

CHAPTER ONE

Turkey



## Country Snapshot

The Ottoman Empire (1299–1922), a sprawling political body whose territory spanned from modern-day Algeria to Iraq and from Saudi Arabia to Hungary, was a major Jewish material, spiritual, and cultural center. Home to both Judeo-Greek speaking Romaniote Jews in the eastern Mediterranean and Karaite Jewish communities in what would become Egypt and Syria, at various times over the course of its existence, the Ottoman Empire welcomed waves of both Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe and Sephardic refugees from Spain. Given the sheer volume of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the years following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Sephardic Jewish population increased so much that it became the main Ottoman Jewish community into which the native Romaniote communities assimilated. Ashkenazi Jews, assimilating at first to the majority Sephardi customs, began to form their own communities as their numbers increased over time.

Under Ottoman rule, Jews lived in relative autonomy as part of the *millet* system, which allowed religious minorities to maintain their own courts, in accordance with their own confessional laws, in exchange for paying a poll tax, or *cizye*. The midcentury Tanzimat, or Ottoman Reforms (1839–1871), affected Jewish life by improving overall material conditions and modernizing the empire, while simultaneously eroding the autonomy from which religious minorities, including Jews, had previously benefitted. Despite these reforms, however, Jews were not pressured to assimilate to Ottoman norms.

Benefitting from the network of state schools, schools run by the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), and Western philanthropic organizations, many Ottoman Jews were able to climb the rungs of the social hierarchy, which resulted in the establishment of a Jewish middle class by the end of the nineteenth century. Likely as a result of the creation of this burgeoning literate bourgeoisie, Jewish journalism gained momentum in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly after the Young Turks Revolution (July 1908), with newspapers being published in a variety of languages including French and Ladino, among others.



MAP 2. Turkey. Source: Bill Nelson, 2022.

Jews also began to participate in political life following this move to a multiparty system. Concentrated in urban areas, Jews were very active in the world of business, administration, and the liberal professions, and on the whole, did well for themselves economically.

The years following the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923) and the subsequent establishment of the Turkish Republic affected the Jewish communities of the newly independent nation. Following the 1923 signing of the Treaty of Lausanne and ensuing establishment of the Turkish Republic, Jews opted to forego the privileges they had been accorded as a religious minority under the Ottomans, which resulted in the end of the *millet* system of governance. In addition, the Turkification process of the mid-twentieth century affected the linguistic landscape of Turkish Jewry through its emphasis on Turkish as the national language. Although the Jewish elite often spoke French and the lower-class Jews Ladino, as the twentieth century progressed, many Jews learned Turkish for business reasons, and it was increasingly spoken in the home. Turkish also gained significant ground as a result of the 1924 language law, which dictated that minority students be taught in Turkish or their national language—which Turkey deemed to be Hebrew for the Jews, despite the fact that few Turkish Jews spoke the language—and the 1926 Unification of Education Act, which forced all AIU schools to close. Over the generations, as Turkish Jews became fluent in the national language, fluency in heritage languages began to erode, and the Jewish community's former multilingualism

gave way to monolingualism. Yet not all Turkish Jews decided to assimilate into more hegemonic ways of life. Toward the mid-twentieth century, for example, many poorer Jews chose to immigrate, particularly to France, the newly founded state of Israel, and to Latin America, where the linguistic similarities between Spanish and Ladino facilitated their integration into their new surroundings.

On the whole, Jews living in the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently in the Republic of Turkey, coexisted in relative peace with their Muslim and Christian counterparts, although they did occasionally face animosity from Christians, with whom Jews competed for government contracts and jobs. In addition, Jews faced little to no state-sanctioned anti-Semitism, and what anti-Semitism they did encounter was often at the hands of their fellow Christian minority, not the Muslim rulers. This relatively peaceful coexistence was threatened on several occasions after the turn of the twentieth century. The Balkan Wars (1912–1913) stirred nationalist sentiments, leaving Jews, who on the whole did not profess nationalist desires, in the uncomfortable middle ground between separatist nationalist aspirations and Ottoman patriotism. During World War II (1939–1945), Turkey was officially neutral, and granted asylum to thousands of German Jewish refugees, including many intellectuals and academics who would go on to shape the modern university system. However, as the vandalization of Jewish homes and businesses by Turkish Nazi sympathizers in the 1934 Thrace riots demonstrate, the absence of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism did not necessarily mean a lack of anti-Semitic violence. In addition, the November 1942 *Varlık Vergisi* (Capital Tax), which was ostensibly enacted to raise funds in the event Turkey were to enter World War II—but whose main goal was to financially decimate non-Muslim minorities in order to bolster economic Turkification—was especially burdensome for minorities, including Jews, as the taxes it levied on them were up to ten times those levied on Muslim Turks. Although short-lived, the onerous burden of paying this tax was a major motivating factor for Jewish emigration, particularly among the lower classes.

The second half of the twentieth century saw significant waves of Turkish Jewish immigration to Israel, particularly after the law barring Turkish Jews from immigrating there was lifted in 1949. However, Zionism was only one of many motivating factors; given the number of poorer and lower-class Jews who moved to Israel, it is clear that economic concerns played a significant role. Indeed, political Zionism had not held much sway among Ottoman and Turkish Jews, who on the whole lent their support to the Ottoman and subsequently Turkish authorities, preferring to integrate themselves into the society in which they lived rather than move to what was said to be their national homeland. On the whole, this loyalty was repaid by governments that permitted Jews to live together freely and with security, and to participate in the economic life of the country.

The Jewish community still exists in Turkey, although small and on the decline: approximately twenty thousand of Turkey's 75 million citizens are Jews, and migration—combined with a stagnant to declining birth rate—have kept these numbers

low. Located mostly in Istanbul and Izmir, Turkish Jews of the twenty-first century retain a collective identity based more on shared historical and cultural consciousness, and less so on religiosity, despite the relatively recent increase in affirmations of religious identity in the face of the growing presence of political Islam. Turkish Jews celebrate the High Holy Days and Passover, take care of their synagogues and cemeteries, and are by and large an integrated part of their nation's landscape.

—*Rebecca Glasberg*

Şişli, Istanbul

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## *Matzah, Simit, and White Cheese*

Lizi Behmoaras

“He is a brother to all of you, in a certain sense,” the teacher said. “Because he’s a little Muslim.” She is talking about the Shah of Iran’s son who was just born, a birth that provoked, God only knows why, the enthusiasm of the entire class at the primary school where I’m enrolled. I know intuitively that the baby in question isn’t *my* brother, nor is he Jacky’s, Victor’s, Corinne’s, Tony’s, or Becky’s . . . in fact, he’s not the brother of any of the other Jews in our class.

For us, being Jewish in class is first and foremost about being distinguished from the “Turks,” since the implication is that only Sunni Muslims are “really Turkish.” Contrary to theirs, our family names are redolent of Spain and our first names sound English or French. On the subject of my own name, mother loves to relate at literary salons that it was inspired by . . . Sartre. She wanted at all costs to modernize my paternal grandmother’s name, Elisa, which, according to Sephardic tradition, I was supposed to inherit. It was while reading *The Respectful Prostitute* that the idea of Lizi came to her.<sup>1</sup> But since the first year of school, the teacher hasn’t gotten used to my name, which she butchers: with knitted brows and in an hesitant voice, she mutters “Sissi.” Being Jewish also means not going to the religion classes which, despite being optional, are attended by all the other students.

One must also avoid admitting that one speaks French or Judeo-Spanish at home, even if one gets tripped up, as I do by lack of habit, on certain Turkish words.<sup>2</sup> Turkish is the language of school and the street. Of the *dolmuş* too, since the diktat of the 1940s, “Citizen, speak Turkish!” is still in place and most drivers turn around, furious, when a foreign word escapes the lips of one of their

1. *The Respectful Prostitute* (original title: *La putain respectueuse*) is a play by Jean-Paul Sartre, written in 1947 and first performed in 1948. The main female character is named Lizzie.

2. Judeo-Spanish likely refers to Ladino; however, we have opted to retain the author’s terminology (judéo-espagnol).



FIGURE 2. Lizi Behmoaras in Istanbul on Şişli Square, in the early 1950s. Behind her, a woman with a headscarf, a *simit* vendor who she half blocks in the picture, and a mustachioed man.

passengers.<sup>3</sup> It's also the language everyone speaks at home to the maid and to my little brother, "so that he, at least, assimilates better," whereas my parents, my maternal grandmother, and I communicate in French. It's an Istanbulite French, warmly sing-songy, peppered with picturesque expressions: we swear "on my life";<sup>4</sup> the telephone, the washing machine, and the car do not break down, but rather "spoil"; a dish is called an "eating"; and we abuse the present subjunctive: "That I tell you! That I go, or not?" My paternal grandmother, from a more conservative family, was not lucky enough to learn the fables of La Fontaine during her childhood. When she visits us, we speak to her with a touch of condescension in the medieval Spanish laced with Turkish and Hebrew that is Judeo-Spanish. Mother, brought up in an environment that emphasized French over and against this "jargon," had to get in the habit of speaking it after her marriage. She calls her mother-in-law *Mama* and addresses her in third-person singular, according to custom, which makes my brother and I snicker. There is also Hebrew, reserved for prayers, totally incomprehensible for us, but whose monotone cadence rocks us to sleep in my father's voice on Passover nights, while we eat *matzah*.<sup>5</sup>

The Shah's son, therefore, is not my brother. I carry the first name of one of Sartre's heroines, I read the texts of the Countess of Ségur, Tintin, and Bécassine. I have two languages at home, a third for the street and school, a fourth for religious holidays. In fact, not totally mastering any of them, I need all of them at once. My halting Turkish does not stop me from composing and reciting tremendously nationalist poems. Any occasion is a good excuse: the anniversary of Atatürk's death, Republic Day, Youth and Sports Day. At some point, overtaken by my patriotic spirit, I evoke in one of my masterpieces, "our glorious flags, red and white stains against the blue sky." The teacher, pallid, then rips the sheet on which I wrote my poem into the tiniest of pieces: "But you are crazy to use the words flag and stain in the same sentence. One could deduce that our flag is—God save us—dirty. Never again! Especially not one of you!" she cried. Especially not one of us, noted . . .

We live in an apartment on the Şişli Square where my first memories are those of a scrawny kid who spent hours at the window, shield and screen erected between her and the world, protecting her from the perils outside. Just across, under an immense verdigris dome, stands the Şişli Mosque, for me a source of infinite distraction from the moment I stopped fearing the muezzin's strident call and the incomprehensible words that he pronounces five times a day in Arabic. In the summer, I spend my days watching the cotton-candy and *simit* vendors leaning

3. Author's note: *Dolmuş* are collective taxis.

4. Here, the author makes an admittedly subtle distinction between the standard French expression "jurer sur la vie de quelqu'un" (to swear on *someone else's* life) and a French rendering of the Ladino expression which has one swearing on "mi vida" (or on *one's own* life).

5. Author's note: *Matzah* is unleavened bread.

against the wall of the mosque and baking in the sun.<sup>6</sup> They are often joined by the knife grinder, the tinsmith, and the bear-handler, whose bells break the torpor of the afternoon. Throughout the year, in the interior courtyard of the mosque, military funerals begin with the sound of Chopin's funeral march that the band plays with relative accuracy. "They are massacring it for me!" laments my grandmother.

During Ramazan, the cylindrical minarets are decorated with lighted crowns that enchant me.<sup>7</sup> Ramazan is also about *pide*, cakes drenched with melted butter as they come out of the oven and served with rose petal jam, white sheep's cheese, *kasar* (another cheese) and olives, all served at *iftar*, the breaking of the fast. I find it very amusing to get up with the maid for the *sahur*, the last meal before dawn, and to watch her do the *namaz*, prostrating herself on her prayer rug. Next we share the *pide*, this time reheated, the olives and the jam, and then she sends me quickly back to bed, fearing reproaches from *Madam*.

The titles of *bey* or *hanım*, although officially eliminated upon the proclamation of the Republic, continue, despite everything, to be the most common forms of address, except for the minorities, which are basically the Armenians, Greeks, and Jews. The maid thus addresses my parents as *Madam Jacqueline* and *Müssü Nessim*.<sup>8</sup> For her part, this has no pejorative connotation and simply means that we are not like her. However, a Muslim woman would be profoundly offended to be addressed in this way and would respond with anger: "I am not a *madam*!"

Same window, same spot. In 1960, I bear witness to the beginnings of a military coup d'état (the first of my life, two others will follow, at ten-year intervals). Students protest against the government and demand the resignation of Prime Minister Menderes.<sup>9</sup> My grandfather is fretful: "They want the Deaf Man to come back!" In the coded vocabulary of Turkish Jews, "the Deaf Man" designates the President İsmet İnönü, who is notoriously hard of hearing, whereas "the Great" is Atatürk, and "the Greens" are Turks, undoubtedly in memory of the Ottoman period during which they alone had the right to wear green.

In the 1940s, the Deaf Man decreed an arbitrary and anti-democratic *varlık vergisi* (wealth tax) that applied only to minorities and provoked the ruin of certain families. Businessmen, merchants, and artisans incapable of paying the exorbitant sums demanded end up condemned to forced labor, east of Anatolia, near the border with the USSR. My grandmother seizes every occasion she can to mention the goods formerly possessed and now disappeared, such as rugs, a piano, Lalique lamps, crystal, silverware, etc., an inventory that invariably and melancholically ends with these words: "Then the *varlık* came and took everything from us . . ." *Varlık* is thus the terrifying ogre of my childhood, he who shows up unannounced,

6. Author's note: *Simit* is a circular roll covered with sesame seeds, sold in Turkey by street vendors.

7. Ramazan is the Turkish word for Ramadan.

8. The spelling "Müssü" mimics the maid's pronunciation of the French word *Monsieur*.

9. Adnan Menderes was Prime Minister of Turkey from 1950–1960.

confiscates all goods, piles them up in immense trunks, and sends the master of the house away under military escort, to go break stones. Why? We don't really know. Where? In Askale, in a tiny village, I saw it in my atlas. The life of my grandparents is thus divided into a before and an after, which they laconically designate *varlık* . . .

From the proclamation of the Republic until the 1960s, discriminatory measures aimed at the non-Muslim minorities (such as the infamous *varlık*) are implemented, one after the next, at a disconcerting pace. Despite this, religion seems hardly present, at least in Istanbul, at least in the neighborhoods where we live. The Islamic veil does not yet exist. Working-class women cover their head with a scarf loosely knotted over the top of their chest, and which slips constantly, revealing their hair. The black *çarşaf* placed on top of one's clothes, covering the head as well as the whole body, is only worn by peasants recently arrived from central, eastern, or south-east Anatolia, in other words, from the edge of the world, from another world.

For a long time, like any minoritarian, I would only know the Turkey of Istanbul, and of Istanbul only the zone commonly called the "Şişli, Nişantaş, Etiler Triangle," neighborhoods on the European shore mostly inhabited by Jews, who also reside, during summer vacations, on two of the Prince Islands, across from the city on the Marmara Sea: Burgaz and "our island," Büyükada, literally the Big Island. In this cosmopolitan microcosm, it is with the Turks, paradoxically, that we share the sentiment of being a minority, because everywhere in the streets bordered by laurels and bougainvillea, at the grocer's or the fishmonger's, one hears Greek being spoken. In general, we "go up" to Büyükada around the month of June, when the mimosas are in bloom, and we "go back down" to the city for the beginning of the school year, when the storks are migrating.

The Istanbul where I live today is no longer exactly the city that I knew as a child, but one still lives it as intensely as before, in the same brouhaha, with perhaps other dreams, other preoccupations. As Mevlâna said, "Everything that belongs to the past, oh my soul, has gone away with the past. We must now speak of other things."<sup>10</sup>

—Translated by Robert Watson

10. Mevlâna refers to the thirteenth-century Muslim saint and Anatolian poet, Mevlâna Jelaleddin Rumî, known in the English-speaking world simply as Rumi.

Ankara

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## Mamma Sultana's Unicorns

Moris Farhi

I am a member of an exclusive club.<sup>1</sup> As clubs go it's tiny and has no links with the cabals of power. But we are such an ethnic mix that we can claim to epitomize Turkey's racial, religious, and cultural mosaic. This New Year's Day, 2012, we are merely eight men and fourteen women, aged forty-three to seventy-one. In our heyday, in 1981, we numbered 123: fifty-six men and sixty-seven women, not counting the twenty-eight who, lamentably, had passed away.

We named our club *Mamma Sultana's Unicorns*.

I, Jak, a Jew, was one of the founders. The others were the three scions of Baybars: Defne, Remzi, and Perihan; Agop, an Armenian; Yorgo, a Greek; Ümit, a Kurd; and Nikolay, a White Russian.<sup>2</sup>

The inauguration took place in Ankara, in 1962, during the banquet celebrating both Remzi's twelfth birthday and his circumcision. The idea to create the club was advanced by Murat Paşa, the Baybars paterfamilias, a descendent of the seventeenth-century Ottoman Grand Vizier, Köprülü. Only those wet-nursed by Sabbatina, our "*Mamma*," were eligible for membership.

Exclusive clubs need exclusive titles. At first we wanted to feature the word, "*Meme*," which in Turkish means "breast." It would have been the perfect honorific for Sabbatina. But, sadly, the expression had been tainted by smutty slang. We decided on *Mamma* when, during our deliberations, poor circumcised Remzi,

1. A reminder to readers that this essay is one of the two in this volume that were originally written in English (UK).

2. Baybars I (full name: al-Malik al-Zāhir Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdāri) was one of the most eminent Mamluk sultans. In the thirteenth century, he reigned over areas corresponding to present-day Egypt and Syria. He was said to have given refuge to scions of the 'Abbāsīd family, thus allowing the reestablishment of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate after its overthrow in 1258. "White Russian" refers to a person from Belarus.



FIGURE 3. Moris Farhi, age three or four (1938 or 1939), in Ankara.

seeking deliverance from the ache in his penis, entreated not Allah nor his mother, Zeynep, as would be expected, but his wet nurse, Sabbatina, calling her *Mamma*, as she was called by her own children. After all, we reasoned, as milk-siblings, we were effectively Sabbatina's children, too. Besides, we asserted, in Muslim lore wet nurses are regarded as members of the family, often more constant than blood relatives.

The appendix, *Unicorns*, was my idea. Unicorns, I maintained, not only possess the grace of the horse which we Turks revere as soulmates, but also symbolize the purity of spirit that humankind had lost and which, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, we were seeking to reclaim. Sabbatina's potent milk would provide us with the fortitude to achieve that aim. (We were idealists then, not the disillusioned beings we are now.)

The regal epithet *Sultana*, "Empress"—the crux of this reminiscence—was coined by Murat Paşa himself.

In 1946, Murat Paşa, a widower for three years, agreed to remarry and thus allay the concerns of his children about his welfare. He wed Zeynep, the only daughter of his estate's foreman.

Ankara, still a fledgling capital in those days where everybody knew everybody, rejoiced. For Murat Paşa, an altruist and model landowner, a bulwark to friends and family, was much loved as a man made "in Atatürk's image." Indeed, his sobriquet, Paşa—the Ottoman rank of field marshal—denoted the reverence accorded him. His protestations that, though he had partaken in the War of Independence, near-fatal wounds in the battle of Sakarya had ended his military career when still a major, fell on deaf ears.

And Zeynep, kindhearted, intelligent, humble, and entrancing like an orange blossom, had instantly captured people's hearts.

But, perversely, Murat Paşa had a delusion: a fervent belief in the immaculacy of Turkish blood. This foible did not engender the slightest prejudice toward any of the minorities—in fact, his best friends and drinking companions were, in the main, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, like my father Vitali. Yet, on matters of lineage, blood had to be pure and none was purer than that which swelled Turkish sinews.

Within the year, Murat Paşa and Zeynep's nuptials were blessed with the birth of a daughter, Defne. Woefully, their felicity soon spiraled into anguish. Zeynep developed mastitis; nursing her baby became torturous. Doctors as well as healers reputed to have magical powers failed to find a remedy. Zeynep was advised to wean Defne and feed her pasteurized milk. She refused. "My child needs breast," she contended. "Not cow's udders! And breast she'll have—come what may!"

Soon Fate intervened. Defne, having struggled for days to draw milk from her mother's lacerated nipples, stopped suckling. Zeynep became even more fraught. She pleaded, cajoled, prayed, wept, and threw tantrums. But Defne not only continued to spurn her mother's bosom but also, tormented by hunger, threw her own heartrending tantrums.

When news of Zeynep's ordeal spread, my parents hastened to help.

While my mother, Paloma, ensconced herself with Zeynep, my father dragged Murat Paşa off for a drink.

Whereas in the past "a drink" meant several glasses of raki, this time they could only indulge in tea.<sup>3</sup>

Murat Paşa confided his fears: his baby faced death—malnutrition invites fatal diseases. If Defne died, so would Zeynep—of a broken heart. And if Zeynep died too, he would not be able to go on living, not even for the sake of his other children, much as he loved them. He clutched my father's hands. "A miracle, Vitali! That's our only hope."

My father tried to soothe him. "Miracles happen every day. Often they're lying around, waiting to be gathered."

"Don't humor me, Vitali."

"I wouldn't presume, Murat Paşa. God is my witness: Paloma and I prayed for just such a miracle. And there it was, tugging at our sleeves."

Murat Paşa started weeping. "Please! No dishonesty between friends, not even in consolation."

My father wiped Murat Paşa's tears. "Listen, please listen . . . When my son, Jak, was born, Paloma developed abscesses and was unable to nurse him, just like Zeynep. Look at Jak now: three already and built like a wrestler."

Murat Paşa stared at my father. "I didn't know . . . How . . . what did you do . . .?"

"We sought help . . . Friends suggested a wet nurse."

"I believe wet-nursing is fine . . . But . . .?"

"And none finer than Sabbatina. We went to her."

"Carpenter Italo's wife? The Levantine?"<sup>4</sup>

"Yes."

"She's Christian . . . Another blood. How could you, a Jew . . .?"

"What's the difference?"

Murat Paşa shook his head. "I . . . I can't do that! Not even if Zeynep . . . no, I can't allow it! However, if there are Turkish wet nurses . . ."

"I expect there are. But we might not find one close by or able to nurse straight away. Whereas Sabbatina lives in the neighborhood. She is healthy, strong, and has a soul like clear water. Most importantly—Paloma verified this—she has recently given birth and is lactating. In fact, we're told that having wet-nursed many, she has never stopped lactating. She'll be your miracle, Murat Paşa."

"But she's not a Turk!"

"Levantines are Venetians from Byzantine times. They've lived here for centuries. They're as Turkish as anybody in the country!"

3. Raki, also written *rakı*, is an anise-flavored liquor found throughout the MENA region and the Balkans. Also known as *arak*, it is similar in flavor to ouzo and pastis.

4. The noun or adjective "levantine" generally refers to the Levant, a geographical designation that derives from the French "soleil levant" (rising sun). When applied to a person or group of people, it refers to non-Muslims of the MENA region.

Murat Paşa hauled himself up. “Not Turk-Turk, Vitali! Sabbatina’s milk won’t be of pure Turkish stock!”

As he rushed out, my father ran after him. “Blood is blood, Murat Paşa. Wholesome! No matter whose!”

“No! There is pure blood. And there is the rest.”

My father grabbed Murat Paşa’s arm, by Turkish conventions a discourteous behavior toward elders. “Forgive me for saying this: would you have Defne die for lack of pure Turkish blood or live with ordinary blood?”

Etiquette prevented Murat Paşa from hitting my father. He scurried home.

My mother fared better. Advancing my father’s reasoning—more delicately, as was her way—she advised Zeynep that the only way to ensure Defne’s well-being was to entrust her to a wet nurse.

At first, Zeynep demurred. She was not averse to the idea of wet-nursing; it was quite prevalent in the countryside where she grew up. But weren’t wet nurses mainly feeders? Could they be as loving as mothers? Besides, given Murat Paşa’s obsession with purity of blood, could one be found suitable enough?

My mother disregarded the notion of pure blood. Instead, she reassured Zeynep that when a woman nurses, she becomes Mother Earth; all babies become hers. Sabbatina was such a Mother Earth; so nourishing was her milk that the many heavenly darlings she had suckled, her son, Jak, included, were now gambling like cubs.

That decided Zeynep. She plucked Defne from her cot and asked my mother to take them to Sabbatina.

That afternoon, Murat Paşa and Zeynep had their first—and reportedly, their only—quarrel.

Regaining home after leaving my father, Murat Paşa found the house empty. Since even Fatma, his faithful servant of countless years, was nowhere to be seen, he thought that something terrible had happened to Zeynep and Defne. Frantically he called friends, neighbors, and the emergency services. No one could give him any news.

He was about to rush out and scour the streets, when Zeynep appeared with Defne sound asleep in her arms and Fatma in tow.

Murat Paşa, blind to Zeynep’s smiling, radiant face, bellowed. “Are you alright? Where have you been?”

Zeynep, ignoring his anger, went up to him. “Look, look at Defne!”

Murat Paşa cast a cursory glance at his daughter. “You haven’t answered me: where have you been?”

“You’re not looking! Take a good look! What do you see?”

Murat Paşa mellowed. “She’s asleep.”

“Yes, and not crying!”

“You sedated her?”

“No. She fed. Ravenously!”

Tears of joy filled Murat Paşa's eyes. "You mean . . . your breasts . . . you can nurse now?"

"I took her to a wet nurse. To Sabbatina."

Murat Paşa's joy turned to fury. "You didn't! You shouldn't have! She . . . she's a Christian! How could you?"

And they quarreled.

Murat Paşa blazoned his belief that only Turkish milk contained pure Turkish blood while Zeynep argued that in order to save Defne she'd feed her anybody's milk, whether Christian, Chinese, Eskimo, or the she-wolf that had nursed Romulus and Remus.

Murat Paşa remained adamant.

Zeynep offered a new argument: given the blood of the countless peoples Turkey had absorbed for millennia—from Hittites to Greeks to Armenians to Jews—she herself was bound to be of mixed blood hundred times over. Therefore, she couldn't be a Turk-Turk, nor, by the same token, could Defne be.

Murat Paşa dismissed her logic as speculative.

This time Zeynep brought up Murat Paşa's primogenitor, the Grand Vizier, Köprülü: illustrious by all accounts, yet of Albanian origin—a fact that, in mindless xenophobia, he had chosen to suppress much of his life, but one which attested that he, too, was not pure Turk-Turk, but crossbred, like everybody else.

The indisputability of that truth desolated Murat Paşa. He collapsed onto his chair. Sheepishly, even as he grieved for the loss of his precious belief, he acknowledged that he had been aberrant in believing in the purity of blood.

Zeynep, tenderhearted as ever, hugged him. "Sabbatina will nurse Defne again in an hour. Come and see."

. . .

Murat Paşa went along. And as he watched Defne imbibe Sabbatina's milk naturally and happily, an auroral peace cocooned him.

When Defne, satiated, fell asleep and Zeynep removed her from Sabbatina's lap, Murat Paşa, tears running down his cheeks, dropped on his knees and kissed Sabbatina's feet. "You are a *Sultana!* Our Sultana! May Allah and your God and every God in heaven preserve you!"

#### POSTSCRIPT

Mamma Sultana lost count of the children she nursed. What is common knowledge is that she lactated well into her sixties averaging about five sucklings a year for some forty years. But there were many others. For during such calamities as earthquakes, fires, etc., she always availed her breasts, like the legendary wet nurses of history, to orphaned babies. (Alas, we could not track down these milk-siblings to induct them into our club.)

Inconceivably, when the urban bourgeoisie reneged on baby-farming as antediluvian and embraced artificial baby milk for its “Western modernity,” Mamma Sultana found herself less in demand. Eventually, however, parents with good sense realized that prodigious wet nurses cannot really be replaced, that breast milk, whether it gushes from the mother or from a wet nurse, is not ersatz but Nature’s gift to humankind. For these parents and for the many unfortunate mothers who—whether for health reasons or because malnourishment prevented them from producing enough milk—the Mamma Sultanas have remained heaven-sent.

I am sure many fathers, too, worshiped their children’s wet nurses, probably as pruriently as I did. For I should confess, when I watched Mamma Sultana—in her fifties at the time—cradle my newborn daughter, Alegra, I kept wanting to bury my face in her still wondrous and bountiful breasts.

Mamma Sultana died in 2002, aged seventy-six. My mother and Murat Paşa (the latter almost centenarian by then), who had been at her bedside for weeks, both swore that, as she took her last breath, she proffered Death nipples that were as frothy as when, in her prime, she had nursed her “Unicorns.”

Istanbul

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## A Non-Jewish Turkish Jew

Roni Margulies

My Jewish childhood in Istanbul was not a very Jewish childhood.<sup>1</sup> At least, not for me.

It was a joyful, carefree time of innocence and bliss, but few of its bright, lively colors had a Jewish tint, few of its wonderful, loud, and varied sounds carried a Jewish tone.

We were, of course, Jewish. No one doubted that. A long line of East European rabbis and dentists on the Ashkenazi side of the family, and an equally long list of Eastern Aegean doctors and small traders on the Sephardi side, an endless succession of Aarons and Bohors, Cecalias and Esmeraldas, and birthplaces as far removed as Grodno, Tattenitz, İzmir, and Tire all bore impeccable witness to the unsullied Jewishness of the family.

In later, less innocent and blissful times, I would taunt Turkish chauvinists with the fact, no doubt true but utterly unimportant to me, that in a land built on the remnants of a multiethnic empire where races and religions had freely mingled, danced, and procreated with each other for many centuries, I was one of a very small number of people who could claim with any certainty to be “of pure blood!”

So, Jewish we were, but I was fortunate enough to be brought up without any particular stress on exactly how Jewish I had to be.

There were, I think, two main reasons for this. One to do with the heroes of this story, my parents and grandparents, and the other with the time and place in which the story was set.

The jewels in the crown of my youth were my two grandfathers.

Joseph Margulies, “Yuzek” to his wife, “Dyeda” to me, had moved to Turkey in 1925, at the age of twenty-seven, out of pure coincidence. When he left Vienna

1. A reminder to readers that this essay is one of the two in this volume that were originally written in English (UK).



FIGURE 4. Istanbul, 1960. Roni Margulies is holding a ball, on the right. He's with his grandfather and his cousins. Behind him, wearing sunglasses, is his mother.

University as an engineer after having fought as a young lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian army, his uncle Wolf found him work in Berlin. The company he went to work for exported machinery, followed by an engineer on a one-year assignment to help the locals set the machines up. He was given the choice of Japan, Hungary, and Turkey. There had just been an earthquake in Japan, he knew and disliked the Hungarian importers, and so chose Turkey. He married my grandmother in Grodno, they caught the train to Constanza, and from there a boat to Istanbul. They came for a year and stayed forever. Thus was I born a *Turkish Jew*.

Joseph was Polish, but at home they spoke my grandmother's native tongue, not his. He had learned Russian when they first met, better to court her in her mother tongue. And in addition to the Russian words I was to learn when I became a socialist—"tovarich," "iskra," "rabochnik"—I still know that "daimi klutch" means "give me the keys," because she would ask him for the room keys several times a day on our family winter holidays in a hotel by a Northern Turkish mountain lake near the Black Sea coast.<sup>2</sup> In the afternoons, all six of us, two grandparents and their four grandchildren, my sister, my two cousins, and I, would go walking around the steel-blue waters of the lake, along forest paths through pine trees weighed down by snow. I do not know if there is a Jewish heaven—I was never interested enough to look into the matter—but if there is, I came as close to it on those walks as I ever will.

On my mother's side, my grandparents spoke Ladino, the language which the Jews brought with them from Spain when they arrived in the Ottoman Empire half a millennium ago. This was the language Moise and Elda Danon spoke with each other; to me they spoke in French, as did my parents. I answered them all in Turkish. I learned no Russian, little Ladino, and much French, but together with Turkish in the streets and English at school, these languages were all part of my aural universe before I could write even a single line of poetry in any one of them.

None of these people, all of whom played a part, difficult to describe but very real nonetheless, in making me who I became, were religious in any formal sense. Some, mostly the women, believed in some sort of God, no doubt a Jewish one, but not a very strict one. Some believed in no such thing. Some were Zionists, in rather a vague, emotional way, not very concretely, and all felt some bond with Israel, though again, not very actively or very meaningfully, but only in a strangely Platonic way.

Thankfully, this strange collection of people who had converged on Istanbul in the 1920s through a series of odd coincidences were all very relaxed about their Jewishness and none felt it to be the core of their lives or the determining feature of their personal identities. The family would come together for dinner on Jewish

2. These Russian words are neither explained nor translated in the original: *Tovarich* (comrade); *iskra* (spark or sparkle; also the title of a revolutionary communist newspaper founded by Lenin in 1900); *rabochnik* (likely a deformation of *rabotnik*, meaning worker).

holidays, but such dinners were only differentiated from others by the gefilte fish and chopped liver cooked by one grandmother or the shore rockling (*gaidropsarus mediterraneus*)—a fish to which Ottoman Jews seem to have given pride of place on festive tables, though I doubt that it has any such place in the Old Testament—cooked by the other. Nothing overtly religious took place on these evenings, and I still cannot tell *Pesach* and *Yom Kippur* apart. I only know they exist because my mother rings to wish me happy holidays, knowing full-well that I will make gentle fun of her and she will have to join me in the laughter.

And yes, I *did* have a bar mitzvah. I know of no Jew in Turkey who has not. As my thirteenth birthday approached, a young man was employed for one or two evenings a week to teach me Hebrew, or at least enough Hebrew for me to recite the necessary prayers during the ceremony at the synagogue. To give credit where it's due, he very quickly realized that I had no interest in the matter and was unlikely to be cajoled into it. We agreed that I could simply memorize the prayers, I quickly did so, and the lessons ended prematurely.

Boring as prayers in an obscure language were for a thirteen-year-old, the bar mitzvah presents made it well worth it. For my twelfth birthday I may have received a leather football, some books, and clothes from close relatives. For the thirteenth, tradition required that rather more serious presents be given by all relatives, as well as my parents' many friends invited to the synagogue. My father, whose pride in my supposed "coming of age" seemed to be no greater than mine, wrote a mock-prayer, in Turkish, not Hebrew, asking guests to leave the presents by the entrance and requiring those who had brought none simply to leave. The Mont Blanc fountain pen and the silver letter opener on my desk, not far from my computer, date from that ceremony where, perhaps I should add, I recited "*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam . . .*" rather than the prayer penned by my father.<sup>3</sup> What the words mean, I still don't know!

Beyond the festive dinners and the bar mitzvah, there is not a great deal of specific Jewishness I remember from my early years. When I look back now, I can see that until the age of fourteen, when I started at Robert College, the American lycée on the banks of the Bosphorus, *all* my friends were Jewish. They were not *chosen* as friends and they were certainly not chosen because they were Jewish. We just happened to be the children of parents who were friends and so we were at the same places at the same time. A few are still my friends. Davut Kohen, the ophthalmologist; Irvin Schick, the mathematician and lecturer in cultural studies; Elio Ancel, the manufacturer of handkerchiefs. Now we know, but then we were just kids and did not think we were different from any of the other kids around, at school, in the streets, or anywhere else. Istanbul in the 1960s was still a considerably multicultural, multiethnic city. I do not remember ever giving a single

3. This formula, "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe . . ." is found at the beginning of most Jewish liturgical blessings.

thought to the fact that my friends included Armenians, Greeks, and Turks, as well as Jews.

I did not know until much later—when, for political reasons, in order to write against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, I began to take an interest in the community—that there are and always have been Jewish schools, newspapers, sports clubs, youth clubs, old peoples' homes, and a whole network of community organizations. As a child and a young man, I knew nothing of this network. This cannot have been my own choice, it must have been chosen for me by my parents and grandparents, and for this I am forever grateful to them. I hate religious, ethnic, or any other particularism now, and I would like to think that I would have hated it then.

I owe it to the heroes of this story that no such particularism was imposed upon me at a time when I was most impressionable. The reason it was not had to do partly with who they were, but partly also with the time and place in which the story was set.

In September 1955, just a few months after I was born, the shops, homes, and holy places of non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul were attacked and ransacked for two days by mobs organized clandestinely by the secret services.<sup>4</sup> No one died, but the trauma was severe. Only thirteen years previously, during the Second World War, the state had imposed a one-off wealth tax which was effectively only levied on the minorities.<sup>5</sup> Those who could not pay were sent to labor camps in the godforsaken eastern part of the country, where they stayed in atrocious conditions until the tax was quietly shelved after about a year.

These and similar inhumanities throughout Republican times, since 1923, had nothing at all to do with religion. They were all planned, prepared, and perpetrated by a vicious nationalist state, not by any spontaneous street crowds, and not only against non-Muslims. And the scars never healed fully; the traumas were never completely overcome.

In such a country, it was always felt by the minorities to be safer not to appear too Jewish, or Greek, or Armenian. The Jewish community, in particular, did its utmost to remain as silent and publicly invisible as a community of more than twenty thousand people can be. No one ever told me this, but I suspect it may have been one reason why none of the Margulies or Danon children were brought up to be too religious. This is not to imply that all Jews in Turkey are atheists on the verge of complete assimilation; far from it. I would guess that only a small handful would be nonbelievers, and anyway, even the most ardent assimilationists would be banging their heads against a brick wall.

4. Known as the Istanbul Pogrom, on the night of September 6, 1955, organized special forces launched attacks targeting primarily the city's Greek population. The city's other minorities, Jews and Armenians, also fell victim to the violence, which was primarily directed against shops and offices.

5. See Country Snapshot: "Turkey."

It was also true, when I was growing up, that the walls separating the many ethnic and religious communities of Istanbul had become weaker and much more porous than they had been even in my parents' youth. And they crumbled and collapsed completely in the years when I traveled the distance between being a child and a young man. My Sephardi grandparents, and certainly their parents, had spent most of their lives behind those invisible walls. I was free to wander.

At Robert College I was suddenly old enough to choose my own friends. And none were Jewish. What we had in common were middle-class families, insatiable intellectual curiosity, an interest in all things cultural, mainly Anglo-Saxon and very rarely Turkish, and an utterly undeserved sense of superiority. This did not mean that we were to be found reading French novels and discussing our existential angst between lessons. Most of my school days were spent playing football, or sitting on stone benches on the edge of the campus watching the boats glide along the Bosphorus.

Those were without any doubt the happiest days of our lives.

Then the country changed, and the world changed, and we changed.

But we had already become who we are now, and the survivors are still my closest friends.

Harbiye, Istanbul

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## Her Name Was Dursineh

Rosie Pinhas-Delpuech

It was at the end of the 1950s, during the February holidays. It was still very cold and we were traveling through Anatolia in a drafty old Jeep, surplus from the American army. The father of my childhood friend was a stateless German Jewish refugee; he loved to explore the interior of the country where his engineering work often took him. At the time it was rare: city folk didn't venture into the villages, unless they had family in the provinces, which was the case neither of Jews nor of Christians. Outside of the cities, Turkey was a vast country unknown to urbanites. With its high mountains, its large rivers, its frozen lakes, and its arid plains, it was as beguiling for me as nearby Russia or faraway America. This vast national space was tied together by the maids who came to work in the city to make some money that they then gave to their lord and master: the husband. They talked of the village; the simple cuisine based on flour, eggs, and dairy; the animals; the forced marriages to old men; the wedding night in all its crudeness; the sheet brandished at the window the following morning in front of everyone; the secret lover they never married; the goats and the sheep they led into the pastures; the wolves that came down from the mountains. They smelled of yogurt and sheep's cheese. They were the Anatolia that still makes me dream today.

One of them was named Dursineh, she was tall and beautiful, upright in body and soul. I imagined her as a descendant of the Turkmen; she knew how to ride a horse, she was proud, independent, fair as the water from the stream, but chained by law and custom to her old man. We spoke of her at night at the dinner table, comparing her either to Tartuffe's Mariane (as the name is spelled in Molière's play) or to Chimène, whom I discovered in middle school. In Turkish, the tyrannical hypocrites had a name: they were called "yobaz" and they did not have much currency in the public opinion of the 1950s. On Fridays, at the end of her day of housework, Dursineh would wash herself, change her headscarf, and tie a long,



FIGURE 5. Rosie Pinhas, age three, in October 1950 with her paternal grandmother in the Taksim Garden.

luminously white batiste veil around her red-cheeked and blue-eyed face; then, in the corner of the living room facing east, on the edge of the big rug, in knit socks and a long flowery skirt, she would say her *namaz*, her prayer. I've known the word forever, since I learned how to speak. As a little girl, I had asked my grandmother about it, and she told me about Ishmael, Mohamed, and Allah; it was sad, obscure, and friendly. Later, at the secular, compulsory public primary school—where I was the only Jewish girl among seventy-two students—I attended the weekly hour-long Muslim religion class on Islamic religion given by our teacher simply because there was nowhere else for me to go. The words of the Qur'an were long, the students mumbled, tripped over them, the teacher made me read their credo, "*Lâ ilahe illallah Muhammed'in res'ul Allah,*" the same as our "*Shema Isra'el,*" as the "Our Father."<sup>1</sup> I came back to the house and practiced reciting it. My family encouraged me. We tolerated not a hint of proselytism, neither from Dursineh nor the school. Gifted with a vivacious synchronic memory, my grandmother told me of the conversions "we" had suffered through, the holy water thrown on "our heads" from up on the stands erected in the public squares of Spain and Portugal. Forced conversion was a haunting, a trauma never erased despite the centuries. I grew up in its shadow. These converts were called "*anusim*" in Hebrew, derived from the word "*ones,*" or rape; the term means "the violated," or "the coerced."

That evening in February, we spent the night at the inn of one of those villages that Dursineh's stories made me dream about. The rooms smelled of soap and firewood; we slept underneath huge, quilted blankets called *yorgan*. The first cock crowed; I opened my eyes; the stove glowed; it was dark. Outside there was a huge explosion followed by a round of gunfire, as if it was war, a word still on the tip of the adults' tongues. We turned on the lights, and people came to reassure us: it was the drum of Ramazan announcing the dawn meal before taking up the fast again until the next sunset.<sup>2</sup> In the explosive violence of the drum there was something that evoked Dursineh's stories. Something frightening, something constraining and collective, like the soiled sheet exhibited for all to see after the membrane had been pierced. But at the same time, Ramazan in the village had an archaic and reassuring dimension: united around a belief, humans stayed warm together, slept under their down quilts, someone kept watch, kept away the ghosts of the night and woke the others up for a communal celebration. I had a kind of primitive nostalgia for this impossible "keeping warm together."

1. The prayer known as the Shahada, transcribed as *lâ 'ilâha 'illâ-llâh, muḥammadur-rasûlu-llâh* (meaning: there is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God), is the declaration of the belief of the oneness of God and the acceptance of Mohammed as God's messenger. Recitation of the Shahada, "with sincerity and conviction," is also the sole requirement for conversion to Islam. The author's comparison to the Jews' Shema Yisrael or the Christian Lord's Prayer, is apt, insofar as all three prayers are the most commonly recited statements of faith of their respective religions.

2. Ramazan is the Turkish word for Ramadan.

Fifty years later, during a stay in the city of Edirne, I often woke up with the cock's crow, accompanied a few seconds later by the muezzin's call. Between night and dawn, in this moment of fluctuation and angst, as if the sun might not rise, the coughs might not cease, the fevers might not fall, as if death could come for us, there is this human voice that lifted up toward the sky. In my childhood, it was *a cappella*, modulated, sinuous, humane. Then the metallic loudspeaker came to the neighborhoods, overwhelming everything with its recorded, screeching voice.

The local mosques were modest and functional. Passing by, one could glimpse men in the middle of the courtyard washing their feet. The prayer hall was masked by a wooden door or a leather hanging. My recollection is of an immense brightness, of numerous windows through which light flooded in, of the simple curve of the dome, of the sensation of soft rugs underneath bare feet or socks, of the smell of soap mixed with that of clean feet. In the city, there was no beating drum; rather it was the aromas wafting out of bread ovens that gave rhythm to Ramadan. At sunset, they began churning out aromatic flatbreads and large platters of lamb and vegetables that families would return to the baker in the morning. Once again, the memory is that of snow and winter, strings of lightbulbs in merchants' shops, of the effervescence of evening, of those who hurried back home to break the fast. Mixed in with this are memories of the Catholics' Christmas, of the smell of brioches with bergamot, of bells that rang in the night, of the Orthodox Epiphany. Of children with lanterns coming to knock on our doors, singing in Greek "*Aghios Vassilis erkheté*" ("Saint Basil is here") and asking for coins or candy.

In the island of my childhood, Greek churches were open all day. They were dark, without windows, illuminated only by many candles and the golden sparkle of the icons. Incense burned in the censers, the Virgin was delicate and beautiful, Jesus looked at you right in the eyes and one felt immediately transported into the space of fiction, with characters and a plot. The Catholic churches were another story: Saint Anthony, on Pera Street in Istanbul, also remained open all day. My ballet professor, a Polish woman, took me there one day. It was my first time, and I watched the graceful gesture of the wrist, the fingertips grazing the surface of the holy water, the sign of the cross on the body, the elegant genuflection before the altar. The Catholic church was the place of great theatrical performance and fascination, which, according to the dictionary, means "charm and enchantment," capturing of the gaze. There one mostly saw women, silent, in prayer. Sometimes one heard the organ; there were exuberant bouquets in front of the altar. The Polish woman was a flamboyant lover, full of grace and culture; her body married the space of the church and eroticism circulated between the two. The adolescent girl I had become felt as though she had entered the temple of extreme elevation where everything was luxury, calm, and delight.<sup>3</sup> I had turned my back on stockinged feet and on the prostrations of the *namaz*.

3. The author is citing a famous line from Baudelaire's *Invitation au voyage* (1857), or *Invitation to a Journey*, which has many different English translations. We've opted to preserve here a version very close to the original French, which reads "luxe, calme, et volupté."

**İlkokul Diploması**

Diploma №: 2122 Tarih: 26.6.1957

Adı ve Soyadı	Rozi Pinhas
Babasının Adı	Nesim
Okul numarası	512
Doğduğu Yer ve Yıl	İstanbul 1946

Yukarıda künyesi yazılı Nesim  
 Öğretmeni Rozi Pinhas 1956-1957 öğretim yılında  
 Pekisi... derece ile Nilüfer Hâtu İlkokulunu  
 bitirdiğinden bu diplomayı almağa hak  
 kazanmıştır.

Maarif Müdürü: Nejat İdil Başöğretmen: G. B. Akal Öğretmen: N. Önderoğlu

FIGURE 6. Turkish Certificate of Study, or Turkish primary school diploma, received in 1957 from the Nilüfer Hâtu school in the Nişantaşı neighborhood.

In the forest of signs, which I interpreted step by step as I made my way forward, those of Jewish culture were the most discrete, invisible, and hushed. The synagogues, far from the residential neighborhoods, were difficult to enter and always closed, except for marriages and burials, two contrasting events: one all in white, the other all in black, both equally distressing. There was nothing to see, nothing to do, except to look at the backs of men rocking back and forth in their prayer shawls. My father did not know how to pray; he passed his reticence on to me. And after the war, after the discriminatory measures taken against minorities and from the founding of Atatürk's secular Republic, Jews were advised to be discrete, to keep a low profile. Like in France. To forget, to be forgotten after what had happened.

To be forgotten. I asked for nothing more. To become another, to be reborn in French and in France. To the point of no longer knowing who I was, to the point where the Hebrew of prayers and the streets brings me back to the stories of my grandmother drawn from our Book, to the synagogues without images, to the humble light of the mosques.

—Translated by Robert Watson