

BAHAR, Beki L. 'The conversion of the Jews and the islamization of Jewish spaces during the first centuries of the Ottoman empire'. *Jewish Migration: Voices of the Diaspora*. Raniero Speelman, Monica Jansen & Silvia Gaiga eds. ITALIANISTICA ULTRAIECTINA 7. Utrecht : Igitur Publishing, 2012. ISBN 978-90-6701-032-0.

#### SUMMARY

This essay by the late Beki L. Behar (z.l.) focuses on conversion to Islam until the end of the Seventeenth Century. If we can speak of a privileged treatment of the Jews in the reigns of Mehmet Fatih, Bayezit II, Süleyman and Selim II – the period of Gracia Mendez and Josef Nasi –, Mehmet IV's reign (1648-1687) was marked by lack of tolerance and the Islamic fanaticism of the fundamentalist Kadezadeli sect, in which period Jews had to face all sorts of prohibition and forced conversion, sometimes losing their living quarters. Although the Jews as inhabitants of cities rather than villages were generally not subjected to conversion and were not encouraged to enter upon the career at Court known as *devşirme*, an important wave of conversions initiated with Shabtai Zwi (Sabbatai Zevi), the false *mashiah* who preferred Islam to death penalty. His numerous followers are known in Turkish as *dönmeler* (dönmes). Other conversions had a less dramatic background, such as divorcing under Shari'a law or for convenience's sake. A famous case is the court physician Moshe ben Raphael Abravanel, who became Muslim in order to be able to practise.

#### KEYWORDS

Conversion, Shabtai Zwi, dönmes, Islamization

© The authors

The proceedings of the international conference *Jewish Migration: Voices of the Diaspora* (Istanbul, June 23-27 2010) are volume 7 of the series ITALIANISTICA ULTRAIECTINA. STUDIES IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE, by Igitur Publishing. ISSN 1874-9577 (<http://www.italianisticaultraiectina.org>).

# THE CONVERSION OF THE JEWS AND THE ISLAMIZATION OF JEWISH SPACES DURING THE FIRST CENTURIES OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

**Beki L. Bahar**

Writer, Istanbul

This contribution focuses on the conversion of Jews and other minorities in the Ottoman Empire, paying attention to the islamization of Jewish space as well. I think this subject may be studied in four parts: the period before the reign of Mehmet IV, that began in 1648, the Conversion and islamization events during this reign (1648-1687), the episode of the conversion of the false Messiah Rabbi Sabbetai Tsvi in 1666 and the consequences after the conversion of Sabbetai Tsvi (Sabbatai Zevi) and the birth of the *dönme* Sect.

## THE PERIOD BEFORE 1648

In 1071, the Muslim Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine Army at Malazgirt in the East of Anatolia. A new state named Rum Seljuk was established in some parts of Anatolia. After its downfall in 1300, ten independent emirates or *beyliks* took its place. The leader of one of these was Osman (1281-1324). The name Ottoman derives from this Osman.

In a battle with the Byzantine Army, Osman captured the daughter of a *tekefur* (a Christian Byzantine town-ruler). After her conversion and after having changed her name he married her to his son Orhan. This may be considered as the first conversion and an early intermarriage of a Christian girl and a royal prince. Afterwards almost all royal princes and Sultans will marry the foreign girls that had been converted and educated in the Royal Palace.

Orhan (1324-1360) conquered in 1326 the city of Prusa, now known as Bursa, and made it his capital. There was a Jewish community in the city that helped Orhan to capture the city. The Jews welcomed the Ottomans and were against the Byzantines because, after Christianity was accepted as the State religion for Byzantium, Jews had suffered many massacres, blood libel cases, forcible conversions, restrictions and religious prohibitions. From the reign of Sultan Orhan, Ashkenazi Jews of Europe started emigrating to the Ottoman State.

During the reign of his son Sultan Murad (1360-1398), the Ottomans started to levy Christian boys, not Jews, from eight to eighteen years old from the conquered places in Europe and Anatolia. It was permitted to take away a boy only if the family had more than one son. Due to poverty sometimes parents simply gave up their son and some boys came by their free will. After being circumcised, some chose to be

educated in the palace school so as to make it possible to serve in the public administration, while others were sent to farms in Anatolia to learn Turkish and study the Islam. This process was named *devşirme*. After a time, the country boys joined the army. These warriors were named *Yeniçeri* (Janissary). In the first years, it was forbidden for them to marry or to do any other work like commerce.

They did not levy Jews. Some historians believe that they abstained from doing so because the Jews were a small minority.

I think that Jewish boys were not suitable for the army. They lived in the cities and were not used to hard work like country boys. They might take them to the Palace. But the authorities gave much importance to trade, to commercial export, import, and banking. Jews were perfect on these subjects. There were many Jews doing these kind of works in all the major cities of the Empire and since business always used to pass from father to son, taking the son would endanger the business and its continuity.

In the middle of the fifteenth century the Ottomans took the city of Andrinopolis, formerly known as Hadrianopolis and presently as Edirne, and made it their new capital. A Rabbi from Edirne, Isak Sarfati,<sup>1</sup> sent letters to many European Jewish Communities, advising them to come to the Ottoman Empire, and he specially emphasized that it would be good for the children to be dressed as they wished and they would enjoy all kinds of freedom. This letter could be seen as a proof that Jewish boys were not taken into *devşirme*.

Historian Sir Paul Ricaut (1629-1710) wrote two centuries later about this period in *The History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire*: “No people in the World have been more open to receive all sorts of nations to them than the Ottomans”.

At the end of the seventeenth century the levy of Christian boys stopped because the Ottoman Empire spread over Muslim countries. Also the slaves and the captives were proselytized. Jews were charged with a heavy tax named *Pidyum Shevuyim*, in order to collect money to ransom Jews kidnapped by bandits or pirates and redeem them from slave markets and prevent conversion. So Jews were not affected as much as the Christians were.

Cloths distinguished non-Muslims (*dhimmis*) from Muslims. Newly converted Muslims used to receive Muslim cloths and headgear. So clothing played an important role in conversion. Sufi dervishes as the *bektaşis* played a major role in the islamization of the first centuries of the empire but as Marc Baer stresses in his book *Honoured by the Glory of Islam*, Muslims always wished to convert Christians and Jews seeing it as an act of merit.

On the other side among the non-Muslims, many people of both sexes chose Islam without compulsion being exercised, even when Sufis no longer played a role in proselytizing the *dhimmis*. According to some scholars, socio-economic reasons as the desire to change social status, to escape the poll tax and – for the Jews – the extra taxes levied upon the Jewish Community were major causes of conversion. The Jewish religious leaders tried to prevent conversion.

Intermarriage was only permitted between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman. And contrarily to Jewish law their children were accepted as Muslims. Many Jewish women specially in the seventeenth century, used conversion to be able to divorce. After their conversion, if the husband refused to follow his wife's example, he was forced to divorce her. Jewish Law prohibited intermarriage and as the woman was considered an apostate and had transgressed the commandments of the Torah, she became prohibited to her husband. The husband then had to divorce her and give her the indemnity that was recorded on the *ketuba* (marriage act). If he refused and she went to the – religious – Court, according to Muslim law the Kadi could decide she had the right to ask for compensation (*mehri mueccel*).

At that time the woman could use her money as she pleased, buying and selling or even trading. And contrarily to Jewish law she could now inherit from her parents. So divorcing a husband sometimes was a profitable act for a Jewish woman.

The conquest of Constantinople by Fatih Mehmed in 1453 put an end to the Byzantine Empire. Most Jewish communities in the Empire were far older than Byzantium. But unfortunately we do not know much about them. There are no Jewish Byzantine historiographers. But we know that, being persecuted, Jews helped the Ottomans in their campaigns and welcomed them. In order to repopulate and rebuild the city, Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror brought families from all parts of the State, sometimes by force and sometimes by granting them privileges. Among these were non-Muslims such as Armenians, Jews and even Greeks. The Sultan identified each of these non-Muslim major groups with the terms *cemaat*, *millet* or *taife*. Each group was guaranteed that they would be allowed to observe their own religion, traditions, customs and occupations. Each *Millet* had his leader. The Jewish leaders had secular and religious power over their communities that were named *kahal* (*kehillà*).

There was no pressure exercised on the leaders. This communal autonomy enabled the Jews to preserve their identity and their religion. While some regional centers tried to convert non-Muslims, the state policy protected their religion. Sultan Mehmed even allowed – a privilege only granted to Jews – to build new synagogues on the foundations of existing houses.<sup>2</sup>

Mehmet's son and successor Beyazit II (he ruled between 1481-1512), was a pious man who was well aware of the capacity and ability of the Jews specially in the field of commerce. He announced that all Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula would be welcome in his Empire without any restrictions.

Indeed, in 1492 from Spain and later from Portugal, Sepharad Jews emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. According to some writers Bayezit ordered the *marranos* to return to judaism.

Kanuni Sultan Suleyman (he ruled between 1520-1566), saved the well known businesswoman Gracia Mendes Nasi from the Venice Inquisition. Gracia Nasi, a Portuguese *marrano*, settled first in Antwerp where she made a great fortune. Fearing religious persecution she ran away with her sister and children to Venice. There her family was arrested and imprisoned with the charge that they were professing

Judaism. Sultan Kanuni, who was influenced by his Jewish doctor Hamon, sent an envoy (a *Çavuş*) to negotiate and save them from prison. She settled in Istanbul to live like a Jew. She continued her worldwide trade activity, becoming the first lady (surnamed, *Senyora*) of the Istanbul Jewry. She spent huge amounts of money on charity and ransom of Jewish captives, buying slaves from the slave market so as to prevent their conversion. She subsidized the building of synagogues, a famous *yeshiva* and public libraries. There were no restrictions for intellectual Jews to come and live in the Empire and to enjoy freedom of mind and of religion.

Suleyman's son Selim II married a Jewish born maid, educated and converted to Islam, named Afife Nurbanu. She was the first person to build a public library in Istanbul. Jozef Nasi, nephew to Donna Gracia, persuaded the Sultan to conquer Cyprus. He had served as a diplomatic ambassador and in gratitude for his services, Selim granted Jozef the title of Duke of Naxos. Historians qualified this period as the Golden Age of the Ottoman Jews. We might say it also was the Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire.

#### CONVERSION AND ISLAMIZATION EVENTS DURING MEHMET IV'S REIGN BETWEEN 1648-1687

Islamization of space started at the reign of the Mehmed III (1595-1603). When his mother Safiye Sultan decided in 1597 to build a mosque complex in Eminönü, a district that was the main port of the city and heavily populated by Jews, known in Byzantine times as Porta Judaica and called *Çifut Kapi* (Jewish Gate) by the Ottomans, buildings belonging to Jews in the area were confiscated and the construction of the mosque began, only to be interrupted by the death of the architect and later of the royal family. The ruins of the unfinished foundations stayed in the middle of Jewish houses, and are known as the *Zülmiye* (oppression) ruins.

With the reign of the Mehmed IV (1648-1687), the policy of the State changed towards a pressure on minorities. Mehmet IV was considered the worst enemy of Christianity and Judaism. All Sultans before him had had their own Jew palace doctors. The Hamon family doctors served Fatih Mehmed, Beyazıt II, and Selim II. They were so close to the Sultans that they could influence them on Jewish cases and at the same time they were administrators of the Jewish communities. None of the doctors or the elite working for the state were, as we have seen, put under pressure to convert. In Mehmet's reign, however, a new Fundamentalist movement, the *Kadizadelis*, started to accuse Sufi orders as *Bektaşis* and *Mevlevi*s of being heretic and of diverging from the orders of the *Qu'ran*. So the Sultan prohibited their practicing *Semas*, mystic dance and music performances.

When Vani Mehmed Efendi became leader of the Kadizelis and the head preacher of Sultan Mehmed IV, he gained a strong influence on the Sultan and his mother and alcoholic drinks were forbidden. This heavily affected the Jews' economic position because they were the only producers and sellers of alcoholic drinks and spirits, as well as tavern-keepers.

In the year 1660 a conflagration started from Eminönü, the Jewish settlement and commerce area, and devastated a great part of Istanbul. The royal family blamed the fire on the Jews of Eminönü and as a divine punishment for the unfaithful. Even the famous geographer Evliya Çelebi wrote it was a divine punishment for the non-Muslims. According to other contemporary writers, thousands of buildings, churches and synagogues burned down and as many as forty thousand people died during the three days' fire and in the days thereafter.

Sultana Hatice decided to build a royal mosque in the burned area as a pious act. They advised her to build a mosque complex in Eminönü at the place of the *Zülmiye* ruins. The construction started a week after the fire. An issued decree prohibited Jews from living in Eminönü and its surroundings, and Jews were ordered to sell their properties to Muslims. The Palace preacher Vani Mehmed Efendi was much more anti-Jewish than against other minorities, though churches as well were razed to the ground and the land where they stood was seized. While foreign states helped the Christians, no one helped the Jews. Christians reclaimed their church properties, and took back some of them on the condition that they would not build churches on their grounds.

A second imperial decree prohibited the Jews to reside in that neighborhood, so they were forced to move to other parts of the city. The landscapes of the burned synagogues and houses became state-owned. Some historians call these prohibitions and acts the "islamization of Jewish land".

Between 1666 and 1687, the conversion to Islam increased. Poverty caused many Jews and Christians, especially women, to come to the Palace and to ask to be "honored by the glory of Islam". During the reign of Mehmed and his mother who act like conversion patrons, many unusual conversions and cases happened. As a unique case there is a love story I would like to recall here.

In 1680, a woman married to a Janissary in Istanbul fell in love with a Jewish merchant. The neighbors raided the home and claimed they found the couple in sexual intercourse. The couple denied. But the *Kadi* gave a legal writ that she is to be stoned to death. Accordingly, she was stoned to death. The Jew was advised to accept Islam in order to be saved. He did so, but was nonetheless decapitated. Later, *şeyhülislams* – heads of religious matters of the Ottoman Empire –wrote that since he was converted, his execution had been a mistake: they could have put him into prison for a long time instead. The *Kadızedeli* sect was blamed for the incident. In the Age of the Ottoman Empire this is the only case where a woman was stoned to death.

Among the elite, we have court doctors who were obliged to convert. Moshe ben Raphael Abravanel is a well known case. He was the head physician of the Royal Palace during the reign of Sultan Mehmed IV and Süleyman III. He was famous for his skillfulness and researches in medicine. Among his books on disease and medicines the fifth volume *Hame-i Hayatizade* is the most important.

Mehmed's mother Hatice Turhan ordered that Abravanel could not serve in the Palace nor touch the Sultan's pulse, not even for a diagnose, until he became a

Muslim. So he converted to maintain his position at the court. After being converted he took the name of Mustafa Fevzi Hayatizade. *Hayat* means tailor in Hebrew. Hayatizade means the son of a tailor (from Hebrew *hayat*, tailor, Abravanel's father's profession). He then stayed as ahead physician for another twenty years. But when Sultan Ahmed II came to power he accused Hayatizade of having been a bad physician to the previous Sultan. He was put in the famous prison of Yedikule in Istanbul, where he was executed in 1692. After him, many doctors converted. Those are individual cases of conversion.

His son and his son in-law continued to practice as court doctors. His grandson, Hayatizade Mehmed Emin Efendi, has been in 1746 for six months the *Şeyhülislam*.

During the reign of Mehmed IV, while Hayatizade was his head physician, the Sabbatian Messianic movement come into being. A rabbi named Shabbetai Tzvi (or Sabbatai Zevi) proclaimed himself the Mashiah, the savior the Jews expected. The Ottoman Rabbinical leaders in Istanbul were against Tzvi and after he had declared he would be the king of the Empire, he was arrested and brought to court to be judged in Edirne. As Sabbatai Zevi did not speak Turkish well enough, Moshe Abravanel (Hayatizade) acted as a translator. There, the false Mashiah accepted Islam in order to save his life and was converted. Some of his followers thought it to be a miracle that he was not executed and, voluntarily converted, they continued to see Zevi as a prophet. This is the first and only case of mass conversion. After Zevi's death some of these converts gradually changed and made a secret sect which is called in Turkish *Dönme*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The document is found in the Bibliotheque National Paris, Ancient Fonds No. 291.

<sup>2</sup> I think these regulations can be seen as part of the Pax Ottomana.