

Jews and Marranos before the Law: Five Mediterranean Stories

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On several occasions in the spring of 1549, Averardo Serristori, Tuscan ambassador to Rome, was called to justify, before influential members of the Roman court, his government's policy toward Portuguese New Christians. In fact, Serristori's lord, Grand-Duke Cosimo I, had decided to invite a group of these *Portughesi* to Tuscany. More than once, the ambassador wrote to Florence about his frustratingly slow progress in obtaining the consent of important Churchmen to the Grand-Duke's plan. Initially, at the end of February, the Pope appeared to be receptive to the idea,¹ but then Serristori seemed to encounter one objection after another. The Portuguese emissary objected to Cosimo's plan, the Pope then vacillated ("because His Holiness is mindful of the king of Portugal's interests"²), and Sfondrato, bishop of Milan raised further objections. People with whom he talked kept repeating to him that if such permission had been denied the year before to a group of New Christians to settle in Ancona, why should they now be allowed to go to Tuscany?³ Serristori seemed unable to get anywhere. Finally, Cosimo, obviously impatient at this procrastination, responded himself. You can tell the "agent of the king of Portugal", he wrote, "that we are not about to take away from anyone the liberty he has to come and live in our own state",⁴ so long as they do not violate our laws. And he continued, pointedly: "And since they are Christians, we do not know for what reason we should deny their request, for would it not be better for them to live among other Christians than go to Salonika, in the lands of the Turk, as many of them do, where they would be entirely lost?"⁵

To be sure, Cosimo might have raised this point simply to tranquilize his Roman interlocutors. If, as they claimed, salvation of souls was their business, they should listen to his argument, that it was better to be hospitable to the New Christians, than to consign them to their eternal perdition by forcing them to settle in the Ottoman Empire. From a Christian perspective, it was best to ensure that New Christians did not live in the land of the Turks, for the Ottoman authorities would allow them to revert to Judaism and to practice their ancient faith freely. Christians, on the other hand, had a variety of means

to convince these people, forcibly converted to Christianity in their Iberian lands, to remain within the fold of the Catholic and Universal Church. But if a good Christian's desire in such matters ought to have been clear, the Grand-Duke's statement also implicitly conveys an awareness of a Jewish strategy. There was a better chance of remaining true to one's Jewish faith if Jews went East, *ne' paesi del Turco*. There, they would not be coerced into abandoning their beliefs; nor need they fear persecution for being descendants of Jewish ancestors. For Jews—Italian, and Iberian—as well as crypto-Jews and Marranos, the Ottoman Empire provided a bright light, a reverse image of the dark circumstances in which they had to exist.

Cosimo I's instructions to his ambassador offers a starting point for the reflection which follows. But before undertaking this reflection, we shall leap ahead in time, 363 years later. In 1912, the island of Rhodes, where a once prosperous Jewish community had existed for the preceding many centuries, was occupied by Italian forces. The Dodecanese now became Italian and the island's Jews had to come to terms with the change of their circumstances. One of the men who was called upon to take stock of the new situation was L. Mehrez, teacher at the local school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle.⁶ In a long letter written to the headquarters of the Alliance on 15 May 1912, he drew a sad picture of the state of the Jewish communities of the East. "The Jew of the Orient", he reflected,

tried by the centuries-long sufferings to which he has been subjected, considers himself the weakest among his compatriots who do not share his religion. One sees him bend with grace before all the demands made by the people who surround him. To save his interests, he is generous with compliments and flatteries to all townspeople who enjoy a certain influence ... The Jew is accommodating, he knows how to get along with everyone; and if, today, the Chief Rabbi and the chiefs of the Jewish community of Rhodes visit the city's Italian governor to pay him their respects and wish him well, tomorrow, when Rhodes will once again become Turkish, they will do the same for the Ottoman government. "Vive le Roi! Vive la Ligue", says the proverb.

By the following January, Boaz Ménashé, President of the Conseil Général de la Communauté of Rhodes wrote to Mehrez in very different tones. The Italian occupation had been very good to the Rhodian Jews, he wrote. The Italians had helped to bring about a betterment in the hygienic and social conditions in the city's Jewish quarter. And the person responsible for this turn of events was the Italian general Ameglio, "our benefactor and our savior, to us Jews of Rhodes. He is the father of our families, since he is the defender of our rights".⁷

In his response written on the very next day, Mehrez enthusiastically

concluded, and urged the Jewish Community of Rhodes to confer an official honor upon General Ameglio, in recognition of his contribution to the improvement in the lot of Rhode's Jews.⁸ To be sure, as is the case with the Grand-Duke's argument to his Portuguese and Roman interlocutors, the Mehrez-Ménashé exchange has to be read in light of the customary rhetorical conventions. One could perhaps suggest that this exchange does nothing more than prove Mehrez's initial, if profoundly pessimistic assessment of his coreligionists, and their inclination to *se plier avec grâce à toutes les exigences* with which they were faced. Even so, the imagery which clearly emerges from these letters is that of a backward community, trapped in its surroundings. Its profoundly disenchanted, even cynical members could only hope that improvement would come from ideas and policies introduced into their midst by Europeans, such as the Italian General Ameglio.

These two incidents—Cosimo I's desire to attract a new Christian settlement in Tuscany without alienating the authorities of the Papal court, and the reactions of two prominent members of the Jewish community of Rhodes to their island's occupation by the Italians—suggest that relations between Italian Jews and Jews of the eastern Mediterranean had changed drastically between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. In the earlier period, the eastern Mediterranean had been a haven for Jews who, in western Europe, were at best begrudgingly tolerated, and more often than not were emarginated and persecuted. Many Sephardi Jews, mainly from Spain, Portugal, France, and Italy, and not a few from central Europe, expelled from their ancestral homes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had sought a haven in the Ottoman Empire. Opportunity, freedom, and tolerance could be found on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Western European rulers, such as Cosimo, often had to work hard to convince Jews—especially experienced and well connected merchants and traders—to settle in their midst, or else they could settle in one of the prosperous, large port cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire offered to Jews at once an escape and a chance to settle and live undisturbed.

By the nineteenth century, the tables had been turned. The eastern Mediterranean had by now become the home of mostly poor, backward Jewish communities, their attention now firmly fixed to the West. One of the disastrous consequences of the Sabbatean mystical movement, which swept through these communities in the middle of the seventeenth century, had been to transform them into closed societies, suspicious of outside influences, often dominated by obscurantist rabbis intent above all on defending traditional practices and values. This strong cultural introversion had coincided with the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire. For most of the Jewish communities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the West—its ideas, its political and cultural institutions, its technology and forms of economic organization, but more especially the ways in which Jews had been integrated and accommodated into mainstream society—offered a beacon of hope for improvement. If in the earlier period, for Jews, the

East and its tolerance offered the possibility of hope, in the more recent past hope would be found in the West, and in the accommodation of Judaism to the dominant ideas of the Enlightenment.

Even if the hierarchies of dependence between these two sets of communities had been reversed, one detects, from the late fifteenth century, at least to the middle of the nineteenth, and in places even into the twentieth, a steady interaction between Jews across the Mediterranean, especially between Italy and the Ottoman Empire. Traces of that interaction are evident above all in the movement of people, and in commercial exchanges. They are also evident in the movement of books—written in Hebrew and in European languages—and, often less tangibly, in the movement of values and of attitudes shared by them, without regard of residence in Italy or in the Ottoman Empire. For four centuries or more, these Sephardic Jews continued to think of themselves as members of a larger, exiled Iberian community.

For the next several minutes I should like to refer to some of these levels of interaction. For the sake of economy, of time, and perhaps of clarity, I shall focus my attention on five stories. In itself, none of these stories is especially significant. Each of them involves small, perhaps justly forgotten persons. For our purposes, the adventures and misadventures of our five heroes help us to launch a small reflection on certain, perhaps not uninteresting aspects of the history of the Mediterranean, and of the cultures which, over the centuries, flourished along its coast-lines. These stories, I should add, are not linked between them. Almost certainly, signor Morpurgo, an Italian merchant who had settled in Salonika in the 18th century, and whom we shall soon meet, had never heard either of Gasparre Ribeira, or of Isaias Cohen, protagonists of our first two stories. Nor is it conceivable that Vidal Nahum, a young entrepreneur in early twentieth century Salonika but held in jail in Marseilles for reasons we shall soon discover, had ever heard of Ribeira, Cohen, or Morpurgo. If some link could be imagined between these stories, it would have to be sought in the behavior of these five people, and in their attitudes toward the religious and political authorities of their days.

Let us then begin with our stories.

The first is about a rather picturesque character, well known among recent historians of Italian Judaism. His name was Gasparre Ribeira. Because of a series of circumstances we have no time to examine here, in January, 1580, Ribeira was accused before the Inquisitorial Tribunal of Venice of being a judaizer, that is of having returned to his ancient faith after his conversion to Christianity. One of the witnesses presented one of the most serious charges against him. He said: "I have held the said Gasparro to be a Marrano. And we hold Marranos to be those who, like ships, sail with two rudders". The inquisitors did not quite understand the meaning of this striking metaphor, and they sought to clarify exactly what this witness had in mind. But the notary, in a marginal notation he inserted in the text, seems to have expressed everyone's disappointment: "Nec clarius ab eo habere potuit". So it was that the witness

was invited to return before the Tribunal a second time to explain himself. This is what he said this second time: "As I said, we think of the Marranos as of those ships with two rudders, that is they are neither Jews, nor Christians". One question, of course, immediately leaps to mind. Who were these "we" to whom this witness was referring? He had said, you remember, that "we think of the Marranos as of those ships with two rudders". If the inventor of this telling metaphor had been a Christian, the charge of apostasy leveled at Ribeira would have been heavy enough. But the fact is that the accuser was a Jew, and then not any ordinary Jew, but rather the well known Venetian rabbi Chain Saruc, hebreus levantinus, quondam Salonicensis, habitator in Ghetto Vetteri Hebraeorum. "levantine Jew, a past resident of Salonika, who now lives in the Old Jewish Ghetto". So, here we have the striking spectacle of a respected rabbi who, before the much feared tribunal of the Inquisition, accused, on behalf of other Jews (those "noi") Gasparre Ribeira. And he accused him, and those who shared Ribeira's views, of being neither "Jews nor Christians", that is of belonging to neither of the worlds recognized by the official culture of the times. Other Venetian documents of the time suggest that Saruc's accusation was not an expression of his own, idiosyncratic views. In that very year, but in the course of another trial, another Jew was faced with the same charge. His accuser charged him with being a Marrano, a people he charged who "are neither Christians, nor Jews, nor Turks, or Moors, but they live in their own fashion, and when they go to the Sinagogue they carry with them a book in the Christian fashion, written in Portuguese, and they are hated by the other Jews, who do not wear anything other than the turban usually worn by Jews".⁹

Our brief encounter with Gasparre Ribeira alerts us to the existence, in the midst of that Jewish world scattered across the Mediterranean, of a group of people who, by their very own choice, sought to create a space at once outside the Christian and the Jewish worlds, within which to act and to think. Take note of the fact that the two witnesses we have so far encountered proposed a definition of Marranism by exclusion. The Marranos were not Christians; they were not Jews; they were not Turks; nor were they Moors. Our witnesses do not tell us what the Marranos were, what, if any values, attitudes, fears, or aspirations might have linked them together, making of them a community or group.

Our second short story will occupy us for a very few minutes. I recount it in order to suggest that the story of Ribeira could not only have taken place in Venice. I want to propose that this second story confirms some ideas to which Ribeira's case points, and, in some instances, amplifies them.¹⁰

In 1566, the Florentine mixed lay-ecclesiastical tribunal of the Nunziatura Apostolica received an accusation against the Jew Isaias Cohen. Cohen had been born in Salonika, of parents who had fled Spain. A few years before the accusation was lodged against him, following a period of wandering when he earned his livelihood as a veil maker, he had settled in Florence. Now, on 7 September 1566, another Jew, Moises de Bondi of Rome but resident in

Florence, accused him of Marranism because Isaias read books in the vernacular Spanish, and did so even in the synagogue. It seems that Moises's animus toward Iberian Jews was well known. When on 20 September Isaias was asked if he knew his accuser, he said that he did, and that Moises was known as a *nemico della nazione hebraea spagnuola*. Isaias's attempt to discredit his accuser was supported by the only Christian witness called by the mixed lay-ecclesiastical tribunal of the Nunziatura which heard the case. In his testimony on 21 October, Laurentius Francisci de Cattanis de Milano said that about two months before Moises had expressed his desire to "become a spy in order to ruin ... the entire Spanish Jewish nation".¹¹ The scribe then added in the margin that the witness had heard it said that Moises had made a written promise of 100 scudi to a Riccio, Bargello, to exert his influence with the Pope so that "this Spanish-Jewish nation would be taken to Rome in chains ... and the said Moses said that ... he would pay him immediately if the said Jewish-Spanish nation were taken with chains to Rome, because they had become Christians, but then they live like Jews".¹²

The case of Isaias Cohen reminds us that in the first several decades of the sixteenth century, Jews of all sorts—local, Italian Jews, Iberian and even Askenazi Jews who fled to Italy—lived precarious lives, caught between the often unpredictable policies of Italian authorities and their desire to establish themselves and launch productive lives in a society which they thought, by virtue of its long traditions, was likely to appreciate the Jews's entrepreneurial skills and commercial vocations. But perhaps precisely because of the fragility of this political context, relations between Italian and Iberian Jews were not especially harmonious and easy. Recent historiography has unearthed abundant evidence to suggest that tensions between these two groups were anything but uncommon, and that integration between their members did not take place until well into the seventeenth century, if not later. Tax exemptions granted to Iberian Jews and Marranos often elicited the resentment of local Jews. So did the privilege to live outside the ghettos. Relations between Italian Jews and the newcomers were further complicated by the presence among the Iberian refugees of a number of Marranos—the overwhelming majority of whom were merchants—who used their Jewishness instrumentally, presenting themselves, when occasion called for it, as Jews, but as often as not assuming Christian identities. They often remained crypto-Jews well after their escape from Spain and Portugal, vacillating between memories of Jewish rituals and traditions to which they clung tenaciously if not always openly, and a conviction that dissimulation was vital to their survival in the Christian world.

When added to the other evidence about the difference in treatment extended to the two groups by local authorities, the case of Isaias Cohen suggests how deep such resentments could run among Italian Jews toward the more adventurous, enterprising and itinerant Jews of Iberian origin.¹³ The fact was that Iberian Jews tended to organize themselves in separate *nationes*, and attended different synagogues.¹⁴ Even someone like Isaias Cohen who, from all

we know about him, did not ever try to conceal his Jewishness, even two generations following his parents's expulsion from Spain, retained the use of his ancestors's rituals and their language. Indeed, language was the instrument which most easily set Iberian Jews apart from the local Jews, a sign, at once, of distinction and apartness. When, in fact, Isaias was asked by the inquisitor why it was that Spanish Jews read books in the vernacular when other Jews did not, he answered by using an Italianized, Spanish expression, duly recorded by the scribe: *perché più gustano leggere in lingua Christiana Spagnuola che li ebrei*.¹⁵

Gasparre Ribeira and Isaias Cohen had been born in Salonika, although their appearances before the law took place in Italian courts. Two of our remaining stories are set in Salonika itself, that great commercial emporium of the Ottoman Empire, and one of the principal centers of the Sephardi diaspora, while the third unfolded between Salonika itself and a jail in Marseille.

Starting in the 1740s, signor Pietro Paradiso (also referred to in contemporary documents with his anglicized name of Peter Paradise) was at once British consul and Austrian vice-consul in Salonika. In order to understand the circumstances of our third story it is necessary to remember that in the first half of the eighteenth century the European powers engaged in a sharp competition over commercial supremacy in the Mediterranean. Part of the competition was aimed at convincing local merchants to declare themselves citizens of their country, in exchange for which citizenship the foreign power would offer its political and diplomatic protection. Diplomats of the great powers—France, England, Austria (and as part of the Austrian Habsburg possessions Tuscany as well)—set out to persuade Jewish merchants to accept the diplomatic protection of their countries, because, as the French consul in Smyrna had written in 1694, “it is to France's advantage and honor to have as many persons who do not recognize a king other than the one who protects them”.¹⁶

The opening up of the Mediterranean traffic and the concurrent availability of a diplomatic shield under which to carry on their mercantile activities served as a stimulus to Italian Jews to enter with renewed vigor the eastern Mediterranean trade. The case of the Livorno Jews suggests the extent of this involvement. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, one finds a string of firms run by Jews from Livorno throughout north Africa and the Levant. Their dominance of the north African trade was overwhelming; but their involvement, alongside an increasing number of Greek and Armenian traders, in the Levant trade was also considerable. A list of Tuscan subjects in the three major Egyptian commercial centers—Alexandria, Cairo, and Rosetta—who in 1731 enjoyed French protection reveals that of the 24 merchants on the list, 19 were Jews, all of them from Livorno.¹⁷ Other such Italian Jews, many enjoying French protection, others under the shield offered by the Grand-Duchy of Tuscany (and, following the establishment of the Lorrena, of the Austrian Empire), or of England, or Holland were situated along the eastern Mediterranean coastline, from Salonika to Smyrna, Aleppo, and Alexandretta.

One has to remember something of the history of these Italian Jews who made their way to the Levant in search of their fortunes; they hailed above all from Livorno, but some of them originated from Ancona and Venice, and, increasingly in the eighteenth century, from Trieste. These histories are often conveyed by their family names. We noted that 19 of the 24 Livornese merchants who, in the mid-eighteenth century worked in Egypt under French protection, were Jews. Of these 19, perhaps as many as ten, if one were to judge by their names, were of Iberian origin. They were the de Paz, de Campos (of whom there were two), Flores, Supino (two), Almeida, Santigliana, Nunes, Javes.¹⁸ In all likelihood, the ancestors of several of these merchants had followed the complicated itineraries we noted earlier: from Spain or Portugal, to Italy, from there on to the Ottoman Empire, back to Italy, and, now, once again, a return to the Ottoman commercial centers. By the eighteenth century, many of them also had relatives in Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Hamburg, and London, and, some, as far away as south America and India. Their memories of their ancestors's peregrinations were set in the context of complex and extensive networks which encompassed nearly the entire world. They were familiar with a culture which was vastly different from that of the Ottoman Jews. Once they went East, they came in contact with Jews who, even if they shared a common ancestry and culture, had remained trapped in the narrow mental confines of a decaying Ottoman Empire, and of an often retrograde rabbinical culture.

It would seem, therefore, that Italian Jews, who in the eighteenth century settled in the major ports of the eastern Mediterranean, brought along with them an economic know-how and a cultural outlook which could not always, at least not always easily, be reconciled with the interests and outlooks of local Jews. Linked to commercial networks which extended far outside the Levant, they also had a cosmopolitan, perhaps a more open cultural outlook. If nothing else, their Tuscan, and following the mid-eighteenth century, Austrian, Imperial citizenship made them appear more European, more attuned to current political and ideological currents in western Europe. And their knowledge of languages, their ability to communicate with other European merchants and traders, their contacts with their families back in Livorno, or in one of the other Italian ports, consolidated this European, open image.

Yet, in one respect, these Italian Jews did not appear to be very European at all. They seemed unaware of, or indifferent to the political consequences of the great power involvement in the political economy of the Mediterranean. At times, many of them anxiously sought the protection of one of the great powers, and sought to take advantage of the citizenship offered to them. The advantage of such protection could not have been clearer than it was in October 1789, when xenophobic riots erupted in Constantinople. Writing to the Count Piccolomini, Herbert Rathkcal, Austrian Ambassador, described in very pointed terms how a Jew with Austrian citizenship, could escape the worst consequences of the xenophobic wave of violence.

The persecutions and executions of the Rayas continue ... Among others, the Jew Cammondo, rich and esteemed man, would have been condemned if I had protected him, as Imperial and Royal subject, since he was born in Brody of Galicia. But, to give some satisfaction to the Porte, I sent him, alongside his entire family, to Trieste, aboard a Venetian ship. On the other hand, the Greek Pancio, furrier by profession, and one of the Taverners's chiefs had his head cut off because of his intrigues. Another Greek, named Petraki, employed in the mint, saved his head only by spending several hundred bags of gold.

But, time and again, European consular officials lamented the indifference of these Jews to the real advantages, and responsibilities that citizenship conferred upon them.

There was something especially irritating to a European diplomat about this attitude. Jews lacked a sense of nationality, there was something shifty and suspicious about them. They were eager to accept the protection of a great power when it was to their advantage to do so. Otherwise, they were willing to (seek their fate) *tentare la loro sorte*, to seek out the best deal among offers of protection available to them. About two centuries earlier, when the ancestors of some of these very same Italian Jews of Iberian origin were being pressured to declare, unequivocally, their religious preference, they had temporized, embracing publicly Christianity, or Judaism, as the occasion might appear to them to demand. In the process they often succeeded in arousing the anger both of Christians and of observant Jews. Now, a comparable temporizing, tinged perhaps by the same sort of dissimulation was at work.

There is perhaps no better illustration of the incomprehensions and bad feelings that could arise between Italian Jews seeking their fortunes in the Ottoman Empire, and representatives of European powers intent on advancing the interests of their countries, than an incident described in a set of letters written by Pietro Paradise in 1747-48. So, finally, we come to our third story. As usual, the issue was to entice a group of Italian Jews who had been trading in Salonika to declare themselves Tuscan (and therefore Austrian) subjects. Only the problem seems to have been that the French had been cleverer, had beaten the Austrians at this game and obtained declarations from the Jews that they accepted French protection. Having received a pressing letter from the Austrian Ambassador in Constantinople to convene the Italian Jews and to get them to declare their Tuscan nationality, Paradise, in his own words,

I convened to my house the heads of these four houses of Livornese Jews, and, also, Signor Morpurgo ... and, having all of them arrived, I began by asking each whose subject he was. All responded: "Of the Grand-Duke of Tuscany". Save for

Morpurgo, who launched into a long narrative, telling me that, in truth, he had been born in a country (*paese*) subject to the house of Austria, but that he grew up in Ancona and Venice, that when he first came to this country he was armed with Venetian letters-patent, but that then, because of his affairs he was led to change protection, that his residence and his shop were now in Ancona, and he considered himself a papal subject; and he added that, in the case of Jews, one did not seek to establish either a home or a Prince, because they did not have either the one or the other (*agli Ebrei non si ricercava né Patria né Principe, non havendo loro né l' un, né l' altro*). I did not let him continue, but I interrupted him, telling him that since, in his estimation, he was from Ancona, I did not have anything else to hear from him or to tell him, save that I would render an account to your Excellency, and so I dismissed him.¹⁹

It is clear, then, that Morpurgo's rambling autobiographical justification for resisting Paradise's inquiry about his nationality elicited an irritated response from the European consular official. It emerges from the rest of the correspondence that what might be taken as Morpurgo's very personal view of nationality was not so personal, at all. The issue was that he had posted surety for a substantial sum of money the previous Customs agents owed to the French firm of Ricoulphe & Co., and it was inadvisable at this moment to renounce French protection. The same applied to the other Italian Jews convoked by Paradise. All of them—Dottor Emanuel Calvo, Mosé Graziadio Leone, Jacob Enriques Miranda, Fernandes Dias, and Raffael Vitta Calvo—initially listened politely to Paradise's entreaties, and, at the end of the meeting, “all said that they wished to submit themselves to the jurisdiction of the Most August Sovereign, but they asked for time ... in order at once to take care of their affairs here, and to seek instructions from their associates and superiors in Livorno”.²⁰ Without waiting for the Jews's response, a week later, Paradise informed them that, as of that day, they would be issued letters patent declaring them Tuscan subjects.²¹ But just five days later, Paradise wrote back to his superiors in Constantinople complaining that “not one of these Jewish gentlemen from Livorno had come back to me” (*nessuno di questi Signori Ebrei Livornesi si è più fatto vedere appresso di me ...*). Paradise had learnt that, shortly after leaving the first meeting with him, the Jews, “having conferred with the Consul of the French nation, [...] changed their way of speaking and some of them said that they did not want to seek any other protection”.²² And so it went. In a tug of war, the consul pressured them to declare themselves Tuscan citizens, even, on one occasion taking them along on a visit to the *Eccellentissimo Paschia*, to show them the influence he wielded with the Ottoman authorities. For their part, the Jews went on temporising trying to understand what they should do. In the end, following several months of such

give and take, some of the Tuscan Jews agreed to sign the necessary papers and be considered Tuscan citizens.²³

It is evident that in the contrast between Morpurgo and Paradise, the former's response did not minimally interest the latter. Paradise was seeking to clarify a point that was simple to him: What was Morpurgo's nationality? Paradise had as much difficulty to understand Morpurgo's answer, as the Venetian notary, almost two centuries earlier, Ribeira's to the Inquisitorial Tribunal. The Venetian notary had resignedly noted that, his efforts notwithstanding, "nec clarius ab eo habere potuit". For his part, the representative of his Britannic Majesty and of the Imperial Crown had reacted with disdainful contempt. At the very moment when Morpurgo had affirmed that Jews had neither a patria nor a prince, Paradise interrupted his guest and showed him to the door. This was an unacceptable way of talking about similar questions. It is true that from the end of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries the field in which our two protagonists were called upon to measure themselves with the authorities of their time had changed. The question of religious identity had been transformed to a question of national identity. But it seems to me that in their general lines the terms of the confrontation had remained the same. Two people — both of them Jews and both of them merchants—were seeking to carve for themselves a space outside the institutions and ideologies which endowed the vast majority of their contemporaries with a sense of their collective identities. The efforts of these Jews were vigorously resisted by the official representatives of the dominant institutions and ideologies.

Let us now jump ahead, another 150 years, to the early twentieth century. Well before its annihilation by the Nazis in 1943, Salonikan Jewry underwent a massive crisis. In the late nineteenth and very early years of the twentieth century, the increasingly nationalist policies of the Young Turk government had presented this community with a challenge to its status and traditions. Then, in 1912, following the Turkish defeat in the Balkan wars, Salonika was conquered by Greece, which was itself intent on pursuing a markedly nationalistic policy in its newly acquired territories. Two young Jews, one an intellectual and a banker, the other a merchant of Livornese origin, caught in different circumstances but facing the same fundamental dilemma, responded to it in ways which evoke echoes of Morpurgo's attitude.

At the time of the Balkan wars, Joseph Nehama (1880-1971) was a young teacher in Salonika's school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. The change of Salonika's sovereignty, from a Turkish to a Greek city, unleashed Nehama's passion. He foresaw, with a clarity perhaps few shared, the economic and cultural consequences upon the Jews of Salonika of recent political changes. In letter after letter to the Alliance headquarters in Paris, Nehama argued the need to keep Salonika apart from the now dominant nation-states in the southern Balkans. Salonika, a Jewish city par excellence, he argued, must retain its commercial vocation. And it can do so only if it is not confined within the

boundaries of a nation-state. What would happen, he asked, if Salonika were to be incorporated in one of the region's nation-states, which were in the process of dividing among themselves its vast hinterland? "Salonika would be a heart that ceased to beat; like a head cut off from its mutilated body".²⁴ The only solution was to internationalize the port of Salonika, which, in any case, "is neither Greek, nor Bulgarian, nor Turkish, it is Jewish" (*n'est ni grec, ni bulgare, ni turc, il est juif*).²⁵ If Salonika were internationalized, it "would cease to be theater of ethnic fights" (*cesserait d'être le théâtre des luttes ethniques*). In a personal letter to the president of the Alliance, written less than a month following the arrival of Greek troops to Salonika, Nehama pondered the quandry faced by Salonika's Jews. "What is to our advantage? Salonika as a free port, an international port, open to the commerce of all Balkan nations and of Austria".²⁶ And he continued describing the flattering offers Greek and Bulgarian officials had made to representatives of the Jewish community in exchange for support. Nehama thought that it would be best not to support any one of these states. Even when a group of Bulgarian Jews told him that "You, Jews of Salonika, should not raise either the Bulgarian or the Greek flag, but, rather the zionist flag, the Star of David ... He was surprised by my hesitation. He took me for an imbecile when he saw that, to avoid any complication, I raised the French flag".²⁷

Nehama's strategy for overcoming the dilemma of the moment was to temporize in the face of need, follow a course of action which would reduce the dangers facing his community, urge that a distance be maintained, not only from the rampant nationalisms of the region, but also, and significantly, from the then emerging Jewish nationalism. And, having once reminded his French correspondent that, "we are, you know, among those Jews who defied the Inquisition", (*nous sommes, vous le savez, de ces Juifs qui ont bravés l'Inquisition*),²⁸ he proceeded on 3 June 1913 to submit a long, and detailed formal plan whose object was "to convert Salonika and its hinterland, into a politically neutral region, guaranteed by the Great Powers, but, from the economic point of view, subject to a condominium, of the three Balkan States, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia, with Salonika itself a free city".²⁹

Vidal Nahum (1894-1984) a young Salonikan Jew at the time of the events which commanded Nehama's attention, seems to have had neither Nehama's intellectual preparation, nor social standing.³⁰ But, just like so many other young Jews of the Ottoman Empire, he was not prepared to submit himself to the obligation of the military draft which was then being imposed by the nationalist governments in the southern Balkans. His great grand-parents had moved to Salonika from Livorno, and, as a result, he enjoyed Italian citizenship. Yet, such was the confusion in Salonika during the course of World War I, that the French troops which had occupied the city, arrested him, and had him expelled to southern France. A complicated set of events ensued, with appeals made to high government officials in France on young Vidal's behalf. Following the decision to free him from jail, Lieutenant Borelli, the police

officer in charge of his case asked Vidal for his nationality.³¹ In the confusing, not to say comical scene which followed, Vidal had to make a choice. He had to choose his public persona. It was a mental process that would have been entirely familiar to generations of his ancestors, from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Three centuries earlier, they had been forced to ask themselves what their religion was. Then, as circumstances in the world changed, religion had come to matter less and the state more. But all along, the basic categories by which individuals—Jews, but, of course, not only they—had been required to identify themselves publicly had been forged in a world in which the Jews themselves had little, or no influence at all. By the time Vidal came to the scene, the category “state” had been further refined and loaded with significance. Its implications could hardly be missed by someone whose ancestors, as Nehama himself had written just a few years earlier, had survived the Inquisition. Ribeira had been asked to declare his religion. Morpurgo, and now Vidal their nationalities.

What was Vidal’s nationality? He could not quite declare himself to be a Turk, since his captors, the French, were at war with Turkey. He excluded the possibility of Greek nationality, since, by the terms of his expulsion to France, the Greek authorities would most probably arrest him if he were to return to his home town. He could declare that he was Italian, or, drawing on family connections, Belgian. He discarded both choices, because they entailed the risk of the draft. The only alternative that seemed to fit the demands of the situation was the very one that made no sense whatsoever to his French captors. He was, he said, a *citoyen salonicien*. Three years earlier, when pressured by his interlocutors to align himself with Bulgaria, or Greece, or Zionism, Nehama, Vidal’s somewhat older contemporary, had raised the French flag, and opted for a solution which he hoped would have placed him safely beyond the consequences of the potentially disastrous controversies which were convulsing the southern Balkans. In much the same manner, Vidal opted for a nationality which, to say the least, puzzled his French captors. Such was his insistence, however, that the French relented and issued him a *carte d’identité* that declared this descendent of Livornese Jews—an Italian citizen, and, by 1915, most probably also a Greek citizen—to have been a citizen of Salonika. And so, for a moment at least, and in the mind of a puzzled French police officer, Joseph Nehama’s seemingly outrageous plan to make of Salonika an autonomous free-port, was translated into a legal reality.

Our stories end here. For a moment I had thought that I, too, would end here, and that I would leave you free to draw your own conclusions. You will, I hope, excuse me if I detain you for a few additional minutes in order to outline, however briefly, a few conclusive thoughts.

My first thought refers to the characteristics which unite the experiences of our five personages—notwithstanding the chronological distance which separates their lives. All five were merchants, Sefardic Jews, who hailed from the Iberian peninsula. The lives of all had been marked by a great migratory

experience, from one corner of the Mediterranean to the other. Ribeira, who had hailed from Portugal, had conducted his business in Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, and many centers of the Ottoman Empire. Cohen, whose parents had been forced to flee Spain, had wandered through the Balkans and northern Italy before trying his luck in Florence. Morpurgo had lived in Ancona, Livorno, Venice, Trieste, Constantinople and Salonika. It is true that Nehama and Nahum had been born and matured in Salonika. But their city's cosmopolitan culture made it possible for them to keep alive the memory of their distant Iberian origins, and of their more recent contacts in the city of Livorno. Nehama's quip strikes me as significant. "Nous sommes, vous le savez", he had written, "de ces Juifs qui ont bravés l' Inquisition". In short, I would suggest that daily experiences and historical and familial memories laced these men's attitudes—their ideologies, if you will—with a mixture of detachment and disenchantment.

One of the problems they had to face—and for us a key that allows us to discuss their experiences—was the contact of each one with the public authorities: Ribeira and Cohen with the Inquisition and the traditionalist rabbis of their age; Morpurgo with the British and Austrian consul; Nahum with the French gendarme. One could even suggest that Nehama's contacts with the leadership of the Alliance had something of a confrontational character. It would not be an exaggeration to assert that in every one of these instances the authorities reacted to their interlocutors with incomprehension. The inquisitors and rabbi Chayn Saruc insistently tried to know in what religious camp to place Ribeira, or, to change the good rabbi's metaphor, with what rudder Ribeira intended to navigate his ship. Signor Paradiso and Lieutenant Borelli had the same question of Morpurgo and Nahum: What was their nationality? Their questions—as was the case with the questions addressed to Ribeira—were direct, simple, and clear. Every category used by the authorities to classify individuals had a name, it occupied a precise place in the age's cultural and ideological taxonomy: Christianity and Judaism in the sixteenth century; the name of a state from the eighteenth century on. Whoever did not adhere to the official classificatory schemes was punished, insulted, or derided. Remember Nehama's answer to the exhortations of his Bulgarian Jewish acquaintance that Salonika's Jews embrace the cause of Zionism. "Il était surpris de mon hésitation", wrote Nehama with evident self satisfaction; "J' ai passé à ses yeux pour un imbécile".

If the authorities insisted that the names of the official taxonomies be respected, it is perhaps not without interest to note that not the names of things, but, rather, metaphors seemed to offer the only possibility to capture the experience and beliefs of our protagonists, and of the others, who, few or many though they may have been, shared their attitudes. A ship with two rudders; a condominium on Salonika; Salonika as an autonomous (not so say an independent) state. What are these but metaphors which enabled individuals (whether the protagonists, or their often puzzled antagonistic interlocutors) to

define a conceptual space—a space that was at once vague and ambiguous and could not be enclosed and delimited by prevalent religious and political changes?

Some years ago, José-Gentil da Silva, in his beautiful paper before the Athens congress on Mediterranean economies, observed that, among the merchants whom he had studied, “one encounters persons who are outside of every State. There is a sort of commerce which remains outside the political organisation of a Europe which is then in the process of emerging”.³² That is quite right. But one could add to this useful insight the thought that these merchants acted not only outside Europe’s then nascent political organization, but also outside the mental structures and ideologies which prevailed among the age’s political leadership. Their images of their actions’s and thoughts’s possible limits were rooted in the reality of a daily life made of expulsions, emargination, absence of power. Their skepticism, and their often refined sense of disenchantment was constantly reinforced by the small and large irritations of a quotidian existence which rarely if ever could reconcile itself with strong and clear ideologies. For them, ambiguity and dissimulation were strategies—and not only rhetorical ones—aimed at ensuring their survival.

In order to survive, our five heroes—but not only they, and certainly not only Sephardic Jews—had to come to terms with complicated and often contradictory situations. The Mediterranean Sea was not then—most certainly it is not in our own days—that “*mer de voisinage*” recently evoked by the Croatian writer Predrag Matvejevitch. The metaphor of neighborly relations conceals from view the conflicts, tensions, hatreds, and wars which often defined the histories of the Mediterranean peoples. Not even Fernand Braudel’s metaphor, more elegant and subtle though it may be, helps to capture the institutional and cultural contexts within which our five protagonists, and others like them, were forced to lead their lives. The expression “*le recouvrement de civilisations*”, which is the title of an important section of Braudel’s famous book, does, indeed, suggest that diverse cultures did overlap with each other, but this does not sufficiently underscore the fact that often these overlappings were accompanied by deep and enduring incomprehensions and hostilities.

For me, the principal point of our five stories is this: that in an often extremely perilous world, in which daily life, and often survival itself were menaced both by authorities and by local populations, people such as Gasparre Ribeira, Isaias Cohen, signor Morpurgo, Joseph Nehama, and Vidal Nahum struggled to carve out for themselves a space, at once physical, mental and psychological, within which to maintain their sense of selfhood and moral integrity.

It is perhaps worth closing with an aside which one could develop some other time. Some scholars recently argued that a sense of disenchantment and critical skepticism toward authority is at the root of our modern sensibility. They point to Baruch Spinoza, a Portuguese Jew, descendant of Marrano

merchants, and persecuted in equal doses by Christian and Jewish authorities in Amsterdam, as the first and clearest exponent of such a philosophy. Philosophies, however, do not emerge full blown from the head even of the most original and brilliant philosopher. In this case, one could imagine that Spinoza's philosophy was rooted in the experience of his ancestors, an experience shared, before him, by the likes of Gasparre Ribeira, and Isaias Cohen, and, in later centuries, by many other merchants, who, well into the twentieth century, had to cultivate an often carefully studied attitude of dissimulation in order to survive in their worlds.

The experience of these merchants, and their complicated, opaque, even contradictory senses of identity were shared by a number—perhaps a large number—of their contemporaries, and certainly not only Jews. Variants of Marranism are evident among Greeks and Armenians, whose diasporas extended from the Indonesian archipelago, through the Middle East, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean sea to western Europe; by Italians in the Aegean Sea and north Africa; by north Africans in south Italy and the Iberian peninsula; by Albanians in the southern Balkans, in the islands of the Aegean and Ionian Seas; by Turks and Arabs throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Their stories do not perhaps add up to the grand sweep of western civilization, as it has been imagined by generations of historians since the middle of the eighteenth century. However, one ventures to think, these stories do point to situations—human situations—to which those interested in Europe's present and future will have increasingly to pay attention.

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Notes

1. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo, 3466, c. 89v, 28 February 1548.
2. S. S. Beatissima tiene delle cose del Re di Portugallo.
3. Ibid., cc. 93v-94r (10 March 1549), 99v (23 March 1549), 103r (3 April 1549); Mediceo 3268, c. 54r (9 April 1549).
4. "agente del Re di Portugallo", he wrote, "che non siamo per levare a niuno quella libertà che li è data di venir et stare per habitare nel sopradetto nostro stato".
5. Et se costoro sono Christiani non sappiamo per qual cagione gle lo habbiamo a denegare, essendo molto meglio che stien fra gli altri Christiani, [o] che vadino a Salonich, ne' paesi del Turco, dove molti ne vanno, che saranno del tutto persi? Mediceo 13, cc. 31-33v: 32r-v (13 April 1549).
6. Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews. The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1990).
7. "notre bénéfacteur et notre sauveur à nous Israélites de Rhodes. C' est le père de nos familles, puisq'il est le défenseur de nos droits". Ibid., 7 janvier 1913.
8. Ibid., 8 janvier 1913.
9. "non sono né christiani, né hebrei, né turchi, né mori, ma vivono al mondo loro, et quando vanno in sinagoga portano un officio alla christiana in lingua portoghese et sono odiati da l' altri Hebrei che non portano altro che'l turpante da Hebrei".
10. Prospero, *L' Inquisizione Romana*, p. 85 (note that Cohen's birthplace was not

Salamanca, but Salonica: è nato a Salonich de Levante); and Siegmund, From Tuscan Household, pp. 19-23, 83-85. My brief summary of the case comes from ASFi, Tribunale della Nunziatura Apostolica 842, unfoliated manuscript. The case begins on 7 September 1566.

11. essere spia per rovinare ... tutta la natione hebrea Spagnuola.
12. questa natione Spagnuola hebrea andasse legata a Roma, et dicto Moise disse che l' haveva facta et che li pagherebbe subito se la dicta natione hebrea spagnuola andava ligata a Roma, perché erano fatti Christiani et poi vivono da Giudei.
13. See the comments of A. Toaff, L' "Universitas Hebaeorum Portugallensium" di Ancona nel Cinquecento. Interessi economici e ambiguità religiosa in *Atti e memorie. Deputazione di storia patria per le Marche*, 87 (1982), pp. 126, 131.
14. Michele Luzzati, *Las sinagoga a Livorno. Monumento ebraico monumento pubblico in Le tre sinagoghe. Edifici di culto e vita ebraica a Livorno dal Seicento al Novecento*, a cura di Michele Luzzati (Livorno, 1995).
15. What Isaias should have said in conclusion of his statement, or if he said it what the scribe should have recorded is più gustano che li altri ebrei. The missing adjective altri could give rise to an inbteresting speculation, which it is not the case to pursue here.
16. "il est avantageux et honorable à la France d' avoir autant de personnes qui ne reconnoissent autre Roy que celui qui les protège".
17. Simon Schwarzfuchs, La 'nazione ebrea' livournaise au Levant, in *Rassegna mensile di Israel* 50, 707-709, 724.
18. Ibid.
19. convocai in casa mia li capi di queste quatro case d' Hebrei Livornesi, come pure il Sig.re Morpurgo ... e, radunati che furono tutti, principiai col dimandare a cadauno di chi era suddito. Tutti risposero del Gran Duca di Toscana, fuorch' il Morpurgo, il quale cominciò a fare una lunga narrativa col dirmi che veramente lui era nato in paese soggetto alla casa di Austria, ma che è stato elevato in Ancona e Venezia, che quando fece la sua prima venuta in questo paese era munito con Pattente veneta, che poi le contingenze de' suoi affari lo fecero cambiare di protezione, che la sua casa, tanto di famiglia come di negozio, ritrovandosi fin' ora stabilita in Ancona, lui si riputava come Papalino, e soggiunse ch' agli Ebrei non si ricercava né Patria né Principe, non havendo loro né l' un, né l' altro. Non lo lasciai passare oltre, ma l' interruppi, dicendogli che siccome lui si faceva Anconitano, non havevo altro né a sentire di lui, né a dirgli, fuorché ne renderei conto a Vostra Eccellenza, e cos[™] lo congedai. SME, 2237, Copia di lettera del Signore Pietro Paradise, console Britannico in Salonicchio, 11 dicembre 1747.
20. tutti s'espressero volersi a sottomettersi al comando dell' Augustissimo Sovrano, ma dimandarono tempo ... tanto per regolare a' loro affari qui, come per servire ed avere risposta da' loro associati e principali a Livorno.
21. Ibid., 19 dicembre 1747.
22. conferrito che ebbero con Signore Console de la Nazione francese, cambiarono il modo di parlare et dissero alcuni non voler riconoscere altra protezione. Ibid, 24 dicembre 1747.
22. The letters sent by Paradise are found, in no particular order, in Ibid, busta 1, and busta 2.
24. Salonique serait comme un coeur qui cesserait de battre, il serait comme une tête qui serait tranchée de son corps dépecé. Archives, Alliance Israélite Universelle, I.C.50,

10 décembre 1912. All letters cited below come from this folder, and can be identified by their date.

25. Ibid., 3 janvier 1913.
26. Ce que nous convient? Salonique port libre, port international, ouvert au commerce de toutes les nations balkaniques et de l' Autriche.
27. Vous, Juifs de Salonique, vous ne devez arborer ni le drapeau bulgare, ni le drapeau grec, mais le *drapeau sioniste, le Magen David* ... il était surpris de mon hésitation. J'ai passé à ses yeux pour un imbécile quand il a constaté que pour éviter toute éventualité fâcheuse j' ai fait arborer à l' Association le drapeau français.Ibid, 27 novembre 1912.
28. Ibid., 12 novembre 1912.
29. de faire de Salonique et de son hinterland, au point de vue politique, une région neutre, sous la garantie des grandes Puissances, mais, soumise, au point de vue économique, à un CONDOMINIUM des trois Etats Balcaniques, Grèce, Bulgaries et Serbie, avec Salonique ville franche. (underlinings and capitals in the original).
30. A biography of Vidal Nahum was recently published by his son, Edgar Morin, Vidal et les siens (Paris, 1989).
31. Ibid., pp. 80-81.
32. "on trouve des gens, des personnages qui sont en dehors de tout Etat. Il y a une sorte de commerce qui demeure en dehors de l' organization politique de l' Europe qui se fait".