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### Digital Exhibition: Romaniote Memories, a Jewish Journey from Ioannina, Greece to Manhattan

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## Digital Exhibition: Romaniote Memories, a Jewish Journey from Ioannina, Greece to Manhattan

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Vincent Giordano was a photographer and filmmaker dedicated to finding and recording the unique, collective memories of families and communities. From 1999 until his untimely death in 2010, he documented the places, people and events of New York's Romaniote Jewish Community, centered at Kehila Kedosha Janina on Broome Street in Manhattan, and their city of origin, Ioannina, Greece. Giordano intended to make a full length documentary on the subject titled *Before the Flame Goes Out*; sadly, he passed away before his project was complete.

In 2019 Hilda Giordano donated the archive of Vincent's work to Queens College, where it is a major part of the Hellenic American Project and is preserved as part of the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library's Special Collections and Archives. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the physical collection has not yet been processed. Fortunately, we were able to use a selection of scans of Giordano's prints and negatives to create a new online exhibition Romaniote Memories, a Jewish Journey from Ioannina, Greece to Manhattan: Photographs by Vincent Giordano. Many of these



**Courtyard and Pergola of Ioannina Synagogue**

Photo credit: Vincent Giordano, Queens College Special Collections and Archives

images have never been presented in public before.

The Hellenic American Project seeks to expand Greek American Studies, which has traditionally focused on the immigration of Greek Orthodox peoples to the U.S., to include communities such as the Romaniote Jews, whose history and culture are not widely known or understood. As exhibition curator Dr. Samuel Gruber says, "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." Romaniotes have their own language - a dialect of Greek that combines words and phrases from Hebrew and Turkish - which is only spoken by the older generation. Tragically, in Ioannina, of the 1,960 Jews deported to Auschwitz by the Germans during World War II, only 110 survived.



**Seth Kofinas Bar Mitzvah in NYC** Photo credit: Vincent Giordano, Queens College Special Collections and Archives

The exhibition, powered by the open source software Scalar, features over 100 photographs presented in thematic sections, or digital paths. Each path begins with a scholarly introduction, followed by galleries of images which are titled, captioned, and tagged with metadata. The initial paths focus on the Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue on the Lower East Side of New York City, while the latter focus on the Kahal Kadosh Yashan Synagogue in the city of Ioannina, in Northern Greece. The images beautifully showcase the art, architecture, religious rites, and still vibrant culture of these congregations. In addition to the buildings and sacred objects housed within, Giordano captured the joyous *Bar Mitzvah* of Seth Kofinas in June 2007 in New York City, and the observance of the High Holidays in Ioannina, Greece, in 2006. Glossary and resource pages help facilitate use of the exhibition for pedagogical purposes. The content was curated by Dr. Samuel Gruber, President of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, and the site was designed by Annie Tummino, Head of Queens College Special Collections and Archives.

The items featured in the exhibition represent only a small fraction of the total Giordano collection. This coming year, the Center for Jewish Studies will fund opportunities for graduate students to fully process and catalog the materials, which will be made available online through the Benjamin Rosenthal Library's partnership with JSTOR Open Community Collections. Additionally, the Hellenic American Project provides research data and oral histories which further contextualize the experience of Romaniote Jews living in New York and the United States, and their ethnic and religious identities.

*Annie Tummino is Head of Special Collections and Archives at Queens College's Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library. Dr. Nicholas Alexiou is Professor of Sociology and Founder and Director of the Hellenic American Project at Queens College.*