

Jewish Heritage and Contemporary Turkey: The Dark Side of the Tolerance Narrative

OLLI, Class 6
Spring 2022

Right: dedication stone from a
recently (Dec. 2021) uncovered 7th
c. Synagogue in Antalya Province





Erdogan hosting 1st gathering of Alliance of Rabbis from the Islamic World, Dec. 21, 2021

- Turkey has the largest Jewish population in the Islamic world (25000?) but also has seen the Jewish heritage as a way of shaping American and policies toward Turkey.

- Marc Baer's 2020 book "Sultanic Saviours" describes the history of this relationship and notes that this "friendship towards world Jewish communities" is tinged with its own anti-semitism that fears "global jewish power"

2021 Alliance created to address:

- Shared danger of anti-semitism and islamophobia
- To build relations between religious communities of shared concern
- To highlight ability to share insight with governments



Jewish Anatolians over time

- Earliest Jewish communities in Anatolia by 3rd c. BCE
- Ottoman Empire a haven from persecution, communities of Romaniotes (Greek speaking Jews), Sephardim (Ladino speaking from Iberia after 1492) Mizrahi (Persian) and Ashkenazi Jews from Europe.
 - Ottoman "millet" system allowed separate language, law and customs.
 - Reforms of 1800s (state centralization) remove isolation of community – for good and bad.
- 1927 Turkish census, Jews 80,000 of population of 13 million
 - Turkey lost 80-100,000 Jews from Salonica, largest Jewish city in the world, in 1923)
- 2020 20-25,000 Jews in a Turkish population of 90 million. (60K Armenians, 3K Greek orthodox)

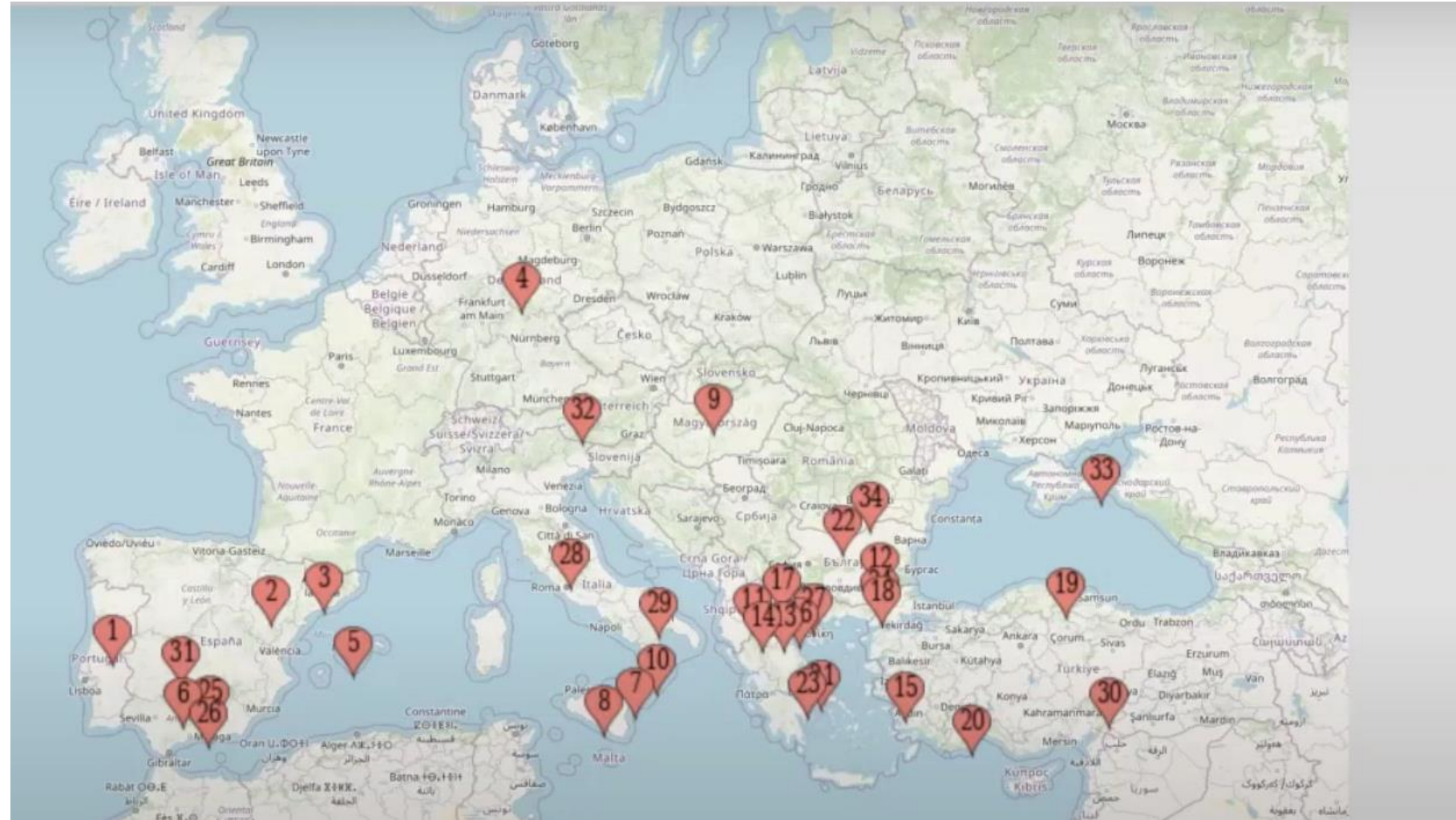
Jewish Turkish communities were incredibly diverse. Map shows sources of Jewish migration to Salonica from 1500-1900, (many also went to other Ottoman sites)

Post 1492 Expulsion
of Jews from Iberia

17-19th c. -
Restrictions on
Jewish communities
in Europe lead to
migration to
Ottoman Lands



Place names
of Synagogues
in 19th c
Istanbul reveal
the variety of
Jews in the
Ottoman
Empire
(Cruz Cilli)



Turkey Heritage Watch – Kenan Cruz Çilli (wordpress.com) a great website!

David Ben Gurion
and Yitzak Ben
Tzvi, Israel's 1st and 2nd
presidents.

The Ottoman Empire was a haven from increasing European Anti-Semitism, shaping the politics within the Jewish community—especially in regards to the Armenians.

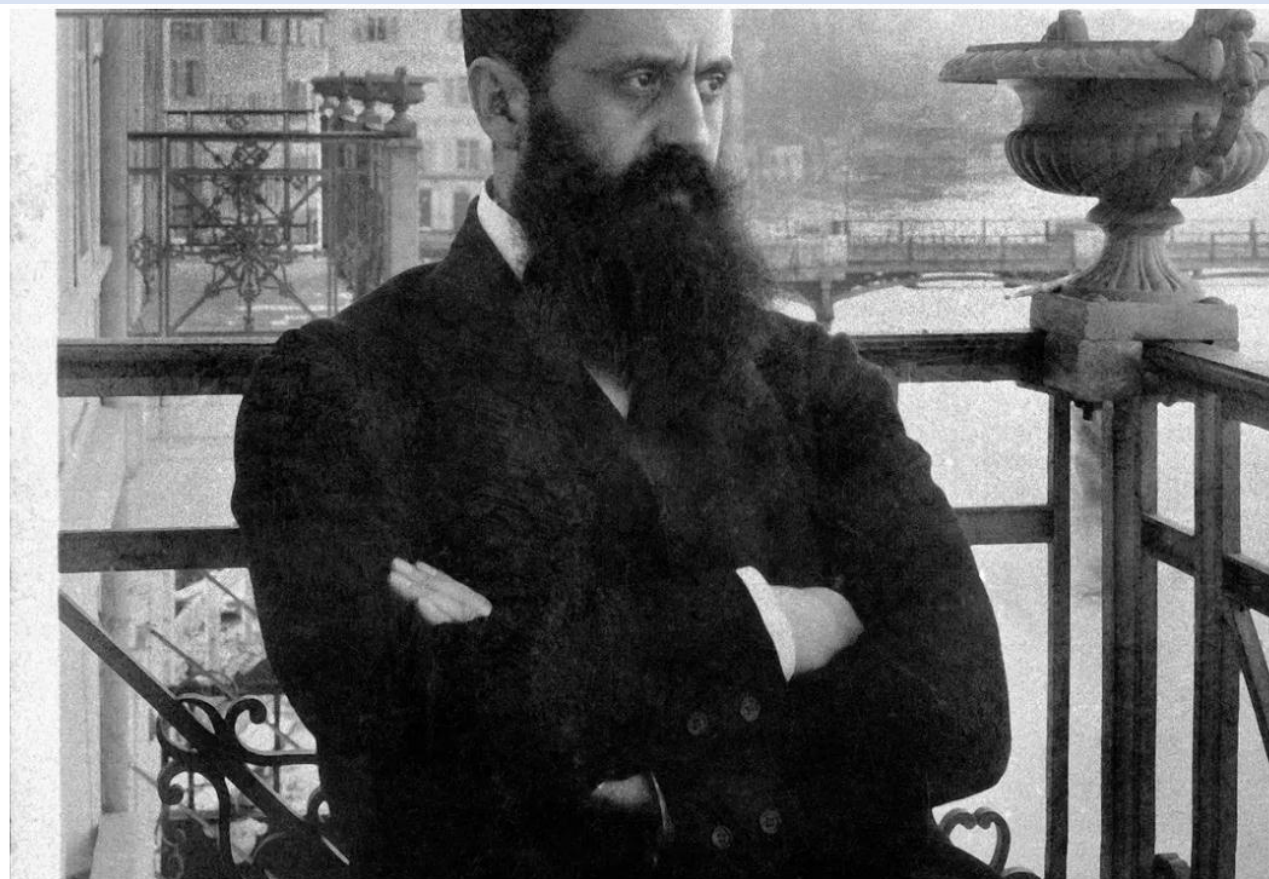
For historian Marc BAer, the key issue was that Jews in the Ottoman Empire had no outside allies – unlike Armenians and Greeks. Jewish leaders chose a policy of presenting themselves as the loyal minority—which meant silence on Greek and Armenian persecution.

Two Ashkenazi Students of Law at Istanbul University, 1912



E VIDEOS

Theodore Herzl made 5 visits to Istanbul to try and convince Sultan Abdul Hamid to allow continued migration and purchase of land in Palestine by Zionist migrants. In the 1890s Herzl offered to help the Ottomans with the negative image from the 1st Armenian massacres. Herzl encouraged communities around the world to dispute the image of the "barbarous Turks" by emphasizing the tolerance historically shown Jews. The "Tolerance Narrative" remains today.



Theodor Herzl in Basel, site of First Zionist Congress. Credit: Central Zionist Archive/Courtesy Simon Wiesenthal Center

The Tolerance Narrative: Useful for the Turkish State and the Jewish Community still.

- Things that can be talked about as evidence of "Tolerance"
 - 1492 (Jews as thankful and loyal guests rescued by the Ottomans)
 - WWII Turkey as safe haven for Jewish faculty, Jewish rescues
 - Turkey recognizing Israel, 1948
 - Heritage Conservation of Jewish sites, Heritage tourism
- Things that can't be talked about:
 - The Armenian Genocide 1915
 - Pogroms in 1930s
 - The Struma Incident (WWII) and the actually less than stellar record of Holocaust rescues...
 - The 1942 Wealth Tax that devastated Jewish citizens, 20th regiment, Aksale Labor Camp
 - The Reality of ongoing Anti-Semitism that affects Jews as Turkish Citizens

1992 marked the 500th anniversary of 1492 and new cultural/lobbying activities to promote vision of "Tolerant" Turkey.

What could be wrong with this? (a lot, say Rifat Bali and Marc Baer. It coincided with an international movement to label the Armenian massacres as Genocide)



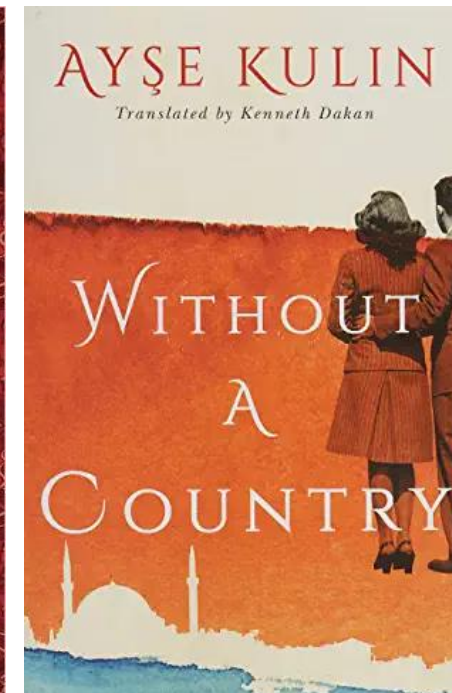
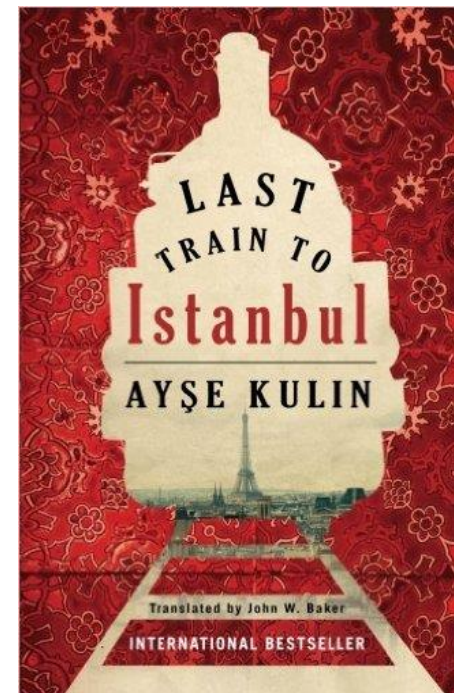
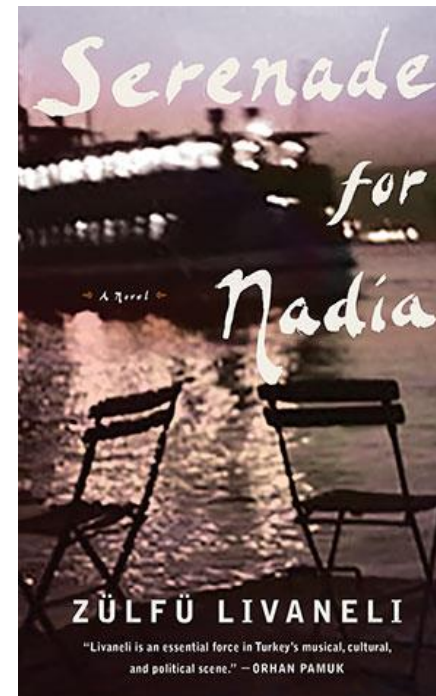
500. Yıl Vakfı Türk Musevileri Müzesi / The Jewish Museum of Turkey

@muze500 · ★ 4.9 (52 reviews) · Museum

Send message

Hi! Please let us know how we can help you.

Sadly, the Turkish Government's role in protecting Jews in Europe was vastly overstated in 2000s novels and films. (Turkish historian Rifat Bali and US historian Marc David Baer.) These popular novels and films are sadly historically inaccurate. The Tolerance narrative also skips over the 1942 wealth tax, labor camps and Jewish army units...



The Politics of Cultural Heritage Sites

Unlike the Armenian and Greek diaspora campaigns, Jewish heritage campaigns get official support. Why? Not really a comforting answer....



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Izmir, Turkey



eurojewcong  Izmir's residents and visitors will soon be able to get a taste of what the city was like when it was home to the third-largest Jewish community in the Ottoman empire.

Thanks to the Izmir Jewish heritage project, nine historic synagogues in Izmir's old town, known as Kemeralti, have been restored and will soon be open to the public as museums, starting in June. The neighborhood, which sits not far from a promenade on the Gulf of Izmir, is one of the largest open markets in the world, attracting tourists from all over Europe and beyond



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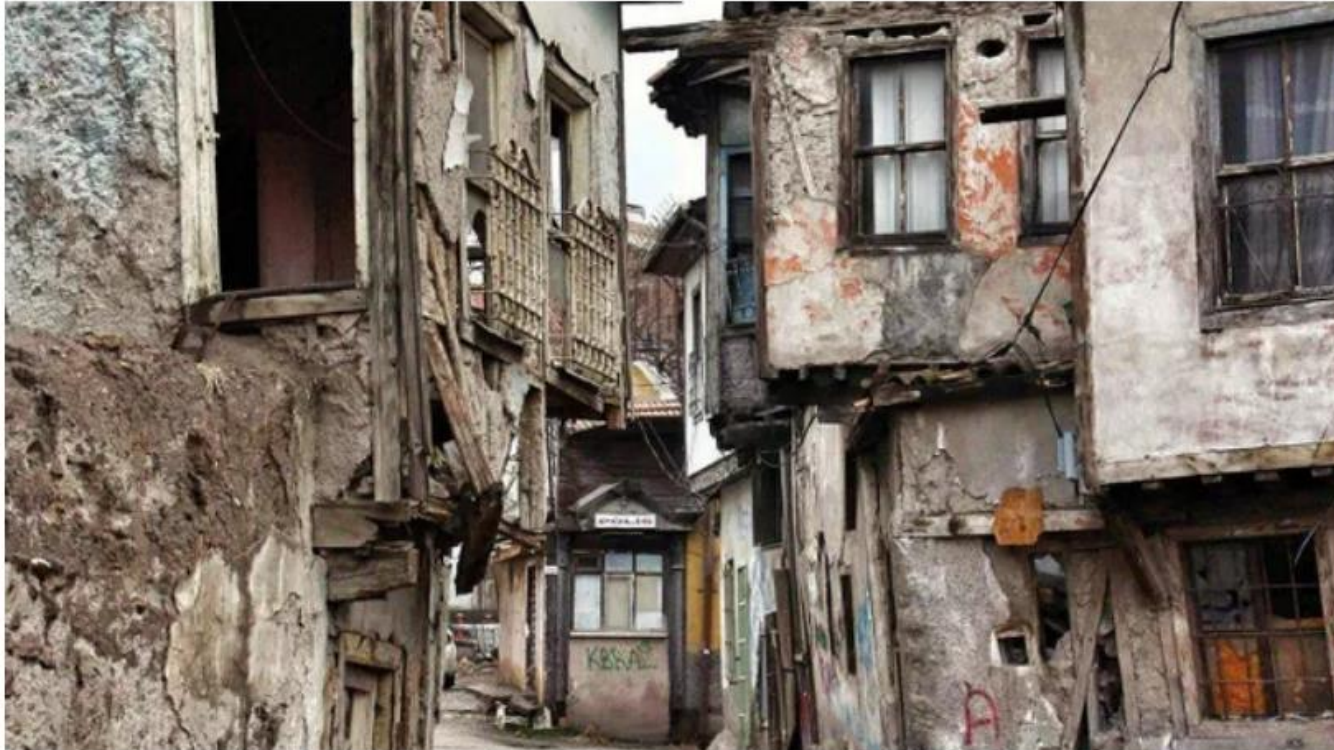
FEBRUARY 17

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Ankara's Jewish Quarter threatened by urban transformation project

Ankara's Jewish Quarter is under threat of destruction by a state project, Ankara Architects Chamber Chair Tezcan Karakuş Candan said. A four-stage urban transformation project threatens to destroy the historical neighborhoods in the Ulus district, Candan noted.

Wednesday March 24 2021 12:44 pm



Most Populars



Photos of Erdoğan's extravagant summer home revealed amid mass poverty



Member of Turkish gang banned in Germany revealed to be close to AKP



Turkish police raid Iraqi faith-healer's office in Istanbul



25 injured in metrobus collision in Istanbul during rush hour

There are no longer Jews in the old Quarter (most moved to modern housing in the 1960s-80s) and there have been several suspicious fires in recent years. Preservationists suspect developers, Developers argue the fires are set by squatters who heat houses and water with coal and wood.



Jewish Quarter, Ankara

[Photo: N. Müge Cengizkan, 2021]

The Ankara Synagogue in the old Jewish Quarter – (the only synagogue in the city of 5 million) renovated recently, but used rarely.

Most of the 30 or so who appear at services are stationed at embassies, etc.

The building dates from late 1800s, replaced earlier buildings on the same site that served different Jewish heritages.



Nov 7, 2021. The Synagogue is opened a few times a year now.

TURKEY

Historical Meeting in Ankara Synagogue



NEWS FROM

Purim Celebration, Ankara Synagogue, 1960?

Census figures are inexact, but the Jewish community was probably always under 1000, and by the 1800s consisted of about 100 households.

In the 1950s many families began to relocate to Israel, and the Jewish quarter was abandoned by 1990s. There are about 40 members of the Synagogue today in the city of 5 million.



Undated, 1960s?
Jewish US
servicemen
visiting the Ankara
Synagogue.

[https://jewishquarterankara.com/
ankara-jewish-community](https://jewishquarterankara.com/ankara-jewish-community)



The Jewish Quarter Bath house, mentioned in many memoirs, has been restored and is still in use, but none of the publicity mentions it was the Jewish Bath House.

I stopped by and was invited in by the Ladies at the women's entrance, but they also had never heard it was Jewish or that the neighborhood was once the Jewish Quarter.

(You can do a virtual tour of the neighborhood at [Jewish Quarter of Ankara](http://JewishQuarterofAnkara.com) (jewishquarterankara.com))



The "Code of Silence" on the Armenian Genocide persists, as this quote from the 2022 Jewish Quarter Ankara website shows:

The Deportation Law (Tehcir Kanunu) enacted in 1915 is one of the important steps of change. During the deportation, about 11,000 Armenians were deported from Ankara. Afterwards, their properties are looted, and a great fire destroys their neighborhood. In 1922, after the National Struggle was won, Greeks faced a similar situation this time. As in many parts of Anatolia, Greeks of Ankara are also forced to leave the city. The population exchange decision taken in 1923 Lausanne Agreement draws the legal framework of the abandonment process. Although they seem to be on the outside of all these developments, the Jews of Ankara, a non-Muslim community, are worried that they might be the next.

In 1850 Ankara was close to 50% non muslim, by 1960 almost total loss of non-muslim population.

The website (brand new in 1922) laments the loss of the multi lingual, multi confessional Jewish, Greek and muslim communities, but never acknowledges the Armenian history which was eradicated in 1915-7, even though Armenians were the largest community in the old city.

Graffiti in old
Jewish Quarter
reads:

Don't be sad that
it's over, be happy
that it happened."

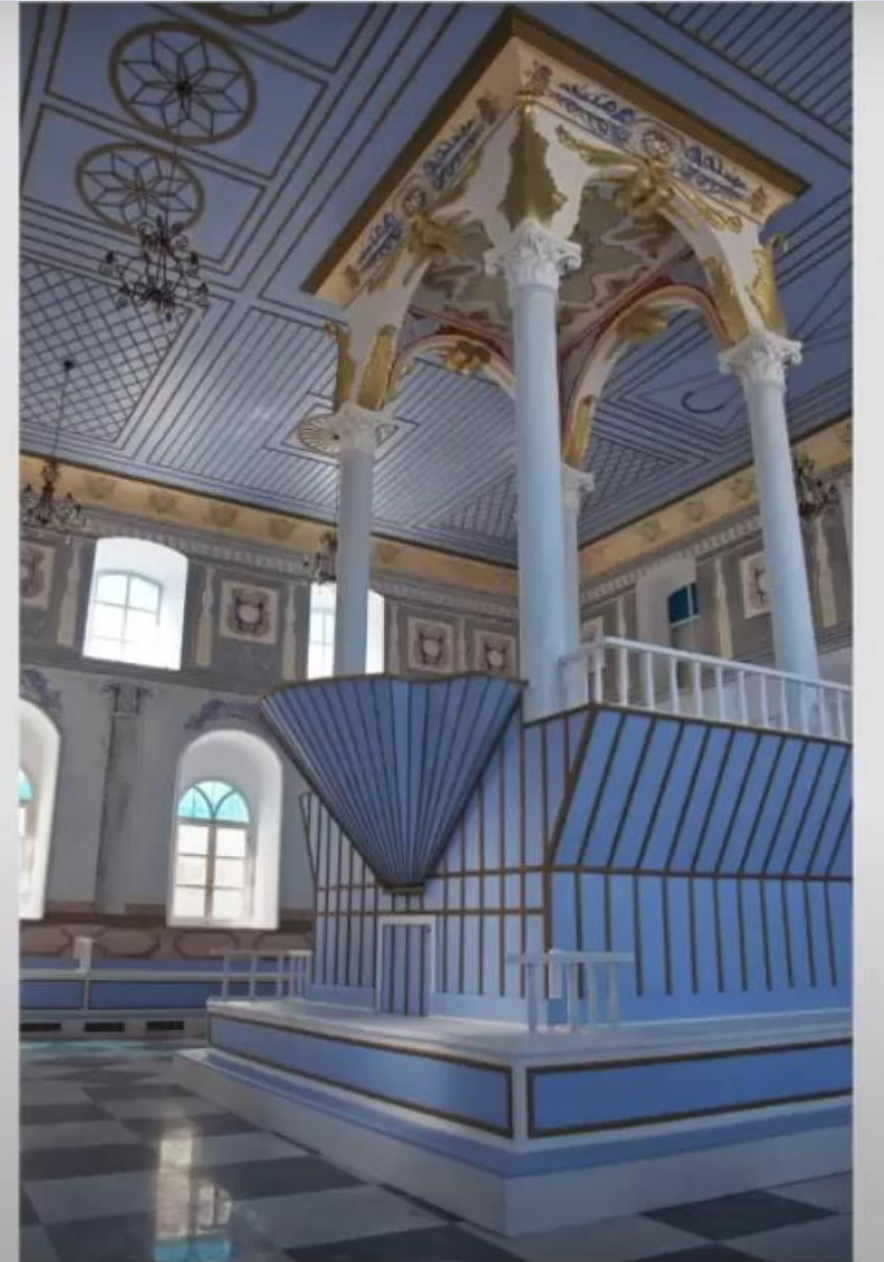


Istanbul Cultural Heritage Projects are full of their own political tensions. There were dozens of synagogues in 1900, only the wealthy ones seem to attract restoration.

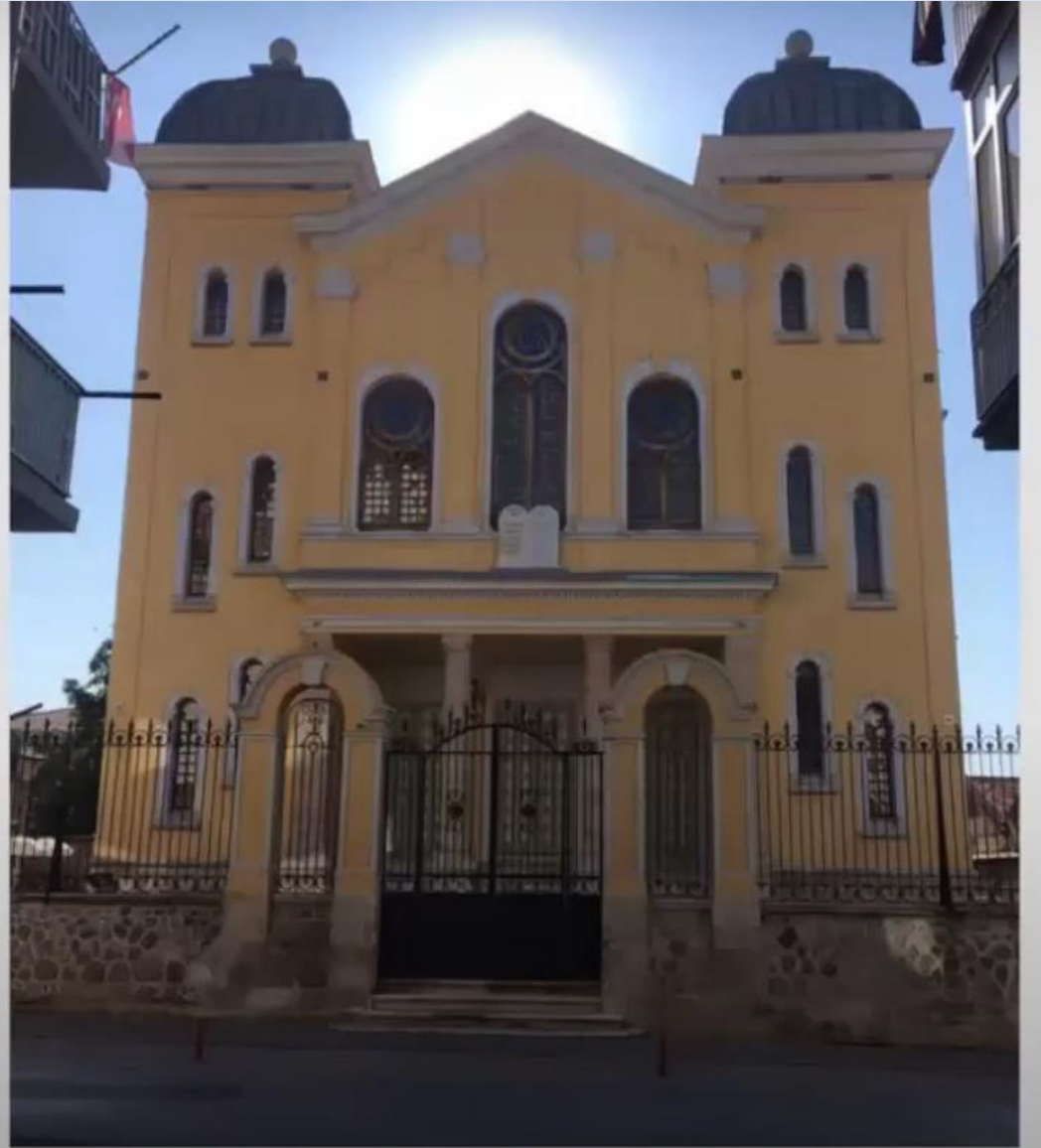


Left, "Austrian" Temple – still active synagogue, 1900, vs Or Hadash, 1890? Synagogue, now a derelict building that once served most impoverished and outcasts (prostitutes, very poor, hospital, soup kitchen...). (Cruz Cilli)

Bergama
Synagogue
Istanbul,
(1875)
restoration
2014



Edirne Grand Synagogue, restored 2014



RE VIDEOS

(k)

Edirne, before restoration. Closed 1980s as many in the community migrated



Wooden
synagogue,
built by
Bulgarian
Jewish refugees
17th c.
(Istanbul)





Byzantine Era Synagogue and Rabbinical Court, Istanbul Balata neighborhood (Romaniot Jews)



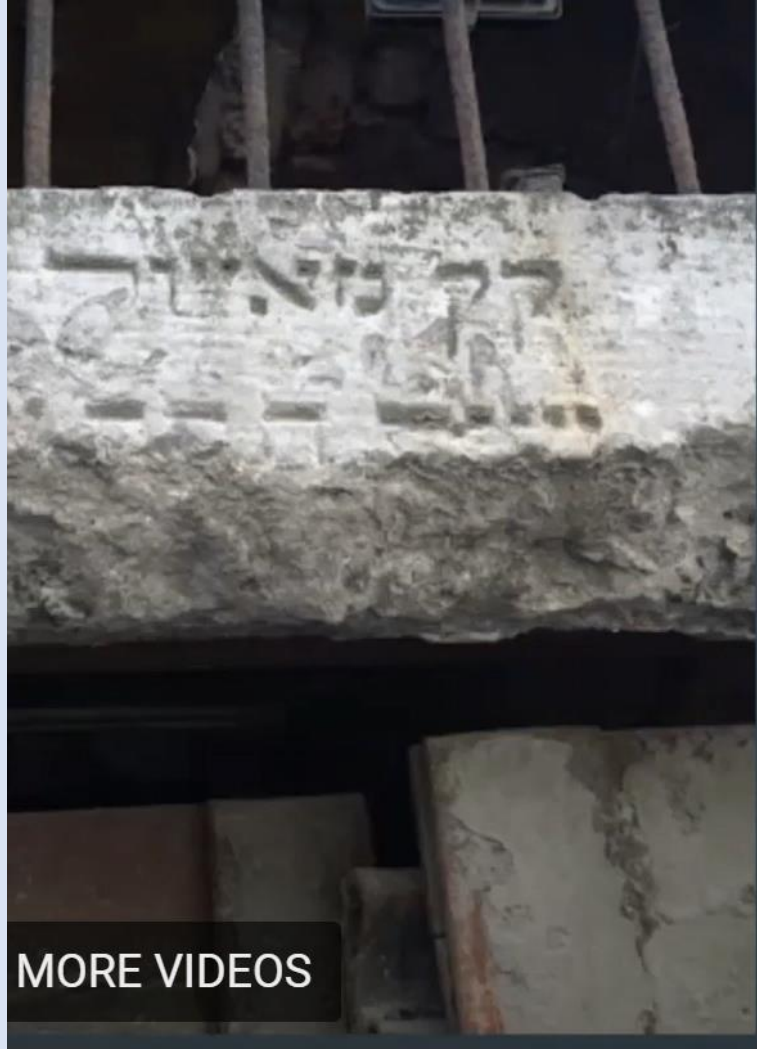
The building has been purchased with Diaspora funds and partly restored



Salonica Synagogue entrance, Balata, Istanbul 1400s. This is all that remains of one of the oldest synagogues.



Istanbul, Mallorca Synagogue, not in use except as occasional art venue



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Interior, Mallorca Synagogue, Haskoy, Istanbul



1600s, The Senora Synagogue, Haskoy.



VIDEOS

Below: Istanbul's Haskoy Abudara Synagogue 1600s, as factory and restored, 2017. The Hebrew plaques on the wall above the Torah Arc were never covered up.

Synagogues abandoned by a shrinking community were sold, not expropriated, which has made restoration projects easier as the diaspora and repurchase them.



Izmir's Jewish Quarter had synagogues serving different Jewish cultural traditions clustered in one neighborhood.



Exterior and Interior of Izmir's Hevra Synagogue (pre 1620), scheduled for restoration



Inside the Hevra Synagogue. Estimates of Turkish Jews in Izmir are about 1700, but the city has many resident expats and tourists who have become involved in the Izmir Heritage project

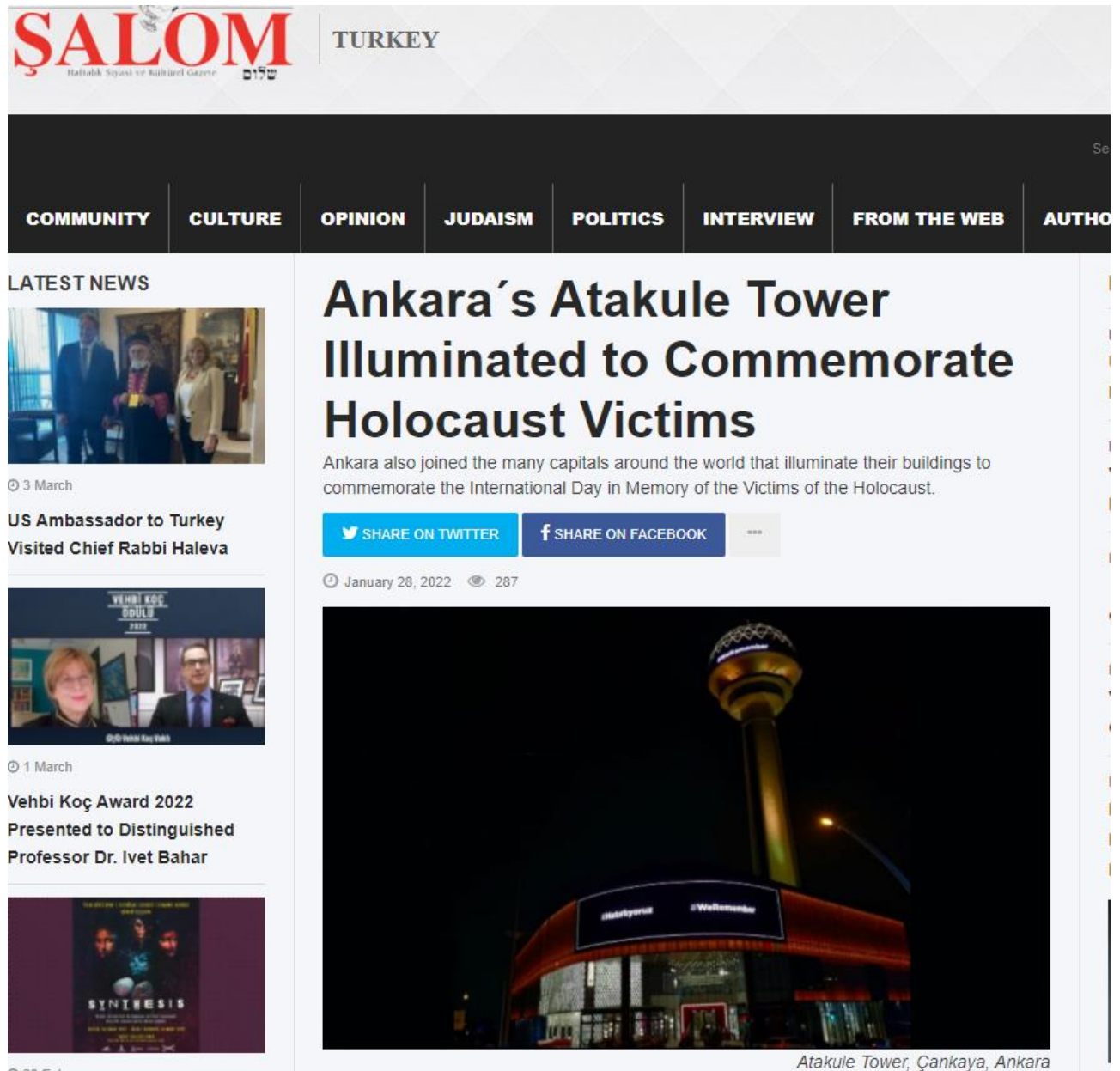
[izmir Jewish Heritage Project – EU Project](http://izmirjewishheritageproject.eu)
[\(izmirjh.com\)](http://izmirjh.com)



VIDEOS

January, 2022

The irony...(nothing wrong with recognition of the Holocaust, but the continued official silence on the Armenian Genocide from the government and the Jewish community in Ankara is striking)



The screenshot shows the SALOM TURKEY website. The header includes the SALOM logo with the tagline "Halkın Sesini ve Kültürel Gazetesini" and the word "TURKEY". Below the header is a navigation menu with categories: COMMUNITY, CULTURE, OPINION, JUDAISM, POLITICS, INTERVIEW, FROM THE WEB, and AUTHORS. The main content area features a "LATEST NEWS" section with three items:

- US Ambassador to Turkey Visited Chief Rabbi Haleva** (dated 3 March)
- Vehbi Koç Award 2022 Presented to Distinguished Professor Dr. İvet Bahar** (dated 1 March)
- SYNTHESIS** (dated 1 March)

The featured article is titled **Ankara's Atakule Tower Illuminated to Commemorate Holocaust Victims**. The sub-headline reads: "Ankara also joined the many capitals around the world that illuminate their buildings to commemorate the International Day in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust." Below the headline are social media sharing buttons for Twitter and Facebook. The article is dated January 28, 2022, and has 287 views. The main image shows the Atakule Tower in Çankaya, Ankara, illuminated at night.

https://www.salom.com.tr/salomTurkey/haber-121117-ankaraacutes_atakule_tower_illuminated_to_commemorate_holocaust_victims.html

- Mark Baer, *Sultanic Saviors and Tolerant Turks: Writing Ottoman Jewish History, Denying the Armenian Genocide*. 2020. (Very readable!)
- Beki L. Bahar, “The Jews of Ankara from Legend to History”, Pan Publishing, 2003 Hard to find.
- Marcy Brink Danan **Jewish Life in 21st C. Turkey**. Chatty ethnography.
- **Websites:**
- [Jewish Quarter of Ankara \(jewishquarterankara.com\)](http://jewishquarterankara.com) (and FB page)
- [The last Jews of Ankara: A once-thriving Jewish community dwindles to near-extinction - Turkey - Haaretz.com](http://Haaretz.com)
- [Projects – Kenan Cruz Çilli \(wordpress.com\)](http://wordpress.com) (includes lectures on Synagogue conservation)
- [İzmir Jewish Heritage Project – EU Project \(izmirjh.com\)](http://izmirjh.com)
- [The Quincentennial Foundation Museum of Turkish Jews - ABOUT US \(muze500.com\)](http://muze500.com) Istanbul Jewish museum and cultural center

