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Sephardic History Beyond Europe

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Foreword

This Yearbook of the Selma Stern Center for Jewish Studies Berlin-Brandenburg (ZJS) returns to the topic of Sephardic History, reflecting recent achievements and innovations which further highlight the complexities and richness of Jewish Studies beyond the Ashkenazic mainstream. Our collection of scholarly contributions features some of the projects completed during the academic year 2020–21. Building on the essays in the earlier Sephardic Yearbook of the academic year 2015–16, the essays in this Yearbook contribute to recent studies on Jews in colonial contexts, the Imperial Turn in Jewish History, as well as the need to decenter and pluralize Jewish Studies. Our authors participated in activities at the ZJS in 2020–21. They have either contributed to our virtual lecture series *Beyond Ashkenaz: Sephardim and other Jews* (https://www.selma-stern-zentrum.de/kalender/zjs/2021_SoSe-RV-Beyond-Ashkenaz/index.html) or they have been awarded Selma Stern Postdoc fellowships and were affiliated with the Chair of Religious Studies and Jewish Thought at the University of Potsdam.

The selection of contributions does not claim to be complete; however, these essays reflect the vitality and relevance of current research in the field of Sephardic Studies in the region of Berlin and Brandenburg. All authors share a rigorous focus on and analysis of findings in numerous archives in Europe, the MENA region, and the Americas. Their essays connect the historical and diplomatic contexts emphasizing the multiple layers of belongings among Sephardim.

In his essay “The Sephardim of the Atlantic World: An Early Modern Empire?” **Jonathan Schorsch** explores the Sephardic communities across the Atlantic coast of western Europe and the eastern coasts of the Americas. He raises

the question of whether these scattered communities formed an empire, despite their small numbers, lack of territory, military, and unified government. Schorsch highlights that while not all Sephardim en route to the Americas were wealthy, they nevertheless established a network of closely interwoven communities. These communities operated autonomously but looked to the leadership of the mother communities in Amsterdam and London for assistance and support. Policy coordination was extensive, even beyond religious matters, and the establishment of new settlements in the Americas involved the initiative of individual entrepreneurs or groups and the *mahamads* in Amsterdam and London.

Enrique Corredera Nilsson discusses “Gabriel Milan and the Sephardic Heritage of the Danish Caribbean.” He starts off with March 26, 1689, when Gabriel Milan, the former governor of St. Thomas, was publicly executed in Copenhagen. After his death, Milan was long forgotten. The rediscovery of Milan as a historical figure of some relevance began in the late nineteenth century when the Danish historian Frederik Krarup studied aspects of Milan’s career and life. The way Krarup presented Milan’s rise and fall set the structure of a picture that was complemented but never modified by scholars in the twentieth century. This perception of Gabriel Milan overshadows the complexity of European and transatlantic Sephardic networks and belongings of the mid and late seventeenth century. Corredera Nilsson shows how a renewed study of Gabriel Milan’s life can serve as a catalyst for the writing of a transatlantic (micro)history of the Sephardic communities linked with Denmark during the late seventeenth century. His study also highlights the yet understudied involvement of Sephardic Jews in Danish colonial expansion or the (Sephardic) colonial Caribbean of the late seventeenth century.

Moving on to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, **Juan Manuel Vilaplana López** seeks to raise awareness of the relevance of Spanish consular archives for the study of Sephardic diasporas. Long dispersed overseas and unavailable for academic research, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation has recently undertaken an important effort to make these documents accessible at its General Archive in Madrid. Spain’s historical consular archives in the former Ottoman Empire contained a wealth of information that is highly relevant for historians, sociologists, and other researchers in Jewish Studies. Important examples are documents from the ar-

chive of the Consulate General of Spain in Alexandria, which include records of Jewish *protégés* and Spanish subjects of Jewish origin in Alexandria and Port Said between 1873 and the late 1970s, in particular lists of residents, correspondence on issues such as marriage, migration, and travel permits, correspondence on the relations of Jewish citizens with local Egyptian authorities, and political reports on historical events that had an impact on the Jewish community. The focus of this essay is on several reports and letters written in 1907, 1922, 1954, 1956, and 1961, which were available at the consular archives and can now be accessed by researchers at the General Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of Spain.

Jonathan Hirsch, in his piece “Maimonides and the Sephardic Mediterranean: Diaspora Horizons in Times of Crisis,” emphasizes the global scale of the 1935 Maimonides celebration as an opportunity for communities outside the Jewish centers in Europe and the United States to participate in and contribute to an all-Jewish debate at a moment of crisis. Most of the events organized to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the important scholar directed their attention to a local and national focus. Nevertheless, the festivities in Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, and even in the Baghdadi diaspora in Shanghai illuminate a transnational perspective that foregrounds a new self-confidence and the culmination of decades of Sephardic modernity. This essay demonstrates that Jewish political positions did not solely oscillate between colonial and national orientations, they also called for a new Sephardic “awakening,” which was supposed to contribute to a missed unity and a transnational engagement of Eastern Sephardim. Given the language of modern Sephardic ambitions, with expressions such as “rise,” “renaissance,” “awakening,” a former state of decline or slumber had, at least discursively, been accepted. Yet, as Hirsch argues, the reclaiming of the Sephardic past was a way out of the European projection of the diverse geographies of Jewish communities as “Orientals.” Thus, Sephardism as an imaginary for a diaspora network of communities in the Mediterranean (and beyond) bore the potential to connect local and individual efforts to give these communities a voice in international Jewish politics.

Allyson Gonzalez maintains in her article “The Quincentennial of 1992: Scholarship and the Transnational Commemorations of the Jewish Expulsion from Spain—Beyond the ‘Sephardic Mystique,’” that the quincentennial of the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1992 marked a significant moment in transnation-



al cultural and intellectual interconnectivity. It led to the creation of a wide body of knowledge that shaped modern Sephardic Studies. The institutional developments surrounding the quincentennial served as a focal point for many leading figures in the field, resulting in complex and often-protracted interrelations. The 500th anniversary of the expulsion commemorated in Turkey, Israel, Greece, Chile, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the United States, also brought about a noticeable shift in wider Jewish and Spanish outward-facing public relations, coinciding with the apparent end of the Cold War. Gonzalez explores how this commemoration, along with other national commemorations of the expulsion, contributed to a shift towards a more polycentric approach, moving away from the notion of a singular “Sepharad.”

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