accompanied an exhibit at the U of Ioannina on Emigration from Epirus to the United States mounted in 2016.

² Yildiz, Gultekin, *Ottoman military organization (1800–1918)* in *The Encyclopedia of War*, First Edition. Edited by Gordon Martel, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with Estelle Yomtov on November 2014. Estelle was Zacharia’s youngest and only surviving child. In the interview, she stated that she always thought her father was “running away from something.”

⁵ Charles Moskos, *Greek Americans: Struggle and Success*, p.156. Transaction Publishers; 2nd edition (January 1, 1989).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dalven, Rae, *Jews of Ioannina*, Cadmus Press, Greece, 1990.

⁸ Greek-speaking Jews are referred to as Romaniote. They have lived in Greece for over two thousand years. They are distinct from the Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jews who settled in Ottoman Greece after 1492. For a general account of the history of Jews in Greece, see the special issue of the *Journal of Modern Hellenism*, Nos. 23-24 (Winter 2006-2007), edited by Dan Georgakas, Christos P. Ioannides, and Nicholas Alexiou.

⁹ Jews from Rhodes settled in Atlanta, Georgia; Los Angeles, California; Seattle, Washington; and Portland, Oregon.

¹⁰ Alliance Israélite Universelle was a French based institution that initially had as its mission the education of Jewish youth in the Ottoman Turkish Empire. The Alliance came to Ioannina in 1905.

¹¹ *In Memory of the Jewish Community of Ioannina*, published by Bloch Publishing, NYC, 2004.

¹² Among the men there were two teachers, a rabbi and a lawyer and only one female professional, a teacher.

¹³ Kehila Kedosha Janina is located on 280 Broome Street in NYC. It functions as a synagogue and features a museum on its upper floor. It has been honored by being listed on the National and State Register of Historical Places and has received NYC Landmark status.

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