



Burak Arliel. *The Turkish Passport*. Interfilm Istanbul, 2011. Documentary Film. 91 minutes.

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Manipulation, Mystification, and Misrepresentation: Review of the Documentary *The Turkish Passport*

In October 2011 the second Amsterdam Turkish Film Festival (ATFF) was held in the noted cultural center De Balie. The film selection presented a wide collection of movies from popular cinema to art-house productions. One of the movies screened was the 90-minute documentary *The Turkish Passport* by director Burak Arliel. This film tells the story of Turkish diplomats posted to Turkish embassies and consulates in France, who allegedly saved numerous, mostly Turkish, Jews during the Second World War. The documentary is based on the testimonies of witnesses and survivors, as well as historical documents, to tell a straightforward story of rescue.

The film stood out from the other movies at the ATFF for various reasons. First, it was the only historical documentary at the film festival; most others were feature films. Second, most of the other movies displayed the creative potential of a new generation of accomplished Turkish filmmakers by courageously addressing taboos such as sex, crime, ethnic identity, and drug abuse. *The Turkish Passport*, however, adopts self-aggrandizing nationalist myths and does not engage with its subject critically or even realistically. The film is problematic for reasons of form, but mostly of content. In this brief review I will highlight the shortcomings of this documentary

We can be rather short about the style of the documentary. It uses historical reenactments including locations, costumes, and props, but for some reason the characters do not speak. The meetings between Turkish diplomats, Nazi officials, and Jews are overlaid with the narrator's commentary about these events. In other words, the documentary is a silent film and not a proper

documentary with spoken dialogue and dramatic reenactments, such as the BBC's recent gem "World War II Behind Closed Doors: Stalin, the Nazis and the West" (2008). That documentary also includes the full range of props, locations, and costumes, as well as German-speaking Nazis, resembling Soviet characters (a pudgy, foul-mouthed Lavrenti Beria; a nervous, sycophantic Vyacheslav Molotov), and best of all: an eerily faithful Stalin played by Alexei Petrenko, who even pulls off the Georgian accent.

The Turkish Passport also employs several stereotypes: sadistic, overly Aryan-looking Nazis; well-educated, sophisticated, and bespectacled Jews; and kind-hearted, child-petting, selfless Turkish diplomats. Furthermore, the documentary needlessly sentimentalizes an already emotional subject by exploiting the imagery of children. The film opens with a child running for its life, and throughout the narrative children's relationships with their mothers are sentimentalized instead of described. Finally, the narrative is quite staccato and interrupted and comes over as a series of moments rather than a coherent story. Some interviews with survivors are flipped back and forth to for very short periods, occasionally only for three to four seconds. This hinders the film from building up a certain continuity and engaging the viewer accordingly.

Yad Vashem identifies four important forms of rescue during the Holocaust: hiding Jews in the one's home or on their property, smuggling and helping Jews to escape, rescuing children, and finally, providing false papers and false identities to persecuted Jews. This includes "some

foreign diplomats who issued visas or passports contrary to their country's instructions and policy." Turkey has one official Righteous: Selahattin Ülkümen (1914-2003) was awarded the title "Righteous among the Nations" in 1989. (Incidentally, Armenia has ten, although some were Soviet citizens.) In this documentary, unexpectedly, Ülkümen is ignored and attention is paid to three other diplomats: İsmail Necdet Kent (1911-2002), Behiç Erkin (1876-1961), and Namık Kemal Yolga (1914-2001).

The claims are the following. Kent was a Turkish diplomat who saved Jews when he was in office as vice consul-general in Marseilles between 1941 and 1944. He gave Turkish citizenship to dozens of Turkish Jews living in France who lacked proper identity papers. Erkin served as Turkey's ambassador to Paris and Vichy in the period 1939-43. As Turkish ambassador in France under the German occupation, Erkin used the power of his office to rescue Turkish Jews who could prove a Turkish connection. He was assisted by Yolga, posted to the Turkish Embassy in Paris in 1940 as the vice-consul. Yolga rescued Jews from Drancy prison camp by pleading with the Nazi authorities for their lives and driving them in his own car to safety.

From June 1940 on, when the Nazis invaded and occupied France, the roundup and deportation of Jews in France gained momentum. The documentary illustrates the acts of these men in detail: they provided passports to Jews who were Turkish citizens, but had been in France since 1933 and at that point had become culturally French, though often had not acquired citizenship yet. By doing so, they delayed deportation, offered an opportunity for escape, or provided temporary protection to Jews.

Some remarkable events necessitate special attention. Reportedly, Kent boarded a train with eighty-one Turkish Jews, bound for Poland, and refused to disembark unless those Jews were also allowed to return home. In November 1942, Erkin arranged the evacuation to Turkey by rail of Turkish diplomatic staff. Turkish-associated Jews were also taken on the train, which took eleven days to finally reach Turkish soil.[1] There is no doubt about it: taken at face value, whatever the motivations of these men, if their actions saved many potential victims they needs to be recognized unequivocally.

However, the story raises many other questions: why has Yad Vashem never recognized Erkin, Yolga, and Kent as "Righteous among the Nations?" Apparently, the Union of Jews from Turkey in Israel has lobbied Yad Vashem for their recognition, but these efforts have not

yet yielded fruit.[2] The rigorous preconditions for granting the title are: 1) active involvement in saving one or several Jews from the threat of death or deportation; 2) risk to the rescuer's life, liberty or position; 3) the intention should be an intrinsic motivation to help persecuted Jews and not extrinsic motivation such as material benefits, religious conversion, etc.; 4) the existence of testimony or documentation about the rescue.[3] The documentary suggests that all criteria have been met, but it is yet unclear why these Turkish diplomats have not been included on the Turkish list of Righteous. According to Corry Gutstadt, who wrote an exhaustive study of Turkey and the Holocaust, the diplomats charged Jews money in exchange for rescue, which disqualifies them from the third criterion. Furthermore, there is not a shred of evidence anywhere that Necdet Kent boarded a deportation train with eighty Turkish Jews. Long story short: the event is a complete fabrication.[4]

Apart from these mysteries, there are sociological and historical problems with the documentary. Sociologically, it largely ignores the diplomats' motivations but ascribes a uni-dimensional morality and humanism to their actions. According to the film, Kent, Yolga, and Erkin rescued Jews because they were inherently committed to universal ideals of human rights. Not only is this naïve, but considering the nature of the then-ruling Kemalist regime (a Turkish-nationalist dictatorship) and the absence of thorough documentation, this claim is likely spurious as well.

The documentary also contains several major misrepresentations and some minor historical inaccuracies. First of all, on September 19, 1942, the Nazis decreed that Turkish Jews could be evacuated until January 31, 1943, a date later extended for several months. This reduction of pressure effectively meant that the persecution of Turkish Jews was temporarily moderated and an opportunity for emigration opened. In other words, this is a matter of fundamental conceptualization: if the persecution was temporarily lifted, it was technically not rescue that the diplomats were engaged in. Moreover, carrying out routine diplomatic procedures cannot be subsumed under the analytical category, "rescue." [5] (How the documentary's production team gained access to the highly restrictive archive of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is another question.)

Second, the documentary confuses exception for rule, and incident for policy. At the moment of Nazi occupation, at least 20,000 Ottoman/Turkish-born Jews were living in France, 10,000 of whom still had Turkish citizen-

ship. Even from the documentary's own narrative it is clear that the diplomats did not rescue all of these people, nor did they launch a serious effort to do so. For example, according to Serge Klarsfeld's *Mémorial de la Déportation des Juifs de France*, 1,300 Turkish Jews, among which 939 were officially recognized as Turkish by the Nazis, were deported and murdered.[6] So it is questionable whether this partial account deserves to be told in isolation from this highly relevant context.

Third, the documentary's claim that the Turkish government ran a benign policy of active rescue is grossly inaccurate. In fact, the documentary ignores the broader context of Turkish attitudes towards the Holocaust and Jews. The Struma tragedy, the denial of asylum to concentration camp survivors, all is forgotten in favor of an unrealistic historical self-image. Thus the documentary revives an old myth best presented in Stanford Shaw's book *Turkey and the Holocaust*. [7] This book has been sharply criticized by subsequent research. The most cogent and comprehensive study of the problem was written by Guttstadt, whose painstaking and detailed study taps into a wealth of new documentation and reaches more nuanced conclusions. According to her, Turkish attitudes were generally informed by a mixture of ambivalence and antagonism toward the Jews. Guttstadt claims that approximately 3,000 to 5,000 Turkish Jews were denaturalized during the war, and demonstrates that the Nazis deported 2,500 Turkish Jews to death camps (Auschwitz and Sobibór) and another 400 to concentration camps (Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen). [8] In the face of these disconcerting facts, Turkey can hardly be said to have rescued its Jews.

The most glaring crime of omission of the documentary is that it ignores anti-Jewish persecution in Turkey. In the period 1923-50, the Turkish government targeted Turkish Jews for cultural and economic Turkification, as well as intimidation, deportation to labor camps, denial of entry, and limitations of various rights. [9] Part of this policy was denaturalization, as a result of which many Turkish Jews ended up in France in the first place. [10] During World War II, the Turkish government passed the "wealth tax," a thinly disguised policy of economic nationalism and expropriation imposed on the country's non-Muslim elites. Many Jews could not pay the astronomical amounts and were deported to a forced labor camp in Erzurum. [11] Doubtlessly, the most offensive distortion relates to Thrace. June 1934 saw a large-scale, state-sponsored pogrom against the Jewish community of Thrace. One rabbi was killed and hundreds of

women raped, causing immense material losses and massive flight of 15,000 Jews. [12] At the end of *The Turkish Passport*, as the train rolls across the Bulgarian-Turkish border into Thrace, feelings of euphoria and salvation are ascribed to the evacuated Jews. But they enter a Thrace ethnically cleansed of Jews!

One puzzling point is that in the documentary, some of the most categorically pro-Turkish arguments are made by Turkish Jews. Having ethnic or religious minorities advocate Turkish-nationalist arguments is a time-tested strategy of the Kemalist establishment. But a false argument is a false argument, whether Turkish Jews support it or not. Guttstadt observed that the objective of the book was to "mobilize this myth and achieve the support of Jewish politicians for the denial of the Armenian genocide. The official representatives of the Jewish community in Turkey also allow themselves to be harnessed for this version." [13] The attitudes of these Jewish community leaders represent the Stockholm syndrome of some minority elites in Turkey, who believe that only absolute conformism to the Turkish government can guarantee their security in the country. This includes the many Turkish Jews interviewed in the documentary, as well as project director Yael Habiv, herself of Turkish-Jewish background.

One does not even have to read between the lines to detect a relation to the Armenian genocide. For no apparent reason, but possibly to lend academic credence to the claim, Armenian genocide denier Heath Lowry appears in the film. He expresses the bizarre claim that whereas other Holocaust rescuers bragged about their deeds, the Turks never did, Lowry explains, because self-aggrandization "is just not part of Turkish character." This series of racist platitudes implies that 1) national characters exist, 2) they apply to tens of millions of individuals with totally different personality structures, and 3) modesty is a national predisposition. Obviously none of these claims merit serious discussion and sociological analysis. What is important however, is the documentary's insistence on Behiç Erkin's moral integrity. It is clear why: there is convincing evidence that Behiç Erkin was involved in ethnically homogenizing the Ottoman railways in 1915. This included dismissal, persecution, removal, and deportation of Armenian railway staff. [14] The documentary attempts to whitewash a perpetrator of the Armenian genocide by painting him as a rescuer in the Holocaust.

All of this hints at a deeper problem in Turkish society: the near-complete inability to grasp and fathom

genocide as a phenomenon. Instead of critical, dispassionate analysis we are fed sentimentalized myths. Instead of a sophisticated treatment of individual human beings and their motivations, we are treated to one-dimensional hagiographies. Instead of truth, we are smothered in lies. So the question remains: why was this movie made, and especially now? If the stories of these diplomats were well known for decades, then both timing and content need to be addressed.

The documentary might be an attempt to mend Turkish-Israeli relations. In an interview with the production team, project director Yael Habiv said that the documentary would mend relations between Turks and Israelis. Manager Güneş Çelikcan admitted that the production team agreed on the appropriate timing of the documentary and saw it as a matter of “cultural interaction.” Producer Burak Arliel declaimed: “This entire struggle is based on one thing, the constitution: ‘Turkish citizens, without distinction of religion, language, race....’ We have come from a tradition like this for centuries. We are together, we always have been together, and we will always be together.”[15] This reflects a general trend to use history for improving inter-ethnic relations. Erkin’s grandson said in an interview that “There is a political problem in our midst. There is no conflict between the nations.... Therefore, these type of stories need to be frequently remembered and people should be reminded of them.”[16] This is an explicit prioritization of politics above journalism or scholarship. Myths to keep the peace are superimposed on the truth, whether a painful one or not.

The documentary also opens a European front: it could also be an attempt to make an impact in French politics. Recent movies such as *Sarah’s Key* (2010) have reignited debate and interest in the Holocaust in France. Time and again politicians treat the Holocaust as an absolute yardstick of good and evil: anyone who helped Jews was absolutely good, anyone who did not was absolutely evil. This film might be an attempt to place Turkey at the right end of this spectrum, especially in France. After all, the French-Armenian movie *L’armée du crime* (2009), directed by Pierre Guédiguian, sought to do the same for the French Armenians of World War II. It used the story of Armenian-born French resistance hero Misak Manouchian (1906-44) to place the French Armenians in the same moral spectrum. It would be unfair to equate *L’armée du crime* with *The Turkish Passport*, but ultimately, both films seem to constitute suggestive and selective acts of remembrance.

Finally, perhaps the documentary was produced as a Turkish equivalent of the popular 2007 Iranian TV series *Zero Degree Turn (Madare Sefr Darajeh)*, which was based on the life of Abdol Hossein Sardari (1914-81), the wartime Persian consul in Paris who rescued Iranian and non-Iranian Jews by offering passports and diplomatic cover. The Iranian government endorsed and financed the film in order to underline that it distinguishes between Jews and Zionists. As such, *Zero Degree Turn* is an attempt to immunize its anti-Israelism from accusations of anti-Semitism. *The Turkish Passport* might be inspired by similar motives.

Ultimately, considering the full evidence and above arguments, the documentary’s desperate claim on its Web site, that it is “objective, unbiased and unmanipulative,” is hard to sustain. On the contrary, it is based on manipulation, mystification, and misrepresentation.

Notes

[1]. Behiç Erkin, *Hâtırat 1876-1958* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2011). Erkin’s grandson recorded his story in a biography. Emir Kıvrıkcık, *Büyükelçi* (Istanbul: Timaş, 2010). This was followed by another biography of unstinting praise: Arnold Reisman, *An Ambassador and a Mensch: The Story of a Turkish Diplomat in Vichy France* (Lexington, KY: Arnold Reisman, 2010).

[2]. Şalom, October 19, 2011. See also www.turkisirael.org

[3]. <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/index.asp>

[4]. “Enttäuschte Hoffnung–verweigerte Rettung,” interview with Corry Guttstadt, *Jüdische Zeitung*, February 2009.

[5]. Jacques Sémelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger, eds., *La résistance aux génocides: De la pluralité des actes de sauvetage* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po., 2008), 21-22.

[6]. Serge Klarsfeld, *Le mémorial de la déportation des juifs de France* (Paris: Klarsfeld, 1978).

[7]. Stanford Shaw, *Turkey and the Holocaust: Turkey’s Role in Rescuing Turkish and European Jewry from Nazi Persecution, 1933-1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

[8]. Corinna G. Guttstadt, *Die Türkei, die Juden und der Holocaust* (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2008).

[9]. Rıfat N. Bali, *Bir Türkleştirme Serüveni (1923-1945): Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri* (Istanbul: İletişim, 1999).

[10]. Corinna Guttstadt, “Depriving Non-Muslims of Citizenship as Part of the Turkification Policy in the Early Years of the Turkish Republic: The Case of Turkish Jews and Its Consequences during the Holocaust,” in *Turkey Beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-Nationalist Identities*, ed. Hans-Lukas Kieser (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 50-56.

[11]. Ayhan Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve “Türkleştirme” Politikaları* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2002).

[12]. Hatice Bayraktar, “The Anti-Jewish Pogrom in Eastern Thrace in 1934: New Evidence for the Responsibility of the Turkish Government,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 2 (2006): 95-111.

[13]. “Enttäuschte Hoffnung–verweigerte Rettung.”

[14]. Ziya Gürel, “Kurtuluş Savaşında Demiryolculuk,” *Bellekten* 44, no. 175 (July 1980): 539-73.

[15]. *Şalom*, October 19, 2011.

[16]. *Radikal*, September 28, 2011.

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