

A SUNDAY stroll along the Büyükdada boardwalk.



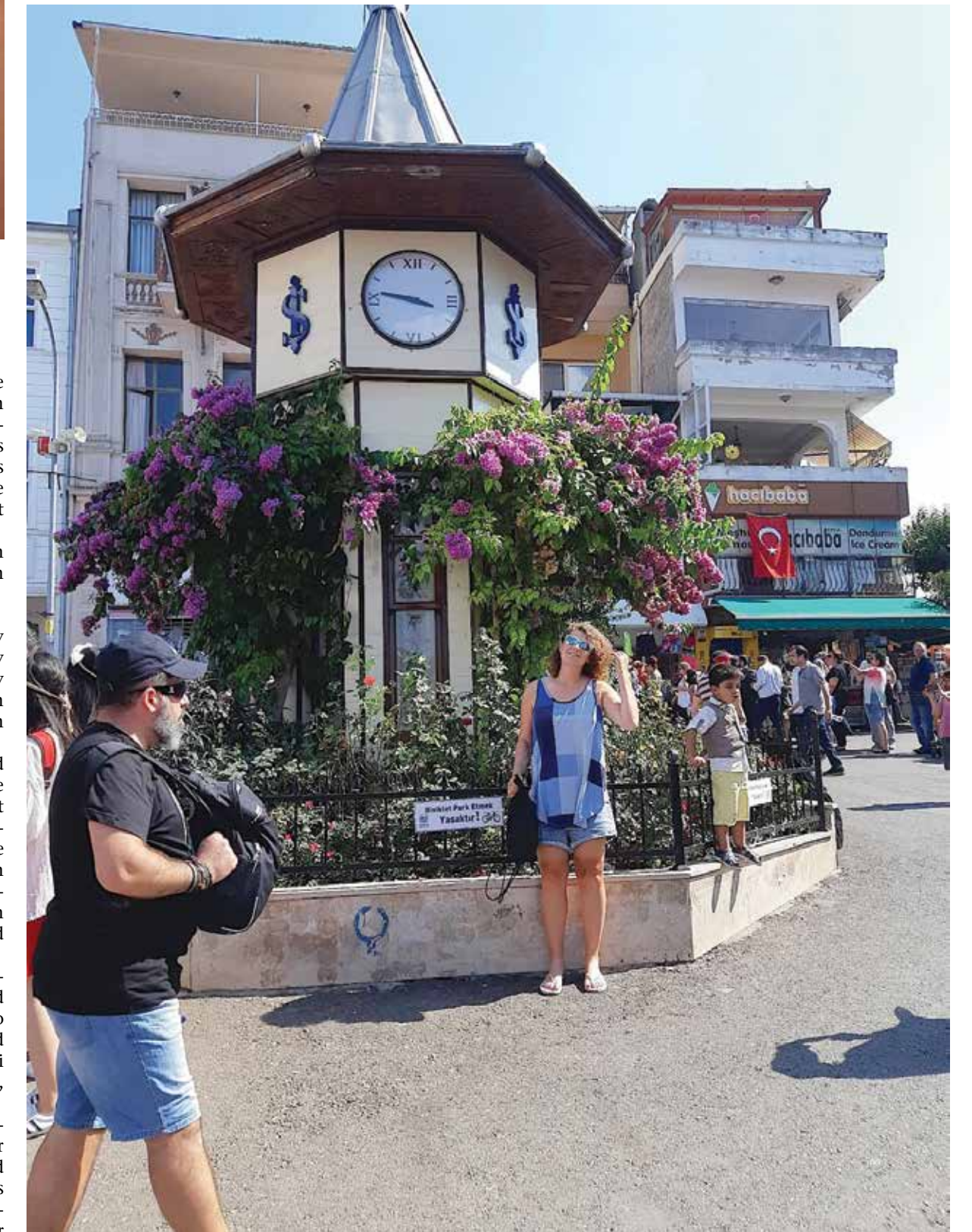
Nearing nostalgia

Turkey's Treasure Island:
Digging up buried Jewish
gems off the coast of Istanbul



TRADING IN 'bageleh' for sesame-crusted 'simit.' (Esin Habif)

BÜYÜKADA BY the clock. (Esin Habif)



• Text and photos:
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Two years ago, I threw all caution to the post-university winds and moved from Canada to Israel for a MASA internship program. Upon meeting new Jewish friends during our orientation in Jerusalem, I was surprised to discover just how many countries we came from: Sweden, Switzerland, Brazil. But the most unexpected location definitely had to be Turkey.

At first I figured it was a coincidence. However, on my first day of work, I met a fellow intern and soon found out that he too hailed from Istanbul.

Coincidence? I think not.

Slowly, the more I settled in Tel Aviv, the larger my circle of Turkish Jewish friends grew. My curiosity grew in tandem: Who was this intriguing group? Why had they moved to Israel? Where had they come from before Turkey? And why were they eligible for Spanish and Portuguese passports?

Well, in 1492, after being expelled from Spain and Portugal, the bulk of Turkey's Jews sought refuge in the Ottoman Empire. When the Turkish Republic was first founded in 1923, records show that the Jewish population hovered at 81,454, with more than half of those individuals residing in Istanbul. Due to a steep rise in antisemitism, that number has dropped to approximately 18,500 today. The community continues to thin as younger generations relocate to Canada, the United States, Europe and, as I have recently discovered, Israel.

As a travel writer, I could not give up the opportunity to delve into this historical narrative firsthand. And so, when my Turkish Jewish friend Esin invited me to stay with her family in Istanbul, I immediately booked my flight, packed my backpack and grabbed my Israeli passport (which granted visa-free entry into Turkey, whereas my Canadian passport did not).

Throughout the eye-opening adventure, I met Esin's friends and family, ate (and now yearn for) their succulent meat, sipped their raki (similar to arak), and visited their sites and attractions. While the exotic teas and freshly packed coffee I purchased from their markets might vanish over time, the one relic I will never



THE REPUBLIC of Turkey's flag flies high on an August afternoon.



SAFETY FIRST on the Istanbul ferry.

PANORAMA OF the city. (Ben Morlok/Flickr)



A PEACEFUL blast from the writer's tour guide's past.

lose is my afternoon visit to Büyükkada.

From Istanbul, a ferry glides along the Sea of Marmara and docks at a cluster of islands known as the Prince Islands. While each island differs in size and splendor – from the minute Spoon Island barely visible from the ferry, to Rabbit Island, which brings back memories of *Watership Down* – our destination, the largest island of Büyükkada, could have easily swallowed those wild rabbits whole.

With exile at the origins of these islands' history, it would seem simple to fit the country's Jewish community into the religiously complex jigsaw puzzle – a people who have been forced to “emigrate” rather than “immigrate” since their humble beginnings. At first approach, Büyükkada eats, sleeps and breathes tourism. The harbor is overflowing with trinkets and tchotchkes, hookahs and captain's hats, fezzes and fried fish and, of course, tourists, most of whom sport hijabs and burkas. This led me to won-

der where “the famous Jewish summer getaway” about which all my Turkish friends boasted could be hiding.

I followed my fabulous friend and tour guide, Esin, as we maneuvered through the hordes of people, desperate for some fresh air or tangible Jewish history to grasp onto. Esin grabbed my hand and led me behind the Barnum & Bailey circus show to some of Büyükkada's more serene streets – sprinkled with charming houses, the occasional stray dog, and young children racing one another on bicycles.

There, questions about a once-booming Jewish community floated stagnantly overhead like the seagulls on the ferry's open-air top deck. Much like those seagulls begging for the smallest crumb of our sesame-crusted *simit* (the Turkish equivalent of beigeleh), I too, begged for a crumb of Jewish culture to squeeze inside the empty puzzle frame.

The first crumb of hope came in the form of a Star of David peering over rooftops and untamed shrubs. Unfortunately,

A STUNNING synagogue peeks out from behind the bushes.

the synagogue to which it had belonged was not only hidden behind a towering gate, the only remaining active synagogue on the island was closed that day. We brushed off the disappointment and continued on our way.

Zigzagging up the winding cobblestone roads toward her grandparents' summerhouse, we passed other remnants of Esin's Jewish upbringing: an old Jewish beach club where she and her friends met on long Shabbat afternoons; an iconic kosher meat restaurant that tragically went out of business due to the growing demand for *ayran* (a popular yogurt drink); and the local ice-cream cart, Yunus Dondurma, stationed proudly on the very same corner on which it stood two decades earlier. A well-shaved son had replaced his mustachioed father, Yunus. Nonetheless, my friend's disposition softened at the sublime discovery.

Something old, something new

Now serving cold confections mostly to one-time visitors, Yunus's son's disposition softened and his smile widened at the sight of a familiar face.

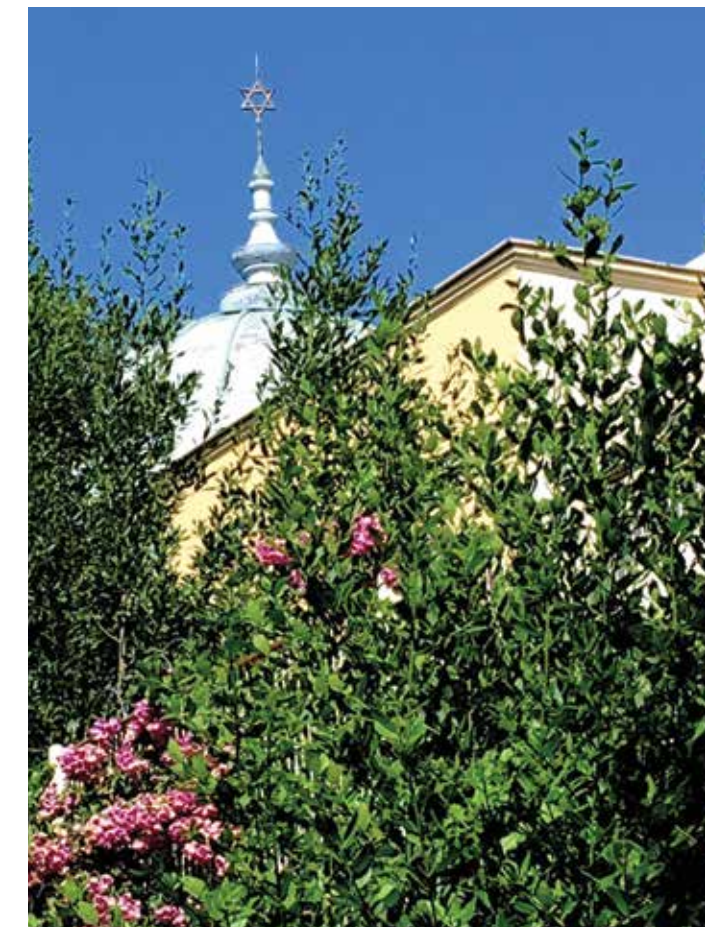
We both marveled at the pristine rose petals he crafted out of fruity flavors – a Yunus Dondurma signature. My heart melted as fast as the all-natural peach and melon petals. Although she chose the same flavors, I could tell that Esin's ice cream tasted bittersweet. Her rose-colored glasses had become foggy.

As we passed through fleeting memories of my wonderful tour guide's childhood, Esin could not help but wear her emotions on her sun-dyed sleeve. With each landmark she seemed near to nostalgia, but never quite arrived, due to disillusionment.

Later that night, I discovered that this was a shared narrative, whereby most of her Turkish Jewish friends had not visited Büyükkada – their Treasure Island – for years, despite it being just a hop, skip and a short ferry trip away.

In a country covered with a mosaic of mosques, it is hard to see such a stunning place – a safe space – lose its personality, and a Jewish one at that. Alfred Lord Tennyson said, “'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” After visiting Büyükkada and experiencing firsthand my friend's reactions to such an important chapter of her life in Turkey, I am not sure I can agree. What I can agree on is that despite its fading Jewish façade, with the right perspective, Büyükkada's cultural innards do endure.

Büyükkada is well worth a visit – to see a world that once was and, hopefully, one day soon again will be. ■



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