Sephardi Lives: An Introduction

> "Let our wise men rise up, let each one search in his own place or town of residence for the memories of his brothers and neighbors. Let them call to the hidden manuscripts: come out!"
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> *Yosef-Da'at/El Progreso,* March 13, 1888

> "History is not only the chronological narration of remarkable events . . . [but] much more: it is the study of life, the search for truth, the analytical description of traditions and customs according to the manner in which they present themselves before the eyes of the observer, and according to the manner in which they are painted in the imagination of the historian."
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> Morris Isaac Cohen, 1911

> "All that we have done so far is but a drop in the ocean."
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> Letter from Esther Michael (née Salem) in Salonica to her brother Jacques Salem in Manchester, August 23–28, 1917

In 1749, Jews in Salonica attempt to evade a communal tax meant to support the Jewish community of Jerusalem; in 1778 a merchant in Livorno writes a Ladino-language guide to modern living; in 1840 eyewitnesses report on the siege of the Jewish quarter of Rhodes in the wake of a blood libel; a rabbi of Sarajevo, writing three decades later, lauds the virtues of the printing press; in 1895 a teacher petitions the Ottoman government to open a school for girls in Istanbul; in the midst of the First World War a young woman sends a letter to her brother in Manchester, offering an eyewitness account of the horrific fire that had just destroyed Salonica; a scholar in the fledgling Turkish Republic, writing in 1927, defends the Arabic alphabet against attempts to introduce the Latin script; a Greek survivor of Auschwitz gives an interview in a displaced persons camp; in 1948 a man writes of his journey to the Belgian Congo.

What do these sources, penned in different languages, centuries, continents, genres, states, and social contexts, have in common? The simplest answer is that they were all produced by Jews who traced their

roots back to medieval Iberia (modern-day Spain and Portugal). These Jews have come to be known as Sephardim because of a linkage Jewish authors in the Middle Ages made between the Iberian Peninsula and a biblical land referred to in Obadiah 1:20 as Sepharad. Although Sephardi communities have historically existed in locales around the globe, the individuals, families, social groups, and institutions treated in this book formed part of the largest Judeo-Spanish cultural sphere to exist outside the Iberian Peninsula—one that reconstituted itself in the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean after the late fifteenth century.

And yet, the answer to the question of what unifies the documents described above, and the many others that fill this book, is infinitely more complicated than any terse demographic accounting can convey. The people who populate the pages of this book did not always identify themselves foremost as Sephardim, or even as Jews. Sometimes they organized themselves according to city, regional, national, imperial, religious, class, professional, and gender affiliations. In the face of this cacophony, this Introduction proposes a series of answers to the question of what unified the diverse experiences of modern Sephardim and what justifies the book you hold before you.

This sourcebook documents the history of the Judeo-Spanish heartland of Southeastern Europe, Anatolia, and the Levant as it existed in dynamic engagement with its diasporic centers on five continents over roughly two hundred and fifty years. We have chosen to begin the volume at the turn of the eighteenth century, a period of cultural stabilization for Ottoman Jewry. Our endpoint is the years immediately following the destruction of the Judeo-Spanish heartland of Southeastern Europe during the Second World War, after which the global geography of Sephardi communities assumed radically new form. Assembled here are roughly 150 sources gathered from archives and libraries all over the world, both in their English original and translated from Bulgarian, Croatian, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Ladino, Portuguese, Serbian, Spanish, Ottoman and modern Turkish, and Yiddish.

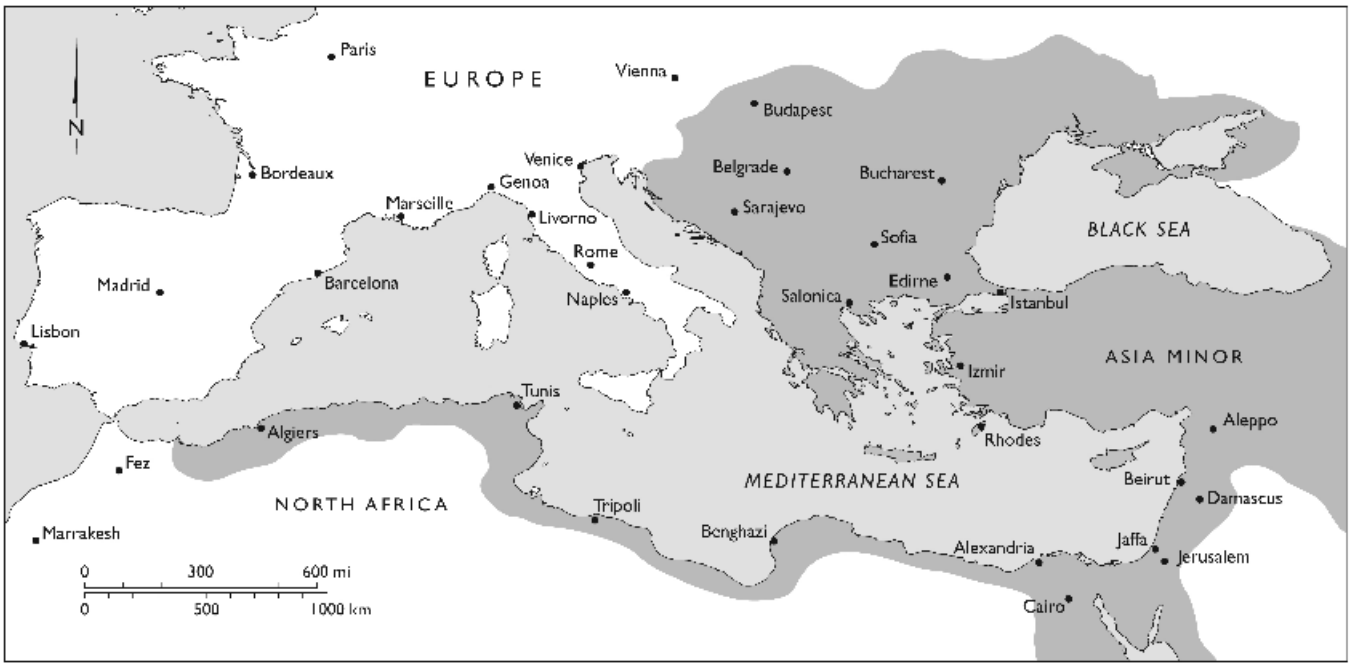
The pages that follow offer a broad historical introduction to the modern Judeo-Spanish heartland and of the Sephardi culture it produced in dialogue with a variety of Ottoman and post-Ottoman societies in the Balkans and the Levant, with non-Jewish cultures, global Jewry, and Sephardi émigré centers.

THE OTTOMAN JUDEO-SPANISH WORLD AND ITS DIASPORA, 1700–1950

The modern Sephardi communities examined in this book were constituted after 1492, when the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula were forced to choose between conversion to Christianity and exile. In the years that followed, a relatively small number of Iberian Jewish converts made their way across the Atlantic and settled in Portuguese and Spanish America, where the watchful eye of the Inquisition made impossible the public expression of Judaism. A portion of those who desired to maintain their Judaism, or return to it, settled in Amsterdam and Dutch colonial holdings in the New World, where they were free to practice their religion. Some fled to southern France and lived as secret Jews until they were finally given free rein to acknowledge their Judaism. Others migrated to North Africa to join existing communities of Arabic- and Berber-speaking Jews long settled in the region. The largest numbers of Iberian Jewish exiles, however, found their way across the Mediterranean (some by way of Italy), to the Ottoman Empire, where they were permitted to settle and practice their Judaism openly. This community is the principal subject of the present volume.

These Iberian Jewish exiles became the most demographically significant Jewish immigrant community in the Ottoman Empire. Other sizable Jewish populations had lived in the region for many centuries. Together these Jewish communities became subjects of an empire that reached, at its height, from the Bosphorus to the Danube in Europe, across the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, and into the Arabic-speaking Middle East as far as the western borders of modern-day Iran. Over the next four hundred and fifty years the Sephardim would prove to be an integral element in Ottoman and post-Ottoman societies, particularly in those cities in which they were most densely concentrated, such as Salonica, Istanbul, Izmir, Edirne, Sarajevo, Sofia, and Jerusalem (see Map 1).

Like most Ottoman subjects and Jews the world over, Sephardi families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were typically poor and, later, working-class. Many worked as small-time peddlers or shopkeepers. Others engaged in specialized crafts and occupations, such



Map 1 The Ottoman Mediterranean, ca. 1683

as Salonica's famous male porters (*hamals*) or the women who rolled cigarettes in their homes or in factories. The voices of the Jewish lower and working classes resound frequently in this book. One example is a petition drawn up in 1847 by impoverished Jews in Izmir who complained that the elites of their community were burdening them disproportionately with taxes and abusing them "much more" than the ancient Egyptians had abused the Hebrews during their enslavement. Another is a letter penned by a mid-nineteenth-century widow in Jerusalem requesting financial support. At times, poverty became a catalyst for politicization. This book also features the Ladino manifesto of a socialist federation of Salonica that was run and supported largely by Sephardi Jews: its authors used this platform to demand proper working conditions and an eight-hour workday.

In addition to poverty, questions surrounding religious observance regularly emerged in Ottoman Jewish life. One voice readers will discover in this volume is that of a Salonican rabbi who in 1755 answered a query as to whether the Dönme—descendants of those Jews who followed the self-proclaimed messiah Shabbetay Sevi into Islam after he converted in 1666—could be considered Jews. A second responsum (singular of responsa, or rabbinic answers to religious queries), penned in 1763, discusses the phenomenon of Jewish men who broke with the prohibition against cutting their *peot*, or sidelocks. Although some tested the boundaries of Judaism, until well into the twentieth century most Ottoman Sephardim were practicing Jews who as a matter of course hewed to religious institutions that structured their everyday lives. Even those who openly disregarded Jewish law or came to identify themselves as freethinkers or atheists continued to be associated with the religious community into which they had been born. In this sense, Ottoman Sephardim were products of their local environment, where religious traditions and communal boundaries remained powerful even after the empire's collapse in the wake of the First World War. Similar patterns prevailed among other Ottoman Jewish communities as well as among Ottoman Muslims and Christians across the empire.

The denominations that emerged among European and American Jews did not take root in the Sephardi world. The Jewish Reform movement, however, did capture the attention of Sephardi authors. One such response appears in this volume in the form of a mid-

nineteenth century text issued by the chief rabbi of Izmir condemning the attempts of Jews in Paris and London to alter their liturgy. During the same period Isaac Akrish, a rabbi of Istanbul, denounced innovations closer to home; when reform-minded Jewish elites opened a new-style Jewish school in 1856, Akrish warned of the grave dangers that the teaching of foreign languages and "knowledge of the nations of the world" posed to traditional Jewish life. Other religious thinkers responded differently to the challenges of their age by seeking to demonstrate how their religion was compatible with modernity. In 1870 Judah Papo (d. 1873), a Sephardi rabbi in Jerusalem, praised the printing press for its ability to spread knowledge about Judaism and to give voice to rabbinical scholars like himself.

Identification with a religious body remained a given well into the twentieth century, but there were many other ways according to which Ottoman subjects identified and grouped themselves. Sephardi women and men also lived in constant dialogue with imperial and, later, national authorities, their non-Jewish neighbors, Jews of other backgrounds, and other individuals and communities across the globe. This dialogue took many forms. Jews and non-Jews shopped in the same markets, cooked similar foods, engaged in neighborly relations, made music together, experienced the same natural and man-made disasters, and appeared before the same courts. One document included in this book records the petition of a Jew who brought a case against his Muslim business partner to the Islamic law court of mid-nineteenth-century Izmir. In later periods Jews attended the same schools, adopted the same fashions, read the same newspapers and books, co-authored scholarship, participated in joint political projects, and socialized in clubs and dance halls with neighbors of other faiths.

Ottoman Sephardim were similarly intertwined with Jews of other backgrounds, including Romaniots (Greek-speaking Jews who lived in portions of the western Ottoman Empire), Mizrahim (Arabic-speaking Jews in the Middle Eastern regions of the empire), Karaites (followers of the Bible who rejected rabbinical Judaism), and Ashkenazi Jews (Jews who traced their roots to medieval Ashkenaz, aka the German Rhineland), many of whom entered the empire from Central and Eastern Europe during the modern period. Even among Sephardim, significant differences in status and class existed, such as those between

Ottoman Sephardim and the *Livornese*—a group that included Sephardi Jews who had settled in Livorno, Italy, following the Iberian expulsion of 1492 and subsequently established extensive global trading networks. The Livornese retained their Italian identity even after they had been settled in Ottoman lands for many decades. Their continued identification with Europe distinguished them from other Ottoman Jews and earned them the moniker of *francos*, *efrenji*, and *ifrangi*, terms meaning "Europeans" in Ladino, Ottoman Turkish, and Arabic respectively.

Modern Sephardim also took part in global developments. A great number resided in port cities that served as a meeting place for people of various nationalities. Many also traveled abroad, had foreign commercial contacts, and encountered travelers and officials hailing from diverse parts of the world. They read foreign publications and participated in political movements both local and international. They corresponded with friends and family who had emigrated, purchased imported goods, and kept up with the latest fashions. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Ottoman Jews also caught the attention of global Jewish philanthropic organizations whose leaders perceived their "Eastern" coreligionists to be in need of cultural regeneration and economic uplift.

For all these points of contact, Ottoman Sephardim also maintained their own traditions—religious, culinary, familial, and ephemeral. Perhaps the best marker of this can be found in the realm of language. During more than four centuries following their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, Sephardi Jews spoke and wrote in Ladino (also known as Judeo-Spanish and Judezmo), an Ibero-Romance language grammatically similar to fifteenth-century Castilian but encompassing loan words from other Romance languages as well as from Hebrew, Aramaic, and various languages Sephardim encountered in their new homes, principally Greek, Turkish, and South Slavic languages. Until the early twentieth century Ladino was printed in a semi-cursive Hebrew typeface known as the Rashi script and penned in a Sephardi style of handwriting known as *soletreo*. Well into the twentieth century the majority of Sephardi Jews in Ottoman lands claimed Ladino as their mother tongue.

The advent of the printing press changed the fabric of their everyday lives, connecting and politicizing modern Sephardi communities.