IMMIGRATION CENTERS OF SEPHARDIC JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract
This article examines the migration and settlement of Sephardic Jewish communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on the Americas. Between 1820 and 1924, economic hardship, persecution, and urbanization in Europe prompted large-scale Jewish emigration, which slowed after U.S. immigration restrictions in the early 1920s. Major Sephardic centers emerged in North and South America, Europe, Southern Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. The study highlights the formation of communal and charitable organizations, such as the Federation of Oriental Jews of America, and explores social, cultural, and legal challenges faced by immigrants. Case studies from New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Cuba, and Mexico illustrate the development of Sephardic diasporic networks.

Keywords: Sephardic Jews, Jewish migration, immigration centers, diaspora, United States, Latin America, Ladino language, communal organizations.

From 1820 to 1924, large waves of Jewish communities migrated to the Americas, a process that culminated in a sharp increase in immigration in the early twentieth century. As a result of the economic hardships and persecutions of the nineteenth century, as well as major social and political upheavals—including industrialization, rapid population growth, and urbanization—millions of Jews from Europe began leaving their towns and villages and migrating to the American continent. This period of immigration slowed significantly with the adoption of restrictive immigration laws between 1921 and 1924. Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe to the United States never again reached the levels recorded prior to 1920.
In the twentieth century, Sephardic immigration centers were primarily located in North America, including cities such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, Montreal, Mexico City, and Veracruz; in South America, notably Lima, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo; in Europe, including Manchester, London, Paris, Marseille, Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, Milan, and Venice; in Southern Africa, such as

Lubumbashi, Salisbury, Johannesburg, and Cape Town; as well as in cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Salonika (Thessaloniki), Tel Aviv, and Alexandria[1].

In the early twentieth century, tens of thousands of Jews from the Ottoman Empire began migrating to New York City in search of improved economic conditions. Many scholars attribute the intensification of this process to the Italo-Ottoman War over Libya in 1911 and the two Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, which led to the adoption of new legislation requiring universal military conscription, including non-Muslims. In New York, as in other Sephardic immigration centers, new charitable organizations emerged to address the needs of the newly arrived immigrant population. In early 1911, a bureau of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society for Sephardic Jewish immigrants—later known as the Oriental Bureau—was established. The following year, prominent Levantine Jewish activists founded the Federation of Oriental Jews, with Joseph Gedalesia, a native of Istanbul, serving as its first president. The organization declared its mission as the "Americanization and improvement of the conditions of Oriental Jews[2].

This organization was known as the Federation of Oriental Jews of America**,** with its headquarters located in New York City. Its stated objective was to improve the conditions of Sephardic Jews in the United States in the spheres of economic activity, industry, education, and civic and religious life.

The oldest Jewish community in North America dates back to 1654, when twenty-three Sephardic refugees fleeing the Portuguese Inquisition arrived in New Amsterdam (later New York City) from Recife, Brazil. These settlers later became known as the Old Sephardim and established their own communal institutions. By this time, the Old Sephardic community in New York was largely affluent, culturally refined, and proficient in English, whereas the newly arrived Sephardic immigrants were predominantly from the working class and often entered the United States with little or no knowledge of the English language.

In 1912, Dr. David de Sola Pool, the rabbi of New York's first Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, emphasized in a sermon that the established Sephardic community had welcomed Jews arriving from the Ottoman Empire with open arms, expressing the hope that these newcomers would infuse new life into its gradually diminishing community[3].

By the mid-nineteenth century, California had become an attractive destination for Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants as a result of rapid economic expansion. Among all Sephardic settlements in the region, Los Angeles soon emerged as the largest. As the Judeo-Spanish–speaking population increased in subsequent decades, the city expanded geographically and demographically throughout the twentieth century.

[1] J. P. Cohen, S. A. Stein, Sephardi Lives A Documentary History, 1700–1950, - Stanford: "Stanford University Press", 2014 – P. 13.
[2] J. P. Cohen, S. A. Stein, Sephardi Lives A Documentary History, 1700–1950, - Stanford: "Stanford University Press", 2014 – P. 327.
[3] J. P. Cohen, S. A. Stein, Sephardi Lives A Documentary History, 1700–1950, - Stanford: "Stanford University Press", 2014 – P.329.

Sephardic Jewish immigrants in Los Angeles quickly established a number of their own communal organizations, including the Society of Peace and Progress, composed primarily of Jews. As the number of members within the Los Angeles Sephardic community grew, so too did the number of Sephardic associative institutions. This momentum led to the founding in 1920 of the Los Angeles Sephardic Society, also known as La Komunidad. The synagogue established by La Komunidad functioned not only as a place of worship but also as a central hub for Jewish communities from the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa in Los Angeles[4].

In the early years of the twentieth century, Seattle (Washington) was recognized as the third-largest Sephardic community in the United States, following New York and Los Angeles. By 1939, Sephardic Jews in Seattle had also established their own communal institutions[5].

After the Second World War, Sephardic Jews migrated to Australia from Egypt, Iraq, India (as descendants of Iraqi Jews), Turkey, and North African countries. Within the Sephardic community, internal distinctions were evident. Jews who had grown up and received their education in Egypt were often regarded as more closely aligned with Western Europe, as they were fluent in French, Italian, and English. The Iraqi Jewish population was considered the most religiously observant, as it had preserved ancestral ways of life.

The Indian Sephardic community was divided into two groups: those from Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) and those from Bombay (present-day Mumbai). The Calcutta Jews followed Syrian customs, while the Bombay Jews adhered to Iraqi traditions. In the mid-twentieth century, during the establishment of the State of Israel, unrest and violence—including killings—erupted in Egypt, Iraq, and other neighboring Arab countries. As a result of these disturbances, Jews were forced to abandon their homes, and some chose to migrate to Australia. In this way, Australia emerged as one of the significant centers of Sephardic migration in the twentieth century[6].

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