

The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks

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On October 16, 1666, Shabbatai Tzevi, who was believed to be the messiah by numerous Jews from northern Europe to southern Yemen, converted to Islam in the presence of Ottoman Sultan Mehmet IV in Edirne. Faced with the choice of converting to Islam or martyrdom, Shabbatai Tzevi chose to change his religion. The act split his followers into three groups. Most lost faith in him and returned, alienated, to normative Judaism. A second group, the Shabbateans, remained Jews, but furtively maintained their faith in Shabbatai Tzevi's messiahship.

For a third group, however, the radical failure of their messiah ironically led, not to disappointment and despair, but confirmation, renewed confidence, and the ecstasy of knowing that one cannot know the mysteries of God's chosen. After all, if his followers could believe him when he moved the Sabbath from Friday to Monday, abolished holidays, and emancipated women and let them be called to read from the Torah, then why not believe him when he said "There is no God, but God" and "Muhammad is God's messenger"?

The followers of Shabbatai Tzevi who became Muslims called themselves Ma'aminim (Hebrew: believers) but came to be more widely known as Dönme (Turkish: convert). They consisted of two to three hundred families (i.e., 1,000 to 1,500 people). Continuing to believe in his messianic calling, they adhered to his religious precepts and practices, which had emerged at the intersection of Kabbalah and Sufism. They coalesced first in Edirne and then, by 1683, in Ottoman Salonika, a Jewish-majority city renowned for a large *converso* community as well as its Sufis.

The nucleus of the Dönme community was established by Shabbatai Tzevi's Salonikan survivors: his last wife Jochebed, who had converted with him and had been renamed Aisha, and brother-in-law Yakub Çelebi (Jacob Querido), to whom the soul of Shabbatai Tzevi was believed to have transmigrated. It was Çelebi who converted Shabbatai Tzevi's antinomianism into ritualized charisma, thereby establishing the structures according to which Dönme belief and practice were organized. The result was a distinct and self-sustaining community that,

within a century, grew to around six hundred families (perhaps 3,000 people).

A crucial factor in the consolidation and perpetuation of the Dönme community was its adherence to the "eighteen commandments" laid down by Shabbatai Tzevi during his lifetime. The commandments, which asserted that God is one and that Shabbatai Tzevi is the redeemer and messiah, ordered the



Tombstone portrait of Vahide (d. 1928), Istanbul. Photo by author.

Dönme to "be scrupulous in their observance of some of the precepts of the Muslims" and to heed "those things which are exposed to the Muslims' view." The commandments also admonished the Dönme not to have any relations with other Muslims and to marry only among themselves.

Dönme belief and practice were a departure from Judaism and Islam. The community had a distinct theological system, manifested in its religious calendar including feast and fast days based on the life of Shabbatai Tzevi: its beginning, the first receiving of revelations, the coronation as messiah, as well as the eventual conversion. The yearly cycle was also rooted in the holidays he instituted, such as making the ninth of Av a day of celebration

of the messiah's birthday rather than one of mourning the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem. Whereas Jews marked the day by rending their garments and fasting, the Dönme dressed in their finest clothes, ate sweets, and danced and sang.

Dönme liturgy, prayers, and beliefs were accepted neither by practitioners of Judaism, the religion the Dönme left, nor Islam, the religion they outwardly confessed. They also possessed their own lay and religious hierarchy and leadership, institutions of orthodoxy including communal courts presided over by judges and served by policing agents and jails, and places of worship, pilgrimage, and burial. Their dietary customs further illustrate their divergence from Judaism and Islam. The Dönme purposely violated the laws of kashrut, cooking meat in butter and eating offal forbidden to Muslims.

Being Dönme was not limited to maintaining unique rituals and a distinct creed. Attached to their religious core was also an ethnic identity. The Dönme chose to distinguish themselves from Jews and Muslims by keeping detailed genealogies to ensure endogamous marriage and burying their dead in distinct cemeteries, walled off from others. Their burial rituals were distinct as well. Unlike the gravestones in Jewish Ottoman cemeteries, Dönme tombstones comprised both head- and footstones and were inscribed in Ottoman script. And like Muslim cemeteries, theirs were thickly planted with cypresses. Mostly absent, however, were the turbans that topped Muslim tombstones.

The Dönme also managed their cultural difference through social segregation, residing in distinct neighborhoods in Salonika, complete with houses of worship and schools attended primarily by members of the community. At the same time, living publicly as Muslims, they assimilated into Ottoman society. They did so while remaining a devout community, forming both a closed caste protecting a unique religion and a fully acculturated group fitting in with their surrounding culture. In the Ottoman Empire, they were able to be fully Dönme among other Dönme and fully Ottoman Muslim in public, at ease inhabiting two worlds and insiders in both. They did not have to abandon



Tombstone portrait of Şemsî Efendi (d. 1917), Istanbul. Photo by author.

their religion to be full members of society, to choose between them in order to play their political, cultural, and economic role.

By the turn of the twentieth century that role was significant. With around 15,000 members, the Dönme had risen to the top of Salonika—a city with a population around 150,000, where they constituted one third of the Muslim population, a minority within a minority since most inhabitants of Salonika continued to be Jewish. The Dönme nonetheless transformed Ottoman Salonika, promoting the newest innovations in literature, architecture, and local politics, urban reform, trade and finance, as well as education.

The Dönme also inhabited an increasingly cosmopolitan network. By the early 1900s, they were found not only across southeastern Europe (in addition to Ottoman Salonika, there were communities in Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria), but also throughout the major cities of the Ottoman Empire, including Istanbul and Izmir, western and central Europe, with notable groups in London, Brussels, Paris, and Berlin, as well as in Vienna and other cities of the Habsburg Empire. Located on the religious margins of society and rigorously endogamous, the Dönme were able to network among their own diaspora, and—given their official status as Muslims—could still rise in the Ottoman administration and military. They also helped hasten its end. Leading revolutionary ideologue Doctor Nâzım (d.

1926) and government minister Mehmet Cavid Bey (d. 1926) were the driving force behind the Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter CUP), the secret society of Young Turks that dethroned the last powerful sultan, Abdülhamid II (d. 1918), following the 1908 revolution. Soon after the revolution, however, the Dönme began to face a double-pronged attack. They were castigated for their membership in what many Muslims perceived to be the atheist and immoral CUP and the decision to remove the sultan from power. For the first time also, their Islamic faith and practice were doubted and the Jewish label was first applied to them by political opponents. At this point in history, the Dönme became similar to *conversos*. Like the early modern crypto-Jews, the Dönme came to be considered “a ship with two rudders,” a group willing to trim its sails to the prevailing religious and political winds.

Soon, the Dönme were not only targeted for what they believed, but for what they did, namely, engage in foreign economic networks and local politics. After Salonika fell to Greece in 1912, there was no room in the city for cosmopolitanism. Some Dönme managed to hold on to their political and financial capital. But after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey just over a decade later, they were expelled from Greece which could not tolerate cosmopolitan elements with substantial financial connections beyond the nation-state.

Banished from Greece because they were Muslim, the Dönme were greeted in

Turkey as if they were Jews. As soon as they arrived, they faced threatening articles in the Turkish press declaring that because Jewish blood ran in their veins, they had no right to live in Turkey. They were depicted as disloyal, sponging parasites who hoarded their wealth and did not sacrifice any part of their fortune for the sake of the nation. As a result, the Dönme were denied a secure place in the secular Turkish nation-state.

Unlike the *conversos*, the Dönme were never accepted as Jews by Jews, nor accused of having close relations with Jews. They were not charged with Judaizing—believing in Judaism or secretly following its commandments, rituals, and customs. Their crime lay less in their actions than in their inherited genes. In the Turkish Republic, they were attacked, not for acting like Jews, but for being Jews, for their racial identity, and for their cosmopolitanism, all of which allegedly caused them to spread immorality.

Facing intense external pressure to abandon their cosmopolitanism and “Jewishness,” the Dönme eventually integrated themselves into the Turkish majority. Their final conversion—to secularism—also brought their end. Abandoning endogamy, the Dönme ceased to be a distinct group by the 1940s.

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