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Ottoman Archival Information on Jews: The Inheritance Register of the Chief Rabbi of Galata (1770)

by Fatma Müge Göçek

SEVERAL STUDIES HAVE discussed the great wealth of information located in the Ottoman Archives on economic and social conditions in the Ottoman Empire, including those of the Jews who formed a part of the society.¹ Of the many different types of archival sources available to scholars, this article focuses on two, which hitherto have been overlooked by most scholars studying Ottoman Jews, namely expense registers (*masraf defterleri*) and inheritance registers (*tereke defterleri*).²

Expense registers were detailed account books of the great households of members of the Ottoman elite. These registers listed in detail all household transactions for periods as short as one month or as long as several years. Inheritance registers, on the other hand, were detailed record books drawn by the state on the property of important persons who died. These registers listed the date and place of death of the deceased, his/her heirs, and a detailed inventory of the estate: real property, cash, goods, personal belongings, credits owed to the deceased, and his/her debts to others. This article documents the significance of these types of sources through an analysis of the inheritance register of the chief rabbi of Galata.

The expense registers of the great Ottoman households contain many references to Jewish craftsmen, merchants, and professionals who performed a variety of services for these households. For example, the expense register of the director of the imperial mint (*darbhane emini*) Yusuf Ağa for the years 1201-1202H/1786-88,³ lists ribbons bought from the Jew Haim and broadcloth from the "blond" Jew (*sarı yahudi*, name not given) in the Covered Market (*bedestan*). The expense register of a minister (*vezir*), dated 1191-93H/1777-80,⁴ contains ref-

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erences to Jewish laborers who were paid 8 kuruş as daily wages for cleaning the chandeliers.

The expense register of Grand Vezir (*Sadrızam*) Seyyid Hasan Paşa, dated 1157–58H/1744–45,⁵ contains two references to Jews: the Jewish physician İsak and his son were presented, probably in return for their services, with 8 measures (*zira*) of broadcloth and 20 measures of satin. The same register also contains a reference to the clothing given to a Jew who had converted to Islam (*yahudiden nevmüslime verilen libas*),⁶ consisting of a jacket (*dolama*) worth 15 kuruş; trousers (*çakşır*), 7.5 kuruş; a loose robe (*entari*), 7 kuruş; underwear (*câmeşuy*), 5.5 kuruş; a turban (*destar*), 7 kuruş; a long broadcloth cloak (*çoka binîş*), 13 kuruş; and a Tunisian sash (*Tunus kuşağı*), 2 kuruş—a total of 52.5 kuruş. The bestowal of robes upon conversion was significant in Ottoman society, where clothing reflected social stratification.

These expense registers thus provide information on some aspects of Jewish participation in Ottoman society: as artisans, physicians, or laborers, or, in attempting to redefine their social position, as converts. If studied in depth and detail, and in adequate numbers, expense registers could reveal important patterns of Jewish existence in the Ottoman Empire.

Inheritance registers provide information of a different nature. First of all, it needs to be stated that there are inheritance registers of Ottoman Jews, drawn up in Islamic religious courts and kept among their records. These provide a glimpse into the life of the individual Jewish family, the accumulation patterns of wealth and the nature of commercial transactions. The Jewish use of Islamic courts has been documented by scholars such as Amnon Cohen,⁷ Bernard Lewis,⁸ and Ömer Lütfi Barkan,⁹ among others. Hundreds of such registers for eighteenth-century Istanbul are located in the office of the Mufti of Istanbul (*Istanbul Müftülüğü*).

In addition, however, there are frequent references to Jews in the inheritance registers of non-Jews, usually as debtors, creditors, or business partners. The inheritance register of Koçozzade Mustafa, the local notable (*ayan*) of Siroz, dated 1197H/1783,¹⁰ for example, contains among the creditors references to one Jewish merchant, as well as to a Daniel Burla, probably another Jew, described as “dragoman (translator) of the British consul.”

This brief survey brings us to the inheritance register that is the main focus of this paper. Located in the Topkapı Palace Archives and catalogued as document number E10223, it is the inheritance register

listing the estate of the chief rabbi (*başaham*) of Galata, dated 1770. As rabbis in the Ottoman Empire did not have imperial diplomas, *berats*, which would identify them as “chief” rabbis before 1835, our rabbi was probably the head of the Jewish community in Galata only, even though he is referred to as *başaham* by the Ottoman document. The name of the rabbi is not stated in the document, although we can deduce from Jewish sources that he was Abraham Meyuhas.¹¹

Why was such a document drawn and how did it end up in the Topkapı Palace? One reason may be the considerable value of the estate, 216,119.5 kuruş, or approximately 26,366,579 akçe (aspers). In the eighteenth century, sizeable estates, often accumulated through the holding of public office, were confiscated and brought to the imperial treasury. In such cases the inheritance registers also contained detailed accounts on the disposal of the funds and how they were distributed among various administrative offices. They usually indicated that cash was sent to the mint, horses to the army, and jewelry to the treasury. No such distribution information exists in the rabbi's register.

Another possibility is that the document was prepared in order to protect the interests of the Jewish community. The large estate may have included the Jewish community's tax obligation to the state, ordinarily collected from its wealthiest members and often lent out on interest until payment was due.¹² One reference in the register that might support this hypothesis is a note attached to the debt certificate of one İsak Baruh for 3,900 kuruş. It states that “the debt is fictitiously made out to Avram Kasavi, thereby necessitating its collection by the new rabbi.” Yet this may also merely mean that the rabbi settled complicated debt transactions within the community.

Let us now analyze the document itself. The register was drawn upon the statement of one of the rabbi's “men” (*adam*), Konorti. It lists cash in the form of gold coins (making 4% of the total estate's value); 34 debt certificates, mostly listing Jewish names (16%); 4 accounts of money lent on interest at various rates: 5, 6.65, and 12 percent, depending on the amount of money and probably on the length of the loan (43%); merchandise (24%); commercial property (3%); personal property (4%); and the debt of Konorti (5%). Hence most of the wealth appears to have been concentrated in commercial transactions.

The detailed information on the nature of the transactions and the individuals involved in them help us to go beyond the numbers.

About the rabbi, we learn that he had kept his cash and debt certificates "within a red bag in an iron chest." He had owned two storerooms (*mahzen*) where he kept his valuable merchandise, consisting mostly of beads. The high value of the merchandise suggests that he had been involved in trade—as were members of the Ottoman administrative elite. The rabbi's storerooms, worth 4,000 kuruş, were yielding a yearly rent of 180 kuruş. They were registered in the name of his brother Pinhas, although "further investigation revealed that he had owned two-thirds of the property while the brother owned only one-third." The register also contains a statement by the rabbi's men "that the deceased also owned another storeroom and the garden surrounding it, worth together 1,500 kuruş and yielding a yearly rent of 60 kuruş." In addition, the rabbi owned a room in the Wooden Inn (*Tahta Han*) worth another 500 kuruş.

As for residential property, the rabbi had bought a house in Hasköy from a certain Rafail for 2,500 kuruş. The rabbi's personal property, including his clothing, books, and trifles was worth 1,250 kuruş.

The individuals listed in the document, almost all of them debtors, are described almost in as much detail as the rabbi. The man of the rabbi, Konorti, owed the rabbi money, but was claiming that the debts were reciprocal: the rabbi owed him money as well. A notation in the register states that this matter was "left to be settled in the future upon procuring written proof or testimonies of witnesses to the transaction." Until the resolution of that matter, Konorti was assigned, by the Ottoman officials, the task of taking possession of the rabbi's merchandise and paying its value in installments spread over a period of fifteen months. Konorti's other official task was to pay the value of the rabbi's personal belongings after its sale. The document does not specify to whom the payment was to be made.

Among the rabbi's debtors was another Konorti, an inn-keeper (*hanca*), who owed 250 kuruş. By coincidence I came across two references to the Konorti inn and the Konorti *yahudihane*, a Jewish boarding house, in another document.¹³ This is the inheritance register, dated 1199H/1786, of Bedros, the money-changer of the Ottoman mint (*darbhane sarrafi*). Bedros had glassware and Saxonian style flatware stored in Konorti's inn; he had also obtained a mortgage (*istiğlal*) on Konorti's boarding house for 11,000 akçes, which entitled him to collect the rent until the repayment of the mortgage. From these documents it might appear that the Konorti family had fallen on bad times.

The other debtors in the register are identified by place of residence, work, profession, or, by last names. Most of them, such as Yako Şaro, Avram, Samuil, and Ilya, were residents of Galata, as had been the rabbi. Rafail, however, resided at Mahmudpaşa, Yasef the son of Hazan (?) at Hasköy, and Pinhas in Balat. Another Rafail was a beeswax seller (*balmumcu*) and one Avram was a physician (*hekim*). Another Avram, the alum-dealer (*şabca*), might have belonged to the Carmona family, which dealt exclusively in alum.¹⁴

The Jews listed with their last names are Avramaçu (a first-name form, used by Jews coming from the Balkans) and his brothers Nesim and İsak ben Aşer, Haim Daro, Haim and İsak Fresko, Yako Şaro, Samir Memi Saroki (or Sarofi), İsak Levi, İsak Baruh, Yosif Kamondo (Camondo), and İsak Zonana. Most of these family names still exist in Turkey today. The Kamondos were a wealthy and influential family prominent in the second half of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. I have found İsak Menteş mentioned in another source, the expense register,¹⁵ dated 1167H/1754, of a minister (*vezir*) where an İsak Menteş sells European wool, silk, and cotton textiles to the household.

Zonana was probably the most significant name on the list of debtors, since in the eighteenth century members of the Zonana family occupied the important position of merchant-paymaster of the Janissary corps.¹⁶ *Vasf Tarihi* (Istanbul, 1978 edition, p. 156) refers to the banishment of one of the Zonanas to Rhodes by Grand Vezir Tiryaki Hasan Paşa, in 1746, for misuse of office, and records the appointments of "Baruh and İlya" instead. During the 1760s, the family continued to retain its position. According to the rabbi's register, one İsak Zonana had borrowed 318 kuruş, while the merchant-paymasters of the Janissary corps Baruh and İlya, clearly identified as *Ocak Bazır-gâm*, had borrowed 13,300 kuruş at 6.65% interest, representing the largest single cash transaction. Hence, from the document, we can conclude that in 1770 they were still holding their post.

Another position mentioned in the register is that of a "community clerk," *millet yazıcısı*, a post never known before this instance. It might have referred to an official who registered transactions within the Jewish community.

The debt certificates also listed four Christian debtors. One was identified merely as a European, *Frenk*, without name, who actually owed money to the rabbi's man, Konorti; the second man was an Ottoman non-Muslim (*zimmi*), the Greek Corci, further identified as Yakovaki's brother-in-law (*enişte*); the third was another zimmi, İstefan,

from the Minister's Inn (*Vezir Hanı*); and the fourth was the Dutch merchant Sinyor Panço. Apparently no Muslim names are mentioned in the register.

From this brief analysis of one inheritance register, we gain valuable insight into the realities of eighteenth-century daily life, observing how Ottoman Jews entered into commercial transactions with each other, purchased or rented real estate, and made arrangements to store their merchandise. There is a wealth of information in these inheritance and expense registers for the study of Jewish social and economic history in the Ottoman Empire. Since this information is spread over hundreds of thousands of documents, cooperation among scholars and more group projects are needed to uncover the lives of Ottoman Jews and to understand the transformation they underwent during the late Ottoman centuries.

Notes

1. See, for example: Halil İnalcık, "Ottoman Archival Materials on Millets," in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (2 vols., New York and London, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 437-49; Uriel Heyd, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine 1552-1615*, Oxford, 1960; Bernard Lewis, *Notes and Documents from the Turkish Archives*, Jerusalem, 1952.

2. The term *tereke* designates the estate left by a person at death, and this is how it should be understood in this article. It is, however, the convention in the field to translate *tereke defterleri* as "inheritance registers."

3. Topkapı Sarayı Archives (henceforth TSA), D2878.

4. Başbakanlık Arşivi (Prime Minister's Archives, henceforth BA) Kamil Kepeci Classification, KK 786.

5. BA, *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterler* (Finance Department Registers), MM 3699.

6. In addition to the Jewish convert, the register also lists many Christian converts granted clothing.

7. See Amnon Cohen, *Jewish Life under Islam: Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984.

8. See Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton, 1984.

9. See Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "Edirne Askeri Kassamına ait Tereke Defterleri (1545-1659)," *Belgeler*, vol. 3 (1966), pp. 1-479.

10. BA, *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterler*, MM 9741, pp. 238-54.

11. I am indebted to Professor Jacob Barnai for providing me with this information. For further details, see: Abraham Ben-Yaakov, *Jerusalem Within the Walls* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 35-44; the rabbi's date of death is listed on p. 39, note 15.

12. The Islamic religious foundations (*vahıfs*, *waqfs*) were engaged in similar practices at the time.

13. TSA, D7217.

14. I would like to thank my colleague Aron Rodrigue for this suggestion and for other information regarding family names listed in this document.

15. BA, *Maliyeden Müdevver Defterler*, MM 3102, pp. 16-17.

16. I would like to thank my colleague Cemal Kafadar for bringing this information to my attention.

Appendix
The Inheritance Register of the Chief Rabbi of Galata,
1770. Topkapı Palace Archives, document no. E10223
(Translation follows).

[Handwritten Ottoman Turkish text, including a title and several columns of entries with dates and names.]

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