

## JEWISH ISTANBUL

Review of Roz Kohen's *Jewish Istanbul: A Collection of Memoirs and Illustrations*.  
By Betty Ruth Kondayan

Roz Kohen, author of *Jewish Istanbul*, was my student during my tenure as an English Literature teacher at The American College for Girls (Robert College of Istanbul) from 1955-1970. Roz graduated in 1969, and I haven't seen her since. However, a year or so ago, out of the blue, I got an e-mail from her telling me that she now is a librarian in St. Louis and has been in the U.S. for thirty years. Recently, I asked her for her book, partly because I remember Roz with affection but also because for the past six months I have made an in-depth study of Judaism, Jewish customs, Jewish connections with the arts, and Jewish writers.

I found Roz's book a delight from beginning to end. It not only added to my fund of knowledge of Judaica but also brought me closer than ever to my student, reminding me of her kind and loving nature, gentle humor, vitality, and serious dedication to keeping Judeo-Spanish alive. (Each vignette of her childhood memories is in both Judeo-Spanish and English). Judeo-Spanish is a dialect spoken in those years by Istanbul Jews, reflecting their Spanish Sephardic origin with a mix of Hebrew, Greek, Turkish and French thrown in.

She paints a vivid picture of Istanbul in those years, especially of the old Jewish quarters near the Galata (Genoese) Tower where her family lived. She brings people and places alive and captures the essence of those years when Istanbul was a city of only a million people and life there was simpler, more leisurely, and less modern than it now is.

The book, which is illustrated with Roz's own charming drawings, brought back warm and happy memories of my own golden years in Istanbul. Summers then were idyllic, at least for academics like my husband and me, and for middle and upper class citizens. Many families, including Roz's, rented houses for the summer months along the Asiatic coast of the Sea of Marmara or on one of the Princes' Islands about an hour away by boat from the city. We were often invited to these homes which more often than not had beautiful gardens, for a day of generous hospitality, swimming, and leisurely conversation.

She also mentions other beaches and communities where we loved to go—Kilyos on the Black Sea, Florya on the European coast of the Marmara, Surreya Beach on the Asian Marmara coast, Altin Kum (Golden Sands) on the Bosphorus, and the village of Yakacik situated on a hill overlooking the Marmara. We even bought a lot in Yakacik and did a lot of dreaming about the summer house we would build there. (We left Istanbul in 1970 without this dream being realized.)

The major thrust of the book is about Sishane, the old Jewish quarter near the Galata Tower where Roz spent her early childhood, with its lively street life and colorful characters from among her family and the neighborhood. There are vignettes about the

cobbler, Mr. Naron, the fortune-teller Namer, the friendly beggars of the Apollon Synagogue, a grandmother originally from Bulgaria, a cousin who emigrated to Israel. There are descriptions of visits to the public baths, of Purim and Passover celebrations, medical cures of the day, a cramped kitchen much like my husband's and mine, occasional visits to Pera (Istiklal Avenue) to go to the Yeni Melek (New Angel) Cinema.

The atmosphere of the whole book is one of love, warm family ties, happiness with small things, and face to face communication and connections. Although remnants of the minority communities of Istanbul remain, most of the Jews of Sishane moved to more fashionable areas after the 1960s or emigrated to Israel, Europe, or the U.S. This time, more than fifty years ago, has now vanished but is resurrected in this charming, heart-warming book.