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Common Culture and Particular Identities:
Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Ottoman Balkans

Editors: Eliezer Papo • Nenad Makuljević

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Jewish Women's Conversion to Islam in the End of the Ottoman Era (Salonica)

*"Mijor dezero verte kortada la garganta
ke azer insulto a tu ley santa",¹*

Gila Hadar

University of Haifa

Mass Conversion of Christians and Jews to Islam was a common phenomenon in the early modern Ottoman Empire.

Most researchers agree that the phenomenon of mass Islamization was due to religious persecution and to political and economic pressure, and that this phenomenon declined at the end of the eighteenth century.² Alongside these mass conversions, thousands of free and slave Christian and Jewish women also converted to Islam within the entire area of the Ottoman Empire.³ Most of the studies on are based on

1 "Evreopula de Izmir", *El Meseret*, 1.12.1921 (Ladino).

2 Nehemia Levtzion, *Conversion to Islam*, Holmes & Meier, New York 1979; Michael Gervers (ed.), *Conversion and Continuity :Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1990; Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans: Kisve Bahası Petitions and Ottoman Social Life, 1670-1730*, Brill, Leiden 2004; Marc Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in the Ottoman Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008; idem, *The Donme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries and Secular Turks*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2010; Rifat Bali, *A Scapegoat for all Seasons: The Donmes or Crypto-Jews of Turkey*, Isis Press, Istanbul 2009; Tijana Krstic, "Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate: Self-Narratives of Conversion to Islam in the Age of Confessionalization", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, 1 (2009), pp. 35-63; idem, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011.

3 Fatma Müge Göçek and Marc D. Baer, "Social Boundaries of Ottoman Women's Experience in Eighteenth-Century Galata Court Records", in Madeline C. Zilfi (ed.),

the Ottoman census records (*tahrir defterleri*), the *sharia* court record (*sicill*), and the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives in İstanbul (BOA).⁴

According to many scholars, the main reasons for conversion until the end of the nineteenth century throughout the Ottoman Empire was the desire of women converts to improve their living conditions in a personal way such as divorce from a violent husband or liberation from slavery or captivity. Conversion was a form of opposition to family and social hierarchy and a means for feminine empowerment.

From a study of the Jewish press appearing in Salonica at the beginning of the twentieth century, we are witness to a rising phenomenon of young Christian and Jewish women converting to Islam in order to marry a Muslim. Each year an average of 10-15 Jewish girls in Salonica became Muslims. In 1909 in Istanbul, 13 Jewish girls converted—12 became Muslim and one became a Christian nun.⁵ In most of these cases the girl ran away from home or was kidnapped by her intended husband. A woman who remained for one night in a Muslim house was considered as being converted and returning to her home and to Judaism was very difficult and sometimes impossible.

Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era, E. J. Brill, New York 1997, pp. 48-65; Marc Baer, "Islamic conversion: Narratives of Women", *Gender & History* 16, 2 (2004), pp. 425-448.

- 4 Ronald C. Jennings, "Women in the Early Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Judicial Records: The Sharia Court of Anatolian Kayseri", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 18 (1975), pp. 53-114; Haim Gerber, "Social and Economic Position of Women in an Ottoman City, Bursa, 1600-1700", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (1980), pp. 231-244; Amnon Cohen, *Jewish Life Under Islam: Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1984; Madeline C. Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, E. J. Brill, New York 1997; Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2003; Bulent Özdemir, "Political Use of Conversion in the Nineteenth Century Ottoman Context: Some Cases From Salonica", *JSRI*, No.7, Spring 2003 pp.155-169; The same article on the net: http://www.jsri.ro.old/html%20version/index/no_7/bulentozdemir-arteol.htm; Eyal Ginio, "Childhood, Mental Capacity and Conversion to Islam in the Ottoman State", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 25 (2001), pp. 90-119 (On Salonica: Ozdemir and Ginio).
- 5 "Muchachas judias konvertidas" (Conversion of Jewish young women), *Revista Popular*, 17.2.1910; "Grave eskandalo en konsepli", *El Avenir*, 23.9.1912; *El Djugeton*, October 1, 1912; "Notas de Kavala", *El Imparsial*, 10.10.1911.

We do not hear the voices of these women, nor are we aware of the reasons for their conversion. The girls disappear behind the veil and the only voices heard are those of the family trying to bring their daughter back into the family circle. The newspapers report this as forbidden love or abduction and describe the attempts of the community leaders and the chief rabbi to prevent conversion and to restore the girl to her family.⁶

The conversion of young women to Islam and marriage with Muslim men is known to us from folk poetry. But one cannot know for certain whether the cases described in poetry actually occurred in reality, or whether the poem was intended for social and educational purposes to deter girls and young women from abandoning their faith and to protect the boundaries of family, community, and religious life.⁷

In this article I shall try to examine the following questions: What were the reasons for conversion? What were the causes for the rise of this phenomenon, its “exposure”, and the public discussion in the press during the period in question?

Salonica at the End of the Ottoman Era

The nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth witnessed far-reaching political, social, and geographical changes in the world and in the Ottoman Empire. Long-standing political and social institutions were undermined, and extensive territories in the Mediterranean area, including Palestine, were lost to the empire. From 1821 onwards, the Balkans—the region in which Salonica is situated—were in a state of unrest. The struggles in the Balkans brought about geopolitical and demographic changes which influenced all the inhabitants of the region. The community was influenced by both Turkish and Hellenic nationalism and by socialist and communist ideologies, as well as by the development of modern capitalist industries. The Alliance Israélite Universelle established schools, and the concepts of equality and fraternity became current, in addition to those of Turkism and, later, Hellenism. Others adopted the concept of Jewish nationalism—Zionism.

6 “La ija pedrida” (A lost girl), *El Avenir*, March 23, 1909; “Las konversiones”, *La Epoka*, August 27, 1911; “En Saloniko”, *El Avenir*, May 29, 1912.

7 Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman (eds.), *Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Bosnia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 1971; Moshe Atias, *Kansionero Judeo-Español*, Ben-Zvi Institute, The Hebrew University, ‘Kiryat-Sefer’, Jerusalem 1972 [in Hebrew and Ladino]; Samuel Elazar, *El romancero judeo-español*, Svjetlost, Sarajevo 1987.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Salonica,⁸ was a multi-religious, multilingual, and multicultural city. The inhabitants of Salonica included Jews, Orthodox Greeks, Muslims, Armenians, and Catholics. These groups, whose interaction shaped the character of the city, were highly stratified into differentiated classes, professions, and income groupings. Culturally, however, each ethnic group developed its own distinct traditions relating to family values, religious rituals, language and literature (Jews in the Judeo-Spanish language called Ladino, Christians in Greek, Muslims in Turkish), and day-to-day customs.⁹

Though sharing the same urban space, sitting in the same coffee houses and *mehanes* drinking Raki and coffee, walking side by side in the bazars and on the seaside, or working together in the tobacco and textile factories,¹⁰ we find three very distinct

- 8 On Salonica at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, see Harry Collinson-Owen, *Salonica and After: The Sideshow That Ended the War*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1919; Leon Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica: Portrait of an Era*, E.H. Allen Ltd., London 1946; Gilles Veinstein (ed.), *Salonique, 1850-1918: La "ville des Juifs" et le réveil des Balkans*, Paris, Autrement, Serie Memoires n.12, 1992; Meropi Anastassiadou, *Salonique, 1830-1912: Une ville ottomane à l'âge des Réformes*, Brill, Leiden 1997; Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950*, Vintage, New York 2005. For a general overview of the relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Ottoman Empire see Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, Holmes & Meier, New York 1982; Paul Dumont and François Georgeon (eds.), *Villes ottomanes à la fin de l'Empire*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1992; François Georgeon, "Selanik musulmane et deunne", in Gilles Veinstein, *Salonique, 1850-1918*, pp. 105-118; Alexandra Yerolympos and Vasilis Colonas, "Un Urbanisme cosmopolite", in Veinstein, *Salonique, 1850-1918*, pp. 158-176; Eugene Cooperman, *Turco-Jewish Relations in the Ottoman City of Salonica, 1889-1912*, A. Bel& Howell, U.M.I Dissertation Services, New York 1993; Minna Rozen (ed.), *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1808-1945*, vols. 1, 2, Proceedings of the International Conference on "The Jewish Communities in the Balkan and Turkey in the 19th and 20th Centuries through the End of World War II", The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 2002.
- 9 Meropi Anastassiadou, "Sports d'élite et élites sportives à Salonique au tournant du siècle", in *Vivre dans l'empire ottoman: Sociabilités et relations intercommunautaires XVIIIe-XXe siècles*, Paul Dumont and François Georgeon (eds.), pp. 144-160, L'Harmattan, Paris 1997.
- 10 Effie Avdala, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in Post-Ottoman Thessaloniki: The Great Tobacco Strike of 1914", in *Borderlines: Genders and Identities in War and Peace, 1870-1930*, Billy Melman (ed.), pp. 421-438, Routledge, New York 1998.

groups who were alien to one another. It was not walls of stone which separated them; it was language, culture, religion, customs, delineations of social class, and in particular, disparate political goals and aspirations.¹¹

In order to understand how individuals and social groups identify themselves about communal and conceptual boundary-crossings, we propose to examine the phenomenon of conversion,¹² mainly of young, poor women, to Islam at the beginning of twentieth century Salonica.

Theories of Conversion: Understanding Religious Change

In 1981 the researchers Lofland and Skonovd¹³ distinguished six different types of conversions: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.¹⁴ This typology is very important for discussions about conversion but does not give a clear answer about the reasons for the conversion of young women and girls from poor families who married young Muslims. There also exist affection, rebellion, and the exertion of social and political power, but the typology does not refer to the psychological and social circumstances of the conversion.

Antti Oksanen suggests a psychological hypothetical model deduced from J. Bowlby's "Attachment theory" that there is a higher probability for a religious conversion to occur in the following cases:¹⁵

- 11 Iakovos J. Aktsoğlu, "The Class Movement in the City of Thessaloniki", *Balkan Studies*, 38, 2 (1997), pp. 285-306.
- 12 H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, AL 1992; Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1993; Antti Oksanen, *Religious Conversion: A Meta-Analytical Study*, Lund University Press, Lund 1994, pp. 52-55; Dennis Washburn and A. Kevin Reinhart (eds), *Converting Cultures: Religion, Ideology and Transformations of Modernity*, Brill, Leiden 2007.
- 13 J. Lofland and N. Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20, 4 (1981), pp. 373-385;
- 14 On psychology and sociology of conversion, see Lewis R. Rambo, "The Psychology of Conversion", pp. 159-177; William Sims Bainbridge, "The Sociology of Conversion", in Newton Malony and Southard (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, pp. 178-191.
- 15 Attachment Theory was first applied to the psychology of religion by L. A. Kirkpatrick and P. R. Shaver, "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29, 3 (1990), pp. 315-334.

1. In the case of individuals with insecure attachment histories
2. When preceded with crisis or tension experiences
3. When there is a positive interaction between individuals manifesting seeking behavior which is directed towards those who are willing and able to provide help and comfort.¹⁶

In this article I shall refer to the theoretical model not in its psychological aspects but in its social ones.

The Community Attitude towards the Converts: “Sifts the chaff and leaves the blessing”

The laws of the Ottoman Empire did not allow a Muslim to convert but he could marry a woman of another religion even if she did not officially convert to Islam.¹⁷

The legal procedure of conversion to Islam was simple: A Jewish or Christian girl who wanted to convert appeared before the *shariah* (Islamic law court) with two witnesses and announced her intention to become a Muslim. She stood in front of the mufti, declared the Muslim Credo: There is no God save God and Muhammad is God's messenger. After that she presented herself for a talk with the chief rabbi or with the heads of the Orthodox/Bulgarian church of the city to declare that she had converted to Islam by choice and not by coercion.¹⁸

In most of the cases that were published in the press the legal procedure was not followed, and the girls did not meet with their parents or speak with the chief rabbi.

In view of the numerous conversions of young girls and the feeling that the “Young Turks” government was more moderate and open to inter-religious negotiations, attempts were made by the heads of the religious communities in cooperation with the mufti and the Ministry of Justice to consult together and reach an agreement on a

16 Antti Oksanen, Abstract.

17 Woodberry, “Conversion to Islam”, pp. 22-40, in H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard, *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Birmingham, Alabama, Religious Education Press, 1992; Sophia, Laiou, “Christian Women in the Ottoman World”, in *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture and History*, Amila Butrović and Irvin Cemil Schick (eds.), pp. 243-272, London and I.B.Tauris, New York 2007.

18 See above Note 3.

method of action for cases of religious conversion. It seems, however, that even if this cooperation was successful at the higher religious levels in the larger cities, the qadis and the Muslims did what they considered was right and proper: they left the girls “illuminated by the light of Islam”.¹⁹

Apparently, the authorities and the police took an active part in the conversion process. In two cases in Salonica and Edime the Jewish girls were abducted by policemen.²⁰

Crossing religious and ethnic boundaries generally disturbs conventions. Female conversions may raise even stronger reactions because traditions have often regarded women as symbols of ethnic and religious boundaries.²¹

It appears that the conversion of young girls to Islam was perceived as treason and desertion of the Jewish or Christian collective, an injury to the religious-national honor of the community, and a shame for the family that did not succeed in inculcating the values of Judaism or Christianity in the young girls.²²

An examination of the efforts made by the heads of the communities to prevent the conversions of girls shows us that these community leaders did not struggle in order to prevent the conversion, and the only times a struggle was conducted was when the family of the girl engaged the press, took a lawyer, and—if they had European citizenship—applied to the consular representative of that country.²³

19 “En Sivdad”, *El Imparsial*, September 1, 1911: “Una aksion del gran rabino”, *El Imparsial*, October 3, 1911.

20 “Las konversiones”, *ibid*, August 31, 1911; “The abduction of Sara Levi by the policeman Husni Yousuf; “Konversion Skandaloza”, *El Imparsial*, October 23, 1911.

21 Mirna Solić, “Women in Ottoman Bosnia as Seen Through the Eyes of Luka Botić, a Christian Poet”, in *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture and History*, Amila Butrović and Irvin Cemil Schick (eds.), I.B.Tauris, London and New York 2007, pp. 307-334.

22 George Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status”, in J. G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965, pp. 19-78; on honour and shame in Muslim societies, see Lila Abu Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honour and Poetry in Bedouin Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988; On the Ottoman Jewish context, see Yaron. Ben-Naeh, “Honor and its Meaning Among Ottoman Jews”, *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 2, (2005), 19-50.

23 *El Imparsial*, August 22, 1911, August 23, 1911, August 25, 1911, on the conversion of Buena E. Despite tremendous efforts, the authorities ignored the legal procedure and Buena disappeared beyond the veil.

Most of the girls who converted to Islam were from bereaved families (orphaned of father or mother), especially poor families.²⁴

The attitude towards such girl converts can be learned from an article published in Thessaloniki in 1921 in concerning of a girl called Minorika,²⁵ who had become Greek Orthodox. The derisive attitude towards girls who had converted is reflected in the heading of the article “Sık olsun” (“Fuck them”).²⁶ The rude heading in Turkish, in the language of the street, was understood by all. The Turkish language was commonly spoken by Jews and Greeks, both the residents and the refugees.

The article refers to a famous case of conversion in Salonica under Ottoman rule at the beginning of the twentieth century, when an Italian Christian girl, from a “good family” and a good house of ill-fame,²⁷ decided to convert to Islam. The Italian consul who was present during the conversion process expressed his opinion as follows: “*Me aze plazer ke vash a tener una mujer turka mas y ke va aver una pu...tifera manko entre muestras mujeres*” [I have the pleasure of knowing that you will have another Turkish woman and there will be one less pu...tifera (prostitute) among our women].²⁸

This situation is about girls who have converted to Islam or Christianity, as “girls of no value who do not constitute a loss to Judaism and therefore one should not fight for them. On the contrary, the conversion of girls like Minorika sifts the chaff and leaves the blessing—wheat flour.

Only after the incorporation of the city into the Greek state were the conversion arrangements altered. The Chief Rabbi, Yaakov Meir, and the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan archbishop Genadius cooperated in order to prevent conversions. In

24 Kantarovich, Yehoshua. “Le-Hinuh Benotenu” [For the education of our girls], *Ha-Mevasser* 35-36 (1914), pp. 537-540 [in Hebrew]. See also “Religious Conversions”, *El Avenir*, April 2, 1909. In this article, the writer decries the fact that young Jewish girls from poor families work as domestic help in Greek and Turkish homes.

25 Minora in Ladino means small, and the diminutive “ka” is the little affectionate suffix usually added to the names of little children. In this case, the idea is to demean her.

26 *El Kulevro*, January 1, 1921, “Sık olsun”.

27 On prostitution in Salonica, see Gila Hadar, “Prostitución: espacio, comunidad y nacionalidad en Salónica a fines del período otomano y después de él”, *El Presente: Studies in Sephardic Culture*, 3 (2010), pp. 141-154; for Istanbul, see Rifat N. Bali, *The Jews and Prostitution in Constantinople, 1854-1922*, Istanbul, Gorgias Press & The Isis Press, 2008.

28 Above no. 26.

January 1914, five girls retracted from their intention to convert to Christianity. The Greek Metropolitane spoke to the girls about their reasons for conversion and sent them to reconsider their decision with the chief rabbi. The girls stayed at the home of Rabbi Meir, conversed with him, and met with their parents. After 24 hours, they girls returned to their families and to Judaism—they did not convert.

But not every person in the community was enthusiastic about his devotion and actions to save the girls, most of whom were on the margins of society. One of the reactions to the girls' retraction from conversion was "Triste konsolasion! Ke se puede esperar de bueno de ijas judiaske solo la difikultad de la conversion las izo trokar su idea?! [Translation: Small comfort! What good can be expected from Jewish girls who changed their minds only because of the difficulties that conversion imposed upon them]".²⁹

The Poetics of Mother's Love

Another source for the attitude towards the conversion of Jewish women is folk poetry. We will discuss two versions of a poem from the other side of the Aegean Sea, one from Izmir (Smirna) and the other from Crete, both in Ladino. These poems do not have a melody and there is no proof that they were put to music and sung. They were both published in 1921 in the period when Greeks ruled the city shortly before the "catastrophe".³⁰

The first poem has two versions, and it was addressed "to most of our girls who previously had associated with Muslims and today with Greeks": "Al adreso de munchas de nuestras ijas ke mas antes eran dalaveras kon turkos i ke agora es lo mizmo kon gregos".³¹

29 *El Avenir*, January 6, 1914.

30 On the Greek catastrophe and the exchange of population between Turkey and Greece, see Stephan Ladas, *The Balkan Exchange of Minorities: Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey*, New York, Macmillan, 1932;

31 *El Meseret*, December 1, 1921 (Ladino)

Evreopula de Izmir

Un dia de Shabat, verso la tadrada
Por la djuderia azia una paseada.
Enkontri una mosa judia sola solika
le dishe “ven i azete kristianika
Abandona tu Shabat i mi alhad sige”.
- Madre, un Grego me dize i me persige:
“Ke deshe al shabat i el alhad ke resiva
ke abandone todo i ke kon el yo biva”.
Mijor dezero verte kortada la garganta
Ke de azer ensulto a tu ley santa.

Translation:

On Saturday, towards evening
I strolled through the Jewish quarter
I met a Jewish girl walking alone
I told her: Come and be a Christian
Leave the Sabbath and keep Sunday.
Mother, a Greek keeps telling me
To stop keeping the Sabbath and make Sunday a holy day
To leave everything and live with him.
- I would prefer to see your neck broken
And not shame our Holy Torah.

Evreopula de Girit (Crete)

Un Alhad demanyanika, en un dia muy ermozo,
Me levanti del lecho, a la djudria me fui kon gozo:
Enkontri una mosa djudia peynandose
Kon un peyne de oro afeytandose,
Antes ke yo kitara biervo de mi boka
Eya se bolto para mi de amor loka.
“Por mis dos ojos, tu sos mi deskojido!”
Le respondi yo entonses: si me tuvites kojido,
Abandona el shabat i el alhad adopta.
Troka tu Pesah i la Paskalya akseptu.
A mi madre se lo dire, disho eya
-Madre, un Grego kere ke kon el me vayga,

ke abandone el shabat i ke alhad lo aga,
ke troke el pesah i labri ke aga.
- Ija mia, mijor es ke te korte la espada
i ke al djudaizmo no des la espalda.

Translation:

Sunday, a clear and beautiful day
I rose from my bed and went to the Jewish quarter with joy:
There I met a Jewish girl combing her hair
With a beautiful golden comb.
Before a word came out of my mouth
She fell madly in love with me.
-With both my eyes, you are the chosen one!
And I answered her: If you chose me
Leave the Sabbath and adopt Sunday
Exchange Passover for Easter
She said, I will tell my mother.
-Mother, a Greek wants me to go with him
I will stop keeping the Sabbath and make Sunday a holy day
I will exchange Passover for Easter.
My daughter, I would prefer to cut your throat
Than let you turn your back to Judaism.

The summary of the poem: A young Greek fellow is courting a Jewish girl. He suggests that she convert and marry him. The girl comes home and tells her mother. The reaction of the mother is sharp and clear: I would rather see your throat cut by a sword than you leaving Judaism.

The source of these poems is from the Greek war of liberation in 1821.³² Omar Veronios Pasha³³ gives Athanasios Diakos³⁴ the choice between conversion and death.³⁵

32 On the Greek war of independence, see David Brewer, *The Greek War of Independence*. The Overlook Press, New York 2001.

33 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omer_Vryonis

34 <http://diakos.snn.gr>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasios_Diakos

35 In comparison to the legendary hero—Deacon Avacum in Serbian History and literature: “There is no better faith than Christian! A Serb is Christ’s, and rejoices in death”. See Bojan

Will you become a Turk , My Diakos
And change your faith
Worship in a djami – and leave the church.
(For Diakos converting to Islam is death) and his answer is cut and clear:
Go you and your faith, Turks, and get lost
I was born Greek, I shall die a Greek.
Look at the time Charon chose to take me,
Now that the branches are flowering,
And the earth sends forth grass.³⁶

From the fact that most of the converts to Islam were young women of a marriageable age, it seems that one should not examine the phenomenon of religious conversion during the Ottoman period and in the Balkan nation-states only according to religious and national criteria, but according to gender and class criteria.

In a poem written in Sarajevo, La Conversa (The Renegade Girl):

Di adi vjerni di manjanika, ja si va ondi el pašá,
Ke li de la lisensia ke turka si va aboltar.
Di adi alhad di manjanika, ja si va ondi el *haham*,
Ke li de la lisensia ke turka si va aboltar.
Mandan a jamar padre I madre, k eli de la lisensia,
Ke li de la lisensia ke turka se va aboltar.
-Ajde, iža, aide, kerida, ajde torna en *tešuva*!
Jo te tomare riku franko, ke pareska paregual.
-Jo no kero ni riko ni franko, ni ke pareska paregual.
Ke la alma tengo apegada kon el ižo de el pašá.
-Ajde, ižos, ajde, keridos, asintemos en *ješivá*.

Aleksov, “Adamant and Treacherous: Serbian Histories on Religious Conversions”, pp. 82-111, in Dennis Washburn and A. Kevin Reinhart (eds.), *Converting Cultures: Religion, Ideology and Transformations of Modernity*, Brill, Leiden 2007.

36 <http://diakos.snn.gr/>; http://en.wikipedis.org/wiki/Athanasios_Diakos. “Εγὼ Γραικὸς γεννήθηκα, Γραικὸς θε να πεθάνω” transliterated as *Ego Graikos yennithika, Graikos the na pethano*. The next day he was impaled. According to popular tradition, as he was being led away to be executed, he said: Για δεξ καιρό που διάλεξε ο Χάρος να με πάρει, τώρα π’ ανθίζουν τα κλαριά και βγάνει η γης χορτάρι – Ya thes kero pou dialexe o Haros na me parei, tora p’ anthizoun ta klaria kai vganei i yis hortari).

Komeremos pasas pretas, ke a Bea la van a entrarar.
 Enterada ke la veja a Beika de onor:
 Tuvjendo todo bueno en kaza, turka si hue a aboltar.
 -Non si sikleje, mi madre, ni si tome *sehora*.
 Aminjana es el djuzgo, kon revolver le vo dar.
 - Ni me daras, ni me tokaras, ni me ozas a matar,
 Ke jo tengo siete letras de il ižo de el paša.³⁷

The process of conversion of a young Jewish girl in love is described in stages, one step after another. On Friday morning, Bella goes to the pasha and asks his permission to become a Muslim. On Sunday she goes to the Rabbi and asks him to give his approval. They send for her parents and ask their permission. The family tries to persuade the girl to marry a rich young Jew and to give up the idea of conversion and marrying the son of the pasha, but in vain. “Come on, dear daughter, repent! I will marry you to a rich European Jew”. Bella insists on her love. “My soul is attracted to the pasha’s son”. After the persuasion attempts have failed, the family conducts itself according to the Jewish rites of mourning, sitting *shiva*, eating black raisins, and lamenting her death (conversion is considered as death).

As in the Ladino poem from Izmir, the person who raises the matter of physical death is the mother. And it is the brother who volunteers to carry out the murder of his sister and restore the honor of the family.³⁸ But the girl in love has her own words and position. She refuses to die a physical death. She wants to celebrate her choice, her love and the new position as the wife of the son of the pasha for both honor and property, and warns the family that if they harm her they will suffer a bitter end.

Additional poems dealing with religious conversions and the role of the mother in the process are the ballad on the girl from Salonica whose mother was angry at her for burning the stuffed grape leaves (*yaprakes*),³⁹ and in North Africa, the widely known ballad about the girl who sacrificed her life as a martyr, Sol Hatchuel from Tangiers.⁴⁰

37 Samuel G. Armistead and Joseph H. Silverman (eds.), *Judeo-Spanish Ballads from Bosnia*, song no. 21, *La conversa*, p. 88; See also Moshe Atias, *Kansionero*, song no. 135, p. 233.

38 On the concept of honor, see above Note 22.

39 Atias, *Kansionero*, song no. 134, p. 232; Elazar, *El romancero judeo-español*, “La kantika de Simbulaca”, p. 128.

40 <http://ruthfullyyours.com/2011/08/07/in-old-morocco-the-tragedy-of-solicha-hatchuel-a-young-women-beheaded-forrefusing-to-convert-to-islam/>; Sharon Vance, *The Martyrdom of a Moroccan Jewish Saint*, Leiden, Brill 2011.

The mother of the Sol had strictly educated her for the tasks of a Jewish woman and the girl of 16 fled to the home of her Muslim neighbor. After a night spent at the neighbor's house, Sol could no longer return to her home and her religion. The grave of Sol, who was executed for refusing to convert publicly, is located in Fez, and the ballad about the girl who refused to convert to Islam and preferred to die became a love song and sanctification of God through which mothers transmitted the maternal and religious message to their daughters.

According to the Attachment Theory developed by J. Bowlby, the son of the pasha is the "person trusted" (the Attachment figure), and his love and affection are able to provide the girl a secure base and a haven of comfort, substituting the insecure base of her family.⁴¹

Paula Hyman's study on gender and assimilation in Jewish history suggested that Jewish women converted because they did not have the Jewish education to strengthen their own faith and identity.⁴² Up until the middle of the twentieth century, the construction of the social and emotional gender identity of the Sephardi Jewish girl thus took place within the private space—at home. Most women and girls did not know how to speak, read, or write Hebrew (the language of prayer and Torah study). They only spoke Ladino. Their household tasks were many and the perception was that girls were not required to study. They were in need of the guidance, warmth, and love that their mothers gave them in abundance. They therefore remained at home and learned the skills of motherhood: taking care of the children, cleaning the house, cooking, and such other feminine tasks such as spinning and weaving.⁴³

41 On the Attachment Theory and Conversion, see J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, volume 1, *Attachment*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd. 1969; idem, *Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1979; idem, *Attachment and Loss*, volume 3, *Loss*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1980; idem, *A Secure Base, Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*, Basic Books Inc., New York 1988.

42 Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women*, University of Washington Press, Seattle; 1995; Marc Lee Raphael (ed.), *Gendering the Jewish Past*, Department of Religion, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 2002.

43 Gila Hadar, "Gender Representation on the Dark Side of *Qidushin*: Between North Morocco and the Balkans (Monastir)", *ElPrezente: Studies in Sephardic Culture*, 2 (2008), pp. 139-156. On mother's love, see especially pp. 144-148.

In a gender reading of the poems and the articles in the Jewish press on the subject of the conversion and marriage of young females, it appears that the mothers have a strong religious and national awareness, and the concept of “mother love” requires additional discussion.⁴⁴ On the other hand, for girls of a marriageable age, religion and nationality were insignificant. They wanted to realize their existence as women, to experience love and desire in a legal manner—to get married, to be a bride, then a wife and mother.

What hindered the girls from doing so in the framework of the community and nation?

Ottoman Jewry was an urban, class-hierarchical society that valued pedigree and wealth. Tremendous importance was attributed to the social order and social distinctions in the public sphere and the individual lives of both Jews and non-Jews. Another obstacle to the marriage of young girls was that the oldest daughter was married off first (and received the largest dowry), followed by her sisters in descending order of age.⁴⁵ The dowry was a prerequisite for marriage.⁴⁶ The necessity of providing a dowry was

44 J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, p. 305. “The principal attachment figure and the subsidiary attachment figure are usually selected from amongst those who are close to the child. They are naturally the following: mother, father, other siblings and grandparents”; L. A. Kirkpatrick and P. R. Shaver, “Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29, no. 3 (1990), pp. 315-334; Antti Oksanen, *Religious Conversion*, p. 23. On the contrary, “Kirkpatrick discovered that those who were avoidantly attached to their mothers were the most likely candidates for sudden religious conversion”.

45 For the Greek Orthodox marriage system and dowry, see Eleonora Skouteri-Didaskalou, *On Greek Dowry Spatiotemporal Transformations*, Social Anthropology Thesis, London, 1976; Michael, Herzfeld, “The Dowry in Greece: Terminological usage and Historical Reconstruction”, *Ethnohistory*, 27, no. 3 (Summer 1980), pp. 225-241; Renee Hirschon, “Under One Roof: Marriage, Dowry and Family Relations in Piraeus”, in *Urban Life in Mediterranean Europe*, M. Kenny and D. I. Kertzer (eds.), University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1983, pp. 299-324; Jane Lambiri-Dimaki, “Dowry in Modern Greece: An Institution at the Crossroads between Persistence and Decline”, in *The Marriage Bargain*, M. Kaplan (ed.) Haworth Press, New York 1985, pp. 165-178. On the Jewish dowry system and marriage strategies, see Gila Hadar, “Gender Representation”, 139-156; idem, “Marriage as Survival Strategy among the Sephardic Jews of Saloniki, 1900-1943: Continuity and Change”, in *El Presente: Studies in Sephardic Culture* 1 (2007), pp. 209-225 [in Hebrew].

46 The dowry tradition is also common among Greeks. The dowry is not only the transfer of property and bride, but also part of the system of “honor” and “disgrace”. On the meaning of the dowry in Greek culture, see Lambiri-Dimaki, “Dowry in Modern Greece”, pp.

the issue around which the life of any family that had been “cursed” with numerous daughters revolved. The equation was simple: a rich dowry meant a rich husband—a poor dowry, a poor husband—no dowry, no marriage.

Usually, the girls married young men chosen by their parents (the preferred match being with someone within the family, such as a cousin). Sometimes a young girl would refuse to marry the chosen candidate and would, instead, follow the dictates of her heart and elope to the house of her lover.

Meeting places with non-Jews were usually in the street, encounters at work, near the home, or stolen glances. Muslim men acted in greater freedom with Jewish and Christian girls than with Muslim girls, mainly for fear of being attacked and murdered by relatives of the Muslim girl.⁴⁷

A relationship or “love” between Muslim men and Jewish girls also had a social and economic aspect. According to Islamic custom, the man paid the *mehr* (bride price) to the parents of the bride, and a young Muslim lad was also subject to the hierarchy of marriage for his elder brothers and sisters and had no chance of getting a wife at a young age.⁴⁸ Therefore, the marriage of young and poor Muslim men to poor Jewish girls was an ideal solution for both sides (the couple and their parents). The man was exempt from providing a *mehr*, and the girl did not need to wait until all her elder sisters married or “until her hair turned white”, in order to realize her existence as a wife and mother. By marrying a young Muslim, they also realized a right that they would never have had—the right to choose. They chose a young husband who had chosen them in spite of their being poor and of no social or national value.

Conversion and marriage were meant to fulfill the life of the girl herself. For a poor, young Jewish girl with no dowry, marrying a young Muslim, for attesting to the uniqueness of God and the apostleship of Muhammad⁴⁹ was the only requirement, was often more attractive than remaining destitute, unmarried, and socially marginal.

165-78; Hirschon, “Under One Roof”, pp. 70-86; Paul Sant Cassia and Constantina Bada, *The Making of the Modern Greek Family*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 53, 74-76.

47 “Las konversiones”, *El Imparsial*, August 31, 1911; “Konversion trafikada”, *El Avenir*, June 24, 1912; Harry Collinson-Owen, *Salonica and After*, p. 87.

48 Pierre Bourdieu, “Les Stratégies Matrimoniales dans le Système Reproduction”, *Annales* (July 1972), pp. 1105-27; Violetta Hionidou, “Nuptiality Patterns and Household Structure on the Greek Island of Mykonos, 1849-1959”, *Journal of Family History*, 20 (1995), pp. 67-102.

49 Woodberry, “Conversion to Islam”, pp. 22-40.

Conversion and marriage offered them a momentary amelioration in their social circumstances. Although they crossed boundaries they were caught up again in the same old feminine boundaries. Their lives as Muslim women did not differ from their lives as Jewesses. As in Judaism, Islam does not demand that women participate actively in religious life. And the Jewish adage “The realm of the princess’ honor is within”,⁵⁰ which reflects a certain social order dictating a division of space between the genders, was valid in Islam as well the requirement to dress modestly, to remain at home, and to raise the children.

The question of why young, poor women converted to Islam, although it does not lead us to a single and definite answer, invokes rather a complex contextual picture of identities and discourses. In the era of nationalism and the Balkan Wars, men were killed for national self-definition, land, religion and flag, while poor young girls converted to Islam and left national and religious pride in the masculine arena.

50 The Jewish adage “The realm of the princess’ honor is within” reflects a certain social order which dictates a division of space between the genders as expressed in the Ladino proverb “A good woman’s realm is to be found behind closed doors”.

