Priority Research Areas for Jewish Genealogy in the Sephardi Realm

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The definition of 'history' is something that changes over time. In an essay entitled *intra-historia* (intrahistory), the early 20th century Spanish author, Miguel de Unamuno, proposed that instead of looking at the great events and its leaders we should look below "at the people who lived the events, the unwritten, the untalked". Indeed, recent decades have seen academic historians broadening their vision and scope of history from the traditional political and economic history of kings and nations (also known as the history of "dead great white men") to include the history and sociology of population groups. Influenced by the French Annales School, academic fields such as women's history, immigration history and many others rapidly developed with the focus on individuals and groups. It is but a logical step in the by now well established historical trend for academics to expand the scope further to include the history of family units—what we call genealogy— which, when done correctly, illustrate and reveal in far greater detail the realities of changes occurring in populations over time. Recent publication of diaries of American slaves or simple midwives clearly illustrate how such intimate studies can shed great light on the history of their historical times. It is thus only appropriate that genealogy now take its rightful place within the field of the history of our people.

Sephardic genealogy is still today in its infancy compared to its older sibling Ashkenazi genealogy and yet its potential for genealogists is much greater for two primary reasons: the existence of older hereditary Sephardic surnames that permit going further back in history and of older archival resources in many countries where Sephardim lived, such as the voluminous notarial records of Spain, dating from the 12th century onward, or the still greatly underutilized Ottoman archives. Much has been achieved in Sephardic genealogy in the past decade, but so much more remains to be done. Huge opportunities for research and scholarly publication exist in this field, but also obstacles that need to be overcome.

In setting priorities for future research, it is logical to go for the low-hanging fruit first while keeping in mind the need for wider research that would ultimately yield greater rewards. It is a cardinal rule of genealogy to start first by interviewing the family elders—since they may not be there later—before going to the archives that will always be there. Sephardic population groups have undergone a massive diaspora in the past century and are in the process of being integrated into their new countries, breaking family and memory trails. It is important to set the highest priority to recording and analyzing interviews of representative elder members of the various Sephardic groups before they and their memories are gone. These are ephemeral resources, ripe, low-hanging fruit if you wish, that will soon fall to the ground and no longer be available. They are thus a high priority. To maximize their value, the interviews must be done properly, with a basic minimum set of questions and criteria. School children in Israel and elsewhere have been given such projects but that is a mere start and does not obviate the involvement of trained researchers who could through in-depth interviews uncover uniquely useful information that young children cannot be expected to do or know about.

Beyond interviews of elders, I suggest assigning priority to those areas that would shed the most light and provide the most help to genealogists. These include research in the areas of Sephardic onomastics, archives, cemeteries, and Sephardic research tools, as discussed below.

Jewish Population Changes

Since I am discussing Sephardic priorities, it would be well to point out that this also affects Ashkenazim interested in their own genealogy. It was not so long ago that Jews living in Europe

were a rarity and most Jews in the world were what we now call Sephardic.

A Roman census in 48 C.E. counted 7 million Jews in the Roman Empire. They constituted 25 percent of the Roman population living in the Eastern Mediterranean and 10 percent of the entire Roman Empire. An additional one million Jews were estimated to live outside the Roman territories, making a total world population of about eight million Jews at that time. As late as the 12th century, Sephardim constituted more than 90 percent of the world Jewish population. At that time, when cities such as Granada and Cordoba counted populations of 12,000 Jews each, the largest Jewish populations in Europe were those of Frankfurt am Main and Vienna with Jewish populations of 700 and 1,200 respectively. As Sephardic Jews underwent persecutions, massacres, and forced conversions they fled to North Africa, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Holland, Germany as well as elsewhere in Europe. Their population was so decimated that by the 1700s they had fallen to 50 percent of the total world Jewish population. The European Jewish population continued to explode while the Jews living in Sephardic countries decreased, and by 1930 Sephardim had dropped to a mere 10 percent of Jews in the world. Since then there has been resurgence with, in 1990, Sephardim accounting for 25 percent of world Jews and the majority of Israeli Jews.

It is not a stretch, therefore, to believe that if Ashkenazim could trace their family trees far enough they would inevitably discover Sephardic roots. Indeed, those with rabbinic roots, and thus able to go back far enough, frequently have found that to be the case; recent DNA studies suggest that to be the case more often than is usually believed. So the development of Sephardic genealogy should be of great interest to the Ashkenazi genealogist as well, eventually allowing Ashkenazi family trees to go further back through new unsuspected paths.

Sephardic Onomastics

Hereditary Sephardic surnames often go back half a millennium or more. This makes the job of identifying potential ancestors in old records much easier. Figures 2 and 3 show examples from 600-year-old notarial records of Spain. As can be seen, Jews usually are identified clearly in these records.

Such Spanish notarial records are very voluminous—often 3,000 per town, per year, from the early 1200s on, so being able to identify Jewish surnames is a distinct advantage in identifying potential ancestors in these records.

My time on this podium is too brief to describe how Jewish names persisted and evolved within the Sephardic world. Suffice it to say that the challenges of Sephardic onomastics differ significantly from those of Ashkenazi onomastics as my friend Alexander Beider surely will explain. Not only are the languages involved different, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and various Iberian dialects being the most common roots, but because of the surnames' ancient age, variations over the centuries due to spelling and, more importantly, due to linguistic translations, take on extraordinary importance for the Sephardic genealogist searching in the archives. Three excerpts from Pilar Leon Tello's book *Judios de Toledo*1 will suffice to illustrate this point. All deal with the sale on March 19, 1483, of a house in the San Tome quarter (the Jewish quarter) of Toledo to a Rabi Abenruel, and show the seller's name being translated from its Hebrew form, Abenmelec, to Aben Rey (Spanish), and to Aben Maleque (Arabic).

1356: Ano 1483 Fol. 5v (*part of request for permission to sell the house*)

"19 de marzo. Lesar Abenmelec pidio licencia al cabildo para vender a rabi Semuel Abenruel napolitano morador en Toledo, las casas que tiene en la juderia, colacion de Santo Tome; ..... "

1357: Santo Tome: Fol. 142v (*part of permission received from council to sell house*)
"Las casas que tenia Alesar Aben Rey, judio ferrero, con cargo e tributo de 200 mrs, en 19 de marzo de 1483 annos, el cabildo dio licencia al dicho Lesar
para vender estas casas a rabi Semuel Abenruel napolitano, judio ..... "

1258: Fol. 21 (*part of title search for house*)
" …. se ha de cobrar de Lesar Aben Maleque o de rabi Semuel Abenruel, napolitano judio, ..."

Similar name variants are numerous and may be considered the norm rather than the exception. They need to be accurately documented based on records and not guesswork. Sephardic onomasticians need to identify such documentable name variants in a way that Ashkenazi onomastics normally need not do. Correct identification of the etymologic language of a surname is also important. For instance, Malka is a Hebrew word for queen and is its meaning when used as a common female first name. In contrast, the Sephardic surname Malka is spelled in ancient documents with an aleph at the end because it is Aramaic in which language it means king—as numerous authors confirm.2

That knowledge permits a researcher to identify and then explain some of its translations seen in the above example that otherwise would be incomprehensible.
Converso surnames, on the other hand, are adopted surnames and—like Eastern European Jewish surnames— may not be unique to a specific family. With converso surnames, the genealogist also faces the nearly impossible challenge of identifying the original Jewish surname prior to conversion.

Archives
Jean-Claude Kuperminc has already discussed Sephardic archives and therefore in the interest of time I will not go over that again except for a few remarks. Authors such as Pilar Leon Tello, Jean Regne, Jose Hinojosa Montalvo 3 and others have extracted many of the Iberian notarial records mentioning Jews, but numerous others, in both large and small towns, have not yet been studied. Figures 1 and 2 came from such undocumented and ignored Iberian notarial records. The similarly rich and old notarial records of Italy are largely unstudied for their Jewish genealogical potential.

Voluminous Jewish records exist in Cairo and Alexandria. In the early 20thth century the Chief Rabbi of Egypt decreed that the rabbinate keep copies of all ketubot written. So the value of these rabbinate records to genealogists is enormous. Unfortunately, they remain inaccessible to scholars and genealogists and even permission to photocopy or microfilm them for archival purposes has been denied by the elderly president of the Cairo Jewish community. In 1956 a fire destroyed a significant part of the Alexandria collection and the mice are feasting on the rest. There is a real risk that when the present tiny, elderly Jewish community in Egypt dies, all these Jewish records may be sold, vandalized, or disappear for good into the bureaucratic Egyptian abyss. It is imperative that backup copies of these voluminous records be obtained and preserved somewhere safe where scholars can access and study them.

The Istanbul rabbinate records have been copied recently and brought to the U.S., but others, such as the rabbinate records of Morocco's many Jewish communities, remain in single precarious states in their original locations with shrinking Jewish populations. They need to be microfilmed for posterity before they irretrievably disappear.

Cemeteries
Cemeteries are both an important genealogical resource and a surprisingly ephemeral one. For instance, in his 1957 book "Precious Stones of the Jews of Curacao" Isaac Emmanuel documented the tombstone inscriptions in the historic, largely Sephardic cemetery of Curacao. Today, because of pollution from nearby refineries, many of these inscriptions no longer are legible and Emmanuel's book is the only

record we have remaining of what used to be legible just a few decades ago.

There are numerous Sephardic cemeteries silently suffering similar or worse fates throughout the world without the benefit of having been preserved in any book. The marble tombstones of the Bassatine of Cairo, the oldest and largest Jewish cemetery in the world after the Mount of Olives have been used in Cairo's building boom and already are lost, along with their inscriptions. The Maghreb, that huge historic population reservoir of Sephardic Jews, has ancient Jewish cemeteries, almost all of which—with the notable exception of one or two exceoptions—have not been systematically surveyed and recorded, especially in the smaller towns and villages where many genealogical and historical missing links are to be found. It would not take much effort to visit and document these tombstones before they are irretrievably gone. The same is true of cemeteries in smaller towns in the eastern Mediterranean. Some larger cemeteries, as in Salonica, have been documented by academics but, decades later, these publicly funded photos are still privately held and the data is not available to other researchers.

Education

Traditionally, most genealogical research, including indexing of archival documents, has been done by amateur hobbyists in the field and this is likely to continue. It is necessary to assist these researchers by providing them with the specialized tools essential for Sephardic genealogy. These include:

1. Genealogy basics:

Hobbyists need to be instructed in the basics of correct genealogical methodology, record keeping and—most importantly —documentation of sources. Though basic, if these are not taught widely, the result may be a considerable wasted time and efforts.

2. Linguistic tools:

Besides the various languages spoken by Sephardic Jews, it is important to be able to read the cursive Hebrew scripts used by Sephardic Jews in their records. It differs significantly from the cursive Hebrew script used in Israel today. Dr Bunis has written a book on reading Sephardic cursive Hebrew script, but it is in Hebrew and not accessible to large numbers of Sephardic researchers who are not fluent in that language. It should be translated into English and French or at least the smaller pamphlet he published in New York should be reprinted and made available4. It would be ideal if it was taught in Israeli schools along with the Ashkenazic script used in Israel, as part of cultural awareness, thus enabling a larger number of Hebrew speakers to read Sephardic documents.

3. Calendars:

Tools to convert the various Muslim and other calendars already exist but need to be made more readily available. I've tried to make some known in my own book but the knowledge needs to be part of any proposed genealogy curriculum.

Accessibility

Increasing numbers of databases are appearing on the Internet. But more need to be developed. The work of pioneers like Mathilde Tagger, Daniel Kazez and Alain Farhi are to be commended and emulated by others. Too many of the databases that do exist, however, are only accidentally stumbled upon by researchers, sometimes after years of fruitless searches. It would be helpful to have a central site with organized links to all the useful databases so that the novice can easily find all those that pertain to him or her and thus maintain interest in genealogy. It should also be remembered that the Internet is ephemeral and the useful information needs to be preserved in more durable forms.

An index of available sources, by which I mean literature, archives, as well as the Internet, would be very helpful. Mathilde Tagger and Yitzhak Kerem's recent book on Sephardic Resources in Israel is an excellent step in the right direction and needs to be widely emulated for other regions of the world. Such

research guides are the road maps that help the novice researcher and by demonstrating all that is available encourage him or her to get involved and uncover new resources.

A unified Sephardic family tree would be a tremendous help if the data in it was dependable and properly documented. Realistically, however, in these days of rampant identity theft, I am not certain this should be done without considerable consideration.

Conclusions

To summarize and attempt to prioritize: My vision of what needs to be done within the academic sphere includes

•Interviews of elder Sephardic representatives by experts in the field

•Cemeteries in major Sephardic countries like Morocco need to be photographed and documented before they are destroyed and their data lost.

• Sephardic records remaining in precarious countries such as Egypt and Morocco need to be fully copied for preservation and accessibility.

• Little known archival resources in Spain and Italy and need to be identified and catalogued so that other researchers can easily find them.

•Better Sephardic onomastic studies with good documentation of name variants, geographic locations, and the sources from which the information was derived must be conduct ed. Despite some minor faults, Laredo's onomastic study of the surnames of Moroccan Jews come closest to the ideal in this field.

•Researchers, most of whom are hobbyists, should be provided as part of a Jewish genealogy curriculum with the tools that will assist them in their efforts and these include education and ease of access.

In making my recommendations, I have limited myself to projects that are both eminently practical to achieve, inexpensive to carry out, and could be performed with great academic rigor. I would like to echo Neville Lamden's opening remarks: academic genealogy needs to be multidisciplinary and held to the highest standards. For instance, documenting the Jewish cemeteries of Morocco is easily achievable, inexpensive to perform, provide new and original material, the analysis of which would reveal valuable data on migration and marriage patterns, family groups and family trees, occurrence of epidemics or local feuds and battles, original onomastic studies and a host of other unique and new data. It would yield several valuable examples of academic genealogical study that would be both multidisciplinary and yet uniquely genealogical in nature. The same could be said of my other suggestions.

Finally I would like to say a few words about Mizrahi genealogy, which I have included in my use of the term Sephardic. Just as Sephardic genealogy was the long-ignored stepchild of Jewish genealogy, Mizrahi genealogy has remained even more in the shadows. Recently Sarina Roffé has tabulated Jewish records from Syria, and, to their great credit, Tagger and Kerem made a point of including Mizrahi records in Israel in their recently published book as I have tried to do in mine. These efforts are to be applauded, supported, and emulated.

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[1] Leon Tello, Pilar. *Judios de Toledo*. Madrid: Institut Arias Montano, 1979.

[2] Laredo, Abraham. *Les Noms des Juifs du Maroc*. Madrid: Institut Montano, 1978.

[3] Pilar Leon Tello, *Judios de Toledo* (Madrid: Institut Arias Montano, 1979); Jean Regne, *History of Jews in Aragon: Collection of Regesta and Court Documents 1213–1327* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), Hinojosa Montalvo, Jose. *The Jews of the Kingdom of Valencia: From Persecution to Expulsion, 1391–1492*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1993.

[4] Bunis, David. A guide to reading and writing Judezmo. N.Y. : ADELANTRE!, The Judezmo Society, 1975, 1976.