

## Preface

Over the past few years, hundreds of thousands of copies of two books by Soner Yalçın entitled *Efendi: Beyaz Türklerin büyük sırrı* (Master: The White Turks' Big Secret) and *Efendi 2: Beyaz Müslümanların büyük sırrı* (Master 2: The White Muslims' Big Secret) have been sold in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> The first purports to uncover the secret Jewish identity of the secular elite that has guided the nation for over a century, the sequel claims to unmask the hidden Jews within leading religious Muslim families. The cover of *Musanın çocukları Tayyip ve Emine* (Moses' Children Tayyip and Emine) by Ergün Poyraz, the second best-selling book in Turkey in 2007, is a photomontage of Turkish religious Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and his headscarf-wearing wife Emine—both of Jewish origin, it contends—trapped within a Star of David.<sup>2</sup> Everyone important in Turkey, it seems, has Jewish ancestry. Ghost Jews haunt the Turkish popular imagination.<sup>3</sup> Many Turkish secularists believe that Prime Minister Erdoğan is a crypto-Jew working to undermine Turkey's secular order. Islamists and, increasingly, large segments of the Turkish reading public think atheist Jews overthrew the Ottoman sultan, dissolved his Islamic empire, replaced it with an anti-Muslim secular republic led by the “secret Jew” Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and still today control the country.<sup>4</sup>

The Republic of Turkey has in fact never been led by a secret Jew. Nevertheless, the popularity of sensational accounts about secret Jewish plotters scheming to undermine Turkey has shed light on a group that would otherwise have remained lost to history. A group of people who seem to have acted as crypto-Jews did exist for over two centuries in Ottoman Salonika and later, after the First Balkan War, when the

city surrendered to the Greeks in 1912, in Greek Thessaloniki, and then after the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange of 1923–24, in Turkish Istanbul. Whether we call them *Ma'aminim* (Hebrew, Believers), as they called themselves, or *Dönmeler* (Turkish, Converts; hereafter Dönme), as others called them, either way, both terms refer to the descendants of Jews who converted to Islam along with their messiah Rabbi Shabbatai Tzevi three centuries ago. Shabbatai Tzevi's story, and that of the first generation of his followers, has been told by Gershom Scholem and others,<sup>5</sup> but the ethno-religious identity, history, and experience of the descendants of the original Dönme in the modern period remains unexplored. Although many believe conspiracy theories about the Dönme, very few know the real character and history of the group. The aim of this book is to answer a number of questions. To what extent is it appropriate to refer to these descendants of Jewish converts simply as Jews? If their beliefs and practices placed them outside the Jewish fold, by what means did they maintain their distinction from Jews and Muslims, and why? How did they view themselves, how did others view them, and how did these perceptions change over time? What role did the group play in late Ottoman and early Turkish republican history? Whether describing conversion from one religious tradition to another, or from a religious way of being to a secular one, how do we know when conversion has occurred? What are the limits to being a Jew, a Muslim, a Turk, or a Greek?

After their initial conversion, the Dönme were accepted as Muslims for two centuries, and by the end of the nineteenth century, they had risen to the top of Salonikan society. From that vantage point, they were able to help bring about new ways of thinking, and of being in the world, in the Ottoman Empire. However, they fervently maintained a separate ethno-religious identity and firm social boundaries, preserved by detailed genealogies, endogamous marriage practices, and separate schools and cemeteries. The Dönme helped transform Ottoman Salonika into a cosmopolitan city by promoting the newest innovations in trade and finance, urban reform, and modern education, combining morality and science, literature, architecture, and local politics. Their greatest and most controversial contribution was in serving as a driving force behind the Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter CUP), the secret society of Young Turks that dethroned the last powerful sultan, Abdülhamid II, following the 1908 revolution.

Soon after the revolution, the Dönme faced a double-pronged attack. In Istanbul, they were castigated for their membership in what many perceived to be the atheist and immoral CUP and the decision to remove the sultan from power. For the first time their Islamic faith and practice were also doubted. They were not only targeted for what they believed, but for what they did, namely, engage in foreign economic networks and local politics. After Salonika fell to Greece in 1912, there was no room in the city for pluralism. In what became Greek Thessaloníki, some Dönme managed to hold on to their political and financial capital, but after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey just over a decade later they were expelled from Greece, which could not tolerate “non-Greek” elements with substantial financial connections beyond the nation-state. In their new homeland, Turkey, which had seen a decade of anti-Dönme rhetoric, the Dönme faced opponents who used ethnicized religion (conflating being Turkish with being Muslim) and racialized nationalism (only accepting those with “Turkish blood”) to deny them a secure place in the secular Turkish nation-state. Relating to this external pressure was a turn away from endogamy, which brought about the real end of Dönme distinctness. The greatest irony is that although they had contributed to the major transformations replacing the empire with the nation-state, the Dönme dissolved as a group during the process.

A further irony is the way the Dönme have been remembered. To their admirers, they were enlightened secularists and Turkish nationalists who fought against the dark forces of superstition and religious obscurantism. But to their opponents, they were atheists, or simply Jews who had engaged in a secret Jewish plot to dissolve the Islamic empire and replace it with an anti-Muslim secular republic led by a crypto-Jew. Both points of view, whether complimentary or critical, assumed that the Dönme were anti-religious. However, the historical record shows that the Dönme created a new form of ethno-religious belief, practice, and identity, which made them distinct, while promoting a morality, ethics, and spirituality that reflected their origins at the intersection of Jewish Kabbalah and Islamic Sufism. Their syncretistic religion, along with a rigorously maintained, distinct ethnic identity, meant that they were neither Jews nor orthodox Muslims.

The three-centuries-long history of the Dönme in the Ottoman Empire, Greece, and the Republic of Turkey has not been the subject of a major academic study. There are many reasons for this. One is the idea

that serious scholars should avoid controversial matters, especially the stuff of conspiracy theories. Another is the ethical minefield of writing about a secret community whose descendants neither want nor deserve to be exposed. But the biggest roadblock to writing about the Dönme is simply that discovering with certainty who members of this group were and locating them in Ottoman and Turkish historical sources is nearly impossible for an outsider. The Dönme were officially considered Muslim, had common Muslim names such as Ahmet and Mehmet, and are thus indistinguishable from other Muslims in the Ottoman archival records available in Thessaloniki and Istanbul and in published Turkish sources. In order to compensate for the difficulty of studying this group, whose identity was an open, if not openly recorded, secret, a historian has to draw from a number of architectural, epigraphic, oral, archival, literary, and official sources, which do not explicitly state that the people in question are descendants of the followers of Shabbatai Tzevi. Only by combining sources can one determine who belonged to the group. In order to investigate those invisible in the nineteenth century, one must first find them in the twentieth century, when major shifts in historical processes made them visible, and then work backward. To the best of my ability as a historian, I have written a narrative moving forward, correlating information contained in written and oral sources. We know the most about the Dönme in the early twentieth century, second most about the group in the late nineteenth century. After 1950 and before 1850, the picture is much less clear, because we have fewer and less reliable sources for these periods. This book thus chiefly deals with the period about which I am most confident in my sources. Short vignettes dramatizing some of the key events and illustrating the lives and sentiments of participants in them, based on historical documents, are embedded in the narrative.

I do not come from a Dönme family, nor did I marry into one. Because I am an outsider to the group, the difficult process of sleuthing together the narrative of this book would not have been possible without the help of many people. It has not been an easy or transparent process and has required much labor, imagination, chance encounter, and good fortune. First, I had to locate and make contact with descendants of Dönme in Turkey, the United States, and western Europe who were willing to discuss their family histories. Along with the very few who allow themselves to be publicly identified as descendants of the group, I discovered three

types of interviewees. One consists of those who told me a great deal, but made me promise never to publish anything about the group, because it would only be taken the wrong way. I have honored their concerns and refrained from publishing significant material I collected from them. Another group of interviewees were those who told me everything they knew and provided ample documentation, but would not permit me to use their real names. The final group were those who allowed me to use the names of their ancestors but not their own.

There are many challenges to conducting research within a culture of secrecy. Some Dönme came to me desperate to learn about their religion and history. Many demanded anonymity. Some wanted publicity. Others sought to persuade me not to research the subject, thus exposing their secrets, whereas others wanted to use me to promote their intragroup interests and prove their claims. Some professed not to know that well-known relatives of theirs (who publicly acknowledged their identity) had spoken on the subject. One day people greeted me with warm receptions and a willingness to be interviewed for hours, to discuss family lore, to show me photographs, postcards, and genealogies, and ask me to decipher Ottoman documents (since the 1928 language reform, Turkish has been written in Latin script). They would offer to introduce me to all of their relatives. But the next day or the next time I called, or the next few times I called, they were either unreachable, or said their relatives were ill or busy, or out of town.

At first, I thought these people feared exposure of their names. Yet why, in that case, had they agreed to the initial meeting and been so willing to provide so much family history and document it? Were they afraid of being recognized for who they were? Then I realized I was playing an important function for many individuals and families: I served as both a release and accomplice. I would listen to all of their pent-up stories and jumbled histories and, they hoped, sort them out or make sense of them. I was in on the secret, yet not part of the secretive group. Coming from abroad, with the stamp of the academy, I could confirm the history underlying their strange stories, the odd instances of discrimination, the bizarre things their grandmothers had told them. And then, freed of the photographs, and the genealogies, and the stories, they could go back to blending in, and being unmarked secular, nationalist Turks, obscuring their grandparents' strange practices with a heavy dose of secular Turkish historical narrative.

Despite challenges such as these, information culled from the oral histories I conducted, supplemented with genealogies, provided names that allowed me to trace a number of families back several generations. Next, I surveyed inscriptions written in Ottoman Turkish script and modern Turkish on tombstones at the main Dönme cemeteries in Istanbul (in modern Thessaloníki, these no longer exist), which contain the graves of thousands of people who were mainly born in Salonika around 1880 and buried in Istanbul in the 1930s. This allowed me to learn their names prior to the adoption of surnames in 1937. Once I compiled information on their social and economic positions and family links in Salonika from the tombstones, I then turned to the Ottoman archives. At the Atatürk Library in Istanbul, I examined the official *Selânik Vilâyeti Salnamesi* (Yearbook of the Province of Salonika), published between 1885 and 1908. I used this source to gather more information on the economic, cultural, and political role of leading Dönme families in Salonika, and their social and financial links and networks. Additional interviews with descendants informed me of the neighborhoods in which Dönme had lived in Salonika, allowing me to then systematically search two additional Ottoman-language sources. The first is the 1906 *Arazi ve Emlaki Esasi Defteri* (Register of Lands and Properties), a neighborhood-by-neighborhood property register preserved at the Historical Archive of Macedonia in Thessaloníki. The second is the *Muhtelit Mübadele Komisyonu Tasfiye Talepnameleri*, the 1923–25 Records of the Mixed Commission, which list the wealth and property of Dönme who were part of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. These files are today kept at the Archive of the Republic in Ankara. From these two sources, I learned about the web of relations Dönme once had in Salonika, enabling me to locate their co-owned family residences and family businesses, and to map their spatial presence and impact in the city. Other sources in Ottoman and Turkish from the Dönme perspective include the literary journal *Gonca-i Edeb*, histories of the two Dönme schools, and memoirs published in Turkey. I also learned much from the Ottoman and Turkish newspapers and journals *Akbaba*, *Akşam*, *Büyük Doğu*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Mihrab*, *Resimli Dünya*, *Resimli Gazete*, *Resimli Şark*, *Sebilürreşat*, *Son Saat*, *Ulus*, *Vatan*, *Vakit*, *Volkan*, and *Yedi Gün*.

Several visits to Thessaloníki afforded me an opportunity to investigate the few traces of the Dönme that remain, namely, the design and layout of buildings such as the New Mosque and seaside villas, and en-

abled me to interview the people who currently work in these buildings. I also found useful Greek memoirs, the Jewish *Journal de Salonique* and the Greek *Efēmeris tōn Balkaniōn*, *Faros tēs Makedonias*, and *Makedonia* newspapers, turn-of-the-century Greek tourist guidebooks, commercial guidebooks, archives of the chamber of commerce and industry, the file of associations and clubs, and voting registers. Finally, I utilized American, Austrian, British, and French diplomatic and commercial reports from Ottoman Salonika.

The Introduction, “Following the Jewish Messiah Turned Muslim, 1666–1862,” is mainly concerned with the development of the unique ethno-religious identity of the Dönme as they and others perceived it. It explains the complicated religion, culture of secrecy, and history of the Dönme from their origins in the wake of the messianic movement of Rabbi Shabbatai Tzevi to when the Ottoman state first recognized their distinctness from other Muslims. It explores Shabbatai Tzevi’s conversion to Islam, the ensuing conversion of one group of his followers, the coalescing of the group in Salonika, and its splitting into three sects (Yakubi, Karakaş, and Kapanacı). Arguing against how the Dönme are portrayed today and how they have been depicted in Greek, Jewish, and Turkish historiography, which consider the Dönme to have been Jews, it describes what made Dönme religion distinct from Judaism and Islam. The chapter considers not only Dönme religion and ethnic identity, but also what Jews thought of the Dönme, and seeks to discover in what ways a comparison with “crypto-Jews” is accurate.

After the Introduction, the book is divided into three sections. Part I concerns the Dönme in Ottoman Salonika. Chapter 1, “Keeping It Within the Family, 1862–1908,” focuses on Dönme belief, practice, and boundary maintaining mechanisms. Chapter 2, “Religious and Moral Education: Schools and Their Effects,” concerns their schools. Chapter 3, “Traveling and Trading,” explores the social and economic networks of the Dönme. Together, the chapters have as their main purpose illustrating the interrelation between the worldview of the Dönme and their impact in Salonika between 1862 and the Constitutional Revolution. The Dönme way of being is illustrated by successful turn-of-the-twentieth-century Salonikan Dönme merchant families that maintained a particularistic religious core and firm social boundaries—especially evident in detailed genealogies, endogamous marriage practices, segregated residential patterns, and distinct mosque and cemeteries. An excellent example is also presented

by the two Dönme schools, which reflected the role religion and morality played in Dönme life and influenced both Salonika's literary scene and Dönme architecture.

Part II concerns the period between the end of empire and rise of the nation-state. Chapter 4, "Making a Revolution, 1908," concerns the history and experience of the Dönme during the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution and in the context of racism and nationalism, when other Muslims began to take notice and attack them. The chapter explores how many leading Dönme entered first local politics, especially seeking the office of the mayor, and then turned to Freemasonry and revolutionary organizations, including the CUP. The chapter in particular addresses the role of the Dönme in the 1908 revolution, as well as in the "Action Army" sent to Istanbul to crush a counterrevolution a year later. A main question the chapter addresses is why the Dönme began to attract so much attention after the revolution, particularly in Dervish Vahdeti's journal *Volkan* (Volcano). Responding to conspiracy theories of secret Jews and world revolution, the chapter compares the Dönme and Soviet Jews, who played a disproportionate role in the Bolshevik Revolution.

Four short years after the Constitutional Revolution, following Ottoman losses in the two Balkan Wars, Salonika was conquered by Greece. Chapter 5, "Choosing Between Greek Thessaloníki and Ottoman Istanbul, 1912–1923," analyzes how the Dönme responded to the new political circumstances. The chapter explores how the new Greek administration of Thessaloníki viewed the Dönme, especially those in local politics, the economic and political situation of the Dönme who remained in the city during this period, the fate of Dönme institutions such as schools, and the careers of leaders, including the last Ottoman mayor, a Dönme. After discussing how some Dönme chose to leave Greek Thessaloníki and reestablish their lives in Istanbul, the chapter discusses the racist written attacks they faced in their new homeland. These included a vicious anonymous caricature linking the group and their international ties to moral and physical corruption, claiming that the Dönme were the main force spreading immorality, charges rebutted by the army veteran Major Sadık, son of Suleiman, who emphasized Dönme moral piety in a secular age.

Part III concerns the Dönme in Turkish Istanbul. Chapter 6, "Losing a Homeland, 1923–1924," explores the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, which involved the expulsion of all Salonikan Dönme from



their ancestral home to Turkey, and how they managed this unwelcome transition, establishing themselves in a nation-state whose population was loathe to receive them. Chapter 7, "Loyal Turks or Fake Muslims? Debating Dönme in Istanbul, 1923–1939," interprets controversies in Turkey about Dönme race and religion. It concerns the new challenges Dönme faced after arriving in Istanbul, how they met them, and how the challenges in turn changed them, and how others viewed them then. This era witnessed the creation of a homogeneous, secular, Turkish national identity from a plural, religious Ottoman identity, debates about who was a Turk, the Turkification of Istanbul, and the change from Ottoman indifference to Turkish debate with and fierce opposition to the Dönme. Dönme also played a major role in the public debate over the history, religion, and identity of the group and its ability to integrate into the nation. While Mehmet Karakaşzade Rüştü took a racialized nationalist line, arguing that the Dönme were racially and religiously Jews and foreigners and not Muslims and Turks, Ahmet Emin Yalman contended that they had always been loyal servants of the nation and were as a group in the process of total dissolution within it. Yalman was countered by many who saw evidence of the continued practice of Dönme religion and perpetuation of their identity. One such was İbrahim Alâettin Gövsa, principal of a Dönme girls' school in Istanbul.

Chapter 8, "Reinscribing the Dönme in the Secular Nation-State," and Chapter 9, "Forgetting to Forget, 1923–1944," focus on how Dönme and others failed to allow the group to assimilate into Turkish and Greek society. Chapter 8 answers the question of how the Dönme maintained their social and religious distinctness and institutions in their new homeland by focusing on self-segregation and separate schools and cemeteries in Istanbul. A change is noticeable. Whereas the Dönme schools in Salonika had produced religious youth comfortable in international contexts, in Istanbul, they were charged with producing secular nationalists. Chapter 9 begins by exploring how those who remained in Greek Thessaloníki faced charges of disloyalty and foreignness similar to those brought against the Dönme in Istanbul. In Istanbul, the wealth tax episode during World War II—which when implemented marked Dönme as distinct from Muslims—showed the failure of both Dönme attempts to assimilate and the secular Turkish nation-state's promise to treat them as equals.

The Conclusion traces how the transition from cosmopolitanism to nationalism and racism to antisemitism affected the Dönme and memory

of the Dönme. It asks what impact knowledge of the Holocaust had on the Dönme and narrates the Dönme experience in the era immediately following World War II. Finally, the Postscript discusses the impact of the return after 1950 of articulations of crude anti-Dönme rhetoric, culminating in attacks on descendants of Dönme, including an attempt in 1952 to assassinate Ahmet Emin Yalman.