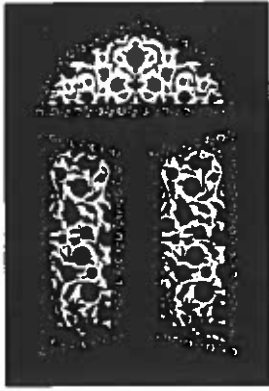


THE
QUINCENTENNIAL
FOUNDATION
OF ISTANBUL



Celebrating 500 Years
of Peaceful Living
in Turkish Lands
of the Jews Expelled
from Spain in 1492

1492-1992

THE
HISTORY
OF THE
TURKISH JEWS

A BRIEF REVIEW

Condensed from a lecture by

MR. NAIM GULERYUZ
Vice President, Quincentennial Foundation of Istanbul

In 1492, the Sephardic Jews, expelled from Spain by royal decree, found a new and lasting home in the Ottoman Empire.

In 1992, we celebrate the 500th anniversary of this milestone in history, a hallmark of thanksgiving and tolerance.

The events and activities planned -- exhibitions, symposia, books, conferences, music, folklore, theater, art, films and special tours to Turkey -- commemorate the longevity and prosperity of the Jewish community in Turkey.

As a whole, the celebration aims to demonstrate the richness and security of life Jews have found in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic over these past five centuries, and show that indeed it is possible for people of different creeds to live together peacefully under one flag.

THE LIFE OF OTTOMAN JEWS

For 300 years following the inquisition, the prosperity and creativity of the Ottoman Jews rivaled that of the Golden Age of Spain. Istanbul, Izmir, Safed and Salonika became the centers of Sephardic Jewry.

Most of the court physicians were Jews: Hakim Yakoub, Joseph and Moshe Hamon, to name only the very first ones.

The new art of printing was brought to the Ottoman Empire from Europe by Jews. In 1493, one year after their expulsion from Spain, David and Samuel ibn Nahmias established the first Hebrew printing press in Istanbul.

Ottoman diplomacy was often carried out by Jews. Joseph Nasi, appointed the Duke of Naxos, was the former Portuguese Marrano Joao Miques. Another Portuguese Marrano, Alvaro Mandas, was named Duke of Mytilene in return for his diplomatic services to the Sultan. Salomon ben Nathan Eskenazi arranged the first diplomatic ties with the British Empire. Jewish women such as Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi and Esther Kyra exercised considerable influence in the court.

In the free air of the Ottoman Empire, Jewish literature flourished. Joseph Caro compiled the Shulhan Aroch. Shlomo-ha-Levi Alkabes composed the Lekhah Dodi, a hymn which welcomes the Sabbath according to both Sephardic and Ashkenazi ritual. Jacob Culi started to write the famous Me-am Lo'az. Rabbi Abraham ben Issac Assa became known as the father of Judeo-Espagnol literature.

Under Ottoman tradition, each non-Moslem religious community was responsible for its own institutions, including schools. In the early 19th century, Abraham de Camondo established a modern school, causing a serious conflict between conservative and secular rabbis which was only settled by the intervention of Sultan Abdulaziz in 1864. The same year the Takkanot ha-Kehilla was published, defining the structure of the Jewish community.

An important event in the life of Ottoman Jews in the 17th century was the schism led by Shabtai Zvi, the pseudo-Messiah who lived in Izmir and adopted Islam with his followers.

EQUALITY AND A NEW REPUBLIC

Efforts at reform of the Ottoman Empire culminated in 1856 with the proclamation of the Hatt-i Humayun, which made all Ottoman citizens, Moslem and non-Moslem alike, equal under the law. As a result, leadership of the community began to shift away from the religious figures to secular forces.

World War I brought to an end the glory of the Ottoman Empire. In its place rose the young Turkish Republic. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was elected president, the Caliphate was abolished and a secular constitution was adopted.

Recognized in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne as a fully independent state within its present-day borders, Turkey accorded minority rights to the three principal non-Moslem religious minorities and permitted them to carry on

A HISTORY PREDATING 1492

The history of the Jews in Asia Minor started many centuries before the migration of the Sephardic Jews. Remnants of Jewish settlements from the 4th century B.C.E. have been uncovered in the Aegean region. The famous 1st century historian Josephus Flavius relates that Aristotle "met Jewish people with whom he had an exchange of views during his trip across Asia Minor."

Ancient synagogue ruins have been found in Sardis, near Izmir, dating from 220 B.C. and traces of other Jewish settlements have been discovered near Bursa in the southeast, and along the Aegean, Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. A bronze column found in Ankara confirms the rights the Emperor Augustus accorded the Jews of Asia Minor.

Jewish communities in Asia Minor flourished during the thousand years of Byzantine rule and continued to prosper through the Turkish conquest. In 1326, when the Ottomans captured Bursa and made it their capital, Sultan Orhan gave the authorization (ferman) to build a synagogue -- the Etz ha-Hayyim (Tree of Life) -- which was in service until 50 years ago.

During the next hundred years, as the Turks conquered the Balkans, numerous Jewish communities came under Ottoman rule, which adhered to the Islamic principle of full recognition of the rights of other monotheistic religions. When Mehmet the Conqueror took Constantinople in 1453, he encountered a Romaniot (Byzantine) Jewish community in the city led by the Rabbi Moses Capsali.

In general, Ottoman rule was much kinder than Byzantine had been. In fact, from the early 15th century on, the Ottomans actively encouraged Jewish immigration. A letter sent by Rabbi Yitzhak Sarfati to Jewish communities in Europe in the first part of the century "invited his co-religionists to leave the torments they were enduring in Christendom and to seek safety and prosperity in Turkey." (Bernard Lewis, The Jews in Islam)

A HAVEN FOR SEPHARDIC JEWS

Sultan Beyazit II's offer of refuge gave new hope to the persecuted Jews of Spain. In 1492, the Sultan ordered the governors of the provinces of the Ottoman Empire "not to refuse the Jews entry or cause them difficulties, but to receive them cordially." (Avram Danon, Yossef Daath, No.4) According to Professor Bernard Lewis, "the Jews were not just permitted to settle in the Ottoman lands, but were encouraged, assisted and sometimes even compelled."

Immanuel Aboad attributes to Beyazit II the famous remark that "the Catholic monarch Ferdinand was wrongly considered as wise, since he impoverished Spain by the expulsion of the Jews, and enriched Turkey."

The arrival of the Sephardim altered the structure of the community and the original group of Romaniot Jews was totally absorbed. Over the centuries an increasing number of European Jews, escaping persecution in their native countries, settled in the Ottoman Empire. By 1477, Jewish households in Istanbul numbered 1647 or 11% of the total. Half a century later, 8070 Jewish households were listed in the city.