Preface

My scholarly interest in sephardism began with a very personal connection when my mother gave me a copy of Rosa Nissán's *Novia que te vea*, and my friend Ileana Lubetzky wondered if I would enjoy this quaint account of growing up as a Ladino speaker in modern Mexico. I too, had grown up in Mexico, though speaking Hebrew rather than Ladino. At one point, however, my Ladino-speaking grandmother came to visit us from Jerusalem, and to our amazement we saw that she could communicate more comfortably with indigenous merchants in the marketplace than with our modern Castilian-speaking friends. This was because her language, like theirs, contained antiquated expressions dating from the time of the conquistadors and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

This was my personal eye-opening encounter with Sephardic history, for, in Haifa, where I was born, I had been surrounded by Hungarian-speaking grandparents who had lived through the Holocaust; within my own immediate family, a hodgepodge of languages and cultures reigned; and even around my Sephardic grandparents, Hebrew was the dominant language. Under such conditions, one tends to see the world comparatively—that is, in relation to *other* places, epochs, and peoples. Therefore, as soon as I tasted Nissán's new cultural mixtures, I began to wonder if other Latin American writers had found similar inspiration in Sephardic history and traditions? It turned out that they had, and Latin American sephardism was already an incipient scholarly field led by Edna Aizenberg. So then I began to wonder if other writers *beyond* Latin America had been drawn to examine themselves in relation to Spain's Jews? This book answers such questions, offering not a conventional history of Sepharad but rather a probe into

how Sephardic history has been imagined by writers from many different national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds from the nineteenth century to the present.

Unmooring itself from questions of Sephardic identity, this comparative cross-cultural approach to Sephardic history leads us to examine how others identify *themselves* in relation to conflicting ideas about the Sephardic experience. Hence sephardism is defined here as a politicized literary metaphor used by Jewish and gentile novelists, poets, and dramatists from Germany, England, France, the Americas, Israel, and even India to explore their own preoccupations with modern national identity. But why did so many writers and intellectuals from such varied cultural environments choose the multifaceted and conflicted Judeo-Spanish experience to express concerns about minorities and dissidents in modern nations? To what extent does sephardism overlap with orientalism, hispanism, medievalism, and other politicized discourses that grew out of the clash between authoritarian, progressive, and romantic ideologies during the age of modern revolutions? As I began to unravel the impact of Sephardic history on the development of modern genres and modern nationalisms, I came to understand how deeply it has affected personal and collective matters shaping our world to this day.

Detectivesque is the best way to describe the labor that went into assembling the twelve case studies offered in this volume. From locating examples of sephardism in different national traditions to hunting for scholars who could situate these examples within a historical, political, and aesthetic context, I found myself groping for missing pieces of a puzzle that gradually cohered into a picture whose diverse parts relate to one another. Three essays in particular—Ismar Schorsch's "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy in Nineteenth-Century Germany," Michael Ragussis's "Writing Spanish History in Nineteenth-Century Britain," and Edna Aizenberg's "Sephardim and Neo-Sephardim in Latin American Literature," originally published in completely different contexts and without any knowledge of one another—function as the cornerstones of our volume. They were distributed among all new contributors to establish a common vocabulary, and are gathered here for the first time under the umbrella of sephardism, now complemented

by new articles exploring the scope and implications of sephardism as a politicized literary phenomenon.

The principal aim of this book is to offer a conceptual foundation for understanding the phenomenon of sephardism, based on a series of case studies that can be expanded in the future. I believe we cover the leading examples of this phenomenon in Europe, Asia, and the Americas, including several languages and literary traditions. Two more case studies that I had hoped to include and consider necessary, but that unfortunately did not materialize for practical reasons, are an essay on eastern European Yiddish sephardism and another on Ottoman Ladino sephardism. Although both take their cues from German and English sephardism, they each adapt scenes of inquisitorial trials and Sephardic luminaries to reflect their own changing attitudes toward history and modernization throughout the nineteenth century and until the eve of the Holocaust. I am grateful to Joel Berkowitz and Julia Phillips Cohen for sharing these insights with me.

An exceptional aspect of this book has been the high degree of collaboration among its contributors. Over the past ten years, we met at conference panels and roundtables, where together with genuinely supportive audiences, we tried to chart a new approach to Sephardic Studies in ways that rechannel ethnic history into an analysis of how medieval and early modern Iberian history has served as a template and catalyst for the development of literary forms and political ideologies that helped create the modern world. If I occasionally adopt a plural voice in introducing this volume, it is to convey the sense of close collaboration which has accompanied this project all along.

This is a very welcome opportunity to mention the early encouragement of Debbie Castillo, Michael Ragussis (z"l), Aron Rodrigue, and Jonathan Sarna. With uncommon generosity, Darrell Lockhart sent me a working bibliography when I first became interested in the topic. The warm spirit of collegiality that I found at McGill, Cornell, and the Hebrew University enriched this work in ways that cannot be itemized. And this warmth and friendship extends also to meetings with members of the Association of Jewish Studies, LAJSA (Latin American Jewish Studies Association), and the Modern Languages Association's Sephardic Studies Group—among whom Edna Aizenberg, Jonathan Schorsch, Monique Balbuena, and Johann Sadock come especially to

mind. For sending me to the needed references, sharing ideas, and generally "being there" as colleagues and friends, I would especially like to thank Stacy Beckwith, Bernie Horn, Dalia Kandiyoti, and Leor Halevi. During its last stages of preparation, the manuscript benefited from valuable feedback from Richard Kagan, Carlos Fraenkel, and above all the anonymous reader for Stanford University Press, whose exceptional care and intelligent advice were much appreciated by all of us. The degree of professionalism at this press has been outstanding at every stage of the book's production.

Claudio Palomares, Louise Larlee, Greg Ellerman, and Hadji Bakara—former graduate students at McGill—worked on this project as research assistants, translators, and editors. Adam Blander did all of the above, functioning as my editorial right hand during the last stages of production; and Brett Hooton—so often and judiciously—lent his invaluable stylistic advice, making the process of assembling this volume significantly easier and also more fun. Finally, it is my pleasant duty to thank the following granting agencies for supporting this project: the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fonds québecois de la recherché sur la société et la culture, the Memorial Foundation of Jewish Culture, and a Lady Davis Fellowship administered by the Hebrew University, all of which enabled the implementation of a project that could be conducted only through a genuinely comparative and collaborative endeavor.

Y. Halevi-Wise
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