

## Jewish Tobacco Workers in Salonika: Gender and Family in the Context of Social and Ethnic Strife

Gila Hadar

Salonika, the largest city of Macedonia, is situated in the northern part of modern Greece.<sup>1</sup> An administrative and commercial center for centuries, Salonika<sup>2</sup> became one of the main sites of settlement for the Sephardic Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century (1492–97) and subsequently became the largest and most dominant element of the city's population.<sup>3</sup> They were primarily involved in commercial and industrial activities, and were highly stratified in different classes, professions, and income groups. Culturally, the Jewish community developed its own distinct traditions in terms of family values, religious rituals, language (Ladino<sup>4</sup>), literature, customs, and habits of everyday life.

In the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, the city of Salonika witnessed far-reaching political, social, geopolitical, and demographic that influenced all its inhabitants. The various communities were influenced by Turkish and Hellenic nationalism, by socialist and communist ideologies, and by the development of modern capitalist industries.

One of the most remarkable phenomena in Salonika was the industrialization and modernization of the city and the contribution of wealthy Jewish, Greek, and Muslim entrepreneurs, together with European banks and businesses, to these processes. The tobacco industry was one of the largest industries in Macedonia and the Near East. The tobacco factories of Greek Macedonia employed approximately 20,000 workers. In Salonika, where the processing plants were located, 8,000 workers were employed, most of whom were young Jewish girls.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, they are absent from the historical narrative of the city, the community, the family, and the working class.

In this article, I examine the process whereby gender, class, and ethnic identities were created among the female Jewish tobacco workers<sup>6</sup> of Salonika, as well as their way of life and everyday activities; the ways that their entrance into the work force influenced how they conceived of themselves in the private and public

spheres; and the ways in which the outside world, the community, and the family related to the “princess” who broke into the public arena, took part in the events and social struggles of the time, and became part of the working community and the Socialist and Communist parties. I address how these processes were connected to issues of communal and ethnic/national interests in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods. Gender, class, and ethnicity are all emotionally laden issues, each of which contributes to the formation of identity and the sense of belonging. Yet throughout this period, we find that delineations of gender, class, and ethnicity crossed, merged, and even conflicted with one another. These various aspects are examined here in light of the theories of spatiality of Henri Lefebvre, David Sibley, and Juval Portugali, as well as the theories of the gendering of space of Shirley Ardener and others.<sup>7</sup>

The main source for this paper is the Sephardic Jewish press—newspapers and journals written in Ladino and published in Salonika from the end of the nineteenth century until 1941.

### **The Socialist Federation**

Until the Young Turk Revolution (July 1908), trade unions and strikes were forbidden.<sup>8</sup> After the revolution, rallying behind the Young Turk motto of “Liberty, Justice, Equality, Fraternity,” the workers demanded equality in everyday life as well as in the factory. In the liberal climate that followed the revolution, a type of cultural mass-production began among the different ethnic and national groups, particularly through the free press, serving to raise ethnic and national consciousness within their respective communities.<sup>9</sup> The new regime permitted the establishment of trade unions and social organizations. “Everyone is eager to exploit the opportunities which freedom has opened up to them. Everyone is establishing trade unions and associations that until now have been prohibited by the authorities. The bakers, railroad workers, tailors, dock workers, shoemakers, sales clerks in the shops and the young girls in the textile mills and factories have all been on strike.”<sup>10</sup>

The umbrella organization of the workers was *La Federation Socialista*, which began to work openly immediately after the revolution.<sup>11</sup> The Federation was established in 1909 by a group of workers from all ethnic groups who were imbued with socialist ideals: Avraham Ben-Aroyah (Benaroya), Alberto Arditi, Samuel Amon (a tobacco worker), Angel Tomov, Dimitri Michalis, Salih Ben Abdi, Mehmet Nâzımî, Istiryo Nikopoulo, Dimitar Vlahof, and Jacques Ventura. The last two represented the Federation in the Turkish Parliament. At the same time, trade unions were formed along religious and ethnic lines. These unions participated in the struggle for better working conditions and higher wages. The organ of the Socialist Federation was *Journal del Lavorador (Laborador)*. It was published in four languages: Ladino, Turkish, Bulgarian, and Greek. Later, due to problems with the censor, the name was changed to *La Solidaridad Ovradera, La Solidarite Ovradera, and Avanti*.

Immediately following the Young Turk Revolution, strikes began in Salonika. The first strike in which tens of thousands of workers participated, including approximately 10,000 tobacco workers and 3–5,000 dockworkers, railroad workers, and bakers, was organized by the tobacco workers' trade union.<sup>12</sup> The tobacco workers were the first in the city to form a trade union that was part of the Socialist Federation. From the very first year of its establishment, female tobacco workers were part of the tobacco workers' organization, though they did not take part in its management, nor in committees that negotiated with employers.

### Working Conditions

The participation of young girls in the work force was, in actuality, an extension of their domestic roles. Just like women who went to work as wet nurses, seamstresses, servants, and laundresses, in the eyes of the family and of the employers, tobacco work too was seen as an extension of women's household duties: sorting (of tobacco leaves), threading (of the leaves on strings), and hanging (the leaves to dry).<sup>14</sup>

Tobacco work was seasonal, and during times when tobacco was not being processed, the young girls worked as servants and laundresses in Jewish, Muslim, and Greek houses. The formation of the gender and class identities of these young Jewish working class girls took place in the private sphere of the home and—quite literally—on the floor of the factory. The word for “on the floor” in Ladino is *embasho*, which also means “below” and carries a certain negative connotation: in Ladino, the word *basho* means “inferior—without education or honor.” Just as floor scrubbing was done on one's knees, so the tobacco work was done while sitting on the factory floor (Figure 5.1).

Young girls aged 12–14 were sent to work as servants in wealthy homes. A Swedish tourist who visited the city in March 1900 wrote: “All the laundresses and maids, even in non-Jewish homes, are Jewish.”<sup>15</sup>

The principal reason for the entrance of young girls into the work force, besides the prevailing hunger and poverty, was the need to save money for a dowry, a prerequisite for marriage.<sup>16</sup> The necessity of providing a dowry was the issue around which the life of any family that had been “cursed” with numerous daughters revolved. The equation was simple: a rich dowry meant a rich husband—a poor dowry, a poor husband—no dowry, no husband. It was estimated in 1910 that a young girl of the working class would need to work 10 to 15 years to save enough money for a dowry.<sup>17</sup>

The reputation of young Jewish girls for being industrious workers, together with the desire of tobacco companies to save on production costs and increase profit, led to the establishment of production lines relying upon the work of young Jewish women and girls. The management strategy of tobacco factories was based on the family. Companies preferred to employ single young girls who, because of their age and the communal and familial nature of Jewish society, were considered submissive and obedient, not “troublemakers.” The workers were not unknown to one another: fathers, mothers, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, sisters,

brothers, cousins, and neighbors worked side by side in the drying and sorting halls, so that there was constant societal supervision over young girls. Both male and female workers worked principally in the sorting and packaging of the tobacco leaves according to size, hue, and quality. The workday lasted between 14 and 16 hours, and took place in dark and dry halls in order to preserve the quality of the tobacco leaves. Female workers sat on the floor either in circles or in lines, and at their feet lay piles of tobacco leaves to be sorted into baskets. Tobacco dust particles, carried in the air, penetrated their lungs and eyes and caused respiratory problems, lung infections, tuberculosis, eye infections, and chronic headaches, while sitting on the floor caused chronic backaches. In contrast to the textile industry, where the rapping noise of the looms made conversation impossible in the production hall, the task of sorting tobacco leaves was quiet in and of itself. This presented the young girls with a golden opportunity to converse about any possible subject, among others their romantic dreams about groom, house, and family—dreams that would never come true if the empty dowry chest was not filled up with household utensils, bedding, and attire suitable for a bride under the wedding canopy. Mixed into this stream of conversation were issues of social and political import: the difficult working conditions, long hours, and low wages, the discrepancy between the wages paid to males and females performing the same tasks, and their living conditions as compared to those of the young girls in the wealthy households where they worked when there was nothing to do in the tobacco factories. The older women, particularly widows who carried the sole financial burden of providing for their children, preferred to do domestic labor. Though wages for domestic labor were low, they were steady throughout the year and therefore provided more economic security.

As international demand for tobacco increased and tobacco prices rose, the local tobacco industry was able to offer higher wages than those customary in the mills and textile factories.<sup>18</sup> The division of labor was according to gender. Men were employed as overseers, cutters, and porters, and they sorted the high-quality tobacco leaves—*baş balı*—whereas young girls picked the leaves from the fields (Figure 5.2) and sorted the lower-quality tobacco leaves—*basma*, *pastalçı*, *mirodatus*, and *kaba kolak*. Furthermore, in cases where both sexes performed the same task, female workers received from one third to one half of the men's wages. In one case, for example, men received 20–23 *kuruş* a day for cutting and sorting, whereas young Turkish girls received only 8–10 *kuruş* a day for the same task. Workers' wages were paid according to gender rather than according to task.<sup>19</sup>

Why did the tobacco industry provide the most fertile ground for the new socialist ideas, and why did tobacco workers, including young girls, form the most militant group of all the trade organizations—the one that led the socialist struggle in the city?

The answer lies in a combination of factors: the relatively large number of workers who labored under one roof,<sup>20</sup> the fact that the work was seasonal, allowing workers time for political and social organization, and the conditions under which tobacco leaves were sorted and stringed. Frequent strikes hurt the



Figure 5.1. A tobacco processing factory at the beginning of the twentieth century. Beth Hatefutsoth, Photography Archives, Tel Aviv. Greece, Salonika, 322/111.47.

factory owners' income and increased production expenses. Employers tried to crush workers' organizations and reduce production costs by several means. In 1910 there was even an attempt, through an appeal to the courts, to outlaw the tobacco trade union. The court complied with the demands of the factory owners, and in response the workers left the factories and laid siege to the courthouse.<sup>21</sup>

Another attempt by factory owners to increase production and break the Jewish trade union was to institute a seven-day work week. The Herzog factory, whose owners were Jewish and which employed 350 Jewish workers along with 30 Turks, Bulgarians, and Greeks, decided to continue production on the Sabbath. In response, the Jewish female workers went on strike, declaring that they refused to work in a factory that did not respect the holiness of the Sabbath.<sup>22</sup>

As female workers were paid less than male workers and were considered more obedient, girls and young women were hired to replace the men in traditionally male positions in the factory, in an attempt to cut costs and optimize efficiency. This process of replacing male workers with female workers was part of an overall trend taking place in the tobacco industry throughout the Ottoman Empire, and which succeeded in particular in Bulgaria.<sup>23</sup>

One of the excuses used for firing male workers and replacing them with female workers was "safeguarding the honor" of the female workers.<sup>24</sup> However, it was not "the honor" of female workers that prompted factory owners to invite



Figure 5.2. Six young women picking tobacco leaves under the supervision of the husband of one of them and his brother, c. 1920.  
Courtesy of the Mattaraso Family, Haifa.

Rabbi Meir, Chief Rabbi of Salonika, to inspect the tobacco workshops in order to “investigate the claim” that Jewish girls were working alongside Jewish, Greek, and Muslim men in the same workshops. Rather, it was their desire to hire female workers for traditionally male positions and thus pay female wages. The trade union declared:

The demand to separate the sexes does not arise from the desire of the employers to safeguard the honor of their female employees. It is poverty which shames the male worker as it does the female worker. It is the Tobacco Worker’s Union that protects the honor of the workers, male and female alike.<sup>25</sup>

The Rabbi inspected and found, to his relief, that in the girls’ workshops there were only female workers, and the only males who—infrequently—entered there were elderly men.<sup>26</sup> From a close inspection of the strikes that broke out at the tobacco plant of the Régie Cointeressée des Tabacs de l’Empire Ottoman, we can see an illustration of the tactics of replacing male with female workers. During the first strike that broke out at the factory in August 1908, 400 male workers and 400 female workers struck, most of whom were Jewish.<sup>27</sup> From March until the end of May 1911, 400 female workers and 90 male workers went out on strike at the Régie tobacco factory. They were joined by male and female workers from other tobacco factories such as Hasan Âkif, Keyazis Emin, and Herzog.<sup>28</sup> The workers demanded wage increases in accordance with the cost of living index, the hiring

of unionized workers, wages that would be paid according to hours worked rather than production quotas, and the shortening of the work day to 7–8 hours in the winter, and 10–11 hours in the summer:

The Jewish, Greek, and Turkish workers reorganized and decided on work hours. The men would work between 7:30 and 16:30 whereas the girls would work between 8:00 and 17:00. The workers would have two fifteen minute breaks during the day. There were different meal/rest times for men and women; the men would take a break when it suited them, whereas the women's break time was signaled by a bell.<sup>29</sup>

One of the main demands during negotiations was that those jobs considered male tasks would not be appropriated to female workers, and that male workers would not sort tobacco leaves with the young girls. In this way, work would be assured for both male and female workers.<sup>30</sup> After long negotiations between workers' representatives and the employers, the strike ended. The wages of female workers were cut, whereas the value of male workers' wages was safeguarded. When the 400 female workers realized that their wages had been reduced, they insisted on continuing the negotiations by themselves; and when the employers refused to speak with them, the young girls called for a strike of their own. The male workers who reported to work found the factory gates locked: "The young girls are on strike and the men are in a lockout." As a sign of sympathy with the Régie factory, the owners of Hasan Âkif, Herzog, and Keyazis Emin also closed down their factories.<sup>31</sup>

The young girls' struggle for fair wages and working conditions sped up their integration into the socialist movement. Female tobacco workers were the first to establish a vocational sector of their own within the tobacco workers' union. This sector was established after the young girls proved their determination and their independence. Their struggles took place both in the factories and on the street, against both their employers and their "brethren" workers who, when it came to the issues of wages and "efficiency" lay-offs, did not hesitate to sacrifice their female counterparts. Each time the young girls felt that their employers or the workers' committees were treating them underhandedly, they called for a strike and took to the streets to demonstrate. Thus, the young girls who worked in the tobacco industry of Salonika became active members of the working class; on the floors of the tobacco factories they acquired an awareness of their rights as workers and, for a limited period of time (that is, until marriage), a new sense of self was formed—one that began to demand rights, to take a stand, and to make decisions not only on the factory floor but also within workers' organizations. By 1912, the factory owners could only dream of employing a young Jewish girl who was not a member of the trade union.<sup>32</sup>

### Changes in Space

As for the class struggle, its role in the production of space is a cardinal one in that this production is performed solely by classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes. Today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space.<sup>33</sup>

Henri Lefebvre

Historical sources show that, as in other Jewish communities, the Jewish woman of Salonika was not an independent entity but an inseparable part of the family. In the patriarchal family and society of Salonika, the life of the family, or, more exactly, the life of the women and children, was conducted not in accordance with official space and time—whether it be “government time” or “Jewish time”—but in terms of more internal, restricted dimensions. Besides the private/public dichotomy, other dichotomies existed in the areas of dress, language, and speech as well.

Female workers of the tobacco industry were the first to shatter the separation between the public and private spheres. Approximately 4,000 workers participated in the May First march of 1911—men, women, children, and their entire families. Speeches were delivered in four languages. Ninety-five percent of the participants were Jews, the rest being Bulgarians, Greeks, and Turks. Public space was converted into a political marketplace.

The march met with the disapproval of many, not only because of the social and political identity of the marchers, but also because for the first time, women and children had participated as well.<sup>34</sup> The events of May 1911, when thousands of male and female tobacco workers, along with their families, occupied and took charge of their own space, marked a new starting point.<sup>35</sup> Beyond the fact that the march was a show of workers’ strength, it was also seen as presenting a threat to public order. Whereas female workers demanding equal rights in the factories had only presented a problem for their employers, girls and young women marching in the streets presented a threat to the traditional order of society and to its institutions. As Lefebvre has argued, “The distinction between the within and the without is as important to the spatial realm as to that of politics. The critique of what happens within has no meaning except by reference to what exists ‘outside’ as possibility.”<sup>36</sup> One could summarize the situation, using an old Jewish adage, as: “The King’s daughter has stepped outside!”<sup>37</sup>

In April 1913,<sup>38</sup> the female tobacco workers once more went on strike, and the male workers joined them. Until then, these young girls had had no say in the decisions taken by the workers’ committees; now they demanded to participate in the decision-making process.<sup>39</sup> On 20 February 1914, on the eve of one of the largest strikes, five hundred young girls participated in the Convention of Female Tobacco Workers, which addressed the issue of the place of women workers within trade unions.<sup>40</sup>



The strike of 1913 had apparently settled the matter of gender relations within the tobacco workers' union. The young girls' participation in the various struggles and demonstrations and their demand for inclusion in the decision-making process proved "that the girls have the energy and discipline needed to wage battle."<sup>41</sup>

### **The Class Consciousness of Female Workers**

Once men understood that the social and class struggle would not succeed without the participation of female workers, they encouraged them to organize and take part in the union's activities. The young girls internalized the concepts of class ideology and social equality both as workers and as women.<sup>42</sup> Within the Jewish community of Salonika, a common expression was: "The most respectable woman is she who speaks little."<sup>43</sup> The fact that these young girls were speaking out and demanding equality and active participation illustrated a change in their consciousness. They now used their voice and participated in discussions that were both political and public. The female tobacco workers possessed both an ideology, and the words to express it. For example, Orico Baruch, Miriam Sasbone, Esterina Kovo, Riketa Filo, Matilda Ashkenazi, Sonhola Algava, and others donated money to the strikers' fund, proclaiming: "Down with scabs! Long live the true unionists!"<sup>44</sup> Not all the young girls took an active part in the political activities of the Socialist-Communist Party<sup>45</sup> and in the struggles within the factories. They admired the courage of spirit and the actions of those who did participate, but shied away from them for fear of losing their jobs.<sup>46</sup>

There was a small core of young girls who, with the encouragement of members of their families who were themselves active in the Party and the unions, led the rest of the girls and urged them to take part in the strikes, demonstrations, and assemblies: "There is no shame in coming to the workers' club. Shame is remaining enslaved. ... There is no shame in forming a trade union. Shame is being without a union and allowing the patrons to suck our blood!"<sup>47</sup> "The Union is Power."<sup>48</sup>

These young Jewish girls looked toward Europe as their model: "Girls, prepare yourselves! Fellow female workers wake up from your deadening slumber; prepare yourselves for the new life! Why aren't we looking towards our sisters in Europe? They take part in everything that happens in the workers' movement and even demand their right to be elected as representatives. And we?"<sup>49</sup>

In 1913, at an evening organized by the Socialist Party, one of the men read a monologue written by the Italian revolutionary author Ida Negri, a socialist Jewish woman, and one of the young girls spoke in support of the women taking to the streets to fight for their rights, side by side with the men.<sup>50</sup>

However, the militant stance of the female tobacco workers remained limited to the field of work relations, expressed in the factories and on the streets. The female workers of Salonika did not succeed in attaining the same achievements as their socialist sisters in western Europe. In particular, they did not succeed in implementing the power of women's solidarity—which they presented toward their employers and their fellow male workers—within the house and the family.

### Ethnic Strife within Class Conflict

In their attempts to break the lines of solidarity of the tobacco workers' organization, and in their endeavors toward decreasing production costs, employers exploited the ethnic differences among the workers. After the incorporation of the city into Greece in October 1912, the strikes and demonstrations in which workers took part had repercussions within spheres beyond those of class and gender. Relations between the Jews, Greeks, and Muslims of the city were greatly disturbed. It would appear that a number of Muslim factory owners felt the new political reality held new possibilities for breaking the tobacco trade union, the majority of whose members were Jewish.

In December 1912, the tobacco company of Hasan Âkif, under Muslim (*Dönme*<sup>51</sup>) ownership, decided to end the employment of Jewish workers, men and young girls alike, and proclaimed that from that day on, the company would hire only Greeks.<sup>52</sup> This tactic, however, did not succeed, as Greek and Turkish workers supported their Jewish counterparts.<sup>53</sup> The support of Greek and Turkish workers for the class struggle was also expressed in their donations to the strike fund of the Socialist Federation. Ambel İsa, a Turkish yoghurt vendor, donated to the fund, declaring "To the Class Struggle!"<sup>54</sup> Istiryo Nikopoulos, a Greek tobacco worker from the Régie factory, made a donation to the fund as well, while Jewish workers donated proclaiming "Ethnic propaganda will not succeed."<sup>55</sup>

After the employers' attempt to replace their male workers with female workers failed, and they discovered that the presumably compliant female workers were precisely those who were involved in organizing the workers and stood at the forefront of the strikes, they tried to replace the Jewish female workers who were unionized with Turkish and non-union Jewish female workers. In an attempt to by-pass the strikers who had congregated at the gates of the factory in order to deny entrance to non-union Jewish female workers, the employers disguised these latter in Turkish garb (*ferâce*), complete with veils covering their faces.<sup>56</sup> This attempt failed, however, as the striking Jewish girls revealed the true identity of the disguised workers and formed committees to consolidate the loyalty of all female workers. During the Great Tobacco Strike of 1914, the Jewish girls once again uncovered the faces of the strikebreakers. Only this time they discovered that behind the veils were not disguised Jewish girls but Muslim girls who had come to Salonika from villages where the tobacco was grown. They were not organized in a union, did the men's work of sorting, and worked for a pittance and a loaf of bread.<sup>57</sup> In the heat of defending their place of work, their wages, the very sustenance of their families, and their hopes for the future, the Jewish female tobacco workers ripped the veils off the faces of the Muslim girls. Nine Jewish girls were arrested by the police for the crime of offending the religious sensitivities of the Muslim workers.<sup>58</sup> In response to these events and to an article in the Turkish newspaper *Yeni Asır* [New Age], which was published in Salonika, Chief Rabbi Meir summoned representatives of the employers and of the Socialist Federation and implored them to calm the situation. At the same time, Rabbi Meir

wrote an article for the newspapers in which he denounced the actions of the young Jewish girls.

The conflict that arose between the Jewish and Greek workers organized in their separate unions on the one hand, and the hungry Muslim female workers on the other, acquired a religious and national character. The strikes and demonstrations that took place in the midst of the crisis of the First World War deeply disturbed the relations between the Jews, Muslims, and Greeks of the city. The positive relationship between the Jewish and Muslim communities, who had shared a sense of being “the outsider” and of alienation as a result of the annexation of their birthplace by Greece, was now damaged, while a spirit of patriotism surged among the Greek population. The strike hurt the principal export of Macedonia—tobacco—and consequently the income of the Greek government. The Greek newspapers *Nea Alithya* [*Νέα Αλήθεια*, “The New Truth”] and *Macedonia* [*Μακεδονία*], referred to the striking Greek workers as “Greek patriots.” However, the Jewish workers, who protested in the streets carrying red flags and wearing the fez<sup>59</sup> associated with Ottoman rule, were accused of attempting to incite the workers of the city in an effort to sabotage Greece’s endeavor to gain the approval of the League of Nations for the annexation of Salonika.<sup>60</sup>

### A Socialist Popular Culture

Collective cognitive maps are inter-subjective in the sense that members of the same cultural, economic, ethnic ... group, or people living in the same neighborhood, share similar cognitive maps.<sup>61</sup>

Juval Portugali

The need for cultural expressions separate from those of the Jewish, Greek, and Turkish bourgeoisie can be seen by inspection of the social meeting places of the working class. Throughout the period discussed in this article, the promenade along the beach and the coffeehouses near the White Tower were the locales of choice for the leisure of the Jewish, Greek, and Turkish middle-classes. Attending to the many who came to enjoy the breeze off the sea, the magnificent sunsets, and the “Parisian” atmosphere were coffeehouses with names bearing ethnic associations such as *Nea Hellas* [*Νέα Ελλάδα*, The New Greece], *Eptanisis* [*Επτάνησος*, The Seven Islands],<sup>62</sup> *Olympos* [*Όλυμπος*, Olympus], *Anadolu* [Anatolia], *La Turquie* [Turkey], and others.<sup>63</sup> Though it might be argued that the patrons of coffeehouses did not necessarily place any importance on the names of these establishments, we see that socialists preferred to sit at the café *El Amaneser* [in Ladino, The Dawn], *El Muevo Mundo* [in Ladino, The New World], *Café International*, and *Café Cristal*,<sup>64</sup> situated in the northwest of the city near Yeni Kapı [in Turkish, The New Gate], adjacent to their neighborhoods and the tobacco factories. In short, the names and locations of the coffeehouses suggest that different groups lived in the same territory and shared the same space, but at the same time operated in different cognitive environments.

The class consciousness of the young girls was formulated on the floors of the production halls and then strengthened in the neighborhood. Most of the workers lived in close proximity to the factories near the Vardar Gate and in the neighborhoods of Baron Hirsch and Régie Vardar (so named because of its proximity to the Régie tobacco factories). The family was an inseparable part of the work experience, the neighborhood, and the social struggle. The leaders of the Tobacco Workers' Union understood that they would not reach their goals by addressing only the workers' issues of working conditions, wages, and the participation of female workers; rather, they needed to appeal first and foremost to the family as a whole and to rally its support for the organization, its goals, and the struggle. The demand for better working conditions and higher wages was part of a larger social demand for improved living conditions in working-class neighborhoods in order to make their "slums of despair" into "slums of hope."<sup>65</sup> The family as a whole was considered to be within the framework of the long-range plans of the union; the entire family participated in First of May celebrations and in the excursions, dances, and picnics that were organized. Donations and food packages were collected and distributed to the families of striking workers.<sup>66</sup> Sports teams were organized and competitions were held between the teams of different unions, public libraries were opened,<sup>67</sup> and evening classes were arranged where the young girls of the tobacco factories taught their tired mothers how to read and write in Ladino (with Hebrew letters); Greek, history, and health care were also taught.<sup>68</sup> Dances were popular events, and those organized by the Socialist Movement took place in a number of dancing schools that supported and made donations to the workers' struggle, such as the *Karı Bazar* dancing school and *Café Havuzlu*.<sup>69</sup> Even at the dances organized by the Jewish community, class hierarchy was maintained and bourgeois women would not be seen dancing with working class men.<sup>70</sup>

The cultural association *De Grupo Dramatiko*, which performed in Ladino, was part of the socialist movement. Its theatre performances had a political and an educational agenda. Right from its early beginnings, *De Grupo Dramatiko* deliberately engaged in a politics of representation that attempted to develop an alternative base of political power within the neighborhood. This organization played a crucial role in the creation and shaping of the social and political spaces and identities where city and Jewish community policies were negotiated and contested.

The tobacco workers, experienced in conflict from the factories, were also struggling with the tensions between fulfilling their expected roles as wife and mother, on the one hand, and, on the other, their desire to emulate the female heroes of the working class such as "Therese Rakin," "Madlene," "Ana Maslovena," and "Mishlin," the sister of the worker "Gilbert" in Octave Mirbeau's play *The Socialist Holiday*,<sup>71</sup> which gave encouragement to the workers of both sexes in their hour of crisis. Every play that was performed relayed a clear socialist message.

### The Female Tobacco Workers in the Eyes of the Bourgeoisie

In the aftermath of the great fire of 1917, the Greek government saw an opportunity to transform the cityscape and revive its ancient Byzantine and Hellenic character.<sup>72</sup> A new spatial geography was shaped, based upon the exchange value of space and social divisions. The proletariat remained in the deteriorated districts, and were pushed out of the center toward the outskirts.<sup>73</sup>

The homes of the tobacco workers and of the urban proletariat, the factories themselves, and the public houses were all situated within an area called the Bara. This area included the streets of *Irinis* [Ειρήνης], *Afroditis*, [Αφροδίτης], *Prometheus* [Προμηθέως], *Odysseus* [Οδυσσέως], *Tantalo* [Ταντάλου],<sup>74</sup> and *Bacchus* [Βάκχου], and was designated by the city as both industrial and adult entertainment zones.

This double process of industrialization and “purification” has been discussed by Henri Lefebvre,<sup>75</sup> and is described as follows by David Sibley in his *The Geographics of Exclusion*:

Nineteenth-century schemes to reshape the city could thus be seen as a process of purification, designed to exclude groups variously identified as polluting—the poor in general, the residual working class, racial minorities, prostitutes and so on.<sup>76</sup>

The proximity of the tobacco workers to the brothels led to the identification by the middle class of the young girl tobacco workers with prostitutes (Figure 5.3). In a 1920 article in the newspaper *El Kulevro* [The Snake], one writer complains:

We ask the Jewish representatives, “Why do you allow the ‘good girls’ to remain in the old quarter rather than send them away? Don’t the authorities know that decent people live in the Bara? Is it fair to leave these ‘fine ladies’ together with decent young women?”<sup>77</sup>

Another reason for the association of the female tobacco workers with prostitutes was their attire. Older girls who worked in the tobacco factories would dress up their younger sisters—sometimes only eight or nine years old—in high-heeled shoes and brassieres padded with rags or cotton wool. They also used make-up on them in an attempt to make them look older, so that they would get employed and thus be kept off the streets.<sup>78</sup>

The young female tobacco workers posed a threat to the comfortable, orderly life of the urban bourgeoisie for an even simpler reason: their employment in the tobacco factories created a shortage of laundresses and servants. In the eyes of middle-class women, the young girls did as they chose—they would come to work in the homes of the middle class when they so desired, and when they did not, they went to work in the tobacco factories. In a humorous newspaper column, an “Aunt Clara” complains that one of her servants went to work as a maid in some Greek or Muslim home because she had not received a raise that would have allowed her to buy a hat “with a garden of flowers upon it,” gloves, and a corset to accentuate the charms of her body, all for her Saturday stroll through

the Beş Çınar Gardens. “Aunt Clara” went on to decry how times had changed, and how the lady of the house now needed to treat her help kindly, because she was under constant threat that her servants might pack their bags, declare that the tobacco season has opened, and set off to the factories.<sup>79</sup>

The young girls preferred the work of sorting tobacco leaves. This seasonal work was a return to a familiar environment. In the factory halls, no “lady of the house” stood over them yelling orders, and they did not have to work until they dropped from exhaustion; here they were equals, they were “countesses,” and they could dream of a different life.<sup>80</sup>

Within their own neighborhoods, on the other hand, the female tobacco workers were highly respected. They were supported and esteemed for their diligence, their contribution to the family income, and especially for their courage in an environment where docility was part of the cultural code. Articles in the socialist press criticized the arrogant behavior of middle-class women toward their maids. They called upon the bourgeois mistresses to protect their female servants from sexual harassment by the masters of the house and their sons, treat them well, and pay them on time.<sup>81</sup>

### **Love and Romance**

As the young girls’ political awareness grew, so did their dreams of romance, family, and children.

Girls usually married young men chosen by their parents (the preferred match being someone within the extended family, such as a cousin). Sometimes—albeit infrequently—a young girl would refuse to marry the appointed candidate, instead choosing to follow the dictates of her own heart. Given the preferences of the families in question, a tobacco worker would not necessarily meet with the approval of the family as a prospective son-in-law, and attempts would be made to separate the loving couple. So it was when Abraham Eskaloni and Estherina Cohen, fellow tobacco workers, fell in love. Estherina’s father disapproved of Abraham’s courting of his daughter and refused to give the marriage his blessing; moreover, she had been promised to another. A frustrated Abraham accosted Estherina’s father, stabbing him with a knife.<sup>82</sup> After ten long years during which Estherina stood her ground as to her right to choose her own husband, her father finally consented to her marriage with Abraham.<sup>83</sup> Marriages also took place, though infrequently, across social and economic classes and religions, as when Jewish women tobacco workers converted to Islam or Christianity and married Muslim or Greek tobacco workers.<sup>84</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have focused on a facet previously overlooked in studies on the private/public spheres, work relations, and the Jewish family and community of Salonika in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods: the female tobacco workers.

It was first and foremost the female tobacco workers—girls and young women who needed to work in order to help support their families and save a bit of



Figure 5.3. Prostitutes in the Bara (Vardar district).

Detail of an anonymous postcard from the collection of Flor Safan Eskaloni.

money for their dowries—who spoke out publicly. They spoke their minds, cried out their plight, and declared their existence. The female tobacco workers' social, class, and political consciousness came about as a result of the working class's understanding that without the recruitment and support of the young girls and their families, the struggle was doomed to failure.

Despite the fact that work in the tobacco factories contributed to the formation of the female workers' self-identity, it did not produce a substantial and lasting change in their way of life. In a society where self-fulfillment was generally channeled through the family, women did not make a career of tobacco work. Rather, they saw it as a necessity that enabled them to make a living and save money for a dowry, so that when the time came, they would be able to marry and start a family.

From interviews conducted some fifty years later with women who had labored in the tobacco factories, it appears that for these working-class girls, industrialization had not meant progress but low-paying and demeaning work. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that when interviewed, these women did not wish to speak about their work, working conditions, low wages, participation in strikes and demonstrations, or the fact that they may have been part of the socialist or communist movements. Instead, they preferred to speak of their married life, family, and children.<sup>85</sup>

Tobacco work was but a stage in the maturation of the young girls from working class neighborhoods of Salonika—a stage during which new values were introduced into their world, and if only for a short time, they were the “countesses” and the “princesses” who dared to take to the streets and demand social equality. Work ties and social and ideological relationships did not replace family bonds, but rather served as a means of incorporating the family as a whole into a larger “ideological family.”

### Notes

1. This article is adapted from a chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation (Hadar 2003), written under the supervision of Prof. Minna Rozen.
2. Also Salonica, Saloniki, Salonique, Selânik, Θεσσαλονίκη; On the multiplicity of names for the city, see Portugali 1993: 156–57: “[T]wo or more collectivities use different languages to refer to the very same phenomenon, so they might construct different cognitive maps of the very same territory. ... From their discourse and actions it is clear that each group perceives the past, present and future of this same territory in its own peculiar way, which is different from that of the other group.”
3. For a discussion of the demographics of Salonika at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, see Moutsopoulos 1980: 19–23. The population of the city was principally composed of Jews, Turks, and Greeks, together with Albanians, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Vlachs, Gipsies, and foreign residents. For a general survey of Salonika during this period, see Veinstein 1992; Anastassiadou 1997; Rozen [forthcoming], 1: 137–73.
4. Language is one of the major elements in the creation of the identity of the group, the nation, and the individual. The Jews of Salonika—and in particular the Jewish women of all classes, though most pointedly those of the worker and proletariat classes—spoke only Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish language written in Hebrew characters.
5. On the Greek tobacco workers, see Dagkas 2004; Quataert 1995: 59–74; Quataert 1996: 311–32.
6. The majority of the workforce in Salonika’s tobacco industry was made up of girls between the ages of 10 and 14, with a minority of female workers falling within the 14-to-20-year-old range. Therefore, when the terms “women workers” or “female workers” are used in this paper, one must keep this fact constantly in mind. At the same time one must remember that modern associations with the term “girl” do not adequately express how these workers saw themselves, nor how their community related to them.
7. On the “Public/Private” dichotomy, see Ardener 1981; Keohane 1992: ix–xii; Rizk Khoury 1997: 105–28.
8. Despite this prohibition, tobacco worker strikes did take place in Kavala, and were suppressed by force. On the strikes of the Kavala tobacco workers see *La Epoca*, 23 February 1900, 31 March 1905.



9. "In Salonika," *El Avenir*, 31 July 1909: "Greek business owners painted their stalls and the entrances to their stores in the colors of the Greek flag."
10. *Ibid.*, 28 July 1908.
11. Ben-Aroyah 1972: 311. For the emergence of Greek and Turkish socialism in the years 1909–1914, see Kofos 1964; Liakos 1985; Harris 1967: 16–20; Tunçay 1967; Haupt and Dumont 1977; Tekeli and İlkin 1980: 351–82.
12. Aktsoğlu 1997: 288; *El Avenir*, 12 August 1908.
13. *Raporto annuel de la union de los laboradores del tutun de Saloniqo* 1909: 6.
14. Throughout the world, young women were employed in sorting tobacco leaves under similar conditions. For other examples, see Pollert 1983: 96–114; Stubbs 1985: 71–76; Tilly 1992: 172–73; Baron 1991: 1–46; White 1996.
15. Uziel 1978: 31; see also "Conversions," *El Avenir*, 2 April 1909.
16. The dowry tradition is also common among Greeks. The dowry is not only a transfer of property and bride, but also part of the system of "honor" and "disgrace." On the meaning of the dowry in Greek culture, see Lambiri-Dimaki 1985: 165–78; Hirschon 1981: 70–86; Sant Cassia and Bada 1992: 53, 74–76.
17. *El Avenir*, January 1910.
18. Quataert 1996: 322–23.
19. "The Tobacco Workers' Strike," *El Avenir*, 13 April 1914; on the low wages paid to female workers in the international tobacco industry, see Stubbs 1985: 79; Tilly 1992: 175; Pollert 1983: 100.
20. "Letter," *Journal del Lavorador*, September 1909; "A Letter to my Sister Workers," *Journal del Lavorador*, October 1909: this was a call to the young female workers who worked in the silk mills and sewing workshops to form a union. Regarding a small group of women who attempted to organize a union but failed, see "Why did they want to commit suicide?" *El Popular*, 19 August 1930: two Greek nurses who tried to organize the nurses at the city hospital into a union were fired from their jobs; they were unable to find other employment as they had acquired the reputation of being "instigators," and in the end committed suicide.
21. *La Epoca*, 8 July 1910; see also Dumont 1997: 67 ref. 32, a letter from Ben-Aroyah to C. Huysmans, 11 August 1910, Arch BSI.
22. *El Avenir*, 24 August 1909.
23. "The Herzog Factory," *El Avenir*, 26 October 1909.
24. The concept of honor has many connotations: the honor of the family and relations, class honor, and more. The honor of the (male) individual is expressed in a cluster of attributes such as generosity, honesty, seriousness, loyalty to friends, and defense of those weaker than oneself—women, small children, and aged parents. A young girl who is unmarried personifies the vulnerability of the group; for this reason, the family preferred to marry off the daughter quickly in order to avoid the risk of disgrace. The honor of the family is inseparable from the Jewish cultural heritage. Historical sources

- and research work alike show that “honor” is not a local variant or type of “orientalist” stereotype: throughout the period from the foundation of the Jewish settlement in Salonika until its tragic destruction, the concept of “honor” was a leitmotif in the social fabric which encompassed individual, family, community, and city.
25. *El Avenir*, 27 May 1911.
  26. The demand to separate the sexes arose in previous strikes. See *Journal del Lavorador* (October 1909): 2; *El Avenir*, 27 May 1911. Male workers also appealed to the Chief Rabbi to intervene in order to help save their jobs.
  27. *Ibid.*, 8 August 1908. The principal demands were a 30% increase in wage and a shortening of the work-day to 10 hours. It would appear that the demand for tobacco was high, and the management of the Régie agreed to a 20% wage increase.
  28. “The strike at the Régie,” *La Solidaridad Ovradera*, 28 April 1911, 5 May 1911, 12 May 1911. The strike spread to all the tobacco factories in Kavala, Drama, and Istanbul.
  29. *Avanti*, 16 October 1913.
  30. “The Lockout,” *La Solidaridad Ovradera*, 21 April 1911; *La Solidarite Ovradera*, 12 May 1911.
  31. “One Strike,” *La Solidaridad Ovradera*, 31 March 1911, 12 April 1911; “The End of the Strike,” *ibid.*, 2 June 1911.
  32. *Avanti*, 9 December 1912.
  33. Lefebvre 1991: 55.
  34. “The First of May in Salonika,” *El Avenir*, 2 May 1911.
  35. Lefebvre 1991: 56.
  36. Shields 1988: 45.
  37. The Jewish adage “The realm of the princess’ honor is within” reflects a certain social order that dictates the subdivision of space between genders as expressed in the Ladino proverb “A good woman’s realm is to be found behind closed doors.” On honor and shame, modesty, and sexual humility, see: Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 1991: 1–20; Pitt-Rivers 1965: 19–78; Friedl 1986: 42–45; Sant Cassia and Bada 1992: 1–3.
  38. *Avanti*, 2 May 1913. The First of May 1913 was the first Socialist “holiday” after the annexation of Salonika by Greece. As the Greek officials feared that the strike would expand and that disturbances would break out as a result of the traditional May Day march, the march was forbidden and the workers celebrated in closed halls at the workers’ club. They heard speeches in Turkish, Bulgarian, Greek, and Ladino.
  39. “The Young Girls’ Convention,” *Avanti* (2 May 1913): 3.
  40. “The Socialist Movement,” *ibid.* (20 February 1914): 3.
  41. “Women and Socialism,” *ibid.*, 7 May 1913.
  42. “Equality between the Sexes,” *ibid.*, 8 December 1913.
  43. In Ladino: *La mujer la mas alavada, es akeya ke avla poco*. Yona 1903: 15.

44. In Ladino: *Abasho las amariyas, Vivan las verdaderas syndikalistas. Avanti*, 22 December 1913.
45. Leontidou 1990: 75. There were many areas of overlap between the Communist Party, the K.K.E. (*Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδος*), and the tobacco workers. The Greek Communist Party, founded in 1918, found supporters among the intelligentsia, refugees from Anatolia, and a large part of the industrial workers—the tobacco workers in particular. In 1924, many of the Jewish members of the Socialist Federation joined the Greek Communist Party. Ben-Aroyah later left the party, and Ventura left as well, in 1928.
46. Interview with Bienvenida Pitchon Mano, Thessaloniki, February 2002.
47. “Letter,” *Avanti*, 27 October 1921. Whereas the female tobacco workers had an organization of their own in 1913, the seamstresses and female workers in the textile mills attained their own organization only in 1921.
48. “The Union is Power,” *Journal del Lavorador*, February 1910.
49. “Letter,” *ibid.*, October 1909.
50. *Avanti*, 29 December 1913.
51. Eden and Stavroulakis 1997: 37–47. In the mid-seventeenth century, Sabbetai Zvi, a Jew from Smyrna, declared himself the redeemer. The sultan gave him the alternative of death or conversion, and he and his followers converted to Islam. Turks and Jews called them *Dönme* (in Turkish, “convert” or “turncoat”). They referred to themselves as *Ma’amin*, which is Hebrew for “believer.” (The corresponding Turkish-Arabic word is virtually identical.) Salonika and Izmir were *Dönme* centers. On this movement and community, see Scholem 1973; Georgeon 1992: 105–18; Küçük 1977.
52. “Lockout,” *Avanti*, 9 December 1912.
53. “Between Tobacco Workers,” *ibid.*, 5 November 1913.
54. “The Daily List of Donations to the Tobacco Strikers,” *ibid.*, 11 April 1913.
55. “The Daily Fund of the Socialist Federation,” *ibid.*, 14 April 1913; Lucha and Rejina Dasa, Istirio Nikopoulos, Jacob Hassid, and Lazer Zion from the Régie factory; *ibid.*, 8 September 1913.
56. In Ladino: *Eyos las azen vestir kon ferâje ... y ansi se izo un groep o de ninias judias—Turkas*. (“Between the Tobacco Workers,” *ibid.*, 5 November 1913.)
57. Avdela 1998: 424–27. Avdela describes the Great Tobacco Strike of 1914 as a unique event that marked a turning point. In my opinion, this is not so. The young Jewish girls participated in demonstrations prior to that time and fought throughout this period against the Turkish and Gypsy girls hired to break their strike. The struggle and the negotiations over better working conditions and wages for both male and female workers began with the Great Strike of 1911, continued in August 1912 and throughout 1913–14. See “The Tobacco Crisis: to the Public, to the Workers, to the Fathers and to the Mothers,” *Avanti*, 14 May 1913. “Since the 17th of August, 1912, the tobacco workers trade union have been engaged in a struggle against the owners of the tobacco factories.” On the employment of Turkish and Gypsy girls, see “The Tobacco Conflict” (*ibid.*, 9 May 1913): 3. The striking girls were replaced with 8–10-year-old

- Turkish girls; “The Tobacco Conflict,” *ibid.*, 13 June 1913. The writer of the article claims that the Turkish and Gypsy workers were unfamiliar with the work of the tobacco factories.
58. “The Tobacco Workers Strike,” *El Avenir*, 14 April 1914; “The Strike,” *ibid.*, 15 April 1914.
59. *La Epoca*, 23 November 1900: “Beginning next week, every worker of the Régie Tobacco Company must wear a fez.” The fez, which the Young Turks wore proudly, became a symbol of freedom, liberty, and class. The tobacco workers of Salonika, who at first wore the fez as a result of orders issued from above, continued to wear it as a symbol of the pride of the tobacco worker; *Avanti*, 9 December 1912. A month after the Greeks entered the city, the Greek press began to criticize the Jews who wore the fez as a form of scorn towards the Greeks (from the newspaper *Paros*); “The First of May in Salonika,” *ibid.*, 2 May 1913. Though the workers were forbidden to hand out pamphlets and fliers about the First of May demonstrations, they congregated in the workers’ club with red flags, red decorations on their buttons, and wearing the fez.
60. Avdela 1998: 424–30. The strikes and demonstrations hurt the tobacco industry which fed Greece’s principle export: in 1918, tobacco made up 43% of Greece’s exports; “The Jews and the Recent Incidents,” *El Mesajero*, 14 May 1936. Similar claims were heard during the Great Tobacco Workers’ Strike at the beginning of May 1936. The fact that by that time, Jews comprised a demographic minority in the city and a minority among the demonstrators in the streets did not prevent the newspaper *Tahidromos* [*Ταχυδρόμος*, The Mail] from accusing Jewish strikers and demonstrators of being devoid of Greek national sentiments and of harming public order.
61. Portugali 1993: 156–57. “Collective cognitive maps are of immediate relevance to the cultural, economic, ethnic and class conflict.”
62. This name referred to the seven islands off the western coast of Greece.
63. Anastasiadou 1997: 191–92.
64. Ben-Aroyah 1972: 311. Socialism was seen as the dawn of a new era; “The Socialist Federation Fund,” *Avanti*, 29 September 1913. In January of 1915, at the Paradise Hall, the theatre troupe of the Socialist Federation put on a performance of Molière’s *L’avare* in honor of the release from prison of Alberto Arditì, a prominent leader of the Federation. “El primo mayo en Saloniko,” *Suplimento del Avenir*, 2 May 1911; Dumont 1997: 82.
65. Leontidou 1990: 84–88.
66. “The Tobacco Crisis,” *Avanti*, 13 June 1913.
67. “Books,” *La Solidaridad Ovradera*, 3 March 1911; “Library,” *Avanti*, 10 December 1921: “The Library of the Communist Youth is open every evening from 6:00 until 9:00 and on Saturday throughout the day.” For the names of the books that have a clear socialist message, see also Dumont 1997: 95, ref. 15.

68. "Ladino Lessons," *Avanti* (21 November 1913): 2. Two Ladino classes were offered, one for men and one for women; "Our Life," *ibid.*, 11 February 1914; an Interview with Flor Eskaloni Sapan, Ramat-Gan, 2000.
69. "The Daily Fund of the Socialist Federation," *Avanti*, 6 October 1913.
70. "The Federation Socialiste Fund," *Avanti*, 15 December 1913: *Porké una noble dama refuzó de baylar kon un ovrador; i ke les sea segunda lisi3n, a los laboradores ke adiran el Sionizmo.*
71. Romero 1983: 256–57, 283–86.
72. Yerolympos 1996.
73. "The Industrial Area," *Aksion*, 8 January 1935. The municipality decided that within 15 days, all factories were obliged to move to the outskirts of the city between "26th of October" Street and the edge of the Beş Çınar Gardens.
74. The tobacco factories of Praudos, Papastrato, Latour, Pomro and others were all situated on Tantalo Street.
75. Lefebvre 1996: 71–72.
76. Sibley 1995: 57.
77. *El Kulevro*, 23 July 1920.
78. Interview with Bienvenida Pitchon-Mano. Ms Mano did not attend school; her three older sisters took her to work with them in the tobacco factory.
79. "Bula Clara: Chronica Popular," *El Avenir*, 3 August 1906.
80. Interview with Bienvenida Pitchon-Mano. The song *La Cigarrera* went: "How your blue suit becomes you, you look like a countess when you walk out of the tobacco factory."
81. "For the Honor of the Jewish Girls," *El Avenir*, 27 October 1910. This article relates the stories of two brothels where Jewish girls between the ages of 15 and 20 worked while their parents were led to believe that they were employed by the tobacco factories.
82. *El Avenir* (2 September 1904): 12.
83. Perhaps the father was right to be concerned over Estherina's choice: after five years of marriage Abraham died, leaving her a pregnant widow with three little babies, no money, and no support. Estherina worked for a time as a wet nurse and later returned to work in the tobacco factory. Her children grew up in her brother's and sisters' homes. During World War II, Estherina and her children hid in the village of Hortiachi using fake documents, and fought with the Greek resistance against the German occupation.
84. "Religious Conversions," *El Avenir*, 2 April 1909. In this article, the writer decries the fact that young Jewish girls from poor families work as domestic help in Greek and Turkish homes.
85. Interviews with Flor Eskloni Safan and Bienvenida Pitchon-Mano.

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