Reflections on the American Immigrant Generation of Judeo-Spanish Jews

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The Literary, Social and Cultural Life of the Judeo-Spanish Sephardim During the Immigrant Generation (Early 1900's)

By Marc D. Angel

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In his book, THE PROMISED CITY, Moses Rischin describes New York's Jews during the period from 1870 until 1914. This was an amazing period in American-Jewish history, with hundreds of thousands of Jews pouring into New York. The lower East Side became the most densely populated section of the city, with many thousands of Jews peopling its tenements and staffing its industry.

This book, as could be expected, focuses almost entirely on the Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. There are a few scattered references to "Levantine Jews", and these references are quite superficial and contain inaccuracies. Rischin's book is a valuable study of Jewish life on the lower East Side and it is also a valuable reflection of the general ignorance concerning the Sephardic dimension of the Jewish life of the lower East Side.

Historians have not taken the time to study the experience of the Sephardic immigrants of the early 20th century. This is not very surprising. Even at the time when thousands of Sephardim were arriving in New York, the general non-

Sephardic community was relatively unaware of their existence. Since they did not speak Yiddish, since they did not fit into the "normal" Jewish patterns of life, for the most part they were either ignored or misunderstood.

Over 25,000 Sephardic Jews from Turkey, the Balkan countries, Syria and elsewhere migrated to the United States during the first two decades of the 20th century. The vast majority settled in New York mostly on the lower East Side. The largest group of these immigrants spoke Judeo-Spanish. There were also smaller groups of Sephardim who spoke Arabic or Greek. Our concern in this paper is with the Jews of Judeo-Spanish background.

Some of my research on these Sephardim appeared in an article in the American Jewish Year Book of 1973. That article included a historical background of Sephardic life in the United States, the reasons for their migration here, some of the early communal and cultural efforts; the article also includes a sociological survey of American-born Sephardim which attempts to describe the effects of the Americanization process on this group. I have also written a book, published by the Jewish Publication Society, based on the Judeo-Spanish newspaper, La America, which appeared during the years of 1910 through 1925. These works provide a comprehensive picture of the Sephardic experience in New York -- and indeed in the United States -- and this paper will only touch on some of the major points.

The Judeo-Spanish speaking Jews formed their own unique society in the lower East Side. They brought with them their cultural heritage from the Sephardic communities of Turkey and the Balkan countries. They were quick to establish restaurants and coffee houses to cater to their culinary tastes. They established their own self-help groups, their own synagogue services, their own burial societies, and their own communal organizations. Sephardim naturally gravitated to streets and buildings which were already inhabited by other of their countrymen. There were buildings and streets which were populated almost exclusively by Sephardim. By living in these enclaves, the new immigrants could feel as if their social context had not been completely uprooted, that they were still living among their own people. In particular, Sephardim were concentrated on Chrystie Street, Forsythe Street, Allen Street, Broome Street, Orchard Street, Eldridge Street and the streets in the general vicinity.

The lower East Side was hardly a beautiful place to live. Jack Farhi, writing in the summer of 1912 in La America, described the situation of the Sephardim of the lower East Side: "We live in New York! In an oven of fire, in the midst of dirt and filth. We live in dark and narrow dwellings which inspire disgust. We work from

morning to night without giving ourselves even one day a week for rest. We sleep badly, eat badly, dress ourselves badly..... We are very frugal, saving our money to send to our relatives in the old country or just hoarding it for a rainy day. We are losing the best days of our lives, the time of our youth..."

Because the setting of their lives was so dismal and so disorienting, Sephardim sought opportunities to meet their co-religionists in order to reminisce or just to pass the time of day. The Sephardic coffee houses and restaurants mirrored the hopes of the immigrants and also their frustrations. They would pass the time playing cards, drinking Turkish coffee, and discussing topics of concern to them. Because of their popularity, coffee houses not only served as recreational centers but also as intellectual and political centers. Any cause or movement which needed to win adherents would seek them in the coffee houses. Orators would make their speeches. Publicists would post their flyers and circulars on the walls. Yet the coffee houses also mirrored problems within the community. They became hangouts for idle and unemployed people, many of whom had become despondent. Also, some of the customers were short-tempered. It was not uncommon for disputes and even fistfights to break out for one reason or another.

In 1910, Mr. Moise Gadol -- a Bulgarian Sephardic Jew -- came to New York to visit relatives. He visited a coffee house and was surprised to find so many young people frequenting it when he thought they should have been at work. When he learned that they were unemployed, he was shocked. Gadol himself was a man of great culture, an active businessman in Europe, and a master of eleven languages. The poverty and despair which he saw among his Sephardic co-religionist on the lower East Side stirred him. So many of them seemed helpless. They did not know where to turn to find jobs. The programs of the Jewish community to help immigrants learn English were geared to Yiddish-speaking immigrants. The Sephardim could not benefit from these programs at all. Jewish organizations which attempted to assist immigrants often did not even recognize that the Sephardim were Jews. Many a Sephardic immigrant would complain that they were believed to be Italians, Greeks or Turks by Jewish officials. Life on the lower East Side was difficult even for the many thousands of Yiddish-speaking Jews; how much more so for the Sephardic Jews who were left almost entirely on their own.

Gadol decided to remain in New York and publish a Judeo-Spanish newspaper, La America. He felt by doing this he would be able to provide practical advice to his readers as well as to give them general enlightenment and intellectual guidance.

Moreover, Gadol convinced the leaders of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society to establish an Oriental Bureau in order to help the "Oriental" Jews -- those who were coming from Levantine countries. Gadol himself served as the secretary of the Oriental Bureau, initially as a volunteer, and spent many hours helping newly arrived Sephardic immigrants -- that others would have ignored -- to get through the immigration procedures. He also helped many people find jobs and gave advice on how to keep their jobs. In the pages of La America, he printed a glossary in order to teach Sephardim English. Interestingly, he also included Yiddish definitions, believing that since many Sephardim worked for Yiddish-speaking employers, Sephardim needed to know Yiddish in order to advance in America.

The pages of La America are a fascinating reflection of the literary, cultural and social life of the immigrant generation of Sephardim. Gadol was a brilliant journalist. Even when reading his editorials now, so many years after they were written, one senses the energy and vitality of the author. The newspaper included news items about Sephardic communities in the United States and abroad. It included poetry and some literary work. It was a forceful spokesman for Zionism, for the advancement of workers, for individual initiative. Gadol printed several articles by a person who signed her name simply as Miss A, which argued for the equality of women.

But for all the good he intended, Gadol did not achieve notable financial success with his newspaper. Quite the contrary. The paper was constantly plagued by financial problems and he would work at other jobs in order to subsidize his newspaper. None of his partnerships lasted very long, because his partners did not share his dedication to La America. They preferred to make money.

There were other Judeo-Spanish publications that appeared among the Sephardic community. The most well-known is the successor of La America, La Vara. La Vara continued publishing until the late 1940's.

The Judeo-Spanish press in New York deserves special attention. These journalistic achievements must be counted among the most important cultural ventures of American Sephardim and are testimony to the literary and creative impulses within the immigrant Sephardic community. The newspapers provided a medium for articulate Sephardic thinkers, for poets and essayists, for political activists, for religious teachers. The newspapers brought to the Sephardic masses a world of ideas and imagination and helped lift them from the dreariness of their everyday lives. Both La America and La Vara had subscribers throughout the United States and even in foreign countries. The Judeo-Spanish newspapers are

clearly the most important literary productions of the immigrant Sephardic generation.

But it was not always easy to find appreciative readers and subscribers. Due to their poverty and lack of formal education in the old country, many Sephardic immigrants had little interest in the newspapers. Enlightened and dedicated Sephardic leaders exerted great effort to stimulate the minds of the Sephardic community. One such man, Mr. Albert Amateau, noted his frustrations in an article in La America, November 29, 1912. He stated that he tried very hard to assist the Sephardim to advance. "But I found myself isolated on all sides and it was impossible for me to work against this apathy alone, without help from anywhere." This sentiment is echoed many times by Moise Gadol and by others. Professor Mair Jose Benardete, who was then a young man, accompanied the venerable Mr. Nessim Behar who sought to encourage Sephardim to attend English classes. Benardete recalls: "We went up and down the malodorous tenements, knocking at the doors of those humble, temporary homes of the new arrivals at the very hour when the men were having their supper after working long hours at very unhealthy and unremunerative jobs. Nessim Behar, the apostle, expected these bodies, whose energies had been squeezed out of them, to have enough physical stamina to respond to the appeal of the spirit." And, Behar was successful in a great many cases.

Along with these efforts to educate and enlighten the Sephardic masses, there were also efforts to organize the community into a cohesive unit. The Sephardim of Judeo-Spanish background spoke the same language; yet they too were divided into many small groups. Usually, Sephardim tended to form societies based on their city of origin. Instead of uniting into large organizations or congregations, the Sephardic immigrant, sponsored a host of small self-help groups, synagogues, and religious schools. A number of Sephardic leaders called for a united community, and one of the outspoken advocates of this idea was Moise Gadol. In 1912, the Federation of Oriental Jews was established. It served as an umbrella organization for a number of Sephardic societies which affiliated with it. While it had some success, it was a short-lived venture. None of the societies wanted to give up any of its autonomy to a more general organization. There were a variety of subsequent efforts to form a central Sephardic community, none of which had lasting success. Yet, the efforts themselves are noteworthy and testify to the progressive and broad-visioned leadership that did exist within the community. Unfortunately, this leadership could not completely succeed among the immigrants.

The individual societies -- and there were many of them -- attempted to provide a number of services to their members. Usually, the major benefit was burial. Gadol frequently argued that the Sephardim needed an organization that would take care of them while they were alive, not just societies to care for them once they were dead. As time went on, the various societies did try to expand their services to include such things as medical care and legal advice. The societies also sponsored picnics and social events to bring their members together. Most also sponsored religious services for the High Holy Days. Some of the societies had literary groups associated with them.

It should be noted here that the Sisterhood of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue had a settlement house on the Lower East Side to assist the Sephardic immigrants. It was first located at 86 Orchard Street, but ultimately moved to larger quarters at 133 Eldridge Street. This building housed a synagogue, Berith Shalom, as well as a Talmud Torah, clubs for children, classes for adults, social services and much more. It became a beehive of activity. While relations between the new Sephardic immigrants and the old established Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue were not always cordial, there was much to be proud of in the relationship.

No discussion of Sephardic life would be complete without mention of the dramatic productions in Judeo-Spanish. There were virtually hundreds of performances of plays sponsored by Sephardic societies in New York, and the enthusiasm for drama was also evident in other cities of Sephardic settlement. Often enough, the plays would be of Biblical themes; some would be translations of French plays; others would be original works by Sephardim in Turkey or even the United States. Dramatic productions were put on to large and enthusiastic audiences. The pages of La America report that plays drew capacity crowds, some numbering over a thousand people. Since the Yiddish theatre and English theatre were not comprehensible to the Sephardim, they developed their own dramatic programs and catered to their own interests.

These productions are significant because they provided creative outlets for Sephardic producers and actors, as well as writers. While the quality of the productions was mixed, individuals could aspire to play important roles before large audiences. Some of the plays were quite elaborate, with rented costumes and special theatrical effects.

A vital part of the cultural life of the Sephardic community was oratory. In those days, before the emergence of television, people were entertained and enlightened by gifted orators who could stir their emotions and give them ideas.

The Sephardic community could boast of a number of individuals who earned distinction as notable orators. One of the best known was Mr. Albert Matarasso, who came to the United States from Salonika. Matarasso was well-educated in his native city, and brought with him substantial rabbinic and general knowledge. He spoke with force and enthusiasm. People still remember him as an orator "with a silver tongue", a man who was invited to speak at many a communal gathering. We should also recall the name of Mr. David N. Barocas who spoke with eloquence and precision. For these men, oratory was an art form.

The Sephardim created their own literary, social and cultural institutions as manifestations of their own unique cultural background. They were Spanish-speaking -- but did not come from a Spanish-speaking land; they came from countries in the Levant -- but they were separated by religion from others who had come from the same lands; they were Jews -- but were culturally far different from the overwhelming majority of Jews in the United States. Consequently, they were a separate and, to a certain extent, isolated entity.