

Passover in Rhodes

For the Sephardim of Rhodes, Pesach was a holiday filled with happiness, a gathering of family and friends, and a time when no one in the Juderia was left alone or hungry. The expression, **“todo el ke tiene hambre venga y koma”** meaning “anyone who is hungry, come in and eat with us”. Everyone’s door was open to anyone.

The young girls had a favorite expression **“De Purim a Pesah major ke mi madre no me pariera”** meaning from Purim to Passover, I wish I was never born. Because of all the work they had to put up helping their mothers.



The preparation began six to eight weeks before the Passover holiday. The first phase comprised a thorough cleaning of the house. The interior and the exterior walls would be white washed. Whatever woodwork was in the house was polished

with a mixture of kerosene and oil. This made the woodwork shine. The floors consisted of small pebbles called “sheshicos”, which would be scrubbed with a brush until they get absolutely clean and shiny.

In the early 1900s, they were throwing the wastewater out in the streets in front of the homes. The city officials eventually put a stop to this. However, during the week of Passover, the Jews were allowed to dispose of their wastewater by throwing it out in the street in front of their homes because of the large quantity of water they used on those days. The homes had what they called a “posa” or cesspool for the disposal of the dirty water, and these were emptied and cleaned out twice a year.

About a month before Passover, the community would rent one of the public ovens for the Passover baking. They hired people to tend the ovens and help with the baking of the matzoth. All the matzoth were baked in these ovens and then sold to the families. They purchased the Passover flour used for other baking purposes from the community. Whatever profit was derived from this was used to buy food for the underprivileged.

Before Pesach, everyone went to the public bath to get ready for the holiday. Spread out on the couch, “kanape”, were completely new outfits for everyone. The youngsters would count the days before the holiday. They could hardly wait for the new clothes.

Walking home through the Juderia, one could still hear the singing, the laughter, the joy and the happiness echoing throughout the homes and this warm feeling of togetherness is a memory never to be forgotten.

On the last day of Passover, in the morning, many would pack picnic lunches and start off in a group, walking the several miles to “Zimboule” Rodini Park.

Since Pesach comes in springtime, when all the greenery is beautiful and the flowers are in bloom, on the way back from Rodini, everyone would gather armsful of greenery and flowers to bring to their homes. They would place them throughout the house and in the doorway, and they would particularly bring in a type of herb called “Arava” The placing of the “Arava” in the home signified the ending of Pesach.

Source: “I Remember Rhodes” by Rebecca Amato Levy