

*Romaniote Memories, a Jewish Journey
from Ioannina, Greece to Manhattan:*

Photographs by Vincent Giordano

November 7th through 29, 2019

Monday – Friday, 10:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Embassy of Greece
2217 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20008

A panel discussion at the Embassy
with Dr. Samuel D. Gruber
and Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos

Wednesday, November 13th, 2019 6:30 p.m.

Introduction: Romaniote Memories

In 1999, photographer Vincent Giordano made an unplanned visit to the small Kehila Kedosha Janina (KKJ) synagogue on New York's Lower East Side. Giordano knew little about Judaism or synagogues, and even less about the Romaniote Jewish tradition of which KKJ is the lone North American representative. In this he was not alone. Romaniotes—those Greek Jews who have maintained traditions dating to the days of ancient Greece and Rome are among the least known of Jewish communities. Since the Holocaust, when Romaniote communities in Greece were destroyed, KKJ has struggled to maintain the millennia-old traditions. Giordano was inspired but what he saw in the small synagogue, which following common Orthodox Jewish practice celebrated the Torah and its teachings through beauty within their sanctuary, not outside. Entering the door of KKJ was for Giordano the entrance into an entirely new and different world.

Beginning in 2001 and guided by members of the KKJ community, Giordano documented the synagogue and its religious art. But what started as a project to document objects became an extended exploration not just of a building, but of a community and individual lives and stories. The project came to include portraiture, oral histories, and documentation of important life cycle, religious, and community rituals and events of the congregation on film, video, and audio tape. Importantly, Giordano realized the history of KKJ is intimately linked to its mother city of Ioannina, Greece, and its small Jewish community. These photographs, including many taken in Ioannina during the High Holidays in 2006, demonstrate the profound links between these communities.

In 2019 the Giordano family donated the archive of Vincent's work to Queens College, where it will become a major part of the Hellenic American Project.

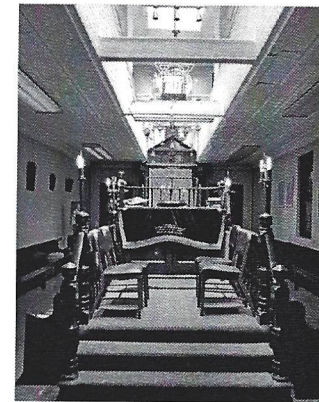
Romaniote Jews

Romaniote Jews are among the most ancient extant Jewish communities in the world. Romaniotes have their own language—a dialect of Greek that combines words and phrases from Hebrew and Turkish. The Romaniote language is a purely spoken one. There is no literature written in Romaniote and today, Romaniote is spoken only by the older generation and may soon be known only second-hand.

The largely unknown Romaniote Jews are a living link with ancient Judaism of the Hellenistic period, which formed the matrix out of which Christianity was born and developed and from which came great rabbis and scholars who influenced Jewish life, including R. Tobias ben Eliezer, R. Moses Kapsali and Shemarya Ikriti. This tradition flourished and evolved for over one thousand years in the lands of the Byzantine Empire, and particularly in what is now modern Greece. Beginning in the 15th century with the establishment of Ottoman Turkish rule over this territory, and especially after 1492 when large numbers of Sephardi Jews from Spain began to establish themselves under Ottoman rule, the political and religious equation shifted, particularly in larger urban centers where Turkish culture overrode Greek, and where Sephardi Judaism dominated and influenced native Romaniote tradition. Nonetheless, significant traditional Romaniote communities

survived in many places, including Ioannina and Arta, until the Holocaust, when tens of thousands of Greek Jews—Sephardi and Romaniote—were deported and murdered by the Nazis and their allies.

In Ioannina, of the 1,960 Jews deported to Auschwitz, only 110 survived. This deadly fate was shared by all the Romaniote communities of Greece, most of which survive today only in memory.

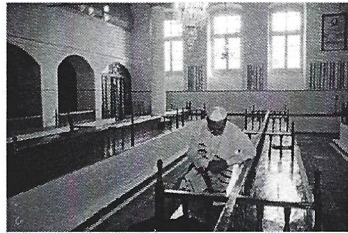


Kehila Kedosha Janina

Kehila Kedosha Janina, located on Broome Street on the Lower East Side of New York City, is the only remaining Romaniote Synagogue in the Western Hemisphere. The congregation [Kehila] was founded in 1906 by a group of Greek-Jewish immigrants from the town of Ioannina (Janina) in northern Greece. For many years they worshiped in private homes or attended other synagogues in the area, but in 1927 there were sufficient congregants to warrant the building of a synagogue to follow the Romaniote *minhag* (rite) and help maintain Romaniote cultural and religious identity in the New World.

Kehila Kedosha Janina is housed in a small building that combines elements of Classical and Moorish architecture, using the three-bay wide style prevalent among New York City synagogues of this period. The two-story building is constructed of buff-colored brick with cast stone detailing with a modest peaked parapet that subtly creates the effect of corner towers. Moorish influence can be seen in the cast stone cusped arch over the front entrance. In addition, traditional Jewish motifs were incorporated in the cast stone tablets of the Ten Commandments placed above the entrance and stained glass windows.

Today, the congregation of Kehila Kedosha Janina is small, but it maintains a vital presence on the Lower East Side and well beyond. The building is listed on both the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places and was designated a New York City Landmark in April 2004. In 2007 it was beautifully conserved – maintaining all of the details of its warm and welcoming interior.



Romaniote Synagogues of Ioannina and New York

Romaniote Memories celebrates two distant Jewish communities connected by history and ritual. From 2001 until his death in 2010, Vincent Giordano documented the Romaniote Jews of New York City and of Ioannina, Greece and, with their roots in the Judaism of the ancient world.

Only one synagogue in Ioannina--Kehila Kedosha Yashan (Old Synagogue), built in 1829, survived the Holocaust. Its interior Ottoman-style courtyard has a fountain for hand washing. A spacious sanctuary serves for congregational prayer. Benches face center leaving an open area for the procession of the Torah Scrolls. An impressive bimah (reader's platform) is on the western wall; the marble *Echal Kodesh* [Holy Ark] is on the east wall. Behind the embroidered curtain (*parokhet*) are Torah Scrolls, encased in *tikkim* (silver or wooden cases). Women formerly sat in an upper gallery behind a wooden screen.

Ioannina Jews created a new religious life in New York at Kehila Kedosha Janina, built in 1927, on Manhattan's Broome Street. The façade indicates the building's public and Jewish nature, but inside is as intimate as a neighborhood clubhouse, in the manner of many small prayer houses that once dotted the Lower East Side. But the dominating bimah and the benches along the walls facing inward also recall Ioannina. In this narrow sanctuary the *Echal Kodesh* appears squeezed by the women's balcony, as it rises two stories.

The many religious and commemorative fittings ultimately overwhelm the architecture. Together, they fulfill the commandment from Exodus 15:2 which exclaims: "This is my God and I will glorify God." These objects, and the ceremonies in which they are still used, knit together the history of this dwindling but tenacious congregation, its memories of Greece, and the life of New York's Romaniote community.

Today, the congregation of Kehila Kedosha Janina is small but remains active and vital. The interior of the synagogue was restored in 2007.



Vincent Giordano

Vincent Giordano, was a photographer and filmmaker dedicated to finding and recording the unique, collective memories of families and communities. Mr. Giordano possessed a keen eye for subject and detail and his work was known for its artistic sensibility and technical excellence. Beginning in 1999, he began documenting the places, people and events of New York's Romaniote Jewish Community, centered at Kehila Kedosha Janina on Broome Street, but also maintaining close ties with their city of origin, Ioannina, Greece. Vincent continued and expanded this work, which he called *Before the Flame Goes Out*, until his death, at which time he was working on a documentary film about the past and present of the Romaniote community.

Mr. Giordano's work has been exhibited in many galleries and is included in numerous private collections. *remembrance*, Mr. Giordano's collection of portraits from September 11, 2001, is in the permanent collection of the New York Historical Society. He was the recipient of several awards including seven Clio Awards for his film work in television commercials.

In addition to *Before the Flame Goes Out*, Mr. Giordano created portfolios including, *Casino*; *The Atlantic City Boardwalk*; *Peggy's Cove*; *The Airport People Mover*; *Central Park*; *Grand Central Station*; *Times Square* and *The Fulton Fish Market*.

Vincent Giordano is survived by his wife Hilda and step-daughter Elizabeth, both of whom have helped make this exhibition possible.

Artist's Statement

Vincent Giordano died in 2010. He wrote this statement about this project for a 2007 exhibition of the work.

Seven years ago, I first visited the Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue on Broome Street and what I heard and saw there made an indelible impression upon me. I listened with great interest and sadness to the story of the Romaniote's forgotten place in Jewish history. I wondered how a community and its culture wither away and vanish...which forces are at work, and which are not? I began to photograph and document the synagogue and the community. This effort was transformed into an incredible personal journey of discovery, filled with wonderful people, interesting experiences, and fascinating places. As I explored and probed deeper, I discovered this story is much larger than the synagogue on Broome Street, that it reaches far into the past...to the rich history of the Jews in ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire...and the devastation of the Holocaust.

Before the Flame Goes Out documents and preserves this unique chapter in Jewish history. I am thankful and blessed to use my talents and skills in this worthwhile endeavor. We are not often called upon to do work that can make a difference.



Acknowledgements

This exhibition is part of the multi-media *Before the Flame Goes Out* by the late Vincent Giordano, a project of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments (ISJM), an independent, non-profit, membership based, educational organization dedicated to the documentation, study, and conservation of historic Jewish sites throughout the world.

Before the Flame Goes Out was conceived and developed by Vincent Giordano with assistance from Dr. Samuel Gruber, president of ISJM, and the leadership of congregation of Kehila Kedosha Janina. Mr. Giordano was grateful for the advice, instruction and support of many scholars and activists, including Prof. Jane Gerber, of the Sephardic Studies Institute at the Graduate School of CUNY; Prof. Steven Bowman, of the Judaic Studies Department of the University of Cincinnati; Dr. Steven Jaffe, curator of the New York Historical Society; and Zanet Bettinou of the Jewish Museum of Greece. Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos, Museum Director, Kehila Kedosha Janina Museum has been a strong supporter of this project.

Before the Flame Goes Out has been supported by generous grants from The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation, The Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund, The Goldie and David Blanksteen Foundation, the Cahman Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation and anonymous donors.

Renewing this project, ISJM is grateful to the Giordano family, and for the interest of the Embassy of Greece in this project and exhibition, and to Ted and Lea Pedas and Jim and Wanda Pedas whose support have made this exhibition possible. Special thanks to Renee Pappas whose leadership and indefatigable energy have brought new life to Vincent Giordano's vision. ISJM is now excited to partner with Queens College and the Hellenic American Project in the next phase of this documentary, artistic, and educational work.



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To support or for more information about *Romaniote Memories* and the entire *Before the Flame Goes Out* project contact:

Renee Pappas, Executive Producer, reneepappas@gmail.com
Dr. Samuel Gruber, President, ISJM, samuelgruber@gmail.com

Or the Hellenic American Project
c/o Prof. Nicolas Alexiou, Nicholas.alexiou@qc.cuny.edu