

| GÜLER ORGUN | |
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| | There really is no city in the world like Istanbul . |
| | We are, after all, in Europe and in Asia. |
| | We are both incredibly modern and have wonderful traditions. |
| | In many ways, Istanbul connects the world –through different cultures between religions, and even in multi ethnic families. |
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| | But I'm going to guess you haven't heard many family stories like mine. |
| | After all, my parents were born Jewish. |
| | But converted to Islam so that means I was born a Muslim, too. |
| | But then I converted to Judaism to get married |
| | And well, that marriage didn't work out and I married a lovely Muslim man. |
| | And when my children were married – they didn't marry Muslims or Jews. |
| | My son-in-law even wears kilts. |
| | So the question is: how could a family be this diverse? And the answer begins, not here in Istanbul, but in Spain, 500 years ago. |
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| | In August 1492, when Christopher Columbus sailed from the port of Palos westwards, the Jews of Spain—who had lived there for a thousand years-- were being expelled by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella . These Jews became known as the Sephardim , as Sepharad in Hebrew means Spain. |
| | Many of these expelled Jews found a new home on the other side of the Mediterranean –in the lands of the Ottoman sultans . |
| | They brought with them their traditions, their style of dress, and even their language—which we call Ladino , or Judeo Español, |
| | Compared to Christian Europe, the Ottomans were far more tolerant toward Jews in their empire. In fact, these Sephardic Jews had found a home. |
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| | Here's where my family fits into all this history. This is Constanza , a city on the Black Sea. It's in Romania. |

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| | <p>And this is where my father's side of the family lived at the beginning of the 20th married and had four children. The youngest of his children, who was born in 1903, would become my father.</p> |
| | <p>In 1920, my grandfather was transferred to the Istanbul branch of his bank, and that is how my father came to Turkey at the age of seventeen.</p> |
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| | <p>I can trace my mother's side of the family back even further. They were also Sephardic Jews and had lived in Çanakkale for generations. This is my great grandmother, Miryam Levi, who lived to be 96 and who we called Nonika.</p> |
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| | <p>She was born in 1847 and died in 1943—and that means she saw the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of modern Turkey, which was founded by Kemal Atatürk in 1923.</p> |
| | <p>My Nonika had one daughter, my grandmother Esther.</p> |
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| | <p>Grandmother, who married a man by the name of Moshe Benezra, had nine children— They went on to become my uncles and aunts. One of her children was Neama, my mother, who was born in 1900—and lived for 97 years.</p> |
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| | <p>In this enormous family of my grandparents, they lived in a modest house in Sirkeci that included all the children as well as Nonika and my grandfather Moshe's mother, who they called La Señora.</p> <p>Now as you know in the First World War, the Ottoman Empire was an ally of Germany and Austria, and Grandfather Moshe went off to serve in the Ottoman army.</p> <p>I don't know where he served, but there were fierce battles between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies, and I know Grandmother Esther never knew when, or if, he would return home.</p> <p>Just to keep bread on the table, She sewed cloth sacks for an exporter of hazelnuts until finally, the war ended, and Grandfather returned home.</p> |
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| | <p>When the republic was born in 1923, the family celebrated with everyone else on our national holidays. As a traditional Sephardic family, they celebrated the Jewish holidays, too, like Pesach, when more than 30 people would come to dinner, to listen to my grandfather lead the service, and the family would prepare traditional Sephardic dishes.</p> |

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| | <p>When my mother was a young woman in the late 1920s and 30s, she volunteered as an accountant at the Jewish Hospital in Istanbul. There she met this very handsome young man when he transferred the accounting books to her. She liked him a lot, but then—she didn't see him again.</p> |
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| | <p>Then a few months later, right here in Istanbul, there was this rainstorm, and my mother was standing in a doorway. Suddenly that same good-looking man from the hospital showed up – and he was holding an umbrella. That man was Henri Nassi. That was the beginning of their courtship, and eventually, Henri and Neema decided to get married.</p> |
| | <p>But it was more complicated than that. You see, remember I told you my father was Romanian? He didn't have Turkish citizenship and he wanted to be Turkish.</p> |
| | <p>And before he and my mother were married, they decided they would take that extra step and convert to Islam. My dad changed his name to Avni Tunçer, and together, he and my mom visited the Mufti to make the conversion.</p> |
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| | <p>That means when I was born a year later, in 1937, I came into the world as a Muslim.</p> |
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| | <p>My father was a hard-working man and before I was born, he had started his own business in aromatic oils.</p> |
| | <p>As a child, I remember he used to come home at night and when he walked in the door, the room was flooded with the scent of roses—or sometimes lemons—it was really wonderful. In fact, people called him 'Avni Bey, the King of Aromatic oils.'</p> |
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| | <p>Now Istanbul when I was growing up was one of the most magical and beautiful cities in the world—a jewel along the Bosphorus, filled with great architecture from the Roman and Byzantine times, when it was called Constantinople----through the centuries of the Ottomans.</p> |
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| | <p>In a very different way, by the 1930s, Europe was becoming a very ugly place.</p> <p>By 1939, the Second World War had begun, but in this war, Turkey managed to stay neutral.</p> <p>Only later did I find out the terrible things that were done in Europe, and I do know now that when some German Jews were fleeing the Nazis, they found refuge in Turkey.</p> <p>How did any of this affect a small child? After all, I was only four-years-old in 1940.</p> <p>But I do remember them putting up black out blinds in our house, and also, bread and sugar were rationed—although my parents never let me feel that.</p> |
| | <p>My father, like so many other men, was conscripted into the army when the war started. No one knew what was really going to happen. Would Turkey join in the war? If so, on whose side?</p> <p>Many non-Muslim families were financially ruined during the war by what they called a Wealth Tax. My father was affected too, but since he had converted to Islam many years before, not as badly as others in our family. Turkey did remain neutral during the war, and when my father returned home, he started to rebuild his business after 1945.</p> |
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| | <p>But five years later, he fell ill with a horrid case of meningitis. The doctors told him he wasn't going to live.</p> |
| | <p>But when he came out of his coma, he whispered to them: 'I can't die, I have a daughter to marry off.'</p> |
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| | <p>Not long after that, I met Ceki Karasu. He was Jewish and he was a student in university. Ceki and I decided to get married. But since he was Jewish and I had been born a Muslim, and since we both wanted to get married in a synagogue, I went through the process of converting to Judaism. First, I went to see the Mufti, and he asked: "Have you thought it over carefully? I said that this was what I wanted.</p> <p>Then I went to the Grand Rabbinate, where I went through the process of becoming Jewish</p> |
| | <p>and we were married in the Neve Shalom Synagogue in 1954.</p> <p>After a few years, Ceki and I started to grow apart: He wanted to continue his studies in the United States, but I wanted to stay in Turkey. And so we parted.</p> |
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| | <p>After my divorce, I started working for my dad. I am proud to say that I became one of the first female sales representatives in Turkey – and traveled all over Europe throughout the 1960s.</p> |
| | <p>In my leisure time, I went horseback riding, and through a friend, I met Günel Orgun, a lovely Muslim man. And what a typical Turk he was! Blonde hair and beautiful green eyes! This time, I knew I had found the right man.</p> |
| | <p>In November 1965, we were married – not in a traditional Muslim way, and not in a synagogue, but a civil ceremony. Günel would remain a Muslim and I would remain Jewish.</p> |
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| | <p>Our son Orhan was born in 1966 and two years later we had our daughter – Gün.</p> |
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| | <p>As we raised our family, we lived in Istanbul and even on a farm.</p> |
| | <p>Although my children grew up on a farm, they studied hard. In fact, I'm proud to say that they both earned their doctorate degrees - Orhan in Linguistics, and Gün in English literature.</p> |
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| | <p>Gün married a wonderful man in Scotland, and they have two children.</p> |
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| | <p>Orhan lives and teaches in California. Because my grandsons in California were sometimes speaking to me in Spanish, at the age of 65 I enrolled in the Cervantes Institute to learn Spanish. I decided, well, I wanted to dust off my Ladino.</p> |
| | <p>Now I am helping edit the Ladino newspaper of Turkey, "El Amaneser", which is read by Sephardic Jews all over the world. Thus I have come back to the language of my grandparents, Moshe and Esther Benezra, the language of my Spanish Jewish heritage.</p> |
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| | <p>In our family, there is a rich mixed heritage, and when my parents were in their 90s, they face a question about their own heritage, and so we asked them:</p> |
| | <p>"Do you want to be buried in a Jewish cemetery or a Muslim cemetery?"</p> |
| | <p>They thought about it. They had lived through an entire – turbulent century and were surrounded by family who were both Jewish and Muslim.</p> |
| | <p>On a May evening in 1997, my mother Neama Benezra Tuncer died. On the next day we fulfilled her wish - we buried her in a Muslim cemetery.</p> |

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| | The imam at the funeral must have sensed something because during the service he said, “We now invoke all our prophets, from Moses to Muhammed.” |
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| | 500 years ago, I know that my own family sought refuge when they were expelled from Spain. I know they found it here, in Istanbul. Maybe what we did here is build a bridge that we made ourselves – between Europe and Asia, between the old and the new, and even between our religions. |