The Spanish Consulate in Istanbul and the Protection of the Sephardim (1804-1913)

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The opening of the Spanish diplomatic delegation in Istanbul in 1783 marked the start of relations with the Ottoman Empire after centuries of conflict. There, the Spanish diplomats came into contact for the first time with a part of the Sephardim expelled in 1492, who after moving around finally settle in the Pearl of the Bosphorus. Despite the many prejudices towards Jews, rooted after centuries of Inquisition, the Spanish were especially moved to see how exile and distance are an extraordinarily fertile land for memory.

In 1783 Spain and Turkey put an end to three centuries of wars in the Mediterranean. From that moment several expeditions were sent from the Iberian Peninsula whose accounts would bring a new image of the Ottoman Empire and its settlers. At that time trade with Turkey was carried out through the minorities, Greeks, Armenians or Jews. Although the accounts of such expeditions were not completely favourable to the Jews, in 1797 there was in the Madrid of the Enlightenment a certain political debate on the abolition of the Decree of Expulsion led by Pedro Valera, Secretary of Finance of Carlos III, who supported the establishment of rich Jews in Spain. This suggests that there was news of the situation of the Sephardim and their role in the incipient Ottoman bourgeoisie. This proposal was not successful and so, in 1802 and 1816, two royal letters patent made it very clear that if a Jew arrived in Spain he had to inform the Court of the Inquisition, which did not definitively disappear until 1854.

However, at the Istanbul consulate some diplomats were in favour of supporting the Ottoman Sephardim, as shown by the fact that in 1804 a passport was granted to Miguel Isaac Coen and the patent of protection to Abraham Angelo de Soria. In these circumstances Sephardic names were frequent in the consulate nationalisation or protection records, as can be seen in the six application forms of 1834 to request a passport made by David Funes, Haum de Toledo, Antonio Callinery, Hahim Sadaca, Rafael Israel Eliakin and Mateo Summa.

The truth is that Spanish society was aware of the existence of the Sephardim in 1860, when O’Donell’s troops entered Tangier and Tetouan, where six thousand Jews lived. Spain, which had seen how most of its American colo-

- The War of Africa was followed very closely by Spanish readers, who had chroniclers like Pedro Ruiz de Alarcón, as well as through the testimonies of the military officers or politicians who took part in the conflict. The meeting with the Moroccan Sephardim produced mixed feelings, involving the traditional Spanish mistrust of Jews, however much they spoke Spanish and considered themselves compatriots.

At the same time, during the 1860s news began to arrive of the Ottoman Sephardim thanks to the information of the diplomats, many of whom combined their work with journalism and travel literature. One of them was Adolfo de Mentaberry, Vice-Consul in Damascus between 1865 and 1867 and sent to the Istanbul legation between 1867 and 1869, that is, just at the moment when the Glorious Revolution broke out and religious freedom was implanted for the first time. In this context, the liberal ideology of Mentaberry and the climate created in Madrid allowed him an approach to the Ottoman Jews that he communicated to his readers in the following way: “Jews descended from those that our Catholic Sovereigns, Don Fernando and Doña Isabel, banished from Spanish dominions. These not only still conserve the language of their ancestors, although they write it with Hebrew characters, but many of them even possess keys and deeds of ownership of their homes in Spain, where they hope to return with that tenacious perseverance of their race, with the same obstinate faith with which they await the Messiah. However – something extraordinary! – they harbour no rancour towards us, they always treat us very well and listen to us with palpitating delight, as if our voice, our word and our style remind them of their dead ancestors, bringing to their fantasy confused and pleasant reminiscences of that affectionate language, of those tender maternal accents that with a soft aura rock the cradle of the children.”

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Many diplomats established in the Ottoman Empire began to consider the fact of protecting the Sephardim, above all bearing in mind that they had an important presence in the financial and trade bourgeoisie of cities at the height of economic expansion, such as Istanbul, Izmir or Alexandria. Not all diplomats agreed and Eduardo Toda y Güell, Spanish Consul in Cairo in the 1880s, is an example: “The day that the Spanish government orders the suspension and termination of the protection that in the East we afford to Jews for supposing them natives of the country, morality will have gained a great deal and we will find ourselves free of a rabble who shame us everywhere.”

The motives offered as proof were that they introduced fake currency, loans with 1000% interest or money exchange.

The Spanish government showed its interest in the fortunes of the Sephardim during the first period of the Restoration (1875-1881), a moment when there was a wave of anti-Semitism in Europe. The Count of Rascón, head of the legation in Istanbul, reported on the fate of many Jews who had arrived from

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Russia to Turkey, through his dispatches in 1881 proposing their protection. The response was not long in coming: “Upon receipt of dispatch no. 1012, HM the King orders me to say to Your Excellency that both His Majesty and the Government will receive the Hebrews from Russia, opening to them the gates to what was their former patria.” The Count of Rascón later prepared a report where he proposed the establishment of Sephardic traders on the Catalan coast and in Andalusia, with the end of establishing trade routes between the Iberian Peninsula, Turkey or the Black Sea, similar to those established by Great Britain or France. This diplomat also proposed in the report the creation of an educational institution based in Istanbul and Thessalonica, which would have made them adopt the Latin alphabet in texts in Judeo-Spanish. Although this initiative had the support of King Alfonso XII and the gov-

6. Ibid., p. 21.
ernment of Sagasta, very few of the Jews from Russia accepted Spanish protection. However, the posture remained clear and would serve as a precedent for the later campaigns.

An example of a great supporter of the Sephardic cause was Diego de Coello Quesada, Spanish Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire between 1884 and 1886 and successor of the Count of Rascón. The Sephardim of Istanbul and Salonica appeared in many of the Count of Coello’s chronicles through the pages of La Época, the newspaper of the Liberal Party which he had founded himself. Already in his first “Letter from Constantinople” he began to send news of the coexistence of the different ethnicities and religions in Istanbul: “All the Christian clergy of Constantinople represented by the Catholic Delegate Monsignor Rotelli, by the Armenian Azeri Patriarch, united to the Chief Hebrew Rabbi, were in the front line of this reception, which was truly brilliant.”

Coello, defender of parliamentary monarchy and of religious freedom, showed his admiration on more than one occasion for the achievements of Ottomanism, in which the Sultan became the protector of all subjects, regardless of their religion: “And like the Christian churches, whose hospitals and schools frequently receive the gifts of the Sovereign, who is the father – pasha – of all his subjects, the thousands and thousands of Israelis of Constantinople received protection, who still recall their beloved Spain after four centuries, and whose fortune is envied by the Jews of Rumania, Hungary, and even the civilised Germany.”

Coello gives his readers a modern image of the Ottoman Sephardim. Thus, reading his chronicles gives the impression that he was quite a popular man in the Jewish upper bourgeoisie of Istanbul, as shown by his response in the Spanish festival of charity to collect funds for the victims of the earthquake in Andalusia in 1884: “[...] Messrs. Fernández, Gran Salomón and Díaz, whose names well recall their Spanish origin; and Moisés de Toledo who, with his intelligent sons, collected one of the richest offerings among the Israelite race of Istanbul who, after three centuries of absence, recall the patria of their parents, Spain.” As can be read between the lines, this author shows great admiration for the help received, mixed with surprise at the fact that the descendents of those expelled collaborated in this way. These kinds of ambivalent feelings were a constant in the treatment of the Sephardim.

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Although Coello was sent to Rome in 1886, the Sephardim did not forget him, inviting him to the inauguration of the railway on his way through Salonica in 1888: “[...] my friends the Count of Camondo, Fernández and Toledo, leaders of the Spanish Israelite community of Pera, Stefanovitch, Aubaret, Fortes and bankers of Constantinople, extremely interested in the railway line from Vienna to Salonica, sent me to Rome to attend its inauguration in the last days of May, although my sorrow was great at not being able to accept the gracious invitation of the Sultan to the opening of the Istanbul railway.” Although he was not present, he did
send a chronicle to the *Ilustración Española y Americana* which allowed the readers of both sides of the Atlantic to discover or learn something more of this community, its links with Spain and the role of Coello himself in the Ottoman Empire.

Returning to the Istanbul consulate, Antonio de Zayas y Beaumont, on 1st January 1897 took up the post of Third Secretary, holding it until 30th July 1898. During his time in the Spanish legation in Constantinople, Zayas realised the importance of the Sephardim, writing a report used by Doctor Pulido in 1904, the date when he published *Los israelitas y el idioma castellano*.¹¹

The opinions of this diplomat emerged again in 1912 in the memoirs of his time in Istanbul entitled *A orillas del Bósforo*, in which he again presents the ambiguity of the Spanish posture, fascinated by the riches of certain members of the community but mistrustful. For this reason, the anti-Semitism of this diplomat did not prevent him from realising that Spain was losing the possibility of having some allies within the Empire. Curiously in this kind of posturing the figure of the Catholic Kings is omnipresent: “I did not consider that a race, damned since the sublime tragedy of Golgotha, in which it played the shameful role of executioner, deserves the benevolence of the Catholic Kings.”¹² Although today this kind of statement can make us smile, one must bear in mind that the Catholic Church put an end to the accusation of Deicide in the Second Vatican Council. If Coello represented the liberal diplomats of Isabelline Spain, Zayas represented the ultraconservative aristocracy, supporting a more radical anti-Semitism. In this way, the decree of the expulsion was justified by “[…] the repugnance that by tradition, custom or routine the people of Hebrew origin inspired in all Christians […].”¹³

Zayas proposed a Spanish approach to the Ottoman Sephardim in which the Spanish relationship with the Jews would have the common characteristic of both being possessors of the same inheritance by stating that “[…] there is no link that brings together and connects so many peoples to others as the identity of language.”¹⁴

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As can be appreciated, at the start of the 20th century many things began to change in Spanish society, which questioned the weight of traditional postures and certain religious values. One result of this situation was the campaign of the doctor and senator Ángel Pu
dido in favour of the Sephardic cause, which was closely followed by the Ottoman communities and the Spanish diplomats sent to the Eastern Mediterranean. Some, such as Alejandro Spagnolo, consul in Alexandria, applauded the initiative: “Allow me, above all, to express my sincerest approbation for the patriotic initiative taken by you, calling the attention of our Government to how very useful it would be for national interests if not to promote at least to prevent our language from disappearing from among these hundreds of thousands of Spanish Jews who, dispersed through the countries of the East and despite all the centuries that

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have passed, have been able to preserve it to the present.”

Alejandro Spagnolo gave the applications of Dr Pulido to José Danon, Director of the Universal Israelite Alliance in Alexandria, and to Abraham Galante, an important Turkish journalist who was exiled in Egypt. Between them they brought together the information requested. David Rousso, a distinguished lawyer and councillor of the Spanish Embassy, contributed in the case of Istanbul.

The Ottoman Empire experienced at this time a political change with the arrival of the Young Turks who took power in 1908 and reopened Parliament, closed since 1876. In these circumstances, with weakened power, Italy invaded and conquered Libya in 1911; Albania revolted between 1910 and 1912; and the First Balkan War broke out in 1912, the year when Greece, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria fought Turkey, reaching Yesilkoy in the spring of 1913, current location of Istanbul airport. The Ottoman Empire lost Crete, part of Thrace with cities such as Edirne, the old Adrianopolis, and ceded to the powers the resolution of the situation of the Aegean islands and Albania. Bulgaria extended its borders to the Mediterranean with a large part of Thrace. The result of the division did not please the Serbians who demanded compensation in Macedonia supported by Greece and fought Bulgaria in July 1913. The Turkish army took advantage of the situation to recover Edirne on 22nd July and the east of Thrace without opposition from the Bulgarians. Lastly, the Treaty of Bucharest of the 10th August 1913 put an end to the question: Bulgaria lost territory to Greece and Serbia which extended their borders through

15. Ángel Pulido (1905), p. 471.
16. Ibid., pp. 474-476.
17. Ibid., p. 405.
Macedonia. Albania became independent and the Ottoman Empire in Europe lost 83% of its territories and 69% of its population.

In view of the insecurity, many Jews decided to leave the new states of the Balkans and settle in Istanbul, some of them requesting the protection of the Spanish consulate. The reasons for this approach are various. As I have explained, a revision of the Sephardic cause had been taking place during the Restoration, a time that coincided with a certain economic expansion resulting from the political stability of the governments of Alfonso XII and his son Alfonso XIII. Proof of this are the 70 records of Sephardic protection that date to 1913. These contain information on around 220 people, as they included the names of the spouses and children. There were only two that were not granted, those of Mair Namiot Epstein and Joseph Saltzman, both from Russia but who stated they were Sephardim.

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As dictated by Spanish bureaucracy, applicants signed with first name and two surnames, including in some cases the name of the wife with the corresponding maiden name and those of the children with their age. This information was guaranteed by a certificate from the Great Rabbinate. Thus, Haim Bejarano, Great Rabbi of Edirne, certified that Nissim Benaroya, son of Aaron and of Esther Benaroya (born Nathan) had on 8th July 1900 married Roza Azaria and that they had had the following children: Henri on 21st June 1901; Roza on 28th September 1902; Esther on 6th March 1907 and Jacob on 26th February 1909.

The age of those protected oscillated between 20 and 50, with extreme cases like that of the brothers Mair and Aaron de Taranto Behar aged 68 and 71, who moved from Salonica to Istanbul with their families in October 1913. As many of them were young, a third was single; and there was the case of the granting of protection to two widows and their children. Apart from the residents in Istanbul, the majority of the applicants were from the Balkans, Bulgaria and Macedonia with some isolated cases from Serbia, Greece, Rumania, Austria or Russia. Therefore, these nationalities predominated with exceptional cases such as that of a resident in Edirne with Argentinean nationality. By cities, almost half came from Edirne and towns close by such as Kirklareli, Haskovo, Demotica or Gomolcine.

In the Byzantine period there was a Jewish colony in what was then known as Adrianopolis and that with time would be called Edirne, where those expelled from the Iberian Peninsula and Jews from Budin in Hungary arrived. In 1873 there were 10,000 Hebrews in Edirne, a number that went up to 20,000 in 1912 with the arrival of many coreligionists from the Balkans after the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878. These were the golden years of a city where Greeks and Turks coexisted with Armenians and Sephardim. The latter had cultural associations, such as El Círculo Israelito, founded in 1859, the club of the Bnei Brit that dates from 1911, the workers’ corporation Hevrat Hapoalim from 1881 and the Zionist Association created in 1898. The school of the Universal Israelite Alliance was inaugurated on 20th October 1867 and would

19. Ibid., pp. 36-37.
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offer its services until the academic year 1936/1937, and by 1925 it had 578 boys, 562 girls and around thirty teachers. The Sephardic community also had a newspaper, La Boz de la Verdad, published between 1910 and 1922 and another in French at around the same time, L’Écho d’Adrianople, and from 1887 plays were performed in Turkish, French and Judeo-Spanish in the Févaide theatre. Edirne was the home of a Great Rabbinate, notably the figure of Haim Bejarano in 1908, collaborator of Dr Pulido. Later, Bejarano moved to Istanbul in 1915, finally directing the Great Rabbinate as locum tenens in the recently created Turkish Republic.

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Returning to those protected by the Spanish consulate, the reason offered was the political situation in which they had found themselves after the passage of Edirne from Turkey to Bulgaria. In fact, half of the requests of 1913 corresponded to the months of February to May, that is, just after the Bulgarian invasion. This is the case of Samuel Behar Menahen:

My Dear Sir,

I humbly inform you of the following:

I am a resident in the city of Adrianopolis, of Jewish faith, and, like all members of my family, an Ottoman subject.

As a result of current events, the political status of my town will soon change, as it did in the town of Kara-Agatch, where I have the house, which has already been officially ceded by the Sublime Porte to Bulgaria. It is natural that this power should wish to impose its nationality on the locals.

Understanding that the Royal Spanish Government is willing to accord its high protection to the eastern Jews who conserve the Spanish language as their mother tongue, I take the liberty of asking of you the favour of admission as a subject of this country.

I enclose the certificate of the Great Rabbinate and a document testifying my civil status.

I hope my request will be accepted and express to you, Mr General Consul, my sincerest respect.

Constantinople, 24th February 1913
Pera, Rue Zumbul, 2
Samuel Behar-Menahem

The Hispanic origin and the refusal to adopt Bulgarian nationality is a constant in this type of request. Some of the people expressed other reasons, this time of an economic nature, such as Nessim Pinyas Mitrani on 18th April 1915:

My Dear Sir,

I request the honour of admission as a Spanish citizen.

Born in Adrianopolis, presently in the service of the Anglo-Levantine Bank, I trust that with my new status I may contribute to developing the trade relations between Spain and the East.

In the hope that my request may be granted, I remain, sir, your most obedient servant.

20. Ibid., p. 149.
The most frequent profession was that of trader in food products such as cheese, eggs, cereals, wines, salted fish or textiles such as silks, leather or fur. Some of them were suppliers to the Turkish army, a detail included by the consulate officials. Another common profession was that of bank employee in the aforementioned Anglo-Levantine Bank, the Ottoman Bank, or in important local trading houses, such as Neoray Papo, Ovadia & Co or Isaac Nahmias & Co, or foreign companies as in the case of the director of the Commercial Company Ltd of London in Edirne.

*The applicant has a good background and a wealthy position which in his capacity as trader and trade representative can serve Spanish interests*

The officials of the Spanish General Consulate in Istanbul produced a brief report on each case indicating the fortune of each individual and the reasons that his protection could be beneficial. There was not always information on the amount of money attributed to them but this oscillated between 300,000 and 10,000 francs. When accepting the record, the argument put forward was usually the following: "The applicant has a good background and a wealthy position which in his capacity as trader and trade representative can serve Spanish interests."

These officials kept in mind the Regulation of September 1871 for Protection in the East, Royal Order no. 14, of 16th May 1905, addressed to this consulate and no. 25, of 28th March 1913, addressed to the Spanish legation in Istanbul. The concession was granted in a period that usually ranged from the same day, in the case of considerable fortune, or between one and two months. From then, the person under protection had to pay the amount of six pesetas; if he did not do so he had to renew the request by paying a fine that corresponded to the annual amount multiplied by the years he had stopped paying the fee.

From this moment the international political situation became complicated with the outbreak of the First World War and the later Turkish War of Liberation (1919-1923). The consulate maintained the attitude of defence and protection of the Sephardim in Istanbul, especially after the promulgation of the decree of Primo de Rivera of December 1924 through which they were permitted to acquire Spanish nationality. It is from that moment when some of those who left Istanbul for Europe settled in Catalonia, working in certain cases in the textile sector, which they had known since before the expulsion, and where they had achieved excellent results in the Ottoman Empire, such as the factories of Salonica, where sails for ships and uniforms for armies were manufactured.

**References**


