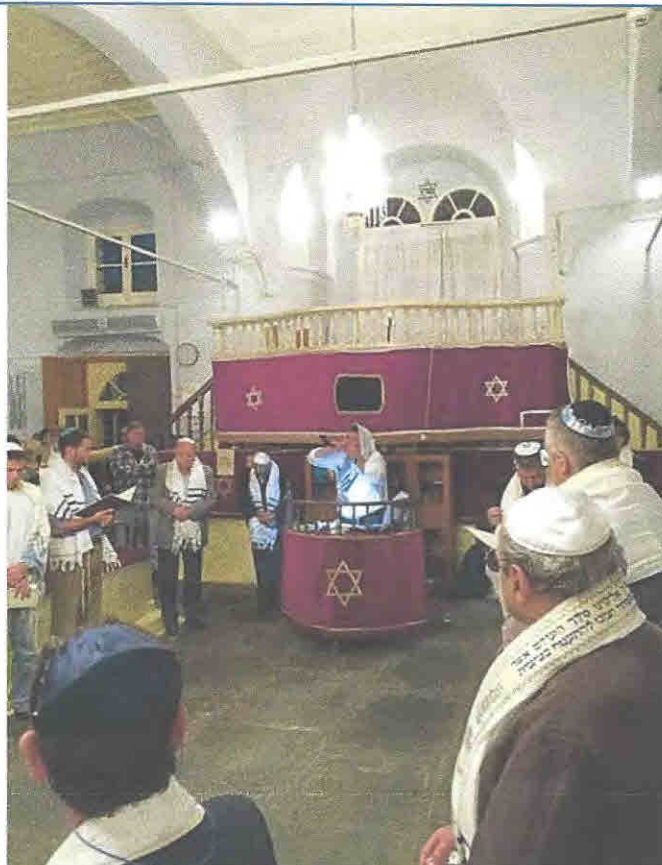


My Ioannina

Even though it was all very pleasant and it was 2016, the Holocaust hovered over us. You could not look at the lake without thinking that this is where they had gathered our families



'THE CANTOR' blew the shofar so beautifully that it brought many to tears.' (Courtesy)

• EMILY UDLER

In August, I received an email from the head of Ioannina's Jewish community inviting all who were born in Ioannina, Greece, and their children, to attend Yom Kippur services there.

Ioannina is situated high in the mountains of northwestern Greece, near the Albanian border, and it once had a unique Jewish community.

This invitation triggered all sorts of emotions. I decided to go, and was thrilled when my eldest son agreed to accompany me. We had not spent four straight days together in 30 years.

Unlike most other cities in Greece where the Jews are the descendants of those expelled from Spain in 1492 and speak Ladino, the Jewish community of Ioannina was, according to tradition, established 300-400 years after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE). Community members know Greek and Hebrew but not Ladino, and are called Romaniots. After the expulsion from Spain, many Spanish and Portuguese Jews arrived in Ioannina, too, but were not warmly received and left, going on to establish communities elsewhere, the largest being in Thessaloniki (Salonika).

In the 1920s new regulations forced the Jews of this old community to refrain from work on Sundays, which diminished their income, since they did not work on Shabbat either. In addition, there were antisemitic rumblings, and half of the 4,000-strong community

emigrated to the US.

On the eve of World War II, there were roughly 2,000 Jews in Ioannina. Some were able to flee, but most were rounded up between 3 and 4 a.m. on Shabbat, March 25, 1944. The entire community was ordered to Lake Pamvotis. They were then trucked to the city of Larissa, which had a rail line. From there they were transported, via Budapest, to Auschwitz. Among the Jews on this train were my mother, Rosa Besso (b. 1918), her parents, Annetta (b. 1889) and Michael Besso (b. 1876), and Annetta's sister Reveka (b. 1887). My father's parents, Mazel Tov (b. 1883) and Haim Isaak (b. 1872), and his sister Anna (b. 1913) and brother Avramaike (b. 1910) were also on the train.

Only my mother survived. Annetta, Michael, Reveka, Mazel Tov and Haim went to the gas chambers and the crematorium upon arrival at Auschwitz. Anna died the day before liberation, and Avramaike was in the Sonderkommando, who were periodically killed so they could not bear witness to the horrors. Only 168 Jews returned to Ioannina after the war.

The survivors came back to find strangers living in their homes and wearing their clothes. They were shocked to realize that so many of their loved ones were gone forever. They clung to one another and, seeking to start new lives, many marriages were arranged.

But where to live? The Outer Synagogue had been destroyed by the Nazis, who used it as horse stables. Since the property on which the synagogue had

stood belonged to the Jewish community, the plot was used to build a complex of apartments for the survivors. Fortunately, the Inner Synagogue, built in 1829 and situated near the lake and within the Castro (the Ottoman walls), was intact.

My parents, Rosa Besso and Yaakov Isaak, were married in 1947, and I was born in 1949. In 1951 we sailed for New York, to which my father's older brother had immigrated in the 1920s.

I was named after my paternal grandmother, Mazel Tov (in Hebrew), Eftichiya (in Greek), and when we got to New York my Uncle Irving said Eftichiya wouldn't work in New York – so for no good reason I became Emily.

The day before Yom Kippur eve, my son and I arrived in Ioannina. Seeing the city through my son's eyes was fascinating. I was surprised at how much he had learned from my parents. He noticed things that I did not, such as Hebrew etched above some doorposts, and how similar I looked to Ioannina's Jewish women. He even understood the Greek conversations fairly well.

The city was reminiscent of the 1970s, yet there were also lovely new pedestrian malls. There was an old-fashioned *kafanio* (you just can't call it a coffee shop) with the most divine kataifi and baklava, but all the patrons appeared to be in their eighties or nineties. Walking down the main street, we wondered how all the gold and silver shops remained in business, since no one seemed to enter any of them. Yet even though it was all very pleasant and it was 2016, the Holocaust hovered over us. You could not look at the lake without thinking that this was where they had gathered our families.

We arrived early at the Inner Synagogue for the Kol Nidre service and were happy to see it all lit up and meet the cantor who had come from Athens. I had no idea how many people would attend, as there are only 35 Jews left in Ioannina and many are in their nineties. I was pleasantly surprised to see a large group of well-dressed, middle-aged people flowing into the synagogue and hugging one another. There were over 150 people, mostly from Athens. This was very heartwarming, since on my previous visits there had barely been a minyan.

The closing service, Ne'ila, stirred us. The cantor blew the shofar so beautifully that it brought many people to tears. And so, despite the near destruction of this ancient and unique Jewish community, my son and I were able to pray in the same synagogue where my father, grandfathers and great-grandfathers had prayed.

Am Yisrael hai.

The writer was born in Ioannina, grew up in New York and made aliya 45 years ago. emily.udler@gmail.com