Musing Cities: From Sefarad to Jerusalem via Istanbul

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During her visit to the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Constantin Brancusi exhibition "The Essence of Things" took the author back to the city of Salonika, also called "the Mother of Israel". Her great-great-grandfather lived in the Jewish quarter of the Ottoman Salonika, formerly Roman and Byzantine, where Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews and Armenians lived together for centuries. She grew up in Istanbul, where she remembers the Ladino language and her Turkish and Jewish double identity. It was in America where the author discovered the complexity of the religion that determines her identity, a religion that she had never believed nor practiced. Finally, she lived in Jerusalem, where she made contact with Palestinians born in Israel and not speaking Hebrew. As in the sculptures of Brancusi, the identity of the people lies in the simplicity of their forms, in the essence of their movements, in their reality.

"I am alone in New York City and having a great weekend," I repeated to myself. Despite my attempts at self-delusion, my visit to the city was turning out to be a disappointment. The friend I had come to visit had not shown me the kind of hospitality I expected, leaving me no choice but to roam around on my own. But the city felt distant and removed. Without a companion, I couldn't take part in New York.

On my way to the Guggenheim Museum, I saw pigeons perched up on a traffic-light pole. For a moment they provided me solace—they looked like the same pigeons that I used to feed on the streets of Istanbul, the city where I grew up.

The exhibition at the Guggenheim, "The Essence of Things", featured an artist I did not recognize: Constantin Brancusi.[1] In the museum's whitewashed lobby stood a single wooden sculpture. I tried to decipher the magical artistry that had carried this odd sculpture into such a prestigious locale but at first sight "The Essence of Things" seemed plain and boring. The name of the artist and its archaic appeal appeared to be the exhibition's only charm. Constantin. Perhaps, I thought, he was named after Istanbul—once also known as Constantinople.

But there was no turning back; I had already paid for my ticket and was not about to let

1. The exhibition "The Essence of Things" featuring the work of Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) was showcased at the Guggenheim Museum between June 11 and September 19, 2004. See http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/brancusi/index.html.

$12.50 go to waste. I looked up the spiral stairs of the museum and, as I climbed up, Constantin brought me back to the cities of my past.

I recently discovered that my paternal great-great-grandfather emigrated from Salonika to "Estambol"[2] sometime in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His name was Moshe Aelion and that is about all I know of him.

The Salonika where Moshe Aelion was born no longer exists. Nationalism wiped 500 years of Ottoman rule off the face of Salonika and, along with it, all reminders of Moshe

In Moshe's time, Salonika was a typical Ottoman city. Yet it was not ordinary—not in the sense of the word as we use it today to describe modern cities. When Victorian travelers stepped out of steamboats at the port of Salonika, they were startled and appalled to be greeted by hordes of Hebrews who spoke a bizarre mixture of a language they called Ladino. These oriental-looking Jews grabbed the travelers and their suitcases and carried them through Salonika's narrow streets into a Western-styled inn, so that they could feel comfortably at home in that picturesque city. My great-great-grandfather must have lived in the Jewish quarter of Salonika and frequently encountered the tourists going to the Levant.

It is impossible for me to understand the reasons why Moshe Aelion left the city that Jews like him called "the Mother of Israel." Perhaps his move was motivated by financial considerations; perhaps it was the lure of the cosmopolitan Ottoman capital that attracted Moshe to Istanbul. Maybe he had the soul of a wanderer and one morning he filled a small suitcase with clothes enough for a week, put on a fez and traveled south. Whatever the reason, his departure changed the future identity of the Aelion family, resulting in my eventual birth to a Jewish Turkish family living in Istanbul. That family spoke Turkish and bore the name "Alyon"—a Turkified version of the original, recreated to follow Turkish grammar rules.

The Salonika where Moshe Aelion was born no longer exists. Nationalism wiped 500 years of Ottoman rule off the face of Salonika and, along with it, all reminders of Moshe.[3] But all this is not surprising—after all Moshe's Ottoman Salonika was a creation that followed the destruction of the Byzantine city that existed before it, and the Byzantine Salonika—a result of the annihilation of Roman Salonika. As two nineteenth-century Victorian travelers wrote then, "all that is of the pagan period has been Byzantinized, all that was Byzantine has been Mohommedanized."[4]

But Salonika is clueless; she is oblivious to her omnipresent identity crisis. After all, she is a modern city, a Greek city. She no longer remembers her previous life as Salonika—a flourishing Ottoman town, where layers and layers of identities coexisted. Nor does she remember her Jewish inhabitants calling her "the Mother of Israel," or how she willingly closed her port on the Jewish Sabbath every Saturday. She has forgotten that at one time the Jews had recreated her as the cultural center of Sephardic Jewry. She cannot recall how Young Turks gathered in secrecy in coffee shops to plan the overthrow of Abdulhamid II or how Sabatean Dönme, or *ma'aminim* (believers) as they would have called themselves, uttered secret prayers before they were shipped off along

2. "Istambul" in Ladino.
3. Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950,* London, Harper Collins, 2004.
4. Georgena Mary Muir Mackenzie and Adeline Paulina Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic Provinces of Turkey-in-Europe,* London, Daldy, Isbister & Co, 1877.

Moshe Aelion and his family in Istanbul (Nathalie Alyon).

with the city's Muslims to foreign lands.[5] Nor does she remember how Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews and Armenians lived in their respective quarters. For centuries, these communities had lived together but separately: without intermingling, yet also without serious quarreling. All this she cannot remember, since not much remains to remind her. She is not confused, since all she knows today is her current identity. Her past existence remains buried under cement buildings and wide boulevards, as if the "Mother of Israel" had never existed.

I grew up in a city suffering a similar identity disease: Istanbul. As a little child I hated visiting my grandparents' home. All the adults shouted in Ladino—my grandfather had hearing problems—while I sat on a big couch, not understanding a word. I always left my grandparents with a headache from all the loud gibberish. Ladino. The language of the Spanish Jews who fled their homeland during

5. The compulsory population exchange between the Muslims of Greece and the Christians of Turkey was signed in 1923 at the Lausanne Peace Conference. The population exchange deemed Salonika's Dönme "Muslims", and despite requests for exemption the community was subjected to the exchange. In an ironic twist of fate, the Jews of the city who remained behind were annihilated by the Nazis during World War II. See Marc David Baer's recently published work on the Dönme which includes a fascinating chapter on Salonika's Sabatean community. Marc David Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, and Secular Turks,* Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009.

the Expulsion, who never let go of their native tongue but enriched (or bastardized) it by infusing it with the languages of their new homes: Turkish, French, Hebrew... Ladino: a language now on its deathbed.[6]

My grandmother never spoke to me in her mother tongue—I would not have understood her. Born and raised in the Turkish Republic, she speaks to me in Turkish with a heavy Ladino accent

Is Ladino even a language in its own right or is it simply ancient Spanish corrupted by the languages of others? "A fabricated language is one that belongs to those who evade history," said Turkish intellectual writer Cemil Meriç; it is the voice "of a generation that lost its memory" and "belongs to those who have no country."[7] I doubt Meriç wrote these lines with Ladino in mind—he was a conservative nationalist. Nevertheless, the Turkish Jews of the Spanish Expulsion have had no country and somehow failed to evade history. My grandmother never spoke to me in her mother tongue—I would not have understood her. Born and raised in the Turkish Republic, she speaks to me in Turkish with a heavy Ladino accent, and when she gets excited, words in Ladino fly out of her mouth like imprisoned butterflies fleeing their cage. As a young girl she endured state sponsored programs that castigated those who spoke Ladino (or Greek or Armenian). "*Vatanda, Türkçe Konu!*" ["Citizen, Speak Turkish!"] the real Turks demanded.[8] She became an immigrant in her own country but she did not move an inch.

I do not speak any fabricated language yet it is my generation who has lost its memory. It is my generation who has killed Ladino. Today when I visit my grandmother and ask her to tell me about her childhood, butterflies take wind off her lips and I understand most of what she says. I understand her because I learned Spanish in America—a language not "fabricated."

Before this third layer, the American, was stitched onto my dual identity as a Turk and a Jew, I was battling to decide whether these dual identities coexisted, like the braided, multi-wicked Havdalah candle lit to signify the end of the Jewish Sabbath, or repelled one another to forever separate them, like the Bosporus parts Asia from Europe. I remember Friday nights when the deep voice of the imam penetrated our living room from an open window and mixed with my grandfather's voice as he chanted the Kiddush (the Sabbath prayer) in Hebrew holding a glass of wine. Ironically, he could not speak a word of Hebrew and read from a transliterated prayer book adapted for Turkish. That dinner table served people of two different eras. Unlike my grandparents who preserved the Salonikan tradition of keeping separate from the people of the nation where they formed a small minority, I answered "no" when they asked if I had made Jewish friends.

Had I chosen the candle? How could I have when, as the daughter of secular parents, I had

6. Nearly all native Ladino speakers today are over sixty years old. While enthusiastic preservationists of Ladino organize conferences and communicate online through internet groups, their children and grandchildren do not learn or speak Ladino. See Tracy K. Harris, "The State of Ladino Today", *European Judaism,* Vol. 44, No. 1, Spring 2011, pp. 51-61. *European Judaism* recently dedicated two issues to Ladino studies.

7. Cemil Meriç, "Arrows of Fate", *Journal of Levantine Studies,* 1, Winter 2011.

8. The "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" campaign, which began in 1928 and continued throughout the 1930s, mobilized the Turkish public to pressure fellow-citizens to speak only Turkish, targeted non-Muslim minorities. Through such initiatives, the government pressured non-Turks to assimilate and become "Turkish". For a detailed analysis of the "Citizen, Speak Turkish!" campaign, see Senem Aslan, "'Citizen, Speak Turkish!': A Nation in the Making", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics,* Vol. 13, No. 2, 2007, pp. 245-272.

no idea that a "Havdalah candle" even existed. I had spent my entire childhood in Turkey refusing to partake in any Jewish activity, be it attending the youth club gatherings at the Jewish community center or befriending the "nice daughter" of my parents' friends. Only after becoming an American Jew did I learn the intricacies of the religion that shaped my identity—a religion that I neither believed in nor practiced.

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Then, somehow, I found myself as the most active member of the Jewish Multicultural Club at my American university, toiling to bake ovens full of Jahnun, having never tasted it. Jahnun is a traditional Yemenite Jewish dish made out of rolled dough baked on a low heat overnight. A few months after my first introduction to Jahnun in the United States, I arrived in Jerusalem as an exchange student at Hebrew University's International School. In Jerusalem I could get frozen Jahnun from the corner market ready to be microwaved. In Jerusalem Judaism was available pre-packaged. Jahnun is Jewish and so was I, but was Jahnun mine—was it *my* culture?

Looking back at my first days in Jerusalem all I remember is the phrase "Shabbat Shalom." It had a visceral effect on me—the sound waves of those uttering "Shabbat Shalom" traveled through my bones and reached my gut. Back in Istanbul, my grandparents used to say these two words during Friday night dinners. After the Kiddush, each member of the family would kiss one another and say "Shabbat Shalom." The meaning of this ritual was insignificant to me back then. But in Jerusalem, people started saying "Shabbat Shalom" on Thursdays and kept repeating it throughout the entire weekend. The cab driver, the woman at the grocery store, my Hebrew teacher, the man playing violin on the street thanking me for the one shekel I dropped in his case—all said "Shabbat Shalom" and I said it back.

Jerusalem—a city strange yet so familiar—reminded me of Istanbul because of their juxtaposing of the modern with the ancient, the two so intermingled that they could not be separated. I spent many afternoons wandering around the Old City, chatting with shop owners, drinking *Kafe Turki* in family-owned restaurants overlooking the Dome of the Rock. Jerusalem's Old City is divided into four quarters: Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Armenian. These quarters are not divided physically like the walls that separate the Old City from modern Jerusalem, but each quarter's inhabitants mark the separation. In a way, this archaic city has preserved the Ottoman tradition to keep together but separate. Even outside the Old City walls built by Sultan Süleyman the Great, the ultra-orthodox Jews of Mea Shearim do not mix with those who lead a secular life and the Anglo-Saxons prefer to settle in neighborhoods such as the German Colony, where one is more likely to hear English than Hebrew. Even though the Arab neighborhoods seem miles away from Jewish Jerusalem, the two are bound together in a tragic twist.

Part of my Jerusalem experience featured *ulpan,* intensive Hebrew classes. I studied in an eclectic class with Americans who had come to Israel for one year, a few South Americans and Russians who had permanently immigrated to Israel, and three Arab-Israelis. The two Russians always sat next to each other; the Argentinean next to the Colombian; the three Arabs in their own little corner, and the Americans sprinkled themselves about the classroom, dominating the lessons with their heavy accents.

I spoke with the Palestinians as much as I could with my broken Hebrew. Once they found out that I was Turkish, they vehemently

inquired whether I was Muslim. To their visible disappointment, I told them I was Jewish. Nevertheless, that did not stop us from continuing pleasant conversations throughout the course. They were all Jerusalem natives and were learning Hebrew in order to study at the university. I was confused. How come they did not speak the language if they were born and raised in Israel? Ibrahim's high-school education was in Arabic. Hebrew was only taught for two years, an hour a week, and he barely showed up to class because he did not want to learn the language of the country he despised. He told me how he later regretted that choice.

Ibrahim reminded me of a comparative literature professor at my university back in America I shall call Professor Woodhead. He was an advisor for Middle Eastern Studies, my minor at the university, and while taking his *1001 Arabian Nights,* I had been contemplating studying abroad in Israel. There were many options for overseas students in Israel—I could study in Tel Aviv or Beer Sheva or Jerusalem. I went to his office to seek his advice.

Sitting across his office desk, I told him about my desire to continue learning Hebrew and to start learning Arabic. His first response was to tell me how hard it is to learn Arabic—"a life-long endeavor" for which I was not a suitable candidate. After assuring him of my awareness of the difficulty of Arabic, he felt the need to ask, "You know I am *not* Jewish?" Why would I be asking his advice? Caught off-guard, I told him that I was consulting him as my professor, not because he was not Jewish, which I did in fact know.

Professor Woodhead, feeling uncomfortable from my logical response to his unprofessional question, mumbled about the different universities in Israel and declared Jerusalem "too dangerous." He then continued, "in either case, the only time you will ever have any contact with Palestinians is when they are cleaning your toilets." To this comment, which felt more like a personal attack, I said nothing. Perhaps it was this professor's attitude that made me pick Jerusalem.

Was I the "Western" American Jew, supposedly brainwashed by Zionist propaganda or was I the descendent of that Salonikan Hebrew that the nineteenth-century European traveler so ignorantly Orientalized?

I left Jerusalem more lost, more confused, and feeling ever further from reaching my essence. The Jahnun, the *Kafe Turki,* Ibrahim, Mr. Woodhead—they all jumbled in my head into a mishmash and I could not make sense of any of it. Before I had time to collect my thoughts, my final year in college began. On a quiet New England autumn day, I took a visitor to the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design. Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Woman Washing at the Well* (1874) captured my attention. It is a typical Orientalist depiction of a naked woman washing at a "Moorish bath." As the light shines on her smooth body from an invisible window, another woman—covered in black robes that make her look skinless—provides the contrast often found in Gérôme's paintings. Two oriental women: one smooth-skinned, dark-featured and exotically voluptuous, and the other covered in her turban, kneeling down in the way Eastern women do when they perform primitive household tasks.

I do not know if Gérôme ever visited Salonika, but he made several trips throughout the Levant and became known as one of Europe's prominent Orientalist painters. He painted in a style that Edward Said would point out as an example of Orientalism.[9] To a certain extent,

9. Said defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." See Edward Said, *Orientalism,* New York, Pantheon Books, 1978.

I agreed with Said: the West, in an effort to colonize, exploit and dominate the East, sought to "study" Eastern lands, languages, cultures and traditions, and emphasized its exoticism, primitiveness, and barbaric despotism. Scholars, in "discovering" the Orient's despotism, had thus justified their imperialism.

Brancusi did not sculpt The Muse *as simply as possible, but rather arrived at her simplicity as a result of depicting her most fundamental existence, by seeking her essence*

Yet the air of simplicity in Said's dichotomous theory, which draws a clear line between the Orient and the Occident annoyed me. If Israel is the colony of the Western Jews illegally exploiting the Palestinians, as Said would argue, then was I the "Western" American Jew, supposedly brainwashed by Zionist propaganda or was I the descendent of that Salonikan Hebrew that the nineteenth-century European traveler so ignorantly Orientalized?

Years have passed since that lonely stroll in New York. Today a replica of Brancusi's *The Muse*, which I bought on that day at the Guggenheim, has a permanent home next to my bedroom mirror. The original veins of the marble that Brancusi chiseled to create the face of the musing woman are in such harmony with the shape that its creator gave her that the stone is at one with its art. She has no eyes—only symmetrically lined eyebrows that meet to form her nose, and a faint smile that assures her peace of mind. It is not the missing details of her facial features that create her personality, but her smooth, oval and almost perfect skull. She is "the muse" but who is she inspiring so intensely?

"Simplicity is not an end in art, but we usually arrive at simplicity as we approach the true sense of things," Brancusi wrote.[10] He did not sculpt *The Muse* as simply as possible, but rather arrived at her simplicity as a result of depicting her most fundamental existence, by seeking her essence.

Brancusi's sculpture of a fish is simply an oval shape with smooth, nose-like ends. "When you see a fish, you do not think of its scales, do you? You think of its speed, its floating, flashing body seen through water... If I made fins and eyes and scales, I would arrest its movement and hold you by a pattern, or a shape of reality. I want just the flash of its spirit."[11] It is much easier for humans to find essence in that from which we are separated. To identify and capture the essence of a fish is one thing and to find one's own essence is another. If the essence of a fish is in the spirit of its movement, where do we search for that of a person? Where do I look to find *my* essence?

I do not have an answer. But sometimes, when I close my eyes, I see myself as all the lives I have searched in ancient cities, I see all the journeys not yet taken through their streets and all the buildings destroyed and rebuilt, the languages spoken and forgotten, the names renamed and the histories fabricated, erased and re-fabricated. At that moment, as if in a flash, I see their essence. They are the Muse.

10. Carolyn Lanchner, *Constantin Brancusi,* New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2010.
11. Ibid., p. 34.

Woman in Seville (José Luis Chacón).