



Olive Press

Newsletter of the Kefi Club



Salonica 1917



February's meeting hosted an entertaining and scholarly lecture on 'Salonica 1917' by Mark Levene, historian and enthusiast for Greece. In a useful corrective to our usual take on that period - an episode in the conflict between Britain and Germany - Mark was keen to place events in other, equally important contexts. Salonika, for example, had been part of Greece only for a very short time, and the largest population group in the city was Jewish. The Ottoman Empire was falling apart, offering an apparent opportunity for Greece to reclaim all those places around the Aegean which had once been Greek - a 'big idea' which classically educated English gentlemen found congenial - and there was a bitter division between King Constantine and Prime Minister Venizelos (and their supporters) as to whether to help the Anglo-French side in the war and thus (it was hoped) get help with the big idea in return.

The end result, after some unreliable behaviour from the British and some perhaps rash moves from Venizelos, was the massive and traumatic exchanges of population between Greece and other countries in the early 1920s. That, roughly, was the scope of Mark's talk; it provoked a volley of questions, leading to some loud and lively arguments about the role of religion and language in Greek consciousness. It was all most entertaining, and the session went on until 9.50, with nobody's interest waning! (Bob Stone)

Cretan Weddings

My cousin and her husband live in Crete and have lived there for fifteen years. They have a lot of local friends and as a result are often invited to weddings! I have been lucky enough to be staying with them for two weddings and in the tradition of typical Greek hospitality, have been included in the invitations.

Most weddings take place in the summer, but in the early evening when it is a bit cooler. The two weddings I have attended were very different from one another. The first one was in August 2013 and was a "second" wedding. The bride, Maria, had been married to an American and lived in the States but her marriage to the American ended and she returned to her home town, Kissamos Kastelli (close to where my cousin lives). She met Mikalis, and it was their wedding I went to. The ceremony was held outside the church as it was August, and everyone stood in a circle around the couple and the priest. The photo shows them wearing the stefanos, the crowns attached by ribbon, which they wear when following the priest to walk around the altar with the bible on it. Each couple will have one or two kombaros, whose role is to make the vows on behalf of the couple, and also later to be there to help with any problems or difficulties the couple may have in their married life. This is a very important role, similar to godparents for children, but taken very seriously and lasts a lifetime.



After the ceremony, everyone lined up to congratulate the couple and their families and to give envelopes containing money to the couple and to wish them well. They say Na Zisete to the couple (να ζήσετε) and Na sas Zisoun to the parents (να σας ζήσουν). It means May you Live (long, well, etc.) and May they Live (long etc.) The reception was held that evening in a school yard near to where they lived. There were masses of trestle tables and in the corner of the yard people prepared the food, which was very simple - just boiled lamb - and on the tables were plastic bottles of fairly basic wine. After the lamb came the pilaffi - sort of savoury rice pudding which was eaten with great relish, especially by the young men. Yoghurt was also served. Much later on, traditional Greek salad appeared, much to my relief as I didn't much care for the boiled lamb or the rice pudding. After the meal there was Cretan dancing. Maria's son Nikos is a very accomplished dancer and his troupe entertained us and then lots of people joined in with the dancing. Later on, we heard gun shots - this is very common at Cretan weddings and slightly alarming! We left at about 1.30 in the morning, but the festivities probably carried on until dawn.



The second wedding I went to was in October this year. It was the wedding of one of the sons of the local priest, who is also called Mikalis. He owns and runs a fruit and vegetable shop in Kastelli, where my cousin and her husband often shop. His beautiful young bride, Despoina, is also from Kastelli, and their wedding was traditional and old fashioned, as they had not been living together before the wedding. For days before the wedding, there was great excitement in the village. Traditionally, sweets called kserotigana (ξεροτιγανά) are served to everyone.

They are made by the village ladies, all together. My cousin tells me that she thinks they make strips of a sort of pastry, then curl them around a wooden spoon, and drop them into boiling oil (the tigano), When they're cooked and cooled, they're soaked in syrup. They are extremely sweet!

Prior to going to the ceremony in the cathedral in Kastelli, many people of the village of Merada (where my cousin lives) met at the house of Mikalis' parents, the priest Pappa Yanni, and his wife Eleni. It was all very noisy and jolly, and there were gun-shots there too (because gun shots would not be allowed in the venue where the reception was to be held)



We went in convoy down the hill to Kastelli and waited outside the cathedral for the bride and her party to arrive. It was raining a bit, but we were able to shelter under the awning. Everyone was in a state of excitement and anticipation. Mikalis and Eleni stood in the centre of the steps and when the bride arrived, she walked up to Mikalis and he handed her the bouquet. This is an important gesture. Traditionally, this was symbolic of the groom asking the girl to marry him, and by her accepting the bouquet, she has accepted his proposal.

The ceremony was quite long and people moved around and came and went as they felt like it! We were unable to see very much as we were behind a pillar but could obviously hear the chanting. At the end, masses of rice was thrown over the couple and again, people lined up to give money and wish the couple well.

The reception was held in an enormous venue as most people from the village and surrounding villages served by the priest had been invited. There was plenty of interesting food - mezzes to begin with, followed by chicken and then of course the traditional lamb and pilaffi, all served very efficiently from trollies wheeled between the tables. Wine and raki was, of course, flowing freely! There was a large stage, and again we were entertained by dancing - by the same troupe as at Maria's wedding, including her son Nikos. Afterwards, the bride danced with all the people who wanted to dance with her and then there was more dancing which lots of people joined in with. It was a truly wonderful occasion and I feel very privileged to have been able to take part. (By Tina Carkeek)

Last Greek hero of Normandy landing dies at age 95

Greece's last survivor of the World War II Normandy landing, Captain Grigoris Pavlakis, has died. He was 95. The Crete-born Hellenic Navy officer took part in the biggest allied push against Germany as chief officer of the corvette Kriezis, one of six Greek ships based in Egypt that participated in the campaign.

Over the course of his career, Pavlakis received 15 medals and commendations for bravery and outstanding service, while in 2004 he was awarded France's Legion of Honor by then president Jacques Chirac.

"Our only hope was the joyful thought that if the operation succeeded, Greece would be freed from the bonds of slavery," Pavlakis had said of D-Day in an interview with Kathimerini in 2001.

His funeral will take place with full military honors on Wednesday, at 2 p.m., at Athens First Cemetery. (ekathimerini.com 25/01/2017)

Yussuroum, a slang term that hides fragments of history

The stories about Athens and its people are endless. Many of them have faded from memory over time. Others are remembered in fragments that come together at some point for the story to be told. The case of the Yussuroum family is one such Athenian tale. As charming as it is distant, the family name has retained its currency in everyday usage: Yussuroum (also rendered as giousouroum) in Greek has come to mean flea market.

The Athens Jewish community held an event in October in honor of Mois Yussuroum, aged 95, for his voluntary service over the decades. A garden in the community's synagogue was named after the benefactor and the event, held on the initiative of the Jewish Museum in Athens and the Jewish community, was an occasion to bring back to light the history of the Yussuroum family.

While many Greeks use the term yussuroum when referring to a flea market, few know that it stems from this family and, in particular, from the antique market it created in the Jewish quarter of central Athens. Mois Yussuroum is the descendant of a long line of successful merchants with a presence in Athens. The Yussuroum home on Karaiskaki and Ermou streets was located in the middle of the city center's commercial district and also housed the capital's first synagogue. This was the heart of the Jewish quarter, which lay between Aghion Asomaton Square, Sarri and Ermou streets.

While the older limbs of the Yussuroum family tree have been lost over time, like many Sephardic Jewish families in Greece they came from Spain after being expelled by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492. The Yussuroums initially settled in Smyrna (now Izmir in Turkey) as the Ottoman Empire had opened its gates to the Jews. The significant contribution of the Jewish presence to the Ottoman Empire and the countries that emerged from its gradual dissolution stems mainly from that wave of eastward emigration from the Iberian peninsula in the late 15th century. When the Greek state was created in the 19th century, one of the Yussuroums, Isaak, moved to Chios in 1830, when the island was still under Ottoman rule. The family moved to the island of Kythnos in 1860 and Isaak's son, Bohor, a tailor by profession, later decided to move to the capital of the Kingdom of Greece, settling in Athens in 1863.

Bohor, Mois's grandfather, opened a clothing store on the corner of Karaiskaki and Ermou streets. "My grandfather was a tailor but people didn't have a lot of money at the time and they bought secondhand clothes," said Mois. "He'd alter used clothes and display his goods every Sunday at Avyssiinias Square, at the bazaar. Everyone else was selling antiques, which is why the phrase 'going to Yussuroum' became so prevalent." Bohor had seven children in Athens. After his death in 1887, his eldest son, Ilias, expanded the business and became a pillar of the Athens Jewish community. Ilias's younger brother, Noah, Mois's father, married Mazaltov Habib, an Athenian Jew, and tried to avail of the many opportunities that opened up in Greece after the Balkan Wars. He moved to Thessaloniki, where he opened a hospital supplies firm with Abraham Nahmias, but the massive fire in 1917 that wiped out almost the entire Jewish quarter in that city scuppered his plans and forced him to move back to Ermou Street in Athens, though to number 84.

At the recent event, Mois reminisced: "My father opened his store when he returned from Thessaloniki together with a partner, Spyros Kourousis. During and especially after the First World War, my father would go to all the places where there were allied troops - French and British - and buy military material, from tents to uniforms, bring them back to Athens and sell them."

Noah Yussuroum was an auction hunter, traveling from France to Egypt to bring back stock for his store. In 1924-25, he struck gold at an auction of materials from the old royal palace (now the Greek Parliament) after Greece was first declared a republic. He built a new house in Thiseio (at 26 Irakleidon Street) and decorated the second-floor balconies with Stars of David.



Noah and his wife had two children, Isaak and Leon, in Thessaloniki and four more children in Athens, born between 1920 and 1929. Mois was the eldest and he and his brother Iakovos fought in the Battle of Crete and then joined the National Liberation Front (EAM) and fought in the resistance.

After the war, Noah's children came together to revive the family fortune. Mois became a dentist, Isaak a civil engineer, and Leon and Iakovos went into the iron business and opened a store on Ermou.

Mois Yussuroum is a living witness to a long family tradition that is intrinsically linked to Athens's commercial life and to active involvement in the city's Jewish community. NIKOS VATOPOULOS [ekathimerini.com 16/11/15]

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