The Jewish Community and its Institutes:  
A Community in Transition

The Jewish community in Izmir, as many other Jewish communities around Europe and the Middle East, has gone through many changes in the last two centuries due to modernism, Zionism etc. Those changes can be recognized in many aspects such us the community structure and its activities, the demographics, and so on. In this chapter we will try to trace those changes using personal narratives documented during many interviews.

The community’s decline

Until the First World War, life for the Jews of Izmir was good. The Ottoman Empire did not intervene in the communal life as long as they paid their taxes. For centuries, the Jews lived near the Market and port, but towards the end of the 19th century, the ones who could afford it started moving to the Karatash area to the south. This was a nicer area by the sea where the people could build bigger homes for themselves and have a better standard of living. Most houses had baths, running water, kitchens, and two floors. Four or five Cortejos existed in this area as well.

Since the community tended to live in the same areas and neighborhoods, they remember many joint activities. The children ate with other families, the food for Shabbat was cooked together, and a favorite pastime was sitting on the porch or street discussing life with the neighbors (rich and poor together). All the merchants and people in the street were Jews, and most of the children went to Jewish schools and had only Jewish friends to play with.

However, during World War I the situation worsened. There was a shortage in food and money, and many men were sent to the eastern front and never returned (the Jews were treated as equals in the army).

Yosef Shaul’s father as a young officer in the Turkish army.
Jews lived all across Europe, and during the First World War often found themselves on both sides of the front, as enemies. Morris Shaul told us of his grandfather, a young officer who was captured by the Greeks, together with other Turkish soldiers. The Greeks began to execute them by throwing them off a ship. The grandfather, who was injured and thought he would be next, started to whisper the “Sh’ma Yisrael.” Among the Greek soldiers was a Jewish officer, who heard him praying in Hebrew and saved his life, even though, formally, they were enemies. He was later sent to the Russian front in east Turkey and, like 100,000 other soldiers, he froze to death.

According to interviews in 1922, during the fighting between the Turks and the Greeks, the Greeks burned down large parts of Izmir and surrounding towns. Many people, among them Jews from small Jewish communities in Turgutlu (50-60 Families), Tynia, Malamat, Milas, Aydin and others, fled to Izmir. In Aydin, it occurred after the Jews were accused of killing a Turkish officer. This led to the growth of the Jewish population in Izmir from 40,000 to 55,000. At first they lived in the poor court-yard houses (Cortejos), and only some could afford to move out later. Many old community lists were subsequently lost in fires. After the war there was nowhere to immigrate to, since the U.S. closed its borders, and Israel was not an option until the founding of the state.

In 1933, Jewish scholars who escaped Germany were invited to come and live in Izmir. They immediately found jobs as teachers in the schools and universities, but after the war many of them left the city. During the Second World War many men were recruited to the army for short periods of time, making life difficult. David Edwin Mordo remembers many beggars in the streets at that time.

In the years after the war, 90% of the community emigrated. After 1948, most of them went to Israel, and the community has been declining in number ever since. We were told more than once that the Jews who emigrated to Israel were mostly from the lower income levels, since the people with high-income levels did not hurry to leave. Most of the community has relatives and friends in Israel, and some have even lived there for different periods of time. They keep in close relations with their relatives, and frequently visit each other.

After the war the political climate had changed: the country became more democratic and enjoyed economical growth. The Jews, who numbered only around 3,000, took the opportunity to start building big businesses to replace the smaller scale commerce. Slowly they started moving to new neighborhoods, and were surrounded by Muslim Turks, instead of fellow Jews. This had a striking effect on the communal solidarity that had been practiced throughout the years. Moreover, it left the traditional areas of Jewish concentration empty of Jews.

Community bonds started to crumble. Young people married non-Jews (mostly Muslim) in civil marriages. (This is also due to the small number of youth remaining in the city). At first, there was great grief over this, but it has come to be more acceptable. The old community homes and public buildings are no longer in use (in Kimeralti, Karatash, Assansur…). The synagogues were called ‘Kahal’, which means a congregation in Hebrew. The changes the community went through have left the concept of ‘Kahal’ void, just as the ‘Kahal’ buildings are today void of Jews. Today, fewer and fewer people visit the synagogues, as Mr. Ashkenazi said: "People would rather put their money into new tennis courts than renovate an old abandoned synagogue. The community is decadent!" (Of course, this is one man's own personal, and one might say quite bitter, view).

Youth Aliya (‘Aliyat Ha'noar’)
This chapter is evidence of the power that the ‘Zionist wave’ had on the Jews of Izmir. A large number of Jewish youth immigrated to Israel during the 1940’s and 1950’s. Influenced by the Zionist movements in Turkey, they chose, at a tender age, to leave their homes and family and start a new life in then British-ruled Palestine, and later in Israel, the new-born state.
Classes in Zionism were given in the “Bikur Holim” Synagogue (some remember big “going away” parties for the children that took place there, as well). Sometimes children felt that their entire class emigrated to Israel. Some of the families intended to follow their children, and sent two and even three of them to Israel. Many of the families objected, but there was little they could do against the mighty wave of ‘Aliya’ that swept everyone. The children were sent to the Kibbutzim “Giv’at Haim” and “Givat Brenner” (and others) upon their arrival, away from home and away from their parents. Later, some joined the Israeli brigades and army, and fought for the establishment of the new Israeli State.

Yosef Shaul remembers going to Hebrew and Torah lessons at “Bikur Holim” before moving to Israel: “When I arrived, in 1950, I was asked whether I was religious or secular, and I said ‘religious’ since I went to synagogue. Little did I know…” He was taken to Haifa, then Karkur, and finally to Jerusalem. He was lonely, so he joined his aunt in Haifa, but after two years, when he saw that his parents were not going to join him, he returned to Izmir.

**Professions**

The Jews who stayed in Izmir work mostly in commerce. Many have leather and plastic factories, and belong to the upper classes of society. They assert that Izmir is known for its relaxed and pleasant life, and that they have a good life there. The rich families have allowed themselves to hire maids and servants. They prefer to employ Jews for their homes and businesses.

They speak many languages, and have great flexibility in the choice of a place to live, depending on financial opportunities and/or social comfort. This is combined with much traveling and a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Jana Galanti tells of her two children, one who married a Muslim convert and worked in Sri-Lanka, Europe, and now China, and the other, who studied in Israel and now works in Istanbul.

Esther, who was called Esther-Nucha by all, and is known today as ‘Nucha’, told us what keeps her family together. Even though her daughter lives in New York and her son works in
Amsterdam, they all feel especially close to each other once a year, on ‘Yom Kippur.’ The ceremonial meal before the holy day is a time when they all call each other on the phone, no matter where they are. Both children have made the decision to marry only Jews, despite the fact that they live an open, modern life abroad.

There are also strong relationships with the surrounding communities - work, education, secular lifestyles, etc.

**Language**
Some of the elders knew Hebrew, especially the more religious ones who used it in their daily prayers. Albert Zibil (82) says his father knew Hebrew and even taught it to his oldest son before passing away. Today, only a few of the elders know Hebrew. Mr. Edvin learned Hebrew only in the 1940’s, when he was twenty. He tells of a teacher (Yosef Tzadok) who came from Israel to teach the children Hebrew which they could use if they moved to Israel. Not knowing how to read Hebrew makes people feel uncomfortable in the synagogue, since they cannot read the prayers.

Everyone in the community spoke Ladino up until the last generation. This enabled them to emigrate to South American countries before World War I, and to many other countries between the wars. At first, Ladino was written in Hebrew letters, but when their knowledge of Hebrew declined, they wrote it in Latin letters (for examples, see the book collection in the Jewish hospital). After the establishment of the Republic, there was pressure from the central government to abandon other languages and study and speak only Turkish. There are stories of Muslim teachers hitting children who spoke Ladino at school. Today some of the elders still enjoy reading a Ladino newspaper, which comes from Istanbul (though in the past many were printed in Izmir).

**The Hospital**
Near the market and community house (‘Haham Hane’), the first Jewish hospital and old-age home was built in the 17th century. It was called 'Bikur Holim' and gave its name to the nearby synagogue. The community had plans to restore the building in the 1970’s, but the project was abandoned, since most of the patients were not Jewish. The hospital closed down in 1975.

**The Karatash Jewish hospital of Izmir**
According to Professor Eti Akyuz Levi, the Karatash Jewish hospital of Izmir was founded in 1831 on Haham-Bashi Street. It was built as a two two-story building, but in 1874 was repaired and enlarged, using a generous donation by Baron Albert Rothschild. This building, which could hold 30 beds, was closed in 1911.

Luckily, Nesim Levi Bayrakli donated his private house in Karatash for the hospital. Two adjacent buildings were bought and used for supporting functions. In 1962 the hospital was renovated and a hostel for the aged was added. An inheritance by Yolanda Ferchen (of Italian
origin), together with community contributions, enabled the construction of a multi-storied building in 1986. This building is still used today as a hospital and as a Jewish hostel for the aged.

The Cemetery
The old cemetery was near the hospital in Karatash. In 1912-14 it was moved to Gurcheshme, and the remaining bones were buried together in 1922. In 1934, a newer cemetery was opened further out of town, in Altindag (the hill of gold). There is a separation between men and women, and the headstones are standing (unlike in the older cemetery), with a picture of the deceased on them.

The Israeli team in the Gurcheshme cemetery, August 2002

Jewish Schools
“Bnei Brit,” built in the late 19th century, in front of the “Beit Israel” Synagogue in Karatash, was founded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Its famous principal was Pontremoli, who was a scholar with connections in Israel and Turkey. It was torn down when the Jews left the neighborhood and new buildings were constructed in the 1950's.

“Alliance,” built in the late 19th century in the old Jewish neighborhood (Kimerality), was founded by the Jewish philanthropic organization “Alliance Israelite Universal,” which founded schools across the Ottoman Empire. It was a high school which taught modern secular subjects, including English and French. It was very close to the old Jewish quarter (the Judria), and remained Jewish up until a few years ago, despite a continuing decline in the number of Jewish students. Today it is called the “Pirires” Turkish school.

The Alliance school, August 2002.
“Talmud Torah,” an elementary school located near the “Alliance” (on 'Musevi' st.), burned and then was destroyed some 25 years ago. Today a parking lot stands in its place.
“Popularia” – an old school. Another Jewish movement that was active in the city was called ‘Machzikei Torah.’ They were active in several Jewish schools, especially in the ‘Talmud Torah’. Esther Ben-Tora says: “Some of my friends made ‘Aliya’ even before 1948. Many children met at the “Machzikei Tora” meetings to sing Hebrew songs and study, even though most did not understand what they were singing. This was all done at a time when any sort of gathering was not permitted.” Courses in Turkish history and culture were obligatory, and so was the singing of the Turkish Anthem every Monday morning.

There were tensions between the more modern “Alliance,” which was run by secular foreigners, and the more orthodox “Talmud Torah,” which was run by the local rabbis. After the Second World War, the influence of the Americans and French dwindled, and the community itself ran all the schools.
Community activities
Under the “Sha’arei Shamayim” Synagogue there is a meeting place for the young and old. The young children (up to age 12) meet for “Sunday school” once a week to study Hebrew, Jewish customs and holidays, and about Israel. Forty to fifty children participate in this activity, and then go on to the “Liga” - a Jewish youth club where the youngsters meet occasionally for educational and fun activities. Teenagers are sent to Israel for a month (though in the past two years they have been going to Hungary). In the past there was a club near “Beit Yisrael” where young Jews could meet.

Other organizations:
- “Security” - guard the synagogues during community gatherings (do not carry firearms)
- “Hevra Kadisha” - volunteers who take care of burial arrangements.
- “Va’ad” (representatives) – deal with the community’s needs, i.e., matzah for Passover, a ritual slaughterer (Shohet) for kosher meat, scholarships for young Jews, up-keep of the synagogues and cemeteries, etc.

The money for these organizations comes from membership fees from the community (called “kisba”), every family according to their financial situation. Approximately 25 shops are rented out in the market area, along with a school and the Hospital. Additional donations are collected.

- “Tzedaka“ - collection of charity for various causes.
- Head of the community – represents the community needs to outside people.