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Fellow Balkan merchants – The Turkish-Israelite and the two Greek Communities of Vienna from 1718 until World War II

My paper addresses the many common features, similarities, connections and interrelations between Vienna's two Greek Orthodox Communities and the so-called Turkish-Israelite Community of the Sephardi Jews in Vienna.

Although the connection between Orthodox Greek and Sephardi merchants from the Balkans in Vienna is rather logical if we look at the sources, it has been overlooked in historiography. On the one hand because the small Turkish-Israelite Community of Vienna has not been paid much attention to by historians at all (even though the Sephardim in the Habsburg capital exercised a considerable influence on their brethren in Southeastern Europe). On the other hand, the historiographic works on the Greek communities in Vienna have mainly concentrated on Greek national and Orthodox church history.

Approaching the history of these communities from a wider perspective shows that they share a common imperial background:

The presence of Orthodox Greek and Sephardi Jewish merchants in Vienna starts with the peace treaties between the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires in Karlowitz (1699) and Passarowitz (1718). Together with the Treaty of Passarowitz a trade agreement was concluded that guaranteed mutual free trade for the subjects of both empires on the territories of the other. Based on these treaties the first Ottoman subjects came to Vienna to trade with their goods.

The earliest evidence about a chapel where Orthodox merchants exercised their religion is from the year 1726. It is a confirmation by the Hofkriegsrat (the court war council, at the time responsible for all issues concerning the Ottoman Empire) that the "Turkish subjects and foreigners of the Greek religion" should be allowed to continue the exercise of their religion undisturbedly. It is related to a "privilege" of the year 1723 the Greeks had reportedly obtained by emperor Charles VI. Such a privilege has not been preserved, allegedly it was destroyed in the course of the later conflicts between Greeks and Serbs in the second half of the 18th century. At this time, the few Greek merchants in Vienna prayed in a chapel in a rented room in the city. This chapel purportedly was the continuation of a private chapel in the house of Alexandros Mavrokordatos, dragoman of the Sublime Porte, who had spent several

years in Vienna during the negotiations for the peace treaty of Karlowitz. Mavrokordatos left liturgical instruments as well as his priest Daniel for the chapel of the merchants.

The beginnings of the Sephardic community in Vienna are quite similar: The first house of prayer is said to have been located in the house of Diego D'Aguilar, a Portuguese Sephardi Jew, who came to Vienna to reorganize the tobacco monopoly under the reign of Charles VI. and later his daughter Maria Theresa. The Jewish merchants coming to Vienna from the Ottoman Empire after the peace of Passarowitz met up in his house and when D'Aguilar finally left Vienna, he left them some liturgical instruments. Reportedly, the "Turkish Jews" were allowed to exercise their religion in house no. 307 in the city from the year 1736 onwards. A so-called "imperial privilege" is said to have been destroyed during a fire in the synagogue in 1824. As the person of D'Aguilar in the 19th century was turned into the protagonist of various novel-like legends, most historians doubt the actual existence of such a privilege. Nevertheless, I would not claim it as completely implausible. Also in the case of the Orthodox Greeks the so-called "privilege" from the year 1723 is not preserved, yet the confirmation of the Hofkriegsrat shows that some kind of permission to exercise their religion definitely had existed before.¹

To sum up, Orthodox Christians as well as Sephardi Jews from the Ottoman Empire were allowed to exercise their religion in Vienna on the basis of the peace treaties that granted the merchants (irrespective of their denomination) mutual free trade. In the case of the Jews this is particularly remarkable, as it took place only a few decades after the so-called second Wiener Gesera (1670), the expulsion of the Jews from the city by emperor Leopold I.

But also for the Greeks the permission to exercise their religion was extraordinary. We should not forget that all other non-Catholics (the so-called Akatholiken) achieved toleration only under the enlightened emperor Joseph II. around fifty years later.

In the first decades after 1718 there was only a small number of single merchants from the Ottoman lands present in Vienna, but due to the development of the Austrian textile industry and the rise in the demand of raw cotton the number of the Ottoman merchants increased considerably from the 1750s on.

The Austrian authorities subsequently sought to control these Ottoman subjects more carefully, as misuse of their trade privileges occurred frequently. For example, Austrian Jews

¹ Furthermore, we also have receipts of the rent of the room for the chapel from these years that prove that Ottoman Greek merchants financed the chapel.

traveled over the border and then pretended to be Ottoman subjects in order to obtain more liberties. Merchants would also declare themselves alternately as Ottoman and Austrian subjects, depending on the more favorable option for the current purpose. A result of the stricter control was the “Conscription of the Turkish subjects in Vienna” from the years 1766/67, that registered all Ottoman subjects present in the city in a detailed manner. Thus, we know that the overwhelming majority of them were so-called Greeks (that is Orthodox Christians), namely 82 persons. 13 were Muslim “Turks”, 21 were (Catholic) Armenians and 19 were Jews. While the Muslims came from Anatolia and the Armenians from the Near East, Greeks as well as Jews came from the Balkan regions of the Ottoman Empire.

Already under the reign of Maria Theresa the communities of the Greeks and the Jews from the Ottoman Empire received imperial documents that officially recognized them.

In 1776 Maria Theresa granted the brotherhood of St. George of the “Greek merchants and Turkish subjects” an imperial privilege that guaranteed them not only the free exercise of their faith, but also regulated the autonomous administration of the chapel belonging to them. This privilege ended the long-lasting conflict between the Ottoman-Greek merchants and the Austro-Serbian clerus of Karlowitz over the chapel and its finances in favor of the Greeks. The text of the privilege clearly stated that the chapel belonged to the non-united Greeks (i.e. Orthodox Christians) that were Ottoman subjects. This caused the formation of a second Greek community of the imperial-royal (Austrian) subjects in Vienna a few years later, as a result of the fact that during the second half of the 18th century many Greek merchants declared themselves Habsburg subjects.

Two years after the Greek brotherhood of St. George’s privilege, also the community of the Sephardi Jews in Vienna received a document by Maria Theresa, the so-called “Puncten”² (points). It is a document by the imperial-royal commissioner who was responsible for the “entire Turkish Jewry present here” in order to regulate the “Turkish Jewish synagogue that is here”. The main reason for the issuing of this document was to make an end to the debt situation of the synagogue. Similar paragraphs dealing with the financial regulation of the chapel of St. George are to be found in the text of the privilege for the community of the Ottoman Greeks. Already the title of the “Puncten” clearly proves that the “Turkish Jewry” in

² “Puncten, die der in Sachen aufgestellte Kais. Königl. Commissarius der gesamten Alhier sich befindenden Türkischen Judenschaft um die alhiesige Türkische Jüdische Synagoge in gute Ordnung zu bringen und in selber zu erhalten ex offio aufgesetzt”.

Vienna had been given the right to exercise their religion and such a thing as a “synagogue” had existed before. Yet it must remain unanswered whether there was some kind of written permission (“privilege”) or whether the existence of a “community” with a synagogue had been tolerated tacitly. Even without considering an earlier “privilege”, the Sephardic community through the “Puncten” of 1778 was by far the oldest officially recognized Jewish community in Vienna. The “Stadttempel”, the first synagogue of the Ashkenazi Jews in Vienna opened in 1826 and a community could only be established in 1849.

After Maria Theresa’s death in 1780 her son and successor Joseph II. realized his ideas of religious tolerance towards the non-Catholics and subsequently issued a series of edicts of toleration (Toleranzpatente). The idea of toleration was strongly connected to a utilitarian attitude that looked at the economic benefits the non-Catholics brought to the Austrian state. The edict of tolerance of 1781 for the Protestants and non-united Greeks gave them not only the right to freely exercise their religion in a house of worship (Bethaus, that should not resemble a Catholic church though) and to establish communities with their own schools, but also allowed them to acquire real estate. Especially the latter was a motivation for Greek merchants in Vienna to change their imperial affiliation from Ottoman to Habsburg Austrian, as it was prohibited to foreign Ottoman subjects to buy real estate. Joseph II. particularly promoted the wealthy Greek merchants and entrepreneurs that became Austrian subjects. He viewed them as “useful citizens” and considered them an advantage for Austrian economy. Hence, he even allowed their community of the Holy Trinity (founded in 1786) to build a bell tower on their newly erected church. Still a considerable number of Greeks in Vienna decided to retain their status as Ottoman subjects and to continue making use of the related trade privileges. The brotherhood of St. George rejected the proposal of a common imperial privilege for Greeks that were Ottoman and Greeks that were Austrian subjects and from that time in Vienna existed two separate Greek communities of the Ottoman and the Austrian subjects with their respective imperial privileges.

In 1782 Joseph II. also issued an edict of toleration for the Jews in Vienna and Lower Austria. In comparison to the edict of 1781 for Protestants and non-united Greeks, but also to the edicts for Jews in other regions of the Empire (such as Galicia), it was far more restrictive. The emperor explicitly stated that it was neither his wish that the Jews could constitute an actual community with a principal nor to increase the number of Jews resident in Vienna. In contrast to the non-united Greeks, they were not allowed to own real estate. In comparison,

the status of the Jews from the Ottoman Empire was much more favorable. They formed an officially recognized community with its synagogue and were allowed to enter the city in order to trade. They had to renew their permit of residence every year, but this seems to have been rather a formality.

Some Austrian Ashkenazi Jews made use of the Ottoman Sephardi Jews privileges: They paid Sephardi Jews for employing them as servants in their houses, so they could sojourn in the city. In 1793 the commissioner reported that in some Sephardi Jews' houses more servants than family members were registered, and the police was ordered to remove all unnecessary servants. Furthermore, during the following decades several Austrian Ashkenazi Jews seem to have succeeded in entering the Habsburg lands with Ottoman passports in order to enjoy the better treatment of the Ottoman Jews. In a merchant directory of the year 1845 several merchants carrying names such as Frankl, Guttmann, Spitzberger etc. are listed under the category "Israelite-Turkish merchants".

Greek and Sephardi Jewish merchants from the Ottoman Empire in Vienna were treated according to the same legal framework (based on the peace treaties and trade agreements between the empires) and moved in the same environment. Traian Stoianovich invented the term "conquering Balkan orthodox merchant" for a group of people that contemporaries often simply called "Greeks" (i.e. merchants) and writes: "In this sense even a Jew could be a Greek."³

Some examples for the mentioned common environment:

The Lower Austrian legal courts (Justiz-Banco-Deputation, Landrecht) were responsible for the affairs of all Ottoman subjects and we often encounter the same people in the documents dealing with their issues. Thomas Chabert (1766-1841) for example was the commissioner for the Turkish Jewry (according to the "Puncten"), but also deeply involved in some internal issues of the two Greek communities.

All Oriental merchants had their shops in the same areas in the city, mainly the so-called Greek quarter around the street Alter Fleischmarkt, where the two Greek churches were located, but also in the neighboring second and third districts of Vienna. Oriental merchants with different denominations, mother-tongues and imperial affiliations met up in the so-called "Greek coffeehouse" on Fleischmarkt. A police report about a fight in the coffeehouse in the

³ Traian Stoianovich, The conquering Balkan orthodox merchant. In: Journal of Economic History 20 (1960), 234-313, here 291.

year 1810 gives us a vivid image of this society. Among the people present in the coffeehouse such as Catholic and Muslim Albanians, a Serb who is a Russian subject and numerous Greek-Vlach merchants, who were either Ottoman or Austrian subjects, we also find Jacob Elias⁴, a Sephardi Jew from Macedonia (probably Kastoria). In the police report he is called a “Greek”.

In the archive of the Greek Community of the Holy Trinity I also found a document referring to a venue called “Orientalisches Casino”, probably a kind of social club. When in 1873 the Casino was shut down, its furniture was sold and the remaining amount of 300 florin was offered to the poor: Two thirds of the sum went to the two Greek-Orthodox communities of Vienna, while one third went to the Turkish-Israelite Community.

In 1836 the prominent Greek merchant Sterio Dumba acted as legal guardian for the children of the deceased “Israelite merchant and Turkish subject” David Aron Heskia.⁵ When Sterio Dumba, who was imperial Ottoman consul general in Vienna, died in 1870, his obituary in the *Neue Freie Presse* wrote:

*“The Ottoman community in Vienna has to bemoan the loss of a benefactor who cared for every single member regardless of his rank and his denomination.”*⁶

Some Jewish children attended the Greek National School run by the Community of the Holy Trinity of the Austrian subjects. Several documents in the archive of the community concern the legal question whether Jewish pupils could be allowed to attend the school according to the new laws after 1848. In 1859 the three Jewish boys from Macedonia Jacob Haim, Moises Menachem and Carl Haim attended the school as extraordinary pupils. Finally in 1861 the Lower Austrian Statthaltereie gave the permission to “children of Israelites resident here of Greek nation” to regularly attend the school. There is also an account of Abraham ben Israel Rosanes, a Sephardi Jew from Rusçuk, who wanted to study Ancient Greek in Vienna. In his memoirs, he narrates that the community’s principals in 1855 forced the school’s teacher to teach the 17-year-old Jewish boy without charge.⁷

⁴ In 1812 he was one of the principals of the Turkish-Israelite community.

⁵ “David Aron Heskia’s Gläubiger”, *Wiener Zeitung* 180 (8th August 1836), 206.

⁶ “Sterio M. Dumba †”, *Neue Freie Presse* 1948 (31st January 1870), 2.

⁷ Julia Phillips Cohen, Sarah Abrevaya Stein (eds.), *Sephardi lives. A documentary history, 1700-1950*. Stanford 2014, 47-48.

On the legal level there are many parallels between the Turkish-Israelite Community and the Greek Community of St. George of the Ottoman subjects:

As already mentioned, Ottoman subjects in Vienna were prohibited to own real estate. Therefore, the building of the Greek church of St. George (consecrated in 1806) was officially owned by Georg Johann von Karajan, who was an Austrian subject - a construction silently accepted by the authorities. In 1834 the emperor finally granted the community the permission to be registered as the official owner of its church building. When the Turkish-Israelite Community wanted to build a new synagogue, they had the same problem. They turned to the Ottoman Embassy for help and also referred to the fact that the Greek Community of the Ottoman subjects had already received the permission to own their church. In 1843 they received the authorization for the acquisition of land in order to erect a synagogue by the emperor and Metternich informed the Turkish Embassy that the permission had been given in order "to manifest once more the prevailing tolerant disposition of the Austrian government towards the Turkish subjects in Austria".

The communities of the Ottoman subjects were a kind of hybrid institutions in between the Ottoman Empire and Austria. While the Greek Community of St. George already from 1776 (the time of the privilege by Maria Theresa) registered the civil status of its members (birth, marriage, death), which made the priest an officer of the Austrian state, the Turkish-Israelite Community consented to registration only in 1845. They feared that the registration would deprive them of their privileges as Ottoman subjects and they would be treated as bad as the local Jews. After consultation with the Ottoman Embassy and with the assurance of the full maintenance of their rights, the registration was introduced in 1846. Later, as a consequence of the constitutional law of 1867, the priest or rabbi, who registered the civil status, as an Austrian official had to be an Austrian citizen. This led to the somehow absurd situation that the priests and rabbis of the communities of Ottoman subjects had to obtain Austrian citizenship.

The Greek Community of St. George and the Turkish-Israelite Community as communities of Ottoman subjects in Vienna both showed expressions of shared loyalty towards both empires (personified by the Sultan and the Kaiser). For example, at the extraordinary occasion when Sultan Abdülaziz visited Vienna in 1867. There are several other accounts of official celebrations where the Ottoman subjects showed their devotion towards the Ottoman Sultan as well as the house of Habsburg. For example, at the inauguration of the new Sephardi

synagogue (the so-called Turkish Temple in the Zirkusgasse) in 1887.⁸ In 1900 the Greek Community of St. George invited the president of the Turkish-Israelite Community to the celebration of the 25th government anniversary of Sultan Abdülhamid II. in their church.

In the late 19th century, all three religious communities of former Balkan merchants experienced changes and conflicts concerning their legal status and their institutional definition. Obviously, there was an exchange between the Turkish-Israelite and the Greek communities regarding legal issues. In the Greek communities the change of a person from Ottoman to Austrian subject meant membership change from the Community of St. George to the Community of the Holy Trinity. There are cases of Sephardi Jews, who thought they had to become members of the Ashkenazi Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, because they had changed citizenship.

After 1867, when in Austria a constitution (Staatsgrundgesetz über die allgemeinen Rechte der Staatsbürger) was introduced that granted freedom of religion and equal civil rights for all citizens, the situation for the former merchant communities changed basically. The Austrian state subsequently sought to organize and regulate the affairs of the “legally recognized religions” and no longer saw a connection between the status as merchants and Ottoman subjects and the organization of the non-Catholic religious communities.

The Austrian Ministry of Cult wanted to organize the religious communities following the principle of territory (Territorialprinzip), as it was valid for the Catholic parishes. But in the case of the Orthodox as well as the Jewish believers in Vienna this led to a series of complex issues.

The Orthodox Christians in addition to the historical division into Ottoman and Austrian subjects, now requested further separation according to the criterion of “nationality” (Serbian, Romanian). In 1893 the Serbian Community of St. Sava was officially established with the inauguration of its church, followed by the strife for the foundation of a Romanian community. The latter deeply involved the Greek Community of the Holy Trinity, because many of its members originally had an Aromanian (Vlach) background.

While the Austrian authorities consented to the formation of further Orthodox communities in Vienna upon the principle of nationality, in the case of the Jews they did not see the necessity for the existence of separate Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities and decreed the

⁸ Two life-size portraits of emperor Franz Joseph I. and sultan Abdülhamid II. were placed in the reception hall of the synagogue (and after 1918 replaced by big mirrors).

incorporation of the Turkish-Israelite Community into the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde (IKG) of Vienna. According to the “Israelitengesetz” (law that regulated the affairs of the Jews in Austria) created in 1890, there was only one administrative body representing all Jews in one area.

The Sephardi Jews were more than unhappy about losing their traditional autonomous status and tried everything to prevent the incorporation but did not succeed.⁹ They claimed that their community not only followed a different liturgical rite, but also consisted of Ottoman subjects that furthermore spoke a different language (Judezmo, i.e. Spanish of the Jews), which would mean that they belonged to a different nationality. Their arguments were not sufficient for the Austrian authorities, who feared further separatism among the Viennese Jews (for instance between progressive and orthodox groups.) They also pointed to the fact that after the foundation of new nation states in the Balkans (especially after the Congress of Berlin in 1878), most of the Sephardim actually were no longer Ottoman subjects.¹⁰ The Greek Community of St. George had the same problem and in the early 20th century there were ongoing conflicts among the two Greek “sister communities” about membership. After the decline of the traditional Balkan trade around 1870 the communities suffered from a severe loss of members and financial problems, which is the reason for the complicated infights that took place before 1918.

Documents in the archive of the Greek Community of the Holy Trinity show that there was an exchange between the Community of the Holy Trinity and the Turkish-Israelite Community on the legal issues that threatened the communities’ autonomy. The community board of the Holy Trinity informed themselves about the argumentation of the Turkish-Israelite Community in its conflict with the IKG, when it had to defend its own autonomy against claims by the Romanian metropolitan of Czernowitz in the Bukowina. But there is also a second aspect: The case of the Turkish-Israelite Community served as a precedent that strongly doubted the right of existence of the Greek Community of St. George of the Ottoman subjects. The Community of the Holy Trinity who proposed a unification of the two Greek communities must have known about that. But unlike the Turkish-Israelite Community the

⁹ In fact, at the first possibility, after the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, the Sephardim declared their community as autonomous again.

¹⁰ It should be noted that most of the people in question were actually born and raised in Vienna, but due to the *ius sanguinis* law could keep a status as Ottoman subjects.

Greek Community of St. George managed to defend its autonomy until 1918 (and also afterwards, even after the end of the Ottoman Empire).

In the Austrian archives there is a big amount of bureaucratic documentation on these legal conflicts that in the end only concerned a small number of people, confronted to the numerous Balkan merchants in the beginning of the 19th century. This should not mislead us to the conclusion that there was a hostility between the Orthodox believers or the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, which was not the case.

Finally, I want to talk about some similar phenomena that can be observed among the Balkan merchants on the cultural level:

The successors of the Balkan merchants in the second half of the 19th century no longer wore their traditional oriental costumes and had become part of the well-to-do bourgeois Viennese society. They cultivated a kind of “Viennese oriental identity” that combined the culture of the Habsburg capital with their roots in the Balkans, but they also emphasized their higher social status towards their poor co-religionists coming to Vienna in the 2nd half of the 19th century. The Greek Community of the Holy Trinity excluded poor Orthodox immigrants from the Eastern parts of the Habsburg Empire from its community affairs and the members of the Turkish-Israelite Community were not very keen on supporting poor Sephardi Jews from the Balkans who travelled to Vienna.

An interesting example of how their cultural environment influenced the communities is liturgical music: Both Greek communities in 1844 introduced four-part chant into their divine service.¹¹ When the Patriarch of Constantinople condemned this music as a harmful novelty, the community board of St. George justified the innovation as follows: The Greeks that have come to the city of Vienna with its fine music, no longer like our traditional chant. If we would keep the traditional music, our church would stay empty, because no one would attend service anymore. The Turkish-Israelite Community – influenced by modernist tendencies in the Viennese Ashkenazi society - as early as 1872 had an organ in their synagogue and in 1881 introduced a choir into their liturgical music. In confronting the reservations of their more conservative co-religionists in Southeastern Europe, the answer was almost identical:

¹¹ The music was written by the notable Austrian composers Benedikt von Randhartinger and Gottfried Preyer.

“we want a hazán with a choir for neither we nor our children comprehend the Oriental chant, nor do we have any interest in [this kind of] chanting.”¹²

In the early 20th century, all three described communities experienced a significant decline. Apart from the mentioned economic and political changes and the connected legal problems, the process of integration into Viennese society led to an alienation from the traditional religious communities. The laments of contemporary historians of the communities about the decline of the formerly proud communities of Balkan merchants sound similar: There are no more members, people do not go the church/synagogue anymore, they do not speak and understand our language (Greek/Judezmo) any longer.

The end of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires was another severe blow for the communities in crisis.

The Greek communities now only consisted of a handful of families. After 1918 the communities that had always defended their autonomy on the basis of the imperial privileges, decided to subordinate under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. There were hardly any successors of the former Balkan merchants left and during World War II other groups of Greeks came to Vienna (Nazi collaborators, forced laborers). After 1945 neither in terms of community organization nor in demography there was a continuity to the historical Greek communities.

The Turkish-Israelite Community also diminished significantly and in the interwar period had great difficulties in maintaining regular divine services. In 1929 many families followed the rabbi Nissim Ovadia and emigrated to Paris. Schleicher's dissertation from 1932 describes a community hardly existing anymore. In 1938 the splendid Turkish Temple in the Zirkusgasse was burnt down by the Nazis. The remaining community members, who did not manage to rescue themselves, were murdered. The traces of the Turkish-Israelite Community in Vienna were completely wiped out.

At the same time, people were queuing up in front of the two Greek churches, as a Greek visitor to Vienna in 1938 reports. “These people do not only want to be Greek anymore, they even are Greek-haters”, the priest told him about the people who were waiting in order to obtain a certificate that they had no Jewish ancestors (Ariernachweis). For people with a

¹² Translation by Stechauner, 179.

Greek name or family background this seems to have been particularly important, as Greeks and Jews in imperial Austria often had been confused.

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