

BUILDING VISIBILITY: THE *OR HADASH SYNAGOGUE* AS EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND GENDERED ISSUES IN 19TH CENTURY OTTOMAN REALM



GÖRÜNÜRLÜĞÜN İNŞASI: 19. YÜZYIL OSMANLI DÜNYASINDA SOSYAL TABAKALAŞMA VE CİNSİYET SORUNLARININ GÖSTERGESİ OLARAK OR HADAŞ SİNAGOGU

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the Or Hadash Synagogue as architectural evidence, revealing how gendered exclusion and social stratification within the nineteenth-century Ottoman Jewish community became visible through the empire's modernization acts. This marginalization was significantly shaped by internal communal dynamics rather than just imperial conditions. The study focuses on marginalized Jewish women—particularly Ashkenazi widows, those with agunah status, and trafficked individuals—who were excluded from communal structures and often pushed into prostitution for survival. Ottoman archives reveal a discrepancy between the building's original drawings and its current state. The study proposes that social and moral boundaries established by the Jewish community shaped its construction; specifically, designers departed from a traditional Orthodox layout by removing the balcony level, merging the facade's floor levels. By manifesting these internal dynamics, the synagogue's form serves as a narrative of Ottoman modernization, bringing obscured religious dynamics to light through the urban fabric. Thus, Or Hadash becomes a sacred space for marginalized individuals and a material testimony to gendered and social divisions. It makes the intersection of communal exclusion, urban visibility, and modernization processes legible, showing how internally produced inequalities materialize across spatial memory. Ultimately, Or Hadash reflects how a specific group constructed its visibility, becoming a testament to what cultural heritage studies have long considered 'undeserving of value'.

Keywords: *Or Hadash Synagogue, Ottoman Modernization, Jewish Community, Gendered Exclusion, Social Stratification*

ÖZ

Bu makale, Or Hadaş Sinagogu'nu; 19. yüzyıl Osmanlı Yahudi toplumundaki toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı dışlanma ve sosyal tabakalaşma süreçlerinin, imparatorluğun modernleşme hamleleri aracılığıyla nasıl görünür hale geldiğini ortaya koyan mimari bir kanıt olarak analiz etmektedir. Çalışma, bu marjinalleşmenin yalnızca imparatorluk koşullarının

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bir ürünü olmadığını, önemli ölçüde cemaat içi dinamikler tarafından şekillendirildiğini savunmaktadır. Makale, Doğu Avrupa'daki pogromlardan kaçarak Osmanlı topraklarına göç eden ve birçoğu kadın olan Yahudilere odaklanmaktadır. Özellikle savaşlar ve pogromlar sırasında eşlerini kaybeden veya *aguna* statüleri nedeniyle yeniden evlenmelerine izin verilmeyen Aşkenaz kadınları, cemaat yapılarından dışlanır ve birçok durumda hayatta kalma mücadelesi olarak fuhşa itilir. Bir diğer grubu dünyanın çeşitli bölgelerine gitmek için iyi bir yaşam vaadiyle kandırılan, ancak İstanbul'da tutulan kadınlar oluşturur.

Çalışma kapsamında Osmanlı arşivlerinde yapılan inceleme, binanın orijinal çizimleri ile mevcut durumu arasında bir tutarsızlık olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Yapı tam olarak ilk planlara göre inşa edilmemiş olmakla birlikte, çok işlevli bir odak noktası olarak planlanması geleneksel cemaat yapısına ilişkin niyetlere dair bir görünüm yansıtmaktadır. Yapının tasarımı ve inşası arasındaki bariz farklardan hareketle bu çalışma, bizzat Yahudi cemaati tarafından belirlenen sosyal ve ahlaki sınırların inşaatı şekillendirdiğini öne sürmektedir; spesifik olarak bu yapıda tasarımcılar, balkon katını kaldırarak mimaride geleneksel Ortodoks düzeninden ayrışır. Bu değişiklik, kat seviyelerinin birleştirildiği cepheye de yansır. Cemaat içi dinamikleri dışa vuran sinagogun başlı başına mevcudiyeti, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl dönüşümlerinin daha önce gizli kalmış dini dinamikleri kentsel doku aracılığıyla gün ışığına çıkardığı bir Osmanlı modernleşmesi anlatısı işlevi görür. Ayrıca, Or Hadaş Sinagogu, sosyo-ekonomik olarak marjinalleşen bireyler için kutsal bir mekana ve cinsiyetlendirilen toplumsal bölünmelerin somut tanığı haline dönüşür. Böylelikle yapı, cemaat esaslı dışlanma, kentsel görünürlük ve Osmanlı modernleşme süreçlerinin kesişimini okunabilir kılarak, içeride üretilen eşitsizliklerin mekânsal bellekte nasıl somutlaştığını açığa çıkarır. Sonuç olarak; kâğıt üzerindeki ilk tasarımından günümüze Or Hadaş, belirli bir grubun Osmanlı modernleşmesi yardımıyla görünürlüğünü nasıl inşa ettiğini yansıtırken; kültürel miras çalışmaları alanında bugüne kadar nelerin değer görmeye layık bulunmadığının bir kanıtıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Or Hadaş Sinagogu, Osmanlı Modernleşmesi, Yahudi Cemaati, Cinsiyet Temelli Dışlanma, Toplumsal Tabakalaşma*

INTRODUCTION

Architecture served as a critical mirror of Westernization in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, capturing the deep socio-demographic changes of the era. These transformations were codified during the Tanzimat era (1839-1876), as the state sought to modernize its institutions through extensive legal and administrative reforms¹. In this context, the Empire began to relax its long-standing religious and architectural restrictions, signaled by a departure from traditionalist approach concerning minorities. Under pressure of European actors, reforms favoring minorities gradually increased. During the 19th century, these changes spread into urban planning and architecture, and were notably implemented in particular pilot regions. This environment of reform and urban tension turned the Galata district into a focal point for both diverse traditions and emerging social crises. Selection of Galata was not ordinary knowing that six hundred years of the Ottoman Empire were largely characterized by a significant degree of multiculturalism, during the 19th century particularly Galata and its surroundings which populations of Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, and others enjoyed with an extended level of acceptance and autonomy for centuries². Despite the benefits of the reforms, Galata was still one of the most problematic areas, both socially and architecturally. As seeing, one of the most tenacious issues of the era was the rise of prostitution in Galata, a system that proved difficult to combat despite legislative efforts. This situation led to frequent disputes between the police department and the Sixth Municipal District, the first administrative body established using European-style municipal practices. Archival petitions from the Ministry of Education highlight the social friction of the time, with residents complaining of women in brothels exhibiting “disgraceful attitudes” visible even to the students of the Imperial High School (Mekteb-i Sultani). These impoverished and marginalized women were often uneducated, widowed, or abandoned, and were increasingly viewed by the state as a threat to both social morality and imperial prestige³.

One of the most significant challenges faced by a group of women living in this region is the set of traditional practices within their own communities. Accordingly, although Jewish lineage is passed down through the mother, this status did not provide women with social freedom in 19th-century Istanbul. Beyond its military outcomes, the Crimean War (1853-1856), triggered a social crisis for Jewish communities. After the Crimean War many women were trapped in a legal ‘limbo’ known as *aguna* (the anchored woman). Under Jewish religious law (halakha), a marriage can only be ended if the husband voluntarily provides a formal divorce document called a *get*. Because their husbands had disappeared in battle, these women could not prove they were widows, nor could they get a divorce. This effectively ‘anchored’ them to their missing husbands, preventing them from ever remarrying legally. Any child born from a new, unofficial relationship would be branded a *mamzer* (illegitimate) and completely rejected by the

1 Karpas, 1985; Zeybek, Kara, 2005, 338-349.

2 Nahum, 2000, 9-10.

3 Özbeke, 2016, 53; Nahum, 2000, 9-10; Yetkin, 2013, 411-412.

community. Left with no legal status and no way to support themselves financially, many of these women were forced into prostitution in the Galata district⁴. Other cases include the reality of deceived women who were lured to Istanbul under false pretenses, as well as those who arrived with the intention of migrating to other countries but ultimately remained stranded in the city. Aron Halévy's report dated March 12, 1890, addressed to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, details how the prostitution sector in Istanbul was taken over by Russians and describes the activities of intermediaries. The report emphasizes the harm this situation imposed on the Jewish community and urges the Paris headquarters to take international action. Knowing that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, international Jewish philanthropic organizations, most notably the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) and the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden (Organization supporting Jewish migration and education), spearheaded a global campaign against the trafficking of Jewish women, a phenomenon then widely termed as 'white slavery', however in the specific context of Ottoman Constantinople, these organizations established strong dominant structures to combat the manipulation of defenseless women arriving from Eastern Europe. According to reports by Aron Halévy and S. Cohen, the Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden (a Jewish aid organization) worked to stop human traffickers at ports, trained girls at risk, and funded safe houses. Historians such as Edward J. Bristow argue that these humanitarian initiatives were driven by a dual purpose: the immediate protection of endangered individuals and a broader communal effort to rehabilitate the 'moral image' of the Jewish Diaspora against contemporary antisemitic tropes that linked Jewish migration to organized crime⁵.

Conceptualizing gender as a social construct where patriarchal structures remain dominant across social, economic, and architectural spheres, this study argues that Or Hadash Synagogue embodies these power dynamics. The Or Hadash Synagogue, built in 1899 on Zürefa Street, was driven by the need for fundamental social institutions, including houses of worship, schools, and nursing homes, for women working as prostitutes, yet functional response to above mentioned social reality. Its design was proposed to Ottoman officials as both a synagogue and a school. Constructed as a hybrid structure, it integrated a religious space with an 'Old Age Home' (Moshav Zakenim) to provide a sanctuary for these socially marginalized women in their later years⁶, while also functioning as a religious school that offers early childhood religious instruction to the youngest members of the community.

Architectural analysis reveals that the building's layout demonstrates distinct floor levels and thresholds. This formation strictly separated the sacred prayer areas from the hospice functions. Archival records and building permits indicate that structural

4 Aydın, 2024, 28; Bornstein-Makovetsky, 2024; Frayman, 2000; Türkoğlu, 2001; Bali, 2008; Karmi, 2019.

5 Bali, 2008; Bristow, 1982; Shaw, 1991; Benbassa, Rodrigue, 1995; Bristow, 1982; Rodrigue, 1990; Stein, 2004.

6 Güleriyüz, 1994, 403-408.

modifications were made during construction. These changes, and the building's very existence, reflect 19th-century Ottoman modernization efforts in both the social and architectural realms. The physical presence of the synagogue on a street designated for brothels serves as architectural proof of the gendered, and social segregation faced at the site. In addition, the synagogue makes the intersection of communal exclusion, urban visibility, and Ottoman modernization processes legible, revealing how internally produced inequalities materialize across spatial memory. Consequently, the building becomes a storyteller of how visibility is constructed and what has been valued within the field of cultural heritage studies, from its initial design process to the present.

In the article, the issue of prostitution in the Galata district is examined, followed by an evaluation of the Ottoman state's approach to the matter, and a socio-architectural reading of the Or Hadash Synagogue. This study involves a comparative architectural history analysis based on a drawing found in the Ottoman Archives and the building's current structure. Ultimately, this approach facilitates a cultural decoding of the site through the lens of its architectural drawing.

PROSTITUTION SECTOR IN 19TH-CENTURY GALATA AND ASHKENAZI WOMEN

The ethnic composition of Galata's residents has changed over time and can be followed from the accounts of visitors such as Benjamin of Tudela who mentions the population of Jewish communities in Galata in the twelfth century. Accordingly, particularly two different congregations of Romaniotes and the Karaites (Karayim) resided in that district⁷. Half a millennium later, a seventeenth-century report by Evliya Çelebi mentions a single Jewish quarter in Galata, with two synagogues, without any detail⁸. Synagogues provide evidence of how the Jewish population in Galata evolved over time, reaching its zenith in the area during the 19th century. Or Hadash or New Light Synagogue was obtained construction license in 1899 when the social fabric of Istanbul was being pulled in unaccustomed directions as a result of the 19th century modernism struggles of the late-Ottoman world. At this point in time, lower class Jewish women, often poor and isolated, began to be seen in the architectural realm of this period; in short, the unwanted became perceivable.

As the marginalized laborers of the prostitution sector in late 19th-century Galata, Ashkenazi women navigated their socio-economic struggles by channeling their demands through the existing patriarchal bureaucracy. The construction of Or Hadash, endorsed by the period of the Tanzimat Era⁹ reveals a strategic reliance on male agency; since these women were denied a direct political voice, they utilized the visible power-holders like Chief Rabbinate or some charity organizations to legitimize their spatial needs. While the women's labor provided fundamental purpose for the structure, their

7 Arslantaş, 2001, 43.

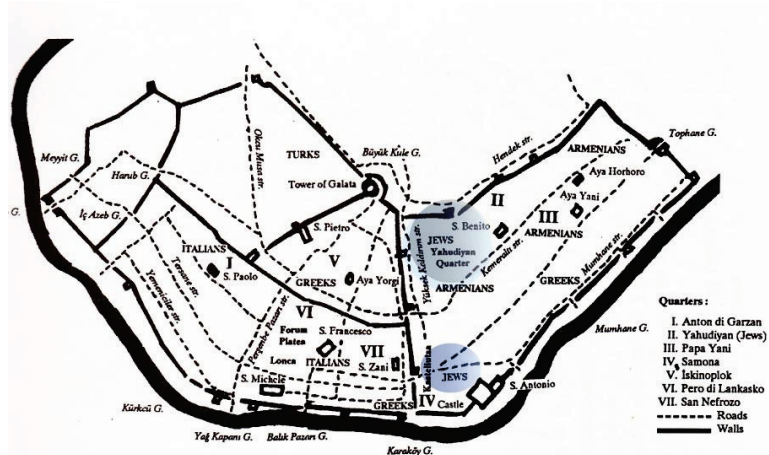
8 Çelebi, 1996, 331–332; Bulunur, 2024, 389.

9 Sarıkaya, 2023, 61.

demands were translated into the legal language of male authority. Consequently, the 11-12 meter monumental height of the building functioned as a dual-purpose architectural tool: it granted the women the visibility they sought within the urban fabric, while simultaneously solidifying the surveillance and 'protection' of the patriarchal order that both exploited and represented them.

Jewish women during the 19th century and their roles within their cultural and religious enclaves some extent has connection prostitution mechanism in the Ottoman Empire¹⁰. Rifat N. Bali, writes on the *the Jews and Prostitution in Constantinople*, which thoroughly depicts the importance of prostitution in the early 20th century in Istanbul; indeed; many brothels were concentrated in Galata, which was close to the harbor. Throughout the century, several groups of Jewish women are in evidence: women who suffered economically and socially and who lived in these impoverished neighborhoods, often falling victim to prostitution, and richer, significantly higher-status Jewish women who engaged in trading activities as merchants and were even welcomed into harems as working visitors. In this research, the social status of the former group is of particular interest. Tracing the lives and fates of these sex workers in the Ottoman Empire of the 19th century exposes class conflicts with both Jewish society and within the larger Empire. The presence of the synagogue highlights how gender, sexuality, and labor were intertwined within patriarchal systems that commodified marginalized women, while simultaneously subjecting them to modernization efforts framed as moral reform. Ultimately, the combined pressure of patriarchy, modernization, and urbanization caused the number of these vulnerable sex workers who are both Jewish and non-Jewish to rise, while making their daily lives unimaginably challenging (Fig. 1) .

Figure 1:
Jewish living
quarters in
Galata in the
19th century.
According to
Edhem, 1993,
5-9. (Modified
by the author).



10 Ünal, 2017, 153-179.

Jewish women in Ottoman society were stratified according to wealth, with those at the bottom of the ladder often forced into prostitution by necessity to survive. During the 19th and 20th centuries, in some examples poorer women in non-Muslim communities served in this role, in part due to the fact that when Eastern Jewish communities moved from Europe to the Ottoman Empire they brought this profession with them¹¹. Researchers have documented that during the 19th century there were two important prostitution centers: one in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the other in the Ottoman capital of Istanbul¹². Like any major port city frequented by transit populations, Istanbul, which has for centuries been a nexus for trading opportunities with ship traffic from Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and other locales, was home to a thriving prostitution sector, chiefly in the Galata district¹³.

The written reports depict the terrifying conditions for many lower-class women in Galata, making clear that prostitution was a big problem for both Jews and non-Jews that had to be addressed. In order to prevent Jewish women from being forced into prostitution, the *Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Woman* labored to end this dehumanizing system. Among the Jewish girls at greatest risk were those from Russia, Romania, and Poland/Ukraine (Galicia) in eastern Europe. When members of the association, tried to encourage these sex workers to disengage themselves from the web of prostitution by distancing themselves from the guides and pimps who maintained the trade, they were accused of being a missionary who merely sought to convert these young Jewish women to Christianity. And since members were unable to speak Yiddish, and thus could not convey their altruistic intent unambiguously, their efforts were constantly undermined by those who profited from trading in young girls¹⁴.

The concentration of prostitution among non-Muslim communities in late 19th-century Istanbul should be analyzed as an intersection of patriarchal systems and the era's socio-legal stratification. While patriarchy commodified female labor across all communities, its manifestation was strictly regulated by the Ottoman 'Mahalle' (neighborhood) system and Sharia-based legal boundaries. Historical records from the Zaptiye Nezareti (Ministry of Police) and imperial decrees regarding 'Adab-ı Umumiye' (Public Morality) demonstrate that Muslim women were subject to intense communal surveillance and severe legal consequences, which largely prevented their entry into the registered prostitution trade. In contrast, the spatial autonomy of districts like Galata that is governed by different communal dynamics and often exempt from the strict 'mahalle' discipline of the Historic Peninsula, allowed prostitution to become a visible survival strategy for non-Muslim migrants, particularly the impoverished Ashkenazi women fleeing pogroms¹⁵. Thus, as Table 1 illustrates, the Jewish predominance in Galata houses

11 Toprak, 1987, 31-40; Toprak, 1993, 342-345.

12 Bali, 2008, 7-37.

13 Cohen, 1914, 2.

14 Bali, 2008, 3.

15 Özbek, 2010; Wyers, 2012

as an indicator of the sex workers with their ethnic backgrounds. Within this framework, it must be noted that other ethnicities were also pulled into prostitution; in fact, Greek and Armenian women profited directly from ensnaring young women in their regions for the trade. This multi-ethnic involvement indicates that the sector operated as a trans-communal economic network, where marginalization transcended specific religious identities while remaining confined within the broader non-Muslim urban enclaves of Istanbul.¹⁶ It can be noticed that Table 1 shows that a number of ethnicities were engaged in the prostitution trade in the various districts of Istanbul, with the Galata houses being principally Jewish in the 19th Century. In line with the city's 'moral geography,' registered Christian and Jewish prostitutes were concentrated on the European side¹⁷ (Table 1).

Table. 1: Districts of Istanbul and Number of Houses in Operations (Bristow,1983, modeled by the author)

Ethnicity of Prostitution Houses	Districts of Istanbul and Number of Houses in Operations					Total
	Abanoz	Ziba	Galata	Üsküdar	Kadıköy	
Greek	37	13	28	--	1	79
Armenian	19	10	6	--	--	35
Jewish	3	--	42	--	--	45
Hungarian	--	--	1	--	--	1
Egyptian	--	--	--	--	1	1
Colored	--	--	--	2	--	2
Bosnian	--	--	--	1	--	1
Turkish	--	--	--	7	4	11
TOTAL	59	23	77	10	6	175

One of the primary methods for supplying women to the brothels in Galata involved a recruitment process disguised as simple commercial activity. Agents used the sale of cheap goods, such as jewelry or clothing, as a cover to enter households and identify young women living in poverty. By acting as traveling salesmen, these recruiters could easily gain the trust of families and observe potential victims without raising suspicion. For example, one study documented how this method worked in Budapest, Hungary, where Solomon David Roman worked with Julie-Anton Hirshfelds as his agent. Once a procurer identified a potential victim, he would extol the beauty, superior living conditions, and job opportunities of Istanbul, before introducing Hirshfeld in the role of

16 Bristow, 1983, 181.

17 Wyers, 2017, 286.

a more trustworthy female to finalize the deal. In many instance these girls travelled to Istanbul with the expectation of becoming nannies or maids but instead were met with the bawdyhouse reality of Istanbul. Jewish pimps who were active in Istanbul included Joseph German off and Nathan Ishar. They were specifically effective in their roles. Handsome and well-dressed with their waistcoats and expensive pocket watches, these “fancy men” knew how to attract the young women arriving in Istanbul by ship or merely passing through from Odessa to other points such as Cairo in Egypt. These are but two of the players who were able to persuade girls and women away from their intended jobs or destinations, and instead made them virtual prisoners in Galata, or sent them on to important prostitution centers in Alexandria, Cairo, Port Said, Bombay, Singapore, and Saigon¹⁸.

In early May 1914, Samuel Cohen, Secretary General of the Association for the Protection of Jewish Girls and Women, recorded a vivid account of the sex trade in Galata and Pera. His report highlights a sharp socio-economic contrast: while Pera housed “free” working women, Galata’s women, predominantly Polish and Russian Jews were forced into labor within unsanitary, labyrinthine streets. Cohen describes these women as prisoners, displayed behind low windows and managed by “madams” under a male-dominated hierarchy of operators. Despite being near commercial centers, churches, and schools, the district remained a site of moral neglect. Authorities, represented by stationary police booths, did not intervene, allowing soldiers and men of various nationalities to sustain the trade. Cohen’s observations reveal an institutionalized system of exploitation where the labor of migrant Jewish women was utilized within a rigid, male-led organizational framework, with no comprehensive efforts made toward urban or social rehabilitation.¹⁹.

After depicting the inhumane conditions of Galata, Cohen questions the government’s tolerance of the trade and its structural inequities. He notes a sharp contrast in perceptions of human trafficking between Western Europe and Turkey, challenging how such practices are reconciled with Islamic morality. Cohen observes that Ottoman men focused solely on the propriety of Turkish women, treating prostitution as a problem belonging only to other faiths and nations. This study argues that the Ottoman administration’s indifference was a deliberate policy of spatial and religious compartmentalization. By confining the visible sex trade to non-Muslim enclaves like Galata, the state outsourced the moral burden to maintain the perceived purity of the Muslim “mahalle.” Ultimately, Cohen’s observations reveal a modernization paradox: the state employed Western-style regulation to manage a sector it ideologically disowned²⁰.

OTTOMAN RESPONSES TO PROSTITUTION MECHANISM

According to Ottoman laws, everyone who engages in any aspect of prostitution (the prostitutes, the pimps, and the users) would be subject to some form of punishment

18 Bristow, 1983, 187-188.

19 Bali, 2008, 81.

20 For further readings Mustafa, 2022, 1-25.

or they draw out to another parts of the Empire²¹. An edict written on 30 June 1560 by the Sultan of Kadı and sent to the governors of Bursa, Ankara, and Beypazarı indicate that both rape and prostitution are immoral and should be treated harshly. Some have even been condemned to death by stoning (*Rajm*), which has long been used in Sharia law for crimes such as adultery. As far as we know, however, the Ottomans only used this extreme form of retribution one time in the case of prostitution—during the 17th century²². Another form of Ottoman punishment involved cauterizing the genital areas of women. In fact, an 18th-century source provides documented evidence of two prostitutes being cauterized and another being put in a sack and thrown in the Marmara Sea to drown. Another example from the 18th century involved a woman who was found in a *madrasa* (a college for Islamic instruction) with a group of men. In this instance, the men were punished with deportation and, again, the woman was sentenced to death by drowning when she was thrown into the Bosphorus. The reformer, Sultan Selim III (d. 1808), sought a somewhat compassionate punishment for prostitution by imprisoning offenders, but Istanbul's prisons and dungeon were already filled with convicts, making this approach difficult to enforce. Punishments were also exacted more publicly to discourage the practice. For example, in the 18th century five of Istanbul's more famous prostitutes were choked to death in a public location, while others were simply exiled. Clearly, however, this public punishment had little effect on restoring the problem, only in 1791 on July, 55 prostitutes were arrested and exiled²³.

Similar to what was occurring in the West, the Ottomans also considered regulating the practice through formal legislation in the 19th century when the modernization struggles was in peak. However, criminal codes enacted on 3 May 1840 and 14 July 1851 do not include any punishment for prostitution, offering little incentive for Istanbul's police to even attempt to address the problem. French criminal code, which was quoted on 9 August 1858 at the *Ceza Kanunname-i Hümayun/Criminal Code*, did not contain any punishment guidelines with respect to prostitution²⁴. The reform period's Grand Vizier, Ali Paşa (1815-1871), also tried to address the pervasive prostitution problem through formal decree, stating that those engaged in the trade could receive prison terms stretching from 48 hours to 3 months, and deportations ranging from 3-to-6 months. But like others before him, those measures had little impact. Prostitution was so widespread that the first brothel opening permission was given by the government in 1856²⁵. The first municipality that was found at Istanbul in 1858, the 6th Office charged for Galata and Pera, enlisted the paid assistance of a doctor to treat prostitutes that presented with venereal diseases. Medical controls of women engaged in prostitution were also carried out at the end of the 1870s by the 6th Office, Authorities with doctors

21 Acar, 2002, 83-88.

22 Von Hammer, 1986, 12-13.

23 Köse, 2007, 113-116; Engin, 2010, 48-50.

24 Gökçen, 1989, 14,95, 168.

25 Bulut, 2009, 111-112.

on site help to control sanitary conditions and they organized establish a hospital where contaminated women can be treated. The rules of prostitution business and lifestyle are tired to be controlled officially²⁶. This approach opened the door for greater regulation of the trade, as municipalities had some control over the brothels and their workforce by licensing them for operation²⁷. It can be said that there were efforts to take control of the institution of prostitution in the world and the Ottomans as well tried to combat with the situation but could not get success. Institutions were arranged to control health conditions of prostitutes in brothels in Galata. These controls can be seen as an effort to keep public health under control. In addition, these controls were the expression of the existence of the administrator on marginal groups and that these groups were not left unattended in which intention social and moral security among the main motives²⁸.

The intensity of the prostitution trade varied depending on the period, becoming increasingly problematic during times of war and rebellion. Notably, it was during the 19th century that prostitution reached its peak in the Ottoman Empire when a poor economy forced the Ottomans to borrow money from the Europeans; thus economic problems and military unrest resulted in increased social and cultural interactions with foreign entities. As noted earlier, the Crimean War cemented the magnitude of the prostitution trade in Istanbul because from 1853 to 1856 European soldiers from France, England, and Sardinia who fought alongside Ottoman troops entered the city in search of new forms of entertainment. Consequently, brothels proliferated to serve this large population of often traumatized men²⁹. It was also time when syphilis made peak in Ottoman territories seeing that soldiers coming from Anatolia they spread the disease from İstanbul to inlands³⁰.

According to some sources, there were almost 200 Jewish families who relied on the prostitution sector in Galata for their livelihood. Given the potential for profit and the possibility of territorial conflict, it was simply smart business practice to co-locate a synagogue near the community's brothel. The necessity for increasing numbers of synagogues resulted from the pogroms in Europe that pushed flocks of people elsewhere in search of safety. Women who saved themselves from the pogroms of Poland, Romania, and Russia sought protection from the Ottomans. This group of women gathered around the construction of Or Hadash, which also had a home for these elderly women and a school for youngest population of the group. The historian Bali conducted oral interviews with Jewish people with knowledge of those days; they recall that the Or Hadash Synagogue was financed by White Russian Jewish groups, and that the synagogue and bawdyhouse were adjoined. People who were working in prostitution sector and spiritual did not want to lose their religious rites therefore preferred their synagogue constructed

26 Özbek, 2010, 557.

27 Toprak, 1993, 343.

28 Özbek, 2010, 559; Yetkin, 2011, 25-27; Kırılı, 2010, 45-50.

29 Yetkin, 2011, 26-27.

30 Ayışığı, 2022, 1075-1096.

next to them³¹. However, this assumption is impractical because Galata was home to many synagogues in very close proximity, as documented in the map provided below. It should be assumed that these people were not accepted by the other Ashkenazi synagogue members and therefore had to find housing solutions in addition to a temple for their religious practices within these isolated areas. Nearby, the Yüksek Kaldırım Ashkenazi Synagogue was erected by an elite group of families who had emigrated from Austria. The existence of three different Ashkenazi synagogues in the same general neighborhood point to the density of the Jewish population in the Galata, as well as the economic strength of these newcomers and the importance self-segregation according to social standing and geographical origin³².

Although written history often overlooks marginalized minority populations, the material evidence provided by Or Hadash makes a significant contribution to the historical record. The modest structure and its segregated usage serve as a physical record of internal social distinctions within the Jewish community. Since the previously invisible segments of society became visible regarding the position of Jews in Ottoman life, the very existence of the building serves as a testimony to radical shifts in Ottoman law. In the pre-reform era, non-Muslims were largely restricted to repairing existing structures; therefore, the permit to construct a stylistically distinctive synagogue from the ground up signifies the newfound legal agency and urban visibility granted to the Jewish community. Furthermore, the struggle of Or Hadash to remain a worthwhile resource speaks to the intra-communal friction and competing interests between various synagogue districts in Galata where different ethnic and cultural subgroups of Jewish migrant communities fought for spatial and religious dominance

This profound social friction as it can be seen in the example of *gabela* crisis (an indirect tax on kosher meat)³³, fueled by the intersection of gendered exclusion and communal displacement, was not merely confined to the ephemeral records of rabbinical petitions or police reports; it was indelibly etched into the urban fabric of Galata. The district's architectural evolution during the late 19th century acted as a physical manifestation of these internal struggles, where the proliferation of diverse synagogues served as a map of social standing and ethnic origin. In this context, the built environment did more than just house a congregation; it functioned as a spatial boundary that codified who was 'honorable' and who was 'marginal.' Therefore, to understand the Or Hadash Synagogue not as an isolated ruin but as a narrative of its time, one must analyze the broader socio-architectural landscape of Galata, where sacred spaces were strategically utilized to navigate the complex hierarchies of the Ottoman Jewish community.

31 Bali,2008, 8.

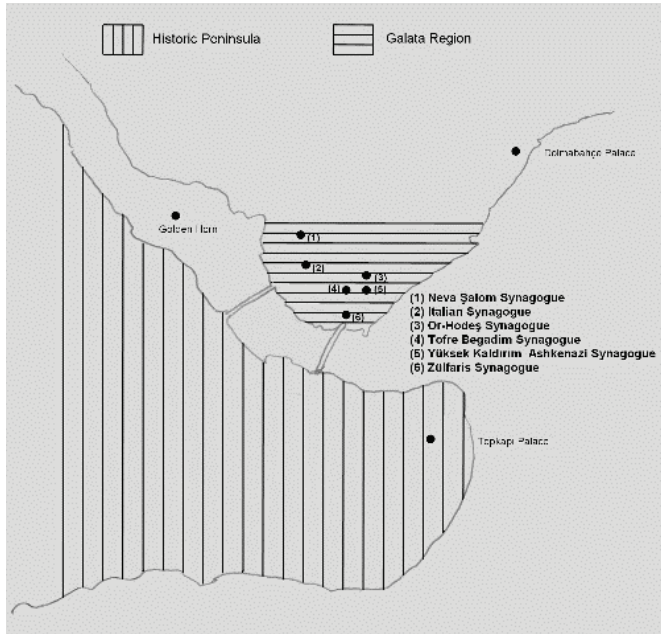
32 Özkan Altınöz, 2017.

33 Directorate of State Archives, Ottoman Archive (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi). DH.MKT. 1646 76. "Dersaadet'teki Yahudi kasaplarının dükkanlarında sattıkları etten gabile namıyla vergi alınmaması Leh Yahudi Cemaati'nce talep olduğundan gereğinin yapılması".

A SOCIO-ARCHITECTURAL READING OF THE OR-HADASH SYNAGOGUE

Within this fragmented urban landscape, the Or Hadash Synagogue stands not merely as a house of worship but as the architectural endpoint of the social stratification discussed above. Galata's architectural history confirms that a number of synagogues were built by different Jewish congregations and their distinct social groups: the Zülfaris Synagogue-Kahalkadoş (1823), the Italian Synagogue (1885), Beth ha Keneseth Tofre Begadim/Schneiderschul-Schneidertemple (1894), Or Hadash (1899), Yüksek Kaldırım Ashkenazi Synagogue (1904), Neve Şalom (1950) (Fig. 2). The relative abundance of Jewish synagogues in one region of Istanbul highlights the significance of this community, as well as the sect-based stratification within the Jewish enclave there³⁴. Table 2 provides examples of the Ashkenazi Synagogues in Galata, Istanbul. (Table 2)

Figure 2:
Sketch for Galata with its
synagogues in the 19th
Century, (created by the
author)



The architectural richness of the period stands in marked contrast to the oppressive inter communal reality. Nineteenth century was when the time, in stylistic terms, the Ottomans were looking to create a new style, leading to a period of design experimentation in many parts of the realm. Inspired by architectural trends occurring in the West, the Ottomans were drawn to romanticism in architecture, using neo-classical, neo-gothic forms in their both religious and civic constructions. As a part of the Ottoman

34 Özkan Altınöz, 2015; Özkan Altınöz, 2017.

Table 2: Ashkenazi Synagogues in Galata, Istanbul (Created by the author)

Building	Date	Location	Style	Owner	Condition
<i>Tofre Begadim</i> (<i>Schneidertempel</i> <i>e-Edirneli</i> <i>Synagogue</i>)	1894	Felek Street/ Galata	Neo-Greek/ eclectic	Ashkenazi congregation	Exists, transformed into an art gallery
<i>Or Hadash-New</i> <i>Light</i>	1899	Zürafa Street/ Galata	Neo-Gothic	Ashkenazi congregation	Exists, in a ruinous condition
<i>Yüksek Kaldırım</i> <i>Askhenazi</i> <i>Synagogue</i>	1904	Yüksek Kaldırım Street	Oriental/ Neo-Islamic Iberian	Ashkenazi congregation	Exists and in use

Millet System, which is a term used to describe the institutional framework that mediated between the Ottoman state and its large and varied non-Muslim populations, the Jews constructed their own synagogues among these popular romantic architectural styles³⁵. This research shows, stylistically, the architecture of Or-Hadash reflects the modernization story of Ottoman Society in that the reformations enabled the Jewish minority to construct their temples as they wished. Thus, the invisible became visible in Istanbul by the means of architecture. Regardless of how archival documents emphasize social status conflicts within Jewish communities, the synagogue itself reflects the prevailing architectural trends of the period through its Neo-Gothic influences and the Empire's evolving social standing.

It is possible to understand that the Polish Jews are not welcomed by other Jewish groups. Sometimes, the issue of the 'unlicensed synagogue' mentioned in archival documents could be seen as a consequence of this internal rivalry³⁶. One group, unwilling to attend the synagogue of the other, would clandestinely convert their private residence into a house of worship. From the petition they wrote it was stated that there was no temple or school for the Polish Jews in the vicinity of Galata and Beyoğlu. In the response, the Chief Rabbinate gave permission for the construction that includes the dimensions of the synagogue that can be made based on the request. Therefore, the building to be

35 Examples of the romantic style can be seen through varied architectural typologies from religious to profane structures in Istanbul such the Aksaray Valide Sultan Mosque, Galata's Yüksek Kaldırım Ashkenazi Synagogue, the Tofrebegadim Synagogue, the Crimean Church, and the Sirkeci Train Station.

36 Directorate of State Archives, Ottoman Archive: Statement regarding the investigation conducted on the other circumstances and the house that Polish Jewswho are Ottoman subjects residing in Galata—converted into an unlicensed synagogue. BOA 1288 – 24 /H-28-08-1312.

constructed should have a height not exceeding 11 meters in the upper part of the sloping land and 12 meters in the lower part in the land of Zürefa Street in Bereketzade Avenue on 20 Ramadan 1313 (5 March 1896). The archival research demonstrates that the architectural history of Or Hadash was started by obtaining permission from the Rabbinate then its process continued with the Ottoman authorities, which required a series of official correspondences with the government. The effort to get the license for the building started with the series of opinion letters to relevant institutions. Accordingly, the construction license, issued with the Sultan's edict numbered 3221, marks the date of 1899. In one of the official papers, the petition of the Chief Rabbinate for construction of a synagogue and the reason for construction of the second synagogue in the same region were explained in a detailed manner with reference to Polish Jews who were not wanted by the other majority of Jews. The record also mentions the construction costs of the synagogue. It is written that the construction will cost two thousand gold, but there are eight hundred gold coins, and the rest will be obtained through the help of wealthy people³⁷.

The Or Hadash Synagogue, which means 'New Light,' owes its existence to Michael Moses Salamonovitz's (widely known as Michael Pasha) efforts. Beyond its religious function, the building was designed as a dual-purpose institution to provide social welfare; the lower level served as Moshav Zakenim, a sanctuary for elderly members of the Ashkenazi community. This spatial organization highlights the building's role as a communal hub that integrated spiritual life with social care. Founded under the leadership of Michael Pasha, Or Hadash remains a significant example of how the Ashkenazi community in 19th-century Istanbul manifested its philanthropic efforts through architectural form. Though Or-Hadash served a poorer class of women who lived and work in this unsavory prostitution area, the other wealthier Ashkenazi congregations viewed it as shameful and tried to close it down. They achieved their goal when Or-Hadash was actually shuttered for a time, but chief Rabbi Moşe Levi (1872-1908) gave permission for it open again and provided that it be physically separated from the street through the construction of tall brick walls. Another Chief Rabbi, Dr. David Markus, tried to purchase the synagogue but the Or-Hadash congregation did not permit to lose their synagogue. Thus, even in its segregated position, the Or-Hadash synagogue continued to serve the local population until the Ottoman chief of police, Osman Bedri Bey, closed it down in 1915 on behalf of the social morality³⁸. The synagogue, whose roof was repaired

37 BOA 2662 - 57/H-29-06-1313; BOA 34 - 15/ H-01-02-1317; BOA 18 - 36 / H-02-09-1313, BOA 756 - 56657/H-10-10-1313; BOA 34 - 15 Document Summary: Permit for the construction of a new synagogue on Zürefa Street (Galata) on land donated by the previous homeowners/ Galata Bereketzade Mahallesi Zürefa Sokağı'nda bulunup mutasarrıfları tarafından terk ve teberru edilen hanenin mülkü yerine müceddeden bir senavi inşasına ruhsat itası. (1317S-02), B.O.A. 756 - 56657 Document Summary: The construction of a temple and school designated for Polish Jews on Zürefa Street, Bereketzade Neighborhood, Beyoğlu/ Beyoğlu'nda Bereketzade Mahallesi Zürefa Sokağı'nda Lehli Musevilere mahsus mabed ve mekteb inşası. (Evkaf, Adliye, Defter-i Hakani, Maarif) Güleriyüz, 2004, 541-542ç

38 Bristow, 1983, 184-185, 225-226.

in 1956, was allocated to the worship of the Georgian Sephardi in return for an annual donation determined by a decision taken in June of that year. The building was a kind of women who worked in prostitution sector and wanted to secure their future. Home of the elders was transferred to the old Alliance School building in Hasköy on September 5, 1963. After the Georgians left, the synagogue was completely abandoned and with a permit the building was sold in 1987³⁹. The reason why this synagogue is in ruined today is not only can the explained by poverty of the Ashkenazi community, the bad condition of the building has very much connection with intra social stratification mechanism of the Jewish community in addition to cultural protection prejudices.

The construction process of the Or Hadash Synagogue, its later transfer of ownership, and its present ruined condition point to unresolved tensions within the community. Its limited visibility in some Jewish historical records also remarkable. For instance, Abraham Galanté's 1937 work, one of the earliest studies on Jewish history, describes the synagogues of Istanbul through several compiled lists. List A was derived from the Hebrew work *Michnat Ribbi Eliézer*, printed in 1853. Since this source predates the construction of the Or Hadash Synagogue (1896–1897), its absence from the list is understandable. However, the synagogue was also excluded from other contemporary lists by certain groups, suggesting a deliberate lack of recognition. Galanté's List B, compiled from the newspaper *El Tiempo*, categorizes synagogues by district. For Galata, it identifies five: Zulfaris, Italian, Ashkenazi (Tailors), Ashkenazi (Austrians), and Eskénazim de Kertch (Crimean and Ukrainian origin). These 'Kerch Jews' likely included Polish Jews who migrated through Crimean ports following Russia's expansion. Galanté describes their synagogue as a modest structure without significant architectural distinction. Finally, in List C, which includes synagogues missing from the previous lists, Or Hadash is briefly mentioned as being located in Galata Kemeralı, though without further comment⁴⁰.

This institutional marginalization meant that women, despite being the biological anchors of the community, were stripped of both legal status and economic security. Subsequently, many were driven toward the prostitution sector or forced to seek refuge in the Moshav Zakenim in their later years. Archival records regarding the 'request for a construction permit for a new school' prove that the Or Hadash building was designed as a hybrid structure to manage these complex needs within the modernized legal framework of the period. The absence of a substantial academic study on the Or Hadash Synagogue at both national and international levels to date, together with the literature reviewed above, suggests that the building has become a strong spatial and social taboo. This taboo, in turn, is reflected in academic scholarship as a marked lack of attention to the structure itself and to the social groups it represents. Luckily, archives contains a design of the synagogue. However, the constructed building and the offered view sketches do not match, which makes us to consider either regulations were not that strict at that

39 Gülerüz, 2018.

40 Galanté, 1937, 14–15.

time, or the design was not accepted due to height and new design had to be offered to the office as a part of the application process. According to the earlier proposed designs, the building supposed to have four stories in height. However today the construction is two storied in the upper part of the slope, four storied at the lower part of the slope which has two entrances both from the both part of the setting. Earlier designed version shows that the façade was divided into three sections vertically among the parts where pilasters are added. The upper part, the 4th floor of the façade, is stressed with pediment whose top contains an emblem of Eye Providence⁴¹. From this an ancient and esoteric cult could be read. Divine watchfulness emblem, guarding divine power which watches all thoughts and actions, also the next world. We don't know from the ruined condition of the building if this symbol is used on the constructed building (Figs. 3-4).

A comparative analysis of the building's archival drawings and its current state reveals that although the officially proposed entrance featured a four story facade arrangement the final construction consists of only two stories. This fundamental discrepancy stems primarily from the removal of the women's balcony known as the *mechitzah* which typically gives Orthodox synagogue architecture a four story appearance. In Orthodox

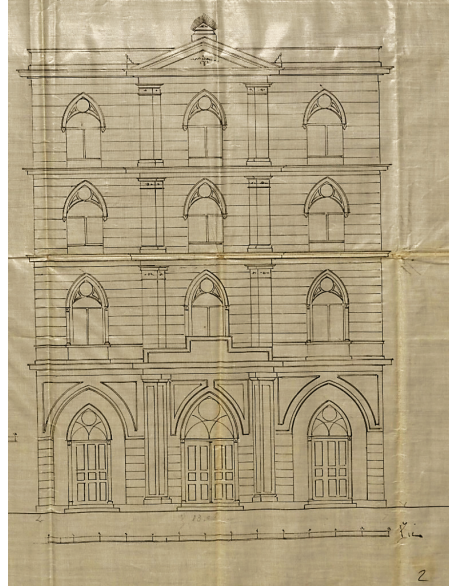


Figure 3: Proposed surveying of Or Hadash in archives. (Presidency of the State Archives of Turkey)



Figure 4: Or Hadash Synagogue entrance. (Photo by author.)

41 Document Summary: Permission was granted for the construction of a synagogue by Polish Jews in the Bereketzade Neighborhood of Galata/Galata'da Bereketzade Mahallesi'nde Lehli Yahudiler tarafından bir sinavi inşasına izin verildiği. BOA 2274 - 96 H-19-07-1317.

buildings, the sections for men and women were strictly separated by different floor levels or physical dividers called *mechitza/mechitzah* woman balcony⁴². Since this section was excluded from the built structure the total number of floors was reduced to two. Furthermore, the integration of Gothic windows on the facade to create a unified spatial suggestion serves as another key element supporting this observation. The nine windows previously visible have been reduced to three. The Gothic window situated above the entrance opening plays a central role, being designed wider and taller, while the Gothic windows on either side are kept narrow to emphasize the central importance of the middle one. Ultimately, this type of architectural segregation was not merely a religious requirement; it was the spatial manifestation of the legal and social isolation these women endured. I propose that on oppose to Orthodox understanding, Or-Hadash's drawings proposed with a *mechitza* structure in mind but, due to the evolving needs and some economic issues of its users, in practice it moved away from the traditional Orthodox understanding of gender separation, and the balcony level was eventually removed. Thus, dual identity of the building balancing the sacred nature of a synagogue with a hospice for the socially excluded is reflected in its facade and entrance design. By utilizing distinct architectural thresholds, the structure managed the spatial encounter between these two disparate worlds, serving as a physical testament to a stratified history of 'squandered lives' and the reformist efforts to regulate social care⁴³.

The structure's response to the steep slope of Zürefa Street results in a split-level configuration, where this vertical transition allows for a functional separation while maintaining a shared spiritual core. This hierarchical organization is further reflected in the light distribution strategy; the towering Neo-Gothic windows on the upper levels funnel light into the main volume, and the removal of the traditional *mechitzah* balcony, a significant departure from Orthodox norms enables this 'divine light' to reach the lower, socio-economically vulnerable segments of the congregation more directly. Furthermore, the massive wall thickness discernible in the window reveals suggests a 'defensive architecture,' creating a citadel-like sanctuary that utilizes its volume to shield occupants from the surrounding urban tension. From the outside the Ehal (Ark), the most sacred part of a synagogue where the Sefer Torah scrolls are kept could be read very well. The protruding Ehal niche on the rear facade functions as a sectional projection, physically and symbolically extending the community's spiritual axis toward Jerusalem, thereby anchoring the building's complex social layers to a singular sacred focus. During Shabbat and holiday prayers, the scrolls are removed from the Ehal to be read upon the Teva (Bimah) (Fig. 5).

The entrance section of the synagogue features a flat lintel system. The keystone appearing above this flat lintel follows the architectural trends of the period. The use of artificial stone significantly defines the façade design of the synagogue. During this period, the application of artificial stone emerged as a prominent technique, developed

42 Türkoğlu, 2001, 22.

43 Dişli, Özcan, 2020, 279-295.

Figure 5:
Or Hadash
Synagogue residential
parts entrance. (Photo
by author.)



out of necessity due to the general limited accessibility of natural stone within Ottoman territories. At the end of the 19th century, before reinforced concrete (a structural system strengthened with iron or steel) was integrated into the building's load-bearing skeleton, it began to be used on façades as cast stone or mold-poured, cement-based ornaments⁴⁴. Starting from the late 19th century until the mid-20th century, artificial stone became a common material for building façades. It was mostly used in districts that were growing fast, changing, or being rebuilt after big fires. In Istanbul, the best examples of this can be seen in Galata and Pera (Beyoğlu), as well as Fener and Balat on the Historical Peninsula⁴⁵. Notably, the use of artificial stone is particularly striking in the arch stone (voussoir) positioned above the entrance lintel.

The second image clearly illustrates the innovative use of cast-in-place concrete. The most striking feature is the cylindrical bay window protruding from the upper floor; its seamless, conical base demonstrates the plastic qualities of concrete that allowed for forms difficult to achieve with traditional stone. Furthermore, the façade displays a variety of artificial stone techniques, using incised joints of different scales to mimic premium masonry. This specific structural element, the concrete bay, serves as a physical testament to the early experimentation with reinforced concrete in the Galata district at the turn of the century. The façade treatment appears to be a low-cost concrete cladding with rather crude or rudimentary shaping. Instead of refined masonry, the surface reflects a hurried imitation of stone, likely chosen for its affordability and speed of application

44 Sur, 2025, 101-124.

45 Baturayoğlu, Ersen, 2009, 21-31.

during the late 19th-century transition to modern materials. The architectural treatment of the synagogue reflects a functional approach aimed at completing the structure as quickly and economically as possible. While the Torah Ark (Aron Kodesh/Mihrab) niche exhibits a higher level of technical skill due to its religious significance, a clear hierarchy exists between the façades. The main façade displays a relatively more meticulous craftsmanship with a distinctive Gothic style, whereas the rear façade, tucked away from the street, reveals much more rudimentary and careless workmanship. This lack of attention to the rear is further evidenced by the choice of simple flat lintel systems instead of the Gothic elements seen in the front, indicating that the aesthetic investment was strictly reserved for the public-facing areas.

Currently, the synagogue is in a state of severe dereliction and faces significant structural decay. The artificial stone cladding is crumbling in various sections, and in areas where early reinforced concrete was used, the reinforcements have likely suffered from corrosion due to exposure. The lack of craftsmanship on the rear façade, as previously noted, has left those sections even more vulnerable to environmental damage, leading to accelerated deterioration. Without an immediate conservation and restoration intervention, this rare example of Galata's early concrete experimentation and Ashkenazi heritage faces the risk of total loss. In any future restoration, preserving the intentional disparity in workmanship between the front and rear façades is crucial, as it serves as a physical record of the socio-economic conditions and the 'hurried completion' strategy of its original construction period. The current dilapidated state of the Or-Hadash Synagogue, concealed behind metal panels, serves as a powerful "storyteller" regarding the politics of cultural heritage in Istanbul. Although the building is officially registered as a "Cultural Asset" by the Istanbul II Regional Board for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, its physical abandonment reveals a deliberate "visual erasure. Institutional inquiries and onsite observations suggest that the lack of restoration is not merely a budgetary issue but a consequence of the building's controversial location. The metal panels do not protect the structure; rather, they signal a desire to hide a site associated with "socially undesirable" histories. This institutional silence confirms that the building is not being preserved because it challenges the sanitized narrative of the district's heritage. It was a "a final refuge" for some women who were legally "anchored" (*agunah* /*pl. agunot*) and economically excluded due to the era's patriarchal legal paralysis.

CONCLUSION

The Or Hadash Synagogue stands as a material evidence of 19th-century Ottoman urban and social reconfigurations. The state's reformation strategy did not merely legalize prostitution to combat the syphilis epidemic; it institutionalized a spatial duality that confined 'unavoidable immorality' to specific districts like Zürefa Street. This multi-faceted containment allowed Ottoman authorities to transform an unregulated social crisis into supervised activity that protected the traditional *mahalle* and imperial prestige. Within this framework, the involvement of organizations like the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) was pivotal. Just as the Ottoman state derived financial and moral stability from

these regulated enclaves, the AIU found a strategic opportunity to further its civilizing mission. By providing aid and educational support to the marginalized residents of Or Hadash, the AIU sought to ‘modernize’ the Jewish frontier, ensuring that even the most destitute elements of the community were brought under a disciplined order.

Architecturally, while the absence of the balcony strongly suggests an ideological choice related to ‘female empowerment,’ it must also be noted that structural deficiencies which is driven by financial constraints and the necessity for rapid completion that could have led to its removal from the plan. In any case, the building’s hybrid identity reflects this complex reality, particularly for women who were economically excluded, legally anchored, or driven toward the sex trade. Finally, the synagogue, for now through its ruined existence, continues to produce an ‘unwanted narrative.’ Concealed behind metal panels, it serves as a powerful ‘storyteller’ of Istanbul’s cultural heritage politics, exposing unresolved tensions between communal belonging, strategic modernization, and social exclusion

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