

Who Are the Sephardim?

"When the Jews of Spain were forced into exile by the Inquisition, they took with them the keys to their homes, hoping one day to return to their native land. These keys they passed down from father to son as a cherished inheritance. And with these keys they kept alive the ancient folk tales of their noble heritage."
-- From Keeping Posted.

The colorful history and distinctive character of Sephardic Jewry and a salute to its current resurgence in the United States are featured in the current issue of Keeping Posted, the bi-monthly published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

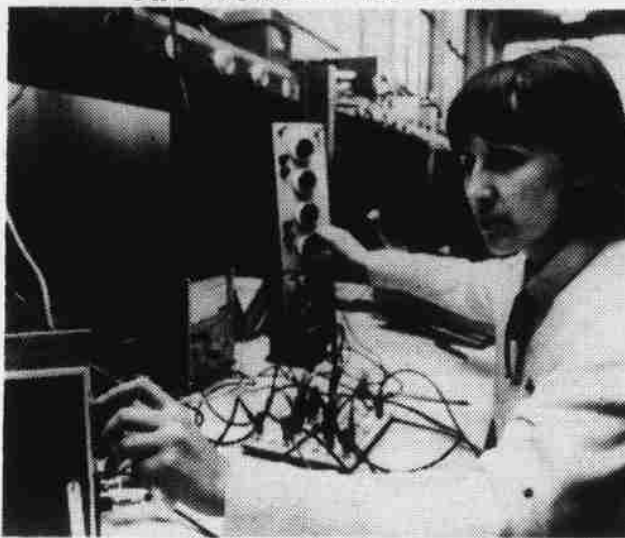
In an introductory note, the magazine's editor, Aron Hirt - Manheimer, observes that although East European Jews predominate in American Jewry, "the rights and privileges we take for granted...were fought for by the Sephardic congregations of Colonial America." It was the large influx of Jewish immigrants from Germany in the mid-1800's and from Czarist Russia at the turn of the century, he writes, that "eclipsed the once - important Sephardic Jewish leadership in this country."

Often forgotten by Jews who trace their roots to Eastern and Central Europe, the magazine points out, is the fact that so much of the Jewish heritage -- including the monumental works of physician - philosopher Maimonides, the poetry of Judah Halevi and Solomon ibn Gabirol, the philosophy of Barugh Spinoza and the scholarship of Joseph Caro - derives from Sephardic Jews.

According to Keeping Posted, Sephardim take their name from Sepharad, the medieval Hebrew name for Spain, to which most Sephardic Jews trace their ancestry. The word Sephardim also refers to Jews from Arab lands. Their language was Judaeo - Spanish, a combination of Hebrew and Spanish, just as Yiddish -- a combination of Hebrew and German -- was the language of Ashkenazic Jews of Central and Eastern Europe.

Although Sephardim comprise only about 2 percent of the U.S. Jewish population, in recent years the Sephardic community -- concentrated mainly in New York, Los Angeles, Miami Beach and Seattle -- "has begun to find its voice and rediscover its heritage through newly-established national and international organizations, as well as through institutes and workshops devoted to the study of Sephardic culture," Keeping Posted reports. In Israel, Sephardim constitute almost 60 percent of the Jewish population.

In a lead article, Raphael Patai traces the history of the Sephardim from their origins



A STUDENT AT THE MONTROY ORT SCHOOL IN PARIS STUDIES IN THE SCHOOL'S ADVANCED COMPUTER DEPARTMENT. THE WORLD ORT UNION RECEIVED \$4.4 MILLION IN 1982 FROM THE AMERICAN JEWISH JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE, A BENEFICIARY AGENCY OF UJA/FEDERATION CAMPAIGNS.

at the time of the Arab conquest of Spain in the eighth century. He describes their expulsion from Spain in 1492, their dispersal to Holland, England, Greece, Italy, Turkey, North Africa and Palestine, and their settlement in Brazil, the Caribbean and New Amsterdam in the 16th and 17th centuries.

"No other Diaspora and no other age has ever achieved or even approximated such a galaxy of greatness of the Sephardic Jewish record of the 10th to 13 centuries," he writes.

Marc D. Angel, a third-generation Sephardic and rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, offers some personal recollections and observations in an article on "The Sephardic Spirit."

Asked if Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, strangers to each other for centuries, will not come closer together, Rabbi Angel replies: "We're all in the same boat, fighting for the same culture, for the Jewish people...Sephardim and Ashkenazim are dependent on each other. One is not a weak partner to the other. We are all Jews."

Another contributor to the special issue of Keeping Posted, Dr. Maria Esformes, tells of her childhood in Salonika, Greece, where Jews had lived as early as 140 B.C.E. and which became a flourishing Jewish metropolis in the 15th century, largely because of the arrival of Sephardim expelled from Spain.

During the 16th & 17th centuries the port city was internationally known for its Jewish cultural pre - eminence as well as for its economic prosperity. Salonika declined in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, and by the early 20th century unstable political conditions caused thousands of Jews to emigrate.

Even so, some 60,000 Jews lived in Salonika in 1935. But in April 1941 Nazi troops entered and city and during the following months 95 percent of the city's Jews were deported to German concentration camps, never to return.

Keeping Posted also features an illustrated feature by Sophie C. Askel, describing Sephardic cookery, with recipes featuring foods from the Mediterranean area.

Public Support for Israel Rebounds

BY DON McEVOY

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Don McEvoy is Senior Vice President of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.)

So seldom do my predictions bear any resemblance to subsequent reality that when I do hit the target I feel I have the right to boast a bit.

Last October, in the aftermath of the massacres in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, many of my close acquaintances, Jews and goyim alike, were deeply distressed over the apparent erosion of American support for Israel.

It mattered not that this atrocity was conducted by representatives of the Lebanese Phalangist armed forces and not by Israeli soldiers. It mattered not that the terror of Palestinian camps followed immediately the end of seven years of PLO occupation of Lebanon during which tens of thousands of Lebanese had been murdered.

Israel had assumed military control and in the eyes of our nation's press Israel was held responsible for the tragic events in the two camps, though not one Israeli soldier had been directly involved.

The High Holy Days were marked by deep anguish and soul searching in synagogues and temples across America. Many Christian supporters of Israel were saddened and shocked. Public opinion polls clearly indicated that support for Israel in this country was ebbing away.

But in Israel, the people were demanding a full and impartial investigation. So great was the public pressure that the government found it impossible not to agree. Seldom, if ever, in human history was there such a spontaneous public response of a nation holding itself to an ethical standard of highest morality than was exhibited by the people of Israel in that woeful moment.

Those in this country who cared most deeply for Israel's survival were despondent over what they were reading and hearing, both in the public media and private conversation.

At that time I was saying to any who would listen: "Don't panic, American public opinion is a very mercurial thing. It is responding momentarily to a very great trauma. But within six months it will be back up to pre - Lebanon War levels. There is simply too deep a commitment to Israel within the American people to be washed away by this current tide. In fact, I believe that the citizens of this country will be so heartened by the moral excellence of Israel in the deliberations of their own internal panel of inquiry that we may come out of this with a stronger base of support than ever before."

One high official at the American Jewish Committee told me that he would give almost anything to be able to believe what I was saying, but he simply could not so believe.

That makes it doubly gratifying to read the latest poll just released by the American Jewish Committee which shows that by early February American support for Israel had rebounded to pre - Lebanon levels.

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