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THE CORVÉE OF OPERATING THE MINES IN SIDEROKAPISI AND
ITS EFFECTS ON THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF THESSALONIKI
IN THE 16th CENTURY

Introduction

The pluralistic nature of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki in the early Ottoman era is very well known. The community of Thessaloniki comprised several congregations, each centered on its own synagogue and named after a district or town in the Iberian Peninsula or southern Italy. The *raison d'être* of each congregation was to conduct Jewish life according to the customs and traditions the immigrants had brought with them from the "old country". The congregations vied with one another energetically to win better conditions for the payment of taxes by their members, to induce wealthy individuals to become members, and to prevent wealthy members from leaving. In addition, within each congregation, the social classes fought one another bitterly to achieve optimal arrangements, with powerful individuals struggling to impose their will on the congregation or even the entire community. Nevertheless, the need to ensure the survival of the Jewish presence in the town forced the various elements of the community to cooperate to a certain extent, in several instances against their will, and certainly against their preferences¹.

The tension between these opposing forces is mirrored in three important Jewish texts dealing with the efforts of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki to reach an internal agreement governing relations with the Ottoman authorities in regard to the taxes imposed on the community and their collections. The three texts refer to a bill of rights obtained by the Thessaloniki community from the Ottoman authorities in 1568 in regard to the assessment and collection of taxes from the former. The document is titled *Ketav ha-Herut* (Decree of Freedom), an exact transliteration from the Turkish *musellimlik*.

1. On this, see M. Rozen, "Individual and Community in Jewish Society of the Ottoman Empire: Salonica in the Sixteenth Century" (in Hebrew), in M. Rozen, *In the Mediterranean Routes: The Jewish-Spanish Diaspora from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, Tel Aviv, 1993, pp. 114-167.

The first text is very well known. It is the famous sermon held by R. Mosheh Almosnino on the Saturday after his return from Istanbul with the Decree of Freedom, on 27 Adar 5327 (February 2, 1568)². In this sermon, Almosnino briefly reviewed his delegation's mission to Istanbul since its inception, i.e. the problems because of which the community decided to send it, the struggles within the community over possible solutions to those problems, the delegation's activities in Istanbul, and the happy ending with Almosnino's return to Thessaloniki with the Decree of Freedom.

The second text is a manuscript now at the Ambrosian Library in Milan which researchers refer to as "The Chronicles of the Ottoman Sultans". This work was authored by Almosnino while in Istanbul from 1566 to 1568 and comprises three sections. The last section, completed in the fall of 1567, describes the city of Istanbul and details of the delegation's efforts on behalf of the Thessaloniki community. All three sections of the text were subsequently edited into proper Spanish and printed in Madrid under the title *Extremos y Grandezas de Constantinopla*, or *The Wonders and Grandeur of Constantinople*. The transcription and editing work was carried out by Ya'aqov Cansino, a translator employed by the Spanish kingdom in Oran, Morocco. Both the *Chronicles* and the *Wonders and Grandeur of Constantinople* are discussed at length in M. Z. Benayah's work on the life and achievements of Mosheh Almosnino³.

The third text is a letter never before published, which until now has been completely unknown to researchers. The letter is undated, but we will show that it was written after the delegation left to Istanbul, some time in the fall of 1567. It was written by leaders of the Siderokapısı community to leaders of the Thessaloniki community. This document, titled *About the Sarraflık* (i.e. operating the mines), shed amazing light on the Jewish community of Thessaloniki at the time. Things which in Almosnino's book and sermon are

2. See R. Mosheh Almosnino, *Me'amez Ko'ah Sermons*, Venice, 1588, Sermon 1, "the sermon I gave upon my return with the Decree of Freedom in the year "Ye'erav 'Alai Sihi" on the Sabbath of "Piqudei", pp. 3a-15b.

3. R. Mosheh Almosnino, *The Chronicles of the Ottoman Sultans* (in Hebrew), Manuscript Ambrosiani, Ambrosian Library, Milan, 126 (SUP) 35 and reproduction thereof at Hebrew Manuscript Reproduction Institute, Reel No. 12037. For a comprehensive discussion of all three parts of the manuscript and the Spanish version, *Extremos y Grandezas de Constantinopla*, Madrid, 1638, see M. Z. Benayah, *Rabbi Mosheh Almosnino of Thessaloniki: His Life and Works* (in Hebrew), Master's Thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1989 (duplicated), pp. 188-210.

merely hinted at delicately are discussed in the letter with unestrained anger, leaving nothing to the imagination⁴.

The delegation to Istanbul itself will not be discussed here: it has already been discussed in great detail⁵ by M. Z. Benayah. The present study's contribution is to weave the letter of the Siderokapı leaders into the fabric of the events that took place in Thessaloniki prior to the delegation's departure and shortly thereafter. This document, on the background of everything we already know about the Decree of Freedom affair, will serve to shed more light on the nature and intensity of the social forces that collided in the city.

A. The King's Taxes and Corvées

It is impossible to understand the social implications of the corvée to operate the mines without understanding the entire system of taxes and corvées that were levied from the Thessaloniki community. An understanding of the taxes must be based on two foundations: an understanding of the taxes themselves and an understanding of the method by which they were collected.

In the historiography of the Jews of Thessaloniki, the subject of taxation has already been discussed several times. The historians who have addressed the subject have proposed several theories, all comprising several identical points and all containing errors, some slight and others fundamental.

In brief, the theories are:

- (1) S. Rozanes does not explicitly mention the fundamental tax, the poll tax, but says that the "King's Clothing" corvée was imposed in ancient times to replace other corvées that the community was unable to raise. The Ottomans originally paid for the goods, and as time went by the community continued to supply the same quantity at the price paid by the government, so the corvée became a tax that induced the wealthy to leave. This theory gives the impression that the "King's clothing" was originally a corvée that replaced all the other taxes and corvées, including the poll tax⁵.

4. *Letter from Siderokapı Community Leaders* (in Hebrew), Montefiore Manuscripts 371/1, Hebrew Manuscript Reproduction Institute, National and University Library, Jerusalem Reel No. 5134, pp. 27a-b.

5. On the theory proposed by Rozanes on this subject see *History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1920, Sofia, 1938, Vol. 2, pp. 98, 102-103 and Vol. 3, pp. 171-172, 393-398. He uses sources from the first half of the 17th century written to

- (2) J. Nehama proposes a theory replete with errors, to the effect that the *musellimlik* annulled all the taxes and corvées in exchange for the supply of the "King's Clothing". Furthermore, his transcription of the Turkish word from Hebrew to modern Turkish (*musselemlik*) is a distortion, and he claims that the significance of the freedom was that the Jews of Thessaloniki were given a province of their own and the jurisdiction of a *Musselem*, or provincial governor, under whom they were independent. Even if this interpretation is correct, the correct transcription of this office is still "Musellim, while in fact the freedom meant that they had the status of *muaf ve-musellim reaya*, i.e. tax-exempt subjects⁶.
- (3) I. S. Emmanuel describes how the Jews of Thessaloniki, burdened with the poll tax and the corvées of droving cattle (*celeplik*)⁷, took advantage of Sultan Süleyman's visit to the city in 1537 to petition him to annul the corvée of droving cattle. The Sultan allowed their petition. The document, which was retained by the Jewish community, was destroyed by the great fire that engulfed Thessaloniki in 1545. Following the loss of the document, the Jews of the city lost the rights that it afforded them. Emmanuel makes the same mistake as Nehama and misinterprets the word *musellim* to mean governor: he even went to far as to write it *musellin*, saying that following the destruction of the document, the *musellin* of Thessaloniki demanded specific performance of the corvée. Thus the *musellimlik* was the voyage to Istanbul in regard to the difficulties the governor made for the community, and the exemption achieved by R. Mosheh Almosnino was to replace the corvée of droving cattle with the corvée of supplying wool⁸.
- (4) E. Shohat, who amassed an enormous quantity of material on the entire subject of taxes in Thessaloniki and the link between them and the King's

convince immigrants from Thessaloniki to continue shouldering the tax burden (R. Hayim Shabetai, *Responsa Torat Hayim*, 3 vols., Thessaloniki, 1713-1722, Vol. 1, Secs. 65, 94; R. Hayim Benvenisti, *Responsa Keneset ha-Gedolah*, Izmir, 1660, *Hoshen Mishpat*, Sec. 278; R. Avraham Alegri, *Responsa Lev Same'ah*, Thessaloniki, 1738, *Hoshen Mishpat*, Secs. 13-14).

6. On Nehama's version of the same events, see J. Nehama, *Histoire des Israelites de Salonique*, 5 vols., Paris, 1935-1959, Vol. 3, pp. 196-209. Nehama relies on the same sources as Rozanes.

7. On the significance of the corvée of the droving of cattle, see below.

8. On Emmanuel's version, see his book *Histoire de l'industrie de tissus des Israelites de Salonique*, Paris, 1935, pp. 120-132; and D. Recanati, ed., *Thessaloniki Memorial* (in Hebrew), pp. 26-27. Emmanuel relies on Almosnino's book, *Extremos y Grandezas*, pp. 89-90, in addition to his sermon and Almosnino's literature.

Clothing, discusses the subject in two articles⁹. In essence, what he says is that the corvée of supplying the clothing was first imposed on the Jews when Süleyman was in the city in 1537. The supply of clothing replaced the corvées of driving cattle and operating the mines. In one instance, Shohat writes that the arrangement of 1568 also included the poll tax, but the authorities did not fulfill this part of the bargain¹⁰. Elsewhere, he writes that the supply of clothing was not a tax, because the Ottomans paid for them, and deducted their price from the poll tax¹¹.

As mentioned earlier, errors were made in all of these descriptions, some because of lacunae in the Ottoman source materials and some because of reliance on later Jewish sources which intentionally portrayed one view of the history of the taxes instead of another¹². The exposure of the Ottoman books of account dating from the end of the reign of Bayezid II reveals the truth about the status of the "King's Clothing". In an earlier period of the community's history, no later than the time these books of account were created (1511), the Jews of Thessaloniki were ordered to supply large quantities of woolen textiles for the production of uniforms for the *yeniçeris* garrisoned in Thessaloniki. This was an unavoidable corvée, by means of which the Ottoman government exercised what it perceived to be its prerogative to all the manpower and natural resources of the Empire. It was a corvée, not a tax: the Ottomans paid hard cash for the textiles they received.

There was no connection between this corvée and the payment of the poll tax (*cizye*), which the Jews of Thessaloniki paid in addition to supplying the textiles. The Ottomans, on their part, funded the purchase of the woolen textiles with the money they collected from the *dhimmis*, i.e. the Jews and Christians in Thessaloniki and its environs, in the form of a poll tax. These amounts were in addition to revenues from other sources which were also used to finance the purchase of the woolen textiles from the Jews¹³. In 1565, the Ottomans also paid for the wool with revenues from the "sheep tax" and the

9. E. Shohat, "Taxation and its Administration in Greek Communities in the Sixteenth Century" (in Hebrew), *Sefunot* Vol. 11 (Vol. 1 of *The Book of Greek Jewry*), 1971-1978, pp. 306-308.

10. *Ibid.*, "Taxation"; A. Shohat "The King's Clothing' in Saloniki" (in Hebrew), *Sefunot* Vol. 12 (Vol. 2 of *The Book of Greek Jewry*), 1971-1978, pp. 271-288.

11. *Ibid.*, "The King's Clothing", pp. 171-174.

12. See below.

13. H. Sahillioğlu, "Yeniçeri Cuhaşi ve II Bayazid'in son Yıllarında Yeniçeri Cuha Muhasebesi: Güney Doğu Avrupa Araştırmaları Dergisi, 2/5 (1973-4), pp. 425-426.

revenues of farming of the Sultan's properties in the Thessaloniki region, which certainly included the poll tax¹⁴.

The exemptions and freedoms granted to the Jews of the city in 1537 were exemptions from the provision of drovers and mine operators, because these were the main targets of their efforts after 1545 and it is evident from their efforts that they had also enjoyed these exemptions previously. In any event, the exemptions did not cover the poll tax. They continued to pay the poll tax, as is evident from both Hebrew sources dating from the entire Ottoman era and the Decree of Freedom they were given in 1568¹⁵. The *musellimlik*, i.e. the freedom they sought, was freedom from irregular corvées, referring to the corvée they were already under, to supply wool for the clothing of the *yeniçeris*. In The Chronicles of the Ottoman Sultans, R. Mosheh Almosnino described how the Jews of Thessaloniki "want to be 'musellimish', like the Turks and Christians in Thessaloniki who guard the towers, because they [the Jews] make the King's Clothing"¹⁶.

14. H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1983, Document 4, p. 83.

15. On the matters covered in the *musellimlik* or *mu'afname* (Book of Freedom) see G. Weinstein's article below. For further Ottoman sources mentioning the poll tax among the taxes paid by the Jews of Thessaloniki after 1568 as well, see H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life*, Document 33, p. 105, of 1607-8. This document mentions amounts ten times the amount mentioned in the *musellimlik*, so it is possible that an error was made in deciphering the figures. On the tax payment procedures prevailing in 1613, see B. Lewis, *Notes and Documents from the Turkish Archives: A Contribution to the History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, Jerusalem, 1952, pp. 27-28. Shohat's interpretation of the document as exempting the Jews of Thessaloniki from the poll tax is mistaken, because the arrangement it embodies incorporated the poll tax (E. Shohat, "Taxation", p. 307). For Hebrew sources on the collection of the poll tax after 1568, see E. Shohat, *ibid.*, pp. 307-308. R. Yosef Ibn-'Ezra, *Masa Melekh*, pp. 141-172, emphasizes the imposition of the poll tax. Of particular interest is his observation at p. 131, where the difference between the poll tax and the "King's Clothing" corvée is particularly prominent: "In our city it is the custom that whoever works and supports himself pays none of the local taxes, but only the poll tax, which is imposed *per capita*, and whoever has one thousand ducats or more pays the tax as assessed in certain places. There are also heavy taxes which are paid only by those who have accumulated wealth. For example, the King's Clothing which is made here in Thessaloniki is truly a heavy burden on our shoulders, borne by the wealthy who each according to his ability is required to make the King's Clothing". In other words, after deduction of the global impost from the real price of the textiles, the community was still under a heavy burden, that of financing the real price of supplying the "King's Clothing", which was borne by the wealthy of the community each according to his ability. See also R. Avraham HaLevi, *Response 'Ein Mishpat*, Thessaloniki, 1897, *Hoshen Mishpat*, Sec. 11,38; R. Aharon Sason, *Responsa, Torat Emet*, Venice, 1926, Sec. 149.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 237; M. Z. Benayah, R. Mosheh Almosnino, p. 62.

In principle, there was no difference between the corvée of the "King's Clothing" and the other corvées. All were based on the idea that all the manpower and other resources of the empire are the property of the Sultan, who has priority over everybody else. However, the corvée to supply the textiles was imposed upon the community as a whole, while the other corvées were imposed upon individual members.

The *celeplik* (the drovers corvée) derived from the Ottoman principle that the state is under an obligation to supply cities, particularly the capital city, with basic foodstuffs. It may be said that this principle is an expression of a ruler's sincere concern for the welfare of his subjects. However, one must not forget that the hungry citizens of the capital were certainly capable of overthrowing a Grand Vizier or even a Sultan. Meat was one of the basic foodstuffs that the Ottoman ruler believed he should supply to his subjects.

In seeking to guarantee the supply of meat to residents of the large cities of the Empire, Ottoman rulers encountered a serious problem. The sources of supply of the meat were the sheep herds bred in Anatolia, Thrace and Macedonia. To bring them to the city, it was often necessary to drive them on foot a distance of several hundred kilometers over difficult terrain. The sheep breeders were not happy to take the risks of transporting the sheep to the city: the proportion that arrived in the city in a condition fit for slaughter and human consumption was evidently not high enough. Thus to secure the supply of meat, it was necessary to find someone to undertake the task of transporting the sheep, both financially and logistically. This individual, the *celepekeşan*, had to have sufficient capital for the purchase of large herds, working capital to wait until the sheep arrived in the city and then—if he was lucky and most of the herd arrived in good condition—he had to find favor with the government officials who fixed the price at which the meat was sold to butchers. In some places, particularly Istanbul, being a butcher did not guarantee one a source of income, especially because of the stringent controls of meat prices, which disregarded market fluctuations. The authorities solved the problem caused by the differential between the low price of meat and a chronic shortage of supply by forcing wealthy people (who soon became improverished) to become butchers, and later by imposing a special tax on the wealthy residents of the city to subsidize meat prices¹⁷.

17. On the drover's corvée, see D. F. Suger, *Southeastern Europe Under Ottoman Rule, 1354-1804*, Washington, 1977, pp. 124-125; B. Çvetovka, "Les celep et leurs rôle dans la vie économique des Balkans à l'époque Ottomane", *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, M. A. Cook, ed., Oxford, 1970, pp. 172-192; idem., "Les registres des celep-

Obviously, under these circumstances it was not always easy to find someone willing to undertake the task of transporting the sheep. To secure a supply of meat for the city, the Ottoman government ordered various population groups in the city to provide financiers to perform the task. The Jewish communities of the large cities were among these population groups¹⁸.

Like the drover (*celepkęşan*), so too the mine operator (*sarrař*) was a wealthy individual forcibly recruited by the Ottoman government. The mine operation corvée was also the consequence of a shortage throughout the Empire. In the 16th century, the Lands of Christendom had almost inexhaustible sources of precious metals, while the Empire had very few. Most of the precious metals used to mint the Empire's coin came from black Africa of the silver mines of Macedonia. The pressure created by precious metals from the west resulted in high inflation throughout Europe¹⁹, which was particularly troubling to the Ottomans and led to redoubled efforts to maximize the Empire's own natural sources of precious metals²⁰.

Mining the precious metal was a task that demanded expert skills, a large initial investment, copious working capital and... lots of luck. One of the main problems was the long time that passed between the initial investment and the time the return on it began to flow in. The investment commenced with the first steps to mine the metal, continued with sifting the ore and refining it and ended with minting the coins. Thus in many basic ways the two corvées were similar to one another. To ensure utilization of the local reserves of precious metals, Süleyman the Magnificent issued a series of decrees in the 1540's with the aim of increasing the output of the local mines,

keşan en tant que sources pour l'histoire de la Bulgarie et des pays Balkaniques", *Hungaro-Turcica, Studies in Honor of Julius Nemeth*, Budapest, 1976, pp. 325-335; A. Cohen, *Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 22. On the forcing of the wealthy of provincial towns to move to Istanbul to become butchers there, see S. Faroqi, *Towns and Townsmen of Ottoman Anatolia: Trade, Crafts and Food Production in an Urban Setting 1520-1650*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 228-233.

18. See reference 17 above, and references 29-30 below; R. Yosef Ibn 'Ezra, *Masa Melekh*, pp. 147-148; R. Shlomoh ben Avraham HaKohen, *Responsa*, 4 vols., Thessaloniki, 1586; Venice, 1592, Thessaloniki, 1592-1652, Vol. 2, Sec. 187.

19. H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life*, pp. 69-70; H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire, The Classical Age, 1300-1600*, London, 1973, p. 128; R. Davis, "English Imports from the Middle East 1580-1970", *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, M. A. Cook, ed., Oxford, 1970, pp. 193-194.

20. On the reforms in the operation of the mines, see R. Anhegger, *Beitrag zur Geschichte des Bergbaus im Osmanischen Reich*, 2 vols., Istanbul, 1943, Vol. 1, p. 181; Vol. 2, pp. 222-223.

thus making the job of mining and its attendant stages one that tied the workers to the mines. To finance the operation of the mines, the sultans sometimes had to force this burden on the wealthy, who included the Jews of Istanbul and Thessaloniki²¹.

One of the most important mining regions of the Empire was located in the town of Siderokapısı, some eight kilometers southeast of Thessaloniki. The town was settled by a group of Hungarian Jews who were expert metallurgists and who may have been brought specially for this purpose by Süleyman the Magnificent on his return from his battles there, probably around 1536²². They were followed by Spanish and Portuguese Jews from Thessaloniki, mainly financial backers and tenants of facilities in the mining town. Most operators of the mines, at all levels, were Jews and Christians, as proven by the fact that the mines were shut down from Friday noon to Monday morning²³. The main financial backers of the mines, the *sarrafs*, were almost always wealthy Jews from Thessaloniki. The *sarraflık* was a potential source of great wealth if the mines were successful, which was by no means a certainty. To ensure that the mines operated without interruption, the rulers of the Empire imposed the obligation to operate them on the Jews of Thessaloniki, as a corvée for all intents and purposes, whenever they were unable to find an individual willing to risk his capital voluntarily²⁴.

The taxes and corvées were collected in various ways. The poll tax (*cizye*) was imposed in principle according to the rules of classical Islam, that is, on every male who had reached puberty and was able to support himself (approximately from the ages of thirteen to sixty-five). The tax was imposed

21. On all this, see H. Jacobsohn, *Jews on the Caravan Routes and in the Silver Mines of Macedonia* (in Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1984, pp. 63-95; R. Eliyahu Misrahi, *Responsa*, Jerusalem, 1937, sec. 15.

22. On the importance of the Siderokapısı silver mines, see R. Anhegger, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 80-81; A. E. Vacalopoulos, *History of Macedonia*, Thessaloniki, 1973, p. 153; S. Vyonis, "The Question of the Byzantine Mines", *Speculum* 37 (1969), p. 13; H. Jacobsohn, *ibid.*, pp. 17-19. On the transfer of Jews from Hungary to Cavala, Trikkala and Seres, all very near Siderokapısı, see *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56 and the relevant footnotes.

23. On the socio-economic composition of the Siderokapısı community, see *Ibid.*, pp. 50-62. On the town's ethnic composition, see P. Belon, *Les observations de plusieurs singularitez choses memorables trouvées a la Grèce*, Paris, 1588, p. 51; and various conflicting sources on this point: A. E. Vacalopoulos, *The Greek Nation 1453-1669*, New Brunswick, 1976, pp. 247-248, and in particular p. 397, reference 196.

24. R. Yosef Ibn 'Ezra, *Masa Melekh*, pp. 91, 148; R. Yom-Tov Zahalon, *Responsa*, Venice, 1694, Sec. 40; R. Shelomoh Hakohen, *Responsa*, Vol. 2, sec. 147; and reference 34 below.

after a census and the taxpayers were divided into three categories: those who paid the high rate (*aula*), those who paid the middle rate (*evsat*) and those who paid the low rate (*edna*). This method was called “*‘ala al ru’us*” in Arabic, meaning “*per capita*”. By another method, a global payment was imposed on the community as a whole: this method was called “*maktu’a*” in Arabic. The poll tax was accompanied by a series of ancillary taxes: the *ispence*, a form of poll tax common in the Balkans before the arrival of the Ottomans, who left it in place; the *rav akçesi*, which was paid by Jews in the Empire, apparently in exchange for the right to be judged by their own laws; and the *avarizhane*, a housing tax imposed on all residents of the Empire. The latter taxes, which were regular, were usually linked to the total poll tax amount levied from the community²⁵.

In any event, the community ignored the decrees of the Ottomans, and whether the tax was imposed *per capita* or as a global payment, the community itself assessed and computed it quite differently. This was also the case in Thessaloniki: the community leaders divided the burden among the congregations, each of which in turn assessed its individual members, according to the three categories (high, middle and low). However, as mentioned earlier, there was no connection between this assessment and that of the Ottomans, if any was made by them at all. The internal assessment method was progressive, with the wealthy also paying the poll tax of many of the poor. A distinction must be made between those who paid their taxes at the “poor” rate and the poor who paid no taxes at all. The taxes of the latter were paid by the wealthy, and those poor played no role in the community’s political life. The wealthy also shouldered the lion’s share of the burden of the welfare and social services provided by the community²⁶.

Whereas payment of the poll tax was regulated by the community internally in a way that served its own interests, the corvées caused it enormous harm. Firstly, it bankrupted the wealthy, on whom the corvées of driving the cattle and operating the mines were imposed, and secondly, it reduced the pool of wealthy people who were the community’s source of funds. But worst of all, even if they and their fortunes were unharmed, the imposition

25. On the taxes imposed on the Thessaloniki community in the 16th century, see H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life*, pp. 36-45; B. Lewis, *Notes and Documents*, pp. 27-28.

26. Among the numerous sources shedding light on this issue, see in particular R. Yosef Ibn ‘Ezra, *Masa Melekh*, pp. 91-92, 141, 156, 172, 181; R. Shemuel de Medina, *Responsa*, Lvov, 1861, *Yoreh De’ah*, Secs. 174, 211; *Hoshen Mishpat*, Sec. 371; M. Rozen, “Individual and Community”, pp. 125-132.

of the corvée automatically exempted them from all other taxes to the Ottoman government. From then on, whatever contributions they made to the community depended entirely on their whim and was no longer obligatory²⁷. Consequently, the communities on which the corvées had been imposed tried to evade them, although they were unable to get away with paying nothing. The compromise they sought was payment of a ransom in exchange for an exemption from the corvée. This ransom was the lesser of evils, because the Ottomans in any case demanded payments from certain community members in exchange for exemption from the corvées.

A fascinating instance is the "accord" made by all the Jews of Istanbul with a man called Shaltiel, who was the *kahya*, the leader of the city's Jews and their liaison with the Ottomans in 1519. The main thrust of the accord was to prevent him from doing anything that involved liaison with the authorities, because he had exploited his position to profit financially from those endeavors. The accord encouraged everyone claiming that Shaltiel had taken money from him in exchange for exemption from the *sarraflık* to sue him to recover their money. In other words, under the leadership of *Kahya* Shaltiel, a custom had evolved of cash payments in lieu of the corvée, to fill the coffers of whoever had been chosen to conduct the community's dealings with the authorities²⁸.

A more conventional aspect of the procedure is evident from later sources. In 1556, for example, 20 wealthy members of the Istanbul community were forced to pay the sum of 10,000 flori (golden ducats) to the Imperial Treasury as a "butcher's fee". The purpose of this payment was to secure the Jewish community's share of the total supply of meat to the city. The twenty protested that they are not the only wealthy Jews in the city, and the decree was amended to divide the sum between additional members of other congregations of the city, who had not been included in the original decree²⁹.

27. R. Yosef Ibn 'Ezra, *Masa Melekh*, p. 148; R. Shelomoh Hakohen, *Responsa*, Vol. 2, Sec. 147.

28. On the institution of the *kahya*, see H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life*, pp. 29-341 and Documents 53, 70, 78. Because the word *kahya* appears alongside the Turkish word *cemaat başı*, i.e. community leaders, Gerber translated it as procurator, whereas examination of the term in view of the *kahya's* function in other contexts of Ottoman society shows it may have been the leader, manager and representative of any group in the Empire, from a group of members of a particular religious community or a group of artisans or merchants to a military unit. This position always included a financial administrative aspect. See also H. A. R. Gibb & H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, 2 Vols., Oxford, 1969, according to the index. The source we discuss is R. Eliyahu Mizrahi, *Responsa*, Sec. 16.

29. A Refik, *Onuncu Asr-i Hicride İstanbul Hayatı*, Istanbul, 1987, Document 19, pp.

To divide the burden between a larger number of people and retain the Jews as sources of payment of the community's taxes, the Istanbul community campaigned for replacement of the individual corvée by a global amount payable by the community as a whole. Ultimately, a decree was issued by the Sultan on 21.3.1586 that the deportee (*sürgün*) communities, namely the Romaniotes, "those who came voluntarily" (*kendi gelen*), namely immigrants from Christian Europe, and the Karaites (*Edirne*) had reached an agreement with the Ottoman authorities that the Jews of the city would collect the amount of 500,000 *akçe*, to establish a reserve from which 100,000 *akçe* would be paid to the Treasury each year. This agreement ensured that they would not be required to actually carry out the corvée of driving the cattle or become butchers or mine operators. The Sultan's decree also guaranteed that they would not be asked to pay any more than the amounts specified in the agreement³⁰. Naturally, they were eventually subject to more demands and imposts³¹, but the principle of replacement of the corvée by a global levy was retained.

Looking at the development of the arrangements connected with the irregular taxes in Istanbul and comparing their chronology to events in Thessaloniki, it is obvious that the latter community was far ahead of the Istanbulis in realizing the need for solidarity in resisting the demands of the Ottoman government. The global arrangements regarding operation of the mines in Siderokapısı were made immediately after the issuing of the relevant *fermans*. The collapse of these arrangements after the fire of 1545 resulted within a decade in a renewed effort to obtain the exemptions once again. However, what was perceived as the "public interest" by those who supported the arrangements was evidently inconsistent with the personal interests of certain members of the community.

B. The Arguments Over the Delegation to Istanbul and the Tension over the "Sarraflik" Corvée

In a sermon held by R. Mosheh Almosnino on 27 Adar 5328 (the Decree of Freedom sermon), he expressed in several ways the tensions that had arisen

128-129. A Hebrew translation of this document was published by H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life*, Document 5, p. 84.

30. A. Refik, *Istanbul Hayatı*, Document 20, pp. 84-85. A Hebrew translation of this documents was published by H. Gerber, *Economic and Social Life*, Document 12, pp. 89-90.

31. For example, see H. Gerber, *ibid.*, Document 27, pp. 100-101.

within Thessaloniki society prior to the delegation's departure. The three members of the delegation, Mosheh Almosnino, Moshch Barukh and Ya'akov Nahmias were chosen from a group of seven procurators, who nominated the three delegates. It may be presumed that the seven procurators represented the seven biggest Sephardi congregations of Thessaloniki, which to its members constituted the "republic" of Thessaloniki Jewry.

The delegation departed amid hard feelings within and without. The Greeks of Thessaloniki were jealous and mistrustful, and hoped the delegation would fail in its mission. But this was not the only form of psychological pressure that marred the delegation's departure. In his sermon, Almosnino stated openly that the mission's success would force certain elements of the community to obey the dictates of the leadership, whose views he represented. He spoke of the many who disobeyed the spiritual leaders and mentioned a specific group who preferred to conduct their affairs with the Ottoman administration independently, instead of shouldering the burden of the community, as the leadership saw it. These individuals were able to conduct their affairs in this way because of the fragmented organizational structure of the community, which made it impossible to presume that everyone together for the common good of Thessaloniki Jewry. Almosnino described exactly how these people conducted their affairs: they bribed Ottoman officials. The obvious conclusion is that the bribes were paid for exemption from the corvées that had been imposed on those individuals, and they were evidently less costly than contributing to the global arrangement for exemption from the corvées³².

These individuals objected so strongly to the delegation's departure that even after it had already left, they attempted to frustrate its mission by informing on and spreading libels about its members, both at the "Sublime Porte" and in Thessaloniki itself³³. Almosnino's descriptions of the conflicts of interests in Thessaloniki are made clearer in the letter sent by Jewish leaders in Siderokapısı to the heads of the Thessaloniki community. From the *Chronicles*, we know that the *celeplik* corvée was imposed on the wealthy of Thessaloniki every year during the period before the delegation departed. In other words, at the time the delegation left, this was the main corvée on the agenda³⁴. The *sarraflık* corvée was merely hanging in the air as a threat, but it was not yet known what would happen. This is evident from Almosnino's description:

32. See R. Mosheh Almosnino, *Me'amez Ko'ah*, pp. 6a-7b, 8a.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 5a, 6a-b, 8b/9a-b, 11b-12a.

34. R. Mosheh Almosnino, *Chronicles*, p. 207; *idem.*, *Extremos y Gratezas*, p. 10.

During the Feast of Tabernacles in the year 5327, we arrived in Constantinople and shortly thereafter we learned... that the *Kadi* and *Emin* of Siderokapısı came to Thessaloniki, intent on taking seven *sarrafs* to finance the mine, by order of the Royal Decree they brought with them³⁵.

It is possible that the reason why the *sarraflık* problem was not known at the time of the delegation's departure is simply because the need for a supply of meat was a recurrent, annual phenomenon, whereas the need for new *sarrafs* became evident only whenever it was found that their predecessors were not operating the mines satisfactorily, the Ottomans were prodded into immediate action whenever unsatisfactory operation of the mines resulted in a shortage of precious metals. In other words, it was not a problem that arose at regular, predictable intervals. Nevertheless, we will see later that the mention of the *sarraflık* problem only after the delegation's departure is a reflection of unwillingness to fight the wealthy members of the community over this issue as well, as long as it was not essential, rather than a belief that the problem would disappear.

It is clear from the Chronicles that the wealthy of Thessaloniki hid or fled the city in order to evade the decree. Some were caught and arrested. Upon the death of Sultan Süleyman, they were freed and the decree was suspended temporarily³⁶. However, this information is incomplete. The fleeing and evasions of the wealthy were a continuation of their unwillingness to share the community's fate, as was intimated by Almosnino in his writings before the delegation's departure:

There was hunger in the land. Everyone did as they saw fit, for they did not obey the leaders and judges. Wealthy private individuals went to live abroad and abandoned the community, because of the poor leadership. Had they been good leaders, the wealthy would not have isolated themselves from the poor in times of hunger³⁷.

This statement, which was written in 1564, merely hints at what was happening in Thessaloniki between 1564 and 1566, but the letter of the Siderokapısı leaders discloses what Almosnino concealed beneath his euphemisms and rhetoric.

35. Idem., *Chronicles*, pp. 201, 235.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

37. Idem., *Yedei Mosheh, Sermons*, Thessaloniki, 1582, Book of Ruth, I, 1:1.

It is clear from between the lines that the writers of the letter were themselves involved in mining and had an interest in the work being carried out to the satisfaction of the authorities. They were motivated by a vested interest, part of which is not expressed in the letter at all: they earned their living from the mines. Another vested interest they had in proper operation of the mines was mentioned expressly: they were afraid the authorities would hold them responsible for unsatisfactory operation. The fact that the unsatisfactory operation of the mines was caused by a shortage of capital shows that the writers of the letter did not belong to the elite of the mine-operating guilds (i.e. the financiers), but were heads of the technical operations, artisans and operators of the various facilities.

These minors knew that their own welfare and that of their small community were not of major concern to the Jews of Thessaloniki, so they explained in great detail the injustice that had been caused to many residents of Thessaloniki itself and the harm that the community as a whole would suffer if the situation were to continue. The letter describes how the wealthy of Thessaloniki hid or fled the city and, worse still, bribed the Ottomans to exempt them from the *sarraflık* work. Consequently, the Ottoman officials sent to Siderokapısı people who were not suited to the task, because they either were unable to work or lacked the necessary capital. It is enlightening to read the description of how the Jews of Thessaloniki evaded encounters with Siderokapısı Jews when they came to the city to conduct business: "They would rather meet a bear that lost its cubs than one of those people". The writers of the letter warned that after all of those unfortunates lose their capital, the turn of the hidden Jews and bribe payers would come, and the entire community would collapse.

The letter spells out the arrangements proposed by the leaders of the Siderokapısı community to solve the problem of operating the mines. According to the writers, these arrangements were based on an understanding with the Ottoman authorities reached following the *kaşaflık* (investigation) conducted by order of the central administration in Istanbul. This may be a reference to the investigation conducted in the summer of 1567 to determine whether 50,000 *aspers* (offered by the Jews as a global payment) would suffice to finance the operation of the mines. In any event, the arrangement proposed in the letter is far more complex than the one that was finally entered into. It could refer to an intermediate stage in the community's ongoing negotiations with the authorities, and if so the letter should be dated in the fall of 1567.

It is clear from the letter that the negotiations had been concluded with nothing achieved, because the wealthy of Thessaloniki refused to participate

in the arrangement proposed by the Ottomans. The arrangement is reminiscent of the one made by the Istanbul community two decades later, depicting the Ottoman taxation procedures as far more logical than implied in the Decree of Freedom sermon and the chronicles, and even than inferred from how the writers of the letter subsequently described the greed of the Ottoman bureaucrats. On the other hand, it depicts the Jewish community as a group lacking social cohesion, with every man for himself. The arrangement proposed by the Siderokapısı community leaders, with the authorities' consent, was based on establishing a common fund to which all members of the Thessaloniki would contribute their share. Special officials would be appointed by the Thessaloniki community to oversee the administration of the fund. Once a week, the officials would issue a fixed amount to the skilled mine operators (those with proven capabilities) and the following week they would receive unworked metal to the same value.

This arrangement would also have benefitted the Ottoman government, because it would have ensured the uninterrupted operation of the mines and relieved them of the need for frequent recruitment of *sarrafs* to replace those who had become bankrupt or fled. The arrangement would also transfer the responsibility for operating the mines from financial backers with no knowledge of mining to skilled artisans, and would establish principles of economic feasibility: if a mine had no ore, it would not be worked. However, as mentioned earlier, the arrangement was unacceptable to those who were essential to its implementation, the wealthy Jews of Thessaloniki. Their evasion of responsibility for the community's fate is the dissension and discord that Almosnino referred to in his sermon.

The writers of the letter ended with the express threat that unless the Jews of Thessaloniki unite to solve the *sarraflık* problem by consolidating all the community's resources, they would be forced to seek recourse to the "Sublime Porte" and name the most suitable candidates for the *sarraflık*. They added that even if they abstain from doing so, it will ultimately be done by someone from the Turkish or Greek communities of Thessaloniki. They mentioned that whenever a royal decree containing a demand for coins is received, the wealthy among them contribute to the operation of the mines to the best of their ability, but their financial backing is not enough. It strips them of all their wealth but ultimately does not save the rich of Thessaloniki from misfortune.

The fact that the delegation was already in Istanbul when these events took place may have made it easier for it to act in a way that would benefit everyone, because it was free of the pressures of those who opposed the ar-

rangement. However, it appears from the Chronicles that things were not so simple. Disagreements between Almosnino and Mosheh Barukh over the need to bribe the Ottoman officials, the latter's suspicious attitude towards Don Yosef Nasi, and difficulties in communicating with Thessaloniki and Siderokapısı severely hampered Almosnino. However, he did not satisfy himself with an exemption from the cattle-droving corvée, but continued to negotiate until the comprehensive arrangement was finalized. This arrangement—which was finalized once the Ottomans were satisfied that it provided sufficient finance for the mines and, to all appearances, studiously ignoring the pressures of the opponents—exempted the Jews of Thessaloniki from the corvées of droving the cattle and operating the mines in exchange for a global payment of 300,000 *aspers* and annual payments of 50,000 *aspers*. These amounts included the poll tax. This arrangement (the *musellimlik*) afforded them the status of “free subjects” (*mu'af ve-müsellim re'aya*), but the freedom they enjoyed was not from the poll tax, but from a corvée they never knew when and how would be collected. Evidently, this was a significant freedom, because—according to Almosnino—it became the object of their neighbors' envy and fostered unprecedented stability and security³⁸.

In practical terms, the arrangement that Almosnino achieved was almost identical to the one mentioned by the Siderokapısı leaders in their letter, but its embodiment in an order of the Sultan changed it from a proposed arrangement to which the wealthy of Thessaloniki could object, to a royal decree that was not subject to appeal.

Reviewing the main points of the affair, two interesting facts emerge. One is the contrast between the metropolis (Thessaloniki) and its satellite (Siderokapısı). The financing of the mines, which were a potential source of wealth, was not always a source of satisfaction; it was clearly a source of conflict between the two communities, at least in the years under review. The mines, which provided jobs for hundreds of Jewish families in Siderokapısı, were often a source of serious trouble for the Thessaloniki community.

The other fact to emerge from the affair is the Ottoman government's role in the creation of the supreme leadership of the Thessaloniki community. It was the achievement of the *musellimlik* that established the status of the supreme community leadership that sent Almosnino to Istanbul. With all the conflicts of interests and absence of solidarity in the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, the mere departure of the delegation, as well as its accomplish-

38. See summary in M. Z. Benayah, *R. Mosheh Almosnino*, pp. 75-93.

ments, reflected the dominance of the needs of the public over the egocentric aspirations of the individuals. They also reflected the victory of the scholars and leaders who had a sense of public responsibility over the wealthy, who were motivated solely by their own interests. Nevertheless, the social conflicts in Thessaloniki did not cease when the Decree of Freedom was received: class tensions continued to prevail well into the future³⁹.

This discussion of the letter from the Jews of Siderokapısı and the *sarraflık* corvée affair does not bring the chapter to a close: many questions on the subject still remain to be answered. One such question concerns the very wealthy Jews, such as 'Ezra Calderon and Yizhaq Terogash, who in the late 16th century were *sarrafs* in Siderokapısı, and apparently amassed great fortunes from their dealings⁴⁰. On the other hand, there are recorded instances of the *sarraflık* being forced on Thessaloniki Jews even after the *musellimlik* was issued⁴¹. These facts indicate that the global tax arrangement was in fact implemented, although not in regard to the Sultan's share of the bargain. The money may possibly have been insufficient for operation of the mines at some times, while at others the mine operators earned high profits. Nevertheless, these points require further clarification.

Another question, the answer to which was alluded to earlier, is what created the perception prevailing in the study of Jewish history that the Jews of Thessaloniki were exempted from payment of the poll tax and the other taxes for the provision of the King's Clothing? The fact that the poll tax proceeds were used to pay for the wool, and the fact that the *musellimlik* (the exemption from the irregular corvées) was based on the obligation to supply woolen textiles, consolidated all these components into a single cohesive whole. This consolidation was particularly important in the mid-17th century and subsequently, when the wealthy of Thessaloniki emigrated in large numbers, and the rabbis of the city sought means of forcing them to share the tax burden following their departure as well. This is the source of the fiction of the inescapable obligation of paying for the King's Clothing instead of the poll tax⁴². Obviously, the rabbis of Thessaloniki in the 17th century sincerely believed this to be true, both because they had no written document to the contrary, and because the version of the facts they were presented with served

39. See R. Mosheh Almosnino, *Me'amez Koah*, p. 12b. See also comprehensive discussion in M. Rozen, "Individual and Community", pp. 125-132.

40. On these people, see H. Jacobsohn, *Jews on the Caravan Routes*, pp. 65-70.

41. R. Yosef Ibn 'Ezra, *Masa Melekh*, p. 91.

42. M. Rozen, "Individual and Community", pp. 155-164.

the interests of their community. In truth however, this is a clear-cut case of revision of history. Jewish historians, who generally relied on these sources, accepted the revision as fact, thus creating the impression described by Rozanes, Nehama, Emmanuel, Shohat⁴³ and others.

43. *Ibid.*, references 5-10.