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From: Victoria Barrett
To: Michael Berenbaum
Cc: Ronald Goldfarb
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Subject: Necdent Kent Interview

NECDET KENT

Turkish Consul in Marseilles, France

Victoria: Ambassador Kent, when you were growing up, you grew up in Istanbul?

Kent: I was born in Istanbul 1911. I grew up, in my younger days I went to Galatasaray

Lise.

Victoria: Did you know any Jewish people when you were growing up there?

Kent: There was one fellow in our class, I can't remember his name now after so many

years, but he was very kind, very quite and everybody liked him.

Victoria: Were there many Jews in the neighborhood?

Kent: No, No.

Victoria: So, how old were you when you went with the diplomatic corps? Was it after law

school?

Kent: Of course, we had a stiff examination.

Victoria: Around 28 or 30?

Kent: 30ish. Yes.

Victoria: And where did you study in America?

Kent: I have studied a little bit in Washington University, because my Uncle was Ambassador of Turkey in Washington and he wanted me to get used to American life, so after that I returned to New York, Uncle returned to Turkey, retired and I went to Columbia Law School, after that I found it very expensive and then I went to New York University Law School and in the summers I used to go to Harvard Law School summer courses. I finally got my diploma from New York University Law school and returned to Turkey and entered the Foreign Service. That's also a very stiff examination. We were thirty four people and only six or seven had been admitted. Mostly their difficulties came from language more than anything else.

Victoria: Do you think being in America affected the way you behaved later? The American ideas of democracy... of treating people...?

Kent: Of course, of course. There couldn't be otherwise. I was born to a sort of soft

hearted person. I had a lovely mother, a very learned father. Father was the

Attorney General of Istanbul. My grand father was an attorney and a professor of Law school and then of course as you all know the Ottoman Empire failed, we lost the war. The whole family, we went to Anatolia to join Ataturk and I was about seven or eight. Then father was sent to Antalya as a Judge. Everything was difficult at that time and very few people got to Ankara.

Victoria: When did you meet Ataturk?

Kent: At that period mostly. My Uncle was at one time foreign minister of Turkey in

Ankara and Ataturk used to come and I remember in the afternoon on horseback on the road and he used to talk with my uncle who was foreign minister and he always had a smile for us and we kissed his hand, children. Then I was sent to Istanbul for serious studies. Istanbul was occupied by the light forces s you know

and Galatasaray was full of French professors. I am grateful to them because they

taught us very good French to begin with and they taught us very decently also.

Victoria: Did you work with Ataturk later when you were in the diplomatic corps?

Kent: Of course, of course. I used to see him quite often. At one time I was in charge of

bringing all the telegrams arriving from foreign offices to take to Ataturk's desk

in the afternoon. He was very kind. He would say to sit down then he would read the telegrams, put some annotations, some few writings, Then I would take them back to the ministry. I was working in the section that dealt with England and America.

Victoria: So, after that your first posting in the corps was in Greece?

Kent: Yes.

Victoria: You were in Greece?

Kent: Yes, I was appointed to Athens as third secretary, small, small. Then I went to

Greece at that time the war started with the Italians and the Germans, who occupied Athens.

Victoria: How did you feel when the Nazis occupied Greece? What were your feelings

about that?

Kent: I didn't like how they really behaved. I mean they were noisy people, very noisy.

Of course they have done little dirty things also. One night, I remember, this is

off the record probably. One night I remember a delightful ambassador,

a bachelor, not really a bachelor, but his wife wasn't there. He was invited to the

Italian embassy, a reception. He asked me if I could go with him. I said "Yes, your Excellency". Then we arrived to the Italian Embassy, there was plenty of eating stuff and then about after midnight the Italians started to bombard the Greek airfields. We left and ambassador, his wife was not there, he said stay with

me at the embassy don't go home. Then Greece was lying to us from the

beginning of the first World War. We got the Prime Minister on the phone and informed him. After a few weeks, we were ordered to close the embassy and return to Ankara. We left a Consul General there but funny enough...The ambassador and myself we should go after the King of Greece, who left also for Egypt. We were supposed to board a ship, I remember vividly at three in the afternoon. At two in the afternoon the German airforce bombarded the ship and many diplomats died there. Thank goodness we missed it. Then we left altogether from Greece. I was appointed after that, I stayed a few month in Ankara.

Victoria: And then you were sent to France?

Kent: The war had already started and I was asked to go to Marseilles. It was a very difficult journey. German army has occupied the whole of Europe. For instance, when I arrived to Vienna, I had to carry my bags from one station to another, the whole daylong. There was nobody, only military. There was an old woman who sold soup. In the station we had to feed ourselves. Anyhow it was a tedious journey.

Victoria: So what were the conditions like in Marseilles?

Kent: To get to Marseilles was the problem. Reached Vienna and the train wasn't

running. So we had to wait three days for a train to take us to France, and then I

say us I mean me. I was not married at the time. Finally I arrived to Marseilles.

You know the Germans occupied Marseilles so everything was geared according to their wishes.

Victoria: When did you become aware of the Nazi, German Policy towards Jews?
After

you arrived?

Kent: Oh, the first day of course! First day I went to the office there were a number of

Jews crying and lamenting because some of their parents had been picked up in the streets. The Germans used to stop the whole of traffic on the big boulevards and examine all male persons. If they were circumcised or not. If they are circumcised they should have been a Jew, so put them on a train and sent them to the concentration camps.

Victoria: So what did you do?

Kent: Well, we protested, nothing to be done. Talked with the French authorities,

nothing to be done. We fought as much as we could with our meager means, but I

say with not great success. They used to pick them up in the streets and just put

them in the trains and this particular train episode is one of those.

Victoria: Do you offer, something about a medical doctor to examine you about being

circumcised?

Kent: No, no, I did have a diplomatic passport. They wouldn't touch me.

Victoria: So, on the train episode, can you tell me about that? The night you went on the

train?

Kent: Only one night. Then one day we were in the office closing the office and then

there used to be a little pastry shop where I used to take my tea there in the afternoon. So I went there walking, walking distance from the Consulate. Then we had a man in the Consulate, he also was a Jew from Izmir, and he came, and he used to work for us. He came to say that the German locked up all these Turks of Jewish origin and they were put, about six o'clock in the afternoon, cold November day rather cold. So, I said to him to take me down to the station. I

saw first the Paris express and then a few wagons attached to the end. So looking

a little more I saw all the Jews that I knew. They were all picked up and forcibly

put in the wagons.

Victoria: What kind of cars were these on the train that the Jews were in?

Kent: Oh, they carry horses, plain wood, doors, no windows. They were sitting, lamenting, crying. So, first a French stationmaster came. "Sir" he said "You have to leave because the train will leave in no time". I said I will not go down, I

will go with these people. And then two German officers arrive, SS Troops.

They were controlling the railway station and one of the with his broken English told me to leave the wagon. "I won't, I will go with these people." So, he walked

a little towards me, I thought he would use force, but he didn't. But, I told him I

was a diplomat and he mustn't think of using force against me. So then another German officer arrived, higher rank, they were all uniformed people. Then the other one suggested I leave. I said no; I would leave with these people. They were crying, they were really heartbreaking.

Victoria: Were there smells or anything?

Kent: No, poor people. Funny enough, they picked up two Algerians also, because they are circumcised. And then finally, they let the Algerians go. The time came, the train left slowly. Oh, one of the officers came to me rather roughly. He didn't touch me but he said, "You have to leave the train!" I said I won't, unless you use force, I am not going to go down. I'm a diplomat, I'd advise you not to use military manners with me. Meantime, the train's leaving time was reached and the train left. I was on it.

Victoria: Were you sitting on the floor?

Kent: Ah yes, they gave me a newspaper. I tried to console them as much as I could.

Then we went about three hours. It's dark, cold and miserable, no water, nothing,

people sitting on the floor. So the train stopped at a station called, if I am correct,

Neim. Then an officer came, high rank, captain, "Sir" he said "Unpleasant thing happened at the Marseilles gar, we have only five minutes here, you can show me all the Turks and have them leave the wagon. Then it is your problem." But in the meantime, another German came, rather rude, sort of walked near me in a military manner. I said don't force me, no military manners, you cannot touch me. Turkey and Germany are at peace; war hasn't started at that way. Anyhow, I

got all the Turks down. One by one, old ladies, children about three am. I had a man at the Consulate, he was with me the Jewish man. I sent him to pick up 7 or 8 taxis to get them back to Marseilles. So finally, we have been able to do that at that time, the taxis had the genius of running their on charcoal or something, I don't remember. Poor Algerians stayed, I had not the jurisdiction for Algerians. We arrived early the next morning to Marseilles. They went home crying, lamenting all that. That's about all.

Victoria: Going back to the train, why did you think you did it? Why did you put yourself in danger?

Kent: Well, I'm a human being. I just couldn't do anything else. Seeing all these people

like Abraham's, what is it? His son? I don't remember my bible quite as well as I

used to. I used to know it quite well. But really, I mean you couldn't do anything

else. Really, If you were in my place you would do the same thing. Anybody, everybody any human being did, because their end was there. They were going to the concentration camp. Or probably throw them from the wagon, kill them along the way.

Victoria: Was there a cooperation between Paris and Marseilles?

Kent: Oh yes, always, always, we have managed two consulates and without really consulting the government, because we had the authority to do it. To protect everybody who has a Turkish passport. It was not very easy. I can assure it was not very easy.

Victoria: What were the two types of citizens you were dealing with? The Turkish citizens

that you were saving. The Turkish Jews were in two categories?

Kent: You know what happened actually, the essence of the problem is. When Turkey

was beaten by the allies in the First World War, we had millions of Jews in this country. And most of them couldn't get jobs, make money, so they took the first French boat to France and established business here, little business there. I don't

blame me them, and then they say I've seen sometimes, Jewish young men

produce 5 or 6 passports, British, French, Italian whatever was suitable for them.

So I don't blame them. We couldn't help them because they had left their Turkish citizenship's

Victoria: They were irregular citizens?

Kent: What they call irregular citizens. So we prolonged that. We used to give a piece

of paper saying his nationality is being examined by the Turkish authorities until

such time he has to be considered as Turkish.

Victoria: Were they bringing in old papers from the Ottoman times?

Kent: Of course, of course, I am very fortunate I learned the old script from the

Galatasaray Lise. I still read Arabic.

Victoria: In the reading I came across a sentence again and again, that Turkey doesn't

discriminate against it's citizens on the basis of religion.

Kent: No.

Victoria: Can you talk a little bit about that? Tell me in your own words about that.

Kent: We have never discriminated. Who took the Jews from Spain? We did. We sent a fleet down to Spain to save the Jews from the Catholics. Other wise they would have been slaughtered all together. The Sultan sent a ??????????. All the Jews who were prosecuted by the Spanish Catholics. We never in our history have any thing of that sort. We have Jewish neighbors, Arab whatever it is. This was a very big empire, Ottoman Empire.

Victoria: So what does the Turkish constitution say? "Turkey does not discriminate?"

Kent: Now of course with the Republic they don't protect the people who have acquired

foreign citizenship, but they can return back to their own nationality, original nationality. My father had a tremendous amount of Jewish friends because he was a lawyer. They used to come and discuss things in the house. We don't have that sort of Germanic ideas of people's freedom.

Victoria: When you were saving Jews, in France, did you have contact with any of the

other consulates or diplomats?

Kent: No, no. Everybody on his own. The Italians didn't enter the war, half of France,

north was occupied by the Germans. AS you know a little later the whole German army walked in down to the Mediterranean.

Victoria: But the neutral countries like Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal, was there any

cooperation in trying to save the Jews?

Kent: No, no. They didn't do it. They were tremendously frightened of the Germans.

Who wasn't?

Victoria: And what was the French people's attitude?

Kent: Neutral.

Victoria: Just one or two more questions Ambassador. When they were stopping the people to check if they were circumcised were they stopping them on the street?

Kent: Yes, pull down you trousers. Sure way of.....

Victoria: Going back to the train scene, going in the night, seems very emotional. What

was it like on the train? Would you say it was a cattle car?

Kent: You know they say in the European custom. So many men that is soldiers and so many animals. Big animals can be carried in these. Carrying cattle, sheep things of that sort.

Victoria: How did you feel when you saw human beings in the animal cars?

Kent: Well it was terrible, terrible feelings! Not only the wagon, but the atmosphere, what was waiting for them. That was really my problem.

Victoria: You knew they would be killed?

Kent: Oh definitely! Don't forget when I served three years in Poland as Ambassador, I saw all these places, extermination stations, so I know what it is. Terrible! Once you go, finished never come back!

Victoria: Were you getting information from Ankara about what was happening to the Jews?

Kent: All these things that I told you was spontaneously done.

Victoria: You were acting on your own?

Kent: My own, I have no communications with Ankara.

Victoria: How were you living daily life there?

Kent: Oh it was nice, it was nice, it was nice. I had rented an apartment. I had an

Armenian cook. Busy life, you had to deal with these sort of problems everyday.

Victoria: Were the French talking about the Jews being taken away? Or did no one say

anything?

Kent: They used to speak among themselves. Most Jewish people had arrived to France

many years ago, they learned French.

Victoria: What did the French people say when they were walking in the streets.

Kent: Nothing, nothing.

Victoria: Past the cattle cars?

Kent: Turn their heads and avanti!

Victoria: These spouses of some of the Turkish Jews, who had old papers, were you able to

help them if they weren't Turkish?

Kent: Well, we have what they called a declaration, who ever invented that I don't

know, but they used to come to the consulate and fill out those papers that he was

born where, what was his previous nationality. You see, what actually has happened was this, when Turkey was invaded, everybody, every minority left Turkey to go to some Turkey, so they could make a livelihood. So all this, I've

seen the Jews with five passports, British, French, Italian. They had to do it
or

they would have never survived.

(There is some more of this interview off-camera, that is sound only. It will
follow)

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