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T Ü R K T A R İ H K U R U M U B A S I M E V İ — A N K A R A  
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# OTTOMAN JEWRY DURING WORLD WAR I

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We are only one year away from one of the most important dates in Ottoman and Jewish history. In 1492, almost five hundred years ago, the Christian conquerors of Muslim Spain expelled the Jews whose ancestors had prospered for eight centuries under the rule of the Caliphs. Most of these refugees went to the Ottoman Empire after receiving invitations from sultans Mehmed II the Conqueror (1451-1481) and Beyazit II (1481-1512), who wanted their help in building the new Turkish empire. Ever since then, for five hundred years, Ottoman and Muslims have lived together in peace and prosperity. While the Christian subjects of the sultan tried for some time to get the Christian states of Europe to drive the Muslim Turks back into Asia, and while serbest and other Christian subjects revolted against the Ottomans and established their own states in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in process massacring all the Muslims and Jews they could find, Ottoman Jewry remained loyal to their Turkish brothers, rejecting the efforts of other Christian nationalist groups to break up the Ottoman Empire so as to secure their own independence as well. So it was that throughout the 20th century, whenever Jews were subjected to persecution in either East or West, they have continued to find refuge in Turkey. In commemoration and celebration of this anniversary, Turkish Muslims and Jews have established the Quincentennial Foundation of Istanbul, which under the leadership of Mr. Jak V. Kamhi, is arranging a whole series of conferences and events of various sorts which will take place throughout 1992, not only in Turkey but also in Israel, Europe, and the United States.

One outstanding example of Jewish gratitude and loyalty to the Turks came during World War I, when the Ottoman Empire was allied with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary because Britain and France were supporting Russian ambitions against the Ottomans in order to secure its alliance. Members of the Ottoman Jewish community, led by Grand Rabbi Haim Naim Nahum Efendi (1909-1920), strongly sup-

ported the Ottoman war effort and prospered greatly as a result in industry, banking and trade. I remember very well that when in 1957 I met Nahum Efendi in Cairo, where he had been Chief Rabbi for forty years, he recalled very fondly the years of the Turkish Constitutional Era and World War I and said that this constituted the most prosperous era of Ottoman Jewry that he remembered. This was in contrast to, and in many ways helped by, the attitude of the other non Muslim minorities, whose declared neutrality in the conflict and what appeared to most Ottomans to be apparent sympathy for the enemy in order to achieve national aims, led to the deportation of many as the war progressed, leaving Jewish bankers, merchants and artisans without serious competition for the first time since the seventeenth century, and without the centuries-long blood libel attacks which had been mounted almost continuously by their Christian neighbors since the early years of the 19th century.

Balat, which had been the center of Jewish life in Istanbul since the sixteenth century, as a result now entered a new era of prosperity, which lasted with little break until the 1930's. Most of its streets were widened and given new, bright lighting and sewage facilities, while wealthy Jews built new brick houses. Whether rich or poor, the newer Jewish houses were built in similar styles and floor plans, the main difference being in the building materials and decorations, with the more expensive houses adding marble and fine woods to the brick which all used. Ground floor entrance halls and living and dining rooms were usually furnished in the traditional Ottoman style, with low sofa, buffets, and carpets as well as a great table where the members of the family dined. The kitchen, usually located in the rear but sometimes in the basement, had a water depot, coal oven, jar of drinking water, and a great copper cauldron for boiling. In the basement they kept the heating wood and coal, and usually the rooms where the servants lived. On the second floor was the great salon furnished and decorated in the European manner, but used only on special occasions. Next to it in the front of the house was the parents bedroom, also richly furnished in the European style, while behind were the rooms of the children and a terrace looking out on the street. The more expensive houses usually had an additional upper floor which was used for storerooms as well as to house the servants. Middle class Jews built their houses in the same way, but usually divided the floors into separate apartments, renting out the lower ones to secure additional income.

Jews had served actively in the Ottoman army during the Balkan Wars, and they continued to serve with distinction during World War I, responding enthusiastically to the general mobilization decrees which called into service all male subjects between the ages of eighteen and forty-five who could not provide proof of foreign citizenship. Ottoman Jews also worked to demonstrate their loyalty to the government by getting hundreds of young non-Ottoman Jewish volunteers to enlist in the army to demonstrate the community's determination to help the war effort. Jewish bankers in and out of the Empire provided a great deal of the financing needed for wartime expenditures and to pay the government's civil servants. Jewish agriculturalists throughout the Empire, and particularly those in Palestine, joined Muslim farmers in contributing animals, tools and carriages to local military units, though this, like the conscription, severely curtailed agricultural production and led to problems of famine and disease in the later years of the war. Jewish charitable organizations organized campaigns to raise money to help the families of Ottoman soldiers, and the Or Ahahim hospital began treating people of all religions because of crowded conditions in the regular state hospitals. In the same way, the Bnai Brith lodge in Istanbul worked with Nahum in helping people of all religions in the face of wartime shortages food and clothing, with the Jews sharing what they received from American organizations with their Muslim and Christian fellow subjects, earning gratitude from all elements of the population as a result.

A teacher of the Alliance Israelite reported:

“The war itself, despite all the miseries, despite all the horrors that accompanied it, did not affect the harmony which continued among the Muslim and Jewish elements. For the Turks, the Jew was the faithful subject par excellence, incapable of treason. The reason for the constant sympathy that the Turks nourished for us must be sought in the certainty that they had of themselves being the object of our sincere respect and our profound loyalty, of which we had given multiple proofs on innumerable occasions... The Armenians and the Greeks, who held posts of confidence in almost all the important centers of the country at the start of the war, contributed no small party by their defection to precipitating the debacle.”

Jewish nationals of enemy countries were severely effected by the Ottomans' unilateral cancellation of the Capitulations soon after the war began in Europe, on 4 October 1914. Following the Ottoman entry into the war on the side of Germany and Austria on 11 November 1914, the same wartime restrictions which were prevalent in other belligerent countries were introduced, including decrees forbidding the flying of foreign flags and the posting of letters written in foreign languages, including Hebrew and Yiddish, so as to ease the task of the censors. Starting in mid December, 1914, subjects of enemy countries, including Jews who had retained their Russian nationality, were required to close their stores and shops and to leave the empire, with some two thousand colonists from Palestine going overland from Jaffa and Tel Aviv to northern Palestine and Damascus and 11, 277 who went by ship to Alexandria in sixteen groups between Chanukah of December 1914 and Passover of April 1915. Zionist pressure from Germany and America along with the protests of Haim Nahum, however, ultimately led the Ottoman government to allow such Jews, most of whom were Russian nationals living in Palestine, to remain so long as they adopted Ottoman citizenship and to do its best to protect the Jewish communities from the full effects of wartime shortages. The Zionist representatives in Palestine appreciated the Ottoman efforts to protect and help their community and sent thanks to both the American and the German ambassadors in Istanbul for their help in this respect. German Foreign Minister Zimmermann, moreover, under the influence of the powerful Zionist lobby in Berlin, developed a plan to establish a Jewish state in Palestine under German influence, both to establish a German presence in the Levant and to win over world Zionists to support the Central Powers, but this plan was opposed by Haim Nahum and most Ottoman Jews in fear that it would significantly hurt their position as loyal Ottoman subjects.

The Ottoman government made special efforts to allow foreign educational and charity institutions maintained by Jewish citizens of enemy countries to continue so long as they were managed by Ottoman Jews. After the Alliance Israelite Universelle closed its schools despite this concession, the Ottomans arranged to substitute schools operated by German Jews, including an elementary school opened by the Ashkenazi leader David Marcus which in 1915 was transformed by the Hilfsverein der

Deutschen Juden as well as local Jewish community organizations into the Beyoğlu Jewish Lycee, which has remained active to the present day. Special state subsidies also were provided to the Grand Rabbi and the staff of the Grand Rabbinate to enable community operations to continue in the face of declining revenues from members, while they and the other religious chiefs continued to serve as members of municipal, provincial and other councils throughout the war. Though the Alliance was gone, Haim Nahum in fact managed to solidify support in the community by uniting all groups for the common war effort, and also by organizing the distribution of supplies of food and other goods sent into the empire by the American Jewish Joins Distribution Committee.

Elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, the fortunes of Ottoman Jewry were largely tied to those of the Muslims during and after World War I. The Jewish communities of Gallipoli and Çanakkale were evacuated along with their Muslim neighbors as a result of the British naval expedition. The Jews of northeastern Anatolia were massacred along with the Muslims by the invading Russian army starting in 1915. The Jewish population of Salonica, which had been in a majority since the sixteenth century, had already been subjected to intense persecution after the city was taken over by Greece during the Balkan Wars and the bulk of the Jewish quarter had been burned in a great fire started by the Greek army in 1917. Most of the remaining Jews of Thrace as those living in Izmir and other parts of Southwestern Anatolia were either driven out or massacred along with the Muslims by the invading Greek army during the Turkish War Independence.

Palestinian Jews suffered considerably with the rest of the population during the early years of the war from famine, plague and other diseases when the area served as a base for Cemal Pasha's Fourth Corps offensive against the Suez Canal and Egypt, joining local Muslims and Christians in supplying forced labor on military roads and railroads built between Jerusalem and Gaza, Tiberias and Safed and Jaffa and Nablus, as well as supplying food, animals and equipment to the army. Since no less than fifty percent of the cultivated land was abandoned, food production in any case fell precipitously. This left little for the civilian population, which further suffered from a British naval blockade of the coast throughout the war, an invasion of locusts during 1915 and 1916, which destroyed most

of the fields, vineyards and plantations maintained by the Jews throughout Palestine, and that of the British from Egypt combined with devastating raids on the civilian population by Arab guerillas supplied by Serif Huseyin's Arab revolt. Starting in 1915, moreover, the entire population of Palestine suffered from a wave of epidemics, including typhus and cholera, whose effect was compounded by the chaos among the Ottoman soldiers returning in disorder following the collapse of Cemal Pasha's campaign against the Suez canal. Thousands of people of all religions died as result in Palestine, especially in Jerusalem and Safed. The Jewish settlements were better off than most, however, because of their ability to raise their own food at least as well as because of the receipt of food and money sent by American Jews as the result of the efforts of the American Ambassador to the Porte at the start of the war, Henry Morgenthau, and his Consul General in Jerusalem, Dr. O. A. Glazebrook, and to a lesser extent of various German Jewish organizations, particularly the Hilfsverein of Frankfurt, with relief ships arriving periodically throughout the war.

The Jews suffered additionally, however, because of the efforts of Arab Christian leaders in Palestine, particularly the Greeks and Maronites, who had long resented the close Jewish-Muslim ties in the Ottoman Empire and mounted a series of violent ritual murder attacks in response. They now sought to use the Ottomans' need for support in the war as a means to satisfy their long-standing ambition to get the Jews out of the Holy Land. Almost as soon as the war began, the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, Damiyanos, informed Minister of Navy Cemal Pasha, who had been appointed Commander of the Fourth Army and Governor of Syria, as well as his commanders and governors in Jaffa, that the Zionist colonists were planning to drive the Turks out of Palestine and that the only solution was to deport all foreign Jews mostly colonists who had come from Russia as tourists, promising strong Christian support for the war effort in return. In 1917 he went so far as to propose to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul that the latter issue a public denial of allegations spread worldwide by the British that the Ottomans were mistreating the Sultan's Christian subjects if only this proposal was carried out. He went on to accuse Palestinian Jews of planning to help the Allied war effort in order to achieve the long-hoped-for Jewish homeland.

These accusations seemed to be confirmed by Ottoman intelligence reports regarding the activities of some European Zionists and Palestinian Jews in support of the British war effort. In the face of strong competition between the Central Powers and western Allies to gain the support of world Zionism, official British Zionist policy initially was to remain neutral because of fears regarding the fate of Ottoman Jewry should they openly support the Allied cause. In the same way. Strong pressure by German Zionists to get their government to turn what had strong sympathy for Zionist aims before the war into an open declaration of support were countered by the Kaiser's fears as to the effect such a policy would have, not only on his alliance with the Sultan, but also on the sensibilities of the Poles.

The Zionist Executive in Britain, however, disagreed with its leaders' caution. Under the leadership of Chaim Weizmann and Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, it advocated a policy of supporting a British invasion to liberate Palestine by force, with the help of a "Jewish Legion," as the first step toward breaking up the Ottoman Empire and getting it out of its alliance with Germany and Austria. Lord Kitchiner opposed the idea because of the fear that these Jewish radicals would then assume dominant control of the Zionist movement, which he preferred to keep under strong British influence. Following his sudden death, however, and with the assumption of the Prime Ministership by David Lloyd George, a much more activist British policy enabled Weizmann and Jabotinsky to secure issuance of the Balfour Declaration from the Lyotd George government and with it to gain support for their plans among young Jewish colonists in Palestine.

Even before this change of British policy, moreover, jabotinsky had gone ahead, leading a group of Young Turkish Zionists from Palestine's agricultural colonies to Alexandria, Egypt. There, with the assistance of Yossef Trumpeldor, a Russian Jew who had gained considerable military experience through service in the Russian army, they established on 3 March 1915 the 'Zion Mule Transportation Corps,' composed largely of Jewish exiles from Russia, which fought against the Ottomans during the early stages of the British invasion of Gallipoli. Even while Zionists in Britain and Egypt were working to provide military support for the Allied war effort against the Ottomans, a few Jewish settlers in Palestine were working toward the same objective through the secret NILI society, which

starting in 1916 spied on the Ottoman army throughout Syria and Palestine, sending regular reports on its movements and dispositions. Late in 1917 NILI also joined with Armenian agents in Jerusalem to spread a rumor that Cemal Pasha trying to negotiate with the British to overthrow the Istanbul government and make a separate peace which would leave him at the head of the Ottoman government, to make certain a British conquest to achieve complete fulfillment of the promises made by Balfour by dividing the Ottoman leaders.

NILI was led by Aaron Aaronsohn, a well-known scientific agricultural agent who from his experimental stations at Zikhron Ya'akov and Atlit, south of Haifa, had been working among the Jewish settlements in Palestine for some years before the war. Aaronson became a leading advisor to the Ottoman governor in Damascus, Cemal Pasha, using his position to steal Istanbul's defense plans for the Arab provinces and send them off to the British in Cairo. He also used Cemal's influence to secure further information during a trip to Germany which he subsequently brought to the British authorities in London, remaining there until the end of the war while the organization's spying activities in Palestine were carried on by his sister Sara Aaronson, Na'aman Belkind from the Rishon Le-Tzion settlement, and Yossef Lishansky, former member of Hashomer who established his own spy group in southern Palestine under the name Hamagan (Protector). In 1916 NILI warned the British leaders in Cairo that the Ottomans were concentrating large forces for a second attack on the Suez Canal. Other information followed regarding the location of Ottoman defenses all over Palestine, and particularly around Beer-sheba, which was of considerable use once the joint British-Arab attack began in February 1917 under the command of Sir Edmond Allenby. NILI agents in Britain and the United States also worked to get support for American entry into the War on the side of Britain, spreading the anti Turkish propaganda developed by Toynbee's propaganda unit in London while adding new stories of their own regarding the supposed Ottoman persecution of the Jewish community (Yishuv) in Palestine.

In the face of Damiyanos' accusations that most Palestinian Jews supported the British and reports by Ottoman intelligence regarding NILI's activities, and particularly about its spreading of Armenian rumors regarding him intended to split the Young Turk Triumverate, it is not surpris-

ing that Cemal Pasha became convinced that Zionism was anti-Turkish and that its representatives in Palestine had to be suppressed if the Ottoman war effort was to succeed. He quickly confiscated the arms of many Jewish colonists as well as those living in Tel Aviv during the late months of 1916. As Allenby's army marched through the Sinai peninsula on its way to Palestine in early March, 1917, the entire population of Gaza was suddenly evacuated by the Ottomans order to remove them the impending battle.

Ottoman intelligence finally informed Cemal Pasha in September 1917 about what NILI was doing. He immediately moved to arrest Sara Aaronsohn along with other NILI members who were known to Ottoman intelligence, but most of them fled successfully across the Sinai desert to Cairo. There they helped General Allenby plan his offensive into Palestine, which began during the spring of 1917 with the help of hundreds of Jewish legion members, organized into the '38th Battalion of Royal Fusiliers' in England, later joined by the 39th (American) and 40th (Palestinian) battalions, all subsequently consolidated into the "First Judean Regiment."

Back in Palestine the crackdown continued. Displays of Zionist banners and flags were forbidden. A number of Zionist leaders were also arrested and deported, including David Ben Gurion and Yitzhak Ben Zvi, who earlier had been allowed to return to Palestine from Istanbul and who as a result had urged its Jewish community to take up Ottoman citizenship and to support the Ottoman war effort, but who were tarred with the actions of NILI and those local Zionists who did indeed support the British to gain fulfillment of what came to be known as the Balfour Declaration. On March 28, 1917, following the failure of the initial British effort to take Jaffa two days earlier, the entire populations of both Jaffa and Tel Aviv were ordered evacuated, Jewish, Muslim and Christian alike, causing considerable suffering, particularly since the evacuees were specifically prohibited from settling in the area of Jerusalem due to the expected British attack in that area. Orders were issued for the evacuation of Jerusalem though this was carried out, due at least partly to the intervention of the Ottomans German allies as well as of Grand Rabbi Haim Nahum Efendi. Half the Jewish evacuees went to the neighboring Jewish settlements at Petah-Tikva and Kfar-Saba, some found shelter in the older Jewish communities in the Galilee, particularly at Tiberias and

Safed, some managed to reach Jerusalem and Damascus, while a few went on to Egypt, where they constituted a considerable burden on the local Jewish community.

These evacuations actually improved the lot of those who were effected, at least for the moment, since they were sent to colonies which had considerably more food and supplies than did crowded cities. The general shortages which subsequently decimated the entire Empire ultimately hurt them as well, however, resulting in many deaths from starvation and disease during most of 1918 despite Ottoman efforts to alleviate their sufferings as well as those of other subjects remaining in Palestine at the time. Subsequent charges, however, spread by the "Secret War Propaganda Department" of the British Foreign Office in London under the direction of Lord Bryce and his young assistant, Arnold Toynbee, under the stimulus of the Nili agents who reached London, that Ottoman soldiers mistreated the deportees and looted Jewish synagogues, were denied in 1918 by Allenby's aide Clayton despite the efforts of war Council Secretary Mark Sykes in London to use them for propaganda purposes against the central Powers. After the failure of his expedition intended to capture the Suez Canal and the news that the Serif Husyein was leading an Arab revolt against the Sultan, Cemal Pasha became much more sympathetic to the Jews in Palestine, working with local community leaders, including some with close Zionist connections, to lessen the suffering of the remaining Jews.

Jews throughout the empire suffered terribly, however, along with other elements of the population, from the badly mismanaged martial law administration, which kept the bulk of food, fuel and clothing for the army. These conditions were exacerbated by destructive communal fighting among the different ethnic groups, the arrival of thousands of Muslim and Jewish refugees from southeastern Europe as well as from the eastern Anatolian territories occupied by Russia, large and destructive urban fires in Istanbul, İzmir, Salonica and elsewhere, Russian naval bombardment of Ottoman towns and villages along the Black Sea coast, banditry and foreign invasions, particularly those of Russia in eastern Anatolia and Britain in Irak, all of which led to massacres and counter-massacres, critical shortages of food, clothing and fuel, and famines and epidemics, particularly during the latter days of the war when disso-

lution of the Ottoman army and the disorganized flight of thousands of armed soldiers added to the chaos and anarchy. Adding even more to the misery was an Ottoman policy of deporting entire populations, Muslims, Christians and Jews alike, from the war zones of Eastern Anatolia, Thrace, Gallipoli, and later Palestine, movements which, given the critical shortages of food, disorganized administration, an almost complete lack of internal security in the face of large-scale bandit attacks, and widespread breakdowns of the railroad system, resulted in great suffering and heavy casualties. The result was an Ottoman genocide, the deaths of some two million people, twenty five percent of the entire population, including as many as fifty percent in the eastern war zones, and the exodus of an equal number under brutal conditions. Many Jews in Eretz Israel, Gallipoli, and other areas invaded by the enemy were deported along with other elements of the population, but there was no serious persecution of Jews, despite British propaganda claims to the contrary, and since most Jews lived outside the war zones and were helped by food shipments from American Jews, few died in comparison with other elements of the population.

After a British force led by General Allenby captured Jerusalem in 1917, British War Cabinet Middle East advisor, Sir Mark Sykes, asked to be supplied with evidence of Ottoman persecution of Palestinian Jews during the war, but when told by Allenby's intelligence officer Sir Reginald Wingate and later General Clayton that there was none, since no significant persecution had occurred, Sykes made up his own reports so as to provide fuel for the anti Ottoman and anti German propaganda then being used to get the United States into the war on the side of Britain<sup>1</sup> When

<sup>1</sup> See FO 371/3055/217597, Sykes to Wingate, 17 November 1917; FO 371/3055/223130, Wingate to Sykes, 21 November 1917, which reported "From personal observation, the chief difficulty would appear to be provision of cattle and ploughing animals that the Turks carried off in their hurried retreat, but inhabitants generally do not appear to be in any worse condition than the rest of the people in the present war zone;" FO 371/9333/W/44, Sykes to Clayton, 2 January 1918; FO 371/9383, Wingate to Foreign Office, 15 January 1918, and Sykes minute "This is vile and barren stuff. He has no idea of propaganda and goes wrong at every turn." FO 371/3388/6074/W/44, Sykes to Clayton, 14 January 1919, "From propaganda point of view in United States of America, Ireland, Russia, and Balkans it is most urgent we should be able to give full detailed and interesting information; FO 371/3388/10748, Clayton to Sykes, 12 January 1919, "I do not think there is much solid ground for any artificial propaganda," with Sykes minute stressing the importance of propaganda to "give us and the Entente as a whole a hold over the vital, vocal and sentimental forces of Jewry..."

his agents could not find evidence of persecution, he made them up and sent them on to Jerusalem to be sent back as what he called “authentic evidence” that the Ottomans had persecuted the Jews in particular.

The Turkish Republic, which rose out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, has continued to provide refuge for European Jewry, and in return Turkish Jews have continued their strong attachment to Turkey. During and after the Bolshevik revolution, thousands of Jews found refuge in Turkey from massacres inflicted not only by the Bolsheviks but also by the Whites who were attempting to restore the rule of the Czar. During the 1930's and World War II, hundreds of Jewish professors and scientists who were being thrown out of their positions in Nazi Germany were appointed as professors and directors of institutes in the major universities, schools and laboratories of Turkey. Thousands of Jews of all sorts fled across Turkey's borders in flight from Nazi oppression and massacre despite the opposition, not only of the Nazis but also of Great Britain, which correctly feared that many of the refugees would ultimately find refuge in Palestine. In more recent times Jews have gained refuge in Turkey from persecution in Saddam Husain's Iraq and Khomeini's Iran. And until Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel, Turkey was the only Muslim country to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel. It is a remarkable record, and the Quincentennial Foundation well deserves the support of all in its efforts to commemorate the long centuries of Jewish life in the Ottoman and Turkish states.