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Jews in Turkey (p.617-618)

by Bülent Şenay

In the fourteenth century, when the * Ottoman state was in its early formative stages, Jews were already settled in Anatolia and the *Balkans, where they had lived for many centuries. Most of them were Greek-speaking because their traditions and culture had been formed under *Byzantine rule. They were known as *Benei Romania*, or *Romaniote Jews, because Byzantium and other Greek-ruled lands were known by the Jews as *Romania*, the land of the Romans, and they developed customs now known as "*minhag Romania*" (see GREECE). The first Ottoman Jews were thus the continuation of the sizable Greek-speaking Jewish communities in pre-Ottoman Asia Minor. Archeo-logical evidence (found in Ephesus, Pergamon, Smyrna, and Sardis) shows that the first signs of Jewish life in Asia Minor date to the fourth century BCE, which makes the Jewish community of Turkey one of the oldest in the world.

The first Jewish colony to be mentioned in Turkish history proper was in Bursa, a city located in a province that has been the cradle of a number of civilizations and religions, from the pre-Christian era to the present. After his conquest of the city in 1324, Orhan, the second sultan of the newly founded Ottoman state, permitted the Jews to build their first synagogue, Etz ha-Hayyim, which has been in use ever since. Before that, under Byzantine rule, Jews had not been allowed to exercise their religion freely. Encouraged by more tolerant rule, many Jews migrated to the Ottoman lands toward the end of the fourteenth century and throughout the fifteenth century; *Karaites, as well as Jews expelled from *Hungary, *France, *Sicily, Venetian-ruled Salonika, and Bavaria, found refuge there.

In the mid-fifteenth century, after taking Constantinople (1453), Sultan Mehmet II issued an official invitation for Jews to settle in the empire. A great influx of Jews arrived during the reign of Mehmet's successor, Beyazid II (1481-1512), after the 1492 expulsion from *Spain. The Spanish Jews settled chiefly in Constantinople, Salonika, Adrianople, Nicopolis, * Jerusalem, *Safed, Damascus, and *Egypt and in Bursa, Tokat, and Amasya in Anatolia. Jews did not settle in Izmir until the mid-sixteenth century. Soon after their arrival at the end of the fifteenth century, * Sephardic Jews became the largest Jewish community in Ottoman lands. They outnumbered both the Romaniote Jews and the *Ashkenazi Jews coming from the *Habsburg Empire, who had constituted most of the Jewish communities in Ottoman lands until that time. The chief center of the Sephardic Jews was Salonika, which became virtually a Spanish Jewish city as the Spanish Jews soon outnumbered their co-religionists of other nationalities and even the original native inhabitants. *Ladino became the ruling tongue, and its purity was maintained for about a century. In the middle of the sixteenth century, another wave of European Jewish refugees, expelled from *Italy and Bohemia, arrived in the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, in 1556 Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent saved the Ancona "*conversos* from papal persecution by declaring them Ottoman subjects.

Jews introduced various arts and industries into the country, including *printing; Sephardim David and Samuel ibn Nahmias established the first Hebrew printing press in Istanbul in 1493. Jews distinguished themselves in *medicine and served as interpreters and diplomatic

agents at the Ottoman courts. In Muslim Constantinople many owned beautiful houses and gardens on the shores of the Bosphorus.

The Ottoman Empire at this time was a classic example of a pluralistic society. Although the Ottoman state was established as a Turkoman principality, it soon expanded to the Rumelia region and established control over Central and Eastern Anatolia, the Middle East, and North Africa, uniting dense Muslim and Christian populations under its administration. When the Sephardic Jews who migrated from Spain are added to this diversity, the extent of religious and ethnic pluralism in the Ottoman state is evident. Legal enforcement of pluralism played a considerable role in the success of the Ottoman experience. The general principle in Islamic-Ottoman law was the application of the same regulations to all individuals in a Muslim society (including non-Muslims). In addition, Christians, Jews, and followers of other religions were also given an opportunity to implement their own laws in certain areas. Non-Muslims were vested with the right to apply to their religious courts in personal status matters as well as the right to apply to Ottoman courts. Jews were on a par with Christians in exercising this judicial right. The Ottoman world was a medley of peoples in a diverse society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Christian and Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire lived under what has been called the *millet* system. *Millet*, which originally meant a religious community, came to mean "nation" in the nineteenth century. The system provided, on the one hand, a degree of religious, cultural, and ethnic continuity within these communities, while on the other it permitted their incorporation into the Ottoman administrative, economic, and political system.

In this relaxed atmosphere, Jewish culture flourished. The sixteenth century witnessed the rise of important thinkers like the *kabbalists of *Safed (Joseph *Karo, Moses *Cordovero, Isaac *Luria, Hayyim Vital); the seventeenth century was marked by the messianic movement of *Shabbatai Zevi, which ended with the emergence of the Donmeh, pseudo-converts to Islam who maintained Jewish identity and traditions in secret (see SABBATEANISM: OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND TURKEY).

During the Crimean War (1853-56), Jews who were fleeing the war zone took refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the nineteenth century, and especially after 1875, as the empire was contracting, giving rise to new nation-states in the Balkans, considerable numbers of Jews, together with even larger numbers of Muslims, migrated from the newly independent states to the remaining Ottoman territories. The Balkan Jews were joined by many Russian Jews who were also seeking refuge in the Ottoman Empire. These immigrants were generally well received and even assisted by the Ottoman authorities and the local Jewish communities. However, in ensuing decades, many of these immigrants moved again, mainly to Western Europe, the Americas, and several African countries. This outward movement also swept with it established Ottoman Jews, who were attracted by economic opportunity in the West. The modern education and Western languages that many of them had recently acquired further facilitated this movement. However, those who stayed in the Ottoman lands continued to prosper and felt like a protected minority.

The new Republic of 1923 was certainly different from the empire in mentality and organization. The Jews, who were once a recognized autonomous community of the Ottoman state, became "equal citizens" of Turkey, and all their institutions came under "state control." In 1933, after Hitler's ascension to power, Ataturk invited Jews to leave *Nazi Germany and settle in Turkey. During *World War II, Turkey, as a neutral country, not only protected its Jews but also facilitated the safe land and sea passage of thousands of European Jewish refugees, mostly to *Palestine and the Americas. Across Europe, Turkish diplomats provided

documents and visas to fleeing Jews, and many Jewish agencies managed to help the war victims from their headquarters in Istanbul.

Today there are approximately 26,000 Jews living in Turkey. The vast majority are in Istanbul, with a community of about 2,500 in Izmir and smaller groups located in Adana, Ankara, Bursa, Canakkale, Iskenderun, and Kırklareli. Sephardic Jews make up 96% of the community, with Ashkenazi Jews accounting for the rest. There are about one hundred Karaites, an independent group that does not accept the authority of the chief rabbi. Turkish Jews are legally represented, as they have been for many centuries, by the *Hakham Bast*, a chief rabbi, who is assisted by a religious council made up of a *Rosh Beit Din* (head of the Jewish court) and three *Hakhamim*. Thirty-five lay counselors look after the secular affairs of the community, and an executive committee of fourteen, the president of which must be elected from among the lay counselors, runs daily affairs. In the early twenty-first century, sixteen synagogues are operating in Istanbul; they are classified as religious foundations (*Vakifs*). The community's newspaper, *Shalom*, is printed in Turkish and Ladino. The Jewish community also maintains a primary school for nearly 300 pupils and a secondary school for 250 students in Istanbul, plus an elementary school for 140 children in Izmir. Turkish is the language of instruction, and Hebrew is taught as well. Two Jewish hospitals (in Istanbul and Izmir) serve the community. Both cities have homes for the aged (*Moshav Zekinim*) and several welfare associations to assist the poor, the sick, needy, children, and orphans. Social clubs containing libraries, cultural and sports facilities, and discotheques give young people opportunities to meet. There are several Jewish professors teaching at the universities of Istanbul and Ankara, and many Turkish Jews are prominent in business, industry, and the liberal professions.

Important studies of this community include

B. Braude, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (1982);

H. Inalcik, "The Ottoman Decline and its Effects upon Reaya." *Aspects of the Balkans: Continuity and Change. Contributions to the International Balkan Conference*, ed. H. Bimbaum and S. Vryonis Jr. (1972);

A. Levy, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (1994);

S. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (1991);

W. F. Weiker, *Ottomans. Turks and the Jewish Polity: A History of the Jews of Turkey*, (1992).

BÜLENT ŞENAY