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# **Balkans SOE centre in Istanbul during the Second World War. The case Salvat Lufti Tozan alias Pants**

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**Abstract.** Salvat Lufti Tozan was a Turkish subject of Bosnian origin, bi-lingual in Serbian and Turkish, speaking French fluently. He has a dynamic character. All his life he appears to have been attracted by revolution and intrigue. Prior to and after the outbreak of Second World War, several members of British Embassy in Ankara, frequently were guests at the Tozan property, among them Commander Wolfson who enlisted Tozan's support in the provision of naval and other intelligence. During the Second World War, Tozan was one of the most important Special Operation Executive's agents in Balkans. Our paper aim is to present his activity and specially his contacts with Iuliu Maniu.

Keywords: Tozan, SOE, Intelligence, Istanbul, Chastelain.

## **1. Introduction**

Salvat Lufti Tozan was a Turkish subject of Bosnian origin, bi-lingual in Serbian and Turkish, speaking French fluently. He has a dynamic character. All his life he appears to have been attracted by revolution and intrigue. He started off as a member of the Committee of the Young Turk revolution at Salonika in the early years of 20th century. He represented the Schneider-Creusot, Bofors and other armament manufacturers in Turkey and parts of the Middle and Near East and owned a factory at Saint Etienne in France. During the Great War, he was opposed to the Turkish Alliance with Germany and claims to have worked against it for the Allies [1].

As such his name is mentioned fairly freely in a book of historical reminiscences by some naval author. After the Great war he dabbled in various international business, in armaments, oil, etc, and made a great deal of money. Masterson suspected that along with business interests, he also dabbled in Balkan politics. His whole character reminds Masterson one of an Oppenheim character of the nineteenth century. In his mind cloaks, daggers and dynamite must necessarily be associated with any underground work. He stated that when he was in Romania, he procured a quantity of dynamite from the Serbs and stored it, together with some grenades and machine guns, in a house in Bucharest. During the First World War he took an active part in politics and strongly opposed the Young Turks' alliance with Germany. He was several occasions arrested and condemned to death but on each occasion managed to escape. On the last occasion when he was in difficulties, he was saved by the armistice.

During one of his escapes he was of considerable assistance to a number of British officers with whom made contact in Syria. From his armaments contracts, Tozan made good contracts and was able to purchase a large property on Bosphorus at Ermigan. This consisted of 450.000 squares meters of land surrounded on three sides by a wall 2 miles in length, and on the fourth by woods and building. This was the property to which he invited the officers of the „Warspite” in August 1939 [2 ].

## **2. SOE recruits Tozan**

Prior to and after the outbreak of Second World War, several members of British Embassy in Ankara, frequently were guests at the Pants property, among them Commander Wolfson who enlisted Pant's support in the provision of naval and other intelligence. In 1941 Commander Wolfson made an agreement with Pants whereby the latter engaged in chartering Turkish caiques on behalf of the Germans as a means of providing regular sources of information.

Apart from his armaments interest Tozan was a senior partner in a trading company in Romania with Ata Constantinescu and in another in Egypt. These companies were formed to develop trade

between Turkey and on the one hand Romania and on the other hand Egypt. Among Tozan most intimate friend in Turkey was:

- Dr. Nihat Regad Belger, well-known Turkish doctor, for a long time political refugee in Paris and interpreter to Ismet Inonu in London and Geneva;

- Cami-bey ex-political refugee and leader –writer in several Turkish newspapers, including „La Turqui”;

- The Vali of Ankara;

- The Turkish Ambassador to Athens, Ines Bay

- The late chief of the Turkish Secret Service and other important personalities. He was the very intimate friend of the late Fazli Tong who died in August 1944 of spinal paralysis contracted in prison in Tripoli. The memoirs of Fazli Tong were being edited by Cami Bey and provided a valuable contribution to modern Turkish history, in which it was found that Tozan played a very important part. Tozan's wife was German from Strasbourg and prior to their marriage was his secretary. Their relations after the war were more those of employee and employer than of husband and wife.

In addition to his commercial activities Tozan was also honorary Finnish consul in Istanbul, for which purpose he had a separate office and a clerk paid entirely from his own pocket. The main advantage accruing to these appointments was the *laissez-passers* which Tozan received from the Legations of all countries through which he traveled, giving him immunity at Customs and foreign exchange controls. It also brought Tozan in touch with members of the Consular Service Allied, neutral and Axis in Istanbul and Ankara [3]

During the Second World War, Tozan was one of the most important SOE agents in Balkans. In august 1941 Romanian Surete arrested Rica Georgescu who was Iuliu Maniu's collaborator and the W/T operator. With the disappearance from the scene of Georgescu and the W/T set, SOE had to fall back on couriers as a means of maintaining contact with Maniu. The Gestapo set up a control post at Svilengrad on the Bulgarian –Turkish frontier and operated it with such severity SOE was obliged to remove certain too-knowlegeable of its Romanian courier to the inaction and safety of South-African Internment camp. It seemed in those last five months of 1941 as though the Gestapo were cutting the slender links with Maniu almost as fast as they were forged. [4]

Recourse was also had to couriers going to Romania from Switzerland, Sweden and Portugal [5].

During a business tour in Romania in the autumn of 1941, Tozan who was an intimate friend of Turkish Ambassador in Bucharest, Suphie Tanriover, in turn an intimate friend of Mihai Popovici, ex Minister of Finance in the Maniu's Government and particularly of latter's wife was introduced with Maniu with whom he had a number of long conversation concerning the political set-up in Romania, and with whom he discussed ways and means of extricating Romania from her predicament. On learning that Tozan had contacts with the British in Turkey (commander Wolfsson, colonel Blunt, Brigadier Arnold, Air Commander George, etc.) Maniu asked Tozan to transmit a verbal message to Chastelain appealing for funds to enable him to bribe officials in order to save Georgescu and the other collaborators who were awaiting trial a charge of high treason.

Tozan returned to Istanbul in November 1941, and was introduced to Chastelain by commander Wolfson, to whom Tozan was supplying naval information. On 26th November with Tozan assistance SOE sent 40.000 dollars through Finnish courier to the Turkish Ambassador in Bucharest who passed the cash to Mihai Popovici for Maniu.

SOE in trouble resorted to simple and traditional methods countered the German Svilengrad border control with the privileges of diplomacy which even the Nazis still found it expedient to respect. So they used Tozan who became the main SOE contact with Maniu. In December 1941, D/HY came to Istanbul interviewed Tozan and briefed him for a returned trip to Bucharest to contact Maniu, Dumitrescu and Moriatti. The object of this conversation was if Maniu was willing to accept a war chest a figure of 100,000,000 to 150,000,000 lei being mentioned. He was also going to ascertain progress made in Maniu's organization and to persuade him to take a W/T set. Tozan wished to take a

W/T set in with him but on D/HY's advice, he left it behind in order to make sure beforehand that Maniu would accept it.

Tozan left Istanbul on 26th December with verbal messages to Maniu and micro-photographic letters to the other two. In Bucharest he had four interviews with Maniu but was less successful with Dumitrescu and Moriatti; the former could not be contacted and the latter immediately destroyed the micro-photograph of D/HY's letter and refused to have anything to do with Tozan. Maniu expressed willingness to accept funds and asked for two W/T set. He acknowledged he received 40.000 dollars and informed Tozan that he was collaborating with powerful military and civilian groups, had the stage ready for revolt had laid all necessary for the W/T and planned himself to leave Romania with Georgescu and Popovici. He conditioned the success of his revolt, however, on an Anglo-Russian guarantee that Romania would not be occupied by Russians troops and asked SOE in the event that this could be obtained to make it known throughout Romania by means of leaflet raids.

In February, 1942, Tozan, after a diplomatically cushioned journey in Bucharest, delivered to Maniu a new W/T set complete with codes, crystals and signal plan. The method was emphatically simple and successful, but like all methods of secret communications it should have been used sparingly.

### **3. The Hungarian Secret Service arrested Tozan**

Unfortunately, His Majesty Government was at the time pressed for agents in the Balkans and Tozan luck was tried too high. In short time he was arrested by Hungarian Secret Police. A Hungarian agent with whom he was instructed to make contact in an access of suspicion (he had only recently been released from gaol) misunderstood his approach and denounced him to the Hungarian Secret Police. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was reduced to one of twelve years' imprisonment. [6]

He served less than two years of it. But two payments into a Swiss Bank of 20,000 Swiss francs and 20,000 dollars brought Tozan safely out of his Hungarian cell with a Croatian passport [7]. After he was released from jail he made two attempts to cross the frontier, once into Transylvania, once into Banat and thence to Romania. Both were engineered with the help of Serbs with whom he was in touch (Mihailovitch men); both attempts were unsuccessful. The first actually entailed shots being fired at him and his party before they gave up. He was at provisional liberty after having got himself first into the hospital prison, for an unnecessary operation to his gall-bladder. The operation was performed; (he showed to Masterson a scar 6 inch long). The provisional liberty entailed a guarantee of 200.000 pen goes deposited with the police and a fortnightly call a Police H. Q. to report himself personally. Maniu uncertain of what Tozan might have revealed under interrogation in Hungary decided it was unsafe to use the W/T set he had brought to Bucharest [8].

The successful escape was due entirely to the help of one Banco Bezon, the Croat minister to Berlin, who repeatedly assisted Tozan. He produced for him a Croat passport (which Masterson have seen) obtained a Romanian visa and sent him by rail accompanied by several Croat official (who Tozan told Masterson were armed to the teeth and prepared to fight and make a break for it, had anything gone wrong to the frontier).

He arrived at Bucharest on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, 1943. He got into touch with Longas, private secretary to the Turkish Minister there (Longas was an Istanbul Greek, useful but venal and womanizer). Longas, who knows everyone in Bucharest, enlisted the support of Vassiliov, under – secretary of Interior and head of the Gendarmerie. Vassiliov, helped Tozan in every way and provided him with all necessary papers. The Turkish Minister was outwardly friendly but Tozan was convinced was not really ready to do anything to assist him. [9] Tozan had an old but still valid Turkish passport in Istanbul: he got his wife to send it up and he presented it to the Legation, who had to issue him with a fresh one as a matter of course. [10]

#### 4. Tozan return to Bucharest

Back in Romania where he survived pursuit by the Gestapo for over six months, he resumes his contacts with Maniu and other SOE agents. But Maniu and Popovici were at first somewhat distant in their relations with him. Latterly he realized that the Opposition was impotent so he made contacts with Mihai Antonescu. It was Violet who, he said, first suggested contact with the Antonescu's. She introduced him to Princess Sturdza, and through her and Malaxa he first met Mihai Antonescu in February 1944. Subsequent meetings took place in Mihai's home in Bucharest and then in Snagov[11].

The latter regarding him as a British agent and knowing him to be a Turk of some standing, charged him with some feelers. Tozan was told by Mihai Antonescu to contact Constantin Giurescu in Istanbul and the two was co-operating. Giurescu appeared to have been Mihai Antonescu's man of confidence in Turkey. During his visit to Bucharest between July 17th to 27th, he was charged by Mihai Antonescu with a parallel feeler mainly directed to the Americans. Teodorescu has received instruction direct from Ion Antonescu to make a concrete approach for an armistice. He also was cooperating with Tozan and Giurescu. [12]

In Bucharest, Tozan maintained close contacts with the Finnish Legation and other Finnish circle. In the course of a conversation with Mihai Antonescu upon Romanian policy, the latter told him that they had been for some time acting in very close concert with Finland and that Romania's relation with Germany and with the Allies would be largely governed by this understanding with Finland. Tozan said that he had also gathered this from his Finnish contacts in Bucharest.

In 1944, he had received instructions from his SOE contacts to attempt the escape of De Chastelain [13].

A SOE report from May 28 1944 calculated that to enable Tozan to carry out exfiltration Autonomous party presume further sum totaling about 6500 pounds sterling. [14 ]

Tozan activity in Bucharest was checked by SOE through its contacts in Bucharest. For example, Vişoianu stated that he met Tozan on two occasions, the last time at a luncheon given at Tabacovici's house. Vişoianu was not impressed and in fact considered Tozan as rather a suspicious character. Vişoianu agreed that Tozan had connections with Maniu and Mihai Popovici, one of the Vice Presidents of the National Peasant Party. He was also a close friend of Atta Constantinescu. The latter was Minister of Public Works, very pro-German, and a friend of Goering's. On one occasion remembers that Tozan denied the veracity of certain military information sent to Maniu by Gane in connection with the changes in the Turkish General Staff. Tozan was against the Inonu regim in Turkey. Vişoianu does not know whether Tozan has direct contact with Mihai and Ion Antonescu, but as he was so friendly with Atta Constantinescu, he had no doubt can get at Mihai Antonescu through this channel. Voda stated although he had not met Tozan he heard a great deal about him. He also knows that Tozan traveled frequently between Bucharest and Budapest, and according to Voda, anybody who can do this must be regarded with suspicious. Upon Masterson mentioning the possibility of organizing the escape of the Autonomous party, Vodă stated that men such as Tozan are better at that kind of business than honest men [15 ]. Tozan also stated that on arrival on Bucharest, when out of funds, it was Violet who financed him by giving him two million lei. He told Masterson he paid for the boat which brought him here out of the 5000 Dollars, Masterson sent him via Malaxa for escape work. This he exchanged into 7, 5 million lei and paid 3 million out for the boat. The balance of this money he left with Maj. Lupuana head of Mihai's 2nd Bureau, whose help on behalf of escapees he had enlisted. [16 ]

A SOE report from 3rd of June 1944 announced a party whom Tozan advised SOE to expect from Romania arrived in a special coach. They consisted of Costache Malaxa (the son of the well-known Malaxa), Mme. Popovitch, described as a close friend of Maniu, and her niece Mme Violet Stircea. Although Tozan intimated that the party had important messages for A13 and for SOE, they made no attempt to get in touch and, in fact, refused any interview for two or three days. In the afternoon of 3rd of June 1944, a meeting was arranged at Mrs. Seden' with A13 and DH/44 but only Mme Stircea

turned up. DH/44 described Violet Stircea as an intelligent young lady who had studied in Paris and has written a treatise upon the minorities in Transylvania.

She stated that, a few days before she left Bucharest, she had had an interview with Chastelain in the Gendarmerie building where he was imprisoned. The interview had been arranged with extreme difficulty and the Minister of the Interior Vasilescu was present. She was forbidden to discuss any political matters and indeed it was impossible to do so as the Minister of the Interior was within earshot throughout the interview, which lasted about an hour. Mme Stircea said that Chastelain was looking well and had got quite fat. He sends his kind regards to Wolfson, DH/44 and other people in Istanbul. According to her account, he particularly requested that Allies should discontinue bombing the residential district of Bucharest but this was probably for the benefit of Minister of the Interior. When DH/44 asked if Tozan had made any arrangements for the escape of Chastelain and the American P.O.Ws. she said that he had been working on this but they were all too closely guarded and it was quite impossible to arrange an escape. She said that Germans and von Killinger in particular had demanded at least 10 times that Chastelain should be handed over them „for a maximum period of three days” but the Romanians consistently refused. [17 ]

Regarding Tozan activities and his need for money she said that he had spent a great deal of money on the following:

- a. Arranging his escape from Budapest for which at least 15 officials had to be bribed.
- b. On work for the Serbo-Croat, the nature of which she did not specify,
- c. On financing Maniu and his party, for example, arranging for a motor to be placed on Maniu’s disposal as he had no other means of transport.

Mme Stircea did not appear to be well-informed upon the higher matters of state. She knew that Peace proposal had been made to the Romanian Government, but she said that Tozan had told her that these were unacceptable as they were too onerous. She did not appear to know that Maniu had mean of communications with SOE. She said that Maniu was living at Snagov, and goes in Bucharest every day. Tozan was living at No. 28 Biserica Amzei. According to her account, Tozan was very closed watched and has practically no freedom of movement. She considered that he was in great danger. However, he had been able to see Alecu quite recently and the two were very intimate. She said that recently there had been two defections of high ranking officers in the army.

Most of her conversation was taken –up with the reiteration of the ill-effects of bombing upon Anglo-Romanian relations. She repeated the message in Tozan’s letter that Malaxa factory at Bucharest should be spared. According to her account neither the rail communications nor factories and munitions works had suffered very much from the air raids but very great damage had been done to residential and particularly the lower-class quarters of Bucharest.

On the whole, her message was disappointing as both A13 and DH/44 gathered that Tozan had no concrete plans for arranging the escape of Chastelain and the American airmen nor did there appear to be much hope of his being able to do anything in this direction. With regard the possibility of Romania coming out the war she stated that the German troops were posted among Romanian at the front, and that Maniu was forming a Popular Front with all the Opposition parties, but she gave the impression that there was very little hope of any action being taken unless Anglo-American troops made a landing on a Black Sea Coast [18 ].

## **5. Run to Istanbul and the end of Tozan's activity as SOE agent**

Pants left Romania on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1944 on a small boat. From the day of his arrival in Turkey Pants was placed under the supervision by the Turkish Secret Police. On 29th July 1944 Tozan had a meeting with two SOE officials, DH/5 and DH/44. During this meeting Tozan gave them following information upon the political situation in Romania.

1. About the Opposition. Maniu’s party, although numbering several important political personages and having a very considerable following was not likely to take any action the existing Regime in Romania. They were content to have numerous meetings and discussions and apparently think that the

coup d'état in Romania can be carried out by political means only, and without bloodshed. Maniu had stated on several occasions that his coup d'états was to take place on a certain day, or a certain hour, but on each occasion an excuse has been found for not taking action. Maniu activities were closely watched and he was followed everywhere. The impression gained from what Tozan said was that Alecu and his party were insecure, and one member of the party who reports to Maniu on Mihai Antonescu's activities does exactly the same thing for Mihai Antonescu. Generally, Maniu's movements were well known and were not considered dangerous. Tozan told DH/5 and DH/44 of the discovery of a clandestine W/T station by the German son July 11th 1944 at an address he thought was in Pia Brătianu. Mihai Antonescu is reported to have been very shocked at the discovery.

2 Antonescu Governments. With regard to the Antonescu Government Tozan states that Ion Antonescu thoroughly disliked but the only remark he had to make regarding Mihai Antonescu is that he is a rather weak character, but a very able and intelligent politician. For DH/5 and DH/44 was no doubt that Tozan was a Mihai Antonescu Emissaries and yet another "string to his fiddle" in his well-known policy of reinsurance for the future. The above was further born out by the fact that he was able to leave Romania in a small fishing boat under the command of a Romanian lieutenant –commander Harting, formerly of the cruiser "Regina Maria", who was instructed to guide them through minefields [19 ].

When Tozan first arrived and contacted DH/44 he asked him, if possible to arrange for Harting to be sent to allied territory. But few days later, however, he was definite in stating that this man must return to Romania. Tozan not only was able to leave Romania quite openly but he was able to bring with him a brief case packed full of different documents, many of a confidential nature and including a private code arranged between Mihai Antonescu and himself not to mention letter from Chastelain D.H/88 and Stefan. Further he told DH/5 and DH/44 of a meeting he had at Snagov with Mihai and Ion Antonescu, at the former country residence of ex-Prince Nicholas. He states that Ion and Mihai Antonescu were very close indeed and lived at the same place. It appears also that for some time previous to Tozan's departure from Romania Mihai Antonescu warned him on several occasions to leave as quickly as possible as he, Mihai Antonescu, was unable to do anything further to protect him. Tozan's opinion on Eugene Cristescu Chief of the S.S.I. was a very low one, and he confirms that he was working closely with the Germans. He does not know Gane.

3. Chastelain. With regard to Chastelain, Tozan states categorically that an exchange of prisoners can be made immediately, and that Mihai Antonescu only was waiting for the agreement of British Government to the exchange. Tozan said that the person it was proposed to exchange. Tozan said that the person proposed to exchange for Chastelain was a Romanian caught with a W/t set in Cyprus. Both DH/5 and DH/44 gained the impression that he refers to Tanasescu, although he was unable to recall the name. It was obvious, therefore, that Mihai Antonescu did not tell Tozan, that SOE telegraphed to the Romanian Government via Gane suggesting this identical exchange. DH/5 and DH/44 believed that Mihai Antonescu did not tell Tozan and prefers to make it look as if the exchange were his idea, and thus gain a certain amount of kudos with the Allies. As regards the place and the means of exchanging prisoners, Tozan was a little vague and said that such matters were merely questions of details whereas he was interested only in main issue. At another meeting Tozan with D/H44 stated that the exchange could not be made until he returned to Romania. DH/5 and DH/44 did not tell Tozan that they were negotiating for the exchange of Chastelain through Gane. After the conversation DH/5 and DH/44 were more than ever convinced that Mihai Antonescu was holding Chastelain as a means of obtaining favorable terms with Allies. After this interview with Tozan the impression gained was that he has been definitely sent by Mihai Antonescu to contact Allies, and to ensure for Mihai Antonescu favorable condition after the War whatever Government may be in power in Romania. [20 ]

Mihai Antonescu, hoped by playing with the Allies, to be able to go to America, and to make some combination with Malaxa, who had considerable sums of money outside Romania, in America and Switzerland. Tozan was also interested in this possible combine in view of his previous requests to SOE to pay Malaxa or his protégées money in Istanbul against lei in Romania. DH/5 and DH/44

remain with the opinion that Tozan knows much more than he was willing to divulge, and was using this as a lever to go to London together Mme Stircea. He also stated that, whilst it was in no way intended as a threat, he would consider himself justified in seeking other contacts with the Allies should be unable to achieve results through DH/5 and DH/44.[21]

In these connections SOE found interesting to note that Maniu expressed his intense mistrust of the Antonescu, saying that no plans which were submitted by them should be regarded with seriousness by the British. [22]

In a SOE's report from August 15th 1944 Masterson wrote that Tozan told him that with a weeks ago he was contacted by the Finnish Minister who sonded him upon the possibilities of getting in touch with the Anglo-American governments. [23].

At the end of Second World War Tozan left Turkey [24]

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