

Turkey and the Jews of Europe during World War II

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The large-scale movement of Jewish refugees to the Ottoman Empire from Spain and Portugal and elsewhere in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries as a result of persecutions engendered by the Inquisition largely came to an end during the centuries of Ottoman disintegration that followed since the decline of political stability and economic unity within the Ottoman Empire made it impossible for the sultans to provide their Jewish subjects with the same sort of protection against Christian bigotry and persecution within the Empire which had enabled the first great wave of Jewish emigrants to prosper. The Ottoman revival under the stimulus of the 19th century Tanzimat reform era changed all this, however, so that during the last century of Ottoman existence, new influxes of Jewish refugees once again placed the Turks in the forefront of the nations providing refuge and succor to the Jews of Europe.¹

The second great wave of Jewish immigration into Ottoman Turkey began in the early years of the 19th century when the Greek Revolution originated modern 'ethnic cleansing' by carrying out massacres and persecutions of its Muslim and Jewish population in order to create a homogeneous basis for the new independent kingdom of Greece. The resulting influx of refugees into the shrinking boundaries of the Ottoman Empire was followed by similar events in the remaining Ottoman provinces in Europe as Serbia, Bulgaria, and Rumania achieved their independence by following the Greek example of persecuting and/or murdering their non-Christian minorities, who in turn fled to the empire which had given their ancestors support and protection over the centuries.² This influx reached its peak as a result of the

¹On the history of Ottoman Jewry, see Stanford J. Shaw, *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic* (MacMillan/Palgrave, London, and New York University Press, 1991-1992), and Avigdor Levy, ed., *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1994).

²The process by which the newly independent Christian states of Southeastern Europe massacred and persecuted their non-Christian inhabitants is studied in detail in Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims*,

Russian pogroms which began in 1881, followed by the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), when Greek assaults on the Jewish community of Salonica and other parts of eastern Macedonia led thousands of Jews, who previously had constituted a majority of its population, to flee eastward into Ottoman territory, settling mostly in Istanbul and Izmir, where they contributed significantly to the revival of their industry and trade that took place during and after World War I.

Most of the Jews coming from the former Ottoman provinces of Southeastern Europe fitted in very well with existing Jewish community practices and customs since most shared the Sephardic religious and cultural practices which had dominated Ottoman Jewry since the late years of the 15th century. They were followed, however, by hundreds of Jewish refugees from the political upheavals and repressions which followed the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars in Europe, and again the revolutions of 1848, when Jewish liberals, many of whom were wealthy merchants, industrialists and bankers who had emerged following the emancipations of the French Revolutionary era, were subjected to large scale harassment by the reactionary monarchies of Europe. These brought to the Ottoman Empire the talents, experience and capital which they had built up in Europe during the previous decades, and applied it to creating banks, factories, and model farms through Anatolia, contributing significantly to the development of Ottoman industry and agriculture during the later years of the Tanzimat. Unlike the immigrants from Southeastern Europe and Russia, however, they did not fit in with the established Ottoman Jewish society, part of Middle Eastern civilization, but instead strengthened the Ashkenazi Ottoman Jewish community to the point where it was able to break away from the cultural dominance of the Sephardim and develop its own synagogues, schools and social institutions, thereby stimulating divisions within Ottoman Jewry which previously had not been significant.

Whereas the Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe who came to the Ottoman Empire were well-established intellectuals, industrialists, merchants and professionals, bringing with them a well developed cultural life as well as capital and knowledge which they were able to apply freely in the Ottoman dominions, very much as the Sephardic immigrants had done in earlier centuries, the Ashkenazi Jews who entered Ottoman territory in flight from the pogroms in Russia and subsequently from the terrors of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War that followed came out of the ghettos of the Russian Pale and brought with them few skills and a ghetto mentality. As a result, they fitted in neither with their Ashkenazi brothers from Central

1821-1922 (Darwin Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1995); see also Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, pp. 188-206.

Europe or with the mass of Sephardic Jews who dominated the Ottoman Jewish establishment, and constituted more of a burden than an asset, both to the Empire and to the Jewish community which had to take care of them. These reacted to their impoverished situation as well as to their segregation from other Ottoman Jews by moving away from the centers of Ottoman political and economic life and following the early Zionist idealists to Palestine, where they settled during the last quarter of the 19th century in what has become known as the first Zionist *Aliyah*. Most of the new immigrants from Russia supported Zionism, since, unlike the Ottoman Jews, they had suffered severe persecution and at the same time had little experience with the advantages of Ottoman life, and looked down on their Middle Eastern brothers as much as they did on their Muslim neighbors. Most Ottoman Jews, both Separdim and Ashkenazim, on the other hand, therefore reacted negatively to the Zionist efforts to establish Palestine as a center of Jewish life, and opposed Theodore Herzl's efforts to convince Sultan Abdülhamid II to turn Palestine over to the Jews, rightfully fearing that the establishment of Jewish domination in Palestine would inevitably destroy the good relations they had maintained with their Muslim neighbors over the centuries. Ottoman Grand Rabbi (1909-1920) Haim Nahoum Efendi, reflected his community's opposition to Zionism, though because of the tremendous burden imposed on his community in Istanbul by the continued influx of thousands of refugees from Southeastern Europe and Russia, he was compelled to cooperate with the Zionists by helping send these refugees on to Palestine before and during World War I, thus helping to fulfill the Zionist ambition despite his fears for the future of Ottoman Jewry.³

A new era of Turkish assistance to Jewish refugees began in the early 1930's, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his Minister of Education, Hasan Ali Yücel, took advantage of Hitler's dismissal of Jewish educators and scientists to bring hundreds of them to Turkey, where they contributed significantly to the development of Turkish universities and scientific establishments as well as to the fine arts and music before and during World War II.⁴ Turkey remained neutral during most of the war. Though it was in a military alliance with Great Britain and France concluded in 1938, and openly sympathized with them in opposition to Nazi Germany, neither was

³Neville Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976); Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, pp. 211-228.

⁴Horst Widmann, *Atatürk ve Üniversite Reformu* (Ankara, 1999); Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust: Turkey's Role in Rescuing Turkish and European Jews from Nazi Persecution, 1933-1945* (MacMillan/Palgrave, London, and New York University Press, 1993).

able to assure it of assistance in case a declaration of war led to a German invasion from Greece and Bulgaria. In addition, most Turks vividly remembered the suffering which all subjects of the Ottoman Empire experienced as a result of the disasters of the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the Turkish War of National Liberation, and did not want to go through that again unless their country's interests were directly threatened. Turkey therefore remained in a perilous state of neutrality through most of the war, though suffering considerable economic and financial difficulties as a result of its need to maintain a very large army against the possibility of a German attack at a time when most of its imports and exports were cut off

Turkey most certainly did not remain out of World War II to help the Jews, but Turkish neutrality put it into a unique position where it could and did provide major assistance to Jews who were being persecuted, imprisoned and exterminated throughout Europe during the Holocaust and World War II. Its diplomats and consuls in Germany and German occupied countries used their diplomatic status to intervene on behalf of resident Turkish Jews who otherwise would have been subjected to the same persecution as that suffered by Jews who were citizens of the European countries occupied by the Nazis.⁵ In France, where we have most information,⁶ this work was carried out by the Turkish Embassy to France, which was located at Vichy starting in 1941, as well as by the Turkish consulates-general at Paris and Marseilles, the latter moved to Grenoble after Germany occupied much of southern France following Italy's withdrawal from the war late in 1943. The Turkish diplomats who were most involved in this work, and who went to great lengths to protect Turkish Jews, often at the risk of their own lives, were at the Paris consulate, Consul-Generals Cevdet Dülger from 1939 until 1942 and Fikret Şefik Özdoğanlı from 1942 until 1945, and Vice Consul Namik Kemal Yolga, who remained in Paris throughout the war. At Marseilles there were Consul Generals Bedi'i Arbel from 1940 until 1943 and Mehmed Fuad Carim, from June 1943 until 1943 and Vice Consul Necdet Kent, who like Ambassador Yolga remained in France until the end of the war.

The Turkish consuls regularly applied to the German and French authorities to exempt Turkish Jews from the anti-Jewish laws introduced by the German

⁵Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust*, pp. 46-250.

⁶This study is based mainly on the hitherto unused archives remaining in the Turkish Embassy and Consulate in Paris, for which I think the Turkish Ambassador to France at the time of my research, Ambassador Tanış Bleda, as well as the French Foreign Ministry archives then located at the Quai d'Orsay in Paris, and materials from the German archives turned over to me by Hon. Serge Klarsfeld.

occupying authorities, and im imitation, and sometimes even more severe, by the Vichy government of unoccupied France. The Turkish claims for exemption were always based on the same principle, stated over and over again, that Turkey made no distinction among its citizens of different religions, and that under treaties maintained between Turkey and Germany, the latter therefore had no right to distinguish between Muslim and Jewish Turks. These diplomats intervened in all sorts of ways to assist Turkish Jews during the Holocaust. First and foremost they kept their Turkish citizenship in force and up to date by getting them to register and informing the authorities that they were entitled to protection as Turkish citizens whenever it became necessary to help them evade or escape Nazi and Vichy persecution.

This was not as easy as it appears on the surface. At the start of World War II, there were about ten thousand Turkish Jews living in France, and about an equal number living elsewhere in Europe. Some had left Turkey as long before as 1921, in the company of the French army that evacuated the country as the result of the Franklin-Bouillon Treaty of Ankara, by which France abandoned its effort to occupy Southeastern Turkey in alliance with Britain against the Turkish War of National Liberation (1918-1923), and began to help the Turks drive the British, Greek and Armenian invaders out of the country. Turkish Jews left Turkey at that time not because they opposed Turkish resistance to the Allied occupation—most Turkish Jews supported Turkish integrity, as they had supported Ottoman integrity against the Christian nationalist revolts that had taken place during the 19th century and World War I. They left, rather, because they were afraid that despite the French withdrawal, the Turks would be unable to win the war against both the British and Greek invaders and that as a result, most of western Turkey would be occupied Greece, which had a long history of persecuting and massacring Jews. The Greeks had burned down the Jewish quarter of Jewish Salonica in 1917, and when the city was being rebuilt right after the war, it had refused to allow the Jews to return, instead turning what was left of Jewish houses and land over to Greek refugees from Anatolia. Other Turkish Jews had gone to France during the 1920's, during the early years of the Turkish Republic, when the future seemed very uncertain as Atatürk was just beginning to put his secular reforms into place, and when residence in France seemed to offer far more comfort and prosperity. By 1940, many of these Turkish Jews in France had married French Jews, had children and even grandchildren who were French citizens, and in many cases had taken up French citizenship themselves. Some had retained their Turkish citizenship by registering with the Turkish consulates in France at least once every five years, as was required by Turkish law, but others had neglected to do this, and had as a result lost their Turkish citizenship according to the terms of a Turkish law passed in 1935 which provided that Turks resident

abroad had to register regularly or lose their citizenship. The situation did not seem important for most Turkish Jews in France, because for most of them it seemed far better to be a French Jew than a Turkish Jew. When the Nazis occupied the country and began persecuting French Jews, however, these Turkish Jews who had given up their Turkish citizenship suddenly found it was far better to be a Turkish Jew than a French Jew, and they applied in large numbers to have their Turkish citizenship restored. This took time, however, since each application had to be referred back to Ankara, and since the applicants had very little documentary proof, in many cases no more than birth certificates issued in Ottoman times. In the meantime, these Turkish Jews were subjected to increasingly severe Nazi persecution unless they could produce Turkish papers. The Turkish diplomats responded to this situation in two ways. On one hand, they urged their superiors in Ankara to speed up the process of restoring citizenship as much as possible. On the other hand, they invented what they called Certificates of Irregular Turkish Citizenships (*Gayri muntazam vatandaşlık tezkeresi*), and gave them to Turkish Jews who were in imminent danger of being shipped off to forced labor, or to a concentration camp, or who were being threatened with eviction from their houses, apartments or ships, stating to the Nazis and the French authorities that even such people had to be considered as Turkish citizens, entitled to all the protections and immunities provided to other Turkish citizens in France. The paper work was immense, but somehow the Turkish diplomats worked tremendously hard to handle all these cases and to protect those Jews who needed protection by giving them papers when they needed them most.

On 2 November 1940, the Turkish Consulate General in Paris sent the following note to the German Embassy in protest against a regulation applying to Turkish Jews a law that forbade all Jews from owning and operating businesses:

To the Embassy of Germany:

The Consulate General of Turkey at Paris, basing itself on the fact that Turkish Constitutional Law makes no distinction between its citizens regardless of the religion to which they belong, has the honor of asking the German Embassy to give instructions to the competent department that the decision that has begun to effect certain merchants

of Turkish nationality, because of the regulation of 18 October 1940, be reconsidered.⁷

The German replies generally accepted the Turkish argument, for example on 28 February 1941:

Despite the general regulations..., the German Embassy is ready to support individual requests for exemptions of Jews by the Turkish Consulate General when they have Turkish nationality.⁸

The French government of unoccupied France based at Vichy in many ways was more devious and difficult regarding Jews after the Vichy law enacted on 16 June 1941 required all Jews in unoccupied France, including Turkish citizens, to register themselves and their property, with the threat of their being sent to concentration camps for refusal to do so. The Turkish Ambassador to Paris (Vichy) objected to this in a statement to the French Foreign Ministry:

The Embassy of Turkey has the honor of informing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that its Government, having been informed of the text of law no. 2,333 of 2 June 1941, which under menace of penal sanctions, orders the inscription of Jews on a special register along with a declaration which they must make regarding their properties, feels that the measures which it dictates are also applicable to Turkish citizens of Jewish origin established in France. Turkey itself establishes no discrimination among its citizens according to race, religion or anything else, and therefore feels with unease such discrimination imposed by the French government on those of its citizens who are established in France, so that the Turkish government can

⁷Turkish Consulate General (Paris) to German Embassy (Paris), no. 605, 28 December 1940. Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris), file 6127. This, and subsequent documents quoted in this study, consist of my English translation from the French or Turkish. Since the Turkish archives at the Paris embassy and consulate had not been catalogued at the time I used them, I am able to cite only the original official numbers found on each document.

⁸German Embassy (Paris) to Turkish Consulate General (Paris) no. 1334, 28 February 1941. Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris), dossier 6127.

*only reserve entirely its rights in what concerns those of the latter who are of the Jewish race.*⁹

In its response, Vichy insisted that a Jew was first and foremost a Jew, regardless of his nationality, and that Turkish Jews therefore had to be treated equally with all other Jews, as in the note from the French Foreign Ministry to the Turkish Embassy (Vichy) on 8 August 1941:

*The Ministry has the honor of informing the (Turkish) Embassy that in establishing themselves in France, the individuals in question have implicitly agreed to submit themselves to the legislation of the country in which they are guests. This principle has sufficient force that the measures regarding people of the Hebrew race apply to all Jews regardless, both those who are of French allegiance as well as those who are nationals of foreign countries.*¹⁰

It is interesting to note that the United States Embassy at Vichy advised American citizens resident in France to accept this argument, and thus not to expect protection from the United States, on the grounds that France did not discriminate among Jews and was treating Jews of American nationality no worse than it was treating other Jews.¹¹ Turkey, however, absolutely refused to accept this argument on the grounds that such treatment violated the treaties signed between Turkey and France, according to which the nationals of Turkey had the privilege of enjoying the same civil rights in France that French citizens enjoyed in Turkey, and that it therefore did not have the right of discriminating among Turkish citizens because of their religion. A Turkish reply to this message, dated 9 September 1941, thus rejected the French claim:

While it is natural enough for foreigners to accept the laws of a country in which they live, in accordance with the strenuously expressed view of the French Foreign Minister that a foreigner who has settled in a country can be assumed

⁹Turkish Embassy to Paris (Vichy) to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Vichy), no. 924/6127, 31 July 1941. Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris) dossier 6127, no. 339 H.T. 13/11-8-41.

¹⁰French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Vichy) to Turkish Embassy (Vichy) no. 15722, 8 August 1941. Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris), no. 269/6 339 H.T. 13, Dossier 6127/296/6

¹¹Maynard Barnes, First Secretary of the American Embassy (Paris) to Turkish Consul General (Paris), 17 October 1940. Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris), file 6127.

*to have accepted the attachment of his state and future to that country's laws, your answer must be that we reserve our rights in regard to a law which discriminates among Turkish citizens of different religions.*¹²

The Turkish consulates in Paris and Marseilles continued to strongly protest against discriminatory laws issued both by the Nazi occupying authorities and the Vichy government, such as those which required Jews who were unemployed to join forced labor gangs; prevented Jews from having telephones or radios in their homes; required that Jewish businesses be Aryanized by being turned over to non Jewish administrators or sold to Aryans; and which caused the arrest of Jews on the most minor sort of protests, with their apartments and businesses turned over to French administrators or sealed, their contents appropriated, and their occupants sent to concentration camps in France or death camps in Eastern Europe. In such cases, the Turkish consuls wrote official letters of protest and made personal contacts with the German Ambassador in Paris, Otto Abetz, and with French and German police officials, concentration camp commanders, S.S. and Gestapo officers and the like. Though there was a good deal of stalling by the Nazis as well as by the French officials, ultimately in most cases they received the answer that if they could document that the Jews in question were in fact Turkish citizens, they would be released, under the condition that they be sent to Turkey as rapidly as possible. At times, the Turkish consuls actually went into the concentration camps to deliver these messages and secure the release of prisoners who had the fortune to have Turkish nationality.

Most of the Jews in France were sent to the concentration camp at Drancy, in the outskirts of Paris, from which they were sent on to Auschwitz for extermination.¹³ The situation of Turkish Jews at Drancy, as at other concentration camps in France, was not easy, since they were scorned and persecuted, not only by the Germans and the French police that guarded the outskirts of the camps, but also by the French Jews who were prisoners, who felt superior to the foreign Jews, who felt that while they were true Frenchmen, the latter were not, and who used their domination of the Jewish camp bureaucracy to favor their own in distributing food, assigning work, and the like, and also to arrange that when the Germans called for a thousand Jews a week to be shipped East to the concentration camps, most of those

¹²Turkish Embassy to Paris (Vichy) to French Foreign Ministry, 9 September 1941. Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris), file 6127.

¹³Drancy was in fact a large apartment development which was transformed by the French police into a prison. After the war, it was restored to its original purpose, and still remains under the name of *La Murette*.

selected were foreign Jews. I have put together accounts of the situation at Drancy written by different Jews who were inmates there during the war:

There were there Frenchmen, Poles, Turks and the like. I was chief of the room, and I never succeeded in being able to place myself between the yiddishists and the hispanoturcs, who constantly intrigued for a few more bits of bread. They lived by nationality, by groups, by compatriots. Each looked after only his own interests and not those of his neighbor....

The internees deplored that there was little solidarity among them. The most striking manifestation of this seemed to be the frequent discussions which opposed some to others, in particular French and foreign Jews. The French Jews reproached the foreigners for being the cause of their misfortunes, and the latter complained about France. Perhaps it is necessary to lay the responsibility at the door of the French Jews, many of whom came to the camp saying that they were superior Jews and that they would be released before the others. But one must recognize that their bitterness was justified, particularly when they were war veterans who had performed their duty for their d=country and could not understand how they could be treated differently than their fellow citizens....

The French and foreign Jews interned in the camp formed two hostile groups: the French Jews affirmed that their being there was the fault of the foreigners, and they hoped for a special treatment by the authorities which never came....

The French Jews believed that they would be freed soon, and so they did not want to be seen in solidarity with the foreigners.... The French Jew believed that it was because of the former that he was in the camp. He spoke of the foreign Jew with disdain.... Their deception brought even more bitterness when they saw that the Germans made no distinction between Jews and Jews.... The foreign Jews in turn reproached the French Jews for the attitude of France.

*This led to interminable discussions that ended in tumult and dispute...*¹⁴

When Turkish Jews not yet in the camps were ordered to join other foreign Jews in forced labor gangs, the Turkish consulate advised them not to report, and sent protests to the French government, which usually led to the Turkish Jews being exempted. To quote a report from Turkish Ambassador Bchiç Erkin (Vichy) to Ankara on 15 December 1942:

*I have wired the French Foreign Ministry by telegram asking that Turkish Jewish subjects not be included in the decision recently published in the newspapers by the Prefecture of Marseilles that all foreign Jews who entered France since December 1933 and who are without work or in need be gathered in foreign worker groups....*¹⁵

At the same time, Erkin sent the following instructions to the Turkish Consul-General in Marseilles, Bedi'i Arbel:

*Jewish citizens whose papers are in order cannot be subjected to forced labor, and if such situations arise, it is natural that we should provide them with protection. The prefects of police should be reminded of the relevant instructions, and it is necessary to intervene with the competent authorities when necessary.*¹⁶

Turkish diplomats in France also spent a good deal of time organizing 'train caravans' to take Turkish Jews back to Turkey. This actually was encouraged by the Vichy government as well as the French authorities in German-occupied France as the only way to make sure that Turkish Jews were not subjected to the anti Jewish laws applied to French Jews, because the Nazi occupation officials themselves were increasingly unhappy about the exemptions and were regularly demanding that they be brought to an end. Thus the French Foreign Ministry wrote to the Turkish Embassy at Vichy on 13 January 1943, after the French finally had accepted the Turkish

¹⁴Quoted from Maurice Rajsfus, *Drancy: Un camp de concentration tres ordinaire, 1941-1944* (Paris, 1991), pp. 72-75.

¹⁵Turkish Embassy to Paris (Vichy) to Turkish Foreign Ministry (Ankara), no. 1667-6127, 15 December 1942.

¹⁶Turkish Ambassador to Paris (Vichy) to Turkish Consul-General (Marseilles), no. 44-17, 27 January 1944.

argument that it was illegal for them to discriminate among Turkish citizens of different religions:

To avoid the application of these measures to Turkish citizens, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would be disposed to look favorably on the return of the interested parties to their countries of origin.¹⁷

In the middle of 1943, the Nazi occupying authorities, inspired by Adolph Eichmann, finally issued an ultimatum to Turkey and other neutral countries that they would have to repatriate all their Jewish citizens in France, after which all those who remained would be treated the same as French Jews. Most of the neutral countries agreed to this right away and evacuated their Jews quickly because they were able to send them home directly without having to send them through third countries. Turkey was unable to do the same because with the Mediterranean closed to shipping, the only way to send Turkish Jews back was by train through Southeastern Europe. The Nazis issued group visas for the Jews being evacuated, but the various countries located along the path of the trains were not at all anxious to help Jews escape extermination. The most notorious of these were Croatia, Serbia and Bulgaria, which caused many difficulties to prevent the trains from passing through their territory on their way to Turkey. Finally, however, the Turkish diplomats were able to organize some four train caravans during 1943 and eight more in 1944, which together transported some 2,000 Jews to Istanbul. Other Jews were helped to flee to the areas of southern France under Italian occupation, where they were treated much better until Mussolini fell and Italy was occupied by the Germans in the middle of 1943. They also fled across the Pyrenees into Franco's Spain, where they were given refuge despite Spain's alliance with Germany, or across the Mediterranean to North Africa. There they were interned but not persecuted, except in Algeria, where the French colons were even more anti-Semitic than were the Germans.

In 1944, when the Vichy government was thinking of deporting all 10,000 Turkish Jews living in its territory to the East for extermination, Turkish Foreign Minister Numan Menemencioglu intervened with the French government, on the direct orders of President Ismet Inönü, stating that such an act would be considered unfriendly by Turkey and would cause a major diplomatic incident, including perhaps a complete break in diplomatic relations. This convinced Vichy to abandon the plan and saved these Jews

¹⁷French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Vichy) to Turkish Embassy to Paris (Vichy), no. 101, 13 January 1943, Archives of the Turkish Embassy (Paris) and Turkish Foreign Ministry (Ankara).

from almost certain death. The original correspondence on this matter has not yet been uncovered. Turkey's key roll in this matter is, however, well documented in other sources. The American Ambassador at Ankara, Laurence Steinhart, himself a Jew, wrote the head of the Jewish Agency office in Istanbul, Chaim (Charles) Barlas on 9 February 1944:

... It has been a great satisfaction to me personally to have been in a position to have intervened with at least some degree of success on behalf of former Turkish citizens in France of Jewish origin. As I explained to you yesterday, while the Vichy government has as yet given no commitment to the Turkish Government, there is every evidence that the intervention of the Turkish authorities has caused the Vichy authorities to at least postpone if altogether abandon their apparent intention to exile these unfortunates to almost certain death by turning them over to the Nazi authorities.¹⁸

This is confirmed in the memoirs of Steinhart's German counterpart in Ankara, Ambassador Franz von Papen, who, of course, emphasized his own role in the affair:

I learned through one of the German émigré professors that the Secretary of the Jewish Agency had asked me to intervene in the matter of the threatened deportation to camps in Poland of 10,000 Jews living in Southern France. Most of them were former Turkish citizens of Levantine origin. I promised my help and discussed the matter with m. Menemencioglu. There was no legal basis to warrant any official action on his part, but he authorized me to inform Hitler that the deportation of these former Turkish citizens would cause a sensation in Turkey and endanger friendly relations between the two countries. This demarche succeeded in quashing the whole affair.¹⁹

Finally, one of Barlas's associates at the Jewish Agency office in Istanbul, Dr. Chaim Pazner, stated to the *Second Yad Vashem International Historical Conference on Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust*, held in Jerusalem in April 1974:

¹⁸Laurence Steinhardt to Charles Barlas, Ankara Palace Hotel, 9 February 1944. Quoted in Haim (Charles) Barlas, *Rescue in the Days of the Holocaust* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, Israel, 1975). Supplement 8. Laurence Steinhart Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹Franz von Papen, *Memoirs* (London, 1952), p. 522

In December 1943, Chaim Barlas notified me from Istanbul that he had received a cable from Isaac Wiesman, representative of the World Jewish Congress in Lisbon, that approximately ten thousand Jews who were Turkish citizens, but had been living in France for years and had neglected to register and renew their Turkish citizenship with the Turkish representation in France, were in danger of being deported to the death camps. Weismann requested that Barlas contact the competent Turkish authorities and attempt to save the above-mentioned Jews. Upon receiving the telegram, Barlas immediately turned to the Turkish Foreign Ministry in Ankara, submitted a detailed memorandum on the subject, and requested urgent action by the Turkish legation in Paris.... We later received word from Istanbul and Paris that, with the exception of several score, these ten thousand Jews were saved from extinction.²⁰

In addition to providing material assistance to Turkish Jews persecuted in France and other countries occupied by the Nazis in Western Europe, Turkey also helped East European Jews persecuted in countries such as Greece, Lithuania, Rumania, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Right from the start of the war, the Turkish government permitted the Jewish Agency to maintain a rescue office at the Pera Palas and other hotels in the Tepebaşı section of Istanbul, overlooking the Golden Horn, under the direction of Chaim (Charles) Barlas, as we have seen.²¹ In addition, other Jewish organizations based in Palestine were allowed to maintain representative offices in Istanbul. Many were sent by *kibbutzim* wanting to rescue members from persecution or death in Eastern Europe. First, however, they had to learn what was going on in those countries. For this purpose they sent their agents from Istanbul to these countries to gather information. They used the Turkish post office to send letters to Jews in these countries and to receive responses. They sent packages of clothing and food to help out when needed. In all of these activities, the Turkish Ministry of Finance, despite Turkey's severe financial problems resulting from the war, provided them with the hard currency needed to meet their expenses, and the Turkish diplomats stationed in these countries allowed their facilities to be used when needed.

With this help, the Jewish rescue groups based in Istanbul were able to organize trains and steamships which carried to safety in Turkey and beyond as many refugees that could leave their homes. In this they were vigorously

²⁰Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Second Yad Vashem International Historical Conference, Jerusalem, April 8-11, 1974 (Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1977), p. 649.

²¹ Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust*, pp. 255-304.

opposed, not only by the Nazis, but also by the British government, which correctly feared that most of the refugees arriving in Turkey would go on in Palestine.²² Turkey as a matter of fact made this a condition of its agreement to allow these refugees to enter its territory. It would not support large number of immigrants of this sort since people in Turkey were already starving as a result of wartime shortages and blockades in the Mediterranean. It did allow the Jewish Agency and other organizations to bring these refugees through Turkey on their way to Palestine, however, permitting the Mossad organization to send them in small boats across the Mediterranean from southern Turkey. When the British were successful in preventing some of these refugees from going to Palestine, instead interning them on Cyprus, the Turkish government allowed them to remain in Turkey far beyond the limits of their transit visas, in many cases right until the end of the war.

The Vatican's reluctance to help the persecuted Jews of Europe is well documented. This was not the case, however, with the Papal Nuncio in Istanbul from 1935 until 1944, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, who later became Pope John XXIII. Roncalli was a very unusual person. When he first came to Turkey even before the war, he taught his parishioners, including many Greeks and Armenians, that they should forget their prejudices against Turks and Muslims, that they should follow the precepts of Christian charity and love in dealing with them, that they should forget the bigotries of the past and work together with their fellow Turkish citizens to build a new and modern Republic. Roncalli learned Turkish himself and recited the Christmas mass in Turkish at least one in Istanbul.²³ This greatly pleased the Turkish people, who had become increasingly disgusted with the insistence of Christians in Turkey to continue using Greek, Italian, French or Armenian in preference to Turkish, unlike the Jews who had emphasized the use of Turkish instead of French and Ladino since the mid 1930's. During the war Roncalli went much further. He got the Sisters of Sion order of nuns to use their own communications network in Eastern Europe to help the Jewish Agency pass communications, clothing and food to Jews in Hungary in particular. Other Vatican couriers going from Istanbul to Eastern Europe did the same thing as the result of Roncalli's orders. He even got them to carry false Certificates of Conversion to Hungarian Jews to help save them from

²²Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust*, pp. 278-281; Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945* (London and Oxford, 1979), p. 247; Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 162-164.

²³Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, 'Roncalli Diplomatico in Turchia e Grecia, 1935-1944,' *Cristianesimo nella Storia* VIII/2 (1987), pp. 33-72.

the Nazis. A remarkable person indeed, early in the year 2000 was recognized as a Saint by the Catholic Church.

Turkey also acted to help the Jews of Greece during the Holocaust. Just as was the case in the areas of southern France occupied by Italy, so also in Greece, during the time it was under Italian occupation early in the war, Greek Jews did reasonably well, despite pressure from Greeks themselves, whose long tradition of anti-Semitism led them to hope that the foreign occupation would at least enable them to get rid of their Jewish fellow-citizens. Even after German troops entered Greece to help the Italians against Greek guerilla resistance. The Italian troops protected Greek Jews from persecution at the hands of the Germans and the Greeks. Once Italy fell out of the war in 1943 and the Germans took over, however, the situation of Jews in Greece became worse than anywhere else in Europe, since while many Frenchmen and Dutchmen, and even Germans had helped the Jews to escape the Nazi persecution, most Greeks did none of this due to their long history of pervasive anti-Semitism.²⁴ The only Greeks who helped Jews were the partisans fighting against the Nazis, who did help Jewish groups spiriting Jews out of Greece, either across the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean to Turkey or Palestine, or by land across the Maritza river into Turkey. Most Greek Jews were in fact exterminated by the Nazis. Jewish synagogues and schools were systematically destroyed. Even the great Jewish cemetery at Salonica was wiped out. After the war, instead of restoring it, Greece built the new Aristotle University of Salonica on the cemetery lands. The Turkish consuls in Greece, at Athens, Salonica and Gümülcine as well as on the islands of Midilli and Rhodes provided the same sort of assistance that the Turkish consuls did in France, also organizing boats to carry Jews to safety in Turkey and intervening with the Germans to exempt Turkish Jews from persecution and extermination. The most outstanding example of this came with the activities of Consul Selahattin Ülkümen in Rhodes, who got the Nazis to spare the Turkish Jews on the island, and who as a result was subsequently imprisoned by the Nazis after his consulate was bombed and his pregnant wife killed by the Germans.²⁵ The Turkish guards on the Greek-Turkish border allowed Jews coming from Greece as well as Bulgaria to

²⁴Yitzhak Kerem, 'Efforts to Rescue the Jews of Greece during the Second World War' (in Hebrew) *Pe'amin*, no. 27 (1986), pp. 27-109; Shaw, *Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, pp. 15-25, 196-206; Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust*, pp. 250-254.

²⁵Mr. Ülkümen subsequently honored by the Yad Vashem Foundation of Israel as a 'righteous gentile' who had helped rescue Jews from Nazi persecution. Unfortunately, Turkish consuls in France, Namik Kemal Yolga (Paris) and Necdet Kent (Marseilles) have not been similarly honored despite the equally important contributions they made to rescuing Jews in France during World War II.

enter turkey even though most of them had no papers at all. Camps were set up for them near Edirne, and ultimately they were allowed to pass on to Istanbul, and, for most of them, to join the other refugees doing by small boats from the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey to Palestine.

Turkey thus provided major assistance to Jews being persecuted by the Nazis, despite pressure from the British, who wanted to stop Jewish immigration to Palestine, and by the Nazis, who demanded not only that this rescue work be stopped, but also that all Turkish Jews, as well as the refugees, be sent to Germany for extermination. Turkey steadfastly refused these demands and continued to assist European Jewry to escape from the Holocaust and in most cases go to Palestine. . Only after it was assured of an Allied victory, and the impossibility of a German invasion, by late 1943, was it ready to enter the war. Even then, however, it reacted to appeals for delay from the Jewish Agency, which understood that immediate Turkish entry would cut off the escape routes through Turkey which were enabling thousand of Jews to escape the Nazis throughout Europe, postponing its entry for almost a year.²⁶

While six million Jews were being exterminated by the Nazis, the rescue of some 15,000 Turkish Jews from France, and even of some 100,000 Jews from Eastern Europe might well be considered as relatively insignificant in comparison. It was, however, very significant to the people who were rescued, and above all it showed that, as had been the case for more than five centuries, Turks and Jews continued to help each other in times of great crises.

²⁶Meeting of the Operating Committee of Relief Organizations, United States Consulate, Istanbul, 31 July 1944: minutes in John Mendelsohn and Donald Detwiler, eds., *The Holocaust, Selected Documents* (18 volumes, New York, 1982),XIV, 44-45, quoted in Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust*, pp. 296-197.