

**Queen Isabella Sforza Szapolyai of Transylvania and Sultan Suleyman of the  
Ottoman Empire  
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What about the women? Where are the women? In most history books, men outnumber women by a wide margin. Thanks to the work of feminist women and feminist men, this is changing. This morning we focus on Queen Isabella Sforza Szapolyai of Transylvania, who was born in 1519 and died at age 40 in 1559. Thanks to the work of the Rev. Dr. Alicia McNary Forsey over the course of a decade, Queen Isabella of Transylvania emerges from obscurity.

Writing this book was a labor of love. She had encouragement from a mentor, but she would have written it regardless of any encouragement because it became a passion of hers to set something straight. What she set straight was a little glimpse into the truth that the Ottomans during Sultan Suleyman's rule were more humane than were the Christians in Europe. This “little glimpse into the truth” calls into question the widespread and unacknowledged bias against the Turks harbored by too many of us. The book also proves the relationship and influence of the Ottomans on our earliest Unitarians in Transylvania.

Alicia McNary Forsey taught Unitarian Universalist history at Starr King School for the Ministry, and I took classes from her. More recently, she has served as an interim minister. This year, she is serving as the interim minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Long Beach. I met with her this week to find out the story behind the book. She wanted to write about 16<sup>th</sup> century women who were part of the “Radical Reformation” (this movement was comprised of people more radical and more persecuted than the followers of Martin Luther and John Calvin). She went to Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. She wanted to find the women missing from history books.

In her research, she came across Bona Sforza, a woman born in Italy who later became the Queen of Poland. Queen Bona Sforza's daughter Isabella was born in Poland and would grow up to be the Queen of Transylvania. Isabella was brought up with a broad humanist education, which gave her the ability to think within a wider frame than most Catholics of her day. Isabella

was married off to John I, King of Hungary in 1518. John I was 30 years older than Isabella. It is significant that John I's guardian, after the death of his parents, was Sultan Suleyman. John I was excommunicated by the Pope for his collaboration with the Turks. When John I died (within two weeks of the birth of his son), Suleyman became the guardian of Isabella and the infant John II. Suleyman sent Isabella and the baby John II from Budapest to Transylvania, with Isabella being declared Queen and John II King Elect.

John II would grow up to be the King of Transylvania – the only Unitarian king in history. Credit is usually given to him for this distinction of issuing an edict of religious tolerance. However, King John's edict of toleration in 1568 was preceded by his mother's edict in 1557. Alicia McNary Forsey was not the one who *discovered* that Isabella wrote the first edict of Universal Religious Tolerance. This fact was in the Latin primary documents describing her place in the history. However, the books in Latin that Alicia McNary Forsey used were mostly unread by anybody, ever! She had to cut the pages apart in order to gain access to the text! These are the words of Queen Isabella Sforza Szapolyai, reaching us across the span of 452 years:

“Inasmuch as We and Our Most serene Son have assented to the most instant supplication of the lords of the realm that each person maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of their faith, just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone that neither the followers of the new religion are to be a source of irritation to the old, nor are the old in any way to be injurious to the followers of the new . . . ”<sup>1</sup>

The story behind the book took a dramatic turn one day when Alicia McNary Forsey's youngest son called her up and asked for his birth certificate. “Are you applying for a passport?” she asked. “How do you always know?” he answered. It turned out that he was going to Istanbul, Turkey to meet his fiancée. It was an arranged marriage; her son could not travel to Iran, and his fiancée could not travel to the United States. Alicia McNary Forsey made plans to go to Istanbul

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<sup>1</sup> *Queen Isabella Sforza Szapolyai of Transylvania and Sultan Suleyman of the Ottoman Empire: A Case of Sixteenth-Century Muslim-Christian Collaboration* by Alicia McNary Forsey, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 2009, p. 111.

with him. “I’m not capable of going without an objective,” she said, so she compiled a list of libraries to visit, libraries that might help her to piece together the ever larger and more intricate puzzle.

She spent 10 days there in the year 2000, and that was the first of her 13 trips to Istanbul. She got a Lily grant one summer and started learning Turkish. A man she met through her son helped her get in touch with the top translator at the Ottoman Archives. She gave the Director of the Archives and his staff a list of names and dates that she was interested in. The staff and the Director of the Archives found documents. The Archives Director became enthused about the project. Each time she visited, he gave her a new stack of documents. It cost \$125 per page for translation. This part of the story behind the book reminds me of gambling. It was a roll of the dice whether any particular page written in Ottoman Turkish would prove to be worth the cost of translation.

By the way, Ottoman Turkish is not the same as modern Turkish. Ottoman Turkish uses a different alphabet. To my eyes, Ottoman Turkish looks like Arabic. Someone familiar with Arabic and Farsi, the language of Persia, would see aspects of each in Ottoman Turkish. Ottoman Turkish was discarded in 1923 by Ataturk, who turned the country into a republic and started using the Latin alphabet. The relative scarcity of scholars who can read Ottoman Turkish made it difficult to research the connection between Queen Isabella and Sultan Suleyman. Only recently is there a push for young scholars to learn Ottoman Turkish.

In seeking to learn about women among the radical reformers, McNary Forsey came to learn about a fascinating woman named Hurrem, as well. Hurrem was not only the contemporary of Isabella, she was also from the same country, the Ukraine, then part of Poland. Hurrem was abducted from the Ukraine and brought to Constantinople (now called Istanbul) as a gift for Suleyman. Suleyman fell head over heels in love with Hurrem. Those around him were not happy that he gave freedom, his heart, marriage, and authority to this foreigner, this woman from the Ukraine to whom he wrote poetry such as this:

“My very own queen, my everything,

my beloved, my bright moon;  
 My intimate companion, my own and all,  
 sovereign of all beauties, my sultan.  
 My life, the gift I own, my be-all,  
 my elixir of Paradise, my Eden,  
 My spring, my joy, my glittering day,  
 my exquisite one who smiles on and on.  
 My sheer delight, my revelry, my feast  
 My torch, my sunshine, my sun in heaven,  
 My orange, my pomegranate,  
 The flaming candle that lights up my pavilion . . .  
 My darling with the lovely hair, brows curved like a bow,  
 eyes that ravish; I am ill.  
 If I die, yours is the guilt. Help, I beg you,  
*my love from a different religion.* [emphasis added]  
 I am at your door to glorify you.  
 Singing your praises, I go on and on . . .”<sup>2</sup>

We will never know for sure, but we can wonder whether, at some level, Sultan Suleyman’s support of Isabella and her son was influenced by the love he felt for Hurrem, who was from the same part of the world. Then again, Suleyman was an unusual ruler in other ways. He went to great lengths to follow Islamic law, in fairness and without breaking his word, for which Muslims gave him the title "Kanuni" (Lawgiver). Isabella and Hurrem had this, at least, in common: They were both powerful and distrusted as foreigners by the people around them. They each held the highest positions of power that it was possible for a woman to hold in their respective societies, but they were treated badly by those who were supposed to be supporting them because they were foreigners and they were women. Both were plagued by plots, intrigues, etc. in their own courts.

Stepping back for a moment, it is reasonable to ask, why did Alicia McNary Forsey start by

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<sup>2</sup> Page 61.

researching the Suleyman side of the Suleyman-Isabella connection? Since Isabella was a queen of Transylvania (which is now an ethnically Hungarian part of Romania), why not start with the Transylvanian side of the connection? Well, none of the Transylvanian Unitarians wanted to help her. The Transylvanian Unitarian bishop told her (through an intermediary) “You are barking up the wrong tree.”

As another example, when she told a Hungarian Unitarian about her project, the person she was talking to said, “There’s a picture . . . “ and her voice trailed off. This woman just would *not* finish the sentence. Based on that conversation, Alicia McNary Forsey knew there was a picture somewhere that linked Isabella and Suleyman. Indeed, she found it, and it is on the cover of the book. It is a Persian Miniature painted by "Painter A" -- a contemporary of Suleyman's who was hired to paint the important events in Suleyman's life. “Painter A depicts Isabella in a long blue cloak with a hood, holding her son as she converses with the Sultan in front of his Imperial Tent. She would not have been in his company without his express invitation, even though she was a queen.”<sup>3</sup>

Transylvania was a tributary state, which meant that Suleyman left it alone if it paid taxes. Beyond relating to a tributary state, Suleyman was emotionally invested in its welfare. Suleyman protected Isabella from threats inside her court (for there was treachery close to home) and from threats outside Transylvania. The external threat was Ferdinand, the brother of Charles V, who was the Holy Roman Emperor. There are edicts from Suleyman warning the Austrians and Germans not disturb Isabella. In 1518 Isabella and John II were forced into exile in Poland. Suleyman wrote to the Germans and Austrians to bring her out of exile or “I will wipe you off the face of the earth.” “He once wrote in his diary that the most difficult commitment he had made was the promise that he would protect Isabella and her son, and he would defend the land to which he sent them.”<sup>4</sup>

There is an imaginary line in our heads between Christian Europe and Muslim territories to the East, but in the 16<sup>th</sup> century people moved back and forth. We assume that the border was not

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<sup>3</sup> Page 43.

<sup>4</sup> Page 93.

crossed until the present era of globalization, but this is not so. The world has been globalized for a while. Despite porous, non-fixed borders, stereotypical prejudices are passed along from generation to generation. Stereotypical prejudices may be covert, but they are present. This is especially true in terms of Islam, Muslims, and Turks.

In fact, the Ottomans had rules of war and peace. Suleyman took into his territory all who were persecuted, including Jews and radical reformers (our religious ancestors). There was no protection in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe for our religious forebears. Yet people were put to death for being defenders of the Turks (the details are found in trial records). Jews and Christian radical reformers were not forced to convert to Islam. They were charged a tax but not drafted. In contrast, Muslims living in these territories were subject to being drafted.

Regarding stereotypes, we often do not know what we are passing on. Often stereotypical prejudices are repressed from our consciousness. Our human nature causes us to project the prejudices onto others. Relevant to this morning's topic is the concept of "Orientalism" – the tantalizing romanticizing of the "East," often to sell books. Few people had been there, so there was little risk that anyone would contradict their accounts. Turkish scholars today are using accounts of Western historians who wrote during the period of Orientalism. It is disturbing that the Turks are using oppressive Orientalist concepts and inaccurate accounts of history. They are repeating as *their* history *our* biases concerning their history.

What is the relevance for us today of this case of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim-Christian collaboration? There are parallels of warning and parallels of hope. In terms of warning, back then the Pope was horrified at those who were allies with the Turks. Protestants needed to gather forces to fight the "other." The "Holy Wars," better called "unholy wars," were all in defense of Christendom. Muslims were the "other." Today, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan promote the "othering" of Muslims. We have created more death and harm than if we had left the Iraqis and the Afghanis to sort things out among themselves. Civil liberties have been sacrificed in the fight against terrorism, and we must fight to get back our civil liberties.

The parallels of hope is that collaboration is possible. Muslims and non-Muslims have interests in common, as well as separate interests. If Muslims and Unitarians could collaborate in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we can do so today! I believe that the historical connections between Muslims and Unitarians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century confer a special responsibility upon Unitarian Universalists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must reach out in friendship to Muslims. In the words of Transylvanian Ferenc David, “We need not think alike to love alike.” May we bring to the light of consciousness our unacknowledged biases. May we reach out in friendship. May it be so!