QUICK STUDIES

AS YOU SEE IT

Save Sabbatai Sevi House from Oblivion

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DOI: 10.1017/S0020743807080038



Sabbatai Sevi House at Agora Girisi, 920, Izmir, Turkey. Photo by the author. [A color version of this figure can be viewed online at www.journals.cambridge.org]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743807080038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Toward the end of 2006, would-be religious savior Sabbatai Sevi came back into the news when a crumbling, three-story house in Izmir, Turkey, was identified as his birthplace just a few weeks before it was due to be demolished.

A mystic rabbi from Izmir (Smyrna), Sevi roiled the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 17th century, particularly its Jewish population, by claiming to be the long-awaited Messiah. When forced to convert to Islam on pain of death in 1666, he interpreted this event as part of a divine plan and became Aziz Mehmed Efendi, a Muslim courtier at the sultan's palace. He secretly continued to believe in his messianic mission, however, developing a unique Sabbataian theology that sprang from both Jewish Kabbalah and Islamic Sufism. Of Jewish descent but outwardly Islamic, his followers, known as *Dönme* (convert), formed a unique bridge between Jewish and Muslim worlds for many centuries.

The 17th-century Jewish neighborhood in which Sevi's house was found was almost entirely razed when the Izmir municipality began excavating the city's Roman agora. This excavation is intended to boost tourism; Izmir is bidding to host the 2015 World Expo. Only Sevi's house and a few others remain intact because they were designated as "historical buildings"—but unfortunately ones in dilapidated condition.

After Sevi's death in 1676, community members maintained their secret identity. To the small community of Sabbataians in Izmir and other cities, the house of the "Messiah" served as the sacred center of town, a venerated *lieu de mémoire*. Under the impact of the modern world, however, their religious views began to disintegrate, and at times at least part of the house was used as a residence. For example, a 1923 Turkish newspaper reported that a Jewish family was guarding the house and probably living in part of it.[1] Likewise, a picture taken sometime before 1937 demonstrates that the house—which was used by the Jewish Cikurel family and then by the Hayim Katan family—was located in a court, called Cortijo de Sevi, where several poor families lived together.[2] It is not clear, however, whether the house was used as a residence, a pilgrimage site, or both. According to Sabbataian oral tradition, in 1925 the governor of Izmir banned visits to the house right after a new Turkish law closed all the Sufi shrines and convents in the country.

Rumors have long existed about the existence and location of Sevi's house, known to only a handful of people. According to Kandemir, author of a 1940 newspaper account, believers maintained the house as a pilgrimage site.[3] He precisely describes the house shown above, with its narrow and steep steps topped by arches and "holy" pictures hung on the walls. Almost twenty years later, on a 1962 visit, travel writer John Freely saw a group of "old" believers lighting candles and performing Ladino-language rituals on the third floor.[4] In the early 1970s, Marc Bregman, now a Jewish studies professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, met Gypsies living in a part of the house who reported that people had been coming and praying in an "unknown language" on the top floor. On the rooftop, it was believed, Sabbatai met his first followers.[5] There, Bregman saw "many candles had been burned."[6] According to Sabbataian

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oral tradition, however, religious observance ceased in the house at the end of the 1960s.

A few observers visited the house in the early 1990s, including Michel Grosman, producer of the documentary *Sazanikos, les derniers Dönmeh*, researcher Mose Grosman, and academician Abraham Alqayam. Afterward, the house was forgotten in the middle of a shantytown occupied by shoemakers and homeless people, and finally was abandoned.

A few researchers—including Barry Kapandji (who is of Sabbataian descent), me, and others—recently helped identify the house as Sevi's. Since that time, testimonies of Sabbataian and Jewish elders, as well as other local residents, have confirmed the identification, and a new chain of discussion and inquiry has resumed. Our small, international team of researchers and philanthropists has started to raise awareness among academics, religious leaders, and the Izmir municipality, but much more needs to be done. Existence of the house exposes the falsity of the common assumption that religious belief in Sevi did not survive the Ottoman Empire. It is clear that the faithful venerated his house into the 20th century.

Neither local Jewish nor Sabbataian groups are particularly keen to utilize the house for any religious purpose.[7] Although no longer an active *lieu de mémoire* for believers, the building could still serve others interested in Sabbatai Sevi—an important figure in Ottoman/Turkish as well as Jewish history. It is time to research the story of the house and decide on the best conservation plan. Should it be transformed into a museum, research institute, tourism center, or something else? Be we Jews, Christians, or Muslims, this house and its neighborhood belong to the contested but shared human experience of us all.

NOTES

[1]"An Unknown Salonican Lad," *Resimli Dünya* 15, no. 3 (15 Teshrinissani 1341/30 June 1923).

[2]Abraham Galanté, *Histoire des Juifs d'Anatolis: Les Juifs d'Izmir (Smyrne)* (İstanbul: Impr. M. Babok, 1937), 254–57.

[3]Kandemir, *Efkar*, 1 June 1940.

[4]John Freely, *The Lost Messiah: In Search of the Mystical Rabbi Sabbatai Sevi* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2003), 7–9.

[5]Bernard Postal and Samuel H. Abramson, *The Landmarks of a People: A Guide to Jewish Sites in Europe* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 236.

[6]David J. Halperin, *Sabbatai Zevi: Testimonies to a Fallen Messiah* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 14.

[7]For a detailed discussion of the debates around the restoration of the house, see Cengiz Sisman, *Sabatay Sevi ve Sabataycılar: Mitler ve Gerçekler* (Sabbatai Sevi and Sabbataians: Myths and Realities) (Ankara: Asina Kitapları, 2007).

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