Editors' Introduction

Autobiographies and memoirs have long captured the attention of students of European Jewish history and culture; in recent years they have been hailed as among the most evocative sources of modern Jewish life, sources whose very production reflected, narrated, and even ushered in modernity. The rich body of memoirs and autobiographies that Jews have penned or translated into English—and, no less, the sophisticated critical scholarship on these sources—have opened entirely new vistas into the Jewish past and into the lives, times, and self-representation of its actors. This diffuse genre of writing, which (with much debate) scholars speak of as "life writing" or "self-narrative," also made its appearance in the Sephardic world. This book—which includes a transcribed and translated edition of the memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi (1820–1903) from its original *soletreo* (Ladino cursive) form—is the first known memoir in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language of the descendants of the Jews expelled from Iberia who settled in Ottoman southeast Europe and Asia Minor beginning in the fifteenth century. Perhaps more important, this memoir paints a vivid portrait of a Jewish cultural tributary (the Sephardic heartland of southeastern Europe) just beginning to tip over the edge of a colossal waterfall of change.

Sa'adi[1] was a resident of the vibrant port city of Salonica (present-day Thessaloniki), an Ottoman, a Jew, an accomplished singer and com-

1. For historical reasons, we choose to refer to "Sa'adi" throughout our introduction. Before the twentieth century when Ottoman successor states determined that surnames of all subjects were required by law, individuals were known by their first names, with some reference to their family ascendance. Accordingly, the most common reference to our author by contemporaries was "Sa'adi the Levite," that

poser, a publisher of Hebrew and Ladino texts religious and secular, a founder of modern Ladino print culture, and a journalist (the editor of *La Epoka*, the first long-lived Ladino newspaper to be published in Salonica). He was also a rebel. More than any other, it is this quality that emerges most powerfully in his memoir. Sa'adi's rebellion pitted him against the Jewish communal leadership of Salonica, which he accused of being corrupt, abusive, and fanatical, and whose leaders, in turn, excommunicated him from the Jewish community. This insurgency, though fierce at the time of its unfolding, can feel thin, even fantastic, at times because the worlds against which Sa'adi agitated no longer exist. The empire he inhabited, still intact at the time he penned this document, would not outlive his children. His home, one of few cities in the world that boasted a majority Jewish population at the beginning of the twentieth century, would, in the decades after Sa'adi composed his memoir, find its Jewish population threatened by wars (1912–13), a major fire (1917), emigration, and a genocide (1943) whose gruesome thoroughness climaxed in this urban center. Even the language in which he wrote, Ladino, mother tongue of the vast majority of the roughly 250,000 Jews in the Ottoman Balkans and Asia Minor, would change dramatically in the ensuing decades. It became transformed by the incursion of dizzying new vocabularies, first Gallicized and eventually pruned of its Hebrew Rashi script[2] and written in the Latin alphabet in republican Turkey and elsewhere. The institution of Ladino print culture that Sa'adi played such an important role in creating blossomed (through the interwar period in Greece) and then rather quickly receded (in the wake of widespread emigration, nationalizing pressures, and the Second World War) as Ladino ceased to serve as a language of popular and intellectual print culture.

At the time Sa'adi composed his memoirs, Salonica in particular and Levantine Jewry more generally had not yet witnessed many of the changes that have come to define Sephardic modernity in historians'

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is, "Sa'adi a-Levi." The latter became Sa'adi's surname much later; subsequently, Sa'adi's son, Sam, along with other descendants, adopted the surname Levy.

2. Rashi script is a Hebrew font of medieval origins used in the writing of Ladino for some five hundred years.

eyes. The Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) had been founded before Sa'adi began this text, but its influence was as yet fledgling. This organization, created in 1860 by the French-Jewish elite, would introduce French Jewish schools across the Levant, offering instruction in French to generations of Sephardic, North African, and Middle Eastern Jews and forever remapping the linguistic and cultural terrain of Jews in these regions. Sa'adi helped Moïse Allatini, a banker and industrialist, establish the first AIU school in Salonica in 1873, a process he describes in the pages that follow; but the tremendous cultural influence this organization would command was yet to be accrued, and Sa'adi's narrative describes an institution struggling to find firm financial footing rather than the towering institution and pedagogic innovator the AIU would become.

Furthermore, crucial aspects of a century-long process of Ottoman governmental reform and centralization effort, known collectively as the Tanzimat, though begun in 1839, were inchoate during much of the period covered by Sa'adi's memoirs. Accordingly, Jews in the empire continued to be beholden to a legal system and power structure that had been in place for centuries but whose dismantling (during the decades that preceded and were to follow the completion of this work) would profoundly alter and arguably erode Jews' and other non–Muslims' traditional place in the Ottoman social fabric. Sa'adi's memoir describes the Ottoman Jewish *millet* (religious community) before these changes became definitive, when its leadership was still able to govern, tax, and legally try its own, when, in short, the Ottoman state granted the rabbinical authorities license to police the religious and social barriers of the Jewish community. These practices, ruthlessly criticized by Sa'adi, would be legislated out of existence in his lifetime and, indeed, were waning even as Sa'adi composed this text.

If Ottoman Jewry was on the cusp of these and other forms of change in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was neither homogenous nor static. Sa'adi himself was aware that he was witnessing a culture in flux. Indeed, as the very first sentence of his preface makes clear ("My purpose in writing this story is to inform future generations how much times have changed within half a century"), he was inspired to reflect on the changes he witnessed precisely because the life he knew appeared