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“Sephardim since Birth”: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America*

by Devin E. Naar

We are but Jews
and our title is Sephardim.
Never were we, nor did we think of being
anything but Sephardim since our birth.¹

Appealing to these lines, the final stanza of a poem published a century ago in the New York Ladino newspaper *El Progreso*, scholars have bolstered an argument that Jews from the Ottoman Empire arrived in the United States in the early twentieth century with an unequivocal and entrenched sense of themselves as “Sephardim.” In his *Sephardim in Twentieth Century America*, Joseph Papo, a Palestinian-born Jewish teacher and social worker who served as the executive director of the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America (1944–47), asserted: “The 20th Century Sephardi immigrants arrived in New York from Turkey and the Balkans, conscious and proud of being *Sepharadim Tehorim* (Pure Sephardim)” (52). Other scholars have reinforced the notion that Ladino-speaking Jews retained “deep connections” to Spain through the ages and take for granted their self-identification with the term “Sephardim” in New York (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 10). But if we examine the excerpted poem in its entirety—and not just the final stanza—it becomes immediately clear that, a century ago, Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States did *not* automatically describe themselves as “Sephardim.” Rather, the term “Sephardi,” as a self-imposed, collective, “ethnic” designation had to be learned and naturalized, and its

parameters defined and negotiated in the new context of the United States and in conversation with discussions about Sephardic identity across the globe.² The definition of the concept of “Sephardi” remains an on-going process that, as evidenced in the recent discussions in Spain and Portugal over the prospect of granting citizenship to Sephardic Jews with ancestry in Spain or Portugal, continues today.

The poem in question begins by describing an encounter between “a Jewish youth” from the Ottoman Empire and a Yiddish-speaking Jew on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The youth, wearing “peasant clothes” from the Ottoman Empire, attempts to explain who he is to the Yiddish speaker: “Oriental Jew,” “Spanish Jew,” “a Jew from Turkey,” and, in final desperation, “Jewish Oriental.” The Yiddish-speaker, however, rejects all of these descriptors as either historically implausible or undesirable. “Spanish” Jewry ceased to exist with the expulsion of 1492. In the context of intense anti-Asian sentiment in American public discourse, did the “Orient” refer to the Far East or the Near East? Moreover, “Turkey” evoked an image of the “Terrible Turk, scimitar-wielding, mustachioed, and befezzed” (Bali 25). The author of the poem, Salonican-born Joseph Saltiel, finally interjects: “Man, don’t you know that the Americans do not get along with the Orientals/ seeing that they think we are Chinese/ or from Japan or that we wear fezzes?” The poem’s didactic conclusion, about being “Sephardim since birth,” then follows.

The poem demonstrates precisely that it was *not* self-evident for Jewish immigrants from the Ottoman Empire to conceive of themselves exclusively—or even necessarily—as Sephardim; the youth in the poem could not even come up with this term in his list of self-descriptors. The assertions that “we don’t wear fezzes” and that we “have never been anything but Sephardim since our birth” reflected *aspirations* rather than an underlying social reality. The poem encapsulated the aims of a new campaign launched in the Ladino press in New York in 1915 that sought to naturalize the term “Sephardi” in the vocabulary of Ladino-speaking Jews—of all classes and geographic origins—in order to privilege it over other available self-designations. This “Sephardi campaign”—as the Ladino press called it—sought to provide readers with the idiom and intellectual tools necessary to present themselves to the American (Jewish) public and to themselves explicitly as “Sephardim,” authentic Jews and legitimate heirs of the legacy and grandeur of medieval Spanish Jewry. The campaign sought to make Jews “Sephardi” in the United States—to compel them both to perceive of and represent themselves as Sephardim “since birth.” This chapter is thus concerned with elaborating central threads of (and opposition to) this

Sephardi campaign, which aimed to reconfigure the components of what it had meant to be a "Jew" in the Ottoman Empire in a way that would effectively and favorably resonate with "mainstream" American Jewry.

MAINSTREAM AMERICAN JEWRY

The Ladino press in the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth century associated the term "Jew" with speaking Ladino, being Ottoman, Oriental, and, for the middle and upper classes, imbued with French culture that they acquired through the education they received from institutions such as the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle (Stein, "The Permeable Boundaries of Ottoman Jewry"; *Making Jews Modern*; Borovaya). "Sephardiness" may have been implied by the term "Jew," but the term "Sephardi" itself was seldom employed in everyday discourse. *Djido*, *djudyo*, *judio*, and *israelita* appeared much more frequently in the Ladino press in the Ottoman Empire. Those Jews who departed the Ottoman Empire and arrived in the United States quickly realized that none of the primary concepts that underpinned their sense of "Jewishness" were built into the definition of "Jew" in the new world. Especially in places like New York, "Jews" referred largely to those of Eastern European provenance who spoke Yiddish and evinced *Yiddishkeit*. Yiddish-speaking Jewry symbolically stood for all American Jewry at this time (e. g., Howe xix).

Part of the issue was demographic. Between the turn of the century and 1924, when the United States Immigration Restriction Act came into effect, as many as sixty thousand Jews from the Ottoman Empire and its successor states immigrated to the United States (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 193–96). While most spoke Ladino, some spoke Arabic or Greek.³ In any case, they constituted a small minority in comparison to the more than two million predominantly Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe who came to represent "mainstream" American Jewry.⁴ The American Ladino press frequently referred to "mainstream" American Jews as *Ashkenazim* or as *Yiddishim*, the latter a recognition of the primacy of their language in shaping their collective identity.

Within this context, Jewish immigrants from Ottoman territories expressed serious anxieties about those whom they perceived to be "mainstream" American Jews, who often called into question the new-comers' Jewish identity due to differing geographic origins, culture, appearance, names, and perhaps most significantly, language. As one satirist recalled, "How could you be a

Jew when you looked like an Italian, spoke Spanish, and never saw a matzoh ball in your life?” (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 108). Jews from the Ottoman Empire went to great lengths to “prove” that they were Jews to potential Ashkenazi employers or landlords by reading from Hebrew prayer books, showing the Hebrew fonts of the Ladino newspapers, displaying their prayer shawls and phylacteries, or even revealing their circumcisions (108–49). Even when the Yiddish paper *Der Fihrer* carried an article on the newcomers from the Eastern Mediterranean in 1915 and recognized them as Jews, the newspaper portrayed them as peculiar, backward, disunited, dishonest, uneducated, impoverished, miserable, and oriental (“El artikulo puvlikado”). Other sensationalist journalistic accounts depicted bearded “Turkish Jews” wearing fezzes and ready to shine shoes for two cents (“In New York Is a City Set Apart”). These kinds of journalistic accounts appeared throughout the 1910s and 1920s and provoked controversy each time. Even Judah Magnes, the president of the New York Jewish Community (*Kehillah*), expressed little interest in the affairs of the “Oriental Jews.” While he hoped that “some way may be found of bringing about greater harmony and more united activity on behalf of the Jewish cause” (“Nuestro movimiento komunal”), he did not offer any suggestions as to how to accomplish this goal. Although it soon became clear to Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States that terms such as “Ottoman,” “Turkish,” “Oriental,” and “Levantine” carried with them negative connotations, they had begun to develop their own cultural and institutional life with these categories in mind. Within this context, their most immediate frame of reference was not Spain, but rather the Ottoman Empire.

BECOMING OTTOMAN JEWS

While Jews in the Ottoman Empire did not always recall ancestral or cultural links to Spain, they increasingly conceived of themselves as part and parcel of the Ottoman Empire, especially over the course of the nineteenth century. The absence of an undisputed awareness of their ostensible links to Spain becomes clear through the ways in which Jews in the Ottoman Empire described themselves and their language. In one of the most important works of Ladino literature, *Guerta de Oro* (1778), the Sarajevo-born merchant residing in Livorno, David Attias, referred to his intended Jewish readers in the Ottoman Empire primarily as *levantinos* (“Levantines,” i.e., “Easterners”). At the same time, he

sought to convince them to consider themselves "Spanish" because "originally our forefathers came from Spain or Portugal" (Bunis, "The Changing Faces of Sephardic Identity"). The fact that Attias had to make this point demonstrates the extent to which his readers may not have been aware of this "fact" and obviously did not think of themselves as "Spanish" even if they may have identified their liturgical customs as constituting the "Sephardic rite."

Furthermore, Jews in the Ottoman Empire primarily understood their spoken language to be a marker of "Jewish" rather than "Spanish" identity. They frequently referred to their vernacular as *judezmo* or *djudyo*. Both terms signify the "Jewish" character of the language, just as Yiddish means "Jewish" in Yiddish (Bunis, "Native Designations of Judezmo"). The fact that Jews in the Ottoman Empire continued to speak a Spanish-based language did not result from a sense of cultural allegiance to Spain, but rather, to the contrary, due to the structure of the Ottoman Empire. The sultan granted non-Muslims populations (namely Jews and Christians) communal autonomy and did not compel them to adopt any particular language, but rather permitted them to use that which each community pleased, so long as they paid their taxes and did not revolt (Rodrigue, interview; Barkey). Within this framework, the Ottoman state referred to the Jews' spoken language as *Yahudice* ("Jewish"), not Spanish (Ortayli). The perception of the language as distinctly "Jewish" even emerged in humorous contexts. When Argentine cinema arrived in Balkans in the early twentieth century, those Jews who flocked to the theater believed that they were viewing "Jewish" films because all of the actors appeared to speak "Jewish," a term they used to identify Argentine Spanish (Bunis, *Voices from Jewish Salonica* 66–67).

Rather than encourage the Jewish masses in the Ottoman Empire to consider themselves as being indelibly connected to Spain, Ottoman Jewish leaders in the nineteenth century undertook an extensive and delicate project to transform their community members into loyal Ottoman patriots. From 1839 to 1876, the Ottoman government instituted a series of reforms, known as the *Tanzimat*, which sought to turn Ottoman "subjects" into "citizens" by guaranteeing equality with regard to property rights, education, government appointments and the administration of justice for all Ottomans regardless of communal affiliation (Jewish, Christian or Muslim) (Davison; Hanioglu 72–108; Campos; Deringil; Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans*). Benefitting from these new opportunities, Ottoman Jewish elite sought to solidify their position within the Ottoman realm, opposed Zionism or any other political ideology that threatened to undermine the territorial integrity of the empire, and soon

became recognized as *en sadık millet* (“the most loyal community”) from the perspective of the Ottoman authorities (Avigdor Levy; Rodrigue; Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans*).

Celebrations organized in the major communities of Istanbul, Salonica, and Izmir in 1892 to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of 1492 significantly contributed to Ottoman Jews’ sense of connection and loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. This was the first occasion that Jews in the Ottoman Empire marked the anniversary of 1492, and they did so in a fascinating manner. Rather than lament the expulsion of their ancestors from Spain, Ottoman Jewish leaders celebrated their arrival in the Ottoman realm and the warm welcome and refuge provided by the sultan (Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans* 45–73). Promoting the incorporation of Jews into the Ottoman polity, those Jewish leaders who orchestrated the 1892 celebrations invoked Spain not to convince the empire’s Jews to consider themselves “Spanish” or “Sephardic,” but rather to fashion them into loyal Ottoman patriots. The increasingly imbedded status of Jews in their Ottoman environment also emerged clearly in several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century illuminated Jewish wedding contracts (*ketubboth*) that integrated distinctly Ottoman imagery, such as the *tughra* (the seal of the sultan) and the star and crescent—ostensibly Islamic symbols—into otherwise Jewish motifs (*Ketubboth* from Tekirdağ).

A sense that Jews from the Ottoman Empire identified closely with their empire of origin also became apparent for those who travelled to the United States. Some of the first Ottoman Jews came to the United States as merchants representing the sultan at the major world fairs in Chicago (1893), St. Louis (1904), and Portland (1905) where they showcased “Oriental” goods, such as rugs, tobacco products, or delicacies such as Turkish delights (Bali 69–89). At the Chicago fair, in particular, Jews accounted for four-fifths of the Ottoman entourage and helped install a mosque as part of the “Turkish village” where they exhibited their wares (69–89). It was also in this mosque where the Jewish representatives of the Ottoman Empire held Yom Kippur services (Cohen, “Oriental by Design”).

While some of the first Ottoman Jews who arrived in the United States at the close of the nineteenth century served as representatives of the sultan, the increasing numbers of Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean who migrated to America during the early twentieth century also continued to link themselves to their empire of origin. The early New York Ladino newspapers, first established in 1910, initially favored the designation *Turkino* to refer to their readers. The term *Turkino* explicitly evoked connections to the Ottoman Empire (or

"Turkey," as the empire was colloquially called). The term *Turkino* had entered public discourse in the context of the nineteenth century Ottoman imperial reforms. The 1860 translation of the Ottoman Imperial Penal Code rendered the Ottoman Turkish phrase *teba-yı devlet-ı âliyye* ("subjects of the Sublime State") into Ladino as *suditos Turkinos*: "Ottoman subjects" or "citizens" regardless of religion (Naar, "*Turkinos* beyond the Empire"). In the context of the United States, the term *Turkino* acquired a more specific resonance and referred specifically to Jews from Ottoman and former Ottoman territories. The Ladino press used the expression, *la kolonia Turkina*—the "Turkino colony"—to refer to the constituencies of Ottoman-born Jews settled throughout America who saw themselves as forming outposts—indeed, colonies—intimately linked to their Ottoman homeland. When the first Ottoman-born Jew in Seattle, which until World War I was home to the second largest *kolonia* after New York, gained American citizenship, the headline in the New York Ladino newspaper ran: *El primer sudito Amerikano Turkino en Siatli* ("The First Ottoman Jewish American Citizen in Seattle").

ORIENTAL, LEVANTINE AND BALKAN

As evidenced by the Jewish youth from the Ottoman Empire featured in the above-mentioned poem who appealed to the labels "Jew-Oriental" and "Oriental-Jew" as his first and last attempts to define himself, *Turkinos* in the United States often referred to themselves initially and unproblematically with reference to labels such as "Oriental." They understood the "Orient," like the term "Levant," to describe the general regions from which they came, but did not conceive of them as homelands in the ways that some of them imagined the Ottoman Empire. Like the term *Turkino*, the term "Oriental" initially garnered favor among some Jewish migrants in America from the Eastern Mediterranean although they soon recognized its ambiguous meanings and deprecatory connotations and sought to distance themselves from them.

The term was most prominently featured in the title of the Federation of Oriental Jews, established in New York in 1911. The Federation, which interfaced with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, sought to provide a framework for Jewish mutual aid associations established by Jews from different hometowns and aimed to improve the "industrial, social and educational conditions" of the "Oriental Jews in the United States of America" (Stein and

Cohen 327–28; Papo 130–35). The Federation's first president, Istanbul-born Joseph Gedalecia, defended the use of the term "Oriental":

I believe "Oriental" is the appropriate term. I feel proud to be classed with Hindus and Chinese and Japanese and other Asiatics. Besides the name reminds us of dear Turkey, to whom we owe so much gratitude and love for protecting us when the civilized countries were oppressing us. The word Levantine may be more accurate, but "Oriental" expresses the Turkish Jew, and we are nothing but Turkish Jews; although we have passed under the dominion of other countries, we still have the old characteristics. . . . The Oriental Jew never drinks; first as a Jew, and then as a Turk, he is forbidden; his ethical standard is both Eastern and Jewish, and this means something. In morals the people of the East are inferior to none. (Stein and Cohen 343)

As with the term *Turkino*, for Gedalecia, the term Oriental evoked a link to the Ottoman Empire ("Turkey") for which he expressed pride. Such a claim sought to counter the prevalent American public and diplomatic discourse that often evoked the image of the "Terrible Turk," and the despotic rule of the "Sick Man of Europe." "Levantine" may have appeared more precise in terms of geography (with the term "Levant" referring specifically to the Eastern Mediterranean). Gedalecia, however, boldly expressed satisfaction with the title of "Oriental" that counted him among Asian immigrants despite the extensive immigration restriction measures aimed against them, most detrimentally, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882).

Although some Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean such as Gedalecia took pride in designations like "Oriental," others insisted on these terms precisely in order to emphasize that the term "Sephardi" should not apply to the newcomers from the sultan's realm. The well-known Rabbi David de Sola Pool, the reverend of Shearith Israel, the famous Spanish and Portuguese synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan whose founding families had lived in America since colonial times, argued that the newcomers ought to be labeled "Levantine," rather than "Oriental" (which connoted, from his perspective, the "Far East"). He also appealed to the term "Balkan"—a term that ostensibly invokes a geographic reference point, but one that also implies the mysterious, uncivilized borderlands between East and West—to refer to those Jews from Southeastern Europe (Todorova). "The Balkan Jew is a man without needs," wrote de Sola Pool as he drew on stereotypical tropes. "He lacks even the energy and the intense ambition which animates even the poorest Eastern [European] Jews. The striving to better his lot is not very powerful. For

this reason, emigration is comparatively slight" (202; cf. Papo 51–64; Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 81–107; Stein and Cohen 328–30).

De Sola Pool and others from Shearith Israel insisted on terms such as Levantine, Oriental, or Balkan for political reasons, in order to distance themselves from the recently-arriving immigrants, and to reserve the term "Sephardi" for themselves as the true, uncorrupted, non-Oriental, upper-class descendants of the Jews of Spain and Portugal to whom the term "Sephardi" was intended to apply.⁵ The two constituencies eventually began to build bridges due to mutual need: the newcomers needed help adjusting to the new setting of America, and the Upper West Side dwellers needed the demographic weight of the new arrivals for the perpetuation of a viable "Sephardic" community of any kind. By the 1920s, the publications of Congregation Shearith Israel began to use the term "Sephardic" to refer to both groups.⁶

While the decision to consider the newcomers from the Ottoman Empire within the umbrella category of "Sephardim" constituted a major change for the leadership of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, the appeals to "Spanish" and "Sephardi" discourse also represented a rupture from the rhetoric employed on the pages of Ladino newspapers in the Ottoman Empire and even in the early American Ladino press. The "Sephardi campaign" overturned earlier efforts by Jewish journalists in the Ottoman Empire to fashion their community members into Ottoman imperial citizens during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also upended the established patterns of self-identification as contributors to the American Ladino press recognized the demeaning connotations of terms like "Ottoman," "Turkish," "Oriental," "Levantine," or "Balkan," as used in American public discourse. The Ottoman Empire's entry into the Great War on the side of the Central Powers provided further incentive for Ottoman-born Jews to distance themselves from their country and region of birth.

"SEPHARDIM BUT NOT ORIENTALS"

In seeking to transform their image and improve their reputation within the context of American and American Jewish society, contributors to the American Ladino press discovered that the term "Sephardi" resonated favorably with mainstream American Jewry. By recasting themselves as "Sephardim" through the "crowning" (*enkronamiento*)—as they called it—of the term Sephardi over

the term Oriental or *Turkino* (or the other designations), Ladino journalists believed that they could successfully legitimize themselves in the eyes of mainstream American Jewry, overturn Orientalist stereotypes of themselves, and accept the challenge of Judah Magnes to engage in more united activity on behalf of “the Jewish cause.” It is no surprise that Moise Gadol, the editor of New York’s first Ladino weekly, *La America*, served as a main architect of the Sephardi campaign, and promoted his Zionist political orientation to advocate for the unity of the Jewish people. He sought to solidify collective identification as “Sephardim” as one of the two constitutive branches of world Jewry (the other being the “Ashkenazim”).

Proponents of the Sephardi campaign could also draw on the increased resonance of the term “Sephardi” and the noble and elite status it implied as explicated in early studies of American Jewish ethnography and anthropology that relied upon pseudo-scientific theories of race. In his 1911 book, *The Jews: A Study of Race and the Environment*, Maurice Fishberg sought to counter nativist efforts to curtail the number of Jewish immigrants admitted into the country by defending Jews against accusations that they were inferior to the white race (Goldstein 110–15). Within his discussion of Jewish “race,” Fishberg explained that between the two groups of Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the latter “are very proud, and consider themselves as that branch of Israel which has succeeded in maintaining itself in its original Semitic purity, and has not suffered foreign intrusion as the Ashkenzim” (107–08). At the same time, Fishberg indicated that the “Spanish traits” the Sephardic Jews acquired through intermixing with their neighbors in Spain gave them a sense of pride, dignity, and superiority (110). The “Sephardi type,” Fishberg suggested, constituted the “ideal Jewish type,” which preserved “the traditional Semitic beauty, which in women often assumes an exquisite nobility.” Continuing with racialized rhetoric, Fishberg surmised that the “brilliant, radiant eyes” gave Sephardim their “reputation for bewitching elegance and charm. The Spanish and Andalusian women are said by some to owe their charms to these beautiful eyes, which are alleged to have their origin in the small quantities of Semitic blood which flows in their veins” (108–11).

While racialized tropes about Sephardic “superiority” had not formed part of the discourse among Jews in the Ottoman Empire, this kind of rhetoric did seem to inform the ways in which Spanish and Portuguese Jews connected to Congregation Shearith Israel had come to conceptualize themselves. Proponents of the Sephardi campaign in the Ladino press recognized that the term “Sephardi” as evoked by the leaders of Congregation Shearith Israel and

as explicated in anthropological literature could be harnessed to their advantage by claiming the designation and its associated characteristics for themselves, too. The "crowning" of the term "Sephardi" in place of "Oriental" on the masthead of Gadol's newspaper, *La America*, constituted the first success of the Sephardi campaign. The title changed from the "organ of the Judeo-Oriental colony of America" to the "organ of the Judeo-Sefaradi colony of America" in October 1915. In order to justify this semantic shift, contributors to the Ladino press wove together and transformed a variety of discourses, most significantly: the scholarship of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ("Scientific Study of Judaism") as expressed in Heinrich Graetz's famous *History of the Jews*; a movement of "philo-Sephardism" promoted by Spanish politician Angel Pulido; and the exceptional status of the city of Salonica, once home to largest and most prosperous Ladino-speaking community in the world.

As the most widely read Jewish history of the era, Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews* was translated from German into French, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian prior to the close of the nineteenth century and shaped how Jews across the globe conceptualized their history from ancient to modern times (Blutinger 133–64; Brenner 73–82). Graetz's work already attained wide repute in America since its translation into English in the 1890s (Grayzel). Back in the Ottoman Empire, the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle incorporated the French translation into the curriculum when it introduced the study of Jewish history in 1892–93 (Rodrigue, *French Jews* 83–85). *El Messeret* in Izmir even translated selections of Graetz's history into Ladino in 1897 (Benbassa and Rodrigue 110). With an awareness of the popularity of Graetz's historical narrative, the editor of *La America* began printing his own "adaptation" of Graetz's *History of the Jews* in installments in February of 1915 ("La istoria del pueblo judio"). The manner in which Graetz's work contributed to the "Sephardi mystique"⁷ by celebrating the intellectual, economic and cultural exploits of figures such as Maimonides and Ibn Shaprut during the medieval "golden age" of *Sefarad* now provided tools with which contributors to the Ladino press in America could redefine the contours of "Sephardi" identification in the United States.

An editorial entitled, "Sephardim but Not Orientals," published in *La America* in October 1915, explicitly located its first appeal and "proof" for the legitimacy of the terminological shift in the masthead of *La America* from "Oriental" to "Sephardi" in Graetz's *History of the Jews*. It is significant that rather than refer to an authority within the textual tradition among Jews in the Ottoman Empire in order to justify the validity of the use of the term

"Sephardi" as a self-designation, the author of the editorial, Bension Behar, appealed first to Graetz. After describing his personal observations about how the term "Oriental" evoked disdain among the American public and concluding that it should be understood as a "false name given to us without reason," Behar appealed to Graetz: "The celebrated historian Graetz, in all of his accounts of Jewish history during the period of *galut* [exile] tells of the glorious acts of our ancient ancestors in Spain like: Yehuda Ha-Levi, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ibn Gabirol. . . . [History] calls them 'the Sephardim' (Spaniards)" (Behar).⁸ The fact that external—and therefore "objective"—sources set the terms of this "Sephardi" identity served as a legitimizing factor: i.e., both Graetz and "History" called "our ancient ancestors" Sephardim. Remarkably, the fact that Behar felt compelled both to place in quotes and to gloss the term "the Sephardim" indicates the extent to which he surmised his intended readers would not be familiar with his usage of the term and its explicit link to Spain.

Furthermore, Behar expanded the definition of "Sephardim" to include not only his "ancient ancestors" but himself and his contemporaries, as well. Behar's definition of Sephardi implied that the grandeur of the Sephardi Jews continued in the "Orient" to the present day, and, in so doing, remarkably overturned Graetz's descriptions in *History of the Jews*. While Graetz elevated the status of Jews in medieval Spain and declared them the first to achieve status as "Europeans," he did not claim that their descendants in Ottoman lands preserved the admirable characteristics of their ancestors. In contrast, rather than continue to refer to "Spanish Jews," he referred to "Turkish Jews" in the Ottoman Empire. According to Graetz, within the context of the allegedly backwards Orient, "The glory of the Turkish Jews was extinguished like a meteor, and plunged into utter darkness" (Graetz 4.630). In Graetz's interpretation, not only did "Turkish Jews" lose their glory, but also they no longer deserved to be included in his narrative. Excised from his account altogether after the seventeenth century, Graetz re-introduces them as "Asiatic Jews"—yet another semantic shift and "downgrade"—who fall victim to the Damascus blood libel of 1840 (Graetz 5.663; Naar, "Fashioning the 'Mother of Israel'").

In order to overcome this negative portrayal and to demonstrate continuity between the great medieval Spanish Jews and their descendants in the Ottoman realm, Behar rewrote the narrative. He disassociated his constituencies from the Orient by naturalizing them in the West, and by recasting Spain, rather than the Ottoman Empire, as their authentic homeland. "The Spanish language and the land of Spain," Behar asserted, "are not Oriental and similarly the official language in Turkey is not Spanish. And we who arrived here [to

the United States], immigrants from Turkey, were there [in Turkey] merely as guests for 400 hundred years" (Behar). The author thus sought to present these Jews as *from* Spain, speaking "Spanish," and having sojourned in "Turkey" without becoming part of the local society, and thus remaining outside the negative "Oriental" characteristics assumed to be prevalent in their surrounding environment. Despite his claims that Jews in the Ottoman Empire spoke "Spanish," Behar ironically utilized the Turkish-derived term for "guests" (*musafires*) and thereby unwittingly offered evidence that Jews in Ottoman lands actually absorbed linguistic elements from their neighbors even if he outwardly denied this very phenomenon.

In addition to appealing to and revising the scholarship of Heinrich Graetz, promoters of the "Sephardic campaign" also drew on another source external to their own tradition in support of their agenda: Spanish political discourse. A campaign of "Philo-Sephardism" launched at the start of the twentieth century by Spanish politician Angel Pulido provided contributors to the "Sephardi campaign" in New York in 1915 with further "objective" proof for their "Sephardi" and thus "Spanish"—rather than Oriental—character. In his campaign, Pulido sought rapprochement between Spain and those whom he characterized as "Spaniards without a homeland" (*Españoles sin patria*, the title of his 1905 book)—i.e., the descendants of the Jews expelled in 1492 who dwelt throughout the "Orient" and whom Pulido "discovered" while aboard a cruise ship on the Danube River. Pulido developed an argument that the decline of the Spanish empire—most recently the loss of Spain's American colonies in 1898—could be traced back in part to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, which constituted an "excision from the Spanish national body." At the core of Pulido's thought was a concept of racial heterogeneity: Jews had provided strength to the Spanish nation, and now, more than four hundred years later, they could again—at least insofar as they represented an untapped commercial market in the Levant.⁹ These sentiments ultimately led the government of General Primo de Rivera to pass a decree in 1924 that allowed Sephardic Jews to claim Spanish citizenship or consular protection within a period of six years and with other restrictions. While several hundred Jewish merchants in places like Salonica gained consular protection, which offered economic benefits, very few "returned" to Spain at the time (Avni).

Reimagining the Jewish vernacular of the Ottoman Empire as a form of "Spanish" served the interests of those promoting the Sephardi campaign. Just as Pulido sought to "reawaken" connections to Ladino-speaking Jews whom he hoped to incorporate into a new Spanish imperial enterprise in the

Eastern Mediterranean, Ladino-speaking Jews also took advantage of Pulido's arguments and mythologies to legitimize their own claims to "Spanish" affiliation. The New York Ladino newspaper, *La Bos del Pueblo*, quoted a letter to this effect signed by Pulido in favor of "Sephardi Jews" (*djidios sefaradim*) during World War I: "Despite being dispersed from their former homeland [*vieja patria*], Spain did not forget the Sephardim, and they did not forget Spain, but rather continue to call themselves Spaniards and religiously conserve the customs and traditions like long-lost members of the Spanish family who are established in foreign lands. . . ." (El editor). The editor provided commentary: "This is another proof to overturn the arguments of those who believe that we are not Spanish Jews. When we ourselves as well as Spain consider us as such, who can have the audacity to deny it?" In this discussion, Spain rather than the Ottoman Empire emerged as the "former homeland," and the subjects of the discussion were understood to be neither Ottoman, *Turkino*, Oriental, Levantine, or Balkan Jews, but rather "Sephardim" and "Spanish Jews."

The challenge remained for Ladino-speaking Jews of the early twentieth century to link themselves to the grandeur of medieval Spanish Jewry. Even when Jews of the Ottoman Empire were accepted as the descendants of medieval Spanish Jews, a perception remained that, at best, they represented "fallen Sephardim" who did not preserve the cultural legacy of their ancestors (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 129–32). In order to counter arguments about cultural discontinuity, supporters of the Sephardi campaign elevated the status of the city of Salonica, once home to the most dynamic Ladino-speaking community in the world, and held it up as an exceptional case that unquestionably demonstrated the link with Spain and with European civilization, more broadly.

La America cultivated a particularly complementary image of Salonica and of Salonican Jewry. "The Jew of Salonica is developed, intelligent, a man of culture and taste," *La America's* editor Gadol wrote in 1915. "The city [of Salonica], thanks to them [the Jews], really has the character of a European city, in the fullest sense of the word [European]" ("La emigrasion de Salonik"). Gadol's praise for the Jews of Salonica persisted in the American setting. He highlighted the exceptional standing of the Salonican Brotherhood of America, the largest mutual aid society of Ladino-speaking Jews in America. "Composed of a well-enlightened element," the Brotherhood, according to Gadol, promoted the "moral" and "material" progress of its members in addition to offering healthcare and burial services common to all immigrant associations.

Gadol further indicated that Salonican Jews displayed a "progressive" stance because the Brotherhood invited all those interested to attend its annual meetings, unlike other associations, which met behind closed doors ("La Ermandad Salonikiota en New York"; "El progreso de la Ermandad Salonikiota").

Contributors to the Ladino press further harnessed images of the economic prowess and cultural distinctiveness of the Jews of Salonica to provide a further link to medieval Spain. For example, in an article published in 1916 in the *Jewish Immigration Bulletin*, the author conceded that in Salonica, the "conditions of living are somewhat better, but in general the situation of the Oriental Jew is miserable" (Auerbach, "The Levantine Jew"). In response, the Salonican-born journalist and lawyer Shimon Nessim provided a litany of statistics, drawn from the National Almanac of the Jewish Hospital of Salonica, to indicate that Jews predominated in almost every industry in Salonica. He concluded that the situation of the Jews in Salonica was not only "somewhat better" than those in other communities, but rather, "we see that the Jew of Salonica is much more capable than the peoples [*pueblos*] that surround him" ("Sefaradim-Orientales"). Nessim argued that not only were Jews in Salonica more successful than other Jewish communities in the region, but also more advanced than either Turks or Greeks.

Shimon's brother, Maurice Nessim, also a journalist, similarly appealed to the case of his native city in order to establish the link between medieval Spain and the present. This particular debate circled around the alleged character of "Oriental" Jewish women as described in another journalistic expose. The article argued, "the Oriental women in New York pretend to be Spanish, when correctly they are nothing but Turkish Jews." Seeking to overturn this claim, Maurice Nessim drew on evidence from his native city: "The very authentic dress of the women of Salonica, the *kofiya*, is the ancient dress of Castile, Spain" (cf. Juhasz). To his point about clothing, Nessim added that Jewish women in Salonica continued to sing the Spanish *romansas* they brought with them from Spain. Furthermore, he argued, Jews in Salonica regarded themselves to be the "direct descendants of the Jews who suffered exile [*egzilo*] from Spain." The fact that the names of their synagogues recalled places in Spain provided further evidence of this point. Nessim hoped that the example of the Jews of Salonica, and especially the city's Jewish women, would provide the necessary evidence to demonstrate that their character should be properly understood as "Spanish" rather than "Oriental" ("Protestacion de Maurice Nessim").

THE SEPHARDI CAMPAIGN: RESISTANCE AND RECONCILIATION

The Sephardi campaign not only sought to recast Ottoman, Oriental, and Levantine Jews as “Spanish” and “Sephardi,” but also sought to displace another set of self-designations involving local, town-based identifiers, such as *Selanikli*, *Izmirli*, *Rhodesli*. Local designation was likely the most entrenched, most obvious method of self-identification. Like many immigrants in the United States, including Yiddish-speaking Jews who established an array of *Landsmanschaft* organizations, Ladino-speaking Jews initially organized themselves into mutual aid societies according to town of origin. Whereas the “crowning” of Sephardi in place of terms such as “Oriental” came more readily, the substitution of the term “Sephardi” for city-based labels met considerable resistance. In addition to resisting the name change due to local attachments, other Ladino-speaking Jewish leaders in New York opposed the Sephardi campaign because they objected to the Zionist leanings of its main promoters. The conclusion of World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire ultimately resulted in reconciliation among the various factions debating the merits of the Sephardi campaign, whose proponents secured a number of victories and established a “pan-Sephardic” taxonomy.

In terms of city-based affiliations, groups from Salonica, Adrianople, Rodosto, Silivria, and Chorlou founded their own societies in 1915 and reinforced local identities at the same time that the movement launched to abandon them began. “Here in America,” the editor of *La America* asserted as part of the Sephardi campaign, “no one asks who you were [before you arrived] and where you came from. A Sephardi immigrating here forgets all of his past in the old world and becomes an American Sephardi” (“Sefaradim orientales i portugezes”). But many of these potential “American Sephardim” expressed serious reservations about relinquishing identification with the “old world.” While the thrust of editorials in *La America* presented aspirations for a unified Sephardi community, in practice, the various groups often preferred independence and attended to their own members’ needs or raised funds to send back to their native towns on their own (e.g., “Por remitir moneda a Izmir”; “Ayudo a los sufrientes de la gera en Angora”). In one instance, thirty representatives of organizations from the Dardanelles, Izmir, and Gallipoli initially put up resistance until a flyer campaign convinced them to “embrace the crowning [*enkronamiento*] of the name Sephardi over the name Oriental” (Saltiel, “Una grande viktoria”). These individuals did not necessarily perceive of their separation as *sin’at achim* (“hatred among brothers”), as some of their detractors claimed, but rather as reflecting a legitimate understanding of difference and independence

among the groups (Sevi). As late as 1930, linguist Max A. Luria argued that twenty-two separate "dialects" of Ladino could be found in New York, each city of origin home to a distinct "dialect" (Luria).

Like those who sought to preserve local identity, political opponents to Zionism also resisted the Sephardi campaign, most significantly, the leaders of the prominent Salonican Brotherhood of America in New York. Zionist advocates in favor of the Sephardi campaign, such as *La America's* editor, Gadol, believed that the creation of a unified American *Sephardi* community would serve as the prerequisite for acceptance by mainstream American Jewish institutions, such as the *Kehillah*. Other contributors to the Ladino press similarly advocated for the creation of a Sephardi community to replace the Oriental Jewish Federation: "Is it that there is some federation of occidental Jews in New York so that we should call ourselves by the opposite name? The *Yiddishim* formed their Yiddish community [i.e., the *Kehillah*], and we should form our Sephardi community" (Avi). With this goal in mind, Gadol urged the Brotherhood to support his position that "we should call ourselves American Sephardim and not Orientals" and implored the Brotherhood to take the lead so that "all the institutions that do not recognize us as Jews because we do not speak Yiddish will understand that we are Jews, children of Jews, too" ("El progreso de la Ermandad Salonikiota"). Leaders of the Brotherhood initially rejected Gadol's proposition. Instead, they preferred a federative communal structure—much like the principle on which the Socialist Workers' Federation in Salonica operated and in which they had been active members (Naar, "From the 'Jerusalem of the Balkans' to the '*Goldene Medina*'" esp. 449, 454, 466)—in order to provide space for the perpetuation of local customs and identities and presumably to eschew the goals of Jewish nationalism ("Anual miting de la Ermandad Salonikiota de Amerika").

Despite these initial hesitations regarding the crowning of Sephardi over the term Oriental or *Turkino* or town-based designations and the political reservations about the Zionist motives underpinning the movement, the logic of the Sephardi campaign ultimately seemed to triumph, especially after the final dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the First World War. With the end of the Ottoman Empire, terms like *Turkino* and "Ottoman" lost their resonance. Contributors to the Ladino press in America in search of new ways to conceptualize their sense of community—as the dissolved Ottoman Empire no longer could provide a unifying framework—recognized that the term *Sephardi* traversed the divides between the new states that emerged out of territories of the former Ottoman Empire. As a sign of this transformation, in

1921, the *Salonican* Brotherhood of America reincorporated as the *Sephardic* Brotherhood of America and opened its doors to Ladino-speakers from towns other than Salonica (Alberto Levy). With this renaming, *Selaniklis*, *Izmirlis*, *Monastirlis*, and *Rhodeslis* (and thus those Jews from cities located within the borders of Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Italy, respectively) were recast as “Sephardim” in America.

With new usages of the term “Sephardi,” a slippery taxonomy also emerged. “Spanish” no longer always equaled “Sephardi,” but rather became one of four types of Sephardim. The others included “Arab” (from Aleppo and Damascus, for example), “Greek” (“Romaniote” Jews from Jannina), and “Portuguese” (those affiliated with Congregation Shearith Israel who previously held the monopoly on the term “Sephardi” in the United States), all of whom, it was argued, while not necessarily sharing common ancestry, nonetheless shared religious customs or a style of rabbinic jurisprudence vaguely linked to Spain—or at least common status as “non-Ashkenazim” (e.g., “Kualo devemos azer”). It is noteworthy that Persian Jews were not initially included in this schema, perhaps because so few Farsi-speaking Jews resided in the United States at the time, or perhaps because they were perceived to be a distinct, non-Sephardi group. Regardless, the “Sephardi” press in the United States never published in any of the other prospective “Sephardi” languages—neither Greek nor Arabic—and began using English in addition to Ladino only in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Naar, “From the ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans’ to the ‘Goldene Medina’” 471). While Ladino newspapers dedicated occasional articles to the Arabic- or Greek-speaking Jews, the primacy of Ladino in the Sephardic American press, through World War II, indicates the extent to which the Ladino-speaking Jews retained the most prominent voice among the various newly concretized Sephardic populations in the United States. The formulation of such a “pan-Sephardi” taxonomy, however imprecise and convoluted, continues to resonate today.

THE RISE OF SEPHARDIC NATIONALISM

Despite the successes of the Sephardi campaign, the processes of recasting ethnic vocabularies occasionally wandered well beyond the initial Zionist impetus as evidenced by the development of a conception of “Sephardi nationalism.” Should Spain, rather than Palestine, constitute the authentic Sephardic

homeland? Should "Jews" and "Sephardim" be conceptualized as two distinct groups or, drawing on racialized language, should Ashkenazim and Sephardim be construed as two different peoples? Should a Hispanic or Spanish framework, rather than a Jewish one, provide the primary lens through which to view the Sephardi experience?

Early on in the Sephardi campaign in 1915, even Gadol became wary of the ultimate implications for his readers if they were to internalize the argument that Spain constituted the true homeland of the Sephardic Jews. Where would that leave the Land of Israel? Such apprehension led Gadol to conclude that while Spain may be understood as a place of origin for Sephardic Jews, it must not be conceptualized as a place to which Jews should be tempted to "return":

We cannot undertake such a campaign [for the "return" of the "Spanish Jews" to their "native country"] knowing the sad history of the Inquisition and that we would not be so ignorant as to return to a country that left us with such sad memories . . . we labor for the honor and dignity of our nation under the new Jewish national ideal (Zionism) to make our people return to our ancient fatherland, "Palestine," and never to another country in any part of the world, being that our conviction is that only in this way will the Jewish question be resolved. ("Espanya i los Sefaradim")

While Gadol objected to the concept of Spain as a living homeland for Sephardic Jews, other commentators took exception to the whole "Sephardic campaign," which one writer construed to be an "attempt to convert our Jews, who call themselves Jews, to Sephardim."¹⁰ Within this context, the recasting of "ethnic" vocabulary permitted some Ladino-speaking Jews to refer to themselves as "Sephardim" in contradistinction not only to Ashkenazim, but also to "Jews," to whom some Ladino-speakers began to refer in the third person (Glazier esp. 309; Stern 136). A Jew from Monastir who settled in Indianapolis recalled this phenomenon: "We used to speak about the Jewish guys, and the Sephardics were different. We didn't speak of ourselves as Jewish guys. Really strange" (Glazier 309).

Taking this line of argument to its logical conclusion, in the 1930s some Ladino-speaking intellectuals began to promote a movement of *nasionalismo Sefaradi* ("Sephardic nationalism") that emphasized the Spanish character of Sephardic Jews and sometimes drew on the rising discussions of racial difference that permeated public discourse during the interwar years. The Istanbul-born physician Vitali Negri (1887–1972), for example, argued in the New

York Ladino newspaper, *La Vara*, that the Sephardim, who “are classified as a group under this name in order to maintain our prestige,” should establish their own “national council” to represent their interests before the Ashkenazim and American society, in general, through the organization of mass meetings, parades, and demonstrations to showcase the interests of Sephardic Jewry (“El nasionalismo Sefaradi”). The aim was less to preserve a distinctive Sephardic culture—intermarriage between Sephardim and Ashkenazim was virtually non-existent until after World War II—but rather to gain recognition on the part of mainstream American Jewry and American society, more generally. Salonican-born scholar Henry Besso (1905–93), who received his masters degree from Columbia University, went further in arguing that Sephardim and Ashkenazim constituted two distinct “national” groups, in parallel to Spaniards and Poles, who happened to share a common religion. “The truth,” Besso proclaimed, “is that the Sephardi appears to be nothing like the Ashkenazi, whether a German or Pole. The Sephardi, to the contrary, has inherited, above all, the Iberian type and physiognomy” (“Sefaradi y Ashkenazi”). Part of the same circle of Sephardic intellectuals with Besso, Dardanelles-born Mair Jose Benardete (1889–1985), who became a Spanish professor at Brooklyn College, inaugurated the first university-level program in Sephardic Studies in the 1930s under the auspices of the Hispanic Institute at Columbia University rather than as part of Jewish Studies. Within this context, the affinity to the Hispanic world proved more alluring and conducive to an exploration of Sephardic history, culture and language, and also prompted Benardete to advocate in favor of the “Castilianization” of Ladino. The title of Benardete’s thesis demonstrates the new emphasis on and argument in support of the Spanish link: *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews* (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 161–73).

An emphasis on “Spanish” or “Hispanic” aspects of Sephardic Jewry also permeated popular discussions during the 1930s and into the period of the Second World War. Writing in 1935 in English in *El Ermanado*, the annual review of the Sephardic Brotherhood, about the responsibilities of the next generation of Sephardim now coming of age, Sylvia Florentin presented the main challenge as one that required the negotiation of “our Spanish heritage” and “the heritage of America.” She mentioned neither “Oriental” nor “Jewish” heritages, the first omission signifying the result of the Sephardi campaign, and the second, of Sephardi nationalist sentiment that envisioned “Sephardi” identity as synonymous with “Spanish” and as separate and even unrelated to “Jewish” (Florentin). The most extreme version of this kind of rhetoric emerged within the context of the Second World War, in which a Salonican-born journalist

who contributed often to the American Ladino press, Sam Levy, then living in France, wrote to the German Embassy in Paris and argued that the Sephardim of Salonica, because of their Spanish descent, should be exempted from treatment intended for Jews because Sephardim should be understood properly as a separate race: "Ario-Latins of the Mosaic faith." The German Embassy investigated the issue, but ultimately concluded that Sephardim did not constitute a distinct race (Dublon-Knebel 84–95).

The effort to make such a claim demonstrates yet again the strategic utility of arguments about Sephardic difference both in the United States and beyond. The possibility of conceptualizing Sephardim and Ashkenazim not as two kinds of Jews, but as two separate peoples, and the possibility of conceptualizing Sephardim as inheritors not of a Jewish legacy, but rather of a Spanish one, represented the extent to which the arguments implicit in Sephardi campaign could wander astray from its intended, unifying Jewish framework.

BECOMING SEPHARDI JEWS IN AMERICA AND BEYOND

The rise of antisemitism and the Second World War facilitated the ultimate rapprochement between "Sephardim" and "Ashkenazim" in America. The Sephardic Brotherhood established the Central Sephardic *Jewish* Community of America in 1941. The inclusion of the term "Jewish" symbolized how its architects sought to be perceived: not as Sephardim, separate from Jews, but rather as Sephardim, a kind of Jew.¹¹ This transformation signified an additional success and permutation of the Sephardi campaign launched first during the First World War, and also serves as a reminder that the meanings and interrelationships between categories such as "Jewish" and "Sephardic" were not preordained but shaped and redefined in different times and places by a variety of historical actors. The promoters of the Sephardi campaign, all recent immigrants to the United States who sought to positively shape their fate in their new political and cultural environments, privileged, naturalized and democratized the term "Sephardi" as a self-designation and remade Ottoman, Oriental, Salonican, or Rhodesli *Jews* (and perhaps to a lesser extent, at least initially, Greek- and Arabic-speaking Jews) in America into *Sephardi Jews*.

The possibilities of creating this "pan-Sephardic" group conceptualization in America emerged as a result of the Sephardi campaign begun in 1915 in New York, and the echoes of that effort remain alive today as represented by

organizations such as New York's American Sephardi Federation, whose programs cover the breath of the so-called non-Ashkenazi Jewish world (Aviv and Shneer 148–49). Simultaneously, the current effort by the Spanish government to invite certain Sephardic Jews to claim Spanish citizenship has provoked the disentangling of the inclusive, pan-Sephardi category in an attempt to separate those Jews who can claim descent from Spain.

The rhetoric surrounding the Spanish citizenship discussions remarkably echoes that of the Sephardi campaign from a century ago, especially the elements inspired by the Philo-Sephardic movement of senator Angel Pulido. At that time, Ladino-speaking Jews harnessed Pulido's claims to counter deprecating Orientalist charges that they were backwards and uncivilized and sought to demonstrate, to the contrary, that they should be understood as the European, cultured, and industrious descendants of the great sages of medieval Spain, fit for participation in mainstream Jewish life. Ironically, however, the recasting of Ladino-speaking Ottoman-born Jews as "Sephardim since birth" substituted one mythology for another. The facile perceptions that Sephardic Jews preserved medieval Spanish intact and retained unhindered cultural loyalty to Spain despite more than four centuries of residence in the Ottoman Empire constitute the flipside of Orientalist imagery. Both present a swathe of the Jewish population as static and unchanging, whether as linked to the backwards Levant, or as relics of medieval Spain. Both images—myth and counter-myth—omit the intense dynamism, cultural innovation, and political change that characterized generations of Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire. The processes by which Jews in the Ottoman Empire began to think of themselves as Ottoman citizens in the nineteenth century, and those by which Jews from the Ottoman Empire began to recast themselves as "Sephardim since birth," constitute two major transformations in self-conception that exemplify dynamism rather than stasis.

Ultimately, terms such as "Ottoman" or "Sephardi" represent just two of a variety of layers of identity, affiliation, and loyalty to which individuals and collectivities appealed as part of a strategy of empowerment through which to shape their sense of self and community (Mays, "Transplanting Cosmopolitans"). These terms also remind us of the constructed nature of individual and collective identities. While the invocation of certain terms and essentialized characteristics introduce a sense of order, such a process also blinds us to the realities and complexities of a changing Jewish world in which permeability and mobility characterized the relationships between various Jewish cultural and geographic centers in Europe and beyond. How, for example, are

we to classify the founder of *La Epoca*, the major Ladino newspaper published in Salonica? As the publisher's name implies, Saadi Besalel Levy Ashkenazi (1820–1903) descended from an Ashkenazi family of printers that arrived in the Ottoman Empire from Amsterdam in the eighteenth century. Within a few generations the family became fully "Sephardic" in culture and language, even as relatives found their way from Salonica to France, Italy, Brazil and the United States during the twentieth century. Saadi's son, Sam Levy, also a journalist, became one of the greatest defenders of the Ladino language. Yet, in his memoir, written in none other than Ladino, Saadi reflected that his family preserved the Ashkenazi custom of not naming children after the living (Rodrigue and Stein).

Launched a century ago, the "Sephardi campaign" intensified the processes of classification through which the term "Sephardi" emerged as a primary self-designation for Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States who sought to link themselves to the "golden age" of medieval Spanish Jewry, to claim "European" rather than "Oriental" heritage, and to achieve rapprochement with mainstream American Jewry. In other locales, these kinds of terminological shifts transpired at different times, as in the case of France, which became home to a large contingent of Ottoman-born Jews. There, the *Association Cultuelle Orientale de Paris*, established in 1909, did not change its name to the *Association Cultuelle Sephardite de Paris* until 1930. The higher social standing of these former Ottoman Jews, due in part to their predisposition to French culture, situated them as interlocutors between the established Jewish community in France and the recently arriving Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe (Hyman 78; Malinovich 127–29). The transformations and permutations of nomenclature varied from place to place (Lehmann; Mays; Guttstadt; Baer; Brodsky; Bejarano; Mays, "I killed her because I loved her too much"; Ben-Ur, "Identity Imperative"; Stein, "Citizens of a Fictional Nation").

As we have seen in the American context, not all agreed initially to recognize themselves as "Sephardim since birth" either because they preferred to highlight their Oriental or Ottoman affiliations, privileged their sense of connection to their town or city of origin, or opposed the ideological underpinnings of the movement. Some even extended the emphasis on their "Spanish" character to argue that Sephardim and Ashkenazim constituted two distinct peoples. Others argued for the creation of a "pan-Sephardi" community in the United States and beyond that would include not only Ladino-speaking, but also Arabic-, Greek-, and later Farsi-speaking Jews. The unresolved debates and discussions that developed a century ago in the United States over who

counts as a “Sephardic Jew”—and what that designation ought to mean—echo today as Spain seeks to “restore” nationality to “Sephardic Jews” living across the globe who have another opportunity to shape their sense of self and their public image.

Notes

- * Based on Naar, "Reformuler l'identité"; and "Making Jews 'Sephardic' in Twentieth Century New York."
1. Saltiel, "Somos . . . Kualo?" 163; Ben-Ur, "Where Diasporas Met"; Papo 54. Further study of the varieties of cultures in the Americas classified as "Sephardic" remains a desideratum pointed out by Stein, "Sephardi Identities."
2. I follow Matthias B. Lehmann's suggestion to consider "changing and contingent formations of Sephardi 'groupness' in changing contexts," proposed in his "Rethinking Sephardi Identity: Jews and Other Jews in Ottoman Palestine."
3. On Arabic-speaking Jews in the United States, see Sutton; on Greek-speaking Jews (*Romaniotes*), see Dalven; Ikonomopoulos; Fleming 1–12.
4. The considerable numbers of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe joined an already established population of German-speaking Jews, as well as a small contingent of *Sephardi* Jews of Portuguese origin established in America since colonial times and affiliated with synagogues such as Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. For an overview, see Diner.
5. Ben-Ur draws a parallel between the relationship among "old" Sephardim and the "Oriental Jews," and German Jews and recently arrived Eastern European Jews, derisively called *ostjuden* (*Sephardic Jews in America* 109–10).
6. Internal publications of Shearith Israel preferred the term "Oriental" through World War I, yet in the 1920s, Shearith Israel recognized the Oriental Jews as one of the two kinds of Sephardi Jews: "the Old Sephardim from Shearith Israel and the more recently arrived Sephardim from the Orient" (Menken; "The New Sephardic Jewish Community Center").
7. On Sephardic mystique, see Schorsch 71–92; Efron; Stein, "Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewries since 1492."
8. Cf. Ben-Ur's discussion of this article in *Sephardic Jews in America* 99–100. Translation of original text by Naar in Stein and Cohen 343–46.
9. Pulido's chief works on this topic included *Israelitas españoles y el idioma castellano; Españoles sin Patria y la Raza Sefardi*. See inter alia Goode.
10. Auerbach, "The Sephardic Jews of New York"; cf. the discussion of this article in Ben-Ur, "Where Diasporas Met" 164–65.
11. The Sephardic Brotherhood of America changed its name to the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America in 1947. Papo 310.

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