

The Turkinos in America

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The friendship between the Turkish and Jewish people is a long and historical one. When Sultan Mehmed II took Constantinople in 1453, he encountered a Jewish community that welcomed him with enthusiasm. Immediately the Sultan issued a proclamation to all Jews: "...Let him dwell in the best of the land, each beneath his vine and fig tree, with silver and with gold, with wealth and cattle. Let him dwell in the land, trade in it, take possession of it." This set the stage for what would come about during his son Beyazid II's administration.

In 1492 after the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decreed that all Jews (over 200,000) must leave Spain. Sultan Beyazid II heard of this sentence that the crown had brought upon the Jews, and took pity on them. He discovered they were seeking refuge, so he wrote letters and sent emissaries to proclaim throughout his territory that none of his rulers may refuse entry, or expel to Jews; instead, they were to be given a gracious welcome. The leadership of the Ottoman Empire had always been tolerant of the Jews, for within the Empire Jews were allowed to speak their Spanish language, as well as govern their own Millets (communities); this tolerance lasted from the beginning of the Empire, up until its final days.

With the collapse of the Empire, and later rise to power of Mustafa Kemal, life was in transition. Beginning with the Balkan wars of 1912-1913, and subsequent World War in 1914, instability and conflict came to dominate most chief cities of Thrace and Western Anatolia; large fires destroyed homes, and violence spread across nearly all populated areas.

Europe would struggle with economic and political recovery during the years following the devastating war, but not the United States. Left virtually unharmed by World War I, the U.S. was even able to experience a decade of peace and prosperity following such a disastrous war.

During this time there was an incredible exodus of Turkish Jewish citizens from Anatolia to the United States, most settling in New York City. Now in the United States, the vast majority of these Spanish speaking Turkish immigrants were able to manage independently. However, for the ones who needed some assistance, the Turkish Jews set up networks among themselves to lend a hand to each other. There were groups such as the *Chain of Life Association of Constantinople*, the *Brotherhood of Adrionople*, and the *Oriental Bureau of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society*. These groups were successful, and helped many new Turkish immigrants to set up fresh lives in their strange new surroundings.

Living mostly on the lower east side of New York City, these Turks lived within Sephardic (Spanish Jewish) enclaves. In this sense they could feel as if they were not completely uprooted from their past. There they frequented the *cavanes* (Turkish cafes), ate Turkish food, sung their Turkish songs, and spoke in their native languages. They did however experience prejudice from the German and Russian Jews who did not understand their Spanish, French, or Arabic languages, as well as were ridiculed because of their Oriental clothing. These initial immigrants were extremely poor, and most got jobs selling fruit, candy, peddling small items, or shining shoes. Eventually they fell into “better” jobs such as seamstresses, clothing pressers, and factory workers. Later, these *Turkinos* (as the Turkish Jews called themselves) developed community clubs such as the Salonika Brotherhood, Dardanelles Social Club, and Oriental American Civic Club as a means of supporting each other.

Though having no formal education or wealth, these immigrant Turks went on to do well for themselves. They developed newspapers in their languages, opened small business, and were even able to save money and donate back to their Turkish Jewish organizations, which would intern use those funds to keep perpetuating the organization, as well as develop educational programs. By the early 1930’s times were changing economically for them; jobs were getting better, and soon New York would have its first Turkino Lawyer, Dentist, and Teacher. Many families (even the poorest ones) sent money to their families back in Turkey who were experiencing poverty.

As New York was getting more crowded with the world's immigrants, and work was harder to find for the common man, many Turkinos fled the city for other communities around the United States. Before long Turkish Jewish communities dotted the landscape from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. Communities sprang up in Los Angeles of Jews from Constantinople and Smyrna, Seattle of Jews from the Island of Rhodes, Portland from the Island of Marmara and the village of Tekirdag, and Cincinnati had Jews from the Dardanelles. As the children and grandchildren of these first immigrants assimilated with modern American culture, their drive for modern education increased, and by the 1940's and 1950's a sizeable population of the second and third generation were completing college; and Jews of Turkish descent went on to obtain respectful positions in mainstream society, education, and business.

Today in the United States there are viable communities made up of descendants of these first immigrants who came to America in the beginning of the century. Though well assimilated, Turkino Jews have established congregations made up mostly of Jews of Turkish ancestry in cities such as Los Angeles, Seattle, Miami, New York and Atlanta. All of these congregations are very proud of their Turkish history, and most have festivals each year commemorating the past, where oriental music is played, Turkish food is enjoyed, and reminiscing of the old country is spoken of. Though there are no mainstream Turkino newspapers in the United States today, there are however newsletters of Sephardic groups such as *Lashon* based in Los Angeles, *Ke Haber*, in Florida, and *American Association of Jewish Friends Newsletter* based in New York. These journals allow Turkinos around the United States to keep in touch, reminisce, and preserve their proud heritage.

When the Turkinos came to America they were seeking tranquility from war torn lands. They brought with them more than their luggage, they carried their Jewish religion, Spanish language, and Turkish culture; they brought with them a rich heritage and tradition that changed America forever.

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