In Search of a Missing Son through the Ottoman Red Crescent during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913: A Tracing Letter for an Ottoman Jewish Soldier

Gürer Karagedikli

Author:

Faculty Member, Middle East Technical University
gurer@metu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0001-7846-6052

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Context

The document analyzed in this article, held in the Turkish Red Crescent Archive (Türk Kızılayı Arşivi) in Ankara, is a letter seeking information about a Jewish soldier, Avram Salama, who served in the Ottoman Army during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.[1] We do not know what happened to this soldier during the war, whether he ever returned to his home in Ankara or was detained somewhere as a prisoner of war. To receive news of their relatives in the Ottoman army, Ottoman citizens sent their letters and petitions through various organizations, including the Turkish Red Crescent, the International Red Cross, and other official and non-official channels. The document under consideration can be regarded as a "tracing request" or "tracing letter" seeking information about the life of a Jewish soldier who fought in the Ottoman Army during the Balkan Wars.[2]

Non-Muslim citizens conscripted into the Ottoman army during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire have already received scholarly attention. A few studies have used soldiers' diaries or memoirs to illuminate non-Muslim soldiers' status or feelings in a Muslim-majority army,[3] yet their relatives' voices during those war-stricken years are largely absent. Jewish soldiers' families, like those of Muslims and Christians, sent petitions or requests for information about their soldier relatives' whereabouts or fate. Sometimes families made use of their connections to reach higher-status individuals in certain circles. The request under consideration appears to have been initiated by Avram Salama's family through one of their connections, likely within the Ottoman Red

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1 Türk Kızılayı Arşivi (Turkish Red Crescent Archive, TKA), Ankara, 280/270. I would like to thank Onur Usta, the editorial team of Keshif, and the anonymous reviewer for reading my transcription and offering valuable suggestions. Needless to say, all the remaining transcription errors are mine.

2 A tracing request represents an official inquiry made to determine the whereabouts of a missing military service member, prisoner of war (POW), or civilian displaced as a result of armed conflict. Such correspondence is usually initiated by families seeking to establish the fate or current location of their loved ones.

3 Abramson, Glenda. Soldiers' Tales: Two Palestinian Jewish Soldiers in the Ottoman Army during the First World War. Vallentine Mitchell, 2013. For a more recent study, see Özgür Özkan, "Sephardic Soldiers in the Late Ottoman Army," in K. Tınaz and O. Aguirre-Mandujano (eds.), *Sephardic Trajectories. Archives, Objects, and the Ottoman Jewish Past in the United States* (İstanbul: Koç University Press, 2021).

Crescent in Ankara or Istanbul. The document offers a new window into the lives, experiences, and grief of local Jews in Anatolian cities, where they sent their boys to fight for their homeland.

Transcription

[left page:]

ʿizzetlü efendim ḥażretleri 25 Mart [*1*]*329* [*/ 7 Nisan 1913*]

evvelen ḫāṭır-ı ʿālīleri istifsār ḳılınur s̲āniyen her ne ḳadar siziñ // yüzüñüzü ṭanımaz isek de siziñ vaṭanperverlik ve yāḫūd milletperverlik // [ve] insāniyyet [ve] merḥamet ve ḥamiyyetiñiz sāyesinde bizce daḫı ism-i ʿālīleri maʿlūm // olmaġla bu defʿa şāyed yapmaġa tenezzül buyurulur ise lüṭfen bu defʿa // ʿömrümüz nihāyetine ḳadar unutulmayacaḳ derecede bir işimiz düşdi ki // bālāda zikr olunan ḥamiyyetleri nāmına bu işimizi görür iseñiz ʿömrümüz // olduḳça maʿa ʿāʾile sizi duʿādan unutmayacaġız çünki eger z̲ikr olunacaḳ // ādemiñ ʿāʾilesi ḥāline vāḳıf olsañız merḥamete gelerek derḥāl bu işi // yapacaġınıza hiç şübhemiz yoḳdur // size raḥmet edecegimiz iş ise yedi sekiz māḥdan berü mektubu [gel?]meyen bir ʿaskerdir //

ʿan aṣl Anḳara'nın Mūsevī milletinden [1]305 tevellüdlü David oġlu Avram Salamā // ʿaskeriñ ismidir. Pederiniñ ismi David vālidesiniñ ismi Baḥura // birāderi ikidir biri İsḥaḳ digeri Mordehay. Hemşīreleri daḫı ikidir // biri Ḳalo digeri Ṣaradır ʿāʾilesiniñ isimleri bunlar ḥālleri yuḳarıda // ʿarż olunduġu vechle pek sefīl gice gündüz bu evlādlarını düşünmekde // dirler nihāyet efendimize tekrār tekrār recā idüb ayaḳlarıñızı öperler // bu perīşānʿāʾileniñ ḥāline merḥamet etmeñiz içün çünkü merḥamete muḥtācdırlar //

[right page:]

buradan ʿasker olub gitdiginde Selānik vilāyetiniñ Istranca ḳaṣabasında ḳırḳ üçüncü alayıñ // ikinci ṭāburunuñ birinci bölügünde Mūsevī milletinden Anḳaralı David oġlu Avram Salamā deyü bu adrese // yazar idik z̲ikr etdigimiz sekiz māh evveline ḳadar oradan cevāb alıyor idik sekiz māhdan berü // yazdıġımız mektūbları maʿlūm-ı ʿālīleridir ki postāḫāneye bile ḳabūl etdiremedik şu ḥālde bizce ḥayāt // [ve] memātı belli olmadıġından size ve siziñ

merḥametiñiz[e] güveniyoruz lütfen bize [sic] sevindiriñiz Allāh teʿālā siz[iñ] // gibi merḥametli vicdān ṣāḥibi ḳardaşlarımızıñ eksikliğini göstermeyüb ʿömrüñüzü uzun eylesin efendim//

21 Mart [*1*]*329* [/ *3 Nisan 1913*]

adresimiz

Anḳara Vilāyetinde Mūsevī milletinden *527 cevāb yazıldı*

Mūytāblar Çarşusında Bezzāz Avram İsḥaḳ *25 Mart* [[*1*]*329* [/ *7 Nisan 1913*]

Salamā deyü yazarsıñız

Avram İshak Salama (in Ladino)

Translation

[Left page:]

His Honorable Excellency, 7 April [1]913

Firstly, we inquire after His Honorable Excellency's health. Secondly, although we do not recognize your face, we are acquainted with your esteemed reputation for patriotism, nationalism, humanity, compassion, and patronage. We kindly request that you consider assisting us once; doing so would be deeply appreciated and remembered throughout our lives. We are faced with an extremely urgent matter, and if you would kindly do this in the name of the individual referenced above, we shall forever keep you in our prayers. Had you been aware of the individual's family situation, we are confident you would have shown immediate mercy and provided aid. The matter requiring your mercy concerns a soldier named Avram Salamā, son of David, born in 1887, who is originally from the Jewish community in Ankara. His father's name is David, his mother's name is Baḥura, and he has two brothers named Isḥaḳ and Mordechai. Additionally, he has two sisters named Kalo and Sara. The family's circumstances are as described above; they are in a state of profound misery, constantly thinking about their son. Ultimately, they earnestly beseech our lord, kiss your feet, and implore you to have mercy on this unfortunate family, as they are in desperate need of compassion.

[Right page:]

When he went from here [Ankara] to become a soldier, he was in the first company of the second battalion of the forty-second regiment in the town of Istranca in the province of Thessaloniki. We used to write to this address [that is] "Avram Salamā, son of David from Ankara of Jewish origin," and we received replies from there until eight months ago. As you are aware, for the past eight months, we have been unable to even get the letters we wrote accepted by the post office. In this situation, since we believe his life and death are uncertain, we trust in you and your mercy. Please gladden us. May God not show us the lack of compassionate and conscientious brothers like you. May your life be long, sir.

3 April [1]913

Our address:

From the Jewish Community in the Ankara Province,

You write as Avram Ishak Salima, the cloth merchant in the Muytablar Bazaar

Avram Ishak Salama (signature in Ladino)

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The response was written on 7 April [1]913

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Facsimile

