

Jewish Revival in Crete

Dr. David Clark

Virtually the whole of Crete's Jewry perished during the Shoah. The Germans rounded up all Jews on the island in May 1944, put them aboard a ship bound for Piraeus; the ship was sunk at sea by the British and all aboard died. And yet there is a new community springing up on the island, thanks in large part to the efforts of one visionary enthusiast.

Nicholas Hannan-Stavroulakis, who had been instrumental in setting up the first Jewish museum in Athens in 1979 and a subsequent museum in Thessaloniki, settled in the small harbor town of Chania in Crete, and soon took on a new project. This was not only the restoration of the town's synagogue, but also the attempt to revive the Jewish community on the island and to create a new kind of community. Hannan-Stavroulakis did not want to see a building restored for it simply to be turned into yet another museum; he had seen enough museums. He wanted it to be the focus for Jewish revival, for the re-establishment of a community on the island, but a community with a difference. He wished to establish a community that would welcome all newcomers, from whatever background or faith, but also all seekers, seekers in search of a spiritual dimension in their lives.



Bimah in the renovated synagogue in Chania.

The first task, however, was to restore the synagogue. Etz Hayyim Synagogue is built on the site of a 14th century church, turned into a synagogue in the 17th century, badly damaged during the war, and, after the war, further damaged by squatters. In 1996 the building was put on list of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monument Watch and with the help of funds from the Lauder and Rothschild Foundations, the Greek Ministry of Culture, The German Embassy in Greece, and other donations, restoration work soon began. Restoration was completed in 1999, and the synagogue duly reopened, with official pomp and circumstance on Rosh Hashana that year.

The next task was to build a community focused around the synagogue. Even now there are precious few Jews living on the island all the year round; some 5 or 6 living in Chania itself, another 6 or so in Iraklion. A further dozen or so have second homes on the island and spend the rest of the time in Israel, Britain or indeed the USA. Still others come for brief spells to study or teach at the University of Crete. And of course, many more, indeed, thousands, come to the island as tourists, especially in the summer months. Yet, the renovation of the synagogue has inspired a new sense of purpose and a new sense of community. An extraordinary band of people have gathered round and meet up in the synagogue, for religious services on Friday and Saturday evenings, for cultural evenings and lectures during the week. There is also a meditation class, with people sitting on the Ottoman style cushions, one of the features of the Sephardi synagogue.



Nikos Hannan-Stavroulakis reading from the Haggadah.

Jews and non-Jews alike seem to be attracted by the odd mixture of the familiar and the visionary. They are few in number, but they are gathering in strength. Some 8 or so people gather on an ordinary Shabbat; half of them not Jewish. When I was there as a volunteer in 2003 for Rosh Hashanah, there were some 38 people gathered together for prayer and for a festive meal; for Pesach 2005 there were some 50 people for the Seder, and by Pesach 2006 there were 80 people present for the Seder, including the Israeli ambassador, Avi Ram, and the American ambassador, Charles Ries, both arriving specially from Athens.

The synagogue community has been studied and even filmed by a research team from the university of Crete on behalf of an EU project on oral history in the Mediterranean region (www.med-voices.org). The overall research project, featuring some 14 cities in the Mediterranean region, focuses especially on neighborhoods and communities with a long history of inter-cultural exchange, living and working together side by side, generally in harmony. In the context of Chania, there are some interviews with elderly residents who remember their pre-war Jewish neighbors and the day they were all taken away. Yet many changes have now taken place. While the pre-war Jewish community was largely Sephardi, the more recent influx of Jews to Crete tends to be more Ashkenazi. Services follow the Sephardi liturgy, as a tribute to Crete's Jewish past, but also include a fair measure of English, as well as Hebrew, to allow the current congregation to follow as well. And this ability to adapt to the present needs of the congregation, with gentle explanations about the nature of the service, also appeals to a non-Jewish audience. And there is an expatriate Christian population on the island, who find such an open door policy particularly attractive. For some, there is the familiarity of the English language, of the Old Testament (as they see it), and a warm welcome.

Hence there are some half a dozen regular non-Jewish participants who attend services, help out in the office, water the plants in the courtyard, feed the cats and show visitors and tourists round the synagogue on a rota basis. There are a further 20 or more sympathizers who turn up to educational talks, music recitals and some of the major festivals. Together with the dozen or so Jewish residents who are on the island all the year round, they provide a sense of fellowship, of belonging together. It is an exciting and vibrant community, however small. Hannan-Stavroulakis has devised his own Haggadah, in English, Greek and Hebrew, beautifully illustrated, for he is a man of many talents, museum curator, historian, art historian, artist and cook. He has published on all these subjects.



The author and his father in the synagogue courtyard.

I should also mention that I thoroughly enjoyed my stay there as a volunteer for one month in 2003. The synagogue always welcomes volunteers, especially in the summer, when visitors stream into the synagogue, but also in the winter-time, when work needs to be carried out in sorting out the library, maintaining the office, translating and improving the current literature and planning the next events. The community has now published an interfaith calendar for 2006-2007 with all the major Jewish, Christian and Muslim festivals, illustrated with photographs of different religious sites and architectural features from Chania, which underscores their commitment to interfaith dialogue.

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