

A Rhodes Scholar, or maybe just a Rhodes tourist

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

Of all the places we visited on a recent trip to the Mediterranean, the Greek island of Rhodes holds pride of place in my memory.

Virtually every street and sidewalk within the high walls of the Medieval City, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is either cobbled or paved in mosaics made of smooth beach stones. Narrow alleyways and shady courtyards give the place a quiet, fairy-tale atmosphere where approximately 6,000 people live and work in the same buildings that the Crusaders used centuries ago.

After crossing the moat into the city we found the Archaeological Museum. Dedicated as a hospital in 1484 by the Knights of St. John, its upstairs wards now serve as exhibit space, arranged chronologically by century. While the most popular exhibit may be the magnificent first century BCE marble Aphrodite Bathing, the entire collection of artifacts is vast and amazing.

But the main item on our agenda was to visit the Jewish section, so we made our way through the twists and turns of this ancient city to the beautifully restored Kahal Shalom synagogue at the bend in a cobblestone alley.

Jews prospered in Rhodes during 390 years of Ottoman rule and under the succeeding Italian occupation, so much so that

the island was dubbed *La Chica Yerushalayim*, Ladino for "The Little Jerusalem." Prior to World War II, the Jewish population of Greece was about 78,000 strong, mostly concentrated in the northern port city of Thessaloniki.

That all changed when the Germans took over. Virtually the entire Jewish population was wiped out in the Holocaust. Among the 5,000 remaining Jews in the country today are about 500 survivors. As for Rhodes, only eighteen Jews remain, but that number increases during the summer months when some of the island's descendants return to host guided tours that, along with a gift shop and the occasional wedding or bar mitzvah, help to keep the synagogue's doors open – and its story alive.

Isaac Habiib was our delightful docent. A survivors' son who grew up in the Congo, he spent his adult life in South Africa teaching French and Spanish. Now retired, the multilingual Habiib returns every year to volunteer his time at the synagogue and museum. He gave us an informative and inspiring talk about the history of the Rhodes Jewish community.

The most powerful story he told us had its genesis on July 19, 1944. The Germans had sent boats to round up all the Jews in the Greek islands, including those of Rhodes, and the Ge-

stapo ordered all of the island's Jewish population to gather at its headquarters, from which they were to be sent to Auschwitz. When he learned what was about to unfold, the Turkish consul to Greece, Selahattin Ülkümen, confronted the Nazi officer in charge, a General Kleeman. He reminded the German that Turkey was neutral in the war, and he threatened to cause an international incident if Kleeman did not release the Turkish citizens and their families. The German relented, and thus Ülkümen was able to save the lives of 45 of the Jews on the island. The remaining 1,673 Jews of Rhodes, were sent to extermination camps. Only 151 of that group survived the war. However, even with his protection, the remaining Jews were subject to constant harassment by the Nazis.

In retaliation for Ülkümen's actions, the Germans bombed the Turkish consulate, killing his pregnant wife and two consular employees. The consul and his infant son survived. The Germans then grabbed him and sent him to the mainland, where he was confined for the rest of the war.

In 1989, Yad Vashem wanted to recognize Ülkümen as a Righteous Gentile, but by this time he was too old and infirm to travel, so his son went in his stead to Jerusalem to witness a tree planted in his father's honor.

This son was the very infant who had survived the bombing of the consulate. I believe I was not alone in experiencing chills at Isaac's account.

If you didn't know the history of the Crusades and their devastating effect on our people as their soldiers rampaged across Europe to "liberate" the Holy Land, you would find the Street of the Knights a charming walkway. On this cobbled street 14th century knights from seven "tongues" lodged in their respective inns, marked by their coats of arms. Arched gateways and cool, plant-filled courtyards give entry to various government offices.

Sitting at the top of the street is the Palace of the Grand Master, a massive Byzantine edifice of over 150 rooms that once served as the citadel of the Knights Hospitalier. Destroyed by a large explosion in 1856, it lay in ruins until the Italians rebuilt it in 1940. The structure now houses the Byzantine Museum, in which about two dozen rooms are open to visitors. Among the treasures there are fine mosaic floors that the Italians lifted from the island of Kos.

Piticas: Pastry Puffs Topped With Honey and Nuts

Adapted from Stella's Sephardic Table: Jewish family recipes from the Mediterranean Island of Rhodes, by Stella Cohen (2012, Hoberman Collection)

Ingredients:

2 cups cake flour, as needed
 ¼ tsp. baking soda
 ½ cup vegetable oil
 ½ cup water
 vegetable oil
 1 cup honey
 ½ cup unsalted pistachios or blanched and toasted almonds, finely chopped
 ½ cup toasted sesame seeds
 ground cinnamon

Directions:

Sift the flour and baking soda into a bowl and make a well in



Inviting courtyard with beach pebbles and slate.



Entrance to the Kahal Shalom Synagogue

the center.

Pour in the oil and water and bring together with your hands, and then knead to make a smooth firm dough. Add more flour if necessary.

Roll into walnut-sized balls, cover with plastic wrap and allow to rest for 1½ hours at room temperature.

Roll out one ball at a time as thinly as possible on a work surface. Keep the remaining balls of dough covered with a tea towel.

Heat enough oil for deep-frying in a large, heavy-based pan over a medium-high heat. When the oil is very hot, slowly lower one piece of dough into the oil and deep-fry.

With a large spoon, continuously scoop hot oil over the pastry to make it puff up until it is crisp and pale golden (30–40 seconds).

With a slotted spoon carefully transfer onto a tray lined with paper towels to drain. Repeat with another rolled piece of dough until all the dough is used.

Reduce the heat if the oil becomes too hot.

Gently stack the fragile pastries on a large platter.

Spoon the honey over the top, making sure each piece is well covered.

Sprinkle with chopped nuts, sesame seeds and ground cinnamon and serve.

Stella's Hint:

Piticas can be made in advance and kept in an airtight container for up to 5 days without the honey and topping. When ready to serve, drizzle the honey and topping over the pastries.



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