
1

Community and Society

ARRIVAL IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The power of the Ottomans grew constantly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. What had been no more than a small tribal outpost on the Anatolian frontier of Byzantium, had become an empire in the process of securing control of the major part of the Balkans, ultimately conquering Constantinople itself in 1453. The Ottomans put an end to Mameluk rule in the Holy Land and Egypt in 1516–17 and, by the mid-sixteenth century, had overwhelmed the greater part of the Near East and North Africa. The rest of the world now saw them as a menacing and invincible force.

Developing from its initial status as a frontier principality into a sophisticated bureaucratic state, deriving its legitimacy from both Islam and pre-Muslim imperial traditions of the Middle East and Asia, the Empire succeeded for several centuries in mobilizing all the dynamic forces of the societies it governed. Separation between religion and the state did not exist: the sultan, as caliph, was responsible for implementing Muslim religious law (*sharia*), in the exercise of justice. He was also theoretically the owner of the whole country and its subjects. The strongly centralized bureaucracy, the army, with the janissaries – a corps of slave soldiers – at its heart, and the clergy formed the three pillars of the ruling élite. These were the only groups that escaped taxation. The rest of the population, tax-paying subjects or *reaya* (the flock), remained strictly separate from the ruling class. However, access to this class was not hereditary; it was open to all Muslims or converts who gained renown for knowledge or military prowess.¹

2 Sephardi Jewry

The ruling élite, whose economic survival depended on the continuation of tax gathering from the *reaya*, attempted systematically to eliminate any concentration of economic and social power which might challenge its authority. It was consequently difficult for horizontal bonds to be forged capable of creating autonomous forms of authority and legitimacy. All power and all status depended on a vertical relationship with the center.

Most of the Jews came to live in large towns or in zones which were closely controlled by the center. They had relatively little to fear from a periphery which, at least during the first centuries of the Empire, was rendered harmless from the outset. For this reason, when they did become the objects of local incidents, such as accusations of ritual murder, the Jews usually succeeded in securing the protection of the Ottoman sultan and the central authorities and in obtaining redress. Such a *de facto* alliance with the center functioned in the Ottoman imperial state for several centuries, the Jews initially rendering many services to the government in return for its protection. And although the importance of the Jewish role declined over time, the model was nonetheless perpetuated until the end of the Empire. The Jewish communities continued to identify strongly with the central authorities and regarded the appearance of new national options in the modern period with mistrust.

From the start, the Ottoman attitude to the Jews was naturally dictated by considerations of self-interest. In a society where the dominant Ottoman Turkish element, formed of soldiers and peasants, was abandoning other sectors of activity, especially international trade, to conquered Christians or foreigners, the Jews could appear as a reliable force. Their skills could be useful and they were not suspected of harboring anti-Ottoman sentiment. The Ottoman policy of tolerance and protection in regard to the Jews had thus already taken on the dimensions of an established tradition from the first centuries of the Empire, well before the arrival of the Sephardim from the Iberian peninsula.

The important role the Jews played in the Empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was therefore closely linked to the Ottoman perception of their usefulness for craft and trade and for their administrative talents. Here, as elsewhere, was the real basis of the Judeo-Ottoman coexistence. Its justification in legal theory was, however, couched in the vocabulary of traditional Islamic discourse. In fact, the Ottoman attitude to the Jews followed the classic model of the *dhimma*² in Muslim lands.

The Muslim tradition (*sunna*) made express provision for the presence of non-Muslims in the land of Islam, so long as they could claim kinship with the Book, that is, the Bible. It forbade their conversion by force, and prescribed the details of their status in a series of stipulations developed in the first centuries that followed the rise of Islam. A hierarchy existed

among non-Muslims which determined their status. Pagans had the choice of death or conversion; Jews and Christians, followers of a revealed religion, and Sabaeans and Zoroastrians had a third possibility: submission. This was governed by a pact (*dhimma*) whereby their new masters guaranteed the public and private rights of these categories of non-Muslims, the people of the Book (*ahl-al kitab*),³ living in territories conquered by Muslims. Those subject to the pact came to be called *dhimmis* (*zimmi* in Turkish).

The *dhimma* conferred a legal status on the *dhimmis*, who were to be protected and tolerated, even if it transformed them into second-class subjects in Muslim society. The origin of this type of contract, or at least of some of its prescriptions, is said to originate with the treaties the prophet Muhammad concluded with conquered populations. These prescriptions were said to be developed and written in the form of a pact under the caliph Umar, though they were probably actually formulated in their final form in the Abbasid period (750–1258). Moreover, several versions of this apocryphal pact exist. Its implementation varied with regime and period. In fact, it is difficult to speak of a consensus on this subject in the Muslim world. According to Muslim jurists, the *dhimma* was a bilateral, permanent contract, and each of the contracting parties was bound to respect its terms.

The restrictions which affected the *dhimmis* had social implications, symbolic as well as practical. They were there in order to indicate the supremacy of Islam and the superiority of the Muslims. The major penalty affecting the *dhimmis* was the payment of a poll tax (*cizye*). In return, they obtained the guarantee of life and property as well as the free practice of their religion. The *dhimmis* also paid a series of other regular or *ad hoc* taxes.

These restrictions were counterbalanced by concessions. The personal status of the non-Muslim was governed by the *jus religionis*. Thus, the protected communities enjoyed a large degree of freedom as far as their internal affairs were concerned. The *dhimmis* were subject to the authority of their own leaders and judges and could lead their personal, family, and religious lives in accordance with their own laws and customs.

The restrictions were more apparent in daily life. The inferiority of the *dhimmis* was defined in social and religious terms. The place assigned them in civil society underpinned their inferiority. Inequality pervaded their relationships with the outside Muslim world. Their clothing, headgear, and even names marked them off from Muslims. Their homes and buildings had to be lower than those of the dominant faith. They were forbidden to carry weapons and did not have the right to ride "noble" animals such as horses and camels. A *dhimmi* could not marry a Muslim woman nor take a Muslim slave. His testimony was inadmissible in a lawsuit involving a Muslim.

4 *Sephardi Jewry*

What must not be lost sight of is that, however numerous these restrictions affecting Jews in Ottoman lands, they were insignificant compared with what Jews had recently experienced in Spain or elsewhere in medieval Europe. The legal tradition concerning non-Muslims was never a fixed, immutable entity that remained static over the centuries, but was constantly interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of current political and social realities. Hence, the implementation of restrictions varied in severity from place to place, from one regime to another.

A new and triumphant force, offering a safe refuge, the Ottoman Empire attracted many Jews even before the Expulsion. Edirne (Adrianople), for example, the capital of the Empire before the conquest of Constantinople, saw the arrival of Jews expelled from Hungary in 1376. Jews driven out of France are also known to have reached this city after 1394.⁴ The existence of this community, as well as the immigrants' attitude towards their new masters, were expressed in the famous letter in which Rabbi Isaac Zarfati invited his fellow Jews in Europe to settle in Ottoman lands:

I have heard of the afflictions, more bitter than death, that have befallen our brethren in Germany – of the tyrannical laws, the compulsory baptisms and the banishments, which are of daily occurrence. I am told that when they flee from one place a yet harder fate befalls them in another . . . on all sides I learn of anguish of soul and torment of body; of daily exactions levied by merciless oppressors. The clergy and the monks, false priests that they are, rise up against the unhappy people of God . . . for this reason they have made a law that every Jew found upon a Christian ship bound for the East shall be flung into the sea. Alas! How evil are the people of God in Germany entreated; how sad is their strength departed! They are driven hither and thither, and they are pursued even unto death . . . Brothers and teachers, friends and acquaintances! I, Isaac Zarfati, though I spring from a French stock, yet I was born in Germany, and sat there at the feet of my esteemed teachers. I proclaim to you that Turkey is a land wherein nothing is lacking, and where, if you will, all shall yet be well with you. The way to the Holy Land lies open to you through Turkey. Is it not better for you to live under Muslims than under Christians? Here every man may dwell at peace under his own vine and fig tree. Here, you are allowed to wear the most precious garments. In Christendom, on the contrary, you dare not even venture to clothe your children in red or in blue, according to our taste, without exposing them to the insult of being beaten black and blue, or kicked green and red, and therefore are ye condemned to go about meanly clad in sad colored raiment . . . and now, seeing all these things, O Israel! Wherefore sleepest thou? Arise! And leave this accursed land forever!⁵

Some Spanish Jews, fleeing the massacres of 1391, also eventually reached Ottoman lands. They were followed by some Jews expelled from France in 1394, some of whom settled in Edirne. Names such as Zarfati and Fransez (Frenchman), Yarhi (Lunel), Harari (Montpellier) bear witness to this

immigration.⁶ They were followed in the course of the fifteenth century by small waves of immigrants from other European areas, such as Bavaria for example, after the expulsion in 1470.⁷ Most of the immigrants settled in Balkan lands controlled by the Ottomans, in Edirne, as well as in areas covered by present-day Bulgaria. This explains why there was a synagogue in Sofia in the fifteenth century, placed under the authority of Rabbi Benjamin Meir Halevi of Nuremberg. The Jewish district of La Baviera in Sofia is proof of the presence of German Jews, corroborated also by family names such as Zalman, Calman, Aciman, Tadjer (Deutscher-Taytscher), Eskenazi, and Zvi (Hirsch), to be found in all the Ottoman Balkans.⁸ Some East European and Italian Jews also made their home in this expanding empire. The names of the synagogues, as well as onomastics, are evidence of these diverse waves of migration.

Nevertheless, the great majority of Jews settled in Ottoman territory before 1492 was formed of Greek-speaking elements, the Romaniots.⁹ As the Ottoman state expanded and gained ascendancy over initially Byzantine areas, so the number of Jewish communities under its jurisdiction increased. Most of the Rabbanite and Karaite (Jews who did not recognize the authority of the Oral Law) Romaniots remained in the Balkans and Asia Minor.¹⁰ Arabophone Jewish communities were to be found to the South and East of Anatolia, spread over the major part of the Fertile Crescent.

The sultan Mehmed II (1451–81), who conquered Constantinople, used Jews to populate the city, deserted by its Greek inhabitants, and to revive its economic life, which had formerly been dominated by Venetians and Genoese. The population of the capital after the conquest approximated between 50,000 and 60,000 inhabitants.¹¹ As there was insufficient voluntary immigration, Mehmed II resorted to deportations. The motives for this policy of population transfer, called *sürgün* in Turkish, were primarily economic, a means of implementing settlement. Many different ethnic-religious groups, including Muslims, as well as Jews, were affected by deportations during the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries.¹² For example, a number of Romaniots, sometimes entire communities, were moved from places such as Edirne, Salonika, Philippopolis, Nicopolis, and Lamia to be settled in the old Venetian sector of Istanbul.¹³ They subsequently moved on to the Istanbul quarter of Hasköy, which remained a Jewish district until the contemporary period. Even though they were not intended as punitive measures, these forced removals were indeed a harsh trial to many communities. The Karaites also suffered deportation en masse to the new Ottoman capital. If the Romaniot Jews had suffered persecutions under the Byzantines, the arrival of the Ottomans did not signal an immediate improvement in their lot, as it was often accompanied by similar forced uprootings.

The policy of *sürgün* was pursued into the sixteenth century. It is known, for example, that 150 of the richest Jewish families of Salonika were exiled to Rhodes in 1523. In 1526, large numbers of Jews from Buda were transplanted to Istanbul, Edirne, and Sofia, where they founded new congregations. In 1576–7 an attempt was made to move hundreds of Jewish families from Safed to Cyprus.¹⁴ While this practice of transferring populations eventually lapsed, it nevertheless had noticeable repercussions on the distribution of populations in the Empire. Its impact on the Jewish community was particularly severe, with demographic and organizational consequences, in addition to the anguish of uprooting and the difficulties of starting a new life. Jewish groups, who did not form part of the mass of the conquerors but rather were of the subject populations, faced particular hardships. In the sixteenth century, the Jews tried various means to have these transfer decrees annulled. The deportations, principally from the Balkans and Anatolia, led to the disappearance of entire communities from some regions and to the creation of new ones in places where previously there had been no Jews. Indeed, this was how Edirne and Istanbul became the two greatest cities of the Empire with a marked concentration of Jews, even before the arrival of the Spanish expellees, while other cities remained devoid of Jews until the massive wave of Sephardi immigration. According to the 1477 census, the Ottoman capital contained 1,647 Jewish households, which represented about 11 percent of its population,¹⁵ a very high proportion for the time.

The large Jewish population of Istanbul indicates the importance of the Romaniot community, comprising Rabbanites and Karaites, well before the arrival of the Sephardim. The Romaniots of the city mainly worked in trade, and their role was particularly important in farming taxes, the collection of customs dues, and in the mint.¹⁶ They controlled all major tax farming in the Istanbul region in 1470–80.¹⁷ Jews engaging in this type of activity in Ottoman lands before 1492 sometimes went into partnership with non-Jews. But very often, Jewish tax farming was based on the community of the region, which became the guarantor for its collection.¹⁸ Jews continued to play an important role in this sector in the sixteenth century when the Romaniots were joined by a number of Sephardim who had already proved their ability in this field in the Iberian peninsula.

The Jews' relatively high economic profile in Istanbul and other Ottoman towns in the Balkans naturally inclined the sultans to favor Jewish immigration into the Empire. This economically useful population arrived at a propitious moment. The Jews had already proven their usefulness to the sultans' demographic and economic policies, and the state had much to gain from welcoming the post-1492 immigrants, who could add to the wealth of the country without posing a political problem. Consequently,

they were not merely authorized to come; they were actively encouraged. Some settled in the harbor towns where they landed, while others were guided to specific localities. The new communities were exempted from certain taxes, although the poll tax (*cizye*, or later, *haraç*, in Turkish) was regularly paid. The story is told that when the sultan Bayezid II (1491–1512) learned of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, he tried to attract the exiles to his territories for political purposes:

So the sultan Bayezid, king of Turkey, heard all the evil that the Spanish king had brought upon the Jews, and heard that they were seeking a refuge and a resting place. He took pity on them, and wrote letters and sent emisaries to proclaim throughout his kingdom that none of his city rulers may be wicked enough to refuse entry to Jews or expel them. Instead, they were to be given a gracious welcome.¹⁹

Bayezid is also said to have voiced the following sentiments concerning the rulers of Spain: "Can you call such a king wise and intelligent? He is impoverishing his country and enriching my kingdom."²⁰

All these quotations are taken from Jewish sources; nothing equivalent can be found in Ottoman documentation. The Ottomans welcomed the Sephardim as a useful population. However, these apocryphal sentences throw more light on the state of mind of the Jews of the period than on formal Ottoman policy. They also express deep-seated Jewish expectations, in the face of the terrible shock of the Expulsion, which would continue to foster a strong submerged messianic current, already present in the Iberian peninsula and destined to surface a century and a half later with Sabbateanism.²¹

Elijah Capsali (1450–1523), a Romaniot, himself descended from those who had suffered from the Ottoman conquest, was one of the first to formulate this new perception of the Ottomans in his chronicle, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* ("The Lesser Order of Elijah"), written in 1523. He linked gratitude to an empire which had been so good as to offer safe haven to the expellees with the model of the good king, which the new arrivals had projected onto an Ottoman context of which they had no experience, in a sort of continuity that attached them to the "lost paradise" of Spain where "good kings" had once been their protectors. This was another myth, magnified by exile and the difficulties of adjustment which are the lot of all immigrants. Yet the Romaniots who had been major objects of the settlement and of the repopulation policy of the new masters and who had not had a smooth transition to Ottoman rule in the first decades after the fall of Constantinople, could not have left the new arrivals in the dark about the local situation.²² Nothing, it seems, could stem this strong projection of goodwill onto a sovereign who could be the source of no evil and whose

help would always be forthcoming. It should be recalled that under this same Bayezid II, whom Capsali extolled, the Jews were subjected to major restrictions stemming from the particularly devout concerns of the sultan.²³ But could the lost *Sefarad* not be recreated on Ottoman soil, and thus make the transplantation easier by the rediscovery of an already familiar terrain? Was Capsali influenced by the hopes cherished by the Spanish immigrants? Was there also perhaps a desire to please the Ottoman authorities? In any case, these myths remain alive today and have received new currency in the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Sephardim in Turkey.

Depictions similar to Capsali's can be found in other testimonies. For example, the letter which Jews from Provence, living in Salonika, sent to their coreligionists expelled from Provence in the beginning of the Sixteenth century, contains the words: "Come and join us in Turkey and you will live in peace and freedom as we do."²⁴ In about the same period, the poet Samuel Usque describes Salonika in the following terms:

It is the mother of Israel which has grown stronger on the foundations of the religion, which yields excellent plants and fruit trees, unequalled the world over. Its fruits are delicious, because watered by rivers. Jews of Europe and other countries, persecuted and banished, have come to seek refuge there, and this town has received them with love and cordiality, as if it were our revered mother Jerusalem.²⁵

The picture the immigrants held of their new "homeland" could not fail to be positive in comparison with the sufferings previously endured. The fact remains that all Jewish historiography would be influenced by this idyllic vision, putting the Ottoman sovereigns on a pedestal and mythifying the welcome given the Sephardim, without identifying the larger political and economic picture.

Two major waves of Sephardi migration to the Empire can be distinguished. The first was formed of the Spanish expellees of 1492 and those who succeeded in leaving Portugal after the mass, forced conversions of 1497. Of course, many did not arrive on Ottoman soil immediately. They stayed in various regions of Italy for a few years before moving east, either by land from the Adriatic, across the Balkans and Asia Minor, or by sea towards the main Ottoman ports. The second wave, much more fragmented and numerically smaller, brought the Marrano immigration, principally from Portugal after the definitive establishment of the Inquisition in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁶ This immigration continued in spurts into the seventeenth century. While many followed their predecessors' Mediterranean itinerary, the Marranos also took more circuitous routes, via the Low Countries in the North.

Ottoman statistics provide ample evidence of the increased Jewish presence in certain large centers of the Empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century which resulted from these migratory movements, with hundreds of Jewish households in cities such as Istanbul, Salonika, Bursa, and Edirne.²⁷ The contours of the Jewish population of the Ottoman capital emerge clearly from censuses taken at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1603, 973 "new" Jewish households were reported, principally formed by post-1492 immigrants. The 1608 census recorded 1,222 "old" Romaniot households, which brings the total to 2,195. Overall therefore, the Sephardi newcomers did not yet dominate numerically the Jewish community of the city.²⁸

The 1478 census does not record the presence of a single Jew in Salonika.²⁹ The Judeo-Byzantine community of that town had been transferred to Istanbul after its conquest by the Turks. The registers for subsequent decades point to a strong increase in the Jewish population, the overwhelming majority Sephardic. In 1529, Salonika contained 2,645 Jewish households against 1,229 Muslim and 989 Greek households.³⁰ This community continued to expand as a result of natural growth and arrivals from various European countries, as well as of Marranos from the Iberian peninsula. Salonika thus became one of the most important Jewish centers in the world in the sixteenth century and the leading Jewish city on the Mediterranean, its 2,933 Jewish households in 1613 representing more than 68 percent of its total population.³¹

The important commercial city of Valona, in Albania, contained 609 Jewish households in the sixteenth century; in Bulgaria, Nicopolis possessed 186, Sofia 21, Vidin 31, Philippopolis 41.³² These latter cities gradually expanded into fairly important Sephardi centers. Other Bulgarian and Anatolian towns and the Aegean islands also housed Jewish settlements of variable size. In the mid-sixteenth century, Sephardim settled in Uskub (Skopje) and Monastir (Bitola) in Macedonia, and in Belgrade and Sarajevo. The Sephardim took up residence in Belgrade after the Turkish conquest in 1521; near the end of the seventeenth century, the community numbered some 800 persons.³³ At that time it was reputed to be the third center of Jewish learning in the Balkans, after Istanbul and Salonika. As for Sarajevo, 15 families of Salonikan merchants settled there in 1565; 16 years later, there is mention of 60 families, and the estimate for the eighteenth century is of about 1,000 Jews.³⁴ The Jewish community of the city grew uninterruptedly. It was referred to as the little Jerusalem. In Venetian Dalmatia, the republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik), a vassal state of the Ottoman sultan, and Spalato (Split), where the port owes its birth to a Sephardi, also had Judeo-Iberian communities that played an important role in trade between the Empire, Venice, and Ancona.³⁵

The conquest of Mameluk Palestine in 1516–17 cleared the path for a revival of Jewish settlement in the region. In this way many Sephardim reached the Holy Land, although their presence remained limited compared with the Jewish populations of the Balkans and the Ottoman capital. Gaza contained 115 Jewish households in 1548–9, and Jerusalem 324 in 1553–4.³⁶ Safed had 719 in 1553–6 and as many as 977 in 1596–7, after reaching a total of 1,700 Jewish households in 1568, which corresponded to the period of the town's growth.³⁷ The demographic fall apparent at the end of the sixteenth century was the direct result of the economic problems experienced by the city, which had been, with Salonika, an important center of the textile industry. These problems caused Jews to emigrate to other areas.

Internal economic developments also contributed to the redistribution of the Jewish populations. They explain the presence of an important Jewish community in Izmir in the seventeenth century, following the arrival of the Marranos and of large numbers of Jews from Salonika in particular, on account of the commercial boom Izmir experienced from the second half of the sixteenth century, which was linked to the activities of the Levant Companies.³⁸

The overall total of Jewish families that arrived in the Ottoman Empire after 1492 is estimated at 12,000, which represents approximately 60,000 persons.³⁹ Some estimates suggest a figure of 50,000 for the whole Jewish population of the Empire at the end of the first quarter of the sixteenth century,⁴⁰ and others put this at 150,000, making the Ottoman Jewish community one of the largest in Europe.⁴¹ Variations in demographic assessments are a constant factor as far as the Ottoman Empire is concerned, even in the nineteenth century. It is important to note that the Ottoman statistics were used for levying taxes, and that it was always very much in the interests of the Jewish community, which was taxed as a group, to underestimate its size, so that the real figures could well have been higher than the official count. In any case, and even on the basis of the data supplied by official censuses, 12,000 families represented a very considerable group for the time. The Mediterranean cities were relatively underpopulated in that period. Venice, for example, had 100,000 people in 1509 rising to 175,000 in 1575; Naples and Milan each contained 100,000 souls at the end of the fifteenth century.⁴² None of the large European cities of the day sheltered more than a few thousand Jews. By comparison, Istanbul and Salonika, as well as the Empire as a whole, appeared to have very large Jewish agglomerations, thus illustrating the eastward movement of the Jewish world's center of gravity in the course of the previous two or three centuries.

COMMUNAL CONFLICTS

Relations between the Sephardim and the autochthonous Jews remained strained and stormy for decades. Differences in interpretation of Jewish religious law (*halakhah*), customs, and culture divided the communities, whether Sephardi, Ashkenazi, or Romaniot. Nevertheless, the real issue was the battle between Sephardim and Romaniots. Istanbul, where the bulk of Romaniot Jewry was concentrated, paid the heaviest price for these endemic frictions.

Most of the Romaniots in the conquered city had been transferred from other regions of the Empire. In Istanbul, they reorganized themselves according to their native town or region. The new Sephardi arrivals would later adopt the same model.⁴³ It is not known whether the Ottomans imposed this type of organization or if the Jews themselves preferred it, since they had been deported in groups from one place or one region. This geographic mode of community restructuring was conducive to the formation of self-identifying units, thus strengthening their sense of Romaniot identity. In the early days, this identification was helpful in overcoming the difficulties of adjusting to an unknown environment. The uprooting they had suffered was partially alleviated by the attachment to the place of origin, while the shared experience of uprooting and common origins welded the community together.

It should not be forgotten that the deportees and their descendants were not allowed to leave their new city without express permission.⁴⁴ In some cases they were even forbidden to contract marriages with outsiders. For economic reasons, the deportee was required to continue with the trade he had practiced prior to being transferred. These restrictions were aimed at implanting the exiles by force into their new context, if only by compulsory restrictions.

Added to this was the fact that, despite everything, the Romaniots, even displaced, were autochthonous Jews when compared with the Sephardi immigrants. The Romaniots had experienced the Ottoman regime in their native region and this familiarity eased their relationship with it. It must also be taken into account that the Ottomans had offered some benefits, such as exemption from certain taxes, to Romaniots who were deported or came of their own free will, in order initially to attract them and subsequently make it easier for them to settle. They did the same for the Sephardim in the early days. The new masters of the country needed this population, as well as others, in order to rebuild Istanbul.

In the beginning, when they were slightly more numerous than the Sephardim, quite naturally, the Romaniots appeared as the stronger group

in Istanbul, anxious to defend their identity in the face of another group of exiles who had chosen departure rather than conversion to Christianity and enjoyed a high cultural reputation in the Jewish world. To a certain extent, the Romaniots and the expellees from the Iberian peninsula shared the same fate; nonetheless, the expellees disembarked in an area which was totally foreign to them and, in theory, should only have disadvantaged them as the most recent arrivals. However, in the long run the restrictions imposed on the Romaniots as a result of the *sürgün* process proved particularly disadvantageous. The Jews expelled from the Iberian peninsula, for their part, had to get acquainted not only with their new land and new rulers but also with the Jews who were already there.

The Romaniot congregations who had been transferred to the capital, as well as those already in existence when the town was conquered, came under the heading of *sürgün* or *sürgünlü* (from “deportees”), while congregations formed by the new arrivals were called *kendi gelen* (“came of their own free will”), names which are still found in the seventeenth century.⁴⁵ The last category did not only include the expellees from the Iberian peninsula, but also Italian, German, and Hungarian Jews. The Italian and Ashkenazi congregations in Istanbul and Salonika gradually joined the dominant Sephardi community. Although this Ottoman distinction was a fiscal measure, leading to the formation of two separate communities, each with its own system of collecting taxes, it is still a good indication of the margin for maneuver left to those who voluntarily chose to settle in the Empire. They were not put into the same structure as the Romaniots. The “welcomed” (to adopt their own self-image), beyond the gratitude they pledged to their “welcomers,” were conscious of having made a choice, first in leaving the Iberian peninsula, then in directing their steps towards the Empire rather than other destinations, such as Italy.

The Sephardim formed a group which was confident of its strength, endowed with great self-esteem, equipped with a stratum of creative intellectuals, and proud of its skills.⁴⁶ The Romaniots themselves, like other Jewish communities around the Mediterranean, had consulted the Jewish thinkers of Spain over a long period. The Sephardim therefore arrived with a glorious cultural and social reputation, or at least such a reputation in the Jewish world. Magnified by the vagaries of exile, this past was mythified and glorified. Judeo-Spanish identity had its roots in this past, in a collective historical experience, and in a fate of shared suffering resulting from the wrenching from a land that the Iberian Jews considered their own – in accordance with a myth that their presence dated back to the destruction of the first Temple (568 BCE). This perception was linked to the right they claimed over Iberian soil. The idealization of the homeland and the value placed on the cultural heritage were embedded in this

context. It was again this attachment to Spain which impelled the expellees to emphasize their links with the city or region whence they came. By perpetuating their customs and traditions in their new host country, they would be able to recreate the "paradise lost" and their sufferings would assume some meaning. If they had made sacrifices in order to remain Jews, they also had the sacred duty to hand on this Hispanicity which was inseparable from their Jewishness.

How acute this problem of transmission was becomes clear when the experiences of the expellees are examined over several generations. Each generation was obsessed with the question of continuity.⁴⁷ The experience of exile had literally destroyed families, separated couples, and left many parents without their children. Forced conversions, disease, abductions, and exhaustion shattered the family nucleus. Some had remained in the peninsula, preferring conversion to departure. This explains why many arrived in the Empire alone, without a family to support them in confronting the new reality. Various calamities such as epidemics and the high death rate which ensued weighed heavily for several generations over the newcomers' perception of their lives. In this period, when the Jew remained attached to the faith, when, furthermore, the notion of "individual" as we know it did not yet exist, the destruction of families meant above all a break in the continuity of the lineage and a challenge to the survival of the Jewish people itself.

In their host countries therefore, the Sephardim organized themselves into separate communities. They did not adopt the *halakhic* rulings (religious law) and the *minhag* (customs) of the autochthonous communities, thereby infringing an accepted rule in the Jewish world, that the newcomer must bow to the customs of the place. This did not fail to provoke serious conflicts between the communities: in this case, it was the new arrivals who wanted to impose their law on the locals, and who rejected, scorned, or disdained local customs. The synagogue liturgy, the decisions based on religious law which regulated the daily life of the group, traditions, cultural activity – all became grounds for confrontation. The expellees placed their past teachers on a pedestal and their inherited culture above anything in their new surroundings. Not to betray this heritage was not only to keep faith with the past but also to trust in the future, through the maintenance of a tradition.

In places where the Sephardim found well established communities, such as the Romaniots in Istanbul or Edirne, or the Mustarabim (Arab-speaking Jews) in Safed or other Jewish centers in North Africa, the general assimilation to Judeo-Iberian practices did not take place overnight. At first, it met opposition, which varied with the size of the local non-Sephardi community and with its own self-image. It took time for the Sephardim to

impose their authority when confronted with the Romaniota, whose scholars fought to safeguard their customs and traditions and prevent the newcomers from speaking for the whole Jewish population. Nevertheless, the Sephardim eventually emerged triumphant, succeeding in imposing their will around the turn of the seventeenth century. The Romaniota underwent a gradual process of Judeo-Hispanicization and, except for a few isolated centers, such as Ioannina in Epirus, Arta, or Corfu (outside the Empire), completely assimilated into the Sephardi group.⁴⁸

Their growing numbers do not explain why the Sephardim succeeded in dominating the Romaniota in a city such as Istanbul, since even by 1623 they did not yet constitute a majority.⁴⁹ It was the weight of their scholars, their culture, and the dynamism of their many rabbis which tipped the scales. In this Jewish world still inseparably bound up with the religious, in the framework of an autonomy itself based on religion, power was in the hands of religious leaders. There are other ways of explaining the Romaniota's decline. The Sephardim disembarked with a network of relationships outside the Empire which could not fail to be of service to them, since it represented a window on to the world of the Infidels for the Ottomans. This asset worked in favor of the expellees, not only for economic reasons, but also by facilitating their relationships with the authorities.

The arrival of the Marranos in the sixteenth century widened this link with the outside and breathed a certain new dynamism into local Sephardim, even though conflicts occurred between the Marranos, who were regarded as newcomers, and the previous settlers.⁵⁰ What is more, these Marranos brought capital and skills born of experience in Christian lands. In this period some lay leaders became privileged intermediaries between the Jewish communities and the Ottomans, because of the place they held in the intricate machinery of the Palace. Their number included such personalities as Shealtiel, a Sephardi; Joseph Nasi, the famous Duke of Naxos, a Marrano from Portugal, and his aunt, Doña Gracia Mendes; the Marrano diplomat the Duke of Mytilene, Salomon Abenaish; and the doctors Moses and Joseph Hamon, probably natives of Granada. Provincial communities were also obliged to go through these intercessors to settle delicate problems. These men helped to advance the cause of the Sephardim at the Court, and by so doing strengthened their position in the capital.

When they arrived, the Sephardim found Moses Capsali (1420–96/7), the spiritual leader of the Jews of Istanbul and the surrounding area, apparently appointed to the position of “Chief Rabbi” by Mehmed II after the conquest of Constantinople. He was succeeded in 1498 by Elijah Mizrahi (although the precise nature and importance of his responsibilities remain unconfirmed).⁵¹ Both were Romaniota. There was no successor

when Mizrahi died because of the power struggles between Romaniots and Sephardim. Responsibility for collecting the taxes, formerly entrusted to the holder of this office, was henceforth assumed by a Sephardi lay leader.⁵² The presence of people like Capsali and Mizrahi was initially an advantage for the Romaniots. The subsequent dissolution of a unified leadership at the head of Istanbul Jewry and the rise of Sephardi lay personalities as intermediaries was a factor in changing the balance of forces.

At the outset, the Romaniots had also been a group of exiles, and had needed to respond to new challenges in the same way as those who would later join them. They now began to lose both economic and political ground *vis-à-vis* the Ottoman central power. The restrictions which had been imposed on them deepened their isolation from the outside world at a time when the centers of European international economy were moving from the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic. Family connections enabled the Sephardim to continue to play a part in the new economic configuration, even though they, too, gradually became isolated, losing their economic power in the Empire to Christian groups who were more closely linked to the West. Other conjunctural factors, specific to the seventeenth century, relating to structural and taxation issues, helped to weaken the Romaniots' position.

In towns such as Salonika, where the Sephardim did not find local communities, the question of a balance of forces between them and the Romaniots did not even arise. The Sephardim also exercised power over the Italian and Ashkenazi communities who were numerically weak. As a result, in Istanbul there were three principal Jewish communities at the end of the sixteenth century: the Sephardi, the Romaniot, and the Karaite.⁵³ The latter, which was also Byzantine, was not directly involved in the struggle for hegemony, because it was regarded as separate from the struggling Rabbanite communities.

In Safed, the Sephardim did not integrate into the existing *Mustarabi* community. Instead, they established a parallel system of communal organization without any real opposition from local scholars or from the population as a whole.⁵⁴ These local Jews did not have the self-confidence to confront the newcomers as the Romaniots had done. Subsequently, the Sephardim used their prestige, numbers, and strength to impose their own norms. In Jerusalem and other towns in Palestine, they gained the upper hand over the other communities, though they did not necessarily Judeo-Hispanicize them as in the case of the Romaniots in the North.⁵⁵ In Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo, the Sephardim retained their specific character for a long time because of their economic supremacy.⁵⁶ However, in these populous Arabophone sectors of the Empire, they were gradually absorbed by the autochthonous communities, who maintained longstanding relations with the authorities and were familiar with local practices.

The same trends can also be observed in North Africa, where disputes between *megorashim* (the expelled) and *toshavim* (local residents) were not rare. In some regions, the expellees were forced to assimilate into existing groups; elsewhere, they founded parallel communities, in Tangier, Tetuan, and Fez, for example, or took over the leadership of an existing community.⁵⁷ They rapidly became dominant in the economy as well as in rabbinic learning.⁵⁸ The so-called "Castilian" law, for example, was eventually imposed on all of Moroccan Jewry. In addition, at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, Jewish merchants from Italy, mostly descendants of Portuguese Marranos, settled in the Mediterranean towns, particularly Tunis. They organized themselves as a separate "nation," and eventually founded a separate community in 1710, the Leghorn community of *grana*. From then on, friction between the autochthonous Jews, the *touansa*, and the new arrivals was endemic to Tunisian life until the twentieth century.⁵⁹

COMMUNITY STRUCTURES AND AUTONOMY

The Sephardim who arrived on Ottoman soil found in cities with a concentration of Jews an extant community organization. They adapted to it, grouping according to their place of origin, as had the deported Romanians. They called these congregations by specifically Iberian names of towns or regions (Catalonia, Toledo, Cordova), by countries (Portugal), by families (Hamon, *Seniora* – for Doña Gracia Mendes, the great benefactress of Marrano origin), or by status (*Gerush*, in Hebrew, "Expulsion"). These existed alongside those adopted by the Romanians: (*Poli Yashan*: old town, Ohri), the Hungarians (*Budun*: Buda), the Ashkenazim (*Alman*: German), the Karaites (*Edirne*: Adrianople), or the Italians (Sicily, Calabria).⁶⁰ Dozens of congregations were formed, their numbers varying from town to town. If Istanbul and Salonika contained between 30 and 100, other smaller places only had six or ten.⁶¹ The purpose of people from the same place of origin banding together was to ensure that their specific rites, traditions, customs, languages, or dialects were preserved and the bonds of Jewishness and the specific ethnic-regional character protected.

This is a regular phenomenon among immigrant populations and a constant feature of the Jewish world (Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike) into the contemporary period. The *landsmanshaftn* created by the East European Jews in Western Europe and on the American continent are a contemporary example. Likewise, the Jewish emigrants from the Maghreb in the 1950s and 1960s founded similar societies where they settled anew. This also applied in Israel where, *a priori*, the Jewishness of the immigrant