

EXCITING ISTANBUL – THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

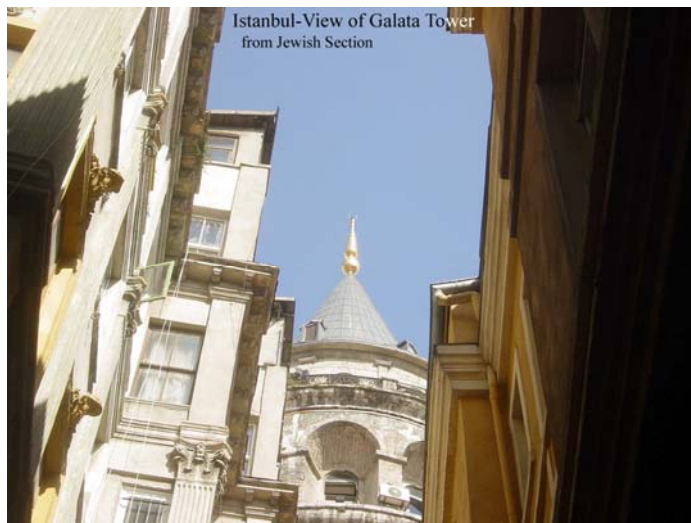
Robert W. Case

History states that there has been a Jewish presence in Turkey for 1000 years, however there is little known about the Jews prior to the conquest of Constantinople (now called Istanbul) by The Turks under *Sultan Mehmet II*

In 1453. Under the reign of *Sultan Beyazit II* (1481-1512), however, Jews escaping the Spanish inquisition were encouraged to settle in the Ottoman Empire, especially Istanbul, and most of them settled near the Balat quarter on the western bank of the Golden Horn.

The total population of Turkey is approximately 70,000,000, 97% of whom are Muslims. The Jewish population of Turkey is 27,500, of which 25,000 live in Istanbul, which has a total population of 15,000,000.

Istanbul has 16 synagogues, most of which are in a very concentrated area of the city referred to as Galata, for the *Galata Tower* which is the central attraction



This area has a bustling street life, with many merchants and artists, however, most of the Jewish residents have moved to the more fashionable suburbs.

The Jews lived in peaceful harmony until September 6th, 1986 when two armed terrorists entered the *Neve Shalom* synagogue, murdered 23 worshippers including the rabbis and the Chazzans.

After the original shock, the community returned to a normal life until November 15, 2003, when two suicide car bombers attacked both the *Neve Shalom* and the *Beit Israel* Synagogue, located in a desirable middle class area of Istanbul. 24 people died, and 257 were wounded, most of which were people passing by. Present thinking is that this was the work of *al Qaeda*.

Today, the security at all the synagogues in Istanbul is extremely tight. It is not possible to “just drop in”. First, you must hire a licensed tour guide who will require a copy of your passport for “preliminary clearance”.

After you have been “pre-approved”, you arrive at the policeman stationed 24/7 in front of the synagogue. After he announces your arrival, the door is opened electronically and you proceed to a “holding area” where there are two more guards monitoring 8 television screens. You then must wait an additional 15 minutes until the “home office” clears you to proceed!



In addition to the terrorist threat, there is another problem – **earthquakes !** The *Neve Shalom* synagogue has been reinforcing the foundations, and also have taken a most unusual approach- Every pew seat has a helmet under the seat, similar to life vests on an airplane !



note helmets under seats !

Interior of Neve Shalom Synagogue

The *Neve Shalom* synagogue is one of the most beautiful and largest Sephardic synagogue in Istanbul. Although there are very few Jews living in the area, It is the synagogue where most of the weddings, bar-mitzvahs, and funerals are held. After the tremendous damage done by the terrorists in 2003, The synagogue was completely restored with the help of a substantial contribution from the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg foundation of Baltimore, MD . There is a plaque in their honor in the temple.



ISTANBUL- Neve Shalom Synagogue- Weinberg Plaque



Istanbul-Ashkenazi Synagogue-Interior

view from Bimah

Interior view of the Ashkenazi synagogue

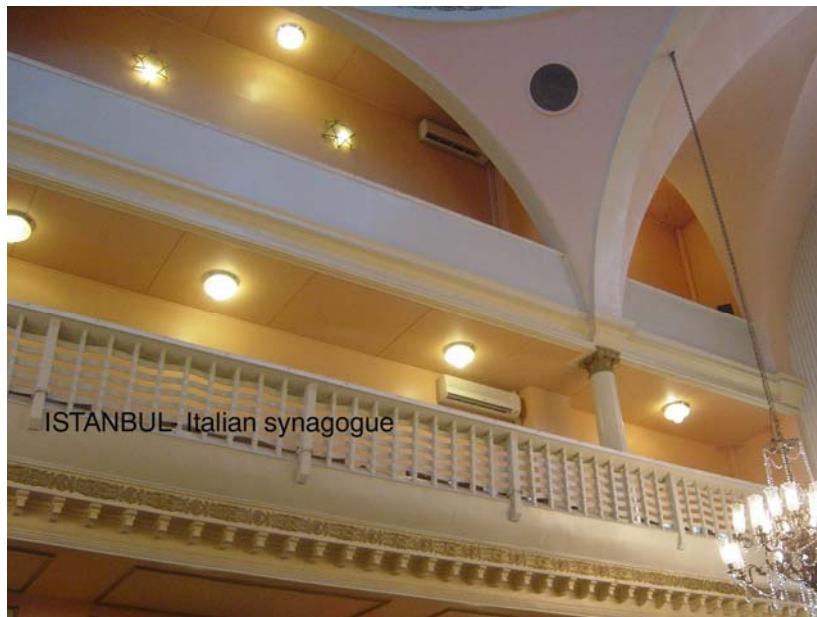


Istanbul-Ashkanazi Shul-entrance
Reenforcing foundation

Entrance to the Ashkanazi Shul. . (note the plank before the steps. This Covers a 25 ft. deep crevice where they are reinforcing the foundations In case of a earthquake!)



The Italian Synagogue- services are in Ladino and Hebrew



Italian Synagogue – view of mechtisah

The Jewish Community in Istanbul is, in my opinion, totally different than most Jewish communities. In the rest of the world, Jewish synagogues are completely autonomous and governed by a board of directors. The rabbi is usually hired by the board, and works on a contractual basis. In Istanbul, the Jews are legally represented by the chief rabbi, who is elected. The rabbi is the absolute authority (Except for a small group of 100, called the Karaites) who do not accept his authority). The Chief Rabbi, Rav, David Asseo, who was elected in 1961, is assisted by a religious Council, 35 lay counsellors, and an executive committee of 14. The president, whom is elected from the lay counselors, runs the daily affairs and business of the Chief Rabbinate.

With the exception of The Ashkenazi synagogue, and the Italian synagogue, all the other synagogues are Sephardic. Unfortunately time constraints made it impossible to visit more synagogues. In conclusion, we found the Jewish community of Istanbul fascinating, and some day we hope to return.

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photographs by Robert W. Case

Robert W. Case

bobcele@yahoo.com

www.jewishsitesvisited.com