My Jewish childhood in Istanbul was not a very Jewish childhood.¹ At least, not for me.

It was a joyful, carefree time of innocence and bliss, but few of its bright, lively colors had a Jewish tint, few of its wonderful, loud, and varied sounds carried a Jewish tone.

We were, of course, Jewish. No one doubted that. A long line of East European rabbis and dentists on the Ashkenazi side of the family, and an equally long list of Eastern Aegean doctors and small traders on the Sephardi side, an endless succession of Aarons and Bohors, Cecilias and Esmeraldas, and birthplaces as far removed as Grodno, Tattenitz, İzmir, and Tire all bore impeccable witness to the unsullied Jewishness of the family.

In later, less innocent and blissful times, I would taunt Turkish chauvinists with the fact, no doubt true but utterly unimportant to me, that in a land built on the remnants of a multiethnic empire where races and religions had freely mingled, danced, and procreated with each other for many centuries, I was one of a very small number of people who could claim with any certainty to be “of pure blood!”

So, Jewish we were, but I was fortunate enough to be brought up without any particular stress on exactly how Jewish I had to be.

There were, I think, two main reasons for this. One to do with the heroes of this story, my parents and grandparents, and the other with the time and place in which the story was set.

The jewels in the crown of my youth were my two grandfathers.

Joseph Margulies, “Yuzek” to his wife, “Dyeda” to me, had moved to Turkey in 1925, at the age of twenty-seven, out of pure coincidence. When he left Vienna

¹ A reminder to readers that this essay is one of the two in this volume that were originally written in English (UK).
Figure 4. Istanbul, 1960. Roni Margulies is holding a ball, on the right. He’s with his grandfather and his cousins. Behind him, wearing sunglasses, is his mother.
University as an engineer after having fought as a young lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian army, his uncle Wolf found him work in Berlin. The company he went to work for exported machinery, followed by an engineer on a one-year assignment to help the locals set the machines up. He was given the choice of Japan, Hungary, and Turkey. There had just been an earthquake in Japan, he knew and disliked the Hungarian importers, and so chose Turkey. He married my grandmother in Grodno, they caught the train to Constanza, and from there a boat to Istanbul. They came for a year and stayed forever. Thus was I born a *Turkish* Jew.

Joseph was Polish, but at home they spoke my grandmother’s native tongue, not his. He had learned Russian when they first met, better to court her in her mother tongue. And in addition to the Russian words I was to learn when I became a socialist—“tovarich,” “iskra,” “rabochnik”—I still know that “daimi klutch” means “give me the keys,” because she would ask him for the room keys several times a day on our family winter holidays in a hotel by a Northern Turkish mountain lake near the Black Sea coast. In the afternoons, all six of us, two grandparents and their four grandchildren, my sister, my two cousins, and I, would go walking around the steel-blue waters of the lake, along forest paths through pine trees weighed down by snow. I do not know if there is a Jewish heaven—I was never interested enough to look into the matter—but if there is, I came as close to it on those walks as I ever will.

On my mother’s side, my grandparents spoke Ladino, the language which the Jews brought with them from Spain when they arrived in the Ottoman Empire half a millennium ago. This was the language Moise and Elda Danon spoke with each other; to me they spoke in French, as did my parents. I answered them all in Turkish. I learned no Russian, little Ladino, and much French, but together with Turkish in the streets and English at school, these languages were all part of my aural universe before I could write even a single line of poetry in any one of them.

None of these people, all of whom played a part, difficult to describe but very real nonetheless, in making me who I became, were religious in any formal sense. Some, mostly the women, believed in some sort of God, no doubt a Jewish one, but not a very strict one. Some believed in no such thing. Some were Zionists, in rather a vague, emotional way, not very concretely, and all felt some bond with Israel, though again, not very actively or very meaningfully, but only in a strangely Platonic way.

Thankfully, this strange collection of people who had converged on Istanbul in the 1920s through a series of odd coincidences were all very relaxed about their Jewishness and none felt it to be the core of their lives or the determining feature of their personal identities. The family would come together for dinner on Jewish

---

2. These Russian words are neither explained nor translated in the original: *Tovarich* (comrade); *iskra* (spark or sparkle; also the title of a revolutionary communist newspaper founded by Lenin in 1900); *rabochnik* (likely a deformation of *rabotnik*, meaning worker).
holidays, but such dinners were only differentiated from others by the gefilte fish and chopped liver cooked by one grandmother or the shore rockling (gaidropsarus mediterraneus)—a fish to which Ottoman Jews seem to have given pride of place on festive tables, though I doubt that it has any such place in the Old Testament—cooked by the other. Nothing overtly religious took place on these evenings, and I still cannot tell Pesach and Yom Kippur apart. I only know they exist because my mother rings to wish me happy holidays, knowing full-well that I will make gentle fun of her and she will have to join me in the laughter.

And yes, I did have a bar mitzvah. I know of no Jew in Turkey who has not. As my thirteenth birthday approached, a young man was employed for one or two evenings a week to teach me Hebrew, or at least enough Hebrew for me to recite the necessary prayers during the ceremony at the synagogue. To give credit where it’s due, he very quickly realized that I had no interest in the matter and was unlikely to be cajoled into it. We agreed that I could simply memorize the prayers, I quickly did so, and the lessons ended prematurely.

Boring as prayers in an obscure language were for a thirteen-year-old, the bar mitzvah presents made it well worth it. For my twelfth birthday I may have received a leather football, some books, and clothes from close relatives. For the thirteenth, tradition required that rather more serious presents be given by all relatives, as well as my parents’ many friends invited to the synagogue. My father, whose pride in my supposed “coming of age” seemed to be no greater than mine, wrote a mock-prayer, in Turkish, not Hebrew, asking guests to leave the presents by the entrance and requiring those who had brought none simply to leave. The Mont Blanc fountain pen and the silver letter opener on my desk, not far from my computer, date from that ceremony where, perhaps I should add, I recited “Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam . . .,” rather than the prayer penned by my father. What the words mean, I still don’t know!

Beyond the festive dinners and the bar mitzvah, there is not a great deal of specific Jewishness I remember from my early years. When I look back now, I can see that until the age of fourteen, when I started at Robert College, the American lycée on the banks of the Bosporus, all my friends were Jewish. They were not chosen as friends and they were certainly not chosen because they were Jewish. We just happened to be the children of parents who were friends and so we were at the same places at the same time. A few are still my friends. Davut Kohen, the ophthalmologist; Irvin Schick, the mathematician and lecturer in cultural studies; Elio Ancel, the manufacturer of handkerchiefs. Now we know, but then we were just kids and did not think we were different from any of the other kids around, at school, in the streets, or anywhere else. Istanbul in the 1960s was still a considerably multicultural, multiethnic city. I do not remember ever giving a single

---

3. This formula, “Blessed art thou, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe . . .,” is found at the beginning of most Jewish liturgical blessings.
thought to the fact that my friends included Armenians, Greeks, and Turks, as well as Jews.

I did not know until much later—when, for political reasons, in order to write against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism, I began to take an interest in the community—that there are and always have been Jewish schools, newspapers, sports clubs, youth clubs, old peoples' homes, and a whole network of community organizations. As a child and a young man, I knew nothing of this network. This cannot have been my own choice, it must have been chosen for me by my parents and grandparents, and for this I am forever grateful to them. I hate religious, ethnic, or any other particularism now, and I would like to think that I would have hated it then.

I owe it to the heroes of this story that no such particularism was imposed upon me at a time when I was most impressionable. The reason it was not had to do partly with who they were, but partly also with the time and place in which the story was set.

In September 1955, just a few months after I was born, the shops, homes, and holy places of non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul were attacked and ransacked for two days by mobs organized clandestinely by the secret services.\(^4\) No one died, but the trauma was severe. Only thirteen years previously, during the Second World War, the state had imposed a one-off wealth tax which was effectively only levied on the minorities.\(^5\) Those who could not pay were sent to labor camps in the godforsaken eastern part of the country, where they stayed in atrocious conditions until the tax was quietly shelved after about a year.

These and similar inhumanities throughout Republican times, since 1923, had nothing at all to do with religion. They were all planned, prepared, and perpetrated by a vicious nationalist state, not by any spontaneous street crowds, and not only against non-Muslims. And the scars never healed fully; the traumas were never completely overcome.

In such a country, it was always felt by the minorities to be safer not to appear too Jewish, or Greek, or Armenian. The Jewish community, in particular, did its utmost to remain as silent and publicly invisible as a community of more than twenty thousand people can be. No one ever told me this, but I suspect it may have been one reason why none of the Margulies or Danon children were brought up to be too religious. This is not to imply that all Jews in Turkey are atheists on the verge of complete assimilation; far from it. I would guess that only a small handful would be nonbelievers, and anyway, even the most ardent assimilationists would be banging their heads against a brick wall.

\(^4\) Known as the Istanbul Pogrom, on the night of September 6, 1955, organized special forces launched attacks targeting primarily the city's Greek population. The city's other minorities, Jews and Armenians, also fell victim to the violence, which was primarily directed against shops and offices.

\(^5\) See Country Snapshot: "Turkey."
It was also true, when I was growing up, that the walls separating the many ethnic and religious communities of Istanbul had become weaker and much more porous than they had been even in my parents’ youth. And they crumbled and collapsed completely in the years when I traveled the distance between being a child and a young man. My Sephardi grandparents, and certainly their parents, had spent most of their lives behind those invisible walls. I was free to wander.

At Robert College I was suddenly old enough to choose my own friends. And none were Jewish. What we had in common were middle-class families, insatiable intellectual curiosity, an interest in all things cultural, mainly Anglo-Saxon and very rarely Turkish, and an utterly undeserved sense of superiority. This did not mean that we were to be found reading French novels and discussing our existential angst between lessons. Most of my school days were spent playing football, or sitting on stone benches on the edge of the campus watching the boats glide along the Bosphorus.

Those were without any doubt the happiest days of our lives.

Then the country changed, and the world changed, and we changed.

But we had already become who we are now, and the survivors are still my closest friends.