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Title: *Eating Food as a Means of Negotiating our Lives: the case of Thessalonikian Jews*

Abstract
This paper is an analysis of the ways the Jewish people in Thessaloniki, a group of about 1,000 who live in a Greek city of the North with a population of just under 1,000,000, negotiate their lives, create their identities and state their presence. It is argued that in this complex process numerous strategies are involved: constructing and crossing boundaries are the most important among them. Food plays an important role in the creation of “a Jewish community” and the sense of belonging to it. Communal institutions like the school, the Old people’s Home and the synagogue are created and recreated through the participation in common activities such as communal, celebratory meals and feasts. Thus the public domain becomes private and vice versa. The Jews of Thessaloniki use food and food discourses as rhetorics of being and belonging. For them the discourses of “healthy” and “light” food are metaphors of “their” food and their “authentic” Sephardic cuisine. Authenticity is translated as traditionality and as such it is used as synonymous of their “authentic” Sephardic identity. And yet boundaries are often negotiated and crossed since their authentic Sephardic food is often equated with the cuisine of Thessaloniki and Greek cuisine. This stresses that as far as cuisine is concerned the term “authenticity” should be a matter of analysis since there is a constant process of food exchange. Of course the processes described above are not harmonious. Tensions and withdrawals often arise. The interpretation of food discourses depends on age. Thus young people cross boundaries easily and so negotiate to a great extent their palate, their boundaries – that often older Jews impose on them - and their identities. This constant interplay of boundaries and identities is deconstructed along with the management of food and eating as strategies of stressing - or refusing - cultural distinctiveness.
Eating food as a means of negotiating our lives: the case of Thessalonikian Jews

“Well the Jews in Thessaloniki had in the past some kind of power because they were thousands. Nowadays there are only a few families left. But you know we still cook. The only thing we have left is our food...” (interview extract)

Introduction

The woman I interviewed is Jewish and lives in Thessaloniki, the most important port of Northern Greece. She is eighty-five years old and she was born and raised in the city before the Second World War. Actually she has lived in a Jewish Thessaloniki in the sense that before the War in a population of about 200,000 almost 70,000 were Jews. The War meant a severe destruction of Thessalonikian Jewry: less than 2,000 people came back from the concentration camps, a loss of 96% of the city’s Jewish population. Today the Jews of this city in a total of 1,000,000 are just under 1,000. Despite their number they belong to an “organised” community in the sense that they do enjoy participation in common institutions like the primary school, the summer camp, the two synagogues and the old people’s home. They also have a museum and a gathering centre which is the community’s administrative centre but it also functions as a place for meetings, communal meals and celebrations.

What follows is an analysis of the ways food is used by Thessalonikian Jews as a means to state their presence, to highlight or hide their distinctiveness - if any - to differentiate themselves from other non-Jewish Thessalonikians and to construct their multiple identities. It is argued that in this complex process of investing their lives with meanings boundaries’ crossing and identities’ negotiation are constant. Thus preparing, eating and talking about food are often used by this group as a rhetoric of being and belonging.

Eating food, constructing boundaries and making communities

Culture is not a fixed and static entity but an ongoing evaluation of past and present relations; the way humans create alliances and oppositions is crucial in maintaining or negating “their” culture. It should be treated as a process that is dialectically and discursively shaped enabling situational and flexible identifications. The opposite view reduces culture to a rigid essentialism where – to use Bauman’s (1999) words – children are seen as “cultural photocopies” and adults turn into “cultural dupes”; in this way all cultural differences are intentional acts of differentiation and cultural
identity is nothing more than an act of identification. Differences, identities and cultures are ongoing processes they are constantly informed by others. Human interrelationships nourish identities, which are marked by translation, interpretation and often negotiation.

Identity is produced through the interplay of social dynamics like “difference”. Differences that are considered to be “real” might be so because they are conceived as such. Identities are highly contested and often challenged or rejected. The term “inflections” used (Cowan, 2000) to describe identity is indicative of the various relations involved.

It has been argued (Fischler 1988) that incorporation plays a significant role in the process of nourishing identities and creating a sense belonging. It is used by groups to define themselves, their boundaries, diversity, hierarchy and organisation. Eating often implies the hope of being or becoming more than we are. Incorporation helps us to be what we wish to be. Thus “the food makes the eater” (Fischler 1988: 282) means that food allows us to realise who we are, who we are not, and who we would like to be or not to be.

In the case of Thessalonikian Jews the sense of belonging to a distinct community and the construction of boundaries were partly achieved through the celebrations that took place at the community's institutions like the primary school, the synagogue and the old people's home. In my experience, food sharing - especially on ritual occasions - proved an effective channel for the reworking of Jewishness and Jewish belonging. It should be noted that there was great differentiation and contestation mainly based on age: the old and middle-aged Thessalonikian Jews expressed a strong association with the Sephardic identity whereas young people were quite reluctant to make such associations explicit. For them "not being different" is a statement often employed in order to express their ambiguous belonging. By tasting food the Jews of the city tasted, transmitted and selectively evoke their past: their Spanishness, their Jewishness, their Greekness and their attachment to Thessaloniki. Yet at times they rejected all these identifications and made different statements about present conditions.

**What kind of identities?**

**a. The Jewish identity**

It would be quite essentialising to claim that all Thessalonikian Jews perceived Jewishness the same way since “being Jewish” encompassed memories, past and present experiences, current preoccupations and future fears. It is important to underline that
Jewishness was differently understood by War survivors, middle aged and young people. Thus there was a general consensus among older and middle aged Thessalonikian people that they were not religious, they attended the synagogue rarely and yet they had a strong “Jewish consciousness”. Albertos, a man in his forties, claimed that his feeling of being Jewish had changed over the years with a conscious effort to maintain and even create differences that could distinguish him from others. For him Jewishness was to be understood by contrast with non-Jewishness and Jewish identity was perceived through the process of sharpening and in certain cases creating differences with other non-Jews:

“I remember when I was a child and went to school I was learning Hebrew. At that time Jewishness for me was no more than a game and a leisure pursuit. I felt Greek and Jewish. I have had this feeling since I was very young. As I grew older I tried to elaborate much more my differences. Everyone was smoking so I decided not to smoke, the others studied classics whereas I decided to study progressive literature. I always had the feeling that my identity was special”

Among the younger people there was no single acceptance and identification with Jewishness. Although most of them had attended the primary school and the summer camp, especially those in their mid-twenties were very reluctant to identify themselves with anything “Jewish”. Some remarked that they were “fed up” with discussions of Jewishness and others said that they did not believe in bounded ethnic identities. For them “Europeanism” and “globalised identities” were the paramount values and in our discussions they avoided any association with Jewish identity.

The refusal of Thessalonikian Jews to keep a kosher diet was part and parcel of their non-religious lifestyle. But things were not that simple or even as homogeneous as they presented them to be. Not only did they prove to be very keen in providing me with different interpretations of the meaning and the usefulness of practising kosher, but also such food was not totally absent from their diet. In fact most of them preferred to buy kosher meat from the kosher butcher shop in Thessaloniki and avoided eating pork or mixing meat with dairy products. Additionally some of them, especially people in their thirties and forties, tried to keep the major fasts prescribed by Judaism. For example they avoided eating rice, bread or pasta during Pessah. Some middle-aged people were even consciously trying to reintroduce a kosher diet into their lives, although they all admitted that kosher products were far more expensive than non-kosher foodstuffs. I remember an informant who decided to start keeping kosher during the Jewish Pessah:
“This year I managed to keep kosher. At least during our Pessah. You know every diasporic people have one major celebration and for us this is the Jewish Easter. This year was the first time I decided to keep the diet rules properly”

On several occasions, as in restaurants, they used to order dishes that were compatible with kosher laws like for example moussaka without mincemeat. Their request often annoyed and confused the waitresses.

In contemporary Thessaloniki kosher was a very sensitive issue especially for the younger generation. The schoolteachers talked about the Judaic dietary rules at school and tried to persuade children to choose a kosher diet. However they avoided exerting much pressure on them. In discussions they argued that the influences on children’s diet were so many and so complex that they did not expect them to keep kosher strictly. According to Barbara, who was a schoolteacher, keeping kosher had become much easier because of the European Community and the opening of the supermarket: it had been possible to find several kosher products including sweets, ice cream, and chocolate. The teachers at the primary school suggested children to prefer these products.

Yet even for the teachers themselves a strictly kosher diet was not feasible and it often generated humorous and even self-sarcastic comments. I remember when I once went to a cafeteria together with Barbara, and some of her friends who were Orthodox Christians. I was surprised that although they had been close friends for more than fifteen years they knew nothing about kosher, or the fact that Barbara used to buy meat from the kosher butcher shop. When Miltiadis asked Barbara if she kept these dietary laws she replied: “I am eating toast with bacon and cheese. What do you think?” and everyone laughed.

b. The Sephardic identity

Thessalonikian Jews claimed to be Sephardic Jews and descendants of the Spanish Jewry that had settled in the area from the end of the fifteenth century onwards. During my fieldwork I witnessed people’s tendency to make associations with their Spanish past. This past stood for something not necessarily distant, but rather familiar and privatised. Memories of Spanish ancestry formulated a common point of reference.

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1 Avoiding eating dairy products with meat is a basic Jewish dietary prohibition.
2 Eating outside the domestic context is gaining increasing popularity in the “modern” era and it is considered a component of contemporary urban life and the pleasures associated with it. But eating in a restaurant is not a thing in itself. Harbottle (1997) argues that the restaurant should not be treated as a static environment but as a social process involved in change.
and a starting point for differentiation with the rest of the population in Thessaloniki. Remembering this specific past was not only a way to denote distinctiveness but also a source of communal pride. References to Spanish ancestry were discursively tied to the multi-ethnic past of Thessaloniki where many famous Rabbis, scientists, scholars and local rulers were born. This strong affiliation with Spanish civilisation of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries covered many aspects of life and various cultural products, including language, music and cuisine.

According to my informants the Sephardic identity was the supreme expression of Judaism, the most liberal expression of Jewishness and what is more, the Sephardic were the most cultivated people. On the other hand, the Ashkenazi, the Jews from central Europe, were thought to be vulgar and backward. Many times people made comments about the uniqueness and the “superiority” of the Sephardic. The rest of the Jews had to “bow” - as they vividly put it to me - in front of the Sephardic who constitute the “elite of Judaism”.

Of course, there was not univocal acceptance of the Sephardic identity. The age factor was decisive. Notably, there was a strong dividing line between the young generation and middle-aged people as well as the older generation. Among the people I talked to, especially those who belonged to the first and the second generation, there was a noticeable consensus about what constituted their past. They were aware of the exact period and the historical reasons for their expulsion from Spain. Young people were also aware of the Sephardic past and yet they avoided –at least in public- any direct identifications with it. They insisted that they were “the same” with other Thessalonikian Greeks they just have a “different religion”.

c. Greek and Thessalonikian identity

Jewishness was not perceived as a homogeneous identity that lacked differentiation. “Being Jewish” evoked some kind of sympathy and commonality but yet different interpretations of “other Jews” resulted in different versions of Judaism. Thus Orthodox Jews were thought to be “obsessed” with Judaism. Israeli Jews were thought to

3 Whereas in Thessaloniki the Sephardic are considered the elite of Judaism in Israel Sephardic Jews are considered “backward” and are looked down upon by Ashkenazi Jews who are considered the more “civilised” people.

4 People over fifty-seven were born during or before the Second World War. I believe that the Holocaust has marked their lives in a direct way and has divided time and memories quite sharply between life in pre-War Thessaloniki and life after their return from the concentration camps.
be different because their eating habits were different: “They have humus and felafel whereas we don’t even know these dishes. We certainly eat differently”.

Thessalonikian Jews identified strongly with Greece and felt that they had all the qualities that distinguished “Greeks” from “Europeans”. For Sara the sun and the mild climate were the essence of Greekness. When I complained about the weather in England she commented: “I don’t blame, you sweetie. Our climate is the best in the world. I could not live anywhere else”. Most people narrated to me incidents of meeting other, European Jews who “lacked” all the characteristics of Greek people namely, “warmth” and “friendliness”. Once Barbara narrated how she had met some English Jews during summer vacation:

“I found out that they were Jews. I didn’t care. I disliked them. Typical English people. We are different”

For my informants, one of the most important and decisive elements that defined Greekness was the fact that someone was born and raised in Greece. The older interviewees faced with anger any questioning of their Greekness since they themselves, their parents and their grandparents were all born and raised in Greece:

“I always felt Greek since I was born here. We were raised and lived in this country. All of us: my parents, my grandparents, and me. Most of my friends are Christians. I am not saying I am a Christian, I am saying Greek. They often ask me if I am Greek or Jewish. Of course I am Greek. I am not a Christian”

Rosa -a Holocaust survivor- explained to me that for her, “feeling Thessalonikian” was more important than any other identity. After the War she could have chosen to live in Israel but instead she returned to her native city which was her “home”. Above all she felt she belonged to Thessaloniki and her past and present were tied to this city:

“After the War many things kept me here. Now I know that I could not live anywhere else. I feel so attached to Thessaloniki and I think that I would suffer very much by leaving here. These are not just personal feelings. All the Jews who were born here love Thessaloniki. I feel that this is my home. I feel that every change that happens in this city also happens in my home. Thessaloniki is my home. It was the right decision to return to Thessaloniki”

Jacob objected strongly to the term “double identity”. He explained that he fully experienced his loyalty to Greece and that Jewishness for him was only a matter of
religious identification. He added that being a Greek–Jew does not mean that he or his family “lack” some aspect of Greekness:

“I am Jewish only as far as my religious identity is concerned. But every other aspect of my identity is purely Greek. I am a Greek citizen, my passport is Greek, my children will complete their military obligations towards this country, I work as a civil servant, and I pay taxes. You know I fully realise my identity when I happen to be abroad. I realise then that I am absolutely Greek.”

Constructing boundaries

a. The search for authenticity

It is difficult to define “authenticity” the term used to describe most culinary worlds. On the surface “authenticity” entails several other notions like “being old”, “being original”, “being uncontaminated” and thus “real” and “pure”. Yet the more concepts we employ in order to explain the claims to authenticity the more complex the issue becomes. Questions like “why” and “when” authenticity is claimed remind us that “being authentic” is not a natural fact, a given description but a conscious construction, a deliberate identification used by individuals. By this token it becomes increasingly difficult to define the criteria that identify something - food in this case - as “authentic” because there is a constant process of authenticating. It is argued (Bakalaki, 2000) that in relation to food these criteria multiply and change sometimes with unpredictable outcomes. Thus “authentic” food is in a process of constant redefinition without having fixed and prescribed boundaries.

The issue of authenticity could be linked to the question regarding the construction of identity. In a study (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997) exploring the connections between culture, power and the centrality of place, it is argued that identity is often involved in the process of authentication. This process could be described as an endeavour to legitimatise and justify social choices. If we take into account the double forces of legitimisation and authentication it becomes easier to explain why specific cultural differences are sometimes considered important in the creation of identities and others are less so.

An analysis of cuisine should enable the deconstruction and the critical re-reading of discourses on “originality” and “authenticity”. Therefore what is interesting is not whether Thessalonikian Jewish cooking was “totally” different from the non-Jewish but to question and assess how, why and when Thessalonikian Jews employed discourses of authenticity and originality in relation to their cuisine. I soon realised that cooking was
used as a channel, which enabled comparisons to be made “silently”. By employing discourses of authenticity in relation to cooking Thessalonikian Jews managed and manipulated in various ways the discourse of cultural distinctiveness. I was often offered to taste this difference: “This is the way our mothers and grandmothers used to cook. Our cuisine has been influenced by theirs”. Others added almost naively that these culinary differences were not actual differences:

“You know most dishes seem the same as yours. But they are not. I don’t know why but they taste differently”

All this emphasis on authenticity sounded like a powerful statement of belonging: eating Sephardic food was equated with being a Sephardic Jew. On several occasions, while I was paying visits to people’s homes or when I participated in celebrations at the community’s institutions, my presence generated a series of comments in relation to the “authenticity” of the food consumed:

“Watch carefully, because these are authentic Sephardic dishes” or “This is purely a Sephardic dish. Only Sephardic Jews know how to prepare it”

It is important to note that my informants were aware that I was interested in their culinary habits so they were consciously trying to draw my attention to the fact that their cuisine was undoubtedly Sephardic.

The fact that most dishes echoed Spanish names was the ultimate proof of this cultural and historical association. I recall phrases like:

“Sfougatico is of Spanish origin” or “Maroncinos is a sweet dish we prepare and this is definitely a Spanish word” or “In Greek you call this sweet loukoumades and in Ladino we call them boumouelos”

Spanish origins were invested with such cultural importance that some Jewish people in Thessaloniki attributed Spanishness to certain food items even where no equivalent word can be found in the Spanish language. I recall the explanation that one of my informants gave me: “Haminados eggs are named like that by the term hamin, which means oven in Spanish”. But another, Albertos, strongly objected to this explanation. For him hamin is not a Spanish but a Hebrew word and it doesn't mean oven but it is used to describe the food that is cooked on a Friday night and metaphorically means “warmth” and “embers”. Sephardic identity was justified through certain dishes but depended
much on personal interpretations; Spanish associations were highly treasured and yet they were subject to individual translation and thus negotiation.

b. Culinary difference as cultural distinctiveness

Cooking for my informants was a vehicle for expressing the feeling of being different from other Thessalonikians. Food provided an excellent opportunity for the demarcation of boundaries and for emphasising the distinct qualities of Jewish cooking in the city. I was often prompted to “taste” some of this difference. While I was offered some food people made comments like:

“Here, have some so you can tell yourself. This is the way we cook. You cook differently. Now you have an idea”

There was a repeated attempt to define otherness, so that Jewish cuisine often stood in contrast to Christian cuisine. In fact the culinary complex was often employed to stress this dividing line. It is important to note here that although I was given different interpretations of the historical factors that influenced Sephardic cuisine there was a noticeable consensus - especially among the first and the second generations - on separating Greek from Jewish cuisine. As Sara explained to me:

“In general the Jewish food is different from the Greek cuisine. You have too much heavy food and you fry it a lot. Of course this can be explained historically. Our ancestors were poor and always persecuted so that they had to move quite often. Our diet mainly consists of vegetables and bread”

Others considered such comments were historically inaccurate since Sephardic Jewry could be found in Thessaloniki uninterruptedly for more than four hundred years.

Going back through my fieldnotes I realise that people, mostly women, were keen to emphasise the differences between the two cuisines (Jewish and Christian) and stressed that although most ingredients were the same, Sephardic culinary culture involves different “techniques”. Linda who lived with her husband had associated the reunion of the family with cooking Sephardic dishes. Her daughters and grandchildren were not living in the same house. Although she initially argued that she cooked only on the occasion of a family reunion I realised - after a number of visits - that preparing and consuming Sephardic dishes was an everyday task. After several visits, she invited me to her kitchen:

“I am preparing our bean soup. Here, taste some. You know our bean soup differs from yours. We fry the beans with fresh onions until they become brown. See? It must be served thick”
I still cannot explain the fact that although Linda’s bean soup looked very similar to the soup prepared in my Christian home it did taste differently. Maybe I was well prepared by my informant to taste this difference. The same thing happened with all the Sephardic Jewish dishes that I happened to try; they had a similar appearance and some of them the same ingredients as non-Sephardic Thessalonikian dishes and yet they tasted differently. Linda’s husband added to our discussions afterwards: “I have never tasted your bean soup but my wife is much more flexible. She can eat it”.

Linda was also proud of the “secret knowledge” involved in Sephardic cooking. I remember that during another visit the same lady shared with me an important “secret” technique of Sephardic cooking:

“Sometimes before baking a pie we twist it like that. You don’t know how to twist pies the way we do. At least I don’t think I’ve seen this technique anywhere”

I am almost positive that this “secret technique” was something that was also found in Christian cooking. Yet what is important is not if differences really existed but the fact that people themselves wanted them to exist. As was mentioned before Thessalonikian Jews interpreted, valorised and negotiated their culinary culture and therefore made statements about their identity.

The distinction “Us” versus “Them” came up frequently when Jewish cooking was compared to non-Jewish cooking. While I was in the field I went to a coffee shop with Andreas, a Christian friend who was very interested in Jewish cuisine, and Nicki the director of the Old People’s Home. Our discussion centred on the topic of Jewish cuisine. Andreas said that the other day some friends had gathered and cooked the Jewish bean soup and he remarked “We added some tomato juice as the cookbook recommends”. Nicki remarked quite surprised:

“But why? We never put tomato in this soup. Some recipes in this book are not exact. I have noticed it with other recipes as well. For example sometimes it suggests many eggs. No, I never cook this way”

It is quite interesting to note that in her words she made use of both “We” and “I” as if the way she cooks is representative of what Jewish cuisine is, or as if Jewish cuisine was something fixed and strictly prescribed. In other words she considered that only “insiders” knew how to preserve their cuisine “correctly”. A fixed culinary order was employed by her and other informants. Yet it has been argued (James, 1997) that the belief in a fixed, static and prescribed culinary world sustains and promotes fixed cultural
identities. Therefore the thought of a culinary order becomes a powerful statement of being and belonging.

Apart from the different techniques of Sephardic cuisine and the different repertoire of recipes the use of different ingredients in cooking is what made dishes different. Thessalonikian Jews translated difference in terms of tastier, lighter and healthier cuisine. Thus my informants drew my attention to the frequent use of unleavened bread (*matzah*) in their cooking. *Matzah* is mainly associated with Passover and it is purchased during those days from the community centre.

The unleavened bread was the basic ingredient for most Sephardic dishes associated with the celebration of *Pessah*. According to Ruth:

“We use matzoth as the basic ingredient in many of our dishes. We use it instead of bread or *phyllo* pastry in order to prepare fried balls, pies, sauces, almost everything. So the dishes become more tasty”

It has been suggested\(^5\) that the concept of “healthy eating” can become a political issue and the information concerning healthy food enacts political influence and power. In the case of the Jewish people in Thessaloniki the concept of “healthy eating” was evolved in order to serve desired “political ends”. Jewish cuisine was considered to be healthier than the non-Jewish - the Greek in general - and this statement could be considered a powerful statement of belonging and identity.\(^6\) Susan asserted that:

“You have too much heavy food and you fry it a lot. Our cuisine is much lighter. Our ancestors’ diet consisted mainly of bread and vegetables. Quite light and simple things”

Even the use of *matzah* to make pies, fried balls or sauces was thought to make the food “tastier” and “lighter” and thus, different. Of course such a belief was not scientifically tested since the preparation of some dishes with *matzah* still involved unhealthy culinary practices like, for example, frying with olive oil. The point I want to make is that Thessalonikian Jews employed the notion of “healthy eating”, most of the time fairly inaccurately, in order to point to the distinct and more positive qualities of

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\(^5\) A number of authors (Keane, 1997, Lupton, 1996, Bradby, 1997, Caplan, 1997) assess the issue of “healthy eating”. Reilly and Miller (1997) discuss the central role of the media in the emergence of food as a social issue. However they argue that it is “important to go beyond media-centric explanations and understand that the way in which the media operates is a product of complex interactions between the media, the social institutions on which they report and the public” (1997: 249).

\(^6\) The major food classification scheme that emerged from interviews with adolescent women in Toronto divided foodstuffs in two categories: “junk food” and “healthy food”. Each category was vested with symbolic meanings. Hence “junk food” was associated with weight gain, friends, independence and guilt
their own cooking. Their accounts of “cooking differently” and having a “healthier diet” were often statements of “being different”.

**Crossing boundaries:**

**a. When the cuisine of Thessalonikian Jews meets the “other”**

Among the first questions which my research generated was whether Jewish cooking was notably different from the cooking of other, non-Jewish Thessalonikians and if so what was the degree of differentiation and the meeting points. My informants were constantly trying to distinguish Jewish from non-Jewish, or more accurately, Christian cuisine and to point up the differences between the two culinary worlds. Nevertheless going back carefully through my field-material I realise that several discussions I had with my informants suggested the blending of Jewish and non-Jewish cuisine. Cuisine, recipes and ingredients, like other cultural devices, are not bounded entities. The search for an uncontaminated and uncorrupted original should be a matter of scepticism (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996). Hybridity, synthesis, appropriation - or whatever one wishes to name this process - is no less “authentic”.

The issue of proximity between Sephardic and Greek cuisine or more correctly between Sephardic and Thessalonikian cuisine was a recurrent theme in most food discussions I had with middle aged and older people. In these discussions the boundaries between Greek, Thessalonikian and Sephardic cooking constantly shifted and were subject to negotiation and change. Sephardic dishes were considered at the same time Thessalonikian dishes and were seen as part and parcel of the history of the city. When I asked Rosa about the origins of Sephardic dishes she replied: “These dishes are taken from the cuisine of Thessaloniki”. Her friend Rene added that:

“The culture of Thessaloniki has been strongly influenced by Jewish culture. You can’t study Sephardic cuisine if you don’t study Thessalonikian and Mediterranean cuisine”

In some cases people treated Sephardic cuisine as an integral part of Greek foodways. Some of their comments were conscious or unconscious efforts to stress the “Greekness” of several ingredients they used. Once Linda commented: “Our olive oil is the best in the world”. In her words the term “Our” referred to Greece and Greek cuisine as opposed to other non-Greek cuisines. The fact that the Jews had lived in Greece for hundred of years provided the justification for the local adaptation of their cuisine:

whereas “healthy food” was associated with weight loss, parents and being at home (Chapman and
“All these are Greek dishes. There is no 100% Jewish cuisine. You know, we have been living here for more than 400 years”

The dynamic processes of negotiation and synthesis were even more evident among younger Thessalonikian Jews. In particular, families with younger members seemed to follow willingly some Christian festivities and the customs that accompany them. Dinah explained the situation as follows:

“I could say that along with the Jewish festive days I also celebrate some Christian festive days and the same applies especially to the younger members of my family. And during Easter we eat mageiritsa, the Christian Easter soup (Laugh). We like it. You know, it’s inevitable”

Maria, a young Christian woman, when asked about her Jewish friend, answered:

“She is Jewish but not like the others, she is modern. Lilly follows our customs. For example during the Christian Easter she eats our mageiritsa”

When I interviewed Flora, a woman in late thirties, I understood that for her there are no real and objective boundaries between Sephardic-Jewish cuisine and local Thessalonikian. As she accurately put it “All the people of Thessaloniki like well-cooked food. That’s why our cuisine is so tasty”.

The process of synthesis and appropriation involved in cooking was one of the themes I repeatedly came across while carrying out fieldwork. Negotiation, interchange and the shifting of culinary boundaries characterised people’s accounts of their present day dietary habits. Not only the cuisine of Thessaloniki but also the Orthodox Christian food traditions had significantly influenced Sephardic foodways. Thessalonikian Jews, by negotiating their menu, shifted between “being” and “feeling” Jewish, Sephardic, Thessalonikian and Greek. My informants mobilised several culinary discourses in their attempt to construct identifications and negotiate their belonging.

b. Ritual food and everyday cooking

Another theme that emerged from my field research was the constant interplay between ritual and everyday cooking. Not only special, ceremonial dishes but also food ingredients that were mainly used for celebratory meals became in many cases part of everyday cooking. The reasons for this shift between ceremonial and everyday cuisine were numerous. Some of them were related to ageing, perceptions about a “healthy diet”

Maclean, 1993).
or even issues of tastiness, and of course the family’s food likes and dislikes. But it seemed to me that the notion of “making the food more tasty” or “lighter” or even “less time-consuming” could be translated into other symbolic discourses namely those of making the food more “acceptable” to Thessalonikian Jews, more familiar to them and eventually distinct from that of other Thessalonikians.

Although matzah stands for the Jewish Passover, it was also widely used among Thessalonikian Jews for many savoury or sweet dishes. In such cases it substituted for fresh bread and it constituted the basic ingredient that indicated a Jewish association. One dish quite popular among the Jewish population was zucchini and eggplant fritada, which was called sfougato or sfougatico. My informants noted that they often added some crumbled matzah in order to make this dish “more solid” and “tasty”.

The use of matzah either crumbled or just wet was commonly found in Jewish cooking. It was often used as the basic foodstuff in Sephardic fried dumplings. The filling consisted of cheese, spinach or leeks. Keftikes are always found on the ritual table of Pessah but they also accompanied daily meals as well. Thessalonikian Jews also used matzah in order to make pies. Instead of using phyllo (pastry) they used matzah - after they had spread on it olive oil or simply water to make it soft - and they filled it with cheese, spinach or pumpkin and beaten eggs. Thessalonikian Jews referred to them as pastel de spinaka o de kalavassa.

Crumbled matzah was used in another dish called bimwelos or boumouelos. It looked like the loukoumades - a kind of doughnut - found all over Greece. Boumwelos were normally prepared for the ritual occasion of Hanukah but I found that some housewives included them in their everyday diet and sometimes by replacing the main course. As Linda said to me:

“This year I did not prepare any boumouelos because my children were away. I used to go to my daughter’s in law place and we would prepare these sweets together. But now I prepare them on ordinary days and this is our lunch. We eat only this and nothing else, so we eat seven or eight of them instead of other food”

Negating boundaries and reconstructing new ones

We think that there is nothing left but…

Food perceptions and preferences are not fixed but are subject to transformation and multiple influences. Often young people express their resistance and their resentment of parental culture through their bodies. Refusing to eat what the parents provide or eating the “wrong” food could be seen as an embodied rebellion (Lupton, 1996). This
was the case for the younger generation of the city’s Jews. Most young people I talked to emphasised the fact that their diet nowadays was not restricted by any rules and that ready-made food, the food that they preferred, could be easily found and consumed. In their attitude I witnessed a strong emphasis on sameness: Thessalonikian Jews were not thought as different from other Thessalonikians and the food they consumed was beyond doubt the same. Lucille, a young woman commented:

“We eat ready-made food and go to fast-food places. For example we eat at McDonalds. Things are the same now. We all eat the same”

Isaac, an educated man in his mid twenties was one of them, “a very free and open minded spirit” as his mother commented. Isaac, his mother and I had a very illuminating discussion regarding the “modern” shift in food preferences and the youth’s perceptions of Sephardic cuisine.

Isaac: “As far as cooking is concerned I don’t think that Sephardic cuisine exists anymore and of course there is no such thing as Jewish identity”

Isaac’s mother: “What about the prassokeftedes that I cook for you? You do like them…”

Isaac: “Okay, probably there is something left. But as far as the younger generation is concerned things have changed. For example I am a vegetarian”

His mother explained to me when he left:

“I am sure that my son won’t create a Jewish family. I can’t say the same about my other son. I mean that Isaac will not seek to marry a Jewish woman and bring up his children according to the Jewish principles. I try not to press him. He is a very free spirit. I think inevitably as time goes by our identity will be lost”

For some younger people the emphasis on the cultural distinctiveness of Thessalonikian Jews was a sign of stagnation, backwardness and incompatibility with “modern” life. Thus they emphasised that life in contemporary Thessaloniki was more free and so were their food habits. Nevertheless a significant number of them participated in Jewish celebrations and ate at least some of the “traditional” dishes that the women in their families had prepared. Isaac’s mother explained to me that what had changed was

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8 Vegetarianism is an important issue related to food choices and general lifestyle. According to Lupton (1996) the vegetarian philosophy is based on major objections to meat: its consumption is unhealthy, unnecessary and immoral. Abstinence from it also enhances spirituality and purity. In this case I believe that vegetarianism has another dimension: rebellion to parental culture and therefore refusal to consume “the same” food as parents do.
not the actual food but the context in which this food was consumed with the help of the new food technology:

“I prepare keftikes and freeze them. So, whenever my sons feel hungry they can find something to eat. You know they love having them for breakfast”

The reaction of the younger people in relation to the food attitudes of the older and the middle-aged generation varied considerably. I remember once when I visited Sara’s home and she was desperately trying to find the booklet that the community centre sends on the occasion of important Jewish celebrations. On the last page one could find many “authentic” Sephardic recipes. Sara apologised:

“I am sorry but I can’t find it anywhere. You know I hide it somewhere because when I cook I look at the recipes of this booklet. But my children laugh at me. They think I am too obsessed. I don’t think I’ll find it. I have hidden it for good”

Other young people held a more positive attitude to Jewish celebrations and rituals. Andreas is a man in his late twenties who is studying in Paris. His grandmother argued that the celebration of Pessah was a strong attraction for him:

“Whenever he phones me he asks me if I intend to celebrate Pessah. I keep this tradition and he seems to enjoy it very much. Whenever Andreas comes I cook for him a pie made with matzah and meat with peas. You know just to remind him of our Pessah”

Although probably Andreas’s food preferences had nothing to do with the food prepared for Pessah he nevertheless consumed it as a sign of family reunion. Food for him became a metaphor of “return” physically and symbolically among his own people.

**Conclusion**

The Jews of Thessaloniki eat food and talk about it while at the same time they perpetuate or reject discourses of cultural distinctiveness and highlight their Jewishness, Thessalonikaness, Sephardicness and Greekness according to the situation they find themselves in. Thus identities whether Jewish, Sephardic, Thessalonikan or Greek shift and are subject to translation and negotiation. Identifications are never unilateral and fixed but contextual, complex often altered and transformed. As it is argued (Hall, 1996: 2) such an interpretation “sees identification as construction, a process never completed but always ‘in process’. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be ‘won’ or ‘lost’, sustained or abandoned”. In the case of the Jewish people in Thessaloniki – in a
city where this group is a religious minority - a constant process of constructing and crossing boundaries takes place. Hence the negotiation of boundaries can be seen as a “survival” strategy and an effective way to create viable and flexible livelihoods in a non-Jewish city.

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