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Istanbul's Jewish Bookstores: Monuments to a Bygone Era

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Erratum

Typo in figure captions; 2/22/2018.

Istanbul's Jewish Bookstores: Monuments to a Bygone Era¹

Unlike the well-documented history of the Jewish press in the Ottoman Empire (for example, see Abrevaya 2004), the history of Jewish bookstores in Turkey was never recorded or studied. While Jewish bookstores had a significant impact on Istanbul's cultural life, only fragments of that history have been preserved. Such tiny bits of information are referenced in recollections on Istanbul's Babiâli (Sublime Porte) district, where headquarters of newspapers and publishers had been located next to government offices since the early 1900s (Okay 2007, 293–323), or in memoirs of those who were affiliated with the rare book trade in Turkey (Erünsal 2013).

Since the late Ottoman Empire and through the early days of the modern Republic of Turkey (established 1923), most of Istanbul's rare book trade and the antiquarian bookstores associated with it were in the hands of Armenians, Greeks, and Jews—minorities who were involved

in the printing and publishing industry, in itself “the result of a collective effort of all the communities comprising this multi-ethnic empire” (Strauss 2013, 225–253). Bookstores were concentrated in the Babiâli district and along the well-known main shopping avenue in Constantinople (renamed Istanbul, 1923), the Grande Rue de Péra (renamed *Istiklâl Caddesi* or Independence Avenue, also known as *Beyoğlu*; Figure 1). In his study, İşli (2004, 689–700) identified seventy bookstores active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which only two were Jewish-owned. Based on his study and other sources not previously available in English, this essay will outline the history of three Jewish bookstores in Istanbul: *Kanaat Kitabevi* (Modesty Bookstore), established by İlyas Bayar; *Tünel Alman Kitap Evi* (Tunnel German Bookstore), established by Izidor (Isidore) Karon; and *Kohen Hemşireler Kitap Evi* (Kohen Sisters' Bookstore).



Figure 1. Grande Rue de Péra, Constantinople, ca. 1912 (Underwood & Underwood, photographer, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672935>; cropped)

¹ This essay is based on previously published article in Turkish (Bali 2010a) and a lecture given at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in a colloquium on books in the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey (Bali 2010b).

These three bookstores represent a bygone era in which individuals in Istanbul’s Jewish community ventured beyond the traditional import-export, retail businesses where Jewish entrepreneurs were usually found. The dramatic decrease in Turkey’s Jewish population following the 1948–1949 mass *aliyah* to Israel, and following each subsequent wave of emigration to Israel and elsewhere whenever political and/or economic disturbances occurred in Turkey, resulted in the small, homogeneous community that remains today, whose interest in cultural matters is drastically diminished. This essay serves as a memorial to the vanished bookish Jewish Istanbul.

İLYAS BAYAR AND HIS MODESTY BOOKSTORE: KANAAT KİTABEVİ

The most renowned of the three bookstores was Kanaat Kitabevi (Modesty Bookstore). The founder of this institution, which was also a publishing house, was İlyas Bayar (1880–1945), a Sephardi Jew whose surname was sometimes spelled “Bahar.” Bayar deeply believed in enlightening and educating Turkish youth with his publications. During Ottoman times, he sided with the Young Turks and demonstrated his opposition to the regime by publishing the works of dissident authors and poets. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, he became a fervent believer, like his coreligionists and compatriots, in the young Republic’s egalitarian principles.

Born in Fâtih, Salma Tomruk, to a poor family originally from Balat, a Jewish district of Istanbul, Bayar was a student at the Alliance israélite universelle school, but his father Balatlı (“from Balat”) Yako had to remove the boy from school so he could help support his large family. As described by Kâzım Nami Duru (1875–1967), an Ottoman Army officer, author, and editor who met Bayar in 1911, it was in his teens that Bayar started to work at Babiâli bookstores, first as an apprentice at İbrahim Hilmi’s store on Ankara Street, and later at Hüseyin Efendi’s Darüşşafaka bookstore. Being a natural entrepreneur, Bayar “accumulated a little capital by selling books

he got from the used-book bazaar to his acquaintances and [then] founded Kanaat Bookstore in 1898. In 1909, he took over Karabet Bookstore and its printing house. As soon as he owned his own bookstore, he focused on history books. Together with the constitutional monarchy, he started publishing this genre, along with foreign language dictionaries” (Duru 1951, 582).²

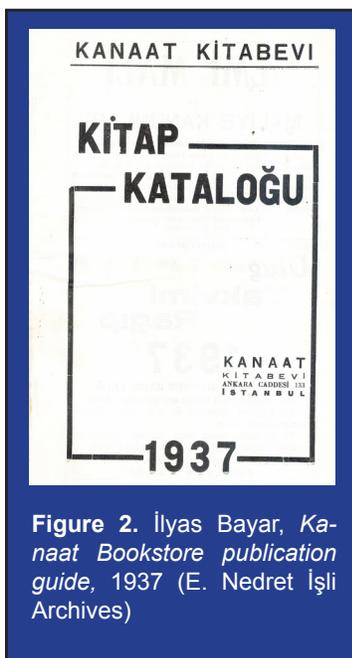


Figure 2. İlyas Bayar, *Kanaat Bookstore publication guide*, 1937 (E. Nedret İşli Archives)

The exact year that Bayar established his bookstore remains unclear. In a newspaper interview (*Kırk Yıllık Kitapçı!* 1936), Bayar claimed that he founded his bookstore in 1905. In the Kanaat catalogue, published in 1937 on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of its foundation (Bayar 1937; Figure 2), and in a eulogy published in the daily *Yeni Sabah* after Bayar’s demise (İlyas Bayar Vefat Etti 1945), the date for the bookstore’s founding was given as 1897. Moreover, the entry in *İstanbul ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopedia of Istanbul, a multi-volume work written by historian Reşat Ekrem Koçu, 1958–1973a) indicates that the bookstore was founded in 1898. Another source, a newspaper article published

² All translations from Turkish to English in this essay are provided by the author.

after İlyas Bayar's death, stated that he had established Kanaat Bookstore at the entrance of the Reşit Efendi Building in 1908, a few years before the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era (Kanaat Kitabevi Sahibi İlyas Bayar Vefat Etti 1945). Thus, we have four possible dates of establishment: 1897, 1898, 1905, and the vague "a few years before 1908."

By the crucial year of 1908, when the Second Constitutional Era was proclaimed, Bayar "... supported and served the Turkish Revolution by joining the Young Turks, secretly publishing and distributing works by national poet and revolutionary Namık Kemal and his friends" (Bahar 1945, 2) and for that he was detained (Benby 1945). According to Duru (1951, 581–582), "Kanaat Bookstore... was progressing faster than any bookstore in the country, thanks to İlyas Bahar's tireless efforts to publish history books, dictionaries and other academic editions. He also encouraged authors such as Ahmet Rasim, Ahmet Refik, Turhan Tan, Ali Canip Yöntem, and many others to write more books." Duru added:

I met him towards the end of 1911 when I first came to Istanbul; his books caught my attention rather than his personality. First of all, until that time the only dictionary available for those who wanted to learn French was the late Şemsettin Sami's French-Turkish dictionary.... Kanaat Bookstore—if you look at the name of his bookstore you'll see how humble it is—is the very first printing house to publish dictionaries other than Şemsettin Sami's, so that school children could benefit from them.

After that came history books. He published works of the late Ahmet Refik and Ahmet Rasim—and not only for students, but for anyone interested in history. Very few of the old booksellers remained in Ankara Street, formerly known as Babıâli. Karabet and Kasbar Bookstore had disappeared. Only İbrahim Hilmi's Kütüphane-i İslâm ve Askeri, which I used to visit when I was studying at the military school, was still standing and publishing. None of these bookstores could compete with Kanaat Bookstore... (Duru 1951, 582)

Similar tributes to Bayar's undertaking, although anonymous, were published in the press after his death:

[Bayar's] exemplary life is worthy of a book. Editor and publisher İlyas Bayar was a man who, until the end of his life, insisted on publishing only the finest and most worthwhile books for Turkey: history and geography books, atlases, encyclopedias, and series of scientific and literary works. Kanaat Bookstore, whose catalogue would embarrass any other publisher because it did not list even a single book published for sheer profit, can be considered one of the few leading establishments to completely identify its own interest with Turkey's higher interests. (Bir Muharrir 1945)

Bayar’s decades-long publishing enterprise produced numerous books³—some four thousands of them according to his own account (*Kırk Yıllık Kitapçı!* 1936). His publications, beginning with *Târih-i Siyasî* (Political History) by Turkish historian Ali Reşad Bey (1877–1929; Ertürk 1999–2000, 217) and followed by “...serious historical compilations, classical and contemporary Turkish literature, encyclopedic compendia, geography books, atlases, large wall maps, and dictionaries, soon helped to put Kanaat Kütüphanesi at the forefront of the Turkish publishing world” (Koçu 1958–1973a). Some of these volumes, including The Great Turkish Dictionary; French-Turkish, German-Turkish, and English-Turkish bilingual dictionaries; reference works such as The History of Islamic Civilization, Naci’s Great Dictionary, Ali Sadi’s Great Ottoman Dictionary, and History of the Great Nations series; maps printed according to European standards; and The Great Atlas, became “real treasures of our cultural library” (İlyas Bayar Vefat Etti 1945).⁴

Duru (1951, 582) referred to Bayar’s educational mission, too: “A Jewish citizen who drops French high school in order to earn his bread, and finds it more appropriate to work for Turkish booksellers. So this man, even as a young boy, felt the need to render service to the country that provided him his daily bread. For this, he regarded libraries as schools. That is an admirable act.” Bayar was also prominent in the public sphere of the publishing industry. As the founder of one of the leading publishing houses and bookstores in Babiâli, Bayar represented Istanbul’s publishers at the Turkish Ministry of Education’s First Turkish Publication Congress in 1939, where he conveyed his ideas on “how to effectively improve the distribution and promotion of publications, relying on the experience I gained in my nearly fifty years as an editor” (*Türk Neşriyat Kongresi* 1997, 379–382).

Bayar’s educational and cultural vision was realized, as attested by his coreligionist and friend Yakim Bahar (1945), who was an attorney of the Istanbul bar association: “By assuming responsibility for publishing countless books, [Bayar] provided libraries in every corner of the country with the most highly-regarded works and thus played an important role in raising the culture of our country and in greatly increasing the level and habit of reading.” Similarly, the *Yeni Sabah* newspaper praised Bayar and emphasized his contribution to the cultural legacy of Turkey: “Besides publishing the first works during the 1908 Revolution and the declaration of the new constitutional monarchy, he never ceased to provide books to Turkish children in Anatolia during the Armistice period, despite pressure from the Babiâli government and the Allied Forces” (İlyas Bayar Vefat Etti 1945).

³ Editor’s note: WorldCat aggregates hundreds of records for items published by Kanaat Bookstore: 759 book records, twelve serials records, and three map records. Dozens of these have been digitized and are available via Hathi Trust Digital Library at <https://www.hathitrust.org>.

⁴ The original list, as it appeared in “İlyas Bayar Vefat Etti” 1945: *Türkçe Büyük Lûgat* (The Great Turkish Dictionary); *Dairetül Maarif* (The Department of Education), *Kıyasî Enbiya* (Stories of the Prophets), *Medeniyeti İslâmiye Tarihi* (The History of Islamic Civilization), *Büyük Lûgat Naci* (Naci’s Great Dictionary), *Netayicülvukuat* (Events and Their Effects), *Büyük Kamusu Osmanî* (Ali Sadi’s Great Ottoman Dictionary), *Büyük Devletlerin Tarih Serisi* (History of the Great Nations series), *Büyük Atlas* (The Great Atlas).

Bayar experienced troubled times in his career. On November 11, 1942, the Turkish Parliament adopted the Wealth Tax Law, which distressed many non-Muslim taxpayers because of its biased implementation. The legislature's *de jure* intention was to tax revenue that originated in profiteering during World War II, but its *de facto* application was discriminatory. The Wealth Tax Law sought to remove non-Muslim merchants and industrialists, who had occupied prominent positions in the Turkish Republic, and replace them with Muslim merchants. The logic behind it was that non-Muslims were not "true Turks," not having shed their blood for the fatherland during the War of Independence (1919–1922). The Wealth Tax was then a "fee" by which non-Muslims would pay their "debt" to the fatherland (for more information, see Bali 2012).

The tax had to be paid on extremely short notice, which forced many non-Muslim taxpayers to liquidate all their assets at great loss. Bayar was also sued for profiteering by the National Court of Protection and sentenced to prison for secretly selling the *German-Turkish Great Lexicon* for 16 Turkish liras to İbrahim Berkalp, a bookseller in Ankara (Kanaat Kitabevi Sahibi İhtikâr Suçundan Tevkif Edildi 1943).

Bayar was assessed a tax of 494,500 Turkish liras (Dokuyan 2014, 35; or 600,000 Turkish liras according to Duru 1951), the equivalent of \$380,000, which, adjusted for inflation, would represent roughly \$5.6 million today. In response, he wrote a petition to the minister of education, pleading for a reduction in the assessed tax amount and requesting an extension for his payment:

Today, my situation obliges me to ask for the help of the Turkish Ministry of Education, which I have served for fifty years. I am requesting this not as a claim, but as a plea for support, as a helpless member of the Turkish education community asking for mercy. While asking for this help, I would also like to present your Supreme Office with several of my works that I proudly offer to the Turkish nation before I die. The first is my great English-Turkish dictionary, which I started working on four years ago. The second is my great German-Turkish dictionary, and the last one is Turkish History, filled with glorious victories. These works, which are the recent efforts of a decrepit Turkish publisher, are mementos to his beloved country.

My plea for assistance arises from my desire and intent to fulfill thoroughly the second national service I have been called upon to perform. I was levied a wealth tax of 494,500 Turkish liras. I have already paid approximately 250,000 Turkish liras of my debt, but I had to sell all my possessions to be able to do so. All that remains to me are the books that I have published for fifty years. Only you can truly assess their value.

Therefore, in order to allow me pay my debt, I humbly ask for your Supreme Office's infinite mercy to purchase my books, which, not having any commercial value to the banks, could nevertheless be appraised and purchased by you. (Dokuyan 2014, 35)

Non-Muslim taxpayers who could not pay their dues, even after liquidating their estates, were sent in January 1943 to forced-labor camps in Aşkale, a small city on the eastern front of Turkey, to construct roads in -30° Celsius conditions. These internees were finally released in December 1943 (Bali 2005, 2010a; Ökte 1987). Bayar was not sent to the forced-labor camps, but we have no information about the total amount he paid the Turkish government.

According to Duru (1951, 582),

If he [Bayar] had not staggered under the Wealth Tax assessment of 600,000 liras—money he had earned with great efforts—his library would be filled today with hundreds of original works and more. This catastrophe destroyed him. To crown it all, he was sent to detention by the National Defense Tribunal (Milli Korunma Mahkemesi) because of a book alleged to be sold in Çankırı [300 miles away from Istanbul] at an exorbitant price; he was eventually acquitted but was unjustly detained in prison for many days. Unfortunately, he was not able to expand the Ankara Library, the New Library, and the National Library series he had recently begun to publish and disseminate.

Three years later, İlyas Bayar had a heart attack and passed away on January 26, 1945. Following a service in Istanbul's Knesset Israel Synagogue, he was buried on Sunday, January 28 in the family grave at Arnavutköy Cemetery. In attendance were the chief of the Press Association for the Istanbul region, Hakkı Tarık Us, as well as newspaper owners, all the booksellers of Ankara Street, and many others (İlyas Bayar 1945).

Many articles published after Bayar's death included biographical information, but few offered any assessment of his personality or accomplishments. One of the rare exceptions was the anonymously published piece (signed "a reporter") that appeared in *Haber Akşam Postası*, a minor Turkish evening daily (established 1931):

İlyas Bayar, founder of Kanaat Bookstore, is one of the most distinguished and memorable personalities of the press world. He began his career as a businessman, went on to work as an important editor and publisher, and died an exemplary human being.

...He knew how to embrace life's bad surprises and traumas with self-assurance and a smile... He spoke more like a philosopher than a merchant and anyone could see in his eyes how indulgent and tolerant a person he was. The fact that he paid the highest royalties of all publishers to his authors, proves that İlyas Bayar cherished humans as much as he cherished books. We witnessed so many of his sacrifices for authors that we have no doubt that he was an idealist committed to moral values, and not merely an ordinary tradesman. (Bir Muharrir 1945)

His friend Yakim Bahar (1945) added:

A young Kemalist, a valuable citizen of the Turkish Republic, and the owner of Kanaat Bookstore has departed this life on January 26, 1945. With his death, the Turkish nation and therefore, the educational system, lost a great treasure. İlyas Bayar, who for over half a century consistently, persistently, and tirelessly carried out his publishing and media duties, has been a memorable figure for the country's novelists, historians, professors—in short for all intellectuals.

The late İlyas Bayar always wanted to meet with prominent authors who were and still are in Babiâli; he paid close attention to them and embraced them. In this way, he brought unsettling, immortal ideas into being. He provided all manner of financial opportunity to venerable authors and thus gave them the opportunity to be significant to the country's culture.

The Jewish journalist David Benbassat, known by his pen name, Benby, wrote his impressions about the funeral in *Le Journal d'Orient*, a French-language newspaper mostly read by the Francophone minorities of Istanbul:

A sumptuous funeral ceremony was organized yesterday for the late İlyas Bayar, owner of Kanaat Bookstore, whose sudden death has grieved everyone who knew him.

The attendance of so many writers, journalists, publishers, merchants, and friends at the ceremony was living proof of how highly esteemed was this person, who spent the best years of his life publishing countless works and op-eds in so many newspapers. Among the people who filled the Knesseth Israel Synagogue were: Hakkı Tarık Us, head of the Press Association of Istanbul; Cemaleddin Saraçoğlu, owner of *Yeni Sabah* newspaper; Selim Nüzhet [Gerçek], senior official at Ministry of Education; Kemal Salih [Sel], owner of *La République* newspaper and manager of İlançılık Advertising Company; journalist-author Peyami Safa; Galip Kemali Söylemezoğlu, former ambassador to Moscow; Kemal İren, manager of the Press Cooperative; Halil Lütfü [Dördüncü], owner of the *Tan* newspaper; Vecihi Göktürk, manager of the State's Printing House; historian [İsmail] Hami Danişmend; attorney Gad Franko; publicist [Munis] Tekinalp; *Journal d'Orient* newspaper executives A. Gattegno and A. Abramovici; O. Kristallidis and Yaveridis of *Apoyevmatini* newspaper; [*Stamboul* newspaper manager] Pierre Le Goff; publishers, paper merchants, representatives of Jewish charity organizations, various newspaper reporters, etc.

Following funeral prayers accompanied by the synagogue choir, Mr. Sadi Kırımlı, former manager of Kanaat Bookstore, who had long been closely following the deceased's professional life, gave a eulogy in a voice muted by grief. He spoke about İlyas Bayar's tremendous energy, tireless work, and inestimable service to the country's educational life thanks to his entrepreneurship.

...The ceremony ended with a prayer recited by Rabbi Moshe Benhabib, member of Chief Rabbinate's Beth Din. Many people escorted İlyas Bayar to his final resting place in Arnavutköy Cemetery. Rest in peace, İlyas Bayar! You were an exemplary role model. (Benby 1945)

Duru (1951) reminisced about İlyas Bayar as follows:

İlyas Bahar will always be a valuable example for all citizens who wish to become book-sellers; he passed away but his sons took over his mission.

The *Great German Dictionary*, which he attempted to publish before his death, was completed last year, thanks to the two sons who followed their in father's footsteps. Anyone who leafs through this dictionary will be surprised at how it could be published under today's circumstances.

Bayar was survived by his wife, Sünbül Hanım, whom he married in 1915 (Koçu 1958–1973a), and his sons, Arslan and Yâkub Bayar. His sons continued to publish textbooks, atlases, and dictionaries. Koçu's entry on Yâkub Bayar in the Encyclopedia of Istanbul reads:

Eldest son of the distinguished publisher and editor İlyas Bahar Bayar; successor and co-owner of Kanaat Kütüphanesi, together with his brother, Arslan Bayar; born in Kuledibi in 1918 and raised in his father's institution; he has a son named İlyas from his marriage to Ayşe Hanım. In addition to his father's business, he also inherited his father's decency and kindness. Arslan Bayar, who was born in 1920, graduated from the Faculty of Law. The first book they published after the death of their father was the *Türkçeden İngilizceye Lûgat* [Turkish-English Dictionary]. (Koçu 1958–1973a)

Arslan Bayar shut down the publishing house in the late 1970s and opened a stationery business. After his death in 1994, Kanaat Bookstore was closed and its assets were liquidated (Robinbook 2004).

“A BOOK SELLER OF FORTY YEARS!”: INTERVIEW WITH İLYAS BAYAR (KIRK YILLIK KİTAPÇI! 1936)

What is the most important recollection you have in your years as an editor?

Right after the proclamation of the [second] constitution, I was taken into custody by police officers for two nights because of the books I published titled *Mahkemei Kübra* (The Final [i.e., Divine] Judgment), *Teşhiri İzmihlâl* (The Attraction of Oblivion), *Serveti Şahane* (The Imperial Treasure/ Treasury), and *Hakkı Millet* (The Right of the Nation); they were judged to be tomes against Abdülhamid [Abdul Hamid II, the last sultan of the Ottoman Empire], who was still on the throne at the time.

In what major ways did you serve Turkish culture?

I think that I rendered particular service to Turkish culture with my publications in the fields of general history and sociology and with the dictionaries in multiple languages that I published at various times.

What is the best-selling book you ever published?

Following the proclamation of the Constitutional Era, there were *Fransa İhtilâli Kebiri* (The Great Revolution in France) by the late Ali Reşat, *Türkçe Sarf ve Nahvi* (Turkish Morphology and Syntax) by Hüseyin Cahid, and *Türk Tarihi* (Turkish History) by Fuat Köprülü; in the Republican era, there was a book that I published in the new alphabet: *Gazi Mustafa Kemal* (The Conqueror Mustafa Kemal) by Bürhan Cahid... and also children's books and dictionaries in various languages. Faik Sabri's *Atlas*, Ahmet Vefik Paşa's collection of Molière in translation, and other publications in this field were the bestsellers.

What other famous bibliophiles did you meet?

Velit Ebuzziya, owner of *Zaman* newspaper; forestry inspector Mahfi; İsmail Hakkı, now director of the State Council's Tanzimat Department; Ali Haydar, member of the Ministry of Culture, Education and Discipline Committee; Mahmut Ragıp, manager of the *İnhisarlar* (Monopolies) Printing House; and many others, whose names I unfortunately cannot recall.

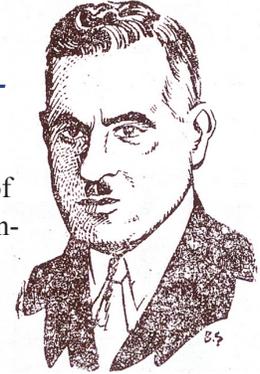


Figure 3. İlyas Bayar (1930s), Illustrated by Bülend Seren (Reşad Ekrem Koçu, *İstanbul ansiklopedisi* 4, 2214. İstanbul: Koçu Yayınları, 1958–1973)

What books are in demand in our country?

Previously, historical and literary publications were more in vogue; currently, reference books that interest children and young people of the new Republican generation are in demand.

What is the most important work you published after the adoption of the new alphabet?

Our latest and most important publications are *Fransızca-Türkçe Büyük Dil Kılavuzu* (French-Turkish Phrasebook), whose third volume is in print, and Hüseyin Daniş's *Hukukî ve Medeni Lûgati* (Dictionary of Legal and Civil Terms).

How many books did you publish in the new alphabet?

Must be more than a thousand.

Izidor Karon's TÜNEL GERMAN BOOKSTORE

Another famous bookstore in Beyoğlu was known as Tünel Kitap Evi (Tunnel Bookstore; Figure 4), owned by Izidor (Isidore) Karon, an Ashkenazi Jew from Istanbul. This bookstore, established in 1923, was situated in Tünel Square (Tunnel Square), the starting point of the main shopping boulevard of Istanbul, or Grande Rue de Péra. This very spot was previously the location of another bookstore, owned by Hristodulo Konstantinidu, and later on, the Librairie des écoles bookshop, owned by Antoine Gérard (Tünel Meydanı 1999). Most of the information about the store is provided by Karon's daughter Elfride (Elfi) Alfandari, who took over the bookstore after her father's death in 1967 and maintained it until 1983. A decade later she described the bookstore activities as follows:

My father, who was the founder of Karon Bookstore, was born in Strasbourg and later found employment as a teacher at the Goldschmidt Schule [established in Istanbul by the donations of Simon Goldschmidt, vice-president of Alliance israélite universelle, to provide a German education for Jewish children]. While teaching in Istanbul, he also started working at Cohen Soeurs [Kohen Sisters Bookstore; see below] in order to earn some extra money. However, he thought they were too commercially minded and that they did not know the literary world well enough, whereas my father was an intellectual. He taught German and literary studies and was interested in many related fields. He read a lot. When the Turkish Republic was proclaimed in 1923 and foreign instructors were banned from work, my father quit teaching and started selling books, a profession that he loved. He opened his first store, the *Deutsche Buchhandlung* [German Bookstore], on the upper floor of Foto Weinberg near Galatasaray [a square at the center of Grande Rue de Péra]. After a short time, a fire broke out in the photo shop and my father's entire inventory was reduced to ashes. He had barely recovered when he opened the Karon-Tünel Bookstore in Tünel, a place that old Stamboulis [Istanbul residents] remember well....



Figure 4. Izidor Karon's Tünel Kitap Evi (Tunnel Bookstore), 1950s? (Teri Galimidi, "The Idealist Book Dealer Izidor Karon," *Şalom*, October 5, 1995)

He sold only German books, newspapers, and magazines, and was very much admired by the German community, for he was adept at what he did; he knew his clientele, he could predict what genre they would prefer, and he stocked up accordingly. When his customers would come, he would say: “I bought these books for you.” He was both a bookseller and a friend, and a “walking source of information.” People would drop by not only to buy books but also to have a cultural discussion. There were some customers who came every day. He would have literary, political conversations with them and discuss new publications. This place was like a chat-room. It was one of the most frequently visited places by Istanbul’s German-speaking intellectuals. This continued until 1933. When Hitler came to power, the boycott of the Jews began. Germans were too frightened to come in. Some would peep from the window or furtively greet him and run away, thrilled to be seen. But in the meantime, a very strange situation arose: Hitler’s minister of foreign affairs, von Ribbentrop’s sister, was married to Jonke, a diplomat working at the embassy in Ankara. They visited my father without fear, from the beginning of the war on.... But the majority would go to Kalinski, a Nazi bookstore subsidized by Germany. There was a class distinction between our store and his. My father was much more knowledgeable and cultivated.

In 1933, while the Germans of Istanbul were moving away from our bookstore, a new bookish clientele started frequenting it. These were professors who had fled from Germany and, as you may know, most of them were Jewish. Our new friends were much more cultured and they had come to Istanbul to establish universities.... I was a kid back then, I had always met with them and befriended many of them, and these friendships lasted until their deaths.... Every time I go back to Germany, their children still call me because, after all, I am the only witness to the life they lived here.... All these professors would visit my father but Prof. [Rudolf] Nissen, Prof. [Philipp] Schwartz, Prof. [Bruno] Taut, Prof. [Ernst] Hirsch, Prof. [Fritz] Neumark, and Prof. [Clemens] Holzmeister would drop by almost every day.

Besides these renowned professors, other people who had barely escaped Germany were among the bookstore’s regulars. They would come and sit for hours in the heated store, breathe the air and culture of Germany, and read all the newspapers from cover to cover. My father would never take money from them. They could come and read any newspaper they wanted.

My father had an excellent memory—just like a computer. He knew his stock so well that he could immediately find any book desired. During the war we went through hard times, as we could not receive any books; they were sporadically imported from Switzerland, but [our] purchasing power had weakened too.

Karon Bookstore was very famous in Turkey back then. It was also known in the Anatolian provinces. After I got married and moved to a rural area for my husband's job, [I discovered that] telling people that I was the daughter of Karon Bookstore's opened doors for me.

My father was a legend to German readers of that period. They could find the book they wanted in the bookstore or they could order it. But as he was not a businessman and did not look at books as merchandise, he always lost money. The price tag would never change after inflations or devaluations.... I have a very clear memory of this: One day, a gentleman came in and asked for the price of a medical book on display. My dad told him it was 107 liras. The man replied: "We'll call it 100." My father did not even reply, but put the book back and began to help other customers. The man did not understand and asked for the book again and that's when my father said: "You cannot negotiate the price of a book, you do not love books, I do not have books to sell to you," and he actually did not sell it. Yet this was not a sought-after book and financially, we did not have the luxury of being reluctant sellers.

For my father, books had a sentimental value; he used to love and caress them as if they were living creatures. Until the end of his life he never lost his love for books. When he passed away in 1967, I had no intention of taking on the bookselling myself. I was married, I had two children, and my husband had a very good job.

I planned to close down the bookstore. Dr. Anhegg, the German cultural attaché of that time, called me and told me not to sell it. I explained to him that I could not deal with it and that I did not want to experience the challenges my father faced. He told me that the Karon name should go on, that this was not an ordinary bookstore but an institution. "If you sell it, a kebab place will open instead," he told me. He explained in detail the crucial place Karon Bookstore occupied within the Istanbul cultural environment and its importance for the continuation of this culture, and he convinced me.

Thanks to him, I worked for twenty more years at the bookstore. But unlike my father, I was not an idealistic bookseller. And in the meanwhile times had changed. I did not sell exclusively German books, but also English and French titles. When I started the business, I looked at the old booksellers: there were Vecdi Bey and my father, both of whom died penniless. I decided to leave aside idealistic thoughts and care more about commerce. This means that I did not maintain any inventory. I imported books on order and could still provide a very good service. I imported books and journals for universities. In a way, I didn't so much do book selling as book importing... As my husband was very much into books, he used to refer to them as a lover would... In recent years, he had retired and was coming to help me just for his own pleasure. In 1983, economic conditions worsened. I was tired and I thought I had earned my retirement. As my daughter did not

want to go on with the business, we had to close down Karon Bookstore. Now there is a kiosk on the premises.

Bookselling is a difficult job; not everyone can do it. Just as not everyone can be an artist, not everyone can be a good bookseller either.

A good bookseller loves books, has an emotional bond with them, but loves people too, knows how to listen to them, finds the book they need. Of course he must have a solid cultural background to do that, must read a lot, carefully scan the catalogues and not expect a great profit while doing all this. A bookseller's greatest pleasures are to open new book parcels, to inhale the smell of new books, to caress them, to place them on shelves, to follow the latest developments, and to read, to endlessly read... (Galimidi 1995a, 4)

Gerhart Kegel, a faculty member of Istanbul University, commented on Elfi Alfandari and the Tünel bookstore in his memoir:

...It is of special importance for me to have met Mrs. Elfi Alfandari, a Jewish bookseller who provided books to my students. I have great admiration for this woman, who seemed to pull the strings of the entire world in her little store. She can speak a dozen languages fluently and there is not a book in the world she cannot import in the shortest time. Being on the same side during the global civil war of the Nazi period quickly brought us closer to each other; also, thanks to her, my Jewish advocacy was strengthened and became a passion. Mrs. Alfandari's husband is a descendant of Sephardic (Spanish) Jews who were pursued, murdered, or expelled by the "most Christian kings" and then sheltered by "infidel" Ottoman sultans—this is a page of world history not very well-known by Europeans. I consider myself fortunate, for the bond between me and this extraordinary woman has not ruptured to this day. (Kegel 1998, 113–114)

THE KOHEN SISTERS' BOOKSTORE

The third well-known bookstore was the long-running Kohen Hemşireler Kitap Evi (Kohen Sisters' Bookstore). It succeeded another bookstore, S. H. Weiss, located at 482 Grande Rue de Péra (Indicateur Ottoman Annuaire-Almanach 1881, 327). The Kohen sisters ([Figure 5](#)) were notable dealers in rare and antiquarian books about the Ottoman Empire and Constantinople. Their store was still active in 1963, when Koçu completed the following entry in his Encyclopedia:

It is a reputable bookstore of Beyoğlu, founded about forty years ago; established in 1918 on İstiklal Street N. 491 by Mazalto (born 1888) and Elisa Cohen (born 1896), who took her husband's surname, Benzimra, after marriage. They are the daughters of Bohor Hay-

im Cohen, a middleclass carpet dealer (their mother's name was Rachel Cohen). The sisters established the bookstore with just four liras of capital and some contributions from their coreligionists. They sell books in foreign languages. Recently, they have started selling works printed and published by local publishers in Istanbul. (Koçu 1958–1973b)

Although Koçu provided valuable biographical information about the sisters, he did not recount that they arrived to Istanbul as refugees, as described by rare book dealer Francis Manasek (1995, 114): “The sisters Cohen, many years ago, fled one of the many pogroms that afflicted Jews living in Russia. As did many of the refugees, the sisters Cohens fled southward and got to Istanbul. The Turks, contrary to what many in the West believe, have a long tradition of tolerance... It was into this cosmopolitan city, a haven to waves of refugees that the Cohen sisters fled with their old books.”



Figure 5. Mazalto Kohen and Elisa Benzimra, 1940s?, illustrated by Bülend Seren (Reşad Ekrem Koçu, *Istanbul ansiklopedisi*, 7, 3599. İstanbul: Koçu Yayınları, 1958–1973)

By 1934, the Kohen sisters moved to another location on the same street (number 495; Kohen Bookstore Website 2017), as described in Koçu's encyclopedia (1958–1973b): “The bookstore is near Tünel on İstiklal Street, on the right-hand side after getting off the underground, a property that belongs to the Swedish Consulate. Recently, the Swedish Consulate planned to evict the Cohen sisters, but disposing a bookstore that served Istanbul's cultural life for more than forty years, while not unheard of, does not comport with diplomatic etiquette.”

The bookstore's sister owners were fluent in several languages. Manasek (1995, 114) recalled that one of them “was fluent in Turkish, Russian, French and Yiddish. I suspect she spoke German but just refused to do so on principle.” Similarly, Koçu reported that “Although both sisters are in the bookselling business, their Turkish is ineloquent: they were born and raised in Istanbul but they did not read Turkish literature; besides their mother tongue [Ladino or maybe Yiddish] and Turkish, Mazalto Cohen speaks French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, and Greek, while Elisa Benzimra speaks French, English, and Spanish; both are coffee addicts; they like to travel and enjoy fine arts (especially painting).”

Elisa's husband, Rafael Benzimra was a Moroccan Jew and an expert in rare and antiquarian books. Benzimra regularly traveled to Europe and brought back rare books and engravings about the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, but new magazines and newspapers were also sold in the store. Interestingly, film critic Giovanni Scognamiglio (1929–2016), a Levantine of Italian origin, reported in his memoirs that during World War II years, the Kohen Sisters bookstore used to sell

the illustrated Nazi propaganda *Signal* and the fascist *Tempo* magazines (Scognamillo 2002, 97). Other printed matter sold in the store included French textbooks; in the 1970s, the Kohen sisters provided imported books to all the French schools in Istanbul (Kohen Bookstore Website 2017).



Figure 6. The Kohen Sisters Bookstore, year unknown (The Kohen Bookstore website; <http://www.kohenkitap.com/Hakkimizda.DP-7.html>)

Samuel Sapan, who had started working at Kohen Sisters bookstore when he was twelve or thirteen years old, was asked about the store's customers years later, in a 1995 interview:

The first names that come to my mind are Prof. Semavi Eyice, Prof. [Arif] Müfit Mansel... The State Academy of Fine Arts, as well as İstanbul University's Faculty of Art History and Archaeology Department were our customers, too. And there were art lovers, as well.... For instance, the owner of Dekorasyon Store, a renowned institution of Beyoğlu, was an amateur collector of old books. One day, there were new arrivals and I was taking the books out of their parcels. An illustrated book of [Antoine Ignace] Melling had arrived. It was a very interesting book with colored engravings. Just as I was about to unpack it, he came in and saw it. He was so delighted, so jubilant, you would think he had found a treasure. I will never forget that moment.... (Galimidi 1995b, 4)

Another collector who used to purchase rare books at Kohen Sisters Bookstore was George C. McGhee (1912–2005), the United States ambassador in Ankara from January 15, 1952 to June 16, 1953. In 1984, McGhee donated his specialized library on the Ottoman Empire and Turkey to Georgetown University. In the foreword of the catalogue prepared for the special collection bearing the ambassador's name, the following reference to the Kohen Sisters Bookstore appears:

Initially, most of my purchases came from one source, the Cohen Sisters, a small book-selling firm in Istanbul, which consisted of two Cohen sisters and a Cohen brother [probably Rafael Benzimira, Elisa's husband]. The Cohens bought books from estates in Istanbul and the Levant and from dealers in London and Paris, where the brother made frequent visits. Apparently, these books sold better in Istanbul in those days. With the help of a dear friend and colleague, Miss Betty Carp, an officer in our Istanbul Consulate, I practically preempted the Turkish market for historical books. I was once rebuked by the British Consul General in Istanbul; he called me late one evening while in his cups to berate me for overpaying for books. Actually, even at the official rate, to which I was limited, the purchases were quite inexpensive, particularly when compared with 1984 values. (Jeffs 1984, VII)

The British author John Freely (1926–2017), known for his Istanbul travel guides and his history of Robert College of Istanbul, also referred to the Kohen Sisters Bookstore. Referring to a visit he made to the store, Freely wrote in the introduction to his 2001 book about Shabbetai Zevi, that Elisa Benzimira used to keep the rarest and most valuable books in a backroom. While perusing the books in that room, Freely noted that he had come across Richard Knolles's *The Lives of the Othoman Kings and Emperors*, which was published in London in 1610, and Sir Paul Rycaut's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, whose fourth edition was republished in London in 1680 (Freely 2001, 1–3).



Figure 7. The Kohen Sisters Bookstore, 13 Tünel Pasajı, Istanbul (The Kohen Bookstore website; <http://www.kohenkitap.com/Hakkimizda.DP-7.html>)

As reported by Koçu (1958–1973b), the Kohen sisters were indeed evicted from their location in the garden of the Swedish Consulate, and then moved to their new location in 13 Tünel Pasajı (Figure 7). It was the end of an era when the Kohen sisters, because of their advanced age, decided to hand their shop over to Samuel Sapan, their relative who had worked with them for

many years. In 2004, Samuel Sapan's son, Albert, took over the business. Today the institution operates under the name of Kohen Bookstore, but rather than dealing in rare books, the owner is engaged in importing fashion, magazines and catalogues (see Kohen Bookstore website 2017).

AFTERWORD: JEWISH BOOKS AND PUBLISHING IN TURKEY TODAY

In the Turkish market books are still primarily sold in stores, although e-commerce sites are becoming increasingly popular due to their financial advantage (space, and labor costs, etc.). The bookstore market is dominated by three principal chains: Inkilap, Remzi, and D&R. Inkilap has twelve stores (eight in Istanbul, two in Izmir, and one each in Ankara and Bursa). Remzi has nine stores (six in Istanbul, two in Izmir, and one in Ankara), and D&R has 282 stores (sixty-nine in Istanbul and the rest scattered throughout the country). Each bookstore chain is in turn owned by a major publisher (e.g., D&R is owned by the Doğan Media Group, which publishes books through its publishing subsidiary Doğan Kitap), but all of these stores sell all books regardless of the publisher. Independent bookstores that exclusively sell their own books face increasing difficulties in the face of the larger chains, which not only sell a greater variety of books, but also CDs and DVDs, phone and computer accessories and other electronics, greeting cards and stationary, among other things, and can thereby attract a greater clientele.

The market for Jewish-themed books in Turkey is both large and small. This paradoxical situation naturally requires some explanation. There has never been a Jewish studies chair or department in any academic institution in Turkey. The closest program to Jewish studies in Turkey is divinity studies, whose PhD students produce dissertations on a regular basis. In the last decade, there has been increased interest in minority issues in academic circles and among the general public but there is a very limited readership and market for scholarly books on Jewish themes. For this reason, two of the three existing Jewish-owned publishing houses have chosen to concentrate on non-Jewish themed titles. On the other hand, the market is saturated with anti-Semitic, anti-Israeli literature and works of conspiracy theory that respond to the demand of a large portion of Turkey's readership (mainly Islamists).

The current population of Turkish Jews is about 17,000, of whom about 1,500 live in Izmir, on Turkey's western coast, and a few dozen families in Ankara, Mersin and Adana. Thus, the majority of the Jewish population (15,000) lives in Istanbul, the cultural and business capital of Turkey, where the Chief Rabbinate and the only Jewish School (Ulus Özel Musevi Okulları) are also located. The library of the Chief Rabbinate in Istanbul consists of about 250 volumes in Ladino, catalogued by Dr. Dov Cohen of Naime and Yehoshua Salti of the Center for Ladino Studies of Bar-Ilan University and a thousand volumes in Hebrew, which have not been catalogued (Kohen 2007). Another collection, housed in Izmir's Jewish hospital in the Karataş quarter of the city, contains about 2,700 rare books, most of them in Hebrew and the remainder in Ladino. The books are catalogued but the catalog is not automated (see "Izmir's Jewish Community Book Collection" 2016 for an unsigned essay and some images; the website is housed on the domain of the Zalman Shazar Center). Additional books are stored in Izmir's synagogues and in the old

community center, where the entire Izmir collection was stored until a few years ago. This is what is left today of the rich libraries of the past. In today's Turkey there are only four publishing houses with Jewish ownership: Gözlem Gazetecilik, GOA Yayıncılık, Libra Kitapçılık and Büyükada Yayıncılık.

Revived under new ownership in 1982, Gözlem Gazetecilik is the publisher of the weekly *Şalom* (pronounced *Shalom*), Turkey's only remaining Jewish newspaper, which was established in 1947 by Avram Leyon (1912–1985). Initially, Gözlem's only goal was to continue to publish the *Şalom* newspaper. Since 1992 it has also published books with Jewish themes. To date, 153 fiction titles have been published, many of them translated from other languages, particularly English and Hebrew. Gözlem primarily serves the Jewish community of Istanbul and also sells Judaica items (mezuzas, menorahs, etc.). The publisher does not have a "brick-and-mortar" bookstore. Its office, situated in one of Istanbul's upscale quarters, also serves as a bookstore, but public access is possible by appointment only due to security concerns.

GOA Yayıncılık, established in 2005, publishes mainly self-help titles, fiction, and poetry. Its bestseller was the Turkish translation of Robin Sharma's *The Monk who Sold His Ferrari: A Fable About Fulfilling Your Dream and Reaching Your Destiny*. Jewish-themed books make up only four of its 246 titles.

Libra Kitapçılık was established in 2008. It publishes exclusively academic titles in Turkish, English, French, and Ladino in the fields of Turkish, Ottoman and Jewish studies. It has published 221 titles, of which 39 are of Jewish cultural interest, including biographies, Judeo-Spanish memoirs, and books on history and the Jewish press. Of Libra's publishing output, 37 titles are the works of its owner (author of this essay), of which 23 relate to Jewish subjects. Libra's main activity is providing libraries and scholars outside Turkey with local monographs and serials in the fields of Ottoman and Turkish studies and Judaica. Publishing represents a minor part of the firm's activities.

Büyükada Yayıncılık was established in 2015 by one of the shareholders of GOA Yayıncılık. Its publishing line is similar to that of GOA: self-help titles and novels. It acts more like a vanity press than a true publisher.

The once vibrant Jewish communities of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace (especially Edirne/ Adrianople) no longer exist; the Jewish cultural institutions and synagogues are gone. Edirne (Adrianople), Istanbul (Constantinople), and Izmir (Smyrna) had been the major Jewish cultural and publishing centers in the Ottoman Empire. Today, the only remaining signs of this glorious past are rare books and extant copies of journals and newspapers that one may encounter at Judaica auctions or rare book dealers in Turkey and abroad.

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