

THE HISTORY OF PRIVATE LIFE AND OF FAMILIES:
OBJECTS AND NEW METHODOLOGIES FOR THE
STUDY OF SEPHARDI-JEWISH HISTORY

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The advent of the industrial age and the rise of the bourgeoisie during the late 19th century is closely linked with the rise of individualism.¹ One manifestation of this fundamental change in the concept of the individual is the increasing prevalence of autobiographies, personal diaries, and memoirs in the West.² These genres, which focus on the self, reflect a desire for self-awareness, self-examination, and personal expression in writing.³

In the Orient, however, there was no evidence of industrialization, nor did a "bourgeoisie" class develop in the Western sense of the term. The bourgeoisie class was defined by its influence in economic spheres, and consisted primarily of non-Muslim groups in the Ottoman Empire including Jews, whose wealth derived largely from commerce. Their wealth enabled them to develop a life-style which was distinct but not entirely separate from that of the surrounding population. This group was not as well established as its Western counterpart, nor did it share the same system of values. However, for lack of a local model, it followed the Western example and

1 P. Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France*, Paris 1971, p. 10.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 59; 181-182.

3 A. Corbin, "Coulisses. Le secret de l'individu", in P. Ariès and G. Duby (eds.), *Histoire de la vie privée*, vol. 4, Paris 1987, p. 419.

formed a specifically Levantine bourgeoisie, which was a unique blend of East and West.

Within this context, the secular literature produced by Sephardi Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generally favored the utilitarian over the narrative genres. In these cultures, for example, keeping a diary or writing an autobiography was considered a frivolous pursuit. Furthermore, such an undertaking required a particularly strong sense of "self" in a society that traditionally looked outward and for which, even at the level of local communities, the group took precedence over the individual. Thus, recording of personal histories became common practice in the Ashkenazi community, especially among the Jews of Western Europe. For along with their emancipation and gradual integration into the surrounding society, the Ashkenazim had come to embrace certain values of that society. It was also during the nineteenth century that the Jews of the West wrote numerous autobiographies.⁴

Against this background, the autobiography, correspondence, personal diary, and family genealogy of Gabriel Arié were relatively rare genres in Sephardi Jewish literature.⁵ Born in 1863, Arié grew up in a Jewish community which was an integral part of the broader Judeo-Spanish culture that developed during the Ottoman Empire.⁶ This culture emerged out of the mass migration of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula to Turkey. Arié's ancestors are traced back to this community, which arrived in the Western Mediterranean during

4 See, for example, M. Richarz, (ed.), *Jewish Life in Germany: Memoirs from Three Centuries*, tr. S.P. and S. Rosenfeld, Bloomington, Indianapolis 1991; M. Moseley, "Jewish Autobiography in Eastern Europe: The Pre-History of a Literary Genre", Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity College 1990.

5 See the recent publication of the autobiography, personal diary, genealogy, and a portion of the correspondence of Gabriel Arié published by this author in collaboration with Prof. A. Rodrigue, *Une vie judeo-espagnole a l'Est: Gabriel Arié*, Paris 1992. The English translation will be published in 1997 by the University of Washington Press, Seattle.

6 On this subject see E. Benbassa and A. Rodrigue, *The Jews of the Balkans: The Judeo-Spanish Community, 15th to 20th Centuries*, Oxford-Cambridge 1995.

the late fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth centuries. His family probably originated in Leon, Spain,⁷ and then settled in Vienna after a period of exile, struggle, and hardship. After being forced out of Vienna by the Emperor Joseph II, the family eventually arrived in Viddin on the Danube and later branches settled in Sofia and Samacoff. A commercial enterprise was founded by one of the family patriarchs, Abraham Arié, after his arrival in Viddin. The business expanded steadily and rapidly until the war between Russia and Turkey in 1877-1878. This branch of the family was successful in the grain trade, industry, iron mining, and banking, with offices in Europe and the East. Gabriel Arié's father, however, did not descend from this wealthy branch of the Arié family.

In keeping with the goals of the genre, Gabriel strove to provide a retrospective and comprehensive synthesis of his life. His autobiography covers events from his birth in 1863 until 1906, when his health began to decline drastically. Suffering from tuberculosis, he traveled to Davos, Switzerland in 1906 and stayed there for a prolonged period. In all likelihood, he actually wrote the autobiography between February 1905 and October 1906.

In his autobiography, Arié not only describes how he moved up in the ranks of society, but also portrays the world he knew, which disappeared and was lost forever. Woven through his personal story is the history of a family whose traditions struck roots in the region throughout the centuries following their expulsion from Spain.

7 See the manuscript I possess on the history of this family between 1768 and 1914: Tchelebi Moshe Abraham Arié II, *Biografia Arié, para la familia Arié de Samokov*, 4 vols. (in Judeo-Spanish). Some information is also provided by Narcisse Arié, the son of Gabriel, in a letter dated 8 November 1989. This work was partially translated into Bulgarian by Eli Eshkenazi and published under the title: *Chronicle of the Arié Family from Samokov*. On the manuscript in my possession only the name of Tchelebi Moshe Abraham Arié appears. According to a letter of Nancen Arié from Bulgaria (29 December 1991), this family biography was started by Naim Arié (1849-1907) and completed by his cousin Tchelebi Moshe Abraham Arié (1849-1948).

It should also be noted that even though the genre was relatively rare in Sephardi Jewish culture, Arié's autobiography was preceded by a chronicle written by another member of the family, Tchelebi Moshe Abraham Arié II (1849–1918), entitled *Biografia Arié, para la familia Arié de Samokov*.⁸

In addition, Joseph Abraham Arié produced a family tree in 1963⁹ — an equally unusual undertaking in Sephardi culture. The family tree was based on the above-mentioned chronicle and on documents that remained in the family's possession. It also relies on information collected and organized by Gabriel Arié himself regarding the period from 1766 to 1929, and, finally, a family tree originally drawn up in 1901 and passed on to the author by his father, Abraham Joseph Arié, in 1944. This genealogy, which has been completed and revised with the most recent data provided by Narcisse Arié, Gabriel's son, goes back to the arrival of the Arié family in Bulgaria during the eighteenth century under the Ottoman Empire. As a result, we now have evidence of a phenomenon even rarer than the autobiography in the Sephardi Jewish community: a complete history of the Arié family dating back two centuries. The history begins with the legend of the family's "patriarch", an ancestor who adopted the name of his birthplace in Spain, "Leon", which was later changed to the Hebrew translation "Arié". Indeed, the story of this great moment in the family's history, as well as the account of the years spent in the illustrious city of Vienna, are based more on family legend than on fact. Nevertheless, they are important and fascinating for social historians as well as for those who deal with personal history.

The tradition of passing on family history from one generation

⁸ See n. 7.

⁹ Mathilde Arié from Israel, widow of Felix Arié, the nephew of Gabriel Arié, gave us a tree which covers the period between 1780, the date of the arrival of the family's ancestor in Samakov, and 1890. The tree was elaborated by Gabriel Arié himself. We also received a copy of the more complete tree which is published in our book. Members of the family all over the world possess a copy of this more or less complete tree.

to the next, and the accompanying sense of pride derived from membership in an elite were thus highly characteristic of the Arié family and fully shared by Gabriel Arié. Gabriel Arié's autobiography was followed by a diary which he began writing in Davos, during the period of his severe illness, and kept until his death in 1939. Through this medium of writing, he perpetuated his personal and family history.¹⁰ In addition, the diary provides a valuable account of the Sephardi and Levantine bourgeoisie during the period of the evolving Balkan states, even if it is limited by Arié's own perspectives and abilities.

In Gabriel Arié's times, the Levantine Jewish community was in the initial stages of westernization. This process, which originated in Europe and spread throughout the world, took various political, ideological, and economic forms,¹¹ and filtered into certain parts of the East through intermediaries. Specifically, this form of westernization was imported by the Jewish elite in the Sephardi community with the help of their counterparts in the West. This process was established through modern communications media, organizations, the press, translations of foreign literature and, most effectively, through European-model school systems.

The westernization process was superficial and took a long time to penetrate these communities. On the local level, each group selected only the aspects it considered most suitable. Following the example of the non-Jews around them, these local Jewish communities experienced a long and tenuous process of westernization, one that remains tenuous to this very day. It was the middle stratum of society that benefited the most, since it took a long time for the influence of westernization to reach the lowest classes.

It follows, then, that the lower social stratum of the Jewish community, into which Gabriel Arié was born and raised, maintained traditional Jewish values and values drawn from the Muslim world.

¹⁰ This manuscript was given to us by Dr. Elie Arié from Paris, a grandson of Gabriel Arié.

¹¹ S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Patterns of Modernity*, 2 vols., London 1987, 1:5; J. Le Goff, *Histoire et Memoire*, Paris 1988, p. 61.

This atmosphere enveloped Arié as a child, when he experienced traditional Jewish schooling, family life, and synagogue along with the influences of his Turkish milieu (Turkish music, for example, was played and sung in his home). Nothing in his background could have determined the course his life would take in later years. Yet, through his personal choices, his frequent visits to the West, and the lengthy periods he spent there when his health was failing, Arié became imbued with European culture — but he never completely lost certain cultural characteristics he had grown up with.

The process of westernization began at the level of external signifiers. The more wealthy families began to abandon the traditional dress of their elders in favor of Western clothing. This evolution can be traced clearly in photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the background of these photographs are gardens, rich printed cloth, pillars, countrysides, columns, and drapes. In the foreground are the subjects seated in European-style armchairs or standing stiffly, their smiles barely discernible as they pose for eternity in the studio, the adults in traditional dress and the youth in European clothing. The wealthier the family, the more frequently they visited famous photographers. Photographs were taken not only to create a permanent record of the major events in a family's life — with the appropriate degree of ceremony, modern hats and dresses for the women and formal suits for the men — but also out of fondness for keepsakes. From the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional dress gradually began to disappear from the photographs. Ultimately, all that distinguished these Jews from westerners was an occasional decorative element in the background revealing their Eastern origin, e.g., a pointed minaret or a floral pattern in the draped cloth. The Eastern signifiers, in contrast, are more common in the photographs taken by less renowned photographers who charged lower fees and generally served a middle-class clientele. In any event, this population was not westernized to the point that they sought to eliminate all Eastern traces at any cost. In some cases, even in photographs with an abundance of "Western" signifiers, one person will be wearing a fez (the traditional masculine headdress), which

recalls the origin of the subjects. The lone fez lost in a Western background is particularly characteristic of wedding photographs. Captured in these photographs are reflections not only of individuals but also of the composite identity of the Levantine bourgeoisie.

Members of these social classes also adopted Western behavior patterns, eating habits, home furnishing, and recreational pastimes such as annual trips to the country. For example, the Sephardi Jews often went the country every summer, as much for medical reasons, i.e., "to breathe fresh air", as for a relief from the heat of the city. With the advancement of Western education in the middle and upper classes, especially for young girls, various principles of child rearing and care were adopted from the European bourgeoisie. A certain number of girls from lower class families also received the same education through the Alliance schools.¹² Emphasis was placed on proper behavior patterns, the most easily discernible signifier. As French cultural influences became established, members of the middle class also began to speak French in the home, and this remained the hallmark of upward mobility for a long time. French began to replace Judeo-Spanish without completely supplanting it. When nation-states were established in the former Ottoman territories, local languages were gradually introduced into Jewish homes, depending on the extent of the family's integration. Women were important and fundamental agents in the processes of westernization and Gallicization.

Anything Western was prestigious and in high demand. Such objects included tissues, trinkets, and ornaments. Similarly, the foreign-language press spread news of the latest fashion in clothes, and the Western styles were assured of success. Nevertheless, traditional social and familial heritage continued to prevail over Western practices and norms in the bourgeois milieu.¹³ Their life-style

12 E. Benbassa, "Education for Jewish Girls in the East: A Portrait of the Galata School in Istanbul, 1879-1912", *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 9, 1993, pp. 163-172.

13 Adeline Daumard, *Les bourgeois et la bourgeoisie en France depuis 1815*, Paris 1991, p. 152.

remained typically Levantine, even though it was a heterogeneous mix of religious and ethnic backgrounds brought by Greek, Armenian, European and Jewish bourgeoisie. Each group maintained its unique identity, while continuing to share certain convergent elements with the surrounding society. The signifiers borrowed from the West were added to this mix of identities.

In the case of Gabriel Arié, the westernization process was not limited to signifiers. As mentioned above, the very act of writing an autobiography and diary was closely linked with westernization, and it was a unique undertaking in his community. During the second half of the nineteenth century, it was common practice in the East to import translations of literary and historical texts written in the West. Arié, on the contrary, wrote his history books in French. He also wrote a large part of the history of the Alliance which appeared under the authorship of Narcisse Leven, President of the Alliance at the time.¹⁴ It was partially through the Alliance that Arié gained access to Western culture, for which he developed a special affinity. Moreover, Arié wrote a history of the Jewish people, which he intended as a textbook for Jewish children in France.¹⁵ His works were, then, exported from East to West — a reversal worthy of note if only for its rarity.

For Gabriel Arié, Western influences were more than superficial, as he became fully involved in the Western culture he so admired. At the same time, he never found the means, or perhaps the true desire, to write the history of his own cultural and ethnic heritage as he had once planned. Perhaps he felt too close to his Sephardi roots to maintain the necessary distance? Or was it that he had already become westernized to the point that he considered this history of secondary importance compared to that of the Jewish people, who were more familiar and hence more accessible to the French public he sought to address? Did Arié experience ethnic self-hatred?

14 N. Leven, *Cinquante ans d'histoire. L'alliance israelite universelle (1860-1910)*, 2 vols., Paris 1911-1920.

15 G. Arié, *Histoire juive depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris 1923.

Although there is a connection between the written chronicles of the Arié family and Gabriel Arié's own decision to record his personal history, as indicated above, the former does not completely account for the latter. In this regard, Arié's Bulgarian roots are of particular interest. Bulgaria was a Christian nation-state patterned after a Western model. The state had overseen the rapid establishment of Bulgarian as the primary language of the school system, thus popularizing the national literature. In Bulgaria, then, more personal works were produced, although the majority are from a later period and have remained unpublished. Notable among them are many works of Jewish nationalists who were anxious to share their experiences with future generations. This kind of literature is well represented among the Bulgarian Jews who emigrated to Eretz Israel and later to the young State of Israel. In addition, several examples of such writing are found among the Jews of Salonici, who also settled in what became, after 1912, a Christian nation-state. Conversely, as far as we know, original works of this type are rarely encountered among populations from predominantly Muslim regions or among the Muslim populations themselves.

Could this genre have reflected an awareness of a world that was vanishing with the advent of westernization and a desire to preserve that world? Since autobiographies and diaries are intended as a storehouse of recollections,¹⁷ some of these texts may be given the status of historical documents. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the impending disappearance of this world was reached in the Sephardi realm. It was also at that time that history books began to be written. Although the authors of these books were not professional historians, their writing is characterized by distance and objectivity which are necessary to record the irreversible changes and accompanying losses experienced by Sephardi Jewry. These authors resorted to the writing of history as a concrete means of establishing a lasting record of the time.

Gabriel Arié, for example, witnessed the passing of an era but

16 B. Didier, *Le Journal intime*, Paris 1976, p. 18.

fully embraced the one that followed. With the decline in his physical condition, he was predisposed toward introspection and had an opportunity to put his thoughts in writing. In Switzerland, a neutral territory where he began his autobiography, he was distant enough from his culture of origin to provide a retrospective account of his life there. Thus Arié's autobiography and diary were written in Europe, the very place the genre itself had originated. The diary was later transplanted from that context to Arié's native milieu upon his return home, and traces a transition between the two worlds to which he belonged himself. Having completed this transition, Arié continued to keep his diary in his country of origin, where he remained until his death in 1936. His autobiography and diary are the products of his love for Western culture, his upward social mobility, and especially the distance he placed between himself and his native milieu, which was alien yet familiar to him at one and the same time.

In his writing, Arié depicts his family as an intensely intimate and private unit, which firmly maintained Jewish tradition despite superficial manifestations of Western behavior. For example, it seems that the family did not maintain relations with non-Jews, and when such contact existed it was limited to clearly defined boundaries. Such was the case in medical visits or dealings with domestic servants. This was as true of Arié's stay in Europe as it was of his years in Bulgaria. In this connection, he does not mention any mixed marriages between members of his family and non-Jews. This traditional Jewish orientation symbolized by the extended family remained deeply ingrained, even if it was based less on religious precepts than on ethnic rituals and customs. Superficially, at least on the level of signifiers, Arié's family very much resembled members of the "petite bourgeoisie" and later the Western bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In general, history reflects the lives of ordinary people living at a given time and place. This brief discussion of the writings of Gabriel Arié shows that further examination of such texts can enhance knowledge about the history of Jewish communities, and particularly about the personal lives of Jews during that time.

The personal writings of individuals who remain anonymous, and other better-known writings such as those of Gabriel Arié, provide new perspectives of the world. They are an indispensable medium which, together with other sources, enables historians to present a more humane account of contemporary Jewish communities. Such sources include family records that do not exist in official archives, as well as records that have been neglected and disregarded. In addition, photographs, postcards, personal letters, literature, newspapers, fashion magazines, and mementos of popular culture provide the contemporary historian with a key that opens doors beyond institutional and intellectual history. They pave the way for an indispensable complementary history, one that lives and breathes.