

THE FIFTH CENTENARY OF THE FIRST JEWISH MIGRATIONS TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE¹

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During the first part of the fifteenth century Jews were subjected to systematic persecution in Bohemia, Austria, and Poland; but it was their oppression in Portugal and Spain, where some of them had submitted, under pain of death, to enforced Christianization², culminating, in 1492, in their expulsion, that gave the greatest impetus to their mass exodus³. The Catholic kings, at the end of their reconquista of Spain, had not only cracked down radically on the Moriscoes (Moors), and on all the other Muslims of the Iberian peninsula, they had also envisaged a final solution for their Jewish subjects.

Since 1412 the Jews had been forced to wear degrading markings on their clothes. In 1480 the Inquisition began persecuting them, and finally the Grand Inquisitor carried out the expropriation and expulsion of about 300,000 Jews. Some of them fled to Morocco, but many of them found refuge in the Ottoman Empire, where they were received with enthusiasm. The Sultan (Bayezit II, 1481-1512) even sent his own ship in order to speed up their rescue operation⁴. Bayezit was particularly well disposed towards them. He encouraged their immigration and settlement throughout the empire, and issued a decree enjoining their good treatment in his dominions. Soon the Maranos, those who had outwardly become Catholic Christian in order to escape persecution in Spain, returned to Judaism⁵.

This mass Jewish exodus is a landmark in Jewish history. It had a profound effect on the Ottoman Empire. Many of the exiles from Spain

¹ In 1992 we shall be commemorating the fifth centenary of the first Jewish migrations to the Ottoman Empire. This short paper has been written for that occasion.

² Bernard Lewis: 'Islam and the West', in E. Ingram (ed.): *National and international politics in the Middle East*, London 1986, p.20.

³ M. Franco: *Essai sur l'histoire des Israélites de l'Empire Ottoman*, Paris 1897, pp. 35 f.

⁴ Eric Feigl: *A myth of terror*, Salzburg 1986, pp. 36-7.

⁵ Franco, p. 39; B. Lewis, p. 20.

were allowed to settle along the Golden Horn (Haliç), in the capital, on favourable terms. As Spain had been, for centuries, the most advanced centre of Jewish life, they brought with them skills, knowledge, and some wealth. A number of them entered the Ottoman service while retaining their previous religion. These newcomers helped to initiate what, according to Bernard Lewis, one may now begin to call 'the Europeanization of Turkey'⁶. They set up their own printing press in Istanbul as early as 1493-4, and began to print books, on condition that they did not print any books in Turkish or Arabic⁷.

A famous passage in Elijah Capsali's *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* states that, the king of Spain was considered in the Istanbul court circles to be a great fool for having enriched an enemy with productive citizens at the expense of his own kingdom⁸. While this statement is often attributed incorrectly to Bayezit himself, Mark A. Epstein believes that it is probably an accurate reflection of the views then current in the Ottoman capital⁹.

Muslims favoured the Jews above the Christians during this period, since the latter were already suspected of unduly sympathising with the powers of Christendom¹⁰. In the words of Ernest Jackh:

'Who but the infidel Turk opened up a Turkish haven, in the Middle Ages, to the Jewish refugees of Christian Spain and Italy? The Ottoman Sultans, Selim and Sulciman, early in the sixteenth century' invited, them to Constantinople (Istanbul) and Salonika (Selanik)¹¹.

Meanwhile, news that the Jews were welcome in the Ottoman Empire spread quickly throughout the Jewish world, and many immigrants began to arrive from Hungary, Moldavia, the Crimea, and parts of Asia.

⁶ B. Lewis, pp. 20-21.

⁷ Turhan Feyzioğlu: 'Atatürk yolu, akılcı, bilimci, gerçekçi yol' (The path of Atatürk, based on rationalism, knowledge, and reality), *Atatürk Yolu*, Istanbul 1981, p. 14.

⁸ Elijah Capsali: *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, vol. I., Jerusalem 1975, p. 240.

⁹ Mark A. Epstein: 'The leadership of Ottoman Jews in the 15th and 16th centuries', in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.): *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire - the functioning of a plural society*, vol. I, *The Central Lands*, New York 1982, p. 105.

¹⁰ H.H. Graetz: *History of the Jews*, vol. IV, London 1891-2, pp. 390 and 415 f.

¹¹ Ernest Jackh: *The Rising Crescent*, New York 1944, p. 37.

The chief centres in which they settled were Istanbul, Selanik, Edirne (Adrianople), and Nikopolis in the European provinces; Bursa, Amasya, and Tokat in the Asiatic provinces. Istanbul soon came to harbour the largest community of Jews in the whole of Europe; and Selanik became a predominantly Jewish city¹².

Jewish communities had already existed in some of the Anatolian emirates during the period of the expanding Ottoman frontier state, as well as in Byzantine Balkans and Slavic states. Under the Byzantines, as late as the twelfth century, Jewish communities were led by rabbis, who were recognised as leaders of their communities by the authorities both in the capital and in the smaller towns¹³. The Ottomans adopted similar policies towards their Jewish subjects, but did not regard them as outcasts, as the Byzantines had done; for example, Murat II did not insist on their dressing in a particular manner, but allowed them to live as they pleased¹⁴.

Jews from the non-Ottoman territories in the Balkans, attracted by the intellectual and economic opportunities in Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, migrated there and joined the existing community, which included both previous Rabbanite and Karaite communities, and the more recent arrivals from Bursa¹⁵. The prosperity and freedom of the Ottoman Jews prompted Chief Rabbi Isaac Tsarfati of the Jewish community of Edirne, who had immigrated from Christian Europe, to write a letter to his European coreligionists, at the behest of two recent arrivals from Europe, informing them of the situation, and urging them to migrate there. The letter advised its recipients not only of the pleasant conditions in the Ottoman domains, but also described the ease of travel to Palestine and the Holy Places as attractions to those who would make the pilgrimage, or choose to be buried There. This letter is believed to have been sent in the 1430s, although some researchers of Jewish history have variously dated it in the period after the conquest of Istanbul by the Turks (1453), or after

¹² Graetz IV, pp. 430 and 433-4; Franco, pp. 40-41.

¹³ Steven B. Bowman: *The Jews in Byzantium, 1261-1453*, PH.D. dissertation, the Ohio State University, 1974, p. 413.

¹⁴ Sir Hamilton Gibb and Harold Bowen: *Islamic Society and the West...*, vol. I, part 2, London 1950 and 1957, p. 217.

¹⁵ Halil İnalcık: 'Bursa', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. I, p. 1334.

the arrival of the Spanish Jews (1492)¹⁶. Turkish historiographer Halil İnalcık states that it was sent 'by Isaac Tافرati' in the year c. 1454¹⁷.

The condition of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire contrasted so strikingly with those imposed on them in various parts of Christendom that the fifteenth century witnessed a large influx of them into the Sultan's dominions¹⁸. However, this version of Jewish migration to, and settlement in, the Ottoman Empire has been challenged by a few modern writers of Jewish history. Joseph C. Hacker, for example, observes that there has been little research into the early Ottoman Jewry, and that the view accepted by scholars and historians of the Ottoman Empire is a rosy one¹⁹. Hacker, therefore, contests the accepted version. He does not believe that the Ottoman Jews had a chief rabbi. He claims that the Jews were forcibly taken to Istanbul from Byzantine cities; that those in Istanbul suffered from the conquest of the city; and that several of them were sold into slavery.

Between 1453 and c. 1470, he says, strong anti-Ottoman attitudes were found among the Byzantine Jews, which was a response to the fate of the Romaniot Jews who had suffered from the Ottoman conquests, and from the Ottoman policy of *sürgün* (relocation) and compulsory resettlement that followed the conquest. According to Hacker, Elijah Capsali, who described the conditions of the Jews under Fatih Mehmet II (the Conqueror, 1451-81), did not mention the compulsory resettlement at all, and said nothing about the fate of the Jews of Istanbul after its fall. Capsali, Hacker claims, was very favourable to the Ottomans, and was pleased with the collapse of the Christian Empire. According to his view, the fall of Byzantium and the rise of the Ottomans represented a divine intervention in history on behalf of those who treated the Jews well²⁰.

¹⁶ See also Shlomo Rozanes: *Divre Yemei Yisrael be Togarmah* (history of the Jews in Turkey), 2nd ed., Tel Aviv 1930-45, vol. I, p. 16 n29; Graetz IV, pp. 293 f.; Gibb and Bowen, I, part 2, p. 225.

¹⁷ Halil İnalcık: 'The re-building of Istanbul by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror', *Cultura Turcica*, IV, Nos. 1-2, Ankara 1967, p. 10.

¹⁸ See Franco, p. 34; Abraham Galanté: *Turcs et Juifs*, Istanbul 1932, p.24: for a letter written to their countrymen early in the fifteenth century by two German rabbis who had sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire, extolling its beauties and advantages.

¹⁹ Joseph R. Hacker: 'Ottoman policy towards the Jews and Jewish attitudes towards the Ottomans during the 15th century', in Braude and Lewis, I, p. 117; see also Rozanes I, pp.21-5 and 30-4; S. Baron: *The Jewish Community*, vol. I, Philadelphia 1942, pp. 195-9 and 350-51; H.Z. Hirschberger: 'The Oriental Jewish Community', *Religion in the Middle East*, (ed.): A.J. Arberry, Cambridge 1969, vol. I, pp. 146-57.

²⁰ Capsali I, pp. 81-3; see also Hacker in Braude and Lewis I, p. 121.

Finally, Hacker admits that the Jews in the Ottoman Empire possessed religious autonomy, as did the other *dimmi* (non-Muslim) groups. Other modern historians, for example Mark A. Epstein and Benjamin Braude, also, contest the official version, but accept that the Ottomans did treat tolerably and equitably their minority subjects, including the Jews, particularly during the heyday of their empire²¹.

Irrespective of whether the Christians and the Jews suffered during the Turkish occupation of Istanbul - and in the prevailing war conditions everybody suffered, including the Muslims - and irrespective of whether the minorities in the Ottoman Empire were organised in autonomous communities known as *millets*, having their own system of individual or collective leadership with specific or empire-wide powers, the fact remains that these communities were preserved in the Turkish Empire until most, if not all, of them established their own nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is necessary to recall here that, when the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492, no Christian state in the whole of Europe opened its doors to them. They found the only solace within the Empire of the Ottoman Turks, who treated them as human beings, and did not persecute them because of their origin, language, or creed. Many Jews did not forget this Turkish magnanimity, so much so that, four hundred years after their influx into the Ottoman Empire, in April 1892, the regional committee of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, as an expression of sincere gratitude, thanked Sultan Abdülhamit II (31.8.1876-27.4.1909) for the protection which the Jews enjoyed on Turkish territory;²² whilst a Jewish poet wrote the following verse (in Turkish), in the Jewish newspaper *El Tempo* of Istanbul:

‘And yesterday, those who were damned,
Entered Istanbul, naked and in misery;
And for the first time they heard these words:
“You are *muhacirs* (immigrants), welcome”²³.

²¹ Epstein in Braude and Lewis I, p. 179; Benjamin Braude: ‘Foundation myths of the Millet system’, in Braude and Lewis, I, p. 14; cf. Graetz IV, pp. 421-2; and Franco, p. 44.

²² Paul Dumont: ‘Jewish communities in Turkey during the last decades of the 19th century in the light of the Archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle’ in Braude and Lewis I, pp. 225 f.

²³ Çetin Yetkin: ‘Osmanlı’dan günümüze azınlıklar’ (minorities from the Ottoman period to our time), *Hürriyet* newspaper, 1.9.1987.

