



Ukrainian  
Jewish  
Encounter

Українсько  
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Зустріч

## Eternal Calendar

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### **Part one. 1672. THE SALAMANDER EARTH I. 1 The Messiah from Smyrna**

Vydavnytsvo Staroho Leva (Old Lion Publishing House), 2019  
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Our story begins in the autumn of the 5426th year since the creation of the world, the year of our Lord 1666, the year 1115 according to the Armenians, and 1076 in the Islamic calendar of the Hijri era, when a galea bastarda sailed from the port city of Smyrna. It was an event that could easily have been overlooked if someone other than Sabbatai Zevi, resident of Smyrna who had proclaimed his messiahship to the world, had sailed on this galley to Istanbul. The years had come that the Jewish scribes and Christian theologians were peering into in order to understand what awaited this world. They were waiting for the coming of the Messiah and end times. Hence the quarrels in the synagogues couldn't be quelled, for the scribes, following along with every letter of the Torah and licking their fingers, unfurled their scrolls of parchment to grasp the words first with their eyes and only then with their minds. The Christian theologians such as Yoanykii Galiatovsky were convinced that only Christians upheld the laws of Moses and would therefore be saved. Astronomers peered into the starry sky looking for divine signs so they could be the first to notice anything that might hint at some news of the end of the world. It was known that before the end times there would come false messiahs, wars, hunger, disease, and floods, and that great mayhem would reign over all peoples. In London, for example, the plague raged, brought by Dutch merchants. Chief Secretary to the Admiralty Samuel Pepys writes in his diary that after the crown's order to put down all dogs and cats that the range of the plague expands. All summer the city's rats spread the fatal disease, while the inhabitants of London carried corpses from their homes and piled them up in the streets because there were no carts to take them to the cemeteries. It was only at the start of September that the royal baker forgot to extinguish the oven he was baking bread in for the court and half the city burned down. Along with the buildings, the carriers of the disease also burned and everyone who'd evacuated London returned. There were some other events around the world that everyone has forgotten, so we cannot recall them here. But that Sabbatai Zevi, who divided the world into twenty-six parts (more on that later), offering them to his

followers, was not in the least concerned that empires and kingdoms had long possessed what he was so easily giving away. The Ottoman and Roman Empires, Spain and Portugal, the tsardom in Moscow and Qing dynasty in China, Patriarch Nikon's abdication, and Isaac Newton's discovery of gravity, the Gunboat War between the English and the Kingdom of Denmark, and the first Armenian bible published in Amsterdam—everything that is connected by the invisible threads of history lived then in anticipation of the end times because the end times are always with us.

Thus, sometime that September, one day before the galley was set to depart from the port of Smyrna, Sabbatai Zevi went to visit Papadopoulos Reis. He found the captain in a port coffeehouse. Papadopoulos sat down to eat lunch—the reis was hungry and this conversation with the Jew could drag on. Sabbatai Zevi noticed his displeasure and felt some hostility directed at his person. Even the captain's sharp look as he sized the Jew up, passing from Sabbatai's head to his feet, didn't portend a pleasant conversation. The table before the reis was still empty and when he swallowed in anticipation, Sabbatai could feel the growling of Papadopoulos's stomach.

But Sabbatai Zevi began anyway,

"I am Sabbatai Zevi," the Jew spoke quickly, holding on tightly to every word like a weak swimmer on the reeds. He quickly gained confidence and had outlined the gist of the matter in a minute. Sabbatai behaved almost as though it was Papadopoulos asking him to board his galley and not the other way around.

As Papadopoulos listened to Sabbatai, he remembered the rumors about this Jew that coursed around Smyrna. At the very end Sabbatai assured the reis that he would pay generously for himself and his followers if he would agree to take them on board.

"How many are you?" Papadopoulos asked.

"Twelve," Sabbatai proudly answered. "Eleven men and Sarah, my wife."

Papadopoulos remembered that one of his caulkers had told him that a Jewish messiah had arrived in Smyrna; it seemed the messiah had just returned from Palestine bringing along his wife, Sarah, whose beauty outshone all the Smyrna belles. This was precisely what the Muslims, Christians, and Jewish households were blabbering on about in their conversations. They gossiped that the messiah walked the streets with a few of his followers singing psalms. He looked crazy, but he wasn't. Someone else from Papadopoulos's crew who was listening to this conversation added that the Smyrna rabbis didn't accept this Sabbatai, but a few dozen Jews here in Smyrna indeed believed his words and were prepared to follow him to the end of the earth.

When the galley was loaded and the navigator had given the rowers the first command, a few dozen of Smyrna's Jews and their children gathered at the port. Some of them cried, some shouted curses after the departing galea bastarda. "What are they shouting?" Papadopoulos Reis asked himself. His ears overgrown with black hairs were filled with the sea air, drowning out the weak voices of the Jews on the shore. The sails shortly filled with the breeze. The people at the port blended into the buildings. And the Jews who huddled together at the stern and whom Papadopoulos had agreed to transport to Istanbul stared ahead at the horizon. Whatever was happening back on shore seemed not to bother them. Only the dark-haired Sarah, who was among the passengers, looked back at the shore and smiled.

There were more than one hundred rowers seated at the dozen long oars on both sides of the galley. Most had been rounded up in Smyrna and the surrounding villages and the rest were brought from the slave markets. The navigator, his quartermaster, the slave overseer, the blacksmiths, caulkers, riggers, and carpenters formed a motley crew that could only be managed by Papadopoulos Reis, a Smyrna Greek whose ancestors had served under Hayreddin Barbarossa. This time the galley also carried the twelve passengers who had asked for passage to Istanbul the day before.

Papadopoulos's galley usually transported wheat that was held in the warehouses of Smyrna's port. The galley had two masts upon which satiny sails, tattered and torn by the strong puffs of the Mediterranean winds, hung like the sirwal pants on the captain's crooked legs.

Often when crossing the sea, the galley was overtaken by the sirocco. This was why Papadopoulos was most afraid of the sirocco wind, which blew the fabric of the sails and shook the masts. If flooded by stormy waves, the flat-bottomed galley could be tossed on the shore. Even when the riggers lowered the sails in time and the slave oarsmen's overseers, listening to the captain's orders, maneuvered, not everyone survived. And Papadopoulos, along with the other survivors, had thrown the bodies of the hapless drowned men from the rocky shores of the island. They were found up and down the shore. The birds circled above them to drink up the eyes of the dead, and at night they could smell the scent of foxes nearby. Later, the caulkers spent a few days swapping out the ruined boards of the ship bottom and sides and the carpenters repaired the broken oars. When the galley and the remains of the crew were ready to continue sailing, Papadopoulos, getting his bearings by the starry sky as if he were in the Smyrna quarter he grew up in, searched among the stars for the place with the closest port.

But yesterday in Smyrna, when Papadopoulos was still waiting on his crew who was out wandering the city, those twelve Jews had asked for passage to Istanbul. The captain of the galea bastarda took a look at them and said that the galley would sail the next day and they could wait for morning in the wheat warehouse on the shore. Old Papadopoulos got a bit suspicious when the Jew who went by Sabbatai Zevi agreed to spend the night in the warehouse and even asked which building it was, explaining that they didn't want to return

home and risk being late. Papadopoulos led them along the rocky shore and unlocked the warehouse, letting them inside. The dry air hit Papadopoulos's nostrils and he sneezed; Sabbatai Zevi and all his followers sneezed after him. The coastal cliffs where grapes were ripening were enshrouded in the fresh sea air. A dirty light quivered in some of the city buildings. Dogs howled. The neighing of hobbled horses could be heard on the cliffs. Somewhere very far away in the surrounding villages, sleepy roosters crowed their songs into the midnight quiet into which a detachment of janissaries headed out. The heavy clatter of horses mixed in with the rough voices that died down as they got farther away from the port and the din.

The building the Jews were sleeping in stood at a distance from the other port structure. Inside, Papadopoulos's passengers made themselves comfortable for the night on the mounds of wheat.

The reis returned to the galley, but he couldn't fall asleep. Sorting through the faces of the Jews in his memory, he was filled with interest and suspicion. Who were they? Why Istanbul? The one called Sabbatai Zevi seemed to Papadopoulos both crazy and a prophet. Sabbatai spoke to the captain as though to a void, to a hole in a rotten wooden board. The Jew stared, riddling the reis with holes. Sabbatai's gaze charmed him like a serpent. The words he spoke were not of the earth, but of books. Only the nervous twitching of his neck and his lips, sometimes stretched thin, attested that speaking was enormous exertion for Sabbatai. And that exertion originated not in his body, but from somewhere up above like a downpour from a cloudy sky.

Papadopoulos stole away to the wheat warehouse and peeked in the gap between the boards of the door. He saw that the Jew by the name of Sabbatai Zevi was bent over a book covered in calf's skin. The light of the moon silver like goat's milk flooded the windows. The woman slept apart from the men. Papadopoulos didn't know who she was. She tossed in her sleep and her calves shone white from under the cotton cover. When she turned onto her left side, the cover slid off, revealing her velvety back and buttocks.

Papadopoulos's heart skipped a beat. He looked at Sabbatai Zevi again, but he had already put away his book and was praying.

When he had stepped away from the door, Papadopoulos was thinking about the dreaming woman and her white calves.

He sighed like a tired beast and returned to the galley and fell asleep with his head under a thick robe.

The silver light of the moon, cracked like an egg shell, dribbled away over the Smyrna bay.

Papadopoulos's crew arrived on shore just before morning. The Greek was awakened by the creaking of a board that sagged under the stout bodies of his sailors as they boarded

the galley. The slaves were brought on right at the end when everyone else had taken up their places on the galley.

The bay sparkled in the morning sun.

The tide started coming in and green waves rolled ashore.

Seagulls flew overhead. The first anglers were readying the nets on their boats so they could make it back with their catch before sunset.

Papadopoulos thundered at his sailors out of habit and set about waiting for the Jews to poke out from the building.

“The fishermen will take to the seas first,” he told his assistant, unsure if it was with reproach or just to have something to say.

When the coastline and port finally began to show signs of life, the door to the building opened. Papadopoulos noticed this, but no one emerged from the warehouse. Holding a book under his arm, Sabbatai Zevi was the first to show his face, followed by ten Jews and that same Jewess that Papadopoulos had devoured with his eyes that very night. All twelve of them hurried to board the ship. Just the day before, when making arrangements with Papadopoulos, Sabbatai Zevi—about whom all of Smyrna was abuzz—had attempted to explain to the Greek that they needed to leave immediately because he and his followers were being pursued by Smyrna’s rabbis. But what did this have to do with the owner of the ship and his unreliable crew? This is why they were leaving in the morning after the tide came in. “It’s nothing but trouble to go into the wind,” thought Papadopoulos.

So Sabbatai Zevi was in a hurry to get out of Smyrna. He whom the label “Mashiach” had been attached to, before whom in the Jewish quarters of Smyrna some fell on their knees, danced, and rejoiced, while others spat in the direction of the wind or human whisper that carried his name. But what of it? Papadopoulos’s ship, loaded with Smyrna’s goods, was going to Istanbul anyway. With the twelve or without them.

The day before yesterday Sabbatai Zevi had gone to the synagogue with a cradle that held a fish wrapped in a scroll of the Torah. He carried the cradle like a rundlet of wine, attracting the attention of passersby and the merchants whose shops lay along his way. Sarah walked behind him. She followed in his footsteps, keeping her eyes on the shadow that fell behind Sabbatai. A few of his disciples followed behind them. The procession stopped near the synagogue and Sabbatai turned to his followers, but of course the passersby, shopkeepers, and rabbi in the synagogue whose doors were open could hear them:

“I, Sabbatai Zevi, Mashiach of the people of Israel, say to you all that the time of Jewish liberation has come,” and he entered the synagogue.

The rabbi met Sabbatai practically at the threshold because the shouts outside had called his attention.

"Is it you who has dared pronounce the name of the Almighty, which the high priest is allowed to speak only once a year on Yom Kippur in the Temple of Jerusalem?" the old rabbi asked him.

"It is I," answered Sabbatai Zevi, "I allow myself this, for I am the Mashiach."

The rabbi lowered his eyes.

"And what have you brought to the synagogue?" he asked, gesturing toward the cradle Sabbatai had not let go of, holding it tight against his breast.

"A fish wrapped in a page of the Torah."

"In a page of the Torah?" the old rabbi repeated with lips trembling.

Standing next to Sabbatai Zevi, Sarah saw the rabbi, who had served more than forty years at the synagogue, buckle at the knees.

It had been a few years since all the rabbis of Smyrna cursed Sabbatai Zevi and he disappeared from the city, showing up in Thessaloniki, whence he went on to Istanbul. Now Sabbatai Zevi had returned, showing up with a cradle on the steps of the synagogue surrounded by his students and disciples.

And when the ship set a course for Istanbul, having exited the Smyrna bay, some of the Jews, feeling the first gusts of sea wind, got out their tallitot and covered up with them. The satin sails fluttered above the heads of the travelers. The helmsman, holding on to the shaky rudder with both hands, shouted something at the crew who ran around the ship's deck and tightened the sheets on the sails. Then eleven men and the woman by the name of Sarah entered the hold to take refuge from the wind.

The ship was seen off, as Papadopoulos would later tell the Sultan's guards during his interrogation in Istanbul, by a few hundred of Smyrna's Jews.

They were silent, not crying, feeling the salty sea air burn their eyes. And each of them wanted to stop the travelers. But when the ship had sailed beyond the horizon, they sighed, gathered up their children, and returned home with a burden on their hearts.

On board the galley that so confidently sailed toward Istanbul was Sabbatai Zevi, native of Smyrna, Messiah of the people of Israel, with his companions and Sarah, his wife. It was he, Sabbatai Zevi, who had paid the owner of the ship for the journey and ordered to sail to Istanbul. Sabbatai Zevi turned his face into the currents of sea wind and heard the luffing

of the fabric. He turned around to look at Smyrna. The city in which he had been born forty years prior, shrank away with each mile the galley traveled; forever, thought Sabbatai Zevi. In his forty years he had traveled much, studied the Torah and Kabbalah, fled cities, argued with rabbis, and never stayed anywhere too long.

He could see the castle of Kadifekale on Mount Pagos, which towered above the city. This was the best place to look out on the gulf. When he was a child, Sabbatai Zevi had scabbled through the shrubs and olive groves to get to the fortress mountain and studied every detail that lay before his eyes. He was most drawn to the green gulf, especially at night when the oil lamps glowed on the galleys and boats. Then, when the sea grew calm, Sabbatai returned home, afraid of dogs and janissaries. Climbing down from the hill, he felt the breath of the Creator. At home, Sabbatai Zevi encountered commotion as usual: Mom was shouting that the janissaries had cut the boy to ribbons or kidnapped him to sell him in Istanbul. When Sabbatai went over to his father, he placed his hand on the boy's head and, leaning over, whispered something in Sabbatai's ear. And the boy went to bed.

Feeling he was bidding Smyrna farewell, Sabbatai also saw how the spires of minarets grew from a solid wall of stone buildings near the mountain. And how the streets merged with the walls of the buildings. A turbid shroud of fog covered the mountain that dominated the city and the city itself.

The ship heaved and Sabbatai Zevi was almost knocked off his feet by a stout rigger who was running full speed to the main-mast. The Mashiach quickly went down into the hold where Sarah was with the ten witnesses to his messianism. Sarah was lying down covered in woolen garments, for seasickness had started to take hold of her. Sabbatai decided not to bother her. Instead, he sat among his associates and struck up a conversation with them.

They were all from Smyrna. Only Sarah, whom Sabbatai brought to his hometown from far away, was born in Podilia, but grew up in Cairo. That is where the young Sabbatai married her because, having heard about the Mashiach, Sarah, who suffered from neuroses and was often visited by prophets and her late father, cut in half by Khmelnytsky's Cossacks, proclaimed herself the Mashiach's affianced. Rumors of the beauty who believed she was betrothed to the Mashiach reached Cairo earlier than a caravan of camels could cross the lands of Palestine and enter Egypt. Sabbatai Zevi sent an envoy and Sarah was brought to Cairo. The wedding took place in the home of Raphael Joseph Çelebi, which Sabbatai Zevi took as the will of the Almighty.

The poor Abraham Rubio, whom the Mashiach had proclaimed just the day before a king and ruler of one twenty-sixth of the world, was the first to speak to Sabbatai Zevi. Sabbatai Zevi divided the world into twenty-six parts because yesterday he had been surrounded by twenty-six of his closest disciples. One was now owned by Abraham. In order to thank Sabbatai for such a high honor for which the wealthy of Smyrna would have to pay him,

poor Abraham, enormous sums, he fulfilled the Mashiach's every wish and was willing to follow him to the ends of the earth. So it was poor Abraham, king and ruler of a portion of the world, the name of which Sabbatai forgot to tell him, who began first.

"When the Mashiach enters the Sultan's palace and removes the brocade turban from the Sultan's head, when the people of Israel are proclaimed free and he leads all Jews to Jerusalem, we will have so many kilims that we'll pave the way to Jerusalem with them," Abraham said in a whisper.

All the others moved in closer, still wearing their tallitot on their heads.

The overseer, who had for some reason run into the passenger hold, initially thought someone had put up a big top, because the Jews the ship was conveying sat so close together in a circle that their foreheads practically touched. They spoke the language of the Torah so no one could understand them or suspect them of conspiracy.

Sarah moaned off to the side. She was nauseous and choking down her sobs like a woman in labor. She retched, wiping the stinking spittle with her sleeve.

"What if the Sultan doesn't want to give up his authority and take off his turban?" the goldsmith, who just yesterday was sitting in his shop on a quiet Smyrna street, expressed his doubts.

Sabbatai Zevi started up, but he hit his head on the low wooden ceiling of the hold and sat back down again. A cry rang out and the galley heeled again; clearly this time a large wave had crashed into the starboard side and the circle of men scattered like wheat from a gunny sack.

Come morning the sea calmed.

Sabbatai Zevi fell asleep on a wooden bed with sheets of sackcloth.

Sarah slept, exhausted by the journey. And the Mashiach's disciples snored in each other's faces and beards to the squeaking of the ship's masts.

All the Talmudists prophesied the arrival of the Mashiach after the terrible trials the people of Israel would encounter all over the world. And when Sabbatai Zevi first showed up in Istanbul, a man by the name of Abraham Yachini went up to him. Yachini had brought him an ancient manuscript that said a Sabbatai Zevi would be born who would become the Messiah, and although he and his students would be persecuted and accused, he, the Messiah, would work miracles and sacrifice himself to the glory of the Lord. The manuscript was a forgery, but no one knew that except for Nathan of Gaza who himself had written it



and found Abraham Yachini in Istanbul to give the manuscript to Sabbatai. Having read the whole manuscript, Sabbatai Zevi, who believed in his own chosenness, grew in his conviction that it was he who was called to be the Mashiach. In the markets of Istanbul and the shops that sold paper, there began to appear various old notebooks copied by Muslim, Christian, or Jewish writers. Sabbatai suspected nothing. Abraham Yachini, into whose hands fell a scroll with cut-off ends and holes worn through that was about Sabbatai Zevi, the Jewish Mashiach, himself likewise believed every word of the manuscript his eyes read. Prior to 1666, the Christian world from London to Amsterdam, Madrid to Kyiv, Vienna to Yazlovets was awaiting the second coming of Jesus Christ. Theologians' prophetic interpretations of signs in which the shapes of animals on the vaults of heaven could be discerned popped up here and there, furthering the world's alarm. At the markets in the capitals of empires, manuscripts with prophecies were passed off as ancient texts and sold after swearing that the writing was ancient and just happened to be found today in monastery libraries or caves of the lands of Palestine. Hence it was easy for Nathan of Gaza to counterfeit the Hebrew script as an ancient record and pass it along to Istanbul in the hands of a reliable man who had served the Ottoman pasha in Jerusalem. Nathan knew precisely where Sabbatai Zevi was.

This happened long before the sea journey of Sabbatai Zevi and Sarah with the ten followers to Istanbul that we are describing.

When he read the scroll Abraham Yachini gave him, Sabbatai Zevi joined the Sultan's caravan in order to get to Jerusalem and confirm the veracity of the text.

After thirty days of traveling with the caravan, the hills of Jerusalem rose up before Sabbatai Zevi. He hopped off the mule he had bought in Istanbul and set out the rest of the way on foot. Neither the shouts of the drivers nor the evening chill and darkness that loomed over the city could stop Sabbatai. An Ottoman driver had to harness Sabbatai's mule to a mare and the caravan spent the night outside Jerusalem. The sultan's subjects built a campfire, for they were afraid not only of the wild beasts, but also an attack of Berbers. The night, however, passed in peace. In the morning they again readied the caravan and set out after Sabbatai, but they couldn't find him anywhere. The Ottoman drivers heard nothing more of him and believed him to be lost in Jerusalem. They sold his mule in Jerusalem and divided the money among themselves.

But Sabbatai hadn't disappeared. He had settled in at the home of a Jew by the name of Mordecai who offered room and board for a modest sum. Mordecai and his family kept all the commandments, fasted, and prayed, so they couldn't help but notice that the stranger, whose face radiated something unspeakably beautiful, got up in the morning and went around to all the synagogues. Mordecai's guest quietly sang psalms in the evening, rocking over open books. Quite often when the morning breeze blew open the curtain that separated the guest room, Mordecai saw him sleeping with his head laid on a book. When Mordecai saw his guest's strange behavior, he told his neighbors about it. They spread it

throughout all of Jerusalem. But when people asked who it was who had taken up residence, Mordecai had no answer for them, for he did not know his guest's name.

Nathan of Gaza also heard about the saint and ascetic because Sabbatai Zevi's glory echoed behind and even sometimes preceded him—especially the fact that he allowed himself to speak the Tetragrammaton of the name of the Lord. Both the rabbis of Jerusalem and ordinary people were perplexed. It was unheard of: how could his lips breach and his voice sound that which the High Priest was only allowed to pronounce once a year in the Temple?

Sabbatai Zevi had barely left Cairo with the Ottoman caravan and gotten settled in Mordecai's home when Jerusalem found out whom it was hosting.

When Nathan of Gaza made this discovery, he raced off to Jerusalem and found the home of Mordecai. And he asked the master everything before Sabbatai Zevi returned, for he had gone to one of the synagogues for morning prayer. It was the seventeenth of Tammuz, the fourth month, during a fast commemorating the breach of the walls of Jerusalem and destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans.

When they met standing in the doorway, they embraced like old friends.

And then Nathan of Gaza said to Sabbatai Zevi, "Every Jew knows that the Mashiach will come from the House of David."

To which Sabbatai Zevi responded, "And every Jew knows that the prophet Elijah is the harbinger of the Mashiach."

Later they sat in Sabbatai's room and looked at each other, Messiah at prophet. Thus they sat until morning, not uttering a single word. When the oil in the lamp was consumed and the burnt darkness left only shreds of its shadows on the rocky hills, they went out into Mordecai's yard where Nathan proclaimed to Jerusalem the arrival of the Mashiach, and the Mashiach that the soul of the prophet Elijah had taken up residence in Nathan's body.

And that everything had come true just as their predecessors had written.

Only Mordecai, who was tying up the heavy grape vines around his yard, could hear this.

Mordecai fell upon his knees and kissed the dust, upon which lay two crooked shadows—the Mashiach's and the prophet Elijah's.

In just a few hours Jewish Jerusalem and the Ottoman pasha knew everything.

Raphael Joseph Çelebi, the director of the Ottoman treasury and state taxes, arrived in Cairo as an Ottoman officer twenty years prior when he was still a young man. He had no

particular wealth or particular belief in any sort of success in life. Now he held all of the finances of the Egyptian eyalet in his hands, which is why Raphael Joseph, along with the pasha and the commander of the Cairo garrison, had the sweet taste of power, which he compared to the juice of an overripe peach. To be fair, over those twenty years, the pasha had changed a few times, as well as the commander of the garrison. Some were called to Istanbul; others died there in Cairo. No one had lasted longer than Raphael Joseph Çelebi, who came into the world in Thessaly. The keeper of the state treasury of the Egyptian eyalet lived in a palace and in luxury, not only caring about increasing the holdings of Istanbul, but not forgetting about the support of the Jews he came from.

Which was why he studied the Kabbalah so closely. When Sabbatai Zevi arrived in Raphael Joseph's palace, he told the Ottoman official that a squalid Jew approached him in the market in Istanbul, a scribe and preacher, a collector of ancient manuscripts, Abraham Yachini. And he showed him, Sabbatai Zevi said, a scroll that contained a prophecy that on the ninth of Av there would be born a boy by the name of Sabbatai Zevi who would become the Mashiach for the Jewish people. It was not said exactly where he'd be born, but the year of his birth and his father were recorded for sure.

"You mean to say that you, Sabbatai Zevi, are the Mashiach?" Raphael Joseph Çelebi asked and sighed in such a way that the echo rolled through all the hallways and rooms of his palace.

Sabbatai Zevi did not answer the keeper of the Ottoman state's treasury's question, so he said, "If you are the Mashiach, then I'm prepared to give up my post and give away my riches."

One could see the faith that filled the mind and will of Raphael Joseph Çelebi light up his eyes. They said in Cairo that fifty rabbis sat around the table in his palace at once and that he surrounded himself with Kabbalists and prophets. And that every year he went to Jerusalem to pray at the tombs of Jewish prophets.

Whether that was true or not, Sabbatai Zevi got out the scroll and gave it to Raphael Joseph. When he unrolled it, he heard sand smelling of sweat fall from the scroll onto the marble floor. He ran his eyes over the text and gave the scroll back to Sabbatai.

What was written on that scroll that Sabbatai Zevi hadn't parted with since he'd bought it from Abraham Yachini?

"And a son will be born to Mordecai Zevi in the year 5386, and he will be called Sabbatai Zevi, and he will defeat a large crocodile and deprive a fierce snake of its strength. He is the true messiah. His kingdom will be eternal. Besides him Israel has no savior. About him Habakkuk prophesied, 'This saint will live by his faith.' His contemporaries will persecute

and scorn him, be they rabbis or leaders of generations. But he will do miracles and sacrifice himself in the name of glorifying the Lord.”

The chief rabbi of Istanbul, Yomtov ben Hananiah Ben Yaqar, would ensure Sabbatai Zevi’s arrest, but while they were carrying out the sultan’s order, the Mashiach managed to leave Smyrna. And, as we already know, sail to Istanbul on Papadopoulos’s galea bastarda. Sabbatai Zevi arrived in Istanbul in November.

There were thirty-three gates one could use to enter the city: eleven of them were on land, thirteen from the Golden Horn, and nine from the Sea of Marmara. A few of the gates had long ago been walled over as no one used them. Just which one Sabbatai Zevi, the Jewish Mashiach, used to enter the city is unknown.

The sails were reefed on Captain Papadopoulos’s orders. The morning tide carried the galley to the inlet of the Golden Horn.

The helmsman made a course for the port. Only the oars pushed apart the dense water, squeaking like a quill on paper. The morning fog lay on all of Istanbul’s hills. The white masts of minarets peeked through the greenish cast of the autumnal air.

Papadopoulos, observing how the helmsman maneuvered the galley into the Istanbul port, glanced at the rowers whose ranks had grown thinner. Some of them had to be thrown overboard because they died of exhaustion. The sirocco that Papadopoulos was most afraid of passed them by this time. The passengers, who survived the ocean crossing only with the greatest difficulties, again rose to the aft of the galley. All twelve of them. The dark-haired Sarah, whom Papadopoulos had spied on when he descended into the hold, stood next to Sabbatai Zevi while underway. She embraced Sabbatai and whispered something in his ear, then giggled nervously and fixed her lush hair tousled by the wind.

A few miles from the port, Papadopoulos spotted the sultan’s guard. He looked anxiously at the janissaries, but calmed himself with the thought that they could be greeting a pasha.

The day before Sabbatai Zevi arrived in Istanbul, the local rabbis received a letter from Rabbi Chaim Benveniste in Smyrna that said Sabbatai Zevi had left Smyrna for Istanbul with the intention of overthrowing the sultan and proclaiming himself Mashiach in the capital of the Sublime Porte. “By the way,” Rav Chaim wrote, “Sabbatai and his followers murdered Smyrna Jew Chaim Fechin in the synagogue because he didn’t recognize Sabbatai as the Mashiach. They broke into the synagogue on a Saturday and Sabbatai Zevi split the skull of that hapless merchant with an axe. If you don’t want to incur the wrath of the sultan, then immediately inform whomever you must about this criminal.” The letter was read and the next day the rabbis of Istanbul went to the palace of Grand Vizier Köprülü. The vizier, having listened to the rabbis, ordered the arrest of Sabbatai Zevi as soon as the criminal’s foot touched shore in Istanbul.

Papadopoulos was mistaken. It was his galley the sultan's cavalry was waiting for.

Shuffling back and forth on their horses, the detachment waited impatiently for the riggers to tie the galley to the pier and for the Jews to disembark. The rowers drew in the oars and Papadopoulos gave the order to disembark. Sabbatai Zevi, suspecting nothing, stepped down from the pier onto the shore. And then something unpredictable happened: fifty dockhands, who were standing near the warehouse ready to unload wheat from the galley that had arrived, rushed to meet the Jews and mixed among them. The sultan's agha gave his cavalry the command to draw their swords and the detachment sprang forward into the crowd of humans.

The frightened Sabbatai Zevi, Sarah, and their students froze in place.

In a moment, a dozen dockhands had been decapitated and a few were trampled by horses.

Seeing this, a scared Papadopoulos realized that not everything with the Jews was above board. He hid in the hold where two janissaries found him and dragged him out. The Jews, surrounded by a detachment of cavalymen, were taken for interrogation.

Istanbul was waking up: shops were opening, it smelled of coffee, the hooves of the sultan's cavalry, who had arrested the criminals and was taking them to the debtors' prison, clattered on the streets.

When Sabbatai Zevi was arrested, he was interrogated but no hand was laid to his body—such was the order of the grand vizier Fazıl Ahmet Köprülü.

"Who are you?" asked the agha of the sultan's cavalry.

"I am a scholar from Jerusalem, authorized to collect alms for the needy," Sabbatai Zevi answered. He couldn't make heads or tails of his arrest and was trying to convince Sarah and his followers that everything would be fine. After a brief interrogation, he was shackled and taken to the fortress in Abydos above the Dardanelles. The grand vizier himself gave the order to escort the arrested man to the fortress. A plan began to take shape in his mind that he decided not to share even with Sultan Mehmed IV.

News that the criminal, the Jew Sabbatai Zevi, had been caught along with eleven of his associates, spread around Istanbul like lightning. Everyone was waiting for the public execution. Even the Jews of Istanbul awaited the Sultan's order with no less desire than the Muslim part of the city. The townspeople were straining to see when the janissary troops that accompanied the criminal chained to a metal cage would finally come out. And when would they finally exhibit Sabbatai's decapitated head on the Alay Meydanı gate?

The Jewish citizens of Europe who believed in Sabbatai's messianism, and even the rabbis who didn't accept the impostor, awaited the news from Istanbul. This man's name disturbed everyone who was waiting for the reconstruction and return of the Temple. All the Christian theologians and writers who had fought for centuries over the timing of the Messiah's return assumed that Sabbatai Zevi could actually turn out to be him. But Yoanykii Galiatovsky, the archimandrite of the Chernihiv monastery, having written his "The True Messiah, Jesus Christ, Son of God. A Conversation between a Christian and a Jew" and printed it at the press in the Kyiv Pecherska Lavra, accused the rabbis of ritual murders and intolerance toward goyim, and begged Christians not to worry about who was really the Messiah.

Someone from Sabbatai Zevi's entourage described the Messiah's arrival in Istanbul thus:

"They received us here with great honors. The Mashiach, whom they sent a lion after, tamed the beast by stroking its mane. The lion instantly lay at the Mashiach's feet. The Mashiach rode the lion to the Topkapı Palace. When the Sultan saw the Mashiach, he removed his crown and placed it on the head of the Mashiach."

Meanwhile, the letters that went out from the fortress where Sabbatai Zevi was being held to all the Jewish communities only served to excite the Jews further. Dozens of them came from every country to bow before their king. When he found out that Sabbatai Zevi was in an Ottoman jail, Raphael Joseph Çelebi passed along a great sum of money via an officer who was taking a defter to Istanbul. The Mashiach's companions bribed the commander of the fortress to secure a few rooms for Sabbatai carpeted with expensive kilims and outfitted with gilded furniture where the Mashiach could receive the Jewish pilgrims. Not a day went by that someone didn't arrive to visit Sabbatai Zevi. During his imprisonment, the commander of the fortress multiplied his riches, building a large house and increasing his harem. The town of Abydos lived on the influx of foreigners.

One morning the Kabbalist Nehemiah ha-Kohen from Lviv arrived in Abydos. Having traveled through Polish and Hungarian lands and spent two months in the Balkans, he finally reached Istanbul. There he asked about Sabbatai Zevi and went south out of the capital to the Dardanelles. Nehemiah ha-Kohen and Sabbatai Zevi spoke for three days and three nights. Nehemiah ha-Kohen saw what luxury Sabbatai Zevi was surrounded by, that he ate and drank with his wife Sarah.

At first the Mashiach inquired as to where Nehemiah had come to him from. He heard from Lviv, Polish lands. Many Jews live in the towns of that land, Nehemiah explained, who had heard about the Mashiach and wanted to find out when they could return to Jerusalem.

They continued their conversation on the second day.

"I see," said Nehemiah ha-Kohen, "that you live like a king." Sabbatai Zevi smiled.

"But will you get out of this jail to fulfill your promise to the people of Israel?"

"Why are you asking me if I'll get out of this jail if you know that the Mashiach must be despised by people and persecuted by his enemies?"

"I'm asking because I read Nathan of Gaza's letters about how the Jewish exodus to Jerusalem will begin in Istanbul. So I'm asking you when. Yet another letter reached us. It says that the Mashiach rode on a lion to the sultan who gave him his crown. So where is it?" Sabbatai Zevi didn't like these questions.

He answered Nehemiah, "Who are you to ask me such questions?"

"And if you can't answer these questions, then I will ask you: Who are you?"

Quiet reigned in Abydos.

On the third day, when he hadn't gotten answers to his questions, Nehemiah ha-Kohen ran out to the city square and rang out that Sabbatai Zevi was an impostor.

The commander of the fortress gave the order to catch the Jew who was shouting in the square and bring him to him. Having shut all exits from the city, the janissaries took the frightened Nehemiah ha-Kohen to the commander. Because he had disturbed the peace this town lived in, this foreign Jew deserved the death penalty.

"What were you shouting out there?" the commander asked Nehemiah.

"I was shouting," Nehemiah answered, overcoming his fear, "that the Sabbatai Zevi, who is being held in the fortress, is an impostor."

The commander knew that he needed to inform Istanbul of the incident on the square, because rumors would reach it anyway. Two thoughts competed in his head: when and how to inform them and what kind of death this Jew should die. Nothing worthwhile came to his head in that minute.

"Moreover," Nehemiah continued, "how can a criminal live in such luxury?"

Having uttered this final word, Nehemiah didn't even have the chance to regret what he'd said. The commander's face was covered with blood. He had drawn his sword and split Nehemiah ha-Kohen in half to his belly from which his reeking bowels spilled out. In a few days, rumors of the incident in Abydos reached the ears of the grand vizier himself.

In half a day, the room in the fortress had turned back into an ordinary jail cell.

Meanwhile, the grand vizier had called the doctor Moshe ben Raphael Abravanel and said that Sabbatai Zevi was being taken to the summer residence in Erdine and Moshe would interpret. Moshe should set out on the road the next day: "You'll go to the fortress where Sabbatai is being held. He hasn't much of a choice," the grand vizier said slowly pronouncing every word. "Either he converts to Islam or he dies a martyr's death."

At that, the palace doctor went to Abydos and conveyed the grand vizier's words. Sabbatai was soon delivered to the Erdine Sarayı. A divan composed of the grand vizier, a rabbi, an imam, and the Sultan's personal doctor, Moshe ben Raphael Abravanel, listened to Sabbatai's proof that he was the true Mashiach.

Mehmed IV was sitting unnoticed behind a lattice partition. Finally the sultan grew tired of it all and from the inconspicuous side doors entered the hall where the divan was meeting accompanied by a janissary archer.

"Here is an archer," Mehmed IV addressed Sabbatai Zevi, "here is his arrow. If you are the Messiah, then your body will repel his bow. If not, well, sorry."

Eyewitnesses have recounted that with the Sultan's words, Sabbatai Zevi bowed his head and put on a turban, taking the Muslim name of Mehmed Efendi. Sarah became Fatma Hanım, and Sabbatai's brothers, Ahmed and Abdullah, and the son he had with Sarah, Ishmael.

Precisely when Sabbatai Zevi was sailing on the galea bastarda to Istanbul, word of the Mashiach reached Yazlovets brought by Dutch Jews. They told everything they themselves knew, but they knew no more than those in Yazlovets. However, Nathan of Gaza's letters had been read long ago in the synagogues of Amsterdam and the Mashiach's arrival had been discussed in all the Jewish homes there. So when these Dutch merchants went to Wallachia, they left a message for those in Yazlovets that quickly passed from mouth to mouth and caused a great commotion there. After the Jews from Amsterdam had left, the people of Yazlovets gathered in the synagogue and till morning talked about the Mashiach, prayed, and slept, placing books under their heads. Some said that they, the Yazlovets Jews, needed to prepare for the journey to Jerusalem and that to get there faster they should sell all their belongings. Others suggested waiting until the Amsterdam merchants returned



from Wallachia to ask them more questions. When the Buchach Jews, whom Moshko, the spice dealer, had brought a letter from Nathan of Gaza copied in Vienna, also confirmed the news of the Mashiach, they sent an attendant from the synagogue to bring them the letter. The attendant went to Buchach and brought it back. They read and re-read the letter for several days, and two rabbis confirmed that the salvation of the people of Israel was upon them. But the Yazlovets Jews did not know what to do next. So they decided to wait for the return of the Amsterdam merchants, but two months went by without a word from them. When Nathan of Gaza's new letter—about the Mashiach who was sailing to Istanbul in order to begin the return of the Jews to the Holy Land—reached the hands of the Yazlovets rabbi, they decided to get ready to leave the lands they had inhabited for two centuries. Some six months later they heard that the Lviv Kabbalist Nehemiah ha-Kohen was headed to Istanbul where Sabbatai Zevi was then staying in order to see him and make sure he was the true Mashiach. In Yazlovets they also decided to send two of their own to the capital of the Sublime Porte. Their joy and carefreeness were overwhelming, for they were preparing to leave. They sang psalms and danced in the streets, attracting the attention of Christians. And Baruch, who had already apportioned his annual tithe to the synagogue, was now joyfully giving gifts to everyone he came across. When the two Yazlovets Jews—Asher and Nahum—set out to meet the Mashiach, night caught up with them after they had passed Mytynysia and were already on the Wallachian Trail.

And they never returned to Yazlovets. Maybe they perished on the way. Who knows?