



**ULUSLARARASI
GAZİ SÜLEYMAN PAŞA
VE KOCAELİ TARİHİ
SEMPOZYUMU-III**

**INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON GAZİ SÜLEYMAN PAŞA
& HISTORY OF KOCAELİ - III**

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SEMPÖZYUMU-III

[KOCAELİ'DEKİ MUSEVİLER: YAHUDİLER,
KARAİMLER VE DÖNMELER]

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Since ancient biblical times Anatolia played an important role in the written texts and oral traditions of the religion of the followers of prophet Moses (known in Islam as *Nabi/Nebi Musa*), i.e. sons of Israel.

The current conference is dedicated to the history of Nicomedia. It provides us an opportunity to present a paper which will share our current knowledge about three Nicomedian/Izmitian communities or sects of the adherents of the religion of Prophet Moses, namely the Jews (turk. *Yahudiler*), the Sabbateans (turk. *Dönmeler*) and the Karaim (turk. *Karaimler*).

Being an important city in today Turkey - as well as it was an important city at the past, - Nicomedia (Izmit) as the hub of nearly all Anatolian roads was a natural gateway to the Bosphorus and the carrying trade of the city, its commerce, its importance as the royal capital attracted respective communities of Jews and Karaim to settle in the city and its suburbs. These Israelite Mosaic communities exerted considerable influence on the trade routes of Anatolia from very early times. But the history of these two Israelite Mosaic communities - the Jews and the Karaim - were very different from one another while the third Israelite Mosaic community - the Sabbateans - even though started as a pseudomessianic movement within Orthodox Jewry after a while its members either came back to 'normative Judaism' or left Judaism entirely adopting Islam and secretly preserving some Jewish sectarian rites.

The Jewish orthodox community of Izmit

The Jewish orthodox community of Izmit was first mentioned in various sources in the sixth century. Izmit was referred to in the Rabbinic Jewish sources as *Isnimit*. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish Jews after their expulsion from Spain (1492), there were already several communities of Jews in Anatolia who spoke Byzantine Greek (they were called in Hebrew

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bene Romania and in Turkish *surgunlu*) as well as the Jews who spoke Arabic. Prior to the Ottoman time Jews of Izmit spoke Byzantine Greek.

The sultans of the Ottoman Empire considered the Jews expelled from Spain (1492) as educated and skilled people that is why they invited these Jews to settle in Ottoman Empire. Although the Jews were expected to pay special tax for non-Muslims and were excluded from public services these refugees contributed greatly to the cultural variety and economic success of the cities in the Ottoman Empire.

During 16th century some Jewish families arrived as refugees from Spain (called *Sefaradim* in Hebrew and *Kendi Gelen* in Turkish) and settled in Izmit, by the middle of the 17th century there were about sixty Jewish orthodox families over there, who dwelled in a separated quarter, called *Yahudi Mahallesi*. As it was common the local Jewish Orthodox community had its court, a synagogue, ritual bath and religious school, as well as a cemetery. According to the *millet* system, every non-Muslim community (i.e. also the Jews) was fully responsible for its own institutions. The members of the community engaged in petty trade, some others were artisans.

A big change came to the life of the Orthodox Jews in general and those of Anatolia in particular by the middle of 17th c. Vast majority of the Orthodox Jews in the Ottoman empire initially accepted the claims of a Jewish rabbi Sabbatai Zevi/Sevi on his 'Messiahship'. Sabbatai Zevi's followers, both during his "Messiahship" and after his conversion to Islam (1666), are known today as Sabbateans (*Dönme* in Turkish). While the Sabbatean movement initially started as a pure Jewish Orthodox pseudomessianic movement, after Sabbatai Zevi/Sevi conversion to Islam in 1666 it would be better described as Judaeo-Islamic rather than Jewish. Indeed here one can speak of a hybrid Jewish-Muslim identity: the Sabbateans were formally converted to the Sunni Islam, but forbade intermarriages with both Orthodox Jews and Muslims, they secretly preserved some knowledge of Hebrew and next to regular Muslim practices performed some rituals of the sectarians.

Even though the expansion of this pseudomessianic movement is well documented, the true reason why we do not know that much about Sabbateans in general and about their influence among the Jews in Anatolia and Izmit in particular is well argued in Gad Nassi article 'Three Sabbatean objects' who wrote: '*Since the apostasy of Sabbetai Sevi, the rabbis and their followers preferred to minimize the importance of the movement and even to ignore it*'. He continues that in many communities, records and documents concerning the Sabbatean movement were destroyed. It can be added as well that Sabbateans themselves initially did everything to hide their true identity (faith, rituals and traditions). The impact of Sabbateans on the entire Ottoman Jewry from middle of 17th c. was enormous, but during the following centuries Jewish orthodox rabbis succeeded to suppress the Sabbateans bringing their spiritual flock – the Orthodox Jews – to the 'normative' Orthodox Judaism. Some Sabbateans indeed took an active part in Young Turk Movement but gradually nearly ceased to exist and their influence on present day Turkey is but a conspiracy theory.

Maximum of Jews as much as 512 are mentioned in Izmit in 1911–12. In 1919, when the Greeks conquered western Anatolia, most of the Jews fled to Istanbul and Jewish community in Izmit ceased to exist.

The Karaim

Unlike their spiritual opponents –the Rabbinic (Orthodox) Jews- the Karaim (an admixture of Turks, Greeks, Persians and Semites who adopted Mosaic faith) do not recognize the so-called Oral or second Torah, arguing that God revealed Himself to the Sons of Israel in the one and only text – the Torah of Moses which was written down in the Pentateuch.

The relationship between the Jews and Karaim one could compare to this of Sunni and Shia Muslims or Catholics and Protestant Christians.

Although sharing with the Jews the joint sacred text – the Pentateuch (which contains the Torah of Moses) – Karaim rejected the Talmud of the Jews and any other Rabbinic authority while adopting Muslim rationalistic approach to the Scripture – the Mu'tazilism.

Karaim in Izmilt lived side by side with both Jews and Christians, and later on – with the Muslims. Some information on the life of Karaite community in Nicomedia one can find in Zvi Ankori book 'Karaites of Byzantium. In his 'Karaite encyclopaedia' published in Frankfurt-on-Main 1995, Nathan Schur in two articles 'Nicomedia' and 'Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia' presumes that the Karam community existed there already in the 13th c (and possibly earlier), and that the standard of learning and education of some of its members was of a high level. The most important theologian and spiritual leader of the Karaim community of Nicomedia' was *hakham* Aaron ben Eliyah (1300-1369) paper on whom I presented during the last conference.

In spite that there is some research done by Turkish and Israeli scholars, the state of research of Israelite Mosaic communities in Turkey in general and in Kocaeli province in particular is still somehow poor. There is no doubt however that further research about these communities is required. In recent years Israeli-American professor Daniel Lasker of Beer-Sheva university tries to research deeper the Byzantine period of Karaim history. But the Ottoman and Turkish period remains till present day under researched.

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