Minna Rozen (ed.)

The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans

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The study of non-Muslim communities has, over the last twenty-five years, turned into one of the major research fields of Ottoman studies. The first volume to address the issue in particular was *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Bernard Lewis and Benjamin Braude (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982). The innovative character of the volume is due to the fact that it addressed all non-Muslim communities within the same comparative framework. Since its publication in 1982, the volume has been criticised on a number of levels, two of which will be addressed here. Firstly, it axiomatically considered non-Muslims to be a separate entity and consequently addressed their experiences separately from those of Muslims in areas where the population generally shared similar concerns. Secondly, in most accounts, the relevant research did not involve sources written in the language of the particular community. Therefore it tended to ignore the intricacies

of community life and considered the political or cultural attitudes of these communities as monolithic in character.

Since then, much water has passed under the bridge. In the 1990s the interest in the different communities of the Empire took a different turn and was systematised. What emerged were volumes which regarded each community separately. The volumes *Ottoman Greeks in the Age of Nationalism*, edited by Dimitris Gontikas and Charles Issawi (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999), *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Avigdor Levy (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), *Armenians in the Ottoman Empire: An Anthology of Transformation, 13th–19th centuries*, edited by Vatche Ghazarian (Waltham: Mayreni, 1997), constitute collections of articles or conference proceedings which investigate several aspects of the abovementioned populations. The novelty in these cases was that more and more scholars who ethnically identified themselves with these communities, whether they still inhabit in the region or elsewhere, were involved in the study of the relevant subjects. They profited from their fluency in the respective languages as well as a local historiographical tradition which, slightly parochial as it may have been, paved the way through significant empirical work. The disadvantage of these collections was, of course, that they tended to ignore parallel cases. The elaborate accounts and sophisticated analyses they included could have been easily applied to other cases had there been a willingness to do so. It is noteworthy that in the same period it was the French historiographical tradition which promptly supplied such an approach. Volumes such as *Villes Ottomanes â la fin de l'Empire* and *Vivre dans l'Empire Ottoman: sociabilités et relations intercommunautaires (XVIIIe–XXe siècles*, edited by François Georgeon and Paul Dumont (Paris: Harmattan, 1992-1997), fall into this category. What has become obvious is that a methodological configuration is required to take advantage of the experience gained from individual cases, and to proceed not in a holistic approach that eliminates differences and peculiarities nor in one that derives from the perspective of the state, but in a way that tackles the emerging heterodoxies; in other words, the ways in which communities and individuals developed through their interaction with each other.

Minna Rozen's voluminous work may be placed in this historiographical context. Author and editor of these two volumes, she is Professor of Jewish History at the University of Haifa, well-known for her study *A History of the Jewish Community in Istanbul: The Formative years, 1453–1566* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). This time she undertakes the difficult task of narrating the history of Jewry in the much larger geography of the Balkans in the late Ottoman period. The fist volume provides a comprehensive and analytically valuable survey of the historical trajectory of Jewish communities in the Balkans and in Turkey from the beginning of Mahmut II's reign to the Second World War, sustained by abundant documentation and written in a manner that can introduce the subject matter to the reader who might not be familiar with the period. It raises a series of crucial historiographical issues and seeks to provide answers to relevant questions. Her declared aim is "securing the place of the communities of Turkey and the Balkans in the collective historical memory of the Jews on the basis of real facts rather than conventions and wishful thinking" (8). The second volume includes articles from a conference that was held in 1995 at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center at Tel Aviv University. According to the editor, the articles offer "an

exploration of the impact on the fate of Ottoman Sephardic Jewry of the processes of westernisation and modernisation within the Ottoman Empire, the growth of modern-day nationalism, and finally the collapse of the Empire and the establishment of nation-states on its former territories" (7). Conference participants from diverse academic backgrounds and different countries, from Israel to Bosnia-Herzegovina, were invited to a "candid discussion of a range of questions whose answers had generally been dictated by the national affiliation of the authors" (8). One cannot but be impressed by the line-up of the scholars involved, ranging from Ilbert Ortayli, Heath Lowry and Selim Deringil from Ottoman studies, to Steven Bowman, Shmuel Raphael, Daniel Carpi from Jewish Studies, as well as many scholars specialising in the history of the Balkan countries. Due to the mass of material involved, this review is limited to the first volume, as it creates the historiographical ground for the individual contributions in the second.

In the first chapter of this volume, the author offers a survey of different theories of nationalism, trying to invoke different interpretations on the development of Jewish nationalism. She interestingly raises the issue of the religious affiliation of many of the theoreticians of nationalism. It is seldom considered that Elie Kedurie, Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, Eric Hobsbawm and Isaiah Berlin are Jewish. Rosen's prompt explanation is of an existential nature: "Jewish existence confronts those who are born into it with trials more difficult than those known by other people" (29). What is more, she claims that in all these cases the study of nationalism involves, at least, some explanation with respect to the fate of the Jews during the past 200 years. None of the scholars mentioned above were Zionists; in fact, some of them were anti-Zionists. She eventually compares these scholars to those of their colleagues who travelled from Eastern Europe to Israel and who have no doubts that "the members of other national groups might have invented their nationality but the Jewish people had certainly not done so – it is ancient and eternal and will endure forever" (31). Modern theories of nationalism, however, have influenced a younger generation of scholars in Israel. This is portrayed by Rozen as a result of the state's failure to fulfil its promise to provide safety and justice for the Jewish population, which had believed in it so much. Thus, she describes the development of a heated debate among Israeli intellectuals who are grouped as positivists, neo-nationalists or de-constructionists. Beyond the realisation that these debates encapsulate the philosophical dilemma on whether 'ultimate truth' (sic) exists, the author turns to the more practical, asking "to what extent are the theories outlined above valid in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman contexts" (40).

In the second chapter, she refers to the emergence of Turkish and other local nationalisms at the end of the Ottoman era. She concludes that "the inability to produce a precise theory of nationalism in this part of the world stems from the complexity of human activity" (50). One certainly wonders, as Vassillis Lambropoulos has argued, why local intellectuals in the Balkans were unable to "abstract their region from its special history and place",[1] as it was the case in Central Europe or the Caribbean. In any case this is one of the weakest chapters of the book.

In the third chapter, Rozen discusses the reforms in the Ottoman Empire and the status of the Jewish population. The beginning of this process represented a severe blow to the Jews of the Empire, who had tied their fate to the janissaries, the elite military and social

group that was eliminated by Sultan Mahmut II, which paved the path for the implementation of the reforms and the concomitant rise of Greek and Armenian businessmen. This led to the "cultural empowerment of the Christian communities of the empire and the coalescing of their group identity" (57). This new impetus led the Jews of the Empire to promptly imitate the 'Francos', the Jewish subjects of Western states, just as Christian communities identified with Christian Europe. The westernisation of the community was also the result of the insecurity it felt under the new circumstances (61).

Chapter four describes the impact of the reforms on the social and spiritual world of Ottoman Jewry. The conservative character of the community was challenged by the reforms which lead to the blood libels and the founding of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. The press also provided information and became an agent of social change. Moreover, Anglo-American missionary institutions provided inspiration for secular education, offering alternatives to the younger generation. European influences had a different impact in different ways in various centres of the Empire. The several streams, however, that flowed through the Jewish communities resulted in intensifying the awareness of Jewish uniqueness in an unprecedented manner (65–7).

Chapter five refers to the Istanbul community in particular during the whole period up to the treaty of Lausanne. Despite the warm welcome extended to them by the Jewish community, the reforms did not advance rapidly because in reality the sort of centralisation they introduced was alien to their political culture. In addition, many Ottoman Jews were unhappy with the interference of well-to-do 'Francos' in Ottoman affairs (80). Moreover, the reorganisation and the conflicts within the community provided an arena for social struggle between the wealthy elite and a broad part of the population that gradually embraced Zionism as a political but also as a social justice cause (129). Before she moves on to the other communities of the Empire, in a tiny chapter on the Balkan nations' wars of independence Rozen addresses the dilemma that Jewish populations of the period encountered. They were expected to replace their sense of loyalty and connection to the Ottoman state with a comparable affinity for a different political entity (131). Thus, the fear for an uncertain future within the new political formations, partly deriving from the fragmentation of what used to be a unified political and geographical space, hindered their immediate integration. One way or another, they experienced the violence that the transition from one form of government to another entailed (136).

The most indicative example, of course, that illustrates the traumatic character of this transition is provided by the Jewish community in Salonica, described in chapter seven. Despite the similarities in the fate of different communities in the region and the unavoidable repetitions throughout the book, the Jewry of Salonica certainly deserved to be addressed separately. The difference, for instance, with the relatively small community in Istanbul is stark. Whereas the latter could always adopt a low profile while supporting the status quo, the former, due to its numerical preponderance, took a much more active part in political developments and they were largely influenced by the local Balkan national movements, appropriating thus their arguments and discourse, occasionally against the Ottomans (137–40). Still, the Salonican community experienced a transformation similar to the one in Istanbul. Westernised 'Francos', like the Allatinis, the equivalent of

the Cammondos in Istanbul, became involved in public affairs with the explicit task of implementing Ottoman reforms while at the same time imposing their own authority over the traditional conservative elites. This was not an easy task and aroused the reaction of the rabbis and large segments of the population who could not afford the high cost of building new educational institutions, for instance, especially if one considers their heavy debts to the Ottoman administration (145). In order to sustain tranquillity community leaders introduced more efficient economic management while making significant contributions to community coffers (151). On the whole, the community, active as it was, responded to the challenges of the time and to different Balkan nationalisms in particular by supporting the notion of a common Ottoman identity. Both in the post-Tanzimat period, starting from the 1870s, but also after the Young Turk movement (152–7), Ottomanism was supported both by the newly emerging modernising bourgeoisie as well as the working class represented by the famous *Federacion*. However, the experience of these years paved the ground for the development of Zionism. As the author points out, it was not a coincidence that Jewish nationalism and socialism developed at the same time as ethnic antagonism did between different communities (161). In Salonica, too, the socioeconomic rift between the lower social strata that supported Zionism and the higher one that supported the status quo became too obvious (163).

In a subchapter entitled "The Jews of Greece and their new state, 1912–1923", Rozen narrates the incorporation of the Salonican Jewish community in particular into the existing legal framework. The period after 1912 was a difficult one for the community considering the atrocities committed against the civilian population of all sides and the great fire of 1917 that irreversibly altered the urban planning and character of the city (176). Despite the polarisation between Greeks and Jews, however, Rosen points out that Salonica was the first city where "Jews were to achieve equality so quickly, and even more, to be given virtually immediate recognition of their ethnic uniqueness" (171). The reason for that, of course, was the fear on the part of the Greek government that local Jewry might support a secession movement. Relations, however, became increasingly tense resulting from, in the author's opinion, the rapid increase of support for the Zionists, especially after the Balfour Declaration of 1917 (177–81).

Chapter eight addresses the history of the Jews in other Balkan states in the period up to the end of the Second World War. The Jews in the south Slavic lands were mostly Ashkenazi who migrated over the course of the nineteenth century and settled in different regions of the Habsburg Empire (187). Croatia and Vojvodina were the first southern Slavic lands to see the development of modern Jewish nationalism (188). This was caused, the author points out, by the "well-developed cultural characteristics" of the majority population and its outcome was "a trend toward secularisation and a strong urge to blend into the surrounding society" (191–2). In Serbia, on the contrary, where nation-state building had started much earlier, the religious difference of the Jews from the rest of the population set an obstacle to obtaining equal civic rights (193). The same is true for the Jews in Bulgaria, the obvious difference being that by the time Bulgaria gained autonomy and independence, Jews had already experienced a sweeping Westernisation which, "imprinted by its Sephardi origins, emphasised all the more its foreign status amid the larger society" (197).

Chapter nine refers to the Jews in the interwar period in all these countries, starting

with Turkey. Rozen claims that this part was the most difficult to write since the archives of the republican period are not accessible to researchers. It is truly ironic when one considers that Turkey boasts of having protected its Jewish population, not only the indigenous one, but also the immigrant one which arrived in those stormy years. Despite the lack of material, it is clear that the devastation of the Turkish lands during the First World War and the subsequent War of Independence did not leave the Jewish population untouched either. Yet, Turkish Jews hoped that the new Republic would offer them equal opportunities and a safe life. Therefore, they "did not reflect in any way a wish to live somewhere else" (229). However, developments from 1926 onwards disenchanted the elites of all the religious minorities that were recognised as such by the Lausanne Treaty. A series of discriminatory measures (non-eligibility for the civil service, suppression of minority languages, state intervention in community foundations, etc.) marked the shift to the more authoritarian policies pertinent to Turkish nation-state building (238). This is one of the rare occasions that the author addresses the experience of the Jewish community within the broader framework of the treatment of non-Muslims under the Ottoman and Turkish administrations. This makes some sense, as while Christians and Jews had in the past followed different trajectories and developed even antagonistic attitudes due to their relations with different parts of the Ottoman elites, this time all minorities were faced with practically the same circumstances. Despite the policy of equality proclaimed by the Turkish authorities, anti-Semitic sentiments within Turkish society were on the rise in the 1930s and this led to several violent outbreaks (239–44). This increased the desire among the Turkish Jewry for immigration to Palestine, which was not permitted by the authorities however. Rosen points out the discrepancy between the positive Turkish attitude towards Zionist activity in Palestine as a means to "disrupt the chain of Arab states in the region"' and the Turkification policies at home. Despite this, however, in a period when Nazi propaganda had begun to dominate in Europe Turkish Jews could have considered themselves relatively safe (255).

As for the Greek Jewry, the author challenges the well-established assumption that the inter-war period was 'a life- and death-struggle' between Greek and Jewish merchants in Salonica. Actually, she argues, that the several violent incidents in Salonica was concomitant with the overall rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe and she maintains that that the term 'economic anti-Semitism' does not accurately describe the history of Salonica's Jews during the period (261). The need to survive under a new state administration led to the formation of two ideological camps: the assimilationists, who wished the community to merge into Greek society, and the Zionists, who tried to convince it otherwise (267). The fact, however, that the Zionists, who managed to dominate the 1928 community elections, were labelled by the state authorities as 'leftist extremists' accounts for the general assumption that the Jews of Salonica were 'communists'. In a period of anti-communist propaganda this label did not enhance their image (277). This climate, Rozen argues, led to the burning down of the Campbell quarter, the most tragic incident of anti-Semitism in that period. This incident marked the turning point in the self-identification of local Jewry. On the whole, Rosen claims that this is "yet another example of the difficulty of the modern nation-states that arose on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire to tolerate elements that were not identical

to the ruling majority in all respects" (289). In any case, this was the period when the migration to Palestine set out. The author considers this movement as a result of economic and political oppression, accentuated by the Greek authorities' claim that the (Christian) Greeks of the city were suffering more from the hardship caused by the Great Depression, making them more deserving of support than the Jews (300). Therefore, despite their loyalty to the nation-state, many Jews were left without much choice. This is how the author interprets their sentiments "We have to leave Salonica because it is not a haven any more. The only haven outside Salonica is the one we will create for ourselves in a country of our own, Zion" (301). In the Slavic lands, the creation of Yugoslavia, the coexistence of difference Slavic ethnicities under the one political umbrella, and the vagueness regarding the definition of the Yugoslav nation allowed local Jews, of which those in Croatia had already developed a strong secular identity, to identify themselves as Yugoslavs despite Serbian attempts to impose their culture (320). As for Bulgaria, Rosen points out that the promptness of the local Jewish community in assimilating itself into the institutions of the nation-state and its organisational ability and efficiency allowed Jews to fight for their rights with relative success compared to their co-religionists in other states (320).

The last chapter, "The end of a Diaspora", discusses what the outcome of the Second World War meant for Balkan Jewry. Despite their different status and circumstances, the communities throughout the region were similarly devastated. The standard explanation offered is that the experience of the war together with the establishment of the state of Israel led the surviving members of these communities to migrate (333). Rozen insists, however, that particular circumstances should also be considered. In Yugoslavia, even though they had fought with the partisans, Jews did not feel protected from anti-Semitism in a state which, interestingly, officially assisted their migration to Palestine (338). In Greece, the devastation of Salonican Jewry stands, for various reasons, in stark contrast to the fate of the Jews of Central Greece. As the author points out, despite the fact that even in the Salonican case the local Christian population did not in any way participate in the deportations, it considered it a 'Jewish problem' and having themselves suffered deportation as refugees from their birthplaces in Turkey, they did not anticipate the outcome of this particular deportation (346). In Greece, however, it is common knowledge that important sites belonging to the Jewish community, the cemetery for instance, were promptly taken over by the local administration and the social and spatial vacuum left was soon filled by the local population. Bulgarian Jewry, the best organised in the Balkans, was economically devastated. However, despite the fact that Bulgaria was the only Balkan satellite of Germany and was expected to treat its Jewry accordingly, it did not do so, a development which gave rise to different political and historiographical interpretations both in Bulgaria and abroad (352). As for Turkey, despite the legendary protection that it provided to its indigenous and immigrant Jewry, the property tax (*varlık vergisi*) that was imposed on all non-Muslim entrepreneurs, purportedly to meet the needs of the emergency caused by the war, led to the devastation of the communities and accelerated a sense of alienation which paved the way to migration (360–1). It was the poor who emigrated initially, supported in their departure by the financial elite of each community, who themselves eventually followed suit (367).

In her epilogue, Rosen maintains that the urge to escape death and the desire to perpetuate themselves were the stimuli for Jewish emigration (369). It is not clear, however, whether she is aware of the fact that these psychological elements cannot serve as an explanatory scheme and can be applied to any living community, leading thus to a tautology. Much more persuasive is her assessment of the development of Jewish nationalism in the context of the Empire's collapse and the "the awakening of primordial urges to glorify the new nation" (379).

This review started with certain historiographical remarks and will conclude accordingly. Over the last ten years a series of works have addressed the fate of Jewry in different Balkan countries. The works of Rena Molho and Rifat Bali on the Jews of Greece and Turkey,[2] for instance, have been path-breaking. Recently, Giorgos Margaritis has broadened the scope of analysis by addressing the fate of Greek Jews within the framework of the treatment of other minorities.[3] Rozen's work is important not only for all the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this review, but also because she goes beyond individual communities and reconstructs a broader geography, a common space, where the experience of these communities gains a new meaning. Unfortunately, the human geography she offers tackles the other ethnoreligious communities only to the extent they are interrelated with the Jewish one. This was the aim of her work and she magnificently achieves her goal. However, it is high time that scholars who specialise in Greek, Armenian, Jewish or Turkish studies seek ways to combine their research agendas and to take advantage of each other's expertise. This will definitely lead to a more comprehensive picture of the multi-communal societies of the Balkans, capable of raising new questions and broadening current debates.

FOOTNOTES

1 Vassilis Lambropoulos, "Must we keep talking about 'the Balkans'", in Tziovas Dimitris (ed.), *Greece and the Balkans: Identities, Perceptions and Cultural Encounters since the Enlightenment*, London: Ashgate, 2003, p. 267.

2 Rena Molho, *Salonica and Istanbul: Social, Political and Cultural Aspects of Jewish Life*, Istanbul: Isis Press, 2005; Rıfat Bali, *Cumhuriyet yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri: bir Türkleştirme serüveni (1923–1945)*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1999; Rıfat N. Bali, *Musa'nın evlatları, Cumhuriyet'in yurttaşları*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003.

3 Giorgos Margaritis, *Ανεπιθύμητοι συμπατριώτες. Τσάμηδες–Εβραίοι Στοιχεία για την καταστροφή των μειονοτήτων της Ελλάδας*, Athens: Βιβλιόραμα, 2005.