

**THE ALTERNATIVE WAY TO COME TO TERMS WITH THE
PAST
THOSE WHO TRY TO FORGET: TURKEY'S JEWISH MINORITY**

I would like to begin my talk today by mentioning two well-known expressions from the popular culture of Turkish Jewry. The first of these is a word which comes from Ladino, the language of Turkey's Sephardic Jews: '*kayadez*'. The second expression is the English 'low profile', from the language that Istanbul's cosmopolitan Jewish community has increasingly begun to use in their daily parlance.

The first word, *kayadez* carries the meaning 'silence' or 'quiet', while the second needs no explanation here. They are employed by members of the Jewish community in the sense of not leading a lifestyle too visible to the general public or that would provoke the greater Turkish society to envy, as well as not publicly expressing critical views of either the Turkish Republic, Turkish society or the country's history, all of which are considered unusual or improper behavior according to the standards of a community that has based its survival strategy on remaining apolitical. Both of these idioms are spoken as warnings, both within the family, passed down from the older generation to the younger members, and as an exhortation from the Chief Rabbi to members of the community.

In order to understand the reasons for such an attitude and behavior on the part of Turkey's Jewish community, it will first be necessary for us to evaluate the demographic, political and cultural weight of the minorities within the Turkish Republic.

State-Minority Relations, Past and Present

In the Ottoman Empire, whose administration was at least theoretically based on Islamic, or ‘Shari’ah’ Law, non-Muslims possessed the status of *dhimmis*, or ‘protected’ peoples. According to this understanding, they were subjects organized as religiously-based communities, living by permission and under the protection of the Muslim majority, but lacking equal legal status with them. The Lausanne Peace Treaty, signed in 1923, accorded the country’s non-Muslim minorities the right to continue their own communal religious life and culture.¹ The Republic of Turkey, which was officially established on October 29, 1923, adopted its constitution the following year that raised the non-Muslim subjects to the status of citizens. Yet, despite these advances ‘on paper’, the *de jure* rights accorded to the minorities by these two documents were never fully implemented in practice. But as long as they remained none too visible or vocal within Turkish society, the minorities could somehow maintain the illusion of equal rights and treatment before the law. Such an illusion could be maintained until the passage in 1942 of the *Varlık Vergisi*, or Capital Tax Law, which was implemented in a fashion so blatantly illegal and discriminatory toward the minorities as to remove all doubt as to their true standing within the country’s legal and political structure.² By the time that this affair came to an end the following year, it was painfully clear that Turkey’s claim to desire to create citizens out of subjects had been dealt a mortal blow.

¹ For the Lausanne Peace Treaty texts please refer to Seha L. Meray (translated by), *Lozan Barış Konferansı Tutanaklar-Belgeler*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul, 1993.

² For further info on the Capital Tax Law the reader is invited to read the memoirs of Faik Ökte, the Director of İstanbul Finance Administration during the tax imposition years: Faik Ökte, *The Tragedy of the Capital Tax*, Croom Helm Ltd., Beckenham, Kent, 1987. The following researchers also deal with the same subject: Rıdvan Akar, *Aşkale Yolcuları – Varlık Vergisi ve Çalışma Kampları*, Belge Yayınları, İstanbul, 1999; Ayhan Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve “Türkleştirme” Politikaları*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2000; Rıfat N. Bali, *The “Varlık Vergisi” Affair A Study of its Legacy – Selected Documents*, The Isis Press, İstanbul, 2005 (forthcoming).

Thus, the terms *kayadez* and ‘low profile’ summarize a philosophy of life that is founded in the historical experience of Turkey’s Jews. Why should a Turkish Jew want to remain silent and unseen? The reason derives from the following paradigm. Although the non-Muslim communities in Turkey no longer possess any demographic or political weight or importance, either within Turkish society or in its political system, the Turkish press, Turkish society and Turkish politicians continue to view the country’s minorities through a thick lens distorted by chauvinism and xenophobia. Thus, so long as these minorities are resolved, despite these conditions, to remain in the country, the only way to do so with some semblance of peace and tranquility is to forget, to remain quiet, and to remain ‘invisible’ in the public sphere, so as not to draw the attention of society as a whole. This ‘silent’ approach is not only a method of survival; it is simultaneously an expression of a profound distrust of both the regime and of Turkish society as a whole. This mistrust and insecurity derives from the deep-seated conviction that there has not been a significant shift in the negative and suspicious view of the Jews that the regime has frequently displayed in the past, and that such a shift cannot be expected in the future. In such a situation, it is clear that there will be no positive developments, either in the present or the foreseeable future; on the contrary, the discussion of past events and their discussion in the public sphere, things that it was once believed would bring such changes, have ultimately brought little or no benefit, and have as often as merely reinforced negative views.

The Roots of the Paradigm

This extremely negative paradigm has its roots mainly in two events that left their mark on the Single Party Period. The first of these was the government-sponsored campaign to compel the country's citizens to speak Turkish in public. Using such slogans as 'Compatriot, Speak Turkish!', its main target was the country's Jewish community, who lived primarily in the country's larger, more cosmopolitan cities, such as Istanbul and Izmir.³ The second event was the aforementioned Capital Tax Law, which aimed, through its discriminatory and unjust implementation against the country's non-Muslims, to reduce the economic power of the non-Muslim bourgeoisie and replace them with a 'Turkish' Muslim one. As a result of the heavy social and political pressure to which they were subjected, Turkey's Jews, which from the state's inception until the 1940s were constantly accused in the press of stubbornly refusing to speak Turkish or of speaking it poorly or with a heavy accent, gradually came to adopt the principle of not speaking in public, in other words, *kayadez*.

The principle of keeping a 'low profile', however, has its roots in the Capital Tax affair. The ostentatious lifestyle led by many wealthy members of Turkey's non-Muslim population, who tended to frequent Istanbul's more luxurious restaurants, cafes and entertainment venues in the 1940s, as well as own or rent summer homes out in the Prince's Islands, gave rise to much resentment and envy on the part of the poorer majority. This simmering resentment eventually made itself heard at the state level, and at a time of great national hardship, this enmity became expressed in the Capital Tax and its discriminatory imposition, something which led to the large-scale appropriation of minority—and particularly Jewish--wealth.

³ For the history of the Turkish Jews during the years 1923-1945 please refer to: Rifat N. Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923-1945)*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 1999.

Turkish Jewry and its Tradition of ‘Guarding’ its Archives

There is another Ladino expression in Turkish Jewish culture: *‘papeliko sataniko’*, literally: ‘small bits of paper are little demons’. The meaning here is that such trifles tend to disappear and can then later reappear in unexpected places, thereby bring trouble upon our heads. This expression, which was frequently used in the economic sphere during the 1970s, when illegal commercial transactions—often in an attempt to avoid customs or taxes—were common, has now become a part of the jargon of Turkish Jewry. It has since expanded its original meaning to encompass not only that the ‘paper trails’ of illegal transactions, but also that all written records as such should be destroyed. This understanding has made its way to the field of community history, as well. Taking as its starting point the dominant position in Turkish press, politics and bureaucracy of a faction that automatically views Jews with deep suspicion, that looks on Zionism as a hostile ideology irreconcilable with the Turkish nationalist ideal, the country’s Jewish community has resorted to restricting its ‘manner of remembering’, by destroying its own communal archives and resorting to self-censorship in an effort to stem the effects of the prevailing mood of anti-Semitism and xenophobic nationalism. The best example of this is the documentation dealing with Zionist activities within the country. The new State of Israel’s declaration of independence in May, 1948 was a turning point for the Jewish youth of Turkey. Having undertaken their activities secretly until that time, nearly the entirety of the community’s idealistic youth would immigrate to the fledging Jewish state

within one year of this date.⁴ Although they no longer intended to live in Turkey, these émigrés opted to destroy all of the documentation regarding their Zionist activities out of concern that such papers could potentially cause hardship for their fellow Jews remaining behind. For example, after having begun to publish his memoirs of the period in newspaper installments in 1960, one young Zionist journalist who immigrated to Israel in 1949 voluntarily halted this action with the statement that “due to political considerations we are ending this serialization”.⁵

The Reconstruction of Turkish Jewish History

As we have already stated, the members of Turkey’s Jewish community have largely come around to the conclusion that a change in the view of Jews now held by the country’s political power structure, its press and the majority of its population will not be forthcoming, and that Turkey itself is unlikely to transform itself into a fully democratic, pluralist and multi-cultural society in the foreseeable future. In light of this fact, the community’s leaders have designed a ‘survival strategy’ for their group that is based on ‘keeping quiet’, ‘learning to get along with the State’ and ‘being of service to the State’. The scope and meaning of ‘being of service to the State’ has expanded since the 1980s, when the Jewish community and its members have been ‘recruited’ to perform public relations worldwide—and in the United States, in particular--work in coordination with the Foreign Ministry of Turkey, which has faced increasing criticism for its human rights violations, its oppression of its Kurdish population and for the Armenian genocide. One

⁴ For the history of the emigration of the Turkish Jews to Israel, please refer to: Rıfat N. Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri Aliya: Bir Toplu Göçün Öyküsü (1946-1949)*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003.

⁵ İzak Yaeş, “Avia Tzionismo en Turkia?”, *La Verdad*, 6 December, 1960.

result of this decision on the part of the community's leaders has been a re-conceptualization of the community's history, something that has entailed the public suppression of all untoward events from the communal history of Jewish life in Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, and their replacement with a 'rose-colored' prism through which the community now explains its history. The work of re-conceptualization has been largely entrusted to The Quincentennial Foundation, an organization established by the community's leadership in 1989 for the purpose of commemorating and celebrating the 500 year anniversary (1992) of the arrival of Spanish Jewry on Ottoman shores, as well as to be the vehicle for 'explaining' to the world the humane treatment meted out to the Jews by the Ottoman Empire and its successor, the Turkish Republic.⁶

But there is another purpose to the foundation and its campaign, one not communicated in its founding documents. By stressing among the American public the message of Turkey and the Turks' tolerant and humane treatment of their Jewish citizens, the foundation's activities aim to renovate Turkey's tattered image abroad, implicitly and explicitly communicating the message that all of the accusations of human rights violations, oppression of the Kurds and the Armenian genocide are simply calumnies being spread by the country's detractors.

Nevertheless, having built its survival strategy on the practice of presenting the Turkish Republic in a positive light abroad, the leaders of Turkey's Jewish community have been forced to submit their own history to self-censorship as well, selectively editing their own 'communal memory' by purging it of any hint of state-sponsored oppression so as to be able carry out to the task with which they've been entrusted. In this

⁶ For the Turkish Jewish lobby please refer to the following unpublished master thesis: Vitali Denis Ojalvo Öner, *Le Lobbyisme Juif En Turquie*, Université de Galatasaray, Institut des Sciences Sociales,

way, 'self-censorship' and 'forgetfulness' have become an integral part of Turkish Jewish identity. One dramatic example of this was the deathbed account of one of the community's former leaders, who, having recounted to a journalist his knowledge and recollections of the Capital Tax affair and other sorrowful periods of the community's history, he then regretted his decision, demanding that the interviewer put pen to page, saying: 'Don't write these things down; they are against Turkey, they're against the country'. It's anyone's guess how many more valuable memories this person, who passed away shortly after the interview, may have taken to the grave with him.⁷

This 're-conceptualized' historical understanding would eventually be very successfully diffused both at home and abroad. As soon as such an understanding of history had become a tool for politics and international lobbying, it was very natural that many negative events that had transpired in the Single Party Period and had been directed at the country's Jews would go unmentioned and their memory blocked. Yet, despite this heavy self-censorship, the memories of these events have never truly been erased. Even while giving their approval to the publishing 'beautified' accounts of the community's past, the Jewish community's leaders have remained faithful to the Biblical commandment to

Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you. (Deut. 32:7)

and have continued to orally transmit their true history to the younger generation.

The Holocaust and Memory

Département de Relations Internationales, Istanbul, 2005.

⁷ Yahya Koçoğlu, *Hatırlıyorum, Türkiye'de Gayrimüslim Hayatlar* (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları), 2003, p. 162.

Interestingly enough, one of the most important themes found in the new historical understanding constructed by the leaders of Turkey's Jewish community is the Holocaust, a major event of recent Jewish history, to be sure, but one from which the country's Jews were totally spared. There are two main reasons for the decision to give this event such a privileged place. The first is that, like in many other parts of the Jewish world, the Holocaust is being employed by Turkey's Jews to stem the process of declining Jewish identity among the community's younger generation. The second reason has to do with the word itself. In Turkish, the terms 'Holocaust' and 'genocide' both have their equivalent in the word *soykırım*. Although these two English terms carry different meanings, Turkey's cultural and political elites can counter accusations of genocide against the Armenians with reference to the Jewish Holocaust, arguing, that 'If the Holocaust means *soykırım*, can we really refer to the Armenian genocide as a *soykırım*?' For these reasons, the Holocaust, which holds but a small place in the history of the Turkish Republic, has been transformed into a theme to which reference is now constantly made, both by the Jewish community and by the Republican leadership.

The Capital Tax and Social Memory

In this process of re-conceptualizing Turkish-Jewish history, the most well-researched of these 'excised' events has been the Capital Tax Law, which, by being directed in discriminatory fashion against the country's religious minorities, helped to bankrupt the project envisaged by the early Republican leadership of creating a secular, overarching Turkish nationality. During the discussions she held with four Jewish industrialists and merchants who were founding members of the Quincentennial

Foundation, Economics Professor Ayşe Buğra reported that she discerned her interviewees' great reluctance to speak about the Capital Tax. She explains her experience thus:

“The Wealth Levy episode appears, in fact, as a bad dream that the Turkish business community—specially its Jewish members—has chosen to forget. Some of the businessmen whom I interviewed were from families that were deeply affected by the levy. Yet, neither they nor the others who were in a position to remember the episode were willing to talk about it.”⁸

The attitude adopted by the community's elites, who tend to either refrain from discussing the issue of the Capital Tax Law or resort to apologizing for it, appears unfathomable to those expatriate Turkish Jews who now live in Israel, and has often been used as a point of criticism. One such Turkish-Israeli has voiced the following critique:

“What is noteworthy is the finding that certain persons within Jewish society do not wish to view the event [Capital Tax Law] clearly. Why not? Because among the Jews of Turkey there is a chronic disease that only a psychologist can [fully] explain, [one characterized by] wanting to forget the past and not wanting it transmit it to the future generations.”⁹

The Film *Salkım Hanım'ın Taneleri* and the Armenisation of the characters

While Turkey's Jewish community was busy forgetting the Capital Tax and other similarly calamitous affairs in their effort to reconstruct their history and that of the Turkish Republic as a whole, the country's Armenian community was doing the exact opposite. Because they had had no part in the Turkish 'international public relations project' that had been foisted upon the country's Jews, Turkey's Armenian community would begin to take on the traditionally Jewish role of unearthing repressed and yet unspoken memories. This process would be accelerated in part because of the liberal and

⁸ Ayşe Buğra, *State and Business in Modern Turkey, A Comparative Study* (Albany, NY: New York [University] Press), 1994, p. 116.

⁹ Selim Amado, “500. Yılın faydası”, *Haber*, 3 April, 1992.

critical viewpoint taking root among Turkey's intellectual and cultural elites, and the erosion of Turkey's 'official version' of its history as a result. The most central and tragic of these memories is no doubt the 1915 Deportations and their aftermath. It has been the long-held and justified wish of Turkey's Armenian elite that the calamitous and sorrowful events of 1915 be given their proper place in Turkey's societal memory.

The divergent strategies of these two minority communities would finally experience an interesting encounter several years back with the filming of the novel *Salkım Hanım'ın Taneleri*. The novel, which treats the period of the Capital Tax Law and whose main protagonists are Jewish, was something of a sensation when it first appeared, and the filmed version gave rise to a lively and often acrimonious debate within Turkish society.¹⁰ But before we deal with this issue, let's first recall the two communal strategies: For the Jewish community, their 'survival strategy' has been constructed on the principles of 'selective amnesia' and acting as unofficial representatives of the Turkish Republic abroad. For their part, the Armenian community has insisted not only on keeping alive the memory of the bitter events of their history but of publicly repeating and stressing their importance and on making sure that these events are firmly ensconced and commemorated within the memory of Turkish society as a whole. This being the case, it goes without saying that the leaders of the Jewish community would be quite discomfited at the prospect of a film being made about the Capital Tax, and one whose main protagonists were Jewish and of which large segments would be devoted to criticism of Turkey on this account. Thus, when the film's creators requested permission

¹⁰ Rıfat N. Bali, *The "Varlık Vergisi" Affair A Study of its Legacy – Selected Documents*, The Isis Press, Istanbul, 2005 (forthcoming).

from the community leadership to film some sections of the movie in synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, their response was decidedly unenthusiastic. It was in large part due to this unwillingness to assist that prompted the director to solve her problem by transforming the novel's Jewish protagonists into Armenian ones. As it so happened, this decision completely dovetailed with the strategy of the Armenian community's leadership, which wished to more firmly establish in Turkish social memory the recollection of the untoward events to which they had been subjected. What's more, as a result of the transformation of the ethno-religious identity of the protagonists, Turkish cinema spectators would leave the theater with the impression that Armenians were the only ones to suffer discrimination under the Capital Tax Law.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with a few lines from *Şalom*, the only press organ of Turkey's Jewish community. These lines written by a Turkish Jewish writer from Istanbul, which come from an article published in 1992, the year when the quincentennial anniversary of the Sephardis' arrival to Ottoman lands was celebrated, need no further explanation:¹¹

For some time we are caught up in a hysterical need to speak with complete openness about everything in public. I believe that this was very unhealthy and even very damaging. I saw that, when most of us –myself included– behaved 'democratically' in our personal relations, the things we said would always be used against us. And anyway, didn't Glasnost and Perestroika ended up destroying Gorbachov, the one who created them?

There have been unpleasant situations in Turkey; periods of great discomfort have been experienced. Nevertheless, just like with a feuding couple that has been reconciled, what advantage is there to be had from dredging up such things? There's [only] damage. Certainly, such things will never be forgotten, but one acts as if they had, one behaves as if they'd never been experienced. This is

¹¹ Beki Bardavid, "Bütünleşmek ile sinmek", *Şalom*, 18 March 1992.

first of all [done] for the [purpose of] mental health. There's nothing to be gained by throwing such things in people's faces. This is nothing more than self-gratification. Moreover, these recollections, which have faded and for which we have struggled with all our might to revive, these memoirs [of our experience] can produce evil thoughts in some persons, especially in the younger generations who have not experienced these events. 'we could have done so many things to the Jews and yet we didn't.' This is what they say today, but tomorrow....God forbid!(...) What is the better path? To remain silent.