

# The Dönmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey

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## Who are the Dönmes? <sup>1</sup>

The term 'Dönme' means, among other things, 'one who has changed religions', or 'a convert', but in modern Turkish parlance, it refers especially to the followers of Sabbetai Sevi, the 17<sup>th</sup> century rabbi who declared himself Messiah in 1666, and their descendants. Sevi himself was born in Izmir, or Smyrna, 1626. According to Gershom Scholem, Sevi received a „thorough religious and Talmudic training and fully mastered the sources of rabbinic culture.“ He was ordained as a rabbi at the age of 18, and at the same time began his study of Kabbalah. Sevi came to believe himself the Messiah early on, and began to tell this to those in his milieu. Joseph Escapa, the Chief Rabbi of Izmir, reacted strongly to Sevi's pronouncements regarding his messiahship, eventually prompting the latter to depart from his hometown and embark on a series of journeys that would take to other major centers of Jewish culture, including Salonica, Athens, Cairo and Jerusalem, among others. While on his way to Jerusalem, another young Kabbalist by the name of Abraham Nathan had a dream in which he later claimed to have seen Sevi and to have been told that he was the long-awaited Messiah. As a result, Nathan, who has become known in history as 'Nathan of Gaza', began to proclaim him as such. He became something of a 'John the Baptist' to Sevi's 'Jesus', earning himself a prominent place in the movement and increasing the number of its adherents, as well. After returning to Izmir in 1666, Sevi declared himself the Messiah, giving himself the title „The One who will establish the Kingdom of God“ and speaking of the return of the entire Jewish nation to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple and of the coming salvation of all nations. His followers' practice of mentioning Sevi as 'King' in their prayers began to disquiet the Sultan, and upon his entrance to Istanbul Sevi was arrested and held. He was subsequently summoned to the palace, where, during his questioning before the Imperial Court and the demand that he either prove the divinity of his mission or face death, he admitted that he was not actually the Messiah, only a simple rabbi, and agreed to adopt the religion of Islam. He was then given the name 'Aziz Mehmet Efendi' and made *Kapıcıbaşı*, or 'Gatekeeper' at the Imperial Palace in Edirne

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on Scholem's work: SCHOLEM, G. 1989. *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah*. WERBLOWSKY R. J. Z. (tr.). Princeton: Princeton University Press. For a most recent study on the Dönmes cf Baer (2009).

(Adrianople). His conversion caused a crisis within the ranks of his followers, with some abandoning him and others following his example and converting to Islam.

After his conversion, Sevi taught his followers the principles which became known as 'The 18 Commandments'. These principles, such as the belief in Sevi's Messiahship, the prohibition against marrying outside of the sect, the external observance Muslim custom and religious ritual, the (secret) recitation of the Psalms, and the public observance and celebration of Muslim religious festivals and covert celebration of the Sabbatean holidays: all of these would become the fundamental components of Dönme life for the next two-and-a-half centuries.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, Sevi's continued unorthodox behavior after his conversion eventually compelled the Sultan to distance him from both his followers and detractors, eventually exiling him in 1673 to the city of Ülgün, or Ulcinj, in what is presently Montenegro. He died there three years later.

After Sevi's death, his brother-in-law Jacob – or 'Yakup' Querido – would assume the mantle of leadership of the sect. Thirteen years after Sevi's death, the constant personal and religious tensions within the group finally erupted, and the sect split, at first into two and later three sub-sects: 1) the 'Yakubi' sect, which continued to follow Querido and his successors; 2) the 'Karakaş', who believed that Osman Baba, a child born nine months and ten days after Sevi's death was actually the reincarnated Messiah himself; and 3) the 'Kapancı's, members of the second group who split off after rejecting Osman's messiahship.

After living in peace in a few neighborhoods of Salonica and, to a lesser extent, Edirne and Izmir for the next two centuries, the community and its insular structure was irreparably damaged by the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and the massive wave of migrations that ensued over the next decade. According to various sources, at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were between 10-15,000 Dönmes living in Salonica.<sup>3</sup> In order to be able to preserve and continue their own specific culture and social construction, the Dönmes had taken care to marry only within their own sects, to bury their dead in specifically Dönme cemeteries and — beginning in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—to send their children to their own schools, where over the years the education took on an increasingly Western character and flavor, including the teaching of foreign languages. This lifestyle continued in some form or another until the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

### **The Dönme debate in the Turkish Republic – Part I: 1923-1945**

During the Lausanne peace talks which were undertaken at the end of Turkey's successful War of Independence, the Turkish delegation demanded, among other things, to be rid of much of their own indigenous Greek population, which had collaborated with the Greek invasion forces and was

<sup>2</sup> Küçük (2001, 349).

<sup>3</sup> Saban (1988-1991, 117-118, 131); Küçük (2001, 347, 353).

therefore seen as an element of permanent insecurity. For both sides, the most practical way to do this was simply to exchange the Greek population of Anatolia for the Greek state's Turkish Muslim minority. Such a decision was completely in keeping with the desire of the new Republic's leadership to create a Turkish nation-state by homogenizing the population and society of Anatolia. Thus, the 'Agreement and Protocol regarding the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations' was signed between the two countries on January 30, 1923, whereby those Turks living in Greece — apart from those in Western Thrace — would be 'exchanged' for all the Greeks living in Turkey—apart from those in Istanbul. As the Dönmes of Salonica were considered to be Muslim Turks, they too were subject to the exchange and sent packing to Turkey. The majority eventually settled in Istanbul,<sup>4</sup> with a much smaller number going to Izmir and other major cities. Those going to Istanbul tended to concentrate in the most exclusive neighborhoods<sup>5</sup>, where they established their schools anew.<sup>6</sup> When they died, the new emigrants would be buried in the Bülbüldere Cemetery, across the Bosphorus in Üsküdar. While at first glance it appears no different than any other Muslim cemetery, a closer examination shows that many of the tombstones contain photographs of the deceased, a habit which is prohibited in Muslim traditions.

In regard to their occupations, the Dönmes who settled in Istanbul and Izmir have distinguished themselves in a variety of fields, including journalism, movie theaters, finance, foreign affairs, higher education, commerce and the arts. Nevertheless, worldly success has not been accompanied popular acclaim or acceptance. The descendants of this community whose number is around 15.000, are still identified as 'Dönme's, or 'Salonicans', both of which terms retain a decidedly negative connotation in popular parlance. The origins of this negative view of the Dönmes stems from the widespread view of them as a community of individuals who are two-faced and unreliable.

### The „Karakaş Rüştü Affair”

The first time the Dönme issue became a public debate was in January 1924 after Turkey declared herself a Republic and it was known as the „Karakaş Rüştü Affair”.

The name 'Karakaş Rüştü' first became known to the Turkish public through a petition submitted by a certain Rüştü, member of the Dönmes' Karakaş sect, to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on January 1, 1924, just as the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange was to come into effect. In his petition, Rüştü claimed that his coreligionists were neither ethnically, racially, spiritually nor morally

<sup>4</sup> For a study on this subject I suggest: HIRSCHON, R. (ed.). 1998. *Crossing the Aegean – An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

<sup>5</sup> Namely, the neighborhoods of Teşvikiye, Nişantaşı and Maçka and the Istanbul suburb of Bakırköy.

<sup>6</sup> These schools which are still operating in Istanbul today are: Feyziye Mektepleri Vakfı Özel Işık Lisesi, Şişli Terakki Lisesi and Boğaziçi Lisesi. The history of the Terakki schools has been published: ALKAN, M. O. 2003. *Selanik'ten İstanbul'a: İmparatorluk'tan Cumhuriyet'e Terakki Vakfı ve Terakki Okulları 1877-2000*. İstanbul: Terakki Vakfı Yayınları.

Turkish, and requested that unless they were willing to fully assimilate and intermarry with Turks they should not be allowed to come to Turkey (cf. BESSEMER, 2003, 121-122). The petition was reported in the press the following day, giving rise to an animated debate in the country's press which lasted for a couple weeks, after which it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared (For an investigation of this debate cf. Baer (2004, 682-708)). During this period, the Dönme population continued to quickly assimilate into the newly-created 'Turkish' national identity. Marriages between Dönmes and ordinary Muslims increased apace. In other words, the communal mentality and solidarity of which Karakaş Rüştü had complained gradually disappeared. For the ruling cadres of the fledgling Republic, who were in any case determined to 'Turkify' the country's various ethnic and religious minorities, this could only be seen as a favorable development. For all purposes, the state appeared to have forgotten about the Dönmes. But with the appearance of the wartime 'Capital Tax Law' in November 1942, it quickly became clear that the state had not forgotten them after all...

### The Capital Tax Law

During the winter of 1942, when the fate of Europe still hung in the balance and Turkey, which had only managed with great difficulty to maintain its neutrality, was suffering greatly from the shortages, speculation and black marketeering created by the wartime conditions, the Turkish Grand National Assembly adopted in November the 'Capital Tax Law'. This was extraordinary tax, passed with the justified intention of taxing the excessive profits being reaped by those taking advantage of the market imbalances and shortages.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite the fair and reasonable goal of the law, the determination and implementation of the tax was carried out in completely arbitrary fashion, one devoid of all pretense of justice or equality.

Turkish taxpayers were divided into three categories<sup>8</sup>: Muslims, non-Muslims and Dönmes, with the percentage of one's capital to be delivered as a tax obligation being determined according to one's membership in one of these groups. Among these three groups, Muslim merchants and industrialists paid at the lowest rate, with the Dönmes paying twice the percentage of other Muslims and non-Muslims being charged four times that rate. As formulated, the law decreed that those unable to pay the tax, whose assessment could not be appealed, would be obligated to perform physical labor in work camps until they had paid off their debt. However, this stipulation was only imposed on non-Muslims, never on Muslims or Dönmes. In this way, the Turkish Republic, which in its 1924 Constitution had declared that all Turkish citizens would be considered

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<sup>7</sup> For more detailed information on this subject in English language cf. Bali (2005), and in French cf. Bali (2010); Ökte (1987).

<sup>8</sup> There were actually four total categories, but the fourth, the 'E' category (for Ecnebi) was for non-Turkish nationals.

and treated equally before the law, had imposed a system whereby its population was actually treated as first, second and third class citizens.

Such a policy brings to mind a number of questions. For instance: How, during the implementation of the Capital Tax Law, did the responsible officials know which persons were of Dönme origin? How and where was this information recorded, and why had it been preserved in the nearly two decades between the founding of the Republic and the adoption of the law?

It is difficult to answer these questions from the surviving documentation, because no detailed or in-depth research has yet been carried out in the population registries. A possible and plausible explanation is that, during the population exchange, those among the Turkish immigrants from Greece who were known to be Dönmes were identified as such in the population registries. But if we ask why it was felt necessary to record such information we find ourselves in a very different field of research. This question ultimately touches on the problem of the Turkish Republic's 'minority policies' from its inception until the end of World War II. During this period the state continually fostered the goal of creating a 'Turkish' nation-state, destroying the various sub-state communal structures remaining from the Ottoman period and forcibly 'Turkifying' and assimilating the country's minorities within an overarching Turkish national identity, and a single shared language, culture and national ideal.<sup>9</sup> But despite this often repeated objective, the state and much of its ruling cadre continued to doubt the 'loyalty' of Dönmes and non-Muslims and to view them as a 'foreign element' within the Turkish body politic. What's more, the indisputable predominance of these two relatively small groups in the country's economic life was intolerable to them, and they continually strove to transfer the control of the economy to Muslim Turks, who were seen as the true owners of the country.

Ultimately, the two notions which played a role in the discriminatory and unjust imposition of the Capital Tax against the Dönmes — the questionable loyalty of non-Muslims and Dönmes to the Turkish Republic and their control of the nation's trade and industry — are convictions that had long before taken root in the popular mind and still continue down to our day. Indeed, the declaration of Mehmed Şevket Eygi which was quoted at the outset, that "a great portion of Turkey's revenues finds its way straight into their pockets and accounts" is of a piece with those beliefs that allowed for the tax's discriminatory implementation more than six decades earlier. In a sentence, this conviction can be expressed thus: 'Even though Muslims are the predominant element and deserving rulers of this country, it is only the non-Muslims and Dönmes who benefit from its blessings.'

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on this subject the following book is suggested: BALI, R. N. 1999. *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923-1945)*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

### The Dönmes in Memoirs and Interviews

Regardless of how much persons of Dönme descent may have abandoned their cultural, religious and ethnic heritage and consciously decided to assimilate themselves within a Turkish national identity, the country's nationalist and Islamist (and, more broadly defined, extreme nationalist) circles have doggedly persisted in interpreting, attributing meaning to and finding cause-effect relationships in every event and occurrence on the basis of racial, ethnic and religious criteria. In recent years, these circles have been joined by various individuals from the other side of the political spectrum, such as Prof. Yalçın Küçük, in issuing a stream of declarations rejecting the claims of various individuals of Sabbatean origin that neither they nor their relatives any longer possess a Sabbatean identity or observe any of the sect's rituals. Not only do they not accept these assertions, they assert the very opposite, setting up an intellectual 'Catch 22' wherein this very rejection itself is asserted to be a reflection of the central Sabbatean commandment of dissimulation.

Righist circles — both secular and religious—have argued that, since those who come from families of Dönme origin tend to be cosmopolitan, Atatürkist and secular, they have been the most ardent defenders of the secular order of the Turkish Republic established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whom they also believe to have been of Dönme origin. Thus, the Dönmes and their descendents are seen as having pursued the policies and ideological line begun by Atatürk down to our day.

As for the descendents of the Dönmes themselves, in the light of the constant demonization of them in the Turkish media, which depicts them as a still existing, unified, „secret Jewish sect“, pursuing dark and untoward objectives — and ones that are to the detriment of Turkey and its Muslim population, and of the transformation in recent years of the term „Dönme“ (and its increasingly popular synonym Sabbatean) — terms always bearing some negative connotation — into terms of absolute opprobrium among a significant portion of Turkey's population, they have remained decidedly unenthusiastic to either publish their memoirs or even reveal their family origins. Such behavior is entirely understandable, as such publication has the potential to not bring physical, social or financial harm to such persons, but to all of those related to them as well. As a result, sources like these: memoirs, confessions, or conversations with those of Dönme origins — at least conversations about their origin—are rare to nonexistent.

For this reason, when it does indeed appear, autobiographical information from persons publicly acknowledging Sabbatean family origins represents a extremely interesting and untouched primary source for the anthropologist, sociologist and historian dealing with the Dönme phenomenon, and one that always holds the promise of filling some of the many gaps in our knowledge of this sect (or, more correctly, three sub-sects) and its history. This article is an attempt to fill this gap somewhat, by presenting a translated collection of these ‚rare occasions‘ when the curtains are thrown back, and we are allowed a glimpse — however fleeting — into this world. What follows

then is a number of conversations with and recollections of those of Dönme origin living in Turkey, which have been taken from oral and print sources.

### The Memoirs of Kâzım Nami Duru

The first of these sources is from Kâzım Nami Duru's book of recollections titled *Arnavutluk ve Makedonya Hatıralarım* (My Memories of Albania and Macedonia), first published in serialized form in the daily *Tan* in 1955 and republished as a book four years later.<sup>10</sup> In one part of these recollections on the author's years in Salonica, he makes mention of the Dönmes who lived there:

Salonica can be considered to have been a cosmopolitan city. Most of the population were Jews, but there were more than a few Turks. There were a great number of Greeks as well. The Bulgars, Serbs, Vlachs and Armenians of Ottoman citizenship were the minorities. For example, in the entire city there were only 45 Armenians. There was also a population who, although their language was Turkish and their names were Muslim, had almost no connection to one another, even though they were of the same race. They called these persons Dönme. How this term came about? During the time of Mehmet IV, who is known by the moniker „The Hunter” (Avcı), there appeared in Izmir among the Sephardic Jews (This was the term for the Jews that came from Spain) one by the name of Sabbatai Sevi who claimed that he was the Messiah. In the Torah it was mentioned that in the future, a Prophet by the name of Messiah would come. The Christians consider Jesus to be the Messiah. The Jews don't believe in the Messiahship of Jesus. The emergence of Sabbatai from among the Jews, as a Kabbalist, which is a sort of mystic, and the fact that some of the Jews and the rabbis believed in him threw the Jews of Izmir into a great confusion. Mehmet IV heard news of this and had Sabbatai called to Edirne; he had pressures put on him; Sabbatai converted to Islam and took on the name Aziz Mehmed, but the Kabbalists remained bound to him; they would even come to Edirne to visit him. In the face of this the Sultan ordered Aziz Mehmed Efendi to be locked up in the Kıldülbahir castle across from Çanakkale.<sup>11</sup> The Kabbalists then began to come by boat or by caique to visit Aziz Mehmed Efendi in the castle. The Sultan was irritated by this as well, [so h]e had the man exiled to the village of Ülgün on the shores of the Adriatic. There Aziz Mehmed Efendi died. A person by the name of Yakup Efendi, who had been among those Kabbalists that had converted to Islam, assembled [all of his followers] and came to Salonica to settle. This people who are referred to as Dönme are the descendents of these Kabbalists who converted to Islam. Some time passed. [One day] Yakup Efendi climbed aboard a boat, saying „I'm going on the Hajj”, and departed. The boat would sink, however, so that Yakup Efendi never returned to Salonica. One section of the Dönmes claimed that Yakup Efendi had not died and that one day he would return to Salonica. In this way, the Dönmes split into two groups, who were called the Kapancı and the Yakubis. Once again, a great deal of time passed, and then a certain Osman Baba appeared from among the Kapancı. This person was considered by some of the Dönmes to be the [re]incarnation of the Messiah, like Aziz Mehmed and Yakup Efendi. When he died, the Dönmes split again. One portion believed that Osman Baba had not died; these became known as the „Osman Babalı"s. This population had separated into three different groups, with each group completely severing its ties with the other two. They did not intermarry. Within each of the three groups there were those who performed their ablutions and went to [pray at ] the mosque; but the Yakubis (they were [also] called the „thin-haired” also involved themselves deeply in Sufism. The elders they called the „Kapancı"s; very few of these went into the state bureaucracy. The Yakubis (because they called them the „thin-haired”) did not

<sup>10</sup> Kâzım Nami Duru (1876 – October 14, 1967) was a member of the Committee for Union and Progress. He was also a member of parliament between 1935–1943. His books are: *Kemalist Rejimde Öğretim ve Eğitim* (1938), *Ziya Gökalp* (1949), *İttihat ve Terakki Hatıralarım* (1957), *Cumhuriyet Devri Hatıralarım* (1958), *Arnavutluk ve Makedonya Hatıralarım* (1959). Source: İŞİK, İ. 2004. *Türkiye Yazarlar Ansiklopedisi*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ankara: Elvan Yayınları, 208.

<sup>11</sup> Duru is mistaken here. Sevi was imprisoned in the castle before his conversion.

prefer the bureaucracy [either]; a part of them owned ranches some among them even became pashas, receiving this rank through the bureaucracy. As for the Osman Babalis, the great majority of them were poor. They engaged in trade. They established companies and involved themselves in large-scale commercial transactions. There was a custom among the Dönmes of [providing charitable] financial assistance [to less fortunate members of their community] that the Jews called the Shekel. For this reason, even the poor were able to pay the [military exemption] tax and only [have to] perform six months of military service. They were all industrious [people], without exception. There were no beggars [among them]. There were solidarity and mutual assistance among them. They were honorable in their commercial transactions; they did not descend into petty and base affairs like hoarding and profiteering. They were reliable in their friendships. There were two primary-level schools — once again, as a result of their mutual support: the Yedigârî Terakki of the Kapancıs, and the Feyziye of the Osman Babalis. [In] these [schools] there was very good instruction, both in Turkish and in French. A fellow by the name of İsmail Hakkı opened a private school called the Primary School for Commerce (Ticaret İdadisi), but upon his death, which occurred almost one year before the [Second] Constitutional Period, this school was purchased by the Committee of Union and Progress. After the declaration of the Constitution it took on the name of the Union and Progress School, and at the beginning of 1910 it moved into a beautiful brand new building, right across from the Primary School for Administration, that the Committee had ordered built. After the Balkan War the Yedigârî Terakki School was brought to Istanbul, and today's Şişli Terakki Lycée first took on the name 'Feyziye' [after having become reestablished] in Nişantaşı, subsequently changing it to its current name, the Işık Lycée. There were many very valuable doctors among the Dönmes. All of them received their education in Europe. One by the name of Rifat, who received the moniker among them of „The Great”, was indeed a very excellent specialist. It was due to him that a treatment was discovered for tuberculosis. There were also other greatly treasured doctors, like Ziya Ethem. Those writers and teachers who have contributed to Turkish culture were persons who will be recalled with gratitude. There was a teacher of Turkish Literature by the name of Osman Şevki at the Yedigârî Terakki School; after the [declaration of the] Constitutional Period he wrote and had published a five volume reading book. There was a precious individual by the name of Fazlı Necip who published the newspaper *Asır*. This was a very old newspaper that was not only read in Salonica, but in [other] provinces like Istanbul and Izmir. After the Constitutional Period this newspaper moved to Izmir and changed its name to *Yeni Asır*. After the declaration of the Constitution and the coming to power of the [Committee of] Union and Progress, Cavid Bey, who had before the declaration been the director of the Feyziye School, was appointed to the Finance Ministry. The Dönmes contribution to our economic life can be considered as praiseworthy. They have never hesitated from providing service to the country. There are, among them, as many [devoted officers] as the Turks in the military, such as my classmate Staff General Remzi, who was one class above me, and Captain Hâzım, who was two classes below me. The heroism that General Remzi showed during the First World War was enormous. (DURU, 1955)<sup>12</sup>

### The Memoirs of Cüneyt Ayrıl, Businessman and Editor-in-Chief of *Konstantiniye Haberleri*:

I am the son of a immigrant family!

That is to say, from those Jewish branches that fled from the Spanish Inquisition (15th century) and were later called „Sabbatean” (17th century)... Since this was a „taboo” subject in our house, it was never discussed — and still isn't. I only learned about it much later.

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly Duru (1957) makes no mention of the Dönmes when discussing Salonica, only mentioning their schools in the following matter-of-fact manner:

The Greeks and Bulgars had gymnasiums. Apart from these there were a number of schools run by the [Catholic] *frères* and *soeurs*. It wasn't easy for the Turks to continue [their education] as far as these schools. There were two schools at the primary level run by the Kapancıs and the İpekçıs, known respectively as the „Yedigârî Terakki” and „Feyziye”. (DURU, 1957, 11)



My father was born in Salonica, while my mother was the Istanbul[-born] daughter of a „Salonican” family. But because her father was the tobacco expert for TEKEL,<sup>13</sup> she spent her entire youth in Anatolia.

When I sat and listened to this lengthy story, I noticed just how little they told me about themselves, but I still didn't dare to ask to learn more; because I believed that after a certain age people could forget their „reality” and simply tell their „fantasies”. Maybe this is the reason that the most beautiful novels are written [by persons] over 50 years of age. The family,<sup>14</sup> which came from Salonica to Istanbul during the great „migration”<sup>15</sup> moved to Ankara in September, 1966. I will not go on about the story of this migration, because it's not my story; it's more my father's and mother's story (...)

The Salonican [D]önmes, who were brought to the [capital] city in the migration, were considered Istanbulis, like the old Ottomans, Jews, Armenians and Greeks. The Gypsies were called „those from Tavatla” or „the people of Dolapdere”; it was considered status to be from Üsküdar, from Çengelköy, Moda, Amavutköy, or Bebek.

Those who stand at the entrance to the train station in Sirkeci in order to depart for Germany were the new inhabitants of Dersaadet [i.e., Istanbul], who have themselves begun to form new suburbs....

During those years the middle class Jews settled around the Şişli Mosque, in the Hürriyet neighborhood, those who grew wealthier over time they began to spread out toward Osmanbey, Nişantaşı and Maçka,<sup>16</sup> and the streets behind the house in which the Great Savior began the „National Struggle.”<sup>17</sup>

Our famous cap-wearing poet<sup>18</sup> once described this area as „a continuation of Old Pera”.

The Salonica Dönmes also chose to live together [in these districts] with the Jewish population. These persons, who during the period of the Capital Tax [Law] (*Varlık Vergisi*) shared the same „horrid fate”, either did business together or came together in their social lives.

To the „Muslim Turks” who were different from them, and even more so to those who began to come from Anatolia [to Istanbul], they began to refer to as „vedre”, a Judeo-Spanish word for „green”.

These persons were in general the leaders in medium scale commerce and manufacturing. They engaged in trades like the production of socks, buttons and zippers, saddles, textiles, haberdashery and silk scarves.

Their connection with culture and art because of „out of rootlessness”, wasn't very deep or intimate. Almost none of them had bookshelves or libraries in their houses. These people were the

<sup>13</sup> Turkish Monopolies.

<sup>14</sup> Note of Ayral: „My father came in 1924 to Istanbul [when] he was three years old”.

<sup>15</sup> Ayral is referring to the Turkish-Greek Population Exchange that began on January 1, 1924 in accordance with dictates of the protocol agreed upon by the two sides the previous year.

<sup>16</sup> Nişantaşı, Teşvikiye and Maçka are three districts close to each other. The Feyziye and Terakki schools were initially established in Nişantaşı. For monographs on these districts cf.: GÖKSEL, A. E. (ed). 1999. *Bir Sadakat Hikâyesi Nişantaşı Maçka Palas*. İstanbul: Körfezbank; ÇETİNTAŞ, M. B. 2006. *Dolmabahçe'den Nişantaşı'na Sultanların ve Paşaların Sementinin Tarihi*. İstanbul: Antik A.Ş. and MAĞGÖNÜL, A. Z. 2004. *Teşvikiye-Nişantaşı „Seçkin” Sementin „Seçkin” Sakinleri*. İstanbul: Kitabevi.

<sup>17</sup> Ayral is referring here to the house of Mustafa Kemal located at Halaskargazi Caddesi no. 250. Halaskargazi Boulevard is the main north-south artery through Osmanbey. This house today is the Atatürk Museum.

<sup>18</sup> The person to which he is making allusion is the poet and novelist Atilla İlhan (1925-2005).

select consumers of the French-language, women's and weekly gossip magazines that came, very late, to Istanbul during that period. Their recreations were to get out of the city on the weekend, to go to Yeşilköy, Büyük Çekmece, or Polenez Köyü to eat or have a picnic; sometimes, to go to the nightclub and especially to listen to the artists that were brought from Europe, and to gather at each other's house and play games of chance, like konken, poker, backgammon, baccarat, and beziqe.

The most important cultural activities during the winter time were to go to the new premieres that would be screened at the movie theaters every week, by purchasing „season tickets” to the Atlas, Emek or Konak Movie Theaters..

The season tickets, [which were] for an entire season, would be sold in the fall, and in this way each week they would dress up — especially the women — and go to the premiere showing of films, which switched every week. The films that came to Istanbul were generally films that had been shown some three to five years earlier in Europe and America.

During those years there was still no opera or ballet in Istanbul. On those evenings the Gentlemen would get into their „costume”, and would, without exception, wear ties.

This custom, which began with the Atlas Cinema in Beyoğlu, was seen by the women as an opportunity to show off their new hats.

When the Konak Cinema was first opened on Valikonağı Boulevard at the end of the Harbiye District, with its plush red armchairs and heavy velvet curtain, those who bought season tickets, this time preferred to switch their preferences to the balcony seats of the new movie theater. Certainly, after this withdrawing from Pera, this [theater] played a role in creating the trend wherein those who had recently arrived in Istanbul and had earned money from the whole gecekondu business would begin to spend their evenings at the nightclubs on Beyoğlu Boulevard [now known as „İstiklâl Caddesi”]. The section of Beyoğlu [Boulevard that stretches] from the Galatasaray Lycée down to [the underground tram at] Tünel had already become transformed into the place for the „late night population” district; for this reason, the native Istanbul population preferred to stay away.

Later on the [opening of the] Emek Cinema and the „BAB Cafeteria” — Turkey's first cafeteria, which opened across from it — were not enough to increase the popularity of nightlife on Beyoğlu [Boulevard].

In our house it was never mentioned that we were „dönmes”, and even any sort of questioning of this subject was vehemently opposed.

The family was „Turks, the sons of Turks”. They were Atatürkists and supporters of the Republican People's Party. At various places in the house there were the red CHP<sup>19</sup> flag with its six arrows, party buttons and stickers, and resting conspicuously in the main corner of the house was a signed photograph of the „National Chief” [i.e., İsmet İnönü] that had been addressed to my father.

In the house there weren't even photos from my parents wedding. One of the three images that I retain from my childhood is a signed photograph of the architect of the Capital Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*),<sup>20</sup> a miniature mosque that was inlaid with ivory and antler, and a little photograph of my grandfather, my mother's father who died young, in a silver frame. Were these pictures in the house in Ankara?

<sup>19</sup> CHP is the acronym of Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or Republican's People Party.

<sup>20</sup> The author is referring here to Prime Minister Şükrü Saracoğlu.

Every time that my father would dance the „hora”,<sup>21</sup> he would never fail to tell the story of how Atatürk had shaken his hand. This story also grew over time and he added a number of details. Among the various stories that were told [in the family] were how my father had cried when Atatürk passed away, how he had been one of the soldiers guarding [Atatürk's] sarcophagus while it was at the Ethnographic Museum, and how he had worked on the construction of the Anıtkabir [Mausoleum and Memorial].

Many years later, when I became interested in the „social history” of Turkey, I began to feel that „there's nothing to gain from fear” and thinking about the pitiful state of my father before the current [trends of] „the left of the middle”, the „social democrats” and other such comedies, I finally understood that I wanted to write poems and stories, narrating my father's situation which could be summed up as „the years were spent in vain, backing the wrong horse”. It's time would come, somehow....

On one hand, my father went against the political current to which his friends — who engaged in manufacturing and trade and most of whom were Jews and other minorities — had attached themselves with the dream of being „one of the millionaires that would be created in each corner [of the country]”,<sup>22</sup> but on the other hand, he also wanted to earn some money from trade.

Our lifestyle was quite above that of the middle class. For this reason, we had the luxury of „going on vacation”.

At the beginning of the 1950s he would rent a summer house on a street on the Anatolian shore of Istanbul, not far from the sea and the house in Şişli would be closed up „for the summer” as we moved „to the other side” to live their for at least three or four months.

This whole business of moving was taken very seriously, with the windows of the winter house being covered over with old newspapers and the curtains taken down so that they wouldn't grow faded from the sun. Old newspapers would be sprayed and rolled up inside the carpets so as to protect them from moths. Every floor of the house was covered with linoleum that looked like parquet. In those days, cloth was put over the linoleum tiles, which were the style in those days.

All of the family's silver, all of the women's jewelry and gold were gathered up and put away in the safe at my father's workplace. The „Frigidaire” brand refrigerator was unplugged and defrosted in order to be transported to the „summer house”. The operation of moving to the summer house was a very serious effort.

As for my father's mother, who was assumed to be the „source” of the family's wealth and the „matriarch” of the extended family, she had at that time moved to the Suadiye Hotel on the sea shore and during the days she would host us at the beach so that her grandchildren could go swimming in the ocean, and, after a short, noontime nap, would go join the konken or poker games in the hotel's private salons.

Everyone in the family would get up late in the morning. My father's mother would get up late because she was tired from being up late gambling. My father would go in to work late in the morning, and would come back late in the evenings. On the weekends, they would find time for noontime naps. In order not to make noise in the house during those times and to suffer the inevitable punishment for having disturbed the „sleeping adults” we had to wait until the „sleeping adults” awoke during the summer months before we could go to the sea.

This whole matter of sleep and tiredness would so embed itself in my mind that I [still] get irritated at those who want to sleep for a long time. I believe that time spent sleeping is a „waste of time”,

<sup>21</sup> A kind of round dance.

<sup>22</sup> The author is referring here to the political slogan „Her mahallede bir milyoner” (a millionaire in each quarter) of the Democrat Party (DP) who won the May 14, 1950 elections.

and I see it as an insufficient regard of one's life. I've been like this for my whole life. Even so, a great majority of the people who have entered my life tend to be „long sleepers”.

The nation's economy, which became unstable after the May 27 Revolution, immediately affected businessmen and the old, ample profits quickly disappeared. Because of this it began to be more difficult to rent a house for summer vacation and go „to the other side”.

This [new] situation was explained to my elder sister and myself as due to the fact that we were in school, and that it „technically” wouldn't be right to leave the house in the city for a long period like three or four months. But this situation certainly wasn't understood as if we would never again have a summer vacation [...] (AYRAL, 2004, 75-74)

### **The Memoirs of an Anonymous British Orientalist**

One of the most active elements in Istanbul is the Salonicans. In particular since the declaration of the Constitutional Period in 1908 they occupy important positions in the government and in commerce. The Salonicans appear at the heads of the largest and wealthiest commercial enterprises in the Istanbul area. Just as there had been a great number of Salonicans among the leading members of the [Committee of] Union and Progress, and that the Central Committee of the CUP had been formed in Salonica, it is for these reasons that the Salonicans have attained such great rank and influence among the Ottomans.

During the [First] World War, on the pretext that the city of Salonica was under the occupation of the Greeks, all of the Salonicans in Istanbul secured themselves exemptions from military service by entering into Greek and Serbian citizenship, and through not serving in the Ottoman armies in any capacity whatsoever, earned great wealth by working exclusively in commerce [during this period]. Those who did actively serve their country were authentic Turks. It can be claimed that among the more than half-million bodies that the Ottoman army buried at Çanakkale [Gallipoli], one could not find a single Salonican footsoldier or officer. The more than 70,000 Ottoman soldiers who[se lives] were destroyed on the Russian border or in the numerous battles like Sarıkamış are all members of the Turkish race, they are all Muslims of Anatolia and Istanbul. Even so, the fate of Turkey still remains in the hands of the Salonicans. Those who participated in the Anatolia resistance are in large part Salonicans. The Salonicans have shown themselves successful only at [establishing factories and] overseeing the [operation of their] machines, they have monopolized this task, in fact; but those who gather around the machines [to actually operate them] are, likewise, the real Turks. The naiveté of the Turks has been the reason that these unimaginable disasters have been coming upon them for the past fifty years. The Salonicans are almost all educated and know [foreign] languages. I have [been in] contact [with] a number Salonicans who engage in various occupations in Istanbul, and they are all, without exception, intelligent, industrious and cunning persons. The Salonicans have a code by which they act: „My right arm belongs to me and to my own kind. I can only devote my left arm to the benefit of others.”

For this reason you will not encounter a Salonican among those beggars that one sees around. Every Salonican works for another Salonican and no Salonican is left hungry and without work. In comparison, there are more than one hundred thousand unemployed Turks wandering [the streets of] Istanbul, dismissed and unemployed officials who have come from their own towns (...)

In the Spanish[-language] work by Fresko titled *Zion* that was published in Madrid there is very important and mysterious information about the Salonicans and the Salonican [D]önmes. Looking at this information, they call the Salonicans who are Muslims from the descendants of Sabbatai Levi „Sazanikos”. The Sazans-Salonicans are divided into three: 1- Tarpuşiler (those with Tarbushes); 2- Çorapçılar (the sockmakers/-sellers); 3- The Hamdi Bey partisans, who are called Honyos.

The Tarpuşis and the Çorapçıs have not intermarried until very recent times, and while they [now both] enter into familial relationships with one another as a result of the modernist ideas of the

Honyos they still do not have marital ties, and they do not allow any stranger in from the outside. Because they have looked so favorably upon this union, tuberculosis is very widespread among the Tarpuşis, and this disease has spread with great speed among all of the other clans.

I never heard of a Turk who married a girl from the Salonicans in Istanbul, nor one who showed any sort of intimacy along these lines.

Several years ago, one of the leading textile merchants by the name of Muhsin Efendi, upon learning of certain secret religious Islamic canonical details by means of the religious suggestons of one of his friends, believed that there was no discrimination within the religion of Islam and gave his daughter [in marriage] to a young Turkish man.

After the Salonicans learned of the circumstances of this marriage [the couple] was shunned by everyone and they were immediately expelled from their communities. Muhsin Efendi went bankrupt because of this, being punished by the community in the way of being subjected to material and spiritual hardship and damage. After these events none dared to initiate any action outside of [their] national customs and traditions. The Salonicans' activities in the field of commerce are a source of envy and admiration for Turkish entrepreneurs. (ERDEBİL; GALİTEKİN, 2005, 218-222)<sup>23</sup>

### The Memoirs of Fuat Andıç

Salonica put great importance on reading and writing. The first Law School after [the one in] Istanbul was opened there. The first Junior Military Academy (Askerî İdadî) in Rumelia was also there. Those who graduated from the academy went to the War Academy (Harp Okulu) in Istanbul. It was as if there were practically no neighborhood schools. Along with the French, Italian and Greek schools, the Dönmes, who were split among themselves into three different groups, and who could neither convince the Jews nor the Muslims to accept them, established three separate schools for their own children: the Terakki, Fevziye and Fevz-i Âti [Schools]. They brought in teachers from France and Switzerland, and began to teach French from the first grade. These schools, whose doors were open to everyone, belonged to the Dönmes. The Dönmes were like another colorful, if secretive part of the mosaic that was Salonica. They followed Sabbatai Sevi, the rabbi who declared himself to be the Messiah, came from Izmir, and later converted and became Muslims. But their Islam was not very convincing, Muslim Turks never fully accepted them or mixed with them. As for the Jews, they shunned them completely. They only mixed with each other, and a short while later, they themselves split over the question of Sabbatai's caliph, and the community divided into three [groups] known as the Yakubis, Karakaş and Kapancis and then continued to live as three separate communities. The wealthier Muslim Turkish and Jewish families competed with each other to be able to place their children in one of these schools. (ANDIÇ, 2004, 15-16)

Film Director Halit Refiğ:

**Question:** It seems that you were born in Izmir, but you are without any doubt an Istanbulian; what is your family's connection with Izmir?

**Answer (Halit Refiğ):** My father was one of the founding members of the Refiğler Textiles Factory (Refiğler Mensucat Fabrikası) and of a family in which my grandfather [his father,] Refik Refiğ was the leading member. In addition to the factory itself, the company also owned sales outlets in which its products were sold. The family entrusted my father with establishing agencies to represent the business in Izmir. I was born there, in the Karataş district, but when I opened up my eyes and began to see the world, the first one that I saw was the environs of Nişantaşı-Osmanbey [in

<sup>23</sup> These memoirs were originally published between March 2 - July 24, 1922 in the Ottoman daily *Peyam-ı Sabah*. The author who signed as C.N.F. was never identified. The translator was the journalist İskender Fahrettin (Sertelli).

Istanbul]. [We owned] an apartment in Nişantaşı. Therefore my identification papers are located in Istanbul's Şişli Population Office.

**Question:** Did all of the family members--[that is to say] all nine brothers--work there?

**Halit Refiğ:** No. Fahri Refiğ, the oldest of the nine children, was a publisher. He was one of Sedat Simavi's closest friends and one of those who helped to bring about the establishment of the daily *Hürriyet*. Another interesting side to the family is its tradition [of involvement in] the Terakki Lycée ever since [its establishment in] Salonica. The youngest of my paternal uncles, Ata Refiğ, who had been one of the founders of the Terakki Foundation, was also the foundation's chairman until very recently. And my youngest paternal aunt was married to one of the most well-respected doctors of his time: Dr. İbrahim Güçer. He was one of those who established the first private hospital in Istanbul: the 'Teşvikiye Health Center' (*Teşvikiye Sağlık Evi*). In this sense, I had a very lucky childhood; Today I don't have health insurance, but back then I did have it because of the family hospital. In other words, although my father and grandfather worked together in the field of textiles, one branch of the family was a leading figure in education, and another branch in the field of medicine. Mehmet Refiğ, the eldest son of my father's oldest brother Fahri, was a banker. At the time that the Second World War broke out he was working as the Ottoman Bank's representative [in] France. When the Germans invaded France he left for Great Britain. Over time he became the director of the BBC's Turkish edition and worked for many years in this position. His son from his French wife was a dancer in the British Royal Ballet. In other words, if you look around for the Refiğ name, you'll find very different Refiğs in a wide variety of places.

**Question:** The Refiğs moved from Salonica to Istanbul in 1913, during the Balkan War; a big family consisting of a father, a mother and nine children. How were relations between the different members? Did they live together?

**Halit Refiğ:** At the time I was born all of the children were still living. My father, Cemil Refiğ, was the third from the last of these siblings; in other words, the youngest was my uncle Ata, then my aunt Refia and then my father. From the viewpoint of seniority, he was near the bottom, but in terms of influence [within the family] he was 'rock bottom', because my youngest aunt [Refia] was a sparkling individual. My grandfather died during the 1940s, during the war years. In fact, his death more or less coincided with the period of the Capital Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*), that is the years 1942-43. During the Second World War, at the time that my father passed away, guess who would then become the head of the family? It was my father's eldest sister, Emine. [That's right.] A woman became the head of the family [...] My Aunt Emine didn't have any children of her own. And she often felt toward me and treated me as if I were her own child. After my own house the place where I would most often go was the house of my Aunt Emine. Unfortunately, after my Aunt Emine's passing in the 1950s, the family began to drift apart.

**Question:** During that time did the family still live together, or were they already split up?

**Halit Refiğ:** Everyone lived apart already, but every Sunday in the winter we would all gather at my grandfather's apartment in Nişantaşı. After my aunt's death though, we really began to go our separate ways. Anyway, each of the children [i.e., my father and his siblings] went off as a result and formed their own families and had their own troubles to deal with. Let me say that over all the first real private industrial enterprises to be established here during the first years of the Republic — at a time when Turkey was still an agricultural society--were built by those families that arrived from Salonica. For instance, the Atabeks<sup>24</sup> and the Bezmens; they were also branches from our line. While one branch of our family were industrialists and businessmen, another branch ended up as academics and politicians. Sabiha Sertel, for instance, is from the same family. In her own book, [her daughter] Yıldız Sertel describes this well, and she knows [the story] better than I do. In other words, while one branch was capitalist, another one was decidedly anti-capitalist. For this reason, no matter what you're looking for [in our family], you're likely to find it; it's a very big,

<sup>24</sup> The Atabek family was the owner of the ATALAR clothing stores.

extremely varied family. But this ‚movement‘ that came from Rumelia has, with the rise of Anatolian capital, gradually lost its leading role in the [Turkish] world of business and commerce. In this sense, the Capital Tax was an important turning point. Particularly since the 1950s, state support for private industry in Turkey was provided on the basis of the calculations of the likely source of electoral votes. In this situation it was only natural that Anatolian capital would see a significant and accelerated growth, and, naturally, our Salonican group was understood to have served its function.

**Question:** Until the 1950s, did this group that you refer to as the ‚Salonica group‘ pursue its economic activities against the background of a certain group solidarity?

**Halit Refiğ:** The term ‚group solidarity‘ is a difficult one to either accept or reject. [Perhaps] it was because of this that I don’t remember any enmity between the different Salonican families; relations were generally positive. I have since learned some things, especially from those who have explained somethings about the „Salonicians, Dönmes, Sabbateans“ and the like; but if there were such things at the time, I didn’t know a thing about them! As a result of those books [that have recently been published on the subject] I have learned exactly what being a ‚Salonican‘ is, what a ‚Dönme‘ is, who Sabbatai Sevi was. But as for those things that are written in some of that type of publication, [where they say things] like „These groups have secret meetings, and secretly support one another“ [...] Absolutely not! I don’t remember any such thing. I have never personally been at any such function, and what’s more, no one has ever offered me any such solidarity or support whatsoever. But even if they did support each other at that time — or even if they didn’t: what does it matter? The economic units of today are very different from those of those days. Until the 1950s there was no capitalist, industrial class apart from the state that could form a powerful class, or a social force of any mention; there were only entrepreneurs. The economic standard of living of these persons was perhaps as great as that of the highest level officials of the state. Thus, when I say that „my grandfather imported the first sewing machines from Manchester, and that my family was among the first to establish textile factories in Turkey“, you shouldn’t absolutely start imagining them to have been like the Rockefellers or Fords. As for my current lifestyle—I am a person who earns a middle class income in Turkey — I have more opportunities than my family did during that [earlier] period.

**Question:** Indeed. Aren’t the standards of living quite different, according to the different period? How were your relations with your grandfather? Can you give us an example?

**Halit Refiğ:** I remember my grandfather up to my primary school years. He was always very kind to me. He was someone who spoke little, to the extent that I remember him, one who didn’t smile often; I don’t remember him ever telling jokes, he was a rather serious person. My uncle Ata still tells this story, that I would get angry at my grandfather for being like that, for not laughing when I would tell a joke. My grandfather was in a situation in which he left his affairs in Istanbul entirely to his children. The one who was responsible for family affairs, and for the factory and sales outlets was my father’s second oldest sibling, my uncle Aziz Refiğ. Naturally, there was the whole problem of being Salonican; but all of the sons — my uncles, that is — came to Istanbul at a young age, and thus became Istanbulians. My grandfather and grandmother remained Salonicians.

**Question:** What sort of thing is it that you describe as being ‚Salonican‘?

**Halit Refiğ:** The older folks, who used to preserve their Salonican identity, would always speak with a distinct Rumelian accent. My grandfather, and both my father’s and mother’s mothers were like that. My father’s mother was a really typical example of a Salonican. I don’t think he ever lost that accent, in fact, because he didn’t leave the house very often. Their reactions before situations that for us seemed completely natural could sometimes be quite entertaining.... (...)

**Question:** Going back to the years of the Second World War: how was it for you, as a child, to live through that period?

**Halit Refiğ:** Of course in those days, we would follow the World War in a large part through the newspapers. There were sometimes films at the movie theaters, but the main source [of our information] was without a doubt the newspapers. When the great storm broke, first in Europe and later in in Asia, Turkey had the good fortune to remain outside of the [conflagration]. If my family circle [can be said to have] taken any side, it would be the tendency to favor the British. The horror that was felt toward the Germans and the anti-Semitic feelings that Nazism brought can be said to have created a certain dread among our circles. In school, for instance, I remember that during the war years we were all generally heavily on the side of the English. And of course, the Americans later entered the picture. The Americans had their own very different ways of making themselves known to us — especially by means of the cinema.

**Question:** During this same period there was the time when the Capital Tax held its reign of terror over Turkey. Was your family affected by it?

**Halit Refiğ:** I'll never forget how the Capital Tax came to our home. In the year 1943 we were living in the family apartment. I will never forget the evening that I first heard talk about the Capital Tax: my father came and explained it to my mother, but after that I don't remember many discussions or arguments, fights or anything else within the family. I remember my father explaining that it would be an enormous blow for the family. But I should also explain that, apart from having overheard the things that my father told to my mother about this matter, I don't remember it being discussed very much within the family. In other words, what happened happened. It was approved. And as a result it was a period in which bread was rationed. I remind all of my young friends that when you compare it to what we have today, that time—and especially during the war years — despite the fact that we were the children of a relatively well-off family, we went through great economic hardships, and even to school at Şişli Terakki Lycée we had to wear hand-me-down clothing that no longer fit the older members of the family, with patches on the seat of our pants, on the elbows of our jackets, tacks and nails to hold our shoes together. During those times you would even see people [so destitute as to go around] half-naked in Nişantaşı. And if you traveled outside Istanbul you would see people who felt fortunate if they merely had a pelt with which to cover themselves [...]. It's very difficult to explain exactly what Turkey has gone through, where it was to the youth of today. When you think about it today, the critiques and assessments of certain hardships [that were experienced] during the implementation of the Capital Tax are a separate question, but something that were unavoidable at the time. Turkey was on a war footing and in such a situation it had to feed the army that would defend it; it had to be prepared for the possibility of actually entering the war, and that was an enormous material burden. If you think about it rationally, [the Capital Tax] was an unavoidable measure.

**Question:** What was upsetting perhaps, was the situation in which it turned into something of a persecution [of the non-Muslim minorities] [...]

**Halit Refiğ:** During the conditions of that time, there was no public stance of anti-Semitism, but the group that was most subjected to the Capital Tax were the Jews. Of the four groups [into which the population was divided] the Salonicians were classified in the ‚D‘ group. The Muslims, Christians, Jews and Dönmes were divided into four separate groups.<sup>25</sup> If such a tax were to be issued here today it would be inevitable that the Christians, Jews and Salonicians would be the first target. Trade is still relatively controlled by these groups. There were some groups who operated on the black market during the war years, but our group was not involved with this business: as a result we didn't experience any ‚positive‘ side to the war. We generally experienced the same hardships as the general population. As a result, since the death of my grandfather occurred at about the same time as the Capital Tax, we had to sacrifice our house on Burgaz. (HRISTIDIS, 2007, 3-6, 9-12)

<sup>25</sup> This is somewhat inaccurate: there were four different classifications, but they were ‚M‘, for Muslims, who were taxed at the lowest rate, ‚G‘ for non-Muslim minorities (*gayri-Müslim*), who paid at a rate four times that of the Muslims, ‚D‘ for the Dönmes, who paid at a rate double that of the Muslims (i.e., half that of the non-Muslims) and ‚E‘, for foreign nationals (*ecnebi*).



**Leskovikli Mehmet Rau<sup>26</sup>**

I was very happy that I would be living in Salonica, because, in addition to the [fact that the] people of Salonica were inclined to liberal ideas, from there it was also easy to establish ties with liberals in Europe and other foreign countries... The people of Salonica are generally passionate about freedom, as would be [subsequently] known by everyone as a result of the self-sacrifice that they displayed during the revolution. [p. 85] Although during the period of the [Hamidian] Tyranny persons acting as spies appeared in just about every corner [of the Empire], those serving the Tyranny through such deceit were not encountered in Salonica.

It is strange that the „Dönmes“, who were to some extent accused of greediness due to the fact that they were mostly employed in commerce, and whose existence was limited to Salonica, went far further in the struggle for liberty than their other Muslim brothers. The fact that [no] spies came from their ranks is the clearest proof of the passion that they nourished for liberty during this inauspicious period. As will be explained later, the „Dönme“ showed great courage and self-sacrifice during the struggles that we undertook while I was in Salonica. At one point, some of the liberals of this party became suspicious of the brethren of [this] community, feeling that they would be incompatible due to their wealth and inclination toward commerce... Basically, the ignorant portion of the Muslim population, relying on some absurd ideas that were carried over from old, did not foster very good opinions regarding the „dönme,“ who were their most faithful co-religionists. Some ignoramuses, by taking these wicked ideas to their conclusion, even consider the Dönmes' religious credentials to be problematic.

The acceptance of this absurd idea by the population of another country, which is not aware of the true situation, has forced us here to digress long enough to give a few explanations:

The Dönme are [descended] from Jews who brought honor upon themselves through [ their conversion to] the religion of Islam two hundred years ago. In their devotion to religious statutes, they are absolutely no different than the other Muslims. Their extreme loyalty and love for Islam, and in particular, for the eternal Ottoman State, as mentioned above, established their love of liberty more firmly in their subsequent actions. [p.86] In short, neither their condition, nor any one of their actions would appear to have given cause for the suspicions about them that some persons held.

In that case, what was the reason that the other Salonican Muslims, who were their fellow inhabitants, possessed such wrong ideas about the Dönme? [...] In my opinion the only reason was their desire not to give their children in marriage to other Muslims who were not their own. In truth, the Dönme showed great extremism in continually giving and receiving daughters only among themselves, and in this way they managed to preserve the borders of their community.

This situation was bound to draw attention from the outside. But if we were to once to ask the Dönmes' own opinion, they would not hesitate to show that the reasons for their practice of not intermarrying were valid. They say that: „If we were to intermarry with our other religious brethren who are not from among us, we would be forced to lose our [sense of] solidarity which is a rule based on mutual aid and cooperation. On the other hand, it has been witnessed that one part of the Muslims who are not from among us are not very observant in regard to love of family and have often abandoned their spouses for no reason. This situation prevents us from giving our children, for whom we have fostered an extraordinary love, to just anyone“...

The second reason does not appear very reasonable, because it is madness to conclude that there are no individuals among the people of Islam who would divorce their spouses for no reason or not show love to their families. A person has the power to choose his son- or daughter-in-law.

<sup>26</sup> For a biography of Mehmet Rauf, cf. BIRINCI, A. 2001. *Tarihin Gölgesinde Meşâhir-i Meçhûleden Birkaç Zât*. İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları.

But the first reason is worth taking into consideration in order to understand the dimensions of the Dönmes' lives. [p.87] Although they are almost half of the Muslim population of Salonica, the fact that among them one finds not a single beggar, shows quite well the degree of mutual aid and force of unity among their people and community.

[But] let's not stop our explanation there, because in entering marital relations with the rest of the Muslim population, this small Islamic community is even divided among itself into three groups and there are rumors about the principle of not giving daughter in marriage [even] to other dönme individuals who are not from their clan.

To understand their progress, it's worth recalling the degree of effort and devotion that the Dönmes place in education and commerce. The scientific establishments which achieve a degree of perfection reaching even to the level of the education in Istanbul are entirely the result of dönme labors and efforts. And just as the boys' and girls' Yedigâr-ı Terakki and Fezziye schools have up to now trained a great number of both male and female students, each possess the character of a university that would be a [source of] pride to our country in the future. The fact that the majority of the students who place first on the competitive examinations held at the Istanbul schools are from the Salonican schools is simply the felicitous result of the efforts that our Dönme brethren have shown for the advancement of education.

Batumlu Tefvik Bey, who was sent by Şehzâde Mecid Efendi to Paris this year in order to complete his education, and who last year finished first in [his class] in the Mülkiye [school], is also a star intellect from the classrooms of the Fezziye school.

Up until a few years ago, most of the Dönme were employed in commerce, and did not desire or enter into [the ranks of] the bureaucracy. But later, [p.88] after having completed their education in the Salonican schools, most of them attended one of the schools of higher education and finished their education [there] and in this manner became masters of a profession, such as engineering, medicine, and administration.

As for the services that the Dönme have provided our country in terms of commerce, this is confirmed by their ability to bring the commercial world of Salonica and even Istanbul under their influence.

In short, there is no doubt that the Dönme have in every way been a very productive element for our country. (LESKOVIKLI, 1991, 84-87)

### **Memoirs of Fashion Designer Cemil İpekçi:**

For many years they married within the family. But there were breaks [with this tradition] during my mother and father's generation. My mother and father are not relatives. For instance, my mother was a Bektaşî. My father's nephews and nieces married foreigners (outsiders). Before this, you didn't marry outside the family [...] (KALYONCU, 2002, 16)

There are still the same foods from 500 years ago. The various [recipes and foods] among us didn't even survive in Spain, but were forgotten there. For example, there is a type of köfte among us called „feather white“. The minced meat is ground with walnuts, and pistachio and egg are then mixed in. After that, we also have a flake pastry filled with eggplant. It's nothing like the one that they have here. We also have fish cooked with plums [...] (KALYONCU, 2002, 18)

My father was someone who was very broad-minded in his views of religion. He didn't perform prayers. I never saw anyone perform prayers in my family. That also includes the older generation. This appearance of being Muslim was [practiced] for maybe the first century. But by the time my father was born there wasn't any more acting [Muslim for the outside world]. In my opinion because of the continued practice of Islam they became finally Muslims. Maybe to the same extent as those in western Anatolia. Their people drank alcohol, but their funeral is done in the

mosque, they read the mevlut, they read the Qur'an. They all write supplicatory prayers at home. But of course I don't think that this [Sabbatean] practice is completely gone. Because they were a clan [...] (KALYONCU, 2002, 20-21)<sup>27</sup>

My true surname was Tokay. Because my mother and father weren't cousins, my father was raised by his maternal aunt and her husband as if he were their own child. I always thought of my father's aunt and uncle as my grandmother and grandfather. However, the name Cemil comes from my grandfather. My surname, which had been Tokay until the 9th grade, suddenly became İpekçi. I am not actually a blood relative of the İpekçis. I am connected [to them] in the sense that there is a Cemil İpekçi who is the son of the brother of my paternal grandmother. The İpekçis frequently married among themselves. That's how the Salonicans are. [It was out of] sympathy, that my father's maternal aunt came to take in my father, because she didn't have any children of her own. Because my true maternal grandmother had five children. I only found out that my grandmother actually was my grandmother much later. When I was seven years old my mother and father suddenly separated. My paternal grandmother raised us. We came to [live] in the İpekçis' apartment building in Nişantaşı. İhsan İpekçi is cousin of my grandfather Cemil. I have some sort of blood tie with İsmail Cem and Abdi İpekçi, but I don't know exactly what it is. İnci İpekçi was like a second mother to me, because she and my mother were classmates. In my mind, she was a mother. Her daughters Zeynep and Samiye (the wife of Erdal Öz)<sup>28</sup> were always together. I was in love with Zeynep until I was 15 years old. That's how I became an İpekçi. The only thing which I am sorry about is that although I have a real grandfather who is a magnificent person, I wasn't told about this for years. I ask myself how it would have been had I been raised by them, or would this have been a loss of somekind. My real grandfather, Mahir Tokay was the physician of [the deposed Sultan], Abdülhamit [II] during the First World War. He was the physician of all Salonicans.

When I was eight years old my father told me that we were Sabbat[ean], and where we came from. My father never hid this. Mahir Bey was someone who completely rejected Sabbateanism. It wasn't because he wanted to hide [from his origins], but because he thought that it was a sort of racism, and would say „What's the point of being a Salonican, what's the point of grouping together?” (ALTAN, *Vatan Pazar*, 23.07.2006)

### „Salonician Mothers” in the Memoirs of Journalist Nimet Arzık<sup>29</sup>

They had big, tree-trunk-like legs. Their faces were fleshy and full of moles. They bore the signs that they had been intermarrying with close relatives for a long time. They all wore navy blue and white. Even when they went to the snobbish Moda Club<sup>30</sup>, they would drape their clothing over one side, and they would always be in black, patent leather shoes, for some reason or another. They were born despots, but in truth, they also had their their side that was composed and unruffled. They didn't go get their noses fixed. They didn't pluck their eyebrows or depilate the hairs on their

<sup>27</sup> The author, who was the one interviewing İpekçi, inserted the following note: „Cemil İpekçi possesses information about what [practices] the individual members of his family performed and about where they lived, from [the time of] Sabbatai Sevi until today. İpekçi, who felt it sufficient to explain this much in regard to the family, is saving his true information for the book that he himself will write. But according to what he said when we spoke later on, as a result of the strong reactions that came from his circle of relatives, it doesn't appear possible to publish such a book—at the very least, not at the present time.”

<sup>28</sup> Erdal Öz (1935-2006) was a novelist and the owner of Can Yayınları.

<sup>29</sup> Journalist and writer (1921-1989). She worked at various private and public institutions of press and broadcasting, including the Directorate General of Press and Information and participated in the establishment of the political weekly *Yön*. Source: [www.kultur.gov.tr](http://www.kultur.gov.tr).

<sup>30</sup> The Moda Navy Club was established by the order of Atatürk in April 8, 1935. Its history goes back to the yacht club established in 1910 by the British nationals living at that time in Moda. For more information cf. [www.modadenizkulubu.org.tr](http://www.modadenizkulubu.org.tr)

foreheads. They kept their irritation and anger to themselves. They didn't try to make others follow their fashion, and no wig ever touched their heads. [...] (ARZIK, 1983, 17)

The wealthy Salonicians lived in Moda. Their daughters all went to our school. They found the girls' school very open. They were women who were as authoritarian, whose legs were distorted. I mentioned this at the beginning. Their husbands were all dandies in public, but slaves at home. They had the homes with the most beautiful views. They had the most children. Their male children would study at St. Joseph, the sister school of Notre Dame de Sion. The Jesuit influence worked its way into the very core of their families. Some of the Salonicians' daughters remained home, some of them were the Turkish teachers in our classrooms. How beautiful Moda was during those days! If only there hadn't been the plinking sound of pianos filling the air from every apartment [...]. When I think about those sounds rising from our school, I want to cover my ears.

Although there were plenty of people who lived there in both summer and winter, Moda was still considered a „summer resort“. Slowly but surely the villas were torn down. The highest apartment houses around at the time began to sprout up, one after the other.

School was heaven for the Salonicians' daughters whom I mentioned. The pressures of school were nothing compared to that of their mothers. I remember one in particular: Leyla. All of her brothers and sisters' names ended with an ‚aaa‘ sound: Şemsa, Şeyda. They were so well trained that they walked as if they had blinders on, because the nuns [at the school] had told them „when you're on the street, don't look to the left or the right“. One time, when there was a storm, and the waves were coming up over the edge of the peninsula, she ran into an object as hard as a rock. It was a poor, confused donkey. Instead of laughing at her predicament, everyone gave her words of encouragement, like: „Bravo! Well done“. (ARZIK, 1983, 100-101)

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