
Sephardic Jews in America: Why They Don't Write More

Diane Matza

To record the history of their individual and collective experience; to interpret their behavior and thinking for others; to place their own culture at the center of an imaginative life, seeing in their families and rituals the material of fiction—these have been among the voluminous written contributions to American culture of Jews of East European background. Some scholars have tried to explain the motivation behind this devotion to the written word: why did and do they write has been the question. A common answer to this question has been that the Jews are a “people of the book,” that they value education, and that they possess a long tradition of scholarship. However, recent research on the goals and accomplishments of Jews and other groups in both the immigrant generation and the one following emphasizes the influence of national background rather than religion to explain choices, behavior, opportunity, and aspirations.¹ Thus, in the case of American Jews of East European background who have contributed to the culture of their New World home, intellectual achievement in the United States is inextricably linked to the immigrant generation’s skills and occupations, to their level of education and economic status, to their exposure to political and cultural movements in Europe, and to their having left Europe in search of new identities and opportunities to develop individual talents.

There were other Jews who left Europe and Asia between 1880 and 1924, notably the nearly fifty thousand Jews from the Ottoman Empire who—despite their different languages and origins—have been termed Sephardim. Written contributions to American culture by this group and their descendants that delineate Sephardic life have not been extensive. Exploring why this has been so offers an excellent opportunity to consider how national origin shapes Jews’ cultural achievements and aspirations in the United States. My interest is in identifying those forces in the Sephardim’s experience that have encouraged and nurtured literary production and those forces that have

worked toward its neglect. To do this requires defining the nature of the Sephardic immigration, stating what the written production has been, and speculating on the reasons for the lack of a rich body of literary and analytical writings.

By no means were the Ottoman Jews who came to the United States in the early years of the twentieth century a homogeneous group. The Jews from Yemen and Syria spoke Arabic; the Jews from Yanina spoke Greek; and those from Salonica, Rhodes, Canakkale, Monastir, and other Turkish towns spoke Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish. Although they all lived under Ottoman rule, their experiences varied greatly depending on local rulers, economic conditions, European influences, and other factors. A small minority of the immigrants were urban dwellers, well-educated, cosmopolitan in outlook, and financially more secure than most immigrants. The vast majority, however, especially prior to World War I, were poor, unskilled, and ill-educated, and they had been isolated from the intellectual, political, and cultural movements that coursed through nineteenth-century Europe. After World War I, though, most Sephardic immigrant males and many females were more literate than those who had preceded them, having benefited from the proliferation of Jewish schools in the Empire in the early twentieth century.²

Among the Sephardim differences in experience, language, and synagogue customs were significant enough so that in the earliest years of their settlement in the United States these Jews from the Levant associated almost exclusively with those who came from their own small towns. By the 1920's Greek- and Spanish-speaking Jews belonged to the same associations and even intermarried. Arabic-speaking Jews in the United States have, by and large, maintained a separate and coherent community that has often eschewed relations with Jews of different backgrounds. The national backgrounds and cultural contributions in the United States of these three language groups have been similar enough, however, to consider them together in the following commentary, except on matters referring specifically to the Ladino language. For convenience, I will refer to all the immigrants from the Levant as Sephardim, although many would argue that the term "Sephardim" when used with greatest accuracy denotes only those Jews who trace their ancestry to Spain.

Sephardic Literary Productivity in America

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons behind the small literary production of Sephardic Jews in the United States and to explore why they have tended to offer certain kinds of cultural contributions over others. First, it is important to note that literary production has certainly not been unknown among the various generations of American Sephardim. During the early days of the immigrant period there were several Ladino newspapers, and though all were plagued by severe financial difficulties, the publisher and writer Moise Gadol did manage to print his *La America* on a regular basis. In 1922 the Sephardic La Vara Publishing Company began to print a newspaper titled *La Vara*, and this remained popular for more than twenty years. In the 1930's two first-generation Sephardim from the same Seattle family wrote master's theses on Sephardic life, one on the Seattle Sephardic community and one on Sephardic folklore. Leon Sciaky, a Sephardic immigrant from Salonica, wrote his autobiography in 1946; and in 1953 Jose Mair Benardete wrote the first book on Sephardic Jews to be published in the United States, *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews*. First-, second-, and third-generation Sephardim have published numerous anecdotal articles about Sephardic life in America; and two book-length works have appeared recently, Joseph Sutton's *The Magic Carpet: Aleppo in Flatbush*, a study of the Syrian community in Brooklyn; and Marc Angel's *La America*, an analysis of Moise Gadol's career and the immigrant Sephardic community in New York. Other works are forthcoming.³

In exploring why the Sephardim have not written more than they have, we should consider the following issues: the national background of the Sephardim; their attitudes toward education; their attitudes toward language, which includes the position of Ladino in the modern world; the nature of Sephardic culture; and the availability of scholarly materials on the Sephardim.

National Background

First, the national background of the Sephardim shows that poverty, isolation, and a low rate of literacy in the earliest years of immigration

are certainly the most concrete and easily documented reasons for the dearth of literary production. As most immigrants, whatever their national and religious background, the Sephardim's primary preoccupation was to earn a living for themselves and their families here and abroad. But even those who were leaders in the immigrant community, and may have been expected to write about their experiences, did not. A few of these men who received high school educations in Turkey and college educations in the United States have told me that they did not consider themselves writers. Perhaps they didn't write for a reason more compelling than this self-perception: the time constraint for those immigrants who held full-time jobs and were active in Sephardic communal life. For example, on the board of directors of the first Central Sephardic Association, begun in 1923, were lawyers, doctors, accountants, businessmen, and social service workers who typically attended general weekly meetings between 9:00 and 11:30 p.m. and spent many hours in already busy schedules participating in committee work, investigating the cost of buildings for a community center, acting as liaisons between the central organization and smaller societies, planning fund-raising activities. Writing of any kind, then, was a luxury even for those who had the skill.⁴

Attitudes Toward Education

In the early days, few did have the skill, and this leads to the second point that contributes to explaining the nature of Sephardic cultural activity: attitudes toward education. It has been a popular belief that immigrant Sephardim did not support secular education for themselves or for their children. Stories abound of first- and second-generation Sephardic girls leaving school by age thirteen and boys leaving not many years later. A Yanioti woman who emigrated at the age of five and who eventually earned a Ph.D. told me that she and one brother who became a doctor of medicine felt they had to "steal" their education in the 1920's, so opposed were their parents to the frivolous pursuit of higher education. As late as the 1950's several second-generation Sephardic men and women struggled to convince their parents they would not "come to (their) senses" and take factory jobs but would, instead, support themselves through bachelor's and sometimes master's degrees.

Sephardic attitudes about education were, however, more varied than this. They depended on where the immigrants came from, on when they came, and on how well-off and how employed their parents were. Those from smaller towns where schooling was limited and where most Jews worked as laborers were likely to follow similar educational and employment patterns in the United States. Some immigrants, men and women, from larger cities such as Izmir, Salonica, and Constantinople, had attended one of the Jewish, French, German, or Scottish schools in Turkey and pursued education for themselves and encouraged it for their children in the United States. Also, by the late teens of this century the B'nai B'rith and the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools had had a significant influence in the smaller towns. Thus, immigrants who came to the United States after World War I were almost all literate, and their children attended college in America in larger numbers than had the children of the earlier immigrants.

The preferred choices of higher study among immigrant and second-generation Sephardim were law, medicine, accounting, teaching, and social work. Students who entered programs in the humanities were few, and these often studied Spanish and linguistics and became teachers and scholars in Spanish literature and folklore, a point I will return to later. For the most part, Sephardim did not become historians, philosophers, or literary, art, or music critics, as did Ashkenazim. Neither have they been writers in the imaginative sphere. Sephardim who chose the path of education chose practical occupations, ones that would provide them with a secure livelihood.⁵

Attitudes Toward Language

The third reason for the Sephardim's not having written extensively as historians, journalists, fiction writers, and autobiographers is related to language. One aspect of language concerns audience, and in this we should find instructive the experience of Moise Gadol, the creator and publisher of *La America* and an individual whose drive to write was often messianic. One of Gadol's major complaints was that enough Sephardim did not buy his paper to keep the publishing venture solvent. Since *La America* was written in Ladino, Gadol could not reach

the Greek- and Arabic-speaking Jews, even though the paper covered issues of importance to all Jews from the Ottoman Empire. Thus, Gadol's potential audience was very small, not even the size of the entire Levantine community. In addition, since the Sephardim were poor, they frequently circulated one copy of the paper among several families. For those immigrants who might have chosen to write in their native tongue, the absence of a wide audience providing financial and emotional sustenance had to have been discouraging. And, because of the generally widespread separation in Turkey of Jewish, Christian, and Moslem communities, no Sephardic Jew would have regarded gentile Greek- or Arabic- or Spanish-speakers as a part of his/her audience.⁶

What, then, of English? What were the Sephardim's attitudes about this new language? Where were the Sephardic immigrants who struggled for mastery of the new tongue and, attaining it, used it as a tool to explain other Sephardim and their vision of America? Again, the basic need to earn a livelihood was paramount among Sephardim. Some attended English classes established especially for them, but the English-language Jewish press and other sources on the early immigrant period (when most of the immigrants were not of public-school-age but in their late teens and twenties) contain many complaints about the infrequent attendance of the Sephardim. Most of the Sephardim chose to learn English—and occasionally Yiddish—the way they had learned Turkish before emigrating, through exposure and by necessity. For many of the Spanish-speaking Sephardim, languages other than Ladino had been necessary for business and for trading with the many national minorities in the Empire; but their national language, the language of heart and home for all but the wealthiest and most Westernized, was Ladino. What I am suggesting here is that these Sephardim would not have automatically connected attaining an accepted place in the United States with learning English quickly and well. For Ladino-speakers especially, attitude toward language did not change with emigration. They retained the attitude toward language that had predominated in Turkey: The Empire was a polyglot land where the national minorities had not been compelled to learn Turkish.

The point about language is an important one. If the Sephardim came to the United States with a strong sense of opportunity denied

them, it was opportunity denied them not so much because they were Jews or because they had their own language but because of the general financial distress and political corruption that affected Christians and Moslems, as well as Jews, throughout the Levant.⁷ Thus, most Sephardim did not consider acquisition of the adopted home's language as more than a tool to ease their passage into the marketplace. No doubt this was true for the majority of Ashkenazim as well; but there was among the East European Jews, too, some desire for a new identity that made speaking and writing English a significant subject in the work of these immigrant memoirists and novelists. In the one autobiography by a Sephardic immigrant, Leon Sciaky's *Farewell to Salonica*, learning English is never mentioned. As we will see later, attitudes changed by the second generation, when many Sephardic children refused to speak anything but English.

Another point about language that worked against Sephardic literary production specifically concerns the Ladino-speaking Jews. By the nineteenth century Ladino was no longer the language of extensive secular materials it once had been. Although many Jewish schools refused to renounce Ladino as the language of instruction, some reformers and institutions, such as the Alliance schools, were trying to replace Ladino with French or Turkish. To be sure, Ladino newspapers still existed; however, while the poor and working-class Sephardim clung to the old language, those who belonged to the intelligentsia most often wrote in French, and several poets wrote in Turkish. At this time there was no effort to revive Ladino or to develop it as a language for the young and the educated; and so it was unlikely that a revival would have taken place in a new land where immigrants had more pressing matters on their minds and where few people understood them.

Cultural Factors

This is not to say that Ladino was not the basis of a coherent culture; and it is the nature of the culture of Ladino-speaking Jews that is the fourth point to discuss in explaining Sephardic cultural activity. Ladino is the language of hundreds of ballads and romanzas preserved for centuries and brought to the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. It is important to the question of why the Sephar-

dim didn't write that this culture of the immigrants was, essentially, an oral one. They sang, they told stories, and they added to the repertoire new tales and verses about their experience in America. These they traded amongst themselves at festivals and marriages, at the bath-houses before the Sabbath, on tenement steps and fire escapes during the summers.⁸

It is difficult to determine the effect this cultural activity had on the second generation. Many Sephardim considered their parents' songs and folktales to be old-fashioned and too foreign for American children to repeat or enjoy. There are countless stories of immigrant children who spoke to their parents in English rather than in the home language. Although this has been a common pattern in America among most immigrant groups, it may have been exacerbated for Lladino-speakers because the Spanish language was so closely associated with the poorer and more discriminated against immigrants from Puerto Rico. Also, when the immigrants and their children spoke Spanish or Greek or Arabic, they suffered the response of incredulity from their Ashkenazi co-religionists who believed all Jews spoke Yiddish. We may wonder whether outsiders' responses to their language bred in the immigrant Sephardim a desire for privacy and in the second generation a desire for assimilation that worked against a strong assertion of a cultural self, which may be necessary to those who write about themselves.

Fortunately, a few among the second generation have become preservers of the culture. One second-generation Sephardic woman told me that when she attended Jose Mair Benardete's Spanish classes at Brooklyn College and he asked her to collect romanzas from her mother, she began to appreciate fully her relatives' storytelling abilities and the content of their tales. She went on to do her own scholarly work in Spanish. The folklorist Emma Adatto Schlesinger was fortunate in having a mother whose home was a center for storytelling sessions and who valued education; and Mrs. Schlesinger credits a Spanish professor at the University of Washington with encouraging her to study Spanish and to write her master's thesis on Sephardic folklore.

Today, the Modern Language Association's annual convention has a special session on Sephardic cultural studies, and a number of the

scholars working in this area are of Sephardic background. Their work of criticism and interpretation is, undoubtedly, creative; but this work is, fundamentally, an act of preservation. I believe it is the fragile nature of their oral culture that accounts in part for the Sephardic stress on preservation rather than on creation of new materials in the form of autobiography, fiction, poetry, and drama. The question of audience is surely relevant here, too, for in the last several years there has been worldwide interest in sponsoring scholarship devoted to Sephardic music and folklore.

Availability of Source Materials

A fifth reason for the limited range of Sephardic literary production concerns the type of primary source materials available on Sephardim in the United States. Scholarly and analytical work on the growth and development of the Sephardic community in the United States has not fared as well as folklore studies, and there are several reasons for this as well. First, a rich source of material is the Ladino press, but though the two most regularly published immigrant newspapers, *La America* and *La Vara*, are available at the New York Public Library, few historians are able to read them.

Another problem for the historian is that other than the Ladino press, few primary sources on Sephardic life in the United States exist. The records of the Federation of Oriental Jewry, an organization begun in 1912 to aid the immigrants, were destroyed by fire. The many small burial and mutual aid societies that proliferated between 1903 and 1924 did not save written records. The records of a Harlem-based organized Sephardic community established in 1923, which were saved, have disappeared. The minutes of Shearith Israel's Sisterhood, which ran a settlement house on the Lower East Side for "Oriental" Jews, and other synagogue sources, such as the papers of David de Sola Pool, rabbi of Shearith Israel during the immigrant period, are still uncatalogued and hence unavailable to the scholar.

Nature and Size of the Sephardic Community

The last reason I want to discuss here to explain the absence of extensive and varied written production by American Sephardim is the most

powerful reason of all. It is the nature and size of this community. On the Lower East Side the Sephardic population in the early twentieth century comprised a small community within a larger and different Jewish one. Remember that compared to the fewer than fifty thousand Sephardim in America by 1924 there were two and a half million East European immigrants. This great difference in size did not result in the immigrants' immediate assimilation into the larger Ashkenazi population. Instead, the Sephardim tried to maintain the distinctiveness of their own communities. When they did move away from the sizable Lower East Side community, they settled into small communities in various parts of Brooklyn, in Harlem, and in the Bronx. Sephardic communities in other parts of the United States were already small. In all of these communities resources were too strained to support for more than a short time in any instance theater groups, newspapers, libraries, music societies, and other cultural institutions. In my view, the fragmentation of the Sephardic community, the attendant cultural inactivity that followed, and the Sephardim's existence in a world that defined Jewishness by Ashkenazi standards, combined to create in the Sephardim a sense, probably not conscious, that if they were to make their mark in America it would be because of the tangible and material gains they made, not because of who they were nor because of any cultural manifestations of their identity they might create.

Among the second generation this attitude, again not conscious, clearly persisted. Further, when the second generation chose to live in a Sephardic community and to marry Sephardim, they were, nonetheless, more distant from their cultural heritage than their parents had been. They spoke less of the home language, knew fewer songs and tales and were reluctant to sing or tell them, and they had increased professional and personal associations with the dominant Ashkenazi world. These factors necessarily worked against the Sephardim's seeing in their own culture the materials of creative expression.

Finally, it seems reasonable to suggest that the immigrant generation's experience of having felt at home in much of the Ottoman Empire meant that a need to make America theirs by having an impact on its culture was not among the immigrants' concerns and so not communicated to their children. In the second generation many Sephardim felt their own culture to be too foreign to provide the materials of a

factual or imaginative literature that would be interesting to others. They were overwhelmed by the East European Jewish culture that came to be the basis of what most people considered to be *the* Jewish American experience. And their increasing assimilation into the mainstream Jewish culture, which has been very common among the third generation, prevented them from discovering a voice of their own.

We may yet discover a fuller picture of Sephardic immigrant life in America if scholars turn their attention to completing oral histories with the immigrants whose memories are still vibrant. The time is probably past, however, for the autobiographies and fiction that would have spoken of Jewish households where before the High Holy Days the beds were spread with onion-skin-thin sheets of phyllo for pastries, where the wedding halls echoed with the sound of the mandolin and the oud, where the Yiddishim called the immigrants Italyeners until the Sephardim grabbed a prayerbook and asserted their Jewishness by reading in their lyrical Hebrew.

Notes

1. For an excellent study of the opportunities open to immigrants and the matters they could control, see John Bodnar, *The Transplanted* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
2. For information on Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire, see Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Marc D. Angel, *The Jews of Rhodes* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1978); and Harriet Pass Friedenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979).
3. For example, see Emma Adatto Schlesinger, "A Study of the Linguistic Character of the Seattle Sephardi Folklore" (M.A. thesis, University of Washington, 1935); Albert Adatto, "Sephardim and the Seattle Sephardic Community" (M.A. thesis, University of Washington), 1939; Leon Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica* (New York: Current Books, 1946); Marc D. Angel, "The Sephardim of the United States: An Exploratory Study," *American Jewish Yearbook*, 1973, pp. 77-136.
4. For information on Sephardic life in the period between 1900 and 1940, I am indebted to Victory Tarry, Joseph Papo, and Albert Amateau.
5. For information on education among Sephardic immigrants and their children, I am indebted to Dr. Rachel Dalven, Joseph Elias, Isaac Ben Joya, Freddie Hazan, David Rouso, Aaron Cohen, and others.
6. Marc D. Angel, *La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982).
7. Although Jews were among the groups that had dhimmi, or second-class, status in the Ottoman Empire, how restrictively this status was enforced varied widely from country to country. Most of the Sephardic Jews I've spoken to who are of Spanish background express a feeling of loyalty to the Empire that sheltered their ancestors who were expelled from Spain.

8. Although I am referring here to Ladino culture, these comments are probably applicable to the Arabic- and Greek-Jewish cultures, about which so much less is known.

Diane Matza teaches American literature and writing at Utica College of Syracuse University. Her research interests focus on Sephardic Jews in twentieth-century America and upon ethnic literature.