

The Sephardi Diaspora

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By Randall C. Belinfante*

The exodus of the Jews from Spain began not in 1492, as many believe, but in 1391, when serious anti-Jewish riots broke out in Toledo and Seville. In striving to convert the entire nation to the Catholic Christian faith, the Spanish leaders forced thousands of Jews to convert. Many others fled the country. Those that had converted came to be known as New Christians or Marranos (meaning "pig"). It was this group that was to become a target of the Inquisition, an organization charged with ensuring adherence to orthodox practice among Catholics but which also set about preventing people from backsliding into their "heathen" faiths.

After Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile united their kingdoms in 1491 they succeeded, with the financial assistance of Jews, in driving the Moors out of Spain at the beginning of 1492. They then set their sights on removing the remaining heathens, the Jews, from Spain. This move was partly motivated by the desire to keep Jews from influencing the New Christians; but there were also financial reasons since the Spanish leadership saw an opportunity to seize the assets of the fleeing Jews. Nevertheless, Spain was to witness the decay of its economy from the time of the expulsion. Even though a great deal of wealth flowed into the country from the empire overseas, the nation was never to perform quite as well as it did prior to 1492.

As for the Jews, one can read about their expulsion in Samuel Usque's Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel. They fled in different directions. Many left for Portugal, where they were at first received with open arms, only to be forced into conversion a few years later. When the new Portuguese king decided to marry a Spanish princess in hopes of uniting the two kingdoms, he was obliged to accept the Inquisition and banish his Jews. However, his economy could not afford the loss of Jewish revenue, and so he forced the Jews to convert. First he took their children in hope that the elders would not wish to let go of their offspring. Later he forced the elders into conversion.

Others fled across the Mediterranean to Morocco. There again they were accepted at first, but as their numbers increased they became subject to oppression. They were forced into cramped areas of the cities called Mellahs. In many cases the Jews developed an interdependent relationship with the Moroccan rulers, wherein the refugees were protected by the leaders of the country while becoming their collectors of customs, minters of coins, and diplomats.

TO UNDERSTAND THE LIVES OF THE SEPHARDIM

The luckiest among the refugees were those who went to Greece, the Balkans, and other lands controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Legend has it that the Sultan Bayezid questioned the wisdom of Christian rulers who would expel their Jews, only to have them enrich his Empire. Among the Ottomans, the Sephardim carried on a brisk trade, and prospered in many areas. They were constrained by certain laws imposed upon non-Muslims, but they did quite well for themselves, serving as tax farmers, traders, and tradesmen. Over the next 350 years the Jews developed semi-autonomous communities in Rhodes, Istanbul, and especially Thessaloniki, where a third of the population (nearly 80,000) were Jews. To understand the lives of the Sephardim in this area, one might wish to read Rabbi Marc Angel's Foundations of Sephardic Spirituality.

From the Ottoman Empire, the Sephardim were to spread out over much of the world. Many joined other Sephardi refugees who traveled to and settled in the trading capitals of Europe in Amsterdam and Antwerp. There they developed small but prosperous communities, dealing in book publishing, diamond cutting, stock trading, and a variety of other occupations.

Some also found their way from Europe to the New World. A good book on this subject is Arbell's Jewish Nation of the Caribbean. The Jews established communities in the Caribbean, Central America, and even small settlements in Northern Brazil. A few writers have even suggested that Columbus bore a few "New Christians", if not Jews along with him on his early voyages to America. Unfortunately, the Inquisition followed them to these locations, and there are numerous cases of trials and burnings of "New Christians" in the New World.

When the Portuguese recaptured Brazil in 1654, a small group of twenty-three Dutch Jews fleeing from the Brazilian town of Recife were blown off course. They went through a whole series of adventures, and ended up in the tiny village of New Amsterdam (later to be called New York). There they established the first Jewish community in North America, Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel). To get some idea about the dispersion of Sephardim around the globe today, one might wish to look at Elazar's book The Other Jews.

* Randall C. Belinfante is Librarian and Archivist at the American Sephardi Federation, New York City.