

Reviews

Benjamin Arbel, *Trading Nations: Jews and Venetians in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean*. Leiden - New York - Köln, 1995

In the history of the Mediterranean, the year 1571 witnessed several most tragic events. On 5 August, Famagusta, the sovereign city of Cyprus, was besieged by the forces of the Ottoman Turks led by Sultan Selim II, and on 7 October, the allied Christian fleet under the command of Don Juan of Austria defeated the Turks in the naval battle of Lepanto. While the great armies clashed and the winds of war prevailed throughout the European continent, an event of different nature took place in the Venetian Republic: on 18 December it was decreed that all the Jews residing within the Republic's borders were to leave the country, their property being confiscated. What preceded this event, and what were the relations between Jews and Venetians, the two "trading nations", really like? These problems and related ones are examined by Benjamin Arbel, professor of history at Tel Aviv University, in his book *Trading Nations*.

Scholarly circles have been familiar with the name of Benjamin Arbel since the late 1970s. Regular readers of the *Mediterranean Historical Review* know him as the editor of this extensive periodical publication.¹ In this well-documented survey, B. Arbel analyzes a number of events dealing with a common problem.

The subject matter "Jews and Italian (primarily Venetian) society" has frequently been explored in recent literature, and any historian who decides to indulge into it must be well-acquainted with the problem. Arbel has made very thorough preparations for this

inquiry. A petty reader is likely to observe that his references and bibliography do not include works in some European languages, German for example. However, one must not fail to discern a number of references in English, French, Italian as well as those of medieval origin. His sources deserve even greater credit. Arbel emerges here as a scholar worthy of every praise, and an experienced archival researcher who has discovered a number of valuable documents (see below) for which he should be given the most credit.

A brief look at the structure of the study unfolds another of this author's qualities: he takes great concern in human destinies. Arbel centers upon man, the individual, his mental pattern and looks, and his environment. This aspect of his work is evident in the earlier studies,² but also in his latest book, in which he inclines toward the medievalistics of the day. Let us now consider the contents of the book.

Up to the sixteenth century, for numerous reasons, the role of Jews as a "trading nation" in the Mediterranean basin was not prominent. On the contrary, it was quite insignificant. According to the author, it was in the sixteenth century, between the years 1530 and 1580 in particular, that the Jews managed to incorporate themselves into the Venetian society. The building of the "Old Ghetto" (1541), and the issuing of the so-called First Charter of Benefit to the Jews (1589) were important steps along the road. The author brings to the fore the period 1560-1570, in an approach which can be described as a set of concentric circles.

The first chapter, "Venice and the Jewish Merchants of Istanbul in the Sixteenth Century", is somewhat different from the others. The author provides a general survey of the subject, in which the prosperity of the Jewish merchants in the Ottoman Empire is

investigated, as well as the reasons underlying it. Toward the close of the chapter, Arbel reveals that the Jews on the Balkan Peninsula assumed the leading role in the wool and cloth trade, having dealings with Ottoman high officials. An interesting piece of evidence should be noted: when in 1563 the Venetians confiscated some Jewish merchandise, its owner later proved to be the grand vizier, Mehmed Pasha Sokollu (p. 20).

The author states that conclusive evidence regarding the trading methods practiced by the Jews in Istanbul cannot always be obtained, but his general assertion is fairly convincing: from the beginning of 1540 until 1625, Jewish merchants occupied dominant or even hegemonic positions in the Venetian trade business with the Empire (p. 28).

In the second chapter, entitled "Abraham Castro Multiplied: Venetian Traders and Jewish Customs Farmers in the Levant, c. 1530-c. 1540", Arbel changes the style of his inquiry. He embarks on an analysis of the activities of a businessman, manager of a mint and customs office, and head of the Jewish community in Egypt. The study is well-documented, as the subject has been amply referred to (on six occasions in the last ten years), so Arbel had no difficulty in presenting a detailed historical survey, supplemented by a commentary on the testimonies from the "Diaries" of Marino Sanudo. The documents might seem rather obscure, as he limns a puzzling portrait of two men bearing the same name - Abraham Castro - one from Alexandria, and the other from Syria.

In the third chapter, "The Jews in Venice and the Ottoman Menace, 1566-1573", the author produces the answer to an important question. It is common knowledge that in the years prior to the Cyprus War 1570-1573, Italy witnessed growing anti-Jewish pro-

tests. How was Venice, a town traditionally permeated by a strong spirit of pragmatism, to resist this widespread persecution? Here, Arbel introduces two phenomena, that of the "complex myth" that was woven about the Jews, and that of the "typical Jew", a phenomenon manufactured in the minds of their non-Jewish neighbors. The latter implied a great many characteristics, such as treachery, deceitfulness, an incomprehensible language suspected to be the doing of witchcraft, etc.

Arbel points to the social and psychological environment the Jews lived in, and in his attempt to find the causes that triggered the events in Venice in 1571, his views differ from those of his predecessors B. Ravid and B. Pullan. These two specialists interpreted those events as a step taken in order to persecute the usurer Ashkenazi. Benjamin Arbel, however, sees the events as the result of intolerance, and a general hostile attitude towards the Jews (pp. 74-75). In my opinion, the latter interpretation seems more convincing.

In the fourth chapter, "Medicine, Diplomacy and Trade: Solomon Ashkenazi and Venetian-Ottoman Relations, c.1564-1573" another Jewish name arises, which is also the subject of the subsequent chapter, "The Eastern Trade, Solomon Ashkenazi and the Readmission of the Jews in Venice in 1573". The person in question is Solomon Ashkenazi, physician, court official, and diplomat. Both chapters devoted to Ashkenazi's business affairs are in fact a contribution to the study of history of the Cyprus campaign and its aftermath.

Although brief, this review reveals Arbel's vast interest for the Jews, this subject being the hallmark of his entire research work. He brings to the fore three facets of the problem of the individual: the structural

analysis of the individual, the role of the individual in conflicting situations, and finally, the individual as a touchstone of all events, pragmatic history. The latter is best illustrated in the occurrences related to the name of Hayyim Saruq (in the sixth chapter, "The Pandora's Box of Hayyim Saruq's Bankruptcy").

Two chapters have been devoted to the history of Hayyim's bankruptcy (112,000 ducats), which the author based on the voluminous source materials of the Venice State Archives (Archivio di Stato di Venezia - ASV). These two chapters represent the central part of the book (70 pages), and should be dealt with separately in the future.

The seventh chapter, "Trade, Espionage and Inquisition: Hayyim Saruq's Resurgence", is quite peculiar. The author studies the documents found in the ASV, spurred by a short note published in the most recent work of P. Preto, *I servizi segreti di Venezia* (1994). This nineteen-page monograph contains the codes Hayyim Saruq was to employ as the Republic's secret agent. The discovery of this document enabled him to include in his work some research which has been done on the highly developed Venetian intelligence service in the Balkans.

The eighth chapter gives a concise history of the Jewish shipowners. Enclosed here is an appendix in which Arbel submits six archival documents from the ASV (Saruq's code book inclusive).

The reader of Arbel's analysis is to draw several conclusions. First, in Arbel's opinion, an exhaustive insight on the biography of each Jew investigated in the book is indispensable. Apart from playing an important part in Jewish history, the lives of Castro and Solomon Ashkenazi, joined by Hayyim Saruq, are illustrative of a "broader area". According to Arbel, they also shed light on

the *modus operandi* of the rising Jewish merchants in the early modern period. F. I. Ashkenazi's involvement in the Ottoman relations with Venice represents not only the important role of Jewish physician in the Ottoman court and its politics, but also the way that it was used to further the private and public interests of Jewish entrepreneurs in the eastern Mediterranean (pp. 185-186).

The authorities on the West-European Jewry (J. Israel in particular) infer that around the year 1570 they experienced significant changes due to new economic opportunities. Arbel's research indicates that similar processes also took place even earlier in the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Mediterranean. The problem deepens with the fact that the developing process did not take considerable time. In the seventeenth century, and with the dawn of the eighteenth century, Western and Armenian merchants began to dominate in the business, while Jews were left with less attractive posts as intermediaries, customs collectors, or interpreters. To my knowledge of the sources, I can agree with this interpretation.

And lastly, something should be said about the author's central concern in the book. Arbel's study most convincingly rejects the argument put forward by some historians (U. Tucci, for example) that "in the commercial milieu of sixteenth-century Venice only the Jews remained excluded from the great consortium of merchants from every nation and that the Jews were not allowed to trade with the Levant, but had to make use of the Venetian intermediary" (p. 188). In fact, Jews were never "fully" accepted into Venetian society. Nevertheless, Arbel considers Tucci's statement that the Jews and Venetians were "two worlds which could never meet" to be far from the truth (pp. 189-190).

There is another feature of Arbel's book I feel an urge to comment on. His account of the people and the course of events fails to include those individuals who represented the Republic of Dubrovnik over the centuries. In addition, when he speaks of vessels, using the word "argosy" in the epigraph at the beginning of chapter eight, Arbel is not in the least aware of the etymology of this English word (Ragusa). It was in Dubrovnik that the first standard model of the internationally classified sailing boat was built. One cannot but consider the above rather odd, for minimum three substantial reasons were to spur Arbel to advert to the role of Dubrovnik and its Jews in the described events. I emphasize that he was expected at least to mention them, and that they were certainly worthy of elaboration.

First of all, the rivalries between the two republics was a fact which could not have been overlooked in terms of economic circumstances in the area. If one state was to benefit, the other experienced losses. The intent of Daniel Rodriga to establish a monopoly of the Split mart, for example, was immediately interpreted as a hostile gesture against Dubrovnik.

Furthermore, Ragusan trade and its Jewish merchants dominated for centuries in the Balkan hinterland, and viewed typologically, it is difficult to distinguish between Jewish inland and maritime trade patterns.³ It is no wonder the segment pertaining to Balkan trade is rather scant in Arbel's book, the likelihood being to suit his purpose. If so, there is every room for criticism.

In conclusion, the relationship masterly epitomized by Benjamin Arbel in the contradiction between "the Republic and its Jews", "was in effect" in Dubrovnik, too (although to a lesser extent, of course). This was a fact that the author of *Trading Na-*

tions had to be acquainted with.

After all, the author is free to act upon his will. He could always find excuse in his lack of familiarity with the Slavic languages. Regretfully, though, he failed to consult publications in European languages, particularly the works of Jorjo Tadić and Bariša Krekić.⁴ Arbel's study could have been enriched by Tadić's references on Venetian Jewry.

Thus, the first chapter of Arbel's book contains evidence related to the income of Venetian Customs collected on the importation and exportation of European goods in 1584, which then amounted to 18,000 and 24,000 ducats respectively (p. 25). Is that much or little? In Tadić's survey on commerce in Dalmatia, *Le commerce en Dalmatie et à Raguse et la décadence économique de Venise au XVII^e siècle*, there is evidence in support of the fact that the total income of Ragusan customs amounted to an annual average of 18,000 to 26,000 ducats, while during the Cyprus War it increased to 106,000 ducats, and in 1571 it rose to 140,000 ducats.⁵

With the "Dubrovnik theme" I recapitulate my essay. I gather that Arbel's avoidance of this mentioned is the result of his reserved attitude which is commendable. Leafing through the book of Benjamin Arbel, the reader is most surely to pose a number of additional questions, only to prove how significant, complex and weighty this study is.

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NOTES

¹ The author of these lines has become familiar with the contents of the publication for the period 1986-1991 while preparing a review for Russian readers. See M. M.

Freidenberg, »Sredizemnomorskoe istoričeskoe obozrenje.« *Voprosi istorii* 6 (1993): pp. 184-187.

² See, for example, his articles on the affairs of Solomon Ashkenazi or Nur Banu.

³ M. M. Freidenberg, *Dubrovnik i Osmanskaja imperija*, 2nd revised and enlarged ed. Moskva: Nauka, 1989; Jorjo Tadić, *Jevreji u Dubrovniku do polovine XVII stoljeća*. Sarajevo: Benevolentia, 1937.

⁴ J. Tadić, »Le commerce en Dalmatie et à Raguse et la décadence économique de Venise au XVII^e siècle.«, in: *Aspetti e cause della decadenza economica veneziana nel secolo XVII*. Venezia - Roma, 1960: pp. 235-274; B. Krekić, »The role of the Jews in Dubrovnik (13th-16th Centuries).«, in: *Viator, Medieval and Renaissance studies*, 4 (1973): pp. 257-271.

⁵ J. Tadić, »Le commerce«: p 248 et seq. These figures are used by all those who write on Ragusan commerce.

Maren M. Freidenberg, *The Jews in the Balkans*. Moskva-Jeruzalem: Textbooks of the Jewish University, 1996 (5756)

Much has been written about the people whose history was dictated by a rhythm of constant threats of exodus, the nightmares of pogroms and plunder, from the first years of exile following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. to the traumatic experience of the Holocaust in World War II. An ample literature recounts the segregation of Jews (which originated in Western Christendom and spread along with Christianity through European and Mediterranean cultures), "holy wars" against pagans, forcible conversion, papal bulls, etc. In the general survey of the Jewish history, however the Balkan region has remained rather neglected. Mention of the Jews in the Balkans can be traced only fragmentarily as more systematic studies most frequently deal with the Jewish communities of Ragusa and Thessaloniki.

The diversity of geographical, historical, and cultural features of the Balkan Peninsula is most remarkable. The character of each Jewish community there was shaped in accordance with the region in which they lived. In the westernmost parts of the peninsula, the duchies of Slovenia, the Jews began to settle by the end of the 13th century, but remained there for not more than two hundred years, since around 1500 they were expelled from there. However, those two centuries proved sufficient enough for them to develop lucrative trade relations. In particular, their banking activities reached a state rarely to be found among their neighbors. The Jews settled along the Adriatic coast in groups or individually, and resided there for centuries, until the arrival of Napoleon's army. The Jews who populated the inland parts of the peninsula, Serbian and Bosnian