The Golden Age of Ottoman Jewry

JEWISH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Jewish Population of the Ottoman Empire

How many Jews gathered together in the dominions of the Sultans during the Golden Age? Exact figures lack, at least until the Ottomans themselves began to compile reasonably accurate census reports starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, but from early Ottoman cadastral records and poll tax registers along with the estimates of foreign visitors, approximations at least are possible.

The largest Jewish population in the Empire, not surprisingly, was at Istanbul, its administrative, financial, and economic center, though Jews here constituted a much smaller proportion of the total than that of Salonica, where they were in a majority. When Benjamin of Tudela passed through Byzantine Constantinople in AD 1160, he found some 2,500 Jewish families (about 17,500 individuals) in all. An early Ottoman census of the capital in 1477, a quarter century after the conquest, shows a population of 1,647 Jewish households (about 11,529 people), or eleven percent of the total 16,326 households (103,621), which also included 9,486 Muslim and 4,891 Christian households. By 1489, as a result of Mehmed II's intensive settlement efforts, this figure had risen to 2,491 Jewish households (17,437 people) out of a total of 10,685 non-Muslim households.

The later Jewish emigration from Spain (estimated at about 36,000 people to Istanbul alone) and from western and central Europe, along with forced resettlement of Jews from newly-conquered territories in Serbia, Greece and Iraq, brought this number to 8,070 households (56,490 people) in 1535, five percent of the total, which included 46,635 Muslim households and 25,292 Christian. The famous Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi stated in 1638 that the Jewish population of Istanbul, settled mostly in the Hasköy quarter of the city, numbered about 11,000 families (77,000 people), which he said was twice as large the Greek population at that
Ottoman poll tax registers for 1690–91 state that there were 8,236 Jewish (57,652) and 45,112 (315,784) Christian heads of households in Istanbul, the latter suspiciously high since registers for the household tax (avariz) from the same year show 9,642 Jewish (67,494) and 14,231 (99,617) Christian households. The British traveler Richard Pococke estimated in 1771–73 that there were 100,000 Jews in Istanbul, but in view of the population figures compiled by the Ottoman census a century later, this number seems exaggerated.

The largest Jewish city in Southeastern Europe, Salonica, almost depopulated at the time of the final Ottoman conquest in 1430, had 2,509 Jewish households (about 17,563 people) enrolled in synagogues in 1530. This rose to 23,001 in 1518, 23,942 people in 1589 and 22,767 in 1613. Although more refugees arrived during the next century, from Central Europe as well as Spain, numerous plagues and fires left the figure about the same until the end of the eighteenth century, still making it the only large city of the empire where the Jews constituted a majority of the population. Elsewhere in Macedonia, Monastir had 48 Jewish households (342 people including bachelors) in 1529 and 60 households (467 people including bachelors) in 1597. Skopje (Üsküp) had 32 Jewish households (224 people) in 1544, increasing to 228 people in 1597.

Among the other larger Jewish communities in the European part of the Ottoman Empire, there were 102 households (714 people) at Buda shortly after its conquest by Süleyman the Magnificent. Since most Buda Jews were sent to Istanbul soon afterwards, the number left fell to 72 households (504) in 1546, compared to 318 Christian households, but this rose to 122 Jewish households (854) in 1566.

In eastern Thrace, Edirne (Adrianople) had 231 Jewish households in 1519 (1,624 people including bachelors) shortly after most of its Jews had been transferred to Istanbul. This rose to 553 households (3,907 people with bachelors) in 1568, as the result of the arrival of new refugees from Central Europe, but fell to 341 (2,532 people with bachelors) in 1570 as the new residents moved to Salonica and Istanbul, which were rapidly becoming more important economic and political centers.

In Albania, the important trade center Valona had a large number of Jewish immigrants from the Iberian peninsula, rising from 97 households, as compared to 665 Christian households, in 1506–7, to 609 in 1519–20, though the subsequent Christian Albanian revolt against the Ottomans, led by Scanderbeg, massacred most of the area’s Muslims and Jews and forced the remainder to flee, mostly to Istanbul or Italy. In Bulgaria, Nicopolis had 66 Jewish households during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (492 people including bachelors), rising to 186 households (1,389 people including bachelors) in 1579. There were only 21 Jewish households at Sofia (147) in 1544, falling to 126 individuals during the reign of Selim II, while Vidin had 31 Jewish households (217) in 1585,