

## **The Other Lower East Side** by Randall C. Belinfante

"We live in New York! In an oven of fire, in the midst of dirt and filth. We live in dark and narrow dwellings which inspire disgust. We work from morning to night without giving ourselves even one day a week for rest. We sleep badly, eat badly, dress ourselves badly. Our economic condition is so bad that we cannot afford to spend several weeks in the country to get away from the oppressive heat of the New York summer. We are very frugal, saving our money to send to our relatives in the old country or just hoarding it away for a rainy day. We are losing the best days of our lives, the time of our youth ..."<sup>1</sup>

Such expressions are familiar to us – they recall the descriptions of many Ashkenazim, of the wretched conditions existing on the Lower East Side of New York in the years between 1900 and the First World War. But this sentiment was expressed not by an Ashkenazi, but by a Sephardic Jewish author named Jack Farhi. It referred to the small but densely packed Sephardic community that dwelled on the Lower East Side during this same period. What few people realize is that during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a large group of some 20 – 30 thousand Sephardim arrived in the Lower East Side, and struggled to make a living in this land that was not quite flowing with milk and honey.

The new world was both a marvel and a misery for many immigrants. Driven from Greece and the Balkans by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of nationalism, they were drawn to the U.S. by the promise of entrepreneurial success and "streets paved with gold". Earlier Sephardic immigrants, arriving in the 1890's had come with education and skills, and many were able to enjoy rapid success in the business world. The teeming masses of the early 1900's arrived only with dreams and resolutions. Lacking even the most fundamental skills, they were obliged to start at the bottom of the economic ladder, working as peddlers, shoe shine boys, and unskilled factory workers. Nevertheless, despite their low station in life, the new Americans were averse to accepting assistance. Contemporaries as Cyrus Adler commented that: "unless they be decrepit, blind, or maimed they ask and take no charity, and to maintain themselves no work is too hard".

The new Sephardim were crowded into a small neighborhood, between Chrystie Street and Essex Street and between East Houston and Canal. Yet, despite their close proximity to the other Lower East Side Communities, they were worlds apart. They lacked even the language to communicate with their neighbors, for rather than speaking Yiddish like the Ashkenazim, they spoke Ladino – a hybrid language passed down through the generations since the expulsion from Spain.

The well-established Sephardim of Congregation Shearith Israel, who had lived in America for hundreds of years, initially saw an opportunity to become partners with the new-comers in a unified Sephardic community. But they were soon overwhelmed by the large masses of new arrivals and began branding them as "Orientals" to distinguish them from the earlier "Grandees." This was ironic, for as Rabbi Marc Angel explains, many of these Jews "tended to be true descendants of the Sephardim who came from the Iberian

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<sup>1</sup> So wrote Jack Farhi in the summer of 1912, describing the situation of the Sephardic Jews of the Lower East Side. (*La America*, p. 19.)

Peninsula, whereas the members of Shearith Israel tended to be predominantly Ashkenazim who had never spoken Spanish or Judeo-Español.”

The majority of the new arrivals were men who had left their families behind, or were young unmarried fellows who had set out to make their fortunes in the new world. Earning meager wages of some six dollars a week, they could ill afford anything but the most humble of lodgings. Frequently they found themselves renting from other poor families, or joining eight or nine other men as they squeezed into tiny two-room apartments. There they spread their blankets on the floor, and returned only when exhaustion required that they sleep.

Meals were taken largely in the coffeehouses that were scattered throughout the neighborhood. Segregated as they were, it was here that the new immigrants took refuge, finding that the coffeehouses provided not only sustenance, but also vital links to the community. They served as communal meeting places; a haven where the refugees could learn community news and keep abreast of politics and other matters.

The coffeehouses had their drawbacks however. They were regular outlets for gambling. The stakes were generally small, but some of the poor working men are reported to have lost enormous sums (i.e., \$2,000) in the space of just a few days. In the local Ladino paper “*La America*” of January 23, 1914, the editor, Moise Gadol warned that the “Turkino” witnessed “a dangerous epidemic” of card playing and gambling, where “Sephardim gambled their money away, losing what they had spent so much time earning.”

In time the lower East side Sephardim began to climb the economic ladder and move away. Some were relocated by such organizations as the Industrial Relief Office (IRO) to such remote places as Seattle, Indianapolis, and even South America. Others were to enjoy success in business and were able to move out of the neighborhood to more spacious quarters in Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Bronx. Through hard work and perseverance, many of these early immigrants had managed to work their way up from positions of humble laborers to become operators of large businesses. The journeys did not come without sacrifice, and many succumbed to working on the Sabbath and to spending insufficient time with wives and family. In time moreover, children and grandchildren would become even further removed from the traditional way of life.

Yet despite their troubles, the Sephardim were ready to face the future with a bit of humor. This is demonstrated in a number of their expressions and comments in Ladino. It is noted for example, that because land was cheap on the outskirts of Brooklyn, many of the Sephardim used it for burial plots. Thus the Sephardim would humorously refer to someone who had passed away as “*Se fue a Brooklee*” (“He went to Brooklyn”).