

METROPOLIS AND NECROPOLIS: THE CULTIVATION  
OF SOCIAL STATUS AMONG THE JEWS OF ISTANBUL  
IN THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

MINNA ROZEN

Although Istanbul Jewish community of today is about 25% of its size at the last years of the Ottoman period, the city of Istanbul is still the house of several monumental remnants of this community's past. The most striking among these are three cemeteries in which burial had started in the 16th through 17th centuries, and continued without interruptions way into the 20th century—the cemeteries of Hasköy, Ortaköy and Kuzguncuk. Although damaged by the teeth of passing time, road building, and vandalism, all three of them still contain thousand of stones, and great parts of them still display quite large and intact original burial plots. During the years 1987–1991 I was able to document some 36,000 tombstones in these cemeteries, and a costume made computer program has enabled me to use a great part of the data in order to rebuild Jewish social life from the late 16th century until the beginning of the 19th century, in a very unique way.<sup>1</sup> The cemeteries became a mirror of the neighborhoods whose residents were buried in them. The systematic analysis of vast burial plots enabled to rebuild the social stratification of the society that had built them, its family trajectories, longevity, age at marriage, number of children per family, attitudes towards children, attitude towards male children as opposed to female children, and attitudes towards the elderly, women, and slaves. Such analysis portrayed the prevalence of polygamy, the values this society considered most, fluctuations in its general economic and political status, fluctuations in the status of particular families, and society's relations with neighboring cultures.<sup>2</sup> The cemetery became the world of the living's mirror.

<sup>1</sup> On this project see M. Rozen, *A Survey of Jewish Cemeteries in Western Turkey*, in "Jewish Quarterly Review," LXXXIII (1992), pp. 71–125; idem, *Hasköy Cemetery: Typology of Stones*, Tel Aviv 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See for example M. Rozen, *The Cycle of Life and the meaning of Old Age in the Ottoman Period*, in Daniel Carpi Jubilee Book, in Id., A. Shapira and D. Porat (eds.), Tel Aviv 1996, pp. 109–179; idem, *Classical Echoes in Ottoman Istanbul*, in A. Ovadia, (ed.), *Hellenic and Jewish Arts*, Tel Aviv 1998, pp. 393–430; idem, *Boatmen and Fishermen's*

In this paper will be displayed one facet of the way the social structure of the living is reflected through the cemetery, and at the same time will be shown how the living used the cemetery as an additional arena to others in which they construct their own world. In other words, the cemetery should not be looked at as a simple mirror, but rather as a mirror set up opposite another mirror, so that infinite reflections of reality look out at one another from within them. For example, a concentration of family tombstones, or monuments, that exhibit a certain character, such as unusually large size and expensive ornamentation, brings to mind the immediate inference that here we have a family of means and financial power that testify to its economic and social status in the community. According to the idea presented here, the expenditure is not always the product of the family's exalted status; sometimes it is an investment toward achieving such status. The investment is not necessarily a picture of reality, but a picture of a reality as the mourners are trying to create. Moreover, in some cases one can see investment in the culture of death not merely as an expression of the social and financial status of the deceased, but as an effort to establish, to maintain, and to enhance the social status of the living.

One of the families that drew my attention to the phenomenon of cultivating social status through the culture of burial is the Tsontsin family. The family name, which is spelled in Hebrew with two *tsadi's*, is a slight corruption of the Italian name 'Soncino'—the name of a town in northern Italy, from which came the famous family of printers, which we mistakenly call 'Shontsino'. The Hebrew *shin* should be pronounced as a *sin*. The family originated in the city of Fürth, near Nuremberg; from there, two members of the family migrated to Soncino in May of 1454. Around the year 1482, one of their descendants, Yehoshu'a Shelomoh, established a printing press in the town of Soncino, and thus initiated an impressive tradition of printing books in Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and Italian, in various cities in Italy, primarily in the Veneto, and immortalized the family's name. Yehoshu'a's grandsons, Gershom and Mosheh, continued in the art of printing. Mosheh was the first one to print books in the Ottoman Empire. He printed several books in Salonika in 1521–1527. Gershom was certainly the greatest Hebrew printer, not only in his generation,

---

*Guilds in 19th Century Istanbul*, in "Mediterranean Historical Review", 15 (2000), pp. 72–93; idem, *A Pound of Flesh: Meat Trade and Social Conflict among the Jews of Istanbul, 1700–1923* in S. Faroqhi and R. Deguilhem (eds.) *Crafts and Craftsmen in the Ottoman Empire*, London 2005, pp. 195–234.

but also in the succeeding generations. In the year 1526, he moved with his son Eli'ezer and with his printing press to Salonika, where he printed several books. In the year 1530, they both moved to Istanbul. Gershom lived in Istanbul only four years, and printed fourteen books there. His son Eli'ezer inherited the printing press and continued in the business until 1547, during which time he printed at least twenty-eight books. Eli'ezer ben Gershom Soncino passed away in Istanbul in the year 1558. The printing press fell to one of his workers, Mosheh ben Ele'azar of the house of Parnas. One of the grandsons of Eli'ezer, Gershom Soncino, printed two books in Cairo in the year 1557.<sup>3</sup> The connection with Cairo gains some significance if we consider the information provided by Sason Hai of the house of Qastiel, an Istanbulu adventurer, who traveled between Ceylon, Burma, India, Afganistan, the Mediterranean and Western Europe at the end of the 17th century and the first decade of the 18th century, trading in diamonds, rubies, and pearls. He relates that in the days of the Ari (Rabbi Yitzhaq Luria Ashkenazi, the founder of the Lurianic Kabbalist school of Safed)—we may assume around 1570—a new Pasha was sent to Egypt; this new governor had Jewish advisors whom he brought with him from Istanbul. Among these was “a man of wisdom and understanding named Ya'aqov, and his father's name was Rabbi Yitzhaq Soncino, all of them perfectly wise in all matters.”<sup>4</sup> Qastiel is not especially known for accuracy, and has a tendency to exaggerate; but the fact that the governors sent by the Porte to Egypt used to bring with them advisors and assistants from Istanbul, among them Jews, is known to us from other sources as well.<sup>5</sup> So we have no reason to reject this information. At the same time, I have not been able to identify this scion of the Soncino family or to verify the connection between him and Gershom, the first printer to settle in Istanbul. He might have been the son of Mosheh (d. 1527) or of Eliezer (d. 1547). Gershom Soncino was

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Haberman, *Ha-Madpisim Benei Soncino* (The Printers of the Soncino House), Vienna, 1933; A. Ya'ari, *Ha-Defus ha-'Ivri be-Qushta* (The Hebrew Press in Istanbul), Jerusalem 1967, pp. 21–24.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Ben Zvi, *Mas'ot Sason Hai Le-Vet Qastiel* (The Travels of Sason Hai from the House of Qastiel) in idem, *Mehqarim u-Meqorot* (Studies and Documents), Jerusalem 1966, p. 469, n. 218.

<sup>5</sup> See for example the *responsum* written by Raphael Yehoshu'a Benveniste to the wealthy brothers Ibn Vileisid from Istanbul (1651) on account of their dispute with another powerful Istanbuli Jew, Aharon Hamon. The latter caused the Governor of Egypt who brought one of the brothers to Cairo to serve as his *sarraf*, to fire him and take one of Hamon's men (*Responsa Sha'ar Yehoshu'a, Hoshen Mishpat*, Jerusalem, 1982, # 27; Mosheh Benveniste, *Responsa Penei Mosheh*, vol 3, Istanbul, 1719, # 28).

apparently the father of Yehoshu'a Soncino (d. 1569) as well. It should be noted however, that this fact had not been clearly expressed in any document mentioning Yehoshu'a's name. Yehoshu'a Soncino, or as he is better known as Tzontzin, was the *Hakham* (congregational rabbinic authority) of a Sephardic congregation, most probably *Qahal Mayor*.<sup>6</sup> His status in the Istanbul community is well attested by his firm opposition to the plan designed by the Nasi family to boycott the port of Ancona on account of the 24 conversos who were burnt on the stake in the city (1555).<sup>7</sup> The status of the Soncino family at the end of the 16th century through the first half of the 17th century is well portrayed in their family connections and their assets. Rabbi Yehoshu'a Soncino's daughter married Mosheh Benveniste who was the court physician of Murad III (1574–1595) and a protégé of the Grand Vizier Siavuş Paşa.<sup>8</sup> His ties with Siavuş Paşa and with Esther Kira<sup>9</sup> led, in the final analysis, to his exile to Rhodes, where he died.<sup>10</sup> Mosheh Benveniste is described by his grandson as: “The righteous prince, the flawless sage, the renowned scholar, who devoted his whole life to helping Jews everywhere, opposite ministers and judges of the highest rank”<sup>11</sup> Esteropoula, the daughter of the *Hakham* Shemuel Soncino married the son of the “rich man” (*gevir*) Shelomoh Alaman (i.e. “the German” = Ashkenazi). This “German” is most probably the famous Venetian physician who

<sup>6</sup> See Yehoshu'a Tzontzin, *Responsa Nahalah li-Yoshu'a*, Istanbul 1731, #40, p. 47a.

<sup>7</sup> On his activities in this matter and other communal matters see M. Rozen, *The Jewish Community of Istanbul: The Formative Years 1543–1566*, Leiden 2004, pp. 44, 79, 91, 98, 213, 221.

<sup>8</sup> Held office as Grand Vizier three times (1582–1586, 1584–1592, 1589–1593).

<sup>9</sup> A Jewish businesswoman who mediated between the women of the harem and the outside world. The enormous wealth and power she accumulated made her an object of envy and hatred. Esther Kira was murdered on 1 April 1600 by mutinous, sword-wielding soldiers on the staircase of the house of Halil Paşa, the *kaymakam* of Istanbul. See M. Rozen, *The Jewish Community of Istanbul: The Formative Years 1543–1566*, Leiden 2004, pp. 204–207.

<sup>10</sup> M. Benayahu *Rofe He-Hatzer Rav Mosheh Benveniste: Shir 'al haglayatho le-Rodos* (R. Mosheh Benveniste, Court Physician: Elegy on his Exile to Rhodes), in “*Sefunot*” 14 (5730–5733 [1970–1973]), pp. 130–131. On the Benveniste family, its pedigree and connections, see the entire article, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–135. The British merchant, John Sanderson, bequeathed to his cousin, Samuel Sanderson, several oil paintings of his Istanbul friends, which he apparently commissioned from an artist in the Great Bazaar of Istanbul during his stay in the capital of the Ottoman Empire. One of these was of the “Jewish Physician Dr. Benveniste.” John Sanderson (ed. W. Foster), *The Travels of John Sanderson in the Levant 1584–1602*, (London 1931) p. 35, ref. 2. See also Benveniste's involvement in the execution of Ester Kira, *ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>11</sup> See introduction to Vol. I of *Penei Mosheh*, Mosheh Benveniste's *Responsa*, printed in Istanbul in 1669.

mediated between the Venetian bailo in Istanbul Marc'Antonio Barbaro and the Grand Vizier Mehmed Sokollu during the war between the two countries, and eventually saved the Jewish community of Venice from the expulsion they were threatened with by the Venetian authorities decision of 18 December 1571.<sup>12</sup> Shemuel Soncino's other daughter married a famous rabbinical scholar, Rabbi Yitzhaq Don Don. Their grandson, rabbi Yitzhaq Ibn Faraj, married the daughter of the Leading Rabbi of the Romaniot congregations in Istanbul, who was at the same time the *Hakham* of *Neveh Shalom* congregation, Rabbi Eliyahu Ibn Hayim.<sup>13</sup> Ibn Hayim's second daughter married the physician Nisim Benveniste (1583–1621), the grandson of Yehoshu'a Soncino (d. 1569). This is just a limited picture covering just seventy years of the intricate marriage network the Soncino's (and other well off Istanbuli families) developed in order to maintain and fortify their dynasty.<sup>14</sup>

Qastiel describes at length the influence of the Jews of Istanbul on political life of the Ottoman Empire, and notes that most of its governors and noblemen “are being nominated by the advise of wealthy men, the most distinguished of those who sit first in the kingdom, and these are from four families: Hamon, ‘Uziel, Rozales, and Soncino—these are the four wealthiest families in the city of Istanbul, who see the king's face, and they buy [merchandise] from these kingdoms[i.e. provinces of the empire] and send as king to whoever their heart desires, by the word of the Sultan (Hunkar); and according to what comes out of the mouth of the Jews, so the Sultan does.”<sup>15</sup>

Let us forget, for the moment, the many exaggerations in Qastiel's description, and let us focus on the remainder. Less than two decades after the Soncino family disappears as a family of printers, it reappears as an affluent family, influential in the politics of Istanbul. Moreover, around that same period, we witness the emergence of an important family of rabbis and wealthy men, named Tsontsin, that continues its activity until the nineteenth century.

<sup>12</sup> On Shelomoh Ashkenazi and his career see B. Arbel, *Trading Nations: Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean*, Leiden 1995, pp. 55–94.

<sup>13</sup> On the office of the Leading Rabbi see Rozen, *The Jewish Community... cit.*, pp. 66–77. Ibn Hayim was the last Leading Rabbi we know of, and interestingly, although leading the Romaniots, he was a Sephardi and a *Hakham* of a Sephardi congregation!

<sup>14</sup> For this part of the Soncino dynasty see Table 1, “*The Soncino Family—Spire-Fürth-Venice-Salonika-Istanbul-Cairo*”.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Zvi, *Travels... cit.*, p. 469.

Soncino the printers, Soncino the favorites of kings, and Tsontsin the rabbis are all one and the same. The likelihood that we are not dealing with one family is very small. The name 'Soncino' is very rare among the Jews of Italy, and the likelihood that two different families with this name settled in Istanbul is almost nil. We are dealing with branches and descendants of the same family. The form 'Tsontsin' is, on the one hand, a mistake due to the inability to find a written equivalent of the [Italian] 'c' [pronounced like the English 'ch' in 'chair'] and the difficulty of pronouncing a [Hebrew] 'samekh' followed by a 'tzadi'. On the other hand, the shortened form 'Tsontsin' [without the final 'o'] is the result of the prevalent custom in the Veneto, where the family was active for about a hundred years, to omit the final 'o' in surnames ending with "no"—as, for example, in the names Riccomino-Riccomin, Bragadino-Bragadin, Delfino-Delfin, etc.; so also 'Soncino' became 'Tsontsin'. Further evidence for this can be seen on the tombstone of Vidah Khursi, the widow of Hayim Tsontsin; on her tombstone three options appear: 'Tsontsin', 'Tsontsino', and 'Sonsino'. Lady Vida passed away on September 23rd, 1948.<sup>16</sup> Another example for the usage to abbreviate the name Soncino can be seen in the opening page of Shelomoh Ibn Gevirol's book *Mivhar Peninim* (Selected Pearls), printed in 1484 in Soncino, in the "printing press of Yehoshu'a ben Israel Natan a man from Soncin."<sup>17</sup> In fact, the name Soncin was written in Hebrew with a "shin", and only Italophones would know that it is actually a "sin".

The question that remains unanswered is how did the Soncinos acquire their wealth? Printing was an honorable profession, but never one to make its practitioners exceptionally wealthy. The Soncinos were the only printers I know of whose name is associated with money. There are three possibilities: one is that Gershom Soncino (d. 1534), a great printer that he was, excelled in his business as nobody else did before him or after. The second one is that when the printing press passed to Mosheh ben Eli'ezer Parnas, someone in the family knew how to parlay the transfer of the business, into a great fortune, a fortune that justified the appellation "wealthy men" as applied to several family members; or,

<sup>16</sup> *The Turkish and Balkan Jewry Documentation Project*, Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, Collection of Turkish Cemeteries (hereafter *Turkish Collection*), Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # M-9, stone # 21, film # 106\*, 28 February 1989.

<sup>17</sup> A. M. Haberman, *Ha-Madpisim Benei Soncino* (The Printers of the Soncino House), Vienna, 1933, rp. In id. *Peraqim be-Toledot ha-Madpisim ha-Ivriyim* (Chapters in the History of the Hebrew Printers), Jerusalem 1978, p. 26.

the last possibility is that at some time a family member who was *not* in the printing business made the family wealthy and prominent. The granddaughters of Gershom (d. 1534) through both his sons, Shemuel and Yehoshu'a (d. 1569) married into important families, in fact, may be two of the best families in the capital, which implies that he himself was the one, who already during his lifetime managed to create a great fortune, either through printing, or by diverting his efforts into different avenues than printing as well.

Marriage of wealthy families into families of scholars was still prevalent in Istanbul Jewish society of this period (this had changed in future generations), which would explain the marriages of Rabbi Yehoshu'a Soncino's daughters, however, Shemuel was not a famous scholar, and the only reason why his daughter Esteropoula married into the Ashkenazi family could have been the wealth of her father. One more allusion to the fact that Gershom's sons were already rich people is found in the sermon made by Rabbi Mosheh Almosnino from Salonika, who stayed in Istanbul in the years 1565–1567 as an ambassador of sorts, nominated by his community to achieve at the Sublime Porte a better tax arrangement for them.<sup>18</sup> Almosnino's sermon, given on the 10th day of the Hebrew moon of Nisan 5329 (28 March 1569) revolves around the theme of money being used for the benefit of the nation, for achieving worthy aims. The allusion is to the way Tzontzin had used his own money.<sup>19</sup>

An overview of the tombstones which the Soncino family had left in the cemeteries of Istanbul, provides us with interesting insights as to the strategy they adopted over the generations, of using the family graves to foster the impression of greatness in Torah, power, and wealth, and to enhance their status.

<sup>18</sup> On Almosnino and his mission to Istanbul see M. Rozen, *The Corvée of Operating the Mines in Siderakapısı and Its Effects on the Jewish Community in Thessaloniki in the 16th Century* in Id. (ed.), *Yemei ha-Sahar—Peraqim be-Toledot ha-Yehudim ba-Imperiyah ha-'Ot'manit* (The Days of the Crescent—Chapters in the History of the Jews in the Ottoman Period), Tel Aviv 1996, pp. 13–38; M. Z. Benayah, *Mosheh Almosnino mi-Saloniqi: Hayav vi-Ytzirato* (Mosheh Almosnino of Salonika. His Life and Work), Tel Aviv 1996. On the social and political strife in Salonika, and the role played by Almosnino in these events, see M. Rozen, *Individual and Community in Jewish Society of the Ottoman Empire: Salonika in the 16th Century*, in A. Levi (ed.), *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, Princeton NJ, 1994, pp. 215–73, and especially 253–60.

<sup>19</sup> Mosheh Almosnino, *Sefer Meametz Koah, Sermons* (in Hebrew), Venice 1588, pp. 62b–74b.

A tour of the cemeteries of Istanbul shows that members of the family were buried in three cemeteries in the city: those of Hasköy, Kuzguncuk and of Ortaköy. In Hasköy cemetery, situated on the northern shore of the Golden Horn, were found only eight tombstones of the family, the earliest dating from 1697 and the latest from 1944. The reason why there are so few family tombstones in this cemetery is twofold. Most of the tombstones from the nineteenth century were destroyed in the course of building the highway that encircles Istanbul (Çevre Yolu); and also, as we shall see below, Hasköy was not the favored neighborhood of the Soncinos in the seventeenth century. It is difficult to say where the Soncinos lived before 1697. It is possible that they lived in Hasköy before that date as well, and their tombstones were simply destroyed; however, we have an impressive number of tombstones dating from between the founding of the cemetery and 1697, and I would have expected a larger number of tombstones of the Soncino family in the cemetery, if they had lived in Hasköy long before 1697. Therefore I suggest that until 1660—the year of the great fire in Eminonu, which brought about the uprooting of most of the Jews of the Old Jewish Quarter and their resettlement in Hasköy—the Soncino family also lived in the old Quarter, and only then moved elsewhere. It is important to note that the two tombstones found in Hasköy, dating from 1893 and 1944 are very simple and cheap certainly attesting to the real situation of the family at the last chapter of this family's history in the city. The eighteenth century stones are mostly expensive and lavishly invested, judging from the workmanship and the inscriptions, as befitting the kind of family described by Qastiel. However, not all of them answer to this description: the young maiden Qalo who was already betrothed to be married, that is between the age of 12 years and that of 12 years and six months, who passed away on 15 August 1751 won a simple coffin-like stone, poorly decorated, and succinctly inscribed.<sup>20</sup> The reason for this thrift could be the fact that her whole personality depended on her future role as a wife and a mother, once she is dead before achieving any of these goals there is no point in investing in her tombstone. The passerby would not add her to the dynastic account of her family, there are others much more worthy of investment than her. The tombstone that is most interesting of all—and this one deserves special attention, in that it mentions the Tsontsin

<sup>20</sup> *Turkish Collection*...cit., Hasköy cemetery, plot 5–11, stone # 48MA, film # 63\*, 8 November 1988.



Photograph 1. *The tombstone of the lady Esther, wife of honorable Rabbi Shelomoh Istamti.*

family only indirectly—is the tombstone of “The Lady Esther, wife of the honorable Rabbi Shelomoh Istamti, and of the house of the wealthy and wise and exalted honorable rabbi Mosheh Tsontsin,”<sup>21</sup> (photograph 1) who passed away on the 11th of November, 1738.

This extremely beautiful monument, more impressive than those of the Soncino family itself, was erected for her by her grieving husband, who thought it proper to note—besides her lofty virtues, which found expression in her assistance of the poor—the fact that she was a proselyte, and that she was from the house of Mosheh Tsontsin. The meaning of these facts is that she was a non-Jewish slave who converted to Judaism. In other words, both the fact that the woman converted to Judaism and the fact that she served in the house of this wealthy man until her marriage seemed to her grieving husband to be facts that would do her honor, and also indirectly enhance the status of the mourners. The great monetary investment in the monument expresses not only

<sup>21</sup> *Turkish Collection* . . . cit., Hasköy cemetery, plot 1–11, stone # 131, film # 536, 15 January, 1989.

her husband's love for her, but also the aspiration to emulate the wealthy family with which she was associated.

Fourteen stones of the Soncinos were found in the Kuzguncuk cemetery. The first among them from 1735, the last from 1909. During the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century Kuzguncuk was the residence of well off Jewish, Muslim, Armenian as well as Greek families. Among them were rich merchants, suppliers of the court and the army, Ottoman dignitaries and functionaries, and last but not least, the chief rabbi of Istanbul.<sup>22</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century this beautiful residence started to lose its glamour in favor of Galata that became a symbol of modernity and westernization. Unless for one tombstone, that of Rahel, wife of the rich and illustrious Menahem Soncino (d. 1742), I was unable to accurately connect the rest of the burials in Kuzguncuk to the family tree created through the Hasköy and Ortaköy burials, that is why they do not appear in the family tree provided here. Out of the fourteen stones, only two display very short and concise epitaphs, and typically, one of them is that of a female child," the pleasant child, beautiful as the moon, flawless as the sun, Sarah daughter of the honorable and distinguished Nisim Tzontzin" who died 24 August, 1778.<sup>23</sup> The second stone that was incised very minimally is that of a very old man, Eli'ezer Tzontzin, who passed away on 27 March 1803.<sup>24</sup> A child means an enfant less than four or five years old, while a very old man should be considered a person over seventy.<sup>25</sup> The death of an enfant or a very old person does not create a huge palpable gap in the everyday life of society, and thus, the common rule is that they never get a heavily invested tombstone. However, in the case of the Soncino family the frugality expressed in the case of Eli'ezer Tzontzin calls for further consideration. Given the fact that there is no mention of children, grandchildren or wife who outlived him, the stone must have been ordered by a distant relative who did not particularly grieve his death, and moreover, he did not see any dynastic gains from investing in the stone. All the rest of the Kuzguncuk stones are incised with

<sup>22</sup> See M. Rozen, *Boatmen and Fishermen's Guilds in 19th Century Istanbul*, in "Mediterranean Historical Review", 15 (2000), pp. 78–80.

<sup>23</sup> *Turkish Collection*... cit., Kuzguncuk cemetery, plot G-3, stone # 8, film # 60, 7 April, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., plot G-12, stone # 48, film # 217, June 1, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> See M. Rozen, *The Cycle of Life and the Meaning of Old Age in the Ottoman Period*, in Id., A. Shapira, and D. Porat (eds.), *Daniel Carpi Jubilee Book*, Tel Aviv 1996, pp. 109–179.



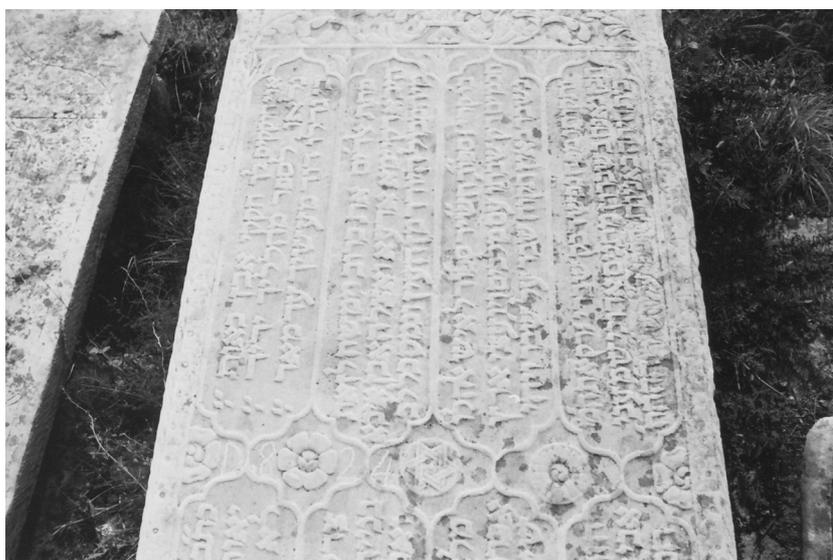
Photograph 2. *The tombstone of the lady Sarah wife of Yehoshu'a Soncino.*

an elaborate epitaph relating in great detail the virtues of the deceased and his or her important place in society, as well as the hollowness his or her death would leave in the life of those who depended or loved the deceased. Given the fact that education was a common norm among the Soncinos, the intricate and elaborate epitaphs should not surprise us, however, they are surprising when inscribed on relatively simple monuments.

Sarah, the wife of Yehoshu'a Soncino who died on September 14, 1735 in the plague, received from her husband a nice pentagonal coffin-like stone, made of Marmara marble, all inscribed with a beautiful poem befitting a distinguished lady who belongs to an important family, but the stone itself, though of good quality and nice cutting (photograph 2),<sup>26</sup> is rather plain in comparison to the monuments erected on the burials of people such as Matatyah Pedrosa (photographs 3–4), or the young David Zonanah<sup>27</sup> (photograph 5).

<sup>26</sup> *Turkish Collection*...cit., Kuzguncuk cemetery, plot D-8, stone # 99, film # \*457, 3, August 1989.

<sup>27</sup> The Zonanah family were rich merchants who took a central role in the leadership of the community at least from the 1730ies until the end of the Ottoman period. David Zonanah is mentioned in 1746 as one of the seven "officials for Palestine in Istanbul", a



Photographs 3–4. *The tombstone of Matatyah Pedrosa, d.8 March, 1730, Turkish Collection...cit., Kuzguncuk Cemetery, plot # D-8, stone # 24, film # \*345, 20 June 1989, general view and detail.*



Photograph 5. *The tombstone of David Zonanah d.10 August 1746, Turkish Collection...cit., Kuzguncuk Cemetery, plot # D-6, stone # 117, film # \*152, 28 August 1989.*

This combination of an elaborate inscription and a medium level of investment in the artwork of the stone repeats itself in the rest of the Tzontzin stones in Kuzguncuk, while the most recent stones display the smallest investment, exactly as it is in Hasköy. One explanation of this phenomenon would be that the Soncino family did not attach the same importance to ostentatious status symbols as other Istanbuli families attached to it in the 18th century. However, another explanation should be taken into account as well; the Soncino family was an important family, but not as rich as the other members of the Istanbuli Jewish elite of this period, like the Zonanah, Ajiman, Qamhi, Aluf or De Medinah, who invested both in epitaphs and in artwork, not to mention the quality of stones they used for their families' tombs. Consequently, the Soncinos displayed their "good name" and value especially through intricate epitaphs, a commodity they were able to get inside the family.

---

very prestigious office (J. Barnai, *The Jews in Palestine in the Eighteenth Century Under the Patronage of the Istanbul Committee of Officials for Palestine*, Tuscaloosa Alabama 1992, p. 87). See also op. cit., pp. 95, 122, 243, notes 10,13. On their role in the community's political life in the 19th century see M. Rozen, *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews of Turkey and the Balkans, 1808-1945*, vol. 1, Tel Aviv 2005, pp. 89-90, 93-94, 96-97, 108-109.

Forty seven stones of the Soncino family are found in the Ortaköy cemetery. This particular cemetery is not well preserved especially because of its proximity to the *Istanbul Merkez Komutanlığı*, the borders of which overlap the cemetery's plots.<sup>28</sup> Given this fact, the natural inference is that most of the family members lived in Ortaköy, at least from the end of the seventeenth century.

Ortaköy was, until the last quarter of the seventeenth century, a summer resort for the residents of Istanbul. Jews, as well as Muslims, Greeks, and Armenians, used to rent summer houses there from the Ottoman dignitaries who owned much real estate on the shores of the Bosphorus. Around that time, Jews began to build permanent houses in the resort village, which became a stylish neighborhood, where wealthy people of three faiths lived side by side in seaside villas (*yalı*) that touched the waters of the strait.<sup>29</sup> These seaside villas, or shore palaces, resembled the one that Sason Hai ben Qastiel had built for himself before his final journey to Southeast Asia that ended in Afganistan, a palace he describes in the account of his journeys.<sup>30</sup>

The first Soncino grave in Ortaköy that we found dates from 1695, the stone of Yehoshu'a son of Meir Tzontzin (photograph 6), and the last is that of Vida Khursi, which we have already mentioned (d. 1948).

Here also the poorest stones are the most recent, that of the said Vida Khursi, and the stone of Sultanah, wife of Raphael Tzontzin, who passed away on 28 June 1898. As for the rest, as in the other cemeteries, most of them climb up in quality and quantity of material as well as in ornamentation as time goes backwards towards the end of the 17th century. Most stones dating from 1695 until approximately 1810 are very expensive, both with respect to the materials and with respect to the physical labor and the inscriptions. All of them are made of large blocks of Marmara

<sup>28</sup> It should be mentioned here that in spite of the delicate nature of this neighbor I was given by the authorities in charge a free hand in photographing all the plots until the very barb of the camp, for which I am indebted.

<sup>29</sup> See the will of Hayim Sulam, made in 1619 on his deathbed in Ortaköy, mentioning a big house with the legal status of *mülk* (private property); the neighbors were another Jew, Mosheh Ibn Ya'ish, and a Greek named Kostanda (Rabbi Yehiel Bassan, *Responsa* 82:54a). On a congregation at a summer resort, see Rabbi Eliyahu Ibn Hayim, *Responsa Mayim 'Amukim*, Venice 1657, 70:119b; Evliya Çelebi lists the *yalı* of Şekerçi Yahudi (the Jewish sugar dealer) and that of the Jew Yitzhaq among the shore palaces of Ottoman dignitaries in the seventeenth century (*Seyahatname*, vol. 1, Istanbul, 1896, p. 451).

<sup>30</sup> Ben Zvi, *Travels... cit.*, pp. 449–451.



Photograph 6. *The tombstone of Yehoshu'a son of Meir Tzontzin, d. 15 January 1695, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortakoy Cemetery, plot # D-6, stone # 45, film # 72, 7 February 1989.*

marble, most of them are adorned with rich ornamentation in the Turkish Baroque style. Most of the 19th century stones are still incised with intricate and long epitaphs, but these are usually plain horizontal slabs, and the artwork disappears altogether. Generally, the inscriptions on 19th century monuments in all three cemeteries of Istanbul are brief, in comparison with the lengthy poems that were composed for the monuments of the Soncino family. Normally, rich epitaphs come together with a richly decorated stone. The Soncinos seem to make a desperate effort to save face in a period of relative depression in their history.

The effort made towards maintaining a façade of nobility and high status, in Ortaköy as well as in the other cemeteries, calls for further consideration. Besides the usual praises of the dead, there are in the inscriptions of the Tsontsin family passages that are intended not for the One who is supposed to allocate the portion of the deceased in the World to Come, but to one who comes to assess the family in this world. For example, on the monument of Yeudah ben Yehoshu'a Tsontsin, who passed away in 1742, is written:



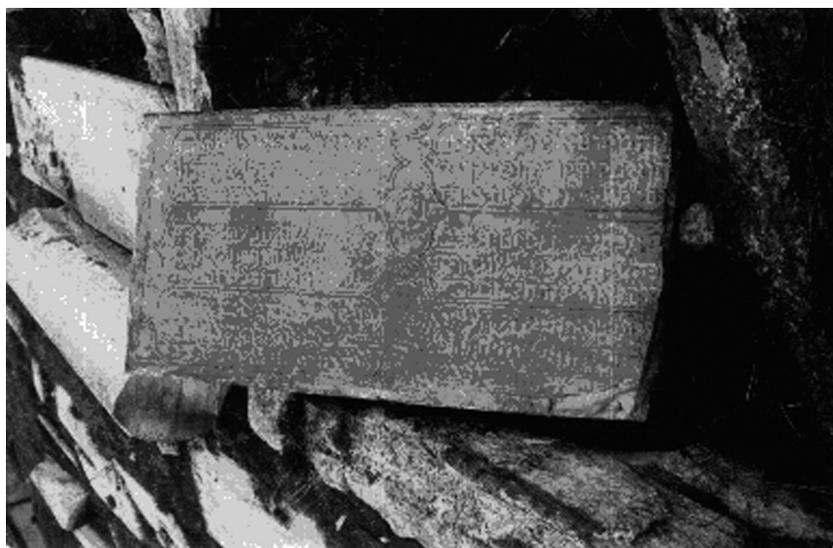
Photograph 7. *The tombstone of Yeuda, son of Yehoshu'a Tsontsin, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # C-3, stone # 14, film # 115\*, 6 March 1989.*

And in accordance with his few years, he wore crimson with refined cloth,<sup>31</sup> and he was a son of kings and noblemen, he was the pleasing student, who was called at a young age, Rabbi Yeuda, son of the wealthy and exalted Yehoshu'a Tsontsin, may his Rock keep him and redeem him... (photograph 7)

The name Yehoshu'a is the most prevalent in the Soncino family tree, apparently due to the first Yehoshu'a Tsontsin (d.~ 1493), the founder of the printing press in the town of Soncino in Italy.

Therefore, besides the wealthy Yehoshu'a (photograph 7), we find also an eighteenth century judge bearing the same name. He apparently was a grandson of Abraham Tsontsin, whose idea it was to print his great-grandfather's, Yehoshu'a Tsontsin's, first book, *Nahalah li-Yhoshua* (see table 2 "*The Soncino Family in Istanbul*"). Abraham Tsontsin is described in the book's Introduction as "the crown of the elders and the beauty of the children, the glory of our exile, the jewel in the crown, he is the ven-

<sup>31</sup> It is possible that this expression "And in accordance with his few years, he wore crimson with refined cloth" is meant to say the opposite, i.e., that in spite of his young age he was dressed in crimson and refined cloth, because he was a son of kings.



Photograph 8. *The tombstone of Avraham Tzontzin, d. 23 March 1732, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortaöy Cemeteriy, plot # C-3, stone # 89, film # 116 \*, 6 March, 1989.*

erable master and great one of the Jews.” His monument is somewhat deteriorated, but one can still read on it the words “the grave of the venerable and honored, faithful, wise, and exalted man” (photograph 8).

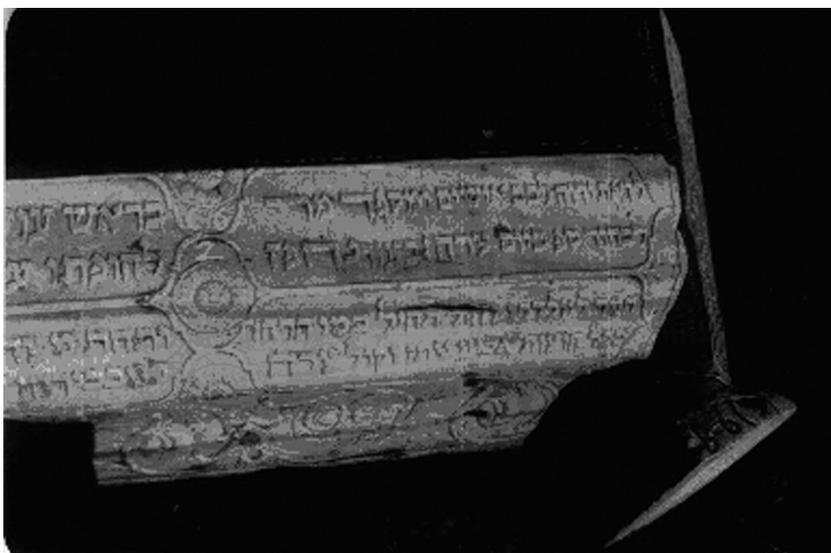
Levi, the son of the said judge Yehoshu‘a Tsontsin, and grandson of Avraham, was born apparently in his father’s old age, and after his father’s death, he died tragically in a plague on his wedding day. On his monument is written, *inter alia*:

Son of the saint who was in the early days savior and prince and commander of nations; he judged Israel as a shepherd keeps his flock. (photograph 9)

The central idea is to glorify the family of the deceased by stressing his descent from noble ancestors.

In the year 1751, Istanbul was ravaged by a plague that left many dead, and thus many gravestones. Despite the large number of deaths, there was no diminution in the quality of the monuments or in the expenditure on ornamentation and inscriptions—not in families whose status was important to them.

Qalo, wife of the wealthy and distinguished Ya‘aqov Tsontsin, merited a very lengthy inscription when she died in 1751. Besides the expressions of sorrow of her husband and children, and the noble virtues that

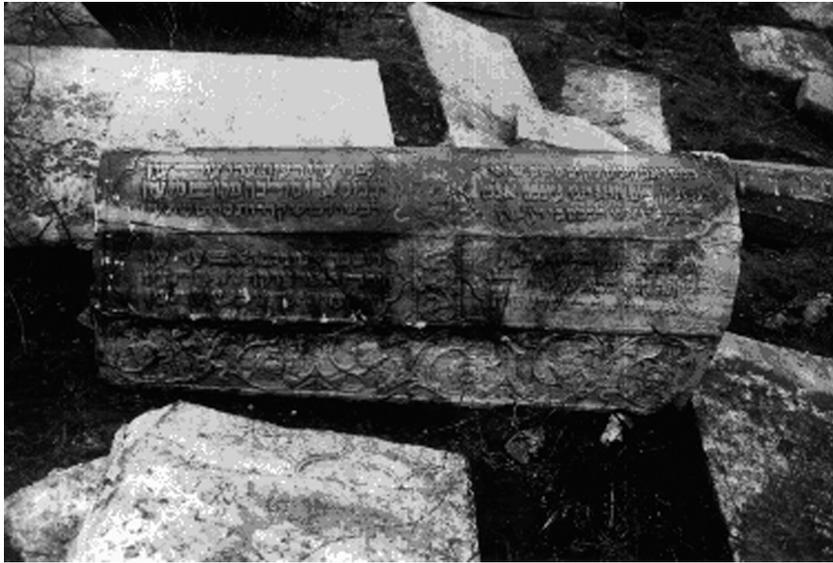


Photograph 9. *The tombstone of Levi son of Yehoshu'a Tsontsin, d. ~ 1751, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # C-6, stone # 2, film # 73, 8 February 1989.*

were ascribed to her, she is also called “daughter of kings.” Her father’s name is not indicated on the monument, but it seems that in the opinion of the composers of the inscription, this was unnecessary; for everyone knew from which family she came (most probably from the Tsontsin family itself) (photograph 10).

It is clear that the famous judge Aharon Tsontsin, who passed away in the very same year of 1751, received a long and laudatory inscription, describing his wisdom and virtue. But this is no wonder, for he was not dependent on the distinction of his family; rather he earned his praise through his own talents and erudition. At the same time, however, the great expense invested in the monument was to glorify not only the man himself, but also his family—his three children, his firstborn son, who was named (what else?) Yehoshu‘a, and his grieving wife (photograph 11).

That same year saw the passing of the distinguished scholar Nisim Yehoshu‘a Tsontsin, who also received a beautiful monument and a laudatory inscription expressing the grief of his father and mother; but the mourners did not forget to note his genealogy, “son of the wealthy and eminent man, our honored teacher Rabbi Hayim Tsontsin.” (photograph 12)



Photograph 10. *Kalo, wife of Ya'akov Tsontsin d. 26 August 1751, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # C-3, stone # 21, film # 10, 26 January 1989.*



Photograph 11. *The tombstone of Aharon Tzontzin d. 19 August 1751, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # D-4, stone # 2, film # 30, 31 January 1989.*



Photograph 12. *The tombstone of Nisim Yehoshu'a Tzontzin, d. 1 November 1751, Turkish Collection... cit., Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # C-4, stone # 11, film # 27, 31 January 1989.*

In the inscription of the monument of the *Haham* Hayim Menahem Tsontsin, who died in the year 1774, is the appellation “High Nest.” (photograph 13) This appellation indicates the desire of his family to constantly remind the community of his eminence, so that some of that eminence would redound to them as well.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the references to the eminence of the family cease. But prominent rabbis still merited special notice, Rabbi Menahem Tsontsin, who died 5 January 1884 was described on his tombstone as “The great rabbi, fortress and tower, elder master, cornerstone, head of the city and head of the academy of populous Kushta<sup>32</sup>” Menahem Tsontsin was the Rabbi of Ortaköy and was appointed as a trustee of the pious foundation named after Shelomo Halevi in this neighborhood. In the year 1863, he was one of the heads of the opposition to Rabbi Ya‘aqov Avigdor, owing to the latter’s inclinations toward modernism. For many years he was one of the permanent

<sup>32</sup> Hebrew abbreviation of Constantinople. The *sin* and *shin* were confused here as well. *Turkish Collection... cit.*, Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # M-6, stone # 26, film # 164, 27 February 1989.



Photograph 13. *The tombstone of Hayim Menahem Tzontzin d. 17 February 1774, Turkish Collection...cit., Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # E-5, stone # 27, film # 48, 3 February 1989.*

judges in the rabbinical court of greater Istanbul.<sup>33</sup> Investing effort in glorifying a rabbi who was considered of great importance by influential circles of the community is not a matter to be surprised at.

At the same time, a member of the family who was not as important as Menahem Tzontzin was also given a great deal of attention. At this time, a period of economic and political troubles, a great effort is expended on fostering the pedigree of the family, in a way which nearly touches the heart. On the 30th of April, 1926, Vidah, daughter of Yehoshu'a Tzontsin, and widow of Shalom HaKohen, passed away. Shalom HaKohen was a judge in the Rabbinical Court of the city during the years of the IWW and the early Republican period. He was not a great rabbinical authority. This was not the season of Torah, nor that of scholars. But there he was, and there he gave those who sought for his advise—and those were not many—his learned opinion.<sup>34</sup> He married Vidah daughter of Yehoshu'a and granddaughter of the said Menahem Tzontzin, the

<sup>33</sup> See *Register of the Rabbinical Court of Istanbul*, n° 4 (1871–1894) (private collection, photocopy at *Turkish Collection...cit.*, Istanbul Court Records), p. 37 # 1.

<sup>34</sup> His nine *responsa* were published in Jerusalem in 1991.

vehement opponent to modern education in Istanbul. Due to the troubled times HaKohen could afford only a plain gravestone to be made for his wife, but he was not about to miss the opportunity to remind the world from what family she came, and indirectly thus laurated himself. On her tombstone were written the following words:

Woe for her who has gone, woe for her who has been taken,  
 A woman of valor, of great eminence, straight in her deeds and in her virtues,  
 The honor of the daughter of a king is inward,  
 This is the bone of an exalted person,  
 Of the seed that combines Torah and greatness,  
 A worthy woman, a rabbi's wife,  
 A noble seed from a unique family,  
 She is the honorable woman, the Lady Vida,  
 Only daughter of the great Rabbi Yehoshu'a Tsontsin, of blessed memory,  
 Wife of the perfectly wise, distinguished, mighty judge,  
 Our honored teacher Rabbi Shalom HaKohen, of blessed memory,  
 She was taken to her eternal home on the sixteenth day of the month of  
 Iyar,  
 In the year 5686.  
 May her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.<sup>35</sup>

The inscription, which includes an acrostic of her name, establishes the eminence of the Tsontsin family in several ways. The woman is “daughter of a king,” “A noble seed from a unique family,” there are “Torah and greatness,” combined together. To conclude the matter the twofold connection are emphasized, to her father and to her husband. The parallel connections are brought in order to complete the picture. The Tzontzins are a noble family, who enters into marriages with worthy people—i.e. Shalom HaKohen had been a match worthy for them, and thus his children are a good match as well. The daughter of a great rabbi marries another great rabbi. The fact that she married him elevates his status, and thus everyone who passes on the path of the cemetery remembers and knows that this is an eminent family. It does not matter what do the Tzontzins—Soncinos think of themselves, the fact is that Hakohen needs their ancestral glamour in order to crown himself, and thus he emphasizes their pedigree.

<sup>35</sup> D. 30 April 1926, *Turkish Collection*, Ortaköy Cemetery, plot # M-9, stone # 7, film # 105\*, 28 February 1989.

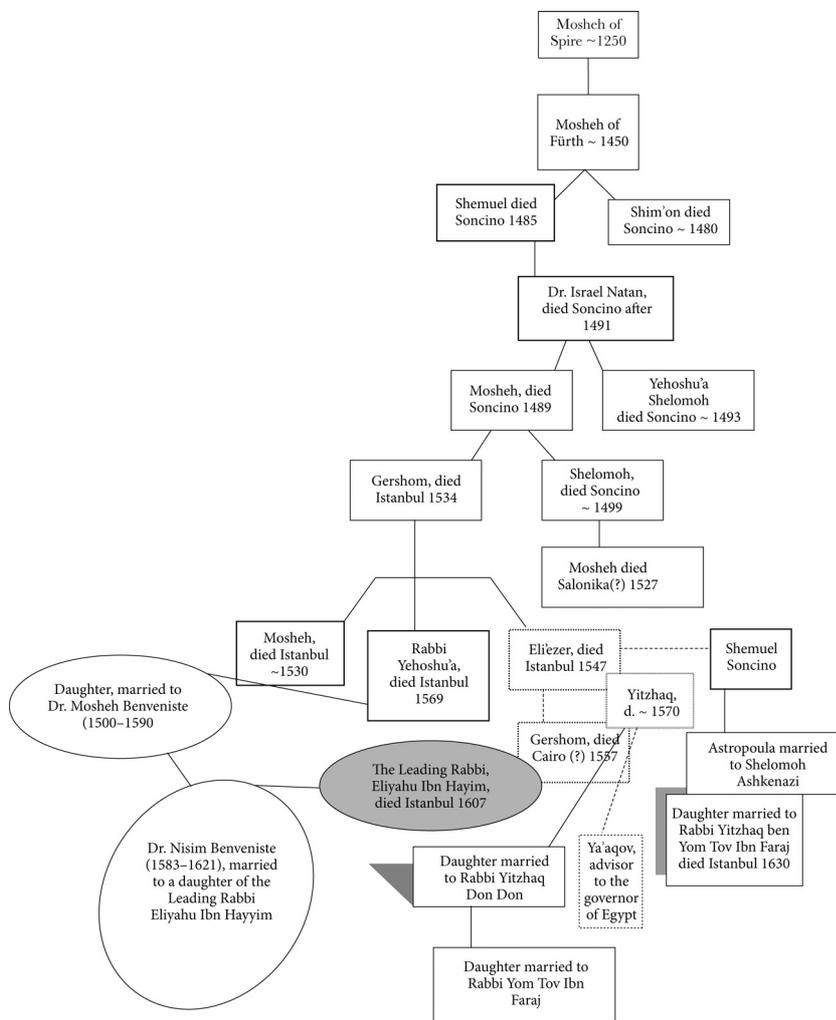
What does the Tsontsin family, through the generations, achieve by means of this strategy? What do other Istanbuli families achieve by that? Cultivation of the family pedigree through the culture of death has great significance for the living as well. That is why even in hard times that forces them to settle for poorly decorated mediocre stones, they still invest great efforts in the epitaph that glorify their dynasty. That is why humble people who marry with them take the trouble to stress their matches with them. This is, of course, only one of the ways to cultivate the pedigree. There are many other ways which will not be discussed in this paper such as building synagogues, Houses of Study, sponsoring the publication of books investing in the dowries of daughters, endogamous marriages etc. The goal of cultivating the past pedigree is to ensure its foundation for the future. On the day that one of the family members matures and is ready to enter into the covenant of marriage, the pedigree gives him a wider range of choices from among families that put forward possible spouses. The wide range is not only in quantity, but also in quality: brides and grooms from families that exhibit similar qualities—money or learning together with pedigree.

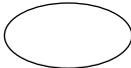
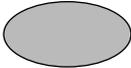
A careful study of all the matches done by the family, as well as by others will show that there is always a barter of sorts, either pedigree and learning for money, or money for money, or learning and money for pedigree. In the case of the Soncinos-Tzontzins, pedigree by itself is not sufficient, for the Tsontsin family itself brings this valuable commodity into the deal. They will look for erudition and money. At the end of the 19th century they settled for a humble judge. Their money evaporated, the male progeny extinct, they had to settle for less.

What causes a society to adopt this particular strategy, i.e., of cultivating pedigree through death culture? It is often said that pedigree is a very important value among Sephardic Jews. But the Soncinos-Tsontsins were not Sephardim; they were Ashkenazim, or at best Italianized Ashkenazim. Similarly, the material investment in the culture of death in the capital city was above and beyond anything that I know of among the Jews of the Ottoman Empire, and it successfully measures up against the investments of the Muslims and the Christians in the city. It is perhaps equal to the expenditures of the Jews in places such as Livorno, or Curacao. Here I can do no more than merely indicate in general terms the reasons for the size of this investment.

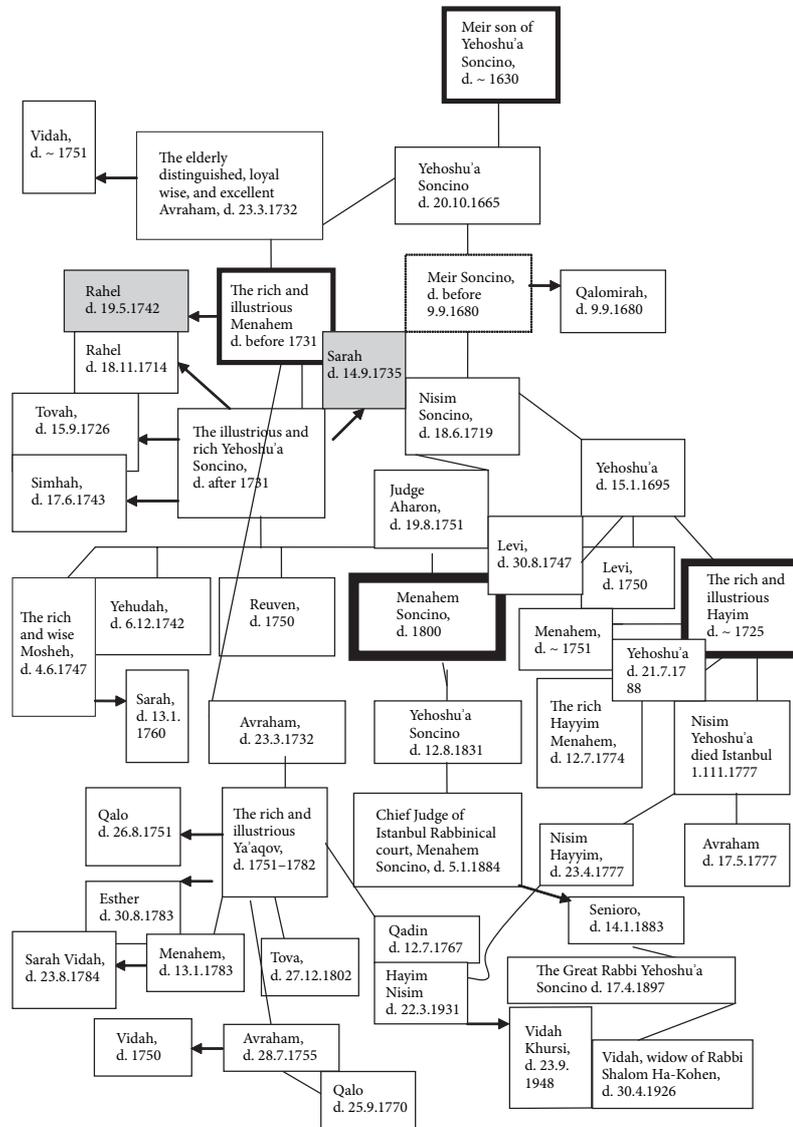
It seems that it was made in places where, as a general rule, great value was ascribed to outward demonstrations of wealth also in the

surrounding society, places where for various reasons materialistic culture prevails as a value in itself, and overshadows all the other values of the society. It is understood that considerable means are required for this large investment, but the investment continues even when the means dwindle. Values do not change as quickly as finances change. In a world in which communication was rather slow, it took many years for people to understand that values that seemed eternal were not valid anymore.



**Legenda:**  
 Benveniste family =       Ibn Hayim family =   
 Ibn Faraj family =       Ashkenazi family = 

1. The Soncino Family—Spire-Fürth-Venice-Salonika-Istanbul-Cairo.



**Legenda:**  
 Hasköy and Ortaköy cemeteries =  Indirect Line   
 Son = —  
 Spouse =   
 Indirect evidence on tombstones  
 And Sources other than cemeteries =   
 Kuzguncuk

2. The Soncino Family in Istanbul.