



## ***Jüdische turnbewegung* – Jewish German gymnastic system in Turkey until 1918**

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### **Abstract**

The Jewish gymnastic system – „*Jüdische Turnbewegung*“ - presents one of the smaller gymnastic movements that emerged in Central Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. At first it was backed by the Zionist political activity and arising self-consciousness of the Jewish population in the German speaking parts of Europe. However, with a club in İstanbul being the first only Jewish „*turnverein*“ ever, the movement had found its supporters also in the eastern regions of Europe and in the Middle East. Before the WWI the Jewish gymnastic club („*Maccabi*“) in İstanbul had become one of the leading units on the Turkish clubs' scene involving more than 1000 members and practising many kinds of activities varying from gymnastic shows, lectures on Jewish themes and public parades and trips. This organization proved itself to be a very important „bi-trigger“ in the unifying Jewish independent movement that won on importance even more after 1918.

**Keywords:** Jewish, turner, gymnastic, Turkey, club, nationalism, Zionism, Maccabi, İstanbul

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## Introduction

The physical exercises in Central Europe at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century are closely bound to national consciousness of individual minorities. Through the renaissance of the body cult they tried to achieve their emancipation goals. Besides the massive German „turnen“ (gymnastic) system and the Slavic Sokol there were several other minor gymnastic movements which were connected to a special ideology (e.g. anti-Semitic federation *DTB 1889*<sup>1</sup>), a social status (e.g. worker's federation „*Arbeiter Turnverband*“<sup>2</sup>) and/or religion (e.g. Christian-democratic federation „*Christlich-deutscher Turnerbund*“<sup>3</sup>). All of them were based on the German turnen as the predominant gymnastic system in the German speaking regions. This German system was formed by the „turn-father“ F.L.Jahn in the second decade of the 19th century as a mean of strenghtening and revival of the German national spirit. In his turnen F.L.Jahn combined the both gymnastic (the apparatus, floor and serial exercises) and the playful Philanthropic system with the national ideology.

At the end of 19th century there was another organization which developed from the German turnen tradition, as well as from the arising self-assurance of its own ethnicum – „*Jüdische Turnbewegung*“ (Jewish turner movement). The increasing influence of the political ideology – Zionism – together with worsening anti-Semitic incentives, especially in the Austrian environment, encouraged to call this independent Jewish movement in life.

Although the first official Jewish „turnverein“ (gymnastic club) was founded in 1895 in the Turkish metropolis İstanbul<sup>4</sup>, it wasn't until 1898 when the leading Turnverein BarKochba Berlin was established. This club had become the decisive power in the federation „*Jüdische Turnerschaft*“ which was formed in 1903, as well as in the all-Jewish sport and gymnastic federation – „*Maccabi World Organization*“ that was established after the WWI.

At the end of 19th century the Jewish population in the Ottoman empire counted a half a million people. From this mass about 200.000 Jews lived in the European part of Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> More to this organization – Benda, F. *Der Deutsche Turnerbund 1889, Seine Entwicklung und Weltanschauung* Wien 1991.

<sup>2</sup> More to this organization – Krammer, L. *Arbeitersport in Österreich, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiterkultur in Österreich bis 1938.* Wien 1981.

<sup>3</sup> More to this organization – Recla, J. *Die Christliche Turnbewegung.* Gölling 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Present İstanbul.

The population of 70.000 İstanbul Jews comprised of two major types of Jewish residents.<sup>5</sup> The first was formed by descendants of the Jews who were expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492. Based on this event they were called „*Sephardim*“ (Spaniols). Over the centuries they had been building their communities in the hub of the Ottoman empire and enjoyed a simple life unstruck by the anti-Semitic madness of Central Europe of the late 19th and early 20th century. On one hand this was due to their many centuries long assimilation to the local lifestyle and culture, on the other hand they took advantage of the city's benevolence and acceptance of other religions.

Only thanks to the western Jews („*Alliance Israelite Universelle*“, „*Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*“) this Jewish population in Turkey was acquainted with their original culture and history.

The second part of the Jewish population (so-called „*Aschkenazim*“) in İstanbul spoke German and related its origin to their ancestors who came from Russia, Romania, Poland or from the eastern Austrian-Hungarian monarchy years ago. In these families the original Jewish language – Yiddish – was also still spoken. The members of this German speaking Jewish population were the actual founders of the German turnen in Turkey, although it had taken some years before this limited group of young men started to influence also the Sephardim Jews in their national-Jewish conviction.

At the end of the 19th century the physical culture was considered by Turkish authorities as unwanted and unnecessary activity due to its possible misuse for military actions, maybe also against the regime. E.g. in 1894 the exercising was banned in one of the Greek schools in Smyrna<sup>6</sup>, because the students presented military exercises during a public show.

Under these circumstances it was very difficult to form a gymnastic club that would be able to secure its existence. However, on January 7th 1895 a group of young Jewish men proved themselves successful and created the first entirely Jewish turnverein in the world ever. Under its name – „*Israelitischer Turnverein in İstanbul*“ - it had existed for 13 years before it was renamed to national-Jewish „*Maccabi*“ in 1908.

The single reason for creating their own club was the intention to escape the anti-Semitic atmosphere in the „*Deutsch Turnverein*“ (German club) in İstanbul. In this point the

<sup>5</sup> Other numerous Jewish population within the then Ottoman empire: Saloniki (80.000), Jerusalem (60.000), Baghdad (50.000), Smyrna (35.000). Statistics based on Kahn, B. Die Juden in der Türkei. In: Jüdische Turnzeitung 1911, n. 7, p. 132.

<sup>6</sup> Present Izmir.

development coincided with the one in Cisleithania where most of the turnvereins forced the Jewish turners to leave due to their race<sup>7</sup>.

As a result of this unwelcoming environment inside this German club the Jews tried to forge their own turnverein which for years (until 1908) had been floating between its decline and penurious activity.

Due to the earlier described and still prevailing situation in the Ottoman empire, the Israelitischer Turnverein in İstanbul had to hide its existence under international, almost Philanthropic grouping. The turners couldn't present their skills in the public, they had to conceal their activities under the protection of a German-Israelite school „*Foundation Goldschmidt*“. Without one of the basic turner principles – the public shows of their activities – the club was doomed to a failure in extending its numbers.

E.g., during 1901 the number of members dropped from 132 to 67 men. Although it came up to 94 members in 1902, it kept swinging up and down due to many changes (e.g. moving of the members, cancelled memberships for skipping the monthly club's fees). This unstable situation brought with itself also financial difficulties which were only overcome by the raising of the monthly membership fee to 5 Piaster. This increase together with more consistent and efficient collecting of the fees improved dramatically the club's balance (in 1903 – 1.700 Ps. higher revenues than 1902).<sup>8</sup>

The Israelitischer Turnverein maintained very close contacts with the „*Foundation Goldschmidt*“ to which the club donated a significant part from revenues from a variety of its shows and feasts. E.g. in 1904 two afternoon shows bore the turnverein a revenue of 1.515 Ps. (about 230 marks). From this amount the whole 760 Ps. were deposited directly to the German-Israelite school. For a simple comparison of the economical situation at the beginning of the 20th century – the price of a set of parallel bars in 1903 was 1.016 Ps.

The Israelitischer Turnverein in İstanbul was divided into several administrative levels. The highest club's instance was the general assembly held once a year, usually before the summer season (May, June), where every member had the right to take part. The executive body was the committee which gathered twice a month and its regular members were: the

<sup>7</sup> More to this topic Šinkovský, R. Vývoj XV. turnerského kraje Deutschösterreich v letech 1886 – 1904. Přeměna liberálního tělocvičného svazu v antisemitistickou organizaci. In: Česká kinantropologie 2005/1. FTVS UK. Praha. and Štumbauer, J., Kössl, J. The outline of the history of German gymnastic organizations in the Czech lands. In: Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Vol. 30. Praha, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> At the end of 1903 the total balance of the club's finances was 2.314 Ps.

chairman (in 1905 – L.Schoenman<sup>9</sup>), vice chairman (J.Cornfeld), cashier (J.Schlick), „turnwart“<sup>10</sup> (A.Ziffer), „zeugwart“<sup>11</sup> (S.Levy), supervisor (B.Goldstein), secretary (O.Wolkenberg) plus other four observers and two substitutes.<sup>12</sup>

Next level of the club's hierarchy were the commissions for the youth and women's divisions (monthly meetings) and commissions for special occasions (e.g. technical, entertaining – occasional meetings).

At this time the gymnastic content of the club's activities varied from obligatory serial exercises, apparatus exercises, marches, pyramids, folk dances and wrestling.

In 1906 the Israelitischer Turnverein formed also a women's and boy's divisions which were engaged mainly in the club and pole exercises. Besides these two divisions, the special fencing, wrestling and cycling groups were organized as well, but not on permanent basis.

To attract new applicants the Israelitischer Turnverein lowered its monthly fee for youngsters on 2,50 Ps. This action brought the increase of number of members in the youth division up to 80 and in the women's division up to 50 gymnasts. However, this also caused a problem due to the lack of „vorturners“.<sup>13</sup> One of the solutions seemed to be the posting of the club's turnwart (A.Zilfer) at a Jewish Turnverein in Vienna, but it had never been actually carried out.

Although the attendance of weekly exercises by the members of the youth and women divisions was satisfying (the average attendance during 95 sessions in 1906 was 31 boys and 35 women), the conditions of the main men's division were very weak (the average attendance during 53 sessions was 11 men). For the very first time the Israelitischer Turnverein had even to cancel the sessions in July and August due to the very low numbers.

This dreary situation (at the end of 1907 there were 96 men, 57 boys, 27 women in their divisions) dramatically changed during the club's year 1908/09.

First of all, it all began with the Young Turk Revolution on July 3rd 1908 shortly after which Sultan Abdülhamid II. restored the constitutional monarchy. This act reduced

<sup>9</sup> He substituted the long-time chairman V.Schwarz.

<sup>10</sup> The German expression describing the leading function of an instructor. More to this topic- Mehl, E. Grundriss des deutschen Turnens. Wien 1930, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> The German expression describing the special function of an apparatus keeper. More to this topic Gasch, R. Handbuch des gesamten Turnwesens. Wein u. Leipzig 1920.

<sup>12</sup> Starting 1909 the representatives of the suburban sections participated in these meetings.

<sup>13</sup> German expressions for a special position in the turnverein which was given to a skilled member who helped the turnwart with organizing exercises. More to this topic Mehl, E. Grundriss des deutschen Turnens. Wien 1930, p.131.

power of the imperial dynasty and led to series of elections which drove also five Jewish representatives into the new parliament. The restoration of constitutionalism granted more federalist and assembling freedom and in some communities, such as the Jewish, reformist groups emulating the Young Turks ousted the conservative ruling elite and replaced them with a new reformist one.

As a result of this the Israelitischer Turnverein could appear in public with its activities which should have ensured the club more supporters and new members in the foreseeable future.

Second of all, the activity of the Israelitischer Turnverein İstanbul brought the club a significant support of the big Jewish organizations. Thanks to a total donation of 800 Fres. through „Zionistische Aktionskomitee“ in Cologne, „Komitee der Chowewe Zion“ in Odessa and „Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden“ in Berlin the İstanbul club was able to employ a „turnlehrer“ (head instructor - Julius Hirsch) in 1909. The club's most successful years fell into his fulltime two year employment which was also supported by his home turnverein BarKochba Berlin and the federation Jüdische Turnerschaft.

In 1908 the Israelitischer Turnverein also changed its name to the national-Jewish „Maccabi“.

This renaming act followed naturally after the general assembly on May 25th 1908 when the club announced, for the very first time publicly, its national-Jewish conviction. This proposal originated by H.Abrham who declared that he was willing to hold his position (vice chairman) only in a national-Jewish turnverein.

The national-Jewish movement originated in 1898 when during the II. Zionist congress in Basel the need for forming independent Jewish turnvereins was proclaimed.<sup>14</sup> A small group of Jewish Berliners felt addressed by this Zionist appeal and created the first national-Jewish turnverein. The initial tendency to support the Zionist ideology provoked the German public because of its clear inclination to an independent Jewish state „(...) if only possible in Palestine“<sup>15</sup> and to the deflection from the German culture. Another reason for not showing the sympathy to the Zionist movement publicly was the fact that quite a few Jews in the German speaking regions of Central Europe didn't agree with this extreme solution of the secession from their assimilated German environment. The Jewish gymnastic federation

<sup>14</sup> More to this topic - Zeugin, B. Die 22 Zionistenkongresse bis zur Staatsgründung Israels. In: Haumann, H. (Hrsg.) Der Erste Zionistenkongress von 1897 – Ursachen, Bedeutung, Aktualität. Karger, Basel 1997, p. 244-250.

<sup>15</sup> Jüdische Turnzeitung 1905, Jg.6, N.1, S.19.

Jüdische Turnerschaft estimated the percentage of the national-oriented Jews among its members between 55-60 %, the indifferent members between 35-40% and 5% were the assimilates. The leading body of the Jüdische Turnerschaft didn't want to give up and lose the indifferent and assimilated members, but hoped that: „(...) *most of them will adjust to the majority through reasonable, consistent, but not coercive education.*“<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned before, starting 1908 the boom of the Maccabi was connected to numerous facts. Another one was the lull of the attacks from the certain Jewish circles who criticized the ongoing national-Jewish tendencies. First with the increasing acknowledgement of this movement through official authorities (e.g. cooperation with governing bodies of İstanbul suburbs, the presence of Turkish officers at their activities, membership of the head rabbi<sup>17</sup>), this part of Jewish population, who saw its future rather in the Pan-Turkish co-existence than in the Jewish- Zionist independence, slowly gave in its criticism. Even the publicly expressed longing of the national-Jewish movement in Turkey for an independent Jewish state in Palestine brought up no tempestuous outcries of the Turkish public and authorities as the national oriented Jews were used to experience in the German-Austrian environment. This is to be explained based on the reality that before the WWI Palestine had actually been a province of the Ottoman empire, so the Turkish Jews were de facto seeking only an „inside country relocation“. Before the departure of the appointed turnlehrer J.Hirsch, the club Maccabi had been a mere cluster of about 200 members from whom a significant part were just passive turners. After two years of his work the Maccabi had developed into an influential organization with about 1.000 (600 adults and 400 youngsters) active members who were divided into numerous units (men, women, youth, children). Meanwhile, this perspective situation was doomed by an extended fire (May 1908) which leveled down the entire suburb of 15000 Jews – Balat. At the same time, some other parts of İstanbul were paralysed by the outbreak of cholera.

Nevertheless, the club kept on flourishing for at the beginning of 1910 it formed some additional sections in the city's suburbs. The biggest section in Pera counted 234 members in 1910 and after just half a year 360 members. Other sections with a total number of 200 turners followed in Hasköj, Ortaköj, Balat and Sirkadschi. The sections in the suburbs exercised independently, but were ruled from the central club through eight member

<sup>16</sup> „ (...) *viele von ihnen bei vernünftiger, konsequenter, aber nicht aufdringlicher Erziehung sich der Majorität anpassen.*“ Jüdische Turnzeitung 1909, Jg.10, N.3/4, S.42

<sup>17</sup> In 1909 from his own initiative the head rabbi in Turkey - Haim Nahoum became an honourable member of the Maccabi İstanbul.

committee. Besides this spreading the Maccabi's members took a part in the education of children at the „*Or-Torah School*“ and „*German-Jewish Public School*“ as well. The Maccabi gymnasts had a choice of seeing the club's doctor for preventive checkups as well.

The club administration also tried to educate the broad spectrum of Jewish public not only through its physical activities but also through a series of bi-monthly lectures related to national-Jewish topics (e.g. Hebrew language, Perspectives of Ottoman Jews, Moses, Principles of Jewish History, Jews as a Race, Cultural and Economical Situation of Palestine, etc.).

Since May 1910 the gymnastic units were given in Hebrew and the club started organizing obligatory lessons of Hebrew for the members. The goal was the support of the national-Jewish idea and the prevention of the lingual and gymnastic-technical misunderstandings.

Based on the then principals the Maccabi İstanbul should have chosen the Turkish terminology for its gymnastic activities, but it chose Hebrew (it was the first national-Jewish club to do so, although in 1908 the leading Jewish turner body – Jüdische Turnerschaft – decided that Hebrew should have been implemented in all the national-Jewish turnvereins. But due to the national consequences in the German environment only some Czech clubs, Maccabi İstanbul and the clubs in Palestine introduced the Hebrew terminology before 1914.

The Jewish turnverein Maccabi was successful in applying the Hebrew gymnastic terminology due to a totally different social, cultural and political situation in Turkey which was almost anti-Semitic free.

The intention of the Turkish Jews led also to the introduction of Hebrew language to the whole Jewish population of the Turkish metropolis, not only Maccabi-bounded. In this way the club fulfilled its national-Jewish goals way beyond its daily gymnastic program. Several Hebrew speaking men of İstanbul participated in creating the gymnastic terminology which was then sent to Jaffa (Palestine) for an appraisal of a turnlehrer – H. Orloff. Next emendation was done by Julius Hirsch – then turnlehrer in İstanbul who extended and added more specific expressions. Naturally it was not an exhaustive gymnastic terminology, e.g. the apparatus terms were missing, but the serial exercises and the floor exercises were complete. The terms were organized in the alphabetical order and printed in several thousands copies which were distributed to every single member. First of all, the main turnwart familiarised all the section turnwarts with this terminology and made sure they understood it well, before they brought it over to their gymnasts.



At the beginning of December 1910 the Maccabi succeeded in buying four sets of gymnastic equipment (horizontal bar, vaulting-buck, parallel bars, parallel bars and three mattresses) for its sections in Haskeuy, Balat, Ortakeuy and Kuskundjuk. All of these sections had a gym at their disposal.

Before 1914 there were actually no gyms in İstanbul in the then European standards, the school physical education didn't practically exist. So, the possibility of using exercising rooms, as we could witness in Central Europe, was very limited.

Finding a suitable space for indoor exercising was quite a challenge considering the fact that the most of the houses in Jewish suburbs were wooden two-storey buildings. Buying the suitable apparatus meant additional expenses for shipping the goods from far away Germany, Austria etc.

Another difference to the standard European Jewish life was the lack of support from other organizations, e.g. there were no student unions, no Zionist local communities, no Jewish literature clubs, where the Jewish youth could gather and shape their national-Jewish belief and conviction. And so, the membership in the Maccabi meant to the turners a complete devotion of their personalities. „Whereas the Jewish turners in Germany or Austria took a part on the twice-a-week exercises and then returned back to their well-to-do assimilated families, the Jewish turner in the East was confronted with the everyday Jewish renaissance movement.“<sup>18</sup>

All these positive changes and progresses inside the Maccabi led naturally to more frequent and consistent gymnastic and social activity. E.g. the periodical winter festivals included besides obligatory exercising also poetry, singing and theatre performances. The Jewish turners used to also celebrate regularly the commemoration of the Maccabees with an annual gymnastic festival. E.g. on December 31st 1910 the wide program was started with the Ottoman anthem followed by the Zionist anthem („Hatikwah“). There were many Turkish officials and authorities present, some of them even gave speeches in one of the three official languages of the Maccabi - Türkisch, Hebrew and French. For instance the Gouverner of Pera (Muhhiedin Bej), whose presence only symbolized good relations with the state, announced that : „(...) *the goals and activities of the Turnverein have the full trust of the government*“<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hirsch,J. Die jüdische Turnbewegung in der Welt – die Türkei. In: Jüdische Turn-und Sportzeitung 1919, n.8, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> „ (...) *dass die die Zwecke des Turnvereines der Regierung volles Vertrauen einflössten.*“ Jüdische Turnzeitung 1911, n.1, p.42

These exceptionally good terms with the governing Turkish bodies led to the aim to organize a feast for financial support of the national fleet.

In reality the Jewish turners often intentionally met on their trips army units and troops with whom they exchanged experience in marching skills and commands or showed their physical activities. During these one-day marching parades they often wandered several hours to points of interest around İstanbul while singing Hebrew and presenting their homogenous appearance accented by their street uniform<sup>20</sup> - white trousers and khaki jacket. At their destinations they e.g. went swimming in the Black Sea or demonstrated one of their pyramids to the local people before heading back home.

With the outbreak of the Turkish-Italian war some of the Jewish turners were also recruited to the army showing their loyalty to the state. The home staying members showed their patriotism at least through performing theater plays with war themes (e.g. presenting a battle while defending the Turkish flag).

In 1912 the *Jüdische Turnerschaft* approved the partition of the turnvereins into regional organizations. With creation of four regions *Deutscher Kreis* (German region), *Westösterreichischer Kreis* (Western-Austrian region), *Galizien-bukowinischer Kreis* (Galicia-Bukowina region) and *Orientkreis* (Turkey, Palestine) the all-Jewish federation tended to deepen the inter-clubs cooperation and more sufficient coordination. In reality only the German and Western-Austrian regions fulfilled these plans while forming a regional structure accompanied by the regional gymnastic festivals („*Kreisturnfest*“).

The distant location of İstanbul from the central club BarKochba Berlin and from the *Jüdische Turnerschaft*, the almost non-existing cooperation among the clubs within the Ottoman empire (partly due to the difficult financial situation, partly due to the enormous distances between them) plus the well-working suburban system of national-Jewish sections of the Maccabi İstanbul caused that the only regional activity in accordance with the *Jüdische Turnerschaft* was the *Kreisturnfest*. This gymnastic festival was held on June 7th 1914 and was visited by a mass of 2500 visitors. Among them there were some important representatives of the public, academic and political life (e.g. the ambassador of the USA, Governor of Pera, rabbis<sup>21</sup>, army officials etc.). The number of participants counted 250 who presented the collective march, apparatus exercises in ten divisions, pattern exercises on the

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<sup>20</sup> The gymnastic uniform consisted of white shirt with blue inscription „*Maccabi*“, white trousers and red belt.

<sup>21</sup> In 1909 from his own initiative the head rabbi in Turkey - Haim Nahoum became an honourable member of the Maccabi İstanbul.

horizontal bar, vaults, gymnastic competitions<sup>22</sup>, sets of pyramids, a football match and a rope pulling contest.

With the August 1914 outset of the WWI the national-Jewish club Maccabi İstanbul interrupted its activity completely and the only news came in 1917 when the leading committee sent a donation of 100 M. to the Jewish newspaper „*Jüdische Turn-und Sportzeitung*“ to support its financial crisis due to the ongoing war.

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<sup>22</sup> In 1912, in accordance with the development in the Jüdische Turnerschaft the Maccabi İstanbul started integrating the gymnastic competitions in its programmes (1st public gymnastic competition display 12.5.1912 – 350 turners from the sections Para, Haskeuy, Balat and Kuskundjuk).

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