

The Sephardic Theater of Seattle

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In the first decade of this century, a small number of Sephardic Jews from the littoral of the Sea of Marmara and from the Aegean island of Rhodes made their way to Seattle, Washington. The established Ashkenazic community was at first somewhat suspicious of the newcomers' Jewishness. The Sephardim spoke Judeo-Spanish rather than Yiddish. Their family names—Policar, Calvo, Alhadeff, etc.—did not sound "Jewish." The Sephardic strangers, descendants of the Jews exiled from Spain in 1492, brought to America a Judeo-Hispanic-Levantine culture which was unknown to the Ashkenazim. As their numbers increased, their culture became transplanted and rooted in Seattle.¹

In its early phases, the Sephardic community of Seattle was plagued by disorganization, poverty, and inadequate leadership.² Although few in number, the Sephardim established three synagogues and a number of social and welfare organizations. Usually, these institutions were founded on the basis of geographical origins. Thus, Congregation Ezra Bessaroth was largely composed of Jews from Rhodes, while the Bikur Holim synagogue was organized by Jews from the Marmara littoral. Today the two synagogues are still generally divided by these geographical origins. With the passage of time, however, the Sephardic community learned to cooperate in a number of important enterprises, including the establishment of the

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¹ For a discussion of the specific nature of Levantine Sephardic culture, see M. J. Benardete, *Hispanic Character and Culture of Sephardic Jews* (New York, 1952). See also my article, "Sephardic Culture in America," *Jewish Life*, March-April, 1971, pp. 7-11. The Levantine Sephardim established communities throughout the United States.

² For a detailed account of the growth of Seattle's Sephardic community, see Albert Adatto, "Sephardim and the Seattle Sephardic Community" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Washington, 1939).

Sephardic Brotherhood and Sisterhood and the Sephardic Talmud Torah.³

Even in the early days of rivalry and divisiveness, the community as a whole did support an amateur Sephardic theater. Dramatic presentations were enthusiastically received by everyone, and the actors themselves represented various geographical origins. All plays were produced in Judeo-Spanish, some being translations, others being original creations of Seattle Sephardim. One of the most colorful of Seattle's dramatists was Morris ("Mushon") Eskenazy. An author, producer, and actor, Eskenazy was a first-rank wit, able to compose humorous verse impromptu to the amazement and entertainment of his audiences. The Sephardic Youth Club (S. Y. C.) presented plays annually in late winter on the night of the fifteenth of Shevat ("fruticas") to capacity crowds. The dramas, usually written by a group of teenagers under the guidance of Professor David Romey and others, were produced as recently as the mid-1950's. Since that time, due mainly to a decline in the use of Judeo-Spanish, plays in that language have all but ceased. Any major dramatic presentation of the Sephardim must now be in English.

The best-known producer in Seattle's Sephardic community was Leon Behar. Born at Istanbul in 1900, Behar came to Seattle in 1920 with his wife Rebecca. From a very early age he had a love for theater and had headed a highly-regarded Jewish amateur group in Istanbul. Following his production of a play, the Judeo-Spanish newspaper *El Juguetón* printed a review praising Behar and his troupe in lavish terms. It went so far as to say that "the truth is, all the amateurs seem to be genuine actors."

The odyssey of Behar's life is interesting to follow. In his early years, he worked in the shoe-repair business. During World War II, he worked in the shipyards and learned the trade of electrician. After the war, he opened a small grocery store. Yet this "common" man knew six languages fluently and wrote poems and plays as a hobby. Moreover, he had the drive to produce many plays, devoting a great deal of his time and ability to the community.

Most of Behar's productions were performed to raise money for

³ "See my article, "The Progress': Seattle's Sephardic Newspaper, 1934-35," in *American Sephardi*, V, No. 1-2 (Autumn, 1971), 91-95.

the Sephardic synagogues and organizations. Committees from the sponsoring groups arranged for the financing and publicizing of the plays. Programs were printed for each play listing the cast, supplying a brief account of each act, and offering several pages of advertisements from local merchants. The ads themselves are interesting documents since they reflect the economic life of Seattle's Jews, especially the Sephardim, in the 1920's and 1930's. Among the occupations of the Sephardim were shoe-shine suppliers, insurance agents, fruit and vegetable salesmen, furniture dealers, dry-goods salesmen, fish dealers, and shoe salesmen. A Sephardic dentist, chiropractor, and jeweler also advertised in the play programs.

The plays were usually performed in Washington Hall, which was located at Fourteenth Avenue and East Fir, then in the midst of the Sephardic neighborhood. The actors always dressed in elaborate costumes. Behar, having a flair for drama, would rent costumes for his actors rather than have them use unprofessional, homemade outfits. He took his hobby quite seriously and expected his actors to do likewise. They did, and so did the entire community.

On March 19, 1922, Behar directed his first play in Seattle. The Ezra Bessaroth sponsored *Dreyfus*.⁴ The profits from the performance went to the Sephardic Talmud Torah. The publicity committee printed circulars in Judeo-Spanish (written in Hebrew letters). It reads in part: "The amateur artists are working with great ardor to satisfy the public and to prove to be a model in the history of Seattle. This play is noted as being of such great worth that anyone who misses this occasion will be filled with regret. The piece is directed by Mr. Leon Behar, founder and director of the Jewish national troupe of Constantinople [Istanbul]." Indeed, Behar had directed *Dreyfus* in Istanbul on January 6, 1920, but that production seems to have been even more elaborate than the one in Seattle for it had contained six rather than five acts and had been accompanied by a large orchestra.

In trying to win the support of all Seattle's Sephardim, the play committee encouraged everyone to attend the performance regardless

⁴For a brief notice about Leon Behar and for photographs of the cast, program, and advertisement circular, see the Dedication Program Book of Congregation Ezra Bessaroth, June, 1971, pp. 22, 24. I am indebted to Mrs. Myer Agoado, a daughter of Leon Behar, for information about her father, for manuscripts, photographs, newspaper clippings, and advertisement circulars.

of geographical origin. The ultimate success of a Sephardic theater depended on widespread community support. The following statement was included in the circulars and advertisements for the play: "Since the Talmud Torah is open to all Sephardim regardless of their city of birth, therefore we hope that all the Sephardim of Seattle will take part in this sacred work." When the play was presented, a large crowd received it enthusiastically. The hopes of the committee and of Behar were realized. A Sephardic theater was launched.

Behar had worked diligently with his actors, and they performed well. The cast was composed largely of Jews from Rhodes, but subsequent plays included actors from many other places. Dreyfus was played by Menashe Israel; Fabris, by Jack Almeleh. The other actors were Alegra AlhadEFF, Jack Azose, Ben Cohen, Morris Israel, Pinhas Almeleh, Morris AlhadEFF, Isaac Benveniste, Joseph Souriario, and Joseph Capelluto, all of whom acted in Behar's later productions. Following the play, Morris Israel presented a lengthy monologue.

With the success of *Dreyfus* under his belt, Behar began work on another play called *Joseph Sold by His Brothers*, or *Joseph Hasadik*. The Sephardic congregations of Seattle sponsored the performance on July 16, 1922. The play, written by a cousin of Behar's in Istanbul, was basically a modern paraphrasing of the biblical story of Joseph. As produced, it contained no less than eleven acts and had a cast of forty-five actors. The advertising for the play reflected significant optimism. A notice for the play in the Judeo-Spanish paper *La America* referred to the "well-known Mr. Leon Behar, director of . . . *Dreyfus*." The ad went on to say that the costumes for the play were of great value, having been obtained from "one of the largest theatrical stores in Seattle." This was the Behar flair at work. The ad then boasted that the coming play would prove to be a model in the history of the United States. Behar's sights rose. A good audience attended the play and watched Jack Levy as Jacob, Morris Israel as Joseph, and a host of other actors.

With the momentum set, Behar regularly produced and directed other plays. Some, of course, were more lavish than others. Often dramatic presentations were given on Purim. The Sephardic theater gave the community a creative outlet and also served an educational purpose.

From time to time, Behar would produce a play which had no

innately Jewish theme. For example, on February 28, 1926, the Ahavath Ahim Congregation under the auspices of Congregation Ezra Bessaroth sponsored *Genoveva*, a seven-act drama of love and violence. Count Frederick, called to battle, had to leave behind his beloved wife Genoveva. While he was away at war, Golo, the villain, declared his love for the countess and was rejected. In revenge, Golo had Genoveva imprisoned. She had a son. Golo ordered the execution of mother and child, but Genoveva was permitted to go to the wilderness instead. Frederick returned, discovered Golo's misdeeds, and had him executed. The count ultimately found his wife and met his son.

Behar produced another major play, *Love and Religion*, on March 20, 1927, under the sponsorship of the Sephardic Bikur Holim. The play contained seven acts of passion and violence, including several attempted suicides. Leading roles were played by Joe Souriano, Rebecca Morhaime, and Morris Eskenazy.

One of the last plays that Behar directed was *The Massacre of the Jews in Russia*. Performed on December 16, 1928, it was sponsored by the Sisterhood of the Bikur Holim. Viewed from our vantage point in history, the production reflected the unity of the Jewish people. Sephardic Jews from the Levant speaking Judeo-Spanish acted out a drama about Russian, Yiddish-speaking Jews. The Sephardim did not find it incongruous that Olga was played by Sol Ovadia; Moshele, by Moshe Alhadeff; and Davidoff, by Elia Calderon. What is more, the play was highly Zionistic. In act three, the *Hatikvah* was sung.

With the advent of the Depression, Behar's work in dramatic production came to an end. He continued to write and dabble in theater, but his best days as a producer and director were over. He died in January, 1970.

The work of Behar and others in the establishment and development of a theater among Seattle's Sephardim is noteworthy. They helped to bring Sephardim of different origins together, both as actors and as spectators. They provided cultural and educational opportunities. They gave the Levantine Sephardim of Seattle reason for pride in their language and their heritage.