

Hello,

I've been asked to give a talk about the life of the Levantines in the Princess Islands. I'm actually not a real islander, until the age of 30 I spent my summers with my family on the hills of Bebek, so I don't have much experience of those years on the islands. The St. Vincent de Paul Daughters of Charity had a marvellous orphanage farm on these hills. I spent my childhood and youth in this environment. Unfortunately, after a very sad process, the nuns and consequently the rest of us were chased away from these properties. But that's another story.

So after 1970 I started to spend the summer months in Kınalıada (Proti) thanks to my wife who was born and raised on this island. I don't know much about the old days of the islands, but as some of you know due to evident circumstances the inhabitants of the islands started to change after the 1970s. I don't claim or pretend to be a historian. However in the later part of my professional life I became an amateur researcher and an accidental writer. Today I stand before you as a Levantine born to an Italian father and French mother. I'm here in my Levantine identity. But I must say that I am tired of the derogatory adjectives used to describe Levantines by western writers and travelers. As I mention in one of my articles, I think that this behaviour is the result of jealousy on the part of these writers. I think this jealousy stems from the fact that their expectations of the exotic East, did not match what they saw. The Levantines had a much similar life or even a better standard of life here in the East as they did in the West. I'll sum it up with a beautiful French expression: 'Il vaut mieux faire envie que pitié', in other words "better to be envied than pitied". Take a good look at me, I'm a true Levantine, I'm one of the last of its kind, like a museum piece.

Anyway, you are already probably wondering, just like my hosts, why did they invite this old veteran here today. I must admit that I like the word "veteran" when one wants to avoid saying "old man" or "outdated". Veterans are treated with respect and tolerance.

They may speak as they wish, taking refuge behind their advanced age.

And people are kind enough to listen to them. And I'm taking advantage of this respect today and I will talk to you a little bit about the Levantines.

The content of what I will present may not meet your expectations, but before I exceed the short time allotted to me, I'd like to share with you my experiences, memories and knowledge accumulated over my 81 years in Turkey. Anyway, as a famous writer once said, it doesn't matter what I have to say, what is important is what you will retain and share once you leave this conference.

In literature, the word Levantine was coined in the seventeenth century by La Fontaine in the fairy tale 'The mouse that retired from the world' in 'Levantines in their legends' (Les levantins dans leur légende). It is curious that he chose the word Levantine he could have easily said 'Les Orientaux dans leur légende'. La Fontaine not only is telling a tale of the east but he calls attention to a nuance, by using the word Levantine he tries to highlight the difference between the Levantine and the Easterner/Oriental. Quite an interesting approach. Later, Renan, Zola and writers such as Victor Hugo, for example, replaced words such as a double-handled dagger, a silk fabric, or a seafarer by the word Levantine. But here is my version. In my opinion, the Levantines were a non-native, Christian group of people during a specific period who came from the West and settled in the Ottoman Empire territory. To summarize it more clearly these are the conditions that characterise the Levantine:

- 1) Comes from the West
- 2) Arrival date is known
- 3) Christian (Catholic, Protestant or Anglican)
- 4) Not a native of the Middle East

When these four conditions are met, you have Levantinism. Most of them are Latin Catholic by origin. There is also a small number who are Anglican and Protestant. Some researchers include

the Melkites and the Maronites, who are no longer in Turkey and have their headquarters in Beirut. I don't totally agree with this inclusion because these Christian communities are indigenous to the Middle East. Whereas Levantines were Christians (Catholic, Protestant or Anglican) who came from countries that were not under the protection of the Ottoman Empire. The vast majority of Levantines who are Italian, French, Maltese, Spanish, Polish, German and Austrian are Latin Catholic. Later on with the industrialisation revolution, especially in Izmir, Belgian, Dutch and the British joined this group. And through them Protestant churches also began to be established. Generally, the British lived in the districts of Buca and Bornova in Izmir, in splendid gardens with magnificent villas. The Levantines were never a large in population and most of them as they were foreigners, did not have the status of nation and/or minority. In my opinion, one could define them to be an ethno-religious (ethno-confessional) group. Levantines were never institutionalised and were often identified with the Latin Catholic religion in Turkey. Like the Greeks, Armenians and Jewish minorities, they never had their own schools or hospitals. Such establishments were undertaken by the religious communities of the Latin Catholic Church. Levantines, on the other hand, established direct organisations only for social purposes: Cercle d'Orient, Prinkipo Yacht Club, Makriköy Aya Stefanos Sailing Club, Khalkedon Racing Club aka Kadiköy Racing Club, Societa Operaia, Circolo Roma, Union Française, Teutonia to name a few. Levantines only charitable organisation founded by an Italian in 1838 was the ARTIGIANA Retirement Home in Harbiye. In 1967, this organisation was granted the status of a public benefit association and is still managed by Levantines today. Based on this ethno-religious concept, it was essential to have a Latin Catholic church in the places where the Levantines summered.

This being the case, a question comes to mind whether churches were built here because Levantines went there in the summers or Levantines went to the countryside because there were churches. The answer to this I leave to the valuable historians present here. As I don't want to exceed the time allocated to me, I would rather talk about the need to categorize the Levantines into various classes, as it was done with all the other social groups. Ottoman/Turkish called Reaya citizens, foreign nationals and those who were influenced by the degrading adjectives and denied their Levantine identity. At the end of the XIXth century, these Levantine groups spent the summer season in the countryside. Thus, according to their linguistic and social affiliation, they went to different parts of the city, to places where there were usually churches. They went to the islands, to the Bosphorus, Moda/Fenerbahçe and along the railway line to Sirkeci/Halkalı, Yedikule, Bakırköy, Yeşilköy and Galatarya. There was also Polonezköy, it was a settlement with a Catholic church. Its status was completely different. In the spring, during the cherry season, people would stay in the Polish family-run guesthouses. But that too is another story.

If we were to start with the islands:

Since there was no Latin church on the island of Kınalı, for the Levantines this island with the exception of one or two families, ours included - was not a place of their choice. These families used to go to Burgaz or Büyükada for Sunday mass.

The situation was a little different in the island of Burgaz. Although there wasn't a Latin church the priests of the Austrian school Saint Georges and its hospital had a small Latin Catholic chapel in the nuns' summer house albeit very few, German-speaking (Germanophone) Levantines spent their holidays on this island. Since there was no Latin Catholic church in Heybeliada, Levantines did not summer there. However, there were one or two Levantines married with Greeks. In Büyükada, the situation was different. There was a Levantine family, the CORPI's who helped build the San Pacifico Latin Catholic church, and this of course became a more popular summer destination. Although this population has declined, a few Levantine families still come to Büyükada to spend their summers. Of course the old island life has gradually disappeared, but some of the Levantine residences, even though the mansions have changed hands, are still trying to keep the tradition and the memories alive.

If we leave the islands and move towards the Bosphorus, the situation is not much different.

Levantines united in language and social class, chose some areas along the Bosphorus for their summer residences. Among them:

A community gathered around the church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, in Büyükdere. Although there was no Latin Church in Tarabya, a few Levantine families lived in Yeniköy and Tarabya using the private chapel of the nuns of Notre Dame de Sion, which is now used as a residence by the president. Bebek was one of the most popular resort areas for Levantines. Thanks to the Sacré Coeur Church of the Lazarist priests of Saint Benoit and the chapel in the orphanage of the Filles de la Charité nuns, which has a famous and very sad story, it was the place where many Levantine families living in Beyoğlu met in the summer. Until the 1970s, Bebek was able to maintain its charm as a resort. However, the conditions of modern life and the arbitrary practices prohibiting rental of the houses belonging to the orphanage made it impossible for the already declining number of Levantines to go to Bebek in the summer. If we look at the Anatolian coast, we see that Levantines were concentrated in Kandilli. Although there was no Latin Church here either, a few Levantine families of French origin used to go to the countryside. For a while, a priest from the church of Saint Antoine went to perform Sunday mass in the house of one of these families. Later, Count Ostrorog and his family, who were the last ones to stay in Kandilli, started to cross by boat from their mansion and attend the Sunday service in Bebek. After his departure, there was no Levantine family left in Kandilli. Moda, was a resort favoured by Levantines of English and Maltese origin. Here, too, there is the Tubini chapel built by a Levantine and the church of the Assomptioniste priests on Cem Street. The well-known Whittal family used to summer in this neighbourhood. A small chapel in the garden of the Touring Hotel in Fenerbahçe was another summer resort frequented by Levantines because of its location. Here the Couteaux family, a well-known Belgian Levantine, had a large mansion, which today has been converted into a modern housing estate.

The modernisation fury devoured this place too. Finally, when it came to the resorts on the shores of the Marmara Sea, Yeşilköy was the most popular. Due to the presence of the Latin Catholic church of San Stefano and the proximity of the hunting grounds, it was a favourite summer resort of the Italian Levantines who were very keen on hunting. Until recent years, it was possible to see the splendid summer houses of well-known Levantine families here. Although Yeşilköy, like Bebek, has ceased to be a seaside resort due to changing living conditions, it is still possible to come across a few Levantine families. Bakırköy and Yedikule are two neighborhoods where Latin churches are located. Yedikule was the place where Italian engineers and their families working on the construction of the railway were located. I didn't want to bore you with too much historical information. You can find it in books or on the internet. I just wanted you to visualise the life I've lived.

Before concluding, I would like to emphasize that Levantinism is a very successful example of integration that still exists as a small reality. However, it is a culture and a way of life that is rapidly disappearing. It would be nice to let it live on in our memories. It is impossible to bring back the old lifestyle in Beyoğlu and the Islands. The human fabric has completely changed. We can rebuild buildings, but unfortunately, we cannot bring back the people who are their souls. There is a common phrase in Latin: 'Sic transit gloriam mundi', this is how the splendor of the world passes. Levantines will also just pass from this world.

As Professor Ekrem Buğra Ekinci says, despite everything, the Levantines left an important mark on Turkish social history. This makes me happy. As for me, despite all that has been said, written and the negativity, I am happy and proud to have lived as a Levantine:

- because I am the surviving heir to traditions preserved by my ancestors for centuries,
- because in Turkey, although I was fully integrated, I integrated without assimilating and without losing my identity,
- because I am between two cultures, the Western and the Turkish cultures,
- because I eat 'pasta with arrabbiata sauce' with the same pleasure as I eat 'imambayıldı',
- I have not forgotten how to speak Italian and French, even if my pronunciation has been found to have a dialectal defect. On the contrary, I have a richer vocabulary than many French and Italians,
- because I feel as comfortable in Istanbul as I do in Rome or Paris,
- Because I think I have served both Italy and Turkey with my presence here,

- because I'm open to everyone and everything,
- because I am part of the diversity that is the richness of this country, because I do not have an identity problem,
- because, as a very important person, whom I will not name, recently said, I know exactly where I come from and who I am: a cosmopolitan Italian from Turkey, i.e. a Levantine....

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