

Floating Minyans and Frozen Soles

Istanbul

Anyone who visits Turkey must take along two necessities....some colloquial Yiddish, and darned socks, preferably heavy woollen gym socks. The Yiddish is essential because the most popular European language in Turkey besides Turkish, is German... which, after all, is only Yiddish with a funny accent. The socks are needed because when entering the Sulamaniyye, or Blue, or Hagai Sophia Mosque, one removes one's shoes. So as not to embarrass your wife, darn your socks first. The wool is recommended to prevent your soles from freezing. Turkey today...and I can say this without fear of contradiction never having been in Turkey earlier...owes all it is to Kemal Ataturk, the dictator who seized power after the crazed Sultan Abdul Hamid ended the role of the Cali-

phate, and in a dictatorial manner, imposed democracy on Turkey. In recent days, military leaders have intervened to 'save' the country, and in a most unconventional gesture, restored democratic government when the crisis passed.

The 20,600 Jews of contemporary Turkey...2,500 in Izmir (source of the dried figs I have eaten for over half a century) 100, in Ankara and the balance in Istanbul, enjoy the freedoms of all Turkish citizens of a secular state in which Ataturk disestablished the Muslim faith, and replaced the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet. Whether he gave the mass of Turks another faith to fill the vacuum created by the dethroning of the Muslim faith, I am not competent to say, even after a lengthy five day stay there. Out of a population of 40 million (like Egypt), 2.5 million Turks are '*gast-arbeiter*' in Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Sweden, and Bulgaria.

During my stay in the city, whose unequalled mosques give the city a fantastic skyline, I saw only two beggars... and about ten thousand itinerant street

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peddlers of everything from T-shirts to cosmetics, carpets, shoes, toys, and wrist-watches. At least they were trying to earn a living.

I also saw more black mink than I have ever seen, the *New Yorker* advertisements included. This was at the weddings...ceremonies, not receptions...I attended as an uninvited but interested spectator at the Neveh Shalom synagogue near the Galatea Tower. Weddings are scheduled Sunday afternoons every hour on the hour, and the ceremonies differ somewhat from what I have taken to be the standard. The *Haham Bashi* of Turkish Rabbinate does not read the *Ketuba* aloud and give it to the bride. He sits close to the groom, discusses it *sotto voce*, and hands it to the groom, who places it in his pocket, and remains seated while the bride, both sets of parents and the assistant *Dayanim* proceed with part of the service...all held on the *bimah* in front of the Ark. Ultimately the groom joins the party, all face the opened ark, and then the couple are covered with a *Chupa* comprised of a *Tallit* which is spread over them...with each family member holding a fringe. There is no address to the happy couple, no unveiling of the bride, no happy kiss between the main participants after the ceremony...and after witnessing three such ceremonies back-to-back, I am not even sure that the groom breaks a glass in memory of the destruction of the Temple. Perhaps such a gesture would be interpreted as constituting the type of foreign alliance that Turkish citizens of all faiths are forbidden.

Kemal Ataturk's picture appears on every banknote and coin of all denominations, in every Turkish Airlines jet as a bas relief, and in all hotels, stores, offi-

ces, even the office of the newly revived Jewish weekly *Szalom*, restaurants, pizza places, and bazaar shops. The father of the country is never out of sight. Among his bequests are some draconian decrees regarding the international contacts of ethnic, religious and other communities which forbid all such ties. Thus not only are Zionist organizations forbidden...so are such innocuous bodies as *B'nai B'rith*...although, I was informed by a Western Embassy officer, the Turks will occasionally ship the Chief Rabbi (*Haham Bashi*) abroad to attend an international rabbinical conclave *davke* to prove how open and free Turkish Jewry's international bonds are. In addition the Jews and all Turkish citizens are subject to certain rules affecting places of worship. If unused, they revert to the government. And so just as many cities have floating crap games, Turkey has floating *Minyans*...in order to prevent a synagogue from falling into disuse, and thereby escheating to the government. In fact, I was told that the Ashkenazi Synagogue hires poor Sephardic Jews to pray at their synagogue to keep it a going concern!

The community supports a school with approximately 300 children, and a very minimal program of Hebrew and Jewish content in the curriculum. The changing character of Turkish Jewry may be gauged, I was informed, in languages...while some of the very old speak only Ladino, the weekly formerly published entirely in Ladino expired six months ago because the Ladino readership declined. Now it has reappeared mostly in Turkish, and partially in Ladino, to meet the needs of the younger community. In many families the oldest child speaks Spanish, the middle one

French, and the youngest — English... mostly a reflection of the educational choices and institutions they attend.

A true example of *chalutzit* I saw was during a visit to the editorial offices of *Szalom*...an apartment, with typewriters busily clattering away, and groups of writers, columnists, and editors huddled in various rooms...all overseen by a large portrait of Ataturk. The entire staff is unpaid, although the community foots the printing bill. Not a likely example to be imitated anywhere except, perhaps, in a youth movement somewhere. The usual editorial concerns prevail... is there an unbalance with too much Israeli news?

I wondered about Turkey's ongoing relationship with Israel...the Embassy it maintained in Israel was closed only five years ago, but an Israeli Consul resides in Istanbul and a Consul General in Ankara. My Western Embassy informants surmised that with Turkey's close ties to the Arab World...she is now allowing an Iraqi oil pipeline to be built across her territory to help Iraq recover oil exports to help fight Khomeini... Turkey tolerates an Israeli presence on her soil because the United States, who finances so much of Turkey's budget, insists on it. El Al maintains an office and a schedule of flights to Israel, and according to my informant, Turkey is a big buyer of Israel's potash and phosphates...for fertilizers, both for herself, and for transshipment to Iran.

What I found fascinating were the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, the incredible opulence of the treasures of the Topkapi museum (made famous in a film with Peter Ustinov stealing the crown jewels). I could not resist the thought that a sale of only part of these

jewels could probably solve all Turkey's foreign exchange problems for years to come. The combination of unimaginable wealth with the incredible cruelty of the Ottomans (not unlike the Czarist example) boggles the imagination.

I asked about the representation of Turkish Jews in the economy and universities and learned that while medicine and law are popular occupations, and university attendance among Jewish youth is very high, the lawyers and all others steer clear of politics. During the thirties, when Ataturk was building Turkey's universities towards Western standards, he imported many Jewish professors of chemistry and mathematics from Germany. Although they are all now retired or passed on, the groundwork they laid is still a mainstay of the university attainment. Currently, no more than three members of the Jewish community have attained professorial status. A related sect, the Dönme practicing Muslims and descendants of the followers of the false Messiah Shabetai Zevi, who converted to the Mohammedan faith in Constantinople in 1666 (and who number perhaps 3,000 in the city today), are very prominently represented among the faculties of Istanbul's seven universities. Like Marranos, they preserve some Jewish traditions, and have their own mosque, the Tesvikye Mosque, which 'true' Moslems refer to as the Jewish Mosque! As a final bit of advice in this brief travelogue, I wish to refer all true lovers of the Turkish bath to the Galata Saray Hamam, built by Sultan Abdul Hamid. Show the address in Latin letters to any cab driver. He will take you there, and you will thank me for the recommendation.

Istanbul has thirteen daily newspaper-

ers (New York gets along with three). I am referring only to the Turkish language dailies, each of which is printed in a crazy-quilt of primary color boxes so that the whole display looks like a comic book rack. The only exception is the single English language paper, the *Turkish Daily News*, a 25 year old unofficial government mouthpiece. On 15 March this year it carried the following excerpt among its 'press views' citations:

"With a peculiar and, it must be said, sinister perversity, the press and television here and abroad blame the Israelis for the daily terrible death toll of the Lebanon.

"Apparently Israelis should not defend themselves. Apparently Israelis should not send out armored columns to protect their flanks against the madmen who willingly die if in so doing they can take a few Israelis with them. Apparently the Israelis cannot use force to make sure that at least on their line of retreat their enemies are not waiting to ambush them...

"Once again the only democratic country in the Middle East, the only country which even attempts to sustain our standards of ethics and the only country in the area which represents and supports the Western way of life is grotesquely libelled. It is hard any more to deny the view that anti-Semitism, that ancient evil, still rests lightly beneath the surface of our so-called civilized society." *Mail On Sunday*.