

The Jewish Community of Rhodes

The Jewish community of the island of Rhodes has a rich history that dates back to the second century BCE, with the earliest reference to it appearing in the book of Maccabees. Other references to the Jewish presence in the island are found in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius.

It was not until the 12th century CE that a detailed account of the community was first recorded. Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, Spain, on his way to Jerusalem wanting to record the many Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean, reported that there were 400 Jews on Rhodes under the authority of Rabbi Hannanel and Rabbi Eliah.



The Jews of Rhodes, like the other Jews living then in Greece and in its islands spoke Greek and conducted the religious services in Greek, following the Romaniote rite, which is distinct from Sephardi, Ashkenaz, and Italian rites.

During the reign of the Knights of St. John in the 14th century, the Jews of the island were relegated to the southeast section of the old city, where they continued to live until their deportation in 1944 to the Nazi extermination camps.

In the year 1500, the Grand Master d'Aubusson expelled all the Jews who did not choose to convert to Christianity.

So it seems that the island was for a short time free of Jews, until in 1522 Suleiman the Magnificent of the Ottomans wished to repopulate the Jewish section of the island. Thus he invited Jews from various parts of his empire to come to Rhodes and start a new community.



The Jews that came were Sephardim, the ones who had found refuge in the Ottoman Empire following the expulsion from Spain in 1492. These Jews brought with them their culture, their customs and traditions: one of the cultural aspects was linguistic: the language they spoke was Espanyol, as they called it (also known as "Ladino" and "Judeo-Spanish").



At the beginning of the 20th century, many young Jews (some with their families) left the island in search of better economic opportunities in the Americas and in parts of Africa: many more left after the enforcement of the racial laws passed by the fascist government of Italy, which had occupied the islands of the Dodecanese, (Rhodes, the capital) in 1912. In the early 1920s the community had reached its peak population of 4,500 souls.

In 1943 Rhodes was taken over by the Germans, and on July 23 of the next year, 1673 members of the Jewish community (practically the whole Jewish population with the exception of some 42 Turkish citizens) were arrested and deported to the Auschwitz extermination camp, where most of them were slaughtered. Only 151 survived.

In 1947 the island was ceded to Greece. Today there are only a handful of Jews living in Rhodes.

Images:

Torah Scroll from Rhodes, 1200 CE

Burial Stone of Eliezer Jilimir, 1665

Yaacov Capelouto, Estrella Mizrahi and their children, 1906

The Jewish Cemetery

The present Jewish cemetery is located 2 kilometers outside the Old City on the road to Kalitheas.



The cemetery is one of the oldest, best preserved and historically significant Jewish cemeteries in the world. The centerpiece involves the recent recovery and restoration of 400 "ancient" Jewish burial stones, some of which date back to the 16th and 17th century.

The Holocaust Memorial



The Holocaust Memorial is located in the Square of the Martyred Jews in the Jewish Quarter of Rhodes. It was dedicated on June 23, 2003 in memory of the World War II victims from the islands of Rhodes and Cos.

Pamphlet prepared by Stella Levi and Aron Hasson

The Jewish Museum of Rhodes

Adjacent to the *Kahal Shalom* sanctuary, in the rooms formerly used for the women prayer rooms, is the Jewish Museum of Rhodes.



It was established by Aron Hasson in 1997 in order to preserve the special heritage of the Jews of Rhodes as well as to advance the public awareness and appreciation of its unique history. Its archives consist of artifacts and photos of Jewish life in Rhodes.

For more information: www.rhodesjewishmuseum.org

Kahal Shalom Entry Plaque



Synagogue entry plaque of 1651 adorns the west entry of the Kahal Shalom synagogue. It states in part:

Peace in the world, let there be peace...May our eyes see the erection of the temple in Jerusalem ("Bet Hamikdash"). With God's coming, salvation abounds. The house was completed, with these words, the house of the "Kahal Kadosh Shalom", it is indeed the house of the Lord. The year (5411) 1651.

The Kahal Shalom Synagogue

The *Kahal Shalom* is the oldest Jewish synagogue in Greece, and the sole remaining synagogue on the island of Rhodes used for services. There were once four synagogues and additional prayer halls in the Jewish Quarter (called "La Juderia").

The *Kahal Shalom* is located on Dossiadou and Simiou Streets and is believed to have been built in the year 1577. The full name of the building is "Kahal Kadosh Shalom" (Holy Congregation of Peace). It is used for prayer services when visitors or former residents and their families visit the island for Sabbath and High Holiday services and for special occasions.



The interior of the *Kahal Shalom* synagogue follows the traditional Sephardic style of having the "tevah" (the prayer reading table) in the center of the sanctuary facing southeast toward Jerusalem. The floor is decorated with graceful black and white mosaic stone patterns, which is a distinctive design motif used throughout the Old City of Rhodes.

In 1934 a balcony was created along the western wall of the sanctuary as a result of a liberalization of religious policy, to be used as a women's prayer area. Prior to that time the women were only allowed to sit in the adjacent rooms along the south wall.

An intriguing feature of the *Kahal Shalom* sanctuary is that it is decorated with numerous religious wall paintings.

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