

# No Local Rift With Turkey

## Assemblyman Cymbrowitz develops Jewish-Turkish ties in Brooklyn

By GABE KAHN

Assemblyman Steven Cymbrowitz is aware that smoothing over the damaged relationship between Turkey and Israel is probably too big a job for

### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

him alone. But that doesn't mean he won't do his part to bring his own community together, one individual at a time.

Cymbrowitz has represented the 45th Assembly District in Brooklyn since winning the seat of his late wife, Lena, in 2000. His district, which includes Sheepshead Bay, has become the largest area for Turkish immigrants in the tristate area, something that he was aware of without fully realizing its significance. His eyes were opened, however, after the Turkish Cultural Center took him and two other assembly members — William F. Boyland Jr. from Brooklyn and Kevin A. Cahill from Kingston — to Turkey in an effort to familiarize them with the Turkish community (the delegates paid for their own flights). What he found surprised him.

"We have a certain idea of what Turkey is, which is completely different from what Turkey really is. I had very little knowledge of Turkey, and I think that's true of many people," Cymbrowitz says.

Although the population is approximately 95 percent Muslim and Turkey is in the midst of a very public rift with Israel, which had been a staunch Turkish ally for decades, Cymbrowitz, who is Jewish, said that the people he met treated him well. "Having grown up in Forest Hills and living in this part of Brooklyn for 20 years now, I didn't have much contact with the Muslim community, and it was an unbelievable experience," he says. "I found them to be welcoming, open and friendly."

The tour was led by Osman Oztaprak, who heads the Turkish Cultural Center. According to Cymbrowitz, in an effort to show the Americans the openness of the Turks, Oztaprak arranged for the group to eat their meals with Turkish residents. "Every meal was held with a family from Turkey, every evening we had dinner in people's homes or in restaurants and we got to speak to each other about Turkish-American relations, about what it was like in Turkey. One person was a doctor. One was a businessman. Once we

had breakfast with a woman who made ceramic art."

Though those experiences taught the assemblyman a lot about the country, he was shocked to learn one historical aspect of Turkey.

"What amazed me most was that there were Jews in Turkey going back hundreds of years, and that was something that Osman pointed out to us everywhere we went. He always took us to a synagogue or showed us



(L-f) Assemblyman Steven Cymbrowitz, Vilma Huertas-Cymbrowitz, Assemblyman William F. Boyland Jr., Assemblyman Kevin A. Cahill and Veyssel Ucan, the executive director of the Turkish Cultural Center of Albany, in front of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.

**The local Turks 'want to open up their doors and be part of their community and show people in the community what they have to offer and who they are. That doesn't happen all the time.'**

in some of the places there were Stars of David in some of the ruins during the Roman time, during the Ottoman Empire. During the Inquisition, many Jews from Spain were welcomed into Turkey. The sultan opened up the doors and said, 'Come.'"

Previously there were hundreds of thousands of Jews living in Turkey, but now there are only about 25,000 left. Cymbrowitz was told that over the years when the Turkish economy has taken a downward turn, the Jews have picked up and moved to Israel or the U.S. Still, the synagogues there are functional, even if visits must be pre-arranged and police are stationed to ensure proper security. On the final day of the trip they visited Turkey's Jewish museum in Istanbul, located in an old synagogue. "They still have the *sefer* Torahs in there," he says.

Would Cymbrowitz recommend that his constituents visit Turkey? Is it safe?

"Absolutely. When we went on a mission to Israel, in certain cities we had two armed guards. Right outside the West Bank we were in an armored bus. Is that the way it is in Turkey? No. At least in the areas that we went to."

Notwithstanding Cymbrowitz's experience, because of the rising tensions with the Israeli government, it is becoming more difficult to live as a Jew in Turkey. Just last week it was reported that the Turkish police raided the Hemdat Yisrael synagogue in Istanbul and demanded that the congregants produce identification and proof of residence, which they did not have because it was the Sabbath.

Ceki Medina, a Turkish immigrant who moved to the Upper East Side in 1999 but still makes frequent trips to Turkey, says that he left because he

saw the situation becoming worse for Jews.

"Today we're seeing what's going on between Turkey and Israel reflected in the streets of Turkey affect the Jewish community directly," he says. During the Israeli war in Gaza that took place last year, Medina says that the Turkish government started treating the Jews like second-class citizens. "I heard that in the center of Istanbul there were signs telling Jews not to come in or Jews aren't allowed, things to that effect. Even if this was not widespread, the fact that this was allowed was not very good news."

During Cymbrowitz's tour, the assembly members had the opportunity to speak with the Turkish parliament about the political situation in Turkey, though he said that he was at best skeptical about what he was told. The government spokesperson, a woman who lived for several years in Scarsdale, N.Y., said that the parliament has no problems with a Jewish population in Turkey. However, Cymbrowitz, who nicknamed the spokesperson "the Spin-Meister" because of her penchant for avoiding straight answers, did not entirely believe her after she also assured him that the government is content with the homosexual community in Turkey, something that those independent from the government said was most certainly not the case. But of the numerous issues facing the Turkish government, Cymbrowitz believes that their worry over the Jewish community in their overwhelmingly Muslim country is relatively low on the list.

Politics aside, the trip reinforced Cymbrowitz's belief that as a local government official, he has a responsibility to his own neighborhood. "I decided that it was important for me to develop a relationship between the

Turkish community in my district and the Jewish community in my district," he says. "The fact that there is this diplomatic issue going on between the two countries, I felt it was important to open up communication between the different groups, which I'm in the process of doing." To that end he arranged for a meeting between the Jewish Community Relations Council and the Turkish Cultural Center, and he is the process of developing a relationship between the Amity School of Brooklyn (a Turkish private school) and a local yeshiva and Jewish community center.

Helping him in those efforts is the fact that he has a very willing partner in the Turkish community. The local Turks, Cymbrowitz says, "want to open up their doors and be part of their community and show people in the community what they have to offer and who they are. That doesn't happen all the time. As a matter of fact, it happens in the reverse, where people will come in and shut themselves in."

Not everyone is as confident that local Turkish immigrants can ignore the bad feelings between Israel and Turkey.

"Being very against Israel and being friendly with Jews is a very hard thing to do, given the ideals of the Israeli state," according to Medina. "I think saying there are problems between Israel and Turkey and yet we should try to get along is somewhat difficult. I think [the Turkish] government is so anti-Israeli that it would be hard to bridge the gap."

Still, Medina is not entirely pessimistic about the attitudes of Cymbrowitz's constituents.

"I think the population in Sheepshead Bay will be receptive to the efforts of the assemblyman. I

don't think they have very religious fundamental views so I think they would be receptive to listening to the other side of the story," he says. "I think it's a very worthwhile effort."

According to Cymbrowitz, the Turks are very cognizant of the fact that Muslim, Jewish and Christian doctrines hold that all three religions originated from Abraham. "Going to different events here, they're very quick to open the door up to all religions because we come from the same father and we all pray to the same God. I think what they're trying to do is say, 'Look, yes we are Muslims, but we're not all what you think Muslims are.'"

Before running for his late wife's seat in the Assembly in 2000, Cymbrowitz had been involved in government, but always in the background. Now he is in the forefront, serving on the Housing, Insurance, Codes and Environmental Conservation committees and chairing the subcommittee on Shoreline Protection. He is also particularly passionate about his work on the Health committee.

"I think the thing that I'm most proud of is the fact that I helped build the Lena Cymbrowitz Pavilion at the Maimonides Cancer Center," he says. "We have two million people living in Brooklyn, and in order for someone who is diagnosed with cancer to get top-notch treatment, they had to go to Manhattan. That can be very difficult for someone who has cancer. It's difficult for someone who's not ill. ... And there is a cancer center that has now been opened. I've gotten responses and comments from many people who call me or see me in the street and say, 'I have cancer and I'm treated there.'"

After suffering a stroke four years ago, Cymbrowitz was fortunate that his wife (he's remarried) immediately recognized the symptoms and called the paramedics, who brought him to Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, a primary stroke center. Though he was completely paralyzed on his left side, the doctors administered the drug TPA then the stroke was removed using the Mercy

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Retriever and all the symptoms reversed. Three weeks later, Cymbrowitz was back in Albany. Now he's working with the Department of Health to develop comprehensive stroke centers and ensure that if emergency medical technicians are able to diagnose a stroke, they will bypass the nearest hospital and deliver the patients there immediately.

"I was lucky. Somebody was watching over me. Because of that I'm trying to develop these comprehensive stroke centers. If I was lucky enough for it to happen that way for me, we can save thousands of people in the state by getting them that help."

Although Cymbrowitz does not consider himself religious, his roots have a lot to do with his wanting to bring the Turkish and Jewish communities together. As the son of Holocaust survivors from Poland, he grew up in a Conservative household. Thus he was surprised to find that the topics he cared most about upon arriving in Turkey revolved around the Jewish community. "It wasn't pre-planned," he says. "When I met with the person from parliament and the human rights commission, the issues I wanted to talk about were Jewish issues. I didn't go there saying, 'This is what I want to talk about,' but I found that this is the thing that I felt was most important.

"I may not be religious, but I'm proud that I am a Jew and what that means."

It's possible that, being a second-generation Holocaust survivor, he is particularly aware of how ignorance can tear a community, a continent and even a world apart, and he uses that as fuel to bring these two worlds together. Cymbrowitz believes that we can't be complacent and that to do nothing will allow those with hatred in their hearts to make inroads in our society.

"The rise of this Holocaust revisionism and neo-Nazism in the world is something we have to fight against. In my small way, if I can open up the doors in different communities, then I welcome that."



**Osman Oztaprak of the Turkish Cultural Center, members of the delegation with staff from the Journalists and Writers Foundation, a human rights, free speech and disaster relief organization, exchanging traditional gifts.**