

PREFACE

Raniero Speelman

Universiteit Utrecht

I would like to begin with a very short quote. I liked it so much that I did not want to leave it out, though I could not find the right place for it. Gini Alhadeff, a writer born in Alexandria, Egypt and living in Tuscany, writes in her autobiographical *The Sun at Midday* (1997): “The Sephardi Mediterranean from which I come is a world of many languages and no borders” (1997, 3). In much the same way, the Icojil conferences have no borders even though they have a common language acting as a spotlight: the Italian. But it is the Italian of many writers born in, among others, Italy, Hungary, Israel, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Lybia, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Germany, and scholars working in still more countries.

This conference, the fourth we have held on row, has by now a certain history. In Amsterdam in the fall of 2006, the first International Conference on Jewish Italian Literature was held, even if the name as such was given only at its end. This fact is important, because all the participants realised that the conference had raised so many questions and suggested such new viewpoints that not only a second meeting but a series would be necessary.

And so it happened in 2007, in Warsaw and Rome, where two more conferences, both on the *Shoah*, were organised by Hanna Serkowska and Stefania Lucamante, who also acted as editors of the respective volumes. After that, we waited for three years before organizing the present conference, which we thought would fit in the numerous activities planned for Istanbul as Cultural Capital of Europe, 2010. And we are sure that many of the participants will have fallen under the spell of this great and marvelous city of many names: Byzantium, Constantinople, Konstantiniye, Stambul... A city moreover that has had an enormous impact on Jewish history and culture, as will be shown in various essays in this volume.

Istanbul, now a city with an unknown number of inhabitants (guesses vary from 12 to 20 million people), is the centre of numerous diasporas. It has an Italian community with its own schools, hospital, social clubs and churches, and probably its own architecture. The Italian community is much older than the Italian unitarian state, because in the Middle Ages the neighbourhoods of Galata and Pera were settlements of the Genoese and Venetians. There are still many Greeks living in Istanbul, with their places of worship all over the metropolis. Of the Armenian community, the same can be said. Later, Curds, Lazlar and Alevis settled here, and “capitulations” (privileged arrangements between minorities and the Sublime Porte) encouraged the formation of

French, Anglo-Saxon, German and Dutch communities. In the aftermath of the Russian revolution, many exiles tried to make a living here, and there are still shops and cafés owned by Russians and Georgians. After the dismantling of the Soviet Union, still other and new groups arrived: Azeris, Moldavians and so on. Within this enormous city, which faced – and solved – many of the problems of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society long before other European capitals were confronted with them, the Jewish community is perhaps not the most visible group, but it ranks among the oldest. And, of course, it is divided according to its geographical and historical background. Long before the Ottoman Sultans welcomed the Sefardim, the Greek world had its so-called Romaniote Jews. Commercial relationships brought numerous Azhkenazim to the Bosphorus, and still others came from Persia and Arabia. Italian Jewry, which is considered a separate group dating from the Maccabean period, also has a presence in Istanbul.

Italian Jews had come to the Ottoman Empire as early as 1498, when the edict of expulsion from Spain was also applied to the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. Neapolitan Jews had followed not very long after, beginning in 1510, when Spain had completely conquered Southern Italy, and in the 1530s Puglia was to expell its Jews. The Italian origin of many communities usually considered as Sefardic can still be seen in the names of the Salonica synagogues that recall their Italian past. In the Venetian-Ottoman war of 1499-1502, Bayezit II made use of a Jewish envoy, a certain Isaac, who might have been the first Ottoman diplomat of Jewish origin; many others would follow. Numerous Venetian Jews in the Early Modern Era were in fact Ottoman subjects. New exiles came to Istanbul in the course of the Counter-Reformation. Among the most famous were Donna Gracia Mendes, who reacted to the Pope's antisemitism by organizing a boycott of the Ancona port in 1556, and her nephew Joseph Miquez, also known as Joseph Nasi.

After having moved from Venice to Istanbul, Joseph Miquez befriended the young Selim, son of Süleyman and Roxelane, and became the sultan's favourite. It is said that he was instrumental in launching the 1570 Turkish campaign against Venetian Cyprus and somewhat later he incited William the Silent of Orange to his rebellion against Philip II of Spain. In later centuries, commercial relations further increased. Jewish merchants had the best possible networks, they could often use common languages as Hebrew, *Yiddish* and Ladino for communication and were used to receiving guests of their own faith, as Boccaccio's novella about 'Abraam giudeo' (*Decameron* I,2) already mentioned. Personally, I find it striking that (at least in nineteenth century Italy) marriage partners were sought and found in other cities, sometimes across state borders.

Only in liturgy, differences between Sefardim, Italkim and Azhkenazim on the level of scripture reading, prayers and melodies are extant to this day. In this field, distinctions between communities have remained visible for a long time, until the communities became so small that co-habitation with other groups in the same *scuola* was a need. This separation is still visible in the twentieth-century synagogue of Trieste,

where the Sefardim have a distinct and smaller hall next to the main one, but the Venetian co-existence of five different *scuole* is the classic example.

We hope the volume originating from this conference will give us a better idea of the richness of all these cultures living peacefully together in the Ottoman Empire, and later, thanks to the reforms and vision of the great *pater patrias* Atatürk, in the Turkish Republic. Some of the papers focus on the contribution of Jewish writers, singers, scholars, civil servants and businessmen to contemporary Turkish society. On the other hand, Turkey did much to help and host Jews on the eve of and during the Second World War. Again, it was Atatürk who invited them to this country. Later, the Turkish Foreign Service saved many lives by helping Jews to obtain Turkish IDs and Turkey even organised railway transport out of Hitler's hell to Istanbul, a glorious episode, about which the well-known writer Ayşe Kulin wrote a breath-taking novel: *Last Train to Istanbul* (*Nefes Nefese*, 2002).

This conference deals with all aspects of the Diaspora as lived and expressed by Jews in Italy, Turkey, Palestine/Israel and elsewhere. One could argue that the whole of Jewish culture is *galut*-related. We therefore might have extended the conference to nearly 6000 years of Jewish history, but have not done so. Our focus is on the Mediterranean, with some excursions to the surrounding world. That we have not adhered strictly to borders is not only because they have never existed in Jewish history, but also because already in the Ancient and Medieval periods Jews travelled much more than average, and in modern times this would only increase thanks to better roads and faster means of transport.

When in 2000 I visited the community of Hara Kebira in Tunisia, one of the few extant *kehillot* in the Arabic world, I was surprised to learn that its members frequently travelled to Israel. So this tiny country on the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean has increasingly become a place no Jew can or will ignore. This of course does not mean that – as some people seem to think – all Jews blindly follow Israel and its leaders. The contrary seems true: Israeli politicians find many prominent Jews all over the world among their foremost critics.

But this brings us to politics, which I would like to emphasize was not the topic of this conference. Many people contributed to this event, with their good advice, their sponsorship or their material help. Among our Turkish hosts, Naim Güteryüz of the 500. Yıl Vakfı was the first to join us. We are greatly indebted to him for his help and the way he contacted prominent members of the Jewish intelligentsia in the Turkish Republic and programmed the concert and the Jewish tour for the conference. We thank Daniel Stork of the Netherlands Consulate-General for his help in making the concert possible. The Belgian Embassy and Consulate-General kindly offered us a reception. The Chair of Italian studies at Utrecht University, Harald Hendrix and the Research Institute for History and Culture at Utrecht University (OGC), generously contributed and were represented at the conference by a strong delegation. Of our Italian friends, Francesco

Servida of the Italian Cultural Institute of Ankara and Gabriella Fortunato of the Italian Cultural Institute of Istanbul were a great help, as was Maria Di Giulio of the Circolo Roma. Hanneke van der Heijden, specialist on contemporary Turkish literature and the Netherlands' most famous translator from Turkish not only agreed to attend the conference, but gave useful advice. Of course, without Ayşe Dilsiz and other staff members of the Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT), this conference would not have been possible. Fokke Gerritsen, Director of the NIT and our host on this occasion, deserves our special thanks for all his efforts and generosity.

A further word of thanks to the writers who attended this conference. It is one of the distinctive features of the ICOJIL formula that creative writing and criticism are brought together, since the last would not exist without the first and the first would not be known without the last. Not all the authors we invited were able to attend, but we are pleased to have been able to bring together both Turkish and Italian writers. Yakub Almelek, Beki L. Behar, Liz Behmoaras, Miro Silvera, Roberto Vigevani, Renzo Modiano, Gabriella Steindl Moscati made this event unforgettable. We regret Beki Behar passed away before this volume was ready, in August 2011; we remember her warm personality and active participation in the conference.

I would like to dedicate these words to her and to the memory of Zuhâl Yılmaz, my much appreciated friend and colleague from Ankara University. As a specialist on Bassani, she would have loved to have been at the conference with us if her health had permitted it. Her untimely death on Friday 25 June 2010 was a terrible shock for those who knew and loved her. May they rest in peace.

WORKS CITED

Alhadeff, Gini. *The Sun at Midday*. New Jersey: Hopewell, 1997.