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## **For you, I'll Wait**

A Scapegoat for all Seasons: The Donmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey

By Rifat Bali

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350 years ago a charismatic and young Jewish Rabbi announced himself as the Messiah, promised Geula-*Salvation* to all and arrived to Israel and carried after himself crowds of followers. The events of this affair are considered as one of the most dramatic in the history of the Jewish people ending in a tragedy: Shabtai Zvi and with him thousand of his followers ending in converting their religion to Islam in 1668, they are called "Shabtaim" amongst the Jews. Majority of his Hassids-*followers* did not follow his path and convert their religion as he himself did, but some hundreds of families kept to his side as Moslems. The historical and theological aspects of this affair were finely ground-*thoroughly discussed* to the finest details by Jewish Historians and non Jews alike' first and foremost of all Gershom Sholem. But what actually happened to the descendants of the Shabtaim to this day?

I met Rifat Bali through a mutual acquaintance of ours on my recent trip to Istanbul, a respected-*well considered* researcher and author of articles and books on the lives of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire. Bali is a documenter, more than an interpreter-commentator. In his book of 400 pages that came out in English just now, *A Scapegoat for all Seasons: The Donmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey*, Bali is quoting hundreds of documents describing from primary sources, the complicated-*interwined* history of the descendants of the Shabtaim in Turkey and their whereabouts. The first part of the book tells the status and history of the Shabtaim and their descendants in the modern day Turkish Society. In the second part of the book, Bali has collected personal testimonies, mostly from the mouths of the Sect's descendants with no additions or interpretations.

Just by investigating the mere name "Donme" as they are called in Turkey, meaning converts in a negative connotation, we can learn a lot about how complicated the situation of the Shabtai descendents is,(the people of the Sect call themselves in the Hebrew name "Believers-*Maaminim*"). In all places, seclusion-*introversion* and an extreme secrecy characterizes the behavior of the descendents of this very special Sect of Marranos that converted to Islam from their own free will. Most of the people whose testimonies Bali brings forward identify themselves with the initials of their names only.

Our generation is probably the last generation that conserves the last traces of memories of people that are still alive from the descendants of the Sect. A friend who is a descendant of the Sect told me what he had heard from his father what his mother who is the grandmother of the narrator used say when she used to go the sea shore

every Friday and whisper a prayer of which his father remembered just the words: Esperano a – te , meaning in Ladino, **for you**(meaning the *Mesiah*)**I'll wait**.

Bali looks at these “believers” and their future in Turkey with ambivalence. According to him, there are those who are doing their best in order to be fully assimilated in the Turkish society, and there are those, mostly young ones that are searching their future back in the Jewish nation. Both this and the other group are motivated because of the continually growing Anti-Semitism in Turkey following the descent of Kemalism’s shine whose head was Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the secular and western new Turkish Republic. Was Ataturk himself a descendant of Donme from his father side? A whole chapter in the book is dedicated to this subject with no final conclusion. But still, many circumstantial evidences support this presumption/*hypothesis* that Mustafa Kemal was indeed of “Jewish seed/*semen*”(which is of no importance of course unless for serving Antisemitic purposes). But it was quite clear that many of those in his surroundings were either declared or hidden Donmes.

The interest in the Sect of Donmes is at its peak nowadays, it is so popular that a book called *Efendi: the Big Secret of the White Turks* claims that most if not all of the ruling elites in modern Turkey from its beginnings until today are descendents of the Donmes, the book sold over 150,000 copies.. One of the claims of the book is that Modern Turkey is a “Jewish Invention” that was founded in order to release Palestine from the hands of the Ottoman Empire for the sake of the Jewish Nation!! Another theory mentioned in Rifat Bali’s book, tells about the part that the Donmes in preventing Turkey’s joining Germany of Hitler in Second World War. According to this claim, the Donmes of the ruling Elite knew that otherwise their fate would be the same as the fate of the Turkish Jewish Population

Another new and popular belief nowadays is that the Donmes were those that are guilty of Armenian Genocide, a kind of a conspiracy theory that could “clean” the Turkish People of this Genocide guilt and throw it to the scapegoat of all times : the Donmes.

Most of the Donmes in Turkey today are the descendents of some 20,000 donmes, mostly from Saloniki in Greece that were deported/*exiled* to Turkey during the twenties of the past century as part of the population exchange between the two countries. Their exile to Turkey was based upon the ruling of Rabbis of Saloniki that refused to consider Donmes as Jews. The historic irony is that thus were their lives saved. Almost all the Jews of Saloniki perished in the death camps of Auschwitz and Maidanek

## **Shabtaism as a faith/belief is not gone from this world**

The following letter was written by a Donme friend of mine, not long time ago, in English, to an Orthodox authority in Israel and he never received an answer to it. From understandable reasons I have taken his name and the consignee's name out and here is its content:

My name is ....and I am a friend of ....who has also written to you a few weeks ago. Since we both are aspiring to return to the Jewish Nation, I have found it suitable to write to you.

My father is a Turkish Citizen from Donme origin both from his mother and father's side. His family resided in Salonika up until they were exiled to Turkey in the 20's. My mother is American and has passed away when I was a kid. As far as I know/was told she grew up as a Protestant.

I know that the Jewish Identity in the Orthodox community is determined either by the mother or by Giyur-Conversion to Judaism. But one way or another, I have always felt as a Jew and identified with the Jewish Nation. My father told me about his origin when I had turned 9 years old. I was not surprised since I had always felt that we were "Different" .....

There is a growing on tendency ( not a movement yet), especially amongst the younger generation of the "Believers-Mamaminim" , to learn about their Jewish heritage. I know a few of them who have joined the Jewish Community headed by Mark Angel, who is the Rabbi of Kehilat- "Sheerit Yisrael" in New York. Others have married Jewish Woman in order to make sure that if not themselves then at least their children will belong to the Jewish Nation. Unfortunately, the "Maaminim" have been refused by most of the Jews in Turkey until not long time ago. In the past 350 years our ways have separated from the Jewish World while at the same time the Moslem world has turned us down too.

I do not believe that Shabtai Zvi was the Messiah neither does my father believe so. The essence-main part of the Shabtai faith/religion has been neglected gradually towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The communities left are bound by either memories or marital bonds.

But this does not mean that Shabtaism as a faith/belief has gone from this world. From the tens of thousands of Shabatim in Turkey and outside of Turkey, some 4000 or 5000 men and woman belong to the sub-group Karakas and have kept their traditions with utmost secrecy. They believe that by living their "double lives" as had lived Sabetai Zvi after converting his religion, they will bring Geula-redemption closer and will bring "Tikun" .

During the past 15 years there has been a witch hunting after the Shabtaim Descendents in Turkey. We have been chosen against our favor to be the scapegoat for all the illnesses and difficulties of Turkey. And in a strange manner, not just by the radical Moslems but also by the Fascists, and the leftists and Kurds and seculars, too.

The situation being thus, it does not apprise any good for the future. It has come to my knowledge that the second president of Israel, Itzhak Ben Zvi aspired that our community return to Conservative Judaism and immigrate to Israel. If only that would have happened then... Looks like it is too late today to visualize this plan in a large scale. But I still think that we have to help those who want to realize this dream by themselves and to their families.