

An Overview of the History of the Jews in Turkey

Early History

Jewish life in Asia Minor has existed for centuries, dating back to the 4th century B.C.E., thus making the Jewish community of Turkey one of the oldest in the world. Historians and travelers in the 4th century noted the existence of Jewish settlement in the area. The famous Jewish chronicler **Josephus Flavius** related that **Aristotle** "*met Jewish people with whom he had an exchange of views during his trip across Asia Minor.*"

With the advent of Christianity, however, life became more difficult for Jews in the region as persecution against the Jews became officially sanctioned and continued pretty consistently into and throughout the period of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine authorities employed harsh measures and enacted discriminatory policies designed to humiliate the Jewish population and limit its opportunities for advancement.

The year 1452 marked the end of the Byzantine Empire and with it the legacy of oppression directed against the Jews of the region. For the Jews, its downfall ushered in a period of tolerance and prosperity, as well as great internal social changes. A letter sent by **Rabbi Yitzhak Sarfati** (from Edirne) to Jewish communities in Europe in the first part of the century "*invit[ing] his coreligionists to leave the torments they were enduring in Christendom and to seek safety and prosperity in Turkey*", is indicative of the general freedom that the Jews experienced under Ottoman rule.

Internal Social Composition

At the time of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, there were several groups of Jews in the City: the **Romanioles** who had settled before, or early in the Byzantine period, and consisted of traditional and **Karaite*** congregations; Jews from Genoa and Venice and Ashkenazi Jews, who emigrated from Central Europe. Following the Ottoman take-over of Constantinople, however, the city's Jewish population vastly increased as **Fatih Sultan Mehmed** established a policy of relocating populations of Jews, Christians and Muslims from Anatolia and Thrace to Constantinople (re-named Istanbul) in an effort to revitalize the city, which had been greatly diminished by the years of war. The groups taken to Istanbul were allowed to establish their own quarters and places of worship. Thus the following Jewish communities were relocated and founded anew within

* The Jewish virtual library provides the following explanation of who the Karaites were: "During the 9th century C.E., a number of sects arose that denied the existence of oral Torah. These sects came to be known as Karaites (literally, People of the Scripture), and they were distinguished from the Rabbanites or Rabbinical Judaism. "

the walls of Istanbul using the names of their cities of origin: Antalya, Bursa, Sinop, Tire, Edirne, and Ohri.

The Inquisition and the Arrival of the Sephardim

The stimulus to perhaps the greatest change in the character of Turkish Jewry came about as a result of the Inquisition and the subsequent exodus of Jews from Spain. The Turkish sultan, **Sultan Bayazid II**, not only accepted these Jews fleeing the Inquisition, but actively encouraged them to seek haven in Turkey. Indeed, according to Immanuel Aboab, **Sultan Bayazid II** is said to have remarked that *"the Catholic monarch Ferdinand was wrongly considered as wise, since he impoverished Spain by the expulsion of the Jews, and enriched Turkey."* This influx of Sephardic Jews completely changed the character of the Jewish population, as they largely overwhelmed the native Jews through intermarriage.

It is important to note, however, that the Ottoman Empire not only served as a refuge for Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition, but also became a sanctuary for Jews fleeing oppression and expulsion in various other parts of Europe as well.

Sephardic Culture: 1492– late 1800s

The Sephardic Jews seeking refuge made their mark on their adopted home through their abundance of creativity and resourcefulness. Four Turkish cities, **Istanbul, Izmir, Safed** and **Salonika**, became centers of Sephardic culture and learning. At its height, in the three centuries following the Inquisition, the accomplishments of Ottoman Jewry arguably rivaled the achievements that the Jews produced during the illustrious *Golden Age of Spain*.

Great works of scholarship, including the classic *Shulchan Aruch* (the standard code of Jewish law until this day) by **Rabbi Joseph Caro** (1488–1575); the Jewish liturgical poem used to welcome the Sabbath, *Lekhah Dodi*, composed by **Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz** (c. 1505–1584); and **Rabbi Jacob Kuli's** (c. 1685–1732) famous *Me'am Loez* (an extremely popular Torah commentary written in Ladino) were written during this time period. **Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac Asa** (Constantinople, 1739–45), known as the father of Judeo-Spanish literature, translated the whole **Bible into Ladino** and it became the most popular text among the Sephardim of the East. One of the most important contributions of the Sephardic Jews was the printing press, as **David & Samuel ibn Nahmias** established the first Hebrew printing press in Istanbul in 1493, just one year after the expulsion. Jews were also prominent doctors, diplomats and financiers, and some of them attained high positions working in these capacities for the Sultan.

The Jews during this time also had a large degree of autonomy over internal matters. In the 19th century, the onset of modernity and secularism impacted the Jews of the region, causing a fair amount of tension within the Jewish community between more modern and traditional elements.

Modern Era

Attempts to reform the Ottoman Empire led to the proclamation of **Hatti Humayun** in 1856 which established the equality of all Ottoman citizens under the law, regardless of religious faith. The leadership for the Jewish community was henceforth transferred from religious leaders to secular forces.

In the aftermath of Ottoman Empire's decline in the wake of World War I, a strongly secular regime was established and study of the Hebrew language, Zionist activities and religious teachings were subsequently prohibited. Jews were also hit hard by various taxes, some of which were discriminatory, and their general economic situation deteriorated. As a result, many Turkish Jews decided to seek out better lives for themselves in existing Turkish Jewish communities in North and Latin America and Israel.

Nazi Era

No discussion of the Jews of Turkey would be complete without mentioning the years of the Nazi era. Turkey managed to maintain its neutrality throughout

World War II, and in many ways served as a refuge for Jews looking to escape the Nazi inferno. From the beginning of Hitler's rise to power in 1933, **President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk** invited prominent German professors to Turkey to help develop the country's university system. Turkey also served as a safe passage for numerous Jews escaping Hitler-dominated Europe. Many Turkish diplomats went out of their way to ensure that Turkish Jews in Nazi occupied countries were not deported. One of them, **Mr. Selahattin Ulkumen**, the Turkish Consul-General in Rhodes 1943-1944, was recognized by Yad Vashem with the prestigious **Righteous Gentile Award** in acknowledgment of the outstanding humanitarianism he displayed in attempting to rescue as many of the Jews of Rhodes as he possibly could.

Turkey, however, also figured prominently in one of the most tragic stories of the Holocaust: the sinking of the *Struma* in 1941. The *Struma* was a ship carrying 769 Romanian Jews seeking to emigrate to Palestine and escape the Nazi occupation. The ship was unsanitary, unsafe and overcrowded, and along the way its engine failed. The *Struma* sought refuge in the Istanbul harbor where it sat for two months while the refugees and world Jewish community searched in vain for any country willing to grant them entry. Finally, Turkish police took control of the ship and towed it out onto the Black Sea where the *Struma* sank, killing all but one of the passengers. The *Struma* subsequently became a symbol for the world's refusal to help the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust.

Today

There are currently estimated to be around **26,000 Jews** who live in Turkey, with the great majority concentrated in Istanbul in addition to smaller communities in Adana, Ankara, Bursa, Canakkale, Iskenderun, Izmir and Kirklareli. Sephardim comprise 96% of the community, and the remainder is Ashkenazi. The Jewish community in Turkey has full rights and is legally recognized by the government. In addition, Israel and Turkey enjoy close ties, with full diplomatic relations, cultural exchange programs and business connections.

Sources:

<http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/vjw/Turkey.html#Turkish%20Jews%20Today>
http://www.mersina.com/lib/turkish_jews/history/equality.htm