

Sephardim of the Lower East Side

350 years ago, 23 Sephardic Jews from Recife, Brazil were forced to flee their adopted homeland and found themselves on the shores of New York, then the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam. Despite opposition from Governor Peter Stuyvesant, this small Jewish community was finally allowed entry into the city and took root in an American society far away from the reach of the Inquisition. These Sephardim, originally from Spain and Portugal, laid the foundations for Congregation Shearith Israel, the first Jewish congregation in North America, and have played a prominent role in American life for over three hundred years.

Some two hundred years later, in the decades between 1880 and 1924, an additional 50,000 -60,000 Sephardim came to America, many of them settling on the Lower East Side of New York. Prompted by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, these Sephardim came from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, looking for a brighter future in the New World. The earliest arrivals were readily employed with many of them developing highly successful businesses in their new environment. However, as the number of immigrants increased, many came to be crowded into Lower East Side tenement buildings. They accepted work in sweat-shops or eked out a living with menial tasks such as shoe-shining and peddling. Frustrated by their employment problems and dismal living conditions, they took refuge in the coffee houses that sprang up in the neighborhood. Despite their poverty they were very proud and very hesitant about accepting charity, regardless of the source.

Initially welcomed by the older, established Sephardic community, the new arrivals came to be regarded as somehow alien by their predecessors. Although they did not speak Yiddish like the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe, they spoke Ladino or Greek--languages which were also unknown to the old Sephardic families. The leaders of Congregation Shearith Israel responded by setting up annex synagogues for the newcomers, but they did not readily accept them into the fold. They were referred to as "Oriental Jews" to distinguish them from the established community.

Nevertheless, this Sephardic community that Louis N. Levy was a part of, prospered. In time, these Sephardim began to move away from the Lower East Side. They settled in Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Others organized new communities in Seattle, Indianapolis, and even South America. Most succeeded in working their way up and out of poverty, becoming contributing members of the larger community. Their culture lives on in the hearts and minds of their descendants.