

JAHRBUCH DES SIMON-DUBNOW-INSTITUTS
SIMON DUBNOW INSTITUTE YEARBOOK



Herausgegeben von
Dan Diner

II

2003

Sonderdruck

DEUTSCHE VERLAGS-ANSTALT
MÜNCHEN

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Questioning Historical Narratives –
The Case of Balkan Sephardi Jewry¹

To everything there is a time and a season. A time to write history, another to read it and above all to re-read it. Since the conference “Between Trieste, Salonika and Odessa. Historicizing Balkan and Related Jewries, 1492–1918” in November 2000 at the Simon Dubnow Institute in Leipzig focused on revisiting the history of southeastern Europe, after I had myself written on that of the Jews of the Balkans, with defects I recognize more easily today, and lacunae due to a lack of works about certain periods, I now feel in a better position to begin its re-reading, probably even to rewrite it differently.²

If time is the stuff a historian deals with, then the history of the Balkan Sephardim itself had its golden days, mythical days par excellence, and its times of non-history, disappearing for those who write the history of Jews, now reemerging, as in the upsurge in recent years, in the wake of a neo-romanticism of a folkloric kind closely linked to nostalgia. Our role is not to judge, but to pursue those phases to have a better grasp of their mechanisms, which are simply those of historiography itself.

With the advent of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) the Sephardi world became the stuff of myth. In the late eighteenth and in the nineteenth century in Germany and Eastern Europe, the followers of this movement created diverse representations of the Sephardi past. The *maskilim* (adherents of Jewish Enlightenment) considered themselves the avant-garde of a new era, and destined to guide the Jewish people out of darkness into the light of civilization. They believed the Sephardi precedent could assist them in that venture, the path to emancipation. Shmuel Feiner distinguishes three types of representations used: that of the historical representation of the Spanish context, that of the Sephardi personalities who were exceptional by dint of their creativity and influ-

¹ This article is based on a lecture given at the international conference “Between Trieste, Salonika and Odessa. Historicizing Balkan and Related Jewries, 1492–1918” at the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture at Leipzig University in November 2000.

² Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry. A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 15th to 20th Centuries*, Berkeley, Los Angeles 2000². A German edition will be published under the title *Die Geschichte der sephardischen Juden. Von Toledo nach Saloniki* by Verlag Dr. Dieter Winkler (Bochum) in the fall of 2003.

ence, and finally that of the crypto-Jews.³ For the Enlighteners, Spain embodied fanaticism, intolerance and persecution of the Jews. By expelling them and persecuting the crypto-Jews, it brought all this to a climax, while simultaneously putting an end to a horrible period in history. A new era had then dawned in Europe, this time founded on tolerance and humanism. In this case, the expulsion from Spain figured as a counter-example which in turn strengthened the validity of the rejuvenated present and future, whose spokesmen were the *maskilim*. The perception of the Iberian experience was not static either. In fact, when it was looked upon as a divine punishment, the Expulsion constituted a warning, its example allowing critics to denounce the ostentatious life led by the Berlin Jewish elite. In some cases, it even managed to intensify the pessimistic view of some *maskilim* persuaded that the era of fanaticism exemplified by Spain was not over.

In opposition to that negative image of Spain, the men of the Enlightenment constructed a pantheon of Sephardi heroes, whose fame derived from their creativity in philosophy, literature and science, turning them into the prototypes of the modern Jew. The *maskilim*, who opposed the supremacy of the study of the Talmud and supported a return to the Bible, were in favor of a secular education. Rationalists themselves and in quest of historical precedents likely to back their program, they could not but turn to Iberian Jewry. If Maimonides was deemed the source of inspiration for Mendelssohn, Baruch Spinoza was not forsaken either, looking like a new guide for the perplexed in the eyes of those who wished to move beyond medieval thought. For the *maskilim* whose modernism was moderate, the *marranos* pointed to possible ways to preserve Judaism against the vicissitudes of history. In short, within *Sepharad* was a range of different images and models that could support the particular cause and agenda of Jewish Enlighteners, whether conservative or reformist.

Many Christian Enlightenment figures considered the medieval Sephardi Jew as the ideal Jew. The image of an integrated Jewish community which the Portuguese Jews succeeded in projecting, and which did indeed correspond to a certain historical reality in southwestern France, enabled them to gain emancipation before their co-religionists from the East.⁴ This was an emancipation which finally would erase the

³ Shmuel Feiner, *Sefarad dans les représentations historiques de la Haskala*. Entre modernisme et conservatisme, in: Esther Benbassa (ed.), *Mémoires juives d'Espagne et du Portugal*, Paris 1996, 239–255.

⁴ On the Jews of southwestern France, see: Esther Benbassa, *Geschichte der Juden in Frankreich*, translated from French by Lilli Herschhorn, Berlin 2000 (original edition: Paris 1997), chapters 4 and 5. See also the English edition: Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France. A History from Antiquity to the Present*, 2nd ed., Princeton, N.J. 2001.

European Sephardi cultural area constituted by the crypto-Jews – an area which in the age of mercantilism had reached its peak. From that time on, every Sephardi group, at least in Western Europe, increasingly integrated into the majority cultures and no longer belonged to that *Sepharad*, which once had existed beyond and in spite of borders. Hence, that real Sephardi Jew, along side his Iberian counterpart of the Middle Ages, also was mythologized: both were fused to represent the modern Jew capable of integration. To distinguish themselves from the East European Jews, the *Ostjuden*, who typified an “archaic” Judaism, the German Jews opted for that redeeming myth of “Sephardic supremacy.”⁵ What we could call the Sephardi fashion, even vogue, began to influence the architecture and the liturgy of the German synagogue as well as the pronunciation of Hebrew. The Jewish literature of the time depicted the Sephardi Jew as proud and self-confident, in harmony with the surrounding world, active in the cultural and social life of his time. He could be seen attending the Spanish courts in the company of the nobility. In elaborating this analogy, the experience of German Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany was compared to that of the Spanish Jews in Spain in the medieval era. A Sephardi Jew was constructed according to the model of the Romantic literature of the time: serious, melancholic, mysterious and of noble character.⁶ From Heinrich Heine’s Sephardi Jew in *Der Rabbi von Bacharach*,⁷ to the brothers Phöbus and Ludwig Philippson, and Hermann Reckendorf, this image, via translations in Hebrew and Yiddish, would extend to the furthest ends of the Eastern Ashkenazi world, and through immigrant communities to the United States. Through this popular literature, even Jewish women as well as the Jewish working class were exposed to the history of the Sephardi Jews and their Iberian expulsion. A similar literature reached Jewish groups who originated in the Iberian Peninsula and settled in the Balkans. All these “heroes” came to embody the qualities of the imaginary Sephardi Jew.

As Ismar Schorsch has noted, the German Jewish perception of Spanish Jewry was an amalgam of the needs of the present and of the reality of the past.⁸ This past combined the Judeo-Islamic culture of the Iberian peninsula, the Jewish experience under Christian rule and the experience of the crypto-Jews in Europe. These histories were interwoven to help to craft a past that could be used to buttress a developing future.

⁵ Ismar Schorsch, *The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy*, *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34 (1989), 47–66.

⁶ Alisa Mehuyas Ginio, *La imagen de los sefaradim en la literatura judía*, *El Olivo* 22,47 (1998), 39–45.

⁷ Heinrich Heine, *The Rabbi of Bacharach. A Fragment*, with a selection of Heine’s letters and an epilogue by E. Loewenthal, New York 1947 (original edition: Hamburg 1840).

⁸ Schorsch, *The Myth*.

This constructed Sephardi mythology was an obstacle to the writing of the history of the Sephardi experience as a whole. The Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire in Islamic lands were forgotten. There was no place for these Sephardim in that imagination. Islam here, in the Ottoman Empire, seemed to be in decline, as opposed to Spain in the golden era. For many decades, the historians who set about writing the history of the Jewish people in the vein of the fashionable positivist movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – a vantage which would also shape Israeli historiography – integrated the history of the Sephardim into a typically Euro-centered perspective. The Iberian age and the age of European crypto-Judaism became these historians' favorite research foci. When they dealt with the Iberian period, they would of course not neglect Islam, which had served as the means for Jews to encounter Greek rationalism. This tendency is well illustrated by Yitzhak Baer and Eliyahu Ashtor.⁹ Somehow that period was neutralized, divested of its Oriental character, due to its privileged relationship with Greek culture, which Europe claimed was its foundation. In contrast, the Jew of post-medieval Islam seemed to be "Oriental," identified as a symbol of the barbaric and primitive – and yet at the same time inhabiting a lost paradise that the West was turning to.¹⁰

Following the Orientalist wave sweeping across Europe with the "Eastern Question" lurking in the background, Ludwig Philippson published his first articles in 1840 about Turkish Jewry in his *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, republished in France by the *Archives israélites*. Essays on this topic were published down to the 1850s. In fact, it was Phöbus (the brother of Ludwig) Philippson, author of *Die Marranen*,¹¹ who now turned his attention to the "Oriental" descendants of those Sephardim who had been a paradigm for German Jewry. In this instance, he did not romanticize these descendants, but instead described the wretched condition in which the Jews of the "Orient" found themselves in large measure due to their ignorance. In a sense, they were awaiting their savior – a thought resonant with the colonialist discourse popular in that era. Since the Jews of the West were now emancipated, they could provide paternal protection for their "backward" co-religionists. The "Oriental" Jews, looked upon as veritable children, had to accept and embrace an education that only an enlightened Europe could provide. Paradoxically, that education deepened the gap between East and West.

⁹ Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 vols., Philadelphia 1978; Eliyahu Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain*, 3 vols., Philadelphia 1973–1979.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1978; Daniel J. Schroeter, Orientalism and the Jews of the Mediterranean, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 4,2 (1994), 183–196.

¹¹ Phöbus Philippson, *Die Marranen*, in: Ludwig Philippson, *Saron. Gesammelte Dichtungen*, part 1, *Novellenbuch von Phöbus und Ludwig Philippson*, vol. 1, Leipzig 1837, 3–124.

So the Alliance Israélite Universelle established a European educational system in North Africa and the territories under Ottoman rule, adopting the discourse of the Gentile promoters of the Emancipation, based on the idea of a "regeneration" achieved through education.¹² This "regeneration" would facilitate emancipation. In spite of the benefits of this pedagogical venture, the Alliance project engendered a sense of alienation in the indigenous Jews, estranging them from their environment, because the educators from the Alliance ignored the local language which would have been indispensable for the indigenous Jews' integration when nation states emerged in those regions.¹³ Far from Europe, gallicized but not integrated, many of them would later go into exile to escape their ambiguous suspension between West and East.

Huge populations were to be shown the light, obtaining knowledge from a prestigious West. Here Enlightenment, there darkness ... In this dichotomy, enlightened Jews are at the center of the historical narrative, whereas "Orientals" disappear, only to be reborn through Enlightenment. Without having their own history, narrating their past will be the work and prerogative of the West.

However, it would be incorrect to believe that because those communities were kept out of history, so to speak, they did not have a history. As in the Eastern Ashkenazi world, new forces of resistance among "Oriental" Jews were developing. As the Orient's gallicization was at its height, a vigorous culture in vernacular language emerged. It integrated the West by shaping it in the native mold, for instance through the translation of European and Hebrew classics into Judeo-Spanish.¹⁴ The references to the West were omnipresent. Moreover, urgent debates arose about whether Judeo-Spanish should be retained or abandoned. The local Jews rejected the ideology underlying the education they were given, only to concentrate on what could be of some more practical use to them. In the short run, for example, that meant the study of foreign languages, a tool to help assist them in becoming economically competitive in the arena occupied by the European powers and other minorities.

This was the new situation in which those groups were advancing when Jewish nationalism sprang onto the scene. It too imposed its Eurocentrist vision. The Zionists utilized the Jews from the Ottoman Empire

¹² Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews. The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey* (The Modern Jewish Experience), Bloomington 1990; idem, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition, 1860–1939. The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle*, Seattle 1993.

¹³ Aron Rodrigue, Eastern Sephardi Jewry and New Nation-States in the Balkans in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, in: Harvey E. Goldberg (ed.), *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries. History and Culture in the Modern Era*, Bloomington 1996, 81–88.

¹⁴ Esther Benbassa, The Process of Modernization in Eastern Sephardi Communities, in: Goldberg, *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries*, 89–98.

to advance their claims to Palestine, only to abandon these Jews as soon as Palestine was no longer Ottoman.¹⁵ In the new states in southeastern Europe born of the dismembered Empire, a Jewish nationalism not directly linked to the World Zionist Organization was developing. In the Balkans, a Sephardist movement was launched in the late nineteenth century, a movement which was in part one of the numerous answers to modernity. The next generation effectively rejected the unitary ideology of the Zionists, committed to building a national home in Palestine. In opposition to the Ashkenazi rule of Zionist leadership in Yugoslavia, it opted for a Zionism with the commitment of remaining in the diaspora, though without abandoning participation in the national reconstruction project in Palestine.

The Orientalization of *Sepharad* projected *Sepharad* right out of history. The Eurocentrism and the Ashkenazo-centrism of Israeli and other modern historiography later would also contribute to the exclusion not only of the Jews of the Balkans but likewise the *edot ha-mizrah*, Jews from the Orient and North Africa, from the larger history of the Jewish people.¹⁶ For example, *A History of the Jewish People* edited by Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson¹⁷ or *The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History* by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz illustrate these two tendencies. In the latter, the *Sephardim* are represented solely by two texts, one of Spinoza and another of Albert Memmi.¹⁸ Elie Barnavi and Saul Friedländer's opus *Les Juifs et le XXe siècle. Dictionnaire critique*, just published in France, where a majority of the Jewish community are of North African origin, does not break with that tradition: only one article authored by Memmi examines Tunisia, and the rest of North Africa is strikingly omitted.¹⁹ The Balkan Jewries also rarely appear within the historiography. In Ezra Mendelsohn's *On Modern Jewish Politics* the *Sephardim* are conspicuous by their near total absence.²⁰ Of

¹⁵ Esther Benbassa, Zionism in the Ottoman Empire at the End of the Nineteenth and the Beginning of the Twentieth Century, *Studies in Zionism* 38,2 (1990), 127–140.

¹⁶ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Exile within Sovereignty. Toward a Critique of the "Negation of Exile" in Israeli Culture, part I, *Te'oriya u-vikoret. Bama Israelit* [Theory and Criticism. Israeli Platform] 4 (1993), 23–55 (in Hebrew); part II, *Teoriya u-vikoret. Bama Israelit* 5 (1994), 113–132; Gabriel Piterberg, Domestic Orientalism. The Representation of "Oriental" Jews in Zionist/Israeli Historiography, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23,2 (1996), 125–145; Joseph Massad, Zionism's Internal Others. Israel and the Oriental Jews, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25,4 (1996), 53–68.

¹⁷ Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, *A History of the Jewish People*, Cambridge, Mass. 1976.

¹⁸ Paul Mendes-Flohr, Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World. A Documentary History*, New York, Oxford 1980¹ and 1995², 58–60, 289–292.

¹⁹ Elie Barnavi, Saul Friedländer (eds.), *Les Juifs et le XXe siècle. Dictionnaire critique*, Paris 2000, 324–333.

²⁰ Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (Studies in Jewish History), New York, Oxford 1993.

course, if the *Sephardim* had no history, how could have they experienced politics?

The history of the *Sephardim* is often divided from the larger history of the Jewish people, as illustrated by the three volumes edited by the late Shmuel Ettinger on the history of the Jews in Islamic lands.²¹ When the focus of historiographical attention, the Balkan Jews often represent the Jewish condition prior to Emancipation, with special attention to religious history. Moreover, these narratives are centered on a few personalities like Sabbatai Sevi or the proto-Zionist-messianic rabbis like Yuda Bibas or Yehuda Alkalay. Removed from their local context, however, the lives of these men cannot fully explain the synergies that are the very foundations of history. And when a segment of the Jewish populations of southeastern Europe came under the rule of independent Christian states, particularly in the nineteenth century, these "Orientalized" Jews disappear from the historical stage. No longer a part of the Jewish community under Islamic rule, still as "Orientals," they cannot be integrated into European Jewish history. The volumes by Ettinger reveal with great clarity the disjuncts within the histories of the Jewish people. This once again begs the question: which Europe are the historians talking about?

At the time of the great commemorations of the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1992, *Sepharad* again became the land of the *convivencia*, with a supposedly harmonious cohabitation of the three monotheisms. The *Sephardim* were romanticized and transformed into the emblems of an idealized lost paradise: What is constructed here is a salmagundi of songs, tales, proverbs, recipes. In this way, elements of identification, along with a language one desperately endeavors not to let pass into oblivion, are preserved. Certainly, folklore should not be disregarded, but by retroflecting those groups to a memory without a history, it dematerializes them by isolating them, confining their experience in a folkloristic ghetto.

Despite their physical presence, for example in Israel, where they form an important and substantial demographic group, Balkan Jews have been marginalized into invisibility and silence. Perhaps it is up to historians to interrogate that absence-presence, of which the Jews from southeastern Europe are only one example. The task is not only to widen the aperture of the writing of "their" history but also to link that history to the general history of Jews beyond the cleavages of *Sephardim*-Ashkenazim, Europe-Orient, Israel-diaspora. Through an inquiry into the different treatments of the history of the Balkan Jews over time, I believe it is possible to

²¹ Shmuel Ettinger (ed.), *History of the Jews in Islamic Countries*, 3 vols., Jerusalem 1981–1986 (in Hebrew).

glimpse the underlying mechanisms, which are simply those of the writing of history itself, marked by various ideological orientations. Not all are allowed to enter history's gate.

Summary

With the advent of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) the sephardic world was constructed as myth. For many Enlightenment figures, the medieval Sephardi Jew was conceived of as the ideal Jew. The real Sephardi Jew, alongside his Iberian counterpart of the Middle Ages, was also romanticized: both were fused to represent the modern Jew, capable of integration. To distinguish themselves from the East European Jews, the *Ostjuden*, who typified an "archaic" Judaism, the German Jews opted for that redeeming myth. As Ismar Schorsch has noted, the German Jewish perception of Sephardim was an amalgam of the needs of the present and of the reality of the past. This Sephardi mythology was in reality a construction. And this was an obstacle to the writing of the history of the Sephardi experience as a whole in the long run, since the *Sephardim* of the Ottoman Empire lands were forgotten. The Orientalization of *Sepharad* projected *Sepharad* right out of history.