

**SYMPOSIUM ON LEVANTINES**  
**21 SEPTEMBER 2019 BÜYÜKADA**

Hello,

I was asked to give a talk about the life of the Levantines in the Prince's Islands. Since I am not a true islander, I do not know much about this. Until I was thirty years old, we used to go to the resort of Bebek on the Bosphorus. It was there we enjoyed the hospitality of the nuns of the *Filles de la Charite* in their magnificent orphanage and farms. My childhood and youth passed in such an environment. Unfortunately, after a very sad process, nuns from there and therefore we were also evicted. But this is another story. So after 1970, I started to spend the summer months in Kinaliada (Proti), so I got to know very well the village of my wife who was brought up there. I don't know the old days of the islands. After the 1970s, the human texture of the islands had already begun to change for obvious reasons. I also have no claim to be a historian. After my business life, I became an amateur researcher and an accidental writer.

Today, I am here in front of you with an Italian Levantine identity from my father and an Italian one from mother. I am tired of the humiliating adjectives that western travellers and writers used for the Levantines. As I mentioned in one of my articles, I think that this attitude is caused by a feeling of jealousy of these authors. Namely, when they came to find an exotic environment unique to the East, they were stunned and became jealous when they came across a western community who lived a life similar to or even superior to their own life. I will close this subject by saying a very nice French phrase in this regard: *Il vaut mieux faire envie que pitié*, that is it is better to be envied rather than pitied.

Look carefully at me, I'm a genuine Levantine. I'm one of the last parts of an endangered species. A kind of museum object. Anyway, those who invited me here today also used the word *doyen* for me. I like this word because when you don't want to tell someone that you are old or outdated, the adjective is used as a veteran. Veterans are also tolerated and treated with tolerance. They take shelter behind their advanced ages and speak as they wish, while others are kind enough to listen to them. I will use this method today and I will tell you about Levantines from here and there. Maybe you will not find what you expect

while coming here. However, without exceeding the short time allotted to me, I will try to transfer some of my knowledge and memories I had saved concerning Levantine along the 81 years of my life I have spent in Turkey. As an author has recounted what I will tell from here is not important, what is important is the things you will say to yourself after listening to me is.

In literature, the word Levantine was used in the seventeenth century by La Fontaine in the fairy tale "The mouse retiring from the world." When he says "Levantines in their legends" (Les levantins dans leur légende) the word Levantine is quite surprising because he could have said "Les Orientaux dans leur légende". However, La Fontaine while telling an Eastern legend, but brings in a nuance. He wants to reveal that there is a difference between a Levantine and an Easterner. For that time, this is a very interesting approach. Later writers such as Renan, Zola and Victor Hugo used the word Levantine instead of words for a double-handled dagger, a silk fabric and a sailor.

And also hear it from me. In my opinion, Levantines are individuals who have settled in the lands of the Ottoman Empire who came from the West within a certain period of time, but who were not locals and were Christian. In short, these are the conditions that qualify a Levantine:

- 1) Coming from the west
- 2) Arrival date being certain
- 3) Christian (Catholic, Protestant or Anglican)
- 4) Not a native of the Middle East

When these four conditions that I counted come together, Levantines can be mentioned. Many of them belong to the Catholic Latin sect because of their origin. However, there are also Anglican and Protestant ones, although they are few in number, because of their origins. Some researchers also place the Beirut centred Melkite and Maronite Christian congregations which are no longer viable in Turkey in the Levantine category. I think it's a wrong approach because these Christian communities are native to the Middle East. However, Levantines are Christians (Catholic, Protestant or Anglican) who came from the countries that were not under the patronage of the Ottoman Empire.

The Italian, French, Maltese, Spanish, Polish, German and Austrians were who made up the majority of the Levantines who were Latin Catholic. Later, with the

industrialization revolution, Belgian, Dutch and British people, especially in Izmir, joined this group. Through these, Protestant churches began to be established. Generally, the British lived in magnificent villas they built in large gardens in the Buca and Bornova districts of Izmir.

The Levantines were never a crowded population, and since most of them were foreigners, they did not qualify as a nation and / or minority. In my opinion, it would be correct to define them as an ethno-confessional group. Levantines never institutionalized and often were considered as one with the Roman Catholic religion in Turkey. They never had their own schools or hospitals such as Greek, Armenian and Jewish minorities did. Such activities were undertaken by the religious communities of the Latin Catholic church. The institutions that the Levantines founded directly were for social purposes only: Cercle d'Orient, Prinkipo Yacht Club, Makriköy Aya Stefanos Sailing Club, Khalkedon Racing Club, later renamed Kadiköy Racing Club, Societa Operaia, Circolo Roma, Union Française, Teutonia. The only philanthropic institution founded by the Levantines is the ARTIGIANA Nursing Home in Harbiye, founded by an Italian in 1838. This institution, which was granted the status of an association working in the public interest in 1967, has been managed by the Levantines until today.

Considering this ethnic-religious concept, it was essential to have a Latin Catholic church in the places where the Levantines went as a summer residence. When this is the case, a question comes to mind, since the Levantines were resident here in the summer, were the churches built here, or was it because of the presence of churches that the Levantines went here. I leave the answer to the valuable historians here.

In order not to exceed the time period allocated to me, before providing information on the various summer locations they migrated to, it is necessary to briefly divide the Levantines into a few classes, as is the case with other social groups. The main divisions are Ottoman / Turkish citizen named Reaya, those who are foreign nationals and those who were influenced by the negative adjectives I have just mentioned and thus concealed their Levantine identity. In the late XIXth century, these Levantine groups would move to the various summer resorts. Thus, according to their language and social affiliation, they would go particularly to where there were existing churches to the islands, the

Bosphorus, Moda / Fenerbahçe and also along the Sirkeci / Halkalı train line to Yedikule, Bakırköy, Yeşilköy and Galatarya (Şenlikköy). And there was also Polonezköy. It is a settlement with a Catholic church. Its status is completely different. People visited the pensions operated by the Polish families there on weekends during the cherry blossom season in spring. But this is another story. If we start from the islands:

Since the island of Kınalı does not have a Latin church, this island was not a place preferred by the Levantines - except for a couple of families, us included. These would go to Sunday Mass in either Burgas or Büyükada Islands.

The situation was slightly different in Burgas Island. Some German-speaking (Germanophone) Levantine families would have gone to this island, and although there was no Latin church, there was a small Latin Catholic chapel in the summer houses of the priests and nuns of the Austrian Saint Georges School and hospital.

Since there is no Latin Catholic church in Heybeliada, it was not a favoured place for Levantines. However, there were a few Levantines married to Greeks resident there through the summers.

In Buyukada, the situation was different again. Here, thanks to the San Pacifico Latin Catholic church built with the help of the CORPI family, a Levantine family, it was the preferred place for Levantine families. Even though their population has decreased, a few Levantine families are still coming to Büyükada to spend the summers. Of course, the old island life is gradually disappearing, but although some of the Levantines' mansions have changed hands, they are still trying to stand as witnesses of a by gone time.

If we reach the Bosphorus, leaving the islands, the situation is not much different. Levantines were again united in language and social classes and selected some places as summer residences. Of these:

There were a couple of eminent families gathering around the Büyükdere church dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Although there was no Latin Church in Tarabya, several Levantine families would go to Yeniköy and Tarabaya, taking advantage of the chapel of the nuns of Notre Dame de Sion, the grounds used by the presidency today.

Bebek was one of the most popular resorts in the Levantines. Thanks to the Sacré Coeur Church of Saint Benoit Lazarist priests and the chapel in the orphanage of the Filles de la Charité nuns, which is a well-known and very sad story, it was a place where many Levantine families of Beyoğlu spent their summers. Until the 1970s, Bebek was able to maintain its charm as a summer resort.

However, as a result of arbitrary practices that prohibit the renting of the houses belonging to the orphanage and the conditions of modern life, the Levantines, which had already decreased, made it impossible for the summer to be spent in Bebek for the community.

If we look at the Anatolian coast of the Bosphorus, we see that the Levantines were concentrated in Kandilli. Although there is no Latin Church here, a few Levantine families of French origin would go to this resort. For a while, a priest from the Saint Antoine church would go to perform Sunday mass at the house of one of these families. Later, Count Ostrorog and his family, who were the last to stay in Kandilli, would cross by the motor-boat from his mansion and started attending Sunday mass in the Bebek. After his departure, there were no remaining Levantine families in Kandilli.

Moda was a favorite place for Levantines of British and Maltese origin. Here, as well there was the Tubini chapel built by a Levantine and a church of the Assumptionists priests on Cem Street. The well-known Whittall family spent their summers in this neighbourhood.

Fenerbahçe was another summer residence for Levantines, as there was a small chapel in the garden of the present Touring Hotel. The Couteaux family, a well-known Belgian Levantine living here, had a large mansion that today has been converted into a modern housing estate. The rage of modernization has gnawed here as well.

Finally, YEŞİLKÖY was the most popular destination when it comes to summer resorts on the shore of the Sea of Marmara.

Due to the presence of the San Stefano Latin Catholic church and the proximity of the hunting grounds this area was popular amongst the Italian Levantines. Until recently it was possible to see the various magnificent summer houses of well-known Levantine families here. Yeşilköy with the changing living conditions

just like in Bebek have meant that the neighbourhood is no longer a summer resort though it is possible to still come across several Levantine families there. Bakırköy and Yedikule districts were two districts with Latin Churches. Here were the places where Italian engineers working, especially in the construction of the Yedikule railroad resided with their families.

I do not want to bore you with too much historical information. You can find them in books or online. I only wanted to show you segments of my life in front of you. I would especially like to underline that Levantine identity is a very successful example of integration that still lives as a small reality before I finish my words. But how happy we are if it remains in collective memory as a culture and lifestyle that is doomed to disappear soon. It is impossible to bring this lifestyle back in Beyoğlu and the Islands. The social landscape of these places has changed completely. We could renovate the buildings but unfortunately we cannot bring back those edifices' souls through the people now long gone. There is a stereotypical idiom in Latin "Sic transit gloriam mundi", this is how the magnificence of the world passes by. Levantines will also have passed through this world.

As Professor Ekrem Buğra Ekinci said, Levantines, despite everything, left an important mark in Turkish social history. I am also happy with that.

As for me, I am happy and proud to have lived as a Levantine, despite all that has been said, written and the mentioned negativities:

- because I am the surviving heir of traditions preserved by my ancestors for centuries;
- because even though I was fully integrated in Turkey, I was able to retain my identity by not being assimilated,
- because I straddle the two cultures, those of the West and Turkey;
- because I eat the 'arrabbiata sauce pasta' with the same pleasure as I like 'imambayıldı dish',
- I did not forget to speak Italian and French even though the obsessive ones would detect an accent in my pronunciation. On the contrary, I have a richer vocabulary than many native French and Italians,
- because I feel comfortable in Istanbul, as in Rome or Paris,
- I'm here because I feel that I am able to better serve in my capacity both Italy and Turkey;

- because I am open to everyone and everything,
- because I am part of the richness and diversity of this country, and I don't have an identity problem,
- because lately, while not naming an important person, I know exactly where I came from and I know who I am: a cosmopolitan Turkish Italian, so ... a Levantine.

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