



Jottings

EUROPEAN DAY OF JEWISH CULTURE

A CRETAN EXODUS May-June 1944 By Katina Singelakis

The general indifference of responsible persons to the memory of the Jews of Hania that has been evident makes it somehow appropriate to bring to mind what precisely took place on the morning of the 29th May 1944 when the community was arrested with no warning. The following short account was written by a Haniote Christian woman, Mrs Katina Singelakis, who lived in the Jewish Quarter – most likely on Skoufon St. just behind the synagogue of Etz Hayyim. By the beginning of the War many former Jewish homes were lived in by Christians as

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On the 16th June the Synagogue participated in a pan European event celebrating Jewish culture. Jewish museums and communities in over 22 European countries organized exhibits, performances, and displays as 'open door' events. The aim was to make known to the general public in the countries participating the important role that Jews have had in European civilization. Sponsoring the over all planning of the event were B'Nei Brith of Europe, The European Council of Jewish Communities, Re de Juderias de Espana (Caminos de Sefarad) and the Agence de Development Touristique du Bas-Rhin. The general theme was the 'Jewish Calendar' but there was great latitude permitted as to how this theme could most appropriately be developed. The over-all coordinators and contact persons were Gady Gronich of Munich and Laure

Amoyel of Luxembourg.

A great amount of creative flexibility made the realization of the project and its effectiveness very challenging. In the case of communities and synagogue spaces we were urged to utilize what was at our disposal. In our instance we singled out the synagogue proper, the mikveh (the oldest surviving rabbis in Greece), the tombs of the open space provided by the north courtyard.

At Etz Hayyim we were especially sensitive to a) the general lack of any knowledge of either Judaism or Jews amongst our Greek Orthodox co-citizens and b) the interest that is shown by our visitors – Jewish and non-Jewish – in our Greco-Iberian Jewish traditions. We were also keenly interested in silently making the point that in some sense

Jews were, until the last World War, the only real 'Europeans' in the contemporary use of the word in the context of the European Union. At a time in the Medieval period when nascent nationalism, what we can call 'nativism', was determining the form that the modern nation state was eventually to take, Jews were not only ubiquitous in Europe but also understandably highly adaptive in their movements and migrations. In a sense Jews and the Catholic Church were the sole remnants of the 'catholicism' of the Roman Empire that was shattered into fragments by the Germanic invasions. Catholicism eventually was to be shattered by the Protestant movement into 'national' churches and Jews were faced with an ill-defined future that was to be determined by

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The BAR MITZVAH of Eddy MOISIS at ETZ HAYYIM - 22 June 2002

Since the re-dedication of the synagogue on 10th Oct. 1999, Etz Hayyim has had good reason to celebrate significant moments. As the synagogue had been derelict since the arrest and final destruction of the community in 1944 its walls had been silent and memory of Hania's Jews faded rapidly. Actually it was this awareness that was one of the main reasons for striving to rebuild the synagogue, but even more importantly to bring it back to Jewish religious life in whatever form this might take. A single memorial service had been organized in 1993. A group of Jewish students led by a rabbi from Athens arrived in Hania, and did their best to isolate the chickens that were kept in it and after cleaning out most of the trash had said prayers and kaddish for the last community. A few of us did not participate mainly due to the fact that while it brought the memory of the community into focus for a moment essentially it was an admission of the success of Hitler – a ruined and rapidly disintegrating synagogue, an abandoned Jewish quarter, and a few Jews gathering to commemorate the violence and tragedy that marked the end of the community. The next day the site was filled once again with chickens and the trash began to mount up as it had for some 30 years. For a few of us



The Bar Mitzvah of Eddy Moisis (Photo by Manolis Kyriakakis)

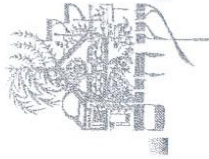
this admission of defeat was tantamount to a silent statement of acceptance of that had transpired.

Since its re-dedication in 1999 Etz Hayyim has witnessed a Jewish revival which is quite unlike its religious role prior to the 2nd WW. We have had two weddings and Pesah and the major Jewish Holidays have been celebrated insofar as it is possible at times without a minyan. Shahrith and Minhah prayers are recited daily but lacking a community and families it seemed out of the question that we would have a Bar Mitzvah. Almost two years ago

Many came from Athens but a large number were also from Larissa, Trikala, Volos and Thessaloniki, the US, and Israel. By that time the synagogue had been made ready with our best textiles hanging on the Bema and our celebration parohet on the Ehal. One of the Sepher Torahs was prepared and given a new Me'il and for the first time a new set of rimonim, a gift of Mr and Mrs Izo and Rita Tezartes of Athens were set on the finials of the Torah. Minha and Arvith prayers followed by Kabbalah Shabbath opened the week-end and on the following morning everyone converged on the synagogue and at 8:30 Shahrith prayers began and at 9:30 Eddy carried the Sepher Torah to the Bema, accompanied by a few of his friends who prepared the Sepher for his reading of the Parasha. The speeches that both he and his father made were especially moving, as Mrs Moisis had died a year previously, hence this journey to Hania had a number of quite special meanings for us all. On returning the Sepher to the Ehal, Eddy was showered with rose petals, rose water and sweets as is our custom in Greece.

For some of us, under the festivities and the joy was the memory

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A Cretan Exodus

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the community had dwindled considerably and consistently since 1912. The article was published in

the 'Evraiki Estia, Athens 1st July 1947 and was titled 'In Twenty Four Hours'. The translation (with some editing) was made by Avi Sharon. Notes in italics are by Nicholas Stavroulakis)

*

We finished class and walked together back to our beloved neighborhood, talking along the way about school, upcoming tests and our lessons. Later that evening my two girlfriends, both orphans, came to our house and the sisterly love that we had for each other will always remain with me. (*Most likely these two Jewish girls were Sarah (22), and Judith (20) Kounio. There was another sister Voulitsa (15) all daughters of Leon Kounio who had died prior to the War. Their still derelict house on 18 Skouphon St., can still be seen. It was most likely Voulitsa who was the school friend of Mrs Syngelakis. Cf. 'Faces' in Jottings, Issue 1, Fall 2000.*)

They were both in a particularly good mood that night and we laughed a lot. Around 9:00 that evening they left and all of us went to bed peacefully. At dawn we were woken from our beds by shrill voices and loud knocking. At first we all thought it was some sort of a landing that had taken place but then we were sadly faced with the frightful truth. Battalion of the occupying forces had surrounded our little neighborhood and in a terrible and violent uproar they were rousing all of the Jews from their houses. They were allowed to take only bare essentials of clothing and food that could last them for eight days.

(*The SS which normally carried out such actions with the assistance of the army was not stationed in Crete. The order for the arrest of the Jews and its execution were both initiated and put into effect by the Wehrmacht.*)

What moments of horror and agony! They (the Jews) were forced to flee, to leave their homes, their workplaces, stores and dear friends; they lost in ten minutes whatever they had achieved through many years of hard work and the sweat of their brows. They had all been very hardworking people and now suddenly they were being marched down to the harbor carrying a few pitiful possessions on their backs, departing like prisoners. The brave soldiers herding them were shouting in excitement over their victory

over an un-armed civilian population of some 300 people.

(*The Jews on Skouphon and Doukas Sts. were badgered down to the harbor whereas those on Kondylaki and Porton were pushed through a narrow funnel-like passage that leads out of the Zudecca at its southern end and into a small open area where trucks were waiting to load them.*)

Other trucks had been stationed in the harbor. While this was going on in the Jewish Quarter officers and soldier were simultaneously arresting Jews in Halepa and near the Court House.)

In only a few moments they were all assembled in the streets. Instead of celebrating the Sabbath in their little synagogue (*Etz Hayyim*) they were being pressed along out of their neighborhood by murderous soldiers. I cannot describe to you the tragic sight of our farewell. We had all lived for so many years together. Perhaps this was going to be the last time that we would see them and the grief was sharper because their lives were going to be so bitter now. They were all leaving and we, their fellow-citizens were not given any permission to help them in any way and my friend, the one who had been such a good student at school now overwhelmed me with a plea from the crowd, 'Katina, please, my books! Say good bye to the school, to my friends there – say good-bye for me'.

One by one they left. In the end only the old men, several invalids and scattered children remained. It was a moving sight, shocking really, when an old blind lady, a revered old woman, was forced to walk quickly without knowing where she was going – pushed along by the barbarian occupiers. Behind her another elderly lady, alone and without a family, nearly one hundred years old, was seized and dragged along the street by force (*This was possible the widow Alegra Frangko who lived at 47 Kondylaki St. She was 93 years old.*)

The little children seemed to walk indifferently, some clutching pieces of bread in their hands. The hateful voices and the waving hands of the German beast hurried them along mercilessly, as if they were crumbs. Amid these frightening and tragic scenes, the tiny population of our neighborhood passed before our eyes.

When the sun had risen we could see that our neighborhood had been almost emptied of all

human presence. In the doorways already there were piled the possessions of European style homes. Soon another expulsion would come, this time purging each house of its inanimate objects. The soldiers proudly began to carry out the various possessions of Jewish peddlers and loaded them on their trucks: chairs, tables, beds, just as they were, with their linen and even the pillows from the night before. The first house that they emptied was that of my two orphan girlfriends, but soon the other houses suffered the same outrage. I went to their house and after repeated requests to the soldiers I was permitted to take a few books. Another of our friends did the same and she too saved three of the girls' notebooks.

I was in such a state that I couldn't prepare my lesson for the day. It was the same nervous agony that we had all suffered when before, almost three years to the day, the first bombs fell and the (*German*) hands had seized our sweet island.

It was time to go to school – I would not be able to meet my friend with whom I had walked to school every day for seven years. I couldn't stand it and as soon as I was in the classroom I burst out crying. Our fellow students and friends felt the same pain as she was such a good girl, she had loved us all so much and they pleaded with me to tell them what had happened. It was then that I gave them her farewell. When our teacher saw me in such a state he asked me what had happened. When he heard the news he became terribly upset and said: 'She was truly such a good girl, a sweet and diligent girl.' The hours went by as if in monotone, filled with grief. Finally class was dismissed. Today I returned home alone but yesterday we had come back together. When I reached our neighborhood I couldn't pass by the street as it was piled high with furniture, clothes, beds, chairs and toys.

After they (*the Germans*) had loaded their cars with all of these things, another scene of horror and disgust came to pass. Greeks, so-called Christians, the neighboring women who only minutes before had seemed to be grieving, were now laughing with the soldiers, asking for permission to steal for themselves the belongings of their unfortunate neighbors. Luckily I didn't see any respectable people amongst them. Hordes of the poorest people rushed into the homes

with incredible swiftness and seeming expertise to steal; the few things that had been left behind by the Germans. At six that evening some terrible occurred. Germans, Greeks, children, wives, husbands – all neighbors – all invaded once again and emerged carrying out their plunder. I grew sick at the wretchedness of the sight, this in our Christian Commonwealth. But what could I do? I only watched it all with contempt.

Then darkness fell and the Germans ordered the police to guard the street overnight and not to let anyone pass.

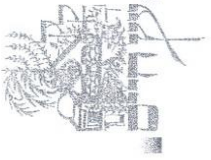
So the great crowd of people, along with the Germans, all left singing. While we went to bed early in our soft warm beds the others were counting their newfound wealth in glee and others, further off, who knows where, were curled up without a roof over their heads; sitting in horror in the face of so much misfortune. How much could the human spirit take?

And now, I swear upon these books which escaped destruction, with tears in my eyes, that I will keep them as a memory of my dear friend and fellow student who had been so concerned about their safety.

The following day pretzels and photographs scattered were throughout the streets. After eight days several cars came to empty the synagogue. Our so-called cultured people, they ransacked that tiny assembly, the House of God. They took all of the valuable objects and then ranted the building as a dwelling. This was the culminating scene in this horrible drama. It was terrible (*Etz Hayyim was completely stripped of everything save the Bema and Ehal which were dismantled later for firewood.*)

The interior was divided up by partitioning. The pediment over the gate, along with the inscription was pulled down and used as 'fill' to block up one of the windows. The Ganiti inscription over the entrance to the synagogue was carried into to provide a light bulb. In the south courtyard the three graves of the rabbis were broken open and their bones scattered. These were gathered together in 1999 and reburied. At the time of the reconstruction of Etz Hayyim (1996-9) signs were everywhere evident of not only the general desecration that had taken place but the deliberate search for what might have been hidden by the Jews in walls and under paving.

The families living inside Etz



A Cretan Exodus

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Hayyim moved out between 1956-1960 after which the site was used as a site for neighborhood trash, chickens, and dogs.)

The Jews waited fifteen days in Ayas prison of Hania without food or clothing and afterwards they were taken to Herakleion – and the next day they were taken away and no one knows where they are. Are they alive? Or... *(At the time of writing this –1947 – there were still several rumors circulating as to the fate of the community. It was only after 1950 that the facts became clear and it was verified that the Jews of Crete had been drowned when the ship transporting them to Athens was torpedoed off of Mylos.)*

They were Greeks, they were our own brothers, and their sons fought with us for freedom during the terrible but victorious battles in Albania.

The expulsion took place in May 1944.

ing of the ritual of the mikveh and 2) to exhibit examples of contemporary Jewish calligraphy. A special pamphlet 'The Waters of Life' was prepared for this exhibit.

All during the day music was played in the Synagogue and north courtyard. The selection included Sephardi music from Greece, Turkey, and North Africa as well as Klezmer music from Eastern Europe. Food was prepared in advance – recipes chosen were those that usually appear on Jewish holidays in Greece though we did have pickled herring and could have had even bagels had we been less pressed for time. There were *marchinos, marzapades, bourekias, pastels* and *rodanches de queso*. Liberal amounts of ouzo and tsikoudia. Coca-cola and other soft drinks were also available. We owe special thanks to Ms Lilika Mordoh of Athens who prepared *bourekites, floyeres, misofengares* all of which were sent down from Athens in advance.

The synagogue was open to the public from 9:30 AM until 10:00 PM and we had a good attendance. Some 100 locals and more than 80 tourists visited during the day. We would have had a greater attendance had it not been that Patriarch Bartholomeos from Istanbul arrived on the same day and naturally (and understandably) diverted local interest.

The response in the media was positive save for one article that appeared in a local newspaper that was redolent of the primitive kind of anti-semitism that occasionally one encounters. In the Haniotika Nea the announcement of the event was simple and straightforward. As the event had been realized in the name of the Havurat Etz Hayyim the invitation went out accordingly. No personal names were cited.

In the Kyrix a quite virulent and sarcastic article appeared in which the name of the director was cited several times, (though it had appeared nowhere in either the announcement or the invitation). An emphatic denial was made about Judeo-Greek traditional cooking insinuating as well the usual question as to if there were Jews at all.

More positive was the response of Kriti TV. The programme director, Mr Kostis Papagiorgiou made an appointment some days after the event was over and a short documentary was made of the synagogue and its present role in the community at large. This appeared on Cretan TV on the 25th June.

European Day of Jewish Culture

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the Shoah and the creation of Israel. Jewish identity remains to this day as a 'problem' poised between these two poles - the Shoah and Israel.

With these thoughts in mind we set our sights on a quite varied and visually stimulating presentation. Members of the Havurah assumed responsibility for welcoming guests, directing them and explaining the main exhibits.

As the main theme was the Jewish Calendar we centered the main exhibit in the sanctuary. Thirty-five representative examples of Jewish calligraphy, manuscript illustration and illumination were selected. Choice was determined by a particular Jewish Festival – Pesah, Shavuoth, Sukkoth – Rosh HaShannah, Yom Kippur and the minor festivals each marking important moments in time throughout the year. The examples chosen were from famous and not so famous Jewish manuscripts, mahors, siddurs and haggadahs. These were scanned, enlarged and colours refined. A special booklet was prepared with an introduction to Jewish art and also an overview of the Jewish sense of time. A separate leaflet had identification numbers of the pictures as well as information on origin, date and location.

The mikveh was set aside for two purposes: 1) to explain the mean-

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of the fact that this was the first Bar Mitzvah to have celebrated his rite of passage into adulthood since at least 1943 – if not earlier. According to our list of the names of the Community of Hania between 1941 and 1944 the year of the arrest, only 6 young boys reached the age of thirteen.

Albert Evlagon b. 1928, Victor Elhais b. 1928, Markos Ishakis b. 1930, Leon Ishakis b. 1930 and Ishak Koen b. 1929. Their Bar Mitzvah should have taken place between 1941 and 1943. Unfortunately we do not have an documents that record religious events: Brith Millah, Bar Mitzvah, wedding and even funerals from the last community. We do know that shortly after the arrival of the Nazis R. Osmos was required by the Wehrmacht to hand over all of the knives

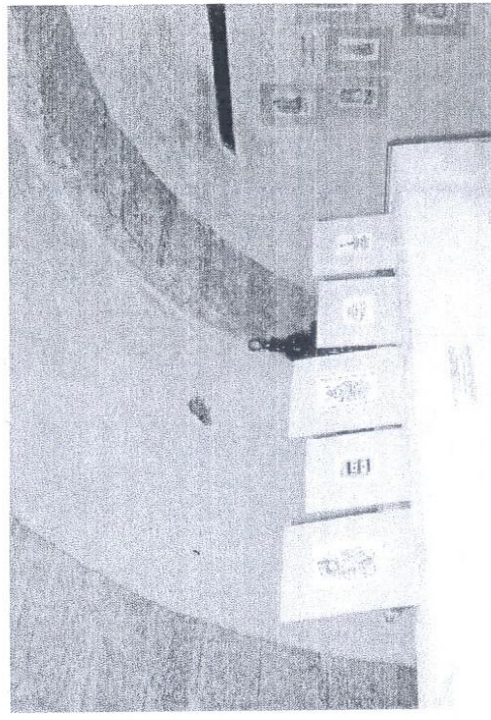
used for shehita – how much further intrusion into Jewish religious life went is unknown. Most likely those boys who reached maturity in 1941 and 1942, perhaps even 1943 performed this important moment in their lives – but for certain it would have been impossible in 1944.

At the termination of Shabbath R. Mizan led Minhah and Arvith prayers at the end of which the Havdalah was performed. A sumptuous banquet was prepared for all at the Mirovolos Restaurant replete with music and dancing – far into the early hours of the morning. On the Sunday and Monday special excursions were laid on to Omalos in the mountains and towards Phalarisana to the far west of Hania.



Up: Drinks and traditional Judeo-Greek refreshments being served at the European Day of Jewish Culture event in the Synagogue.

Down: Exhibit of Hebrew Calligraphy in the Mikveh.





Memorial Service for the Last Community of Hania

13th June, 2002

For the last three years we have had annual commemorations in memory of our last Jewish community that perished in 1944.

Announcements were made in the newspapers, a poster was printed and personal invitations were sent to the mayor, the governor of our prefecture, and the Archbishops of Hania and Kasteli and some other notables. On neither occasion was the event recognized as being worthy of either their participation or even written response. As if to underline their indifference was the more active response of others who either tore down the posters or even threatened store-keepers who put it up.

This year we only made the announcement in the newspapers and concentrated on more limited participation and that mainly of our Hawurah. On the evening of the 13th June some 60 people gathered to participate in Arvith prayers shortly after the sun had set.

The director of the Synagogue gave a short homily that concentrated mainly on finding man's responsibility for the evils that befall him that are beyond the 'normal' function of nature and its laws. We are perhaps subject not to one law but to several that are interwoven, the one into the other. There are the laws of Nature and the Universe.

There is also a Law of Cause and Effect that determines our human destiny. We appear to have an intuition of good and evil and with this free will to function in this real. But even here DNA, the Laws of Nature and cumulative responsibility determine that he suffer at times with no apparent reason.

One way of looking at the role of humanity in this universe is to see it as an almost Sisyphus-like endeavor to incarnate values into the world about us. We can succeed or fail in this but to the degree that we fail then we also suffer in one form or the other.

Torah is very clear about this as it is also very clear that the descriptions of the horrendous intrusion of God into time and history are not only rare but also perhaps interpretations of the world as determined by historical circumstances, culture, language and even worse, literalism.

We have had for centuries a tendency to inflict upon God that which is unfathomable in our

lives — wars, famine, earthquakes, droughts, floods and the horrors of war, and in our own age, genocide hamessed to the effective machinery of the industrial age. At this very moment, in the full light of the present we can see clearly the tangle of motives, intentions, egoism, ignorance and anger that is at the heart if the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

Those who lay the burden of the problem at God or Allah's throne are certainly only adding to the conflict. It is not God who is the problem but man who appears to refuse to examine and respond to conflict.

Our prophets were wise men who, like most wise men, had very simple messages — 'stop! Stop and see things as they are' is one of them. Stop and see things as they are and not as they are determined by what the great Dogen characterized as 'emotion-thought'.

The horror of the Shoah and more contemporary acts of genocide (Cambodia, the Congo etc.) are not punishments brought on this world by God but the consequences of ages of ignorance and anger that erupt in terrible and incomprehensible acts of cruelty and hate.

Our task in this life could be simply that each of us bring more light, love, mercy, compassion and patience into our lives and the lives of those immediately around us — sentient and insentient beings all seeking healing.

None of this means that we will be spared pain, illness and even, God forbid, the consequences of other's violence and ignorance as was our community in 1944. This is, however, the only place where we can be human.

After a few minutes of silence the Ehal was opened and the prayers for Martyrs were recited in Hebrew, Greek and English and then from the Bema three women, Mrs Natalie Ventoura, Mrs. Elizabeth Outram and Mrs. Karen Kanellos slowly read out all of the 263 names of members of the 1944 community. At the end of this recitation each person took several vigils, lit them and placed them in the south courtyard around the graves of the rabbis, on the parapets and steps.

As we left the synagogue 263 lights flickered brilliantly against the fruit trees and roses of a dark June night.

A poem

This poem by John Hannan was written after a recent visit to the Synagogue. With it he sent a short note - 'I was very moved by the story about the Jews, and wrote the following poem the next day.'

One cruel early morning,
Hundreds suddenly homeless,
Condemned to a lingering death,
Desperately hoping for release.

Terror on the faces,
Fearing what must come,
Holding on to one another,
Like those who went before.

Crammed on board a ship,
Their future starkly plain
Release came when least expected,
Saving all from greater pain.

Donations

Three years ago the Synagogue was quite ascetic if not austere in appearance. Its walls stark white and little if any furniture save the benches, ehal and bema. Since that time many gifts have been given to the Synagogue and it is now quite difficult to imagine it being the way it was. It is even possible for us now to honour the special haggim with hangings and dedications.

Some of the most recent gifts have been:

1. 95 embroidered Indian patchwork cushions for the benches of the Kal. (Donors - the Moisis and Beraha families of Athens)
2. Talleth bag from Ioannina (Gift of Mrs Aliki Beraha of Athens (Ioannina). Talleth bags of this genre were the normal gift to a young man when he became Bar Mitzvah in Ioannina. Very few of them have survived and those that have are especially valuable as they are inscribed with the names of the recipients and dates. Most of them are quite small measuring about 20x25 cms. and are made of violet or scarlet velour. The embroidery is very rich and in a technique known as "sirmakissi" in which gilt wire is bound around floral designs cut from heavy cardboard. These are then attached by couching then to the surface of the velour. On the flap side appears the name of the young man and on the other invariably a Luah ha Brith (Tables of the Law) surmounted by a crown in which mixed silver and gilt wire threads are used. The inscription on this bag reads: 'David Michael HaLevi - BeSiman Tov - 1674 (1914 C.E.)'.

We have been very fortunate in having two additional 'hands' at the Synagogue this summer. It is imperative that the synagogue be kept open as much as possible during the Summer months. On some days up to 250 Israelis arrive and there are several tour leaders who always bring their groups of non-Jews to the Kal. The task of keeping the synagogue open from 8:30 AM until 8:30 PM is quite taxing and the help that we are getting from two volunteers this year is deeply valued. Mr. Christopher Layman from the University of Vermont helped out for over a month and recently Miss Alex Singer from the University of Birmingham arrived for a stint of 2 months. Her own words best sum up the experience she is having... 'I feel very much at home here, and Hania is beautiful. Etz Hayyim is fascinating... and this is a fabulous opportunity to do something really worthwhile, meeting Jews from all over the world and even practicing my Hebrew.'

** Persons interested in the Volunteer programme at the Synagogue should contact the director.*

WEB SITE and

DATA BASE

In the future the web site will be changed more frequently and in addition we are preparing a data base. The latter will evolve as material and time dictate. At the moment we are concentrating on specific subjects such as: a) Bibliography on Cretan Jewry, b) Articles on Cretan-Judean history, c) Photographs, d) Membership lists, e) Recent events, e) Related material from other Jewish centers in Greece, f) Family trees and lineages of Cretan Jews as well as names and addresses of persons who come from families originating in Crete.

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