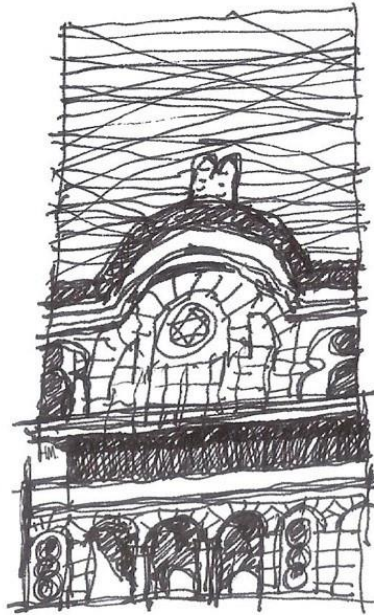


ELIAS V. MESSINAS

The Synagogue
And other stories¹

Athens 2022



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¹ Sketches and architectural drawings by Elias Messinas.

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"The Synagogue" is the psychic basis of a long research work, which looks more like an inner call. It starts from the feeling of debt, and flows into the mobilization of consciences. The architect Elias Messinas was one of the first, when at a young age and in a climate of relative indifference, if not negativity, he raised in the public debate the issue of rescuing those synagogues that were still standing in Greece. With his new book, Elias Messinas consolidates his position as a researcher who faithfully serves the multiculturalism and historical continuity of the architectural wealth of Greek cities and the historical imprint of Greek Jewry, a cultural and religious minority and its place in the future."

Nikos Vatopoulos, Journalist KATHIMERINI Newspaper, Author.

"Wonderful! A trip to Greece through the synagogues of Greek Jewry and at the same time human stories, which look like short stories. Amazing last piece! An astonishing excavation in the life of Belle Mazur, the American Polish-Jewish archaeologist who was looking for the ancient synagogue of Aegina. "

Nikos Bakounakis, Professor of Storytelling Techniques, Panteion University, Author, Journalist (formerly at VIMA Newspaper)

The Author

Elias Messinas (1964-) is an architect and urban planner, sustainability and public participation expert. Graduate of Athens College, of the Yale School of Architecture, of Bezalel Academy, he holds a PhD in Urban Planning and an MSc in "Environment and Development" from the National Technical University of Athens, a postdoctoral fellowship from the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning of the Technion Institute of Technology, with published research on bioclimatic design at the Desert Architecture Unit of the University Ben Gurion in Israel.

Undertook for the first time the extensive study and survey of synagogues in Greece since 1993, which he published extensively in Greece and abroad. From 1995 until today he has undertaken with associates the study, restoration and renovation of synagogues in Veroia, Thessaloniki, Trikala and Kos, while in Aegina, together with Yvette Nahmia-Messina and in collaboration with the Ephorate of Antiquities of Piraeus and Islands of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, undertook the initiative to protect the mosaic floor belonging to an ancient synagogue and the construction of a protective roof.

Creator of the website "Kol haKEHILA" for the Jewish monuments of Greece and ECOWEEK which since 2005 promotes sustainable and participatory planning, the circular economy, innovation and public consultation in 17 countries. Initiated the friendship park "Athens 2004" in Zur Moshe in Israel, and has shared his work with dozens publications, lectures, reports, blog pages, and newspapers, among others of the "Jerusalem Post" in Israel and "News of Saronic Gulf" in Greece.

He has been awarded for his work and he has been nominated for the Tallberg / Eliasson Global Leadership Awards and European Prize, while he participated in the Greek participation catalogue of the Venice Biennale in 2006.

Shares his time between Jerusalem and Aegina, and teaches sustainable design among others at the School of Architecture of the University of Patras in Greece and the Holon Institute of Technology in Israel.

He is married to Yvette and have three daughters, Maya, Noa and Eden.

Foreword

The Synagogue is a building. But it is also a sacred place. Synagogue is also the people who pray and guard this place and pass it on from generation to generation. More or less as we should all do with the planet, which in recent decades has been suffering from the climate crisis and because of human activity. Synagogue is an ancient institution that was created when the Jews were unable to visit the Temple in Jerusalem for sacrifices. They created a space that served both the religious needs of prayer and the liturgical needs of the community. This institution was transmitted throughout the Diaspora. It became the point of reference, gathering, prayer, celebration, joy and sorrow, where the Jews settled and created their community. Sometimes after persecution or destruction and sometimes in search of a better fate. The Nazis also gathered the Jews in the synagogues, before transporting them in trucks and from there in commercial wagons to the concentration camps and crematoria in the Holocaust. The Holocaust was perhaps the event that sealed the future of many Jewish communities in the Diaspora (i.e. communities outside of Israel). Thus, while in Israel the population is expected to increase by 50% in the next 20 years, in the Diaspora and especially in Greece the population of the Jewish communities is declining. After the Holocaust, which lost 87% of the Jewish population of Greece - 96% in Thessaloniki - immigration, mixed marriages and low birth rates lead to ancient communities with thousands of years of history, such as those of Halkida and Ioannina, in extinction trajectory. The synagogue is the background behind the research. Dialogue and concern. The expectation and the note in the notebook. All this canvas and embroidery of experience that is often lost in a scientific publication. The texts are based on many years of research on the buildings themselves, on published items and archives (documents, texts, photographs) in Greece, Israel and elsewhere, some of which are also accessible on the internet. They are also based on interviews and facts from the time of the investigation to the present day. In contact with people and places, in scenes reminiscent of a movie, with a synagogue or the ruins of a synagogue in the background.

The years during which I dealt with this subject were not easy. As soon as I started my professional career, engaging in this research robbed me of time and energy from my professional pursuits. The tangle of life unfolded and I often found myself in a difficult position, as on the one hand I had to adhere to personal principles and values, on the other hand I had to defy the mixed feelings that my research might have caused to some, with implications for my professional relationships. Often the flame of the young man and the lack of experience in the dialogue led me to useless conflicts. Now, I know that with dialogue and negotiation, I could probably achieve much more ("If only I had known", as a Greek idiom wisely says). There are gaps in the narration of events. So, where the path of history is lost and there is a gap in research, I try to fill in the gaps with fiction. Like the pieces that complement the broken ceramics or the shiny marbles that bind the fragments to the ancient columns, so - I hope - these additions contribute to the reconstruction of the events, as I perceive them.

Finally, this year that Greece assumed the Presidency of the International Alliance for the Remembrance of the Holocaust (IHRA), I hope that the scattered memories and their protagonists, which this book brings to light, will inspire and contribute to the "promotion and deepening education, memory and research on the Holocaust" (quoting the words of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis), so that "never again" on the Holocaust and "never again" on any future catastrophe to which humanity is led.

And this brings us to the second important anniversary which is the COP26 in Glasgow, which took place in November 2021. The COP is the leading decision-making body for the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 1992 and the Paris Agreement (2015). As entire communities were wiped out in the Holocaust, so today communities are destroyed by floods and fires, by intense urbanization and civil wars, and are forced to migrate en masse, due to rising sea levels that threaten to wipe out their homes, cities and their villages. Our fellow human beings die every day because of pollution, chemicals and plastics in seas and rivers and all this to maintain a standard of living that is never enough for us.

Every day up to 150 species are lost in nature, upsetting balances and endangering, among other things, the food chain, of which we are a part. Eighty years ago, Nazi ideology aimed to exterminate the Jews. Today, the mentality of capitalism and overconsumption, indifferent to the effects on our lives, threatens to destroy us all. "Never again", then, for destruction, death and pain, whatever form it takes and to whomever it is directed. And to paraphrase post-war German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller (1946), because "today" the destruction or persecution may concern foreigners, "tomorrow" may concern our neighbor and very soon it may concern ourselves. Let us, then, be informed and have the wisdom and strength to react at the right time and do what we can. Have the courage to speak to others, so that collectively and together we can prevent the next catastrophe.

Wishing you a good read,

Elias Messinas

Aegina and Jerusalem 2021

The Book in brief

The Synagogue: Xanthi - in 5 acts

The synagogue in Xanthi was demolished in 1995. The author surveyed the abandoned building in the fall of 1993 and later was unsuccessfully involved in preventing its demolition. The story, in 5 acts, takes us through different periods of the building - during its construction, before and immediately after WWII - involving some of the people who experienced this building, including the author. The story ends with a young student looking for an apartment in the new apartment building that was erected on the site, raising questions and concerns about the sacredness and memory of the site.

The Dome: Komotini

One of the most remarkable synagogues surveyed and studied by the author was the synagogue Beth El of Komotini, demolished in 1994. Eager to reach Komotini before the partially collapsed synagogue was demolished, the author arrived to the city only to be met by a local who offers him a gift. The next morning, when he arrived to the synagogue site to survey the dome, another surprise awaits him.

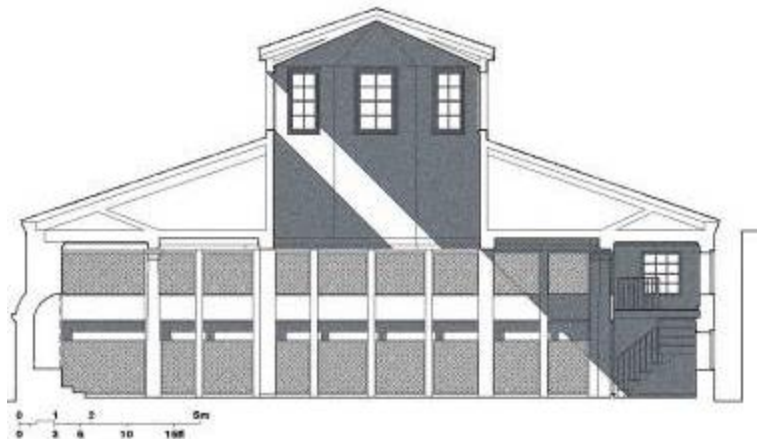


Image: Reconstruction section drawing of the demolished Beth El synagogue in Komotini

*Elias Messinas Architect,
Historical and Architectural Archive of E. Messinas of the Synagogues of Greece*

The Soldier: Didimoticho

The author, while a soldier, wanders in the city of Didimoticho looking for traces of its Jewish past. The city center, once dominated by a grand mosque and a near-by synagogue, is different now, and fewer people remember. Yet, his wanderings through the city bring him to the spot of the demolished synagogue, and as he digs to find the floor, he is rewarded by an acquaintance with a local resident who remembers the Jewish community well.

The First Step: Halkida

The author navigates us through the beginning of the project of the survey and study of the synagogues of Greece. His narrative is enriched by the history of the Jewish community as it is shared to him by local Jews, who take him step by step to the outline of the Jewish quarter, the Jewish families and businesses, and the Jewish cemetery. The narration takes the author back to Ioannina, during the time he surveyed the synagogue in the old city.

The Ghetto: Veroia

An Israeli, born in Veroia, is trying to re-establish his Greek citizenship. During this process, he re-discovers his roots to Veroia and follows and films his father to a trip to Veroia, sixty years after the Shoah. The story intertwines with the story of the author who visits the synagogue in the '90s and later returns with his young daughters to share his own experience in the synagogue and Jewish cemetery.

The Mosaic: Aegina

The story of a mosaic belonging to an ancient synagogue, around which evolves the story of a German archaeologist, and Belle Mazur, an American Polish Jewish archaeologist, who later worked for JOINT to help re-establish the Greek Jewish communities after the Shoah. The story intertwines with the author's research on the mosaic and its presentation in an exhibition in Aegina. The chapter is presented in full below.

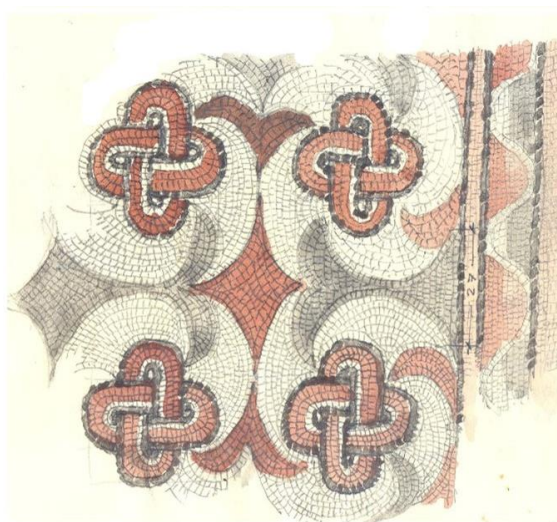


Image: Drawing of the mosaic of the Synagogue in Aegina, in 1994

*Elias Messinas Architect,
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Image: Drawing of the Kolona Archaeological site, Aegina, in 2019

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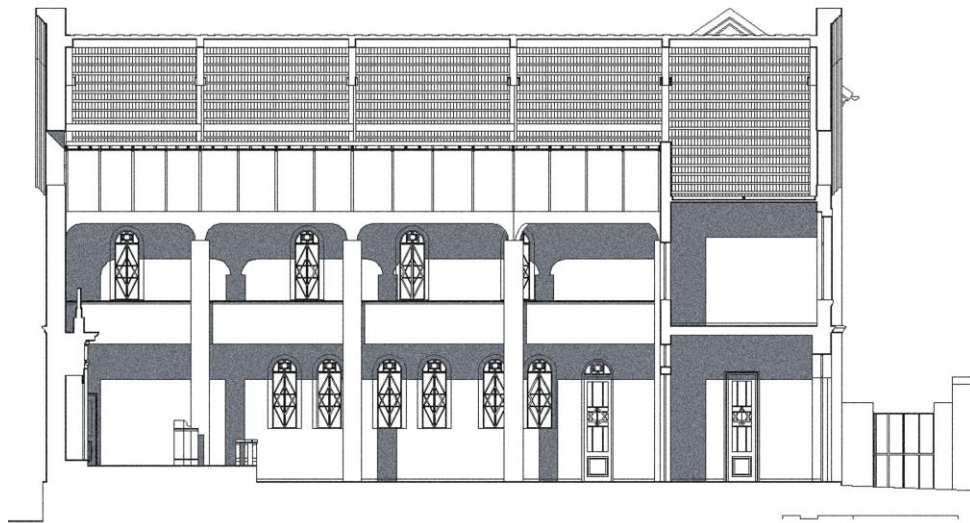


Image: Reconstruction section drawing of the demolished synagogue in Xanthi

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